Populism in Search of its Model

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Abstract This article makes the case that populism needs to be understood in the context of a model. The key argument formulated in this article is that the phenomenon of populism does not lend itself to taut theoretical formulations. Consequently, the explanatory and the inferential reaches of populism are largely descriptive. However, “mere description” within the context of a model is more than enough to produce rich understandings of populism and, under the right modeling conditions, even predictions of populist discourse eruptions and movements.

Keywords Populism · Model · Ideology · Movement · Discourse

“Models mediate between theory and the world.” (Cartwright 1999, 179–180)

1 Introduction

With the shock of the Brexit referendum in Great Britain and the election of Donald Trump to the presidency in the United States, populism has regained notoriety. An inverse dynamic, however, has emerged between the growing popular use of the term by the media and its use by the public and social scientists. Many social scientists are convinced that the popularity of populism is indicative of a concept that lacks a precise definition and is not grounded in any rigorous theorizing. They see its popularity as a sign of conceptual promiscuousness, that it is now a cliché, and that any written or oral presentation on populism should begin with the

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proverbial assertion that the concept has been poorly or inappropriately defined (Mény and Surel 2002). As Ernesto Laclau (1977, pp. 143) emphatically has stated, “few [terms] have been defined with less precision... We know intuitively to what we are referring when we call a movement or an ideology populist, but we have the greatest difficulty in translating the intuition into concepts.” Jansen (2011, pp. 76) asserts that this lack of clarity and conceptual coherence undermines the concept’s utility: “such usage may be appropriate for journalistic purposes, but it is inadequate for social scientific analysis.” He adds that “the fundamental problem is that most academic discussions of populism continue to rely on folk theories. Everyday usage of the term is overly general, applying to any person, movement, or regime that makes claims by appealing to ordinary (i.e., non-elite) people.”¹

The crux of these critical reflections is that the conceptual net of populism is too broad and its theoretical core too shallow (Pappas 2016). As a consequence, a myriad of political discourses and disparate political and social movements are too easily classified as populist. Gidron and Bonikoski (2013, pp. 1) articulate such a critique in their assessment of the extant literature:

In recent years, populism has attracted considerable interest from social scientists and political commentators despite the fact that, ‘[t]he mercurial nature of populism has often exasperated those attempting to take it seriously.’ Indeed, the term ‘populism’ is both widely used and widely contested. It has been defined based on political, economic, social, and discursive features and analyzed from myriad theoretical perspectives including structuralism, post-structuralism, modernization theory, social movement theory, party politics, political psychology, political economy, and democratic theory and a variety of methodological approaches, such as archival research, discourse analysis, and formal modeling. As observed by Wiles (1969), ‘to each his own definition of populism, according to the academic axe he grinds.’

Obviously, what is asserted in these critical reflections on populism is that the concept of populism needs a tauter theoretical definition and a more precise way to categorize populist movements.

The argument developed herein for this special issue of the *Chinese Political Science Review* on “Populism in the Age of Globalization” is that most of the criticisms are misguided. They conflate competing interpretive views of populism with the broader conceptual model of populism. The contention here is that populism is an example of a successful and effective conceptual model whose fundamental problem arises from those working on populism not recognizing the distinction between conceptual models and theories. Interestingly, the effectiveness of populism as a model emerged by default; it is the outgrowth of the misplaced attempts to develop a more precise theoretical definition (Woods 2014). In doing so, what the literature unintentionally achieved is the articulation of a model that encapsulates many key dimensions of populism. This is underscored in the diversity of the essays in this special issue on populism. The articles explore populism from

¹ Many of the references and some of the language in this article are drawn from a previous article (Woods 2014).

different angles and differ on how they define, measure, and study it. However, if these articles are viewed as part of a broader model, they underscore that populism is a multi-dimensional phenomenon that requires more than one definition of it and different levels of analysis.

This article is organized into three sections. First, there is a brief overview of what constitutes a model and why models are useful. Second, a model of populism is presented. Finally, there is a discussion on what a model of populism suggests should be future areas of conceptual exploration and debate.

