

17

**VALUE FRAMING AND SUPPORT
FOR POPULIST PROPAGANDA**

Joel Cooper and Joseph Avery

The past few decades have borne witness to a rise in what scholars and pundits refer to as *populism*. Political scientist Ivan Krastev has dubbed the modern era the “Age of Populism” (Krastev, 2007), and few would disagree. Populism is not a new phenomenon, although scholars disagree about its roots. There is also little consensus about whether populism can be placed on a left–right political spectrum, or whether it is a dimension that is orthogonal to left and right wings in politics.

It is unfortunately not difficult to conjure the names of leaders in Europe and the United States who represent populism on the far right. In Europe, Victor Orban, Jaroslaw Kaczynski, and Boris Johnson are frequently referred to as populist, while in the United States that label affixes to Donald J. Trump. Although it can be argued that far-right populism is ascendant in 2020, there are numerous examples of leaders on the left of the political spectrum whom commentators see as populist. Senator Bernie Sanders, probably the most progressive national figure in American politics today, is often viewed as a populist. Similarly, Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez is seen as a populist, and many also would affix that label to Elizabeth Warren.

“Populist” is often cast as a pejorative adjective. To label a leader as a populist is to conjure images of Huey Long and Adolf Hitler. However, there are examples of populist movements that the perspective of time has cast into more positive light. Indira Gandhi’s campaign to remove poverty in India was a populist movement (Ranjan, 2018). We can also consider the circumstances of the famous Salt March that took place in India in March and April of 1930. When the British East India Company began to assert its rule over British provinces in India, it imposed special taxes on Indian salt (Guha, 2019). The aim of these taxes was to encourage salt importation, which would increase profits for the British East

India Company. The taxes continued for decades. In 1930, they were still in place, and Mahatma Gandhi took aim at the salt tax in an act of nonviolent civil disobedience. He led a 24-day march that culminated at the Arabian Sea, where Gandhi scooped muddy water into his hands and began to dry it. He proceeded to boil the water and produce salt in violation of the law. He instructed his followers to do the same, and he instructed villages and common Indian people to do so as well (Homer, 1994). The message was clear: salt, which is provided by nature and freely available to the people, cannot be controlled by foreign elites. In speaking about the Salt March, Gandhi emphasized the “inalienable right of the Indian people” and the “exploitation of the masses” (Wolpert, 1999, p. 204).

Populism on the Left and Right

What unites various forms of populism? The clearest tenet of populism is not what it supports but rather what it opposes. At its root, populism includes an appeal to the “people” to combat the tyranny imposed by the elite (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). In the populist view, the masses have been oppressed by the elite and the institutions built by the elite. On the progressive side of American politics, the elite are the infamous 1% who control the wealth of the country and the big banks that institutionalize their tyranny. On the right wing of American politics, big media companies are among the institutions that are alleged to mislead and misinform the masses. The institutions of government itself are also thought to be instruments of oppression within them a “deep state” that conspires against the common people.

Populist rhetoric often includes a moral component. As Muller (2016) views it, populists combine anti-elitism with a conviction that they hold a morally superior vision of what it means to be a true citizen of their nation. How to conceptualize the moral component may differ as a function of left and right politics. For progressive populists, the moral component may be the achievement of justice and equality for all people (Zabala, 2017), whereas the moral component of far-right populism may be the economic and social elevation of the ingroup (also see Crano and Gaffney; Kruglanski et al; and Marcus, this volume). Populism of the far right adds an element to the rhetoric that is not typically found in progressive populism. In order to arrive at the conclusion that the masses that comprise the ingroup are being tyrannized, two additional elements are typically offered. One is that the broad membership of the ingroup is being deprived relative to the elites. This does not need to be the case objectively, but right-wing populism appeals to relative deprivation—either compared with other groups in society (Marchlewska, Cichocka, Panayiotou, Castellanos, & Batayneh, 2017) or with one’s own aspirations—i.e., compared with the wealth or status that they had expected or deserved to achieve at this point in their lives (Pettigrew, 2017; see also Gelfand; and Hogg & Goetsche-Astrup; this volume). For far-right populism, there is a threat of great magnitude that is depriving the masses of what

