



LET THE PEOPLE RULE! DEFINITIONS AND THEORIES OF POPULISM

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There was a time when European politics was dominated by three traditional party families: the Christian-democrats, the social-democrats and the liberals. The hegemonic position of these party families was first challenged by the “new politics” of the Greens in the 1970s and by the populist radical right, which gained substantial electoral results from the 1980s onwards. In the aftermath of the global financial crisis of 2008 renewed attention has been given to defining the international wave of populism happening in both eastern and western Europe and to identifying the causes of the populist surge that could effectively change the face of EU politics in the years to come.

The term “populism” has been widely used and applied to different contexts: nineteenth-century Russia and the USA, twentieth-century Latin America, and twenty-first century Europe. The scholarship on populism is remarkably sparse and many scholars have given up on the possibility of using the term in any meaningful manner. For instance, in the European context the term has been used to describe anti-immigration and anti-EU parties like the French National Front (FN), the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) and the Dutch Party for Freedom (PVV), whereas in the Latin American debate populism was frequently employed to allude to the economic mismanagement and clientelistic practices of populist leaders like Juan Domingo Perón (Argentina), Alberto Fujimori (Peru), or Hugo Chávez (Venezuela). The term falls short of encompassing something precise.

Part of the terminological confusion stems from the fact that people and organisations labelled “populists” rarely identify themselves as such. Instead, the term is ascribed by others, most often as a distinctly negative label. The term populism is used pejoratively in the European media to denote such diverse phenomena as a grassroots movement, an irresponsible economic programme, or a demagogic style of politics. Thus, populism joins the ranks of other “loaded” terms in the social sciences that lack a commonly accepted

definition. In fact, the use of populism resembles the use of another value-laden term, “terrorism”, a word with intrinsically negative connotations that is generally applied to one’s opponents, or to those with whom one disagrees and would otherwise prefer to ignore.

For clarity’s sake, this volume has adopted a working definition that captures the core attributes of past and present manifestations of populism:

Populism is a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite,” and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people (Cas Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*. Cambridge University Press, 2007: 23).

Because populism is a thin ideology, it can be adapted for use on the left and the right. This minimalist definition effectively captures the malleability and tendency of populism to attach itself to other “thick” ideologies (liberalism, socialism, etc.), but also the alleged confrontation between the “common people” and the “establishment”, a term that encapsulates traditional parties but also cultural, economic and media elites. In practice, however, the will of the people can also be confronted by external “enemies of the people”. When discussing migration or refugees, for instance, European populists respond with a “common sense” defence of the (native) people against a demonised out-group, namely immigrants. Crime and terrorism would be additional examples of how the populist politics of feelings oppose the elite-led politics of facts.

In the European context, it has been common to argue that populism in the east and the west remains fundamentally different, but the literature on post-communist Europe has demonstrated the increasing convergence of the former east and west. A growing number of right-wing movements now share the same mental map and provide a critique of the crooked establishment and adulation of the common people that make up the nation. For instance, populist movements across Europe have retrenched to a “put us first!” flavour of nationalism plainly visible in their slogans, from Farage’s “we want our country back” to the Austrian Freedom Party’s guiding principle, “Austria first”, but also Trump’s protectionist “America First” approach.

Another distinction worth highlighting is the right-wing or left-wing ideology of populist parties. Although the contemporary usage of the term populism has focused on far-right xenophobic movements, left-wing parties are not immune to populism (e.g. Bernie Sanders in the USA or Syriza in Greece). A noticeable example on the left is provided by the Spanish party Podemos, which does not

shy away from the populist label and champions a particular understanding of “the people”, “the elite” and “the general will”, as originated in the writings of theorists like Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. It should not come as a surprise that a malleable ideology like populism is assimilated by a variety of political parties interested in using a divisive rhetoric.

This edited volume has a comparative pan-European perspective with cases from both western and eastern Europe. The cross-national selection of cases reflects the in-house expertise of CIDOB but also the shape of shocks to come for progressive and centrist politicians across the EU. The diffusion of right-wing populism has been made possible by a stagnant economy and a persistent migration crisis but also by the ability of populists to develop “catch-all” strategies capable of attracting wide support. Whether traditional party families will be able to contain the rise of populist parties all over Europe and provide an effective counter-message remains to be seen.

