

ARTICLE

Identity Politics and Left-wing Populism

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Abstract

How does the politicization of identities like race, ethnicity, religion or sexual orientation shape populist activism on the left? In this article, I demonstrate that left-wing populists engaged in identity politics resort to two contrasting – but not incompatible – types of activism: identity-based advocacy and identity-based threat construction. The paper examines these types of activism by studying how four major populist leaders on the left – two leaders each from Europe (Jean-Luc Mélenchon and Sahra Wagenknecht) and Africa (Ousmane Sonko and Julius Malema) – have positioned themselves vis-à-vis specific identity groups. Building on the distinction between identity-based advocacy and threat construction, the article conceptualizes different types of identity-based populist references. The paper thereby contributes to existing research as it detects how left-wing populist leaders integrate identity politics into the discursive construction of the elite vs. the people antagonism. Finally, by facilitating comparative cross-area research on a specific branch of leftism, the paper also goes beyond existing debates about leftist identity politics.

Keywords: populism; left-wing politics; identity politics; comparative politics

The rise of radical right-wing populism in the Global North has stimulated scholarly interest in identity politics. As Abdul Noury and Gerard Roland (2021: 423) observe, the exclusionary politicization of identity practised by right-wing populists ‘focuses on the understanding of identity based on ascriptive characteristics such as race, ethnicity, and religion.’ In Europe and the USA, for example, the vilification of Muslims and Islam has been a prime theme in rightist populist discourse (Betz 2021; Haynes 2020; Kaya and Tecmen 2021). In Eastern Europe, the populist right has openly targeted indigenous ethnic minorities (Koev 2015; Mudde 2007: 69–73). Furthermore, as concerns sexual orientation, homophobia and wider anti-LGBTQ rhetoric have equally been constitutive of right-wing populist narratives in countries like Italy or Poland (Corrales and Kiryk 2022; Yermakova 2021). While the role identity politics plays in

rightist populism has been extensively studied, the same cannot be said about the relationship between identity politics and left-wing populism. This is despite the fact that leftist identity politics has turned into a hotly debated issue (see e.g. Bernstein 2005; Hobsbawn 1996; Mounk 2023; Schubert 2024).

Left-wing populists like Bernie Sanders in the United States, the French ‘tribune’ Jean-Luc Mélenchon, the former Mexican president Andrés Manuel López Obrador or South Africa’s Julius Malema share two basic characteristics. First, they are defined as populist due to the centrality of people-centrism and anti-elitism – the two defining features of populism – in their political rhetoric (March 2007: 64; Venizelos and Stavrakakis 2023: 292). Second, they are leftist ‘in their emphasis on egalitarianism, and their identification of economic inequity as the basis of existing political and social arrangements’ (March 2007: 66). Even though left-wing populism has suffered important setbacks in recent years, it remains a relevant force in various settings in both the Global North and South (Venizelos and Stavrakakis 2023).

How, then, does identity politics shape populist activism on the left? Left-wing populists point to the existence of distributional conflicts between elites and ‘the majority’. In this article, I explore how left-wing populist struggles against socioeconomic inequalities can be combined and interwoven with the politicization of demographic categories like race, ethnicity and religion. To do so, I study how four major populist leaders on the left – two leaders each from Europe (Jean-Luc Mélenchon and Sahra Wagenknecht) and Africa (Ousmane Sonko and Julius Malema) – have positioned themselves vis-à-vis specific identity groups. These case studies allow me to illustrate that left-wing populists engaged in identity politics resort to two contrasting – but not incompatible – types of activism: *identity-based advocacy* and *identity-based threat construction*. While the former consists in the defence of perceivedly disadvantaged and discriminated identity groups, the latter revolves around the rejection of purportedly dangerous groups. Based on the identification of these activisms, I examine how left-wing populist leaders integrate identity politics into the discursive construction of the elite vs. people antagonism. Specifically, I distinguish *actor-* and *action-centred populist references* in identity-based advocacy and threat construction. Whereas actor-centred populist references equate the people or the elite with particular demographic groups, action-centred references consist of statements accusing the elite of identity-based interventions against the people.

Existing research on contemporary populism has been greatly influenced by Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser’s (2013a) distinction between inclusionary/leftist and exclusionary/rightist populism. While they contrast inclusionary with exclusionary populism, Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser define pluralism as a direct opposite to both forms of populism (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013a: 151). This view has been challenged, however, as the populist focus on ‘the people’ does not necessarily rule out a strong commitment to minority rights (Katsambekis 2022; Lavizzari and Pirro 2024). By exploring the involvement of left-wing populists in identity-based advocacy, the paper demonstrates that this commitment can be integrated into populist reasoning via the claim that the elite is deliberately dividing the people along the lines of identity to maintain the socioeconomic status quo. At same time, I trace how selected left-wing populist actors in the Global North and South have resorted to identity-based threat construction on religious and sexual grounds. I thereby equally

contribute to a nascent literature qualifying the inclusionary nature of left-wing populism (see e.g. Barreto and Maldonado 2025; Bonansinga 2022; Ivanov 2024). While this literature focuses on the left-wing populist depiction of elites as representing a fundamental threat to the people, I show that left-wing populism is not guiltless when it comes to targeting disadvantaged minorities.