they deserve. And this, in turn, permits populist leaders on the right to blame not only the institutions within their own group, but also to define what it means to be a pure member of the ingroup (see also Forgas & Lantos; Krekó, this volume). The insecurity aroused by the feelings of deprivation and injustice finds its solution in ingroup solidarity and outgroup degradation in line with social identity theory (see also Bar-Tal & Magal, this volume). For right-wing populism, more so than progressive populism, nativism becomes a frequent hallmark (Jay, Batruch, Jetten, McGarty, & Muldoon, 2019).

The Effect of Framing on Voters' Support for Populism

We believe there is support and opposition to populism depending on whose version of populism is at issue. In this chapter, we will focus our attention and our data on voters in the United States and try to shed light on their support for populism. We began with the hypothesis that liberals and conservatives are both likely to support populism and to support populist positions. However, while populism on the left and right share opposition to the elite and empowering the masses, liberals (instantiated imperfectly as Democrats in the United States) and conservatives (instantiated as Republicans) differ in the particular policies that flow from that underlying belief. We suspect that general support for populism will not be affected by people's liberalism or conservatism, but will vary dramatically by the way the populism is framed.

In our first study, we concentrated on two of the main issues that differentiate progressive populists from right-wing populists: morality and nativism. Morality is a component of populism for liberals and conservatives, although, as we discussed previously, the specific form of the morality differs. Nativism, we believe, is salient for conservative Republicans but not for progressive Democrats. It follows that if the concept of nativism is made accessible through priming, Republicans will be more likely to endorse populism than will Democrats or than Republicans who have not been primed with nativism. If morality is primed, conservatives and liberals will endorse populism because liberals and conservatives both view moral superiority as a part of their populism. The content of the moral arguments may be different, but morality is still central for both groups. Specifically, our hypothesis is that the frame (nativism vs. morality) will affect Republicans and Democrats differently, resulting in an interaction between political party and frame type.

Our first study included 112 United States citizens living in the United States who were registered as Democrat or Republican. Participants were presented with either a moral frame or a nativist frame. In the moral frame, participants were told to think about

moral values. You might think of values related to fairness and equality, or loyalty and authority. But really think about what it means, to you, to be

322 Joel Cooper and Joseph Avery

a moral person. Think about how notions of morality influence you and guide your behavior.

Then they were instructed to write a few sentences exploring the thoughts posed in the frame.

In the nativist condition, participants were told to think about

the value of putting America first. You might think of the threats posed by non-Americans, by outsiders. You might think about how there is much to be said for supporting the American people and making sure that they receive the benefits and rewards of society. But really think about what it means, to you, to put your country first. Think about how this notion of putting America first influences you and guides your behavior.

Then they were instructed to write a few sentences exploring the thoughts posed.

After viewing one of the two frames, participants reviewed a description of populism and were asked to rate how favorable they felt towards the concept. They were told, “the concerns of ordinary people are disregarded by established elite groups. It would be best if there were a way to kick out the political establishment, the entrenched elite groups who override the will of the people.”

Participants were presented with three populism items in random order. On 5-point Likert-type scales (1 = definitely not, 5 = definitely yes), participants indicated how favorable they were to populism and populists and were also asked if populism is good for the country. The three items were averaged into a single measure, Cronbach’s alpha, which was .89.

Data: Republicans, Democrats, and Framing

The data showed that Republicans and Democrats were moderately favorable towards populists and populism, with a mean of 2.83. Moreover, Republicans and Democrats showed no difference in their support of populism. Mean ratings by Republicans was 2.80 while Democrats were non-significantly higher at 2.85.

As predicted, framing made an important difference in feelings about populism. Figure 17.1 shows the data for Republicans and Democrats who were primed to think about morality or primed to think about nativism. The effect was primarily due to Democrats. When Democrats were asked to think about moral issues, their support for populism and populists was high (mean = 3.17), but when they thought about nativism, their support for populism fell to a mean of 2.27. This difference was highly significant. Republicans were not affected by the framing of populism. Most likely because some version of morality and nativism are already baked into their conception of populism, support for populism remained steady. The interaction between party affiliation and framing was significant.

