

# The left-right spectrum in relation to populism, elitism, and pluralism

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**This presentation:**

1. The semiotic square: a flexible application
2. A spectrum for political style
3. Political style vs. left-right
4. A Combined spectrum
5. Conclusion

Explain the order of the presentation

## 1. The semiotic square: a flexible application

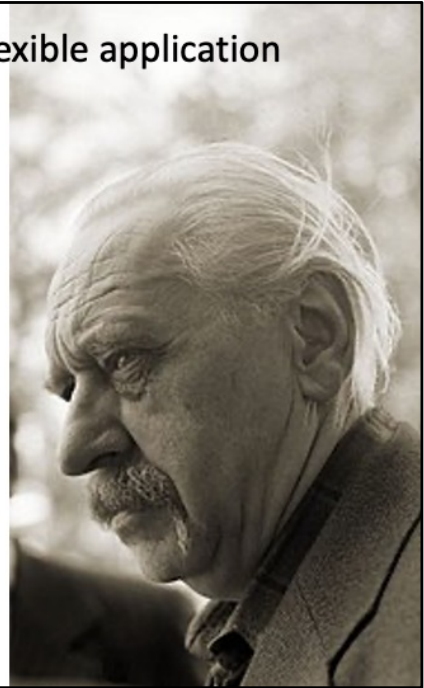
GREIMAS:

*In search for an immanent structure behind meaning.*

*Meaning has to be narrated – so looking for narrative structures of meaning*

THREE levels of meaning:

- 1) manifestations,  
f.i. texts, performances etc.
- 2) surface semio-narrative structure,  
based on actions  
*actantial model*
- 3) deep semio-narrative structures  
based on oppositions  
*semiotic square*



First, the model for assessing political style in discourse. This model is based on the structural linguistic theory of Algirdas Greimas.

Greimas was in search for an immanent structure behind meaning. And because meaning has to be narrated, he looked for narrative structures of meaning.

Greimas saw three levels of meaning: First, the manifestation level; this was what you see in texts or talk.

Under these manifestations are two structures. The surface narrative structure, based on actions. These are basic narrative structures that can be analyzed with the help of the actantial model of Greimas.

Beyond the actantial level, there is yet another level, the deep semio-narrative level. Here is no action, time or place, but only oppositions of words. In order to analyze the deep structure of language, Greimas devised a tool: the semiotic square.

# 1. The semiotic square: a flexible application

the semiotic square breaks the meaning of a word down into binary oppositions, thereby revealing the underlying logic.  
It works like this:

The concept *White* is placed at (S1) of the upper axis of the square (the positive contrary axis), in opposition to *black* at (S2). Black (S2) implies that it is not-white (–S1) and white (S1) implies that it is not-black (–S2). This results in two secondary oppositions at the diagonal axes: *black* versus *not-black*, and *white* versus *not-white*. These implied oppositions (S1/–S1 and S2/–S2) are broader than the first (S1/S2) because it is not only *white* that is not-black, but also colors such as blue and red as well. The same applies to *not-white*: besides black, also other colors are not-white. These two secondary oppositions create a third opposition: the negative contrary between *not-white* and *not-black* (–S1/–S2). Comparing this with the initial S1-S2 reveals the fourth opposition: the implied opposition of *grey scales* (S), the synthesis of black and white, and *multi-colors* (–S), the synthesis of not-black and not-white.

The Greimassian square has been criticized as being reductive and invalidating the subjectivity of the interpreter's framework, but this critique has been countered as an

overly-narrow reading of Greimas' work (Chandler, 2002, p. 121; Hébert, 2019, p. 11; Parret, 1989; Schleifer, 1987, p. 164). Greimas sees the possibilities for new manifestations as endless, but suggests these manifestations are still produced from a limited set of rules (Parret, 1989). Greimas has also suggested that his tools are open for a more flexible application, connecting semiotic squares with each other (Felluga, 2015, p. 125; Greimas, 1970/1987, p. 60).

I apply the semiotic square flexibly, connecting multiple squares to reveal hidden framings. A semiotic analysis never shows the true meaning of a word (which does not exist) but always just one framing of it. Connected squares show other possible meanings, which were neglected or repressed when using one frame instead of another.

The figure on the left of the slide demonstrates this flexible use of the semiotic square with the opposition white-black. The fourth opposition shows how an interpreter frames *white* by putting it in opposition to *black* instead of in opposition to something else. The interpreter is added here as a flexible application of the square (Felluga, 2015, p. 125; Greimas, 1970/1987, p. 60). Contrasting the same word with different oppositions creates a row of connected semiotic squares (on the right of the slide). Each square depicts a different framing (F) of *white*; the synthesis of the implied opposition between S and –S. *White* is framed as a material matter (color), a social matter (race), or a psychological matter (feeling). This allows the recognition of differences between connected squares/framings.

