

THE IN A HURRY SERIES

Populism *in a Hurry*

The people against the elite

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The Whole Thing in One Page

Populism is commonly used as a bin. An unaffordable promise, a rude speech, a popular referendum, an attack on experts and an election result somebody dislikes are thrown into it together. The label then records disapproval rather than explaining a form of politics.

The useful meaning is narrower. Populism compresses a divided society into two moral actors: a decent people whose authority has been denied, and a corrupt elite that has taken power without moral title. It then claims that government should express the will of that people more directly. The people may be workers, taxpayers, citizens, native families, believers, neglected regions or everyone said to contribute without being heard. The elite may include party leaders, bankers, judges, officials, journalists, academics, corporations, cultural institutions or foreign bodies. These centres of power do not naturally form one group. Populist politics makes them one enemy by giving their different actions one motive: they protect each other against us.

That double construction is the engine. Differences inside the people are pushed down. Differences among elites are pushed down too. A wealthy leader can become the voice of ordinary citizens, while a nurse, teacher or local official can be placed inside an elite because education, profession or institutional loyalty marks the wrong side of the moral boundary. Populism is therefore neither a census category nor a synonym for class conflict. It is a claim about who counts as the legitimate whole.

The name travelled through movements without a shared programme. Russian radicals went to the peasantry in the 1870s. American farmers and labour organisers built the People's Party in the 1890s. Latin American leaders brought workers into mass politics through unions, welfare and the state. Poujadism mobilised French shopkeepers against tax officials and parliamentarians. Later movements attacked austerity, finance, immigration, supranational rule, corrupt parties or cultural authority. The common structure lies in the people-elite division, not in inherited policies.

Populism is thin. A host ideology supplies the rest. Socialism can name economic power as the enemy. Nationalism and nativism can identify a betrayed native majority. Religion, market liberalism or environmentalism can provide different accounts of membership, injury and repair. That is why populism can demand redistribution or tax cuts, nationalisation or privatisation, expanded welfare or harder borders.

Grievance does not organise itself. Economic loss, status decline, corruption, party convergence and remote administration can make the claim plausible. Organisation turns those experiences into power. Leaders, activists, money, media and electoral rules decide whether anger becomes a durable movement. The direct voice is always produced through intermediaries, even when its performance depends on denying them.

This gives populism a democratic force. Elites can become insulated, institutions can conceal choice behind expertise and parties can stop representing. A populist challenge may restore neglected questions and recruit withdrawn citizens. The danger grows from the same act. Once one movement claims that it alone embodies the real people, opponents become counterfeit, defeat becomes suspect and every independent institution can be recast as an obstruction.

Populism begins by shortening political distance. Its decisive test is whether the shortcut leaves citizens free to disagree, organise, lose and later win. A movement may speak for part of the people with great justice. Democracy begins to close when it mistakes that part for the only people entitled to speak.

That is the book.

Why You Should Care

At Omaha in 1892, the United States People's Party demanded public control of railways. Then its platform paused to worry about the state it hoped to enlarge. More public jobs could mean more favours for a president to distribute. The answer was strict civil-service rules for all government employees, secured by a constitutional amendment. The same movement could accuse corporations of capturing government and fear that government might capture the cure.

That tension is a better entrance to populism than the usual cartoon. Populists are often presented as citizens shouting at expertise while a charismatic leader offers easy answers. Some cases fit. Others begin with an exact diagnosis of concentrated power, failed representation or institutions built around insiders. The difficult question is what happens when a justified complaint is compressed into a moral division between one authentic people and one corrupt elite.

You can probably call a politician populist without being asked what you mean. That ease creates several errors at once. A concept that covers any popular policy cannot distinguish representation from bribery, fiscal error or ordinary campaigning. A concept that means the radical right cannot explain left movements directed against finance and austerity. A concept that means crude style cannot identify polished leaders who make the same claim in constitutional language. Precision matters because the remedy depends on the diagnosis.

The first practical distinction concerns criticism. Elites exist. They may collude, capture regulators, protect professions, conceal trade-offs or arrange institutions around their own convenience. Democracy requires organised attacks on those failures. Calling all anti-elitism populist turns a description of power into a defence of incumbents. Yet proving that an elite has failed does not prove that one movement embodies everyone entitled to object. The step from exposure to ownership is where populism begins to change the argument.

The second distinction concerns mediation. Large democracies act through parties, courts, public servants and other intermediaries. Populists often present them as a wall between people and power. Sometimes they are. They can also expose error and keep a present majority from cancelling everyone else's political standing. A referendum or stronger executive may improve a system. Neither removes the need to decide who sets the question, verifies the count and protects future opposition.

The third concerns the elite in the subtitle. Bankers, judges, television editors, academics and elected ministers possess different powers, answer to different rules and often fight one another. A movement may have strong evidence against one and little against another. Populist compression turns institutional complexity into a single hostile intention. Once every independent centre belongs to the same corrupt bloc, contrary evidence becomes proof of coordination. The diagnosis becomes harder to falsify as it expands.

The concept also explains why a rich insider can perform the outsider. Economic position is only one political boundary. A billionaire may claim moral ordinariness through taste, speech, national loyalty or hostility to institutions that reject him. A low-paid professional may be assigned to the elite because credentials or public office mark cultural power. The people and the elite are roles inside an argument before they are income brackets.

Follow the argument into ordinary life and it becomes harder to dismiss. A railway bill, a wage agreement or access to a doctor can tell citizens whether government notices them. A speech can give those experiences a common name. An appointment to a court can decide whether the new rulers remain answerable. The historical cases in this book move between those scales: what people receive, what they believe it means, and what their representatives do with the authority that follows.

Keep the central tension open. Populism can identify a democracy that has stopped hearing. It can also make listening impossible by deciding in advance who speaks for the whole. Understanding it means rejecting two evasions: sneering at citizens because a populist organised them, and

surrendering citizens to whoever claimed them first.

The Core Ideas

A People Must Be Assembled

Populist claims begin by saying the people have been ignored. The sentence sounds as though a complete group has been waiting outside politics, ready to be counted. Look closer and the group keeps changing.

The people can mean the citizen body understood as the source of political authority, or, more narrowly, the electorate entitled to vote. It can mean ordinary people, contrasted with wealth, office or credentials. It can mean the nation, bounded by citizenship, ancestry or culture. It can mean workers, taxpayers, producers, believers, neglected regions, the silent majority or those who obey while others exploit the rules. These categories overlap and conflict. A nurse may be educated, unionised, urban, religious, foreign-born, well paid or badly paid. No census can identify which feature makes her part of the authentic people.

Political work does that. A movement selects injuries with different causes and says they express one neglect. A farmer facing debt, a shopkeeper facing tax inspection, a worker facing factory closure and a parent angry about school policy can be joined by a shared explanation: people like us contribute and obey, while a protected group makes decisions and escapes the cost. The connection may reveal a real structure. It may be opportunistic. Successful mobilisation often contains discovery and construction together.

This is why the word people is so useful. A party admits that it represents a part. An interest group admits that other interests exist. The people sounds prior to organisation and larger than faction. Once a movement occupies the word, rivals inherit an awkward role. They no longer appear to be another part of the public. They appear to stand against the public.

The construction has two movements. First, differences inside the coalition

are reduced. A self-employed owner and an employee may disagree about wages and tax, but both can be named producers. Second, a boundary is sharpened against others. The vertical boundary places people below and elites above. A horizontal boundary may divide natives from migrants, citizens from foreigners, the devout from the secular or the deserving from the dependent. Right populisms often join both axes. Left populisms more often stress the vertical one, though neither tendency is a rule.

Calling the people constructed does not mean imaginary. Electorates, classes and nations also depend on law, institutions, symbols and argument. A constructed identity can express neglected experience and organise solidarity. The error is to mistake political selection for neutral discovery. Somebody chose the injuries, the name, the symbols and the omissions. Somebody decided that one difference should be set aside while another became decisive.

Inspect the silences inside the word. Women may be praised as mothers rather than addressed as citizens. Minorities may be welcomed as workers until they challenge the majority's account of the nation. Affluent supporters may count as ordinary through moral standing rather than income. Dissenting supporters may be recast as corrupted once they question the leader.

The achievement is to give scattered dissatisfaction a common address. People who might have campaigned separately can recognise one another as allies and discover that they have the numbers to matter. That need not be a deception. The trouble starts when a useful alliance is mistaken for the entire public. The farmer and the shopkeeper can march together and still disagree about the price of food. Winning a shared enemy has not given them a shared answer to everything.

The Elite Is Made into One Enemy

A banker and the regulator trying to restrain that bank can both appear on a populist list of elites. So can a minister and the judge who rules against the ministry. Each has power. It does not follow that they share it, use it together or want the same result. The distinction matters because a democracy unable to name concentrated power will protect it, while one unable to distinguish different powers will struggle to control them.

These powers do not form one natural class. Universities can challenge governments and reproduce their own hierarchies. Business owners may welcome one policy and fear another. The populist move is to compress those differences into one morally coherent bloc whose members supposedly protect each other against the people.

Joining those powers into one enemy gives varied grievances one author. A closed factory, an unpopular treaty and a court ruling no longer need separate explanations: the same people did all of it. Institutional friction becomes intention. A judge might delay a policy because rights conflict, or an official because the law is unclear. In the fused account, both are obstructing the people. That explanation also helps when the movement's own promises collide. Failure need not expose a bad plan or a divided coalition if an enemy powerful enough to cause every problem is still available to blame.

