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*Concepts, uses and contexts*

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#### DOI

[10.4324/9781003333326-9](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003333326-9)

#### Publication date

2025

#### Document Version

Final published version

#### Published in

The Routledge Handbook of Political Campaigning

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[Link to publication](#)

#### Citation for published version (APA):

Bos, L. (2025). Populist rhetoric: Concepts, uses and contexts. In D. G. Lilleker, D. Jackson, B. Kalsnes, C. Mellado, F. Trevisan, & A. Veneti (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Political Campaigning* (pp. 87-99). (Routledge International Handbooks). Routledge.  
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003333326-9>

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# 6

## POPULIST RHETORIC

### Concepts, uses, and contexts

*Linda Bos*

#### **Introduction**

Politics is by its very nature complex, disorganized, and multifaceted. Political actors have the responsibility of making sense of this complex political reality by bringing order to the chaos. By dividing society into two “homogenous and antagonistic groups” (Mudde, 2004), the people and the elite, populist politicians do this in a very distinctive fashion. Through employing populist rhetoric, they discursively create these two entities, making it plain to their audience who belongs to each group – the people and the elite – and how they should be assessed. The elite are immoral and corrupt, in contrast to the people, who are by definition good, moral, and hardworking. The popularity of populist movements around the world proves that this extremely condensed Manichean view of the political universe is incredibly potent.

This chapter gives an overview of the current state-of-the-art of research on populist rhetoric, by first conceptualizing the phenomenon and laying out where it can be found in communication. I will dive into populism’s mobilizing and persuading qualities by describing the mechanisms via which its rhetoric persuades voters and why its message is so alluring. I will go more into detail about this using a current case study that allows for comparison across contexts: the COVID-19 pandemic. The impact of the pandemic on populist rhetoric will be discussed in general terms, along with examples of the shapes populist rhetoric took in this worldwide crisis situation, and how these forms vary across contexts and communicators, after which I will elaborate on the potential attractiveness and effects of populist rhetoric in a crisis context. Finally, I will highlight some challenges and avenues for future research.

### Conceptualization: What is populist rhetoric?

While the field of (political) populism research has been conducive for lively academic discussions on the definition and conceptualization of the subject, in recent years, the dust has settled. Scholars have reached consensus in using Mudde's definition of populism as 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" (2004, p. 543). I will unpack this later but would like to emphasize here that while agreement has been reached on the core elements or the definition of populism (pro-people, anti-elite and the general will), there are different perspectives on its conceptualization. It is perceived by some as a thin-centered ideology (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017; Stanley, 2008) in the sense that it does not constitute a "practical political ideology. It lacks the capacity to put forward a wide-ranging and coherent programme for the solution of crucial political questions" (Stanley, 2008, p. 95). This *thin-centered ideology* of populism functions as a chameleon: it changes color when attached to other, more full-fledged ideologies, such as socialism (left-wing populism) or nativism (radical right populism). In this tradition, while not considered a "proper" ideology, populism is very much tied to the study of party politics and political theory.

Alternatively, Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017) broadened the conceptualization of populism by proposing "*the ideational approach*" within which populism is perceived as a political discourse positing a "cosmic struggle" between the people and the elite. This discourse can be distinguished from the discursive frameworks of pluralism (acknowledging the existence of different factions among the people) and elitism (heralding instead of derogating the political elite). Importantly, the ideational approach conceptualizes populism as a set of ideas, which allows scholars to study the extent to which populist ideas are shared in texts or supported by voters. While the first can be viewed as an impetus to study the dispersion of populist ideas beyond party politics, the last has led to the measurement of populist attitudes among voters. Finally, combining the ideological and discursive traditions sketched out here, De Vreese et al. (2018) perceive populism as the communicative manifestation of both the thin-centered ideology – the latent set of populist ideas – as well as the language that is used to express them. The focus here is shifted from the (populist) actor sending the populist message to features of *populism as communication*. As noted by Sorensen (2021, p. 384) this "implies a shift in focus from what populism is to what it does and how it does it". Here one can differentiate between different aspects of populist communication – the content of the populist message, the style with which it is communicated, and the communication channels that are used – and study its spread as well as the mechanisms that explain its consequences.

