

**PART III**

**The Tribal Call**

Social Identity and Populism

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## 11

**SELF-UNCERTAINTY AND  
POPULISM****Why We Endorse Populist Ideologies,  
Identify With Populist Groups, and Support  
Populist Leaders**

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In recent years, the term “populism” has gained currency in news media and everyday discourse. Individuals, leaders, regimes, social movements, belief systems, and ideologies are often described as populist. One might be forgiven for wondering whether the world has merely “discovered” a new word. But, on reflection, it is evident that populism is “real” and is flourishing in early 21st century society (e.g., Bos, Sheets, & Boomgaarden, 2018; Ernst, Engesser, Büchel, Blassnig, & Esser, 2017; Inglehart & Norris, 2016; Nai & Maier, 2018).

In the United States, there is Donald Trump and his “make America great again” (MAGA) movement; and at the other end of the political spectrum, during the run-up to the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections, Bernie Sanders’s socialist vision for America. Further south, Venezuelans are living with the legacy of Hugo Chávez’s populist dismantling of democracy; and Brazil’s populist president, Jair Bolsonaro, promotes a far-right nationalist and socially conservative agenda. Across the Atlantic, the UK has had its populist leadership alternatives of Boris Johnson and Jeremy Corbyn, and its Brexiteers and United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP); Germany has the Nationalist Alternative für Deutschland (AfD); and Italy has the Northern League for the Independence of Padania (i.e., Lega Nord). Further east, Hungary (under Viktor Orbán’s leadership; see also Forgas & Lantos, this volume) and Poland (under Andrzej Duda’s leadership) are both experiencing democratic backsliding, Euroscepticism, and an authoritarian approach to government. In India, Narendra Modi is remodeling the world’s largest democracy as a Hindu Nationalist state; and in the Philippines, President Rodrigo Duterte is characterized as a populist “man of the people” who vigorously promotes a nationalist agenda.

These national examples differ in many ways, but there is a common thread running through them—they are all considered, and spoken about as, examples of

populism, populist ideology, and populist leadership. One thing that is notable is that populism transcends political boundaries—there is populism of both the left and the right. So, what is populism, what are its distal and proximal causes, how does it emerge, and what are its social psychological dynamics? Research on populism has a long history in political science (e.g., Kaltwasser, Taggart, Espejo, & Ostiguy, 2017; Inglehart & Norris, 2016; Noury & Roland, 2020; Rooduijn, 2019; Steenbergen & Siczek, 2017), but has only recently become a focus for social psychologists (e.g., Bos et al., 2020; Gaffney, Hackett, Rast, Hohman, & Jaurique, 2018; Jay, Batruch, Jetten, McGarty, & Muldoon, 2019; Marchlewska, Cichocka, Panayiotou, Castellanos, & Batayneh, 2018).

In this chapter, we describe the nature of populism to provide our social psychological characterization, and then dedicate the chapter to an exploration of how feelings of self-uncertainty, particularly relating to the collective self, may make populist ideologies, groups, identities, and leaders attractive. This account rests on uncertainty-identity theory (e.g., Hogg, 2007, 2012, 2021) and its explanation of radicalization and extremism (e.g., Hogg, 2014, in press).

## What Is Populism?

Defining populism is not straightforward, and early attempts are described as suffering from an “inherent incompleteness” (Taggart, 2004). In recent years, a burgeoning literature, particularly in political science, has attempted to resolve these early issues (see also Marcus, this volume). But rather than converging on a single definition of populism and a set of explanatory factors, many different approaches now exist. Some argue that in contrast to what are called *thick* ideologies, such as liberalism and socialism, populism can be described as a *thin* ideology—a collection of ideas, rather than a complete integrated framework within which events are given meaning (Ernst, Engesser, Büchel, Blassnig, & Esser, 2017; Mudde, 2007). Populism structures meaning, and as such it can be infused with other ideologies. This is why we see populist tactics and rhetoric on the political left as well as the right. Other researchers have argued that we should not understand populism as a political ideology at all, but rather a style of political rhetoric (Bonikowski & DiMaggio, 2016) or discourse tied to the discursive frames (Aslanidis, 2016; Hawkins & Kaltwasser, 2018).

This debate is far from over. However, two components of populism stand out. There is an ideology and belief system that (a) robustly and assertively prioritizes the collective will and sovereignty of the people as being of supreme importance, and (b) maintains that the people’s collective will is actively undermined and subverted by an antagonistic “system” or “elite” that the people oppose (e.g., Bakker, Rooduijn, & Schumacher, 2016). This characterization can be expanded to include other features of populism that, from a social psychological point of view, paint a picture of populism as a social identity dynamic and a group and intergroup process.

