

Populism in the Twenty-First Century

Undergraduate Seminar for the 2026 Summer Term (14335.0107)¹

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Office Hours: Monday, 15:00 – 17:00, IBW Building Room 3.13c (By appointment)

Modules: SM Repräsentation und Wahlen (PO 2021, ECTS Points: 6)

Schwerpunktmodul Seminar Politikwissenschaft I (PO 2015, ECTS Points: 9)

Course Time & Place: Tuesday, 10:00 – 11:30

Room TBA (IBW Building, Herbert-Lewin-Str. 2)

First and Last Sessions: April 14, 2026 – July 21, 2026

Course Overview

Far from retreating, populism continues to reshape global politics. The past few years have seen the continued rule of populist strongmen like Orbán, Erdoğan, and Modi, as well as the rise of new figures such as Milei and Subianto. In Europe, the 2024 European Parliament elections showcase the increasing influence of populist forces, while the Alternative for Germany's breakthrough as Germany's second-largest party highlight how populists are not only gaining power but actively reshaping democratic and authoritarian systems alike. Meanwhile, Donald Trump's return to power signals the evolution and mainstreaming of populist politics, even in established democracies.

Holding executive offices, forming governments, and being at the heart of international and supranational institutions, populists have long possessed the capacity to redefine the political narrative, challenge mainstream competitors spanning the ideological spectrum, and (directly or indirectly) alter institutional and organizational structures, legislations, and regulations, along with relational dynamics in the political, social and economic spheres. Despite this, misconceptions and misunderstandings about the concept persist to this day.

Against this background, the main objective of this course is to provide students with the conceptual, theoretical and empirical foundations to understand the phenomenon of contemporary populism. Examining the various definitions, forms, measurements, as well as causes and consequences of populism, the course explores (I) what populism stands for in today's political context, (II) how it differs from its earlier manifestations, (III) how it relates to democracy and affects the political structure, (IV) which strategic

¹ This syllabus is preliminary and subject to minor changes. Version 1.0: 02.02.2026.

responses are available to mitigate its impacts, (V) why it is often associated with conspiracy theories and fake news, and (VI) what the ongoing debates are about its future trajectory.

Course Structure

The course will follow weekly synchronous sessions that will be predominantly held in person. One to two sessions throughout the semester, however, are planned to take place online via Zoom with guest lecturers to enhance the learning experience. All course materials as well as weekly assignments and an online forum for discussions and collaborative work, will be accessible through ILIAS.

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this course, the students will be able to:

- Define the concept of populism and outline its core constitutive features.
- Distinguish between the different conceptual approaches to populism.
- Describe the ways of measuring populism at the public and elite levels.
- Identify the differences and similarities that exist among populist cases.
- Explain the demand-side and supply-side factors for the rise and continued success of populism.
- Elucidate the ambiguous relationship between populism and democracy.
- Critically evaluate the competing strategies developed in response to the alleged populist surge.
- Investigate the relationship between populism and the spread of conspiracy theories and fake news.
- Evaluate the ongoing debates on the potential trajectory of populism, including the possibility of it being a fleeting trend or a lasting phenomenon that will continue to shape politics.

Prerequisites

This seminar is intended for both novice and experienced undergraduate students. A general understanding of political science concepts and theories, as well as knowledge of fundamental quantitative and qualitative research methods, is sufficient to partake in the seminar.

While perfection is neither expected nor required, students should possess the ability to comprehend and articulate themselves in English, as it will be the primary language used in class.

Assessment

This course adopts a dynamic and interactive seminar format that not only entails individual research, but also group activities, debates and discussions, critical analysis of the course material, and collective exploration of different cases. To fully benefit from the course, students are expected to come prepared by completing the assigned (compulsory and additional) readings in advance of the relevant session. Active

participation in class discussions and group activities in a positive, constructive, and respectful manner is a crucial component of the course and will be reflected in the final grade.

The final grade will be based on the following (details on the format and specific criteria for assessment will be made available to students at ILIAS):