# 1. The semiotic square: a flexible application

## Populism opposed to elitism and pluralism

- Mudde, 2004; 2017

## Populism opposed to liberalism

- Pappas 2016

## Populism opposed to pragmatism

- Canovan, 1999, 2002

## Populism opposed to technocracy

- Taguieff, 1997, 1998;  
Moffitt and Tormey, 2014;  
Moffitt 2016

## Populism opposed to institutionalism

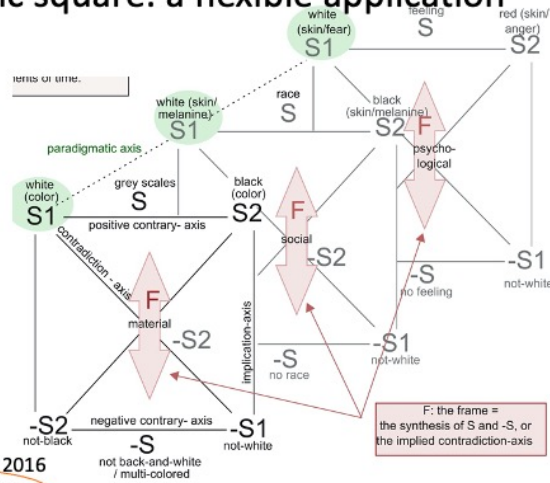
- Laclau 2005

## Populism opposed to nationalism, nativism

- De Cleen and Stavrakakis, 2017, Pappas 2016

## Left-wing Populism opposed to Right-wing populism

- Katsambekis, 2016; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013; Stavrakakis & Katsambekis, 2014; Stavrakakis, Katsambekis, Nikisianis, Kioupkiolis, & Siomos, 2017)



Behind model for assessing political style (that I will show a in the next slides) lies an analysis of different usages of the word *populism* (on the manifestation level of discourse), as well as on the academic narratives explaining populist practices (the surface discourse structure).

All these different meanings of populism relate to different oppositions to other words, and different semiotic squares that can be connected through the S1 paradigmatic axis, in green on the slide.

In this analysis, three specific semiotic squares showed to be structurally interwoven, on multiple levels. These are the concepts of populism, elitism, and pluralism. If you put one of the three at S1, and another at S2, the third always appears at -S.

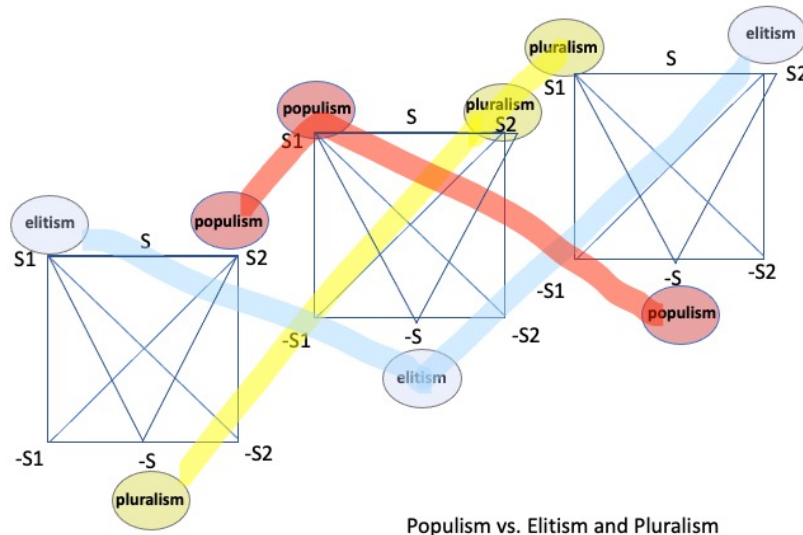
## 1. The semiotic square: a flexible application

### The three concepts:

In **populism**, a populist leader speaks directly for the people, claiming power back from the corrupt elite.

In **elitism**, the elite governs. The people have the power to choose and dismiss their elite leaders as they see fit.

In **pluralism**, people share power. Everybody is part of the people. The one with the most support is granted power temporarily.

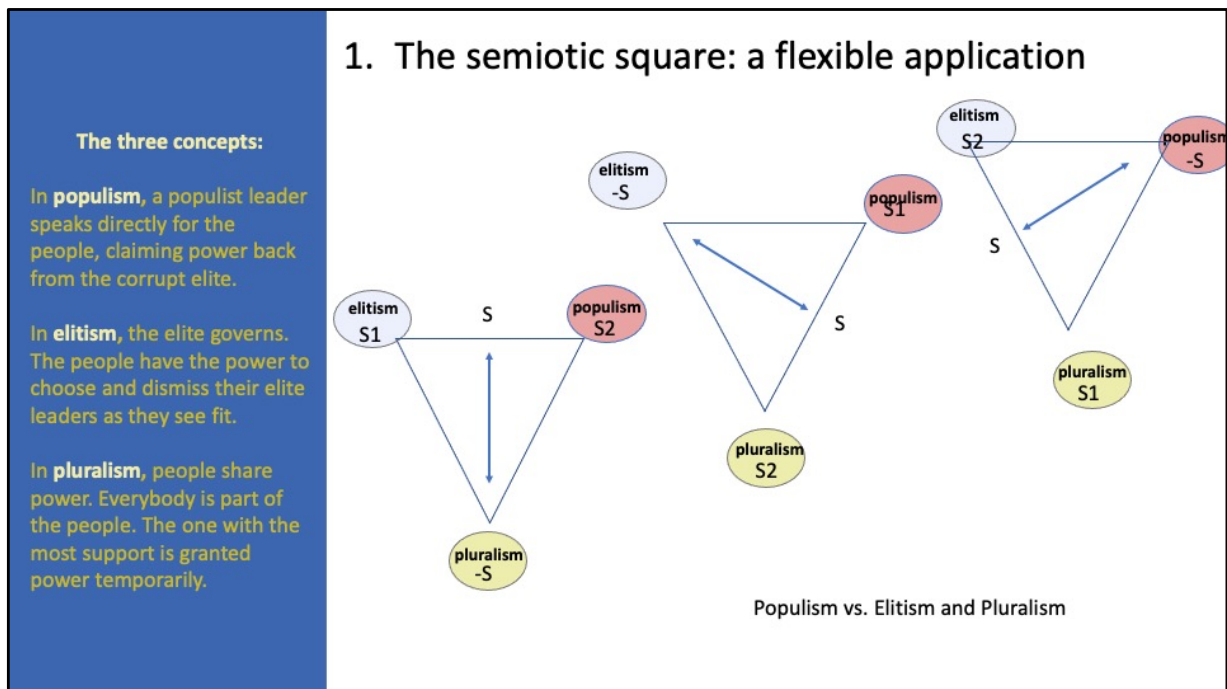


If you put *populism* at S1 and elitism at S2, pluralism appears at the bottom of the square.

