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On behalf of the people?

Perceptions, usage and effects of references to the people in political communication

Strikovic, E.

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DISCUSSION

This dissertation speaks to the communicative core of populism, and investigates political elites, the media and citizens. There is a vast body of literature that studies populist rhetoric and communication, pointing to the importance of researching the effects and implications of this particular communicative style. This dissertation adds to the political communication literature by looking at the defining element of populist communication - references to the people - and examining this unconfined by ideology or party boundaries. The findings of my studies indicate that references to the people are a deliberate and effective communicative tool and that these references have wider democratic implications for those being referenced. This concluding chapter lays out the main findings of the dissertation, discusses the implications of these findings and some limitations of the research, and suggests potential expansions for future research.

Summary of Findings

Beginning with the source of the communication, and then moving on to investigate elements of content and effect, allows the chapters of this dissertation to build on each other. Chapter one establishes the ways in which politicians come to understand the concept of 'the people', which related informational sources they value the most, and how they reconcile the opinions of the individual voter with having to respond to wider public opinion. Chapter two illustrates how the communication strategies that politicians use manifest themselves on different communication platforms and shows discrepancies between different actors in their usage of these terms. Chapter three then shows the effectiveness on the reader of the specific cues found on the media platforms in chapter two.

Chapter one investigates politicians' perceptions of 'the people' and examines their (the politicians') understanding of and perspectives on the use of references to the people in political communication. Findings reveal the way media platforms facilitate an information exchange between politicians and the people. Politicians use both social and traditional media to assess what issues are on people's minds and how people generally feel about these issues. However, when it comes to what politicians consider the most important and genuine source of information about public opinion, speaking to the people directly is valued most. Remarkably enough, the significance placed on the individual opinions of those they talk to is not reflected in the political decision-making process. This is guided mostly by party agendas and their own viewpoints, with the individual opinions of the public serving as guidelines for how to present to the public the decisions

that were made on their behalf. For some politicians, references to the people prove useful in that explanatory context, since they position the politicians within the people, implying a closeness and trust. However, for some MPs, addressing the people as one homogenous unit raises suspicion as it ignores diversity of types and opinions, and may lead to feelings of exclusion. These MPs advocate references to the people that include the pluralist nature of the public and distance themselves from the abstract term of 'the people'.

Chapter two takes a closer look at the communication platforms on which politicians depend for communicating with the people. Taking into account politicians' conceptualizations of the people as generally 'good', in some cases specifically differentiating them from those who are not, findings show that social media account for most references to the people that reflect those two sentiments: advocative and oppositional. Populist politicians are more likely to engage in communication that pits the people against other actors, in keeping with communication strategies tied to populist ideology. While it may not be surprising that communication that sounds populist (us vs. them) is more often used by populist actors, it is puzzling that this is not the case for advocative references to the people, e.g., people-centric communication across the board. If people centrism is at the core of populist communication, this finding may point to the need for a broader understanding of, and approach to, populist communication. The populist mantra is that populists are close to the people, much more so than other politicians, and that the people in question are the pious, hardworking backbone of the country. This notion of the piety of the people is not reflected in the findings for populist actors communicating on social media and traditional media – platforms most easily and directly accessible by the people. Moreover, advocative references to the people are mostly accounted for in parliamentary data. This is somewhat surprising, considering the direct and reciprocal nature of communication on social media. What may be important to consider is the nature of parliamentary speeches and debates: they are not only public, with a potentially large audience due to the reproduction of segments of the speeches across all platforms, but the topics that are discussed often have high-stakes and are geared towards decision-making, so that politicians may have more incentive to use persuasive communication strategies. This may also help explain why populist politicians are more likely to use advocative references on the parliamentary platform than a) their political counterparts and b) on other platforms.

