Contrary to popular opinion, there is no populist upsurge in Britain

*Taken how often we use the term, we need to be more accurate in who/what we call populist, writes **Luke March**. In this analysis he defines the term and explains why, despite what is often said, there is no populist upsurge in the UK.*

It has become a standard cliché that populism, like communism before it, is the 'spectre' haunting Europe. There is allegedly a populist Zeitgeist, and politicians of right and left, of fringe and mainstream, from Le Pen to Macron and Mélenchon, Trump to Sanders, appear to evidence a populist surge. Britain also appears at the forefront of this surge, with the rise of UKIP and its role in Brexit, and new forms of 'left populism', from the Greens to Ed Miliband and now Jeremy Corbyn. Apparently, we are all populists.

But is populism really so ubiquitous? Does it really unite politicians across the political spectrum? While analysts have noted that populism is 'chameleonic' and adaptable, they have also noted a tendency for the term to be bandied about indiscriminately. If the concept is so promiscuous, is it still in any way useful?

My recent study shows that, providing we use accurate definitions and measurement techniques, populism remains a revealing and useful term. However, at least in the British case, populism is far less omnipresent than often assumed: it exists on the fringes of the party system for sure, but its use by mainstream parties is at best fleeting, and generally seems to exhibit *demoticism* (closeness to the ordinary people), which is necessary but not sufficient for populism. Many observers who find populism are arguably seeing demoticism instead.

In this study, I analysed the manifestos of key left- and right-wing parties in Westminster and Scottish elections from 1999-2015, comparing the mainstream (Labour and the Conservatives) and the allegedly populist parties (Respect and the Scottish Socialist Party [SSP], UKIP and the British National Party [BNP]). The Scottish focus was chosen to maximise data, because the SSP was (once, before an acrimonious and tawdry split), one of Europe's better performing populist radical left parties.

A profusion of techniques for measuring populism have emerged in recent years. These can be criticised for replicating the problem they claim to solve, i.e. instead of helping accurately identify populism, they end up arguing that populism is *a matter of degree*, and because they provide only an aggregate populism score, they don't sufficiently focus on how populism and mainstream parties differ.

In order to obviate such criticisms, I adapted one of the most robust content analysis schemes originated by Matthijs Rooduijn and Teun Pauwels. I made it more fine-grained and discerning, by focussing on sentences, not paragraphs, and added a category (popular sovereignty), so that three populist sub-components were examined (people-centrism, anti-elitism, and popular sovereignty). This makes my schema match more closely one of the most influential definitions of populism in the literature: '*a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' and 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the* volonté générale *(general will) of the people'*. I also examined the party manifestos in-depth, to avoid relying simply on numerical data for questions requiring nuanced interpretation.

Figure 1. Party populism (manifestos 1999-2015)
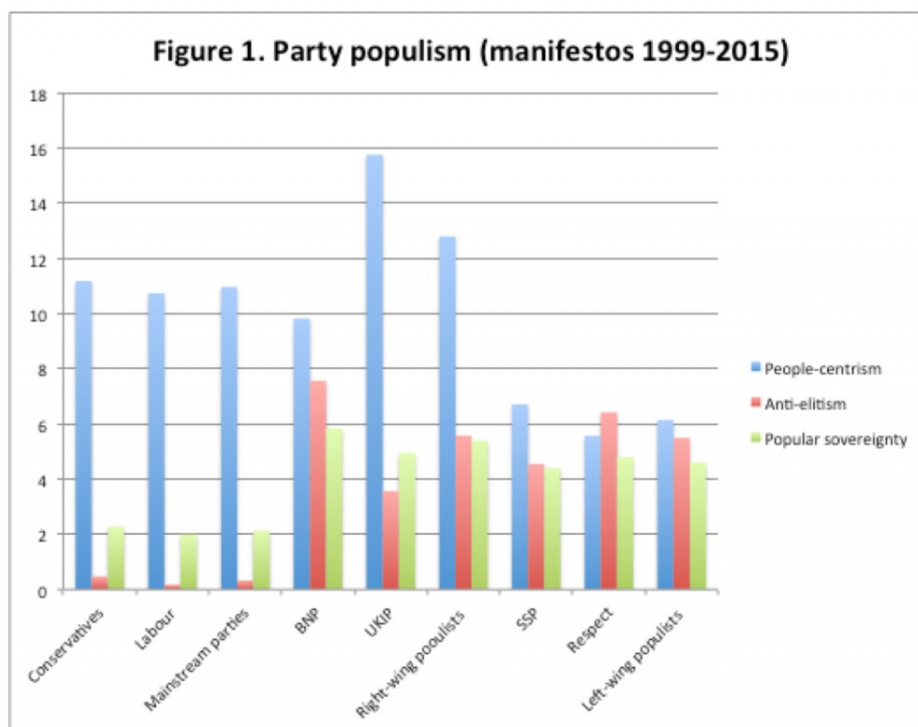
Key: the figure analyses the percentage of populist sentences per manifesto