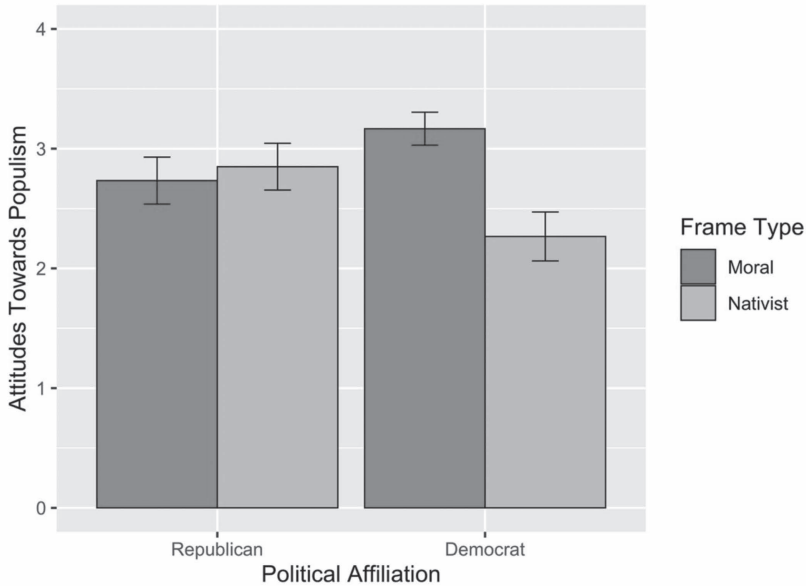


FIGURE 17.1 Attitudes towards populism by political affiliation and frame type. A two-way between-subjects ANOVA for the interaction of frame type (moral vs. nativist) by political affiliation (Democrat vs. Republican) was significant at $p = .007$. For Democrats, there was a significant difference in attitudes towards populism by frame type ($p < .001$), but for Republicans there was no observed difference ($p = .68$).

The Effect of Framing on Democrats' Support for Populist Policies

Our second study sought to understand the way framing affects support for specific populist positions. Populist leaders such as those mentioned earlier—Boris Johnson, Donald J. Trump, Bernie Sanders, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez—do not merely present as populists for the sake of the populist label. Rather, the label is valuable to the extent that it permits the passage of populist agenda items. Thus, in the remaining studies discussed in this chapter, we expand the use of frames so that they are applied not just to populism in general but to specific positions that fall within populist platforms.

We proceeded in a stepwise fashion. First, considering only Democrats, we explored whether we could replicate the effects found above with specific populist positions. Within American populism, there is distrust of big media companies, which are alleged to mislead and misinform the masses. In addition, there is distrust of immigration, as it is alleged to benefit wealthy elites at the expense of the middle classes. To evaluate support for positions attendant to these beliefs, we

asked participants to what extent (0–100 scale) they agreed with the following: “the elitist Press should be held accountable”; “restrictions on immigration into the United States should be increased.” As before, the primary manipulation was that, prior to viewing the two dependent variables, participants were presented with either a moral frame or a nativist frame.

Our population included 100 United States citizens living in the United States who were registered as Democrats.

Data: Democrats, Framing, and Specific Populist Positions

As predicted, the data showed that framing made a difference in Democrats’ feelings about populist positions. When Democrats were asked to think about their moral values, their support for the two populist positions was about 15 points higher (on a 100–point scale) than when they were asked to think about nativism (Figure 17.2). It was intriguing that this effect was found for both policy positions: whether it was restricting immigration or opposing the influence of the media, Democrats’ primed to think about nativism showed diminished support for the position.

The Effect of Framing on Democrats and Republicans’ Support for Populist Policies

We have just seen that framing populist positions as nativist diminishes liberals’ support for them, while emphasizing morality appears to increase their support. This is only part of the picture: how about conservatives? Given the results of our first study, we might assume that conservatives have already built their conceptions of morality and nativism into their endorsement of populist positions, and thus, in contrast to liberals, would be immune from the effects of framing. In our third study, we explore this assertion.

