Populist Divisions: Sources of Popularity and Legitimacy

Collin Reid

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Beloit College

Introduction: What is Populism?

Legitimacy is the heart of politics, it determines who can do what and why. The degree to which a political movement is seen as legitimate determines its ability to inspire people to take action in support of it, which in turn determines how prevalent that movement will be in determining how a society is run. Our current political age largely subscribes to the liberal notion that the will and/or interests of individual people living within a state is the most important source of legitimacy. Whereas the political age that preceded ours was framed by the idea that the popular will was not only tangential to political legitimacy but in some cases counter to it, the current political age has completely reversed this sentiment. Political legitimacy now comes from public support; the more a political movement has the support of the general population in a state, the more legitimate it is generally internationally recognized as.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The procurement of legitimacy through popular support lends itself to a particular style of politics: populism. Populism, as a broad concept, is a political strategy that channels the will of people outside of the political sphere and seeks to embody that will through a political movement. Essentially, this means embracing what is generally popular outside of the traditional political sphere. If the support of the people living within a society is what bequeaths legitimacy, then it is expedient to utilize popular sentiment as a means of acquiring the consent of the governed.

Because it is based purely on appealing to what people in any society think, populism is not beholden to any particular ideological principles or worldviews. Instead, populism is the process of adopting those ideologies and worldviews that are widely held by the people living in a society, whatever they are and whatever outcomes the extension of those views may have. However, this does not require that populist political figures must only adopt policies that the public is already advocating. While this is possible, it is more common that populists create a movement that gains popularity because it engages pre-existing sentiments a population holds, such as the progressive populist movement in the United States using the anti-business sentiments to rally around specific policies like the strengthening of farmers unions, collective ownership of railroads, and the free coinage of silver.[[2]](#footnote-2)

These movements are generally characterized by a “good versus evil” mentality, framing those who are against the movement as fundamentally evil, and those that are with the movement as fundamentally good. This is an extension of the liberal idea that the general population bequeaths legitimacy to institutions based on popular support. In opposing populist movements, the opposition is declared illegitimate and worthy of hatred because the populists embody the popular will, and are working with both the consent and blessing of the general population, made up of by those supporting the movement.[[3]](#footnote-3)

In dividing the world into camps of good and evil, populists will then almost always identify with or as a member of whatever group they claim to be supporting. This is evidenced by the language populists use such as the collective “we” and “our” when talking about political struggles and developments. However, populists are not necessarily required to identify in this way so long as they are able to make it seem like they embody a particular popular political movement.

This division for the purposes of a popular political strategy often starkly divides existing groups within a society. While one group of people may support a popular movement and consider the opposition evil, the opposition may also have popular support among a different social group. This leads to the perplexing situation of there being multiple opposing popular wills competing against each other within a society. Such paradoxes are especially prone to appearing in democratic states where each individual person has the ability to put whatever faction they support into power with the ballot. When the divisive framing inherent in populism is used to vilify and demonize the opposition, the hopes for a politically liberal government predicated on the ideas of consensus building falls apart.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The main characteristic that distinguishes populist movements from simply making policies appealing to a constituency is that the movements fundamentally come from the demands of the ruled population. Even if a populist figure creates a popular movement that did not originate in the minds and ideas of the population, the movement is still populist because the sentiment they created, and thus the base of power for the movement, rests within the hearts of the people. Therefore, even if a politician creates a popular movement, it is not necessarily the politician, but the people who believe in the movement who have control over it. This is why populist movements can and are often considered a Pandora’s Box in democratic politics. The entity that created a popular movement may lose control of it when its creator fails to adequately embody that movement. A recent example of this phenomenon is the 2016 American primary election, where commentators have suggested the rising popularity of Donald Trump is due to the Republican party’s stoking of populist sentiment by engaging the Tea Party.[[5]](#footnote-5)

When these movements gain control over a government, it is likely that they will not seek to compromise with those outside the movement. Instead, those outside of the popular movement will probably be marginalized and silenced because their potential value to the movement will have so substantially decreased in value. In a sense, there are diminishing political returns when it comes to the expansion of support. After a populist takes power, they may recognize that the only people they must necessarily appease are the base of supporters who brought them to power, while the rest of the population outside their political movement, who may challenge them, need only to be kept quiet. Hugo Chavez’s treatment of Venezuelan opposition reflects this trend: initially seeking wide support in forming a reliable core to create a stable power base, and the subsequent demonization and rejection of detractors.[[6]](#footnote-6)

However, the degree to which these situations occur varies based on the particular populist strategies political figures use. There are different populist strategies that utilize different social sentiments to acquire popularity. While some of these strategies can call for and achieve social unification and progress, others can stoke the fires of prejudice in the pursuit of political power. Thus, understanding what types of populism politicians employ, both in their rhetoric and their corresponding actions, can help us to see through their general popular platitudes, and into what their motivations and goals are. This vision serves both as a method of seeking out potential societal threats, and finding those actors who may possess a genuine want to improve people’s situation with a sensible approach to governance. Understanding the types of populism allows people to recognize when a populist is manipulating the mob for their personal advancement, or advancing the greater interests of society.

I: Scholarship on Populism

There are four main types of populism that fall into two contrasting pairs: expansive and exclusive; interest and interesting. The expansive and exclusive pair clarifies who populists seek to represent among the general population, with expansive seeking to unify many different groups in support of a movement, and exclusive seeking to advance the interests or status of one particular group through a movement. The interest and interesting populists clarify the reasons why populist political figures implement policies. Interest populists implement policies because they believe it is in the peoples’ collective interest to have a particular policy in place. Interesting populists implement policies because the people demand something be implemented.

Although there is a plethora of scholarship on the topic of populism, the majority of it strictly defines populism as it appears in specific movements at specific moments in time. It is probably because of this habit of scholarship that one word: populist, is applied in almost equal measure to people whose ideologies range from Martin Luther King Jr. to Hitler. But rather than complicating populism, the populist schema I have presented of the contrasting interest vs interesting and expansive vs exclusive forms actually helps clarify the fact that populism is not constrained by ideology. It sets the standard that populism is a source of legitimacy for any policy based on a popular political movement whose ultimate power rests with the sentiments of the population, and that political figures representing those popular movements can work for radically different causes while still holding to fundamental populist principles. Populists are able to operate in different ways, those ways highlighted by this schema, so long as they adhere to populist fundamentals.

Thus, for the purposes of this paper, I will focus on and incorporate the elements of three main scholars: Harry Boyte, John Lukacs, and William Riker. Each of these scholars approach populism from a unique vantage point in terms of where populism comes from and what populism’s effects are and the way they channel the popular will. They help clarify the different styles in which populism politically manifests itself.

*1: Boyte - Populism of Possibility*

Harry Boyte offers the most optimistic view of populism. He states that it possesses two fundamental parts: the idea of “the people” as a common group with common interests, and the idea that “the people” are an agent of change. This essentially characterizes populism as the collective will of all the people within a state working together to achieve their common interests.[[7]](#footnote-7) He also sees populism as a force for democratization through which people collectively work towards their common interests. He focuses on the role of local community organizations in building a consensus between people within their communities, insisting that they are channels through which people begin to collectivize their individual interests. From there, collective groups of citizens begin implementing local policies and advocating for the implementation of regional and national policies that further advance the interests of their collective interests.[[8]](#footnote-8)

While I agree with Boyte’s fundamental characterization of populism in that it is a force for change driven by people asserting their voice in politics, there are a few areas where he inadequately addresses the pitfalls of populism. Boyte essentially contends that there is only one group of “ordinary people” who represent the true interests of all people. But this only covers the expansive and interest forms of populism. He thus fails to recognize that there can be competing groups of exclusive populists who do not care about the collective agenda, but only their specific group’s elevation. These political figures still represent the interests of “ordinary people,” but they have a definition of “ordinary people” that is not all encompassing, but specific and exclusive.

