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Thick populism:
democracy-enhancing popular participation

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Abstract

This article posits that some forms of popular participation offer important resources for democratic renewal. It develops a conceptual distinction between thin and thick varieties of populism. Thin populist movements mobilize popular support to replace elite leaders by undermining or corroding the deliberative and inclusionary principles of representative government. In contrast, thick populist movements seek to modify or alter the practices and conventions of representative government by offering democracy-enhancing and trust-building organizational forms and political practices. This distinction between thin and thick populism helps identify a swath of normative and practical common ground occupied by populists and deliberative democratic reformers and innovators, who have also held deeply critical views of representative democracy. The article discusses four contemporary examples of democratic innovation (broadly understood) to illustrate how thick populism can take root in organisations, institutions, campaigns and in the efforts of everyday citizens. Consideration is given to the lessons that contemporary forms of thick populism offer for advocates of participatory and deliberative democratic innovation.

1. Introduction
Contemporary politics is awash with populist developments, particularly in the political spaces surrounding elections, political parties and leaders. These trends have significant implications for how we practice and conceptualize modern democracies, and for their reform. Most significantly, they signal widespread distrust with conventional democratic institutions, increasing disconnection between citizens and elected representatives, and a growing dislike of ‘politics as usual’. The consequences of populism are very real, as the UK, the US, the Netherlands, France, Germany and many other countries are currently experiencing (Kaltwasser et al. 2017). But, populism takes many forms, and there are varieties that offer opportunities for democratic renewal.¹

Should this seem Pollyannaish and naively open-minded, consider for a moment the steady stream of warnings mainstream Political Science has sent for nearly two decades about declining levels of citizen participation and trust in formal politics and in civil society. Putnam’s grim description of citizens as solitary bowlers with few social ties, and Skocpol’s portrait of leading civic organizations as ‘body less heads’ demanding little more than financial contributions from their members, were just a two of the prominent narratives of democratic decline; they indicated how conventional social and political structures made civic engagement difficult and unappealing for many people (Putnam 2000; Skocpol 2003). Given this widespread scholarly concern about civic decline, we think that the bursts of formal and informal civic involvement labeled ‘populist’ today—movements which often flare-up among people who are distrustful of the political establishment and who have little previous experience or interest in politics—are of great importance to understanding both the dangers and the possibilities of democratic renewal. Without discounting the potentially toxic characteristics of populism, we call for a re-framing of how popular participation and its relationship to democratic practice are understood.

In this article we seek to reframe the current debates on populism and democracy through two novel moves. First, we develop a distinction between thin and thick varieties of populism. Thin populist movements mobilize popular support to replace elite leaders by undermining or

¹ Though ours appears to be a minority position among scholars of populism, we do have good company (e.g. Grattan 2016, Boyte 2012; Canovan 2005). We agree with Tormey’s (this issue) argument that it makes little sense to fix a general normative position on populism. Rather, one must assess the constructive or destructive elements of a particular populist effort by placing it into context and examining its specific aims, methods, and rhetoric.
corroding the deliberative and inclusionary principles of representative government. This thin variety of populism has been the dominant focus in scholarly and media discussions on populism in contemporary politics. It describes a particular kind of popular participation that challenges and corrodes traditional modes of representative government, generates emotional appeals to bind people together in collective action, and is often marked by exclusionary bias or racism. These toxic elements are clearly present in the movements behind the Brexit and Trump victories. Yet, these are not the only, or even most characteristic, elements of populism, understood as a range of specific historical movements (Canovan 1981). We argue that more consideration needs to be given to thick forms of populism that bring opportunities for democratic renewal. To develop the notion of thick populism, we draw insights from studies on the everyday practices and institutional experimentation of early popular movements against corporate expansion in the United States (e.g. Botye 2004; Grattan 2016). We argue that thick populism promotes popular participation through the organizing strategies of citizens’ movements working to circumvent, challenge and reform political institutions.

Second, we suggest that ‘thick populist’ dimensions of successful, citizen-led, democratic innovations offer considerable learning for practitioners and scholars of participatory and deliberative democracy. There is a wide swath of normative and practical common-ground occupied by populists and deliberative democratic reformers and participatory innovators, many of whom hold deeply critical views of representative democracy (e.g. Dryzek, 2000; Fishkin 2009; van Reybrouck 2016; Pateman 2012). However, we contend that to fully appreciate the democracy-enhancing elements of populism, a more expansive view of democratic innovation is needed that goes beyond one-off designed participatory forums – the focus of most scholars and practitioners of deliberative democracy (e.g. Gastil and Levine 2005; Fishkin 2009; Smith 2009). In this article we adopt a more expansive understanding of democratic innovation to encompass a wide variety of participatory activities and community organizing efforts that emerge in everyday spaces of public life and politics (see Hendriks and Dzur 2015).² We

² Our interest in everyday participatory practices speaks to recent theoretical debates in deliberative democracy on the concept of a ‘deliberative system’, which acknowledges that public deliberation takes place in a variety of modes and multiple locations — some informal, others formal, some face-to-face others online (Parkinson and Mansbridge 2012; Mansbridge 1999; Rollo 2016).
discuss four empirical cases to illustrate how thick populism can take root in the democratic innovations found in organisations, institutions, campaigns and in the efforts of everyday citizens. We conclude by considering the participatory lessons emerging from thick populism for scholars and practitioners of democratic innovation.