As before, the primary manipulation was that participants were presented with either a moral frame or a nativist frame. After viewing the frame, they were presented with one of the populist policy positions—either an expression of opposition to immigration or to big media and the “elitist press”—and asked to what extent they agreed with the position (1–5 scale, where greater indicated more agreement). We hypothesized that framing populist positions as nativist would diminish liberals’ support for them and that this effect would not be evident for the conservatives.

Our population included a new population of Democrats and also a population of Republicans. In total, the study included 248 participants who were registered as Democrat or Republican and were United States citizens living in the United States.

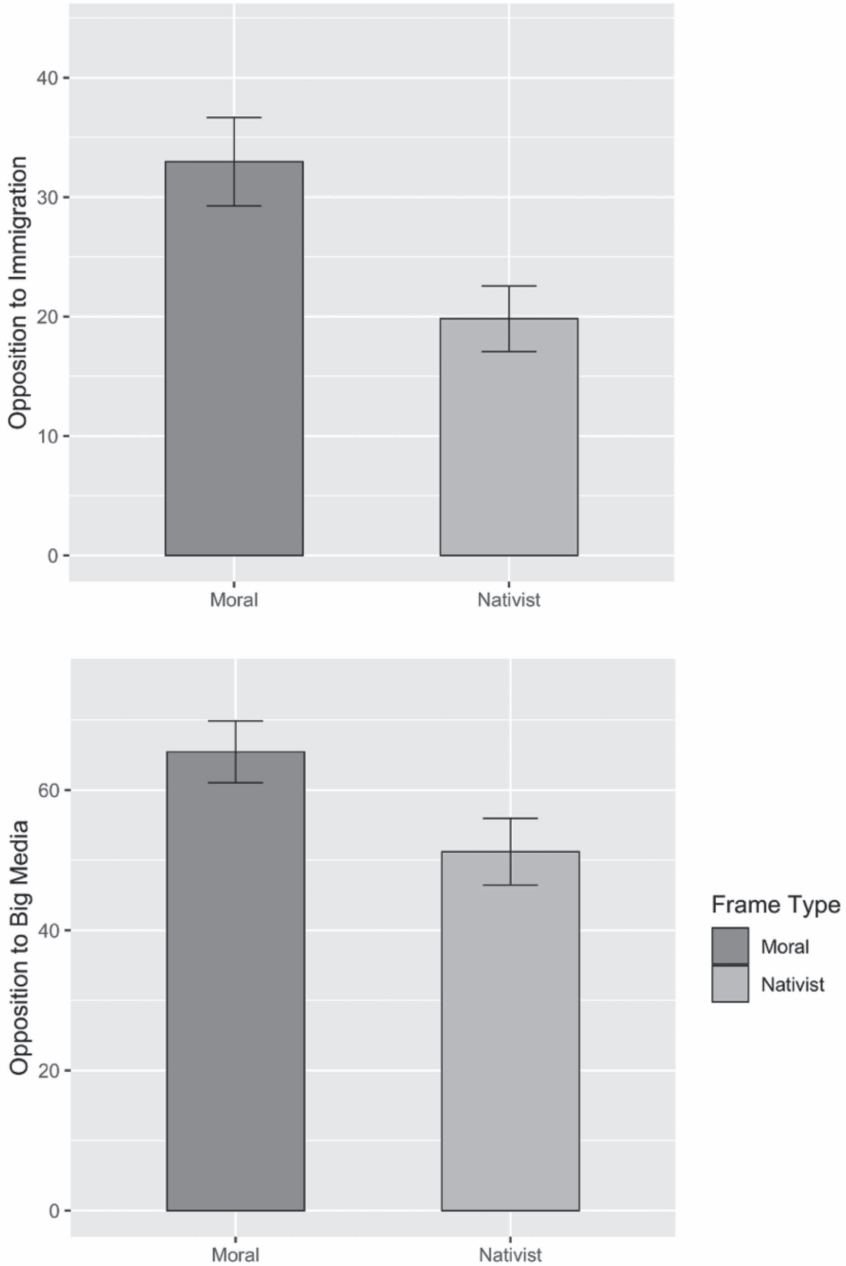


FIGURE 17.2 Democrats' attitudes towards populist positions by frame type. For both the anti-immigration ($p = .005$) and anti-big media ($p = .03$) items, framing the populist positions as nativist diminished liberals' (Democrats') enthusiasm for them but emphasizing morality increased it.

