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Introduction

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Aalberg, T.; de Vreese, C.H.

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Edited by Toril Aalberg, Frank Esser,
Carsten Reinemann, Jesper Strömbäck,
and Claes H. de Vreese

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1 Introduction

Comprehending Populist Political Communication

Toril Aalberg and Claes H. de Vreese

Introduction

Although populist politics is a well-known phenomenon in many European democracies, its communicative aspects have been underexplored or often ignored. Yet—in light of the current large-scale social, political, and economic turmoil of recent populist backlashes against governments, and of the changing media environment—the study of populist political communication has never been more important. The purpose of this book is to provide information and knowledge about the conditions that give rise to the presence (or absence) of populist political communication and about its impact in different European democracies.

Over the years, as populist parties have gained electoral success, an increasing number of researchers have started to study populist parties and their supporters. To understand populism as an increasingly pervasive phenomenon in European politics, it is crucial to understand the characteristics and organization of populist parties as well as their electoral foundation. However, as we will show throughout this book, *communication*—a key element of this phenomenon—has mostly been overlooked. Systematic knowledge is sparse on questions related to populist actors as communicators, to the role of the media, and to the impact of populist communication strategies on citizens. This sparsity is surprising since the populist zeitgeist, as signaled by Mudde (2004) more than a decade ago, was in part seen to be caused by the media's preference for, and receptivity toward, populist actors.

We believe that it is more important now than ever to map, dissect, and explicate the phenomenon of populist political communication. As populism increases over time and space, we need to understand how communication may be related to populism's growth. Given that previously marginalized populist actors have become a significant and powerful part of the political scene in many European countries, an important question is whether their position is related to the way populists communicate and interact with the media.

Although specific, systematic, comparative research is lacking, several arguments have been put forward suggesting that communication plays a significant role in the rise of populism. Populist parties are said to be more dependent on the media for communication because they have weaker party organization compared to the old, traditional parties. Another argument is that the news media tend to welcome the dramatic headlines that are created

by populist actors; some scholars therefore claim that the more commercial media—such as tabloid newspapers and private broadcasters—give increasing attention to populist actors, because the accompanying headlines attract larger audiences (Mazzoleni, Stewart, & Horsfield, 2003). If this association is true, populism will increase as media systems across Europe become more commercialized. Thus, we have a striking paradox: Although it is widely acknowledged that the media and, more broadly, the role of communication are key to understanding the rise and success of populist leaders, parties, and movements, research on populist political communication is scant. The few exceptions that exist are typically scattered across various country-specific case studies in a variety of languages. We therefore have yet to fully understand this phenomenon and the challenges that it poses.

This book offers the first systematic, large-scale, comparative review of extant research on populist political communication in Europe. The review covers research published not only in English but also in the native language of each participating country. Native-language research is a resource of particular value, since most of what we know about populism and communication is based either on the international literature or on only one or two specific cases. In this first chapter, we will provide an introduction to the central debates related to the phenomenon of populist political communication and offer an outline of the book's organization and the method behind the country reviews.

Central Debates

The few studies that have empirically explored populist political communication highlight the role that communication and the media play in populist politics. These studies have broken important ground and point to potentially important problems. But they also have significant shortcomings: they tend to be single-country studies, to offer very small comparisons, and to focus on single elections, organizations, or individuals. They do not capture many of the latest developments or look at populism in an integrated way. Most research also treats populism as a danger to democracy. Yet a more neutral and comprehensive understanding that takes populism seriously as an expression of democratic malaise may be more productive. It might open our eyes to the conditions that are responsible for making this political communicative style currently so popular.

In the study of political communication, the focus typically centers around three key actors: (a) the political parties, candidates, or movements, (b) the media, and (c) citizens as voters and audience. One central insight is the importance of the mass media in widening the appeal of populist political actors. Many scholars maintain that populist actors need the “oxygen of publicity”, which is often supplied by the mass media. For instance, in his examination of European far-right parties, Ellinas (2010) found that the media control the gateway to the electoral marketplace and that they enable smaller, newer groups to reach larger audiences than their resources would ordinarily allow

(see also Bos, van der Brug, & de Vreese, 2010; Mazzoleni et al., 2003). No guarantee is given, however, that all publicity is good publicity. For example, some researchers observe that the media can act as a foe in relation to the appeal of populist actors. As Bos, van der Brug, and de Vreese (2011) found in the Netherlands, how populist actors are portrayed is important. Populist actors often receive critical coverage in the “elite” media and favorable coverage in the popular press (Mazzoleni et al., 2003). That said, other studies suggest that the picture may be more complex with no simple binary divide between elite and tabloid newspapers (Akkerman, 2011).

