

Heinisch | Holtz-Bacha | Mazzoleni [Eds.]

# Political Populism

Handbook of Concepts,  
Questions and Strategies of Research

2<sup>nd</sup> Edition



**Nomos**  
Handbook

## International Studies on Populism

herausgegeben von | edited by

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Reinhard Heinisch | Christina Holtz-Bacha  
Oscar Mazzoleni [Eds.]

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Questions and Strategies of Research

2<sup>nd</sup> revised and extended Edition



**Nomos**  
Handbook

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## PREFACE

*Reinhard Heinisch, Christina Holtz-Bacha and Oscar Mazzoleni*

This Handbook is part of a series of works devoted to the study of political populism published by Nomos. The three editors of this volume also share overall responsibility for the entire series and view this Handbook, which has been revised and updated, as a conceptual introduction to the different questions and topics related to populism that are featured in the aforementioned series. We opted specifically for the title ‘political populism’ to demarcate the subject matter in this Handbook from the literature devoted to the study of cultural manifestations of populism, including popular religious beliefs. Thus, many of the concepts, issues and empirical cases analysed in this work should be viewed as calls for further research and, more broadly, an invitation to engage in scholarship on populism as it relates to political actors, political mobilisation and political institutions, as well as political discourse and style.

A project of this magnitude and range necessitated the collaboration of scholars from different disciplines – most notably political scientists, scholars of communication, historians and sociologists. In all cases, the authors were asked to bear the following points in mind when approaching their respective contributions. First, they were expected to use their own expertise and judgement to identify the pivotal issues, controversies and new directions in their respective areas of scholarship. Thus, contributors had considerable freedom to present their particular approaches. However, they were also asked to reflect on the core idea that populism can be conceived as a response to a crisis of conventional politics or, more precisely, a crisis of legitimacy that established institutions, mainstream political actors and the business of politics as usual have encountered. Second, due to the diversity of disciplines and research traditions, it was important that the Handbook would not present a uniform conceptualisation of and perspective on populism. Instead, the purpose of this Handbook was to introduce readers to a range of ideas. However, all contributors were asked to focus on current debates, discuss the dominant approaches to and the most prominent conceptualisations of the subject, and present shortcomings and criticisms in their respective areas of research.

While this Handbook includes chapters from different disciplines, it centers core aspects in political science and communication. These are arguably two disciplines whose insights into political populism are central to understanding the phenomenon and whose respective works most complement one another. Political scientists are keenly aware that media and communication play a significant role in the process of understanding populism’s appeal and impact, but they often lack the analytical tools to examine populism’s communication dimensions. Similarly, the rapidly growing political science literature on populism still has not yet had the impact on communication and media studies that one may expect. Thus, despite the increasing specialisation in the social sciences, it is necessary for scholars of different fields to also talk to one other and draw on each other’s ideas. Therefore, this book aims to foster a closer relationship between these two strands of scholarship.

Another goal of this Handbook is to focus on both empirical scholarship and current issues. As such, we do not present populism as a settled concept, but instead show the tension be-

tween different approaches and highlight the controversies and new directions that characterise activity in this research community. At the same time, we did not want to prevent the Handbook to become too eclectic. Therefore, the authors discuss several of the most widely used conceptualisations of populism but also highlight their respective shortcomings. In addition, this updated version includes new chapters on issues and policy areas that have since become relevant in populism studies.

## The Challenges of and Opportunities Offered by Populism Research

Scholarship on populism has made substantial progress in the last two decades. After mostly historical and descriptive work from 1945 to the 1980s, which was focused on historical continuity, the 1990s saw an infusion of social science theories in the study of populism. Subsequently, after 2000, scholars began concentrate both on demand-side and supply-side aspects of radical right-wing populist politics and more clearly on populist parties, their representatives and supporters. In contemporary research works, goes to go beyond the narrow themes and policy issues, such as immigration, that have often characterised publications on populism and embrace the phenomenon in its entire complexity, especially that have been under researched. This also means dealing with emerging global issues, such as climate change, the coronavirus pandemic, and the development of digital politics and social media.

Populism's rise in popularity has presented scholars with various opportunities and problems. As research on populism has moved to the academic mainstream, securing project funding and presenting relevant research has become easier. At the same time, the term populism is almost universally employed to describe a large number of different political phenomena, political actors, policy decisions and regimes that often have little more in common than the label. The growing attention to populism has also increased the pressure on social scientists to come up with clear and easily communicable answers that satisfy the curiosity of people trying to understand the political changes unfolding from the Americas to Europe and beyond. The enormous interest in populism is drawing in new scholars who were not part of this previously close-knit research community. This development is highly welcome because it incorporates fresh perspectives and new insights. However, it also means that several ideas about populism that were once believed to be settled are now being called into question once again, renewing the impression that little has been learned thus far. At the same time, other scholars, for whom the question of conceptualisation is indeed settled, have embarked on the next phase of scholarship by no longer treating populism as an outsider or protest phenomenon, but as one that has taken hold in the centres of political power. As a result, scholars have begun in studying the impact of populism on governments, party systems and policymaking.

Despite the clearly global nature of political populism, research communities are still fairly segregated and remain reluctant to take issue with each other's approaches or draw on each other's insights and conceptualisations. For a long time, Western European researchers all but ignored decades' worth of works on Latin American and North American populism. These different ways of approaching the subject matter were also rooted in different research cultures and epistemologies. In fact, even within the European context, achieving more successful integration of the scholarship on populism in Western Europe, the Nordic countries, Central and Eastern Europe, the Western Balkans and the Mediterranean would be desirable. An even

bigger challenge has been the effort to overcome disciplinary boundaries, such as those that exist between political science, history, sociology and communication. It is with these challenges and opportunities in mind that we approached the design of this Handbook. It presents a snapshot of social science scholarship on populism, which is both on the verge of new research agendas and in need of greater transdisciplinary and international cooperation.

## Our Objectives

Handbooks seek to be as comprehensive as possible. While we agree that such a work needs to reflect a substantial number of different issues and geographic areas, selectivity and focus also matter: First, a Handbook is not an encyclopaedia but should rather point to those areas of research and discussions in the field that are most promising or most controversial. Thus, we have asked our authors to show why these topics matter within the overall debate and to identify the major controversies in their fields of research. Our contributors were also invited to demonstrate directions of progress and suggest where scholarship in their different areas might turn next. This was important, because we also wanted this Handbook to be especially useful for scholars just entering the populism research. Second, the Handbook is selective not only in its concentration on theory and empirical application, but also in its focus on contemporary expressions of the phenomenon. Thus, the various aspects of party-based populism in Europe form the core of the analysis. In addition, there are also extensive sections devoted to populism in the Americas and other novel manifestations of populism. Third, an important aspect is the focus on communication and the goal to bridge scholarship between communication and political science. Following the rise of populist parties, communication researchers have only recently taken up the topic. This coincided with the emergence of the internet and social media networks, which provide political actors with direct access to the electorate, thus shaking up the political communication process and the role of the traditional mass media. To emphasize the interconnectedness of political science and communication in understanding populism, this book combines their respective fields and presents the different types of analysis alongside each other.

