**The Prospects of Populism**

Jeffrey Carroll

University of Virginia

1207 Villa Ln, Unit F

Charlottesville, VA 22903

740-705-1516

jmc5xm@virginia.edu

‘Populism’ has become a pejorative. In the United States, supporters of Donald Trump are often referred to as populists. Those same supporters labeled Bernie Sanders a populist. It is clear that neither use is intended to be a compliment. It is less clear what is meant by this now derogatory epithet.

The negative connotation tied to the word ‘populism’ predates contemporary American politics. While not the first such use, populism appears as the antagonist of William Riker’s influential *Liberalism against Populism*.[[1]](#footnote-1) Riker leaves no doubt that populism is the enemy of liberalism, but there is doubt about precisely who or, better yet, *what* this enemy is. The first task of this paper is to perform a conceptual analysis of populism. To know whether populism is antithetical to liberalism requires knowing what populism is.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Upon gaining further conceptual clarity, the second task of the paper is to assess Riker’s contention that liberalism and populism are at odds. Riker’s project was not one of conceptual analysis, but one of investigating the implications social choice theory has on democratic theory. While not the first to arrive at this conclusion, I contend that Riker’s criticism of populism is not as damning as he suggests.

The final task of the paper is to suggest that Buchanan and Tullock’s consensus model of justification is actually a promising possibility for a “populist” means of satisfying the justificatory conditions defended by Riker.[[3]](#footnote-3) What we might call *Ideal Populism* – which employs an unanimity rule – circumvents criticisms raised by Riker. But is ideal populism *actually* populism? The answer, perhaps unsurprisingly, depends on what conception of populism one employs.

**What is Populism?**

A Google search for the definition of ‘populism’ produces the following result: “a political approach that strives to appeal to ordinary people who feel that their concerns disregarded by established elites.” While vague, this preliminary definition is helpful in that emphasizes an important aspect of populism: anti-elitism. Jan-Werner Müller, in a book that shares its name with the title of this section, suggests that the heterogenous uses of ‘populism’ actually have a common core which can be more precisely stated as two necessary conditions – one of which is anti-elitism.

*Anti-elitism*: X is populist if and only if X is critical of elites.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The other necessary condition is what Müller takes to be his contribution.

*Anti-pluralism*: X is populist if and only if X identifies an out-group or set of out-groups that are not part of “the people”, properly understood, and claims made by out-groups are illegitimate.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Both supporters of Trump and supporters of Sanders are anti-elitist in some sense. But that alone does not make either a populist. To be a populist requires also being opposed to pluralism. Populists recognize a “people” as well as some group or groups that are not properly part of the “people” whose claims lack legitimacy.

Müller’s addition of anti-pluralism helps make the notion of populism more determinate. However, I believe these two necessary conditions alone leave populism underspecified. A third necessary condition is needed.

*Anti-toleration*: X is populist if and only if X maintains that out-groups cannot consistently hold that their position, p\*, is true if it is not the position, p, identified by “the people.”

To be clear, populists need not be anti-toleration in the sense that they permit violence towards the out-groups. Rather, populists are committed to anti-toleration at the level of beliefs. For example, let p be the position that national borders ought to be closed and let p\* be the position that national borders ought to be open. A populist would say that an out-group is making a logical mistake by believing that national borders should be open is justified given that “the people” settled that national borders should be closed.

Anti-toleration is a furtherance of anti-pluralism. Whereas anti-pluralism holds that the claims of out-groups lack standing, anti-toleration goes further to say that political truths are settled by “the people” and one is being epistemically irresponsible by not internalizing the conclusions arrived at by “the people.” The former is a negative claim about which claims do not matter, while the latter is a claim about political truth.

