

# Only Another Adjective, or Finally a New Functional Post-Ideological Subtype? A Conceptual Analysis of Valence Populism

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**Abstract:** *This paper explores the impact of the increasing focus on subtypes of populism on contemporary discussions within the field of political science. In an effort to provide more precise descriptions of emerging political tendencies, scholars have responded by introducing new and other types of ‘populism with adjectives’. Among these original conceptualisations remains a valence populism that fuses the appeals of populism and technocracy, and strategic positionality on the political spectrum. The paper begins by elucidating the development of valence populism’s conceptualisation and presents an analysis drawing from Sartori’s methodologies for conceptual innovation. Subsequently, the study assesses the qualities of the valence populism concept. The paper finds that, while valence populism stands as a promising and innovative concept with positive intrinsic attributes, it operates in the field of concurrent concepts with no significant troubles. We identify essential issues related to resonance and the need for clear differentiation from other concepts, which warrant careful consideration in future studies.*

**Keywords:** *concept, conceptual analysis, populism, valence populism, populism with adjectives*

## Introduction

Populism dominates contemporary debates on new forms of politics and possible strategies. Over the recent decades, scholarship on this phenomenon has proliferated, incorporating the concept of populism as a pivot for various theoretical explanations and subsequent empirical applications (e.g. Bus-

tikova & Guasti 2019; Díaz et al. 2023; Kaltwasser & Zanotti 2023). Alongside theoretical and empirical debates, the study of conceptual aspects of populism has significantly enriched the research agenda in political science (e.g. De Cleen & Glynos 2021; Pappas 2016). However, although there is minimal academic consensus on the fundamental definition of the *root* concept of populism (e.g. Hunger & Paxton 2021; Pappas 2016), many of its subtypes suffer from definitional and conceptual confusion. Valence populism is an example of this lack of clarity. The concept remains not clearly defined, making it difficult to distinguish from other closely related concepts (Gerring 1999). Furthermore, other concepts that describe similar phenomena – particularly non-ideological or non-left-right populism, such as technocratic (Bickerton & Accetti 2017) or centrist (Saxonberg & Heinisch 2022) subtypes – often apply to the same empirical cases. This significant overlap strengthens the need for clearer conceptual boundaries around valence populism.

To address these issues with the urgency of the comparative dimension, we follow the approach of previous conceptual analyses that examined subtypes of broader political concepts including democracy (Collier & Levitsky 1997), autocracy (Ali 2022) or coups (Marsteintredet & Malamud 2020). This approach allows us to treat valence populism as a *concept with adjectives*, situated on the lower rung on the ladder of abstraction compared to the root concept of populism (Sartori 1975). Based on this, this paper poses a crucial conceptual question: does the concept of valence populism occupy a meaningful place in the debate on populism subtypes, or is it merely another instance of conceptual stretching (Sartori 1970)? To respond to this question, we aim to determine whether valence populism offers a unique analytical tool or simply adds to the growing complexity and confusion within populism studies.

In a comprehensive examination of various iterations of valence populism, we ought to trace their etymological development and set currently missing theoretical and empirical boundaries for evaluating its scientific validity. This approach inherently consists of two main components: (1) an analysis of the term as such by its definition and the assessment of its empirical capacities, and (2) a broader validation test (Collier & Gerring 2009; Sartori 1975). The objective of this strategy, which integrates methodological insights from social sciences, is to determine how effectively the concept contributes to the scientific debate and the value it can hold against alternative concepts. Due to its unique blend of terms from different scientific disciplines, and its growing diffusion, valence populism (defined by Zulianello 2020; Zulianello & Larsen 2021) represents an ideal example for testing ‘populism with adjectives’.

The paper is structured as follows. The first part addresses the analysis of concepts with adjectives and underscores the importance of the link between different levels of abstraction. From the linguistic viewpoint, the second section argues for the relevance of associating terminology with political phenomena,

drawing upon arguments collected by Giovanni Sartori, a prominent European political scientist. In this section, we discover the gradual development of valence populism and elucidate its emergence in political science. The empirical part of the paper takes valence populism as a sovereign concept. Through qualitative analysis, it evaluates its relevance within the criteria proposed by Gerring (2009), which includes domain, external differentiation and resonance.

