

“Everything is Biased”: Populist Supporters’ Folk Theories of Journalism

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Abstract

Populist supporters have a complex relationship with journalism (e.g., embracing elites’ negative rhetoric, yet consuming news profusely). This study explores this relationship. The notion of folk theories informs an inductive analysis of thirty-three in-depth interviews conducted in 2021 with right-wing and left-wing populist supporters in the United States and Spain to understand how they (RQ1) make sense of their news consumption habits and (RQ2) navigate the current high-choice media environment to stay informed. Findings reveal three interconnected folk theories that populist supporters drew from in explaining their news consumption: (1) “everything is biased,” (2) “it’s a way of seeing what other people think,” and (3) “it’s a pleasurable source of information.” Findings additionally support an important role of emotion underlying these folk theories, which helped participants reconcile their negative views of journalism with the pleasure they derived from meeting ingrained normative democratic ideals.

Keywords

journalism, populism, folk theories, audience studies, comparative research

Social and political identities play an important role in audiences’ interest and trust in news, as well as news consumption broadly (Banjac 2022; Riedl and Eberl 2022; Suiter and Fletcher 2020). Among them, support for populism, increasingly prevalent worldwide (Rovira Kaltwasser et al. 2017), is particularly useful to predict attitudes

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and trust in news (Fletcher 2019; Mitchell et al. 2018; Schulz et al. 2020). Populist supporters' views of journalism relate to perceptions that the news media service the elites, which are reinforced by populist leaders' discourse (Fawzi 2019). Populist elites frequently antagonize the news media, which can negatively affect audiences' perceptions and trust in news (Fawzi 2019; Van Duyn and Collier 2019). Although populist supporters tend to hold negative attitudes toward news, they also are avid consumers of commercial, tabloid, alternative, and partisan media (Fawzi 2019; Fletcher 2019; Schulz 2019), as well as established news sources (Stier et al. 2020).

Our understanding of populist supporters' relationship with journalism is limited, as research has tended to focus on elites' criticism of journalism (e.g., Van Duyn and Collier 2019; Waisbord and Amado 2017). While research has examined populist attitudes' effects on news perceptions and consumption (e.g., Fawzi 2019; Fletcher 2019), these studies have predominantly employed quantitative methods, thus overlooking populist supporters' interpretations of their relationship with news. Hence, this study seeks to grasp how populist supporters understand journalism, and the role of emotion in this interpretive exercise. This is critical given the political relevance of populism around the globe, as well as the increasingly recognized importance of populist attitudes in social, political, and news-related attitudes and behaviors (Mitchell et al. 2018; Rovira Kaltwasser et al. 2017; Schulz 2019).

A theoretical framework based on the notion of folk theories informed an inductive analysis of thirty-three in-depth interviews conducted in 2021 with right-wing¹ and left-wing populist supporters in the United States and Spain. The analysis revealed ingrained normative democratic ideals underlying populist supporters' understandings of journalism. Findings also highlight the importance of emotion embedded in participants' folk theories, suggesting that the concept is useful to understand how populist supporters relate to news.

Populist Supporters and Journalism

The definition of populism has been subject to scholarly debate, with some highlighting its communicative nature (e.g., Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser 2018; Jagers and Walgrave 2007), others emphasizing its ideological dimension (e.g., Mudde 2004; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2018), and yet others considering it a political style, logic, or strategy (Laclau 2005; Moffitt and Tormey 2014; Weyland 2001, respectively). According to Mudde's (2004: 543) oft-cited definition, populism divides society into the "pure people" and the "corrupt elites" and contends that politics should be dictated by the people's will. Arguably, relative consensus exists around the importance of three concepts, namely, people-centrism, anti-elitism, and popular sovereignty (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2018).

Populist elites' rhetoric is captured and amplified in media, as they attract coverage due to their charisma, media savviness, and emotional appeals (Hameleers et al. 2017; Mazzoleni 2008; Moffitt 2018; Nai 2021). In fact, emotion is a main defining feature of populist rhetoric (Mazzoleni et al. 2003). While a central role of emotion is not exclusive to populist politics, specific emotional states can contribute to populism's emergence

and success (Bonansinga 2020). Populist messaging can elicit powerful positive and negative collective emotions among supporters, fostering their mobilization (Bucy et al. 2020; Obradović et al. 2020) and persuasion (Wirz 2018). Emotion is also central in populists' antagonistic relationship with journalism. Populist politicians and supporters have used social media to confront and harass critical voices, including journalists (Waisbord and Amado 2017; Waisbord 2020). Populist elites frequently accuse journalists of attacking them, servicing corrupt elites, blatantly lying, and hiding important events from the public to prevent their success (Krämer 2018; Waisbord 2014). Populist elites' emotional rhetoric is mirrored in supporters' views that news media service elites and their coverage is biased against their political views (Fawzi 2019; Mitchell et al. 2018; Schulz et al. 2020; Van Duyn and Collier 2019).