One could accept Müller’s anti-pluralism condition without accepting anti-toleration. Take an out-group such as anarchists. If one only accepts anti-pluralism, the challenge to state authority by anarchists lacks standing insofar as “the people” conclude that the state has authority. But anarchists could still coherently maintain that the state lacks authority. It is just when the anarchists make their case that the state is unauthoritative, there is no need to hear it out.[[6]](#footnote-6) However, if one accepts anti-toleration too, then anarchists are believing something false when they assert that the state lacks authority. The practical implication of a commitment to anti-toleration is that out-groups are not justified in living on their own terms, even when those terms fail to interfere with the lives of parties that comprise “the people”, because their position has been determined to be false. This means that a commitment to anti-toleration rules out something like the utopian vision spelled out by Robert Nozick in Part III of *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*.[[7]](#footnote-7)

It seems to me like actual examples of populism are committed to anti-toleration. The populist credo would not be that “the people” are right and if you disagree, you are *irrelevant*, but rather that you are *wrong*. Populists do not want the out-group to be either cast out or allowed to leave; they want the out-group to be shown the light or, in some more extremes cases, be forced to act in accordance with the truth. Indeed, as Rousseau says in *On the Social Contract*, “whoever refuses to obey the general will…will be forced to be free.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

Although short of an explicit definition which may not surprising given, as Chantal Mouffe says, that populism “is not an ideology or a political regime, and cannot be attributed to a specific programmatic content”, these three necessary conditions seem to form its conceptual core.[[9]](#footnote-9)

**Riker on Liberalism or Populism**

In *Liberalism against Populism*, Riker looks at democracy through the lens of social choice theory. For Riker, democracy is fundamentally a way of making decisions by way of the vote. Voting is a way of making social choices. So, studying democracy from a social choice perspective is appropriate.

Democracy is a special kind of social choice mechanism because of its commitment to the ideals of liberty, participation and equality. Liberty involves being able to vote, participation regards doing so, and equality requires that each vote count the same. These ideals give way to a special set of constraints on collective decision-procedures. In order for a decision-procedure to be justified, it must be *moral* and *meaningful*.[[10]](#footnote-10)

*Moral*: A decision-procedure, D, must be both *fair* in the sense that it permits participation from all and *autonomy-compliant* in the sense that each agent, ultimately, complies with social rules of their own choosing.

*Meaningful*: A decision-procedure, D, must generate outcomes which are indicative of the general will and fully explicable in terms of the inputs of the voters.

Can democracy satisfy the moral and meaningful conditions? Given that the justification of democracy appeals to the ideals of equality, liberty and participation, it should be able to satisfy the pair of constraints that follow from them. But can it?

As Coleman and Ferejohn say, the problem social choice theory poses to democracy theory “is that any democratic voting procedure that is fair in the appropriate sense will be normatively defensible but not meaningful, that is, its outcomes will be arbitrary.”[[11]](#footnote-11) Put differently, using democratic voting as the decision-procedure must be moral and meaningful, but Riker concludes that no procedure can actually be both. The reason is that outputs of the decision-procedure are prone to being either *paradoxical* or *rule-contingent*. An example of an output that is paradoxical is an ordering that violates transitivity: A>B>C>A. Whereas, a rule-contingent output is one that keeps the preference profiles constant, modifies features of the decision-procedure, and arrives at a different output.

It is worth stating the underlying logic behind why it might be problematic that a decision-procedure produces outputs that are paradoxical or rule-contingent. A paradoxical output is problematic for a given D because it means that D is open to producing *incoherent* results. If D takes coherent individual inputs and produces an output that is incoherent, then one may take incoherence to generated by the particular features of D. A rule-contingent output is problematic for D because it means that D is subject to yielding an *arbitrary* result.[[12]](#footnote-12) If one holds the inputs constant, changes the features of D, and arrives at a different output, the arbitrariness appears to be a product of the changes to D.

