Populist political communication

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POLb1140 Populist political communication

Outline

1. Populism as a communication style – the approach

2. Features of populism as a communication style

How to communicate in a populist way?

Populism as a communication style

- Follows populism as a thin centered ideology:

- "populism as an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people" (Mudde 2004)

BUT

- Anchored in the (political) communication studies: stress on the communication environment and communicatio *per se* -> populism as a matter of degree/part of communication of a political actor

Populism as a communication style

- „Populism is *reflected in* the oral, written, and *visual communication*" of various actors (Reinemann et al. 2016)
- „it is a *communication frame* that appeals to and identify with the people and pretend to speak in their name" (Jagers, Walgrave 2007)
- Characteristics of a *message* rather than of an *actor*: populist messages as independent "phenomenon as such" and no longer on a particular party family or type of politician" (De Vreese et al. 2018)
- a discursive manifestation of a thin centered ideology that is not only focused on the underlying set of basic assumptions about the world but in particular on "*the language that unwittingly expresses them*" (De Vreese et al. 2018)
- Stress on the *communication tools* and the *style* of communication

Populism in the changing media environment

- (populist) political communication takes place in a media environment
- Recent changes support the spread of populism
- "populism is particularly suited to the contours of the 'new media galaxy.'" (Kean 2013, in De Vreese 2018)
- Social media as a by-pass of mainstream media (anti-populist bias – Mazzoleni 2003)
- Three actors of populist political communication – political actors, the media, the public

Political actors

- Close to the ideational approach BUT stress on the messages
- Three elements of populism:

(1) reference to "the People,"

(2) a battle against the "corrupt" elite,

(3) the identification of an out-group

- a specific sense of social identity is at the heart of populism.
- Populist messages can define in-groups (the good people), and construct out-groups (problematic minorities, self-serving elites, scapegoats presented as threats)

Populist communication in Belgium

- J. Jagers and S. Walgrave (2007): „Populism as political communication style: An empirical study of political parties` discourse in Belgium." *European Journal of Political Research* 46 (3), 319-345.
- Context – striking electoral success of Vlaams Blok Study of supply side (strategy of the party) underdeveloped – one of the reasons for the research
- Explanation of the success of the party

- H: *The Vlaams Blok's external communication is characterised by an outspoken and all-pervading populism.*
- Need for a comparative research (in Belgium)
- Lack of a measurable concept of populism – development of an operationalisable definition of populism

Populist communication in Belgium

- Three key elements of populism: appeal to the people, anti-elitism, an exclusion strategy

- Thick and thin populism
  - Thin pop. – refers to the people, pretending to speak in their name, „precondition" of thick populism (minimal definition of populism)
  - Thick pop. – includes also the two other features of classical definitions of populism

- Two dimensional typology (vertical and horizontal dimension)

Data and measurement

- The aim is to examine communication style of Belgian political parties (related to the research question and the hypotheses)

- Public TV broadcast– similarity and comparability of the data across political parties (each party 20 broadcast + 200 minutes per party, not electoral broadcast – to avoid affecting by political events)