We hope that the readers will take away a deeper understanding of the complexities and challenges of populism research. We also trust they will appreciate our intention not to convey definitive answers but rather to maintain a degree of openness towards different theoretical approaches, which are each elaborated with their respective strengths and weaknesses. Ultimately, it is for the readers to decide which ideas seem most persuasive and what avenues of enquiry they want to pursue. We hope that this Handbook will make a significant contribution to this process.

This new edition includes revised and updated versions of the chapters provided in the first edition and ten new contributions. Populism is an ongoing and open field of research, with growing numbers of publications every year on both traditional and new topics. This new edition intends to reflect this growing trend by presenting both consolidated and emerging issues. The Handbook consists of 34 chapters organised in four parts. The first one covers theories, approaches, conceptualisations and measurements in relation to political populism. The second part presents populist manifestations in Europe and the Americas; the third part is devoted to political communication; and the fourth part focuses on emerging phenomena and new

research agendas. While it was not the book's intention to provide a geographically comprehensive account of populism and its manifestations, an effort was made to cover as many different cases and variations of populism in Europe and the Americas as possible. Throughout the Handbook, the focus lies on empirical research, and thus the conceptualisations and theoretical accounts introduced in the first part provide the tools for empirical analysis, either for cross-national comparisons or individual case studies in the subsequent chapters. The chapters generally end with a consideration of various unanswered questions and discuss topics for potential further research.

*A Handbook is a collaborative endeavour and we, the editors, want to thank the many contributing authors for their dedication and commitment to the project. The deadline for submitting the chapters coincided with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, and we are grateful to the authors for managing to meet their deadlines and submit their chapters in these difficult times.*

*Apart from the editors and authors, we are especially grateful to Cecilia Biancalana, a post-doc researcher at the University of Lausanne, for corresponding with the authors and managing the texts during their various stages of development and review. We also wish to thank our many colleagues whose counsel and helpful comments on various chapters have helped improve them and have enriched this Handbook's content.*



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## INTRODUCTION

*Reinhard Heinisch, Christina Holtz-Bacha and Oscar Mazzoleni*

### Here to Stay: Populism in the Spotlight<sup>1</sup>

At the time when the first edition of this Handbook was published in 2017, the populist challenge to democratic government was a dominant subject in the media worldwide. The election of Donald Trump and Brexit had prompted *The Washington Post* to call 2016 ‘the year of populism’. Since then the success and endurance of populist politicians and parties have scarcely been the surprise they once were. In Europe, there are no longer countries that can be considered ‘safe’ from successful populist parties. Whereas, for example, Germany was once considered relatively immune to far right populism because of its history and the UK was thought to have a barrier against resurgent third parties in the form of its first-past-the-post electoral system, these expectations clearly no longer apply. The Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland, AfD) has since established itself as a potent political force throughout Germany. The United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) and its successor, the Brexit Party, were major forces behind Britain’s decision to leave the European Union and the post-Brexit process. Even the Nordic countries – often admired for their efficient and transparent political systems, corruption-free governments, extensive welfare states and high living standards – have each developed formidable populist parties. In Denmark and Norway, these parties have served in public office and helped shape national policy. Also, Southern Europe saw the emergence of radical left and right populist protest parties, several of which have since entered the government in Greece, Spain and Italy. In fact, in various EU member states, including Belgium, the Netherlands, Italy and Spain, more than one radical populist party has become an important political player on the national stage.

Yet, the years that followed also delivered setbacks to populists. In Austria, the candidate for the presidency supported by the Green Party (Die Grünen – Die Grüne Alternative) unexpectedly beat the candidate of the radical right populist Freedom Party (Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs, FPÖ). Again in Austria, the conservative far right coalition government formed in 2017 collapsed after fewer than two years in office when a videotape surfaced showing the leader of the Freedom Party of Austria Heinz-Christian Strache in a highly compromising political situation. In France, Marine Le Pen’s quest for the presidency was unsuccessful in the end, when, unexpectedly, a new political figure, Emmanuel Macron, beat both the establishment parties and the populist far right. In Italy too, the populists initially triumphed, forming a government consisting of the populist leftist Five Star Movement (Movimento 5 Stelle, M5S) and the far right League (Lega, previously Lega Nord, LN), whose leader Matteo Salvini became minister of the interior and dominated Italian government politics. When he overreached by trying to trigger new elections, his erstwhile coalition partner switched sides and formed a government without Salvini. In Germany, the Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland, AfD)

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<sup>1</sup> This research received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation program under the grant agreement n. 822337 (Project ‘PaCE’).

performed well in national elections, coming in third in 2017. It subsequently became the largest opposition party and entered the regional parliament in every German state. Yet, it too seems to have plateaued and continues to be divided between its extremist wing and its more far right, conservative orientation. In Denmark, the far right was soundly beaten by the Social Democrats (Socialdemokraterne) in elections in 2019. The 2020 US elections saw the defeat of Donald Trump at the hands of a politician who embodied the polar opposite in terms of persona and political sentiment. Although Brexit became a reality, its torturous process and the upheaval it caused in the UK made other populist parties think twice about making similar demands (Heinisch et al. 2020). Lastly, in Greece, the populist party SYRIZA (Coalition of the Radical Left – Progressive Alliance) was voted out of office.

However, despite these setbacks, populism is clearly here to stay. The Austrian far right was beaten back in part because the Conservatives adopted much of the rhetoric and policies of radical right-wing populists. Also, the victorious Social Democrats in Denmark often sounded themselves more like the far right. In France, the erstwhile popular Macron has been battling unpopularity, large-scale protests and one crisis after another. In the US, even the defeat of Donald Trump seemed to some like a victory for populism given that he continues to have a lock on his Republican Party and defied expectations and poll numbers by further increasing his support among voters. In Italy, it may just be a matter of time before Salvini can return to government. In other countries, radical populists continue to govern, among others, in Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary, and as part of coalitions in Italy and Spain. Taken together, the vote share of parties generally considered populist by empirical scholarship grew in Europe from 11.81 per cent in 2000 to 27.26 per cent in 2019. Of these formations, 15.11 per cent can be classified as far right and 5.31 per cent as far left populist, whereas a further 6.84 per cent were other types of populists (ParlGov and PopuList data). Even at EU level, the growth of populism over the past two decades has been extraordinary. There, the vote share of populist parties assembled in the European Parliament for the period 2019-2024 stands at 30.6 per cent (Stockemer and Amengay 2020, 3). This constitutes an enormous growth if we consider that, prior to 2004, the percentage of Members of the European Parliament (MEP) had been only 5.1 per cent (of which 4.3 per cent were right-wing populists), with their combined vote share increasing to 14.2 per cent in 2004 and to 17.8 per cent in 2009. It is noteworthy that, initially, left-wing populists grew more quickly and were able to more than triple their presence (1.2 per cent to 4.1 per cent). Subsequently, it was the far right's turn as they increased their vote shares from 13.5 per cent to 20.9 per cent in 2014 and to 26.4 per cent in 2019 (Stockemer and Amengay 2020).

