

POPULISM

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Edited by
Robert A. Huber & Michael Jankowski

POPULISM

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To Mr Eli (M.J.)

Praise for *Populism: An Introduction*

‘Simply the most cutting-edge and comprehensive new textbook on how radical populism impacts democracy. Clear, concise, and thoroughly grounded in empirical research, this book covers all the important dimensions of this most significant political phenomenon, expertly analyzed and presented by leading international populism scholars.’

Reinhard Heinisch, University of Salzburg, Austria and the author of *Politicizing Islam in Austria: The Far-Right Impact in the Twenty-First Century*.

‘This is a highly engaging textbook on the captivating and crucial topic of populism. This excellent volume introduces readers to populism’s essence and facets, methods to study populism, and its societal influences across all levels. It is comprehensive, accessible, and perfect for students and curious readers alike.’

Annika Werner, Professor at the School of Politics and International Relations, Australian National University, Australia.

‘This lively volume is a welcome addition to the scholarship on populism. Although aimed primarily at students, who will surely find it accessible and informative, it should also serve as a comprehensive introduction to the topic for advanced researchers.’

Duncan McDonnell, Professor of Politics, Griffith University, Australia.

‘This textbook stands out as a welcome and innovative approach to one of the most talked about political phenomena of our contemporary political age. Guided by a clear didactic approach, it provides a comprehensive and accessible guide to populism. A must-read.’

George Newth, Lecturer in Politics, University of Bath, UK.

‘This is a unique collection of chapters on populism. The editors have collected cutting edge scholars to address pressing issues surrounding the study of populism, ranging from methodological, theoretical, and empirical questions. The book is situated as a textbook, but it will surely have a broader impact on the study of populism.’

Andrej Zaslove, Associate Professor of Comparative Politics, Radboud University, Netherlands.

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Online Resources

Populism: An Introduction is accompanied by a range of additional materials hosted by the editors and designed to enhance learning, which can be accessed via:

<https://github.com/populismbook/populismbook>.

This includes additional empirical material, exercises, and code and data to replicate the empirical analyses.

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Robert A. Huber and Michael Jankowski
April 2024

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1

Introduction

Robert A. Huber and Michael Jankowski

Political scientists are often drawn to topics that do not always catch the attention of the general public and media. However, with populism, this has definitely been the case. Populism is one of the most discussed political phenomena of the last decades, both in academic research and in public debates. As of the writing of this text (in March 2024), a simple search for the term ‘populism’ in Google Scholar (Google’s search engine for scholarly literature) returns approximately 600,000 entries. We display the number of entries related to populism for each year since 1980 in Figure 1.1. As you can see, populism is a hot topic among academics.

The fascination with populism is certainly warranted, especially since 2016. You can probably guess why. Donald J. Trump’s election as the 45th President of the United States vaulted populism and its apparent transformative impact on the political landscape into the forefront of many people’s minds, even those who typically do not focus on politics. Shortly after Trump’s inauguration, even Pope Francis commented on the rise of populism (El País 2017), drawing a direct comparison to the rise of Hitler in Germany (though, as you will learn in this book, political scientists usually do not agree on equating populism with Nazism). It is therefore no surprise that ‘populism’ was selected as the 2017 ‘Word of the Year’ by the *Cambridge Dictionary*.

But populism is not just about Donald Trump. Populist actors were highly successful in the decades before. Almost every democracy in the world has an at least somewhat successful populist party. You can see this in Figure 1.2, which uses a dataset known as ‘V-Party’ (Lindberg et al. 2022) (this is an excellent data source for studying parties that you will learn more about in Chapter 7). Among many other things, the V-Party dataset provides information about the level of populism in parties over time and for almost every country in the world. To demonstrate how populism has developed, for each country we measure whether the most populist party in that country has a low, moderate, or high populism score. As you can see in Figure 1.2, the share of countries with a highly populist party has increased from approximately 30% to almost 50% over the last 40 years (light grey area in Figure 1.2). In contrast, the share of countries without a particular populist party decreased from over 25% in the 1980s to nearly 10% in 2023. So, populism is not just a reality in the US. It’s a global phenomenon.

