

9 The populist problem

On the uses of ‘populism’ in public discourse

Coline Rondiat

1 Introduction

In contemporary public discourse, the word ‘populism’ and its derivatives (hereafter *populis**) have become pervasive, spanning academic scholarship, media commentary, and political communication. Within political science, populism has turned into a prolific site of conceptual and theoretical production. Since the early 2000s, expansive literature has emerged attempting to define the term, differentiate its variants, analyse its discursive and organisational mechanisms, and to assess its implications for democratic politics. Yet this theoretical accumulation has not led to conceptual stability. On the contrary, it has amplified methodological divergence and deepened normative disagreement. This is partly inherent to the object of study: populism is not only treated as an analytical category but also relates to underlying debates about the nature of democracy itself. As such, disagreements over what populism is tend to mirror disagreements over what democracy ought to be. The problem becomes more acute when the term shifts from scholarly debate into everyday political and journalistic use. In public discourse, ‘populism’ is rarely defined. It is employed as if its meaning were self-evident, yet its referents are sufficiently malleable to encompass a wide range of phenomena: exclusionary right-wing nationalism, egalitarian left-wing redistribution, charismatic leadership, anti-elite rhetoric, policy heterodoxy, or even a style marked by emotionality, vulgarity, or excess. This semantic elasticity accounts for the expansive use of the term, but it also poses a challenge for democratic reasoning. Since ‘populism’ collapses heterogeneous political phenomena into a single object of disapproval, it becomes possible to reject ‘populism’ without articulating what is being condemned, which norm is said to be violated, or why that violation is problematic.

The analysis below explores the ways in which populism is problematised in contemporary public discourse, with particular attention to the normative assumptions underpinning such critiques. It aims to uncover both the explicit and tacit rationales used to justify negative assessments

of populism, and to evaluate the extent to which these are articulated in relation to democratic ideals. More specifically, it explores whether populism is framed as incompatible with foundational democratic principles – such as popular sovereignty, pluralism, and the rule of law – or whether it is cast in a diffuse, normatively indeterminate light. The focus, therefore, lies on the prevailing conceptualisations of populism and the negative valence they carry, with the goal of inferring what these representations imply, indirectly, about the contested meaning of democracy itself.

The argument unfolds in three stages. First, the chapter offers an overview of the main conceptualisations of populism in literature. Second, it analyses how *populis** functions as a negative operator in public discourse, often unanchored from explicit criteria. Third, it offers a typology of journalistic uses, distinguishing patterns based on their referential specificity and the degree to which they articulate – rather than merely imply – their normative commitments. Finally, the chapter concludes that the ‘populist problem’ is not only about the phenomenon itself, but also about the democratic costs of a vocabulary that blurs the line between legitimate contestation and genuine anti-democratic threat.

2 A concept in tension

Populism has emerged as a central category of analysis in contemporary political science, giving rise to a vast and still expanding scholarship – particularly since the early 2000s – devoted to defining the concept, tracing its empirical manifestations, and assessing its normative implications (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017; Pappas, 2016). Yet rather than resulting in conceptual clarity, this proliferation of research has often intensified theoretical ambiguity. The field remains marked by profound conceptual divides, reflecting competing visions of politics and democracy itself.

Over time, at least four major approaches to populism have emerged, each rooted in distinct assumptions about its nature and, by extension, about how it should be analysed. These frameworks reflect competing ontologies of the political as well as divergent views on the relationship between leaders, citizens, and democratic institutions. Among them, the ideational or ideological approach has emerged as the dominant paradigm within political science. It defines populism as a ‘thin-centered ideology’ that can be affixed to more comprehensive ideological formations such as nationalism, socialism, or neoliberalism (Mudde, 2004; Stanley, 2008). From this perspective, populism is structured around three key components: a moralised antagonism between ‘the pure people’ and ‘the corrupt elite’; the elevation of popular sovereignty as the source of legitimate authority; and the assertion that politics should enact the general will of the people (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). This conceptualisation does not treat populism as a deviation from democratic norms,

but rather as a coherent interpretive framework through which political actors construe the world, which has given rise to cross-national comparisons (Norris, 2020). However, critics caution that this model may risk essentialising a fluid and context-sensitive phenomenon by reducing it to a static moral opposition between two camps: the pure people versus the corrupt elite (Aslanidis, 2015; Katsambekis, 2020).

In contrast, the discursive-performative tradition rejects the idea that populism can be reduced to a fixed set of ideas. Drawing on Laclau (2005), it conceives populism as a logic of articulation or a way of doing politics, in which antagonism between 'the people' and 'the elite' is discursively constructed. On this view, populism is not an ideology per se but a modality of political practice through which collective identities are formed and contested. Central to this framework is the performative nature of discourse: leaders, movements, and publics enact 'the people' through language, symbols, and affects. Scholars such as Ostiguy (2017) and Moffitt (2016) have extended this view by exploring the stylistic and aesthetic dimensions of populist performance, bridging discourse theory, and political communication. This approach captures the contingent and dynamic nature of populism, yet its high level of theoretical abstraction complicates empirical application: it remains difficult to specify clear criteria for identifying what constitutes 'populist discourse' in practice.

The stylistic approach takes the expressive turn further, treating populism as a recognisable *political style* rather than a discursive logic or ideological system (Moffitt & Tormey 2014). This approach foregrounds the embodied, affective, and mediated dimensions of political communication – its dramaturgy of crisis, appeal to authenticity, and deliberate transgression of elite norms. Populism, in this sense, manifests not only through words but through tone, gesture, and performance, through recurring performative patterns: appeals to the people versus the elite, the deliberate violation of elite norms, and the moralisation of political conflict. This perspective expands the study of populism towards its affective and mediated dimensions but also risks conceptual overstretch: almost any disruptive or charismatic form of communication could be labelled 'populist'.