In this chapter, I will mainly focus on populist rhetoric, that is the key populist message pitting the (morally good) people against the (evil immoral) elite, as some would argue that this message could be used as a campaign tool,

strategically adding a “populist flavor” to any political campaign. As noted, in the research on populist communication, scholars additionally focus on the specific communication style used by populist politicians or attached to the populist message. This style can pertain to the simple language (Oliver & Rahn, 2016) used to connect to the common people, the hostility aimed at elites and other political opponents (Nai, 2021), the emotionality (Widmann, 2021) embedded in the populist message or to characteristics of the campaign, such as (charismatic) personalization (Krämer, 2014). Analyses of the distinct populist style can be useful to understand the delivery, appeal, and effectiveness of the populist message (in specific contexts), but studying it in isolation, unconnected to either the populist message or a populist candidate, blurs the concept of populist campaigning.

The populist message has been characterized as a rhetorical style/discourse (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Pauwels, 2011), a discursive frame (Aslanidis, 2016), a performative style (e.g., Moffitt & Tormey, 2014; Moffitt, 2015), and a strategy (Wirth et al., 2016). Again, while conceptualizations differ, the elements that make it up are the same. In line with Mudde’s definition of populism, populist rhetoric combines positive references to the people with negative attributes of the elite, making clear the two homogenous groups are morally antagonistic. Importantly here, who are the people and which elite is criticized depends on the context (and the ideology populism is attached to). While the populist radical right generally defines the people grounded in nativist considerations, excluding non-native elements such as immigrants, the populist left oftentimes has a more inclusive – class-based – perspective. The elite that is opposed always includes the political elite, responsible for the ill representation of the people, but this is regularly extended to media, legal, international, and in the case of left-wing populism also the capitalist or economic elite. In that sense, the populist message dichotomizes the complex political world, making clear you’re either with them or against them.

In political communication research, most academic disparity exists about the minimal definition and the delineation of the concept. For instance, is rhetoric populist when only the people are referenced in a positive manner (sometimes dubbed *empty populism*) or when the political elite are criticized (*anti-elite* or *anti-establishment populism*) or are both elements necessary (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007)? The fuzziness in these discussions sometimes hinders conceptual clarity, when nearest neighbors – for example, negative campaigning, anti-immigration rhetoric, Euroscepticism or the usage of communication styles that are perceived as populist – are presented as (examples of) populist communication or rhetoric. Here, a minimal definition of populist rhetoric follows Mudde’s conceptualization and therefore includes both pro-people and anti-elite references, pitting the bad elite against the good people. Importantly, while it is dependent upon the context who constitutes the people, the people are always undivided, and the existence of factions within the people is denied, while the opposed elite at minimum includes the political elite (and the entire elite, not one or two opposed parties).

### Where can we find populist rhetoric and who uses it?

Conceptualizing populism as a communication phenomenon allows us to study it in different communication channels, exploring the extent to which it fluctuates over time, between actors and channels. Following up on the idea of the “populist zeitgeist” (Mudde, 2004), political scientists studied the presence of populist rhetoric in what I would characterize as *traditional direct political communication*: in speeches (Bonikowski & Gidron, 2016), internal and external party documents (Pauwels, 2011; Rooduijn et al., 2014), press releases (Bernhard & Kriesi, 2019), and party political broadcasts (Bos & Brants, 2014). These studies have shown that contrary to what was proposed in the populist zeitgeist thesis – that populism spreads and increases over time – it is the populist or non-mainstream parties that make the most use of populist rhetoric (Bernhard & Kriesi, 2019; Bos & Brants, 2014; Pauwels, 2011; Rooduijn et al., 2014). In other words, one needs to be a populist in order to communicate as one. But it also shows that populist rhetoric indeed can be attached to different ideologies (Bonikowski & Gidron, 2016; Pauwels, 2011) and issues (Bernhard & Kriesi, 2019) and that the populist language of the left and right differs in such a way that left-wing politicians oppose economic elites while right-wing politicians criticize statist elites. Interestingly, an analysis of presidential candidates’ speeches in the United States suggests that populist communication can be used in a strategic way, especially by political challengers as they find that the prevalence of populist rhetoric depends upon the audience and their placement at the periphery of the political system.

