

Week 13. Populism

1 Müller, “What Populists Say”

Populism is a contested concept: there is no clear, universal meaning associated with it in common discourse.

Understanding Populism: Dead Ends (11)

Some possible ways to understand populism:

1. Populism is “political pandering”, favouring irresponsible policies;
2. Populism are movements favouring the petty bourgeoisie and farmers, channelling their anger at modernity;
3. Populism is best understood by listening to what populists say.

Against (1): Even though many populist policies are irresponsible, this is not enough to set populism apart from other movements (13). Also, what counts as “responsible” is a partisan notion.

Against (2): This definition is empirically questionable. Populist parties can have diverse demographic profiles (14-5). Psychologizing analyses focussing on anger and other emotions ignore that people follow populists for reasons (16). In general, this account relies on implausible modernisation theory (17).

Against (3): We might look for the definition of populism at historical figures like the *narodniki*. But we should not simply believe how particular historical figures have defined their own isms.

Questions for Discussion. (1) What speaks against a historical inquiry to find the meaning of “populism”? (2) How should we see claims about populism in light of results on voter ignorance? (3) Does “populism” necessarily have a negative connotation? Should it?

The Logic of Populism (19)

Instead, “populism [...] is a particular *moralistic imagination of politics*, a way of perceiving the political world that sets a morally pure and fully unified [...] people against elites who are deemed corrupt or in some other way morally inferior” (19).

Populists are always anti-pluralist. They claim that they represent the people, and no one else; moreover, “only some of the people are really the people” (21). So fighting for the *plebs* is not populism; but identifying the *plebs* with the whole of the people is populism (23).

In opposition to “the people”, populists put the notion of a corrupt elite (23). Populists rely on some moralist distinction between “pure” and “impure” people.

Questions for Discussion. (1) Does this fully capture what we talk about populism? (1) What (if anything) is morally problematic with the type of populism Müller describes?

Just What Exactly Do Populists Claim to Represent? (25)

Populists are not against representation, though they have a narrow vision of it. Populists believe that “there is a single common good, that the people can discern and will it, and that a politician or party [...] can unambiguously implement it as policy” (25). Example: Orban’s claim that “we all know [what] needs to be done” (26).

How do populists explain that they’re not already in government? It’s because “the people” have failed to speak—cf. Nixon’s notion of the “silent majority” (27). Populists always rely on some illusion of “the people” which are essentially unrepresentable (28-9).

Populists also have no problem with elites as such (29–30)—as long as *they* are the elites. So it is naïve to object that populist leaders are part of the elite. Populists make a distinction between the elite and the “proper” elite.

Because the popular will is easily discernible, there is no real need for deliberation. Constitutions and imaginary “contracts” with the people can be created without deliberation (31).

Populist Leadership (32)

Many populist leaders are often not average people. Still, populists see no contradiction in this. Populist leaders are thought to be excellent at discerning what “the people” want (33–4). Such leaders might know this even before the people do.

What legitimises populist leaders is their “direct” connection to the people—their claim to “directly represent” the common people. Example: Beppe Grillo’s claim to “play the amplifier”; Trump’s use of Twitter.

Populist parties often lack democratic organisation: if the will of the people is so clearly discernible, what is the point in deliberation? (36). Example: Geert Wilders’ PVV.

Questions for Discussion. (1) How do populist movements rely on illusions? (2) Why is the non-democratic form of populist movement not a contradiction of their own views?

One More Time: Isn’t Everyone a Populist, Then? (38)

Many political factions make claims that they are right, and their opponents are mistaken. But non-populists respect the *fallibility* of such claims (39). Populists claim that they’re more than just a political faction.

2 Mudde and Kaltwasser, “Populism and Democracy”

Main claim: populism by itself is neither good nor bad; it can be a threat or a corrective for democracy.

Populism and (liberal) democracy (80)

We should define *democracy* as “the combination of popular sovereignty and majority rule” (80). We must distinguish this from a wider definition of *liberal democracy* which also includes institutions focussed on fundamental rights.

Populism is “essentially democratic, but at odds with *liberal* democracy” (81). Populists distrust unelected institutions. It can develop into “democratic extremism” (82). It limits public contestation, but can increase political participation—e.g., by giving voice to the silent majority (84). (See table on p. 83 for a full overview of positive and negative effects.)

Questions for Discussion. (1) If this is correct, are pure proceduralists about democracy necessarily “populists”? (2) Is this an overly charitable interpretation of populism? (3) How does this definition compare with Müller’s?

Populism and the process of (de-)democratization (86)

Rather than thinking about democracy in a static way, it is also helpful to think about democratization and de-democratization. We can distinguish four systems: (1) full authoritarianism, (2) competitive authoritarianism, (3) electoral democracy, (4) liberal democracy. Populism has different effects on the transitions between these types of regime.

