

## Populism: A conceptual definition<sup>1</sup>

Charles Dick, University of Huddersfield

### Abstract

*This paper aims to provide a brief overview of literature pertaining to the definition of 'Populism', while providing readers with a conceptual definition with which to understand and analyse populism. In covering the literature, the paper will examine the historic roots and contemporary developments of a contested political subject, from its agricultural beginnings to the Brexit and Donald Trump. Second, two competing academic definitions are examined, with the aim of combining elements of the two to provide a more comprehensive conceptual definition of what populism is.*

While *populism* is an almost universally used word across political, media and academic environments, it is also something of a mystery in its definition. Almost all academic works concerning the subject of populism contain the writers' definition of populism. Ergo, it is a much-contested concept. The following paper will further clarify what is meant by the term 'populism', aiming to provide a working-definition which may be of some use to those conducting research in this area.

In doing this, we will chart the origins of populism throughout its modern history, from the 1800's to the present day, ranging from early agrarian forms, to contemporary manifestations. This will bring us through two schools of thought on the best way to define populism; whether it be an ideological standpoint, or a political communication style.

While on the surface the two schools of thought may appear incompatible, there is scope for a wider understanding of populism to be gained through combining elements of the two conceptualisations. This is due to the central elements of populism being reflected in both definitions; a propensity for popular sovereignty, with an anti-elitist and anti-'other' sentiment based around threat and perceived injustice.

---

<sup>1</sup> If this paper is quoted or referenced, we ask that it be acknowledged as:

Dick, C. (2020) *Populism: A conceptual definition*. In B. Krzywosz-Rynkiewicz & V. Zorbas (Eds.), *Citizenship at a Crossroads: Rights, Identity, and Education* (pp. 700 - 708). Prague, CZ: Charles University and Children's Identity and Citizenship European Association. ISBN: 978-80-7603-104-3.

## Historic roots of Populism

Without delving too far into the annals of history, we must first examine the political landscape of North America at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. In particular, the rise of third-party political challengers; the People's Party. With its roots in agrarian and labour movements, organising across America throughout the early 1800's, the People's Party can be seen as the culmination of a mass reaction to increasing inequality, lowered life chances and achievements, increased debt and disenfranchisement of America's lower and middle-classes, responsible for producing the nation's riches, yet receiving a pittance in return. This rebellion against corporate capitalism, led by the increasing role which moneyed interests played in ruling the United States enacted a broad-based resistance movement (Grattan, 2016). This resistance (formed of a multitude of farmer's alliances, unions, religious groups, revolutionaries and minority groups) aimed to produce a horizontal collective amongst the 'producer' classes, superseding intra-class racial and gendered divides, as a rebellion against liberal-capitalist understandings of democratic engagement (Grattan, 2016).

However, this apparent united front also bubbled with unease, mainly amongst white, male supporters, confronted with challenges to readily held beliefs about the role of women and the position of African-Americans and immigrants in society. Indeed, this unease was willingly engaged with as a means to undermine the populist position by incumbent Democratic politicians who faced challenges from the People's Party (Hild, 2007). Grattan (2016), notes that reactionary elements within the People's Party could have laid the foundations for contemporary understandings of American populism; white, middle-class, masculine, and Christian tropes continue to be employed by both grassroots and elite populists, with their effects being visible throughout American history, from McCarthyism, to Nixon's silent majority, to the Tea Party, and Donald Trump.

European populism around the same time as the growth of its American counterpart, remained fairly marginal. The *Narodniki*, a group of Russian elites who aimed to bring about a social revolution based on the forms of socialism found in peasant collectivisation, held 'the people' in the highest regard as vehicles for social change (Pedler, 1927). However, while this populist movement floundered when the *Narodniki* actually attempted to instigate an agrarian uprising, in Eastern Europe populist movements gained traction in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, embodying a similar conceptualisation of 'people power' as the American populists (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). However, these parties and movements were largely excluded from political power, due to the authoritarian elites who ran their respective countries.

Outside of a few isolated examples (*Poujadism* in France, and Progress parties in Denmark and Norway) post-war Europe experienced very little in the way of populist politics until the late 1980's (Mudde, 2015). The 80's and 90's saw the rise of right-wing populist parties across Western Europe. Largely seen as a response to political conflicts arising from a transition to a post-industrial form of capitalism (Betz, 1993), issues within the European Union, a loss of belief that political elites can adequately address the issues close to the electorate, and changing media structures (Mudde, 2015). Betz (1993), notes that there are two forms that radical right-wing populists exist in Western Europe. National populist parties exhibit radical xenophobia and authoritarian policy programs, primarily appealing to working-class voters. Neoliberal populists on the other hand, appeal to a wider cross section of society, stressing market-oriented, libertarian elements of their programs, over their xenophobic ones.