The target can be economic, political, cultural, legal, informational or external. Left populists often stress finance, corporations and wealth. Right populists often attack party establishments, universities, media, judges, civil servants or international institutions. Many combine them. What matters is not the occupation named but the moral relationship assigned: the elite does not merely hold power or make errors; it has severed itself from the legitimate public.

This is why income provides a poor membership test. A billionaire can claim outsider status through national loyalty, plain speech or contempt for credentialled institutions. A teacher can be placed inside the elite because

professional authority carries cultural standing. Populism sorts by political role, not by tax return. Supporters may treat a leader's wealth as independence from the institutions accused of controlling everyone else.

The attack also promotes a new set of powerful people. Candidates choose advisers, donors gain access and organisers decide who can speak for the movement. These counter-elites may be better than the people they replace. They are still elites. Calling them the people's servants does not tell us who can dismiss them or inspect their decisions. The dodge comes when a leader's power is treated as different in kind from a predecessor's: other people exercise authority, while our people merely express the public will. A change of personnel can then pass for the disappearance of hierarchy.

Anti-elitism alone remains insufficient. An anti-corruption movement can specify misconduct, demand evidence, divide responsible from innocent office-holders and accept lawful defeat. A labour movement can oppose owners without claiming that all citizens share one will. Democratic criticism becomes populist when it joins a virtuous people to a morally unified elite and treats the transfer of authority as restoration rather than one contestable programme.

Test the allegation, rather than trusting the label. Can the accusation be tested against named powers, conduct and remedies? Or does every institution that disagrees join the elite by disagreeing? A defined concentration can be exposed, regulated or removed. An elastic enemy cannot be disproved, because denial becomes another sign of corruption. The elite then stops describing power and begins protecting the movement's explanation from the world.

A Thin Idea Borrows a Programme

Pure people, corrupt elite, popular will: that tells you who should rule and who has obstructed them. It does not set a tax rate, design a health service, define a family, choose an energy system, settle ownership or decide where national membership begins.

An influential account developed by Cas Mudde and others calls populism a

thin-centred ideology. Thin does not mean weak or unserious. It means the conceptual core is too restricted to govern alone. Populism must borrow from a broader host. Socialism can supply class, ownership and redistribution. Nationalism can supply a historical community and a claim to sovereignty. Nativism can supply an insider-outsider boundary. Religion can supply moral law and sacred membership. Market liberalism can supply hostility to tax, regulation and the administrative state. Environmentalism can supply a people defending land against corporate extraction.

The host explains why two movements can use nearly identical language about betrayal while demanding opposite economies. A left-populist coalition may name workers, tenants and excluded minorities as the people, then blame finance, concentrated ownership and established parties. A right-populist coalition may name taxpayers, native citizens and small owners, then blame political, cultural and supranational elites. Both promise restoration. They disagree about who belongs, what was taken and what restored authority should do.

The history makes the flexibility concrete. The American People's Party wanted the state to own the railways. A century later, Latin American market reformers used anti-establishment mandates for privatisation. Carlos Menem pursued that turn from inside Peronism, a tradition associated with workers' rights and an enlarged economic role for the state. Public ownership could be the cure in one campaign and the problem in another. Populism alone cannot tell you which programme to support. You have to read it.

The same flexibility creates analytical traps. A restrictive immigration policy is not populist by itself. A redistributive policy is not populist by itself. Neither is a referendum, a national flag, a public bank or a tax revolt. The question is how the measure is justified. Does it restore one rightful people against an elite whose power is portrayed as morally illegitimate? The policy may be wise or foolish. That judgement requires its own evidence.

Borrowing also changes the host. Nationalism can accept rival accounts of a nation's interest; populism presses towards one authentic nation betrayed

by its rulers. Socialism can preserve disagreement inside labour; populism can turn one workers' coalition into the moral people and rival workers into clients of the elite. Market liberalism can defend competition through general rules; attached to populism, it can become a campaign to free producers from a parasitic state. The host supplies substance, while the populist division recasts it as recovery of rightful ownership.

Host ideology also shapes democratic consequences. A people defined expansively can widen political, material or symbolic membership for groups excluded by an older order. A people defined through ancestry, religion or loyalty can narrow it. Inclusion in one dimension does not guarantee pluralism in another. A government may expand welfare while restricting opposition, or preserve competitive institutions while drawing a hard boundary around who deserves public provision.

Populism therefore explains less than its public reputation suggests and more than a policy label can. It does not tell you the programme. It tells you how a programme claims authority. To understand any case, identify both layers: the thin division that says who rules, and the host that says what rule is for.

Grievance Needs Organisation

Suppose a factory shuts and its machinery is sold. Losing the wage is only part of what the town loses. The closure can also weaken local shops, bargaining power and the expectation that children will find a place nearby. Yet the same kind of shock can produce support for a trade union, an established party, a populist challenger or nobody. The injury does not arrive with a political address attached.

Economic insecurity can make a difference without describing every supporter. Research on import competition, insecure work and regional decline has found effects on support for particular populist parties or positions. A 2024 synthesis of causal studies found a contribution across the research it included, with substantial variation among settings. That is evidence against dismissing economic injury as irrelevant. It does not turn

populism into a census category. Income, occupation and local decline measure different things, and political responses depend on more than how much money somebody has.

Status helps explain the connection. People compare their standing with their parents' lives, neighbouring places and the groups they believe get a hearing. Material security and social confidence can part company. A household need not be destitute to feel that its occupation has become a joke or its town an afterthought. Conversely, an economic loss need not become a story of cultural humiliation. Political organisers help decide which interpretation sticks. Economic and cultural explanations become misleading when they are made to compete as though a job could supply income but never pride.

The missing step is supply. Leaders, activists and organisations name experiences, join them and offer action. They require money, lists, candidates, meeting places, media access, legal registration, local knowledge and a way to manage internal conflict. A crisis may open attention, but somebody must build the vehicle.

There are several ways to study the mobilisation, and they do not always identify the same thing. Listen to the claim and the ideational approach asks whether a virtuous people is set against a corrupt elite. Follow the language joining different complaints and the discursive approach asks how those people become a political force. Watch who controls the candidates and the political-strategic approach asks about a personal leader's direct support and freedom from strong organisations. Watch the performance and the style approach asks how bad manners and a sense of crisis make authority look authentic. These are rival definitions as well as different questions. This book uses the ideational account to identify populist claims. The others prevent a description of a speech from passing for an explanation of a movement.

A movement may begin with patient organisation and later centre on a leader. The American Populists built alliances, cooperatives and newspapers before nominating a presidential candidate. Peronism used

unions and state institutions. Poujadism relied on local committees. Newer movements have mixed public assemblies and digital participation with tightly controlled media faces. The performance of spontaneous eruption often rests on years of labour nobody sees.

Media changes opportunity. Radio can make a national leader intimate. Television rewards a recognisable face. Digital platforms increase speed, feedback, targeting and supporter distribution. Traditional outlets may amplify a movement while attacking it because conflict attracts an audience. Yet no medium turns grievance into durable power without organisation, and no leader reaches citizens without technical, financial and human intermediaries.

Demand, supply and opportunity interact over time. Demand concerns experiences and attitudes; supply, the organisations offering an interpretation; opportunity, access to power and the weakness of competitors. None is sufficient alone. Their interaction prevents three bad explanations: suffering speaks for itself, leaders manufacture anger from nothing, or technology writes politics on its own.

The Direct Voice Has Intermediaries

Consider a voter choosing a party promising better public services and lower taxes. Months later, its representatives bargain over which service, whose taxes and how soon. They may be working through the promise or retreating from it. From outside, the two can look much the same. Representative democracy gives agents room to decide matters that a ballot could not specify. Populists make that distance an accusation: the people knew what they wanted, and the intermediary is where their will went missing.

The promised remedy is directness. A leader speaks without the party machine. A referendum settles what parliament delayed. A public broadcast bypasses hostile journalists. A movement rejects the party label, opens an online platform or presents its programme as common sense rather than doctrine. Each form can alter access. None removes mediation.

Take the referendum. Someone has to write the question, and a choice between two answers can hide disagreement inside each. Citizens may agree to reject a policy while wanting incompatible replacements. The vote settles the question asked, not every question needed to carry it out. Deciding what the result authorises therefore gives power to another interpreter. The same problem appears in different clothes online: somebody owns the data, moderates disputes and decides which proposals reach a vote. Directness may improve participation. It does not leave the public alone with an untouched will.

The leader can become the most powerful shortcut. Ordinary representation says: I am one office-holder authorised for a term. Populist embodiment says: attacks on me are attacks on the people because I am the instrument through which their suppressed will becomes audible. Personal biography then carries political meaning. Wealth can prove independence. Coarseness can prove freedom from elite manners. Rejection by established institutions can prove authenticity. The leader's body, voice and grievance provide a visible unity that the coalition itself lacks.

Charisma helps but is not required. Some leaders are magnetic; others succeed through disciplined parties, inherited organisations or control of office. Personalism matters when rules and loyalty increasingly depend on one person. Internal criticism becomes betrayal, succession becomes dangerous and the movement's ability to learn narrows. A leader can still lose and leave. The risk lies in an organisation that cannot distinguish its cause from its current interpreter.

