

Matthijs Rooduijn\*

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## The Nucleus of Populism: In Search of the Lowest Common Denominator

There are different area-based bodies of literature on populism, which generally define the concept in slightly different ways. As a result, the term ‘populism’ has been attached to a wide variety of political actors, from Perot in the US to Berlusconi in Italy, and from Perón in Argentina to Le Pen in France. Is it an unfortunate coincidence that the same word has been used for completely different parties and politicians, or is it possible to discern the lowest common denominator that these actors share? By means of a comparison of six cases, based on a most-different systems design, I demonstrate that populists in different times and places have four characteristics in common: (1) they emphasize the central position of the people; (2) they criticize the elite; (3) they perceive the people as a homogeneous entity; and (4) they proclaim a serious crisis. These four characteristics constitute the core elements of populism.

*There can, at present, be no doubt about the importance of populism. But no one is quite clear just what it is . . . It bobs up everywhere, but in many and contradictory shapes. Does it have any underlying unity, or does one name cover a multitude of unconnected tendencies?* (Ionescu and Gellner 1969: 1)

ALTHOUGH THIS FRAGMENT WAS PUT ON PAPER MORE THAN 40 YEARS AGO, it could have been written today. The term ‘populism’ is still being applied to a wide variety of parties and politicians, and in different contexts still points to different phenomena (Canovan 1981: 3). Just as it did half a century ago, the concept deals with ‘an essential impalpability, an awkward conceptual slipperiness’ (Taggart 2000: 1). In one context populism refers to small-scale bottom-up movements, whereas in others it denotes strong charismatic leaders or radical right political parties. A pressing question is whether these phenomena actually have something in common.

\* Matthijs Rooduijn is a Lecturer and Postdoctoral Researcher at the University of Amsterdam. Contact email: [M.Rooduijn@uva.nl](mailto:M.Rooduijn@uva.nl).

Three area-based bodies of literature can be distinguished that classify different types of political actors as populist. First, the US literature looks at political movements such as the nineteenth-century People's Party, Perot's Progress Party and, more recently, the Tea Party. Second, the Latin American literature focuses on authoritarian regimes such as those of Perón in Argentina, Chávez in Venezuela and Morales in Bolivia. Third, the Western European literature emphasizes parties such as Le Pen's National Front (Front National – FN) in France, Berlusconi's Forza Italia (FI) in Italy and Haider's Austrian Freedom Party (Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs – FPÖ). Within each body of literature, the classification of political actors as populist is often in accordance with a *contextual* definition of populism. It is therefore unclear whether Perón would be labelled populist by European standards and whether Perot would be seen as a populist according to the Latin American point of view.

The fact that scholars in different regions use the same term to analyse strongly divergent political actors raises the question of whether it is merely an unfortunate coincidence that political actors from different times, from various places and with different ideologies have all been labelled populist, or whether they actually have something in common. The aim of this article is to find out whether there exists a lowest common denominator that all allegedly populist actors share.

I argue and demonstrate that there indeed exists such a lowest common denominator. It consists of four characteristics: (1) populists emphasize the central position of the people; (2) they criticize the elite; (3) they conceive of the people as a homogeneous entity; and (4) they proclaim that there is a serious crisis. This common core could be the point of departure for the comparison of populist actors across regions and over time.

This is an important finding because it vindicates the usage of the classical Sartorian approach to conceptualizing populism. According to this approach, a phenomenon has to have a core (set of) characteristic(s) in order to be classified as populist (see Sartori 1970). We can then formulate a 'minimal definition' of the concept at the highest level of abstraction (see Gerring 2001). Many scholars have already employed such an approach (for example, Abts and Rummens 2007; Mudde 2004; Pappas 2013; Stanley 2008), and some of them have also used it in cross-regionalist comparisons (for example, Hawkins 2009; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012;

Rooduijn and Pauwels 2011). Yet a systematic validation of this approach is still absent.<sup>1</sup>

The article proceeds as follows. First, I make a distinction between 12 alleged characteristics of populism. Next, six political actors are selected that are seen as ‘prototypical populists’ – that is, there exists strong agreement among scholars that these actors can be labelled populist. To be able to discover the lowest common denominator, these actors are selected from backgrounds as dissimilar as possible in terms of time, space and ideology. In the following section, I assess how far the selected actors possess the alleged characteristics of populism. In the final section I pay attention to the implications of these findings for the issue of defining populism and the use of the concept in future comparative research.

#### CHARACTERISTICS OF POPULISM MENTIONED IN THE LITERATURE

We can make a distinction between three area-based bodies of literature on populism: the US literature, the Latin American literature and the Western European literature. The US literature focuses on late nineteenth-century popular and agrarian movements and perceives populism as ‘a way of looking at things’ that contrasts the ‘plain’ people from rural states with the industrial cosmopolitans from the eastern shores of the country (see Goodwyn 1976, 1978; Hicks 1961; Hofstadter 1955; McKenna 1974). In the Latin American literature, the emphasis is on contraposing the people against the elite as well. Yet, in most Latin American countries, the actors who proclaim this populist message are not small-scale bottom-up movements but powerful and paternalistic political leaders (see Hawkins 2010; di Tella 1965, 1997; de la Torre 2010; Weyland 2001). The conceptualizations of populism in the Western European body of literature have been strongly influenced by political parties on the far right (see Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008a; Mény and Surel 2002a; Mudde 2007). These parties emphasize the cultural identity of the people and therefore position them not only against the bad elite but also against ‘dangerous others’ (immigrants or people of another race or religion).<sup>2</sup>

The cross-fertilization between these three bodies of literature is still minimal. Although authors from different literatures increasingly cite each other, the definitions of populism they make use of in their analyses are still strongly influenced by their ‘own’ bodies of literature.

