

Successes of the language of populism...

How have politicians twisted and shaped their words to sway public opinion, and what is the appeal of populism?

What do Putin, Trump, and Nigel Farage all share in common?

Despite some very obvious differences, at some point they have all been labelled “populists”.

What is a populist, you may ask? In politics, “populism” is the idea that society is separated into two groups, both pitted against each-other. The “populist” leader takes the side of the “many” (think Corbyn’s slogan – “For the many, not the few”). There are three main types of populism, each differentiated by which group they oppose.

The first type, which is most similar to Corbyn’s ideas, is socio-economic populism. This claims that the “true” people are the hard-working members of the working class, and the outsiders are big businesses and capital owners who “prop up an international capitalist system”. Key themes include anti-capitalism, working-class solidarity, and presenting any foreign businesses as the enemy.

Anti-establishment populism paints the true people as victims of a state with different or outdated interests. It presents the other politicians, those with the ideas of the prior regime, as the enemy. This type of populism aims to “purge the state from corruption”.

The final type is cultural populism, which claims the true people are the native members of that nation, and outsiders can include immigrants, criminals, and ethnic and religious minorities. Cultural populism is passionate about religious traditionalism, as well as painting migrants as the enemy. An example could be the current US president we all know and love: Trump.

Trump is famously known for his questionable choice of words. His speeches are almost always very simplified, which doesn’t exactly present him as someone with enough knowledge to run one of the most powerful countries in the world! (And I would argue he doesn’t, but I digress) Still, with this informal language, he somehow successfully appeals to the “people” and the masses. Using this simple language, he can attract the 32 million illiterate American adults, 21 percent reading below a 5th grade level, and functionally illiterate 19 percent of high school graduates (which means they can’t read well enough to manage daily living and perform tasks required by many jobs.) (As of 2016).

By contrast, the language of the contemporary left is anti-populist. Its vocabulary, much of it taken from academia, is the opposite of accessible—it has to be decoded and learned. Terms such as *centered* and *marginalized* separate outsiders from insiders, creating an immediate divide between those educated and those not.

Trump has managed to appeal to the “many” who feel that they are excluded from the Left’s speeches, using simple noun-noun complexes (‘We will construct (verb) a wall (noun)’ (1 verb, 1 noun); ‘Construction (noun) of the wall (noun) will take (verb) time (noun)’ (1 verb, 3 nouns) to draw in his viewers. Since his language is just so simplified, there isn’t a “barrier” between him and his voters, and he can connect to those who feel the Left’s vocabulary is confusing.

I’m certainly not saying Trump comes without his own confusion. Having researched confusing Trump quotes and the first website being “SEVENTY-FIVE stupid things that Trump has said”, it would be difficult to argue against that.

(I had to include this quote from the New York Times because it did make me laugh: "To be blunt, people would vote for me. They just would. Why? Maybe because I'm so good looking.")

Sure, that’s it, Donald.

...

Maybe Trump wasn’t the best example. It’s difficult to argue that he himself isn’t confusing, but you can see that he embodies the opinions of a cultural populist, and really places himself right within the people (and often below, with some of the remarks he manages to get away with). But, something about his painfully simple language must have worked, right? Trump’s populism - the politics of pitting the common people against their supposed enemies, evoking strong emotions in colloquial language - *is* American. That’s why it’s been successful, and consistently underestimated by Trump’s opponents.

There are many other examples of vocabulary being shaped to influence public opinion. Nigel Farage, for example, declared Brexit as “a victory for the real people”, subsequently labelling the 48% of the British public who did not vote for Brexit as somehow less of a real person. According to that, he wouldn’t be too surprised if he saw 16,141,241 centaurs, fauns and minotaurs walking the streets of London.

The rhetorical division between the people and outsiders that Farage used is a powerful political tool. It enables him to tap into the politics of anger and resentment. Populists rarely create social divisions from scratch. Rather, they exploit and stoke social divisions that have often been simmering under the surface of politics for many years. Furthermore, populists often dramatise social divisions as threats to the nation and elevate them to a matter of national urgency.

So, we have two clear-cut examples of populism “working”, but what do the trends show across the world?

According to trends, populism is **ironically** becoming more popular. The rise in global populism over this period is remarkable. Between 1990 and 2018, the number of populists in power around the world has increased fivefold, from four to 20. This includes countries

not only in Latin America and in Eastern and Central Europe, where populism has traditionally been most prevalent, but also in Asia and in Western Europe.

So, say what you will about these leaders, but clearly, the use of language is absolutely vital in becoming a leader in today's world, and they seem to have found something that works.