

# Sovereignist wine in populist bottles? An introduction

Linda Basile & Oscar Mazzoleni

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*Sovereignist claims are on the rise - in Europe, the USA, and beyond. In dealing with processes such as globalization and supranational integration, which have progressively shifted powers and competencies away from nation states, these transformations have created a fertile terrain for reactions against the sources of such insecurity, which find full expression in the sovereignist claims to 'take back control', that is to say to return to the traditional understanding of sovereignty being based upon mutually exclusive territories. These sources of insecurity and social unrest have also provided structures of political opportunity for the electoral success of populist parties. Despite its relevance for the understanding of the populist discourse, however, sovereignty has been largely under-theorised by scholars dealing with populism. Accordingly, we propose a new research agenda to study populist mobilization that focuses on the linkage between populism and sovereignism, while also encouraging further theoretical and empirical studies, focusing on both the demand side and the supply side. In particular, we suggest some crucial aspects with which the Special Issue seeks to engage, before pointing to some substantial implications that are likely to emerge from the findings of this research agenda.*

KEYWORDS Sovereignty; sovereignism; populism; globalization; supranational integration; representation

## 1. Introduction

In recent decades, across Europe as well as on the other side of the Atlantic, several actors labelled as populist have achieved significant electoral results and have even succeeded in coming to power by appealing to the 'national people' and the 'disadvantaged', as opposed to supranational institutions, the EU, the global economy, the 'elites', and the 'foreign threat'. (Akkerman,

Mudde, & Zaslove, 2014; Kriesi et al., 2012; Mudde, 2007; Wolinetz & Zaslove, 2018). Despite their intrinsic heterogeneity, these parties share a common emphasis on claims of popular sovereignty (De Spiegeleire et al., 2017), as well as ‘the belief in the uncontested primacy of national-level politics and the call to recover at this precise level (institutionally as well as territorially) power that has slipped away to more distant and diffuse layers of governance’, namely *sovereignism* (Kallis, 2018, p. 299). The seemingly recurrent reference to sovereignism in the populist discourse raises two questions: How do populism and sovereignism relate to each other? Could sovereignism be adopted as a notion to better grasp the nature of populist mobilization?

In this contribution, we will seek to address these questions, while suggesting theoretically grounded insights for a research agenda that explores the linkages between sovereignism and populism. It is organized as follows: In the first and second sections, respectively, we will examine the concept of sovereignty and the current socio-political challenges to nation-states on which sovereignist claims rely. These will provide, in the third section, the theoretical underpinnings regarding the relationship between sovereignism and populism; we will then propose, in the fourth section, a number of issues for a new research agenda aimed at addressing such a close relationship. In the final section, we will briefly introduce the papers included in the present Special Issue, which, by adopting different perspectives and methodological approaches, provide a valuable theoretical and analytical contribution to the development of such a research agenda.

## **2. Sovereignty: from the modern-state’s conceptualization to the contemporary transformations**

Sovereignty is an old, yet changing and constantly evolving concept. Alongside the concept of sovereignism, it has long been addressed by several disciplines, including legal studies, political theory, geography, and international relations; in political science, on the other hand, sovereignty has often been considered as a proxy for Westphalian state, or nation-state institutional authority (Keating, 2003, pp. 191-193). Indeed, although the origins of this term can be traced back to ancient Greece and Rome, it was only with the advent of the modern state in the sixteenth century that it developed into the definition of ‘full decision-making and authority of a governing body over a clearly defined territory, or a *polity*’. Yet while Bodin and Hobbes conceived of sovereignty as the absolute decision-making power of the ruler (i.e. the king), from Rousseau onwards it became ‘the will of the people’, which exerts such a power through its representatives (Held, 1995; Sassen, 1996; 2008). The contemporary conceptualization of sovereignty therefore points to at least three core elements: First, sovereignty is exerted over *mutually exclusive territories*, which mostly coincide with the national state; second, it is an expression of the *popular will*; third, such popular will

is expressed through *mechanisms of representative democracy*, on which liberal democracies rely.