Democratisation Processes

Liberalisation (from (1) to (2)): “populism ends to be [...] a positive force for democracy” (88), as it helps to articulate demands of popular sovereignty. Example: Poland’s *Solidarność*.

Democratic transition (from (2) to (3)): “populism plays an ambiguous, but still rather constructive role” (89), because populists advance the idea that the people, rather than elites, should rule. Example: Mexico’s *Partido de la Revolución Democrática*.

Democratic deepening (from (3) to (4)): “[theoretically], populists are at odds with the process of democratic deepening” (90).

De-democratisation Processes

Democratic erosion (from (4) to (3)): populists are inclined to support this transition. Example: Hungary’s *Fidesz*.

Democratic breakdown (from (3) to (2)): populists will play an ambiguous role, because they are inclined to tilt the rules in their favour (91-2). Example: Peru’s Fujimori.

Repressiveness (from (2) to (1)): “populists will generally oppose this process of repressiveness” (92). Example: Belarus’ Lukashenko.

Questions for Discussion. (1) Do these distinctions help us to think about Trump? (2) Does populism always help to deepen democracy?

Intervening Variables (93)

The strength and impact of populism will vary depending on a number of factors—(i) power of the populist actors, (ii) the type of political system (e.g., presidential or parliamentary), (iii) international context (e.g., integration within EU).

Populism and democracy revisited (95)

Summary:

In essence, populism is not against democracy; rather it is at odds with liberal democracy. It is a set of ideas that defends extreme majoritarianism and supports a form of illiberal democracy. (95)

3 Looking Back

Guiding Questions

Remember our two guiding questions:

1. *is democracy intrinsically valuable?* Answers:
instrumentalism / proceduralism / hybrid views
2. *what makes democracy valuable?* Answers:
equality / deliberation / representation / consent / voting / outcomes / ...

Surveying the Field

What answers to these questions do the authors give we have discussed so far? (see next page)

What connections can we find between these different authors?

Which of these answers do you find most promising?

What has been overlooked in the literature (we have discussed)?

Issues Raised by Different Authors

author	themes / insights
2 <i>Brett-schneider</i>	Fundamental distinctions (instrumentalism, proceduralism, hybrid views) Conflicts between different dimensions
<i>Anderson</i>	Different ways to understand democracy Democracy as a culture and as a “way of life” Democracy as a way of collective learning
3 <i>Dworkin</i>	Influence vs Impact, Equal Influence vs Equal Opportunity for Influence Choice-Sensitive vs Choice-Insensitive Issues
4 <i>Green</i>	Remove and Manyness Second-Class Citizenship Plutocracy: wealth will always be a factor
<i>Gilens/Page</i>	Testing four Theories: Majoritarian Electoral Democracy, Economic-Elite Domination, Majoritarian Pluralism, Biased Pluralism
5 <i>Christiano</i>	Pervasive Disagreement and Fallibility Publicity (“Justice must be seen to be done”) Equal Promotion of Interests as a Foundation
<i>Brennan</i>	Epistocracy vs Democracy Political Competence as a skill like others Problems with semiotic arguments
6 <i>Gutmann/Thompson</i>	Deliberative democracy: nature, forms, distinctions, benefits The reason-giving requirement in deliberative democracy
<i>Lafont</i>	The idea of mini-publics Conflicts between ideal and implementation Idealised deliberators vs. actual people
7 <i>Huemer</i>	Explicit vs implicit consent Conditions for valid consent (e.g., exit option) Actual democracy does not rest on consent

8 <i>Mansbridge</i>	Descriptive representation <i>De facto</i> legitimacy
9 <i>Brennan</i>	Wide-spread political ignorance Cognitive biases in politics Voters vote altruistically
<i>Landemore</i>	Collective Competence Condorcet Jury Theorem, Miracle of Aggregation, “Diversity Trumps Ability” theorem
10 <i>Dowding</i>	Utility of Voting ($u = pB - C + D$) Paradox of Voting (voting looks irrational) Expressive Benefits of Voting (D-term solution)
<i>Lomasky/Brennan</i>	Arguments for Duty to Vote: prudence, consequentialism, fairness/generalization, expression Voting as being a sports fan
11 <i>Goodin</i>	The Demos Problem: who should be included? The All-Affected Principle Global Democracy
<i>Miller</i>	The Coercion Principle Democratic values that entail inclusion/exclusion Infeasibility of All-Affected Principle
12 <i>Brennan</i>	The Competence Principle, The Jury Analogy Estlund’s Expert/Boss Fallacy Estlund’s Qualified Acceptability Requirement
<i>Cholbi</i>	Strict and Proportional Retributivism Social Benefits of Felon Disenfranchisement Fundamental Right of Self-Determination
13 <i>Müller</i>	Populism as “moralistic imagination of politics” The illusion of a unitary “the people” The people vs the elites
<i>Mudde/Kaltwasser</i>	Democracy vs liberal democracy Democratisation and de-democratisation Populism as an ambiguous force