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Referencing the Public by Populist and Non-Populist Parties in the Slovene Parliament

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1. Introduction

In the last two decades, political reality in many democratic countries in Europe as well as around the globe has witnessed an increase in active populist political parties and a rise in their popularity among citizens. Parallel to the spread of populism, political science and sociological analyses note a clear difference between the discourses of members of populist and non-populist parties, especially when using social and other media. However, less is known about the relationship between populist and non-populist discourses in the speeches of members of parliament (MPs) in political systems of parliamentary democracy, in which parliaments are the central representative, legislative, and controlling state institutions. This contribution aims at suggesting a model for such analysis. The proposed analysis is embedded around two key concepts. First, we use the concepts of life-world to acknowledge the existence of a specific reality of MPs in which their speech is made. Second, we draw on the existing typology of populist and non-populist parties created by political scientists and sociologists to see how MPs from two different groups of political parties, i.e. populist and non-populist, construct their view of the public. The goal of the analysis is to detect any differences between populist and non-populist discourse observed through the lens of their references to the general public.

2. Approach and methodology

To further investigate the connection between the speech of MPs, their image of the public, and their populist or non-populist origin, we combine cultural history of parliamentarianism with corpus linguistics. From a historical perspective, we draw on recent developments in political history, focusing on the cultural side of the history of parliamentarism (Aerts, 2019; Gjuričová and Zahradníček, 2018; Gašparič, 2012; Schulz and Wirsching, 2012; Ihalainen et al., 2016). For this purpose, we use the concept of life-world (or *Lebenswelt*). The concept of life-world originated in philosophy (Husserl, 1962, Habermas, 2007). The concept of life-world has been used in historiography to emphasize the circumstances in which parliamentarianism is experienced, focusing on MPs as historical actors (Gjuričová et al., 2014). The approach brings to the fore research questions about MPs' perceptions, education, and expectations; their political socialization, prior experiences, and everyday life; and the influence of collective opinions, public images, and the media on their work. In this paper, we focus on one of the aspects of MPs' life-world, namely their relationship to their counterpart, the public, through the words they choose to use, which, in turn, reveals a part of their self-understanding.

In the framework of life-world, we further distinguish between populist and non-populist parties on two axes. First, based on the contents of political parties, we draw on existing research to determine which Slovenian political parties qualify as populist. Second, on the temporal axis, we acknowledge the break of 2004 as a year that witnessed the active beginnings of modern populism in Slovene political space (Fink Hafner, 2019; Frank in Šori, 2015; Fabijan in Ribać, 2021; Campani and Pajnik, 2017; Šori, 2015; Hadalin, 2020; Hadalin, 2021; Lovec, 2019; Pajnik, 2019). We take into account the difference between modern populist parties, as they emerged in the last decade and a half, and their immediate precursors, which have existed since the early 1990s. Therefore, the analysis counts the Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS) and its predecessor, the Social Democratic Party of Slovenia (SDSS), New Slovenia (NSi) and the Slovenian National Party (Slovenska nacionalna stranka, SNS) as populist parties, while all others were classified as non-populist.

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3. Analysis

The analysis is based on the *Slovenian parliamentary corpus (1990–2018) siParl 2.0* (Pančur et al., 2020). We take into account the time span from 1992 when the first term of the Slovenian parliament started until 2018 when the seventh term ended. The time frame thus includes some important events that affected the development of Slovenian political parties and their governing style, such as Slovenia's accession to the European Union in 2004 (Gašparič, 2012), the global financial crisis in 2007 and 2008, and the migrant crisis in 2015 (Moffitt, 2014). Using the typology advocated by sociologists and political scientists (see Section 2), we created subcorpora of populist and non-populist political parties for each parliamentary term, resulting in a total of 14 subcorpora. The subcorpora ranged between just under a million tokens in Term1 and to 12 million tokens in Term7 for populist parties, and between 7 million tokens in Term1 and to just under 15 million tokens in Term7 for non-populist parties.

The next step presented a challenge, as there are no pre-existing wordlists of references to the general public that we could rely on. We therefore generated frequency lists of nouns for each subcorpus and manually selected those that refer to the public in the broadest sense (e.g. *person, citizen, inhabitant*) from the 1,000 most frequent nouns in each subcorpus. We only took into account the nouns that can only refer to people (groups or individuals), disregarding those that can be used for institutions (e.g. *association*) or objects (e.g. *school*). We also checked their usage via concordance search and discarded the expressions that could potentially be used for the general public but in this specific corpus predominantly refer to the MPs, the government or their staff (e.g. *proposer*).