However, while populists generally oppose all forms of mediation, preferring direct contact with “their people”, they do not only depend on it, but their populist message is also formed by the particularities of specific media channels (Sorensen, 2021). Populist rhetoric can therefore also be found in (*mass*) *media content* (Bos & Brants, 2014; Mazzoleni, 2008). Here authors distinguish between *populism for/through the media* – populist rhetoric that is communicated by political (or societal) actors and covered in media content – and *populism by the media/media populism* in which journalists themselves engage in populist communication (Bos & Brants, 2014; Esser et al., 2016; Krämer, 2014; Mazzoleni, 2008). From the perspective of political actors, the first is particularly relevant. Here it is assumed that it is the commercialization of mass media and the appeal to media logic that makes populist actors and populist rhetoric attractive to journalists, even those who would consider themselves critical and independent. Wodak's (2013) conceptualization of the populist radical right (PRR) relationship to the media as a *Perpetuum Mobile* is particularly useful here. She describes the stages through which PRR parties such as the Austrian FPÖ take control over the media agenda by creating scandals, attacking opponents and out-groups, and forcing other politicians and journalists to respond. While such a perpetuum mobile doesn't necessarily apply to all (left-wing and right-wing) populist politicians, it does illustrate very well how the dichotomous populist message, especially accompanied by a well strategized populist style is

extremely newsworthy. However, journalists are not only reacting. Populists also find an ally in ideological and partisan media that are more likely to engage in (media) populism themselves, thereby legitimizing the populist claim.

Finally, populist rhetoric can be found on *social media*, a medium particularly appealing to populist actors who defy not only political (and/or economic) elites but increasingly are critical of the media elite, accusing them of corruption, bias, and untruthfulness (Hameleers, 2020) – in other words, of being part of the elite. While in the old days politicians had to rely on mass media to connect to their voters, social media allow them to circumvent this channel (Gerbaudo, 2018), and platform affordances benefit populists (Hopster, 2021, p. 556). The algorithms used by social media make it relatively easy for sensational populist claims to spread relatively quickly, so (more radical) populist actors can circumvent editorial filters. In addition to allowing for a real-time expression of the general will of the people, their interfaces invite a populist style of communication (e.g., favoring short messages or more emotional messages). Again, political actors themselves can engage in direct populist communication on social media (Engesser et al., 2017; Hameleers & Minihold, 2020; Schmuck & Hameleers, 2020; Schwartz et al., 2022), but citizens or non-political actors can also use populist rhetoric here (e.g., Gründl, 2022), and mainstream populist ideas. In line with the studies on direct traditional political communication, this strand of research shows that it is the political actors on the extreme ends of the political spectrum who are using more populist rhetoric in their social media posts (Engesser et al., 2017), but also that the populist message shared on social media generally is more fragmented and implicit (Mazzoleni & Bracciale, 2018). More often than not, appeals include either references to the people or to the elite and not to both.

### **(Explaining the) impact of populist rhetoric on voters**

Recent research has shown that populist rhetoric can engage and persuade voters. It is because of this effectiveness that populist rhetoric is sometimes perceived as a (deliberate) political strategy (Wirth et al., 2016). Yet I would refrain from this characterization as long as we are oblivious of the motivations underlying the use of rhetorical tactics by populist actors. I would not rule out the option that populism is first and foremost an expression of the political grievances of populist actors (Ivarsflaten, 2008). At the same time, it is important to understand the impact populist communication can have on voters, and the mechanisms through which it does.

First, populist rhetoric has often been characterized as distinctly emotional. By blaming political elites for the problems of the people, perceived as unfairly bestowed upon them, morally loading the antagonistic relationship between the morally good people that have fallen victim to the corrupt elite, the populist message is charged with (moral) anger (Rico et al., 2017). In addition, the populist radical right in particular feeds on the politics of fear of “the outsider”, such as immigrants, refugees, or other minorities while alluding to pride and

hope for the future of “the people”. Importantly, populist rhetoric not only includes more emotional language, but it also elicits these emotions among voters, explaining the persuasiveness of populist messages (Hameleers et al., 2017; Rico et al., 2017; Wirz, 2018), a finding crucial for understanding the appeal of these parties. An experiment among German-speaking citizens in Europe showed that advocative populist appeals – praising the people and demanding their sovereignty – elicited feelings of hope and pride, while conflictive populist appeals – emphasizing the conflict between the people and the elite – elicited fear and anger (Wirz, 2018). Importantly, respondents who were more hopeful after the advocative appeal or angry after the conflictive appeal also agreed more with the policies that were promoted in the message: the emotions embedded in populist communication aid its persuasiveness. The emotions elicited by the populist rhetoric likely change how the addressed people perceived the world, impacting the way they process information and form attitudes and their political behavior (Widmann, 2021).

