

**PART IV**

**Populist Narratives and  
Propaganda**

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## 16

**SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGICAL  
CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE STUDY  
OF POPULISM****Minority Influence and Leadership  
Processes in the Rise and Fall of Populist  
Movements**

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Extreme views permeate civic interactions, rendering compromise and mutual understanding difficult, if not impossible. Immovable attitudes on both sides of contentious issues exacerbate the gulf between proponents of competing causes and diminish chances of progress on crucial issues, presaging growing intolerance and repression (Gibson, 2013; Goldstein, 2014; Sullivan, Piereson, & Marcus, 1982). Committed partisans often are unwilling to entertain opposing views. This reality may be disastrous. Motivating extremists to moderate their positions may facilitate more openminded debate and convergence of actions that are mutually acceptable—or at least tolerable. A key factor in the miasma of blame and counter-blame is populism, the focus of this volume. Although noteworthy exceptions can be cited, populism is not a prominent feature of social psychological research (Jetten, 2019). This is surprising, as populism touches upon so many of social psychology's central concerns, including inter- and intragroup relations, communication and persuasion, social identity theory, minority and majority group influence, and extremism, among others. Instead, research on key features of populism have been left primarily to theorists and researchers in political science and sociology. There are many reasons for lack of social psychological attention, but one seems to stand out—lack of a clear definition of the construct. Judis (2016) argued that to attempt a definition is a mistake, because no overarching set of beliefs or traits adequately defines the construct. Considering the broad historical swath in which extremely diverse “populist” groups have acted worldwide, one is inclined to agree, but to do so removes the study of populism from focused scientific consideration.

Despite years of useful research, no consensual definition of populism has arisen. However, noteworthy similarities among many populist movements have been identified in the US over the past 200 years. We will examine some of these, with an occasional nod to European movements that until recently have evolved differently from those in North America. This is not to ignore the importance of European movements, which today are clearly on the ascent (e.g., Italy's Five Star Movement, France's National Front), but rather to recognize that the American brand(s) of populism often differ in subtle and not-so-subtle ways from European varieties, and often are more tractable. A central differentiator of populist movements is that the European varieties often morph into distinct political parties. The powerful two-party system characterizing the American electoral process leaves little room for a populist movement to attain legislative power, without which such movements are absorbed into the mainstream or wither. This is not to suggest that populist movements do not shape American politics. They do, but in indirect ways by insurgent groups and rhetorically skilled leaders influencing and politicizing people's existing attitudes. In the American two-party system, there is little room for a third party take over; rather, change requires an insurgent presence molding, shaping, and altering major political parties from within.

This chapter points to the many foci of social psychological research that can inform and be informed by close consideration of populism. Through historical and contemporary American examples of populism, we show that key features of successes and failures are informed by the integration of two prominent social psychological perspectives on social influence: the leniency model of minority group influence and social identity theory.

## Common Features of Populist Groups

### *Relative Deprivation (RD)*

We begin with a consideration of features that characterize many populist movements and that many consider fundamental to the construct. A useful descriptive feature of populism involves a widespread, shared sense of relative deprivation (RD) among adherents (Carrillo, Corning, Dennehy, & Crosby, 2011; Moghaddam, 2008; Pettigrew, 2002, 2015). Pettigrew (2015) argued that RD was based on perceptions of status or identity loss, and the resultant anger in response. The perception of absolute decline does not matter nearly as much as *relative* loss (Smith & Kessler, 2004; Smith & Pettigrew, 2015), a characterization that complements Inglehart and Norris' (2017) thesis, which suggests that changes to a country's economy that "leaves out" some workers, as well as cultural backlash toward a society's changing demographics, provide the backbone of most populist movements' platforms. This is inherently tethered to RD, wherein the people represented by the populist group feel deprived economically and/or socially compared to other groups (e.g., immigrants, the financial 1%, etc.). Perceived

relative loss rouses anger, also a motivating factor in the life course of populist movements. Gaffney and associates (2018) expanded this view, placing RD solidly in a social identity framework. They argued that only when anger was perceived as widely consensual was its effect linked to rising populism, and this relation was mediated via perceptions of RD. Growth and development of shared *relative* anger are heightened by selective exposure, in which those experiencing RD are more likely to shun counter-attitudinal messages and seek out attitude-congruent messages, reinforcing consensual perceptions of ill-treatment (Hameleers, Bos, & de Vreese, 2018). Widespread availability of social media facilitates the transmutation of RD from a series of isolates to an entity of individuals sharing common concerns. Far from a simple egocentric response to ill treatment, of which there is plenty to go around, populism requires consensus around an identified source of discontent, reinforced by an aggrieved group whose perception of an injustice legitimizes their dissatisfaction. This process is accelerated by social media, facilitating exposure to communications that bolster the commonality of grievances.

