

Prologue

Populism continues to resist disciplinary enclosure. It is at once a language of political antagonism, a style of performance, a theory of representation, and increasingly, a legal and technological problem. For that reason, any serious engagement with populism today must move across the boundaries of political theory, political sociology, media studies, and public law. The contributions gathered in this issue do precisely that. Taken together, they show that populism is not a static category or settled concept, but an evolving field of contestation whose meanings, practices, and consequences are being reworked in real life.

One of the strengths of the present issue is that it does not presume a single point of entry into the study of populism. Instead, it approaches the phenomenon from several complementary angles. At the conceptual level, the issue revisits one of the enduring questions in populism studies, namely whether populism should be understood primarily by the form it takes or by the content it advances. The study of the work produced by Chantal Mouffe on left populism and by Patrick Dennen on “aristopopulism” returns readers to this foundational debate by placing post-Marxist and post-liberal populist thought in conversation with the liberal-pluralist mainstream. In doing so, it suggests that the differences between populisms may be as analytically significant as the formal similarities that often lead them to be grouped.

This theoretical concern is carried into a more empirical register by the article on populist moderation in Italy and Spain. Rather than focusing solely on ideology or party programmes, it directs attention to populism as a political style, examining manners, appeals, visibility, performance, and the informal codes through which leaders construct proximity to “the people” and distance from elites. Its findings complicate any easy assumption that governing responsibility necessarily domesticates populism. Some parties moderate, some radicalise, and some combine both tendencies across different dimensions of political style. In that sense, populism appears not simply as a doctrine, but as a flexible repertoire of political presentation that adapts unevenly to institutional pressures.

The issue also speaks directly to one of the defining transformations of contemporary politics, the migration of populist mobilisation into digitally mediated and increasingly algorithmic environments. The article on digital populism and AI demonstrates that the relation between populism and technology is no longer exhausted by familiar discussions of social media, virality, or platform logic. The appropriation of AI, recommender systems, automated content generation, and microtargeting strategies raises a more profound question about the future of

popular sovereignty itself. If democratic will formation is increasingly shaped by opaque technical infrastructures, then the populist claim to embody the voice of “the people” becomes entangled with forms of algorithmic steering, manipulation, and epistemic fragmentation that law has only begun to address.

The legal and normative stakes of populism are explored further in the article on human rights decline in the United States between 2016 and 2025. Here the focus shifts from rhetoric and mediation to institutions, doctrines and the cumulative transformation of constitutional practice. By tracing changes across freedom of expression, minority rights, immigration and asylum, and judicial independence, the article shows how populism may operate not outside legality but through it, using law as an instrument for majoritarian pressure and exclusionary politics. The contribution is an important reminder that rights’ erosion in established democracies is rarely sudden. More often, it proceeds through a gradual normalisation of exceptional measures, holistic discourse, and institutional strain.

What unities the papers in this issue, then, is not a single definition of populism, but a shared recognition that populism must be studied through its tensions between people and elite, representation and performance, democracy and constitutional restraint, immediacy and mediation, voice and technology. The issue shows that populism is not merely something political actors say. It is also something they stage, perform, encode, and institutionalize. It is argued over in theory, performed in everyday political communication, accelerated through digital systems, and contested in courts, rights regimes, and public institutions. Thus, the collection offers more than a set of case studies but the increasingly interdisciplinary maturity of populism studies itself. The contributions assembled invite readers to refine their understanding but also to confront its changing modalities. In the contemporary world.

As a guest editor, I hope this issue encourages further dialogue across disciplinary boundaries and stimulates new research into the conceptual, performative, and legal transformations of populism. If the articles gathered here make one point especially clear, it is that populism remains not a residue or exceptional phenomenon, but one of the central issues through which contemporary democracy must now be understood.

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