As noted above, the populist message blames the political elite for the problems of “the common people”, making it in essence a responsibility attribution frame. Blame attribution is not only a widespread strategy in political communication, making clear who is responsible for political problems, it is also very effective in garnering responsibility attributions among voters. Experimental studies have shown that exposure to populist messages blaming elites (or immigrants) for the people’s problems increases the perception that these groups are indeed to blame, while also positively affecting populist attitudes – that is agreement with the populist set of ideas, as well as support for populist candidates, while reducing support for mainstream candidates (Busby et al., 2019; Hameleers, Bos & de Vreese, 2017, 2018; Hameleers & Schmuck, 2017). In other words, the populist message is particularly effective in persuading voters to agree with their Manichean worldview.

Closely connected to the characterization of the populist message as a “blame frame” is the depiction of the populist message as a “social identity frame”. This strand of research is rooted in Social Identity Theory. Here it is assumed that populist rhetoric invites voters to identify with the victimized in-group of the people, while portraying the elite as the out-group that is blamed for the problems the in-group faces. Especially respondents in need of a positive self-identity, in fear of status loss, and feeling uncertain or disregarded by politics and society find a sense of belonging in populist rhetoric and are therefore more likely to be attracted to, persuaded and mobilized by this message (Bos et al., 2020; Hogg, 2021; Obradović et al., 2020). Importantly, by making clear the individual citizens are part of the in-group of blameless victims, they are absolved of responsibility for their loss of status or feeling of deprivation. The finding of the scapegoat boosts their self-confidence and connects them to a politicized people. As Bos et al. note, the populist message makes a group of voters feel heard. Related to this, Strikovic et al. (2021) showed that populist references to the people (portraying them as being part of a nativist in-group or pitting the people against the elite) increases their feelings of being represented.

Overall, current populism research shows that populist rhetoric is used by populist politicians as a campaign tool in their direct communication efforts but can also be found in journalistic media content, and on social media. This populist rhetoric has consistently strong effects on voters by eliciting negative emotions of anger and fear, instilling in them the belief that the elite is to blame for a specific societal problem and that there is an antagonistic relationship between the people and the elite (bolstering their populist attitudes), while making them feel heard and represented. In other words, populist rhetoric boosts the political confidence of voters that feel disregarded or unrepresented, while at the same increasing the distance between them and mainstream politicians, and possibly other (political) out-groups. It is thus very successful in promoting the dichotomization of politics.

### **COVID-19 as a case study**

In order to make the attractiveness of populist rhetoric more tangible, I will use the COVID-19 pandemic as an example. In recent years, various scholars have studied this specific case to show how populist rhetoric was used in an attempt to mobilize voters through politicizing the crisis.

Importantly, the pandemic crisis served as a discursive opportunity for populist rhetoric. Populists thrive under crisis situations. In fact, populism has often been characterized as a response to the crisis of democracy or of (ill) democratic representation. In addition, crisis language is central to the populist: urgency is key, the corrupt immoral elite should be replaced yesterday rather than today (e.g., Bos et al., 2010). According to Moffitt (2015), populism not only responds to and thrives on crises but also acts as a trigger for crisis. In his seminal article, he lays out what the populist performance model of crisis looks like:

- (1) Identify failure;
- (2) Elevate to the level of crisis by linking into a wider framework and adding a temporal dimension;
- (3) Frame “the people” vs. those responsible for the crisis;
- (4) Use media to propagate performance;
- (5) Present simple solutions and strong leadership;
- (6) Continue to propagate crisis.

