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Populism and Emotions

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In November 2016, the United States elected a strongly populist candidate, Donald Trump, as President. This seems to be a part of a larger wave, one that includes the Brexit vote and parties that have come to power in Hungary, Poland, Greece, and Italy. Populism can have positive and negative effects on democratic institutions and social unity. Because of this, social scientists are trying to understand the reasons why populist parties win elections, especially how populist candidates win the support of individual voters.

Scholars have already explored the aggregate-level conditions behind the rise in populist movements around the world (Hawkins, Read, and Pauwels 2016). More recently, however, they have begun to investigate the individual level of populist attitudes, specifically, how to activate and deactivate populist attitudes (Busby, Doyle, Gubler, Hawkins, and Wiesehomeier 2015). Because this research is fairly new, there has been little study of the emotions involved with populist attitudes. In social psychology, scholars find that different situations prompt different emotional responses, and that emotions can in turn trigger different decisions. For example, individuals will experience different levels of fear and anger, depending on if they are aware of a change in the status quo or if they are able to blame people for their circumstances (Mackuen, Marcus, and Neuman 2000). People are more likely to feel anger if they are able to blame someone for their circumstances; in contrast, they feel more fear when they are unsure of the outcome (Wagner 2014).

To better measure the connection between populism and emotions, we designed and conducted a survey experiment. This experiment sought to establish what, if any, is the relationship between emotions and populism. As the literature suggests, negative emotions are correlated with specific policy opinions. What is unclear is if populism is itself associated with negative or positive emotions, or if emotions are driven by the specific policy issues that accompany populist rhetoric. Through this experiment, we sought to clarify the relationship between populism and emotions. We hypothesized that populism is associated with negative emotions, anger, disgust, and fear.

To test this hypothesis, we conducted a survey experiment in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Spain. The experiment consisted of three basic blocks: pre-treatment measures (demographics and pre-populism measure), treatment, and post-treatment measures (emotional measurements and post-populism measurement). The treatment exposed each subject to a list of potentially troubling problems about the respective country and asked the subject to rank the listed problems from most serious to least serious. We used two sets of issues, economic and non-economic (US and UK – healthcare, Spain – government corruption). Following this exercise, subjects were asked to answer randomly assigned open-ended questions. One group was asked what groups or individuals are most responsible for the issues they were asked to rank, a known technique for activating populist attitudes; the other asked what events or circumstances were responsible, which tends to suppress populist attitudes. After this treatment, subjects were asked to consider the problem they ranked as highest and report the extent to which they felt the following emotions: anger, disgust, fear, happiness, enthusiasm, interest, sadness, and hope.

We found that subjects did experience higher levels of expressed populism after each treatment; the amount of increase varied based on country and issue, but there was still an increase. Additionally, when subjects were asked to blame “group or individuals,” they experienced more expressed populism. This finding confirms previous work done on expressed populism. Second, we found that each issue and treatment did cause an emotional response; as expected, most of the issues caused lower positive emotions and higher negative ones. Lastly, we analyzed the relationship between populist attitudes and
emotions. To measure this relationship, we subjected the data to causal mediation analysis developed by Hicks and Tingley (2011). We used this to test four emotions where there was the largest effect, anger, disgust, fear, and hope. Across all three countries, we found little to no statistically significant results, meaning that expressed populism is not correlated with heightened emotions. From these results, we can conclude that the treatments do create an emotional response and create expressions of populism. However, the expression of populism does not operate through an emotional response—it is the issues that do the work.

While these findings do not support our hypothesis, they do help to further the understanding of populist attitudes and how they operate. Our analysis confirmed previous research and methods on the activation of populist attitudes. It also showed that specific political issues, like the economy, health care, and government corruption do carry emotions. By understanding that populist attitudes may be more fueled by the issues, rather than emotions, this will help to further direct research efforts to understand populism. Further research should be done to understand how specific issues influence populism and how these can be used by political candidates.

**Works Cited**


Hicks, Raymond, and Dustin Tingley. 2011. “Causal mediation analysis.” Stata Journal 11, no. 4: 605


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