### Political Orientation

Politically based differences do not provide useful discrimination of the many populist movements that have evolved. Populist movements on both ends of the spectrum have arisen and prospered—or died (Chermak & Gruenewald, 2015). We are not concerned now with those that have risen to capture the mainstream of political life, even attaining supreme authority (e.g., communism, fascism, Nazism), as this is not the explicit case with the American brand of populism. It should be noted, however, that the success of populist movements at running the show (though few attain that position) has not produced much in the way of happy endings, as was anticipated by experimental research on minority groups that rise to positions of power (Prislin & Christensen, 2005; Prislin, Sawicki, & Williams, 2011). Historically, US populist groups have proven most successful when they form part of the loyal opposition.

### The People, the Establishment, and the Elites

Left or right, populist movements share the common thread of RD. However, differences do distinguish left- from right-wing populism. Judis (2016) suggests that left-wing populists generally favor “the people” over “the establishment,” whereas right-wing populists appear to favor “the people” over “the elites,” whom they perceive as advantaging a group other than themselves (e.g., racial, ethnic, and religious minorities, undocumented immigrants, the poor, or other groups to which the budding populist does not belong). This bifurcation brings to mind Kazin’s (1995) views on the nature of populism, which he viewed as a play that casts some individuals into the role of the noble everyman, untouched by irrelevant concerns like wealth or power, and distinguishes those admirable people

from powerful “elites” (via wealth, education, high birth), whose actions are motivated by self-interest, not cooperation, altruism, or the public good. Kazin’s distinction is interesting. It fits well with considerations of in-group/out-group membership, and who in society defines representativeness and prototypicality—major features of the social identity framework that occupies a key role in the current analysis (Abrams & Hogg, 1999; Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, & Flament, 1971; Tajfel & Turner, 2004; Turner, 1985; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987).

### **Insecurity and the Status Quo**

It is difficult to imagine circumstances in which a populist revolution would arise in communities in which the “livin’ is easy,” but this is not unerringly correct. Populist sentiments arise in groups whose perceived self-interest is threatened; RD plays an important role in perceptions of disadvantage. Even when subsistence needs are met adequately, dissatisfaction with one’s lot vis-à-vis that of unknown strangers or even one’s neighbors may be sufficient to stimulate a sense of unfair deprivation of a lifestyle that is remembered as having been available in the past. This mindset gives rise to dissatisfaction with the status quo and a longing to return to better times, real or imagined. The sense of being left behind, unable to ensure a life for oneself or one’s children, is at the heart of many populist causes.

The Tea Party movement that arose in 2008 and gained traction in the US in Barack Obama’s second term was a conservative-leaning group that called for lower taxes, lower national debt, isolationist policies, rejection of universal health-care, a balanced budget, and other economically conservative reforms to cut the size and spending of the federal government (Przybyla, 2010). The goal of this group was to return to a world before Obama. Ahh, nostalgia. The Tea Party was not a coalition of a poor, disenfranchised minority. It consisted largely of older (55% vs. 32% of poll respondents) white men (61%), who were more religious than the general population (44% identified as “born-again Christians”), and who identified with the Republican Party (66% voted Republican always or usually). The movement was not of the economically downtrodden—Tea Party adherents considered themselves middle-class or above (Przybyla, 2010). In absolute terms, the average Tea Partier was doing fine, but not as fine as they remembered (also see Golec de Zavala, this volume).

### **Roots**

#### *Know Nothings and the American Party*

It would be a mistake to assume the Tea Party came into being in the American political system fully formed, without strong precedents. The US political

landscape is strewn with the detritus of populist movements, most of which enjoyed a few moments in the spotlight and then faded. One of the earliest of these was the *Know Nothings*, a Protestant citizens' secret group opposed to immigration and Catholics. There is a symmetry to these targets, as at that time (mid-1800s) the bulk of immigrants were Irish Catholics. An often-overlooked feature of the life and death of the movement was the industrialization of the east coast, and the dislocation this brought to the status quo ante. Modernization seriously disrupted the usual patterns and was the source of anger and a sense of RD, which energized many to join this movement (Mulkern, 1990). Because of its racial, religious, and ethnic discrimination, the party's views were not widely accepted, and ultimately it died of its own internal contradictions. The American Party was soundly thrashed in the election of 1860, by which time many anti-slavery members had joined the party that elected Lincoln.

