



## POLITICAL THEORY WORKS WITH POPULISM: A STUDY

*Dr. Hafiz Hammaduddin*  
*Ph.D in International Relations*  
*FUFAST*  
*Karachi –Pakistan*  
[hafizhammaduddin@gmail.com](mailto:hafizhammaduddin@gmail.com)

*Sumayya Akhter*  
*M.Phil in Mass Communication*  
*Visiting Lecture*  
*University of Karachi*  
*Karachi –Pakistan*  
[sumayyakhter@gmail.com](mailto:sumayyakhter@gmail.com)

*Afshan Iqbal*  
*Assistant Professor*  
*Department of International Relations*  
*Federal Urdu University of Arts, Sciences & Technology*  
*Karachi -Pakistan*  
[afshaniqbal41@yahoo.com](mailto:afshaniqbal41@yahoo.com)

### Abstract

*Populism is a global trend that's hard to pin down. Its meaning varies across different cultures, making it a challenge for political experts to define universally. To truly understand populism, one must look at the historical and social contexts of where it arises. At its core, populism is deeply connected to democratic ideals, emphasizing the importance of the nation and its people. However, it often morphs these principles, prioritizing certain groups over others, usually under the guidance of a magnetic leader who draws strength from their followers. Even though it's rooted in democratic thought, populism can sometimes conflict with the established rules of constitutional democracy. This piece delves into the ever-changing nature of populism, its relationship with democratic governance, and the ways it's perceived today. It also sheds light on how populism, when in power, can alter fundamental democratic concepts like the definition of "the people", the importance of elections, and the essence of representation.*

**Keywords:** Direct representation, fascism, majority principle, populist democracy, representative democracy.

### Introduction

Populism, a phenomenon deeply intertwined with the democratization process of the 19th century,



has gained significant visibility and relevance in today's political landscape. However, coping with populism poses a challenge for political theorists. While it was once studied as a subset of fascism and confined to the margins of Western society, primarily in Latin America, populism now simultaneously emerges with intensity in nearly all countries governed by constitutional democracies. From Caracas to Budapest, Washington to Rome, comprehending contemporary politics necessitates an understanding of this phenomenon.

People's feelings about populism have changed over time. Back in the day, most folks thought of it as a big problem. But now, many, including experts, see it as a sign that our usual way of doing politics might be getting old. Some even think populism could give democracy a fresh start. But, here's the thing: the word "populism" gets thrown around a lot. Sometimes, it's just used to slap a label on political groups or leaders, whether they're against immigrants or just don't like certain economic policies. So, we've got to be careful not to oversimplify what populism really means.

This critical approach carelessly reduces politics to a binary choice between governability and populism, in which the latter is likened with all forms of opposition, and democratic politics becomes primarily concerned with managing institutions. Thus, the site surrounding populism is complex, requiring a nuanced understanding that moves beyond superficial categorizations and explores the underlying principles and dynamics at play.

The concept of populism challenges clear and universally accepted definitions, as it does not align with any specific ideology or political regime. Instead, populism manifests as a form of collective action seeking to acquire power. It takes on diverse forms across different periods and locations. However, populism is inherently mismatched with non-democratic political systems, as it aims to construct a collective identity based on consent and challenges existing social orders in favor of the interests of the majority. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, populism strives to appeal to ordinary people who feel neglected by established elite groups.

Nevertheless, while populism emphasizes the attachment of the "ordinary" masses, this inclusiveness is often accompanied by an exclusionary process (Mouffe 2016). Populism positions itself in opposition to the political establishment, which becomes the external force against which populism's notion of "the people" defines itself (Mouffe 2016). Consequently, regardless of whether populism adopts right-wing or left-wing associations, its fundamental characteristic lies in the radical partiality with which it interprets the concept of the people and the majority. This implies that if a populist movement rises to power, it can have a detrimental impact on democratic institutions, the rule of law, and the separation of powers that constitute a constitutional democracy. In fact, it has the potential to push constitutional democracy to its limits and create an opening for authoritarian measures or even dictatorship. Paradoxically, such a regime change would ultimately undermine populism itself (Arditi 2007). The fate of populism is complicatedly linked to that of democracy, and its perpetual state of "never quite taking place" is an inherent aspect of its nature. Some scholars have employed the metaphor of a parasite to illustrate its unique relationship with democracy. Regardless of the analogy



used, the manifestations and consequences of populism are deeply contextual and contingent upon the political, social, and cultural context of each country.

