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Populism as "Truth": How Mediated Authenticity Strengthens the Populist Message

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Abstract

The rise of populism is often explained by political factors, economic factors, and media and communication factors. This article analyzes populism in the context of an increased focus on authenticity in political communication. The main aim is to discuss to what degree mediated authenticity strengthens the populist message and what consequences the nexus between authenticity and populism might have for the quality of democratic governance. As a theoretical backdrop, the article discusses the implications of increased valorization of authenticity in times of distrust, and how performed truth is a key appeal of populism in representative democracies. The methodological approach is a systematic analysis of seven authenticity strategies identified in previous research: consistency, spontaneity, ordinariness, confession, immediacy, ambivalence, and imperfection. In addition to the theoretical analysis, the article offers a case study of the performance of Donald Trump, focusing on how mediated authenticity strengthens the populist message. The study is conducted in a mainly U.S.-context and includes material collected between 2016 and 2023. A key argument is that although performed authenticity can be both advantageous and disadvantageous, depending on the status of the candidate, there is lower risk involved for populist politicians than mainstream politicians because the strategies correspond more with the ideology. In conclusion, the article argues that performed authenticity might legitimize hate speech, conspiracy theories, and post-truth politics because populists claim to have a particular relation to the truth.

Keywords

authenticity, mediated authenticity, politics, performance, populism, Trump

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Introduction

The rise of populism is often explained by political factors (Mudde 2004), economic factors (Franko and Witko 2018), and media and communication factors (Engesser et al. 2017; Jagers and Walgrave 2007). This article analyzes the rise of populism in the context of an increased focus on authenticity in political communication.

A key argument in the growing body of studies on the relationship between authenticity and populism is that the emerging focus on authenticity in politics benefits populist politicians (Fieschi 2019; Iszatt-White et al. 2018; Montgomery 2017; Sorensen 2018). Fieschi (2019) even argued that authenticity is "the secret element of populism," making the populist message more appealing and powerful. Yet, we know little about precisely how performative strategies benefit the populist message and what consequences the emphasis on authenticity in political communication has for the democratic process. These research questions are explored by a systematic theoretical analysis of performative strategies, based primarily on research literature, yet supplemented by a case study of the media performance of Donald Trump, as an illustration of how authenticity strengthens the populist message.

The theoretical framework is *mediated authenticity*, based on the paradox that although we base much of our knowledge about society and politics on mediated representations of reality, we remain well aware that the media are constructed, manipulated, and even faked. In the media context, authenticity is defined through a communicative process, and the degree of authenticity depends on symbolic negotiations between the main participants in the communication (Enli 2014: 1–3). According to the theory, these negotiations concern how the candidate performs according to key authenticity markers and how they are received by the voters and the public sphere: consistency, spontaneity, immediacy, confession, ordinariness, ambivalence, and imperfection (Enli 2014: 136–7). Before unpacking these authenticity markers and their linkage to populism, the article offers a conceptual discussion of first authenticity and then populism.

The Ideal of Authenticity in the Age of Distrust

Authenticity is a buzzword in contemporary society, particularly across marketing, the tourism and food industry, and political communication. Typically, media coverage and debates about politicians and election campaigns evaluate their degree of authenticity and if they seem to be "performing as themselves." Despite many advances in political communication research in recent decades, the notion of authenticity is still fairly mysterious and needs to be theoretically developed and empirically analyzed (Alexander 2010; Luebke 2020; Umbach and Humphrey 2017).

The concept of authenticity originates within existential psychology, philosophy, and aesthetics. In existentialism, the ideal of the authentic is related to being true to "the inner self" as opposed to being influenced by external expectations and societal norms (Taylor 1991). Since then, its use has expanded and become a critical perspective in fields such as art history, sociology, anthropology, music studies, tourism

