

A Threat and A Corrective for Democracy: An Introduction to Populism in the Past and Present

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Abstract: With the increasing interdependence between states, populism also rises through opposing current institutions, which gradually becomes a political force in some regions nowadays. However, there is no accepted academic definition of populism. Therefore, this essay lists three major approaches for scholars to define populism, the sociocultural approach, the political-strategic approach, the ideational approach, and makes some critical comments on them. After the evaluations, the reasons why the ideational approach is the most probable method to illustrate populism can be explained. By analyzing the mobilization of populism in different regions, the core features of populists can be reflected and the demands of populists can update with time advance. On the aspect of political effect, this article studies its influence on democratic institutions and policy-making, which show both positive and negative sides under different circumstances. In summary, populism is a special kind of ideology related to the people and the elite that can attach to other ideologies. Besides, populism can remind the rulers to solve some problems when they are in opposition, nevertheless, populism can also be a threat to democracy when they thoroughly control a regime.

Keywords: populism, definition, history, political effects, democracy

1. Introduction

In the background of economic globalization and political multi-polarization, populist parties or leaders have successfully seized power in different regions by challenging dominant trends, such as the Brothers of Italy (Fratelli d'Italia) in Europe and Donald Trump in America. Though populism has a history over hundreds of years and populist parties are dynamic in the involvement of political affairs, an academic definition that is broadly accepted by scholars still remains to be invented. Therefore, the contribution of this article is to prove the rationality of the definition by Cas Mudde and show the positive and negative effects of populism through the case studies of populists in the past and present. This paper will begin with a literature review containing the essential resources and opinions from different experts about populism and the view of the author. The next part of the essay provides three mainstream beliefs on the definition of populism and some critical evaluations of them. The fourth section of this article describes the history of populism in Latin America and Europe with some typical examples to reflect the changeable political pursuits and the essence of populism that never changed under different eras. Moreover, the effects of populism on democracy and immigration

policies will be discussed in the fifth section combined with an example of Italy. Finally, a conclusion will be given to wrap up the ideas of the author.

2. Literature review

Populism is a controversial concept for which scholars have different explanations. Daniel Rueda summarized three main streams to defining populism, the sociocultural approach, the political-strategic approach, and the ideational approach. As a traditional school, the sociocultural approach consumed that populism is a specific political relationship between the supply side and the demand side based on the history and socioeconomic framework of the state, which was criticized for its ignorance of the factors under the new global order and individual effects of the leaders. The political-strategic approach tried to define populism as a strategy to gain emotional followers and political powers. However, Daniel Rueda suggested that this method was unable to define populism properly because it only treated the leaders as core and overlooked the elements of the demand sides and the political institution [1]. Cas Mudde comprehensively defined populism as an ideology and stated the essential actors related to populism, “the pure people”, “the corrupt elite”, and “the general well”. Besides, they also found the feature that populism needs combinations with other ideologies like liberalism, ecologism, and nationalism to develop itself [2].

When it comes to the history and mobilization of populism in Latin America, Cas Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser divided them into three waves under different backgrounds [3]. Although the Latin American populist parties updated the ideologies they attached to, their core requirement of equality in political and economic status between the people and the elite has been sustained. The proposals of the European populist parties after World War II can be separated into three types by Cas Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, which were xenophobia, lower taxation, and anti-communism with the examples of the National Front in France, the Italian Social Movement, and the anti-communist trade union solidarity in Poland.

As to the relationship between populism and democracy, Jan-Werner Müller thought that populism could be a threat to democratic institutions [4]. However, Kazin suggested that populism is dangerous but significant to the regimes [5]. Moreover, Christian F. Rostbøll also emphasized that populism can harm democracy when it is in power, nevertheless, populism can improve democratic institutions by reminding the rulers of some potential issues when it is on the opposition [6]. Therefore, the effects of populism have two sides.

In summary, populism is a special kind of ideology that focuses on the conflicts between “the people” and “the elite” under the determination of different eras and socioeconomic conditions. Furthermore, it can represent both positive and negative impacts to the democratic institutions.

3. The definition of populism

This section will focus on several definitions from three different typical approaches to make an explanation of “what is populism?” and make some justifications for them.

Firstly, as a contested and complex concept, populism was given various definitions in different academic resources. According to Daniel Rueda, the definitions of populism vary, and are separated into three main schools that are mostly adopted by scholars, namely the sociocultural approach, which supposed populism as a special kind of political relationship between leaders and citizens, the political-strategic approach by Weyland, who defined populism as a strategy to seek political power, and the ideational approach by Mudde, who recognized populism as a particular ideology [7].

Since there are some divergences of the definition, disputes between these schools also appeared. The sociocultural approach put too much attention on the aspects of historical events and traditional cultures but ignored the effects of leaders’ personalities and other new elements under different eras.

