Populism: Defining Characteristics

Abstract This chapter explores and synthesizes the defining characteristics of left- and right-wing populism in previous research. In conclusion, populism has three modes. A first that emphasizes the use of unserious and ill-founded policy solutions to complex social and economic problems, and a second that focuses on a specific set of political strategies which use a distinct rhetorical style and discursive frame to deliberately polarize society, and a third that stresses the autocratic institutional orientation that follows. The three modes often go together and form the political strategies that populists use.

Keywords Populism · Defining characteristics · Populist strategies · Unserious policies · Polarization · Autocratic orientation · Left- and rightwing populism

There is today a huge, expanding literature in the social sciences about populism. After having surveyed the major empirical and theoretical contributions, an obvious conclusion is that it is hard to define populism. It comes in many shades, some to the left and some to the right, but also in the center. As pointed out by Taggart (2000), populism is like a chameleon, adapting to the colors of the environment, local and ideological. Hence, as noted above, populism is not an ideology in the traditional

sense like liberalism, conservatism, or socialism. It does not have a distinct set of core values and beliefs about how the world works or a particular view of human nature. Moreover, there are degrees of populism. Consequently, I shall instead of attempting to give a strict definition provide some defining characteristics of populism and populists.

Simplifying, populism may be said to have three modes. In popular discourse and among economists' populism is often seen as a politics that appeals to the people by advocating unserious and ill-founded policies. However, in the broader social science literature populism has increasingly become identified with a distinct set of political strategies that deliberately cultivate the polarization of society. As we shall see, these first two modes often go together, resulting in the third, a process of creeping autocratization. This is when populism becomes a real threat to liberal democracy, markets, and the open society.

Unserious and Ill-Founded Policies

Populists are thus often, especially by economists, considered to offer unserious and ill-founded policy solutions to complex social and economic problems, often some sort of economic or social crises, to get elected. Or more generally, offering simplistic answers to complex questions. Typical examples of this mode are major increases in public spending and redistribution at the same time as advocating tax cuts or favoring severe punishments as the sole measure to battle crime or juvenile pregnancies.

For example, Williamson (1992: 347) defined populism as "the phenomenon where a politician tries to win power ... with sweeping promises of benefits and concessions ... to the lower classes". Dornbusch and Edwards (1991) defined it as a set of economic policies aimed at redistributing income by implementing policies that violate 'good economics', including budget constraints and efficiency principles. Similarly, Rodrik (2018: 196) sees populism as a set of "irresponsible, unsustainable policies that often end in disaster and hurt most ordinary people they purportedly aim to help". These kinds of policies are a major factor contributing to the often-observed economic decline under populist rule (Dornbusch & Edwards, 1991; Dovis et al., 2016).

In an analysis of more than 20 experiences or episodes of populism in Latin America from 1946 to 2019—including the regimes of Juan Peron in Argentine, Salvador Allende in Chile, Rafael Correa in Ecuador, Hugo Chavez and Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela, and Jair Bolsonaro in

Brazil—Edwards (2010) distinguishes between five phases that may be summarized as follows:

1. The election or rise of a charismatic leader who advocates heterodox economic policies to redistribute income, explicitly ignoring constraints on public expenditures and monetary expansion.
2. The economy reacts strongly to aggregate demand shock; and growth, real wages, and employment are high.
3. The economy runs into bottlenecks due to expansionary demand, lack of foreign currency, and capital flight; inflation increases significantly, wages are indexed, and budget deficits continue to worsen.
4. Pervasive shortages, increased capital flights, and an extreme acceleration of inflation; price controls are intensified, and the currency is devalued.
5. Collapse, and cleanup by a new government, often through the enactment of an International Monetary Fund program.

In the more recent examples of populism that he documents, inflation did not soar to the same extent, while public debt instead exploded, and protectionist policies, mandatory minimum wages increase, and constitutional reforms were implemented. Nevertheless, in all cases, as a result of the populist policies, the real incomes—and in particular the incomes of the poor—declined to levels significantly lower than when the populist episodes started. Moreover, the institutions of democracy and the open society were undermined. Significantly, 13 of these 20 experiences involved left-wing governments (see also Cachanosky & Padilla, 2021).

