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Populism in Contemporary Politics

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Abstract

Politics and state share a long historical relationship and sometimes it is believed that one can't understand the one without understanding the other. While the state remains static, the nature of politics kept on changing. All the states, despite having some similarities, are largely different entities. Historical, socio-cultural and geographical factors determine the nature of the state, its institutions, laws and processes. Politics has a long history and it has faced several challenges, witnessed various changes and experienced numerous trends. Populism is one such important and growing trend in politics. It has changed people's perceptions and orientation towards politics. Political parties and leaders across states adopt a populist stance to win the support of the people. Populism is not restricted or specific to any particular political system or regime; rather it has increasingly become a new normal in the politics of contemporary times. Political parties, representing different ideologies and led by different leaders in diverse political systems practice populism to a certain degree of political convenience. Scholars believe that states have witnessed a surge in populist leaders and policies in the recent past it has become an important phenomenon to understand the nature of politics in present times. The present study focuses on the relationship between the state and contemporary politics in the context of populism.

Introduction

Over the years since populism has emerged as an important political stance, academics have made attempts to explain, 'define' and theorise it. The closest they have come to however is to identify several factors or aspects that are essential to populism. What makes the theorisation of populism even more difficult is that very often it is used for completely

different situations and leaders. Many Presidents of the United States of America, which happens to be one of the most consolidated democracies of the world, have been termed as populists. On the other hand, leaders like Vladimir Putin of Russia, Hugo Chavez of Venezuela; who don't have much to do with democracy have also been labelled as populists. It thus becomes difficult to find common ground for classification of populism. But still, there are certain commonly held aspects described to be essential to populism such as: sovereignty, the people, the elite, the populist actor and the other.

It is also important to note that populism is not restricted to any ideology as such. Populism has been used by leaders and political parties from across ideological spectrums to appeal to the masses. Scholars have two diverse opinions regarding the impact of populism on democratic systems. Some considers populism as a serious challenge to democracy arguing that it undermines democratic institutions and inclines towards authoritarianism. While some others believe that at the time when population growth rate is less in some regions, common masses are less interested in the political system and the voting percentage is falling in most of the major democracies, populism has in fact revived democracy as the masses are taking more interest in the political procedure and the electoral process has become livelier.

Despite all the debate surrounding populism it cannot be ignored that in recent times it has influenced democracies all across the world; populist leaders were elected to office in some countries while in some others their vote shares multiplied manifold. Although many argue that after Donald Trump lost his re-election bid in 2020 it's a downhill ahead for populism, in democracies at least, but this is certain that the impact that Trump and many other populists like him have left would be felt in countries across the world for a long-long time.

Defining populism

The Oxford English Dictionary defines populism as "*Populism strives to appeal to ordinary people who feel their concerns are disregarded by the established elite groups.*" A definition similar to this but more of an extended version was given by Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart who established that there are three important elements that populism has. These are: anti-establishment, authoritarianism and nativism.

Anti-establishment is primarily concerned with the institutions and structures of democracy that already exist; something that the populists believe and also make others to believe is working against the interest of the people. According to such populist leaders the

establishment, represented by the current elites are inefficient, corrupt and selfish and were declared as the entrenched enemy by them.

The second element 'authoritarianism' is concerned with liberal democracy in the political system. Populism gives the ultimate importance to "the interest of the people" and thus considers certain institutions such as free press, independent judiciary, civil society groups and organizations necessary to liberal democracy to check the government's actions and authority.

The third element 'Nativism' is in direct contrast to cosmopolitanism, something that as a result of globalization has become an indispensable aspect of most democracies. Populism emphasizes on creating a common identity of "the people" whom it represents. It also creates an "other" out of the certain groups of people – mostly a religious, linguistic or ethnic minority. Minority rights are often under threat in populist regimes.

According to Mudde, populism establishes a moralistic opposition between "the people" and "the elites" and it aims for the realisation of the principle of "*la volonté générale*" (general will) proposed by Rousseau. Populist movements usually rise in opposition to what they see as a "deep crisis" in democracies. It doesn't place values on the democratic institutions like Parliament, opposition, free press, independent investigative agencies, judiciary etc. and also considers traditions like debate and discussions, accommodating differences as "time wasting practices." The Liberal democratic measures of checks and balances are considered to be unnecessary by the populists who rather prefer direct democracy and an unrestricted assertion of people's sovereignty.

Populism has been distinguished by many scholars in terms of right and left wing populism. While left wing populism considers the economic class divisions to be important, those on the right focus more on ethnic and cultural divisions. Populism has also been defined as a 'thin ideology.' What this term essentially means is that populism refers to a narrow set of beliefs and ideas regarding the world and regarding the power structures of the world. Populism on its own is not a full ideology but when combined with other ideologies like nationalism, socialism etc. as it takes different forms in different states.

