

Us and them: How populist parties get their message across

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Current discussions about politics – be it European, British, or American – almost inevitably end up being discussions about populism. Yet we know little about how populist parties communicate their messages. Focusing on this area, and drawing on extensive research from across Europe, [Toril Aalberg](#), [Frank Esser](#), [Carsten Reinemann](#), [Jesper Stromback](#), and [Claes de Vreese](#) share some key findings on populist political communication.

In light of ongoing social, political, and economic turmoil – and recent populist backlashes against incumbent governments – the study of populism has perhaps never been more important. Yet existing research on populism tends to focus on parties and voters. To understand populism as an increasingly pervasive phenomenon in European politics, it is just as crucial to study the characteristics and organisation of populist parties as their electoral foundation. Indeed, as the Brexit referendum showed, the communicative aspects are also key to understanding the electoral outcome.

The Leave and Remain campaigns were able to make bold claims – not unusual for campaigns on European matters. However, populist political communication was also readily present: messages about self-serving elites, about out-groups – whether immigrants or the EU as a whole – were omnipresent, all while the campaigns were eager to define themselves as representing the ‘ordinary people’. These elements fit strongly with current definitions of populism.

Almost a decade ago, colleagues Jagers and Walgrave suggested a distinction between different types of populism: complete populism, which includes reference and appeals to the people, anti-elitism, and exclusion of outgroups; excluding populism, which includes only reference and appeals to the people, and exclusion of outgroups; anti-elitist populism, which includes reference and appeals to the people together with anti-elitism; empty populism, which includes only reference and appeals to the people.

Despite the plethora of definitions, references to, or the communicative construction of, “the people” should be regarded as the *key* component of populist messages, with anti-elitism and anti-outgroup stances serving as optional additional elements. These elements can be combined in various ways, resulting in different types of populism.

Constructing an in-group of “the people” lies at the heart of populist political communication. “The people” can have different meanings, and refer to the people as a sovereign group, as a class, as an ethnic group, as a nation etc. The additional elements – anti-elite and anti-outgroup messages – can be regarded as functional equivalents that define the standard to which “the people” (“we”) are contrasted, and strengthen individual identification with the in-group – they foster in-group favouritism, and contribute to self-enhancement, reducing self-uncertainty.

In current European scholarship there is a long list of case studies that help us understand the role of the communication strategies of, for example, Le Pen, Wilders or Orban. There are studies of how the media cover populist actors or launch campaigns themselves which are seen by some as expressions of the so-called media populism. Even still, little systematic evidence is available on the specific role of communication.

In light of this, the research in the new book [Populist Political Communication in Europe](#) is unique, covering work published in 24 languages. We show that on the side of populist actors we often find rhetoric that is emotional, includes blame attribution and scapegoats, uses straightforward and sometimes violent language, and presents simplistic solutions to problems. Again, the essence of populist communication consists of references to the people, anti-elitism, and the exclusion of various out-groups. Such an understanding of populist political communication is

not merely theoretical but uses examples from several countries and finds empirical evidence of such strategies.

Looking at the media and how they cover populist parties across Europe we also identify three cross-national patterns: the previously limited coverage increased, often spurred by rising poll figures; with the increase in coverage we often see an increase in “negative” coverage – but given the anti-elite and anti-establishment feeling among many citizens, such negative coverage is not actually always negative for populist actors; some media actively engage in critical coverage of populist actors out of concern for democracy. In this way, we can think about the role of the media as populism by the media, populism through the media, and populist citizen journalism.

As scholars we have a wealth of research in different countries. Much of this knowledge remains undisclosed because it is published in different languages. But at the same time, there is a quest for understanding the popularity of populist actors. This goes for Britain, but also for continental Europe and the US in light of its current presidential campaign. We believe that not only *including* but *focusing* on the communicative aspects of populism will help us to better understand one of the hallmarks of contemporary politics.

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Note: This article draws on the authors' edited book [Populist Political Communication in Europe](#). The article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of EUOPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics. It originally appeared at our sister site, [British Politics and Policy at LSE](#).

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