

Ana Laura Rodrigues Ferreira Ferrari

**Retrocesso democrático e populismo:
caminhos para uma conexão mais produtiva
(Democratic backsliding and populism:
paths for a more productive connection)**

São Paulo

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Dissertação apresentada ao Programa de Pós-Graduação em Ciência Política do Departamento de Ciência Política da Faculdade de Filosofia, Letras e Ciências Humanas da Universidade de São Paulo como requisito parcial para a obtenção do título de Mestra em Ciência Política.

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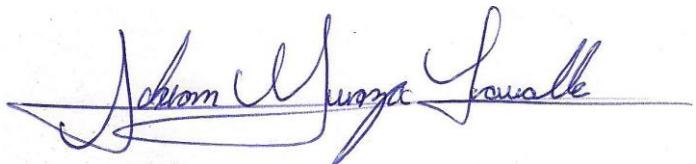
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Aprovado em: 03/08/2021

Adrian Gurza Lavalle
Professor Doutor, Universidade de São Paulo
(orientador)

Ricardo Fabrino Mendonça
Professor Doutor, Universidade de Minas Gerais

Paulo Henrique Paschoeto Cassimiro
Professor Doutor, Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro

Jonathan Phillips
Professor Doutor, Universidade de São Paulo
(convidado)

São Paulo

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Abstract

This master's thesis aims to clarify the connection between democratic backsliding and populism and propose productive paths for the progress of these research agendas. My first research goal is to answer whether the concept of populism adds gains to democratic backsliding studies or whether the costs inherent to this contested concept outweigh them. My second research goal is to suggest how the ideational approach to populism can overcome the limitation of not theorizing about the effects of populism on the quality of democracy. I assess the gains in the concept of populism by investigating three analytical advantages that it could bring to democratic backsliding studies: identifying authoritarian preferences in political actors, recognizing a pattern of institutional change in backsliding processes, and facilitating the unfolding of backsliding processes by legitimating authoritarian measures. After discussing each of these advantages and comparing the patterns of institutional change of a populist (Hungary, 2010-2015) and a non-populist (Bulgaria, 2016-2019) episode of democratic backsliding, I conclude that: identifying authoritarian preferences is a weak analytical advantage of populism; populism does not distinguish the actions chief executives take to erode democracy; and interpreting populism as a legitimating ideology requires that scholars adopt an ideational theoretical strand uncommon in democratic backsliding studies. Therefore, I suggest that scholars interested in democratic backsliding should rethink when and how they should mention populism, as the concept may generate more costs than gains to this research agenda. Finally, I suggest that scholars who adhere to the ideational approach could interpret populism in power as a legitimating ideology and explore how it exerts *power in ideas* and *power through ideas* over politicians and voters after elections. Thus, I conclude that, without having to waive its preferred theoretical framework, the ideational approach can expand its reach to embrace the effects of populism on democratic backsliding.

Keywords: democratic backsliding, democratic decline, democratic erosion, populism, ideational approach.

Resumo

Esta dissertação visa esclarecer a conexão entre retrocesso democrático e populismo e propor caminhos produtivos para o avanço dessas agendas de pesquisa. Meu primeiro objetivo de pesquisa é responder se o conceito de populismo agrega ganhos aos estudos de retrocesso democrático ou se os custos inerentes a esse conceito os superam. Meu segundo objetivo de pesquisa é sugerir como a abordagem ideacional do populismo pode superar a limitação de não teorizar sobre os efeitos do populismo na qualidade da democracia. Eu avalio os ganhos do conceito de populismo investigando três vantagens analíticas que ele poderia trazer para estudos de retrocesso democrático: identificar preferências autoritárias em atores políticos, reconhecer um padrão de mudança institucional em processos de retrocesso democrático e facilitar o desdobramento de processos de retrocesso democrático por meio da legitimação de medidas autoritárias. Depois de discutir cada uma dessas vantagens e comparar os padrões de mudança institucional de um episódio de retrocesso democrático populista (Hungria, 2010-2015) e um não populista (Bulgária, 2016-2019), eu concluo que: identificar preferências autoritárias é uma vantagem analítica fraca do populismo; populismo não distingue as ações que chefes de governo tomam para erodir a democracia; e interpretar o populismo como uma ideologia legitimadora requer que pesquisadores adotem uma vertente teórica ideacional que é incomum em estudos de retrocesso democrático. Portanto, eu sugiro que pesquisadores interessados em retrocesso democrático devem repensar quando e como deve-se mencionar populismo, já que o conceito pode gerar mais custos do que ganhos para essa agenda de pesquisa. Finalmente, eu sugiro que pesquisadores que aderem à abordagem ideacional podem interpretar o populismo no poder como uma ideologia legitimadora e explorar como ele exerce *poder em ideias* e *poder por meio de ideias* sobre políticos e eleitores após as eleições. Assim, eu concluo que, sem ter que renunciar a sua vertente teórica preferida, a abordagem ideacional pode expandir seu alcance para abranger os efeitos do populismo sobre os processos de retrocesso democrático.

Palavras-chave: retrocesso democrático, declínio democrático, erosão democrática, populismo, abordagem ideacional.

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Introduction

The preamble of the Hungarian Constitution approved in 2011 states that “the family and the nation constitute the principal framework” of the country’s coexistence. It recognizes “the role of Christianity in preserving nationhood”, praises Hungarian heritage, and offers to minority groups the position of “living in Hungary”—but not a common nationality. In 2010, prime minister Viktor Orbán and his Fidesz party came to power with mass support, campaigning against the elite and claiming to represent the true people whom the political system had forgotten. Observers acknowledged the power of a divisive and anti-elitist ideology. Populism came into the spotlight.

Also, since 2010, Hungary’s democracy has weakened. The country may be the first non-democratic regime to compose the European Union. Gaining a super-majority of seats in parliament in recurring elections, Orbán concentrated power in the Executive branch, imposed control over the judiciary, and narrowed the independence of media outlets. Today, Hungary is a telling instance of democratic backsliding, a slow and open-ended mode of transition from democracy in which the chief executive converts central democratic institutions into tools for increasing her own power.

This example is emblematic of a broader trend. In the last decade, scholars and the general public alike turned their attention to the electoral success of populist leaders and parties in Europe and the United States. Populism, a phenomenon previously associated with charismatic left-wing Latin American politicians, expanded to other regions and showed its right-wing form. At the same time, citizens of different countries have become less satisfied with democratic institutions and open to authoritarian alternatives. In many cases, leaders with no commitment to democracy managed to lead governments that gradually erode democratic institutions—for instance, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil and Narendra Modi in India—which prompted discussions about a new wave of autocratization.

Are the emergence of populism and democratic setbacks related? Scholars interested in democratic backsliding constantly mention populism and call attention to populist cases. Simultaneously, the most common approach to populism in political science—the ideational one—acknowledges that populists tend to harm democratic procedures and minority rights. Nevertheless, the connection between these research agendas is hazy. On the one hand, the literature on democratic backsliding does not establish how the concept of populism helps to analyze backsliding processes or what function it should perform in research. On the other hand, the literature on populism does not systematically address its effect on the quality of democracy, failing to theorize a relevant part of the phenomena: populism’s presence in governments.

The lack of clarity in the connection between populism and democratic backsliding leads each research agenda to unproductive paths. For democratic backsliding studies, the inconsistent mentions of populism generate several costs. First, political scientists disagree about the definition of populism, about the elements that are subject to this classification, and even more about its relationship with democracy. Besides, the focus on populism can induce scholars to neglect equally important non-populist cases. In this scenario, populism may produce more confusion than benefits for democratic backsliding studies, mainly because authors employ the concept with different purposes and do not explain why it is helpful to their research goals.

For the ideational approach to populism, the ambiguous view about the consequences of populism for democracy expresses a limitation of its potential. As I recount here, the distinctive feature of the ideational approach is asserting the influence of ideas on real-world developments. However, authors who adhere to this approach only analyze electoral processes, disregarding the power of ideas over democratic governments and the unfolding of democratic backsliding. Thus, while the approach recognizes the tendency of populist leaders to undermine democratic institutions, the theory about the influence of populist ideas remains underdeveloped, focusing only on pre-electoral moments.

This work aims to untangle the connection between democratic backsliding and populism and propose productive paths for their progress. To this end, I first search for possible analytical advantages that the concept of populism may have for democratic backsliding studies (chapters 2 and 3). Then, I discuss how scholars could expand the ideational approach to cover the effects of populism on democratic backsliding (chapter 3). The reasoning behind the first effort is that populism needs to add relevant analytical advantages to democratic backsliding studies so that the gains it generates exceed the costs it imposes on research. If some advantage exists, democratic backsliding studies must clarify it and establish how authors should mobilize the concept. On the contrary, if populism does not specify elements that help explain or distinguish democratic backsliding processes, the costs and confusion it brings to research will stand out. In this context, authors interested in democratic backsliding will not have reasons to employ the concept of populism, and the most productive path for democratic backsliding studies would be abandoning the concept.

In chapter 2, I first argue that one possible analytical advantage of populism could be *recognizing authoritarian preferences in political actors*. To make this point, I consider the well-established agreement in comparative research on democracy that political elites' lack of commitment to democratic norms can damage democratic regimes. Then, I defend that, according to the ideational approach, populism is an anti-pluralist ideology. As such, it contradicts fundamental principles and institutions of the regimes considered democratic today, standing for an authoritarian ideology. However, I stress that this gain is weak and

does not surpass the high costs populism imposes on research. Since there are easier ways of detecting authoritarian preferences, I conclude that employing the concept of populism for this purpose can still be harmful.

I also conduct a case-comparison study in chapter 2 to investigate whether the analytical advantage of populism could be *recognizing a particular pattern of institutional change in backsliding processes*. I do not intend to prove or disprove the causal relationship between populism and democratic backsliding—a goal for which a comparison between two cases would not be suitable. Rather, I propose to test specific ways in which a concept can help to analyze phenomena. To this end, comparing two countries is appropriate because my choice of cases will not determine the apprehension of conceptual analytical advantages. Instead, I would find a strong analytical advantage in comparing any populist and non-populist cases. Otherwise, the advantage is actually weak.

After carrying out a case selection with clearly defined criteria, I compare the backsliding processes in Hungary (2010-2015), under the populist prime minister Viktor Orbán, and in Bulgaria (2016-2019), under the non-populist prime minister Boyko Borisov. I conduct a detailed description of these processes based on [Huq and Ginsburg \(2018\)](#)'s typology of pathways of democratic backsliding. I conclude that, in both cases, the prime ministers and the ruling parties relied on similar measures to decrease the quality of democracy and harmed the same democratic dimensions. Therefore, recognizing differences in the institutional pattern of backsliding processes is not an analytical advantage of populism.

Finally, chapter 3 discusses an interpretation of populism that can simultaneously expand the ideational approach to populism and add an analytical advantage to democratic backsliding studies. Starting from the observation that populism is an anti-pluralist ideology, I defend that it could operate as a *legitimating ideology* in democratic backsliding processes. If that is the case, populist chief executives can more easily foster authoritarian measures and democratic backsliding because they legitimate their actions through populist justifications. Although populism does not predict differences at the institutional level of backsliding processes, its discursive distinction could account for their depth and likelihood. Here, I do not test this hypothesis. Instead, I aim to show how both research agendas would benefit from pursuing it.

In chapter 3, I first argue that the ideational approach could overcome its limitation and address the effects of populism on democratic quality by interpreting populism in power as a legitimating ideology. The theory behind legitimating processes and the ideational approach share the same assumptions about the causal power of ideas. Therefore, scholars who adhere to the ideational approach do not need to waive their preferred causal framework to address legitimating processes in democratic backsliding. Rather, I suggest that they could investigate the effects of populism on democratic backsliding by exploring

two types of ideational power: *power in ideas*, which delimits the ideas that actors see as viable, and *power through ideas*, which induces actors to support specific measures.

With the same interpretation, democratic backsliding studies can also find an analytical advantage in populism. Scholars will have reasons to employ populism in research if it operates as a legitimating ideology and facilitates democratic backsliding processes. Thus, democratic backsliding studies would benefit from pursuing this hypothesis and setting a clear function for the concept of populism. However, the use of populism as a legitimating ideology requires that scholars endorse an ideational explanation of the phenomenon, recognizing the causal power of ideas. Because of this and other caveats that I discuss in chapter 3, authors interested in democratic backsliding should evaluate when and how it is advantageous to mention populism.

From the perspective of democratic backsliding studies, this work hopes to encourage reflections on whether and how authors should employ the concept of populism. The only analytical advantage found here requires importing specific assumptions about the causal power of ideas, which not all scholars are willing to do. Thus, considering how most works on democratic backsliding mention populism today, it may be more beneficial to abandon the concept altogether and eliminate its costs. From the perspective of the ideational approach to populism, this work hopes to promote the understanding that the approach can analyze the relationship between populism and democratic backsliding through a natural extension of its assumptions and causal framework. With that, the relationship between populism and democracy would be clearer, and the approach would offer contributions to the analysis of democratic backsliding processes.

1 Democratic Backsliding and Populism

How are democratic backsliding and populism connected? This chapter discusses the relationship between these two research agendas and shows how the lack of clarity in their connection creates problems. To this end, I will first define democratic backsliding and present its current explanations. Then, I will briefly introduce possible definitions of populism and delve into the ideational approach, recounting its definition, methodological prescriptions, and theory. After that, I will show how the use of the concept of populism in democratic backsliding studies brings costs to this research agenda. Finally, I will argue that the lack of clarity in the relationship between populism and democratic backsliding is not detrimental to the ideational approach. Yet, the approach's ambiguous view about the effects of populism on the quality of democracy is a limitation that prevents it from reaching its full potential.

By presenting costs and a limitation in the connection between democratic backsliding and populism, this chapter supports the goals of the next ones: to search for the analytical advantages of populism for democratic backsliding studies (chapters 2 and 3) and to answer how authors can expand the ideational approach so that it covers the effects of populism on democratic backsliding processes (chapter 3).

1.1 Democratic Backsliding Studies

More often than not, real-world developments define the research agenda of political scientists. The study of the broad phenomena of democratization and autocratization does not escape this fact. When countries in different continents experienced military coups in a row in the second half of the 20th century, scholars started to investigate the sudden collapse of democracies. Some decades later, with the end of several authoritarian regimes and the fall of the Iron Curtain, political scientists turned their attention to the study of democratization. Today, the trend that drives comparative research on democracy is the *crisis of democracy*. In an overall pattern, regimes with different levels of democracy are deteriorating in quality.

Part of the growing interest in the crisis of democracy comes from unfulfilled expectations ([Levitsky and Way, 2015](#)). From the Portuguese democratic transition in 1974 to the end of the 20th century, democratization processes have become more common than transitions *to* authoritarian rule worldwide ([Diamond, 2020](#)). Scholars nurtured the belief that the West model of liberal democracy would be the only possible path for former autocracies to follow. However, as time passed, it became clear that the spread of high-quality liberal democracies had limits. Scholars realized that transitions *from*

authoritarian regimes do not necessarily lead to the establishment of democracies. On the contrary, these transitions often arrive at new full-blown dictatorships or stable hybrid regimes that merge elections with violations of laws and rights (Levitsky and Way, 2002). Motivated by this change in perception about the prospects for the spread of democracy, scholars started to recognize a crisis.

Around the first decade of the 21st century, concerns about the rollback of democracies seemed to be motivated by failed experiences of democratization. In this sense, scholars first noticed the limits of democratic consolidation in countries that have never had the conditions to be democratic (Levitsky and Way, 2015). However, more recently, significant U-turns to more authoritarianism proved possible even in countries that have consolidated their democracies. The global loss of democratic quality that observed today is not produced only by countries that lack a democratic record but by strategically significant democracies such as the United States, South Africa, and South Korea (Diamond, 2020). Undoubtedly, relevant new developments are in place regarding the pattern of democracy seen in the world so far.

Yearly since 2006, more countries experience setbacks than gains in political rights and civil liberties (Repucci, 2020). The number of democracies that collapsed into autocracies was higher than the number of countries that became democratic over the last 10 years (Lührmann et al., 2020). Not coincidentally, political scientists began to discuss the third reverse wave of democratization (Lührmann and Lindberg, 2019), the electoral victories of wannabe autocrats (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018; Mounk, 2018; Runciman, 2018), and the emergence of authoritarian alternatives in the international landscape (Kneuer and Demmelhuber, 2016). Discussions about the crisis of democracy reached widely circulated books, countless events, and the passion of academics and think tanks worldwide.