Some scholars have argued that context is important. For instance, Mazzoleni et al. (2003) note that the media might be more likely to give coverage to populist actors when certain salient issues dominate the news. Similarly, Walgrave and De Swert (2004) found that by focusing on certain issues, such as crime and immigration, the media aided the rise of the populist Vlaams Blok in Belgium (see also Ellinas, 2010). Other studies suggest that populist actors can help their cause through the adoption of particular communication strategies and the use of the Internet, thereby bypassing several obstacles posed by more traditional media (see Atton, 2006; Bartlett, Birdwell, & Littler, 2011; Mazzoleni et al., 2003). Context also seems to influence how populist parties are perceived and how they communicate; for example, successful populist parties seem to lose their protest appeal or even tone down their populism entirely (Schumacher & Rooduijn, 2013; Rooduijn, de Lange, & van der Brug, 2014).

It is important to stress, however, that the study of populist political communication must not be confined to the analysis of populist actors only. Indeed, Jagers and Walgrave (2007) note that populism can also be seen as a political communication *style*, one that contains a central binary between an “us” and a “them” (see Chapter 2 in this volume for a further discussion). In this respect, populist communication is not a question of either/or, but rather one of strength, degree, and type. Others have identified what they call common populist frames (see Caiani & della Porta, 2011; Rydgren, 2005). Studies of populism in the popular media have found that some tabloid media outlets in the United Kingdom readily appropriate populist binaries in relation to immigration and the European Union (Stanyer, 2007). Other studies demonstrate that mainstream political parties and their leaders are not averse to using populist political rhetoric (Cranmer, 2011).

A handful of studies have examined the media’s impact on support for populist actors. These studies have generally found a link (in some countries) between the prominence of anti-immigration issues in the news and the share of support for anti-immigration parties, even when controlling for other factors (see Boomgaarden & Vliegenthart, 2006, 2009; Gerstlé, 2003). Other studies have found that watching commercial television correlates with opposition to immigration, whereas the opposite is true for public service news (Karlsen & Aalberg, 2015; Strabac, Thorbjørn-srud, & Jenssen, 2012). There is no consensus on the effect of different

communication channels, and it might be, for instance, that the Web reinforces the views of those who already identify with extreme political ideas (see Bartlett et al., 2011).

The studies mentioned above have broken important ground and started a timely debate, but in many regards, they have failed to look at populism in an integrated way, since none of them has explored the relationship between populist actors, the media, and citizens cohesively. Without a concerted and co-ordinated effort, we believe that the impact of populist political communication on democratic life cannot be fully understood.

Many of the key shortcomings in the previous literature can be grouped according to three main challenges. The first challenge is to define populist political actors and communication and to determine communication success. While studies have tended to focus on right-wing (neo-populist) political actors and their antagonism toward conventional political elites, the potential diversity of populist communicators must be recognized. The existing understanding of what constitutes populism and populist actors must be rethought, taking account of the diversity of actors and discourses that permeate the mediated public spheres of European democracies. Many, but by no means all, of these actors could be described as right-wing neo-populists. Moreover, a range of left-wing groups have been actively involved in protests (e.g., SYRIZA in Greece, the Socialist Party in the Netherlands, The Left in Germany, and the Left Front and the Communist Party in France). In addition, transient-issue entrepreneurs fighting for single causes are on the rise, including the Pirate Party in Sweden and Germany and the 5 Star Movement in Italy. These examples of populist actors cannot be classified neatly as right-wing neo-populists, although they may share similar populist communication strategies.

The extent to which the use of public relations strategies empowers populist political communicators must be understood. Research in political science and communication science shows that the use of such strategies can enable advocacy groups to set the media agenda, but is this success replicated elsewhere? Similarly, at a micro level, the personal communicative qualities of individual actors require more exploration. To what extent do rhetorical skills, for example, enhance or retard actors' ability to get their message across? Moreover, the spread of the Web and the proliferation of social media have provided new spaces for political actors to exercise their voices and to interact with a new generation of citizens. Is the Web enhancing the communicative potential of populist actors? And if so, in what way? To what extent is the Web being used by populist political actors to engage citizens and mobilize supporters? Of course, it is also important to build on existing piecemeal insights into the populist political communication styles and frames that have been adopted by mainstream political parties in order to further investigate the extent to which this process has taken place. Finally, comprehensive assessments of populist political actors and their communicative activities outside election campaign periods must be made. Understanding the extent to which populist discourse enters the mainstream requires a more inclusive and longer term perspective than mere election campaigns.