2. Populism: thin and thick varieties

The term ‘populism’ in social science typically refers to social movements characterized by strong distrust of policy elites, which seek to remove, replace or constrain a current set of officials, sometimes through means that bypass established parties or intermediary organizations, in reaction to a particular social, economic, or political issue that has catalyzed public concern (Canovan 2004). At their core populists are anti-establishment; they are cynical of existing institutions such as political parties, banks, courts, and the media, and elites including policy experts, politicians, and opinion leaders. Populists prefer to put their faith in the wisdom and virtues of ordinary people (Mudde 2007; Inglehart and Norris 2016; Barr 2009).

The term populism is also a powerful label that carries multiple meanings (Mudde 2007). Consider, for example, the term ‘penal populism’ which was coined by social scientists to describe social movements in Australia, the US, the UK and New Zealand seeking to ‘get tough on crime’ by increasing the use of prisons and enacting harsh mandatory minimum sentencing constraints on judges (Bottoms 1995; Pratt 2007). Empirical studies of political parties operationalize populism by focusing on three core features, namely anti-establishment, authoritarianism and nativism (e.g. Inglehart and Norris 2016, Mudde 2007). More generally, of course, in the last decade the term ‘populism’ has come to take on a specific meaning referring to the many political initiatives, politicians and parties on the right of the political spectrum, who emphasize economic nationalism, some degree of nativism and anti-immigrant sentiment, and so-called ‘traditional values’.

It is important to notice, however, the long history of populism and the rather wide range of its normative commitments that cannot be clearly located on one side of a left-right continuum (Grattan 2014). Indeed, the positive and negative democratic consequences of populism are not
new topics for political theory, but were central to: proto-populist 18th century debates over civic republican notions of ‘popular sovereignty’ and ‘self-government’ (Morgan 1988); 19th century understandings of what ‘government of, for and by the people’ means in the context of rapidly industrializing nations; and 20th century concerns about ‘participatory democracy’, on the one hand, and ‘big government’, on the other (McGrath 2013). These are debates over who ‘the people’ are, and, even more fundamentally, what ‘they’ can, and should, be empowered to do in the realm of governance.

Here, we shed light on some of these neglected aspects of the democratic roots of populism. Focusing on the normative core of citizen agency, Harry Boyte (2004) has shown how the late nineteenth-century American social movements that ushered in the ‘populist’ nomenclature, linked together diverse groups, such as farmers’ cooperatives, labor unions and temperance societies, through an ambitious set of goals: ‘Populism was a set of organizing strategies, a legislative program, a lecture circuit aimed at self-education, and a vision of the cooperative commonwealth, all together. The overall thrust was an effort to bring the economic and social transformations associated with emerging industry, monopoly capital, and urbanization under popular control’ (Boyte 2004, 19).

Early populists were reacting to changes in modern life that had disempowered and marginalized large numbers of citizens, particularly in rural areas (Goodwyn 1976). Their social movements, and then, later, formal political party efforts, sought to develop what can be called ‘civic capacity’—abilities to organize, act in concert to solve social problems and be able to articulate interests requiring attention. As Boyte (2004, 20) notes, the great hope of these early populist movements was that lay citizens could ‘exercise control over larger structures, both corporate and bureaucratic, that were reshaping the United States from a nation of small towns and a largely agricultural society to an urbanized, industrialized nation’.

While mobilization was crucial to the success of early populist movements, so was the way people at the grassroots level engaged in horizontal forms of power sharing and cooperation across social and geographic divides (Grattan 2016). A recent historical study of the grassroots activities in early populist movements in the United States finds that, at the local level, people
regularly worked across divisions of class, race, ethnicity and gender (Grattan 2016). For example, farmers and labourers organized local institutions and experimented with banking and other economic cooperatives, women used their social networks to connect people in rural and urban areas, and black communities built schools and fought for civil and political rights. Grattan (2016, 16) contends that, without these everyday spaces for people to learn, experience and share power across societal groups and hierarchies, the mass coordinated resistance against the corporate revolution in America would never have been possible. Further, she argues that the everyday practices within the early populist movement influenced both its democratic form and impact (p. 16):

Where [early] Populism’s everyday spaces thrived and crossed divides, the movement succeeded in organizing people’s aspirations to enact egalitarian, pluralistic forms of popular power. Where they did not, [early] Populism failed to sustain its coalitional base, and its grassroots power reinforced hierarchies of white supremacy, nativism and patriarchy’.

These analyses highlight the constructive understanding of citizenship present in early populist movements: good citizens work together, shouldering responsibility for the public sphere and for the social, political, and economic institutions that impact on it. Contemporary concepts like ‘public work’ and ‘co-creation’ and ‘asset-based community development’, used by scholars and practitioners active in civic renewal today, all reflect the early populist normative standpoint, seeing lay citizens as active shapers of a shared environment, linked by ties of public responsibility that are not God-given or inherent in nature, but which emerge from the process of social organization and collective action (Boyte 2007; Levine 2013; Kretzmann and McKnight 1996). Early populism was a reaction to industrial development and urbanization to be sure, but it was not merely a corrosive force. Instead, it led to the development of cooperative markets, affordable insurance schemes, credit unions, as well as new and reformed institutional avenues for popular influence at all levels of government (Goodwyn 1976).

