

AperTO - Archivio Istituzionale Open Access dell'Università di Torino

## COVID-19 and Populism: A Sui Generis Crisis

**This is a pre print version of the following article:**

*Original Citation:*

*Availability:*

This version is available <http://hdl.handle.net/2318/1851504> since 2022-03-29T15:03:42Z

*Publisher:*

Palgrave Macmillan

*Published version:*

DOI:10.1007/978-3-030-66011-6\_1

*Terms of use:*

Open Access

Anyone can freely access the full text of works made available as "Open Access". Works made available under a Creative Commons license can be used according to the terms and conditions of said license. Use of all other works requires consent of the right holder (author or publisher) if not exempted from copyright protection by the applicable law.

(Article begins on next page)

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENT**

This work was supported by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 822590 (Democratic Efficacy and the Varieties of Populism in Europe).





\$SHU72 \$UFKLYLR ,VWLWX]LRQDOH 2SHQ \$FFHV V GHOO 8QLY

&29,' DQG 3RSXOLVP \$ 6XL \*HQBULV &ULVLV

7KLV LV D SUH SULQW YHUVLRQ RI WKH IROORZLQJ DUWLFOH

Original Citation:

Availability:

7KLV YHUVLRQ LKWSLODEOHKDQGOH QHW VLQFH 7 =

Publisher:

Palgrave Macmillan

Published version:

DOI:10.1007/978-3-030-66011-6\_1

Terms of use:

Open Access

\$Q\|RQH FDQ IUHHO\ DFFHV V WKH IXOO WH[W RI ZRUNV PDGH DYDLODEOH D  
XQGHU D &UHDWLYH &RPPRQV OLFHQVH FDQ EH XVHG DFFRUGLQJ WR WKH  
RI DOO RWKHU ZRUNV UHTXLUHV FRQVHQW RI WKH ULJKW KROGHU DXWKR  
SURWHFWLRQ E\ WKH DSSOLFDEOH ODZ

(Article begins on next page)

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Translated Name of the Party	Original Name of the Party	Acronym
<b>United Kingdom</b>		
United Kingdom Independence Party	United Kingdom Independence Party	UKIP
Brexit Party	Brexit Party	Brexit Party
<b>Spain</b>		
Spanish Socialist Workers' Party	Partido Socialista Obrero Español	PSOE
People's Party	Partido Popular	PP
VOX	VOX	VOX
United We Can	Unidas Podemos	PP
Citizens	Ciudadanos	C's
<b>Italy</b>		
Go Italy	Forza Italia	FI
Brothers of Italy	Fratelli d'Italia	FdI
League	Lega	Lega
Five Star Movement	Movimento 5 Stelle	M5S
Democratic Party	Partito Democratico	PD
<b>France</b>		
National Rally	Rassemblement National	RN
Indomitable France	La France Insoumise	LFI
The Republic on the Move	La République en Marche	LREM
MODEM	MODEM	MODEM
Democrats and Independants' Union	Union des Démocrates et Indépendants	UDI
Socialist Party	Parti Socialiste	PS
Greens	Les Verts	EELV
The Republicans	Les Républicains	LR
<b>Germany</b>		
Alternative for Germany	Alternative für Deutschland	AfD
Federal Minister of Health	Bundesministerium für Gesundheit	BMG
Christian Democratic Union	Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands	CDU
Christian Social Union in Bavaria	Christlich-Soziale Union in Bayern	CSU
Liberal Democratic Party	Freie Demokratische Partei	F.D.P.
Green Party	Bündnis 90/Die Grünen	Grüne
The Left Party	Die Linke	Linke
Robert Koch Institute	Robert Koch Institut	RKI
Social Democratic Party	Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands	SPD
<b>Hungary</b>		
Fidesz	Fidesz	Fidesz
Christian Democratic People's Party	Kereszténydemokrata Néppárt	KDNP
Hungarian Socialist Party	Magyar Szocialista Párt	MSZP
For a Better Hungary	Jobbik Magyarországért Mozgalom	Jobbik
Democratic Coalition	Demokratikus Koalíció	DK
Another Politics Is Possible	Lehet Más a Politika	LMP
Momentum	Momentum	Momentum
Dialogue	Párbeszéd	P
<b>Czech Republic</b>		
ANO 2011	ANO 2011	ANO
Freedom and Direct Democracy	Svoboda a přímá demokracie	SPD
Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia	Komunistická strana Čech a Moravy	KSČM
<b>Poland</b>		
Law and Justice	Prawo i Sprawiedliwość	PiS
Confederation 'Freedom and Independence'	Konfederacja 'Wolność i Niepodległość'	Confederation
Civic Platform	Platforma Obywatelska	PO
Polish People's Party	Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe	PSL
Democratic Left Alliance	Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej	SLD

## CHAPTER 1

### COVID-19 AND POPULISM: A SUI GENERIS CRISIS

#### **Abstract**

It is widely believed that populists benefit from crisis situations. This chapter discusses the literature on crises and populism from a theoretical perspective and provides a novel framework of analysis for addressing the study of the COVID-19 crisis in the light of its (de)politicization. This framework allows the study of the politicization of the COVID-19 issue by populists looking at the divide between the political and the non-political status of the issue, disputes about different stakes and their relative priority in managing the crisis, and issue-specific and policy-related contentions about COVID-19. The general research question is whether populists in Europe used the COVID-19 issue to gain centrality in the political field and/or to push forward new opposition lines. A further related question is to pinpoint whether populists reacted in a similar way across countries or whether they adapted their response according to their institutional role.