As can be seen in Table 1, this yielded a total of 86 unique nouns with the total absolute frequency of 359,320 and relative frequency of 7,322.53 for the populist parties and the total absolute frequency of 524,195 and relative frequency of 6,788.74 for their non-populist counterparts. Most (69) of the nouns are shared between both party groups (e.g. *human*), in addition to 10 that are unique for the populist MPs (e.g. *Croat*) and 7 that are specific to non-populist MPs (e.g. *stakeholder*).

Group	LEMMA	POPULIST1-7 AF	POPULIST1-7 RF	NON-POPULIST1-7 AF	NON-POPULIST1-7 RF	P:N ratio
	#tokens	49,070,504		77,215,381		
	#lemmas	76		74		
	LEMMA	AF	RF	AF	RF	P:N ratio
P-ONLY	Hrvat	1,341	**27.33**	0	0.00	/
	žena	397	8.09	0	0.00	/
	Avstrijec	318	6.48	0	0.00	/
	diplomant	300	6.11	0	0.00	/
	storilec	232	4.73	0	0.00	/
	volilec	161	3.28	0	0.00	/
	delojemalec	36	0.73	0	0.00	/
	neslovenec	31	0.63	0	0.00	/
	svojec	27	0.55	0	0.00	/
	delavka	0	0.00	0	0.00	/
N-ONLY	deležnik	0	0.00	1,784	**23.10**	/
	prejemnik	0	0.00	1,191	15.42	/
	najemnik	0	0.00	983	12.73	/
	dolžnik	0	0.00	752	9.74	/
	vajenec	0	0.00	444	5.75	/
	kadilec	0	0.00	290	3.76	/
	krajan	0	0.00	172	2.23	/
JOINT	oče	929	18.93	329	4.26	**4.44**
	obrtnik	1,187	24.19	540	6.99	**3.46**
	davkoplačevalec	4,762	97.04	2,178	28.21	**3.44**
	migrant	2,627	53.54	1,255	16.25	**3.29**
	vlagatelj	426	8.68	260	3.37	2.58
	podjetnik	3,880	79.07	2,671	34.59	2.29
	moški	827	16.85	619	8.02	2.10
	ljudstvo	3,089	62.95	2,376	30.77	2.05
	Italijan	272	5.54	216	2.80	1.98
	Slovenka	1,432	29.18	1,143	14.80	1.97
	pacient	1,619	32.99	1,452	18.80	1.75
	zamejstvo	1,067	21.74	966	12.51	1.74
	kmet	6,839	139.37	6,739	87.28	1.60
	prijatelj	1,024	20.87	1,012	13.11	1.59
	naročnik	517	10.54	516	6.68	1.58
	Slovenec	10,103	205.89	11,090	143.62	1.43
	dijak	2,403	48.97	2,670	34.58	1.42
	kupec	1,216	24.78	1,357	17.57	1.41
	državljan	21,570	439.57	24,828	321.54	1.37
	priča	4,061	82.76	4,701	60.88	1.36
	državljanka	6,902	140.65	8,372	108.42	1.30
	narod	4,952	100.92	6,035	78.16	1.29
	žrtev	3,945	80.39	4,810	62.29	1.29
	sosed	738	15.04	928	12.02	1.25
	človek	68,517	**1,396.30**	86,824	**1,124.44**	1.24
	Rom	627	12.78	808	10.46	1.22
	bolnik	1,279	26.06	1,717	22.24	1.17
	prosilec	343	6.99	468	6.06	1.15
	javnost	16,248	331.12	22,367	289.67	1.14
	starš	5,732	116.81	7,893	102.22	1.14
	oseba	16,836	343.10	23,762	307.74	1.11
	subjekt	3,406	69.41	4,866	63.02	1.10
	družina	11,120	226.61	16,298	211.07	1.07
	otrok	18,205	371.00	26,762	346.59	1.07
	gost	966	19.69	1,438	18.62	1.06
	begunec	1,247	25.41	1,879	24.33	1.04
	mladina	1,384	28.20	2,101	27.21	1.04
	delničar	444	9.05	684	8.86	1.02
	tujec	3,169	64.58	4,908	63.56	1.02
	zavarovanec	896	18.26	1,394	18.05	**1.01**
	volivec	3,478	70.88	5,544	71.80	0.99
	lastnik	8,031	163.66	12,814	165.95	0.99
	mati	320	6.52	512	6.63	0.98
	družba	23,431	477.50	38,532	499.02	0.96
	študent	4,973	101.34	8,202	106.22	0.95
	posameznik	7,367	150.13	12,307	159.39	0.94
	zavezanec	2,437	49.66	4,096	53.05	0.94
	uporabnik	3,441	70.12	5,866	75.97	0.92
	nosilec	2,211	45.06	3,812	49.37	0.91
	občan	1,558	31.75	2,688	34.81	0.91
	prebivalec	5,318	108.37	9,404	121.79	0.89
	partner	4,580	93.34	8,312	107.65	0.87
	potrošnik	1,657	33.77	3,060	39.63	0.85
	generacija	2,279	46.44	4,215	54.59	0.85
	delavec	10,768	219.44	20,055	259.73	0.84
	invalid	3,032	61.79	5,760	74.60	0.83
	prebivalstvo	2,727	55.57	5,452	70.61	0.79
	manjšina	2,742	55.88	5,518	71.46	0.78
	učenec	1,437	29.28	3,071	39.77	0.74
	ženska	2,941	59.93	6,517	84.40	0.71
	upokojenec	3,547	72.28	8,097	104.86	0.69
	skupnost	16,208	330.30	38,163	494.24	0.67
	pripadnik	1,375	28.02	3,238	41.93	0.67
	upravičenec	1,673	34.09	4,523	58.58	0.58
	upnik	566	11.53	1,725	22.34	0.52
	podpisnik	465	9.48	1,460	18.91	0.50
	udeleženec	500	10.19	1,685	21.82	**0.47**
	porabnik	129	2.63	540	6.99	**0.38**
	populacija	480	9.78	2,179	28.22	**0.35**
	Total	359,320	7,322.53	524,195	6,788.74	1.08