In an extensive historical study by Funke et al. (2020) a quantitative evaluation of 50 populist regimes from 1900 to 2018 was carried out, showing that the populists underperform significantly: 15 years after the populist takeover, GDP per capita was 10% below the non-populist counterfactual, and income inequality did not fall. Rising economic nationalism and protectionism, unsustainable macroeconomic policies, and institutional decay under populist rule did lasting damage to the economies.

A RHETORICAL STYLE AND DISCOURSE FRAME

In sociology and political science, populism is instead often characterized as a specific political style, discourse frame or strategy, designed to mobilize the deserving majority (the 'people') against, allegedly, corrupt, conspiring elites and the institutions they occupy. From this mode or perspective, populism may be presented as a seemingly democratic device. Müller (2016) among others, however, argues that it often hides dangerously anti-democratic impulses which can stray into authoritarianism.

The deliberate polarization of politics and society is at the core of this strategy, using emotional arguments and framing to create anger and moral outrage toward opponents and their supporters (Prior & van Hoef, 2018). On this interpretation, the active promotion of political conflict is central to populism. The polarization of politics and society into an 'us versus them' antagonism is the deliberate means used to mobilize support. Often a real or imagined economic or social crisis of some kind, increasing uncertainty, is used to trigger such sentiments. The two modes of populism may thus develop together.

It has been argued that it is possible to distinguish between ideational, political-strategical, and socio-cultural approaches to the concept of populism (Kaltwasser et al., 2017), but in my view, they can all be viewed as characterizing populism as a specific kind of political strategy with a specific institutional orientation, namely, to seek polarization to promote autocratization. By political strategy is here simply meant a plan for how to gain power and stay in power.

The populists thus portray or frame themselves as the true democrats and the representatives of the people against the elites (Mudde 2004; Müller, 2016), whether political, economic, or cultural, often called "the establishment". Populists also most often identify, or create, external enemies, 'others', whom they blame for the shortcomings of their own societies. It could be immigrants, Romani, or Jews, or even foreign or supranational powers like the World Bank, the European Union, international corporations, or the globalized economy itself. According to Galston (2017), this means that a kind of tribalism is typical for populist movements.

According to Mudde (2007), populism moreover claims that politics should be an expression of the *volonté general* (general will) of the people, based on the ideas of Rousseau. Consequently, populists do not believe in constitutional constraints on democratic processes or the

rights of minorities against the will of the majority. Populists dislike the check-and-balances of liberal democracy (Urbinati, 2019) and are anti-pluralists (Galston, 2017). Populists are ultra-majoritarian. The 'people' that populist appeal to are at most a majority of the voters, as Urbinati (2019) has pointed out. According to Diamond (2019), populism thus has four core features: anti-elitist; anti-institutional; plebiscitary, and ultra-majoritarian. Populists in this way aim to create a direct connection with their supporters, unmediated by political parties, civil society groups, or the media, using mass meetings, television shows, and digital channels.

Populist leaders are often seen as charismatic demagogues who have an intuitive sense for using this 'us versus them' logic in media and in speeches (Eichengreen, 2018). As the 'true' representatives of the people, they prefer to communicate directly to people on television, mass meetings, press conferences, and, nowadays, social media platforms, without interfering filters or commentators. Kenny (2017) explicitly understands populism as a distinctively personalistic type of political movement or organization in which charismatic leaders look to directly mobilize mass constituencies through the media and other means.

Typically, populists also deliberately show crude, ruthless, unrestrained, "bad boy" manners (Moffitt, 2016). Ostiguy (2017) has called this "flaunting of the 'low'" in politics, to show that the populist leaders themselves come from the people. This is in contrast with the 'high' style of the established elites, in which public self-presentation is well-mannered, proper, and composed. For example, Rodrigo Duterte, the former, popular president of the Philippines, not only pioneered a brutal tough-on-crime policy involving extrajudicial killings of alleged criminals, but also bragged about extramarital affairs and, on separate occasions, referred to both the US President and the Pope as a "Son of a Whore" (Beauchamp, 2022). Donald Trump in the US arguably showed the same kind of "bad boy" manors in his attacks on opponents, media, and the courts, just as Hugo Chavez in Venezuela and many others (Ostiguy & Roberts, 2016).

