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Is Populism a New Cleavage in Parliaments? Insights from three Western European Countries

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This paper examines the uses of the words populism(s) and populist(s) by members of three Western European Parliaments (Belgium, France, Spain). It inquires whether these uses by Members of Parliament (MPs) reveal the emergence of a new political cleavage, distinguishing between MPs who identify as populists and those who align themselves as anti-populist figures. Using a database listing all uses of populis* in the three Parliaments for 2019, the paper confirms existing findings in the literature on the uses of populis* in non-parliamentary arenas: it is associated with nationalism, extremism and demagogy in a pejorative sense. However, beyond its comparative dimension, the paper presents two noteworthy findings. First, when employed by MPs, populism mainly refers to political opponents, but in an indirect way. It rather qualifies actions or claims than political enemies. Furthermore, the latter are not necessarily the parties identified as populist in political science scholarship. Secondly, populism is mainly used pejoratively by right and centre-right parties to legitimise themselves against political opponents. Evoking populism is thus more a strategy implemented by right and centre-right parties to impose a dualistic reading of the political contexts (anti-populists VS populists) rather than a meaningful cleavage shared by all the parties represented in parliaments.

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