

A Case Study in Left Wing Neo-Populism: The Rise of the Syriza Party in Greece

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Abstract

This research considers three approaches to the study of populism: populism as an ideology, populism as a discourse, and populism as a strategy. We highlight the debates between these different approaches. Next, we take the most significant definition from each of the three approaches and rethink how populism as an ideology should be defined as fundamentally rooted in popular sovereignty. We then ground this discussion by applying each approach to a recent phenomenon in the European political arena, the Syriza party. Finally, we use discriminant analysis to identify the distinguishing characteristics of a Syriza party supporter. We find that this party's supporters are less critical of the European Union, younger and more leftist than other recent neo-populist parties in Europe.

Keywords: populism, Greece, Syriza party

1. Introduction

It has been argued that the term “populism” originated in the United States by the self-identified populists of the People's Party of the 19th century, which emerged as an agrarian response to the crop-lien system and industrialization (Houwen, 2011). In today's nomenclature, populism is often used in a pejorative manner by scholars, pundits, and politicians alike. This shift in connotation has roots with sociologist Edward Shils (1956, pp. 98-103) who equated populism with Nazism and McCarthyism, calling them “an irrational protest ideology”. A decade later, Richard Hofstadter (1964) reinforced the negative connotation associated with populism, by arguing that “the People's Party had mobilized irrational hostilities, i.e., elements of anti-Semitism and generalized xenophobia against immigrants” (p. 19).

Despite this negative view of populism, some scholars have argued that, in fact, populism is inherently democratic. Goodwyn (1976) presents populism as something intrinsically democratic—an act of popular sovereignty that is by definition, democratic. Grattan (2014) identifies two differing views on populism: supporters (radical democrats) and critics (liberal critics). As such, populism can be a corrective democratic force or conversely, it can be perceived as an anti-democratic act of tyranny by a majority.

2. Populism as an Ideology

Populism as an “ideology” emphasizes the “moralization” of the antagonistic relationship between “the people” and “the other”. The “moral” element has roots in Edward Shils's (1956) definition of populism. Shils proposes a gamut of questions and statements regarding both populism and populists, and he makes a vigorous and negative account of populism. He describes the will of the people who are “impatient” with “bureaucratic red tape” and that ultimately, “the people” are better than “their rulers and the urban middle classes” (pp. 1-5). Similarly, Ionescu et al. (1969) conclude that populism “worshipped the people” and that the people were the meek and miserable. These authors also pondered whether populism transformed or was absorbed into other ideologies or movements such as nationalism, socialism, and peasantry. Canovan (1981) outlined agrarian populisms and political populisms. She describes agrarian populisms as farmers' radicalism (i.e., U.S., 19th century People's Party), peasant movements (i.e., Eastern European green rising) and intellectual agrarian socialism (the Russian narodniks). As for the political populisms she describes populist dictatorships (i.e., Peron), populist democracy (i.e., calls for referendums), reactionary populism (i.e., George Wallace), and politicians populism (i.e., broad non-ideological collation building that draws on the unification appeal of “the people”). In a later work, Canovan

(2002) constructs an ideological understanding of populism. She challenges the “discourse” approaches because, as she says “populism has a characteristic of core concepts that it asserts, priorities and decontests—democracy, popular sovereignty, the people [...] these cannot be dismissed as empty rhetorical flourishes” (p. 33).

Mudde (2004) argues that both of these conceptions miss the core attributes of what populism actually represents. Indeed, Mudde argues that almost all definitions have “at least two points of reference in common: ‘the elite’ and ‘the people’” (p. 543). Therefore, Mudde argues for a new definition and puts forward a concept that includes only the “necessary and sufficient” conditions that promote low “intension” and “high” extension. In other words, a definition narrow enough to avoid Laclau (2005) argument that all politics is a degree of populism, but broad enough to capture a wide array of parties. Mudde states: “I define populism as an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’ and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people. Populism, so defined, has two opposites: elitism and pluralism. Elitism is populism’s mirror image: it shares its Manichean worldview, but wants politics to be an expression of the views of the moral elite, instead of the amoral people. Pluralism, on the other hand, rejects the homogeneity of both populism and elitism, seeing society as a heterogeneous collection of groups and individuals with often fundamentally different views and wishes” (p. 543).

Stanley (2008) argues for a “thin” ideology of populism. He states that populism is “an ideology articulated by political agents in the attempt to mobilize ‘the people’” (Stanley, 2008, p. 98). Stanley goes on to define the core concepts of populism: 1) the existence of two homogenous units of analysis, “the people” and “the elite”; 2) the antagonistic relationship between the people and the elite; 3) the idea of popular sovereignty; and 4) the positive valorization of “the people” and the denigration of “the elite” (p. 102).