This new *crisis of democracy* drew attention to a distinctive process of loss of democratic quality. Up until some decades ago, most transitions to authoritarian rule were marked by the explicit intervention of authoritarian forces. In *democratic breakdown* processes, political actors extinct parties, suspend elections or impose new practices that expose the end of the democratic normalcy (Erdmann, 2011, p. 26). However, since 2005, four out of five transitions to authoritarian rule were carried out by elected chief executives who remain in power with expressed popular support—at least in the beginning (Svolik, 2019). Instead of dissolving the Congress and driving tanks to the streets—as in Alberto Fujimori’s 1992 self-coup in Peru—presidents and prime ministers started to deteriorate democratic institutions incrementally. This gradual process of loss of democratic quality was distinctive enough to create and name a new research agenda: *democratic backsliding studies*.

What is new about democratic backsliding is the gradual and slow nature that transitions from democracy can assume—even in countries with initially high levels

of democratic quality. In the unfolding of these processes, one action alone does not cease democratic normalcy. Rather, several aggregated actions carried out by incumbent governments constitute a process of loss of democratic quality that can lead to hybrid or authoritarian regimes. The speed and outcome of these processes are not determined from the beginning. As happened in South Korea, countries can experience democratic backsliding and revert this trend later on. In the country, authoritarian measures such as the abusive application of criminal defamation laws (Gerschewski, 2021) and the state bureaucracy's politicization (Yuk, 2019) stopped after the transfer of power in 2017. Conversely, countries can follow the path of democratic backsliding without a stopping point. In Venezuela, a prolonged process of loss of democratic quality occasioned the consolidation of an authoritarian regime (Scheppele, 2018).

Another particularity of democratic backsliding processes is that authoritarian forces do not have to break with formal democratic procedures to achieve their authoritarian goals. Instead, these proper procedures—with rightly approved laws, court decisions, and popular approval—can enable the demise of democracy (Bermeo, 2016; Scheppele, 2018). To give some examples, elected chief executives can approve laws to reduce the legislature's oversight. Their parties can change the retirement age of judges to purge non-friendly ones. They can revoke broadcasting licenses to close independent media outlets. Finally, at a more electoral level, the ruling party can manipulate district boundaries for its own gain or alter term limits. The examples abound.

Political scientists have named the process described above as democratic backsliding (Bermeo, 2016), decline (Anderson et al., 2017), decay (Gerschewski, 2021), recession (Lührmann and Lindberg, 2019), and regression (Diamond, 2020), among other options. Since this is a new research frontier, significant confusion exists regarding this process's denomination and measurement strategy (Waldner and Lust, 2018). However, despite minor divergences, democratic backsliding studies centrally analyze an open-ended mode of transition from democracy in which, without the threat of overt violence, the elected chief executive remains in office and converts central democratic institutions into tools for increasing her own power.

Since *backsliding* seems to be the most common term in these works, I decided to use it here to contribute to the standardization of the naming of this process in the literature. Nevertheless, all of these terms are interchangeable, with minor differences depending on the exact definition each author provides. Here, I define that a democratic backsliding process occurs when, through the types of actions mentioned above, substantial decays simultaneously happen in three predicates of democracy: the rule of law¹, liberal rights to speech and association, and competitive elections (Huq and Ginsburg, 2018,

¹ Defined as “the stability, predictability, and integrity of law and legal institutions [...], functionally necessary to allow democratic engagement without fear or coercion” (Huq and Ginsburg, 2018, p. 87).

p. 83).

Democratic backsliding studies assume that not every loss of democratic quality has the same meaning or enables similar results. Although democratic regimes eventually lose quality due to crises, punctual episodes, or the natural tendency incumbent administrations have to increase their power and future electoral advantage, democratic backsliding is a more complete and deeper phenomenon. Therefore, one should not consider that “any amount of slippage [from the ideal of democratic governance] is conceptually homologous, or normatively untroubling” ([Huq and Ginsburg, 2018](#), p. 162). The aggregation of small quantitative changes in democratic quality can result in significant variations in a country’s overall level of democracy and qualitative differences in regime types. In this context, this research agenda’s first challenge is determining when losses of democratic quality are broad and deep enough to characterize a backsliding process.

The subsequent challenge of democratic backsliding studies is theorizing the factors that lead to this outcome. At first, resorting to political science’s accumulated knowledge about democratic breakdown is helpful. Nevertheless, *democratic breakdown* and *democratic backsliding* are unique modes of transition from democracy and, as such, require different explanatory models. In general, existing theories about democratic breakdown give a great value to military forces and analyze countries with poor democratic records and weak states in an international context different from today. In turn, democratic backsliding comprises new political actors, institutional arrangements, and international conditions. Therefore, the research agenda on democratic backsliding should follow an autonomous path within the field of comparative research on democracy ([Tomini, 2018](#), p. 155). To reveal the causes behind backsliding processes, scholars must develop customized theoretical frameworks.

Many authors have attempted to explain the occurrence of democratic backsliding, and these attempts fit in different theoretical strands. Following a political institutions framework, [Huq and Ginsburg \(2018\)](#) and [Schepppele \(2018\)](#) question whether Constitutional texts are capable of preventing their own subversion. Along similar lines, they show that formal rules are not enough. On the contrary, wannabe autocrats can explore open possibilities within democratic legality to move forward with their autocratic power grab. In the same family theory, [Bogaards \(2018\)](#) raises the hypothesis that highly majoritarian electoral systems can increase the likelihood of democratic backsliding because they concentrate political power. Finally, [Przeworski \(2019\)](#) points out that the collapse of traditional party systems signals worrying changes in the prospects for democratic regimes.

[Levitsky and Ziblatt \(2018\)](#) comes to conclusions similar to those of [Huq and Ginsburg \(2018\)](#) and [Schepppele \(2018\)](#) but favor a political leadership family theory that investigates political elites’ actions as the primary causal link leading to democratic backsliding. According to the authors, the resilience of formal institutions alone does not guarantee democratic stability. Rather, democratic survival depends on political elites’

mutual tolerance and institutional forbearance. If political parties and leaders place their electoral gains and willingness to weaken the opposition above democratic conventions, no Constitutional rule will preserve an even playing field.

Another common theoretical strand in explanations of democratic backsliding concerns political coalitions and privileges a balance-of-power perspective. For instance, [Luo and Przeworski \(2019\)](#) and [Nalepa et al. \(2018\)](#) show that, either because of a given trade-off or lack of information, citizens may prefer to maintain wannabe autocrats in power in a context in which minor authoritarian measures do not entail an explicit democratic rupture. Therefore, one cannot expect that voters will necessarily penalize politicians that foster democratic backsliding, even if they still have the chance to do so. Similarly, [Svolik \(2018\)](#) finds that polarized societies are prone to democratic backsliding because voters waive the democratic principles they hold for maintaining their preferred party in power. Through a survey experiment, the author tests the theory in Venezuela. He concludes that polarization can affect the capacity of voters to contain authoritarian temptations by the incumbent.

Finally, some authors prefer to look at economic structures as the first causal trigger in explanations of democratic backsliding. Examining democratic backsliding in advanced industrial economies, [Przeworski \(2019\)](#) and [Mounk \(2018\)](#) discuss how living standards stagnated in the last decades due to slow economic growth and accelerating inequality. As a result, younger generations will not surpass their parents' financial achievements for the first time since the establishment of liberal-democratic regimes. In these circumstances, failed economic expectations are responsible for citizens' distrust in traditional parties and democratic institutions, which benefits the electoral performance of anti-establishment figures. In turn, the electoral success of anti-establishment politicians explains democratic backsliding today.

In conclusion, just as political scientists in the second half of the last century sought to explain the occurrence of democratic breakdown, the scholarship today is seeking to build and test theories about democratic backsliding. This new scholarly interest builds upon the findings of the literature on democratic breakdown. Nevertheless, it analyzes a distinct process and needs to develop a coherent theoretical understanding of the phenomenon ([Waldner and Lust, 2018](#)). Finally, as democratic backsliding studies constitute a new research frontier, my thesis comes at a promising time. As soon as the literature discusses whether and how populism contributes to theoretical understandings of democratic backsliding, more efficiently the research agenda will progress.

1.2 Populism and the Ideational Approach

Populism can have different definitions depending on the literature reviewed. For some Latin American authors, the term applies to the phase of capitalist development in which the bourgeois hegemony solidified (Germani et al., 1973; Weffort, 1989). For the political theorists Laclau (2005) and Mouffe (2018), it is a logic that articulates different demands around an empty signifier, mobilizing the citizens. For Weyland (2001), it is a strategy that personalistic leaders adopt to reach power. Another frequent meaning of populism is the implementation of economic policies damaging in the long run (Acemoglu et al., 2013). Finally, the ideational approach defines populism as an ideology that puts the people against the elite and defends that the general will should guide politics (Hawkins et al., 2018a).

Each of these definitions circumscribes a specific part of the empirical reality scholars want to analyze. Often, the elements highlighted by different approaches do not overlap at all with one another. In some studies, populism refers to particular policies (Acemoglu et al., 2013). In others, it stands for a logic recognizable in all political discourses (Laclau, 2005). Because coexisting definitions disagree on what the term refers to, it is not possible to reach a consensus about which units are populists. In a seminal article about the uses of the term “populist” in social sciences, Canovan (1982) argues that different phenomena acquired this label in a contingent manner. According to her, “we must not assume in advance that they all share common features” (Canovan, 1982, p. 550). Going beyond, perhaps scholars should think of all the meanings of that word not as sub-types of the same concept, but as different concepts that only share a reference to “people” or “popular”.

Because of this multitude of meanings, any statement about populism will depend on the definition in use. A change in the concept’s definition will change the sample of cases under analysis and the characteristics under consideration, which alters conclusions about the effects of populism on electoral mobilization, democracy, corruption, economic performance, or other topics scholars constantly investigate. Although it is challenging to avoid the conceptual doubts that come with populism, debates will be more productive if authors acknowledge that populism denotes different things in different fields of study. After all, some disagreements about populism’s effects are only the consequence of conceptual differences. For this reason, scholars should always define populism and reveal the approach they employ.

Among coexisting definitions, I understand populism as an ideology that is propagated by politicians, guides their actions, and mobilizes voters. Therefore, my work builds upon the *ideational approach to populism* (Hawkins et al., 2018a). This approach defines populism as an ideology that “considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’,

and which argues that politics should be an expression of the general will of the people” (Mudde, 2004, p. 543). The content of populist ideas is deemed to be the key to analyze real-world political developments. Authors who adhere to this approach understand that “ideas are the core of populism” and therefore “they have some independent causal power with measurable effects” in electoral processes and other political events (Hawkins et al., 2018a, p. 6).

The ideational approach embraces definitions that place ideas at the center of populism, regardless of minor differences. In this sense, *ideology* assumes an inclusive meaning: a recurrent and shared set of ideas, beliefs, opinions, and values that maps and organizes “how we read (and misread) political facts, events, occurrences and actions” (Freeden et al., 2003, p. 3). Some authors detail further and define populism as a *thin-centered ideology* (Canovan, 2002; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017), suggesting that populism lacks a programmatic content and is limited in scope (Freeden et al., 1996). Overarching ideologies such as liberalism and socialism present a full spectrum of responses to political problems and rely on several complementary concepts to convey their meanings. In contrast, populism is narrow because it only elaborates on the struggles between the people and the elite. As a result, politicians can combine populism with other ideas of both the left and right sides of the political spectrum.

Defining populism as a set of ideas has advantages. Mainly, it allows researchers to measure these ideas in several textual contents, as in politicians’ public speeches and parties’ manifestos. Besides, opinion polls can assess which parts of the electorate agree with populist ideas. Consequently, research possibilities expand. For example, scholars can go beyond the study of successful electoral leaders and investigate populist minority parties and marginal political movements. They can also compare political realities in diverse countries and historical periods since textual content is relatively accessible. In sum, by reducing populism’s meaning to a minimal core and analyzing discourses, the approach advances with comparative research.

I chose to adhere to the ideational approach for some reasons. First, given that populism can mean completely different things depending on the definition in use, it would be impracticable to explore the connection between populism and democratic backsliding without narrowing the scholarship on populism under analysis. Second, when authors interested in democratic backsliding mention populism, they usually refer to the set of ideas mentioned above. Thus, since a natural convergence between democratic backsliding studies and the ideational approach to populism already exists, it is reasonable to embrace the latter.

Third, the ideational definition of populism is the most common one in political science. An examination of fourteen political science journals showed that 28% of the articles on populism published between 1990 and 2015 employed an ideational definition

(Kaltwasser et al., 2017). Because most publications did not define the concept, this number indicates a predominance in political science research. In this context, working with the ideational approach is positive because of the accumulated knowledge on the topic and because, when authors interested in democratic backsliding studies do not express what they understand by populism, it is possible to assume that they have the ideational definition in mind (Kaltwasser et al., 2017).

Fourth, the ideational approach does not refrain from considering the impacts of populism on democracy, although this reflection happens more frequently on a theoretical rather than empirical level. Within this approach, a significant debate exists about the implications of populism for democratic notions such as minority rights and political participation (Hawkins, 2009; Hawkins and Kaltwasser, 2017; Mudde, 2004; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017; Rummens, 2017). Arguably, the concept of populism can only analyze democratic backsliding processes if it addresses democracy somehow. Thus, I deliberately chose the approach to populism that more likely connects with democratic backsliding studies.

Although research on democratic backsliding often mobilizes the ideational concept of populism, the relationship between populism and democracy is not the primary concern of the ideational approach. Before that, the bulk of the literature is focused on explaining populist politicians' elections (Hawkins et al., 2018a). The ideational theory aims to present a common explanation for the demand-side of populism, when voters share populist ideas and choose populist candidates in polls, and for the supply-side of populism, when populist politicians aspire to win elections and organize campaigns. Mainly, the approach investigates how parties and politicians frame citizens' resentment in a populist manner, mobilize voters and transform traditional party systems (Mudde, 2013; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017).

The ideational theory defends that the content of populist ideas is the key to understand why candidates express this ideology and persuade voters in particular political scenarios. Alternatively, other explanations have stressed the importance of changes in cultural values (Inglehart and Norris, 2016), increased immigration (Hogan and Haltinner, 2015), economic insecurity (Rodrik, 2018), and the failure of political parties (Grzymala-Busse, 2019) for the populist rise. The ideational theory does not deny that these factors can play a role in the election of populist leaders. However, it considers that many different combinations of factors—and not only one—form the context in which populist mobilizations succeed.

The ideational theory begins at the individual level. Scholars have noticed that individuals have different levels of approval of populist ideas, which can be measured by opinion polls. In general, numerous citizens in every country agree with populist statements when asked in surveys (Akkerman et al., 2014; Elchardus and Spruyt, 2016; Hawkins

et al., 2018b; Van Hauwaert and Van Kessel, 2018). These citizens believe that the elite takes advantage of the people, that politicians only act to protect their privilege, that the majority of the people should always have the last call in politics, and that politics is ultimately a struggle between good and evil, among other things.²

However, populists do not always win elections. Why? Exploring the nature of survey responses, scholars realized that many citizens did not hold a true *attitude* in relation to populist ideas, but an inarticulate *predisposition* towards this ideology. For psychology research, an attitude is “a relatively enduring organization of beliefs, feelings, and behavioral tendencies towards socially significant objects, groups, events or symbols” (Vaughan and Hogg, 2005). An individual who sustains an attitude will have a level of consciousness and knowledge about the object subject to this attitude and will manifest behavioral components about it. In contrast, an individual who lacks an attitudinal trait will not express a coherent set of affection, knowledge, and behavioral intentions towards this object. According to the ideational approach, people who agree with populist statements in surveys usually fit in this latest pattern. Consequently, they do not develop a demand for populist politicians.

A predisposition towards populism can become a true attitude under particular contextual triggers. Psychology has shown that the realization of predispositions depends on situational factors (Chanley, 1994; Tett and Guterman, 2000; Cesario et al., 2010). In the context of populist predispositions, these situational factors are unwelcoming events at the macro-level (context) added to specific discourses (framing). Unless provoked, voters can hold populist predispositions without displaying attitudes. In other words, the *latent demand* for populism may never become a *concrete demand* for populist politicians.

The activation of populist latent demands occurs in contexts of *intentional failure of democratic representation*. When citizens perceive that politicians’ intentional actions and omissions are responsible for their hardships and interpret that recurrent political acts were unfair or violated their rights, they feel resentment (Hawkins et al., 2018a, p. 8). Inadequate responses on the part of the political establishment during profound socio-economic changes can make citizens lose trust in the existing political actors. In this context, constituencies will interpret the political reality resentfully and be open to populist mobilization. For this theory, a context in which a widespread perception of failure in democratic representation occurs is a necessary condition for the electoral success of populist forces.