GIULIANO BOBBA, University of Turin (giuliano.bobba@unito.it)

NICOLAS HUBÉ, University of Lorraine

#### **Introduction**

Although the debate about the link between crises and populism is a lengthy one, several authors agree that alleged crisis situations are a precondition for the emergence of populist mobilization. Or at least that they can favour it. While the impact of COVID-19 has not been the same in countries around the world, in many of them this pandemic has been the biggest health and, in its aftermath, economic crisis since World War II. Despite the peculiar nature of this crisis, however, it is not obvious how populists may benefit from it. Like other catastrophes or natural events, COVID-19 is hard to politicize, that is, to become an arena of political confrontation among parties with the traditional divides (us vs. others; elites vs. people), at least in its initial stage. This crisis has popped up without having been triggered by populists as a consequence of the failure of the elite, migrants, etc. (Moffitt, 2015). The chapter will provide a framework of analysis, discussing the literature on crises and populism from a theoretical perspective and in the light of the concept of politicization. It will then offer an overview of the main contents of the book.

#### **1. Crisis and populism**

Populism is an ‘essentially contested concept’ (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017) and there is a lengthy debate on its definition and whether it can be considered as an ideology (Mudde, 2004, 2007; Taggart, 2000), a communication style (De Vreese *et al.*, 2018; Aalberg *et al.*, 2017; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Moffitt, 2016), or a political strategy (Weyland, 2001; Roberts, 1995). Nevertheless, scholars generally agree on a minimum definition of populism: the juxtaposition of the ‘good people’ with a series of ‘bad elites’ and disturbing out-groups (notable exceptions include Müller, 2016 and Urbinati, 2019). Populists in Western democracies present themselves as the ‘real’ democrats committed to explaining to the people ‘what went wrong, who is to blame, and what is to be done to reverse the situation’ (Betz & Johnson, 2004: 323). Democracy should be an ‘expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people’ (Mudde, 2004: 544); instead it has been usurped by ‘the elites’ who are to blame for all the major problems affecting ‘the people’. The positive valuation of ‘the people’ is thus combined with the denigration of their enemies, namely ‘the elites’ who are accused of being arrogant, corrupt and more generally of acting against ‘the people’ (Canovan, 1999: 5), and out-groups (migrants, LGBT, etc.), accused of othering the essential nature of the ‘real people’.

Similarly, the concept of the crisis has been widely associated with populism, although there is some debate about the nature of the link between the two phenomena. 'Crisis' is a term with a long history in the field of political philosophy and political science (Koselleck, 2006). From different perspectives, classical theorists such as Karl Marx (1981), Antonio Gramsci (1971), and Jürgen Habermas (1975) considered the crisis as a critical conjuncture undermining State authority and offering an opportunity for change. A crisis is not only an objective phenomenon; it also needs to be subjectively perceived as such and/or discursively pushed to the forefront by political actors.

According to Colin Hay (1999: 317), while the concept of the crisis is ubiquitous within social and political thought, it remains one of the most 'elusive, imprecise and generally unspecified concepts within the theoretician's armoury'. In the literature, the concept of crisis is used to name mutually incompatible conditions, processes, and properties. For example, crises are generally considered temporary, but they can also be permanent; they are a one-off deviation from the natural course of events, but they can also be cyclical; normally they have a solution, but they can also be unsolvable. Hay addresses this gap by making an analytical distinction between the *objective* and *subjective* components of crises (see also Habermas, 1975). On the one hand, contradictions can intentionally be addressed by an agent through a decisive or inconclusive intervention (objective component). On the other hand, the same contradictions can be subjectively perceived as such or remain publicly unacknowledged. The combination of these two components results in a typology in which the crisis is only one of the different types of possible systemic contradictions and responses.