Finally, the paper deviates from existing debates about leftist identity politics. These debates exhibit three overarching defining features: (1) they are often focused on developments in the USA and in Western Europe; (2) they revolve around a relatively vague and monolithic notion of the 'left' or leftist movements; and (3) they are centred on the normatively-laden question whether identity politics from the left undermines the principle of universalism and the struggle against material inequalities. Departing from this regional and epistemological focus, I seek to conceptually capture divergent trajectories of a specific branch of leftist politics in the Global North and South to facilitate comparative cross-area research. To do so, I proceed as follows. The article's first section revisits existing research on leftist identity politics and inclusionary/exclusionary populism. Drawing on insights offered by this research, I define identity-based advocacy and identity-based threat construction as two contrasting forms of activism. In a second step, I systematically show how selected leftist populists have become involved in these types of activism in relation to two different identity categories: religion (Islam/Muslim populations) and sexual orientation (homosexuality/gay communities).

Altogether, I study four populist leaders on the left who have all established their own political parties. As regards Islam/Muslim populations, I present the identity-based advocacy practised by Jean-Luc Mélenchon (La France insoumise, LFI), and the identity-based threat construction attributable to the German politician Sahra Wagenknecht (Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht, BSW). Considering homosexuality/gay communities, I examine the contrasting activism of Julius Malema (Economic Freedom Fighters, EFF), and Senegal's Ousmane Sonko (Patriotes africains du Sénégal pour le travail, l'éthique et la fraternité, Pastef). Finally, I identify different types of identity-based populist references and trace how left-wing populist leaders integrate identity politics into the discursive construction of the elite vs. the people antagonism based on the four case studies.

Leftist identity politics and inclusionary/exclusionary populism

Identity politics revolves around the politicization of collective social identities such as race, religion, class, gender, ethnicity or sexual orientation. This politicization can materialize in the struggle against the perceived marginalization of particular identity groups as well as in the discriminatory targeting of specific identity categories (Fukuyama 2018; Holtug 2025). Furthermore, identity politics is practised by left-wing and right-wing actors and, irrespective of its ideological agenda, it can be primarily orientated towards both minority and majority groups (Fölscher et al. 2021; Holtug 2025). Contemporary leftist identity politics in Western societies is commonly described in terms of an identity-focused progressivism pushing for the empowerment of disadvantaged minorities (see e.g. Fukuyama 2018; Hobsbawm 1996; Mounk 2023; Schubert 2024).

A controversy about the merits and perils of this identity-focused progressivism has come to shape existing research. As Mary Bernstein (2005: 51) recapitulates, within this controversy, the opponents of identity politics contend that ‘the essentialism of identity politics precludes the articulation of a universal vision for social change [...] instead making particularistic claims for group-based benefits and leading to the decline of the left’. A recent version of this line of reasoning has been provided by Yascha Mounk (2023), who contends that the left has fallen into an ‘identity trap’. According to Mounk, an ‘identity-synthesis’ has eclipsed the universalist leftism historically championed by social democrats and communists. His argument revolves around the claim that ‘it has, over the past five decades, become a mark of many left-wing movements [...] that they proudly embrace the call of ethnicity and religion where they were once skeptical of the destructive force that such group identities might have in the world’ (Mounk 2023: 26). Mounk finds that as the left has accorded discriminated minorities increasing attention, it has started to primarily define people based on categories of ascriptive identity, thereby abandoning the notion of equality and undermining social trust. Other authors, on the contrary, depict hegemonic discourses of universalism and equality as predominantly reflecting the perspectives of privileged identity groups. In the light of this verdict, they consider identity-focused progressivism as a crucial stepping stone towards an inclusive universalism (see e.g. Bickford 1997; Holtug 2025; Schubert 2024).

