Comparative populism

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Time period: 4-15 April 2016
Course level: Graduate (Master’s)
Credits: 2.0

Introduction to the course and objectives
This graduate course focuses on the political nature, mechanics, attributes, and concrete outcomes of populism in pluralist political systems with a particular emphasis on modern and contemporary European politics. Its objective is to rigorously review the most recent developments and state-of-art literature in the booming fields of comparative populism and illiberal politics. It seeks to familiarize students with the intricacies of empirically complex – and, for this reason, theoretically challenging – phenomena, as well as assess their impact on current real politics, be that at specific national, EU, or world level. The course is both analytical and comparative in scope. Accordingly, the lectures will be thematic and supported by a large number of concrete cases of populism taken from several country- and time-contexts. Through our explorations of a large number of empirical cases, we will draw from several disciplines besides political science (including history, sociology and cognitive psychology), methodological approaches, continents, and individual countries. We are moreover going to examine a broad cross-section of topics; engage in re-conceptualizations; try to understand the micro-mechanisms of populist emergence; the rationales of the populist voter; the attributes of populism when in power; and its normative implications for contemporary liberal democracy.

Course requirements
Besides their active participation in class, students are expected to write either one research essay of about 3,500-4,000 words or, more preferably, two smaller such essays of about 1,500-2,000 words each. Please, note that consultation with the lecturer prior
to deciding about your essay topic is required. Course grading will depend on class participation (40%) and essay quality (60%) in terms of conceptual clarity, analytical power, theoretical value, and, of course, good language. All papers are due by May 1, 2016 (please send by email to my personal address). No extensions will be granted.

Course outline

1. The field, so far. How have we studied populism?
(NoteBene: This will be a 3-hour class and will include essay assignments to students)

How have scholars from different parts of the world studied populism since this phenomenon entered the political and social science agenda in the late 1960s? And how have we tried to conceptualize its main features to this very date? Is it an ideology? A strategy? A style? A certain discourse? Something else? And, crucially, who are “the people” in populism?

Readings:


2. Wars of definition, and methodological bugs

Could we, possibly, re-conceptualize populism in a way that is at the same time minimal and with sufficient discriminatory power, politically relevant, analytically compelling, operationally feasible, and clearly pointing to an opposite pole? By understanding populism as “democratic illiberalism,” we pit it against contemporary liberal democracy and see how the two concepts contrast. We also make populism fully operational for comparative research.

Readings:

3. What is populism, and who are the populists?

Populism is an omnipresent, multifaceted, and ideologically boundless phenomenon. What, then, distinguishes its various manifestations in Europe, Latin America, the United States, and elsewhere across time (old vs. new populisms), region (western vs. eastern; but also Nordic, Alpine, Baltic, and Southern European), regime type in which they develop (democracy vs. non-democracy), and ideological hue (right vs. left populisms)?

Readings:

4. Populist emergence: The mechanics

When, and under which conditions, do populist leaders, movements or parties, and
even entire illiberal polities emerge? This class provides an integrated analytical framework for understanding the rise of populism in the seemingly different contexts of Europe and Latin America. It also points to the importance of social resentment politicization, new cleavage formation, and intense polarization.

Readings:


5. Where populism fails to emerge?

After their almost simultaneous transition to pluralist politics, Greece and Spain countries followed a seemingly similar course of democratic consolidation based on modernization and Europeanization. However, one of them, Greece, became imbued with populism, while the other, Spain, remained until recently populism-free. We use these cases as country-laboratories for understanding the specific causal (and, most often, agency-related) mechanisms that may trigger populism or, when such mechanisms fail to get activated, end up with a non-populist effect.

Readings:


6. Are populist leaders charismatic?

How does charismatic leadership relate to, and work on, populism? And how much does it account for the latter’s continuing success? While several authors have considered
charismatic leadership an essential feature of populism, empirical evidence suggests otherwise. This class includes a theoretical reconceptualization of political charisma and its empirical application to a large number of cases from both Europe and Latin America.

Readings:


7. The populist discourse: Symbolic frames

Populist emergence requires a ‘master narrative’, that is, the utilization of symbolic frames for constructing a new political reality in which the (virtuous) ‘people’ is set against some (evil) ‘elite’. What it takes for such a novel construction to emerge out of old politics in which objective cleavages seemed to be long solidified? And how are populist majorities produced?

Readings:


8. The populist voter: A mind-frame analysis

What are the determinants of voting motivation for populist parties? And how do they differ from voting mainstream parties? We examine theories of ideological voting; socioeconomic voting; policy voting; party leader voting; protest voting; strategic
voting, and examine their predictive values. We then turn the tables and focus on societies’ “systematically biased beliefs” where populism is strong.

Readings:


9. Populism in office: Populist democracies

What happens once the populists come into office, as has happened several times in both Europe and Latin America? This class introduces populist democracy as a novel democratic subtype indicating a situation in which both the party in office and the major opposition are populist. It analyzes the particular stages and causal mechanisms of it, and asks whether it is an endemic or more permanent phenomenon.

Readings:


10. Normative implications: The good, the bad, and the Hungarian

Turning to contemporary political developments (such as the concurrent elections for the European Parliament), this class asks: Is populism a pathological phenomenon or a most authentic form of political representation? Dow does it matter? Does it all tell us something about the different qualities of democracy in (various pasts of) Europe and Latin America? And how does this discussion relate to ‘electoral authoritarianism’?

Readings: