



Scoping review of populism influence on healthcare policy and the impact on public health

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ABSTRACT

OBJECTIVE

Populism has become increasingly popular in many countries and can be a threat to democracy. Populism is also feared to be a threat to public health. However, the impact of populism on healthcare policy has not been studied further. For seeking an explanation of this phenomenon, the aim of this review is to discuss how trends in populism affect health policy and its impact on public health.

METHODS

This scoping review conducted using the five-step framework by Arksey and O'Malley. The literature search was conducted on the Google Scholar, Pubmed, and Sciencedirect databases from Augustus-September 2021. All the included studies were extracted based on characteristics that included study author, year of publication, country, theme, and the relevant results.

RESULTS

After searching the literature, 500 studies were found that matched the keywords. After going through the exclusion process, 7 studies were obtained.

CONCLUSIONS

This review explains the impact of populism on healthcare policies related to public health. Analysis from the perspective of broader participants and more specific communities can help understand how populism impacts public healthcare policy.

DESCRIPTORS

Health care policy, Health professions, Populisms, Public health, Welfare.

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INTRODUCTION

The trend of populism has become a concern for researchers because of its potential to be a threat to democracy¹. Although the definition of populism is not clear, it can be characterized by setting themselves as part of the will from the homogeneous society that positions them to fight against the so-called 'elite' groups and any other considered dangerous groups that can threaten people's rights and values². The rise of populism which is synonymous with identity politics has developed into a political phenomenon in many countries in America, Europe, and Asia as a result of developments around the world^{3,4}. The issue of populism is related to raising themes related to migration, declining employment, nationalism, and the exclusion of minority groups which are published in the media and can now be applied through political policies thanks to the massive support from some people⁵.

A political policy approach that is based on a chauvinist ideology characterized by populism can be dangerous because it can influence the making of various policies, one of which is related to healthcare⁶. Populism can be a threat to public health because public health policy is a multi-sectoral problem that interferes with sustainable development^{7,8}. The current development of populism can influence the political policy decision-making process at various levels of government⁹. As a result, public health policies can be discriminatory and endanger many lives, especially for minority groups who have long had difficulty accessing health services and are increasingly at risk of discrimination¹⁰.

Public health is based on scientific evidence but can also be influenced by the political system in government run by politicians who do not understand the importance of a scientific approach in public policy¹¹. Although according to some experts, the impact of populism does not have a major impact as long as democratic values in government remain strong, criticism from these groups can develop a narrative on health issues that is in line with the approach of populist groups³. For example, a study by de Koster et al (2012) shows a populist Dutch right party to support welfare chauvinism that prioritizes welfare services for native people, which is an issue that is used to increase party electoral competition in election competitions¹². Also, the influence of populist leaders in several countries such as Trump in the US, Bolsonaro in Brazil, and Mohdi in India has a responsibility for the response in the country during the Covid-19 pandemic crisis¹³.

In some cases, populist groups do not discuss issues directly related to health issues^{14,15}. However, as coalitions with other groups in government increase, populist groups can influence public health policy^{14,16}. Although it has become a concern, the impact of populism on healthcare policy has not been studied further. For seeking an explanation of this phenomenon, the aim of this study is to provide an overview and analysis of existing research on the effects of populism on various healthcare policies.

METHODS

The selection of the scoping review method for this review aims to provide answers to specific questions by mapping all existing research-related study literature on a particular topic. Beside, scoping reviews provide greater flexibility and scope for searching the literature on the topics sought compared to systematic reviews, which aim to assess the quality of the existing literature⁶.

The scoping review was conducted using the five-step framework by Arksey and O'Malley (2005)¹⁷. This scoping review is not to evaluate the quality of the available evidence, but to answer specific questions by assessing the various qualitative or quantitative studies available across multiple databases and

mapping the gap from available studies on the impact of populism on public health.

In the first stage, research questions were identified. Based on the purpose of this review, the research question of this scoping review is 'How does populism affect healthcare policy and its impact on public health?'

In the second stage, the literature search was conducted on the Google Scholar, Pubmed, and Sciencedirect databases from Augustus-September 2021. The search was conducted using a combination of the keywords "populism", "populist", "healthcare policy", and "public health". The literature that has been obtained is then reviewed to find other sources from the literature obtained to answer research questions.

In the third stage, the selection of studies with inclusion criteria is qualitative or quantitative studies published in full-text journal articles published in less than 10 years and written in English. These inclusion criteria are restricted to studies that analyze the influence of populism in government on health care policies. This study excludes books, magazines, abstracts, posters, or non-journal sources and is not published in English.

