

Populist Communication in a Time of Global Pandemic: Understanding ‘Post-truth Populism’ During COVID-19

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Populist Communication in a Time of Global Pandemic: Understanding ‘Post-truth Populism’ During COVID-19. Populism and the post-truth: two concepts often used simultaneously or interchangeably to explain current developments in contemporary politics, yet the demarcation line between them remains blurry. Building on definitions of populism that describe it as a style of political communication, ‘post-truth populism’ can be regarded as a specific type of populist communication which shares the characteristics of post-truth politics. How the two phenomena intertwine, and how the aesthetic transformation of the public sphere and the rise of social media had a role in their appearance will be discussed. The theoretical framework is illustrated by two cases during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Sociológia* 2023, Vol. 55 (No. 2: 244-265)

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Introduction

Two highly popular approaches that are used to simultaneously explain the rise of outstanding political actors and events in our contemporary arena are on one hand ‘populism’ and on the other hand the ‘post-truth’. Although the two have their very own academic literature, they are often used to refer to the very same thing(s). Even though they do have a lot in common (such as their origin), they are not entirely the same. However, where and how they differ, is still blurry. One of the aims of this paper is foremost to discuss this conceptual overlap by analyzing if ‘post-truth populism’ can be regarded as a category on its own and a special type of populist political communication, where emphasis is on the use of emotions – especially if they are merged with false statements (“fake news”) - as a specific tool within the larger frame of populist communication.

We will begin our paper by summarizing the theoretical background of both populism and the post-truth and then proceed to lay out how these two intertwine in reality to create the category of ‘post-truth populism’. We will also address the role that the aesthetic transformation of the public sphere and more specifically, the rise of social media has had in this process. We will conclude our paper by looking at two empirical cases that took place during

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COVID-19 through the lens of our theoretical framework; highlighting the implications that this type of communication might have during health emergencies. To provide illustrative examples of our theory, present qualitative case studies about how Donald J. Trump and Jair Bolsonaro have approached COVID-19.

Trump and Bolsonaro have been selected, as there is a general agreement about them being populist and having post-truth tendencies. By looking at how they handled the pandemic, we wish to analyze if we can actually identify the populist and post-truth characteristics that will be identified in the theoretical part of the paper. By studying their general approach to the pandemic and their rhetoric, we can explore if the two concepts go hand in hand.

Our contemporary political landscape: the post-truth and populism

Our contemporary political landscape has been largely characterized by the concepts of populism and the post-truth in recent years. Often, the two have been intertwined or mixed up as they seem to go hand in hand and are even used to refer to quite similar, if not the very same things. Scholars argue that the rise of both populism and of the post-truth are due to similar reasons, such as the arrival of social media, the economic crisis of 2008, the increased polarization of political parties, growing inequality, or cultural backlash (Lewandowsky et al. 2017; Speed – Mannion 2017). However, the appearance and success of these phenomena cannot be reduced and viewed only as a ‘symptom’ of extra-political developments, as these are given particular meaning and importance in discourses, depending on the political goals of the actor in question (De Cleen – Stavrakakis 2017: 314; De Cleen et al. 2018: 4; Laclau 2005a, 2005b: 33). To put it differently: both populism and the post-truth are present in our contemporary political world at their own right and should not be regarded as mere consequences of other things. It is for this reason that it is essential to explore the phenomena of ‘post-truth populism’, as a possible tool within political communication. In our understanding, the definition of ‘post-truth populism’ is based on a unique mixture of populism and the post-truth, which are two concepts at their own right. Therefore, firstly we provide a summary of both phenomena below; with the help of which we will be able to explore ‘post-truth populism’ as a distinct category.

Contemporary populism

Scholarly literature about populism is rather divided, with different approaches to it: ideological, communicative, strategic, and discursive; not to mention the approaches that use alternative lenses through which they study populism (such as democracy studies). We may even differentiate between left-wing and right-

