

# Populism and gender\*

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**Abstract:** *This paper focused on two concept widely discussed in literature and widely used in public discourse: Populism and Gender. “Populism” can be defined as a thin-centered ideology that views society as composed of two groups, ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’. “Gender” typically refers only to behavioral, social, and psychological characteristics of men and women,<sup>1</sup> as well as the socially constructed roles, behaviors, activities, and attributes within a cultural and social context. Although the two concepts relate many times to shared topics, they are rarely mentioned together. There only few studies that examine both concepts in a direct manner, for example that of Mudde and Kaltwasser (2015), and thus the paper wished to conclude whether or not the two concept have any connection one with the other and the nature of such a relationship, if such exist. The premise was that the two concept share various characteristics, such as being of elusive nature and thus do not have a decisive definition accepted by all. Another example can be that the two are linked to subjects such as politics and allocation of resources and power. These examples imply that a relationship between the two can be established. In order to do so the various aspects and usages of the two concepts were compared. The comparison implied a relationship between the two concepts can be established but it is a very complex relationship, one that includes both similarities and contradictions. The paper shows that although both populism and gender have shared attributes, such as their basic definition is based on a dichotomy of two contrasts, the contradictions that exist between the two, such as populism being mostly male dominant, can explain the reason why the two are rarely put together.*

**Keywords:** *Populism, Gender, Inequality, Political Inequality.*

## Introduction

In the past years, the concept of populism has entered public awareness as populist parties have seen an

unprecedented growth in Europe and throughout the world<sup>2</sup>, and populist discourse has seem to be more prevalent than ever before. There are many examples to the rise of

populism in Europe and other western countries, alongside populist leaders in other regions, such as Latin America. There are numerous examples of such populist leaders and movements from recent years, among them in the USA Donald Trump's campaign to US presidency or in France Marine Le Pen and the "National Front" party.

Populism and Gender are two central concepts in modern discourse, and both gained much attention in recent years, not only in public discourse and in the political arena, but also in the academia from scholars of various disciplines. Although the two concepts are rarely put together, they do share several common characteristics and relate to common discourse as well as research topics, and hence it is interesting to try to reveal whether or not there is a relationship between the two concepts.

If we look at the two examples above, it is obvious that the question of a relationship between Populism and Gender can be examined from different angles. The first example, that of Donald Trump in the US, reveals populist attitudes alongside demining attitudes towards women, which raised also many gender issues. The second example, Marine Le Pen in France, shed light on a different possible connection between the two, as Marine Le Pen is a woman who leads a nationalist party, avoiding all together the issue of gender and monopolizing on the

simple and clear dichotomy of "them" versus "us".

So how does one begin to examine a possible relationship between the two concepts? One possibility is to begin from the similarities between the two concepts, as they both share common characteristics. For example, the fact that the definition of the two concepts can vary in various contexts, although the term gender has a rather specific acceptable definition, whereas populism has yet to receive a definition that is accepted by all or at least most scholars.

The basic definition of "Gender" is the behavioral, social, and psychological characteristics of men and women.<sup>3</sup> For the purpose of this paper, the concept "Populism" can be defined according to Mudde and Kaltwasser's<sup>4</sup> definition: a thin-centered ideology that views society as composed of two groups, 'the people' and 'the elite'.

It is interesting that populism seems to avoid the subject of gender. This is interesting since populism, which stresses clear opposition between the people and the elite, seems to avoid the opposition of men and women. The reason is that since both men and women can be members of each of the opposing groups, that is, men and women can be part of "the people", and both can be part of "the elite". In other words, populism refers to men and women and the differences between them, as it does to all other differences within the category of 'the people', and

these differences are secondary to the primary gap that exist between ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’<sup>5</sup>.

Although the two concepts relate many times to shared topics, they are rarely mentioned together. There only few studies that examine both concepts in a direct manner, for example that of Mudde and Kaltwasser (2015), and although the concept of populism as well as populist discourse and style, received much attention, little research has been done on the possible gendered aspects of populism<sup>6</sup>.

Thus, the current paper aims to conclude whether or not the two concept have any connection one with the other and, if such a relationship exist, what is the nature of such a relationship.

### **Research Hypothesis**

This paper explores various aspects of the two concepts Populism and Gender in an attempt to establish the nature of the relationship between the two concepts if such relationship exists. The premise of this paper is that the two concept share various characteristics, and are linked to subjects such as politics and allocation of resources and power. This can imply that a relationship between the two can be established.

