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A qualitative study on the social representations of populism and democracy in Peru

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The purpose of this paper is to describe and analyze the social representations of democracy, populism and the relationship between both concepts in a sample of citizens from different regions of Peru ($n = 76$). To this end, a qualitative research design was proposed, using in-depth interviews, which were analyzed from a discursive approach. The results show that democracy and populism are two closely related concepts in tension. On the one hand, the social representation of democracy is semantically poor, closely related to electoral behavior and is seen as a political system that, ideally, is positively valued. Populism, on the other hand, is seen as a political strategy based on the manipulation of citizens' needs in order to reach power using the democratic process of elections. The representation of populism in general is negative, and it is mentioned that it appears and acquires strength in the face of citizen dissatisfaction with democracy, when it cannot solve problems of poverty, corruption or exclusion. The representations of populism take up the constitutive components proposed by different authors on the topic (people, elites and democracy as a product of popular will), but the participants do not necessarily structure the relationships between these components as proposed in the academic literature. Finally, the results shows that respondents' experiences with democracy and populism in Peru act as important socializing forces that will frame how citizens relate to politics and the public.

KEYWORDS

democracy, political dissatisfaction, political strategy, populism, social representations, ideology

Introduction

Populism and democracy can often be represented as juxtaposed political concepts, since both allude in general terms to a government of the people (Forgas and Crano, 2021). However, they can also be represented as concepts in tension (Stanley, 2008; Perceval, 2020; Forgas and Crano, 2021), being symptoms of the conflictive relationship between the structures and dynamics in which political power is sustained in a society, and the need -or intention- expressed by the masses to “genuinely” democratize such society. Thus, populism emerges as the search for a “true” democratic conformation of power, based in the popular will (Villacañas, 2017).

On the other hand, the concept of democracy presents many nuances and can be understood in different ways (see [Shin, 2007](#); [Hoffman and Graham, 2015](#)), which would have some impact on the ambiguity of its relationship with populism ([Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017](#); [Perceval, 2020](#); [Forgas and Crano, 2021](#)). [Villacañas \(2017\)](#) mentions that, as a mass phenomenon, populist means to access or to exercise power, must be somehow socially democratic, despite the fact that they enter into tension with liberal democracy and its values. Emphasizing this tension, [Forgas and Crano \(2021\)](#) refer that, in many liberal democracies, the rise of populist politics, of emotional and identity-based nature, has been replacing the democratic norms of rational, analytical and pragmatic decision-making, while allowing consensus and compromise to be displaced by hostility and tribal hatreds (p.2). [Forgas and Crano \(2021\)](#) represent populism as an irrational collective expression which specifically threatens liberal democracy, and place this problem exclusively in the behavior of the masses, and in the populist politicians. However, they do not seem to pay attention to the contextual conditions that produce dissatisfaction and distrust toward the democratic system in that mass (where the populist demand would be located), nor to the conditions in which a populist politician -or political movement- emerges to channel that dissatisfaction (where the populist supply would be located). Consistently with the above, from Political Psychology, different studies show that the social, political and economic aspects that characterize a society will produce observable effects on the political and civic beliefs, attitudes and behaviors of people in relation to the way in which they perceive and exercise their citizenship, and relate to democracy (see [Chaparro, 2018](#); [Brussino and Alonso, 2021](#)). Thus, attempts to “democratize” a society associated with populism arise from perceptions of lack of legitimacy and malfunctioning of society and democracy, which result in high levels of mistrust or psychological dissatisfaction among citizens ([Perceval, 2020](#)).

Populism as a political phenomenon can be seen in two distinct moments. The first is that of populism as a form of political action to access power, and the second is that of populism as an exercise of such power. In both scenarios, populism is based on the adhesion and loyalty of a group of citizens who define themselves as the people ([Villacañas, 2017](#), p.18), and who are psychologically dissatisfied with the functioning of society and democracy ([Perceval, 2020](#)).

A first element of interest is that the idea of mass expressed previously, corresponds to a Manichean representation of the people, which will be the central component in the different existing approaches on the topic of populism ([Villacañas, 2017](#); [Perceval, 2020](#)).

For [Perceval \(2020\)](#), this notion of people comprises an invention of the elites in a society, who present themselves as representatives of this entity to emotionally manage the dissatisfied public opinion in their favor.

From the Social Sciences, there are different ways of approaching the topic of populism, which can be disaggregated into three central approaches: (1) populism as a thin ideology ([Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017](#)), (2) populism as a discursive framework ([Miscoiu, 2013](#); [Rode and Revuelta, 2015](#); [Aslanidis, 2016](#); [Perceval, 2020](#)) and (3) populism as a political strategy ([Aslanidis, 2016](#); [Perceval, 2020](#)).

The representation of populism as a thin ideology is related to the so-called ideational approach ([Mudde, 2004](#); [Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017](#)), which understands populism as an ideology attached, as a complement, to a heavy or full ideology such as, for example, nationalism, conservatism, socialism, among others ([Mudde, 2004](#); [Stanley, 2008](#); [Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013](#); [de la Torre, 2018](#)). From this, an explanation of the origin and expression of populisms of diverse political spectrums around the world, some of them antagonistic to each other can be concluded ([Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013](#); [Rooduijn and Akkerman, 2017](#)).

The ideational approach has resulted useful, conceptually and methodologically, by introducing the three constituting elements presented as necessary and sufficient to understand any expression of a populist phenomenon: (1) an idealized moral people, (2) a despised corrupt elite, and (3) the discourse that true democracy emanates from the popular will ([Mudde, 2004](#); [Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017](#)).

For [Aslanidis \(2016\)](#), the definition of populism as a thin ideology represents a major conceptual problem, because speaking of ideology, the notion of thinness is spurious, as it entails a lack of axiological centrality and a lack of coherence, which are fundamental characteristics of any ideology since the classical approaches in social sciences. However, it is possible to overcome this criticism when ideology is represented with two levels of analysis that include (1) a functional or motivational substructure and (2) a socially constructed discursive superstructure ([Jost et al., 2009](#)). On the previous assumption, it would be possible to situate populism as a discursive superstructure comprising a network of socially constructed attitudes, values and beliefs tied to a specific ideological posture in a given time and place ([Jost et al., 2009](#)). In sum, drawing a parallel with the ideational approach, the discursive superstructure could be considered the thin ideology and the motivational functional substructure could be considered the heavy or full ideology (cf. [Miscoiu, 2013](#)).

The representation of populism as an ideological discursive superstructure would be consistent with complementary approaches on the topic, which have transited in the representation of populism both as a discursive framework and as a political strategy ([Stanley, 2008](#); [Aslanidis, 2016](#); [Perceval, 2020](#)).

Systematically, the literature about populism suggests that this, as a discursive framework, fulfills strategic objectives, which is why it is reasonable to integrate the discursive and strategic approaches of the topic. Hence, populism emerges as a narrative whose survival is linked to the perceptions of sectors of public opinion on the legitimacy -or lack of legitimacy- of democratic regimes ([Perceval, 2020](#)). Then, the populist discursive framework could be summarized in a narrative that proposes that a true democracy comes from the popular will, making explicit the moral superiority of the people, in confrontation with the corrupt elites ([Miscoiu, 2013](#); [Aslanidis, 2016](#)). This discursive framework will be complemented by political strategies based on personalistic, charismatic and plebiscitary leadership styles, through which populist politicians attempt to build an identitarian relationship with the people they claim to represent, aiming to gain or maintain power based on the direct support of a mass of followers,

while simultaneously undermining the political institutionality of a society (Weyland, 1999, 2020).

