

# INTRODUCTORY NOTE<sup>1</sup>

## POPULISMS: AN INTRODUCTION

Marco Lisi and Nuno Severiano Teixeira

Although historically the phenomenon of populism emerged in a variety of political and institutional contexts, discussion of the concept among scholars was launched by the famous conference held by the London School of Economics in 1967, in which several experts met to discuss and analyse, both theoretically and empirically, the diverse experiences related to populism. Back then, the various participants already referred to this phenomenon as the “specter haunting the world”, that is, a global phenomenon spanning different historical periods and liable to emerge in very distinct countries in terms of their political regime and economic and social features. Never before the present moment was this truer, if we consider not only the prominence given to this phenomenon by the media, but also the attention granted to it by the academia<sup>2</sup>. It is worth noting the ambiguousness and the fluid nature of the concept of populism. There is a plethora of studies that undertake a historical and theoretical revision of this concept, highlighting how difficult it is to find common denominators warranting the use of this notion across different historical and geographical periods. Drawing on the vital contributions of a number of authors<sup>3</sup>, it is possible to identify some relevant dimensions that together comprise the concept’s “lower common denominator”. Literature on the subject, however, still betrays profound divergences as to the approach (or perspective) to use in the study of populism.

In the first place, populism was deemed an ideology, a set of values or a worldview that places the idea of the people at its centre<sup>4</sup>. The ideological matrix of populism sees the people, in their capacity of object and subject of democracy, as a homogenous and “pure” community, an organic entity possessing only virtues, such as incorruptibility and common sense. This worldview entails the opposition between people and oligarchy, the latter composed of a corrupt elite and of representative institutions (in *primis* political parties) which are guilty of misrepresenting the public good. And yet this attempt to define populism through ideology is clearly hampered by the ambiguousness behind the concept of the “people”. That is why a few authors – Mudde in particular – prefer to see populism as a low density phenomenon essentially based on the dichotomy between the people and the elite.

Another approach adopted in the study of populism relates to the communication style and the rhetoric employed within the political sphere<sup>5</sup>. From this standpoint, the goal of the populist phenomenon is to appeal to the citizens' emotions in order to mobilise them, rather than building a coherent and systematic discourse highlighting the strengths (or the weaknesses) of a political platform. Populism as a communicational approach usually begins with the demonisation of the opponent, followed by a highlighting of the needed change or revolution to give sovereignty back to the people. Finally, there is direct identification with the leader through the use of plain language and convergence between the leader and their spokesperson, able to embody the qualities of the community they represent. A major implication of this is that populist rhetoric boasts a universal character, narrowing or downright eliminating any chance of pluralism and political debate. This style has been strengthened by the use of social networks, which favour direct and simplistic messages to the detriment of reasoning, deliberation and dialectics.

The third approach used in the study of populism revolves around organisation and the type of leadership<sup>6</sup>. Even though we may come across different types of (more or less juvenile) leadership formulae, the populist phenomenon is linked to the presence of a strong acclaimed leader. One of the typical features of the populist leader is the fact that they are considered an outsider, that is, an element not belonging to the political elite, either because they have been excluded or because they do not belong in the "polluted" political world. These leaders surface in a strong context of political personalisation, which encourages the structuring of populist forces – usually and party or movement – on the basis of the leaders themselves. In this sense, the leader builds direct and immediate ties with his support base, avoiding the use of intermediary structures and a rigid professionalised bureaucracy. This strategy and form of organisation facilitates a political style relying on the simplification of problems, on direct language and "spontaneous" behaviours praising the populist leader as the natural "spokesperson" of this homogenous and organic community.

Naturally, each of these dimensions *per se* is not enough for a party to be classified as populist<sup>7</sup>. When the three aspects are simultaneously present, however, we may be facing a populist party in the narrowest sense of the term. In practice, though, there is a wide variety of populisms taking on different features especially according to their varying notions of "people". Recently, regarding mainly the articulation of populism and nationalism, Mudde and Kaltwasser have made a distinction between exclusionary and inclusionary populism<sup>8</sup>. Exclusionary populism purports to marginalise specific socio-economic, cultural or ethnic groups. The second type of populism, on the other hand, is positioned in the left ideological spectrum, and emphasises equality, the reinforcement of political participation among the lower classes and a greater integration of the groups that remain excluded from the political system (the poor, ethnic minorities, immigrants, etc).