studies, and media and communication studies. The scholarly interest in authenticity has fluctuated throughout history and has been at its high point at times of cultural and societal change. The ideal of authenticity arose out of the first wave of modernism in the West and was a manifestation of the immersed subjective turn in modern culture (Berman 2009). In media studies, the introduction of new media technologies has caused concerns about authenticity, such as the Frankfurter School's critique of mass communication and what they interpreted as inauthentic portrayal of reality (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002/1944). As the commercialization of European culture intensified in the 1970s and 1980s, the terms "hyperreal" and "simulacra" was used to describe a cultural condition in which the real and the fictional are interchangeable, and copies replace the originals (Baudrillard 1981; Eco 1987). From the early 2000s onwards, the rise of social networks and the migration of communication to digital platforms was criticized for destabilizing editorial standards and devaluing genuine relationships (Baym 2010; Morozov 2011). More recently, the scholarly focus on (in) authenticity has become prevalent in the context of artificial intelligence, and key mechanisms in the spread of misinformation and fake news (Chesney and Citron 2019; Gregory 2022). Since digital platforms are becoming a primary source of political information for many users, a key concern is that the spread of fake news on digital platforms might undermine the quality of democratic governance (Tucker et al. 2018).

In a cultural context of disinformation, artificial intelligence, and post-truth politics, there is a renewed valorization of authenticity. This knowledge has been embraced by the marketing industry decades ago (Banet-Weiser 2012; Gilmore and Pine 2007; Henderson and Bowley 2010), as well as by political candidates and their campaign managers (Alexander 2010; Burton and Shea 2010). The value of authenticity is particularly high in times of distrust and a "pervasive skepticism toward politics and the media, a coherent and congruent message carefully crafted to induce a perception of authenticity is a political campaign imperative" (Sheinheit and Bogard 2016: 971).

Political candidates regarded by the public as authentic will often benefit from this in elections because they build alliances with the voters and craft an image of sincerity and trustworthiness. Yet, the strategic and performative aspects of authenticity should not be overlooked and being regarded as authentic does not imply honesty or truthfulness but rather a successful performance as authentic (Kreiss et al. 2018; Montgomery 2017; Rosenblum et al. 2020; Seifert 2012; Shane 2018; Sheinheit and Bogard 2016; Stiers et al. 2021). A bouquet of contributions shows that authenticity is expressed through, for example, text and language (Rosenblum et al. 2020), gaffes (Sheinheit and Bogard 2016), tweets (Enli 2014; Shane 2018), and visual images (Grabe and Bucy 2011). The conceptual link between authenticity and performance is paradoxical (Enli 2014; Pillow et al. 2018) and might seem contradictory. While some scholars associate "performance" with manipulative and persuasive actions and the opposite of authentic political messages (Louden and McCauliff 2004), others suggest that candidates need skills and a thoughtful political message to perform authentically (Alexander 2010). In populism, both perspectives are relevant because authentic performance is often a combination of personality and strategic communication, as I will further explore in the case study.

Populism, the Democratic Paradox, and Performed "Truth"

Populism is a widely used but elusive and vaguely defined term. Although the term has precise meanings in specific contexts, an overarching general theory or universal definition is still missing (Canovan 1999; Taggart 2004). Yet, a common feature of populists across different social and economic contexts is a political appeal to the people and a claim to legitimacy based on the democratic ideology of popular sovereignty and majority rule (Canovan 2002: 25). It is commonly agreed that "populism is of the people and not of the system" (Taggart 1996: 32). Populists claim legitimacy because they speak for the people, and populists appeal in ways that are "democratic" in that they are accessible and aimed at "ordinary people." Populism has been characterized as a "thin" ideology because it lacks political fundament beyond supporting the "pure" people against the "corrupt" elite and because it might support both right-wing and left-wing politics (Engesser et al. 2017; Mudde 2004; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013). Yet, it is also argued that populism is an ideology of democracy beyond the right/left dichotomy, meaning that it pinpoints the paradoxes of representative politics that "democratic politics does not and cannot make sense to most of the people it aims to empower" (Canovan 2002: 25), and even act as a "bellwether for the latter's health" (Taggart 2004: 63). In turn, this indicates that populism might best be understood as performance rather than classic political ideology.

Although some scholars argue that the importance of the *performative* dimension of populism has been overlooked (Bucy et al. 2020; de Vreese et al. 2018), a growing body of studies discusses the populist style and rhetoric as characteristics of the movements and their politicians. Mazzoleni et al. (2003) claimed that a highly emotional tabloid language recognizes the populist style, and according to Canovan (1999: 4), populism capitalizes on widespread distrust in politicians' evasiveness and bureaucratic jargon by using a simple and direct style. Moffitt (2016) suggested a model in which the populist leader is defined as the "performer," the people as the "audience," and the media as a "stage" on which the populist enacts the drama. Moreover, Ungureanu and Popartan (2020) argued that populists are charismatic truth-tellers, claiming to express "the real will of the people," playing the "supreme unmasker." Yet, according to Müller (2022: 618), a premise for the populist "truth-teller" is to come across as authentic and offer a more "real" version of the truth than mainstream politicians. This claim to access a hidden truth is also a democratic challenge as it might involve conspiracy theories.

