Populist (de)legitimation of international organizations

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Ever since the end of the Second World War, international organizations (IOs) have been a bedrock of multilateralism, both at the core of the so-called liberal international order and at its margins. Given that populism in its currently dominant right-wing variant is usually associated with a strong emphasis on nationalism and sovereignty,[1] many observers are convinced that the rise of populism in world politics poses a challenge to the legitimacy of the liberal international order and multilateral cooperation. This belief is by no means unfounded. An increasing number of heads of government—such as former US president Donald Trump, former Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro and Boris Johnson, the former prime minister of the United Kingdom—draw on a populist repertoire to challenge, weaken or withdraw from established IOs.

However, experts on populism have cautioned against portraying populists as unilateralists or oversimplifying their foreign policies.[2] While populist leaders may contest certain IOs, they often come out in support of others. For example, several populist leaders such as Viktor Orbán (Hungary), Narendra Modi (India) and Rodrigo Duterte (the former president of the Philippines) have endorsed cooperation under the UN's climate framework.[3] Even the Trump administration remained an active participant in many important IOs.

To explain these contradictions, this article investigates how state leaders use populism as a source for legitimating and delegitimating IOs. As the introduction to this special section points out, legitimation and delegitimation are crucial ways of influencing the workings of IOs, because legitimacy is a key tool for

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[1] Mark Copelovitch and Jon C. W. Pevehouse, 'International organizations in a new era of populist nationalism', *The Review of International Organizations* 14: 2, 2019, pp. 169–86, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11558-019-09353-1; Stephan De Spiegeleire, Clarissa Skinner and Tim Sweijs, *The rise of populist sovereignism: what it is, where it comes from, and what it means for international security and defense* (The Hague: The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, 2017). (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 3 Jan. 2023.)

[2] Sandra Destradi, David Cadier and Johannes Plagemann, 'Populism and foreign policy: a research agenda (Introduction)', *Comparative European Politics* 19: 6, 2021, pp. 663–82 at pp. 673–4, https://doi.org/10.1057/s41295-021-00255-4.

[3] Sandra Destradi and Johannes Plagemann, 'Populism and International Relations: (un)predictability, personalisation, and the reinforcement of existing trends in world politics', *Review of International Studies* 45: 5, 2019, pp. 711–30, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210519000184.

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ensuring their effectiveness.[4] According to existing legitimacy research, actors usually (de)legitimate IOs by constructing arguments about whether they effectively provide collective goods (functional or performance legitimacy) and how responsive they are to key stakeholders (procedural legitimacy).[5] In focusing on these liberal legitimation standards, scholars have disregarded the possibility that populist leaders may draw on entirely different standards and norms when (de) legitimating IOs.[6] Based on theoretical scholarship on populism, we argue that populist leaders seek to transform the normative premises of debates about IO legitimacy by basing their (de)legitimation primarily on the representative qualities of the IOs. While work on domestic political institutions has long acknowledged claims about representation, these issues have largely been overlooked by scholars of IO legitimation.[7] Logically, prior to conventional functional and procedural legitimation, representational legitimation critically interrogates IOs by asking on whose authority they speak, in whose interest they act, who they are made up of, and what they stand for. By doing so, populist leaders promote standards of legitimacy that contest dominant liberal norms. This allows populist leaders to link their (de)legitimation of IOs to their goal of portraying themselves as the ultimate representatives of 'the people'.

We therefore argue that populism enters debates about IO legitimation primarily through the representative claims of state leaders. While populism is often regarded in a rather simplified manner as politics guided by public opinion, we contend that populist leaders do not simply react to anti-IO sentiments in the broader public when (de)legitimating IOs, but actively try to convince audiences about the relevance of alternative legitimacy standards. Populism, which we understand as a mode of framing political discourses, offers leaders a way of articulating latent grievances among key audiences in terms of an antagonism between 'the people' and 'the elite', and directing those grievances toward specific IOs. This argument resonates with recent research that finds that government communication has a strong influence on public perceptions of IO legitimacy.[8] In line with these premises, we focus our inquiry on one specific analytical perspective, agent-based legitimation, within the larger agents-audiences-environment (AAE) framework developed by Tobias Lenz and Fredrik Söderbaum in the introduc-

[4] Tobias Lenz and Fredrik Söderbaum, 'The origins of legitimation strategies in international organizations: agents, audiences and environments', *International Affairs* 99: 3, 2023, pp. 899–920.

[5] Jonas Tallberg, Karin Bäckstrand and Jan Aart Scholte, eds, *Legitimacy in global governance: sources, processes, and consequences* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198826873.001.0001.

[6] For exceptions, see Daniel F. Wajner, 'The populist way out: why contemporary populist leaders seek transnational legitimation', *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 24: 3, 2022, pp. 416–36, https://doi.org/10.1177%2F13691481211069345; Daniel F. Wajner and Luis Roniger, 'Populism and transnational projection: the legitimation strategies of Pink Tide neo-populist leaderships in Latin America', *Comparative Political Theory* 2: 2, 2022, pp. 118–47, https://doi.org/10.1163/26669773-bja10037.

[7] Michael Saward, *The representative claim* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 138–68. For a rare treatment of the international dimension, see Pieter de Wilde, 'The quality of representative claims: Uncovering a weakness in the defense of the liberal world order', *Political Studies* 68: 2, 2019, pp. 271–92, https://doi.org/10.1177/0032321719845199.

[8] Lisa M. Dellmuth and Jonas Tallberg, 'Elite communication and the popular legitimacy of international organizations', *British Journal of Political Science* 51: 3, 2021, pp. 1292–313, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123419000620.

tion to this special section.[9] This perspective emphasizes the strategic agency of political decision-makers as a crucial source of IO (de)legitimation. In exploring these endogenous origins, this approach contrasts with audience-based perspectives, in which agents reactively consider the normative beliefs of key audiences, as well as environment-based (de)legitimation, where agents emulate arguments about other IOs that are deemed highly legitimate.

To illustrate how leaders use populism for the (de)legitimation of IOs, we employ a comparative research design covering three cases: incumbent Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, the late Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez and the former Philippine president Rodrigo Duterte. This approach allows us to demonstrate that leaders across a broad political spectrum consistently use representative claims to impose the 'people vs elite' logic on discourses about IO legitimacy. Specifically, populist leaders employ two representational frames—popular sovereignty and popular identity. Based on these frames, they question the liberal norms that conventionally undergird procedural and functional legitimation while at the same time persuading audiences of the validity of popular identity and sovereignty as alternative legitimacy standards, which follows the agent-based logic of (de)legitimation. Populist representational frames thus enable direct (de)legitimation of IOs based on claims about their representative qualities. At the same time, these frames allow populist leaders to challenge and replace the conventional liberal legitimacy standards with a specific populist inflection by demanding that IOs should provide governance 'for the people' and 'by the people', rather than for/by detached elites.

