

Populism in Perspective: Many Strategies, Not Populisms*

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Populizme bir Bakış Açısı: Birden Fazla Populizm Yerine Birçok Strateji

Abstract

In the recent years, populism has become a dominant theme in world politics especially through the debates around the issues like Brexit or 2016 US elections. Despite a number of studies exploring the phenomenon, the literature on populism remains highly fragmented due to the lack of a conceptual framework to start the analysis with a tendency to generate too many populisms (e.g. authoritarian populism, neopopulism, third-world populism). This article starts with this puzzling development in the literature and aims to provide a framework that is applicable to the cases of populism via differentiating strategies of populism from its core features. The article argues that there is no need to invent new populisms in each and every case, but a need to map the concept by referring to the core features of populism and strategies available for the usage by populist politicians.

Keywords: Populism, Populist Politics, Populist Strategies

Özet

Son yıllarda uluslararası siyasette oldukça baskın bir yer edinmiş populizm Brexit veya 2016 Amerikan seçimleri gibi tartışmalı olaylarla daha da öne çıkmıştır. Bu fenomeni inceleyen bir çok çalışma yapılmasına rağmen, populizm üzerine literatür gittikçe dağınık bir hal almıştır ki bunun nedeni de analize başlamak için gereken kavramsal çerçevenin olmaması ve bunun yanı sıra literatürdeki farklı populizm çeşitleri üretme eğilimidir. Bu durumdan hareketle bu makale alanda geçerli olabilecek bir kavramsal çerçeve oluşturmayı hedeflemektedir. Makale her vaka için farklı bir populizm kavramsallaştırılmasının yerine, kavramın ana özellikleri ve populist siyasetçilerin kullanımında olan stratejilerinin ayrımının yapılması gerektiğini ileri sürmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Populizm, Popülist Siyaset, Popülist Stratejiler

Paper Type: Research

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1. Introduction

Populism has been at the top of the world agenda for some time now. However, it has been highly referred within the American or European contexts (e.g. Brexit, 2016 United States (US) presidential elections), despite it is a common theme for many other regions (e.g. Latin America, Asia). At the end, populism is not exclusive for one region or one ideological perspective, in contrast it has become more influential all around the world in the recent decades.

The phenomenon is, therefore, explored in the literature in many contexts and cases, yet without a clear conceptual framework. In addition to many conceptualizations of populism, studying these in the literature resulted with the proliferation of populisms: “authoritarian populism”, “right-wing/left-wing populism”, “inclusive/exclusive populism”, “Islamic populism”, “neopopulism”, “Euroscaptic populism”, “third world populism”, “neoliberal populism”, “advanced populism”, “electoral populism” (Di Tella, 1997; Hadiz, 2014; Mişcoiu, 2013; Mudde, 2004; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2013; Munro-Kua, 1996; Peters and Pierre 2020; Selçuk, 2016). The proliferation is due to arguments referring strategies of populism found in different cases as features of populism, which leads, in turn, to the various classifications of populism in each case. However, the literature has, so far, identified the core features of populism and there is only one touch needed; that is identifying the strategies of populism and differentiating them from the core features. Doing this so would result with one populism with many strategies and the fragmentation regarding many populisms in the literature would have been prevented.

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Considering the afore-mentioned discussion, this article argues that there is a need to differentiate the core features of populism and strategies serving useful tools to achieve desired political ends by the populist politicians rather than proliferating populisms popping up in the literature. Therefore, in populist politics strategies are only the means for the desired ends rather than being features of populism.

The article starts with focusing on problems regarding the many conceptualizations and varieties of populism in the literature and then it explores the core features and strategies of populism in detail. Next, it provides concluding remarks.

