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POPULISM AND ELECTORAL POLITICS IN NEW ZEALAND

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In 1848, Karl Marx wrote that ‘a spectre stalks the land of Europe—the spectre of communism’ (p. 14). In the early 21st century, ‘populism’ constitutes a new apparition that is feared by many, haunting the wider world of representative democracy (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008). Populism has been described as one of two ‘deformations’ of liberal democracy, as a response to the alternative deformation of elitism (Galston, 2018). To Cas Mudde (2015, n.p.), for example, populism is an ‘illiberal democratic response to undemocratic liberalism’.

Much current discussion of populism frames the phenomenon pejoratively, as a disorder or affliction that threatens liberal democracy. Populism is said to be the antithesis of both pluralism and elitism. In this analysis of recent New Zealand politics, we challenge this construction of the concept, in both the New Zealand context and elsewhere. Some forms of populism may be anti-pluralist and, indeed, become anti-democratic, particularly when combined with authoritarianism. History has shown that apparently populist appeals to ‘the people’ may have a dark side, particularly when strong leaders become authoritarian and these appeals exclude some ethnic groups, immigrants or other minorities. However, other forms of populism accept difference, defining the core populist idea of ‘the people’ across ethnic and cultural distinctions to include everyone except a narrow elite, defined as those who exert excessive power based

on concentrated wealth and influence. In ideological terms, populism exists on the left and on the right, overlapping with ‘inclusionary’ versus ‘exclusionary’ dimensions.

This chapter considers the coherence, validity and portability of various constructions of populism and their applicability to contemporary New Zealand politics. This will allow us to begin to assess if, how and why New Zealand may be an exception to a trend that, elsewhere, is not only populist but sometimes also authoritarian. Is there, as Moffitt (2017) argued, an ‘Antipodean form of populism’ that New Zealand shares with Australia? Of course, the meanings of words and concepts are not fixed. Within the broad framework of its discourse, populism may be defined however one likes. But to contribute value in political analysis, populism requires a minimal definition that all can understand and share.

Defining Populism: Existing Approaches

Populism has taken several forms in political discourse, so many that it has been described as offering a ‘classic example’ of what political scientists describe as a ‘stretched concept, pulled out of shape by overuse and misuse’ (Brett, 2013, p. 410). Scholars have failed to reach consensus on a single approach to defining and measuring populism. Indeed, the recently published *Oxford handbook of populism* features three alternative constructions: ideological, organisational/strategic and discursive/performative (Kaltwasser, Ostiguy, Espejo & Taggart, 2017, pp. 1–2). However, these three constructions do not exhaust the available options. The lack of a single, clear definition in the scholarly literature is compounded by the changing real-world politics of populism—namely, the entry of parties that are described as populist into government and the wildly varying, ‘almost random’, vernacular uses of the term, including both in the media and by politicians themselves (Bale, Taggart & van Kessel, 2011, p. 128).

The most straightforward application of the concept is a label used to classify political parties and movements as ‘populist’ or ‘non-populist’—this was Mudde’s (2007) starting point. Individual politicians may be similarly categorised. Notably, populism tends to be a label ascribed by others, but not necessarily embraced by the relevant parties or movements in question. A populist/non-populist dichotomy is a crude instrument.

Parties can be represented on a continuum or scale, as demonstrated by Norris (2020). Once the existence of degrees of populism or non-populism is admitted, the picture becomes more complex.

What does the label ‘populist’ connote? Mudde’s ideational approach is the most widely applied. In his terms, populism is a ‘thin ideology’, able to be employed by parties and movements with varied objectives—for example, both neoliberal and anti-neoliberal. Its foundations are deeply moral, pitting a ‘pure people’ against a ‘corrupt elite’. The people are capable of generating a ‘general will’ that expresses their purported common interests against the elite’s special interests. Populism finds its opposite in both elitism and pluralism. Populism is anti-pluralist due to its emphasis on the general will. Mudde regarded this as ‘a kind of vulgar Rousseauian argument’ (2017, p. 8). Populists are strongly convinced of the intrinsic morality of their views; therefore, according to Mudde, they constitute a danger to democracy. While Mudde’s approach has been applied widely, doubts exist concerning its ability to travel. It works best as an ideal-type applied to authoritarian and exclusionary forms of populism; however, it is not otherwise particularly robust. A minimal definition is required to encompass all the necessary territory (Norris & Inglehart, 2019, p. 24).

A less pejorative approach has been offered by Ostiguy (2017), who defined populism as ‘style’. Following Ostiguy, Moffitt (2017) has argued that, in Australia and New Zealand, populism as style focuses on both discursive and performative elements of political actors and is characterised by appeals to ‘the People’ versus ‘the Elite’ and by ‘bad manners’ and ‘low’ behaviours (e.g. coarse and colourful, rather than technocratic, language). The essence of populism is a relationship between populist leaders and the ‘authentic’ people—who are not necessarily ‘pure’ or ‘virtuous’—who wish their neglected interests to be fully represented in government (Ostiguy, 2017, p. 91). This approach has some merit but may also be too narrow.