The analysis results (Figure 1) show the utility of breaking populism into components rather than relying on aggregate populism scores, as do many other scales. So doing is not especially revealing, and even misleading – after all, the *overall* scores of some populist and mainstream parties are little different. The table clearly shows that the populist parties score consistently and (mostly) equally across each of the three core populist components, whereas the mainstream parties scores load very heavily on the people-centrism scale, with low popular sovereignty scores and negligible anti-elitism scores.

The scale proves accurate in showing that only the supposedly populist parties truly fulfil the full ideological definition of populism. Focussing on the results over time further indicates that there is no real upsurge of populism – the only consistent increase is in the people-centrism scores of the mainstream parties. All in all, evidence for a British populist Zeitgeist is meagre, although demotic rhetoric is increasingly evident.

A more detailed focus on the manifestos reinforces this. It indicates that: 1) only the allegedly populist parties have a detailed, coherent populist critique which consistently attacks a range of elites (political, economic, international) and focuses on measures designed to empower a broad homogeneous people; and 2) left and right populisms are not substantially similar, but are clearly distinguishable by the nature of their core ideology. That is, they attack different elites (economic vs. cultural), have different conceptions of the people (more inclusive and pluralist for the left, more exclusive [against immigrants] and monocultural for the right). In other words, their populism has little substantive content separate from the parties' core ideological positions.

In contrast, the mainstream parties' focus on popular sovereignty and (in particular) anti-elitism is very fleeting, vague, and tokenistic (e.g. providing more accessible public services, or attacking 'remote politicians'). But their people-centrism is ubiquitous – they repeatedly speak in the name of the people to emphasise common projects (the 2010 Conservative claim that 'we are all in this together' is typical).

This indicates that, in the UK, apart from the obvious electoral rise of UKIP (until its dramatic collapse in the 2017 elections), there is no real populist upsurge. There are populist parties to the left and right of the party system, but their fundamental programmatic differences make them hardly examples of the same phenomenon. The 'populism' of the mainstream parties exists only in a handful of vague phrases, but for the most part, such parties are demotic, which is arguably mainly a product of catch-all parties operating in a majoritarian party system than any consistent mainstream populism.

At first glance, such findings seem counterintuitive given the Brexit referendum. Focussing on party manifestos certainly doesn't exclude that populism is a major feature of some of the British press or that it is used periodically by individual politicians (e.g. Michael Gove's attack on experts, or Theresa May's post-Brexit insistence on fulfilling the 'will of the people'). Yet, it does show how the UK party system acts to confine genuine populism to the fringes. In this respect, the populism associated with Brexit is arguably far more a *product* of the referendum campaign than anything whose prior rise made the referendum inevitable.

Certainly, the 2017 election campaign shows more continuity than change, not least because of the demise of UKIP and the Conservatives' un-populist (and unpopular) campaign. Although Jeremy Corbyn is often portrayed as a left-wing populist, the 2017 Labour Manifesto contains only a handful of invocations against the 'rigged system', and its central slogan ('For the Many not the Few') is authentically Blairite. So seeing Corbyn as a populist is, at best, a half-truth.

As a consequence, we clearly need to be more accurate and judicious in who/what we call populist, especially by noting substantial left/right differences, and distinguishing populism from demoticism. Manifestly, populism works as a general category, but like the similar term 'Euroscepticism', it is not always particularly revealing. To define, observe, clarify, and delimit populism further does not necessarily mean that it is an unimportant term; it is merely to note that it is often the most observable, but not necessarily the most significant, of several concurrent phenomena. For instance, the central campaign slogan of the victorious Leave campaign, 'Take Back Control' was evidently populist (seizing control from remote EU elites) but equally, and perhaps even more importantly, it was demotic (emphasising individual, community and national empowerment and sovereignty). This explains why it was so effective at the time. Certainly, subsuming all such elements beneath the catch-all label of populism threatens to oversimplify and obscure, rather than illuminate.

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About the Author

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