A populist Zeitgeist? The impact of populism on parties, media and the public in Western Europe

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Chapter 2

THE NUCLEUS OF POPULISM

In Search of the Lowest Common Denominator

> *There can, at present, be no doubt about the importance of populism.*
> *But no one is quite clear just what it* is*. [...] It bobs up everywhere, but in*
> *many and contradictory shapes. Does it have any underlying unity, or*
> *does one name cover a multitude of unconnected tendencies?*
>
> Ghita Ionescu & Ernest Gellner, 1969b, p. 1.

Introduction

Although this excerpt was written more than forty years ago, it could have been written today. The term populism is still being applied to a wide variety of parties and politicians, and it still points in different contexts to different phenomena (Canovan, 1981: 3). Just like half a century ago, the concept deals with 'an essential impalpability, an awkward conceptual slipperiness' (Taggart, 2000: 1). In one context, populism refers to small-scale bottom-up movements, whereas it denotes strong charismatic leaders or radical right political parties in others. A pressing question is whether these phenomena actually have something in common.

Three area-based bodies of literature can be distinguished, which classify different types of political actors as populist. First, the United States literature looks at political movements such as the nineteenth century *People's Party*, Perot's *Reform Party*, and, more recently, the *Tea Party*. Second, the Latin American literature focuses on authoritarian regimes, such as those of Perón in Argentina, Chávez in Venezuela and Morales in Bolivia. Third, the Western European literature emphasizes parties such as Le Pen's *Front National* (FN) in France, Berlusconi's *Forza Italia* (FI) in Italy and Haider's *Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs* (FPÖ) in Austria. Within each body of literature, the classification of political actors as populist is often in accordance with a *contextual* definition of populism. It is therefore unclear whether Perón would also be labeled as populist by European standards and whether Perot would also be seen as a populist according to the Latin American point of view.

The fact that scholars in different regions use the same term to analyze strongly divergent political actors raises the question of whether it is merely an unfortunate coincidence that political actors from different times, from various places, and with different ideologies have all been labeled populist, or whether they actually have something in common. The aim of this chapter is to find out whether there exists a lowest common denominator that all allegedly populist actors share.

I argue and demonstrate that there indeed exists a lowest common denominator. This lowest common denominator consists of four characteristics: (1) populists emphasize the central position of the people; (2) they criticize the elite; (3) they conceive of the people as a homogeneous entity; and (4) they proclaim a serious crisis. This common core could be the point of departure for the comparison of populist actors across regions and over time.

This is an important finding because it justifies the usage of the classical Sartorian approach, according to which a phenomenon necessitates a core (set of) characteristic(s) to be classified as populist (see Sartori, 1970). Many scholars have already employed such an approach (see Abts & Rummens, 2007; Mudde, 2004; Stanley, 2008; Weyland, 2001), and some of them have also used it in cross-regionalist comparisons (Hawkins, 2009; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012). Yet a systematic validation of this approach is still lacking.[13]

The chapter proceeds as follows. First I make a distinction between twelve alleged characteristics of populism. Each characteristic is emphasized in at least one of the area-based bodies of literature. Next, six political actors are selected that are seen as 'prototypical populists' – i.e., there exists strong agreement among scholars that these actors can be labeled as populist. To be able to discover the lowest common denominator, these actors are selected from backgrounds as dissimilar as possible in terms of time, space and

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[13] In this chapter, I focus on the classical Sartorian approach only. I will therefore pay no attention to other approaches to conceptualization (such as, for instance, the family resemblance approach).

ideology. In the following section, the extent to which the selected actors possess the alleged characteristics of populism is assessed. In the final section, I focus on the implications of these findings for the issue of defining populism and the usage of the concept in future comparative research.

Characteristics of populism mentioned in the literature

We can make a distinction between three area-based bodies of literature on populism: the United States literature, the Latin American literature, and the Western European literature. The United States literature focuses on late nineteenth century popular and agrarian movements and perceives populism as 'a way of looking at things' that contrasts the 'plain' people from rural states with the industrial cosmopolitans from the Eastern shores of the country (see Goodwyn, 1976, 1978; Hicks, 1961; Hofstadter, 1955; Kazin, 1995; McKenna, 1974). In the Latin American literature, the emphasis is on contraposing the people against the elite as well. Yet, in most Latin American countries, the actors who proclaim this populist message are not small-scale bottom-up movements, but powerful and paternalistic political leaders (see De la Torre, 2010; Di Tella, 1965, 1997; Hawkins, 2009, 2010; Roberts, 1995; Weyland, 2001). The conceptualizations of populism in the Western European body of literature have been strongly influenced by political parties on the far right (see Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008a; Mudde, 2007; Mény & Surel, 2002a). These parties emphasize the cultural identity of the people and therefore position them not only against the bad elite but also against 'dangerous others' (immigrants or people of another race or religion).

