

Unpacking the social psychology of populism: A brief introductory note

Sofia Stathi¹  | Rita Guerra² 

¹School of Human Sciences, Institute for Lifecourse Development, University of Greenwich, London, UK

²CIS-IUL, ISCTE-Instituto Universitário de Lisboa, Lisboa, Portugal

Correspondence

Sofia Stathi, School of Human Sciences, Institute for Lifecourse Development, University of Greenwich, London, UK.
Email: S.Stathi@gre.ac.uk

Rita Guerra, CIS-IUL, ISCTE-Instituto Universitário de Lisboa, Portugal.
Email: Ana_Rita_Guerra@iscte-iul.pt

Abstract

Research on populism spans disciplines, theoretical frameworks, and methodologies. As interest in the study of populism rises, social psychology scholars strive to understand (social) psychological factors associated with it. The aim of this Special Issue is to highlight the unique yet complementary role of social psychology in understanding - and possibly tackling - populism. The papers comprising this Special Issue offer an in-depth, comprehensive study of the topic, while including theoretical and methodological approaches to move the research in this field forward. Taken together, the papers provide insights of interest to academics, researchers, as well as policy makers and educators.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Populism is one of the “buzzwords” of the 21st century (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). It became a “sexy” term in everyday political discourse, increasingly used by the media during and after Brexit, and the election of Donald Trump in 2016 (Rooduijn, 2018). The Guardian, one of the major daily British newspapers, indicated that whereas in 1998 about 300 articles referring to populism were published, less than 20 years later, in 2016, this number was more than 2000 (Rooduijn, 2018). This media attention is not surprising considering that support for populism increased in the past years. Taking the European context as an example, voting for populist parties in national elections increased from about 7 per cent to more than 25 per cent since 2000; the number of European countries with populist parties in the government has also increased, from two countries 20 years ago to 11 countries by 2019 (Grindheim, 2019). The interest of psychology scholars in understanding populism and factors associated with it has also increased over the past decade (e.g., Bettache & Chiu, 2018; Mols & Jetten, 2016, 2020; Obradovic et al., 2020; Reicher & Haslam, 2017). This could be the consequence of observing current socio-political events around the world that highlight evidently the appeal of populism on politics and beyond.

Despite the current surge of scholarly attention on populism, interest in populism is far from new. The term was applied as early as in the 19th century, to refer to the People's Party in the United States, and in 1967, a conference was organized by the London School of Economics and Political Science with the single aim of defining populism. According to the verbatim report, scholars aimed at answering one question: “*can a single concept of populism be extrapolated from all the populisms and their aspects which we shall look at; or shall we conclude, on the contrary, that what people call by the same name in different parts of the world and different periods of history are entirely different things...*” (Conference on populism: verbatim report, 1967, p. 3). Interestingly, more than half a century later, scholars still do not have a consensual definition, and refer to populism as a “contested” concept (Brubaker, 2017; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018).

Largely used by lay people to describe certain left- and right-wing political parties and leaders, contemporary scholars agree that populism is a multifaceted concept, which is used to refer to many distinct phenomena and has different meanings. Populism is conceptually approached as an ideology, a movement, a syndrome, a discourse style or frame, as well as a political strategy (see Aslanidis, 2016; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018). It has been conceived primarily as an ideology, which highlights how anti-elite and

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people-centric messages appeal to individuals holding populist attitudes (Mudde, 2004), and is partly associated with other ideologies, such as anti-immigration or anti-globalization (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013; Neuner & Wratil, 2020). From this perspective, there are three core concepts in populism: the pure people, the corrupt elite, and the general will (Mudde, 2004). Most scholars agree that populism refers to differentiation and opposition of two distinct groups, “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite,” which some refer to as vertical differentiation (Brubaker, 2017). Indeed, a “minimal” definition of populism is “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, p. 543).

Despite the fact that a growing body of literature approaches populism as an ideology, there is still considerable debate about the advantages and disadvantages of framing it this way (de la Torre & Mazzoleni, 2019) instead of, for instance, a discursive style (Aslanidis, 2016), of defining populism as mainly involving a vertical differentiation between the pure people versus the corrupt elite that should not be conflated with nationalism (De Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2017), or regarding the multiple meanings of “the people” and the consequent horizontal differentiation between “us” the people and “them” the outside groups, mirroring nationalism (Brubaker, 2017, 2020). Right-wing populism, for instance, relies on a “two-dimensional vision of social space,” combining vertical and horizontal differentiations, targeting both the corrupt elite as well as migrants and all those who are seen as not belonging to the ethnically homogenous nation (Brubaker, 2017, p. 362).

