Summary and Keywords

The topic of populism in foreign policy is receiving growing attention in academic and public discourse as populist parties and movements proliferate around the world. Yet foreign policy analysis (FPA) scholars interested in the role of populism in foreign policy have to deal with a concept that is notoriously slippery and contested.

The existing literature on populism and foreign policy has already offered interesting insights. Focused primarily on Europe, it usually applies the conceptualization of populism as a thin-centered ideology that attaches to thicker ideological traditions and reformulates them in terms of the elite-people divide. Following this conceptualization (that is today the dominant framework for the comparative analysis of populism, particularly in Europe), this literature argues that populist parties of the right have foreign policy positions that reflect their nativism, opposition to immigration, focus on national sovereignty, and rejection of economic and cultural globalization. Populist parties of the left on the other hand reject in their foreign policy positions neo-liberalism and open markets. Together, European populist parties of all persuasions are Eurosceptic, anti-American, and usually pro-Putin’s Russia.

Highlighted are the breadth of critical and discursive approaches on populism that scholars of populism and foreign policy can use, particularly because they have been applied successfully to cases outside of Europe, where populists have long held political power and have influenced foreign policy in practice. Such conceptualizations commonly view populism as a reaction to crises of political representation engendered by dislocations caused by globalisation and other shifts in international politics. These dislocations will take different forms, but populism in the West and populism in the Global South can be seen, despite more specific differences of outlook, at the very least as a specific type of reaction to concurrent political and economic crises in a rapidly denationalized and deterritorialized world. In this context, most populist foreign policies reflect a preoccupation with popular sovereignty and unmediated projection of popular
demands and national interests outside of established processes of global governance. Populists will also tend to perceive and analyze foreign policy issues through the lens of the elite-underdog opposition.

Populism is commonly associated or conflated with nationalism (especially in the case of the European radical right) and isolationism, but in practice this does not always have to be the case. The “people” for whom populists speak in international affairs can very well transcend national borders, as evidenced, for example, in the foreign policies of Hugo Chavez and Mahmud Ahmadinejad, who aimed to represent transnational constituencies like the Global South, the Islamic world, the world poor, etc. And while populists generally eschew commitments to broader milieu goals of the international system, they can still engage with foreign affairs if they see immediate material benefits. The same goes for trade: populists (particularly in the United States) are seen usually as ideological protectionists, but most often they do not mind striking trade deals if these favor their interests (see, e.g., Donald Trump’s discourse on this issue).

In terms of theoretical and methodological advancements, foreign policy scholars interested in populism are urged to embrace the large variety of conceptual approaches on populism (ideological, critical, discursive) and to build on the growing literature on cross-regional comparison of populist politics, something particularly pertinent in a world characterized by the presence and prominence of populism in almost all world regions.

Keywords: populism, foreign policy, political parties, state, globalization, sovereignty, global governance, ideology, immigration, trade, Europe, United States, Russia, Latin America

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