The cross-fertilization between these three different bodies of literature is still minimal. Although authors from different literatures increasingly cite each other, the definitions of populism they make use of in their analyses are still strongly influenced by their 'own' bodies of literature. There are only a few scholars who have transcended 'their' literatures and analyzed populist phenomena over a long time period and across different continents (see Canovan, 1981; Ionescu & Gellner, 1969a; Taggart, 2000). These studies,

however, are not based on a systematic comparison across cases and over time.

Within these three bodies of literature, populism has been associated with many different features. Below I focus on the most notable of these features. Some are mentioned in only one of the three bodies of literature, and others are discussed in all three of them. A distinction is made between: (1) features that relate to the *ideas* of populist actors; (2) characteristics that have to do with the *style* of populists; and (3) attributes that concern the *organization* of populist actors.

Characteristics relating to ideas

One feature that is often associated with populism is *the centrality of the people*. Populists are said to worship the people and to emphasize the people's fundamental position at the center of politics (Goodwyn, 1976; Ionescu & Gellner, 1969b; Kazin, 1995; Mény & Surel, 2002b; Taggart, 2000; De la Torre, 2010). 'The people' can mean many different things to many different populists in many different circumstances (Canovan, 1981: 261; Mudde, 2004: 545-546). It can refer, for instance, to the electorate, to the nation, or to no fixed group at all. This does not mean that 'the people' has no meaning (Panizza, 2005: 3). It only means that the way in which the term is understood is dependent on the particular context.[14]

People-centrism cannot be understood without the characteristic of *anti-elitism*. The elite is accused of being alienated from the people, of having no idea what ordinary people find important, and of only representing its own interests (Barr, 2009; Canovan, 2002; Goodwyn, 1978; Laclau, 2005; McKenna, 1974; Mudde, 2004; Weyland, 2001). The accusations differ from arrogance

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[14] To deal with the slipperiness of the concept of 'the people', Taggart proposes to make use of the term 'heartland'. A heartland can be seen as an idealized conception of the people, located in an idealized landscape. The heartland is a mythical and constructed ideal of the population; it is an 'imagined community'. The heartland can be used as a tool to better understand what a specific populist means when he or she refers to a particular people (see Taggart 2000).

and selfishness to incompetence and corruption. In most cases, these allegations go hand in hand. Just as people-centrism, anti-elitism is dependent of the context and can take different forms. It could be directed at a political elite (politicians in general, political parties, the 'established' political order), an economic elite (business elites, bank executives or capitalism in general), a cultural elite (intellectuals), a media elite (journalists) or a legal elite (judges) (see also Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). No matter which type of elite is criticized, the general message is the same: that of a conflict between those without power (the people) and those with power (the elite).

The people is conceived of as a homogeneous entity. This is a result of the antagonistic character of the perceived relationship between the people and the elite (see Panizza, 2005: 3). Because populists argue that the people is exploited by the elite, they believe that *all* 'ordinary' men have a shared interest in their opposition against the elite. Therefore, they present 'the people' (singular) as a uniform entity. Some scholars argue that when they address the people, populists blur class distinctions by lumping all men in one single homogeneous category (McKenna, 1974: xii-xiv). Other scholars do not focus explicitly on this lack of class consciousness. They do, however, just as well argue that populists conceive of the people as a homogeneous whole (Taggart, 2000: 92).

According to many scholars, this emphasis on the power of the people and the negativity about the elite leads to the message that 'ordinary citizens' must be given their voices back and that people, consequentially, should have more influence on the political decision-making process. It has therefore been argued that populists want to circumvent the 'opaque and complex consensus seeking politics' by introducing more directness in the form of *measures of direct democracy* such as referenda, popular initiatives and plebiscites (Canovan, 1981: ch. 5; Taggart, 2000: 103-105).

Populism is sometimes not only associated with negativity about the elite but also with negativity about specific social groups: *exclusionism* (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008b; Taguieff, 1995). Populists claim to defend the collective identity of the 'true' people against enemies from the outside. It

depends on the concrete context whether the outsiders are immigrants, unemployed, or people of another religion or race.

To emphasize their message of anti-elitism and/or exclusionism, populists often *proclaim a serious crisis* (political, cultural and/or economic) (Betz, 2002: 198). Populists argue that the political influence, the cultural identity or the economic situation of ordinary people is under great threat and must urgently be protected (Taggart, 2000: 93-94). It does not matter whether this proclaimed crisis is real or not, it only matters that populists *argue* that there is such a crisis.

