Populism: Notes for UPSC Polity

Populism is a political stance that stresses upon the idea of the “people” while in opposition with a real or perceived elite or establishment.

There are several definitions of populism put forth by political scientists and this article will highlight some of them while at the same time give further details about populism within the context of the IAS Exam.

Definitions of Populism

● The commonly used approach to populism is the one which is defined as per specific ideas. As per this definition, populism refers to those political groups and individuals that make appeals to “people” and then contrast this group against “the elite”.

● Political scientist Manuel Anselmi proposed that populism be defined as putting a homogenous community of people which perceives itself as the absolute holder of popular sovereignty.

● According to Rovira Kaltwasser (Professor at the School of Political Science of the Diego Portales University (UDP) in Santiago de Chile), populism is, ”a kind of mental map through which individuals analyse and comprehend political reality”.

● In socio-economic terms the definition of populism is with regard to irresponsible economic policies in which the government engages in large-scale public spending, through foreign loans mostly, following which the country will suffer from hyperinflation.

● In political discourse, populism is used in an negative way be referring to politics that is involved in promoting simple solutions to complex problems by appealing to the emotional sentiments of population.

● Examples of this would include a governing political party lowering taxes before an election or promising to provide things to the electorate which the state cannot afford to pay for.

Origins of Populism

The term populism came into use in the late 19th century alongside the promotion of democracy. In the United States, it was closely associated with the People's Party, while in the Russian Empire it was linked to the agrarian socialist Narodnik movement.
In the 1960s the term became increasingly popular among social scientists in Western countries, and later in the 20th century it was applied to various political parties active in liberal democracies. In the 21st century, the term became increasingly common in political discourse, particularly in the Americas and Europe, to describe a range of left-wing, right-wing, and centrist groups that challenged the established parties.

Characteristics of Populism

The following are the characteristics commonly associated with populism:

**Use of the term “the people”**

In populism, ‘people’ are represented as a homogeneous group who are virtuous in nature, disregarding the fact that they come from different backgrounds and bring a whole host of complex problems. Populists encourage a sense of shared identity among different groups within society and facilitate their mobilisation toward a common cause.

A second way in which "the people" is conceived by populists combines a socioeconomic or class based category with one that refers to certain cultural traditions and popular values.

A third use of "the people" by populists employs it as a synonym for "the nation", whether that national community be conceived in either ethnic or civic terms. In such a framework, all individuals regarded as being "native" to a particular state, either by birth or by ethnicity, could be considered part of "the people".

Overall, populism represents the people as underdogs and that they are oppressed, making promises to uplift them from their present condition.

**Concept of “the elite”**

Anti-elitism is considered a part and parcel of populism. Populism discourse suggests that along with condemning the political elite, the economic, cultural, academic, and media elite are also condemned. They are normally represented as one homogeneous, corrupt group.

In various instances, populists claim that "the elite" is working against the interests of the country. In the European Union (EU), for instance, various populist groups allege that their national political elites put the interests of the EU itself over those of their own nation-states.

**General Will**

Another component of populism is the idea of the general will. By emphasizing it, many populist share the idea that rather than choosing laws for themselves, these citizens are only mobilised for elections in
which their only option is to select their representatives rather than taking a more direct role in legislation and governance. Populists often favour the use of direct democratic measures such as referendums and plebiscites.

**Right-wing and Left Wing Populism**

As a result of the various different ideologies with which populism can be paired, the forms that populism can take vary widely. Populism itself cannot be positioned on the left–right political spectrum, and both right and left-wing populisms exist. Populist movements can also mix divisions between left and right, for instance by combining xenophobic attitudes commonly associated with the far-right with redistributive economic policies closer to those of the left.