There have been many America First Parties over the years, but the first named as such was formed in 1943. It was an isolationist, reactionary group steeped in racism, religious bigotry, and rampant anti-Semitism. At the time of its founding, the US was engulfed in World War II. The America Firsters' candidates in the presidential election of 1944 did not fare well, receiving fewer than 1800 votes of the 47 million cast. After its name change, a common third-party response to an electoral drubbing, the party received 42 votes in the election four years later. It disappeared shortly thereafter. It is curious that the party's name retains its cachet. In Trump's 2016 inaugural address, he invoked an isolationist mantra identical to the earlier, discredited America First Party's, when he intoned, "From this day forward, it's going to be only America first. . . . America first" (Graham, 2017).

### *Coughlin, the Kingfish, and Trump*

Other less formal and less organized populist factions have emerged over the years. Often, they were centered around a charismatic figure, like Father Charles Coughlin (1871–1979), a Catholic priest who gained notoriety with his radio sermons, which began in 1926 with his Sunday homilies, broadcast from a local radio in station in Detroit, and grew by 1935 to address a nationwide "congregation" of more than 300 million weekly listeners (Sayer, 1987). At the height of his popularity, his "sermons" focused almost entirely on politics, not Jesus, and his popularity exceeded that of any public figure in the US.

Coughlin, however, had an Achilles' heel, as Brinkley (1982, p. 83) noted: "As the years passed, a strain of megalomania wore away his self-restraint until finally his excesses destroyed him." The "radio priest's" popularity was based on his eloquence, cunning, charisma, ambition, and apparent defense of common people against avaricious (Jewish) bankers and others (e.g., rich oligarchs) in power who, in his view, ran the society to their benefit and were responsible for the Great Depression (Warren, 1996). His initial admiration and praise of Franklin D. Roosevelt's "New Deal" changed over time to virulent attacks on communism,

Wall Street, Jews, involvement in World War II, FDR, and the New Deal itself. His increasingly hyperbolic rants against the “international (Jewish) conspiracy” and communists, and not-so-subtle admiration of Hitler and Mussolini, even in 1942 with the US heavily involved in the war, proved too much for a nation at war and the Catholic Church’s attempts to alleviate concerns about its allegiance to the country. The priest’s access to the mass media was lifted by order of the Catholic hierarchy, who directed the priest to stop his weekly radio broadcasts. Further, his popular magazine, *Social Justice*, a second pillar of his success (and millions of dollars in weekly contributions) was banned from the US mails for violating the Espionage Act. Deprived of his mass media megaphones, Coughlin’s popularity rapidly waned. He retired in 1966 and died 13 years later.

Coughlin’s story is similar to other populist leaders whose influence was based on personal charisma and a talent for exploiting popular discontent with the status quo. Perceptions of RD exist in all societies. Upward social comparison and economic insecurity, exploitation of the less powerful by the more powerful, and anger at perceived inequities seem unavoidable. However, the rise of populist leaders who can exploit these conditions is not a foregone conclusion, nor is their continued influence after they die or even while they live without their bullhorns. This suggests a distinction between two forms of populism that seem to have evolved over time. The first, which we call leader-based populism, is well organized and headed by a solitary, predominant spokesperson who elaborates and dictates grievances that resonate with adherents. The weakness of this form of populist group is that it is dependent upon a singular individual with a consistent message, and when this person dies or is removed, message coherence may be lost, and the movement founders. A real danger of this form is that the prototypical leader tends sometimes to drift into demagoguery. The alternative populist model is a leaderless form in which the movement springs organically from the populace. Its likelihood of success and longevity is lower, and usually occurs in extremis. The birth and development of the labor movement in the US is an example of this type, when leaders emerged in response to intolerable local conditions (the earliest organized strike occurred in 1768, when journeymen tailors resisted a wage cut), and only later became organized into large-scale organizations with powerful leaders (e.g., Eugene Debs, Samuel Gompers, George Meany, Walter Reuther, John L. Lewis, Cesar Chavez, etc.) The original leaderless unions were not prone to evolve to totalitarian leadership owing to the nature of their inception and early development. Only later did strongman leaders arise. This reversal process in leader-based populist groups is not common.

Contemporaneous with Fr. Coughlin was Senator Huey Long of Louisiana, who championed the poor of his state and promised them a better life. But when Sen. Long was assassinated in 1935, his “Share our Wealth” movement died along with him. His program promised the poor an equitable return in payment for their labors, and a consequent loss to the “fat cats.” He was loved by the poor despite not making good on his promises. He was reviled by the rich for trying



to do so, who claimed his “reforms” were studies of corrupt spending in service of his grandiose ego.