2 What is a Model?

At the most fundamental level, a model is a representation of something that provides a structure. Models serve many purposes and come in many varieties (Morgan and Morrison 1999; Morton 1999; Nersessian 1999; Taagepera 2008; Morgan 2012). Economists rely generally on formal models that they sometimes confuse with theories (Rodrik 2015). Other social sciences are less sure about whether they are engaged in modeling or theoretical construction. Since it is difficult to precisely define what a model is, social scientists have a hard time distinguishing between the models and theories. The difficulty in separating the two leads to a conflation in which models are treated as theories and theories are viewed as generating predictions and hypotheses that require empirical confirmation. Although the distinction between the two is difficult, it is useful to view models and theories as distinct from each other. In Isaak's (1969, pp. 174–175) perspective, "the basic argument is that models, unlike theories, do not explain anything and are not abstractions or idealized representations in any general sense."

There are three broad ways of thinking about models. First, there is the syntactic view in which models are understood as consisting of statements from which predictions can be deduced and tested to determine whether or not they are confirmed. The syntactic notion of models comes close to the hypothetico-deductive tradition that has been associated with Karl Popper. Models are essentially theories that produce predictions or hypotheses that can be confirmed or falsified. In contrast to this definition of models, Clarke and Primo (2012) argue that models are like maps that are neither true nor false, but derive their role from their utility. In the semantic view advocated by Clarke and Primo among others, models are "representations of selected parts of the world." A third definition of models is what James Johnson (2014) calls the *predicate* view; it sees models as "linguistic entities—specifically, definitions or conceptions—that are distinct from but can be incorporated into theories." Johnson (2014, pp. 557) posits that in this view, models are not statements themselves or assertions about the world and so are neither true nor false except in a trivial sense. Indeed: "It is a category mistake to ask whether they are true or attempt to test them." The primary purpose of models is conceptual exploration. Like Johnson, I endorse this view of models.

The main virtue of the predicate notion of models is that, unlike the syntactic or the semantic view, it clearly differentiates models and theories. As Johnson notes, the predicate view keeps the two distinct and it offers a view of how we use models primarily for conceptual exploration (Johnson 2014, pp. 557). Loosely speaking,

models are conceptual sorting tools that allow us to articulate a considerably more concrete conception of things. In other words, as Johnson (2017, pp. 45) argues in a recent paper, “when making a model we do not abstract from reality, as economists and political scientists tend to imagine, but move in very nearly the opposite direction. We move from the relatively abstract and general to the relatively concrete and particular.” As heuristic devices, models help us organize “our study of an unfamiliar situation or area.” Models open the door to how we should theorize about something concrete (Isaak 1969). I would add that models also help us determine what can and cannot be formulated as a theory.

As stated, models are not theories. A theory can be defined as a set of ideas that provide an explanation of a phenomenon or an empirical generalization (Isaak 1969). In sum, “a theory is set of generalizations containing concepts with which we are directly acquainted and those which are operationally defined; but in addition, and more important, theoretical concepts that although not directly tied to observations are logically related to those concepts that are” (Isaak 1969, pp. 173). The central criterion for assessing a theory “is to determine how well it is doing what it is expected to do.” In an ideal context, “social science theories should be able to explain empirical generalizations because it is more general, more inclusive than they are” (Isaak 1969, pp. 173–174). More telling,

theories explain and organize existing knowledge. They also suggest potential knowledge by general hypotheses. A theory can, on the basis of its highly abstract generalizations, often predict an empirical generalization—predict that a particular relationship holds. The hypothesis can then be tested and accepted or rejected. Thus, it can be said that in addition to its explanatory and organizational functions, theory has a heuristic one – to suggest, to generalize hypotheses (Isaak 1969, pp. 173).

Generally speaking, in the social sciences, we do not have theories of this nature (Flyvberg 2014).² What we have is the ability to explore phenomena in the context of models—they can be formal or non-formal. Models are exploratory devices that have a great deal of heuristic value. As Isaak (1969, pp. 176) states, “if models are mainly heuristic value, if their primary function within the scientific enterprise is to suggest relationships between concepts—to generate hypotheses—then they belong to the realm of scientific discovery and not explanation.”

