

# The politics of style

Citation for published version (APA):

Schoor, C. (2020). *The politics of style: political performance caught between populism, elitism, and pluralism*. [Doctoral Thesis, Maastricht University]. ProefschriftMaken. <https://doi.org/10.26481/dis.20200824cs>

## Document status and date:

Published: 01/01/2020

## DOI:

[10.26481/dis.20200824cs](https://doi.org/10.26481/dis.20200824cs)

## Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

## Please check the document version of this publication:

- A submitted manuscript is the version of the article upon submission and before peer-review. There can be important differences between the submitted version and the official published version of record. People interested in the research are advised to contact the author for the final version of the publication, or visit the DOI to the publisher's website.
- The final author version and the galley proof are versions of the publication after peer review.
- The final published version features the final layout of the paper including the volume, issue and page numbers.

[Link to publication](#)

## General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal.

If the publication is distributed under the terms of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, indicated by the "Taverne" license above, please follow below link for the End User Agreement:

[www.umlib.nl/taverne-license](http://www.umlib.nl/taverne-license)

## Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us at:

[repository@maastrichtuniversity.nl](mailto:repository@maastrichtuniversity.nl)

providing details and we will investigate your claim.

## **The Politics of Style.**

### ***Political Performance caught between Populism, Elitism, and Pluralism.***

**In recent decades, populism has nestled into politics all over the world. This dissertation offers a new analytical model for assessing this development. The model reveals political presentations as a mix of populism, elitism, and pluralism. The systematic disentanglement of political presentations fosters a better understanding of political events such as the American elections and Brexit.**

The computer-guided analysis tool is used to analyze three political contexts: the US, the UK, and the Netherlands. The political context is important in these analyses; nothing is populist in itself, only in its specific context and in relation to pluralism and elitism.

Nonetheless, after analyzing performances in their own contexts, they become comparable on another level of abstraction. This allows a detailed comparison of the political styles of, for instance, Donald Trump and Boris Johnson.

### **The US**

The political styles of the following US politicians during the 2016 presidential election are analyzed and compared: Hillary Clinton, Bernie Sanders, Barack Obama, and Donald Trump. Trump's style is additionally analyzed over the three subsequent years in order to assess its development.

The results of the analyzes put into perspective the traditional characterization of American democracy as being deeply rooted in pluralism. Amongst the analyzed American politicians, only Obama is shown to be fully pluralist. Sanders' style is one of mixed populism-pluralism, and Clinton's mixes pluralism with elitism. Trump's style is found to have been fully populist during the 2016 presidential campaign. In later years, however, his style evolved from purely populist into mixed populism-elitism: as a president, Trump continues to create an internal populist frontier within American society. However, the opposition is no longer between the people and the elite; the new divide is between the 'real people'

## The model

The analysis model is based on the language structure underlying the concept of populism. This structure connects populism directly with the concepts of pluralism and elitism. In shifting constellations, the common features of two concepts are the exact opposite of the features of the third concept (see: one shared structure). This inevitably happens in three different dimensions: if not, the concepts would contradict themselves. The first dimension is the ideational dimension. The second is the social dimension. The third is the presentational dimension; the realm of communication and language. Populism means something else in every dimension and contradicts itself when those dimensions are mixed. However, the meaning of populism is unambiguous in each dimension. Together with pluralism and elitism, it provides a perfect set of definitions for political analysis, as it strictly delineates what is populist (elitist, pluralist) and what is not. The model describes the three concepts relative to each other in 3 dimensions and 5 focus elements; 'the people,' 'the elite,' 'democracy/government,' 'politics,' and 'the political context.' By analyzing political statements on these 15 points, the political style can be determined and plotted on a triangular field that depicts the tension between the three concepts.