As these lines were written, the world was in the grip of the COVID-19 pandemic, the implications of which for populism and its continued success were not yet clear. However, early trends suggested that populism stands to benefit in various ways. People feeling negatively affected by coronavirus-related policy decisions taken by experts and political elites, chafing under lockdowns and mask-mandates, seeing their livelihoods at risk as businesses are shut down, or perceiving liberal democracies as too technocratic and ineffective to deal with a health and economic emergency may have nowhere else to turn but to parties outside the mainstream. It seems clear that both the coronavirus crisis and many aspects associated with it are being increasingly politicised and will continue to shape ongoing trends in democratic regimes (e.g. Bobba and Hubé 2021).

## Understanding Populism as a Complex Phenomenon

Aiming to understand political populism, scholarship tends to begin with a common starting point: the people who embody ‘the heart of democracy’ (Akkerman et al. 2014) and are viewed as sovereign and virtuous. People would constitute a silent but often ignored majority, forming the basis of a good society (Canovan 1981; Mény and Surel 2002; Mudde 2004). ‘The people’ in populist diction are the ‘plebs’, the ‘underdogs’, the ‘heartland residents’, the ‘natives’, the ‘forgotten’, the ‘true’ majority, the ‘non-outsiders’ (Taggart 2002; Laclau 2005; Urbinati 2019a; 2019b). As populists call upon ‘real’ people to vote for them, this too can refer to authentic as in ‘salt of the earth’, ‘deeply rooted’ and ‘middle of the country’, or it can have a strong ethnic and nativist dimension in the sense of non-immigrant and non-minority. In leftist populism, the concept of ‘real’ or authentic may have a class or social connotation, referring to working people. Thus, the construct of ‘real people’ can have different meanings for different populist actors in different contexts. The construction of ‘the elites’ also strongly varies. Although they are generally seen as ‘arrogant, selfish, incompetent, and often also corrupt’ (Rooduijn 2015, 4), they represent a much wider variety of entities. These comprise, for example, ‘the others’ and/or ‘dangerous others’ (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008); out(side)-groups (Heinisch 2003); the political establishment and the mainstream media (Jagers and Walgrave 2007); sub-national, national and/or supranational entities (Mazzoleni 2005); bankers, large companies, secret societies, intellectuals, academics and writers (Brubaker 2017; Blokker and Anselmi 2020). Beyond their common references to the people and the elites, different strands of populism represent varied legacies. These have been associated with both class divisions and centre–periphery cleavages, and the dialectic processes resulting from this. Populism’s provenance is the ‘heartland’, a euphemism for the hinterland, where people feel imposed upon by far-off elites in the central cities. The common thread populism represents in its various manifestations is the rejection of societal and political elites. And one of the central arguments in this book is that political populism is largely a response to a fundamental crisis of legitimacy of political institutions and actors.

When populism surfaced as a broader trend in Western Europe some three decades ago, it was initially perceived as a new phenomenon despite political precursors such as *Qualunquismo* in Italy in the 1940s and *Poujadism* in France in the 1950s. In the Americas, by comparison, populism has had a long tradition and rather different ideological associations. The term populism is inseparably linked to the word *populus* – the people –, from which it partly derives its meaning. It is also closely connected to the adjective ‘popular’, with which it shares operative logic. Populists must first and foremost remain popular to maintain credibility and legitimacy. Like the *populares*, pre-imperial Roman senators who stood in opposition to the *optimates*, the senatorial aristocracy, populists may be politically self-serving, but they need to be perceived as serving above all the interests of ordinary people. Akin to ancient Rome, where these populist senators were associated with the plebs, the unsophisticated ‘common folk’, the populists of today tend to find their voters especially among the ranks of blue-collar workers, those without university level education, and people from small towns and rural areas.

The etymology of the term populism in Anglo-Saxon and Western European usage, as Damir Skenderovic suggests in Chapter 1, is closely associated with the history of populism in the US, which arguably began with the ‘Jacksonian revolution’. In the early part of the nineteenth century, Andrew Jackson styled himself as the advocate of the yeoman farmers, the simple home-

steads and frontiersmen, whose support carried the outsider Jackson to the presidency. His followers had lost patience with the policies and posturing of the coastal elites and wanted to wrest power away from big business and the Jeffersonian ‘aristocracy’ in office in Washington. In the European context, Ghita Ionescu and Ernest Gellner (1969) were among the first to draw attention to populism as a problem that, in their view, superseded even that posed by communism. In an important collection of essays edited in 1969, Ionescu and Gellner paraphrased Marx and Engels by using the opening words ‘A Spectre is haunting the world – Populism’ and demanded that scholarship devote more attention to its study. About a decade later, the influential political theorist Margaret Canovan made an important contribution to the growing scholarship with her major work *Populism* (1981), in which she developed research strategies that would later prove significant for empirical scholarship. Whereas populism is a relatively recent phenomenon in most European countries, it has much longer roots in Latin America. There, charismatic political figures like Juan Perón and Getúlio Vargas, who pursued authoritarian leadership styles, were early but influential subjects of study, spawning an extensive and rich scholarly tradition (Weyland 2001; 2017). There, the influential Marxist philosopher Ernesto Laclau (1977; 2005) noted the connection between populism and bouts of modernisation pressure, which the political system was unable to channel into a stable democratic institutional development. In its absence, charismatic personalities created a popular hegemonic bloc through their discourse, through which these populist leaders could mobilise support and use it to their political ends.

Although it is easy to observe and even measure the segments of the population that support populism, the ‘people’, as evoked in populist rhetoric and imagery, are often vague and ill-defined. ‘What people?’ Alfio Mastropaolo asks in Chapter 2 on populist representation, since populism often chooses to be purposefully ambiguous about the people it wants to represent. However, not every form of protest by or every electoral success of a far left or far right party is attributable to populism. One engages in problematic oversimplification if all manners of unconventional or unexpected political developments are subsumed under the label of ‘populism’. Crucially, there is often the conflation of the everyday use and media notion of the term ‘populism’ with the way the concept is understood in the social sciences. The first tends to mean a garish or folksy style politicians adopt to appear provocative or polemic so as to appeal to certain voter segments. However, this is quite different from the way much of the social sciences understand populism, as will also become clear from this book.

