

GREAT DECISIONS

1918 • FOREIGN POLICY ASSOCIATION

HIGH SCHOOL

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THE RISE OF POPULISM



**HOW DO WE
DEFINE IT?**

**WHERE DID
IT BEGIN?**

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NATIONALISM**

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ELECTION**

BY PEREGRINE FRISSELL



STICKING UP FOR THE LITTLE GUY?

With promises of common sense leadership that would “make America great again,” former movie star Ronald Reagan rode a wave of populist energy into the White House in 1980.

Of all the political buzzwords of the 21st century, few have been wielded as frequently in the year 2024 as the word *populist*. Perhaps that is in part because this year, about half the world’s population, living in sixty different countries, [is holding elections](#). Populist movements are impacting how politicians run campaigns and could influence how those elected choose to govern.

But what does this term mean? Political scientists have long struggled to fully define

the word *populism*, though most definitions are similar to the one in [Encyclopedia Britannica](#): “Populism...claims to champion the common person, usually by favorable contrast with a real or perceived elite or **establishment**.” In other words, populist leaders claim to speak up for the little guy and demand a fair shake from the elites or those in power who they claim have grown out of touch with the needs of the people.

Cas Mudde, a professor of political science at the University of Georgia and

author of *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*, would add that in some instances populist candidates show a willingness to bend rules in order to achieve the perceived will of the people or advance their own self-interests or goals.

“Populism also has a dark side,” Mudde wrote in his book. “Whatever its manifestation... its notion of a ‘general will’ may well lead to the support of **authoritarian** tendencies.”

If serving the will of “the people” is the single most important goal for these politicians, they

can also sometimes be tempted to erode or weaken democratic rules and norms to accomplish that aim. In other words, it can be tempting for them to take on traits of authoritarianism. Populist leaders often present society's problems in a simple way, with simple solutions that can appeal to a large part of the public. For example, they might blame all of a country's problems on a particular group of people. This allows the rest of the public to think that defeating this supposed enemy will solve all of their issues.

THE ROOTS OF POPULISM

Populism is less of a political ideology and more of a political method, a strategy politicians of any party can use to gain power. It is confusing in part because it has been used to describe movements as wildly different as those of Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump in the United States, the Brexit campaign of 2016, Vladimir Putin in Russia, and Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines.

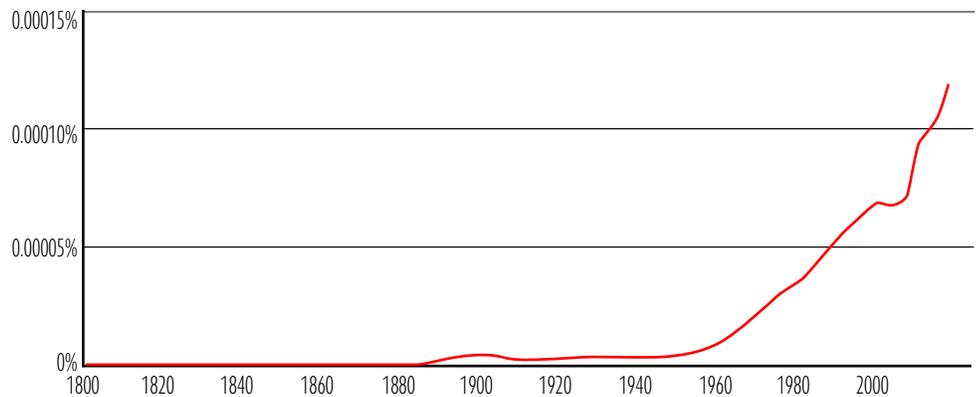
According to [Google's NGram service](#), the word *populism* first started appearing in western literature in the 1880s. The word was important in the United States back then as the name of a major political party. The People's Party—also called the Populist Party—sprang up to represent the needs of farmers and other working class folks who had been harmed by a string of natural and market calamities and felt the government wasn't doing enough to represent their interests. Crop failures had happened at the

same time as food prices were falling, and banks were weary of lending to farmers on favorable terms, all while businessmen in other industries were allowed to grow fabulously wealthy. It was a run of tough breaks for farmers, and the Populist Party was formed to advocate on their behalf. It focused on people in rural America, from the frontier to farming communities.

At that time, the word was commonly used because it applied to the name of a major party.

A populist was simply anyone aligned with that party. Today we have no self-described Populist Party.

After its introduction, the term went dormant for a while following the disbanding of the Populist Party in 1908. It returned to common use about twenty years later, as President Franklin Delano Roosevelt embraced transformational change to the federal government to lessen the effects of the Great Depression on working class Americans. Roosevelt is



This graph shows how usage of the word *populism* has increased over time.

THE DEBATE

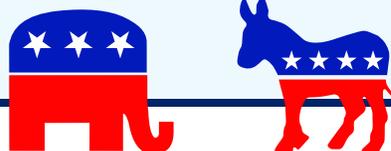
CAN POPULIST LEADERS BENEFIT A COUNTRY?

