

Populist communication: content & style elements (Self-Presentation of Political Actors)

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KEYWORDS

populism, political actors, style, key messages

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

Populist communication, in this entry, refers to the occurrence of a) specific messages that are seen as the expression of populist ideology and b) characteristic style elements that are often associated with these messages expressing populist ideology in political actors' (or other actors such as journalists' or citizens') communication (Ernst et al., 2019; De Vreese et al., 2018).

FIELD OF APPLICATION/THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

Populism has been defined in various terms; e.g., as Ideology (Canovan, 1999; Mudde, 2004), set of ideas (Hawkins et al., 2018, Taggart, 2000), discourse (Laclau, 2005; Mouffe, 2018), political style (Moffit, 2016), communication style (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007), or political strategy (Weyland, 2017). Thus, there have been numerous operationalizations of populism or populist communication in content analyses that cannot all be accounted for here. This entry specifically follows a communication-centered perspective (Stanyer et al., 2016; De Vreese et al., 2018). Jagers & Walgrave (2007), in a pioneer study on populist communication, define populism as a political communication style "essentially displaying proximity of the people, while at the same time taking an anti-establishment stance and stressing the (ideal) homogeneity of the people by excluding specific population segments." In a more recent study, Ernst et al. (2019) differentiate between populist communication content and populist communication style. **Populist communication**

content refers to the communicative representation of the populist ideology (what is being said) that can be expressed in the form of **populist key messages**. Depending on the parsimony of the definition, populist ideology comprises three or four dimensions: people-centrism, anti-elitism, restoring sovereignty, and exclusion (e.g., De Vreese et al., 2018; Mudde, 2004; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Wirth et al., 2016). In distinction to the content, Ernst et al. (2019) define **populist communication style** as the use of **populism-related style elements** (how something is said) (see also De Vreese et al., 2018; Bracciale & Martella, 2018).

Communication-centered content analyses of populist communication are often carried out in three steps. First, specific characteristics of populist communication (e.g., populist key messages or stylistic elements) are identified. Second, the occurrence of these individual elements is then coded either on the statement level (e.g. Ernst et al., 2019; Wirth et al., 2016), excerpts level (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007), or on the text/article level (e.g. Blassnig et al, 2019). Third, the level of populism is determined using different indices for populist communication as a whole (e.g. maximum indices; Blassnig et al., 2019; Ernst et al., 2019) or for the individual dimensions separately (e.g., Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). Populism indices can be calculated at the statement level, text level, or actor level.

REFERENCES/COMBINATION WITH OTHER METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

Whereas this entry focuses on quantitative and deductive approaches, populist communication has also been investigated using qualitative or inductive approaches (e.g., Wodak, 2015), especially in studies following a more actor-centered



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approach (Stanyer et al., 2016). Most studies on populist communication have used manual content analysis. Yet, some analyses have also applied automated approaches to investigate the occurrence of populist communication in texts

(e.g., Hawkins & Castanho Silva, 2018).

EXAMPLE STUDIES

Blassnig et al. (2019); Bracciale & Martella (2017); Ernst et al. (2019); Jagers & Walgrave (2007)

Table 1. Summary of a selection of studies on populist communication.

| Author(s) | Sample | Unit of Analysis | Values | Reliability |
|-------------------------|--|--|---|-----------------------------|
| Jagers & Walgrave, 2007 | <p><i>Content type:</i> political party broadcasts (PPB)</p> <p><i>Country:</i> Belgium (Flemish part)</p> <p><i>Political actors:</i> six Belgian-Flemish parties</p> <p><i>Outlets:</i> 20 PPBs per party</p> <p><i>Sampling period:</i> 1999 - 2001</p> <p><i>Sample size:</i> 1,200 PPB excerpts</p> | <p><i>Unit of analysis:</i> excerpts including ‘thin’ populism (references to the people)</p> <p><i>Level of analysis:</i> excerpt level and actor level</p> <p><i>People-index:</i> multiplication of the proportion and intensity of references to the people for each party</p> <p><i>Anti-state-index:</i> number of anti-state excerpts * average intension anti-state excerpts (1-5) per party</p> <p><i>Anti-politics-index:</i> number of anti-politics excerpts * average intension anti-politics excerpts (1-5) per party</p> <p><i>Anti-media-index:</i> number of anti-media excerpts * average intension anti-media excerpts (1-5) per party</p> <p><i>Anti-establishment-index:</i> anti-state + anti-politics + anti-media per party</p> <p><i>Exclusivity-index:</i> J-scores; (positive – negative evaluations) / (positive + neutral + negative evaluations of specific population categories)</p> | <p><i>References to the people:</i> terms referring to the population (as a whole or population categories), that cover the people “in political terms”, meaning the “political entity”</p> <p><i>Anti-state:</i> failure of the state with regard to (1) single failure, (2) systematic failure, (3) public service should be abolished, (4) all public services are criticized at once, (5) the system</p> <p><i>Anti-politics:</i> criticism directed towards (1) policy measure or present situation, (2) policy, (3) politician, (4) party, (5) group of parties, (6) all parties. (7) the system</p> <p><i>Anti-media:</i> media targets of criticism; (1) newspaper/ magazine/ tv channel, (2) group of media, (3) all (the) media</p> <p><i>Evaluation of specific population categories:</i> positive, neutral, negative (for further restrictions for the individual variables and more detailed instructions see the methodological appendix by Jagers & Walgrave, 2007)</p> | Reliability is not reported |

