Help! The Populists are coming: appeals to the people in contemporary Swedish politics

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ABSTRACT
This article argues that the fears of populism, frequently conflated with the rise of the so-called Populist Radical Right parties (RRPs) risk transmuting into a fear of considering the people in democratic governance. Populism refers to the appeals to the people, morally de-attached from the elite, in the everyday political communication between the people and the mediated elites. The concept of banal populism is introduced to, firstly, conform to the view that populism is an inescapable ambiguity of democracy and, secondly, to analyze appeals to the people in the contemporary Swedish political debate. The articles expands on three approaches to populism, based on ideology, style and logic to suggest an analytical framework for the study of articulations of banal populism in democratic practice, devoid of normative presuppositions. The analysis is centered on how the rhetorical figure of the reality people was used by (1) the right-wing oriented populist party New Democracy; (2) the Christian Democratic Party and also by (3) the nationalist-populist party the Sweden Democrats. By way of conclusion, the appeals to the reality people alone do not show the passionate intensity of representative politics, rather to recognizing the banal realities of the common man – of letting the people on the ground have a say in the democratic process. The appeals are not necessarily related to the personalization of politics or depend on the charismatic leader, however, they touch upon the emotional aspects of democratic politics – offering promises that the Swedish society will and should remain the same.

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Mainstream European politicians are troubled by the eruption of Populist Radical Right Parties (RRPs) in the parliamentary arena. These parties, in general, suggest strong reductions in the immigration to “our country”, protecting the interests of “our people”. The concept of populism is frequently being associated with the RRPs. I argue that the fears of populism risk transmuting into a fear of seriously considering the people in democratic governance.

With populism I refer to the appeals to the people, morally de-attached from the elite, in the everyday political communication between the elected representatives and the citizenry. This article introduces the concept of banal populism to, firstly, conform to the view that populism is an ‘inescapable ambiguity’ (Canovan 1999: 16) of democracy and thus not alien to mainstream politics. Secondly, I will illustrate how this concept can be used to assess appeals to the people in contemporary Swedish politics.

This article begins with a discussion on the intrinsic functioning of populism in democratic governance, centered on the people as an object of democratic mobilization. I then expand on three approaches to populism, based on ideology, style and logic to suggest an analytical framework for the study of articulations of banal populism in democratic practice, devoid of normative presuppositions. Empirically, I will illustrate how the rhetorical figure of the reality people has been used by (1) the right-wing oriented populist party New Democracy (NyD), in the national parliament between 1991 and 1994; (2) the Christian Democratic Party (KD) before the 2010 national elections and also by (3) the nationalist-populist party the Sweden Democrats (SD), which for the first time gained seats in the Swedish parliament by 2010.

**Populism and Democracy**

The ultimate source of authority in democratic governance is centered on the category of the people. In essence, representative politics represents the interests and wishes of the population – to embody and realize the popular will. Talking in the name of the people, usually described as the trademark of populism, is essential for all political parties trying to maximize their voting support; hence, it has been argued that the populist aspects of political parties, previously at the fringe now belongs to the political mainstream (Mudde 2004: 542).
Why is it that few mainstream politicians, especially in Europe, cling to the notion of populism? In the public debate, the populist politician is presented as an opportunist that suggests simple solutions to complex political issues. Populism is a term of abuse, used by its antagonists to present their own politics as genuine and long-term oriented. In this argumentative logic “populist” is something that mainstream politics is not.

Herein is a certain ambiguity. If representative politics is about representing the people, the distinction between the people and the elite is crucial for pursuing democratic politics. The so-called populists share with the mainstream political culture the conviction that the legitimacy of democratic governance lies in the sovereign people.

Kaltwasser (2011) suggests that different democratic normative ideals provide different answers to the question whether populism is a democratic corrective to include more people in the polity or if it is rather a pathological phenomenon that attracts e.g. the RRPs to exclude ethnic minorities. This paper expands on the assumption that the intricate relationship between democracy and populism is open for empirical contestation and ultimately concerns which people is mobilized against whom.

The People in democratic governance
The people is an elusive concept filled with ambiguities and uncertainties. The fear of the people as the uneducated masses suggests that “the people” needs to be controlled and kept in check by responsible elites, according to Francisco Panizza (2005: 15): ‘Under democracy, the people came to be identified as the holders of sovereignty and the term became co-extensive with the citizen. /…/ traces of the original image of the people as dangerous and irrational plebs still resonate in late modern politics…’.

At the same time, the people is a legitimizing force in representative politics and ‘has in its power to confer legitimacy upon governments, parties and policies, a fact that makes it one of the more used and abused concepts in the history of politics’ (Näsström 2007: 624). Sometimes the people refers to something narrower than the population, which could imply an exclusive group
of privileged citizens but sometimes ‘(conversely and confusingly) because it means precisely those excluded from that elite, ‘the common people’’ (Canovan 2005: 3). The people connotes to, on the one hand, the masses or the lower strata of the population and on the other hand to the citizenry of the state or the nation.

