
Fractured implicitness. Why implicit populism matters?

KOME – An International Journal of Pure
Communication Inquiry
Volume 0 Issue 0, p. 00-00.
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kome@komejournal.com
Published by the Hungarian
Communication Studies Association
DOI: [10.17646/KOME.75672.68](https://doi.org/10.17646/KOME.75672.68)

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Abstract: This paper aims to refine a theoretical and methodological approach in social sciences, namely implicit populism. To achieve this goal, the study aims to connect implicit populism and its counterpart, explicit populism to a specific research approach, namely the political communication style and introduce their contributions to the literature. Additionally, the paper introduces implicit populism's possible effects on content analyses to demonstrate its methodological potential. Finally, the study attempts to provide an aspect by which the antagonist part of implicit populism can be subcategorized. Therefore, new subdimension of antagonism might emerge in populism studies. The first focuses on the articulated enemy by employing, for instance, the signifier of 'dangerous people.' The second aims to explore the more sophisticated populist political style embedding the 'culprit others' in a concealed way. Consequently, expressions such as 'danger,' 'threat,' 'anger,' and 'hatred' are also parts of antagonism representing a universal and unarticulated problem that harmfully affects people.

Keywords: populism studies, explicit populism, implicit populism, populist political communication style, content analysis

Introduction

In recent years, populism has become one of the most-analyzed research fields within social sciences. Populism is a slippery concept that mostly lacks cohesion (Taggart, 2000), thus several definitions have emerged in the research field. Although there is no single definition that scholars accept (Zsolt et al., 2021), many of them agree with the idea that populism is a (thin) ideology (Mudde, 2004), stressing the core concept of the corruptness and goodness between the *elite*¹ and the homogenous mass of the ordinary people (Elchardus and Spruyt, 2016, Van Aelst et al., 2017, Pauwels, 2014). Other researchers consider populism as a discursive frame (Aslanidis, 2016), a style (Moffitt and Tormey, 2014), a performative style

¹As an empty signifier, the 'elite' might refer to the political, economic, cultural, medical, or scientific one.

(Bucy et al., 2020), a logic (Laclau, 2005b), an organization (Weyland, 2001), and a political communication style (Jagers and Walgrave, 2007, Bracciale and Martella, 2017).

Recently, a new analytical refinement has emerged in the research field, namely explicit (EP) and implicit populism (IP) relying partly on the *ideational* and the *stylistic* approaches (Tóth, 2020b). EP appears when a communicator directly refers both to the ‘people’ and their ‘common enemy’ in the very same coding unit stressing that the latter is harmful for the *volonté general* or disregards the general will (Mudde, 2004). IP focuses on either the popular sovereignty or the threat that the ‘dangerous’ others represent for the general will (Hameleers, 2018). Even though this refinement is an essential contribution to research field (see the explanation in the subsequent sections), at least three gaps emerge in the paper (Tóth, 2020b) that introduced the concept. Two gaps connect to the theory, while the third relates to the methodology. First, the study above highlights that populism is a thin ideology and it also regards it as a political communication style. It is important to mention that Tóth (2020b) refers to an argument that considers populism both as a thin ideology as a political communication style (Pauwels, 2011). Although this argument is acceptable, choosing a theoretical aspect that suits best EP and IP would be an important step towards cleaning these refinements’ goals and feasibility. We aim to fill this gap by choosing the most relevant theoretical background for EP and IP, namely the political communication style. Second, Tóth (2020b) argues that IP implies either people-centrism or antagonism, but he does not discern further categories within the implicit style. This paper aims to develop different IP categories to help scholars detect, measure, and analyze the phenomenon in future studies focusing on one of the vital attributes of the populist style: antagonism that emphasizes that specific agents or vague entities threaten the people’s sovereignty or the general will. We aim to provide an approach by which researchers might recognize the diverging populist political communication styles (PPCS) by implementing supplemented categories relying on antagonism. Finally, the former study lacks exact arguments how EP and IP contribute to content analysis methods. We also attempt to cover this gap. We hope that the further elaboration of EP and IP might be practical support for academics who concentrate on language-specific in-depth analysis even in cross-national studies.

