

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.)

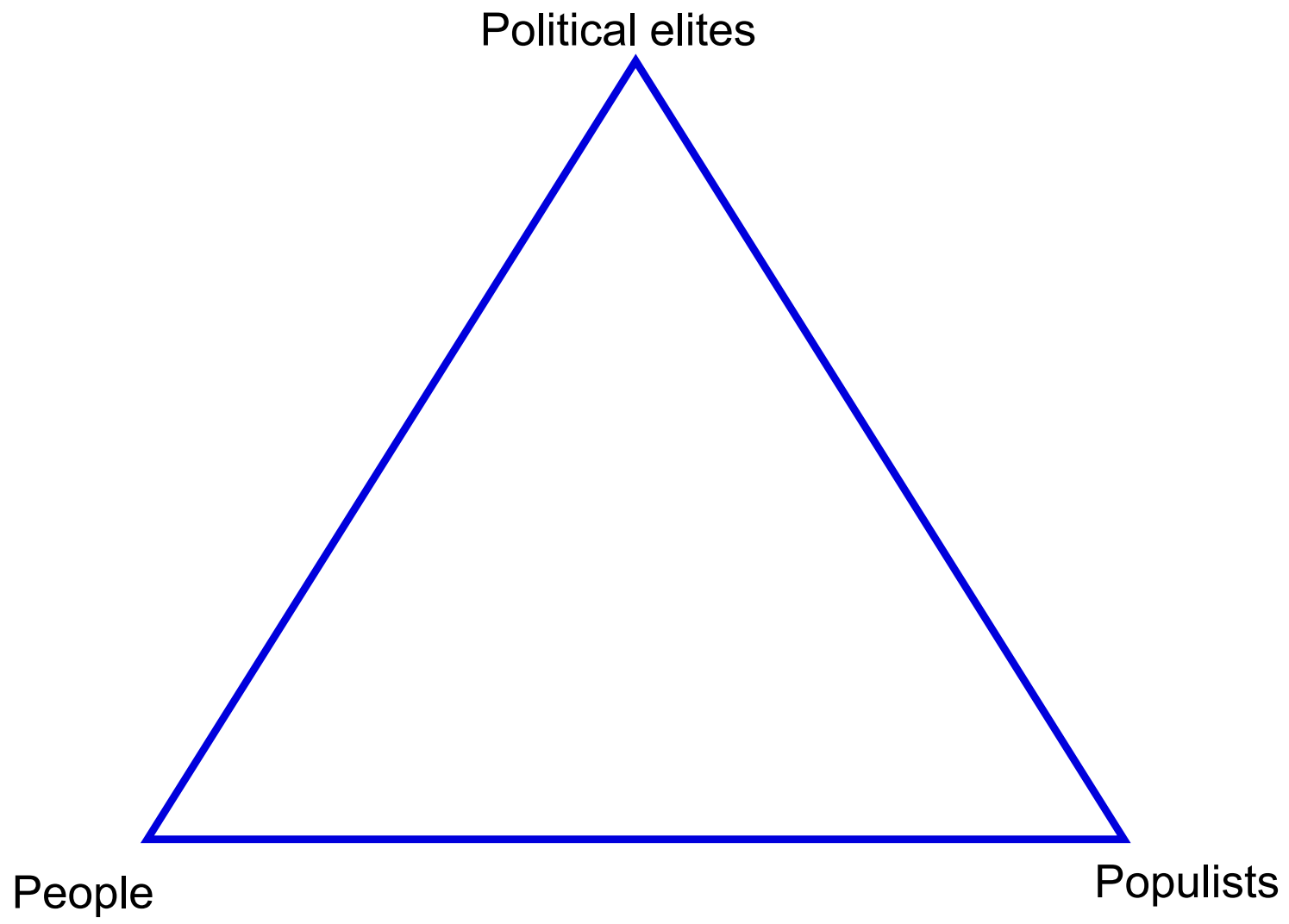
POPULISM AS A THIN-CENTERED IDEOLOGY

- 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
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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
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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



