

# Populism and the 2022 Australian Election

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*The campaigns and the final outcome of the Australian federal election, which took place on 21 May 2022, furnish a unique insight into the essentially right-wing nature of populism. The political phenomenon of populism can be defined as a construction of 'elites' based on identity, these being middle class and educated, as 'the enemy', while actual elites of wealth become the main policy beneficiaries. This has been termed a 'bait and switch' strategy. Before the election campaign, the Coalition had absorbed many aspects of populism, and populism was also being exploited to a very large degree by the One Nation Party, and by the United Australia Party. In addition, a noisy fringe of 'anti-vaxxers' were adopting the populist stance. Populism emerged frequently in the campaign, for instance in the transphobic rhetoric of candidate for Warringah Katherine Deves, the media output of Sky News, the publicity stunts of Prime Minister Morrison, and perhaps most persistently, in the propaganda of Clive Palmer and Craig Kelly from the UAP. However, despite all of this, the result of the election was a poor showing for the ONP and UAP, a victory of 'teal' independents in Liberal seats, and the Coalition's loss of 19 seats — a disaster for the Morrison approach. In speculating about the future of populism in Australia, this paper seeks to explore the implications of these results. Such speculation includes the possible replacement of traditional media by social media, and the retreat of the middle-class populist core to a more far-right ideological positioning.*

KEY WORDS: Populism; bait-and-switch strategy; class; culture wars

## Introduction

There is a vast recent literature on the subject of political populism, and it is not necessary to review it comprehensively for our purposes here. Most writers refer to the original 'zeitgeist' article by Cas Mudde, published in *Government and Opposition* in 2004. While on the whole a perceptive and timely discussion of populism, this article tended to steer away from an ideological understanding of the phenomenon, partly dismissing it as a futile reaction to the inevitable rise of free-market policies (Mudde 2004: 555). The definition of populism by Mudde is useful, as it avoids reductionist arguments equating populism with 'common sense' and 'gut feeling' rhetoric, and also with vote buying via pork barrelling, and correctly zooms in on the central role of the symbolism of elites versus masses (Mudde 2004: 543). Another important contemporary writer who has noticed this is the brilliant U.S. political and cultural commentator Thomas Frank. In his 2006 book, *What's the Matter With America?*, Frank charts the rise of populism in the Republican Party from the 1994 mid-term elections to the 2004 Presidential election. By the 2004 campaign, the nature of the phenomenon had become crystal clear, and it was founded on fear and hatred of 'tyrannical liberal snobs' on the part of the working class, and others of the middle class who like to identify with the working class (Frank 2006: 242, 254). This central trope of anti-

elite emotion superficially resembles the more colourful segments of class politics, and the resemblance is not missed by Frank. He frequently makes wry observations about this parallel, such as this one:

The angry workers, mighty in their numbers, are marching irresistibly against the arrogant. They are shaking their fists at the sons of privilege. ... They are massing at the gates ... hoisting the black flag, and while the millionaires tremble in their mansions they are bellowing out their terrifying demands. "We are here" they scream "to cut your taxes" (Frank 2006: 109).

The second fundamental characteristic of populism is that in addition to using a highly emotive binary of elites and downtrodden ordinary folk, it adopts policies which benefit the rich.

This so-called 'bait and switch' strategy, which entices resentful voters with lurid images of haughty educated upper-middle-class professionals and celebrities, and their refined social ideals, then swipes out the policy prescriptions implied by a working-class agenda, in order to substitute upwardly redistributive economic

