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DOI

[10.1111/pops.12840](https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12840)

Publication date

2022

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Political Psychology

License

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Citation for published version (APA):

Maher, P. J., Lüders, A., Erisen, E., Rooduijn, M., & Jonas, E. M. (2022). The Many Guises of Populism and Crisis: Introduction to the Special Issue on Populism and Global Crises. *Political Psychology*, 43(5), 819-826. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12840>

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The Many Guises of Populism and Crisis: Introduction to the Special Issue on Populism and Global Crises

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Populism is a powerful social force that has reshaped the political landscapes of many nations since the turn of the 21st century. Much of the success of populist movements is attributed to various social crises and a deep dissatisfaction with political systems. In the present issue, we sought to find papers that investigate what drives the demand for populist politics during crises on a psychological level and, correspondingly, how populist rhetoric influences the way individuals think about, and respond, to crises. In this editorial, we introduce a multidisciplinary issue and summarize the key themes stemming from the articles included. The contributions addressed various forms of crises; from identity issues to global transformations, and various aspects of populism; from the antiestablishment attitudes of the public, to the populist rhetoric of political actors. There was also a key theme centered on the role of emotions. We believe that these topics are of great interest to political psychologists of any mold. We hope that this special issue can play a part in increasing our understanding of how populism thrives during crises and in driving future research on this topic.

KEY WORDS: Populism, Attitudes, Emotion, Threat

The study of populism can be traced back to at least the last 50 years (Rooduijn, 2019), but events of the last two decades in particular have brought increased attention and an intensified scrutiny to the concept. In particular, the election of Donald Trump and the result of the Brexit Referendum spurred a renewed interest among academics and journalists in the West. The term is now firmly embedded in public discourse (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017), although there is great inconsistency in its use. On the one hand, political leaders refer to populism as a source of pride or democratic superiority (e.g.,

Highlights

- The meaning attributed to populism in specific national contexts shapes support for crises response among supporters. When science scepticism became associated with anti-elitism during the COVID-19 pandemic, populist supporters relied on common-sense arguments to oppose restrictions. Yet, anti-elitism can also encourage support for crises mitigation, especially in a national contexts that include inclusionary populist parties.
- Social exclusion and crises of belonging are important drivers of populist support. Exclusion stemming from economic deprivation is a particularly important predictor of populism and populist voting. Deficits in social belonging are most strongly associated with right-wing populist support.
- There is a counter-intuitive element to the strategy needed for populist and anti-populist emotional communications. Populist actors communicate more positive emotions during times of crises, and more negative emotions during times of relative calm. In the case of pro-establishment rhetoric, negative emotional responses are especially strong among populist radical right supporters.

MSS, see Schwörer, 2021). On the other hand, it has been described as a syndrome of demagoguery (Weyland, 2001) and a source of evil (Galais & Rico, 2021). Perhaps most prominently in Europe today, populism is professed as a sign of decay in democratic institutions and a threat to global political systems (Schwörer, 2021). Indeed, the populist label has become a pejorative term that is a tool of political rhetoric in itself (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). Despite these disparaging connotations (which can be unfair; see Aslanidis, 2017), populism has not lost its appeal at the ballot box, and populist parties continue to poll highly across Europe and around the world (e.g., Rooduijn et al., 2019). Much of the more recent populist successes have been attributed, in large part, to various economic and social crises (Brubaker, 2017).

Populism thrives during times of social, cultural, and political crises. Populist attitudes are consistently associated with anxiety about the future of one's group or country, with anger, protest, insecurity, and an overall pessimism about the state of society (Elchardus & Spruyt, 2016; Jay et al., 2019). Indeed, the populist surge of the last decade was buoyed by economic and social upheaval, including the great recession (Kriesi & Pappas, 2015) and the refugee crisis (e.g., Mols & Jetten, 2016). Today, the crisis of COVID-19 has provided a renewed focus for many populist movements (Montiel et al., 2021) and foreseeable future challenges such as the refugee streams and diplomatic discords created by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the threat of climate change, have the potential to fuel populist sentiment for many years to come. To address current and future challenges in the study of populism, researchers should adopt a multifaceted and nuanced evaluation of populism from the perspective of the individual. Hence, in this special issue we present an interdisciplinary collection of articles addressing populism in various national contexts and with different methodologies.