- **Reflection Papers (30%)** — After each meeting, students will be assigned a question and will have a week to provide a brief written response, usually around 250-300 words. These responses do not require extensive research or adherence to a specific format but should demonstrate familiarity with the assigned readings. The goal is to foster critical thinking and personal reflection on the week's material and discussions.
- **Speech Coding (35%)** — During the semester, students will be asked to form groups of three, follow the training videos provided by the instructor, and collectively perform qualitative content analysis on a sample of texts (speeches given by a president or prime minister). Using the "holistic grading technique" and the rubric established by the Global Populism Database, they will identify the statements indicating populist sentiments in leaders' discourse and assign a populism grade to the speeches. At the end of the semester, they will be asked to present their findings, ensure inter-coder reliability, Determine an averaged final score for the selected leader and submit their reports.
- **Presentation (35%)** — In last weeks of of the seminar, students will give an 8-minute oral presentation on a populist case of their choosing (party, leader, movement, and the like), drawing from any historical or contemporary context worldwide. In their brief introduction to the case, they will be asked to engage with key themes covered in the course, addressing questions such as: Should this case be considered populist, and if so, why? What type of populism do they represent? What structural or institutional factors might have led to their success (or a lack thereof)? What consequences have they had in the political setting within which they exist? Additionally, each student will provide a short critique of one of their classmates' presentations and, only if they take the course as part of *Schwerpunktmodul Seminar Politikwissenschaft I*, a written report on their selected case. Cases, presentation dates, and discussants will be determined in the first weeks of the course in consultation with the instructor.
- **In-Class Debate (Bonus, 5%)** — Students will have the opportunity to earn up to 5 bonus points on their final grade by participating in in-class debates, each of which lasting 15 to 20 minutes, in the final session of the semester. At the beginning of the semester, students will be divided into small groups and assigned specific debate topics and propositions. This will provide them with ample time to research the topic, construct logical arguments, gather supportive evidence, and prepare counterarguments and rebuttals before the debate.

Grading

At the end of the semester, points will be converted to final grades as follows:

Points	Grade
96 – 100	1,0
91 – 95	1,3
86 – 90	1,7
81 – 85	2,0
76 – 80	2,3
71– 75	2,7
66 – 70	3,0
61 – 65	3,3
56 – 60	3,7
51– 55	4,0
0 – 50	5,0

Registration

Registration is only possible independently by the students, for the course and the exam separately via KLIPS. The deadline for exam registration will be announced following the start of the semester. Late registrations, unfortunately, cannot be accommodated. Detailed instructions and support for exam registration can be found on the Institute's website:

<https://politik.uni-koeln.de/en/studies/examinations/registration>.

Additional Sources

Below there are some additional sources that students can utilize in their presentations, essays and discussions related to the topics covered in the course.

- Team Populism: <https://populism.byu.edu>
- The Populism Seminar: <http://populism-seminar.com>
- The PopuList: <https://popu-list.org>
- Political Observer on Populism: <https://populismobserver.com>
- POPULISMUS Populist Discourse and Democracy: <http://www.populismus.gr>
- Populist Political Communication in Europe: <https://www.ntnu.edu/populistcommunication>
- Extremism & Democracy: <https://standinggroups.ecpr.eu/extremismanddemocracy>
- Party Facts: <http://www.partyfacts.org>

Course Schedule

Week	Subject
Week 1 April 14	<i>Introduction & Populism: Then and Now</i>
<p><u>Compulsory Reading(s)</u></p> <p>Özbey, E. E. (2024, November 7). Please don't Make Populism Great Again! – Reflections in the Wake of the U.S. Elections. <i>Review of Democracy</i>. https://revdem.ceu.edu/2024/11/07/dont-make-populism-great-again</p> <p>Rovira Kaltwasser, C., Taggart, P., Ochoa Espejo, P., & Ostiguy, P. (2017). Populism: An Overview of the Concept and the State of the Art. In C. Rovira Kaltwasser, P. A. Taggart, P. Ochoa Espejo & P. Ostiguy (Eds.) <i>The Oxford Handbook of Populism</i> (pp. 1–24). Oxford University Press.</p> <p>Mudde, C. & C. Rovira Kaltwasser. (2017). Populism around the World. In C. Mudde & C. Rovira Kaltwasser (Eds.) <i>Populism: A Very Short Introduction</i> (pp. 21–41). Oxford University Press.</p> <p><u>Additional Reading(s)</u></p> <p>Mudde, C. (2016). Europe's Populist Surge: Long Time in the Making. <i>Foreign Affairs</i>, 95(6), 25–30.</p> <p>Lewis, P., Barr, C., Clarke, S., Voce, A., Levett, C., & Gutiérrez, P. (2019, March 6). Revealed: the Rise and Rise of Populist Rhetoric. <i>Guardian</i>. https://www.theguardian.com/world/ng-interactive/2019/mar/06/revealed-the-rise-and-rise-of-populist-rhetoric</p>	
Week 2 April 21	Conceptual Approaches
<p><u>Compulsory Reading(s)</u></p> <p>Mudde, C. & C. Rovira Kaltwasser. (2017). What is Populism?. In C. Mudde & C. Rovira Kaltwasser (Eds.) <i>Populism: A Very Short Introduction</i> (pp. 1–20). Oxford University Press.</p> <p><u>Additional Reading(s)</u></p> <p>Hawkins, K. A., & Rovira Kaltwasser, C. (2018). Introduction: The Ideational Approach. In K. A. Hawkins, R. E. Carlin, L. Littvay, C. Rovira Kaltwasser (Eds.) <i>The Ideational Approach to Populism: Concept, Theory, and Analysis</i> (pp. 1–24). Routledge.</p> <p>Ostiguy, P. (2017). Populism: A Socio-Cultural Approach. In C. Rovira Kaltwasser, P. A. Taggart, P. Ochoa Espejo & P. Ostiguy (Eds.) <i>The Oxford Handbook of Populism</i> (pp. 73–98). Oxford University Press.</p>	