If you put populism at S1 and pluralism at S2, now elitism turns up at -S.

If you put elitism at S1 and pluralism at S2, now populism turns up at -S.

I will explain this more elaborately later, what I want to show here is that the squares can be connected at multiple ways. It looks messy this way, but it becomes clearer when you rotate the squares.



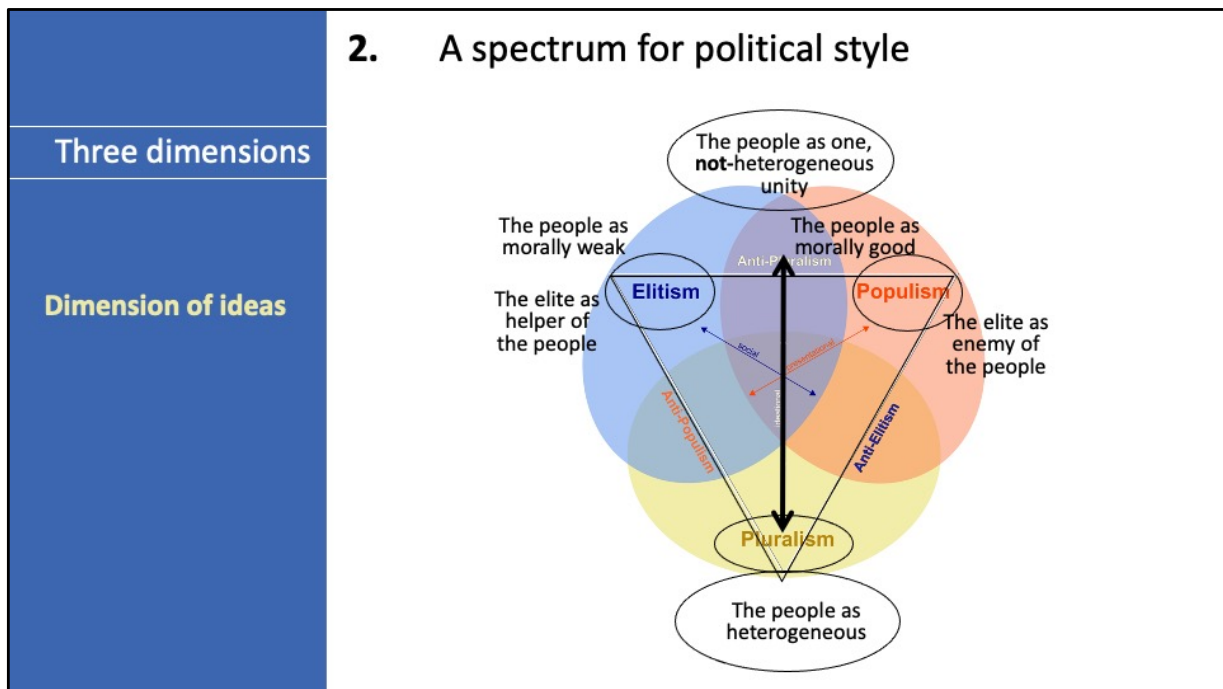
And if you rotate square 2 and 3 the concepts are placed at the same corner of one triangle.

This triangle is assembled from 3 triangles on top of each other. It depicts three oppositions S vs –S. And all –S are simultaneously also the S and S2 of another opposition.

I will now explain which three oppositions are in the core of the meaning of populism, elitism, and pluralism.

Questions so far on Greimas? because now we are leaving his theory, and just focusing on the meaning of populism, elitism and pluralism.