The paper's main contribution is threefold. First, it streamlines the conceptual debate regarding innovative populist subtypes. Second, it contributes to the clarification of core conceptual questions about the root concept of populism. Third, the paper challenges some assumptions that unquestionably link the methodological traditions of Giovanni Sartori and John Gerring.

## **The 'root' concept of populism and its subtypes with adjectives**

Concepts play a crucial role in the social sciences as foundational building components for constructing theories (Botes 2002; Goertz 2006: 6). While all concepts serve the function of theorising phenomena and their classes equally in principle (Gallie 1955), their practical role in research usually varies due to the force of exogenous influences, such as domain specificity, theoretical expectations or considerations of utility. Given the complexity of the contemporary world, concept hierarchy is a natural feature. The relationship between concept hierarchy, theory-building and subsequent generalisation is primarily defined by the ladder of abstraction, as outlined by Sartori (1970). This virtual hierarchy inherently shapes varying levels of *generalisability* depending on proximity to the empirical world, and it establishes the analytical area, where the root concept (Collier and Gerring 2009) represents the most general position, while descending the ladder indicates the decreasing opportunities for generalisation. Sartori (1975) himself calls for the complex analyses of these sub-concepts with adjectives (reflected by Collier & Levitsky 1997; Marstein-tredet & Malamud 2020) because they remain as existential reminders of the positivist scientific tradition. For fifty years, discussions in this area have led to various approaches, encompassing debates about prevailing scientific concepts in the contemporary landscape.

Populism stands as an example of the dispute about conceptualisation remaining paramount. Scholars often criticise populism for being stretched (Hunger – Paxton 2021), insufficiently and unclearly defined (Canovan 1981; Rovira Kaltwasser et al. 2019; Weyland 2001), or even problematic due to its unsystematic use (van Kessel 2014). These definitional concerns refer to the potential incoherence in theoretical and empirical utility. There are two ways to mitigate issues with the conceptualisation of populism. The first approach aligns with the call for a comprehensive general theory of populism (Pappas 2016) and involves reconceptualising and discovering the dominant paradigm. Despite

the current overwhelming set of definitions, Cas Mudde's (2004) ideological explanation is the most widely recognised in the community (Hunger & Paxton 2021). The second approach involves descending the ladder of abstraction to define the features of populism with adjectives. This attitude targets more specific issues and assesses the interrelationships among concurrent terms at the same level of abstraction to ensure comparability and external differentiation (Gerring 2017; Sartori 1991).

An eminent part of analysing populism at the lower level of abstraction concerns the terminology reflecting the left-right economic continuum (Mouffe 2018; Mudde 2004). While the concept of right-wing populism emerged from the systematic rise of the radical and extreme right factions and their mainstreaming (Rydgren 2005), left-wing populism mainly involved a new wave of movements asserting themselves after the Great Recession (Clements et al. 2018; Mouffe 2018). Nevertheless, the success of breakthrough populist actors who do not neatly fit within the left-right spectrum means that new considerations are needed for conceptualising subtypes. This adds categories like 'technocratic' or 'valence populism', which have a broader scope beyond positionality. For the analysis, I have selected the concept of valence populism due to its double-track interdisciplinary establishment, which brings a new perspective to the understanding of these political phenomena.

Valence populism sits at the medium level of abstraction (Sartori, 1975) and aligns with the empirical concept of valence politics presented by Curini (2018). In contrast to positional politics, which relies on the notion that political decisions are primarily measurable through left-right ideological ideas, valence politics centres on post-ideological characteristics defined by pursuing widely shared political values, such as transparency and anti-corruption narratives. The valence populism concept introduced by Zulianello (2020) occupies the same hierarchical position as valence politics in the conceptual area. Empirical cases of parties labeled 'valence populists', such as MS5 in Italy, ANO 2011 in Czechia or OL'aNO in Slovakia, are the parties that reject the dominance of the left-right scale and address the topics from a new angle. However, these empirical cases serve for other conceptualisations of populism subtypes as well (Goertz 2006), leading to definitional and conceptual overlap.

