Taking Account of the Visual Politics of Populism

Benjamin Moffitt, Australian Catholic University

Populism is arguably the defining political phenomenon of the first two decades of the twenty-first century, and it also is perhaps the defining academic publishing phenomenon in political science of the same period. An enormous amount of research has been produced on the topic in recent years, but strangely, one important aspect of populism has remained largely ignored: the visual and aesthetic aspects of populism. This is striking, not only as it is widely acknowledged we are living in a world characterized by a "pictorial turn"[1] where images shape our political reality, but also because some of the most salient cases of populism in recent years have used the visual as a core aspect of their appeal: from Trump's red "Make America Great Again" caps to UKIP's incendiary anti-migrant billboards to Hugo Chávez's iconic red beret. Given this context, I make the case for studying the visual politics of populism. I first articulate why images matter in populism, then delineate the benefits of taking into account the visual from the perspectives of the analytical dimensions of populism discussed in this symposium, and outline potential methodological approaches for tackling the visual in future work on populism.

Why Should We Care About the Visual Politics of Populism?

A first question: why should we care about the visual politics of populism? A broad answer is that visuals matter to politics in general, from political campaigning, image management, and social movements, to digital politics, protests, and acts of

I wish to thank the editors of this symposium, Paula Diehl and Till Weber, as well as the anonymous reviewer, for their constructive and generous comments, which helped improve this article greatly. This research was supported by the Australian Government through the Australian Research Council's Discovery Early Career Researcher Award funding scheme (project DE190101127).

1. W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

Published online June 2, 2022.

Polity, volume 54, number 3, July 2022.
 https://doi.org/10.1086/719829

resistance. This is arguably only intensifying, given that media technologies now used around the world tend to privilege the image above other forms of communication. A burgeoning literature on visual politics has made this clear in recent years, breaking new ground in theorizing the vital role of images in how we make sense of politics today. This literature is most strongly developed in the field of international relations, where innovative work on the role of images in international security—such as in the cases of Abu Ghraib and the Muhammad cartoon crisis in Denmark[2]—and on the relationship between images, emotions, and world politics has shown that images have real-world ramifications for questions of political identity, security and policy-making, and thus are not "extraneous" to political reality, but rather deserve a central place in our analysis of contemporary politics.[3]

What about when it comes to populism? While Reinemann et al. correctly note that "populism is mostly reflected in the oral, written, and visual communication of individual politicians, parties [and] social movements,"[4] it is generally only the first two of these forms of communication that receive serious analytical attention. In the study of populism, visuals tend to be either ignored or treated, at best, as an addendum to more familiar material such as speeches, party platforms, party publications, media releases, and the like. Yet this seems to miss an important part of populism's appeal: underlying a great deal of the work on populism's affective pull,[5] its harnessing of televisual and digital media,[6] and even populist politicians' distinctive mannerisms,[7] there is a clear (even if not explicitly noted) sense that the visual plays a very important role in populism. As such, it is vital to consider the questions of if, how, and why this might be the case.

---

2. Lene Hansen, "Theorizing the image for Security Studies: Visual securitization and the Muhammad Cartoon Crisis," *European Journal of International Relations* 17 (2007): 51–74; and Lene Hansen, "How images make world politics: International icons and the case of Abu Ghraib," *Review of International Studies* 41 (2015): 263–88.

3. Roland Bleiker et. al, "The Visual Dehumanisation of Refugees," *Australian Journal of Political Science* 48 (2013): 398–416.

4. Carsten Reinemann et. al, "Populist Political Communication: Toward a Model of Its Causes, Forms, and Effects," in *Populist Political Communication in Europe*, ed. Toril Aalberg et. al (New York: Routledge, 2017), 13.

5. Emmy Eklundh, "Mad Marx? Rethinking Emotions, Euroscepticism and Nationalism in the Populist Left," *Journal of Contemporary European Research* 17 (2021), 207–23.

6. Luca Manucci, "Populism and the Media", in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, ed. Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser et. al (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017): 467–88.

