



SAMUEL NEAMAN INSTITUTE
FOR NATIONAL POLICY RESEARCH

Populism

A Survey of Recent Research

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Contents

Defining Populism	4
Measuring Populism Worldwide	5
Populist Ideas	5
How to Study Populism	6
Trump, Republicans and Populism in the US	7
Populism and Nationalism	7
Populism in Israel	8
Populism and the Economy	11
Conclusion	11

"For too long, a small group in our nation's Capital has reaped the rewards of government while the people have borne the cost. Washington flourished – but the people did not share in its wealth. Politicians prospered – but the jobs left, and the factories closed. The establishment protected itself, but not the citizens of our country. Their victories have not been your victories; their triumphs have not been your triumphs; and while they celebrated in our nation's Capital, there was little to celebrate for struggling families all across our land.

That all changes – starting right here, and right now, because this moment is your moment: it belongs to you. It belongs to everyone gathered here today and everyone watching all across America.

This is your day. This is your celebration. And this, the United States of America, is your country. What truly matters is not which party controls our government, but whether our government is controlled by the people."

- Donald Trump, Inaugural Address, Jan. 20, 2017¹

In the 2016 US Presidential election, the Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton received about 2.9 million more votes nationwide than Donald Trump -- a margin of 2.1% of the total cast. However, Trump won a victory in the Electoral College, winning 30 states with 306 pledged electors out of 538. Despite losing the popular vote, Trump unabashedly celebrated 'government...controlled by the people' in his inaugural address. In doing so, he validated the claim that his dominant theme is not 'Right', or Republican, but rather populist.

Trump joins a large and growing number of leaders globally who espouse populism, some of whom have become elected leaders.

This survey reviews recent research on populism, its nature and essential elements and values.

We begin by defining populism.

¹ Trump, D. J. (2017, January 20). The Inaugural Address. The White House. <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/the-inaugural-address/>

Defining Populism

Hunger and Paxton² note the longstanding lack of “conceptual clarity and consensus on what the term populism denotes” (p. 617). But they assert that “most scholars defer to Mudde’s definition of populism as:

“an 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 *volonte generale* (general will) of the people. Populism, so defined, has two opposites: Elitism and pluralism. Elitism is populism’s mirror image. It shares the Manichean worldview [those who see the world as black and white, good and evil] but wants politics to be an expression of the views of the moral elite, instead of the amoral people.”

Mudde³ notes several key characteristics of populism.

* Populism is a distinct ideology [any system of ideas and ideals], but does not possess ‘the same level of intellectual refinement and consistency as, for example, socialism or liberalism’.

* Populism is not defined ‘on the basis of a special type of organization, i.e. charismatic leadership, or as a special style of communication (i.e. without intermediaries). These features facilitate rather than define populism.’

Mudde notes ‘the general trend towards strong party leaders and more direct communication between party leadership and party supporters, developed over the past decades.’

Mudde would likely agree that the rise of the Internet and social media has greatly enhanced and facilitated ‘direct communication’. See Engesser et al.⁴.

Norris⁵ prefers a looser definition of populism, noting that it is defined as an ideology, a looser ‘set of ideas’, and a form of political rhetoric, ‘without a consensus in the subfield’.

² Hunger, S., & Paxton, F. (2022). What's in a buzzword? A systematic review of the state of populism research in political science. *Political Science Research and Methods*, 10(3), 617-633.

³ Mudde, C. (2004). The populist zeitgeist. *Government and opposition*, 39(4), 541-563.

⁴ Engesser, S., Ernst, N., Esser, F., & Büchel, F. (2017). Populism and social media: How politicians spread a fragmented ideology. *Information, communication & society*, 20(8), 1109-1126.

⁵ Norris, P. (2020). Measuring populism worldwide. *Party politics*, 26(6), 697-717.

Measuring Populism Worldwide

Norris⁵ focuses on how to measure populism “in consistent, valid and reliable ways, facilitating identification of varieties of populism in countries around the world?” Norris uses a core measure to operationalize populist rhetoric:

“[political] parties can be classified by their current use of populist or pluralist rhetoric. Populist language typically challenges the legitimacy of established political institutions and emphasizes that the will of the people should prevail. By contrast, pluralist rhetoric rejects these ideas, believing that elected leaders should govern, constrained by minority rights, bargaining and compromise, as well as checks and balances on executive power.”

Norris studies independent nation-states worldwide in 2018. She finds that “despite being often labeled ‘radical right’, in fact populist parties are also distributed in the other quadrants”. E.g. Denmark’s People’s Party and the Czech Freedom and Direct Democracy party, both Center-Left. Top right (political ideology) quadrant includes many populist parties (right wing re the economy, embracing traditional social values), however, “parties using populist rhetoric fall across the economic spectrum”.

