

Abstract

Populism dominates democratic politics across the world as a distinctive political phenomenon. Yet, inherent subjectivity defies any linear conception of this idea. It is understood as a set of ideas, strategy or a political-cultural approach shaping the discourse of electoral democracies. Despite the fluidity, few common attributes of populism do hold. The populist appeal makes an antagonistic societal division between the ‘virtuous people’ and the ‘corrupt elite’ or the ‘threatening outsiders.’ It considers the institutions in democracy as impediments to the ‘real’ representation of the ‘true people.’ A charismatic leader appeals to the masses with populist rhetoric by claiming to represent the ‘authentic people’ and marginalise the ‘evil other.’

Studying a populist leader’s appeal is crucial to assess the impact of populist discourses in a democracy. India has witnessed such appeals through several leaders where political communication has been directly made to ‘the people’ by leaders using socio-economic and cultural registers to secure electoral support. It circumvents political intermediaries and democratic institutions.

This research is a comparative study of the populist appeal of three contemporary political leaders in India - Narendra Modi, Mamata Banerjee and Arvind Kejriwal (2014 - 2021) with four objectives. First, it focusses on the political profile and communication of the three leaders to understand the supply side of populism. Second, it dissects the key factors that make populist appeal of these leaders acceptable to the people revealing the demand side of populism. Third, it captures the public perception on the populist ideas on politics and society that provides a conducive context for populist leadership to thrive. Finally, research analyses the impact of populist leadership appeal on political, societal and institutional discourses of India democracy. The study uses primary and second data sources, followed with mixed research methodology to present its research findings.