What both camps have in common – apart from a strong normative orientation – is a relatively vague and monolithic notion of the ‘left’ or leftist movements. This conceptual vagueness stands in the way of a comparative assessment of specific leftist actors and their potentially divergent involvements in identity politics. Among other things, the discussion on the value of identity-focused progressivism has remained largely isolated from existing research on left-wing populism as a result.¹

When it comes to capturing the relationship between populism and identity politics, one must bear in mind that the logical structure of populism contains both a vertical and a horizontal dimension. While populists propagate ‘the *vertical* opposition between “the people” and “the elite”’ (Brubaker 2017: 362), they often also construct a ‘*horizontal* opposition between “the people” and outside groups and forces’ (Brubaker 2017: 362). The respective outside groups are normally defined by specific identity markers like religion, nationality, ethnicity or sexual orientation (see e.g. Corrales and Kiryk 2022; Haynes 2020; Koev 2015). As Giorgos Katsambekis (2022: 59) observes, ‘populists are expected, by definition, to be rather hostile to minority rights, as this would undermine the alleged homogeneity of “the people” and their sovereign will’. For example, even though they contrast inclusionary with exclusionary populism, Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2013a: 151) find that both variants of populism depict the people as a ‘homogeneous and virtuous community’. Building on this delineation, they define pluralism and its emphasis on the protection of minority rights as a direct opposite to populism.²

This view is constitutive of a broader strand of research designating populism as inherently anti-pluralistic (see Walz 2025). Yet the existing evidence suggests that populism’s people-centredness is not incompatible with the propagation of the empowerment or protection of minorities. For example, Spain’s left-populist Podemos party has been found to be systematically calling for the advancement of the status of

minorities like the LGBTQ community (Lavizzari and Pirro 2024). Likewise, the Greek SYRIZA party traditionally promoted a brand of left-populism that went alongside ‘a pluralistic view of society and a strong agenda of protecting minority rights’ (Katsambekis 2022: 68).

Importantly, left-wing populist lobbying for specific identity groups goes beyond pro-minority activism. For example, studying ‘ethnic populism’ in Latin America, Raúl Madrid (2008) finds that the Bolivian *Movimiento al Socialismo* (MAS) and its charismatic leader Evo Morales managed to turn into a powerful electoral force by coupling a left-wing populist programme with an ethnic agenda catering to the country’s large indigenous population. According to Madrid, ‘the MAS styled itself as the representative of the indigenous population and made numerous rhetorical and symbolic appeals to it’ (Madrid 2008: 486). This campaigning in favour of Bolivia’s disadvantaged indigenous population was accompanied by a broader anti-establishment narrative denouncing the country’s traditional elites and political parties and calling for redistributive policies that would benefit the masses (Madrid 2008: 491–495). Such a focus on the fight for distributional justice is reflective of the strong inclusionary orientation that generally characterizes left-wing populism (March 2017; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013a).

However, as Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2013a: 165) note, the language used by individual populist leaders on the left like Morales or the former Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez ‘is not only inclusionary’. Rather, these leaders depict the elite as an existential threat to the people (Bonansinga 2022; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013a: 165). This discursive threat construction can also include the targeting of specific demographic groups. For example, as they explore the evolution of Hugo Chávez’s political discourse, Amílcar Barreto and Diego Maldonado (2025) stress that following the 2002 coup attempt against him, Chávez increasingly resorted to racially charged rhetoric implicitly presenting his elite adversaries as ‘the white conquistadores in direct opposition to the indigenous [...] Venezuelan’ (Barreto and Maldonado 2025: 394). Based on this observation, Barreto and Maldonado (2025: 396) caution against the assumption that left-wing populists necessarily refrain from ‘blatantly exclusionary acts’. Overall, existing research suggests that left-wing populists can engage in two contrasting forms of identity politics: (1) they may propagate the empowerment of disadvantaged and discriminated identity groups; and (2) they can problematize purportedly dangerous groups. While the latter type of activism can be accurately designated as ‘identity-based threat construction’, the former is best captured by the label ‘identity-based advocacy’. How, then, have these contrasting types of activism been applied by left-wing populists across different identity categories?

Left-wing populism and identity-based advocacy/threat construction

To shed further light on left-wing populist involvement in identity politics, I explore selected politicizations of religion and sexual orientation. This not only allows me to identify identity-based advocacy and threat construction across two different identity categories but also makes it possible to demonstrate that left-wing populists operating in the same regional context may adopt diametrically opposed stances regarding specific identity categories. Altogether, I study four populist leaders on

the left from Europe and Africa who have all established their own political parties: Jean-Luc Mélenchon (LFI), Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW), Julius Malema (EFF) and Ousmane Sonko (Pastef). By selecting these leaders, I heed the call for more cross-area research on different variants of populism (see Hunger and Paxton 2022: 618) and provide further evidence that left-wing populist involvement in identity politics is an inter-regional phenomenon present in both the Global North and South. I begin by revisiting the antagonistic identity politics attributable to Jean-Luc Mélenchon (LFI) and Germany's Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW) vis-à-vis Muslim populations in their respective countries. Turning next to the category of sexual orientation, I then assess the contrasting activism of South Africa's Julius Malema (EFF) and Senegal's Ousmane Sonko (Pastef) with respect to the status of homosexual populations.

