Routledge Handbook of Global Populism

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Publication details
https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315226446-4

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Published online on: 03 Sep 2018

How to cite: Robert R. Barr. 03 Sep 2018, Populism as a political strategy from: Routledge Handbook of Global Populism Routledge Accessed on: 09 Sep 2023
https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315226446-4
Populism as a political strategy

Robert R. Barr

Introduction

As is obvious to most observers of populism, the robust debate about its conceptualization continues unabated. That deeply held views backed by thorough research lead to divergent positions is no surprise. What is surprising, or perhaps ironic, though, is the frequency with which scholars agree on actual instances of populism. Few would exclude from an analysis of populism the likes of, say, Hugo Chávez, with his inflammatory rhetoric, impressive mass mobilization, concentration of personal power, and impact on Venezuela’s politics and political institutions. A number of cases (though not all) find ready agreement in the literature on their classification, but not on the reasons for it. Just what makes Chávez a populist? Is it the means by which he gained so much power and, as a result, was able to have such an impact on the country? Is it a function of his worldview or ideology? Is Chávez but a messenger where populism is the message?

For many students of populism, the point of reference or the source of scholarly interest is the power and potential of mass mobilization. The movements – often led by colorful or dynamic personalities and backed by large followings – that challenge the status quo and take control of governments are inherently consequential and important. But just how does this happen? How did Juan Perón or Recep Tayyip Erdoğan gain enough power to transform their countries? And how can we not only understand what these mechanisms are but also in a way that allows for direct empirical study?

One approach to populism attempts to answer these questions by locating the concept in the domain of politics: the search for and use of power. More specifically, it considers populism in strategic terms, as a means of building and/or maintaining political power based on the mass mobilization of supporters. Leaders use this power to gain and retain control of the state. Among scholars using this approach to populism, there are obviously differences of opinion, including divergent views of the key or defining attributes of the populist strategy. But a shared focus on the means and ends of building power based on mobilization – and thus on agency and political action – brings them together. This view of populism in behavioral terms distinguishes the political approach from those that instead are based on ideas or discursive relations.

This chapter makes the case that the political approach to populism has empirical and analytical advantages. As others have argued, this definition effectively captures the distinctive nature of the
phenomenon that so many find interesting, if not perplexing. The definition results in part from an inductive process, building from the observation of cases, but also from the concept’s evolution over time. It can thus identify what the real-world examples are, and do so in a way that facilitates study. The compelling empirical and analytical benefits owe to the clear theoretical relationship between its defining characteristics and the indicators thereof. Put differently, the means of identifying populism’s real-world empirical referents are included at the conceptual level. As such, researchers can look for examples of the thing itself—not some derivative or subtype. For similar reasons, the political conceptualization aids in the study of populism’s causes and consequences. The attributes of this definition allow for hypothesis development and explanation again without the need for conceptual crutches. In essence, by grounding this understanding in terms of agency and action, we can make sense of, for example, its consequences on democratic institutions, political incorporation, and so on. An ideology, however, cannot by itself account for such results. The sections that follow expand upon these points.

Evolution of the approach

Until relatively recently, much of populism’s conceptual development came from the scholarship of Latin America. Granted, the use of the word as a political label began in the United States as a descriptor of the People’s Party. Early studies used the term, often pejoratively, as a capitalized noun with reference to that one movement of the late 1800s. In the 1950s, propelled in part by McCarthyism, the term’s reach expanded. Richard Hofstadter (1955) saw a link connecting the People’s Party and the Progressive Movement with the New Deal, a vision or impulse driving periods of reform. Shils (1956, p. 104) argued populism “acclaims the demagogue who, breaking through the formalistic barriers erected by lawyers, pedants, and bureaucrats, renews the righteousness of government and society.” Still, much of the term’s conceptual development took place within the Latin American literature, as observers attempted to account for the region’s particular mode of political incorporation.

For some time, structural approaches based in modernization or dependency theories dominated this scholarship. These tended to be multi-domain understandings in that defining attributes came from various spheres—economic, political, social, etc. (Weyland, 2001). Most, though, located populism in specific stages of development. Modernization definitions, for instance, considered populism to be an outgrowth of processes of industrialization, urbanization, and education that expanded mass participation. For the dependency-based approaches, crises of peripheral countries’ development strategies uprooted popular classes, making mass constituencies available for mobilization. In either case, these works considered populism to be historically rooted, tied to specific stages of economic and social development. At such junctures, personalistic leaders promised material benefits to forge new multi-class alliances, and with them challenged the established political order. Thus conceived, populism was understood in social, material, as well as political terms.

