

Determining the extent of populist discourse in Iranian Press

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Abstract : The general purpose of this study is to determine the extent of dealing the different topics with which different media (in terms of political tendencies) have to do, and, hence, to compare them. Our principal question, therefore, is that what the populist discourse is in Iranian press in 2008? The most important concern, thus, of this article is identifying the indexes of populist discourse to offer an explanation of populist discourse in Iranian press. To do so, the available texts and papers were studied, first of all, and, then, the enumeration was drawn from the indexes considered. In the next stage, enumerated indexes, all together, were presented to the professors and theorists of the field so, while reading it, they would do the modifications. Finally, the proper indexes were selected, taken into consideration, and analyzed in details, respectively. To answer the principal question the hypotheses were set, in the next step. Being determined, thereby, indexes of populist discourse were explored on the basis of questions, hypotheses, and purposes of the study. Using content analysis method, we considered two cases of Keihan newspaper (right wing) and Etemad Meli (left wing) to explore, comparatively, the populist discourse in Iranian press in 2008. In order to examine the proposed hypotheses, therefore, two national newspapers were selected which had different political and socio-cultural attitude, and, also, of same public written structure (what is printed and published), namely, Keihan and Etemad Meli.

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Introduction

Populism, as a political concept, according to Herbert Schiller, is based on the primary hypothesis that 'the public is unaware and passive, without being able of discrimination'. Characteristic of someone being populist, on the other hand, is her/his enthusiasm 'to be seen', that is, those who are more enchanted with "visual attractions based on feelings" rather than "reasonable analyses". Populism, in other words, means presenting fine images to those who 'don't see well'. Populism, in other reliable sources, has been defined as having 'belief in people', 'being popular' and 'people-ism school', etc. In political sciences, principally, a populist one would like his/her image to be displayed by dramatically inciting emotions before public more than thinking to introduce his/her thoughts or offering fundamental strategies in politics or other fields. Such an attitude is well sufficient that media – once in hands of people with political power, specifically those believing in populism – would convert to powerful means of, provisionally, expansion of that belief. Beside the political incentives, however, commercial and profitable aspects, maybe not that much political, are to be considered too in perspective. It is here that social conception of populism, that is, immediate impressing or inciting the people, is taken into account more than political one.

As the name of populism shows, thus, it is most often based on having dominance over the public. The term "People" is a word, although, but it has abundant semantic and concrete consequences. In all socio-political systems, almost, in the recent centuries and even before that, people have had played fundamental and, occasionally, unique

role. People themselves, sometimes, would have caused a riot or revolution; people's revolt has been set out, caused sometimes by stimulation of a number of profiteers and opportunists, sometimes by freedom - loving and liberal ones, who've been on top of people's stream of demand and volition, or familiar with their language and pains. People, in any way, were a necessary and inseparable part of the most of socio-political events and changes and, also, revolts and revolutions which have had occurred during the whole history and scope of the world. But "all the revolutions were which set out in the name of people and all the revolts and revolutions were which directed by the same people have been specified and classified by different names and titles. It has been said, although, in these revolts and developments, that every thing and everybody is people, that there is nothing outside their volition considered, and that whatever is done is to satisfy the same volition; but once the result and process of actions along with decisions is considered, differences would have clearly been revealed; and here is taken as the origin of such "isms", whose emblem, purpose and basis is the people. One which would reminds more, among all these "isms", of people, by name and title, is nothing but populism. Its history has been traced back to mid 19th century, and, to different movements which have occurred in such lands as former Soviet Union."

In populism, therefore, we thoroughly speak of people and their demand and wish. People are everything and there is nothing outside them or their willing; whoever and whatever resists this is the enemy of people, of nation, of their demand and volition, of a slogan and a target.

Whatever volition of people aimed, it should be realized; not only no one should oppose it, but also there is no one who does so, because everybody in society is one of the people, since people are all integrated and sincere, their slogan is the same and any imagination of "other voice" in such society would abolish initially.

Nor multiplicity of creeds, thus, nor multiple voices and thoughts one would find in such systems. The Populist system calls for, and sees only, univocality and sincerity. Differences should be either ignored or omitted, since these differences, these opposing voices, are all against society's willing. All of them just want to sow discord and worry about, beside their unity, rising of people's wish. They are not concerned about people at all. All they worry about, therefore, besides seeking their needs and desires, is just fulfillment of demands of their own: all the oppositions are proceed from this raven. Populism is the system which not only is not glad by opposed votes and different thoughts, but also is afraid of such diversity. Differences of thoughts, to this tenet, has no meaning; everybody should say the same as what people say, so even though people is a plural noun itself but actually is singular, the singular which speaks in the form of the leader of movement, who speaks only of people's demands. In such a system, differences of colures, of races, of classes, and of wealth should not be mentioned and all the people should be alike.