Riker concludes that if a given D produces an output that is either paradoxical or rule-contingent, then it can be said to be “meaningless.”[[13]](#footnote-13) Though I find the use of “meaningless” less than illuminating, the idea seems to be that an output that is either paradoxical or rule-contingent lacks justification. But why would the fact that an output is paradoxical or rule-contingent *entail* that it lacks justification? If an output is paradoxical and, ultimately, incoherent as a result of cycling, then I can see why that output would lack justification. Though, for this to be a substantial challenge requires that there be evidence of cycling occurring with regularity in practice. If cycles are not present in practice, one may wonder about how much trouble this actually poses.[[14]](#footnote-14)

On the other hand, an output that is rule-contingent does not seem to have a straightforward explanation as to why arbitrariness entails the absence of a justification. That different decision-procedures yield different outputs from the same set of inputs may not be problematic. Indeed, one may prefer a certain decision-procedure for a *reason*. Perhaps the most apparent reason is that certain procedures may yield better *consequences* than other procedures. D1 may be justified on the basis of it producing better (which could be cashed out in different ways: more accurate? more true? more utility maximizing?) results than D2. Hence, it does not follow from the fact that different procedures produce different results from the same set of inputs that any particular procedure lacks justification.

This is why it would be better if Riker did not assert that an output is meaningless if it is either paradoxical or rule-contingent. Lumping the respective strands together under the meaningless-umbrella unnecessarily muddles the conceptual terrain. Having separated out Riker’s argument, one could respond that the paradoxical strand lacks relevance (as Mackie) and the rule-contingent strand actually does not undermine the justification of a decision-procedure (doing so would require showing that a given D is not employed for some principled reason).

If that is right, Riker’s argument is confused in important ways. Nonetheless, Riker could maintain that, though outputs being paradoxical and rule-contingent is not as worrying as initially believed, it still has not been demonstrated that any D could be both moral and meaningful, in the relevant senses. That is, it might not be a problem that an output is rule-contingent; the problem is that the reason for the decision-procedure (e.g. it does well on consequentialist grounds) is not a means of satisfying the meaningful condition. That requires the outcome be an expression of the general will.

At this point, one may simply want to rebuff the meaningful condition. Why believe that an output must be ‘meaningful’ understood as being an expression of the general will? This is what Riker’s *liberal* does. What he calls the liberal or Madisonian interpretation of voting maintains that “the function of voting is to control officials, *and nothing more*”.[[15]](#footnote-15) The liberal does not assume that the output of an election is truth-tracking or general will-tracking. The liberal just wants to “be able to vote the bastards out.”

But Riker’s *populist* wants to retain the meaningful condition. What Riker calls the populist or Rousseauistic interpretation of voting sees voting as the “way to discover the general will, which is the objectively correct common interest of the incorporated citi­zens”, and this “computation will be accurate if each citizen, when giving an opinion or vote, considers and chooses only the common interest, not a personal or private interest.”[[16]](#footnote-16) It is worth noting that it is a bit misleading to label Riker’s conception of populism “Rousseauistic” as Rousseau is explicit that an electoral output is not necessarily the general will. In Bk II, Ch. 3 of *On the Social Contract*, Rousseau says that there “is often a great deal of difference between the will of all and the general will.”[[17]](#footnote-17) The general will is the output of a suitably idealized electoral process. It is *that* electoral output that the nonideal electoral output must be identical to in order to be meaningful.

I make this qualification not to dwell on exegesis, but because Riker’s populist holds an even more ambition position than Rousseau because the populist has an implicit “moral certainty” as “the opinions of the majority *must* be right and *must* be respected because the will of the people is the liberty of the people.”[[18]](#footnote-18) For Riker, the populist holds that majority opinion is necessarily the general will, whereas Rousseau admits that the two may come apart. These are both in contrast to the liberal interpretation of voting in which “there is no such magical identification” between majority opinion and truth, and the “outcome of voting is just a decision and has no special moral character.”[[19]](#footnote-19) This returns us to the previously discussed issue of conceptual analysis as Riker’s move beyond Rousseau is, in essence, a justification for what I proposed calling the anti-toleration necessary condition.

To summarize, the populist is wed to the meaningful condition, but the general will in the condition is just whatever the electoral output is. So understood, the meaningful condition actually becomes trivially satisfied because the general will *just is* the electoral output. This is clearly not the conclusion Riker desired. It seems that Riker’s argument relies on an equivocation in the notion of the general will. On the one hand, he needs the general will to be something over and beyond the electoral output in order to criticize populist decision-procedures for failing to be meaningful. But, on the other hand, he characterizes the populist interpretation of voting as identifying the electoral output with the general.

