



DEBATING MATTERS

sixth-form debating competition

DEBATING MATTERS TOPIC GUIDE

“Populism is a threat to democracy”

INTRODUCTION

Populism is the political buzzword of the day – with commentators, political theorists and politicians all debating its meaning and the merits of its apparent rise in recent years. From the election of Donald Trump in America [Ref: [Guardian](#)], and the rise of Marine Le Pen in France [Ref: [Guardian](#)], to left wing anti-austerity parties Syriza in Greece [Ref: [New Statesman](#)], and Podemos in Spain [Ref: [BBC News](#)], it seems that populist politics has carved a niche for itself in the political landscape. However, some fear that the rise of right wing populism in particular, is dangerous for democracy and liberal values, going so far as to suggest that it has echoes of the emergence of fascism in the 1930's and 1940's [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. But is it as clear cut as that – should we view populism with optimism or fear? For advocates, populism whether left or right wing, is democracy and popular sovereignty in action, and embodies the will of the people, potentially acting as a catalyst for profound and lasting political change, by disrupting consensus and re-invigorating debate. It signifies the re-engagement of the populace with politics and political ideas, and ultimately represents the, “public desire for democracy” [Ref: [spiked](#)]. However, critics see populism in less favourable terms, with many suggesting that populist movements are empty vessels for which to carry all the vitriol that the public may have on a range of issues. One commentator concludes that populism is essentially “the belief that there are easy solutions to hard problems – [the] belief that one can escape reality.” [Ref: [Atlantic](#)] So amid the competing arguments, is populism something we should welcome as capturing the undiluted will of the people, the very essence of democracy? Or should we be wary of it as a divisive and dangerous phenomenon, attempting to distil complex societal problems

into simplistic slogans with little practical application? Is populism good for politics?

DEBATE IN CONTEXT

This section provides a summary of the key issues in the debate, set in the context of recent discussions and the competing positions that have been adopted.

What is populism?

Political populism is not new, and it can be traced to as far back as the power struggle between the 'populares' and 'optimates' in Ancient Rome [Ref: [Encyclopaedia Britannica](#)]. A slippery and often misused word, according to Oxford Dictionaries, populism denotes: "The quality of appealing to or being aimed at ordinary people." [Ref: [Oxford Dictionaries](#)] And expanding on this definition, political theorist Cas Mudde suggests that what unifies all populist movements of the left or right, is that: "In its original form, populism is an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups: the 'pure people', and the 'corrupt elite', and suggests that politics should be an expression of the general will of the people." [Ref: [Guardian](#)] In this way, politicians as distinct as Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines [Ref: [BBC News](#)], Evo Morales in Bolivia [Ref: [BBC News](#)], Geert Wilders in the Netherlands [Ref: [Telegraph](#)], and Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn in Britain [Ref: [Guardian](#)] have all been defined as populists at one time or another. Nonetheless, the contemporary debate remains contentious, as advocates underline that on principle, enhancing representation through the general will of the people is an important democratic corrective to stagnant political discourse, which often excludes large swathes of the electorate [Ref: [The Conversation](#)]. Critics though, are suspicious of this assertion of the general will. With some suggesting that because "populists are defined by their claim that they alone represent the people, and that all others are illegitimate" this creates a problem for political discourse, and warn that, "populism's belief that the people are always right is bad news for two elements of liberal democracy: the rights of minorities and the rule of law." [Ref: [Economist](#)]