Data: Democrats and Republicans, Framing, and Specific Populist Positions

As predicted, framing made a difference in feelings about populist policies—and that difference was distinct across Democrats and Republicans. Figure 17.3 shows the data for Republicans and Democrats who were primed to think about morality or primed to think about nativism prior to giving their opinion about one of two populist policy positions. As in our first study, the effect was driven by Democrats' responses to the frames. When Democrats were asked to think about moral issues, their support for the populist positions was not significantly different from Republicans' support for the positions, regardless of which frame (moral vs. nativist) Republicans had seen. But, when Democrats were asked to think about nativism, their support for the populist positions significantly eroded.

Implications for Past and Future Populist Leaders and Supporters

Past research, especially in psychology, has primarily focused on populism as a construct: what it is (Marchlewska et al., 2017; Sakki & Pettersson, 2015) and what conditions lead to it (Jay et al., 2019). In this chapter, we have taken a slightly different approach. Rather than prod at the definition, we let it exist in its ambiguity, and we explored how different frames impact attitudes towards it. Our primary finding was that framing populism as nativist diminishes liberals' enthusiasm for it. On the other hand, framing populism as a moral issue increases liberals' enthusiasm for it. For conservatives, frame type seemed not to matter: whether thought of in moral or nativist terms, conservative enthusiasm for populism remained relatively constant.

Moreover, we found that this effect extended to specific populist positions, including opposition to immigration and opposition to the influence of big media. For both positions, conservative support was about equal across the moral and nativist frames. This support was also equal to liberals' support for the positions—but only when the liberals had viewed the moral frame. When the frame was nativist, liberal support for the populist positions plummeted.

How can this be explained? The most likely explanation is that conservatives must have already built morality and nativism into their endorsement of populism. In other words, their conceptions of populism subsume both moral and nativist dimensions, and thus the effects of such frames are attenuated. For liberals, while their conception of populism clearly includes a moral dimension, the nativist dimension is lacking. Thus, introducing such a dimension erodes support both for populism in general and populist policies in particular.

There are at least two important implications of this account. First, it suggests a fundamental difference in the substance and tenor of different populist movements. Those that originate on the right might be as morally motivated as those

