

Political Crises and Populism

Kai Arzheimer

Framework

Populism as a consequence of crises

Crises as a consequence of populism

Summary & Outlook



Framework

Interest in populism is exploding ...

How can we measure scientific interest in populism?

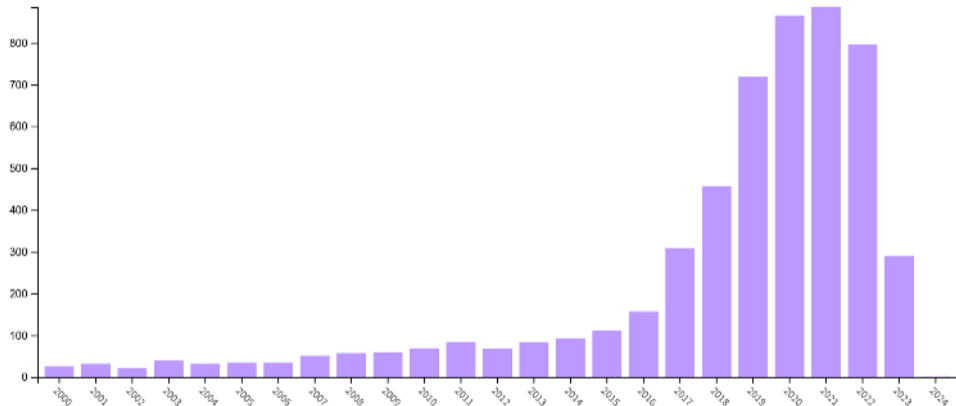
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- In the Social Science Citation Index (scientific journals selected on reputation)
- Since 1956

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- In the Social Science Citation Index (scientific journals selected on reputation)
- Since 1956
- Yields \approx 6,000 hits

This is a relatively recent phenomenon



FRAMEWORK *Everything is populism!*

And it affects many fields (but mostly political science)



FRAMEWORK *Everything is populism!*

Why you should (perhaps) *not* study populism



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- High levels of competition
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- High levels of competition
- Difficult to find a research question/topic that had *not* been done to death yet
- **But also: potentially very relevant and interesting research**

Why definitions?

- A concept without a clear definition is just a buzzword
- Without shared definitions, research becomes a dialog of the deaf
- Many definitions still common:
 - A communication style
 - A political strategy
 - A system of government
 - A personality trait
 - ...

Why definitions?

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- Many definitions still common:
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 - ...
- But within political science, “ideational approach” (Hawkins and Kaltwasser, 2017) now dominant
 - Defines populism as a “thin” ideology
 - I.e. a political idea that attaches itself to host ideologies

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- The belief that all politics boils down to a fundamental conflict between
 - *a corrupt elite* and
 - *the pure people*
- (Denies that the “the people” (and the elites) have heterogeneous interests)
- Often implies some “external other” (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2015)

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- Threat to system/elites that could lead to transformation or breakdown (Svensson, 1986, pp. 133-134)
- Can only be applied *ex-post* with certainty
- Different from everyday usage
- Does imply suddenness, but what about perma-crises?
- *Does not consider internal perspective of citizens/political actors* – but *feelings* of crisis central for populism

A broader definition from a (populist) politician's point of view?

- Any sort of real, alleged, or imagined political, cultural, or economic development or situation ...
- That can be framed as a **threat** to the pure/good/ordinary **people** ...
- And is (by commission or omission) the fault of the **elites** and/or **external others**

1. Populists rely (or at least benefit) from perceptions of crises, and may frame political events in a way that foments a feeling of crisis
2. They may have an incentive to manufacture crises, and may contribute to what constitutes crises in the systems perspective

Populism as a consequence of crises

The 2007-2015 financial crisis

- Predatory lending and obscure financial products → 2007-2008 global banking crisis (Lehman); recession/unemployment in the real economy; bank bailouts
- (French and German) banks exposed to risks from government debt in poorer Eurozone states → sovereign debt crisis from 2009/10 (Cyprus, Greece, Portugal, Ireland, also Italy + Spain)
- Bailout/intervention by ECB, Commission, IMF (“Troika”); conditional on massive cuts to social spending
- (Allowed northern states like Germany, Denmark, NL to borrow very cheaply)

- World-wide movements (Occupy ...); inequality and regulation back on the agenda
- Rise of far-left (and arguably populist) parties in Greece (Syriza), Spain (Podemos), Italy (?, 5 Stars)
- North-south polarisation (lazy Greeks vs greedy Germans) within EU

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- North-south polarisation (lazy Greeks vs greedy Germans) within EU
- *Very little systemic change*, few long-term gains for populist radical left

- Worsening of the civil war in Syria and other conflicts → increase in the already high number of asylum seekers/refugees
- Large groups passing through the Balkans and getting stuck in Hungary; near-collapse of the Schengen system & no agreement on resettlement across EU
- Large number of arrivals in Germany and some other states; apparent mood-swing

Political consequences

- Speeded-up transformation of Germany's AfD to radical right populist party
- Increased salience of immigration in many countries → core issue of populist radical right
- Renewed tensions within EU (north vs south, east vs west) & backlash against EU
- Problem (or rather cluster of problems) still unresolved (see latest developments in EU)
- By and large benefited / benefits the populist radical right

- You still have this in memory, don't you?

- You still have this in memory, don't you?
- A global health, economic, political crisis, probably the biggest in living memory

Political consequences

- Populist actors, mostly (but not exclusively) on the (far) right, minimised both the health risks of Covid & the benefits of vaccination and other measures
- Unprecedented global wave of mis- and disinformation, large-scale populist mobilisation (but mostly online)
- For many partisan actors, no real pay-off, at least not in the global West
- (But probably helped to build networks and make money)

Three major crises ...

- That mostly fuelled radical right-wing populism
- Is this primarily about populism, or about right-wing radicalism?

Crises as a consequence of populism

2016: Transatlantic parallels

- UK: After decades-long campaign, right-wing media, a far-right party & the eurosceptic wing of the Tory party succeed in (very close) referendum on British EU membership
- US: After decades-long campaign, right-wing actors within GOP succeed in making Donald Trump the Republican nominee, who subsequently wins the presidency (albeit only b/c of the EC)

Political Consequences

- Both Trump and the Brexiteers turn their parties into “radicalised mainstream parties”
- Undermine
 - Liberal-democratic institutions (parliament, the judiciary, the media, even the justice & security apparatus), claiming to have a “mandate from the people™”
 - Liberal international institutions
- Also foment internal polarisation
- (And arguably mess up Covid response)

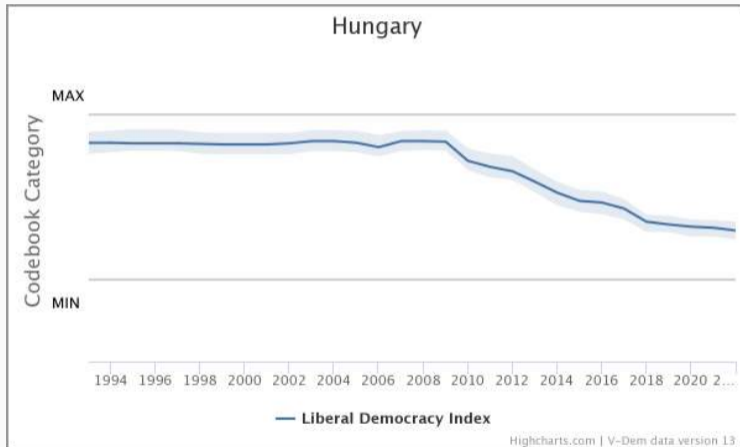
What's the matter with Hungary & Poland's governments?

- “Radicalised mainstream parties”
 - Poland: Law & Order (PiS) started out as (populist) centre-right party, moved quickly further to the right, undermines judiciary & EU rules
 - Hungary: Fidesz started out as (populist) liberal-conservative, moved to the far right in 2010, also very, very corrupt
- Both countries work together to block decisions by EU to bring them in line
- Happily use EU as external other (difficult to mobilise against internal elites, especially in HU)

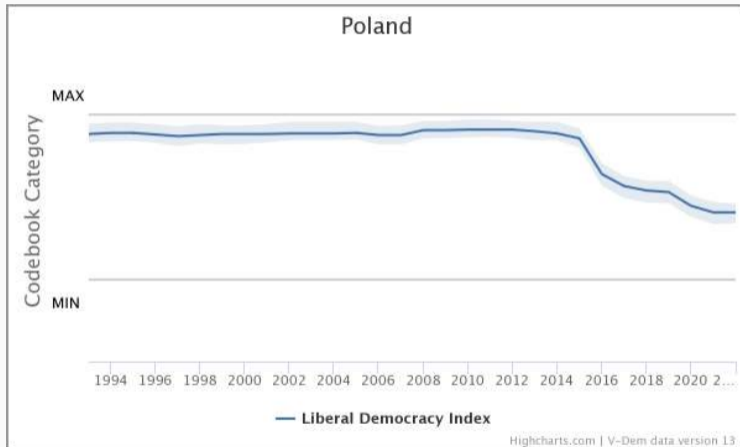
Political consequences

- Create multiple headaches for EU (but also see problems in/with other countries)
- Hungary no longer considered a (full, liberal) democracy by European Parliament + scientists
- Poland ranks not much higher

Hungary: V-DEM Liberal Democracy Index 1994-2022



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- Still, both inside EU & Poland important for pro-Ukrainian coalition, so?
- Again more about right-wing radicalism than populism per se?

Summary & Outlook

Caution!



- I'm a (Western) Europeanist, so *very much* is missing from the picture
- E.g. developments in many other European countries, Africa & Asia
- Literally libraries about populism in Latin America
- (And a major thing in North American politics since the 1800s)

- Two definitions/types of crisis (system vs subjective perspective)
- Close link between populism and both kinds of crisis
- In Europe, right-wing populism much more relevant/successful than left-wing
 - Populists seem to benefit from real or hyped-up crises that fit into their core ideology (d'oh!)
 - But could hardly benefit from Covid (at least in Western Europe)
- Populists *create* crises (in the systems perspective sense) for liberal democracy



- In the long run, populists may achieve transformation
- I.e.: a specific, reduced, illiberal type of democracy
- E.g. Hungary, many scary examples in the history of Latin America ...