Week	Subject
<p>Weyland, K. (2017). Populism: A Political-Strategic Approach. In C. Rovira Kaltwasser, P. A. Taggart, P. Ochoa Espejo & P. Ostiguy (Eds.) <i>The Oxford Handbook of Populism</i> (pp. 48–72). Oxford University Press.</p>	
Week 3 April 28	Inclusionary vs. Exclusionary Populism
<p><u>Compulsory Reading(s)</u></p> <p>Mudde, C., & Rovira Kaltwasser, C. (2013). Exclusionary vs. Inclusionary Populism: Comparing Contemporary Europe and Latin America. <i>Government and Opposition</i>, 48(2), 147–174.</p> <p><u>Additional Reading(s)</u></p> <p>Mouffe, C. (2020, September 15). Why a Populist Left Should Rally around a Green Democratic Transformation. <i>OpenDemocracy</i>. https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/rethinking-populism/left-populist-strategy-post-covid-19/</p> <p>Rooduijn, M. (2019). State of the field: How To Study Populism and Adjacent Topics? A Plea for both More and Less Focus. <i>European Journal of Political Research</i>, 58(1), 362–372.</p>	
Week 4 May 5	Measuring Populism
<p><u>Compulsory Reading(s)</u></p> <p>Akkerman, A., Mudde, C., & Zaslove, A. (2014). How Populist are the People? Measuring Populist Attitudes in Voters. <i>Comparative Political Studies</i>, 47(9), 1324–1353.</p> <p>Hawkins, K. A., Aguilar, R., Castanho Silva, B., Jenne, E. K., Kocijan, B., & Rovira Kaltwasser, C. (2019, June 20-22). <i>Measuring Populist Discourse: The Global Populism Database</i>, Paper presented at the 2019 EPSA Annual Conference in Belfast, UK.</p> <p><u>Additional Reading(s)</u></p> <p>Norris, P. (2020). Measuring Populism Worldwide, <i>Party Politics</i>, 26(6), 697–717.</p> <p>Tamaki, E. R., Jung, Y. J., Chatterley, J., Mitchell, G., Dzebo, S., Sandoval, C., Littvay, L., & Hawkins, K. A. (2025, October 10). <i>Populism Meets AI: Advancing Populism Research with LLMs</i>. ArXiv Preprint.</p>	
Week 5 May 12	Causes of Populism: Economic Grievances
<p><u>Compulsory Reading(s)</u></p>	

Week	Subject
<p>Hawkins, K., Read, M., Pauwels, T. (2017). Populism and Its Causes. In C. Rovira Kaltwasser, P. A. Taggart, P. Ochoa Espejo & P. Ostiguy (Eds.) <i>The Oxford Handbook of Populism</i> (pp. 267–286). Oxford University Press.</p> <p>Rodrik, D. (2020). Why does Globalization Fuel Populism? Economics, Culture, and the Rise of Right-Wing Populism. <i>Annual Review of Economics</i>, 13, 133–170.</p> <p><u>Additional Reading(s)</u></p> <p>Kriesi, H., Grande, E., Lachat, R., Dolezal, M., Bornschier, S., & Frey, T. (2006). Globalization and the transformation of the National Political Space: Six European Countries Compared. <i>European Journal of Political Research</i>, 45(6), 921–956.</p>	
Week 6 May 19	Causes of Populism: Cultural Backlash
<p><u>Compulsory Reading(s)</u></p> <p>Bale, T., & Kaltwasser, C. (2021). The Mainstream Right in Western Europe: Caught between the Silent Revolution and Silent Counter-Revolution. In T. Bale & C. Rovira Kaltwasser (Eds.), <i>Riding the Populist Wave: Europe's Mainstream Right in Crisis</i> (pp. 1–37). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.</p> <p>Inglehart, R. F., & Norris, P. (2016). Trump, Brexit, and the Rise of Populism: Economic Have-Nots and Cultural Backlash, HKS Working Paper No. RWP16–026.</p> <p><u>Additional Reading(s)</u></p> <p>Schäfer, A. (2021). Cultural Backlash? How (Not) to Explain the Rise of Authoritarian Populism. <i>British Journal of Political Science</i>, 52(4), 1977–1993.</p>	
Week 7 June 2	Causes of Populism: Electoral System and Party Competition
<p><u>Compulsory Reading(s)</u></p> <p>Rooduijn, M., De Lange, S. L., & Van der Brug, W. (2014). A Populist <i>Zeitgeist</i>? Programmatic Contagion by Populist Parties in Western Europe. <i>Party Politics</i>, 20(4), 563–575.</p> <p><u>Additional Reading(s)</u></p> <p>Mudde, C. (2004). The Populist <i>Zeitgeist</i>. <i>Government and Opposition</i>, 39(4), 541–563.</p>	
Week 8 June 9	Populists in Power