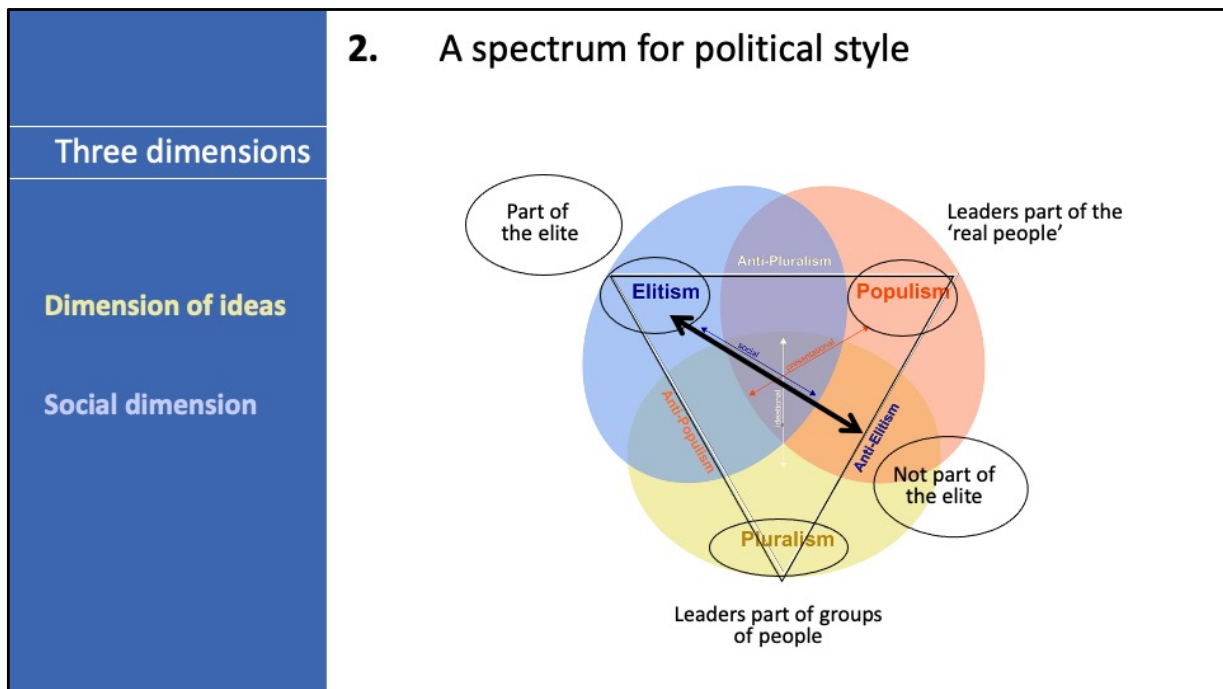
(2:20) For instance,

If you put populism in opposition to elitism, as in the slide, features are highlighted such as: 'seeing the people as morally good or weak'. Or: 'the elite as enemy or helper of the people'. But in every opposition, the two concepts share one feature: they both see the people as one unity.

[klik] In this common feature, they are the opposite of pluralism, where the people are a heterogeneous group.

This is a matter of ideas, hence, this framing of populism is tied to the ideational dimension.

Researchers, familiar with populism theories, will recognize in this structure the populism definition of Cas Mudde. This definition is adopted by many researchers, but not by all.



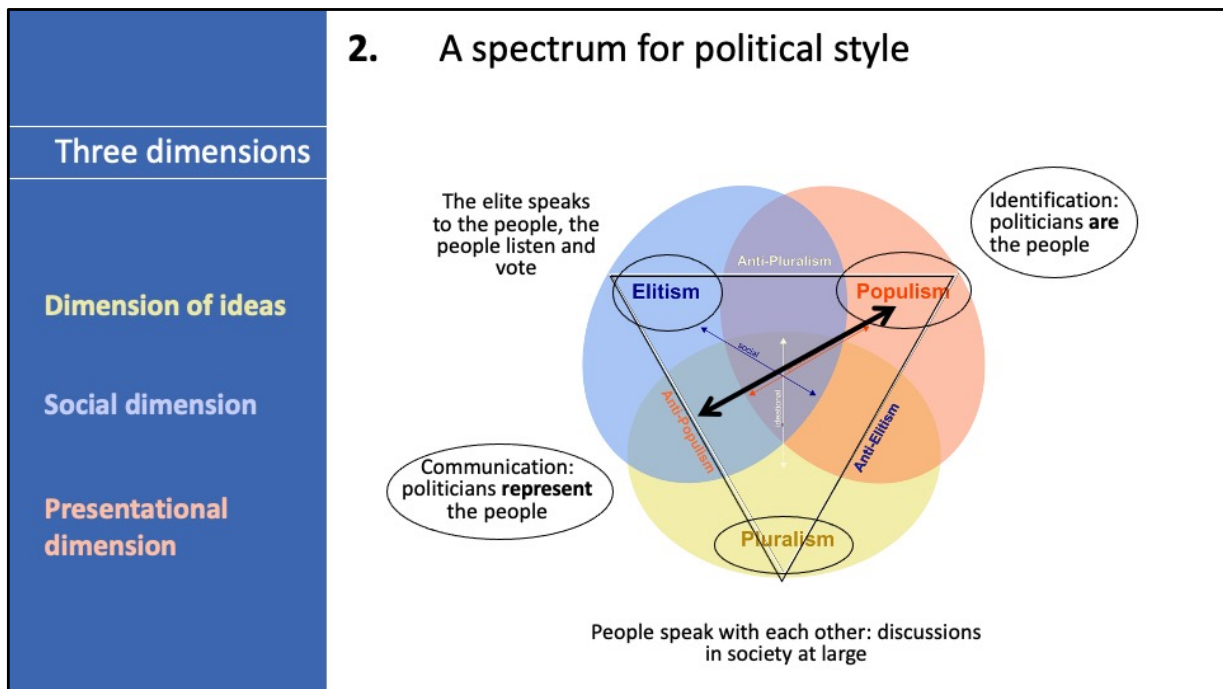
Another framing of populism is revealed by putting populism in opposition to pluralism instead of elitism. Populism differs from pluralism at features such as 'being part of the 'real people' versus 'being part of groups of people'. They have in common that

[klik]

they both see political leaders as part of the people, and not of the elite. In this common feature, they are the negation of elitism, where leaders are necessarily part of the elite.

This is a matter of social action and of power. Hence, it is tied to the social dimension of discourse.

This frame is – partly – used by researches such as Ostiguy, or Laclau. Still, there is yet another dimension in discourse, and also another framing of populism.