Despite the recent boom in populist research, the field has faced challenges in conceptual and methodological focus, and this is something we were mindful of when curating this issue. In an overview of the field, Rooduijn (2019) made the case for future research on populism to apply more narrow and coherent conceptualizations, while at the same time remaining open to cross-disciplinary integration to drive the development of new research questions. On the first point, a consensual definition of populism across the articles presented here is that of a set of ideas centered on the core components of people-centrism and antielitism. Individual articles focus on one or both of these factors, addressing them at an attitudinal, rhetorical, or behavioral level. This definition is broadly consistent with the ideational approach to populism (Hawkins et al., 2018) and the commonly cited

conceptualization of populism as a “thin ideology” (Mudde, 2004), that can be flexibly applied to several host ideologies under various societal conditions.

On the second point, it was important to us to have an interdisciplinary special issue. Given the flexible nature of populism as a set of ideas, attempts to understand the many different manifestations of populism under one single lens are, to some extent, doomed to fail. With respect to populism’s relationship with crises, a cross-disciplinary and cross-national focus is required. It is common for societal unrest to drive dissatisfaction with the political system, but it is unclear what drives *populist demand* in particular, and this is likely to vary across contexts. Indeed, there are many ways to construct an “us vs. them” categorization and offer a target for anger, without the core themes of people-centrism and antielitism (e.g., Reicher & Hopkins, 1996). In this issue, we present articles that address populism and crises from many different angles with careful conceptualizations that effectively distinguish it from broad ideologies and related concepts.

Some key highlights from the findings presented in this special issue include: (1) new insights into the role of emotions in populist rhetoric; (2) novel categorizations of threat that help isolate psychological mechanisms; (3) broad and in-depth investigations of the link between relative deprivation and populist appeal; and (4) systematic approaches to identifying key contextual differences in manifestations of populism across Europe. On emotions, Widmann (this issue) finds that populist parties communicate opposing emotions during times of crises versus calm times and explores the strategic reasons for this asymmetry. Furthermore, Schumacher et al. (this issue) discover a novel congruency effect in citizens’ emotional responses to populist rhetoric. On the psychological mechanisms of threat, Dennison and Turnbull-Dugarte (this issue) introduce the concept of global transformation as a particular form of threat and show that the resulting populist support is driven by a fear of societal change itself, rather than any loss of sovereignty that may arise. On relative deprivation, Manunta and colleagues (this issue) demonstrate that identity motive frustrations can partially explain the link between interpersonal, but not personal, relative deprivation, and populism. Finally, on cross-national variations, Staerkle et al. (this issue) delineate variations in the relationship between different dimension of populism and science skepticism across Europe, while Lagenkamp and Bienstman (this issue) conversely reveal cross-national commonalities, including a general tendency for right-wing populists to appeal more to the socially isolated.

As a whole, we invited submissions that address the psychology of populism’s relationship with crises, variations in this relationship across different movements, and what this relationship tells us about the nature of populism itself. In particular, we encouraged articles that offered coherent operationalization and an interdisciplinary focus. In the end, we have included eight articles that tackle these questions from various perspectives and using a range of different methodologies. We have research focusing on the supply side (Van Prooijen et al., this issue) and the demand side (Langenkamp & Bienstman, this issue), on the psychology of the masses (Dennison & Turnbull-Dugarte, this issue), and the rhetoric of populist actors in response to crises (Widmann, this issue). Indeed, this is a truly multidisciplinary issue, with contributions from experts from the fields of social psychology and sociology, as well as the communication and political sciences. We hope that this diversity in theories, methods, and disciplinary angles will advance the understanding of populism and spark future research that combines parts of the presented repertoire. Below, we summarize the main contributions.

