

POPULISM

Populism is regarded as a “thin” ideology – like nationalism – based on the moral polarity between “the pure people” and “the corrupt elite” as well as the protection of popular sovereignty in any event. Considering how thin populism is as a concept, it normally affixes to other more elaborate ideologies which in turn has accounted for its rise and longevity. From agrarian movements in Russia to the US Tea Party movement to European nativist parties, populism has many guises. Given the continent on which populism is practiced and the time period, it has come to have very different meanings, but over time three core concepts have been identified.

Core Concepts

The People

The common consensus is that “the people” is a fiction. At the most, it is a simplified explanatory term for something in real life. This looseness of term, some believe, makes it pointless as a concept, while others have attempted to identify “the people” more specifically. However, the fact that “the people” functions as an empty signifier, has been offered as what makes populism an ideology with considerable teeth and reach.

“The people” as a constructed concept gives it flexibility, and it is usually paired in conjunction with the ensuing three meanings: “the people as sovereign, the common people, and peoples as nations.” The idea of the people as sovereign is premised on the contemporary democratic concept that interprets the people as the well-spring of political authority *and* the rulers. The objective of populist movements for instance, is to give power back to the people, the sovereign. “The common people” is usually invoked in criticism of the dominant culture, which is viewed as suspicious of the proclivities, political or cultural, of the common citizens. The people in the “peoples as nations” concept encompasses the entire nation as a collective. Formulating a definition to the nation creates difficulties, for instance, regarding the inner and outer bounds of who “the people” may be.

The Elite

The primary difference between “the people” and “the elite” is a moral one: the people are pure and the elites are corrupt. The elite are a uniform entity that plots against the will of the people. They comprise the top echelons of power, holding elevated seats in politics, in economic activity, in the media and within the arts. Populism is quintessentially anti-establishment; therefore, many contend that populists cannot stay in power as this would render them part of the elite. This however is to disregard the ethos of the difference between the people and the elite which is based in morality rather than situation. For populists, implicating the elite with economic power is a useful tool in the populist armoury to explicate

their own political failures. Populists also maintain that the elite while disregarding the needs and wishes of the common people also actively work against national interests.

The General Will

The general will, according to Rousseau, is distinct from the will of all. The first is the potential and the ability of the people to be a part of a collective and further their common interests via legislation. The second refers to the totality of specific interests at a specific point in time. The duality of the concept of the people and the elite reinforces the idea of a general will as wielded by the people. The role of the politicians is to be able to identify the general will and marshal the citizens into a community to carry out that will.

Populist ideology, like Rousseau's, carries a critique of representative forms of government which follows from the concept of the general will. Populists remain unconvinced that an electoral process which happens occasionally that accomplishes nothing more than elect representatives is capable of carrying out the general will of the people. To reduce the likelihood that people are reduced to bystanders in political processes, populists are in favour of direct democratic procedures such as referenda and plebiscites. In other words, populist ideology sanctions action that operationalises the will of the people.

The general will of the people, it must be noted, is not rooted in rational discussion and deliberation, rather it is rooted in "common sense" which enables it to identify a particular set of concerns and act upon them challenging the status quo. Populism, from this vantage, is a democratising influence, giving the power of expression to people who are represented by political institutions. This has been referred to as the scope of populism to "enact the redemptive side of democracy." However, when the will of the people is absolute, those who oppose it can be termed enemies. As such, authoritarian scenarios can emerge in which enemies are attacked.

Adapted from Cas Mudde and Christóbal R. Kaltwasser, 'Populism' in Michael Freeden, Lyman Tower Sargeant and Marc Stears (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Political Ideologies* (OUP 2013)