At this juncture, it is crucial to address the potential usefulness of valence populism, especially as it competes with other subtypes, notably technocratic and centrist populism. This raises important questions about the logic behind the emergence of this subtype and the specific niche it occupies in populism studies. Zulianello (2020), building on the framework proposed by Roberts (2018), acknowledges that all populist actors have their valence dimension, which serves as a tool for opposing traditional political approaches, often aligned with the defence of liberal democracy and conventional governance. Besides, Zulianello distinguishes valence populism as a separate subtype, dis-

connected from the left-right ideological spectrum. In left-wing and right-wing populism, the valence dimension is closely tied to a host ideology (Zulianello 2020). Zulianello argues that the introduction of this new subtype is necessary to reflect cases where there is no direct relationship with any traditional ideology, mainly related with the left-wing or the right-wing attitudes. In such instances, valence populism stands independently at the space, unanchored by traditional ideological frameworks (Zulianello 2020).

In Zulianello (2020), Zulianello and Larsen (2021), as well as other empirical applications, valence populism is defined inductively. The concept asserts itself in opposition not only to left-wing and right-wing populism but also to other populist subtypes. Hence, we must consider three key dimensions: 1) a definition establishing clear conceptual boundaries, 2) cohesion and differentiation ensuring the concept maintains internal coherence while standing apart from competing concepts and 3) empirical applicability assessing how well the concept can be applied in the empirical world, especially to the cases of the political parties.

## The process of the valence populism conceptualisation

Like many contemporary concepts used in political science, valence populism has its roots in the natural science. Its application in political science can be traced to the moment when the terms ‘valence’ and ‘populism’ completely converged and began to be used as a joint phrase. The term ‘populism’ was first defined by the *Etymology Dictionary*, which described it as ‘political doctrines and principles of the Populist Party’ (Populism – OED n.d.). Early classical works on populism (Canovan 1981) focused primarily on movements in America and Russia. However, over time, the empirical scope of populism research expanded significantly. This broadening of populism’s empirical reach led to new conceptual questions, particularly regarding whether populism should be viewed solely as an empirical label for certain movements or if it carries theoretical significance or aligns with specific ideologies or modes of thinking.

In contrast to the populism, the concept of ‘valence’ emerged with a relatively lower degree of specificity and empirical clarity. The *Etymology Dictionary* denotes it as a noun meaning ‘extract’ or ‘preparation’, with its origin in the Latin word ‘Valentia’, which originally meant ‘to be strong’ (Valence – OED n.d.). The political use of the term can be traced back to the 1960s, when Stokes (1963) introduced it into the empirical context of US politics. Stokes’ research began with an examination of political corruption in America, asserting that the two dominant American political parties held nearly indistinguishable positions, leading to their perceived interchangeability (Stokes 1963). Stokes instrumentalised the division between ‘positional’ and ‘valence’ political issues, where, in the former, parties remained anchored to their core positions, while

in the latter, their stances tended to moderate, often resulting in ‘centrist-first’ shared functions. A few decades later, Curini (2018) revisited the concept of valence and clarified which issues are explicitly valence-based, with corruption taking a central position. His work, along with Zulianello’s (2020) interpretation, emphasised that the role of valence populism lies in advancing valence issues – such as corruption, competence and governance – through populist strategies. Crucially, valence populism operates without a direct affiliation to any specific host ideology, positioning itself as ‘clear’ or ideologically neutral. This enables populist actors to mobilise support based on shared concerns about governance, rather than through traditional left-right ideological frameworks.

### ***Definitions and empirical applications***

Zulianello (2020) introduced the valence populism as a new subtype of populism along with the compilation of a dataset on European political parties by Zulianello and Larsen (2021). Zulianello (2020) characterised valence populism as primarily centred on non-positional issues, such as combating corruption, promoting transparency and advocating for democratic reforms, all while utilising populist, anti-establishment rhetoric. This approach links his understanding of populism with earlier definitions of valence by Roberts and Curini. Zulianello further took steps to differentiate valence populism from other subtypes, while also acknowledging its similarity to Stanley’s concept of centrist populism (Stanley 2017). By emphasising these non-positional, broadly appealing issues, valence populism stands apart from more ideologically anchored forms of populism, focusing instead on competence and governance. Nonetheless, as argued above, valence populism is not directly associated with the centrist political position; the shared characteristic is merely the absence of positionality – the ‘non-left-right’ character. Concepts should not inevitably overlap, and the centrist position depicts the fixed stance of a political strategy, whereas valence populism approximates a purer form and signifies its adaptable and dynamic nature.