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People



Populists

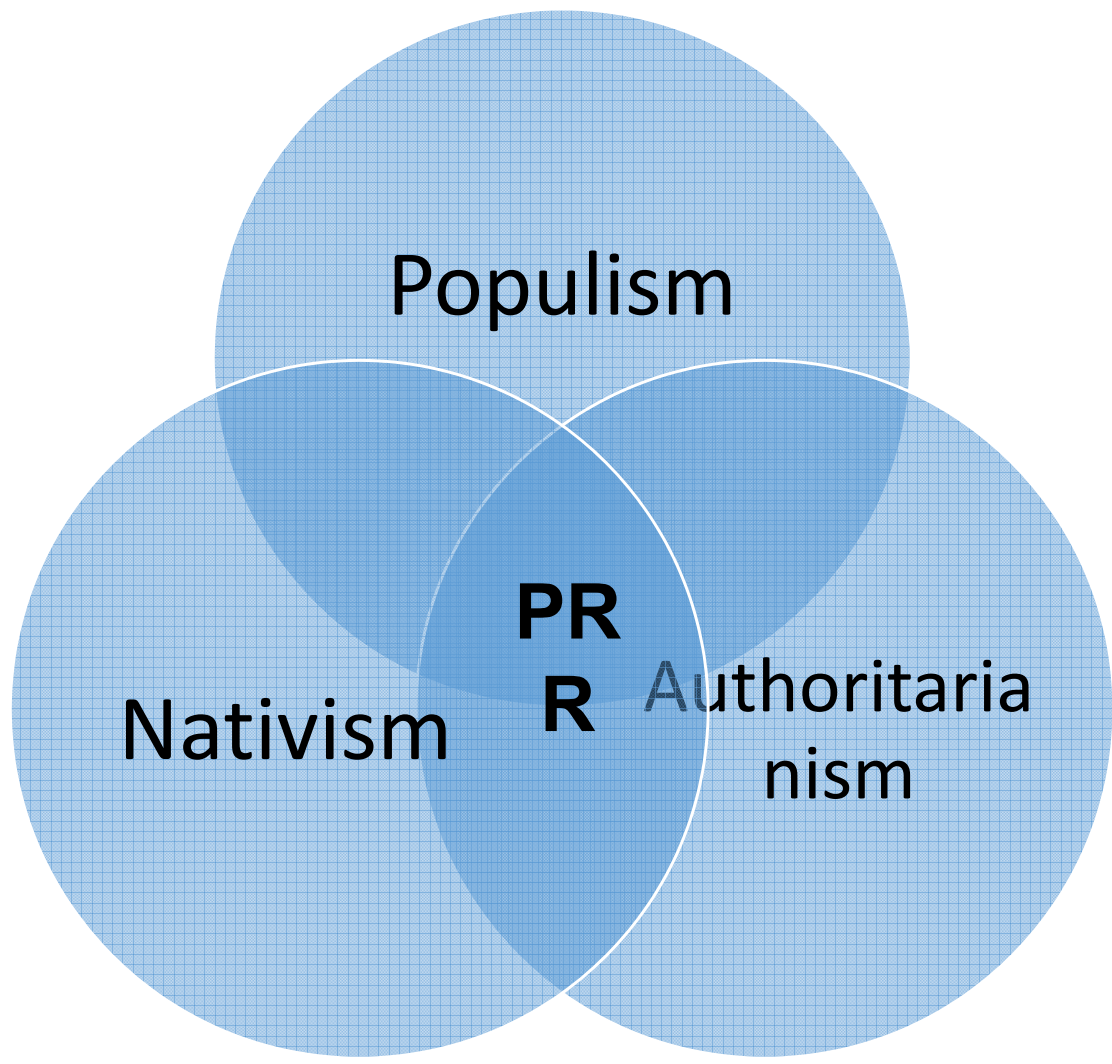
Types of populism

- **thin-centered ideology** (Freeden 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