Variations in Forms of Populism

Populism manifests in different ways across different political contexts, and so it is with the relationship between populism and crises (Aslanidis, 2021). In some nations, so-called “economic populism” can emerge in response to financial crises (e.g., Stavrakakis et al., 2018), while in others,

a more nativist brand of cultural populism may emerge as a response to immigration concerns (Brubaker, 2017). Two articles in this issue exemplify the importance of political context by studying contemporary populist movements using different methods. In particular, Gonthier et al. explore a specific national movement in the form of the Yellow Vests in France, while Staerke et al. investigate differences in the relationship between populism and COVID-19-inspired science skepticism across five different nations.

Rather than modeling crisis-solving motivations regarding climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic as a direct product of populist attitudes, Staerke and colleagues go beyond the simple expectation of a negative association between the two and shed light on a more nuanced relationship affected by science skepticism and the country context. Reporting on findings from structural-equation models based on cross-sectional studies conducted in five different countries in Europe (Switzerland, France, Finland, Greece, and Italy), they show how the people sovereignty and antielitism dimensions of populism affect science skepticism across countries. Once the impact is positive, the defense of common-sense knowledge against science becomes detrimental to taking individual responsibility for, and supporting, policies on crisis mitigation. Furthermore, the meaning attributed to populism in a specific country shapes populist attitudes' direct impact on crisis-solving motivations. While people sovereignty enhances the sense of individual responsibility for crisis mitigation in France and Italy, antielitism increases support for pandemic government intervention in Finland and Switzerland. The authors tie together different strands of the literature and show that the destabilizing impact of science skepticism on crisis-solving motivations has its roots in experiences of relative deprivation across all surveyed countries.

In also examining relationships between populism and crises, Gonthier et al. offer significant insights into one of the largest and most powerful populist movements in recent Europe—the French Yellow Vests movement. Using a sample of nearly 3,000 Yellow Vests supporters and a conjoint experiment, the authors analyzed candidate preferences among this leaderless bottom-up-driven protest movement. By approaching populism from a utilitarian perspective, they emphasize the importance of people sovereignty as a central populist demand. The author's present findings, suggesting that expressed support for the Citizens Initiative Referendum (i.e., a key demand of the YV movement), predicted candidate support more so than other potential features such as sociodemographic and ideological similarity. Indeed, support for the referendum outperformed mere antiestablishment statements suggesting that populist sentiments may be about more than individual discontent and motivated by constructive rather than destructive concerns.

Variations in Forms of Crises

Much has been written about the relationship between populism and social exclusion (e.g., Obradović et al., 2020), and this is a particularly important area of research as we live through what has been termed an epidemic of loneliness (Jeste et al., 2020). In this issue, articles from Manunta et al. (this issue) and Langenkamp et al. (this issue) provide new perspectives on this topic.

In the first case, Manunta and colleagues propose that the processes of motivated identity construction (Vignoles, 2011) are involved in explaining the relationship between populist attitudes and exclusion. The researchers conducted two survey studies in France and showed with the help of structural-equation models that status-based identity threat mediated the links between different forms of relative deprivation and populism. In particular, the identity motive of frustrated belonging (i.e., feelings of social exclusion) was central to explain this pattern. Thus, identity threat seems to be a crucial variable to explain why people feel attracted to populist ideas. The perception of having a lower economic status in society leads to the frustration of identity motives due to economic

deprivation, especially the motive to belong, which in turn predicted populism and populist voting. As such, relative deprivation can be measured on different levels, such as on an intergroup and inter-individual level as well as on a temporal level compared to their own position that all led to feelings of social exclusion (frustration of belonging) with regard to one's economic position. Thus Manunta et al. discover a missing link in the understanding of how social-economic distress and populism are related by integrating economic distress with the frustration of identity motives, especially the motive to belong.

In the second case, Langenkamp and Bienstman used multilevel models to test the quality of social relationships and intentions to vote for populist parties of differing ideologies across 25 European nations ($n = 95,866$). While previous work had explored this connection from the point of view of social capital, these authors take a more psychological approach by examining the quality of social connections and group memberships. Furthermore, they theorize that the underlying narratives of opposing host ideologies (i.e., left vs. right populism) correspond to different degrees with the affective needs of individuals with weak social belonging. Their results reveal that weak social belonging is positively related to lower electoral turnout and votes for populist parties. These findings evidence not only that the quality of social relationships is an important predictor of votes for nonpopulist parties, but also the importance of considering the host ideology. For parties of the right, the relationship between poor social connection and ballot-box support held, but for those on the left no such relationship existed. The authors discuss both psychology and sociological drivers of these relationships.