The extent of success of populism as discursive framework and as political strategy, could be translated into its capacity to transmit coherent meanings to its audience in specific political situations (Moffitt and Tormey, 2014; Aslanidis, 2016; Meléndez, 2022), which would be consistent with the view of this political phenomenon as the ideological expression of a discursive superstructure, that can be thought in psychosocial terms as a social representation (see Jost et al., 2009). In this scenario, the following question arises: what is the social representation that Peruvian citizens have of populism?

From Social Psychology, a social representation is a complex concept that refers to the construction of knowledge as a social and collective phenomenon. Individuals in groups act as socio-psychological structures that symbolically represent objects of knowledge, and in doing so, social representations actually replace the objects they represent, becoming the objects themselves for those individuals or groups producing the representation (Abric, 2001). As collective phenomenon, social representations refer to systems of values, ideas and practices that have a double function: (1) they establish a structure that allows individuals to deal with the social world, and to perceive control over it, and (2) they allow communication among the members of a community, since they provide them with codes that permits them to classify situations without ambiguities (Moscovici, 1984).

In other words, the social representation of the operation of a political system which triggers the populist phenomenon, would act as a framing process of political information, fulfilling a cognitive function that allows people to find schemes and categories to interpret and interact with the information they receive from their environment (see Jodelet, 1985; García Beaudoux and D'Adamo, 2007). According to cognitive theories on emotions, such framing would affect the emotional responses of people exposed to a message, because evaluative and emotional responses are always linked to a representation of a social context (see Jodelet, 1985), since people do not tend to develop attitudes or experience emotions randomly, but rather these arise as a result of a cognitive evaluation of some specific situation (Gross and D'Ambrosio, 2004).

In a complementary vein, Jodelet (1985) mentions that social representations can be viewed as a discursive form, with characteristics that emerge from the discursive practices of individuals within a society. Therefore, the social properties of the representations come from (1) the communicational situations, (2) the belonging of the individuals who express them, and (3) the purpose of their discourse (Jodelet, 1985, p. 479). Thus, taking up the constitutive elements of populism and presenting them as a discursive framework we have as a result an intergroup dynamic where, the representation of the people would act as the in group and the elite would be socially represented as the outgroup.

In sum, a successful populist discursive framework offers certainty and cognitive simplicity in representing a problematic political situation, as well as constructing a positive identity, a sense of moral superiority and the promise of a collective solution to the problem affecting the people, all of which together make

it potentially attractive to its target audience (Forgas and Crano, 2021).

Thus, populist values, beliefs and attitudes are the result of a social construction based on the interaction between the political offer, expressed in the populist discourse and strategy, and citizen demands, which are framed in a context of dissatisfaction and distrust toward the democratic system (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017; Perceval, 2020; Spruyt et al., 2021).

From the above, it could be established that the underlying problem in the relationship between populism and democracy would not be the rejection by citizens of democracy as the desired form of government since, at the international level, different opinion studies have consistently shown that, in most of the societies evaluated, people support democracy as a form of government (Inglehart and Welzel, 2005; Shin, 2007). Then, expressions supporting the populist offer would be the product of dissatisfaction -and consequent distrust- with the functioning of liberal democracy and the expression of its difficulties in responding to the demands and needs of the self-declared people (Stanley, 2008; Hameleers and de Vreese, 2020; Hawkins et al., 2020). In this scenario, where citizens demand alternative political mechanisms for a "true" democratization of society, the populist offer will gain strength (see Villacañas, 2017; Meléndez and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2019; Meléndez, 2022).

All of the above reflects that populism has been studied and explored extensively in Western countries and democracies (Stanley, 2008). Specifically, much work has been done on WEIRD population (referring to those raised in Western, Educated, Industrial, Rich, Democracies), a population that has been identified as unrepresentative (Henrich et al., 2010), so opening the focus to other realities would allow a more precise understanding of the communalities and differences of the populist phenomenon. Considering that political crisis is a common factor in Latin American countries, it would be important to investigate populism in this context.

Thus, in some Latin American countries, citizen dissatisfaction with the democratic functioning has favored the emergence of various political movements of a populist and authoritarian nature, both left-wing (e.g., Chavismo in Venezuela) (Lozada, 2020) and right-wing (e.g., Bolsonarismo in Brazil) (Hur and Sandoval, 2020), where the hegemonic discourses at the base of such movements refer to a refoundation of the political system with narratives that confront the so-called good citizens -or the moral people- against corrupt elites. Also adding that these experiences, far from democratizing society or putting an end to the problems they originally attacked in their discourses, have worsened the situation of democracy in the countries that pass through them (see Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018; Dargent, 2019).

Specifically, in the Peruvian case, which is where the present study is based, different authors report a political scenario in permanent crisis with structural -and in some cases historical- problems that produce discomfort and psychological dissatisfaction such as corruption (Quiroz, 2013), political and social violence (Espinosa et al., 2023), the weakening of the political party system (Meléndez, 2019), institutional weakening and distrust toward institutions (Chaparro, 2018; Dargent, 2019), among others. This seems to have produced a political culture in which the majority

of Peruvian citizens express adherence to some of the forms of populist offers existing in the country (Meléndez, 2022). However, the populist offer in Peru is hardly qualified as such by its followers, so it is reasonable to think that there is a discrepancy between the academic notions of populism described above and the social representation of populism from the citizens' perspective in the Peruvian context. In this regard, Meléndez (2019, 2022) has found that the successful populist offer in Peru is related to an anti-establishment discourse and the exaltation of the people, which functions as a mechanism that builds an identity relationship between populist politicians and their voters, but without the term populist appearing explicitly. That is, populism functions as an academic concept and even as a colloquial concept, but the actors who could be considered populist from these perspectives do not necessarily identify themselves as such.

Finally, in the scenario described above, the present study aims to explore the social representations of (1) democracy, (2) populism and (3) the relationship between both concepts in a sample of Peruvian citizens. The contribution of this study is that it places the approach to populism and democracy in the representations of ordinary citizens, that is, in the social representation that gives rise to the colloquial use of these concepts, in order to contrast them with the definitions and characteristics attributed to them from the Social Sciences.

Method and materials

Participants

The participants in the present study were 76 Peruvian citizens of legal age, ranging in age from 18 to 57 years ($M = 30.9$, $SD = 10.3$). 43 of the participants were female and 33 were male. A total of 26 participants resided in the Lima region (Lima, Huaral, and Callao), 21 participants resided in departments of the Southern Region of the country (Arequipa, Cusco, Ayacucho and Puno), 11 participants were residents of departments of the Central Region (Junín, Huancavelica and Pasco), 10 participants resided in departments of the Northern Region (Piura, La Libertad, Ancash and Lambayeque) and eight participants were residents of the Northeastern Region of Peru (Loreto and San Martín). Regarding the self-perceived socioeconomic level, four participants presented themselves as high level, nine as medium-high level, 45 as medium level, 9 as medium-low level and 4 as low level; in addition, three people did not report this information. The heterogeneity of the participants, considering their demographic characteristics, allows us to extract with considerable precision the core aspects of the social representations on the objects of study of this research in Peruvian society.