Table 1: List of specific and joint public-related words identified in the subcorpora of populist and non-populist speeches with their absolute and relative frequencies as well as the usage ratio.

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The list of populist-specific nouns contains words describing people according to their background (e.g. *Austrian, non-Slovenian*), family role (e.g., *relative, wife*) and employment status (e.g. *female worker, employee*). Non-populist-specific nouns contain expressions which describe the role or status of a person in an administrative or legal procedure (e.g. *stakeholder, recepient*), business transaction (e.g. *tenant, debtor*), origin (e.g. *local*), education (e.g. *apprentice*) or health status (e.g. *smoker*). Among the joint nouns, *father*, *craftsman*, *taxpayer* and *migrant* are used three times more frequently by populist MPs, whereas *beneficiary*, *participant*, *consumer* and *population* are use more than twice as frequently by non-populist MPs. *Insurance holde*r, *voter* and *owner* are used nearly identically by both groups of MPs. This might reflect a difference between the populist and non-populist parties and their focus in their political base: while the first usually rally voters from rural areas, the latter are traditionally more successful in urban areas.

	T1	T2	T3	T4	T5	T6	T7	Total
Populist #tokens	950,851	4,917,224	7,291,606	8,607,268	8,598,006	6,622,380	12,083,169	49,070,504
Populist "public" AF	6,204	27,738	49,606	68,971	57,041	48,881	100,879	359,320
Populist "public" RF	6,525	5,641	6,803	8,013	6,634	7,381	8,349	7,323
Non-populist #tokens	7,323,569	11,387,486	8,838,299	14,394,700	11,452,223	8,869,712	14,949,392	77,215,381
Non-populist "public" AF	48,446	58,100	52,118	91,254	84,878	67,310	122,089	524,195
Non-populist "public" RF	6,615	5,102	5,897	6,339	7,411	7,589	8,167	6,789
P-value	0.3059	2.54E-43	6.61E-116	0	8.25E-94	2.81E-03	2.01E-07	1.41E-269
Chi2 test	1.0482	190.4453	523.7064	2181.3538	422.1633	21.9444	27.0286	1230.5394
Statistical significance	NO	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES

Table 2: Absolute and relative frequency of public-related words as used by populist and non-populist MPs per parliamentary term and statistical significance tests.
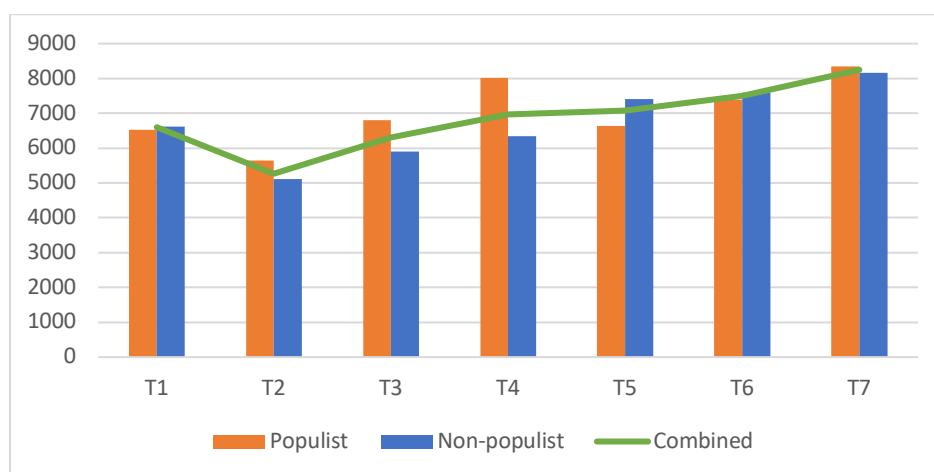

Figure 1: Relative frequency of nouns referring to the public in speeches of MPs from populist and non-populist political parties in the Slovene parliament 1992 – 2018, by parliamentary term.