Weyland’s political-strategic approach emphasises ‘personalistic leadership that rests on direct, unmediated, un-institutionalised support from large masses of mostly unorganised followers’ (2017, p. 48). Populism is distinguished from fascism by the opportunism displayed by its leaders, who place vote maximisation ahead of ideological purity. Further, populists retain some commitment to democracy, whereas fascists do not, creating an even clearer divide. Again, this approach may fail to capture all necessary facets of the phenomenon. Meanwhile, some economists have identified populism with economic irresponsibility, where politicians

maximise their popularity while in government via unsustainable expenditure (Dornbusch & Edwards, 1991; Sachs, 1989). However, over the last two decades, the use of populist appeals by subsequent fiscally responsible governments in various countries (most notably in Latin America) presents a counterexample.

Laclau has proposed a more promising concept of populism, which conceives of 'the people' in terms of the construction of a popular hegemonic bloc. In this vision, populism forms an essential component of democracy. Populists seek to promote universal ideas of justice by creating 'empty signifiers' (Laclau, 2005, p. 131). The 'people' and 'the elite' are symbolic containers for content that is specific to political context and culture, thereby maximising the concept's travel potential. Laclau was one of the first scholars of populism to focus on its discursive elements, a direction followed in much subsequent research. Aslanidis (2016) abandoned Laclau's post-structuralist, interpretative and very broad definition of discourse, while still drawing on his central insights. He proposed the idea of a 'populist frame' that discursively mobilises the sovereign people against the elite. This frame can be captured empirically through textual analysis of populist discourse—an approach that is now followed by most researchers in the field.

While paying due respect to Mudde's contribution, Aslanidis rejects the idea of populism as ideology of any kind, thick or thin. Populism, as used in the language of political parties and movements, is a discursive mode of operation or strategy. The 'sovereignty of the people' is a key component of the populist frame, in addition to being central to democratic discourse in general. Some, including left-wing cultural theorist Stuart Hall (Williams, 2012), have questioned the existence of such a thing as 'the people'; a statement oddly reminiscent of Margaret Thatcher's denial of 'society' (as quoted in Thatcher, 2013). Of course, such concepts as 'the people' and 'populism' are discursive constructions in themselves, as Laclau and Aslanidis have pointed out. Such constructions become 'real' when they resonate with attitudes and behaviour and are given status in normative debate and, often, in constitutional laws or norms. The idea of 'the people' can hardly be rejected out of hand without removing one of the foundations of democracy itself. For example, consider the normative force of the first words of the United States Constitution: 'We the People'.

In constructing the concept of the ‘people’ as a symbolic signifier, in Laclau’s terms, the key distinction exists between inclusionary and exclusionary populism (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013). When employed as a vehicle by the authoritarian right, populism becomes exclusionary. The people are unified according to their purity; a division is created between them and the corrupt elite and, crucially, other excluded groups who become, by definition, outsiders. Müller (2016) has contended that, by delineating insider and outsider groups in this way, this form of populism becomes a form of identity politics. The substantive identity of the ‘pure’ people can vary—the people could be, for example, white, working-class, Christian, ‘hard working folk’ or a designated nation. The ‘ordinary people’ are typically defined in nationalistic or ethnocentric terms (Donovan & Redlawsk, 2018; Mudde, 2013, 2014). Therefore, those who oppose them are part of the corrupt elite (and, thus, not part of ‘the people’) and cannot be legitimate (Müller, 2016). The denial of the possibility of legitimate opposition is the last step in the transformation of this form of populism from its origins as a democratic movement into one that more loosely resembles authoritarianism, as seen in contemporary examples such as Viktor Orbán’s Hungary.

Left-wing populists define the people more broadly. As a democratic movement of the left, populism defines the people as a super-majority—or, as famously popularised by Occupy Wall Street, ‘the 99 per cent’. Historically, populism emerged from the democratic left—other contemporary examples of populism have continued this tradition (Katsambakis, 2016; March, 2007; Mouffe, 2018; Ramiro & Gomez, 2017). Populism arose during the so-called ‘gilded age’, a late 19th-century period in the United States that was characterised by economic growth, but also punctuated by recessions and further characterised by extreme poverty and economic inequality. Business elites encouraged political corruption and successfully influenced politicians not to regulate or legislate in the public interest. Populists mobilised ‘the people’ against elites in a movement that included both blacks and whites and was eventually incorporated into the Democratic Party (Goodwyn, 1976).

When mapped globally, varieties of populism can also be found across the range of the widely identified second dimension of party competition: from conservative, traditionalist, authoritarian or parochial values, at one end, to cosmopolitan, liberal and multicultural values, at the other (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). ‘The people’ are defined narrowly or broadly, across different dimensions (Abts & Rummens, 2007; Font, Graziano &

Tsakatika, 2019; Stanley, 2008, p. 107). In contrast to standard accounts of populist movements and leaders delineating a homogenous 'people', inclusionary populism (e.g. Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain) may involve a highly heterogeneous and pluralist vision of 'the people' (Font et al., 2019, p. 6). Anti-pluralism does not appear to be a necessary condition of populism across all its discourses, unless one wishes to narrow its definition.

