

Popularism in the XXI. Century.

The phrase populism is not new but it got more prevalent with the information boom of the XXI. century. No wonder as it works best on large groups exploiting many psychological phenomena for which the internet and social media is the most effective tools.

The theoretical and historical literature is ample, and here i try to focus on some of its methods and features and how to tackle them.

There are arguments whether populism is good or bad. I share the view that it is simply a means to reach certain population segment.

The segment characterised by a couple of less flattering phrases, nevertheless voter analysis studies prove them across borders (UK Brexit, trump supporters, UK Reform party voters, Hungary Orban voters):

- Low education/intellect: the tools work best if you are not able to understand the problem. Therefore you accept simplifications and shortcuts which lead false conclusions and open the door for wrong solution (see Misinterpretation of democracy).
- Information isolation: can have multiple reasons, like low intellect (see above), geographical position - rural vs urban -, or psychological reason. This leads to similar effect to low education although the root-cause is different.
- Age: we get more rigid and closed to new ideas with time and our capability to cope with information and cognitive challenges decreases leading us to the situations discussed above.
- Desperation/hopelessness either social or economic: such mental state impairs critical thinking, complex understanding. We are more inclined to listen to emotional arguments, validation, and promises. We crave for certainty and guidance to get comfort and relief as [cognitive closure](#). We use [rationalisation](#) to overcome [cognitive dissonance](#) issues.

Some argue that populism could draw those who are not engaged into politics therefore broaden democracy. Theoretically it sounds great but studies on voter participation proves it otherwise. Besides, why drag someone to vote who doesn't bother from inside motivation and vulnerable to tools like populism which can be used by malicious actors.

Populism works with some simple but shockingly effective toolkit very similar to marketing strategies:

- Minimalism: pick only a few topics to advocate so followers can stay focused. Topics change swiftly as public interest turns keeping followers on their toes.
- Simplicity: make direct, straightforward link between two points ignoring details and nuances what makes it easy to jump logic. Over-generalisation can hide the real problem and the output can be manipulative.
- Scapegoating: find a well-defined sometimes arbitrary enemy to blame, usually marginalise minority groups and stir emotional connection.
- Exaggerate: enlarge the importance of the topic and the involvement or responsibility of the scapegoated group beyond reality.
- Aggressive rhetoric: use emotionally charged, vocal performance to captive attention and entertain. The population segment highlighted above is more susceptible to emotional reactions and to replace logic and knowledge with that. Especially with negative ones. (see Misinterpretation of democracy).
- Negative emotional charge: create fear, distrust, hatred in relation with the topic and the scapegoated group. Negative emotions are easier to generate and stays longer. We tend to believe them more than any positive ones. They also incite to act and act aggressively as part of the unconscious atavistic self-defence psychological mechanism.

- Identity fusion: create deep association and blur the border between the person and the cause. The leader becomes a symbol for the ideology, the group and it's members themselves. In extreme cases it transforms to cultism.
- False solution: the loss of critical thinking and channelled information makes the followers vulnerable for malicious solutions against the scapegoated group. They accept simple solutions which might not be directly evil but inadequate to handle complex problems.

Populism exploits an evolutionary cognitive shortcut when we tend to associate confidence with competence. The constant repetition of few and simple phrases by a loud leader become engraved into the followers. The simplified reasoning is sometimes distorted or even outright lies but the seemingly independent 'information channels', influencers, create the illusion of independent verification of the same topics. Created echo-chambers provide social proof, and this isolation blocks outside information and reasoning. The artificially promoted group identity facilitates memory conformity, smoothen cognitive dissonance and deepens cognitive bias. Social media combined with AI geographic segmentation provides controlled channel to those already hooked up and algorithmic content feed can pull others gradually into the follower group modifying their thinking with small, incremental slipping from reality.

The support base of populists is visibly growing in times of economic or political uncertainty as desperation widens. While traditional politics is based on facts, reasoning and solution presentation in a logical, correct manner, this approach unfortunately does not resonate well in a population segment deluded by populism.

Other approaches need to be explored to reach out and break these chains on the brain:

- Adjust level of information and style of communication to the target group. Every level of intelligence has a maximum capacity they can understand and cope with. If that is exceeded different protective mechanisms kick in automatically. Any message therefore has to be phrased in different style and complexity adjusted to the target group to make it digestible to all distinct segments of the society.
- Break isolation in small groups. It is not enough to be present on mainstream media or even run a social media platform. It is necessary to meet these people in organised discussion forums where a homogenous population segment is selectively invited preferably mixed with non-populists. Personal presence also reinforces the audience's own importance and carefully built interactive communication can lead them out from thinking traps.
- Keep it simple. Short targeted message can penetrate more easily regardless of any group of the target audience.
- Don't judge and provide emotional support and certainty. Understanding the opposition is the key to any conflict. Acknowledging the fear and emotions is crucial. On top of that, the negative emotions need to be replaced with hope and clarity to provide cognitive closure. No one likes to be angry and have fears. So any alternative which can replace these is welcomed by the most of us.
- Don't avoid sensitive question. Many of the problems populists target are uncomfortable for the main parties. They may be 'politically incorrect', have deep questionable historical roots or difficult moral dilemmas. But the populist followers are incited against those for the very same reason. It is sometimes useful to acknowledge that there is no good solution while point out the impossibility or immorality of the populist's solution. That is already a step forward.
- Find common ground of understanding. That is a common debating technique yet it is seldomly used in politics. The main effort focus on how to look different to the opponent. That is not always the best approach as it divides people and those in the middle may fall into the black hole. If we manage to create gray zones with acknowledging similarities it is easier to lead followers towards alternative solution based on rationality, morality and humanitarianism.

- Lead and don't push. Gradually lead to dismantle the lies and false logic instead of directly stating it is wrong. People get sensitive if someone points out they have fallen for a fallacy especially when identity fusion has already happened. So if someone show them the door and open for them only need a little nudge to make that final step by themselves which leads to clarity.

Breaking cultism and brainwashing is really hard and sometimes takes even years. But not all of the populist followers are full victim yet and if someone careful and apply these directives at the rise of populism, the success will be enough to dissolve the critical mass of stupidity.

Peter Simsa, 2025

Disclaimer

None of the ideas are mine. I don't claim any priority over them. The purpose of the essay is to put together the knowledge and focus on available solutions. The list of references are incomplete and serve as starting point to those interested in a deeper and more detailed understanding.

Further readings

Adamidis, Vasileios (2021). "Populism and the Rule of Recognition: Challenging the Foundations of Democratic Legal Systems". *Populism*. 4 (1): 1–24. doi:10.1163/25888072-BJA10016. S2CID 234082341. https://brill.com/view/journals/popu/4/1/article-p1_1.xml

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Misinterpretation of democracy: <https://www.oprem.co.uk/essay/MisinterpretationDemocracy.pdf>

Wikipedia, populism: <https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Populism>

UK Brexit voters: <https://www.jrf.org.uk/public-attitudes/brexit-vote-explained-poverty-low-skills-and-lack-of-opportunities>

trump supporters 2024: <https://lordashcroftpolls.com/2024/12/eyes-wide-open-trump-harris-the-voters-and-the-2024-election/>

UK Reform party voters: <https://li.com/whos-voting-reform/>

Fidesz party, Hungary: <https://www.populismstudies.org/a-pyrrhic-victory-for-the-populist-right-in-hungary/>