To be trusted as the voice of a hidden and "real" truth, populist politicians need to come across as more authentic than their opponents. Authenticity is thus often mentioned as a signifier of populists' trustworthiness because it enables an efficient embodiment of the anti-elitist perspective and, therefore, explicit or implicit criticism of mainstream politicians for lack of authenticity (Engesser et al. 2017). An image as authentic can position populist politicians as the "real" representatives of the people; "this allows candidates to pursue a populist narrative more aggressively, labeling candidates and even institutions to be fake or counter the interests of the people" (Stiers et al. 2021: 1185). As a consequence, Stiers et al. (2021) claimed that it is "clearly

advantageous for a populist leader to be perceived as authentic," and Fieschi suggested that authenticity is "the secret element" of populism by turning a "thin-centered ideology into a powerful one" (2021: 715).

The Case Study of Donald Trump

The primary research strategy is a systematic analysis of political authenticity by unpacking the seven performative strategies outlined in the framework for theorizing mediated authenticity: consistency, spontaneity, immediacy, ordinariness, confessions, ambivalence, and imperfection (Enli 2014: 136–7). The following parts will critically discuss each of these strategies, with emphasis on potential advantages and disadvantages for populist politicians. Moreover, examples of Donald Trump's media performance will be drawn from a relatively limited but illustrative case study. The rationale for selecting Trump is the combined role as a populist politician and a media persona promoting "realness" and authenticity across various platforms, such as the Twitter handle @realDonadTrump and the social media platform *Truth Social*. The case study is based on secondary literature and empirical material collected by online searches for news coverage of Trump's media performances with relevance for the seven strategies in the period 2016–2023.

Consistency. *Consistency* is linked to the core notion of authenticity as being true to the "inner self" (Taylor 1991). The importance of consistency for a candidate's image as authentic has deep historical roots, and it has since the early nineteenth century been an established insight in American election campaigns that the voters prefer candidates who seem "unchanged by money, power, education, or status" (Seifert 2012: 18). The image of authenticity is created by performing consistently in visual and verbal style, as well as political messages remaining unchanged over time and despite criticism or lack of popularity (Friedman and Kampf 2020; Gaden and Dumitrica 2015; Jones 2016; Salisbury and Pooley 2017; Sheinheit and Bogard 2016; Theye and Melling 2018). A key argument in this strand of research is that performed consistency increases the candidate's image as authentic and thus also trustworthy (Gaden and Dumitrica 2015; Gilpin et al. 2010; Hahl et al. 2018; Parry-Giles 2014; Pillow et al. 2018; Sheinheit and Bogard 2016; Theye and Melling 2018). Consistency in performances over time and across cultural contexts indicates that the politician has integrity and is unaffected by external pressure.

Despite the image as inconsistent and wobbly, Donald Trump is also recognized as a politician who performs with a high degree of consistency in style and message; close readings of his tweets, speeches, and media interviews show that Trump's rhetoric is recognizable because of his frequent use of identical phrases and words (Sclafani 2018). Frequent repetition of signature phrases might contribute to an image of the candidate as consistent, and in turn, communicate authenticity. In some cases, particularly involving mainstream politicians, repetition of slogans and "staying on message" might be evaluated as inauthentic because it reflects on the campaign strategists and reveals that the candidate is performing in line with a script. A typical flipside of

consistency is when candidates are accused of "political parroting" (Parry-Giles 2014). Yet, in the context of populism, the predictable style broadly supports and underscores the message, which is also arguably "thin," repetitive, and predictable.

Spontaneity. *Spontaneity* gives an impression of candidates who, unable to control their emotions and reactions, almost unwillingly show a glimpse of their "true self" (Shane 2018). Spontaneity is a signifier of authenticity in that it communicates humanity, and the performance seems raw and unscripted, as if the candidate is performing with no filter (Fordahl 2018; Seifert 2012).

