


Article

Time for a change: Replacing the populist model with elite theory

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Abstract

In recent years, the concept of populism has been used to explain the actions of politicians around the globe, from Jair Bolsonaro to Boris Johnson. This presents a problem for scholars who are seeking to understand present-day political trends. Essentially, the populist school does not have a coherent definition of its subject matter, cannot accurately identify who should get this label, and is unable to correctly explain the behavior of those leaders who acquire the moniker. Since elite theory stands on stronger ground when it comes to these three dimensions, it should be used instead to evaluate the events and actors that are currently explored using the populist model. After providing evidence to support this argument, a concluding section proposes future research projects that can strengthen the claim that elite theory is a better way to understand politics.

“At last,” the editors of *The Oxford Handbook of Populism* declare, “everyone understands that populism matters. Recent political events have brought the word ‘populism’ to the center of discussions across the globe” (Kaltwasser et al., 2017, p. 1). A quick glance at scholarly and journalistic commentaries appears to justify this verdict. In the United States, this concept is employed to understand Donald Trump’s rise to power and how he governed. Eric Oliver and Wendy Rahn (2016) state that, “Trump stands out in particular as the populist par excellence” (p. 189). Across the Atlantic, this term is also applied to comprehend the antics of former Prime Minister Boris Johnson (Duncan, 2021). The populist approach is even used to explain the Brexit vote

(Bale, 2019). In Brazil, the racist, homophobic, and anti-democratic actions of President Jair Bolsonaro are also analyzed from this perspective (Rachman, 2020). As Yascha Mounk (2018) states, populists have “been gaining strength in every major democracy, from Athens to Ankara, from Sydney to Stockholm, and from Warsaw to Wellington. Despite the obvious differences between the populists who are on the rise in all these countries, their commonalities go deep -- and render each of them a danger to the political system in surprisingly similar ways” (p. 7).

While some embrace this term’s success, Oliver and Rahn (2016) admit that the populist concept has problems, especially its promiscuous tendency that allows it to be applied to politicians of the left, right, and center. “Given this diversity,” they ask, “does the concept of populism still have utility? A rich body of comparative research suggests that it does” (p. 190). When it comes to understanding recent political trends around the world, the present article disagrees. It aligns itself instead with William Brett’s (2013) comment that, “‘Populism’ is a classic example of a stretched concept, pulled out of shape by overuse and misuse” (p. 410). While some commentators are impressed by the “wave of policymakers, pundits, and scholars [who] are gripped by this [populist] phenomenon” (Kaltwasser et al., 2017, p. 1), this study views such enthusiasm with a dose of skepticism. It does not consider populism to be a perfect guide. This article argues that elite theory, while not infallible, is a more useful approach when it comes to understanding politics.

Why is elite theory better than the populist model when it comes to analyzing politics? The elite approach has several advantages that elude the populist perspective. Specifically, it can precisely define its subject matter, clearly identify which actors need to be studied, and accurately explain their political behavior. The populist school fails on each of these dimensions. Also, the elite approach employs a variety of concepts that make it more theoretically rigorous than the alternative perspective.

To be perfectly clear, the present study is not associated with the normative beliefs of classical elitism. Edmund Burke is an example of that type of thinking. In his writings, he proclaims that the lower classes are ill-suited to govern and must permit property owners and members of the aristocracy to rule (Ebenstein and Ebenstein, 1990). Henri Saint-Simon (1825/1952) also fits into the classical elitist category, arguing that some individuals in society need to be placed above the rest. When discussing how to promote economic prosperity, he says that, “We must . . . ensure that the national wealth is administered by men most fitted for it, and most concerned in its administration, that is to say the most important industrialists” (p. 77). He also states that scientists and artists should be revered by the public and policymakers. While the present article agrees with Vilfredo Pareto’s (1901/1968) notion that only a small number of people rule at any given time, it firmly rejects his view that elites are the “strongest, the most energetic, and most capable” (p. 36). Such claims are simply wrongheaded. Elites are not intellectually, physically, or morally superior to the general public.

This study also disagrees with elitists who argue that the masses are a destabilizing force in society, a conclusion one finds in *The Crisis of Democracy*.

In Samuel Huntington's (1975) contribution to this monograph, he writes that grassroots mobilizations of Americans in the 1960s created serious problems for the federal government. He argues that an "excess of democracy" caused an "overload" of the political system. Public demands for more education, healthcare, and welfare spending outstripped the government's ability to satisfy such desires, leading to widespread distrust of politicians. As a corrective, Huntington suggests that citizens need to accept that, "the effective operation of a democratic political system usually requires some measure of apathy and noninvolvement on the part of individuals and groups" (p. 114). Moreover, along the lines of Burke and Saint-Simon, he says that the public should allow leaders to decide what is best for society. "In many situations," Huntington states, "the claims of expertise, seniority, experience, and special talents may override the claims of democracy as a way of constituting authority" (p. 113). Beliefs such as these are plainly normative and not grounded in scientific data.

The present study rejects classical elitism and follows a different model: elite theory. This perspective argues that a numeric minority occupies the highest positions in society's economic, cultural, civic, social, and political institutions. This group is drawn from the privileged strata of the community -- mostly the upper and upper-middle classes -- even though there are some cases where those from lower castes have been recruited into the higher circle after demonstrating allegiance to its value system. Among the elite's goals are gaining and holding power. Also, instead of using state authority to promote the common good, members of this select group seek to construct and maintain a system that benefits themselves at the expense of the majority. Elites, not the general public, are the ones who develop major pieces of legislation and executive-branch regulations. If the masses benefit from public policy, it is due to a calculated step taken by powerbrokers to manipulate the people or an accidental byproduct of the decision-making process. When elites decide to respond to the demands of the masses, which happens infrequently and mostly during periods of social unrest, policy changes rarely threaten the status quo. Citizens are expected to be passive actors, and society's powerbrokers intentionally manipulate and minimize the role of the public in decision-making centers.