As regards sources, I explore publications released by the four leaders (monographs, blog entries, forewords to party manifestos, social media posts) and public statements captured by conventional media outlets. In addition, I also explore non-rhetorical interventions such as a leader's participation in public demonstrations. Crucially, I do not consider identity-based advocacy and threat construction to be incompatible. After all, political actors can resort to both types of activism at the same time regarding one or several identity categories. Furthermore, populist leaders' (non)involvement in identity politics may change over time. Consequently, it is important to point out that the four case studies do not represent comprehensive assessments of the respective actors' engagement in identity politics. Finally, identity-based advocacy and threat construction are obviously not populist in themselves. Thus, in a second step, I conceptualize different types of identity-based populist references and, drawing on the case studies, trace how left-wing populist leaders integrate identity politics into the discursive construction of the elite vs. the people antagonism.

Religion

Identity-based advocacy: Jean-Luc Mélenchon vis-à-vis Islam/Muslim populations

Jean-Luc Mélenchon is one of the most influential and long-established left-wing populist figures in Europe. A former senator of France's Parti socialiste, Mélenchon narrowly missed out on reaching the second round of the French presidential elections in 2017 and 2022 as the candidate of LFI, the party he had created in 2016 (Chelini-Pont 2023). Describing himself as a 'people's tribune' (Mélenchon 2023: 10), Mélenchon has articulated a multifaceted ideological framework drawing on 'classical Marxism, French socialism, French communism, left-wing republicanism, alter-globalisation, Latin American socialism, radical ecology and techno-futurism' (Chiocchetti 2019: 111). This framework is built around the juxtaposition of the 'people' and a corrupt 'oligarchy' to be swept away by a so-called citizens' revolution (Mélenchon 2023: 175–212; Marlière 2019).

Alongside his struggle against socioeconomic inequalities, Mélenchon has also become an outspoken critic of the alleged discrimination and targeting of French Muslims. As Ugo Gaudino (2025: 211) observes, '[s]ince 9/11, French policymakers have increasingly considered Muslims as a potential threat to national security and the presence of Islam in the public space as a threat to French Republican values, such as secularism (*laïcité*)'. Several jihadist terror attacks that shook France starting in the

early 2010s have triggered heated public debates about the influence of Islamist ideologies on French Muslim communities and about the latter's adherence to republican values (Chelini-Pont 2023).

Within these debates, Mélenchon has come to openly position himself in favour of prominent Muslim concerns. In November 2019, he participated in a demonstration against Islamophobia in Paris and signed a public letter denouncing, inter alia, the stigmatization of French Muslims as potential terrorists and the social exclusion of women wearing the hijab (France Inter 2019; Libération 2019). In doing so, Mélenchon performed an ideological shift, as he had traditionally been critical both of the veil and of the concept of Islamophobia (Gaudino 2025: 225–226; Knobel 2024). On his blog, '*Jean-Luc Mélenchon le blog*', Mélenchon has since published numerous entries taking aim at the prevalence of Islamophobia in French society. In contemporary France, Mélenchon argues, anti-Muslim sentiment has come to play a role comparable to the status of antisemitism in past centuries (Mélenchon 2024a).

Against this background, LFI's manifesto for the 2022 French presidential and legislative elections warns against the political instrumentalization of the principle of *laïcité*, stating that 'it must never be used to point the finger at the faithful of a religion, as has recently been done against Muslims' (LFI 2021: 29). Mélenchon has thus clearly practised identity-based advocacy of Muslim minorities. The same holds true for other populist leaders on the left like Britain's Jeremy Corbyn or Bernie Sanders (Sherwood 2018; Wagner 2015). The German politician Sahra Wagenknecht, on the other hand, has resorted to identity-based threat construction of Germany's Muslim population.

Identity-based threat construction: Sahra Wagenknecht vis-à-vis Islam/Muslim populations

Like Jean-Luc Mélenchon in France, Sahra Wagenknecht represents a charismatic and controversial protagonist within the German left. Formerly an orthodox Marxist, Wagenknecht eventually developed a less hardline brand of radical leftism as one of the leading figures of the party Die Linke (The Left) (Lang 2010). As part of this ideological transformation, populism has come to play a key role in Wagenknecht's political rhetoric (see also Thomeczek 2024). For example, in her book *Die Selbstgerechten* (The self-righteous) that was published in 2021, Wagenknecht constructs an antagonism between the interests of large multinational companies, lobbyists and media owners on the one side, and 'the will of the majority' on the other (Wagenknecht 2021: 261). Referring to Rousseau's concept of the *volonté générale*, Wagenknecht embraces the concept of a 'republican democracy' (Wagenknecht 2021: 261) as an alternative to liberal democracy to protect the majority against processes of oligarchization driven by the rich.