However, despite populist supporters' negative perceptions and low trust in news, they tend to consume more news than non-populist citizens, even when controlling for political interest, need for cognition, political orientation, and media skepticism (Schulz 2019). Research suggests that populist supporters have strong media preferences, particularly valuing a few outlets (Fawzi 2019; Fletcher 2019). Based on this research, it might seem that populist supporters are intensely engaged with a handful of media outlets. Yet, although populist supporters tend to prefer commercial and tabloid news, in addition to alternative and partisan media (Fawzi 2019; Fletcher 2019; Schulz 2019), established news sources remain central in their news repertoires (Stier et al. 2020). Although quantitative research has examined populist supporters' apparently contradictory news-related attitudes and behaviors (e.g., Fawzi 2019; Fletcher 2019; Schulz 2019; Stier et al. 2020), our understanding of how populist supporters make sense of journalism remains limited. Therefore, this study contributes insight to grasp populist supporters' perspectives beyond geography and ideology, and unearth deeper processes affecting their relationship with news.

Populist Supporters' Folk Theories of Journalism

This study's theoretical framework was informed by the notion of folk theories of journalism. Folk theories are popular explanations about what something is or how it works (Rip 2006). Unlike scientific theories, they need not be systematically checked, as people can rely on contradictory understandings (Rip 2006; Nielsen, 2016). Importantly, folk theories can be based on first-hand experience or secondary sources, for instance political elites' discourse and news (Rip 2006). In journalism studies, folk theories are useful to examine people's interpretations of their news media consumption and understand how these interpretations inform their engagement with news. Nielsen (2016: 840) defined folk theories of journalism as "popular beliefs about what journalism is, what it does, and what it ought to do." While folk theories might not be demonstrably true, coherent, and exhaustive, they nonetheless can guide understandings, practices, and engagement with news (Nielsen 2016). A folk theories of journalism framework allows us to uncover deeper processes underlying news engagement, which are ingrained in communities' cultures and, therefore, can provide tacit yet significant guidance for behavior.

Research has examined how audiences' folk theories of journalism have informed their news consumption and trust. For instance, folk theories have been useful to unearth perceptions of journalistic practices underlying anti-journalism discourses (Palmer 2019; Wilner et al. 2021). Wilner et al.'s (2021) participants, mostly frequent news consumers, expressed folk theories which emphasized an ideal of journalism as being unbiased, while interpreting common journalistic practices as providing scope for bias. Similarly, Nelson and Lewis' (2023) participants, who consumed ideologically consistent and cross-cutting sources mostly from established news organizations, expressed distrust in news stemming from their perceptions of bias. Like with frequent news consumers, skepticism of journalism rooted in perceptions of bias also marked folk theories of journalism shared by news avoiders in the United Kingdom and Spain (Palmer et al. 2020). Although only a few participants expressed support for populist leaders, their folk theories of journalism were intertwined with perceptions that bias was driven by economic and political elites, thus undermining watchdog role ideals. Additionally, the notion of folk theories has helped uncover news avoiders' beliefs that they do not need to purposely seek news to stay informed, and illuminate the rationale behind their negative attitudes toward established news media (Toff and Nielsen 2018; Palmer et al. 2020).

The studies reviewed above, which use a theoretical framework informed by folk theories of journalism, employ inductive approaches. Inductive analyses are helpful to avoid imposing professional or scholarly definitions, and artificially structuring participants' narratives through them as a result. Moreover, inductive approaches make it possible to build on people's ideas of journalism broadly, which can encompass their understandings of specific news sources, digital platforms, journalistic practices, and the social role of journalism, among others. Similarly, folk theories of journalism allow us to inductively examine populist supporters' definitions of news, including their perspectives about what it is, what it ought to be, and how these ideas inform their narratives about the journalistic and non-journalistic content they use to stay informed about current affairs.

This study uses a theoretical lens informed by the notion of folk theories to inductively examine how right-wing and left-wing populist supporters in the U.S. and Spain draw from their understandings of journalism to (*RQ1*) make sense of their news consumption habits and (*RQ2*) navigate the current high-choice media environment to stay informed. Folk theories of journalism are particularly useful to understand how populist supporters interpret their experiences consuming news. Thus, they can shed light onto the conundrum of how to stay informed about current events from the perspective of those who support political elites which notably criticize journalists. This is important because although research suggests that populist supporters are avid news consumers (Schulz, 2019), our understanding of how they approach and think about news is limited. While clarifying whether populist supporters are, in fact, well-informed is out of the scope of this research, a folk theories framework is useful to explore whether they think that they are well-informed and whether that is important to them. Such a lens, and its associated interpretive methodologies, can additionally allow us to understand the intertwined role of emotion in populist supporters' relationship with news.