- Human coded content analysis

- Developing of „the people index" – proportion and intensity of thin populism in PPB, the anti-establishment index (degree of hostility towards the state, the media and politics) and the exclusivity index (proportion of positive and negative evaluations of specific groups of population)
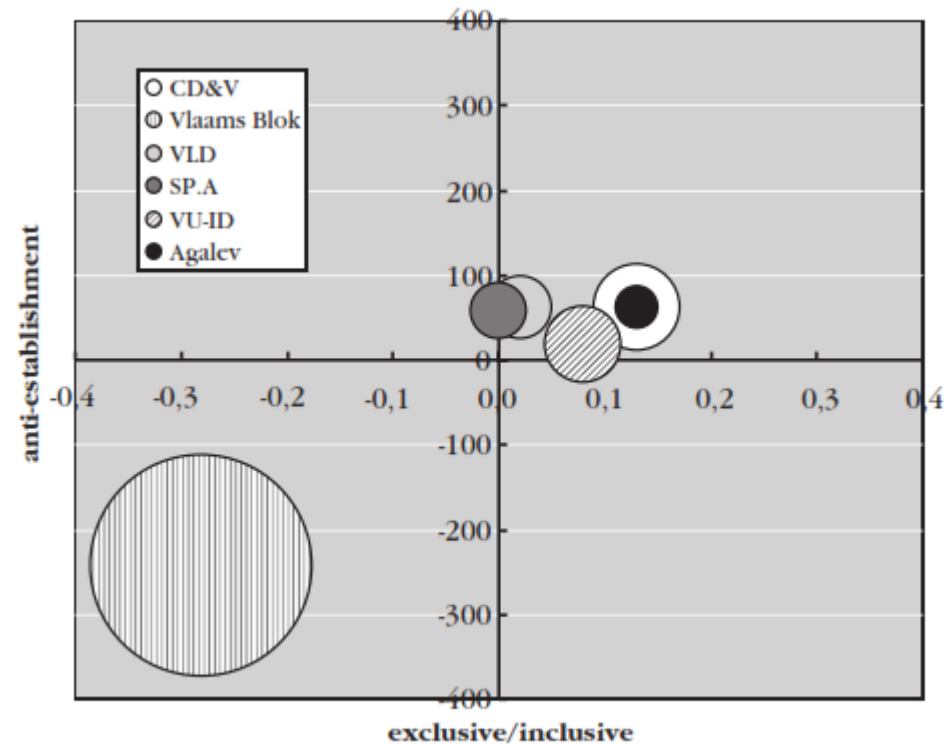
Results of the research

Figure 4. Thin and thick populism: People-index, anti-establishment-index and exclusivity-index of each party (1999–2001).

- Vlaams Blok fundamentally differs from the other parties in terms of political communication (Jagers, Walgrave 2007)

Results of the research – a typology o populism

Figure 5. Types of populism.

Source: Jagers, Walgrave 2007

The media

- Two approaches: media populism and media as a messenger (Mazzoleni)
- 1) media populism – media as activist actors communicating *their own* populist messages

- 2) media as messengers – carriers of someone else`s populist messages

- Help populist mobilization
- A tool for spreading populist messages (social media)
- Media coverage of both actors and issues

Citizens

- Communication content and its effects on political attitudes and electoral preferences (e.g. the research on framing)

- as communicators expressing their beliefs and demands in reaction to the media or on the media (social media)

- Some support of the relationship of populist voters and news consumption and preference of certain types of the media (mainstream/tabloid)

- Messages induce/reinforce populist attitudes and support for populist parties

Elements of populist political communication

- Ernst et al. (2017): *Populists prefer social media to talkshows*

- systematic parallels in the use of populist key messages and the use of certain stylistic elements

- Populist messages + communicative styles (not necessarily populist! See Part I of the lecture) linked to populism

- a communication-centered approach, conceives of populist communication as an outcome of a strategy that uses both ideological key messages and certain stylistic elements – what is their relationship?

- Detailed and clear operationalization of populism and populist communication style

Table 1. Conceptualization and Operationalization of Populist Key Messages.

Dimension	Populist key message	Underlying ideology	Categories
Anti-Elitism	Discrediting the elite	Elites are corrupt.	Elites are accused of being malevolent, criminal, lazy, stupid, extremist, racist, undemocratic, and so on. The elite are called names and denied morality, charisma, credibility, intelligence, competence, consistency, and so on.
	Blaming the elite	Elites are harmful.	Elites are described as a threat/burden, responsible for negative developments/situations, or as having committed mistakes or crimes. Elites are described as not being a source of enrichment or responsible for positive developments/situations.
	Detaching the elite from the people	Elites do not represent the people.	Elites are described as not belonging to the people, not being close to the people, not knowing the people, not speaking for the people, not caring for the people, or not performing everyday actions.
People centrism	Stressing the people's virtues	The people are virtuous.	The people are bestowed with morality, charisma, credibility, intelligence, competence, consistency, and so on. The people are exempt from being malevolent, criminal, lazy, stupid, extremist, racist, undemocratic, and so on.
	Praising the people's achievements	The people are beneficial.	The people are described as being enriched or responsible for a positive development/situation. The people are described as not being a threat/burden, not being responsible for negative developments/situations, nor as having committed mistakes or crimes.
	Stating a monolithic people	The people are homogeneous.	People are described as sharing common feelings, desires, or opinions.
	Demonstrating closeness to the people	The populist represents the people.	The speaker describes himself as belonging to the people, being close to the people, knowing the people, speaking for the people, caring for the people, agreeing with the people, or performing everyday actions. The speaker claims to represent or embody the people.
Restoring sovereignty	Demanding popular sovereignty	The people are the ultimate sovereign.	The speaker argues for general institutional reforms to grant the people more power by introducing direct-democratic elements or increasing political participation. The speaker argues in favor of granting more power to the people within the context of a specific issue (e.g., election, immigration, security).
	Denying elite sovereignty	The elites deprive the people of their sovereignty.	The speaker argues in favor of granting less power to elites within the context of a specific issue (e.g., election, immigration, security).