Style supplies information to supporters. Deliberate breaches of etiquette can signal that the speaker owes nothing to the people who wrote the etiquette. Crisis performance can keep distant injuries inside one urgent story. Repetition can make categories familiar enough to organise new events. These techniques are not proof of populism, and polished constitutional language can carry the same moral claim. They explain how the claim becomes felt.

Movements often combine channels rather than choosing between

organisation and immediacy. Peronism linked a leader to unions, welfare offices, rallies and radio. Chavismo used neighbourhood bodies and long broadcasts. A direct relationship can be a dense organisational achievement.

This leads to a harder question than whether intermediaries are good. Which intermediary performs which task, under whose control and with what route of correction? Some bodies protect privilege. Others preserve the evidence, bargaining and lawful opposition without which popular rule becomes one-way communication. Populism can be persuasive when institutions have forgotten whom they serve. It becomes most dangerous when every institution capable of answering back is treated as proof that service has failed.

The Corrective Has a Cost

Populism lives inside democracy's promises. It does not need to reject elections. It claims to take popular rule more seriously than the establishment does.

Margaret Canovan described democracy as carrying a pragmatic face and a redemptive one. The pragmatic face is government: procedure, administration, expertise, compromise and rules for losing. The redemptive face is the promise that ordinary citizens can take control of their common life. Procedure without popular authority feels empty. Redemption without durable rules cannot handle disagreement. Populism becomes persuasive in the space between them.

The corrective begins with attention. A populist movement can force parties to address regions, classes or issues they ignored. It can bring non-voters into conflict, lower the social threshold for speaking, expose collusion and challenge technical language used to hide political choice. Latin American cases have sometimes expanded recognition or provision for groups kept outside older oligarchic systems. European challengers have broken settled competition or made austerity, integration and sovereignty contestable again.

Those effects should not be dismissed because a movement is impolite. Institutions can preserve injustice. Experts can confuse insulation with independence. Mainstream parties can converge until elections change personnel more readily than direction. Anti-populism can then become a language through which people already holding the microphone explain why others should remain quiet.

The cost appears because attention and inclusion are selective. The movement raises some neglected voices by naming them the people. Others become easier to ignore because they do not fit the name. Participation can rise while pluralism falls. Welfare can widen material membership while public language narrows cultural membership. A government can consult supporters more often and make it harder for opponents to organise. Democratic qualities do not travel as one bundle.

Populism also treats mediation as suspect when mediation has work to do. Legislatures slow decisions because interests conflict and details matter. Courts may block majorities to preserve rights that keep minorities citizens rather than guests. Civil services retain capacity across changes of government. Journalists test claims no voter can investigate alone. Federal and local institutions prevent one national majority from deciding every question. These bodies fail, but abolishing the body does not abolish the task.

Comparative research gives an uneven verdict. Studies repeatedly associate populist incumbents with pressure on civil liberties, media freedom, electoral integrity and checks on executives. Evidence for durable gains in participation and representation is less consistent. The pattern is neither destiny nor proof that ideas alone cause every outcome. Coalition partners, organised opposition, party rules, courts, state capacity, inherited institutional strength and time in office alter what governments can do.

The distinction becomes visible whenever participation is mistaken for control. Being invited to applaud a programme is different from being able to change it. Being consulted is different from having a decision-maker's job in your hands. A movement may give supporters more occasions to speak

while making their leaders harder to remove. That is why a crowded square, a new welfare payment and a fair election answer different questions. The first shows mobilisation; the second may show delivery; the third tests a continuing right to choose. None can do the work of the others.

The corrective and the cost can arrive in sequence. A movement identifies a neglected public, opens competition and wins a deserved mandate. In office, continued opposition is recast as proof that the old elite still rules. Institutions that permitted entry are accused of preventing fulfilment. Insurgency turns into incumbent protection without one moment at which supporters chose a new regime.

A serious response must hold both halves. Repair the failure of representation without granting anyone ownership of the represented. Reform institutions that do not listen while defending the institutions that let different citizens answer back. Rule by better elites is not an answer to populism. A people reduced to one authorised voice is not an answer to failed elitism.

The Shortcut Can Close the Exit

Populism begins by assembling a people and fusing an elite. Government gives the movement power to repeat both operations with law, appointments and public resources.

Every governing party claims a mandate. The populist claim is stronger: victory has restored the rightful public against a system that displaced it. Institutions occupied by previous appointees, professional norms or rival parties can therefore be presented as surviving pieces of the usurpation. The movement does not have to reject democracy. It can describe each concentration of executive power as democracy completed.

The sequence varies. A referendum, constitutional assembly or emergency claim may strengthen the mandate. Conflict then develops with bodies that can say no to the executive, from judges to local governments. Some will deserve reform. The danger is not a change to any one familiar arrangement. It is a change that makes correction depend on the permission

of the people being corrected. A reform that gives an elected leader more authority can still preserve public control; one that makes rivals unable to inherit or challenge that authority cannot claim the same defence.

Appointments and resources can tilt the field without cancelling elections. Suppose a broadcaster must renew its licence through a board newly filled with governing-party loyalists. No censor needs to sit beside the editor. The editor must decide how much criticism the business can afford. Public contracts and selective legal pressure can create similar incentives to cooperate. The example is hypothetical; the mechanism is that dependency can do work an explicit ban would make conspicuous. Opposition may remain lawful while becoming costlier to organise, finance and hear.

Nancy Bermeo calls the broader method executive aggrandisement. It is not unique to populists, and populist rhetoric is insufficient to produce it. The representational claim supplies a distinctive defence: limits on an elected leader become limits on the people, while oversight becomes government by unelected enemies. A lawful instrument can therefore be used to weaken the conditions under which law remains contestable.

Not every populist succeeds or tries. Democratic erosion is more likely where institutions are weak, crisis discredits rivals and executives have the resources and time to replace opponents. Coalitions, independent courts, organised opposition and credible electoral competition can interrupt the sequence. Leaders also split movements, mishandle government and lose.

Defeat reveals the model most clearly. A democratic party can believe its programme serves the country and still accept that citizens authorised somebody else. A movement claiming exclusive representation faces a deeper contradiction: if it alone speaks for the real people, how could the real people remove it? The available answers are dangerous. Voters were deceived. The count was stolen. Improper citizens decided. Foreign forces intervened. The movement may leave office despite that language, but the language provides reasons not to.

The exit can narrow without a constitutional rupture. Competitors copy the

movement's categories. Supporters retain an identity organised around betrayal. A leader forms a new vehicle or captures an older party. In its most self-protective form, the story can absorb every outcome: victory proves awakening, resistance proves conspiracy and defeat proves theft. The political people survives the government that first assembled it.

The coalition was built by lowering internal differences and sharpening an external boundary. Power increases the capacity to police both. Supporters who dissent can be expelled morally before they leave electorally. New enemies can explain failed promises. The more the leader claims embodiment, the harder it becomes to admit that the public has changed its mind.

The shortcut from a divided citizenry to one clear voice may correct a system that stopped hearing. Once the voice controls the institutions that decide who may speak, vote, report, judge and organise, the shortcut can remove the route back to plurality. The final democratic question is practical: can those called enemies today lawfully become the government tomorrow?

How It Actually Works

A name before a settled concept

In the summer of 1874, educated young Russians left towns for the countryside. They dressed as workers, took jobs, taught, offered pamphlets and tried to persuade peasants that the village commune could become the base of a more equal order. The campaign became known as going to the people.

The visitors carried a theory of historical possibility. Russia's village commune held land collectively and redistributed use among households, so radicals hoped it could support a socialist future without passing through a long capitalist stage. Many villagers did not respond as the visitors expected. Some distrusted them, rejected their teaching or handed them to the authorities. Police arrests followed. The larger narodnik movement divided over education, organisation and violence, and one branch later

embraced political assassination. Others pursued patient propaganda, agrarian organisation or legal reform. Its members had gone looking for a people imagined as the moral centre of Russia and found peasants with their own loyalties, fears and judgements.

The Russian word *narod* can mean people or folk, and *narodnik* supplied one early route into the European vocabulary of populism. The translation tempts a false family tree. The narodniks were agrarian socialists confronting tsarism, land and the problem of whether Russia could avoid western capitalism. They did not hand a doctrine to later American, Latin American or European movements. What they supplied was an early version of the recurring act: intellectuals naming an authentic people, distrusting established institutions and discovering that the people could answer back.

The American People's Party

The movement that made Populist an English political name grew from a different world. After the American Civil War, farmers faced falling crop prices, debt, railway charges, tight credit and distant markets. They built alliances, cooperatives, newspapers, lecture circuits and purchasing schemes before they built a national party. The organisation mattered. These were not isolated victims waiting for an orator. They had already learned to compare accounts, challenge monopolies and turn private burdens into public claims.

The People's Party met at Omaha in July 1892 and nominated former Union general James B. Weaver for president. Its platform described a republic corrupted by party machines, banks, corporations and concentrated wealth, then claimed government back for ordinary producers. Monetary policy carried special force because deflation increased the real burden of debt: a dollar grew harder to earn while the mortgage did not shrink. Free silver promised more currency and higher prices, though it could never carry the whole coalition.