However, a favorable context is not sufficient for the emergence of populism. For citizens to elaborate their dissatisfaction through a populist lens, they need to be induced

² The following surveys ask these questions, respectively: Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP), LIVEWHAT survey, Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP), and Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES)

by a populist framework. Populist discourses route the citizens' resentment into a coherent world view and blame a common enemy for all evils. Populism works as an outlet for the resentful interpretation that part of the constituency already holds. According to the ideational approach, populism is particularly effective for political mobilization because it incites three cognitive mechanisms existing in all individuals, pushing citizens to vote.

First, populism explores the fact that individuals prefer to see harmful intentions in others rather than blaming themselves for unwanted outcomes ([Jones and Nisbett, 1987](#); [Watson, 1982](#)). When populists blame the elite for all the wrongs, they capitalize on this attribution of blame. Second, populists take advantage of in-group/out-group dynamics and the sense of self-esteem and community they confer to individuals ([Tajfel and Turner, 2004](#)). Populists build the identity of "the people," offering norms and stereotypes that differentiate them from competing groups. Third, populism encourages and validates emotions such as fear and anger. These emotions are effective triggers to decision-making and action ([Lerner et al., 2015](#)), which increases the commitment of populist voters.

In contexts of intentional failure of democratic representation, in which populist latent demands can be properly activated, the supply-side of populism explore citizens' resentment electorally. For this goal, parties and politicians centralize decisions and guide citizens towards cooperation and coordination, overcoming collective action problems inherent to all political mobilizations. Therefore, the last step of the populist mobilization is offering to voters a credible manner of defeating the elite's control and regaining power over politics: the electoral victory.

In sum, the ideational theory establishes a theoretical framework that explains how macro-level factors reflect on agents in the micro-level to generate aggregated outcomes through votes and electoral results. It also accepts that several factors can be combined to activate populist latent demands. Factors that create resentment among citizens—as corruption scandals, government instability, economic crisis, and income inequality—vary among cases and interact with other contextual characteristics, such as political systems, the material conditions that parties rely on, and so forth. Nevertheless, the process that connects these factors to the electoral outcome is invariably the same. The main contribution of the ideational approach is showing that the emergence of populism needs the widespread perception of failure of representation and a populist leadership or organization ready to benefit from it.

1.3 A hazy connection

The research agendas on democratic backsliding and populism are independent and have different goals. While the former aims to build theoretical frameworks to explain gradual transitions from democracy, the latter focuses on elections and voting behavior.

Nevertheless, democratic backsliding studies constantly mention populism and give special attention to populist cases. A brief overview of this research agenda show this trend. Using the research platform *EBSCO host* and the database *Academic Search Premier*, I selected 136 academic papers in democratic backsliding studies. The database gathers articles published in more than 8,500 multi-disciplinary journals. Through the EBSCO host research platform, I searched for the term “democratic backsliding” and variations in titles or abstracts of all papers published between 2010 and 2021 available in the database. I selected all that did not have the word “populism”, “populist” or “populists” in the title. I searched for the variations: democratic backsliding, democratic decline, democratic erosion, erosion of democracy, democratic decay, democratic recession, and democratic regression.

After that, I checked out how many papers in this sample cited at least one of the following words: populism, populist, and populists. Excluding the PDFs that I could not access and that the R package could not read, I evaluated 127 papers. In the end, 59% of these papers cited the word “populism” or variations at least once. The sample covered more than 80 journals with different impact factors and from different disciplines. I also evaluated a narrower sample with journals with higher impact factors. I selected only the papers published in: the first 100 political science journals with the highest impact factor, according to the Scimago Journal & Country Rank (SJC); the first 100 journals of law with the highest impact factor, according to the SJC; the Journal of Democracy, which is an influential journal in autocratization studies, despite not being peer-reviewed and therefore not being evaluated by the SJC. This narrower sample had 40 papers, and 67.5% of them mentioned the word populism or variations. Table 1 summarizes this overview.

Table 1 – Mentions of populism on democratic backsliding studies

| | Mentioning populism ^b | Nº of journals | Most frequent journals |
|---|----------------------------------|----------------|--|
| Sample 1^a <i>N = 127</i> | 75 (59.05%) | 83 | Democratization, Journal of Democracy, Journal of European Public Policy, Journal of Southeast European & Black Sea Studies |
| Sample 2^a <i>N = 40</i> | 27 (67.5%) | 11 | Democratization, Journal of Democracy, Journal of European Integration, University of Chicago Law Review |

Notes: ^a Papers with the term “democratic backsliding” and variations in titles or abstracts according to search in the platform EBSCO host. Sample 1 includes all papers. Sample 2 is restricted to the first 100 political science and the first 100 law journals with the highest impact factor according to the SJC, plus the Journal of Democracy. ^b The numbers of journals in each Sample that cited the word “populism” and variations.

Selecting papers through keywords in titles and abstracts does not guarantee that

all of them have democratic backsliding processes as a central concern. Some of the works may refer to these processes only secondarily. Besides, the search for the word populism and variation covered full-texts, including footnotes and references. Thus, papers that do not mention populism directly but have any reference with populism in the title were also considered in the percentages above. Still, this overview shows that the majority of authors who want to investigate democratic backsliding—either centrally or secondarily—employ the concept of populism or rely on literature that addresses populism, which is a significant proportion.

Why should scholars interested in democratic backsliding mention populism—a concept primarily associated with electoral contexts? This question is relevant because, when scholars opt to mention populism, they inevitably incur the costs this concept imposes on research. Populism is not a harmless concept that may clarify particular arguments in papers and books. Instead, it is a contested concept that usually generates confusion and raises endless debates. In these circumstances, populism needs to confer relevant gains to the study of democratic backsliding processes, or the costs it attaches to research will prevail. Here, I will present five costs that populism imposes on democratic backsliding studies and show how they may hinder the progress of this research agenda.

First, I will discuss the divergent functions populism performs in research on democratic backsliding. Second, I will show that populism has multiple definitions within social sciences. Third, I will reckon the ideational approach's ambiguous stand about the consequences of populism for democracy. All these factors generates confusion regarding what populism is and how it relates to authoritarian outcomes. Forth, I will show that, as populism is a set of abstract ideas, its measurement can be unreliable. Fifth, I will defend that the focus on populism can lead democratic backsliding studies to neglect equally relevant non-populist cases.

The first cost scholars need to bear when mentioning populism is related to the divergent functions this concept has in democratic backsliding studies. The literature on democratic backsliding does not establish how populism connects with authoritarian outcomes and for what purpose authors should employ the concept. On the contrary, populism assumes different roles in the construction of arguments of different papers or books, even when authors define the concept in the same ideational way. Consequently, readers strive to understand how populism relates to democratic backsliding in each work, and authors end up making their argumentation more confusing. A non-exhaustive analysis of how populism appears in democratic backsliding studies illustrates this first cost.

For [Przeworski \(2019\)](#), the success of populist parties is not a cause of the crisis of democracy but a sign of fundamental changes in party systems. [Huq and Ginsburg \(2018\)](#) see populism as a strategy that wannabe autocrats adopt to win elections and govern. For [Tomini \(2018\)](#), populism is strictly an electoral platform. In some cases, authors

refer to populists as the only political actors associated with democratic backsliding, as if the two phenomena did not exist separately (Diamond, 2020; Havlik, 2019). In other cases, authors do not define the concept, just use it as an adjective (Waldner and Lust, 2018). Finally, Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) and Norris (2017) link populism explicitly with political actors' authoritarian behavior. Note that all these authors adopt the ideational definition of populism. Nevertheless, they mention populism with different purposes and do not always discuss how it relates to the phenomenon they aim to explain.

The second cost scholars incur when mentioning populism is due to its multiple definitions. As presented in the previous section, the meaning of populism varies greatly among works. Therefore, scholars who primarily want to make causal inferences and test theories about democratic backsliding may find themselves stuck in initial discussions about the definition of populism, even though populism is not a central concept in their research. The use of populism may generate long and unproductive debates since peers and readers may have another understanding of the concept.

The third cost of populism is that political scientists disagree about its consequences for democracy. When authors mention populism to analyze authoritarian tendencies, the communication gap around the interpretation of the concept is further deepened. The problem is not solved even if the same definition of populism is used. For example, the ideational approach does not establish whether populism is positive or negative for democracy. Rather, it assumes that populism has a mixed effect on democracy, conditional on the dimensions under analysis. For example, Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017, p. 95) consider populists democratic because they uphold the majoritarian principle, despite harming liberal rights. For Hawkins (2010, p. 36), populists adopt an "anything goes attitude" toward democratic institutions but are "very democratic" for promoting the sovereignty of the people.

For the goals of the ideational approach, the investigation of elections can follow without a unified perspective on the impact of populism on democratic quality. However, an ambiguous view on the topic can hamper the research goals of scholars interested in democratic backsliding. These two research agendas lean on different definitions of democracy, which leads to confusion every time they intersect. For populism studies, appealing to the people's sovereignty and mobilizing voters are enough to qualify political actors as democratic. For scholars who want to unravel the actions that lead to democratic backsliding, assaults on procedural and minority rights are enough to identify authoritarian tendencies. In this scenario, the lack of clarity about populism's impact on democracy is a cost for democratic backsliding studies.

The fourth cost that democratic backsliding studies pay when mentioning populism comes from measurement problems. Even among authors who define populism as a set of ideas, divergences exist about who is populist. Because the ideas that define populism

are fuzzy, different indexes reach different classifications of the same political actors. A comparison between two databases that define populism in the same way illustrates it. Currently, scholars who want to identify populist chief executives across all continents have to rely on one of two databases available: the *Global Populism*, elaborated by the main authors of the ideational approach ([Hawkins et al., 2019](#)), or the *Populists in Power: 1990–2018*, elaborated by the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change.

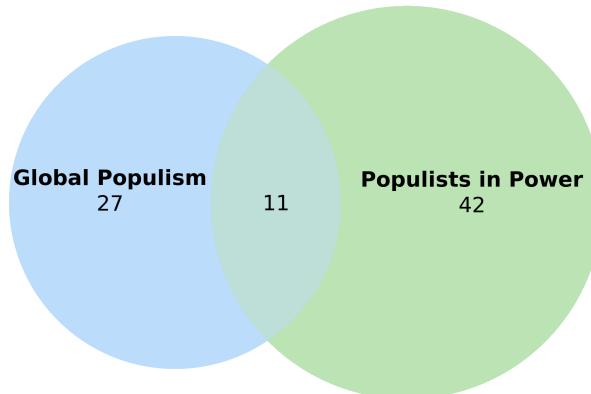
The Global Populism Database evaluates presidents' and prime ministers' speeches to determine the level of populism in their terms. For this purpose, they use the *holistic grade technique* ([Hawkins, 2009](#)), intended to check not only the presence of particular words in textual contents but also diffuse arguments and meanings. Following this technique, at least two coders read politicians' speeches and verify the occurrence of populist ideas. They compare each speech to a rubric, grounded on the ideational approach, that defines and exemplifies what populist ideas are and are not. Coders assign a score of 0 (few if any populist elements) to 2 (extremely populist) to each speech analyzed, and terms that score at least 0.75 (by the average of the chief executive's speeches) are considered populists ([Silva, 2019, p. 283](#)).

The Populists in Power Database defines populism nearly in the same way that the ideational approach, although populists are later subdivided into additional categories. For its authors, populism claims that “a country’s ‘true people’ are locked into conflict with outsiders, including establishment elites” and that “nothing should constrain the will of the true people.” Instead of verifying these ideas in political speeches, the authors listed the politicians who were considered populists by the scientific literature on populism (including 66 academic journals and a handbook). After that, they checked whether these politicians met both of the elements of their definition of populism. Finally, they consulted populist experts about their initial list and gathered more suggestions. In the end, they listed 42 populist leaders.

One could expect that, with few exceptions, two databases that define populism so closely would arrive at similar lists of populist leaders. To check if that is true, I compared all populist chief executives in power after 1989 that each database selects. Contrary to what one could anticipate, only 18% of total entries are common to the two databases. From the 42 chief executives that the Populists in Power identify through the literature on populism, only 11 also appear in the Global Populism Database. Likewise, of the 27 chief executives whose terms score at least 0.75 in the Global Populism Database, only 11 are at the intersection between the two databases. Furthermore, 9 of the populist chief executives identified by the Populists in Power are evaluated as non-populists for the Global Populism. In these cases, their speeches were indeed evaluated by coders, but they did not achieve a sufficient score to be considered populists. Figure 1 shows the results.

This comparison shows how the measurement of populist ideas can result in different

Figure 1 – Similarities between databases



Source: *Author own elaboration.*

classifications of units. Since the ideational definition of populism has abstract components—such as the meaning given to the will of the people—, indexes risk not being reliable or comparable. A measurement challenge should not be an impediment to research on the topic. However, if the concept of populism does not add analytical advantages to democratic backsliding studies, this difficulty would be imported unnecessarily. Again, this problem is added to divergences about the concept's definition and relation to democracy.

Finally, the fifth cost democratic backsliding studies incur when mentioning populism is the unjustified focus on populist cases. According to the literature, populists are not the only political actors eroding democracy today ([Huq and Ginsburg, 2018](#), p. 138; [Kyle and Mounk, 2018](#)). Yet, many works focus exclusively on populist cases, overlooking equally important non-populist cases. To illustrate this situation, Figure 2 organizes the empirical manifestations of populism and democratic backsliding and the intersections between them. First, the figure shows that governments headed by populists do not always co-occur with democratic backsliding. For the research agenda on populism, all cases in Frames 1 and 3—regardless of democratic backsliding—interest. They are all relevant to explore the emergence of populism and its impacts on other factors unrelated to autocratization.

Second and consequently, the figure illustrates that democratic backsliding also happens in the absence of populism. Thus, democratic backsliding studies should investigate all cases in Frames 1 and 2. Especially because the advantages of employing populism are not established, populist and non-populist cases of democratic backsliding are equally relevant for untangling the factors that may explain the occurrence of this phenomenon. However, scholars interested in democratic backsliding often give disproportionate attention to Frame 1. Without satisfactory explanation, democratic backsliding studies distinguish populist from non-populist cases and give centrality to the former, which can harm their goals.

Figure 2 – Empirical manifestation of cases

| | | Populism | |
|------------------------|-----|----------|-----|
| | | YES | NO |
| Democratic backsliding | YES | (1) | (2) |
| | NO | (3) | |

Source: *Author own elaboration.*

In conclusion, democratic backsliding studies often mobilize the concept of populism, even though its definition and relationship with democracy raise controversies. Furthermore, populism performs divergent functions in this research agenda and may encourage an unjustified focus on populist cases. In this scenario, populism needs to add relevant analytical advantages to democratic backsliding studies so that its gains outweigh the costs it inherently brings to research. In turn, the concept will bring gains if it predicts politicians' behavior with democracy and holds a clear function within this research agenda. The search for these analytical advantages is the first goal of this work.³

As evidenced here, democratic backsliding studies constantly and unsystematically mention populism, which generates confusion for this research agenda. However, this does not mean that the same problems hold the other way around. In fact, for the goals of the ideational approach, the hazy connection between populism and democratic backsliding does not pose substantial costs. Nevertheless, the ambiguity and the lack of theorizing about the influence of populism in post-electoral moments is counterintuitive and an unnecessary limitation. Therefore, this work's second goal is to propose a way to expand the ideational approach and overcome this limitation.

As stated before, the ideational approach's distinctive feature is asserting the influence of ideas on real-world developments. As a result, one could expect to find thriving literature on how the populist ideology affects the exercise of power and democratic stability. After all, populism has garnered a great deal of attention in the last decades because of

³ To find analytical advantages in populism, I must assume that it provides relevant information about the unfolding of backsliding processes. Otherwise, populism would be a factor that sometimes coincides with these processes but is inconsequential for them. However, this assumption does not imply that populism in governments always leads to democratic backsliding. As Figure 2 indicates, I understand that several other factors beyond populism affect this possibility and that populist chief executives can govern democratically if, for any reason, they do not implement the actions that the populist ideology fosters.

its troubled relationship with democracy. Latin American presidents who strengthened presidential power and changed Constitutions in the 2000s were called populists (Kaltwasser et al., 2017). In Europe, parties labeled populists are usually far-right and not committed to democracy (Akkerman et al., 2016; Mudde, 2016). Part of what motivates the academic interest in populism is the authoritarian path populists take once they reach power.

Indeed, the literature on populism often discusses the democratic or authoritarian potential of populists in power (Mudde, 2004; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017; Rummens, 2017; Mudde, 2017). Yet, the ideational approach does not centrally explore the consequences of populism for democratic governments. According to Carlin et al. (2018, p. 429), the approach is concerned with the causes of populism, and its consequences “are taken as given”. However, this stance does not impair the goals of this research agenda. As authors who adhere to the ideational approach are concerned with the election of populist leaders, they do not need to define how populism relates to democratic backsliding.