However, the social, economic, and political processes unfolding since the aftermath of World War 2 and, above all, the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989, have jeopardized such cornerstones of modern sovereignty in contemporary democracies. As some scholars have pointed out, the European nation-states that emerged as core units of the international system within the Westphalian paradigm and were consolidated throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century, have gradually weakened their sovereignty (Sassen, 2008; Van Creveld, 1999), as a result of the rise and strengthening of supranational and subnational political institutions and transnational corporations, especially in recent decades (Grimm, 2015, pp. 84 ff.; Sassen, 2008, p. 2; Strange, 1996).

Globalized economy and increasing patterns of shared authority, often expressed by forms of supranational integration, have progressively de-territorialized the geography of power, with state economies nowadays required to face complex challenges related to the free movement of capital, the reduction of trade barriers, and the increase of foreign investments; likewise, international conventions and agreements have limited states' control of their borders and of immigration. While globalization has increased states' competencies, the increasing flow of information and of people across borders has challenged 'one of the fundamental principles' of state sovereignty, that is, 'the ability to control what crosses borders' and, more generally, to find at the national level the capacity to adequately answer global problems (Sassen, 1996; 2008). The process of European integration provides a paradigmatic example of this transformation and dispersion of sovereignty away from, but not excluding the national state. This is the case, for instance, with the tension between intergovernmental and supranational institutions in the EU, or the multi-level governance system (Agnew, 2009, p. 97 ff.; Hooghe & Marks, 2003).

These ongoing and relentless processes have not led, however, to a definitive demise of the nation state (Mann, 1997; Smith, Solinger, & Topik, 1999). Rather, sovereignty has been transformed and dispersed across several institutional arenas, with nation-states required to share their decision-making authority with other institutional arenas. This new form of 'diffuse sovereignty' has therefore upended the traditional understanding of sovereignty, based upon the principle of 'mutually exclusive territories' and the modern theory of the liberal democratic state as based on a 'national community of fate [...], which rightly governs itself and determines its own future' (Held & McGrew, 1993, p. 264; Kallis, 2018).

### **3. From sovereignty to sovereignist claims**

All these transformations did not come without consequences. In the early 1990s, Held and McGrew (1993, pp. 284-285) warned that in an increasingly globalizing and regionalizing context, 'the meaning and the place of

democratic politics have to be rethought'. They pointed out the urgent need to address the weakened regulatory capacity of nation-states, the challenges to the accountability and representativeness of the democratic states, and the interlocking of political decisions and outcomes across states, as a result of these processes of global interconnectedness: 'If [democratic politics] fails to [come to terms with all these developments], it is likely to become ever less effective in determining the shape and limits of political activity'. (Ibid.) However, more than 25 years later, while national governments have sought over time to develop forms of cooperation and integration in order to better face global challenges, there are significant signs of failure in such attempts at 'rethinking'.

Recent critical junctures have further brought to light the trade-offs and uncertainties related to this shift of sovereignty away from the nation-state. In turn, these uncertainties are likely to trigger a 'societal malaise' (Aschauer, 2017), which represents a fertile terrain for reactions against the sources of such insecurity. For instance, the uprisings in the Arab world, the armed conflict taking place in Syria, and political instability in Libya and other North African countries (Attinà, 2016) have revealed the difficulties in defining effective, coordinated responses at supranational levels. Similarly, when facing the flow of migrants towards their borders, the governments of the European Union have been unable to find a shared agreement on asylum mechanisms and quota-based systems for the relocation of migrants. The global financial crisis, on the other hand, has shown how economic globalization is likely to pose a serious threat to jobs and welfare, while the austerity policies promoted by the EU to address the financial crisis have further exacerbated socio-economic inequalities among Europeans.