3 A Model of Populism

In not explicitly thinking about populism in the context of a model, the literature has generated more obfuscation and confusion than is necessary. The perennial claim that populism is hard to define turns out not to be correct in the context of a model. Different theories and definitions purport to capture populism, but it is obvious that the types of populist manifestations and empirical patterns they identify vary. Within a model, the disparate conceptualizations allow us to evaluate and compare

² I am agnostic as to whether this claim is true in general; however, I believe it applies to populism.

plausible mechanisms and patterns of populism. To evaluate these conceptions; however, we first need to understand that the explanatory target only makes sense within a model. Precisely what manifestations count as populism? Do any specific social and economic dynamics qualify as dynamics of populism? As is now obvious, populism designates not a single unambiguous concept, but a cluster of concepts and measures. Thus, how and why they relate is determined by a model of populism, a model that represents a conceptual sorting mechanism whose purpose is to help identify what kind of populism is at issue. The different descriptive explanations offered in the literature may not in fact be in competition because the *explananda* differ (Bramson et al. 2017).

If models are heuristic devices that structure the way we explore things, then we need to begin by asking what type of model is populism. The response is overwhelming in the literature that populism is an inductive model. In this respect, a model of populism has emerged as a type of “reasoning by analogy” (Nersessian 1999, pp. 20). Populism as a concept seems to have arisen from inductive conceptualizing of analogous historical events that required some type of characterization and identification. The emergence of grassroots movements in nineteenth century United States and Russia contributed to the ideographic identification of populism as a type of popular social mobilization in which the ideal of the people as “sovereign” and “indivisible” predominated against small elite. Populist manifestations in Latin America in the mid-twentieth century reinforced the centrality of the people and the element of anti-elitism in how populism appeared to operate as a social movement. Thus, the purpose and the utility of the model are directly linked to efforts to interpret and explore a phenomenon whose manifestations have been contextual, but persistent (Postel 2007).

Three broad waves of populism have been identified: agrarian populism, Latin American populism, and new-right populism. Agrarian populism is to be found in the Russian intellectual *Narodniki* in the second half of the nineteenth century, in the egalitarian struggle on behalf of Russian peasants. Also, the American People’s Party, which pleaded against capitalism in favor of agrarian socio-economic interests around the turn of the 20th century, is generally considered as an example of agrarian populism. Houwen (2011, pp. 8, 9) observes that “the term ‘populism’ arises at the end of the 19th century, during an era in which the notion of “the people” becomes a key word of modern politics and ‘democracy’ tends to be positively valued again.” Moreover, it was used to characterize the American Peoples Party founded in 1892. Notably, the Peoples Party appealed to the unprivileged position of the ordinary people and reclaimed the power of the people as a whole...” (Houwen 2011, pp. 9).”

The Latin American variant of populism prospered in the 1940s and 1950s with the authoritarian regimes of Péron in Argentina and Vargas in Brazil (Weyland 2001). These nationalist, charismatic leaders claimed to embody the people and to govern on their behalf against external nefarious forces.

A fourth wave of populism appeared in the 1990s. This wave of populism emerged in Europe, primarily as a kind of new-right populism. New-right populism typically focuses on issues such as immigration, taxes, crime, and nationalism. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, several Eastern Europe countries witnessed the emergence or resurgence of populist movements. In Latin America, a type of neoliberal and left-wing populism surged. Resurgence of populism in North

America has drawn scholarly attention. From the first two waves, two of the three defining elements in most conceptions of populism emerged: first, the centrality of the people and second, a strong anti-elitism. Within the model of populism, these two core elements of populism have remained the primary reason that the concept is invoked to explain populist movements and leaders in disparate places such as Sri Lanka, Thailand, Iran, India, and Russia.