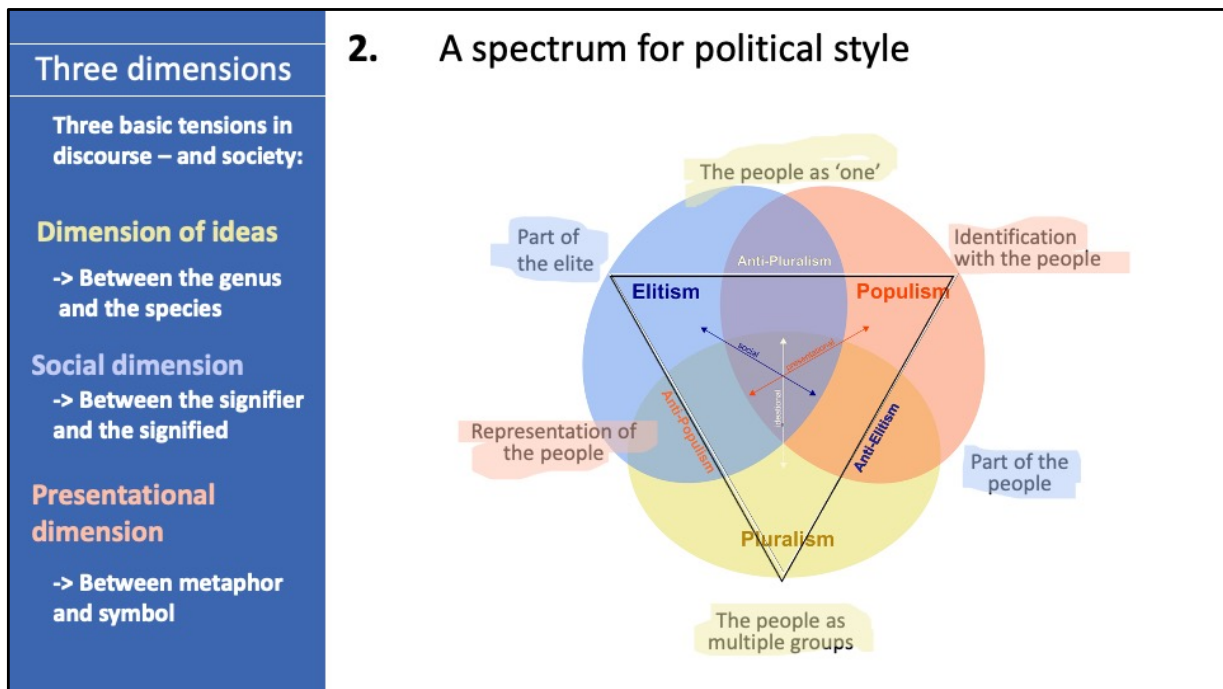


When you put pluralism in opposition to elitism, the third dimension comes into play. In this framing, oppositions such as ‘the elite speaks to the people versus ‘people discuss things with each other’ are activated. And of course, also these two concepts have an important feature in common:

[klik]

they both have a mediated relationship with the people. In this, they are the direct opposite of populism. Here leaders speak directly for the people. They have an –as if – unmediated relationship with the people.

This framing of populism aligns with Kurt Weyland’s so-called ‘populist twist’, with Panizza’s populist identification, and with parts of Laclau’s theory.



(5:00) These three oppositions in three dimensions form the core structure underlying populism. All existing definitions of populism – in academia and common sense - abide to this structure, because this logic makes populist expressions possible in the first place. But one expression never uses the whole structure, because by including all dimensions simultaneously, populism would contradict itself: because in one dimension populism is the ally of pluralism, opposing elitism, and in the other dimensions it is the other way around.

This explains why populism researchers cannot agree on the definition of populism. Some aspects of one dimension contradict the other. For instance, this happens with the homogeneity of the people, and with leaderless populism.

In my dissertation, I have circumvented the problem by analyzing the dimensions separately; basically by doing every speech analysis three times. Only after analysis, the results were combined. The average score reveals in which dimension this specific expression of populism is enacted predominantly.

## 2. A spectrum for political style

populism opposed to....

**Populism** opposed to **elitism and pluralism**

- Mudde, 2004; 2017  
- Müller, 2016, 2017

**Populism** opposed to **liberalism**

- Pappas 2016

**Populism** opposed to **pragmatism**

- Canovan, 1999, 2002

**Populism** opposed to **technocracy**

- Taguieff, 1997, 1998;

Moffitt and Tormey, 2014;