Still, the ideational approach’s unwillingness to explore the effects of populism on democratic governments is a limitation. When the approach disregards the impacts of populist ideas on the exercise of power and overlooks the assumption that ideas have implications for post-electoral moments, it falls short of its potential. Instead, scholars could extend the ideational approach’s assumptions and findings to cover the effects of populist discourses on democratic governance. Precisely, I discuss in chapter ?? one way to expand the ideational approach. To further clarify the connection between populism and democratic backsliding, I suggest that the ideational approach could interpret populism in power as a legitimating ideology and explain how populist ideas act in backsliding processes.

2 Insufficient Analytical Advantages of Populism

Why should scholars underscore the populist ideology of political actors when analyzing democratic backsliding processes? This chapter approaches the hazy connection between democratic backsliding and populism from the perspective of the former. It discusses two analytical advantages that populism could have for democratic backsliding studies and concludes that they are insufficient to overcome the costs that this concept imposes on this research agenda.

2.1 Populism as an Authoritarian Preference

Populism is an anti-pluralist and, consequently, authoritarian ideology. As such, it indicates the authoritarian preferences of political actors. After delving into the research agendas on democratic backsliding and populism and considering the divergent functions populism performs in the latter, this is the analytical advantage that I suggest in this section. As I will argue, identifying authoritarian preferences is a promising interpretation of populism that can generate gains for democratic backsliding studies. As long as populism designates politicians' preferences and behavior towards democratic institutions, it will be a relevant factor in democratic backsliding processes. In this way, scholars can connect populism with well-established literature on autocratization, clarify why it is brought to research, and raise the mechanism through which populists may erode democracy.

An established finding in comparative research on democracy is that political elites' preferences for democracy matter for autocratization ([Linz and Stepan, 1978](#)). While democratization processes need to mobilize several spheres of society to succeed, it is widely understood that political elites can undermine democracy unilaterally ([Tomini and Wagemann, 2018](#)). Elite actors who withdraw from democratic practices can shape political institutions, refuse to follow the laws, and make decisions that favor or destroy stability ([Bunce, 2000](#)). Thus, the lack of commitment to democratic norms on the part of political elites is a factor that must be taken into account by scholars who analyze autocratization.

The findings of [Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán \(2013\)](#) exemplify this comprehension. The authors analyzed all 20 Latin American countries from 1945 to 2005 to answer what factors hindered or facilitated democratic breakdowns in this period. They listed key political actors—such as presidents, political parties, social movements, and business associations—and measured the level of policy radicalism and the existence of normative

preferences for democracy in each of them. They concluded that political actors' preferences predict the chance of democratic survival or breakdown more than alternative explanations based on socioeconomic or institutional factors. When political actors value democratic norms intrinsically, a rupture is far less likely. Besides, they find that policy radicalism increases the risk of democratic breakdown because the cost of tolerance becomes too high.

Despite important differences between *democratic breakdown* and *democratic backsliding*, the agreement about the role of political actors' preferences holds for the two phenomena. Recent explanations of the latter show this comprehension. According to [Huq and Ginsburg \(2018\)](#), "democratic stability [...] depends on the preferences of particular leaders", mainly the ones occupying the Executive branch. For [Przeworski \(2019\)](#), political leaders' motives matter as much as the constraints they face in the decision to erode democracy. When they are highly ideological and believe that their opponents are enemies, they will resort to any means to prevent other parties from coming to office. Similarly, [Levitsky and Ziblatt \(2018\)](#) argue that democratic survival depends not only on formal institutions but also on political actors' mutual tolerance and institutional forbearance.

The recognition of actors' preferences is the point to which populism and democratic backsliding studies can converge. By establishing that populism is an authoritarian ideology, scholars can assert that it shapes actors' values and preferences, and consequently, their strategies and behavior. Thus, a populist politician would be a leader who does not have normative preferences for democracy, acting accordingly. In this context, the analytical advantage of populism for democratic backsliding studies would be recognizing authoritarian political actors. Of all functions that populism could have in research on democratic backsliding, the purpose of identifying leaders with authoritarian preferences is a simple and working one. After all, politicians' authoritarian tendencies have always played an essential role in autocratization processes ([Linz and Stepan, 1978](#); [Bunce, 2000](#)).

The identification of authoritarian preferences is a promising analytical advantage of populism, compared to some other possible interpretations, for at least two reasons. First, populism is an ideology attributed to political actors and voters—a characteristic of agents. Consequently, the concept will more easily relate and contribute to theoretical frameworks that analyze the behavior of individuals instead of structural or institutional factors. If one states that the main explanation for democratic backsliding is the long-term changes in economic expectations or failures in institutional arrangements, the ideology of the incumbent administration is inconsequential since it cannot influence the context prior to its rise. Conversely, actor-based perspectives would more likely consider ideological traits. Therefore, it seems reasonable to look for the analytical advantage of populism in the information it gives about the agents in power during backsliding processes, which the analytical advantage suggested here does.

Second, democratic backsliding is a process in which chief executives' decisions and

actions are predominantly influential. Thus, populism will more likely have an analytical advantage if it somehow addresses the behavior of politicians regarding democratic institutions. For this reason, interpretations of populism that are ambiguous about its impact on democracy or unrelated to chief executives' conduct in office would hardly be able to contribute to theoretical accounts of democratic backsliding. In turn, interpreting populism as an authoritarian preference allows scholars to consider politicians' decisions and actions in government and reinforce the agreement that political elites' lack of commitment to democratic norms matters for autocratization.

However, to establish populism as an authoritarian preference, I need to show that populism is an authoritarian ideology. Are there enough arguments to make this claim? Yes, according to the proper reasoning at the center of the ideational approach. On the one hand, the ideational approach consensually considers that the negative pole of populism is pluralism ([Hawkins et al., 2018a](#), p. 4; [Mudde, 2017](#), p. 34). In this sense, populism collides with pluralism, implying the opposite of its constitutive ideas. On the other hand, pluralism bases the procedures and safeguards that define democracy, being an essential value for its normative sense and institutional arrangement. Consequently, the antagonism between populism and pluralism imposes insurmountable conflicts between the former and democracy itself.

Pluralism, as a set of ideas, is directly related to the establishment of modern democracies. For example, the Federalist papers express pluralist ideas when they recognize diversity in interests as a source of mutual controls between groups ([Plattner, 2010](#)). Until the 18th century, pundits considered that stable and peaceful political regimes were only possible in monochromatic societies ([Sartori, 1997](#)). In contrast to this previous interpretation, pluralism sustains that diversity protects the very rules for sharing and exercising political power. Instead of a source of irreparable disorder for polities, diversity was gradually accepted as a value that prevents tyrannic outcomes. In this process, pluralism established the principles of existing democracies, with separation of powers and the existence of political parties.

The founding idea of pluralism is perceiving cross-cutting cleavages in the social and political worlds. For pluralists, multiple nonexclusive and voluntary associations exist in society, which prevents the dominance of one group over the others. Naturally, multiple groups with divergent interests will disagree about the directions of the polity. In this context, pluralism sustains the existence of mutual rules for channeling and organizing political conflicts. This set of ideas validates minority rights, procedural norms, and the rule of law as prerequisites for adjusting many divergent understandings into solutions. Besides, since it respects divergent views, it advocates for the establishment of coalitions and the making of concessions, being strongly related to the idea of tolerance ([Sartori, 1997](#)).

Conversely, populism recognizes only one cleavage in society: the one dividing the people from the elite. Rather than defending the coexistence of these groups, populism depicts the elite as an enemy group and elaborates an excluding claim about who should participate in politics. Populists do not respect the elite's divergent views but defend that only the will of the people should guide political decisions. As populists stem from the belief that only one group constitutes the people who legitimize politics, they understand that no rule or restriction should impede it to act—even when its decisions violate the rights of the political minority. Furthermore, since populism discards tolerance and acceptance of divergences, it rejects concessions and compromise.

As a result of the incompatibility between pluralism and populism, governments based on the latter will tend to harm democracy. If pluralism bases the institutions of democratic regimes, its negative pole will confront precisely these institutions, for instance, the separation of powers, freedom of organization and association, equality before the law, and so forth. Even if populists mobilize hitherto excluded groups and encourage democratic participation, as part of the literature stresses (Kaltwasser et al., 2017; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2012), populism's conflict with pluralist institutions is enough to classify this set of ideas as authoritarian. By definition, one cannot admit as democratic an ideology that threatens constitutive components of democracy.

Indeed, authors who adhere to the ideational approach explicitly state that populists disregard minority and procedural rights. For example, Hawkins affirms that populists see these rules as something that "may be violated in order to better express the will of the people" (Hawkins, 2009, p. 1044). For Mudde, "populism is inherently hostile to the idea and institutions of the liberal democracy or constitutional democracy" (Mudde, 2004, p. 561). The only reason the ideational approach does not anchor populism as an authoritarian ideology is because it draws on a flexible definition of democracy—which nonetheless is compatible with its goal of analyzing elections. However, democratic backsliding studies work with a definition of democracy for which the weakening of pluralist institutions characterize authoritarianism. According to that reasoning, this research agenda must interpret populism as an authoritarian ideology.

In sum, according to a common understanding of the ideational approach, populism is an anti-pluralist set of ideas that contradicts fundamental democratic institutions. Therefore, the concept can add gains to democratic backsliding studies by identifying political actors' authoritarian preferences—a relevant explanatory factor in autocratization processes. Research on democratic backsliding would benefit from establishing a more explicit connection with populism and defining the analytical advantage of the concept. Moreover, this suggestion may translate what many scholars have in mind when they stress populism to refer to leaders who erode democratic institutions. In at least two works, identifying authoritarian political actors is precisely the function that populism has

(Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018; Norris, 2017). Nevertheless, given that populism is a contested concept, this analytical advantage may not be strong enough to surpass the costs that it imposes on research.

For three reasons, I defend that the recognition of authoritarian preferences is a weak analytical advantage of populism. First, when the concept of populism draws attention to political actors' authoritarian preferences, it points out a factor in autocratization processes that political science has always considered. In this sense, populism adds at most a trivial gain to the analysis of these processes. At the same time, this trivial gain comes with all the costs mentioned earlier, and the concept continues to generate confusion in this research agenda.

Second, since populists are not the only political actors with authoritarian preferences, the presence of populism is not a good proxy for authoritarian politicians. In fact, researchers who employ populism to identify authoritarian preferences will catch a subset of authoritarian political actors and neglect the remaining. For democratic backsliding studies, this is a problem because non-populist authoritarian politicians also carry out backsliding processes. Thus, if populism was the only criterion for identifying authoritarian preferences, authors will overlook backsliding cases equally relevant to their research goals.

Third, scholars do not need to resort to populism to measure authoritarian preferences. Instead, they can focus on measuring authoritarian ideas specifically, which includes but is not restricted to populist politicians who share this bias. Two works exemplify the last point. For instance, Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán (2013) measure political actor's lack of normative preferences for democracy through straightforward features: whether they expressed hostility toward democratic institutions, questioned the validity of democratic procedures when these produced unfavorable results, questioned the legitimacy of any opposition outside an encompassing national movement, among other criteria.

In turn, Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) organize four key indicators of authoritarian behavior to be measured in political actors' words or actions. They are: rejection of (or weak commitment to) democratic rules of the game, denial of the legitimacy of political opponents, toleration or encouragement of violence, and readiness to curtail civil liberties of opponents. As these examples make clear, one does not need to measure vague ideas such as the attribution of "cosmic proportions" or the assumption of a "unified whole" (Hawkins, 2009, p. 1062)—as populism indexes do—to identify authoritarian actors. By focusing on authoritarian ideas, it is possible to eliminate the complexity of the concept of populism and still identify political actors' authoritarian preferences.

Identifying authoritarian preferences is not the only possible analytical advantage of populism. In the remainder of this work, I will follow a similar line of argument to search for stronger gains of this concept. Raising other possibilities, I will further explore how populism could contribute to explanations of democratic backsliding that works through

actors' decisions and actions. The next section has an actor-based perspective on democratic backsliding because it approaches the actions and decisions that chief executives take to erode democracy. In chapter 3, this perspective appears because legitimating processes happen due to the discourses and ideas propagated by politicians.

2.2 Populism as an Institutional Pattern

I have concluded that populism can add a weak analytical advantage to democratic backsliding studies by recognizing authoritarian preferences. Does this concept help to identify a distinctive pattern of institutional change in democratic backsliding processes? Can it be a stronger analytical advantage of the concept? Following the argumentation in the previous section, I will assume that political actors' authoritarian preferences are populist or non-populist. The distinction between these two kinds of preferences would be the reasoning and discourses behind the measures that lead to democratic backsliding. However, the difference at the discursive level does not necessarily appear at the institutional level. On the contrary, the distinctive effects of populism on the pattern of democratic backsliding remain to be proven.

On the one hand, populism may induce the weakening of specific democratic dimensions or the use of particular strategies in this regard. In this circumstance, the analytical advantage of populism would be distinguishing an institutional pattern in democratic backsliding cases. On the other hand, the presence of populism can make no difference during democratic backsliding processes. If what matters in successful attempts to erode democracy is the window of opportunity each authoritarian-leaning politician finds in power, populism will not predict any particularity at the institutional level. To test these possibilities, I carried out a case selection with clearly defined criteria and compared a populist and a non-populist case of democratic backsliding.

2.2.1 Case Selection

The quantification of democratic backsliding episodes can be tricky. One way to overcome this challenge is using the loss of democratic quality measured by reliable indexes as proxy ([Huq and Ginsburg, 2018](#), p. 120). For this purpose, I used the Liberal Democracy Index (LDI) of V-Dem and replicated the approach of [Lührmann and Lindberg \(2019\)](#).¹ I

¹ I could have replicated other methods. [Erdmann \(2011\)](#) uses the Freedom House Index to detect regime change and quality change within regimes. [Mainwaring and Bizzarro \(2019\)](#) uses the Electoral Democracy Index (V-Dem) to classify the outcomes of third-wave democracies into five categories: breakdowns, erosions, stagnations, advances, and highly democratic without major advances. Finally, [Tomini \(2018\)](#) identifies regime change toward democracy, hybrid regime, or autocracy using three different databases: Freedom House, Polity IV, and V-Dem. Among available databases, I choose to use V-Dem because it is more accurate and allows us to identify small variations in scores. I did not follow the method of [Mainwaring and Bizzarro \(2019\)](#) because their typology does not apprehend my

was interested in democratic backsliding processes in relatively stable liberal democracies, which I regard as the most unexpected and interesting cases to study. Therefore, taking advantage of a natural division of the data, I only considered the countries that scored above 0.5 in the LDI for at least 16 years before the backsliding episode's beginning.

A potential episode of democratic backsliding begins when a decrease of at least 0.01 occurs in the LDI from one year to another. An episode continues while there are further declines of the same magnitude. A process comes to an end if there is an increase of at least 0.02 in the LDI or if the LDI does not drop by 0.01 or more for four consecutive years. Thus, to reflect their slow nature, I allowed up to three years of temporary stagnation of the LDI in the middle of the episodes of democratic backsliding. Finally, I considered the episode significant if, from its first to its last year, the LDI decreased by at least 0.1.²

To identify which heads of government in charge of declining countries were or were not populists, I used the Global Populism Database (GPD), which gathers scores for the level of populism in chief executives' speeches and terms ([Hawkins et al., 2019](#)). To arrive at the populism score of each term of office, coders rate at least four speeches of chief executives per term and average them. I chose to use the GPD because the main authors of the ideational approach constructed it, and it seeks to operationalize the ideational definition of populism. Therefore, it is consistent with this work's comprehension of the concept.³ Although the GPD's codebook does not offer a score from which the speeches and terms are considered populists, 0.75 is the accepted threshold in the literature ([Silva, 2019](#), p. 283).

With the GPD, I identified the periods within each democratic backsliding episode that had only populist incumbents or non-populist incumbents. In the case a backsliding country had two non-populist governments in a row, all years of these tenures were considered part of the same non-populist period. Following this criterion, I can ensure that I will compare periods that had or did not have populist incumbents from beginning to end. This choice implies that some episodes have started before the selected periods, and some have continued after that. Yet, I can extend the analysis to the entire period when convenient because I know the episodes' initial and final years. Table 1 shows the periods of populism and non-populism within each democratic backsliding episode subject

definition of democratic backsliding. Finally, I did not follow the method of [Tomini \(2018\)](#) because the author does not detail it in his book.