| Author(s) | Sample | Unit of Analysis | Values | Reliability |
|--|---|--|---|--|
| Ernst, Blassnig, Engesser, Büchel, & Esser (2019) (See also Ernst et al., 2018; Ernst, Esser et al., 2019; Wirth et al., 2016) | <p><i>Content type:</i> statements by politicians expressing either a political position, an elaboration on a political issue, or an evaluation/ attribution of a target actor</p> <p><i>Countries:</i> CH, DE, IT, FR, UK, US</p> <p><i>Political actors:</i> 98 politicians from 31 parties</p> <p><i>Outlets:</i> political talk shows (2 per country), politicians' Facebook and Twitter accounts</p> <p><i>Sampling period:</i> April through May 2015</p> <p><i>Sample size:</i> n = 2'067 (n = 969 talk show statements, n = 734 Facebook posts, and n = 364 Tweets)</p> | <p><i>Unit of analysis:</i> a single statement by a politician on a target actor or an issue</p> <p><i>Level of analysis:</i> statement level and actor level</p> <p><i>Populism index:</i> Maximum index based on the nine populist key messages and seven stylistic elements (0/1)</p> | <p><i>Populist key messages:</i></p> <p><i>Anti-elitism:</i> discrediting the elite, blaming the elite, detaching the elite from the people</p> <p><i>People-centrism:</i> stressing the people's virtues, praising the people's achievements, stating a monolithic people, demonstrating closeness to the people</p> <p><i>Restoring sovereignty:</i> demanding popular sovereignty, denying elite sovereignty</p> <p><i>Populist style elements:</i></p> <p><i>Negativity:</i> negativism, crisis rhetoric</p> <p><i>Emotionality:</i> emotional tone, absolutism, patriotism)</p> <p><i>Sociability:</i> colloquialism, intimization (all items were coded as dummy variables based on more detailed sub-categories)</p> | Brennan & Prediger's kappa average = 0.91 (³ 0.65) |
| Blassnig, Ernst, Büchel, Engesser, & Esser (2019) | <p><i>Content type:</i> election news coverage about immigration and adjacent reader comments</p> <p><i>Countries:</i> CH, FR, UK</p> <p><i>Actors/Speakers:</i> politicians, journalists, and citizens</p> <p><i>Outlets:</i> 6 online news outlets per country</p> | <p><i>Unit of analysis:</i> news article / reader comment</p> <p><i>Level of analysis:</i> article level</p> <p><i>Populism index:</i> Maximum index based on the twelve populist key messages (0/1)</p> | <p><i>Populist key messages:</i></p> <p><i>Anti-elitism:</i> discrediting the elite, blaming the elite, detaching the elite from the people</p> <p><i>People-centrism:</i> praising the people's virtues, praising the people's achievements, describing the people as homogenous, demonstrating closeness to the people</p> <p><i>Restoring sovereignty:</i> demanding popular sovereignty, denying</p> | Brennan & Prediger's kappa average = 0.75 |

| Author(s) | Sample | Unit of Analysis | Values | Reliability |
|-----------------------------|--|---|--|----------------------------|
| | <p><i>Sampling period:</i> six weeks before the respective election days. CH: September to October 2015; FR: April to May 2017; UK: April to May 2015 Sample size: n = 493 news articles and n = 2904</p> | | <p>elite sovereignty Exclusion: discrediting specific social groups, blaming specific social groups, excluding specific social groups from the people (all items were coded as dummy variables)</p> | |
| Bracciale & Martella (2017) | <p><i>Content type:</i> politicians' tweets <i>Country:</i> Italy <i>Political actors:</i> 5 party leaders <i>Outlets:</i> leaders' Twiter timelines <i>Sampling period:</i> 1 January 2015 to 1 July 2016 <i>Sample size:</i> n = 7,772</p> | <p><i>Unit of analysis:</i> tweets <i>Level of analysis:</i> tweets, actors <i>Indices:</i> <i>Populist ideology:</i> three additive synthetic dichotomous indices adding together the indicators for each of the three dimensions of populism (sovereignty of the people, attacking the elite, ostracizing others) The variables for political communication style were summarized using multiple correspondence analysis (MCA) into two dimensions: communicative mode (positive vs. negative) and communicative focus (personalization vs. political/campaign)</p> | <p><i>Political communication style:</i> Stagecraft: emotionalisation; informality, instrumental actualization, intimisation, negative affect, simplification, storytelling, taboo breaker, vulgarity <i>Register (communicative tone):</i> referential/ neutral, aggressive/ provocative, humorous/ ironic, conversational/ participatory <i>Topic:</i> political issues, policy issues, campaign issues, personal issues, current affairs <i>Function:</i> campaign updating, self-promotion, setting the agenda, position-taking, call to action, opposition/ violence, endorsement, irony, request for interaction, pointless babble <i>Populist ideology:</i> Emphasizing sovereignty of the people: refers to the people, refers to 'ad hoc' people,</p> | Krippendorff's Alpha > .83 |

| Author(s) | Sample | Unit of Analysis | Values | Reliability |
|-----------|--------|------------------|---|-------------|
| | | | direct representation Attacking the elite: generic anti-establishment, political anti-establishment, economic anti-establishment, EU anti-establishment, institutional anti-establishment, anti-elitism media, anti-elitism intellectuals Ostracizing others: dangerous others, authoritarianism (all individual indicators were coded as dummy variables) | |

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