Ironically he even provides an example of this in the rise of what he defines as two competing forms of populism in the modern American political system where two competing groups define what it means to be a representative of the American nation, an “ordinary person,” differently.[[9]](#footnote-9) Each of these forms of populism he finds do not have this grand vision of collectivizing all peoples’ interests. Instead, an expansive progressive populist group that seeks to incorporate all people into its ranks is fighting an exclusive conservative populist group that seeks to elevate the status of its restricted membership. While Boyte contends that these two groups are fundamentally the same and should just start working together, and their failure to consolidate their power comes purely from outside forces manipulating their ideologies.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Though it is tempting to argue that people are simply being brainwashed, I would contend that Boyte implies that reason has a greater presence in people’s minds and political dialogues than it actually does. Rather than being beholden to the ideas that are in peoples’ interests, they will vote based on a multitude of factors that have absolutely nothing to do with their collective interests, but often that even play upon their social division depending upon the political context.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Thus, the interest and interesting classifications are better suited to explain the phenomena of competing modern American populist divisions. While Boyte would declare that populists who demand policies that are not in their interests are just not populist, but supporters of the system who do not understand their interests, it would be better to classify them as people who advocate what they are interested in above what is in their individual interests. Rather than seeing the current state of polarized American populism as a sort of programming error as Boyte would essentially classify it, it is more easily understood as two competing forms of populism: interest against interesting. It is entirely possible that interesting populists would convert to interest populists if they fully understood their interests. However, I find it imperative to recognize that populist figures do not have to work for the interests of the people. As long as the base of power rests in a popular movement, regardless of who it benefits, the leaders who represent those popular movements, be they interest oriented or interesting, are populists.

Furthermore, while Boyte sees the goal of collectivization and unity of all people as populist, I would contend that many populists such as Anglo-American nativists are populists in that their movement comes from popular support among a population of “ordinary people,” even though their movement was entirely based on exclusion of others.[[12]](#footnote-12) Although Boyte successfully identifies the expansive interest populist pair, he completely looks over the exclusive interesting categories.

*2: Lukacs - Populism of Propaganda*

In stark contrast to Boyte stands the theory of populism John Lukacs puts forth in his book *Democracy and Populism: Fear and Hatred*. In order to understand Lukacs’ characterization of populism, he corrects two fundamental errors in common American political dialogue: the misunderstanding of socialism and the misunderstanding of nationalism. Socialism is the political philosophy that a government exists to take care of its people. A socialist state is a state which sees the care and advancement of all its citizens as a vital state interest and source of legitimacy.[[13]](#footnote-13) Nationalism is the love of the myth of a people, and the use of that myth to justify political action in the name of bringing glory to that group of people. The people, in this case, are a nation: a group of people with a common unifying trait, generally language and/or ethnic makeup.[[14]](#footnote-14) This means that nationalism is pride in one’s specific group of people, and the desire to make that particular group of people respected and prestigious.

Lukacs defines populism as the political expression of nationalism because of nationalism’s appeal to the “common man.” This appeal exists because the “ordinary people” are the myth of the national character; they are the personification of the nation, which can effectively unite people with that common identity despite their possibly contrasting interests. When this nationalist sentiment manifests itself in politics, it is populism because those who are a part of a nation are the “ordinary people” who populism represents. This “folkish” aspect means that populism is capable of excluding those who fall outside the national group. One must be a part of the “folk,” or the “nation,” in order to be a part of “the people.”[[15]](#footnote-15) Lukacs thus characterizes populism as inherently racist and exclusive, and cites the anti-Semitic undertones of populist movements both in Europe and the United States in their manifestation of the idea of moral Christian workers, the “folk” of the nation, fighting “the banks” as a symbol for “the Jews.”[[16]](#footnote-16)

Lukacs concludes that because of this exclusionary nature, populism is inherently undemocratic. While Boyte argues that populism is a force for democratization because of its expansive nature, Lukacs argues that it is a force for authoritarianization because advancing the myth of the people does not require a liberal democracy built on compromise between various factions within a state. Such processes only inhibit the nation’s ability to efficiently govern itself and manifest its mythology. Populism, as Lukacs defines it, demands that action be taken to advance the glory of the myth of the nation, the “folk” or “people.” This excludes multiculturalism because of its emphasis on the sanctity of one particular nation, and the need to manifest that particular nation’s mythology and predominance above all other nations.[[17]](#footnote-17)

While Lukacs succeeds in highlighting the exclusive interesting forms of populism in that nationalism is something people are merely interested in and something inherently exclusive, he forgets to address the populist nature of the expansive interest movements Boyte highlights. Movements such as Martin Luther King Jr’s non-violence civil rights campaign demonstrate that certain kinds of populism are capable of seeking to incorporate all of humanity under one collective interest in nonviolence.[[18]](#footnote-18) This is also similar to the progressive populist internationalism present before The Great War, when workers across Europe began to see the world in Marx’s vision of class consciousness, promoting international socialism that sought to unite the “workers of the world” until the Great War broke out and saw nationalism subdue this sentiment in the pursuit of the combatants to win the unprecedented violent struggle.[[19]](#footnote-19) These primary examples, brief as they may have been, demonstrate that populism, while commonly characterized by Lukacs’ exclusive interesting nationalism, is capable of incorporating Boyte’s expansive interest populism as well.

*3: Riker - Populism of Problems*

The exclusive interest aspect of Lukacs’ populism possesses similarities with William Riker’s characterization of populism in his work *Liberalism Against Populism*. Here he contends that populism is a broken theory of democracy because it is founded upon the premise of doing “what the people as a corporate entity, want.”[[20]](#footnote-20) Populism, as he defines it, is rooted in Rousseau, and he thus contends that populism has two main points: that what the people collectively want ought to be state policy, and that the people are free when their wishes are law.[[21]](#footnote-21)

Riker insists this Rousseauian populist form of democracy is flawed because voting cannot unify or represent the collective will. Instead, he argues it merely represents competing factions within a state. However, he does believe that democracy is laudable because it allows people to recall intolerable state actors, which he declares is a Madisonian Liberal democracy.[[22]](#footnote-22) In this sense, Riker identifies an expansive interesting form of populism in Rousseauian theory, but an exclusive interesting form of populism when applied to society in fact. He suggests that theoretically, populism is a Rousseauian concept because it seeks to embody the will of all people so that they may collectivize their interests and appoint a leader they all find suitable. This is an idea Boyte would wholly endorse.

But he agrees more with Lukacs in that, in practice, populism only represents one competing faction or group of people, and creates greater division between them, fundamentally disrupting a democratic process that is built on compromise. Unlike Lucaks, he does not suggest that populism is necessarily a force that destroys democracy, or that it is something inherently tied to nationalism. His main argument is that populism is exclusive in practice while expansive in theory.[[23]](#footnote-23)

I do not necessarily disagree with anything Riker concludes. However, I do suggest that, much like with both Boyte and Lukacs, populism has elements beyond what Riker suggests. Populism can merely be a disruptive force that inhibits a democratic government’s ability to function by polarizing people while still remaining a democratic system (albeit a broken one.) However, it’s possible for populism to be a force that systematically dismantles democratic institutions in order to efficiently and effectively carry out the national will. It is also possible that populism can be a force that seeks to unite all of humanity under a common identity by advocating the idea that no group should be marginalized, creating a human rather than a national consciousness of “the people.”

Lukacs gives ample evidence to demonstrate that authoritarian governments can be and are founded on populist bases including but not limited to the rise of the Soviet Union and National Socialist Germany (the Soviet Union creating authoritarianism through expansive interest populism based on economics and the Germans creating authoritarianism through exclusive interesting populism based on nationalism.)[[24]](#footnote-24) However, Lawrence Goodwyn, a historian on populism who agrees with Boyte’s characterization of populism, has also written extensively on how the American populist movement of the late 19th and early 20th century was a force for democratization in his work *Democratic Promise: The Populist Movement in America*.[[25]](#footnote-25) However, it is important to recognize that in the very populist movement Goodwyn holds up as a model for expansive interest populism, the movement had highly exclusive tenancies due to its treatment of black people in the Southern United States, and that as Riker suggests, the division populism creates was evident in the clear rural-urban divide during that era that was arguably detrimental to a Madisonian concept of compromising democracy.[[26]](#footnote-26)

*4: Categorization*

Each of these scholars contribute to the larger definition of populism by identifying some of the fundamental aspects of the different populist categories. Boyte identifies expansive interest populism with his definition because of his emphasis on the collectivization of popular will to support the collective’s interests, seeking to define the as many people as possible as “ordinary people.” Lukacs identifies exclusive interesting populism because of its association with nationalism, something people of one specific group want regardless of whether or not what benefits the national myth advances their own individual interests. Riker, while not identifying a new system of categorization, identifies a fallacy of expansive interesting populism because of the natural divisions in society. This examination demonstrates that populism is generally exclusive even when it tries to be expansive due to inherent populist characteristics such as the demonization of opposition and the unwillingness to compromise on principles deemed to be necessary due to popular demand. He thus identifies the existence of exclusive interest populism in that, while populists may attempt to incorporate everyone into their faction, their initial inception is almost always in an atmosphere of division and uncompromising pursuit of whatever is deemed popular, be it in the public’s interest or what the public finds interesting.