7. Paula Diehl, "The Body in Populism," in *Political Populism: A Handbook*, eds. Reinhard C. Heinisch, Christina Holtz-Bacha and Oscar Mazzoleni (Baden-Baden, DE: Nomos, 2017): 361–72.

The Visual Politics of Populism: Communicative, Ideational, or Strategic?

Where does a focus on the visual politics of populism fit with the different conceptual dimensions outlined in this symposium? It is obviously most coherent with the communicative dimension: the visual aspects of populism are, by nature, a specific mode of communication, given that they rely not only on a populist actor producing and/or being depicted in images, but also on audiences receiving and interpreting these images. As a result, it is little surprise that the extant literature that has paid attention to populism's visual characteristics has tended to come from those who see the phenomenon as a mode of political communication, a political discourse, or a political style. Indeed, those who focus specifically on populist communication have already done significant work in this area, perhaps due to communication studies' adroitness and familiarity with visual communication as compared to the somewhat staider realm of political science, which still very much privileges language.

Those who view populism as a political style have also examined the role of images. This is because such scholars see populism as "more than" words, and focus on the performative repertoire that populists put forward across a range of mediums, whether that be written texts, speeches, bodily performances, fashion, or audio-visual material.[8] Mbete, for example, has written about how the distinctive fashion choices of the Economic Freedom Fighters in South Africa disrupt political norms,[9] while Ostiguy has made clear the importance of the visual in the performance of "the low" that he argues defines populism.[10] There has also been important work on populist visuals from those who see populism as a discourse. Wodak, for instance, has written numerous texts that incorporate images into her multi-modal analyses of populism.[11]

However, a focus on the visuals of populism can also be approached with an ideational lens, analyzing images circulated by populists as expressions of the populist

8. Benjamin Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016).

9. Sithembile Mbete, "Out With the Old, In With the New?: The ANC and EFF's Battle to Represent the South African 'People'," in *Populism in Global Perspective: A Performative and Discursive Approach*, eds. Pierre Ostiguy, Francisco Panizza and Benjamin Moffitt (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2020): 240–254.

10. Pierre Ostiguy, "Populism: A Socio-Cultural Approach," in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, ed. Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser et. al (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017): 73–97.

11. Ruth Wodak. *The Politics of Fear: What Right-Wing Populist Discourses Mean* (London: SAGE, 2015).

worldview. While images obviously require audiences to hold a pre-existing ideological roadmap that they use to interpret images, and an image may not be as ideologically detailed as a traditional text of ideational analysis (such as a party manifesto), images can nonetheless play an important role in expressing what is central to populist ideology. For example, a populist may be vague or use weasel-words in expressing who they believe "their people" to be—often as a way of sidestepping claims of outright nativism in the case of radical right populism—but an image from their advertisements or campaign material may make the demographic character of their perceived "people" clear in an instant. As the cliché goes, a picture is worth a thousand words, and in expressing the core components of the populist ideology, this may very well be the case for populist images. Indeed, approaching populism from this perspective can help us to better understand the interplay between the communicative and ideological dimensions of the phenomenon.

At a stretch, one could even examine the visual politics of populism through the lens of the strategic or mobilizational dimension of populism, considering how images or visual symbols serve to express the nature of populist organization.[12] We might consider, for example, how images or symbols such as the famous *ojos de Chávez*—a stylized symbol of Hugo Chávez's eyes in silhouette seen on billboards, flags, and murals across Venezuela—express the claim that "the people" is embodied in the populist leader. We might ask how a visual depiction of "unorganized" masses at a "V-Day" rally with Beppe Grillo reinforces the notion of unmediated connection between populist leaders and followers, and more so, how this might align (or not) with the actual reality of the populist organization, which may be far more top-down, bureaucratic, and professional than such images depict. The tension between image and reality here is ripe for analysis.