The policy list was concrete: a graduated income tax, postal savings, public

control of railways and communications, monetary reform, direct election of senators and stronger democratic mechanisms. The platform's railway plank also proposed a constitutional safeguard against patronage, placing all government employees under strict civil-service rules. Public ownership was not to become a stock of jobs with which an administration could reward friends. Some demands later entered national law through other parties. The Populists were modernisers who wanted the state to master new corporate systems, not peasants asking history to run backwards.

Their people was broad in aspiration and narrower in practice. Organisers in the South sometimes sought cooperation between black and white farmers against shared creditors and railways. White supremacy, intimidation and partisan calculation repeatedly broke that possibility. Women organised and spoke prominently, but most could not vote; Wyoming already allowed women to vote in presidential elections in 1892. The platform joined rural and urban labour while blaming imported cheap labour for depressed wages. The exclusions were not all imposed from outside. A movement could challenge one hierarchy while carrying another into its definition of the people.

In 1896 much of the party fused with the Democrats behind William Jennings Bryan and free silver. The decision gained a larger presidential campaign and blurred the independent organisation. Defeat, repression in the South, economic change and absorption by major parties weakened the Populists. Their programme did not vanish, but their name became detachable from them. Later Americans would use populism for styles and coalitions the Omaha delegates would not have recognised.

Mass incorporation in Latin America

The next major use arose amid urbanisation, industrial growth and mass politics. Across Latin America in the middle decades of the twentieth century, older oligarchic systems faced workers, migrants to cities and expanding electorates that could no longer be governed as spectators. Radio allowed a national voice to enter factories and homes, while labour ministries and social insurance turned political recognition into documents, wages and services. The state became both organiser and audience. Leaders and states built new relationships through labour law, unions, welfare, public employment, national development and direct political symbolism.

Lázaro Cárdenas in Mexico, Getúlio Vargas in Brazil and Juan Perón in Argentina are often grouped as classical populists, though the label fits them differently. That disagreement matters. Some scholars emphasise multiclass coalitions and state-led development. Others emphasise personal leadership, mass incorporation or a people-elite discourse. The cases created the category before scholars agreed what the category contained.

Perón makes the mechanism visible. As labour secretary within Argentina's military government after 1943, he developed ties with organised workers and expanded social and workplace protections. His arrest in October 1945 prompted a vast labour mobilisation in Buenos Aires. Released, he won the presidency in 1946. Eva Perón added a public language of loyalty, charity and recognition that made social membership personal as well as administrative.

Peronism brought workers into the political centre and gave many supporters a durable sense that the nation had seen them. Paid holidays, collective bargaining, pensions and union power tied the movement to everyday life, while ceremonies and speeches described beneficiaries as the organised people rather than clients receiving favours. Opponents saw a state swallowing independent society. Supporters saw institutions finally aligned with social citizenship. It also subordinated unions, pressured opposition, restricted parts of the press and treated conflict with established

institutions as conflict with the people's mandate. The combination is why the case refuses clean moral filing. Incorporation and domination were not separate chapters. The movement's ability to distribute rights and recognition strengthened the leader's claim to define the community receiving them.

Perón was overthrown in 1955, but Peronism survived prohibition, exile, factional struggle and its founder's death. It became a political identity broad enough to contain programmes that later moved far apart. Populism here was not a moment of anger. It helped reorganise party competition, class language and belonging for generations.

Shopkeepers against the system

France produced a smaller post-war case. Pierre Poujade, a bookseller and stationer in Saint-Céré, began organising shopkeepers against tax inspections in 1953. The post-war state was becoming more administrative and retail more concentrated. Independent traders saw paperwork, enforcement and large business as one machine built by salaried people against those who carried risk themselves. Poujade denounced officials, parliamentarians and economic modernisation in deliberately coarse language, then built local committees around resistance to inspection.

Poujadism sent dozens of deputies to the National Assembly in 1956 and faded quickly. Its group included a young Jean-Marie Le Pen, one thread connecting the revolt to later nationalist politics without making Poujade their founder. The movement had a vivid people, the honest small producer, and a broad elite, but little capacity to turn protest into parliamentary work. Later radical-right parties joined this vertical division to a horizontal one against immigrants, minorities or supranational institutions. Nativism supplied the boundary. Populism supplied the claim that established parties had conspired to prevent the native majority from ruling.

The neoliberal chameleon

Economic crisis in the 1980s and 1990s disrupted the assumption that populism required redistribution. Debt and inflation discredited established parties. Television strengthened candidate-centred campaigns, while weakened organisations made personal mandates easier to build and harder to supervise. Carlos Menem in Argentina and Alberto Fujimori in Peru attacked failed establishments, then pursued market reforms associated with technocrats and international lenders.

The label neopopulism exposed a conceptual choice. Menem's Peronist identity showed how a durable people could be attached to a changed programme. Privatisation could be sold as a leader clearing away a captured state, just as public ownership had once been sold as recovery from private oligarchy. If populism meant one economy, the cases did not fit. If it meant a political strategy or representational claim, the host could change.

Fujimori showed the flexibility and the boundary. Elected in 1990 as an outsider, he stabilised an economy in crisis and confronted the Shining Path insurgency. In 1992 he dissolved Congress and suspended constitutional restraints with military support. That seizure belongs to authoritarian history. The populist mechanism concerns justification: anti-system authority and weak party mediation helped present institutional destruction as the removal of obstacles between president and people. It did not cause every later act.

Refoundation in Venezuela

Hugo Chávez entered Venezuelan politics after the old party order had lost authority through economic decline, inequality, corruption and the memory of violent unrest. A former army officer who had led a failed coup attempt in 1992, he won the presidency in 1998 by promising to replace the political system rather than manage it.

The replacement began with constitution-making. A constituent process produced a new constitution in 1999 and renamed the republic. It also changed institutions, expanded social and participatory language and

offered voters a founding moment rather than an ordinary alternation. Chávez used long broadcasts and frequent direct encounters to connect policy, personal narrative and national history. Elections and referendums became recurring sources of legitimacy. Chávez's language divided a virtuous people from an oligarchy that had captured oil wealth and the state. Rising oil income later financed social programmes that expanded access to health, education and subsidised goods and gave poor communities forms of recognition long denied by established parties. New participatory bodies offered channels outside old parties and local authorities. Their dependence on central resources, however, could make mobilisation and executive patronage difficult to separate.

The same project concentrated authority. Chávez treated independent media, business groups, sections of organised labour and later state institutions as fronts in a struggle between the people and the old order. A failed coup against him in 2002, followed by conflict in the oil industry and a recall referendum in 2004, hardened the division. Real attempts to remove him outside ordinary competition made the language of permanent siege more credible. Electoral victories then supported further changes to courts, administration, broadcasting and the balance of state power.

Chavismo demonstrates why verdicts split. Supporters can point to incorporation, participation and material provision. Critics can point to polarisation, weakened checks and an increasingly uneven contest. Both examine the same chain from opposite ends. The government's achievements strengthened its claim to embodiment, while threats from opponents made restraints easier to portray as weapons. After Chávez died in 2013, the system's dependence on oil, executive control and a movement organised around loyalty became harder to separate from Venezuela's wider collapse. The later authoritarian and humanitarian history exceeds this book, but the populist mechanism had helped shape the inheritance.

A billionaire becomes ordinary

A thirty-baht health scheme is a more tangible promise than a new relationship between people and power. In Thailand the two became connected. Thaksin Shinawatra, a telecommunications billionaire, won the 2001 election with Thai Rak Thai and brought national policy into the daily calculations of people far from Bangkok. He operated under the 1997 constitution, which had strengthened elected government while creating independent bodies to restrain abuse. The politician who used that stronger centre would also clash with the forces claiming to check it.

Winning power and keeping support were different achievements. Thaksin's resources helped build a formidable party; researchers dispute how far money, electoral reform and policy promises each explain the first victory. In office, the promises acquired a practical meaning through village development funds, farmer debt relief and the health scheme. These were services and resources people could encounter, not merely a new face on television. Delivery helped build an electoral constituency resilient enough to survive later efforts to weaken Thaksin-linked parties. Policy did not make the leader ordinary by making him poor. It made his government consequential to voters whom older political arrangements had neglected.

The case also scrambles class shorthand. A billionaire could present himself as the democratic champion of voters outside Bangkok against a network associated with bureaucracy, courts, military power and established urban status. Opponents included citizens with serious concerns about corruption, conflicts of interest and executive concentration. The 2006 military coup removed the elected government but did not dissolve the constituency its policies had helped organise. A wealthy leader can become politically ordinary when the boundary is moral and territorial rather than an income line. An elite can also contain rival institutions whose conflicts should not be compressed into one intention.

Crisis and the new parties

The financial crisis of 2008 and the austerity that followed damaged claims of competence across Europe. Bank rescues, unemployment, fiscal rules and distant decision-making created an ideal charge: citizens paid while connected institutions survived. Existing parties often shared the main constraints, which made alternation look cosmetic.

New movements translated the anger in different directions. Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain attacked austerity, finance and closed party systems from the left. Italy's Five Star Movement joined anti-corruption, environmental themes, digital participation and hostility to professional politics. On the right, older radical parties and newer challengers connected distrust to immigration, national identity and European integration. Organisers often combined assemblies and online participation with leader-centred television. Horizontal language and concentrated public faces could grow together.

The cases show why crisis is an opportunity rather than an author. Greece's sovereign-debt confrontation placed a national mandate against creditor institutions with immediate budgetary power. Spain's indignados protests did not dictate the organisation Podemos later built. Italy's anger passed through the comic performances and online infrastructure surrounding Beppe Grillo. Similar injuries entered different political machines, shaped by electoral rules, regional conflicts and available entrepreneurs.