The question to Riker is: Is the general will something over and above the electoral output? But Riker is not the only one with a looming question. The question to populists is: can a decision-procedure be both moral and meaningful? If so, how does it need to be designed?

**Ideal Populism**

Ultimately, I am unsure whether an actual, nonideal decision-procedure can simultaneously satisfy the moral and meaningful conditions, nor I am sure that they should care to. The conditions may simply be too demanding. And the fact that they go unsatisfied may not give anyone reason to stay up at night worrying that they are not.

Still, there is a looming question of whether they can be jointly satisfied at a more abstract level. The type of proposal that has the potential to be both moral and meaningful has roots in James Buchanan and Gordon Tullock’s *The Calculus of Consent*.[[20]](#footnote-20) Although Buchanan and Tullock are explicit that they are “not attempting to write an “ideal” political constitution for society”, suppose we skip the preface and decide to not take them at their word.[[21]](#footnote-21)

To ask that a decision-procedure be moral and meaningful is to ask that it be fair, autonomy-compliant, and indicate a general will of the citizenry. Supposing we adopt the deflationary conception of the general will articulated by Riker, the substantive question is what kind of decision-procedure can be both fair – in the sense that it permits participation from all – and autonomy-compliant – in the sense that each agent, ultimately, complies with social rules of their own choosing.

To my ears, a fair and autonomy-compliant decision-procedure is a procedure that employs an *unanimity rule*.[[22]](#footnote-22) It is fair in that consensus is required which means allare at liberty to participate. It is autonomy-compliant in that each agent is at liberty to veto a decision if one chooses. Of course, an unanimity rule is not a realistic alternative at present. But let us bracket that challenge in order to explore the theoretical potential of the position.

Would the adoption of an unanimity rule succumb to the problems raised by Riker? Recall the worries were that a decision-procedure would produce either paradoxical outputs which were problematic because they were incoherent, or rule-contingent outputs which were problematic because they were arbitrary. First, an unanimity rule would prevent paradoxical outputs. Discussing the voting paradox, Riker writes that “[a]lthough individuals can arrive at a unique choice, in this case society cannot even choose. What makes all this so democratically unpalatable is that, apparently, the only way to make “society” choose coherently is to impose a dictator.”[[23]](#footnote-23) Instead of appointing *a* dictator, Buchanan and Tullock ensure coherency by making *everyone* a dictator. All have decisive veto-power. The possibility of an output being incoherent is, thereby, ruled out. Second, enacting an unanimity rule would avoid the charge of rule-contingent outputs being arbitrary because, since all the inputs are the same, the order in which they are taken up is otiose. It seems that this form of ideal populism that employs an unanimity rule as the decision-procedure is not prone to producing the problematic types of outputs Riker worried about.

I will close by considering whether ideal populism is antithetical to liberalism. Near the close of his book, Riker ruminates on the consistency of populism and liberalism. He writes:

The main threat to democracy from populism is not, however, the exceptional temptation to subvert elections but the exceptional ability to do so. Populist institutions depend on the elimination of constitutional restraints, and the populist interpretation of voting justifies this elimina­tion. With the restraints removed, it is easy to change electoral arrange­ments, which is why populist democracies so often revert to autocracies. Perhaps the leaders of some future populism will be so thoroughly imbued with liberal ideals that they will never meddle with free elections. But since even in Britain, where liberal ideals originated, the populist elimina­tion of constitutional limitations has begun to produce attacks on the integrity of elections, it seems unlikely that the liberal sanction can sur­vive populist institutions. Indeed this empirical regularity suggests to me that there is a profound theoretical reason that populism induces rulers to ensconce themselves in office. At any rate, on the practical level at least, the answer is clearly negative to the main question of this section: Is liberal rejectability compatible with populist incorporability? No: because the constitutional restraints practically associated with liberalism must be destroyed to achieve populism.[[24]](#footnote-24)

In short, liberalism and populism are not compatible because liberalism requires constitutional protections and populism requires the absence of or the active removal of such constraints.