Van Kessel (2014) utilizes a ladder of abstraction, “the basic idea is that concepts higher on the ladder have fewer properties and are, therefore, applicable to more cases”. He argues that at the most abstract level populism is mere discourse, and conversely, while at the most intension populism is a “thin” ideology, which can be found in forms such as “populist radical right” or “social populism” (Ibid., pp. 111-112). Perhaps Van Kessel’s boldest contribution, however, is his prescription for what not to do: 1) do not use the adjective of populism when a case only complies with some of the components of populism; 2) do not use populism as a “descriptor” when a political actor expresses discourse that complies with a minimal definition of populism; 3) do not stay on this level of abstraction if populism is not a lasting constituent feature of the political party or movement, or when the study merely means to analyze degrees of populism; 4) do not use populism as a “classifier” when populism is an essential characteristic of a political actor and when the study refers to a case within an exclusive category of populist actors, such as “populist parties” (pp. 112-113).

3. Populism as a Discourse

Discourse denotes “all ‘systems of meaningful practices’ that form the identities of subjects and objects through the construction of antagonisms and the drawing of political frontiers” (Stavarakakis & Katsambekis, 2014). Therefore, this section examines both discursive analysis and “historicist” or “constitutive accounts” of populism. Laclau (2005) describes a theoretical process by which populism emerges out of the discourse of “social demand” which he argues in logic of difference and equivalence in the discursive field. Panizza (2005) offers a collection of authors take on populism in three broad categories: empirical generalizations, historicist accounts and symptomatic readings. He aims to understand populism in the context of three key questions: Who are the people? Who speaks for the people? And how does populist identification take place (pp. 1-2)? Lowndes (2005) offers a “historicist” account of populism by employing an anti-naturalist concept formation to build a narrative about 20th century populism in the American south. While Lowndes does concede some “definitional” characteristics of populism, such that “populist discourse assumes a homogenous notion of the people” and that “populist leaders claim an immediate identification between themselves and those they represent” he qualifies this by saying that “the emergence of right-wing populism can be reduced neither to historical determinacy nor to a radical contingency of the political moment”.

Comaroff (2011) argues that populism is a “shifter” which is a term used by linguists to describe a word which has no meaning except when in reference to the message. Comaroff (2011) elaborates that populism is almost always used “in opposition to what is defined, by contrast, as elite, exclusive, or establishment, its deployment being more about marking difference than denoting content” (p. 100).

4. Populism as a Strategy

Populism as a “mobilization and organizational strategy” is distinguished from the other two approaches discussed, because it puts a special emphasis on the organizational structure of populist movements and the relationship between “the people” and the leader. This is in contrast to both the ideological and discourse approaches because they are not concerned with a “charismatic leader”. Second, the strategy approach often invokes both discourse and ideological notions to operationalize their conception of populism as a mobilization strategy. Third, a distinction can be made regarding the nature of the definitions themselves, both the ideology and discourse approaches—where they exist as such—are “theoretical” while the strategy approach has a much stronger tendency to be an “operational” definition.

Weyland (2001) argues that populism is a political strategy, with two sub-types, which is differentiated by what constitutes “the people”. At the core of any populist strategy, according to Weyland, is a leader, which is necessarily reliant on mass support. However, that mass support can come in two forms, in the language of Rousseau, the *volonté général* or *volonté des tous*, the general will or the aggregation of private individuals. Notably, Weyland argues that more-or-less that “classical populism” of the 19th and early 20th century is more like the “general will” while “neo-populism” is a phenomenon starting around the 1980s. Zaslove (2008) explicitly sidesteps the debate about whether or not populism is an ideology, yet he does conceive of an “ideal” condition for populism described as such:

“I divide the populist ideal into two parts: the discourse of populism and the institutional form of populism. The discourse pits the common every day, virtuous, and homogenous people against both elites (politicians, intellectuals, the media) and perceived outside threats (special interest groups, immigrants, feminists, ecologists) [...] a charismatic and populist leader who claims to possess a direct and unmediated relationship with the people [...] this leads to a centralizations of leadership and a low level of party institutionalization [...] to be sure, not all populist parties or movements meet all the demands of the ideal type. But in order for a populist party to be considered populist it must adhere as closely as possible to this ideal type” (pp. 323-324).

This definition is actually quite comprehensive in both its account of the perceived ideology of populism while still paying attention to the operational side of how populism manifests. It retains the core of Mudde’s definition (through discourse) while incorporating a nod to Laclau’s “internal frontier” and simultaneously narrows the conception toward Weyland’s operational definition.