Characteristics relating to style

The first feature of the allegedly populist style is the usage of a *simplistic language*. Because of their glorification of the people and their contempt for the elite, populists tend to use a rather simple language that is understandable for 'normal' people and differs from the difficult and formal language of the elite. This focus on linguistic simplicity has frequently been described as the 'tabloid style' of populists (see Canovan, 1999: 5).

It is often argued that, to communicate their message, populists make use of *a direct communication style*. The idea is that populists do not want to communicate with citizens via side roads such as 'inconvenient' party platforms or 'annoying' institutions such as parliament. These are obstacles that stand in the way of a direct relationship between policy and voter. Populist politicians therefore prefer to communicate directly via popular mass media such as television (Mazzoleni, 2003) – and more recently also via social media such as Facebook and Twitter.

It has also been argued that populists *polarize* to bring their message of crisis across (Canovan, 2004: 242). They dichotomize the debate and often employ an aggressive language (Taggart, 2000: 113).

Finally, populists often create *an outsider image*. They present themselves as not being part of the elite (see Goodwyn, 1976) and as political mavericks (Barr, 2009; Betz & Johnson, 2004). This does not necessarily mean

that they actually *are* political outsiders. As Mudde has emphasized, it is sufficient that they create such an image (Mudde, 2004: 560).

Characteristics relating to organization

Organizational characteristics concern the way in which populist organizations are constituted. According to some scholars, *centralization of the leader* plays a pivotal role. Weyland (2001: 18) emphasizes that a populist organization has a strong personalistic leader at its apex. Additionally, Taggart (2000: 100-103) argues that populist organizations are characterized by their centralized nature and the pivotal role of (charismatic) leaders.

Another organizational characteristic is that populists want *a loosely mediated relationship between leader and followers*. This means that populists want to eliminate intermediate institutions and organizations that stand in the way of a direct relationship between themselves and their followers. Most populists therefore refuse to create a party structure that is similar to the dominant model of party organization (Taggart, 2000: 75). Populists tend to organize themselves in loose movements instead of tightly structured political parties (Wiles, 1969: 167).

For an overview of all the characteristics that have been discerned from the three bodies of literature, see Table 2.1.

Case selection

To find the lowest common denominator, a 'most different systems design' is employed (Mudde, 2007: 14). Ideally, I would study *all* populist actors. However, because this is practically impossible, I selected a sample of six populist actors from backgrounds as divergent as possible in terms of time, space and ideology. Political actors have been included only when most scholars within a body of literature agree that they are populist. Spatial diversity is guaranteed by selecting two prototypical populist actors from each of the geographical areas that correspond to the three bodies of literature.

Table 2.1

Characteristics of populism mentioned in the literature

Ideas

1. People-centrism
2. Anti-elitism
3. Homogeneity of the people
4. Direct democracy
5. Exclusionism
6. Proclamation of a crisis

Style

7. Simplistic language
8. Direct communication style
9. Polarization
10. Image of outsider

Organization

11. Centralization of leader
12. Loosely mediated relationship

To guarantee temporal diversity, the focus is not only on contemporary populism but also on historical cases. Finally, I have also aimed at ideological variety. Although one could disagree on the ideological labels I have attached to the selected populist actors, I believe that the selected actors represent a wide variety of ideological stances (see Table 2.2).

The first selected populist actor is Tom Watson's *United States People's Party* (see Goodwyn, 1976; Hicks, 1961; Kazin, 1995). This political movement was established in 1891 to defend the interests of farmers. It faded away a decade later. The second selected populist actor is Ross Perot's *Reform Party*. As an independent candidate and challenger of the established parties, Perot participated in the United States presidential elections in 1992 and 1996 (see

Table 2.2

Selection of actors that are generally considered populist

	Space		
Time	United States	Latin America	Western Europe
Classical	Watson	Peron	Le Pen
	People's Party	Justicialist Party	Front National
	1890s	1940s-1970s	1970s-2000s
	(Farmers interests)	(Social-democratic)	(Far right)
Modern	Perot	Chávez	Berlusconi
	Reform Party	MVR / PSUV	Forza Italia
	1990s	2000s	1990s-2000s
	(Liberal)	(Far left)	(Conservative)

Canovan, 2004; Kazin, 1995; Taggart, 2000). Third, the Argentinian politician and general Juan Perón and his *Justicialist Party* is included (see De la Torre, 2010; Roberts, 1995; Weyland, 2001). He was president of Argentina from 1946 until 1955 and from 1973 until 1974. The fourth populist is Hugo Chávez (see Hawkins, 2010; Roberts, 2007; Weyland, 2003). He has been the president of Venezuela since 1999 and is famous for his critique on the United States' foreign policy. Fifth, Jean-Marie Le Pen's *Front National* (FN) from France is selected (see Betz, 1993; Rydgren, 2008; Surel, 2002). Le Pen participated in five presidential elections. Sixth, Silvio Berlusconi's FI is included in the analysis. Berlusconi founded his own political party after a widespread corruption scandal in the early nineties has long been the leader of the center-right *Popolo della Libertà* (PdL) (see De Beus, 2009; Tarchi, 2008; Zaslove, 2008).