A concept of populism that focuses on the language of popular sovereignty against undemocratic elites makes sense as a minimal definition that can operationalise classification of parties and movements. Quantitative textual analysis also encourages estimates of degrees of populism, rather than a strict dichotomy. However, populism works not only due to the grievances on which it may feed, but also because, discursively, it taps into democratic norms and values. Indeed, as discussed in Chapter 3 (Comparative Study of Electoral Systems, 2016; Norris & Inglehart, 2019), one can identify populist norms in public attitudes and opinions. In a world of norms, we return to ideology, even in inchoate form. To identify the intellectual origins of popular norms, we must address democratic theory.

Surprisingly, most work on populism has hitherto ignored democratic theory as a source of norms. However, continuing a long tradition of debate, some social choice theorists have identified populism as one of two alternative traditions of democracy. Institutionally, populism is based on the principle of responsible party government, in contrast with an opposing 'liberal' theory (Riker, 1982). Riker identified this form of populism as the model of responsible party government advocated in the United States in the 1950s (American Political Science Association, 1950). Based on an idealisation of Westminster democracy, as practised in the United Kingdom, responsible party government requires internally democratic political parties, the construction of party programs (presented to voters in advance of elections) and the granting of a mandate to implement those policies if a party gains office.

Riker (1982) himself became a critic of populist democracy as he defined it. Using social choice theory, derived from Arrow (1951), he argued that true democratic majority cannot be guaranteed on any political decision, that the inevitable fate of democratic politics is chaos and disequilibrium and that only a thin or minimalist liberal democracy is feasible, based on retrospective accountability of governments to voters and with

constitutional limits on majority rule. This line of thinking followed influential ideas promoted by Schumpeter, which have since become known as the theory of democratic elitism (Bachrach, 1967; Riker, 1982; Schumpeter, 1942).

From the 1950s onwards, this populist model of democratic responsiveness to mass opinion has attracted sustained criticism from social choice theorists, liberals, neoliberals and some empirical political scientists. Meanwhile, political theorists who have defended populism in these terms have contested these social choice arguments (e.g. McLean, 2002; Radcliffe, 1993; Weale, 1984). Ultimately, the choice between elitist/liberal and populist forms of democracy relates to values (Dowding, 2006; Mackie, 2003). The normative ideal and practice of responsible party government remains central to much research into electoral politics (Adams, 2001). However, inspection of critiques of populism in mainstream political science demonstrates that, when many political scientists and politicians talk of ‘liberal democracy’, they often mean its elitist version.

Populists are critical of liberal democracy when it merges with elitism, pointing out its limitations in addressing economic and political problems: a shrinking of the ‘space reserved to politics and to the people’ (Pinelli, 2011, p. 15). Populists continue to use traditional institutional forms to gain election; however, many also advocate for more direct forms of expressing the will of ‘the people’, such as referendums. From the populist perspective, the shifting of some decision-making to unelected or technocratic elites distances government from the people, diminishes citizens’ capacity to express their will and supports a (likely nefarious) elite consensus. In response, their critics disdainfully describe populism as a ‘degraded form of democracy’ (Müller, 2016, p. 10).

Liberal/elitist forms of democracy seek to limit the power of the majority by means of two mechanisms: constitutional limits to government authority (Urbinati, 2017) and the separation of powers, thereby giving often privileged minorities rights of both veto and influence. Populists oppose such limits to democratic majoritarianism. If liberal democracy is defined in terms of its constitutionalism, this forms the most important difference between liberal and populist democracy. This distinction is crucial for understanding populism in New Zealand. Even more so than the United Kingdom, New Zealand almost wholly lacks constitutional limits on government authority, other than by way of democratic

election—an almost perfect case of institutional populism. As Palmer and Butler put it, New Zealand's constitution is 'dangerously incomplete, obscure, fragmentary and far too flexible' (2016, p. 13). Subject only to a majority in its single-chamber parliament, virtually every constitutional rule can be altered easily, without judicial review.

In normative terms, then, there exist two dominant ways of framing populism: one negative, which portrays it as a disorder or affliction, presenting a threat to liberal democracy, and another (now somewhat less emphasised) neutral or even positive, which conceives of populism as a social movement that aims to promote and expand democracy and remove control from economic and political elites with excessive power.

Norris and Inglehart (2019) have recently clarified the debate by distinguishing between populist and authoritarian attitudes. They identify a first-order principle regarding 'who should rule' common to all forms of populism: the claim that the people, rather than the 'establishment', elected representatives or, worse, technocrats and experts, are the true and legitimate sources of political and moral authority. The second-order principles that emerge from these principles and the concrete policies that flow from them can, however, take a variety of forms: for instance, in either authoritarian or liberal directions. Populism that seeks to implement authoritarian values emphasises security and order, conformity to a certain way of life, tradition or group, and obedience to strong leadership. By contrast, libertarian populism may prioritise participatory styles of politics and include rhetoric against financial elites, neoliberalism and mainstream political parties, while also supporting or at least tolerating more progressive social attitudes (Norris & Inglehart, 2019, p. 11). Therefore, whereas populist rhetoric pushes grievances upwards towards elites, authoritarian rhetoric directs grievances outwards towards scapegoat groups perceived as threatening the values and norms of the in-group (Norris & Inglehart, 2019, p. 7).

