

Populism: definition and theoretical approaches

POLb1111 Populism and political parties

Aims of the lecture

- Explain the core features of populism as a distinctive concept
- Briefly introduce different approaches to the study of populism
- Define different types of populism

The main thesis is that...

...populism is like arancini.



Problems with populism



Canovan (1999): 'contested concept'

Stanley (2008): vague term retaining an 'awkward conceptual slipperiness'

Taggart (2000): 'chameleonic nature'

Problems with populism

- - **Popular perception** of populism (unrealistic promises, irresponsible policies, demagoguery, spending, socialist policies, xenophobia...)
- - **Negative political label**
- - **Terminological mess:** protest parties, challenger parties, anti-party parties, anti-mainstream parties, anti-political establishment parties, anti-establishment reform parties, discontent parties, neopopulism/new populism, anti-corruption parties, national populist parties...

Popular perception of populism

- Stretching of the term
- All politicians are populists (from time to time)
- Content – unrealistic promises, irresponsible policies, demagoguery, spending, socialist policies, xenophobia...
- See Bale, Taggart, van Kessel. 2011: “Thrown around with abandon? Popular understandings of populism as conveyed by the print media: a UK case study.” *Acta Politica* 46 (2).
- Populism as a label in political fight



Three waves of populism

- Empirical diversity of populism (Pauwels 2014)
- 19th century populism – the People`s Party in the USA, „narodniky“ in Russia (Canovan 1981, Taggart 2000)
- Latin American populism – Peron, Chávez, De la Torre...
- New populism – radical right-wing or radical left parties in Europe
 - (+ exclusively/centrist populist parties)
- Case driven definitions (agrarian populism until the 1970s, RRP in Western Europe)

POPULISM AS AN IDEOLOGY

- Ideology:
- total, closed and cohesive view of human beings in society / a systematic body of concepts / a comprehensive normative vision / the integrated assertions, theories and aims that constitute a sociopolitical program
- Is populism an ideology?
- Populism is usually **not** regarded as a full-blown ideology (such as socialism, liberalism etc.)