For a representation of scholarship that influences the foundation of elite theory, the Italian political scientist Gaetano Mosca's (1939) research can be cited. He states that, "In all societies -- from societies that are very meagerly developed and have barely attained the dawns of civilization, down to the most advanced and powerful societies -- two classes of people appear -- a class that rules and a class that is ruled" (p. 50). The first group, he maintains, is always a minority and "performs all political functions, monopolizes power and enjoys the advantages that power brings, whereas the second, the more numerous class, is directed and controlled by the first . . ." (p. 50). Thomas Dye and Harmon Zeigler (2009) also agree that, "Major political, economic, and social decisions are made by tiny minorities, not the masses of people" (p. 1).

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (1848/1985) add their own unique contribution to this conversation. Under capitalism, they contend, a class struggle exists between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Until this economic

system is overthrown, the owners of the means of production will dominate society. Whether they are Marxists or not, numerous contemporary scholars support and build on such thinking. Michael Parenti (2011), for example, maintains that the United States is run by the wealthy and their political minions. “American capitalism represents more than just an economic system; it is a plutocracy, that is, a social order ruled mostly for and by the rich” (p. 47). William Domhoff (1983) supports this argument, saying that, “there is a social upper class in the United States that is a ruling class by virtue of its dominant role in the economy and government” (p. 1). Robert and Helen Lynd’s (1937) well-known analysis of Muncie, Indiana, further validates such assertions. They write that the brothers who owned the Ball Corporation in the 1930s controlled “Middletown.” “The power of this family has become so great as to differentiate the city today somewhat from cities with a more diffuse type of control” (p. 77).

Even Robert Dahl (1957), a pluralist whose writings reject elite theory, notes that small groups of citizens always rule. “That some people have more power than others is one of the most palpable facts of human existence” (p. 201). But contrary to the Marxists, he believes that America and other democracies contain a broad array of political actors that compete for power within a polyarchy in which voters have ultimate control (Dahl 2005). Harold Lasswell (1952) supports Dahl’s position. When it comes to pluralism in society, he writes that, “There are as many elites as there are values. Besides an elite of power (the political elite) there are elites of wealth, respect, and knowledge (to name but a few)” (p. 6). Although he has little in common with Lasswell or Dahl, C. Wright Mills (1956/2000) concurs that there is a diverse structure of elites in every society, one that includes economic, political, and military actors. He calls this group the “power elite.” Mills contends that they are not, contrary to the pluralist school’s position, accountable to the masses.

Building on past scholarship, the present study seeks to demonstrate that when compared to the alternative approach, elite theory is a better way to analyze current political trends, especially those that have been labelled populist. It highlights how the elite school accurately defines its subject matter, clearly pinpoints individuals who deserve to be placed in the elite category, and correctly explicates their actions. The populist perspective underperforms on all of these measures. Beyond clarifying and expanding on these observations, this study also identifies concepts used by elite theory to explain politics, all of which have been overlooked by populist scholars. These tools help the elite approach outperform the alternative model, especially when it comes to understanding how political actors rise to power and govern.

This article is significant for a couple reasons. For starters, even those who apply populism to the study of politics have noted its inadequacies. As Paul Taggart (2000) asserts, “It has an essential impalpability, an awkward conceptual slipperiness” (p. 1). It is time, therefore, to begin a conversation about following a different model. This article offers a viable replacement and documents how it is a cut above the populist school, something that has not been considered in the existing literature. Additionally, in recent years, there has been a dearth of works using the elite school of thought in the social sciences.

Nana de Graaff and Bastiaan Van Apeldoorn (2021) note that power-elite studies are making a comeback, but this trend is taking place primarily in the field of foreign policy analysis. Furthermore, as Inderjeet Parmar (2017) writes, “mainstream political science and international relations (and the social sciences more generally) remain almost silent on the question of elite power per se -- in theoretical terms let alone in terms of political significance in democratic political systems.” While the *Palgrave Handbook of Political Elites* and *The New Power Elite* help fill the gap, there is room to expand the elite perspective’s role within political science.

This article presents a critique of the populist model. But its criticisms are not based on an ethical appraisal that Ernesto Laclau (2005) censures in his research. He states, “Its dismissal has been part of the discursive construction of a certain normality, of an ascetic political universe from which its dangerous logics had to be excluded” (p. 19). This study confronts populism from a performance-based perspective, examining how it fails on different measures that are unrelated to normative concerns. To identify its inadequacies, the next section of this article presents a critique of the populist school. Included within its paragraphs is a juxtaposition of this approach to elite theory, an exercise that highlights why the latter is better suited to explain recent political trends. After this, a conclusion offers some thoughts regarding future research that can buttress the claims made in this study.

A Critique of Populist Studies

This section is divided into three parts. The first deals with how populist scholars attempt to define their subject matter. The second part confronts the issue of how this school determines which actors to classify as populists. The third section seeks to understand how this literature explains the motivations and actions of those who are assigned the populist moniker. The intent is to document the main weaknesses of this approach and demonstrate how elite theory is a better model. The latter is achieved by highlighting how the elite school defines its subject matter, determines who to include in the elite category, and understands the motivations and actions of those who rule.

