

# Is Populism an Ideology? A Refutation and a New Perspective

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The dominant theoretical paradigm originating in the work of Cas Mudde conceives of populism as a thin-centered ideology that focuses on the antagonism between people and elites against the backdrop of popular sovereignty. While this framework has contributed significantly to an improved scientific analysis of populism, it is argued in this article that its ideological connotations are ill-conceived both conceptually and methodologically, and that its normative implications and failure to acknowledge the graded nature of populist behavior hinder the further evolution of the field of populism studies. Combining insights from the work of Ernesto Laclau and the proponents of frame theory, the article suggests dropping the ideological clause and simply conceiving populism as a discursive frame. The article contends that frame analysis reveals a strong fit between discursive elements and cognitive features of populism, furnishing solid methodological foundations to conduct empirical research and encouraging cooperation with neighboring fields of social science.

**Keywords:** populism; discourse; frame theory; populist frame; content analysis

Ideology is a hotly contested concept in social science. In a systematic and exhaustive survey of the literature, John Gerring (1997) not only dismisses it as a ‘farflung’ notion but also concludes that its various conceptualizations usually encompass blatantly contradictory traits. Hence, to employ the precarious conceptual edifice of ideology as the cornerstone upon which to establish yet another contested term – ‘populism’ – should not strike us as a sound idea. Yet this is exactly what has taken place.

The most widely cited definition of populism during the past decade has been formulated by Cas Mudde (2004, p. 543), who proclaims it to be ‘an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite”, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people’. Populism, Mudde (2004) stresses, is a ‘thin-centered’ ideology, since the particular ideas under its command are of limited scope, complexity and ambition when measured against ‘full’ ideologies.

While acknowledging the denotational merits of Mudde’s definition of populism, this article exposes the false conceptual foundations of the ideological premise and highlights the detrimental normative implications inserted by this choice of genus. Discourse, understood through the lens of frame analysis, is put forward as the proper candidate to replace ideology and contribute a superior analytical and methodological perspective.

## Populism as Thin-Centered Ideology

Fortunately, we need not engage in a lengthy overview of the various conceptualizations of ideology to prove that populism is *not* a complete ideology by any established measure.<sup>1</sup> Most scholars of populism refrain from asserting that their concept stands on a par with

liberalism, socialism or any other fully developed *-ism* that connotes a series of far-ranging policy implications and captures the hearts and minds of dedicated partisans around the world. The staunchest proponents of the ideological clause, Margaret Canovan (2002) first, and then Mudde (2004),<sup>2</sup> have proceeded to relegate populism to a ‘thin-centered’ ideology status, implicitly or explicitly acknowledging that it basically lacks what Gerring (1997) has distilled as the single most unchallenged dimension of ideology in the literature: *coherence*.

Indeed, analysts take great pains to show that much of populism’s power and relevance lies in its inherently ‘chameleonic’ nature, its ability to change face according to context and attach itself to full ideologies (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013; Taggart, 2000). This is why we commonly identify as populist such ideologically diverse political phenomena as the American Populist Party and the Russian Narodniki of the nineteenth century, Peronism in Argentina and the French Poujadists of the 1950s, and leaders such as Hugo Chávez, Evo Morales, Marine Le Pen and Geert Wilders.

No trace of ideological coherence can be substantiated across these cases. Arguably, there is not a single policy area where we could not find two populist actors at loggerheads. Hans-Georg Betz (1994, p. 107) testifies that ‘populist parties are generally held to lack grand visions or comprehensive ideological projects’, and, as has repeatedly been stressed, there is no Populist International, no sacred texts upon which populist disciples can draw inspiration, no universally revered populist icons, and no acknowledged historical continuity among populist manifestations (Bale *et al.*, 2011; Moffitt and Tormey, 2014; Stanley, 2008; Worsley, 1969).

Populism quite obviously falls short of the status of ideology.<sup>3</sup> Still, many scholars accentuate the ideological part of Mudde’s (2004) definition, even when, like Luke March (2007, p. 64), they contradict themselves by stating that ‘defining populism as an ideology should certainly not imply intellectual robustness or consistency’. Therefore, despite the obvious errors in their purported relation, there still exists a knee-jerk association of populism with ideology in the literature, usually predicated upon the invocation of populism’s peculiar ideological ‘thinness’. This deserves closer scrutiny.

As with Canovan (2002), Mudde’s (2004) ‘thin-centered’ ideological framework for populism – currently the dominant theoretical paradigm (Moffitt and Tormey, 2014) – draws its authority entirely from Michael Freeden’s (1996; 1998) ‘morphological approach’ on ideology. Freeden (1998, p. 750) describes a thin-centered ideology as ‘one that arbitrarily severs itself from wider ideational contexts, by the deliberate removal and replacement of concepts’, exhibiting ‘a restricted core attached to a narrower range of political concepts’. Populism’s malleability and tendency to attach itself to other ‘thick’ or ‘thin’ host ideologies such as liberalism, socialism, ecologism and nationalism, are expounded by Mudde (2004) and Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2012a; 2013) specifically along these lines.

