Populism Across Borders

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Introduction

Populism is often treated as a domestic drama—a clash between “the people” and “the elite” staged within national borders. This book argues that the drama spills across borders in patterned ways. When populist leaders and movements gain traction, they do not merely rewrite social contracts at home; they also recast alliance

obligations, trade preferences, and migration policy. The result is a distinctive form of foreign policy—responsive to mass grievances, skeptical of distant authority, and prone to sudden shifts—that reverberates through the international system.

By “populism” I mean a political logic that pits a morally pure people against a corrupt elite and claims that only a singular leadership can restore popular sovereignty. This logic can be harnessed by actors on the left or right and fused with thicker ideologies such as nationalism, socialism, or conservatism. In foreign policy, the throughline is a sovereignty-first impulse: resist delegation to international bodies, renegotiate or exit agreements perceived as unfair, and tighten control over borders. Yet the empirical record is more varied than the stereotypes suggest. Populists sometimes open trade in strategic sectors, court nontraditional partners, or deploy humanitarian rhetoric to justify selective engagement.

The core contribution of this book is to show how domestic political incentives translate into external choices in systematic, measurable ways. Electoral coalitions that hinge on import-competing regions, for example, make tariff threats more likely; coalitions anchored in export-oriented sectors push leaders toward symbolic confrontation paired with quietly preserved market access. Leader-centric governance reduces bureaucratic filtering, increasing the speed and amplitude of policy turns. Media ecosystems—especially social platforms—lower the cost of mobilizing nationalist sentiment, reshaping the audience costs leaders face when compromising abroad. These mechanisms connect kitchen-table grievances to cabinet-room decisions.

To establish these links, I combine original datasets with comparative case studies and micro-level evidence. The quantitative chapters track changes in alliance contributions, treaty accessions and withdrawals, UN voting, trade remedies, and migration rules as movements ascend, peak, and govern. Event studies examine shocks—referendums, corruption scandals, migrant surges—and their policy aftermaths. Text analysis of leader speeches and party platforms helps identify when populist frames are deployed and how they interact with economic and security conditions. The qualitative chapters follow decision processes inside cabinets, courts, and parliaments to reveal how guardrails constrain—or fail to constrain—rapid turns.

Foreign policy volatility carries costs: allies hesitate to invest in joint capabilities, firms delay cross-border production, and migrants face policy whiplash with human consequences. But volatility is not destiny. Institutions matter. Domestically, procedural guardrails—independent advisory bodies, supermajority or legislative approval for treaty exit, time-limited fast-track authority paired with oversight, and professional civil services—can align responsiveness with stability. Internationally, agreement design can include credible escape clauses, review cycles, and reciprocity triggers that channel domestic pressure without collapsing cooperation. The evidence here suggests that such designs reduce swings while preserving democratic control.

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The chapters that follow move from concepts and drivers to mechanisms and outcomes, then to regional variations and policy solutions. Throughout, the analysis treats populism neither as a pathology to be dismissed nor as a panacea to be embraced, but as a durable mode of democratic politics with predictable external effects. By tracing how domestic mandates reshape foreign conduct—and by identifying the institutional responses that maintain reliable commitments—this book aims to help scholars, practitioners, and citizens navigate an era in which the boundaries between home politics and world politics are ever more porous.

CHAPTER ONE: The Many Faces of Populism: Definitions and Debates

Populism is a word that gets around. It is pinned to protest parties, charismatic presidents, social media campaigns, and even policy proposals that promise to give power back to "the people." The term is elastic enough to include left-wing platforms that tax the rich and right-wing rallies that build walls. That elasticity makes the word useful in everyday conversation, but it complicates the work of explanation. If populism is everywhere, is it anywhere? If it can be both left and right, both democratic and illiberal, what, if anything, does the concept actually describe?