Despite the use of multiple domains, many definitions from this period referred to populism’s political aspects. Germani (1978), for instance, described populism as a multi-class movement organized by a charismatic leader. According to Jaguaribe,

What is typical of populism is therefore the direct nature of the relationship between the masses and the leader, the lack of mediation by some intermediate echelons and the fact that it is based on the hope of quick achievement of objectives.

(1967, p. 168)
Others included anti-status quo appeals in relation to the mobilization (di Tella, 1965). Though at times implied, a common characteristic among these definitions was the means and ends of building political power.

These historicist views, though, faced challenges by new understandings of populism and by new empirical circumstances. By the 1980s or so, the multi-domain structural definitions had company. Some began to understand populism in terms of discourse (e.g., Laclau, 1977) and others limited it to redistributive and undisciplined economic policies (e.g., Dornbusch and Edwards, 1991). Also, in Latin America a few leaders like Alberto Fujimori or Carlos Menem struck many observers as quite similar to their forerunners of the Lázaro Cárdenas generation, even though the former worked under the fiscal constraints of neoliberal economic policies. Meanwhile in Europe, right-wing politicians increasingly gained traction. Despite the changing circumstances and conceptual advances, however, the original perspectives provide a touchstone for subsequent understandings of this phenomenon.

Some resisted the idea of using the label populism to describe the new personalistic leaders, or even called for abandoning the concept altogether. Nevertheless, others concluded that the concept had continued relevance and analytical utility, but only with some modifications. There are reasonable concerns for uprooting a concept from its original usage, in particular the possibility of resultant conceptual stretching and homonymy (Schamis, 2013). Nevertheless, a compelling argument emerged for separating populism from any specific historic juncture (e.g., Dix, 1985) or sets of redistributive policies (e.g., Roberts, 1995). Weyland (1996) reached similar conclusions but restricted populism to a single, political domain. He defined it as a political strategy with three components: a personal leader appeals to a heterogenous mass of followers, the leader does so in a direct manner, and political organizing takes the form of personal vehicles with low levels of institutionalization. An advantage of restricting it to the political domain, he added, is that characteristics like economic policies or social constituencies are not determined by definitional fiat, thus allowing the concept to appropriately capture varying empirical realities.

This perspective has grown in prominence, perhaps particularly among students of Latin America, while the ideational approach may have more adherents among those studying European populism. Still, the divides are hardly absolute. Scholars apply the political strategy definition to leaders and movements in many national and regional contexts, such as Africa (e.g., Resnick, 2015), Italy (e.g., Fella and Ruzza, 2013), Indonesia (e.g., Aspinall, 2014), Thailand (e.g., Phongpaichit and Baker, 2008), Turkey (e.g., Aytaç and Öniş, 2014), western Europe (e.g., Pappas, 2012), and so on. Many of these, meanwhile, are explicitly comparative and multi-regional in scope. Within Latin America, this approach has helped make sense not only of the more conservative populists who embraced neoliberal economies in the 1990s, but also the more recent variant of the left (e.g., Mayorga, 2006). Examples include Bolivia’s Evo Morales (e.g., Anria, 2013), Ecuador’s Rafael Correa (e.g., Montúfar, 2013), and Venezuela’s Hugo Chávez (e.g., Roberts, 2003).