2. Populism in perspective: Many strategies, not populisms

For long, scholars have engaged in conceptualization of populism, yet no consensus emerged out of this and the debate on conceptualizing populism seems a never-ending venture (Caiani and Graziano, 2019: 1142; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2018: 1669). In line with such a debate, populism constitutes a concept with diverse definitions like an ideology, thin ideology, strategy, discursive frame, political style, mentality, movement, syndrome, political logic and strategy (e.g. Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2008; Bonikowski, 2016; Bugarcic, 2019; Caiani and Graziano, 2019; Canovan, 1999; Gherghina and Soare, 2013; Moffit, 2016; Mudde, 2004; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2018; Stanley, 2008; Tarchi, 2013). Despite some kind of minimal common understanding seen among those conceptualizations, populism still remains a conceptually vague issue regarding its features, tools or strategies, ways or styles.

The afore-mentioned problematic picture in the literature is, in essence, a result of case-based research on populism focusing on different regions (e.g. US, Latin America, Western Europe, Asia) without adopting a “lowest common denominator that all allegedly populist actors share” (Rooduijn, 2014: 573). Most importantly, core features and strategies of populism and conditions for it have not been differentiated in the literature, instead both strategies and conditions of/for populism (e.g. charismatic leadership, simplistic language, crises) have been treated as defining features of the concept. At the end, populism has conceptually become an empty box fulfilled by whatever it gets in line with each empirical case demonstrates and the result is the unavailing effort to define and conceptualize populism.

In order to prevent such slippery conceptualizations and fragmentation in the literature, one needs to differentiate the core features and strategies of populism, on the one hand, and conditions for it, on the other. Instead of referring to empirically-driven several conceptualizations of populism, this article systematically maps the concept with its different components through exploring its core features constituting minimal definition of populism, strategies that are used by the populist leaders when needed, and conditions that lead to the rise populist politics.

In essence, it is not fruitful to focus on what populism is and label it as an ideology, for instance, thin-centered ideology or strategy. Populism, here, is referred as a political phenomenon increasingly observed in today’s world across regions and political ideologies. Therefore, there is not a specific identifier of populism other than its core features more or less established by the current literature. Populism actually refers a Machiavellian style of politics exercised by populist parties and leaders to achieve their aims by employing a variety of strategies. At the end, the most important thing in the Machiavellian world of populism is to reach the end (i.e. get support from the people) via different means available to the populist parties and leaders, who are evaluating those to use case-by-case. This particular characteristic of populism actually makes the concept that slippery, because strategies change according to the need of the current cases evaluated by the populists.

3. No need for proliferation of populisms: Core features

Keeping in mind the afore-mentioned basic rule of the Machiavellian world of populism, it is possible to identify core features of populism, so far, established clearly in the literature and these are: elite/people divide, the antagonistic relationship between them and the primacy of people’s will. It is important to stress here is that many features attributed to populist politics by different scholars are, in essence, related to discussions on the core features or strategies of populism rather than additional features of the concept.

As mentioned, the elite/people divide lies within the very center of populist politics. Notably, populism put people forward before all, while adopting an anti-elitist and anti-establishment approach. According to populists, society is divided into one “pure, ordinary, homogenous people” and “corrupt, exploiting, privileged elites” (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2008: 4-5; Mudde, 2004: 543-544; Stanley, 2008: 104). Yet, as Mudde and Kaltwasser (2013: 151) stress, both concepts constitute “empty vessels” to be filled by populists according to their need. In other words, their content remains vague as more of “imagined communities” and constructed by the relevant politicians.

Despite heavy stress on the “people” by populists, as afore-mentioned, the term remains vague in its usage, which, in turn, leads many scholars to unpack the term “people” in various forms as follows: homogenous, uniform entity; one and inherently good population; sovereign entity; underdogs of the society; ordinary persons with a shared interest in their opposition to the elites; legitimate sovereign entity; united body; a certain class within the society; virtuous, uniform population residing in populists’ heartland – a place that populists imagine (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2008: 6; Canovan: 5; Roodujin, 2014: 576; Mudde, 2004: 545; Stanley, 2008: 101, 105; Taggart: 278; Tarchi: 121). At the end, the vital point in all is that people constitute the disadvantaged and powerless population or the ‘silent majority’ in the society opposite to the power holders – elites and those whose “interests and opinions are (they claim) regularly overridden by arrogant elites [...]” (Canovan, 1999: 5).