agendas, has worked well in some elections. As Frank attests, populism transformed the Kansas Republican Party in the 1990s, with a radical agenda of anti-abortion, pro-gun, and pro-Bible rhetoric, linked to extreme cuts in government services, and correspondingly reduced taxation of economic elites. In the 2004 national elections in the U.S., a similar surge of populism gave 'W.' {Bush} a coveted second term and elected numerous hard right congresspersons (Frank 2006: 253). Another of Frank's books, *Pity the Billionaire*, charts the rise of the Tea Party movement in 2010. Following the greatest financial collapse since the 1930s Depression, this movement blamed the imagined 'elites' for all that was wrong in America, and promoted the austerity cause. A protest that was started by Chicago futures traders, the Tea Party pretended to be both ultra-patriotic and working class, while promoting more or less libertarian economic positions (Frank 2012: 41). In reality, there is no such thing as left populism. Those writers who see populism as divided into left and right variants arguably overlook the possibility that appeals to the masses against elites, when combined with leftist policies of redistribution and social justice, are not populist; they are socialist (Moore 2017). The real key to appreciating populist politics, is not merely the appeal to the masses against confected 'elites', but the use of such outrage to advance elite economic agendas. It is not the 'bait' as much as the 'switch', which determines the essentially right-wing nature of populism, in this account. The 'left' populist, in this view, is either somebody unwilling to act upon their stated 'left' platform, or is in reality a 'right' figure posing as the proverbial wolf in sheep's clothing.

### **Right-wing background to populism**

Before the 2022 federal election campaign, populism had enjoyed a long and colourful history in Australian political life (Moore 2019: 209-211). The election of Pauline Hanson for the lower house seat of Oxley in 1996, was the outcome of a burst of intense populism. As has been pointed out by Lynch and Reavell (1997: 35), there had been some trenchant criticism of so-called 'political correctness' before the 1996 elections, and the bungled attempts to de-select Hanson just before the vote helped to make her a lightning rod for the disaffected. Her maiden speech in the House of Representatives in 1996 was front-page news across the country, and it sparked a furious debate which polarised opinion on a number of issues, especially race relations (Marr 2017: 11). The gentrification of the political left had followed a similar trajectory in both the U.S. and Australia, and in both countries populists took maximum advantage of this. The Hansonism of the late 1990s, which especially reacted against non-European immigration and the land claims of First Nations people, revolved around a binary of virtuous rural and outer suburban conservatives, versus

inner-city leftist 'elites' (Coghlan 2019: 185). These centre-left 'activists' were previously tolerated by the capitalist establishment, because their brand of political change involved little or no cost for the financial and business leviathans, which had been growing rapidly since the 1970s and 1980s. Noisy support for mild environment protections, limited First Nations rights, liberal feminism, LGBTI+ rights, and similar modest reforms, were very easy for the establishment to live with, as they did not much affect profits (Moore 2019: 207). They also had the advantage of drawing attention away from the defects of wage restraint, deregulation, privatisation, and the so-called free market. But rapid changes in the same areas of reform upset social conservatives, and made it easy for canny politicians and commentators to fan the flames of populism (Walter 2010: 306-307).

With the sole exception of her opposition to privatisation of Telstra, the populism espoused by Pauline Hanson in the late 1990s had involved no actual policies that might favour the 'virtuous' masses, to which the ideology brazenly appealed. The only tax reform which Hanson campaigned for was a 2% 'Easytax', which would have been extremely regressive, and would have resulted in huge retrenchments of government-funded services and programs (Kingston 1999: 12-14). Like Hanson, the wealthy business owner Clive Palmer was a former member of the Liberal-National Party (LNP) in Queensland. Palmer had resigned from the LNP in late 2012 (Stephens 2014), in order to form his own populist party, named the Palmer United Party (PUP), but later reformed as the United Australia Party (UAP). In the 2013 elections, Palmer won a Queensland lower house seat by the narrowest of margins, and three of his PUP Senate candidates, Glenn Lazarus, Jacqui Lambie, and Dio Wang, were successful (Holmes 2014). Like so many populist leaders, Palmer did not play well with others, and one by one all three of his senators left the PUP. Populism had been in retreat in Australia since the early 2000s, but it made a comeback in the years immediately following the Global Financial Crisis of 2008, in much the same manner as populism in the U.S., which had re-emerged under the banner of the Tea Party (Moore 2019: 203). In the 2016 elections, Pauline Hanson won a Senate seat in Queensland, returning to the federal parliament with a similar populist agenda to the one which had worked so well for her in the late 1990s, except that Islam had replaced Asia as the 'enemy' (Crosby 2019: 119-121). A few months later, Donald Trump unexpectedly won the U.S. presidential election, and this raised the profile of populism globally. Then, in the 2019 Australian general elections, Palmer and his re-branded UAP used a \$60 million populist advertising extravaganza to help secure a narrow victory for the LNP Coalition (Muller 2020). Even though Palmer won no seats in either chamber, his money was wisely invested, as the Coalition, still in

government, was highly motivated to enhance his fossil-fuel mining returns.