The political approach can cut through contrasting national circumstances, varying economic positions and policies, and differences among social constituencies, and still permit effective comparative analysis. It does so by conceiving of populism as a strategy for mobilizing support. For instance, Resnick considers populism “an electoral strategy aimed at mobilizing voters to support a particular party,” and one that “relies on a charismatic leader who fosters unmediated linkages with a mass of unorganized, marginalized constituents” (2015, p. 317). Mayorga calls it a pattern of politics in which a “charismatic leader exploits an ideological discourse of defending the poor and excluded, through which he gamers electoral support and democratically legitimizes the quest for and exercise of power” (2006, p. 135). And Roberts defines it as the “political mobilization of mass constituencies by personalistic leaders who challenge established elites” (2006, p. 127). Or, as Pappas concisely puts it, populism is a “strategic power game” (2012, p. 2).
This conceptualization captures political behavior. Using the word behavior, incidentally, does not imply the use of rational choice assumptions or behavioralism’s methods. It is merely to distinguish this focus on what actors do from those of other approaches. Ideational approaches, for instance, define populism in terms of ideologies or worldviews (e.g., Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012). Those perspectives focus on the content, not its form or its use. The discursive approach, though overlapping with the others in some ways, starts from a normative and anti-positivist position (e.g., Laclau, 2005a). It considers populism a logic of structuring social relations. This chapter returns to these views below, but a key point here is that the political approach stands apart not only because of the content of the definition – i.e., the strategic element – but also its underlying concern for agency and behavior.

Divisions and debates

The political approach, naturally, is not without fissures. To an extent, these lines of division are reflected in the various labels used to capture this approach: political strategy, political-institutional, political-organizational, or even political style. Still, these views share the idea that populism is a mechanism of mobilizing support. This is not to claim, however, that there are no substantive debates. Indeed there are disputes regarding the list of populism’s defining traits. Characteristics that some view as key or essential, others see as incidental. The various positions affect, of course, the concept’s extension (how vast or narrow) and the classification of specific empirical cases.

One such debate deals with the role of rhetoric or appeals, and specifically their relationship with efforts at mobilization. Is populism based on a certain kind of appeals, a certain kind of relationship between leader and followers, or both? The appeals in question are usually characterized as “us versus them,” anti-establishment, or Manichaean. Weyland, though, excludes appeals from his definition of populism. He defines it 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” (2001, p. 14). De la Torre, by contrast, considers populism “political mobilization based on strong rhetorical appeals to the people and crowd action on behalf of a leader” (de la Torre, 2010, p. 4). Rhetoric here is considered in strategic terms, thus implying intentionality. In the former view, what the populist leader conveys to his audience is not essential to the strategy; in the latter, it is. The implication is that, for Weyland, the rhetoric and other appeals are of secondary importance, and so a greater variety of personalistic leaders – regardless of their message – might fit this definition. However, a strong case can be made for including appeals as one of the defining characteristics. Populists may or may not be sincere in their desire to “make the oligarchs squeal,” as Hugo Chávez colorfully put it, but citizens might find those views attractive. Offering different appeals might have different results, and the reasons for those results might vary as well. The point, then, is that the particular appeals not only matter but also help distinguish populism from other mass mobilizational phenomena, such as fascism. Therefore, incorporating appeals in the definition helps restrain what otherwise might be an overly broad extension.

Some scholars go beyond appeals and emphasize the broader stylistic aspects of the strategy. According to Knight’s “politico-stylistic” definition, for instance, populism implies a close bond between leader and followers, invokes the people against some other, and is linked to the mobilization of followers. Similarly, Leaman (2004, p. 324) suggests the word populism applies when there is a “verticalist and personalist leadership style and rhetoric” along with a multi-class following. But what is the point of this style? When framed this way, it is a
method of engaging with and mobilizing supporters – a means toward an end. Consider Hellström’s (2013, p. 9) explanation (italics this author’s own):

Populism as style refers to a certain way of doing politics … The populist style typically relies on the charismatic leadership to partly bypass established ways of doing politics via e.g. party politics. Populist politics encourages direct channels for popular participation. The charismatic leader embodies the popular will in his or her persona. In this regard, the populist politician mobilizes voters along feelings of resentment, aiming to represent the common sense of the ordinary people vis-à-vis the political institutions and the established (indirect) ways of doing politics.

The basis of these perspectives, then, is the notion that political actors use certain means to mobilize popular support. The term style, however, is applied in various ways, and not all would agree that it always belongs in the political approach (see Moffitt and Tormey, 2014). Nevertheless, as long as style is understood in strategic (as opposed to, say, discursive) terms, this distinction is a matter of semantics and emphasis.