The strategic approach, by contrast, defines populism less as an idea or discourse than as a mode of political mobilisation (Weyland, 2001, 2020; Barr, 2009). From this perspective, populism is characterised by a distinctive style of leadership and organisation that hinges on the construction of a direct, unmediated relationship between a charismatic leader and a largely undifferentiated mass of followers. Emphasis is placed on the strategic pursuit of power, plebiscitarian linkages, and the marginalisation – or active erosion – of intermediary institutions such as parties and parliaments. This framework offers valuable insight into how populist actors navigate institutional constraints and electoral competition. However, it

has been criticised for assuming that leaders can simply bring about outcomes through sheer will, and for paying too little attention to the symbols, emotions, or moral claims that make populist messages stick.

A consistent thread runs through these conceptualisations of populism: it is said to structure politics through a fundamental antagonism between ‘the people’ and ‘the elites’. This dichotomy rests on the claim that elites, by virtue of their separation from the people, are inherently unfit to represent them – thus legitimising the call for their replacement by ‘authentic’ representatives who are themselves of the people. If populism exists as a distinctive conception of society and politics, its core lies in the essentialist construction of ‘the people’ as a unified, morally pure collective whose interests and will are presumed to be self-evident. This essentialism makes it plausible to assert that certain actors can legitimately ‘incarnate’ the people, reinforcing the affinity of populism with nationalism, insofar as both rely on imaginaries of organic unity and exclusionary boundaries. Other attributes commonly associated with populism – such as its rhetorical style, its emphasis on charismatic leadership, or its authoritarian tendencies – may be interpreted as secondary effects, or derivatives, of this foundational premise.

Although sharing this common core, the development of a multiplicity of approaches have contributed to a situation in which ‘populism’ is invoked to describe an increasingly heterogeneous array of political phenomena: far-right and radical left parties (Borriello & Brack, 2019), charismatic leadership (Nai & Martínez i Coma, 2019), protest movements (Aslanidis, 2017), electoral strategies (Weyland, 2001), anti-elite rhetoric (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007), and appeals to popular sovereignty (Canovan, 1999), among others. While some scholars defend this conceptual expansiveness as a necessary reflection of the empirical complexity of populism (Panizza, 2005), it also raises pressing concerns about the comparative validity of the category. From an ideological or attitudinal standpoint, one may reasonably ask what justifies classifying public figures as diverse as Donald Trump (Kellner, 2022), Jean-Luc Mélenchon (Marlière, 2019; Zicman de Barros & Aiolfi, 2025), Beppe Grillo (Pirro, 2018), Tom Van Grieken (Lambrechts & De Cleen, 2024), Pablo Iglesias (Zarzalejos, 2016), or even Bernie Sanders (Staufer, 2021) under the same conceptual label – without diluting the term to the point that it could plausibly apply to political actors who are *not* generally considered populist (Baloge & Hubé, 2024).

This problem has led to a deeper methodological critique. Scholars (e.g., Chollet, 2023; Collovald, 2004; Tarragoni, 2019) have drawn attention to the theoretical impasses generated by cumulative and inductive definitional strategies, particularly those aimed at producing general typologies. A central objection concerns the circular logic underlying much of this work: scholars begin with high-profile cases already assumed to be ‘populist’,

extract recurring traits from these cases, and then use those traits to retroactively define populism – without interrogating the criteria by which the initial sample has been constituted. This methodological reflexivity is often absent, resulting in a form of conceptual circularity whereby ‘populism’ becomes defined not through theoretically grounded parameters, but through the prior social or media recognition of certain emblematic figures. In the absence of clearly demarcated boundaries, the concept is thus continually adjusted to accommodate the cases it is meant to explain, thereby eroding its analytical coherence and explanatory power.

The definitional impasse surrounding populism ultimately opens onto a more fundamental question: what vision of democracy does populism presuppose and promote? Despite all their differences, most accounts converge on a common concern: a shared preoccupation with popular sovereignty and its proper mediation. At its core, populism advances a vision of democracy as the unmediated expression of the people’s will. By defending a radical form of popular sovereignty, populism is not inherently opposed to democracy and can even be seen as an attempt to deepen it. This view resonates with foundational democratic ideals of equality and sovereignty, giving populism a strong normative appeal. It can even appear as a democratic corrective: by amplifying excluded voices and exposing elite insulation, populism may reinvigorate responsiveness and broaden participation (Canovan, 1999; Panizza, 2005). From this perspective, populism serves as a reminder that democracy ultimately rests on popular sovereignty and the inclusion of neglected demands (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012). Yet the very same emphasis on a direct and unmediated relationship between the people and power is often what raises concern. Critics argue that such immediacy risks bypassing the institutional and deliberative dimensions that sustain pluralist democracy, making populism appear, paradoxically, as both a democratic impulse and a democratic threat. However, this same understanding departs sharply from liberal traditions that define democracy through procedures, institutional checks, and pluralist contestation (Urbinati, 2019), but most importantly it is at odds with the main assumptions that justify the liberal democratic procedures and institutions. The clash can be expressed as one between majoritarian and pluralist models of democracy, or between input legitimacy, rooted in immediate responsiveness to citizens, and throughput legitimacy, grounded in procedures, deliberation, and institutional safeguards (Scharpf, 1972, Schmidt & Wood, 2019).