As to the political-strategic approach, populism was defined as “a political strategy through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government power based on direct, unmediated, uninstitutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers” by Weyland in his article “Clarifying a Contested Concept: Populism in the Study of Latin American Politics” [8] or “a primarily political strategy, whose political rhetoric is the evocation of latent grievances and the appeal to emotions provoked by them” by Betz in his work “Conditions Favouring the Success and Failure of Radical Right-Wing Populist Parties in Contemporary Democracies” [9]. These definitions were criticized for their excessive focusing on the aims and actions of leaders, missing the factors of the supporters, history, political institutions, and especially ideology. For example, populism nowadays attempts to simulate different ideologies, like nationalism or ecologism.

Secondly, the definition of the ideational approach can be found in the book “Populism: a Very Short Introduction” by Mudde, which is “a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, ‘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” [10]. In this definition, Mudde described populism as “a thin-centered ideology”, which means other ideologies like socialism, nationalism, and ecologism can be easily absorbed and combined by populism. For instance, the United European Left, a left-wing populist coalition including the Greens and Communists in northern Europe. Moreover, the *Rassemblement National*, a far right-wing populist party that strongly advocated nationalism in France. Additionally, this definition also emphasized the essential element within populism, the conflicts in political power and social status between “the people” and “the elite”, directly suggesting that elitism which despises “the people” and pluralism which promotes tolerance among all the classes can be the opposites of populism. What’s more, the vagueness of the meaning of “the people” provides flexibility for populist propaganda and helps populism gain support from different groups. For example, “the people” can be the owner of sovereignty to against the current political establishment, encouraging the citizens to reclaim the political power from “the elite”, it can be the common class in the society to attack the ruling class, it can also be one specific nation to mobilize the ethnic tensions in one region. When it comes to the concept of “the corrupt elite”, the word “corrupt” reflects another feature of populism, the criteria of morality. Therefore, “the elite” can be simply assumed as the one in power who occupies the interests of “the people”. Finally, this definition also mentioned the other core concept, the general will, which reflects the capability of every citizen to unite and make laws to protect their interests. Hence, the regime conducted by populism prefers the institution of direct democracy, like referenda and plebiscites, to obtain supporters from the underclass and criticize the elite in power ignoring the interests of all the people.

Accordingly, though the definition of the ideational approach was criticized for its broadness and abstraction, it not only shows the features of populist parties but also offers a deep understanding of the core concepts within populism. For instance, the limited contents of populism make it combine with other ideologies. Besides, “ideology” includes a series of political actions, take both suppliers and consumers into consideration, which extends the broad of populism, rather than simply defining it as a typical movement or leadership. Moreover, this definition reminded researchers to rethink the relationship between populism and democracy, populism can be a tool for politicians to polish their democratic institutions, however, it can also become “a permanent shadow of modern representative democracy, and a constant peril” [11]. Thus, this definition can be a comprehensive explanation for the behaviors of nowadays populists.

4. The mobilization of populism in different regions

This part will describe the rise and fall of populism throughout history with the example of Latin America and Europe.

With the democratic elections and the widening gaps between the elite and the people, Latin America can be a hotbed of populism, especially after the oppression of the autocratic regime and oligarchy, citizens would be inclined to vote for a populist leader who commits to organizing a government that takes the people's interests into consideration, rather than a dictator. Among various populist regimes in Latin America, Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser assumed that they could be divided into three types in chronological order [12].

4.1. The first wave

The first wave of populism in Latin America started at the outbreak of the Great Depression in 1929 and was eliminated under the dominance of the bureaucratic authoritarian in the 1960s. In this era, Latin America was in the Process of Industrialization, which attracted the rural population to flow into the cities. With the expansion of the labor groups, the intensive conflicts between the people represented by the workforce and the elite represented by the capitalists led to some social problems, which provided opportunities for populist parties to seize the regimes. For example, Juan Domingo Perón, who won the presidential election of Argentina in 1946. As the former director of the Labor Department responsible for mediating the labor-capital contradictions, Perón got access to build successful relationships with labor unions by promoting labor laws, ameliorating working conditions, and increasing the wages of workers. However, Perón also managed to suppress the organizations that refused to be controlled by the government, almost all the communities connected to communism were forbidden to continue their activities with the threat of arrestment. Benefiting from this special strategy, Perón won 52.4 percent of the vote in the election under the open resistance of the United States. Relying on the support from the laborers, Perón started a dictatorship in Argentina, he refused to share any power with other parties in the congress, banned the media that criticized his policies. In economics, Perón improved the health care system, social welfare, and reclaimed the railroad owned by Britain and France to gain more supporters among citizens [13]. On the other side, he promoted state intervention policies, used five-year plans to develop state-owned industries and public works, established a domestic economic system with a strict trade protection strategy. Perón's economic policies directly contributed to the decrease in the market dynamic, higher inflation rate, and stalled economic growth. Perón was overthrown by the army in 1955. His arbitrary ruling and extreme economic policies caused the loss of supporters from other classes and finally ruined this regime.