I admit that I find this passage quite vexing. Why does populism depend on eliminating constitutional restraints? The answer seems to be because populists want to be able to meddle with electoral outcomes and grab power when possible. Here populists seem to not be acting in accordance with anything like the general will, but rather out of self-interest and the pursuit of power. But why characterize populists in this nonideal way?

The comparison Riker seems to be making is between nonideal populists and ideal liberals. There is a sort of methodological asymmetry.[[25]](#footnote-25) The liberal ideal of rejecting candidates “who have offended so many voters that they cannot win an election” is presented as readily achievable because it is “a negative ideal” and less demanding because it “does not require that voting produce a clear, consistent, meaningful statement of the popular will.”[[26]](#footnote-26) Of course though, there are many ways liberals can fail to “vote the bastards out.” Voters may be subject to similar biases that lead them to voting systematically “wrong” – whatever that may mean.[[27]](#footnote-27)

Although ideal populism invokes the unanimity rule found in Buchanan and Tullock’s work, the position articulated in *The Calculus of Consent* is not claimed to be a version of ideal populism. To be populist requires being anti-elitist, anti-pluralist, and anti-toleration. Ideal populism seems to satisfy anti-elitism, albeit in a slightly different sense, in that elites do not have extra authority as all have decisive veto power. However, Buchanan and Tullock, despite what might be found in more polemical and less scholarly books, are not anti-pluralist and anti-toleration.[[28]](#footnote-28)

Ultimately, it is unclear whether ideal populism is a coherent notion. Ideal populism employs an unanimity rule, but the conceptual core of populism was said to involve anti-pluralism and anti-toleration. Identifying an illegitimate out-group does not seem possible in the presence of an unanimity rule as all have veto power. Interestingly, Riker ties populism fundamentally to the general will – not anti-pluralism and anti-toleration – in which case ideal populism is coherent (the general will just is what everyone decides) and could satisfy his justificatory conditions.

**Conclusion**

The problem with populism at the most fundamental level is not one of “meaningless” social choices. This formal objection has logical and empirical limits. Rather the problem with populism is normative in that it opposes pluralism and toleration. Future criticisms of populism will be more fruitful if they are directed at the moral limits of populism, not at its supposed incoherence.

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1. Riker, *Liberalism against Populism*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For an excellent piece of conceptual analysis, see Urbinati, “Political Theory of Populism.” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Buchanan and Tullock, *The Calculus of Consent*. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Müller, *What Is Populism?*, 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Müller, 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. This holds regardless of how sophisticated the anarchists’ case is. See, for instance, Simmons, *Moral Principles and Political Obligations* and Huemer, *The Problem of Political Authority*. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, pt. III. See also, Kukathas, *The Liberal Archipelago*. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Rousseau, *The Basic Political Writings*, bks. 1, Ch. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Mouffe, “The Populist Moment.” [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. This elaborates on a point made in Coleman and Ferejohn, “Democracy and Social Choice,” 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Coleman and Ferejohn, 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Interestingly, Rawls was also concerned with giving a non-arbitrary justification for his two principles of justice. It is the basis on which his theory is built as it provides the justification for the original position thought-experiment. See Rawls, *A Theory of Justice: Revised Edition*. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Riker, *Liberalism against Populism*, 136–37. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Mackie, *Democracy Defended*. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Riker, *Liberalism against Populism*, 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Riker, 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Rousseau, *The Basic Political Writings*, bk. II, Ch. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Riker, *Liberalism against Populism*, 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Riker, 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Buchanan and Tullock, *The Calculus of Consent*. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Buchanan and Tullock, vi. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Buchanan and Tullock, 85–96. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Riker, *Liberalism against Populism*, 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Riker, 249. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. For more on specifically behaviorally asymmetry, see Buchanan and Brennan, *The Reason of Rules*. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Riker, *Liberalism against Populism*, 242. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Caplan, *The Myth of the Rational Voter*. But see also Lomasky, “Swing and a Myth.” [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. MacLean, *Democracy in Chains*. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)