Being at the other side of the spectrum, the term “elite” is portrayed by populists as the greedy power centers that are corrupted, arrogant and privileged exploiters of people (Roodujin, 2014: 575; Stanley, 2008: 104). Yet, again, detailing the content of the term depends on the context, since elites can take different forms like political, economic, cultural or legal elites (Roodujin, 2014: 575). At the end, elites are the “dominant illegitimate power-holders who are jealously protective of their status [...]” (Stanley, 2008: 104).

As Mudde (2004: 544) emphasizes, the core concept of populism is “the people” rather than “the elites” and “even the concept of ‘the elite’ takes its identity from it (being its opposite, its nemesis).” This brings the second core feature of populism, namely the antagonistic relationship between the people and the elites. The general message of populism is that elites monopolize political power for their own interests at the expense of public interest and hold that power illegitimately, while conspiring against people (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2008: 5). Therefore, populism perceives the relationship between the people and the elites characterized as a conflict “[...] between those without power (the people) and those with power (the elite)” and between ‘us’ and ‘them’ (Roodujin, 2014: 575).

Last, portraying society divided and conflictual between the ordinary people and the power-holder elites, populism supports the urgent shift of power center from the elites to the people as the legitimate owner of power that represent the general will of the society (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2008: 5). Therefore, populists offer emancipation to the people, who are suppressed by the elites and deprived of their power which is, in essence, theirs, through changing the status of the people in the political system (Mudde, 2004: 546). At the end, such claims demonstrate an anti-establishment stance of populists, who aim to change the current status quo reflecting the power of enemized elites. It is not a surprise to see populists’ anti-elitist, anti-establishment and pro-people approach merge into each other, since a change in the current political system is promised on behalf of the people by the populists.

It is important to note that many evaluate crises as a core feature of populism and an impetus or driver for populists exemplified with many like political split of the representatives from the people or economic problems (Moffitt, 2016: 45). Yet, crises could only be a reason for the rise of populism rather than a core feature and could be instrumentalized by populist politicians to increase electorates’ support by employing different strategies like dramatization of the events (Moffitt, 2016: 45).

Such tendency of identifying drivers or conditions of/for populism as core features or strategies of populism leads to further confusion in the literature. For instance, Pasquino (2007: 26) identifies political, social and ideological conditions for populism, among which there is actually a strategy of populism, which treated as a condition for the rise of populism: personalization of political power. Nevertheless, there are other approaches examining conditions for populism without conceptualizing it as a core feature of populism as Albertazzi and McDonnell(2008: 9)

do, focusing on structural conditions that hinder or facilitate the rise of populism as follows: “political culture; issues of religion and identity; immigration; the economy; the electoral system; disenchantment with politics and institutions; the party system; the role of the media; European integration; corruption.”

To sum up all, a minimal conceptualization of populism, which is fruitful for any analysis exploring various cases in different regions, relies on the afore-mentioned core features. Many examples of populist politics in different contexts demonstrate those features like we see in the cases of Chavez in Venezuela and Wilders in Netherlands (Bonikowski, 2016; Selçuk, 2016). Yet, it is important to note again is that some of the core features of populism suggested in the literature are actually strategies of populism or conditions for populism to emerge rather than the features of it.

4. Delivering the message: Using one or more strategies if necessary, if suitable

Strategies of populism constitute a toolbox for populist politicians to use, yet, employing them after evaluating the necessity and suitability of each strategy for each case. This is, as mentioned, in line with the Machiavellian understanding of politics that involves the use of necessary means to achieve the desired ends by the rational rulers - politicians in our case - even if the mean employed normatively seems “unacceptable”. Despite a long list of strategies available for and actively used by populist politicians that are also stressed in the literature, they are not mapped as strategies of populism but mapped as features of it. Notably, these strategies are not necessarily employed by each populist politician in each case, since populists rationally evaluate what they need to use in different circumstances; therefore, a cherry-pick process is at work regarding the strategies of populism.

Among different strategies of populist politicians, so far, the following are detected and explored in the literature: enemization; personalization of politics through a charismatic leader and mystification of the leader; bad manners; supporting and adopting, if possible, a direct relationship between the leader and the people; tabloid-style simplistic communication; effective usage of both traditional and new media; and post-truth, which is conceptualized by this article as one of the populist strategies.

