

France's Front National and Front de Gauche are both labelled as populist. But they are far from two sides of the same coin.

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In recent years, France has seen a rise of parties that have been branded as 'populist' by media and academics. But what is populism, and is it necessarily a bad thing? Philippe Marlière argues that, in France, the concept of populism is an ambivalent one, often used by those in the mainstream to brand those who disagree as demagogues. Ultimately, its use has led to the conflation of two very differently oriented parties, the far-right Front National, and the radical left Front de Gauche.



Traditionally, the notion of 'populism' has been used to refer to the opportunistic exploitation of popular, sometimes demagogic, sentiments with a resonance amongst the masses. More recently, the label of 'populism' has been more loosely applied by the media and in academic circles. In its currently accepted meaning, populism essentially entails: a criticism of the forms and practices of liberal democracy; a movement that tends to draw its values from the past and which offers an ideological and sentimental landmark; demagoguery and 'catch-all' politics; and a 'Manichean' worldview in which the 'people' are celebrated and the political elites are presented as 'corrupt' and 'out of touch'. Populism is therefore about siding with 'the people' against 'the elites'.

Such typology is not entirely enlightening. Firstly, to be critical of liberal-democratic institutions does not necessarily make a politician or a party an enemy of those institutions, let alone a threat to democracy. Secondly, mainstream parties arguably can also draw inspiration and values from the past. Think, for instance, of conservatives and traditional social-democrats. Thirdly, there is nothing wrong about popular movements singling out 'corrupt' and 'out of touch' politicians. Fourthly, virtually all parties across the political spectrum are desperate to be in tune with 'vox pop' and practice various forms of 'catch-all' politics. Otherwise, why would they bother to run focus groups and why would they be over-reliant on opinion polls? This shows that populism is a rather ambivalent concept and therefore one has to exercise a degree of caution when using it.



Election posters for the Front de Gauche and Jean-Luc Mélenchon Credit: Thomas Bartherote (Creative Commons BY SA)

More than anywhere else in Europe, the notion of populism has been greatly used in French politics and academia. This is largely due to the persisting electoral successes of the Front National, an extreme-right party, from the mid-1980s onward. It is quite ironic to note that the reference to populism in French media and academia is inversely proportional to the presence and visibility of the 'people' in politics (understood as working-class or 'popular' classes). In other words, the less represented the 'popular' classes are in political parties, in parliament or in government, the more populism is branded a threat for French society.

Talks about 'populism' culminated in 2005, when after a politicised debate nationwide, 55% of French voters rejected the European Constitution. Mainstream parties and media had all called for a 'yes' vote. They were prompt to reprimand an 'irrational' and 'immature' electorate which had followed 'populist' politicians from the right and from the left. Hardly one year later, the Lisbon Treaty – which is essentially the repackaged European Constitution – was adopted by heads of state behind closed doors. This time, the French government did not consult its people. Nicolas Sarkozy, then French president, publicly admitted that had he organised a new referendum, the French would have opposed it again. To paraphrase Bertold Brecht: by voting 'the wrong way', the French 'people had forfeited the confidence of the government'. As the government could not possibly 'dissolve the people and elect another', it opted to impose its decision in this most undemocratic manner.

There is more to it than the question of people's 'political immaturity'. The 'populism' tag also indicates that the popular classes are potentially morally corrupt and dangerous. Evidence of this is that they support demagogues. By labelling 'populist' political movements as opposed as the Front National and the Front de Gauche, one tends to demonise forces which at best have only one thing in common: they disagree with mainstream political parties' policies. In so doing, one confuses political movements which are historically antagonistic. For instance, the Front National's Marine Le Pen and the Front de Gauche's Jean-Luc Mélenchon are both frequently called 'populist' in the media and by some academics. Yet their worldview and policies are totally at loggerheads. Le Pen's politics is essentially 'ethno-centred' (end of immigration, anti-Islam stand, discrimination against foreigners), whereas Mélenchon's politics is essentially a radical critique of neoliberal economics. By branding both politicians as 'populist', one rather insidiously suggests to the public that the Front National and the Front de Gauche are two symmetrical forces. In other words, they are the two flip sides of the same coin or the same rotten apples that spoil the barrel.



Front National leader Marine le Pen Credit: Blandine LC(Creative Commons BY)

In the mid-1980s, the French political scientist Pierre-André Taguieff [presented](#) the Front National as a 'National-Populism'; a notion originally used in the United States to describe the New Right. He was adamant that the Front National was no longer 'extreme' or 'fascist', but simply 'radical'. This is a contentious interpretation. The Front National in the mid-1980s was a party which had been founded ten years earlier by a ragbag of Monarchists, former Nazi collaborators, [Maurrasians](#), former OAS members (French terrorist organisation in Algeria), and whose leader had been condemned several times for publicly expressing racial and anti-Semitic abuse. Critics saw it as an attempt to water down the Front National fascist legacy (Vichy and Pétainism, French Algeria), as well as the extreme nature of some of its policies (on immigration and nationality law). Indeed to call the Front National 'populist' sounds less extreme and threatening. It somehow gives the party an air of 'respectability'. Some have contended that it helped kick-start a long process of [de-demonisation](#) of the French extreme right.

The categorisation of the extreme right as 'populist' has above all helped discredit both the left and the popular classes themselves. In the mid-1995, Pascal Perrineau [talked of](#) 'Gauchisme-Lepénisme' to explain that a significant fraction of communist voters had transferred their votes to the Front National. If true, this would demonstrate that the 'two political extremes' converge and are politically compatible. Furthermore, it would ascertain the idea that blue collar workers are racist and authoritarian, and therefore politically unreliable. Annie Collovald has [demonstrated](#) that this was a far-fetched interpretation. Marine Le Pen may have [received](#) 31% of the working-class vote in the first round of the 2012 presidential election; the truth of the matter is that 69% of them did not vote for her. Furthermore, the notion of 'Gauchisme-Lepénisme' overlooks two important factors. Firstly, a very large number of working-class voters abstain from voting altogether. Secondly, since the 1950s, there have always been a fair number of working-class people who have rejected the left in France. So there is nothing new here.

"Reasonable' commentators in France suggest that the popular classes switch their allegiance from mainstream parties to the extreme right and the radical left for essentialist reasons; because they are allegedly 'racist', 'authoritarian' and politically 'immature'. Few wonder whether this vote transfer might not have to do with the socio-political environment, such as the economic policies implemented by mainstream parties (austerity), the economic crisis, unemployment, the loss of class identity or politicians' corruption and broken promises. As for the so-called 'authoritarian' penchant of the popular classes, the 'reasonable' mainstream parties only have themselves to blame. Both the centre-left Parti Socialiste and the centre-right Union pour un Mouvement Populaire have for long put at the heart of their programmes and rhetoric the issues of immigration and law and order, and both have advocated a 'tough stand' on crime.

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