Populism analytical tools to unearth the roots of Euroscepticism

Abstract

*Populist leaders around the globe magnify pre-existing frustrations and dramatise crises to erode confidence in elites and institutions. They adapt their othering and blame attribution discourses to specific geographical realities to take advantage of local problems and prejudices. Most Eurosceptic parties apply a similar populist logic of articulation simplifying political problems, morally delegitimising their political adversaries and supranational institutions, appealing to an idealised and somewhat homogeneous notion of society, as well as presenting popular sovereignty as threatened by Brussels and mainstream parties. Populism literature has developed theories and measurement tools that are very useful to explain the emergence of Eurosceptic movements and to what extent their narratives resonate with citizen's pre-existing attitudes and/or contribute to shaping them. This paper shows the value of using populism as an epistemic framework to analyse Euroscepticism and understand how parties tailor their messages (supply-side) to trigger specific beliefs and behaviours (demand-side) in the inhabitants of different geographic context*s.

The term Euroscepticism is mostly associated in the public sphere to far-right populist leaders such as Nigel Farage, Giorgia Meloni, Viktor Orban, and Geert Wilders. However, this is not exclusively a right-wing or a top-down phenomenon. Some leftist politicians, such as Jean-Luc Melenchon, Pablo Iglesias and Yanis Varoufakis are also very critical of the European Union (EU). Euroscepticism can be considered as a manifestation of deeper attitudinal traits developed within specific socio-economic and geographic contexts (Vasilopoulou 2016; Gartzou-Kastouyanni et al. 2022). As such, it is important not to focus exclusively on the 'supply-side of the phenomenon', but also analyse its 'demand-side'. Namely, the people, that on both sides of the ideological spectrum, express their frustration and channel their discontent against the institutions and ideals. These include supporters of declared Eurosceptic parties, as well as other heterogeneous groups of citizens, such as the British 'Brexiters', the Spanish *Indignados* and the French *Gilet Jaunes*, most of which display in different degrees the typical antagonistic blame discourses with moral undertones and appeals to popular sovereignty, that characterise populism.

The literature on Euroscepticism has often revolved around the electoral performance and dynamics of Eurosceptic parties (Mudde 2012; Szczerbiak & Taggart 2017) and on how they shape policies and European institutions (Halikiopoulou 2012; Usherwood & Startin 2013). Thus, to a large extent this subfield has prioritised the consequences of Euroscepticism, such as protest vote, political blame-shifting towards EU institutions, xenophobic attitudes, inability to adopt key reforms and diplomatic failures. Less attention has been devoted to understanding the discursive, ideational, and even performative roots of this phenomenon. Some studies investigate the nature and origins of negative views on the process of European integration (Hoogue & Marks 2007, De Vries 2018) and whether psychological traits, such as collective narcissism, foster Euroscepticism (Golec de Zavala et al. 2017). However, the literature has rarely addressed if there is a common populist logic of articulation reflected in

the discourses and beliefs of both politicians and citizens. I argue that the theories and methods developed within the field of populism can contribute to better understanding and to comparing different sources of Euroscepticism.

The justifications for populism expressed by some experts match well the discourses and slogans used by Eurosceptics. For instance, Euroscepticism can be considered a sort of counter-hegemonic effort to challenge a 'neo-liberal' order or status quo (Grattan 2016; Mouffe 2018). Populism defends that democratic procedures and processes need to be legitimised by the people's authority. The exaltation of popular sovereignty as a check and balance on elected or unelected officials may contribute to enfranchise citizens and foster their political participation (Canovan 1999: 14-16). Therefore, populism could be to some extent considered as an empowering ideal that promotes inclusiveness (Mény & Surel 2002).