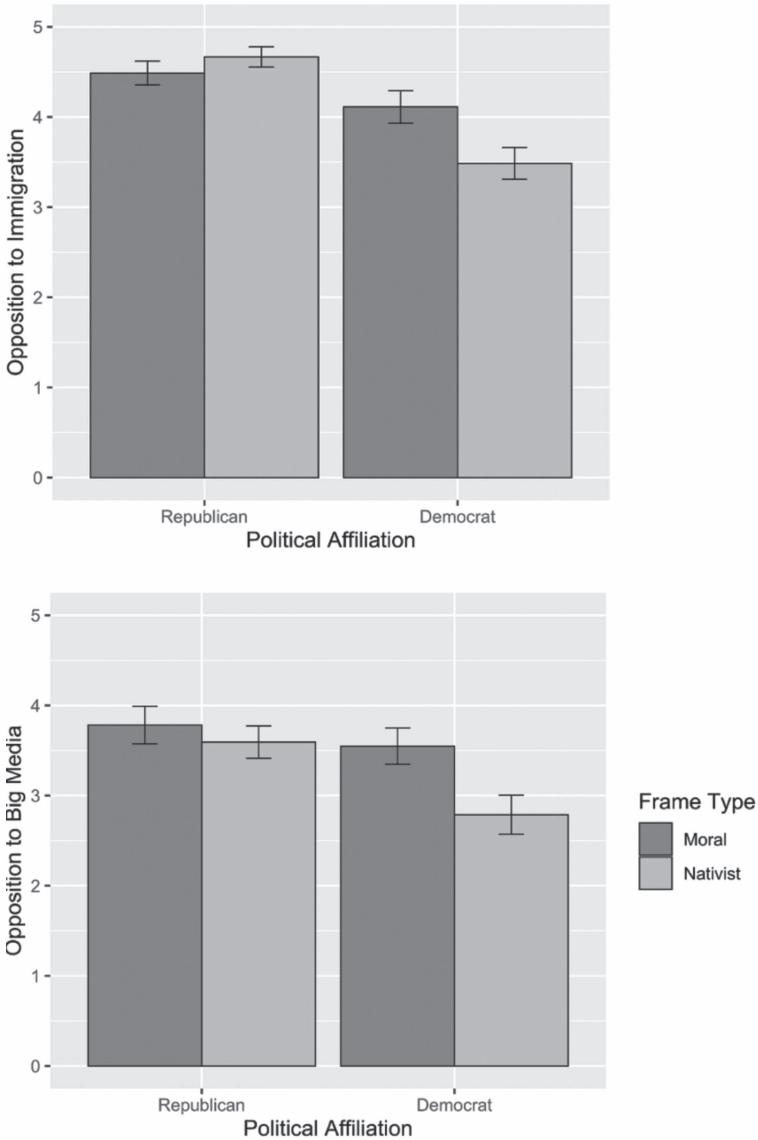


FIGURE 17.3 Democrats' attitudes towards populist positions by frame type. For both the anti-immigration and anti-big media positions, framing the populist positions as nativist diminished liberals' (Democrats') enthusiasm for them. Frame type had no effect on conservatives' (Republicans') enthusiasm for the items. When Democrats were primed to think of nativism, they showed significantly less support for the populist positions as compared with Democrats primed to think of morality (for both the anti-immigration and anti-big media items, p -values $< .02$) and as compared with Republicans in either condition (nativism, both p -values $< .007$; morality, both p -values $< .002$). There were no observed differences for Republicans across the two frame types.

that originate on the left, but they also are much more nativist. Given the substantial research linking nativism with harmful behaviors and beliefs, including racism (Betz, 2019; Smith, 2016), this is a troubling aspect of the far-right iteration of populism. We might ask if this aspect is evident in public actors associated with the respective iterations of populisms.

Populists on the left of the U.S. political spectrum have emphasized moral values in their rhetoric (Smash, 2018). Ocasio-Cortez, in particular, has argued that morality may matter more than facts (Curtis, 2019). In contrast, consider the far-right populist leaders whom we identified: Victor Orban, Jaroslaw Kaczynski, Boris Johnson, Donald J. Trump. None of these leaders has asserted strong claims to morality. Some have even prided themselves on how forgiving their constituents would be of their moral failings: as Trump infamously said, “I could stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody and I wouldn’t lose any voters” (Aratani, 2019).

The data tell us that populists’ crusades to upend institutions and political elites are at their strongest when they emphasize the morality of their crusades (see also Krekó, this volume). We found people on both sides of the spectrum that supported populism and populist positions. However, when populism was framed in nativist terms, it caused liberals to disengage. The suggestion for populists on both sides of the spectrum is to emphasize their moral rectitude rather than encourage ingroup social identity. The latter, which finds its political instantiation in anti-immigrant policies, turns off liberals without increasing support by conservatives. What does this tell us about populist politicians who have risen to power? If we were to consider political strategy on its own, it would make sense for both right and left populists to emphasize their moral authority while downplaying their nativist leanings. This would yield support from both sides of the political spectrum. However, populists like Trump and Orban do not shy away from nativist rhetoric, and thus we must wonder at the conditions that allow them to reach power. First, our results suggest that Trump and Orban’s brand of far-right populism would lead to extreme polarization, as liberals would abandon their support for such a populist. It is revealing that in the United States, deepening partisanship has been a hallmark of the Trump presidency.