Political representatives who say to talk in the name of the people or seek justifications to reclaim power to the people against the ruling elites (e.g. the king, the government or the cultural elite), rely on myths about popular authority (Näsström 2007). The act of representation, the process through which a political agent speak and act on behalf of a whole group, also creates the group of people to be represented. This move allows the people, through the voices of their representatives, to lift above the mere aggregation of separate individual interests into a cohesive body who act like a single person. The uses of myths about the people are something that we cannot do without, if we listen to Margaret Canovan (2002: 417): ‘this emperor has no clothes, but to keep the system functioning we must go on admiring his imaginary robe’.

**A flavor of the politics of faith**

Benjamín Arditi (2004) recognizes that populism, like any other concept in the political vocabulary, revolves around the poles of the politics of skepticism and the politics of faith – on the promises of human salvation and redemption (the politics of faith), on the one hand, and institutional stability and pragmatism on the other (the politics of skepticism).

This distinction, introduced by Michael Oakeshott (1996: 66-7), should not be equated with a particular ideology, political party or governmental system. Rather these poles represent two distinct logics that in their ideal-form organize the activity of governing in modern politics. In short, the politics of faith refers to the perfection of mankind; its faith in human activity serves the pursuit of human emancipation and the improvement of the human character. The misfortunes of political or religious dissent are, in this vein, treated as “errors” to be corrected and suppressed by minute governance. The politics of skepticism, by contrast, shows no trust in human perfection and the activity of governing is limited to and given by the law. This logic objects to any imposition of governmental activity to determine human activity.
Margaret Canovan claims that populism follows democracy like a shadow, an inescapable ambiguity of modern democratic politics. Populist mobilization, then, constitutes a reaction towards *politics-as-usual* (Arditi 2004: 142). Populism is an important reminder that politics is not merely about administrating already made decisions - it is also about shaping and realizing popular expectations and visions. Drawing on Oakeshott’s distinction, Canovan (2004: 245) elaborates on two faces of democratic politics; redemption and pragmatism. The pragmatic face is about maintaining an institutional design to managing conflicts and disagreements, without anyone involved getting hurt. Conversely, the redemptive face expands on the idea of popular sovereignty and raises claims about bringing the masses into the realm of politics.

Democracy as an ideal-form of governance constitutes a redemptive vision, to enable the citizenry to realize “the good society”. In its actual implementation, though, democracy features certain institutions and is pragmatically concerned with stability and order. In its particular form, the pragmatic view features e.g. free elections, multi-party system and the right-of-law. However, as Canovan (1999: 11) suggests: ‘Inherent in modern democracy, in tension with its pragmatic face, is faith in secular redemption: the promise of a better world through action by the sovereign people’.

It is illusory, Canovan predicts, to imagine democratic governance without redemptive impulses. It is necessary to maintain a proper balance between the constitutional and popular pillars of democracy, i.e. the mutual trust between the electorate and the elected representatives. She (ibid: 14) makes an allegory to the role of the church in modern secular societies, referring to Max Weber’s idea that ‘a church is an institution in which religious charisma is routinized’ where the voice of God is mediated and institutionally arranged. The analogy suggests that populism thrives in societies that suffer from a lack of balance between the two faces of democracy - to ignore the redemptive impulses inherent in democratic politics is similar to running a church in which the congregation lacks faith in religion.

Chantal Mouffe (2000) argues that the passions of representative politics refer to the delicate balancing between the functional needs of the system and the emotive appeals to the people. The basic paradox of liberal democracy, accordingly, is that it combines the incongruent ideals of the
universal (liberal) rights of the individual to be protected from both state oppression and the fears of mob-rule with the particularistic democratic references to popular sovereignty by means of majority rule. The question how we authorise political power in representative democracies thus bridge the direct demands of the citizenry and the mediated power of the representative elites.

If politics is not merely about the aggregation of rational interests or sensible deliberation, but also about mobilizing passions, frustrations and enthusiasm in the name of the people – then, populism plays a significant role in modern representative politics. In this vein, populism connotes to various modes of identification rather than to individuals or parties (Panizza 2005). Passions and affects are fundamental for the constitution of collective identities and thus foster allegiance to political projects, Mouffe (2000: 24; cf. Stavrakakis 2004: 264) says.

In this vein, Philip Abbot (2007: 438) acknowledges that populism has, potentially, a vitalizing effect on contemporary representative politics. He asks: ‘Are the two faces of populism – one xenophobic, racist, prone to accepting demagogues and extra-constitutional measures; the other decent, humane, innovative, and communitarian – also the consequences of the two faces of anger, where one seeks to build and one seeks to destroy?’ Scholars, who pursue a narrow rationalist view on politics, tend to neglect the potential passionate intensity of representative politics, as this argument runs. This is also to disregard the central functioning of populism in democratic politics.