A third conceptualization of social crises is presented by Dennison and Turnbull-Dugarte (this issue). The authors gather evidence from India and the United Kingdom to investigate the relationship between populist attitudes and the perceptions of global transformations. In particular, they explore the levels of perceived threat posed by six global transformations (climate change, migration, digitalization, pandemics, financial and economic integration, and terrorism) and to three objects of threat (national way of life, national economy, and humanitarian concerns). Based on three different studies—one experiment and observational studies in the United Kingdom (with data coming from the British Election Study) and India—the authors find that populist attitudes are associated with levels of perceived threat posed by all six types of transformations. Moreover, they show that the possibility of global governance solutions to the six transformations under study do not fuel the levels of perceived threat. This suggests that the perception of threat is a consequence of the social transformations themselves rather than a potential global-governance response. These findings support the ideational conceptualization of populism according to which populism is a thin ideology that should be distinguished from other concepts like nationalism or left–right attitudes.

Populism and Emotions

On an emotional level, it is most commonly negative affections that people associate with populism (Müller, 2016). Of course, the topics of populism and crises will be associated with fear and anger, but on the so-called supply side, emotional rhetoric should harness both positive and negative feelings. In this issue, we have articles that explore how populist rhetoric builds on hopes and fears, how populist attitudes are related to nostalgia, and whether populist messages arouse both positive and negative affect more generally.

The topic of political party rhetoric is reexamined in a contribution by Widmann. The author follows a big data approach to examine changes in populist rhetoric during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the first part of his analysis, Widmann uses a trained algorithm (i.e., word embeddings and neural network classifier) to analyze changes in the sentiment of social media posts from government and populist party officials in four European countries. His

findings suggest an intriguing contortion of emotional expression in response to the crisis. While in noncrisis times, populist parties communicate negative emotions (i.e., fear) and governmental parties positive emotions (i.e., hope), this pattern substantially reversed during the first wave of the pandemic. The author offers as an explanation that hope appeals may have helped populist to maintain an antielitist narrative and prevent potential rally-'round-the-flag effects. In a second analytical step, Widmann investigates the potential impact of these appeals on public opinion. Using vector autoregression as a methodological tool, he shows that increased online spreading of hope messages by populist leaders were associated with increased hope rhetoric in tweets that were sent out by populist party (but not government party) supporters the following day. In sum, the results show how populist leaders flexibly adjust their rhetoric and how these changes may influence populist supporters.

Turning to another category of emotions, research presented by Van Prooijen et al. (this issue) suggest that one reason why people find populism appealing is because of its associated nostalgic feelings which imply a promise for a better future by returning to the past. The authors conducted three studies of which the main finding is that nostalgia is related to populist attitudes independent of political orientation. Building on previous research, the authors show in Study 1 that the effect of collective angst on populist attitudes was mediated by personal and collective nostalgia. However, the causal order remained unclear and employing an experimental manipulation of nostalgia did not increase populist attitudes or intentions to vote for a populist candidate. Alternatively, Study 3 found that an experimental manipulation of a populist rhetoric did increase feelings of nostalgia. More specifically, a populist speech (compared to a pluralistic speech) increased feelings of (personal and collective) nostalgia—which moreover mediated the effect of the speeches on populist attitudes. Thus, it still remains unclear whether the effect between nostalgia and populist attitudes goes in both directions (people respond to movements that connect to their nostalgic feelings and those movements enhance these feelings to increase support) because feelings of nostalgia might be more easily affected by an experimental manipulation whereas populist attitudes might be part of a more stable worldview.