Living by one's true inner self rather than adjusting to external social norms is a core ideal in philosophical existentialism. The modern model of authenticity is also related to being true to oneself but with a stronger emphasis on an ideology of the autonomous self, who, independent of social relations and traditions, is encouraged to seek self-fulfillment and self-realization.

The advantages of spontaneous performances of politicians, particularly populist candidates, have been pinpointed in a body of studies of media and politics (Ernst et al. 2019; Lacatus and Meibauer 2022; Liebes 2001; Theye and Melling 2018). Although it may seem contradictory that both consistency and spontaneity are markers of mediated authenticity, they work well together. Donald Trump is known for being spontaneous, thus confirming his performative persona characterized precicely by spontaneity. During his first election campaign, Trump performed with an unusually high degree of spontaneity and seemingly lack of control across different arenas and media platforms, including rallies, interviews, and tweets. Moreover, he criticized candidates for using speechwriters and teleprompters; Trump claimed that voters would never know the candidates' real personalities if they read from a screen.[1]

Accordingly, spontaneous performances might be efficient signifiers of authenticity, particularly for populist politicians with an overall style and a message based on anti-elitism. For a mainstream politician, there is far more risk involved. It would, for example, backfire to perform with impoliteness, rudeness, or signs of aggression, as it would break the norm of formal politics and democratic behavior. However, populist candidates like Donald Trump might benefit from performing with a lack of control (Nussban 2016), rage, and rhetorics of resentment (Kelly 2020; Ott and Dickinson 2019) as it provides efficient and poignant markers of authenticity.

Immediacy. *Immediacy* in political communication creates a sense of realness when the politicians connect with the voters in a shared experience of "here and now." Drawing on insights from media history and broadcast theory, a starting point for understanding the role of immediacy in political communication is live broadcasting or "liveness," which efficiently creates a sense of togetherness and connection with audiences. In a shared "now," the performer and the audience construct meaning and authenticity together (Scannel 1996). This "liveness" is connected to a sense of suspension because no one seems to know the outcome of, for example, a quiz show, intensifying the suspension and the shared experience (Enli 2014). Moreover, the importance of togetherness also has an element of symbolic intimacy described in

television studies as "intimacy at a distance" (Horton and Wohl 1956), meaning that the viewers feel that they know media personas on the screen, almost as if they were their friends. Meyrowitz (1986) pinpointed that TV brought politicians close to people's inspection, and allowed them to observe the most intimate details, undermining traditional political leadership based on distanced authority.

Political communication research has documented a mutually enforcing relationship between social media and populism because of the direct and immediate communicative style (Bødker and Anderson 2019; Enli 2017; Gerbaudo 2017). Immediacy is partly related to the affordances of media technologies. The emergence of social media platforms has provided a new arena for politicians to perform immediacy and communicate with the public in real-time. Social media has essentially become an orchestrator of intimate relations between politicians and voters: "Self-personalization on social media activates these psychological mechanisms so that the public feels they have insight into or access to the candidate's affective states" (McGregor 2018). Immediacy is also a key to understanding the populist appeal, according to Bødker and Anderson (2019), who links populism to the "politics of impatience," and the myth that "problems are immediately solved by real people rather than through bureaucratic structures" (p. 5957). Moreover, the authors suggest "populist time" to describe "a performance that attempts to disrupt or circumvent the delays build into liberal democracy" (p. 5961).

The symbiosis between Twitter and Trump has been demonstrated in several studies, pinpointing how he built a base of followers and used it to communicate in real time to create a sense of immediacy through populist rhetoric (Enli 2017; Ott 2017). The Twitter account @realDonaldTrump was suspended from Twitter after thousands of protesters stormed the Capitol building in Washington, DC, on January 6, 2021, in an attempt to contest the results of the 2020 U.S. presidential election. Twitter argued that they took unprecedented steps to ban Trump after he had voiced support for the protesters, being a "risk of further incitement of violence" (Twitter/X, 2021). This incident demonstrates the power, but also the high risk, of immediacy and "populist time" to connect with the public and come across as an authentic "voice of the people." Moreover, when the suspension was lifted in November 2022, it was legitimized by a poll initiated by the, at the time, CEO and owner Elan Musk, who announced the result by tweeting: "The people have spoken. Trump will be reinstated. Vox Populi. Vox Dei." This populist message celebrated the people's sovereignty and immediacy in decision-making and political power.