The Core Features of Explicit and Implicit Populism

In this section, we introduce the features of EP and IP to characterize this theoretical and methodological approach. EP and IP might be useful methods because they might help researchers understand the possible connections between the style-attitude-mobilization ‘troika’ (Bonikowski, 2017). EP and IP can be apparent when scholars aim to analyze whether politicians employ people-centrism (Canovan, 2005) or antagonism (Gonawela et al., 2018) solely (IP) in their communication or both (EP) to acquire support. Do political agents and their consultants think that stressing direct dichotomies (EP) or focusing on rather one feature of populism (IP) is more effective in political communication?

At this point, we define, who the culprit others are, besides the political elite: in the PPCS, smaller, vertical groups (economic elite) can be attacked from the left-wing populists and horizontal minorities can be ostracized from the right-wing (immigrants, refugees, Muslims, other ethnic minorities, and LMBTQ communities) if the communicator emphasizes that (1) the political elite favors these groups rather than “its own people” (Schmuck and Matthes, 2015, Hameleers et al., 2018). Additionally, if these groups are depicted as threats for welfare or the sources of (relative) deprivation, they challenge people’s will, such as maintaining health care systems (Speed and Mannion, 2020, De Cleen and Speed, 2020). The right-winger Trump and Farage also focused on this idea in the presidential election in the US and at the

Brexit vote in 2016, while the far-right Austrian FPÖ blamed immigrants for the COVID-19 virus' onset and proliferation (Falkenbach and Greer, 2020, Speed and Mannion, 2020). In turn, the left-wing Irish Sinn Féin blames the private insurance companies, the economic elite, which keep the policy fees increasing on a yearly basis; therefore, people can choose whether they pay more for treatment or disregard private insurance and face long waiting lists (Murray, 2020).

The explicitness, implicitness and the degrees of the populist communication styles might be dependent on several aspects. First, the communicators' incumbent-opposition positions might affect their styles, especially if the challenger does not have experience in politics. The less experience a candidate has in politics, the higher the chance that they will utilize the PPCS (Bonikowski and Gidron, 2016). In contrast, incumbents who formerly were inexperienced in politics applies the populist style with less intensity in their second campaign periods as defenders of the incumbent positions (Bonikowski and Gidron, 2016). There are several instances where politicians employ populism only at a communicative level (Bracciale and Martella, 2017), while several individuals are populists both in communication and in the legislation (Bartha et al., 2020). Second, the different periods might invoke the PPCS more intensively: campaigns might indicate a higher frequency of the style than 'calmer' times between two elections (Tóth, 2020a). Third, specific events such as rallies, debates, press conferences, ribbon-cutting ceremonies, local or global crises such as immigration, pandemic, wars, austerities, protests, and riots might affect to what extent political agents use the PPCS (Eatwell and Goodwin, 2018). Scholars argue that crises might make the PPCS attractive because the establishment's ruler position becomes vulnerable (Berman and Snegovaya, 2019). Fourth, the texts' types, for instance, live speeches, Facebook posts, tweets, party manifestos, and interviews might show various types and degrees of PPCS (Aslanidis, 2018, Gründl, 2020). Former studies have already shown that Donald Trump's tweets are IP instead of EP (Tóth, 2020a), while style-wise, Fidesz's Facebook posts are EP-dominant during the 2018 campaign in Hungary (Tóth, 2020b). Finally, people's diverging demands (de Nadal, 2020), such as changing the establishment, tax-reductions, protecting inhabitants' culture, and welfare might also influence the political agents' communication, especially if one considers a positive correlation between political mobilization and anti-elitism. Bos et al. (2020) suggest that anti-elitism might induce political mobilization while the exclusive style (e.g., blaming immigrants or the capitalists) might not. EP and IP might help researchers understand what type of styles are employed by specific political agents, in diverging countries, at different times and which category might help political forces on the ascendancy of power.