Second, our results suggest that, for a populist who espouses nativism to rise to power, a majority of voters must be conservative, as it is clear that such a politician will not receive support from liberals (see also results in Forgas & Lantos, this volume). Barring the existence of such a conservative majority, the only other way such a politician could reach power is by weakening democratic processes, as in the case of Orban (Gehrke, 2020), or by some electoral oddity that overrides the popular vote, as in the case of Trump (Begley, 2016).

We said that there are at least two important implications of our account of populism. The first is this fundamental difference in the substance and tenor of different populist movements and what that means about the conditions enabling the leaders who arise from the respective movements. The second implication is an ironic one. Both of the populist policies that we presented to our participants

were arguably more reflective of far-right populist platforms: opposing immigration and opposing undue influence by big media. Yet, when framed in moral terms, liberal support for these policies was as robust as conservative support. This makes us wonder at the susceptibility of liberals to populist positions that they may not support in principle but will support if primed with moral values. In other words, unless there is a repulsive element, such as nativism, liberal populists might align themselves with conservative populists.

Other Potentially Impactful Frames and Factors

This final point brings us to consider the frames that we did not evaluate. While nativism often is deemed part of the content of far-right populism (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017), there are other correlates for far-left populism, most notably socialism. In future work, it would be interesting to determine whether a socialist frame would erode conservative support for populism and populist policies. If so, we would have a sense of the precise lines of which populist leaders must be aware in making their arguments. Does the socialist label render Bernie Sanders unelectable on a national scale? Perhaps, especially given that far-left populists are unlikely to pursue the strategies that benefitted far-right populists like Orban and Trump.

In addition, future work might explore different approximations of where people fall on the political spectrum. As discussed in the introduction to this chapter, we used Democrats and Republicans, although we did so with the understanding that such associations are merely approximations of liberalism and conservatism. Relatedly, we know that there are many individuals who fall between the political poles and are neither liberal nor conservative. For such individuals, what effect would our frames have, if any? This is a question worthy of empirical exploration.

Populism Says No—Or Does It?

Populism, like nihilism, is often defined in terms of what it stands against. In particular, the negation it entails is a negation of the elite (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017; Muller, 2016). Who the elites are is often in dispute (the wealthiest 1%, Ivy League intellectuals, big media, the “deep state,” globalists), but what is not in dispute is that populism seeks to overcome the undue influence exerted by them.

Our results suggest a nuance that distinguishes progressive from far-right populism. When the “anti” stance is highlighted, populism may become distasteful to those who would otherwise endorse it. That is, nativism, like populism, takes an oppositional stance: it pits perceived natives against perceived non-natives and argues that the former should be prioritized. Our other frame, which focused on moral values, was not oppositional. Rather, it prompted participants to consider the positive values and beliefs that matter to them. The fact that the nativist frame resulted in erosion of populist support by liberals suggests something about the nature of liberal populism. In particular, there may be limits on the extent to which liberals are willing to endorse an “anti” stance.

Liberal populists may not want to make the oppositional nature of populism explicit. The notions of liberalness and progressiveness are associated with an expansion of thought, belief, and behavior. In particular, they are concerned with inclusiveness rather than exclusiveness. From this vantage, it is more palatable to think of populism in “pro” rather than “anti” terms. Populism is not against the elites; it is for the people. Populism is not against foreigners; it is for the average citizen. Thus, when presented with the nativist frame, it is likely that our liberal participants felt an aversion to the oppositional nature of nativism, and this spread to their attitudes towards populism. On the right, interestingly enough, there appears not to be this aversion to oppositional stances.