Valence populism represents an empirical concept with inductive foundations grounded in existing political parties that emphasise specific topics in their communication. However, this attribute tends to pose problems with proper case selection. For instance, Huber et al. (2021) recommend applying the concept in cases where direct positioning on the left-right scale is absent. They present some left-wing and right-wing actors as valence populists and select parties for an empirical analysis, using the term ‘left- and right-wing valence populist parties’. In this way they classify Austrian FPÖ, Polish PiS, Czech ANO 2011 or Italian M5S. This application does not correspond strictly to Zulianello and Larsen’s umbrella dataset and contributes to further conceptual stretching.



Empirically, the concept has a twofold function. First, it operates as a full-fledged concept that can be applied, particularly in the case of political parties that promote a strong and visible anti-corruption agenda, which often becomes a central feature of their political messaging. Zulianello and Larsen’s (2021) original dataset provides a foundational framework for identifying whether such parties qualify as valence populist or not. This classification is also followed by other scholars, such as Dragoman (2021), who applied the concept to the Union Party in Romania because it avoids positional political problems in its communication and emphasises non-positional policies such as anti-corruption, transparency, democratic reform and moral integrity.

However, the second approach to empirically using valence populism is less clearly targeted and is observed through cases where valence populism is treated as one of several possible analytical frameworks rather than a direct and exclusive route from conceptualisation to empirical application. For instance, Perottino and Guasti (2020) draw connections between valence issues and the populist position of Emmanuel Macron in France. While they point out the importance of valence issues in Macron’s appeal, they ultimately align his political approach more closely with the technocracy, as it better reflects his governance style rather than valence concerns. Similarly, Angelucci and Vittori (2022) examine the case of the Italian M5S and claim that its appeal is rooted in valence issues and anti-corruption campaigns. Hence, they see the valence-populism unity as valuable but also work with other concepts for covering the broader portfolio of the subtypes.

*Table 1* presents the definitions of valence populism used in the present study. The table highlights the four most influential purposes, constituting a decisive component of the conceptualisation of this phenomenon.

**Table 1: An overview of valence populism definitions**

Author	Year	Definition
Roberts	2018	'Valence types of competition do not stake out distinct issue stands, but rather contest the ability of a political establishment to achieve widely-shared social and political goals.'
Zulianello	2019	'(Valence populist) parties that predominantly, if not exclusively, compete by focusing on non-positional issues such as the fight against corruption, increased transparency, democratic reform, and moral integrity while emphasizing anti-establishment motives.'
Dragoman	2020	'(Valence populists), namely the propensity of the party to avoid a positional character and predominantly compete by focusing on non-positional issues, for example, anti-corruption, increasing transparency, democratic reform, or moral integrity, while emphasizing anti-establishment motives.'
Angelucci & Vittori	2022	'Valence issues are anti-establishment appeals and anti-corruption campaigns.'

Source: Author

## Methodology

The intricacies of the concepts in social science call for in-depth analyses to assess their validity (Gerring 1999) and utility (Botes 2002). Qualitative research, which delves into the concepts' internal structures, is guided mainly by proposals provided by Giovanni Sartori's work. Sartori identified stretching as the most significant challenge to a concept's validity (Sartori 1970; 1975; 2009), which occurs when a domain and extension are improperly expanded. It appears that the numerous definitions of populism in this field have fallen into this trap. Over the last four decades, there emerged a community of Sartori's followers in social sciences, with John Gerring being recognised as a main representative of this methodological current (Collier & Gerring 2009; Lane 2016).

While the link between Sartori and Gerring is commonly viewed as aligned, I contend that subtle but significant differences between the methodological approaches of these two authors cast doubt on this conclusion. For Sartori (1975), conceptual taxonomies stand out for their indispensability in reducing social reality and play a crucial role in reflecting the hierarchical structure of concepts. He acknowledges that their internal hierarchy depends strictly on their context, and their validity is changeable across circumstances. In contrast, Gerring (1999) defends the concepts' independence from time constraints. The authors also differ in their interpretation of paths leading to concept formation. Sartori embraces a 'definitional' approach, extracting all relevant features. Gerring, on the other hand, accepts the formation of concepts through the notion of 'family resemblance' (Gerring 1999), which is essential for other scholars as well (Goertz 2006; Nyström 2005). This aspect is conspicuously absent in Sartori's work.