It can be argued that radical right populism has grown throughout Europe over the last few decades, from its marginal outsider status to a more mainstream political force. Breaking from the structural and strain explanations for the growth of radical right-wing populist parties, Rydgren (2005), suggests that another way to explain this rise is through the development of a master frame for radical right populists to base their political programs on. This successful master frame combines cultural racism, based on ethno-pluralist ideals, with anti-political establishment populism. Ethno-pluralism is a non-hierarchical conceptualisation of racial division suggesting that cultures and ethnicities are welcome to live separately but should not mix. Employing cultural understandings of racism allows the right populist party to mobilise public xenophobia and racism without having the label of 'racist' attached to it. Additionally, positioning the party as the opposition to the political class whilst remaining committed to democracy, means that right populists can remain legitimate in the eyes of voters who largely value democracy (Rydgren, 2005). The diffusion of this successful framework across European radical right parties, in combination with structural and individual issues, results in the growth of right populism witnessed throughout Europe.

This does not, however, mean that left-wing populism is non-existent in Europe. While being largely confined to southern states of the EU (Spain and Greece), left populism has grown in recent years, particularly in response to the financial crash of 2008-9 (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). Combining more traditional left-wing policies with anti-establishment populism, these parties have capitalised on resentment felt by populations bearing the brunt of neo-liberal austerity measures enacted to combat the economic downturn, which interestingly for SYRIZA (in Greece) manifests a Euroscepticism, for social rather than national reasons (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017).

Contemporary populist events, such as Brexit, or the election of President Trump can be better understood in the context of populism's history and development. Brexit, it could be argued, is a result of the diffusion of a master frame (Rydgren, 2005), employed in the UK by the UK Independence Party, building off successful radical right populism in mainland Europe, coupled with a Euroscepticism at the heart of both centre- and radical-right British politics (Bale, 2018), alongside structural issues outlined by Betz (1993) and Mudde (2015).

## **Understandings of Populism**

Providing a conceptual clarification of populism, when clearly populism has varied greatly across its history, could therefore prove to be difficult. However, there would appear to be two broad schools of thought about how best to define populism within the literature. Each of these holds its own unique take on what populism is, bringing with it a contribution to further understanding how to properly define the concept of populism. However, it is vitally important to note, that while scholars argue about the conceptual definition given to populism, there are three almost universally agreed upon elements; 'the people', 'the elite', and 'the other' (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008; Canovan, 1981; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Kriesi, 2014; Mudde, 2004).

## **Ideological**

An ideology is a core concept within political science, being at the heart of the subject as a core form of understanding political behaviour. Whilst certainly remaining a contested concept, for brevities sake a review of the various arguments around ideology can be found elsewhere (e.g. Knight, 2006). For the purpose of this essay ideology is taken to refer to a "coherent and relatively stable set of beliefs and values" (Knight, 2006, p.625). In addition to this, Knight (2006) notes the oppositional and spatial elements of ideology; meaning it can be placed in opposition to another set of values and organised along a spectrum of left-right politics. Furthermore, Sandru (2012), argues that ideology is relative to the society it operates in, reflecting values present within the society that it either agrees or disagrees with, while striving to produce the idealised society it typifies based on its interpretation of its own values.

Mudde (2004), building on Freedon (1998), considers populism to be a thin-ideology (restricted to a small set of political concepts, allowing it to be mixed with more rounded ideologies such as communism or nationalism), which divides society between two homogenous groups; a pure people in opposition to a

corrupt elite, in which it is argued that politics should be an expression of the general will of the people. In defining populism this way, Mudde (2004) notes that there are two opposites to populism: elitism and pluralism, with elitism being the mirror image of populism, in that the 'good' elites should rule over the 'amoral' people. Pluralism, however, rejects the homogeneity of both populism and elitism, arguing that society is a heterogeneous mix of individuals and groups with differing views and attitudes. Thus, populism creates a sense of opposition between groups within a society. Their adherents are the 'in' group and the opponents become the 'out' group. Albertazzi & McDonnell (2008) present a similar definition, arguing that populism 'puts a homogenous and virtuous people against a set of elites and dangerous others' (p3), who are trying to deprive 'the people' of their rights, voice, or identity.