*(p. 198)*

An urgent (generally acknowledged and accepted) worldwide crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic can therefore be used by populists to put forward their claim of the ill representation by elites, blaming them for not handling the crisis properly, pointing at easy solutions that could be implemented by strong populist leaders, while making certain this narrative remains prominent on the agenda. In their study of populist radical right parties' (PRRP) discourses on Twitter, Schwörer and Fernández-García (2022) show that these parties indeed latched themselves onto the COVID-19 crisis to overcome a period in which there was relatively less attention for the immigration issue, and thus a limited nativist discursive opportunity structure.

Interestingly, the few studies that examined populist pandemic crisis rhetoric show that populists not only clung to the pandemic issue but also tried to reframe it as a populist claim. Once the number of infections dropped three out of the six parties studied by Schwörer and Fernández-García (2022) – Vox (Spain), AfD (Germany) and FPÖ (Austria) – started to use demonizing political rhetoric against the national political elite, blaming them for blocking democracy and freedom in their crisis response. This narrative of course nicely fits into the populist idea: the political elite is blamed for ignoring the people’s problems, in this case their suffering from the restrictions in place to combat the pandemic crisis. This threatens their existence. The simple solution then is to abolish the restrictions that limit the people’s freedom. An analysis of Vox’ interventions in COVID-19 debates shows that its rhetoric became more moralizing and antagonistic over time, as they tried to capitalize on the pandemic crisis, decreasing the distance between them and the people on the one hand, and increasing the distance between the people and the elite on the other. As noted by Olivás Osuna and Rama (2021) in his speeches Vox party leader Abascal tried “to delegitimize the Spanish government, by accusing them of disinformation and of having hidden motives”, allowing him to present his party as a viable alternative to the government.

There are other prominent examples of populist parties politicizing the pandemic for their political gain. In Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro neglected the seriousness of the crisis and blamed local governments for acting in their own political interest instead of in the people’s interest: arguing their restrictive policies would increase unemployment rates. At the same time he promoted his own, unrelated, policies, thereby showcasing his “populist superhero” style of leadership (Burni & Tamaki, 2021, p. 114). This proved to be a successful strategy, to the astonishment of many, considering the rising infections and death tolls in Brazil during the pandemic. The secret seems to lie in his reframing of the pandemic. Instead of framing the COVID-19 pandemic as a health crisis, it was considered an economic crisis, in which the people suffered from the economic impact of the pandemic measures. Bolsonaro presented himself as the only one concerned for the people, close to them, and understanding the impact the restrictions had on their lives and livelihood if they couldn’t work. The solution he presented again was simple: he was against government interference in the pandemic and presented hydroxychloroquine as a simple and effective cure.

A similar, but different example, is the communication strategy of Thierry Baudet, party leader of the Dutch Forum for Democracy (FvD). This fairly young populist radical right party positioned itself as the champion for freedom during the COVID-19 pandemic. The playbook was similar to the one sketched above, but the FvD did not reframe the pandemic crisis as an economic crisis, but as an individual rights crisis. Related, Thierry Baudet used this as an opportunity to form a counter movement by not only proclaiming to be part of the people and connected to the people, but by showcasing it through installing a “Freedom caravan” that traveled through the country, meeting people, and visiting malls and squares at a time when restrictions still ordered citizens to keep

their distance. Baudet announced the events on social media, on Twitter, and the party's Telegram channel, following the populist playbook of circumventing the mass media. The Freedom caravan connected the party leader directly with his followers, and through "selfies" the personal encounters were subsequently showcased on social media to underline the authenticity of the populist leader.

A final illustration of the way in which the pandemic was politicized is the case of U.S. president Trump. As noted above, a central element in the populist rhetoric is portraying the people as a victim of the elite. One of the challenges of established or experienced politicians is to present themselves not as a member of the elite, but of the victimized people. Neville-Shepard (2021) nicely illustrates how Trump's refusal to wear masks installed him as a victim-in-chief, moreover making clear how this refusal should be interpreted in light of his portrayal of the American populist heartland, being under the surge of a feminine wave. Wearing a mask was depicted as a sign of feminine weakness, while being unmasked was considered masculine toughness, generating a clear connection between being pro-Trump and anti-mask. Unmasking can be considered a populist performance.