Moffitt 2016

**Populism** opposed to **institutionalism**

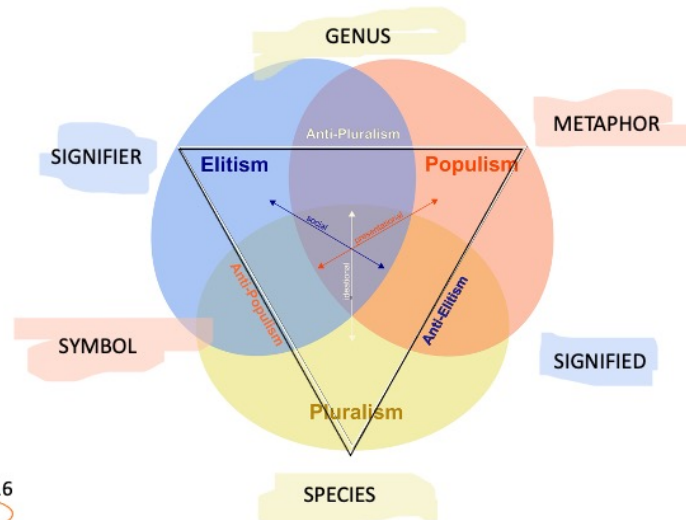
- Laclau 2005

**Populism** opposed to **nationalism, nativism**

- De Cleen and Stavrakakis, 2017; Pappas 2016

**Left-wing Populism** opposed to **Right-wing populism**

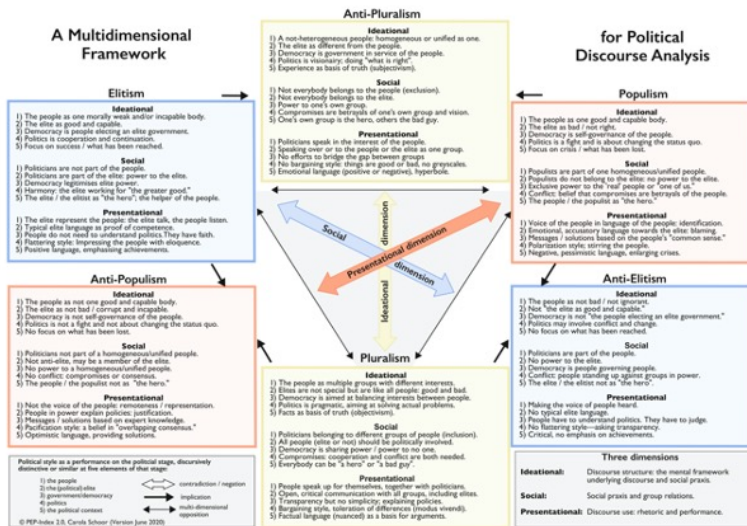
- Katsambekis, 2016; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013; Stavrakakis & Katsambekis, 2014; Stavrakakis, Katsambekis, Nikisianis, Kioupkiolis, & Siomos, 2017)



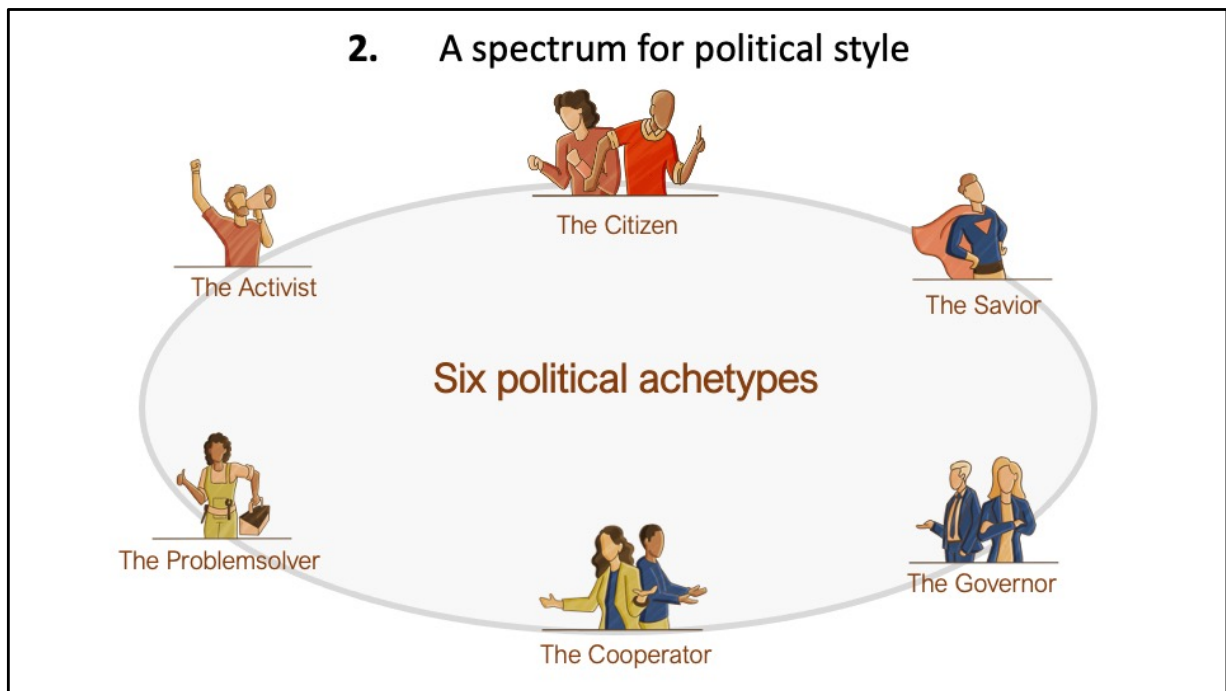
All those other oppositions of populism with other concepts, that we saw earlier on, trace back to these basic three tensions within language and society  
And, as I will argue, so does the political spectrum. I will come to that later on.

This is only logical: because these three tensions are responsible for the generation of meaning in our society.