Populism transcends being merely a historical occurrence or a form of dissent; it is intrinsically linked to the evolution of contemporary democracy. This connection serves as a foundational reference for any scholarly exploration. Thus, despite the absence of a comprehensive theory of populism, as noted by Müller (2012, p. 23), political scholars can derive insights from its inherent relationship with democracy, a system whose principles and processes are well-entrenched in Populism doesn't stand alone as a distinct political system. Instead, it borrows its essence from democracy, specifically a form of democracy rooted in representation and constitutional principles. This democracy employs both traditional elections and, at times, direct voting methods like referendums. Its political landscape is shaped by issues and party loyalties, not just individual players and electoral events. Populism rises from the realm of public opinion, challenging these democratic attributes. It capitalizes on the belief, as highlighted by Norris (1997), that conventional parliamentary and party politics often overlook significant segments of society. Populism critiques the disconnect between the idealized notion of "the people" and the actual societal makeup, especially the divide between voters and their representatives. Populists aim to bridge this divide, asserting that their approach upholds the true power of the nation against various threats, be it the elite, global economic forces, immigration, or religious extremism, as noted by Skocpol & Williamson (2012). However, a paradox emerges: within populism, "the people" don't represent themselves. Instead, a charismatic leader claims to voice their collective grievances against the perceived complacency of mainstream parties. Laclau (2005a, p. 40) posits that the identity of populist regimes is often tied to their leaders. Without a cohesive story and a leader championing it, populism remains a protest against societal shifts that seem to undermine core democratic values, especially the principle of equality.

In the initial section, I delve into the situational nature of populism, highlighting how its periodic emergence mirrors the dynamics of representative governance. Moving to the second section, I explore contemporary perspectives on populism, emphasizing a growing consensus regarding its rhetorical essence and its tactics to gain power within democratic frameworks. Drawing from this extensive research, the final section outlines the defining traits of populism when in authority and its propensity to reshape core democratic pillars: the concept of the people and majority, the electoral process, and representation. A distinctive feature of modern populism is its emphasis on a direct bond between the leader and the masses, its supreme reliance on public sentiment, and its tendency to sideline traditional political entities like parties and established media, as well as institutional norms, administrative structures, and oversight bodies. Using Rosanvallon's (2006) terms, populism capitalizes on the "counter-democratic" or "negative politics" tools that constitutional democracy inherently provides. Populist democracy poses a challenge to party-based democracy, and upon gaining traction, it solidifies its position by excessively leveraging democratic instruments. This includes continuously rallying public sentiment behind its governing leader and, when feasible, revising the constitution. As Arato (2017) aptly notes, populism currently aims to dominate the realm of foundational political power.



## **Literature Review**

Populism, a global phenomenon, is notorious for its elusive nature and resistance to clear definitions. It defies generalizations and necessitates scholars of politics to adopt a comparative approach, as its language and substance are deeply intertwined with the unique political cultures of the societies in which it emerges. Populist movements in different countries take on distinct characteristics, influenced by factors such as religious inclinations, nationalism, and secularism. They may employ the rhetoric of republican patriotism or emphasize notions of indigeneity, nativism, and the ideal of the original inhabitants. Furthermore, populism can emphasize various cleavages, such as the center-periphery divide or the urban-rural dichotomy.

Historically, populism has manifested in diverse ways. Some populist experiences have emerged from collectivist agrarian traditions seeking to resist the forces of modernization, Western influence, and industrialization. Others have embodied the ethos of self-made individuals celebrated in popular culture, valuing small-scale entrepreneurship. There have also been instances where populism has sought state intervention to govern modernization or protect and support the well-being of the middle class. The extraordinary range of past and present populisms highlights that what may be considered appropriate or effective in one region, like Latin America, may not necessarily hold true in Europe or the United States (1999, pp. 1–2). Similarly, conclusions drawn from Northern and Western Europe may not be applicable to Eastern or Southern regions of the continent.