Norris and Inglehart have continued to accept the idea that populism sits in opposition to pluralism, a core tenet of both democracy and liberalism (Abts & Rummens, 2007; Mudde, 2017; Müller, 2016; Norris & Inglehart, 2019). Populism is posited to be the opposite of pluralism, due to claims that it seeks to attack the role of representation in representative democracy (Taggart, 2000), prioritising unity (not pluralism) and the unmediated relationship between (strong) leaders and the people

(Urbinati, 2017, p. 575). We argue that this is a narrow identification of populism. Logically, accusations of anti-pluralism apply only to exclusionary and authoritarian forms.

An inclusionary form of populism, by definition, will acknowledge difference while also building majority coalitions across society around concerns that all can share, by means of strategic or ‘heresthetic’ leadership: a strategy by which a person or group affects the context of a decision-making process to ensure that they prevail (Nagel, 1993). In broad terms, this social choice concept has much in common with Laclau’s constructivist theory of establishing a popular hegemony. It also counters the criticism of the ‘general will’ as a naïve concept. Majorities are constructed via mobilisation, discourse and coalition building; few, if any, practical political actors can deny this point, populists and non-populists alike. Of those who accuse populism of being necessarily anti-pluralist we might ask: is this opposition to populism anti-majoritarian? Do they agree with Riker’s (1982) claim that there can be no substantive content or moral force to the notions of majority rule and popular will? If so, can someone who claims the mantle of a democrat deny the principle of majority rule? Further, if majority rule, imperfect though it may be, is denied as a principle, what are the normative and behavioural bonds of cohesion that maintain a polity and make it possible for those who lose a debate to accept the result? Schumpeter’s position provides the clearest answer to this question—trust in established elites and a constitutional order that suppresses majority rule, reinforced, if necessary, by the coercive power of the state. In situations where these values come into conflict, people face stark and uncomfortable choices.

If we set aside a view of populism as inherently exclusionary and authoritarian and acknowledge its nuanced and complex relationship with democracy, both historically and in contemporary normative theory, we may approach a more firmly grounded concept of populism that defines its opposite as elitism rather than pluralism. We make one key concession: as noted, populism has a dark side—even an initially democratic and inclusionary movement may be perverted if authoritarians assume leadership and themselves become an elite. Indeed, authoritarian populist movements are often led by persons with elite backgrounds and may make exclusionary appeals to the people on cultural issues to draw attention away from continued elite power and privilege. In so doing,

they render populism a caricature of its own original aims, identifying it with politicians and movements whose actions and rhetoric increasingly smack of neo-fascism, if not fascism itself.

In this book, we define populism in two senses. First, in terms of normative political theory, populism is founded on the people's belief in government as its source of ultimate sovereignty and has both moral and pragmatic foundations. Foundations are moral in that the source of collective decisions should be collective deliberation among the people, all with equal claims to speak, and pragmatic in terms of scepticism regarding the claims of elites to superior wisdom and judgement over 'the mass'. Populism can be channelled indirectly through the institutions of representative democracy, or by other more direct means, but preferably where constitutional barriers to executive authority and legislative power do not strongly inhibit majority rule, thereby avoiding a wide separation of powers and the existence of multiple veto points. In our second sense of populism, we define it as a discursive or rhetorical strategy, in those terms discussed earlier in this chapter (Aslanidis, 2016). In passing, we also note that a populist frame may be used by those whose norms are not populist. Much of the confusion regarding populism is due to the use of populist discourse to promote parties or movements whose objectives are not populist in relation to normative democratic theory. For example, the style and rhetoric of current British Conservative Party leader Boris Johnson could be described as populist; however, his party's objectives are not.

To operationalise the concept of populism, we apply it at two levels: the discourse of political parties and its resonance(s) in mass opinion. For party discourse, the idea of a discursive frame is attractive because it may cut across both inclusionary/democratic and exclusionary/authoritarian boundaries. Regarding mass opinion, we first turn to the work of those who have pioneered a series of survey instruments to capture the phenomenon in public attitudes, including those who designed the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems module from which we draw. In both empirical applications of the concept, we also reject a binary populist/non-populist distinction; there exist continuums of discourse, attitudes and behaviour that run between populism and elitism. As outlined in Chapters 3 and 4, we refined our selection of instruments, using additional items from the New Zealand Election Study, to better separate out populist and authoritarian values and preferences.