### **Populism**

Populism is a well-known concept that emerged or re-emerged in recent years. It became prevalent in public

discourse and in political parties gaining power and influence across Europe and the world. The rise of populism in Western Europe, according to Albertazzi and McDonnell<sup>7</sup>, is partially due to the disappointment many people in many western countries feel towards the governments and traditional establishments that failed to respond and provide a solution to many problems “the people” face. Problems such as economic and cultural globalization, immigration, the decline of ideologies and class politics, and more. Another factor that enabled the emergence of populist parties and populist discourse is the exposure of elite corruption that led to lack of interest and distrust in politics and politicians<sup>8</sup>.

For such a discussed and studied concept, it is strange that the concept has numerous definitions in literature<sup>9</sup> and there is no clear and acceptable definition of populism and its meaning. A successful and accepted definition of the concept has yet to be reached and the concept is today, as it was in the past, contested. Populism has been defined in a broad variety of ways in different places and time<sup>10</sup>. The disagreement among scholars is not limited to the wording of an acceptable definition. Scholars from various disciplines were not able, and still are not able, to reach an agreement as to what populism is<sup>11</sup>.

The difficulty to reach such an agreement can be exemplified by the definition found in Encyclopedia Britannica: “Populism, political pro-

gram or movement that champions the common person, usually by favorable contrast with elite. Populism usually combines elements of the left and the right, opposing large business and financial interests but also frequently being hostile to established socialist and labor parties. The term populism can designate either democratic or authoritarian movements. [...] In its contemporary understanding, however, populism is most often associated with an authoritarian form of politics. Populist politics, following this definition, revolves around a charismatic leader who appeals to and claims to embody the will of the people in order to consolidate his own power. [...] In the second half of the 20th century, populism came to be identified with the political style and program of Latin American leaders such as Juan Perón, Getúlio Vargas, and Hugo Chávez. Populist is often used pejoratively to criticize a politician for pandering to a people's fear and enthusiasm."<sup>12</sup>

The above (shortened) description of the term emphasizes the many aspects the term relates to, and the many ways in which it can be interpreted. However, Laclau claims<sup>13</sup> that the apparent vagueness and the inability to reach a decisive definition of the concept "populism" does not mean there is any doubt as to its importance and the importance of its attributive function.

For the purpose of this paper, the concept "Populism" can be defined according to Mudde and

Kaltwasser's<sup>14</sup> definition: a thin-centered ideology that views society as composed of two groups, 'the people' and 'the elite'. Albertazzi and McDonnell suggest a similar definition:

[Populism] is an ideology which pits a virtuous and homogeneous people against a set of elites and dangerous 'others' who are together depicted as depriving (or attempting to deprive) the sovereign people of their rights, values, prosperity, identity and voice<sup>15</sup>.

In other words, the term refers to belief systems by which the current situation is explained as it provides an interpretative framework through which individuals and/or organizations make sense of their own experiences, relate to the external world and plan the future<sup>16</sup>. Mudde and Kaltwasser<sup>17</sup> add that populism aims to a situation in which politics is an expression of the general will of the people. To make their definition more clear and decisive they contrast populism with elitism<sup>18</sup> and pluralism<sup>19</sup>, arguing that the two are the main oppositions of populism.

There is a large body of literature on populism, which generally distinguishes between various aspects of the concept, mainly between right-wing populism in Europe and left-wing populism in Latin America<sup>20</sup>.

Populism is widely studied in the context of Latin America politics. This interest is largely due to the reemergence of populism, or as it is sometimes referred to "neo-populism", among leading politicians in

that region<sup>21</sup>. These Latin American politicians have come to power by “mobilizing marginalized social sectors into publicly visible and contentious political action, while articulating an anti-elite, nationalist rhetoric that valorizes ordinary people”<sup>22</sup>. By doing so they have succeeded to gain legitimacy and support.

As mentioned above, populism has emerged not only in Latin America. It has also emerged in Europe and other western countries. It seems, however, that populism has different characteristics unique and descriptive for each region. For example, one of the reasons populism has emerged in Western countries, and populist discourse is employed by populist leaders, is an anti-political climate that spreads throughout Western European societies. In other words, the disappointment “the people” have towards traditional parties in western countries gave rise to populist leaders and parties.