The Trump phenomenon in the US provides another example of the staying power of a movement characterized by a strong spokesperson who appears unamenable to counter-argument or evidence, and a knack for suppressing internal dissent. One might debate whether the Make America Great Again (MAGA) movement has made good on its promises to drain the swamp, but for some, delivery on the promises is less important than the promises themselves.

Nazism, too, was characterized by a powerful leader who capitalized on the population’s widespread experience of RD, combined with consensually shared anger triggered by an ever more desperate social and economic situation, and a consistent message promising better times to come. This message became increasingly accepted. Hitler’s combination is an almost foolproof recipe for the rise of a populist leader, and he polished all the necessary components of the machinery to a fine sheen. His rising popularity gave him unlimited power to penalize those straying too far from orthodoxy, sometimes with fatal results, thus killing dissent (along with the dissenter). No doubt the bad ending of the war, at least for Hitler, largely undid his movement, but one can only imagine a different future had that not been so (see Roth, 2004).

A quick informal indicator of the rise and likely longevity of a populist movement involves a simple question: “Who is the spokesperson for Movement X?” For Coughlin’s movement, it was Coughlin. For MAGA, it is Trump. For the “Share Our Wealth” movement, it was Long. But consider the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement, which purported that 1% of the US population controlled 99% of the wealth of the nation. Who was its leader? The answer to this question does not come readily to mind, probably because there was none. The movement had many non-overlapping goals and spokespersons, but no central organizing theme other than a strong sense of injustice, anger, and RD. Many Americans concurred with the movement: some polls reported 40% popular agreement with OWS’s goals, if not tactics. However, the lack of goal coherence and leadership spelled OWS’s doom. The movement flared out in less than a year, even though many of its ideas inform progressive policies today. Fulfilling a need for a powerful leader and a unifying and coherent message appear necessary requirements for a populist movement’s longevity. This source of unique influence arises when a sub-group of reasonable size shares growing concerns of mistreatment, and a perceptive leader arises with an understanding of how to exploit these perceptions (Gardikiotis, Martin, & Hewstone, 2004) and disseminates them widely among other like-minded individuals, who share a similar sense that their lot in life was much better at some earlier (perhaps imagined) time. Without these factors, strong reactions to the status quo are unlikely. This was theorized from the earliest days of RD research. Stouffer, Suchman, Devinney, Star, and Williams (1949) held that immediately available comparisons formed the basis of RD, and that absolute judgments were not as powerful a determinant as social

comparisons, and who could be a better source of social comparison than one's earlier self. Notably absent from this list of qualities and qualifications needed to lead a populist movement is the ability to lie with a straight face, but it often proves a necessary talent.

## A Social Psychological Analysis

As the Sydney Symposium series implies, our focus is social psychology, and so it is reasonable to consider the relevance of the field to populism. Many answers are presented in this volume, but our view is focused on theoretical models that have occupied the discipline for years: they include minority influence, social identity, and communication and persuasion. In combination, these topics offer a useful basis for understanding populism and the processes that nurture its development, growth, success, or failure.

## Political Identities and Polarization

Who are the people so inherently good in comparison to elites, the foundation of many populist movements? The “common” people, the “general populace,” “the silent majority,” “ordinary people” define themselves in juxtaposition to an immoral ruling class. Because of this collective definition of identity, an analysis of populism should examine the construct as a product of both inter- and intragroup relations. Gaffney and colleagues (2018, p. 20) suggested that

examining political outrage and populist sentiments from a point that starts with considering people's collective identities allows scholars to ground public opinion and political decision making not in individual irrationality, but in purposeful reasoning and action motivated by concern on behalf of important identities.

People understand and interpret their self-concepts in part from the knowledge and esteem they derive from their group memberships—their social identities (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Being a part of a “political revolution” furnishes people with significant knowledge about the self and the political world. In 2016, Bernie Sanders' supporters defined themselves in opposition to the Democratic National Committee (DNC) and mainstream Democrats. The defining features of Bernie supporters and their shared understanding of the political sphere acted on both their emotions (outrage) and behaviors (e.g., how they cast their votes after Sanders lost the Democratic primary to Hillary Clinton). Because populist movements are characterized by a shared sense of rage toward economic or political elites, the belief structure of populism is rooted in intergroup relations. Decades of research on collective action (Klandermans, 2014) suggest that when collectives become aware of their engagement in a political struggle against a