Results

Watson's People's Party

The United States People's Party was created in 1892 from a collection of regional agrarian organizations in which farmers and other 'normal' people opposed the ruling economic and political elite. During the founding meeting, the Populists of the People's Party presented a declaration of principles in which they showed that they were both strongly people-centrist and anti-elitist: 'We have witnessed for more than a quarter of a century the struggles of the two great political parties for power and plunder, while grievous wrongs have been inflicted upon the suffering people' (quoted in McKenna, 1974: 90). The Populists attacked the rich from the East in general, and the corrupt railroad corporations, politicians and capitalists in particular. The party proclaimed a devastating crisis in the first sentence of their Omaha Platform: 'we meet in the midst of a nation brought to the verge of moral, political, and material ruin' (quoted in McKenna, 1974: 89). One of the central measures to overcome this crisis was the introduction of the popular initiative and the referendum.

The 'people' the Populists referred to were seen as a uniform entity that transcended specific classes and other groups. According to Goodwyn (1978: 97), the Populists saw the 'people' as an alliance of northern farmers, southern blacks and urban workers. Some Populists wanted to include black people in their alliance as well, but most were rather exclusionist (Kazin, 1995: 37-38). Moreover, in its official documents, the party emphasized that immigrant labor should be restricted (Canovan, 1981: 37).

Because the party developed from collaborations between small, regional farmers' organizations, the party consisted of a rather complex set of alliances and sub-alliances in which the connections between the bottom and top were only loosely mediated (Goodwyn, 1976: 91). It could, therefore, be described as a bottom-up movement. Because the regional organizations continued to play a pivotal role within the People's Party, the party 'was not a function of a particular charismatic leader' (Taggart, 2000: 26), not even of the most central figure, Tom Watson.

To persuade the people to rebel against the ruling elite, the People's Party frequently employed a Manichean discourse of Good versus Evil (us vs. them, democracy vs. plutocracy, producers vs. exploiters), as a result of which the party's language was rather polarizing (see the previous examples from their Omaha Platform). Yet its language was not simplistic; it was impregnated with complex arguments and rather complicated sentences.[15]

Apart from the platform, most Populists did not communicate directly with the electorate; a great deal of communication took place at the regional level via the farmers' alliances. In their initial communications, the Populists presented themselves as outsiders in politics. A few years later, however, they decided to form a union with the Democratic Party, and they did not emphasize their 'outsiderness' anymore. This turned out to be a bad electoral choice, for it marked the beginning of the end of their success. Their message of anti-elitism had become much less credible after they had formed an alliance with the Democrats.

Perot's Reform Party

One century after the formation of the People's Party, another third party challenged the main US establishment. During the 1992 presidential elections, Ross Perot, an independent candidate from Texas – and also a billionaire businessman – gained approximately twenty per cent of the vote. Perot claimed that his country was in crisis, and he castigated 'the decade of

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[15] See for instance the following sentence in the Omaha Platform: 'While our sympathies as a party of reform are naturally upon the side of every proposition which will tend to make men intelligent, virtuous, and temperate, we nevertheless regard these questions, important as they are, as secondary to the great issues now pressing for solution, and upon which not only our individual prosperity but the very existence of free institutions depend; and we ask all men to first help us to determine whether we are to have a republic to administer before we differ as to the conditions upon which it is to be administered, believing that the forces of reform this day organized will never cease to move forward until every wrong is remedied and equal rights and equal privileges securely established for all the men and women of this country' (website History Matters).

greed, the era of trickle-down economics' (Kazin, 1995: 273). To solve the crisis, the established political order had to make room for a political entrepreneur who would balance the budget.

He said that 'normal' Americans were the owners of the country and had to claim it back from the politicians in Washington. To give more power to the people, he wanted to introduce more direct democracy by means of 'electronic town halls'. One of his one-liners was: 'I am Ross, and you are the boss' (Posner, 1996: 251). Perot did not exclude specific classes or groups in his plea to give more power to the people. Instead, he argued that *all* Americans shared the same interests in their struggle against the corrupt politicians. This was clearly represented by the initial name of his political organization: *United We Stand America* (my emphasis).