Information collection instruments

Sociodemographic data sheet: A form was developed to collect basic demographic information such as gender, age, and city of origin of the participants, which allowed the participants to be grouped into five geographic regions.

TABLE 1 Structure of the interview guide: thematic axis and emerging questions.

Structure of the interview guide	
Thematic axis	Emerging questions
Representation of democracy	What do you think democracy is? What would a democratic citizen be like? Do you think democracy has positive consequences for society? Do you think democracy has negative consequences for society? How do you think democracy is expressed in Peru?
Representation of populism	Have you ever heard of populism? What do you know about populism? How do you think populism is expressed? Why do you think populism occurs or exists in a society? Are there conditions that facilitate the existence of populism? What would they be? If you had to give examples of populism, what would they be? Can there be such a thing as a populist citizen? What characteristics would such a person have?
Relationship between populism and democracy	Do you think there is any relationship between Populism and Democracy? How would the relationship be?

Interview guide: A semi-structured interview guide was elaborated with three thematic axes: (1) representation of democracy, (2) representation of populism, and (3) the relationship between populism and democracy. The structure of the interview guide according to thematic axis and models of emerging questions by axis is shown in Table 1.

Procedure

A team of 12 interviewers of both sexes, who were in their final years of psychology or had recently graduated from it, was formed to collect the information. All interviewers had received training in interviewing techniques during their professional formation and were properly trained in the application of the interview guide of the present study by the senior researchers of the project, who also supervised the quality of the interviews conducted during the field work.

The selection of participants was intentional and by snowballing. Initially, members of the research team and interviewers contacted people within their personal networks who met the criteria for inclusion in the study. From these initial contacts, the number of participants gradually increased. In accordance with the ethical principles of research in the social sciences, at the time of the first contact with each participant in the study, the objective of the study was presented orally to them, as well as the conditions regarding their participation in terms of voluntariness and how the information would be managed in terms of confidentiality, and the analytic treatment that would be given to the information obtained. If the contacted persons agreed to participate in the study, the day and time of the interviews were coordinated directly with them according to their time availability.

On the day of the interview, the terms of the informed consent were shared with the participants and read by the interviewers to ensure that they were fully understood. The informed consent provided a detailed explanation of the rights of the participants during the study and also explained that their participation did not entail any risk to their integrity and wellbeing. It should be noted that the field work was carried out between March and May 2021, when Peru still had certain restrictions on social mobility due to the COVID-19 pandemic, so, for reasons of health security, all contact between interviewers and interviewees was carried out and recorded by digital tools. The application of the interviews took between 45 min and 60 min.

Information analysis

The analysis of the information is proposed following a discursive approach (Wodak and Meyer, 2009; Potter, 2012), given that at a conceptual level populism, the central topic of this study, can be considered both a discursive framework and a political strategy (Aslanidis, 2016), which should be expressed in people's social representations on the topic (see Jodelet, 1985). Specifically, discursive analysis understands language in use as a socially constituted practice, configuring and shaped by social relations, identities and expressions of power, which allows showing the ideological effect of discourse through which shared objects of knowledge are shaped, as social representations of reality, revealing ambiguous, problematic or paradoxical positions in relation to it (Wodak and Meyer, 2009).

At the technical level, all interviews were literally transcribed and processed for analysis in software Atlas.ti 22. Initially, 20% of the interviews were analyzed in an inductive and open procedure, from which a series of discursive repertoires were identified, and then critically discussed with the theoretical proposals reviewed for the study. From this, more complex families of discourses were grouped, with which the remaining 80% of interviews were analyzed, arriving at a synthesis of the social representations of democracy, populism and the relationship between the two concepts. The analysis process was carried out by the research team through a dynamic process of coding by consensus to guarantee consistency in the results obtained. The discursive analysis made it possible to identify the functionality of the concurrences, as well as the inconsistencies and problematization that are naturally emitted in the discourse, to recognize convergences in shared and complex representations, composed of metaphors, paradoxes and contradictions underlying people's apparently simple and/or coherent use of language (Potter, 2012).

Results

The results will be reported in two general topics: democracy and populism, seeking, at the end of the second topic, to address the relationships between both concepts. Each topic articulates the social representations obtained from the analysis of the discursive repertoires identified.

Social representations of democracy

For the participants of the study, democracy is represented from four discursive repertoires that are articulated to configure a complex understanding, where contradictions coexist that are functional to define the phenomenon and relate to it: (1) democracy as practice of freedom of choice and freedom to exercise power, which is composed of coexisting (2) positive and (3) negative aspects, and which (4) connotes a certain type of citizen who exercises it.

Democracy as a practice of freedom, choice, and power

For participants, at a general and basic level, democracy is represented as the exercise of the right to vote, normally linked to electoral processes in which people who will occupy positions of power are elected.

"...the first thing that comes to my mind is the right to vote,...It seems to me to be the classic example of people choosing who is going to lead the country both in parliament as well as the president" (Woman, Lima, 24 years old).

"We live in a democratic society because we vote for our president, we vote for our Congress members, we vote for our mayors..." (Woman, Lima, 22 years old).

As a second idea about democracy, it emphasizes the fact that democracy allows them to yearn for and express themselves freely, exercising fundamental rights, not only during electoral processes, but also in other important moments of their lives when decisions must be made about various issues such as their education, economic life, work, etc.

"...when we choose where we are going to be educated, in which bank we are going to leave our patrimony, then we are free to choose, right? That is democracy" (Woman, Lima, 27 years old).

"Democracy allows you to express yourself freely, to comment, to criticize, to act freely, each person has the possibility of advancing in their educational life, in their political life, in their economic life with all the freedoms that a person needs..." (Man, Lima, 55 years old).

It is important to mention that for some interviewees, freedom of expression is translated into non-conventional mechanisms of political participation, that are different from elections, and through which people in a democracy can avoid abuses of power and arbitrary behaviors of the authorities, something that would not be possible in authoritarian and repressive systems.

"... about the protests that took place. Democracy makes that possible, if we were in an authoritarian government, our voice would not be allowed to be heard ... We are going to be heard and what we believe in is going to be respected, not just imposed what they think" (Man, Junín, 22 years old).

The following two ideas about democracy expressed by interviewees represent it as a system of government and a way of exercising power at the same time. On the one hand, some interviewees referred to democracy as the government of the people, for the people or the power of the people. This idea includes descriptions based on the etymology of the term, but also, and more frequently, descriptions of processes that give the people the capacity to decide who their representatives are, mainly through their electoral behavior.

“...democracy means that it is a government for the people, with justice, so that everyone can participate” (Man, Lima, 35 years old).

“Democracy is the power of the people, the people put you, the people elect you, you have the right to choose who you like, that is why we vote, we elect a person at the local, regional level, I tell you in three little words, it is the power of people” (Man, Lima, 24 years old).

The other idea in this line refers to democracy as the government of the majority, and from this description emerges an underlying idea that represents the majority as the result of an inclusive political agreement, which is reached by a broad number of individuals and social groups that gain access to power.

“Democracy is the system by which the majority has always the right, has the power. And it seems that democracy tries to include diverse social groups. It tries to have a voice, in theory, everyone’s voice” (Woman, Pasco, 29 years old).