Laclau's populism theory (2005), helps explain the processes conducive to the emergence of a Euroscepticism political identity through the construction of antagonisms and the (re)drawing of political frontiers (Howarth and Stavrakakis: 2002: 3-4). Populists try to decontest the notion of 'the people' by a discursive dichotomisation of the social space and the creation of a chain of equivalent demands (Laclau 2005: 18-19, 74, 83). This process applies a 'logic of difference' with the construction of an enemy of the people, who is placed on the other side of the (chosen or newly drawn) frontier, and a 'logic of equivalence' to unify 'the people' by presenting their individual demands, fears, and grievances against the social 'other' as analogous (Figure 1). This task is facilitated by the discursive creation of 'empty signifiers', that are vague and malleable symbols or conceptualisations of universal ideals, which have a homogenising function in a highly heterogeneous reality.
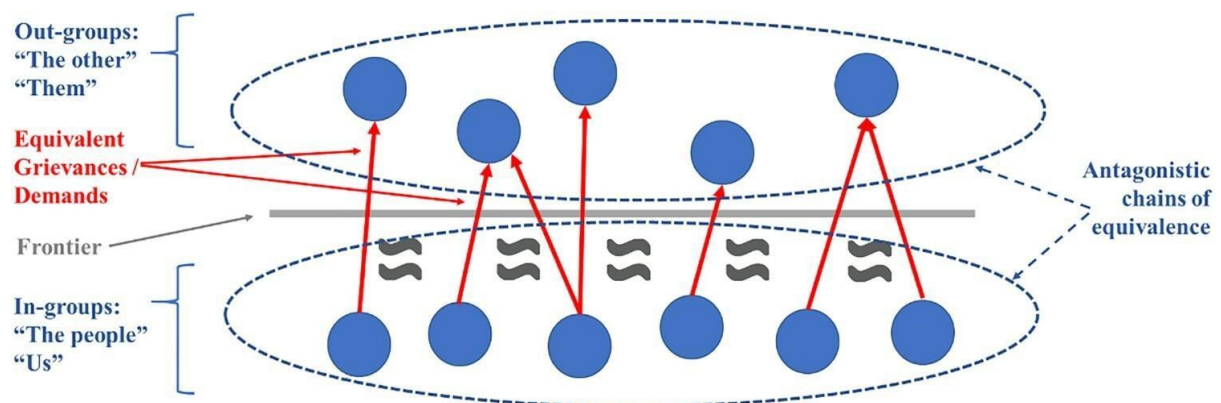

Figure 1: Laclau's chains of equivalence. Source: Olivas Osuna 2022

Eurosceptic parties, establish 'chains of equivalence' —usually adapted to specific geopolitical and social contexts— to cut across different social sectors and interests seeking to construct 'the people' as the union of those who oppose the (European) elites or other types of social 'other', such as immigrants and religious and ethnolinguistic minorities. As in other forms of populism, Eurosceptics present their movement as a struggle against different, but equivalent, forms of subordination or exploitation (Laclau & Mouffe 2001). Depending on the situation, Eurosceptic leaders bundle and foster grievances against 'Brussels', the 'Troika', 'EU elites', or 'European bureaucrats' who they blame for a variety of issues. While left-wing parties —such as *La France Insoumise*, *Podemos* and *Syriza*— accused the EU of raising inequality and job insecurity, right-wing ones —such as UKIP, *Rassemblement National* and *Fratelli d'Italia*— focused their critiques on growing immigration, higher taxes and 'red tape'. There are also overlapping stances across the ideological such as claims around loss of

sovereignty, democratic representativeness, relative economic decline, and de-industrialisation.

Via simplistic populist messages Eurosceptic leaders try to generate a shared sense of frustration and belonging to *a* people, defined in opposition to a not clearly defined 'enemy', that can be internal, external or both. In these Manichean depictions of the self and the other, they incorporate local specificities and anxieties to maximise the effects elicited in each specific population. Borders become a discursive resource for populist leaders who can pick, emphasise, or mute them to suit best their interests and agendas (Biancalana & Mazzoleni 2020; Lamour & Varga 2020) or to legitimise certain forms of exclusion (Wodak 2015: 2-6). These exclusionary constructions of the people Eurosceptic parties promote have been also fuelled by the tabloidization of news regarding Europe (Zapettini 2021) and the normalisation of ethno-nationalist and nativist discourses (Krzyżanowski 2020).