## Ideology, Discourse, Style

Nearly as ubiquitous as articles and commentaries on populism is the assertion that it is difficult to define. Accordingly, populism is believed to have a complicated history and to be closely connected to various belief systems. In relation to this, Dietmar Loch writes about ‘Conceptualising the Relationship between Populism and the Radical Right’ in Chapter 3, where he discusses the party families to which radical right-wing populist parties belong. His contribution also focuses on their core agenda of advocating nativist protectionism in a globalised world. Indeed, in the field of populism research, there have been numerous conceptualisations, which are themselves derived from several fundamental approaches that differ, as has already been mentioned, in their ideas on whether populism is primarily ideational, discursive, stylistic



or strategic. While the details of this debate, along with a more nuanced conceptualisation, will be discussed throughout this book, it is important to understand that these differences in approach have much to do with the way populism has been concretely experienced in distinct historical, political and social contexts. In Europe, the most influential approach in empirical research to date was put forth by the Dutch Scholar Cas Mudde (2004). In ‘The Populist Zeitgeist’, he defines 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’. This conceptualisation forms the basis of what is often called the ideational approach to populism (Hawkins et al. 2018). It conceives of populism as a ‘thin’ ideology or set of ideas that can be activated in people and which can be combined with ‘thick’ ideologies to form radical right-wing and radical left-wing populism.

Other scholars have conceived of the concept quite differently, such as Aslanidis (2016a) (*populism as a discursive claim*), Moffitt (2016) (*populism as a political style, performance and representation*) and Takis (2019) (*populism as illiberal democracy*), who all provided their own alternative accounts. This echoes significant criticism that the application of the ideational model may be too reductionist, which especially concerns scholars working on populism outside Western Europe (Aslanidis 2016; de la Torre and Mazzoleni 2019). Even Michael Freedon (2016) himself, whose work on thin ideologies inspired the appropriation of this concept in theorising about populism, distanced himself from the notion that populism is a thin-centred ideology. In his view, it is ‘too thin’ to be meaningfully conceived as an ideology. As a result, less restrictive versions of the ideational approach think of populism in terms of degree, whereas in its strict form, populism is categorical. For empirical scholarship, this matters less because quantitative indicators generally measure the extent of a phenomenon, not the absolute. Building on these approaches and criticism of the ‘dominant paradigm’ in Chapter 5, Reinhard Heinisch and Oscar Mazzoleni suggest, for instance, a finely grained framework for empirical research that seeks to bridge existing conceptualisations by conceiving populism as both a discourse and a practice. This framework emphasises aspects of populism that the ideational approach deemphasised, but which may help explain its success and widespread discursive practice. Populists aim primarily at responsive politics and thus often make intrinsically ambivalent claims that challenge the status quo in favour of people’s empowerment and elite change. Populism’s affinity to eschew dogma and adapt its message to what is popular, its propensity for incongruous or contradictory claims, and its frequent ambiguity in position-taking on most but their core issues, in short populism’s chameleonic quality, sets it apart from its radical and extremist rivals as well as from its consistent mainstream competitors.

## Leadership, Protest and Organisation

Populism is not only a matter of discourse or ideology. Some authors identify organisational patterns in it, arguing populism expresses strategic linkages with unorganised followers through personalistic leadership (Weyland 2017; Barr 2018). This approach has some advantages in that it highlights the relevance of populism as a relationship with and within a heterogeneous constituency. This highlights the role of the ‘charismatic’ leader in shaping the ‘true’ people, the relevance of emotions and certain forms of mobilisation in the pursuit and preser-

**PART I:**  
**Defining and Analysing the Concept**

## CHAPTER 1:

# POPULISM: A HISTORY OF THE CONCEPT

*Damir Skenderovic*

## Introduction

‘There can at present be no doubt about the *importance* of populism. But no one is quite clear what it *is*,’ write Ghita Ionesco and Ernest Gellner (1969b, 1; emphasis in original) in the introduction to the influential anthology, *Populism. Its Meanings and Characteristics*, which appeared in 1969. While the current relevance of populism has led to a revival of interest in the almost forgotten populist movements of the nineteenth century, as Ionesco and Gellner go on to state, the question arises as to whether ‘populism’ is ‘simply a word wrongly used in completely heterogeneous contexts’ (Ionesco and Gellner 1969b, 3). More than forty years later, Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (2012a, 1; see also 2017, 1–2) make a similar critique that, ‘one of the most used and abused terms inside and outside academia is undoubtedly populism’, and point out that there have been repeated calls to simply abandon the term and that the academic debate is some distance away from reaching a minimal consensus on the definition and meaning of populism.

The history of the concept ‘populism’ has been accompanied by scepticism over its definition and reservations over its phenomenology, which have not only led to the stimulation of regular academic debates, but also continually reflected strong concerns about the common and everyday political usage of the term. The lack of semantic precision and ambiguity with regard to content has led to it being used for very different phenomena and developments in politics and society, which has resulted in doubt over its heuristic and explanatory value. In addition, the term ‘populism’ is normatively loaded in political and academic language and thus always includes statements and findings on the state of democracy. Even the core idea of the term that populism speaks, as the etymology of the word implies, in the name of the people, rather than the elites, power blocks and privileged special interest groups, is rooted in normative dichotomies.

## Conjuncture and Controversy in Politics and Academia

Despite these substantial weaknesses, in the course of the last fifteen years, there has been a striking increase in the use of the concept of ‘populism’ in the public media as well as in the everyday political life of Europe, and particularly in the context of the increase and consolidation that has been seen in recent years among parties on the right-wing margins of the European party system. The expression ‘(right-wing) populist’ has established itself as the descrip-

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This text is a revised and expanded version of the article entitled *Populisme*, which appeared in French in: Christin, Olivier (eds.) (2016): *Dictionnaire des concepts nomades en sciences humaines*. Paris: Éditions Métailié, 87–106.

tion for a number of parties, such as the Austrian Freedom Party (Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs, FPÖ), Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland, AfD), the Swiss People's Party (Schweizerische Volkspartei, SVP), the National Rally (Rassemblement National, RN; previously National Front, Front National, FN) in France, the League (Lega; previously Lega Nord, LN) in Italy, Flemish Interest (Vlaams Belang, VB) in Belgium, Hungarian Civic Alliance (Fidesz) in Hungary or Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS) in Poland. At the same time, the term is applied on a global scale to powerful political leaders, such as Narendra Modi in India, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil and Donald Trump in the USA. However, 'populism' is not only used specifically for parties, tendencies and politicians, but is also often used much more generally, whereby it is seen as a supposedly new way in which politicians and parties seek to woo their supporters and, in the process, to employ new means of communication and strategy. On the whole, the term 'populism' has been widely established in terms of language and the media, and for some it even seems to fulfil the claim of contributing to raising and nurturing awareness of various social and political developments at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

In the vocabulary of politicians and parties, too, 'populism' as a political catchword has experienced a pronounced boom. In its function as a negatively connoted battle cry, it is primarily used in politics to disavow the opponent, serving as a reproach and attack, as denunciation and accusation. With the use of the term 'populist' in political day-to-day events, it is suggested to the adversary that he or she responds to complex facts with phrases and simple formulas, and ultimately pursues the goal of polarising society in order to take advantage of instantaneous moods and make unscrupulous political capital. Something that also contributes to the pejorative understanding of the term is the long shadow cast by the plebiscitary mass politics, demagogic mobilisations and the invocation of the so-called 'will of the people' by leaders who have caused historical catastrophes in Europe. Basically, the political and public debates about populism are constantly concerned with the dangers it may pose to democracy and its cornerstones of freedom, plurality and representation (Müller 2016; Urbinati 2019).