Another debate in the literature centers on populism’s organizational features. Many analysts emphasize populism’s general lack of institutionalization (Weyland, 2001, p. 14) and/or the absence of organizational intermediaries (Mouzelis, 1985). Roberts, by contrast, suggests that “any number of organizational outcomes is likely to emerge” from a populist movement (2003, p. 2). Examples range from Alberto Fujimori’s highly ephemeral electoral coalitions to the thoroughly organized Justicialista Party of Juan Perón, with Preston Manning’s Reform Party perhaps somewhere in between. Similarly, to what extent are these organizations, whether well institutionalized or not, constructed in a top-down, plebiscitarian fashion? A small number within the political approach do not restrict populism to one type or the other. While Jansen (2015), for instance, centers populism around the notion of popular mobilization, it could be of the bottom-up or top-down varieties. And so Rafael Correa’s “citizens’ revolution” could be studied together with the 19th-century US agrarian movement. However, the majority, including the scholars of earlier generations, has highlighted the top-down and personalistic nature of populist mobilization. This point suggests that bottom-up strategies of mobilization would be considered something other than populism.

The differences between the types of mobilization are not incidental; they have substantial implications for the political dynamics involved (Roberts, 2015, p. 146). Where mobilization and organization emerge from civil society and/or prioritize horizontal involvement and collective participation, a leader’s autonomy may be relatively circumscribed. On the other hand, mobilization and organization of a top-down and plebiscitarian nature points to the leader’s role as a (seemingly) direct and authentic representative of the people. In the latter cases, any resultant partisan institutions are structured to empower the one individual. As such, the two variants have distinct internal political dynamics and, logically, divergent implications for the character of governance. To follow through with the grassroots nature of the former, political reforms would need to enhance the role and influence of citizens’ groups. The other would prioritize the power of the movement’s leader, which may help explain the often authoritarian governance styles of populist leaders. To include the two types of movements together would mean ignoring these distinctions, and necessarily would raise questions about their comparability.

Restricting populism to top-down efforts at mass mobilization obviously reduces the empirical reach of the concept. Examples such as the grassroots movement that propelled Bolivia’s Evo Morales to national prominence would be excluded. However, it is important to note that strategies of mobilization are neither necessarily static nor singular; politicians
often alter them or use multiple strategies simultaneously. For instance, just because Hugo
Chávez’s system included some mechanisms of horizontal participation does not negate the
fact that his principal strategy had a highly top-down character. Returning to Morales, his
unsuccesful run for office in 2002 indeed depended on a relationship with his mostly rural
supporters that was inconsistent with the highly personalistic and plebiscitarian nature typically
associated with populism. In 2005, however, he added a top-down mobilization strategy to
reach urban voters, the success of which led to his election as president (Anria, 2013). His
populist strategy was essential but not exclusive. Populism can be understood as one tool
among many; a reliance on it does not exclude the use of others.

Discussions of types of mobilization and the organizational characteristics that may
accompany them lead some to conclude that the political approach is really about institutions.
As such, they label the approach “political-institutional” or “political-organizational.” In
reducing the definition of populism to such attributes, however, they conflate the concept’s
definitional core with secondary traits. Within the political approach, the central aspect of
populism concerns political actors with goal-oriented behavior. Populism, first, is a means
toward an end; second, these means may have rhetorical, organizational, and/or other
features. One might understand them as tactics associated with the broader strategy, specific
mechanisms that facilitate the mobilization of popular support, for instance. I, for one,
consider the defining traits to be the use of anti-establishment, pro-people appeals and
plebiscitarian linkages. Whatever the specific attributes, the political approach understands
populism in terms of power.

Advantages of the political approach

Defining populism as a political strategy has a number of advantages, as I have argued
elsewhere (Barr, 2017). It has, first, a line of historical continuity with earlier, foundational
understandings of the phenomenon. Additionally, when coupled with a small number of
defining attributes, it results in a reasonable number of cases to investigate. This may be in
keeping with the not rare but still atypical examples of populism: they are not so few that one
can only study isolated instances, but at the same time the universe of cases is not overflowing.
Finally, operationalization and hypothesizing are supported in a straightforward manner by a
political understanding of the concept, which aids empirical observation and explanation.

One advantage of the political approach is its connection with earlier understandings of
populism. Schamis (2013, pp. 146–147) highlights the perils of disconnecting concepts from
their original usage and advocates anchoring them in their historical meanings. He has a point:
to the extent that concepts can be redefined at will, they lose all utility. Yet there must be
some level of flexibility to allow for advances in knowledge and theoretical development.
Rather than treat them as fixed and permanent, one might aim for a recognizable line of
continuity, a traceable heritage. To be sure, many of the contemporary political definitions of
populism are structured differently than the classical definitions, which used multi-domain
concepts of a variety of types. That said, the more recent variants retain essential components
of the earlier ones while stripping them of non-essential, temporally specific aspects (Roberts,
1995; Weyland, 1996). Hence, while not the same as the definitions originally used, there
remains a clear lineage.

