

On Populism, Planets, and Why Concepts Should Precede Definitions and Theory-Seeking

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Abstract

Despite its remarkable growth in recent years, the study of populism has long suffered from the lack of a comprehensive theory about its causes, development, and outcomes. Yet, no such theory can be arrived at before previously having resolved what "populism" really is (and what it is *not*). Good definitions, therefore, require a prior conceptualization of the phenomena we classify as populist, and want explained. Like planets, which are hard to define but easier to conceptualize as the component parts of our solar system, modern populism is better understood as a novel political system that maintains electoral democracy while also working against the principles of political liberalism. Based on such a conceptualization, we may define populism simply as "democratic illiberalism," which opens the door for new empirical research and worthwhile theory-building.

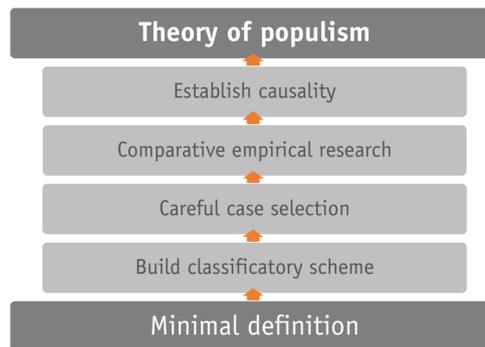
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Many academic articles about populism begin by lamenting the conceptual confusion surrounding the topic, then go on offering their own definitions and other clarifications, only to inexorably end up having further muddied the waters. Philippe Schmitter's essay (2019), which is the point of departure for the present symposium on populism, serves as a typical example of such fruitlessness. It begins with a blunt acknowledgement that "[n]o topic in the contemporary practice or study of politics is more debatable than 'populism' [...] [since it] can mean many quite different things" (p. 76). Then he vows to "try the impossible: [i.e.,] define contemporary populism in a 'neutral' fashion" (*ibidem*) — a task for which he employs two-hundred-and-one words. But this is in vain, and so our author admits defeat: "Alas," he writes, "I have no comprehensive theory to offer for determining why and when [populism] will emerge" (*ibidem*).

The question is thus raised: What does it take to build a theory of populism? The answer is that it takes clear definitions, as well as the meticulous comparative analysis of the cases that are available for empirical research. The order of operations that have to be performed in order to arrive from comprehensive definition to composite causal theory is condensed in the graph below. The whole process

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begins at bottom with a lucid and unambiguous definition of the topic under consideration — in our case “populism” — and then proceeds with a classificatory scheme that enables telling populists apart from non-populists. Based on such a classification, one should then be able to select the cases of populist occurrence and begin their systematic study in comparative fashion. If lucky enough, causal patterns will emerge that are common among the cases, which may then lead to interesting propositions, which, after been tested, may give rise to a sound theoretical framework addressing the major questions in the study of populism: What causes it in the beginning, and how it develops subsequently? How does populism rule when in office? Which are the long-term consequences of such a rule?



To be sure, the travel upwards from definition to theory is hard and demanding, but the first major difficulty appears already at the starting point. For, a *minimal* definition is hard to come by unless it has sound and well-specified conceptual foundations. Concepts are the basic units of our thinking when trying to make sense of reality and, for this reason, they stand prior to defining the phenomena that we want explained. Concepts, moreover, derive from our living experience and, in a very real sense, embody our contemporary and current historical and political realities. To give an example, since my concept of modern Greek democracy is different from Socrates’ concept of his ancient Athenian democracy, each of us would be expected to arrive at different definitions of “democracy” and, from there, follow quite different paths towards democratic theory-building. In similar fashion, no definition of modern populism is possible without a clear conceptualization of this phenomenon in its various interactions with contemporary political reality. On that account, it can be said that we have a concept of populism when, first, we achieve a common understanding of what we are talking about when uttering the word “populism,” and, second, are able to distinguish populism from non-populism. It is then, and only then, that we may transfigure our concept into a usable definition and begin our upward odyssey in search of theory as depicted in the foregoing graph.

To better exemplify why a clear conceptualization should always precede our attempts to define populism, let us transpose mentally to another science, astronomy, and ask ourselves: What is the definition for “planet?” To be sure, there are many definitions that vary from anything moving around the sun; to things with moons; things that are big enough to see with your eye; things pulling the earth around their orbits; large rocky bodies in the solar system. None of these definitions is good enough considering reality: Asteroids also move around the sun; Mercury and Venus lack moons; Uranus or Neptune are not visible to the eye; the only thing that pulls the earth around its orbit is the sun; besides the terrestrial planets, the solar system also contains the gas giants of Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus and Neptune. To make things even worse for definition buffs, one has simply to query whether any definition proposed is also good for extrasolar planets.