wing populism based on the topics that the populist actors discursively cover. Right-wing populism draws the line of division foremost in terms of social position, race, nationality and ethnicity, while left-wing populism focuses more on equality and justice with regards to social classes or ethnicity (Muller 2016 in Waisbord 2018). The contemporary, fourth wave of populism studies seems to point into the direction of understanding populism as a tool or style of political communication, regardless of where it appears on the political spectrum, and it is the one that this paper relies on (Pappas 2016). This way, what can be argued overall is that focus is shifted away from the contents of populism to its form (Casullo 2020; De Cleen et al. 2018: 4; Laclau 2005a, 2005b, etc.). In this approach, the communicative features of the phenomenon come forward, while attempts to characterize it as an ideology, a ‘thin-ideology’ (Mudde 2004) or as a typical characteristic of far-right parties become overshadowed. However, the ones that understand populism as a political strategy also come forward. This approach is primarily related to Weyland (2017), who defines populism as “a political strategy through which a personalistic leader seeks and exercises government power based on direct, unmediated, uninstitutionalized support from a number of mostly unorganized followers”. According to this approach, populism is a strategy consisting of a coherent set of mechanisms for gaining and maintaining political power and governmental authority. At the core of this strategy is the personalistic political leader, who maintains a special relationship with the electorate that rests on seemingly direct, emotional connection. Populist leaders achieve daily presence in the life of their followers – especially via the social media – and provide them with “a sense of belonging, which liberal, pluralist democracy with its reliance on ‘cold’ procedural mechanisms lack”. Overall, for Weyland, populism is an opportunistic strategy for reaching, maximizing, and keeping political power. Therefore, personalistic populist leaders do not commit to anything, such as an ideology, but communicate flexibly and shift their position when their circumstances require them to do so. In this sense, populism can be seen as flexible, opportunistic, and non-ideocratic.

Stating that we will use the definition of populism that defines it as something communicative seems easier than it actually is. Unfortunately, even within this tradition we can find numerous definitions of the phenomenon (e.g. Aalberg et al. 2016; Bossetta 2017; Jagers – Walgrave 2007; Moffitt 2016, De Vreese et al. 2018). Overall, what unites these definitions is their agreement on the fact that what unites populist political actors from the wide range of the political spectrum – both from leftist and rightist parties – despite their ideological differences is a certain way of communication. Building on four prominent definitions by Block and Negrine (2017), by Jagers and Walgrave (2007), by Weyland (2017) and by Moffitt (2016), as for the aims of this

research, we conclude populism to be: a strategic style of political communication that is characterized by an appeal to the people and a simultaneous exclusion of an ‘other’ (whose identity depends on the goal of the populist actor, but it is usually the elite or certain out-groups) expressed via a style of communication that can be defined as adversarial and abrasive, displaying ‘bad manners’. Populist discourse often builds on the topics of crisis, breakdown and threat (Körösenyi 2019; Moffitt 2015; Moffitt 2016). This is what Casullo refers to as ‘populist myth’, when she argues that populism is a particular style of storytelling genre which consists of the beginning, the middle and the end, or to put it differently: the damage, the struggle, and the redemption. The myth consists of a dual hero (leader and people) and a dual villain (elite and traitor), which co-create each other. In this narrative populist leaders present themselves as redeemers, while in reality they are basically storytellers who narrate, over and over, a story about wrongdoing and redemption (Casullo 2020).

Overall, following the general trend in the fourth wave of populism studies (Pappas 2016), populism can be foremost defined as a contemporary style of political communication that is strategically used by political actors as a tool via the media in order to appeal to their electorate, and especially to those disillusioned with or just uninterested in politics, the ‘left-behind’ public, as populist actors tend to take advantage of this disillusionment and channel it communicatively for their very own political benefit (Block – Negrine 2017: 179; Bradean-Ebinger – Drávucz 2018).

Post-truth

Defining populism is a complex task, however, defining post-truth is not. As defined by the Oxford English Dictionary, the concept can be described as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” (Oxford Dictionaries 2016). This is the definition used by almost all the publications regarding post-truth, and the same dictionary even proclaimed it the word of the year in 2016.

As McIntyre argues, “the word ‘post-truth’ is irreducibly normative” (2018: 6). It is essential to state that “the prefix “post” is meant to indicate not so much the idea that we are ‘past’ truth in a temporal sense (as in ‘postwar’) but in the sense that truth has been eclipsed— that it has become irrelevant” (McIntyre 2018: 5). Of course, this is not entirely new in politics. In liberal democracies, science denial, and the influence of various lobbies to formulate political agenda on different topics undermining fact-checking have gained the attention of the scholars even before the current interest on post-truth has developed (Rabin-Havt 2016; McIntyre 2018). The studies which investigate

the presence of post-truth in 21st century politics tend to emphasize the relevance that emotions have in political communication. According to Salgado, the most important feature of post-truth is “the primacy of emotions over facts and substantive, hard information” (Salgado 2018: 318). In post-truth politics, values that were generally accepted are questioned again (Fraune-Knodt 2018 in Vicensová et al. 2022). And as Salgado points it out, language plays a crucial part in provoking emotional reactions through sentences that can be controversial, emotional, or provoking (Salgado 2018: 318).

