

Despite his victory in the New York Democratic primary, Bill de Blasio is not a populist

In the wake of his victory in the New York mayoral election's Democratic primary earlier this month some commentators have labelled Bill de Blasio as 'populist', especially in light of his policies aimed at narrowing the gaps between rich and poor. [Duncan McDonnell](#) takes issue with the use of the common use of the term 'populist' in this way, arguing that true populists juxtapose the idea of "good" people with a "bad" set of elites, and wish to restore what they argue is the voice of the people by removing the checks, balances, structures and complexities of liberal democracy.



Sometimes, there's just no escaping populism. Coming back from a conference on "Democracy and Populism" in Sofia last Sunday evening, I picked up a copy of *The Economist*. After three enjoyable but long days of discussions with colleagues from across Europe about populist parties, I was looking forward to reading something a bit lighter that I could take or leave. So, I turned to the pages on US politics.

Bad move. For there it was, the title jumping off the page and poking me in the eye: "[Populism Pays](#)" – a story about Bill de Blasio's victory in the New York Democratic Party primaries. And how is de Blasio "populist" according to *The Economist*? Well, apparently he wants to reduce the massive disparity between rich and poor in the city and introduce higher taxes on the wealthiest. Now, whatever one thinks of that policy and the likelihood of de Blasio ever implementing it, there is one thing we can say about it straight away: it is not, in itself, "populist". At least not in the sense that anyone particularly familiar with the concept would agree with.

I shouldn't have been surprised: *The Economist* has form on this one. Despite being a newspaper which promotes its own [style-guide](#) as a bible of linguistic clarity, it throws the term "populism" around like confetti at a wedding. In the past two weeks alone, it has referred to Australia's [Tony Abbott](#), Iran's [Mahmoud Ahmadinejad](#) and the [July coup in Egypt](#) as "populist" in one way or another.

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Scattergun use

To be fair, its journalists are not the only ones practicing a scattergun use of the term. After the final leaders' debate in the recent Australian election, Mark Kenny in *The Sydney Morning Herald* [told readers](#) that Kevin Rudd had "thrown the lever to populism" by calling for stricter limits on sales of Australian land to foreigners. It was certainly a desperate attempt at crowd-pleasing by a candidate in deep trouble. But it was not populist.

Politicians of course are no better on this topic. Much like Dylan Thomas's definition of an alcoholic as "someone you don't like who drinks as much as you", the label "populist" is used by politicians in public debate to denigrate statements and measures by opposing parties, however similar they may be to what your own side is proposing. When a politician calls someone a "populist", it is meant to shut down discussion, not enlighten it.

Nor are academics blameless when it comes to creating confusion about the term. Nonetheless, among those who have actually done proper research on populism and populist parties, there is broad consensus on the idea that populists first and foremost juxtapose a "good" people with a "bad" set of elites. This is true of both left and right-wing populists. However, in the case of the latter, the people's values, identities and rights are also said to be endangered by a series of "others" who are not considered "of the people" and who – it is claimed – are given preferential treatment by the elites.

The elites and the others

Invoking a sense of crisis and presenting themselves as the “real” democrats, the main contention of populists is that democracy has been occupied, distorted and exploited by elites. And that the people must be given back their democratic voice and power through the populist leader and party. If these claims are not present, then we are not dealing with populists.

It's worth taking a brief look at the key ingredients of populism. The notion of a “good people” is the first one. For populists, the people constitute a homogeneous and virtuous community – with “community” being a place where, as the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman explains [in his book of the same name](#), there is mutual trust and “it is crystal-clear who is one of us and who is not”. By contrast, the enemies of the people – the elites and “the others” – are neither homogeneous nor virtuous. The former generally comprise political, financial, media, bureaucratic, judicial and intellectual elites who are charged with being, at best, distant and incompetent. As for “the others”, their identity differs from case to case, but for right-wing populists in Europe, it usually includes immigrants (and, in particular since 9/11, Muslims), homosexuals, welfare recipients, Roma communities and other groups who are held not to be “of the people”.

Casting themselves as being in battle against the political elites, populists claim they are on a mission to restore sovereignty to the people. While not anti-democratic per se (quite the opposite, in fact), they do however criticise the checks, balances, structures and complexities of liberal democracy. These are said by populists to limit the expression of the will of the people and favour various categories of “others”. As the French political scientists Yves Mény and Yves Surel commented in their 2002 volume [Democracies and the Populist Challenge](#): “Populist movements speak and behave as if democracy meant the power of the people and only the power of the people.” This discrepancy between what the ideal of democracy promises (“rule of the people by the people”) and how liberal democracies actually function (“limited majority rule in the name of the people”) provides the core energy of the populist challenge.

Rip up and rewrite

We can see this clearly when someone such as Italy's [Silvio Berlusconi](#) objects to unelected judges having the power to sanction him, ie. a man who has received the support of millions of Italians. Or when populists want to rip up and rewrite constitutions which constrain their powers – a tactic tried by populists as ideologically different as Viktor Orbán in Hungary and [Hugo Chávez](#) in Venezuela.

So, to return to the journalistic uses of the term: Kevin Rudd and Tony Abbott may be many things, but neither is a populist. Nor, it would appear, is Bill de Blasio. These men, for all their flaws, do not attack the basic principles of liberal democracy in the manner that the likes of Berlusconi, Orbán, Chávez, Australia's Pauline Hanson or [Geert Wilders](#) have done. Nor do they conceive of “the people”, “elites” and “others” in populist ways. There are plenty of populists for The Economist and other media outlets to choose from. A little less inflationary of the term would be most welcome.

PS. In a further example that there is no escaping populism, I will be talking about “populism and crisis” at the [2013 Australian Political Studies Association Conference](#) in Perth on 30 September, along with David Denmark from the University of Western Australia and Rae Wear from the University of Queensland. Do drop in if you're at the conference!

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About the author

Duncan McDonnell - *European University Institute, Florence*

Duncan McDonnell is Marie Curie Fellow in the Department of Political and Social Sciences at the [European University Institute](#) in Florence. He is the co-editor of [Twenty-First Century Populism](#) (Palgrave, 2008), the 2012 '[Politica in Italia/Italian Politics](#)' yearbook and has recently published on the [Lega Nord](#), [Outsider Parties](#), Silvio Berlusconi's [personal parties](#) and the relationships between [mayors and parties](#). He is currently working with Daniele Albertazzi on a book entitled 'Populists in Power' which will be published by Routledge. He tweets [@duncanmcdonnell](#).



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