The constructive account of citizenship as both an aspirational goal and an asset to be utilized for collective problem solving can very well go hand-in-hand with an intensely negative view of government and politicians, but it has not always done so. Many populists have viewed
government, not as an enemy, but as an ally in the larger project of building a commonwealth, with good government itself understood as part of the people’s historical project. As a citizen activist recently stated: ‘This idea of get government out of my life—I don’t know how that works. Because we’re supposed to be a government of the people, by the people, and for the people. So how do I just take government out of my life? I am government!’ (Moyers 2010). Indeed, populist movements’ emphases on community self-reliance, self-governance and co-ownership of government have allowed them to appeal to citizens across conventional political party lines (Boyte 2012).

It is too easy, therefore, to critique contemporary populist movements because they seek direct, and somewhat non-deliberative, public impact on policy, or because their rhetoric contains biased or reactionary elements. These criticisms are valid, at least for some populist efforts, but they do not go far enough and they can also distract us from recognizing other, possibly more important, messages communicated by such movements about the disaffection of many citizens and the means to give voice to that disaffection. Populist movements are to be faulted for their rhetoric and their policies, to be sure, but we should be equally critical of their process: many offer their adherents few of the constructive, self-organizing, self-reliant, institution-shaping elements of the best populist efforts of the past. Reproducing by default the professionalization and centralization of the formal party politics they eschew, many grassroots protest efforts employ mobilization strategies that ‘expect very little of the citizen; …depend upon caricatures of the enemy; and … are forms of citizen participation in which professionals craft both the message and the patterns of involvement’ (Boyte 2004, 26). More extreme cases can be found in contemporary populist leaders who display authoritarian tendencies, and draw heavily on charismatic and personal forms of power to assert that they reflect the voice of everyday people (Ingelhart and Norris 2016; Mudde 2007). These are in contrast to the citizen-centered organizing strategies of early populist efforts, which stress ‘patient, sustained work in communities,’ ‘face to face horizontal interactions among people’ and ‘respect for the intelligence and talents of ordinary, uncredentialed citizens’ (Boyte 2004, 35).

Disaffection with government and elites can be part of constructive movements that energize the marginalized and disaffected with a sense of civic ownership and public responsibility.
Canovan (1999) has written that contemporary populism emerges from tensions between ‘two faces’ of modern democracy: a pragmatic side ‘coping peacefully with the conflicts of modern societies’ through complex, and sometimes confusing, institutions, like multiparty electoral systems; and a redemptive side, honoring the people, rather than institutions, as the true source of legitimacy, and promising a kind of salvation through political action (Canovan 1999, 10). While it is true that ‘democracy cannot in fact function without alienating institutions and professional expertise’ notes Canovan, ‘it could also be argued that (like routinized religious institutions in Weber’s analysis) democratic institutions need an occasional upsurge of faith as a means of renewal’ (Canovan 1999, 14). Following Canovan (1999) then, we can recognize how contemporary populist efforts might, with the right forms of organization, become institutionally redemptive, rather than destructive, leading to a sense of ownership, rather than further distrust and alienation.

Drawing on scholars such as Boyte (2004; 2007; 2012) and Canovan (1981; 1999; 2004; 2005), we can thus distinguish, very schematically, between what we categorize as democracy-disrupting ‘thin’ populist efforts and democracy-enhancing ‘thick’ populism.

Thick populists see government as a collective project in which ordinary citizens have a rightful share. In contrast to thin populists, who hold an enemy image of ‘big government’, thick populists are happy to work with government, although elites who resist the populist commonwealth idea are distrusted. Thick populism is based on a completely different mode of political action from its thin counterpart. Thin populists are focused on mobilizing; their movements do what it takes to get numerical power (collect signatures, get people to email or call their representatives, get people to donate online), but they do not do anything to encourage the development of civic skills or horizontal networks. In contrast, thick populists take an organizing approach by employing strategies that help people work together to do the social problem-solving on their own, or to re-create institutions. They engage people in inclusive forms of non-violent political action to agitate for change, while also encouraging communities to think creatively and cooperatively to solve and address collective problems. Thick populism seeks to build strength person by person, actualizing each person’s interest and ability to connect with others around specific problems.
Table 1: Two Kinds of Populism³

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Thin Populism</th>
<th>Thick Populism</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>View of Government:</td>
<td>Intrusive and coercive force to be minimized</td>
<td>Potential ally, public project, commonwealth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude Toward Experts:</td>
<td>Distrust</td>
<td>Ambivalence, open to collaboration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mode of Operation:</td>
<td>Mobilization</td>
<td>Organization and cooperation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goals:</td>
<td>Policy or leadership change</td>
<td>Institutional reform, civic capacity building</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time Horizon:</td>
<td>Short term</td>
<td>Long term</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Matrix:</td>
<td>Homogeneous</td>
<td>Heterogeneous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Theory:</td>
<td>Faith in individuals left alone</td>
<td>Faith in individuals working together</td>
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Our conceptual categories of thin and thick populism provide a useful heuristic device for distinguishing populist practices that erode democratic principles from those that enhance them.⁴ Importantly these distinctions allow us to view some forms of populism as potentially positive efforts to rejuvenate democratic institutions. To do this, one must be critical of thin populism, as many contemporary democratic theorists have been, while not giving up on the potential that even corrosive popular movements may have for thickening, and becoming more constructive.