Speaking about language: for many contemporary philosophers, language cannot guarantee the truth, which is why they have approached the truth as if it was a relative and not an absolute concept (Sim 2019). It is still being questioned whether politics is interested in truth at all. Postmodernism is one of the factors that is often mentioned as a reason that have helped the arrival of the post-truth culture (McIntyre 2018). Postmodernists had questioned everything and excluded the possibility of one absolute truth or right answer. Rather, they emphasized that focus must be directed at the narrative process itself (McIntyre 2018). In this sense truth mirrors the ideas of the person who is claiming it; and knowledge is mediated by and through individual experiences. Hence, there is no objective reality.

While populism has been studied for decades and can easily stand alone as a concept in political science, post-truth is a relatively new phenomenon. Some scholars consider post-truth to be a “dangerous concept, both epistemically and politically” (Vogelmann 2018). Vogelmann’s criticism regarding post-truth is related to how this concept simplifies the connection between politics and truth, which “encourages authoritarianism” (Vogelmann 2018). Other analysts have suggested that it is a concept used by left-wing commentators to express their worldview, according to which the left is more interested in pursuing the truth through facts than the right (Young 2016).

Another frequently voiced criticism about post-truth is that it takes for granted that rational actions are better than emotional actions in politics, or that it can be described as an attribute of other bigger concepts, such as populism. While post-truth may have similar characteristics to populism, it is different since it indicates a precise type of political communication where only two elements are important: the emotional reaction and the complete ignorance of facts. When defining a political message as a post-truth message, we are able to identify immediately which characteristics nurture that message. However, to have a populist message, we don’t necessarily need to have these two characteristics that are essential to post-truth.

The era of contemporary politics

As times change, inevitably, politics change, too. Contemporary populism and the post-truth cannot be understood without taking into consideration what larger trends have affected them. There are certain contextual factors and broader trends in politics that must be considered, such as: citizens' disengagement, the decline in partisanship, legitimacy problems, mediatization, mediatization 2.0, presidentialization and the general aesthetic transformation of the public sphere, which has been characterized by personalization and the appearance of populist communication. These trends have changed the nature of modern democracies and contributed to the birth of the "audience democracy" (Körösenyi – Patkós 2017). These structural trends have transformed politics, and the contemporary populism is grounded in them (Waisbord 2018).

Populist communication could not thrive this well without our contemporary political arena, which is foremost characterized by the aesthetic transformation of the public sphere. In the mediatized postmodern environment in which politics takes place, the value of ideology has decreased, thus shifting attention away from actual political content to the communicative aspects of politics, such as political image or rhetorical abilities (McNair 2018). This era is referred to as the fourth wave of political communication, characterized by the prevalence of media logic and attention-based politics (Merkovity 2017, 2018). Visibility becomes the primary goal of political actors, while celebrity politicians and mediagenic political actors come forward. This setting favors populist communication, as features of the populist style (e.g. the simplification of complex issues) correspond well with media logic (Block – Negrine 2017). Politics are becoming popular, in which self-mediatization and spectacularization are crucial processes.

Overall, it can be argued that the transformation of the public sphere and the media environment contributes to the popularity of populist figures. However, Canovan argues that the willingness to communicate in tabloid style and the usage of simple and direct language does not make anyone populist, unless he / she is prepared to offer simple and direct political analyses and solutions as well (1999).

The role of the social media and emotions

Both populism and the post-truth can only be understood within the framework of media-driven influences that shape its contemporary features (Mazzoleni 2014: 54). Communication has structurally transformed the last few decades: from a pyramidal mass communication, it has become a multilayered flow of information. The growth of digital access led to the dissemination of beliefs,

which are often caught in echo chambers. The possibility of expressing multiple voices in the media is what sets the ground for the post-truth. Disseminating false information is not a top-down strategy anymore (Waisbord 2018). Indeed, the appearance of the new media (mediatization 2.0), especially social media, has completely transformed political communication. The other fundamental development of this era is that the role of emotions have been rediscovered, highlighting yet again how emotions affect political decision-making and that voters are far from being rational.