Nativism

- The key concept is nationalism
- A political doctrine based on the congruence on the cultural and the political unit, i.e. on the nation and the state
- Internal homogenization + external exclusiveness as tools
- How to distinguish between moderate and *radical* nationalism?
- Nativism = „*An ideology, which holds that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group (“the nation”) and that nonnative elements (persons and ideas) are fundamentally threatening to the homogenous nation-state.*“
(Mudde 2007: 19)
 - = combination of nationalism and xenophobia
 - Different construct of native(ness) – racist, cultural, religious...

Economy

- Not of the primary importance for populist radical right
- Winning formula – free market economic policies combined with xenophobia and social-cultural conservatism (Kitschelt and McGann)
- The empirical evidence provides a more mixed picture
- Protectionism determined by nativism (critical approach to international market)
- Welfare chauvinism – social benefits guaranteed only for natives

Populism and radical left

- „chameleonic“ nature of populism open to appeal from different parts of the ideological spectrum
- Combination of left-ideologies with populism relatively new – European populism almost exclusively tied to radical right politics (X the 19th century populism in USA, Latin American experience)
- 1990s – atmosphere critical to the prevailing economic (neo)liberalism + the fall of communism in CEE (losers of transition)
- The ideological background of radical left populism = populism + democratic socialism

Democratic socialism as a host ideology

- „A democratic ideology between revolution and reform“ (Pauwels 2014)
- Reformism of social democratic parties criticized – abandonment of the working class (centrism, a power-seeking strategy)
- Revolutionary ideas of communism (overthrowing of democracy and capitalism) rejected
- On the left from social democracy but seeking to transform the system
- The crucial importance of issues related to the *economic dimension of political competition* (X RRP) – welfare-state, redistribution, public ownership, (socioeconomic) equality
- The new left issues (feminism, environmentalism)
- Conflict of pop. and demsoc.:
 - minority status of the working class and „common sense“ (*vox populi*) vs educative activities of the „vanguard of the proletariat“

Populism of radical left

“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)

- Who are the *people*?
 - The ordinary hard-working people
- Who is the enemy?
 - The (neoliberal) political and economic elites, a bourgeois class
 - Social democratic parties – traitors of the interest of the working class, i.e. RLP presenting themselves as „purifiers“
 - External enemies – imperialists (USA, EU)
- Exploitation of the working class by the elites – a Manichean view (intensity of the conflict)
-





HOPE
IS ON THE WAY!



ΣΥΡΙΖΑ
ΣΥΝΑΣΠΙΣΜΟΣ ΡΙΖΟΣΠΑΣΤΙΚΗΣ ΑΡΙΣΤΕΡΑΣ

New/centrist populism

- Emergence in CEE in the late 1990s
- Arisen from the dissatisfaction to political elites and anti-political/anti-party sentiments
- The lack of a coherent host ideology
- The key issue is corruption, otherwise modest profile (AERPs – Hanley, Sikk) lacking radicalism of PRR or PRL
- Politics presented by a grubby business performed by incompetent and selfish politicians
- Offer of a “third way”, “non-ideological solutions”, “common sense” ...
- The people – citizens, ordinary people
- Very flexible in terms of attitudes to other issues

Conclusion

- populism as a contested concept X agreement on the analytical/definitional core: **the people and the elite as homogeneous groups, antagonistic (and essentially moralistic) relationship between the two, popular sovereignty**
- Populism and democracy (next lecture)
- Populism and demagoguery and/or opportunism
- Vague use of the term in the media/popular discourse X a precisely defined in political science (**and in this course**)
- Populism usually combined with other ideologies that fill the “emptiness” of populism
- The omnipresent moralistic antagonism between the people and the elites varies in its specific context

Thank you for your
attention.