Once populism is defined as an antagonistic appeal to the people, it is most often cast as corrosive to democracy, for several recurring reasons. Scholars often begin with its tendency to concentrate power in the figure of a leader. Populism is frequently linked to personalistic and plebiscitary forms of rule, where authority rests less on institutions than on the direct

bond between leader and people (Weyland, 2024; Rosanvallon, 2021; Taggart, 1995). Such concentration is deemed democratically problematic because it weakens collective accountability and makes political representation dependent on charisma rather than institutionalised procedures. Once power is personalised in this way, intermediary bodies such as parliaments, courts, and independent media are easily recast as obstacles to the people's will. This, in turn, raises concerns about the erosion of checks and balances, judicial independence, and parliamentary oversight (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Muller, 2016).

Beyond the institutional dimension, critics underline the consequences of the logic of populism for political pluralism. By claiming to embody the people as a homogeneous whole, populist actors deny legitimacy to alternative voices, casting opponents not merely as rivals but as enemies of the community. This delegitimises opposition parties, stigmatises minorities, and undermines the coexistence of identities, interests, and perspectives that liberal theory views as essential to democracy (Arditi, 2007). In practice, opposition parties can be branded 'anti-people', journalists portrayed as conspirators against democracy, or civil society groups accused of being foreign agents. Accordingly, populism threatens the coexistence of multiple parties, interests, and identities within a competitive framework (Manin, 1997). This exclusivist logic also shapes policymaking. By appealing to the immediacy of the people's will, populist leaders are accused of privileging responsiveness over responsibility, sacrificing deliberation, expertise, and compromise to short-term satisfaction (Urbinati, 2019). Policies are often framed as direct enactments of popular sovereignty, justified less through evidence or negotiation than through claims of fidelity to 'the people'. Critics argue that this orientation encourages performative gestures – symbolic measures that resonate emotionally but fail to address complex structural problems (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). The result can be governance that is volatile, majoritarian, and prone to abrupt shifts, undermining the continuity and predictability on which democratic accountability depends.

Yet the issue at stake goes far beyond stability or good governance. The separation of powers, the rule of law, constitutional rights, and deliberative institutions do not merely ensure order or prevent excess; they are what make the exercise of popular sovereignty meaningful and legitimate. Their purpose is to protect the general interest against the contingencies of partisan or short-term interests, including those of a temporary majority. From this perspective, the problem with populism, understood both as a form of demagoguery that follows the immediate preferences of a majority and as a belief that a few elected representatives can fully embody the will of the people, is that it tends to conflate the general interest with the momentary expression of majority will. Democratic elections confer authority, but they do not guarantee that this authority will serve the collective good (Cassani &

Tomini, 2020), especially in societies marked by temporal and social heterogeneity. The liberal-democratic institutions that populists often dismiss are thus not obstacles to popular sovereignty but one of its most robust safeguards: they ensure that the power derived from the people remains oriented towards the people as a whole, across time and differences. In this light, the democratic problem of populism lies not in its disruptive or anti-elitist tone, as critics sometimes suggest, but in its reduction of the people’s sovereignty to an unmediated, homogeneous, and potentially exclusionary majority. Ironically, it is precisely the procedural and institutional constraints that populism rejects which make it possible to honour the democratic ideal it claims to defend.

3 Populism in public discourse

These insights show that the category of ‘populism’ points to a genuine and important democratic issue, namely, the tension between political pluralism and the institutional and procedural arrangements that are meant to secure it. In this sense, it may still retain analytical value in political science. This added value, however, is less evident in public discourse. In political and media arenas, *populis** is so loosely and inconsistently employed that one might reasonably conclude that the category is ultimately dispensable. Discourse analytical work has long documented this semantic instability and has tried to reconstruct what, if anything, the term denotes in practice (e.g., Kranert, 2020, Rovamo & Sakki, 2024; Shchinova, 2024). The conclusion is consistent: meanings remain heterogeneous; they are shifting, and they are only weakly anchored to scholarly definitions. In public discourse, *populis** is overwhelmingly used in negative evaluations, routinely bundled with terms such as ‘rise’, ‘nationalism’, ‘extremism’, or ‘threat’, and stretched to cover phenomena as diverse as racism, ultra nationalism, antagonistic rhetoric, or demagoguery (Thornborrow *et al.*, 2021). It is often invoked to discuss diffuse dangers to liberal democracy rather than to describe a clearly delimited ideological family (Goyvaerts *et al.*, 2024). Citizens’ understandings are even more fragmented: survey and interview research on social representations suggests that many respondents struggle to define the term and variously equate it with ‘being popular’ or ‘speaking for the people’, treat it as a positive democratic force linked to community and equality, or condemn it as manipulation, extremism, and demagoguery. Only a minority spontaneously invoke the people versus elite opposition that structures most academic definitions (Ntotsikas & Chrysoschoou, 2025, Rovamo & Sakki, 2024).

This polysemy helps to explain the expansive reach of the term. Because ‘populism’ can be made to mean many different things all at once, it is readily attached to a wide range of actors, styles, and policies that share

little beyond presumed mass appeal. It is also rarely defined *in situ*, a vagueness that encourages its use as a political buzzword or journalistic shortcut rather than as a precise analytical label (Bale *et al.*, 2010, Hatakka & Herkman, 2022). The same indeterminacy also underpins its use as a delegitimising device: by labelling an actor, movement, or agenda ‘populist’, speakers can discredit it through association alone, without having to specify what is being criticised or why (see De Cleen *et al.*, 2018; see also Aulit *et al.*, Chapter 6 in this volume). In doing so, it is used to perform boundary-making work: to name, and thereby morally sort, forms of dissent that unsettle prevailing understandings of democratic normality. The effect is to smuggle in normative assumptions under the guise of description, making contestable conceptions of democratic norms and values appear self-evident. The delegitimising force of *populis** thus typically rests on unexamined premises: its pejorative charge is treated as obvious, while the grounds of its purported problematic character – and their relation to the normative commitments of democratic theory – remain under-specified and obscure.

