

From Chávez to Trump, must we really talk about populism?



There has been a surge in academic and media interest in populism, fuelled mainly by the election of Donald Trump. But as misleading comparisons with Venezuela's Hugo Chávez show, the concept obscures more than it illuminates, while also marginalising any challenge to a dysfunctional "moderate centre", writes [Barry Cannon](#) (Maynooth University).

There is a spectre haunting global politics – populism! And some of the leading politicians in Europe and the Americas know it, from [Jean Claude Juncker](#) and [Francois Hollande](#), to [Angela Merkel](#) and [Barack Obama](#).

The media agrees, with the term used 695 times in the headlines of the world's major English-language news publications from early 2015 to mid-2017. Academia, too, has long been concerned with the issue, but in recent years there has been a notable boom in that concern, with the WorldCat database showing 1,854 results for titles referencing "populism" from 2013 to 2017.



The spectre of populism has stoked fear amongst publics and politicians alike ([Surian Soosay](#), [CC BY 2.0](#))

But here I want to argue that this concern is misplaced and in fact distracts from the real problems facing us in an age of crisis. Populism is not a useful concept for academic or indeed media analyses of contemporary politics. It is too conceptually loose, too normatively biased towards liberal variants of democracy, and too easily instrumentalised to marginalise challengers to the political status quo regardless of their ideological positions or programmatic proposals.

The many meanings of populism

Populism has a wide range of meanings and is a highly-contested concept. Though first used in Russia and the US in the 19th century, it was developed mainly in the post-World War II period. Broadly speaking, the term is used in four senses:

- an historical/sociological perspective, emphasising populism as a stage and consequence of economic and social development
- an economic perspective, identifying populism with expansionist and redistributive economic policies

- a political perspective, equating populism with vertical or leader-led popular mobilisation at the expense of existing democratic institutions, leading to direct leader-people communication
- an ideological perspective, emphasising discourse based on the ‘people’ against those in power, the ‘underdog’ against the ‘elite’.

Thus, [populism can refer](#) “to a family of ideologies, a variety of political movements, a type of regime, a ruling style, an economic model, and a particular mode of political appellation”.

With such a wide range of (contested) meanings it’s no surprise then that an equally wide range of political phenomena can be placed in the ‘populist’ bag.

Chávez and Trump: two of a kind?

Take, for example, former president Hugo Chávez of Venezuela. Chávez implemented expansionist policies providing increased welfare, education, and health services to the poor and readily identified himself as a leader of the international Left. His detractors – at home and abroad – accused him of being top-down and authoritarian, and of using an elite/underdog discourse, despite having won numerous elections,. He could thus be regarded as populist on a number of counts.

More recently, Donald Trump [has been branded populist](#), mostly due to his use of an elite/underdog discourse and his authoritarian tendencies. Yet it could be argued that Trump is reducing welfare for the poorest (as by abolishing Obamacare), increasing inequality (as by reducing taxes for the wealthy), and courting support from far-right, white-supremacist groups.

Clearly, Trump’s policies are a far cry from the mixed-race Chávez’s leftist and internationalist stances. While the two utilise a similar discursive strategy, they are widely different in ideological intentions and programmatic objectives. Yet the term populist links them analytically and – more importantly – morally, obscuring rather than highlighting these differences.

This analytic and moral equivalence is based on the supposedly anti-democratic and demagogic nature of these presidents. But this depends on how you define democracy.

Both Chávez and Trump were elected – Chávez repeatedly – and both represent important constituencies. Moreover, many permissibly democratic leaders – Tony Blair, for example – use anti-elite discourse and appeals to “the people”, whereas some so-called populists – such as Beppe Grillo of the Italian Five Star Movement – do not.



Is there more to the comparison than discursive styles? (Mix of [Isabelle Blanchemain](#) and [openDemocracy](#), CC BY-SA 2.0)

Democracy itself is rarely defined by those writing on populism, but the underlying presumption is that it means “liberal democracy”. Yet democracy too is a highly-contested concept, and liberal democracy but one variant of many.

Chávez’s Bolivarian Revolution led to the inclusion of millions of previously excluded Venezuelan citizens in the economic, social, and political life of the country. Trump, on the other hand, seeks to exclude many Americans on the basis of religion or race. Hence, while those labelled “populist” are construed as anti-democratic, totalitarian even, this actually depends on the programmatic content of the supposedly populist movement in question.

Does populism obscure more than it illuminates?

The label, then, is in fact essentially misleading as it irons out and obscures important distinctions in programmatic intent between “populist” regimes, which can have a direct bearing on our democracies, economies, and societies.

This is especially true in the current context of ongoing national, regional, and global crises, because hegemonic struggles over their meaning, duration, and solutions remain unsettled. Theorists of crisis [argue that](#) analysts must respond with conceptual rigour to these challenges, using clearly defined concepts that help us chart a course out of crisis, but “populism” only serves to stifle necessary critical discourse.

It [counterposes](#) a “moderate centre” of dominant political parties, institutions, and media with “populist” extremes that are depicted as equally dangerous, whether left- or right-wing, radical democratic or neo-Nazi. Only the “moderate centre”, as it exists or slightly reformed, can bring us back to stability. Yet, it was the “moderate centre” that led us into the current crisis in the first place.

Neoliberalisation, that fetishisation of market over social logics, was pursued vigorously by the majority of these ‘centrist’ institutions, creating the very context in which so-called populist extremes emerged. And rather than tempering or abandoning neoliberalism in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, the “moderate centre” has since pursued it with ever more gusto, causing even greater damage to our social fabrics.

Any challenge to this state of affairs is dismissed as populist, with little interrogation of its underlying rationale, proposals, or utility to resolving the current crisis. Thus, the concept of populism helps stymie vital debate rather than stimulate it.

If not populism, then what?

Instead, we need to be more precise in our conceptualisations, labelling political phenomena in ways that better reflect their true natures.

Thus, instead of calling the [Alternative for Germany \(AfD\)](#) party and Spain’s [Podemos](#) respectively right- and left-populist, with all the moral equivalence that this suggests, we should foreground their programmatic content by calling the first ‘right-wing neo-fascist’ and the second ‘left-wing radical democratic’.

We may argue about the exact terminology, but there are many options that would improve upon the normatively charged, catch-all vagueness of “populism”. This could then foster deeper discussion of the actual content of these parties’ policy platforms and what they mean for the values and aspirations of our societies.

Sadly, it is unlikely that the term will be abandoned any time soon. It is simply too politically powerful, too emotionally charged, and too resonant a term for analysts to abjure its use. Social scientists, however, could at least reconsider using the concept, as it is our moral and ethical duty to provide clear and accurate conceptual tools to help guide public discourse.

Populism, I fear, is not up to the task.

Notes:

- *The views expressed here are of the authors and do not reflect the position of the Centre or of the LSE*
- *Please read our [Comments Policy](#) before commenting*



Barry Cannon – *Maynooth University*

Dr Barry Cannon lectures on politics at Maynooth University, Ireland. His research focuses on Latin American politics, especially civil society, democratisation, and the left and right in the region. He has been published in *Third World Quarterly*, *Latin American Politics and Society*, and *Democratization*. His most recent book is *The Right in Latin America: Elite Power, Hegemony and the Struggle for the State* (Routledge, 2016).