Assessing and comparing populist ideas, discourses, strategies, and performances entails certain complications, such as disentangling populism from nationalism or demagoguery, agreeing on a specific definition of the concepts, adopting a minimalistic or multidimensional approach to the term, and operationalising populism as a matter of 'nature' or 'degree' (Olivas Osuna 2021: 830-836). Nonetheless, a variety of new instruments and tools have been introduced to assess populism at both 'supply-' and 'demand-side' levels. These instruments help us produce data that can be assessed statistically and qualitatively in conjunction with data on Eurosceptic attitudes, discourses, policies, and support for Eurosceptic parties, among others. Therefore, these populism measurement strategies may prove decisive in better understanding the rise of Euroscepticism and in designing policies to address them.

On the one hand, the literature on populism offers a variety of textual analysis techniques that can be applied to political manifestos, speeches, official communications and even statements on social media by parties or their leaders. Some authors assess the degree of populist Euroscepticism via content analysis of party manifestos (Gomez-Reino & Plaza-Colodro 2018, Olivas Osuna 2022), or the examination of their press releases (Bernhard & Kriesi 2019), meanwhile others rely on automated dictionary-based (Rooduijn & Pauwels 2011) and on supervised machine learning analyses (Di Cocco & Monechi 2021) of populists' texts.

The study of the 'supply-side' of Eurosceptic populism can be also made via expert surveys, i.e., building additive indexes from country specialists' responses. For instance, the PopuList classifies parties as populist, far right, far left and/or Eurosceptic in 30 countries (Rooduijn et al 2020), Global Party Survey (Norris 2020) analyses populist rhetoric across 1052 parties in 163 countries; and the Political Parties Expert Survey (Meijers & Zaslove 2021)(Figure 2) compares populist attributes, such as Manichean worldview, indivisible people, general will, people-centrism and anti-elitism across 250 parties in 28 countries. Although these techniques for the analysis of the supply side are usually applied at a national level, parties and leaders can instrumentalise distinct narratives at international and sub-state level, and make them evolve to capitalise emerging societal threats and fears. The programmatic and discursive variability observed across Eurosceptic parties is simply the tip of the iceberg. To really understand the Eurosceptic appeal, we need to apply these tools at a regional and local level too.
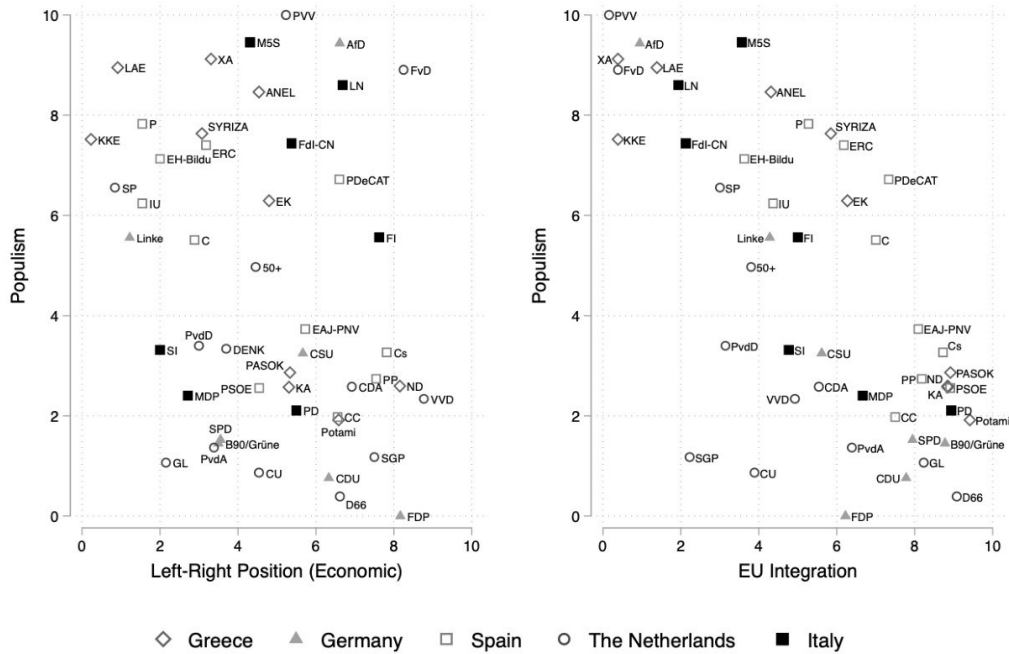
Figure 2: Scatter plots for populism / left-right (economic) and populism / EU integration party positions, Greece, Germany, Spain, Netherlands, and Italy (Meijers & Zaslove 2021: 396)