As can be seen from Table 2 and Figure 1, we observe a steady general upwards trend in the use of nouns, describing the public in both populist and non-populist parties over time. For all terms combined, populist MPs refer to the public statistically significantly more frequently than their non-populist counterparts (P-value 1,41E-269, Chi2 test 1230,5394[1]), which confirms our main hypothesis. For all the MPs combined, the only, and quite substantial, drop in the frequency of references to the public can be observed from Term1 and Term2, which could be contributed to the early stages of the formation of the Slovenian political space. Especially in Term1, the MPs had to face many questions of establishing the working of the new parliament itself. It took time before a new normality of the parliamentary work was established, before the MPs began to address the public more. While early Slovene political transition exhibited a general consensus about the need to strengthen parliamentary democracy, the time after that has been much less clear, which could account to the increase of references of the public by the MPs, since they had to search for new contents of policy-making.

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[1] https://www.korpus.cz/calc/

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As for individual terms, populist MPs refer to the public statistically significantly more often in Terms2–4 and 7 with Term4 as the biggest outlier, while the opposite is true of Terms5–6 with Term5 as the biggest outlier. In Term1, non-populist MPs use more public-denominating expressions but the difference is not statistically significant. Terms2–3 can be interpreted as the period of formation of populist parties (1992–2004), with Term4 being the first parliamentary term working with a populist (SDS-led) government. In turn, Term7 (2014–2018) could suggest the emergence of the second-wave growing power of populist parties in the face of the crisis of the non-populist parties.

In Terms5–6, when references to the general public prevailed in what sociologists and political scientists refer to as the non-populist discourse, the Slovenian political space witnessed an emergence of numerous new political parties, many of which entered the parliament, which influenced the relation between populist and non-populist discourse. Due to the safe-guards in parliamentary procedures which ensure equal opportunity of participation for opposition MPs regardless of their number, the speeches of MPs might also be influenced by the existence of populist and non-populist led governments and the strength of the populist and non-populist parties in the parliament at the time. While party strength is usually counted by the number of seats taken in the parliament, there are many more factors that influence it and make the correlation between the number of seats, coalition and opposition roles, and party strength challenging (Sartori, 2005; Krašovec, 2000).

4. Discussion

While the results do confirm our initial hypothesis that populist parties refer to the public more, the difference between the two blocs appears to be smaller than the current findings of studies in sociology and political science suggest. Where research from these two fields mainly focuses on the speech of members of populist parties in (selected) television interviews, on social media, and other, less rigid environments, this contribution focused on taking into account all the speeches of MPs throughout the Slovenian parliament which is a highly institutionalized and regulated environment that probably allows for less differentiation between MPs of different political orientation. Our results show that the same life-world of MPs, marked by their shared experience, social forms, norms, and a shared dialogue in plenary sessions provides an environment with a strong unifying factor. Although there is little doubt that political parties themselves decisively differ from one another, the power of the institution, its rigidity and specificity as well as MPs awareness of the target audience and reach of their speeches, proved to be decisive factors in MPs speech when speaking about the public.

According to political scientists and historians, the political space in Slovenia has been increasingly polarized since 1992. Again, our results show a somewhat more nuanced picture: while a growing difference between populist and non-populist discourse can be observed in Terms2–4, the gap narrows in Terms5–7. This challenges the dominant narrative of Slovenian political space. The record high frequency of references to the public by populist MPs in Term4 coincides with SDS winning the 2004 election for the first time after 1992, which happened immediately after the party went through its populist transformation in 2003. Term5, SDS witnessed a backlash with the non-populist coalition prevailing, while one of the populist parties, the NSi, did not even reach the parliamentary threshold.

The general public as well as the media frequently refer to several of the more recent parties, such as Levica, as populist as well. While these parties do exhibit a certain populist appeal, their content, attitudes towards experts and state institutions, as well as their actions in the parliament place them in the non-populist spectrum, with Levica gravitating more towards the spectre of democratic socialism (Toplišek, 2019) than to the same category of populism as defined by Mudde (2005, 2007) which was the theoretical framework of this study. Another methodological issue is temporality: the modern populist shift is a phenomenon belonging to the 21st century; thus, the decade after 1992, included in our analysis, requires a separate interpretation and can only be understood as a preface to the later populist shift (Fuentes, 2020).

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