

# The politics of style

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# VALORIZATION ADDENDUM

## Relevance

Populism is on the rise as a global phenomenon, causing polarization and societal unrest. This dissertation provides a new perspective on this political development. Subsequently, this new vision on populism is used in the construction of an analysis tool for political style.

The tool helps to gain insight into political situations and events, such as the US presidential campaign of 2016. In this campaign, Donald Trump uttered right-wing populist rhetoric, while Bernie Sanders used a left-wing populist narrative. How can these similarities be assessed? The tool provides a transparent method for analyzing political discourse. Distinct political styles are mapped onto the same fifteen elements, which demonstrates in detail where the styles of politicians differ or not. In the cases of Sanders and Trump, it revealed Trump as more populist than Sanders. The two styles only converge in their attitude towards politics: both see politics as conflict. They diverge the most in their ideas regarding the people: in Trump's view, the people are one, whereas Sanders views the people as heterogeneous.

The analysis tool is called the PEP-index, an abbreviation of *populism*, *elitism*, and *pluralism*<sup>29</sup>. The reason is that the tool uses a relative definition of populism: nothing is populist in itself, only in relation to elitism and pluralism. This is a great advantage because the concept of populism is contested when regarded on its own; it frequently contradicts itself, which is why researchers not always agree on what counts as populist and what does not. Based on an analysis of the language structure underlying the three concepts, this dissertation was able to define populism (and elitism and pluralism) according to one logical rule. This rule is that *the shared features of two of the three concepts precisely contradict the third*. This clear-cut relationship makes the three concepts ideal as the basis of an analysis instrument, as they unambiguously define what is populist and what not. The contradictions exist in three different dimensions (if occurring in one dimension, populism would indeed contradict itself), as follows:

- Populism as an *idea* aligns with elitism (both see 'the people' as one entity). Together they oppose pluralism, which does not see the people as 'one,' but as multiple groups.

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<sup>29</sup> In *populism*, the people demand power back from the corrupt elite. *Elitism* bestows power upon the elite, chosen by the people. In *pluralism*, groups of people share power.

- Populism as a *social practice* aligns with pluralism (both want power for the people(s)). Together they oppose elitism, which restricts power to the elite.
- Populism as a *rhetorical presentation* stands opposite to a united pluralism-elitism; populism speaks directly for the people, whereas pluralism and elitism have a mediated relationship.

An additional advantage of using this logic as the core of an analysis tool is that it can address more than just populism—all political styles, including the mainstream, can be assessed. This allowed me to use the same tool to compare Trump’s and Sanders’s populist style with that of Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama. The tool reveals that Clinton has a mixed pluralist-elitist style, and Obama a pluralist one. Whereas the latter succeeds in positioning himself diagonally against Trump, whom Obama disregards as an elitist, Clinton often takes the position of an elitist herself, while she also portrays herself as part of the people, which is populist or pluralist. For example, she presented herself as an extremely busy politician working for a higher cause, apologizing for not having time to socialize with the people (elitist). At the same time, she depicted herself as a common woman going to the grocery store with her black and Latino sisters (pluralist), and she protested against the unfair treatment of herself as a woman (populist/pluralist). The combination of three styles within one style element is not plausible—logically, only two of the three styles can be combined—and can explain why her performance was often assessed as unauthentic.

The PEP-index also allows intercultural comparison and assessments over time; after evaluating political styles within their own contexts, they also become comparable on a higher level of abstraction. Speeches held by Trump in three different years were analyzed, showing that his style shifted from populism towards mixed populism-elitism. This allowed him to keep his populist style while embracing his elite role as president. Subsequently, Trump’s style was compared with mixed populist-elitist politicians in other countries: Boris Johnson in the UK and Thierry Baudet in the Netherlands. It revealed that the populist-elitist style mix often goes hand in hand with nationalism, and that it comes with an undemocratic tendency; the mix facilitates the construction of an “elite people”, which is not democratic.

The analysis of Johnson’s speeches also provided insight into the Brexit process. Johnson’s style was much more populist during the Brexit referendum campaign than before and after, which can be explained by the polarizing incentives of a referendum. His style gradually evolved from pluralist-elitist in 2015, into populist-elitist in 2016, to fully elitist in

2017. The latter two are predominantly anti-pluralist styles. The assemblage of Johnson's style suggests that anti-pluralism fits him better than pluralism, as his 2016 and 2017 styles were internally more coherent than his mixed elitist-pluralist style in 2015. In the future, Johnson's style can be further explored using the PEP-index, in order to evaluate how his style evolves as Prime Minister negotiating Brexit and coping with the Corona crisis. Because the PEP-index covers all political styles, it can continuously provide relevant analyses of new political situations.

## Stakeholders

Besides the general public for which this dissertation provides a new perspective on populism and other political developments, as described above, this work is relevant for three groups.

### *People working in politics.*

The PEP-index offers politicians the opportunity to evaluate their own presentation, both independently and in relation to their opponents. The model is fit not only to analyze political speeches and debates, but also to reflect on various fragmented and mediatized political presentations, such as outfits, YouTube video's, Twitter threads, and public encounters.

Analyzing political performances with the PEP-index reveals whether or not a style is internally coherent. The analyses in this dissertation suggest that it is more persuasive to express one's own style—be it populist, elitist, or pluralist—than to imitate styles that do not fit with one's political message and identity. For a coherent political style, small details matter. For the one politician it may be better to use “we” when referring to the people, for the other “they”—both can be persuasive. For instance, in speeches surrounding the Brexit referendum, Nigel Farage consistently used “we” when he spoke of *the people*. This fitted with his populist identity. Boris Johnson, on the other hand, always used “they,” which perfectly matched his elitism. Both politicians were very successful during the Brexit referendum, showing that it was not their populist “we” or elitist “they” that was decisive, but rather the internal coherence of their styles. Words, even nuances such as pronouns, must match with one's personality and ideas to construct a stable and believable political

identity. Rhetorical craftsmanship shows itself when every word or gesture precisely fits a particular political identity.

