

Researchers point to populism's appeal to victimhood and resentment

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A new study from the Department of Politics and International Studies at the University of Warwick combines research on populist rhetoric, emotions and security in order to examine how particular groups of voters are mobilized.

The article argues that populists like Donald Trump, Marine Le Pen, or some Brexit campaigners, construct fantasies of past national greatness and belonging to instill audiences with a sense of pride and nostalgia.

At the same time, these political entrepreneurs use rhetoric that targets feelings of resentment and anger, representing themselves and their

audiences as victims of the establishment.

Populists promote an emotive politics of outrage which manipulates public sentiments for political gain and underwrites a radical departure from established political norms.

In the article *Populism and the Affective Politics of Humiliation Narrative*, published in *Global Studies Quarterly* (2021), authors Dr. Alexandra Homolar and Dr. Georg Löffmann look at the use of populist humiliation narratives and voter mobilization in the United Kingdom, France, and the U.S..

They find that populist appeals to victimhood are used to assign blame with elites in politics, businesses, and media for a sense of loss and marginalization, for national decline from past imagined glories, and to foster political conflict.

"Stories shape our feelings toward others and ourselves, toward what is right and wrong, and populist security narratives grip voters through their deep-seated emotional appeal" explains Dr. Homolar.

Populist framing techniques identified in the paper include:

- **Regaining former glories:** Marine le Pen and Donald Trump both explicitly pledged to make their countries "great again." The researchers see echoes of a similar appeal in the Brexit referendum campaign.
- **The "chosen trauma":** populists weight a historic or nostalgic event with disproportionate emotion and meaning in order to exploit it. In the U.S., the Civil War and the Confederacy have become a [focal point](#) for feelings of loss and suffering among certain groups, demonstrated clearly in the Charlottesville protests.

- Taking back control: blame for a country's presumed decline is placed at the feet of "nefarious elites" from whom the populist promises to take back control on behalf of the people. In the UK, a notorious headline during the Brexit campaign characterized three of Britain's High Court judges as "enemies of the people."

The article also considers the recent insurrection at the Capitol in Washington DC. The researchers conclude that the insurrection was the result of President Donald Trump inciting his followers to riot by convincing them that they had been humiliated by a conspiracy of 'fake news' media and the political establishment, urging them to retaliate.

Commenting on the study, Dr. Löffmann said: "The main conclusion from our research is that while emotions shape politics, politics also shapes and channels emotions.

"Populists use fantasies of humiliation to mobilize their voters, appealing to emotions of anger and resentment in society to overturn the political status quo."

More information: Alexandra Homolar et al. Populism and the Affective Politics of Humiliation Narratives, *Global Studies Quarterly* (2021). [DOI: 10.1093/isagsq/ksab002](https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksab002)

Provided by University of Warwick

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