



OBSERVATORY OF POPULISM

Populism is a complex political approach. It borrows elements of behavior and leadership from several other movements and regime types. The following is a glossary of terms that overlap and interact with populism. The features encountered here can be found in a number of contemporary models of governance.

Definitions:

Populism	2	Authoritarianism	3
Illiberalism	4	Nationalism	5
Liberalism	6	Sultanism	7
Ethnic Democracy	9	Electoral authoritarianism	10
Facism	11	Totalitarianism	12

POPULISM

In populist thinking, the people are virtuous, good and all-powerful.

“Populism” was first used as a term to designate political movements in Czarist Russia in the second half of the 19th century. Around the same time in the United States, populism was used by the People’s Party to criticize cronyism and party politics. Yet, the notion also came to refer to how power was exercised in Latin America, for instance in Brazil in the 1930s with Getulio Vargas. Following the Second World War, it was also used to designate the rule of General Juan Perón in Argentina. Since the end of the 20th century, populism has established itself as a long-term, global phenomenon.

As a more or less elaborate ideology, contemporary populism is based on three main characteristics. First, it claims an irreducible opposition between a good, virtuous and powerful people and a small, homogeneous elite plotting against the masses. Most commonly articulated on the right of the political spectrum, populism also finds support from the left. The common denominator linking the two is the idea that popular and national sovereignty is without limit. However, populism can also be defined as a style adopted by a leader claiming to be the sole representative of the people. The latter often resorts to demagoguery, to simplification, and to the designation of enemies. A typical example would be the attempt by populists to present foreigners as an immediate threat. Finally, populism is also a political strategy to gain power. Populists impose their ideas in public debates and in the political agenda. They rule by getting rid of their opponents through stigmatization and through freedom.

To learn more about this topic:

- Mudde, Cas, Rovira Kaltwasser, Cristóbal. *Populism : A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017.
- Urbinati, Nadia. *Me the people: How populism transforms democracy*, Harvard, Harvard University Press, 2019.
- Werder Müller, Jan. *What is Populism?*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016.

AUTHORITARIANISM

Authoritarianism refers to contemporary dictatorial political regimes.

We commonly distinguish three types of political regimes today: democracies, totalitarian regimes and, sitting between these two, authoritarian regimes.

For the Spanish political scientist Juan Linz, authoritarian regimes are characterized by the intense repression of their opposition, who will vary in strength and resistance depending on the moment in history. Authoritarian regimes will also seek to impede pluralism in the press, media, and publishing, as well as in intellectual and cultural circles. Such activities tend to be allowed only in the parts of civil society that are under regime control.

Finally, authoritarianism does not pursue ideological projects of societal transformation, which are rather typical for totalitarian regimes. In fact, authoritarian regimes do not aim to trigger anthropological revolutions to create "a new mankind", which explains the low levels of politicization in authoritarian regimes, even though they do seek to maintain a heavy influence on the mentality of the population. Linz's definition can be used to characterize many past and present regimes all around the world. However, because the border between authoritarianism and totalitarianism is blurry, Linz' definition should be used with caution and nuance. This implies contextually analyzing the political dynamics underway, in order to identify the channels and moments of changeover through which authoritarian leaders come to power in representative democracies. The same goes for the passage from authoritarian to totalitarian regimes.

[To learn more about this topic:](#)

- Linz, Juan. *Totalitarian and authoritarian regimes*. Boulder (CO), Lynne Rienner Publishers. 2000.
- Moore Jr, Barrington. *Social origins of dictatorship and democracy: lord and peasant in the making of the modern world*. Boston, Beacon Press. 1993.
- Norris, Pippa. Inglehart, Ronald. *Cultural backlash : Trump, Brexit, and authoritarian populism*. Cambridge University Press. 2019.

ILLIBERALISM

Illiberalism is both an ideology and a type of political regime.

The concept of *illiberalism* emerged at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, both in public debate and in the social sciences. It is a catch-all term with various meanings and uses.