His speech 'We Own This Country' formed the start of a campaign strategy involving appearances on many TV shows. With his anti-Washington message and his unusual mix of political positions, he appealed to both Republicans and Democrats. Perot claimed that, initially, he did not want to run as a political candidate, but that he was forced into it because he felt the obligation to rescue the country from the established politicians (see Taggart, 2000: 42).

To appeal to the people, he used a simple language, explained economic troubles in a facile and straightforward way, and also communicated directly with his voters through talk shows on television (Kazin, 1995: 273). On TV, he mixed this simple language with a bombastic style to show his frustration with the established order (Taggart, 2000: 42). He ridiculed overdressed lobbyists, 'country clubbers' and 'preppies' in the White House (Kazin, 1995: 272-273). People liked this clear, tough and confrontational political approach. 'Keeping his message simple, and spicing the shows with his own brand of down-home Texas humor, he was a fresh face in a sea of candidates who normally were reserved and shied away from candor, controversy, or color' (Posner, 1996: 260).

Perot built a political organization around himself, of which the only and uncontested leader was Perot himself. The movement was completely inferior to his personal political performance. Because he strongly disliked the existing

parties and their institutionalized organizational structure, he established an organization in which the distance between him and his rank and file was as short as possible. Kazin (1995: 273) argues that Perot never built a party organization that was more than a mere network of his admirers. Except for the moments that Perot appeared on television, the party was invisible.

Perón's Justicialist Party

Although Juan Perón died in 1974, he is still one of the most popular Argentinean politicians. In 1946, Perón was elected president for the first time. He argued that the country faced a social and political crisis and therefore urgently needed a strong and charismatic leader who would solve the problems (Crassweller, 1987: 222). Perón defined his ideological stance as the 'Third Position': a middle way between capitalism and socialism. He was re-elected in 1951, but he was ousted after a coup in 1955. He lived in Paraguay and Spain and returned to Argentina only in 1973, when he was elected president again. He died one year later.

Similar to the political actors I have discussed so far, Perón strongly emphasized the struggle between the (good) people and the (bad) oligarchy (De la Torre, 2010: 18; Roberts, 2007: 3). His supporters have been called 'descamisados' (shirtless ones) to distinguish them from the members of the political elite, who always wore jackets and ties (Page, 1983: 136-137). Although many of Perón's supporters were working class, one should not conclude that Peronism was a working class movement (Crassweller, 1987: 222). Perón emphasized the importance of national unity and tried to close the gap between the different socio-economic classes by forging a cross-class alliance of supporters – a uniform entity in its opposition against the elite. Perón did not exclude specific social groups such as immigrants or people of another religion, and he was not a supporter of the means of direct democracy. He argued that the will of the people had to be expressed via a strong and charismatic leader (Taggart, 2000: 64).

To forge a cross-class alliance, Perón employed a language that was not only understandable for the highly educated but also for the lower classes. He

therefore used many metaphors. His discourse, however, could not be called simplistic. As Crassweller argues, his communicative strength 'lay in Perón's strange ability to combine *lofty* language with homespun metaphors' (my emphasis) (Crassweller, 1987: 184). And although he criticized the 'oligarchy', his style was not polarizing. In fact, his Third Way politics ('neither left, nor right'), and his emphasis on social justice, made his style rather accommodative.[16] To distinguish 'us' (the people) from 'them' (the elite), Perón presented himself as a political outsider. He was famous for his direct communication with the public. 'The iconography of Perón appearing on the balcony to greet the masses who chanted his name and greeted his appearance with an ovation became an integral component in his subsequent rule as the symbol of his direct link to the people and his genuine popular support' (Taggart, 2000: 62).

Perón had never made a secret of his admiration for the leadership style of Mussolini. He perceived politics in military terms and emphasized that he saw himself as the 'Conductor': a strong personalistic leader (Page, 1983: 220). In his emphasis on strong leadership, Perón was 'hostile to the idea of political parties as bases of power, for they were inconsistent with the functions of the "Conductor"' (Crassweller, 1987: 230). To be able to directly control his organization, Perón made sure that the party was strongly underinstitutionalized and completely dependent on his personalistic leadership (Roberts, 2006: 131).

Chávez's MVR / PSUV

In the early eighties, a group of military academy graduates, inspired by the thoughts of the Venezuelan patriot Simón Bolívar, founded a secret organization within the armed forces. The goal of this organization was to do something about the increasing corruption in the country. In 1992, the group performed a coup against the government. The coup failed, but in 1998 they

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[16] This does not mean that Perón *acted* accommodative towards his opponents too. To the contrary, he did not hesitate to jail critical journalists or politicians.

were more successful. The leader of the group (that had by then turned into a political party) – the charismatic Hugo Chávez – convincingly won the presidential election. Now, almost fifteen years later, he is still the president of Venezuela.