None of these scholars have flawed conceptions of what populism is as a broad term; their definitions do clarify important aspects that help define populism as a whole. Each of them correctly identifies different ways in which populism manifests itself, and what the effects and goals of populism can be based on those manifestations. But each of these scholars claims that only the particular styles of populism they identify are the true forms of populism, instead of acknowledging the multi-faceted idea that populism can manifest itself in distinctly different and even contradicting forms. Even when populism manifests itself in these contrasting ways, it still retains the fundamental elements of using a popular movement to gain political legitimacy.

II: Breaking Down Populism

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, populism is “the policies or principles of any of various political parties which seek to represent the interests of ordinary people.”[[27]](#footnote-27) While this definition does work as a broad umbrella term, it is far too broad. Mainly, the question of who “ordinary people” are must be clarified in order to adequately understand who populist figures represent and how people who represent different groups of people within the same society can be and are simultaneously labeled as populists.

*1: Ordinary People*

“Ordinary people” are the ideal member of a political movement: the people who represent the mythology and/or ideals of a political movement. The “ordinary person” is the personification or focus of this ideal, such as the farmer in the Jeffersonian idea of America, the factory worker in Marx’s political and economic philosophies, the German in Nazism, and black people in Black Nationalism. This allows multiple populist movements to exist even within one state or society based on the competing demographics and ideals held by the people living there. In this sense, “ordinary people” is not a fixed term or group of people. Rather, who is ordinary depends upon the particular world views of populist politicians and popular movements. This means that the ordinary vary based on the particular popular political movements being referenced. If Jackson’s Jeffersonian populism is being referenced, then land-owning white farmers are ordinary people. If Black Nationalism is being referenced, then black people are ordinary people. If these two movements exist at the same time in a society, then both groups are still ordinary, it just depends upon whether a Jeffersonian or Black Nationalist is asked about who is ordinary.

*2: Expansive and Exclusive Populism*

The flexibility that is used to define what it means to be an “ordinary person” leads to two of the major classifications within populism: expansive populism that seeks to incorporate different groups into its definition of “ordinary people,” and exclusive populism that seeks to represent a set group of “ordinary people” that is either incapable of or unwilling to expand their definition of “ordinary people” to incorporate other groups.

The expansive populist seeks generally seek to unify people under one common idea or interest that transcends group divisions. Seeking to promote collective wants or interests that cut across group divisions, sometimes even seeking to unite all humanity, is a common and effective characteristic of expansive populism. Instead of focusing on what divides people, expansive populists focus on the topics that unite them, whether this be something they are collectively interested in, or in their collective interests.

This means that expansive populists generally have to focus on unifying various groups around their proposed policies in order to convince everyone that their interests are unified. Their movements’ proposals will thus generally attempt to concern issues that are seen as being universal values such as the eradication of poverty or the pursuit of peace.

Conversely, the exclusive populist appeals to a particular group and actively excludes other groups from joining their political movements. The one particular group that exclusive populists represent is generally defined by unchanging characteristics such as a particular extrinsic identifications like race or nationality. Because things like race and nationality already cut across economic class boundaries, this strategy allows exclusive populists to rely heavily on pre-existing social cohesion, and can more easily succeed in uniting all the necessary forces of society in support of a movement depending upon how prevalent the particular group they support is in their given society. Their political work is thus generally focused on convincing that united group of people that a particular populist movement embodies that group’s interests or desires.

*3: Interest and Interesting Populism*

It is in the representation of interests that we come the second major division in the source of populist legitimacy: interest populism and interesting populism. In *The Sociological Imagination* C. Wright Mills implores that people recognize the difference between “what men are interested in,” and “what is to men’s interests.”[[28]](#footnote-28) He contends that the inability of the general population to recognize this is a fundamental flaw in democracy, because people will vote based on what they want, what they are interested in, rather than what they need, what is in their interests.

From this we can identify the second two major categories: interesting populists who promote what “ordinary people” are interested in, and interest populists who promote what is in “ordinary people’s” interests. Interest populism is characterized by the promotion of what will benefit those who are classified as “ordinary people” usually collectively, but sometimes also individually. Interest populist figures seek to embody the principles and policies that will secure benefits for the collective group of “ordinary people.” For example, if what characterizes ordinary people is the vision of Jeffersonian America, then a political figure who seeks to support farmers’ ability to prosper by implementing policies promoting government ownership of the railroads or a currency policy that will see food prices rise and wealth more easily enter rural communities is an interest populist because they are representing what is in the collective and to a large extent the individual interests of “ordinary people,” the small landowning farmer.

Interesting populism is characterized by the elevation of the status of what it means to be an ordinary person. Interesting populists justify their policies by linking policy goals with a popular social mythology or the pursuit of a particular ideological vision for what a society ought to be. These principles generally rely on pre-existing social sentiments such as popular morals, nationalism, and religion.[[29]](#footnote-29) This transcends the interests of the individual and even collective because of the seriousness with which these beliefs are held by the population. The interesting populist thus uses these pre-existing popular sentiments to justify policy, no matter what the ends may be. The fact that these policies may require the sacrifice of individual or collective interests is tolerable because those sacrifices were made for something generally seen as either central to or greater than one’s self.

While populism’s broad appeals to a general population may seem extremely similar, in reality the interest and interesting forms are completely different in the policies they promote, the way they see the world, and the goals they seek to achieve. The ultimate goal of interest populists is to ensure that their “ordinary people” prosper, either individually, collectively, or both. The interesting populist seeks to support policies that are not necessarily in their “ordinary people’s” collective or individual interests, but merely to gain power by connecting their policy objectives with popular sentiments.

*4: Summation*

These two pairs of opposing classifications of populism bring a much needed order and flexibility in understanding the ways populism exists and what populists seek to achieve. The expansive and exclusive pair helps to understand who exactly a populist identifies an “ordinary person” as, and can help us to realize their ultimate political intentions in that regard: to unite people using their ideas, or to elevate a specific group of people above the rest. The interest and interesting pair helps us to understand why populists support and advance certain policies in the name of their ordinary people: because they will improve the situation of “ordinary people,” or because of the policies’ connection to “ordinary people’s” pre-existing sentiments.

III: Primary Manifestations of Populist Categories

Now that the categories of populism and their academic context has been fully established, the manifestations of the four distinct populist strategies: expansive interest, exclusive interest, expansive interesting, and exclusive interesting, must be demonstrated. Each of these four figures clearly represent one of the major populist strategies, and a deeper analysis into their rhetoric, world views, and goals will clarify how these strategies can be applied to actual political figures.

*1: Expansive Interest Populism: Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.*

The first thing that must be done before analyzing the type of populist figure is justifying why the umbrella term “populist” should be applied to them at all. One simple and major justification for classifying Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. as a populist is that, when they were working together, he told Harry Boyte that he identified as a populist.[[30]](#footnote-30)

But beyond this, King’s rhetoric provides us with ample evidence of his populist character, such as in his letter from Birmingham where he stresses the necessity for people to demand their rights from their oppressors, and “that human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability. It comes from the tireless efforts and persistent work of men.”[[31]](#footnote-31) This is fundamentally populist because he is connecting his movement with the demands of the people. He frames his political struggle as one that is founded on the wants of the people.