"Mass media" or "media populism" emerged, clearly and obviously during the World War I, in the world. Mass mobilization for future war and fighting with other nations, and even with internal political opposition, was their most important goal. The most important symbol of such media in the world was Josef Goebbels in Germany, propaganda minister of Hitler administration. Leader thinkers of this school refer to, as their major influences, thinkers such as Gustave Le Bon and Jean Gabriel de Tarde. Populist media define their prophecy, at least, to conduct heterogeneous society toward uniformity and homogeneity.

What is under consideration, as a result, in this article is comparative study of populist discourse in Iranian press in ۲۰۰۸. The most important issue in this research is: in which society and circumstances populist media are formed in and what is their origin? With what trait and context endurance and stability of mass media messages would increase or decrease? In other words, how and under which conditions, on one hand, can written media make society uniform and homogenous, in order to conduct them toward their favorite goals, and, on the other hand, to what extent effects and endurance of such political, social and economic messages is stable. Finally, within what environment and social, economic and political grounds are they reduced and undermined?

Indeed, populism grows, in the modern world, through media and develops into democracy and the society. It reproduces itself too, basically, in this way and breakthroughs into different social levels. Accordingly, populist discourse can be distinguished by reading media and, with different

methodological instruments, the way in which they deal with different subjects.

Research methodology

Any study or research seeks to reach certain aims. In this regard, the primary principle and the first step for reaching the aims is the method.

After being specified, research aims should be applied, by researcher, to practical issues; because, basically, principal aim of every research is to explore, to explain, to interpret and to expand knowledge about special phenomena. So too, this research tries, using general principles and rules of such study, to select proper measuring tools for research.

Accordingly, this research tries, methodologically, by content analysis of two newspapers, namely, Keihan (right wing) and Etemad Melli (left wing) to study populist discourse in Iranian press comparatively. To achieve this goal, therefore, information gathering tools are suggested as following:

- 1- In the first stage, that is, identification of dimensions and components of populist discourse, the method was information gathering in libraries;
- 2- In the second stage, that is, comparative study of populist discourse in Iranian press, the method was information gathering using content analysis;
- 3- In the third stage, evidently, the professors and authorities were interviewed in order to determine the indexes of populist discourse.

Research hypotheses

- 1- It seems that populist discourse has been used in all media considered;
- 2- It seems that populist discourse is the characteristic of political excitation, through newspapers, in Iran;
- 3- It seems that, no matter which political tendency, populist discourse is the dominant way for political figures to promote their plans;
- 4- It seems that different newspapers, which are affected, highly, by diverse political events (such as election), tend to use populist writing style;
- 5- It seems that there is no difference between political newspapers in respect to ways in which they apply and pay attention to populist discourse.

Statistical population and sample

Statistical population includes all the elements which have one or more common group traits and may be selected for study. It is this element to which measuring tool is applied, and the statistical population includes all such elements or intelligible observations relating to the research subject. In other words, statistical population includes all the elements by which research matter subject manifests and from which conclusion can be drawn.

Our statistical population: Etemad Melli and Keihan newspapers in 2008.

Our samples: about 52 numbers have been selected from each newspaper.

Studied newspapers; (1) Keihan (2) Etemad Melli.

The reasons for such selection: both newspapers have obvious political tendencies; populist discourse, therefore, can be more clearly assessed in these texts.

Data analysis method

Two newspapers, as mentioned above, were selected among national newspapers in order to examine validation of the hypotheses. These two newspapers, as we said earlier, are different in terms of political attitude, socio-cultural approaches, and in terms of written structure of news (what is printed and published). These two newspapers are Keihan and Etemad Melli.

Differences of these two newspapers were as following:

- 1- Administrative and organizational structure;
- 2- Financing sources;
- 3- Form and size of newspaper;
- 4- Internal structure of newspaper (Etemad newspaper used to have one appendix and Keihan didn't. They were different in terms of form and composition as well);
- 5- Political tendency;
- 6- Social and cultural tendency.

To examine these newspapers equally, in spite of their differences, the same sampling was done.