A good starting point is the distinction between a thin-centered ideology and a thick worldview. Populism, in the understanding adopted here, is thin. It provides a particular grammar of politics—a way of framing conflicts as a struggle between a pure, unified people and a corrupt, self-serving elite—but it does not, by itself, supply a full political program. It needs to be grafted onto a thicker ideology such as nationalism, socialism, conservatism, or liberalism. That grafting explains the variations we see in the wild: populist nationalism promises to defend the nation against foreign threats and elites who welcome them; populist socialism vows to redistribute wealth away from plutocrats; populist liberalism attacks establishment barriers to individual choice.

The core claim is simple and powerful: popular sovereignty is being betrayed. According to this logic, the people are a cohesive community with a common interest, and they are the only legitimate source of authority. Elites—political, economic, media, academic—are portrayed as a self-interested caste that has usurped that authority. The populist leader presents himself or herself as the authentic voice of the people, uniquely capable of restoring their rightful place. That claim has moral force, but it also has strategic consequences. It encourages a view of politics as a winner-take-all contest between good and evil, which complicates compromise and challenges the neutrality of institutions.

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Different scholars have emphasized different facets of this logic. Some focus on the discursive style, noting how populists frame opponents not merely as rivals but as enemies of the people. Others stress organization, pointing to the tendency of populist movements to build personalistic parties that pivot around a single leader. Still others highlight the economic dimension, arguing that populism thrives when inequality rises and citizens feel that the game is rigged. What these approaches share is the sense that populism is less a set of policies than a particular way of doing politics—one that is anti-pluralist in spirit even when it operates inside democracies.

One widely used definition treats populism as a "logic" or "strategy" rather than a fixed ideology. In this view, actors do not need to self-identify as populist to be engaging in populist politics. They can adopt the people-versus-elite frame opportunistically, especially when established parties lose credibility. This flexibility helps explain why the same leader can sound populist on the campaign trail and then govern with technocratic restraint once in office. It also explains why the label is contested: being called a populist is often a political liability, so many actors reject it even as they deploy its elements.

The difference between left-wing and right-wing populism turns on the thicker ideas that are attached to the thin core. Left-wing populists tend to emphasize class grievances and inequality; their people are the working and middle classes exploited by capitalist elites; their enemies include multinational corporations and financial institutions. Right-wing populists tend to emphasize national identity and sovereignty; their people are the nation; their enemies often include immigrants, supranational bodies, and cosmopolitan elites. Both can criticize trade deals, but for different reasons: left-wing critiques focus on labor standards and corporate power; right-wing critiques focus on job losses and loss of control over borders.

Populism should be distinguished from related concepts like nationalism, authoritarianism, and technocracy. Nationalism centers the nation as the principal political unit; populism centers the people as a moral majority. They can overlap, especially when populists claim that "the nation" is being betrayed by elites, but they are not identical. Authoritarianism refers to the concentration of power and the erosion of checks and balances; populism can lead to authoritarian practices, but it can also exist within democratic constraints. Technocracy emphasizes rule by experts; populism often rails against technocratic elites, but populists can also adopt technocratic trappings to legitimize their policies.

A useful way to clarify the concept is to distinguish between populist attitudes and populist rhetoric and practices. Populist attitudes include distrust of elites, belief in a common will of the people, and hostility to compromise. Not all citizens hold these attitudes, and many who do may never vote for a populist party. Populist rhetoric is the strategic deployment of people-versus-elite frames in speeches, slogans, and

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social media. Populist practices include personalistic leadership, direct appeals to the public over institutions, and attempts to politicize or reshape independent bodies. A movement may exhibit one or two of these features without being fully populist.

The empirical record shows that populism is not a fringe phenomenon. It has won elections in established democracies, reshaped party systems in newer democracies, and found expression in leaders who govern with broad mandates. That success has prompted debates about whether populism is a democratic correction or a democratic threat. The reality is context dependent. Populist movements can bring exposed groups into politics, expose corruption, and force attention to distributional grievances. They can also weaken institutional guardrails, polarize publics, and generate policy volatility. The tension between responsiveness and restraint is not unique to populism, but it is especially sharp because of the moral framing and personalistic leadership typical of populist politics.