Western European populism is commonly associated with the radical right, though there are exceptions. However, “42% of populist parties around the world were socially conservative, but located on the left toward the economy”.

Western European and US populism tends to occur among parties classified as Right or Far Right. In contrast, Latin American populism tends to be among parties classified as Left.

Populist Ideas

Tables 3 and 4 in Norris⁵ show the correlations between two independent survey classifications of populist ideas (‘GPS’ and ‘Popu-List’).

Table 3 shows the six populist characteristics with correlations above 0.4 are: populist rhetoric vs. pluralism, nationalism vs. multilateralism, ‘politicals should follow the will of the people’, liberal democratic principles respected or undermined, rhetoric that most politicians are dishonest and corrupt, and ‘opposes minority rights’.

Table 4 compares different survey measures of populism, showing high correlations for: political decision-making is simple vs. complex; ordinary people are indivisible; ordinary people’s interests are singular; appeal to the emotions; anti-elitism; moral struggle between good and evil; sovereignty should be exclusively with ordinary people.

Citing Western European politics, Norris⁵ asserts that “scholars need to identify varieties of populists distributed across a multidimensional issue space, rather than by assuming that all can

be categorized by their 'extreme' right-wing position along a single Left-Right dimension'. (p. 714.).

How to Study Populism

Rooduijn⁶ asserts that a clear precise definition of populism is vital ... yet, "when it comes to exploring the literature in search of new hypotheses, scholars should employ a more open mind-set. After all, theories developed in adjacent fields can inspire populism scholars to formulate innovative new questions and expectations."

This reflects the fact that each discipline – political science, sociology, economics, psychology – researches populism as viewed through its own disciplinary perspective, with little interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary creativity. "Populism research remains relatively detached from adjacent fields, and fruitful fertilization across literatures is still rather uncommon", Rooduijn asserts.

Mudde and Kaltwasser⁷ offer practical suggestions for more integrative, comparative perspectives in research on populism.

"...those who have been doing comparative research on populism for several years, if not decades, usually do not leave their comfort zone and thus fail to link their own studies to other fields of study, which can help explore fruitful, new avenues of research.", they note.

"The four [areas] that are particularly interesting for future research on populist politics: (a) economic anxiety, (b) cultural backlash, (c) the tension between responsiveness and responsibility, and (d) (negative) partisanship and polarization."

It is interesting that they attribute the boom in interest in populism research to two political events: "...a great deal of the increasing interest in populism is driven by the shock results of Brexit and Trump."

⁶ Rooduijn, M. (2019). State of the field: How to study populism and adjacent topics? A plea for both more and less focus. *European Journal of Political Research*, 58(1), 362-372.

⁷ Mudde, C., & Kaltwasser, C. (2018). Studying populism in comparative perspective: Reflections on the contemporary and future research agenda. *Comparative political studies*, 51(13), 1667-1693.

Trump, Republicans and Populism in the US

Lowndes⁸ provides a fascinating analysis of the complexities of US Trumpian populism within the Republican Party. He notes:

"From late December 2015 through early January 2016, according to the Rand Corporation's Presidential Election Panel Survey, Trump outstripped competitors in two distinct areas: race and economic populism. For Republican primary voters who score high on measures of racial resentment, nativism, and White ethnocentrism, Trump support was robust. Similarly, for those Republicans who hold progressive positions on health care, taxes, the minimum wage and unions, Trump leads among primary competitors."

Lowndes' analysis, written prior to the 2016 Presidential election, includes a highly accurate prediction: "...it would appear likely that racial populism will become an even more pronounced trend over time in the party, even as party elites have sought to emphasize multiculturalism, not class, as the basis for party expansion among donors and voters. These elements pulling in opposite directions may create an historic crisis for the party. This articulation of political elements, the historic basis of the Silent Majority, is proving to be a surprisingly powerful force at least within Republican presidential campaign politics. Yet it is causing a crisis among conservatives."

Populism has indeed generated an internal crisis within the Republican Party, leading to the unprecedented dismissal of the House Speaker and deadlock resulting in the fewest pieces of legislation in 90 years. The deadlock between the minority Republican Freedom Caucus and the majority of moderate Republican House representatives continues, even though Republicans hold a narrow majority in the House.

Populism and Nationalism

What is the link between populism and nationalism ("identification with one's own nation and support for its interests, especially to the exclusion or detriment of the interests of other nations) ? Populist leaders often espouse extreme nationalist rhetoric.