An inductive model of populism is significant for two reasons. First, the model indicates that the factors behind the rise of populism are non-structural. What this means is that there is no underlying structural element—such as capitalism, globalization, and demography—that engenders populist manifestations cross-nationally. Muro (2017, pp. 11) captures this nicely:

In the absence of a general theory of populism, the scholarly literature has explained its emergence as the passive consequence of macro-level socio-economic 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 polarization 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 socio-economic changes but actively shape their destinies.

This is not to say that in specific places and under certain conditions structural factors do not contribute to the rise of populism movements, parties, or leaders, but it does indicate that there is no strong correlative relationship in which one can specify how a crisis of capitalism or globalization gives rise to populism. If this is the case, then efforts to theorize populism as a linear phenomenon or illustrative of some specifiable data generating process is a waste of time. Thus, context matters and any attempts at comparative cross-national analysis of populism must address this contextual fact and rely on the model to figure out how to generalize outside of context (Houle and Kenny 2016).

Second, as Pappas (2012, pp. 2) puts it, “populism obtains when a certain political entrepreneur is able to polarize politics by creating a cleavage based on the interaction between ‘the people’ versus some establishment,” thus forging a... political movement.” In this respect, the model of populism highlights the centrality of power and the politics of achieving it. This is what William Riker (1996, pp. 9, 10) defined as *heresthetics*; that is, a political strategy by which a person or group manipulates the context and decision-making process to win or disrupts the rules in their favor to win.³ From Riker we learn that all institutional equilibria are

³ This logic is also at the heart of what Riker (1996, pp. 9, 10) coins “*heresthetics*.” *Heresthetics* refers to a political strategy by which parties structure political competition in such a way that they gain leverage from competing on a pre-existing dimension on which advantages are already held or by introducing an issue dimension that allows them to reshuffle the current structure of party competition to their advantage.

susceptible to generic instability.⁴ Populism is often a source of this instability. Riker (1990) states that “what we have learned is simply this: disequilibrium, or the potential that the *status quo* be upset, is the characteristic feature of politics.” In many ways, Laclau (2005) has provided the best theorizing within the conceptual narrative of a populist model of the centrality of power and the strategy to win.

Finally, a model of populism evokes crisis (Kriesi 2014). Crisis and *heresthetics* are related. In his study of populism and crisis, Moffitt (2017) underscores the fact that populist manifestations do not only arise in response to crises, but that populism acts as a trigger to crisis. If a core dimension of populism is the disruption of the status quo, then crises are instrumental to any populist leader or movement as they seek to disrupt the status quo.

4 The Purpose of a Model

Since the purpose of models is to explore and seek out some conceptual clarity, we should expect competing and complementary theories and descriptions of why the non-structural basis to populism lends itself to contextualized manifestations of the phenomenon, and how populism intersects with power and institutional stability and instability (Riker 1982). I argue that the model of populism has contributed to effective descriptive analyses (Gerring 2012). We know a lot about populism and what engenders it.

However, in conflating theories and models, the literature has failed to recognize the development of an effective descriptive analysis of populism. At this point, three distinct descriptive analyses have emerged that help us understand, measure, and, *ceteris paribus*, even predict, to some degree, the rise of populist leaders, discourses, and movements. These descriptive analyses conceptualize populism as a “thin ideology,” as political strategy, and as communication style. My contention is that within a model of populism these descriptive analyses have fared better than others because an inductive model of populism imposes certain limitations on how we go about explaining it!

5 Populism as Ideology

Within any narrative or fable of populism, the people matter (Rooduijn 2013). As Müller (2016, pp. 5) argues, “populism... is a particular moralistic imagination of politics, a way of perceiving the political world that sets a morally pure and fully unified—but ... ultimately fictional—people against elites.” At the most general level, this is the bedrock of the populist notion and it is a recurrent theme in populist rhetoric and claims to legitimacy. Beyond the abstract claim to “the people,” there is obviously a great deal of variation in interpretations of what constitutes “the

⁴ As Hobolt and de Vries (2015: 1166) point out, “Riker uses the metaphor of the market to explain why losers in the political game will try to find some alternative that beats the current winner. The model of issue evolution has been successfully applied to explain the rise of issues, such as slavery, racial segregation, abortion, and ‘culture wars issues’ in the U.S. context.”

people.” Context, history, and leadership style play key roles in giving content to the abstraction of “the people” in populism. There was a degree of natural legitimacy attached to “the people” and illegitimacy to “the elite.” Both “the people” and “the elite” were rather nebulous ideation categories, but they nevertheless serve as nodal points. While “the people” versus “the elite” anchors the concept of populism as an ideology, the analytical use of the concept of populism as a way to understand and explain an ideological system is limited.