Core Concepts in Populism

Populism invokes certain core concepts and values in politics that justify and validate their criticism and claim to power. Populist leaders rigorously pursue popular sovereignty by questioning the nature and authority of the ruling elites.

Populism and sovereignty

Sovereignty is considered as a central concept in populism. While liberal and constitutional democracy give value to systems of checks and balances, populism demands unrestricted authority as they have been elected by the people who are the locus of power. While constitutional democracy assigns power to the constitution and liberal democracy to the anonymous rule of law, populism believes that the people have the undisputable right to constitute power. In other words, populism demands unrestrained power for the ruling authority in the name of people.

The Elites who have been ruling are accused by the populists of denying the people the right to express their will in the government. The elites prefer the existing political systems because they don't allow the general will of the people to prevail unrestrictedly. In turn, they pursue their own selfish motives and the people hence end up suffering in their hands. The populists seek to change this system. They believe that popular sovereignty should be exerted in the most unreserved, unrestricted way possible and democracy has to be a direct representation of the will of the people.

Populism and People

People are the locus of power according to the populists. In the network of populism, sovereignty is at the centre and the people must have access to this sovereignty. All actions of populists are justified by them as 'the will of the people'. An example of this is President Rodrigo Duterte of Philippines, whose term in office has been the cause of extrajudicial killings of more than 8,000 people in the country, often on unproved charges of drug trade. But all seems forgiven in the name of the will of the people as he still enjoys an approval rating of 83% in his country.

It is also important to note that the populist notion of people is often a homogeneous group that share at least some common historical bond. It is obvious that the populist categorisation of the people is concerned primarily with the majority group and minorities largely remain excluded. The people for the populists could be the members of a group based on religious, cultural, ethnic, class, caste, race or any other such distinction. Cas Mudde has argued that people in the populist notion are neither real nor all-inclusive, but are in fact a mythical and constructed subset of the whole population.

According to the Italian populist leader Silvio Berlusconi's notion the people are a group which is hard-working, conservative, law-abiding citizens; but are now increasingly getting

livid as their society is being contaminated by the corrupt and immoral elites, aliens and criminals.

Populism and the Elite Class

The elites are the existing ruling class that the populists aim to overthrow. They are described by the populists as arrogant, selfish, evil, corrupt, unaccountable, exploitative, and immoral and primarily they are the most important reason why the people's sovereignty is getting undermined. Populists thrive on the presence of an enemy. The elites are the most significant enemy of the people according to the populists. While the populist actors will always argue for the complete overthrow of elites and wish to remove them entirely from the system, they don't exactly do that in practice. The populists always keep the elites around in order to make sure that there is always the notion of an enemy present. The elites are also accused of favouring the minorities and overlooking the people. Phrases and expressions like 'ignoring the masses' and 'appeasement of minorities' are hence thrown around every so often by the populists to criticise the elites.

The Elites according to the populists include the political (the government), economic (big corporations), cultural (media, artists), intellectuals (academics, writers) or legal elites (judges, lawyers). They are accused of betraying the people by not fulfilling the promises that had been made by them to the people and, exploiting and degrading the democratic systems for their own benefit.

Populist Leader

The populist leader/actor seeks to give back the people their power and centrality, which was till now being restricted by the elites. Populist leaders are often charismatic individuals who are essentially 'outsiders' to the political system and are from within the masses. Although populism focuses so much on the idea of anti-establishment, in reality it doesn't seem to refer to economic elites as has been seen in the case of populist leaders like Donald Trump, Ross Perot and Silvio Berlusconi who were part of the economic elite. Despite this because of similar values people voted for them.

Some scholars are of the view that the presence of a leader is inherent to populism, while some believe that while leaders are often a feature of populism, but they are not a necessary part. The Populist leaders are eloquent speakers and put the most important emphasis on the people's will. Populist campaigns always have an emotional edge to them and are motivated towards the aim of "saving the country." For example, the Make America Great

Again campaign by Donald Trump in 2016 was aimed at re-establishing the United States' dominance in the world again or the 'Chinese Dream' a project of national rejuvenation that is often invoked by Xi Jinping in China.