There are only a few scholars who have transcended ‘their’ literatures and have analysed populist phenomena over a long time period and across different continents (see Canovan 1981; Ionescu and Gellner 1969; Taggart 2000). These studies, however, are not based on a systematic comparison across cases and over time.

Within these three bodies of literature, populism has been associated with many features. Below, I examine the most notable of these features. Some are mentioned in only one of the three bodies of literature and others are discussed in all three of them. A distinction is made between: (1) features that relate to the *ideas* of populist actors; (2) characteristics that have to do with the *style* of populists; and (3) attributes that concern the *organization* of populist actors.

### *Characteristics Relating to Ideas*

One feature that is often associated with populism is the centrality of the people. Populists are said to worship the people and to emphasize the people’s fundamental position at the centre of politics (see Goodwyn 1976; Ionescu and Gellner 1969; Kazin 1995; Mény and Surel 2002b; Taggart 2000; de la Torre 2010). ‘The people’ can mean many different things to many different populists in many different circumstances (Canovan 1981: 261; Mudde 2004: 545–6). It can refer, for instance, to the electorate, to the nation or to no fixed group at all. This does not mean that ‘the people’ has no meaning (Panizza 2005: 3). It only means that the way in which the term is understood is dependent on the particular context.

People-centrism cannot be understood without the characteristic of anti-elitism. The elite is accused of being alienated from the people, of having no idea what ordinary people find important and of only representing its own interests (Barr 2009; Goodwyn 1978; Laclau 2005; Mudde 2004). The accusations differ from arrogance and selfishness to incompetence and corruption. In most cases these allegations go hand in hand. Like people-centrism, anti-elitism is dependent on the context and can take different forms. It could be directed to a political elite (politicians in general, political parties, the ‘established’ political order), an economic elite (business elites, bank executives or capitalism in general), a cultural elite (intellectuals), a media elite (journalists) or a legal elite (judges). No matter which type of elite is criticized, the general message is the same: that of a conflict between those without power (the people) and those with power (the elite).

'The people' is conceived of as a homogeneous entity. This is a result of the antagonistic character of the perceived relationship between the people and the elite (Panizza 2005: 3). Because populists argue that the people is exploited by the elite, they believe that all 'ordinary' persons have a shared interest in their opposition to the elite. Therefore, they present 'the people' (singular) as a uniform entity. Some scholars argue that when they address the people, populists blur class distinctions by lumping all people in one single homogeneous category (McKenna 1974: xii–xiv). Other scholars do not focus explicitly on this lack of class consciousness. They do, however, conceive of the people as a homogeneous whole, just the same (Taggart 2000: 92).

According to many scholars, this emphasis on the power of the people and the negativity towards the elite leads to the message that 'ordinary citizens' must be given their voices back and that people should therefore have more influence on the political decision-making process. It has thus been argued that populists want to circumvent the 'opaque and complex consensus seeking politics' by introducing more directness in the form of measures of direct democracy such as referenda, popular initiatives and plebiscites (Canovan 1981: ch. 5; Taggart 2000: 103–5).

Populism is sometimes associated not only with negativity about the elite but also with negativity about specific social groups: exclusionism (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008b; Taguieff 1995). Populists claim to defend the collective identity of the 'true' people against enemies from outside. It depends on the context whether the outsiders are immigrants, unemployed, or people of another religion or race.

To emphasize their message of anti-elitism and/or exclusionism, populists often proclaim a serious crisis (political, cultural and/or economic) (Betz 2002). Populists argue that the political influence, the cultural identity or the economic situation of ordinary people is under great threat and must urgently be protected (Taggart 2000: 93–4). It does not matter whether this proclaimed crisis is real or not; it only matters that populists *argue* that there is such a crisis.

### *Characteristics Relating to Style*

The first feature of the allegedly populist style is the use of simplistic language. Because of their glorification of the people and their loathing of the elite, populists tend to use rather simple language that is understood by 'normal' people and differs from the difficult and formal

language of the elite. This focus on linguistic simplicity has frequently been described as the 'tabloid style' of populists (see Canovan 1999: 5).

It is often argued that populists, to get their message across, make use of a direct communication style. The idea is that populists do not want to communicate with citizens via routes such as 'inconvenient' party platforms or 'annoying' institutions such as parliament. These are obstacles that stand in the way of a direct relationship between policy and voter. Populist politicians therefore prefer to communicate directly via popular mass media such as television (Mazzoleni 2003) – and, more recently, also via social media such as Facebook and Twitter.

It has also been claimed that populists polarize in order to get their message of crisis across (Canovan 2004: 242). They dichotomize the debate and often employ aggressive language (Taggart 2000: 113).

Finally, populists often create an 'outsider image'. They present themselves as not being part of the elite and as being political mavericks (Barr 2009: 33–4; Betz and Johnson 2004: 315). This does not necessarily mean that they actually *are* political outsiders. As Mudde (2004: 560) has emphasized, it is sufficient that they create such an image.

### *Characteristics Relating to Organization*

Organizational characteristics concern the way in which populist organizations are constituted. According to some scholars, the centralization of the leader plays a pivotal role. Weyland (2001) emphasizes that a populist organization has a strong personalistic leader at its apex. Taggart (2000: 100–3) also argues that populist organizations are characterized by their centralized nature and the pivotal role of (charismatic) leaders.