Starting with the enemization strategy, it is widely known now that many populists perceive the world from a Manichean perspective, a dualistic understanding of the world and politics. In this worldview, world politics consists of dualities like ‘good and evil’, ‘us and others’, ‘friends and foes’, ‘corrupt and virtuous’, ‘privileged and underprivileged’, ‘believers and infidels’ (Kaya, 2016: 10; Mudd, 2004: 544; Tarchi, 2013: 127) Such an understanding leads to an active usage of enemization strategy to emphasize the other side of the duality they do not belong to.

Despite enemization is closely related to the elite/people divide and antagonistic relationship between them leading to the construction of elites as the real enemy of the people, enemies of the populists can be numerous like immigrants, outside-groups, the opposition, or even another country. For instance, under the label of exclusionary/inclusionary populism, Mudde and Kaltwasser (2013) stress afore-mentioned dynamics and conclude that subtypes of populism exist in different regions: an exclusionary populism in Europe and inclusionary populism in Latin America. Though, such extra-conceptualization of populism is redundant, since enemization strategy includes the ‘other’ of the populists as the enemy, be it like the immigrants or the Americans, regardless whether populism is inclusionary or exclusionary. Once enemies are defined, the threat comes from them are effectively stressed by the populists, since each needs a ‘threat’ to hold the group together.

To illustrate, far right parties of Europe (e.g. Flemish Bloc in Belgium, Front National in France) have more or less consensus on favoring anti-immigrant measures (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2013: 160) Immigration and migrants are seen from a zero-sum logic by the European populists: “either the ‘outsiders’ obtain something at the cost of the ‘natives’, or the latter advance their material incorporation as a result of the exclusion of the immigrants” (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2013: 160-161). Other than migrants populist parties and leaders also enemized both their political elites and outsiders like Chavez did through enemizing the Punto Fiji system, Venezuelan elites and the US or Thaksin through enemizing elites and the establishment in Thailand (Moffitt, 2016: 299; Roodujin, 2014: 584; Selçuk, 2016: 578).

Personalization of politics through charismatic leadership is also widely seen as a strategy of many populist leaders. To start with, such a strategy turns populism into a more leader-based one than the party-based populism

and it is increasingly employed in different regions like Latin America or Africa. In this, charismatic leader, who is able to “personify the interests of the nation” (Canovan, 1999: 5) and “who is portrayed as knowing instinctively what the people want” as “[...] ‘one of the people’ and, hence, one ‘with the people’” leads the way for all (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2008: 5, 7).

Putin is one among many examples exercising successfully the afore-mentioned strategy and even Putinism as some sort of ideology emerged in Russia due to such strategy: “The attempt to introduce order, political and economic stability in Russia has been translated into a new “ideology” (Putinism) able to strengthen the relationship between and politics and people” (Morini, 2013: 367). Berlusconi, as another example, ran *Forza Italia* as his “personal party” by 1994 through a highly personalized populist politics (Mazzoleni, 2008: 53). Furthermore, in Africa, the lines between populism and charismatic leader is even blurred, since African leaders like Michael Sata of Zambia or Jacob Zuma of South Africa rule through high degrees of personalization of politics, embodying the will of the people (Resnick, 2015: 320).

Interestingly, with the personalization of politics, the leader is portrayed as “one of the ordinary people or one of us” and “extraordinary individual” at the same time and both aspects (i.e. extraordinariness and ordinariness of the leader) are effectively used to link the leader closer to the people (Kaya, 2016: 11; Mudde, 2004: 560). While the leader with his/her gestures, dialect, body language, dressing seems just one ordinary person among the sovereign people, he/she also shows some extraordinary hallmarks like masculinity, femininity or strength as demonstrated in various cases like Putin’s topless pictures as a hunter (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2008: 5; Kaya, 2016: 11).

