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## What Does Populism Mean?

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# What Does Populism Mean?

## **Abstract**

"Populism is linked to equality and decentralized power."

Posting about the history of political ideologies from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/what-does-populism-mean/>

## **Keywords**

In All Things, populism, democracy, ideology, political parties

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## **Comments**

*In All Things* is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service](#) at Dordt College.

# What Does Populism Mean?

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 [inallthings.org/what-does-populism-mean/](https://allthings.org/what-does-populism-mean/)

Jeff Taylor

*Populism* is the ideology that supports the rights, aspirations, and power of the people. Populism supports democracy. *Democracy* is the form of government in which the people control society. The English word *democracy* comes from the Greek word *demokratia*, which means rule by the common people.

The word *populus* also means “people.” It is the Latin equivalent of the Greek *demos*. Elitism is the opposite of populism. The word *elite* comes from a French word with roots in the Latin *eligere*, meaning “to choose or select” from among the people. In other words, a chosen few rather than all or most. Elite rule, by definition, is the opposite of democratic rule. Populism is linked to equality and decentralized power.

In practice, democracy means majority rule because decision-making is not conducted through complete consensus (unanimity). Popular sovereignty means that all-of-the-people rule by collectively sharing power but this is translated, in practical terms, into rule by the-majority-of-the-people when it comes to public policy decisions. Populists usually acknowledge some guarantee of minority rights even as they champion majority rule. Given the perceived impracticality of direct, Athenian-style democracy in the modern world of large nation-states, populists may support indirect, representative democracy but they prefer that the resulting republic lean in the direction of democracy as opposed to aristocracy or monarchy.

While the words *populist* and *demagogue* are both rooted in the word *people*, there is a significant difference between the two because populists are sincere and demagogues are insincere. It is the difference between genuine public service and using the public as a stepping stone for personal gain. It is often unclear whether a political leader who speaks on behalf of the people is more of a populist or a demagogue because motive is difficult to ascertain.

In the United States, populism is a transcendent ideology that includes some conservatives, liberals, communitarians, and libertarians. The preeminent father of American populism is Thomas Jefferson, primary founder of the Democratic Party. In 1816, the former president wrote, “My most earnest wish is to see the republican element of popular control pushed to the maximum of its practicable exercise.” This is the essence of populism. Other populist-minded early American liberals include Benjamin Franklin, Patrick Henry, Samuel Adams, Thomas Paine, and John Taylor of Caroline.

Anti-Federalists often used populist arguments against the proposed U.S. Constitution in 1787-88. Using the threefold model of constitutional classification popularized in ancient Greece by Plato and Aristotle, opponents of the Constitution argued that it would produce a republic tilted too far toward monarchy and aristocracy, in contrast to the more-decentralized, democracy-inclined Articles of Confederation.

During the nineteenth century, the Democratic Party experienced revivals of Jeffersonian populism under Andrew Jackson and William Jennings Bryan. Policy examples included support for laissez-faire economics, enlargement of suffrage among white men, and popular election of U.S. senators, as well as opposition to the Bank of the United States and to Wall Street.

In the early 1890s, the People’s Party, commonly known as the Populist Party, was partly built on a foundation of agrarian grassroots reform, including the Grange and the Farmers’ Alliance. Capital-P Populists attempted to craft a transcendent populist coalition: North and South, white and black, rural and urban. They had some success until they largely merged in 1896 with the Jeffersonian wing of the Democratic Party. This period also saw the rise of populist-tinged labor unions and socialist parties centered in cities.

During the Progressive Era of the early twentieth century, W.J. Bryan personified the Jeffersonian wing of the Democratic Party while Robert La Follette did the same within the Republican Party. Both battled for more popular government, including the direct-democracy measures of initiative, referendum, and recall.

American populism has been manifested during the past 100 years primarily through three political groups: southern Democrats, northern progressive Democrats, and conservative Republicans. All three were ideologically descended from Jefferson and all three have been out of the mainstream of wealth and power.

Benjamin Tillman, Thomas Watson, James Vardaman, Theodore Bilbo, and George Wallace are examples of southern Democrats who combined socioeconomic populism for lower-class whites with race-baiting against blacks. Wright Patman, Huey Long, and Estes Kefauver were southern populists who were not as racist.

Northern progressive populists within the Democratic Party have included Burton Wheeler, Jerry Voorhis, William Proxmire, Russell Feingold, Dennis Kucinich, and Bernie Sanders. Ralph Nader, a four-time presidential candidate, represented a similar impulse as a Green Party and Independent standard-bearer.

Robert Taft, Barry Goldwater, Ronald Reagan, Pat Robertson, Pat Buchanan, Ron Paul, and Donald Trump are examples of conservative Republicans who have represented the populist wing of the GOP. The Religious Right and the Tea Party are recent examples of anti-establishment efforts.

In addition to political populism, economic populism and cultural populism are often used—sometimes cynically—in electoral politics. Specifically, Democrats accuse Republicans of being economic elitists and Republicans accuse Democrats of being cultural elitists. Populists tend to be skeptical of both big government and big business.

From the days of the Populist Party to our own day, advocates of greater democracy have often been accused of anti-Semitism, racial bigotry, and xenophobic nativism. Scholars who have carefully studied populists present a more nuanced portrait. For example, most Populists criticized the Rothschilds of Europe and some Wall Street bankers not because they were Jewish but because they were international bankers. The racial prejudice of populist southern Democrats was often more crude than that of their elitist Bourbon opponents but the latter were equally racist. What strikes some as xenophobia is seen by others as patriotism.

Populist-minded intellectuals and academics during the twentieth century include Charles Beard, Claude Bowers, C. Wright Mills, Gore Vidal, Wilson Carey McWilliams, and Christopher Lasch. Such populists often hold to the Elite Theory of American politics, arguing that the U.S. is more of a plutocratic aristocracy than a genuine democracy.

In the American political system today, Jeffersonian populism is a minority ideology among politicians. It lacks respectability and power. Among average citizens, however, it remains a deeply-ingrained instinct that cuts across party lines and ideological labels. The surprising success of the Trump and Sanders campaigns this year is evidence of the persistence of grassroots populism.