Another organizational characteristic is that populists want a loosely mediated relationship between leader and followers. This means that populists want to get rid of intermediate institutions and organizations that stand in the way of a direct relationship between themselves and their followers. Most populists therefore refuse to create a party structure that is similar to the dominant model of party organization (Taggart 2000: 75). Populists tend to organize themselves in loose movements instead of tightly structured political parties (Wiles 1969: 167).

For an overview of all the characteristics that have been discerned from the three bodies of literature, see Table 1.

**Table 1**  
*Characteristics of Populism Mentioned in the Literature*

<i>Ideas</i>	<i>Style</i>	<i>Organization</i>
1 People-centrism	7 Simplistic language	11 Centralization of leader
2 Anti-elitism	8 Direct communication style	12 Loosely mediated relationship
3 Homogeneity of the people	9 Polarization	
4 Direct democracy	10 Image of outsider	
5 Exclusionism		
6 Proclamation of a crisis		

### CASE SELECTION

In order to find the lowest common denominator, a most-different systems design is employed (Mudde 2007: 14). Ideally, I would need to study *all* populist actors but because this is practically impossible I selected a sample of six populist actors from backgrounds as divergent as possible in terms of time, space and ideology. Political actors have been included only when most scholars in a body of literature agree that they are populist. The populists analysed in this article are all labelled as populist by at least three authoritative scholars (see below). Spatial diversity is guaranteed by selecting two prototypical populist actors from each of the geographical areas that correspond to the three bodies of literature. To guarantee temporal diversity, the focus is not only on contemporary populism but also on historical cases. Finally, I have also aimed for ideological variety. Although one could disagree about the ideological labels I have attached to the selected populist actors, I believe that the selected actors represent a wide variety of ideological stances (see Table 2).

The first selected populist actor is Tom Watson's United States People's Party. This nineteenth-century movement has been labelled populist by various prominent scholars in the US body of literature, such as Goodwyn (1976), Hicks (1961) and Kazin (1995). The second selected populist actor is Ross Perot's Progress Party. Authoritative scholars such as Canovan (2004), Taggart (2000) and Kazin (1995) have claimed that Perot was a prototypical populist politician. Third, the Argentinian politician Juan Perón and his

**Table 2**  
*Selection of Actors that are Generally Considered Populist*

<i>Time</i>	<i>Space</i>		
	<i>United States</i>	<i>Latin America</i>	<i>Western Europe</i>
<i>Classical</i>	Watson People's Party 1890s (farmers' interests)	Perón Justicialist Party 1940s–1970s (social democratic)	Le Pen National Front 1970s–2000s (far right)
<i>Modern</i>	Perot Reform Party 1990s (liberal)	Chávez MVR/PSUV 2000s (far left)	Berlusconi Forza Italia 1990s–2000s (conservative)

Justicialist Party is included. Within the Latin American body of literature, Perón is seen as the prime example of classical populism (Roberts 1995; de la Torre 2010; Weyland 2001). The fourth populist is Hugo Chávez in Venezuela. Many prominent scholars perceive him as the main example of modern left-wing populism in Latin America (Hawkins 2010; Roberts 2007; Weyland 2003). Fifth, Jean-Marie Le Pen's National Front from France is selected. Many country experts see Le Pen as one of the most typical illustrations of the Western European populist radical right (Betz 1994; Rydgren 2008; Surel 2002).<sup>3</sup> Sixth, Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia is included in the analysis. Both country experts, such as Tarchi (2008) and Zaslove (2008), and prominent political theorists on populism in general, such as Taggart (2000) and Mudde (2004), have qualified Berlusconi as a typically populist politician.

To validate my findings I have also incorporated one 'marginal case' – that is, an actor that has been called populist by some, but about whose status as populist exists no clear consensus – that I briefly examine in order to assess whether it differs from the prototypical populists. This marginal case is the Dutch Socialist Party (Socialistische Partij – SP) (March 2007; March and Mudde 2005).

## RESULTS

### *Watson's People's Party*

The United States People's Party was created in 1892 from a group of regional agrarian organizations in which farmers and other



'normal' people opposed the ruling economic and political elite. During the founding meeting, the Populists of the People's Party presented a declaration of principles in which they showed that they were both strongly people-centrist and anti-elitist: 'We have witnessed for more than a quarter of a century the struggles of the two great political parties for power and plunder, while grievous wrongs have been inflicted upon the suffering people' (quoted in McKenna 1974: 90). The Populists attacked the rich from the east in general, and the corrupt railroad corporations, politicians and capitalists in particular. The party proclaimed a devastating crisis in the first sentence of their Omaha Platform: 'we meet in the midst of a nation brought to the verge of moral, political, and material ruin' (quoted in McKenna 1974: 89). One of the central measures that they believed would overcome this crisis was the introduction of the popular initiative and the referendum.

The 'people' the Populists referred to was seen as a uniform entity that transcended specific classes and other groups. According to Goodwyn (1978: 97), the Populists saw the 'people' as an alliance of northern farmers, southern blacks and urban workers. Some Populists wanted to include black people in their alliance as well, but most Populists were somewhat exclusionist (Kazin 1995: 37–8). Moreover, in its official documents the party emphasized that immigrant labour should be restricted (Canovan 1981: 37).