Week	Subject
<p><u>Compulsory Reading(s)</u></p> <p>Taggart, P. & Rovira Kaltwasser, C. (2016). Dealing with Populists in Government: Some Comparative Conclusions, <i>Democratization</i>, 23(2), 345–365.</p> <p><u>Additional Reading(s)</u></p> <p>Mudde, C. (2013). Three Decades of Populist Radical Right Parties in Western Europe: So What?, <i>European Journal of Political Research</i>, 52(1): 1–19.</p>	
Week 9 June 16	Populism and Democratic Backsliding
<p>Rovira Kaltwasser, C. (2017). Populism and the Question of How to Respond to It. In C. Rovira Kaltwasser, P. A. Taggart, P. Ochoa Espejo & P. Ostiguy (Eds.) <i>The Oxford Handbook of Populism</i> (pp. 489–508). Oxford University Press.</p> <p>Ruth-Lovell, S. P., & Grahn, S. (2023). Threat or Corrective to Democracy? The Relationship between Populism and Different Models of Democracy. <i>European Journal of Political Research</i>, 62(3), 677–698.</p> <p><u>Additional Reading(s)</u></p> <p>Mudde, C. (2021). Populism in Europe: An Illiberal Democratic Response to Undemocratic Liberalism (The Government and Opposition/Leonard Schapiro Lecture 2019). <i>Government and Opposition</i>, 1–21.</p>	
Week 10 June 23	Populism, Crises, and Anti-Populism
<p><u>Compulsory Reading(s)</u></p> <p>Moffitt, B. (2015). How to Perform Crisis: A Model for Understanding the Key Role of Crisis in Contemporary Populism. <i>Government and Opposition</i>, 50(2), 189–217.</p> <p>Moffitt, B. (2018). The Populism/Anti-Populism Divide in Western Europe. <i>Democratic Theory</i>, 5(2), 1–16.</p> <p>Özbey, E. E. (Host, April 10, 2025). Trapped in the Cycle? – Giorgos Venizelos on the Year of Elections and Politics of (Anti-)Populism [Audio Podcast Episode]. <i>Review of Democracy</i>. https://revdem.ceu.edu/2025/04/10/trapped-in-the-cycle-giorgos-venizelos-on-the-year-of-elections-and-politics-of-anti-populism</p> <p><u>Additional Reading(s)</u></p>	

Week	Subject
<p>Stavrakakis, Y., Katsambekis, G., Kioupiolis, A., Nikisianis, N., & Siomos, T. (2018). Populism, Anti-Populism and Crisis. <i>Contemporary Political Theory</i>, 17(1), 4–27.</p>	
Week 11 June 30	Populism, Conspiracy Theories, and Fake News
<p><u>Compulsory Reading(s)</u></p> <p>Castanho Silva, B., Vegetti, F., & Littvay, L. (2017). The Elite is Up to Something: Exploring the Relation between Populism and Belief in Conspiracy Theories. <i>Swiss Political Science Review</i>, 23(4), 423–443.</p> <p>Pirro, A. L., & Taggart, P. (2023). Populists in Power and Conspiracy Theories. <i>Party Politics</i>, 29(3), 413–423.</p> <p><u>Additional Reading(s)</u></p> <p>Schulz, A., Wirth, W., & Müller, P. (2020). We Are the People and You Are Fake News: A Social Identity Approach to Populist Citizens’ False Consensus and Hostile Media Perceptions. <i>Communication Research</i>, 47(2), 201–226.</p>	
Week 12 July 7	Case Presentations
Week 13 July 14	Case Presentations
Week 14 July 21	In-Class Debates and <i>Wrap-Up</i>