## *Operationalisation and data*

The necessary condition for an in-depth analysis of a scientific concept is the operationalisation of criteria that researchers consider crucial for its validity. The requirements for theoretically and empirically valid concepts possess universal parameters, the fulfillment of which advances the scientific discourse. In this case, operationalisation introduces measurable criteria into the empirical realm, which have informative value for the concept's internal validity. It is important to emphasise that I chose a methodological approach with criteria that allow the assessment of using these criteria in a form enabling the assessment of observable characteristics of the concept beyond the confines of its theoretical conceptualisation. This represents a subsequent step in the scientific process when more concepts are connected. Thus, we focus on an intensive examination of scientific sources engaging with the concept, thereby creating a framework within which it is scientifically employed.



Gerring (2017: 116) presents a framework that includes six criteria of valuable concepts that correspond to Sartori's focus on etymology while also introducing operational and empirical dimensions of the concept. This approach assumes that the concept is a holistic scientific phenomenon, where changes in one aspect result in changes in all its elements (Gerring 2017: 116). In this paper, we will address three of these criteria: (1) resonance, (2) domain and (3) differentiation. Criteria (a) fecundity, (b) causal utility and (c) consistency have been excluded from the analysis because (a) is relatively broadly defined and implies the need to apply the concept in theory-building, (b) poses challenges in defining analytical relations and causalities and (c) requires systematic qualitative work with all the cited articles and its internal character inherently correlating with (2) domain. Since we argue that a thorough assessment of the domain in a broader context addresses any potential problems arising from inconsistent use of the concept, the consistency criterion would only be during the analysis of subsequent theory validation. Gerring (2017: 30) himself argues that concepts serve causal and descriptive functions, justifying the exclusion of these criteria.

The operationalisation of (1) resonance is related to the amount of within-field published works that engage with the valence populism involving descriptive statistics; (2) domain pertains to the virtual space around the concept. With a concept established on an interdisciplinary basis, it provides an outcome assessing conditional interdisciplinarity. Finally, criterion (3), differentiation, introduces a comparative perspective when analysing neighbouring concepts and explains their differences and similarities.

For the empirical test of the set of criteria, we have added data to the dataset, which includes the article written by Mattia Zulianello in 2020, which, for the first time, systematically works with valence populism as a central analytical concept. Empirical data stems from the Google Scholar database<sup>1</sup> and involves *Author(s)*, *Title*, *Journal*, *Scientific field*, *Country for analysis* and *Year of publication* variables. Data were gathered from 216 publications.

Table 2 stages of Gerring's criteria for a valuable concept and operationalisation.

Gerring (2012: 114) identifies the fundamental problem in displacing conceptual disputes from the concept to the context, which results in replacing in-depth conceptualisation with empirical applications, which is replaced by empirical applications. The criteria aim to avoid the initial conceptual confusion. This empirical analysis aims to assess whether valence populism meets the conditions of value and utility.

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1 The latest update of the dataset was completed on 31 July 2023.

**Table 2: Gerring's criteria for a valuable concept and criteria's operationalisation**

Criterion	Definition of the criterion	Question	Operationalisation	Variable(s)
<b>Domain</b>	Area and scientific field where the concept is used	How clear and logical is (a) the territorial community and (b) the application on empirical cases?	Identification of the scientific disciplines working with concept, territorial affiliation	Scientific field, Country for analysis (dataset)
<b>Differentiation</b>	Refers to how different they are from other concepts	How distinguishable is a concept from neighbouring concepts? What defines the space of contrasts?	Identification of conceptual borders with (a) neighbouring and (b) similar concepts	Comparative analysis
<b>Resonance</b>	The extent to which (a concept) conforms or clashes with established usage	How faithful is the concept to extant definitions and dominant use?	Identification of the set of works citing the main work	Scientific field, Year of publication, Total number of publications (dataset)

Source: Author. Based on Gerring (2012)