Within 52 weeks of the year, one number was sampled every week. Monday, on the basis of random sampling, was selected sampling day for both papers out of six days a week. No newspaper, nevertheless, was published in the first two weeks of the year; this defect was compensated by increase of sampling, in the next two weeks, with two additional numbers. In each month, hence, Mondays were selected as sampling days. However, next Tuesday was selected, in the case of Monday being vacation, as the first substitute, and Wednesday was selected as the second substitute for such vacations. From the first newspaper (Etemad) and the second newspaper (Keihan) 52 numbers were selected. The mentioned newspapers were selected because they represented two extremes of political and social attitudes and, therefore, could properly cover the hypotheses of research.

Indexes under consideration in these papers were:

- Main pictures of the front page or first title;
- Texts and articles.

Pictures:

The most important picture of news or main story, published in the front page. Significance of the picture is determined from paper's own point of view, and importance which the newspaper gives to it.

Indexes considered in pictures were:

- Paying attention to non-organizational political elites (the elites who are not identified as member of parties, that is, non-party characters even if they were a member.);
- Paying attention to the organizational political elites (the elites who are identified as a member of parties or other political organizations);

- Paying attention to the public in general, that is, as a totality not divided into social system units;
- Paying attention to the public in terms of the social groups;
- Formal picture of persons or subjects;
- Informal picture of persons or subjects;
- Paying attention to the subject in picture;
- Paying attention to the person as the one and only subject in picture;
- Paying attention to the person in terms of a more general subject or in a broader scope;
- Paying attention to the appearance of persons (the person's clothing, face or look being highlighted);
- Showing the person being inexpensive (to accentuate simple appearance of the person as regard to dress and behavior);
- Showing individual pictures with mighty appearance (despite the fact that grasping the picture is based on personal feeling of the addressee, or interpreter, some authoritative pictures are, indeed, discernible on the basis of general common principles. For example, to put emphasis on personal prestige, medals, bottom up picture, etc, indicates regarding the subject by Insinuation of his power or authority);
- Showing public pictures with authoritative appearance (displaying people or social groups in a position so as to transfer authority or power to the reader);

The texts studied in the newspapers include:

- Editorial article or the main note of newspaper which is substitute for editorial one or associating it;
- First title of the newspaper;
- Main story of the newspaper (in case that newspaper, rarely, had more than one main story, so as they could not be distinguished, one of them has been selected randomly). In this section, two main axes were considered: (1) Title of the main story (2) Text of the story;
- Main article and important notes (in case of several articles or notes to be not possible to discern – which occurred in the most numbers of newspapers - random sampling was done.)

Indexes studied in the texts :

- Paying attention to organization;
- Paying attention to political and social groups;
- Paying attention to different aspects of the Constitution;
- Freedom as the right of all individuals and a fundamental right – no matter the limiting aspects;
 - Freedom under special conditions (freedom as a right but under conditions and limitations where display confiding aspects of enjoying freedom);
 - Legality as an important affair, besides to determine its instance and use, mentioned in the text;
 - Political parties as main actors of political affairs (no matter the instances, nor other attitudes, nor positive or negative assessment of role of political actors under special conditions);
 - Election as a situation of competition between political organizations and parties (election as demonstration of organized competition);
 - Election as a situation for competition of people;

- Paying attention to democracy;
- Using democratic ways in political competition and to seize the power (presence of dominant democratic discourse);
- Political disclosure (in terms of political groups or manners or actions);
- Individual disclosure;
- Comparing administrations in economic issues based on documents, statistics and figures and using instances;
- Comparing administrations in economic issues in general;
- Comparing administrations in social issues, based on documents and by use of instances;
- Comparing administrations in social issues in general;
- Comparing administrations in cultural issues in general;
- Comparing administrations by their foreign policy;
- Comparing administrations by their local policy;
- Positive approach to private life of the individuals (for elevating the person in public opinion);
- Negative approach to private life of the individuals (to make the person look bad in public opinion);
- Politics as an important and positive issue in personal and social life;
- Politics as a forbidden and negative issue in personal and social life;
- Social organization as a positive phenomenon (necessary and proper for social life);
- Social organization as a negative phenomenon;
- NGOs as positive instruments;
- NGOs as negative instruments;
- Approaching to NGOs with no positive or negative attitude;

Also following indexes have been considered in the sample newspapers:

- Percentage of political news (out of total news);
- Percentage of political stories (out of total reports);
- Percentage of political articles or notes (out of total articles or notes);
- Percentage of social news (out of total news);
- Percentage of social stories (out of total stories);
- Percentage of social articles or notes (out of total articles or notes);
- Percentage of political subjects by elitist approach (written for elites);
- Percentage of social subjects by elitist approach (written for elites);