The empirical focus of our study is on regional IOs, since these are particularly intense sites—and simultaneously objects—of populist (de)legitimation strategies. This is evidenced by the ongoing politicization of EU membership by European populist leaders, from Marine Le Pen in France to Orbán in Hungary, as well as the competition over regional initiatives during the so-called 'Pink Tide' of populism which swept across Latin America from the early 2000s. In spite of this focus on regional IOs, however, we also seek to glean insights into IOs more generally, especially with regard to how they are affected by populist delegitimation. From a populist vantage point, what is primarily wrong with many established IOs is not that they lack transparency or are ineffective, but that their procedures and functions reflect a liberal, elitist order and fail to represent 'the people'. Consequently, we argue that stakeholders of established IOs will do little to address populist delegitimation if they continue to rely on procedural and functional legitimation based on conventional legitimacy standards while sidestepping more fundamental representational questions of sovereignty and identity. Instead, defending established IOs requires their stakeholders to take up the populist challenge by engaging in more fundamental debates over the organizations' purpose and mandate.

The article is structured in the following way. First, we review the literature on populism and legitimacy in international cooperation, showing that there is

[9] Lenz and Söderbaum, 'The origins of legitimation strategies in international organizations'.

still very little research on populist legitimation of IOs. The next section develops the analytical framework of representational legitimation frames, and situates our approach within the broader theoretical landscape. Next, we elaborate the research design and methodological considerations before presenting a comparative empirical analysis of the cases of Orbán, Chávez and Duterte. The final section draws broader conclusions from the study for research on populism as well as on legitimacy in global governance.

Existing literature on populism and legitimacy in international cooperation

While existing scholarship has generated many insights into the sources, drivers and consequences of legitimacy in IOs, it has not sufficiently considered the implications of the rise of populists to power. Instead, the most influential parts of the literature have often focused on dimensions of legitimacy that resonate with liberal conceptions of international order. From this perspective, procedural and functional legitimacy have received considerable attention, but without problematizing different conceptions of the core constituencies and beneficiaries of IOs.[10] The current wave of populism has challenged these dominant liberal underpinnings of IO authority.

Recent advances beyond the dominant liberal institutional perspective should be acknowledged, for instance research on the 'dark sides' of international and regional cooperation as well as on the strategic use of IOs by political leaders and governments—either for the purposes of regime survival, regime-boosting or legitimacy-boosting, or as a smokescreen for achieving narrow interests.[11] However, this literature focuses primarily on authoritarian instead of populist regimes. Furthermore, it usually examines how international cooperation fosters domestic regime legitimacy, rather than how illiberal actors engage in the (de)legitimation of IOs.

To address this gap, we look to the emerging literature that has started to unpack and analyse the nexus between the domestic and international dimensions of populism.[12] Daniel Wajner, for example, argues that populist leaders' international (de)legitimation strategies externalize their domestic political strategies.[13] This research suggests that international cooperation may play an important role in populist leaders' politics, not just as an object of critique but also as a substantial feature of their foreign policy. However, most scholars have studied the particularities of populist foreign policy in different parts of the world and there is a lack

[10] Tallberg et al., *Legitimacy in global governance*; Jonas Tallberg and Michael Zürn, 'The legitimacy and legitimation of international organizations: introduction and framework', *The Review of International Organizations*, vol. 14, 2019, pp. 581–606; Klaus Dingwerth, Antonia Witt, Ina Lehmann, Ellen Reichel and Tobias Weise, *International organizations under pressure: legitimating global governance in challenging times* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

[11] Maria J. Debre and Lee Morgenbesser, 'Out of the shadows: autocratic regimes, election observation and legitimation', *Contemporary Politics* 23: 3, 2017, pp. 328–47, https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2017.1304318; Fredrik Söderbaum, *Rethinking regionalism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

[12] Angelos Chryssogelos, 'Populism in foreign policy', in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

[13] Wajner, 'The populist way out'.

of organized and systematic research on populist (de)legitimation of IOs. Even when comparative perspectives are adopted, this is often for the sake of teasing out differences between 'thick' variants of populism, rather than interrogating common trends and approaches.[14] The idiographic orientation of existing scholarship has prevented generalization and theory-building as well as the formation of empirical knowledge about how populists engage in the (de)legitimation of global and regional IOs. The following section develops a theoretical framework that allows a first step in this direction.

Approach and framework: representational frames of (de)legitimation

Our conceptualization understands populism as a mode of *framing* political issues for the purpose of obtaining and sustaining public support.[15] In line with common usages in the social sciences, we define frames as sense-making tools through which actors—in our case, the populist state leaders—organize reality in ways that connect it to existing knowledge, ideologies and normative dispositions.[16] At its core, populist framing relies on the construction of a morally pure people and the corrupt elite as antagonistic group identities.[17] Populist leaders then legitimate themselves as embodying 'the people' in their fight against 'the elite'. We can see this in its purest form in Hugo Chávez's dictum: 'I am not myself, I am the people'.[18] Populism, in this understanding, is not merely a politics of passively following the demands of ordinary citizens—it is a discursive strategy that political elites use to influence public perceptions and beliefs. This emphasis on elite agency brings it into natural association with agent-based legitimation in the AAE framework introduced by Lenz and Söderbaum in the introduction to this special section. Elite agency is also compatible with theories that emphasize populism's stylistic and performative elements.[19] Complementing these works, our framing approach provides an analytical focus on the substantive themes of legitimation that populist leaders employ.

Because frames have multiple functions—they define problems, diagnose causes, enable moral judgements, prescribe solutions and motivate action[20]—they are important ways in which actors organize (de)legitimation discourses. Framing helps leaders justify and 'sell' foreign policy decisions to key audiences as part of their broader political quest.[21] But what do specifically populist (de)legitimation

[14] Destradi and Plagemann, 'Populism and International Relations'.
[15] Paris Aslanidis, 'Is populism an ideology? A refutation and a new perspective', *Political Studies* 64: 1 suppl., 2016, pp. 88–104 at p. 99.
[16] Robert M. Entman, 'Framing: toward clarification of a fractured paradigm', *Journal of Communication* 43: 4, 1993, pp. 51–58, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1993.tb01304.x.
[17] Erin K. Jenne, 'Populism, nationalism and revisionist foreign policy', *International Affairs* 97: 2, 2021, pp. 323–43, https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiaa230.
[18] José Pedro Zúquete, 'The missionary politics of Hugo Chávez', *Latin American Politics and Society* 50: 1, 2008, pp. 91–121 at p. 100, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-2456.2008.00005.x.
[19] Benjamin Moffitt, The global rise of populism: performance, political style, and representation (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016).
[20] Entman, 'Framing', p. 52.
[21] Bart Bonikowski, 'Ethno-nationalist populism and the mobilization of collective resentment', *The British Journal of Sociology* 68: S1, 2017, pp. S181–S213 at p. 192, https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-4446.12325.

frames of IOs look like? Theories of populism suggest that populists will mainly frame IOs in terms of representation. Benjamin Arditi, for example, sees populism as a 'mode of representation' that constructs an intimate connection between the populist leader and 'the people', and sees the former as a 'vehicle for the expression of the popular will'.[22] The notion of representation comprises different aspects. In a basic sense, it refers to the idea of being formally authorized to speak for someone and acting in that person's interest, which could be subsumed under procedural and functional legitimacy. In a deeper sense, however, it is a process of 'rendering present, bringing into presence through a substitute'.[23] Representation therefore has formal and substantial, but also descriptive and symbolic elements[24]—all of which can confer legitimacy to an actor or institution.