In other words, the dispersion and de-territorialization of the centres of powers have weakened the decision-making authority of nation-states, as well as their capacity to address people's uncertainties and concerns with effective policies. As a result, there is an increasing dissatisfaction and lack of trust towards the supranational actors and institutions, which are seen as distant and incapable of effectively addressing the main challenges posed by multi-level governance and the new global order (Dahlberg & Linde, 2016).

Moreover, the evolution of decision-making processes towards multi-level models of governance has raised issues concerning popular legitimacy, democratic accountability, and control over the government (Held, 1995; Keating, 2003; Papadopoulos, 2010). Indeed, with the *loci of power* so territorially dispersed, it is increasingly difficult for ordinary citizens to clearly identify the actors responsible for law-making, or the representatives they could refer to in order to express their complaints or demands. A clear example of the reactions generated by the 'deficit of democracy' and the lack of accountability among the supranational decision-makers are the enduring challenges faced by the process of European integration (Lord & Beetham, 2001; Scharpf, 1999), which reached a peak with Brexit (Clarke, Goodwin, & Whiteley, 2017).

To sum up, as national states have lost their exclusive authority over

*their territory*, this has undermined the credibility of national governments, and their elites, to *effectively address* challenges and concerns (i.e. 'to give answers'), *represent the popular will* and act in their interests (i.e. 'to listen to citizens' demands'). It is precisely in this context that reactions to the ongoing transformations of sovereignty arise, thus developing into *sovereignism*, that is, the return to the traditional understanding of sovereignty being based upon mutually exclusive territories and the retrenchment to the national dimension, clearly epitomized by the sovereignist motto: 'take back control' (Kallis, 2018).

#### **4. Bridging sovereignism and populism**

The scenario described above has also opened up political opportunities for parties commonly referred to as populist. Despite its growing diffusion, populism is probably one of the current most contested terms in literature and is often used to define even deeply different kinds of actors, ranging from the left to the right of the political continuum. Populism is actually also used to qualify both 'exclusive' and 'inclusive' actors, with the former focusing on identitarian claims rejecting any form of pluralism that might hinder the cultural distinctiveness of the national people, in contrast to the latter. There is little agreement even on the very nature of populism, in terms of it being an ideology, a frame, a political style, or a strategy, as three recently published handbooks show (de la Torre, 2019; Heinisch, Holz-Bacha, & Mazzoleni, 2017; Rovira Kaltwasser, Taggart, & Ostiguy, 2017). Populism is actually a global phenomenon that 'escapes generalization' as 'its language and content are imbued with the political culture of the society in which it arises' (Urbinati, 2019, p. 4). Moreover, when populism is understood as a claim - a discourse or set of attitudes - provided by citizens or political actors to frame the opposition between the 'people' and the 'others' in a Manichean manner, some scholars prefer to use the notion of nationalism (De Cleen, 2017; De Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2017).

Yet, the intrinsic heterogeneity of this group of parties, movements, and leaders should not prevent us from looking for some common denominator that would tie this plurality of *populisms* together and transcend context-based differences. In particular, such a *trait d'union* might be found precisely in the aforementioned concept of sovereignism (Kallis, 2018). Indeed, we might observe that all populist discourses are likely to share appeals to 'the people', while making a claim for a renewed enhancement of national sovereignty. For instance, the leader of the UK Independence Party (UKIP) in Great Britain, Nigel Farage, successfully waved the flag of the 'proud, patriotic country that has control of its borders' in order to get the majority of British votes in favour of the Leave side in the Brexit referendum. In France, Marine Le Pen, the party leader of the Front National (FN), emphasized the fight against the Euro and the need to reduce the power of supranational bodies in her campaign as a candidate for the 2017 French presidency. In Italy, Matteo Salvini led the transformation of the Lega Nord - officially known just as Lega since 2018 - from a regionalist party appealing

to Northern Italy, into a nation-based party, waving the motto 'Italians first!' (Albertazzi, Giovannini, & Seddone, 2018; Mazzoleni & Ruzza, 2018). Beyond Europe, the most relevant sovereignist claim emerged in the 2017 election of the US president, Donald Trump, with his slogan 'America first'.