In recent years, therefore, the controversy surrounding the issue has intensified in academic debates over the question of whether populism should be seen as a threat or a corrective to democracy and whether, alongside its negative impacts, it might also have positive influences on the function and legitimation of democracy (Canovan 2002; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012b). Many authors suggest that populism has an ambivalent relationship with democracy, which is built on the population participating as broadly as possible, but is also characterised by a complex, partially opaque decision-making system, which is associated with the representative and delegating character of (parliamentary) democracy. It is suggested that populists seek to exploit a lack of transparency and immediacy and the resulting dissatisfaction with political institutions in order to promote a return to 'true' democracy, which must be realised beyond intermediary institutional settings and political elites. It should not be forgotten, however, that populists do not reject the principle of representation, *per se*, but rather those who are, in their eyes, the wrong representatives. Consequently, there is no doubt that there can be '[p]opulism without participation' (Müller 2016, 29). It is emphasised, furthermore, that populist actors insist on the indivisible power of the majority, thereby undermining not only liberal democratic principles, such as minority rights and the division of power, but also important democratic practices, such as the principle of checks and balances or the search for political consensus solutions.

There has also been a marked increase in interest in the subject of populism in empirical research (Rovira Kaltwasser et al. 2017a). In countless social science studies, the wide variety of contemporary political movements and parties has been examined and their affiliations and organisational structures analysed, along with their parliamentary and programmatic work, their political and institutional opportunity structures, and their social framework conditions. There is also a lively debate over the question of the analytical and operational uses of the concept of ‘populism’. On the one hand, there is a group of authors who primarily seek to identify certain characteristics of movements and parties as conceptual criteria, while on the other, there are those who view stringing together characteristics as an insufficient means of working out a concise conceptualisation of ‘populism’, and therefore call for more generally valid core elements of the kind that are useful for a broader comparative analysis (Taguieff 2007a). In the root cause analysis, there has been a growth in explanatory approaches, in which many interpret the recent upswing of populism as a side effect of globalisation and Europeanisation, and the medialisation and personalisation of politics (Jörke and Selk 2017; Eatwell and Goodwin 2018). It is also often argued that the reasons behind the examples of successful populist mobilisation are a crisis of political legitimacy that the system of democratic representation created, and not least, as Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson (2012) argue in connection with the Tea Party in the USA, that in the decline of traditional political participation, such as electoral turnout and party membership, populism is, as it were, a new form of political engagement. For many, it does not seem to be surprising that in times of an increased sense of crisis among parts of the population, there should be a call for the soothing and assuring responses of politics, to which populist actors respond with offers of interpretations and solutions in which community feeling, cohesion and orientation are central references.

In view of the inflationary, but often historically amnesic, use of ‘populism’, it is all the more important to cast a historical look at its academic conceptualisation. As Federico Finchelstein (2014, 467f) has remarked, ‘at worst, populism appears as a concept without history’ and this view reduces populism ‘to a transcendental (or trans-historical) metaphor of something else’. More recently, as a historian, he has started to study how populism and fascism have been ‘connected historically and theoretically’ and has emphasised how ‘[m]odern populism was born out of fascism’ (Finchelstein 2017, xii). The study of continuities and changes in populist phenomena, as well as central moments in academic debates, makes it possible to show certain denominational characteristics and analytical categories that have proved to be sustainable in the definition of ‘populism’. In addition, the epistemic negotiations on concepts, meanings and definitions – and this is often forgotten today – involved representatives from a number of different disciplines, including history, social anthropology, economics, political science and sociology, with the result that meanings have also been generated on the basis of specific empirical foundations and methodological approaches. As a consequence, the conceptual history of ‘populism’ is strongly linked to the study of concrete historical phenomena and conditions; heuristic findings have resulted from the fact that structural analogies and functional equivalences have been produced, and different contexts and framework conditions considered. In a history of what is meant by ‘populism’, it is also a question of acknowledging the historicity of the concept, which thus contributes to the historicisation of the academic approaches and interpretations that accompany the historical development of an important key concept of political and academic language (Steinmetz 2011). To a certain extent this is how, at the forefront of

## **Europe**

## CHAPTER 10: POPULISM AND EUROSCEPTICISM: TWO SIDES OF THE SAME COIN?

*Fabian Habersack and Carsten Wegscheider*

### Introduction

At the latest since the European parliamentary elections in 2019, it has become increasingly popular to label political opponents as populist and Eurosceptical. In addition to excessive political media coverage and public interest, however, it is undisputed that populism and Euroscepticism are two political phenomena that have become increasingly important both in political science research and in the reality of electoral politics. Radical left and right populist parties did indeed gain about 29 per cent of the seats in the last European parliamentary elections and benefited greatly from their critical and negative stance towards the European Union (Rankin 2019; Rooduijn et al. 2019; Henley 2020). It is hardly surprising that populism and Euroscepticism often appear in tandem, given that there are considerable conceptual parallels between the two. Furthermore, this overlap exists not only at the party level, but also extends to the public and the relationship between Eurosceptical and populist attitudes.

However, while populism and Euroscepticism are often regarded as two sides of the same coin, we still lack systematic research and cross-national evidence on what drives this strong connection on both the supply and demand sides of electoral politics, taking into account the host ideology to which populism is attached. This chapter is dedicated to these questions and provides an overview of previous research on the relationship between populism and Euroscepticism, as well as an outlook on issues that future research should address. In the following section, we outline conceptual definitions of both populism and Euroscepticism. In the third section, we review the causal mechanisms between populism and Euroscepticism on both the supply and the demand side by considering the role of host ideologies in this relationship. Finally, we empirically analyse the role of the interaction between populism and ideology in explaining Euroscepticism on both the party and the voter level. We conclude by highlighting important gaps in the research literature on this subject area and propose a framework for further research on the topic.

### Conceptualising Populism and Euroscepticism

Populist beliefs and Eurosceptical stances overlap conceptually and often appear in tandem (Kneuer 2019). However, the concepts also differ and relate to distinct issues in politics: while populism relates to a more abstract idea of the role of the people in politics and the functioning of democracy, Euroscepticism refers to specific attitudes and positions on the issue of European integration (Rooduijn and van Kessel 2019). This section provides a definition of

both concepts, thereby preparing the ground for further conceptual and empirical reflection on the relationship between populism and Euroscepticism.