Illiberalism stands in opposition to political liberalism, making a clear distinction between the latter and democracy. In other words, there can be illiberal democracies. This composite ideology mixes social and cultural conservatism with nationalism. In contrast to economic liberalism, illiberalism goes hand in hand with economic protectionism. In Europe, national-populist movements champion illiberalism as a political alternative in the battle for cultural hegemony, aspiring to rebuild a political, social, and intellectual order. When ideological illiberalism becomes a power practice, we thus end up with an *illiberal democracy* - a notion used by social scientists and political leaders, such as the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. This implies the exercise of autocracy, the suppression of opposition powers, stifling the freedom of the press, the desire to control schools and universities, and the promotion of nationalism. Unlike authoritarianism, illiberal democracy is based on a gradual shift from a liberal, representative democracy to something else. It appeals to the virtuous and wise people, whose leader claims to embody their will and express their truest sentiments. Finally, illiberal democracy needs electoral institutions. It allows for competition between various parties, even if the competition is biased and distorted (which has not prevented political opponents from being elected in Warsaw, Budapest, or Istanbul). This allows for a permanent mobilization of the population, as well as a polarization and radicalization of politics, thereby maintaining the regime's dynamics.

To learn more about this topic:

- Levitsky, Steven. Ziblatt, Daniel. *How Democracies Die. What History Tells us about Our Future*. New York, Crown. 2019.
- Zakaria, Fareed. *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad*. New York, W. W. Norton & Company. 2007.

NATIONALISM

An emancipatory or seclusionary ideology?

Nearly two centuries ago, European nationalistic movements gave rise to a large number of European nations, built on the ruins of empires and/or the merging of states. While many other ideologies have since withered, nationalism has withstood the test of time. This resilience can be explained in part by the dual nature of this “ism,” which acts as both a movement of liberation (from an oppressor) and as a movement of isolation and seclusion. Nationalism is thus a double-sided ideology. Its universalist side aims to emancipate humans through the construction of nations made up of citizens born with equal rights in a given territory. Conversely, its ethnic side defines the Nation through primary identity markers (language, race, religion, etc.), which in reality are not necessarily shared by all residents of the nation-state. However, in this second case, these markers do enable emigrants to have something they can identify with, as is the case of diasporas.

The universalist version of nationalism is now playing second fiddle, while the so-called ethnic version is in full swing. Ethnic nationalism rises from its ashes at regular intervals in the wake of economic, social and political crises, when a group feels threatened by an alleged Other - migrants, neighboring states, a minority perceived as a fifth column, Jews or Muslims in certain countries - or by a body accused of undermining national sovereignty, such as the EU. Some politicians, populists particularly, are keen to exploit this fear of the Other and the underlying anger. They willingly utilize a national mythology loaded with sentiment to play on emotions. By coupling populism (a political style) with nationalism (an ideology), they create a “national-populism,” in which only the “sons of the soil” make up “the People,” and they are usually a majority of the population - hence the expression “majoritarianism”.

[To learn more about this topic:](#)

- Dieckhoff, Alain. Jaffrelot, Christophe. *Revisiting nationalism*. London, Hurst. 2005.
- Gellner, Ernest. *Nations and Nationalism*. Oxford, Basil Blackwell. 1983.
- Smith, D. Anthony. *Theories of nationalism*. London, Gerald Duckworth & Co Ltd. 1971.

LIBERALISM

Liberalism, a multifaceted notion that is neither left-wing, nor right-wing.

Few terms are as variously interpreted as this one, mostly due to the diverse array of fields to which it can be applied. In economics, liberalism refers to the absence of State intervention in the market and free trade. In politics, it alludes to a type of democratic regime that combines universal suffrage, the separation of powers, and the rule of law as enshrined in Constitutions. Culturally, and based on a more recent understanding of the term, liberalism covers a system of values advocating for equality (on race, gender, social justice etc.) and open to broader social mores, such as recognizing abortion, divorce, or LGBTQ+ rights.

Populism questions some of these dimensions, especially the political and the cultural. In the political sphere, the populist leader tends to undermine the very foundations of the rule of law. This is "justified" by the perceived legitimacy the leader derives from the ballot box (and therefore the people) which supposedly allows them to challenge institutions. Populism thus tends to emphasize the importance of popular vote, at the expense of the checks and balances that are central to liberalism.