In view of the foregoing history of recent populist politics in Australia, it is not difficult to understand that many of the players in the 2022 general election campaign would find populism highly tempting. As Thomas Frank (2006: 10) says, it has been 'culture war that gets the goods' in many of these contemporary electoral contests. Our question here is, whether it actually worked in May of 2022. There were at least two forms of culture war present within the populism of the campaign, first the regular type, and secondly, a new 'COVID-19 pandemic' type of populism. While the LNP Coalition politicians did explore populist themes of the first familiar type to a certain extent, it was Palmer's UAP which was at the forefront in using both variants of populist rhetoric during the six-week campaign. Aside from the political protagonists themselves, there were also some outspoken celebrities and media personalities who aired these themes, and it could never be said that populism had been stifled, or muted, in the discourses of the 2022 elections.

When Scott Morrison had taken over the leadership of the Coalition, and simultaneously of the country, in August 2018, he embraced populism tightly, possibly being encouraged to do so by the apparent success of Donald Trump in the U.S., and of Boris Johnson in the U.K. Like John Howard before him, Morrison pursued a neoliberal set of economic and fiscal policies, and deep cuts to government services, behind his populist façade. He combined these neoliberal policies with a public image, which was tightly engineered around presenting the manufactured persona of a suburban male stereotype. When scandals involving the treatment of women engulfed the Coalition in the year before the poll, this male stereotype proved to be a considerable liability (Withers 2022). Nowhere was Morrison's desire to craft a relatable public image more in evidence than in his numerous staged appearances enacting 'regular' workforce roles. Both before and during the election campaign, the prime minister paraded himself before the TV cameras, pretending to be a chef, a hairdresser, a pilot, a welder, a truck driver, and anything involving the use of high visibility vests and safety helmets. This culminated in a cringe-worthy domestic dinner table set-up, where Morrison serenaded the cameras with a ukulele, playing the role of the Australian everyman a little too obviously with his 'faux larrikinism' (Bongiorno 2021). His type of folksy appeal was not much more than this, however, as he was tied to government responsibilities in COVID-19 pandemic management, and had also been obliged to make certain concessions on climate policy, both of which barred him from going 'full populist'. No such impediments to full and unabashed populism existed for the minor parties and independents in the campaign, however.

## The minor parties and independents

The independents, and minor party personalities, who resorted to populism, often in its more extreme forms, included George Christensen, Pauline Hanson, Bob Katter, and especially Craig Kelly as the nominal leader of the Palmer-backed UAP. In the case of Kelly, his populist campaign owed a great deal to the COVID-19 response, and to Donald Trump's outbursts, and we shall return to this aspect shortly, but first there is the other type of populism to consider. In the 2016 elections, Hanson had secured a Senate seat for Queensland by repudiating First Nations recognition, by attacking Australian Muslims, and by rejecting the 'elitism' of the U.N. and international law. However, as Crosby (2019: 131-133) has pointed out, Hanson paid less attention to policies, and more to her symbolic presence as the known champion of the allegedly dispossessed and ignored common person. Six years later, Hanson was using similar strategies, but also leveraging her record as a power broker in the Senate, and her trenchant opposition to the COVID-19 response. She was especially critical of the Greens, and was adamant that only she stood in the way of their gaining the balance of power in the federal upper house (Hanson 2022). The One Nation position on climate change has been markedly denialist, and they have also sought to restrict access to voting by using updated types of ID card, both of which are policy positions associated with U.S. populism. The party had also recruited George Christensen, who had previously been the member for the lower house seat of Dawson, before he unexpectedly quit the National Party because he thought it was not strong enough in its denial of climate change, and also for allowing COVID-19 restrictions (Tamer 2022).