In the fourth stage, All the included studies were extracted based on characteristics that included the author of the study, year of publication, country, topic, and the relevant results related to answering the research question. Data extraction was carried out independently during the study. The results of data extraction are then analyzed for a thorough review and tabulated with narrative descriptions.

In the fifth stage, all data are compiled and reported in tables. Analysis of the data obtained was carried out using conventional qualitative analysis as the purpose of this study was to determine the effect of populism on public health¹⁸.

RESULTS

After searching the literature, 500 studies were found that matched the keywords. After going through the exclusion process, 7 studies were obtained (Figure 1). 2 studies are qualitative studies, 2 comparative studies, 2 case-control studies and 1 study is cross-sectional. Of the 7 included studies, 4 studies related to vaccination programs^{19,22}, 3 studies related to healthcare governance reform^{21,23,24}, 1 study related to mental healthcare reform²⁰, and 1 study related to the influence of populism on the level of adherence to COVID-19 safeguard guidelines²⁵. Three studies assessed findings in the main country of study and four studies assessed findings from several countries. The data obtained can be viewed in Table 1.

Figure 1. Flowchart of literature search.

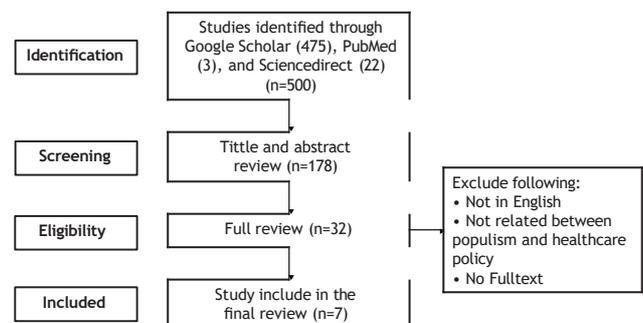


Table 1. Descriptive summary table of the included studies.

Author (Year)	Country	Years of study	Type of analysis	Main outcome measures	Relevant result
Žuk and Žuk P (2020)	Poland	2014-2018	Qualitative case analysis	Connection between anti-vaccine activist in Youtube and health policy	Populism political movement reject vaccination on the grounds of erroneous post-vaccination complications, pharmaceutical industry conspiracy, medical totalitarianism, the imposition of individual rights to health, to nationalism reasons against the European Union (EU)
Numerato, Honová, and Sedláčková (2021)	Czech Republic	2017-2019	Qualitative case analysis	Reformation of mental healthcare and vaccination policy	The two issues are not related to populism because the topic is too risky to approach so that it leads to health practitioners. The politicization of the problematic aspects of the subject of the vaccination and mental healthcare controversy, the public debate regarding the social representation of patients, the plurality of arguments from various organizations, and the medical controversy of the two issues influence policy making.
Pavolini et al (2018)	Denmark, England, Germany, Italia, and Turkey	2011-2018	Quantitative analysis with comparative case study	Healthcare governance	The discourse of populism develops in countries that place doctors who do not participate in healthcare policy and low levels of trust in the health system.
Agartan and Kuhlmann (2019).	Turkey	2003-2017	Case study	Healthcare reform	Political actors use populist discourse by questioning medical organizations and targeting physicians as self-serving actors as opposed to the 'real people'
Speed and Mannion (2020)	USA, UK, Italy	2016 (UK), 2017 (USA and Italy)	Case study	Healthcare reform (USA), Brexit regulation (UK), and vaccination program (Italy)	Populist actor in USA and UK repeal the legislation to reform healthcare program while the populist government actors in Italy reject the advice of health experts regarding vaccinations for children.
Lasco and Larson (2020).	Nigeria, Ukraine, Italy, Philipphine	2003-2004 (Nigeria), 2008 (Ukraine), 2015 (Italy), 2017 (Philipphine)	Comparative case study	Immunisation program	Distrust due to fear and mistakes in vaccination programs can be used by populist actors to reduce trust in the healthcare system
van Mulukom (2020)	Australia, Brazil, Croatia, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Netherland, New Zealand, Portugal, UK, USA	2020	Cross-sectional	Adherence level to safety guideline for COVID-19	Populist governance is associated with misguided/self-centered behaviors (e.g., hoarding), mediated by conspiracy beliefs, and distrust in health institutional websites (e.g, World Health Organization). This distrust is then related to the low level of adherence to COVID-19 safety guidelines.

DISCUSSION

This scoping review maps from the available evidence of the influence of populism on health care policy and how it impacts public health. This review focuses on the outcomes of health care policy issues resulting from governments influenced by populist movements or groups. From this review, the author finds out how populism develops health care policy issues that are following the group's program and ideology.

