

What Is Populism – Modern US Populism?

Populism has many definitions, but the one that most closely defines current US populism is the “common man” versus the “Elites”. The “common man” or the “people” are defined by class, ethnicity, nationality, or economic status. But “common man” goes even deeper than that. It is the individual and that individual's Constitutional rights that are part of who we are as Americans.

The “elite” can include political, economic, media, and cultural leaders, the intelligentsia, and government. Any group that exerts unfair force against the individual or the people could be considered the elite.

***Example:** Suppose that several large companies who offer a utility like service start banning people based on their political beliefs. That might start a popular movement by the people who were banned against the large companies. If the government took the side of the companies, then this would likely start a populist movement that would effect the next election.*

This quote about President Andrew Jackson provides a good description of a conservative populist. It also explains why President Trump had a portrait of Jackson in the Oval Office and why Biden had it removed.

Andrew Jackson helped shape a political philosophy that has rippled through the American political firmament for nearly 200 years. Call it conservative populism—an **aversion to bigness in all of its forms, including big government, and a faith in the capacity of ordinary folks to understand and to act upon their own interests**. Conservative populism includes a **natural aversion to entrenched elites, who always fight back against conservative populists whenever they challenge elite power**. Republicans of today who tout the leadership of the last great GOP president, **Ronald Reagan**, should know they are **touting the 20th century’s greatest exponent of Jackson-style populist politics**. [source](#)

Anything that stresses the relationship between the people and the leaders can result in the creation of a populist movement. In the US, it is usually a result of an economic imbalance between the working class and large corporations resulting from the federal government favoring the corporations. We see this going on now with the Covid-19 lockdowns causing many small businesses to go out of business while big businesses like Amazon and Walmart make record profits. The government is acting in an unfair manner, favoring one set of businesses over another. In some states, there is the additional problem of treating churches more restrictively than other comparable entities.

Populism is often an attempt to correct the economic inequalities resulting from corporations pursuing profits over social responsibility. In the US, populism serves as a safety valve for capitalism, trying to correct the imbalance caused when the government favors big business over the people.

By law, corporations are organized to create profit for stockholders, not to share the profit with workers or to keep keep manufacturing plants in the US.

The leading statement of the law's view on corporate social responsibility goes back to [Dodge v.](#)

Ford Motor Co, a 1919 decision that held that **"a business corporation is organized and carried on primarily for the profit of the stockholders."** [source](#)

It is up to government to provide the right level of regulation that allows business to be conducted as freely as possible, while at the same time ensuring that the workers are not being taken unfair advantage of. This imbalance has played out over and over again in the US. Often the Democrats will gain power and over-regulate and then the Republicans will gain power and under-regulate. But each has it's favorites, and these favorites will often receive favorable tax and regulatory policies, creating an unfair competitive environment.

While economics is the primary cause of populism, there is often a cultural component. Here are 2 earlier examples of US populism. The primary causes are economic, but there are secondary cultural causes.

Name	Date	Economic	Cultural
Populist Party	1892-1908	Ban on foreign land ownership State control of railroads Shortened work days Anti-corruption	Temperance
Ronald Reagan	1981-1989	Reduce regulations Limit federal power Tax cuts	Individual rights Public Morality War on Drugs

Opinion: I have noticed while doing research for this article, that the left will view, for example, tax cuts as a cultural issue because they see it as hurting the poor and the working class, while the right will see it as an economic issue raising everyone's standard of living. Another example is the southern border wall. The right sees this as a security issue and the left sees it as discrimination against people of color. Where it becomes dangerous is when one side takes a position and the other side unfairly labels it using inflammatory language. The elites will echo this language as a way to discredit and destroy the populist movement. Both sides have been guilty of this.

Types of Populism

Populism is not considered to be an ideology, but is paired with an ideology such as nationalism, socialism, communism, conservatism, liberalism, constitutionalism, or fascism. Often times it is referred to as left-wing or right-wing populism, but that does not provide a clear description of the movement.

A populist movement is usually led by a charismatic leader such as Ross Perot (United We Stand), Sarah Palin (Associated with The Tea Party), Bernie Sanders (Democrat Socialist), and Donald Trump (MAGA). Trump was the only recent populist to become President. Occupy Wall Street and the Tea Party didn't have an identified leader, although Sarah Palin became one of the Tea Party's leading spokespeople.

Let's look at each of these movements.

- **Ross Perot 1992** – Balanced budget, economic nationalism, war on drugs, POW/MIA issue, increased tax on wealthy, trade issues. Populist/Economic/Nationalist
- **Tea Party (2000s)** – Small government, lower taxes, fiscal discipline, lower national debt, balanced budget. Sarah Palin best known person associated with the Tea Party. Primarily Republican. Populist/Economic/Conservative
- **Occupy Wall Street (2011)** – Anti-corporate, bank reform, economic reform, forgiveness of student loans, income disparity, We Are the 99%. Primarily Democrat. Populist/Economic/Socialist
- **Bernie Sanders (2016, 2020)** - Democrat Socialist. Economic inequity, single-payer healthcare, \$15 minimum wage, free public college tuition, paid parental leave. Populist/Economic/Socialist
- **Donald Trump (2016, 2020)** – Republican. Renegotiate trade agreements, America First, bring jobs back to US, stop illegal immigration (Build the Wall), reduce legal immigration, reduce regulations, non-interventionist foreign policy. Populist/Economic/Nationalist/Conservative

Summary

Populism is the people versus the elites. It occurs when the people believe that they are being treated unfairly by the people in power and they seek to correct this imbalance, often through a Presidential election. Almost always, the imbalance is an economic one, although there may also be cultural issues such as discrimination, free speech, gun rights, and abortion.

Populism is not an ideology, so it takes the form of an ideology such as conservatism, liberalism, fascism, socialism, communism, economics, and nationalism. A populist movement is usually led by a charismatic personality.