### ***Collective Narcissism, Conspiracy Theories, Collective Victimhood, and Hierarchy***

For example, populist ideologies frequently reflect collective narcissism—an unrealistic belief in the greatness of one's group and identity, which is associated with over-sensitivity to perceived disrespect (e.g., Golec de Zvala & Lantos, 2020; Marchlewska et al., 2018; see also Golec de Zvala, this volume). Such ideologies also subscribe to conspiracy theories (e.g., Douglas & Sutton, 2018; Douglas, Sutton, & Cichoka, 2017; see also Krekó, this volume), which identify specific outgroups (often characterized as expert/elites) that intentionally conspire and act to discredit and destroy the ingroup's identity and way of life. There is a narrative of collective victimhood revolving around a shared ingroup identity threat that is promoted and framed as an existential peril (e.g., Belavadi & Hogg, 2018; Noor, Vollhardt, Mari, & Nadler, 2017), which justifies hostile and violent attitudes and actions towards the victimizing outgroup, and ingroup members or third parties viewed as aligned with the outgroup (Belavadi, Rinella, & Hogg, 2020).

Populism can also be associated with support for hierarchy and belief in social dominance (e.g., Pratto, Sidanius, & Levin, 2006), which can be associated with believing that the ingroup's rightful place in society's hierarchy has been underestimated or intentionally sabotaged. Authoritarianism can also play a role (see also Bar-Tal, this volume). The key features of authoritarianism include submission to authorities, aggression towards "outsiders", and adherence to conventional norms (Altemeyer, 1998; also see Duckitt, Bizumic, Krauss, & Heled, 2010; Passini, 2017)—all of which are evident in many populist belief systems where people endorse and defer to strong ingroup leaders, express hostility and aggression towards outgroups, and conform to ingroup identity-defining norms and traditions.

### ***Populist Leadership***

No discussion of populism is complete without a discussion of leadership—populism is almost always associated with particular leadership dynamics and leadership styles. Those who subscribe to and promote populist beliefs and ideologies present themselves as the guarantors of the people's will, and as strong leaders who can protect and promote popular sovereignty, despite attempts by antagonistic and hostile groups to thwart the people's will (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007).

Populist leaders, who are often associated with the right (Bos et al., 2018) but can also be found on the left (Nai & Maier, 2018), promote populist beliefs and ideology as described above, and they do this by engaging in what Bos and associates call "populist identity framing" (Bos et al., 2020). Populist identity framing is a leadership strategy that focuses attention on social identity and strengthens ingroup identification, loyalty, attachment, and commitment. Bos and colleagues report an experiment with 7,286 participants across 15 European countries that

shows how this leadership strategy works. Leaders portray the ingroup as being threatened by immigrants and various outgroup (political) elites who are blamed for societal or economic problems harming ordinary people. That immigrants and outsiders pose an existential identity threat to the ingroup is a central plank of populist ideologies and a central message of populist leaders—it strengthens ingroup identification and fuels prejudice, xenophobia, and ultimately acts of hostility and aggression (e.g., Jetten, 2019; Jetten, Ryan, & Mols, 2017).

Populist leaders also tend to behave in a manner that projects strength, conviction, and an unwavering absence of message ambiguity. They are relatively autocratic and authoritarian, and because they need to embody the populist message and strengthen group identification, they express the group's anger and target outsiders to derogate, insult, and bully.

### ***Fertile Ground for Populism***

Our characterization of populism is broad and inclusive. We view it as a social identity dynamic and a group and intergroup process, which is reflected in the specific form taken by ideologies and belief systems, groups and social identities, and leaders and leadership behavior. Populism has a number of interrelated facets that can manifest in different ways and with different strength, and not all of which necessarily co-occur.

There are eight overlapping key features of our characterization: (a) the group's autonomy and freedom to determine its own identity and destiny (i.e., its collective *will and sovereignty*) is supremely important, but (b) is actively undermined and subverted by an *antagonistic "system"* or "elite" that the people oppose; (c) there is an unrealistic belief in the greatness of the ingroup and its identity, which is associated with over-sensitivity to perceived disrespect (*collective narcissism*); (d) *conspiracy theories* identifying specific outsiders that intentionally conspire and act to discredit and destroy the ingroup's identity and way of life, flourish and are sustained and promulgated; (e) there is a *narrative of collective victimhood* that paints a picture of existential threat to the group's identity and existence, which justifies extreme actions against outsiders; (f) there is approval of *hierarchy, social dominance, and authoritarianism*; (g) leaders champion and promote these populist beliefs and behaviors at the same time as they raise the salience of the group's identity in order to strengthen group identification (*populist identity framing*); and (h) they do this in a relatively *autocratic and authoritarian* manner that projects strength, conviction, and absence of message ambiguity.