It is helpful to stress that while the emergence of populism is not a recent phenomenon, it takes on greater visibility and strength from the 1980s. From this viewpoint, populism is a consequence of two macro phenomena which affect Western democracies. The first has to do with the crisis of representative institutions and the “hollowing out” of political parties, which have favoured a growing personalisation of the political power and a direct connection between leaders and electorate. The second macro phenomenon which has brought structural changes to the more developed societies is globalisation and, in the European context, the integration process. These changes have altered the systems of the welfare state, reinforced the deregulation of the industrial sector (relocation) and have favoured migration flows, leading to a rising hollowing out of the principle of national sovereignty.

One of the key aspects of recent debate on populism is the attempt to identify the causes that account for the greater or lesser success of populist forces. Although it is not the purpose of this introduction to examine this extensive literature, it is appropriate to highlight the connection between the advent of the populist phenomenon and the presence of an economic, political or cultural crisis<sup>9</sup>. In the first place, populist forces thrive in a context of wealth depletion, job loss and cuts in social support. This situation generates a sense of insecurity and uncertainty which is reflected on the voting preferences of the electorate. In the second place, populism is linked to the progressive loss of party and institution representativeness. Government parties, moderate forces, are the ones most affected by this political crisis, often accused of seeking only their own reelection and not upholding the common interest, constituting a “caste” that strives to conquer and maintain power. Lastly, but not less important, populism evolves in the context of a cultural crisis which materialises in Europe through the growing importance of the multiculturalism vs nationalism divide. The successive migration waves beginning in the 1990s strengthened the “exclusionary” and nationalistic rhetoric of populist parties. These abrupt changes in societies echo in a rising interpersonal distrust, in the importance of the security issue and in a perception of immigrants as the “enemy” responsible for all the problems and the main cause of discontent within societies.

The three crises emerged in the European context through different characteristics and dynamics. The type and intensity of each crisis has varied greatly from country to country. Political crisis has mainly affected Western European countries, whereas economic crisis has had a more significant impact on peripheral countries, particularly in Southern Europe<sup>10</sup>. Finally, the migration crisis has emerged with greater strength in the more developed countries, although this has been a more or less generalised crisis.

It is a matter of relative consensus that there is an association between populism and the presence of crisis and feelings of insecurity and fear. However, in order to distinguish between the specific circumstances favouring the emergence or extinction of populism phenomena in specific national contexts and periods, it is necessary to carry out an analysis in terms of political science and history. The discontent and reivindica-

tions of certain social groups and the politicisation of new cleavages fomented the phenomenon of populism. However, equally important is the ability of more or less orthodox political forces, especially “traditional” government parties, to react to populist forces, incorporating in their own political offer typically populist slogans or programmes. But the rise of populist parties is also often connected to specific circumstances, that is, windows of opportunity that were opened in the context of specific national contexts, such as scandals and corruption cases, or the visibility that some leaders achieve through media platforms.

Besides the electoral success of populist parties, the past decade has witnessed two important qualitative changes. The first consists in the transition of populist forces from opposition to government. Although this process began in 2000, when the Freedom Party of Austria entered government, in the past decade several other countries experienced this same change. The second noteworthy novelty is the emergence, in Europe, of populist parties linked to the left variety, that is, “inclusionary” populist parties, which originated mainly as a consequence of the Great Recession, the case of Syriza in Greece and of Podemos in Spain.

How is the Portuguese case to be understood in the framework of the growing success of populist forces? Unlike other countries affected by the economic crisis, the new political forces that emerged in Portugal after 2008 were unable to alter in any significant way the characteristics and dynamics of the partisan system<sup>11</sup>. In fact, left wing parties are the ones which to a greater extent have sought to address the discontent and the dissatisfaction of citizens regarding political actors and implemented policies. Bloco de Esquerda and Partido Comunista Português have introduced in their discursive strategy some elements typical of populism; even so, their level of populism stood below that of the “new” parties of the radical left<sup>12</sup>. However, in the 2019 elections, a new radical-right populist party emerged, Chega, which managed to elect a MP. Although the electoral result was rather insignificant (1,29% of the votes), especially when compared to that of other similar political forces, the fact itself represents a debut in the Portuguese political panorama<sup>13</sup>.

