MAPPING POPULISM:
DEFINITIONS, CASES, AND CHALLENGES
TO DEMOCRACY

PINAR DİNÇ

October 2016
Pınar Dinç is the Research and Development Coordinator at IPC.

About Istanbul Policy Center

Istanbul Policy Center (IPC) is an independent policy research institute with global outreach. Its mission is to foster academic research in social sciences and its application to policy making. IPC team is firmly committed to providing decision-makers, opinion leaders, academics, and general public with innovative and objective analyses in key domestic and foreign policy issues. IPC has expertise in a wide range of areas, including — but not exhaustive to — Turkey-EU-U.S. relations, education, climate change, current trends of political and social transformation in Turkey, as well as the impact of civil society and local governance on this metamorphosis.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The roundtable event entitled “Three Facets of Rising Populism: Cases from Turkey, Europe, and the United States” was organized by Istanbul Policy Center and the Black Sea Trust for Regional Cooperation, a project of the German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF), to draw parallels among the drivers of populism from a theoretical and empirical standpoint. It was a timely event given that populism appears to be on the rise over a vast horizon, spanning from the gates of Europe to the shores of North America.

At the time of the organization of this conference, Turkey was under frequent terror attacks, which caused international organizations to cancel or relocate their programs in Turkey. We are very grateful to panel chairs, panelists, and participants of the meeting who came from various parts of the world and contributed to the discussions.
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Populist ideology, political parties, leaders, and discourse are on the rise, spanning from America to Europe and from the Middle East to East Asia. However, there is still a lack of an agreed definition—or measurement—of this phenomenon. Populism has diverse meanings within different geographies, historical contexts, and ideologies. For example, left-wing populism in Venezuela under Hugo Chávez in the late 1990s and 2000s is different from right-wing populism in Hungary under Viktor Orbán. Similar yet diverging examples of the recent populist trend are seen around the world. In June 2016, the UK voted to enact “Brexit,” Donald Trump officially became the Republican Party’s candidate for the 2016 U.S. presidential elections, and the Alternative für Deutschland met with considerable success in regional elections in Germany. The increasing popularity of leaders such as India’s Narendra Modi, Turkey’s Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and Russia’s Vladimir Putin has broadened the global populist trend. Populist parties came to the fore across Europe after the left-wing political party Syriza won the general elections in Greece in early 2015 and Podemos significantly raised its votes in Spain’s national elections the same year.

Current studies on populism are useful yet vary due to the absence of a clear and operationalizable definition. What do we mean when we say “populism?” How do we measure it? What links does it have with other key ideas such as democracy, globalization, neoliberalism, and majoritarianism? Who can be defined as a populist? Is populism something to be cured? These were the key questions that arose during our one-day roundtable discussion on populism. This report provides a brief overview of these issues through a theoretical discussion supported by empirical cases from across the world. It concludes with suggestions for further research.
INTRODUCTION

As the map above shows, when we talk about populism today we are talking about a global phenomenon observed across five continents. One can find many articles, both academic and non-academic, about populism in India, in Thailand, in Senegal, and in Zambia; across Europe in countries such as Turkey, Greece, Germany, Italy, and the UK; and in the United States and Latin American countries such as Argentina, Venezuela, and Brazil.

Nonetheless, in almost all of these works, there is a lack of consensus on how to define the term. Pappas highlights that the keywords in populism debates today are “[A]ctors (the “people,” some elite, a leader); actions (mass mobilization, strategic leadership); style (moralistic, dichotomous, majoritarian); domain (old-new, left-right, democratic-nondemocratic, European-non-European); consequences (polarization, social homogenization, charisma); and normative implications (threat or corrective of democracy).”

In parallel with this confusion on how to explain what populism is, the current literature suggests diverse ways of operationalizing the concept. Structuralists emphasize the importance of socio-economic factors and macro-level issues around modernization, industrialization, capitalism, and democratization to identify the causal mechanisms of populism. Institutionalists focus more on the national aspects, such as national politics, economy, and society, to explain populism at the nation-specific level. Constructivists and cognitive psychological approaches draw their attention to agents, such as voters, leaders, and their emotions, playing on traumas and fears, to explain how populism is constructed and framed at the individual level.