In the cultural sphere, the situation is even trickier. On the one hand, the rise of liberalism in society has contributed to populist tensions. The promotion of minority rights and more open social norms has led to perceived threats to the social status, and hence to the identity, of ethnic majorities in a number of countries. On the other hand, once in power, national-populists often pass conservative laws against minorities and women.

While national-populists (Right-wing or far-Right populists) claim to be "*of the people*," they do not advocate for equality, whether racial or social, and do not support redistribution policies.

[To learn more about this topic:](#)

- Mounk, Yascha. *The People vs. Democracy. Why our Freedom is in Danger and How to Save It?* Cambridge Mass, Harvard University Press? 2018.
- Rueschemeyer, Dietrich. Huber Stephens, Evelyne. Stephens, John D. *Capitalist Development and Democracy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1992.
- Tilly, Charles. *Democracy*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. 2007.

SULTANISM

Sultanism, the combination of arbitrariness, patrimonialism and privatization of legitimate violence.

Sultanism is a variant of authoritarianism theorized by the Spanish political scientist Juan Linz, on the basis of the groundwork laid by Max Weber.

This term relies on three pillars:

- A form of "personal rulership" based on "a mixture of fear and rewards." Arbitrariness is somewhat inherent in any form of authoritarianism, simply because power is concentrated in the hands of a few, and checks and balances are dramatically eroded. In sultanism, this dimension is drastically exacerbated. In contrast to other types of authoritarianism, which may be based on organizations (including political parties), in sultanism, power is highly personalized and the leader may thus behave whimsically. Power is usually exerted through a state bureaucracy where those who are close to the sultan are given key positions. This feature complements populism well, as both political styles almost systematically imply personal embodiment. The populist leader relates to the people directly, at the expense of institutions, including his/her own political party.
- The political economy of sultanism is a form of patrimonialism. As described by Linz: "*the economy is subject to considerable government interference not for planning purposes, but for extracting resources*". In countries where the public and private sectors coexisted before this kind of regime was established, they continue to do so. But the former is subjected to an intense form of state control while the latter is directly impacted by political interference. The rulers "*demand gifts and payoffs from business for which no public accounting is given*" and they "*establish profit-oriented monopolies*". Cronies or oligarchs thus play an important role in politics because they finance the sultans' election campaigns. Affinities between sultanism and populism are obvious : the power of populists relies on the legitimacy given by popular mandate. To hold onto legitimacy, the populist therefore needs to contest elections that are usually biased (see the section on electoral authoritarianism), but nevertheless still competitive and therefore costly. Cronies help the sultan cover these costs in exchange for help in consolidating their monopolies or oligopolies.

SULTANISM

- Sultanism also relies on "*the use of violence to sustain the regime*". Sultans usually build militias or private armies in order to free themselves from the police or the military, which can be unreliable in the beginning of their rule (later on, they usually appoint their own men to the security apparatus and essentially privatize it). Whether private or public, forces paying allegiance to the sultan resort to a twofold form of violence. First, they physically intimidate or repress dissidents (particularly in the context of election campaigns). Secondly, they impose a form of cultural policing vis-à-vis the minorities and those considered "deviant". Here again, affinities with national-populism are quite obvious because national-populist leaders are committed to making the *Other* abide in order to reassure the majority that they exert societal supremacy. Minorities and "liberals" (a derogatory word in their lexicon) are therefore targeted by the sultan's militias and/or the police.

Sultanism is an ideal-type (a theoretical model rarely encountered in reality), but some of its features have materialized in Putin's Russia, Erdogan's Turkey and Modi's India.

[To learn more about this topic:](#)

- Jaffrelot, Christophe. "Populism against democracy or people against democracy?" in *Contemporary Populists in Power*. New York, Springer. 2022.
- Linz, Juan. *Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes*, Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner. 2000.
- Linz, Juan. *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation*. Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore. 1996.

ETHNIC DEMOCRACY

Ethnic Democracy, a democracy delivering for the ethnic majority only.