An often-debated question is whether or not mainstream politics—left, center, or right—should adopt a more populist discourse in order to effectively compete with populist parties. Generally speaking, if politicians wish to enhance their presentation, it is more effective to change a detail of one’s style, than to adopt a style that contradicts one’s political personality. All styles are constructed out of three dimensions, which are either styled in a *personal*, *group*, or *systematic* way (see chapter 2.7 and 4.5). It then follows that one can choose to change the style of just one dimension, by making it more personal, more social, or more systematic. By zooming in on the details, one can enhance one’s presentation without becoming internally incoherent.

### *A politically active public.*

This dissertation does not, unlike many other contributions on populism, generally condemn populist politics as morally defective, nor does it advocate it as an effective strategy—instead, it offers a model that can place populist manifestations within a broader perspective. This clarifies Chantal Mouffe’s (2018a) plea for a left-wing populism. As a scholar-activist, she advocates populism as an effective political strategy. Others, such as Žižek, warn that this strategy uses scapegoats and creates an enemy. In doing this, it equals right-wing populism (Žižek, 2006a). It is a discussion that engages many politically active people on the left.

This dissertation shows that left-wing populism is principally different from right-wing populism; right-wing populism’s main perspective is the ideational dimension, centered around whether ideas are right or wrong, whereas left-wing populism’s main perspective is the social dimension, centered around whether social practices are fair or unfair. The manifestations of both may be similar, as what is fair is easily equated with what is right and vice versa. Additionally, both combine their particular view with the perspective of the people against the political class, presenting themselves as *we* against *them*—here Žižek is right. However, the deeper underlying structures of left- and right-wing populism are principally different—which supports Mouffe’s point. One can still object to scapegoating politics as a whole, using a *we-against-them* theme, but it is not essentially right-wing to do so.

### *Watchdogs over our democracy.*

The analysis of political styles in this dissertation puts the current populist wave in perspective. The discursive structure underlying political style demonstrates that no style is here to stay: all political styles try, in their own ways, to overcome the tensions inherent in discourse, all ultimately without success. It then follows that new political styles will inevitably evolve in reaction to the weaknesses of current styles and events. The 2020 Corona crisis, for example, pushes many leaders to change their style in one or the other direction. Some may tend more towards pluralism, stressing the importance of relying on objective knowledge about the virus, as in the Netherlands and Germany. Others tend more towards elitism, prioritizing a strict adherence to government regulations, such as in Italy, Spain, and France. Populist leaders, like in the US, Hungary, and Brazil, currently face major problems with their political message because a virus is essentially a non-populist struggle; it naturally aligns more with pluralism and elitism, as in a pandemic there is no internal frontier in society between the people and the elite but an external frontier between all people and a virus. Nevertheless, the crisis also facilitates undemocratic measures, which can result in populist leaders not becoming less populist, but instead less democratic.

The coming years will reveal if populism is here to stay as an influential democratic practice, or if other political styles will become more prominent. Detailed insight into the political styles of politicians, such as is offered in this dissertation, can help to maintain a healthy democratic environment. In this environment, populism, elitism, and pluralism can function as political styles that mostly stay on a democratic spectrum. Awareness, however, is needed, and a detailed analysis of political performances can help to reveal whether or not political styles are democratically justified, or not.

### **Activities**

In order to share my findings with a broader public, I have presented my work on various platforms. In 2017, in New York, I presented my research at an event of *The Order of the Prince* ([www.ovdp.net](http://www.ovdp.net)), an organization upholding the Dutch language and culture. In Edinburgh, I presented my research at an aimed at the broader public: *the World Café* ([https://blogs.napier.ac.uk/popnat18/2018/05/29/schoor\\_masstricht\\_university](https://blogs.napier.ac.uk/popnat18/2018/05/29/schoor_masstricht_university)).

Furthermore, since 2014 I have been publishing articles for a broad public (in Dutch) on my blog *Aristoteles op het Binnenhof* ([www.aristoteles.nu](http://www.aristoteles.nu)) and ([www.facebook.com/pg/aristoteles.op.het.binnenhof](https://www.facebook.com/pg/aristoteles.op.het.binnenhof)).

### **In the future**

In the near future, I will seek to further valorize the findings of my dissertation in three distinct ways.

*First*, I intend to partially take up my old profession as a Political Communication Advisor in The Hague. I will offer my advice to political stakeholders in order to help them assess and enhance their political performance. My goal is to enlarge politicians' understanding of how to strengthen their bond with their own group of voters. This is important in allowing our democracy to adapt to the image-driven, presentation-centered political context in which it now functions. Knowledge of the deeper structures that underly political communication is, in my view, necessary for reinforcing democracy's resilience against anti-democratic tendencies.

*Second*, I will offer lunchbreak lectures to organizations such as the Communication Departments of Ministries, Political Parties, and non-governmental organizations. Also, I will publish more often for a broader public, both in my blog and in a book on politics and style. Besides this, I will work on a textbook for bachelor students on the topic of political style.

*Third*, and most urgently, I will seek funding for the further development of the PEP-index. Ideally, the tool will be published as a web-based program or an app. The foundation is already in place but needs technical support to make it more broadly accessible. This tool will give various stakeholders—such as students, researchers, and political communication professionals—the opportunity to analyze political performances in a transparent and standardized manner. They will be able to upload their analysis to the site and compare it with analyses uploaded by others. This way, the app will fuel cooperation and hopefully contribute to the growing knowledge of the politics of style.