



University of  
Zurich <sup>UZH</sup>

Department of Communication and Media Research (IKMZ)

# Populism scholarship – where *are* we going, where *should* we be going, how can we get there?

## Panel 1: Theories & Concepts

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Symposium “Populism, Polarization, Propaganda in Times of Crisis”, 18 Oct 2022, Zurich

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**Where *are* we going?**



# Where *are* we going?

**Populism theorizing has expanded + diversified substantially, focusing on different...**

- Disciplinary approaches (comm, psych, polisci, ...)
- Epistemological traditions (poststructuralism, positivism, ...)
- Settings (digital media, policy-making, ...)
- Manifestations (attitudes, communication, ...)
- Societal institutions (politics, media, science, ...)
- Topical contexts (immigration, climate change, ...)
- Levels of conceptual specificity
- Degrees of empirical embeddedness
- ...



# Where *are* we going?

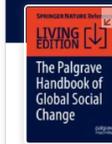
## Potential ways ahead:

1. Further expansion and diversification: more nuance vs. more redundancy, provincialism, “conceptual slippage”?  
(DeAndrea & Holbert, 2012; Gerring, 1999; Slater & Gleason, 2012)
2. Further attempts to integrate scholarship: “a grand theory of populism”  
(Canovan, 1982; Hosseini et al, 2022; Poblete, 2015)
3. Further questioning of status quo: “Old wine in new bottles?” “Is populism an ideology?”  
(Aslanidis 2016; Bonikowski, 2017; Geurkink et al., 2020)
4. Further calls to just give up on the whole thing: “move beyond academia’s populist moment”  
(Brubaker, 2017; De Cleen & Glynos, 2021)

### Contributing to Theory and Knowledge in Quantitative Communication Science

Michael D. Slater and Laurel S. Gleason  
*The School of Communication, The Ohio State University*

We propose to theory nesses of analysis Research about the by research research work of d



The Palgrave Handbook of Global Social Change pp 1–24 | Cite as

### Right-wing Populism in a Global Perspective: The Necessity for an Integrative Theory

S. A. Hamed Hosseini [✉](#), Lawrence J. Saha & Elizabeth Adamczyk

Living refer  
53 Accesses

Political Studies

Available access | Research article  
First published online October 5, 2015

### Is Populism an Ideology? A Refutation and a New Perspective

[Paris Aslanidis](#) [View](#)  
Volume 64, Issue  
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X17000000>

Published: 26 October 2017

### Why populism?

[Rogers Brubaker](#) [✉](#)

*Theory and Society* 46, 357–385 (2017) | [Cite this article](#)  
23k Accesses | 248 Citations | 79 Altmetric | [Metrics](#)

### Abstract

It is a commonplace to observe that we have been living through an extraordinary pan-European and trans-Atlantic populist moment. But do the heterogeneous phenomena lumped under the rubric “populist” in fact belong together? Or is “populism” just a journalistic cliché

**Where *are* we going?**



**Where *should* we be going?**



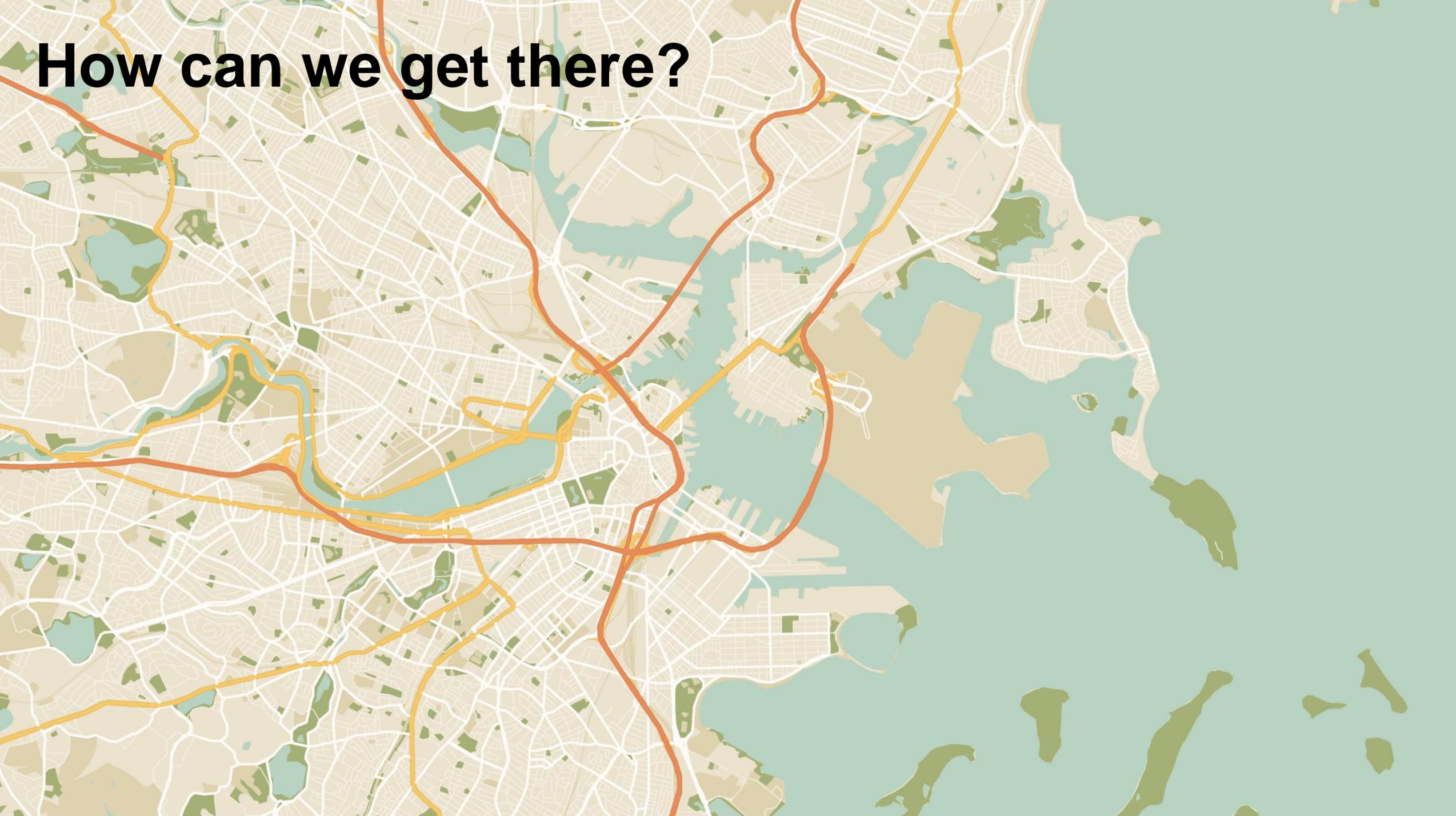
# Where *should* we be going?

