

Populism in Power: Discourse and Performativity in SYRIZA and Donald Trump

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Populism has been extensively analyzed through lenses such as democratic theory, public communication, and psycho-social perspectives. However, less attention has been given to how populists govern, beyond the assumption that they pose a threat to democracy or struggle to maintain their rhetoric once in office. In *Populism in Power: Discourse and Performativity in SYRIZA and Donald Trump*, Giorgos Venizelos fills this gap by examining how populists translate their discourse into governance in two different scenarios. Rather than focusing on policy achievements or impacts on democracy, Venizelos investigates through a comparative approach the charismatic function of populist discourse—centered on antagonistic narratives, transgressive style, and appeals to ‘the people.’ His findings challenge the expectation that populism fades in power.

Venizelos offers a comparative study of how populist movements evolve in government, focusing on SYRIZA in Greece and Donald Trump in the United States. The book challenges conventional assumptions that populism is inherently unstable or unsustainable in power, arguing instead that populist leaders can retain their populist style while governing, albeit in different ways. By drawing on Ernesto Laclau’s theory of populism as a political logic that constructs identities of ‘the people’ against an ‘elite,’ Venizelos demonstrates how SYRIZA’s left-wing populism and Trump’s right-wing populism share similar discursive-performative strategies, despite their ideological differences. Venizelos also proves the possibility of comparing populisms with socio-cultural definitions, which confronts the necessity of an ‘ideational approach’ (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018). Each type of populism’s trajectory in power depends thus on the specific socio-political

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context of its articulations and their host ideology, understood as a thicker ideology such as liberalism, conservatism or communism.

The book is divided in seven chapters. Chapter 1 delves into a critical review of contemporary literature on populism in power, highlighting its roots in the negative perception of ‘populism’ in public discourse, and argues that understanding populism’s transformation from opposition to power requires examining governing populists’ discursive performances and emotional identification with ‘the people.’ I would emphasize that populists do not always want to change bureaucracy or laws, because of systemic or non-systemic pressures, and that the author chose specifically populists that were engaged on transforming it. Chapter 2 examines the emergence of SYRIZA and Donald Trump, tracing their roots in past populist mobilizations and emphasizing populism’s reactivating nature. In Chapter 3, the focus shifts to SYRIZA’s discourse during 2012–2015, exploring its progressive and democratic attributes and the construction of ‘the people’ through relations of equivalence against a shared “enemy”. Chapter 4 focuses on SYRIZA in power during 2015–2019, noting its retention of populist style while incorporating new repertoires; nonetheless, its retreat from key economic promises damaged the affective bond with ‘the people.’ Chapter 5 examines Donald Trump’s emergence as a political outsider in the US, utilizing a transgressive style to mobilize grassroots affects and construct an anti-establishment identity. Chapter 6 explores Trump’s populist discourse and performativity in the White House, showing its persistence and resonance despite rhetorical inconsistency and poor governance. Chapter 7 offers a comparative analysis of the two cases, revealing how they reinvented populist styles based on their ideologies, elicited different emotions, and related to political institutions in opposing ways, leading to divergent trajectories of affective collective identity. And, adhering to Ostiguy’s (2017) perspective on performative antagonism as a relational concept, maps socio-political space orthogonally with high/low (non-verbal aspects on *manners*) and left/right axes (ideologically). The politico-cultural component, cutting diagonally, relates to models of political leadership and decision-making (p. 30). While SYRIZA’s performance varied vastly along the axes, Trump’s discourse was more consistent, achieving a stronger counter-hegemonic impact, which underwent less changes, and had ‘a more “successful” counter-hegemonic effect than Tsipras’ (p. 223). A clear image on how SYRIZA and Trump are placed on these axes would be ideal. The author demonstrates *why* and *how* mainstream perspectives in populism studies have teleological or normative views, and *why* does it matter.

Venizelos understand populism as a political logic that creates collective identities – usually ‘the people’ – in against a construction of ‘the elite.’ What both identities have in common is their emptiness of content and the variety by their social-cultural spatiotemporal contexts, following Ernesto Laclau (1996). This means that although SYRIZA left-wing ideology differs greatly from Donald Trump’s (extreme) right-wing ideology both perform populism in their discourse and in government. While the former presented a dyadic and a chain of solidarity among the groups that constituted ‘the people,’ the latter clearly identified a deep vertical relationship with its people with a triadic (Judis 2016) discursive framework.

Venizelos rejects assumptions that populism is either an ideology (referring to a system of political ideas) or a regime type (the outcome perspective) because it depends on the host-ideology whether conservative, fascist, liberal, or socialist. One cannot determine its trajectory in power *a priori* (p. 221).

The book also masterfully compares seemingly extremely distant cases drawn closer by the same phenomenon, following an implicit 'most different system design' approach (Przeworski 1970). By criticizing the dominant and negative view of populism, the book shows how populism's trajectory in power depends on the specific socio-political context and the host ideology. This is specially important for comparisons involving Global South scholars, whether for understanding variances of populism over time in Latin America or differences and similarities with other populisms worldwide, such as in India (BJP) or in the Philippines (Rodrigo Duterte). No doubt Venizelos stands out from the crowd by not only comparing two unusual cases, but also comparing two contrasting host-ideologies.

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Data Availability

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