The attempt to preserve ideology as populism’s genus by resorting to its alleged thinness is open to three major lines of criticism. First, the very notion of thinness is conceptually spurious; second, this position entails significant methodological inconsistencies in the framework of its proponents; and third, its essentialist connotations erect insurmountable obstacles with regard to classification and measurement. I will address each of these issues in turn.

### *The Complications of 'Thinness'*

In his influential body of work, Freedon (1996) describes the morphology of ideologies as a three-tiered structure containing core, adjacent and peripheral concepts, conditioned by means of elaborate proximities and weights idiosyncratic to each ideological variant. For instance, liberalism is described as having liberty at its core; human rights, democracy and equality adjacent to the core; and nationalism on the periphery. Every belief that stems from an ideology travels along a specific route from core to periphery, acquiring elements from conceptual nodes along the way. Core concepts are present 'in all known cases of the ideology in question' (Freedon, 2013, p. 125), as with liberty in liberalism. So, a purported instance of liberalism that lacks liberty at its core would 'raise profound doubts about whether that case is indeed a member of the liberal family' (Freedon, 2013, p. 125).

How do thin-centered ideologies differ from this basic type? Collecting various fragments from Freedon (1996; 1998; 2001), thin-centered ideologies such as nationalism, feminism and ecologism<sup>4</sup> are seen as ephemeral 'groupings of political thought' displaying a 'decreased internal integration' (Freedon, 1996, p. 485), and 'a restricted core attached to a narrower range of political concepts' (Freedon, 1998, p. 750), failing to exhibit 'the full or broad range of concepts and political positions normally to be found within the mainstream ideological families' (Freedon, 2001, p. 203). A thin-centered ideology is 'limited in ideational ambitions and scope' and thus is unable to provide a 'reasonably broad, if not comprehensive, range of answers to the political questions that societies generate' (Freedon, 1998, p. 750). Moreover, the 'cohesive intricacy of the ideological product' as well as the existence and spread of 'a unifying system among[,] its ideological producers' set a thick ideology apart (Freedon, 1996, pp. 545–6).

Freedon explicitly, but rather unsystematically, assigns a number of attributes to thick ideologies: (1) substantial internal integration, (2) a rich core attached to a wide range of political concepts, (3) the capacity to exhibit a broad range of concepts and political positions, (4) a reasonably broad range of answers to the political questions of society, (5) far-reaching ideational ambitions and scope, (6) a sufficiently cohesive and intricate ideological product and (7) unity among ideological producers – these are the ones we can at least surmise from his texts, absent a definitive checklist. Thin ideologies, while undoubtedly belonging to the same genus as thick ideologies, exhibit a subordinate morphology, lacking these necessary attributes.

Freedon is conceptualizing thin-centered ideologies as inferior instances of a super-ordinate category, diminished subtypes of an ideal type of ideology, thus actually employing a radial structure for the concept of 'ideology'. In radial categories (Collier and Levitsky, 1997; Collier and Mahon, 1993; Gerring, 2012), the existence of all defining attributes signifies a full instance of the concept (i.e. thick ideologies), with diminished subtypes illustrating only a subset of these attributes (i.e. thin ideologies).

To distinguish between full instances and diminished subtypes, defining attributes need to be clearly stated and operationalized, allowing the execution of valid tests of inclusion or exclusion. Freedon does not provide a comprehensive set of defining attributes for full (thick) ideologies; nor does he provide any operationalization. Thus, he never clarifies how exactly thin ideologies become subordinate. Which 'range of concepts' and how wide a 'scope' makes for a thick ideology? How is a 'restricted core' restricted? Which degree of

'integration', 'ambition' and 'cohesive intricacy' is required? How many 'political positions' and how 'unified' a system among ideological producers would be adequate? These and similar issues are left untouched, rendering us unable to distinguish between thick and thin ideologies if we are unwilling to rely on arguments from authority. Mathew Humphrey (2013), for instance, applies the morphological approach to claim that ecologism can plausibly be perceived as a thick rather than the thin ideology Freedden asserts. Who is to tell, when all these loose dimensions remain barren? As Humphrey (2013, p. 436) concludes, the choice is 'always a matter of emphasis and interpretation'. This is not an answer of high scientific merit.

There is no way out of the conceptual apparatus that Freedden has concocted: almost any political notion can acquire the status of a thin-centered ideology as long as it contains an alleged 'small' number of core concepts that the claimant perceives as being unable to supply a comprehensive package of policy proposals. After all, a 'small' set of core attributes is always necessary in order to define something. Then racism, anti-immigration, xenophobia, sexism, capitalism, radicalism, multiculturalism, technocracy, cosmopolitanism, Euroscepticism, neoliberalism, anti-neoliberalism, globalization, anti-globalization, religious fundamentalism, authoritarianism, antisemitism, militarism, neoconservatism, Keynesianism and consumerism are all thin-centered ideologies by this criterion; the list can have no end. We could also claim that populism's core features – anti-elitism, people-centrism and popular sovereignty – as posited by Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (2013), are thin ideologies of their own standing. Again, who is to tell? In effect, and this is the gist of this first point, Freedden professes a conceptual exceptionalism for ideology that is methodologically unwarranted. No social scientific notion, and populism in particular, can bear fruit when planted on such slippery conceptual ground.