The commonality centers on mass mobilization by personalistic leaders. By highlighting
agency and action, the early scholars incorporated political behavior into their understanding
of populism. Whether or not they also included anti-status quo appeals or ideologies, this
implicit concern for behavior stands in contrast to the contemporary ideational school.
Malloy, for instance, notes the role of “populist rhetoric” but he considered populism a kind of movement that emerged in response to crises of delayed dependent development: “it became the guise within which change-oriented segments of the middle class sought to construct multi-class coalitions powerful enough to gain control of the state and undermine programs of structural transformation” (1977, p. 9). Though emphasizing the context in which it emerges, he conceives of populism in terms of agency and goal-oriented action.

Other approaches, however, consider a focus on political behavior to be misplaced. Works concerned primarily with the content of ideas necessarily de-emphasize agency and political action, and/or suggest that the latter result from and are thus dependent on the former. Hawkins, for instance, argues “behavioral attributes are products of the underlying set of ideas. A populist worldview is the motivating force that lies at the heart of every populist movement” (2010, p. 39; italics original). Belief, then, drives the actions of politicians; and, at least at the conceptual level, agency has no role. The investigation of populism that follows relies on the language articulated by individuals, which requires the assumption that language reflects beliefs. By this view, populist politicians necessarily would be authentic representatives of these ideas and thus could not be manipulators of public opinion. In other words, this view conflates sincerity with performances of sincerity, leaving no room for the politician who holds one set of beliefs but articulates another simply to produce some desired effect. A long-held view, however, suggests an opportunistic leader is at the heart of populism, not a worldview. The ideational perspective breaks with that tradition.

More important than historic continuities, however, is analytical utility. A concept is good only to the extent that it can help us make sense of the world. Comparative analysis depends on appropriate classification, and thus on effectively defined concepts that permit definitive inclusion and exclusion of empirical cases. Having clearly defined characteristics that result in a balanced extension is therefore crucial. If the extension is too great, virtually any case might fit the classification and so the grounds for comparison would erode; if too limited, the concept could apply to few or no empirical instances and there would be little to study. To facilitate empirical analysis, then, the universe of populist cases should include more than only the elusive ideal types and yet far fewer than the everyday examples of democratic politics.

Most political definitions of populism use a classical concept structure, as opposed to radial or family resemblance. With this structure, the identified attributes of a concept are all necessary and collectively sufficient to classify a given case. A concept with but one such attribute would have a wide extension; adding others narrows it. Naturally, if too many attributes are included, then the extension may become too narrow and few cases would fit the classification. Still, this general structure may be helpful in getting a handle on the slippery notion of populism. Most political definitions use few defining traits and yet are not considered “minimal” definitions. As such, they may help produce a modest and balanced empirical extension. For instance, if the strategy has the characteristics of plebiscitarian linkages and anti-establishment appeals, instances of populism would need to exhibit not just one or the other trait, but both. While the universe of cases hardly would be empty, there would be far fewer than if the definition only included one of those traits.

Some observers may argue, however, that the political definition with this sort of concept structure may be too limited. That is, it may exclude too many cases and thus be unable to account for the broad diversity of populist experiences. For example, would the definition above apply to the 19th-century movements in the United States or even to some right-wing political parties of contemporary Europe? Because of this concern, a number of scholars encourage the use of a minimal definition, in part to bring well-needed consensus to the discipline (e.g., Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012). Though a unifying definition is
Populism as a political strategy

certainly desirable, minimal is not always optimal because it can result in an expansive extension. And, the broader the extension is, the greater the likelihood of capturing dissimilar empirical cases. For instance, if one identifies cases of populism by, say, its Manichaean discourse (e.g., Hawkins, 2010), a number of diverse cases are likely to be included. Using this approach, all examples of generally divisive language might be taken to be populist, regardless of the speakers’ character, their goals, and so forth. As such, George W. Bush might be considered a populist alongside José María Velasco Ibarra, the leaderless Occupy Movement, and even the Islamic State. Though one could draw from any number of cases in Europe, Latin America and beyond, meaningful comparison would be in doubt.