perceived oppressor, they are motivated to act together for social change, particularly if they view their subjugated position as illegitimate (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Gaffney and colleagues (2018) held that populist movements are protest movements engaged in what they view as collective action against their governments. In an analysis of demonstrators and protesters at the 2016 Republican and Democratic National Conventions, they found that to the extent demonstrators and protesters felt their anger was characteristic of all Americans, their feelings of RD positively predicted populist sentiment. This relationship was weaker or not apparent among people who felt that their anger was unique to their group in American society. Those who projected their own anger onto all Americans, and thus likely viewed themselves as part of the American majority, expressed populist sentiments. This promotes the idea that populism is a belief structure rooted deeply in intergroup relations—the perceived oppositional relationship of the people to the government or ruling class. The specific collective call to action is based on the need to tear down the government so that power rests in the hands of the people whom the movement purports to represent. Populist groups operate under the assumption that they understand the will of the people—and best represent it.

### **A Vision for the Collective: Popular Leadership**

Groups represent shared identities cognitively, through prototypes—amalgamations of attributes and features that define what the group is and what it is not (Hogg, 2006). Borrowing directly from the language of populism, which divides people into distinct factions: “we are the pure people”; “they are the corrupt elite” (Mudde, 2007, p. 23). This suggests the identity that populists form through self- and social-categorization processes (Turner et al., 1987). When group membership becomes psychologically salient (e.g., awareness that someone is a Republican Party supporter) in comparison to a relevant out-group (e.g., Democrats), people view themselves and others with respect to the defining features of their group prototype. Through this process of depersonalization, the group prototype becomes the prominent source of influence, as people view themselves and others through the lens of the prototype while actively attempting to approximate their in-group prototype (e.g., Hogg & Turner, 1987; Turner, 1991). As a result, group members who are prototypical, who embody group attributes and best represent the group’s identity, wield significant influence (Hogg & Reid, 2006). People tend to elect and support prototypical group members to leadership positions (Barreto & Hogg, 2017) who, once in leadership positions, can refine and bolster what is group prototypical (Reicher & Hopkins, 2003). The position of leadership itself may confer the “right to lead” (Abrams, Travaglino, Marques, Pinto, & Levine, 2018). For example, in examining the changing nature of the Republican party, Gaffney and colleagues (2019) showed that Republicans rated Donald Trump as more prototypical of the Republican Party *after* he won the

presidency then when he was a candidate. This effect was explained partially by Republicans expressing greater consensus and coalescing around their views of Trump as representative of their identity group, an indication of the changing nature of the Republican Party prototype to the “Party of Trump.”

For our analysis, it is important to understand that although out-group members may perceive populist leaders such as Trump as selling his followers a bill of goods, due to his inability to complete his promised border wall, failure to destroy Obamacare, disastrous Covid-19 response, or general impotence or unwillingness to “drain the swamp,” the in-group is likely swayed by the pledge and not the follow-through. This also could be an outsider’s perspective of Huey Long. Recall that populist movements are inspired by the *promise* and not necessarily the delivery on the promise, if the intent is pure and is enacted on behalf of the collective. Abrams and colleagues (2013) reported that group members provide leaders (especially prototypical leaders) with transgression credit, in which group members often are willing to overlook a leader’s transgressions or failures, particularly if they believe the leader is acting in the group’s best interest. A leader’s lie may be viewed as being “for us, a statement taken out of context, or simply blown out of proportion by critics and haters.”

Notable contemporary populist movements have a clear figure head, a visible leader. In the United States’ example of “Trumpism,” this is clear, but on the other side of the spectrum, progressives and Democratic Socialists have Bernie Sanders at the helm. Geert Wilders is the face of the Netherlands’ Party for Freedom, Marine le Pen leads France’s National Front, and Evo Morales, a former president of his country, leads the Bolivian Movement for Socialism. These examples illustrate the importance of leadership to the success of any movement. Both successful and memorable movements (regardless of their populist tendencies) share the common feature of leadership. “Flat” movements tend to fall flat (e.g., “Occupy Wall Street”), but when asked to picture a successful movement such as the American Civil Rights movement, the name Martin Luther King, Jr. immediately becomes synonymous with the movement, even though his success was partly a function of the country’s rejection of more radical solutions to racism’s ravages (Crano, 2012). The United Farmworkers Association recalls Cesar Chavez, and Nazi immediately brings Hitler to mind. Father Coughlin and Senator Huey Long were so central to their populist movements that their organizations dissipated in their absence. Such is the case when populist movements are led by strong and representative leaders. They are the face of their movement and so connected to the movement’s identity that it often becomes feckless in their absence (unless the leader is martyred). Because a leader embodies the group identity and presents a literal (and visual) representation of the group to the world, the leader clarifies the group prototype (Hogg & Reid, 2006). The leader delineates the nature and structure of the group—for in-group and out-group members. The leader enhances perceptions of a group’s *entitativity*, a term coined by Campbell (1958), which refers to the extent to which people perceive

a collection of individuals as a real or structured group. Groups range from loose assemblages to tightly knit entitative associations that exhibit high belief similarity among members, cohesiveness, and interdependence (Lickel et al., 2000). As a result, highly entitative groups stand out, capture attention (Clark & Wegener, 2009), and have clearly defined norms and precise intergroup boundaries. The more entitative the group, the more clearly defined is its prototype—members know who is with them and who is not.