⁸ Lowndes, J. (2016, April). White populism and the transformation of the silent majority. In *The Forum* (Vol. 14, No. 1, pp. 25-37). De Gruyter.

De Cleen and Stavrakakis⁹ differentiate between populism and nationalism as “distinct ways of discursively constructing and claiming to represent “the people”, as underdog and as nation respectively.”

In other words, populist leaders use rhetoric that focuses on ‘them and us’, internally, within the nation (elite vs. underclass, etc.). Nationalist leaders use rhetoric that focuses on ‘them and us’, but us as a nation, and them as those from foreign nations.

There is some overlap. Populist leaders rant against immigrants, who allegedly take away jobs and resources from citizens. This has nationalist overtones. Rhetoric of Trump and Republican populists is both populist and nationalist. It is probably a matter of emphasis and context. Nationalist rhetoric arises, for example, in the US Congress, when discussions of spending for military aid to Ukraine arise. But even there, it is closely linked with immigration, with Republicans tying approval of aid to Ukraine with stiff measures to secure the borders against immigrants.

Populism in Israel

In Israel scholars have studied populism long before the onset of the populist coalition government emerging from the Nov. 4, 2022 elections.

Filc¹⁰ observed more than a decade ago that “the populist phenomenon in Israel is not solely a ‘shadow’ of representative democracy, but rather a central characteristic of [Israel’s] political system in recent year.” He noted that Israel’s society is characterized by ongoing struggles by peripheral groups, or semi-peripheral, for inclusion in the system; populist parties have played key roles in this struggle. In previous research, he has portrayed the founding of the Likud right-wing party, founded in 1973 by Menachem Begin and Ariel Sharon, as an “inclusive populist party”, serving as an alternative to the hegemony of the Labor Party, which ruled Israel from 1948 until 1977. In contrast, other political entities, especially those comprising the ruling coalition emerging from the Nov. 4, 2022, are clearly exclusionary populist, whose agendas focus on more narrow parts of Israeli society.

Continuing in this vein, Cohen et al.¹¹ recently published a lengthy discourse on the crucial difference between ‘inclusive populism’ and ‘exclusive populism’ (i.e. populism that seeks to

⁹ De Cleen, B., & Stavrakakis, Y. (2017). Distinctions and articulations: A discourse theoretical framework for the study of populism and nationalism. *Javnost-The Public*, 24(4), 301-319.

¹⁰ Filc, Dani. “We are the people (and you are not!). Inclusive populism and exclusive populism in Israel. Ben Gurion University, 2010, vol. 20. *Studies in the Revival of Israel* (Hebrew) <https://in.bgu.ac.il/bgi/iyunim/20/a2.pdf>

¹¹ Amitai Cohen and Yaniv Roznai, “Populism and Constitutional Democracy in Israel”, *Studies in Jurisprudence*, 2021, 87-170. (Hebrew). <https://www.taulawreview.sites.tau.ac.il/md1/cohen-roznai>

include all parts of society, or populism that focuses on a particular segment of society, excluding others). Their lengthy treatise argues that the deep divisions within Israeli society have contributed to, and greatly fostered, exclusionary identity politics, in which “exclusionary elite Ashkenazi civil institutions” are portrayed as those that must be replaced. Israel’s institutions comprise “fertile ground for populist politics”.

What can be done? They ask. The response, among others: To install a constitution. Israel is one of only six countries in the world without a written constitution, though two of them, Britain and New Zealand, have large bodies of common law that serve de facto as constitutions. Lack of a constitution – a clear set of ‘rules of the political game’ -- makes it easy for exclusionary populist measures that disempower large segments of Israeli society – as occurred during the past 13 months.

On Nov. 4, 2022, as noted above, Israel held national elections. The result was a right-wing populist government of 64 MK’s. What ensued was 11 months of protests against the government’s populist anti-democratic policies and legislation. The short opinion piece by Prof. Gideon Rahat¹² reflects the sentiments of a broad span of Israeli society and the thinking of many who see populism as an existential threat:

“It is common to argue that populism – with its anti-pluralist and anti-elite zeal – threatens liberal democracy. Yet, populism is also a threat to the health of the state itself as a successful populist regime is likely to produce a failed state. Liberal democracies have historically produced strong states because they contain a framework of regulated conflict between different worldviews, opinions, and interests. They are relatively stable thanks to the regulation of conflict, and thanks to their inclusiveness they are more capable of mobilizing their population and recruiting needed resources to sustain their strength. Yet, populists aspire for total uniformity, putting the people of the majority group (or alleged majority group) against minority groups and the elites.