In a situation in which people perceive politics to be more distant and irrelevant to people’s lives and politicians to be more self-serving and similar to one another than in the past, has enabled the use of populist discourse in order to attract disillusioned voters to new, more radical, alternatives.<sup>23</sup>

Yet, the question remains, what exactly is populism? It is clear that it is difficult to conceptualize. Jansen<sup>24</sup> noted that the term has been used to describe movements, regimes, leaders, ideologies, policies, modes of incorporation, and state structures.

Populism does hold several characteristics, such as its contrasting components. Laclau<sup>25</sup> mentions as an example the contract between the populist claim for equality and the participation of the common people, and the fact that a charismatic leader usually leads the party or movement that employ this claim in order to gain power.

The term is also used in everyday discourse, which is also very general. Jansen argued that the term can be applied to any person, movement, or regime that attempts to gain power and acceptance among the ordinary people as a legitimate opposition to the ruling elite<sup>26</sup>. Thus, the core component of populism is the dichotomy of “the people” and “the elite”, which can be described as “the deprived” and “the privileged”.

Such a distinction refers, among others, to the idea of equality, distribution and allocation of power and resources, ideas and themes that are central not only to populism but also to gender and gender studies as well. In this light it is surprising that there are only a few studies that examine both concepts in a direct manner, and only little research has been done on the possible gendered aspects of populism<sup>27</sup>.

## **Gender**

The term “Gender” entered the academic sphere in the 1970s.<sup>28</sup> The most basic definition of the term “Gender” involves the distinction

made between “sex” and “gender”. “Sex” has come to refer to the biological and physiological characteristics and biological aspects of being male and female. “Gender” typically refers to the behavioral, social, and psychological characteristics of men and women,<sup>29</sup> as well as the socially constructed roles, behaviors, activities, and attributes within a cultural and social context.

Gender is important since it penetrates many aspects of our lives, as Wharton claims:

[...] gender matters in social life – it is one of the organizing principles of the social world: it organizes our identities and self concepts, structures our interactions, and is one basis upon which power and resources are allocated.<sup>30</sup>

The term “gender” deals with gender roles and gender identity and scholars from different disciplines engage with gendered aspect of various study topics. The term emerged in the mid-1900s, and became part of the public discourse and a research topic as the feminist movement began to incorporate it and use the term in the 1970s. During the past two decades, the term has gained much scholarly attention.

Although the distinction may imply that “gender” as “sex” can be easily defined, the opposite is true, as the definition of gender can vary greatly. To people who study it, gender indicates something about socialized behavior patterns. Therefore, studies about gender differences seem to imply that the

focus is on social behaviors and psychological aspects of the study subjects and its participants. However, a problem arises since when people are grouped into gender categories based on their sex, the study is just as likely to be about sex differences<sup>31</sup>.

### **The relationship between populism and gender**

There is a large body of literature on populism, which generally distinguishes between various aspects of the concept, mainly between right-wing populism in Europe and left-wing populism in Latin America<sup>32</sup>. However, these distinctions do not refer to gender. And since populism is on the rise in Europe and America, it seems that there is room to explore the connection between the two concepts.

As stated above, there are numerous examples of such populist leaders and movements from recent years, among them in the USA Donald Trump’s campaign to US presidency or in France Marine Le Pen and the “National Front” party. Both examples can raise the question of Populism and Gender from different angles. The first, Donald Trump in the US reveals populist attitudes alongside demining attitudes towards women, which raised also many gender issues, and the latter, Marine Le Pen in France, a women who leads a nationalist party, avoiding all together the issue of gender and

monopolizing on the simple and clear dichotomy of “them” versus “us”.

These examples imply that there is no clear connection between the two concepts. However, considering the vagueness of the term populism the connection may be vague and complex as well. Hence, the first step in order to establish whether there is a relationship between the two should be to explore the similarities and the various characteristics and features the two concept have in common.

Gender and Populism share some similarities and common themes. For example, the two terms first appeared during the mid-1900s, penetrated the academy and political discourse during the 1970s and lately received much attention both in public discourse and with scholars from various shared disciplines.

Additional common attributes relate to the fact that the core of the two concepts relate to a certain dichotomy, populism – “the people” and “the elite”, gender – men and women. However, populism stresses the sharp opposition between the two, avoiding to some extent all other differences that exist within each group, while gender asks to shed light on the diversity that exist within such a dichotomy. In other words, populism simplifies the situation at hand while gender asks to deal with the complicity and diversity that exist within the discussed dichotomy.