In saying this, it is important to clarify two important points. First, I am not claiming that the visual politics of populism are an inherent or definitional part of populism *tout court*; I am not seeking to add a new definition of populism to the literature. Rather, I am aiming to draw attention to an important mode of communication used by populist actors across the globe that has not received its due attention. Second, I am also not claiming that there is *a* single populist visual language that unites all populists. However, I do expect that there are common visual *themes* that arise across populist cases that correlate to the core subjects of populism: "the people" and "the elite." For example, I would expect that we would see, across left and right populisms, visual representations of "the people" that stress their size:

12. See Giorgia Bulli, "Ethnographic Methods in Populism Research: Towards a Multidimensional Approach," *Polity* 54 (2022): 538–46.

images of mass rallies, speeches, gatherings, and large crowds would not only signal a populist's "direct" connection to "the people," but also provide visual evidence of "the people's" devotion and how widespread the support is for a populist leader. Moreover, such images provide a sense of democratic legitimacy for a populist leader, giving a sense of grassroots and bottom-up support, highlighting that this is not elite politics as usual (tracking how these images are visually different to democratic protests on one hand, and fascist rallies on the other, would be of great interest). We might also expect to see the use of visual symbols that stress populist leaders' "regular" nature and their connection to the "real" people,[13] whether Nigel Farage nursing a pint of beer and a cigarette, showing he is "one of us," or Evo Morales's *chompa* (a sweater made of alpaca wool), demonstrating his humble roots. As for who those populists are opposed to, we can expect stereotyped visual tropes of "the elite": images of decadence and greed characterizing the business elite, images of effeteness and out-of-touchness depicting the cultural elite, and images of corruption depicting the political elite. Finally, in the case of the populist right, we can expect to see anti-Islamic, anti-Semitic, or anti-immigrant imagery in their depictions of "dangerous Others."

How Do You Study the Visual Politics of Populism?

If one accepts that the visual politics of populism are worthy of attention, then the difficult question that follows is: how do we study them? On a broader level, it is important to acknowledge that "there is no one method, no matter how thorough or systematic, that can provide us with authentic insights into what images are or how they function."[14] This, however, is not a failure of methodological insight—the same can be said of language, where there is no one method that provides insight into the phenomenon. Instead, there are many potential ways to analyze the visual politics of populism. To guide us, Bleiker,[15] drawing on Rose,[16] proposes that we break down the analysis of images into three steps: (1) the production of images, (2) the content of images, and (3) the reception or impact of images. Each of these steps requires a different method.

---

13. See Carlos de la Torre, "The Complex Constructions of the People and the Leader in Populism," *Polity* 54 (2022): 529–37.

14. Roland Bleiker, "Pluralist Methods for Visual Global Politics." *Millennium* 43 (2015): 877.

15. Ibid.

16. Gillian, Rose, *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials*. 4th ed. (London: SAGE, 2016).

The first step, production, requires inquiry into the framing and choosing of images, and involves asking questions regarding the *kinds* of visual material populists circulate: *Who* made the image? *How* was the image composed, framed, or captured? *What* is the official purpose of the image? *Why* do some images gain more circulation than others? In some ways, this represents a technical, behind-the-scenes aspect of image production. For populists, this would involve potentially speaking to those who have worked on their campaigns to produce visual material, interviewing photographers, photojournalists, and editors to understand the decisions behind what they cover when it comes to populists, and asking questions regarding the use of visual platforms (such as Instagram) versus other media platforms when it comes to populism versus other politicians. For example, Muñoz and Towner found in their research that Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders, populists from either side of the political spectrum, were amongst the highest frequency users of Instagram of all candidates in the crowded 2016 US election primaries[17]—why is that, as compared to "mainstream" politicians' use of the platform?

The second step, content, requires more traditional discourse, semiotic, and content analysis. It involves asking questions about *who* is represented in the image, *how* they are represented, the demographic (age, gender, race, etc.) dimensions of the representation, the *genre* of the image, and the visual *themes* that emerge. This aligns very strongly with much of the existing research on populism, and would simply extend to asking these questions of visual material rather than written material. For example, how are "the people" represented in a populist actors' campaign promotional material? Who are "the elite" that populists target in their visual advertisements, and how are they depicted? What kind of visual narratives or semiotic patterns emerge? How is the populist leader depicted in media coverage? These kinds of questions can lend themselves to detailed analysis of a small number of images,[18] or, alternatively, can extend to quantitative approaches across a larger corpus of material.[19]

The third step, reception, relies on interviews, surveys, and observations, and involves asking questions about *who* the intended audience of the image is and

17. Caroline Lego Muñoz and Terri L Towner, "The Image Is the Message: Instagram Marketing and the 2016 Presidential Primary Season," *Journal of Political Marketing* 16 (2017): 290–318.

