

Why Populism?

The rise to power of populists like Donald Trump is usually attributed to the shifting values and policy preferences of voters – the demand side. *Why Populism* shifts the public debate on populism and examines the other half of the equation – the supply side. Kenny argues that to understand the rise of populism is to understand the cost of different strategies for winning and keeping power. For the aspiring leader, populism – appealing directly to the people through mass communication – can be a quicker, cheaper, and more effective strategy than working through a political party.

Probing the long history of populism in the West from its Ancient Greek roots to the present, this highly readable book shows that the “economic laws of populism are constant.” “Forget ideology. Forget resentment. Forget racism or sexism.” Populism, the author writes, is the result of a hidden strategic calculus.

PAUL D. KENNY is an award-winning author of two previous books, *Populism and Patronage: Why Populists Win Elections in India, Asia, and Beyond* and *Populism in Southeast Asia*. He holds a PhD in political science from Yale University and degrees in economics and political economy from Trinity College Dublin and the London School of Economics.

Why Populism?

*Political Strategy from Ancient Greece
to the Present*

PAUL D. KENNY
Australian Catholic University



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press & Assessment

978-1-009-27529-3 — Why Populism?

Paul Kenny

Frontmatter

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 8EA, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

314-321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi – 110025, India

103 Penang Road, #05-06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of Cambridge University Press & Assessment, a department of the University of Cambridge.

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www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781009275293

DOI: 10.1017/9781009275262

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First published 2023

Printed in the United Kingdom by TJ Books Limited, Padstow Cornwall

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

NAMES: Kenny, Paul, 1981– author.

TITLE: Why populism? : political strategy from ancient Greece to the present / Paul Kenny, Australian Catholic University, Melbourne.

DESCRIPTION: First Edition. | New York : Cambridge University Press, 2023. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

IDENTIFIERS: LCCN 2022043282 (print) | LCCN 2022043283 (ebook) | ISBN 9781009275293 (Hardback) | ISBN 9781009275309 (Paperback) | ISBN 9781009275262 (epub)

SUBJECTS: LCSH: Populism—History.

CLASSIFICATION: LCC JC423 .K384 2023 (print) | LCC JC423 (ebook) | DDC 320.56/62—dc23/eng/20220930

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2022043282>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2022043283>

ISBN 978-1-009-27529-3 Hardback

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For Kate

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>page</i> ix
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xiii
1 The Price of Power	i
2 Populists before Parties	24
3 After the Revolution	55
4 Democracy's Children	92
5 Crisis and Charisma	132
6 Survival of the Fittest	163
7 Parties, Factions, and Populism	199
8 Populism and Democracy	218
<i>Notes</i>	231
<i>Index</i>	256

Preface

Men love power.

Alexander Hamilton¹

[H]e who neglects what is done for what ought to be done, sooner effects his ruin than his preservation.

Niccolò Machiavelli²

POLITICS IS ABOUT POWER

“Men,” said the inimitable Alexander Hamilton, “love power.” Politicians seek the highest office that their talents and resources will allow, and they seek as much authority as that office makes possible. Of course, we shouldn’t assume that politicians *only* want power or that they are devoid of other goals. No doubt, some politicians have a genuine desire to help (or harm) others. Yet whatever it is that politicians *want* to accomplish, they *need* power to do so. As the preeminent student of political power, Niccolò Machiavelli, wrote in his manual for government, *The Prince*, “[h]e who neglects what is done for what ought to be done, sooner effects his ruin than his preservation.” Power first, ideals later. Or in the words of Huey Long, governor of Louisiana and then United States senator, “First you must come into power – POWER – and then you can do things.”³

Populism, as Long himself knew well, is a strategy in this essential quest for power. This book seeks to explain why politicians choose populism rather than its alternatives. In its most naked form, the competition for power comes down to a clash of arms; assassinations, arrests, coups, bombs, and battles are its means. But if, as Mao Zedong said, “politics is war without bloodshed,” we

can think about the recruitment of a mass political party membership, vote buying, and social media communication as different sorts of weapons in an aspiring leader's strategic arsenal. Should a politician try to dominate elective office through a disciplined party machine? Or try to gain a following by handing out gifts to supporters? Or try to mobilize support by direct communication with the masses? Putting the recourse to arms aside, these *programmatic*, *patronage*, and *populist* strategies are the three main options from which a politician must choose.⁴

From the politician's perspective, in an ideal world, he might use elements of all these strategies. The more resources he has, the more he'll do, and just as in war, those with the most resources will usually be victorious. God, Napoleon quipped, is on the side with the heaviest artillery. In the 2008 US presidential race, Barack Obama raised and spent more than twice as much as his opponent, John McCain. In 1896, Republican stalwart William McKinley was even better endowed, with more than ten times the funds available to the charismatic William Jennings Bryan. On remarkably few occasions has an outspent candidate won the presidency. Yet because politicians typically compete with closely matched foes, they can ill afford to waste their resources. In any case, no politician has unlimited reserves to throw into the battle. For the politician, money spent on an excessively large personal victory today is money that can't be used to fund the campaigns of allies tomorrow. A landslide victory, according to the esteemed political scientist E. E. Schattschneider, "*is simply political extravagance.*" The ambitious politician must maximize his chances of winning and keeping power given constraints on his money, time, and talents. Good political strategists must be efficient. They must *economize*.⁵