The second challenge is to establish the media's role in the promotion of populist politics. We believe that the current view of the media's role in enabling or retarding the growth of populist politics is likely too simplistic. Conclusions on this topic become even more pressing given the widely documented commercialization and growing competition in the media environment and the rise of the Web. In some countries, the competitive online networked environment may provide populist actors with news opportunities that allow them to "crash" the established media gates. With online news being increasingly driven by readers, potential exists for grassroots campaigns to shape news agendas. Drawing on research from the United States, it is possible to imagine situations where extreme views shape the editorial policies of certain media. As the power of traditional, established media outlets wanes in many polities, we need to move away from traditional gatekeeper models and recognize the increasing complexity of the environments in which media organizations now operate. It may well be that commercialization, growing competition, and the Web weaken the traditional publicizing function of established media outlets, but these forces may also encourage some ratings-driven outlets to pander to populist reactionary political agendas and to adopt populist frames on a range of prescient political issues.

The third challenge is to understand the effects that populist messages have on citizens and how citizens engage with populist political communication. Current approaches have focused almost exclusively on election campaigns and the media's impact on support for populist actors. In this context, well-documented trends in national electorates—such as party-voter de-alignment and exposure via different media—might make citizens more susceptible to populist appeals. Those who rely mainly on the tabloid media for news may, for example, be more likely to support populist political parties. There is little exploration, however, of the different possible effects of the media, such as agenda setting, priming, and framing—key areas in media effects research. One recent study based on priming theory showed how a combination of party cues, immigrant cues, and anti-politics cues underlie support for right-wing populism, anti-immigrant attitudes, and political cynicism (Sheets, Bos, & Boomgaarden, 2015).

Such exceptions notwithstanding, the way citizens interact with populist messages and actors in everyday life is generally underexplored. This situation is a paradox, given that citizen engagement with populist political actors and discourses is a crucial part of understanding populism. Another reason why these key factors require exploration is the increased opportunities for citizens to exercise their voice in blogs and via social networking on a range of issues. New possible patterns of political engagement are emerging. But to what extent is the Web used to mobilize support for populism? U.S. research points to extreme views possibly increasingly populating a growing political fringe due to, in part, selective exposure of like-minded actors. But we still need a thorough exploration of public attitudes toward populist messages, the consequences of these messages, and the people most likely to engage with populist messages and in populist political activity.

Comprehending Populist Political Communication

This book is set in the midst of what can be labeled as “populist times,” where ongoing political and societal transformations like globalization and responses to a long recession dominate the agenda. It is highly relevant to map extant and ongoing scholarship on populist political communication to collectively arrive at conclusions that transcend specific electoral moments, specific candidates or parties, or specific media platforms. Consequently, this book aims to be comprehensive and inclusive.

We organize the shortcomings in the previous literature according to the classical distinction between a focus on political actors, a focus on media, and a focus on citizens. While many important questions and challenges lie within each of these pillars—such as the definition of populist actors and communication styles—many interesting questions are likewise to be found where the three pillars intersect. For instance, to fully understand populist political communication, it is important to explore the relationship between political actors and the media in addition to the relationship between media and citizens. In this book, we will search for answers to the questions that are related specifically to these groups as well as to questions that arise at each intersection (see Figure 1.1).

While the purpose of this first chapter is to outline some of the key discussions and shortcomings in existing research on populism and populist political communication, Chapter 2 will outline some of the main theoretical lines of thought and move toward a working definition of populism and populist actors, seeking to explore their activities, communication, and effects in a large-scale comparative context.

This book provides insight into populism and populist political communication from current research and public debates in 24 European countries. We have chosen to present the knowledge from the various countries in groups drawn from four main European geographical areas. Although there are many differences between countries, within these areas are also many similarities. In Northern Europe, for instance, the focus has largely been on typical right-wing, neo-populist parties, whereas in the southern parts of Europe, populism more often also includes left-wing populism and a strong focus on individual populist leaders. In Western Europe, one of the key denominators has been populist parties’ influence on long-established, mainstream parties. Typical for many of the central and eastern European countries is the absence of a populism that is based on immigrant out-groups; rather, a stronger focus centers on other ethnic or religious minorities and anti-elitism.