Populism as a concept originated in a conference at the London School of Economics in 1967. Back then, Ionescu and Gellner were, in fact, not very far from populism discussions today; they did not doubt the importance of populism but nevertheless suggested

---


that there is unclarity on how to explain the phenomena. In the 1970s and 1980s, there were two main approaches to populism, one being associated with modernization theory and the other being associated with structural Marxism. Both approaches, however, understood populism as a consequence of historical and political circumstances in developing countries and the semi-periphery world. Beginning in the 1990s, a new wave of populism studies has looked at populist leaders and their supporters, identifying this as “neopopulism.” Today, populism as a concept is both relevant and widely used pejoratively, reducing its value as an analytical tool. Given the disagreement over the meaning of the term, the first challenge at hand is to define what populism is.

---

4 Ibid., 1.
6 Pappas, “Modern Populism: Research Advances.”
Despite the enriching literature on populism, many scholarly articles begin by underlining the ambiguity in defining populism. Moffitt and Torney write that there is “little agreement as to how properly conceptualize populism.” Hawkins asserts that “scholars, journalists, and much of the public are still unsure of what the word [populism] means.” Weyland simply suggests that populism is “a particularly confusing concept.”

Gidron and Bonikowski tackle the challenges of defining the concept of populism by identifying three main conceptual approaches in the literature, which define populism (1) as an ideology, (2) as a discursive style, and (3) as a form of political mobilization.

The first approach identifies populism as an ideology, and a “thin-centered” one at that. Populism as an ideology and as a movement can be framed in various social and political contexts, by different actors, and through diverse mechanisms. Political parties and politicians may be populist, and this can be traced through their statements. Cas Mudde identifies two general understandings of populism in public debate. First is the politics of the public, meaning “highly emotional and simplistic discourse that is directed at the ‘gut feelings’ of the people.” Second is the “opportunistic policies with the aim of (quickly) pleasing the people/voters.” Building up on these two general assumptions, Mudde defines populism as follows: “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.”

The second approach to populism suggests that populism is a discursive style. This populist discursive style mainly builds on the dichotomy between us, the people, and them, the corrupt elite. This approach does not define populism as an ideology as it sees populism as “a mode of political expression that is employed selectively and strategically by both right and left, liberals and conservatives.” Bale et al. suggest that political actors risk being labelled as populist depending on the frequency of their appearance in the media, regardless of their ideological standpoint. This definition gives populism fluidity as “it [populism] is a form of politics [rather] than a stable category of actors.”

The third approach underlines populism’s contextual limits and fluid nature and suggests that populism is a political strategy. This political strategy might be towards nationalization, economic redistribution policies, or securing the support of popular political parties/leaders. Levitsky and Roberts explain populism as, “[A] top-down political mobilisation of mass constituencies by personalistic leaders who challenge established political or economic elites on behalf of an ill-defined pueblo.” This suggests that populism is not necessarily a bottom-up approach directly reflecting the will of the “pure” people. To the contrary, it implies that certain charismatic leaders redefine who the people are on behalf of the people to challenge establishments.

This definition suggests that in politics populism may be used as a strategy for policy making, political organization, and forms of mobilization within different economic, historical, and political contexts. Political actors, especially charismatic leaders, are important actors in populist politics as they offer a way to not only explain what populism is but also evaluate the mechanisms through which they proceed. However, it should be underlined that not all populist leaders are charismatic or majority-supported actors. Table 1 is a useful summary of the three main approaches to populism and their units of analysis. It also allows us to reconsider ways of measuring populism within and across different cases.

---

8 Ibid., 381.
13 Ibid., 542.
14 Ibid.
15 Ibid., emphasis added by the author.
19 Steven Levitsky and Kenneth M. Roberts. The Resurgence of the Latin American Left (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011).
Table 1. Three approaches to populism

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>DEFINITION OF POPULISM</th>
<th>UNIT OF ANALYSIS</th>
<th>RELEVANT METHODS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Populism as ideology</td>
<td>A set of interrelated ideas about the nature of politics and society</td>
<td>Parties and party leaders</td>
<td>Text analysis (partisan literature)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Populism as discourse</td>
<td>A way of making claims about politics; characteristics of discourse</td>
<td>Texts, speeches, public discourse about politics</td>
<td>Interpretive textual analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Populism as political strategy</td>
<td>A form of mobilization and organization</td>
<td>Parties (with a focus on structures), social movements, leaders</td>
<td>Comparative historical analysis, case studies</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Gidron and Bonikowski (2013), 17.