Through a more micro-level analysis on the communications of Eurosceptic parties we can identify core populist dimensions or attributes (and their relative salience) that may be then used to establish comparisons and distinguish typologies within Euroscepticism (Olivas Osuna 2021). For example:

1) Eurosceptic parties establish a binary logic in which the EU elites are opposed to the people. This antagonism is also manifested in how EU institutions are blamed and on the radical solutions proposed.

2) They try to delegitimize the EU, the political elites, and immigrants on moral grounds: the 'corrupt other vs virtuous people'. The latter are usually portrayed as 'left behind' or 'voiceless' victims of the former, who are suspected to conspire and act following hidden motives.

3) Society is depicted in an idealised and ahistorical manner, based on nationalistic narratives that emphasise constitutive myths. The local economy and identities are presented as threatened by the forces of globalisation and the EU.

4) The populist conception of sovereignty is founded on a majoritarian understanding of politics, dichotomisation of policy choices and on the reliance on direct democracy instruments, such as referendums. Political institutions, minority rights and laws that are considered against the 'will of the people' are disregarded. 'Take back control' becomes a common theme.

5) Personalistic leaders use an aggressive style and 'bad manners' to connect directly with 'the people' and present themselves as an alternative to the distant mainstream politicians and Brussels' bureaucrats. A more multidimensional approach to the analysis of Eurosceptic discourses can assist in determining why party narratives (supply) resonate in different degrees with voters' attitudes (demand) depending on the context (Figure 3).
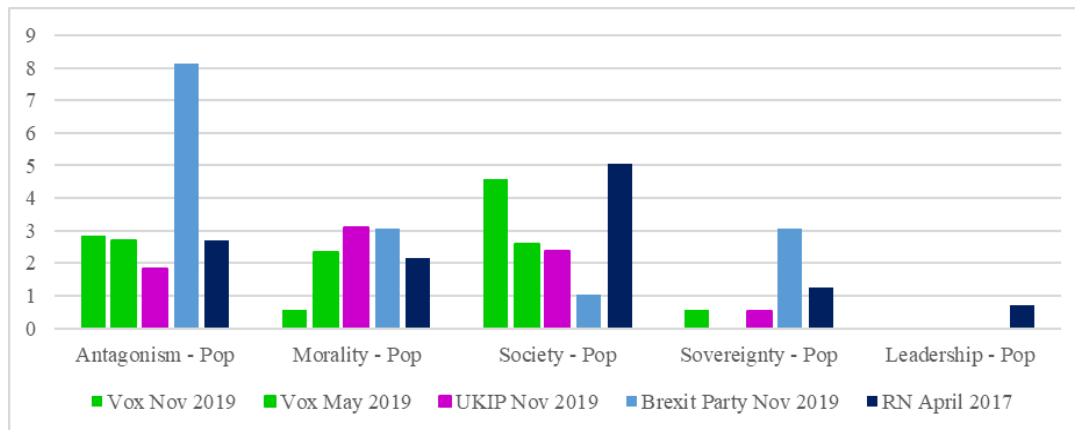
Figure 3: Example of comparative analysis of density of populist references in the political manifestos of four Eurosceptic parties (Olivas Osuna 2022).