In the lower house seat of Kennedy, Bob Katter was running again, as he had done successfully since 1993. Always colourful and outspoken, Katter had been in the public spotlight for briefly associating himself, and his Katter's Australian Party, with Fraser Anning, a white supremacist. For a few months in 2018, Anning had been a member of the KAP, after quitting Pauline Hanson's One Nation as a Senator, before his extremist views resulted in expulsion. Representing an outback Queensland seat, Bob Katter has cultivated a 'maverick' image, and favoured certain causes, notably the relaxation of gun ownership laws. He has frequently made inflammatory statements opposing the environment movement, and the activities of foreign-owned multinational corporations, and he advocated for the Australian automobile industry when it was being allowed to wither and die. In the 2022 federal campaign, Katter stuck to this formula, and won the seat comfortably again, with virtually no change from the 2019 result. His image and his politics both appear to have very strong appeal in the many rural and isolated areas which make up this vast electorate of Kennedy, where it is not to be expected that there would be any sympathy

for positions which can be portrayed as urban and elitist (Moffitt 2022). The strident nationalist flavour of Katter's rhetoric also makes him an ideal populist candidate for this particular electorate, where insecurities about the Near North no doubt run deep.

There were numerous fringe independents and micro-parties which took part in the election campaign, and which specialised in populist messaging, but for our purposes we can focus on Palmer's unique United Australia Party (UAP). The UAP was conspicuous for the large amount of money spent on advertising, including television prime-time spot ads, and large yellow billboards, replicating the UAP high spending strategy from the 2019 elections. In fact, the Party exceeded its 2019 level of expenditure, with somewhere between \$70 million and \$100 million being poured into the advertising blitz (Elias 2022). The UAP advertising tended to attack the major parties as being intrinsically out of touch with an imagined mainstream, but it also introduced several policies, including a federal tax on iron ore exports, a ban on superannuation investments in offshore shares, and a poorly defined policy to cap home interest rates at 3%. When he gave a speech at the National Press Club in early April 2022, Palmer accused the government of economic recklessness for the deficit, and aired the UAP superannuation policy, but spent most of his time on COVID-19 related matters. This tied in with the UAP one-word slogan for the 2022 campaign, FREEDOM, which was branded on all their advertising images. In the speech Palmer concentrated on the pandemic response measures, notably the lockdowns and the vaccine mandates, as being both ineffective and repressive (Thomas et al. 2022). He was especially critical of the lockdowns which had been imposed in the State of Victoria. Palmer also spent time praising the drug hydroxychloroquine, which he claimed was a treatment for the virus, and which was being suppressed by elites, in league with shadowy representatives of Big Pharma. This was a position borrowed directly from Donald Trump in the U.S.

The supposed leader of the UAP in the 2022 elections was Craig Kelly, the member for the lower house seat of Hughes. Like other examples of populist politicians in Australia, Kelly had previously been a Liberal Party right winger, whose pungent brand of politics saw him nearly toppled from preselection in late 2018, when he only retained his Liberal endorsement thanks to an intervention by his long-term friend, Prime Minister Morrison. He was particularly outspoken in 2018 on the subject of climate change denialism, and support for Australian coal mining. During the pandemic, Kelly augmented his pro-coal rhetoric, with severe criticism of lockdowns, vaccines, and vaccine mandates. In early 2021 Kelly had even advocated the use of the veterinary product ivermectin as a cure for the COVID-19 virus, on the basis of no medical

evidence whatever (Shepherd 2021). This ended in his decision to resign from the Liberal Party in early 2021 and sit as an independent. Palmer recruited Kelly to the UAP in August 2021, making him the parliamentary leader of the UAP while still guaranteeing supply to the government, as Kelly had previously promised. During the 2022 campaign, Kelly became especially unpopular due to his use of a technique involving unsolicited random SMS text messaging to mobile phones (Orr 2022). Much of this messaging was aimed at vaccines and vaccine mandates. Before the campaign, Kelly had been positioning himself as leader of the anti-lockdown and anti-mandate fringe movement, and he attempted to capitalise on this in the campaign itself. At the end of 2021, when anti-lockdown protesting was at its height, Kelly spoke at a number of gatherings, assuming a leadership role (Gorrey 2021), and there is no doubt that he was attempting to leverage this type of populism in his 2022 campaign strategy.