In the wake of the 2015/2016 European migration crisis, which saw the arrival of more than one million refugees in Germany, Wagenknecht started to reliably provoke indignation within progressive left-wing circles by advocating a number of socially conservative positions (see e.g. Denkler 2016; Schwarz 2021). Among other things, Wagenknecht embarked on depicting Muslim communities in Germany as breeding grounds of Islamism. Denouncing the existence of 'parallel societies' (Wagenknecht 2021: 119; Wagenknecht 2024), she has singled out Muslim 'migratory

milieus' (Wagenknecht 2021: 120) and claims that in the latter 'a self-image characterised by ancestry and religion even in the third and fourth generation, is much more pronounced than among the direct descendants of the immigrants in the seventies and eighties' (Wagenknecht 2021: 120).

A comparable rhetoric is also detectable in official documents of BSW, the party Wagenknecht created after leaving Die Linke in 2023. For example, the party's manifesto for the 2024 European Parliament election claims that '[i]n France [...], and to a little lesser extent in Germany, a completely misguided immigration policy has brought about the emergence of Islamist-influenced parallel societies in which law and order only apply to a limited extent, Sharia law is preached and children grow up hating Western culture' (BSW 2024). According to Wagenknecht, economic liberalism and the dismantling of the welfare state have created a social vacuum filled by fundamentalist Islamic institutions (Wagenknecht 2021: 120). Moreover, she blames liberal leftists for having contributed to the spread of reactionary ideas among Muslims by insisting on the principle of tolerance and accusing critical voices like hers of Islamophobia (Wagenknecht 2021: 119). Importantly, Wagenknecht's critique goes beyond the rejection of political Islam. For instance, doubling down on the perils of leftist liberal tolerance, she qualifies the Islamic veil as a 'symbol of oppression' (Wagenknecht 2021: 119) diametrically opposed to mainstream secular values. In stark contrast with Jean-Luc Mélenchon, Wagenknecht has therefore framed the German Muslim population as a potential source of danger and destabilization.

Sexual orientation

Identity-based advocacy: Julius Malema vis-à-vis homosexuality/gay populations

While left-wing populism has been particularly influential in Latin America and Europe, it has not been absent from Africa (Paget 2024: 873). In post-Apartheid South Africa, for example, Julius Malema, the former leader of the youth wing of the ruling African National Congress (ANC), created the left-wing populist party EFF in 2013, which has won vote shares of between 6% and 10% in the country's last three general elections. Presenting the EFF as a 'Marxist-Leninist Fanonian organisation' (EFF 2014: 2), Malema has vocally denounced the persistent socioeconomic marginalization of South Africa's black majority population (Fölscher et al. 2021). In Malema's populist framework, this majority is framed as representing the people and pitted against both the white minority and the post-Apartheid political establishment. While Malema accuses the former of continuously exploiting the black masses, he blames the latter for having failed to effectively tackle 'economic apartheid' (see e.g. EFF 2024: 8). Thus, as regards race, Malema has resorted both to identity-based advocacy – vis-à-vis the black majority – and identity-based threat construction – vis-à-vis the white minority (Zulu 2021).

At the same time, Malema has styled himself as an advocate for sexual minorities. For example, in November 2013, he declared to 'love all the gay people in South Africa and the world' (Mail and Guardian 2013). In April 2023, Malema spoke at a demonstration in front of the Ugandan embassy in Pretoria condemning the Anti-Homosexuality Act passed by the Ugandan parliament.³ In his speech, Malema defended gay rights as

human rights (Sibanyoni 2023). Moreover, comparing the plight of Uganda's sexual minorities to the historical oppression of black South African's, Malema stated that both groups were 'victims of identity politics' (SABC News 2023). Claiming that '[a]s long as the LGBTQ+ community is not free in Uganda, we are not free' (SABC News 2023), he depicted the struggle against homophobia as constitutive of a broader internationalist and pan-Africanist orientation.

In addition, Malema has promoted his party's local activities in defence of sexual minorities and has urged his followers to refrain from homophobic discrimination.⁴ For example, in June 2021 he announced on his Facebook profile that 'the EFF will join in the celebration of pride month, which seeks to eradicate homophobia and the discrimination of the LGBTQI+ communities' (Malema 2021). As part of an opening statement delivered at an EFF meeting in September 2022, Malema stated that 'if you still see a lesbian and a gay and you want to classify them as undesirable people in our society you are backward and therefore do not belong to our organization' (EFF 2022: 39:56–40:10 min). Overall, Malema has therefore clearly practised identity-based advocacy in favour of sexual minorities in and beyond South Africa.