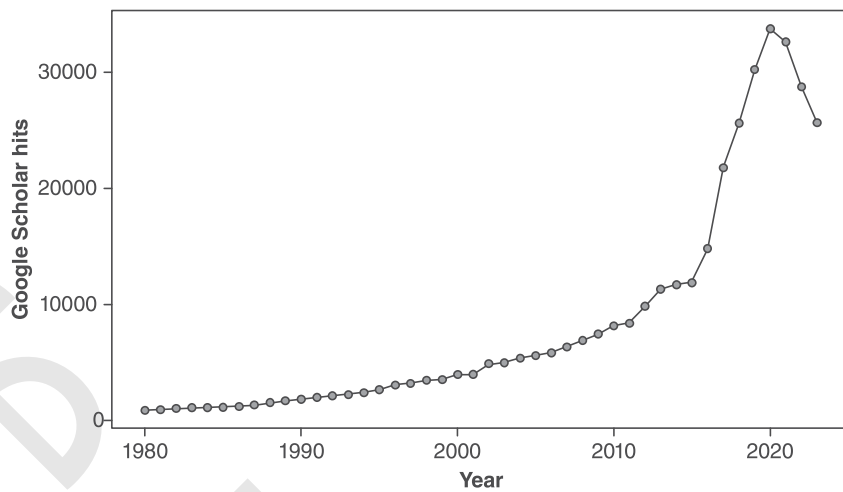


Figure 1.1 Google Scholar entries for 'populism' in each year since 1980

Note: Figure shows the approximate number of entries in Google Scholar for the search term 'populism' in each year. Data collected on 29 March 2024.

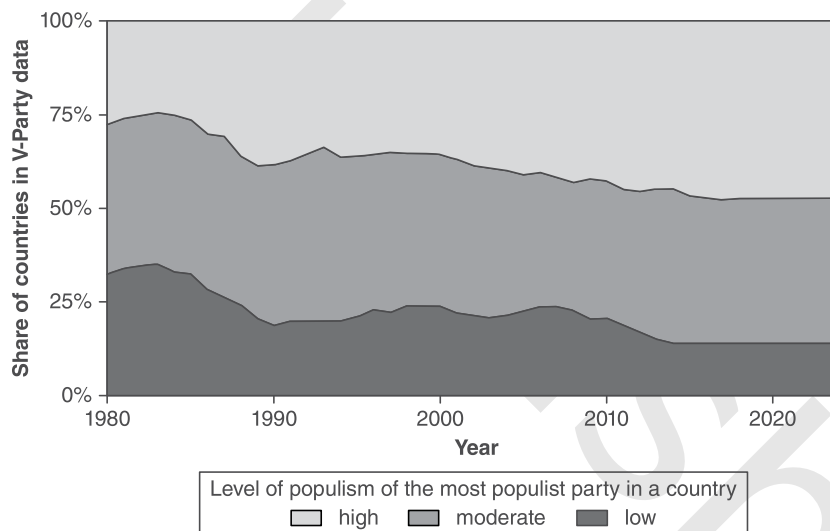


Figure 1.2 Share of countries in which the most populist party has a low, moderate or high level of populism (based on V-PARTY data) since 1980

Note: Only parties with a seat share of more than 5% in the national parliament are considered. Own calculations based on V-Party data (Lindberg et al. 2022). 'High populism' is defined as a populism value of 0.66 or higher on a scale from 0 to 1, where 1 is the most populists. 'Low populism' refers to parties with a level of populism below or equal to 0.33. 'Moderate populism' are parties with values between 0.33 and 0.66.

While the events of 2016 resulted in an unprecedented boost in research about populism, it is important to note that much of the field-defining literature was written years before.

At the beginning of the 2000s, several books and research articles were written that became instant classics, including work by Kurt Weyland (2001), Margaret Canovan (2002), and Ernesto Laclau, whose book *On Populist Reason* was published in 2005. And, of course, Cas Mudde, who is widely considered to be one of the most influential figures in populism research, published his famous article ‘The populist zeitgeist’ in 2004. This article not only offered a definition of populism which was later adopted by several scholars, but also explained how populist discourse has become mainstream. Three years later, Mudde published his book on the populist radical-right in Europe (Mudde 2007). It proves that the election of Trump was by no means the beginning of populism. Populism was already an important political phenomenon before 2016.

What Is Populism?