I assume that the appeals to the people in representative politics, potentially, bring a flavour of the politics of faith, complementing a view on politics as the administration of political decision that, in turn, cling closer to the politics of scepticism. The appeals to the people thus, potentially, aim to satisfy popular demands of collective identification, rather than the interests and pragmatic concerns of institutional stability.

I here use the concept of banal populism to emphasize the frequently adopted appeals to the people in the political communication of the votes. These appeals might indicate a turn to the politics of faith, however these appeals can also signify the banal, in the sense trivial, references to the illusive category of the people in the daily political communication. In the
next section, I discuss three contemporary - not easily separable - approaches to the study of populism in the scholarly literature. This overview aims to create an analytical framework for the scrutiny of banal appeals to the people in the political communication between the mediated elites and citizenry.

**Populism as ideology**

Scholars of populism who attribute to the populist movement a certain ideological core tend to describe populism as ‘thin ideology’ (Stanley 2008; Abts & Rummens 2007; Mudde 2007; Fieschi 2004). This interpretation, in turn, relies on Michael Freedens´ (1998) understanding of nationalism. For him, ideology represents a coherent frame of interpretations, providing answers to how values of e.g. freedom and equality best be understood, given priority to and further implemented. A full-fledged ideology provides solutions to questions of social justice and the distribution of rights and conflict management (ibid: 752). Nationalism tends to transmute itself to different institutional settings, and blend with other ideologies such as socialism, conservatism or liberalism. It displays a thin core, which according to Freeden, rests on a positive valorization of a particular group; i.e. the nationals.

With reference to Freeden, Ben Stanley (2008) suggests that populism is a thin ideology, used by political agents to mobilize “the people”. The ideology of populism is devoid of coherent ideological traditions. The conceptual core of populism refers to the antagonistic relationship between the people and the elite and rests on the positive valorization of the people and thus the denigration of the elite (ibid: 102). In this view, populism - once it has found its ”host vessel” (an adjacent ideology) – might turn into the core element of e.g. a nationalist ideological configuration (See e.g. Mudde 2007).

Paul Taggart (2002: 67) claims that the appeals to ‘the people’ are not enough to serve as the constitutive element of populist discourse, though: ‘the people’ is too broad and diffuse a concept to have real meaning as it signifies different things to different populists /…/ Thus, ‘the people’ are nothing more than the populace of the heartland’.
In addition to the identification with a particular heartland, Taggart suggests the following characteristics of populist movements: resistance towards representative politics, in the sense disassociation from one-sided constitutionalism; lack of core values that are not – at the moment – associated with the heartland; reactions to anticipated societal crises; a particular anti-political style\(^2\), based on the charismatic leadership. All this brings a certain chameleonic character to the populist movements that only seem to mobilize when the heartland is threatened by e.g. “mass-immigration” or EU-membership, which explains its relative short-liveness – once in power, it is increasingly difficult to maintain the populist position, Taggart (2004) predicts.

This view on populism has triggered scholars to warn about the populist ideological challenge to liberal democratic societies. In particular, scholars have referred to populism as thin ideology to assess the ideological underpinnings of a particular European party family that resist (too much) immigration, instead supporting the interests and wishes of the native population. In his much referred to definition of the RRPs, then, Cas Mudde (2007: 22-3) include three definitional features: nativism, authoritarianism and populism as thin-centered ideology, based on the antagonistic separation between “the pure people” and “the corrupt elite”.

Discussing the populism of ‘the radical right’, Hans-Georg Betz and Carol Johnson (2004) claim that the RRP parties’ political agenda is more than mere opportunism; it aims to replace democracy with ethnocracy – an ethnic characterization of the ‘true people’ that embody the volonté general.

In this view, the popular will is predetermined and restricted to the national population. This is an exclusionary appealing to ‘national preferences’, likewise openly discriminatory and based on the illusive trajectory of the common sense. Betz and Johnson, borrowing a concept from Pierre-André Taguieff (1990), assumes its ideological core to be rooted in differentialist racism imbued with categorical imperatives that preserves the identity of the native group to secure the survival of the nation.

Betz and Johnson might be right to warn about the progress and the dissemination of ideas attributed to e.g. the Lega Nord in Italy or the Front National in France. Banal appeals to the
people do not, however, merely convey particular concerns devoted to a certain *ethnos*, based on the dichotomy between the natives and the non-natives (Mény & Surel 2002; Canovan 2005: 75). In modern political history, populism has been associated with a diverse set of movements and parties, ranging from e.g. the U.S people Party and the *Narodniki* movement in Russia to Hugo Chavez in Venezuela and Geert Wilders in the Netherlands, to mentioning only a few examples (Canovan 2004: 243).