Those perspectives following Ernesto Laclau face similar difficulties. Laclau does not offer a definition of populism per se, at least not in a reductionist sense of the word. Rather, for Laclau populism is about the logic of constructing social identities. While the consideration of identities and identity formation is both interesting and important, this specific configuration can present certain empirical challenges, in part because it has an unbounded extension. Because his concept deals with the creation of political divisions, it becomes indistinct from virtually any other kind of political discourse. Indeed, Laclau explicitly makes this point. He writes, for instance, that populism is not “some kind of marginal political phenomenon, but . . . the very essence of the political” (2005a, p. 222). Even more definitively, he asks whether populism could be synonymous with politics and responds unambiguously: “The answer can only be affirmative” (2005b, p. 47). Similarly, Panizza notes “almost every political speech appeals to the people or claims to speak for the people, which could make it impossible to distinguish populist from non-populist political entities” (2005, p. 5). Efforts at mobilizing support for interstate wars or guerrilla insurgencies, for returning political power to the people or taking it away from them, and for mundane policy issues or revolutionary programs might all fit the category of populism by this notion. As a result, this definition of populism provides little guidance in empirical classification or analysis (see Moffitt and Tormey, 2014, p. 385).

Definitions that allow for vast empirical extension, in short, leave the analyst with little capacity to differentiate cases that belong in the category of populism from those that do not. And if the political definition fails to accommodate other kinds of phenomena that may not be comparable, that should not be seen as a strike against it. If one seeks a concept that facilitates analysis of similar – appropriately comparable – phenomena, the political approach, particularly using a modest number of defining characteristics, might fit the bill.

Another benefit of defining populism as a political strategy concerns its operationalization. That is, there is a clear theoretical relationship between its defining characteristics and the indicators with which observers can assess empirical reality. Other approaches do not have this advantage. Goertz’s (2006) view of concepts helps make this point. He considers concepts at three distinct levels: the basic, secondary and indicator levels. The first is the essential aspect of the object. Populism is a strategy, for instance. The second level includes the defining attributes: the necessary characteristics to define the object. The strategy of populism may have the traits of top–down mobilization and anti-establishment appeals. The third level guides the operationalization of the concept. As Goertz explains, “it is where the concept gets specific enough to guide the acquisition of empirical data” (2006, p. 62). One might operationalize top–down mobilization by identifying, for instance, the origins of the efforts or the organizational structure of the party. The three levels of the concept have a hierarchical but logical relationship, flowing from the essential aspect of the object down to the means by which one can observe it. Because the indicators stem from the secondary characteristics, the classification of populist examples need not rely on other concepts or subtypes to connect to the empirical world. Effective operationalization frequently presents challenges, but to the
extent that guidance is found in the concept itself— and not a derivative thereof—these can be overcome. When one can assess the means and mechanisms that politicians use and thus both classify appropriate cases as populist (or not), the empirical advantage is obvious: we can observe the thing itself.

Not all understandings of populism, however, have such clear connections between their conceptualizations and the empirical referents. This issue stems from a tension found in some schools whose definitions exclude agency and whose investigations nevertheless embrace agency. Panizza, of the discourse school, explains while it “is mostly the relation between the leader and his/her followers that gives populist politics its distinct mode of identification,” populism “does not necessarily depend on the existence of a leader” (Panizza, 2005, p. 18). Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2012), of the ideational school, define populism as a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be divided into antagonistic camps. They also note, however, that populist “leaders are indeed very relevant. They not only try to mobilize the electorate but are also one of the main protagonists in the process of defining the morphology of the populist ideology.” Populism, additionally, “depends on skillful political entrepreneurs and social groups” (2012, p. 10). Despite these claims, no actors or behaviors are part of their definition.

