Course description

One of the main challenges in comparative studies on populism concerns its temporal and spatial measurements within and between many parties and countries. The unclear nature of this term has led to an abundance of definitions in books, papers and articles and hindered scholars' capability of finding alternative methods for its quantification. Textual analysis relying on supervised and unsupervised machine learning and other techniques in these fields significantly boosted empirical research on this topic, clearing the way for new studies and approaches to this crucial question. The course aims to provide students with general information about populism (and related issues), some basic foundations about machine learning and its use in this research field, and a more in-depth review of significant works that used automated tools for their measurements and study. Among the topics presented, we will introduce textual analysis using (supervised) machine learning, sentiment analysis and other automated approaches that can help students investigate populism and other voting behaviours by adopting new and stimulating perspectives. We will also discuss the limits of machine learning, and the paths the recent research works in these topics are exploring. Finally, we will more generally debate the advantages and (or) disadvantages of adopting interdisciplinary approaches for empirical studies in the fields of social sciences. The course includes in-class exercises and debates to absorb better the concepts presented while developing specific skills for the practical study of the populist phenomenon and beyond. No programming knowledge is required to participate in this course.

Pre-session task

Students are required to complete a short pre-session task that will be sent to those attending the seminar. Students should complete the pre-session task before reading any of the recommended papers for this course.

List of readings

It is recommended to start reading from the articles by Hawkins and Silva (2018) and Meijers and Zaslove (2021) and then proceed in chronological order of publication for each subset of readings

General readings (recommended)

Hawkins, K. A., & Silva, B. C. (2018). Textual analysis: big data approaches. In *The ideational approach to populism* (pp. 27-48). Routledge.

Meijers, M. J., & Zaslove, A. (2021). Measuring populism in political parties: Appraisal of a new approach. *Comparative political studies*, *54*(2), 372-407.

Measuring populism and populist communication

Gründl, J. (2020). Populist ideas on social media: A dictionary-based measurement of populist communication. *New Media & Society*, 1461444820976970.

Di Cocco, J., & Monechi, B. (2021). How populist are parties? measuring degrees of populism in party manifestos using supervised machine learning. *Political Analysis*, 1-17.

Ulinkskaitė, J., & Pukelis, L. (2021). Identifying Populist Paragraphs in Text: A machine-learning approach. *arXiv preprint arXiv:2106.03161*.

Populism, emotions and sentiments

Bakker, B. N., Schumacher, G., & Rooduijn, M. (2021). Hot politics? Affective responses to political rhetoric. *American Political Science Review*, *115*(1), 150-164.

Nai, A. (2021). Fear and loathing in populist campaigns? Comparing the communication style of populists and non-populists in elections worldwide. *Journal of Political Marketing*, *20*(2), 219-250.

Widmann, T. (2021). How emotional are populists really? Factors explaining emotional appeals in the communication of political parties. *Political psychology*, *42*(1), 163-181.

Biography

Jessica Di Cocco is a Max Weber post-doctoral Fellow at the European University Institute in Fiesole. She works on populism and electoral behaviour, negative campaigning and affective polarization. Her main interests concern the quantitative study of these phenomena, with an emphasis on cross-fertilization with computational sciences. She has recently published a paper in *Political Analysis* on the measurement of populism through the automated analysis of parties' national electoral manifestos. She is currently working with speeches, tweets and manifestos, as well as on more advanced computational approaches for populism measurement and the study of adjacent topics.