Confessions. According to Foucault (1978), we live in a "confessional culture," which celebrates feelings and intimate revelations, and phenomena such as reality TV can undoubtedly be taken as popular expressions of this culture (Aslama and Patti 2006). The theory of mediated authenticity defines *confessions* as the "disclosure of personal secrets and details about oneself that seems plausible because they are recognizable for the audience and resonates with their personal experience" (Enli 2014: 137). Confessions are influential because they establish trust and build emotional alliances, and often used to achieve sympathy for politicians involved in media scandals (Thompson 2000).

As we know from framing theory, storytelling might be among the most efficient ways to communicate a political message and an accessible perspective on complex matters (Black 2013; Bucy et al. 2020). Shamir and Eilam (2005) argued that storytelling can provide leaders with a meaning system from which they can perform as authentic and that leaders are seen as authentic to the extent that they act and justify their actions based on the meaning system provided by their life stories. The use of confessions to come across as authentic often takes the form of a self-presentation narrative or storytelling to craft an image by referring to their own family background and life story, which links the candidate to the political agenda. A familiar genre in political storytelling is autobiography, which allows the author an autonomous capacity to define narratives, perspectives, and interpretations (Warner 2012). In line with the anti-elitist ideal of populism, political autobiography often tells a story of struggle and hardship, with a strong "rags-to-riches"-moral, which means a portray of the politician as a protagonist who started without resources but worked hard and became a respected politician (Hanska 2012: 33).

Donald Trump's status as a celebrity was partly based on the culture of confession, both in the context of reality TV as the host of The *Apprentice* and the author of *The Art of the Deal* (1987). In these contexts of mediated authenticty, Trump established an image of a successful businessman, which became a vital force in his election campaign. Trump has also confessed inappropriate behavior publicly and acting seemingly unafraid of being seen as politically incorrect.[2] The confessions of Trump must be seen in the context of populist narratives based on the performance of a charismatic "truth-teller" (Nordensvard and Ketola 2022). Confessions is a high risk strategy, because these performances will backfire if they come in conflict with the skills and qualifications normally expected of a politician. Yet, populist politicians are likely to have a greater leeway than mainstream politicians regarding the relations to truth and the degree to which confessions of inappropriate behavior are accepted.

Ordinariness. *Ordinariness* is among the most well-established and widespread strategies for authenticity in political communication (Fuller et al. 2018; Gruber 2019; Wood et al. 2016). In representative democracies, ordinariness is a symbolic manifestation of the ideal that politicians should represent the people. Historically, what we might call the "ordinariness-turn" in American politics dates at least back to the 1969 campaign when Jimmy Carter was praised for not changing his accent or casual style but carrying his bags himself and being photographed while working on his farm (Seifert 2012: 35–47).

In current political communication, performance as ordinary is typically found in visual representations of politicians doing everyday activities such as eating, drinking, commuting, doing or watching sports, and other mundane activities. There are national, regional, and socio-cultural differences between the chosen activities and how well they resonated with the people. The main aim is to establish an image as ordinary, meaning "just like me" or "to mirror the people" (Mendonça and Caetano 2021).

As Roland Barthes (1957; 1961) noted, food is a "system of communication" and one of the most emblematic areas of cultural meta-language symbolizing ordinariness and patriotism. In U.S. election campaigns, food is used to connect with Americanness,

such as when Donald Trump tells reporters that he serves McDonalds' hamburgers in official meetings.[3] The Trump-campaign published an image of their candidate eating McDonalds' together with a detailed report of his standard order at the fast-food chain: "Two Big Macs, two Filet-O-Fish sandwiches, and a chocolate shake."[4]

However, strategic ordinariness might also backfire, and the press will often question the authenticity if the politicians fail to come across as trustworthy, such as when Trump, as well as other politicians, have been eating pizza with a fork and knife in public.[5] Politicians might come across as "elites" rather than the "people" if they fail to eat or behave like ordinary people, even if they try to blend in. Hence, a paradox of performed ordinariness is that political leaders are seldom ordinary but extraordinary and operate in privileged positions of power and resources. This parallels populism's paradoxical embrace of ordinariness, and there is for examle very little ordinary about Donald Trump, which might be explained by how; it "requires the most extraordinary individuals to lead the most ordinary people" (Taggart 2000: 1). Populist voters may not want to be ruled by "the man in the street" in sociodemographic terms, yet, they want to be understood by their leaders (Mudde 2004). This extraordinary ordinariness demonstrates the performative aspect of both populism and authenticity and underscores their symbiosis.