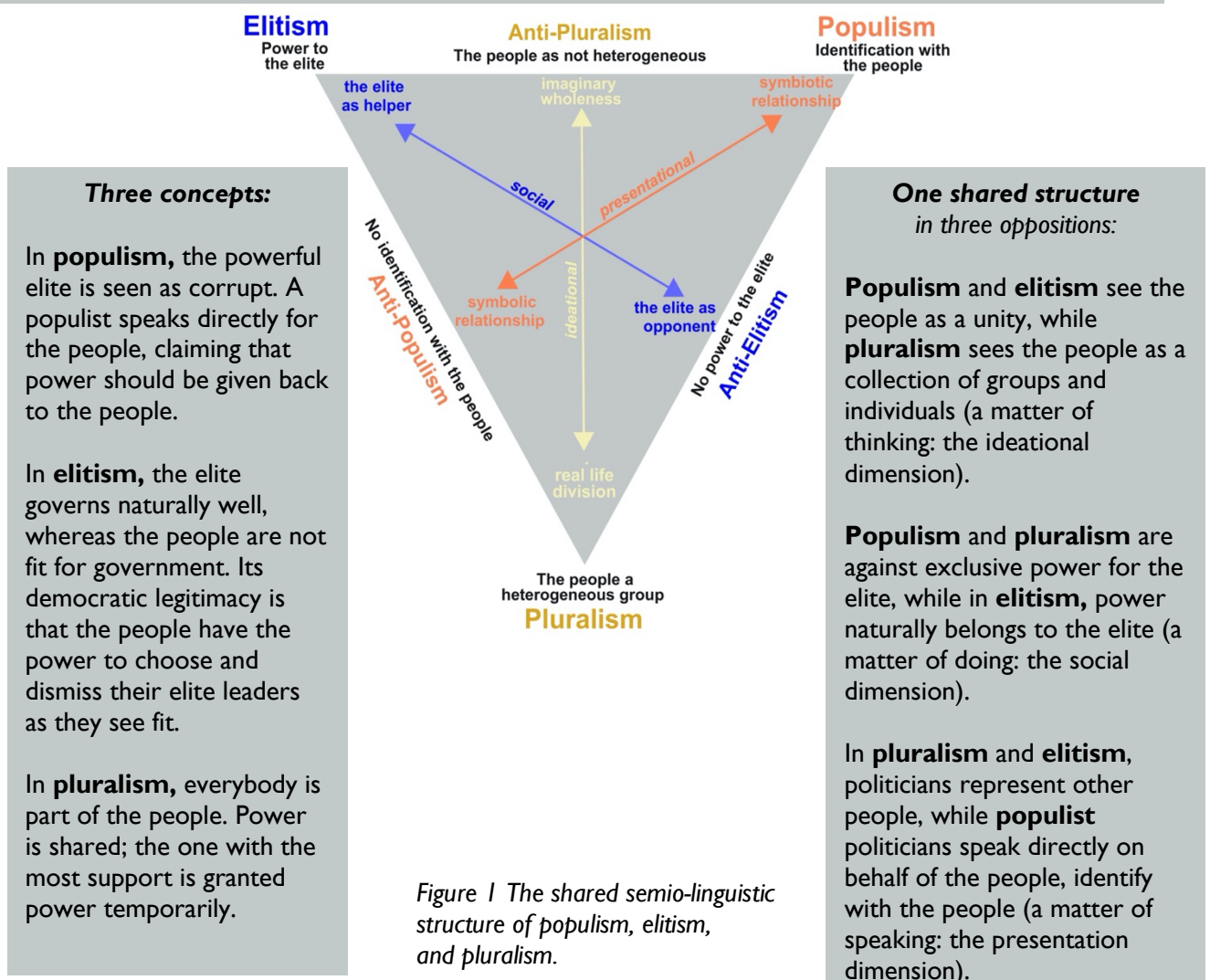


Figure 1 The shared semio-linguistic structure of populism, elitism, and pluralism.

together with the 'real elite,' against the 'bad elite' and 'bad people' (Democrats, immigrants). This shift allows him to embrace his elite role as president while remaining part of the populist 'real people.'

The model reveals Trump's style—and the mix of populism with elitism in general—as essentially anti-pluralist. Moreover, the style facilitates the construction of an elite people, which is not only anti-pluralist but also undemocratic. In elitism, elite members compete with one another over the leadership of the people, and the best leader wins. In populism, the leader and the people are seen as identical. Combining the two, not only frames the leader as the best; the people are also the best, better than other peoples, which is undemocratic. This construction was found many times in Trump's discourse.

The analysis of the 2016 election also explains why Clinton's performance was often received as unauthentic. Clinton mainly expressed a political style of mixed pluralism-elitism. At the same time, however, she sometimes used populist expressions. This undermined the credibility of her presentation: the model shows that the combination of three styles at one element is not plausible—logically, only two of the three styles can be combined. Mixing three styles inevitably leads to internal contradictions. For example, Clinton's performance in the social dimension of the element of *the people* was one of an extremely busy politician, apologizing for being late and not having time to socialize with the people (elitist). At the same time, she portrayed herself as a common woman going to the grocery store, just like her 'black and Latino sisters' (populist/pluralist). The combination of these two identities in one person is implausible and exemplifies why her performance was often assessed as unauthentic.