My point is that, without a clear definition for “planet,” one cannot be certain about how many planetary bodies are out there. To the Greeks and Romans, our solar system included seven planets. When I went to school I learned that the number of known planets is nine. By the time my children became of school age, that number had been decreased to eight following the 2006 decision of the International Astronomical Association to demote Pluto from planethood. Even more recently, many astronomers have suggested stretching the definition of the word “planet” so as to include about two hundred bod-

ies! The word in that case would mean anything orbiting around the sun that is big enough to take the shape of a sphere.

But, as already said, definitions are bad when stated irrespective of the concept that keeps hidden at their core. With regard to planets, their concept (that is, the key idea that people have in mind when they say “planet”) is simple to state: A planet is one of a small number of bodies that dominate a planetary system. The implication is that, by studying planets, we just want to explain what the solar system is and how it works. And here comes a lesson, too: No definition of “planet” should be formulated without taking into account the role these bodies play in the working of the solar system.

Leaving astronomy aside and returning to our own object of interest, how are we to grasp the concept of “populism” before attempting to formulate a definition of it? The best way, I submit, is by simply asking ourselves what is actually prompting our recent obsession with populism. In this respect, there are two chief questions to ask: (1) why do we have to study populism now? And (2) why our current study of populism is so full of consternation and dread for the future of democracy? The answers to these questions are disarmingly simple: To the first question, the reason for the lack of previous systematic research on populism is that, during the early postwar decades at least in Europe and the United States, it hardly existed; it is only in recent decades that populism has grown strong, also proposing itself as a *novel* political system. To the second question, the reason of widespread anxiety about the rise of populism is precisely the *attractiveness* of the political novelty it represents: while it preserves all the characteristics of democracy, populism dispenses with its liberal nature, actually presenting as the main foe of contemporary liberal democracy.

The realization that populism represents a novel political system which is attractive precisely because it maintains electoral democracy but discounts liberal institutions, constitutes a wholly new reconceptualization of the phenomenon which places it squarely within contemporary politics against a background of liberal democratic decay. In a way analogous to the study of planets, our concept of populism, and real reason of why we study it, pertains to our need to understand, explain, and possibly prevent the dangers it poses to both the present functioning and the future of contemporary liberal democracy. With such a conceptualization in mind, it is now easy to define populism simply as, and use synonymously with, **democratic illiberalism**. This definition has at least three great advantages. First, it is a truly minimal one in that it includes just the two core characteristics of populism: a semblance of democracy combined with a dismantling of liberal institutions. Second, it is historically and geographically specific since it effectively differentiates between liberal democracies being transformed into a populist direction from (pseudo) “populism” in states with *entrenched* illiberalism, like Russia or Turkey. Third, this definition lends itself nicely as a normative idea of how populism, once in power, may sap the liberal roots of contemporary democratic systems and, occasionally, even lead to autocracy.

Above all, the definition of populism as “democratic illiberalism” is perfectly suited to lead students of populism through each of the steps that one needs to take for traveling the distance that separates definition from theory. It also promises that the theory thus produced will succeed where Philippe Schmitter and a good many of other scholars have been defeated, that is, to determine, not only why and when populism may emerge, but also to predict the outcomes of populist rule in those nations that are unlucky enough to have experienced it.

References

This article was sparked off by Philippe C. Schmitter’s “The Vices and Virtues of Populism,” *Sociologica*, 13(1), 2019, 75–81. For a book-length study of populism, which further exemplifies many of the conceptual, methodological, and theoretical points raised herein, see my recent *Populism and Liberal Democracy: A Comparative and Theoretical Analysis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019). For a condensed account of what may happen in nations that are ruled by populists, see Takis S. Pappas, “When Populists Come to Power,” *Journal of Democracy*, 30(2), (2019), 70–84. My discussion on planets draws heavily from Mike Brown’s superb *How I Killed Pluto and Why It Had It Coming* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2012). Finally, based on Giovanni Sartori’s seminal work on concept-building, a *minimal definition* is one that includes the core, or constant, properties of a term while excluding the secondary, or variable, ones.

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