At the same time, populism as thin ideology shares certain core features such as the existence of two homogenous antagonistically opposed groups in the society, the elite versus the people (which is positively valued by the populists) and the idea of popular sovereignty (Stanley 2008: 102). According to Stanley (ibid: 105), ‘[t]he invocation of authenticity and ordinariness is a key aspect of populism’s appeal to the people, as it allows populists to lay claim to genuine representativeness’. In the populist ideology, the people and the elite are viewed as antithetical opposites (ibid) and diffuse through full ideologies.

**Populism as style**

Populism as *style* refers to a certain way of doing politics. It is generally acknowledged, that the populist style matches well with a medialized political landscape as the political form proves to be more significant for the political outcome, than its content. The populist style typically relies on notions of *the charismatic leadership* to partly bypass established ways of doing politics. Populist politics encourages direct channels for popular participation. The charismatic leader embodies the popular will in his or her *persona*. In this regard, the populist political representative mobilizes voters along feelings of resentment, seeking to represent the “common sense” of “the ordinary people” *vis-à-vis* the political institutions and the established (indirect) ways of doing politics.

In this sense, the populist leader is both one of the people and their leader. In this operation, she/he ‘appears as an ordinary person with extraordinary attributes’ (Panizza 2005: 21). Populism as a particular style here associates with psycho-analytical ideas of the idealization of the object of identification; hence, the love of the leader has been ‘put in place of the ego ideal’
(Laclau 2005: 55). The equivalential attachment forged between people appears as the result of their common love for the populist leader.

In European politics, the populist style has been attributed to dissimilar political figures such as Vladimir Putin in Russia and the Italian Prime Minister, Silvio Berlusconi who recently stepped down from his post. Populism as style refers to the personalization of politics, an emphasis on charismatic leadership and the medialization of mainstream politics.

Populism as style shows preferences for a close relationship between the electorate and the elected. Traditionally, the link between the voters and the government has been organized and mediated by the parties, Peter Mair (2002: 84) says. According to him, the parties no longer adequately represent competing interests to ‘guarantee procedures rather than mediation’ (ibid: 91). As the parties cease to play a central role in organizing electoral preferences, popular democracy is mediated by populist means. The British case shows: ‘populism as a form of governing in which party is sidelined or disappears; where the people are undifferentiated, and in which a more or less ‘neutral government attempts to serve the interests of all.’ (ibid: 96).

The distinction between ideology and style corresponds to the analytical separation between politics as content (populism as ideology) and politics as form (populism as style). It is not rare that these features of politics intermingle – and certainly so in the extensive literature on the RRP. In the literature, populist parties tend to be associated with particular organizational characteristics centered on the leader rather than on traditional party organizations.

**Populism as logic**

Populism, as logic, creates a new form of agency out of a plurality of political demands. It lacks universally applicable content, yet it requires a radical division of the society in two separate camps, the people versus the elite. Ernesto Laclau (2005: 117) shares such a view on populism and refutes attempts to finding out what is idiosyncratic in populist movements, as these – according to him - are essentially flawed. Instead, populism (as logic) constitutes a certain discursive activity through which the people is defined and further mobilized. Populist mobilization, given this interpretation, provides otherwise disregarded groups with tools to voice
their fragmented demands and organize these through a *chain of equivalence*. This view is much in tune with a radical democratic approach that recognizes social antagonisms as necessary for democratic politics (Kaltwasser 2011: 191).

The constant political dispute over the proper name of the people – and thus the claims for popular sovereignty – crystallize in various political projects (e.g. the Kemalist movement in Turkey and the Peronist movement in Argentina, two examples given by Laclau) that try to monopolize the meaning of the people to match particular political programs. There is no guarantee that the populist logic may be used by e.g. progressive political movements to mobilize solidarity ties against authoritarian governance. Similarly, it is not preset that the populist logic may be used by e.g. demagogues to exploit the masses against the visible minorities. Populism here implies a particular strategy to include new social groups in the democratic process, yet to exclude others.

Yannis Stavrakakis (2004) appreciates Laclau’s anti-descriptivist approach to the study of populism. Laclau’s move from ideology to discourse shifts attention to a closer scrutiny of how a variety of political movements refer to ‘the people’, he says (ibid: 255).³ Assessing the populist *logic* in contemporary representative politics invites a close encounter with how the appeals to the people are invoked to recommend political action.⁴ However, Stanley (2008: 98) would argue that the Laclaudian view is too romantic about the prospects of populist mobilization, since there is no guarantee that the assorted differences between the fragmented demands would articulate themselves in a solidaristic fashion.

I would say that the difference between Stanley’s idea of populism as thin ideology and Laclau’s view of populism as formal logic should not be exaggerated. Their different approaches partly emanate from different empirical focus (while Laclau tends to focus more on populist mobilization in Latin America, Stanley’s empirical illustrations tends towards the European experiences). In this regard Kaltwasser (2011: 199) argues that ‘…in the European context, populism and the radical right are experiencing since the 1980s a sort of ‘marriage of convenience’.”