Whether or not a subject represents a constituency is not given a priori but depends on successful 'representative claims'—speech acts that follow a basic grammar in which a claim-maker (here: the populist leader) argues that a subject (here: the IO) stands for an object (here: the IO's constituency and its interests) or fails to do so.[25] Such claims can have powerful legitimation effects because they invoke democratic ideals. While proponents of liberal democracy ascribe the function of representation primarily to political institutions, populist framing depicts those institutions as undemocratic and argues that the leader is the only authentic representative of 'the people'.[26] Accordingly, we define legitimation frames as representational if they contain representative claims about IOs, i.e. arguments about whose authority the IO acts on (formal representation), in whose interest it acts (substantial representation), who it is made up of (descriptive representation), and/or who it stands for (symbolic representation). Using representational legitimation frames allows populist leaders to embed their (de)legitimation of IOs in the 'people vs elite' logic of populism. They can legitimate IOs by depicting them as embodiments of 'the people' and acting in pursuit of the popular will, or delegitimate them by portraying them as symbols of a reviled liberal international order, dominated by detached elites acting against 'the people's' interests without popular control and participation. Either way, by making claims about the representative qualities of an IO the populist leader also makes implicit representative claims about themselves. If the IO represents 'the people', it is because it is authorized and controlled by the leader as the trustee of 'the people'; if it does not represent 'the people', the populist leader will challenge its authority on behalf of 'the people'. Populist leaders' (de)legitimation of IOs thus has the ultimate purpose of legitimating their own rule.

Representative claims are used by actors across the political spectrum, but research indicates that opponents of established political orders are often better at using representative claims to challenge those orders than established actors are

[22] Benjamin Arditi, *Politics on the edges of liberalism: difference, populism, revolution, agitation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p. 63.
[23] Arditi, *Politics on the edges of liberalism*.
[24] Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, *The concept of representation* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1967).
[25] Saward, *The representative claim*, p. 36.
[26] Nadia Urbinati, 'Political theory of populism', *Annual Review of Political Science* 22, 2019, pp. 111–127, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-050317-070753.

at using them to sustain support for it, which confirms the connection between populism and representation stipulated in theories of populism.[27] Our empirical analysis shows that implicit or explicit representative claims are indeed pervasive in populist leaders' discourses around IOs. Thematically, the claims can be organized into two main frames: popular sovereignty and popular identity.

With regard to the first frame, popular sovereignty, the leader's role in 'taking back control' for the voiceless by circumventing established representative institutions has been identified as an essential feature of populist politics.[28] Beyond domestic contexts, this translates into narratives that see popular sovereignty as threatened by IOs that encourage the delegation of authority to centralized and supranational international institutions.[29] Angelos Chryssogelos goes as far as to say that 'whether defined along national, regional or transnational lines, "sovereignty" is probably the term that most accurately captures the populist logic of international affairs'.[30] To be sure, the genealogy of popular sovereignty has a distinct liberal dimension, connected as it is to the emergence of republican nation-states and contractualist political philosophy. However, populist leaders provide a particular spin on the principle by detaching it from notions of institutional representation and pitting 'the people' against sovereignty-usurping elites. From this perspective, the hegemonic liberalism advanced primarily by western states and liberal elites, which supports the idea of IOs intruding into member state affairs, appears as anti-sovereigntist.[31] At the same time, populist leaders legitimate IOs that are compatible with popular notions of sovereignty and protect or even enhance the leader's role as guardian of 'the people's' interests.

Regarding the second frame of popular identity, populism relies on the notion of 'the people' as an 'imagined community'.[32] Through mythical narratives of virtue and authenticity, 'the people' are constructed as the ultimate constituency of all populist politics.[33] They are imagined as a community threatened in their authenticity or sheer existence, 'held back by the collusion of foreign forces and self-serving elites at home'.[34] This Other of 'the people' is frequently characterized as liberal or 'globalist'. 'The elite' is said to act against the interests of 'the people' through inter- and supranational institutions.[35] Although scholars frequently

[27] Pieter de Wilde, 'Representative claims analysis: theory meets method', *Journal of European Public Policy* 20: 2, 2013, pp. 278–94, https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2013.746128.
[28] Urbinati, 'Political theory of populism'.
[29] De Spiegeleire et al., *The rise of populist sovereignism*, pp. 76–8.
[30] Chryssogelos, 'Populism in foreign policy', p. 2.
[31] Angelos Chryssogelos, 'Undermining the West from within: European populists, the US and Russia', *European View* 9: 2, 2010, pp. 267–77, https://doi.org/10.1007/s12290-010-0135-1; Wajner, 'The populist way out', p. 425.
[32] Cas Mudde, 'The populist Zeitgeist', *Government and Opposition* 39: 4, 2004, pp. 541–63 at p. 546, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1477-7053.2004.00135.x.
[33] Margaret Canovan, 'Taking politics to the people: populism as the ideology of democracy', in Yves Mény and Yves Surel, eds, *Democracies and the populist challenge* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), pp. 25–44.
[34] Jeff D. Colgan and Robert O. Keohane, 'The liberal order is rigged: fix it now or watch it wither', *Foreign Affairs* 96: 3, 2017, pp. 36–44 at p. 36.
[35] Cynthia Miller-Idriss, 'The global dimensions of populist nationalism', *The International Spectator* 54: 2, 2019, pp. 17–34 at p. 25, https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2019.1592870.

characterize 'the people' as a 'homogeneous'[36] or 'monolithic'[37] category, such identities may very well be multi-layered. Populists politicize identity, but do not necessarily perceive regional and national belonging as a zero-sum game. Invoking transnational bonds may help reinforce the 'people vs elite' antagonism—for example, by summoning solidarity against a common enemy. This suggests that populist leaders will endorse cooperation if it represents counterhegemonic or defensive projects, sometimes even within broader institutional frameworks such as the EU.[38]

Taken together, the popular sovereignty and identity frames constitute a form of representational (de)legitimation in line with the populist political logic. In relation to Lenz and Söderbaum's AAE framework, such representational legitimation is agent-based, rather than audience- or environment-based. The leaders attempt to persuade audiences to view IOs' legitimacy in terms of popular sovereignty and identity, instead of passively adjusting to audiences' pre-existing normative demands or copying established legitimation strategies from successful IOs. While populist leaders need to frame their claims in a way that resonates with potential audiences such as domestic voters, by ascribing sovereignty and identity to 'the people' they essentially construct their audience in the speech act itself rather than addressing it as a pre-defined entity.[39] In doing so, their (de)legitimation strategies can transform the normative grounds of debates about IO legitimacy in favour of the 'people vs elite' antagonism.