Populism in New Zealand: Historical Patterns and Contemporary Context

In the terms we have clarified above, New Zealand has, in many respects, a populist political culture and populist political institutions. Several accounts of New Zealand politics and political culture have pointed to traditions of populism dating back to the late 19th century, shaped partly by the wave of British settler immigrants to New Zealand who sought to apply the democratic principles of the Chartist movement (Gustafson, 2006; Moffitt, 2017; Vowles, 1987). Universal suffrage occurred in 1893—all but one of the Chartist principles were in place by the end of the 19th century; the one exception was annual parliaments. New Zealand's maximum three-year term of parliament remains much shorter than those of other democracies and has survived two elite-led attempts to extend it. Richard Seddon, who led the country's first party government from 1893 to 1906, is widely described as one of the most significant examples of local populist politics, in the vein of late 19th- and early 20th-century populism in the United States (Hamer, 1988; Nagel, 1993; Simpson, 1976). Indeed, Nagel described Seddon's substantive policies and political style as 'designed to build an overwhelming majority based on the common people of his country' (1993, p. 172). In this interpretation, the goal of populist leadership is to create lasting majorities by means of well-tuned electoral strategy. Norman Kirk, a short-lived Labour prime minister in the early 1970s, sought to shape a recasting of New Zealand national identity towards the Pacific, using rhetoric that was highly evocative of populism (Kirk, 1969).

As a small, intimate democracy whose politicians are much less isolated from citizens than in many other countries, expectations of high levels of responsiveness to public opinion were characteristic of 20th-century New Zealand politics (Vowles, 1998). The absence of both a constitution as fundamental law and judicial review of legislation, within a simple unitary state where authority is concentrated in parliament, means governments wield potentially 'unbridled power' (Palmer, 1979), even following more recent electoral and constitutional reforms. Historically, prime ministers kept copies of their manifestos close to hand in their offices (Mulgan, 1990). However, political elites began to abandon norms regarding the electoral mandate during the neoliberal policy revolution of the late 1980s and early 1990s (Chapman, 1992; Gibbons, 2000). The response to this was a crisis of political legitimacy and a successful

campaign to change the electoral system from first-past-the-post to proportional representation. Arguments for reform criticised governments with strong parliamentary majorities that failed to gain majority support among voters (Katz, 1997; Royal Commission on the Electoral System, 1985). During the crucial period, strong populist sentiments existed among those seeking reform (Vowles, Miller, Lamare, Catt & Aimer, 1995; see also Chapter 7). Reassertion of norms of governments ‘keeping promises’ and ‘doing what the people want’ have been important features of what citizens have sought from government after the 1996 shift to proportional representation (Vowles, 2011).

At various periods of New Zealand’s political history, episodes of populism—as discourse, style or rhetoric—have been identified across almost all major political parties and their leaders. The type of populism most commonly described is grounded in a claim to represent and give effect to the will of large majorities: a kind of moderate policy responsiveness. Former Prime Minister John Key’s habit of checking public opinion in preparation for formulating and subsequently amending policy reflected the reality that, in a small, parliamentary democracy, whose citizens have easy and direct access to the political class, responsiveness to voters’ concerns is valued. Further, for voters, a (relatively short) three-yearly parliamentary cycle means that a chance to sanction parties at election time is never far away.

Such a conception of policy responsiveness bears some similarities to the argument that ‘ad hoc pragmatism’, in the form of reactive decision-making by political leaders in real time and as political events unfold, has driven the country’s trajectory of incremental and sometimes unexpected constitutional change (Palmer, 2007, p. 571). The kind of populism evident in this political culture emphasises appeals to the people and giving force to the will of majorities; however, it rarely attacks pluralist politics or suggests that political rivals are existential enemies (MacDonald, 2019). Populism, in this sense, is not perceived to be a negative feature of the political style. Neither is it restricted to marginal or ideologically exclusionary parties; rather, as Moffitt (2016) has argued, it can be thought of as a ‘mainstream’ feature of the political system.

Nevertheless, strands of more pathologically authoritarian populism have been identified in both New Zealand’s political history and aspects of its political culture (Ausubel, 1965; Bedgood, 1975). The authoritarian populist appeals of Robert Muldoon’s National

Government (1975–1984) are an obvious example, particularly in terms of anti-immigrant campaigning and a backlash against Pacific Island immigrants, in addition to attacks on the media and a bullying style of leadership that explicitly appealed to the ‘ordinary people’. In a famous example, justified by an electoral mandate, Muldoon ignored constitutional and legal norms by prematurely instructing officials to ignore a law intended for repeal; however, the courts did not agree (Palmer, 1979). In more recent times, the National Party’s divisive Iwi/Kiwi billboards during the 2005 election campaign, under Don Brash, demonstrated a recurrence of populist rhetoric.¹