Because the party developed from collaborations between small, regional farmers' organizations, the party consisted of a rather complex set of alliances and sub-alliances in which the connections between bottom and top were only loosely mediated (Goodwyn 1976: 91). It could, therefore, be described as a bottom-up movement. Because the regional organizations continued to play a pivotal role within the People's Party, the party 'was not a function of a particular charismatic leader' (Taggart 2000: 26), not even of the most central figure, Tom Watson.

To persuade the people to rebel against the ruling elite, the People's Party frequently used a Manichaeian discourse of Good versus Evil (us versus them, democracy versus plutocracy, producers versus exploiters), as a result of which the party's language was somewhat polarizing (see the example above from their Omaha Platform). Yet its language was not simplistic; it was impregnated with complex arguments and some complicated sentences.<sup>4</sup>

Apart from the platform, most Populists did not communicate directly with the electorate; much of the communication took place at the regional level via the farmers' alliances. In their initial communications, the Populists presented themselves as outsiders in politics. A few years later, however, they decided to form a union with the Democratic Party and no longer emphasized their 'outsiderness'. This turned out to be a poor electoral choice and was the beginning of the end of their success. Their message of anti-elitism had become much less credible since their alliance with the Democrats.

### *Perot's Progress Party*

One century after the formation of the People's Party, another third party challenged the main US establishment. During the 1992 presidential elections, Ross Perot, an independent candidate from Texas – and also a billionaire businessman – gained around 20 per cent of the vote. Perot claimed that his country was in crisis and he castigated 'the decade of greed, the era of trickle-down economics' (Kazin 1995: 273). In order to solve the crisis, the established political order had to make way for a political entrepreneur who would balance the budget.

He said that 'normal' Americans were the owners of the country and should claim it back from the politicians in Washington. To give more power to the people, he wanted to introduce more direct democracy by means of 'electronic town halls'. One of his one-liners was: 'I am Ross, and you are the boss' (Posner 1996: 251). Perot did not exclude specific classes or groups in his plea to give more power to the people. Instead, he argued that *all* Americans shared the same interests in their struggle against the corrupt politicians. This was clearly represented in the initial name of his political organization: *United We Stand America* (my emphasis).

His speech, 'We Own this Country', formed the start of a campaign strategy of many appearances on television shows. With his anti-Washington message and his unusual mix of political positions, he appealed to both Republicans and Democrats. Perot claimed that, initially, he did not want to run as a political candidate, but that he was forced into it because he felt the obligation to rescue the country from the established politicians (see Taggart 2000: 42).

To appeal to the people, he used simple language, explained economic troubles in a facile and straightforward way and also

communicated directly with his voters through talk shows on television (Kazin 1995: 273). On television, he mixed this simple language with a bombastic style to show his frustration with the established order (Taggart 2000: 42). He ridiculed overdressed lobbyists, 'country clubbers' and 'preppies' in the White House (Kazin 1995: 272–3). People liked this clear, tough and confrontational political approach. 'Keeping his message simple, and spicing the shows with his own brand of down-home Texas humor, he was a fresh face in a sea of candidates who normally were reserved and shied away from candor, controversy, or color' (Posner 1996: 260).

Perot built a political organization around himself, of which the only and uncontested leader was Perot himself. The movement was completely subordinate to his personal political performance. Because he strongly disliked the existing parties and their institutionalized organizational structure, he established an organization in which the distance between him and his rank and file was as short as possible. Kazin (1995: 273) argues that Perot never built a party organization that was more than a mere network of his admirers; except for the moments when Perot appeared on television, the party was invisible.

### *Perón's Justicialist Party*

Although Juan Perón died in 1974, he is still one of the most popular Argentinian politicians. In 1946 Perón was elected president for the first time. He argued that the country faced a social and political crisis and therefore urgently needed a strong and charismatic leader who would solve the problems (Crassweller 1987: 222). Perón defined his ideological stance as the 'Third Position': a middle way between capitalism and socialism. He was re-elected in 1951 but was ousted after a coup in 1955. He lived in Paraguay and Spain and returned to Argentina only in 1973, when he was elected president again. He died one year later.

Like the political actors we have discussed so far, Perón strongly emphasized the struggle between the (good) people and the (bad) oligarchy (Roberts 2007: 3; de la Torre 2010: 18). His supporters have been called '*descamisados*' (shirtless ones) to distinguish them from the members of the political elite, who always wore jackets and ties (Page 1983: 136–7). Although many of Perón's supporters were working class, one should not conclude that Peronism was a working-class movement

(Crassweller 1987: 222). He stressed the importance of national unity and tried to close the gap between the different socioeconomic classes by forging a cross-class alliance of supporters – an entity united by its opposition against the elite. Perón did not exclude specific social groups such as immigrants or people of another religion, nor was he a supporter of the means of direct democracy. He argued that the will of the people had to be expressed via a strong and charismatic leader (Taggart 2000: 64).

In order to forge a cross-class alliance, Perón employed language that was comprehensible not only for the highly educated but also for the lower classes; he used many metaphors, and his discourse could not be called simplistic. As Crassweller (1987: 184, my emphasis) argues, the communicative strength ‘lay in Perón’s strange ability to combine *lofty* language with homespun metaphors’. Although he criticized the ‘oligarchy’, his style was not polarizing. In fact, his Third Way politics (‘neither left, nor right’) and his emphasis on social justice made his style rather accommodative.<sup>5</sup> To distinguish ‘us’ (the people) from ‘them’ (the elite), Perón presented himself as a political outsider. He was famous for his direct communication with the public. ‘The iconography of Perón appearing on the balcony to greet the masses who chanted his name and greeted his appearance with an ovation became an integral component in his subsequent rule as the symbol of his direct link to the people and his genuine popular support’ (Taggart 2000: 62).