Research design and methodological considerations

In this section we compare the legitimation frames of three populist leaders: Viktor Orbán, the late Hugo Chávez and Rodrigo Duterte. They were purposely selected from among the list of 48 populist heads of state and government identified in the 'Populism in power' database.[40] First, we excluded those leaders whose period in power ended before 2000 in order to reduce the potential effects of historical context. From the remaining 41 leaders, we chose three whose cases showed maximum variation in terms of ideological orientation and geographical location. Orbán's nativist nationalism makes him an exponent of Europe's current wave of far-right populism. Chávez was arguably the icon of Latin America's 'Pink Tide' of populism, with strong socialist overtones. Duterte has been associated with an ideologically flexible form of populism that is often seen as a specifically south-east Asian variant. Our rationale for this selection was that a comparison of the most dissimilar cases would make for a robust test of our arguments about populist (de)legitimation as an agent-based process. Leaders who are situated in different regional contexts and at different positions on the political spectrum need to speak to considerably different audiences, and previous research has suggested

[36] Mudde, 'The populist Zeitgeist', p. 543.
[37] Paul Taggart, *Populism* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2000), p. 92.
[38] Cf. Thomas Legler, 'Gobernanza regional: El vínculo multilateral', *Foreign Affairs Latinoamérica* 10: 3, 2010, pp. 18–23.
[39] Cf. Saward, *The representative claim*, pp. 48–56; Urbinati, 'Political theory of populism', p. 120.
[40] Jordan Kyle and Brett Meyer, *High tide? Populism in power, 1990–2020*, paper (Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, 2020).

that prevalent forms of populism in Europe, Latin America and south-east Asia are to a certain extent *sui generis* phenomena.[41] If we still find common patterns across all cases, we can assume that the leaders' strategies are oriented towards persuading their respective audiences of the legitimacy standards that their populist discursive strategy prescribes, rather than passively responding to the normative demands of their audiences.

We performed online searches to sample public statements (speeches and interviews) by these leaders that include references to IOs. We found these statements on websites of governments and IOs as well as in news archives. Video material was also included. Since we are interested in populists in power, we specifically looked at statements from the respective leaders' most recent periods of incumbency—from 2010 for Orbán (including statements made until April 2022), from 1999 to 2013 for Chávez and from 2016 to 2022 for Duterte. Overall, we analysed 35 speeches by Orbán, 13 by Chávez and 26 by Duterte.[42] We also included quotes in secondary literature to make up for imbalances in corpus size for the individual leaders. In a loose adaption of frame-analysis techniques, we carried out a thematic analysis of the statements with the objective of uncovering patterns in how the leaders (de)legitimated a range of regional IOs. Using the theory-based expectations about populist framings of international cooperation as a hermeneutic framework, we identified sections of the texts that referred to IOs and coded their depictions of those IOs. We then gradually refined our coding where we found that the framing did not map onto our initial ideas. For example, we initially treated anti-liberalism as a distinct frame, but eventually realized it was more plausible to treat it as a sub-theme within the two main frames of popular sovereignty and popular identity. Finally, we revisited the coded text to identify any representative claims within it, using the standard grammar mentioned above as a hermeneutic tool.

Comparative analysis

While there are some important differences, which can in part be explained by ideological leanings, the populist leaders organize their (de)legitimation of regional IOs around the two frames expressing the core populist logic of the 'people vs elite' antagonism. The first two subsections below present the findings from the three cases in terms of these two frames, while the third subsection provides a comparative summary that discusses the representative dimension of the frames.

[41] Cas Mudde and Cristobál Rovira Kaltwasser, *Voices of the peoples: populism in Europe and Latin America compared*, Working Paper 378 (Helen Kellogg Institute for International Studies, 2011); Richard Robison and Vedi R. Hadiz, 'Populism in Southeast Asia: a vehicle for reform or a tool for despots', in Toby Carroll, Shahar Hameiri and Lee Jones, eds, *The political economy of Southeast Asia: politics and uneven development under hyperglobalisation* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), pp. 155–75.

[42] For Orbán's speeches, we relied on the official English translations. For Chávez, we relied on the original Spanish version. For Duterte, we analysed speeches published in English, either on the website of the government of the Republic of the Philippines or in the media. The data collection and analysis builds partially on Fredrik Söderbaum, Kilian Spandler and Agnese Pacciardi, *Contestations of the liberal international order: a populist script of regional cooperation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

Popular sovereignty

Although all three populist leaders draw to some extent on nationalist rhetoric, there is no evidence that this automatically translates into unilateral foreign policy stances. On the contrary, populist governments tend to endorse and actively engage in regional IOs when the latter promise to enhance, rather than threaten, sovereignty. The empirical findings demonstrate that populists frame and judge regional IOs specifically in terms of *popular* sovereignty. Populists ascribe a major value to regional IOs in so far as they support their mission of tying politics to the will of 'the people'. An important common theme in populist leaders' statements is that regional IOs should preserve the autonomy and independence of the leader to pursue policies on behalf of 'the people', free from external domination.

Viktor Orbán portrays himself as working to re-establish national sovereignty in the EU, taking the power from supranational elites in Brussels and giving it back to national governments. However, from his perspective, Hungary is not anti-EU; rather, it is opposed to liberal EU politicians who disregard the nation-state and the people it is supposed to represent. A key trope of Orbán's narrative is that pro-migrant, pro-integration elites undermine the sovereignty of Hungary and its virtuous people with their imperial project of a United States of Europe,[43] which reveals his framing as one of popular sovereignty. 'Those who do most to endanger the future of Europe', he proclaimed in 2016, 'are not those who want to come here, but the political, economic and intellectual leaders who are trying to reshape Europe against the will of the European people'.[44] Orbán describes Europe and the EU as being divided between sovereigntist-nationalists, like Hungary and its fellow members of the Visegrad Group (V4, a regional alliance that unites the leaders of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia), and federalist-supranationalists, who promote regional integration at the expense of the nation-state.[45] Accordingly, Orbán has legitimized the V4 as a representative of the Central European peoples and as the vanguard in the effort to (re-)establish popular sovereignty within Europe and the EU.[46]

Hugo Chávez, who in his speeches addressed a region that had been heavily marked by a colonial past, promoted himself as a leader who would bring sovereignty back to the Latin American people. His regional strategy did not just aim to delegitimate US hemispheric institutionalism, embodied by the Organization of American States (OAS) and the initiative for a Free Trade Area of the Americas

[43] 'Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's "State of the Nation" address', *Visegrád Post*, 11 Feb. 2019, https://visegradpost.com/en/2019/02/11/prime-minister-viktor-orbans-state-of-the-nation-address-full-speech/. See also Edit Zgut and Robert Csehi, 'Orban's peacock dance', *Aspen Review*, 28 Aug. 2019, https://www.aspen.review/article/2019/orbans-peacock-dance/.