The year 2016 made the form globally conspicuous. The British vote to leave the European Union and Donald Trump's election each contained strong claims about restoring control to a betrayed people, though neither electorate nor result can be reduced to populism. Partisanship, migration, race, region, trade and media also mattered. Populism explains the representational grammar, not the complete vote.

From insurgency to incumbency

Winning changes the target. Opposition populists blame a governing elite. Once in office, they also inherit ministries that fail, promises that conflict and supporters whose interests diverge. Blame can turn outward to inherited officials, hostile markets, foreign institutions or internal enemies. The ability to define obstruction becomes a governing resource. Incumbents discover courts, central banks, legislatures, public broadcasters, local authorities and career officials who can still refuse, delay or investigate. The movement must decide whether those bodies are legitimate constraints, reformable failures or remnants of an enemy regime.

Hungary after Fidesz returned to power in 2010 shows how a large electoral mandate, disciplined party, constitutional majority and time can combine. The government rewrote constitutional and electoral rules, altered media regulation, changed appointments and recast national institutions around its programme. Elections continued, but the resources and rules of competition became less even. Populist claims about a national people facing liberal, foreign and bureaucratic elites helped connect separate institutional changes into one mandate.

Other populists have been constrained by coalition partners, courts, divided parties, federal structures or electoral defeat. Italy's Five Star Movement entered coalitions with parties it had attacked and discovered that government required bargaining. Syriza won an anti-austerity mandate in 2015 but faced financial institutions and euro-area rules it could not remove through a national vote. These constraints may frustrate sovereignty, but they also expose that a people's will does not erase dependence. Some govern noisily and leave office. Some moderate. Some retain rhetoric while accepting rules. Comparative research finds a negative average effect on several liberal-democratic protections without a universal route to breakdown. Opportunity, organisation and inherited institutions decide how much a representational claim can become a governing system.

Defeat, persistence and imitation

A populist party can lose while its division survives. It may have changed the agenda more than the law, taught voters a new explanation of events and forced every rival to answer its categories. Rivals copy its issues and tone. The coalition's account of betrayal may pass into a new vehicle, a faction inside a larger party or a later return after the establishment fails again. The name of the elite changes more easily than the experience of exclusion.

The reverse also happens. Governing exposes contradictions inside the people. Taxpayers, pensioners, workers, regions and business owners want different things. Promises meet budgets, law and administration. Failure can break the coalition, unless new obstruction explains it.

Nor does accepting a defeat necessarily dissolve a populist identity. In December 2007, Venezuelan voters rejected Chávez's proposed constitutional changes, and he publicly accepted the result. He had not stopped being a populist between the campaign and the count. The episode does not certify his whole government as pluralist; it shows why particular conduct matters more than a prediction read off a label. At the other extreme, a movement can make every result confirm its story, treating victory as awakening and defeat as theft. Persistence and refusal to lose are different things. Confusing them makes the warning less useful precisely where it is most needed.

How we know

Populism has no official membership test. Researchers code speeches, ask specialists to rate parties, survey citizens or classify leaders from case evidence. Each method observes a different object: a message, a party, an attitude or a way of organising power.

The PopuList classifies European parties; the Global Populism Database codes leaders' speeches. Neither alone explains why a citizen voted. Someone may choose a party for its tax policy without sharing its view of a corrupt elite. Treating every supporter as equally populist would turn a measure of the message into an invented description of its audience. A

recent dataset release can also describe events years earlier.

A study published in 2026 compared discourse and political-strategic indicators across 64 countries using observations from 1990 to 2022. Its discourse measure was more consistently associated with declining liberal-democratic protections. The evidence was observational, however, and changing the measures affected some results. It strengthens a reason to examine ideas alongside organisation, not a licence to predict every government from its speeches.

The history here remains weighted towards Europe and the Americas, where the term and much measurement developed. Thailand tests transportability without making one case a continent. Evidence is strongest when definition, actor, geography, period and outcome stay aligned.

What People Get Wrong

“Populism Means Popular Policies”

A tax cut, price cap or spending promise is often called populist when the speaker means cheap, unaffordable or designed to win votes. That may describe opportunism. It does not identify populism.

Every democratic party offers measures it expects people to like.

Technocrats also choose popular policies when evidence and electoral survival point the same way. Governments sometimes spend beyond their means, conceal trade-offs or make promises they cannot keep. Those failures have precise names: fiscal irresponsibility, deception, short-termism or clientelism. None becomes clearer when folded into one pejorative. A policy becomes part of populist politics through the account attached to it: a rightful people has been denied control by an illegitimate elite, and the measure restores their will. The same tax cut can be defended through growth, fairness, administrative simplicity or revenge on a parasitic state. Only the last structure approaches the concept.

This matters because bad economics should be criticised with budgets,

incentives and evidence. Calling it populist avoids that work. It also allows sound reforms to be dismissed because they challenge powerful institutions. The label belongs to the claim about representation, not to a commentator's estimate of fiscal seriousness.

“It Belongs to the Right”

Recent European and North American debate has made populism look like another name for the radical right. The overlap is substantial because many successful parties combine people-versus-elite language with nativism, national sovereignty and hostility to immigration. The host has swallowed the category.

Left populisms build the people differently. They may join workers, tenants, debtors, public-service users and excluded minorities against financial, corporate or political elites. Syriza, Podemos and Latin American movements have supplied prominent cases. Their policies, moral boundaries and treatment of minorities can differ sharply from those of the right.

The historical record widens the picture further. The United States People's Party attacked railways, banks and concentrated capital. Peronism joined labour incorporation to national leadership. Neoliberal outsiders later combined anti-establishment mandates with market reform. Populism has moved across the economic spectrum because its thin core cannot settle an economy.

The shared structure should not erase the difference. Right-populist movements often add a horizontal boundary between native insiders and outsiders. Left-populist movements more often direct conflict vertically towards wealth and power. Those are tendencies, not guarantees. The correction matters because democratic consequences depend partly on the host ideology and on whom the people excludes.

“The People Are Poor and the Elite Are Rich”

The picture is persuasive because inequality is visible: a struggling household and a wealthy minister look like the people and the elite already cast. Yet populist categories can cut across that divide. A secure pensioner may identify with precarious workers against a political establishment. A small business owner may campaign beside employees while opposing higher wages. What unites them is not necessarily a common income or interest in every policy. It is a common account of whose interests the system respects.

Economic insecurity can shift support, especially where trade, automation, austerity or regional decline created visible losses. Income alone misses exposure and direction. A household may own a home in a shrinking town, fear downward mobility for its children and see its occupation lose standing. Another may be poorer in a growing city and feel politically represented. Material position shapes experience without dictating its interpretation.

The reverse case matters just as much. Thaksin Shinawatra was a telecommunications billionaire, yet could claim to represent rural voters against established centres of power. Wealth may be reframed as independence from the system, while credentials or public office can place a modestly paid person inside the elite. None of this makes class irrelevant. It means the movement selects which hierarchy carries moral meaning.

The better question is not how poor the supporters are. Ask which groups were joined, which forms of power were fused, and why each accepted the same boundary.

“A Crisis Produces Populism by Itself”

Crises discredit competence, break habits and make emergency language plausible. The financial crash, austerity, corruption scandals, migration surges and public-health emergencies have all opened space for populist claims. Yet similar shocks produce different politics.

Timing also defeats the simple model. Grievances can accumulate for years

before a credible entrepreneur appears, while parties may retain loyalty through severe downturns. Prosperity can assist an incumbent populist by financing visible benefits and proving, to supporters, that recovery follows restored sovereignty.

A crisis has no authorised interpretation. Parties and movements decide whether bank rescue means necessary stabilisation, elite protection, national humiliation or proof that capitalism is rigged. They need leaders, organisers, money, media access, legal vehicles, local candidates and a coalition able to survive disagreement. Electoral rules and rival parties shape whether anger becomes a new movement, enters an old one or disperses.

The automatic story flatters incumbents because it presents politics as weather. It also flatters populists by making their victory the natural voice of suffering. Crises create opportunities and evidence. Political supply decides which explanation becomes organised power.

“Social Media Created It”

Populism looks native to the feed: direct address, insult, repetition, crisis, enemy and instant applause. Platforms let leaders bypass some gatekeepers, test language quickly and turn supporters into distributors. Traditional outlets often amplify the same material while attacking it.

Long before a personal account could address millions, a radio voice could make national politics sound intimate. Perón’s broadcasts reached listeners through a movement also built from unions, rallies and state institutions. Earlier American Populists had relied on newspapers and lecture circuits. What changed was the means of access, not the need to organise it. The old media were not miniature versions of social platforms, but their existence is enough to rule out the claim that populism began with a feed.

Social platforms also rearrange gatekeeping rather than abolishing it. A leader who appears to speak alone may rely on consultants, advertising markets, recommendation systems, volunteer networks and sympathetic broadcasters. The direct relationship is partly a production, though

supporters can still experience it as immediate and personal.

Digital systems changed scale, speed, targeting and feedback. They can reward outrage, hide organisation behind a personal account and make a permanent campaign cheap. Evidence does not support one universal effect in which exposure converts users into populists. Platforms interact with prior attitudes, institutions and political supply. Blaming the tool can become another way to avoid the grievance and organisation moving through it.