However, is this enough to establish a relationship between the two? Mudde and Kaltwasser argue that conceptually, populism has no

specific relationship to gender. They base this claim on the fact that populism consider all differences among the people (and that includes among other gender differences) as secondary, if not irrelevant, to populist politics<sup>33</sup>.

Thus, as Mudde and Kaltwasser claim that, both in theory and practice, populists do not hold a strong position on gender issues. This can be seen when trying to find gender related issues in populist programs, as the case of Mudde and Kaltwasser study, resulting in only few references to gender, irrespective of other features of the populist case examined (such as accompanying ideology or geographical region).<sup>34</sup>

Another problem that arises when trying to establish a connection or exploring the nature of the relationship between the two concepts, is that the task can be quite confusing as both can vary in various context, especially that of various cultures and societies.

One aspects of populism that should serve as a direct link to gender is that populist attitudes involve a combination of a negative and a positive component – against the establishment and for the people. This combination, Anduiza, Guinjoan and Rico claim, serves as a motivation for engaging in politics.<sup>35</sup>

However, the relationship to politics and motivation for political participation is not just a shared point that can connect the two concepts. It also serves as a dividing point, as populism is mostly associated with

men. This does not mean that they one cannot find women among populist leaders. There are several examples of female populist leaders. While some have attained most of their power because of personal relations to a male leader<sup>36</sup>, others have made a career without the help of such a male 'patron', for example Sarah Palin in the United States<sup>37</sup>. However, the fact remain that most of the populist leaders and the populist masses and electorate are predominantly male<sup>38</sup>.

Mudde and Kaltwasser argue that this is not just a matter of the sex of the participants and leaders, it is also a matter that, particularly in Latin America, populists have often engaged in machismo politics, which is the antithesis of feminism. These leaders promote sexist ideas and policies, and thus hinder women's political and social rights and position<sup>39</sup>. Mudde and Kaltwasser comparative analysis indicated that the relationship between populism and gender politics is highly dependent on the cultural context in which populist actors operate.

The two concepts, as a study subject, share an elusive quality. Both can be studied as indicating something about socialized behavior patterns. As with populism, gender also can be elusive, as gender differences can be assumed as focusing on social behaviors and psychological aspects of their participants, but this is hard to determine in the case in which people are grouped into gender categories based on their sex<sup>40</sup>.

Even if populist movements and parties are mostly led by men, represented by male party members and supported by male voters, this does not in itself mean that they hold traditional views on gender roles and relations<sup>41</sup>. Mudde and Kaltwasser argue that the influence of ideology is more important than culture (region) for determining the position populists leaders and parties hold in regards to gender issues<sup>42</sup>.

Thus, a relationship between populism and gender can be established but it is a weak and complex relationship. Mudde and Kaltwasser argue that given the growing number of prominent female populist leaders<sup>43</sup> and the almost universal gender gap in the electorate of populist parties, the relationship between gender and populism has probably become the most relevant of the many understudied issues related to populism<sup>44</sup>.

## Conclusions

Both populism and gender are concepts that receive much attention in various disciplines, attention that has increased significantly during the past two decades. The two concept has also increasingly entered public discourse. Although the two concepts relate to shared study topics and relate to similar discourse it is hard to establish a clear and decisive connection between the two.

The paper presented several similarities between the two concepts



that can imply on a relationship that exists between the two. Gender and populism relate to political discourse, and the two terms are frequently used in public discourse of power. The concepts engage in complex dichotomies that may vary in various contexts.

The relationship found in this paper implies a complex connection, one that is full of contradictions alongside shared themes. Both share several characteristics and relate to similar topics, but as each characteristic is explored, the common ground seems to divide, with a distinct difference – populism is used many times to simplify and avoid the

complexity of a situation, whereas gender is aimed at the opposite direction and avoids the simplification of situations.

The relationship is also hard to establish since populist leaders, including men and women, seem to not employ gender, and perhaps not because it is secondary in its importance. It may be due to the fact that the matter of gender is in itself a complex matter that is beyond the realm of populist discourse that turns not just to “the people” but rather to the common fear and desires of the ordinary man (and women), and gender cannot be seen as a simple component of such discourse.