Method

This study seeks to understand how populist supporters articulate their relationship with journalism based on an inductive analysis of thirty-three in-depth interviews with right-wing and left-wing populist supporters from the United States and Spain.

Populism in the United States and Spain

Comparative research is important to understand populist phenomena, as they can present differently in varying national and ideological conditions (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2018; Rovira Kaltwasser et al. 2017). Although tremendously ambitious, comparative research in populism rarely encompasses various countries and ideologically different subtypes of populism in a single study (e.g., Tamames 2020; Weyland 1999). This constitutes a main challenge to distinguish features shared among populist electorates (Rooduijn 2018). Precisely, a central contribution of this study is a cross-national and cross-ideological comparison, necessary to sift what is essential, and thus remains central, in populist movements across different settings. Therefore, this research examines the United States and Spain as cases to explore the general relationship between populist supporters and journalism.

The United States and Spain offer an appropriate case for comparison as, despite different media and political systems, both have seen increased support for populist elites in recent years: Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders, representing right-wing and left-wing populism in the United States, and Pablo Iglesias and Santiago Abascal, representing left-wing and right-wing populism in Spain. Therefore, the present is a “most-different” comparative case study analysis (Gerring 2007: 139–44), which makes it possible to unearth populist supporters’ interpretations of journalism, regardless of their location, geographically or on the political spectrum.

According to Hallin and Mancini (2004), the United States’ media system is characterized by a high reach of the press market, low degree of political parallelism and high professionalization of journalism, with a weak role of the state. These features, however, should be understood more as tendencies rather than accurate descriptions, especially as media systems evolve. For instance, objectivity, a traditionally American journalistic norm (Schudson 2001), has been giving way to markedly partisan news in the United States (e.g., Iyengar and Hahn 2009). Furthermore, trends of declining trust in news and increasing affective polarization have been connected with a particularly strong relationship between partisanship and trust in news in the United States (Gottfried and Liedke 2021; Mason 2018; Suiter and Fletcher 2020).

Hallin and Mancini (2004) described Spain’s media system as the opposite. Political parallelism in Spain has led to a tradition of news outlets with ideological leanings, rarely explicit, but perceived by the public (Cardenal et al. 2019; Masip et al. 2020). Ideology can predict trust and news source preference in Spain (Masip et al. 2020). Trust in news has also declined in recent years in Spain, with Spanish populist supporters displaying notably low levels (Mitchell et al. 2018). Thus, some trends signal a resemblance between the United States and Spain. However, these recent trends do not

erase underlying fundamental normative, political, and institutional differences that have historically shaped these countries' media and political systems in generally polarized directions (Brüggemann et al. 2014; Hallin and Mancini 2004). Despite these differences, right-wing and left-wing populist elites have gathered massive support in the United States and Spain. A brief explanation focusing on their discourse about news media is provided.

Scholars tend to agree that Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders represent right-wing and left-wing populism in the United States, respectively (e.g., Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser 2018; Lacatus 2019). Previously known as a businessman and celebrity, Trump led a successful presidential campaign for the Republican Party in 2016. Trump incisively antagonized news media prior and during his presidency (2016–2020), effectively eroding the public's trust in journalism (Carlson et al. 2021; Van Duyn and Collier 2019). Concurrently, Sanders ran in the Democratic Party's presidential primary elections of 2016 and 2020. Although Sanders did not secure the party's nomination, he was credited with mainstreaming democratic socialist discourse in the United States (Tamames 2020). Sanders repeatedly denounced an alleged boycott by the media, who he connected to economic elites.²

Similarly, scholars identify Santiago Abascal and Pablo Iglesias as populist leaders of the Spanish right-wing party Vox and left-wing party Podemos, respectively (e.g., Vampa 2020). Led by Abascal, Vox became the third most-voted force in 2019, thus ending Spain's exceptionalism to the populist radical right (Arroyo-Menéndez 2020; Turnbull-Dugarte 2019). Vox leaders, including Abascal, have claimed that the news media lie to serve political elites and are biased against them and their supporters.³ Meanwhile, Podemos' founder, Iglesias, entered a coalition government as vice president in 2020. Podemos was born from the anti-austerity and anti-corruption *Indignados* movement. Podemos, and Iglesias specifically, have denounced alleged news media corruption, manipulation, and hostility against them repeatedly, even after Iglesias left politics in 2021.⁴

In-Depth Interviews

Between April and October, 2021, I used video-call software to conduct thirty-three semi-structured interviews with (nine) Trump, (eight) Sanders, (eight) Abascal, and (eight) Iglesias supporters. It is important to acknowledge that, while the reduced sample sizes have implications for findings at the group level, they do not negate the significance of findings prominent across geographic and ideological distinctions. Participants were recruited with a screener survey distributed through two market research companies, Facebook ads, and snowball sampling. Recruiting strategies were previously consulted with and approved by the University of Minnesota's IRB, including compensation, which all participants received. Participants (1) had read or posted political content online in the two weeks prior; (2) strongly agreed with populist ideas (Roccatto et al. 2019); and (3) expressed support for Trump, Sanders, Abascal, or Iglesias (for more details see Appendix A in the Supplemental Information file).