This thematic issue serves two chief purposes. The first is to examine the interaction between populism and the electoral and media arenas, two key dimensions providing the structural conditions for the emergence and success of populism. This aspect is crucial for understanding how long this phenomenon is destined to last, and how it cannot be considered merely a pathology of contemporary democracies. The second objective pertains to the analysis of the Portuguese case and intends to dig deeper into a number of specific features of the country in light of other European experiences. The fact that Portugal has not proved so far to be fertile ground for the emergence of populist players does not mean that studying its case is not of value for a wider debate on populism. As such, the essays included in this volume offer not only a contribution to a more thorough classification of populist varieties, but also devise and develop new

arguments to interpret the populist phenomenon and its interaction with other spheres (economic, cultural and social) of the political system.

The first article in this issue, by Carla Luís, delves into the interaction between populism and the quality of the electoral process. Recently, the emergence of populist forces and leaders has been linked to the erosion of electoral integrity, not only in the context of new democracies, but also within consolidated democracies. As the 2020 US elections have shown<sup>14</sup>, the criticism raised by populists regarding the formal procedures of representative democracy weakens electoral legitimacy and the citizens' trust in elections as a vital instrument of political representation. Not only that, the growing use of social networks and other digital platforms, boosted by the pandemic context, foster the establishment of a direct relation between electorate and political players, in the absence of regulation that might control and sanction potential misuse, injustice and infringements. This is a central question in the analysis of the populist phenomenon, particularly when the point is to assess the implications – negative or positive – for the quality of democracy.

Rita Figueiras's essay addresses the close relation between the media and the populist phenomenon. The main premise is that the populist style is particularly propitious to attract media visibility, broadcasting a simpler, more direct style which is easy to reproduce in different platforms. In this sense, the new and the old media represent especially favourable platforms for the dissemination of the populist offer, through a circular and multidimensional process based on the constant interaction of different types of players and means of communication. Rita Figueiras's article offers an extremely interesting reflection about the complex relationship between politics and the media, as well the different logics of the traditional media and the new tools. Even though social networks add to the growing polarisation and foster direct connection between populist leaders and the electorate, we are yet to ascertain in what measure do new digital technologies boost the performance of populist forces. Not only that, it would be interesting to inquire, in the scope of future research, into how political culture impacts political communication systems and the greater or lesser relevance of populist rhetoric.

The success of populist discourse rests also on how a certain worldview or set of ideas are built historically and socially. Luca Manucci's contribution fits into this type of approach – his article focuses on the legacy of the authoritarian regimes in the Iberian Peninsula in order to explain the different paths taken by the new far-right populist parties. Whereas, in Spain, the party Vox managed to obtain significant results and contributed to the bipartisan crisis, Chega, in Portugal, so far has registered poorer results, and traditional parties have shown greater resilience. According to the author, in order to account for the different trajectories, it is crucial to consider the different path of democratisation in the two countries and how collective memory emerged and evolved in the course of the democratic period.