The world is no stranger to populism. Populist uprisings, revolutions, regime changes, and social movements, based on religion, ethnicity, and political ideology (of the left and the right), are the stuff of history. Specific examples are too numerous to list, but research points to a more limited number of general conditions that are conducive to populism. One precursor is the perception that the status and prestige of one's identity and group is under threat of

erosion (e.g., Mutz, 2018). Another related condition revolves around perceived inequality—the belief that one’s group is disadvantaged and deprived relative to other groups (e.g., Bos et al., 2020; Jay et al., 2019; Jetten, 2019; Jetten et al., 2017; Marchlewska et al., 2018).

Yet another condition, which is the focus of this chapter, is uncertainty about the world one lives in—often induced by sudden change that disrupts equilibrium and makes the world and one’s place within it unpredictable (e.g., Hogg, 2014, in press; Hogg, Kruglanski, & Bos, 2013; see also Bar-Tal, this volume). For example, the Great Depression of the 1930s created enormous uncertainty that provided fertile ground for the two mid-century populist movements, Communism and Fascism, to thrive. Research has also shown that economic uncertainty can fuel populism (e.g., Kakkar & Sivanathan, 2017), as can societal shifts that reflect both economic and cultural changes (e.g., Gaffney et al., 2018), and there is already indication that the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic has invoked widespread uncertainty that has (re)energized populist movements and regimes (Abrams, Lalot, & Hogg, in press; Rosenfeld et al., 2020).

For the remainder of this chapter, we present a social psychological account of how uncertainty might fuel populism; more specifically, how uncertainty may make populism attractive and motivate people to subscribe to populist beliefs and ideologies, identify with populist groups and identities, and support and empower populist leaders.

## Self-Uncertainty and Group Identification

This account is provided by uncertainty-identity theory—an analysis of how feelings of uncertainty about oneself can motivate people to identify with social groups, and how identification satisfies this need to reduce self-uncertainty (Hogg, 2007, 2012, 2021).

### *Self-Uncertainty*

Social psychologists have long known that people are motivated to reduce uncertainty, and that uncertainty reduction plays a significant role in human behavior—for example, in the context of decision-making (e.g., Kahneman, Slovic, & Tversky, 1982) and social comparison processes (e.g., Festinger, 1954). Because reducing uncertainty can be cognitively demanding, and people strategically allocate their limited cognitive resources (e.g., Fiske & Taylor, 2017), people expend cognitive energy resolving only those uncertainties that matter to them. They also reduce uncertainty only until they feel “adequately” certain, and have sufficient cognitive closure (cf. Koffka, 1935; Kruglanski & Fishman, 2009; Kruglanski & Webster, 1996) to be able to re-allocate cognitive effort elsewhere.

One focus of uncertainty that matters a great deal to people is themselves. The self organizes and stores information about who we are and allows us to interpret

and act within social contexts (e.g., Swann & Bosson, 2010). Uncertainty about ourselves and our relevant perceptions, attitudes, feelings, and behaviors plays a significant motivational role (Jonas et al., 2014). We strive to reduce such uncertainties so that we feel less uncertain about the world we live in. Reduced self-uncertainty is fundamentally adaptive—it allows us to feel we know ourselves, anticipate how others will perceive and treat us, and plan how to act effectively. Uncertainty-identity theory addresses the motivational role of context-induced self-uncertainty, not uncertainties that are unrelated to self-conception; and argues that group identification is one very effective way for people to reduce self-uncertainty (see Arkin, Oleson, & Carroll, 2010, for different perspectives on self-uncertainty).

Uncertainty reduction is not the only self-related motive. People are also motivated to secure and maintain a favorable image of themselves by pursuing self-enhancement (e.g., Sedikides & Strube, 1997). Scholars disagree over which of these motivations, self-enhancement and self-uncertainty reduction, is primary (e.g., Higgins, 2019). Both are, however, involved in group and social identity phenomena (e.g., Hogg, 2018). Self-enhancement explains why and how groups struggle over status and prestige (e.g., Abrams & Hogg, 1988; Tajfel & Turner, 1986; see also Golec de Zavala, this volume). Uncertainty reduction explains why and how groups seek an unambiguous, clearly defined, and distinct identity. Research has shown that having a “certain” sense of self can take priority over having a favorable sense of self—people confronted by feelings of self-uncertainty will identify with a group that mediates undesirable status and lower self-esteem if such a group is their only social identity option (Reid & Hogg, 2005).

Self-uncertainty involves uncertainty about self, which begs the question: what aspect of self? The self is structured into different selves and identities that become psychologically salient in different contexts as the basis of perception and behavior. One key distinction, proposed by Brewer and Gardner (1996), is between (a) *individual selves*, based on personal traits that differentiate “me” from all others; (b) *relational selves*, based on connections and role relationships with significant others; and (c) *collective selves*, based on group memberships that differentiate “us” from “them” (cf. Chen, Boucher, & Tapias, 2006; Sedikides & Brewer, 2001). Self-uncertainty can be associated with any of these types of self and identity. You can feel uncertain about your individual attributes, yourself in relation to specific other people, or yourself as a group member.