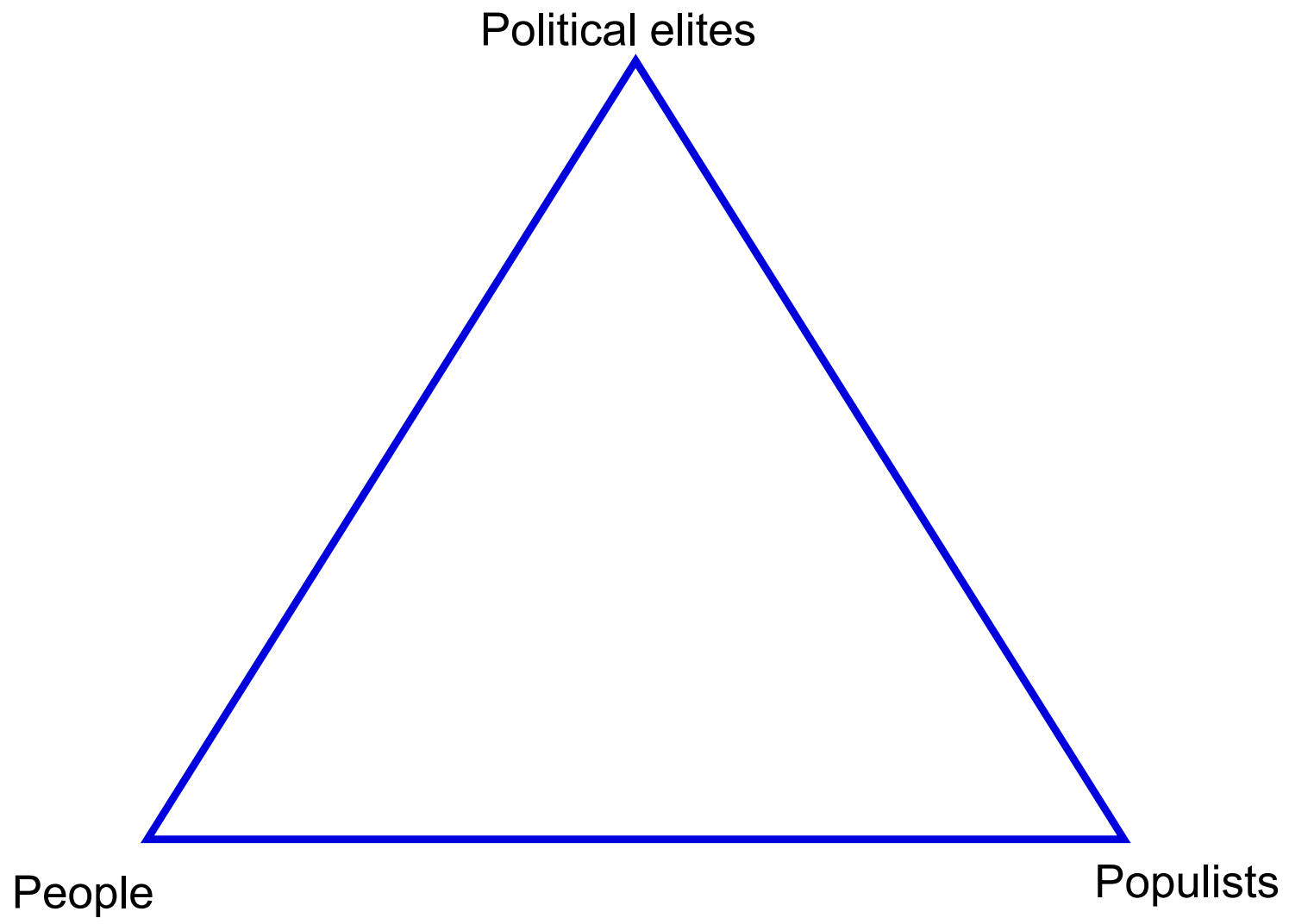
POPULISM AS A THIN-CENTERED IDEOLOGY

- Cas Mudde (2004, 2007):
- “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 *volonté générale* (general will) of the people”
- **thin-centered ideology** – does not cover all aspects of life, only specific political questions
- *can* be combined with other thin-centered or full blown ideologies – ‘a receptive partner for full ideologies’ (Stanley 2008), ‘colourless’ (Jagers, Walgrave, 2007) – East-Central European experience, M5S
- Stanley, B. (2008). „The thin ideology of populism.“ *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 13(1), 95-110.



ANALYTICAL CORE OF POPULISM

- Deconstruction of the definition (Rooduijn 2016, see also Deiwiks 2009, Stanley 2008, Muller 2016):
 - Muller (2016): *moralistic imagination of politics*
1. The people as a **homogeneous group** – the people and the elite
 2. **Denigration of the elites**
 3. The **antagonistic relationship** between the elites and the people
 4. The idea of **(restoration) of popular sovereignty**



THE 'PURE PEOPLE' AS A HOMOGENEOUS GROUP

- Crucial importance for populism
- Refusal of division of society into different groups (antipluralist – next lecture)
- How is the people defined – an empty signifier?
- **Purity** as the most single important characteristic of the people
- Taggart: *heartland, idealized conception of the community*

Class task!!!

Imagine you are a populist leader coming from:

- a) The United States
- b) Italy
- c) Poland
- d) Czech Republic
- e) The United Kingdom

How would you define the „pure people“ or a
member of *your* heartland?

1 bonus point! (5 minutes to complete the task)



THE 'PURE PEOPLE' AS A HOMOGENEOUS GROUP

- Culturally/politically determined content of the “people”
- **As the sovereign** – *demos*, against principles of liberal and representative democracy
- **As a nation** – *ethnos*, populism = nationalism (?), vs. foreigners, immigrants etc.
- **As a class** – ‘working people’, the ‘99 per cent’ vs. ‘the rich’, the ‘1 per cent’, exploitation the lower class
- BUT related to the host ideology (see later)

Political elites



People

Populists

DENIGRATION OF THE ELITES

- Establishment/elites as a collective, monolithic entity
- Criticism targeting *all the established actors*

- Political parties, businessmen, ‘the rich’, oligarchy, the ‘1 per cent’, ‘champagne drinkers’, “latte-drinking, sushi-eating, Volvo-driving, New York Times-reading, Hollywood-loving” liberal elites ...
- Particular interests which are in opposition to the interests of the people
- Sabotaging the interests and democratic rights of the people
- Beyond the usual opposition

Class task!!!