In an effort to create uniformity, populists are ready to destroy the state. They demonize it and describe normal institutions with pejoratives such as the “deep state.” This deep state, controlled by the elites, is standing in the way of the people’s (that is, the real or alleged majority) plan to implement their program. We witnessed such attacks in the United States, Venezuela Hungary, and Brazil.

The current populist government in Israel would like to see itself as the most patriotic government that ever-ruled Israel. In reality, it is a government whose policies are against the state of Israel in at least three ways. First, the government aims to destroy the monopoly on the legitimate use of force, the main characteristic of any functioning modern state. It attempts to

¹² Rahat, Gideon. Populism as an Existential Threat in Israel. Israel Democracy Institute, August 2023. <https://en.idi.org.il/articles/50482> (Originally published in E-International Relations).

divide the authority over the military (by appointing an additional minister that would have separate, specific military authorities), and to politicize the police, even creating an additional police force (a politicized "national guard" under the direct authority of the relevant minister). These are both moves that hurt the monopoly on force because they explicitly create two separate competing forces that claim to own the legitimate use of force at the same level of government.

Second, the government is promoting policies that contradict the principles on which the state of Israel was established. The Israeli Declaration of Independence states that Israel "will foster the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants; it will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture; it will safeguard the Holy Places of all religions; and it will be faithful to the principles of the Charter of the United Nations."

Instead of adopting these democratic principles as its guiding document, the populist government promotes policies and laws that go against its democratic spirit: from going after the court system that guards people's rights and freedoms to initiatives that will hurt various freedoms that are spelled in the declaration. Limiting the courts' ability to check the executive branch (by the recent law that abolished the use of the claim for "reasonableness") means that citizens have less protection against the arbitrary decision of the government.

Third, it is attacking the institutions of the state, including the professional elements in Israel's public administration, the judicial advisors, the Central Bank, the police and the military, and the judicial system. It is also attacking non-state institutions that make up the mind and spirit of the state, such as academic and cultural institutions. And, of course, the media is under attack, especially the parts embodying the ethos of truth and criticism that empower the state to improve by bringing light to its faults.

It might surprise many people that leaders who have claimed they would make their countries great again are, in fact, a threat to them, but indeed, this is the case. What is a state if not its monopoly on the legitimate use of force, its values, and its institutions? The current Israeli case should serve as a warning sign to patriots worldwide. Populism is not about love for the state; it is an expression of hate for it. And by undermining its own institutions, populist leaders threaten not only liberal democracy, but the state itself.

People must actively avoid the temptation to support the destruction of their state. The destruction of political institutions far too often results in crime, corruption, social polarization, and individual and economic insecurity. What follows is the unfortunate but perhaps inevitable reality of the failed state, which is the attempt to create order through a dictatorship. People who find fault in their systems should improve them from the inside, not destroy them. Improvements in the rules of the game, of the constitutional principles, should be done carefully with broad consent. In most democratic countries, such changes indeed require wide consent.

In Israel, unfortunately, such changes are easy to promote. This was not really a problem until lately, until a populist government decided to take advantage of this weakness.

Those who “razed the old world to the ground” from the left and from the right created chaos and suffering. Those who improved it, step by step, respecting the rules of the game, have done much better.”

Populism and the Economy

How do economies perform under populist leaders? This key question is addressed by three German economists from the Kiel Institute for the World Economy, in Germany.¹³ The world has provided a natural experiment to answer the question, since, as the authors note, “23 per cent of nations [are] currently governed by populists.”

They identify 51 populist presidents and prime ministers, for the period 1900 to 2000 (note that populism is not a 20th C. invention) and show that “**the economic cost of populism is high**”. Their database covers some 95% of world GDP in 1955 and again in 2015.

* After 15 years, “GDP per capita is 10 per cent lower [under populism] compared to a plausible nonpopulist counterfactual.” For Israel, with a GDP of \$488.5 b., the cost of a populist government is, by this measure, some \$50 b.

* “Economic disintegration, decreasing macroeconomic stability and the erosion of institutions typically go hand in hand with populist rule”.

Conclusion

There is growing interest in populism, as populism itself grows globally as a force within internal politics. Future research on populism will be most productive if it integrates more than a single discipline – because the most interesting and important aspects of populism do not confine themselves to the narrow borders of one discipline. For example, populism and economic anxiety – a topic linking economics, political science and psychology (emotions, perceptions).

¹³ Funke, M., Schularick, M., & Trebesch, C. (2023). Populist leaders and the economy. *American Economic Review*, 113(12), 3249-3288.



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