People power

Having faith in the demos to engage with challenging ideas about how society should work, is a core principle of democracy, not just populism, argue supporters. However: "From Plato onwards, the social and cultural outlook of the

political elites has been suspicious of and often hostile towards public opinion” [Ref: [spiked](#)], argues one commentator. Meaning that ultimately, “populism is seen as dangerous because democracy is dangerous” [Ref: [Guardian](#)], with supporters claiming that, “many politicians dream of democracy without the demos”, and ask “what is the eventual target of anti-populism today – populism or the people?” [Ref: [Newsweek](#)] Similarly, political theorist Chantal Mouffe argues that “populism represents an important dimension in democracy” [Ref: [The Conversation](#)], enhancing the plurality of the political sphere, and thus empowering the electorate, and allowing their views to be represented authentically [Ref: [The Conversation](#)]. In this sense, populism needn’t be seen as a pejorative term, “exclusively linked to the radical right, leading to an incorrect conflation of populism and xenophobia” [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. And instead, should be understood as the rejection of a distant, technocratic and increasingly irrelevant ruling political elite, whose messages no longer resonate with the majority of people [Ref: [spiked](#)]. However, despite this, supporters observe that: “Populism... has been redefined as the pathology of the simple minded masses” [Ref: [spiked](#)], allowing mainstream politicians to dismiss the will of the people as backward, primitive and problematic. This is a mistake, because they argue that populist politics has the potential to change the dynamics of political debate in radical ways, bringing to the fore, “issues that large parts of the population care about, but that the political elites want to avoid discussing” [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. Recent examples would be last year’s Brexit vote in the UK, as well as Podemos in Spain and Syriza in Greece – both anti-austerity movements rising out of the financial crisis of 2008, which have sought to change the terms of the debate, and have done so by challenging the “neoliberal hegemony through parliamentary politics.” [Ref: [The Conversation](#)] It is this disruptive quality, which advocates say stimulates discourse and challenges the orthodoxies of the elite, and can help “create the conditions for the re-politicisation of public life, reviving a culture of political participation and democratic debate.” [Ref: [spiked](#)]

Are the people always right?

“The modus operandi of populism is not to reason but to roar” [Ref: [New York Times](#)] claims former British Prime Minister Tony Blair. This broadly reflects the anxieties that opponents of populism cite, with most arguing that in all its forms, it is divisive for society and problematic for democracy. Some such as philosopher Julian Baggini question the idea that, “the will of the people is...clear, virtuous and homogenous”, and argue that the consequence of this assumption is that populists end up, “ignoring or denying the fact that there are different, competing interests in society, not just those of the majority.” [Ref: [Guardian](#)] The problem, Baggini asserts, is that democracy is not simply about trusting the will

of the people as supporters of populism would suggest. It is also predicated on the people trusting their elected officials, and trusting their institutions, but he notes that the ideology inherent to populist movements views politicians and institutions with suspicion, and even hostility – thus demeaning representative democracy, not enhancing it [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. In addition, a common criticism is that: “Populists are dividers, not uniters” [Ref: [Atlantic](#)], and controversial figures such as Front Nationale leader Marine Le Pen [Ref: [Guardian](#)], American President Donald Trump [Ref: [Guardian](#)] and Hungarian President Viktor Orban [Ref: [BBC News](#)], are used as examples of how divisive and problematic right wing populism can be. It is also claimed in some quarters that populist leaders are often illiberal, and end up defining ‘the people’ in ways that seek to exclude groups based on ethnicity, nationality or religion [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. However, they are equally scathing of socialist populist movements as seen in Venezuela under the late Hugo Chavez [Ref: [New York Times](#)] for example, and observe the struggles that Greek party Syriza are having enacting their own populist programme in government [Ref: [Atlantic](#)], as evidence of the hollowness of populist politics. One academic suggests that in the end, the ‘us’ and ‘them’ mentality that populists of all sides exhibit, is not sophisticated enough to, “navigate a complex reality that requires serious, long term planning, and compromise”, because “they have no solutions to offer.” [Ref: [Atlantic](#)] So, how should we view populism? Is it the embodiment of democratic principles and popular sovereignty, expressing the will of the people and thus invigorating political discourse? Or is it an empty and divisive form of politics which we should avoid?

ESSENTIAL READING

It is crucial for debaters to have read the articles in this section, which provide essential information and arguments for and against the debate motion. Students will be expected to have additional evidence and examples derived from independent research, but they can expect to be criticised if they lack a basic familiarity with the issues raised in the essential reading.

What is populism?

Economist 19 December 2016

Populism and democracy: Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde?