3. Thick populism in practice

Using this theoretical distinction, we discuss some recent democratic innovations to illustrate what thick populism looks like in practice, and the democratic opportunities it potentially offers. As argued in the introduction, we conceptualise democratic innovation in broad terms; it

³ This table borrows from Dzur (2012).

⁴ These categories are not intended as labels to ascribe to actors. Indeed, most of the actors and advocates in our examples discussed below would not self-identify as a ‘populists’, favouring instead terms such as, ‘concerned citizens’ or ‘engaged communities’.
encompasses a variety of alternative and novel ways to regularly engage citizens in collective conversations about public problems that produce some concrete outcome (Hendriks and Dzur 2015). We are particularly interested in forms of democratic innovation that extend well-beyond a deliberative experiment, collective reading group or symbolic public relations; it must be ‘load-bearing’ and make a difference to the lives of people and the organizations and institutions that govern them (Dzur 2012; Dzur 2018). Many democratic innovations of this kind display characteristics of thick populism, such as a commitment to community organizing, empowering everyday people, building civic capacity and collective problem solving (sometimes in collaboration with state and market actors).

In the following section we discuss four different contemporary examples to demonstrate how think populism can emerge in democratic innovations located in: i) organisations; ii) institutions; ii) campaigns; and iv) the efforts of everyday citizens.

i. Thick populist organisations: the case of Voices4Indi (V4I)
Many citizen-led political organizations display characteristics of thick populism, particularly those that empower everyday people to engage in political change. The context of this case of thick populism is the conservative rural electorate of Indi in Victoria, Australia with a population of around 130,000. In the lead up to the 2013 Federal election many residents in Indi felt abandoned by the political system: the local member at the time (MP Sophie Mirabella) appeared unresponsive, the party system offered few choices and, in such a safe seat, the act of voting felt worthless (see Hendriks 2017). This frustration with the status quo drove a group of about 20 local citizens to form a small community group, Voices4Indi (V4I), to engage the electorate in political conversations about improving local democracy. Many of V4I’s explicit goals were populist in orientation. For example, it sought to ‘be a voice for the people of Indi’ (p. 2) and to offer a ‘new means for political action’ by ‘mobilis[ing] a voting public that is well informed and engaged, and develop[ing] political representation that is receptive and open to the broader community’ (V4I 2013, 2-3). This was thick, rather than thin, populism in that it

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5 There are many aspects to the changing political landscape in the electorate of Indi since 2012. For a fuller account of the citizen-led democratic innovation in Indi, see Hendriks (2017).
sought to work with the existing political institutions, provide public input and ‘act as a conduit to our federal representative’ (V4I 2013, 2).

From its inception, V4I was about community organizing, rather than mobilization. The founding members of V4I were committed to listening to, and empowering, local people. Many had extensive experience in the community development sector, and knew the value of using participatory approaches to engage people in projects (see Hendriks 2017). In the *Voices4Indi* movement, one influential participatory approach was Kitchen Table Conversations (KTC). Originally designed by Mary Crooks (VWT 2000, 2007), Kitchen Table Conversations involve a group of around 10 people meeting at a host’s house to participate in a structured, facilitated discussion, guided by a set of questions, with one participant scribing (Capper 2013). The initial set of conversations were structured around a series of starter questions, such as:

- what makes for a strong community?
- what concerns do you feel should be brought to the attention of your elected representatives?
- what do you think makes for a really good political representative?
- are there particular issues of concern that you feel strongly about?

Through these conversations, citizens in Indi opened up and started engaging on political issues and reimagining their democratic possibilities. Over a period of eight months, 53 structured, facilitated conversations (KTCs) were held across the 28000 square kilometre electorate (approximately the size of Massachusetts in the US). Overall, 425 people participated and their thoughts and opinions were recorded and collated into a report that was presented to their representative Sophie Mirabella (see V4I 2013).

Here, we see the essence of thick populism at work: the V4I movement actively organized the community and sought input from everyday citizens. Rather than getting individual people to support the organization’s ‘solution’ to local democracy, for example via a petition, citizens in Indi are being asked to set the agenda of *Voices4Indi*. As one of the movement’s founding members Alana Johnson explains (cited in Capper 2013):

[Provided text that is not visible in the image.]
The Kitchen Table Conversations created a vehicle or a place that was not only welcoming and safe, because it didn’t matter what your party politics were, but you were there because your ideas were going to be valued…and it became really apparent people wanted more from their representatives, they wanted a different type of relationship with their representative, and many wanted their representative to be a rural person who understood them.

