# The following excerpts are from a February 1, 2017 [talk](https://www.carnegiecouncil.org/studio/multimedia/20170201b-the-populist-explosion-how-the-great-recession-transformed-american-and-european-politics) by [John B. Judis](https://www.carnegiecouncil.org/people/john-judis) at Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs concerning his book, [*The Populist Explosion: How the Great Recession Transformed American and European Politics*](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B01KEL4GGI/ref=dp-kindle-redirect?_encoding=UTF8&btkr=1)*.* The excerpt has been modified for the classroom.

**What is populism?**

First of all, people get confused [by the concept of populism] because they think of political terms like scientific terms, as if you're talking about gravity or some chemical compound. But political terms like "liberal," "conservative," and "populist" don't have specific definitions. There is no exclusive set of characteristics that will tell you what is or isn't a populist. Putin has been described as a populist; Reagan was described as a populist. A lot of times it is used as a synonym for "popular," [and] in Europe for "demagoguery."

The distinguishing characteristic of this [populist] tradition is a conflict between the people and an elite. There is not any specific group at any specific time that has to be defined as "the people" or as "the elite." Sometimes "the people" are the poor; sometimes they're the struggling middle class. Sometimes "the elite" are Wall Street, the money power; sometimes they are the treacherous Democrats in Washington; sometimes they are just Washington itself. It is a two-pronged relationship between the people and the elite.

**How does left-wing populism differ from right-wing populism?**

Now I want to introduce something to confuse matters a little, which is that there are left-wing and right-wing varieties of populism. The left wing unites the middle and the bottom of society against the top. The classic example currently would be Occupy Wall Street with the 99 percent versus the 1 percent. [Also] Bernie Sanders against the billionaire class. In American history, the [People's Party](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/People%27s_Party_%28United_States%29" \t "_blank) [also known as the Populist Party] of the 1890s or [Huey Long](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Huey_Long" \t "_blank) would be another example of left-wing populism.

Then there is what you might call a right-wing or conservative variety [of populism] that also sees a conflict between the people and the elite. For instance, Donald Trump attacks corporation heads who want to move their firms to Mexico and leave workers in the lurch.

But there is also, in addition to seeing a conflict between the people and the elite, a third term that enters the equation, and that is the idea that the elite, or Establishment, is coddling another group—Muslims, African-Americans, illegal immigrants, asylum-seekers—you name it. It is an "other" group. With right-wing populism you have this third element entering the picture [but in] left-wing populism [it] is just the middle and bottom [class] versus the top.

...Although I call them "left-wing" and "right-wing," there is something misleading about that, too. The right-wing populists are not in many respects right-wing. Donald Trump, for instance, campaigned on a promise to protect Medicare and Social Security; his trade policies are pretty much the same as Bernie Sanders', attacking "runaway shops," corporations that leave the United States in order to find cheaper wages elsewhere. In Europe, the [French] [National Front](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Front_%28France%29" \t "_blank) platform is somewhat to the left of the Democratic Party. It is way to the left of Hillary Clinton and slightly to the left of Bernie Sanders on domestic issues.

In other words, although I describe these as "right" and "left," they are peculiar in other respects. They are kind of hybrids, these right-wing populist parties.