A *crisis* is a moment in which systemic contradictions (i.e. failures) are widely perceived as salient in the political, cultural, or ideological spheres and decisive interventions and structural transformations are implemented. A political crisis occurs when the common rationalities in solving the problem are blurred and when agents appear to be overwhelmed in handling the facts in all areas of the crisis. The other names for it are *failure*, *tipping point*, and *catastrophic equilibrium*. *Failure* is an accumulation of unresolved systemic contradictions and the dysfunctional symptoms they generate, regardless of individuals' perception or awareness. It provides the 'structural preconditions for perceived crisis; the necessary but insufficient conditions' for a crisis (Hay, 1999: 324). A *tipping point* is a moment at which an intervention made unintentionally, in a situation of unperceived systemic contradictions, subsequently 'proves to be decisive in terms of the transformation of the system in question' (325). Finally, *catastrophic equilibrium* (Gramsci, 1971: 276) refers to a situation in which symptoms of systemic contradictions are commonly recognized as a wider problem, even in the absence of mobilization and decisive intervention.

The COVID-19 pandemic led European countries to a peculiar crisis situation where neither national health care systems nor the World Health Organization were able to predict or control the risk, and where the medical sciences were unable to face the pandemic effectively or rationally. The nature of the crisis does not fit in with the common problem-solving schemes of an economic or migration crisis and this is the main difference with the last decade of 'crisis-ridden Europe' in which populists have grown, sometimes playing an active role (Kriesi & Pappas, 2015: 303; see also: Trenz, Ruzza, & Guiraudon, 2015).

## **2. Role of Crisis in Contemporary Populism**

In this paragraph we need to disentangle the literature on crises and that on populism in order to better understand the role of crises in the rise of populism and the role of populists in the rise of crises. The role of crises in the contemporary populist literature is disputed. While it is quite common to find references to crises in the populist literature, studies devoted to this connection are rare and it remains in many respects undertheorized: the term is normally used in a vague manner, with no definition provided. Nevertheless, except for a few authors who have contested any link between crises and populism (i.e. Knight, 1998; Arditì, 2007), scholars addressing this topic generally fall into two broad categories: those who state that there is a direct connection between the existence of a crisis and the rise of populism, and those who are less sure about a causal link between these two processes.



Ernesto Laclau (1977, 2005) is certainly one of the first scholars link the rise of populism to crises. According to Laclau (1977: 175) ‘the emergence of populism is historically linked to a crisis of the dominant ideological discourse, which in turn is part of a more general social crisis’. In other words, populism simply cannot emerge without a political crisis, which is considered a ‘necessary precondition for populism’ (2005: 177). A crisis of representation in particular is what allows populists to emerge and succeed. Several authors agree that this particular kind of political crisis is at the root of any populist mobilization (see Canovan, 1999; Roberts, 1995, 2015; Kriesi, 2015; Mouffe, 2005). Among them, Hanspeter Kriesi (2015) links the current rise of populists in Europe to long-term trends in political representation. As party democracy weakens, ‘the opportunities for populist protest clearly increases’ (Mair, 2002: 88). This process is even more evident in the light of the new ‘integration-demarcation’ divide caused by the process of globalization (Kriesi *et al.*, 2006, 2012). Party democracy is facing new challenges, since ‘divide theory meets Europe’s crises’ (Hooghe & Marks, 2017), and Euroscepticism, like populism, is becoming more mainstream (Conti, 2018). In Kriesi’s words, ‘the lack of responsiveness of established parties to the plight of the ‘globalization losers’ provided a chance for their mobilization by the new populist right parties (2015: 178). Focusing on Latin American populism, Kenneth Roberts (1995, 2015) similarly argues that weak political institutions and crises of representation trigger different types of populist mobilization in the region: top-down or plebiscitary mobilizations (i.e. Hugo Chavez in Venezuela) coexist with bottom-up or participatory mobilizations (i.e. Evo Morales in Bolivia). Crises could of course have other natures besides political representation. Kurt Weyland (1999: 395) argued that crises of economic neoliberalism triggered the emergence of ‘neoliberal populism’ in Latin America, with specific reference to Carlos Menem in Argentina, Fernando Collor in Brazil and Alberto Fujimori in Peru. While Kriesi (2015) argues that a crisis of representation is ‘the basic condition’ for the rise of populism, an economic crisis is considered as a facilitating condition. In the last few years, several authors have interpreted the performance of populist parties as linked to the Great Recession and the European debt crisis (Kriesi & Pappas, 2015; Kneuer, 2019), while others have pointed to the role of migrant and refugee crises (Brubaker, 2017; Stojarová, 2018). For these authors, some kind of political and economic crisis is a necessary precondition – and the main explanation – for the emergence of populism.

A second strand of literature is, however, more cautious about the link between crises and populism. As an advocate of the ideological approach, Mudde (2007) states that the concept of crisis is used too vaguely to have a heuristic value. While this link seems to be corroborated by the correlation between the electoral success of European radical right populists and certain empirical indicators of a crisis (i.e. economic instability, unemployment or political dissatisfaction), the under-theorization of the concept makes this interpretation not entirely reliable (2007: 205). Moreover, as suggested by Rovira Kaltwasser (2012: 186), this link applies better to a ‘liberal approach’ to populism that conceives populism as a ‘pathology’, as ‘a reaction to the malfunctioning of democratic rule’, while it seems less appropriate in other approaches. The relevance of a crisis is thus more nuanced in this strand of literature: a crisis can be a facilitating factor, but it is not necessarily a prerequisite for the rise of populism.