Identity-based threat construction: Ousmane Sonko vis-à-vis homosexuality/gay populations

In comparison with Malema, Senegal's Ousmane Sonko has developed a less radical and electorally more successful pan-Africanist populist project. Working as a tax inspector, Sonko created the party Pastef in 2014 (Riedl and Sylla 2019: 98). In 2024, he was appointed Senegalese prime minister after the Pastef candidate Bassirou Diomaye Faye – a Sonko protégé filling in for his mentor as the latter's candidacy had not been validated – won the Senegalese presidential election (Al Jazeera 2024). Prior to this electoral triumph, Sonko had built his political brand with the help of a left-wing populist narrative denouncing a corrupt elite made up of 'politicians, senior technocrats, media owners, businessmen of all stripes' (Sonko 2017: 19). According to Sonko, this self-privileging elite has kept Senegal underdeveloped and needs to be replaced on the basis of a 'patriotic awakening' (Sonko 2017: 39). Specifically, he has championed a participatory 'citizen state' working against wealth concentration in the hands of a small group of people and in favour of 'economic democracy' (Sonko 2017: 114, 122).

While Sonko has presented himself as an egalitarian anti-establishment figure, his views on sexual minorities mirror mainstream attitudes among political elites in sub-Saharan Africa. In May 2021, Sonko took part in a march against homosexuality in Dakar (Koffi 2021). One year later, he publicly declared that as president, he would push for an intensified criminalization of homosexuality (Le Figaro 2022).⁵ In March 2022, he also took to Twitter to affirm that '[t]he fight against homosexuality does not only contain a religious aspect, but above all a concern for preserving our humanity' (Sonko 2022). Furthermore, during a joint event held with Jean-Luc Mélenchon at Cheikh-Anta-Diop University in May 2024, Sonko stressed that while he shared many political views with Mélenchon, the question of sexual minorities constituted a disagreement between the two leaders. Dwelling on this discord, Sonko stressed that 'the LGBTQ issue risks becoming the next *casus belli* between the Western world and the rest of the globe' (RFI 2024). Touching on the status of sexual minorities in Senegal,

Sonko emphasized that ‘Senegal and many African countries cannot accept whatever attempt to force on us the legalization of this phenomenon’ (Mélénchon 2024b: 2:07:11–2:07:21 min). Thus, unlike Julius Malema, who has framed his advocacy in favour of sexual minorities as part of a pan-Africanist struggle, Sonko has combined pan-Africanist narratives with a homophobic threat construction.

Left-wing populism and identity-based populist references

Populists on the left like Jean-Luc Mélénchon, Sahra Wagenknecht, Ousmane Sonko and Julius Malema resort to identity-based advocacy and threat construction. Importantly, however, these types of activism are not populist in themselves. In his examination of how populists target marginalized outside groups, Rogers Brubaker (2020: 55) elaborates that this targeting ‘becomes populist only when elites – domestic or international – are blamed for prioritising or privileging in some way those who are at one on the bottom and outside, while neglecting problems and predicaments of “ordinary people”’. Likewise, the lobbying in favour of specific identity groups can only be reasonably qualified as populist if it is incorporated into the discursive construction of the populist elite/people divide. For example, considering this criterion, Julius Malema’s above-quoted condemnation of homophobia at an EFF meeting in September 2022 does not qualify as populist, as it does not blame the discrimination of sexual minorities on ‘the elite’. Indeed, when it comes to naming the causes of this discrimination, Malema and the EFF have denounced wider ‘social norms which declare LGBTQI sexual preferences as abnormal’ (EFF 2019: 45). This underlines that left-wing populists do not automatically engage in populist variants of identity politics.

Based on the distinction between identity-based advocacy and threat construction, it is possible to identify four different types of identity-based populist references (see Table 1). Both identity-based advocacy and threat construction can be *actor-* or *action-centred*. Actor-centred populist references equate the people or the elite with specific demographic groups. In the case of identity-based advocacy, this discursive move refers to the people. As far as left-wing populism is concerned, the focus of these people-centred references is on socioeconomically marginalized demographic groups.⁶ For instance, while Julius Malema’s advocacy in favour of sexual minorities does not appear to have followed a populist logic, his discourse on the struggles of South Africa’s black population does, as it conceives of the people as the ‘black majority’ (Fölscher et al. 2021). A tendency of equating the people with specific racial groups has also been attributed to former Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez who, according to Barreto and Maldonado (2025: 393), ‘yoked indigenous Americans and Africans – and implicitly, those who were racially mixed – in a non-white alliance against the country’s traditional elites’.

As regards identity-based threat construction, actor-centred populist references identify specific demographic groups as representing the elite (see also Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013b: 504). As part of these references, left-wing populists decry material inequalities. For instance, Julius Malema’s racial populism not only equates the people with South Africa’s black population but also presents the country’s white minority as an exploitative and unduly privileged elite owning ‘all the means of economic survival and existence’ (EFF 2024: 8).

