

POPULISM AS A POLITICAL TERM AND IN THE CONTEXT OF THE STATE OF DEMOCRACY IN ISRAEL

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Abstract

This article delves into populism as a contemporary political term, focusing on its Western manifestation within Israel's political landscape. Drawing on a comprehensive literature review, the author distinguishes populism from historical connotations and employs a theoretical-philosophical approach, utilizing Israel as a case study. The study emphasizes the elusiveness of populism, rooted in its linguistic and cultural dimensions. The author contends that populism transcends traditional political divisions, illustrating this through examples from Israeli politics. Examining the role of language in shaping political thought, the paper invokes Wittgenstein's philosophy, asserting that populism's impact is deeply ingrained in social and cultural contexts. The article navigates through the complexities of populism in democracies, distinguishing between 'substantial' and 'skinny' democracies. It concludes by emphasizing the need to understand populism beyond mere rhetoric, acknowledging its intricate connection with societal structures and urging a nuanced cross-country analysis.

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1. Introduction

This paper deals with populism as a political term and relies on a comprehensive literature review including papers as well as articles from around the world which understand populism as a global phenomenon. However, here I address only its Western manifestation that has not skipped over Israel's politics. In this paper I refer to populism in its contemporary meaning, and not as a historical phenomenon which allegedly goes as far back as the 19th century. In what follows, I assess populism as a theoretical-philosophical term using the state of Israel as a case study to instantiate it. This theoretical discussion will be used as a groundwork for my PhD dissertation, which tackles the state of democracy as we know it today, in light of the rise of populism across Western societies.

2. Literature review

"The Populist Temptation: Economic Grievance and Political Reaction in the Modern Era" by Barry Eichengreen: Barry Eichengreen's work explores the intersection of economic grievances and political reactions in the modern era, focusing on the phenomenon of populism. Eichengreen delves into the complex relationship between economic factors and the rise of populist movements, analyzing how economic discontent can shape political landscapes. Through a comprehensive review, Eichengreen contextualizes the populist temptation within historical and contemporary economic frameworks, offering insights into the motivations behind populist movements.

"Populism: A Very Short Introduction" by Cas Mudde and Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser: In their concise work, Cas Mudde and Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser provide a brief yet insightful introduction to the multifaceted concept of populism. The authors present a review that encompasses key theoretical

approaches to populism, drawing from political science, sociology, and other relevant disciplines. By examining the historical roots and contemporary manifestations of populism, the book aims to offer readers a solid foundation for understanding the common features and variations of populist movements worldwide.

"Populism in Israel" by Naomi Chazan: Naomi Chazan's work, "Populism in Israel," is trying to provide a comprehensive review on the subject, focusing specifically on the context of Israel. Chazan explores the historical and political factors that have contributed to the rise and evolution of populist movements within the Israeli political landscape.

3. Methodology

The main objectives of this research are:

- a) **Terminological Clarification of Populism:** The primary objective is to emphasize the importance of terminological clarification regarding the concept of populism. The term "populism" is often used pejoratively to label the 'other,' and it requires clarification to bridge the gap between theoretical definitions and the complex reality of modern states with diverse cultures and motivations.
- b) **Deconstruction of Populism Stereotypes:** aiming to challenge and deconstruct stereotypes associated with populism. It discusses how populists are often portrayed as simplistic, irrational, and superficial individuals caught up in myths. This characterization oversimplifies the diverse motivations and complexities within modern states, emphasizing the need to understand populism beyond stereotypes.
- c) **Populism as a Mental, Sociological, and Cultural Position:** Seeking to shift the understanding of populism from a purely political perspective to a mental, sociological, and cultural position. It argues that populism should be viewed as a complex phenomenon deeply rooted in social and cultural dimensions. Terminological clarity is essential in comprehending populism as a mental and cultural position rather than a strictly political ideology.
- d) **Contextual Examination of Populism:** The research argues for a contextual examination of populism within the social and cultural dimensions of each state. The populist dimension in politics is deeply grounded in the social and cultural context of a particular nation. Diagnosing populism in its causal and circumstantial context, distinguishing between liberal democracies and electoral democracies, and highlighting the impact of populist rhetoric on the democratic process.
- e) **Case Study of Israel:** Using Israel as a case study, the research explores the tension between being a liberal democracy and a Jewish state. It highlights the contradiction in defining Israel as a country belonging equally to everyone while also being a Jewish state. This tension is expressed in the failure to enact a constitution and reflects the broader challenge of reconciling civic nationalism with national identity.

