

## A POPULIST LEADER'S POLITICAL STYLE BALANCING THE ORDINARY WITH THE EXTRAORDINARY

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A core focus of contemporary populism studies is how the leader 'does' and performs populism.<sup>1</sup> Benjamin Moffitt (2016) suggests that an aspect of this populist performance is the way in which some populist leaders attempt to find a balance between simultaneously appearing as ordinary as 'the people' and extraordinary beyond 'the people'.<sup>2</sup> One way to appear ordinary is to use 'bad manners' through which the leader distances herself or himself from the political establishment. For example, Hugo Chávez evoked a common man persona by emphasizing that he was a farm kid who came from a very poor family.<sup>3</sup> He also swore and used simple, relatable language, particularly in his television show *Aló Presidente*. Other populist leaders incorporate fashion into their political style. Evo Morales visualises his ties to the rural areas of Bolivia through his chompa, an alpaca wool sweater, as does Yoweri Museveni, who wears a broad-brimmed hat to show his association with the farmers in Uganda.<sup>4</sup>

However, it is not enough for populists to demonstrate their ordinariness. They also have to convince people of their extraordinariness. There are several techniques to accomplish this. One of them is the strategy of projecting oneself as the only one able to fix 'the people's' problems, as Thaksin Shinawatra did when he said, "I am the major force in government and everyone else is just my helper." Sometimes, a populist even presents herself or himself in divine light and utilizes religious tropes as Berlusconi did in 2006 when he declared, "I am the Jesus Christ of politics. I am a patient victim, I put up with everyone, I sacrifice myself for everyone."<sup>5</sup> In claiming the ability to fix 'the people's' problems, certain populist leaders also draw attention to their body as the embodiment of potency and strength, usually communicated through crude banter or what some would consider "politically incorrect" statements. For instance, Berlusco-

ni's misogynist claim of having sex with up to eight women a night is an attempt to project extraordinary masculinity as a necessary trait of a strong leader.

Meanwhile, female populists such as Sarah Palin and Pauline Hanson, tend to highlight their toughness and strength - allegedly masculine traits, but they combine these with attributes traditionally associated with femininity, such as care, empathy and maternalism.<sup>6</sup> According to historian Robert Mason who analysed Hanson and Palin's political style, both leaders portrayed "an alluring physicality as working mothers and used their sexual appeal to reinforce an image of themselves as vessels of national renewal."<sup>7</sup> But this seems not to apply to all female populists. Marine Le Pen, for example, has managed to avoid the sexualisation of her person.

Using the lens of populism as a political style indicates the importance of the performative aspect of the leader, a significant part of which is how the ordinary and the extraordinary are constructed, performed for the public, for what purpose, and with what effects. As Moffitt argues, this is especially significant in our highly digitalised and mediatized world where these kinds of performances are more accessible to the public, subjected to closer scrutiny, and have a bigger role in shaping politics and public opinion. Furthermore, following Moffitt, treating populism as a political style also means that some leaders can have a populist political style, but will not necessarily be populist in their policies. This enables an unpacking and comparison of various kinds of political styles, one of which is populism.

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1 LROBERTS, K.M. (2006). 'POPULISM, POLITICAL CONFLICT AND GRASS-ROOTS ORGANIZATION IN LATIN AMERICA', IN *COMPARATIVE POLITICS* 38(2), 127-148.

2 MOFFITT, B. (2016). *THE GLOBAL RISE OF POPULISM: PERFORMANCE, POLITICAL STYLE AND REPRESENTATION*. STANFORD: STANFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS.

3 CHÁVEZ FRIAS, H. (2005). 'TRANSCRIPT: HUGO CHÁVEZ INTERVIEW'. IN *NIGHTLINE*, SEPTEMBER 16 2005.

4 MOFFITT, (2016).

5 THAKSIN AND BERLUSCONI ARE DISCUSSED IN MOFFITT, (2016).

6 MOFFITT, (2016).

7 MASON, R. (2010). 'PITBULLS' AND POPULIST POLITICIANS: SARAH PALIN, PAULINE HANSON AND THE USE OF GENDERED NOSTALGIA IN ELECTORAL CAMPAIGNS'. *COMPARATIVE AMERICAN STUDIES* 8(3), 185-199.