

Trending topics in the research on populist communication and unresolved problems: The COST Action IS1308 final conference in Madrid (March 19–21, 2018)

On March 19–21, 2018, a scientific conference about populists' political communication was held in Madrid, which brought together scholars from more than 20 European countries who were affiliated with the COST Action IS 1308 "Populist Political Communication in Europe: Comprehending the Challenge of Mediated Political Populism for Democratic Politics" (2013–2018). While the findings from the working groups of the action will be published in a volume expected to be out in spring 2019, the meeting also staged a panel where scholars could present research about populism which they conducted outside of the Action's working groups. The papers presented in this panel can be summarized under three main headings: a) the press and populist communication; b) effects of populist communication on citizens; c) political elites as communicators of populism. Further on, I summarize selected points discussed by the presenters in their contributions and add some own thoughts related to these questions.

THE PRESS AND POPULIST COMMUNICATION

A group of scholars from the University of Zürich led by Martin Wettstein dealt with the challenges populist communication poses to the press and journalism. It was argued, for instance, that the media might assume either the role of gatekeepers, interpreters or facilitators for "populist messages," understood as statements including populist ideas. Which of these roles is chosen seems to depend on the circumstances of the situation and the type and editorial policy of the media organization at hand. One related aspect that was less addressed in the conference, but seems important nevertheless, is the attitude of journalists toward populism and how this matters for the press-populism relationship. It is important to see that beyond the media as professional organizations with their constraints and policies, journalists as individuals or a group of like-minded professionals also shape the way populism is covered. In other words, journalists' personal cognitions, affects and attitudes toward the multifaceted phenomenon of populism most likely matter for how they deal with it. From previous research into the subjective biases of journalists (Kepplinger, 1989), we know that journalists are voluntarist actors who might support political causes and can be captured by specific interests. Some journalists may perceive themselves even as political advocates for or against something or someone, or claim that their business is inextricable with supporting certain political values, which seem general but are

often understood in a particular way by the vast majority of the journalists (for example that *democracy* as a generally accepted value would be incommensurate with populism, a view that is not shared by everybody). This is consequential insofar as journalists tend to hold similar political attitudes and thus are always in jeopardy to develop a form of groupthink: The stories of the “pack” are identical or similar in diction and perspective and the reporters might behave like a flock of sheep, following a consensus, regardless of whether or not it is backed by an objective look at the facts. Phenomena like groupthink, for example, and professional consensus can thus harm the media’s credibility and alienate important parts of the audience who might come to believe there is no fair representation of different points of view in the public sphere. Groupthink or “pack journalism” can spiral out of control when journalists who dissent with a dominant groupthink, for example about populism might fear pressure from editors if they do not support the frames and interpretations used by the “pack” (Matusitz & Breen, 2012).

THE EFFECTS OF POPULIST COMMUNICATION ON THE AUDIENCE

A second complex topic addressed in this panel was related to the effects of populist communication, in either the press or on Facebook, on citizens. What is the nature and importance of such effects is a quite natural question given the success populist parties have achieved in elections across Europe (and beyond). Is the success of these parties attributable to their program because it corresponds best to the preferences of a considerable share of the voters or, rather, is their upswing a result of successful communication? Moreover, upon what kind of political attitudes does populist communication act, how strongly, and on what intervening variables do the effects depend? For instance, one contribution (Bobba et al.) explored gender as an intervening variable in the causal chain from populist content to audience reactions on Facebook, in terms of “likes” for political postings. Findings show the existence of a gender-oriented reaction to populism of the form that male users tend to give populist postings more support than female. In particular, the anti-elite component of populist discourse obtains more likes by male Facebook users. Dominique Wirz and colleagues addressed a much publicly debated question: Do elements of right-wing populist communication in newspapers have an impact on attitudes toward immigration? They presented evidence based on the combination of panel surveys and manual content analysis of newspapers and found that anti-immigrant rhetoric along with other elements of right-wing populism influence citizens’ attitudes toward immigrants on top of pre-existing attitudes. A third type of study relied on a multi-country online experiment (Hameleers et al.) to address another side of the effects-related topic in regards to populist communication: effects on political engagement in terms of peoples’ willingness to talk about, share, or formally support (by signing a petition) the populist content of a message. It turned out that populist messages stressing anti-elitism had the strongest effect on

engagement, while anti-immigrant messages had the strongest *demobilizing* effects. An especially important insight from this study is that national structural context conditions, such as the level of unemployment, seem to moderate the impact of populist communication on the audience. Further studies might go in-depth into the differences between countries in terms of effects of populist messages, which might explain, at least to some extent, the stunning success (or total lack of) of populist parties across Europe.

POPULISM IN POLITICAL DISCOURSE

Last but not least, a third theme addressed the question of how political actors, understood as political communicators who strive to persuade voters, incorporate populist communication into their repertoire of rhetoric. Contributions addressing this aspect focused on political actors' communication via social media platforms, as these platforms provide a medium where politicians can communicate unrestrained by media gatekeepers while reaching a large and diverse audience including people who tune in accidentally. Contributions sought to compare political leaders' communication with regard to populist elements and rank communicators as more or less populist. One comparison focused on the Twitter communication of four politicians — moderate, left- and right-wing — who ran as challengers in the presidential elections of the United States and France (Maurer & Diehl). Another put the spotlight on Facebook postings of more than 80 politicians from the United States, European and Latin American democracies (Zulianiello, Albertini, & Ceccobelli). As a general conclusion, large differences in the extent to which politicians use elements of populist communication as well as in its shades were revealed. Yet, there are also differences between the studies focusing on Facebook and Twitter: While the Twitter study found rather high levels of populism in the communication of all challengers, the Facebook-based study could not confirm the thesis of the existence of a "populist Zeitgeist." Moreover, it found differences between areas, as the spread of elements of populist communication in Latin America is considerably lower in comparison with Western countries. These differences were minor between the tweeting patterns of politicians in France and the United States. I might argue that the major insight of this communicator-centred research is, however, methodological: It concerns the challenge of multi-lingual comparisons of populist communication and how it can be tackled. Both studies show the difficulties inherent in the equivalent measurement of in-vivo political communication, be it on Facebook or Twitter. The greatest of these difficulties is not even the language, but the respective personal parlance and style of the politicians. This poses a huge challenge, especially to automated measurement, that is not yet resolved.

For more information about the COST Action IS1308 please check: www.populistcommunication.eu.

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Context and content of populist political communication: The conference on “Populist political communication” at the Faculty of Political Science and Journalism, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, Poland (April 10–11, 2018)



Prof. Gianpietro Mazzoleni (University of Milan) and prof. Agnieszka Stępińska (Adam Mickiewicz University). Photo by: Bartłomiej Secler

the conference was rather seminar-like, with brief presentations of the recently conducted studies (theoretical background, methods, and findings) followed by long discussions in each session.

From 10 to 11 April 2018, a conference on “Populist political communication” was organized at the Faculty of Political Science and Journalism at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Poland. The conference was organized by a research team that has been studying Polish populist political communication since 2016 (www.populizm.amu.edu.pl). The main purpose of the conference was to provide an opportunity for Polish scholars not only to present findings of their studies, but also discuss the main methodological challenges related to designing and conducting studies on populist political communication. Furthermore, the participants of that two-day event had a chance to discuss their ideas on further projects with their peers who have been studying the same phenomenon for years now. Hence, the structure of the