Definitions

One problem in the literature is that there are fundamental disagreements about what populism actually means. Ghita Ionescu and Ernest Gellner (1969) admit that populism can be “elusive and protean” (p. 1). Nevertheless, scholars have attempted to capture its essence. Based on his research into late nineteenth-century agricultural movements in America, Lawrence Goodwyn (1976) says that, “Populism is the story of how a large number of people, through a gradual process of self-education that grew out of their cooperative efforts, developed a new interpretation of their society and new political institutions to give expression to these interpretations” (p. 88). Goodwyn says, moreover, that nineteenth-century populism provided poor farmers with a novel political culture, one that allowed them to develop a sense of self-worth in an economic system that exploited their labor. Updating this term for twentieth-century capitalism, Alistair Hennessy (1969) defines populism as the act of organizing

politically independent members of the industrial working class. Also focusing on economics, Richard Hofstadter (1969) adds that populism is related to the fiscal concerns of “entrepreneurial radicals.”

Other academics have placed more emphasis on the political dimensions of this term. According to Nadia Urbinati (2018), for instance, populism is the transformation of representative democracy. Laclau (2005) also confronts the political nature of this concept, stating that, “by ‘populism’ we do not understand a type of movement -- identifiable with either a special social base or a particular ideological orientation -- but a political logic” (p. 117). Following an ideational approach, Cas Mudde and Cristobal Kaltwasser (2017) contend that populism is “a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, ‘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” (p. 6). But after all the energy put into these definitional endeavors, John Judis (2016) rejects any effort to finalize the meaning of this term. He states, “When political scientists write about populism, they often begin by trying to define it, as if it were a scientific term like entropy or photosynthesis. That’s a mistake. There is no set of features that exclusively defines movements, parties, and people that are called populists . . .” (p. 13).

Not having a firm idea about what one is studying is a serious problem. As E. E. Schattschneider (1975) argues, scholars need accurate definitions of their subject matter or they will not know what to look for and not know when they have found it. His research dealing with the concept of democracy reinforces this conclusion. Since there is no firm understanding of this term, he writes, academics develop false notions about what democracy can achieve and what roles citizens should play in political systems that get this label. Schattschneider maintains that, “the failure to produce a good working definition of democracy is responsible for a great part of the confusion in the literature of politics” (p. 127). Joseph Schumpeter (1962) presents the same conclusion in *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, in which he contends that eighteenth-century liberalism instilled high-minded ideals about democratic politics that ultimately led to inaccurate beliefs about how this form of government actually works.

Populism, says Kurt Weyland (2017), “constantly changes ‘colors’ and threatens to escape analytical grasp. As soon as scholars are confident that they have encircled it with their definitional snares, it resurfaces in a different form in another corner of the impenetrable jungle of politics” (p. 49). This difficulty does not afflict elite theory. Heinrich Best and John Higley’s (2018) definition of this school of thought clearly denotes a concretely demarcated subject matter. They state that elite theory is the study of “individuals and small, relatively cohesive, and stable groups with disproportionate power to affect national and supranational political outcomes on a continuing basis” (p. 3). “This definition of political elites, or one very close to it, is now standard in the literature, although scholars use different methods to identify ‘proximate decision makers’” (p. 4).

Elite theory posits that a minority of the population not only controls government activities but also directs social, cultural, civic, and economic affairs. Furthermore, this group's motivations are focused on obtaining and holding power, not working for the public's interests. Elite theory also contends that this group shares a common set of values and acts to construct and preserve a system that benefits themselves at the expense of the majority (Hellinger and Judd, 1991). Additionally, elites intentionally manipulate and minimize the role of the public in society's decision-making centers. When elites do promote reforms to appease the people, none of the changes significantly threaten their primary interests.

According to Lasswell (1936), political science is the study of who gets what, when, and how. Underlying his perspective is the concept of power, which is what the elite model places at the center of its analysis. The study of this term within elite theory has been assisted by Dahl's seemingly innocuous claim in 1957 that, "A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would otherwise not do" (pp. 202-203). While the elite approach accepts this perspective, it moves far beyond it. In *The Semisovereign People*, Schattschneider (1975) adds that power is also, among other things, about displacing conflicts. He writes, "All forms of political organization have a bias in favor of the exploitation of some kinds of conflict and the suppression of others because organization is the mobilization of bias" (p. 69). If the chair of a congressional committee does not want another lawmaker's legislation to get a hearing, then one is never scheduled. In this case, A has prevented B's issue from getting on the political agenda. Nondecision, in other words, is a form of power.

Elite theory also says that there is another dimension of political influence that needs to be recognized. Steven Lukes (2005) notes that, "To put the matter sharply, A may exercise power over B by getting him to do what he does not want to do, but he also exercises power over him by influencing, shaping or determining his very wants" (p. 27). This process entails those in positions of authority controlling the means of communication and socialization and using them to manipulate the thoughts and desires of the masses, which preempts the emergence of any dissent against the existing equilibrium (Gaventa, 1982). For elite theory, the richness associated with its understanding of power adds to its usefulness. Even though they focus on authority, populist studies overlook the three-dimensions debate -- with Dahl representing the first, Schattschneider the second, and Lukes the third. This prevents its adherents from developing a better understanding of those actors whom they call populists.

An example of the populist approach to power comes from William Howell and Terry Moe (2020). They write, "The history and real-world experience of populism isn't about noble struggles to bring about a more equitable democratic society. It's about power and disruption -- and often, about bringing democracy down" (p. 7). Robert Barr (2019) further contends that, "For many students of populism, the point of reference or the source of scholarly interest is the power and potential of mass mobilization" (p. 44). But while many populist scholars study political authority, the concept can get overshadowed in this branch of the literature. This mostly happens when attention shifts to debates about the motives of politicians and also how these actors relate to their

supporters. In both of these situations, there is a tendency to treat populists as the “saviors” of the downtrodden, which distract from the power thesis and its focus on the selfishness of political leaders.

With political authority added to the definitional elements mentioned earlier, the elite model stands on much firmer ground when it comes to understanding its subject matter than the alternative perspective. It is also more capable of identifying who to study when compared to the populist approach, an argument that is considered presently.