² [Lührmann and Lindberg \(2019\)](#) identify episodes of autocratization from 1900 to 2017 using the Electoral Democracy Index (EDI). Their approach differs from mine in one minor specification. They allow up to four years of temporary stagnation in the EDI, while I allow up to three years in the LDI. The adjustment from 4 to 3 years of temporary stagnation does not alter the set of countries each approach selects, only the initial or final years of some democratic backsliding episodes. Because of differences in the EDI and LDI's composition, the adjustment was necessary to seize the exact moment the quality of democracies declines.

³ As introduced in Chapter 1, only two databases classify chief executives as populist or non-populist with a global reach: Global Populism Database and Populists in Power. Between these two options, I chose the one closest to the ideational approach.

to comparison according to the case selection's specifications.

Table 2 – Populist and non-populists periods within democratic backsliding episodes

| Populists | | | | | |
|----------------|----------------------|--------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------|
| Country | Episode ^a | Δ LDI ^b | Head of government ^c | Period by term ^d | GPI ^e |
| Hungary | 2010-2015 | -0.28 | Viktor Orbán | 2010-2015 | 0.87 |
| Poland | 2015-2019 | -0.32 | Beata Szydło | 2015-2016 | 0.86 |
| USA | 2015-2019 | -0.14 | Donald Trump | 2017-2019 | 0.78 |
| Venezuela | 1998-2005 | -0.43 | Hugo Chávez | 1999-2005 | 1.92 |
| Non-populists | | | | | |
| Country | Episode | Δ LDI | Head of government | Period by term | GPI |
| Brazil | 2014-2019 | -0.28 | Dilma Rousseff | 2014-2015 | 0.17 |
| | | | Michel Temer | 2016-2018 | 0.00 |
| | | | Jair Bolsonaro | 2019 | 0.50 |
| Bulgaria | 2016-2019 | -0.14 | Boyko Borisov | 2016-2019 | 0.14 |
| Czech Republic | 2013-2019 | -0.15 | Petr Necas | 2013 | 0.12 |
| | | | Bohuslav Sobotka | 2014-2016 | 0.00 |
| India | 2014-2019 | -0.20 | Narendra Modi | 2014-2019 | 0.55 |

Notes: ^a Total length of the democratic backsliding episode. ^b Total variation of the Liberal Democracy Index from the year prior to the episode to the ending year of the episode (or 2019, latest year available in the database). ^c Heads of government in power during the episode (only those who compose consecutive periods of populism or non-populism). ^d Populist or non-populist period within the democratic backsliding episode, separated by the term of office of each head of government. ^e Index of populism according to the Global Populism Database.

In the last step of the case selection, the guiding principle was similarities among cases derived from the country's region. By choosing country-periods from the same region, I could assume that populism is a critical distinction between them. Although "region" does not have explanatory power alone, it is a meaningful criterion for case selection because it indicates similarities between historical experiences, economic structures, diffusion of authoritarian institutions, and design of democratization (Bunce, 2000, p. 722). Conversely, choosing cases from different regions would increase the chance of comparing significantly different episodes in all these factors.

I did not select the United States or India because they do not have regional equivalents in the other group. The Brazilian democratic backsliding includes the terms of three different chief executives, which makes a comparison between Brazil and its regional equivalent (Venezuela) complex. From the populist periods, I selected Hungary for having non-populist regional equivalents and for having a longer backsliding episode than Poland. Since democratic backsliding processes have an incremental and slow nature, I opted for picking longer periods. From the non-populist cases, I chose Bulgaria to analyze in-depth. Considering the magnitude of the loss of democratic quality (Δ LDI) for the elapsed time, the Bulgarian democratic backsliding is more comparable to Hungary than the Czech one.

By the measurement criteria of democratic backsliding episodes, Hungary experienced two episodes from 2010 to 2019. The first one, which Table 1 shows, started in 2010

and ended in 2015. The approach I used to measure backsliding episodes establishes that an episode comes to an end if there is an increase of at least 0.02 in the LDI from one year to the next, which happened in Hungary from 2015 to 2016. However, between 2017 and 2019, the decreases in the LDI in Hungary reveal that the country suffered another episode of democratic backsliding. The division between the two episodes results solely from the approach I used. In general, the literature considers that the Hungarian democracy has been suffering decays in quality continuously since 2010. Nevertheless, I chose to follow the approach and study in-depth only the first phase of the democratic backsliding episode in Hungary while occasionally referring to the entire period and pointing out some events that happened after 2015.

The Global Populism Database is a systematic effort to measure populism through a clear definition. However, as one could expect from a contested concept, doubts can arise regarding the cases classified as populists. While portraying Hungary as a populist example seems consensual between scholars, finding out non-populist cases is a more complex effort. For instance, if I have drawn on alternative strategies to identify populism, I could have framed all cases the GPD places as non-populist as the opposite. Relying on classifications of Czech parties, I could have argued that the Czech period specified here is populist since Necas and Sobotka formed coalitions with parties considered populist ([Havlík and Voda, 2018](#)). In the same vein, I could have based my selection on some papers and opinion articles that place Modi, Bolsonaro⁴ and Borisov as populist leaders (e.g., [Heller, 2020](#); [Zankina, 2016](#)). Here, the challenge is to find leaders who were never called populists.

The difficulty of finding uncontroversial non-populist cases prompts two considerations. First, it elucidates that the multiple existing definitions of populism have led to diverging classifications of populist actors both inside and outside academia. Second, it reveals the hazy connection between democratic backsliding and populism. All cases of backsliding identified here were cited at some point as examples of populism as if some authors intending to address democratic backsliding observed populism instead—despite not using a rigorous method for measuring it. Nevertheless, the only option scholars have to move beyond initial conceptual discussions and advance in research is to rely on a definition and measurement strategy they consider adequate. Therefore, here I build upon the most common approach to populism in political science to set Hungary as a populist case and Bulgaria as a non-populist case. As the GPD shows, I will compare the governments of two politicians that objectively share different visions of a Manichaean world and the will of the people.

⁴ The database ended in 2019. For this reason, it only analyzes Bolsonaro's speeches until his first year in office. This limitation may affect the score he receives in the index.

2.2.2 Case Analysis

Prime minister Viktor Orbán in Hungary and Boyko Borisov in Bulgaria are different regarding the types of discourses they share. Nevertheless, they took many similar actions to decay the quality of democracy in their countries. In both cases, the Executive branch and the power core around it are to blame for the backsliding process, and they benefited from the same movements that generated the erosion of democratic institutions. The severity of the processes does vary between the countries. However, in both of them, the rule of law, the liberal rights to speech and association, and competitive elections were weakened.

Hungary is the worst-case scenario of democratic backsliding among consolidated democracies. When Orbán and his party (Fidesz, Hungarian Civic Alliance) gained power in 2010, they captured the state at an alarming rate. It is not easy to find another case with the completeness of the Hungarian one, let alone with the same initial quality of democratic institutions. On the one hand, any other example of democratic backsliding in Central-eastern Europe is less intense—Bulgaria included. On the other hand, when the Hungarian case presents so many actions that diminished the quality of democracy, it becomes a kind of ideal type of democratic backsliding other cases can be compared with.

Although I will not reach conclusions about what enabled or precluded the backsliding processes in Hungary and Bulgaria—populism included—it is relevant to discuss the windows of opportunity each prime ministers found in government. In Hungary, two factors elucidate how Orbán could foster such an overt backsliding process: the Hungarian electoral system and the rules for changing the Constitution. During democratization, Hungarian constitutional drafters were worried about two situations: deadlocks in parliament caused by the election of many small parties; and the approval of a rigid Constitution that the future democratic political class could not update ([Bánkuti et al., 2012](#), p. 138). Thus, to handle these concerns, politicians opted for a majoritarian electoral system, in which larger parties gained additional seats in parliament; and they decided that the rules for changing the Constitution would be permissive ([Bánkuti et al., 2012](#), p. 138). A single two-thirds majority could change any part of the constitutional text.

When Fidesz gained the election in 2009, it obtained 53% of the vote share. However, because of the majoritarian bias of the Hungarian electoral system, the party made 68% of the seats in parliament—a two-thirds majority ([Bánkuti et al., 2012](#), p. 139). As a result, preferences were aligned across the Legislative and the Executive branches in a way that suppressed the restrictive powers of parliament over Executive agendas. Consequently, Fidesz could change the Constitution when it prohibited any of their urges to take place. In Hungary, the complete annulment of the constraining functions of the legislature and the Constitution formed the perfect scenario for the capture of the state that happened

afterward.

In Bulgaria, old institutional problems underpin the ongoing democratic backsliding process. Even after democratization, the country never solved entrenched issues with the rule of law, and severe corruption problems have always existed. However, as set by reports and indexes on the quality of democracy, the situation worsened since the third term of prime minister Boyko Borisov (2017-on). Taking advantage of structural institutional defects and avoiding reforms, Borisov and his party (GERB, Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria) started to stick to power through authoritarian strategies. More than changing the rules to remain in power, the incumbent administration seized opportunities already available in the legal and political landscapes to capture the state and diminish its chance of electoral loss.

This chapter aims to describe the efforts in Hungary and Bulgaria that qualified both countries as instances of democratic backsliding, underscoring the similarities and differences between them. For this purpose, I will build upon [Huq and Ginsburg](#)'s five pathways of democratic backsliding, which organize the common strategies heads of government take to erode democracy. They are: (i) using constitutional amendments to marginalize political opposition and concentrate power; (ii) eliminating institutional checks by controlling independent oversight institutions; (iii) politicizing the executive power by appointing loyalist officials to bureaucratic positions; (iv) contracting the public sphere by chasing the media and civil society; and (v) eliminating political competition through legislative changes and intimidation ([Huq and Ginsburg, 2018](#)).

2.2.2.1 Hungary

The complete transformation of the Hungarian political regime was not a talking point in the 2009 general elections ([Kovács and Scheppelé, 2018](#), p. 2; [Pap, 2017](#), p. 12). Nevertheless, prime minister Viktor Orbán stated to modify rules and confront conventions from the moment he assumed power. On the one hand, the changes brought about by his government in the first year and a half in power prepared the ground for the proposal of a new Constitution. When the ruling party introduced the Constitutional draft in parliament in 2011, many political actors and institutions with prerogatives to question the initiative were already impaired. On the other hand, the new Constitution acted for deepening and consolidating the previous state capture. As a result, future coalitions will have to achieve extraordinary electoral success to revert the alterations that depleted the Hungarian democratic quality.

When Orbán came to power, he first targeted the Constitutional Court. Up to that point, the Constitutional Court was one of the strongest institutions in the Hungarian democracy: any citizen could request the constitutionality review of any law ([Pap, 2017](#), p. 19). Not coincidentally, Fidesz amended the Constitution already in 2010 to be able

to appoint judges without the agreement of other political parties (Bánkuti et al., 2012, p. 139). It also restricted the Constitutional Court’s jurisdiction, disallowing it to rule over fiscal issues—even when they violated fundamental rights. Not yet satisfied, the parliament increased the number of seats in the Court from 11 to 15. As a result, the ruling party’s representatives could nominate and elect seven loyal judges in less than two years (Bánkuti et al., 2012, p. 140).

The appointment of judges and changes in the Supreme Court’s operating rules undermined its oversight function in a short period. Today, the Court does not accept as a valid precedent any Court decision made before 2012—when the incumbent administration had not yet appointed most of its judges. Besides, the rules that define who can make requests of abstract constitutional review to the Supreme Court have never been more restrictive (Pap, 2017; Kovács and Schepple, 2018). Consequently, citizens and civil society organizations cannot question the Supreme Court about the government’s possible constitutional violations.

Alongside the attacks on the Constitutional Court, Orbán’s government also targeted media freedom. In 2010, the parliament updated media regulations and restructured the media regulatory body, establishing the National Media and Infocommunications Authority (NMHH) and the Media Council. Orbán was granted the right to appoint the head of the NMHH, who was also the head of the Council. All other members of the Council were Fidesz loyalists elected by the parliament. The new regulation put into operation by these two bodies weakened the media freedom in the country in one go. Vested with great powers, the Council can allocate radio frequency distributions following broad criteria (Bajomi-Lázár, 2013, p. 82), nominate all public media executive directors (Freedom House, 2012), and impose fines when media outlets do not produce a “balanced” news coverage (Bánkuti et al., 2012, p. 140).

Furthermore, the new regulation determined that all public service broadcasters were obliged to have the same news coverage. The agency responsible for producing the news coverage—the Hungarian News Agency (MTI)—is funded by the parliament and filled with pro-Fidesz journalists and directors (Bajomi-Lázár, 2013). The NMHH and the Media Council grant or refuse operating licenses for all media agencies, including online services. Finally, the regulation established overly broad exceptions to the right of journalists not to disclose their sources (Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, 2011). In addition to all these changes, libel is considered a criminal offense in Hungary, which can hinder journalists and media outlets from criticizing influential public figures.

The implementation of these regulations had noticeable consequences for the freedom of expression in Hungary. First, the Media Council prioritizes government supporters in radio frequencies’ distributions, harming independent radio stations (Polyák, 2019, p. 285) (Bajomi-Lázár, 2013, p. 82). One telling example is the struggle between the Media

Council and the long-standing Club Radio, considered the voice of the left-liberal opposition. In 2011, the Council refused to renew the station's frequency concession ([Bajomi-Lázár, 2013](#), p. 82). After three court rulings in favor of the radio, the Council granted a permanent concession of 7 years to the Club Radio. However, when the license expired again in 2020, the Media Council alleged that Club Radio had violated the country's media law and reopened the radio's frequency for bidding ([Wesolowsky, 2020](#)). This example shows how the Council exercises its power against the independent press.

Second, state media's news coverage adopted an explicit pro-government bias. Assessments show that they hear government members and the ruling party more often than they hear opposition parties ([Bajomi-Lázár, 2013](#), p. 83). Third, the Hungarian News Agency (MTI) releases for free for all media outlets the pro-government news coverage it produces. As access to free news coverage lowers the maintenance costs of media outlets that are willing to broadcast pro-government content, companies that want to produce their news independently face unfair competition. Finally, the media regulatory body's decision-making power over the content and licensing of media companies creates an environment of self-censorship that also undermines media freedom.

The regulatory changes that the government approved in 2010 and the climate of intimidation against journalism had long-lasting consequences for the private media sector in Hungary. For instance, nonpartisan media outlets often fail to secure revenue since private firms that wish to keep good relations with the government avoid advertising with them ([Kornai, 2015](#), p. 40). On the one hand, independent media outlets are subject to libel suits and selective audits from tax authorities, which the government uses to intimidate them ([European Federation of Journalists, 2019](#)). On the other hand, the government rewards companies that broadcast pro-government content, redirecting taxpayer money—including EU funds—to advertise with them. In this scenario, many private media outlets went bankrupt or were bought by government supporters.

One of the long-term effects of the attacks on media freedom was the concentration of media ownership in the hands of few pro-government investors. Due to the financial struggles of independent media companies, loyalist investors started to buy media conglomerates that were once critical of the government, shift their editorial line, fire the professional staff, and even shut whole newspapers down. The Media Council and the Hungarian Competition Authority—acting on behalf of the government—did not prevent the formation of media oligopolies. Consequently, the offering of media content critical of the government decreased. One example of this situation is the political daily *Népszabadság*, which used to have the highest circulation figures in Hungary. In 2014, a Fidesz-friendly businessman brought the media company that owned it. In 2016, it was closed overnight ([Polyák, 2019](#), p. 286).

The measures taken by the Hungarian government in 2010 and 2011 were not restricted to assailing the separation of powers or media freedom but also reached the

electoral dimension of democracy. For example, one of Fidesz's main draft bills in 2010 aimed to control the body that supervises the legality of the Hungarian elections. To prematurely end the term of the hitherto members of the National Election Committee and nominate loyalists, Fidesz approved a law requiring all Election Committee members to be reelected after every National Elections ([Pap, 2017](#), p. 17). With this shortcut, they could elect all members of a body that makes critical decisions. Notably, the Committee approves or rejects proposals for referendums, a participatory mechanism that the opposition can no longer use ([Bánkuti et al., 2012](#), p. 140).

The Hungarian electoral system also went through transformations. Fidesz members needed to guarantee a constitutional majority in the 2014 elections to move forward with their goals. To overcome uncertainties, the parliament approved a law in 2011 that eliminated the second round in parliamentary elections, a measure that benefits the relatively biggest party; allowed out-of-country voting in a moment in which Fidesz's members had reasons to believe that ethnic Hungarians with no permanent residence in the country would overwhelmingly vote for them; and redrew constituency boundaries, which raises suspicions of gerrymandering ([László and Krekó, 2020](#), p. 2-5). In 2014, the government coalition obtained 44.54% of the proportional vote, which resulted in 66.83% of the seats in parliament ([Goat and Banuta, 2019](#)). In this context, Fidesz arguably crafted modifications to increase its vote share.