This sheds light on the reason why ideologically disparate figures can all be labelled ‘populist’: because they are perceived as violating *a norm*. Invoking populism thus functions as a mechanism of moral regulation that sorts actors into hierarchies of democratic legitimacy, contrasting the responsible with the reckless, the rational with the emotional, the mature with the impulsive, and in so doing enacts a consequential exclusion by delineating who may speak as a guardian of the democratic order and who should be dismissed as a threat. Each accusation reinforces an ideal of ‘good’ democracy, imagined as moderate, technocratic, restrained, against a ‘bad’ democracy cast as passionate or excessive, so that what appears as a neutral defence of democratic principles should be better understood as the affirmation of a *particular model* of democracy.

Some scholars contend that this model rests on a profoundly elitist, even anti-democratic, vision. Their argument is that the practices most frequently denounced as ‘populist’ – appealing to the people, criticising elites, challenging political institutions – are themselves constitutive of the history and development of democracy. Through this lens, anti-populist discourse appears as a contemporary variant of classic anti-democratic rhetoric, rooted in fear of the masses, suspicion of universal suffrage, and the valorisation of an order grounded in competence, moderation, and expertise (Chollet, 2023: 15–17). In doing so, it subtly reinforces an elitist conception of representative democracy while presenting itself as a defence of democratic norms. There would be, in this sense, a structural homology between the rejection of populism and the tacit preservation of a liberal consensus that is portrayed as natural and beyond contestation. The critical thesis advanced by anti-anti-populist scholars constitutes

an important intervention: it exposes the normative operations that may underpin uses of the term populism and shows how such uses may serve to delegitimise contestation under the guise of defending democracy. Yet the polemical force that gives this thesis its critical edge also risks narrowing its analytical reach.

Following this line of reasoning, populism emerges as a normative category that should be treated with caution, given its imposition of a specific – and deeply debatable – conception of democracy. Yet the tendency to construct a systematic equivalence between anti-populist and anti-democratic discourse risks a significant overgeneralisation. Such a framing collapses in a complex discursive landscape, in which the uses, targets, and effects of the label *populis** vary considerably. This simplification creates a form of reverse symmetry: just as dominant deployments of the term often reduce democratic critique to democratic threat, radical critiques of anti-populism may treat any invocation of *populis** as a merely strategic tool of elite exclusion. In both cases, what disappears is the political and discursive heterogeneity that characterises how the term applies to the real world.

Rather than foreclosing the issue, the debate over populism can be reframed in empirical terms: what normative assumptions underpin the various uses of *populis**? Are the grounds on which it is problematised clearly articulated – either normatively or empirically? Do these grounds stem from principles broadly shared within democratic theory, or are they rooted in a particular, and potentially partial, model of democracy? Do they express a commitment to pluralism and a rejection of direct, unmediated claims to represent ‘the people’ – which might justify continued use of the term – or do they instead reflect an attempt to distinguish elite-sanctioned political actors from those deemed ‘disruptive’ (in which case the category becomes analytically suspect)? When the negative valence of populism is merely asserted rather than substantiated – that is, when its illegitimacy is presumed rather than argued – there is a risk of embedding contestable democratic assumptions within ostensibly neutral discourse. Such tendencies warrant closer scrutiny. They invite not only a reassessment of how populism is defined, but also a deeper inquiry into the democratic imaginaries that structure its uses in public discourse.

4 Why is populism a problem? Insights from media outlets

In the following, the analysis seeks to clarify why and how populism is presented as problematic in contemporary public discourse. The aim is to identify the explicit and implicit reasons invoked to justify negative evaluations of populism and to assess the extent to which these reasons are framed in relation to democratic norms. More specifically, the section seeks to explore whether populism is criticised because it is construed as incompatible with core liberal-democratic principles such as popular

sovereignty, pluralism, or the rule of law, or whether it is primarily problematised in a more diffuse and normatively under-specified manner. The focus is therefore on the conceptions of populism and the negative valence attached to it, with a view to inferring what these conceptions suggest, indirectly, about democracy itself.

From this perspective, media discourse constitutes a particularly relevant site of inquiry. Journalists are, at least in principle, expected to justify criticism by appealing to publicly acceptable reasons – for instance, by presenting populism as democratically harmful or objectively dangerous. Political actors, by contrast, can denounce populism from a strategic or partisan standpoint without necessarily implying that it is problematic in itself. In recent years, media uses of ‘populism’ have surged. A dataset containing all the articles where *populis** occurs in several leading European newspapers during the year 2019 illustrates this prominence: De Standaard (Dutch-speaking Belgium) refers to *populis** 509 times, Le Soir (French-speaking Belgium) 984 times, Le Monde (France) 784 times, and El País (Spain) 1,639 times. In concrete terms, this means that the term appears, on average, at least once a day in these newspapers, and in some cases up to four times a day. The observations developed in what follows draw on an in-depth examination of a sample of 100 randomly selected occurrences from this dataset. The aim is therefore not to offer an exhaustive and systematic analysis of the corpus, but rather to use the data to illustrate the diversity of explicit and implicit normative backgrounds underlying the uses of *populis** in the press. Different recurring types of use of *populis** are distinguished, defined by how these normative backgrounds come to the surface and by the features that differentiate them. Four analytically distinct types of use can be identified: referential uses, evaluative and indeterminate uses, normative uses, and hierarchising uses.