Personalized and charismatic leadership, which typically defines populist political actors, has come forward in the social media era. Enli and Skogerbø suggests that the social media has engaged with the ongoing process of giving more space to the individual personality of politicians in political communication (Enli – Skogerbø 2013). Especially in the era of the new media, representation has become increasingly personalized, signaling a shift from program-oriented competition towards personalized campaign (Körösi 2017: 13; 2019: 291). Political leaders now perform a very special role, as they provide a direct form of representation, which is actually based on emotions. The public develops an emotional connection with political leaders, through whom they can feel recognized and empowered (Block – Negrine 2017).

This connection is absolutely essential, as it encourages the importance of the connections built on shared values and patriotic feelings, mixed with a general dissatisfaction with political elites (Kriesi 2014: 363). In this setting, the primary role of rhetoric is to stir emotions and exploit them (Urbinati 2014). As populism heavily relies on symbolic representation and emotional-affective attachment, in this sense it can be deemed irrational from the voters' side and rational from the political actors' side (Caramani 2017). As Canovan argues, what makes populist politics different from routine politics is specifically because of the extra emotional ingredient that it carries. "It has the revivalist flavour of a movement, powered by the enthusiasm that draws normally unpolitical people into the political arena" (Canovan 1999: 6).

Many researchers believe that one of the reasons why the post-truth has become a defining factor of our contemporary political arena is the appearance of the social media. Hence, post-truth events are best explained through the new media's characteristics (Salgado 2018; Gabler 2016 in Ott 2017; Lewandowsky et al. 2012). Of course, this is true in the case of contemporary populism as well. Researchers, such as Engesser et al., have provided evidence that populist actors have an unprecedented degree of liberty to share their messages and ideology via the social media (2017).

If until the early 2010s the interest of the scholars was to analyze the positive influence of Internet in democracy, the events of 2016 have switched their attention to the threats that they pose to democracy (Miller – Vaccari

2020). What foremost distinguishes social media from traditional mass media is that it provides a direct link to the people, and makes the flow of communication much easier, as the journalism fact-checking is out of the picture (Engesser et al. 2017; Bennett – Manheim 2006). As Mazzoleni argues, media can be used to mobilize populist causes (2008). Bartlett considers social media to be the best platform for the appearance of populist messages, both from the left and right camps, precisely because of how the social media allows the appeal to emotions (Bartlett 2018).

While there has been and still is a general consensus between scholars about the role of social media as a space where you can discuss politics and organize collective action in a positive manner (Lilleker – Koc-Michalska 2017; Johannessen 2013; Shirky 2011; Vaccari 2017; Bennett – Segerberg 2013; Baringhorst 2008), there is also an on-going debate about the content of that discussion and the type of that action, raising concerns about their previously assumed positive nature. The enthusiasm about a possible embodiment of the public sphere through internet that was seen in the late '90s (Salgado 2018) has recently shifted to debates about the real possibilities of the virtual space to involve different arguments and create room for rational discussions.

Speed and Mannion suggests that post-truth politics have a role in populism, by cultivating a new wave of discriminatory populism. Social media plays its part in this process through the representation of fake news and 'alternative facts'. They argue that emotions which are born out of this mechanism are fear or hatred of the 'other', with the specific purpose of shaping voter's opinion (Speed – Mannion 2017).

De Vreese et al. agree also with the idea that the tools through which populist ideas are spread are as relevant as the ideas they are sharing (2018). Various researches show that messages which contain emotions in social media have a more significant effect (Stieglitz – Dang-Xuan 2013). Social media are built on this idea. On analyzing Twitter, Ott has argued that "Twitter structurally disallows the communication of detailed and sophisticated messages" (Ott 2017: 60). Ott also suggests that Twitter gives more space to simple communication, impulsive or even uncivil communication (2017), while other researchers have argued that messages charged in an emotional way on Twitter tend to have more retweets than the normal ones (Stieglitz – Dang- Xuan 2013). Another important feature to be emphasized is repetition of a dominant motif without having reliable facts, which is a "a common rhetorical device in populist post-truth politics" according to Speed and Mannion (2017: 250). Social media platforms provide an excellent channel for not only the production of adversarial, populist messages which are then picked up by the media for their multiplication, but it also gives a chance for populist actors themselves for this kind of repetitive communication.