## 2. A spectrum for political style



## 2. A spectrum for political style



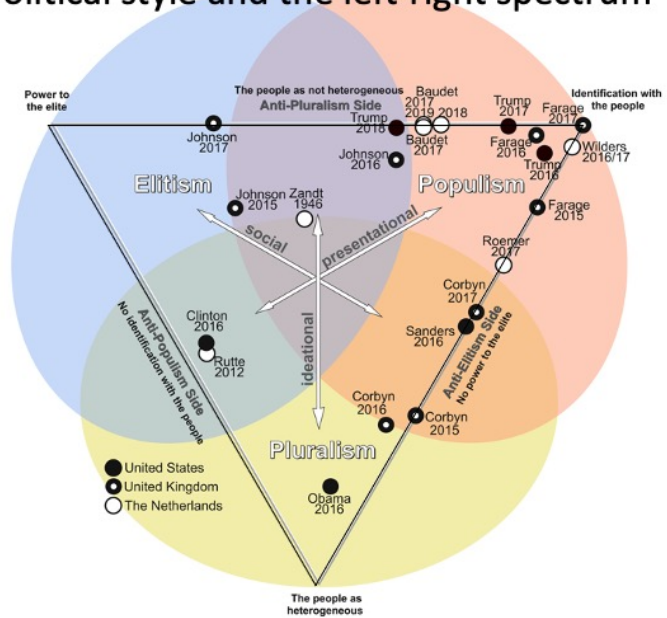
## Three dimensions

Dimension of ideas

Social dimension

Presentational dimension

### 3. Political style and the left-right spectrum



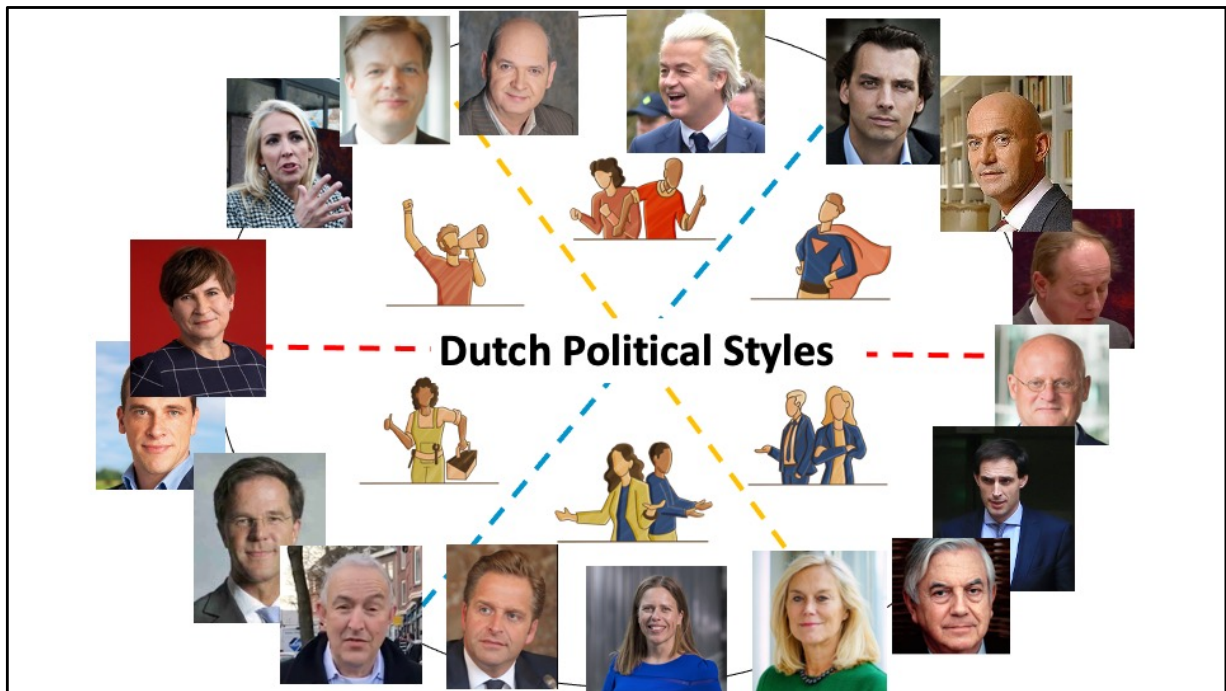


## Three dimensions

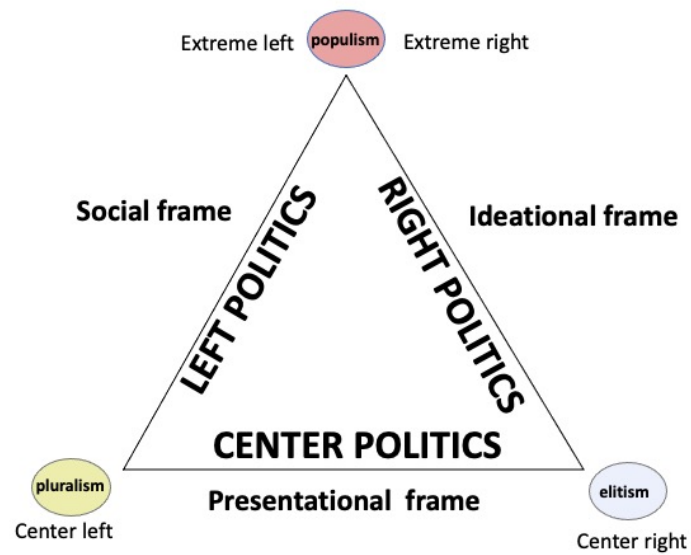
## Social dimension

## Presentational dimension






#### 4. A combined spectrum



#### 4. A combined spectrum

1) A linear political spectrum:




left center right

1 dimension: ideas, content

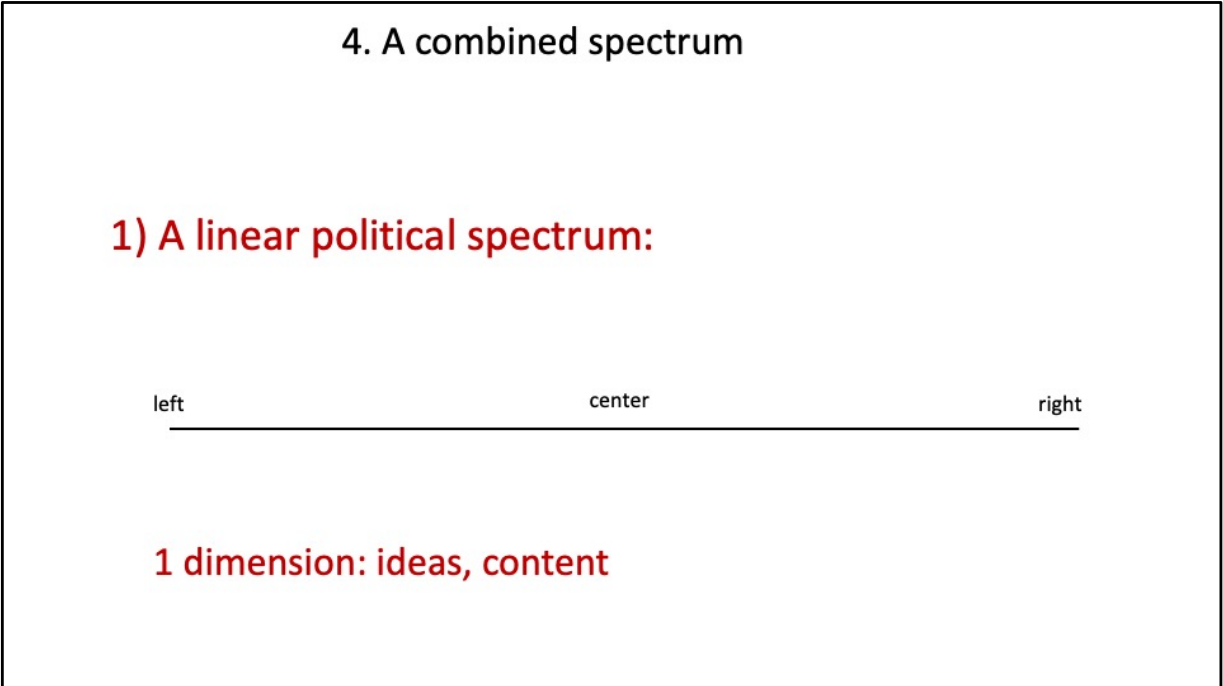
#### 4. A combined spectrum

1) A linear political spectrum:




left center right

1 dimension: ideas, content



#### 4. A combined spectrum

1) A linear political spectrum:



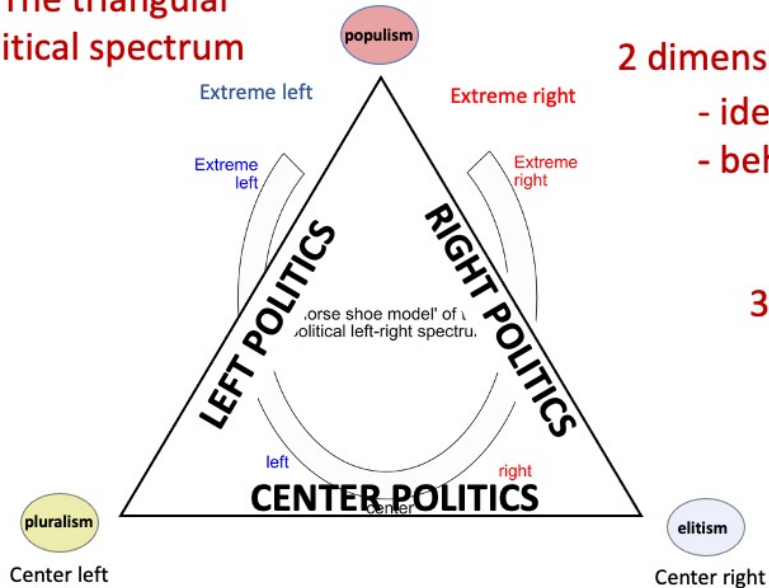
left center right

1 dimension: ideas, content



#### 4. A combined spectrum

### 3) The triangular political spectrum



### 2 dimensions:

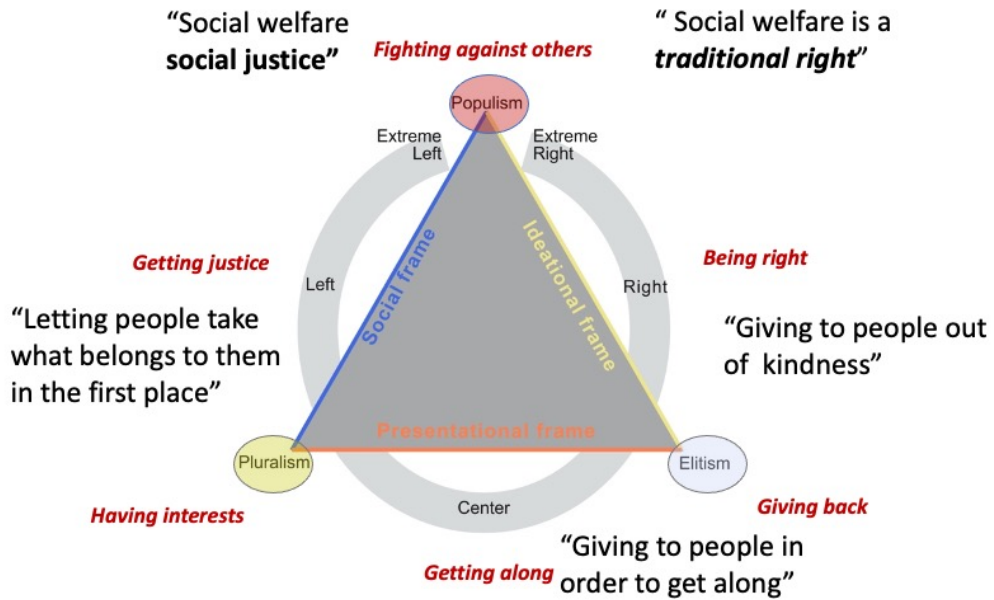
- ideas/content
- behavior/action/style



### 3 dimensions:

- ideas/**framing**
- behavior/action
- communication-style

#### 4. A combined spectrum



## Conclusion

- A combined political and style spectrum explains a current politics better
- The main differences in politics are tied to **framing** instead of standpoints
- Populism, elitism and pluralism mark a **shift in framing** between left, right and center politics.