Further to this, Zaslove (2008), notes that populism can be separated into two dimensions: the discourse and the institutional. The discourse of populism echoes what other academics have stated to be the central elements of populism: unmediated popular sovereignty as an expression of representative democracy, with a homogeneous people in opposition to elites and others who threaten the virtue of the people. Coupled with this is an organisational element, which holds the populist leader as a direct communication vessel between the people and the populists. Ideologically, then, this forms a basic party type upon which charismatic leaders can build. The core values are represented and regurgitated through their leader's direct access to supporters.

Therefore, given the centrality of popular sovereignty, the opposition to 'the elite' and 'the other', who threaten the constructed homogeneous entity known as 'the people', we have populism's core political concepts, as expressed as an ideology (Freedman, 1998; Mudde, 2004; Knight, 2006). These core principles of populism exhibit its stable set of beliefs and values which its adherents attempt to impart onto the political and social world. Taking Brexit as an example, using Sandru's (2012) argument, the populist elements of Brexit are clearly reflected within UK society. Elements of Euroscepticism, an imagined or constructed 'in-group' of leave voters characterised as 'the people', coupled with opposition to 'the elite' (Westminster politicians, academic experts, and EU bureaucrats) and 'the other' (migrants, asylum seekers, remain voters), it could be argued that Brexit has galvanised the populist ideology within contemporary UK politics. The coherence and stability of these beliefs and values (Knight, 2006), as well as their opposition to remain arguments are only strengthened by the fact that post-Brexit opinion of leaving the EU has barely shifted, with recent YouGov polls showing that while 48% of voters believe that voting for Brexit was wrong, 42% still believe it was the correct decision (YouGov/The Times, 2018).

## Communication

While the ideological interpretation of populism has allowed the literature to expand exponentially around the subject of populism, it is not without its critics. Aslanidis (2015), suggests that in conceptualising populism as a thin-ideology, academics are guilty of ignoring issues surrounding 'degreeism' (i.e. the different levels and degrees that populism may take) and of methodological inconsistency (i.e. using pluralism and elitism as opposites to populism, when these are not classified as ideological concepts). Similarly, Aslanidis (2015), notes that portraying populism as an ideology also prompts the writer to take sides in favour or against it, resulting in a number of schools of thought which either portray populism as a destructive threat to democracy, a prerogative of the radical right, or an original progressive political outlook, depending on their own philosophic and political bent. Instead it is suggested that populism be analysed as a form of political discourse or communication.

Building on these issues with the ideological interpretation, we can see that populism could also be conceptualised as something else within political science: a communication style. Jagers & Walgreave (2007) offer the interpretation that populism is instead a political communication style which can be used by political actors of any party, wing, or organisation, providing there is specific reference to the three core elements of populism: 'the people', 'anti-elitism' and 'othering/exclusion'. Taking a 'thin' definition in this case, Jagers & Walgreave (2007), suggest that just referring to 'the people' could constitute populism. However, a 'thicker' interpretation requires the three elements to be present, suggesting that the political actor is truly using a populist communication strategy.

Further research along this vein has produced a framework of how to interpret political communication as populist. These four elements of communication contain references to a constructed 'people' whose issues will be put to the forefront, 'anti-elitism' (through criticism of the establishment and status quo), exclusion of 'out-groups' (largely immigrants and minorities), and a narrative of crisis (e.g. economic or migrant) (Caser-Ripolles, Sintes-Olivella & Franch, 2017; Jagers & Walgreave, 2007; Moffitt & Tomey, 2014; Rooduijn, 2014). Indeed, much of this communication research helps to understand the spread of populism across media formats such as social media by tapping into a key feature of populism; unmediated interaction between the leader and 'the people' (Zaslove, 2008).

## Towards a working definition

The previous sections have examined the history of populism, charting its various phases and resurgences, along with two conceptual definitions which aim to address the complex nature of populism by characterising it along ideological or communication lines. This section attempts to bridge the gap between the two conceptual definitions, to provide a more rounded understanding of populism.

Examining the ideological elements proposed by Mudde & co.: providing a core set of values and beliefs though supposedly lacking the coherence of 'true' ideologies (Aslanidis, 2016) with which to test suspected populist politicians and movements, it could be argued that using the 'thin-ideology' idea of populism supplies a key starting point for further academic clarification.