The point of departure for Chávez's political ideas is the centrality of the Venezuelan people. A slogan during the 2000 campaign was, for instance, 'With Chávez, the people rule' (Hawkins, 2010: 15). Although he focused mostly on the elevation of the poorest people from the lowest classes, he stated explicitly that his message was directed towards all Venezuelans (Roberts, 2003). In his conception, they form one entity in their opposition against the elite. He argued that their interests were at risk because of a group of conspiring elites, supported by a corrupt political system. Addressing the elite, Chávez frequently uses terms such as 'enemies', 'corruption', 'the oligarchy', 'counterrevolutionary forces', 'coup-mongers', 'the lackeys of imperialism', 'the nightmare of world capitalism' and 'savage neoliberalism' (Hawkins, 2010).

Chávez's main goal was a revolution to overthrow the existing political order. In his opinion, this was the only possible way to solve the political and cultural crisis in which the country was placed by the corrupted political Punto Fijo system (Hellinger, 2003). He had had enough of the representative system and proposed to introduce measures of direct democracy (Ellner, 2003: 149). Chávez was not exclusionist towards specific societal groups, except, of course, for the Venezuelan (and later also foreign – read United States) elite.

To bring his message across, Chávez employs simple language in which he refers to famous myths and symbols (Hawkins, 2010: 56-57). When he talks about the corrupt elite, his language is strongly polarizing and even bellicose.

> 'Chávez recited passages from *Florentino y el Diablo*, a Venezuelan folk ballad in which a cowboy named Florentino is challenged to a singing duel with the Devil; Florentino courageously accepts the challenge and eventually defeats the Devil through his perseverance and wit. Chávez

asserted that the coup-mongering leaders of the opposition were the Devil, and behind them was the biggest Devil of all, George W. Bush.' (Hawkins, 2010: 2)

Chávez often emphasizes that he is a political outsider and that he does not belong to the 'political class'. In fact, he is one of the ordinary people (Ellner, 2003: 145-146) and therefore prefers to communicate directly with Venezuelans through his own television and radio shows in which he discusses his policies, tells jokes and sings songs. The most fascinating example is Chávez's television show *Aló Presidente*, which was, for a long time, broadcasted every week.

Chávez is supported by a network of decentralized grass-roots organizations. Maybe the most important organizations were the so-called 'Bolivarian Circles' – neighborhood committees (Roberts, 2007: 7). Hawkins (2010: 178-181) shows that these organizations were strongly dependent on their political leader and that they had a movement-like form of organization, which was rather unmediated and completely different from the bureaucratic hierarchies of the established political parties.

Le Pen's Front National

The *Front National* (FN) was founded in 1972. It was an amalgam of many different radical right groups, such as 'French Algeria die-hards; revolutionary nationalists; wartime Vichyites; Holocaust revisionists; neo-fascists; neo-Nazis; monarchists; Catholic fundamentalists; former members of extreme right *groupuscules*; and so on' (Hainsworth, 2000: 18). During the first decade of its existence, the party was not successful. Only in 1983, in a local election, did the party make its electoral breakthrough. The greatest success for the FN took place exactly three decades after its foundation: in 2002 FN-leader Jean-Marie Le Pen eliminated the leader of the Socialist Party in the first round of the presidential election.

The FN was founded due to concern about a perceived socio-cultural crisis; an alleged decline of the greatness of the country. France had to act

quickly to avoid a national disaster (Betz, 1994: 130-131). The party strongly emphasized – and still emphasizes – the importance of preservation of what it calls the French national identity. There was fear that this French identity was under threat by the influx of migrants who wanted to keep their own identity and thereby undermined and challenged everything that was typical of the French nation. 'France for the French' is one of the most famous slogans of the FN (Davies, 1999). This emphasis on the nation resulted in a rather homogeneous understanding of the people. The FN did not focus on specific socio-economic groups and developed an *interclassiste* profile (Davies, 2002: 140).

Yet the French people are not only contrapositioned against 'dangerous others'; the FN also emphasizes the antagonistic relationship between the good people and the bad elite. Le Pen depicts all political parties as a single political class that is alienated from the public (Rydgren, 2008: 174). He talks about the 'Gang of Four' (political parties) that captures the established order. He also refers to politics as a 'closed shop' and supports measures of direct democracy (Davies, 2002: 136). 'He proclaims himself as the man fighting for the real interests of the French people against the whole of the French political establishment' and thus presents himself as a political outsider (Davies, 1999). A clear example, which also demonstrates the direct communication style of the FN, is the postcards that the party published for New Year on which it wrote: '1991: The Year of the Outsider' (Davies, 2002: 136).