Defining populism is surprisingly challenging. As you will read in more detail in Chapter 3, different approaches to understanding populism exist. Thus, every definition of populism is at least somewhat contested. However, most scholars agree that populism is characterized by an ‘us versus them’ worldview, which combines a favourable conception of ‘the people’ with a negative view of ‘the elites’. As such, populism can be seen as a critique on the current state of political representation. Populists often claim that they are the ‘true’ representatives of ‘the people’, while ‘the elites’ are a self-serving group whose interests and actions contradict the will of ‘the people’. Thus, populism can be understood as a political approach that strives to appeal to ordinary people who feel their concerns are being disregarded by established parts of the elite.

Populism is very context-dependent and is often described as being ‘chameleon-like’, due to its many different appearances and its ability to shift its style or message depending on where and how it occurs. For example, ‘the elites’ criticized by populists can be the ruling politicians, but can also be the media, economic elites such as bankers and businessmen, or scientists. Likewise, how populists define who belongs to ‘the people’ is also highly context-dependent. Other definitions of populism pay more attention to the organizational features of populist movements, such as focusing on charismatic leaders or their unique way of communicating.

It is also important to recognize what populism is *not*. Populism is not associated with an overriding meta-ideology; rather, populism can be combined with different ideological leanings. As you will learn in the following chapters, populism can be, and has been, combined with left-wing, centrist, and right-wing ideologies. Being aware of these differences is extremely important when talking about and researching populism, to ensure that you are actually focusing on populism and not one of these other ideologies.

The considerable academic attention that populism now receives also comes with some drawbacks. In fact, many scholars fear that populism has become a mere ‘buzzword’ – a word that sounds fancy and is often thrown about, even though its actual substance or understanding is shallow. It appears that populism is a frequently debated topic, yet its definition is often unclear. Maybe you have noticed this yourself. It seems as though populism is everywhere and yet, at the same time, it is quite challenging to define it clearly. Even political scientists

struggle with this task. In a highly influential article about populism research, Sophia Hunger and Fred Paxton (who is also the author of Chapter 13 in this book) demonstrate that many researchers mean different things when they refer to populism, or they refer to it to make their research more contemporary (Hunger and Paxton 2022). But it's not just academics who are confused by the term. Tim Bale, Stijn van Kessel, and Paul Taggart (2011) investigated how the media in the UK have used the word 'populism'. It turns out that pretty much every political actor has been labelled as populist in print media reporting. For example, both the Democrat Barack Obama and his Republican adversary for the 2008 presidential election, John McCain, were called populists. If both of these politicians are called populist, then there is some confusion about what populism means. In the public sphere, we may also conclude that 'populist' is just another term used to discredit political opponents. As Jakob Schwörer (2021) has shown, based on an analysis of politicians' public communication, politicians often use the term 'populism' simply to discredit their political opponents, regardless of whether their opponent is actually a populist.

Thus, while it is popular to speak about populism, it remains unclear what populism actually is. To fully understand and analyse populism, we need conceptual clarity: *What is populism and how can we study it?* This book is here to help. In the following 14 chapters, we will provide you with an overview of the most relevant theories, methods, and findings in populism research. Luckily, as we already saw in Figure 1.1, we can call on a substantial scholarly literature to do so. Indeed, the last decades of populism research have been fruitful, and we have seen significant advances in various aspects of populism research.

Navigating through the various strands of populism research can be challenging, given that there are so many interesting aspects on which you can focus. For example, we can hone in on the debate about defining populism, or we can join the conversation on how best to measure populism, examining the best methods to use and the kinds of data to collect, or we can delve into the theory of explaining populism, investigating why it occurs and what are its consequences. This book will introduce you to all these aspects of research.

As editors, we, Robert and Michael, have assembled a team of outstanding scholars from around the world. In the remainder of this chapter, we will walk you through each chapter and introduce you to the guides who will accompany you through this exciting journey.

The Mission of This Book

Populism is an important political phenomenon. With this textbook, we want to offer you a convenient and exciting introduction to the field of populism research, with its various theoretical, methodological, and empirical challenges. Having read this book, you should have a solid understanding of state-of-the-art populism research and be ready to take a deep dive into more complex debates.

