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Emotions, populism and the politics of the everyday

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Emotions and populism are often discussed in conjunction, with the implicit assumption that populists are very emotional, and not seldom too emotional for politics. This assumption is commonplace, and has been expressed by political commentators and academic scholars alike. However, does a presence of emotions in politics pose a threat to our democratic system? Or, are emotions the very foundation for the construction of political identities? This article explores the connection between emotions, populism and everyday life, and argues that populists are often using our affective attachment to everyday life to construct political communities.

Let us begin with the assumption that populists are too emotional. Why do we say that? This is often explained with reference to that populists are doing politics slightly differently than many other political actors. Populist politics focuses a lot of the performance, the very act of being a political actor today. This can take many different forms. For instance, we may refer to how populists speak. Many talk in way that signals authenticity, they may focus less on media trained individuals and transgress boundaries of what is acceptable in public speech. Many scholars have written on this issue, such as [Theo Aiolfi](#) who argues that populism is simply a form of transgression of the norm, a way to break free from set conventions. Others such as [Pierre Ostiguy](#) have argued that populism indeed connect to the 'low' of politics, to the more basic and brute forms of expression, in opposition to civilised speech.

This can be seen when looking at populist communication. For instance, we can take the example of [Marine Le Pen and her cats](#). For the uninitiated reader, Le Pen is an ardent cat lover. She actually considered giving up politics to become a full-time cat breeder (which supposedly would fit right into her eugenicist worldview). In lieu of cat-breeding, she decided to use the cats as a



response to the cat in order to improve her public persona. Similarly we can look at the use of food in populist communication. Leaders such as Matteo Salvini in Italy and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil have a disproportionate large focus on food in their social media feeds. Salvini seems to adore going to small food producers in the Italian countryside and eat their food with gusto, but also argues that **migrants cannot digest pasta** and are therefore alien to Italian culture. Bolsonaro frequently **documents his paltry breakfasts** consisting of bread, fruit and coffee. Why are they doing this? Both leaders are aiming to connect with their voters on a basic, human level. Our emotional connection with food is very strong, and both leaders are using everyday life to communicate to their voters that they lead an ordinary existence. There are many more examples of how populists communicate through other, less traditional means. In 2019, at the height of the leadership election in the Conservative Party in the United Kingdom, **Boris Johnson brought a kipper** (a smoked fish) with him onto stage. Waving the kipper around he criticised EU regulations on food production, not always producing a factually correct picture. The kipper became the symbol of the struggle against EU bureaucracy – the poor fish got a renewed status overnight as the very core of politics.

This raises questions about how we understand and study populism. It is clear from the examples above that it is not sufficient to study populism as only present in the written or spoken word. It is necessary to study populism as a practice. Many scholars have focussed on this and make convincing arguments for an increased focus on the material conditions and expressions of populism. Casullo, for example, connects populism to our affective spheres. Similarly, we can draw on Barthes to understand how food is always connected to our national belonging, and thus has a strong emotional component. As such, to understand how populism and emotions are connected, it is also important to understand how politics is present not only



In addition, however, we may ask ourselves whether this is a phenomenon that is local to populism, or whether it could be applied to politics more broadly? Do populists really use more affective forms of communication? To some degree, it is true that populists have embraced references to everyday life, and they are also very well-versed in communicating on social media. However, they are by no means the only politicians doing this. We may recall the example of Ed Miliband in the UK and his attempt to connect with the people by **eating a bacon sandwich** in the run-up to the 2015 election. Unfortunately for Miliband, people in general were appalled by the way he ate the sandwich, and Miliband, who is Jewish, was accused both of not knowing how to eat it properly as well as breaking the rules of his faith. As such, food and everyday life figure in the repertoire of mainstream politicians as well, further testing the theory that populists are more emotional than others.

In opposition to this reasoning, there is increasing scholarship which points to that the main function of the term populism is not to indicate any special category of politics, but it is simply to label some politicians as worthy of public office, and some as not. Such scholarship has pointed to that populism is more of a signifier than it is an analytical category, more normative than neutral. If this is true, is it perhaps so that the politics of the everyday which is often the chosen arena of the populist is also considered inferior, and less important than, say, inflation targets or military spending. Interestingly, however, voters seem to understand the political messaging around food and pets, indicating that it may be more relevant than what people think.

In the end we can conclude that everyday life is highly affective, but also very effective when creating a political community. References to the everyday carry emotionally laden meanings and histories which are common for collective identities. That these practices are political should come as no


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qualities of populism, rather than understanding how the everyday – and our emotional attachment to it – forms a core component of any political identity.

Source: <https://alicenews.ces.uc.pt/index.php?lang=1&id=39409>

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"Dismantling Populism: Comparing Emotional Narrative Formation and Its Effects on Political Behavior"

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