18. Katja Freistein and Frank Gadinger, "Populist Stories of Honest Men and Proud Mothers: A Visual Narrative Analysis," *Review of International Studies* 46 (2020): 217–36.

19. Jenni Hokka and Matti Nelimarkka, "Affective Economy of National-Populist Images: Investigating National and Transnational Online Networks through Visual Big Data," *New Media & Society* 22 (2020): 770–92.

how it has been circulated, interpreted, and ascribed meaning. As Bleiker puts it, this is all about "how audiences receive images, or as I prefer to put it: the actual impact of images."[20] This could involve, for example, interviewing followers of populist leaders about how they interpret or are motivated by certain images from a populists' campaign. Equally, we could ask partisans who are anti-populist how they interpret the same images to see how people assign meaning differently to such visual material. Another potential avenue here is the use of survey experiments, where groups are given different populist visual materials that have been artificially manipulated to see what potential effects or impacts images have on populist attitudes.[21]

The breadth of visual material that is freely available and open to research on the visual politics of populism is overwhelming: campaign posters, party and candidate websites, image-based social media such as Instagram, television ads, social media advertisements, memes, and protest signs are just the tip of the iceberg. Moreover, visuals are not only produced from the top down—from the populist leader or party, or traditional media outlets—but also from the bottom up—from populist followers, movements, and supporter groups. The interrelation between these two is also of great interest. One example of this is Donald Trump reposting supporter-generated memes on his (now defunct) Twitter account, including the infamous GIF of him at a WWE wrestling match attacking a man with a CNN symbol superimposed over his head. In many ways, the biggest question one needs to ask when taking on the visual politics of populism is: what aspect, and what actor, do I want to focus on?

Conclusion

Despite the explosion of literature on populism in recent years, there is still much to learn about the phenomenon. In this contribution, I have sought to make the case that one promising and under-researched avenue is the visual politics of populism. Making this case does not mean that we should "leave language behind" when studying populism; rather, it is a plea to supplement our analyses with work on the visual and acknowledge that it is an important part of the phenomenon. Bucy and Joo have correctly argued that "it is no longer sufficient to analyze . . . [populists'] persuasive communication from a rhetorical perspective alone; increasingly, nonverbal aspects of public communication and televised behavior—the embodied or

20. Bleiker, "Pluralist Methods," 879.

21. Jörg Matthes and Desirée Schmuck, "The effects of anti-immigrant right-wing populist ads on implicit and explicit attitudes: A moderated mediation model," *Communication Research* 44 (2017): 556–81.

visceral aspect of their mass appeal—must be taken into consideration."[22] In line with this, my aim here has been to (a) make a case for why we should care about populist visuals, (b) consider how they fit into existing conceptual approaches to populism, and (c) offer some methodological strategies for how to analyze them. If we want to get the "full picture" of populism and how it operates today, we need to pay attention to its visual politics.

Benjamin Moffitt is Associate Professor of Politics and Australian Research Council DECRA Fellow in the National School of Arts at the Australian Catholic University, Melbourne. His research is located at the intersection of comparative politics, contemporary political theory, and political communications, and focuses on contemporary populism across the globe. He is the author of *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style and Representation* (Stanford University Press, 2016) and *Populism* (Polity, 2020); co-author of *Political Meritocracy and Populism: Curse or Cure?* (Routledge, 2020); and co-editor of *Populism in Global Perspective: A Performative and Discursive Approach* (Routledge, 2021). He can be reached at benjamin.moffitt@acu.edu.au.

22. Erik P. Bucy and Jungseouk Joo, "Editors' Introduction: Visual Politics, Grand Collaborative Programs, and the Opportunity to Think Big," *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 26 (2021): 11.