The Structure of This Book

The book is structured into three parts. Part I is theoretical. It will introduce you to the historical development of populism studies, refine the definition of populism, and establish

the two core theoretical issues that require attention: populism's relationship with liberal democracy and how populism can be distinguished from other ideologies. However, this book is not just focused on theory. We want you to be able to analyse populism empirically by making use of various data sources and research methods. Therefore, Part II of the book introduces you to the different methodological approaches for measuring and analysing populism. Finally, in Part III of the book, you will see how these theories and methods are applied to address the important questions populism raises.

The four chapters in Part II give you concrete guidance on how to empirically study populism. The approaches cover various research traditions, from qualitative approaches to the latest text-as-data and survey research trends. In our own experience, this area of education in the field of populism research has been rather neglected. Hence, we hope that these chapters empower you not only to read about populism and consume populism research, but to conduct (even better) research on populism.

Having examined methods, Part III introduces you to various empirical topics. Building on the theoretical concepts and the methodological approaches, you will learn about how populists communicate, who votes for populists, how parties compete, what it may mean if populists join the government, and how populism affects different types of representation. In other words, this book gives you a comprehensive introduction to the empirical study of populism. But let us walk you through these parts in more detail.

The Didactical Approach of This Book

Each chapter in this book is designed to make learning about populism easy and accessible. The book therefore seeks to provide easy-to-understand language and to avoid unnecessary academic jargon whenever possible. All chapters have been reviewed by students to ensure that you get the core information you need.

The book is structured in three main parts (theory, methods, and empirical applications). We have designed the order of the chapters in such a way that you can read it from cover to cover. However, each chapter is also designed to stand on its own as much as possible. So, if you want to skip a particular chapter, it will not be a problem. Of course, there are some limitations. If you haven't read about populism before, you should definitely read Chapters 2 and 3 first to understand the fundamental aspects of populism research. However, in Parts II and III, the order of the chapters matters less.

Every chapter follows a clear and logical structure and was written with you, the reader, in mind. Clear headings and organized sections mean you can navigate the content seamlessly. We start each chapter with a list of learning goals, so you can track your learning journey. Next, we provide a sneak peek – an abstract that gives you a taste of what's to come. A more detailed introduction to the chapter follows, and we end the chapter preliminaries with a handy 'What do I need to know?' box, so that you can prepare the knowledge you need to maximize each chapter's learning (and enjoyment). At the end of each chapter, we summarize the most important points, and provide some questions that you can reflect on individually or discuss as a group. The questions help to ensure that you have understood the most important aspects of the chapter, but they also allow you to reflect critically on the content. The questions can also be used in seminars for group discussions. Finally, we include some follow-up readings so you can delve deeper into the chapter topic.

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Our expert contributors have carefully selected examples from diverse contexts, illustrating the multifaceted nature of populism without compromising on academic rigour. Looking at examples from around the world helps you to understand how populism develops in different political settings. We tie these pieces of evidence together in the concluding Chapter 15.

We hope to give you an introduction to the topic that allows you to command the field of populism research. We would love to hear about what you liked and disliked in this book, so please feel free to contact us with your feedback. This is the beginning of a conversation, and we hope to empower and inspire future academics and interested citizens to think critically about populism.

Part I: The Theoretical Foundations of Studying Populism

Chapter 2, on the history of populism, by Luca Manucci, takes you on a journey through the historical development of populism and populism research. He convincingly tells a story of how the concept of populism, and research on it, has developed over the last 200 years. This chapter will contextualize the phenomenon for you and explain how populism has been understood through time and space. You will see that some of the confusion discussed above may be a consequence of how research was conducted in different periods.

Chapter 3, by Daphne Halikiopoulou and Sofia Vasilopoulou, conceptualizes, explains, and contrasts a series of established definitions of populism. Being able to define what you mean when you use the term ‘populism’ is essential for studying specific cases in more detail and making convincing arguments. Given the nuances of various definitions and the fuzziness of the term in public discourse, this chapter will guide you through the definitions, their similarities and differences, and provide you with clear instructions on which definition to pick, depending on the circumstances of your research question.