On the other hand, over the last decade many authors have created and used instruments to capture the supply-side of populism, i.e., individuals' attitudes and beliefs. This is achieved via large-n surveys in which people are asked to express their degree of agreement with certain items/statements on a Likert scale (Akkerman et al. 2014; Elchardus & Spruyt 2016; Schultz et al. 2018; Hobolt et al. 2016). Each of these items are grounded on different attributes or dimensions of the populist construct. Usually, these scales include questions related to the notion of popular sovereignty, anti-elitism, and Manichean worldview (Table 1). These surveys may yield different results depending on the geographic area and scope of the study.

Zooming in specific countries or local areas can help explain why some Eurosceptic parties often meet with very discrepant levels of popular support in different geographic areas (Dijkstra el al. 2020). Dominant collective interpretations and specific socio-economic trajectories shape citizens' Eurosceptic attitudes (Olivas Osuna et al. 2021; Gartzou-Katsouyanni 2021). Table 2 provides an illustration of how the analyses of populist attitudes (and other psychosocial attitudinal scales) can help understand Euroscepticism and unveil different patterns across countries. Data was collected in April 2022, through an original survey conducted by Qualtrics Research in Greece, Italy and Spain (N=3000; N=1000 in each of the countries).

Table 1: Populism items in several widely used scales of populist attitudes.

Akkerman et al. (2014)	Elchardus and Spruyt (2016)	Hobolt et al. (2016)	Schultz et al. (2018)
'The politicians in the [COUNTRY] parliament need to follow the will of the people.'	'The opinion of ordinary people is worth more than that of experts and politicians.'	'Most politicians do not care about the people.'	'MPs in Parliament very quickly lose touch with ordinary people.'
'The people, and not politicians, should make our most important policy decisions.'	'Politicians should listen more closely to the problems the people have'	'The people, and not politicians, should make our most important policy decisions.'	'The differences between ordinary people and the ruling elite are much greater than the differences between ordinary people.'
'The political differences between the elite and the people are larger than the differences among the people.'	'Ministers should spend less time behind their desks, and more among the ordinary people'	'Most politicians are trustworthy' (reverse)	'People like me have no influence on what the government does.'
'I would rather be represented by a citizen than by a specialized politician.'	'People who have studied for a long time and have many diplomas do not really know what makes the world go round'	'Politicians are the main problem in [COUNTRY]'	'Politicians talk too much and take too little action.'
'Elected officials talk too much and take too little action.'		'Having a strong leader in government is good for [COUNTRY] even if the leader bends the rules to get things done.'	'The people should have the final say on the most important political issues by voting on them directly in referendums.'
'Politics is ultimately a struggle between good and evil.'		'Most politicians care only about the interests of the rich and powerful.'	'The people should be asked whenever important decisions are taken.'
'What people call "compromise" in politics is really just selling out on one's principles.'		'What people call "compromise" in politics is really just selling out one's principles.'	'The people, not the politicians, should make our most important policy decisions.'
'Interest groups have too much influence over political decisions.'			'The politicians in Parliament need to follow the will of the people.' 'Ordinary people all pull together.'
			'Ordinary people are of good and honest character.'
			'Ordinary people share the same values and interests.
			'Although the Swiss are very different from each other, when it comes down to it they all think the same.'

The table summarises the correlations between trust in the EU, populist attitudes (6 items, Akkerman et al. 2014), nativism (5 items, Young et al. 2019), satisfaction with the governance in the country (6 variables), trust in institutions (3 variables, trust in the parliament, judiciary, and police forces), how important is to live in a democracy and left-right ideological placement. It shows that populist attitudes are negatively correlated with trust in the EU, but that the relationship is much stronger in Greece and Italy than in Spain. Anti-immigration views and considering important to live in a democracy are not correlated with populist views in our sample. Likewise, this exploratory analysis reveals that low trust in the EU is associated to left-wing individuals in Greece and right-wing ones in Italy, but there is not a statistical correlation if we take the three countries together. These results confirm the need to consider different political contexts and the need to revisit simplistic fit-for-all explanations on the roots of Euroscepticism.