Table 1. Different Types of Identity-based Populist References

Identity-based advocacy	
Actor-centred	Action-centred
The people as (a) specific demographic group(s)	Elite-orchestrated division of the people
Left-populist example:	Left-populist example:
The people as an excluded black majority (Julius Malema)	Exploitation of Islamophobia by the oligarchy (Jean-Luc Mélenchon)
Identity-based threat construction	
Actor-centred	Action-centred
The elite as (a) specific demographic group(s)	Elite support for 'dangerous' minorities
Left-populist example:	Left-populist example:
The elite as an exploitative white minority (Julius Malema)	Elite sponsoring of Islamist parallel societies (Sahra Wagenknecht)

Action-centred populist references consist in statements accusing the elite of identity-based interventions against the people (see also Brubaker 2020; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013b). When it comes to identity-based advocacy, these references revolve around the claim that the elite is deliberately dividing the people along the lines of identity. In the case of left-wing populism, the elite is accused of applying identity-based divide-and-rule tactics to maintain the socio-economic status quo. Jean-Luc Mélenchon, for example, has denounced the 'oligarchy' for fomenting Islamophobia and other forms of discrimination. In his latest book *Faites Mieux!* (Do it better!), Mélenchon argues that

[the] oligarchy despises the people, subdues them and deliberately divides them through its propaganda, which relentlessly disseminates arguments of fragmentation. It stirs up racializing and gender-specific prejudice. It turns Islamophobia into a business as it applies the theory propelled by Samuel Huntington's strategy of the 'clash of civilizations' [...] (Mélenchon 2023: 177).

Against this backdrop, Mélenchon has advocated an 'implacable struggle against all forms of racist, sexist and homophobic discrimination' (LFI 2021: 18). Identity-based advocacy has therefore clearly been integrated into Mélenchon's left-wing populist reasoning. In the USA, the long-established leftist leader Bernie Sanders has cultivated a similar rhetoric. During the 'Fight Oligarchy Tour' he started in February 2025 following the second inauguration of Donald Trump, Sanders condemned the billionaire elite as part of the so-called 1% of the population and urged his audience to not 'let them divide us up by the colour of our skin or where we were born or our religion or sexual orientation' (MeidasTouch 2025: 1:21:47–1:21:54 min).⁷

By contrast, as regards action-centred references in identity-based threat construction, elites are accused of supporting 'dangerous' minorities. Sahra Wagenknecht, for example, has argued that leftist liberal elites have facilitated the emergence of radicalized Muslim communities. In her 2021 book, as she denounces the emergence of Islamist parallel societies, she contends that

[a]t the time of the Blairs and Schröders, when left-wing liberals were also fierce economic liberals, they drove the division of society from two sides at once. Socially, by depriving the bottom half of the population of the prospect of prosperity and advancement and thus also depriving many immigrants and their descendants of the hope of becoming a recognized and respected part of society. And culturally, by persistently pitting supposed minority interests against those of the majority, sorting the population according to descent communities, and promoting Islamist organizations as their mouthpieces – even as the latter did everything they could to delegitimize Western culture and its values and turn the immigrant milieus against the majority society (Wagenknecht 2021: 121).

Wagenknecht thereby constructs a divide between a leftist liberal elite and the majority while excluding Muslim communities from ‘majority society’ based on the claim of their elite-sponsored radicalization. In a similar vein, Ousmane Sonko has coupled his politicization of sexual orientation with anti-establishment rhetoric. For example, he accused Senegal’s former president Macky Sall of forcing the acceptance of homosexuality on the Senegalese people in cooperation with outside forces. At a press conference in June 2022, Sonko declared that

[w]e have seen that there are things that people want to impose on us: homosexuality. It’s a sacrilege condemned by our society. God has punished entire peoples for it. Some societies have tried to practise it and have been faced with a falling birth rate and an ageing population, and now they want to force other societies to do the same. I want to make that clear to everyone! Macky Sall is pushing the homosexual agenda in Senegal. The proof is that he refuses to pass the law criminalising homosexuality. That’s what he’s defending. To put things into perspective, Macky Sall has said that our society is not yet ready to accept homosexuality. This means that when society is ready, we will have homosexuals in our country, with gay pride days and so on. That’s Macky Sall’s programme (Jotna TV 2022: 1:58:05–1:59:20min).

By identifying an allegedly dangerous minority and accusing an elite actor of promoting this group against the interests of the people, Sonko follows an action-centred logic of identity-based threat construction comparable to Wagenknecht’s reasoning vis-à-vis Muslim communities. Both Sonko’s and Wagenknecht’s rhetoric underlines that when it comes to discursively constructing threats, left-wing populists do not exclusively single out elites but may also resort to the targeting of disadvantaged minorities commonly associated with right-wing populism.