Who belongs?

Jan-Werner Muller (2016) states that, “we seem to lack coherent criteria for deciding when political actors turn populist in some meaningful sense” (p. 2). Other scholars put it this way: “The difficulty in pinpointing exactly which actors are populist or not has added to the concept’s unsystematic use and the more general confusion surrounding the term” (Abts and Van Kessel, 2015, p. 611). As an example of this problem, consider the case of Al Gore, who was presented with the populist label when he ran for the White House in 2000 (Zelnick, 2001). During his presidential bid in 2004, John Kerry was also given this tag (James, 2004). It is doubtful whether anyone would call Gore or Kerry populists today, especially since Trump has become the yardstick that is used when assigning this moniker. This is an important point to consider. Essentially, what populism refers to changes over the course of history. Even those who follow the populist perspective recognize this fact. Writing about the late nineteenth-century farmers’ movement, Goodwyn (1976) notes that, “the Populists did have a greater sense of self as democratic citizens and a more hopeful view of democratic possibility than that which is culturally licensed within the modern progressive societies around the globe, either socialist or capitalist. Indeed, the ideas that surged to life during the brief Populist moment make the fragile hopes of participation in our own twentieth-century American society seem cramped by comparison” (p. xiii). Thus, it appears that cultural change presents a serious problem when it comes to identifying the archetypal populist. As Goodwyn recognizes, the notion of citizenship as it relates to populism has evolved over time and created a cognitive disconnect between current and past generations. Consequently, based on their own culturally-bounded understanding of populism, members of the farmers’ movement would probably not recognize Trump’s crusade as representative of their own objectives, just as his supporters would not see their reflections in the planter class. Methodologically speaking, moreover, since the goalpost moves throughout history, this creates difficulties for scholars who seek longitudinal data to analyze populism across different eras.

In terms of finding specific methods used by populist scholars as they scour the landscape for their specimens, the *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences* is a good place to start. It notes that the so-called populist “tries to give power back to the people and restore popular sovereignty” (Abts and Van Kessel, 2015, p. 610). As Taggart (2000) asserts, furthermore, “Populists celebrate the ‘people,’ especially in so far as their values contrast with those of the elites” (p. 91). To find one of these leaders, scholars simply need to search

for politicians who pledge to return power to the people, extol the virtues of the masses, and rail against the establishment. The problem is that such traits are not exclusive to one political breed. If a list was made of every leader who criticized elites and promised to give power back to the masses, countless trees would need to die. As Muller (2016) notes, “every politician -- especially in poll-driven democracies -- wants to appeal to ‘the people,’ all want to tell a story that can be understood by as many citizens as possible, all want to be sensitive to how ‘ordinary folks’ think and, in particular, feel” (p. 2). Furthermore, Mills (1956/2000) asks sarcastically, “what is not done in the name of the public interest?” (p. 344). Based on these comments, it appears that the populist school needs another way to find their subjects.

Before describing the next indicator that this approach employs, a word or two needs to be said about “the people,” especially since the authors mentioned above include this entity in their locator kits. Basically, the argument goes, find this group and a populist is lurking somewhere in the vicinity. But this tracking method overlooks some important facts. Specifically, “the people” do not exist until they are socially constructed. This entity does not grow organically. While some populist scholars accept this reality, others do not. Consider the origin story offered by Laclau (2005) as a way to highlight this internal dispute. In his book *On Populist Reason*, he contends that, “the people” -- in a populist sense -- are born when a segment of the population has unfulfilled political demands. As a reaction to government unresponsiveness, a segment of the public erects an “antagonistic frontier” that separates it from the regime. After this, the populist movement spreads to other geographic areas by finding commonalities -- “equivalencies,” in his words -- that unite disparate factions within society. Laclau does acknowledge that individual leaders help construct “the people.” But he contends that this social group has grown naturally from the grassroots before politicians arrive on the scene. For other populist scholars, however, leaders are essential to consider when seeking to understand from whence “the people” arise. Politicians, the second cohort argues, are responsible for constructing this group. This process involves a division of society into citizens who are “worthy” and those who are not. The former category is what populist politicians reportedly seek to represent. The other group includes self-centered elites who are cast aside. By comparing Laclau’s position to the latter interpretation, it is evident that this school of thought fails to agree on a concept that forms an important part of its approach.

The elite model offers clarity when it comes to this subject. It argues that leaders are the ones who mold and shape the identities of social groups and do so whenever and however they desire. These mythical constructs are crafted for purely selfish reasons, which contrasts with Taggart’s (2000) argument that, “The populist claim to speak in the name of this constituency is not empty” (p. 98). Consider Edward Said’s (1979) analysis of the West’s interactions with the Middle East to highlight the elite model’s position. In *Orientalism*, he documents how Occidental powerbrokers dominated the Islamic world by labelling its inhabitants as “dangerous” and “backward.” With these impressions firmly planted in the Western imagination, which mainly occurred through images presented in the mass media and popular literature, citizens in rich countries

accepted the West's unjust impositions of colonial and neocolonial policies in the Middle East. The methods might vary from country to country, but the motivation is still the same: the social construction of a segment of society for the purpose of domination. This perspective fits with some populist scholars, but not all. While students of populism disagree about whether this is a top-down or bottom-up process, or whether it is for good or ill, elite theory is crystal clear about how social construction works.