## Domain

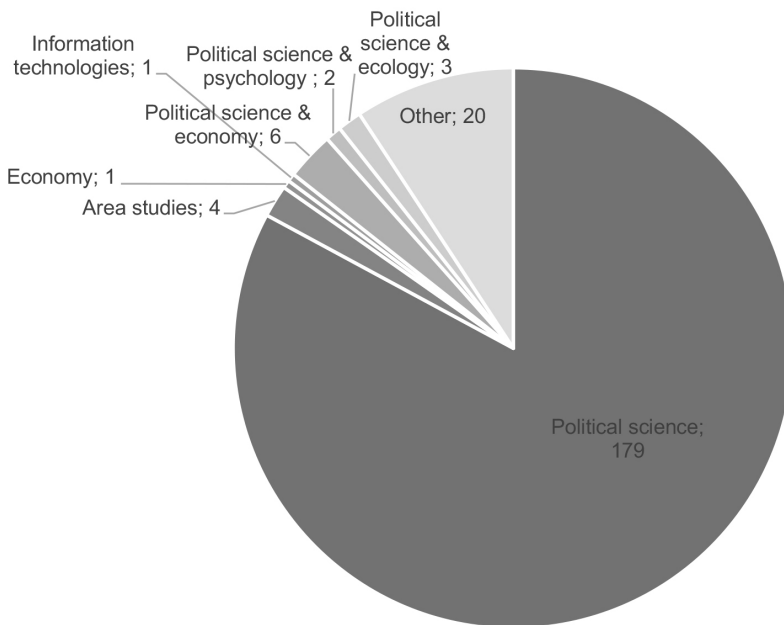
Gerring (2012: 120) comprehensively evaluates the domain through the general utility of the concept. This part of the empirical test includes assessing (a) territorial and (b) functional domains. While (a) concerns the regional focus of debates surrounding the concept, as seen when Stokes (1953) initially concentrated his study on the United States, (b) measures the relevance of the concept for individual scientific fields and their sub-disciplines. Notably, (a) data confirm that case studies based in Italy and Central Europe have significantly impacted the debate, primarily due to the presence of non-left-right breakthrough actors in politics. Data on the most influential works reveal that 141 (65.2%) articles affiliated with European territories, including 36 articles originating from Italy, establish this country as a flagship of the research. The articles published in Italy most often refer to the *de-ideologisation* of politics and the crisis of the traditional left-right continuum. Through an empirical application, they then try to explain new strategies adopted by the (mainly) populist parties operating in the territory. The concept is highly influential in Central Europe, where it is used to generate mid-range theories depicting the recent success of anti-corruption actors.

The evaluation of the (b) functional domain suggests that most papers belong to the pure form of political science (179, 82.8%), while a significant number of

papers are interdisciplinary, and political science is an essential component. In contrast, natural sciences, from which the concept of valence is adopted, occupy a negligible position. It should also be noted that a significant number of papers cite Zulianello’s article, mainly because of the follow-up dataset, which has become a springboard for research by many authors. The disciplinary domain indicates that, with Zulianello’s work, any connection to the natural sciences has completely disappeared and that valence populism can hardly be applied anywhere other than in the social sciences. As for sub-disciplines, I have analysed the connection with political party research, this being the fundamental part of Zulianello’s work. A total of 89 papers (41.5%) use the application in this field, representing less than half of the sample. In terms of sub-disciplinary classification, it is highly significant that valence populism can be applied to describe other units of analysis.

*Figure 1* shows the functional domain of the valence populism concept.

**Figure 1: Functional domain of the valence populism concept**



Source: Author

## Differentiation

Gerring (2012) delimits the concept as two-dimensional, inherently involving a focus on (1) neighbouring and (2) similar concepts. ‘Neighbourhood’ refers to the spatial determination concept situated ‘next to’ the original concept. For

instance, Zulianello (2020) has constructed the categories of left, right and valence populism, although some scholars do not explicitly distinguish valence from the left-wing or right-wing positions (Huber et al. 2021). Nevertheless, Zulianello's approach predominates in this debate. However, nuances regarding the placement of valence populism on the left-right scale raise a pivotal question: should valence populism be positioned alongside the left-right scale or within it? The one-dimensionality of the ideational space should be considered when populism is viewed as promoting a thin-centred ideology, as proposed by Mudde (2004), who proposed a paradigm. These considerations give rise to two approaches for defining neighbouring concepts in this context: (1) the ideational approach, which situates left-wing and right-wing populisms, and (2) a return to valence politics, which can help determine the position of valency.

Direct engagement with the valence populism concept is recommended, as the definition of valence politics inherently assumes the opposite of positional politics, which would require a conceptualisation of the term 'positional populism'. Furthermore, right-wing and left-wing types of populism have been previously defined and are widely conceptualised in the literature (Mouffe 2018; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2013), which situates the valence populism concept with greater precision.