Self-uncertainty experienced in one self-domain may spread to other self-domains. For example, if you are primarily uncertain about your relational self, you may also become uncertain about your individual self. Hogg and Mahajan (2018) conducted two studies ( $N = 522$ ), which (a) confirmed Brewer and associates’ individual/relational/collective distinction; (b) showed that uncertainty in one domain overlapped to some degree with uncertainty in other domains; and (c) found, as predicted, that uncertainty strengthened identification most strongly when the focus of uncertainty was the collective self.



The extent to which uncertainty about one aspect of self “contaminates” one’s entire self-concept is influenced by self- and social identity-complexity—the degree to which attributes that define one aspect of self (or one social identity) are the same as those that define other aspects of self (or other social identities) (Brewer & Pierce, 2005; Roccas & Brewer, 2002). A person has a complex self-concept and social identity if they have many distinct identities that do not overlap; a person has a simple social identity if they have few identities and those they do have are largely isomorphic. A complex self-structure can quarantine identity-specific self-uncertainty and allow people to compensate by identifying more strongly with other identities (or aspects of self) that they believe are central to their overall sense of self. A pair of studies ( $N=177$ ) by Grant and Hogg (2012) provide some support for this idea.

The experience of self-uncertainty can differ depending on whether one believes one has adequate cognitive, emotional, social, and material resources to reduce the uncertainty (e.g., Blascovich, Mendes, Tomaka, Salomon, & Seery, 2003; Blascovich & Tomaka, 1996). With adequate resources, uncertainty is an exciting challenge to confront and resolve; without such resources, it is a stressful threat to protect oneself against. How uncertainty is experienced may influence the behaviors people adopt to reduce the uncertainty—behaviors that can reflect a more self-promotive, or more self-protective, behavioral orientation (see Higgins’s, 1998, regulatory focus theory). Uncertainty experienced as a challenge would encourage promotive behaviors (e.g., public assertion of one’s identity); uncertainty experienced as a threat would encourage more protective behaviors (e.g., retreat into identity echo chambers).

There are many causes of self-uncertainty—some proximal, some distal; some transitory, some enduring. Of most relevance perhaps to our discussion of the role played by self-uncertainty in populism as a social identity dynamic are: globalization, mass migration, climate crisis, automation and the reconfiguration of “work”, political dysfunction and polarization, postcolonialism and the new world order, and the realignment of super-national entities and alliances (e.g., the European Union). Collective self-uncertainty can be particularly aroused by uncertainty about the defining attributes of a group that one identifies with (social identity clarity and distinctiveness is absent—Wagoner, Belavadi, & Jung, 2017), about how well one fits into and is accepted by a group that is central to one’s sense of self (Goldman & Hogg, 2016; Hohman, Gaffney, & Hogg, 2017), and about how well one’s group fits into a larger collective (for example a nation within the European Union—Wagoner, Antonini, Hogg, Barbieri, & Talamo, 2018; Wagoner & Hogg, 2016a). But, most importantly, people are motivated to reduce self-uncertainty only when exogenous conditions create a sense of self-uncertainty.

### **Group Identification**

According to uncertainty-identity theory (Hogg, 2007, 2012, 2021), group identification, via the process of self-categorization (e.g., Turner, Hogg, Oakes,

Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987; see Abrams & Hogg, 2010; Hogg, 2018), is one of the most effective ways to reduce uncertainty about self, particularly the collective self. The process of categorizing oneself as a group member reduces self-uncertainty because it cognitively internalizes a shared ingroup prototype that describes and prescribes who one is and how one should behave.

Group identification is highly adaptive and remarkably effective at reducing self-uncertainty: (a) it provides a sense of who we are that prescribes what we should think, feel, and do; (b) it reduces uncertainty about how others, both ingroup and outgroup members, will behave and about how social interactions will unfold; and (c) it provides consensual validation of our worldview and sense of self. Consensual validation, an important source of self-uncertainty reduction, occurs because people who share a social identity typically have a shared worldview and shared representation of who “we” and who “they” are. Our expectations about the identity-based behavior of others are usually confirmed, and fellow group members who we typically view as “people like us” agree with our perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, and values and approve of how we behave. The discovery that such people do not see the world as we do can arouse significant uncertainty about the group’s identity and our own sense of who we are (e.g., Wagoner et al., 2017).

Because identification so effectively reduces and protects people from self-uncertainty, uncertainty-identity theory’s most basic prediction is that the more uncertain people are, the more likely they are to identify, and to identify more strongly, with a relevant social category that is available to them or they already belong to. This prediction has been confirmed across numerous studies where uncertainty is measured or manipulated, and identification is measured by widely used and reliable group identification scales. Some studies experimentally manipulate self-uncertainty indirectly through perceptual uncertainty or information about identity clarity; others prime self-uncertainty or directly prime collective self-uncertainty; and others directly or indirectly measure self-uncertainty. A meta-analysis of 35 of these studies, involving 4,657 participants, found that uncertainty was a significant predictor of group identification that explained, depending on research methodology, between 2.0% and 6.8% of variance in identification (Choi & Hogg, 2020).