These small local participatory discussions grew into a powerful force reshaping Australian Federal politics. In response to community concerns about feeling disconnected from their elected representatives, the Voices4Indi movement produced an independent candidate to run against the incumbent Liberal member (for a full account, see Hendriks 2017). Collectively, the efforts of V4I empowered the community and, through inclusive participatory processes and informal gatherings, they were able to reengage people in local democracy. As two members of the Voices4Indi movement explained (Klose and Haines 2013):

Indi has never seen anything like this before. For the first time in living memory thousands of people from all walks of life were engaging in politics and having a say in how they would like to see their electorate represented.

….While the rest of Australia switched off at this election, we switched on. We are now an engaged electorate. The people of Indi are claiming the power to be the architects and authors of our community’s future. Whoever is elected as the Member for Indi will have a strong, engaged, opinionated community to answer to and that is a win for any democracy.

Thick populist efforts such as Voices4Indi also have flow-on effects. V4I has built civic capacity through a strong volunteer program and a series of national seminars. A few active volunteers in V4I have gone on to successfully stand for local elections, and are now elected members in local councils in the region (Hendriks 2016). V4I has also inspired similar local grass-root movements, for example, Strathbogie Voices. This has come about due to the advocacy work of Voices4Indi; it has become a participatory champion and trainer for other communities by running workshops for other grassroots groups interested in promoting democratic change (Chan 2015; McGowan 2015b).
The grassroots movement of Voice4Indi represents more than sophisticated community organizing; it is a story of thick populism by communities who are using participatory approaches to mediate between the official world of formal political institutions and local communities. In this case, the transformative impact of the KTCs on the functioning of mainstream democratic activities well exceeds what community organizing and citizen activism traditionally achieves. What began as a small group of disgruntled voters talking together resulted in significant changes in local and national politics.

ii. Thick populist institutions: the case of Restorative Justice

Thick populist efforts can also become institutionalized enabling them to slowly reshape the very established institutions they critique. Such populist initiatives may start as a counter-movement resisting status quo administrative or political practices and the mainstream professionals and experts that uphold them. However, over time, this counter-movement can grow and eventually become embedded as a thick populist institutional form that welcomes in more democratic professionals.

A good example of such institutional embeddedness is the worldwide restorative justice movement. Highly critical of mainstream legal institutions, advocates like John Braithwaite, Nils Christie and Howard Zehr urge court professionals and citizens alike to see crime not simply as an offense against the state, but as a harm to real people in actual communities and to reform the adversarial approach, so that it becomes a more deliberative and democratic process that restores lost dignity and property to the victim and establishes networks of support for the offender. Consider John Braithwaite’s (1999) widely influential model, based on the Australian experience of family group conferencing, in which victims, offenders, their family and friends and representatives from their community, all engage in a dialogue. Essential ingredients in this process are that: dialogue be un-dominated; all voices are heard; the experience of the harm be articulated clearly and concretely; and opportunities be offered for making up for the harm through apology or restitution. Supporters and volunteer facilitators encourage parties to: open up about an event; explain reasons for an action; and reveal its short-term and long-term consequences. Citizen participants in this process do more than symbolize the public, they are
actually members of the particular public sphere that victims and offenders will rejoin after the forum. ‘It is not the shame of police or judges or newspapers that is most able to get through to us,’ notes Braithwaite, ‘it is shame in the eyes of those we respect and trust’ (Braithwaite 1999, 40).

Restorative justice is populist in its reliance on assets held by lay citizens that are useful for handling problems of social ordering, yet it is also thick in its expectations for mutuality, other-orientation and personal and social growth. Advocates see family group conferences, circle sentencing, victim-offender mediation and other similar forums as ideally transformative of the victims’ and offender’s attitudes toward the offense, as well as, over time, the public’s view of crime and punishment. ‘Experience is the best educator,’ according to Braithwaite, ‘more so the more nuanced the skills required. We hope that citizens are learning in conferences and circles how to deliberate respectfully in the face of the greatest provocations of daily life’ (Braithwaite 2002, 132). Far from expecting ‘the community’ to adjudicate and punish better than criminal justice professionals, advocates expect that citizens learn to adjudicate and punish via dialogical procedures that give voice to the many different interests and perspectives involved in a conflict or harmful event. As circle sentencing practitioner Kay Pranis notes (Dzur 2016):

there is energy around crime. If there is a robbery in your neighborhood, there is a whole bunch of energy around that. This is initially negative energy. The restorative processes—particularly circles because they can engage more people—give you a way to transform the negative energy that arises naturally into positive community building energy. The individual event creates a situation in which people come together—often out of fear, anger or frustration. But if you use a process like a [restorative] circle, for people to initially talk about that particular issue, the process starts to build the relationships so that they become more committed collectively to the well-being of the whole.