[44] 'Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's State of the Nation address', Miniszterelnok.hu, 28 Feb. 2016, https://www.miniszterelnok.hu/prime-minister-viktor-orbans-state-of-the-nation-address/.

[45] See for example 'Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's speech on the 62nd anniversary of the 1956 revolution and freedom fight', *Visegrád Post*, 23 Oct. 2018, https://visegradpost.com/en/2018/10/24/viktor-orban-confronts-globalism-and-brussels-in-view-of-upcoming-european-parliament-elections-full-speech/.

[46] 'Viktor Orbán's speech at the Visegrád Group conference "The Future of Europe"', *About Hungary*, 26 Jan. 2018, https://abouthungary.hu/prime-minister/viktor-orbans-speech-at-the-visegrad-group-conference-the-future-of-europe.

(FTAA); it also included the creation of a new regional institutional architecture with the clear objective of excluding the United States.[47] Several regional IOs in which Venezuela took a leadership role were characterized by a strong role for heads of state coupled with a low level of organizational autonomy, sometimes described as 'interpresidentialism'.[48] The Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA), in particular, was explicitly designed to reinforce the self-determination and sovereignty of Latin American peoples with a plan of integration that would counteract the hegemonic economic policies of the US, the World Bank and the IMF.[49] As his main organizational vehicle for this strategy, Chávez promoted ALBA as an anti-imperialist alternative to the FTAA. In 2012, when Venezuela officially joined the Mercosur trade bloc, Chávez hailed the accession as a 'defeat to American imperialism'[50] and announced that he would 'politicize Mercosur', arguing that it should not be 'a project of the elites' and steering it towards anti-neoliberalism in the interest of 'the people'.[51] The same rationale underlay his involvement in the creation of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) in 2011, which he legitimated as a Latin American organization, free of any US influence, that would replace the OAS.[52] Chávez's appeal to popular sovereignty also informed his delegitimation of the Andean Community (CAN). When terminating Venezuela's membership of the CAN, Chávez argued that it made no sense 'for Venezuela to remain in the CAN, a body which [served] only the elites and transnational companies and not "our people" […]'.[53] By delegitimating what he asserted were unrepresentative IOs in this way, he implicitly advanced a claim of being the true representative of 'the people'.

Rodrigo Duterte's legitimation and delegitimation strategies resembled those of Chávez in that he deployed anti-imperialist or anti-colonialist rhetoric to challenge the US and western interests.[54] He argued that the experience of colonization made it imperative for Filipinos to preserve sovereignty.[55] Duterte promised

[47] Daniel F. Wajner and Luis Roniger, 'Transnational identity politics in the Americas: reshaping "Nuestramérica" as Chavismo's regional legitimation strategy', *Latin American Research Review* 54: 2, 2019, pp. 458–75, https://doi.org/10.25222/larr.43.

[48] Thomas Legler, 'Post-hegemonic regionalism and sovereignty in Latin America: Optimists, skeptics, and an emerging research agenda', *Contexto Internacional* 35: 2, 2013, pp. 325–52, at p. 327.

[49] Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA), *Declaración conjunta* [Joint declaration], Havana, 14 Dec. 2004; 'Principios fundacionales del ALBA-TCP', *Granma*, 13 Dec. 2018, Art. 7.e, 12, https://www.granma.cu/mundo/2018-12-13/principios-fundacionales-del-alba-tcp-13-12-2018-17-12-34.

[50] M. A. Bastenier, 'Caribbean Mercosur: Venezuela's entry to the trade bloc highlights pivotal role Chavez plays in the region's politics', *El País*, 9 Aug. 2012, https://english.elpais.com/elpais/2012/08/09/inenglish/1344515660_744168.html.

[51] 'Venezuela joins South America trade bloc', AP Archive via YouTube, 21 July 2015, www.youtube.com/watch?v=H-v087tdX3k; José Briceño Ruiz, 'El MERCOSUR y el ALBA en la estrategia de integración de Venezuela' [MERCOSUR and ALBA in the Venezuelan integration strategy], *Cuadernos Latinoamericanos* [Latin American Notebooks] 17: 30, 2006, pp. 97–119.

[52] 'Celac pode ser alternativa à OEA, diz Chávez' [Celac could be an alternative to the OAS, says Chávez], RFI, 2 Dec. 2011, https://www.rfi.fr/pt/americas/20111202-com-cuba-e-sem-eua-america-latina-cria-nova-organizacao.

[53] Carlos Malamud, 'Venezuela's withdrawal from the Andean Community of Nations and the consequences for regional integration (Part I)', *Area: Latin America*, vol. 54, 2006, pp. 1–7 at p. 2.

[54] Julio C. Teehankee, 'Duterte's resurgent nationalism in the Philippines: a discursive institutionalist analysis', *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 35: 3, 2016, pp. 69–89, https://doi.org/10.1177/186810341603500304.

[55] Dwight de Leon, 'Don't compromise sovereignty, says Duterte on 500th year of Magellan's arrival', *Rappler*, 18 March 2021, https://www.rappler.com/nation/duterte-wants-filipinos-reject-compromise-sovereignty-magellan-expedition-commemoration-2021/.

to reorient the country's foreign relations away from its traditional dependency on the US and towards national interests and the benefit of ordinary citizens, thus questioning the Philippines' longstanding commitment to the so-called liberal international order.[56] To be sure, populism alone cannot explain this shift away from the US (and towards rapprochement with China), driven as it was by strategic geopolitical considerations. However, Duterte used populist framings to legitimate the role of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) within this overarching vision for Philippine foreign policy. He represented regional cooperation in the ASEAN framework as a means of preserving the independence of the Philippines against the US as the former colonial power and of regaining the autonomy of its people. In his speeches within ASEAN forums, he recalled the principles of the group's founders, such as mutual respect for independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity, national identity and non-interference, and called for the reconciliation of the bloc's community-building project with the national interests of its member states.[57] While Duterte picked up traditional ASEAN discourse, he gave it a particular populist flavour through frequent references to the realities of ordinary people rather than referring to a more abstract understanding of national interests. He predicated ASEAN's legitimacy on its ability to represent their interests, saying that 'ASEAN must do more to bring positive change to the lives of its [peoples]'[58] and suggesting to fellow ASEAN leaders: 'Together, let us cultivate [in] our peoples a sense of ownership—for them to own the ASEAN story as their story, and to see ASEAN's future as their own.'[59] Duterte thus framed the relation between national interests and regional cooperation in terms of popular sovereignty, in the sense that regional IOs should serve all member states' citizens as their ultimate constituency. This framing resonated well with ASEAN's self-legitimating discourse of building a 'people-centred' or 'people-oriented' community.[60]

Popular identity

Anchoring the notion of sovereignty, 'the people' are constructed as the foundational constituency of populist politics. Consequently, appeals to shared values, history and culture play a major role in populist leaders' framing of regional IOs. Contrary to conventional wisdom, however, populist (de)legitimation strategies

[56] Richard J. Heydarian, *The rise of Duterte: a populist revolt against elite democracy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 43.