Media populism

To intensify populist behavior of media depends, partly, on their relation to political groups of the country. In other words, newspapers take populist route in dominant political air, and use such manner instead of extending reasonable criticism. The same action, in fact, is found in political groups and their elite's behavior. Press, in this way, deviates from normal direction, and tend to intensify

extreme behavior in society. In sphere where emotions and inflammations are dominant, and these are means by which movement fans are attracted, press is following, consequently, this direction as well. The press which promotes populist thought is the one which avoids, strongly, from thought, rational discussion and moral codes. They prefer factional benefits over public benefits and even, for such benefits, maybe victimize democracy. These are specifications of populist press.

Many analysts recognize the term "populism" synonymous to the idiom "to be seen", a synonymy that is such a criteria in which, if not according to Persian grammar, one can cover, bestow meaning or associate the other.

Populists, in this regard, don't lose any opportunity to be seen. They like to be seen because they are noticed by others, and this can accelerate applying their populist policies. Populists don't like to sit behind the desks for expert discussions, and listen to their boring speech, because, in this way, they are not to be seen and, therefore, don't show any tendency to work behind closed doors. For this reason, populists copiously tend to be among people, since they can attend vehement public gatherings and persist on their policies, so as to receive approval of their plans on different subjects, instead of using the expert views, by people's applause. This tendency of populists to receive credit from people to execute their plans, usually, leads to seek confirmation of policies not in experts gathering but in the large squares of cities and communication with the public face to face.

In a populist's belief, confirmation of executed, or future, policies should be applauded by the public to be legitimately actualized or realized, since this is shouting of the public that is the best evidence to justify policies and plans; populists persist on authenticity of this confirmation, even if one asks whether is the people's belief or opinion the best criteria for many complex and expert subjects which require specific education or knowledge. For this reason, a populist needs to be seen continually in order to introduce, and execute, his popular policies ceaselessly after being confirmed by people; and this is the way in which such false accreditation would be the best propaganda to dominate populism in all dimensions of a society.

It should be said, indeed, that according to populists it is not necessary to restrict it, in enlivening their beliefs, only to the country borders, since border, for populism, is a meaningless concept. Advocates of this thought find each other everywhere in any rank, and embrace each other brotherly before TV cameras to prove, to the public, that a common thought based on adoring populace can unite peers and which, notwithstanding religion, culture and tradition, lead to expansion of geographical scope.

Survival of populism is rest on extravert demonstration whether emerging such extraversion is shown by appearance and attending among the people or as article or picture printed on front pages of papers or, as well, by exciting motion pictures in magic frame of TV.

Populism, by any possible means, needs to bring itself to the people, which prove its opposition to individuality and its support for totality. For this reason, populism highly tries to execute policies in which essential trait is supporting poor and unknowing majority.

Generally, dividing society into majority and minority parts and everyday emphasis on existence of poor and rich classes in those parts, frequently accentuated and promoted by populists, not only is not by accident but results from such support for poor majority.

In this school, the value of majority support for populist policies is more than attention of minority to those policies; so, populists always try to accompany the majority and satisfy them.

Populists get excited by majority attention, since the excitement result from this attention to accelerate the execution of their populist plans. This is the direction in which what is called, by them, wealthy minority class is ignored, because such minority doesn't care to "being seen" and nor to the manner in which it is performed; therefore populists can't grant any share of benefits to such class, since their role helps destroy populism rather than support it. A populist, by any price, should be seen and what is important to them is not the form of display, but its doing by essence. Therefore, to choose doing it or not is not the case or, if one prefers, is not an option for the populists, but it is replaced by another important concern which can have many limitations per se, that is, the way of doing.

A populist, in order to be seen, requires media and specially those which necessarily accentuate and promote him, because the less speak of the rivals the more his success and victory; populism hates rival and rivalry and prefers to remain as a single hero.

Populists, accordingly, don't deny tend to play in an arena as the only actor, since it is evident that while winner of this play can be a single hero, why bothering to share such sweet victory with a rival. On the other hand, media can play an important role to organize the minds of individuals into a special direction; populism is well aware of this mechanism, so that some media populism is born in a close interplay of these two apparently incompatible components and, also, in an arena without rival.

Facts

On the basis of findings of this research, the following results are obtained in pictures analysis:

- In the second newspaper (Keihan) paying attention to non-organizational political elites (the elites who are not identified as a member of parties and are non-party characters even if they were member of a party) is more than the first newspaper (Etemad Melli). By contrast, there was more paying attention to organizational political elites (the elites who are identified as a member of parties or other political organizations) in the first newspaper (Etemad Melli) more than other.