## **The UK**

For the UK, three politicians with a central role in Brexit are analyzed; Boris Johnson, Nigel Farage, and Jeremy Corbyn. In the media, Johnson is often portrayed as a populist; however, the style analysis in this dissertation reveals him as primarily an elitist. For instance, he never speaks of "we" when referring to the people, instead he speaks of "we" in the sense of "the elite", or "the British," the latter referring to the unification of the British people *and* elite. He combines this elitism with some populist traits, such as using popular language and critiquing the elite—of which he is clearly part—as in: "We have got to stop trying to kid the British people." Johnson used these kinds of populist expressions far more during the 2016 Brexit campaign than either before or after. This suggests that his populism was mainly for

electoral purposes. Johnson's blended style of populism-elitism is different from Trump's. Johnson never identifies with the people; he consistently speaks of them as "they", whereas Trump mostly refers to the people as "we." Johnson's use of elitism-populism mostly serves his nationalism. Unlike Trump, he does not construct an elite people; instead he, as a leader, is part of the elite.

Furthermore, Johnson's style grows more anti-pluralist over the analyzed years, as does Jeremy Corbyn's. The latter's style is found to be more populist in 2017 than in 2016 (during the Brexit referendum) and 2015, when it was mixed pluralist-populist. This can be explained by the anti-pluralist tendency fostered by the referendum: expressing that 'the British people' voted for Brexit presupposes 'one' people, which fits with elitism or populism, but not of pluralism, where the people are seen as heterogeneous. This explanation is also in accordance with Nigel Farage's style. His style is analyzed as being consistently populist; nevertheless, after the Brexit referendum he grew even more anti-pluralist than he already was.

As already mentioned, Corbyn's style is analyzed as predominantly mixed populist-pluralist. This explains why his populism is often contested in academia. The analysis in this dissertation places him in between populism and pluralism. It shows that his style is only populist where it overlaps with pluralism, and vice versa. This makes him mainly anti-elitist because this is what populism has in common with pluralism.

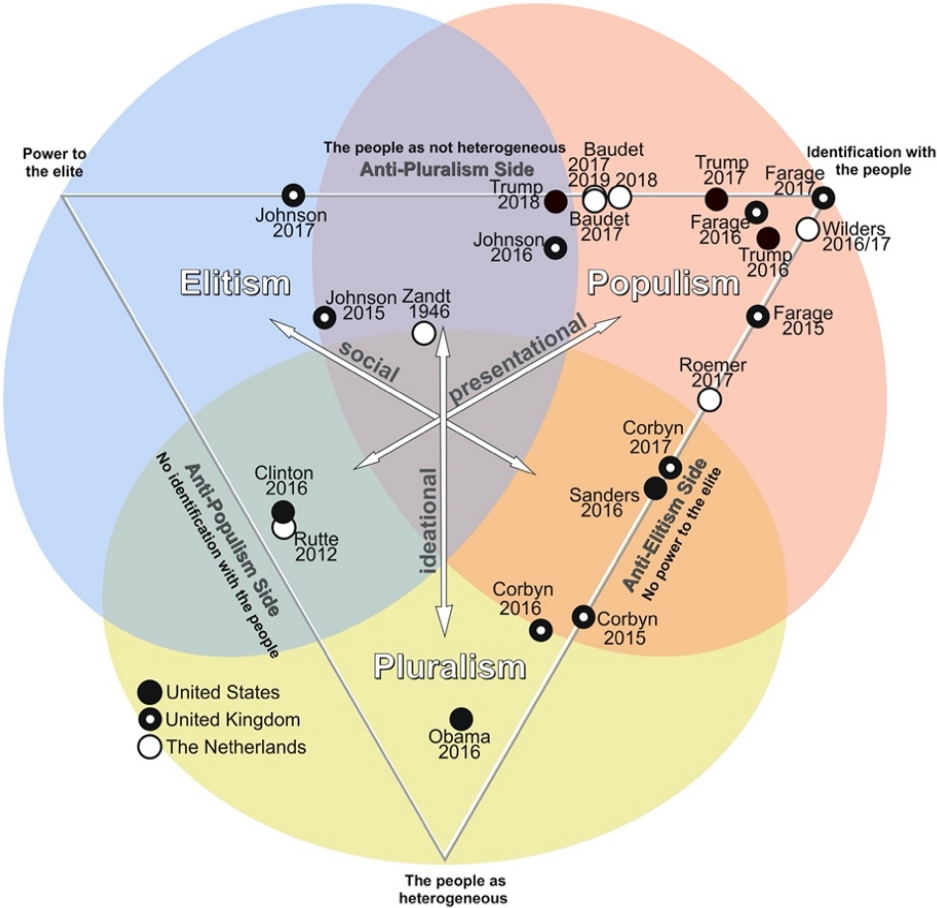
## **The Netherlands**

For the Netherlands, presentations of three populist politicians held during the 2017 elections were analyzed: Geert Wilders', Thierry Baudet's, and Emile Roemer's. All three turn out to be full populists with scores close to the populist corner in the triangular field on which the average style scores are plotted (see figure 2). Wilders, like Farage, is a prototype populist, scoring almost at the corner of the triangular field. Roemer, like Sanders and Corbyn, combines populism with pluralism, albeit with fewer pluralist elements than his colleagues in the US and the UK.