Perón had never made a secret of his admiration for the leadership style of Mussolini. He perceived politics in military terms and emphasized that he saw himself as a ‘conductor’: a strong personalistic leader (Page 1983: 220). In his emphasis on strong leadership, Perón was ‘hostile to the idea of political parties as bases of power, for they were inconsistent with the functions of the “Conductor”’ (Crassweller 1987: 230). In order to be able to directly control his organization, Perón made sure that the party was strongly underinstitutionalized and completely dependent on his personalistic leadership (Roberts 2006: 131).

### *Chávez’s Movement of the Fifth Republic/United Socialist Party of Venezuela (MVR/PSUV)*

In the early 1980s, a group of military academy graduates, inspired by the thoughts of the Venezuelan patriot Simón Bolívar, founded a secret organization within the armed forces. The goal of this

organization was to do something about the increasing corruption in the country. In 1992, the group carried out a coup against the government. The coup failed, but in 1998 it was more successful. The leader of the group (which had by then turned into a political party) – the charismatic Hugo Chávez – convincingly won the presidential elections. He remained president of Venezuela until his death on 5 March 2013.

The point of departure for Chávez's political ideas was the centrality of the Venezuelan people. A slogan during the 2000 campaign was, for instance, 'With Chávez, the people rule' (Hawkins 2010: 15). Although he focused mostly on the elevation of the poorest people from the lowest classes, he stated explicitly that his message was directed towards all Venezuelans (Roberts 2003). In his conception, the people formed one entity in their opposition against the elite. He argued that their interests were at risk because of a group of conspiring elites, who were supported by a corrupt political system. Addressing the elite, Chávez frequently used terms such as 'enemies', 'corruption', 'the oligarchy', 'counterrevolutionary forces', 'coup-mongers', 'the lackeys of imperialism', 'the nightmare of world capitalism' and 'savage neoliberalism' (Hawkins 2010).

Chávez's main goal was a revolution to overthrow the existing political order. In his opinion, this was the only possible way to solve the political and cultural crisis in which the country was placed by the corrupt political Punto Fijo system (Hellinger 2003). He had had enough of the representative system and proposed introducing measures of direct democracy (Ellner 2003). Chávez was not exclusionist towards specific societal groups, except, of course, for the Venezuelan (and later also foreign – read US) elite.

To convey his message, Chávez employed simple language in which he referred to famous myths and symbols (Hawkins 2010: 56–7). When he talked about the corrupt elite, his language was strongly polarizing and even bellicose:

Chávez recited passages from *Florentino y el Diablo*, a Venezuelan folk ballad in which a cowboy named Florentino is challenged to a singing duel with the Devil; Florentino courageously accepts the challenge and eventually defeats the Devil through his perseverance and wit. Chávez asserted that the coup-mongering leaders of the opposition were the Devil, and behind them was the biggest Devil of all, George W. Bush. (Hawkins 2010: 2)

Chávez often emphasized that he was a political outsider and that he did not belong to the 'political class'. In fact, he was one of the

ordinary people (Ellner 2003) and therefore preferred to communicate directly with Venezuelans through his own television and radio shows in which he discussed his policies, told jokes and sang songs. The most fascinating example is Chávez's television show *Aló Presidente*, which was broadcasted every week.

Chávez was supported by a network of decentralized grassroots organizations. Perhaps the most important organizations were the so-called 'Bolivarian Circles' – neighbourhood committees that operated relatively independently from the official party organization (Roberts 2007: 7). Hawkins (2010: 178–81) shows that these organizations were strongly dependent on their political leader and that they had a movement-like form of organization that was somewhat unmediated and completely different from the bureaucratic hierarchies of the established political parties.

### *Le Pen's National Front*

The French National Front was founded in 1972. It was an amalgam of many different radical right groups, such as 'French Algeria die-hards; revolutionary nationalists; wartime Vichyites; Holocaust revisionists; neo-fascists; neo-Nazis; monarchists; Catholic fundamentalists; former members of extreme right *groupuscules*; and so on' (Hainsworth 2000: 18). During the first decade of its existence, the party was not successful. It was in 1983, in a local election, that the party made its electoral breakthrough. But the biggest success for the National Front took place exactly three decades after its foundation: in 2002 National Front leader Jean-Marie Le Pen eliminated the leader of the Socialist Party in the first round of the presidential election.

The National Front was founded because of concern about a perceived sociocultural crisis: an alleged decline of the greatness of the country. France had to act quickly in order to avoid a national disaster (Betz 1994: 131–2). The party strongly emphasized – and still emphasizes – the importance of preserving what it calls the French national identity. There was fear that this French identity was under threat by the influx of migrants who wanted to keep their own identity and thereby undermined and challenged everything that was typical of the French nation. 'France for the French' is one of the most famous slogans of the National Front (Davies 1999). This emphasis on the nation resulted in an understanding of the people

as being rather homogeneous. The National Front did not focus on specific socioeconomic groups and developed an *interclassiste* profile (Davies 2002: 140).