What accounts for the international populist surge?

In the absence of a general theory of populism, the scholarly literature has explained its emergence as the passive consequence of macro-level socioeconomic developments. Read in this way, populism is the straightforward consequence of globalisation and its unwanted effects: outsourcing, relentless automation, lost jobs, and stagnant middle-class incomes. But it is an all-too-common misperception to describe populist voters as mere losers of the process of modernisation with a misguided sense of blame attribution. Explanations citing austerity and income polarisation may account for anger and frustration but they need to be balanced out with the central role of ideology and an analysis of the will of populist leaders to gain power and change social reality. Populist parties are not mere consequences of socioeconomic changes but actively shape their destinies.

Populists’ powerful message is to give ordinary people what they want. Populists claim they want to “let the people rule” and argue that the main obstacle are the “corrupt elites”. Since the great recession, populist movements have been much more critical of the political influence of the wealthy. According to this Manichean view of society, the cosmopolitan elites have championed globalisation but the benefits of economic and technological change have not always trickled down to the unprotected masses. Populists want to be the champions of ordinary men and women deprived of the wellbeing they are entitled to. And the message is being heard by the discontented. Loud and clear.

The populist message resonates partly because it builds on the democratic promise of respecting the will of the people that is so central to European politics.

Whereas too much attention has focused on self-centred opportunists with authoritarian personalities, much less has focused on understanding why the anti-establishment message produces positive feelings. An increasing number of voters are disillusioned with the functioning of free markets and liberal democracy and have legitimate worries, such as inequality, joblessness, immigration, political mistrust, declining income per capita, etc. There is an urgent need to understand the fears, concerns and emotional responses of certain subgroups and accept that populists blurt out the occasional truth. Furthermore, populists aim to be the spokespersons for those left behind by the twenty-first century economy and claim to derive a direct mandate (and legitimacy) from their contact with the sovereign people.

Populism also provides a moral story in which the pure and the corrupt oppose each other. This moralistic conception of politics is highly critical of elites, who are considered morally inferior, and highly generous towards the noble common people. In addition to being anti-elitist, populists are also antipluralist, for they, and only they, can represent the people. Their political competitors are depicted as insiders, timeworn politicians, or members of the shady elite whose time has passed because they lack a direct connection and identification with the authentic people of the "heartland". In addition to this moralising form of antipluralism, populists claim an exclusive right to represent the interests of the people, and idealise the nation, which they define as they deem necessary. The legitimate opposition are not "like them" and are sometimes defined as enemies who cannot discern the will of the "real people". In short, populism is also about representation and who gets to speak for the people.

Finally, the rise of populist parties indicates a restructuring of political conflict in Europe. Populist parties have become serious electoral contenders and are no longer confined to the margins of politics. An increasing number of European voters, disillusioned with mainstream politics, are shifting their allegiance from conservative, socialist and liberal parties to populist options, and anti-establishment politicians are confident their aims and goals have moved from the fringe to the centre. The populist takeover is about parties and non-party organisations but also indicates a much bigger cultural change, as suggested by the rise of anti-expert rhetoric and post-truth politics in the shadow of the great recession.

This publication

In this book, populist right-wing parties in contemporary Europe are the prime unit of analysis. These were chosen because their anti-establishment and nativist reactions suggest a renationalisation of politics which challenges the project

of “ever closer union”. Their potential to undermine the EU and create a new system in which nations work together in a much looser structure should not be underestimated. Populist supporters are not pleased with how the worlds of economics and politics have worked since the end of the Cold War and they want to regain control over their own fate.

The disintegration of the European Union is not in sight but ignoring the signals of populists could prove disastrous. The tide of nationalism is quickly rising and calls for cultural homogeneity and taking back control are proving to be compelling messages. By appealing to nationalist sentiment, populists have gained support across Europe, partly because a systemic crisis is being fuelled externally, namely, by the threat of Salafi jihadism and a relentless influx of migrants and refugees. Renewing the ties that bind European citizens will require a reformulated social compact that deals with existing discontent.