In foreign policy, the thin-centered nature of populism is particularly consequential. Because populism needs to be attached to a thicker ideology, it can produce different external orientations depending on the context. Left-wing populists may pursue anti-imperialist rhetoric and seek new partners outside traditional alliances. Right-wing populist may turn to nationalist isolation or assertive protectionism. Both, however, share a sovereignty-first impulse: they are skeptical of ceding authority to international bodies, they dislike binding commitments that can be portrayed as elite sellouts, and they prefer short-term, visible actions—tariffs, border controls, aid revaluations—over incremental, long-term cooperation.

A helpful clarification is that not all nationalist, protectionist, or anti-elite foreign policies are populist. States have long pursued realist strategies that prioritize national interest, and leaders routinely criticize international organizations for domestic audiences. What makes a policy move count as populist is the fusion of that move with the people-versus-elite frame and a claim that the leader alone represents the authentic people against corrupt intermediaries. For example, a non-populist leader might raise tariffs due to a security threat and justify it on strategic grounds; a populist leader might raise tariffs and claim they are taking on globalist forces that have sold out domestic workers.

Given this variety, it is tempting to treat populism as "whatever I don't like" or "whatever is new and disruptive." Both temptations should be resisted. The concept is most useful when it helps identify a pattern: a political logic that claims exclusive representation of the people against a corrupt elite, which is then fused with thicker ideologies and translated into policy strategies. This pattern is observable across parties, leaders, and countries; it has consistent effects on how leaders communicate and decide; and it shapes external choices in ways that are not random but structured by domestic incentives and institutional channels.

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The book's roadmap follows from this analytic posture. After defining terms and laying out core debates, we move to the demand side—what drives citizens toward populist frames—and the supply side—how parties, leaders, and media ecosystems operationalize these frames. We then trace how populist strategies win office and how governing styles shape external choices. The empirical heart of the book links these domestic dynamics to observable foreign policy outcomes: alliance contributions, trade moves, migration rules, and engagement with international institutions. In doing so, it brings together comparative politics and international relations in a way that clarifies why volatility has increased and what can be done about it.

One recurring question is whether populism is a symptom of deeper problems—inequality, cultural change, corruption—or a cause of new ones. The evidence suggests feedback loops. Economic shocks and cultural anxieties create fertile ground; media ecosystems and party strategies harvest it; policy volatility follows; volatility can, in turn, aggravate grievances and invite new waves of mobilization. That loop is not inevitable. Institutions, leadership choices, and the behavior of non-populist parties can interrupt it. But understanding the loop is essential for interpreting what looks like chaotic foreign policy as a patterned response to domestic incentives.

To be clear about scope: the book focuses primarily on electoral populism that operates within democratic or partially democratic systems. It does not deny the existence of populist authoritarianism, but its mechanisms and constraints differ where elections are not competitive. The analysis also does not claim that all populist foreign policy is "bad" in some moral sense. It is, however, more volatile on average and more likely to produce uncertainty for allies, investors, and migrants. That functional claim is compatible with judgments that certain populist moves are, on balance, justified or overdue. The goal is explanation and prediction, not prescription about ends.

It is worth addressing a common confusion: populism versus majoritarianism. Majoritarianism refers to the idea that a bare majority should rule without constraint. Populism is a moral claim about who constitutes the people and who represents them. The two can coincide, but they do not always. A leader can be majoritarian without being populist—think of a prime minister who implements a policy because a referendum mandated it and defends it on procedural grounds. Conversely, a populist leader may claim a moral majority that does not correspond to actual electoral majorities, and may even lose elections while asserting that the "real people" have been silenced.

Some critics argue that populism is an empty signifier, a catch-all label that obscures more than it reveals. The label is indeed flexible, but that is a feature, not a bug, of any concept that seeks to capture a political logic rather than a fixed program. The

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task is not to police boundaries rigidly but to identify a set of core features that travel across contexts and generate observable implications. When we see personalistic leadership, a people-versus-elite frame, and hostility to independent institutions, we can expect a particular kind of politics. When those features are paired with thicker ideologies, we can expect specific policy orientations.

