

Populism, Lies and Bullshit: the Missing Links

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Populist leaders, such as Trump and Maduro, often lie—sometimes in seemingly absurd ways. However, populist discourse follows a very specific logic. This article explains that logic by articulating a normative theory of populist communication—that is, an account of the kind of communication populist actors must engage in to achieve their goal of forging a shared identity of “us, the people” against “the elite.” For that project to succeed, truth and falsehood are relatively indifferent; what matters most is populist bullshitting.

As You Know, Populists Lie—a Lot!

Social scientists have widely documented how populist actors unscrupulously engage in deceptive forms of communication. The paradigmatic example is, of course, U.S.A. president Donald Trump, who during his first term alone made an outstanding record of 30,573 false or misleading claims. That is almost 21 deceptive statements per day in office (Kessler et al. 2021).

The lies populists pour into the public sphere are surprising not only because of their numbers, but also because, often, they are literally

unbelievable, not to say simply crazy. Recall, for instance, Trump's claim that immigrants eat pets (Kessler et al. 2021), or Maduro's confession that Hugo Chávez appeared to him in the form of a little bird to bless him (Scharfenberg 2013).

So populists lie. A lot. But why? The answer lies, I believe, in populist theory itself—and, more precisely, in the normative theory of communication that populism entails.

Populism and Populist Communication

Populism is, essentially, a way of doing politics—more precisely, a political strategy to gain power through massive popular support. The key task of a populist leader is to generate in as many people as possible the feeling of belonging to the same social group—referred to as “the people”—which is to be perceived as betrayed by, and in a “moral battle” against, the ruling and corrupt elite (Mansbridge & Macedo 2019; see also Laclau 2005; Mouffe 2019).

But how can so many disparate groups of people, with so different interests and demands, be made to feel that they belong to the same social group? Well, obviously, populists should not encourage citizens to engage in rational deliberations, as that would probably lead them to realize that their demands and interests are, in fact, incompatible. From a populist perspective, stimulating citizens' rational engagement in politics is thus not only inessential, but often counterproductive.

Instead, what populists should do is follow what I refer to as “the populist criterion of newsworthiness.” This criterion is the normative cornerstone of populist communication. It commands to prioritize the content that would best contribute to creating and maintaining popular identity, regardless of whether such content is truthful or informative.

The kind of speech that results from following this criterion is a mix of truths, lies, and things in between both that, drawing inspiration from Frankfurt (2005)'s notion of bullshit, I refer to as “populist bullshit”. In a nutshell, populist bullshit is a form of communication wherein the speaker (i) intends to conceal their true intention of polarizing society into two opposing groups—“we, the people” versus “they, the elite”—and (ii) lacks any commitment to truthfulness.

Why is This Relevant?

At a purely conceptual level, explicating the populist theory of communication—so far a missing piece in populist theory—helps clarify the connections between populism and disinformation. The theory of populist communication reveals that populist speech is not merely lying, nor simply crazy talk, as it might seem by looking at some populist leaders, but the result of following a very specific logic defined by the populist criterion of newsworthiness. Since this criterion is grounded in the theory of populism itself, we can conclude that the tendency of populist actors to mislead their audiences is not an incidental by-product, but the natural outcome of adopting the populist theory as a guide for political practice.

A troubling revelation here is that, as populist discourse gains ascendancy and polarizes its audiences, it exacerbates their cognitive biases, which in turn makes lies more effective. This might explain why populists sometimes resort to falsehoods that are so strikingly blatant.

From a normative point of view, this is quite telling as well, as the non-incidental connection between populism and disinformation challenges the acceptability of populism as a way of doing politics. Advocates of populism, both on the left and on the right, face a difficult dilemma: to substantially revise their theory, or to bite the bullet and accept that they defend populist bullshitting as their preferred normative theory of communication—thereby renouncing the value of truth in politics.

Finally, the theory of populist communication may also be of interest to empirical researchers, who could develop empirical indicators to measure how populist different actors are, depending on the extent to which their discourses mirrors the structure and logic of populist bullshit.

Full publication

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