Looking at the literature on crises and the rise of populism in the light of Hay’s typology, we acknowledge that most authors refer to different types of specific failures using the term ‘crisis’ uncritically. The success of populism is often interpreted as being the result of an external crisis (economic, financial, political, migrants, traditional values). The term is thus simply used to depict a conjuncture of disorder, chaos or breakdown. However, these are situations of failure that do not necessarily lead to a crisis of problem-solving rationality. Here the point does not concern just the terminological question. Populist parties have to be understood in relation to their current political and cultural field (Ostiguy, 2017; Weyland, 2017). Many commentators on European politics highlight the crisis of representation or democracy as the main factor explaining the emergence and success of populist movements. When applied to populism, Hay’s typology is fruitful because it requires crisis situations to be considered as dynamic processes that may have different stages, or

facets. In this process, populists can exploit the situation but also actively contribute to the emergence of systemic contradictions, which can lead to an actual crisis. At a critical juncture, populists need their anti-populist counterparts (Stavrakakis *et al.*, 2018).

In this perspective, populists cannot be conceived simply as actors reacting to external crises, but rather as actors that actively perform and spread a sense of crisis. According to Moffitt (2015: 195), it is exactly this performance of crisis that provides populists with ‘an effective way to divide ‘the people’ and their other, and to legitimate strong leadership by presenting themselves as voices of the sovereign people’. Populists can, therefore, intervene in those situations that Hay has called *failure*, *catastrophic equilibrium* and *tipping point*, and, through their action, ensure that these contradictions are clearly perceived among citizens and push the system towards the moment of decisive intervention (table 1.1).

Two components – one real, referred to as systemic failure, and another symbolic, referred to as the public construction of crisis – are thus mobilized by populists and become part of an irreducible dialectic (Stavrakakis *et al.*, 2018). Populists exploit failures, catastrophic equilibria, and tipping points through the politicization of the specific issues that underlie them (i.e. unemployment, border control, corruption, Islamic veil, etc.). While politicization –the process through which issues ‘are thematised as contingent and controversial topics’ (Palonen, 2005: 44), becoming subjects of political confrontation among parties and citizens – is a process common to all political actors, populists, bringing every issue into their Manichean vision of society, create a sense of crisis and ‘use that sense to inject an urgency and an importance into their message’ (Taggart, 2004: 275). Populists therefore exploit the contradictions of the system and contribute to amplifying them, in real and symbolic terms, through the politicization of broad or narrow issues related to them. They are performing the crisis (Moffitt, 2015) by giving it a discursive reality. As a communication style, populism benefits from the era of polarization and conflict-friendly communication (Blumler, 2016; Reinemann *et al.*, 2019)

**Table 1.1 Contradictions, Decisive Interventions and Populist Interventions**

	<b>MOMENT OF DECISIVE INTERVENTION</b>	<b>MOMENT OF INDECISIVE INTERVENTION OR NON-INTERVENTION</b>
<b>SUBJECTIVELY PERCEIVED CONTRADICTIONS</b>	<b>CRISIS</b>	<b>! □ Catastrophic equilibrium</b>
<b>UNPERCEIVED CONTRADICTIONS</b>	<b>" □ Tipping point</b>	<b># □ □ Failure □</b>

**!** =Populist Interventions

(Adapted from Hay, 1995)

This is how things normally work when contradictions are endogenous, determined by factors internal to the political system. But when contradictions are exogenous, determined by external shocks, their politicization is more complex, since causal attribution of responsibility is not always possible. This is particularly true for those situations determined by accidental causes or natural disasters such as floods, earthquakes, droughts, and hurricanes. Stone (1989: 284) explains that ‘these phenomena are devoid of purpose, either in their actions or consequences. In fact, one cannot properly speak of actions here, but only of occurrences. This is the realm of accident and fate’. These accidents are difficult to politicize since they are caused by ‘events beyond human control’. They postulate a kind of innocence: no one can exert control over this kind of accident and therefore no one can be blamed. In order to become a political crisis, these kinds of accidents have to be framed as such by agents who have an interest in acting like that. In other words, they need to be politicized.

The COVID-19 health crisis fits perfectly into this kind of framework, where there is *a priori* no political purpose or direct responsibility for the origin of the pandemic. Such a situation meets the definition of a crisis since both decisive intervention and public awareness of the problem are present.

The peculiar nature of this crisis, however, requires further efforts to understand how populists can politicize such an issue and possibly benefit from it. Thus, while governments seek to steer the problem away from the intentional and toward the realm of nature (i.e. managing the COVID-19 crisis as a non-political, science-based task), the other side, which often includes populists, tries to push the problem into the realm of human intention, in order to politicize it.