Although my argument in this book is very much "economic," the explanation I offer is not one of how financial crises, unemployment, inflation, or inequality – the subjects of *macroeconomics* – have made populism more or less likely. This territory has been well covered by other writers. My approach is economic in a different sense. Nineteenth-century Scottish writer Thomas Carlyle famously called economics the "*dismal science.*" For modern economists, it is, as I recall learning in my very first weeks as an undergraduate, "the science of scarcity." This doesn't mean that economics should be a source of anxiety. Rather, it means that economics can be understood as the science of how trade-offs are weighed in a world where money, time, and energy are finite. Economics – or more precisely, *microeconomics* – as Nobel Prize-winner Ronald H. Coase put it, "is the science of human choice." Rather than being a specialized academic niche concerned with "the economy," economics is an approach to understanding human behavior in the most general sense.⁶

This "economic approach," as Gary Becker, another Nobel Prize winner termed it, is ideally suited to explaining why a political leader would choose one strategy rather than another to win and keep power. The economic approach takes as fundamental the idea that every choice entails *opportunity costs* – the hidden cost of the investment not made, the good not consumed, the path not

taken. Political strategy, as much as any commercial activity, represents a choice in a world of limited resources. Any money, time, or effort expended pursuing one strategy cannot be spent on others. For anyone who has ground their way through ECON 101, many of the concepts and ideas used in this book will be quite familiar, but no prior reading in economics is necessary to understand its main argument: Populism is a political strategy that relies on the use of a personalistic political organization and mass communication to mobilize support in the quest for power; it will be most successful when it is more cost effective than its alternatives.⁷

This sense for the economic logic of populism grew out of my doctoral dissertation research on the political development of post-independence India. Unlike most of its former colonial counterparts, India remained democratic for more than two decades after independence, thanks in large part to the deft distribution of patronage to regional elites by the country's first prime minister and leader of the Indian National Congress party, Jawaharlal Nehru. However, by the time Nehru's daughter, Indira Gandhi, became prime minister in 1966, regional power brokers had the ability to extract ever higher payments for the delivery of their vote banks to the national Congress party. For Mrs. Gandhi, "going once more direct to the people" over the heads of a cabal of these regional elites ominously known as *The Syndicate* was the economically rational choice. I soon found that my explanation for the Indian experience made sense of other well-known cases such as Venezuela and Peru, where the populist strategies of Hugo Chávez and Alberto Fujimori, respectively, were winning propositions amid their countries fraying party systems.⁸

The Asian and Latin American cases I examined in my first two books, *Populism and Patronage* and *Populism in Southeast Asia*, showed that the more costly it becomes to rule through patronage, the more likely populism is to emerge as a successful alternative. However, whenever I talked to Western audiences about my research on populism in these mostly poor and middle-income states, one of the first questions I inevitably received was about how this approach would travel to America or Europe: How, in particular, would it explain the rise of Donald Trump? *Why Populism?* is my attempt to answer that question.

Although Trump features prominently in this book, to really understand why populism has become increasingly prevalent in modern-day North America and Western Europe, I believe we have to put the present in its proper historical context. It is only by taking a longer view, all the way from the ancient world through to the rise of mass democracy in the twentieth century, that we can appreciate what is special about the present – that we can fully explain why Trump succeeded in 2016 whereas most other populists before him in American history have failed. What this historical perspective shows is that the economic laws of populism are constant; when the conditions that affect the cost of different types of political strategy change, so too does effectiveness of populism.

Acknowledgments

Given that I had little interest in, or knowledge of, populism as I began my academic career, I find myself looking back with some surprise that I've now completed yet another book on the subject. Populism has a way of sucking you in. If ten years and three books seem like a lot to dedicate to a single problem, I haven't done it alone. I owe most appreciation to Kate, my partner in everything. Amid illnesses and lockdowns, the last few years have made it even harder for us all to leave work at the "office," but Kate has shared my attention with Roosevelt, Churchill, De Gaulle, and others with equanimity and humor.

About halfway through the writing of this book, we moved from Canberra to Melbourne, as I left my position at the Australian National University (ANU) to join the new Institute for Humanities and Social Sciences at the Australian Catholic University (ACU). I thank the academic and professional staff at both ANU and ACU for providing such supportive research environments and making that transition as smooth as possible.

One of the reasons for my sustained interest in populism has been the amazing engagement I've had from colleagues and friends over the years. Once people learn that I study and write about people like Trump for a living, they're never short of a question or an opinion. I am grateful for all of those conversations. I've benefited from lots of direct and indirect engagement with fellow political scientists and economists on this book. I received valuable feedback from presentations of this project at Johns Hopkins University, the University of Canberra, Dublin City University, Korea University, and the Academia Sinica. I particularly want to thank Jan Werner Müller, Kurt Weyland, and Andrew Leigh, who read all or part of the manuscript, and provided me with very useful criticisms. I also thank the anonymous reviewers solicited by Cambridge University Press for their thoughtful comments.

Finally, I'd like to thank my editor at Cambridge University Press, Robert Dreesen, as well as Lucy Rhymmer, the editor of a previous book of mine, who connected us for this project. They and the rest of the team at Cambridge did a fantastic job in bringing this book to fruition.