Contemporary studies of the post-truth point out some key concepts that relate to it. One of them is ‘fake news’, which can be described as “low quality news with intentionally false information” (Shu, K. et al. 2017: 22). This false information is spread to manipulate and thus control the narrative that is shared in public in order to present a particular story. This in turn is also impacting the political debate and swaying the public opinion (Rabin-Havt 2016; Mooney 2019). Fake news encourages post-truth populist communication. Fear or rumors can circulate with an alarming speed on social media, giving more weight to emotions than to facts. Charismatic leaders establish an emotional attachment with their audience, unlike conventional politics (Speed – Mannion 2017). As highlighted earlier, emotions have a crucial role, even negative ones: often, anger drives populist attitudes (Rico et al. 2017) or boosts support for populist actors (Magni 2017) and populist actors use it significantly more often than positive ones (Widmann 2020). Ressentiment is particularly relevant in contemporary politics, and it is often the foundation of reactionary and authoritarian forms of right-wing populism. As the emotion systems function outside of one’s awareness, by selecting the right words, images or sound, one can “tag personal experiences or deeply ingrained symbols of success, failure, or danger, can help unleash the desired emotional response in the audience” (Brader 2005: 390).

Cognitive bias is also an important factor regarding the post-truth. “Especially when we are emotionally invested in a subject, all of the experimental evidence shows that our ability to reason well will probably be affected” (McIntyre 2018: 54). Researchers have tried many times to demonstrate empirically how cognitive dissonance can be considered relevant in shaping political behavior (Mullainathan – Washington 2009). People will gather the information that they think will help their line of thought better, “to avoid experiencing unwanted cognitive conflict” (Gainous – Wagner 2013: 32). Often, this leads to them ending up in their own ‘bubble’, which is related to the filter bubble phenomenon. A filter bubble is created naturally in social media, as due to the algorithms, they are rarely forced to face information that is contrary to their beliefs.

‘Post-truth populism’

Populism and the post-truth seem to be intertwined, but does this mean that they always appear together, or can one exist without the other? Waisbord (2018) argues that there is ‘elective affinity’ between the two concepts, and that the upsurge of populism is a symptomatic effect of the consolidation of post-truth communication in contemporary politics. In a way, populism opposes truth, and is rather based on narrative. A binary vision of politics is present: both the elite and the people have their own truth, and in these, facts are often

subsidiary to narratives. Speed and Mannion (2017) argue that populism exists in the era of post-truth politics, the latter being generally responsible for the changes in political communication.

We define post-truth populism as a specific type of populism (understood here as a communicative-strategic phenomenon) which on one hand bears the characteristics of populist communication, but on the other hand puts a serious emphasis on the use of emotions and the parallel denial of facts as well. Thus, post-truth populism addresses a specific condition in which populist communication shares post-truth characteristics. We argue that although the two phenomena often get mixed up in the eyes of the public, populism is not always de facto emotional, and emotion-based communication is not always populist. However, it is important to investigate under what conditions these meet, and more importantly: for what purpose? With the help of our case study, we aim to shed light on this question with the help of our illustrative case studies.

Table 1: Typical type of post-truth populism in political communication

Populist characteristics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> appeal to the people exclusion of the ‘other’ conflictual style (‘bad manners’) simplistic discourse simplification of complex issues common topics: crisis, breakdown, threat
Post-truth characteristics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> appeal to emotions non-relevance of facts

Illustrative case studies

To explore the relation between populism and the post-truth, we have selected two case studies to serve as illustrative examples. Our selected political actors are Donald J. Trump and Jair Bolsonaro – the latter has even referred to himself once as the “tropical Trump” (Schneider 2020: 5). All three figures are prominent representatives of populism and the post-truth as well, according to the scholarly and journalistic opinions. To narrow the scope of the analysis, we looked at how these political leaders have tackled the COVID-19 pandemic. The analysis relies on multiple data sources: scholarly, journalistic, official and secondary sources were all used. In these case studies, we wish to explore if populism and post-truth were equally present in the communication of our selected political leaders.

The case of COVID-19 and Donald J. Trump

Up until now we have discussed separately all the factors that interact with each other to form the category of ‘post-truth populism’. Namely: populism, the post-truth itself, and the situational surroundings (the aesthetic transformation of the public sphere and mediatization 2.0). Now we aim to demonstrate this theoretical framework by turning to the case of COVID-19 and Donald J. Trump as an empirical illustration of all the above. We have chosen Donald J. Trump as he has been labelled as both a populist and a post-truth political actor, and stands as an outstanding case of both. To narrow the scope of our research we have decided to focus on his general response given to COVID-19, as it is an exceptional situation where facts and emotions both play an outstanding role, and it is precisely the interaction between these two factors that makes this analysis worthy of attention for the sake of this paper.

