Influencing Political Tolerance among Populists in the UK

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In recent years, politics around the world have seen a drastic change in its elections. Not too long ago, Mexican leftist populist candidate Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador swept the elections in July 2018. It did not come as a surprise as several other countries, especially in Europe, have seen a wave of populism emerging with the election of centrist French President Emmanuel Macron and the reelection of German Chancellor Angela Merkel. In this context, populists are generally those who view the world with an “us-versus-them” mentality and who see some sort of conspiring elite (often the government) who disregard the will of the public.

With this shift towards populist movements often comes intolerance. One of the more common forms intolerance has taken in recent years has been through xenophobia and anti-immigration sentiment in general. Tolerance is necessary for civic engagement because tolerance allows for opposing beliefs to be heard and respected, thereby resulting in compromise and progress. This is a rather intuitive idea that is unfortunately easier said than done. Thus, we aim to enhance tolerance among those who are most prone to intolerance – in this case those who are highly populist and who have strong anti-immigrant sentiments.

The UK is no stranger to this group of people. We chose to study the UK because of the unique circumstances the country is facing under the looming Brexit deadline. Populist parties such as UKIP have very recently resurged in support and attitudes towards immigrants and discussions of political cooperation are extremely salient; the country was (and remains) sharply divided over Brexit and its implications, making cross-party discussions necessary for any sort of progress. Thus, we have a prime stage to look at populism and tolerance and hope to find ways to enhance levels of civic discussion through boosting tolerance.

In this study, we look at UK residents who have high levels of expressed populism and high levels of expressed anti-immigration sentiment to find whether validating their beliefs (rather than shaming) will increase their tolerance levels towards those who are strongly pro-immigration. We expect that validating their beliefs will increase tolerance while shaming will decrease it.

The main component of our theory is the relationship between shame and validation. For the purposes of this paper, we define shame as anything that marginalizes or devalues one’s ideas. We define validation as the opposite: anything that honors, respects and values one’s ideas. The process by which shame and validation work is aptly reflected by reciprocal empathy: reciprocal empathy can be described as where opponents of one party express empathy for the other, thus increasing humanization and consequently tolerance. We think it is reasonable to assume that tolerance and humanization go hand-in-hand. With humanization comes tolerance – thus, by utilizing a tool that enhances humanization, we can achieve our desired effect of enhancing tolerance towards opposing parties. Our treatment uses a form of reciprocal empathy in which participants who are populist and anti-immigration are told that they have reasonable views that should be considered. Presumably, as implied by the wording of our treatment, this validation is coming from the typical stance that opposes the populist anti-immigrant one. Our experiment also uses the opposite of empathy, which in this case is shame. While there isn’t as much literature on the impact of shame, we believe that shaming someone’s beliefs will lead them to only become further entrenched and distant from their opponents. We draw this logic from literature on cognitive dissonance.
The “shame” treatment behaved as expected: high populist, anti-immigration participants who received the shame treatment averaged a political tolerance level lower than those in the control treatment. Shaming these individuals could have triggered a perceived threat, or rather prompted the participants to develop a cognitive dissonance towards individuals who hold such shaming views, potentially like their political opponents, thus creating more intolerance towards them.

However, our validation treatments yielded rather unexpected, similar results. While we had predicted that validating the opinions of high populist, anti-immigration respondents would increase average tolerance for political opponents, it did the opposite. Validating anti-immigrant sentiments led to a decline in political tolerance. Taken verbatim, this suggests that validating the opinions of these individuals prompted them to have more intolerant views towards their political opponents. Perhaps this is because high populist individuals may have anticipated the negative sentiment brought about by their views, only feeling safe to honestly reveal them in the validation treatment.

We thus find ourselves in a theoretical predicament. Both shame and validation led right-wing populists to become more intolerant of their political opponents compared to the control treatment, while such treatments did nothing for the tolerance given by leftwing populists. Rather than suggest that merely mentioning sensitive issues to such a group sparks political intolerance, we can offer potential alternatives. It may have been the survey framing the political viewpoints in a personal way that sparked backlash in both treatments.

Tolerance and populism are significantly linked if viewed under the lens of perceived threat to issues key to the populist’s ideology. Findings indicate that populism is substantially correlated with intolerance in right-wing populist participants, perhaps due to the perceived threat immigration may pose to right-wing participants. Unexpectedly, both shame and validation both significantly influenced right-wing populists to exhibit more intolerant views towards their political opponents, and although theories exist that attempt to explain why this is the case, further research is needed to rule out biases such as social desirability and lurking variables.

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