4.2. The second wave

The second wave started after the economic crisis in the early 1990s, the elite monopolized the majority of the interests, while the people of Latin America suffered from unemployment and high prices brought by hyperinflation and the fragile monetary system. This atmosphere gave populism another chance to obtain support from citizens. For instance, Carlos Menem, a populist who won the 1989 presidential election in Argentina. Guided by neoliberalism, Menem started a series of monetary reforms and policies of open-up, which improved the life qualities of the people to some extent. To control the persistent inflation, he tried to cooperate with the IMF and the convertibility plan which connected the peso with the dollar. At the same time, he limited state interventions toward the economy, used privatization to deal with the state-owned enterprises that fell into crisis. However, with the decrease in state-owned assets, the social welfare for the underclass also faced shrinkage because of the shortage of government revenue. In politics, like other populist politicians, Menem attempted to centralize all the power into himself, regardless of the congress and the court. For example, he can make some decrees without the permission of the congress. Moreover, the constitution was reformed by him in order to have a second term. Although Menem updated the ideology that populism attached to, the core concept, the contradiction between "the pure people" and

“the corrupt elite” was maintained, autocracy brought by populism can still be a threat to democratic institutions.

4.3. The third wave

The third wave was aroused by the resentment of the neoliberal reforms at the end of the twentieth century. These reforms made some processes in stabilizing macroeconomics, however, the huge gaps between the elite and the people in the socioeconomic were still a burning issue that reforms did not solve. With the problems of equality and some socialist ideologies, populists were able to lead “the people” at the bottom to accuse the corruption and grievance of “the elite”. For example, Hugo Chávez, who strongly opposed extensive privatization and proposed to crack down on corruption in various departments during the Venezuelan presidential election, won 56 percent of the vote in 1998. Similar to traditional populism, Chávez advocated criticizing “the corrupt elite”, combined with socialism, Chávez made policies on land reforms and the nationalization of strategic industries. In politics, Chávez chose to establish new institutions to administrate public affairs, rather than abrogating the old one that was ineffective. When trialing the corrupt officers, like most populist politicians, Chávez went beyond the current court and founded additional institutions.

4.4. The contemporary populism in Europe

When it comes to populism in Europe during the trend of integration and the era of the Cold War, xenophobia, lower taxation, and anti-communism can represent the persuasions of the majority of them [14]. For instance, the National Front established by Jean-Marie Le Pen in 1972, a far right-wing populist party considered the welfare system was monopolized by “the elite” and the interests of citizens were carved up by the immigrants. In addition, the National Front also accused the policies of European integration because of the alienation of national sovereignty and benefits. Besides, with the higher taxes brought by the welfare state and the rise of right-wing parties, some populist parties promoted the proposals of neoliberalism, which were lower taxation and free trade. For example, the Forza Italia and the Italian Social Movement, the populist parties in Italy, which supported decreased taxation and reduced unnecessary financial expenses to improve the life equality of citizens, rather than exploiting laborers and small business owners with high taxes, while sharing the state welfare with outsiders [15]. After the drastic change in Eastern Europe, the populist parties that encouraged the people to resist the communist elites won the most sympathy of voters in the elections, such as the Czech Umbrella Party and the anti-communist trade union solidarity in Poland.

5. The effects of populism

This section will briefly summarize the effects of populism on democratic institutions and immigration policies.

5.1. The democracy and populism

Firstly, the influence of populism on democracy has two sides. Kazin commented populism can be dangerous but necessary to regimes [16]. Furthermore, according to Christian F. Rostbøll, populism is helpful to democracy when it is out of office, however, when the populist party is in power and drifts away from regulations, democratic institutions will be threatened by its autocracy [17]. Specifically, the activities of populism encourage citizens to be involved in political affairs, remind the rulers of the classes they have forgotten and some problems remained to be solved. For example, the refugee issues in Europe and the dramatic level of inequality in Latin America [18]. Nevertheless, populism only focuses on the interests of “the majority people” and ignores to guarantee the rights of

“the minority” that should be provided by liberal democracy. Therefore, institutions like judicial offices and the independent media that tried to protect the minority can be attacked and controlled by populists. For instance, the far right-wing populist parties advanced chauvinism and racism required a state with one single race, which encroached on the rights of other ethnicities.