## Populist Identities, Groups, and Ideologies

Identification reduces self-uncertainty. However, some groups, identities, and leadership are better equipped than others to do this, which makes them particularly attractive under uncertainty (Hogg, 2014, in press). The properties of these groups, identities, belief systems, and leadership processes map very closely onto the broad and inclusive characterization of populism that we developed earlier in this chapter. We characterized populism as a belief that a group’s autonomy (*will and sovereignty*) is supreme but is actively subverted by the coordinated actions of

outsiders (cf. *conspiracy theories*) who represent an *antagonistic system or elite*. There is an unrealistic belief in the greatness of the ingroup and its identity (*collective narcissism*) associated with over-sensitivity to perceived disrespect, and a *narrative of victimhood* that paints a picture of existential threat posed by outsiders and justifies extreme actions against them. *Hierarchy, social dominance, and authoritarianism* are attractive, and leaders promote populist beliefs and fuel zealotry (*identity framing*) in a relatively *autocratic and authoritarian* manner that projects strength, conviction, and unambiguous messaging.

### ***Distinctive Groups and Unambiguous Identities***

One significant moderator of the uncertainty-identification relationship is *entitativity* (e.g., Hamilton & Sherman, 1996; Lickel et al., 2000). An entitative group is a distinctive, coherent, and clearly structured unit with sharp intergroup boundaries, within which members share attributes and goals, have a shared fate, and interact in a climate of interdependence—it does an excellent job of reducing self-uncertainty. In contrast, a low entitativity group is unclearly structured with indistinct boundaries, ambiguous membership criteria, limited shared goals, and little agreement on group attributes—it is poorly equipped to reduce self-uncertainty.

Highly entitative groups provide an identity that is simple, clear, unambiguous, prescriptive, focused, and consensual; whereas less entitative groups provide an identity that is relatively vague, ambiguous, unfocused, and dissensual. The former identity attributes are exactly what one looks for to effectively reduce uncertainty. Furthermore, people are more likely to anchor the former group and identity attributes in invariant underlying qualities or essences (e.g., Haslam, Bastian, Bain, & Kashima, 2006), which provides further interpretative predictability and stability and make the group and its identity even better at reducing and fending off uncertainty.

Uncertainty-identity theory predicts that under uncertainty, people seek highly entitative groups to identify with, or identify more strongly with and accentuate the entitativity of groups to which they already belong. Numerous direct tests support this prediction. People identify more strongly with high than low entitativity groups and tend to dis-identify from low entitativity groups or make such groups appear more entitative. (e.g., Hogg, Meehan, & Farquharson, 2010; Hogg, Sherman, Dierselhuis, Maitner, & Moffitt, 2007; Jung, Hogg, & Choi, 2016; Jung, Hogg, & Lewis, 2018; Sherman, Hogg, & Maitner, 2009; Wagoner et al., 2018; Wagoner & Hogg, 2016a).

### ***Marginal Members and Subgroup Factions***

For an entitative group to effectively reduce self-uncertainty, those who identify need to feel the group is welcoming, and that it validates their identity and

accepts and includes them as full members. Those who strive for inclusion, but feel treated as marginal members who do not fit in or embody the group's attributes may experience particularly strong self-uncertainty (e.g., Hohman et al., 2017; Wagoner & Hogg, 2016b). They may go to great extremes to demonstrate commitment and try to win the group's trust and secure acceptance. Goldman and Hogg (2016) conducted a study of fraternity and sorority members ( $N = 218$ )—on US college campuses, membership in such organizations is highly valued among students who identify or seek to identify with them. Goldman and Hogg found, as predicted, that it was peripheral members who were most likely to intend to support and engage in ingroup-serving antisocial and aggressive intergroup behaviors (e.g., vandalism, stealing, fighting, and poisoning food). This research speaks very clearly to conditions that make people vulnerable to radicalization.

If attempts, however extreme, to be accepted prove unsuccessful, people may loosen their ties and dis-identify from the group to seek identity validation elsewhere, where they believe it is more assured. This latter path is readily available in the era of social media and global internet access. Under uncertainty, people can largely choose their own online “echo chamber” as a source of confirmation bias to validate their worldview and identity (cf. Barberá, Jost, Nagler, Tucker, & Bonneau, 2015; Colleoni, Rozza, & Arvidsson, 2014; Peters, Morton, & Haslam, 2010).