Drawing parallels with Berlin's reflections on Romanticism, it is essential to acknowledge that any attempt to generalize the phenomenon of populism will inevitably encounter countervailing evidence. Even seemingly innocuous generalizations should be approached with caution, guarding against excessive certainty or overconfidence in defining populism.

Populism's significance isn't tied to its clarity or a well-defined concept. It's a movement that defies easy categorization, but its impact is real and can deeply influence the mindset and lives of those who adopt it.

At a groundbreaking 1967 conference at the London School of Economics, scholars unveiled interdisciplinary insights into "global populism," underscoring its integral role in our political landscape and its indication of a shift in the democratic system (Berlin 1968, p. 138). While we might not echo Berlin's (1999, p. 2) bold assertion about Romanticism, which he described as a profound transformation "after which nothing was ever the same," we can certainly recognize populism's significant place within the vast and global tapestry of democracy.

At its heart, populism draws from the twin pillars of *ethnos* and *demos* (the nation and its people), which have been foundational to the idea of popular sovereignty since the dawn of democratization in the 18th century. The imprint of populism on a democratic society can reshape both the tone and substance of public dialogue, even if it doesn't ascend to governance or amend the constitution. This



capacity for change sets the backdrop for framing a political theory of populism. Given the elusive nature of populism as a concrete concept, it's understandable that academics might question whether it stands as a unique occurrence or merely an ideological construct.

The critique raised is indeed valid. Yet, the consistent use of the term "populism" in both daily politics and scholarly works underscores its importance and warrants our analytical scrutiny. When examining populism, it's crucial to consider its context without becoming confined by it. Early research on populism associated it with resistance to modernization, especially in pre-democratic and postcolonial settings, and the challenges of evolving representative governance in democratic contexts (Germani 1978). The label "populism" surfaced in the latter half of the 19th century, initially in Russia (narodnicestvo) and subsequently in the U.S. (the People's Party). In these contexts, it depicted an intellectual ethos and a principled political movement that championed a bucolic society of close-knit villages and independent producers, opposing the tide of industrialization and corporate capitalism. In Russia, the inaugural populist sentiment came from intellectuals who envisioned a pristine community of peasants. Conversely, in the U.S., it was the very populace that challenged the dominant elites, invoking their constitutional rights (Hofstadter 1956, Walicki 1969, Taguieff 1997). The American instance marks one of the earliest manifestations of populism as a political movement, positioning itself as the genuine voice of the people within a party-centric governance structure (Canovan 1981, Mudde 2004).

## **Interpretations**

Modern studies on populism can be broadly categorized into two clusters: one that delves into the contextual or societal backdrop of populism, and another that zeroes in on the intrinsic political essence and features of populism. The first approach is rooted in political history and comparative societal research, while the second leans towards political theory and the history of concepts. Research that emphasizes the specific conditions and trajectories of populism often questions the feasibility of drawing theories from real-world examples (Murillo 2018). For those delving into populism, much like those studying democracy, the socio-historical context is pivotal to discerning the nuances within a larger category.

However, a challenge arises with populism. Unlike democracy, there's a lack of consensus on what the overarching category of populism encompasses. Given its nebulous nature and lack of alignment with a distinct political system, the subcategories of populism derived from historical scrutiny might inadvertently pigeonhole researchers within their specific contexts. This could lead to a situation where every subtype is perceived as a standalone instance, resulting in myriad interpretations of populism without a unified definition. While a historical-social approach offers depth in examining diverse populist experiences, it might falter in offering broad generalizations and normative benchmarks. Hence, a fusion of contextual analysis with theoretical perspectives becomes imperative. An early endeavor to merge these two lenses is evident in the classification of various forms and facets of populism in relation to cultural, religious, socio-economic, and political factors.