One of the findings of this review explain that populist policies in the field of public health place healthcare workers and health organizations as the opposite party by influencing the level of public trust and nationalist sentiment to influence health regulation. This issue can be seen in the problem of the immunization program, where a populist group supported by some groups of people who refuse immunization chooses to ignore the advice of health experts¹⁹⁻²². This can increase public distrust of the health care system and have a domino effect on future public health problems²⁶.

Furthermore, this review looks at the influence of populist groups in government that can influence changes in health care policy regulations as an effect of distrust of health organizations and experts^{21,23,24}. Doctors and health care providers in government play an important role in reducing the impact of populism on health care policies. The growth of populism in government is an effect of the low involvement of health care professionals and experts in government²⁷. Although some health care professionals and experts can be non-objective, the tendency of populist groups to ignore suggestions that are contrary to their views by experts makes ignoring the design of the health care system to be inclusive in favor of populist support groups^{28,29}.

The impact of distrust of the existing health system will encourage populist groups in the government to reform health services³⁰. Moreover, the use of anti-international sentiments used by populist groups will encourage health service reforms to prioritize natives in getting access to health³¹. Health service reforms campaigned by populist groups will favor certain

groups as well as the welfare chauvinism approach used and will ignore vulnerable and minority groups²⁷. This situation will then become a threat to universal healthcare for equitable access to health and obscure professional roles and status due to distrust of the profession^{32,33}.

The outcome of the themes found by the authors was also influenced by the year of study, in which over the past 10 years there has been increased attention to mental health issues, immunization controversies, and most recently related to the Covid-19 pandemic³⁴⁻³⁶. Numerato et al (2021) find that mental health and immunization issues are politicized through the topic of biomedical controversies, social, economic, and legal rights, and representations as well as the process of politicizing between the two topics²⁰. This finding has similarities in aspects raised by populism groups, namely economics and welfare, as well as the emergence of populism to take advantage of emotions and mass psychology³⁷⁻³⁹. The use of health issues is associated with economic and social problems in the ideology of populism to encourage public support⁴⁰.

On the issue of immunization, distrust of health professionals is driving resistance to vaccination programs, with a study from Kennedy (2019) showing a relationship between vaccination hesitancy and people tendencies in supporting the populist groups⁴¹. Backhaus et al (2019) study found an association between populist voters and health-related rates where 43% of the sample reported having fair/poor health-related levels as a result of group pessimism, which is a trait found mostly in mental health issues⁴². In addition, populist voters are also affected by exposure to content that triggers anger and negative emotions from populist groups⁴³. However, more extensive studies are needed to further examine the relationship between populism trends and mental health issues and their relationship to public health.

The trend of populism is also increasingly in the spotlight regarding the management of the Covid-19 pandemic, were neglected by Covid-19 management suggested by health experts has been rejected by populist leaders and groups⁴⁴. van Mulukom study (2020) shows the relationship between populist

government and the level of compliance with Covid-19 security guidelines related to distrust of populist governments with advice and input from health experts²⁵. Another study by Hedges and Lasco (2021) shows how Covid-19 testing aimed at tracking and isolating infected people is being politicized by populist actors and influencing measures of pandemic management⁴⁵. Populism has also created opposition to pandemic management, one of which is protesting against restrictions by populist groups as part of the distrust of health experts⁴⁶.

The limitation of this study is not identifying the characteristics of the political system and socio-economic development in recent years of each country. Different political systems in each country play an important role in protecting public health policies from the influence of populist groups⁴⁷. Also, socio-economic factors in the voters' environment also affect the development and support of populism in various countries^{48,49}. In addition, the disadvantage of using conventional qualitative data analysis may not represent the entire data, but this analytical method can help to build concepts from existing phenomena as well as the benefits of a scoping review, namely identifying and analyzing gaps in existing knowledge⁵⁰. However, the literature search and analysis performed were not free from selection bias by the authors. Future studies by analyzing health outcomes data and from the perspective of the wider community and more affected communities can help understand how populism impacts public healthcare policies.

CONCLUSION

This review explains the impact of populism on healthcare policies related to public health. The growing trend of populism can threaten the health care management system by exploiting the distrust of health experts and current health issues. Populism towards public health service policies can be influenced by encouragement from the community and ignoring health expert advice and distrust healthcare management, although this factor can also be influenced by how well populist politicians understand the existing health issues. However, further interpretation is needed to study the impact of policies identical to populism on public health, in which health outcomes can show the impact of populist health care policies on public health.

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