Furthermore, King’s characterization of the world in terms of the natural good of his cause and the natural evil of his opposition demonstrates populism’s characteristic divisiveness as highlighted by Lukacs and Hofstadter.[[32]](#footnote-32) [[33]](#footnote-33) This division of the world into parts is apparent in the framing of his struggle for civil rights in virtually all of his rhetoric, from the vision of history he presents as a struggle of the people against the oppressors in his letter from Birmingham, to his “I Have a Dream” and “Beyond Vietnam” speeches where he invokes strong imagery of evil to characterize government policies and decisions he disagrees with.[[34]](#footnote-34) [[35]](#footnote-35) [[36]](#footnote-36)

King is one of the best examples of what it means to be an expansive populist because the ultimate goal of his movement called for unity across group divisions under the idea of peace, justice, and equality among mutually respecting individuals. In this sense, he fits especially well into Boyte’s fundamentally expansive characterization of populism, which may be attributed to the fact that Boyte worked with King personally and possibly had a major influence on Boyte’s conception of the nature of populism.[[37]](#footnote-37)

Although it could be said that he was not expansive because he was exclusive in his goal to improve the situation of black people in the United States, the philosophy behind his movement, and the ultimate goals his actions sought to achieve, stretched far beyond the immediate concerns of black people alone. In his famous letter from a Birmingham jail where he defends his protests in Alabama, he decidedly confirms his stance that all people, no matter who they are or where they live, have a vested interest in his movement:

Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial "outside agitator" idea. Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider.[[38]](#footnote-38)

This inclusion of even his opposition in the pursuit of helping improve the situation of black people in the United States clearly demonstrates that King sought not to represent only one segment of the population, but the greater brotherhood of man in the pursuit of their common interests in peace. He truly believed that by working for the cause of justice in Alabama, that he was working in the interests of all people by helping to preserve justice for all of them.

King’s “ordinary people” were thus the greater brotherhood of man: the human community as a whole. He demonstrates this by referring to all people, both white and black, as brothers, whether they actively supported his cause or not.[[39]](#footnote-39) Furthermore, this idea of a universal brotherhood is best reflected in King’s “Beyond Vietnam” speech when calling for

a genuine revolution of values [in which] our loyalties must become ecumenical rather than sectional. Every nation must now develop an overriding loyalty to mankind as a whole in order to preserve the best in their individual societies.[[40]](#footnote-40)

This rhetoric of inclusion demonstrates that King sought to unite all people under his ideals by converting them to his ideas about justice and morality because he feared that if he did not, the world would be plunged into violent sections, and that strength would replace moral legitimacy. Advancement of his vision would come from the eventual assent of his opposition to what he felt were his objectively morally superior beliefs, rather than an exclusive populist who would propose that their vision be achieved by whatever means necessary.

This strategy is expansionist because it sought to gain followers across many different groups, not just from one specific group of people. While his immediate interests do rest with black people who have been persecuted because of their race in the South as he pens a letter to his fellow Southern Christian leadership and throughout the majority of his work, his ultimate vision involves the cooperation and advancement of all people together. This was demonstrated when he called for an end to the Vietnam war, and a “revolution of values” so that all the people living within the United States of all races could secure the fruits of peace and eradicate the troubles of poverty.[[41]](#footnote-41)

King’s movements to eradicate poverty and improve the social cohesion in society demonstrate that he was trying to work in the interests of his “ordinary people.” Although his populist strategies did incorporate topics people are interested in like religion to rally support around his causes, the fundamental purpose of his movement was to work for the interests of humanity as a whole through the reduction of poverty and the predominance of peace.

He sought to make it clear that living in an egalitarian world was not just in the interests of black people, but the interests of white people as well. This is clear when he laments the situation of black people using violence to gain what they want, and his insistence that if white people who wanted to uphold the system of racial injustice did not allow society to change, that he could not stop violent action from being taken against them, especially if the system was being maintained through violence.[[42]](#footnote-42)

*2: Exclusive Interest Populism: Malcolm X*

Again, the mid-20th century and the civil rights era in the United States provide an exemplary figure for another type of populism: exclusive interest. Malcolm X was a populist because he sought to embody the political movement of Black Nationalism through institutions like the Nation of Islam, framing the world in terms of an independent black nation resisting the oppression of the oppressive white governed status quo. This is clearly characterized in populist terms in his 1963 speech “Message to Grassroots” where he lambasts the “Uncle Tom” peaceful leadership of the civil rights movement like King, and praises the communities that took politics into their own hands by rising up in anger and protests to force their issues onto the political table.[[43]](#footnote-43)

Because Malcolm encouraged individuals to rise up on their own volition, he advocated an extremely pure form of populism because it is “ordinary people,” in this case black people, standing up for themselves, regardless of whether or not they were in the nation of Islam, against the powers he characterized as evil.[[44]](#footnote-44) His movement’s power came from “ordinary people’s” willingness and ability up for their own interests, and he sought to embody and spread that movement. By portraying himself as the embodiment of what his “ordinary people’s” interests were, demonizing the opposition, and having his base of power come directly from the people who supported the movements he represented, Malcolm X clearly fits into the general idea of what a populist is.

Malcolm’s “ordinary people” were specifically black people in America; however, in a grand scheme he sought to advance the position and interests of all ethnicities who were oppressed by the “white nation.” [[45]](#footnote-45) In this international context, he specifically sought to strengthen and join the international religious brotherhood of Islam in liberating themselves from white oppression everywhere, especially late in his career.[[46]](#footnote-46)

While this can be considered to be expansionist because he sought to unify people behind their common interests in their hatred of white oppression, I would contend that it is exclusive because the demographic he is appealing to is completely fixed. While King refers to both white and black people as his brothers,[[47]](#footnote-47) Malcolm refers only to other “colored” people as his brothers,[[48]](#footnote-48) and specifically refers to white people as his enemies.[[49]](#footnote-49) It’s impossible to simply turn all white people into “colored” people, though it is possible to convert a militarist into a pacifist, or a racist into a racial integrationist. But because Malcolm defined who was an “ordinary person” in terms of the unchanging trait of race, he is an exclusive populist.

Ultimately, Malcolm sought to exclusively represent black people and advocated that they improve their situation by forming an exclusively black nation under Islam. This nation would be separate from white American nation, working only for the betterment of black people. As he says in his famous “Ballot or the Bullet” speech

I don't even consider myself an American. If you and I were Americans, there'd be no problem. Those Honkies that just got off the boat, they're already Americans; Polacks are already Americans; the Italian refugees are already Americans. Everything that came out of Europe, every blue-eyed thing, is already an American. And as long as you and I have been over here, we aren't Americans yet. [[50]](#footnote-50)

In this speech specifically, he emphasizes the exclusivity of his movement by suggesting black people have a duty to stick up for themselves as a unified group and play off the division of white politicians in the 1960 presidential election. He is seeking to use the unity of Black Nationalism under the Nation of Islam to inspire his “ordinary people” to assert their political power to benefit black people exclusively.[[51]](#footnote-51)

Furthermore, although Malcolm supported all of the races in their struggle against white oppression, he did not think that the world should unify under one unified representative of all peoples. Rather, he thought different groups based on nationality should peacefully cooperate and respect each other’s boundaries.[[52]](#footnote-52) This is demonstrated in his auto-biography when he takes the Hajj[[53]](#footnote-53) to Mecca and notices that all the people unified under Islam are walking together towards the holy sites, the Muslims of different ethnicities still walked in groups of their common nationalities:

Africans were with Africans. Pakistanis were with Pakistanis… where true brotherhood existed among all colors, where no one felt segregated, where there was no “superiority” complex, no “inferiority” complex – then voluntarily, naturally, people of the same kind felt drawn together by that which they had in common.[[54]](#footnote-54)

He sees this as something to be admired not necessarily because people are segregated into groups based on nationality, but that people are forming their groups without enforcement. Malcolm felt it was imperative the all people are able to decide for themselves where they fit into society, rather than forcing people to be either separate or apart. It is from these ideas that we can realize that although Malcolm was working exclusively for black people in the United States, the greater scope of his mission extended beyond this community: “if white Americans could accept the Oneness of God, then perhaps, too, they could accept in reality the Oneness of Man – and cease to measure, and hinder, and harm others in terms of their ‘differences’ in color.”[[55]](#footnote-55)

While this international cooperation is important, Malcolm’s primary concern is still his “ordinary people,” black people, working for their interests and developing their own identity so that they may take part in this congress of nations with honor.[[56]](#footnote-56) This retention of identity and wish to represent and advocate the interests of only one group, even in collaboration with many other groups, is still ultimately exclusive populism. He is appealing to black people’s interest in being a respected member of the international community, and providing for the collective “nation’s” interests by capturing and retaining their independence, which means he is working exclusively for that group of people.