Now, we aim to introduce the main characteristics of EP: one can perceive it if any direct, Manichean dichotomy appears between the homogenous masses and the culprit others in the analyzed coding unit. If the communicator mentions directly the morally unacceptable, culprit enemy, either by emphasizing the name of a person, a specific group, or provide a broader picture of the foe and refers directly to the people, EP occurs. It is crucial that the term 'dangerous people' functions as a universal but articulated threat while 'danger' is an unarticulated one. Following Laclau (2005a), the former word combination contains an empty signifier (e.g., the people), while the latter does not refer to the *source* of the threat. According to populists, threats might be immigrants, entire countries, businessmen, the political elite, lying experts, the fake news media, austerities, banks, the European Union, the United Nations, NGOs, specific ideologies, and their followers (Stavrakakis and Katsampekis, 2020, Hameleers, 2018, Eatwell and Goodwin, 2018). These features of the PPCS signify the threat's source, but 'danger' itself is an implicit term and cannot be a sufficient EP feature.

IP, on the other hand, has two different subcategories. The first (IP₁) relies on people-centrism (Franzmann, 2016); therefore, if the sovereignty of the people (Canovan, 1981) or

the people's demands appear (Laclau, 2005a), which oppose antagonist agents' interests, but the foe does not occur in the coding unit (e.g., the communicator does not mention it explicitly), the message falls under the implicit category. It is important to note that referring to the people might be *demoticism* (March, 2017) but IP₁ focuses on the presence of the people and their will in the same coding unit. The second (IP₂) focuses on antagonism (Hameleers, 2018): if the communicator mentions the enemy, regardless of it is a specific person, group, a vague circle, hostile ideologies, austerity, or a universal 'danger,' which mean common threat for the people, but does not evoke the masses, the coding unit also becomes part of the implicit style.

In sum, antagonist agents and the people are morally irreconcilable groups; therefore, they might appear solely in coding units and still be the features of the PPCS. Threatening the general will or appealing to the people whose will is the focal point of the populist style are eligible to categorize content units as IP.

Why to choose the political communication style and what the added theoretical contributions are?

Choosing the concept of political communication style rather than the ideological approach is supported by what Aslanidis (Aslanidis, 2016) calls the problem of 'degreeism.' Allegiance to ideology is often perceived as a dichotomous attitude: someone subscribes to it or refrains from being attached to one (Aslanidis, 2016). Consequently, the ideological aspect has a 'take it or leave it' nature, thus measuring the phenomenon at a communicative level from this perspective might provide binary results *in content analysis*. In turn, the PPCS implements the stylistic features of populism and provides an opportunity for researchers to analyze to what extent politicians operationalize this type of communication. As a result, many comparative studies emerge that analyze PPCS' similarities and differences within the different languages, territories, and cultural contexts (Gründl, 2020). We assume that the degrees of the different styles and their effects on citizens' populist attitude might be researched by considering the phenomenon as a political communication style.

Similarly to Jagers and Walgrave's (2007) perspective, we consider EP and IP as a political communication style that avoids complexity in communication and praises common sense politics supported by strong emotional appeals (Meijers and Zaslove, 2020). Jagers and Walgrave (2007) also took into consideration (1) anti-elitism, (2) exclusion (e.g., anti-immigrant rhetoric), and (3) people-centrism when they analyzed right-wing populism. The latter, according to Canovan (2005), is the crucial feature of populism. If all of them emerge, full populism kicks in, but if the masses appear in the coding unit solely, empty populism occurs (Bracciale and Martella, 2017). *In this sense, EP is between the full and empty categories because one apparent dichotomy is sufficient for this direct style.* This a vital contribution to the theory that considers populism as political communication style. Put it differently, only one antagonistic character is eligible to label a message as EP if the 'people' also appear in the coding unit.