- 1. Integrate extant populism conceptualizations** —
  - Devise overarching frameworks
  - Relate new to existing theories
- 2. Theorize unexplored “realms” rather than “islands”** —
  - Societal transformations: digitalization (AI, platform governance), polarization, etc.
  - Visual dimensions of populism: Imagery, memes, etc.
  - The “dark matter”: Closed communities, dark platforms, messengers, non-mediated communication, etc.
- 3. Avoid searching the theory of everything**
- 4. Overcome theory-method gaps**
- 5. Consider normative dimensions** —
  - Reduce Western, male, English-speaking bias in research and teaching
- 6. Don’t lose grip on so-what questions and third mission**
  - Reflect scholarly socialization, researcher df’s, etc.
  - Debate the need and ways to prevent populism

**Where *should* we be going?**



**How can we get there?**



# How can we get there?

1. **Integrate extant populism conceptualizations**

2. Theorize unexplored “realms” rather than “islands”

3. Avoid searching the theory of everything

4. Overcome theory-method gaps

5. Consider normative dimensions

6. Don't lose grip on the so-what questions and third mission

▶ More thorough lit review (Slow Science)

▶ Better peer review

▶ More exchange of scholars (e.g., host symposia in Swiss cities with mediocre soccer clubs)

▶ Aim to become PPP+ expert\* instead of P expert\*\*

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\* populism / propaganda / polarization / ...

\*\* populism

# How can we get there?

1. Integrate extant populism conceptualizations

2. **Theorize unexplored “realms” rather than “islands”**

3. Avoid searching the theory of everything

4. Overcome theory-method gaps

5. Consider normative dimensions

6. Don't lose grip on the so-what questions and third mission

▶ Invest more effort to identify theoretical gaps and needs

▶ ...through conceptual debate (where to put Occam's theory razor?) (Kuhn, 1977)

▶ ...via empirical studies (review, meta studies, etc.) (Hunger & Paxton, 2021)

# How can we get there?

1. Integrate extant populism conceptualizations
  2. Theorize unexplored “realms” rather than “islands”
  - 3. Avoid searching the theory of everything**
  4. Overcome theory-method gaps
  5. Consider normative dimensions
  6. Don't lose grip on the so-what questions and third mission
- ▶ Carve out areas of overlaps/consensus
  - ▶ Connect related conceptualizations (e.g., science-related populism and media populism)

# How can we get there?

1. Integrate extant populism conceptualizations
  2. Theorize unexplored “realms” rather than “islands”
  3. Avoid searching the theory of everything
  - 4. Overcome theory-method gaps**
  5. Consider normative dimensions
  6. Don't lose grip on the so-what questions and third mission
- ▶ Avoid contemplative theory essays and atheoretical big data studies
  - ▶ Connect “theoretical estimand” and “empirical estimand” (Lundberg et al., 2021)

# How can we get there?

1. Integrate extant populism conceptualizations

2. Theorize unexplored “realms” rather than “islands”

3. Avoid searching the theory of everything

4. Overcome theory-method gaps

**5. Consider normative dimensions**

6. Don't lose grip on the so-what questions and third mission

- ▶ Discuss theory and syllabus building across cultures, genders, linguistic scholarly communities (McQuail, 2005; Mohammed, 2022)
- ▶ Account for ethical implications of responses to populism (see Drażkiewicz Grodzicka & Harambam, 2021)
- ▶ Beware of pathologizing publics, social media, etc. without robust evidence

# How can we get there?

1. Integrate extant populism conceptualizations
  2. Theorize unexplored “realms” rather than “islands”
  3. Avoid searching the theory of everything
  4. Overcome theory-method gaps
  5. Consider normative dimensions
  6. **Don't lose grip on the so-what questions and third mission**
- ▶ Engage in public outreach and dialogue with society
  - ▶ Set up “deliberative citizen knowledge platforms” (Harambam, 2021)



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**Thank you for your attention!**



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