In supporting this idea of mutual respect between different ethnic groups, Malcolm actually possesses similarities with King’s idea that people have an interest in a mutually respectful society. One of the main ways in which these figures parted was that King sought to get this respect by converting his opposition, while Malcolm sought to gain this respect by forcing his opposition to respect his people through whatever means necessary.[[57]](#footnote-57) Again, this is what fundamentally demonstrates the difference between an exclusive an expansive populist.

But another way in which both King and Malcolm came together was in their pursuit of the individual interests of “ordinary people,” which for both of them meant black people in the United States and oppressed people around the world. Both King and Malcom were interest populists because they wanted to improve and represent the interests of the individuals within their communities. When Malcolm lambasted and insulted black people by calling those who followed King and the other peaceful activists “Uncle Toms,” he did so because he wanted them to truly realize their interests by individually asserting their rights.[[58]](#footnote-58) He truly believed that the only way his “ordinary people” could advance their interests was by forcing their opposition to consider their interests.

Beyond this, he didn’t care what the “ordinary people” found interesting, he primarily cared about what was in their interests. This was demonstrated by his eventual break with the nation of Islam when he reached the conclusion that the organization was not sufficiently working in the interests of black people in the United States.[[59]](#footnote-59) Although throughout his career he worked as a spokesman for the Nation of Islam and sought to get black people interested in the ideas of the nation, which on its face seems interesting, his purpose in doing so was to engage black people in the assertion of their interests and their rejection of the white nation that had abused them. He felt that King was actually playing into the hands of a manipulative white government, especially with what he saw as the futility of the 1964 march on Washington.

And in 1964, this seems to be the year. Because what can the white man use, now, to fool us? After he put down that March on Washington – and you see all through that now, he tricked you, had you marching down to Washington. Had you marching back and forth between the feet of a dead man named Lincoln and another dead man named George Washington, singing, "We Shall Overcome."

He made a chump out of you. He made a fool out of you. He made you think you were going somewhere and you end up going nowhere but between Lincoln and Washington.[[60]](#footnote-60)

The Nation of Islam and the movement he was inspired to create after his Hajj and break with the Nation were created to rally black people in support of their collective interest in governing their own society.[[61]](#footnote-61)

*3: Expansive Interesting Populism: Ronald Reagan*

Ronald Reagan was a populist in broad terms because he thought that “the American people” needed to get government “off our backs.”[[62]](#footnote-62) This quote demonstrates an important populist characteristic of Reagan’s: his use of the “we” form when referring to his constituents. This linguistic choices is an attempt to prove his connection with “ordinary people” because he considers himself a part of their group. Reagan did not want to just show that he was working for ordinary Americans, but that he was one of them, and thus embodied what they wanted in the political system. This habit of referring to the American people as “we” is consistent throughout his rhetoric as he frames himself as being a member of the people and that the struggle to improve the country is a collective one:

In this present crisis, government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem. From time to time we’ve been tempted to believe that society has become too complex to be managed by self-rule, that government by an elite group is superior to government for, by, and of the people. But if no one among us is capable of governing himself, then who among us has the capacity to govern someone else?

All of us together -- in and out of government -- must bear the burden.[[63]](#footnote-63)

However, there are some issues where Reagan’s use of “we” runs is somewhat misplaced when analyzing his speech to the NAACP in 1981. While he does at some points refer to the people of the NAACP as “we” in reference to a few issues, the majority of the speech is consistently saturated with him referring to them as a separate “you,” and ends saying “it will be my honor to stand alongside you”[[64]](#footnote-64) rather than the bonding “together we’re going to do what needs to be done”[[65]](#footnote-65) in his electoral victory speech.

The fact that he was speaking to reach out to the NAACP does demonstrate that he is an expansive populist because he didn’t just blatantly disregard their community. Furthermore, Reagan’s expansive populist nature truly shines through in his first inaugural address when he states

We hear much of special interest groups. Well our concern must be for a special interest group that has been too long neglected. It knows no sectional boundaries, or ethnic and racial divisions, and it crosses political party lines. It is made up of men and women who raise our food, patrol our streets, man our mines and factories, teach our children, keep our homes, and heal us when we’re sick -- professionals, industrialists, shopkeepers, clerks, cabbies, and truck drivers. They are, in short, “We the People.” This breed called Americans.[[66]](#footnote-66)

However, this rhetorical difference highlights something fundamental about Reagan’s “ordinary person” in that being one was based around the interesting idea of national pride. This explains why Reagan would use “we” in his electoral victory speech and not in his address to the NAACP.

Although Reagan’s pursuit of a smaller government is framed in the context of being in the American people’s interests, Reagan was actually an interesting populist. Had he been an interest populist, his political movement’s emphasis would have focused on specifically helping people no matter what policy would help them. But when he tries to write about how his actions benefitted the American public, the ideas behind the policies are lauded much more than the actual supposed beneficiaries of the policies themselves. Furthermore, he is willing to quote from broad economic trends, but does not seem to be able to find data about the actual people he claims are benefitting from his policies.[[67]](#footnote-67) This demonstrates that his goal was not the collective interests of his “ordinary people,” but was centered on improving prestige and predominance of this liberal[[68]](#footnote-68) idea both on the world stage and in the United States.

The reason Reagan is an inclusive interesting populist rather than an exclusive interesting populist, even when promoting the idea of American exceptionalism, is because the ideas Reagan felt were necessary to be one of his supporters were not a fixed identity like a national characteristic. Instead, he generally saw himself in the terms of an internationalist, because he assumed all people fundamentally shared his liberal view of the world across all states.

This idea that there is a universal “ordinary person,” is reflected in the rhetoric of his autobiography when he talks about negotiations with the Soviet Union. In a specific passage, he notes that the negotiations with the “Russians” were blocked by the “Soviets.”[[69]](#footnote-69) In his mind, the Russian people were “ordinary people” just like Americans who ultimately wanted peace, and it was the evil Soviet government that prevented the realization of this human potential. This is similar to his view of domestic politics in which the actual American people’s potential was inhibited by the intrusion of the government. Much like King in this sense, Reagan did not want to destroy his opposition, but convert it to his liberal ideas. Unlike a rallying point like race or ethnicity, idealism[[70]](#footnote-70) is fluid because people are able to change their minds about what they believe. His reliance upon an idea to channel his supporters, and goal of uniting all of humanity under that idea are what make Reagan an interesting populist. Even if Reagan did genuinely believe he was working for people’s interests rather than what they were interested in, his emphasis on an idea before actual progress for his governed people make him an interesting populist.

Reagan’s style of populism fits well into Lukacs’ characterization of the current struggle between “nationalism” and “socialism” (the right and left) in modern American politics because it was decidedly nationalist in character. Reagan and his policies were promoting an idea, a myth of the American people, and used that myth to justify his policies of tax and social spending cuts while rapidly increasing military spending. He wanted to spread this myth in the United States and internationally, and by expanding this ideology he would expand who fell into the category of his “ordinary people.”

He sought to proselytize his vision of America and what it could be, ironically given his support of the military-industrial complex, similar to King. Both figures were expansive in their definition of what it meant to be an “ordinary person,” and sought to bring the world into their fold. Even in their ultimate vision, Reagan stresses the idea that he ultimately wanted peace, using a military buildup as a strategy of “peace through strength.”[[71]](#footnote-71) But where King sought to inspire by addressing people’s individual and collective interests in a peaceful society, Reagan sought to rally people around the idea of peace through strength with an emphasis on the glory and prestige associated with victory.