### ***Methodological Inconsistencies***

The spurious conceptual structure of the 'thin-centered ideology' stratagem becomes evident in Mudde's attempt to draw opposites for populism. Mudde (2004) and Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2013) prescribe two direct opposites for populism: elitism and pluralism. However, rudimentary methodological consistency dictates that when discussing antithetical concepts, we compare concepts of the same rank, co-existing at the same level of conceptual hierarchy.<sup>5</sup> Since populism is a (thin-centered) ideology, it would entail that elitism and pluralism are also ideologies, thin-centered or otherwise. But unless we are willing to stretch concepts to the point of breakdown, this can hardly be the case. Consequently, Mudde would need to revise populism's genus to coincide with the one accounting for elitism and pluralism, whatever that is. Takis S. Pappas (2013, p. 33), to take one example, is more cognizant of such hierarchical consistency requirements, conceptualizing populism as *democratic illiberalism*, 'the polar opposite of political liberalism', treating populism as being on the same level as other ideologies.

Furthermore, the dependence on the ideological genus has forced Mudde and his associates into one further conceptual sleight of hand. Previously, we mentioned how Freedden employs thin ideologies as diminished subtypes of a radial concept structure. Radial categories have been blamed for encouraging conceptual stretching and fostering a 'pseudo-consensus' by collapsing different concepts under the same term, thus actually

perpetuating rather than reducing confusion (Møller and Skaaning, 2010; Weyland, 2001). While methodologists may agree or disagree with this critique, interestingly, Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2012a), reiterating Kurt Weyland (2001), also express their skepticism against applying radial categorizations to the study of populism, criticizing their decreased conceptual productivity and explicitly opting for a classical categorization as the best way to foster conceptual clarity and knowledge accumulation. Having earlier assigned their concept's genus to thin-centered ideology – the product of a radial categorization – they have obviously failed to employ consistently high standards across their methodological decisions.

### ***Betrayed by 'Degreeism'***

Alliance to ideology is usually perceived as a dichotomous exercise; one subscribes to an ideology, or refrains from doing so. For most people, there is no sense in speaking of 'degrees' of socialism, Marxism or liberalism since the normative political concepts that undergird such ideologies are of a 'take it or leave it' nature. You either acknowledge the overarching significance of class struggle, or place liberty at the center of your moral compass, or you do not. When core facets of an ideology are contested, the normal outcome is the birth of a subtype of the original ideology; you have social liberals, libertarians, conservative liberals and hundreds of other subtypes of liberalism, but there is generally no sense in speaking of or measuring degrees of an original liberalism. This is commensurate with the radial categorization of ideologies that Freedman employs.

Treating populism as ideology reiterates this essentialist perspective. Hence, a political party or leader can or cannot be populist; there is no grey zone. At best, as Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2013) advise, we can proceed to naming subtypes of populism such as neoliberal populism, inclusionary populism, national populism, agrarian populism and so on; measurement becomes a dichotomous process of classification into populist and non-populist phenomena. The essentialist ideological perspective inherently abhors 'degreeism' and refrains from any quantification of the phenomenon that would expose intragroup variation; variation can only produce subtypes.

Yet there has recently been a surge of quantitative research which, on the contrary, clearly acknowledges degrees of populism. Works such as Jagers and Walgrave (2007), Hawkins (2009), Deegan-Krause and Haughton (2009), Reungoat (2010), Pauwels (2011), Rooduijn and Pauwels (2011), Gemenis *et al.* (2012), March (2012), Vasilopoulou *et al.* (2014), Rooduijn *et al.* (2014), Bernhard *et al.* (2015), Pauwels and Rooduijn (2015) and Aslanidis (2015) have distilled the necessary dimensions of populism and operationalized them using various methodologies of text analysis to arrive at interesting conclusions illustrating variation across the unit of analysis (political parties, leaders, etc.).

As a matter of fact, most of these researchers rely explicitly or implicitly on the ideological definition provided by Mudde (2004) to choose and operationalize dimensions that they then apply on discursive artifacts. This is not unexpected at all; denotational clarity and operationalizability are probably the strongest aspects of Mudde's (2004) definition. All three dimensions that Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2013) suggest as necessary and sufficient – the exaltation of a 'noble people', the condemnation of 'corrupt elites' and the appeal to the value of popular sovereignty – share two qualities that render

them ideal for quantitative work. First, if properly operationalized, they can be identified within discursive data produced by political actors (electoral manifestos, speeches, interviews, etc.); and second, they are of a continuous rather than dichotomous nature, measured by the frequency of appearance within given data units – a standard approach in text analysis (Popping, 2000). Thus, since the necessary dimensions of the concept can exhibit variation, surely the concept itself can vary accordingly. These realizations have led the researchers mentioned above to devise innovative coding schemes and dictionaries to perform manual or automated measurements of populist discourse, reaching encouraging levels of reliability and validity. Therefore, to decry ‘degreeism’ and insist on a dichotomous qualitative perspective in light of a convincing body of research that illustrates the merits of investigating gradations can only be understood as employing an idiosyncratic cut-off threshold over which inclusion is justified, without ever disclosing the means to calculate it.