Yet the French people are not contraposed only to 'dangerous others'; the National Front also emphasizes the antagonistic relationship between the good people and the bad elite. Le Pen depicts all political parties as a single political class that is alienated from the public (Rydgren 2008: 174). He talks about the 'Gang of Four' (political parties) that captures the established order. He also refers to politics as a 'closed shop' and supports measures of direct democracy (Davies 2002: 136). 'He proclaims himself as the man fighting for the real interests of French people against the whole of the French political establishment' and thus presents himself as a political outsider (Davies 1999). A clear example, which also demonstrates the direct communication style of the National Front, is the postcards that the party published for New Year, on which it wrote: '1991: The Year of the Outsider' (Davies 2002: 136).

To convey its message, the party makes use of accessible and down-to-earth language (Davies 2002: 135) and does not shun polarizing stances. Just one example is the following line from National Front politician Stirbois: 'Immigrants from beyond the Mediterranean: go back to your huts' (quoted in Hainsworth 2000: 24). From the foundation of the party until 2011, Le Pen was the leader of the National Front. He withstood all the challenges from other candidates who contested his leadership, and he managed to keep all the different currents in the National Front together. Since then he has often been portrayed as a charismatic and charming politician (Declair 1999; Hainsworth 2000) who managed to build a 'highly disciplined, efficient, and authoritarian organization' around himself (Simmons 1996: 187). In January 2011, Jean-Marie Le Pen, aged 82, handed over the party leadership to his daughter Marine Le Pen.

### *Berlusconi's Forza Italia/People of Freedom (PdL)*

In the early 1990s Italy witnessed a huge political corruption scandal with enormous political consequences. One of those consequences was the opening up of the possibility for new political entrepreneurs to enter the stage. One such entrepreneur was marketing man, soccer club owner and media tycoon Silvio Berlusconi. Berlusconi

argued that he had decided to go into politics because he did not believe in the 'old political class', or the *partitocrazia* any more. The country was, in his opinion, in a devastating social and political crisis (Campus 2006: 141–2). According to Berlusconi, politicians had to start listening to what 'normal Italians' wanted. It was not clear who Berlusconi meant when he talked about 'normal Italians'; most probably he referred to everybody who was not part of the (according to Berlusconi mostly left-wing) political elite – after all, all 'normal Italians' shared the same interests in their struggle with the elite. Unlike Le Pen in France, Berlusconi was not explicitly negative about immigrants (Tarchi 2003: 171). One of the ways in which Berlusconi wanted to translate the will of the people into policy was by means of some measures of direct democracy.

Berlusconi makes a clear distinction between 'Good' (the people and Berlusconi himself) and 'Evil' (the arrogant 'communist' political elite) and does not, at any time, nuance this distinction. To distinguish himself from the political elite, Berlusconi presents himself as an outsider in the political realm. He emphasizes that he is a normal man, just like everyone else, and that his political adventure is only a temporary enterprise. As soon as the country is safe from the corrupt elite, he will leave the stage again (Tarchi 2003: 163–4). To reinforce the image of an anti-elitist outsider, Berlusconi makes use of simple and clear language that is often aggressive towards the leftist media and legal elites: language that comes from the realm of television and that everyone can easily understand (Tarchi 2003: 163–8). An interesting example in this respect is the language of football. Because football is often associated with action and success, it plays a pivotal role in Berlusconi's discourse. The name of his former party, Forza Italia, is the chant of the supporters of the national football team. Literally, it means 'Go Italy' (Jones 2003: 106).

Berlusconi tries to communicate as directly as possible with his electorate. During campaigns he speaks to the people via his own television channels (he owns three of the six largest television networks) and refuses to make use of the mediation of the press. He applies the methods of television advertising to the realm of politics (Ginsborg 2004). Moreover, during the 2001 campaign, he sent a biography of himself, called *Una Storia Italiana* (An Italian Story), to almost every Italian household. The book contained simply written stories about Berlusconi's life and, most of all, pictures of his successes (Stille 2006: 252).



Forza Italia (the predecessor of the present People of Freedom party (Popolo della Libertá – PdL)) was not a party in the traditional sense of the word. In fact, Berlusconi argued that when Forza Italia was called a ‘political party’ he felt shivers down his spine (Tarchi 2003: 166). It is better seen as a loosely organized electoral machine with only one goal: winning elections. Berlusconi was the uncontested leader who ruled the party with an iron hand. During campaigns, his face was on huge posters on boards alongside the road, in railway and train stations and all other imaginable spots (Ginsborg 2003). Berlusconi presents himself not only as ‘the idealized archetype of the Italian everyman’ but also as ‘exceptional, a superman in the making’ (Stille 2006: 257). A comparison Berlusconi himself likes to make is with Moses or Jesus (Jones 2003: 293).

*The Lowest Common Denominator and a ‘Marginal Case’*

The results indicate that only four of the 12 characteristics which are often associated with populism are shared by all populist actors (see Table 3). Interestingly, all shared features relate to ideas. The first shared feature is that all populists emphasize the central position of the people. What exactly they mean by ‘the people’ often remains unclear. What *is* clear, however – and this is the second shared feature – is that they seem to have the idea that the people with whom they identify is homogeneous. The third shared characteristic is that they all argue that the people are exploited by a corrupt and selfish elite. The fourth feature that can be found in all six cases is that populists argue that the exploitation of the people by the selfish elite constitutes a serious political, economic and/or cultural crisis.

To test whether this lowest common denominator distinguishes populist actors from other political actors, I have also analysed a ‘marginal case’ – that is, an actor about which scholars disagree as to whether it can be labelled populist. If this actor turns out not to contain all four characteristics, we can conclude that the lowest common denominator distinguishes prototypical populist actors from other actors rather well.