To bring its message across, the party makes use of an accessible and down-to-earth language (Davies, 2002: 135), and it does not shun polarizing stances. Just one example is the following line of the FN-politician Stirbois: 'Immigrants from beyond the Mediterranean: go back to your huts' (quoted in Hainsworth, 2000: 24). From the foundation of the party until 2011, Le Pen was the leader of the FN. He withstood all the challenges from other candidates who contested his leadership, and he managed to keep all the different currents in the FN together. By now he is often portrayed as a charismatic and charming politician (Declair, 1999; Hainsworth, 2000) who managed to build a 'highly disciplined, efficient, and authoritarian organization' around himself (Simmons, 1996: 187). In January 2011, Jean-

Marie Le Pen, aged 82, handed over the party leadership to his daughter Marine Le Pen.

Berlusconi's Forza Italia / PdL

In the early nineties, Italy witnessed a huge political corruption scandal of which the political consequences were enormous. One of those consequences was that it opened up the possibility for new political entrepreneurs to enter the stage. One of those entrepreneurs was marketing man, soccer club owner and a media tycoon Silvio Berlusconi. Berlusconi argued that he had decided to go into politics because he did not believe in the 'old political class', or the *partitocrazia* anymore. The country was, in his opinion, in a devastating social and political crisis (Campus, 2006: 141-142). According to Berlusconi, politicians had to start listening to what 'normal Italians' wanted. It was not clear to whom exactly Berlusconi referred when he talked about 'normal Italians'. He likely referred to everybody who was not part of the (according to Berlusconi mostly left-wing) political elite – after all, all 'normal Italians' shared the same interests in their struggle with the elite. Contrary to Le Pen in France, Berlusconi was not explicitly negative about immigrants (Tarchi, 2003: 171). One of the ways in which Berlusconi wanted to translate the will of the people into policy was by means of measures of direct democracy.

Berlusconi makes a clear distinction between 'Good' (the people and Berlusconi himself) and 'Evil' (the arrogant 'communist' political elite), and he does not, at any time, nuance this distinction. To distinguish himself from the political elite, Berlusconi presents himself as an outsider in the political realm. He emphasizes that he is a normal man, just like everyone else, and that his political adventure is only a temporary enterprise. As soon as the country is safe from the corrupt elite, he will leave the stage again (Tarchi, 2003: 163-164). To enforce this image as an anti-elitist outsider, Berlusconi makes use of a simple and clear language that is often aggressive towards the leftist media and legal elites: a language that comes from the realm of television and that everyone can easily understand (Tarchi, 2003: 168). An interesting example in this respect is the language of football. Because football is often associated

with action and success, it plays a pivotal role in Berlusconi's discourse. The name of his former party, *Forza Italia*, is the chant of the supporters of the national football team. Literally it means 'Go Italy' (Jones, 2003: 106).

Berlusconi tries to communicate as directly as possible with his electorate. During campaigns, he speaks to the people directly via his own TV channels (he owns three of the six largest television networks), and he refuses to make use of the mediation of the press. He applies the methods of TV advertising to the realm of politics (Ginsborg, 2004). Moreover, during the campaign in 2001, he sent a biography of himself, called *Una Storia Italiana* (An Italian Story), to almost every Italian household. The book contained simply written stories about Berlusconi's life, and, most of all, pictures of his successes (Stille, 2006: 252).

FI (the predecessor of the present PdL) was not a party in the traditional sense of the word. In fact, Berlusconi argued that when FI was called a 'political party' he felt shivers down the spine (Tarchi, 2003: 166). It could better be seen as a loosely organized electoral machinery with only one goal: winning elections. Berlusconi was the uncontested leader who ruled the party with an iron hand. During campaigns, Berlusconi's face was on huge posters on boards alongside the road, in railway and train stations, and all other imaginable spots (Ginsborg, 2003). Berlusconi presents himself not only as 'the idealized archetype of the Italian everyman' but also as 'exceptional, a superman in the making' (Stille, 2006: 257). A comparison Berlusconi himself likes to make is with Moses or Jesus (Jones, 2003: 293).

Conclusion and discussion

More than forty years ago, scholars posed the following question: 'Does [populism] have any underlying unity, or does one name cover a multitude of unconnected tendencies?' (Ionescu & Gellner, 1969b: 1). As this pressing question has not been answered yet, the goal of this chapter was to assess whether there exists a lowest common denominator shared by alleged populist actors across regions and over time.