On the other hand, IP₂ challenges one of the specific claims of Jagers and Walgrave, who argue (2007) that anti-elitism is not eligible for coding a message as 'populist' if the people are not present in the analyzed content. On the contrary, IP₂ endeavors to show that despite the absence of explicit references to the people or the *volonté general* in specific texts, they might be the invisible part of individual coding units. Thus, IP₂ is a possible unit for measuring the fragmented elements of populism (Tóth, 2020) if the enemy's interest threatens the general will. This is the second theoretical contribution: sole antagonism is not enough to label a message as IP₂, *but a common enemy that threatens the people's will, sovereignty,*

and welfare is the sufficient typology for this category. Threatening the general will is a distinctive feature of IP₂ and it is a stark contrast to negative campaigns. In sum, the political agents might focus explicitly on either the IP₁ or IP₂; however, the other entity is still part of the coding unit but in a concealed way. In this light, IP has, similarly to Taggart's claim, an 'inherent incompleteness' (Taggart, 2004).

Besides emotionalization (Bos et al., 2011) and simplification (Moghadam, 2018), several aspects might complete the populist style as follows:

- actualization (Krämer, 2014),
- antagonism (Arnold, 2018),
- blaming the common enemy which disregards the people's will (Laclau, 2005a),
- emphasizing negative pieces of information (Caiani and Graziano, 2016),
- informality (Moffitt and Tormey, 2014),
- people-centrism (Bracciale and Martella, 2017),
- stressing the idea of 'Zeitgeist vision' (Mouffe, 2005),
- taboo-breaking (Krämer, 2014),
- vulgarity (Bracciale and Martella, 2017).

EP and IP connect primarily to the stylistic approach because the direct, articulated dichotomies and suggested tensions might also be features of the PPCS. This is the third contribution of EP and IP and an essential reason why the stylistic approach suits better this concept rather than others do. From this perspective, explicitness is a plausible component of the PPCS because it compresses and converts the political frontier between the people and the culprit others in the same message. On the other hand, implicitness supports scholars' arguments claiming that the populist style often relies on a fragmented communication method; thus, it disregards one specific element of the phenomenon but enhances the other (Engesser et al., 2017). Therefore, considering populism's fragmented nature is useful to understand why the incomplete subtypes of the PPCS might proliferate.

Why EP and IP are important in content analysis methodologies?

In this section, we outline two important ideas that should be considered in content analysis methods if one aims to use EP and IP. First, as discussed above, EP implements manifest dichotomies, where at least one antagonist agent and the people are mentioned by the communicator. Dictionary-based automatic content analysis methods might easily detect EP, which is vital if one aims to code manifest contents with a scientific objectivity (Holsti, 1969). This process has a maximum reliability, but its validity might be contested (Aslanidis, 2018). However, implying manual coding to use mixed-methods analysis might increase the validity of the results (Gründl, 2020).

Second, and most importantly, IP evokes a challenge connecting to the coding unit lengths. We introduce quotes from Donald Trump's White House Press Conference during the Election Count on 5 November 2020 to demonstrate the emerging challenge:

'Democrats are the party of the big donors, the big media, the big tech, it seems.' This sentence from Trump fits IP₂ category. However, the entire paragraph looks like as follows:

'Democrats are the party of the big donors, the big media, the big tech, it seems. And Republicans have become the party of the American worker, and that's what's happened. And we're also, I believe, the party of inclusion.' This content unit consists of antagonism and people-centrism; therefore, it should be labelled as EP. Note that the second, longer quote is an entire paragraph from Donald Trump's speech held at the press conference above.

It is important to note that there is no consensus among scholars on which coding unit length is the most appropriate in content analyses (Krippendorff, 2004). Scholars scrutinize words, semantic triplets, core-sentences, paragraphs, and entire texts in content analysis (Aslanidis, 2018). However, just few researchers implement different coding unit lengths in populism studies, such as Rooduijn and Pauwels (2011) did. Anderson and colleagues (2000) claim that expanding a coding unit's size, for example from a sentence to a paragraph, might encompass more variables. This is what exactly happens in the example above; the first coding unit type (e.g., the core-sentence) is IP₂ because it highlights that the Democrats prioritize the elite, while the expanded coding unit (paragraph) also contains that the Republican party is for the working people. In other words, it upgrades the message from IP to EP.