The individual country chapters (found in Parts II–IV) follow a systematic logic and structure. They begin by providing an overview of country-specific definitions of populism and populist actors and the extent of existing research. All chapters offer a review of country-specific, authoritative, scientific literature published since 1995 that deals with the themes of the three pillars identified earlier: (a) populist actors as communicators and populist communication by political actors, (b) the media and populism, and (c) citizens and the effects of populist messages. The authors have

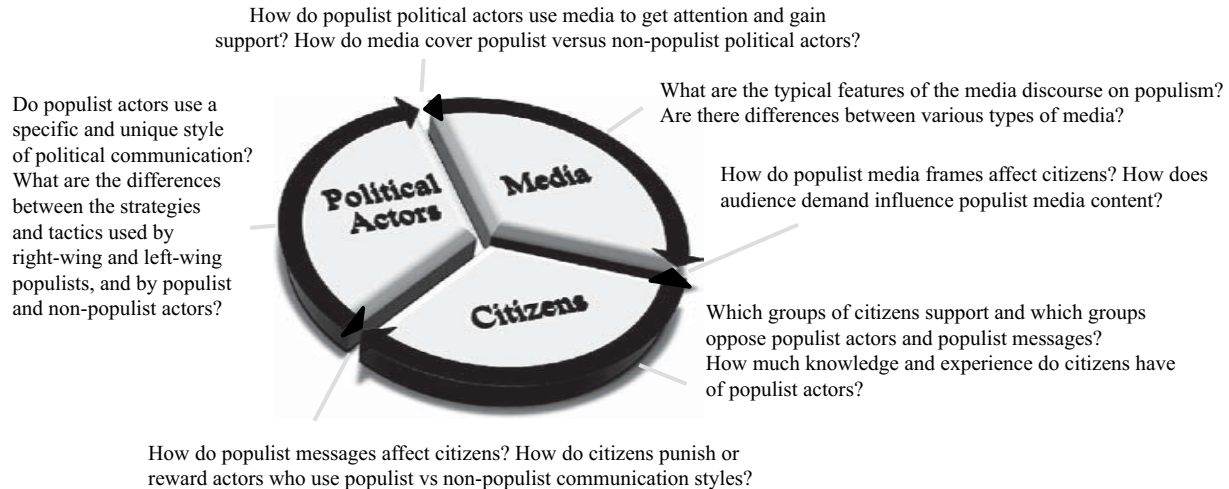


Figure 1.1 The three pillars of populist political communication.

investigated both native language publications and international publications referring to each country. In addition, each chapter summarizes and describes recent developments that have not been reflected in systematic scholarly research.

To avoid a priori inclusion or exclusion of actors and communication patterns, the chapters predominantly include research in which either actors or communication has been labeled populist by academic scholars, or alternatively—if no research exists—in the public debate. Since the term *populism* is uncommon in some countries, in a few instances actors or political communication have been identified as falling under the populism category even if they are not called as such by current research.

To begin with, as a working definition of populism, all authors were asked to refer to the basic indicators of the different types of populism described by Jagers and Walgrave (2007; see also Chapter 2 in this volume). *Complete populism* includes reference and appeals to the people, as well as anti-elitism and exclusion of out-groups. *Excluding populism* includes only reference and appeals to the people and exclusion of out-groups, whereas *anti-elitist populism* includes reference and appeals to the people and anti-elitism. Finally, *empty populism* includes only reference and appeals to the people.

The book concludes with three chapters organized according to the above three pillars. These chapters offer cross-cutting reviews of key findings and identify current gaps in the research literature. Looking at actors, we conclude that many studies emphasize that populist rhetoric is often emotional and includes blame attribution and scapegoats. In many countries in recent years, populist actors have moved closer to political power and government. At the same time, these general observations hold only to some extent, since there is tremendous variation in the type and nature of populist actors.

Regarding the media, we conclude that rising polls often result in media attention to populist actors, that populist actors per se do not seem to suffer from negative news coverage, and that some media are critical of populist actors out of concern for democracy. Again, dissecting these media roles comes with caution, given cross-national variation. Looking at effects, we conclude that—except for a few countries—we have very little knowledge about the typical populist voter or the effects of populist communication on citizens' attitudes.

In addition to summarizing the cross-national findings, the three concluding chapters also provide an overview of conditionalities and factors affecting populist political communication and offer avenues for future systematic and cross-nationally comparable research on this topic.

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