4.1 *Referential uses*

First, in some instances, *populis** is used mainly to refer to a specific and identifiable reality (most often a person or a party). For instance, in examples (1) and (2), respectively, from Le Monde and Le Soir, the Italian government (led by the League and the Five Stars Movement) and Hungary’s Prime Minister Viktor Orbán are identified as ‘populist’:

- (1) *La France a rappelé son ambassadeur à Rome, jeudi 7 février, afin de protester contre les provocations du gouvernement populiste au pouvoir à Rome.*

France recalled its ambassador to Rome on Thursday, February 7, in protest against the provocations of the populist government in power in Rome.

(*Le Monde*, 08 February 2019)

- (2) *Une manière d'accélérer le départ de Viktor Orbán? S'il a le sentiment que le Hongrois « veut rester au PPE », [Manfred Weber] estime que « ce qui est aujourd'hui sur la table ne suffit pas » et qu'il allait faire en sorte de rencontrer le leader populiste à Budapest.*

A way to speed up Viktor Orbán's departure? While he senses that the Hungarian leader "wants to remain in the EPP", [Manfred Weber] believes that "what is currently on the table is not enough" and said he would make sure to meet the populist leader in Budapest.

(*Le Soir*, 10 March 2019)

Such uses appear in statements whose function is mainly descriptive. They may reflect taken-for-granted background assumptions in journalistic or political discourse, but do not always convey an explicit evaluative intent. Admittedly, for regular readers of *Le Monde* or *Le Soir*, the association of populism with the Italian government led by Luigi Di Maio and Matteo Salvini or with the much-contested figure Viktor Orbán may be enough to make it a negative term. However, it cannot be said that populism is presented here as something particularly problematic. It may appear to be one characteristic among others, which in this case applies to the Italian government and to Orbán.

It should also be noted that the meaning of the term remains vague, so that little can be said about what counts as a 'populist' or as 'populism'. Such uses of *populis** thus appear as part of a sedimented association rather than a carefully weighed judgement: it does not rest on any explicit definitional criteria, but on the reiterated association of certain figures, here Salvini and Orbán, and 'populism' – an association that may draw on nationalist discourse, illiberal policies, or a particular style of rule, but because these connections are not made explicit, such uses of 'populist' cannot be treated as carrying a normative dimension. Therefore, even though *populis** is likely to carry a negative valence for the authors and readers of the articles, these uses do not clearly construct populism as a problem. They reflect an established journalistic routine more than an active effort to draw a normative boundary between populism and democracy, or any other valued principle or political position.

4.2 *Evaluative and indeterminate uses*

The second type concerns cases that resemble the previous one, but in which the meaning of *populis** is even vaguer, if not entirely opaque, and no clear referential function is at work, as in examples (3) and (4). Here, the negative charge that the term carries is more pronounced, yet it often remains implicit: populism is depicted as a threat that ‘rises’ and to which one must respond.

- (3) *La COP25, qui débute ce lundi à Madrid, sera-t-elle celle du déclic tant attendu? Elle intervient en tout cas dans un drôle de climat planétaire, entre montée des populismes, pour participer à la construction de cette Europe ouverte, cette Europe de partage où il fait encore bon vivre. Jusqu’à quand?*

Will COP25, which begins this Monday in Madrid, be the long-awaited turning point? In any case, it comes at a strange time for the planet, with the rise of populism, to help build an open Europe, a Europe of sharing where life is still good. But for how long?

(*Le Parisien*, 01 December 2019)

- (4) *Devant la montée des populismes et face à la perspective de voir le Parlement de l’Union européenne envahi par des formations euroseptiques après les élections du 26 mai, Bernard-Henri Lévy a décidé de prendre son bâton de pèlerin. Du 5 mars au 20 mai, il va interpréter, seul sur scène, dans 25 capitales et grandes villes européennes, une pièce qu’il a écrite pour l’occasion, Looking for Europe.*

In response to the rise of populism and the prospect of the European Union Parliament being overrun by Eurosceptic parties after the May 26 elections, Bernard-Henri Lévy has decided to take up his pilgrim’s staff. From March 5 to May 20, he will be performing, alone onstage, in 25 European capitals and major cities, a play he has written for the occasion: Looking for Europe.

(*Le Soir*, 25 January 2019)

In both examples, *populis** functions primarily as a contextual label. It situates the event discussed in this chapter within a broader political climate and invokes ‘populism’ as a highly abstract, indeterminate phenomenon. What remains unclear is the concrete reality to which the term is meant to refer, namely, which actors, ideas, practices, or developments are actually being named. Describing the meaning of populism as opaque is not to suggest that the term is meaningless. On the contrary, it is expected to

be intelligible to the intended readership because it activates a reservoir of presumed shared knowledge about what is generally called 'populist'. Yet this presumed knowledge is precisely what makes the reference so unstable. Given the diversity of actors, movements, and styles of politics commonly labelled 'populist', the term can only point to a loosely bounded and internally heterogeneous set of realities, leaving the reader to fill in the content from context, habit, or prior associations. Example (4) offers a partial cue by mentioning 'Eurosceptic parties', which may guide the reader towards one possible referent. At the same time, the co-occurrence of both expressions suggests that they are not simply interchangeable. If 'Eurosceptic parties' already captures the relevant actors, the additional mention of 'populism' is likely to add an evaluative frame rather than a precise designation, signalling a broader syndrome or threat beyond Euroscepticism alone. In this sense, the term does not so much identify as it insinuates, anchoring the event in a familiar narrative while keeping its referent(s) open.