## Euroscepticism

Given that issues related to the process of European integration only started to gain public attention at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Euroscepticism is still a fairly recent political phenomenon (Rooduijn and van Kessel 2019). Since then, the relevance of Euroscepticism in the academic, media and public debate as well as in European party competition has increased significantly (Taggart and Szczerbiak 2018). The term Euroscepticism was initially used to describe both ‘contingent or qualified opposition, as well as incorporating outright and unqualified opposition to the process of European integration’ (Taggart 1998, 366). However, this definition has been criticized for its conceptual fuzziness and vastness, since any form of rejection and criticism of EU policy decisions corresponds to this definition and makes it difficult to determine the relative position of political actors (Kopecký and Mudde 2002). Kopecký and Mudde (ibid.) in turn proposed an alternative definition of Euroscepticism based on Easton’s (1975) distinction between diffuse and specific support: ‘By *diffuse* support we mean support for the general *ideas* of European integration that underlie the EU. By *specific* support we denote support for the general *practice* of European integration; that is, the EU as it is and as it is developing’ (Kopecký and Mudde 2002, 300). This distinction highlights the qualitative difference between a party rejecting the fundamental idea of ‘Europe’ and one that is sceptical towards specific EU-related policies. Building on this, Szczerbiak and Taggart (2008) distinguish between soft and hard Euroscepticism, a conceptualisation that is still widely used. This typology refers to (party-based) opposition against the transfer of decision-making power to the EU level and to ‘attitudes towards further actual or planned extensions of EU competencies’ (ibid., 13). While soft Euroscepticism is rather a qualified criticism of the current design of the process of European integration, hard Euroscepticism refers to a fundamental rejection of the idea of supranational cooperation at the European level. This approach thus allows distinguishing between different types of Eurosceptical parties.

In contrast, a gradual approach to measuring party positions towards European integration enables an assessment of party-based Euroscepticism both within and across countries (Mudde 2012). Given the increasing mainstreaming of Eurosceptical positions among political parties, this approach is particularly well-suited for distinguishing between qualified criticism and rhetoric on the one hand, and fundamental ideological rejection of European integration on the other. Because whereas Eurosceptical positions have been primarily held by political parties at the fringes of the political spectrum, they are now widespread even among governing parties and parties in the political centre (Ray 2007; Taggart and Szczerbiak 2013; Leconte 2015; Meijers 2017). Although European issues and policies have a comparatively low salience among parties and voters (Mudde 2012), parties often face severe internal divisions when it comes to their position on European integration (Hooghe and Marks 2006). This already indicates that Eurosceptic actors may pursue different goals and that, on the one hand, ideological beliefs play a crucial role (Hooghe, Marks and Wilson 2002; Marks and Wilson 2000), but Eurosceptic claims may also be born out of strategic considerations (Sitter 2001; McDonnell and Werner 2019; Heinisch, McDonnell and Werner 2020). One of the key chal-



allenges for party-based research on Euroscepticism lies in distinguishing between these two functions. Furthermore, we lack research on the effects of Euroscepticism on the political behaviour of parties in order to assess the relevance of this concept, apart from public opinion, media coverage and strategic use by political parties (Szczerbiak and Taggart 2018; Huber, Lehner and Wegscheider 2019).

However, Euroscepticism is not limited to political parties, however, but also appears as attitudes and feelings on the part of citizens. Following on from the discussion at the party level, there are various aspects and dimensions of European integration against which individuals can take a Eurosceptical stance. While Eurosceptical attitudes were initially assessed primarily in terms of a general opposition to or support for European integration (Hooghe and Marks 2005), in recent years scholars have developed a more nuanced perspective on diffuse and specific attitudes towards the EU. In addition to different dimensions and policy areas of EU-related attitudes, such as the rejection of specific economic, social or cultural policies of European integration (Sørensen 2008; Leconte 2010; Hobolt and Vries 2016; Vries 2018), this also includes the distinction between general support for the idea of the EU and the specific assessment of its current functioning (van Elsas, Hakhverdian and van der Brug 2016). In sum, Euroscepticism is a multidimensional concept at both the party and the individual level that encompasses general and specific positions and attitudes towards the process of European integration and the current functioning of the EU.

## Populism

Populism, by contrast, is an essentially controversial concept, as some scholars define it as either a political strategy (Weyland 2001; Kenny 2020), style (Moffitt and Tormey 2014; Moffitt 2016), discourse (Laclau 1977; 1980; Hawkins 2009; 2010), form of logic (Laclau 2005a; 2005b; 2006) or frame (Aslanidis 2016; Heinisch and Mazzoleni 2017). However, these definitions have the drawback that, similarly to Euroscepticism, even non-populist actors occasionally use populist rhetoric, strategies or stylistic elements (Rooduijn, Lange and van der Brug 2014). Hence, in order to shape the positions and behaviour of political parties and individuals in the long term, populism needs to be regarded as an ideological characteristic. We therefore consider populism to be a set of ideas and follow the ideational approach (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013; 2017; Mudde 2017; Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser 2018), according to which populism is 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’ (Mudde 2004b, 543). Briefly summarised and in reference to the chapter in this Handbook by Heinisch and Mazzoleni: By providing answers to who is responsible for people’s grievances (*the elite*) and who should govern and hold political power (*the people*), populism ‘makes normative claims about the functioning of democracy’ (van Hauwaert and van Kessel 2018, 72). Thus, in contrast to Euroscepticism, populism is rather an abstract and more fundamental idea of the way political decisions should be made.

However, unlike *full* or *thick* ideologies, populism lacks programmatic ideas on a broad range of policy areas and social issues, making it a *thin-centred* ideology, which needs to be combined with a *host ideology* (Freeden 1998; Mudde 2004b; Stanley 2008). In the European con-

text, populism occurs mainly in combination with a radical left or right host ideology, which gives it its *chameleonic* nature (Taggart 2004). While radical right populist parties emphasise cultural issues and combine populism with a nativist and authoritarian agenda (Mudde 2007), radical left populist parties focus on socio-economic issues and combine populism with a left-wing economic ideology (March 2011). Consequently, and as a guideline for the following reflections on the relationship between populism and Euroscepticism, we also need to consider the host ideologies to which populism is connected.

## The Interplay Between Populism and Euroscepticism: State of Research and Causal Mechanisms

‘Populism and Euroscepticism can easily be seen as two sides of the same coin’ (Rooduijn and van Kessel 2019). Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that populist parties tend to adapt easily to and benefit electorally from crises at the European level – be it the financial crisis, the migration crisis or the Brexit vote – given that they feed directly into populist claims and discourses (Pirro, Taggart and van Kessel 2018). Though populist parties differed fundamentally in their responses to these crises, a common theme was that populist parties across countries blamed the EU for its lack of responsiveness to the ordinary people and its poor performance in light of ever more competences ceded to the EU and the loss of national sovereignty.