[57] Bonn Juego, 'The Philippines 2017: Duterte-led authoritarian populism and its liberal-democratic roots', *Asia Maior* XXVIII, 2017, pp. 129–63 at p. 157.

[58] 'Intervention of President Rodrigo Roa Duterte during the 34th ASEAN summit', Presidential Communications Operations Office, Bangkok, 22 June 2019, https://pcoo.gov.ph/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/20190622-intervention-of-president-rodrigo-roa-duterte-during-the-34th-asean-summit-plenary.pdf.

[59] Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia, 'Empower the ASEAN peoples, President Duterte tells govts', 23 Oct. 2017, https://www.eria.org/news-and-views/empower-the-asean-peoples-president-duterte-tells-govts/.

[60] 'Remarks of President Rodrigo Roa Duterte at the opening ceremony of the 30th ASEAN Summit, PICC, Manila, Philippines, 29 April 2017', ASEAN, Manila, 29 April 2017, https://asean.org/remarks-of-president-rodrigo-roa-duterte-at-the-opening-ceremony-of-the-30th-asean-summit-picc-manila-philippines-29-april-2017/.

are often able to reconcile national identity with the construction of transnational identities on a regional level. Regional identities can be constructed through the notion that 'the people' of a region face a struggle against a common Other. Populist leaders then legitimate the organizations as expressions of these regional and transnational identities to bolster support both from their own domestic constituencies and among fellow populist governments. Interestingly, we can see evidence of these multilayered identities in all of the cases we present, which questions simple dichotomies between inclusive and exclusive populism.

Populist leaders can draw on different bases of common identity: religious ties, for example, in the case of Orbán's invocation of Christianity as a basis for 'Central Europeanness' in the V4 states. Orbán has energetically fostered a discourse of 'two Europes'. The first is an 'authentic' Europe, grounded on values and identities embodied by Orbán himself and attributed to 'average' European citizens, while the second is an 'elitist' Europe based on 'liberal philosophy', devoid of social depth and represented by Brussels.[61] According to this framing, the EU has rejected its original roots and turned into a major vehicle for the advancement of selfish and often unpatriotic liberal interests and values.[62] Put differently, liberal forces are accused of moving Europe into a post-Christian and post-national era by fostering pro-immigration policies and jeopardizing Europe's true values.[63] In the context of delegitimating the EU establishment, Orbán portrays himself as representing authentic European identity, a 'freedom fighter' on a mission to redeem Europe and recover its Christian roots.[64] He often quotes Robert Schumann, one of the founding fathers of the EU, saying that 'Europe will either be Christian or it will not exist'.[65] Orbán has strengthened anti-liberal cooperation—especially on the part of the V4, which can be seen as protecting national values and identity against domination from the EU's liberal quarters. Importantly, the V4 has not constituted an alternative to the EU for Orbán, but has rather been a means for pushing for reforms and legitimating a Central European vision within it.[66]

During his time as president of Venezuela, Chávez legitimated his pursuit of closer integration between Latin American countries by invoking a common regional heritage that transcended state boundaries. This common sense of belonging was rooted in Bolívarian imaginings of a Pan-American identity and the notion of 'Americanismo', the idea that the common (and ongoing) anti-colonial struggle of many Latin American countries would unite different ethnic groups

[61] Ramona Coman and Cécile Leconte, 'Contesting EU authority in the name of European identity: the new clothes of the sovereignty discourse in central Europe', *Journal of European Integration* 41: 7, 2019, pp. 855–70 at p. 862; 'Viktor Orbán's speech at the 14th Kötcse civil picnic', Miniszterelnok.hu, 5 Sept. 2015, http://2010-2015.miniszterelnok.hu/in_english_article/viktor_orban_s_speech_at_the_14th_kotcse_civil_picnic.

[62] Marc F. Plattner, 'Illiberal democracy and the struggle on the right', *Journal of Democracy* 30: 1, 2019, pp. 5–19 at p. 10.

[63] 'Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's address after swearing the prime-ministerial oath of office', Miniszterelnok.hu, 10 May 2018, https://miniszterelnok.hu/prime-minister-viktor-orbans-address-after-swearing-the-prime-ministerial-oath-of-office/.

[64] Coman and Leconte, 'Contesting EU authority', p. 863.

[65] Martijn Mos, 'Ambiguity and interpretive politics in the crisis of European values: Evidence from Hungary', *East European Politics*, 36: 2, 2020, pp. 267–87.

[66] Ladislav Cabada, 'The Visegrad cooperation in the context of other Central European cooperation formats', *Politics in Central Europe* 14: 2, 2018, pp. 165–79, https://doi.org/10.2478/pce-2018-0014.

and multiple identities.[67] In reviving this narrative, Chávez mainly targeted the neoliberal and, allegedly, imperialist agenda of the global trade and financial regime embodied by the US and the Bretton Woods institutions.[68] This stance is evident in many of his official speeches, where he used anti-US rhetoric to dismiss criticism from North America and to legitimate left-wing Latin American regimes, both domestically and internationally.[69] In a famous speech delivered to the UN General Assembly in 2006, Chávez referred to US imperialism as the 'greatest threat looming over our planet' and called then President George W. Bush 'the devil'.[70] Based on the narrative of solidarity against a common enemy, Chávez legitimated regional organizations like ALBA by referring to Latin America as 'Our America' (*Nuestramérica*) and presenting the unity of its peoples as the only way to defeat US imperialism and expansionism.[71] During his speech on the occasion of Venezuela's admission to Mercosur, Chávez characterized the organization as representing the interests of '*Nuestramérica*', a region he described as the 'Great Homeland' and, invoking the Venezuelan anti-colonial hero Simón Bolívar, as 'the Queen of Nations, the Great Republic, the Great Nation or the Great Homeland'.[72]

For his part, Duterte's speeches appealed to a multiplicity of identities that faced a common threat from the imperial West, represented primarily by the US and the IOs of the so-called liberal international order. Duterte's populism was built on a strong sense of Filipino nationalism, which took on an anti-American flavour that not only stemmed from the more recent confrontations over the 'war on drugs' but was also rooted in historical grievances.[73] However, his nationalism did not preclude broader regional identities. On many occasions, Duterte emphasized ASEAN unity and solidarity to legitimate the organization. When the Philippines assumed the chair of ASEAN in late 2016, Duterte claimed that the main goal during his country's chairmanship of the organization would be to 'consolidate our community for our peoples, with a sense of togetherness and common identity; ready and able to take our rightful place in the global community of nations'.[74] At the opening ceremony of the 30th ASEAN Summit in April 2017, he referred to 'our ASEAN brothers' and the 'ASEAN family', and hailed the virtues of the peoples of ASEAN ('some of the hardest working you will

[67] Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, *Voices of the peoples*; Wajner and Roniger, 'Transnational identity politics in the Americas', p. 10.