At the same time, actors and behaviors constitute the focus of empirical investigation, perhaps because ideas can be difficult to examine directly. Stanley (2008, p. 108) explains that studying populism as a thin ideology depends on identifying “those individual or collective political actors” and the “full ideologies with which populists associate themselves.” As such, actors like Europe’s right-wing parties or radical leaders in Latin America stand as the targets of empirical investigation. Also using an ideological definition, Rooduijn, de Lange, and van der Brug (2014) study the parties that use the message, but not the message itself. Hawkins (2010), who considers populism to be a worldview, takes a similar approach by reviewing politicians’ speeches. According to these views, then, populism belongs to one realm (ideas) and yet its examples belong to another (behavior). Put another way, an empirical investigation of populism as a set of ideas is stymied without turning to actors for help. A gap exists between the concept’s second and third levels—i.e., the indicators do not follow from the defining attributes—making for an uneasy relationship between these definitions of populism and their operationalization.

An implication of these alternative approaches to populism, more specifically, is that one must use conceptual subtypes in order to study the phenomenon. Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser explicitly highlight this point: “in the real world there are few, if any, pure forms of populism (in isolation) but, rather, subtypes of it, which show a specific articulation of certain ideological features” (2011, p. 5). The ideational approach uses classical concept structures, which means when cases exhibit all of the necessary and sufficient conditions plus additional ones, they may be grouped in subtypes (but not diminished subtypes). Requiring additional characteristics for the purpose of empirical investigation, however, may have consequences. According to this concept structure, each subtype must be a full member in the category of populism and, by extension, be comparable in empirical terms. Thus the study of populism as a set of ideas would examine competing subtypes, such as “populist presidents” alongside “populist parties,” “populist regimes,” “populist movements,” and so on—yet no instances of just populism. This list of empirical examples then might include individuals, organizations, examples of collective action, etc., despite their fundamental differences. Obvious empirical difficulties stem from the investigation of dissimilar experiences. A political definition, on the other hand, does not require any such bridge to connect the concept’s defining characteristics to its empirical functions. As a result, those instances identified as populist in fact can be examples of populism, and not derivatives thereof.
A similar issue emerges with respect to the investigation of populism’s causes and effects. A concept should facilitate, not hinder, theorizing and investigation. As Goertz explains: “A good concept draws distinctions that are important in the behavior of the object. The central attributes that a definition refers to are those that prove relevant for hypothesis, explanations, and causal mechanisms” (Goertz, 2006, p. 4). Efforts to theorize and explain a given phenomenon need a concept that supports them. For instance, to understand the consequences of populist mobilization, the identified causal mechanisms must be consistent with the conceptualization of populism. Defining this phenomenon as a political strategy with specific attributes is helpful in this sense. A strategy characterized by, say, top-down and personalistic mobilization could be connected to an outcome of weakening representative institutions. One might hypothesize that the leader of such a movement could wield its power to overwhelm those defending the institutions, or to convene constituent assemblies that transfer power from the legislature to the executive. The strategy, in other words, is about power; and one can hypothesize about the implications of using that power. Or, in explaining the origins of populism, one could ask about the conditions that make the use of certain political styles or appeals advantageous. When the citizens have grown tired of corrupt and harmful political practices, for instance, an opportunistic politician might see advantages of a strategy that uses anti-establishment appeals.

As mentioned, the impactful and at times transformative (for better or for worse) nature of populist mobilization is one reason for its scholarly attention. Powerful actors and their behavior account for results along these lines; they simply do not happen in the absence of agency. Ideas or political logics, on their own, cannot explain the concentration of political power, the erosion of democratic institutions, etc. Nor can they help us understand the sources or the decisions to employ a populist strategy. As Jansen writes (2015, p. 171), “a set of ideas can float about in the ether of political discourse without ever being instantiated in an actual mobilization project.” In other words, the ideational conceptualization does not provide the tools required for explanation. For instance, to hypothesize a connection between the belief in a Manichaean worldview and the weakening of representative institutions, one needs help drawn from outside the boundaries of the concept. Perhaps an ambitious politician might use the language associated with that worldview to build support and then use that support to rewrite the constitution. Evident here is the disconnect between concept and explanation, because the former is ideational and the latter depends on behavior. Research along these lines, then, can result in explanations of actors’ and their actions, as opposed to ideas by themselves.

Many in the political approach recognize the salience of ideas, yet only as expressed in politicians’ appeals, as part of a strategy. It is their strategic use, in other words, and not the ideas themselves. Roberts, in a nod to the importance of rhetorical appeals, writes:

Populism’s political power, along with its disruptive potential, is ultimately rooted in its ability to wed antielite and antiestablishment discursive appeals to the political mobilization of the excluded and the alienated – that is, to inspire popular subjects to rally, to protest, to strike, to blockade, to organize, and/or to vote.