Returning to the identification methods used to locate populists, another way scholars attempt to distinguish these subjects is through discourse analysis. "The label *populist* is often used to emphasize that these politicians use a rhetoric that aggressively defends the interests of the common man against the privileged elite" (Acemoglu, et al., 2013, p. 771). Furthermore, this type of leader supposedly speaks a different kind of language when compared to nonpopulist politicians, one that is more bombastic, hyperbolic, and rude (Ostiguy, 2017). For example, Trump's speeches about "fake news" are often called extreme and over the top. Some have even compared his attacks on the media to Adolf Hitler's. The former president's language is presented as evidence of his populist bona fides. But an equally probable explanation is that he simply cannot control his verbal outbursts. Or that he was raised to behave this way (Trump, 2020). Moreover, the discourse method ignores the fact that almost all politicians employ hyperbole, even those who are not considered populists. Hillary Clinton once said that Trump's supporters "belong in a basket of deplorables" (Reilly, 2016). Furthermore, one of the most frequently mentioned populist statements made by Trump is his "Make America Great Again" slogan. But this phrase was not considered populist when Bill Clinton uttered it when announcing his bid for the White House in 1991. Trump's proclivity to promote violence against others in his speeches is also used to justify calling him a populist. But when Joe Biden said he wanted to "beat the hell" out of Trump, no one awarded him with this moniker (Pengelly, 2018). This inconsistency is a problem when it comes to identifying who should be included in the populist camp.

Locating so-called populists using rhetorical techniques also opens the door to social-class bias. Since academic analysts mostly come from upper and upper middle-class backgrounds (Morgan et al., 2021), this group's vernacular prejudices might influence their work. Once an "uncouth" term is uttered by a politician, a university professor might be prone, based on his or her upbringing, to label it as populist. A down-home manner of speaking can also be misinterpreted. While a scholar might see this as an indicator of populism, it could simply be a political strategy employed by the elite. As Mills (1956/2000) maintains, "status pretenses of politicians have to be held carefully in curb: high political figures, even when it goes against their status grain, have had to learn to be folksy, and, from the standpoint of more ceremonial codes, vulgar in their tone of speech and style of life" (p. 85). While elite theorists come from the same privileged backgrounds as populist scholars, they do not use rhetorical analysis to identify their subjects, which helps them avoid misclassifying political actors.

Another problem with discourse analysis is that politicians frequently use slogans that are hard to decipher, such as the British Labour Party's 1997 manifesto that was titled "New Labour Because Britain Deserves Better." The Conservatives responded with a poster that showed a devilish-looking Tony Blair with the statement "New Labour, New Danger." As Weyland (2017) writes, "Given the vagueness of politicians' rhetoric, how can one define and delimit populist discourse?" (p. 49). He also notes that, "populist movements are notorious for not espousing a clear, systematic, and comprehensive worldview; they avoid embracing a specific, well-defined ideology" (p. 53). These facts make it hard to determine who belongs in this category. Consequently, methods used to provide precise measurements of rhetoric have produced "important 'false positives': crucial cases are improperly classified as populist" (Weyland, 2017, p. 54).

Elite theorists are skeptical of rhetorical analysis when it comes to categorizing politicians. In his seminal study of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD), Robert Michels (1911/2009) finds that powerbrokers from every social status -- rich or poor -- and party affiliation -- conservative or socialist -- use similar language when speaking to the masses. Even members of the most traditional parties express themselves in ways that make them sound somewhat leftwing. His research also shows that the typical politician promises to represent the public interest. According to Mills (1956/2000), "most American men of affairs have learned well the rhetoric of public relations . . ." (p. 5). Thus, using discourse analysis does not bring the populist approach any closer to being able to identify the political species it is tracking.

A further attempt by the populist school to find its unit of analysis focuses on domestic public policy. It is argued that populist leaders have unique agendas when compared to nonpopulists. As Judis (2016) states, "These are not ordinary demands that populists believe will be subject to immediate negotiation. The populists believe the demands are worthy and justified, but they don't believe the establishment will be willing to grant them" (p. 16). A significant problem exists when policies are labelled as either populist or nonpopulist, especially since political leaders change positions frequently. Trump's pro-choice stance on abortion before he switched to a pro-life posture highlights a flaw associated with classifying policies as populist. Moreover, as one group of scholars note, "People rejecting the EU or 'Washington politics,' or politicians invoking Islamophobia, racist ideas, and appeals to traditionalism may in fact be Eurosceptics, right-wing conservatives or far-right radicals but not populists" (Heinisch, et al., 2017, p. 21). The populist school responds by saying that populist ideas can be detected by their simplicity and common-sense nature. The problem with this argument is that almost all politicians seek to present ideas to the public in a digestible manner. It seems that another method used to identify this breed is insufficient.

Even with these misfires, populist scholars have slogged on. According to the literature, these types of politicians can be distinguished by their distinctive approach to foreign affairs (Drezner, 2017). Populists are said to be hostile to globalization and multilateral organizations. To consider this argument, think about the case of Hugo Chavez, a so-called populist. While he harshly

criticized globalization on a regular basis, his government wholeheartedly participated in the world energy market and maintained Venezuela's membership in the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). Moreover, even though Trump removed the United States from the Paris Climate Accords and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), he did not terminate the US's partnerships with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) or the World Trade Organization (WTO). Also, working with Mexico's President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, another leader who is classified as a populist, Trump gave Nafta a new lease on life as the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA). Thus, it appears that finding a distinctive approach to international relations cannot be used to identify members of this club, especially since so-called populists do not have a coherent set of policies that distinguish them from other politicians.