“Well, as a meaning I suppose it is (...) a political regime, isn’t it? Where the actions of a society are governed, but on the basis of the majority as it is said, right? Or based on the agreement of the majority. I consider that as democracy” (Man, Lima, 29 years old).

Positive aspects of democracy

Interviewees were also asked about democracy and its expression in society. Regarding the positive impressions perceived, 6 ideas emerged that produced the greatest consensus among the participants.

The first idea is that democracy stimulates and strengthens political participation, not only through electoral behavior, but also through other ways in which citizens can freely inform and express themselves, generating a civic conscience that helps to avoid problems with authorities and institutions.

“On the positive aspect, I could point out that this awakens the people because...they can’t always go downhill, right? And that awakens conscience. I feel that in Peru a kind of conscience has been formed, the so-called ‘bicentennial generation’ as they call my generation, that we are crazy, but I see, well, in this generation there is at least a little interest in learning. They don’t get carried away so easily...” (Man, Junín, 20 years old).

“Well, the people in the streets have demonstrated many times and have removed presidents, the last one removed was

done through the mobilization of the people which is allowed by law, to rise up, to go out to the streets, to protest is allowed by the Constitution, so that was a benefit for us” (Man, Lima, 55 years old).

One idea related to political participation, considers as a good moment for democracy the wave of protests developed in November 2020 against a set of congressional decisions, among which was the dismissal of the president of the country in the middle of the health crisis produced by COVID-19 and the appointment by the congress of an interim president with serious problems of legitimacy before public opinion. In this context, the protests led to the resignation of the interim president arbitrarily imposed by the congress and the substitution with another president whose political profile is more acceptable to the citizens. This result is contextually interesting because it explicitly refers to social protest as a legitimate and effective mechanism of participation of democracy and for defending it.

“The people speak through this action, right? The movements, the mobilizations, the protests, when you go to a demonstration you see groups, for example, in this last one what happened was incredible because the whole country was united, communities were united, groups, movements were united, it did not matter what you professed [...], then, I feel that this is a democratic act” (Woman, Cusco, 26 years old).

“I think it was a good moment after a bad moment because, after all, it was shown that the people and the youth can do it, that it was worth it to go out to the streets and protest” (Man, Junín, 20 years old).

The following ideas refer that democracy is also expressed in positive values such as freedom and justice, which fulfill, when put into practice, a function of inclusion of all citizens to the political community they belong to, making them worthy of a dignified and respectful treatment, with the ability to choose and freely express what they consider best for themselves and society.

“... for democracy to exist there has to be justice, democracy for me is based on justice, on equity, on the fact that we should all be free to have an opinion, to be able to choose” (Woman, Ancash, 31 years old).

“Yes, we are in a democracy because we can choose.” (Woman, Lima, 40 years old).

Another positive idea about democracy that emerges from the responses of the interviewees is that it allows the development of a citizen’s willingness to control that the exercise of power and authority will not be perverted by bad public officials. This control is aligned with the ideas expressed in previous paragraphs, since it is based on the political information that the citizens manage and is expressed in an awareness of the necessity to participate in public affairs.

“I feel that as a result of what has happened in the congressional elections, I feel that our eyes have been opened a little more with respect to being able to enter and see each

candidate and see if this candidate is a good choice or not a good choice, if he/she has a background and all of that.” (Woman, Ancash, 21 years old).

Democracy is also positively related to the respect for the agreements made in a society. This idea is related to previous ones, on which the agreement is built in an inclusive and diverse vision of the majority.

“If there is a referendum, a vote, it doesn’t matter the result, what matters is that what has been chosen by the majority is fulfilled, that agreement is respected” (Man, Huancavelica, 22 years old).

Negative aspects of democracy

Despite the positive aspects that participants have in their representations of democracy, the results show that democracy is also related to negative aspects that seem to emerge from the daily political experience that Peruvians apparently have with it. One of the first ideas that emerge when thinking about the negative aspects of democracy is its vulnerability to citizen’s bad choices. Thus, if freedom of choice is one of the positive attributes of democracy, this will become negative when the election results in candidates or parties coming to power without defending the public interest or the well-being of the citizens, weakening the democratic system in the long term. In other words, there are risks to democracy in the mechanisms by which it functions.

“I believe that yes, apparently we do live in a democratic society, but when the people elected to represent us take power and break with democracy. So, I think it is like a simulated democracy because in the end the power is concentrated in a group and even though they have been elected by the citizens they end up concentrating the power in them. I think there is, but something similar. The mechanisms of democracy are used, but then they stop applying them when they take power” (Woman, Callao, 23 years old).

A second negative idea about democracy that arouses considerable consensus is that this system is characterized by opening the doors to corruption, through the bad decisions made by citizens when choosing candidates and parties. Thus, corruption is the result of a bad choice made by citizens, which, as we have seen, is a consequence of the weakness of the system in the face of the poor quality of the political offer. In the same vein, the election system on which democracy is based is potentially risky when the political offer does not respect fundamental democratic principles.

“They are going to look out for their own interests, instead of those of the people. They even take advantage of people who are in a situation of need, because they tell them that they are going to give them something or that they are going to get them out of poverty, and they only say it during the campaign time” (Man, Junín, 22 years old).

Poor choices and corruption expressed in a democracy seem to be associated with the idea that there is a deficient

political offer. However, democracy is also flawed when political demand is considered of poor quality. The first for defending perverse interests and the second for not developing a political conscience about the common good that would result in good choices. In this scenario, candidates who weaken democracy by violating citizens’ rights through their political actions are elected. Simultaneously, there is dissatisfaction with the democratic political system and it begins to open the way to the populist offer as a political phenomenon.

“First, that this candidate will probably be elected, because that works quite a lot in Peru. Another is that when they come to power, they will probably do nothing and just fill their pockets with money. Another effect would be that afterwards people would be complaining about the bad management of those governors, and that would obviously also be a consequence of that populism, because they have not [been] able to inform themselves or investigate who that candidate is” (Man, Junín, 22 years old).

“[Democracy] misunderstood can bring as a consequence that individuals who meet these characteristics of being anti-democratic, violators of rights, participate and take power” (Man, Lima, 35 years old).

Democratic citizen

Four ideas were identified that refer to a positive image of democracy as a model of political socialization, as well as of citizens who embrace its values through the attributes that characterize them as democratic citizens. The first and most consensual idea about the democratic citizen attributes to this individual the fact of being a well-informed person with access to information of good quality, which reduces the risk of being vulnerable to political manipulation strategies that would cause citizens to make decisions that weaken democracy.

“[Information] is a very important factor even [for] democracy, isn’t it? But sometimes people who can have more information and, logically, who can also defend their points of view well, will help to shape their [decisions] better” (Man, Lima, 23 years old).

Consistently, the second idea about the attributes of a democratic citizen is that this person should be educated, that he/she should have a formation that allows him/her to manage knowledge and motivates him/her to inform about what is going on in society. In contrast, ignorance and lack of education separate citizens from democracy and weaken it.

“That is, precisely when we persons choose, we are not trained, we are not prepared, we do not care about what is happening in the country, about what we really need. When we ignore things and we choose only for what seems to me or for what is particularly convenient for me, for what I was promised, for what I dreamed was the best. Then that’s where the problems come from” (Man, Loreto, 57 years old).