Muldoon’s legacy continues into the 21st century, in the form of the New Zealand First Party (Joiner, 2015). Internationally, comparative studies of populism generally identify New Zealand First as the main (and usually sole) populist party active in New Zealand politics and its leader of 26 years, Winston Peters, as New Zealand’s primary populist politician (Denemark & Bowler, 2002; Donovan & Redlawsk, 2018; Moffitt, 2016, 2017; Norris & Inglehart, 2017). Many scholars place New Zealand First in the company of the usual right-populist suspects in Europe.² Norris and Inglehart’s inclusion of New Zealand First in their 2019 study of authoritarian-populist parties and Moffitt’s (2017) exclusive focus on Winston Peters as an exemplar of an ‘Antipodean’ model of populism are only two examples of the common approach taken by international scholarship.³ New Zealand First has exhibited exclusionary populist credentials over the years, via its periodic deployment of anti-immigration rhetoric in tandem with standard populist attacks on business and bureaucratic elites. Further, it has consistently supported referendums as a means of accessing, and giving effect to, the will of the majority (the ‘ordinary folk’ or ‘hard-working Kiwis’) in the political process. These political discourses reflect the core elements of common understandings

1 Following in the wake of a period of significant political disagreement regarding rights of access to, and ownership over, the foreshore and seabed of the New Zealand coastline, the Iwi/Kiwi billboards implied that New Zealand beaches would fall under Māori ownership under a Labour government, whereas a National government would retain them in ‘Kiwi’ hands. As explained below, ‘Kiwi’, a colloquial label for ‘New Zealander’, signalled the populist idea of New Zealanders being ‘one people’, inclusive of Māori as citizens but failing to recognise their rights as an indigenous people and Treaty partner.

2 Some scholars have even classified New Zealand First as a ‘radical right’ party (Betz, 2002; Norris, 2005), which appears inconsistent with its ultimately comparatively moderate positions on both the left–right and authoritarian–libertarian dimensions.

3 See also Moffitt’s (2016) list that identifies key populist actors globally.

of populism (as identified earlier)—creating moral divides between ‘the people’ and elites, on one hand, and stressing the desirability of direct expression of the *vox populi*, on the other.

However, New Zealand First also presents a contrast to many authoritarian–populist parties. While advocating for referendums and opposing some aspects of minority rights (e.g. designated Māori seats in parliament), New Zealand First has seldom, if ever, sought to subvert the democratic process or to undermine constitutional limitations in the way described by Urbinati (2017); nor has it questioned the role of representation in democracy (Taggart, 2000). Indeed, its multiple periods of government participation reflect that, while its leader’s rhetorical flourishes may be frequently anti-establishment, they are not anti-system.⁴

It is, moreover, precisely New Zealand First’s movement in and out of government that demonstrates another feature of its discourse and style. As MacDonald noted, New Zealand First cannot be simply categorised as a ‘populist party’; rather, it moves between populism and pluralism, ‘selectively and strategically deploying and pulling back populism when required’ (2019, p. 228). In opposition and during election campaigns, it has deployed a liberal degree of populist rhetoric; however, it has also engaged in regular pluralist politics during those periods in which it has held responsibilities in government.⁵ Thus, while New Zealand First can, to some extent, fit the right-leaning or authoritarian–populist mould that forms the focus of most international studies, its populism in these terms is periodic, inconsistent and is as much rhetorical style—or performance, as described by Moffitt (2016)—as it is ideology.

Meanwhile, changes in society from the late 20th into the early 21st centuries increasingly complicate the analysis of populism in New Zealand. First, the Māori population has increased and Māori have become more active in national political institutions. Māori elites based in *iwi* (tribal) organisations and educational organisations have advanced strong claims for greater recognition of Māori status as an indigenous people with Treaty rights, as agreed between the British Crown and Māori chiefs at Waitangi in 1840. An alleged remark by Treaty negotiator

4 New Zealand First has participated in three governments: in full coalition with the centre-right National Party (1996–1998), as a support party for the 2005–2008 Labour-led government and from 2017 onwards in formal coalition with the Labour Party.

5 MacDonald (2019) also contested the tendency of scholars, as outlined and criticised in the first section of this chapter, to identify populism and pluralism as polar opposites.

William Hobson that European settlers and Māori had become ‘one people’ (Colenso, 1890) is used by conservative Pākehā, such as former National and ACT party leader Don Brash, to promote a single national identity and deny Māori ‘special treatment’. However, Māori are a distinct people with their own language and culture. Meanwhile, after increased immigration, New Zealand has become one of the most ethnically and culturally diverse countries in the world, raising further questions regarding a definition of ‘the people’.

In all accounts of populism, the identity of ‘the people’ is crucial, due to the structuring of a moral divide in society between authentic people and some outsider group, be it ‘the establishment’, business elites or, in exclusionary forms, immigrants or other social minorities. Generally, scholars assume that ‘the people’ is a homogenous group and, in studies that focus on right-authoritarian populism, describe an exclusionary form of boundary-drawing. On both counts, features of New Zealand’s sociopolitical and historical context complicate the straightforward application of dominant accounts of populism to the country.