These conceptualizations and categorizations of references to the people are put to the test in *chapter three*, which investigates the effects of references to the people on those who are so addressed: the people themselves. The first experiment revealed that respondents felt more represented if they read an anonymous statement that constructed 'the people' by assigning them to a specific in-group (nationality) or defining a common enemy (oppositional) than those respondents who read a statement containing a neutral cue in the references to the people. This was also the case for statements that were tied to actual politicians. However, this was only the case for statements made by politicians the respondents favoured. In other words, although cues rooted in populist ideology were shown to be more effective than neutral or pluralist cues, they are only effective if politicians communicate to citizens who already support them. In this study, populist cues (in the way the people are addressed) proved to be effective in eliciting a feeling of representation, rather than in persuading voters to vote for a candidate. It is worth noting, then, that while homogenous cues can contribute to candidates' electoral success, they also may affect voters' satisfaction with their elected candidate, which might help explain the overall popularity of candidates and parties that utilize these communication strategies.

Implications

While populist politics is a well-known phenomenon in many European democracies, some its communicative aspects are still underexplored. This is especially the case when it comes to the defining element of populist communication – references to the people. Adding to previously existing anecdotal evidence from past campaigns and speeches, this dissertation provides solid empirical evidence to show that this particular communicative tool is used by politicians across the political spectrum, making it particularly important to examine its use outside of the populist arena.

Several common themes are present throughout the findings outlined above. Even though each study approaches references to the people from a different perspective, four key elements were discernible and carried across all three chapters. These four main areas, as well as some practical implications of them will now be addressed in detail.

1. The good people

This dissertation has shown that advocative, homogenous references are the most common communicative construction of the people: politicians reflect this in their descriptions of the hard-working, ordinary, pure core of

the country, which keeps society going and whose concerns remain largely unheard (chapter one), and it is also reflected in media output, as it is the most prevalent construction in all three media platforms studied (chapter two). This is in line with the notion of the “silent engine” that assigns the group virtue and echoes the principle of ‘the people’ as the underdog and the sovereign backbone of the country (Canovan, 1984). However, even though a majority of politicians agree that it is important to acknowledge differences in society, in practice they address the people in a way that echoes populist perceptions of the people (Canovan, 1999; Taggart, 2004), pointing out their (the people’s) virtuousness and solid work ethic and their (implied collective) liability to fall prey to elite actors. This is specifically important to consider in light of the effects of this communicative construction of the people. References to the people that originate in populist communication are more effective than other types of references to the people, namely pluralist references to the people, with the latter being designed to acknowledge the differences in opinion and the diversity inherent in society, rather than set the people up as a homogenous group. In line with populist literature, the results showed that in addition to political attitudes (e.g., Matthes & Schmuck, 2015), mobilization (e.g., Hameleers & Schmuck, 2017) and vote intention (e.g., Bos et al., 2011), homogenous cues to the people can also affect perceptions of representation. This dissertation provides empirical evidence for the belief widely held by politicians that advocative, homogenous references to the people are useful and representative. I show that that these references are not only ubiquitous on all media platforms, but that they are also effective, specifically in terms of feeling represented.

2. The politicians, the individual and the public

In terms of representation, the dissertation also uncovers unique dynamics between the politicians, individual people and the public as a whole. As outlined above, politicians paint a virtuous picture of the people, and in their search for the most valuable information on what those people want and need, they give most credence to conversations with individual people (chapter one): people they happen to strike up a conversation with, people from their neighbourhood, people riding on the same train or waiting in line at the butcher. This is the information politicians rely on most when forming their views on public opinion. But the micro-level of these information sources must translate into the macro-level of representational capacity: while politicians set most store in people’s individual accounts of their concerns, they have a responsibility to represent the public as a whole. And communication is a key element in taking the concerns of the person on the

train and applying it to the country as a whole. Communicating in a way that positions themselves within the people, using those advocative references to the people in their communication output as anecdotal evidence of their belonging to the people, is intended to foster trust in their electorate that the decisions politicians made for (rather than on behalf of) the people are the right ones. Through the previously described communicative strategies, i.e., referencing the public in the form of the hard-working, pure core of the nation, politicians then communicate back to the individual how their decisions for the nation as a whole are the right decisions for the individual people. It is a back-and-forth between the micro-level of the individual people and the macro-level of the public, starting from individual opinions, generalizing those to a public opinion to guide policy, and communicating this responsiveness back to the individual.