This classification forms the crux of a significant body of work, notably the compilation by Ionescu & Gellner (1969) and the seminal writings of Canovan (spanning from 1981 to 2005), a trailblazer in populism studies. Canovan's insights draw from a rich tapestry of sociological perspectives, notably those of Gino Germani (1978) and Torcuato di Tella (1970). These Argentinian academics, with Germani having fled Fascist Italy, were pioneers in crafting a descriptive framework for populism. Their aim was to elucidate how, in societies that aren't nation-states, the act of defining 'the people' becomes the central mission of populism (Laclau 2011). For Canovan, the relationship with political systems and the conceptualization of 'the people' are foundational touchpoints for understanding populism's conditions and contexts. She elevates the discourse on populism to a realm that intertwines theory with normative considerations, particularly concerning political legitimacy.

Contemporary discussions on populism predominantly branch into two primary schools of thought: the minimalist approach and the maximalist perspective. The minimalist approach focuses on refining interpretative tools to better identify and understand populism by distilling core elements from its various manifestations. On the other hand, the maximalist perspective goes beyond mere analysis. It seeks to provide citizens with a practical framework, guiding them in forming a cohesive group poised to achieve majority influence and governance. Especially during periods of institutional uncertainty and waning trust in traditional political parties, this maximalist blueprint can potentially reshape the democratic landscape.

### **A Theory of Populism in Power**

The diverse interpretations and theoretical frameworks have illuminated many facets of the populist phenomenon. Yet, when scrutinized in isolation, they tend to provide fragmented insights, often highlighting certain elements while potentially oversimplifying populism's intricate nature. For a holistic understanding of populism, it's imperative to embrace a democratic lens that delves into both the political arena and its processes. Such a perspective not only aids in grasping the emergence of populist entities but also evaluates their alignment with the foundational norms that underpin the enduring and equitable operations of democratic systems and institutions.

I advocate for a synthesis of these interpretative strands into a research paradigm that is both rooted in socio-historical contexts and informed by political theory. This integrated approach necessitates distinguishing between two manifestations of populism: (a) populism as a sentiment-driven movement, typically characterized by its adversarial stance, which doesn't inherently seek to build a representative base and is often evident in electoral democracies; and (b) populism as an ambitious drive aiming for state governance. Analyzing populism when it ascends to power warrants a nuanced focus within democratic theory, as highlighted by Urbinati (2014, Ch. 3).

Populist figureheads, irrespective of their affiliation with established or nascent parties, harness ideological narratives to chart their ascent, actively engaging with both the public and specialists via democratic channels. The interplay between populism and democracy has been a subject of intense



debate among scholars of democracy. My assertion, culminating this discourse, is that when populism takes the reins of power, it reshapes democratic tenets, though it doesn't necessarily abandon them entirely.

A hallmark of populist discourse is its anti-establishment fervor. Interestingly, this doesn't always translate to a disdain for the socio-economic elite, and it isn't strictly anchored in class or financial distinctions. Notable figures like Italy's Silvio Berlusconi and the U.S.'s Ross Perot and Donald Trump, despite being entrenched in economic elitism, resonated with their electorate. Voters, especially those rallying behind Perot, were drawn to individuals who showcased success and mirrored their values. As Kazin (1995, pp. 280–81) observed, Perot's supporters viewed the struggle as the collective populace versus the political class. Hence, affluent figures like Berlusconi, Perot, and Trump were perceived as genuine representatives, perhaps even more so than their less affluent counterparts, as suggested by Mudde (2017, p. 28).

Being "of the people" doesn't necessitate moral impeccability. Berlusconi's behavior, reminiscent of what was termed "locker room talk" during Trump's campaign, mirrors the actions of many everyday individuals. Similarly, Alberto Fujimori's 1990 campaign resonated with the masses through its relatable slogan, "A President Like You" (Levitsky & Loxton 2013, p. 167). This pattern is evident across various populist leaders, as noted by Levitsky & Loxton (2013, p. 162). Trump's approach to legal navigation, particularly in tax matters, further underscores this point. In essence, populist supporters didn't seek saintly perfection in figures like Berlusconi, Fujimori, or Trump, as they recognized their own imperfections. The crux of the matter isn't personal morality but the wielding of power. Populism's primary contention is with the political establishment, which bridges diverse social elites and poses a challenge to political egalitarianism, as articulated by Mills (1956).