The eruption of a populist movement opposed to COVID-19 lockdowns, vaccines, mask wearing, and vaccine mandates, was a trans-national phenomenon. Libertarian, far right, and populist figures in many places around the world, railed against governments which were using their legitimate sovereign competencies, to control the public health emergency. In September 2021 the delta variant of COVID-19 took off in some parts of Australia, notably Victoria, and one Victorian State government response was to mandate at least one vaccination for workers employed on large building sites, as these had been identified as places of likely disease transmission. On 20 September 2021, there was an anti-vaccine protest at the Melbourne offices of the CFMEU, the construction industry trade union, where union organisers were violently attacked, and the building also was damaged (Feik 2021). After this highly publicised event, the Australian anti-lockdown and anti-vaccine fringe became more active and organised. This in turn prompted a reaction against such people, as seriously risking public health due to their selfish personal beliefs, and they became known as 'cookers'. This term of political ridicule appropriates an Australian slang term for a chronic drug user, which seems to relate to the trend for some of the protesters to affect an unkempt working-class appearance, but in going too far, to seem more like unhoused 'ice' addicts (Anon. 2022). Assuming this to be the case, it would fit the populist method of trying to attract those who identify as disenfranchised workers, to join in an essentially right wing or libertarian movement of the middle class as supporters. It would be the 'bait' in the 'bait and switch'.

### **Concluding remarks**

Subsequent media attention on the 'cookers' added to the existing pressure on State and Commonwealth

governments, to back away from measures to prevent COVID-19 from entering communities. Australia has an unusually concentrated media ownership and control, compared with other industrialised countries, and this encouraged criticism of certain governments, especially the Andrews ALP government of Victoria. The Sky News network, in particular, which has been closely modelled on Fox News in the U.S., featured programming which constantly lambasted the so-called 'woke' liberal left, and especially its 'elite' character, and supported anti-mandate protests (Loewenstein 2022). By the time of the 2022 elections, the bias of the mainstream media itself had become part of the political debate, especially following the woes of the Liberal Party opposition in both Western Australia and Victoria, which called into question the continuing relevance of media groups such as Sky News. On social media platforms, especially Twitter, influencers such as 'PRGuy17' were tearing the mainstream media to shreds, while video blog sites such as 'Friendlyjodies' provided a superior source of investigative journalism (Hall 2022). Mainstream media attention was intense in February 2022, when a few thousand 'anti-mandate' protesters were in Canberra. Despite the relative lack of interest in the cause of the protesters among the Australian population as a whole, Prime Minister Morrison made a point of supporting their right to protest, and took pains to point out that the mandates had only been enacted by State governments. The mainstream media played up the protest and Morrison's statements, while most people seemed to regard the whole affair as a bit of a joke (Wallace 2022). The social media response to the antics of the cooks in Canberra was scathing.

By the time of the 2022 election campaign, during which many voters had already recorded their verdict well before polling day, COVID-19 issues were no longer as central as they had once been. Life had moved on for many Australians. The prospect of conflict with China, Australia's number one trading partner, and the Special Military Operation by Russia in the disputed parts of Ukraine, were both matters of great concern. Even more pressing was the aftermath of unprecedented weather events and catastrophic floods, clearly signs of the rapidly worsening climate emergency (Biddle and Jackman 2022: 7). During the campaign, memories of the so-called 'Black Summer' 2019-2020 bushfires, and Prime Minister Morrison's poor response to this earlier climate disaster, featured prominently on social media. The populist theme of climate denialism, which was previously such a feature of the rhetoric of Pauline Hanson's One Nation and the UAP, had now become an albatross around the neck of these politicians in the eyes of many potential supporters. Images of rural working class 'battlers' wiped out by floods, or earlier images of such people refusing to shake hands with Prime Minister Morrison after the bushfires, undercut the trope of urban climate change activists

being the enemy of the virtuous rural workers. This had been in play during the 2019 election campaign, when Greens Party supporters staged an ill-considered 'tour' of rural Queensland, but there was no repetition in 2022. Last-minute stunts, such as the attempt by Morrison to wedge his opponents on gender politics, via support of LNP candidate Katherine Deves, and even an announced refugee boat arrival on polling day itself, were of no avail.