Similarly, practitioner Lauren Abramson is insistent that the participatory and reflective process provided by her Community Conferencing restorative justice program in Baltimore does not in any way repair social problems for people, but rather serves as a medium for them to handle their own problems in their own way (Dzur 2015):
[C]onferencing recognizes that we all have a larger capacity to resolve complicated conflicts and crimes than we are allowed to. But people also need to have an appropriate structure to do it. I think it was Winston Churchill who said, ‘We’re shaped by the institutions that govern us.’ So if our institutions are top-down—if we need a judge in a black robe telling people how they should be punished—then we’re going to get one set of outcomes. But if we engage people with this alternative structure—in a circle where they acknowledge what happened, share how they’ve been affected, and then decide how to make it better—then we will get a whole different set of outcomes. …

The fact that people in highly distressed neighborhoods can negotiate solutions within the structure provided by Community Conferencing only emphasizes the fact that we are all capable of safely and effectively resolving many of our own conflicts.

Thus, restorative justice programs encourage citizen participation, but do not allow it to be ‘thin’—solipsistic, self-interested, or hasty. Volunteer facilitators, supporters and others are prompted to participate in a thick way, by taking up specific obligations related to the particular suffering individuals before the forum. Citizen participation is crucial for restorative justice practice because of the widespread capacity for judgment present in every community, but also to encourage shared responsibility for shaping future patterns of less harmful social interaction. Restorative justice programs thus promote a thick populist form of civic capacity building that stresses our ‘interconnectedness,’ the ‘web of relationships’ that link us together in the tasks that generate and regenerate our public world: ‘When this web is disrupted,’ writes Zehr, ‘we are all affected. The primary elements of restorative justice—harm and need, obligation, and participation—derive from this vision’ (Zehr 2002, 35).

iii. Thick populist campaigns: White Ribbon Campaign (WRC)
Divisiveness and nativism are strong features of thin populist movements. But, not all popular movements are built around racial or cultural divisions or national pride. On the contrary, thick populist movements demonstrate that popular support can be generated by empowering everyday people to participate in ways that are inclusive, flexible and unifying. Some popular movements actively seek to bridge cultural and socio-economic divides (Grattan 2016). One
such thick populist initiative is the White Ribbon Campaign (WRC), a global participatory campaign focused upon violence against women.

The idea for WRC began in 1991 when three men in Toronto, Canada, began talking about how they might build a campaign aimed at men and boys about violence against women (VAW). According to one of the founders, Michael Kaufman (2001a, 45):

We decided we had a responsibility to urge men to speak out against violence against women. We knew that most men in Canada were not violent towards women but we also knew that the vast majority of us remained silent. Through our silence, we allowed the violence to continue.

Central to the WRC campaign is the symbol of wearing a white ribbon on a specific day of the year (in many countries this is November 25, International Day of the Eradication of VAW). The ribbon represents an individual act, but it carries with it a strong political agenda, as Kaufman explains (2001a, 45-6):

Wearing the ribbon was a personal pledge to never to commit, condone, or remain silent about violence against women. It would be a catalyst for discussion and soul-searching. It would be a public challenge to those many men who may use violence against a wife, girlfriend, family member or stranger. It would be a call on our policymakers, opinion leaders, police and courts to take seriously this national and international epidemic. And it would be an act of love for the women in our lives.

Today, the White Ribbon Campaign is an active and popular movement worldwide. It runs education sessions, campaigns and dialogues in schools and communities in over 25 countries.

On the surface, WRC could be interpreted as a successful global thin populist awareness campaign. However, when one digs deeper, the movement displays a number of thick populist characteristics. In contrast to thin populist movements, the WRC is highly inclusive; it aims to include the vast majority of men and so it seeks unity, not divisiveness. As an organization, WRC is ‘strictly non-partisan’ (Kaufman 2001b, 15). As Kaufman explains (2001a, p. 47): ‘We needed to pitch a tent that would bring together men from across the political, economic and social spectrums…’. He argues that an inclusive approach is not only promotes unity against
the cause (VAW), but more powerfully it ‘allows men to redefine traditional ways of working together’ (p. 47).

WRC is anti-establishment in that it emerged in response to the failure of state-sponsored education campaigns on VAW to involve and empower men to take responsibility for changing patterns of behavior towards women. More radically, WRC aims to help men redefine manhood, so that they can challenge patterns of domination and control (Kaufman 2001a). The movement takes an explicit participatory approach to addressing the complexities of VAW. From the outset, WRC acknowledged the gendered reality that most men and boys listen to, and learn from, other men and boys. The campaigns thus needed to ‘involve them in the work to end the violence’ (Kaufman 2001a, 39). In other words, participation of men and boys in the campaign intentionally builds ownership of the problem (Kaufman 2001a).

Alongside its mobilization and advocacy work, WRC undertakes a number of community organizing efforts that seek to empower individuals (particularly men) and their networks and communities to take responsibility for VAW. In other words, WRC seeks to do ‘more than just education’; rather it was founded on a strong belief that ‘men could and would take action’ (Kaufman 2012, 139). To this end, WRC organizes and facilitates community discussions worldwide to encourage men to ‘break the silence’, self-reflect and take individual and collective responsibility. For example, Kaufman describes how, in a series of community dialogues in Namibia, men and boys were asked (Kaufman 2001, p. 38): ‘what can you do, together, to end wife assault and sexual violence in your community? Not grand schemes. Simply, what can you do next week and in the weeks ahead?’