### **3. Politicization of the pandemic crisis**

‘Politicization’ has long been a key concept in the study of politics. In the European tradition of social and political theory, the term connotes the process through which a given phenomenon or issue enters the sphere of ‘the political’ and thus turns into a target of contention, a hub for conflicts, a space open to alternatives and controversies (Palonen, 2003). In the American tradition of behavioural and empirical political science, the same term tends to signify a narrower dynamic, whereby the visibility of a given phenomenon or issue suddenly increases, attracting public interest and triggering mobilization and ‘voice’ (Easton, 1957; Verba, 1960). Additionally, ‘de-politicization’ has become a classical concept. In the wake of Carl Schmitt’s thinking (2008), in the European tradition de-politicization is seen as the removal of a given phenomenon or issue from the realm of ‘the political’, or a preventative denial of its political character (Rancière, 1995; Wood & Flinders, 2014). In the American tradition, however, de-politicization mostly indicates a set of narrower processes such as a diminishing interest in politics and participation, the hollowing out of the public sphere, and power exercises aimed at thwarting potential oppositions (Pharr & Putnam, 2000; Roberts, 2017). On both sides of the Atlantic, de-politicization dynamics have attracted increasing attention – empirically and analytically – in the context of research on technocratic policy-making and anti-politics (Fawcett *et al.*, 2017).

In the last few decades, scholars have mainly used the concept of politicization within three different strands of literature (Zürn, 2019). Firstly, at the domestic level, politicization has been mainly studied as a process of de-politicization and re-politicization, especially in investigations of the decline of the class divide, offset by the globalization divide between integrationists and demarcationists (Kriesi *et al.*, 2012) or between cosmopolitans and communitarians (de Wilde *et al.*, 2019; Hooghe & Marks, 2017). Secondly, the concept has been widely applied to the process of EU integration and studied through three key dimensions: the salience of the EU and EU related issues, their contentiousness, and the expansion of actors engaged with the EU (De Wilde, 2011; Statham & Trenz, 2012; Hutter & Kriesi, 2019). Thirdly, the study of politicization of international institutions has mainly focused on the ongoing transnationalization of social protests (Della Porta, 2007; Della Porta & Caiani, 2009). Scholars who have studied politicization in its entirety from the perspective of political theory have found that the term throws up different facets of a complex process and that more clarity is needed, starting with a specific vocabulary (Palonen, 2003; Hay, 2007).

Alongside this literature, other scholars have dealt with similar processes applied to narrower contexts, such as the emergence of an issue as salient within the political field. Erik Neveu (2015), focusing on the development of public problems, defines it as a multi-stage process through which a private and non-political issue could be transformed into a public problem with a political scope. An issue needs to be constructed, performed and framed as a problem on the public agenda to be perceived as such (Gamson, 1990). Entrepreneurs of a public problem – ordinary citizens, stakeholders or political actors – need to implement a series of actions to introduce a specific issue into the political realm (Gusfield, 1981). This means framing the issue within the common political divides or conflicts at stake in the political field, or, with more difficulty, pushing the issue as a new divide. Among these actions, the ‘naming, blaming, claiming’ trilogy (Felstiner, Abel & Sarat, 1981) is noteworthy when adapted to public problems (Orsini, 2002; Zittoun, 2014). ‘Naming’ refers to the action of defining a private or public situation as unfair and worthy of being politically addressed since it produces individual or collective damage or injuries. ‘Blaming’ is the action through which one or more social or political actors are identified as responsible for the given problem. Finally,

‘claiming’ indicates the action of proposing and supporting a solution to the problem (Neveu, 2015: 41-94).

In the light of this literature, we propose to combine the process of politicization with the three actions identified by Felstiner, Abel & Sarat (1981) in order to define a framework for the analysis of the *politicization of issues* (table 1.2). We argue that an issue, to be politicized, should follow three stages in which distinct processes, actions, objects of contention, and outputs follow one another. In the phase of the *emergence* of a problem, the action of ‘naming’ brings a given issue into the political field and allows political agents to earn a place as legitimate players in the crisis-solving process; in the *confrontation* phase, the attribution of accountability and ownership of the issue is determined through the ‘blaming’ action; finally, in the *managing* phase, the action of ‘claiming’ refers to the confrontation of issue-specific solutions.