[68] Michael Dodson and Manochehr Dorraj, 'Populism and foreign policy in Venezuela and Iran', *Whitehead Journal of Diplomacy and International Relations*, vol. 9, 2008, pp. 71–87 at p. 76.

[69] Ronald D. Sylvia and Constantine P. Danopoulos, 'The Chávez phenomenon: political change in Venezuela', *Third World Quarterly* 24: 1, 2003, pp. 63–76.

[70] Kristin L. Brown, 'Venezuela joins Mercosur: The impact felt around the Americas', *Law and Business Review of the Americas* 16: 1, 2010, pp. 85–94 at p. 86.

[71] 'Discurso de Hugo Chávez en Mar del Plata' [Speech by Hugo Chávez in Mar del Plata], Cadena Nacional de Radio y Television, 4 Nov. 2005, www.nodal.am/2015/11/a-diez-anos-del-no-al-alca-discruso-completo-de-hugo-chavez-en-la-contra-cumbre/; Wajner and Roniger, 'Transnational identity politics in the Americas'.

[72] 'Hugo Chávez se pronuncia tras el ingreso de su país al grupo Mercosur' [Hugo Chávez speaks after his country's entry into the Mercosur group], NTN24 via YouTube, 31 July 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OBGLkWmZBQg.

[73] Teehankee, 'Duterte's resurgent nationalism in the Philippines'.

[74] Republic of the Philippines, 'Speech of President Rodrigo Roa Duterte during the closing ceremony of the 28th and 29th ASEAN Summits and related summits', *Official Gazette*, 8 Sept. 2016.

find anywhere, willing to endure great sacrifices') to justify putting them at the centre of ASEAN's community-building,[75] and underlining 'the leading role of the country in articulating and performing political and imagined pan-ASEAN identities'.[76] Duterte also invoked the notion of 'Asian values', a concept advanced by Asian intellectuals and politicians in the 1990s to emphasize distinctive regional civilizational traits and challenge western universalism.[77] In addition, he used ASEAN as a vehicle to portray himself as defending 'the people' against the vice of illegal drugs, which 'challenge […] the safety of our people'.[78] Constructing the illicit drug trade as a threat to societal cohesion as well as to regional community-building, he revived the vision of a 'drug-free ASEAN' during his chairmanship.[79] Responding to accusations of human rights violations in his 'war on drugs' by the Obama administration as well as the EU and the UN, he refuted liberal cosmopolitanism as a perceived imposition of a biased human rights agenda by western actors[80] and pointedly skipped ASEAN meetings with the UN and the US in 2016.[81] Positioning ASEAN as a counterweight to western meddling resonates with ASEAN's historical purpose of strengthening member states' regimes against external interference, but also gives it a populist inflection by tying it to the well-being of the 'ordinary' people.

Summary: representational legitimation frames among populists

The comparative analysis illustrates that populist leaders use agent-based (de)legitimation to actively change the normative basis on which IOs are judged, instead of passively reacting to audience demands as outlined in the conventional audience-based perspective. Our analysis shows that they do so by using representational frames, which implicitly or explicitly ask on whose authority these organizations act, in whose interest they act, who they are made up of and who they stand for. By emphasizing the legitimacy standards of (popular) sovereignty and (popular) identity, the three populist leaders contest the liberal and functional standards on which these other forms are conventionally based (see table 1). Our analysis reveals a distinct populist legitimation pattern in which regional IOs are justified on the basis that they help to re-establish popular sovereignty and improve the everyday lives of citizens—e.g. Europe as the 'home of nations', ALBA as an alliance 'for the

[75] 'Remarks of President Rodrigo Roa Duterte at the opening ceremony of the 30th ASEAN Summit'.

[76] William Peterson and Reagan Romero Maiquez, '"Yesterday's dreams, tomorrow's promise": performing a pan-ASEAN archipelagic identity at age 50', in Marcus Cheng Chye Tan and Charlene Rajendran, eds, *Performing Southeast Asia: Performance, politics and the contemporary* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), pp. 35–59 at p. 36.

[77] Heydarian, *The rise of Duterte*.

[78] Rosette Adel, 'Duterte urges ASEAN anew: Redouble collective efforts vs drugs, other threats', *PhilStar*, 23 June 2019, www.philstar.com/headlines/2019/06/23/1928887/duterte-urges-asean-anew-redouble-collective-efforts-vs-drugs-other-threats.

[79] 'Remarks of President Rodrigo Roa Duterte at the opening ceremony of the 30th ASEAN Summit'.

[80] Juego, 'The Philippines 2017'; Pia Ranada, 'Duterte threatens to slap UN rapporteur if she probes drug war', *Rappler*, 9 Nov. 2017, https://www.rappler.com/nation/187899-duterte-threat-slap-un-rapporteur-callamard/.

[81] Paterno Esmaquel II, 'Duterte skips ASEAN-US Summit in Laos', *Rappler*, 8 Sept. 2016, https://www.rappler.com/nation/145577-duterte-skips-asean-us-summit/.

peoples of Our America', and a 'people-centred' ASEAN. Undergirding these ideas are identity-based frames that aim to portray 'the people' as a morally pure constituency of the leaders' regional cooperation initiatives. Some organizations are thus legitimated as expressions of national and transboundary identities, while others (including some global IOs) are seen as carriers of elitist cosmopolitan ideas that threaten popular identities, the latter being rooted in various amalgamations of cultural and religious affinities, ethnonationalism or shared historical experiences.

Table 1: Comparison of representational (de)legitimation frames

	Popular sovereignty	*Popular identity*
Viktor Orbán	Europe as the 'home of nations' Cooperation should re-establish national sovereignty vs disenfranchisement by EU-style post-national supranationalism	Hungarian nativism, European and Christian identity 'Authentic Europe', 'Central Europeanness', solidarity against threat to moral purity of 'the people'
Hugo Chávez	ALBA: Regionalism 'for the peoples of our America' Cooperation should preserve hard-fought independence against neo-colonial forces and achieve equal distribution of cooperation benefits to all social groups	Revolutionary Bolívarianism and Nuestramérica Latin American community, solidarity against threat of imperialist and expansionist North America
Rodrigo Duterte	ASEAN as a people-oriented community Cooperation should preserve autonomy despite great-power influence and empower the peoples of ASEAN member states	Filipino nationalism and the 'ASEAN family' 'ASEAN centrality', unity and solidarity against threat of external (western) intervention, cooperation to fight drugs which are a threat to society

Exploring how these representational frames relate to conventional forms of legitimation helps us understand why populists endorse some IOs while challenging others. Representational legitimation does not (necessarily) replace procedural and functional legitimation—in fact, in the statements we analysed, populists did use those forms as well. For example, Orbán criticized the EU for failing to solve the 'migration problem'. However, at least in populist (de)legiti-

mation, representational frames are logically prior to these other forms in so far as they may transform the legitimacy standards on which their procedural and functional arguments are based. Populist representational frames orient judgement of the procedural and functional features of organizations away from liberal and towards what Lenz and Schmidtke call 'communitarian' legitimacy standards in this special section.[82] Orbán's critique of the EU's procedures and performance on migration, for example, was subsumed under the frames of popular sovereignty and popular identity. He argued that immigration was threatening the 'existence of Europe's free, Christian and independent nations' and asserted: 'If it is true that the people do not want the current insane immigration policy from Brussels—and indeed they oppose it—we should make room for their voice, and listen to what they have to say.'[83] Accordingly, he criticized plans for formal quotas as disrespecting the will of 'the people', instead favouring voluntary and non-binding arrangements as exemplified by the V4.