These examples already show quite nicely how politicians contextualized their populist pandemic rhetorical strategies, but there are also some clear patterns here. The study by Schwörer and Fernández-García shows that the rhetorical strategy chosen not only depends on the national context (e.g., the infection numbers, or the discursive opportunity structure) but also on the historical rhetorical strategy. Since Rassemblement National in early stages of the pandemic fed the conspiracy theory blaming foreign elements of spreading the virus, it was difficult or even impossible for them to pivot and in later stages argue for the abolishment or loosening of COVID-19 restrictions, taking a similar stance as the examples laid out above. Additionally, populists in power (Bobbà & Hubé, 2021) behaved differently from those in opposition. The first tried to depoliticize the crisis, mitigating populist discourse, while the latter tried to profit from the situation, dramatizing their populist rhetoric. There is also some indication that the embodiment of populist crisis communication depended on the type of populism. In some cases science skepticism was connected to anti-elitism, and common sense arguments were used to oppose pandemic restrictions, while in national contexts with inclusionary populist parties anti-elitism could also encourage mitigation measures (Maher et al., 2022).

Bobbà and Hubé reach the conclusion that political gain was limited because of the difficulty to gain issue ownership of the COVID-19 crisis, but I would argue that that depends on how one defines success. Indeed, populists could not own the issue and did not benefit electorally because of their radical perspective on the pandemic, but many were successful with their own issue-specific frame, which is substantiated by the finding that (right-wing) populist voters in France, Italy, Germany, Switzerland, and the United States were generally more skeptical of the pandemic, and less keen than other voters to prioritize health over the economy (Mazzoleni & Ivaldi, 2022). Along the same lines, Austrian panel data analysis shows that, during the pandemic, respondents with stronger populist

attitudes were less trustful of political and scientific institutes, which positively relates with COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs, regardless of their political ideology. Here, populist parties benefited from alternative media spreading “pandemic populism” (Boberg et al., 2020). In other words, on the aggregate level many populist parties lost voters because of their extremist stance, denying the health risks of the COVID-19 pandemic, but a closer look reveals that they did persuade a part of the electorate of their (critical) pandemic standpoint and possibly even mobilized new groups of voters, most likely those who felt excluded, unrepresented, and threatened in their identity or livelihood (De Coninck et al., 2021)

### **Conclusion and future developments**

The field of populist communication is thriving and expanding. While knowledge on the conceptualization of the populist message, its performance, and its effects is abundant, new developments lead to new questions. Most urgent in the current communication landscape is the role of social media in spreading populist rhetoric. While in the “classic” perspective populist communication could only be defined as such when combining pro-people and anti-elite statements, the fragmented nature of populism on social media (Engesser et al., 2017) shows that populism is found in snippets online. It is unclear how we should evaluate this phenomenon in light of existing research. As noted above: expanding the definition of populist communication to its elements or related styles, risks blurring the boundaries of the concept. Yet we cannot rule out that tiny populist cues can act as heuristics (or dog whistles) and taken together mainstream the populist dichotomization in the hybrid media environment. Related phenomena are the shareworthiness of the populist message (Bracciale et al., 2021), and its affinity with mis- and disinformation (Bergmann, 2020; Hameleers & Minihold, 2020). While promising for populists, without restrictions social media platforms can serve as vehicles for alternative realities in which political and mainstream media elites are denounced, and the people’s truth prevails.

Aiming to give an overview of the mobilizing nature of populist communication, I deliberately did not expand on its nefarious consequences. But they are abundant. The populist frame is persuasive, and while it provides followers with a sense of belonging, it does so at a cost. Its Manichean populist identity frame draws a clear distinction between the good people and the bad elite, and often other social out-groups. Not only does this encourage verbal attacks on opposed elites and out-groups, it increasingly leads to violence. In addition, democratic politics is by nature messy and chaotic, with diverging interests that have to be met, necessitating the willingness to respect differences and reach consensus. Presenting politics as a struggle between black and white, disregards its colorful nature, and risks the erosion of democratic norms.

Future research in this field therefore has one main challenge, and that is finding a way to respond to populists without disregarding the interests and needs of

their followers, or in other words, to win back voters and news consumers who moved into a populist home they longed for.

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