Distinguishing the concept from those with similar or even more precisely defined attributes poses a greater challenge. The context in which scholars commonly use the central term must be examined. Two main concepts are identified in their definitions potentially interchangeable with valence populism: technocratic populism and centrist populism. In both cases, their internal consistency should be assessed. Bustikova and Guasti (2019) employ technocratic populism as a thin ideology rejecting traditional ideologies, prioritising expert political solutions and emphasising technocratic competence. The term has been applied to political parties that highlight the technocratic style of their politics and communication at the expense of other forms, for instance, the ANO 2011 movement in Czechia (Hartikainen 2021) or Macron's party *En Marche!* in France (Perottino & Guasti 2020). The notion of expertise differentiates this term from valence populism, which does not strongly emphasise policymaking characterised by these aspects. Moreover, technocracy tends to represent a more stable phenomenon, defined by clear positions regarding governance and decision-making based on expertise and competence. In contrast, valence populism remains more volatile due to its tendency to align with multiple host ideologies and address a range of broadly relevant political issues. This flexibility allows valence populism to adapt to different political contexts, but it also contributes to its conceptual fluidity, making it less stable than technocracy, which is anchored in the notion of rule by experts and specialised knowledge.

According to Stanley (2017: 185), centrist populism is relevant to the description of the anti-corruption narrative. The populist appeal is moderate and

centrist, owing to the ideological hollowness of these parties (Stanley 2017: 189). This concept attempts to classify the populist parties based on their location on the left-right scale. Unlike valence populism, this concept is regionally anchored. It has been applied in a similar way to the valence populism in the Czech case with the additional adjective ‘entrepreneurial’ (Saxonberg & Heinisch 2022), while earlier it was used to describe Slovak populism (Ucen et al. 2005). Furthermore, Zulianello (2019) acknowledges the similarity between valence and centrist populism. It should be noted that the overlap between these two concepts is more substantial than in the case of technocratic populism because it potentially refers to the questionable issue of left-right scaling. As previously mentioned, Huber et al. (2021) differentiate between these concepts based on the stability of the party position.

*Table 3* defines concepts with similarities to valence populism: technocratic and centrist.

**Table 3: Similar concepts to valence populism**

Concept	Year	Definition
<b>Technocratic populism</b> (Guasti and Butíková)	2019	'A thin ideology rejects the traditional political parties on the left and the right. Instead, it promises political expert solutions that will benefit the ordinary people. They suggest that it strategically uses the appeal of technocratic competence and weaponizes numbers to deliver a populist message.'
<b>Centrist populism</b> (Stanley)	2017	'Parties compete over competence and moral probity claims rather than distinct policy platforms. Here, the "thick ideological" content of populist parties' appeals is minimal or non-existent, to the extent that the parties appear -whether by design or by omission - to be more moderate and centrist.'