On a more general note, Giovanni Sartori’s supposed insistence on the perils of ‘degreeism’, widely cited as reason enough to stick with dichotomous concepts, is but an enduring myth. In reality, Sartori welcomes variations in degree. ‘Classes’, he argues, ‘do not impute “real sameness”, but similarity. The objects that fall into a same class are more similar among themselves – with respect to the criterion of the sorting – than to the objects that fall into other classes’ (Sartori, 1991, p. 246). He then explains: ‘Any class, no matter how minute, allows for intra-class variations (at least of degree); and it is up to the classifier to decide how much his classes are to be inclusive (broad) or discriminating (narrow)’ (Sartori, 1991, p. 246). Regarding the concept of ‘democracy’, Sartori (1987, p. 185; emphasis in original) explicitly declares that ‘*What is (democracy)? and How much (democracy)?* are both rightful and complementary, not mutually exclusive, questions’. When unfavorably referring to degreeism, what Sartori takes issue with is the ‘abuse (uncritical use) of the maxim that differences in kind are best conceived as differences of degree, and that dichotomous treatments are invariably best replaced by continuous ones’ (Sartori, 1991, p. 248). The empirical research on measuring populism has already provided ample evidence that no abuse is at work in the employment of degrees.

Undoubtedly, the debate over the dichotomous or graded nature of political concepts is not new. This same contention has unfolded at length regarding degrees of democracy (see Collier and Adcock, 1999). However, political scientists have devised sophisticated indices of democracy such as Freedom House and Polity IV, and numerous quantitative analyses have drawn from these datasets.<sup>6</sup> These efforts have their own problems, but one cannot see why corresponding indices for populism are illegitimate, when its allegedly dichotomous nature has repeatedly been overruled by empirical studies. The burden of proof is now squarely on the shoulders of those who deny the merits of quantification.

### Why Does This Debate Matter?

The resounding success in measuring populism has led some researchers to call the debate over the genus of populism a moot point (Van Kessel, 2014). To accept this would require that we, as scientists, for ‘practical reasons’, give up on our most revered scientific duty – the falsification of deficient theories – a rather ignominious compromise. But practical reasons are also at stake here. The misclassification of populism as ideology raises significant

problems for the proper analysis of populist phenomena, due to the normative elements that essentialist accounts force on their study.

Portraying populism as ideology swells the scope and purported impact of the phenomenon and forces analysts to take sides in favor of or against it. The normative implications of populism have plagued the literature and crippled its evolution into a respected theory. More often than not, scholars of populism tend to write as if they are loyal opponents or supporters of a political cause, rather than objective observers. As Jan-Werner Müller (2014, p. 484) acknowledges, 'evocations of populism often only seem to serve the purpose of criticizing something else'. This, of course, is no mere accident, since populism was (re)introduced preloaded with normative baggage. As J.B. Allcock (1971) testifies, it was Edward Shils who first coined the term in 1954, in such a way as to portray populism as an ideological phenomenon which consists of a threat to the rule of law, a threat to democracy. These normative connotations linger on to this day, nudging scholars to lean towards this side or the other when asked to classify political phenomena.

Since the study of populism frequently reflects 'anxieties both by liberals about democracy and by democrats about liberalism' (Müller, 2014), contemporary scholarship has roughly become divided into two main camps, according to the normative valence assigned to the term. The first camp comprises liberal-minded researchers emphasizing – with varying intensity – the negative effects of populism on liberal democracy. Populism, left and right, is accused of corroding democratic institutions, undermining checks and balances, paving the way to some form of authoritarianism. The opposite camp is populated by scholars more to the left, themselves divided into two smaller groups: the first group, influenced by mainstream liberal literature, has internalized the pejorative connotations, but strives to safeguard esteemed left-wing populist projects, claiming that the populist label should only be used for radical right-wing phenomena; the second group, predominantly comprised of post-Marxists, reverses the normative sign and upholds populism as an originally progressive political outlook rather than an accusation, refusing the legitimacy of using it to characterize right-wing episodes. As always, there is a large gray zone, plus a few on the left who insist that populism is nothing more than a Cold War-era insult employed to reinforce the 'theory of the two extremes', the equation of communism with fascism (D'Eramo, 2013). Consequently, academic production during the past decades tends to dovetail with political trends.

Scholarly opinion on two recent social movements in the United States – the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street – provides an interesting case in point. Analysts who do not sympathize with populism tend to apply the term to the movement they dislike, and protect their favorite from the ominous association. On the contrary, supporters of populism as a progressive notion happily assign its label to the movement they feel to be endearing and refuse its bestowal on 'reactionary' ones. In both cases, *ad hoc* dimensions are inserted to justify these choices.