The main hypotheses are:

1. *The research posits that the elusiveness of the term "populism" necessitates terminological clarification. The term, rooted in the Latin word "populus" (people), is linked to democracy, and the addition of "ism" implies the inclusion of scientific criteria to theoretically elucidate populism. The study aims to bridge the gap between theoretical definitions and the complex reality of modern states with diverse cultures and motivations.*
2. *The research hypothesizes that the term populism is used pejoratively in contemporary discourse, particularly to label the 'other.' It suggests that the 'other,' perceived as populist, is characterized as simplistic, irrational, and caught up in myths. The research aims to challenge these stereotypes and understand populism beyond the pejorative connotations.*
3. *The research contends that populism, philosophically defined as the division between 'us' and 'them,' transcends traditional left-right political divisions. It explores the hypothesis that the significance of terminological clarification lies in understanding populism not as a purely political phenomenon but as a mental, sociological, and cultural position.*

4. The research examines the hypothesis that political dynamics and party positions can shift over time. Using Israel's political landscape as a case study, it explores how parties like "Israel beiteinu" may transition from traditionally right-wing inclinations to supporting the leftist block, showcasing the evolving nature of political ideologies.

The importance of a terminological clarification derives from the elusiveness of the phenomenon called 'populism'. The term itself contains the old Latin word "populus" - namely, people, which directly corresponds with the term "democracy", as the latter presumes the will of the people. The "ism" suffix is added here to denote the inclusion of scientific criteria in order to theoretically elucidate populism as a phenomenon. It goes without saying that when it comes to phenomena which deal with human life, theories are never exhaustive, in the sense that some aspects are unavoidably excluded from the theory. Hence, I save no effort below to bridge the gap between theory and reality - at least as I understand it. And one last caveat before moving on, things are much more complex when it comes to modern states, which consists of minorities and multiple cultures with different motivations.

The main research question is

"How does the elusiveness of the term 'populism,' as a phenomenon intertwined with language, influence perceptions, political dynamics, and the cultural and sociological dimensions within modern states, particularly considering the shifting nature of political ideologies, the pejorative use of populism, and its philosophical underpinning as a division between 'us' and 'them'?"

4. The importance of understanding populism

The term populism is used today as a pejorative for addressing the 'other'. This 'other' is someone who is not 'me', or more precisely 'us'. This 'us' is believed to always think right, with a substantial degree of complexity and coherency. In contrast, the 'other' or 'others' are populists - they are simplistic, irrational and superficial - and they are caught up in myths. The populist is seen as an unreasonable creature, leaning towards the opinion of the masses, incapable of developing independent and rational thinking. Populists are activated by emotion fueled by grudge, and have immediate instincts to reality, even when it does not fit modern and progressive thinking.

Populist ideas - according to those who perceive themselves as not populists - originate from a-priori conclusions, which organize their world around mythical imagination underpinned by partial data. The data do not represent reality as it is, but rather a popular social structure stemming from the imagination of a shared past and a desirable future. Populist do not engage in deconstruction of the past and the present, fearing it may harm the historical stability as well as the present of the nation. Stability, it is claimed, is to the populist the most supreme value that sets aside all other values. Therefore, his way of thinking will always lead him to favor the particular past – in the sense of preferring the well-being of the people he belongs to over reason in its modern sense, which assesses reality on a case by case basis. The imaginative past seems as the ultimate guiding truth.

Philosophically, as we have hitherto observed, the definition of populism consists of 'us' and 'them'. Therefore, in practice the obsolete political division to 'left' and 'right' is irrelevant here. Rightists may blame leftist for being populists – and vice versa. Hence, the significance of terminological clarification becomes clear, for populism is not a political but rather a mental, sociological and cultural position and so it should be understood.

Right wing movements claim their political rivals are populists in the sense that they are trying to preserve old elite power. For example, in Israel, right wing parties treat left and center parties as if their sole purpose was to preserve their dwindling electoral power through the institutional bureaucracy, which sees itself as indispensably necessary, though in fact being nothing but a futile slogan of an empty signified in the world

To demonstrate this, see how right-wing parties often mock "Yesh Atid"'s ("There's a Future") party leader Yair Lapid for what they perceive as slogan-filled speech style, detached from a world of realpolitik and hence, inefficient in terms of changing anything in the world – if not an altogether

contradiction of reality. Lapid's own image of being a 'democrat' conflicts with the fact that his party conducts no primary elections and that its list is determined solely by him. For instance, ex-party member Ofer Shelah, was forced to leave the party by Lapid after demanding that the party choose its members through primary election. But Shelah also complained against his party leader that his political messages are intentionally opaque so as to gain broad support from the people .

Another party that instantiates the changing structure and positions of political left and right in Israel is "Israel beiteinu" party ("Israel our home"). Founded in 1999 by party leader Avigdor Liberman, the party traditionally targeted immigrants from former Soviet Union, voters with right wing inclination. However, since the 2020 electoral campaign, the party moved to support the leftist block as a part of their opposition to Benjamin Netanyahu's continuing rule and their rather consistent position against military service exoneration granted to orthodox 'Haredi' youth. Their objection to the latter generated populist expression by party leader Liberman who said that he "would send the Haredi's together with Bibi (i.e., Netanyahu) on one wheelbarrow to a good garbage dump ". Had such a statement been said in a different country, it would have probably been labeled as antisemitic. In Israel, however, it was seen as mainly populist, while categorizing in fact a whole group of the society, as the Haredi parties are political allies of the right block in Israel. Either way, this statement would probably force Liberman's party to remain in the left block for years to come as a shared coalition between the Haredi and Liberman's party seems to be a political impossibility in the near future.