This dissertation also shows that citizens feel represented by a politician when he/she references them (the citizens) as the hard-working, pure core of the nation, given that those citizens support the communicating politician to some extent (chapter three). Whether this is a case of supporters feeling represented by their favoured politicians no matter what they (the politicians) say, or a case of politicians being well-informed about the people and their supporters (and this being reflected in their communication) is not entirely clear-cut and is up to future research to determine. However, given the importance placed on the opinions of individual citizens, combined with the other information-gathering processes that chapter one reveals, there is reason to speculate that, to a large extent, it is a case of the latter. Politicians are likely to use these communication strategies inspired by informal information gathered from the people in order to convince their supporters that they (the politicians) are good representatives for the people. In terms of the dynamic between politician and voter, and the role of communication in politics and democracy at large, this is an important finding to consider. While studies that focus on persuasion, vote intention and mobilization can speak to the persuasiveness of communication aimed at getting voters to vote for a certain politician, these new findings speak to what comes largely afterwards. It is while in office that politicians communicate with the people the most and it also during this period that their task of representing the people truly begins. These results have important ramifications for understanding the significance of references to the people in terms of how they can affect people's satisfaction with, and trust in, their politicians. Crucially, this dissertation shows that this delicate feeling of being represented – an indicator of the essence of representative democracy –

is susceptible to simple tweaks in the way the people are addressed. This is important to consider from a communication point of view: while it is established that politicians are responsive to the people's needs (Page & Sapiro, 1983; Hakhverdian, 2010), people may not perceive this to be the case. It is therefore the way that this responsiveness is communicated, and the cues that are used in the reference to the people, that will facilitate a perception of this responsiveness and representation and might therefore affect people's overall evaluation and satisfaction with democracy.

3. The role of the media

It is important to briefly reflect on the role of the media in this interplay between politicians and the people. There seems to be a reciprocal relationship between politicians and the people: politicians have a responsibility to represent the people, but the people must also *feel* represented. The media facilitate this reciprocal relationship. Politicians need to have certain information about the people in order to communicate information back to the people. Not only do the media shape the discourse of society, but also they shape what politicians will perceive as the biggest issues. They serve not only as a platform for communication but also as a source of information. Politicians point to the traditional media as a country-compass, indicating what issues are at the forefront of people's minds. Even if these are not strictly issues that are most important to individual people, the daily newspapers create what will be perceived by the public as the most important issues of that day. This can help guide the issues that politicians address, much in line with traditional agenda-setting theories (Helfer, 2016; Walgrave, 2008). When deciding how to approach an issue, politicians point to social media as a guide to the public's mood – how individual people respond to those issues deemed most important. Politicians also tend to use social media more commonly than other media platforms to appeal directly to the people, appearing accessible and in touch, which is likely to make them seem more connected to the people (Coleman, 2005). Politicians take their understanding of the most important issues, as described by the traditional media, and the information they can get from individual people, and translate them into communicative strategies that the media delivers to the citizens in a way that elicits feelings of being represented in their (the politicians') supporters. The media, as opposed to being an actor, are evaluated here as simply a facilitator of that reciprocal relationship, and this dissertation has shown that even in the most compact version (namely tweets) the media output of politicians can have an effect on an outcome as complex as feelings of representation.

