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Populism and Crisis: Exploring the Interplay of Political Dynamics

Over the past two decades, the world has faced a series of crises including economic downturns, political disruptions exemplified by events such as the latest example of the Covid-19 pandemic, which have generated a discourse around a perceived crisis in democratic governance. Due to its perceived association with these crises, populism has become a focal point of both academic inquiry and broader societal discourse, with a strong emphasis on its relationship with democracy (Mény & Surel, [2002](#)). Scholarly investigations into populism have expanded to encompass various dimensions, including its conceptual underpinnings and implications for democratic systems. The existing literature on populism underscores its delineation along two main axes: the assertion of popular sovereignty and the espousal of anti-establishment sentiments. Despite populism's frequently observed confluence with moments of crisis, the precise nature of the relationship between the rise of populism and the management of such crises remains relatively underdeveloped in theoretical discourse. Understanding the appeal of populism therefore requires not only an examination of external determinants but also an elucidation of how populist actors astutely leverage crises to cultivate support.

The term populism, rooted in the notion of popular sovereignty, whereby the populace is deemed the fundamental source of state authority and holds the power to confer or withdraw legitimacy from governmental entities. Scholarship on populism has evolved since the 1950s, with various theoretical frameworks delineating its conceptual contours across societal, national, and regional contexts. These frameworks encompass diverse perspectives ranging from Dahl's ([1956](#)) polyarchy, which emphasizes responsiveness to popular sovereignty, to Laclau and Mouffe's ([1985](#)) radical democracy, which posits populism as an emancipatory force, to Dornbusch and Edward's ([1991](#)) macroeconomic approach, which characterises populism as entailing irresponsible economic policies, to Mudde's ([2004](#)) think-centred ideology approach, to Pappa's ([2016](#)) approach to capture the phenomenon specifically within the context of contemporary democracies. This diversity underscores the contested nature of the concept, with different scholarly perspectives reflecting distinct definitional nuances and operationalisations. However, these perspectives often overlook the discursive dimension of populism, which Laclau ([1980, pp. 87-93](#)) highlights as crucial for understanding its construction and operationalisation. Discourse-centred analyses explore how populist rhetoric shapes social and political identities, with scholars like Aslanidis ([2016](#)) highlighting the role of framing in social mobilisation, positing populism as a discursive frame derived directly from its rhetorical content. Looking more closely at the various approaches to populism, several factors emerge that may elucidate a link between populism and crisis, particularly concerning the management and exploitation of crises by populist actors. However, before delving into the theoretical framework that synthesises these concepts, it is imperative to first discuss the concept of crisis itself.

Scholars generally concur that a crisis is a disruptive phase characterised by unpredictability and undesirability, representing a period of disorder in the normal course of a system ([Boin et al., 2005](#)). During a crisis, conventional modes of operation become ineffective, creating a sense of threat to the community's core values and structures, a sense of urgency to address the situation promptly, and a sense of uncertainty about its causes, nature, and consequences, thereby influencing public perception ([Boin et al., 2009, pp. 81-106](#)). Consequently, crises

create environments that can impose constraints but also provide opportunities for significant policy agenda proposals and reforms. Kingdon (1995) posits a primary agenda-setting approach, suggesting that crises create windows of opportunity for policy entrepreneurs to advocate for policy change in response to emerging problems. The nuanced nature of crises can lead to different outcomes within polities. While much of the existing literature focuses on agenda-setting effects, the variable effects of crises warrant further exploration when considering urgent crises like the 2008 financial crisis or long-term issues such as climate change. Understanding crises involves not only objective assessments of external circumstances but also subjective perceptions and their relationship to ideological change, which shape interpretations of crises within social reality. Therefore, studying crisis-induced framing is crucial for understanding how political actors strategically manage crises, suggesting that crises are not only external to populism but are internalised by populist movements to enhance their effectiveness.

The link between populism and crisis has been the subject of considerable scholarly attention, characterised by ambivalence. Laclau (1977), drawing on Gramsci's (1971) concept of crisis as a breakdown in hegemony and mobilisation suggests that populism often emerges in the context of wider social crises, and sees crisis as a precondition for populist movements. Stavrakakis (2005, pp. 224–249) similarly links the rise of populism to the dislocation of prevailing discourses. While some scholars view crisis as an external phenomenon or as an external precondition for populism, Moffitt (2015) challenges this notion by emphasising the performative aspect of crisis within populism. Leadership plays a crucial role in crisis management, with Roberts (1995) arguing that populism thrives in times of crisis or social transformation where political institutions' responses to crisis circumstances fail to govern political behaviour, and populist actors claiming the lost confidence of the electorate. Tormey and Moffitt (2013) extend this idea, linking populism to a range of issues beyond institutional breakdown e.g. migration, perceived injustice, economic difficulties. In this sense, populist actors often exploit crises by framing them as failures of the establishment and mobilising support by presenting themselves as agents of necessary change.

My argument builds on the theorised relationship of crisis exploitation and behaviour of political actors, according to which, crisis exploitation involves strategic framing to shape public perceptions and political outcomes (Boin et al., 2009). Populist leaders leverage crises to challenge the status quo and rally support against established elites. The ideological approach posits that an actor's stance in a crisis is shaped by their underlying ideology, with populists emphasising blame and anti-establishment rhetoric. The organisational approach considers the effects of crisis exploitation on political actors, leadership dynamics, and institutional reform. Moreover, crisis management requires strategic exploitation to restore public trust and minimise adverse effects (Boin et al., 2009). However, populism may prioritise disruption over stability, posing challenges for crisis leadership. The interplay between different leadership narratives and crisis framing strategies is crucial in understanding populist behaviour.

Discourse also plays a central role in both populism and crisis concepts. It is a tool with which populist actors respond to crises, shape perceived realities and influence public opinion. While Moffitt (2015) distinguishes between external and internal crises, I argue that the two are interconnected, with crises serving as fertile ground for populist actors to establish themselves

while undermining formal crisis management efforts. Ultimately, understanding the relationship between populism and crisis requires considering both external factors and internal dynamics within populist movements.

To conclude, to better understand populism, whether that e.g. is the rise of populist actors, or the retention of power by populist actors it is essential to examine how populist actors exploit crises to enhance their performance and maintain relevance amidst multiple crises. Examining how populist actors persist and adapt their discourse during ongoing crises can offer insights into crisis exploitation management and contribute to methodological approaches for measuring crisis responsiveness. Thus, investigating the interplay between populism and crisis management is vital for a comprehensive understanding of contemporary political dynamics of polycrisis, and the impact of populism on the quality of democracy itself.

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