“Every Outsider Is a Populist”

New parties attack old parties. Reformers denounce corruption.

Whistle-blowers accuse institutions. Campaigners speak for neglected groups. None of that requires a morally unified people, a corrupt elite and a claim to embody the general will.

Nor does establishment membership settle the issue. A governing party can become populist by redefining itself as the last representative of an authentic nation under attack from judges, journalists or international bodies. An opposition party can remain non-populist while demanding radical constitutional change. Position inside or outside office does not determine the representational claim.

The outsider image is persuasive because many populists use it. It supplies innocence from the system and permission to break its etiquette. Yet wealthy celebrities, former ministers and long-standing party figures can perform outsider status, while genuine newcomers can remain pluralists. A green party can challenge an establishment through evidence and coalition. An anti-corruption candidate can prosecute officials while accepting that opponents belong and may win.

Ask what the newcomer claims to represent. Is there a virtuous people set against a corrupt elite, or a particular failure the candidate wants to repair? Then ask how the claim treats rivals. That second question tests its democratic implications; being new to office answers neither.

“It Is Either Democracy’s Cure or Its Death”

Supporters describe populism as democracy restored. Critics describe it as authoritarianism arriving through elections. Each side captures a sequence and mistakes it for the whole.

Populist movements can expose insulated rule, recruit excluded citizens and force neglected issues into competition. Populist incumbents are also associated on average with weaker media freedom, horizontal accountability, civil liberties and electoral integrity. Findings of lasting gains in participation or representation are more uneven. Neither pattern applies identically to every case.

The argument is also damaged by selective cases. Critics study the governments that caused the greatest erosion and infer a law. Defenders point to moments of inclusion and ignore what followed. Comparative research improves the picture by counting quieter failures, constrained governments and cases that left office.

Institutions, host ideology, coalition partners, state resources, opposition conduct and time in office alter the result. A movement may correct representation in opposition and damage contestation in government. It may be contained, moderate, fail or leave after defeat. The binary myth prevents the necessary double response: repair the failure that made the challenge credible, and defend the plural rules that stop one answer becoming permanent.

Use It

Ask who counts as the people

When a politician says the people have decided, replace the noun with a list. Which citizens, workers, regions, taxpayers, families or cultural groups are being invoked? Who is affected but missing? Who is present only in a supporting role?

This does more than expose exclusion. It reveals the coalition being built.

“Working people” may join employees and small owners by praising contribution. “The nation” may join classes by lowering economic conflict and raising cultural membership. “Ordinary citizens” may include affluent supporters by contrasting manners and status rather than wealth.

Then inspect movement over time. A broad people in opposition can narrow in government as critics become disloyal. A group first praised as neglected may be pushed outside when it demands independent power. The useful question is not whether the people exists. It is which differences have been suppressed to make it appear singular, and who had authority to choose them.

Separate diagnosis from monopoly

Break an anti-elite claim into two parts. First: what concentration of power, corruption, insulation or policy failure is being alleged? Second: why does this speaker claim special authority to remedy it?

The first claim may be well supported. Banks may have influenced regulation. Parties may have converged. A court may have protected an unjust rule. Journalists may share social assumptions. Administrative decisions may be remote. Evidence should decide those questions.

The second claim requires another standard. Correct diagnosis does not grant ownership of every citizen harmed by it. A movement can identify a captured institution and still misrepresent opponents, conceal trade-offs or demand powers unrelated to the repair. Keeping the claims separate prevents two common evasions: establishment defenders treating all criticism as demagoguery, and populist leaders treating every proved failure as a blank cheque.

Separate the powers called elite

When several elites are named together, separate them. List the political office, economic asset, legal power, professional authority, media reach or external leverage each one holds. Then ask whether the evidence supports a shared interest, coordination or motive.

This prevents institutional complexity from becoming a conspiracy by grammar. A bank, court, newspaper and university can each deserve criticism while acting for different reasons and constraining one another. Treating them as one bloc may clarify a coalition's story while weakening its diagnosis. A remedy aimed at financial capture will not repair a badly designed court, and an attack on cultural status will not by itself redistribute wealth.

Then draw the two common boundaries. The vertical line places people below and elites above. The horizontal line places insiders beside outsiders. Some movements blame elites for protecting outsiders against insiders, which lets a wealthy supporter remain ordinary while a poor migrant stays outside. Others define the conflict mainly through economic power. Ask who sits above, who sits outside, who can cross the lines and what evidence would show that the alleged bloc is not one bloc after all.

Track the missing intermediary

Whenever a proposal promises to let the people act directly, identify the intermediary being removed. Then list what it did badly and what it did at all.

Start with a concrete task. A party does more than put a logo on a ballot: it selects the person whose name goes beside it. Remove a discredited selection committee and someone must still choose. An open membership vote could widen control; a leader's personal nomination could narrow it. Both can be advertised as clearing away the machine. Courts, civil services and journalism present the same question in different forms. The institution may fail at its work, but abolishing it does not make that work unnecessary.

The key distinction is replacement against vacancy. Reform may transfer a function to a more accountable body. Populist concentration often leaves the function inside the executive while describing the transfer as direct rule. The public sees one layer fewer and one centre stronger. Ask where agenda-setting, interpretation, appointment and enforcement went after the broker was denounced.

Apply the defeat test

Campaign language is cheap evidence of democratic commitment. Defeat is better.

Ask four questions. Are opponents legitimate members of the political community? Can they organise and criticise the government without persecution? Can they win a fair election? Can they take office and exercise the same powers under the same rules?

A movement may criticise an election result, challenge misconduct and demand recounts without failing the test. Democracies need procedures for disputed votes. Failure appears when adverse outcomes are impossible by definition because the authentic people cannot reject their sole representative. Evidence then becomes secondary to identity: a loss proves corruption, deception or contamination of the electorate.

Use the same test on supporters and critics. Anti-populists who imply that certain voters are too ignorant to count reproduce the exclusion they condemn. The democratic answer to a bad choice is persuasion, lawful constraint and another contest, not a better class of sovereign.

Follow the concentration of power

Populist programmes often promise restored control. Trace where control ends up.

A referendum may return one decision to voters while increasing executive freedom over implementation. A constitutional rewrite may widen participation and alter appointments in favour of the governing movement. An attack on media concentration may create public oversight or replace private concentration with state-aligned ownership. Anti-corruption reform may make procurement visible or make prosecution selective.

Intent is insufficient. Track appointment powers, tenure, budgets, ownership, legal immunity, access to information and the ability to organise opposition. Then compare concentration with reversibility. Power temporarily gathered to break a closed system may be defensible if rules specify its limit and

rivals can inherit the same fair contest. Power justified as the permanent expression of one people has no natural stopping point, because any independent check can be redescribed as the elite returning. The final test is inheritance: would the same powers be safe in an opponent's hands?

The limits

Populism is a contested analytical category, not a chemical test. The unresolved dispute is whether ideology, discourse, strategy, style or anti-pluralism should lead the definition. Borderline cases will move when the measure changes. Calling an actor populist never substitutes for explaining policies, institutions, supporters or history.

The concept also carries a built-in temptation for whoever applies it. Critics can use populism to make ordinary citizens sound irrational and protect established power from scrutiny. Supporters can use the people to hide conflict inside their coalition. Both turn a political judgement into a social essence.

Nor can this book tell you whether a particular elite accusation is true. That requires evidence about the institution and claim. It cannot tell you whether a referendum, strong executive or radical reform is wise without examining design and context. Non-populist governments can lie, centralise power and damage democracy. Populist governments can enact useful policy and leave office lawfully.

Use the model to ask better questions, then do the substantive work. The label is a beginning of analysis only when it narrows attention. When it becomes a verdict on the people or a complete account of a government, it has resumed its old job as a boo word.

The one thing to keep

Keep the plural inside the people.

Popular sovereignty is indispensable. Democratic public institutions have authority because citizens, not birth, wealth, force or certified expertise, are entitled to govern their common life. That promise should remain dangerous

to insulated parties, captured regulators, complacent professionals and every office-holder who starts treating consent as an administrative detail.

But citizens do not become one mind when they become sovereign. They remain workers and owners, believers and sceptics, majorities and minorities, neighbours with incompatible interests, people who change their minds and people who lose. Representation is difficult because the public is plural, not because intermediaries have concealed a single answer.

Populism sees a real wound when institutions cease to hear. It offers a powerful repair: name the neglected, join their grievances and return authority to those who were treated as scenery. The repair becomes dangerous when the coalition is renamed the whole, its leader becomes its voice and disagreement becomes evidence of exclusion from the public itself.

So keep one question ready whenever anyone claims the people. Not “are they popular?” Not “are they rude?” Not even “are they right about the elite?” Ask whether the people in their sentence still contains citizens who oppose them.

If the answer is yes, the claim may be fierce democratic politics. If the answer is no, sovereignty has changed owners. The people have stopped being the source of government and become a certificate held by whoever speaks in their name.

Terms

Populism. A political idea or logic opposing a morally legitimate people to a corrupt elite and demanding that public power express the people’s will. Definitions differ over whether ideology, discourse, strategy or style should lead.

The people. The collective claimed as the proper source of authority. It may mean all citizens, ordinary people, workers, taxpayers, natives or another selected group. Political conflict constructs its boundary.