In contrast to thin populist campaigns, which are typically driven centrally and top-down, WRC adopted a decentralized community-organizing approach (Kaufman 2012). This flexible and grassroots approach was both philosophical and practical, as Kaufman (2012, 151) explains: ‘we had no desire to, or intention of developing a large organization’. Nor has WRC attempted to control the campaign, for example, to have intellectual property rights, or to restrict how and when the symbol and its ideas can be used (Kaufman 2012 p. 151-2):
We also did not want to direct how campaigns in other countries should start or develop or how they should be run….this decentralization was key to the spread of the white ribbon campaigns worldwide….as a symbol white ribbon has been culturally adapted.

In terms of collaboration, WRC partners with state and non-state organizations, such as relevant government departments, NGOs, women’s organisations, churches and international organizations such as the UN. The organization also uses political elites and high-profile men to speak out against violence. For example, it puts out an annual “Famous Guy” entitled *These Guys Know it’s Time to put an end to Men’s Violence Against Women*” with signatures from popular singers, writers, artists and business leaders (Kaufman 2001b). WRC collaborates with organizations worldwide that are associated with where men and boys work, shop and play, such as workplaces, unions, corporations and schools. In sum, ‘WRC encourages men and boys to do whatever is appropriate in their community to reach and involve boys and men’ (Kaufman 2001b, 14). In Canada, the WRC now supports extensive Community of Practice program bringing together nine organizations across the nation working on reducing gender based violence against women and girls.7

**iv. Thick populist efforts of everyday citizens: Orange Sky Laundry**

Many thick populist efforts are rooted in citizens’ frustrations with the failure of government to address pressing public policy problems. Citizens may become so fed up the state’s neglect of a particular issue, or its incapacity to address complex, systemic social problems such as poverty, homelessness or domestic violence. In such contexts, citizens may self-organize and take steps to start addressing the problem themselves. These are the initiatives of everyday citizens and, if open and participatory, they can evolve into ‘thick populist’ efforts. Here, we discuss one such effort which recently emerged in Australia.

Orange Sky Laundry (OSL) is a community initiative that provides free mobile laundry services to the homeless. The initiative began in 2014 when two men retrofitted a simple van with two washing machines, a dryer and water tankers, and then travelled around the city of Brisbane offering free laundry facilities to those living on the street. Two years later OSL has snowballed

7 See http://whiteribbon.ca/pdfs/NEF_CoP.pdf
into a popular movement involving over 620 volunteers. It has set up in 11 other locations across Australia, with growing international interest (OSL 2016). Their services have also expanded; in some locations OSL also offers free shower services, or they partner with food vans, so that, while people wait for their washing to be clean, they can access a free cooked meal. Today Orange Sky also provides laundry assistance in disaster zones, and is partnering with other organizations to offer training and employment opportunities for the homeless (OSL 2016).

On one level, Orange Sky Laundry is an innovative charity. It intentionally does not want to be understood as a political association (OSL 2016 p. 26):

- We are not politically or religiously associated, just everyday people in the community.
- Our one purpose is to positively connect the community…. Our volunteers are not there to fix anything, sell anything or preach anything
- but purely provide a platform to reconnect people with the community.

Yet, on another level, OSL activities appear deeply political; it has a strong social change agenda, and is committed to reframing public perceptions of homelessness.

The political work of OSL is subtle and occurs in different ways. First and foremost, Orange Sky vans are practical and social hubs where marginalized people in the community can get something done (e.g. washing). But, Orange Sky is offering far more than clean clothes and improved hygiene for the homeless; it is a community initiative that is driven by a commitment to social change through community building. As the co-founder Lucas Prachett explains (quoted in Browne 2015): ‘The first thing we all do in the morning is put a fresh set of clean clothes on…Everyone's made of the same stuff. We think everyone should have that same basic human right.’ At the heart of the OSL model is the desire to create opportunities to form connections with homeless people through conversations (OSL 2016 p.5):

- Orange Sky Laundry is a catalyst for conversation. In the one hour time it takes to wash and dry someone’s clothes there is absolutely nothing to do but sit down on one of our 6 orange chairs and have a positive and genuine conversation between our everyday volunteers and everyday friends on the street.

The vans are a simple, effective way for homeless people to find some dignity, connections and hope (OSL 2016). Via orange chair conversations connections form, and possibilities for social
change open up, people on the streets are now becoming volunteers themselves and are working within the organization and learning new skills (OSL 2016).

Secondly, the activities of OSL are about changing perceptions in the broader community about homelessness. This is done primarily through its popular volunteer program. OSL also seeks to break down the stigma of homelessness by listening to, and putting on the public record, the stories of ordinary people in extraordinarily dire circumstances on the street. For example, in its 2015-2016 Annual Report it gives voice to various homeless people across Australia by retelling their stories and publishing their poems (OSL 2016 p. 3):

After two years of operation, our extraordinary volunteers have clocked up over 64,000 hours of genuine and non-judgmental conversation, creating a safe, positive and supportive community for friends on the street. The humble orange van and six orange chairs have broken down barriers in communities all over Australia. Powerful bonds have positively changed the lives of many people, some are friends on the street, some are our volunteers. There are many stories, some are heartwarming and empowering, others are surprising and confronting. Unfortunately, many stories are heart-wrenchingly sad.