Another debate concerns whether populism is inherently anti-democratic. The answer depends on what is meant by democracy. If democracy is merely majoritarian rule, then populism may appear as its purest expression. If democracy also includes liberal elements—protection of minority rights, independent courts, free media, and checks and balances—then populism often clashes with it. The tension arises because populists equate democracy with the rule of the "true" people and view institutional constraints as obstacles to popular sovereignty. In practice, populist governments have dismantled some checks and preserved others, creating hybrid regimes that are neither fully liberal nor fully autocratic.

The role of the media is another flashpoint. Some observers blame social media for the rise of populism, arguing that platforms amplify simplistic messages and bypass gatekeepers. Others argue that legacy media created the conditions by focusing on spectacle and undercovering economic grievances. Both factors matter. Social media lowers the cost of direct communication and enables rapid mobilization; it also creates feedback loops where outrage is rewarded with attention. But media ecosystems are not deterministic. In some countries, regulated broadcasting and strong public media have tempered populism's rise, while in others, fragmented and partisan media have accelerated it.

A final set of debates revolves around measurement and classification. How should researchers decide whether a party or leader is populist? Some use expert surveys and coding protocols that identify parties based on party manifestos, speeches, and organizational features. Others use text analysis to measure the frequency of people-versus-elite frames. Still others rely on case knowledge and process tracing. Each approach has trade-offs. Broad, replicable coding can miss nuance; deep case studies can miss cross-national patterns. The most robust findings come from triangulating methods, which is the approach taken in later chapters.

Understanding these debates clarifies what this book does—and does not—claim. It does not assert that populism is a single, monolithic force or that it produces uniform outcomes. It argues instead that there is a recognizable political logic, observable in many places and times, that has predictable effects on political communication, institutional relationships, and policy choices. That logic interacts with economic conditions, cultural cleavages, and institutional designs to generate patterns we can study. And because the patterns are linked to domestic incentives, they are amenable to both scholarly analysis and practical reform.

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The payoff of getting the definition right is practical, not just academic. If we mislabel every disruptive political movement as populist, we lose the ability to distinguish among motivations and forecast consequences. If we define populism too narrowly, we miss important variants and policy implications. A balanced approach recognizes a core logic and its flexible expression, enabling us to connect domestic grievances to external choices in a systematic way. That is the foundation for the rest of the book's argument about why populist movements emerge, spread, and reshape foreign policy.

To set the stage for what follows, consider a stylized example. A party rises by targeting a trade deal that, it claims, was negotiated by elites who ignored workers in a struggling region. The party's leader promises to "take back control," framing the issue as a moral struggle between the nation's people and distant bureaucrats. Once in power, the leader threatens to exit the deal, launches symbolic tariffs, and negotiates a revised agreement that includes some gains for the affected region. In the process, the leader bypasses traditional ministries, uses social media to claim credit, and warns that courts or watchdogs that resist are part of the elite conspiracy. The outcome is a mix of policy change and institutional strain, with effects that ripple through supply chains and alliance meetings.

From this example, we can derive a set of recurring themes that this book will examine across countries and policy areas. The people-versus-elite frame is the lingua franca, but its policy content depends on the thicker ideology it is paired with. Institutional channels matter: independent courts, legislative procedures, and professional bureaucracies can slow or reshape policy turns. Media ecosystems shape the incentives leaders face when they bargain abroad. Domestic coalitions—whose interests are at stake in trade, security, and migration—determine which external moves are politically salient. And international reactions—retaliation, reassurance, or resistance—feed back into domestic politics, sometimes intensifying the populist cycle.

By placing these themes at the center of the analysis, the book bridges comparative politics and international relations. It explains why the domestic roots of populism are not separate from foreign policy outcomes, and it shows how those outcomes, in turn, create new domestic constituencies and constraints. The goal is not to declare populism good or bad, but to explain why it matters for how states interact with one another. The following chapters unpack the mechanisms, test their implications, and consider what can be done to preserve democratic responsiveness without sacrificing the predictability that international cooperation requires.

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