Populist scholars claim that it is possible "to accurately capture the core of all major past and present manifestations of populism, while still precise enough to exclude clearly nonpopulist phenomena" (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 5). The evidence presented above does not support such a conclusion. For elite theory, identifying individuals who need to be studied is not difficult. Questions do remain about how many people fit into the inner-circle category and the exact extent of their influence. Furthermore, disagreements exist over which people are the most influential in society, with Marxists identifying a specific social class and Millsians advocating for a broader array of actors. But there are no doubts about their existence. This group may be called by different names or titles: bourgeoisie, ruling class, ruling elite, power elite, political elites, inner circle, the influentials, or the higher circle. Regardless of nomenclature, the elite model maintains that individuals who possess political, economic, cultural, civic, and social influence are part of an exclusive fraternity. Scholars who follow this approach, even though they might word it differently, most likely accept Dye's (1976) statement that there are a few in society who have the ability to "decide about war and peace, wages and prices, consumption and investment, employment and production, law and justice, taxes and benefits, education and learning, health and welfare, advertising and communication, life and leisure" (p. 3). Also, as Ursula Hoffmann-Lange (2018) writes, "A definition of elites as groups or individuals with regular and substantial influence on important decisions within an organization or a society is general enough to make the elite concept applicable to all kinds of social systems" (p. 79).

In *Community Power and Political Theory*, Nelson Polsby (1963) says that elite theory cannot accurately identify its unit of analysis. He states, "no uniform criteria for inclusion in these elites are specified in the literature . . ." (p. 84). This is not a fair criticism. Floyd Hunter (1953) enumerates physical spaces that help determine whom to count as part of the ruling clique: "In locating these men of power in a community one finds them, when not at home or at work, dividing their time between their clubs, the hotel luncheon and committee rooms, and other public and semi-public meeting places" (p. 10). Dye (1976) adds that elites can be found in "the top positions in the institutional structure of . . . society" (p. 12). Best and Higley (2018) offer the following tips

for identifying the institutions they occupy:

Political elite members hold top positions in large or otherwise pivotal organizations, institutions, and social movements, and they participate in or directly influence political decision-making. Political elites include the familiar ‘power elite’ triumvirate of top business, government executive, and military leaders along with persons and groups holding strategic positions in political parties and parliaments, major interest organizations and professional associations, important media enterprises and trade unions, and religious and other hierarchically structured institutions powerful enough to affect political decisions (p. 3).

The institutional technique is just one of several methods that are employed by this school to locate key influentials. Another is the decisional approach, which “identifies elites according to their active involvement in important policy decisions” (Hoffmann-Lange, 2018, p. 83). Reputational analysis is also used. “The reputational method relies on experts in order to identify elites” (Hoffman-Lange, 2018, p. 85). This technique involves asking those who represent important sectors of society to specify whom they believe to be influential. Social network analysis is another promising way to locate those who belong. “When social network analysts talk about networks, they mean data of a specific format: a dataset describing the characteristics of the actors and another dataset describing the relationship of the actors” (Keller, 2018, p. 136). Biographical studies, which form part of the reputational, network, and positional methods, can also be utilized as a stand-alone identification technique. While elite theorists disagree about which procedure is best, any of the tools just described are more useful than those employed by the populist school.

Another methodological advantage of elite theory is that it can be applied to any historical period, which is a problem for populist scholars since the meaning of populism changes over time. Several contortions are needed to identify and compare actors across history using the latter approach, which limits its analytical power. Elite theory remains a potent tool even when ruling cliques change. This school understands that there is a circulation of powerbrokers that occurs in every society, a process that involves either the replacement of one group by another or the addition of a few actors to the existing lineup. But while the faces change, there is a consistency that allows the elite school to remain relevant. For starters, members of any inner circle come from specific social classes. As Robert Putnam (1976) states, “Political leaders are drawn disproportionately from upper-status occupations and privileged family backgrounds” (p. 22). Furthermore, elite structures are composed of like-minded individuals who want power and seek to hold it for as long as possible. In *The Dictator’s Handbook*, Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and Alastair Smith (2011) contend that, “Just like autocrats and tyrants, leaders of democratic nations . . . want to get power and keep it” (p. 19). This understanding makes it easier to identify who to study from the elite perspective, even when dealing with different epochs. It also offers an important signpost when trying to understand

the actions of politicians, which is highlighted in the following paragraphs.

Populist behavior

While many populist scholars criticize populist leaders, some within this school create ambiguity about the attitudes and actions of these politicians. According to Carlos de la Torre (2019), “Rightwing and leftwing variants of populism are not the same. As will be shown later, [the far right’s] ethnic and religious constructs of the unitary people are a danger to democracy, and the project of the Enlightenment. Leftwing variants at least promise more and better democracies, and do not use racism and xenophobia to appeal to their constituencies” (p. 9). Adding to the allure of this concept, some writers “highlight the progressive, direct-democratic” aspects of populism and identify this term with a belief that the people “finally [get to] take the country’s fate into their own hands and shake off domination by selfish elites” (Weyland, 2017, p. 55).

Pierre Ostiguy (2017) writes about the idolization problem this way: “‘Populism’ carries highly charged normative connotations (including in most ‘scientific’ definitions)” (p. 74). As a result of this romanticizing, academics open the door to bias. Glamourizing detracts from a correct understanding of the so-called populists. Classical elitism, represented by Pareto and Saint-Simon, is also normative and biased. But Jan Palkuski (2018) maintains that today’s studies of elites are more “value neutral.” As Hunter (1953) notes in his research, the “power structure is looked at here, not from the point of view of what one may think we have, or what one may think we ought to have, but rather in terms of what we’ve got” (p. 104). Elite theory also overcomes the perception of ideological bias by asserting that all political actors, regardless of party affiliation, seek to benefit themselves. This school, with some exceptions (Dye 1976), does not present a chivalrous interpretation of those who govern. It criticizes politicians from across the political spectrum. When the elite appellation is assigned to an individual, it is not a term of endearment. Academics following this school of thought are clear-eyed when it comes to articulating what this minority wants. “By definition, elites are distinguished by their greater power. Hence, it is natural to assume that motivationally they are distinguished by an unusual need for power” (Putnam, 1976, p. 73). Michels states (1911/2009), furthermore, that elites have “a natural greed for power” (p. 205).