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For Kaltwasser, populism is neither the pathology of representative politics nor the purest form of democracy. Instead, he suggests that the study of populism should be based on concrete cases that can be either a corrective or a threat to democracy.

**Banal Populism**

A populist movement might rely on a certain ideological populist position, against the elites, embrace a particular populist style to attract its voters or purse the populist logic between the people and the elite to gain credibility for a particular political programme. One possible route forward is to separate between populist ideologies that, on the hand, are vitalizing representative democracy and, on the other hand, risk undermining the liberal democratic institutions. Another possibility is to discern to what extent the populist style makes a permanent or occasional feature of modern representative politics. To view populism as *logic*, invites the scrutiny of the appeals to the people as political means to bring together fragmented demands into a cohesive whole.

The concept of banal populism invites further scrutiny of how the differentiation between the people and the elite is being invoked in the everyday political communication between the citizenry and the mediated elite.

Abts and Rummens (2007) suggest a flagrant discontinuity between the logic of populism and the logic of (constitutional) democracy, though. They argue that much research, devoted to show the internal tensions within democracy itself, come down to the so-called two-strand model, between liberalism and democracy. Typically, this view rests on assumptions of the intrinsic incongruence between the liberal and the democratic pillar in liberal democracies.

The liberal pillar, in this framework, is about the anonymous rule of law that serves to protect the individual rights of all citizens against the arbitrary exercises of power. The democratic pillar, in contrast, assumes the political legitimacy to reside not in the law, but with the people. While the liberal pillar brings universalistic aspirations, the democratic pillar is particularistic. Here, populism belongs to the democratic pillar and it only risks becoming a threat, when the democratic pillar take the upper hand and thus marginalize other (liberal) elements in this
combination. Populism gives voice to the democratic impulse that too much focus on the array of checks and balances dilute the democratic promises of popular sovereignty.

Abts and Rummens argue that this model has two major shortcomings. First, they say it overestimates the paradoxical nature of constitutional democracy and second, it suffers from a lack of sufficient tools to analyse when and how populism becomes dangerous. Instead, they suggest a model of three logics. First, the democratic logic assumes that the locus of power in any democratic regime should remain an empty place, here following Lefort’s seminal works. Second, in the logic of liberalism, the locus of power vanishes and is replaced by the anonymous rule of law. Third, the logic of populism is defined as the closure of the empty place of power by a substantive image of the people.

Rather than stressing the irreconcilability of the democratic and the liberal pillar, they emphasize the mutual dependence of individual rights and the democratic construction of the wills of the people (ibid: 410; cf. Canovan 2005: 83-90). Conversely, ‘populism appears as a proto-totalitarian logic’, highly incompatible with the compromising forces provided by the democratic and liberal pillars (Abts & Rummens 2007: 414). Accordingly, the populist logic of homogeneity is at odds with the openness of democracy.

They (ibid: 420) conclude: ‘… when parties argue for their proposals by referring to the ‘will of the people’, a further analysis of their actions is required to establish whether they envisage a homogenizing and closed interpretation of this will, or whether their proposals are meant as a contribution to the mediated construction of the common good’. However, to categorize the former as populist and the latter as democratic is both to romanticise the democratic logic and to denounce populism as anti-democratic. This interpretation risks to reduce our understanding of contemporary political activities as either “good” (democratic) or “bad” (populist). Their approach also risk to omit the central functioning of the passions of representative politics - the activity of political mobilization might be used both for the benefits of the common good to serve the pursuit of human emancipation and to block the influences of underprivileged minorities in the democratic polity.
Without political mobilization that involves distinct appeals to the people, democracy risks turning into an activity of governance restricted to the elites. With the concept of banal populism, I emphasise the everyday realities of the populist potential in representative politics; it thrives on popular sovereignty and is at such not \textit{a priori} alien to-, or dangerous for or at odds with democratic politics.

**Banal populism in democratic practice**

The people needs to be called upon and constructed, in order to elevate from the status of “ordinary people” to become a sovereign authority. It can also be understood as something more trivial, the people as concept remains ambiguous and opens up for political disputes over its precise contents. To talk in the name of the people, as many politicians often do, is to use the people to confer legitimacy upon certain political views.

Articulations of banal populism show in the political communication between the representative elites and the people. By way of analogy, Michael Billig’s (1995) much referred to notion of \textit{banal nationalism} suggests that nationalism can be banal, non-violent and possess a reassuring normality. By means of banal nationalism we, the citizens, are constantly reminded of our membership of the nation and our loyalty to it. \textit{Banal populism}, to conclude the analogy, is based on a moral division between the people and the elite, appealing to the people in the everyday practices of the political competition of the votes. Analyzing particular appeals to the people provides a means to analyze articulations of populism in democratic action, devoid of normative presuppositions.

