

Chapter 4

Trump, Sanders, and the Essential Contest Over “Populism”

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ABSTRACT

Twenty-first century politics has been marked by breaks with tradition across large areas of the world. Allegiances have broken down, and surprising results have occurred: the Brexit vote; the rise of movements of the left in Greece and the right in France, Austria, and Germany; and the success or near-success of outsider candidates. Much of this has been labeled ‘populist’. But, by itself, this explains little. The term is complex, contested, and possibly confused. This dissertation sets out why this is so, clarifies some of the competing elements within the various conceptions, and explores some of the reasons that may underlie dispute. It applies these ideas to reports and assessments of the electoral campaigns waged by Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders for the US presidency, concluding on the utility of different conceptualisations of ‘populism’.

1. INTRODUCTION

Recently there has been an upsurge in campaigns and movements apparently reflecting discontent with traditional politics. Some of these have been remarkably successful, against the apparent odds. The description often offered for this has been ‘populism’. The term’s origins lie in late 19th century US politics. It has continued to be used to characterize an otherwise ideologically wide range of US politicians, some of

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-4679-6.ch004

whom I will refer to in later discussion: Huey Long, George Wallace and Fred Harris being well-known examples. But academic work has tended to focus much more on Latin American figures like Peron in Argentina and Chavez in Venezuela. Attention has also been paid to the application of the concept in European politics: its features in common with fascism; more recent 21st century events. Although the term has been widely used in connection with Trump and Sanders, the theoretical grounding in the context of US politics is not clear. I will therefore try to prepare for a survey of their campaigns by providing a broad theoretical consideration of the concept, its difficulties and its connotations. In section 2, I will summarise the origins and main features of the general concept. In section 3, I will set out a view of the role played by values in conceptualization. In section 4, I will examine the concept in the context of its essential contestability and consider some of the ways in which competing conceptions are offered. I will then, in section 5, analyse the use of competing conceptions in commentaries on the electoral campaigns conducted by Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders. I will conclude, in section 6, by summarizing the points made and drawing attention to the identified strengths and weaknesses in different approaches and the need to take explicit account of the contrasting inclusive and exclusive tendencies apparent in different forms of populism.

2. THE CONCEPT OF ‘POPULISM’

Like all political concepts, ‘populism’ has been variously defined. Its usage is, perhaps, surprisingly recent. The emergence of the term, and its initially narrow focus, are illustrated by the OED entry (‘P’ entries completed 1908-9). ‘Populism’ briefly refers to ‘Populist’ which in turn is primarily defined as ‘An adherent of a political party formed in the U.S. in Feb. 1892, the chief objects of which were public control of railways, limitations of private ownership of land, ... a graduated income tax, etc..’ (OED, 1933). No more general definition or earlier usage is offered. This usage is strongly associated with what now appears as a strange mixture of socialist and liberal ideas, inspired by writers like Henry George.

More recent definitions offered in academic work for theoretical analysis and/or empirical operation are broader. The main features appear to be:

1. “A form of politics predicated on a moral distinction between corrupt elites and the virtuous people, with the latter viewed as the sole legitimate source of political power (Laclau, 1997; Mudde, 2007; cited in Bonikowski and Gidron, 2016: 7)

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