Concerning the interpretation of populist actions, those who study these actors contend that their “single greatest enemy is ‘the system,’ and they do everything they can to weaken and delegitimize existing institutions and established elites” (Howell and Moe, 2020, p. 10). This view overlooks the fact that many of these “outsiders” work within the systems they propose to destroy. In the case of Trump, he toiled alongside the establishment during his presidency. Contrary to his pledge to “drain the swamp,” he frequently met and worked with interest groups (Cole, 2020), as did many of his cabinet secretaries (Protess, 2018). Hundreds of lobbyists were employed by his administration (Mora, 2019). Furthermore, even though he spent much of his time during the 2016 election speaking with coal miners, none of them were awarded high-profile positions in his administration. But an energy lobbyist was installed as

head of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) (Lambert, 2019). Moreover, many of his cabinet secretaries were drawn from the well-to-do and/or were political insiders (Lai and Parlapiano, 2016). “In contrast to Trump’s populist pronouncements on the campaign stump, his economic policy appointees hailed from Wall Street and the conservative Washington establishment” (Schier and Eberly, 2017, Kindle, Chapter 2). Additionally, throughout his time in the White House, he embedded himself in tight relationships with top Republican elites, such as with Representative Kevin McCarthy.

Populist scholars do not adequately address this “insider” behavior. Elite theory does. It understands that politicians, regardless of their rhetorical flourishes about fighting the “system,” work in concert with the establishment. Daniel Hellinger and Dennis Judd (1991) contend that, “elites have structured and manipulated the ‘rules of the game’ and the institutions . . . of politics to protect [their] wealth and privilege” (p. iii). Therefore, they do not seek to destroy what is meant to secure them -- as long as it works to safeguard their interests. It is no surprise, then, that so-called populists work from the inside. For Trump, he learned a lesson about insider privilege during the 2000 election when he tried to win the presidency by joining the Reform Party. After this failure, his run in 2016 was geared toward inserting himself firmly into the mainstream party system.

But there is also the opposite reality: so-called populists sometimes undermine the systems that were constructed for their benefit. In their research, Howell and Moe (2021) document the ways in which Trump weakened the rule of law in the United States. Bolsonaro, furthermore, once said he wanted the military to overthrow Brazil’s democratic government. For some populist scholars, this behavior is hard to fathom, especially since “populism goes hand in hand with democracy” (Kaltwasser, et al., 2017, p. 18). In terms of elite theory, exploration of this topic is not difficult since its followers know that leaders “do not always live up to their responsibilities to preserve the system and its values. Elite behavior is not always enlightened and farsighted but is instead frequently shortsighted and narrowly self-serving” (Dye and Zeigler, 2009, p. 13). When investigators find that lawmakers accept bribes from corporations, which was discovered during Brazil’s Operation Lava Jato (Watts, 2017), the elite school is not surprised. As David Simon (2018) notes, “Elite deviance, in all its forms, now constitutes a major social problem for American society and . . . much of the world as well” (p. 6).

Some writers explain such anti-democratic behavior this way: “on many occasions America’s elites have demonstrated a distrust and disdain for democracy to the point where they have been willing to destroy it when it seemed inimical to their interests -- that is, when it threatened their political hegemony and control over wealth-producing institutions” (Hellinger and Judd, 1991, p. 14). This happened during the Cold War when the US government ousted democratically-elected leaders in Iran, Guatemala, and Chile. Mills (1956/2000) shows, moreover, that politicians will alter institutions that fail to serve them. “If the centralized state could not rely upon the inculcation of nationalist loyalties in public and private schools, its leaders would promptly seek to modify the decentralized educational system” (p. 6). Furthermore, “Far

from being dependent upon the structure of institutions, modern elites may smash one structure and set up another in which they then enact quite different roles” (p. 24). Thus, elite theory is able to explain why leaders switch from supporting the “system” to undermining it.

This model also clears up any perplexity surrounding politicians and their anti-democratic behavior by relying on a realist perspective of democracy. This school of thought does not adhere to a high-minded definition of democracy. It strips away philosophical sentiments associated with political liberalism that derive from the Enlightenment. Instead of describing this type of political system as one that seeks to protect “life, liberty, and property,” it understands democracy to be a zone of managed conflict. According to Schattschneider (1975), democracy is “a competitive political system in which competing leaders and organizations define the alternatives of public policy in such a way that the public can participate in the decision-making process” (p. 138). In his telling, politicians start fights and then bring citizens into the ring using tactics that allow elites to manage the scope of the conflict. The public is inactive until leaders want them in the mix.

In terms of understanding politics, this section attempted to demonstrate that the populist approach has several weaknesses that do not affect elite theory. Whether the reader was convinced by the evidence is beyond the author’s control. However, future scholarship can add weight to this article’s claim and possibly win converts to its side. To pursue this end, the next section sets out a research agenda to stimulate thinking about the applicability of elite theory and how to go about putting together projects based on its ideas.

Crossing Over

In recent years, scholars have been scrambling to make sense of the shocking and anti-democratic behaviors that have appeared around the world. From Rodrigo Duterte’s murderous regime in the Philippines to the rise of the far right in France, academics have been trying to locate tools to comprehend these disturbing developments. Most have settled on populism as their guide. But this school of thought is insufficient when it comes to explaining politics. Even scholars associated with this approach understand its problems. “Since populism cannot be rendered as a precise concept,” says Urbinati (2018), “scholars are rightly skeptical that it may even be treated as a distinct phenomenon rather than an ideological creation” (p. 114). Moreover, as de la Torre and Manuel Anselmi (2019) write, “there is no consensus on one theory of populism” (p. 467). The findings of this study reinforce these observations.