Insiders and outsiders alike believe highly entitative groups move as a unit and are efficient in attaining their goals (Rydell & McConnell, 2005). They engage perceivers in greater message processing of counter-attitudinal messages and are more persuasive than groups of low entitativity (Clark & Wegener, 2009). Populist movements, characterized by a strong leader, are attractive to the extent they provide an unambiguous identity. The importance of a leader who clearly represents the group cannot be overemphasized. Our analysis suggests that populist groups that are led and thus defined by a strong leader appear effective in achieving their goals. This is important to the success and health of the movement—there would be no reason to advocate tearing down the government and placing political control in the hands of the people if they did not believe the people could grasp control and effectively govern themselves. Successful populist leaders establish entitative groups and avow effective delivery of the group's promises. They are selling their vision, not a bill of goods.

Further highlighting the essential role of leadership as a necessity of successful populist group formation is research on movements that lose their figureheads. Often, these groups lose momentum because of a loss of entitativity and clarity of the group prototype. This does not suggest that group members always act in blind accord with their leaders, but rather that the role of group members in enacting their leader's vision is one of *engaged followership* (Reicher, Haslam, & Smith, 2012). Loss of leadership likely signals the waning of cohesion and entitativity, complicating the normative structure of the group. Members facing a loss of leader may experience identity failure (Haslam & Reicher, 2007) and question the very nature of the group and their membership in it, leading to the eventual fading of the movement. The importance of a strong, persuasive, insistent, and charismatic leader whose actions create the essential entitativity of the group cannot be overstated. Success or failure of a populist movement is defined by such leadership.

Prototypes and the nature of the groups they represent shift with social contexts. We introduced the idea that groups shape and are shaped by leadership and are changed by new leadership (e.g., the Republican Party's shift to the "Party of Trump"; Gaffney, Sherburne, Hackett, Rast, & Hohman, 2019) and the loss of leadership. More generally, the nature of intergroup contexts shapes the way people perceive their group's prototype. Hogg and associates (1990) showed that the presence of an out-group polarizes group members' attitudes *away* from a relevant out-group's position. Polarization occurred by changing the group prototype

such that exposure to an out-group position resulted in an increase of perceived intragroup similarity over intergroup differentiation. This is essential to our general thesis, as we maintain that populists, particularly in the US sociopolitical context, gain traction not by forming third parties but rather by changing the nature of existing political parties from within. Populists take advantage of a polarized political climate by driving a wedge between contending identities. This was supported by David and Turner (1999), who showed that extreme in-group factions cannot effectively change moderate in-group members' attitudes when the group context forced a comparison between moderates and extreme in-group factions. Yet, when the comparative context involved the extreme in-group faction's position in juxtaposition to a relevant out-group's, moderates become more supportive of the extremist position. This allows the in-group to establish distinct boundaries between the in-group and the relevant out-group.

An experiment by Gaffney and associates (2014) showed that these processes may have benefitted the agenda of the Tea Party. Their research provided moderate conservatives with an extreme politically and socially conservative message, ostensibly from a Tea Party leader. When the context involved comparison between moderates and Tea Party members, it was ineffective. However, if the message elicited an intergroup comparison with the Democratic Party, moderate conservatives were far more likely to embrace the Tea Party message, particularly in a context of uncertainty. This suggests the Tea Party message was effective because aligning with it allowed moderates to distinguish conservatives from the real out-group—Democrats. Changes to political identity and political groups evolve from small factions within the group, not from the outside. Insurgents, although minorities within their groups, are effective at promoting their agenda to the extent they can cast themselves as part of the in-group—a case study in successful minority influence (Crano, 2012; Moscovici, 1994).