Sammy Smootha, who developed the theory of ethnic democracy, presents it as a product of ethnic nationalism. He defines this sense of belonging as inextricably linked with a rejection of the Other, perceived as a threat. This is a precondition to the emergence of an ethnic democracy, but another, external condition must also be fulfilled: the neutrality (or even support) of the international community toward the ethnic nation-state.

Smootha notes that many countries have gone down the road of ethnic democracy but he considers Israel as the archetype of this political system, as a state aspiring to combine an ethnic (Jewish) identity with a parliamentary system drawing its inspiration from Western Europe. The two sides of this coin are the Jewish nature of the nation-state and the restrictions on the rights of minorities, especially the Palestinians. The ethnic aspect of the nation can be seen in the judaization of everyday symbols, among which "*Israel's titular name, calendar, days and sites of commemoration, heroes, flag, emblem, national anthem, names of places, ceremonies and the like are all Jewish.*"

If Israel is a *de jure* ethnic democracy, most discrimination is unofficial but exists in practice, such as making military service a criterion of eligibility for benefits, ruling out most minority groups. The notion of ethnic democracy is contradictory because it divides the "*demos*" in two categories. Some citizens do not have the same rights as others due to their religious identity. Ethnic democracy has clear affinities with national-populism, a regime in which the ethnic majority represents "*the people*" whereas the minorities are second class citizens.

[To learn more about this topic:](#)

- Jaffrelot, Christophe. *Modi's India – Hindu Nationalism and the Rise of Ethnic Democracy*, Princeton Nj., Princeton University Press. 2021.
- Peled, Yehuda. *The Challenge of Ethnic Democracy: The State and Minority Groups in Israel, Poland and Northern Ireland*, London, Routledge. 2018.
- Smootha, Sammy. "The model of ethnic democracy: Israel as a Jewish and democratic state," *Nations and Nationalism*. 2002.

ELECTORAL AUTHORITARIANISM

When voters matter, but are not on an even playing field.

The notion of electoral authoritarianism was introduced by the political scientist Andreas Schedler to describe authoritarian regimes which hold multiparty elections but "*deprive them of their democratic substance*" because they "*distort (...) the formation of popular preference as well as the expression of popular preferences*". How do they achieve this?

First, opponents are not in a position to contest elections freely, because of all kinds of intimidations: they may be threatened physically or financially (through tax raids) or they may not be able to campaign. Second, the election commission (or any administrative body in charge of the election) is not guaranteed to be independent. As a result, the moral code of conduct may be imposed only on the opposition, whereas the ruling party may be free to use all kinds of means (including religious appeal in the election campaign). Third, the media may be biased, either because they fear the same intimidation as the political opponents or because the owners are close to the ruling party. This usually helps the rulers saturate the public space, even in the country where some rules and regulations should be able to prevent such a scenario. Fourth, the ruling party may be in a position to spend more than its opponents, because regulations do not exist or are breached, and/or because companies (are forced to) give to the country's rulers.

Electoral authoritarianism often surfaces during the first electoral campaign that populists have to contest as incumbents. They tend to resort to these techniques for three reasons:

- Usually, they have not delivered as much as promised in order to be re-elected (given the fact that populists are more demagogic than most politicians);
- They have already concentrated power in their hands, personalization of power being inherent to populism;
- They consider it necessary to contest elections in order to reinforce their legitimacy *vis-à-vis* other power centers (including the judiciary) and to show the world (including the West) that they tick the democratic criteria. That being said, autocrats have not been systematically sanctioned by Western countries in the near past, especially when they are considered to be saving their country from an "Islamist threat", as is the case with General Sissi in Egypt or Kais Saïed in Tunisia.

To learn more about this topic:

- Kenny, Paul. *Populism and Patronage. Why Populists Win Elections in India, Asia and Beyond*, Delhi, Oxford University Press. 2017.
- Levitsky, Steven. Way, Lucan A. *Competitive Authoritarianism. Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2010.
- Schedler, Andreas. *Electoral Authoritarianism. The Dynamics of Unfree Competition*, Boulder, Lynne Rienner. 2006.

