
 <p><b><u>Norbert Merkovity</u></b></p>	 <p><b><u>11-16 minutes</u></b></p>	<p>Thing to remember:</p> <p>Populism is not political content but political style.</p>
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## Populism

What is populism?

- Political (party) program?
- Governing style?
- Communication style of extreme-right parties?
- Communication style of all parties?
- Or politicians? (not institutional)
- Using immigrant and law-and-order themes in a populist and anti-political discourse?
- Ideology?

Basically, in countries where extreme-right parties flourish, discussion is focusing on whether extreme-right voters actually vote in favour of something – a party, a candidate, a programme, an issue – or only against something – the other parties, the system, the establishment. In other words, is an extreme-right vote an ideological vote or just an expression of protest/discontent?

It's important to feel yourself to be the people, to love, suffer, enjoy your pleasures like the people. (Eva Perón)

Populism is the label that political elites attach to policies supported by ordinary citizens that they don't like. (Francis Fukuyama)

## Example

Reasons for populism in E&C Europe:

- Europism
- Re-nationalization
- Globalization

Populism is not political content but political style in these countries.

The populist parties and politicians in CEE countries always occur on behalf of one community (e.g. nation, people, ethnicity, etc.). Opposed to ‘others’ this particular community is pure, homogeneous who communicate directly with the leader while the ‘others’ are the corrupt elites.

Types of populism in CEE countries:

- Agrarian populism
- Economical populism
- Identity (or national) populism
- Protest populism

## The classic concept of populism

Margaret Canovan:

’Populism in modern democratic societies is best seen as an appeal to ‘the people’ against both the established structure of power and dominant ideas and values of the society’ ([Canovan 1999, 3](#)).

## Origins

Political scientists and political actors frequently refer to populism to characterise certain political phenomena or brand competitors in a political conflict. This may cause a confusion in understanding.

Highlighting the most documented cases throughout history, we can distinguish three successive waves of populism:

- Agrarian populism is to be found in the Russian intellectual Narodniki in the second half of

the nineteenth century, engaging in an egalitarianist struggle on behalf of Russian peasants. Also in the U.S., the American People’s Party, which pleaded against capitalism and in favour of agrarian socio-economic interests around end of 1800s, beginning of 1900s.

- Latin American variant of populism prospered in the 1940s and 1950s with the authoritarian regimes of Juan Péron in Argentina and Getúlio Vargas in Brazil. Key elements: nationalist, charismatic leaders pretended to be a direct emanation of the people and to govern for the people against established interests.
- New-right populism mobilises, from the 1970s onwards, against traditional politics, which is reproached as being self-serving while systematically ignoring the real wishes of the people. New-right populism typically focuses on issues such as immigration, taxes, crime and nationalism.

Three concepts can be considered as common denominators of these successive historical, and scholarly theoretical, shapes of populism. Populism **always refers to the people** and justifies its actions by appealing to and identifying with the people; it is rooted in anti-elite feelings; and it considers the people as a monolithic group without internal differences except for some very specific categories who are subject to an exclusion strategy.

With these three elements we can give a definition to populism.

### **Re-defining populism**

It is possible, though, to distinguish a ‘thin’ and a ‘thick’ concept of populism. We will use the thin definition, only relying on the first element of merely making reference to the people, as an operational definition. The thick definition comes close to the classic concept and consists of a combination of the all the elements and states that populism refers to the people, vents anti-establishment ideas and simultaneously excludes certain population categories

### *Thin populism*

Referring to the people can hardly be considered a (new) ideology, let alone a political movement. That is why we opt to define populism in the tradition of Canovan’s ‘politicians’ populism’ as a style rather than an ideology (see Canovan 1981).

The populist actors can be politicians and political parties, but also movement leaders, interest group representatives and journalists. Populism, therefore, is a communication frame that appeals to and identifies with the people, and pretends to speak in their name (Taggart 2000; Canovan 1981). It is a master frame, a way to wrap up all kinds of issues. More concretely, populism is a conspicuous exhibition of closeness to (ordinary) citizens. This self-presentation can take different guises – using casual or colloquial language or adopting an informal dress code – but the most important element of a political style is the content of the discourse.

### *Thick populism*

Although anti-establishmentness cannot be considered as an exclusive feature of populism – many radical political movements in general are driven by anti-elitist attitudes and nurture anti-elitist feelings – most populism scholars consider anti-elitism as a central feature of populism.

Anti-elitist or antiestablishment discourse emphasises the distance and estrangement between the people and the elites. Anti-elite populists side with the people against the elites who live in ivory towers and only pursue their own interests. The *enemy is external to the people*, ‘up there’ and high above ordinary citizens. Since populism holds a very broad concept of politics, all failures and problems are blamed on politics; they are caused by political incompetence, unwillingness and sabotage.

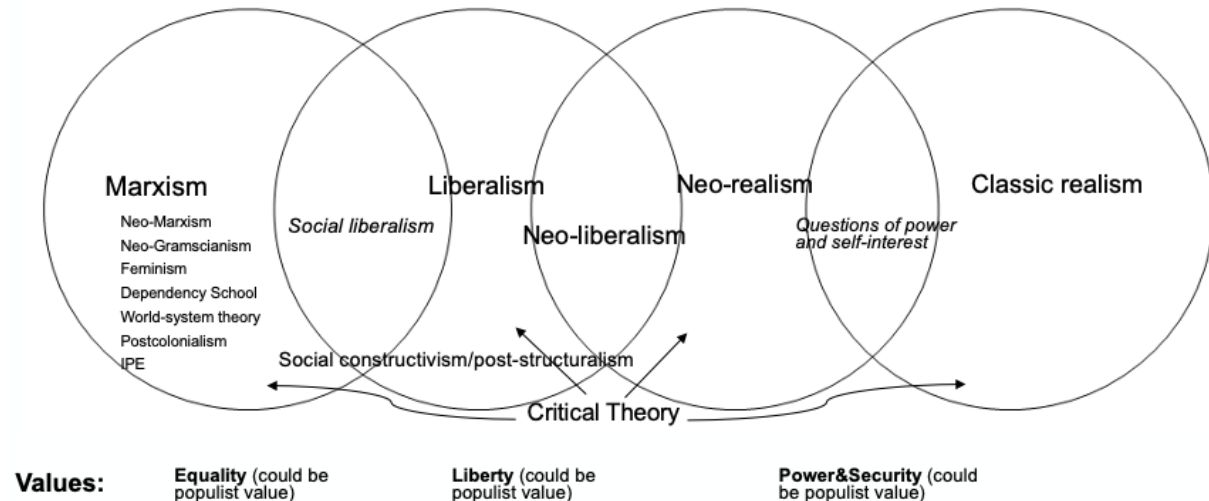
Generally, people are considered as a homogeneous category. Therefore, thick populism relates to the *horizontal* dimension.

Finally, populism is not a permanent category, it changed and changes over time. We should be always ready to ‘re-re-define’ the concept.



Populism of 2010s: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ctE-SqcHVxw>

## Progress



## Questions

1. What can we understand under *populism*?
2. Is *populism* just the extreme right?
3. What are the reasons for populism in C&E Europe?
4. What types of populisms are known in CEE countries?
5. What wrote Margaret Canovan about the classic concept of populism?
6. What can you say about the *agrarian populism* as an origin of populism?
7. What are the characteristics of *Latin-American* and *new-right* populism?
8. What else can be populism, if not an ideology?
9. What is thin populism?
10. What is thick populism?

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