José Santana Pereira's contribution is in line with the growing importance paid to populist political attitudes as a way to estimate the success of populist forces and the variations among different countries<sup>15</sup>. This is a tremendously important area, since it allows for the association between populist demand and supply. In this sense, the Portuguese case is of special interest, inasmuch as it enables an analysis of populist attitudes and behaviours in a partisan context characterised by a lack of mobilisation of these claims among the political forces. Making use of data collected in the scope of surveys involving a representative sample of the Portuguese population, José Santana Pereira's article explores the relationship between populist parties and conventional and unconventional patterns of political participation. Results suggest that individuals exhibiting more populist attitudes tend to display higher levels of conventional political participation, as well as enrol in nonviolent acts of protest (example: demonstrations, petition signing and boycott of products). These preliminary results also offer the occasion to compare the Portuguese case with other realities. However, it would be interesting in the future to understand more thoroughly the origin of these populist attitudes, as well as the relationship between structural conditions and the characteristics of the partisan system. Caeiro's article focuses on media visibility of populist discourse, which is traditionally considered an important factor for their success. She studies different types of media outlets (TV broadcasters and press) in 2018, thus empirically addressing some of the arguments put forth by Rita Figueira's contribution. Consequently, this contribution is an important piece to better understand the 'exceptionalism' of the Portuguese case. Through a content analysis of five media outlets (TV broadcasters and press), Caeiro shows that populism had a marginal presence in the media, and this can (at least partially) explain the relatively failure of populist forces to obtain wide electoral support until 2019. From this viewpoint, there are two lines of research that deserve to be developed in the future. The first is to perform an analysis of populist discourse in election campaigns, which is of the utmost importance especially after the rise of *Chega* and the electoral success of its leader in the 2021 presidential campaign. The second is to examine not only traditional media outlets, but also the visibility of populist discourse in the social media and the use of new digital platforms by populist forces. Lisi and Gaio e Silva study populist reforms at the institutional level in five distinct populist parties. By adopting several criteria to classify institutional reforms, their contribution sheds more light on the anti-systemic nature of populist discourse and policies and contributes to better identifying the core nucleus of populism. The authors find that populist reforms aim to significantly alter the functioning of democratic political systems, thus addressing one of the diseases affecting representative democracies. In particular, they aim to change electoral rules and to strengthen instruments of direct democracy. While there is a mix between 'constructive' and 'populist' proposals, there are no significant differences between inclusive vs exclusive populist parties. The particular set of reforms seems to be more associated to the specificities of the political

system, rather than the specific characteristics of populist parties. It would be interesting to further develop this analysis by comparing populist and mainstream parties, as well as to study the impact of anti-system attitudes on the electoral performance of populist forces. Future studies can also fruitfully examine institutional reforms advanced by populist parties in connection with their visibility in public opinion (i.e. media coverage) and inter-party competition (for example by considering parliamentary debates). <sup>RJ</sup>

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> A previous version of this note was published at *Relações Internacionais*, n. 67, September 2020.

<sup>2</sup> ROODUIJN, Matthijs – «The nucleus of populism: in search of the lowest common denominator». In *Government and Opposition*. Vol. 49, N.º 4, 1 de outubro de 2014, pp. 573-599. KALTWASSER, Cristóbal Rovira; TAGGART, Paul; ESPEJO, Paulina Ochoa; OSTIGUY, Perre, eds. – *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. HADIZ, Vedi R.; CHRYSOGELOS, Angelos – «Populism in world politics: a comparative cross-regional perspective». In *International Political Science Review*, Vol. 38, N.º 4, 2017, pp. 399-411.

<sup>3</sup> See, among others, CANOVAN, M. – *Populism*. Nova York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981. TAGGART, Paul – *Populism*. London: Oxford University Press, 2000. MUDDÉ, Cas – «The populist Zeitgeist». In *Government and Opposition*. Vol. 39, N.º 4, 2004, pp. 541-563. See also também ROODUIJN, Matthijs – «The nucleus of populism: in search of the lowest common denominator». In *Government and Opposition*. Vol. 49, N.º 4, 1 October 2014, pp. 573-599.

<sup>4</sup> CANOVAN, M. – «Taking politics to the people: populism as the ideology of democracy». In MÉNY, Y.; SUREL, Y., eds. – *Democracies and the Populist Challenge*. Oxford: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002, pp. 25-44. STANLEY, Ben – «The thin ideology of populism». In *Journal of Political Ideologies*. Vol. 13, N.º 1, 2008, pp. 95-110.

<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, MAZZOLENI, Gianpiero; STEWART, J.; HORSFIELD, B., eds. – *The Media and Neo-Populism*. Westport: Praeger, 2003. ELLINAS, Antonis A. – *The Media and the Far Right in Western Europe: Playing the Nationalist Card*. 2010. MOFFIT, Benjamin – *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style and Representation*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016. MANUCCI, Luca; WEBER, E. – «Why the big picture matters: political and media populism in Western Europe since the 1970s». In *Swiss Political Science Review*. 2017. Available at: <https://doi.org/doi:10.1111/spsr.12267>.

<sup>6</sup> WEYLAND, Kurt – «Clarifying a contested concept: populism in the study of Latin American politics». In *Comparative Politics*.