*4: Exclusive Interesting Populism: Hitler*

Hitler was a populist because he appealed to the “ordinary people” of the German nation in the vast majority, if not all, of his public rhetoric. He wanted them to identify with him, seeing him not as some distant political elite entrenched in the politics of the Weimar republic, but a simple man who belonged to the German people:

I myself, to whom the people have given their trust and who have been called to be their leader, come from the people. All the millions of German workers know that it is… a German who has come from their own ranks… National Socialism always bears in mind the interests of the people as a whole and not the interests of one class or another.[[72]](#footnote-72)

The irony in this last sentence must be addressed. When he says “not in the interests of one class or another” he is talking about economic class divisions, not racial ones. Instead of attempting to unify multiple groups of people under one political movement, he is attempting to unite all of one group, the German people, into a single entity that stretched across the multitude of economic classes. Thus, Hitler’s “ordinary person” was anyone who could be determined to be ethnically German.

When Hitler promotes the idea that he is representing the German people, we must not take that to mean that he is representing all of the people in the German state. Instead, he was attempting to present himself as a manifestation of the wants of the German nation, promoting the agenda specific group of people whose membership is unchanging. He is thus an exclusive populist because the people he defines as German, his “ordinary people,” are unchanging. This is evident in his rhetoric in which he insists he is working for “the German people,” not all the people of various ethnic background in Germany.[[73]](#footnote-73)

This small yet vital difference demonstrates the objective exclusivity of his populism because it highlights his nationalist character, which demands a certain exclusivity because nationalism, as Lukacs masterfully defines it, is a tool used to justify political actions on behalf of the promotion of a particular group of people.[[74]](#footnote-74) For Hitler, this group was a narrow definition of the German people, and he did not seek the support of all those outside what was perceived to be the German nation: Jews, Gypsies, Slavs, homosexuals, etc. and actively persecuted them to curry favor with the existing sentiments against those people already present in the European social context.[[75]](#footnote-75) Hitler did not create anti-Semitic sentiments, he merely utilized those already existing in the population, which makes him an interesting populist because he utilized pre-existing popular sentiments to gain support for a popular movement.[[76]](#footnote-76)

The exclusivity of Hitler’s populism is obvious. However, whether he was an interest populist working for his “ordinary people’s” individual interests, or an interesting populist who pandered to their desires is at least up for some debate. He constantly claims to be working in the interests of the German people, and there is a popular notion that Germany prospered under Hitler before the war began, this being the reason he won such wide support among the population. But in reality his policies, in both the short and long run, were only able to be implemented because of the popularity of his ideas. Furthermore, both his rhetoric and policies focused on promoting German nationalism rather than actually benefiting the German people.[[77]](#footnote-77)

The issue of Time that bequeathed him the distinction of man of the year in 1938 reflected on the situation of the individual German people in a somewhat perilous light:

As 1938 drew to a close many were the signs that the Nazi economy… was cracking. Nor were signs lacking that many Germans disliked the cruelties of their Government, but were afraid to protest them. Having a hard time to provide enough bread to go round, Führer Hitler was being driven to give the German people another diverting circus. The Nazi controlled press… shrieked insults at real and imagined enemies. And the pace of the German dictatorship quickened as more & more guns rolled from factories and little more butter was produced.[[78]](#footnote-78)

While this article is obviously biased against Hitler (though, if you have to have a bias, having it against Hitler is probably the best one to have,) it does offer us some insight into how Hitler’s power base did not rest on his ability to secure actual individual and collective benefits for the German people. Lukacs thus contends that the German peoples’ interest in nationalism, rather than any tangible benefits secured by the Nazi regime, was the primary source of Hitler’s power.[[79]](#footnote-79) This makes him an interesting populist, despite claiming that he is working in the German peoples’ interest. His power was built on German nationalists who wanted their nation to be perceived as glorious and restored to its rightful place as the most powerful people on Earth after the humiliation of the Great War.

The actual prosperity of the German people was merely a means to promote nationalist pride. National Socialism’s focus was primarily on nationalism, and socialism was almost an afterthought. Although it may seem that nationalism promotes the interests of the people who compose the nation, an it certainly can be used that way as Malcolm X demonstrated with the nation of Islam, many forms of nationalism, especially Hitler’s form, did not actually work for the interests of people of the nation. While the unity of the people nationalism presents can be used to work in their interests, it can also be used as merely something they are interested in, and something that can often convince them to sacrifice their own interests for the sake of sometimes completely immoral and contradictory causes.[[80]](#footnote-80)

It is almost always problematic to make comparisons to Hitler due to the atrocious crimes he committed with no remorse. However, I would suggest, as does Lukacs, that Hitler’s popularity was not dependent on his specific ideology of Pan-Germanic global hegemony and ethnic cleansing, but on his embodiment of German pride and nationalism as a means to achieve those ends. The ends are undoubtedly horrifying, but I would contend that we must separate those ends from the means because this association inhibits our ability to willingly and intelligently evaluate whether or not interesting populist means, means that can be used to justify virtually anything including genocide, are being used by current political actors or political actors we may face in the future.

Rather than accusing someone of literally being Hitler because they are using similar means, implying that they have similar ends, we must agree that the means themselves are separate from the ends, and must be judged on their own, despite our wants to focus on the terrible ends.[[81]](#footnote-81) The only way to stop such ends is to identify and eradicate the means that were used to reach that point. In this case then, I would argue that the means of interesting populism are completely immoral, and must always be viewed through a highly critical lens.

Hitler thus best represents exclusive interesting populism because this form is inherently racist and depends upon the manipulation of people for political power. This form of populism is the most immoral form, and is the polar opposite of expansive interest populism. Whereas the exclusive interest populism of Malcolm X is undoubtedly racist in its division of the world between races,[[82]](#footnote-82) it is at least attempting to improve the situation of the people who that particular race represents. Also working in Malcolm’s morality is that he pursued cooperation between the races, and demonized the race that he saw had violated the respect all different races must give each other when sharing the world.[[83]](#footnote-83) Reagan’s expansive interesting populism, while manipulating the population by advocating their wants even when it is to the detriment of their actual situation, at least attempted (albeit unsuccessfully) to unite all people under that banner of common pride, even if the source of that pride is in something they should not be proud of. [[84]](#footnote-84) Exclusive interesting populism takes the worst aspects of both of these forms as it is characterized by a racist division of the world and a support base founded upon the manipulation of the wants, rather than the promotion of the interests, of the people. This division based on unchanging characteristics and ability to propose virtually any policy so long as it can be framed as something the people of that group of supporters are composed of want, gives the leaders of such political movements to do anything they want, no matter how horrible.

IV: Aspects of Populism

Populism generally does not exist within the vacuum of appealing to the wants and needs of a particular population. The role of nationalism, religion must be taken into account in order to understand how a populist is able to win popularity among their “ordinary people.” These specific areas often serve as catalysts that can be used to create mass ideology, mass ideology being a set of principles and way of viewing the world that is generally uniformly adopted by so much of the population that the sheer number of supporters forces their principles and worldviews to be an active force in a political system. It is with this mass ideology that populism finds its most powerful political strength due to willingness of such a large part of the population to comply with and promote policies put forth that leaders can somehow frame within the context of those sentiments that individuals hold highly valuable.

*1: Nationalism and Patriotism*

Nationalism is a relatively new term in the English language, finding its origins in the German word “nationalismus” as late as 1774, and being recorded as an English word 24 years later in 1798. It is currently defined as “Advocacy of or support for the interests of one's own nation, esp. to the exclusion or detriment of the interests of other nations.” [[85]](#footnote-85) Although a definition for nationalism has been established earlier in this paper when establishing its role in interesting populism, it is still important to use the Oxford English Dictionary’s definition when delving into the core of what nationalism is and how it relates to populism.

In order to understand nationalism’s role in populism, beyond Lukacs’ argument that populism exists solely as nationalism’s political manifestations, it must first be established that nationalism is by all means separate from and often opposed to patriotism. While nationalism is the love of a particular group of people, patriotism is the “love of a particular land, with its particular traditions,” which can encompass people of many nationalities because it is the love of what already is, rather than the love of what is not but one feels should be.[[86]](#footnote-86)

Both nationalists and patriots can be populists, but the kind of populism they employ is generally vastly different in character due to their subtle yet important differences. Patriotic populism is often expansive, and can be styled as being more truly conservative[[87]](#footnote-87) in that it seeks to defend what is already in existence, or strengthen and build on the order that currently exists. Thus patriotic populism tends to generally be expansive because it seeks to unite all those who exist within a particular country, regardless of their ethnicity. “Ordinary people” in patriotic populism are all the people living in a country because all of them, not just one group, are essential elements of the country. The true patriot loves every single part of their country, and sees only room for improvement of all those living in that state.

