

Populism: theoretical approaches, definitions

POL333 Populism and political parties

What is populism?

Problems with populism

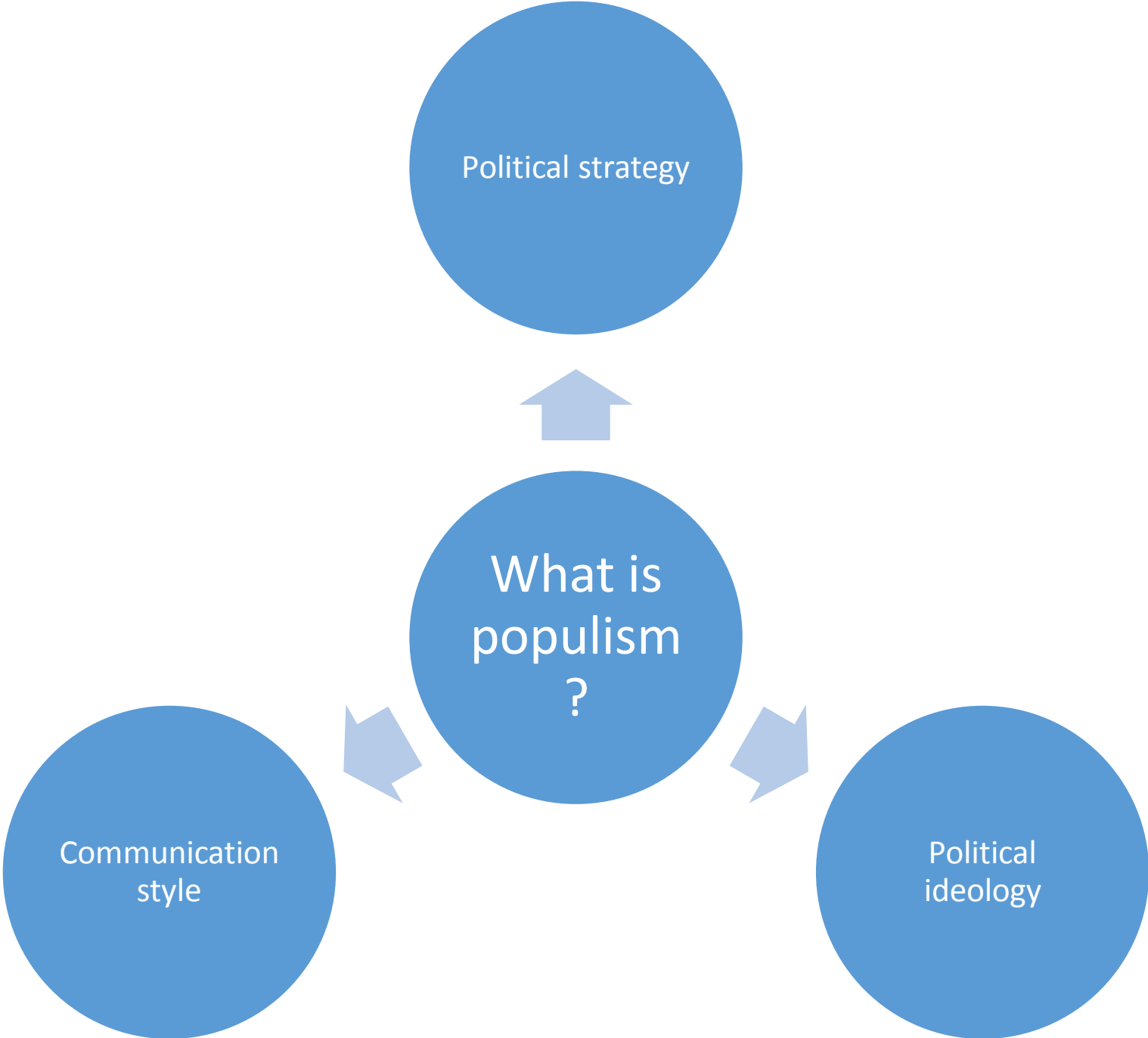
- No universally accepted definition: Canovan (1999): 'contested concept', vague term (Stanley 2008), retaining an 'awkward conceptual slipperiness', 'chameleonic nature' (Taggart 2000)
- Reasons for difficulties with a good definition of populism:

Media and public 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).
- Populist accusation as a weapon of political fight
- Perception of populism as demagoguery

Three waves of populism (Pauwels 2014)

- Empirical diversity of populism
- 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)



POPULISM AS A STRATEGY/ORGANIZATION

- ‘a specific way of competing for and exercising political power’ (Weyland, 2001)
- A way of implementation of a populist programme
- ‘a political strategy through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government power based on direct, unmediated, uninstitutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers’ (Weyland, 2001; study of Latin American politics)
- Direct quasi-personal connection between the leader and the people - the spokesperson of the ‘vox populi’
- Loose organization structure of populist movements
- Organizational aspect of populism (explanation of the low stability of electoral support of populist movements in LatAm)
- A top-down mobilization strategy
- Drawbacks?

POPULISM AS A COMMUNICATION STYLE

- Communicative, rhetorical elements – performance vs. content
- Simplistic language, direct communication, colourful expression, swearing, slang X formal language of the elite, ‘tabloid style of populism’ (Canovan)
- Jagers and Walgrave (2007) – ‘a political communication style of political actors that refers to the people’, appeals to and identifies with the people and pretends to speak in the name of the people – thin vs thick populism
- populism as a tool used by different political parties, movements, individual politicians – problematic in the context of comparative politics
- a way to address the voters, not (necessarily) part of the identity of the party (Laclau`s approach)
- Drawbacks?

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:
- “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,
- Criticism of the approach

ANALYTICAL CORE OF POPULISM

- Deconstruction of the definition (see also Deiwiks 2009, Stanley 2008):
 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 'PEOPLE' AS A HOMOGENEOUS GROUP

- Crucial importance for populism
- Refusal of division of society into different groups (against pluralism – next lecture)
- How the people is defined?
- **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
- Taggart: *heartland*, Mudde: constructed subset of population

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', ...
- Particular interests which are in opposition to the interests of the people
- Sabotaging the interests and democratic rights of the people

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

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*

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 extremism

- The relationship to democracy:
- Populism is not against democracy *per se* („democratic illiberalism“ – Pappas, see next lecture)
- Extremism defined by its anti-democratic/antisystemic approach

POPULISM AND XENOPHOBIA

- Definition:
- “the dislike of that which is perceived to be foreign or strange“
- Often combined with prejudices
- Can be combined with populism as a part of a host ideology (nativism) but it is populism *per se*

POPULISM AND DEMAGOGY

Demagogy, demagoguery (IS NOT POPULISM):

- the use of distorted and simplified arguments appealing mainly to the emotions and prejudices, used to influence individuals and groups
- thinking that offers appealing, simple, and straightforward solutions to complex problems, regardless of if the solutions are realistic, right etc.

Mudde: politics of the pub, directed at the “gut feeling” of the people, the intuitive understanding of the world

- But used (also) by populist parties/leaders

POPULISM AND OPPORTUNISM

- similar to demagoguery (difference in the intent of the politician)
- **opportunistic policies** – aiming at pleasing the people and voters and to buy their support (Mudde, 2004), rather than rationally looking for the best option

PROBLEM: How do you tell if the politician is honest / opportunistic or not?

- Demag./opport. and populism usually interchangeable outside of scholarly discussion... unfortunately
- can be and often are connected x distinct phenomena

other concepts...

- **Populist rage** - discernible public feeling that the few are unjustly profiting at the expense of the many (e.g. Occupy Wall Street)
- **doubled-wage populism**
- **tax populism**



<http://politicalhumor.about.com/od/economy/ig/Economic-Cartoons/Populist-Rage.05Ko.htm>

Conclusion

- populism as a contested concept X agreement on the analytical/definitional core: the people and the elite as homogeneous groups, antagonistic relationship between the two, popular sovereignty, positive valorisation of the people and denigration of the elite
- Several approaches (faces of populism) – ideology, strategy, communication
- 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**)

Thank you for your
attention.