This discussion of marginal members can be extended to the, perhaps more common, situation where a subgroup feels marginal within the larger group to which it belongs. If the larger group lacks consensus and has an unclear social identity, the subgroup may pursue autonomy or separation. This is most likely when the subgroup is self-conceptually important and is viewed as being relatively more entitative and having a less ambiguous and dissensual identity. Research in Sardinia within Italy (Wagoner et al., 2018), Texas within the US (Wagoner & Hogg, 2016a), Scotland within the UK (Jung et al., 2018), and South Korea within the wider Korean identity (Jung et al., 2016) supports this reasoning. The pursuit of factional autonomy is often contested, resisted, and discredited, sometimes aggressively, by the superordinate group; which can cause factions to turn to populism and become forceful and radical in resolutely fashioning, promulgating, and protecting their distinctive identity. This can spiral into violence—factions become armed militia or revolutionary cadres engaging in what is effectively an uprising or civil war.

### ***Extremist Groups and Identities***

Self-uncertainty strengthens identification with entitative groups, essentializes identities, makes people vulnerable to radicalization, and can dismantle larger groups into populist subgroups and factions. It can also have darker effects on groups, social identities, and interaction with outgroups (Hogg, 2014, in

press). These may emerge when there is widespread, extreme, and chronic self-uncertainty caused by shared exogenous conditions such as mass migration, economic collapse, and socio-political disintegration; and become amplified when people have a monolithic identity structure with very few discrete (and positive) identities that do not share attributes—that is, when social identity complexity (Roccas & Brewer, 2002) is low, and people's sense of self is grounded in a single social identity that saturates the self-concept (cf. identity-fusion—Swann, Jetten, Gomez, Whitehouse, & Bastian, 2012).

Under these circumstances, uncertainty may be experienced as an existential threat that people feel they do not have the capacity to resolve. They are desperate to identify and belong and yearn for leadership to help defend against or resolve uncertainty and make them feel included and validated. They are receptive to populist ideologies and messaging, as characterized earlier, that raise ingroup solidarity and demonize hated outsiders that subvert and oppress the ingroup and are plotting its demise. Group-centrism prevails (Kruglanski, Pierro, Mannetti, & De Grada, 2006; see also Kruglanski, this volume), as does ethnocentrism (Brewer & Campbell, 1976), intolerance and accentuated mistrust and fear of outsiders (Stephan, 2014), a view of normative group attributes as fixed underlying essences (essentialism—Haslam et al., 2006), and the potential to dehumanize outgroups (Haslam, 2006; Haslam, Loughnan, & Kashima, 2008). These are “extreme” groups and identities that, even if they do not have all the attributes described, are attractive under conditions of elevated self-uncertainty, which they reduce by furnishing people with a self-saturating, rigidly defined, exclusionary, and highly prescriptive social identity and sense of self.

For example, laboratory and field experiments have shown that self-uncertainty can lead university students to endorse and be more inclined to join more radical and populist campus protest groups (e.g., Hogg et al., 2010), that marginal members of fraternities and sororities who feel uncertain about their membership status are more likely to engage in extreme and violent intergroup behavior (Goldman & Hogg, 2016), that conservatives and liberals in the US polarize differences between Republicans and Democrats (Gaffney, Rast, Hackett, & Hogg, 2014; Sherman et al., 2009), and that Israelis and Palestinians are more supportive of extreme and violent intergroup behaviors that are available to their respective national groups (Hogg & Adelman, 2013). More broadly, self-uncertainty has been implicated in religious extremism (Hogg, Adelman, & Blagg, 2010), gang membership (Goldman, Giles, & Hogg, 2014), adolescent cohorts that engage in risky health behaviors (Hogg, Siegel, & Hohman, 2011), and globalization-induced extremist attitudes towards cultural outgroups and endorsement of violent extremism (Ozer, 2020).

Focusing specifically on self-uncertainty and populism a recent review of empirical evidence concludes that there is strong support for the role of self-uncertainty in political extremism and radicalization (Götzsche-Astrup, 2018). For example, two experiments with citizens in the United States and Denmark

( $N = 2,889$ ) found self-uncertainty caused stronger intentions to engage in collective political violence when the ingroup was threatened (Gøtzsche-Astrup, 2020). This relationship was found to be particularly significant among people ( $N = 4,806$ ) with low dispositional openness (Gøtzsche-Astrup, 2019). Another set of three studies ( $N = 5,882$ ) found that increasing uncertainty (measured or manipulated) predicted increasing support for Right Wing populist ideologies and leaders who promoted such ideologies (Gøtzsche-Astrup & Hogg, 2020). Only those individuals who scored most highly on authoritarianism were unaffected by uncertainty—they resolutely endorsed right-wing populism significantly more strongly than moderates and non-authoritarians.

