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Editorial: Populism and the border: theoretically and empirically dissecting strategies of exclusion and the recreation of identities

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Editorial on the Research Topic

[Populism and the border: theoretically and empirically dissecting strategies of exclusion and the recreation of identities](#)

In recent years, physical borders and symbolic boundaries have re-emerged as crucial elements that structure political life at the international level. Border controls have been reinstated within the European Schengen Area, the United States under the Trump administration imposed new restrictions at its external borders on the movement of people and goods, and similar trends are visible elsewhere as states seek to redefine sovereignty and belonging in response to perceived crises. Against this backdrop, this Research Topic addresses a dimension of populism that remains comparatively underexplored: the intricate reciprocal relationship between populism and borders.

Political science has recently seen a surge in interest regarding the dynamics of populism in the context of borders and identity formation (Biancalana and Mazzoleni, 2020; Lamour, 2022). Building on this momentum, Olivas Osuna (2024) argues that populism and borders are mutually constitutive concepts and that a systematic exchange between these literatures offers fertile ground for explaining how populist discourses underpin authoritarian border policies embedded in nationalist projects of identity formation.

Border studies, for their part, have long emphasized that borders are not merely territorial lines but rather are symbolic constructs that are spatially and temporally fluid and continually reshaped by political, social, and cultural actors (Parker and Vaughan-Williams, 2009; Brambilla, 2015). Borders shape collective identities and serve as tools of exclusion, categorizing individuals based on territorial, linguistic, religious, or biological traits (Rumford, 2010; de Wilde et al., 2019). From this perspective, discursive approaches to populism—understood as practices of identity formation that construct a “people” in opposition to “outsiders” or an “us” against a “them”/“frontier” (Palonen, 2020)—offer a particularly productive framework for examining the making and remaking of borders.

The aim of this Research Topic is therefore to foster an interdisciplinary dialogue that deepens our understanding of the complex interplay between populism and borders. The contributions assembled here address both empirical and theoretical

perspectives, investigating how borders are mobilized in populist politics and discourses, and how public attitudes and beliefs regarding borders influence, and are influenced by, populist mobilization. These articles provide a foundation for advancing scholarship on the border–populism nexus, highlighting the central role of bordering practices in contemporary populist projects that nurture and exploit negative sentiments to reshape political identities.

Lessons from diverse case studies and research approaches

The contributions include five articles, with three original empirical studies, a theoretical essay, and a policy review. Bridging diverse theoretical and methodological approaches and drawing on a range of country case studies, the articles collectively shed new light on how populism, broadly speaking, contributes to the discursive construction of borders, boundaries and political identities. The first set of articles explores the relationship between populism, nationalism, and borders from a supply-side or actor-centered perspective. [Leung et al.](#), in their research article, analyze the different ways in which borders are constructed in state and grassroots nationalist discourses in China, acquiring not only a geopolitical dimension but also ideological and emotional ones. In a similar vein, [Linnamäki](#) examines how the Hungarian government's authoritarian-populist anti-immigration and family policies are deeply intertwined and how they instrumentalize the concept of “family” as a signifier of an illiberal political community to establish a frontier between those who belong to the nation and those who do not.

The second set of articles considers the role of populism in European borderlands, i.e., regions where notions of community and identity, and “inside” and “outside” become particularly salient. Adopting a demand-side perspective on populism, [Bernhard and Lauener's](#) research article is a survey-based comparative study of Swiss border regions. Their work reveals a significant correlation between the number of cross-border commuters in an area and the degree of opposition to the freedom of movement treaty with the EU among its citizens. [Žuk and Žuk](#) study the migration crisis on the Polish–Belarusian border and introduce the concept of “borderphobia”, charting how right-wing populist actors manipulate border anxieties and spatial narratives as instrumental strategies in the consolidation of authoritarian political authority. Finally, the article by [Cooper](#) draws on Stuart Hall's theoretical framework to explain the shift in right-wing discourses from classical neoliberalism to authoritarian protectionism, and emphasizes the centrality of anti-immigration and sovereigntist frames in this post-neoliberal ideological transition.

Collectively, these five contributions illuminate several relevant research strands: the recasting of migration as a populist identity-building tool, the alignment of bordering rhetoric with authoritarian political strategies and illiberal policies, the struggle to control the framing of issues and crises, along with the increasingly salient affective dimension of populist politics. Each piece, in its distinct disciplinary and empirical register, contributes

to a richer, more layered understanding of how populism shapes—and is shaped by—the politics of borders.

Ways forward

This Research Topic hints at several promising avenues for future research. First, regarding the supply side of populist politics, further research is needed on how populist movements construct borders and boundaries, particularly in response to crises that transcend national and political demarcations. One critical line of inquiry concerns the intersection of the climate crisis and populist border-making, with attention to how narratives of resource scarcity and national security shape and are shaped by populist discourse. Another important direction involves examining the practices of populists in power, moving beyond rhetorical strategies to assess the translation of discursive bordering into concrete policy and its social, political, economic, and environmental consequences.

Second, from a demand-side perspective, the empirical findings contributed here indicate that borders also shape the appeal of populist discourses and policies. Comparative and longitudinal analyses of socio-political attitudes and emotions in borderland regions thus hold the potential to shed light on the enduring influence of geographical borders on political preferences, identity formation, and cross-border relations. Similarly, the role of artificial intelligence and new media in fostering (or mitigating) exclusionary views among citizens should receive more scholarly attention.

Third, new research should investigate forms of resistance and solidarity that emerge in response to bordering discourses and policies. Grassroots initiatives, transnational activism, and community organizing represent critical sites of contestation that often develop alternative bordering practices or even draw selectively on populist styles to mobilize support ([Volk, 2020](#)). Exploring these dynamics can provide a more comprehensive understanding of how borders are not only constructed and enforced by populist actors but also challenged and reimagined from below.

Finally, as this Research Topic demonstrates, combining different research traditions and methods, together with a variety of case studies, can enhance our understanding of context-specific features and processes that more “orthodox” approaches to populism have not yet successfully explained.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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The author(s) declare that no Gen AI was used in the creation of this manuscript.

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