Nadia Urbinati (2014, p. 130), while acknowledging that both movements employ populist discourse, claims that Occupy is not populist while the Tea Party is, since populism requires a leader, a 'vertical and unified structure'. Even though both movements lack clear hierarchical features, Urbinati claims that Tea Partiers are actually in active search of a leader through whom to take over the Republican Party. The Tea Party wants to be more

than merely a protest movement; Occupy apparently does not. Thus, the Tea Party is a populist movement and Occupy is a ‘popular’ movement. For Charles Postel (2012a), on the contrary, Occupy is a ‘most strikingly populist response to the present crisis ... old Populists would be proud of’; at the same time, the Tea Party is refused the label since Tea Partiers are simply conservatives whose ‘moral center is the market and the supposed freedom of the marketplace’ (Postel, 2012b, p. 33), with their anti-elitism directed only against elites with whom they disagree.

Of course this was an extreme example of contradiction originating in normative evaluations. But the elevation of populism into an ideology and the ample opportunity for subjective reasoning that go with this allow us to argue in favor of or against the populist nature of a phenomenon with seemingly equal validity. Only a more nuanced approach that is grounded in measurable artifacts can help overcome such inconsistencies or else we will continue talking past one another. Efforts such as the one made recently by Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2012b) to provide a more balanced assessment of the impact of populism on democracy across regions are welcome developments. However, the notion of populism-as-ideology and its essentialist connotations leaves qualitative classificatory exercises open to debate since cases of populist politics are by definition pushed to the one or the other extreme, left or right, instead of assuming positions along a continuum.

Hence, Gemenis *et al.* (2012, p. 3) rightly complain that ‘the term populist is used so often and in a derogatory way that its empirical measurement has largely escaped scholarly attention’; this is equally true for appreciative assessments. Shifting away from essentialism, and acknowledging the continuous nature of populism, we can mitigate normative biases, and this is why this debate matters. A graded approach will reveal a more subtle and refined political landscape, where political parties are not easily classified as either populist or non-populist; it will demonstrate the fact that populist discursive elements are scattered across the ideological spectrum and that their intensity varies with time. This will undermine normative and ideological arguments on both sides since populist discourse will become a contingent trait of both ‘friends’ and ‘enemies’ of (liberal) democracy.

### **If Not an Ideology, What?**

The theoretical framework of populism as thin-centered ideology has been scrutinized and found to suffer from three major misconceptions that severely undermine its usability. However, the question remains: if populism is not a (thin-centered) ideology, what is it? During its life as a concept, populism has been associated with various characteristics. For instance, before the 1990s, populism was routinely associated with fiscally ‘irresponsible’ policies of deficit spending. Unexpectedly, the appearance of ‘neoliberal’ populist leaders in Latin America such as Alberto Fujimori, Carlos Menem and Fernando Collor de Mello during the early 1990s necessitated a paradigm shift, driving influential scholars to remove economic policies from the set of necessary dimensions for identifying populism (Roberts, 1995; Weyland, 1996). Later instances of openly pro-market populist parties in Europe and elsewhere have confirmed the soundness of this decision. Economic policy is now widely considered a contingent but not a necessary factor in the classification of populist parties (Hawkins, 2010; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013).



The same holds true for another contested dimension that gradually lost its currency: charismatic leadership. While populist figures such as Juan Perón and Jean-Marie Le Pen had accentuated the role of charisma, the contested nature of the concept and various empirical developments have also relegated this feature to a facilitating, rather than a necessary variable (Hawkins, 2010; Mudde, 2004). However interesting this debate on obsolete dimensions may be, here we focus on locating the genus of populism rather than its denotational features. Therefore, we focus on the two main contenders found in the literature: populism as strategy, and populism as discourse. In what follows, I briefly discuss why the first option does not amount to an analytically useful genus, and subsequently elaborate on discourse as the most plausible choice.

Weyland (1996; 2001, p. 14) has repeatedly emphasized that populism is best seen as strategy, or more precisely, ‘a political strategy through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government power based on direct, unmediated, uninstitutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers’. Betz (2002, p. 198) concurs, claiming that ‘populism is primarily a political strategy, whose political rhetoric is the evocation of latent grievances and the appeal to emotions provoked by them, rather than an ideology’. Nevertheless, whether a political agent truly believes in politics as a struggle between an overwhelming majority of people and a minority of elites, or whether this discourse is employed as a cynically opportunistic strategy in order to reap electoral benefits, this is largely an empirical issue which, as Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2012a, p. 9) hold, ‘is often almost impossible to answer conclusively (without getting into the populist’s head)’. After all, strategy is inherent in political activity. One could rightfully claim that each and every political action is strategic rather than ideological or straightforwardly technocratic since political agents are rational actors aiming to maximize political returns for their decisions.