Populism as a strategy covers a variety of conceptions concerning populism. Zaslove’s definition, however, seems far more significant and useful. It isn’t enough to be populist for this approach, because the act of being populist is defined, at least partially, by the actions of people in a social movement with “populist features” and ostensibly under the leadership of some patriarchal figure. This approach and its authors view populism differently than both the ideological approach and the discourse approach.

5. Re-Thinking Populism and Its Consequential Scholars

This section aims to extract the most important definitions from each category and compare them against each other. These include Cas Mudde’s “thin-centered” ideology definition, Ernesto Laclau’s discourse theory definition, and Andre Zaslove’s two-part definition that pays attention to both discourse and organizational forms of populism. Mudde’s definition, as arguably are all ideological definitions, is logic of interpretation or an “ideational” argument—that is to say the populists have a fundamental set of ideas that have belief in “the people” as being pure and as always in opposition to the corrupt elites. While both Laclau’s and Zaslove’s seem to be logics of position or “structural” arguments—that is to say the actors are responding to material forces (for example, increased access to health care or rejecting immigrants) and that any antagonistic relationship between “the people” and “the elites” can come and go as demands rise and are satiated.

In light of this, the article asks how a definition might be constructed that captures the ideological foundation of populism and its central tenets but also accounts for those who would use discourse and organizational strategies that reflect populist ideology, but perhaps do not actually believe in that ideology. Populism as an ideology must be rooted in popular sovereignty. As such, it is incompatible with any and all ideologies that reject any notion of “the state” and “the people”. We have chosen the most influential definition from each of the three categories of populism scholarship. This article offers therefore the following definition:

Populism is an ideology that believes “the state” is constituted by popular sovereignty. Populist discourse pits “the people” against “the elites” and “the pluralists” in an “internal antagonistic frontier” whom would strive to reconfigure state sovereignty, traditions, and laws away from the general will of “the people”. As such, populism is an ideology fundamentally incompatible with other ideologies that reject “the state” or “the people”.

Stated as such, this definition retains a theoretical level of abstraction so as to be applicable across time and space, yet narrow enough to avoid including a variety of cases, which simply could not be ideologically grounded populism. However because of its concise conception of how populist discourse works, it provides a clean way to compare those who believe populism ideology versus those who simply use populist discourse. Expressed as such, this definition may provide a way forward for research to be more precise in what is populism and simultaneously avoid having to rely on an overly broad typology.

The next section grounds these definitions in a case study of the recent Greek phenomenon of the Syriza party in Greece. It uses each approach, as discussed above, as a tool to assess if this party is indeed populist or not.

6. Is the Syriza Party a Populist Party?

Because of electoral rules, a minority party often has greater EU level representation than at the national level, but the Syriza party has done well on both fronts. The Syriza party obtained just over 35 percent of the vote in the most recent national election of September 2015 (BBC.com^a). Moreover, it won nearly 27 percent of the vote in the 2014 EU parliament elections (BBC.com^b). In both cases, the Syriza party was the top choice for Greek voters.

Using discourse analysis, Stavrakakis and Katsambekis (2014) conclude that there is some antagonistic relationship between “the people” and some “other”, by examining statements made by the Syriza party and its leader Alexis Tsipras. Their analysis begins by tracing the status of “the people” and they find that in the early years of the Syriza party there was hardly any reference at all to “the people” but instead words like “society” and “youths” were more prevalent. However, by 2012, they found that in at least one speech, Tsipras referred to “the people” over 50 times. More than just counting the use of the phrase “the people” however, the significance of the word becomes more powerful, “...it clearly assumes the role of a privileged reference, a nodal point that over-determines this discourse from beginning to end...” (p. 128). In other words, they argue it clearly fulfills the criterion of the discourse having a central reference to “the people”.

Many authors who claim populism is a strategy for mobilization often focus on organizational or “operational” components of populism. Following the definition by Zaslove (2008), populism is first identified by the discourse pitting “the people” against both “elites” and “others”. Second, a “charismatic leader” claims to have a “direct and unmediated relationship” with “the people”, which leads to a “centralizations of leadership” and a “low level of party institutionalization” (pp. 323-324).

To explore populism as an ideology we can refer back Mudde’s “populism is an ideology” that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite” and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people (Mudde, 2004). By this point, after exploring two approaches, it has been well established that Tsipras and the Syriza party view the Greek people divided, arguably, into the “homogenous and antagonistic groups”. However, it hasn’t been clear that the people are “pure” or that the elite (establishment or status quo) are “corrupt”. Going directly to the source, at the website of the prime minister of Greece, Tsipras says in a speech “The political and economic storm that our country has seen left one thing steadfast in place: the clientelistic and corrupt state that supported the political and economic elite of this country” (Primeminster.gov.gr). Even if we grant that referring to a “corrupt state” satisfies the “corrupt elite”—and I think we should—there is no indication or mention of a “pure people”. However, it is conceivable that by definition, if the state is corrupt and in opposition to the people, the people are therefore pure.