Despite this ambiguity, the negative charge that the term is carrying is more clearly marked here than in examples (1) and (2). It is treated as self-evident and largely taken for granted, even when it remains implicit: populism is portrayed as a threat that 'rises' and to which one must respond, rather than as a merely descriptive label for specific individuals or groups. In other words, 'populism' is presented as problematic in itself, yet the grounds for that problematisation remain unspecified. There are few cues in example (4), and none in example (3), that would clarify the normative background that makes this phenomenon worrisome, or that would indicate which values, principles, or political goods are presumed to be at stake.

4.3 Normative uses

A third category includes uses in which the association between *populis** and democratically problematic phenomena is relatively clear and grounded in identifiable normative assumptions. In examples (5) and (6), Donald Trump and Boris Johnson are linked to populism and are also portrayed as dangerous or politically troubling figures in the articles from which the excerpts are selected. What is distinctive here is that the reasons why populism is viewed negatively, and implicitly treated as a threat to democracy, are explicitly spelled out rather than merely assumed. In both cases, these reasons relate to what appears to constitute a core feature of the populism problem discussed above: the claim, or pretension, that certain political actors can directly embody 'the authentic people' and give voice to its supposedly unified essence. In this configuration, *populis** operates less as a loose journalistic label and more as an analytical category with a relatively

precise, explicitly articulated meaning, especially in example (6), which presents this mechanism as the ‘hallmark of populism’.

- (5) *Le leader populiste a promis d'établir une "relation directe" avec son peuple et compte bien se passer des intermédiaires pour gouverner.*

The populist leader [Trump] has promised to establish a “direct relationship” with his people and intends to govern without intermediaries.

(*Le Parisien*, 01 January 2019)

- (6) *Ce n'est pas seulement la fierté de Westminster et la réputation du Royaume-Uni comme bastion de la démocratie représentative qui sont en jeu dans ce nouveau coup d'éclat de Boris Johnson. Car que vise celui-ci, au fond, dans cette démarche? Il cherche à exacerber la polarisation au sein de l'opinion britannique, que la question du Brexit a douloureusement divisée depuis trois ans, et à jouer le peuple contre le Parlement. C'est le propre du populisme.*

It is not only Westminster's pride and the UK's reputation as a bastion of representative democracy that are at stake in this latest stunt by Boris Johnson. What is he really aiming for with this move? He is seeking to exacerbate the polarization within British public opinion, which has been painfully divided over the issue of Brexit for the past three years, and to play the people off against Parliament. This is the hallmark of populism.

(*Le Monde*, 9 August 2019)

Similarly, examples (7) and (8) explicitly highlight the association between populism and phenomena commonly described as democracy eroding, through links with fascism and demagoguery. Across these four instances, the meaning of *populis** is therefore specified, which produces a contrast with the two previous categories: by tying populism to anti-democratic ideas or practices, the excerpts delineate the reasons why populism may be treated as a threat to democracy.

- (7) *Een maand lang reizen Rudi Vranckx en Yassine Atari langs de nieuwe populistische breuklijn in Europa, op zoek naar de jongeren die de Unie van morgen zullen vormgeven. De volgende haltes? Rome, waar Yassine een dag doorbrengt met een fascistische jongerengroepering en Macerata, waar Rudi Vranckx ontdekt hoe Italië in een gewelddadige spiraal belandt.*

For a month, Rudi Vranckx and Yassine Atari travel along the new populist fault line in Europe, looking for the young people who will shape the Union of tomorrow. The next stops? Rome, where Yassine spends a day with a fascist youth group, and Macerata, where Rudi Vranckx discovers how Italy has slipped into a violent spiral.

(VRT, 07 April 2019)

- (8) [López Obrador] *Abandera las promesas de construir una democracia social avanzada. Su práctica política está teñida de populismo y la verbosidad de que hace gala linda en ocasiones con la demagogia. Pero no es un advenedizo al poder ni un revolucionario al uso.*

[López Obrador] proudly proclaims his promise to build an advanced social democracy. His political practices are tinged with populism, and his verbosity sometimes borders on demagoguery. But he is neither a newcomer to power nor a revolutionary in the usual sense of the term.

(*El País*, 10 May 2019)

Unlike examples (5) and (6), examples (7) and (8) do not clearly distinguish 'populism' from neighbouring labels such as racism, fascism, or demagoguery. In example (7), the narrative moves seamlessly from 'populist fault line' to a 'fascist youth group' and to 'a spiral of violence', without specifying what, exactly, makes the phenomenon populist rather than simply fascist, radical-right, or violent-extremist. In example (8), 'populism' appears as a tonal qualifier alongside 'demagoguery'. Yet this example does not indicate the distinctive mechanism that would justify treating populism as analytically separable from a broader critique of rhetorical style. Importantly, these under-specified uses seem more frequent than the clearer, contrastive ones exemplified in (5) and (6). The analytical added value of the label thus becomes difficult to defend when it merely shadows more determinate categories. If the empirical referent is a fascist organisation, why is populism the headline concept rather than fascism, or the far right, or authoritarian nationalism? If the criticism concerns rhetorical excess, why does one refer to populism rather than to demagoguery, majoritarianism, or personalistic leadership? One may suggest that 'populism' functions as a container term, gathering heterogeneous worries under a single negative sign while leaving the criteria for inclusion implicit. Rather than isolating a specific logic of political representation, a characteristic related to institutions, or a distinct justificatory repertoire, the term risks operating as shorthand for 'politics perceived as dangerous'. Even when accompanied by concrete traits, it can remain conceptually loose, and its explanatory relevance therefore remains debatable.