**Table 1.2 Politicization of public problems/issues**

Phase	Action	Contention	Output
Emergence	Naming	Political vs. non-political status of the problem/issue	One or more political or social actors identify a specific problem/issue as a problem/issue with a public scope and political nature. The issue becomes a new political divide or opposition.
Confrontation	Blaming	Attribution of accountability and ownership of the problem/issue	One or more political or social actors blame other actors for not facing the problem, or not facing it with the necessary urgency and effectiveness
Managing	Claiming	Alternative problem/issue-specific solutions	One or more political or social actors proposes a solution and claims the ability to solve the problem/issue

These are also the steps of the political process traditionally followed by populist movements in order to trigger and perform a crisis through which they gain legitimacy: *naming* the crisis by identifying failures and elevating the crisis level; *blaming* those responsible who acted against the interests of the people, using the media; and finally, *claiming* new solutions. This framework will allow us to study the politicization of the COVID-19 issue by looking at the divide between the political and the non-political status of the issue, disputes about different stakes and their relative priority in managing the crisis, and issue-specific and policy-related contentions about COVID-19. The suddenness of the pandemic is interesting, since there is no previous issue ownership at stake.

#### 4. Aims, Framework and Structure of the Book

In the light of the above, the book aims to provide an initial overview of how populist parties reacted during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. The general research question asks whether populists have benefited from the COVID-19 crisis (RQ1), gaining centrality in the political field and/or using the crisis to push forward new opposition lines. Through a comparative approach, it focuses especially on two sub-questions: how have populists adapted their discourse to the pandemic crisis (RQ1a)? And how have populists politicized the COVID-19 issue (RQ1b)? Besides systemic differences, our assumption is that populists’ ability to politicize the COVID-19 issue has been key to their taking

advantage of the crisis in terms of relevance in the political debate and citizens' opinion. In addition, since populists have achieved key policy victories and survived the experience of government in recent years (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2015) by maintaining a high level of politization and polarization on controversial issues (Pappas, 2019), a second research question asks whether populists in power and populists in opposition have faced COVID-19 in a similar or a different way (RQ2). While the classical divides seem (at least temporarily) to have weakened, we posit that the COVID-19 crisis has opened a window of opportunity for traditional populist claims such as those about controlling borders or against the (pharmaceutical and scientific) elites, with claims tailored for the crisis, such as the limitation of public freedoms or support for new conspiracy theories.

The analysis aims to identify the main features of populist action by focusing on the leaders' statements and their political initiatives over a period of four months, from January to May. This period covers three different phases: (a) pre-COVID phase, when the COVID-19 crisis was elsewhere, and there were no contagions or national outbreaks; (b) the phase of virus spread and containment measures, when COVID-19 was widely diffuse in the country and restrictive measures were taken by the political authorities; and (c) the mitigation of contagion phase, when the virus spread was under control in the country and restrictive measures were eased or removed. With regard to official activities on their websites and social media profiles, two distinct analyses were run. On the one hand, the key elements of populism – the people, the elites, and outgroups – were analysed in order to understand how they discourses unfolded in this crisis situation and whether they changed compared to a routine period (RQ1a). On the other hand, an assessment was made of how populists defined and attempted to politicize the COVID-19 issue, using the framework of politicization based on the *naming, blaming, claiming* formula (table 1.2).

The variety of cases analysed (hard hit by the crisis or otherwise) and types of populism (right-wing, left-wing, in power or not) allow this book to contribute to the literature on crises and populism, to account for similarities and differences and to define patterns among different types of populism (RQ2). We gathered data from eight European countries from various geographical regions of the European Union that were differently affected by the pandemic (table 1.3). Four countries were in a critical situation: Spain, Italy, France and the United Kingdom. Conversely, two countries were affected very little by the pandemic (Poland and Czech Republic). Finally, we add two countries experiencing a medium situation (Germany and Hungary). These eight countries implemented and experimented with different policies to face the crisis. We also mixed different political situations (table 1.4): countries with governing populist parties (Italy, Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic and Spain) with ones with non-governing populist parties (France, Germany, UK).

**Table 1.3 Impact of COVID-19 in the cases selected (10 June 2020)**

	Reported Deaths	Reported deaths per 100,000 population	Impact of COVID-19
<b>Spain</b>	27,136	58.1	<b>High</b>
<b>UK</b>	40,883	61.5	
<b>Italy</b>	34,043	56.3	
<b>France</b>	29,296	43.7	
<b>Germany</b>	8,729	10.5	<b>Medium</b>
<b>Hungary</b>	550	5.6	
<b>Poland</b>	1,183	3.1	<b>Low</b>
<b>Czech Republic</b>	328	3.1	

Source: European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control ([www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/cases-2019-ncov-eueea](http://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/cases-2019-ncov-eueea))

**Table 1.4 Populists parties in the cases selected**

Relevance of populism	Impact of COVID-19		
	High	Medium	Low
<b>In power</b>	Italy (M5S) Spain (Podemos)	Hungary (Fidesz and KDNP)	Poland (PiS) Czech Republic (ANO)
<b>In opposition</b>	Italy (League) UK (Brexit Party) France (RN and LFI) Spain (Vox)	Germany (AfD)	Czech Republic (SPD and KSČM) Poland (Konfederacja)