5.2. The immigration policies and populism---the case of Italy

Secondly, the populist parties prefer to make harsh immigration policies, however, the compromise existed in some circumstances. Use the Italian populist party, the Northern League, as an example, to secure the welfare of native laborers, this party used to strongly oppose when migrants entered Italy in the 1990s (see Figure 1). Nevertheless, the graph below shows a rapid increase in 2002 and 2003 because this party was forced to permit a law that committed the legitimacy of migrant workers for the lack of labor forces in the Italian factories [19]. Accordingly, populist parties can change their tough stand on some issues to satisfy the interests of “the people”.

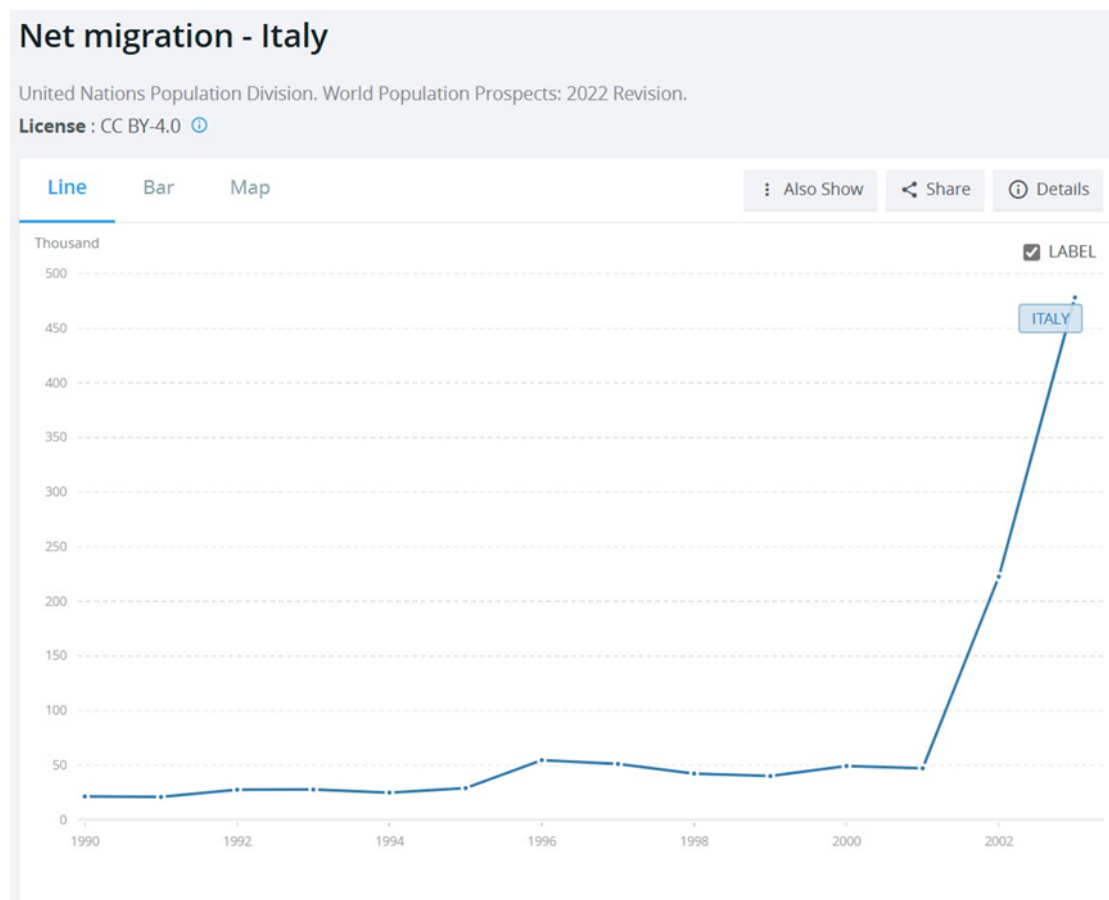


Figure 1: The World Bank, Italian net migration from 1990 to 2003

However, the leadership of the Northern League was transferred to Matteo Salvini in 2013. The new Party Secretary and his supporters blamed the rulers for ignoring the poverty and unemployment of citizens but paid more attention to immigrations who brought unstable elements to the society and claimed the welfare of native Italians. Thus, the attitude toward immigration became conservative again in 2013 (see Figure 2). Therefore, the views of populist leaders can also control the decisions of the populist parties.



Figure 2: The World Bank, Italian net migration from 2012 to 2021

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this essay has discussed the definition of populism, which is a special kind of “thin-center” ideology that can attach to other mainstream ideologies. Besides, the historical events indicated that populist parties highly focus on the contradiction between “the people” and “the elite”, regardless of the modified times. Populists only protect the interests of “the people”, which is the class vote for them, thus, the benefits of other classes can be ignored and pluralism is its opposition. Therefore, populism can be a threat to democracy because of its autocracy, nevertheless, it also increases citizens’ enthusiasm for involvement in political affairs, forcing the party in power to pay more attention to the interests of the bottom, polishes the democratic institutions to some extent.

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