Populism's critique of political elites taps into a longstanding discontent within democratic systems, where the few often dominate the many. Historically, as Manin (1997) highlights, the evolution of representative government has been punctuated by challenges to the status quo, such as the rise of party democracy as a response to the perceived elitism of liberal parliamentarianism. However, what populism often overlooks is that true democratic evolution doesn't seek to eliminate leadership but rather to diversify it. This diversification ensures that democracy remains a realm of pluralism, where majority rule and vote counting are intertwined. As Kelsen (2013 [1929], p. 91) astutely notes, democracy thrives not in the absence of leaders but in their abundance, making elections a pivotal mechanism for leadership selection.

Populists, however, have a unique perspective on elections. They view them not merely as tools for representation but as rites that unveil and validate a pre-existing majority. In the populist narrative, this majority isn't just numerically significant but holds a moral and cultural superiority. Elections, for populists, are less about gauging diverse representative claims and more about affirming the dominance of their perceived majority, as Tarchi (2015) suggests.



Drawing from this, I posit that populism, when triumphant, may seek to enshrine its specific majority view within constitutional frameworks. It does so by championing a particular segment of the populace, aligning them closely with the ruling figurehead. This differentiates populism from ideologies like fascism, which doesn't rely on electoral validation. Instead, populism emerges as a form of intensified majoritarianism, leveraging elections to showcase its dominance, as Urbinati (2017) elucidates.

Populism's skewed engagement with democratic norms results in a governance style that can be described as an authoritarian interpretation of democracy. Here, "authoritarian" denotes a leader who, once elected, prioritizes his majority's views, often sidelining pluralistic values and the essence of legitimate opposition. In power, populism paints a picture where only a select portion of the populace is deemed worthy. Consequently, populist leaders often act with a sense of unilateral authority, bypassing institutional checks and balances, while continually engaging with their base to reinforce their role as champions of the people's will. Trump's rhetoric serves as a case in point. The underlying strategy of populism, masked by its "thin ideology" of moral politics, is a quest for power that inherently leans towards intolerance. This is evident in how populist victories are framed—as a reclamation of the nation, implying that prior representations were flawed, thereby justifying any subsequent disregard or denigration of them.

Populism cannot simply be categorized as an ideology rallying the masses against the establishment or as a movement aiming to empower the people towards self-liberation. Instead, it's more fitting to understand that populist leaders employ anti-establishment narratives to encourage the public to see themselves in these leaders. They promise to champion the people's cause, often positioning themselves against other segments of the population, and assuring their followers that they will handle the heavy lifting (Roberts 2015). This isn't a manifestation of direct democracy but rather what can be termed as "direct representation" (Urbinati 2015). This term captures the essence of a leader's direct and ongoing engagement with their base, facilitated by modern electronic media. The leader sidesteps traditional intermediaries like political parties and mainstream media, maintaining a daily dialogue with their followers to continually reinforce their alignment with the people's interests.

A poignant example of this dynamic is the Hungarian Parliament's decision on March 11, 2013. Led by the majority party, Fidesz, the parliament endorsed constitutional amendments that diminished the authority of the Constitutional Court, curtailed civil rights, and leaned towards a majoritarian democracy. Among the 22 revised articles were provisions that potentially restricted free speech, criminalized homelessness in public spaces, and undermined foundational democratic principles like the separation of powers. These changes, while diverse in nature, share a common thread: they consolidate the power of the majority, often at the expense of minorities and political adversaries, using them as scapegoats for the nation's challenges. The intent behind such constitutional shifts is to solidify the current majority's hold on power.