Similarly, traditional ideological rifts between left and right in Israel - such as territorial concessions for peace or political economy (market or neoliberal economy vs social or social democratic economy) – are also being transferred to the terminological field of populism and its division between 'us' and 'them'.

The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein describes the instrumental use of language, in two of his books "Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus " – the only book published during his life – as well as in "Philosophical Investigations ". These books have significantly influenced the way we think about language and its uses, and especially our understanding of its impact on the human consciousness. His work was subject to a fair number of interpretative studies. According to my understanding of Wittgenstein, the limit of human thought is language.

5. Beyond understanding the definitions

The use of language needs to be seen from within a play of words rather than analyze the word as a sole atom. If we accept his approach, then populism's use of language (e.g the division to 'us' and 'them') affects the way human beings think and trigger their actions. Again, it must be emphasized that we ought to avoid the mistake that deals with the ascription of populism to ideological right and left, since what is really at hand is the use of language populism and populist leaders make so as to achieve their goals.

Hence, the populist dimension in the political sphere is grounded deeply in the social and cultural dimensions of each state. Thus, the term must be examined in the context that is relevant to each particular state. It must be diagnosed in its causal and circumstantial context; Between liberal democracies, which emphasize human rights, and electoral democracies which tend to focus on electoral results. Professor Mordechai Kremnitzer would name the former 'substantial' democracies and the latter 'skinny democracies' .

Democracies which move away from human rights and tend to leave political decisions entirely at the hands of voters, develop from substantial democracies not only as a regime structure, but also as a source for the rhetorical pride they take as the 'real democracies' . The scholar Yascha Mounk, researcher of populism from Harvard University, claims that this kind of pride is not expressed exclusively in positive terms. Moreover, it is a sort of a counter reaction to forms of regimes that in the eye of 'skinny democracies' seem as 'undemocratic liberalism'. In this view, private liberal rights such as freedom of expression are indeed safeguarded in these democracies, but it comes at the cost of muting the collective freedom of expression of the people, that which expresses itself in free elections .

This article suggests not to underestimate the veracity of this statement. While old categories of the big ideologies such as fascism and communism openly and clearly subjected the people to the state, by the same token, illiberal democracies were easy to discern – populism as a structural regime is more complex and thus harder to distinguish. In fact, the argument goes like this: if you are interested in a real democracy, you must go voting in the free elections. In this way you express your true will, without being deprived of the liberal value for the freedom of speech. The other way around: the true expression of your will is in the ballot box. Those who rob democracy and the true freedom of speech do that by liberal means.

The counter reaction then, uses the democratic language and the liberal values themselves as weapons to attack from within. The rhetoric harnesses the sentiment of the people against the institutionalized elite in the judiciary, in the media and in other places, in order to establish a true democracy which enshrines the freedom of choice. One claim is that the elite allow for elections only because they believe that governance remains anyway in their hands between electoral campaigns. Hence the liberal democracy leverages liberal values to govern without permitting free elections.

A major expression for that in Israel is in the case of orthodox parties. According to Israel's declaration of independence, Israel is defined as a Jewish democratic country, and that makes it an interesting case study for testing this argument. On the one hand, Israel is a liberal democracy and on the other hand it is by definition a Jewish state and by nature gives weight to its belonging to the Jewish nationality. In the country where a big Arab minority group lives (approximately 20% of the population), there is an inherent contradiction between the definition of the state as belonging to everyone equally while being at the same time also Jewish. Some people try to settle this tension rhetorically by referring to Judaism as a national identity, yet all governments in the history of the country without exceptions refused to see Israel as if committed to neutral civic nationalism. This position is shared across the political gamut and between religious and Jewish secular parties alike.

One expression of that tension is demonstrated by the fact that throughout its 75 years of existence, Israel has never come to enact a constitution. Well known statement in this regard has been made by "Shas's orthodox party leader Rabbi Aryeh Deri, who said that even if the "Tablet's of stone" had been declared as Israel's constitution, he would have objected, fearing that its interpretation by judicial elite would diverge from his own understanding and from that of the public he represents .

Conclusion

To sum up, populism as a term is neither merely a structural regime nor can be ascribed to one political camp only. Populism emerges from the review above as a vague phenomenon in the post-big-ideologies world. It should be understood not just as a political expression but also as a social and cultural structure.

It should not be dismissed as empty rhetoric or hollow slogans, but as a use of language that touches the people - mostly, in its objection to the dominant elite who govern in practice between the elections and trigger counter reaction from the people. It should not be seen as a mere sentiment. In addition, an absolute cross-country comparison cannot be so readily drawn for the social and cultural structures differ between states. Hence, an understanding of populism is crucial for the ability to engage in a dialogue with it, not from a sense of reason-supremacy but as a real-life phenomenon.

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