Conclusion

We believe that populism, given its relatively nebulous content, is sensitive to the context in which it is presented. This context does not necessarily affect all individuals in the same ways. We have identified key differences in the effect of frames across the political spectrum. When framed as a moral issue, populism receives considerable support from both liberal and conservative Americans. However, when framed as a nativist issue, populism loses support from liberals, but conservatives appear immune to any such impact. Importantly, these effects are not limited to attitudes regarding populism, but rather extend to attitudes regarding specific policy positions that fall within populist platforms. Curbing immigration and opposing big media are policies that have appeal when framed as moral issues. However, Democrats’ support for such policies is eroded when the policies are attached to a nativist doctrine. Some of this effect might be due to fundamental differences between liberal and conservative worldviews. Liberals, in embracing new ideas and emphasizing inclusiveness, may feel a natural aversion to nativism’s oppositional stance and the extent to which it highlights a similar oppositional stance within populism.

We conclude by wondering what comes next for populism and populist supporters. Far-right populism has proven more successful in attaining power, especially elected offices, and we wonder if this suggests potential limits to how successful far-left populists can be. If so, then political success on the left might entail finding a way to appease far left populists without becoming truly populist. We are reminded of Barack Obama’s repeated quoting of Martin Luther King, Jr., who appealed to “the arc of the moral universe” and expressed a belief that, in the end, morality would be the law by which outcomes were swayed.

References

- Aratani, L. (2019, October 23). Trump couldn’t be prosecuted if he shot someone on Fifth Avenue, lawyer claims. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/oct/23/donald-trump-immune-shoot-fifth-avenue-murder

- Begley, S. (2016, December 20). Hillary Clinton leads by 2.8 Million in final popular vote count. *Time*. Retrieved from <https://time.com/4608555/hillary-clinton-popular-vote-final/>
- Betz, H.-G. (2019). Facets of nativism: A heuristic exploration. *Patterns of Prejudice*, 53(2), 111–135.
- Curtis, T. (2019, January 22). Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez is right that morality matters more than facts. *The Federalist*. Retrieved from <https://thefederalist.com/2019/01/22/alexandria-ocasio-cortez-right-morality-matters-facts/>
- Gehrke, L. (2020, May 6). Hungary no longer a democracy, Freedom House says. *Politico*. Retrieved from www.politico.com/news/2020/05/06/hungary-no-longer-a-democracy-report-239807
- Guha, R. (2019). *Gandhi: The years that changed the world, 1914–1948*. New York: Vintage.
- Homer, J. A. (Ed.). (1994). *The Gandhi reader: A source book of his life and writings*. New York: Grove Press.
- Jay, S., Batruch, A., Jetten, J., McGarty, C., & Muldoon, O. T. (2019). Economic inequality and the rise of far-right populism: A social psychological analysis. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, 29(5), 418–428. <https://doi.org/10.1002/casp.2409>
- Krastev, I. (2007). The populist moment. *Eurozine*. Retrieved from www.eurozine.com/the-populist-moment/
- Marchlewska, M., Cichocka, A., Panayiotou, O., Castellanos, K., & Batayneh, J. (2017). Populism as identity politics. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 9(2), 151–162. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550617732393>
- Mudde, C., & Kaltwasser, C. R. (2017). *Populism: A very short introduction*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Muller, J. W. (2016). *What is populism?* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Pettigrew, T. S. (2017). Social psychological perspectives on trump supporters. *Journal of Social and Political Psychology*, 5(1), 107–116. doi:10.5964/jssp.v5i1.750
- Ranjan, P. (2018, November 29). Is populism synonymous with the Right-Wing? *The Wire*. Retrieved from <https://thewire.in/politics/populism-india-narendra-modi-indira-gandhi>
- Sakki, I., & Pettersson, K. (2015). Discursive constructions of otherness in populist radical right political blogs. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 46(2), 156–170. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2142>
- Smarsh, S. (2018, August 4). How the American left is rediscovering morality. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/aug/04/american-left-morality-alexandria-ocasio-cortez-bernie-sanders
- Smith, H. J. (2016). Britishness as racist nativism: A case of the unnamed “other.” *Journal of Education for Teaching*, 42(2), 298–313.
- Wolpert, S. (1999). *India*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Zabala, S. (2017, January 17). The difference between right and left-wing populism. *Al Jazeera*. Retrieved from <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2017/1/17/the-difference-between-right-and-left-wing-populism/>