Baudet combines populism with elitism. Having a populist message and an elite image. His position on the triangular field is close to Trump's. In Baudet's case, his populist-elitist style has the strategic benefit of positioning him advantageously in the Dutch political field: he stands out from all mainstream politicians, such as prime minister Mark Rutte, but also from the dominant populist player in the Netherlands, Geert Wilders. Like Trump (and

unlike Johnson), Baudet creates an elite people of which he is part; both he and the native Dutch people are the metaphorical heirs of the highly praised Dutch culture, which comprises important figures like Rembrandt and Spinoza. With this metaphor, Baudet pits the native Dutch people as better than other people, such as non-western immigrants.

Figure 2: Political styles plotted onto a triangular field between populism, elitism, and pluralism.



**Left-right-center and political style**

Comparing the analyzed styles in three political contexts points at a striking similarity. The so-called right-oriented populists in the analyzes—Trump, Johnson, and Baudet—all mix populism with elitism. The left-oriented populists—Sanders, Corbyn, and Roemers—all mix populism with pluralism. Analyzed center politicians, such as Clinton and Rutte, mix pluralism with elitism. Further analyses of occurring populisms in other political contexts can confirm whether or not this pattern is broadly visible. The pattern is theoretically sound, and strongly points at a connection between the political concepts of left, right, and middle with the styles of populism, elitism, and pluralism.

In this connection, populism is the combination and intersection between left and right; elitism between right and center; pluralism between left and center. The intersections indicate when the dominant frame of looking at politics changes. This conceptualization of populism in relation to the left-right political spectrum offers an alternative to the so-called horse-shoe model. Whereas the horse-shoe model (correctly) describes the left-right spectrum as a curve in which the extreme left and right approach each other, the triangular model also offers an explanation for the observation that the extreme left and right have more in common with each other than with centrist politics (see figure 3).

Figure 3: The triangular model of populism, elitism, and pluralism plotted onto the horse-shoe model of left-right.



Right-wing politicians mainly regard political issues from the ideational dimension, relying on traditional framings of reality. In this frame, politics is about the absolute truth that should be followed. Left-oriented politicians regard politics from a social perspective: politics is primarily about social justice because what is seen as ‘true’ is often advantageous for those in charge because they dominate mainstream narratives. Centrist politicians view politics from a communicative perspective; politics is not about being right or getting justice, but about collaboration and communication.

These differences are seldom clear-cut because the dimensions are intertwined: what is true is also often seen as just and vice versa, or if not, the two can be reconciled through collaboration. But politicians and political parties do differ in the emphasis they put certain aspects of politics. As depicted in figure 3, populism combines ‘being right’ and ‘getting justice.’ In elitism, ‘being right’ meets ‘working together.’ Pluralism combines ‘working

together' with 'getting justice.' These three dimensions are definitive elements in any political context, anywhere in the world. All three are necessary for a healthy political dynamic.

### **Populist approaches**

Populism is a highly contested concept, and the underlying structure beneath this dissertation's analysis model brings together different approaches to populism. The structure levels the playing field and explains where diverging approaches meet. It shows that every approach inevitably offers a limited view of populism, because populism has different meanings in each of the three dimensions; meanings that—per definition—exclude other parts of its meaning in the other dimensions. Hence, there is no right or wrong approach as they all contribute to our knowledge of the phenomenon.

### **Metaphor and political style**

Lastly, this dissertation scrutinized the relationship between political style and use of metaphor. Most saliently, it is found that populist politicians do not so much *have* a populist political style; they themselves *are* an expression of a populist style. Their entire performance is a metaphor for the people, bringing the people metaphorically into the political realm. Through this practice, they bridge the gap between politicians and the people they represent through metaphor, by 'being' the people. In contrast, mainstream politicians bridge this gap in a metonymic way, through communication with the people.



*Carola Schoor is an independent consultant and trainer in political communication. Before writing this dissertation, she worked as a lobbyist and journalist in political communication. You can contact her at: [carola.schoor@gmail.com](mailto:carola.schoor@gmail.com).*