

The influence of Populist Discourse on Social Policy. A Comparison of Left and Right – Wing Populists in Europe

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Abstract:

This study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of populist discourse, starting from the main hypothesis that discourses act as an influence on social reforms, by overcoming the institutional obstacles that stand in the way of change.

The analysis sample consists of ruling populist leaders and their parties who won the national parliamentary elections and led the Government or, as the case may be, they were part of the ruling coalition during the period 2016–2019. We empirically analysed the way in which the discourse on the various social issues was framed in the political programs of four parties belonging to both the radical right (Lega Nord, Italy and PiS, Poland) and also to the radical left (Smer–SD, Slovakia and Podemos, Spain).

We have analysed whether a particular party program, the rhetoric of political leaders, and their official campaign messages are consistent with Cas Mudde's definition of populism, according to which *populism is a thin-centred ideology that views society as ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups – the "pure people" and the "corrupt elite"*.

As a research method we used exclusively the qualitative method, particularly Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). In carrying out this study, we started from the premise that there is no distinct family of populist parties and, therefore, populist parties should be treated as an empirical class covering several party families (ideological). More specifically, the specific role that certain parties play in diverse national and European contexts underlines the populist logic of understanding politics and competition for power.

As a conclusion, we argue that populist discourse has a predominant role in framing social policy. In addition, our analysis confirms that populist leaders may seem particularly effective in social reforms by circumventing the institutionalized political mechanisms.