4. The people and (not) populism

While the aim of this dissertation was to examine an element of populist communication in the wider political context, I would like to reflect on the significance of the populist aspect throughout the findings. The studies make it clear that references to the people and populism are closely intertwined. Even though the term (populism) was not used in the interviews with politicians, most made the connection between the two and offered their opinions on populism rather than the term 'the people'. Politicians were quick to define the term (the people) as 'everyone' before they proceeded to carve out a much more defined conceptualization of the people, echoing the homogeneity and virtuousness associated with populist appeals. These homogenous and virtuous depictions of the people also echo those populist notions that people-centrism is used to suggest a sense of belonging to the public (Esser & Matthes, 2013) and to allocate some of the political decision-making power back to the constituents, rather than them having decisions made for them (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014; Pitkin, 1967). In chapter two, this dissertation lays out two main ways in which politicians reference the people: they use advocative references to the people, speaking to the people's virtuousness, as well as oppositional references to the people, pointing to an (elite) enemy of the people (from whom the communicating politician will protect the people). Both of these types of references to the people are rooted in populist communication and are proven to be persuasive (e.g., Bos et al., 2013; Hameleers et al., 2018; Rooduijn et al., 2017). These types of references also seem to be effective in communicating a responsiveness to the people (chapter three). Politicians seem to value the inclusivity of references to the people. But is their initial notion of inclusivity and describing the people as 'everyone' reflected in their communication output, or can echoes of the populist notion of the pure people (as opposed to an evil elite) be observed? Chapter two reveals that it is more so a case of the latter. References to the people rooted in populist rhetoric not only position the communicating politicians on the side of the people but they signal a responsiveness to a seemingly perceived threat to the people, implying knowledge about what the people want and need, offering political representation through this responsiveness (Pitkin, 1967). These references are mostly used - and are most effective - in communicating responsiveness and representation. Responsiveness to the people is one of the key elements of the mechanism that fuels and sustains democratic satisfaction. Politicians are aware of, and alert to, the fact that references to the people signal this responsiveness (chapter one) and help communicate to the people that their needs are heard (Dalton, 2013). The types of references used by politicians

(as shown in this dissertation) are rooted in populist communication and are shown by previous studies to be persuasive (e.g., Bos et al., 2013; Hameleers et al., 2018; Rooduijn et al., 2017). This dissertation shows that they are also capable of making people feel represented. This may not come as a surprise since it is at the core of populism and fuels its very existence. Populism is a reaction to a crisis in representative democracy. It is an inevitable part of it. It often gains momentum in the context of a crisis - with that crisis often involving the loss of trust between citizens and their representatives - seemingly offering the leadership and representation necessary to restore that trust (Taggart, 2000; Moffitt & Tormey, 2014). Thus, while not all communication that references the people is populist, considering the way politicians construct the people, the way they reference them in their communicative output and the effect this communication has on the feelings of representation, this dissertation has shown that the two (references to the people and populism) cannot be entirely untangled from each other's grasp.

5. Practical implications

Lastly, I would like to briefly outline the practical implications of these findings. Politicians have a responsibility to represent the people of their electorate and to do so in a transparent way. Politicians agree that between making decisions *for* the people and acting *on behalf of* the people, it is with the former that their responsibility lies. In the reality of the political decision-making process, this may be the norm, but communicating a responsiveness to the people is nevertheless key. With these results in mind, politicians have a tool kit to effectively communicate to the people that they (the people) are heard and that their needs, as a public, are being addressed. The results of the dissertation speak to the persuasive nature of populist communication cues only in connection to respondent's feelings of representation. This makes it even more important to view these findings in a nuanced way. The persuasive effect was only shown for party supporters, while on those who did not like the communicating party displayed no or even a backlash effect. While populist cues in references the people may be effective in circumstances where the audience supports the politician (to some extent, at least), this may not be the case for a general audience or undecided voters. As shown in this dissertation, this can have significant effects on people's perception of representation and, in turn, play a part in their satisfaction with democracy.