Table 2. Conceptualization and Operationalization of Populism-Related Style Elements.

Dimension	Stylistic devices	Underlying style element	Categories
Negativity	Negativism	Paint society and its members (part of the people) "in black" by attributing negative characteristics or condemning actions/situations with negative outcome.	Targets are accused of being malevolent, criminal, lazy, stupid, racist, and so on or are denied being benevolent, likable, intelligent, credible, loyal, consistent, and so on.
	Crisis rhetoric	Portraying a situation/development as a crisis using exaggerations, emergency rhetoric or declaring a scandal.	Speaker uses rhetorical elements of immorality, exaggeration, scandal, emergency, or war rhetoric.
Emotionality	Emotional tone	Sharing positive and negative emotions or revealing feelings.	Speaker uses emotional language by expressing discrete positive (e.g., happiness, contentment, hope, pride, trust) or negative (e.g., anger, uneasiness, sadness, fear, regret, affection) emotions.
	Absolutism	Using an assertive tone and lacking relativizing words. Tendency to paint world in black and white without any shades of gray.	Speaker uses rhetorical figure of absolutism by presenting something as the only conceivable option or as preposterous or unbearable.
	Patriotism	Emphasizing of the superiority of own country by referencing an idealized and utopic heartland.	Speaker uses rhetorical figure of patriotism by emphasizing superiority of own country or some obscure heartland.
Sociability	Colloquialism	Preference for a simple, dialect, colloquial, or vulgar language and use of nicknames to reach the ordinary people.	Speaker uses vulgar language or slang, employs sarcasm or rhetorical questions and address targets with nicknames.
	Intimization	Recounting personal and intimate details about personal life.	Targets are described in their predominately personal life by emphasizing their family or love life and making references to personal way of life or leisure activities.

Analysis

- Set of hypotheses related to the type of the media and political actors (challengers/extreme)
- Social media used more often for spreading populist content (both messages and style)
- Challenger parties use populism more often
- Extreme parties use populism more often

- Linkage between different contents, media and actors
- A good definition of the communication styles

Is pop.com. agressive and negative?

- Nai (2019)
- Comparing populist and non-populist parties/candidates
- Partly based on the ideational approach
- Negative campaigning vs positive self-presentation
- Emotions inducing communication
- Why should populists be negative and emotional?
- Based on an original expert survey (negativity, target of attacks, fear and enthusiasm)
- Populists more negative, more personal attacks and more often using fear

And what about post-truth?

- Kluknavská, Eisele (2021)
- Post-truth claim:
- as part of anti-elitism – elites accused of communicating „purposefully false interpretations of reality"
  - Truth evaluation
  - Truth conflict
  - Truth restoration
- Style: emotional communication (vs fact-based) + negativity
- Analysis of Trump`s Twitter account: truth evaluation linked to emotionality and negativity, media most targeted actors
- Qualitative part – e.g. Blaming for being „fake (news)"

Conclusion

- Populist political communication partly related to the ideational approach
- Focus on communication rather than on actors
- Populism as a matter of degree
- Placed in a complex communication systems including political actors, the media, and citizens
- Features of populist communication

Table 1. Foci of Populist Communication Research.

Actor	Foci
Political actors	References to the people, anti-elitism, and out-groups. Communication aimed at the media (indirect) or supporters (direct) via speeches, advertising, manifestos, or social media
Media	Populism *by* the media (as "activist" organizations) and *through* the media (as platforms for populist actors)
Citizens	Selection of populist media contents, expressions of populist attitudes, targets of populist messages

Source: De Vreese et al. 2018