Table 2: Correlations Matrix. Greece, Italy, Spain and total.

Greece	Populism (Akkerman et al.)	Left-Right	Political Satisfaction	Importance of democracy	Nativism	Trust in country institutions
Left-Right	-0.19***					
Political Satisfaction	-0.46***	0.36***				
Importance of democracy	-0.03	0.01	0.13***			
Nativism (Young et al.)	0.03	0.02	0.05	0.13***		
Trust in country institutions	-0.42***	0.32***	0.79***	0.18***	0.12***	
Trust in the EU	-0.46***	0.24***	0.65***	0.11***	-0.03	0.63***

Spain	Populism (Akkerman et al.)	Left-Right	Political Satisfaction	Importance of democracy	Nativism	Trust in country institutions
Left-Right	0.00					
Political Satisfaction	-0.34***	0.05**				
Importance of democracy	-0.03	-0.03*	0.18***			
Nativism (Young et al.)	-0.03	0.05**	0.02	0.10***		
Trust in country institutions	-0.32***	0.16***	0.72***	0.21***	-0.02	
Trust in the EU	-0.33***	0.02	0.63***	0.17***	-0.05**	0.64***

Italy	Populism (Akkerman et al.)	Left-Right	Political Satisfaction	Importance of democracy	Nativism	Trust in country institutions
Left-Right	0.16***					
Political Satisfaction	-0.36***	-0.04				
Importance of democracy	-0.05	-0.09**	0.18***			
Nativism (Young et al.)	0.03	-0.01	0.07*	0.12***		
Trust in country institutions	-0.33***	-0.05	0.78***	0.21***	0.09**	
Trust in the EU	-0.37***	-0.18***	0.67***	0.24***	0.05	0.68***

Total (3 countries)	Populism (Akkerman et al.)	Left-Right	Political Satisfaction	Importance of democracy	Nativism	Trust in country institutions
Left-Right	0.00					
Political Satisfaction	-0.34***	0.05**				
Importance of democracy	-0.03	-0.03*	0.18***			
Nativism (Young et al.)	-0.03	0.05**	0.02	0.10***		
Trust in country institutions	-0.32***	0.16***	0.72***	0.21***	-0.02	
Trust in the EU	-0.33***	0.02	0.63***	0.17***	-0.05**	0.64***

Note: Pearson correlation coefficients (*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$).

Finally, the literature analysing the relationship between populism and crisis provides a valuable framework to study Euroscepticism. Populist movements usually appear within a crisis context (Laclau 2005). Crises erode trust on political representatives, fuel grievances, and serve as a justification for radical measures such as those proposed by Eurosceptic leaders (Roberts 2015). Crises are discursively (re)constructed and performed by populist leaders (Moffitt 2015) that seek to generate and exploit moral panic. They create an opportunity to fuel indignation, anger, and even hatred as mobilising forces. Thus, populist politicians attempt to turn social, health and economic crises into political ones (Olivas Osuna & Rama 2021). The impact of crises is often asymmetric given that some geographical areas are more exposed than others. Hence, to understand and prepare for the exclusionary discourses that Eurosceptics employ in the context of catastrophes or major threats, we need to assess how these crises are constructed and perceived in different places.

In sum, populism theory can be handy as lenses to better understand the roots of Eurosceptic attitudes and the success of Eurosceptic parties. Populist discourses serve to articulate different grievances and demands and direct them towards *a* 'other' sometimes the EU institutions and public servants. But it is also worth noting that populist discourses usually are rooted on 'real' structural problems and inequalities of specific places. A populist Eurosceptic vote is sometimes a 'vote of desperation, a cry for help' that is motivated by a pessimistic (often misled) interpretation of the individual's micro and macro contexts. Our analyses should not be circumscribed to the national level, but also investigate specific local and regional realities.

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