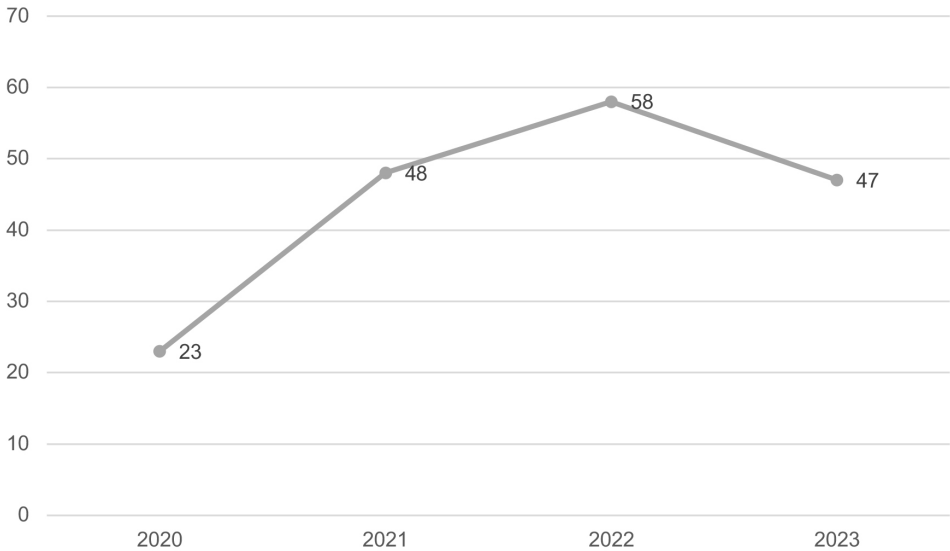
Source: Author

## **Resonance**

Resonance is understood within the scopes of (1) internal or (2) external discipline. Internal discipline refers to the resonance in the social sciences field, identified above as a primary scientific field. Given the direct link between valence populism and political science, the resonance assessment in external disciplines may not be as relevant. To assess resonance within political science, I filter political science (and political science + additional secondary disciplines) data outputs and focus on the years in which the concept most strongly influenced the scientific debate.

*Figure 2* shows the development of resonance in terms of time.

**Figure 2: Resonance of valence populism over time (2020–2023)**



Note: 2023 only until 31 July  
Source: Author

The empirical analysis of valence populism provides that the concept is logically structured but its practical utility may potentially be overwhelmed by additional items. The domain is limited to the field of political science, which has shifted the initial understanding of valency with a conceptual connection with populism in a newly-created arena. Also, it is proven that the tendency to compare subtypes of populism is necessary.

## Conclusion and debate

By applying Sartorian methodological principles, this research conducted a conceptual analysis of valence populism as presented by Zulianello (2020) and his successors. First, the study addressed gaps in the concept's definition, which largely stemmed from its primarily empirical and inductive development. As such, assessing the precise position of valence populism within the broader subtypes of populism became necessary. Importantly, no significant troubles were identified regarding the coherence or internal capacity. However, a revision of the empirical applications of valence populism was required. Key questions arose concerning the comparability of the concept, particularly in relation to other similar counterparts that explain the same political parties as their empirical cases. Therefore, the empirical applications were divided into two categories: one where valence populism operates as the primary explanatory concept, and another where it competes with other concepts for relevance. The



need to compare valence populism with its conceptual neighbours, especially centrist and technocratic populism, revealed significant overlaps. Despite these intersections, valence populism maintains the potential to defend its own place within the taxonomy of populism subtypes. Its distinctiveness lies in its combination of valence, which focuses on non-positional issues like anti-corruption and governance, and populism, both of which are independently defined and reflective of broader political phenomena. In conclusion, valence populism proves to be a useful and valuable concept in its own right. However, its empirical applications must be carefully delineated, as there is an inherent risk of conceptual stretching if not precisely applied, similar to other populism subtypes. Thanks to recent empirical cases involving political parties that build their campaigns on anti-corruption narratives or ambiguous political positions, valence populism remains valid and relevant within ongoing discussions about the subtypes of populism.

Taking a broader perspective, this paper advocates a more comprehensive analysis of concepts through the use of adjectives, as this approach can unearth underlying issues and their root concepts. In the context of populism, the article identifies a crucial gap that fosters conceptual confusion, particularly at lower levels of abstraction. The term 'populism' itself is quite elastic, with consequent impacts on its various subtypes.

This paper also underscores a connection between the methodological principles of Giovanni Sartori and John Gerring. Although Gerring is often regarded as the torchbearer of the Sartorian tradition in qualitative methods within political science, the article discerns fundamental differences in their respective approaches. Sartori's focus leans towards a more linguistic treatment of concepts, primarily aimed at enhancing terminology. Hence, Sartori places greater emphasis on taxonomies as the primary intrinsic features of 'complete' concepts. By contrast, Gerring's approach reflects a more empirical-based assessment of concepts, considering conceptual utility and the limits of the concept's application. Gerring also presents a complex array of potential principles, whereas Sartori acknowledges only one dimension.

This analysis is limited by its one-dimensional character as it scrutinises the defined concept as a singular entity rather than within the context of theory-building. The aim of this analysis was not to evaluate the potential for causal relationships, correlations or other intricate phenomena that demand in-depth qualitative exploration. Instead, the article argues that the concept should first undergo thorough conceptualisation, encompassing the historical root and subsequent development. The evaluation of the concept's applications and implementations should follow as the next step. In this respect, from a conceptualisation standpoint, valence populism emerges as a valuable and applicable concept, effectively addressing the typical issues within its domain.

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