When the Hungarian government started the constitutional endeavor in 2011, democracy in Hungary was already weakened. Thus, the ruling party could seize the window of opportunity to grab even more power. The constitutional making process in the Hungarian parliament did not follow a negotiated path. Instead, Fidesz took advantage of its supermajority to change the existing rules and speed up the proceedings. In fact, the constitution in place in 2011 did not allow a two-thirds majority to begin a new constitutional-making process. However, it allowed a two-thirds majority to change any constitutional rule—including the one about constitutional processes—which Fidesz did. With this move, Fidesz's members could present the draft of the new constitution. The draft was introduced in parliament as a private member's bill, which eliminated the requirement of consulting the opposition parties and citizens. With this last maneuver, the ruling party approved the new constitution and did not have to compromise with the opposition.

The most tangible impact of the approval of the new constitution appears in the weakening of the rule of law and the independence of the judiciary. The new text lowered the mandatory retirement age of judges and prosecutors in the country. Thus, the government could install allies in these senior positions. Besides, the new constitution reformulated the administration of courts and the Prosecution Service, allowing the judiciary to act in line with the executive. The creation of the National Judicial Office (NJO) was an important

way of achieving this result. The NJO's president selects the inferior courts' presidents and can appoint, promote, demote, or relocate any judge in the country. Of course, the fact that a loyalist holds this position hampers the independence of the judiciary. All the NJO's prerogatives can be used to penalize or reward judges according to their loyalty to the government.

The Prosecution Service works through the same logic. The Prosecutor General is not subject to any check. She manages the career of all prosecutors and can transfer, dismiss, promote, and discipline them alone. At any time, she can terminate investigations or decide not to take a case to court. Individual prosecutors can receive instruction from her in any case or have their cases reassigned to other prosecutors on her decision ([Transparency International Hungary, 2021](#)) The Executive branch chooses the Prosecutor General for a mandate of 9 years, and the parliament approves the nomination by a two-thirds majority vote. Again, Fidesz has placed an ally in this position. As a result, investigations involving people close to the government hardly progress ([Kornai, 2015](#), p. 35).

Two examples suggest how the judicial system may be rigged in Hungary: the Elios company case and the charges pressed against the opposition leader András Fekete-Győr. The first story begins in 2009, when István Tiborcz, son-in-law of Prime Minister Orbán, co-founded the Elios company. In May 2010, the company won its first public tender to implement lighting systems with LED technology—although it did not have previous experience in the field. Between 2010 and 2014, the company implemented more than 30 projects of the same kind, all founded by the European Union. Its profitability skyrocketed during this time.

Problems started to emerge in 2015, when Hungarian investigative journalists reported irregularities in the public procurement processes involving Elios. A firm called Sistrade Ltd. had prepared the tender documentation of most municipalities that hired Elios's public lighting. This consultancy was owned by a business partner of István Tiborcz, Endre Hamar, who could have drafted the documents to benefit Elios. Besides, journalists found evidence that the bidders that lost the tendering for Elios were later hired as subcontractors, which would indicate collusion.

After the case made the news, opposition parties requested that the Prosecution Service opened an investigation. The Prosecution Service briefly investigated the case. However, it terminated the investigation shortly after alleging that no irregularities were found. In 2018, the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF) sent a formal criminal complaint to the Prosecution Service pushing for the reopening of the investigation. Four months later, the Prosecutor General informed that he would close the case again due to the absence of crime ([Transparency International Hungary, 2019](#)). At one go, the Elios case illustrates the Prosecution Service's partiality, the misuse of European Union funds, and

the prevalent corruption under Orbán’s government.

We can interpret the prevalence of corruption in Hungary as another consequence of eliminating control institutions. According to Transparency International, the country’s perception of anti-corruption performance has been decreasing sharply since 2012 ([Transparency International, 2021](#)). Because the national government centralized power and politicized the bureaucracy, powerful politicians can favor oligarchies and benefit from their economic success without worrying about investigations. In this context, “money-making becomes possible based not on market performance but on political connections” ([Martin and Ligeti, 2018](#), p. 181). Companies run by individuals not connected to the incumbent administration face unpredictable political risks and regulatory environment changes. Companies with ties with the political elite get public decisions favorable to them and get rid of investigations.

Citizens who want to protest against the government have more reasons for concern. For example, the Prosecution Service wasted no time in pressing charges against András Fekete-Győr, the leader of the opposition party Momentum. In December 2018, he took part in a demonstration in front of the Hungarian Parliament that escalated into violence and teargas shooting by the police. Along with other suspects—including a local representative of Momentum in Budapest—, the Prosecutor Service accused him of throwing smoke bombs and bottles at the policemen who were protecting the building ([Hungary Today, 2020](#)). If András Fekete-Győr was found guilty, he will likely face a suspended prison sentence and not be arrested. Nevertheless, the incisive action of the Prosecution Service in a minor case contrasts with its inaction regarding corruption cases that involve the government’s allies. Besides, the recurrence of cases like this can intimidate citizens and civil society organizations, curtailing their right to demonstrate.

Indeed, the relationship between the incumbent administration and civil society organizations is often conflicted. Member of the Hungarian government—including the prime minister himself—have long been depicting non-government organizations as agents opposed to national interests ([Civil Liberties Union for Europe, 2017](#)). The most intense blow against these organizations took place in 2017. This year, the parliament approved a law requiring that all NGOs receiving donations from abroad above a certain amount registered with public authorities. Now, NGOs must publicize their funding sources and exhibit the label “foreign-funded” in their materials, including websites. Failure to comply can lead to fines, penalization of employees, and the dissolution of organizations ([Helsinki Commission Report, 2020](#)). The law’s alleged goal was to combat money laundering and terrorist financing. However, its immediate result was further decreases in the space of the public sphere.

Finally, the government shrank the space of the public sphere through another strategy: restricting academic freedom and the autonomy of universities. In 2017, Orbán’s

government declared war against the Central European University (CEU), a U.S.-chartered university based in Budapest. In April of this year, Fidesz approved a bill in parliament that established new criteria which foreign universities should meet to operate in Hungary. In practice, the law mainly affected the CEU and put at risk its educational activities in the country. Citizens in Hungary and worldwide—including 20 Nobel laureates—stood up for the university ([Enyedi, 2018](#), p. 1067-1068). The European Commission requested the prime minister to drop the law and took Hungary to court. Nevertheless, the CEU decided to transfer its operations to Vienna instead of complying with all the new requirements the law created. In this case, the Hungarian government managed to build a “legal limbo” to force a university out of the country ([Bárd, 2020](#), p. 93).

In Hungary, the government repeatedly used some tools to grab power and defuse the opposition. In several situations it terminated mandates prematurely, fulfilled bureaucratic vacancies with loyalists, and created new government agencies that work with partiality to benefit the incumbent administration. Other examples follow the same scheme. In 2012, a new judicial body replaced the Supreme Court and its president was prematurely dismissed ([Pap, 2017](#), p. 20). The state audit office, responsible for investigating public funds misuse, has been revoking opposition parties’ state funds and imposing fines upon them disproportionately ([Kovács, 2019](#)). Besides, many agencies and commissions were packed with Fidesz-appointees, as the National Bank, the Budget Council, and the Ombudsman Office ([Huq and Ginsburg, 2018](#), p. 130).

In sum, the democratic backsliding process in Hungary does not have an isolated episode that anchors the end of democracy. Up until today, the Executive gradually consolidates its dominance over other branches and independent institutions. On the one hand, the European Union Commissions have consistently reported the undemocratic frame of the government’s proposed measures, and citizens organized street protests in several moments. As a result, Fidesz was forced to back down more than once during these years. On the other hand, the weakening of democratic institutions in Hungary was remarkably effective in the early years of Orbán’s government. With the constitutionalization of rules that benefit the incumbent administration and the ruling party’s advantages in the electoral system, Hungary is now advanced in the path of autocratization.

2.2.2.2 Bulgaria

The worsening of democratic indexes in Bulgaria was first noticed in 2016. Except for the period between January and May 2017, when Ognyan Gerdzhikov served as an interim Prime Minister, Boyko Borisov (GERB) has been in power throughout the Bulgarian democratic backsliding. Since 2009, his party won an election after another. However, unlike Fidesz in Hungary, GERB could never control the Constitution Court or the legislature. The Constitutional Court in Bulgaria effectively constrains the Executive

branch, and the fact that the parliament does not elect the majority of its members reinforces its independence ([Engelbrekt and Kostadinova, 2020](#), p. 242). Besides, as I will recount here, GERB does not always win the vote in parliament. Nevertheless, the Bulgarian government still managed to move forward with authoritarian measures in the last years.

To begin comparing the most similar aspects of the Hungarian and Bulgarian democratic backsliding, I will outline the politicization of the judiciary and the Prosecution Service. In Bulgaria, the Supreme Judicial Council (SJC) manages the career of all judges and prosecutors, doing a function comparable to that of NJO in Hungary. The parliament elects the majority of its members, and judges and prosecutors elect the minority. The consequence of this institutional arrangement is clear: the governing majority can choose the officials that will make highly significant decisions. Namely, the SJC elects the presidents of the two Supreme Courts and the Prosecutor General. It also determines judges and prosecutor's appointments, promotions, demotions, and relocations ([Slavov, 2021](#)).

Indeed, as GERB solidified in power, it filled the SJC with loyalists and created a climate of fear among judges ([European Commission, 2020](#)). In 2015, the parliament approved an amendment to the Constitution that strengthened the powers of the Inspectorate, a structure suited for investigating judges and prosecutors. This body can now examine their property declarations and investigate conflicts of interest. However, the independence of the Inspectorate is discredited. Its members are elected by parliament and act under the request of the SJC. Thus, it can easily become a tool to threaten deviating judiciary members ([Ceeli Institute, 2020](#)). Besides, the Bulgarian Judges Association denounces that the government already uses tax audits to this goal. According to the organization, tax authorities disproportionately target judges that rule against the government interests ([Ceeli Institute, 2020](#)).

In another attempt to curtail the independence of the judiciary, the ruling coalition proposed an amendment to the Judicial System Act in 2017 that would decrease the funding sources of judges and prosecutors' professional organizations. Alleging to combat "external intervention", the draft amendment established that these professional organizations could only receive donations from their members, which prohibited funding from EU programs and could disable their operation in practice ([Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, 2017](#)). Judges, prosecutors, and non-government organizations opposed the draft, which was later defeated. They considered that it was intended to weaken the professional organizations that act for the independence of the judiciary ([Bulgarian Judges Association, 2017](#)).

Prosecutors face additional problems internally. The Prosecution Service is headed by the Prosecutor General (PG), elected by the SJC. The PG can decide to begin criminal investigations against any person or company or refuse to do so even if there are reasons to proceed ([Ganev, 2018](#), p. 98). She also has a decisive influence on the career of prosecutors

and can annul or amend their individual acts ([Slavov, 2021](#)). The independence of the Prosecution Service seemed weak under the last two PG. In 2017, the PG Sotir Tzatzarov was accused of pressuring a private media outlet to stop criticizing the government ([Cheresheva, 2017](#)). In 2019, the SJC elected the PG Ivan Geshev, who constantly criticizes the media, the civil society, and even the opposition ([Perry, 2019](#)).

The appointment of Geshev did not go unscathed. Instead, the perception that his nomination was a further step in capturing the Prosecutor's Office boosted massive protests. Demonstrators called on the president of Bulgaria to veto the nomination. President Rumen Radev, a Borisov's opponent elected by popular vote in 2017, did so. Nevertheless, the SJC overturned the veto and appointed Geshev anyway ([Europost, 2019](#)). Less than one year later, the Prosecution Service raided the Presidential Office and arrested Radev's advisers under an investigation of influence-peddling ([Okov, 2020](#)). The police operation culminated in the biggest protest wave Bulgaria had ever seen, and thousands of citizens went to the streets to demonstrate their dissatisfaction with the perceived partiality of the Prosecution Service ([Slavov, 2021](#)).

At the time of this episode, Geshev already had a tarnished reputation. In 2017, an amendment to the Criminal Procedure Code had established that the Specialized Criminal Court and the Specialized Prosecution would have exclusive jurisdiction over corruption cases against high-ranking officials. Gashev was appointed the head of the Specialized Prosecution and was responsible for its operations. In 2018, the Specialized Prosecution arrested Desislava Ivancheva, the opposition mayor of a Sofia district, in a highly publicized police action. She was sentenced to 20 years in prison for taking a bribe in a municipal contract—an unprecedented sentence for corruption in the history of Bulgaria. Later on, journalists revealed that the main witness of the case had been a business partner of Geshev's wife ([Engelbrekt and Kostadinova, 2020](#), p. 248). On this account, this case discredited Gashev's work and warned society that the government was using anti-corruption structures as a political repression tool.

Corruption is relevant facet of the Bulgarian democratic backsliding. The country is continuously at the bottom of corruption indexes among EU member states ([Transparency International, 2021](#)). The democratization process in Bulgaria did not stop the control of businessmen over state institutions and their connections with senior government officials and politicians ([Engelbrekt and Kostadinova, 2020](#), p. 99). As in Hungary, political connections determine the success of businesses in the country. On the one hand, members of the ruling party know they will not be targets of investigations from the Prosecutor Service and feel free to demand bribes and favors ([Ganev, 2018](#), p. 98). On the other hand, powerful economic elites are interested in manipulating public tenders and establishing cartels ([Engelbrekt and Kostadinova, 2020](#), p. 99). In this scenario, the support of the Bulgarian oligarchies to GERB and Borisov is in the best interests of all parties concerned.

This situation puts Bulgaria under constant pressure from the European Union to increase the fight against corruption. After the amendment to the Criminal Procedure Code in 2017 was not enough to convict corruption cases, the Bulgarian parliament approved the creation of a new anti-corruption commission in 2018 responsible for investigating senior public officers. However, instead of meeting EU requirements, the parliament designed it as another tool for expanding the government's hold on power. First, all of its members are elected by a simple majority in parliament. Second, it can open investigations and gather private information voluntarily. Third, it can confiscate properties without prior conviction, only on behalf of a "reasonable assumption" about the unlawful acquisition of assets ([National Assembly of Bulgaria, 2018](#)). Since 2019, the president of the anti-corruption commission is Sotir Tzatzarov, the former PG who was accused of pressuring an independent media outlet.

Since its creation, the anti-corruption commission has been accused of lacking independence and impartiality ([European Commission, 2020](#)). Indeed, one of its first investigations targeted the publisher and owner of critical media outlets Ivo Prokoviev. Investigators accused him of illegally acquiring a mining company during Bulgaria's transition to market economy almost two decades earlier. The fact that a final court decision had already established that no wrongdoings were found in the privatization process did not matter. In 2017, the commission froze his and his companies' assets. Not coincidentally, Prokoviev's weekly newspaper *Capital* and news website *Dnevnik* are not afraid of reporting corruption scandals involving government members ([Campbell, 2018](#)).

Prokoviev's case exemplifies the shrinking of media freedom in Bulgaria and the climate of intimidation that prevails among independent publishers and journalists. GERB did not change laws or created new regulatory authorities. Nevertheless, private media companies were brought by government loyalists and state owned ones are commanded by them ([Ganev, 2018](#), p. 96). The most prominent example of the former trend is MP Delyan Peevski, who own several media outlets and 80% of all distribution market in the country ([Union of Publishers in Bulgaria, 2018](#)). The "media mogul of Bulgaria", as he is known, belongs to the opposition party MRF, but has close ties with prime minister Borisov. The concentration of media ownership is one of the most similar developments in Hungary and Bulgaria.

In parallel to the ownership shift, media outlets became more dependent on state money. Since private advertising revenue is not enough, many companies sell ad space to ministries or local governments ([Davies, 2020](#)). In this context, the ruling political class chooses the outlets that will receive public money based on their willingness to become less critical of the government. EU structural funds for communication are also allocated for pro-government media, which helps to undermine independent companies ([Campbell, 2018](#)). In turn, media owners prefer not to displease the government to secure financial

sustainability ([European Commission, 2020](#)). Furthermore, Bulgaria lacks transparency regarding media outlets' ownership, which hinders citizens from making informed decisions about the outlets they will consume ([European Commission, 2020](#)).

The political persecution of private companies extends beyond Prokopiev's conglomerate. For instance, the newspaper Sega went through a full tax audit in 2015, some days after prime minister Borisov complained about its political coverage. The audit was widely read as an intimidation attempt at that time. In another example of the influence of the government in private media companies, Deputy Prime Minister Valeri Simeonov publicly threatened to get the journalist Viktor Nikolaev fired from Nova TV in 2017. Nikolaev had asked some questions about the purchase of an aircraft by the government ([Freedom House, 2018](#)). The journalist was not fired at the time, but a Bulgarian businessman brought the Nova Broadcasting Group in 2019. As a result, the television editorial policy has now a pro-government bias ([Freedom House, 2020](#)).