Trump supporters mostly identified as female ($N=6$), White ($N=8$), and their median age was 51 years old. Most had completed a higher or post-secondary

education degree ($N=7$) and their combined annual household income ranged between \$15,000 and \$174,999. Sanders supporters also mostly identified as female ($N=7$). Regarding race and ethnicity, Sanders supporters identified as White ($N=4$), Black ($N=2$), Hispanic or Latinx ($N=1$), and non-White ($N=1$). Their median age was 44 years old. Most had completed a higher or post-secondary education degree ($N=7$), and their combined annual household income ranged between less than \$10,000 and \$249,999. Abascal supporters mostly identified as male ($N=5$) and White ($N=7$). Their median age was 33.5 years old. Most had completed a higher or post-secondary education degree ($N=6$) and their combined annual household income ranged between less than €14,999 and €74,999. Gender distribution for Iglesias supporters was balanced, most identified as White ($N=7$). Their median age was 32.5 years old. Most had completed a higher education degree ($N=7$), and their combined annual household income ranged between less than €14,999 and €99,999 (see Appendix B in the Supplemental Information file for more details about the sample's demographic distribution). This demographic distribution is generally consistent with research characterizing these populist supporters (e.g., Arroyo-Menéndez 2020; Bronner and Bacon 2020; Norris and Inglehart 2019; Tamames 2020). However, this sample included more female and highly educated participants, which might respond to online research biases (e.g., Coppock and McClellan 2019).

Interviews were an average of seventy-six minutes long, although their focus was broader than participants' relationship with journalism. Specific questions inquired about participants' news consumption, and their strategies to stay informed (e.g., how do you stay up to date with current affairs? What media do you normally go to when you want to know what's going on in the world?). Mentions of news and journalism were avoided initially so as not to steer or impose definitions on participants. Participants were encouraged to describe and compare the sources they spontaneously mentioned. These questions were useful to understand participants' definition of journalism beyond normative and industry concerns (Swart et al. 2022). This resulted in the inclusion of social media and specific sources, and the exclusion of others, as part of their folk theories of journalism. Finally, participants were invited to share their perspectives about journalists and their work in their countries (e.g., how would you describe journalists in [country]? What do you think about journalism in [country]?) (see Appendix C in the Supplemental Information file for more details about the interview protocol).

The analysis was conducted manually and followed the steps of (1) data immersion, (2) first cycle coding, and (3) second cycle coding (Saldaña 2013; Tracy 2013). During first cycle coding, descriptive coding (Saldaña 2013) yielded a list of themes present in participants' accounts about their own news consumption. "In vivo" coding (Saldaña 2013) was used to reflect participants' language. During second cycle coding, which consisted of collapsing themes into categories, more complex understandings were developed, corresponding to populist supporters' folk theories of journalism (Saldaña 2013; Tracy 2013). The analysis was inductive, structured by the notion of folk theories of journalism and previous literature, and thus focused on participants' meaning-making around their perceptions, expectations, and attitudes toward journalism, as well as the relationships among these.

The following section provides an explanation of the study's findings, including illustrative evidence from interviews. Interviews were conducted in participants' native language, namely English and Spanish. Excerpts from Spanish interviews were translated by the author. Randomly assigned pseudonyms are used instead of interviewees' names.

Findings and Discussion

Consistent with past research, participants shared populist elites' negative rhetoric toward news (Fawzi 2019; Van Duyn and Collier 2019), expressed low trust in news generally (Fletcher 2019; Mitchell et al. 2018), and yet consumed news profusely (Fletcher 2019; Schulz 2019). Interviewees expressed consuming news from diverse sources, combining older and newer media logics (Chadwick 2017). The inductive approach employed in this study revealed that participants embraced a broad definition of news, which included journalistic content mixed with commentary on social media, and political elites' own content. For example, as put by Felix, an Abascal supporter:

I look for the different parties' pages, people from different parties that can have information. For example, if it's someone from Podemos and they have information, maybe they will post a link I can click on, or if it's someone from Vox that has information, I also click on the link to check it.