Because patriotism involves the love of something greater than one’s self, patriotic populism is a form of interesting populism. The patriot has interests beyond what they individually or even collectively desire, and take into account what actions will benefit the country, sometimes even above its people. The preservation of traditions and the advancement of all the people in a country concern the patriot more than the advancement of their particular immediate individual and collective interests. This means that patriots will, if necessary, sacrifice their those interests if the preservation of the country and its traditions are at stake. Such a stance is defensive in nature, only requiring sacrifice for preservation. Offensive advancement which involves sacrifice for the advancement of a particular group or the pursuit of something more than what already is are nationalist, not patriotic.

However, it is possible for patriotism to create nationalism. If changes are being made to a land or its traditions that are deemed favorable to some groups within that country but that disrupt what patriots vision of that country is, they may react by turning to nationalism rather than embracing the change and creating a new country to fall in love with. Furthermore, the traditions patriots may love can be connected to a specific national group, and they may mix patriotism and nationalism in being proud of their land because it holds the specific group of people they identify with.

The John Birch Society is a manifestation of patriotism that turns into nationalism. The society sought to roll back civil rights reforms in the 1960s due to a perceived communist threat, calling on patriotic sentiment to defend the country against changes that they thought would destroy the traditions they valued.[[88]](#footnote-88) Rather than uniting as a whole country to secure and build upon the traditions in a way that benefitted all in the country, the John Birch Society turned to a nationalistic characterization of an “us versus them” mentality among different groups within the country.[[89]](#footnote-89)

Division of people into these groups creates nationalism because of its competitive atmosphere. Such competition provokes people to identify with a particular group and then seek to place that group’s status above the interests of the country. In fact, the interests of the country might even be sacrificed by a powerful group to advance that particular group’s position in society. Sacrificing of the greater interests of the country is something a patriot would never accept, though a nationalist would readily accept it for the benefit of their group.

Like patriotic populism, nationalist populism is interesting, rather than interest based, because it places a collective will above the individual’s interests. But these two political sentiments diverge when it comes to their exclusivity. While patriotic populism is expansive because it tries to unite all the people who make up a country for their collective preservation, nationalist populism is exclusive because its “ordinary people” are only those within a specific national group. The collective will of nationalism does not extend to those outside of the national group, who are seen as competitors.

This worldview can be seen in the current right-wing Israeli government and the rise of Israeli extreme right. Both sides in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are fundamentally nationalist, but in particular the Israeli extreme right’s call for a purely Jewish state encompassing the entire region, regardless of the instability the pursuit of that goal brings to the country, demonstrates what it means to put a specific group’s national mythology above what’s best for the country.[[90]](#footnote-90) This force is also present in both Malcolm X’s and Hitler’s political worldviews in that the benefit of their particular people was placed above the concerns for the collective benefits of the nation. In the specific case of nationalism, the main difference between these two figures arises in that Malcolm was using a nationalism as a tool to secure the interests of his national community because he felt “my life was inseparably committed to the American black man’s struggle,”[[91]](#footnote-91) while Hitler was using nationalism to support his pan-Germanic imperial ambitions.[[92]](#footnote-92)

*2: Religion*

Another important element that contributes to the ability of populists to engage and attempt to embody a population’s will is through the use of Religion. While nationalism is often now referred to as a substitute for religion, faith still plays a unique and important role in society as a whole, and specifically in populism. Rather than playing its traditional vital role in “the old military/theological system,” religion has become one of multiple ideals widely held by the population that modern populists are able to exploit.[[93]](#footnote-93)

What is interesting about religion’s role in populism though is the contrasting ways the same religion can manifest its political influence. In the case of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Christian populism manifested itself in an expansive form that harkens back to the biblical roots of Christianity. King explicitly tied his movement to that of the early Christian martyrs, invoking the idea that like them, he was attempting to convert the world to his movement, a movement for universal peace.[[94]](#footnote-94) He thus united the concept of proselytization with modern political populism where instead of beating political opponents, the movement seeks to convert them.

King’s heavy use of Christian rhetoric and allusions to scripture throughout his speeches does suggest that he was working for something people were interested in: religion, rather than something that was in people’s interests. However, while this religious sentiment does bring interesting elements to King’s populism, overall his fundamental principles are still upholding the collective interests of all people within his movement. He is not purely preaching the Christian gospel for political momentum, he is using the gospel as a source of legitimacy for his movement and a means of converting people. This created a fusion of interest and interesting politics: using something people are interested in as a way to work for something in people’s interests. But although biblical scripture plays an important role in King’s movement, his fundamental goal and purpose was securing the collective interests of everyone in a peaceful civil society, and he should still be considered an interest populist.

The fusion of these elements, religion and civil society, is evident in King’s “Beyond Vietnam” speech when he recognizes his religious duties as a minister in the pursuit of peace, but also his duty to help advance the interests of the American poor:

Since I am a preacher by calling… I have seven major reasons for bringing Vietnam into the field of my moral vision. There is at the outset a very obvious and almost facile connection between the war in Vietnam and the struggle I, and others, have been waging in America. A few years ago there was a shining moment in that struggle. It seemed as if there was a real promise of hope for the poor -- both black and white -- through the poverty program… and I watched this program broken and eviscerated, as if it were some idle political plaything of a society gone mad on war, and I knew that America would never invest the necessary funds or energies in rehabilitation of its poor so long as adventures like Vietnam continued to draw men and skills and money like some demonic destructive suction tube.[[95]](#footnote-95)

King ties moralism with people’s interests, arguing that the morally right choice is the choice that benefits his “ordinary people,” the American poor. He is using what people are interested in, religion, to entice them into supporting what is in their interests, social advancement.

This stands in stark contrast to the current right wing American evangelicalism that has permeated into populist thought. Whereas King’s religious populism seeks to take what people are interested in and make it work in their interests, the current right wing religious movements, such as the grassroots abortion movement, are predicated on what their supporters find interesting, their moral values, rather than what is in their interests.

Although such interesting movements do not always require that people sacrifice their interests to support a movement, Harry Boyte and Laura Grattan observe that this kind of religious grassroots populism can even be used to get people to sacrifice their immediate interests for the sake of the religion they are so interested in.[[96]](#footnote-96)[[97]](#footnote-97) Because people feel they are so connected with religion on a personal level, they are easily willing to sacrifice their immediate interests for the sake of advancing political actors who suggest that they are connected with that religion. Appeals to religion are extremely populist because the appeals’ strength are dependent entirely on the population’s support of the particular religion being invoked. The “ordinary people” who are being appealed to being all those members of the religion, or at least all those who take their faith seriously as the populist figure allows the values of the population to dictate the terms of their movement. This collective identity and willingness to sacrifice is thus heavily connected to nationalism in its pursuit of one group’s above all others.

The promotion of religion also connects with patriotism in that it can be a call to preserve traditions and values they hold as important. This is distinctly different from patriotism though in that patriotism calls for the preservation of a country’s traditions and values in society that, while possibly being influenced by religion, have become secular traditions and values in their own right that are connected with a country’s identity. Appeals to patriotism are thus distinct from appeals to religion because these appeals call for the preservation of a particular religion’s traditions and values in society.

The tie between religion and nationalism extends beyond Christianity though, and is clearly evident in Malcolm X’s use of the Nation of Islam and eventually orthodox Islam as a rallying organization through which Black Nationalism was espoused. Allah was seen as the one true God whose teachings would allow black people to realize their ability to improve their situation in the face of an aggressive overpowering white nation.[[98]](#footnote-98)

However, a distinct difference between Malcolm’s religious goals and the goals of contemporary right-wing Christians in their nationalist tenancies is Malcolm’s focus on advancing the actual interests of his followers by promoting economic community investment and unity in resistance to oppression.[[99]](#footnote-99) It is this sentiment that largely explains his decision to eventually break with the nation of Islam and found his own orthodox Islamic group because he “felt a challenge to plan, and build, an organization that could help to cure the black man in North America of the sickness which has kept him under the white man’s heel.”[[100]](#footnote-100) This decision largely came from his disillusionment with the Nation of Islam’s leadership in that he felt they were merely using Islam to establish an exclusive interesting political support system to entrench their leadership positions, rather than an exclusive interest goal of actively working for their followers’ collective benefits.