- In the first newspaper (Etemad) paying attention to people as a totality not divided into social system units was a bit less than second newspaper (Keihan). In this case differences are not significant.

- In the first newspaper (Etemad) paying attention to people as social groups is considerably more than second newspaper (Keihan).

- Official picture of individuals or subject: it was observed in the first newspaper more than the second newspaper; in the case of non-official pictures this proportion is inverted for two newspapers, but these differences are not significant.

- Paying attention to the person as the one and only subject in picture in Keihan newspaper is more than Etemad newspaper, but these differences are not statistically significant.

- Paying attention to the person in terms of a general subject or in a broader scope in Keihan is more than Etemad newspaper.

- Paying attention to look and appearance of individuals (clothing or face or look of the person being accentuated) and showing the person's inexpensiveness (simple appearance of the persons in terms of dress and behavior being accentuated) was found not in Etemad but in Keihan newspaper. These differences are significant at level of 95%.

- Showing individual pictures with mighty appearance is found in Etemad more than Keihan newspaper, although public pictures with mighty appearance (displaying social groups or populace in a situation to transfer hegemony or authority to the reader) were found in Etemad just once, but was not found in Keihan Newspaper .

Studies and results above show that Keihan newspaper has potential more than Etemad to use pictures which can serve to populist attitude of the newspaper.

On the base of this research and results obtained from content analysis of sample numbers of papers, the following results obtained:

- Research results show that Keihan newspaper has experienced less variation in numbers of political news than Etemad newspaper during the study. In other words, covering political news by Keihan in considered samples was less dispersed than Etemad newspaper. Significance of this subject has been statistically shown by using Chi-Square test at level of 95%.

- Survey of different numbers shows that studied newspapers would contain more political subjects in volumes while acceding to the end of year (except for the last 2 weeks of the year). As regard to the fact that year 2008 was a busy year to campaign and candidateship for presidential election of June ۲۰۰۹, this was reasonable. Dividing volumes by seasons, moreover, shows that winter 2008 included more political issues than other three seasons for both newspapers. The question that whether upcoming election affected such matter, or whether the press accentuated the subject, should be object of another study, but it can be mentioned that there is a significant relationship between increase of political news of studied papers and upcoming of election.

- This study shows that Etemad newspaper assigned 25% of its stories in 52 numbers to political ones, while this rate was 14% for Keihan newspaper. Variation rate of this in Keihan newspaper was less than Etemad newspaper. To put it better, Keihan newspaper had clearer thread and less changed trend. While Keihan newspaper had assigned at most 20% of the stories to political ones, but Etemad newspaper had 40% of its stories as political. These differences are statistically significant. In other words, it seemed that Etemad was more into politics, as to contents of stories, than Keihan, while at the same time Keihan had clearer and less changed policy, as regard to stories percentages.

- In the case of political articles and notes, in two newspapers, it was observed that 60% of total articles and notes of one of them was assigned to political subjects. Also, by upcoming the election and during the weeks in which political debates were hot (and announced that Khatami or Mir Hossein Moosavi run for president), political articles and notes were significant on the basis of Chi-Square test at level of 95%. The first newspaper (Etemad) was, significantly, more sensitive to ongoing political issues than the second newspaper and contained more political stories.

- Although a newspaper being political doesn't mean it has populist tendency, there is a clear relationship between air of public sphere and studied newspapers.

- While results of study show that there are some differences in two newspapers as regard to inclusion of social news, but following table which is the result of applying Chi-square test, on the basis of difference of two newspapers, indicates that these differences are not significant.

- The second newspaper (Keihan) tried more to reports social stories than the first, but these differences are not statistically significant.

- In the political articles and notes, there are no significant differences between two newspapers.

- The first newspaper (Etemad) has, significantly by statistics, more elitist material, whether in social or political issues, than the second newspaper (Keihan). In fact, it can be said that elitist approach of Etemad is stronger than Keihan.

- To consider contents of Etemad and Keihan newspapers, by stories, show that Etemad newspaper has less people-oriented approach (in terms of addressee) rather than elitist approach as compare to Keihan.

On the basis of results obtained above from quantitative content analysis of the subjects, it seems that we can conclude Keihan newspaper, due to tendency to public subjects, and also lack of attention or little attention to social and political issues from elitist point of view, has more potential for populist approach than Etemad.

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