The recent case of COVID-19 has given us an excellent opportunity to assess how post-truth populism affects health policies in times of a global pandemic. In one of the early conferences regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, the Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO) Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus stated that “we’re not just fighting an epidemic; we’re fighting an infodemic” (Munich Security Conference 2020), and he considered fake news to be as dangerous as the virus itself. With regards to COVID-19, Meyer has divided populist leaders in two categories: on the one hand those who downplayed the virus, and on the other hand those who took it seriously. One would argue that Donald J. Trump represents the first category (Meyer 2020; Lasco 2020), however, Lasco (2020) has found evidence for the opposite as well. According to Lasco, Trump did not only spectacularize the crisis with using the language of war and hyperbolic language to describe government responses, but he simplified the pandemic when he for example recommended Hydroxychloroquine, disinfectants and the UV light as treatment, or when he claimed that probably it would be gone with warmer weather (Baker – Crowley 2020).

Our chronological summary of Trump’s COVID-response starts in the end of January 2020, when he had first congratulated the Chinese government’s response (Viala-Gaudefroy – Lindaman 2020), and set up a task force to monitor the virus. On the 2nd of February, the United States enforced travel restrictions for nationals who had been in China for the past two weeks (Ibrahim, 2020). Trump was quick to change the direction of his narrative once the virus hit home, by calling it the “Chinese virus”. It was then that China has taken the role of the populist scapegoat, and according to Factbase, Trump used the expression “Chinese virus” more than 20 times from the 16th of March to the 30th (Viala-Gaudefroy – Lindaman 2020).

With the media reporting multiple cases of racism and xenophobia towards members of Asian communities in the United States (Aguilera 2020), several experts criticized Donald J. Trump's use of the above-mentioned terminology, calling it racist and dangerous (Chiu 2020). In 2015 the World Health Organization (WHO) has given clear guidelines on how to address a virus by name in order to minimize the possible negative impact that it might have on certain ethnic groups (WHO 2015). By addressing it as the "Chinese virus", Trump enables the identification of a virus as related to an ethnic 'other'. He did the very same thing when framing the narrative of the virus by stating that it could have been made inside a Chinese laboratory, without providing any proof of it. When one reporter asked him whether he had seen anything that might suggest with a certain confidence that Wuhan laboratory was the source of COVID- 19, Trump responded "Yes, I have. Yes, I have" (BBC News 2020). In the same conference, he attacked publicly the WHO for giving support to China (BBC News 2020), right after cutting the funds given to the WHO a couple of days earlier. Trump's attacks on WHO can also be seen through the lens of post-truth populism, since he not only went against a powerful international organization, but he did that without providing actual facts to back up his narrative and his decision regarding the cutting of the funds, while fueling turbulent emotions among his followers.

As we have seen, framing the virus for political purposes was present since the beginning of the pandemic. By framing we understand the process in communication where some considerations are preferred and emphasized over other ones (Bolsen et al. 2014); thus, a specific narrative is being put forward. Beside claiming that the virus would disappear once the weather gets warmer, Trump continued to make several simplistic knowledge claims, such as comparing the virus to the regular flu (Brooks 2020; Ecarma 2020). Pro-republican media started to frame the virus in a way similar to Trump. Sean Hannity, one of the biggest Fox News tv stars, who has been praised a lot by Trump, declared that COVID-19 "at worst, at worst, worst-case scenario it could be the flu" (Ecarma 2020). They repeatedly claimed that COVID-19 was portrayed to be a bigger issue than what it really was, and that it was just something used by the left-wing politicians and mainstream media to damage Trump's chances for re-election. Trump himself started accusing the Democratic Party of politicizing the situation, declaring that the virus was "their new hoax" (Egan 2020). This narrative has had a clear impact on the public opinion. According to the Pew Research Center, in March 2020, Republicans were less worried than Democrats when it came to the possible risks related to COVID-19 (Green – Tyson 2020). Furthermore, other studies confirmed that the use of conservative media correlated with believing in conspiracy theories regarding the virus (Hall Jamieson – Albarracín 2020).