In other words, by addressing the diffuse sense of insecurity among citizens, populist claims for an empowerment of the nation-state are presented to citizens as a way to regain control over the national economy, decision-making and traditions, in the face of globalized flows and supranational powers. As Kallis (2018, p. 294) argues, such emphasis on the need to restore national sovereignty and re-territorialize state power, that is what we earlier defined as sovereignism, is what actually bonds together all populist movements, across the range from left to right, regardless of their inclusive or exclusive nature. Quite surprisingly, although the concept of sovereignism appears to be key in populist discourse, it has been taken for granted and under-theorized by scholars dealing with populism. For instance, in the introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, Rovira Kaltwasser et al. (2017, p. 2) argue that

the origin of the term can be traced further back in time through the modern history of democratic legitimacy. In the history of modern democracy 'the people' emerge not only as the source of political authority, but also as unified entity able to act and to retrieve power from government officials: the *sovereign people*. This popular ground legitimizes democratic politics but also paves the way for populism. (see also Kelly, 2017).

## **5. A new research agenda**

In order to fill the gap, it would be useful to focus on the linkage between populism and sovereignism, and to propose a new research agenda with which to study populist mobilization and the current challenges to representative democracy and supranational integration. Indeed, although the theoretical insights introduced in the previous section offer some relevant ideas for better grasping this linkage, there are other crucial issues that remain to be addressed:

### **5.1. Sovereignism as an aspect of populist discourse, but not exclusive to it**

Although appeals to national sovereignty can be detected in several parties, not necessarily qualified as populist, they can be considered some of the recurrent and core themes of populist discourse. Indeed, sovereignist claims pre-exist populism, but populism simply took over ideas such as those of popular sovereignty and of the regaining of decision-making power under a narrower, territorial authority, which coincides with the national state. In other words, while sovereignism might exist without populism, there is no populist discourse that does not include sovereignist claims. This argument, however, poses the crucial question of the need to clearly identify what differentiates the sovereignty claims of mainstream parties from those waved by populist

actors. In other words, how can we distinguish between the claims of the UK Conservative Prime Minister, Theresa May, to 'restore national self-determination' and UKIP leader Nigel Farage's similar pleas for the UK's 'right of self-determination'? As the following points also seem to suggest, a possible, initial answer to such a crucial question is that populism merely re-elaborates on sovereignist claims, by emphasizing the blame placed on the establishment and the mechanisms of representative democracy as being chiefly responsible for the uncertainties and unresponsiveness of the current democratic systems.

## 5.2. Sovereignism as a distinct concept

While some might argue that sovereignism is just 'old wine in new bottles', we contend that it is distinct from other concepts. For instance, sovereignism shares with nationalism the promotion of the nation, its superiority, self-determination, and exclusive right to decide. However, as argued earlier, sovereignism is a form of grievance, a reaction that aims at bringing back control within a specific territory, namely the nation state. It emphasizes the need to *restore* authority to the place where it was supposedly originally conceived and the *reaction against the shifts of authority away from the national boundaries*. This concept therefore explicitly aims at restoring the state's sovereignty, that is the absolute or exclusive capacity of decision-making within a specific territory and, more generally, the 'ability to determine . [the nation's] own destiny and care of the welfare of its citizens' (Grimm, 2015, p. ix). The restoration of the past does not necessarily mean, however, that this past really existed. According to Freedon, for populism, and right-wing populism in particular, sovereignty is seen

*not merely as the spatial control over territory but the appropriation of a temporal trajectory of 'we were here first', hence we are the ultimate deciders, the fons et origo of what matters and happens here, and hence also we always have precedence over immigrants, disregarding the fact that our ancestors were immigrants too. (Freedon, 2017, p. 4)*