4.4 Hierarchising uses

The last set of uses treats *populis** as a term representing a critique directed at individuals, measures, or ideas, like in examples (5)–(8). However, this critique is here not grounded in identifiable normative principles. Instead, the label is used following subjective and contestable criteria. Rather than marking a boundary between what is democratically acceptable and what violates democratic standards, these uses tend to rank actors and attitudes as desirable or undesirable from the author's standpoint. Example (9) illustrates this trend. Here, 'populism' is effectively equated with criticism of the European Union (EU), or even with arguments supporting the exit from the European Union. As previously discussed, the term is not clearly defined. Yet it is unmistakably framed as a problem: it is associated with the rejection of EU politics and opposed to 'europhilia'. The implication is that contesting EU policies is itself a sign of populism and, by extension, a mark of illegitimacy.

- (9) *Si le rétablissement des droits de douane - venait à compromettre les exportations agricoles? Sur qui se porterait la colère? Londres? Dublin? Bruxelles? " L'exception irlandaise, son indéfectible europhilie, l'apparente imperméabilité de l'île au populisme, ont de solides racines mais aussi des limites. Même s'ils ne sont aucunement tentés par une sortie de l'UE, entre 20% et 30% des Irlandais critiquent la politique de l'UE. Et beaucoup, surtout des jeunes qui n'ont pas connu les violences du passé*

If the reintroduction of customs duties were to end up jeopardizing agricultural exports, who would people's anger be directed at? London? Dublin? Brussels? Ireland's 'exceptional' status, its unwavering Europhilia, and the island's apparent immunity to populism have deep roots, but also limits. Even though they are in no way tempted by leaving the EU, between 20% and 30% of Irish people criticize the EU's policies. And many, especially young people who have not experienced the violence of the past

(*Le Monde*, 17 May 2019)

In example (10), 'populism' is equated with a desire to break with prevailing economic policy orthodoxies. Once again, the term functions less as an analytical descriptor than as a delegitimising label: it frames a proposed reorientation of economic policy as 'populist', which may lead one to perceive such a policy as being inherently suspect or unacceptable. The excerpt makes this clear by presenting 'the rise of populism' as a source of anxiety for wealthy individuals considering relocating to the United Kingdom, and

by identifying Jeremy Corbyn as the archetypal threat, precisely because he proposes renationalising railways and introducing a maximum wage. In this configuration, 'populism' becomes a shorthand for redistributive or interventionist policy proposals, with the negative evaluation taken for granted rather than argued for.

- (10) *Le Brexit inquiète mais, pour le moment, il n'affecterait pas ce segment du luxe très haut de gamme. Les fortunes qui souhaitent s'installer outre-Manche craignent plutôt l'inconstance des politiques économiques et la montée du populisme. Leur bête noire, c'est Jeremy Corbyn, le leader de l'opposition travailliste, qui promet, s'il arrive au 10 Downing Street, de renationaliser les chemins de fer et d'instaurer un salaire maximum.*

Brexit is a cause for concern, but for now it does not appear to be affecting this segment of ultra high end luxury. Wealthy individuals who want to move to the UK are more worried about the inconsistency of economic policies and the rise of populism. Their bête noire is Jeremy Corbyn, the Labour opposition leader, who promises that if he makes it to 10 Downing Street, he will renationalize the railways and introduce a maximum wage.

(Le Monde, 15 August 2019)

Example (11) suggests that this tendency to associate populism with negative traits on the basis of highly subjective criteria can go beyond strictly political dimensions of discourse. In some cases, *populis** is mobilised to discredit personal behaviour or expression that arguably fall closer to matters of taste, decorum, or cultural judgement than to anything that can be meaningfully condemned through a category that is often presented as analytically grounded or scientifically robust.

- (11) *Cette année-là, une femme d'entreprise blonde fait rire les téléspectateurs par son parler franc, transgressif, vulgaire, qui change de la langue de bois dans les émissions politiques. On la prend pour un clown. Mais ce populisme va, au fil des épisodes, faire des émules et cette femme devenue Premier ministre n'hésitera pas à faire disparaître et regrouper dans les camps ceux qu'elle juge inadéquats.*

That year, a blonde businesswoman made viewers laugh with her frank, transgressive, vulgar language, which was a change from the political doublespeak heard on political programs. She was taken for a clown. But as the episodes progressed, her populism caught on,

and this woman, who had become prime minister, did not hesitate to remove and gather into camps those she deemed unsuitable.

(*France Info*, 25 August 2019)

In example (11), ‘populism’ is first anchored in a communicative style: ‘frank, transgressive, vulgar’ speech, contrasted with the coded restraint of conventional political language (‘political doublespeak’). The opposition is primarily aesthetic and moral, not explicitly democratic. The protagonist’s appeal is described through the registers of entertainment and shock value, she ‘made viewers laugh’, she was seen as a ‘clown’, and her persona is defined by a deliberate breach of respectable political performance. ‘Populism’, at this stage, designates a mode of address that rejects established rhetorical conventions in favour of an abrasive, ostensibly authentic style. The excerpt then introduces an authoritarian turn, namely, the decision to ‘remove and gather into camps those she deemed unsuitable’, and retrospectively folds this development back into the earlier stylistic description. A continuum is implied: vulgar outspokenness ‘catches on’, produces imitators, and ultimately culminates in overtly anti-democratic practices. Yet the label ‘populism’ is attached to the moment, whereas the primary issue encompasses one’s tone, persona, and media resonance, rather than the violation of basic rights. In this configuration, ‘populism’ functions as an early warning attached to a particular form of visibility and appeal: bluntness, spectacle, and popular attraction that bypass established norms of civility and respectability. The danger is framed not only as authoritarian measures, but as the public’s readiness to embrace a figure who first breaks with conventional standards of political propriety. In this sense, ‘populism’ becomes a compressed signifier, combining stylistic deviance with mass appeal and an insinuated trajectory towards authoritarianism.