## Populist Leadership

People learn about a group's identity from many sources. The more central the group is to a person's sense of self, the more pressing is the need for information and the more important it becomes that the information is reliable and the source trustworthy—people turn to sources they feel best represent the group's defining attributes (Belavadi & Hogg, 2019). One of the most trusted sources is the group's leader, particularly a leader who can be viewed as “one of us” (highly prototypical of the group) because they closely embody the group's identity (Hogg, 2020). Such group prototypical leaders are turned to as a reliable source of information about the group, and thus are very influential (e.g., Hogg, Van Knippenberg, & Rast, 2012). A meta-analysis of 35 social identity studies of leadership ( $N = 6,678$ ) found that between 24% and 40% of variance in leader evaluation and support was attributable to how group prototypical the leader was considered to be (Barreto & Hogg, 2017).

Under uncertainty, the thirst for reliable information about the group and its identity is significantly strengthened—uncertainty is reduced by having reliable and unambiguous information about one's self and identity. Under these circumstances, people are particularly driven to obtain information that confirms their beliefs about their group's identity and thus their own identity. People have a strong confirmation bias (e.g., Wason, 1960) that leads them to avoid or discredit information and information sources that do not confirm who they are (e.g., Frimer, Skitka, & Motyl, 2017). As Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel put it in their 1970 song “The Boxer”: “a man hears only what he wants to hear, and disregards the rest”.

McKay Coppins, a writer for the *Atlantic*, provides a powerful and populism-relevant illustration of confirmation bias (Coppins, 2020). He attended a MAGA (Make America Great Again) rally in Mississippi and spoke to Trump supporters. Coppins writes:

a 34 year-old maintenance worker who had an American flag wrapped around his head, observed that Trump . . . had said things no other

politicians would say. When I asked him if it mattered whether those things were true, he thought for a moment before answering, “He tells you what you want to hear” . . . “And I don’t know if it’s true or not—but it sounds good, so fuck it”.

*(Coppins, 2020, p. 39)*

Over recent years, social media and the internet have made it extraordinarily easy for people to satisfy their need for identity confirmation—they can “safely” inhabit populism-infused identity echo chambers that are impervious to alternative realities, worldviews, and identities (Barberá et al., 2015; Colleoni et al., 2014; Peters et al., 2010).

Self-uncertainty strengthens not only confirmation bias but also the need for leadership and builds support for populist leadership—leaders who both embody and promote populism. A pair of studies reported by Rast and associates speak to the need for leadership under uncertainty (Rast, Gaffney, Hogg, & Crisp, 2012). They found that uncertainty weakened people’s usual preference for a prototypical over non-prototypical leader, because it improved evaluations of and support for a non-prototypical leader. When people evaluated only a prototypical leader or only a non-prototypical leader (a between-subjects design), the preference disappeared entirely. The non-prototypical leader was evaluated extremely favorably—as favorably as the prototypical leader. Uncertainty creates a general yearning for leadership itself.

One positive implication of this uncertainty-invoked yearning is that obstacles to leadership that social minorities encounter may be removed (Gaffney, Rast, & Hogg, 2018), and this may facilitate (pro)social innovation and change by allowing novel and adaptive responses to crises to emerge (e.g., Watts, Steele, & Den Hartog, 2020). However, uncertainty-induced need for leadership may also open the door to non-prototypical leaders who are incompetent, manipulative, toxic, or socially destructive

For example, uncertainty can empower leaders to employ a rhetoric of uncertainty strategically to elevate members’ uncertainty and thus their need for leadership; and then promote a social identity resolution that simultaneously builds group cohesion and a common identity—a process called populist identity framing (Bos et al., 2020), or social identity framing (Seyranian, 2014), which can secure or advance the leader’s leadership credentials. Hohman and associates (Hohman, Hogg, & Bligh, 2010) conducted a study showing that US presidential speeches that conveyed a self-uncertainty eliciting message strengthened national identification and leader support. Since uncertainty, particularly uncertainty in the absence of resources (uncertainty as a threat rather than challenge), can be considered a position of relative powerlessness, leaders can create uncertainty merely to exercise power and control over the group (Marris, 1996). Research has also shown that the uncertainty-invoking context of mass migration can be used by leaders to strengthen ingroup identification and provoke anti-immigration

xenophobia and populist and nationalist sentiments (e.g., Bos et al., 2020; Jetten, 2019; Jetten et al., 2017).

Self-uncertainty impacts the type of leadership styles and behaviors that people prefer. A large ( $N = 5,882$ ) direct test of the impact of self-uncertainty on support for populism and populist leadership found, as discussed earlier, that self-uncertainty increased people's support not only for populism but also for populist leaders—leaders who promote populist ideologies (Gøtzsche-Astrup & Hogg, 2020). Other research speaks to the fact, noted earlier, that self-uncertainty builds preference for groups and identities to be rigidly and consensually structured to clearly differentiate between more prototypical central members and less prototypical peripheral members, and between leaders and followers. In these situations, leaders may become intoxicated by their power and feel divorced from the rank-and-file of the group—they can readily become autocratic despots or feel insecure and paranoid because they are isolated by their status from the group as a whole (e.g., Treviño, Weaver, & Brown, 2008).