The focus on restoration, on the recovery of a (real or imaginary) past explains why sovereignism has a peculiar meaning, and cannot be considered as a proxy of a nationalist claim, although the two are closely related and might sometimes overlap. Moreover, while nationalism also embraces cultural and socio-psychological aspects, sovereignism focuses specifically on the aspect of (restored) 'control' over a defined territory (Ichijo, 2009, p. 159; Sheehan, 2006). Likewise, sovereignism has strong ties to Euroscepticism (Leconte, 2010; Szczerbiak & Taggart, 2007), especially as a claim for national sovereignty. However, sovereignism explicitly puts forward an alternative proposal for the distribution of authority, and clearly redefines the polity within national boundaries, while Euroscepticism does not necessarily include such specific counter-proposals. Furthermore,

Euroscepticism should not necessarily be considered as a sharp rejection of supranational integration; rather, it should be conceived as an attitude ranging from 'soft' criticism of the current shape of the European project, and thus claims for its reform, to 'hard', principled opposition to the European Union, invoking the return to the previous system of independent, European nation-states (Szczerbiak & Taggart, 2007). Nonetheless, if sovereignty is to be considered as crucial for the understanding of populism, further research is required to clarify any likely overlap with other concepts.

### 5.3. Sovereignism as a multidimensional concept

Sovereignism can be conceived as a multi-faceted response to socio-economic, cultural and political challenges. It might therefore assume different forms and refer to different scopes of action, including: popular (or political) sovereignism, that is the idea that 'the will of the people is considered the ultimate source of legitimacy' (Spruyt, Keppens, & Van Droogenbroeck, 2016, p. 336), as opposed to parliamentary sovereignism (Wellings & Vines, 2016); national sovereignism, as opposed to the supranational sovereignism embodied, for example, by the European Union; and economic sovereignism, as a claim for a political economy that could be beneficial for the (national) people's wealth. If sovereignist claims are the core themes of the populist discourse, the multidimensionality of the concept of sovereignism then explains the intrinsic ideological heterogeneity of populist parties; at the same time, it strengthens the argument that references to 'taking back the control', although articulated according to different spheres of sovereignty, are what actually bonds together otherwise different parties. Moreover, parties might combine more than one dimension in a geometry-variable perspective. For instance, the Spanish, leftist Podemos claims to restore the control of political and economic sovereignty back to the national level, but it is utterly distant from the emphasis on border control that features within the right-wing and exclusive Dutch Party for Freedom (PVV), or the Italian Lega. Nonetheless, as Kallis (2018, p. 298) argues, while focusing on different dimensions of sovereignty, 'the two projects converge on the reinvention of the border - symbolic and physical - of the existing nation states as the marker of redeemed sovereignty'. Hence, by unfolding the multidimensionality of sovereignism, it would be possible to have a better understanding of the complexity of the populist phenomenon, while at the same time avoiding the trap of its tendency to 'escape generalisation'.

### 5.4. Sovereignism as an anti-establishment discourse

A crucial dimension of sovereignism is, as seen above, that of popular (or political) sovereignty. It could be defined as the appeal to give control back to ordinary citizens, who perceive the institutions and elites of such a 'diffuse' and 'dispersed' form of sovereignty as distant, unresponsive, ineffective and disrespectful of the real interest of the people. This implies a broader



challenge towards the establishment:

In a populist democracy the political domain consequently extends into spheres not considered 'political' in a liberal democracy: media, judiciary, culture, the economy and education are allegedly no longer largely impartial and non-political institutions, but all spheres which are political and over which 'the people' consequently should be able to exert influence. (Corduwener, 2014, p. 432)

Elites are thus described as actors that undermine 'true' sovereignty and consequently incapable of defending ordinary citizens from the threats to their culture, identity, economic wealth, and security. Likewise, the national elites who built supranational institutions are perceived as mainly responsible for the legal framework, or the lack thereof, of the global economic system. To this purpose, Kallis (2018, p. 296) offers an interesting insight: what qualifies the populist reframing of sovereignist arguments is the emphasis on the 'panegyric redemption of sovereignty from the grip of the internationalized/globalized agents that needs to be performed'.