5 Discussion and conclusion

In the last example, the use of *populis** does not rest on any coherent normative understanding of democracy, but on unexamined preferences about demeanour, respectability, and the proper tone of public life. More generally, in these hierarchising uses, *populis**, as a category of analysis in the political sphere, registers less a principled concern for democracy than a preference for certain specific and ideologically marked political values or orientations (e.g., pro-European, pro-capitalist, pro-globalisation) – which are presented as obviously more legitimate than others – or a personal or aesthetic discomfort with a certain style of politics. ‘Populism’ becomes a code for what is perceived as illegitimate policies, bad taste, or excessive emotion, rather than a category that tracks violations of specific democratic norms. Because such uses coexist with more substantive ones, the cumulative effect is to stretch the meaning of populism to cover an

ever-wider range of actors and practices. Egalitarian demands for participation, nationalist projects of exclusion, critiques of technocracy, transgressions of institutional decorum, and openly authoritarian agendas can all be folded into the same category. Yet what appears as a classificatory problem is in fact a normative one: a vocabulary that erases the moral distinction between those who seek to deepen democracy and those who seek to erode it. The semantic flexibility that has helped to make the term ubiquitous now undermines capacity for discernment in democracy. This collapse can be observed along two main lines.

On the one hand, the label populism blurs the line between democratic contestation and anti-democratic disruption. A democratic order worthy of the name must remain open to critique, transformation, and even rupture. As the literature on democratic theory emphasises, the democratic space is defined by its constitutive indeterminacy (Lefort, 1988): who speaks for 'the people', and what counts as legitimate representation, cannot be finally settled. Movements that demand equality, participation, or a redistribution of voice express this openness; they are manifestations of democratic vitality, not pathologies. When such movements are grouped together with xenophobic or authoritarian forces under the same heading, a crucial normative distinction disappears; between those who claim to know who the 'demos' is and what it wants and those who accept that the limits, interests, and demands of the 'demos' are always open to debate. In doing so, the discourse deprives citizens of the conceptual tools needed for moral judgement. Democratic legitimacy depends on the ability to distinguish between voice and violence, critique and negation, contestation and destruction. A vocabulary that erases these distinctions does not protect democracy; it disarms it.

On the other hand, the discursive conflation of heterogeneous phenomena benefits those most hostile to democratic principles, and it does so partly because the anti-populist gesture often presupposes a boundary that is neither clear nor politically neutral. When populism is used loosely, and when it quietly tracks the commentator's own sense of what counts as legitimate politics, it sustains the presupposition that media and governing elites set the terms of acceptable opinion, confusing partisan preferences with a shared, transpartisan democratic frame. This posture does not merely establish the limits of legitimacy, it can also deepen mistrust towards representatives and institutions and thereby nourish the very dynamics it claims to contain. In this context, reappropriation becomes easy: if *populis** names whatever sits outside the approved frame, then an actor can embrace the label as proof of authenticity and proximity to 'ordinary people'. J.D. Vance's formula makes the inversion explicit, 'If being a populist means being on the side of working people ... I'm proud of it'.¹ By doing so, the negative moral charge of populism is

flipped. Anti-democratic actors present themselves as victims of an elitist orthodoxy, turning condemnation into legitimacy. The same vagueness that allows liberal democracies to stigmatise dissent simultaneously enables their illiberal challengers to claim the mantle of truth-telling. The discursive weapon is therefore a double-edged sword. Pierre Poilievre's viral exchange works similarly, when he repeatedly blames a journalist for taking a 'populist pathway' with a simple question, 'What does that mean?',² forcing the accuser to reveal how unstable and contestable the category is.

The problem with 'populism', then, cannot be reduced to empirical vagueness. Indeterminacy is precisely what enables its strategic and performative uses: to disqualify or to legitimise, depending on who speaks and in what context. A term that can stigmatise conflictual politics today and be reappropriated as moral authenticity tomorrow cannot serve as a reliable criterion for democratic evaluation. If democracy rests, as some argue (Urbinati, 2019), on a fragile balance between suspicion and trust, it requires concepts that sustain rather than dissolve that tension. The current use of populism destabilises this balance: it either casts all deviation from centrist norms as dangerous or renders genuine threats indistinguishable from legitimate critique. In both cases, normative reasoning gives way to affective impressions, with tone and emotional resonance taking precedence over substance and principle.

This does not mean, however, that populism, as a concept, is useless, or that all of its uses are problematic. As shown, it can be employed in a meaningful way to designate a contestable understanding of the relationship between 'the people' and those who hold power and claim, or are expected, to embody them. Moreover, the analysis indicates that not all uses of populism are equivalent, nor do they invariably serve to discredit political orientations deemed subjectively undesirable. Yet most uses of this category remain highly vague and rely on normative backgrounds that are left implicit, thereby reinforcing the difficulties identified here. The aim, therefore, is not necessarily to discard the category of populism, but rather to use it in a precise and rigorous manner.

Notes

- 1 <https://x.com/BullMooseProj/status/1829219535842406640>, accessed on 28 January 2026.
- 2 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rnEj7WLsWbk&t=124s> (2:00), accessed on 28 January 2026.

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