Despite the conceptual similarities between ideational populism and Euroscepticism, the link and especially the strength of the relationship between the two remains in the dark. On the political *supply side*, populist parties regularly adopt Eurosceptical positions too, although Euroscepticism is not a sufficient condition for populism, and both can occur independently of each other. In addition, empirical indicators of party-based Euroscepticism often remain too vague and unidimensional to account for the various facets of the multidimensional nature of Euroscepticism. Even fine-grained scales of the degree of Euroscepticism lag behind conceptual distinctions in terms of the *diffuse* and *specific* dimensions of positions towards European integration and the EU (Kopecký and Mudde 2002) as well as ideologically informed differences in policy goals that result in different forms of Euroscepticism. When it comes to populist attitudes among the *demand side*, even less is known about the extent to which such attitudes inform Euroscepticism and Eurosceptical voting, independently of voters’ self-placement on the left-right axis. Comparing levels of Euroscepticism at the voter and the party level also reveals there are striking differences between Western Europe and Eastern Europe, especially with regard to the salience of positions towards the EU among parties and within the population, and different perspectives on EU membership, for instance between old and new member states as well as EU accession candidates. These differences, also with regard to the different meaning of populism to the party systems of Central and Eastern Europe, are still understudied and existing research is highly centred on Western Europe. Despite this, one can identify various causal mechanisms tying populism or populist attitudes to Euroscepticism, and these links are largely comparable for both the party and the voter level. The following sections aim at delineating these mechanisms and outlining the state of research by considering the effect of host ideologies, from which populism needs to be distinguished, on various aspects of Euroscepticism.

**PART III:**  
**Populism and Communication**

## CHAPTER 22:

# THE SYMBIOSIS BETWEEN MEDIA AND POPULISM: CONCEPTS, ISSUES, EVIDENCE

*Lone Sorensen*

### Introduction: Overall Context

The media are playing an unprecedented and crucial role in the success of the wave of populism currently sweeping the globe. Modern populism is facilitated by conditions of what Keane (2013, 1) calls ‘a revolutionary age of communicative abundance ... [that is] structured by a new world system of overlapping and interlinked media devices’. Fundamental changes to media regulation coupled with innovations in media technologies, not least the internet, mean that media have become embedded in all aspects of everyday life. New media technologies have opened up a profusion of communicative spaces for a variety of political and media actors and citizens. At the same time, the traditional party system is in decline, or perhaps renewing itself (Chadwick and Stromer-Galley 2016). Many citizens are becoming increasingly disillusioned with the lack of authenticity in mainstream politics and are seeking out marginal and less institutional political voices. Worldwide, populists have been able to capitalise on these conditions.

In media and communication studies, the changing media environment has created at least three concurrent preoccupations. First, the increasing intrusion and power of the traditional mass media – chiefly television, radio and the press – in relation to politics have fostered a focus on the media’s ability to define reality. Political institutions are increasingly adapting their operations to the norms and practices of the media to maximise their chances of getting their message across to audiences unscathed (Strömbäck and Esser 2014). The media, in turn, scrutinise this practice, and the cycle of mutual influence between the media and politics is serving to engender mistrust of politicians’ authenticity (Coleman 2011).

Second, developments in new media technologies – especially web 2.0 and social media platforms – have fomented questioning of the role of technology in disseminating political content. Research in this area queries the way online technologies privilege certain actors according to different criteria from those of traditional mass media. Such dynamics have, in turn, raised interest in a third area of study connected to the role of audiences<sup>1</sup> *vis-à-vis* new media technologies. This includes audiences’ susceptibility to misinformation, especially in the face of algorithms that filter content so that users are largely exposed to information which reinforces

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I am indebted to Jay Blumler, Katrin Voltmer and Katy Parry for their insightful comments on an earlier draft.

1 To avoid confusion about the terms ‘reception’ and ‘consumption’, Thumim (2012, 63–69) argues for the use of the term ‘audiences’ in both new and traditional media in the context of the mediation process, even where audience engagement goes beyond active involvement with the media in processes of interpretation to include content production, circulation and recontextualisation.

or polarises existing views. Yet audiences are conversely seen as increasingly active in interpreting, shaping and creating political content. All three areas of study are concerned with changing aspects of the otherwise well-established process of ‘mediation’ whereby the media substantively intervene in the problematic process of communicating ‘reality’. They hinge on processes that reside in the *institutions* of the mass media, media and communication *technologies*, and *audiences* (Silverstone 2005, 189).

A key position in the emerging body of literature on populism’s relationship to the media maintains that recent changes in media systems and technologies, and in the media’s relationship to politics, may be contributing to populist success (Aalberg and de Vreese 2016; Esser et al. 2016). Populists, it is argued, have a certain affinity with the media despite their well-known antipathy towards the mass media and mediation in general. Only recently have comparative studies and more comprehensive theoretical frameworks begun to place populism in the context of broader changes in the media environment. What general trends can we identify in populism’s ability to negotiate the treacherous process of mediation so successfully and to retain an aura of authenticity where mainstream parties and politicians often fail?

This chapter takes a communication-centred approach to populism as its starting point. It first outlines this perspective. While it touches on populism by the media and among citizens, its primary focus is populist politicians and their efforts in negotiating the mediation process. The chapter therefore goes on to discuss one of the most influential recent general theories in communication studies, mediation, as a framework for conceptualising the link between populist politicians and the media. Finally, it inspects a substantial body of research literature for its conceptual abundance, divergences in approach and gaps needing attention. The review maps the literature to the aforementioned sites of mediation – media institutions, technologies and audiences – to specifically consider how close we are to answering the question of how populists negotiate the process of mediation.

## A Communications Approach to Populism

The criteria and dynamics of mediation that shape populist meaning relate to its communicative dimension. Approaching populism from a communications perspective implies a shift in focus from *what populism is* to *what it does* and *how it does it*. In other words, the concern is less with issues of definition and classification of the phenomenon, which I only briefly engage with here (for a detailed discussion, see Heinisch and Mazzoleni in this volume), and more with questions of process and practice. Such an approach investigates how populist ideology is naturalised, the role the media play in this, the extent to which the undertaking succeeds and the conditions under which it does so.

### Classifying Populism

Given the concept’s contested nature, the definitional problem nevertheless has to be considered. A brief consideration of the dualism between stylistic and ideational classifications of populism may illuminate the perspective of populist communication. While most scholars see

definitions of populism as an ideology and a style<sup>2</sup> as mutually exclusive, ideational and stylistic definitions largely home in on the same core characteristics. Populists identify *the people* as a morally decent ‘silent majority’ (Canovan 1999) that constitutes the totality of the community but reduces their multiplicity of disparate demands and interests (Mudde 2004; Laclau 2005; Moffitt 2016). They portray *the elite* as immoral and opposed to the people (e.g. Jägers and Walgrave 2007; Mudde 2007; Aalberg et al. 2016) and themselves as *one of the people* and as able to restore *sovereignty* to the people through their enlightenment (Canovan 2005; Abts and Rummens 2007). In addition, populists signal their outsider status and the illegitimacy of institutional or elite-driven norms through *disruptive performances* (Moffitt 2016; Bucy et al. 2020; Sorensen 2021; 2018) that *evoke a crisis* (Moffitt 2016; Taggart 2000).