While the strategic dimension can indeed uncover interesting facets of the conduct of populist agents, it cannot provide the conceptual depth we are looking for since it sits at too distant a position in the conceptual hierarchy to be of immediate use. If we simply lump together every type of political behavior under ‘strategy’, we sacrifice conceptual refinement and equate populism with demagoguery, the tendency to overpromise and ‘say what the people want to hear’. If we are to uphold the analytical utility of the concept of populism for political science, we need to acknowledge that it stands for a behavior that fulfills a specific political function which can then be either employed strategically or asserted as a matter of conviction, i.e. put on the mantle of ideology.

Based on the above, we consider ‘discourse’ as much better suited to characterize the conceptual genus of populism. If we do away with the unnecessary ideological clause in Mudde’s (2004) formulation, we are left with a purely discursive definition: populism modestly becomes a discourse, invoking the supremacy of popular sovereignty to claim that corrupt elites are defrauding ‘the People’ of their rightful political authority. It becomes an *anti-elite discourse in the name of the sovereign People*. This is, more or less, how the concept has been operationalized in the growing quantitative literature mentioned earlier. The methodological implications of operationalization expose the discursive nature of populism since even researchers who abide by Mudde’s ideological clause rely on purely non-ideological dimensions to seize their object. They do not operationalize programmatic

commitments, organizational structures, stances on immigration, economy, welfare, foreign affairs, human rights, environmental practices and other indicators of ideological disposition as, for instance, researchers of the Comparative Manifesto Project would do (see Budge *et al.*, 2001). To seize and measure populism, it has been found sufficient to meticulously analyze the discourse of political actors and see if discursive elements of exalting the ‘noble People’ and condemning ‘corrupt elites’ in the name of popular sovereignty are there, and how much of them.

Many would reject this perspective as overly behavioristic, but the fact remains that populism is a systematically recurring political phenomenon empirically located within political discourse. On the contrary, ideological, or even strategic claims, purport to have glimpsed inside the ‘populist’s head’ and to have discovered an ulterior motive for this type of behavior. And even if methods such as elite interviews could be employed to prove this (and they are not), they would be restricted to those political actors who are still around and willing to supply such insights sincerely. Evidently, the burden of proof of the ideological nature of populism lies with those who stand by such strong claims.

The discursive strand in populist scholarship has been active at least since Ernesto Laclau’s (1977) first take on populism, further elaborated in Laclau (2005a) and Laclau (2005b). This post-structuralist corpus is not for the faint of heart, but is nonetheless very rewarding. Laclau pioneered efforts to discard nonessential dimensions (economic, social, etc.) that contaminated the literature and focused on the discursive construction of populist appeals. Rather reasonably, the scholarly drift towards acknowledging the discursive nature of populism has led his disciples to celebrate Laclau’s eventual vindication (e.g. Stavrakakis and Katsambekis, 2014).

Nevertheless, subscribing to a discursive populism does not entail a wholesale commitment to the Laclauian theoretical edifice or the methodology of the Essex School of discourse analysis, which is but one school of thought among numerous other perspectives on analyzing political discourse. On the contrary, for all its merits, Laclau’s approach exhibits several limitations that inhibit its expansion outside post-structuralist circles. Apart from its outdated Marxist overtones (Stavrakakis, 2004), a significant shortcoming with respect to the objectives of this article is its purely qualitative and binary toolbox. Discourse-analytic applications purport to identify populist projects by discovering manifestations of Laclau’s two criteria: ‘a central reference to “the people” and an equivalential, antagonistic discursive logic’ (Stavrakakis, 2004, p. 259). Even if one does not side with Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser’s (2012a, p. 7) unjust dismissal of Laclau’s theory as ‘extremely abstract’, its applications frequently rely on highly interpretive narrative. Hence, while the Essex School methodological paradigm can contribute to holistic case-study appraisals of populist projects, it fails to provide objective comparative methodological instruments, remaining indifferent towards any quantitative valuations. Laclau (2005b, p. 47) explicitly defines populism as a graded concept, but never provides concrete means of operationalizing indicators to reveal variation in some detail; he only vaguely states that the degree of populism ‘will depend on the depth of the chasm separating political alternatives’.

Despite this line of criticism, Laclau’s contribution to the theory of populism has been widely under-estimated thus far. From early on, Laclau stressed the need to focus on

ubiquitous discursive patterns and warned against mistaking particularities of populist instances in different regions for essential characteristics, as several other analysts did at the time. As he exclaimed, ‘a movement is not populist because in its politics or ideology it presents actual contents identifiable as populist, but because it shows a particular logic of articulation of those contents – whatever those contents are’ (Laclau, 2005b, p. 33). This ‘displacement of the conceptualization, from contents to form’ (Laclau, 2005b, p. 44) remains his most formidable contribution. The populist form pits a certain ‘People’ against a certain ‘power bloc’, but both subjectivities are ‘empty signifiers’, symbolic vessels filled with particular content depending on the specifics of the political context within which they are invoked and the cultural toolbox at work (Laclau, 2005a; 2005b). It is those formal components of populist discourse that account for the – almost instinctive – affinity we perceive among the varying phenomena collected under the populist umbrella, while the flexibility of their contents explains the diversity of this ecosystem.