Ambivalence. *Ambivalence* is considered a marker of authenticity because ambivalent performance and hesitant revelation of the "truth" tend to come across as more trustworthy than unambiguous performance without hesitations (Enli 2014: 137). In political communication, ambivalence is mainly seen in the version of populist politicians, as they often question the authority of politicians and elites and thus place themselves as both an actor (politician) and an opponent (anti-politician).

Skepticism against the power elite is a core element of populism. Accordingly, an ambivalence towards political power and democratic societies is connected with populism, given that both are manifestations of public discontent with the power elite and opposition to the established. A common criticism is power concentration and claims that certain elites or cities have too much power compared to the rest of the population, expressed by labels such as the "Beltway" for Washington DC and the "Westminster Bubble" for Parliament in London.[6]

In a populist culture of distrust in established political institutions, authenticity is often performed as the antithesis of the political establishment. A crown example is Donald Trump, who was a political outsider because he lacked political experience when running for president in 2016. His inexperience could have been a drawback in the election campaign. Still, Trump turned his rawness into a performative asset, denying being a politician during his campaign: "I am a businessman. Not a politician" and "I am not a politician. Thank goodness!." However, this is paradoxical and comes across as a strategic ambivalence because it downplays his position in the economic establishment and power relations.

According to Mudde (2004), populist leaders are not necessarily true outsiders, as they often were connected to elites when they entered politics but are neither considered true insiders, because of their critical approach. Accordingly, ambivalence in the

role of a politician is more convenient for populists than mainstream politicians, given that populism is based on skepticism against authorities. Performing ambivalent has the advantage of promising a new and untarnished agenda without the track record of established politicians. To keep this rhetorical position when they serve as elected politicians, the populists must serve as the "people's uniquely authentic representatives" (Mudde 2022: 622).

Imperfection. *Imperfection* in the forms of mistakes, errors, and blemishes during a performance is a classic way to humanize political messages, making the political leader seem more relatable. As argued in Wood et al. (2016: 586), "authentic politicians are constructed as inevitably flawed individuals, which gives them an 'authentic' quality, contrasted with distant and aloof politicians." Moreover, in a study of three political gaffes, Sheinheit and Bogard (2016: 990) demonstrated that "constructing the gaffe as the authentic embodiment of a candidate" has certain strategic advantages. The idea is that imperfections might be an advantage, enhancing the candidate's image as authentic by showing not only the flawless side but also the unpolished, raw version, thus exposing a complete version of "the true self."

In particular, celebrity journalism prefers personalities who perform as successful and influential, but also publicly share "suffering, dysfunctional and personal flaw, once concealed but now revealed to the public" (Nunn and Biressi 2010: 53). While it is difficult to argue that mistakes are made deliberately to construct an image as authentic, it is not unthinkable that politicians choose to expose imperfections rather than hide them to build alliances with the voters. Typically, former president Donald Trump was infamous for notoriously imperfect performances, for example his tweets were recognized by spelling mistakes and indexical errors (Enli 2014; Shane 2018). In a world of media-trained politicians, this rhetoric of mistakes, naivety, and non-intentionality is a currency; at the same time, Trump's use of indexes may seem idiosyncratic, but likely, the index's rhetorical power is at play in other political contexts (Shane 2018: 11). The appeal of imperfect performances by public figures is paradoxical, as it might seem like voters expect ''authenticity in their politicians and simultaneously expect flawless performances from them" (Sheinheit and Bogard 2016: 989).

However, there are high risks in performing imperfections and a thin line between charming mistakes and political scandals. Even though there are examples of leading politicians who lost their standing and credibility after imperfect or scandalous performances, Donald Trump has been strikingly immune to mistakes, scandals and even trials and fraud. An explanation might be the first of the seven strategies, namely consistency; Trump is known for breaking the rules and being imperfect, and the image will thus not be damaged, but rather strenghtened, as a result of numerous mistakes.