Following the argument above (Anderson et al., 2000), scholars might acquire different results (e.g., ratios) of EP and IP even with the codebook if content analysis is conducted on different coding unit lengths. Put it differently, if one works with more extended coding units (paragraphs and whole texts), IP's frequency might decrease while EP's proportion might increase. In contrast, if scholars analyze smaller coding unit lengths (semantic triplets or core-sentences), a reversed process might be apparent: the smaller the coding unit is, the higher the chance that implicit messages will appear because political agents aim to use PPCS' fractures such as anti-elitism, exclusion, and people-centrism (Engesser et al., 2017). If our presumption was correct, we would suggest to code EP and IP on at least two levels of coding units, namely the narrow and extended ones in the same content. Scholars might test this hypothesis on a narrow level in semantic triplets or core-sentences and on the extended level in paragraphs, or whole texts (tweets, Facebook posts, speeches, and manifestos).

The further elaboration of Implicit Populism

As discussed above, IP has two fundamental categories: people-centrism (IP₁) and antagonism (IP₂). These subtypes might imply either the articulated appeal to the (will of) 'people' or the common 'foe.' In this paper, we elaborate the antagonist messages' subcategorizations (IP_{2a-2b}, see Table 1). Before we introduce the details of antagonism in IP, we provide another example from Donald Trump, who utilized people-centrism. We demonstrate this PPCS type in the intersection of 'People-centrism' and 'IP₁' in Table 1.

Table 1. Diverging features of the populist styles with examples

	EP	IP ₁	IP _{2a}	IP _{2b}
Unarticulated antagonism	X	X	X	'Genuine power-sharing and good government are possible, but the current impasse is unacceptable – Mary Lou McDonald told the British Secretary of State following a meeting in Belfast today.' ²
Articulated antagonism	X	X	The failing @nytimes writes total fiction concerning me. They have gotten it wrong for two years, and now are making up stories & sources! ³	X
People-centrism	X	'Instead of driving jobs and wealth away, AMERICA will become the world's great magnet for INNOVATION & JOB CREATION.' ⁴	X	
Articulated dichotomy	'Let people see what radical left Democrats will do to our country.' ⁵	X	X	X

In this message, nobody knows who is responsible for the disappearing vacancies, but the people are explicitly present in the tweet above. We suggest that this text, as part of people-centrism, should fall under IP₁ category. From Trump again, the following tweet, which was posted after his electoral victory and presented in the intersection of 'Articulated antagonism' and 'IP_{2a},' focuses on the new primary enemy, namely the media, which misleads the people. The foe appears while the masses are missing from this message. Even though the people do not occur explicitly, and Trump claims that the media is lying about him, the message under the surface is the following: the journalists lie to the people, which is morally unacceptable. In this light, the masses are involved in the tweet where they seem to be missing at first glance. Therefore, that tweet falls under the category of IP₂. To further elaborate the concept of IP₂ and avoid vague categorizations, we suggest that antagonistic messages containing *the articulated type of the culprit others* but disregards mentioning the people should be labelled as IP_{2a}.

However, there are messages in which antagonism occurs in a much more moderate, blurry, or hidden way. For example, neither the people nor the culprit others are directly addressed, like in the message in the intersection of 'Unarticulated antagonism' and 'IP_{2b}' (Table 1). However, it enhances the situation's unacceptableness; thus, there is a need for a change. In this case, references to the missing checks and balances, the emphasis of a government that listens to the people's voice, and explicit criticism towards the undesirable situation bring the message closer to antagonism than people-centrism. Our explanation is the following: there are not articulated dichotomies within Sinn Féin's post, so it cannot be part of EP. The term

² A Facebook post from the left-wing populist, Irish Sinn Féin party on 21 November 2019.

³ A tweet from Donald Trump posted on 2 February 2017.

⁴ A tweet from Donald Trump posted on 3 January 2017.

⁵ A quote from Donald Trump from the Oklahoma Rally Speech held in Tulsa on 20 June 2020.

‘impasse’ is blurry and universal, and it disregards any reference to the source of the problem, threat, or danger. However, Sinn Fein brings attention to a morally ‘unacceptable’ situation, suggesting that it harms the people. The people are invisible, and the source of the problem does not appear, but the need for change refers to the failing, ineffective, and corrupt establishment. This message might be part of IP_2 , as it contains unarticulated signifiers (the situation) and lacks the articulated ones. Therefore, we suggest operationalizing IP_{2b} , which does not contain references to the people and the threat’s source but focuses on the vague danger.