The third idea about the attributes of a democratic citizen is the sense of responsibility and conscience, which consists of

recognizing that one's own political behavior, by action or omission, has consequences for society. Responsibility is an attribute that interacts with the previously mentioned, by creating conscience about the importance of participating in political affairs and promoting the motivation to do so, while assuming responsibility for one's own political decisions.

"From your level of consciousness and your level of interest, right? I guess. Of interest in what I decide and not in others deciding for me. 'Ah well, God will be done.' Something like that" (Man, Lima, 29 years old).

The fourth idea that emerges in the description of the democratic citizen is that of rationality. This idea assumes that a citizen's political decisions should distance themselves from emotional issues and the irrationality of some political offers. Rationality from this point of view allows openness to different opinions and perspectives on matters of public interest, which in the long run could favor better political decision making by citizens.

"I believe that therein lies the affective issue and perhaps the power that can be conferred to this person or to this party, because, let's put it this way, when they identify themselves with a person or with a party, they even try to leave aside all rational issues or possibly the issues of criteria and only focus on that. (Man, Lima, 23 years old).

Social representations of populism

In contrast to democracy, the representations of populism do not refer to a type of political system, but to a discursive repertoire that accounts for a set of processes and strategies used by politicians to gain access to positions of power. This leads to a repertoire that includes the characteristics of people who are likely to become followers of this strategy. The definition of populism also includes semantic elements with a strong negative evaluation and an identification of the negative effects that this phenomenon produces in society that, under circumstances of a weak democracy, has the conditions to emerge and position itself.

Political strategies for gaining access to power

A first repertoire with which participants characterize populism is based on the perception that the populist offer takes advantage of the needs of people living in poverty or exclusion.

"Yes, one of the conditions that I believe is very important are the needs that still exist and that are not covered by the State, because this also gives them tools, it gives them space, it gives them the opportunity for possible leaders or pseudo-leaders to take these ideas, pick them up, and base themselves only on them, so that they can get to occupy a position or get the chance to have some [political] option. So, as long as our population may not have its needs satisfied, as long as there are gaps, there will always

be these types of claims, [...]. If we do not cover basic needs, the population will always have these demands and this great lack, which I believe is one of the pillars of [populism]" (Man, Lima, 23 years old).

It is on people's needs that politicians begin to make promises of change and attention to the needs of inclusion. A characteristic element of populism is that the promises made from the populist offer are not guaranteed to be fulfilled, but they are efficient when they connect with the expectations of some groups of the population, which can be translated into votes and political support to reach power.

"Well, for example, currently, in preparation for the elections, there are many candidates visiting areas where there are minorities or vulnerable people and they are promising them a thousand and one things that they probably do not know, or even some of them do know, that is why they reject it, that are not going to be possible to be carried out, right? They are totally crazy to say the least. And I think that this is one of the ways, especially from an electoral point of view, the promises that many governors have made to us, which unfortunately have not been fulfilled" (Man, Lima, 23 years old).

The above reinforces the ideas that represent populism as a strategy that produces a relationship of identification between the populist leader or politician and the people. These strategies also include other types of actions in which an attempt is made to win the people's favor through clientelistic and prebendary actions.

"I feel that is what it is, that politicians seek strategies to make themselves close to them and, in that way, gain their trust and win their vote. I feel that these are populist actions, when they go like that, they sit down, they accept the food. . . . And, of course, these are actions that are seeking the approval of the majority. . . . And these are issues that do not have directly to do with his government plan, but people affect them a lot, that is why they believe that it is important to gain trust through superficial things that do not have a deep, profound promise" (Woman, Lima, 27 years old).

"When he is a candidate of that in his campaign rallies, he never mentions a realistic proposal and the only thing he does is to hire the fashionable artist or take things to a shantytown, walk around to offer a health campaign, etc. But at no time is there a debate, there is no realistic conversation with the people, nor are there any measures that really correspond to them". (Woman, Ancash, 18 years old).

For the participants in the study, populism acts in an attempt to take advantage of the ignorance and disinterest of voters in public and political issues. In this sense, it is perceived that populist demand increases in contexts where social capital is impoverished due to lack of education and access to information, to the point of tolerating -and normalizing- corrupt or transgressive behaviors in exchange for supposedly small benefits that, in addition, often result in deceit or unfulfilled promises.

“Also, populism is a deception to keep the people resting on their laurels while I do dirty things all the time. In other words, populism is ‘he steals, but he does works’. It is ‘I keep you happy because I made the bridge, so I can steal in peace’, then when a scandal comes out it is like ‘but he made the bridge, the bridge with which I can call my relatives’, ‘yes, he stole, but in these times who doesn’t steal from politics.’” (Man, Lima, 29 years old).

“I believe that the voter is, let’s see, I tell you, we have been in campaign and popular ideas attract a lot of attention and those who promise and promise and many times do not fulfill, we have a voter who does not read a government plan, we have a voter who is not educated, is not cultivated, votes for [the one] who smiles, for the one who dances, for the one who gives you a gift, so, he is a populist voter, he is the one I like, he is not the one who is more prepared, he is a populist voter” (Man, Huaral, 24 years old).

they forget that this characteristic of the emotional, of having a short-term memory too, of not analyzing, it seems to me, is another characteristic of populism. And some people who believe, don’t they? Believing faithfully, blindly what that person may be saying” (Woman, Junín, 26 years old).

“Everything starts from ignorance or lack of knowledge and even the contradiction that exists in people, which feeds populism, because of course if I know that these policies and proposals are born from people who are not necessarily going to fulfill them, and I give my vote to these people, and they show me once when they are in power that they are not going to fulfill them, and I trust again in another person who does the same thing. On the other hand, populism itself feeds this kind of contradiction because it fills human beings with hope, it fills people with hope, we have the hope that this president is going to come who will change everything, we exercise our power as citizens, because as citizens we give power to the president thinking that he is going to solve all our problems” (Man, Lima, 23 years old).

Populist citizen

From the previous repertoire we can deduce the profile of what the interviewees considered a populist citizen, which in perspective comprises a negative characterization, diametrically opposed to that of the democratic citizen represented in the previous section. It is important to clarify that, although participants were able to raise certain characteristics of what a populist citizen is, as mentioned in the structure of the interview guide, it was a concept that was posed directly to them in one of the questions.

A first element attributable to the populist citizen is that this person lacks resources -usually economic and material- and is excluded. Material deprivation, poverty and exclusion will be the socio-demographic conditions where populism will have the best opportunities to grow. In general, the participants attribute to the citizens who opt for the populist offer an intention to obtain benefits from the clientelist actions deployed from it, as a way to alleviate the material needs they have.

“It is complex, in my opinion it is because of people’s needs and their problems, and in their search for a quick solution they end up accepting populism. If there were not so many inequalities and people were not so desperate to solve them, populism would not be as strong as it is now. As we live in a society in constant crisis, need and inequality has increased, it is a good breeding ground for more populist options to emerge” (Woman, Lima, 39 years old).

The conditions of need and exclusion produce, in general terms, two types of populist citizen, although their characteristics are not necessarily excluding between them. On the one hand, there is the naïve populist citizen, who believes in the offer of populist politicians due to ignorance and lack of access to education. This is a citizen who can be influenced and is not very critical of the populist political offer, someone who is driven more by emotions than by reason.