Going even further, sometimes those populist leaders are either mystified by others or by themselves like George W. Bush presenting himself as the Messiah (Kaya, 2016: 11). Such populist leaders highlight their uniqueness and “their unique qualities and vision mean that only they can be the savior of the people” (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2008: 5). Besides, both conspiracy theories and paranoia are specific features of such kind of mystification of the leader. Illustrating clearly this, to be killed by the enemy is a common theme among many populist charismatic leaders like Chavez suspecting a possible poisoning by the Colombian oligarchy (Kaya, 2016: 11).

The strategy of adopting bad manners is also a way for the populist leaders to promote the leader’s ordinariness and, therefore, closeness to the people. Opposite to the technocratic and rigid framework of politics, some populist leaders adopt manners like using slang language or promoting political incorrectness in public for presenting themselves completely different than the current political elites and closer to the ways of doings of the ordinary people (Moffitt, 2016: 44). As Taggart (2004: 276). stresses, such leaders “are expressing a rejection of more bureaucratized, regularized and constrained forms of leadership.” For instance, Boris Johnson as a populist politician and the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom is not cautious in his words and manners at all exemplified several times in his writings like his piece on Putin referring to a Harry Potter character: “Despite looking a bit like Dobby the House Elf, he is a ruthless and manipulative tyrant” (Johnson, 2015). Sarah Palin also represents an instance for bad manners by populists with her “directness, playfulness, a certain disregard for hierarchy and tradition, ready resort to anecdote as ‘evidence’ [...]” (Moffitt, 2016: 44).

Most populists also adopt a tabloid style of communication, a direct and simple style, as another populist strategy. Canovan (1999: 5) emphasizes the logic of populists on this as follows: “Capitalizing on popular distrust of politicians’ evasiveness and bureaucratic jargon, they pride themselves on simplicity and directness.” Therefore, through this strategy, populists distinguish themselves with the current elites, who use a more bureaucratic, esoteric and distant style of communication and, speak for the ‘normal or ordinary’ people that could understand such language style easily (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2008: 7; Roodujin, 2014: 576). Chavez was, for instance, using a simplistic language referring myths and symbols like calling George W. Bush as “the biggest Devil of all” (Roodujin, 2014: 584). Most importantly, populist politicians are often criticized due to their demagogic practices: “for playing on popular emotions, making irresponsible and unrealistic promises to the masses, and stoking an atmosphere of enmity and distrust towards political elites” (Stanley, 2008: 101).

Another strategy of populists is the preference of direct relationship of the politicians/government and the people for the unmediated reflection of general will (Bonikowski, 2016: 11; Mudde, 2004: 559; Roodujin, 2014:

577). Due to favoring direct forms of participation or methods of direct democracy (e.g. referenda, elections), most populists call removal of intermediating institutions (e.g. Parliament) between the politicians and the people (Bonikowski, 2016: 11). Such strong faith of populists is related to both majoritarianism and authenticity of the general will. The importance of majoritarianism for populism is that it helps to reinforce the *authenticity* of the will of the people. The greater a majority in favour of a particular policy or moral value, the more credibly it can be said to reflect the popular will (Stanley, 2008: 104-105).

Establishing direct communication with the people is also a quite common strategy among populists (Mudde, 2004: 545). This is also related to the afore-mentioned discussion of rejecting intermediary institutions, since populists prefer personal ties with their followers (Canovan, 1999: 6). Therefore, populist politicians inclined to use actively both traditional media like televisions and alternative/new media like twitter (Roodujin, 2014: 577).

One trick of the populist leaders to deliver their message is to use the traditional media outlets that are owned by themselves (Moffitt, 2016: 72). Berlusconi, for example, used his own television networks during the election campaigns to remove any intermediary establishment between him and the electorate (Roodujin, 2014: 587). Chavez as well communicated directly with his people through his own television (Roodujin, 2014: 585).

Most importantly, developments in the media regarding its features, role and landscape (e.g. commercialization, diversification of media landscape, technological advances) also enable populists further their ties with the people through active usage of the alternative/new media (Moffitt, 2016: 74; Mudde, 2004: 553). Increasing usage of the social media by both populists and the people contributing to the populist aim deliver the message in a simple and direct language to the wider public. For instance, Geert Wilders, the populist leader of the Dutch Party for Freedom, is one among many European populist politicians using social media to deliver his messages and mobilize masses like through creating a website for writing complaints about immigrants by the Dutch citizens in Netherlands (Moffitt, 2016: 89).