For this reason, populism is seen as a “thin ideology.” Mudde and Kaltwasser (2016, pp. 3) formulate it as follows

In theory, populism is an independent ideology, unattached to any particular other ideology. In practice, populism is almost always combined with one or more other ideological features. Which ideological features attach to populism depend upon the socio- political context within which the populist actors mobilize. Seen in this light, the rise and consolidation of populism is highly determined by national, regional, and historical circumstances, since the latter influence the shape of political ideologies, particularly when it comes to addressing “the people” living in a given territory in a particular point of time. At the same time, while populism does take a different shape in Europe and Latin America, populist actors always favor a particular type of politics, which is not anti-democratic per se but, rather, at odds with liberal democracy.

In a model of populism, it is inconceivable that we could make sense of it without defining in some way these ideological characteristics (Woods 2010; Elchardus and Spuryt 2016).

5.1 Populism as Political Strategy

In the now extensive literature on populism, a great deal of attention is paid to the political strategies of individuals and their use of populist ideology to mobilize “the people” against those in power (Moffitt 2016). In some cases, such as Hugo Chavez in Venezuela and Thaksin Shinawatra in Thailand, populism becomes the ideological vehicle through which a charismatic leader seeks or exercises government power based on direct, unmediated support from large numbers of mostly followers (Hawkins and Selway 2017). Within the model of populism the theory that looks at populism as political strategy focuses on shifts in the role of individuals in mobilizing and structuring populist movements. Oftentimes, a charismatic personality embodies “the people” and seeks to act as a *vox populi* to right the wrongs that “the people” have suffered at the hands of something external to them. Overall, as Helström (2013, pp. 9) notes,

populism as style refers to a certain way of doing politics. ... The populist style typically relies on the charismatic leadership to partly bypass established ways of doing politics via, e.g., party politics. Populist politics encourages direct channels for popular participation. The charismatic leader embodies the popular will in his or her persona. In this regard, the populist politician mobilizes voters along feelings of resentment, aiming to represent the

common sense of the ordinary people vis-à-vis the political institutions and the established (indirect) ways of doing politics.

By giving analytical primacy to populism as a political strategy, both conceptual and empirical foci turn to the populist leader. Ideology is often displaced with more attention going to the leader and the attachment forged between him and “the people.” The populist style has been attributed to dissimilar political figures such as Vladimir Putin in Russia, Shinawatra in Thailand, Bossi in Italy, and Wilders in the Netherlands. What ties these dissimilar political figures together is that populism as a political strategy evokes a style that connects to a certain personalization of politics and the Rikerian *heresthetics* of power politics and the disruption of institutional equilibrium.

5.2 Populism as Discursive Style

While some effort in the populist literature has been undertaken to separate the thin-ideological aspect of populism from its discursive style, as several of the articles in this issue and other studies have shown, the two are integral to each other. Carlos de la Torre (2000, pp. 4) defines populism as a “rhetoric that constructs politics as the moral and ethical struggle between *el pueblo* [the people] and the oligarchy.” As argued earlier, the binaries of populism “us versus them,” “the people” versus “the elite” anchors populism, even when it links to other ideologies, to a certain discursive style and form of mobilization. Basically, across all populist movements these binary elements predominate. Whether or not these binary elements are captured in the core beliefs of political actors as expressive of an ideology, or rather as a form of political expression that is employed selectively and strategically by both right and left, liberals and conservatives, depends on the context (Schmidt 2008).⁵

Despite some similarities between the ideological and discursive approaches, the differences between them carry significant conceptual and methodological implications and push researchers toward different modes of empirical inquiry (Jagers and Walgrave 2007; Bonikoski 2017; Aslanidis 2017b). The most important implications concern the units of analysis and measurement scales employed in the study of populism: considering populism as a discursive style lends itself to its operationalization as a gradational property of specific instances of political expression rather than as an essential attribute of political parties or political leaders that can be captured by a simple populist/non-populist dichotomy. Since political actors can shape and reshape their rhetorical style more easily than their official ideology, this definition makes it possible to more closely trace variations in levels and types of populist politics between political actors.