Finally, the Bulgarian government also compromised the independence of state-controlled media. As happened in Hungary, the Bulgarian media regulatory body—whose majority of members are elected by parliament—placed loyalists in the national television and radio. Consequently, these outlets acquired a pro-government bias and started to persecute independent workers. For instance, the Bulgarian National Television (BNT) purged several executives and investigative journalists that were critical of the government in 2019 ([Dziadul, 2019](#)). In the same year, the Bulgarian National Radio (BNR) suddenly took off the air a radio host that was criticizing the nomination of the new PG. These episodes express the partisanship of state-owned media ([RadioFreeEurope, 2019](#)).

Another dimension of the shrinking of the public sphere in Bulgaria is the siege on civil society organizations. In 2020, the parliament started to discuss a draft bill similar to the Hungarian law on NGOs. The bill requires that foreign-funded NGOs register with the government and declare their sources of donations. Moreover, it allows state agencies to audit these organizations financially and enables the anti-corruption commission to investigate their managers ([Bulgarian Center for Not-for-Profit Law, 2020](#)). From the moment the draft was introduced, the organized civil society and international bodies protested against its restrictive consequences for the freedom of organization ([European Commission, 2020](#)). In this context, the parliament withdrew from approving the bill—at least for now.

Concerning the electoral dimension of democracy, Borisov's party engaged in electoral reforms that possibly aimed to increase its vote share. In 2016, alleging to combat vote-buying, the parliament limited the number of out-of-country polling stations to 35 per country. The most striking consequence of this act was decreasing in 101 the number of polling stations available for Bulgarians living in Turkey ([Council of Europe, 2017](#)). In Turkey, members of the Bulgarian diaspora massively support the ethnic-Turkish

dominated party MRF—which is not in the majority coalition. Because of that, this electoral reform was interpreted as collusion on the part of majority and minority parties in parliament to weaken the MRF.

The second proposal came in 2019, when GERB got enough support in parliament to approve an old bill about the financing of political parties. The new regulation drastically reduced the state subsidy of parties while removing private and corporate contribution limits. In the long term, the measure can impair the existence of small political parties and privilege the ones connected to wealthy interest groups. More important to the Bulgarian democratic backsliding, this reform favors the ruling party, that can now take advantage of its established relationship with Bulgarian oligarchies ([Freedom House, 2020](#)).

The future of Bulgaria's democracy is uncertain. For sure, Borisov captured part of the state apparatus and rigged the functioning of democratic institutions in the country. Democracy indexes and the case study show that Bulgaria has experienced democratic backsliding since 2016. However, one should not conclude that this path is linear or irreversible. On the contrary, the EU is constantly monitoring legislative changes in the country. At the same time that the government implemented many measures that deepened the democratic backsliding process in the last years, it also reverted some others measures that the EU deemed harmful to democracy ([Engelbrekt and Kostadinova, 2020](#), p. 254). Besides, Bulgarians featured massive protests throughout 2019 and 2020 against the government's abuses. Although the declining trend regarding the quality of democracy in Bulgaria is real, it is not necessarily permanent.

2.2.3 Discussion

Bulgaria and Hungary developed comparable flaws in many of democracy's fundamental dimensions. The undermining of the rule of law and the shrinking of the public sphere took on similar developments in both cases. Furthermore, the government in both places relied on the same pathways to decrease the quality of democracy. In Bulgaria, the ruling party amended the Constitutions to strengthen state agencies that would favor its members (the Inspectorate). Although Hungary can be considered a unique case of over-constitutionalization, Bulgaria's government also draw on this strategy to increase its power. The elimination of institutional checks was more visible in Hungary since Fidesz could pack the Constitutional Court. However, GERB did the same with other judicial bodies and filled oversight institutions with loyalists as well.

Both countries engaged in the politicization of the Executive branch and the deterioration of bureaucratic autonomy. For instance, the patronage system that politically decides which companies will win public bids and advantages follows the same pattern in Hungary and Bulgaria. Besides, in both cases, state agencies serve the incumbent administrations and chase the opposition. Two similar examples are the media regulatory

bodies and the tax authorities. In Hungary, the supermajority in parliament allowed Fidesz to reform whole structures or create state agencies. In Bulgaria, the government did create the anti-corruption commission, although founding new organizations was a rarer strategy.

The governments of Hungary and Bulgaria have built a media environment favorable to them through similar steps. The capture of public broadcasters, the concentration of media ownership, and the arbitrary allocation of advertisements allowed these governments to flaw the independent media. Finally, GERB and Fidesz tried to decrease electoral competition through legislative measures. Overall, considering that the Bulgarian government had less power to move forward with authoritarian measures, I conclude that the democratic backsliding processes in both countries proceeded in similar ways, impaired comparable democratic dimensions, and relied on the same strategies and tools.

So, what differences did populism make in these processes? Regarding the pathways of democratic backsliding, populism did not depict any particularity in the Hungarian case. Orbán's ideology did not lead him to turn to specific strategies or prioritize the weakening of particular democratic dimensions. A comparison with the Bulgarian case shows that the tools and shortcuts used by chief executives are not exclusive to populists. On the contrary, one can expect that wannabe autocrats not sharing a populist discourse adopt similar actions.

Of course, populism can still stand for relevant differences beyond the one tested here. For example, my case analysis did not examine whether the policies pursued and implemented by populist and non-populist politicians vary in some meaningful way—a possible existing difference that political scientists may want to investigate. Moreover, the difference at the discursive level between populists like Orbán and non-populist like Borisov may have consequences for other dimensions of government that I have not considered here. Precisely, the next chapter discusses how populist ideas can have particular influence over the depth and likelihood of backsliding processes by legitimating authoritarian measures.

Yet, the finding that populism does not predict a pattern of institutional change is relevant for democratic backsliding studies. Given the attention populism has received in this research agenda, it would be reasonable to assume that there would be a clear difference between populist and non-populist cases, one that appears in the very institutions whose changes define democratic backsliding. However, as this chapter shows, populism does not distinguish the steps leaders take to erode democracy. If populism entails some difference in backsliding processes, it will be a more subtle one that affects their speed and extension, not their pattern.

3 The Expansion of the Ideational Approach and an Additional Analytical Advantage

The hazy connection between democratic backsliding and populism is the problem this work discusses. For democratic backsliding studies, this is a problem because scholars incur costs when mentioning populism inconsistently. For the ideational approach to populism, this problem appears in the form of a limitation of its potential. Against this backdrop, this work aims to point out clearer and more productive ways for connecting these research agendas. So far, I have approached this problem from the perspective of democratic backsliding studies. I argued that, for authors interested in democratic backsliding to mention populism beneficially, the concept would have to add some analytical advantage to their research goals. Thus, I discussed two analytical advantages that populism could bring to democratic backsliding studies: recognizing authoritarian preferences in political actors and identifying a pattern of institutional change in backsliding processes.

Neither of these analytical advantages proved to be strong enough to overcome the costs that the concept of populism brings to democratic backsliding studies. As I have shown, there is no need to mention populism to address authoritarian preferences, and chief executives with authoritarian preferences that engage in democratic backsliding, whether populist or non-populist, leave similar observable effects at democratic institutions. Adding these findings to the costs presented in chapter 1, it would be reasonable to assume that democratic backsliding studies should abandon the concept of populism once and for all. With this conclusion, I would move on to my second goal and discuss the limitation of the ideational approach and a way to overcome it.

However, with a caveat, I will still suggest another analytical advantage of populism for democratic backsliding studies. Although populist authoritarian preferences do not predict a pattern of institutional change in democratic backsliding processes, the existing distinction at the discursive level between populist and non-populist cases can still account for differences in the likelihood and the depth of this outcome. In this chapter, I will defend that scholars could interpret populism as a legitimating ideology that helps political leaders advance with authoritarian measures and impel democratic backsliding. This interpretation points to an analytical advantage of populism for democratic backsliding studies and also suggests an expansion of the ideational approach to populism—addressing both of this work’s goals.

Importantly, this chapter does not intend to prove that populism indeed facilitates the unfolding of backsliding processes. Instead, it recognizes that this relationship is open to empirical verification. For populism and democratic backsliding studies to set with

some degree of certainty the expansion of the ideational approach and the analytical advantage of populism proposed here, scholars will have to find evidence that this effect of populism exists. Here, rather than proving this causal link, my goal is to raise and detail this hypothesis and discuss how pursuing it is productive for both research agendas.

3.1 Populism as a Legitimizing Ideology

A classical view of power states that A exercises power over B when B behaves in a way she would not in the absence of the influence of A (Dahl, 1957). Initially, one can exercise power over others by putting in place a system of punishment and reward that shapes people's behavior towards a given desired goal. However, a system based entirely on force, surveillance and financial benefits is costly and unstable (Tyler, 2005, p. 211). To think about this situation, imagine a leader's attempt to rule over a polity. In order to assert her power based on coercion, she needs to sustain a coercive force that will monitor people's acts and punish detractors. She also needs to allocate resources to reward the groups that support her. Arguably, maintaining coercive forces and buying off allies is costly. Moreover, these actions do not guarantee that people do not reject this exercise of power in private or that it is sustainable in the long term.

A more stable and less costly way of exercising power exists. Instead of relying only on coercion, actors who want to influence the behavior of others can justify their goals, asserting that pursuing a certain set of actions, norms, and values is right and proper. When people believe that their actions, the norms they follow, the values they share, and the leader they respond to are proper, they comply with them voluntarily, even if they do not financially gain or lose directly from them. In this situation, an actor who wants to shape the behavior of others needs less punishment and reward, achieving a more resolute influence. This influence is built upon legitimacy, a quality of something that is widely accepted and considered natural, right, and proper (Zelditch Jr., 2006, p. 324). Power can be exercised through legitimacy because people do not act only on account of material advantages or self-preservation but also on moral considerations and beliefs (Tyler, 2005, p. 212).

When power is legitimized, it becomes authority. In general, people comply with authority and compel others to do the same—reinforcing its legitimacy. However, any authority has a limited scope of action. Normative constraints limit the extent to which an authority can exert power over others and the actions and stances that people will consider natural or proper (Zelditch Jr., 2006, p. 326). For instance, an electoral victory confers legitimacy to presidents to govern for a specified term of office. Nevertheless, it does not allow them to rule unconditionally. The popular vote does not validate that a president assumes power and demands the arrest of all opposition party members. As long

as a shared belief exists that arresting political opponents is inadequate and lies beyond the president's authority, this action will lack legitimacy. Therefore, with greater chances, citizens will demonstrate their dissatisfaction, political actors will mobilize against this decision, and public officials will refuse to follow this order. To maintain her demand and power, the president will be more dependent on instruments of coercion and reward.

Distinct sets of ideas determine the scope of action of authorities and the limits of what is considered legitimate in different ways. Although other ideologies can legitimize that presidents arrest political opponents, the example above clarifies that the democratic ideal expressed in the popular vote does not. That is because two dimensions constitute the democratic ideal that bases existing democratic regimes: the defense of the majority's will and the guarantee of the minority's rights. In this sense, democracy requires popular sovereignty (manifested in the holding of elections) as much as it requires pluralism (manifested in limited government and respect for the rights of political minorities). Thus, democratic arguments cannot legitimize actions that violate the rights of political opponents or any other institutional arrangement that comes from pluralism—as the separation of powers or equality before the law. In contrast, other sets of ideas can justify authoritarian measures and include them in the scope of action of authorities.

While political actors cannot justify authoritarian measures through democratic arguments, they can draw on other sets of ideas to this end—even if they were elected through democratic elections. For instance, rather than reminding voters that, in a democracy, freedom of the press is guaranteed, a president could resort to the idea of defending religious values to legitimize the judicial harassment of progressive journalists. In this case, a different legitimating set of ideas—or legitimating ideology—would override the democratic one to make people voluntarily accept and comply with the authoritarian measures advanced by the given authority. More formally, a legitimating ideology is a “set of justifications [...] that lead a political or social system and its authorities and institutions to be viewed as normatively or morally appropriate by the people within the system” ([Tyler, 2005](#), p. 212).

How exactly can an actor build legitimacy for elements (values, acts, etc.) that people initially contest? According to the legitimacy theory, a claim to legitimacy is successful when it builds upon elements that people already consider legitimate ([Zelditch Jr., 2006](#), p. 340). In this sense, it takes advantage of pre-given accepted values, norms, beliefs, and practices and connects them with the contested elements, expanding an authority's scope of actions. For example, people tend to accept that efficiency is a desired characteristic of processes. Thus, to legitimize a process considered unfair, one can state that the way it is structured guarantees efficiency for achieving a specific goal ([Zelditch Jr., 2006](#), p. 341). In the same vein, a president who wants to move forward with authoritarian measures can justify them by exploring, in an authoritarian manner, the values and norms that

citizens already hold. If she can justify the need for authoritarian measures through this strategy, she can build legitimacy outside democratic ideals. Populism is a well-suited ideology for legitimizing authoritarian measures. As an anti-pluralist world view, populism contradicts a constitutive part of democracy. Therefore, it can legitimize not just a few but various authoritarian measures. Arguably, several sets of ideas can occasionally justify measures that lower the quality of democracy, as the example above about the defense of religious values illustrates. Nevertheless, the populist ideology stands out among these possible justifications because its constitutive ideas contradicts defining ideas of democracy. When populists create political enemies and defend that the popular will should guide politics above all else, they prepare the ground for later justifying several acts that lead to democratic backsliding. Thus, one significant hypothesis scholars interested in democratic backsliding and populism may consider is that populism facilitates backsliding processes by helping to legitimize institutional modifications.

According to the ideational approach, a populist electoral campaign presents populist ideas to the electorate, exploring latent demands in a context of intentional failure of democratic representation and encouraging voters to adopt a populist framework. After the election of a populist politician, a large part of the electorate believes that the political system works against the people's demands, democratic procedures are impediments to the will of the people, and members of the opposition are an imminent threat to the people, among other broad ideas. Populist politicians who successfully propagated populist ideas in electoral campaigns have no reasons to stop exploiting them when they take office. On the contrary, since the electoral process demonstrated that citizens accept this set of ideas as proper, politicians can use it to justify more concrete acts that increase their power and weaken the opposition. In this process, populist politicians make use of already accepted populist ideas to legitimize authoritarian measures.

Because populism is an anti-pluralist ideology, it can easily justify the weakening of democratic institutions that limit the government's power and guarantee the rights of minorities. According to populist reasoning, the true people who must guide all political decisions are already in government; and opponents of the true people are enemies that should be treated as such. Therefore, populism denies that diversity is positive and that the exercise and the dispute of power must be regulated so that no group can oppress the rest. Conversely, it asserts that the majority's will is the only principle that should guide political decisions—even when it has high costs for opponents. As a complete anti-pluralist world-view, populism can justify a multitude of authoritarian measures.

For example, one cannot defend legislative measures that reduce the Supreme Court's oversight powers based on democratic arguments. After all, pluralism—which composes the democratic ideal—understands that mutually agreed rules and institutions should check the political force in power. In general, most citizens in a democratic regime

believe that having an independent Supreme Court is proper. However, populist ideas can change this comprehension. Unlike pluralism, populism sustains that institutions whose decisions are not taken by the majority of the people are corrupt and illegitimate. Thus, when part of the population accepts broad populist ideas, they can come to consider that seizing the Supreme Court is the right thing to do. If the electorate accepts broad populist ideas, politicians can lend their legitimacy to move forward with authoritarian measures.

Populist ideas do not automatically translate into support for concrete authoritarian actions. The perceptions, values, ideas, and beliefs that the population's majority accepts as legitimate after a successful populist campaign are, in general, more abstract than the explicit support of a bill, the creation of a new state agency, or the nomination of a person. For example, a constituency will not necessarily consider right and proper a series of legislative changes that affect the financial sustainability of media vehicles. However, if a political leader builds upon the existing belief that the elite aims to undermine her power and argues that media outlets serve this purpose, her constituency will more easily legitimize concrete measures that reduce media freedom. By connecting pre-given accepted ideas to concrete acts that diminish the quality of democracy, populism can legitimize them, facilitating the unfolding of democratic backsliding processes.

Non-populists also justify the measures they take while in office. Formal constitutional amendments, legislative changes, appointments of loyalist public officials, and other acts that decay the rule of law, liberal rights to speech and association, and competitive elections are not proposed, approved, and/or implemented in a vacuum. Instead, they require discussions, negotiations, and disclosure. In this sense, all acts are embedded in discourses that aim to validate them. Thus, other sets of ideas beyond populism can also base claims to legitimacy. For instance, a prime minister can build legitimacy for measures that diminish citizens' civil liberties based on arguments about the need for protection from a terrorist threat. Alternatively, a president can argue that the concentration of power in the Executive branch is necessary to implement fundamental reforms for the country's development. Independently of specific situations and the effectiveness of each set of ideas to justify particular ends, one can expect that non-populist politicians also try to legitimize the measures they want to take in order to increase their chance of being accomplished.