(Roberts, 2015, p. 142)

The inclusion of political intentionality, or goal-oriented political leadership, helps avoid the pitfalls of an exclusive focus on the ideational. As important as ideas are, conceptualizing populism in strictly ideational terms is to hinder the full accounting for outcomes that are dependent in part on agency and action. The political approach, however, deals with the use
of various means to build support and it does so at the conceptual level. As such, it facilitates direct empirical analysis.

None of this should be taken as an indictment of studying ideas and discourse. It should go without saying that the content of ideologies, the nature of social identities, and the like are important topics. The point, instead, is narrower, and concerns the gap between how populism is defined and what is studied. To define it in ideational terms means that studying leaders or movements is to study something other than populism. Given the content of much of the research, it seems as though many scholars are ultimately interested in political agency and action. This is certainly the case for those who define it as a political strategy. From this perspective, the political approach helps illuminate and discriminate among empirical cases, and facilitates the direct examination of its causes and consequences.

Conclusion

Scholars unavoidably make choices about the concepts they use, and these have certain costs and benefits. Among those studying populism, it is possible that the focus of interest is not at all the same from one group to another. If this is the case, definitional debates may not only be necessary, but irresolvable. Nevertheless, for those interested in the atypical phenomena in which mass mobilizations challenge established politics and elevate leaders to incredible heights of power, the political approach has its advantages. Smith, writing in 1969 (p. 30), argued that the “persistent bewilderment” about Peronismo had to do with the “remarkable relationship” between the leader and the masses. Many observers of contemporary populism might make a similar point. A political definition of populism helps make sense of this uncommon and impactful phenomenon. Understanding populism this way – as a means of building and/or maintaining political power based on the mass mobilization of supporters captures what it is and does so in a way that directly benefits research. This is particularly true when using a classical concept structure with modest extension.

From this vantage point, it is easy to see that populism would be useful in certain circumstances, less so in others. Not everyone knows how to use each and every tool, and at times they are misapplied. But, when circumstances warrant, skillful use of the right instrument can be effective in producing the desired result. With this in mind, the literature would benefit from additional comparative analyses, particularly across regions and historic periods. The strong suit of the populist literature has been its rich, detailed studies of single cases. More recently, and perhaps especially in the ideational school, there have been comparative and cross-regional studies. Still, much can be gained by doing the same with political definitions of populism, and by using a variety of research methodologies.

This perspective, additionally, should turn our attention to the factors that affect strategic choices. Under what conditions is a populist strategy likely to appear more attractive to political candidates and more appealing to the people? Many note the role of troubled party systems in making populism more likely, but there are any number of additional governing and civil institutions that could be influential. For instance, what are the implications of various media environments: does the existence of Twitter make populism a more attractive strategy? Do presidential and parliamentary systems have an impact on populism, on the specific tactics associated with the strategy, the use of it alongside other simultaneous efforts at building support, or the nature of organizing that support?

At a more fundamental level, the role of agency should receive greater attention, and particularly its relationship with the relative success of the strategy. Many say there is an art to politics, and it is not a stretch to assume it takes a relatively rare skill to cultivate a mass base of Robert R. Barr
Populism as a political strategy

supporters – hence the frequently cited notion of charisma. Consider that populism emerges in times of crisis, and has been thought to be the result of specific circumstances, but it also appears in non-crisis situations. Can sufficiently skilled politicians effectively use a populist strategy in normal times, or when the party system is well institutionalized and strong, or when citizens have favorable opinions of establishment politics? Does the successful execution of a populist strategy depend on personality or political skill? Not every politician, additionally, realizes the benefits of using populism in even relatively welcoming circumstances: why not? Charisma and other personality traits, though, remain difficult to define and assess. In specifying the distinctive attributes of individual populists, moreover, one runs the risk of making each and every case unique, again undermining comparative analysis. Such difficulties, nevertheless, are no excuse to ignore these factors. In fact, unless we want to interpret theories in deterministic terms, the role of agency must be considered in depth. This issue is hardly a matter of mere academic debate. As seems obvious from current headlines and from the many studies of populism, the phenomenon has real-world and present-day consequences. For these reasons, further research into this fascinating and confounding subject is certainly in order.

References