FASCISM

A combination of a nationalist totalitarianism and a complete rejection of materialistic individualism

The word fascism stems from the Italian word *fascio* (plural: *fasci*), which may mean "bundle", as in a political or militant group, or a nation. The term also comes from the fasces (rods bundled around an axe), an ancient Roman symbol of the authority of magistrates. The symbolism of the fasces suggested "strength through unity"; while a single rod could be easily broken, the bundle is very difficult to break.

The term fascism was originally used by an Italian political movement that resorted to violence against its enemies (socialists, communists, democrats) and then ruled Italy from 1922 to 1943 under the leadership of Benito Mussolini. In his *Doctrine of Fascism* (1932), Mussolini defines fascism as being a "left-wing collectivist ideology" in opposition to socialism, liberalism, democracy and individualism, and he describes it as "a spiritual way of life" emphasizing the "importance of traditions". His conception of fascism completely rejects individualism and gives absolute power to the state. The fascist regime included the repression of the opponents, an attempt to create a form of political religion, and the desire to create "a new humanity" in which from 1938 onwards, Jews were excluded. The fascist regime eventually allied itself with Nazi Germany and fought alongside Germans in World War II.

After the defeat of Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany in World War II, the term became highly pejorative, mainly due to the abhorrent crimes against humanity committed by the Nazis. Unlike liberals, communists, progressives or socialists, fascists no longer use the term fascism to refer to their movements. This is because fascism is a term which is often used by the opponents as a "political epithet" to discredit a movement and to portray them as undemocratic, authoritarian, or totalitarian.

[To learn more about this topic:](#)

- DGentile, Emilio. *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy*, Harvard, Harvard University Press. 1996.
- Griffin, Roger. *The Nature of Fascism*. Routledge. 2013.
- Payne, Stanley G. *A History of Fascism 1914-1945*. London: Routledge. 1991.

TOTALITARIANISM

When the state has total control.

The words "*totalitarian*" and "*totalitarianism*" are derived from "*totalitario*" and "*totalitarismo*". The term "*totalitarian*" was coined in 1923 by Giovanni Amendola to describe Mussolini's fascist ambitions to monopolize power, exercise total control, and to transform Italian society through the creation of a new political religion. After World War II, different theoreticians and political scientists transformed this adjective into a name and a concept. Among these, one of the most famous has been political scientist Hannah Arendt. Under totalitarianism, the ruling party exercises total control over the entire state apparatus: the police, the military, the media, and the economic and education systems. The idea was to exert control on every aspect of life through intense propaganda, with a permanent mobilization and politicization of the population. In a totalitarian regime, repression against opponents is severe; they are considered enemies that need to be eliminated. Nazi Germany had concentration and extermination camps for Jews during the Holocaust, whereas the Stalinist Regime in the Soviet Union had Gulags with high mortality rates. Such camps have existed across all communist regimes at some point in their histories. In all totalitarian cases, the regimes developed a nationalist ideology, with a mix of internationalism in the communist case. Hannah Arendt explained that totalitarian regimes do not attempt to reconcile the past with the present, but rather attempt to create a new national identity in order to shape the political culture in a country. Therefore, it "*severs an individual's or group's relation to a continuous past*" and "*forbids grief and remembrance*". She highlights that like imperialism, totalitarianism is defined by its emphasis on constant movement, taking away the individual agency of men and women by making them insignificant in the grand scheme of history or nature. Since World War II, other movements or regimes have shown totalitarian features. The Khmer Rouge in Cambodia in the 1970s organized a genocide against their population for instance, while Khomeini in Iran, or more recently, the Islamic State in the Middle East have used exercised signification repression against their "enemies".

[To learn more about this topic:](#)

- Larendt, Hannah. *The Origins of Totalitarianism* [1951]. San Diego and New York. 1973.
- Friedrich, Joachim C. Brzezinski, Zbigniew K. *Totalitarian dictatorship and autocracy*. 1965.
- Linz, Juan. *Totalitarian and authoritarian regimes*, Boulder (CO), Lynne Rienner Publishers. 2000.