However, later, when the situation had globally worsened, there was a twist in the narrative of Trump as he has also gotten more serious. He dramatized the situation and purposely created a crisis when invoking the language of war. He has characterized the virus as an ‘invisible enemy’ and himself as a ‘wartime president’. This resonates well with the concept of crisis in populist narratives and with the ‘the narrative genre of the populist myth’ by Casullo (2020). Throughout the entire period he continuously made unscientific claims, for instance he recommended the use of anti-malarial drugs, disinfectant injections and even the UV light to treat the virus (Broad – Levin 2020; Lasco 2020).

For researchers, there is more behind Trump’s idiosyncratic way of speaking. Homolar and Scholz argue that Trump’s language is part of a rhetorical strategy, which “helped him control meaning and mobilize the public” (Homolar – Scholz 2018: 346). Indeed, part of his supporters would engage in protests against the government’s lockdown decisions, clearly not respecting the rules proposed by the scientific community, such as social distancing or the use of masks (Gabbatt 2020). Considering that unverifiable content related to COVID-19 had been shared “at an alarming rate” (Kouzy et al. 2020), part of the public opinion inevitably became uninformed, consuming fake news, which generated false beliefs regarding the COVID-19 pandemic. Needless to say, this could have devastating implications on general health.

When Waisbord (2018) analyzed Trump’s presidential campaign and first year of presidency, he concluded that it embodies the affinity between populism and post-truth communication. Some of his findings are relevant for our case as well, particularly that he points out the circumstantial facts of his success. As he argues, right-wing media communication has been based on partisanship and ideology for a long time by Trump’s appearance. The conspiracy theories and xenophobia spread by the alt-right media gained more presence than ever, and extremist views has been spread fast by the social media networks. Politics was increasingly about identity. Trump started his career by enforcing these views by spreading conspiracy theories and denying scientific claims, such as the climate change. Through him, fringe opinions became mainstream US politics. As such, post-truth populist communication became the very essence of right-wing communication in the US, and it was done in a strategic manner by Trump for gaining and maintaining power in our contemporary communication environment.

According to all the above, Donald J. Trump can be considered to be within the category of post-truth populist leader, or even an ideal-type of it, reaching maximum compatibility in all the characteristics needed, except for ‘appeal to the people’, which in this case has not been the dominant discursive narrative.

To put this in perspective, let us take a glance at two other figures of American politics: Bernie Sanders and Joe Biden. Many pundits in the States

and around the world refer to Bernie Sanders as a left-wing populist leader, based on mostly his appeal to the ‘disillusioned people’. But can he be considered a post-truth leader as well? The Poynter Institute, one of the leading institutions promoting fact-checking journalism through the Politifact website, has analyzed more than 171 statements made by Bernie Sanders (Politifact 2021). So far only 10% of the declarations taken into analysis are considered false, while 15% mostly false. In comparison, the actual President of the United States Joe Biden, who competed against Sanders in the primaries and is perceived as being a non-populist leader, has significantly more negative score. From 208 Biden statements analyzed by the Poynter Institute, 19% of them are considered as mostly false, 18% as false, while 2% enters in the extreme category of “Pants on fire” (ridiculous claim). In total, 38% of Biden statements are based at least at some type of lies, compared to only 25% of Sanders. While populist leaders cannot be equalized to post-truth leaders, post-truth leaders in general are perceived as popular leaders as well, mostly because they often appeal to emotions, which is also a key element of populist discourse, as it has been pointed out. But would that be enough to equalize the two concepts?

The case of Jair Bolsonaro

Jair Bolsonaro, Brazil’s 38th president serving his term from 2019 to 2022, is another political figure who has not only been labelled populist, but also an advocate of fake news and conspiracy theories. During the first phase of the COVID pandemic, Bolsonaro’s approach was exceptionally skeptical. Contrary to Brazilian medical health experts or opposition leaders, he often downplayed the virus calling it a ‘little cold / flu’ (De Orte 2020 in Lasco 2020). Even as the situation worsened in the country, he held on to his skeptic position and made bald statements, such as saying that Brazilians are immune to the virus or that his athletic past would save him. He advocated publicly that hydroxychloroquine – an anti-malarial medicine – is an effective remedy for the virus (O Globo 2020 in Lasco 2020). He refused social isolation, instead, he emphasized the importance of keeping up the economy: he even launched a #BrazilCannotStop campaign. However, he did not look at the economy from the viewpoint of the corporations, but the common man. He argued that the country cannot stop because the people cannot afford it. As to the origins of the virus, he had different ideas: sometimes he blamed China, but other times he claimed that the virus is just a fantasy propagated by the media. Overall, observing his narrative approach, it can be stated that Bolsonaro simplified the virus and the threat it was posing and “made a spectacle of his own antagonistic, denialist response” (Lasco 2020: 1421). He publicly condemned

the recommendations of the WHO and the Pan-American Health Organization multiple times (Lapper 2021: 226).

