

## Interview with Article Award Recipient

# Robert Jansen

Interviewed by Shannon Golden  
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Robert Jansen was a co-recipient of the Political Sociology Section's Article Award in 2012 for his article "Populist Mobilization: A New Theoretical Approach to Populism" (2011, *Sociological Theory* 29(2): 75-96). Jansen is currently an assistant professor of sociology at the University of Michigan.

*What motivated you to consider the topic of populist politics? How do you situate this work in your broader research agenda, both your past work and future research plans?*

RJ: I came to the study of populism through a broader interest in contentious politics. In particular, I've long been fascinated by the relationship between political practices, on the one hand, and the formation and dissolution of social identities and solidarities (whether based on nation, race/ethnicity, class, region, or political loyalty), on the other. It was this interest, for example, that motivated my earlier research into the uses of collective memory by Latin American revolutionary movements. And it was this interest that guided me as I considered a small handful of potential dissertation topics.

In the early 2000s, as Latin American politics seemed to be on the verge of a new turn to the left, many countries in the region had also recently seen what was being recognized as a re-

vival of populism. Venezuela's Hugo Chávez was, of course, the prime example; but there were others as well. These contemporary political developments caught my attention. And I quickly realized that studying Latin American populism would afford me many opportunities to address my underlying theoretical concerns. At the same time, as I dug a little deeper, I was struck by political sociology's general lack of engagement

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work has enabled me at least to touch on my motivating interest in the political foundations of social solidarities, but it has also pushed me into new areas, most notably, into questions of political innovation and repertoire emergence.



(at least in the Latin American context) with cases that have traditionally been labeled "populist." So I constructed a dissertation project around this topic.

I'm currently in the midst of extending this work into book and a series of articles on what I argue is the first case of large-scale populist mobilization in Latin American history: the campaigning that led up to Peru's 1931 presidential election. In this episode, two quite different candidates developed similar populist strategies in their competition to mobilize ordinarily marginalized social sectors. This

When I look beyond this current work and into the future, I think it's safe to assume that my research trajectory will be guided more by my underlying theoretical interests than by the substantive topic of populism. This isn't to foreclose the possibility of doing further work in the area (indeed, I have some potential follow-up projects in

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mind). But I have also considered other lines of research that might, on the surface at least, appear to be more of a departure.

*You develop the concept of populist mobilization as a new theoretical approach, seeing it as a means (rather than an end) or as a political project, rather than as a particular type of ideology or regime. Can you explain the process by which you developed this idea? How did you become interested in this specific theoretical project?*

RJ: I didn't start out intending to write a theoretical piece on populism. But as I began to learn more about the recent cases of Latin American "neo-populism," I was looking for a theoretical apparatus that could make sense of these new cases and situate them appropriately in historical context. I was disappointed with what I found. Digging through the interdisciplinary literature on populism, I found much use of the term (as a common-sense descriptive label), but very little serious conceptual or theoretical work. And the concepts and theories that I did encounter seemed plagued by intense disagreements and deep contradictions. The literature was fragmentary and conceptually problematic; and people had been talking past one another for decades.

Obviously, it would have been hubris to think that I could rectify this situation on my own, with one article. But I at least needed to assess what was out there and to set out my own conceptual toolkit—it was a necessary preliminary for the empirical work that I wanted to do. And I hoped that others might find at least some utility in this exercise.

In the article, I tried to assess the interdisciplinary literature and to identify some common strengths and weaknesses in the various perspectives. The most common stumbling block that I came across was a relentless desire to pin down the true nature or essence of populism (whether as a regime, movement, or ideology type)—to figure out what this political form truly is. But one of the most striking things I was learning as I studied a wide range of Latin American cases was just how flexible, versatile, and adaptable populist practices can be. They are enacted in a wide range of contexts, by a wide range of political actors, to accomplish a wide range of ends. If there is any consistency across cases, it is in what popu-

list politicians actually do—in the sorts of mobilization practices that they develop, and the type of rhetoric with which they infuse these practices—not in who they are, in the nature of their political enterprise, or even in what they are trying to achieve. And this is why I ultimately made the shift from a focus on populism per se to a focus on populist mobilization as a political practice.

*In the article, you apply the concept of populist mobilization to mid-twentieth-century Latin America. Can you address the relevance or applicability of the theoretical concept to other regions or other time periods?*

RJ: I'm quite aware that my expertise in this topical area is largely limited to the Latin American context. The initial impetus for my research came from following contemporary politics in the region. I eventually shifted to considering a range of historical cases there and I ended up conducting a sustained study of early-twentieth-century Peru. These were the cases on which the literature that I was reviewing was largely focused and these were the cases that I was wrestling with as I developed the article's core theoretical contributions. This is why the empirical section of the article, in which I attempt to demonstrate the analytical utility of my approach, focuses on mid-twentieth-century Latin America.

I note in the article that I'm agnostic about the applicability of the framework beyond Latin America, and I remain so. Without a much larger base of comparative case knowledge, any stronger claim would be too presumptuous for my taste.

That said, the umbrella term "populist" has certainly been applied to a wide number of movements and situations around the world in recent years. Most notably, the rise of right-wing parties in Europe, the emergence of the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street movements in the U.S., and the flowering of Arab Spring protests have all been painted with this brush, at least by some. Ultimately, the applicability of my framework to such cases is for area experts to assess. But I do hope that my article at least raises provocative questions, highlights some interesting similarities and differences in the domain of contentious political practice, and provides a provisional baseline for good comparative research.