Importantly, regardless of how populism is framed and defined, and the resulting complexities in operationalizing it, one can find key psychological and social psychological constructs intertwined with it. At first glance, we can see classic social psychological processes of self-categorization, influence, and politicized social identities at the core of populism (see also Aslanidis, 2020). Obradovic and colleagues (2020) recently offered an interesting psychological approach to populism, highlighting the importance of psychology to help understand the demand side of populism. While most research has focused on the supply side of populism, examining political parties' manifestos and discourses of political leaders, less is known about the demand side, specifically about populist attitudes and what explains them (Hawkins et al., 2020). That is, while scholars agree on the main features of populist leaders' discourses and rhetoric, it is still not clear how voters internalize these discourses and what psychological factors account for that. Obradovic and colleagues (2020) elaborate on the importance of psychology in the effort to understand the demand side of populism, focusing on three main factors: the classic social psychological division between us and them (i.e., social categorization and intergroup dynamics); economic and cultural processes related to status concerns; and collective emotions that are mobilized in political communication.

This special issue builds on these current advances, proposing that a more comprehensive approach can be offered by—specifically—a

social psychological lens to populism. Approaching populism from a social psychological perspective can shed light not only on the individual and situational factors explaining populism support, but mainly capture its dynamic interplay relying on the classic Lewinian “person-environment interaction” approach (Lewin, 1936). Social psychology offers then a unique theoretical and methodological frame to understand how individual factors explaining the demand side of populism (e.g., economic grievances, cultural anxiety) interact with and are affected by situational, supply conditions (e.g., strategic party positioning, charismatic leadership). Indeed, a recent proposal for an integrative framework to understand populist radical right parties highlighted precisely the need for research focusing on the “feedback loop between ‘supply’ and ‘demand’” sides (Mols & Jetten, 2020, p. 3). A recent example that illustrates this interplay is offered by Kende and Kreko's (2020) analysis of the rise of right-wing populism support in East-Central European countries. The authors eloquently highlight how nationalism and normative prejudice toward minorities on the demand side are activated by an anti-immigrant, threatening discourse on the supply side. With a social psychological approach, we can ultimately help identify ways of successfully challenging the increasing support for populism.

2 | CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE PRESENT SPECIAL ISSUE

In line with the recent agenda proposed by Aslanidis (2020), highlighting the importance of self-categorization and collective, politicized identities, this special issue offers a broader approach to the topic, which can help us frame key facets on both the demand and supply side of populism, and importantly understand their dynamic interaction. This is attained by delving into (a) both antecedents of support for populism examining, for example, the role of individual differences (such as collective narcissism, national nostalgia, ingroup identification) and structural conditions (such as deprivation), (b) outcomes of embracing a populist ideology on both the group and individual level, such as hostile outgroup attitudes and restoring control respectively, and (c) the interaction of demand-supply examining, for example, how individuals' beliefs, emotions, identities, and social representations are activated and mobilized by populist parties' messages and narratives.

We note that the contributions of this special issue, as most of the social psychological literature, approach populism as predominantly associated with a right-wing, nationalist ideology (but see Urbanska et al.). The authors present empirical evidence from several countries where populism is shaping the political discourse: Hungary (Lantos & Forgas), Germany (Hirsch, Veit, & Fritsche; Mahendran, English, & Nieland; Ardag & Thomeczek), the Netherlands (Smeekes, Wildschut, & Sedikides), France (Urbanska, Pehrson, & Guimond), Sweden (Mahendran, English, & Nieland), the United Kingdom (Mahendran, English, & Nieland), Ireland (Mahendran, English, & Nieland), and Australia (Flannery, Watt, & Phillips). This is important as it showcases that, while populism manifests fiercely in several

countries, scholars take notice and indeed examine the phenomenon. To this end, both contextual and generalizable processes can be uncovered and pave the path for a more in-depth comprehension of relevant phenomena.