Elite. A minority holding unusual political, economic, cultural, legal or informational power. Populism often fuses several such groups into one corrupt or alien bloc; elite criticism can remain democratic and non-populist.

General will. The supposed common interest of the people considered as a whole. Populists claim to express it, raising the problem of how one will can be known among citizens who disagree.

Thin-centred ideology. An ideology with a restricted conceptual core that cannot supply a full programme alone. Populism needs broader ideas about economy, nation, religion, class, environment or social order.

Host ideology. The broader doctrine giving populism policy and membership content. Socialism, nationalism, nativism, market liberalism, religion or environmentalism can identify the enemy and specify what restored power should do.

People-centrism. Language praising ordinary people or placing them at the centre of politics. It contributes to populism but is insufficient without anti-elitism, moral division and a claim about popular sovereignty.

Anti-elitism. Opposition to concentrated or insulated power. It becomes populist when joined to a virtuous people and a demand that their will override corrupt intermediaries.

Anti-pluralism. Rejection of legitimate diversity in political interests, identities and representation. In populism it appears when one movement claims exclusive moral authority to speak for the real people.

Popular sovereignty. The principle that ultimate political authority belongs to the people rather than a monarch, aristocracy, army or expert caste. Populism sharpens the dispute over who counts and who may interpret their will.

Pluralism. Acceptance that society contains enduring groups and individuals with different interests and values. Democratic pluralism keeps opponents legitimate citizens and possible future governments.

Majoritarianism. The view that electoral majorities should face few constraints. Majority rule decides many questions, but democracy also needs rights, fair competition and procedures preserving the status of losers.

Liberal democracy. A system combining competitive popular government with civil liberties, legal equality and constraints on public power. Liberal here concerns rights and limited government, not one economic programme.

Representative democracy. Government in which citizens authorise office-holders to decide, bargain and administer for them. Populists attack the distance representation creates while using elections to claim a mandate.

Direct democracy. Public decision without elected representatives making the final choice, commonly through a referendum or initiative. It still depends on rules for questions, campaigns, eligibility and implementation.

Referendum. A vote in which an electorate decides or advises on a specified proposal. Referendums are not inherently populist, though populists favour their image of an unmediated popular answer.

Plebiscite. A direct public vote, often initiated from above to ratify leadership, territory or constitutional change. The term suggests stronger executive agenda control than referendum, though usage overlaps.

Charismatic leadership. Authority grounded partly in followers' belief that a leader has exceptional qualities or a special mission. It can assist populism, but neither defines nor exhausts it.

Personalism. Concentration of organisation and loyalty around an individual rather than durable rules. It can make the leader appear to embody the people and make succession or internal dissent harder.

Movement-party. An organisation combining elections with activist networks, public mobilisation or claims to stand beyond ordinary party politics. It may reject the party label while performing party functions.

Technocracy. Decision-making justified by specialised knowledge and competence. Populists cast it as power without consent; technocrats may cast populism as opinion without constraint. Democracy must combine knowledge with accountability.

Nativism. The belief that states should belong to native members and that non-native people or ideas threaten the community. It often supplies right populism with an insider-outsider boundary.

Nationalism. The claim that a nation forms a political community entitled to self-government. It becomes populist when a true nation is opposed to elites said to betray its will.

Inclusionary populism. Populism widening political, material or symbolic membership for previously excluded groups. Inclusion in one dimension can coexist with control, patronage or exclusion in another.

Exclusionary populism. Populism narrowing membership or benefits around a favoured people. It commonly joins anti-elite politics to nativism, but can also exclude through class, religion, region or loyalty.

Left populism. Populism whose host ideology emphasises economic hierarchy, redistribution or social inclusion. Its people is often constructed against financial or corporate power, though programmes and democratic practices vary.

Right populism. Populism whose host ideology often emphasises nation, order, cultural authority, nativism or tax resistance. It commonly joins vertical anti-elitism to horizontal exclusion without one fixed economic policy.

Clientelism. Exchange of targeted benefits, jobs or access for political support. It can accompany populism but is distinct: one is a distribution relationship, the other a claim about legitimate rule.

Executive aggrandisement. Gradual expansion of executive power through legal changes, appointments, budgets and weakened oversight rather than a sudden coup. Populist mandates can portray restraints as obstacles to the people.

Democratic backsliding. Deliberate deterioration of institutions sustaining fair competition, accountability, rights and lawful replacement of rulers. Populist incumbency is associated with backsliding on average, but outcomes vary.

Go Deeper

The clear overview

Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (2017). [Begin here](#). In little more than a hundred pages, the authors explain the ideational definition used as this book's starting point, show why populism can attach to the left or right, and compare Europe, Latin America and the United States without pretending that the cases are identical. The chapters on leadership, democracy and causes are compact enough to orient a newcomer and precise enough to reveal where the arguments remain open. Its chief limitation is the cost of compression: readers interested in construction of "the people", political performance or organisational strategy will need the contrasting works below.

The historical correction

Charles Postel, *The Populist Vision* (2007). Read this for the United States movement that made Populist a political name. Postel replaces the standard picture of nostalgic farmers resisting modernity with organisers who built newspapers, lecture networks, cooperatives and a technically ambitious programme for governing railways, finance and communications. The detail matters because it shows grievances becoming institutions before a presidential candidate arrived. This is a substantial scholarly history rather than a brisk global survey, and it concentrates on one movement whose racial, regional and organisational conflicts cannot stand for later populisms. It is the best antidote to using the nineteenth-century party as decorative ancestry.

The democratic warning

Jan-Werner Müller, *What Is Populism?* (2016). Müller makes the sharpest case that anti-elitism alone is insufficient and that populism turns dangerous through exclusive moral representation: the claim that one actor, and no rival, speaks for the real people. The book is strongest on what happens after victory, when courts, media, civil servants and opposition parties can be cast as illegitimate obstructions. Its narrowness is deliberate and contested. Some scholars think it makes anti-pluralism too close to a defining test and underplays inclusion, political style or the construction of demands. Read it as a stringent democratic diagnostic, then test its standard against cases that remain competitive and plural.

The performance and the medium

Benjamin Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation* (2016). Moffitt explains what the ideational model can leave too static: how leaders perform ordinariness, break respectable conventions, stage crisis and use media systems to create a direct relationship with an audience. The case studies move across regions and show that style is organised rather than spontaneous. This is especially useful for understanding why social media accelerated some populist practices without inventing them, and why bad manners can function as evidence of authenticity. The warning is conceptual: style catches actors and moments that a stricter ideology test may not. The disagreement is productive because it forces the reader to specify what, exactly, is being classified.

Notes and Sources

The term populism has no universally accepted definition. This book uses the influential ideational account to identify claims about a moral people-elite division and popular sovereignty. Discursive, strategic and stylistic approaches are treated as serious alternatives with their own objects of explanation, not as interchangeable labels. The synthesis follows how a varied public becomes one legitimate people, different power centres become one corrupt elite, and direct authority can become exclusive authority. Classification concerns evidence at a stated level and period, not a permanent essence attached to a voter, party or country.

The Whole Thing in One Page and Why You Should Care

Minimum definition. Cas Mudde's 2004 article defines populism through a morally divided people and elite, popular sovereignty and the claim that politics should express the general will. Ben Stanley develops the thin-ideology account. Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser's short introduction gives the clearest later synthesis. Jan-Werner Müller adds the claim to exclusive moral representation and anti-pluralism. The body presents Müller's criterion as a strong danger test rather than the only accepted definition.

Construction of the people. Ernesto Laclau's account of linking heterogeneous demands supports the claim that a popular subject is politically made. Nadia Urbinati develops the consequences for representation. Construction here does not mean invention from nothing. The text keeps material injuries and institutional failures separate from the political work that joins them.

Thinness and hosts. Mudde and Stanley support the distinction between populism's restricted core and the thicker ideologies that supply policy, identity and social order. Luke March helps distinguish people-centred language from fuller populism and compares left and right variants. The manuscript does not infer populism from any policy alone.

Democracy's double promise. Margaret Canovan's distinction between democracy's pragmatic and redemptive faces supplies the central tension between mediated government and popular rule. The book adapts this as an explanatory model, not a claim that every populist episode follows one sequence.

Concept and mechanisms

People and elite. "The people" can refer to the sovereign citizenry, ordinary people or a bounded nation. The tripartite distinction is common in the comparative literature. The manuscript uses examples to show how categories overlap without claiming that every movement deploys all three. It treats "the elite" symmetrically as a constructed political category that can fuse political, economic, legal, cultural, professional, informational and external centres of power. This does not deny real hierarchy or coordination. Elite criticism is kept distinct from populism because corruption, capture and insulation can be documented without treating every independent institution as one moral bloc or claiming exclusive authority to represent the public.

General will and moral conflict. Mudde, Müller and Urbinati support the argument that populist conflict is moral rather than merely positional. Jean-Jacques Rousseau's general will is background to the term, but modern populist usage is not treated as faithful Rousseauian theory. The decisive question is how a common will is claimed among citizens who continue to disagree.

Inclusion and exclusion. Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser's 2013 comparison distinguishes political, material and symbolic dimensions in selected European and Latin American cases. The manuscript retains their regional tendency while refusing to make "Europe" synonymous with exclusion or "Latin America" with inclusion. A government may include in one dimension and exclude in another.