Canovan (1999) distinguishes between three different ways of referring to the people in political discourse. First, it could refer to \textit{the united people} as a contrast to the political elites that are accused of dividing the people, causing societal fragmentation. This appeal envisions the people as a united body in need of cautious care. It is, in theory, inclusive as it aims to mobilize support for what knit people together. Second, the appeal to the people could address the view that politics ultimately should be restricted to \textit{our people}, e.g. the population of \textit{the heartland}. This appeal is distinguishably exclusive, as it demarcates which groups of people - or ideas - that belong to the people. Third, Canovan talks about the appeals to \textit{the common people} against the
educated and privileged cultural elites. This appeal regularly presupposes that the interests and views of the ordinary people are overridden by the political elites and ridiculed by the cultural elites.

To completely refute and ignore these appeals is to restrict democratic governance to the mediated elites. References to the reality people might, hypothetically, connote to something banal, in the sense trivial and unimportant. The prefix “reality”, however, indicates a moral distinction between the people and airy-fairy elites (political, economic and/or cultural) not acquainted with how people on the ground live their lives. References to the reality people in the political rhetoric, potentially, bring a flavour of the politics of faith as a reaction to the pragmatic-oriented elite/s; hence, the populist divide between the people and the elite echoes the intrinsic ambiguity between populism and democracy.

In the next section, I will use the notion of banal populism to assessing how the noun the reality people (verklighetens folk) – a variety of “the common people” - has been used by three Swedish parties, two different RRP’s and one mainstream party. The three approaches presented above invite a set of questions to examine the appeals to the reality people in the Swedish political discourse (figure 1).

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<th>Approach</th>
<th>Questions</th>
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| **Ideology** | • Who is the sender of these appeals?  
• What are the sender’s ideological affiliations?  
• What is the ideological content of this appeal? |
| **Style** | • What are the forms of doing politics provided by the sender?  
• What is the relation between the people and the charismatic leader provided by these appeals? |
| **Logic** | • How and if are these appeals used to mobilize the fragmented demands into a cohesive whole?  
• What political action to take place is recommended by the sender? |

Figure 1. Analytical approaches to the appeals to the reality people in Swedish political discourse.
The Reality People: the NyD

In February 1991 the business entrepreneur and count, Ian Wachtmeister, together with the record-company director Bert Karlsson, formed a new political party (NyD). The party made a rocket career and crossed the electoral threshold to the national parliament in September 1991 with 6.7 percent of the total votes. Its’ political profile was much in line with the so-called second populist wave (Kiiskinen & Saveljef 2010: 42). This movement, which prospered in e.g. Denmark and Norway in the early 1970s, mobilized voters around an anti-establishment rhetoric, often neo-liberal oriented, against too high taxes, public expenses and bureaucracy. After a while, the NyD also started to grieve against immigration. The NyD disappeared as quickly as it is rose – in the 1994 parliamentary elections it lost its representation in the national parliament.

A prevalent theme in the NyD rhetoric was the rhetorical figure of ‘the reality people’, interpreted as ordinary workers tired of too much bureaucracy and too high welfare expenses. The reality people alluded to ‘the ordinary people’ that constitute a rather fragmented assembly of people who were united in feelings of resentment towards the elite (Wendel 2001). The reality people resisted both the foreigners - who were accused of polluting the Swedish society with criminality (a theme developed with time) - and the elites that neglected to recognize the popular demands of “the common man”.

Ideology

The appeals to the reality people in the NyD rhetoric assume a division between the corrupted elite, and the morally superior people who is akin to resist such interventions by the state. The strong anti-immigration stance developed by the NyD pitted the reality people not only against the political elites, but also against those people (i.e. the immigrants) who were accused of exploiting welfare benefits. The party failed to establish internally agreed coherent views about which people should be mobilized against which elites; hence, content-wise this appeal showed to be empty-hearted. Once in the parliament, then, the party organization proved to be highly fragile and the internal conflicts, eventually, turned the party into collapse.
Style
The appeals to the reality people can be interpreted as a form of communication strategy that relies on the charismatic leadership of Karlsson and Wachtmeister, who were not recognized as “normal” politicians and thus not part of the established party hierarchy. The two party leaders incarnate the personalization of politics and their appearance also provoked much media attention. They represented segments of the society outside the realm of party politics to generate support for a political agenda that ultimately thrived on the gap between the reality people and the elected political elite/s.

Logic
The essence of the appeals to the reality people, finally, downplayed the role of elected representatives to interfere (too much) with how the people choose to live their life. The party managed to mobilize previously unheard popular demands of e.g. less bureaucracy and also less immigration, to lend itself a potent contender in the political communication of the votes. Ultimately, it failed to establish a coherent vision of the totality of the fragmented demands of the electorate that, back in 1991, identified themselves with the “reality people”.

The appeals to the reality people were perhaps not merely rhetorical ornaments, however, the NyD never managed to transform the expectations and visions of the population into a potent new political agency, other than as mere resistance to the establishment.