In addition to the three approaches above, an alternative definition of populism characterizes it as a “political style.” Moffitt and Tormey argue that the relationship between a performing politician and audience is reflexive as “the performance can actually change or create the audience’s subjectivity, and this in turn can change the context and efficiency of the performance.”

Therefore, they suggest that analysts need to focus on this reflective interaction among the performers and their audience, which is also subject to change across time, place, and individuals.

Moffitt and Tormey identify three elements of populist performance, which are the appeal to the people; perception of crisis, breakdown, or threat; and bad manners. As populists appeal to the people, they distinguish the people from the elite and claim to be far different from them. By this, populist politicians not only become “pseudo-celebrities,” but they also increase the value of ordinary citizens’ knowledge, which is defined as “epistemological populism.”

Second, through real or perceived crises such as globalization, neoliberalism, war, terror, or immigration, populist leaders propose an emergency exit program to the people, usually in favor of “short-term and swift action rather than the ‘slow politics.’” As a result, they care less about being politically correct or appropriate, resulting often in “tabloid style” politics that involve “slang, swearing, political incorrectness” as opposed to diplomacy.

---

22 Ibid., 389.
23 Ibid., 388.
The conceptual debate over the definition of populism implies that it can appear in different countries, under different forms of governments and leaders, and in different historical, political, economic, and social contexts. Populist leaders may lean left or right, towards or away from political correctness, or towards inclusiveness or exclusiveness. This section briefly looks at the discussions around the presidential campaign in the United States, some examples of the spread of populism in Europe, and the current political atmosphere in Turkey.

According to Eiermann, “American politics has long been dominated by an elite that has successfully insulated itself against the whims and tides of the public opinion.” With this background, he argues, one can understand why and how populists such as Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders found strong support. Linda Chavez writes that both Trump and Sanders “rely on populist anger to stoke fear, envy, and retribution among supposed democratic majorities against minorities—racial and religious in Trump’s case, class-based in Sanders’.” Among Trump’s plans is the construction of a wall along the Mexican border that the Mexican government will pay for, as well as banning all Muslims from entering the United States. On Sanders’ agenda is the corrupt economy, tax system, and the environment. Although he is no longer in the running for the presidency in 2016, such class-based populism has affected the extent to which Hillary Clinton, now the Democratic Party nominee, leans to the left and panders to populist class-based sentiments.

Trump and Sanders may not be European politicians, but the populism they represent certainly exists in Europe. European populism is divided along right- and left-wing arguments. On the one hand, there is right-wing populism fueling nationalism and xenophobia, especially against non-EU immigrants (e.g. Germany, Austria, Hungary, France, and the Netherlands), while on the other hand there is left-wing populism criticizing neoliberal economies (e.g. Greece and Spain).

Bagnanni highlights that “Trump is an American version of an early harbinger of the rising populist tide: Italy’s Silvio Berlusconi […] Sanders, meanwhile, is the political twin of Britain’s Jeremy Corbyn.” Corbyn and his Labour Party, along with David Cameron and the Conservative Party, campaigned for the UK to remain in the EU in the 2016 referendum. The opposition, the right-wing UK Independence Party (UKIP) under Nigel Farage’s leadership, framed the referendum as a necessary decision for “independence” from international institutions in order for Britain to make decisions based on its own national will. On June 23, British citizens voted to exit the EU, therefore, representing a win for the rising populist campaigns and a threat to the unity of the EU as an international mechanism representing European solidarity. The Brexit decision is a significant example, but not the only indicator showing the rise of populism in Europe. As the results of the Berlin State Elections in September 2016 have shown, there is increasing support for the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), a political party known for its anti-immigrant focus, also in Germany. Anti-immigrant and nationalist parties and leaders are gaining more support and strength in the EU. This, in turn, is weakening the European Union as a strong actor not only in Europe but also as an anchor for democratizing countries like Turkey.

As Islamophobia and xenophobia grow in Western democracies such as the United States and the EU, anti-Americanism and anti-Europeanism are rising in today’s Turkey. When it first came to power in 2002, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) adopted a series of democratic reforms to fulfill the EU accession requirements. From 2005 onwards, however, the reform process slowed down, eventually moving Turkey and the EU away from each other. The AKP’s withdrawal from the reform process went hand in hand with its increasing adoption of populism as a political strategy, involving elements of anti-European and anti-Western rhetoric.