After viewing the facts presented in this article, it is evident that populism has many weaknesses that justify its shelving. This label will most likely not disappear from the political lexicon anytime soon. Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017) state that, “While the frustration [with the concept] is understandable, the term populism is too central to debates about politics from Europe to the Americas to simply do away with” (p. 5). Put differently, since this word is embedded in scholarly and journalistic circles, it has staying power. Also, this concept has been used for more than one hundred years, which adds difficulty when trying to extricate it from the political lingo. Complicating matters ever

more, politicians who assign this nomenclature to themselves perceive it to be a vote-winning strategy. They will not abandon it lightly. Taking all of these factors into account, it is time to wean scholars and the media from their dependence on this concept. To fill the void, elite theory offers analysts the tools they need to understand historical and current political developments, especially those that get assigned the populist label. While this approach has its own problems, which the school's advocates (Higley, 2010) and its pluralist critics acknowledge, its shortcomings are not as significant as those facing populist studies.

For those who adopt the elite model, they need not abandon their quantitative or qualitative skills since both are employed within this literature. Another positive aspect is that academics who shift to this school can acquire new methodological tools, such as the ones mentioned earlier. Based on a comparison of the two sets of literatures, furthermore, it appears that converts can focus on the same research questions that have been asked in the populist scholarship.

In terms of next steps, ensuing projects need to apply elite theory to past events and actors who have been analyzed using the populist lens. In addition, academics need to use this model to study politicians in power -- or those currently seeking it -- who have claimed the populist mantle. Concerning other specific pursuits that can demonstrate this perspective's advantages over the alternative, scholars should explore socioeconomic topics. Elite theory predicts that with few exceptions, politicians emerge from upper and upper middle-class backgrounds. Putnam (1976) calls this the "law of increasing disproportion": "no matter how we measure political and social status, the higher the level of political authority, the greater the representation for high-status social groups" (p. 33). Surveys and/or biographical analyses of so-called populists should confirm the applicability of his law to these actors. This data can add weight to the elite approach in two ways. First, socioeconomic variations between groups can create policy differences in society, a subject that is considered in a few moments. Second, social-class distinctions produce physical segregation. This is important to consider since the scholarship portrays populists as constantly mingling with the masses. But members of the upper strata tend to live, learn, and associate with their own element, which prevents them from frequently interacting with the general public. Due to their access to considerable financial resources, the upper strata mostly reside in communities that exclude the *hoi polloi*. The Lynds (1937) note this trend in their study of Muncie, where the wealthy lived in exclusive subdivisions as a "group apart." Also, elites belong to private clubs and attend prestigious universities that are beyond the reach of the masses. As a result, the upper crust ends up congregating "somewhat more definitely [with] their own social set" (p. 96). Moreover, elites work in occupations where they are disconnected from the lower classes.

Collecting and analyzing data on the so-called populists' economic, social, educational, and occupational experiences should help undermine the notion that these actors constantly seek fellowship with the public. Rare are the interpersonal interactions that take place between these two groups. Reality demonstrates that most of their contact occurs at campaign rallies or through Twitter

posts. This perspective shows the populist figure in the appropriate light: as an elite who experiences life secluded from the rest of society.

As stated above, focusing on the socioeconomic background of the populist raises another topic, one that deals with policy preferences. For those who follow the populist school, “the people” and the populist are harmonious and united when it comes to social and political issues. But elite theory maintains that leaders hold views and opinions that differ from the masses. According to Dye and Zeigler (2009), these groups diverge on immigration, economics, and tolerance for minorities, among other issues. These differences, says Mills (1956/2000), result from elite socialization, which happens in organizations that are off limits to the average citizen. Attending private boarding schools, going to Ivy League universities, and joining exclusive clubs shape the inner circle’s attitudes in ways that bring its members closer to one another culturally and ideologically. These experiences also produce viewpoint differences between this group and the general public. Therefore, a study comparing the political attitudes of populists and the masses on an array of policy issues can be used to further strengthen the elite model. Confirming any differences would undermine the alternative school since it contends that populists represent the views of the common people.

A final research idea focuses on alterations in personnel among top leadership positions. Scholars treat populist “takeovers” as unique events that occur at specific moments in history, mostly during economic downturns. Elite theory agrees that financial factors influence leadership changes, but it also adds that the inner circle can ask so-called outsiders, or counterelites, to join the insider club in order to make the public believe the political system is open and democratic. The establishment can also seek out new recruits to gain access to their cutting-edge knowledge. Furthermore, contrary to the populist perspective’s notion that leadership changes are unscripted and disruptive, the elite approach understands these alterations to be regular and manageable, even though a revolutionary situation is possible and brings with it violent behavior. As Dye and Zeigler (2009) state, “the movement of nonelites into elite positions must be slow and continuous in order to maintain stability and avoid revolution. Furthermore, potential elite members must demonstrate their commitment to the basic elite consensus before being admitted to elite positions” (p. 69).

Exploring the “circulation of elites,” as the process is called in the literature, can provide further support for this article’s preferred model. To pursue this line of inquiry, researchers need to consider cases that have been classified as populist “takeovers” to determine if these events resulted in major personnel shifts at the apex of major institutions. Elite theory allows for some staffing changes, but also anticipates significant continuity in membership. Scholars should also investigate whether the so-called takeover disrupted the policy environment. Evidence needs to be gathered on whether the populists who gained power dramatically altered the political agenda or maintained the status quo. The elite approach anticipates more policy continuity than change when it comes to the circulation of elites.

Those who disagree with this article’s thesis will undoubtedly locate errors

associated with elite theory. On their journey, critics will inevitably find themselves perusing the pluralist literature. This school of thought offers plenty of ammunition for those seeking to determine the elite approach's weaknesses. But while this model most certainly has its shortcomings, its problems pale in comparison to those affecting the alternative perspective.

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