“I think it would be the emotional aspect of populism. As I said, sometimes the population lives on the memory of the good, the beautiful, and forgets the bad things that happened. Maybe there were ten bad things and one good thing, and

A second type of populist citizen is someone fanaticized or blinded by the populist offer of his or her preference. This profile can even be found in people who have not necessarily suffered from economic or material deprivation. Sometimes, they are persons who have been raised in environments with consolidated political preferences, where there is no place for critical reflection on such preferences, even when these have had negative consequences for society. They tend to respond aggressively to questions about their political preferences.

“At the university I know someone who is a person who is a super fan of APRA, there is a group of young people who are faithful followers of APRA and believe that Alan [García] is the best and that everyone else is inept and they are blinded from reality because many times their parents are part of the party, it is something that is transferred from generation to generation and he has access to quality education, he has the basic services, but he believes” (Woman, Callao, 23 years old).

“They confront us because the people who are interested in populist measures and who assume them as good [...] are like blind people who are behind a leader who is leading them to the abyss. So, what it does is that this group is advancing blindly” (Man, Loreto, 57 years old).

The populist politician and his/her message

In the strategic representation shared by the interviewees about populism, it is also possible to identify the distinctive aspects of populist politicians and leaders. The first ideas about populist leaders point out that these, regardless of the quality or veracity of their political proposals, must be charismatic and persuasive, since these attributes are what allow them to transmit the message that awakens the connection and identification with their target audience.

“Populism is as I was telling you: ‘the snake-bait salesman.’ In other words, I talk nice to you. There is a little name for these people who have a good speech. Alan García has that gift: ‘demagogue’. For me, that is populism. Talking nonsense, but

nice. You fool people, and people believe you” (Man, Ayacucho, 56 years old).

“He is a prefabricated candidate from my point of view. He was a soccer player, then a businessman, in practice he did not need to be Mayor of La Victoria, he has been put there because he had a certain popularity in soccer. I believe that he has entered as Mayor of La Victoria basically because of sympathy from the fans of the club to which he belonged” (Man, Lima, 39 years old).

The mass media -especially the private media- play an important role in the transmission of the political content of some populist messages. The idea of manipulated media is related to the belief that the owners of these media, who belong to the economic elites of the country, occasionally “sell” their editorial line to certain political groups in order to obtain benefits from an eventual triumph of these groups.

“This elite, in addition to this press, and political groups that we already know who they are [...], are also the big families here in Peru: the Miró Quesada family and others, the great economic powers of Peru, who are selling the people’s current hotness, with a common interest associated with these political groups” (Man, Lima, 26 years old).

Regarding the contents of the populist discourse, these are centered on two main and complementary ideas, in the first, the populist discourse offers a supposed political representation to the people, especially those persons in need due to poverty or exclusion.

“The corrupt [candidate] sees people with needs and what he wants to do is just to get into power, and he is going to take advantage of the needs, and pretend to represent them to get into power, and once he is in power he forgets about them.” (Woman, Arequipa, 20 years old).

The second idea represents the populist discourse as a questioning of the economic and political elites, who are blamed for distorting the functioning of the political system for their own benefit. This second discourse channels the discontent of the people against the elites, who are the class that has traditionally run the country.

“In Peru the popular classes are the most abundant or at least I think so, and then it is like more people, and if more people vote, and there is one thing that the popular classes look badly on the upper social classes because it is like they have always had the power, and when a candidate is the candidate of the rich, they are already seen negatively. So, in that sense the other candidates take advantage of populism, they take advantage of democracy and use populism to win more votes, because they promise to please the majority with a better quality of life, so, in that sense they take advantage” (Woman, Junín, 20 years old).

Both the discourse of a supposed representation of the people and the discourse of questioning the elites seek to achieve popular electoral support. In other words, populist politicians use the election mechanisms of democracy to gain power.

Consequences of populism

In perspective, the interviewees perceive the consequences of populism in a general phenomenon, which is the distrust toward the political system or the increase of political cynicism. This consequence is the result of the discrepancy between citizens’ expectations and the performance of politicians who gain access to power.

“Well, to the citizens, many times the issue is the opportunity that we give to people or leaders are not retributed to us. So, this will also generate divisions, lack of trust, conflicts, and possibly cause society to lose trust in its political leaders and in its political class” (Man, Lima, 23 years old).

“One of the saddest [consequences] is that people start to distrust, they no longer believe politicians, they don’t believe those who tell the truth or those who ‘play tricks’. Political mistrust does a lot of damage to society” (Woman, Cusco, 31 years old).

The mistrust described above translates into a wide variety of specific negative consequences reported. On the one hand, populism is perceived as a strategy that only brings benefits, usually economic, to those who come to power through it. The benefits for populist politicians are usually derived from corrupt or transgressive practices in the exercise of power.

“So, these populist people will seek first to come to power and when they come to power they will want to increase their income in addition to what the government gives them. Then they seek by other means, even if it is something corrupt, to have more money. Then, it affects politics a little bit, once they reach the presidency. The Congress members too, many of them have been found to be corrupt” (Man, Junín, 21 years old).

Populism will generate a structure and dynamics of corruption that will gradually erode the public good and democracy due to the defense of private interests.

“As I was telling you, those politicians who use this tool to enrich themselves privately, to achieve Machiavellian ends to a certain extent, because they are using people, because they do not see them as an end but as a means, I believe that in the end, populism is totally related to corruption, populism badly used, [...]. In the end the great majority of people who get into politics are more, or focus more on the ego, on the self, on getting more private goods than social goods, what general characteristics society needs, that is what makes politics uncomfortable to a certain extent, not politics itself, but politics used by certain political groups” (Man, Lima, 23 years old).

Thus, populism opens the doors of the political scene to people who do not present adequate characteristics for the exercise of power, the management of public affairs and the defense of democracy. This may be due to the fact that those who make up the populist political offer are either immoral or incompetent people, or even both at the same time. The problem with political scenarios with a wide variety and prevalence of populist political offerings is that this systematically worsens the quality of politicians

running for public office, and of politics itself, generating despair and resignation in the face of its malfunctioning.

“I think it makes for an unconcerned or unprepared political class because, by using these means, these populist proposals or rising to power through it, it doesn’t demand much from them. It simply demands empty solutions. So, as a consequence, we have people in power who are not prepared at all. Another thing that feeds corruption, because if people are not prepared to take office, why else would they do it? [...] Yes, I think that happens. It is like a cycle and, if that is not broken and keeps repeating itself, we will continue to choose between the lesser evil” (Woman, Pasco, 29 years old).

Regarding the negative effects of populism on citizens, the interviewees identified two main ideas. The first is that populism feeds on ignorance, which is why it seeks to keep people in this condition. The second idea is that populism produces conformism and resignation in citizens, who cannot expect anything good from politics and its representatives.

“The first, as I told you, would be the loss of critical judgment, people in their gray matter begin to believe the first thing a politician X or a media Y tells them. Secondly, people lose the ability to want to investigate things, to investigate reality and what the situations really are. They lose the desire to know, they become conformist” (Man, San Martín, 18 years old).

“The negative effects of populism is, I believe, that in some way or another it forms conformism, right? [...] the great majority or those who become populist end up showing us that they only had one objective, which could be to reach power but then they were only promises, and I think that it affects us a lot, it makes people less interested either in the moments of the electoral festivities when we are supposed to be more interested, but no, it is like in the queue you find out who is there, who has the highest score, it is good to vote for them without knowing who they are or you only focus on what they have done at that moment or what is the news at that moment” (Woman, Puno, 26 years old).