Arguably, the AKP won “the biggest election of all” by defeating the coup attempt on the night of July 15. With this new popular support, there was an increasing emphasis on “the people’s will” in the aftermath of the coup attempt, which involved controversial issues such as reinstating the death penalty. In response to criticisms from the EU, Erdoğan stated that Europeans “have no right to criticize” Turkey’s decisions on matters like the death penalty or declaration of the state of emergency in the post-coup process. Anti-Americanism has also increased, since the alleged mastermind of the coup attempt, Fethullah Gülen, lives in self-imposed exile in the United States. Turkey demands his immediate extradition as the head of a terrorist organization, comparing Gülen’s FETÖ (Fethullah Terror Organization) to Bin-Laden’s Al-Qaeda. The newspaper Daily Sabah’s poll on Twitter showed that 69% of the respondents believe that the CIA was involved in the coup attempt in Turkey.


CURING POPULISM? ISSUES EMERGING FROM THE THREE FACETS OF POPULISM

Be it Turkey, the EU, or the United States, populism has been on the rise, often accompanied by discriminative discourse towards “others” and increasing polarization. Is populism a problem or something that needs to be cured? Could it be both? Could populism have both advantages and disadvantages for democracy? This is a key issue that is often raised in discussions on populism, and it refers directly to the impact of populism on democracy.

Populism is not a new phenomenon within democracies. In fact, it has been endemic in democracies and democratizing countries. The existing literature highlights two very different effects of populism on democracies. First is the view that populism supports democracy, that is, the rule of the people is “the purest form of democracy.”

Moffitt and Tormey refer to Ernesto Laclau, who “argues that it [populism] is the logic of the political” where people are the main subject in politics and populism puts the people in the center. Mudde and Kaltwasser suggest that populism, in fact, could be “corrective” for liberal democracy by giving voice to the groups “that do not feel represented by the elites.” The second view argues that populism is a form of illiberal democracy, and thus it harms democracy. For instance, Pappas argues that populism “contaminates formerly liberal political and party systems” that turn this phenomenon into a permanent problem for liberal democracies.

In order to understand the connection between populism and democracy, there also needs to be a discussion of what democracy is. Can populism be explained by looking at the “democratic disconnect,” that is, “a gap between citizens and those institutions at the national, regional, and transnational levels?” When we say democracy, do we mean ideal democracy or democracy as it is practiced? Canovan underlines that democracy has “two-faces” and that populism thrives on the tension between the two. He identifies these two faces as redemptive and pragmatic, which are also interdependent. Redemptive democracy promises salvation through the politics of the people as the source of legitimate authority, which at times involves an anti-institutional impulse. Pragmatic democracy proposes rules to cope with conflicts, a form of government, and thus institutions that “not just (to) limit power, but also (to) constitute it and make it effective.” The coexistence and conflict between redemptive democracy and pragmatic democracy, Canovan suggests, is what “provide[s] the stimulus to the populist mobilization that follows democracy like a shadow.”

---

38 Kaltwasser, “The Ambivalence of Populism.”
39 Ibid., 185.
40 Ibid., 18.
43 Ibid.
44 Ibid., 10.
45 Ibid.
46 Ibid.
Populism is a mass phenomenon, a movement with spillover effects permeating the whole of society. A spillover movement can have direct or indirect routes, often by mimicking and affecting each other in terms of ideology, frames, tactics, structure, and opportunities.47 As a result, even mainstream parties find themselves in a populist stream.48 In addition to these domestic outcomes, populism has implications on states’ foreign policies, thus on international relations.

A common conclusion in our roundtable meeting was that populism was here to stay. And so the question is, what do we do with it? First of all, we need to work on finding common grounds for defining the concept. Second, we need to work on operationalization of the term, considering issues of reliability and validity in populism research. Third, there is a need for building bridges across research on populism. There are two ways of doing this. First is by carrying out comparative case studies to explain this global trend and how populism is reflected in different contexts. Second is to carry out detailed individual case studies that combine structures, institutions, and discourses with process tracing to explain the causes and impacts of populism. The first method would allow us to compare cases, and the latter method would give researchers more and new insight on populism in different cases. Indeed, populism seems to be here to stay, and only further rigorous research will be able to tell us more.

48 Balfour et. al., Europe’s Troublemakers: The Populist Challenge to Foreign Policy (Brussels: European Policy Centre, 2016).


