POPULISM IN CONTEXT. A CROSS-COUNTRY INVESTIGATION OF THE FACEBOOK USAGE OF POPULIST APPEALS DURING THE 2019 EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTIONS

Márton Bene
Centre for Social Sciences, Hungarian Academy of Sciences Centre of Excellene &
ELTE Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest

Melanie Magin
Norwegian University of Science and Technology

Jörg Haßler
LMU Munich

Uta Russmann
University of Innsbruck

Darren Lilleker
Bournemouth University

Simon Kruschinski
Johannes Gutenberg-University Mainz

Dan Jackson
Bournemouth University

Vicente Fenollπ
University of Valencia

Xénia Farkas
Centre for Social Sciences, Hungarian Academy of Sciences Centre of Excellene

Paweł Baranowski
University of Wrocław

Delia Balaban
Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca

Recent scholarship demonstrated that social networking platforms (SNPs), especially Facebook, are a convenient and fertile space for populist political communication to proliferate (e.g., Engesser et al., 2017). Facebook enables the publication of multimedia content, with unlimited frequency at relatively negligible costs. This allows populists to reach a mass audience bypassing the filters of journalistic gatekeepers who frequently present populist arguments in a negative way (Wettstein et al., 2018). Research shows that political communication on SNPs is characterized by higher levels of populist sentiment (Engesser et al., 2017), and populist actors are more prominent on SNPs than on other media channels (Ernst et al., 2019). Also, populist appeals prove to be highly popular on SNPs as they provoke more reactions, comments, and shares from users than non-populist appeals, which increases the reach of populist communication (Jost et al., 2020).

Existing works, however, mostly focus only on the prevalence of the three dimensions of populist communication, while less attention has been paid to the overall context of their strategic use. This is a surprising gap as several scholars emphasized that populist communication is a context-dependent strategy (Weyland, 2001) which has two important consequences. First, populist elements are consciously combined with other content (De Bruycker & Rooduijn, 2021) rather than used independently from the immediate context of communication. Second, its usage is also conditioned by actors' political position and strategic goals (Schmuck & Hameleers, 2020). If populist communication is a strategic tool, it is important to uncover the conditions under which it is more likely to appear and identify the elements of communication and political contexts that are strongly associated with the use of populist appeals. By identifying the specific context of populist appeals, we can better understand communication- and actor-related factors that facilitate the heightened presence of populist communication on social media. While some research has focused on certain contextual factors such as topics (De Bruycker & Rooduijn, 2021) or actors' political positions (Schmuck & Hameleers, 2020), a gap in research exists requiring us to analyze in detail what communication- and actor-specific conditions are related to the use of populist appeals on SNPs. To fill this gap, our main research objective is to explore what post- and page-level factors were associated with parties' populist communication on Facebook during the 2019 EP election. Our study brings together common factors from populism research.

Our hypotheses are discussed on two dimensions: post- and page-level. A Facebook-post usually have a topical focus discussed on a certain political level (e.g. local, national or EU-level), serving particular strategic goal (e.g. information, interaction, mobilization) and is communicated via different modalities and styles. Based on the literature, we expect that certain topics (H1 - economy, immigration, social policy, environment), political levels (H2 - European level), strategic goals (H3 - mobilization appeals) and modalities (H4 - visual communication) are more frequently associated with populist appeals that other content elements.

Research indicates that the application of populist communication is not only shaped by the communication content, but also by the political context. Populist communication is 'endemic' in the sense that it is not limited to populist actors (Mazzoleni & Bracciale, 2018). A range of parties uses populist rhetoric strategically in line with their political positions and goals (Schmuck & Hameleers, 2020). We expect that parties will use populist appeals to different extents based on their ideologies (H5 - more extreme and more conservative parties will be more populist) and role as governing or opposition party (H6 - opposition parties will be more populist) at the national level.
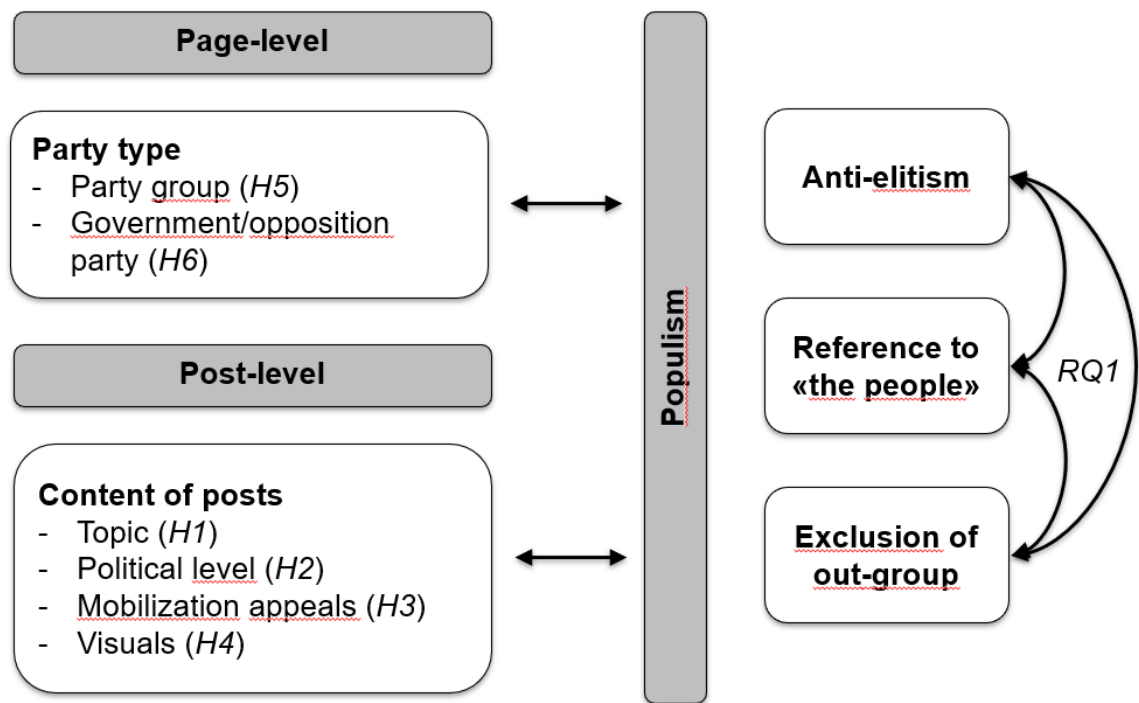

Figure 1. Overview of factors assumed to be associated with populism.

To test our hypotheses and answer our research question, we conducted a quantitative content analysis of parties' Facebook posts during the 2019 EP election. Twelve countries were chosen as the site of our analysis (Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Poland, Romania, Spain, Sweden, and UK). The Facebook posts of all parties from these 12 countries that reached more than 5% of votes in the 2019 EP Election (N of parties = 67, N of posts =8,074) were collected during a four-week investigation period prior to the election.

Our findings show that while there is a remarkable co-occurrence between the subdimensions of populism, the different subtypes of populist appeals are used in specific ways. On post-level, anti-elitism is frequently used in relation to economy, labor and social policy and immigration, people-centric appeals are associated with labor and social policy and used when parties call for action, while out-group messages are not related to other topics beyond immigration. Interestingly, populist appeals do not draw upon visuals more heavily, and their usage are less connected to specific political level. At the party-level it seems that anti-elitism is more often used by parties not belonging

to the EP´s 'grand coalition', while references to out-groups characterize party posts of the far-right EP groups. However, the usage of people centrism, is not explained by parties' ideology. Rather, it seems to be a widely used communication appeal across the political spectrum.

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