**References**

- Aalberg, F. Esser, C. Reinemann, Strömbäck, J. & de Vreese C. (Eds.) (2017) *Populist Political Communication in Europe*. New York: Routledge.
- Albertazzi, D. & McDonnell, D. (2015) *Populists in Power*. Oxon/New-York: Routledge.
- Arditi, B. (2007) *Politics on the Edges of Liberalism: Difference, Populism, Revolution, Agitation*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Betz, H. G., & Johnson, C. (2004) Against the current – stemming the tide: The nostalgic ideology of the contemporary radical populist right. *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 9(3): 311–327.
- Blumler, J. (2016) The Fourth Age of Political Communication. *Politiques de communication*, 6(1), 19-30.
- Brubaker, R. (2017) Why populism?. *Theory and Society*, 46: 357–385.
- Canovan, M. (1999) Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy, *Political Studies*, 47(1): 2-16.
- Conti, N. (2018) National political elites, the EU, and the populist challenge. *Politics*, 38(3), 361–377.
- de Vreese, C. H., Esser, F., Aalberg, T., Reinemann, C. & Stanyer, J. (2018). Populism as an Expression of Political Communication Content and Style: A New Perspective. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 23(4): 423–438.
- De Wilde P. (2011) No Polity for Old Politics? A Framework for Analyzing the Politicization of European Integration, *Journal of European Integration*, 33(5): 559-575.
- De Wilde, P., Koopmans, R., Merkel, W., Strijbis, O. & Zürn, M. (Eds.) (2019) *The Struggle Over Borders: Cosmopolitanism and Communitarianism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Della Porta, D. (Ed.) (2007) *The Global Justice Movement: Cross-National and Transnational Perspectives*. Boulder: Paradigm.
- Della Porta, D. & Caiani, M. (2009) *Social Movements and Europeanization*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Easton, D. (1957) An approach to the analysis of political systems. *World politics*, 9(3), 383-400.
- Fawcett, P., Flinders, M., Wood, M. & Hay, C. (Eds.) (2017) *Anti-politics, Depoliticization, and Governance*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Felstiner, W. L. F., Abel, R. L. & Sarat, A. (1980) The Emergence and Transformation of Disputes: Naming, Blaming, Claiming... *Law & Society Review*, 15(3/4): 631-54.
- Gamson, W. (1990) *The strategy of social protest*. Belmont: Wadsworth Pub.
- Gramsci, A. (1971) *Selections From Prison Notebooks*. London: Lawrence & Wishart.
- Gusfield, J. (1981) *The culture of public problems: Drinking-driving and the symbolic order*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Habermas J. (1975) *Legitimation crisis*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Hay, C. (1995) Narratives of the New Right and Constructions of Crisis. *Rethinking Marxism* 8(2).
- Hay, C. (1999) Crisis and the Structural Transformation of the State: Interrogating the Process of Change, *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 1(2): 317–44.
- Hay, C. (2007) *Why We Hate Politics*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

- Hooghe L., & Marks, G. (2017) Cleavage theory meets Europe's crises: Lipset, Rokkan, and the transnational cleavage. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 25(1): 109-135,
- Hutter, S. & Kriesi, H. (2019) Politicizing Europe in times of crisis. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 26(7): 996-1017.
- Jagers, J. & Walgrave, S. (2007) Populism as political communication style: An empirical study of political parties' discourse in Belgium. *European Journal of Political Research*, 46(3), 319-345.
- Kneuer, M. (2019) The tandem of populism and Euroscepticism: a comparative perspective in the light of the European crises. *Contemporary Social Science*, 14(1): 26-42.
- Knight, A. (1998) Populism and Neo-Populism in Latin America, Especially Mexico. *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 30(2): 223–248.
- Koselleck, R. (2006) Crisis. *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 67(2): 357-400
- Kriesi, H. (2015) Populism. Concepts and conditions for its rise in Europe. *Comunicazione politica*, 16(2): 175-193.
- Kriesi, H., Pappas, T. (Eds.) (2015) *European Populism in the Shadow of the Great Recession*. Colchester: ECPR Press.
- Kriesi, H., Grande, E., Dolezal, M., Helbling, M., Hutter, S., Höglinger, D. & Wüest, B. (2012) *Political conflict in Western Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kriesi, H., Grande, E., Lachat, R., Dolezal, M., Bornschier, S., Frey & T. (2006) Globalization and the transformation of the national political space: six European countries compared. *European Journal of Political Research*, 45(6): 921-957.
- Laclau, E. (1977) *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory*. London: New Left Books.
- Laclau, E. (2005) *On Populist Reason*. London: Verso.
- Mair, P. (2002) Populist Democracy vs Party Democracy. In: Mény Y., Surel Y. (Eds.) *Democracies and the Populist Challenge*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Marx, K. (1981), *Capital Volume III*, trans. D. Fernbach. London: Penguin Books.
- Moffitt, B. (2015) How to Perform Crisis: A Model for Understanding the Key Role of Crisis in Contemporary Populism. *Government and Opposition*, 50(2): 189-217.
- Moffitt, B. (2016) *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, Representation*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Mouffe C. (2005) *On the Political*. Abingdon – New York: Routledge.
- Mudde, C. (2004) The Populist Zeitgeist. *Government & Opposition* 39(4): 541–563.
- Mudde, C. (2007) *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mudde, C. & Rovira Kaltwasser, C. (2017) *Populism: a very short introduction*. Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press.
- Müller, J. W. (2016) *What Is populism?* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Neveu, E. (2015) *Sociologie des problèmes publics*. Paris: Armand Colin.
- Orsini, M. (2002) The Politics of Naming, Blaming and Claiming: HIV, Hepatitis C and the Emergence of Blood Activism in Canada. *Canadian Journal of Political Science / Revue Canadienne De Science Politique*, 35(3): 475-498.
- Ostiguy, P. (2017) Populism: A socio-cultural approach. In Rovira Kaltwasser, C., Taggart, P., Ochoa Espejo, P & Ostiguy, P. (Eds.) *The Oxford handbook of populism* (73-97). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Palonen, K. (2003) Four times of politics: Policy, polity, politicking, and politicization. *Alternatives*, 28(2), 171-186.
- Palonen, K. (2005) The politics of conceptual history. *Contributions to the History of Concepts*, 1(1): 37–50.
- Pappas, T.S. (2019) Populists in Power. *Journal of Democracy* 30(2): 70-84.
- Pharr, S. J., & Putnam, R. D. (Eds.) (2000). *Disaffected democracies: What's troubling the trilateral countries?*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Rancière, J. (1995) *On the shores of politics*. London: Verso.