As many analysts have pointed out (e.g. Hawkins, 2009; Rooduijn *et al.*, 2014), formal discursive elements are implicit in Mudde’s (2004) ideological definition. Structural qualities of populist discourse are successfully exploited by quantitative researchers in pursuance of valid traces of the phenomenon. To capitalize on the progress made so far, and to direct Laclau’s and Mudde’s insights towards a more positivist outlook accounting for variation among cases, I suggest the introduction of the notion of the ‘*populist frame*’. As I argue in the next section, frame analysis is a more productive methodological vantage point than discourse analysis, as it is geared firmly towards quantitative work and devoid of any normative complications.

### Populism as a Discursive Frame

Post-structuralists understand discourse in an inflated sense, as an ‘ensemble of the phenomena in and through which social production of meaning takes place’ (Laclau, 1980, p. 86) – a formulation encompassing the near totality of social experience. This is an overly broad scope of analysis, and even though secondary elements such as gesture, dress and performative repertoires arguably contribute to the overall meaning a political actor conveys,<sup>7</sup> by ‘discourse’ I here simply refer to language, textual data, written or spoken – in other words, the standard material of text analysis (Popping, 2000). This material is sufficient to identify a political practice as populist; if populist elements cannot be located within a political actor’s textual production, their discovery within other areas of symbolic action is highly unlikely. I argue that the formal elements of populist discourse are better conceptualized as a *discursive frame*, rather than an ideology. Thinking of populism as a discursive frame exhibits two advantages: it resonates better with the cognitive aspects of the populist message; and it provides a solid methodological framework for empirical research.

Frames, as introduced in social science by Erving Goffman, are ‘schemata of interpretation’ that allow their users ‘to locate, perceive, identify, and label’ complex events taking place in daily life (Goffman, 1974, p. 21). In their influential work, David Snow and his associates have employed Goffman’s insights to analyze the importance of frames for social mobilization. As they explain, collective action frames are employed to provide meaning to events and occurrences out there, ‘to organize experience and guide action’ (Snow *et al.*,

1986, p. 464). Frames may not comprise elaborate and comprehensive structures like ideologies, but they can nevertheless convey coherent meaning in certain situations. As Sidney Tarrow (1992, p. 190) claims, ‘frames are more flexible and situationally influenced constructs than formal ideological systems and are more easily and rapidly communicated to target groups, adapted to change, and extended to blend with other frames’. Since reality can be presented and comprehended in a variety of ways, frames enable the selection of a specific perspective to interpret experience. Hence, ‘to frame is to actively construct the meaning of the reality in question’ (Hänggli and Kriesi, 2010, p. 142). The impact of framing on influencing individual judgement has been repeatedly proven empirically in the aftermath of the Nobel Prize-winning work of Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky (1984) in cognitive science, and political primers have been published to take advantage of properly framing issues in political communication (e.g. Lakoff, 2004; Luntz, 2007).

David Snow and Robert Benford (1988, p. 199) have further analyzed the *core framing tasks* at work. Frames provide a *diagnosis* by identifying ‘some event or aspect of social life as problematic and in need of alteration’, then proceed to suggest a prognosis, ‘a proposed solution to the diagnosed problem that specifies what needs to be done’ and conclude by circulating a *motivational urgency* to take corrective action. This theoretical framework has found extensive application in social movement studies, but also resonates strongly with populist logic. Populist discourse can equally be perceived as the systematic dissemination of a frame that diagnoses reality as problematic because ‘corrupt elites’ have unjustly usurped the sovereign authority of the ‘noble People’ and maintains that the solution to the problem resides in the righteous political mobilization of the latter in order to regain power. This, therefore, can be labelled the ‘*populist frame*’ – the ‘subatomic matter’ that constitutes populist discourse.

This framework for the study of populism can accommodate all contesting perspectives. Populist frames, as formal vessels of meaning, readily contain ideational elements that have been mistaken for constituting ideology. As William Gamson (1995) explains, collective action frames are both adversarial and aggregative in their demonstration of a collective ‘we’ in opposition to some ‘they’; this quality explains the largely accepted Manichean nature of populism. The fact that frames are straightforward communicative forms, bereft of the nuances and intricacies of ideologies, indicates that the simplistic and Manichean nature of the populist message fits better with frames rather than ideologies. Moreover, the diagnostic function of the populist frame explains why populism has been frequently associated with a sense of crisis (Moffitt, 2014; Taggart, 2000) since political urgency is required to successfully portray a situation as gravely problematic during the diagnostic stage.

Passing from frames-as-forms to *framing* as a deliberate activity (Benford, 1997), we see that the conscious dissemination of frames accounts for the strategic implications that many authors have discerned in populist politics. As Benford and Snow (2000) explain, political entrepreneurs engage in strategic framing in order to persuade audiences to tune into their own representation of reality – something that reverberates strongly with Michael Kazin’s (1995, p. 3) understanding of populism as a ‘flexible mode of persuasion’ and Laclau’s (2005b, p. 41) insistence that ‘antagonistic political strategies would be based on different ways of creating political frontiers’. Successful framing strategies manage to rearticulate the

current state of affairs by tapping into existing values, skillfully employing elements of the ‘cultural toolkit’ (Swidler, 1986) which audiences readily recognize. Thus, the importance of agency is acknowledged, but strategic intent is freed from normative implications of ‘opportunism’ since framing is a *sine qua non* of political conduct. Populist framing is just another tool of persuasion in the arsenal of political agents.