One political actor that fits the requirements of a marginal case is the Dutch Socialist Party (Socialistische Partij – SP). This party has been labelled populist by various scholars (March and Mudde 2005). However, some authors have argued that the Socialist Party has

**Table 3**  
*Populists and their Characteristics*

	<i>Watson People's Party</i>	<i>Perot Reform Party</i>	<i>Perón Justicialist Party</i>	<i>Chávez MVR/PSUV</i>	<i>Le Pen National Front</i>	<i>Berlusconi Forza Italia</i>
<i>Ideas</i>						
1 People-centrism	+	+	+	+	+	+
2 Anti-elitism	+	+	+	+	+	+
3 Homogeneity of the people	+	+	+	+	+	+
4 Direct democracy	+	+	-	+	+	+
5 Exclusionism	+	-	-	-	+	-
6 Proclamation of a crisis	+	+	+	+	+	+
<i>Style</i>						
7 Simplistic language	-	+	-	+	+	+
8 Direct communication style	+	+	-	+	+	+
9 Polarization	-	+	+	+	+	+
10 Image of outsider	-	+	+	+	+	+
<i>Organization</i>						
11 Centralization of leader	-	+	+	+	+	+
12 Loosely mediated relationship	+	+	+	+	-	+

become less populist over the years (Lucardie and Voerman 2012: 68), and others have even concluded that today's Socialist Party is not more populist than the average mainstream party (de Lange and Rooduijn 2012; Rooduijn et al. 2012).

The Dutch Socialist Party was established in the early 1970s as a Marxist-Leninist and Maoist party. Over the years it incorporated populist elements as well (March 2007: 44). In the 1990s especially, the party emphasized the importance of listening to 'ordinary people'. The party argued that 'ordinary citizens' share a common interest which is in conflict with the corrupt political and economic interests of the established order (Pauwels 2012: 159–76). This anti-elitist attitude is most clearly demonstrated by the 1994 election slogan: 'Vote against, vote SP'. The perceived conflict between the people and the elite was seen as a serious sociopolitical crisis. The Socialist Party argued that neoliberal thinking had infected the established parties on both the left and the right. 'Politics has become sick, nearly disabled' (SP 1994: 3).

In the 2000s, however, the Socialist Party became more moderate. It not only dropped its more extreme positions (such as its plea to leave the NATO and its wish to abolish the Dutch monarchy), it also became less populist. This becomes apparent if the party's manifestos from the 1990s are compared with those from the 2000s. In 1994, the Socialist Party attacked the non-responsiveness of the 'established order' in its entirety. Yet in 2006 the party criticized the policy plans of specific coalition parties only (de Lange and Rooduijn 2012: 324). By dropping its anti-elitist message, the Socialist Party also discarded its characterization of the people as a homogeneous entity. As a result, it no longer proclaimed that there was a serious crisis either. This does not mean that the Socialist Party dropped its anti-elitism completely; once in a while, anti-elitist reflexes do emerge. In 2008, for instance, Socialist Party leader Jan Marijnissen argued: 'They promise all kinds of things in The Hague, but they make a mess of it and only take good care of each other and of themselves' (Voerman 2009: 31, my translation). However, anti-elitism has become the exception rather than the rule.

We might conclude that from the 2000s onwards the Socialist Party has held an ambivalent position with regard to its populism and should not therefore be seen as a prototypical populist party any more (see Table 4).

**Table 4**  
*A Marginal Case: The Dutch Socialist Party*

	<i>Socialist Party in 1990s</i>	<i>Socialist Party in 2000s</i>
1 People-centrism	+	+
2 Anti-elitism	+	(+)
3 Homogeneity of the people	+	–
6 Proclamation of a crisis	+	–

## CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

More than 40 years ago, scholars posed the following question: ‘Does [populism] have any underlying unity, or does one name cover a multitude of unconnected tendencies?’ (Ionescu and Gellner 1969: 1). As this pressing question has not yet been answered, the goal of this article has been to assess whether there exists a lowest common denominator shared by alleged populist actors across regions and over time.

First, I distinguished three area-based bodies of literature on populism: US, Latin American and Western European bodies of literature. Second, I identified 12 characteristics of populism that are often mentioned in at least one of these three bodies of literature. Third, I selected two ‘prototypical populists’ from each body of literature. In order to assess the lowest common denominator that all these actors share, I made sure that the selected populist actors came from backgrounds as dissimilar as possible in terms of space, time and ideology. The selected populist actors are: Watson’s People’s Party and Perot’s Progress Party in the US; Perón’s Justicialist Party (Argentina) and Chávez’s Movement of the Fifth Republic/United Socialist Party of Venezuela in Latin America; and Le Pen’s National Front (France) and Berlusconi’s Forza Italia (Italy) in Western Europe. Fourth, I have assessed to what extent these populist actors possess the 12 characteristics of populism.

The main finding of this study is that only four of the 12 characteristics are shared by all populist actors. Interestingly, all these shared features are of an ideational nature: people-centrism, anti-elitism, the homogeneity of the people and the proclamation of a crisis. This suggests that actors labelled as populist actually have

something in common and that it is not a coincidence that they have all been labelled in the same way. This is an important finding because it vindicates the classical Sartorian approach towards conceptualizing populism – and thus the usage of a minimal definition. We can travel between different regional contexts and compare nineteenth-century populists in the US with twentieth-century populist leaders in Latin America and present-day populist parties in Western Europe. Moreover, the analysis of the Dutch Socialist Party indicated that the discovered lowest common denominator can distinguish prototypical populist parties from more marginal cases and thereby provides a strong justification for its usefulness.