Populism in the exercise of power is also dangerous because many of the offers, usually clientelistic, are made without considering the social, political or economic impact that their possible implementation could have. From the above, it follows that populist politicians do not consider the consequences that their political promises and actions could have on society.

“Mainly on the economic topic, it is necessary to know exactly how much to distribute, what is going to be the expense. If I offer that the gas cylinder is going to be at 12 soles and I come to power and I realize that I cannot put it at 12 soles but I have to put it at 36 soles, it is going to generate that my ministries, of energy and mines and the economy, all will be affected in some way” (Woman, Lima, 39 years old).

“For me populism is more a matter of what I offer, to the ways in which I plan to get there. So, if I don’t have a way to achieve something, I don’t have concrete measures or I don’t have short-term plans like what, how precisely it is supposed to work during the period that, in theory, I should achieve those

interests. It can happen that, by trying to fulfill an impossible goal, I waste the budget or they do not work well or simply do nothing.” (Woman, Lima, 24 years old).

Despite the mostly negative representation of populism among those interviewed, some positive aspects are expressed. Among the great variety of populisms, there are some that vindicate fundamental rights and democratize a society, giving representation and opportunities for political participation to groups that previously had none. These populisms, which have had concrete effects on the social inclusion of traditionally disadvantaged groups, are often positively represented by some of the interviewees.

“There are different types of populism as I told you. Velasco’s populism in the sense that he rescued a proposal to defend the peasant communities, it was positive, the Agrarian Reform, he revalued everything that is indigenous, which is populist, but it was in favor. He promoted the idea that ‘the peasant, the boss will no longer eat from your poverty’”. (Man, Lima, 36 years old).

In the same vein, another positive aspect of populism is that, in its criticism of the functioning of the political system, it opens the opportunity to discuss socially relevant issues that demand attention from the authorities. This, in perspective, represents the conditions where dissatisfaction with the flaws of democracy originates, and the need to introduce changes in the system, resulting in its redemocratization. However, this is more a hope of achieving good representation than the real probabilities of this happening.

“I believe that yes, some would be the inclusion of the population to their ideas, to what they want to do ‘supposedly transform Peru’, that they take their opinions as I was saying before, that is usually at the beginning, but it seems that the population feels included and in part that is good, I think” (Man, Junín, 21 years old).

“It could be, I don’t know, what do I know, that some good candidate emerges, it is a minimal percentage, but it could happen, I give the benefit of the doubt to the possibility, but realistically the possibilities are a little null, after everything we have talked about” (Man, Lima, 26 years old).

The relationship between concepts: a weak democracy, an opportunity for populism

The results show a social representation of democracy as a type of political system whose functioning is mainly based on electoral processes, while populism is represented as a political strategy -or set of strategies- aimed at gaining popular support for the political project of a candidate or group seeking to achieve or maintain power.

Ideally, the social representation of democracy is positive, but when weaknesses or flaws are perceived in it, populist actors strategically use the dissatisfaction of citizens to question it and achieve electoral pull that allows them, through offers of representation and drastic changes in the system, to seize power.

Thus, the potential for the emergence, action and development of populism gains strength in a democratic system perceived as deficient. Populism strategically uses democratic tools to reach power, and once in it, the probabilities of weakening or worsening the quality of democracy increase. In contrast, for the interviewees, the risk of the populist offer succeeding in full or well-established democracies is considerably reduced.

“Democracy facilitates populism and populism at the same time breaks democracy. In a system in which the election is by majority there will always be the strategist who buys the majority” (Man, Ayacucho, 56 years old).

“It is a vicious circle relationship, in a true democracy it should not exist, but in a corrupt system to get elected you have to be a populist” (Woman, Arequipa, 21 years old).

Discussion

An initial approximation to the social representations of democracy results in a semantically poor description, where democracy is mainly associated with elections, which emerges as the central attribute of democracy and the most consensual idea obtained in the study. Also, although to a lesser extent, democracy is represented as a way of exercising and expressing rights and freedom in a broad sense, and although the interviewees have a positive view of this, their responses tend to be not very elaborate. In this regard, it has been previously established that the characteristics of a society produce observable effects on the way people represent and relate to the political sphere (see Chaparro, 2018; Brussino and Alonso, 2021). In that sense, a democracy systematically besieged by political actors that constantly weaken it, seems to constitute itself as a socio-political scenario that results in the semantical poverty of representation described above (see Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018; Dargent, 2019) or, put in other words, a precarious democratic context, with a poor democratic experience, brings with it a poor representation of democracy in people.

This does not mean that the descriptions on which democracy is represented are necessarily incorrect. However, these do not capture the complexity of the concept and its taxonomy as it is addressed from the social sciences (see Shin, 2007; Hoffman and Graham, 2015). In that sense, the results show generic descriptions on which democracy is considered as the government of the people or the government of the majority, which is consistent with the etymology of the concept (Forgas and Crano, 2021). In general, participants have a positive representation and valuation of democracy, especially in those aspects that coincide with an ideal definition of it, which is consistent with the idea that people tend to support democracy as a system of government (Inglehart and Welzel, 2005; Shin, 2007), when certain democratic performance -as minimum quality standards- is achieved (see Tyler, 2006; Brussino and Alonso, 2021).

The positive representation of democracy will incorporate values such as justice and freedom, and will result in the political socialization of rational, well-informed citizens, who are interested in public and political affairs, capable of reaching agreements

and, more importantly, capable of respecting them (see Forgas and Crano, 2021). However, as has been mentioned above, the participants' experience with democracy in Peru is composed of systemic failures, as Peruvian society has historically gone through processes of corruption (Quiroz, 2013), political and social violence (Espinosa et al., 2023), institutional and civic weakening (Chaparro, 2018; Dargent, 2019), and a generalized crisis of political representation (Meléndez, 2019).

This has resulted in generalized processes of institutional and civic distrust, which end up by impoverishing the social capital in terms of the existing political supply and demand, that is, the participants mention a growing presence of both poor candidates and poor voters, which weaken the positive aspects of democracy from within, opening the doors to populism as a consequence of the systemic malfunctioning and its perverted actors.

One interesting aspect is that some interviewees identify non-conventional forms of political participation as democratic alternatives of political expression to electoral behavior. Specifically, some interviewees referred to protests and demonstrations as forms of expression that are permitted in democracy, and that fulfill a function of defending it. This result is a clear example of how social representations are reconfigured by specific social practices (see Moscovici, 1984), such as the protests that took place during November 2020 against arbitrary decisions of the Congress of the Republic, which some participants described as a process that is originated in democracy, to defend and strengthen it, as these protests confront the abuse of power exercised by the authorities and makes people develop a political conscience on issues of public interest. However, it would be important to investigate whether this content of the social representations of democracy would be persistent and stable over time or whether it has only developed as a temporary representational aspect, related to the described event.

In the social representation of democracy, participants move from an ideal positive description to a realistic negative one. That is, when participants begin to talk about the negative aspects of democracy, their responses are framed by several problems of the Peruvian political reality, such as: the lack of education in citizenship and the effect this has on the election of representatives, the poor political offer expressed in candidates who are not very competent or, even worse, are immoral, and the generalized effect of the above, which translates into the prevalence of corruption, distrust and dissatisfaction with the system, that is social anomie (Chaparro, 2018). The interesting thing about this result is that, far from perceiving democracy as a system where these problems could be addressed and even attacked, it is perceived as a system in whose game rules, based on electoral processes, lies its greatest weakness.