Imagine you are a populist leader coming from:

- a) The United States
- b) Italy
- c) Poland
- d) Czech Republic
- e) The United Kingdom

How would you define the elites (and why)?

1 bonus point! (5 minutes to complete the task)



Political elites



People

Populists

Political elites



PRIORITY LIST

1. me
2. me
3. me
4. me
5. ~~you~~ me.



People

Populists

Political elites



PRIORITY LIST
1. me
2. me
3. me
4. me
~~5. you~~ me.



People

Populists

THE ANTAGONISTIC RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE PEOPLE AND THE ELITE

- Manichaeian view (*moral dimension*, normative outlook)
- The *good* ('pure') people and the *bad* elite
- People betrayed by the corrupt elite
- Alienation of the elite, people exploited by the elite
- P. speak in the name of the 'oppressed people'
- The chief social divide between the governing and the governed – denial of the old cleavages
- Aggressive and/or mocking rhetoric ('political class', 'dinosaurs', 'robber barons', 'thieves', 'oligarchy', 'godfathers' ...)
- Emphasis on the proclaimed crisis (elites blamed for it) - political, cultural, social, economic

Political elites



PRIORITY LIST
1. me
2. me
3. me
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~~5. you~~ me.



People

Populists

THE IDEA OF POPULAR SOVEREIGNTY

- Sovereignty taken away from the people by the elite - against the representative democracy (next lecture)
- Often proponents of direct democracy (not a defining characteristic of p.)
- Renewal of the 'distorted' relationship between the elites and the people
- People are fully formed and self-aware (no need for incompetent political elites)
- 'common sense' as the leading principle ('votes for us are votes for common sense' – R. John (VV))
- All representatives have to do is to listen to the *vox populi*

Political elites



PRIORITY LIST
1. me
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People



Populists

Types of populism

- **thin-centered ideology** (Freedden 1996)
- *Goes together* with other thin-centered of full blown ideologies:
- Populist radical right (Lega, National Rally, Bolsonaro)
- Populist radical left (Podemos, Syriza)
- Centrist populist parties (ANO, M5S)



Typology of populism (based on Pauwels 2014; Havlík, Stanley 2015; modified)

	Social populism	Radical right-wing populism	Neoliberal populism	Non-ideological populism
Construction of the people	Working class, the oppressed, 99%, the exploited	(Pure) nation, ethnos	Hard-working taxpayers, entrepreneurs	Ordinary people, citizens
Depiction of the elites/enemies	Capitalists, imperialists, bankers, exploiters	Immigrants, foreigners, multiculturalism, feminism	Bureaucratic elites/states, interventionist state	Corrupt incompetent politicians
Host ideology	Socialism	Nativism	Economic liberalism	Not clear
Examples	PDS, Syriza, SP	NF, VB, Ataka	LPF, ALP, ANO (SVK)	ANO (CZ), NDSV, M5S

Populism and democracy

Main questions

- What is the relationship of populism and democracy?
- Is populism dangerous to democracy?

Outline

1. The two faces of democracy
2. Populism – threat or corrective to democracy?

What is democracy?

Democracy

- Popular sovereignty
- Majority rule
- Schumpeter (1949: 250): 'institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote';
representative democracy, a *method* of selection of rulers, free and fair elections

Populism

- “populism as 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” (Mudde, 2007)
- Populism supports popular sovereignty and majority rule

Populism and democracy - discussion

- Why so much discussion on the relationship between populism and democracy?
- Is populism dangerous to democracy? Why?

Democracy

- Popular sovereignty
- Majority rule
- Schumpeter (1949: 250): 'institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote'; *representative democracy, a method of selection of rulers, free and fair elections*
- Most contemporary democracies are *liberal* (vs. procedural approach to democracy)

What makes a democracy to be a liberal one?