Orange Sky Laundry represents a thick populism ‘everyday citizen’ style; it is inspired by an underlying notion that, if the state cannot provide simple basic human services (such as shelter and hygiene), then organized citizens can assist by washing your clothes. Rather than make loud noises for governments to do more, and get people to sign petitions, OSL takes a ‘thick’ approach by engaging everyday citizens in practical actions for social change. In contrast to thin populist movements, OSL is not anti-government, nor does it reject support from elites. Across 11 different locations, OSL is partnering up with state government departments, religious groups, charity organizations and corporations (OSL 2016 p. 24-25). In the spirit of thick populism, OSL is willing to work with collaborators (state or non-state) who support its mission (2016, p 26):

Orange Sky aims to reduce the strain on resources and do so with many other like minded service providers…We work alongside a range of incredible service providers in 71 service locations across Australia … These service providers range from large
charities, school groups, small community service providers and everyone in between. All of these groups are critical to the success of Orange Sky but more so in achieving our mission of positively connecting people who are homeless.

Orange Sky Laundry’s remarkable expansion from one to ten vans in just two years (between 2014 and 2016) demonstrates how an initiative led by two citizens can evolve into a small-scale, thick populist movement. Today, OSL organizes a growing group of people around Australia who are committed to supporting homeless people by offering them some of life’s basic needs: clean clothes and a conversation.

4. Concluding reflections on populism and democratic renewal
If populism represents a prominent new mode of ‘doing politics’ then we contend that more consideration needs to be given, not just to the pathologies it poses to democracy, but also to its remedial offerings. In this article, we have shed light on the potential for populist practices to foster democratic innovation and renewal by offering a conceptual distinction between thin and thick populism. We recognize that thick populism is much rarer than its thin variety in large-scale national politics. But, our goal here has been to draw attention to some of the democratic opportunities that populism potentially offers, and to provide some examples of where its thicker variety might be found and fostered. Often, as we have seen, these initiatives do not travel under the bright banner of ‘populism’, and so they can be easily missed.

Our four examples of thick populism illustrate some of the important features of effective, citizen-led, democratic innovation. Firstly, citizens engage in politics when the participatory opportunities are highly accessible, informal, conversational and flexible. In the examples, we see how citizen participation is productive for democracy when: it is enjoyable and meaningful for citizens; makes a difference in some kind of concrete problem-solving; and offers hope, social opportunities and fun. At the same time, many of the participatory practices in thick populism provide room for emotions in politics, such as anger, frustration, empathy or desperation. However, unlike thin populism, thick popular participation harnesses political emotion into horizontal citizen action, rather than vertical reliance on a centralized leader.
Finally, in all our examples we see the willingness of everyday citizens to engage in collective practical efforts for long-term social change. Around the globe, there are committed and engaged citizens taking small, significant steps every day to make sure their democracies function as they should (Dzur 2018; Hendriks 2016). In an era of loud voices and thin populism, we need to remember the significant, often silent, and rarely self-aggrandizing work of people within our democracies who are nudging away at change: meeting around kitchen tables, organizing a community justice forum, wearing a white ribbon, and driving an orange van.

Moving forward the significant challenge for democratic reform is applying the lessons from thicker populist efforts to unfavourable circumstances, for example in issue areas such as crime and punishment, immigration and social welfare policy, where thin populism seems to thrive. Further research could examine when, and under what circumstances, thin populist adherents might gravitate towards ‘thicker’ efforts. The realization of thick populism in contemporary politics may also be challenged by the fact that the larger structures that many citizens oppose (such as globalization, markets, population migration, and urbanization) are more difficult to exercise control over than those facing early populists. Moreover, the nativist trend in thin populism is strong, pervasive, and seemingly deep-rooted. Nevertheless, while an internationally-oriented thick populist movement might be illusive, there are global populist initiatives such as restorative justice movement and White Ribbon Campaign, that demonstrate the possibilities of learning and sharing around the globe.

To conclude, we offer three provocations for those interested in democratic reform and innovation in an era of populism. First, populism in its ‘thick’ community-organizing variety has many virtues for democratic reform, but we have to open our eyes to the sometimes unconventional, and sometimes deliberately apolitical, practices emerging all around us. Second, thick populist efforts point a way out of dead ends in which contemporary democratic innovators often find themselves through rigid commitments to specific replicable methods—whether they are deliberative polls, citizens juries, or study circles—that may keep deliberative forums overly abstract, elite, academic and isolated from the ground level social problem-solving that citizens are passionate about. Instead, effective democratic reform must actually connect people to public institutions via constructive and everyday participatory approaches, or
non-corrosive social movements, that are linked to institutions. Third, we must not dismiss or denigrate adherents of ‘deplorable’ populist efforts. Rather than explaining and complaining, we need to work harder at putting in place a ‘civic infrastructure’ where there are many possibilities for real impact—for example, on a school or a local government budget, or in a volunteer-oriented restorative justice program. Those of us interested in democratic innovation need to work out ways of inviting those drawn to thin populist messages to take up thicker roles.
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