Therefore, it seems that in comparison to the other two approaches, relatively speaking, it is less clear whether or not the Syriza party is indeed populist according to the Mudde’s ideological approach. This is partially due to the fact that a moral component doesn’t seem to enhance or better capture who or who is not populist. Moreover, the inferred discourse from said moralization also seems absent in the case of Syriza. It seems unlikely that Mudde and other scholars who follow this approach would classify the Syriza party as populist.

Let us turn then to the new definition as put forward by this paper. First and foremost, populism is an ideology that believes “the people” are the constituent power of the state—that the state is legitimated by popular sovereignty. As such, the discourse should reflect “the people” in opposition to the “the state” and “the pluralists” who would aim to undermine or reconfigure “the people’s” will. The discourse of the Syriza party clearly articulates populist discourse, through both rhetoric and images. More importantly, however, is that because Greece is a democracy, we can imagine that not only does Tsipras and the Syriza party use populist rhetoric, but that they actually believe populism as an ideology—that the state itself is representative of and constituted by the popular sovereignty. This is further confirmed by the fact that the Syriza party is neither

anti-state nor anti-people as a party. Therefore the Syriza party is quite obviously a party with populism ideology.

We thus argue that definitions currently in use are somewhat burdened with terminology that can cause confusion and inaccuracies in finding and identifying populism and populists, i.e., leaders or morals. Second, even if a definition does accurately capture the concept of populism, these definitions sometimes fail to even acknowledge a fundamental aspect of populism—popular sovereignty. Following this point, current conceptions don't exclude what obviously cannot be populism, such as anti-state or anti-people ideologies—which allows for a clear distinction between populist rhetoric and populism ideology. As such, our new definition maps onto arguments about populism being affiliated primarily with right-wing nationalist parties, but retains a utility to also explain left-wing examples such as the Syriza party, without having to precondition itself as left or right wing populism or as “inclusionary” or “exclusionary” populism. Indeed, such prefixes have nothing to do with the fundamental ideology of populism, and making such distinctions conflates the “thin-centered” ideology of populism with the compatible host ideologies. In other words, the exclusionary component of “exclusionary populism”, as defined by Mudde, isn't that the populism ideology is somehow different between “exclusionary” and “inclusionary” populists, but that instead they have a different ideology about race, gender, religion, or other criteria.

7. Discriminant Analysis

In order to identify what factors influence how Greek voters actually cast their votes, we conduct a canonical linear discriminant analysis (Note 1) to identify the most important variables that distinguish between the parties in Greece. The data is taken from the European Election Study (Schmitt et al., 2015), which was collected via Computer-Assisted Personal Interviews (CAPI) in February and March of 2015, using a multi-stage stratified random sample of residents 18 years of age and over. There were 681 completed interviews of Greek voters.

Only three variables met the F score to be included in the model, suggesting that these three variables were the best discriminators of vote for a particular party.

We can interpret the first function to represent the Left-Right placement, the second to be trust in the EU, and function three to be age.

Table 1. Group means on canonical variables

Party	F1-L-R	F2 EU Trust	F3 Age
New Democracy	1.1229	0.1812	0.0737
Syriza	-0.9646	0.1786	-0.3328
Panhellenic soc.	-0.2160	0.1828	0.3906
Ind. Greeks	0.1158	-0.4865	-0.1179
Golden Dawn	1.4042	-1.0869	-0.3892
Dem Left	-0.9478	-0.4370	-0.0837
Communist	-2.3135	-0.5281	0.4775
Recreate Gr	-0.0663	0.3691	-1.0667
Greens	1.3892	-1.4700	0.3384

Table 1 shows the group means of the various Greek parties for each of the functions. For Left-Right placement, we see that the Syriza party is the second most left party, behind the Communist party, and close to the Democratic Left party. The Golden Dawn party is the most right party, just ahead of the Greens. The largest party (in this survey) was the New Democracy, and it was the third most right party.

Turning to trust in the EU, the Recreate Greece party was the most trusting in the EU. The New Democracy, the Syriza party and the Socialists had about the same moderately positive trust, with the Greens the most untrusting, followed by Golden Dawn.

Turning to the third significant function, age, and the Recreate Greece party had the youngest average age for any party, and the Syriza party and Golden dawn were also below the overall average age. The communists, socialists and Greens were older than the average.