What is most notable about this difference with right wing evangelicalism is that, in some sense, Malcolm’s idea of unifying behind a religion to resist an oppressive society is a unifying thing that both Christianity and Islam share in this specific circumstance. As King connected his movement with the early Christian martyrs as inspiration for standing up to an oppressive society, Malcolm alluded to the necessity of Islamic faith “because this is the one religion that erases from society the race problem… I have never before seen sincere and true brotherhood practiced by all colors together, irrespective of their color.”[[101]](#footnote-101)

V: Conclusion

Populism is extremely dangerous, and while it can be a political force that can be rallied around a good cause, it is too often that this political strategy allows otherwise immoral policies to be legitimized in the name of an often vaguely alluded to “ordinary people.” The success of populists, to a large degree, comes from the vagueness with which they define who they are working for and on whose behalf. Who an “ordinary person” is has been given a substantial amount of analysis in this paper. But the average voting member of society will almost certainly not think this much about political figures advancing causes they are sentimental for.

However, the main dangers populism presents doesn’t come from the politicians who embrace popular sentiment. The politicians who initially embrace or create a popular movement can be dangerous, but in reality it is the continuation of a popular political movement beyond one figure, beyond control, that leads to the dangers populism presents. Populism is the argument against democracy in this regard. An overly engaged populace that does not fully appreciate the implications of the policies they support is almost if not just as dangerous as the most tyrannical absolute monarch in its ability to produce arbitrary and immoral decisions. There is a common theme among political theorists that suggests an engaged population leads to an ideal government, and lament any form of that seeks to establish its legitimacy from a body other than that so vague a group called “the people.”[[102]](#footnote-102) But the people advocating this popular engagement seem to forget that each person in a society cannot devote their lives to fully understanding and appreciating the decisions they are making that affect the whole human community.

Populism promotes the idea that an individual political cause is righteous and cannot be tainted with compromise. As Riker suggests, the fundamental principle that makes democracy work is the idea that multiple groups working together in society will compromise their interests for the benefit of the collective whole.[[103]](#footnote-103) But populism makes its followers believe that the only way to run a society is through the movement they support, and that any other suggestions must be totally rejected because they taint the popular vision.

When multiple uncompromising political forces meet, one must eventually give up. But because populism engages the population on sometimes such deep levels, building off of sentiments that often define who people are, it is unlikely that the people supporting those movements will compromise. There are many implications for this, but the main three are thus: political stagnation of a body that attempts to unite a divided population, separation of a formerly united community into distinct independent parts founded on the populist ideas that divided the once united community, and violence as a means of suppressing the opposition.

The idea that popularity bequeaths legitimacy allows whatever people are convinced is a good thing ought to be state policy. While I do not completely subscribe to either the Lockean or Hobbesian view of humanity, populism does clearly demonstrate that both versions exist in the diverse manifestations of popular sentiment for both good and evil. Therefore, while what is popular should be taken into account by political leaders, it should not dictate state policy. The problem currently being faced by democracy is just that: what is popular has become a replacement for what is legitimate, and the policy of the state is beginning to rest more fundamentally on what people are interested in, rather than their interests, or the collective interests of humanity. While there are certainly many citizens who vote on behalf of their interests, there are many who do not even recognize what is and is not both in their individual and collective interests. These people are thus willing to sacrifice their interests, the interests of society, and potentially the lives of those who dare resist their movements for the sake of populism.

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14. Lukacs, 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Lukacs, 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Lukacs, 62-70. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Lukacs, 71-73. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. “Martin Luther King, Jr. Beyond Vietnam – A Time to Break Silence.” [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Lukacs, 60. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Riker, 238. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Riker, 9-12. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Riker, 238. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
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24. Lukacs, 39-44, 68-70. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
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26. Goodwyn, 276-307. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
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52. X, 373-378. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. The Hajj is a spiritual pilgrimage to Mecca that is to be taken by Muslims at least once in their lives. It is notable that Malcolm took this pilgrimage after his break with the Nation of Islam, demonstrating both his devotion to more orthodox forms of Islam than those espoused by the Nation, and fears of retribution that were validated by a would-be assassin who had informed him of the Nation’s orders to kill him. X, 338. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. X, 375. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. X, 372. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. X, 374-397. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. “Social Justice Speeches: The Ballot or the Bullet.” [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
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59. X, 342. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
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67. Reagan, 334-336. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. “Liberal” in this case meaning economic liberalism: the idea that the government that governs best governs least, rather than what liberal has come to mean in the modern American political discussion, which is more accurately defined as socialism. This idea is highlighted by Lukacs in his work *Democracy and Populism: Fear and Hatred*. 38-45. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. Reagan, 550. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, ideology is defined as “Any of various views according to which reality is ultimately in some sense mental or mind-dependent; any of various views according to which the objects of knowledge or perception are ideas (in various senses: see idea n.); more generally, any view opposed to some form of realism or materialism.” Given this definition, Reagan can be considered an extreme idealist. His worldview was governed by the idea that there was a universal form of humanity that all wanted a liberal economic system and to retain their cultural roots. (“Ronald Reagan Remarks at the Annual Convention of the National Association of Evangelicals,” *American Rhetoric*, accessed Feb 29, 2016.) [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. Reagan, 549. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
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74. Lukacs, 36-38. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. Lukacs, 63. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. Lukacs, 63-68. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
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78. “Adolf Hitler: Man of the Year, 1938,” *Time Magazine*, Vol XXXIII, no 1, 1938. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. Lukacs, 131. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. Lukacs, 131. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. Lukacs, 133-134. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. Racism in this sense referring to the Oxford English Dictionary’s definition of “A belief that one’s own racial or ethnic group is superior, or that other such groups represent a threat to one's cultural identity, racial integrity, or economic well-being.” I wouldn’t necessarily argue that Malcolm X thought that his race was superior to others because he did believe that races are separate entities but that none are necessarily superior to any others. Rather, Malcolm’s racism came from his legitimate fear that the white race posed a threat to his cultural identity, racial integrity, and economic well-being. X, 450. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. X, 396. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. Although there are many people who take pride in Ronald Reagan to this day, scandals like the Iran-Contra affair, a drastic military buildup as Reagan argued for a small government, and the mischaracterization of social programs such as the case of Linda Taylor as the “Welfare Queen” who represented the state of American welfare when in reality such cases were rare. Reagan’s national mythology allowed him to put these facts to the side in pursuit of national pride. Dishonesty in pursuit of popular support is not something people should be proud of, and Reagan exhibited that shame through his dishonesty. Gene Demby, “The Truth Behind The Lies Of The Original 'Welfare Queen,'” *NPR Code Switch*, December 23, 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. *Oxford English Dictionary,* s.v. “nationalism,” accessed March 24, 2016, http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/125289?redirectedFrom=nationalism&. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. Lukacs, 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. Another term which Lukacs offers further insight into clarifying: conservatism means the preservation of the society that exists as it is, resisting change. It is the idea that what ought to be already is, and that attempting to interfere with that established order is only dangerous and unnecessary. The discussion around conservatism in modern American politics is thus problematic, because the general consensus of American “conservatives” isn’t that the current system ought to be preserved, but that the ideas behind an old system (not even the old system itself) must be used to change the government in a way different from what socialists want. These thoughts are then more reactionary in character, as they depend upon the myth of what something was, rather than the conservation of what something was or is. [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. “What’s Wrong With Civil Rights?” *Birch Watcher*, accessed Mar 24, 2016, http://birchwatcher.com/civil-rights/. [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
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98. X, 231. [↑](#footnote-ref-98)
99. X, 213-215. [↑](#footnote-ref-99)
100. X, 342. [↑](#footnote-ref-100)
101. X, 371. [↑](#footnote-ref-101)
102. Boyte, 10-35. [↑](#footnote-ref-102)
103. Riker, 12-13. [↑](#footnote-ref-103)