YES

- ✓ Government is meant to reflect the will of the people
- ✓ Populist political movements have fought for many important rights over the history of our country, such as voting rights and labor rights
- ✓ Populism can help a political party grow closer to its base, which is the entire goal of a democracy

NO

- ✗ Voters can be fooled by populist leaders into voting against their best interests
- ✗ When a small majority of voters elect a leader with big ambitions, it can be dangerous for minority populations who aren't a part of that coalition
- ✗ Many issues are more complicated than populists make them out to be, and simple solutions aren't always the best answer





Bettmann/Getty Images

A woman watches Senator Joseph McCarthy speak on a broadcast in 1954. McCarthy stoked populist fears with false claims that Communists had infiltrated the US media, government, and military drew a great deal of attention in the 1950s.

often lauded as one of our nation's greatest leaders, and he fits the definition of *populist* perfectly.

POPULISM IN AMERICA

Roosevelt's New Deal program of the 1930s was a dramatic reversal of the previous administration, which had encouraged people to pick themselves up by their bootstraps and work harder to make a living. Roosevelt was able to gain popular support by pledging to meet the needs of those who had been ignored in earlier years, getting jobs and adequate wages to those who needed them.

He also used his power and popularity to greatly increase the powers of the executive branch

of government. He was the first American president to run for and win a third term, breaking a norm of a two-term limit that had been in place since President George Washington. He responded to the checks and balances of the courts by trying to change the rules of the Supreme Court and pack it with justices sympathetic to his political ideas.

Also in the 1930s, U.S. Senator Huey Long [boasted publicly of buying legislators](#) "like sacks of potatoes" and playing them "like a deck of cards." He gave away free textbooks to schoolchildren and [proposed](#) an individual fortune cap of \$50 million (about \$600 million in today's money) with aims of redistributing

that wealth throughout society. He was assassinated shortly thereafter, in the capitol building in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, his home state.

During a period that came to be known as the Second Red Scare, US Senator Joseph McCarthy catered to the interests of the common person by appealing to fears of safety and security. By convincing people that America had a problem (Communist forces lurking within groups of immigrants) and that he had a solution, he was able to win and hold on to power.

From about 1960, use of the term *populism* started to climb and climb. In a decade where powerful political movements were growing and clashing, populist campaigns became common. As the tumult of this decade wound down, the campaign of Ronald Reagan took advantage of people's distrust of government by distilling society's woes down to smaller issues that were easier to handle and communicate.

In all these instances, politicians succeeded in winning political capital by taking the complex world we all inhabit, often oversimplifying it, and presenting a version to voters that made them feel as if they were on one side and some enemy on the other side was the root of their problems.

WIELDING THE FLAG

Populists also often use **nationalism** to build their campaigns, going to lengths to identify themselves as patriotic flag-bearers. In doing so, they put forth the idea that support for their own political movements is the

same as support for the country itself.

Nationalists promote an idea of national superiority, that members of their country and national interests are better and more important than those of other countries and their citizens. This ideology often doesn't leave room for dissent, which is an important pillar of democracy. If supporting America means supporting a certain candidate, then the implication is that to support a different candidate means supporting something other than your own nation. If you believe supporting your country is more important than anything else, then following that leader completely can seem like the best thing to do.

In many parts of America today, displaying an American flag graphic on your truck or your T-shirt now implies that you are likely to have conservative political beliefs. Things were not always this way. But after decades of nationalist arguments from Republican politicians, many people have come to believe that conservative beliefs are more "patriotic."

POPULISM ABROAD

Adolf Hitler is known as one of the great villains of history. But he was democratically elected in Germany as a populist-style candidate. He worked to appeal to a basic majority of working class German voters by creating enemies of the establishment and the wealthy and outsiders. Through appealing to these sensibilities of the white working class, he was elected to higher office. Hitler used other minority groups in the

THE DEBATE

YES

- ✓ Blind support of your country can lead to the belief that other countries are inferior
- ✓ It is important to be skeptical of your country and what it stands for
- ✓ Conservative populists have changed what it means to fly a U.S. flag

NO

- ✗ People of all political beliefs can feel patriotic
- ✗ People can feel proud of their country for many different reasons
- ✗ It is important not to let nationalists take control of the flag as their own symbol



Dan Thornberg/Shutterstock

German public like foreigners and Jewish people as scapegoats for the problems that were keeping the common man from achieving prosperity. Hitler first created a world of black and white, us against them, and then he defined "them" and used his power to warp

the rules of government to try to destroy them.

Former Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte used bombastic statements and proposed unorthodox and drastic solutions to long-held problems in Filipino society. He used fears of street crime and



Former Philippines president Rodrigo Duterte rose to power in part by promising a swift and violent end to the country's crime problems.