The classification as an ideology or style differs chiefly with respect to the types of phenomena in which these characteristics are observed and the importance ascribed to style or ideology in political mobilisation more generally. Ideological approaches contend that populism’s ideational content inspires action and resides in populist actors. The morally informed and binary relationship between the people and the elite is central to populism’s ability to mobilise latent constituent attitudes. The types of people designated by the ideas of the people and the elite vary across different political and cultural contexts. Yet minimal definitions suggest that populist actors fill these core ideas with meaning by adapting them to a given culture and host ideology (see e.g. Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013).

Stylistic and performative approaches hone in on the same characteristics but are more concerned with their form of articulation, such as the use of informal language to denote an ordinary people (Ostiguy 2020), or with the constitutive nature of performances that bring that which they denote into being (Moffitt 2016). Performance here involves a process of symbolic meaning-formation (Alexander 2006; Moffitt 2016, 38) that becomes the object of study. Such perspectives on populism see performance and style as the means through which populism gains traction and mobilises its constituents, and as an important factor in not only the transmission of ideas but also in shaping their meaning.

### Populism as a Communicative Process

From a communications perspective, both classifications have merit as both ideology and style are integral parts of the communicative process (see also Engesser et al. 2017; de Vreese et al. 2018; Sorensen 2021, chapter 3). Empirically, the core characteristics of populism clearly manifest themselves in both stylistic expression and ideas, in the content of a communicated message. Communication science dictates that ideas cannot be communicated without a discursive style. And style in and of itself contributes to the formation of meaning; it is not a neutral vehicle in the transmission of an ideological message. Putting the communicative process at the forefront of our investigations explains why both classifications have resulted in almost identical definitions. It queries what part each of these dimensions plays in the manifestation of populist meaning. It has two further advantages: to explain populism’s contextualism and to understand its relationship to the media.

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2 Other approaches include the categorisation of populism as a discourse, a strategy and a form of political logic.

Contextualism has proven to be a stumbling block in comparative studies of populism. The ideas of a given instance of populism and the manifestation of its style often differ from those of other instances of populism. This has complicated the definitional debate. Yet a certain communicative process of meaning-making is shared across very different contextual manifestations, from left-wing to right-wing forms of populism in both established and transitional democracies (Sorensen 2021, chapters 3 and 6). This is the process through which ideas attain manifest form through stylised articulation. It involves the construction of meaning on the basis of a given set of cultural resources and in response to particular conditions of social power. Common perceptions of, attitudes to and feelings about politics in a given political culture form the resources that give meaning to populist ideas. These ideas are then performed through the disruption of a given set of institutional norms in a morally essentialist fashion. On the basis of this communicative process, different forms of populism emerge from the nuances of contextual conditions. These forms of populism share the practices of delegitimising elite representation and, in the course of disrupting the established order, making a claim to disintermediation. In response to allusive relations between citizens and elite representatives in democracies around the world, the communicative process of populism makes the path between citizens and populist representatives appear more direct.

From this perspective, populism is fundamentally opposed to all forms of mediation, both political and media-related. A communication perspective on populism therefore highlights the role of the media and that of mediation more generally in establishing a seemingly direct connection to citizens. But even ‘direct’ media mediate. Different media technologies invite different communicative styles and norms, but they also have an affinity with certain ideas and imaginaries, as do different media institutions, audiences and contexts of reception, all of which, in turn, shape meaning. These aspects all form part of the process of mediation that populist communication must inevitably undergo. How does it do so whilst upholding its claim to directness? The following section discusses the concept of mediation as a theoretical framework for reviewing the literature on populism’s relationship to mediation.

## Mediation

In everyday English, ‘mediation’ means getting in between, negotiating or resolving disputes, and generating mutual understanding and agreement instead of conflict. However, in the field of media and communication studies, it points to a much more problematic process (Livingstone 2009, 4–5). Here, the term is often concerned with questions of the media’s power to shape representations of ‘reality’. Rather than a process of clarification, it denotes a more substantive intervention, where what is being dealt with is itself changed by that intervention. This includes how reality is depicted and understood. In the words of Hepp and Krotz (2014, 3), ‘communication has to be grasped as a process of mediating meaning construction’.

The concept of mediatisation goes further by emphasising change over time and denotes an increase in mediation that is taking place with new developments in and of the media (Strömback 2008; Livingstone 2009, 7; Hepp and Krotz 2014, 3). In the field of political communication, mediatisation is a process whereby the media become more and more of a political actor in their own right. Increasingly, the ‘logic’ of the media – understood as the norms and routines that govern the media’s operations (Altheide and Snow 1979) – is adopted by, and

thereby transforms, political institutions (Strömbäck 2008; Strömbäck and Esser 2014). Mediatisation is thus a more specific process than mediation. However, analysis of the process of mediation is key to determining how the relationship between ‘reality’ and political communication is changing as part of the process of mediatisation (Hepp and Krotz 2014, 3–4).

Swanson (1992, 29) breaks down the media’s depiction of reality into three distinct aspects, which are here adopted with reference to the overall process of mediation:

‘objective’ political reality (the actual events and conditions that are the referents of journalists’ and politicians’ representations in campaign messages); ‘constructed’ political reality (the content of the representations offered by journalists and political leaders); and ‘subjective’ political reality (citizens’ perceptions of political reality, including political attitudes, beliefs, impressions of political leaders, and so on).

These areas of analysis in turn direct attention towards the relationships between them, which are open to investigation through different theoretical approaches and objects of study. For example, the relationship between objective and constructed political realities may be investigated from an institutionalist or a materialist perspective (these are elaborated in the following sections), depending on whether the media as an institution or as material technology is conceived as the more important factor in constructing reality in a given context. Media effects studies, meanwhile, focus on the relationship between constructed political reality and the subjective reality of audiences.

These relationships, then, constitute three sites of mediation: *media institutions* and, for instance, the impact of commercial imperatives on news values and editorial decisions; *media technologies* and the ways in which they shape the production, distribution and recirculation of content; and *media audiences* and their variously active participation, interpretation and interaction with populist content. In new media, the relationships between these actors, institutions and environments are asymmetrical and non-linear: media work ‘through a process of environmental transformation which in turn transforms the conditions under which any future media can be produced and understood’ (Couldry 2008, 8). The following sections go on to review extant literature on populist political communication and its relationship to the media through the lens of these three sites of mediation.

## Media Institutions as Sites of Mediation

The role of institutions in the construction of a populist political reality has been considered in studies of the practices of content selection, gatekeeping and framing that emerge from the norms and routines of journalists and other key media workers. Institutional studies have, unsurprisingly, exclusively focused on traditional media. However, recent interventions by social media platform owners in relation to populist content suggest that this is an area of study that is now ripe for expansion. The institutionalist perspective adopted by studies of populism and the traditional mass media see institutional practices, norms and routines as shared by the news media collectively as a single institution (Cook 2006; Asp 2014). This institution is seen as wielding collective power in relation to the sphere of politics through media logic. Research literature has investigated populism’s affinity with media logic and its concurrent and somewhat conflicting criticism of the media.



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