Coloring participants' narratives were references to emotion, suggesting its central role not only in populist elites' rhetoric (Mazzoleni et al. 2003) but also in supporters' folk theories of journalism. While negative emotions are frequently performed and primed by elites when referring to the news media (Krämer 2018; Waisbord 2014), positive emotions were also prominent in supporters' folk theories. Instead of avoiding news based on perceived influence by economic and political elites (Palmer et al. 2020), these participants enjoyed feeling that they were up to date with current and political affairs. In that sense, participants' interpretations revealed underlying normative ideals of informed citizenship, as they articulated a sense of pride about staying informed.

Consistent with research on frequent news consumers, interviewees referred to those who they perceived were not as well-informed as "ignorant," "a herd of sheep," or "asleep," which allowed them to express a positive social identity (Nelson and Lewis 2023). As put by Anna, a Trump supporter: "This one, [group name redacted], is basically telling Americans to stop being sheep, to think for [themselves] and stop believing what the news has to say. That's basically how I feel, too. People need to start thinking for themselves." These populist supporters enjoyed and had a positive affective relationship with specific sources, even those often grouped under the label of "mainstream media," which they valued insofar as they contributed to their sense of feeling informed. As put by Andrew, a Sanders supporter:

I usually watch NBC, CBS, ABC, MSNBC, whatever it is. MSNBC, [PBS], and BBC, Vice Channel . . . I can't think of the other one. *Vox*. I think it's V-O-X. *Politico*. Can't

think of them off the top of my head, but those are pretty much, like I said, the mainstream TV for the local news and not all the time, but I do love MSNBC, I just love it. I think they got my message.

Moreover, participants obtained pleasure from becoming and feeling informed. As put by Imma, an Iglesias supporter: “I really like being informed, and since a lot of the people I read are also well-informed, in general I like what I receive, what I read.” These emotions affected their understandings of, and how they navigated, their news media ecosystems. Importantly, not all the emotions intertwined in populist supporters’ folk theories of journalism were positive. As seen below, perceptions of bias were expressed with negative emotions such as anger. However, these findings suggest that populist supporters experience a broader range of emotions when engaging with news than it might seem judging by populist elites’ rhetoric, and that emotion, positive and negative, plays a central role in such engagement.

Interviewees drew mainly from three interconnected folk theories in their reflections about news. Folk Theory 1, “everything is biased,” reflected participants’ perceptions of generalized bias in news, and their appreciation of ideologically consistent news. Folk Theory 2, or “it’s a way of seeing what other people think,” referred to their views of news and social media as reflective of public opinion. Finally, Folk Theory 3, or “it’s a pleasurable news source,” consisted of participants’ understandings of social media affordances and news’ ideological leanings as tools to stay informed while managing their mood. Collectively, these folk theories address the research questions guiding this study, which asked how right-wing and left-wing populist supporters in the United States and Spain draw from their understandings of journalism to (*RQ1*) make sense of their news consumption habits and (*RQ2*) navigate the current high-choice media environment to stay informed.

Folk Theory 1: “Everything is biased”

Consistent with the literature, populist supporters echoed elites’ rhetoric about journalists as part of, or controlled by, political and economic elites (Fawzi 2019; Schulz 2019). When reflecting on journalism, participants’ tone was generally negative: “It’s bad. It’s corrupt, and I don’t know why they are that way, and why they hated Trump so bad” (Sabine, Trump supporter). This tone was marked by anger, elicited by perceptions of deviation from normative ideals of journalism, allegedly to the extent of spreading false information, and bias against their views, with right-wing supporters especially troubled by their perceived misrepresentation in news.

Although the objectivity norm is historically more deeply rooted in American journalism (Schudson 2001), participants in both countries described journalism as not meeting their objectivity ideals. Spanish participants accepted ideological leanings more openly, while they disapproved of perceived disinformation in news. As put by Azucena, an Abascal supporter: “The lack of objectivity has always been there, but I think that disinformation has become more widespread in the last few years.” This finding contrasts with research on news avoiders suggesting that frustration stemming

from perceived bias attributed to political and financial influence on news can be particularly intense in Spain (Palmer et al. 2020). However, it is important to note that these populist supporters were frequent news consumers, suggesting that embracing a more open stance toward ideological leanings can allow politically interested audiences to rely on different sources to stay informed despite perceived bias.

Participants in both countries displayed high interest in politics and news, which they related to normative ideals of informed citizenship. These narratives resembled folk theories articulated by other frequent news consumers, criticizing perceived bias while evoking watchdog ideals (Wilner et al. 2021). While populist perceptions that bias in news is driven by political and economic elites can undermine watchdog ideals and drive news avoidance (Palmer et al. 2020), participants reacted contrarily. Despite their views of journalists as servicing elites, these populist supporters engaged with diverse news sources, motivated by a strong perceived duty of staying informed, and the positive emotions that they associated with its fulfillment.