### **Relevance of Majority/Minority Influence Principles to Populism**

An analysis of populism that combines social identity and minority influence concepts may pay dividends in understanding how populist groups form, develop, or wither. Start with the proposition that populist movements generally begin as minority groups, often as out-group minorities, which (if successful) become insurgent in-group minorities. To address the issue of the way populist groups gain traction, our minority influence-based analysis turns to Moscovici, one of the 20th century's most prominent social psychologists, who was fascinated with the question of how a minority attained its goals when it could not force the majority to agree to its demands (Moscovici, 1976, 1980, 1985). His research established that minorities could affect the majority in laboratory judgment tasks, but these effects were apparent only if the group was consistent, persistent, and unanimous. Failing any of these criteria resulted in failure. Perhaps this is why majorities deal

so harshly with members who contravene group norms (Marques & Yzerbyt, 1988; Pinto, Marques, Levine, & Abrams, 2010).

Having established that inconsistencies within *minority* groups destroy their capacity to influence, the question of how this occurs stimulated considerable research, and over time many theoretical models were advanced to organize the wealth of information that had accumulated (e.g., Crano, 1994; Crano & Seyranian, 2009; Erb & Bohner, 2001; Martin & Hewstone, 2008; Mugny & Pérez, 1991). An interesting feature of this literature is that a minority's influence on the majority's beliefs and actions frequently is delayed, if it occurs at all. However, immediate persuasive effects often ensue in response to a minority's appeal on related attitudes associated with the focal attitude. For example, Pérez and Mugny (1987) found women attending a high school in Spain resisted communications arguing for relaxation of the country's anti-abortion laws. This argument was contrary to their Catholic faith; however, if the message was delivered by an *in-group* minority (i.e., young women attending their same school), the women became significantly more open to the idea of contraception, even though contraception was never mentioned in the communication—and also contrary to Church teachings.

Alvaro and Crano (1997) established that indirect influence of this type occurred even though participants were unaware of the cognitive proximity of the attitude under persuasive minority argument and the related or linked attitude. Their study showed that subjects' attitudes toward "gays in the military" and "gun control" were strongly related, but subjects indicated a lack of awareness of this linkage. When a communication arguing against gays in the military (counter-attitudinal for most subjects) was attributed to an *in-group* minority, no direct influence was found. However, subjects changed in a conservative direction on a measure of the related attitude—gun control. The study was replicated with new subjects, switching the focal and related attitudes, with similar results. Later research showed that if this "indirect change effect" was large, attitudes on the focal issue also were likely to change with the passage of time (Crano & Chen, 1998; Gordijn, De Vries, & De Dreu, 2002).

These studies revealed *in-group* minority members were not derogated as a result of their counter-normative positions, nor were their pleas rejected out of hand—it was as if the majority audience listened politely to the minority's pleas, understood the issues raised, and disregarded them (Crano, 2017). The problem with this accommodation is that having processed the minority's information with little counter-argumentation ("Why argue? The minority's position has no chance") and no source derogation describe the nearly perfect conditions for attitude change (Crano, Siegel, & Alvaro, 2013). The cognitive dynamics of attitude change indicate that a strong persuasive message processed attentively with little counter-argument or source disparagement is likely to have substantial impact (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Petty, Haugtvedt, & Smith, 1995; Petty & Wegener, 1999). To ensure a more certain outcome in minority influence contexts, we add



the following constraints: the minority is most likely to succeed if it is in-group; its message must not threaten the group's entitativity, and the message must be strong (i.e., difficult to counter-argue) and personally relevant.

The *leniency contract theory* was developed to systematize the forces at work in minority influence. It postulates a quid pro quo, as do all contracts, for the kind of treatment accorded to in-group minorities. It is understood by both parties that in recompense for the majority's kind treatment, it will not change its position. However, despite the contract, the minority's message may change related attitudes, and if the change is sufficient, it will unbalance the cognitive structure theorized to link the individual's attitudes (e.g., Anderson, 1983). Assuming a strong link between the indirect and focal attitudes, this imbalance will prove unpleasant (Abelson et al., 1968), and most likely, one of two outcomes will occur. If the "indirect" change is sufficient, it will pull the focal attitude into congruity, resulting in delayed focal change. If it is small, the indirect change will return to its original position (Crano & Chen, 1998). For a complete exposition of the leniency contract model, see Crano and Alvaro (1998) or Crano and Seyranian (2007, 2009).

### Synergy of Leniency Contract With Social Identity Theory

In concert with the social identity perspective, the change dynamics detailed and predicted in the *leniency contract* have the potential to deepen understanding of the processes of populist group formation (Crano, 2010; Crano & Seyranian, 2009). In combination, these two models provide a useful depiction of the process of populist group development. The leniency contract stipulates that in most conditions, successful minority influence is wielded by a deviant in-group. The in-group nature of the minority stifles extreme negative reactions, because attacking an in-group member, even if that member occupies a minority position, endangers group entitativity. To compromise entitativity poses a threat, as the group contributes to members' self-identities. Research on intragroup relations is consistent with this possibility, as most groups are reluctant to lose members, and often do whatever's needed to maintain members, even offering in-group deviants a sympathetic hearing. Although groups tend to derogate their "black sheep," they also attempt to persuade them to return to the normative fold (Marques, Abrams, & Serôdio, 2001).