The above leads us to populism, and how it is represented. So, if democracy comprises a political system, populism comprises a strategy -or set of strategies- to achieve or maintain power within that system (Aslanidis, 2016; Perceval, 2020). The relationship between democracy and populism is ambivalent, since populism appears and presents itself -always strategically- as a way of responding to certain flawed aspects of democracy -or attributable to it- that produce dissatisfaction and distrust toward the system (Perceval, 2020). Paradoxically, populism would offer a true “democratization” of society, based on the political representation

of an excluded people (see [Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017](#); [Villacañas, 2017](#)). An interesting aspect of this study's results is that the social representation of populism is consistently negative. That is, participants recognize populism as a political strategy used by perverse political actors for perverse purposes. For some interviewees, the populist strategy has its origin in the political and economic elites that use the resources and power at their disposal (e.g., control of the mass media) to channel citizen discomfort in favor of their political interests. This is consistent with that proposed by [Perceval \(2020\)](#), when he mentions that the constructions of the notions of people closely related to the origin of populism are elaborated by the elites for political purposes. However, the populist offer does not occur in a vacuum, but in a series of social and structural conditions such as poverty and exclusion, which produce a political demand for inclusion before the system.

For the interviewees, the social conditions described above produce an ignorant, irrational, disinformed, uninterested in public affairs and fanatic citizen, which represents the kind of person inclined to vote for or support the proposals of the populist offer. It is noteworthy that this description is diametrically opposed to the representation of the democratic citizen. Thus, populism as a strategy seems to fulfill a socializing political function, from which it reinforces in citizens those aspects that populist politicians will be able to take advantage of in the future ([Gherghina et al., 2017](#)). [Forgas and Crano \(2021\)](#), relate irrationality and bigotry with the identity and tribal exacerbation that populism produces in its followers. Consistently, these authors mention that these characteristics are factors that put liberal democracy, its values and rationality under threat.

While it is true that populism becomes a risk for democracy as it gains followers among citizens. Taking up [Perceval's \(2020\)](#) idea on the origin of the people's representations as a core element in the development of the populist strategy used by the political and economic elites to win the support of the citizenry, it is important to consider how to tackle it from its origin in the behavior of the elites. Because, it is important not to lose sight of the role that the elites have played in weakening democracy by generating citizen dissatisfaction with it (see [Cañete Alonso, 2018](#); [Dargent, 2019](#)).

On the other hand, the interviews performed show that people recognize several of the constitutive elements of populism proposed from the ideational approach ([Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017](#)). Thus, the notions of people, elite and democracy are recurrent in the representation of populism. But the relationship between these entities does not take up the discursive framework proposed from this theory, where there are a moral people confronted with a corrupt elite that must be displaced from power so that, from the popular will, a true democracy could be constituted (see [Aslanidis, 2016](#); [Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017](#)).

Instead, for the participants, there is a political elite that strategically uses populism as a way to manipulate the poorly educated, ignorant and needy popular classes, with offers that often will not be fulfilled or are unfeasible. Populism thus distorts the democratic system by not attending to genuine demands for inclusion or attention to social problems.

Populism is represented as a strategy used to elicit a sense of identification with a leader who, to be successful, must be

charismatic and persuasive ([Weyland, 1999, 2020](#); [Gherghina et al., 2017](#)). The identitarian aspect is recurrent in the social representation of populism. However, participants report that this identification is not with populism as a concept, but with the relevant categories used in the populist strategy (e.g., people or citizens of good). That is, hardly anyone will represent himself as a populist, when in the representation of the concept, the populist politician is an incompetent or immoral figure and the populist citizen is someone who brings with him the negative attributes described above (irrational, uneducated, ignorant, etc.) (cf. [Miscoiu, 2013](#)). In sum, the representation of populism differs from the representation of the popular.

In this regard, [Meléndez \(2019, 2022\)](#) mentions that in a country with an extensive populist political offer, the most successful populist projects are those that are presented as opposing the system that affects the people. In short, populism as a strategy is inserted in flawed or precarious democratic systems such as the Peruvian one, it begins from inside to weaken them and to build the conditions for its persistence as a way of doing politics in a society. In societies such as the Peruvian one, populism has become a strategy used by almost all politicians in the country, while the citizenry shows a high adherence to populist attitudes ([Meléndez, 2022](#)). Despite the above, the populist category does not produce identification and, rather, carries negative contents that make people distance themselves from it. This reinforces the idea of differentiating the representations of populism from the representations of the people and the popular, because although they have common aspects, they relate to politics in a different manner ([Stavrakakis cited in Stanley, 2008](#)). In addition, it is suggested to be careful with studies that measure populist attitudes with the conventional scales developed in the social sciences, because many of them fail to establish a clear distinction between the populist dispositions of the citizenry and its demand for greater democratization of society.

Finally, from the results, it is not possible to infer the representation of populism as a thin ideology. Neither, there is a description that places the populist discourse as a political strategy that is more important than other types of strategies used from populist offers. However, this does not detract from the fact that populism as a discursive ideological superstructure may present coherence for its target audience ([Jost et al., 2009](#)).

In view of the above, it is important to point out some of the limitations of this study. One of them was that the participants were not presented with the idea of "people" as a stimulus for the construction of social representations on populism. This caused the participants to distance themselves -in terms of identity- from the populist category, which acts as an outgroup. Future research could investigate the construction of the definition of populism and populist citizen, incorporating this view of "people" as an explicit stimulus.

Also, participants were asked directly to describe what a populist citizen would be like; the category did not come out spontaneously. This was done intentionally so that we could have a more specific characterization of what a person belonging to that group would be like. However, it is recognized that the category is not so clear for all participants. It is suggested that the conceptualization of this term be further explored.

Finally, we also had a broad and diverse sample from different regions of Peru, however, the analysis was not carried out through a comparison of these groups since we wanted to have a general look at this phenomenon of populism and because it is not an objective of this qualitative study. In any case, it would be relevant to continue investigating the different approaches to this concept from the point of view of different racial and ethnic groups in Peru.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

Ethical approval was not required for the study involving humans because it was low-risk and there are no mandatory procedures for this kind of research in Peru. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent for participation was not required from the participants in accordance with the national legislation and institutional requirements. Verbal informed consent was obtained from the participants and recorded digitally.

Author contributions

AE: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing—original draft, Writing—review & editing. EJ: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Software, Supervision, Writing—original draft, Writing—review & editing. MP: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Supervision, Writing—original draft, Writing—review & editing. RC: Formal analysis, Writing—review & editing. FC: Formal analysis,

Writing—review & editing. RD: Formal analysis, Writing—review & editing. CD: Formal analysis, Writing—review & editing. CG: Formal analysis, Writing—review & editing. CH: Formal analysis, Writing—review & editing. SM: Formal analysis, Writing—review & editing. DP: Formal analysis, Writing—review & editing. JR: Formal analysis, Writing—review & editing. ES: Formal analysis, Writing—review & editing. MS: Formal analysis, Writing—review & editing. KV: Formal analysis, Writing—review & editing. AV: Methodology, Validation, Writing—original draft, Writing—review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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