First, I distinguished three area-based bodies of literature on populism: the United States literature, the Latin American literature, and the Western European literature. Second, I distinguished twelve characteristics of populism that are often mentioned in at least one of these three bodies of literature. Third, I selected two 'prototypical populists' from each body of literature. To assess the lowest common denominator that all these actors share, I made sure that the selected populist actors came from backgrounds as dissimilar as possible in terms of space, time and ideology. The selected populist actors are Watson's People's Party and Perot's Reform Party in the United States; Perón's Justicialist Party (Argentina) and Chávez's MVR/PSUV (Venezuela) in Latin America; and Le Pen's FN (France) and Berlusconi's FI (Italy) in Western Europe. Fourth, I assessed to what extent these populist actors possess the twelve characteristics of populism.

The results indicate that only four of the twelve characteristics that are often associated with populism are shared by all populist actors (see Table 2.3). Interestingly, all shared features relate to ideas. The first shared feature is that all populists emphasize the central position of the people. What they exactly mean by 'the people' often remains unclear. What *is* clear, however, and this is the second shared feature, is that they seem to have the idea that the people with whom they identify are homogeneous. The third shared characteristic is that they all argue that the people are exploited by a corrupt and selfish elite. And the fourth feature that can be found in all six cases is that populists argue that the exploitation of the people by the selfish elite constitutes a serious political, economic and/or cultural crisis.

These findings suggest that actors labeled as populist actually have something in common and that it is not a coincidence that they have all been labeled as such. This is an important finding because it means that it is possible to formulate a minimal definition of populism. We can travel between different regional contexts and compare populists in the United States of the nineteenth century with twentieth century populist leaders in Latin America and present-day allegedly populist parties in Western Europe on the basis of this definition.

Table 2.3

Populists and their characteristics

	Watson People's Party	Perot Reform Party	Perón Justicialist Party	Chávez MVR/PSUV	Le Pen Front National	Berlusconi Forza Italia
Ideas						
1. People-centrism	+	+	+	+	+	+
2. Anti-elitism	+	+	+	+	+	+
3. Homogeneity of the people	+	+	+	+	+	+
4. Direct democracy	+	+	-	+	+	+
5. Exclusionism	+	-	-	-	+	-
6. Proclamation of a crisis	+	+	+	+	+	+
Style						
7. Simplistic language	-	+	-	+	+	+
8. Direct communication style	+	+	-	+	+	+
9. Polarization	-	+	+	+	+	+
10. Image of outsider	-	+	+	+	+	+
Organization						
11. Centralization of leader	-	+	+	+	+	+
12. Loosely mediated relationship	+	+	+	+	-	+

On the basis of these findings, it is possible to formulate a baseline criterion that a minimal definition of populism must fulfill: it should never contain elements other than the four elements of the lowest common denominator (people-centrism + anti-elitism + homogeneity of the people + proclamation of a crisis). For example, a definition of populism in which exclusionism plays an important role could be employed to analyse cases in Western Europe.[17] Such a definition cannot, however, travel to the United States or Latin America. Similarly, a definition in which leadership is one of the central attributes could be used in an analysis of Latin American populism, but it cannot be applied to cases in the United States or Western Europe.[18] This does not mean that all four elements of the lowest common denominator should necessarily be included in the definition. It might, for instance, be argued that the proclamation of a crisis is not a defining element of populism, but a consequence of contrasting the Good people with the evil elite.

At least two existing, and often employed, definitions of populism fulfill the baseline criterion. Mudde (2004: 543) has defined 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'; and Hawkins (2009: 1042) has defined populism 'as a Manichean discourse that identifies Good with a unified will of the people and Evil with a conspiring elite'. Of course, these definitions differ from each other in some respects. Yet both meet the baseline prerequisite of containing no other attributes than the elements of the lowest common denominator.[19] As such, these minimal definitions are appropriate for comparing populist actors across regions and over time.

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[17] See, for instance, the definition formulated by Albertazzi & McDonnell (2008b: 3).

[18] See, for example, the definition of Weyland (2001: 18).

[19] Note that these definitions do not contain all four elements of the lowest common denominator. Both contain the elements of people-centrism and anti-elitism, and also the attribute of homogeneity of the people. Mudde, after all, emphasizes the 'pureness' of the people and their *volonté générale*, and Hawkins talks about the 'unified will' of

In the remainder of this dissertation, I employ Mudde's definition of populism for two main reasons. First, the findings in this chapter confirm that this definition can be employed to compare populists across cases and over time. Second, the Zeitgeist-claim, on which this dissertation is based, has been formulated by Mudde. To be sure that I conceive of populism in a similar way as Mudde, it is appropriate to make use of Mudde's own definition of the term.

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the people. But neither definition also explicitly incorporates the proclamation of a crisis.