Despite populist supporters' negative perceptions of traditional news media, they engaged with legacy news outlets of different leanings and other sources of political information, apparently unaware that these behaviors could reward a system they despise through metrics of news engagement. Participants tended to enjoy labor-intensive news consumption activities, such as comparing information, fact-checking it, and expanding their knowledge. For example, Manuel, an Iglesias supporter, explained how he compared sources from different leanings to "approach truth":

I follow a variety of media, [I like to] compare them to see how each one explains something. I often find differences, and I can then make my own conclusions . . . [The media should] be respectful and approach truth. When I see that [the media] try to cover something up, I stop following them. If I see that they are trying to be impartial and as close to reality as possible, because it is very hard, you can't say it's reality but as close as possible . . . that's what I try to follow and read.

Although they engaged with diverse sources, participants described preferring a few of them, often ideologically consistent. Descriptions of these sources were marked by a positive tone and affective attachments. This finding adds to research examining perceptions of bias in folk theories of journalism. Participants in previous studies saw bias as problematic even when it was consistent with their political views, which contributed to distrust in news (Nelson and Lewis, 2023; Wilner et al., 2021). This was not the case for these populist supporters, who trusted their preferred news outlets and referred to them as exceptions in their perceptions of journalism. In contrast to generalized distrust in news, participants' patterns of selective trust resemble those identified among other audiences critical of journalism (Toff et al. 2021b). As put by Louise, a Sanders supporter: "I feel like some news sources are starting to get biased. I'm sure *CNN* is biased, but is biased to what I believe in."

In sum, the "everything is biased" folk theory encompassed participants' perceptions of news as inherently biased, often against their preferred political leaders, ideas, and themselves. Participants' perceptions of generalized bias conflicted with their

desire to meet normative ideals of informed citizenship, which they resolved by consuming diverse sources, including cross-cutting news. While these patterns are consistent with conventional notions of normatively desirable news consumption in pluralist democracies, perceptions of bias also elicited negative emotions, especially anger, which participants directed at the news media. Additionally, despite participants' disapproval of the news media generally, they described preferring and trusting ideologically consistent sources, and tolerating perceived favorable bias in news.

Folk Theory 2: "It's a way of seeing what other people think"

Interviewees described actively seeking out consistent and cross-cutting content in social and news media with the goal of surveying public opinion. This folk theory reflects participants' grouping of digital platforms and news media as containing information that similarly allowed them to do so. Participants did not express distinctions between information found in platforms or news sites in terms of trust or quality (see Mont'Alverne et al. 2022; Toff et al. 2021b), presumably because they trusted their inferences based on these sources. Research has documented the use of social media to represent public opinion, specifically among journalists (Dubois et al. 2020; McGregor 2019). Although it is not possible to adjudicate in this study whether journalists' practices have influenced citizens, participants used social media similarly.

Social media allowed populist supporters to recognize members of their imagined community of "the people," and compare themselves to them. As put by Peter, a Trump supporter, when referring to a Facebook group: "There is 20% that are more radical, that think stronger than me, but there is 80% that think definitely weaker than me." Additionally, participants drew from their idea that social media accurately reflected public opinion to gauge political opponents' general sentiment. As put by Amadeo, an Abascal supporter:

Sometimes it's entertaining. It's a way of seeing what other people think. It's another vision of other people's reality . . . I really want to know what the other side thinks. In [Facebook] public groups people do not really discuss stuff . . . so, then, I have to go to this other one, because I know that they are discussing this or that they support this one party there.

To understand public opinion among ideological opponents, participants also consumed cross-cutting news. For example, Summer, a Sanders supporter, explained that she consumed Fox News to understand her conservative father's perspective and facilitate conversation between them:

I do have Fox News on my phone, which I've had friends who saw that and were like, "What's going on?" I was just like, "You've got to know what's happening. You've got to hear what's going on." My dad would link me to stuff and then it's like, "Okay, I have context for what you are telling me because they've been posting about this for the past two weeks."

Participants' engagement with cross-cutting news guided their causal inferences between the content and their perceived public opinion trends. While populist supporters tend to believe that public opinion is consistent with their own, and that journalistic coverage is biased against their political views (Schulz et al. 2018), this study's findings suggest an unexplored link between these two perceptions. Participants imagined ideological opponents as deeply affected by media, also known as third-person effects (Davison 1983), and consequently holding inaccurate perceptions of reality. As put by Belen, an Iglesias supporter:

Older people receive many news messages from news, on Antena 3 or Televisión Española, that promote the right constantly. It feels like they try to foster a close-minded attitude among the population, like "hey, look, an immigrant wave is going to invade us, now look at Vox, how cool." They repeat some of their arguments, I notice it in older people . . . It's like "Oof, [my uncle] is repeating the arguments he watches on TV, the messages he receives constantly."