This is actually even in line with the scholarly arguments suggesting that the European Union was built with the 'permissive consensus' of the mainstream parties, with limited forms of political opposition, especially at its onset (Hooghe & Marks, 2009). Accordingly, new research agenda should therefore examine the populist anti-establishment rhetoric as a reframing of sovereignist arguments, and clearly spell out when sovereignist appeals to popular sovereignty become populist anti-establishment claims. The following examples, albeit with some oversimplification, would better explain the populist re-elaboration of sovereignist arguments. For instance, a typical identitarian sovereignist argument promotes the restoration of the national control of borders in order to prevent migration flows; in its populist re-elaboration, the lost control of national borders is the result of an elite-driven project, put forward regardless of citizens' consent, that has made such borders porous and blurred, while promoting ineffective forms of transnational cooperation. Likewise, economic sovereignism claims to regain the state's full sovereignty over economic decision-making; however, according to the populists' reframing, by endorsing the integration of markets, the globalized elites and the national mainstream parties have weakened the authority of the state and its capacity to protect the (national) people's wealth and well-being; moreover, the elites are accused of having pursued these processes without the consent of the (mostly unaware) represented people. Finally, the transformation of sovereignty has implied a shift of the centres of authority away from nation-states, thus triggering the political sovereignist demands to bring institutions back within the national borders. Populists reformulated these claims by blaming the distant, unaccountable, and unresponsive elites of cutting citizens off from decision-making, whose dynamics are increasingly perceived as opaque.

## 5.5. Sovereignism as criticism of representative democracy

Sovereignist claims mainly target representative democracy, which has been established as the prevailing model of the nation-state flourishing during the process of democratization, and challenged by globalization. Indeed, it has favoured the processes of globalization, but has ended up being deeply transformed by it. As previously argued, liberal democracy has increasingly been perceived as falling short of adequately addressing the challenges posed by the transformations of sovereignty and has therefore been blamed as a main source of insecurity by sovereignist claims. Likewise, the ideological core of populism is nourished by what Urbinati (2019) defines as the *demos*, namely the people, and the emphasis on the need to retrieve power from politicians, which closely relates to populists' ambivalence about representative democracy. The 'people' that populist actors usually refer to is a homogeneous, though vaguely undefined entity who are unheard by politicians, and whose 'purity' is threatened by the procedures of mediation and compromise that traditionally feature in representative democracy (Mastropaolo, 2017). As a consequence, the populist discourse promotes alternative forms of representation and decision-making, which are likely to overcome the power of the established elites and their institutions. In particular, populist movements make a claim for more direct democracy, which would confer power to people. Populism thus promotes a form of government power, alternative to representative democracy, based on a large, unmediated, non-institutionalized support for the personalistic leader, defined by Urbinati (2019, p. 9) as 'direct representation'. In populists' ideal world, representative democracy would be better replaced by a system in which mechanisms of direct democracy combine with the power of the leader, with a reduced role for any form of intermediaries between the people and the decision-makers (that is to say, the parties). Against this backdrop, the new research agenda on populism and sovereignism should therefore further explore how the populist ambivalence, if not rejection of representative democracy actually relates to the sovereignist blame placed on this democratic model.