In keeping with Kögl’s (2010) argument that conceptions of populism need to be cognizant of levels of analysis, there are recent studies that are attempting to measure populism not only through discourse or content analysis, or focusing on the strategic behavior of elites, but at the individual level (Jennings 2011). Also,

⁵ Schmidt (2008).

experimental and simulation methods are being developed to add to the exploratory toolbox of the inductive model of populism. Muis and Scholte (2013) have employed agent-based modeling to tease out the mechanisms by which populist parties evolve and adapt in their search for winning positions. They argued that agent-based modeling is a fruitful tool to systematically map out the implications of hypotheses on the behavior of parties, voters, and their interactions. The agent-based modeling should be complemented with game-theoretic methodology in some instances as a way to sharpen our focus on the underlying strategic or decision-theoretic logic of populist leaders.

6 Good Models are Useful Models

My central thesis is that there is not a problem with how to define populism since it is not a singular phenomenon and that too much “ink” has been wasted on articulating the right definition. While there is no singular definition of populism, this does not mean that populism cannot be defined. It can and it has been. The most useful definitions of populism have arisen in an inductive model of the phenomenon that the literature failed to explicitly develop but has generated nonetheless by default. By providing a disambiguation of populism into three distinct descriptive *explananda* as part of a broader model, I have sought to facilitate how we should think about populism. In doing so, I have made three bold claims. First, populism cannot be adequately conceptualized outside of a model. Second, there is no theory of populism; there are “mere descriptions” of it and descriptive explanations of its contextual manifestations (Golder and Golder 2016). Finally, despite the uneasiness that academics have about the concept, the implicit inductive modeling of populism has resulted in a rich descriptive and empirical literature that suggests that we have accumulated a great deal of knowledge about it. In this respect, since a good model is judged by how useful it is, the inductive model of populism has proven to be quite effective.

As the articles in this special issue show, the future direction of work on populism lies in moving beyond how it is defined and whether it is a “thin ideology,” discourse, or movement and towards deeper explorations for why populism is such a contextual phenomenon, and in what ways, as Aslanidis (2017a) suggests, the literature can move beyond its biases. Moreover, there are other aspects of populism that remain unexplored. For instance, why does the ideational core, i.e., the “thin ideology, of populism need to piggy back on other ideological traditions? (Ricoeur 1979). Providing some understanding of the affinity of populism with other ideologies is a lot more useful than arguments that it is not a thin or thick ideology (Freeden 2017). In other words, what is it about populism that engenders such an eclectic affinity with other ideologies? Also, what is the relationship between populism, broadly understood as an ideology, discursive phenomenon, and movement, to political regimes and representation (Caramani 2017)? There is little evidence that permits us to think about populism as a regime type. Nonetheless, populist discourse, ideology, and movements affect political regimes and modes of representation (Van Hauwaert and Van Kessel 2017; Norris

and Inglehart 2017). The nature of the effects appears also to be contextual. The centrality of populism under Chavez and the popular socialist regime he presided over is quite different from the effects of the populism in Orbán's Hungary.

The upshot is that an inductive model of populism has resulted in a large and diverse literature and, as shown in this special issue, is producing a conceptually and empirically rich understanding of an elusive phenomenon. Without abusing the analogy, populism is a little like the quantum in quantum mechanics. We know its there, we know its real, but it has the odd character of being in more than one place at the same time and nowhere. However, as Weinberg argued, the model of quantum physics has helped to produce great insights despite doubts regarding extant theories of it.⁶

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