In sum, the folk theory "it's a way of seeing what other people think" encompassed populist supporters' perceptions of direct access to public opinion. They used social media to survey ingroup members and norms, which appeared to be useful to participants to clarify their social identities. Accessing cross-cutting online communities and news allowed participants to infer the other side's public opinion, which in turn elicited positive emotions associated with meeting ideals of informed citizenship. These inferences, however, were often based on assumptions such as that others were more deeply affected by media than themselves.

Folk Theory 3: "It's a pleasurable news source"

Folk Theory 3, or "it's a pleasurable news source" comprised participants' understandings of social media affordances and news' ideological leanings as useful to manage their mood, which was negatively affected by other sources they accessed to overcome perceived generalized bias (Folk Theory 1), as well as to survey public opinion (Folk Theory 2), in order to feel informed. While anticipated anxiety can lead to news avoidance (Toff and Nielsen 2022), these populist supporters experienced reassurance by anticipated agreement, and thus used ideologically consistent mainstream and alternative sources to meet their information goals. As explained by Carlos (below) this allowed them to stay informed while protecting their mood. Relatedly, Thea (below) explained that political humor served a similar function.

I consider [Twitter] a news source, although I know that I am deceiving myself because it's a biased source, it's a pleasurable news source. I follow different sources that talk a bit about everything, but most are a bit on my side and I know that's a bit deceiving. (Carlos, Iglesias supporter)

It's funny and it's informational, so as he changed from running for president to just staying [senator] . . . I just liked staying up to date to see how much things he said changed or stayed the same based on what position he was in. (Thea, Sanders supporter)

Besides mainstream sources, alternative outlets provided information while protecting participants' mood. Consuming content on alternative outlets, like niche media, Facebook groups, and newsletters, provided participants with a sense of possessing privileged information. This finding reinforces research showing that audiences with varying frequencies of news use and levels of trust, can construct a positive identity around perceptions of circumventing bias (Nelson and Lewis 2023; Toff et al. 2021a), suggesting that similar dynamics might be at play for populist supporters consuming alternative news outlets. Furthermore, research has documented selective trust among partisans and critics of news media generally (Toff et al. 2021b), suggesting that it might be especially relevant for populist supporters. Given that populist supporters saw negative news bias as personal, against their views or themselves, finding belief-confirming information in these outlets provided them with emotional relief and satisfaction. Additionally, populist supporters went to great lengths to obtain news absent in mainstream outlets, which fostered a highly rewarding perception that they were well-informed, allowing them to identify with ideals of informed citizenship. As explained by Joel, a Trump supporter:

It's not just *The Epoch Times* the U.S. version, I usually click on the Chinese version on the News Google Translate. Just to get a perspective of not the United States version of the news, but a perspective of what's happening in the United States according to China . . . There are world events that have taken place that have never hit the United States news networks.

Following news outlets on social media also made news consumption pleasurable for participants, as it allowed them to retain agency regarding when, where, and for how long they wanted to consume news. This sense of control was important for populist supporters, as they expressed negative emotions elicited by the news and by their views of journalists as servicing the elites and hindering popular sovereignty. To that extent, participants described scanning their social media feeds to decide which news deserved their attention, a pattern of "measured avoidance" (Groot Kormelink 2020). Thus, social media affordances like curation and measured avoidance can be particularly important elements of news engagement among audiences which, like populist supporters, are highly motivated to feel informed, but experience negative emotions when engaging with news. As put by Angela, an Abascal supporter:

I don't like to have breakfast first thing in the morning and watch the news, everything is just so sad. Rapes, killings . . . I don't watch them [on TV] but I do on Facebook. Because there, if I don't like it, I can skip it. Instead, watching them on TV makes me sick.

In sum, the folk theory "it's a pleasurable news source" allowed these populist supporters to reconcile positive emotions stemming from feeling informed, with negative emotions elicited by news. Participants consumed media that they anticipated agreeing with preventatively, to safeguard their mood, and as a way to cope with anxiety elicited by news consumption. Additionally, they described strategies that allowed them to

retain a sense of control in news engagement, such as relying on expected news framing, curating their social media feeds, measuring their news avoidance, consuming political humor, and accessing alternative news media outlets. Thus, participants utilized the high-choice media environment purposely to meet their ideals of informed citizenship while protecting their mood.

Conclusion

This study explored the apparently incongruous relationship between populist supporters' attitudes and behaviors toward news. One of this study's key findings is the relevant role of emotion in populist supporters' news engagement. The analysis revealed a distinct "populist worldview," articulated around populist democratic ideals such as people-centrism, anti-elitism, and popular sovereignty. Regarding participants' folk theories of journalism, the "populist worldview" encompassed, on the one hand, positive concepts and emotions that supporters associated with leaders and fellow members of "the people," such as ideals of informed and rational citizenship as morally desirable to drive popular sovereignty. On the other hand, the "populist worldview," comprised negative concepts and emotions that supporters associated with everything they perceived to be opposed to "the people," and their sovereignty, including journalists and their work (e.g., perceived to service elites through bias and, therefore, morally corrupt).