Nevertheless, among all possible sets of ideas that help politicians legitimize their power, populism is the one that seems most associated with democratic backsliding. It is likely not a coincidence that democratic backsliding studies investigate populist cases and that populism studies mention populists' authoritarian tendencies. Thus, scholars interested in democratic backsliding processes and populism in government may consider the possibility that politicians who do not have normative preferences for democracy and aim to undermine democratic institutions are more suited to do so if they promote

populist ideas. As a world-view fundamentally contrary to the whole pluralist dimension of democracy, populism may be more effective than other sets of ideas for legitimating multiple and deep authoritarian measures. Besides, this characteristic of populism could explain why many politicians who successfully erode democracy are populist.

The interpretation of populism as a legitimating ideology is entirely consistent with the ideational approach. As well as the ideational approach, theories of the legitimation of power emphasize that ideas shared through discourses are important explanatory factors in political analysis. The latter investigates how political actors draw upon preexisting perceptions, beliefs, and values to legitimize their authority and acts. The former explores how populist politicians capitalize on citizens' preexisting perceptions, beliefs, and values—generated by a context—to build a successful populist electoral campaign. In both cases, the ideas shared through discourses explain political outcomes—be it the election of a politician or party, be it an act, authority, or regime's legitimacy. Hence, seeing populism as a legitimating ideology can allow scholars to expand the scope of the ideational approach to cover populism in governments.

The ideational approach proposes to analyze political outcomes through the lenses of the ideational power, that is, the “capacity of actors (whether individual or collective) to influence other actors’ normative and cognitive beliefs through the use of ideational elements” ([Carstensen and Schmidt, 2016](#), p. 320). By acknowledging that ideas matter, the ideational approach recognizes that power has symbolic and normative dimensions that transcend coercion and control over institutions and state resources. To shed light on important aspects of democratic backsliding processes, the approach needs to detail how the ideational power of populism in government affects government actions and legitimizes authoritarian measures. Of course, the expansion of the ideational approach will not be automatic and will require the joint contribution of several researchers. Nevertheless, I suggest here that scholars can start thinking about the influence of populist ideas on democratic backsliding processes by recognizing two different *types of ideational power* that act in this phenomena: *power in ideas* and *power through ideas* ([Carstensen and Schmidt, 2016](#), p. 320). With this effort, I elucidate how the ideational approach can retain its preferred theoretical framework and still investigate populism in post-electoral moments.

The first type of ideational power that populist exerts in democratic backsliding processes is *power in ideas*. Power in ideas explains why actors view some ideas as viable while disregarding others as extreme, even for discussion. It is about the ideas that actors deeply accept, that structure their thoughts, and that establish the acts that they consider available to pursue ([Carstensen and Schmidt, 2016](#), p. 329). In government, populism first forms the background of the policies and measures that government members and the ruling party consider and that citizens accept as practicable. A politician who takes office

after a successful populist campaign knows that her constituency interprets the world through a populist framework. In this initial context, the power of ideas comes from the populist campaign, which reinforced populist ideas in the minds of voters, government members, representatives, public officials, judges, police officers, etc. Thus, a large part of the population accepts populist ideas, which remain unarticulated in their minds as background knowledge (Carstensen and Schmidt, 2016, p. 329). In turn, this deep acceptance of populist ideas opens up the possibilities for action available to political elites.

The second ideational power of populism in governments is persuading actors to support specific measures. Actors exercise this *power through ideas* when they induce others to support the government's goals as a result of cognitive and normative arguments (Carstensen and Schmidt, 2016, p. 323). An argument is deemed to be cognitively successful when it defines the problem to be faced and presents a coherent solution to it. A normative argument is persuasive when it defends that a given measure is adequate because it reflects certain values that people stem. In this regard, populism is precisely capable of introducing clear and resonating problems and solutions. Indeed, the "oversimplification of policy challenges" is one characteristic commonly associated with populists (Müller, 2016, p. 26). In an enlightening book about populism, Müller (2016) argues that, as populists defend that they are the voice of the real people, they introduce policies "clearly comprehensible to common sense."

A hypothetical example can show how the populist discourse is able to justify simplistic policies and authoritarian measures. A populist politician could easily defend that the source of public policy failures is the work of bureaucrats aligned with the elite. After all, the populist ideology implies that every person who does not relate to the people favors the elite's interests. The solutions for this problem would be the appointment of loyalist bureaucrats to all public offices, which would return state control to the real people. In this context, populist ideas provide a simple and accessible narrative about the causes and remedies of a given problem. Furthermore, it connects solutions to values that part of the population already accepts. In this process, populism builds legitimacy to measures that would otherwise be outside of the politician's authority, justifying the politicization of the state.

In sum, the ideational approach can investigate how the power of populist ideas act upon political actors and the electorate in post-electoral moments. Rather than overlooking the influence of populist governments on the quality of democracies, authors who adhere to the ideational approach can acknowledge that populism legitimizes measures that lead to democratic backsliding. In doing so, they would expand the scope of the ideational approach, detail how the populist ideology relates to democratic backsliding, and make the connection between these two research agendas clearer. Of course, scholars' collaborative

work can outline more detailed, promising, and testable hypotheses about the influence of populist ideas on democratic quality. Here, my contribution is pointing out the possibility of advancing this research agenda. My main point is that the ideational approach should address the legitimating dimension of populist ideas if there is a chance that populism acts in this way.

Interpreting populism as legitimating ideology not only expands the ideational approach but offers gains to democratic backsliding studies. If populism legitimizes authoritarian measures and facilitates the unfolding of backsliding processes, authors will have reasons to employ it in research. In this case, the analytical advantage of populism would be turning the attention to a process that expands an authority's scope of action and makes large parts of the population support authoritarian measures. Thus, as a legitimating ideology, populism directly relates to a possible explanatory factor of backsliding processes: the popular support for a government and its decisions.

However, for the gains in this interpretation of populism to overcome the costs of the concept, scholars must be cautious about the theoretical premises that must accompany this analytical advantage. To assert that populism is a legitimating ideology in democratic backsliding processes, scholars need to accept that the explanatory power of populism lies in the influence of ideas on constructing and maintaining the populist politician's popular support for eroding democracy. In other words, one cannot state that populism legitimizes democratic backsliding without acknowledging the power of ideas over political processes. On the contrary, this interpretation of populism requires a theoretical strand that assumes that ideas have causal power with measurable effects over political phenomena.

Scholars must be cautious with this analytical advantage because, in general, ideational accounts are not common in comparative research on democracy. Some of the most common theory families that address democratic transition, consolidation, stability, and breakdown are concerned with leader's attributes and actions, voter's cultural values, institutional arrangements, economic condition, and international influences ([Lust and Waldner, 2015](#)). Theories addressing the explanatory power of ideas over political analysis are rare. Nevertheless, to mention populism as a legitimating ideology, scholars must elucidate that populism's analytical advantage lies in its ideational power. Of course, they can combine this theoretical strand with others, and the prominence that populism has in their research may vary. Still, scholars need to endorse an ideational explanation of democratic backsliding to make a justified use of populism in research on democratic backsliding.

In conclusion, scholars interested in democratic backsliding benefit from finding a clear analytical advantage of populism. By pointing out the role of populism in legitimating processes, democratic backsliding studies define what populism offers to explanations of these processes. Moreover, with this suggestion, scholars elucidate that populism has an

anti-pluralist nature that determines its effects on the quality of democracy. Nevertheless, this analytical advantage requires that democratic backsliding studies import ideational premises, which is uncommon in this research agenda.

3.2 Final Considerations

One fundamental proposition of this work is that populism is an anti-pluralist ideology. All the analytic advantages discussed here depended on this proposition, as did the expansion of the ideational approach. To discuss whether populism could indicate political actor's authoritarian preferences, I first recalled that comparative research on democracy understands that political elites' preferences for democracy play a central role in autocratization processes. Then, I defended that populism is an anti-pluralist ideology that, as such, indicates the authoritarian preferences of political actors. In this way, I could connect the anti-pluralism of populism with a widespread agreement in the literature. However, I defended that this is a weak analytical advantage, mainly because it is trivial, and scholars can identify authoritarian preferences through concepts and measurement strategies that do not carry the problems that populism does.

After that, I questioned whether populism predicted a particular pattern of institutional change in democratic backsliding processes. Again, the search for this gain depended on the definition that populists share an anti-pluralist world-view that could distinctly guide their actions towards democratic backsliding. Since papers and books about democratic backsliding so often cite populism, one could expect that populist cases would express an explicit difference compared to non-populist cases, one that manifested itself at the institutional level that is so central for comparative research on democracy. However, after conducting a case-comparison study between Hungary (2010-2015) and Bulgaria (2016-2019), I found that populists and non-populists resort to similar measures to erode the quality of democracy and undermine the same democratic dimensions. Therefore, I concluded that populism does not have the analytical advantage of distinguishing the paths chief executives take to promote democratic backsliding processes.

Finally, in this last chapter, I suggested that scholars could interpret populism as legitimating ideology. Thus, the anti-pluralist characteristic of populism would be the content that legitimizes authoritarian measures and convince people that a given authority, government, and set of actions are proper. From the perspective of the ideational approach, interpreting populism as a legitimating ideology is a natural step. Without abandoning the approach's preferred theoretical framework, scholars can explore how populist ideas continue to influence voters and politicians after elections. In this chapter, I have suggested that the legitimating effect of populist ideas works through two different types of ideational power: power in ideas and power through ideas. However, the approach can easily develop

other suggestions to analyze the consequences of populism on democratic quality.

From the perspective of democratic backsliding studies, the interpretation of populism as a legitimating ideology establishes a precise and likely advantage of the concept. Since many chief executives who successfully promote democratic backsliding are populist, scholars may pursue the hypothesis that the populist set of ideas facilitates this process by legitimizing authoritarian measures. Nevertheless, this use of the concept requires that scholars acknowledge the causal power of ideas over political processes and adopt an ideational theoretical strand, which is not common in comparative research on democracy. Therefore, scholars must recognize this caveat when considering whether the use of the concept of populism is justified in democratic backsliding studies.

The interpretation of populism as a legitimating ideology brings the research agendas on democratic backsliding and populism closer together. In the search for the analytical advantages of populism in the previous chapters, democratic backsliding studies was only borrowing the ideational definition of populism but not the ideational approach's analytic premises. In turn, to locate the analytical advantage of populism in its impact on legitimating processes, authors interested in democratic backsliding will have to adopt the same theoretical framework of the ideational approach. Therefore, if both research agendas interpret populism as a legitimating ideology, each would follow a more productive path and eventually contribute to their mutual development.

With these conclusions, are the problems in the connection between democratic backsliding and populism resolved? Regarding the expansion of the ideational approach, they are. Considering that: i) the ambiguity regarding the effects of populism on democracy has never significantly hindered the ideational approach's goal; ii) and that the approach's expansion proposed here is natural, this point does not require further discussion. In other words, interpreting populism as a legitimating ideology is enough to clarify the connection between democratic backsliding and populism and point out a way to expand the ideational approach. However, things are more complicated in the other direction. Since the use of populism in democratic backsliding studies is more varied and imposes high costs on this research agenda, I need to discuss two additional caveats.

The first caveat concerns democratic backsliding studies' excessive focus on populist cases. Currently, scholars interested in democratic backsliding tend to give special attention to populist cases without explaining why they deserve it. In these circumstances, it is positive that scholars reveal that they mention populism in research to explore its legitimating effects. However, even if the literature finds strong evidence that populism legitimizes authoritarian measures in backsliding processes, there will still be no reason to neglect non-populist cases. After all, democratic backsliding processes happen in the absence of populism—as the Bulgarian case makes clear—, and these cases are informative about the factors that lead to this outcome. Therefore, finding an analytical advantage of

populism cannot excuse the exclusive focus on populist cases or the wrongful perception that democratic backsliding is always associated with populism.

The second point concerns the fact that this advantage has not yet been tested and compared. Democratic backsliding studies have not explored whether populism indeed facilitates the unfolding of these processes, whether other ideologies also do this, and how populism differs from them. Because of that, even if scholars interpret populism as an ideology that legitimizes authoritarian measures and fosters democratic backsliding, they cannot presume that it is the only one with this effect.

In fact, the literature indicates that other sets of ideas can also legitimize authoritarian measures at a level capable of facilitating democratic backsliding. For example, [Ganev \(2018\)](#) shows that prime minister Borisov dismisses its critics and neutralizes demands for reforms in Bulgaria by selling normalcy. Instead of despising the international elite embodied in the European Union or invoking the people's unity to act, the GERB leader tries to convince Bulgarians that nothing exceptional is happening in the country. Thus, the Bulgarian ruling class does not try to expand its authority with populist arguments. Instead, it seeks to equate authoritarian measures with widely accepted measures in democratic regimes, claiming that the government acts in full accordance with democratic norms. Arguably, this kind of discourse can also expand the scope of actions of authorities by connecting authoritarian measures with the accepted and desired idea of normality.

In the same vein, [Scheppelle \(2018, p. 563\)](#) discusses how all wannabe autocrats—and not specifically populists—legitimize authoritarian measures. According to her, these politicians base their legitimacy claims on the fact that they won elections and do not explicitly violate democratic procedures—using a legalist discourse for this goal. In this sense, legalism would be another set of ideas that could help chief executives legitimize authoritarian measures and foster democratic backsliding. As these examples show, even if scholars establish that the analytical advantage of populism is legitimating backsliding processes, they cannot at first assume that other ideologies do not have this effect. In this context, perhaps democratic backsliding studies could open a new research frontier to investigate whether distinct ideologies have different results or are equally effective in legitimating backsliding processes. Until then, scholars should not exclusively focus on populism under the risk of unreasonably neglecting non-populist cases.

In conclusion, the ideational approach can naturally expand its scope by interpreting populism in power as a legitimating ideology. In contrast, this suggestion does not solve all the problems that democratic backsliding studies confront when mentioning populism. Using populism to address legitimating processes requires adopting ideational lenses, which not all scholars may be willing to do. Furthermore, establishing the analytical advantage of populism for democratic backsliding studies can have the side effect of excusing an excessive focus on populist cases, which will not benefit this research agenda.

In all chapters, I have tried to find the most promising analytical advantages of populism—advantages that would justify employing populism on research on democratic backsliding. For this goal, I deliberately chose an approach to populism that discussed its relationship with democracy. Thus, I guaranteed the possibility that the concept would prove beneficial. Even so, of the three analytical advantages discussed here—populism as an authoritarian preference, populism as an institutional pattern, and populism as a legitimating ideology—, only the last one was existing and strong, and its adequacy depends on adopting an ideational theoretical strand. Thus, considering that ideational accounts are not common in democratic backsliding studies and that authors do not usually use the concept for this purpose, in most works on democratic backsliding today populism is likely generating more costs than gains. In these cases, democratic backsliding studies should abandon the concept of populism and eliminate its costs.

Conclusion

This work analyzed the connection between populism and democratic backsliding, proposing pathways for these research agendas to clarify their relationship and advance their primary research goals. In Chapter 1, I showed the costs that authors interested in democratic backsliding incur for mobilizing the concept of populism. I also argued that the ideational approach to populism falls short of its potential by overlooking the impact of populist ideas on democratic backsliding processes. To address these costs and this limitation, in subsequent chapters, I explored the analytical advantages that populism could bring to research on democratic backsliding, and I suggested how scholars could expand the ideational approach so that it sheds light on democratic backsliding processes.

In two chapters, I discussed or tested three analytical advantages of populism for democratic backsliding: identifying authoritarian preferences, recognizing a pattern of institutional change, and legitimating authoritarian measures. I concluded that the first one is weak, the second one does not exist, and the third one requires adopting an ideational theoretical strand unusual in comparative research on democracy. In chapter 3, I also argued that, by interpreting populism as a legitimating ideology, scholars could expand the ideational approach and examine the ideational power of populist ideas in governments and backsliding processes.

By indicating an analytical advantage of populism and suggesting a way to expand the ideational approach, I hope to contribute to the advancement of these two research agendas. For scholars interested in democratic backsliding, recognizing the costs of the concept of populism and reflecting on its analytical advantages means rethinking when and whether it is productive to mobilize this concept. For scholars who adhere to the ideational approach, recognizing that a surmountable limitation exists in current research on populism means increasing the scope of topics and cases analyzed through ideational lenses. In both cases, the benefit is clarifying how political scientists can handle the connection between these research agendas more accurately and productively.

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