Golec de Zavala and Keenan provide a theoretical framework for using national collective narcissism—defined as “an ingroup identification tied to an emotional investment in an unrealistic belief about the unparalleled greatness of an ingroup” (de Zavala et al., 2009, p. 1074)—to understand right-wing populism. Essentially, the authors delve into the dynamic relation of demand-supply sides of populism focusing on how individuals' endorsement of collective narcissism is intertwined with populist narratives that mobilize it, and explaining this way why illiberal right-wing populism is so substantially appealing.

Lantos and Forgas place their empirical questions in the demand side of populism, examining collective narcissism and its role in predicting populist attitudes. They start by providing a reflection regarding the rise of populism in Hungary and continue with two research studies that provide evidence regarding the role of national collective narcissism on negative attitudes toward the European Union and support for the populist party Fidesz.

Adopting a social identity framework, Urbanska, Pehrson, and Guimond explore the role of identification with the government on past voting behavior and current voting intentions for a populist party, and likelihood to switch from a non-populist to a populist party. Their results demonstrate that lower identification with the government predicts support for (right or left) populist parties, above and beyond populist attitudes, highlighting the key role of social identification processes for understanding the demand side of populism.

Smeekes, Wildschut, and Sedikides focus on national nostalgia, that is longing for the nation's—positively remembered—past, and how it relates to (voting) support for populist radical right parties, demonstrating the importance of emotional factors within the interplay of demand and supply sides of populist radical right parties. With a representative sample of native Dutch adults, the authors find positive associations between national nostalgia and voting, and sympathy for populist radical right parties. These associations are mediated by greater endorsement of ethnic nationhood and anti-Muslim attitudes.

Flannery, Watt, and Phillips explore the newly introduced construct of “right-wing protective popular nationalism,” which conceptualizes right-popular nationalism and draws on the desire to protect and preserve the national culture and way of life. The authors present a study conducted in the Australian context, examining the detrimental consequences of right-wing protective popular nationalism on intergroup relations, showing that it predicts and moderates aggressive tendencies toward minority groups.

Hirsch, Veit, and Fritsche provide a motivated social cognition approach to right-wing populism, building on research on causal attribution and control. In two experimental studies conducted in Germany, the authors find that blaming antagonistic outgroups (such as immigrants) as well as prejudice—both of which often portray in

the messages of populist leaders—increase feelings of control. The findings offer a new motivated social cognition lens to understand the supply side of populism.

Ardag and Thomeczek build on the ideational approach to populism, examining the interplay of demand and supply sides of populism in Germany, through an online experiment with German voters. Using a person-centered approach to unpack populist attitudes (latent profile analysis), the authors empirically demonstrate that the impact of populist attitudinal profiles (high people-centrism, anti-elitism, right-wing authoritarianism, and collective narcissism) is contingent on its activation by environmental cues (e.g., Pegida party slogans).

Mahendran, English, and Nieland rely on social representations theory and a dialogical self-approach to critically analyze the concept of *home*, how it is mobilized by the supply side of populism, in populist leaders' narratives, and how this is intertwined with citizens actual social representations of home. Qualitative analysis of European citizens interviews highlights three main social representations of home (as a threatened space, a birthplace, and a lifespan journey) and how these are reflected in populist projects.

The thematic overlap between social psychology, political psychology, and political science provides not only fruitful research directions, but also an exciting analytical framework of sociopolitical events (see also Aslanidis, 2020). Underlining the role of social psychology in this frame is critical, and can provide outputs relevant not only to academics but, critically, to policy makers and educators. Such outputs can potentially be used in the effort to increase political literacy from an early age, allowing a more critical evaluation of populist messages and, possibly, minimizing populist appeal. This, of course, remains to be tested and would certainly require active, fluent collaboration among relevant stakeholders (such as researchers, practitioners, and educators). We thus believe this special issue is highly topical and may provide an avenue of communication of current theoretical and empirical perspectives that will stimulate an informed discussion on understanding the appeal of populism, its consequences, and ways of tackling it. This way, we aim to spark a scientific dialogue that will enhance social psychological theory and practice, and will advance our understanding of current (and future) sociopolitical issues.

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ORCID

Sofia Stathi  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1218-5239>

Rita Guerra  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3184-5164>

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