Concluding discussion

This article has explored the understudied relationship between identity politics and left-wing populism. Based on a study of four populist leaders on the left from Europe and Africa, it provides evidence that left-wing populists engaged in identity politics resort to two contrasting forms of activism: identity-based advocacy and identity-based threat construction. While the former consists in the defence of identity groups that are perceived to be disadvantaged and discriminated against, the latter revolves

around the rejection of purportedly dangerous groups. Building on this conceptual distinction, the article traces how left-wing populist leaders integrate identity politics into the discursive construction of the elite vs. the people antagonism. Specifically, I find that both identity-based advocacy and threat construction can contain actor- and action-centred populist references. Whereas actor-centred populist references equate the people or the elite with particular demographic groups, action-centred references consist in statements accusing the elite of identity-based interventions against the people. As part of this concept-building effort, the article provides evidence that left-populist narratives can both defend and problematize underprivileged minorities. The article thereby goes beyond existing research on the involvement of left-populist actors in pro-minority activism and elite-centred threat construction.

Overall, the paper has sought to provide a counterpoint to predominant approaches to the study of leftist identity politics. In contrast to these approaches, the paper does not make normative judgements about leftist identity politics the linchpin of its analysis, but instead endeavours to facilitate comparative inter-area research. Taking as a point of departure the paper's conceptual considerations, future research could systematically compare the extent to which populist discourses cultivated by different leftist actors in the Global North and South are shaped by identity politics. Crucially, the mere observation of identity-based left-wing populist rhetoric does not necessarily manifest an identity-centred version of left-populism. After all, one and the same populist discourse can include both identity-based and identity-neutral rhetoric. For instance, when Jean-Luc Mélenchon (2023: 178) advances that the oligarchy 'lives in a state of physical secession from the majority in terms of housing, transport, schooling, health, leisure and the supplies of ordinary life', he constructs a people/elite divide without drawing on identity-based references. Against this background, it would be important to systematically assess the salience of identity politics within populist discourse on the left. Leaders or parties whose populist discourse is marked by a high salience of identity-based advocacy or threat construction could then plausibly be designated as proponents of identity-centred left-populism. A mixed-methods approach combining qualitative exploration with frequency scores could be a potentially fruitful tool for this assessment (see e.g. Aslanidis 2018).

It would further be highly relevant to investigate how and why left-wing populist approaches to identity politics change over time. For instance, as pointed out above, Barreto and Maldonado (2025) find that following the 2002 coup attempt against him, Hugo Chávez's populist discourse increasingly drew on racial elements. Jean-Luc Mélenchon, on the other hand, seems to have turned towards progressive identity politics following the 2017 French presidential election (Zicman de Barros 2022), while Sahra Wagenknecht embarked on targeting 'Islamist parallel societies' in the wake of the European migration crisis. By systematically exploring the drivers of such shifts future studies could make a relevant contribution.

Finally, the potential of identity politics for provoking intra-populist conflicts equally merits attention. Jean-Luc Mélenchon, for example, has quarrelled with fellow populist activists on the left like François Ruffin, who has accused Mélenchon of abandoning a universalist vision of radical leftism by turning his back on white working-class voters (Le Meneec 2024). In South Africa, Julius Malema has recently seen the departure of several fellow EFF activists towards a new left-wing populist

party, uMkhonto weSizwe (The Spear of the Nation), which proposes a socially conservative agenda contradicting the EFF's progressivism (Nonyukela 2024). Against this background, by comparatively examining the politicization of identity as a potential intra-populist bone of contention, future studies could contribute to a better understanding of the fault-lines and dynamics that characterize broader intra-leftist disputes about identity politics.

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Notes

1 For rare exceptions, see Yates (2024) and Zicman de Barros (2022).

2 Katsambekis (2022) identifies contradictions in Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser's reasoning. Among other things, he draws attention to the fact that while Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser present Evo Morales as a proponent of inclusionary populism, they fail to acknowledge that 'at the core of his conception of the popular subject lies a vividly pluralistic understanding of society, encapsulated in the constitutional renaming of Bolivia as a *plurinational state*' (Katsambekis 2022: 57).

3 The bill was signed into law by Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni in May 2023. It restricts freedom of speech on LGBT issues and stipulates severe penalties such as life imprisonment for consensual same-sex relations.

4 While the EFF's past two electoral manifestos (EFF 2024, 2019) include pleas for the defence and expansion of sexual minority rights, the party came under fire in June 2023 for inviting a Kenyan academic openly supportive of Uganda's Anti-Homosexuality Act to give a lecture at a party event (Qodashe 2023).

5 In Senegal, same-sex sexual activity is criminalized and can result in imprisonment of one to five years.

6 This does not mean that identity-based populist references equating the people with socioeconomically marginalized groups necessarily stem from leftist narratives. For example, the populist Ugandan opposition leader Robert Kyagulanyi has defined the people in terms of Uganda's large disempowered youth population without promoting a leftist agenda (Melchiorre 2023).

7 This statement was part of a speech Sanders delivered at a rally in Tucson, Arizona, on 22 March 2025.

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