At the same time, populist leaders also need to signal that they somehow are above and better than the people and therefore deserve to rule and represent them (Moffitt, 2016). Various techniques are used to show such extraordinariness, including showing off wealth, and masculinity, and presenting themselves as the singular figure who can fix the economy and the law and order, etc. Ultimately, populist leaders see themselves as symbols, embodying the true people. As put by Hugo Chavez: "I am the people" (Zúquete, 2008).

Apart from promises of policies of the kinds described in the previous section, populists usually have strong opinions about how their societies should be, depending on their ideological leanings. For conservatives, it may concern the promotion of traditional values, for socialists it may be the equality of resources. They are willing to use the state to promote the "good" or the values they favor through taxes, regulations, and interventions in markets and civil society. Individual rights are subordinated to the "common good", or general will, as interpreted by the populist leadership.

The rhetorical styles or discourse frames of populists involve the use of narratives that "construct" the people and their different enemies. Emotions of belonging and identity, rather than rational arguments about facts and empirical evidence, are central to these populist strategies. The narratives typically involve a demand for respect and recognition of the lives of ordinary, hard-working people, who are said to be left behind and ignored by the elites and established institutions.'Facts' and 'news' are constructed and contrasted to the 'lies' of opponents, or the 'fake news' of the media.

To some extent, all politics in democratic societies have some of these elements of populism in it, a fact that often can be observed in heated election campaigns and the like when opponents attack each other. However, populists are willing to use the kind of strategies and narratives described above to the extreme. While not in any sense democratic, the same is true of autocratic regimes like Putin's Russia and Xi Jinping's China.

As we shall see in a coming chapter, these populist strategies are based on several divisive, activist ideas and the deliberate denial of rational discourse, objectivity, and truth. These ideas originate from Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, and Carl Schmitt, later to be developed by thinkers within post-modernism and critical theory, to form the basis for both left- and right-wing populism.

LEFT- AND RIGHT-WING POPULISM

There are both left- and right-wing versions of how populists frame the 'us-versus-them' logic. Those on the left commonly argue that" neoliberalism" is to blame for all kinds of economic and social problems. According to this rhetorical framing, it was the deregulations, privatizations, and tax cuts starting in the 1980s that are the causes of all kinds

of problems within education and healthcare systems, with consequences like inequality, a precariat, etc. An overall theme in this construct is that neoliberalism has enabled huge transnational corporations to use the state (especially in the US) to promote their own interests (see e.g., Cayla, 2021; Elliott, 2021; Harvey, 2007; Mirowski & Plehwe, 2009). I shall return to the question of neoliberalism in Chapter 6.

Those on the right instead blame liberalism more generally for causing threats to traditional family values, religion, and communities. In their narrative, it is untrammeled markets, competition, choice, "identity politics", LGBTQ rights, abortion rights, etc., but also immigrants, Islam, etc., that cause the threats to national culture and to social and economic stability (see e.g., Deneen 2018; Hazony, 2018). Table 2.1 summarizes how left-wing and right-wing populists frame the 'us-versus-them' logic (partly inspired by Kyle & Gultchin, 2018).

Right-wing populist strategies thus differ to some extent from those on the left, even though they use the same kind of strategy. As shown in the table they differ in how they construct the people, the elite, and the 'others', and in the key themes they emphasize. But the structure of how they go about creating polarization is largely similar.