Moffitt has contended that a key feature of ‘Antipodean’ populism is that it is ‘primarily “exclusive”’ (2017, p. 131); it seeks to exclude identified ‘others’ on the material, political and symbolic dimensions identified by Mudde and Kaltwasser (2013). He further suggested that, in this model, the authentic people is ‘an inherently monocultural (or sometimes in the case of New Zealand, bicultural) group’ and that ‘the people’ face a triple enemy: the elite, immigrants and indigenous people (Moffitt, 2017, p. 133).⁶ As highlighted earlier, in the example of the National Party’s Iwi/Kiwi billboards, instances of right-populist discourse that deny Māori their indigenous status and Treaty rights have undoubtedly occurred over time and have not been restricted to the political fringes.

However, the delineation of insider and outsider groups in this context remains complex. In these conservative Pākehā terms, Māori are both ‘inside’, as equal citizens, and ‘outside’, in terms of their indigenous rights. Winston Peters is himself Māori. His populist rhetoric related to Māori issues does not create the ‘indigenous people’ as a generalised out-group. One of Peters’ primary targets has been what he considers to be *iwi* elites

6 Moffitt (2017) also characterised the ‘authentic’ people in this model of populism as those in rural or agricultural regions, including small business owners or manual workers in the regions, who line up against city bureaucrats, business elites or ‘welfare recipients’.

who, he argues, have benefited from a ‘grievance industry’ arising from the Treaty of Waitangi claims and settlement processes (Johansson, 2003, p. 66; see also Brash, 2004). These elites have benefited, he claims, at the expense of ‘regular’ Māori. Given that conservative Māori voters have formed a segment of New Zealand First’s voter base over the years, it is certainly impossible to talk of a clear Pākehā–Māori insider/outsider dichotomy in right-populist style. Rather, the dichotomy is that of a business-elite ‘outsider’ that cuts across ethnic groups.

Further, ideas regarding the boundaries of the ‘nation’ or its dominant cultural norms are not self-evident. Historically, who or what constitutes the ‘nation’ or ‘the people’ has been an eternally challenging question, given the complex relationship among the constituent peoples of New Zealand society since the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi and the hesitant and incremental process of disentangling citizenship and national identity from their colonial origins (Barker & McMillan, 2014). Many have argued against any attempt to identify a single nation. The late historian Michael King aptly noted that New Zealand could be seen as ‘representing at least two cultures and two heritages, very often looking in two different directions’ (2003, p. 167). Consequently, the singularity and homogeneity of the ‘nation’ that is often assumed by politicians, but also by many scholars in studies of populism, are difficult to pinpoint in the New Zealand context. In such a context, it is correspondingly more difficult to sustain a political claim that a part of the people is, or embodies, the whole people (Müller, 2016; Rosenblum, 2008).

In New Zealand, the institutional and sociopolitical context further serves to weaken the incentive for, or likelihood of, strong populist rhetoric that would construct the indigenous population as one part of Moffitt’s ‘triple enemy’ (2017). Official biculturalism (Pearson, 2001), the growing entrenchment of principles of the Treaty of Waitangi in public organisations and in policy- and law-making processes, and significant Māori representation in parliament (both via the current seven designated Māori parliamentary seats and outside of them) serve to limit the electoral cut-through of populist politics on these issues. This is not to deny periodic criticism of the ‘Treaty industry’, guaranteed Māori seats in parliament and ‘special rights’ for New Zealanders of Māori descent in election campaign rhetoric employed by politicians in New Zealand First, in centre-right National and in the neoliberal ACT Party. However, this

style of populist politics is neither engaged in consistently nor tenable for most New Zealand parties that seek votes from an increasingly diverse Māori electorate with a multiplicity of actors and interests.

In addition to the complexity of identifying a singular and homogenous ‘people’ in a formally bicultural society, the nature of immigration and migrants’ political incorporation further complicates application of the concept, in addition to the actual spread of populism. As Chapter 5 demonstrates, by international comparison, New Zealand has historically exhibited relatively high levels of support for immigration, consistent with the pattern of other settler states. Even where public support for immigration has evidenced some decline in recent years, this has occurred in the context of record levels of immigration flows and diversification of the population over the past three decades. In the 15 years preceding 2018, Asian and Pacific shares of the population had risen dramatically, reaching 15.1 per cent (compared to 9.1 per cent in 2006) and 8.1 per cent, respectively.

The consequences of immigration did become a point of debate in the 2017 election campaign; however, the significant polarisation and populist appeals seen elsewhere did not gain significant electoral traction—the basic foundations of an expansionist immigration policy remained and still benefited from cross-party consensus (Barker, 2018). A ‘protective’ feature in New Zealand is the size of the electorate of recent immigrant origin. Since 1975, non-citizen permanent residents have been eligible to vote in New Zealand, provided they have lived in New Zealand continuously, at some time, for a period of 12 months or more.⁷ In other words, electoral law does not discriminate among nationals of different countries for the purposes of voting, even as the right to be elected to parliament remains restricted to citizens (Barker & McMillan, 2016).⁸

7 Aside from those people who are in New Zealand on a temporary permit (e.g. a student visa or a temporary visitor’s permit), most resident visa holders are enfranchised. The criteria include those who are explicitly defined as ‘permanent residents’ under the 2009 *Immigration Act* and also persons on visas who are not required to ‘leave New Zealand immediately or within a specific time’. Therefore, those on a long-term work visa could be eligible even though they do not hold an official ‘permanent resident visa’ (Barker & McMillan, 2016).