Lorie Schaul/Wikimedia Commons

During his 2016 and 2020 presidential campaigns, Bernie Sanders ran on the populist notion that the wealthy should be required to pay higher taxes to support programs that benefit middle and lower income people.

general chaos to build a campaign to win the presidency, framing the election as a choice between law and order or societal disarray. Drug use and abuse became one of his main rallying cries. In order to

combat the country’s drug problem, Duterte encouraged groups of citizens to roam the streets and public areas of the country and kill suspected drug dealers and users. He has often bragged about

personally gunning down three men while mayor of the Philippine city of Davao.

Statements like the one from Duterte can electrify a large minority of a country that is tired of street crime and thinks it would be great to stop at nothing to restore order. Another large group, those who have family or loved ones that had been impacted by drugs, were suitably alarmed at this extrajudicial exercise of state power. When one is gunned down in the street for expected drug use, it leaves no space for trials and no opportunity to fight for one’s innocence. These are basic norms of law and justice in advanced societies, and they were flouted by Duterte in order to fill what he saw as the “will of the people.”

POPULISM TODAY

Both Duterte and Hitler were guilty of simplifying the problems society faced in order to drum up support for their political campaigns, then using this power to cut down on people’s freedoms. These are extreme examples, but this kind of strategy is becoming increasingly popular in American politics.

It can be useful to politicians on the left or the right. Think of, in the 2016 election cycle, Donald Trump promising to “drain the swamp” as Bernie Sanders rallied the 99% against the 1%. Both candidates attempted to bind a large and diverse American society with many different interests together in a political movement of “the people” allied together against “elites” or “the establishment.” But their actual political goals and motives could not have been more different.

Credit: tk

THE DEBATE

IS IT POSSIBLE THAT A POPULIST LEADER AS DESTRUCTIVE AS HITLER COULD COME TO POWER AGAIN?

YES

- ✓ Modern politicians use many of the same strategies Hitler used
- ✓ Some right-wing politicians have beliefs similar to those of Hitler
- ✓ Most people today were not alive during Hitler’s time in power and do not remember the consequences

NO

- ✗ People today are more opposed to racism and hate speech
- ✗ Today’s politicians are less extreme than those of Hitler’s era
- ✗ We have learned our lesson from history and would be able to stop something like that before it happened

In 2024, the year when half the world votes, populist political undertones are as influential as ever. The provinces that make up East Germany gave a far-right party [their first victory](#) since the Nazi era. Populist candidates have

also made gains in countries such as [Mexico, India, and Indonesia](#).

To confront the changing face of politics, it is imperative that voters educate themselves about specific policy proposals and ideas from candidates rather than vote

based on broad slogans. Making America great again sounds quite nice, but that's the goal of every U.S. politician. The trick is how one does that, and that's what voters need to be basing their decisions on.

ELECTION PARTICIPATION

CHOOSING YOUR CANDIDATE

You probably aren't able to vote yet, but you will be soon, and it's never too early to start paying attention to the political campaigns that will affect your future. When candidates for office make big promises and issue attacks on their opponents, it can be tough to decide who to vote for. It's always important to do your research and make an educated choice, though—don't simply fall for the easy solutions some candidates offer voters.

LISTEN

Listen and watch carefully when [candidates](#) make statements, give speeches, or debate each other. What kinds of things do they post on social media? How do they react to current events that matter most to you? Do they seem like the kind of person you'd rely on to make important decisions? If the candidate has held office before, consider whether their actions matched up with the things they promised.

READ

Stay up to date by reading [reliable news sources](#). If you see something about a candidate posted on social media, try to verify it with a trustworthy source. It's all too common for [false rumors](#) to spread online or for candidates' words to be taken out of context. Avoid relying on TV broadcasters or online influencers as your main sources of news—they are likely to present their opinions as facts or leave out important information to try and influence viewers.

COMPARE

You might not see a big difference between candidates in some races. It's possible that you won't like anyone who's running. That doesn't mean you should sit out the election. Try to figure out which issues are most important to you, then look carefully at how each candidate approaches those issues. Think about the pros and cons of electing each candidate.

VOTE!

Make sure you [register to vote](#) when you turn eighteen. Once you're registered, you'll need to find your local polling place and make plans to fill out a ballot. Most states allow early voting and voting by mail, so there are plenty of options if you are busy on Election Day.

WHAT STUDENTS ARE SAYING

“Populist claims make me feel frustrated, occasionally apathetic, and often motivated to advocate for the facts regarding politicians. . . . When we start portraying politicians as the elite and everyone else as the ‘common people,’ we forget that for any forwards change all individuals must move together.

—Anahita P., *Imagine International Academy of North Texas, McKinney, Texas*



THE REAL PROBLEM

1. What do you think this cartoon is trying to say?
2. Why do you think the people in the rally support this candidate?
3. Is this a fair depiction of populist policies? Why or why not?

NOW IT'S YOUR TURN TO MAKE GREAT DECISIONS

1. What kinds of qualities do you think are most important in a political candidate, and why?
2. What kinds of issues could a political candidate raise to get your support?
3. **YOUR STORY:** Have you ever had an argument with a relative or friend about their support for a candidate? What caused the argument and how did you resolve it?

KEY WORDS & TERMS

authoritarian
establishment

ideology
nationalism

populism



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