Finally, using physiological measures of emotional responses, Schumacher and colleagues examine the affective responses that populist rhetoric evokes. Clearly, populist sentiments enthruse some and anger others, but for whom is populist rhetoric, particularly its antiestablishment component, arousing, and who has positive or negative affective responses? While several previous studies have analyzed self-reports of anger or anxiety, there is no work that examines immediate, uncontrollable physiological responses. In particular, the authors study for whom populist antiestablishment rhetoric is arousing and who responds positively or negatively. They conducted several lab-in-the-field experiments at different sites in the Netherlands (e.g., music festivals, religious gatherings). Arousal was measured with facial electromyography (fEMG), and valence by examining the activity of the facial muscles. They compare affective responses for different groups and explore which specific parts of the antiestablishment message evoke affective responses. The results show that although there are no overall differences in affective responses to proestablishment and antiestablishment rhetoric, several noteworthy differences exist across groups. In particular, responses differ along the lines of voter behavior and education. When it comes to arousal, both the lower educated and those who vote for populist radical-right (PRR) parties stand out: In comparison to others, both groups are more strongly aroused by proestablishment rhetoric. PRR voters also distinguish themselves by responding with more negative valence to a proestablishment message. This suggests that we are witnessing an incongruence effect: It is not messages that are *congruent* with someone's prior attitudes that result in (negative) affective responses, but rhetoric that is in *conflict* with someone's existing attitudes. This raises questions about what an antiestablishment counter-frame should look like and what its (emotional) effects will be.

Conclusion

As a whole, the work presented in this special issue reinforces many of the previous findings on the psychology of populism, with added insights into how populism relates to social and emotional crises. For example, we have long known that populism is a destabilizing force in times of crises, but by examining the issue of science skepticism during COVID-19, Staerkle et al. (this issue) highlighted the complex role that populist attitudes can play in determining support for response strategies. They further propose that relative deprivation can explain novel ways in which this relationship exists across different nations. By considering populism from a utilitarian lens, Gonthier et al. (this issue) emphasize the potential of populism to act as a corrective rather than disruptive element within the political arena.

On a psychological level, we have long known that populism is related to social isolation, but the articles within provide new insights into the nature of this relationship by emphasizing identity-based concerns and how the quality of social relationships interacts with support for different host ideologies. Finally, we know that populist appeal builds upon emotional sentiments that appeal to both fear and glory, hope and despair. Van Prooijen et al. (this issue) questioned the causal nature of the relationship between populism and nostalgia and found that populist rhetoric can increase feelings of nostalgia. Consistently, Widmann (this issue) examines how populist actors are strategic and flexible in their use of emotional appeals to populism.

Of course, there are many aspects of populism that are not covered in this special issue. Although many articles investigate cross-national differences in populism, there is very little research from the global south included (however, see Dennison and Turnbull-Dugarte, this issue). Instead, there is a Eurocentric element to this Special Issue, and we invite readers to consider this before overgeneralizing the findings herein. For instance, consider that populism has more negative connotations in Europe in comparison to South America (De Nadal, 2021), where it is more common for populist movements to be inclusive and progressive (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013). Indeed, while European populism is often perceived as a threat to democracy, many Latin American populist movements focus on expanding and strengthening democratic procedures (de la Torre, 2019). In addition, there is little focus on charismatic populist leaders in this issue (however, see Gonthier et al., this issue). This again may reflect the Eurocentric nature of the contributions. In contrast to many European populists, Latin America has many examples of populist political movements that were formed in a top-down fashion around leaders like Hugo Chávez and Rafael Correa (Levitsky & Roberts, 2011). Of course, there are many examples of Latin American-inspired populism within Europe (De Nadal, 2021), but the above are important differences to note at a general level. This issue is not fully equipped to address many of the distinctions between western and nonwestern populism.

We sought articles that investigated what drives the demand for populist politics on a psychological level and, correspondingly, how populist rhetoric influences the way individuals think, feel, and behave. Overall, the novel insights gained here stem from coherent conceptualizations of populism that weave together theoretical approaches from various disciplinary backgrounds, including theories of relative deprivation and social identity. In the end, we hope the articles of this issue make a strong contribution to the overall understanding of the psychology of populism and to the way in which research on this topic develops into the future.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

We thank all those who submitted their work for this special issue, as well as those who acted as reviewers and external editors. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Paul J. Maher, Department of Psychology, University of Limerick, Limerick, Ireland. E-mail: paul.maher@ul.ie. Open access funding provided by IReL.

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