People who are striving to reduce self-uncertainty through group identification need a clear and unambiguous identity message that conveys a concrete and distinctive social identity. Self-uncertainty has been shown to create a marked preference for the leader's message to convey an extreme and polarized vision of the group's identity (Gaffney et al., 2014). Under uncertainty, leaders are also evaluated more favorable and supported more strongly if they deliver a message about the group's social identity in a clear, simple, and unambiguous manner (using affirmational language—"we are . . .") rather than a more nuanced and complex manner (using negational language—"we are not . . .")—when uncertainty was low people, preferred a more negational language (Gaffney, Rast, Hogg, & Crisp, 2020).

Other research has shown that experimentally primed self-uncertainty can lead employees who normally prefer a non-autocratic organizational leader over an autocratic leader to display the opposite preference—strong preference for an autocratic leader over a non-autocratic leader (Rast, Hogg, & Giessner, 2013). A more recent, very large-scale set of correlational studies (more than 140,000 participants across 69 countries and two decades) found that economic uncertainty (measured by the poverty rate, the housing vacancy rate, and the unemployment rate) strengthened support for dominant leaders, and that this relationship was mediated by the self-uncertainty related construct of lack of personal control (Kakkar & Sivanathan, 2017).

Finally, the Dark Triad (a personality constellation embodying attributes of sub-clinical Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychoticism that are associated with autocratic, toxic, and dysfunctional behavior) may be associated with populist leadership. Guillén and associates conducted four studies ( $N = 3,589$ ) confirming that people who possess Dark Triad traits are more motivated to take leadership when they experience self-uncertainty than those who do not possess such attributes (Guillén, Jacquart, & Hogg, 2020). In another series of three, as



yet unpublished, studies ( $N = 331$ ) focusing on followers, Guillén and associates found that leaders with psychopathic traits were more likely to be supported by followers who felt uncertain about their own sense of self (also see Nevicka, De Hoogh, Van Vianen, & Ten Velden, 2013). Overall, self-uncertainty creates a perfect storm—followers back away from leadership (under uncertainty they look for leadership from others rather than take leadership themselves) to leave the field open for Dark Triad individuals to satisfy their powerful drive to lead.

## Closing Comments

We live in times when populism is on the rise. Populist ideologies, identities, regimes, and leaders attract increasingly widespread and strong support. However, there is little scholarly consensus over how to define populism. We have argued that populism involves the belief that the *will and sovereignty* of the people (the group's autonomy) is supreme but is actively subverted by the deliberate actions of outsiders who represent an *antagonistic system or elite* that is determined to destroy “us”. To broaden this characterization, we added a belief in *conspiracy theories*, a sense of *collective narcissism*, a narrative of *collective victimhood*, support for *hierarchy, social dominance and authoritarianism*, and a preference for leaders who *fuel zealotry and embody and promote populist attributes in an autocratic and authoritarian manner* that projects strength and conviction and a simple and unambiguous identity message.

In this chapter, we draw on uncertainty-identity theory (e.g., Hogg, 2007, 2012, 2021) and its application to societal extremism (e.g., Hogg, 2014, in press) to explain how feelings of self-uncertainty may motivate and generate populism. We argue that conditions, particularly widespread social disruptions and crises, can create a powerful and highly aversive sense of uncertainty about oneself and one's identity in the world.

People resolve this self-uncertainty by identifying with groups with attributes that very closely map onto our characterization of populism—attributes that reduce self-uncertainty by providing people with a clearly defined sense of self in the world. They identify zealously with groups that are distinctive and polarized, and have unambiguous, simple, and clearly defined identities that are ethnocentric and xenophobic. Such groups demonize and persecute dissenters, outsiders, and outgroups that they believe disrespect them, systematically undermine their autonomy, and aim to degrade and destroy their identity. Populist leadership is important because self-uncertainty builds a yearning for reliable, trusted information about who one is. People not only seek identity confirmation wherever they can find it (e.g., social media), but they also look to leaders to embody and provide unambiguous identity information that reflects populist beliefs. And they support leaders who do this in a strong, assertive authoritarian way.

There is empirical support, which we briefly refer to throughout, for many aspects of this analysis; however, there is, as always, scope for additional empirical

research and conceptual extension and nuances. Populism is a powerful force for social change in the world. Whether it is a good or a bad thing is a matter of one's world view—liberals might welcome left-wing populism while conservatives welcome right-wing populism. The take-away message is that increased uncertainty can engender a move towards populism and populist leaders as a means of self-uncertainty reduction. In uncertain times, populism can seem an attractive solution.

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