The Reality People: The Christian Democrats
The NyD dissolved, however, the reality people made a stunning comeback in the political language adopted by the KD party leader, Göran Hägglund, minister of social affairs in both the first (2006-2010) and the second (2010-) governmental Centre-Right coalition. On 17 September 2009, Hägglund (2009) let publish a debating article in the leading Swedish morning paper Dagens Nyheter. He predicted that the “radical elite” had become the new upper-class. Accordingly, its academic language and far-fetched reasoning around e.g. queer theory and gender pedagogies might appeal to a small-numbered, likewise loud-voiced, cultural elite,
however it is polemically oriented towards how the ordinary people (i.e. the reality people) live their lives.

With the reality people, Hägglund refers to the regular families that try to make the daily life go around. The appeals to the reality people were not used against the Swedish foreign-born population; nevertheless the moral opposition between the people and the (cultural) elite was equally salient.

**Ideology**
The appeals to reality people in the KD political rhetoric indicate an ideological positioning that take side with the ordinary citizens – i.e. the working population, families with small children and so forth - against the radical (cultural) elite who, undeservedly, look down on how the reality people live their everyday lives. These appeals do not alone constitute a full-fledged ideology; however, combined with adjacent ideological articulations towards e.g. social conservatism these appeals are part of a wider ideological package addressed by a Christian Democratic party that prefers community cohesion and family values against urban centered life-style politics.

**Style**
In contrast with the previous case, the forms of doing politics are founded on a traditional party organization. The KD is the smallest party in the current Swedish governmental coalition. It continuously straddles on the 4 per cent electoral threshold in the opinion polls. In this sense, the appeals to the reality people might be interpreted as a particular communication strategy to obtain a wider potential voter share. It is seemingly not based on ideas of the charismatic leadership; it rather accentuates and appreciates the “normal” life style of the ordinary citizens.

**Logic**
The KD appeals to the reality people, potentially, embrace a diverse set of people, and families, who unite in their unanimous resistance towards the cultural elite. The appeals to the reality people in the KD political language speak on behalf of the people on the ground that choose to live their life the way they always had, not having to be interrupted by the seemingly progressive ideas of the radical elite.
These appeals might aim to install trust and confidence in the ordinary citizens of having someone in the government that acknowledge their situation. However, the appeals did not serve the ideals of human emancipation, but conserving a “normal” life style, differentiated from experiments of cultural relativism injected by the cultural (rather than the political) elite.

The Reality People: The Sweden Democrats

Jimmie Åkesson is the Party Leader of the nationalist party SD that in the 2010 national elections crossed the electoral threshold to the national parliament. When Hägglund picked up the rhetorical figure of the reality people, Åkesson replied that it is the SD, rather than the minister for social affairs, that truly represent the wills and preferences of the reality people. In a debating article in the tabloid Expressen, he argued that the reality people is challenged by ideals of ‘political correctness’ that disregard what the people really think (Åkesson 2009; cf. Norocel 2010). The SD, according to Åkesson, listens to and takes into account the ‘real’ problems with e.g. “mass-immigration” and the “alarming criminality rates”, which the reality people experience in their daily life. The SD appreciates the authentic Swedish cultural heritage that appeals to the reality people, yet ridiculed by the cultural elite: ‘For the cultural radical elite, that obviously include high representatives of the KD, the Swedish cultural heritage is boring, racist and hillbilly-like’. 7

Åkesson says to represent the common man who experience real problems with e.g. multicultural experiments and the “mass-importation” of culturally dissimilar immigrants (See e.g. Åkesson 2007). He welcomes Hägglund´s appeals to the reality people and the implicit critique against the hegemony established by Marxists and Liberals, out of touch with reality, in the public debate. He insists to be a much more credible spokesman for the reality people, though.

Ideology

In the SD political rhetoric, populism as thin ideology indicates a conflation between demos and ethnos. The reality people are culturally similar Swedes, and, potentially, also immigrants who have worked hard to assimilate into the Swedish culture. The elite are represented by the other
parliamentary parties, the mainstream press and the cultural elites that dominate the public debate.

The appeals to the reality people are combined with elements of an explicit nationalist positioning. This position entails that the natives come first and cultural differences are viewed as eternal and incommensurable. At the SD party congress in November 2011, the SD defined its ideology as rooted in social conservatism and thus not merely nationalism. This shift, arguably, allows the SD to discursively broaden its political agenda to expand the range of possible political issues (Hellström et. al 2012).

**Style**
The appeals to the reality people in the SD political rhetoric emphasize a particular style based on the party’s underdog position, before the 2010 national elections. It dwells on popular concerns about mundane fears in the everyday life of ordinary citizens.

The SD appeals to the reality people do not embark on ideas of the charismatic leadership – rather these appeals aim to reflect the mundane realities of the majority population; i.e. a rather conventional form of doing politics. The appeals to the reality people in the SD political rhetoric suggest that the people on the ground prefer safety and security instead of a generous immigration policy and multi-cultural experiments. The SD claims to represent the voice of the people vis-à-vis the political and cultural elites who have lost contact with the reality. The appeals to the reality people thus aim to narrow the gap between the people and the mediated elites.