While our analysis is limited to regional IOs, it also allows some insights into broader (de)legitimation dynamics. Our approach helps explain the empirical observation that populist leaders tend to endorse regional over global IOs. It appears that regional IOs can more easily accommodate populist standards of formal, substantial, descriptive and symbolic representation compared to global ones. Due to their limited membership and the idea that they serve a territorially defined constituency, regional IOs are easier to initiate and control by a single populist-ruled state or a small regional coalition of populists, as demonstrated by the examples of the V4 and Venezuela's leadership in ALBA. The geographical scope of a regional IO also makes it easier to portray its policies as benefiting a specific 'people', as implied, for example, in the slogan 'a people-centred ASEAN'. Regional IOs can be depicted as embodiments of a transboundary but exclusive identity, such as *Nuestramérica*, 'Central Europe' or the 'ASEAN family'. By contrast, global IOs are often associated with elitist and cosmopolitan ('globalist') identities, and populist leaders often position regional IOs as venues for collectively defending the integrity of territorial communities.

However, this endorsement of regional IOs only holds as long as they do not contradict the notion of popular sovereignty. Orbán's criticism of EU supranationalism is a case in point. Likewise, where cross-border popular identities are weak, as with India and its subcontinental neighbours, populist leaders may shun regional cooperation, as Narendra Modi's lack of interest in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) has demonstrated. In short, while we can see certain affinities between populist notions of representation and regional—as well as low-authority—IOs, it is impossible to establish any clean causality. Country size and status are potential mediating factors. For example, middle-sized countries such as the ones studied here may be more inclined than major powers to take up regional leadership roles.

[82] See Tobias Lenz and Henning Schmidtke, 'The normative diversity of discursive legitimation in international organizations', *International Affairs* 99: 3, 2023, pp. 921–40 at p. 928.
[83] 'Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's State of the Nation address', 2016.

Conclusion

In the post-liberal world, ideas about legitimate global governance have become more contentious, and yet existing research on legitimacy is strongly geared towards liberal norms. Therefore, it fails to account for (de)legitimation by populist state leaders, which is usually articulated in opposition to liberal norms. In this article, we have remedied this shortcoming by arguing that populist leaders use representational (de)legitimation frames in a way that problematizes and contests established legitimacy standards. In terms of Lenz and Söderbaum's AAE framework, populist representational legitimation is agent-based, as it is driven by the leaders' strategic agency and aims to actively shape audiences' legitimacy beliefs instead of passively adapting to their demands.[84] The empirical analysis in this article has focused on the discourses relating to foreign policy—and specifically to regional IOs—of three high-profile populist leaders: Viktor Orbán, Hugo Chávez and Rodrigo Duterte. Obviously, foreign policies are influenced by a myriad of factors that are not reducible to populism, and we find a certain variation in terms of the leaders' actual engagement with regional IOs. However, the comparison provides evidence of common framing patterns that uncover the representational dimension of populist leaders' (de)legitimation strategies: by framing their judgements of the organizations' authority in terms of popular sovereignty and identity, the leaders evaluate them based on their purported position in the 'people vs elite' antagonism. This approach is in line with, and reinforces, their domestic strategies of obtaining and sustaining political support. While our finding of similarities across the political spectrum should not be overstated, it does provide a counterpoint to arguments that right- and left-wing populism are so fundamentally different that they lead to diametrically opposed foreign policies.[85] Their positioning on the political spectrum does not as such make populist leaders more pro- or anti-IO in general. Their stance rather results from considerations about how the mandate, design and policies of specific IOs relate to their master frames of sovereignty and identity.

Our study suggests a range of policy implications for IOs, at both the regional and global levels. While delegitimation is first and foremost a rhetorical phenomenon, if successful it can seriously affect IOs' ability to address today's transboundary challenges. Unpacking populist (de)legitimation tells us something about the kind of international order populists envision—one in which institutionalized cooperation is possible but cosmopolitan identities are rejected and authority is firmly vested in state leaders as the representatives of 'the people'. Those IOs which do not fit this vision, and their stakeholders, will need to find ways to address the populist challenge. The one-sided focus in research and policy-making on performance and procedural aspects of legitimation, and the accompanying reluctance to address issues of sovereignty and identity, do not bode well in this respect. Populist leaders do not argue that IOs' decision-making structures

[84] Lenz and Söderbaum, 'The origins of legitimation strategies in international organizations'.
[85] Bertjan Verbeek and Andrej Zaslove, 'Populism and foreign policy', in Rovira Kaltwasser et al., eds, *The Oxford handbook of populism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

are unresponsive or that their policies are totally ineffective, but rather demand that they be responsive to and provide policies benefiting 'the people' instead of liberal 'globalist' elites. In other words, the key question is not so much whether IOs work, but for whom they work.

By emphasizing popular sovereignty and identity over liberal standards, populist delegitimation is much more difficult to address than contestation based on performance and procedural aspects. For example, the Trump administration's delegitimation of the World Health Organization in the middle of a pandemic had little to do with either performance or procedure, but related instead to the body's purported deference to China. Another example is the debate surrounding Brexit, where 'Remainers' have often focused on the material benefits of remaining within the EU, while arguably missing that British sovereignty and identity were the real motivating factors for Brexiteers. Unless global and regional IOs and their stakeholders take up the populist challenge and acknowledge the representative dimension of legitimation, it seems that the traditional functional and procedural justification of IO authority is losing a significant part of its legitimating power. Rebuking populists for being unilateralists (which they may not be) or for not subscribing to liberal normative standards (which they will not do) appears counterproductive and may very well strengthen the populist cause. After all, rejection of the liberal international order lies at the very core of populist self-legitimation. Instead, those trying to meet the populist challenge need to engage in more fundamental debates over the very purpose and mandate of these IOs. This does not imply giving in to demands to return all sovereignty to nation-states, but it does require the adoption of political stances. As de Wilde puts it, IOs and their stakeholders 'need to articulate more clearly who is responsible for what, to what end, and as part of which societal struggle'.[86]

[86] de Wilde, 'The quality of representative claims', p. 286.