Second, this dissertation illustrates that this feeling of representation is fueled by references to the people as facilitated by the media. This stresses the importance of politicians being active and vocal about their decision-making processes on those channels. Even though in the experimental setting people responded to different cues in references to the people, in real life they may not encounter enough of these specific references to have an impact. If they are aware of the potential outcomes of their communication strategies, politicians can make an effort to actively participate in this relationship, specifically outside of election times, in order to provide citizens with the information needed to make evaluations about their representatives. At the same time, there is a balance to be struck. A too liberal use of references to the people, specifically politicians' references to their belonging to the people, can quickly seem like shallow rhetoric that avoids addressing substantial issues. It may come across as an empty slogan, specifically when such references become ever-present in the communication of politicians across the board. Correspondingly, journalists play a key role in selecting and disseminating much of politicians' communication and have thus a similarly active role and responsibility in the communication between the people and politicians – and should therefore be aware of the impact of the choices they make.

Lastly, there are some practical implications for the public. The findings of this dissertation can encourage citizens to more critically evaluate persuasive and people-centric communication and can promote an understanding of the purpose these communicative strategies serve. With this, citizens may be inspired to look beyond the rhetoric and evaluate policy proposals and decisions more closely – this also and specifically goes for the policies of parties they support.

Notes for future research

The research in this dissertation is subject to some limitations which suggest a path for future research. While the Dutch case provided an ideal platform to study references to the people in a broad political context, this might impact the generalizability of the results. We can hypothesize that findings may be similar in other European multi-party contexts but this would be interesting to test empirically. It would also greatly benefit the field to study the way politicians utilize references to the people, and how effective these references are, in a dichotomous political context, where party loyalties are much stronger than in a multi-party context.

Secondly, future research may benefit from more closely following politicians across platforms and time, and, in the analysis, taking into consideration the overlap between actor and platform in order to identify whether it is the actors or the platforms that are driving differences in communication patterns and strategies. A broader look at politicians' communication output may also be beneficial to the field. While this dissertation only analyzed communication output including references to the people, future studies could look into the overall communication output of politicians in order to assess how common references to the people are in their communication at large. This could help shed some light on the potential impact on their communication strategies as a whole.

Another area for possible expansion of the research concerns individual-level factors – both in the respondents and in the other actors that the people are put into opposition with. In chapter one, politicians allude to the fact that the biggest threat to the people are other politicians. With chapter two having only limited data on the actor that constituted the 'others' that people are put into opposition with, it was difficult to make any general conclusions about these other actors. It would be beneficial to investigate these other actors more closely with a sample that is large enough to provide sufficient data to draw more precise conclusions about how and when immigrants, the economic elite, the media and other outside actors are invoked in people-centric communication – and by whom. Moreover, testing the differences use of these types of opposing actors has in generating perceptions of representation would expand the understanding of the effectiveness (and possible limitations) of such oppositional cues.

At the same time, individual-level data of respondents would also be insightful in an effects study. Chapter three does not elaborate on individual-level differences between the respondents and how those differences may influence their susceptibility to different cues in references to the people. Respondents with populist attitudes may be particularly susceptible to populist references, for example, and particularly people who develop these attitudes as a result of a perceived deprivation, a perceived injustice against the hard-working people like themselves to the profit of elites (Elchardus & Spruyt, 2016). In this sense, education, income and even where respondents live (rural vs. urban) might influence their vulnerability to communication strategies rooted in populist rhetoric and need to be taken into account in future research.

Conclusion

Despite its limitations, this dissertation makes some key contributions to research in (populist) political communication by isolating a key communicative element, traditionally associated with populist communication, and examining this element – references to the people – as it is thought of and used across the political spectrum, unconfined by ideology or party. The studies included in this dissertation are among the first to look at a core element of populist rhetoric and examine its use by politicians across the board, uncovering the way people-centric elements of communication are positioned within political communication as a whole. It also introduces a new dependent variable, examining the effects of the references to the people on people’s perceptions of being represented. The findings of these studies therefore add to our understanding of the mechanisms at play in political responsiveness and democratic representation.