Approaches, leadership, mediation and style. Mudde and Hawkins support the ideational focus on people, elite, moral conflict and popular sovereignty. Laclau's discursive account explains how heterogeneous

demands can be joined into a political subject. Kurt Weyland's strategic definition directs attention to personal leadership, weak organisation and direct mass linkage. Moffitt's political-style approach explains performed ordinariness, transgression, crisis and media. Müller and Urbinati develop representation and anti-pluralism. The manuscript does not collapse these into one definition. The ideational model identifies the minimum claim; the other approaches explain construction, organisation, presentation and use. Personalism, charisma, transgression and direct communication remain common mechanisms rather than individually necessary conditions. Radio, television and social platforms change reach and feedback; they do not abolish mediation.

Demand, supply and opportunity. Sergei Guriev and Elias Papaioannou survey economic, cultural, technological and institutional explanations. Yotam Margalit argues that economic insecurity can matter without explaining most of the total vote. Gábor Scheiring and colleagues' 2024 meta-analysis finds a causal contribution from insecurity associated with globalisation across the studies included, with heterogeneity across settings. Noam Gidron and Peter Hall connect material and cultural change through subjective social status. Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart make the cultural-backlash case. Sheri Berman emphasises longer institutional and party-system failures. The manuscript treats these as interacting mechanisms rather than a contest requiring one universal winner.

Supporters. Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser and Steven Van Hauwaert compare citizen-level populist attitudes across Europe and Latin America. Their work supports heterogeneity and the separation of populist attitudes from host ideology. No single profile in the body is offered as a global median voter.

Democratic consequences. Saskia Ruth-Lovell and Sandra Grahn distinguish effects across models of democracy. Kirk Hawkins and Grant Mitchell's 2025 synthesis reports repeated negative associations between populist incumbency and civil liberties, media freedom, horizontal accountability and electoral integrity, while positive findings on participation

and representation are less consistent. Hawkins, Ruth-Lovell and Mitchell's 2016 article compares ideational and political-strategic measures across 201 incumbents in 64 countries from 1990 to 2022. In its observational models, the intensity of populist discourse was the more robust predictor of decline in clean elections, civil liberties and horizontal accountability. The authors limit causal inference and call for process tracing and experiments. Kurt Weyland stresses opportunity and institutional strength. Nancy Bermeo's executive-aggrandisement model explains gradual erosion through lawful instruments without making it unique to populists. The book states an average association with variation, not an automatic path from rhetoric to dictatorship.

Operating history

Russian narodnichestvo. Franco Venturi remains a major narrative history of nineteenth-century Russian populist and socialist movements. The 1874 "going to the people" campaign, the importance of the village commune, peasant distrust, repression and later strategic division are secure at the level used. *Narodnik* and populist are not treated as proof of a continuous international organisation or doctrine. Kropotkin's memoir also describes disguised activists taking manual work, circulating texts and the mass rural campaign of 1874. It is an engaged participant's recollection, not a neutral count of peasant reactions.

The United States People's Party. The 1892 Omaha Platform supports the movement's moralised account of concentrated power and its programme on currency, railways, communications, taxation and postal savings. Its public-ownership plank proposed strict civil-service regulation for all government employees, under a constitutional amendment preventing expanded patronage. Its accompanying resolutions also included immigration restrictions. Charles Postel supports the account of alliances, cooperatives, newspapers, lecturers and technological modernisation. Interracial practice varied by state and organisation; the movement did not escape the racial order in which it worked. The Wyoming State Archives confirms that women voted in Wyoming's 1892 presidential election. Most

American women still lacked that right: this was a state-dependent distinction, not a uniform federal prohibition.

Latin American incorporation. Michael Conniff's edited history, Carlos de la Torre's comparative interpretation and Kenneth Roberts's work on organisation support the account of labour incorporation, welfare, development, leadership and varied movement structures. Cárdenas, Vargas and Perón are grouped in much scholarship but do not fit every definition equally. The body therefore presents the classification dispute rather than converting "classical populism" into a settled species.

Peronism. De la Torre, Conniff and Roberts support the combination of labour incorporation, leader-centred symbolism, social rights, pressure on opposition and durable political identity. The October 1945 mobilisation and 1946 election are well established. The narrative does not quantify attendance or reduce worker action to Perón's manipulation.

Poujadism. James G. Shields supports the account of Pierre Poujade's 1953 tax revolt, its small-trader base, anti-parliamentary language, 1956 parliamentary success and rapid decline. Jean-Marie Le Pen entered the National Assembly as a Poujadist deputy in 1956. That link is treated as one thread, not proof that Poujade founded every later French radical-right formation.

Neopopulism and Peru. Weyland's strategic account and the Latin American comparative literature support the claim that personalistic anti-establishment politics could accompany market reform in the 1990s. Alberto Fujimori's April 1992 dissolution of Congress with military backing marks an authoritarian seizure. The text does not claim that populist legitimacy alone caused the autogolpe or later abuses.

Venezuela. Kirk Hawkins supplies the main comparative study of Chavismo's discourse and organisation. Steven Levitsky and James Loxton examine the route from outsider populism towards competitive authoritarianism in the Andes. The account distinguishes constitutional refoundation, elections, social provision, participation, opposition illegality

and institutional concentration. It avoids attributing Venezuela's later economic and humanitarian collapse to populism alone; oil dependence, policy, state capacity, coercion and external conditions require fuller treatment elsewhere.

Thailand and Thaksin. Teri L. Caraway distinguishes Thai Rak Thai's initial 2001 victory from the later reproduction of its support, stressing financial resources in the first and policy delivery in the second. Joel Sawat Selway's published response contests her sufficiency claim and argues that electoral reform and policy incentives were important to the first victory too. The body does not adjudicate that disagreement. Caraway supports the village-development funds, farmer debt relief and thirty-baht health scheme at the level used here. Kevin Hewison traces the developing relationship among Thaksin, policy, elite opposition and an organised electoral base. The 2006 coup removed an elected government; this does not invalidate every criticism of its conflicts of interest or executive concentration. Thailand is a bounded case, not a proxy for Asia.

The post-2008 European field. Guriev and Papaioannou, Berman, Margalit and the party literature support the account of bank rescue, austerity, unemployment, party convergence and sovereignty conflict as opportunities rather than sufficient causes. Syriza, Podemos and the Five Star Movement are used to show different organisations built from overlapping grievances. The British referendum on European Union membership and Donald Trump's 2016 election included strong populist claims, but neither result nor supporting electorate is reduced to populism.

Incumbency. Hungary after 2010 is used as a case of sustained institutional opportunity, disciplined organisation and constitutional power. Weyland, Bermeo, Ruth-Lovell and Grahn, and Hawkins and Mitchell support the separation between populist justification and the wider mechanisms of democratic erosion. Italy and Greece show different forms of constraint. The cases are illustrative, not matched experiments.

Measurement. Maurits Meijers and Andrej Zaslove show how expert measurement can treat party populism as multidimensional and continuous.

The PopuList 4.0 release information, dated May 2026, specifies parties in 31 European countries and national elections from 1 January 1989 through 1 May 2026; its entries were reviewed by more than 100 academics and remain revisable. The Global Populism Database v2 codes 1,240 selected speeches from 241 chief executives in 74 countries, mostly from 2000 to 2022. Hawkins, Ruth-Lovell and Mitchell's 2026 comparison uses separate continuous indicators for discourse and political-strategic characteristics across 64 countries. These resources measure different actors, texts, geographies, periods and outcomes. The manuscript does not use a party classification as a voter attribute, a speech score as a complete government description or a democracy index as a measure of populism.

What People Get Wrong and Use It

Popular policy and outsider status. Mudde, March and Müller support the distinction among popularity, people-centred rhetoric, anti-elitism and full populism. Fiscal irresponsibility, clientelism, demagoguery and political novelty remain separate concepts. A long-serving insider can make a populist claim; a newcomer can remain pluralist.

Left, right, class and social composition. The thin-ideology literature, the inclusion-exclusion comparison and citizen-level studies support the argument that populism crosses the economic spectrum and recruits heterogeneous coalitions. Gidron and Hall, Margalit, Norris and Inglehart, Scheiring and colleagues, and Guriev and Papaioannou support separating income, economic exposure, regional decline, status and cultural interpretation. "The people" and "the elite" are therefore not treated as income brackets. The vertical and horizontal axes are analytical aids, not a universal coding rule.

Crisis and media. Guriev and Papaioannou, Margalit, Berman and Moffitt support the separation of shock from political interpretation and organisation. The historical cases disprove any claim that social platforms created populism. The narrower current claim is that digital systems alter scale, speed, targeting, bypass and feedback, with effects conditioned by prior attitudes and institutions.

The defeat test and reversibility. Müller's exclusive-representation argument, Urbinati's account of populist representation and comparative work on incumbency support the practical test: whether opponents remain legitimate members of the public who may win and govern. This is a diagnostic lens, not a legal threshold or a substitute for examining electoral evidence. Chávez's public acceptance of the December 2007 constitutional-referendum defeat is documented in the contemporaneous AFP report carried by Emol on 3 December 2007. It establishes that act, not a general assessment of his democratic record.

Limits. Borderline classifications change with definition and measurement. The book therefore avoids vote-share totals, league tables and claims about a single global populist wave. It does not decide whether any particular elite accusation is true without evidence about that institution, and it does not treat non-populist government as harmless.

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