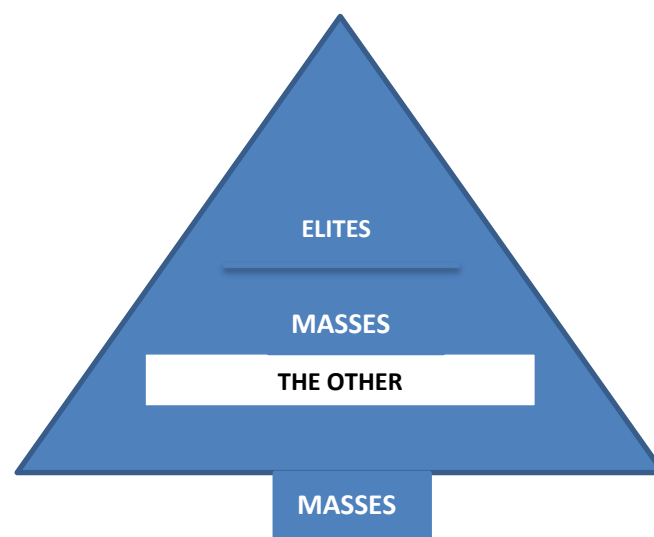
Populists reject all those institutions of Liberal democracy that are a barrier on the direct and full expression of the people's sovereignty. They reject transparency, complex procedures, treaties, coalitions and other such technicalities as unnecessary hurdles that only experts can understand. They rather advocate a simple and direct link between the people and the government.

The notion of the 'Other'

The elites remain excluded from 'the people', along with them 'the other' – the minorities, are also not included. The minorities could be religious, ethnic, racial, linguistic, etc. in nature. The other is although not a part of the elite, but populists are of the opinion that they are favoured by the elites and are a part of elite's conspiracy against the masses. The position of these others in populism has been a matter of debate; some consider them to be at the core of populism while some are of the belief that the others only become important in case of right-wing populism.

Two models for explaining the position of 'the other' has been given. These are:

Vertical and Horizontal Dimension Model: According to some scholars, for the populist the elites are the threat from above (vertical) whereas, 'the other' are a threat from within (horizontal).



Two-fold Vertical Structure: According to some authors there is a two-fold structure in which the elites are at top of the hierarchy and the masses are below them. The others are

placed at the very bottom of the society and they are considered as excluded from the people by the populists.



Populism in Recent Times

In its modern form populism emerged from an agrarian movement in the United States of America in the 1870s, which was called the Farmer's Alliance which later got politically institutionalised and took the form of the People's Party in 1891, which was probably the first populist party of modern times. Sometime after that in Russia, a group of intellectuals started a populist movement. They wanted an ideal society constituted of peasants.

Emergence of populist leaders and governments has been a major development of the early 20th century. Vladimir Lenin with his Red Revolution was on the spectrum of what many call the left-wing populism, although the ideological tilt of the Bolsheviks was mainly towards Socialism-Communism, populism combined with their ideology helped them to get the mass support they needed to overthrow the Tsar. Not long after the Russian Revolution the Fascists assumed power in Italy under populist leader Benito Mussolini, again here as well the populist ideas weren't at the forefront; but were aiding the fascist ideology. Mussolini rise and falls under the ambit of right wing populism.

After the Great Depression of 1930s, unemployment was rampant and inflation was increasing manifold. At a time like this Hitler and his Nazi Party rode a wave of populist support and established their rule in Germany. Hitler is probably one of the best examples of a populist leader in the sense that he very perfectly embodies the textbook definition of a populist leader. He was extremely critical of the ruling elite i.e. the Weimar Republic who according to him had betrayed the people of Germany and was responsible for the humiliation of their country in Versailles in the hands of the allies. Hitler was also responsible for the segregation of the Jews as the "other" and framing them as traitors and enemies of Germans. The most important factor that played a part in Hitler's rise was his populist promises of restoring the pre-World War I glory and power of Germany. Although once Hitler became the sole source of authority in Germany after the Reichstag fire, he could

no longer be called a populist since elections and democracy are essential for populism. Through the course of the rest of the 20th century many other leaders like Margaret Thatcher, Indira Gandhi, and Ross Perot etc. emerged as major populist leaders.

After the Great Recession of 2008 populist leaders all across the world started to win elections. In the USA, which is considered to be one of the most exemplary democracies of the world, Barack Obama was elected as President in 2008. Obama wasn't a populist in the absolute sense, but his policies like Obama-care and the Tax Relief Act were certainly on the populist side.

Obama's successor Donald Trump has been often credited as being the forerunner of populism in the present times. The Trump influence was to such an extent that many believed that after he lost the 2020 Presidential election the wave of populism is going to die down. Trump's Make America Great Again (MAGA) campaign was based upon hyper-nationalism, promising American people that the jobs that immigrants have been usurping in the country would be protected and illegal immigration would be stopped by constructing "a big and beautiful wall" on the Mexican borders. He also made promises to fight Islamic terrorism especially with ISIS being at its peak. Although Trump is considered to be the most important populist leader in recent times he barely managed a majority in his 2016 election and couldn't even win the majority vote.