8 The 1956 *Electoral Act* had required electors to be a ‘British subject ordinarily resident in New Zealand’. The 1975 *Electoral Amendment Act* dropped the requirement of being a British subject, meaning that any non-citizen who met the visa and residence test was now eligible to vote (Barker & McMillan, 2016).

On a symbolic level, the existence of the non-citizen vote constitutes an expansionist delineation of ‘the people’. This does not, in and of itself, protect against the use of exclusionary populist discourse against recent immigrants; however, the non-citizen vote has the effect of generating a proportionately much larger voting population of recent immigrant origin than exists in many other countries. Although instances of exclusionary populist rhetoric in political discourse over time may be identified, the growing strength of the (recent) immigrant electorate means that political parties have an ever-stronger incentive to adopt inclusionary approaches to questions of national identity and on issues related to immigration and diversity.

Together, the bicultural context and the expansionist understanding of ‘the people’ in a formal electoral sense serve both to complicate the meaning of ‘the people’ in the New Zealand context and to mitigate any exclusionary manifestation and impact. Other structural features of New Zealand’s economy and polity could also be interpreted as dampening the exclusionary populism evident in so many other countries. Recent explanations of populism emphasise the interaction of economic and cultural factors in explaining the rise in populist attitudes among voters and the timing of electoral success of populist parties and politicians (Gidron & Hall, 2017; Norris & Inglehart, 2017, 2019). White, lesser-educated/skilled men are identified as the chief supporters of populist parties and, particularly, of the authoritarian-populist right. They are argued to be motivated by declining economic and employment security following the global financial crisis combined with resistance to cultural transformations and to the ‘silent revolution’ that generated ‘post-materialist’ values, rights movements and accompanying social change. Further, citizens’ perceptions of their deteriorating status—relative to other groups (Gidron & Hall, 2017), to elites (Mudde, 2016) or to the past (Gest, 2016; Hochschild, 2016)—drive a turn away from mainstream parties (who represent the ‘corrupt elite’) and towards populist policies and discourses. Economic and cultural insecurity is said to trigger in-group/out-group reflexes from which ‘strongman’ populist leaders can profit. Established, mainstream political elites are, at best, not providing solutions to the problems or, at worst, seen to have been responsible for creating or exacerbating the problems. This drives a profound distrust of the political class, which also opens the way for populist parties and politicians.

As later chapters explore in further detail, the New Zealand economy was affected less severely by the global financial crisis than many other countries. Further, a feeling of crisis in relation to immigration was palpably absent. In addition to the historically pro-immigration baseline attitudes, the absence of a land border and the country's sheer distance from conflict zones mean that immigration flows and pressure on the border have not offered a 'crisis' moment that exclusionary populist leaders could build up and exploit as they have done elsewhere in the world (Moffitt, 2016). While New Zealand's proportional electoral system does, in theory, provide a permissive opportunity structure for the electoral success and representation of a populist party, traditions in its democracy of policy responsiveness and of moderate populist rhetoric across the main political parties, anchored in the majoritarian democratic impulse, leave less scope for sustained cut-through by populist actors.

Conclusions

Bale et al. have stated that it is 'a function of the variety of usage that there is no agreement on what would constitute a canon of cases of populism' (2011, p. 114). This chapter has identified some key definitions of populism found in the international literature and outlined the approach to populism taken in this book. We argue for operationalisation of populism on two separate levels: political discourse and public attitudes. In both cases, populism and elitism form a continuum rather than a dichotomy. We argue that political history and practice in the New Zealand context does not support the dominant 'populism as authoritarianism' interpretation. Populism and authoritarianism are separate factors—one does not imply the other; however, when combined, they may form a potent mixture. New Zealand has experienced both authoritarian and non-authoritarian populism, with more experience of the latter. The argument that populism is associated with anti-pluralism will be taken up again in Chapter 8. However, New Zealand's experience of a populist campaign to establish an electoral reform that is claimed to be based on consensus necessitates careful thought.

As a value expressed in moderation across the party system, New Zealand's populism as 'moderate policy responsiveness' could, at the least, be considered normatively neutral. It might also offer some potential protection against the more destructive articulations of authoritarian and

exclusionary populism found elsewhere. Considering both the historical traditions of the country's political style and the structural and institutional features of its constitution and contemporary politics, we could describe populism in New Zealand as moderate, majoritarian and mainstream, blending by turns both exclusionary and inclusionary populist discourse.

The preceding discussion of features of populism throughout New Zealand's political history, in addition to political and institutional features that affect the portability of common understandings of populism to New Zealand, has offered conceptual and empirical foundations for the subsequent chapters. These chapters, through their examination of a variety of aspects of voter attitudes in New Zealand's 2017 general election, illuminate evidence of the type(s) and degree(s) of populism that exist in New Zealand's politics.

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