However, populism diverges from ideologies like fascism. While fascism seeks to cement its leader's position indefinitely, undermining checks and balances, populism thrives on a dynamic relationship





with its audience. The populist leader continually rejuvenates their appeal through regular engagement, using propaganda against perceived adversaries as a tool to galvanize support. To avoid being perceived as the new establishment, a populist leader oscillates between two strategies: rallying the masses through acts of public endorsement and constantly seeking validation through media presence and direct appeals to the public. Central to both strategies is the anti-establishment narrative, ensuring the leader is always seen as the people's champion, perpetually challenging the status quo. This continuous engagement makes populism in power resemble an unending election campaign (Mazzoleni 2008, p. 58).

Populism's evolution towards establishing a populist constitution, whether in practice or formally, highlights a defining characteristic: its reliance on faith-based trust rather than trust cultivated through open dialogue and potential dissent among its followers. This trust is intrinsically tied to its antithesis, distrust. Populism often sidesteps the concept of accountability, asserting that the mere presence of a beloved populist leader is sufficient grounds for trust. This perspective leans heavily on imagination, urging its followers to forgo tangible evidence. The populist vision of "the people" is not just about representing a majority but portraying an "authentic" populace. This vision often morphs the real citizenry into an idealized version embodied by the leader, distinguishing the "true" people from the broader population (Arato 2013). As exemplified by Trump's inaugural speech, the emphasis is on the people reclaiming their nation, sidelining the importance of party politics.

This conflation of trust with unwavering faith diminishes the significance of elections, as highlighted by Schmitt [2008 (1928)] in his critique of then-declining parliamentarianism. Schmitt argued that electoral accountability was a liberal notion, more suited to market transactions than genuine politics. In his view, the real, tangible populace of a nation is the rightful sovereign, and their overt support and endorsement of their leader is the only genuine form of accountability, as it's direct and unmediated [Schmitt 2008 (1928), p. 370]. The public's enthusiastic endorsement is both a testament to their power and an affirmation of their leader's legitimacy. This perspective suggests that the populist narrative, which contrasts the "authentic" people with the establishment, is merely the visible part of a deeper belief: that the people, as represented by their leader, being sovereign, are infallible. Populism gives the democratic populace a fixed identity, unlike the fluid nature of a democratic society that evolves through shifting opinions and majorities. In the populist mindset, their representation as "the people" means they are always right; their sovereignty implies they cannot be defeated.

Populism's trajectory in governance often leans towards the creation of a populist constitution, either in practice or formally. This trajectory underscores a defining characteristic of populism: its foundation on trust rooted in faith rather than trust cultivated through open dialogue and potential dissent among its followers. This trust is intrinsically tied to its antithesis, distrust. Populism often sidesteps the concept of accountability, asserting that the mere presence of a beloved populist leader is sufficient grounds for trust. This perspective leans heavily on imagination, urging its followers to forgo tangible evidence. The populist vision of "the people" is not just about representing a majority



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## **Conclusion**

Populism today isn't about bad intentions; it's a reaction to how our democracies have been working since World War II. While this democratic system has done wonders in fighting off dictatorships and boosting economies, it's starting to feel a bit outdated, like an old cage. Some people love it because they feel it gives them a real say, while others think it's just a show put on by the powerful elites. A lot of the talk about populism doesn't really dive into the nitty-gritty of what "liberal democracy" means. We often use it as a catch-all term for democracy, but that's missing the point. Democracy isn't just one set idea; it's got a rich history and can look different depending on where you are. By just sticking to a textbook definition, we're missing out on the real-life dramas, the different beliefs, and the unique reasons people have for supporting it.

Seeing democracy merely as an ideology renders us ill-equipped to counter its internal challenges. This article posits that when populism takes the reins of power, it ushers in a novel mixed-governance model, where a specific segment of society wields disproportionate influence over others. It challenges constitutional democracy by intertwining a distinct portrayal of the populace with the concept of people's sovereignty. This amalgamation is realized through what I describe as "direct representation", where democracy is characterized by an unmediated bond between the leader and the citizenry.

For a holistic understanding and critique of populism, it's imperative to delve into democracy's representative and party-centric aspects, facets often sidelined in prevailing democratic discourses,



be they procedural or deliberative.

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