The left-wing populist parties and politicians, like the Podemos in Spain, Syriza in Greece, and all their Latin American counterparts, all

Table 2.1 Ways that populists frame the 'us-versus-them' logic

	Left-wing populism	*Right-wing populism*
The 'people'	The working class, ordinary, decent people, welfare recipients, the "precariat"	'Native' citizens, patriots, often rural and religious, ordinary, hardworking people, taxpayers
The 'elite'	Neoliberals, right-wing media, right of center political parties, experts, capitalists, IMF, World Bank	Academics, experts, left-wing media, established parties, international organizations, EU, cosmopolitan elites
The 'others'	Big business, capital owners, foreign companies, actors on the global markets, US, EU	Migrants, non-natives, ethnic and religious minorities, Muslims, Jews
Key themes	Anti-capitalism, anti-globalization, neoliberalism, exploitation, protectionism, anti-Americanism, inequality, redistribution, restoring welfare systems	Nationalism, cultural identity, anti-immigration, traditionalism, law and order, anti-globalization, national sovereignty, protectionism, restoring welfare systems

use classical Marxist and socialist ways of framing capitalists, big business, capitalist institutions, globalization, and the like as the enemies of the 'people', the working class, with common themes around inequality, redistribution, and welfare. Bernie Sanders in the US and Jeremy Corbyn in the UK are two well-known examples. This is the kind of rhetorical style that socialists and many social democratic parties have used for the last 100 years or more.

The right-wing populist parties and politicians, on the other hand, as the Lega in Italy, Fidesz in Hungary, the National Rally (National Front before 2018) in France, United Kingdom Independence Party, UKIP in the UK, Alternative für Deutschland, AFD, in Germany, Law and Justice party, PiS, in Poland, Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs, FPÖ, in Austria, and the Swedish Democrats in Sweden, but also Trump in the US, Bolsonaro in Brazil, Erdoğan in Turkey, and many others, are nativist or nationalists that frame experts, established parties, left-wing media, international organizations, cosmopolitan elites, immigrants, ethnic and religious minorities as enemies of the people. Common themes among these are nationalism, protectionism, anti-pluralism, cultural identity, law and order, traditional values, and the restoration of welfare systems.

In a slightly similar way, Kyle and Gultchin (2018) have distinguished between three types of populism: (1) "cultural populists" that claim that the true people are the native members of the nation-state and with outsiders such as immigrants, criminals, ethnic and religious minorities, and cosmopolitan elites; (2) "socio-economic populists" that claim that the true people are honest, hard-working members of the working class, and outsiders that include big business, capital owners and actors perceived as propping up an international capitalist system; and (3) "anti-establishment populists" that paint the true people as hard-working victims of a state run by special interests and outsiders as political elites. In all cases, including those in the center, the populist parties adapt to the local conditions.

Norris (2020), based on a global expert survey, differentiates between the economic and social values of different types of populist parties, which gives a more nuanced view than the simple left–right dimension. In Table 2.2 some examples are given:

Table 2.2 Varieties of populism

	Left-wing economic values	*Right-wing economic values*
Conservative social values	Hungary's Fidesz, Polish Law and Justice party, Danish People's Party	Swiss People's Party, Israel's Likud, India's *Bharatiya Janata Party*, BJP, Greek Golden Dawn, US Republicans
Liberal social values	Spain's Podemos, Greece's Syrzia, Italy's Five Star Movement	Bangladesh Jatiya Party, Norway Progress Party

For example, Poland's Law and Justice party (in common with many Eastern European populist parties) is leftwing towards the economy and welfare state but highly traditional in its social values, regarding Christianity, homosexuality, and immigrants. By contrast, fewer populist parties are seen by experts as free market economically and socially liberal, but there are some, such as the Norwegian Progress party. The position of several of the parties mentioned can of course be discussed. It is worth noting as well that some populist parties or movements are hard to classify as either left or right. They may be at the very center of politics, both economically and socially, but they may also be formed from a completely different standpoint, e.g., as Islamist parties, that use exactly the same kind of strategies as those described above.

An Autocratic Institutional Orientation

When populists get into power the rhetorical style and discourse frames tend to be used to implement successive autocratic measures, like limiting the opposition through manipulating elections, thwarting the free press, changing the constitution in their own favor, and circumscribing minority, civil, political, and economic rights.