Following this "populist worldview," participants obtained pleasure and pride from perceiving themselves as meeting normative ideals of informed and rational citizenship. Further, these emotions intersected their folk theories of journalism. First, the folk theory "everything is biased" encompassed understandings of news as generally biased, to which participants responded with consuming diverse sources of information with the goal of approaching truth. Second, the folk theory "it's a way of seeing what other people think" was articulated by participants to explain their understanding of social media and news as reflective of public opinion, which participants perceived as useful to feel informed. Third, the folk theory "it's a pleasurable news source" consisted of participants' understandings of ideological leanings as effective to manage their mood while staying informed. Although their attitudes toward journalism remained negative, these understandings and related patterns of engagement with news allowed participants to experience positive emotions stemming from feeling and staying informed.

While it colored participants' folk theories of journalism, emotion did not have explanatory potential to stand as a folk theory or a deep story, an affective narrative that helps people make sense of the world (Hochschild 2016; Palmer 2019). Still, emotion helps us grasp participants' understandings and rationales to navigate their news media ecosystems. Thus, excluding it would result in a loss of meaning in participants' folk theories of journalism. It has been discussed that, while folk theories have been attributed a cognitive character, they might be closely connected with affect (Palmer 2019). This study's findings suggest that emotion might, in fact, be a crucial aspect of folk theories. Therefore, emotion should be considered in

future research examining folk theories of journalism, especially as its centrality is increasingly recognized in news production and reception (Lecheler 2020; Wahl-Jorgensen 2020).

The exploratory nature of this study permitted the interpretation of populist supporters' folk theories of journalism. However, such a study does not come without limitations. First, measuring these beliefs' strength and relationships was out of this study's scope. Future research could measure these news-related normative beliefs and test their relationship with journalistic behavioral intentions. Second, self-selection biases might have resulted in a sample of especially interested participants. Indeed, participants graciously shared their time and perspectives despite the researcher's academic position. Similarly, interviewees could have been affected by social desirability biases, thus overestimating their cross-cutting news consumption, the depth of their news engagement, or the pleasure they derived from these activities. However, research on message board posts by Spanish right-wing populists' supporters showcases similar behaviors and attitudes (Juarez Miro and Toff 2022). Third, a higher number of recruited participants might have permitted the examination of each group's folk theories of journalism. Despite this limitation, the role of emotion and the three folk theories identified were prominent across ideology and geographical location. Furthermore, a main contribution of this study stems from its comparative design, which made it possible to distinguish characteristics of populism that remained constant across contexts. In that sense, more comparative research is needed to continue to disentangle populism's independent power. Additionally, future research comparing populist supporters with non-populists could clarify whether the findings unearthed by this work can explain similarly conflicting attitudes and behaviors in the broader public.

Ultimately, this study's findings illuminate broader implications for journalists and their work, often received with hostility by populist elites and their supporters. Perhaps chief among them is the central role of emotion in populist supporters' understandings of and engagement with news. Despite their high motivation to feel informed, perceptions of generalized bias and detrimental influence of news complicated their efforts, in turn eliciting strong negative emotions, which they directed at journalists and their work. Importantly, the high choice media environment and social media affordances, allowed populist supporters to retain control over their news consumption, and manage their emotions. Moreover, given that emotions can importantly affect news consumption (e.g., Toff and Nielsen 2022), this study's findings suggest that maintaining a pluralistic democratic society might require news organizations to seriously consider audiences' emotions and agency, so that populist supporters, among other audiences, continue to consume news and further rely on them to enhance their sense of being informed.

Author's Note

The author agrees to this submission. This article is not currently being considered for publication by any other print or electronic journal.

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Ethics

The IRB at the University of Minnesota approved this study (STUDY00011155).

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Data Availability Statement

The data underlying this article cannot be shared publicly to protect the privacy of individuals that participated in the study. Moreover, its sensitive nature, including potentially identifying information as well as information about social and political behaviors support this decision. The data will be shared on reasonable request to the corresponding author.

Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. Several terms have been used to describe this phenomenon, including authoritarian populism (Norris and Inglehart 2019) and populist radical right (e.g., Mudde 2017).
2. Golshan, T. (2019, August 19). Bernie Sanders versus the “corporate media,” explained. *Vox*. Retrieved from <https://www.vox.com>
3. Abascal defiende el veto a medios de comunicación y los acusa de una “demonización” de Vox que puede generar violencia. (2019, November 7). *Europa Press*. Retrieved from <https://www.europapress.es>
4. Aduriz, I. (2022, July 11). Iglesias critica el silencio de Sánchez y “gente de la izquierda”

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