On the basis of these findings, it is possible to formulate a baseline criterion that a minimal definition of populism must fulfil: it should never contain more than the four elements of the lowest common denominator (people-centrism plus anti-elitism plus homogeneity of the people plus proclamation of a crisis). For example, a definition of populism in which exclusionism plays an important role could be employed to analyse cases in Western Europe (see, for example, Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008b: 3). Such a definition cannot, however, travel to the US or Latin America. Similarly, a definition in which leadership is one of the central attributes could be used in an analysis of Latin American populism, but it cannot be applied to cases in the US or Western Europe (see, for example, Weyland 2001: 18).

At least two existing, and often employed, definitions of populism fulfil this baseline criterion. Mudde (2004: 543) has defined populism as ‘an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘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; Hawkins (2009: 1042) has defined populism as ‘a Manichean discourse that identifies Good with a unified will of the people and Evil with a conspiring elite’. Of course, these definitions differ from each other in some respects. Which definition is preferable is a matter of theoretical considerations and will not be discussed here. Yet both meet the baseline prerequisite of containing no other attributes than the elements of the lowest common denominator.

Notice, however, that these definitions do not include all elements of the lowest common denominator. At least, not explicitly. Although both definitions contain the elements of

people-centrism and anti-elitism, and also the attribute of homogeneity of the people – Mudde, after all, emphasizes the ‘pureness’ of the people and its *volonté générale*, and Hawkins talks about the ‘unified will’ of the people – neither definition also explicitly incorporates the proclamation of a crisis. This is not necessarily a problem. The baseline criterion that no elements other than the elements of the lowest common denominator can be included in the minimal definition does not also imply that all shared elements *must* necessarily be part of it. The reason is that, on a theoretical level, it might well be argued that the proclamation of a crisis is not a defining characteristic of populism but a *consequence* of adhering to the populist set of ideas. As argued above, the features of people-centrism, anti-elitism and homogeneity can be combined in the coherent set of ideas that the homogeneous people is exploited and betrayed by a corrupt elite. It is only *because of this view* that populists proclaim that there is a serious sociopolitical crisis. Because everyone who has a Manichaean worldview – according to which the world is divided into Good (the people) and Evil (the elites) – will, inevitably, also believe that there is a sociopolitical crisis going on, the proclamation of a crisis should be conceived of as a *necessary* consequence of the populist set of ideas.

That all characteristics of the lowest common denominator are of an ideational nature does not mean that specific populisms cannot be related to specific styles or forms of organization. Although style and organization do not *define* populism, certain styles of practising politics and specific organizational strategies might still *facilitate* populism, especially within particular temporal or spatial contexts (Mudde 2004: 545). The way in which populists organize is (at least partly) dependent on the ideas they adhere to and the way in which the conflict between the people and the elite is presented (Hawkins 2010: 6–7). Chávez’s initial focus on poor people, for instance, led to a bottom-up organization of Bolivarian Circles. Berlusconi’s dislike of political parties made him found an organization that is more an electoral machine than a traditional party. The analyses in this study also corroborate that most populists exhibit specific stylistic attributes such as, for instance, the use of simplistic language. However, this is not necessarily the case. In the US of the nineteenth century, the People’s Party did not employ such language at all.

Whereas the proclamation of a crisis is thus a *necessary consequence* of populism because the populist outlook will *always* lead to the

proclamation of a crisis, the organizational and stylistic features can best be conceived of as *probable consequences* of populism. After all, a populist set of ideas will not always lead to a specific type of organization and style.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> In this article I focus on the classical Sartorian approach only. I will therefore pay no attention to other approaches to conceptualization (such as, for instance, the family resemblance approach).

<sup>2</sup> One could think of various context-specific reasons why these regions differ from each other. Roberts (2007), for instance, has argued that in Latin America strong political institutions prevent populists from coming to power, whereas the lack of such institutions contributes to the success of leaders such as Chávez and Perón. Diverging strengths of political institutions might explain some of the differences between Latin America, Western Europe and the US as well. In this study, however, I ignore such explanations because my main interest does not concern the causes of populism, but the question is about populism itself: what do various populist actors share with each other?

<sup>3</sup> I have decided not to analyse fascism as a historical case of Western European populism because it has been argued that fascism is in essence anti-democratic, whereas populism is (at least nominally) democratic (see Mudde 2007: 31). Although the National Front is not a real 'historical' case (after all, it still is an influential player within the French party system), it was established in the 1970s. Moreover, it is perceived to be one of the most prototypical populist radical right parties in Western Europe (see Rydgren 2005).

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, the following sentence in the Omaha Platform: 'While our sympathies as a party of reform are naturally upon the side of every proposition which will tend to make men intelligent, virtuous, and temperate, we nevertheless regard these questions, important as they are, as secondary to the great issues now pressing for solution, and upon which not only our individual prosperity but the very existence of free institutions depend; and we ask all men to first help us to determine whether we are to have a republic to administer before we differ as to the conditions upon which it is to be administered, believing that the forces of reform this day organized will never cease to move forward until every wrong is remedied and equal rights and equal privileges securely established for all the men and women of this country' (History Matters website: <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5361/>).

- <sup>5</sup> This does not mean that Perón *acted* accommodatingly towards his opponents too. On the contrary, he did not hesitate to jail critical journalists or politicians.

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