The cognitive fit between frame theory and populism is one aspect of the value of our thesis. The other useful aspect is the way in which this understanding can foster empirical work. Frame analysis has been employed in diverse scientific fields with tremendous success. Its application has reinvented social movement studies (Snow *et al.*, 2014), as well as media and political communication studies (De Vreese, 2012), producing an immense body of qualitative and quantitative work. Unfortunately, frame theory has scarcely been applied to populism, and existing efforts have remained disconnected from a broader research agenda. Lee (2006) and Tsatsanis (2011) have produced qualitative papers, while Jagers and Walgrave (2007), Ruzza and Fella (2011) and Vasilopoulou *et al.* (2014) have partially used frames for quantitative work. However, there are some more promising attempts. Caiani and Della Porta (2011) – both social movement scholars – employ frame theory to perform a content analysis of populist discourse in German and Italian right-wing political organizations, yielding interesting results. Problems with intercoder reliability and index considerations have been addressed in Aslanidis (2015), where a detailed method of measuring populist frames in political texts is described, using semantic text analysis to build an index of populist content in social movement manifestos. These applications have proven the viability of a frame theoretical approach, vindicating discourse as the entirely appropriate field to study populist phenomena.

Frame analysis can reinvigorate populism theory into a quantitative direction in the same way it has fostered research in other scientific subdisciplines. A research program that operationalizes populism as a discursive frame can encourage comparative work, facilitate cooperation with neighboring fields, shed light on borderline cases of populism and enable the construction of large datasets to analyze systematically the impact of populism as an independent variable. Besides, the majority of existing quantitative approaches to populism already implicitly analyze populism as a discursive phenomenon, remaining indifferent towards ideological or other implications, as explained previously. Employing the populist frame as a coding unit in text analysis projects provides an improved analytical ground for empirical applications and enhances reliability and validity in measuring populism.

## Conclusion

This article should not be interpreted as a dismissal of the merits of the dominant theoretical framework for populism, originating in the influential work of Cas Mudde. On the contrary, it is acknowledged that his perspective has considerably improved the analysis of the populist phenomenon, providing conceptual refinement by discarding superfluous attributes and preserving only core characteristics. Through its capacity to travel both temporally and spatially, his framework has underpinned significant comparative projects (e.g. Kriesi and Pappas, 2015; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012b) and its operational

virtues have unintentionally facilitated the production of a substantial body of quantitative research.

Nevertheless, there is considerable room for improvement. In order to contribute towards this goal, I have raised concerns regarding the justification of assigning populism's genus to ideology. The inadequate conceptual foundations of the notion of 'thin-centeredness' in Freedon's work, the methodological contradictions that the ideological claim has inflicted on Mudde's framework and the incapacity to account for the graded nature of populism have severely undermined the validity of conceptualizing populism as an ideology. Moreover, I have argued extensively that the wrong choice of genus has produced the unintended consequence of ushering an unneeded amount of normative baggage into the study of populist phenomena, entrenching scholars behind ideological barricades and sharply impairing standards of objectivity in the literature.

In place of ideology, and in light of developments in the quantitative application of Mudde's (2004) definition, it is suggested that populism is better conceptualized as a discourse. Referring to the work of Laclau, I have underscored the benefits of a formal approach to populism, in which structural elements of populist discourse account for perceived patterns among populist instances, with differences explained by the circumstantial content of the constructed subjectivities of the 'People' and the 'elites'.

However, a discursive conceptualization of populism does not entail a full surrender to Laclau's theoretical intricacies and the interpretive methodology of the Essex School. On the contrary, I argued that its deficiencies with regard to the objectives of this article can be overcome by applying a frame theoretical perspective on studying populist discourse. The introduction of the notion of the 'populist frame' successfully addresses cognitive aspects of populist argumentation and stresses the significance of agency without bearing normative implications. Applying frame analysis to populism can stimulate empirical work, and quantitative analyses in particular, opening avenues for collaboration with neighboring literatures within a broad interdisciplinary research project.

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## Notes

- 1 For the concept of 'ideology', see also an introduction by Eagleton (1991) and a review by Knight (2006).
- 2 See also Abts and Rummens (2007) and Stanley (2008).
- 3 See also Fieschi (2004).
- 4 Freedon never mentions populism as a thin-centered ideology in his numerous publications.
- 5 For instance, Sartori (1987, p. 185) examines democracy's opposites by analyzing a class of concepts containing the following political systems: tyranny, despotism, autocracy, absolutism, dictatorship, authoritarianism and totalitarianism.
- 6 See Munck and Verkuilen (2002) for an evaluation of extant indices.
- 7 See Moffitt and Torney (2014) for an interesting discussion on populist style.

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