The final outcome of the 2022 elections provides observers of Australian politics with much food for thought, especially regarding the trends within populism (Beaumont 2022). The Australian Labor Party won the election, and Anthony Albanese became the new prime minister. The defeated LNP did not dispute the election count, and their downcast supporters did not storm Parliament House in anger. In Queensland, Pauline Hanson, the original 1996 populist, was re-elected to the Senate, but only by the narrowest of margins, and none of the other populist politicians did well. In the seat of Hughes, Craig Kelly won barely seven per cent of the votes, and after preferences were distributed, it was an easy win for the preselected Liberal Party candidate. George Christensen also bowed out of politics, although Bob Katter retained his unique seat. The UAP did just manage to secure a single Senate seat, in Western Australia, although the Party has subsequently become deregistered. While Labor won an absolute majority of Lower House seats, with eight seats taken from the government, the LNP Coalition lost another ten seats, mostly to the Greens Party and so-called 'teal' independent candidates (Beaumont 2022). Strategic and tactical voting in specific lower house seats meant that the primary ALP vote in total was unusually low, and this may have misled some observers into thinking that there was a large swing against both of the major parties. The reduced ALP primary vote may still be a problem, because it remains unclear how much of it was due to strategic and tactical voting. The Greens and teal candidates who won, and others such as the successful Senate candidate for the Capital Territory, David Pocock, were popular because of their strong commitment on climate change, and on greenhouse gas reduction strategies (Biddle and Jackman 2022: 7-8). While Labor was not as strong on climate, they did promise to 'end the climate wars' and to actively encourage renewables, at a time of extreme events such as floods, and the earlier fires.

The key strategy of all populists, which involves pitting the virtuous 'ordinary folks' against the educated urban 'elites', clearly ran out of steam in the Australian 2022 elections. The results for the flagship populists, PHON and the UAP, were disappointing. The 'populist-lite' stance of Morrison, and Coalition candidates in general, did nothing to save them from a devastating defeat at the polls. After nine years and three prime ministers, the Coalition appeared to be past its 'use by' date, and the ALP seemed to be united

and confident under Albanese. Media support for Morrison was of little assistance, including the powerful Murdoch media, which has always been happy to assist populist causes, in the name of increased audience and revenue (Loewenstein 2022). Populists may have confused and alienated many voters, by lurching from the older type of populism, which attacked 'elites' on the territory of social progressivism, to the COVID-19-related populism of the cooks, as represented by Craig Kelly. Libertarians and some others might have been offended by the public health measures, but most citizens probably found these predictable and comforting in a time of pandemic. Looking to the future, it is by no means certain that populism has had its day. The ALP remains the Party of Hawke and Keating, which embraced economic rationalism, later termed neoliberalism, and reduced the institutional strength of unions, and this does not augur well for those who have been hoping for socio-economic improvements. Working class disillusion and disappointment, if it does follow, is the very thing upon which middle-class populism feeds and thrives, and populism itself is a mere hair's breadth away from fascism.

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### Author

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## Simple

A strelitzia bud & I are working it out.  
Its sister was stolen, perhaps  
some teenager sawed it off,  
bound to the parameters of new love.

Loss of colour leaves holes in the eye,  
the adamance of that crest  
does not belong in ordinary lives.

I feed manure & hose regularly  
whilst still not understanding the chemistries of beauty.  
A new stalk arches up & out...  
crane-like this construction will take weeks.

Woke up aflame, does the spring breed wild dreams as  
heat wraps the soil in the urgencies of rebirth.  
There's pain too, I carry it like the compost bags.  
An insect adopts a new god.  
The shade kneels in prayer.

LES WICKS

## The Ceasefire

All those great loves *moved on*.

No conflict there now.

Thus asserted.

Four apartments, four single men  
15 square metres, a bed &  
bathrooms the size of an Amazon package.

Rice & beans bubble with indignity  
as one man peels the skin  
from his guilt. The deeper he gouges  
the closer he comes to peace.  
Kids alternate weekends.

Next door another enjoys himself.  
It's free but messy.  
He mistakes his own echoes  
for affirmation. Certainty stains the light.

The 3rd one is too old to worry. All that cancer rime  
scribbled across the stucco is just another story that  
accretes about the building.  
He goes to work. Then comes home.

Unit 4 has a meaty jive...  
anger that passes for some as sexy,  
a delusion that isn't power.  
He alone still believes this "scene" is temporary,  
needs to bleed some more.

LES WICKS