## Note

- <sup>1</sup> J.,Pryzgoda, & J. C., Chrisler, „Definitions of gender and sex: The subtleties of meaning”, în *Sex roles*, 2000, 43(7), pp. 553-569.
- <sup>2</sup> E., Anduiza, M., Guinjoan, & G. Rico, “Populism, participation and political equality”, ECPR General Conference, Prague, 2016.
- <sup>3</sup> J.,Pryzgoda, & J. C., Chrisler, „Definitions of gender and sex: The subtleties of meaning”, op.cit;
- <sup>4</sup> C., Mudde, & C. R. Kaltwasser, „Vox populi or vox masculini? Populism and gender in Northern Europe and South America”, *Patterns of Prejudice*, 2015, 49(1-2), pp. 16-36.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>7</sup> D., Albertazzi, & D. McDonnell, “Introduction: The sceptre and the spectre”, *Twenty-first century*

- populism*, 2008, Palgrave Macmillan UK, pp. 1-11.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>9</sup> E., Laclau, *On populist reason*, Verso, London, 2005.
- <sup>10</sup> C., Mudde, & C. R. Kaltwasser, „Vox populi or vox masculini? Populism and gender in Northern Europe and South America”, op. cit.
- <sup>11</sup> R. S., Jansen, „Populist mobilization: A new theoretical approach to populism”, *Sociological Theory*, 2011, 29(2), pp. 75-96.
- <sup>12</sup> A. Munro, “Populism”. Encyclopedia Britannica, 2013, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/populism>;
- <sup>13</sup> E., Laclau, *On populist reason*, op.cit;
- <sup>14</sup> C., Mudde, & C. R. Kaltwasser, „Vox populi or vox masculini? Populism and gender in Northern Europe and South America”, op. cit.

- 15 *Ibid*, p. 3.
- 16 *Ibid*.
- 17 *Ibid*.
- 18 *Ibid*. define ‘Elitism’ is the mirror-image of populism, in that it shares the overall outlook on society but instead sees ‘the elite’ as pure and ‘the people’ as corrupt, and wants politics to represent elite opinions and values.
- 19 *Ibid*. ‘Pluralism’ as viewing society as consisting of various heterogeneous and crosscutting groups, and that politics should be based on compromises between these groups;
- 20 *Ibid*.
- 21 Politicians such as Alberto Fujimori in Peru, Hugo Chavez in Venezuela, and Evo Morales in Bolivia, among others;
- 22 R. S., Jansen, „Populist mobilization: A new theoretical approach to populism”, op. cit., p. 75;
- 23 D., Albertazzi, & D. McDonnell, “Introduction: The sceptre and the spectre”, op.cit;
- 24 *Ibid*;
- 25 E., Laclau, *On populist reason*, op.cit;
- 26 R. S., Jansen, „Populist mobilization: A new theoretical approach to populism”, op. cit.
- 27 *Ibid*.
- 28 A. S., Wharton, *The sociology of gender: An introduction to theory and research*, John Wiley & Sons, 2009;
- 29 J.,Pryzgod, & J. C., Chrisler, „Definitions of gender and sex: The subtleties of meaning”, op. cit.
- 30 A. S., Wharton, *The sociology of gender: An introduction to theory and research*, John Wiley & Sons, 2009, p. 9.
- 31 *Ibid*.
- 32 C., Mudde, & C. R. Kaltwasser, „Vox populi or vox masculini? Populism and gender in Northern Europe and South America”, op. cit;
- 33 *Ibid*.
- 34 *Ibid*.
- 35 E., Anduiza, M., Guinjoan, & G. Rico, “Populism, participation and political equality”, op. cit.
- 36 For example, Marine Le Pen in France, who today leads the “National Front”, a far-right political party, led formerly by her father, Jean-Marie Le Pen, who founded the party.
- 37 C., Mudde, & C. R. Kaltwasser, „Vox populi or vox masculini? Populism and gender in Northern Europe and South America”, op. cit.
- 38 *Ibid*.
- 39 *Ibid*. This argument can be exemplified by the example they provide of populist political actors, such as Hugo Chávez in Venezuela and European populist leaders like Silvio Berlusconi in Italy, and others;
- 40 J.,Pryzgod, & J. C., Chrisler, „Definitions of gender and sex: The subtleties of meaning”, op. cit.
- 41 C., Mudde, & C. R. Kaltwasser, „Vox populi or vox masculini? Populism and gender in Northern Europe and South America”, op. cit.
- 42 *Ibid*.
- 43 *Ibid*. mention for example Siv Jensen, Keiko Fujimori, Marine Le Pen, Roxana Miranda and Sarah Palin, among others;
- 44 *Ibid*.
- \* This article has been published, with the same title, in Cogito Journal, Vol. IX, no. 3/ September, 2017

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