Limitations

We would like to enhance that our study has specific limitations. First, as introduced above, this paper only focuses on antagonism in IP for creating subcategories relying on articulated (IP_{2a}) and unarticulated foes (IP_{2b}). Second, people-centrism within IP might be separated further. One might assume that several pronouns such as ‘we,’ ‘our,’ ‘ours,’ ‘us,’ ‘you,’ and ‘yours’ might address the masses; however, these words might be more general than the ‘good people,’ ‘nation,’ ‘county,’ and ‘homeland’ and they challenge the content analysis’ validity. Indeed, the pronouns above, might not refer directly to ethnopopulism, yet they might support it implicitly. Therefore, they might become part of a new subcategory in implicit people-centrism. Besides, in languages such as Hungarian, the communicator does not have to use pronouns but only modify the relevant verb to operate a collective tone. Detecting people-centrism is complex progress, so the in-depth, empirical analysis is inevitable to conceptualize $IP_{1a-1b-1x}$. Third, a methodological challenge might also emerge when one aims to analyze EP and IP on different coding unit lengths. First, if a communicator decides to refer solely to the common enemy or the people, either people-centrism (IP_1) or antagonism (IP_2) will appear in the findings, excluding the chance of detecting EP. In this case, there is not much sense to implement content analysis on narrow and extended coding units. Finally, this paper is theoretical one, thus empirical research is sufficient to prove our methodological assumptions.

Conclusion

Researchers argue that several political agents utilize the PPCS solely because its fragmented features might provide extra supports from citizens of diverging political partisanship (Bracciale and Martella, 2017). As we outlined above, the scrutiny of populism is essential in social sciences, and one of the most critical units of examination is the *content* of the discourse (Jagers and Walgrave, 2007). Consequently, content analysis might be a helpful analytical tool to make scholars understand the phenomenon’s holistic nature and find possible ties between communication, political mobilization, and partisanship.

In this light, EP and IP might be applicable methods in content analysis. IP might be a useful methodological tool for scrutinizing political agents inclined to implement the fractured PPCS to win campaigns or maintain power. In other words, IP might help researchers detect the populist style in political agents’ communication who are not considered ‘populist’ in their politics but can utilize this part of the PPCS to expand their supporting background. Scholars have recently started to focus on people-centrism and antagonism in specific content analyses (Aslanidis, 2018). However, according to our knowledge, there is no research implementing the subcategories of IP_2 . In this study, we attempted to supply and suggest creating two versions within implicit, antagonistic messages. IP_{2a} highlights coding units bringing attention to the articulated source of the common threat. On the other hand, IP_{2b} takes into account messages

where the people do not occur, and the danger is too universal as the communicator does not provide minimal characterizations such as dangerous ‘people,’ ‘minorities,’ ‘immigrants,’ ‘legislations,’ ‘ideologies,’ ‘austerity,’ ‘viruses,’ ‘organizations,’ ‘aliens,’ ‘criminals,’ and ‘rioters.’ IP_{2b} can supply an extra opportunity for scholars to extend their measurements so they can analyze more extensive data. Besides, operationalizing IP_{2a-2b} might support explorative research to examine whether political agents tend to articulate the source of the danger that threatens the people’s will or instead keep the common problem as universal as possible. As Engesser et al. (2017) and Goodwin and Eatwell (2018) suggest, *implicitness will be, if not it is already, one of the critical features of populism*. The subcategories of IP₂ might be feasible approaches to verify scholars’ hypothesis above. Finally, if further research proves that there are statistically significant differences between EP and IP ratios on narrow and extended coding units, it is possible that this content analysis method should be used on at least two different coding unit lengths. The main reason for this methodological adjustment is PPCS’ fragmented nature, which might be detected and analyzed by operationalizing mixed-methods content analysis to provide high reliability and validity. We aim to test this assumption in further empirical research. <https://doi.org/>

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