**Logic**
The appeals to the reality people shape popular expectations and fears embedded in the everyday experiences of the ordinary citizens. These appeals epitomize a longing back to attitudes and interests that counter the ideals of e.g. individual self-realization appreciated by the contemporary elites. To proceed with this task the party mobilizes voters, from both the right and the left, along a message that radicalize banal sentiments of what constitutes Swedishness and the Swedish national identity. From the SD perspective, the ideal of social cohesion necessitates
cultural conformism and this refutes the multi-cultural experiments of the political and cultural elites.

The Reality People: the struggles of meaning
By now, the KD has ensured property rights over the trademark *the reality people*. On its’ homepage the party explains what this refers to: ‘They who believe it is alright to have a family, to work, to go on vacation, to comfy together with the family on Friday evening and enjoy watching *Så ska det låta*[^8] on the television and do not want politicians to interfere with how they choose to live their everyday lives’ (Montgomery 2009).

The NyD, the KD and the SD all use “the reality people” in different ways, serving different political purposes. What unites these banal uses is the emphasis on the reality people as both the common people (as opposed to the cultural/radical elite) and the ordinary citizens. Of course, critical voices in the public debate rebut both these aspirations and e.g. ask: who does not belong to the reality people? (See e.g. Baas 2009).

The various uses of the term indicate its attractive force to raise claims about accurately representing the man on the street, to be on equal footing with *the common man*. Ultimately, this is a struggle of what the people is and wishes for. This analysis, ultimately, informs about the passionate intensity in Swedish representative politics as not being limited to ideas of charismatic leadership or the personalization of politics, conversely it is based on ideas of the moral superiority of *the common man*, offering promises that the Swedish society will and/or should remain the way it always has been. The appeals to the reality people, as it seems, nurture a vision that look backwards rather than forward.

Final reflections
Should the conclusion of this article be that Göran Hägglund has become a populist, contaminated by the *populist malaise*? I suggest this kind of question dodge the close semblance between populism and democracy in contemporary representative politics. The ambiguity nested in the concept of the people is constitutive for democratic politics. It is perhaps, then, more
relevant to ask the question: how do political actors invoke the populist divide between the people and the elite in the political competition over the votes? This move invites research that focuses less on who is a populist (and who is not), to emphasize the people as the prime object of democratic politics.

The fact that the SD invokes the populist divide between the people and the elite is neither odd nor dangerous per se. The risk is, then, to conflating our fears of populism (often reduced to the RRPs and in the Swedish case, the SD) with a fear of the people in democratic politics, here represented by the small minority (5, 7 per cent) in Sweden who voted for the SD in the latest national elections. The polarized political debate between the SD and the rest epitomizes the delicate relationship between populism and democracy in contemporary representative politics (see further Hellström & Nilsson 2010). The debate around the SD, on both sides, brings a flavor of the politics of faith in the otherwise pragmatic-oriented political discourse. The appeals to the reality people, in this regard, rest on and radicalize popular sentiments of what the ideal (Swedish) citizen want and wish for.

My analysis suggests that the political struggle of who the people are and what they want and wishes for might stir up emotions, but it also makes a permanent companion nested in liberal democratic governance. For future research, then, it is worth noting that the articulations of banal populism involve a mobilization force in democratic politics. As such it should neither be reduced to nativist anti-immigrant forces nor to progressive movements that resist authoritative governance or e.g. struggle for the rights of the undocumented refugees to enjoy the same welfare privileges as the native-born people.

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Notes

1 Benjamín Arditi (2004: 151) develops on this metaphor, inferring that populism represents a spectre of democracy; it both follows and haunts the democratic institutions.

2 Clearly an emphasis on ideology as ideology is not always easily separable from populism as style.

3 This move should not be exaggerated, though - for e.g. a discursive view on the ideology of nationalism, see Özkirimli (2010: 206-9).

4 Stavarakakis adds (2004: 263), though, that the Laclaudian approach does not help much to discriminate between different appeals to ‘the people’ in democratic practice and the risk is ‘to lose the conceptual particularity of populism as a tool for concrete analysis’.
The media material has been collected by means of search, using the search word ‘Verklighetens folk’ in the print media database, Mediarkivet. In total, I collected more than 2000 articles and news items. The analysis focuses on articles that explicitly dealt with the uses of ‘verklighetens folk’, by Wachtmeister (29 articles), Göran Hägglund and Jimmie Åkesson (their debate articles and the immediate reactions to these, approximately 50 articles), though.

Approximately one decade after the Second World War, populist political parties began to take shape that shared little resemblance with the first way of populist parties, which by contrast had tentacles with fragmented racist or neo-nazi groups in Europe.

Own translation

Så ska det låta is a popular television game show with celebrities trying to identify and sing the correct songs with the correct lyrics.