Key features of liberal democracy

- Free and fair elections
- Popular sovereignty
- Majority rule

+

- Checks and balances and the constitutional protection of minority rights

Two faces of democracy

Two faces of democracy

- Canovan (1999) – two faces of democracy:
- Redemptive face – ‘salvation through politics’, direct exercise of power
- Pragmatic face – ‘ballots, not bullets’, a way of peaceful resolution of conflicts, a form of government, and institutions and rules
- C. Mouffe – a liberal/constitutional pillar & democratic pillar
- **Ideal of democracy vs. Real functioning** – *permanent* internal tension between the two faces of democracy
- Populist appeal refers (only) to the redemptive face of democracy vs. principles of *liberal* democracy

Democratic tension as a breeding ground for populism

- „A broad tendency that is always latent to some degree in modern democracies“ (Plattner, 2010)
- „If it becomes clear that those involved see in democracy nothing but horsetrading, they, and eventually the system itself, are liable to lose their legitimacy. When too **great a gap opens up between haloed democracy and the grubby business of politics**, populists tend to move on to the vacant territory, promising in place of the dirty world of party manoeuvring the shining ideal of democracy renewed.“ (Canovan 1999: 11).
- Populism as a ‘shadow of democracy’, democracy/political crisis as a (possible explanation of the rise of populism x different kind of populisms)

Populism as a threat to democracy I.

- Democracy seen by populist only as the ‘power of the people’ – reductionist definition of democracy (Mény, Surel, 2002)
- ‘democratic illiberalism’ (Pappas, 2012)
- ‘pure populist democracy vs. the practice of *constitutional* democracy’ (Abts, Rummens, 2007)
- ‘little patience with liberalism`s emphasis on procedural niceties and protections for individual rights’ (Plattner, 2010)
- Populism is not against democracy *per se*, but against the principles of liberal democracy

Populism as a threat to democracy II.

- Negative effects on different aspects of democracy:

1. Position of individuals and social groups

- Rejection of the *unified-in-diversity* vision of society
- Circumvention of minority rights in the name of majority rule/majority rights
- Ignorance of constitutional guarantees for the individual rights of citizens
- Attitudes to NGOs, media, academia
- Pluralism at stake with populism

Populism as a threat to democracy III.

2. Institutions and rules of liberal democracy

- System of 'checks and balances', a complex model of bargaining, compromises in contrast with populist vision of democracy
- Delegitimization of institutions necessary for 'good governance'
- 'Solutions':
- By-passing of representative principles of liberal democracy by promotion of elements of direct democracy
- Limitation of separation of powers, weakening of 'pluralist' institutions (parliaments, opposition rights, discussion, constitutional courts...)
- Delegation of elected bodies, replacing by 'non-political' principles
- Effectivity instead of procedural checks

Populism as a threat to democracy IV.

3. Effectiveness of political processes

- Indirect effect related mostly to democracy support
- Limited coalition potential of populist parties – formation of ideologically non-connected coalitions (a new political cleavage - Greece) – convergence of political space – growing dissatisfaction with democracy (lack of representativeness)
- Formation of ‘populist democracies’ (Pappas) – reaction to success of populist rhetoric, populist inflation
- Populists in government – ‘mainstreamization’, lack of trust, ‘spiral of discontent’ – clash of a programme of redemptive democracy and the practice of pragmatic democracy
- Drop of legitimacy of standard institutions of liberal democracy (intentional delegitimation – framing and cueing)

Populism as a corrective to democracy

- Populist success as a litmus paper of pragmatism of democracy
- Corrective function of populism (Mudde, Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012)
- Mostly related to the inclusionist face of populism:
 1. Representation of 'silent majority'
 2. Mobilization and representation of excluded sections of population (issues important for this part of society but neglected by political representation)
 3. Increase of democratic accountability – new issues in the *political* agenda
 4. 'Democratisation of democracy' – related to mobilization, revitalization/intensification of political conflicts

Conclusion

- Populism based on basic principles of democracy (the essence of populism *is* democratic)
- Different faces of democracy: idea/practice of democracy – liberal democracy
- Three faces of populism:
 1. *Latent and permanent* danger to *liberal* democracy
 2. *Possible* corrective to liberal democracy
 3. Litmus paper of functioning of democracy (demand)
- Empirical investigation needed, case studies (presentations?)

**Thank you for your
attention.**