Vol. 34, N.º 1, 2001, pp. 1-22. PAPPAS, Takis S. – «Are populist leaders “charismatic”? The evidence from Europe». In *Constellations*. Vol. 23, N.º 3, 2016, pp. 378-390.

<sup>7</sup> To better contextualise this concept, see: ZASLOVE, Andrej – «Here to stay? Populism as a new party type». In *European Review*. Vol. 16, N.º 3, 2008, pp. 319-336. NORRIS, Pippa – «Varieties of populist parties». In *Philosophy and Social Criticism*. Vol. 45, N.º 9-10, 2019, pp. 981-1012.

<sup>8</sup> MUDDÉ, Cas; KALTWASSER, Cristóbal Rovira – «Exclusionary vs inclusionary populism: comparing contemporary Europe and Latin America». In *Government and Opposition*. Vol. 48, N.º 2, 2013, pp. 147-174.

<sup>9</sup> KRIESI, Hanspeter; PAPPAS, Takis S., eds. – *European Populism in the Shadow of the Great Recession*. Colchester: ECPR press, 2015. CAIANI, Manuela; GRAZIANO Paolo – «Understanding varieties of populism in times of crises». In *West European Politics*. Vol. 42, N.º 6, 2019, pp. 1141-1158. MOFFIT, Benjamin – «How to perform crisis: a model for understanding the key role

of crisis in contemporary populism». In *Government and Opposition*. Vol. 50, N.º 2, 2015, pp. 189-217. Available at: <https://doi.org/doi:10.1017/gov.2014.13>.

**10** See HUTTER, Swen; KRIESI, Hanspeter, eds. – *European Party Politics in Times of Crisis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. CASAL BÉRTOA, Fernando; RAMA, José – «Party decline or social transformation? Economic, institutional and sociological change and the rise of anti-political-establishment parties in Western Europe». In *European Political Science Review*. 2020. Available at: <https://doi.org/doi:10.1017/S1755773920000260>.

**11** JALALI, Carlos – *Partidos e Sistemas Partidários*. Lisboa: Fundação Francisco Manuel dos Santos. FERREIRA DA SILVA, Frederico; MENDES, Mariana S. – «Portugal. A tale of apparent stability and surreptitious transformation». In HUTTER, Swen; KRIESI, Hanspeter, eds. – *European*

*Party Politics in Times of Crisis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019, pp. 139-163.

**12** LISI, Marco; BORGHETTO, Enrico – «Populism, blame shifting and the crisis: discourse strategies in Portuguese political parties». In *South European Society and Politics*. Vol. 23, N.º 4, 2018, pp. 405-427. LISI, Marco; LLAMAZARES, Iván; TSAKATIKA, Myrto – «Economic crisis and the variety of Populist response: evidence from Greece, Portugal and Spain». In *West European Politics*. Vol. 42, N.º 6, 2019, pp. 1284-1309.

**13** See MENDES, Mariana S.; DENNISON, James – «Explaining the emergence of the radical right in Spain and Portugal: salience, stigma and supply». In *West European Politics*. 2020. Available at: <https://doi.org/DOI:10.1080/01402382.2020.1777504>.

**14** In this regard, it might be useful to see NORRIS, Pippa; GARNETT, Holly Ann;

GRÖMPING, Max – «The paranoid style of American elections: explaining perceptions of electoral integrity in an age of populism». In *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion & Parties*. Vol. 30, N.º 1, 2020, pp. 105-125.

**15** See, for instance, the following contributions: AKKERMAN, Tjitske; MUDDE, Cas; ZASLOVE, Andrej – «How Populist are the people? Measuring Populist attitudes in voters». In *Comparative Political Studies*. Vol. 47, N.º 9, 2014, pp. 1324-1353. SCHULTZ, Anne; MÜLLER, Philipp; SCHEMER, Christian; WIRZ, Stefanie; WETTSTEIN, Martin; WIRTH, Werner – «Measuring populist attitudes on three dimensions». In *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*. Vol. 30, N.º 2, 2018, pp. 316-326. RICO, Guillem; GUINJOAN, Marc; ANDUIZA, Eva – «The emotional underpinnings of populism: how anger and fear affect populist attitudes». In *Swiss Political Science Review*. Vol. 23, 2017, pp. 444-461.

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