The afore-mentioned developments in technology and, therefore, the media bring another strategy of populism, highly and especially recently debated, and that is the post-truth, which is increasingly employed by the populist politicians. Post-truth strategy in populism starts with the assumption enduring the definition of post-truth: "relating to circumstances in which people respond more to feelings and beliefs than to facts" (Oxford Dictionaries, 2020). Populist politicians employ this strategy in order to shape the public opinion in line with their own understanding of issues. Although it cannot be said that post-truth strategy is the synonymous of lying, it denotes many forms of misleading circumstances like misinformation, fake and/or falsified stories, untruths and half-truths, or assertions with no factual basis (Yilmaz, 2019: 238). Therefore, it is a deliberate act of populist politicians rather than naive misunderstandings or white lies.

No matter what, it is important to note that post-truth strategy constitutes a common strategy exercised by many populists (e.g. Donald Trump) especially with the increasing usage of new tools of the alternative/new media. Despite still using old style strategies like mass rallies, populist politicians tend to use especially the social media "as a mouthpiece to peddle 'fake news' and circulate 'alternative facts' with the specific intention of shaping voter opinion and exciting emotions through inciting fear and hatred of the 'other'" (Speed and Mannion, 2017: 251).

As a specific example for the usage of post-truth, Turkey's Erdoğan skilfully exercises post-truth strategy in his speeches (Oruçoğlu, 2015; Temelkuran 2016)). For instance, in the 2017 Euro-Turkish crisis during the Turkish constitutional changes post-truth elements exist in many speeches of Erdoğan and other leaders within the Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (Justice and Development Party - AKP) government (Yılmaz, 2019). Erdoğan accused the Dutch as involved to the UN peace-keepers with a battalion for failing to halt the Srebrenica massacre (Yılmaz, 2019: 243). Yet, the Dutch as peace-keepers cannot be blamed for the massacre with such a statement, because it is simply not true; in fact, Serb militias were responsible for the massacre. Therefore, Erdoğan's statement rather reflects a misinformation attempt targeting the Turkish public in order to receive their support at the referendum. Another example is the statement by the Turkish Minister of Economy, Nihat Zeybekçi as follows: "our economy is in a good place [...]"; while the value of dollar was constantly increasing in 2017 (Canpolat, 2017). Such statements reflect the active usage of the post-truth by the populist Turkish government in different occasions.

To conclude, as seen there are many strategies available for populist politicians through evaluating the necessity and suitability of each strategy for each case. The afore-mentioned core features and strategies of populism constitute indicative characteristics of populism.

5. Conclusion

As being at the agenda of the world for sometime now, the concept of populism is a popular phenomenon, which has increasingly been explored in the literature. However, the concept still lacks one-for-all definition; rather it has been labelled differently by many like an ideology, frame or strategy. Besides, rather than a common understanding, the literature is dominated by many populisms such as authoritarian or democratic populism through the proliferation of conceptualizations. In turn, this leads to a confusing ground to start the analysis on populism in different cases.

Considering the afore-mentioned puzzling development in the literature, this article suggested to differentiate the core features of populism from a variety of strategies that populist politicians exercise. In line with this, core features of populism are mapped as the elite/people divide, the antagonistic relationship between them and the primacy of the people's will and the strategies of populism as the enemization, tabloid-style communication, personalization of politics through a charismatic leader with the mystification of the leader, adopting a direct relationship between the leader and the people, bad manners, effective usage of traditional and social media and post-truth.

Through such conceptualization of populism, the vagueness of the concept and fragmentation within the literature has been eliminated. Moreover, this enables the research on populism to focus on different issues related to populism other than conceptualization and, therefore, prevent further proliferation of the concept. In turn, the research could be widened its scope and context without dealing with many populisms; rather exploring one populism in different cases.

Conflicts of Interest

The author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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