In another major democracy of the world another populist leader gained power two years before Trump came to office in America. This was Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India, whose predecessors were plagued with major corruption charges, on top of the increasing inflation and the on-going effects of the 2008 recession made sure that the Indian National Congress had no chance against the Modi Wave. Lucrative populist promises were made by the BJP, some of which included the promises of according high priorities to job creation and opportunities of entrepreneurship, bringing back black money accumulated in tax havens by corrupt politicians, rolling out of a massive low budget housing programme, among others. In his re-election bid in 2019 his emphasis was on evoking nationalistic sentiments in the wake of the unfortunate Pulwama Terror Attacks and the response of the Indian Air Force to it by striking and demolishing several terror camps in Pakistan's Balakot. However, over the course of more than years of his government Prime Minister Modi has faced some major objections to many of his policy decisions; but his approval rating among the masses still remains on the high.

Another major populist leader worth mentioning here is President Putin of Russia who despite being in power for more than two decades has never seen a slump below 60% in his approval ratings. Putin's populist image is fuelled by his bare-chested hardliner approach, show of military power in Crimea, Ukraine and Syria and also possibly because there isn't any real opposition left in Russia to contest his popularity. However, recently Putin is facing possibly the biggest ever challenge to his power with thousands of people protesting in Russia against the arrest of Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny.

Many other populist leaders across the world have either assumed power or have come very close to it, these include the right-wing nationalist, nativist, anti-Islamic leaders and parties like Marine Le Pen's France National Front, the Alternative for Germany and the United Kingdom Independence Party which was a major reason for Brexit; others include the Islamic Nationalist President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Turkey, Prabowo Subianto in Indonesia, Viktor Orban in Hungary, Geert Wilders in the Netherlands, Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines, Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil among others.

Conclusion

Like "good" and "bad" Taliban some scholars have distinguished between "good" and "bad" populism. The "good" about populism refers to how it gives a voice to the people whose problems and concerns have long been ignored by the elites. Before the emergence of populism in contemporary times, in democracies all across the world the citizens were getting increasingly disenchanted by the political processes. The belief that elections won't make any real difference in their lives was prevailing among common people and voter turnouts were declining around the world. Electoral processes have seen an almost revival of sorts after the emergence of populist leaders. These leaders promise revolutionary change in the systems that are perceived to be corrupt and exploitative, and hence people turn out in large numbers to make sure their leader wins. Populism also dismantles the dominance of the elites who have increasingly become unaccountable. In most of the countries where populist governments emerge they are usually preceded with the presence of governments that have largely failed to fulfil their promises and are accused of corruption and exclusivity. The elitist nature of these governments detaches them from the people, and the populists then emerge to fill this gap.

The "bad" side of populism on the other hand is mostly concerned with what happens after the government is formed. Populist governments have a tendency to ignore the democratic traditions, practices, institutions, etc. The Populists consider them to be a hindrance in the

fast and effective functioning of their government. Populist governments all across the world have been known to be critical of the checks and balances to their power by the judiciary and other institutions. They claim that since the “people” have voted them into power any restriction on their actions is a restriction on the will of the people.

Populist governments have had a history of a strong tilt towards authoritarianism. The dynamic of the “people” and the “other” leads to the minorities (religious, linguistic, ethnic, etc.) and immigrants being painted as a threat and outsiders. Populist states have been notorious when it comes to making encroachments upon the rights of the minorities. Dissent is again something that populism has a hard time tolerating. Since it thrives upon the support of the people, populists equate anyone disagreeing with them as disagreement to the will of the people. The opposition leaders, activists, intellectuals, minorities, anyone else who are in conflict with their stand are labelled as the enemy of the people. Populism, particularly left wing populist leaders have also been blamed for failing economies of various states to fulfil their impractical promises and to hide their bad governance. Sri Lanka here can be referred as the most recent example.

An important factor in populism is the importance of elections and that too free and fair election. Populism for all its authoritarian tendencies does respect the will of the people in each election. However, it should be noted that given the way populist governments control the narratives in popular media and largely establish the opposition as enemies of the people, defeating them even in free and fair elections is not an easy job either. The way the 2020 Presidential election panned out in the USA is a good example of this. Just a few months before the elections the Black Lives Matter (BLM) Movement was on its full swing and millions were on the streets protesting all across the USA and Trump had for the last four years of his presidency had left no stone unturned establish himself as a white supremacist. Despite this, thanks to the way the Trump campaign had used cable television and social media to influence its voter base since 2015, Trump lost by a very narrow margin.

Populism certainly is a problem for liberal democracy. It ends up leaving a lasting impact on the political institutions of a country. But it cannot be ignored that populism doesn’t emerge in void, it is a result of governments getting detached from the people. Political parties across the world need to go back to the grass root level and make serious attempts to consolidate support from the masses once again. That is the only way to counter the populist challenge in contemporary times.

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