An important determinant of populist success is that the group be viewed as an integral if somewhat deviant part the majority. If the populist faction's demands are seriously incompatible with the status quo, it may be cast as an out-group. Assuming in-group status, the question then becomes whether the in-group's appeal is presented consistently, persistently, coherently, and with no backtracking. If it fails on any count, its success is unlikely. The context in which the minority seeks to change the majority is crucial to its success. Populist minorities



seize on a polarized intergroup context, and because they represent a portion of the group's membership, the majority can use their message to distance and further polarize their out-group rivals (Gaffney, Rast, Hackett, & Hogg, 2014).

A populist group can enhance the likelihood of satisfying leniency contract requirements by developing or choosing prototypical leaders as the major spokespersons for the movement. The odds of populist groups' survival are enhanced by a strong leader solely responsible for articulating its positions. Given the requirement for consistency and persistence, shared leadership is risky and unlikely to produce sought-after message unanimity. Shared leadership allows for disagreement among the group's leaders and inconsistencies among the group's arguments. Inconsistencies seriously weaken the potential to influence. The failure of the OWS movement, which should have succeeded given its widespread appeal in the general population, fits this description well. The movement had no leader, and its factions were largely incommunicado. Occupy's message became so diluted and disjointed that potential adherents did not know precisely what the group represented. This fits the leniency contract's recipe for failure. Diffuse messaging is unlikely when a prototypical leader commands the group's pulpit. Such leaders not only personify the movement but are considerably less likely to advance conflicting positions—and when they do, they often are extended the benefit of the doubt (Abrams et al., 2018). It is not that a populist group's ideology must be based on a single argument—many highly related arguments may succeed without endangering message unanimity and coherence. Ideally, however, a simple sentence or phrase should summarize the thrust of the group's requisites (e.g., “No New Taxes,” or “End the War”). Backsliding, too, can lead to a loss of effect, because it might be considered a lack of commitment to “the cause,” and a consequent dismissal from serious consideration by the majority (Kruglanski & Mackie, 1990). All-powerful leaders can cause major problems in other ways (e.g., Hitler, Mussolini, Lenin, etc.), but in the developing days of a populist movement, they may be indispensable, because to strong in-group members (“true believers”), prototypical leaders enact a shared vision on behalf of all (e.g., Hogg & Reid, 2006).

The contribution of social identity factors is not exhausted by clear specification of the leadership role most likely to succeed. The theory also lays strong emphasis on group entitativity, as does the minority influence model. As shown, a minority's message that seriously threatens the continuance of the group is likely to demolish minority influence. In social identity terms, actions that threaten entitativity will not be tolerated.

Another point of contact between the theoretical positions concerns the group's message. Whereas a social identity perspective places strong emphasis on the persuasive primacy of the message source, minority influence concerns complement this approach with the requirement that the message is strong and compelling, difficult to counter-argue, and well-informed by persuasion theory (Crano, Alvaro, & Siegel, 2019). Perhaps more than social identity's approach, the

leniency contract model is strongly integrated with models of persuasion, which emphasize the need for conscious attention to the rules of influence that lead to the success or failure of a populist movement. The content of the populist group's message must not only be consistent, persistent, and unanimous, but to succeed must also be informed by persuasion theory (Crano, 1994, 2012, 2017; Crano et al., 2013).

## Concluding Comments

Clearly, the social identity and minority influence literatures, despite approaching the issue of populism from different angles, offer useful and complementary models of analyses. Although their underlying assumptions are different, they are complementary. In part, each provides insights into how and why some movements succeed and others fail. Each succeeds to the extent that it is congruent with the other. Each model informs the other, and it is difficult to imagine why their mutual interaction would not profit both. Certainly, both approaches use different “languages” to argue their cases, but the translation from one to the other is neither difficult nor forced. The advantage of this integrative approach is that although both offer important, independent paths to understanding populism, its formation, and consequences, together they provide a better understanding than either theory in isolation. Where one perspective forces the science to account for and empirically study the specific social context in which a populist group emerges, the other specifies the form of communication responsible for successful persuasion. Populism is the result of a group that attempts to incite change, and in combination, these models provide a better understanding of the complex nature of populism.

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