- Reinemann, C., Stanyer, J., Aalberg, T., Esser, F., & de Vreese, C. (Eds.) (2019) *Communicating populism. Comparing interactions between politicians, media, and citizens across Europe*. New-York: Routledge.
- Roberts, A. (2017) *Four crises of American democracy: Representation, mastery, discipline, anticipation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Roberts, K. (1995) Neoliberalism and the Transformation of Populism in Latin America: The Peruvian Case. *World Politics*, 48(1): 82-116.
- Roberts, K. (2015) Populism, Political Mobilizations, and Crises of Political Representation. In de la Torre, Carlos (Ed.) *The Promise and Perils of Populism* (140-158). Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky.
- Rovira Kaltwasser, C. (2012) The Ambivalence of Populism: Threat and Corrective for Democracy. *Democratization*, 19(2): 184–208.
- Schmitt, C. (2008) *The concept of the political: Expanded edition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Statham, P., & Trezn, H. J. (2012) *The Politicization of Europe: Contesting the Constitution in the Mass Media*. London: Routledge.
- Stavrakakis, Y., Katsambekis, G., Kioupkiolis, A., Nikisianis N. & Siomos, T. (2018) Populism, anti-populism and crisis. *Contemporary Political Theory* 17: 4–27.
- Stojarová, V. (2018) Populist, Radical and Extremist Political Parties in Visegrad countries vis à vis the migration crisis. In the name of the people and the nation in Central Europe, *Open Political Science*, 1(1): 32-45.
- Stone, D. (1989) Causal Stories and the Formation of Policy Agendas. *Political Science Quarterly*, 104(2): 281-300.
- Taggart P. (2004). Populism and Representative Politics in Contemporary Europe. *Journal of Political Ideologies* 9(3): 269-288.
- Taggart, P. (2000) *Populism: Concepts in the social sciences*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Trenz, H.-J., Ruzza, C. & Guiraudon, V. (Eds.) (2015) *Europe's prolonged crisis: The making or the unmaking of a political Union*. London, Palgrave.
- Urbinati, N. (2019) Political theory of populism. *Annual Review of Political Science*. 22: 111–127
- Verba, S. (1960) Political Behavior and Politics. *World Politics*, 12(2): 280-291.
- Weyland, K. (1999) Neoliberal Populism in Latin America and Eastern Europe. *Comparative Politics*, 31(4): 379-401
- Weyland, K. (2001) Clarifying a contested concept: ‘populism’ in the study of Latin American politics. *Comparative Politics*, 34(1): 1–22.
- Weyland, K. (2017) Populism: a Political-Strategic Approach. In Rovira Kaltwasser, C., Taggart, P., Ochoa Espejo, P & Ostiguy, P. (Eds.) *The Oxford handbook of populism* (48-72). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wood, M. & Flinders, M. (2014), Rethinking depoliticisation: beyond the governmental. *Policy & Politics*, 42 (2): 151-170.
- Zittoun, P. (2014) Creating Social Disorder: Constructing, Propagating and Politicising Social Problems. In: *The Political Process of Policymaking. Studies in the Political Economy of Public Policy*. Palgrave Macmillan, London.
- Zürn, M. (2019) Politicization compared: at national, European, and global levels, *Journal of European Public Policy*, 26(7): 977-995.