To a degree, populism is, in general, more resistant to imperfections than mainstream politics because the unpolished style corresponds with the anti-elitism of populism (Engesser et al. 2017; Müller 2016; Stiers et al. 2021), as well as the populist ideology of democracy as "government by the sovereign people, not as government by politicians, bureaucrats, and judges" (Canovan 2002: 33).

Summarizing the Inter-Relation Between the Seven Strategies

In sum, these seven strategies make up a theoretical framework for analyzing authenticity in political performances, and the case of Donald Trump has shown their relevance for analyzing populist politicians. Even though the multi-dimensional framework for unpacking authenticity as performance is comprehensive, the seven strategies also relate to each other in specific ways. The most important of the strategies is *consistency* because it lays a fundament for the other strategies and creates a coherent, robust image, which in turn work as a protection against critique. The second crucial strategy is *ordinariness* because it is easily performed in mediated contexts and thus is also widely used among politicians and generally approved by the press and the voters. A third core strategy, with general appeal and rhetoric strength, particularly in social media, is *immediacy* because it creates a basis for a common here and now and a shared "truth." While these three strategies constitute the basic fundament, the four remaining might be described as a top layer, which might strengthen the effect of a particular message. *Spontaneity* amplifies performed immediacy and increases the message's sense of urgency and investment. *Confessions* will typically be used strategically to respond to a political scandal but can also be framed as storytelling in the context of an election campaign. *Ambivalence* belongs to the more advanced elements in the framework and is demanding and risky yet rewarding as an authenticity marker. Likewise, *imperfection* is related to ordinariness because mistakes are human, but more on the risky side and demand a robust image and a layer of consistency to come across as successful performances.

Conclusion

This study is based on a theoretical discussion of seven performative strategies and authenticity markers identified in previous research, supplemented by a case study of Donald Trump's media performance. The main aim is to explore to what degree and how performed authenticity strengthens the populist message and the potential consequences of the nexus between populism and authenticity for representative democracies.

Despite limited empirical material in scale and scope, the findings contribute to the existing literature in the fields of populism research, authenticity theory, as well as performance studies in political communication. First, the article offers insight into how performed authenticity and populism work in tandem. While previous research has claimed authenticity is essential for populism, even characterized as the "secret element" (Fieschi 2019; see also Iszatt-White et al. 2018; Montgomery 2017; Sorensen 2018), this study pinpoints seven specific performative strategies, and demonstrates how they strengthen the populist message. The seven performative strategies are essential in political communication across different political ideologies and are not restricted to populist politicians. However, there are significant degrees of risk involved in performed authenticity, and each strategy has a flipside that might backfire

and harm the candidate. The most high-risk strategies are spontaneity, confessions, and imperfection because they require balancing a thin line between authority as a serious politician on the one hand and an authentic representative of the people on the other hand. A key argument in this article is that populist politicians have greater leeway for such risks and pitfalls because of their anti-elitism and "ideology of democracy," which makes them less vulnerable to criticism from the establishment.

A second contribution to research is related to the populist claim to have a particular relation to the truth and how this might influence the democratic process (Müller 2022). As demonstrated, mediated authenticity might enable populists to *legitimize misinformation and conspiracy theories* because the rhetoric claims to tell a different "truth" hidden by mainstream media and politicians. Moreover, a problematic consequence of strategic authenticity is that performances might *legitimize impoliteness and exclusivism* because even rudeness can be framed as acceptable in the name of authenticity. In turn, a dangerous effect of the mixture of populism and the current ideal of the authentic, autonomous self is that it could validate also extreme expressions of social exclusivism, such as nationalism, sexism, and racism (Lieberman and Kirk 2004).

The theory of mediated authenticity constitute a methodological framework for analyzing performed authenticity in political communication. Highly relevant avenues for future work include comparative analysis of populist politicians operating in different political systems, with regards to how mediated authenticity strenghtens the populist message in various cultural contexts. In addition, a vital avenue would be a systematic analysis of how performed authenticity on various social media platforms works to promote populism but also to legitimize hate speech, conspiracy theories and post-truth-politics in contemporary representative democracies.

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Notes

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