The Conversation 2 November 2016

A brief history of populism

Newsweek 26 September 2015

FOR

Against populism, the centre must hold

Tony Blair **New York Times** 3 March 2017

Populists are out to divide us. They must be stopped

Timothy Garton-Ash **Guardian** 11 November 2016

Think democracy means the people are always right? Wrong

Julian Baggini **Guardian** 5 October 2016

The problem with populism

Cas Mudde **Guardian** 17 February 2015

AGAINST

In defence of populism

Desmond Fennell **Irish Times** 23 December 2016

Populism: a defence

Frank Furedi **spiked** 4 November 2016

Why not all populism is bad populism

Antonis Galanopoulos **Newsweek** 2 November 2016

In defence of left wing populism

Chantal Mouffe **The Conversation** 29 April 2016

IN DEPTH

What is a populist?

Uri Friedman **Atlantic** 27 February 2017

Us vs Them: The birth of populism

John B Judis **Guardian** 13 October 2016

KEY TERMS

Definitions of key concepts that are crucial for understanding the topic. Students should be familiar with these terms and the different ways in which they are used and interpreted and should be prepared to explain their significance.

Demos

Popular sovereignty

Populares and Optimates

Populism

BACKGROUNDEERS

Useful websites and materials that provide a good starting point for research.

What democracies can learn from Greece's failed populist experiment

Stathis Kalyvas **Atlantic** 4 May 2017

How does populism turn to authoritarianism? Venezuela is a case in point

Max Fisher **New York Times** 1 April 2017

Populism is the result of global economic failure

Larry Elliott **Guardian** 26 March 2017

Populism vs post democracy

John O'Sullivan **Spectator** 31 December 2016

The return of the people

Tom Slater **spiked** 23 December 2016

Left populists good, right populists bad?

The Times 18 December 2016

What has become of conservatism?

Nick Cohen **Guardian** 27 November 2016

Syriza revisited: what can the British left learn from Greece

Michael Chessum **New Statesman** 14 November 2016

Don't knock the elites, they have made our lives better

Jason O'Mahoney **The Times** 14 November 2016

The left needs a new populism fast. It's clear what happens if we fail

Owen Jones **Guardian** 10 November 2016

Jeremy Corbyn is a great populist. But that's no good for democracy

Julian Baggini **Guardian** 25 July 2016

The populists

George Packer **New Yorker** 7 September 2015

Populism and democracy: friend or foe? Rising stars deepen dilemma

Benjamin Moffitt **The Conversation** 23 April 2015

Why Ernesto Laclau is the intellectual figurehead for Syriza and Podemos

Dan Hancox **Guardian** 9 February 2015

Viva Podemos: the left shows it can adapt and thrive in a crisis

Owen Jones **Guardian** 16 November 2014

Populism sounds good, but it always ends badly

Pierpaolo Barbieri **Huffington Post**

IN THE NEWS

Relevant recent news stories from a variety of sources, which ensure students have an up to date awareness of the state of the debate.

Greece agrees bailout reforms deal with creditors

Financial Times 2 May 2017

Marine Le Pen rails against rampant globalisation after election success

Guardian 24 April 2017

Tony Blair launches push back against 'frightening populism'

Guardian 17 March 2017

Dutch voters halt revolt as far right fails election test

The Times 16 March 2017

Dutch election 2017: who is Geert Wilders, the 'Dutch Trump'?

Telegraph 15 March 2017

The rise of populist leaders threatened democracy, says Human Rights Watch

Guardian 13 January 2017

Renzi resists march of populists in Italy

The Times 4 December 2016

Donald Trump wins presidential election, plunging US into uncertain future

Guardian 9 November 2016

Migrant crisis: Hungary MPs reject Orban anti-refugee bill

BBC News 8 November 2016

Philippines election: maverick Rodrigo Duterte wins presidency

BBC News 10 May 2016

Profile: Bolivia's president Evo Morales

BBC News 22 February 2016

Podemos: Spain's anti austerity party banging on the doors of power

BBC News 21 December 2015