

They did it! The Pervasiveness and Persuasiveness of Populist Communication

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Populism is oftentimes regarded as a severe threat to democracy. In 2012, the former president of the European Council van Rompuy even argued that populism is the greatest threat to Europeⁱ. Despite this, millions of voters around the world are attracted to populist political parties. The media are frequently associated with the electoral success of these partiesⁱⁱ. Is this a valid accusation? Are they playing a bigger role than simply reporting newsworthy events? Based on empirical findings, I want to stress that the media can indeed play an important role, albeit for specific groups.

Core Ideas of Populism

Before delving deeper into the media's role in spreading populist ideas, it is important to highlight the core ideas of populist rhetoric. Too often, populism is reduced to a general sense of simplification, anti-other sentiments and political distrust. The core of populism is more profound than this. Populism revolves around the emphasis on a central societal divide between a superior "us" and a corrupt and culpable "them"ⁱⁱⁱ. The in-group consists of the ordinary people, whose will should be central in political decision-making. In right-wing populism, "the people" also has a cultural and nativist meaning. Populism's most central out-group is constructed as the self-interested, corrupt and unresponsive elites. They are constructed as an enemy of the people and are accused of only caring about themselves whilst neglecting the will of the ordinary people. In right-wing populism, for example expressed by Geert Wilders and his Freedom Party, other out-groups are additionally excluded from the people: immigrants, Islam, and refugees are seen as a salient threat to the ordinary, native people. These core elements of populism can be integrated into the central idea of populist blame attributions: the ordinary people are innocent, and the elites and other out-groups are deemed responsible for the crisis of the native people^{iv}.

Populism, News Media, and Popular Opinion

Populist ideas are extremely persuasive, as they identify external causes for the problems experienced by the people. But how can the media fuel such sentiments among society? Based on a systematic analysis of various Dutch media, it can be concluded that the media themselves are using populist framing only to a limited extent^v. And if they do draw on populist framing,

they do so in combination with a highly interpretative, conflict-driven style of coverage. Next to this, populist ideas are more salient in tabloid media outlets than broadsheet or quality media.

Although they may not be omnipresent in traditional media outlets, populist ideas do have a strong effect on citizens' political opinions. Multiple experimental studies demonstrate that the core message of populist communication – emphasizing the central opposition between the good people and the culprit others – strengthens “us versus them” perceptions among receivers^{vi}. Specifically, this means that if a populist message stresses that the corrupt Dutch government and immigrants are responsible for the ordinary native people's problems, people respond with a more negative evaluation of the government and immigrants compared to when people are exposed to a non-populist message. More important, such messages increase the likelihood that people intend to vote for a populist political party and it decreases the probability that people intend to vote on the government. In that sense, the spread of persuasive populist messages may foster polarization among society.

It should be noted, however, that only a specific segment of the audience feels attracted to populist communication. People who experience feelings of losing out more than other groups in society, and people who feel strongly attached to the in-group of the people, are affected strongest by exposure to populist messages. In addition, these relatively deprived citizens are most likely to select populist messages in their daily media environment. Populist messages thus cater to the needs and preferences of a specific “disenchanted” group of citizens.

Populism and Polarization

What are the implications of these findings? First of all, populist communication is highly effective. Second, although traditional media may not contribute substantially to the spread of populist rhetoric, populist messages are distributed frequently via social media channels of politicians and citizens. In the current era of separated media, selective exposure, filter bubbles, and the increasing choice between offline and online media channels, citizens are only able to avoid populist communication to a limited extent. Moreover, the algorithms of online media may expose people to populist communication that is in line with their patterns of previous selection and persuasion.

In any case, if populist messages are received, they can have a polarizing effect on society: people who disagree with populist ideas will further reinforce their opposition, while people with existing populist views reinforce their existing agreement. Antidotes should therefore not focus on changing supply-side media content, but should correct perceptions driving the selection and persuasion of populism. Only if the psychological roots of populism are acknowledged, we can start to address the polarizing potential of populist communication.

ⁱ Pop, V. (2012, April 25). Van Rompuy: 'Winds of populism' threaten free movement. The EU Observer.

Retrieved from <https://euobserver.com/justice/116032>

ⁱⁱ Mazzoleni, G. (2008). Populism and the Media. In D. Albertazzi & D. McDonnell (Eds.), *Twenty-First Century Populism: The Spectre of Western European Democracy* (pp. 49-64). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

ⁱⁱⁱ Mudde, C. (2004). The populist zeitgeist. *Government and Opposition*, 39, 542–564.

^{iv} Hameleers, M., Bos, L., & de Vreese, C. H. (2017). “They did it”: The effects of emotionalized blame attribution in populist communication. *Communication Research*, 44(6), 870–900.

^v Hameleers, M., Bos, L., & de Vreese, C. H. (2017). Shoot the messenger? The media’s role in framing populist attributions of blame. *Journalism*

^{vi} See for example Hameleers, M., & Schmuck, D. (2017). It’s Us against Them: A Comparative Experiment on the Effects of Populist Messages Communicated via Social Media. *Information, Communication & Society*, 20(9), 1425-1444