The communication style proposed by Jagers & Walgreave (2007), amongst others suggests a way to bring discursive elements into the understanding of the populist concept. In understanding the ways which populism manifests within political communication, we have further analytical options in classifying and researching populism.

To bridge the gap between the two conceptualisations it is suggested that abandoning the ideological approach would not be beneficial to furthering research of populism, just as the communication approach is equally informative. Instead, populism can be conceptualised as a communication strategy employed to varying degrees by political actors who subscribe to a populist ideology, which holds at its heart a closeness to an imagined or constructed community of 'the people', who are in opposition to 'the elite' and a constructed 'other' grouping. The coherence required for ideological truism can be found through the communication elements employed: an unmediated linkage between the populist leader, the party, and 'the people', circumventing established ('elite') political communication traditions in favour of direct communication concerned, to varying degrees, with the topics of people-centrism, anti-elitism, exclusionism, and crisis mobilisation.

## References

Aslanidis, P. (2016). Is populism an ideology? A refutation and a new perspective. *Political Studies*, 64(1\_suppl), 88-104. doi:10.1111/1467-9248.12224

- Bale, T. (2018). Who leads and who follows? The symbiotic relationship between UKIP and the Conservatives – and populism and Euroscepticism. *Politics*, 38(3), 263-277. doi:10.1177/0263395718754718
- Betz, H. (1993). The two faces of radical right-wing populism in western Europe. *The Review of Politics*, 55(4), 663-686. doi:10.1017/S0034670500018040
- Casero-Ripollés, A., Sintes-Olivella, M., & Franch, P. (2017). The populist political communication style in action: Podemos's issues and functions on twitter during the 2016 spanish general election. *The American Behavioral Scientist*, 61(9), 986. doi:10.1177/0002764217707624
- Freeden, M. (1998). Is Nationalism a Distinct Ideology?. *Political Studies*, 46, 748-765. doi:10.1111/1467-9248.00165.
- Grattan, L. (2016). *Populism's power: radical grassroots democracy in America*. Retrieved from <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com>
- Hild, M. (2007). *Greenbackers, knights of labor, and populists: farmer-labor insurgency in the late-nineteenth-century south*. Retrieved from <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com>
- Jagers, J., & Walgreave, S. (2007). Populism as political communication style: An empirical study of political parties' discourse in Belgium. *European Journal of Political Research*, 46(3), 319-345. doi:10.1111/j.1475-6765.2006.00690.x
- Knight, K. (2006). Transformations of the concept of ideology in the twentieth century. *American Political Science Review*, 100(4), 619-626. doi:10.1017/S0003055406062502
- Moffitt, B., & Tormey, S. (2014). Rethinking populism: Politics, mediatisation and political style. *Political Studies*, 62(2), 381-397. doi:10.1111/1467-9248.12032
- Mudde, C. (2004). The Populist Zeitgeist. *Government and Opposition*, 39(4), 541-563. doi: **10.1111/j.1477-7053.2004.00135.x**
- Mudde, C. (2015, May, 12). *Populism in Europe: a primer*. Retrieved from <https://www.opendemocracy.net/can-europe-make-it/cas-mudde/populism-in-europe-primer>
- Mudde, C. & Kaltwasser, C.R. (2017). *Populism: A very short introduction*. Retrieved from <https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=KHquDQAAQBAJ>
- Pedler, A. (1927). Going to the people. the Russian Narodniki in 1874-5. *The Slavonic Review*, 6(16), 130-141. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor-org.libaccess.hud.ac.uk/stable/4202141>

Rooduijn, M. (2014). The nucleus of populism: In search of the lowest common denominator. *Government and Opposition*, 49(4), 573-599. doi:10.1017/gov.2013.30

Rydgren, J. (2005). Is extreme right-wing populism contagious? explaining the emergence of a new party family. *European Journal of Political Research*, 44(3), 413-437. doi:10.1111/j.1475-6765.2005.00233.x

Şandru, D. (2012). Ideology, between the concept and the political reality. *Sfera Politicii*, XX(169), 93-99.

Yougov/The Times. (2018). In hindsight do you think Britain was right or wrong to vote to leave the European Union? Retrieved from [https://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus\\_uploads/document/j73mcdcj1w/Times\\_180904\\_VI\\_Trackers\\_W.pdf](https://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus_uploads/document/j73mcdcj1w/Times_180904_VI_Trackers_W.pdf)

Zaslove, A., 2008. Here to Stay? Populism as a New Party Type. *European Review*, 16(3), pp. 319-336.