Overall, it can be said that Bolsonaro simplified the pandemic by calling it just a ‘little flu’ or offering hydroxychloroquine as a treatment, spectacularized the crisis by evoking the language of conspiracy or launching the #BrazilCannotStop campaign, and forged divisions within society by staging China, his political opponents and health experts as enemies of the people (Lasco 2020: 1424). Although his discursive approach was characterized by this skepticism, it cannot be left unmentioned that the emergency aid that his government allocated between April and December 2020, has been outstanding, and perhaps it can qualify as an appeal to the people in practical terms. A total of 67.2 million people benefitted from it (44.1% of the population), making it the most generous support that has been handed out during the pandemic globally. Its short-term impact has been extremely positive and has brought Bolsonaro strong support especially among lower-income people. However, the aid put a huge strain on the budget, seriously increasing the deficit ratio, which was only worsened by the second aid distributed in March 2021. The second wave of the coronavirus was extremely severe in Brazil, with an average of 1000 people dying per day in the period from January to February, followed by as many as 2000 in March. The total death rate was 300,000 in March, the second highest in the world. All this has affected Bolsonaro's skepticism, but by then it was too late: opinion polls showed his support had dropped significantly and central parties had turned away from him. However, he continued to be supported by the conservative groups that were his main voter base, members of the evangelical churches, members of the military and police, the smallholders and the miners (Lapper 2021: 229-248). It can be only speculated how his management of the pandemic has in the end contributed to his loss in the 2022 presidential election.

Table 2: Are Trump and Bolsonaro typical examples of typical post-truth populist leaders?

Populist characteristics in a leader	Trump	Bolsonaro
Appeal to the people	+	++
Exclusion of the ‘other’	++	++
Conflictual style	++	++
Simplistic discourse	++	++
Post-truth characteristics in a leader	Trump	Bolsonaro
Appeal to emotions	++	++
Facts no longer relevant	++	++

Notes: ++ is equivalent to a maximum compatibility, + equivalent to medium compatibility, - is equivalent to no compatibility.

Conclusion

Populism and the post-truth are prominent in our contemporary political world, however, their relation to each other has remained blurry to some extent. This article intended to discuss not just the concepts themselves, but also how they can possibly relate to each other in theory, and in practice.

We have theorized that the relation between populism and the post-truth is only partial, as they might co-exist, but that is not a necessity, being concepts on their own. To illustrate this, we have looked at the cases of two political leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on these, in practice, populism and the post-truth seem to go hand in hand. Perhaps this should not be a surprise, as they are both the products of a general aesthetic and emotional transformation of contemporary politics, to which Speed and Mannion (2017) even refers to as the era of post-truth.

As empirical illustrations, the cases of Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro were selected because they are strong representatives of both populism and post-truth communication, according to academic literature. Indeed, as our case studies show, they can be labelled as ideal types of post-truth populism. The only difference between them is that although reference to the people is not a strong trait in Trump's communication, it is a strong aspect of Bolsonaro's pandemic management: he not only stood up (at least seemingly) for the interests of the people when he declared that the economy cannot stop but distributed the largest emergency aid globally. Overall, both political actors exhibited the characteristics of post-truth populism to a full extent, at least as far as this theoretical framework is concerned.

To conclude our article, we argue that it must be stressed that although the definitions of populism and post-truth have both reached the status of cliché and are largely used as catchphrases for political ills, the implications they can have in the time of a global pandemic is enormous. This paper first and foremost served as an invitation for an intellectual exercise discussing what these concepts actually mean, and how they are intertwined with and in our contemporary political arena. Perhaps, they are all indicators of a general transformation that is taking place in politics. Going beyond the limitations of this study, future research could be conducted in a large-scale and comparative manner, including both presumably populist and non-populist political actors. This way, statistical data could be gathered on the actual ratio of correlation between populist and post-truth messages in the communication of not only populist, but mainstream political figures as well.

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