## 5.6. Sovereignism as citizens' and political actors' claims

Sovereignism might be seen and analyzed from both a supply-side and demand-side perspective. From a supply-side perspective, sovereignism, and its populist re-elaboration, is an actor-driven discourse, denouncing the elite for hindering people's sovereignty, with the (bad) elites/political representatives portrayed as those who have 'sold out' people's sovereignty to supranational powers and/or outsiders (such as immigrants). It also includes a promise of change in order to restore people's sovereignty, a change that would be ensured only by trusting the 'new' leaders and their parties. Upon these premises, a research agenda that links populism and sovereignism should investigate whether populist parties play the role of

‘entrepreneurs’ of sovereignist claims, and to what extent these claims exert a contagion towards the mainstream parties. In a demand-side perspective, sovereignism might be seen as a latent or explicit demand in favour of national independence, re-bordering orientations and direct democracy, and against crisis and uncertainty, the establishment and representative democracy and supranational power (much like a Eurosceptic sentiment). This makes compelling further analyses on the relevance of claims in citizens’ attitudes and how this relates to party preferences for populist actors.

## **6. Research contributions for the new research agenda: a special issue**

The suggested research agenda mainly aims at ‘sowing doubts, rather than gathering certainties’ (Bobbio, 2005). The six research issues outlined above should actually be considered as open-ended questions, still in need of further theoretical and empirical inputs, rather than ‘yardsticks’ for the sovereignism-populism linkage. The complexity of this research agenda is also reflected in the five articles included in this Special Issue focusing on populism and sovereignty. They all explore, in different, yet complementary ways, specific aspects of this multifaceted relationship. By using a widerange of methodological approaches, these articles include sovereignism and populism either as dependent or independent variables and thus provide an encompassing analysis of the two phenomena, their linkage, and the main theoretical and substantial implications of such a relationship. As for the research design, most contributions offer a fine-grained analysis, through a case-study research design, while the comparative study by Basile, Borri and Verzichelli (2019) explores the sovereignist-populist linkage by using European-wide data. Furthermore, some of the articles focus on the ‘supply’ side of sovereignism and populism (Baldini, Bressanelli, & Gianfreda 2019; Ivaldi & Mazzoleni 2019), thus investigating the nature of the sovereignist discourse in political parties; on the other hand, Basile, Borri, & Verzichelli (2019) and Mueller and Heidelberger (2019) focus on the ‘demand’ side, by examining, respectively, the determinants of the support for sovereignist claims, and the impact of the support for such claims on voting choices. Finally, Heinisch, Werner and Habersack (2019) focus on both the ‘demand’ and the ‘supply’ side, by examining party discourses as well as voting preferences for sovereignist and populist parties in the Austrian case.

Although conceived as standalone papers on the topic in question, these contributions overall address the aforementioned six research lines from different perspectives and approaches, providing valuable insights to the theoretical and empirical debate. In particular, by proposing compound, though diverse operationalizations of the concept, all the articles seem to point to the need to conceive of sovereignism as an intrinsically multidimensional concept. Interestingly, the tension between sovereignism and populism emerges in these five studies, which engage in a critical and insightful effort to propose theoretical and empirical grounds to the debated demarcation line between populism and sovereignism, and the nature of their

linkage.

Yet beyond the theoretical and empirical contribution to literature, and besides their interest from a scholarly point of view, the findings of these articles also carry substantial implications. By unravelling the context in which sovereignist claims originate, they indicate the main sources of the increasing popularity of sovereignist claims, as well as at least some of the reasons for their growing appeal among the European electorates. They reveal common patterns across different European countries, thus drawing attention to the likely consequences of sovereignist and populist phenomena on the eve of the European elections of 2019. Indeed, contrary to what was argued at the beginning of this section, among the many ‘doubts’ that it triggers, a certainty is likely to emerge from this scholarly effort: Sovereignism is increasingly relevant in the contemporary political discourse, and it is ultimately likely to develop as a distinct cleavage of political competition. Coupled with their growing electoral success, the great capacity of populist actors to feed on sovereignist claims inevitably poses a challenge to the projects of supranational integration, and at the same time, urges a timely rethinking of democratic politics in a context of increasing globalization and regionalization, as already suggested long ago by Held and McGrew (1995). Indeed, the guardians of representative democracy should clearly spell out, and put forward, far-sighted alternatives to ‘taking back control’, before sovereignist fences and walls are built as a shield to contemporary challenges.

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