Table 2. Means on all variables by party

Variable	Party									
	Ndem	Syriza	PSM	IG	GD	DL	CP	RG	GR	Total
* L-R	7.908	4.575	5.710	6.643	8.818	4.765	2.550	6.200	8.714	6.162
* EU trust	2.431	2.745	2.720	3.143	3.152	3.059	3.425	2.200	3.143	2.724
* Age	54.32	46.41	52.55	44.21	46.30	49.17	52.00	43.80	60.57	50.78
Terrorism	0.021	0.065	0.022	0.000	0.091	0.000	0.050	0.200	0.143	0.041
Agriculture	0.113	0.065	0.151	0.143	0.091	0.059	0.125	0.000	0.286	0.106
Power of EU	0.185	0.183	0.086	0.071	0.121	0.118	0.150	0.200	0.286	0.158
Immigration	0.221	0.242	0.269	0.214	0.333	0.059	0.150	0.000	0.429	0.232
Crime	0.292	0.275	0.269	0.143	0.333	0.353	0.325	0.000	0.286	0.284
Gender	1.569	1.542	1.559	1.429	1.394	1.294	1.400	1.400	1.143	1.519
Class	1.979	1.882	1.860	1.786	1.606	1.706	1.850	2.400	1.714	1.889
Lost job	1.682	1.503	1.677	1.714	1.485	1.412	1.425	1.400	1.286	1.587
Less Income	1.046	1.033	1.065	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.050	1.000	1.143	1.041
Unemployment	0.672	0.850	0.699	0.857	0.758	0.706	0.875	0.400	0.714	0.749
Econ. Growth	0.703	0.765	0.613	0.571	0.606	0.647	0.550	0.800	0.857	0.686
Euro	0.195	0.111	0.226	0.071	0.152	0.118	0.125	0.000	0.286	0.163
M/L Unification	6.492	6.039	6.312	5.857	5.333	6.353	4.050	7.600	3.143	6.041

Table 2 shows the group means on each question included in the model. This shows that the Syriza party was more leftist, with a score of 4.57, than the average of 6.16 for all Greeks. They were nearly as trusting of the EU as the other parties, although slightly less trusting than the New Democracy voters. Also, they were just over four years younger than the sample average, while New Democracy voters were just over four years older than the average. The other variables did not significantly distinguish between the parties.

8. Conclusions

Despite all the economic woes of Greece, this highly successful Syriza Party has not shown itself to be anti-EU, and clearly has an appeal among younger, newer voters. Unlike our previous studies of European populist parties, such as the DPP in Denmark, and UKIP in the UK, the Syriza party is not distinguished by their right wing ideology, animosity to immigrants, or sharp distrust of the EU (Southwell, 2013; Southwell & Lindgren, 2013, 2015). This party seems to be closer to that of the left-leaning Pirate Party of Iceland (Southwell, 2015), although Syriza supporters seem more focused on issues related to the European Union. As such, the ideological leanings of neo-populist parties in Europe appears to vary considerably. Upcoming elections in Iceland and France may reveal whether these parties will have further electoral success by leaning toward one side of the political spectrum or not.

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Note

Note 1. Canonical Discriminant Analysis is used to investigate the difference between groups on the basis of the attributes of the cases, indicating which attributes contribute most to group separation (Burns & Burns, 2008). The analysis was conducted using weighted prior probabilities for each party's proportion of the population. Linear discriminant analysis involves the determination of a linear equation like regression that will predict to which group a case belongs. The form of the equation is: $D = v_1X_1 + v_2X_2 + v_3X_3 + \dots + v_iX_i + a$ Where D=Discriminant function, v=discriminant coefficient or weight, X=respondent's score for that variable, a=a constant, i=number of predictor variables.

Appendix A. Variables used in analysis

QPP5 Political party voted for in last parliamentary elections

Qpp13 Left-Right placement

Qp5t_1 Unemployment (as most important issue)

Qp5t_2 Crime (as most important issue)

Qp5t_3 Terrorism (as most important issue)

Qp5t_4 Economic Growth (as most important issue)

Qp5t_5 Euro stability (as most important issue)

Qp5t_6 Pensions (as most important issue)

Qp5t_7 Immigration (as most important issue)

Qp5t_8 Agriculture (as most important issue)

Qp5t_9 Power of EU (as most important issue)

D10 Gender

Vd11 Age

D61r Class (three levels)

Qpp11_1 Lost Job in last 12 months

Qpp11_2 Less income in last 12 months

Qp6_2 Trust in EU as Institution

Qpp18 European Unification More or Less

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