Chapter 4 examines populism’s relationship with democracy. Often, we hear of populism as being a threat to democracy. But why is this the case? Do populists really challenge democracy, and if so, what kind of democracy is being challenged? In Chapter 4, Saskia P. Ruth-Lovell, Rosa Kindt, Joep van Lit, and Marie-Isabel Theuwis discuss how populism relates to democracy. In this chapter, you will hear that not only is populism a complex term, but that there are also various definitions of democracy. Depending on which model of democracy we investigate, populism may be a threat, a corrective, or actually both. Saskia, Rosa, Joep, and Marie-Isabel start by outlining the theoretical fundamentals of the potential relationship between populism and democracy before introducing you to empirical evidence on the matter.

Finally in Part I, Chapter 5 (written by us) outlines how populism interacts with other ideologies. We start by introducing you to different types of ideologies. We explain why considering other ideologies simultaneously with populism is important if we are to gain a comprehensive understanding of populism, its explanations, and its consequences. We will argue that left-wing and right-wing populists share some important features but may vary substantially on other dimensions. This has important implications for how we study populism. We discuss how to capture ideologies before showing you some data on where populism usually occurs in the political sphere. The chapter concludes a theoretical introduction to populism.

Part II: Methodological Approaches to Studying Populism

Having learned what populism is and how it relates to democracy or ideologies, you are probably eager to start studying populism yourself. The second part of the book will help you do this. Each of the four chapters outlines one method to study populism empirically in a structured and analytical way.

Chapter 6, by Alexander Alekseev and Emilia Palonen, provides a comprehensive introduction on how to study populism qualitatively. The qualitative study of populism has a long history and is central to our field. Many of the giants on whose shoulders populism research stands started by delving into specific cases, paying particular attention to the details and contexts of that case. This is what qualitative methods are extremely good at. Thus, understanding how to conduct an in-depth investigation into the actions of populist parties, how to transition the theoretical definition into useful concepts for empirical analysis, and how to deploy concrete techniques to understand populism helps you to form an informed opinion on a case. Ultimately, this is a central methodological approach to studying populism.

Chapter 7 introduces you to a common data source on populist parties, expert surveys. It turns out that even when professional scholars are unsure what to make of a party, they ask other experts. Nina Wiesehomeier and Maurits Meijers have extensive experience of expert surveys and share what they have learned from decades of expert survey research. They outline which questions to ask experts and discuss a series of existing expert surveys and what they can (and cannot) offer.

While asking experts is a one way to capture the degree of populism evident in political parties, other approaches exist too. Populism is often associated with its unique style of communication. Populists often use a different kind of vocabulary when they speak about politics. Can we systematically identify such populist language in texts? Lisa Zehnter explains how to do this effectively and which aspects you need to consider. Therefore, Chapter 8 explores text-as-data approaches, from qualitative content analysis to machine learning models, and explains their underlying logic.

Now, you have learned a lot about how to study the degree of populism that exists in political systems and parties. But what about citizens? Can they also be populist? In Chapter 9, Bruno Castanho Silva outlines how to study populism on an individual level. You will hear about the fundamental elements of survey design questions that attempt to capture how populist citizens are. Finally, the chapter provides an overview of how to study populism in citizens and what we can learn from this. Put differently, having read this chapter, you will be able to analyse how populist you are.

Part III: The Empirical Study of Populism

Now that you know the concepts and methods of studying populism, the remaining six chapters put this knowledge into practice by providing insights into several core themes of populism studies.

In Chapter 10, Edina Strikovic and Linda Bos explore populist communication styles. They introduce you to the basics of studying political communication and place populism in this framework. They also connect populist communication back to some of the definitions you learned in Chapter 3, to differentiate the rhetoric and style of populist communication.

Finally, they provide examples of populist communication that may inspire you to investigate populist communication in more detail yourself.

Chapters 11 and 12 introduce you to how populist parties compete for votes with other parties. In Chapter 11, Patricia Rehus and Steven M. Van Hauwaert theoretically and empirically explore who votes for populist parties. They guide you through what unites supporters of populist parties. They reveal how their findings connect to Chapter 9 on research into populism at the individual level. Hence, this chapter provides a comprehensive introduction to the *demand* side of populist politics. This is complemented with Chapter 12, by Sofia Marini and Markus Wagner, who outline the transformative impact of populist parties on party competition, and thus explore the *supply* side of populist politics. They describe how populists have changed party systems, what this means for how mainstream parties position themselves in response, and how this contributes to polarization. Combined, these two chapters give you an excellent introduction to why populist parties are successful electorally and the struggles that non-populist parties face in how to respond to populism.