This should come as no surprise, given the populists' anti-pluralism, their belief that established elites or the opposition per definition are treasonous, and their conviction that they represent the general will of the people. Since they represent the true people, other people's votes do not count as legitimate. This autocratic orientation is what makes populism a real threat to liberal democracy and an open society. This is also why populist tendencies and the use of populist strategies by established democratic parties and actors may have long-run dangerous effects on our societies.

As argued by Krygier et al. (2022), it is common for populists to weaken or dismantle legal and constitutional checks upon executive and/or legislative powers, thus distorting and typically seeking to subvert democratic and constitutional rules of the game, but not by abolishing them wholesale. The public institutions, just like the public radio and television services, are filled with loyal supporters, while their private counterparts become controlled by various clients of the populist regimes.

This autocratic institutional orientation is prevalent on both the left and the right, as examples from Latin America and Eastern Europe show (V-Dem Institute, 2022). For example, as Weyland (2013) has shown, in Latin America democracy has been on the defensive under the cover of progressive rhetoric with leaders like Hugo Chávez who eroded institutional checks and balances, marginalized the opposition through discriminatory legalism, and severely skewed political competition. The same is true of more right-wing leaders like Victor Orbán in Hungary and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey.

Populists are thus usually not against electoral democracy per se, but rather at odds with liberal democracy (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012, 2017). They are hostile to the underlying values and principles of constitutionalism, and to institutional practices that have been developed to serve those values and principles, while elections are still held, and repeatedly so, to boost the legitimacy of the regime (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). Usually, these authoritarian ambitions are not proclaimed openly, but, as many know, in 2014 Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán openly declared his vision for an "illiberal democracy", based on a strong state, a weak opposition, and emaciated checks and balances (Belov, 2021). This means the end of liberty and an open society.

Diamond (2019) has described this process as "the autocrats' twelve-step program":

1. Begin to demonize the opposition as illegitimate and unpatriotic.
2. Undermine the independence of the courts.
3. Attack the independence of the media.
4. Gain control of any public broadcasting.
5. Impose strict control of the internet.
6. Subdue other elements of civil society.
7. Intimidate the business community.
8. Enrich a new class of crony capitalists.
9. Assert political control over the civil service and the security apparatus.

10. Gerrymander districts and rig the electoral rules.
12. Gain control of the body that runs the elections.
13. Repeat steps 1– 1.

The Populist Strategies

To summarize, in my interpretation populism has three modes: a first that emphasizes the use of unserious and ill-founded policy solutions to complex social and economic problems, and a second that focuses on a specific set of political strategies which use a distinct rhetorical style and discursive frame to deliberately polarize society, and a third that stresses the autocratic institutional orientation that follows. The three modes often go together forming the political strategies that populists use.

Table 2.3 summarizes the main characteristics of the major populist strategies under two headings: rhetorical style and discursive frame, and autocratic orientation.

Table 2.3 The major populist strategies

A.	**Rhetorical style and discursive framing**
1.	Use any kind of crisis or major economic and social changes to delegitimize established parties and elites
2.	Promote unserious and ill-founded policy solutions
3.	Portray yourself and your movement as the symbolic representative of the'true people'
4.	Foster polarization, use the 'us-versus-them' logic, attack the establishment and different elites
5.	Identify 'others' that threatens the existential identity of the 'true people'
6.	Demonize opponents, attack media and science for producing lies and fake news
7.	Flaunt the 'low', be intolerant and ruthless
8.	Use narratives and emotional arguments about identity, rather than rational arguments and evidence, and call for the respect for and recognition of ordinary people
B.	**Autocratic institutional orientation**
1.	Create a direct relationship with the 'people' through charismatic leadership and by circumventing representative government
2.	Take control of the courts, the public service, media companies, and restrict media freedom
3.	Manipulate elections, abolish minority rights, constitutional constraints, and the rule of law to establish an illiberal democracy
4.	Use the power of the state to promote your own ideas of the good
5.	Favor creeping autocratization, the gradual decline of the democratic, open society, rather than open coups

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