Building on this, in Chapter 13, Fred Paxton explains what it means if these actors are successful and form governments or join coalitions. Complementing the discussion in Chapter 12, Fred explores what challenges populist parties face in government and how they govern. Based on this discussion, you will learn more about the impact that populist parties in government have, and will be able to evaluate their various impacts within the context in which they operate.

In Chapter 14, Christina-Marie Juen explores the tensions between populism and representation. She investigates how populist parties appeal to certain marginalized voter groups and what populism means for representation in descriptive and substantive terms. For example, she explores why populist parties still seem to be dominated by male legislators, but how this is now slowly changing. Chapter 14 closes the empirical discussion of the various themes related to populism in this book.

Finally, in Chapter 15, we (Robert and Michael again) tie all the evidence together, reflect on the future of populism studies, and outline why we believe that exploring populism comparatively is essential. To this end, we walk you through populist actors around the globe and discuss the commonalities and differences of populist politics in Europe, Latin America, the US, Africa, and Asia. Thus, we set out why learning more and moving beyond a Eurocentric approach to populism is useful, if not mandatory.

Having written this introduction, we are excited to read the book again. We hope you are ready to do so too!

Discussion Questions

- You may have noticed that we critically discussed the ambiguous meaning of populism. The term is used in various contexts and in different ways by several actors. What is your understanding of populism? How would you define it? (You will learn more about the different definitions of populism in Chapters 2 and 3.)
- In the chapter, we mentioned that in 2017 Pope Francis compared the surge of populism to the rise of Hitler in Germany. We also mentioned that political scientists

usually do not agree with such a comparison. Why do you think that is the case? (Chapter 4 in this book discusses this question in more detail.)

- Choose a country that most interests you. Which political parties in this country would you describe as ‘populist’? What factors led you to label these parties as populist? Reflect about your selection. (You will learn more about measuring the populism of parties in Part II of the book, especially in Chapter 7.)
- Why do you think so many populists are successful? What drives people to vote for populist parties? Do you think there are common factors that lead citizens to vote for populist parties in different countries and, if so, what are these factors? (Chapters 9 and 11 will discuss these questions in more detail.)
- Imagine the following (probably not so hypothetical) scenario: You live in a country in which a populist radical-right party is highly successful. An established conservative, non-populist party hires you as their political consultant and asks for advice on how to respond to the success of the populist radical-right party. How do you respond? (In Chapter 12, you will read about the different strategies that non-populist parties have used to respond to populism.)

Recommended Readings

Hawkins, K.A., R. Carlin, L. Littvay, and C. Rovira Kaltwasser (Eds.) (2019). *The Ideational Approach to Populism: Concept, Theory and Analysis*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge.

This volume, edited by Kirk Hawkins and colleagues, is an outstanding handbook, addressing the core questions on the ideational approach to populism (you will learn more about this and other approaches in Chapter 3). The first part provides you with an excellent further reading list. The book covers conceptual discussions as well as the question of how to measure populism on multiple levels. It is a must-read if you are interested in learning more about the ideational approach.

Manucci, L. (Ed.) (2023). *The Populism Interviews: A Dialogue with Leading Experts*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge.

Luca Manucci has interviewed scholars on populism over many years. In this book, he collects 30 interviews from his blog (<https://populismobserver.com/>) and provides readers with a personal view of some of the outstanding scholars of populism. It is easy to read, covers important topics, and offers a fun introduction to the faces and minds of the big names in the discipline. We strongly recommend Luca’s blog and this book.

Moffitt, B. (2020). *Populism*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Ben Moffitt presents an excellent discussion of populism through the lens of political theory. This book may be less applied and methodologically oriented than ours, or that of Hawkins and colleagues (2019), but is nonetheless a key reading, accessible and comprehensive. Read it, once you finish this book!

Mudde, C., and C. Rovira Kaltwasser (2017). *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser provide a short and accessible introduction to research on populism. While not written for an academic audience, this book puts names and movements into perspective and is precisely what the title says: a very short introduction into populism. It will allow you to explore your interests and is a good companion to reading this book.