Science-Related Populism

Conceptualization, Empirical Investigation, and Implications for Science Communication

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Abstract

Populist and anti-intellectual sentiments pose a considerable challenge to science and science communication in many countries worldwide. One proliferating variant of such sentiments can be conceived as science-related populism. Science-related populism criticizes that scientists, scholars, and experts supposedly determine how society produces ‘true knowledge’ and communicates about it, because they are seen as members of an academic elite which allegedly applies unreliable methods, is ideologically biased – and ignores that the common sense of ordinary people ought to be superior to scientific knowledge. Accordingly, science-related populism assumes that the ordinary people, and not academic elites, should be in charge for the production and communication of ‘true knowledge’. Scholarly and journalistic accounts suggested that science-related populism can have negative implications for the legitimacy of scientific expertise in society and societal discourse about science. However, there has been neither a conceptual framework nor empirical methods and evidence to evaluate these accounts. This cumulative dissertation addresses this deficit: It includes five articles that present a conceptualization of science-related populism (Article I), a survey scale to measure science-related populist attitudes (Article II), empirical findings on these attitudes and related perceptions (Article II, Article III, and Article IV), and a discussion of populist demands toward science communication (Article V). The synopsis scrutinizes the arguments and results published in these articles in three ways: First, it discusses further theoretical considerations on science-related populism, advantages and challenges of its measurement, and broader contexts of empirical evidence on it. Second, it describes implications of science-related populism for communication and discourse about science, and proposes ways in which these implications can be addressed in science communication practice. Third, it considers how scholarship of science-related populism can advance social-scientific research on populism and anti-scientific resentments and could develop in the future.
# Table of Contents

1 Introduction .................................................................................................................................... 1

1.1 A Populist Challenge to Science .......................................................................................... 1

1.2 Overview of Articles and Structure of the Synopsis .......................................................... 4

2 Discussion of the Conceptualization and Investigation of Science-Related Populism .... 7

2.1 Scrutinizing the Concept of Science-Related Populism ..................................................... 7
  2.1.1 Science-Related Populism as a Concept With Low Distinctiveness? .............................. 8
  2.1.2 Science-Related Populism as a Consequence of Issue-Specific Factors? .................... 12
  2.1.3 Science-Related Populism as a Catalyzer of Societal Polarization? .......................... 18

2.2 Scrutinizing the Measurement of Science-Related Populism .......................................... 24
  2.2.1 Advantages of the SciPop Scale .................................................................................... 24
  2.2.2 Limitations of the SciPop Scale and Solutions to Them ................................................. 27
  2.2.3 Designing Studies on Science-Related Populist Attitudes: Challenges and Ways to Address Them ........................................................................................................................................... 31

2.3 Scrutinizing the Evidence on Science-Related Populism .................................................. 33
  2.3.1 Science-Related Populism Within People: Discussing Findings at an Individual Level ........................................................................................................................................... 33
  2.3.2 Science-Related Populism Within Society: Discussing Findings at a Macro Level ........ 37

3 Implications of Science-Related Populism for Science Communication .......................... 42

3.1 How Science-Related Populism May Shape Individual Communication and Societal Discourse about Science .................................................................................................................. 42
  3.1.1 Implications for Individual Communication About Science ......................................... 42
  3.1.2 Implications for Societal Discourse About Science ...................................................... 45

3.2 How Science-Related Populism May Be Addressed in Science Communication Practice ........................................................................................................................................... 47
  3.2.1 A Responsibility to Prevent Science-Related Populism ................................................ 48
  3.2.2 A Response to Science-Related Populism ................................................................. 50

4 Conclusion .................................................................................................................................... 55

References ........................................................................................................................................ 59
Appendix............................................................................................................................................. 87

A Statement of Authorship............................................................................................................. 87

B Author’s Contribution to Co-Authored Publications ............................................................... 88

C Curriculum Vitae....................................................................................................................... 91

D Copies of the Individual Articles of the Thesis........................................................................ 100
   Article I........................................................................................................................................... 100
   Article II......................................................................................................................................... 120
   Article III...................................................................................................................................... 142
   Article IV...................................................................................................................................... 155
   Article V....................................................................................................................................... 168
List of Tables

Table 1: Articles included in the cumulative dissertation ............................................................. 4

Table 2: Unpublished manuscripts cited in the synopsis .............................................................. 5

Table 3: Public, scholarly, and journalistic attention to populist discourse about scientific issues .................................................................................................................... 13

Table 4: Overview of survey scales measuring sentiments akin to science-related populism ........................................................................................................................................ 25
List of Figures

Figure 1: Protester at demonstration in Toronto (Twitter, 2021) ................................................. 2

Figure 2: Advertisement for German homeopathic manufacturer DHU (Twitter, 2020)........... 2

Figure 3: Online petition “Stop 5G from being implemented in Canada”
(Change.org, 2019) .................................................................................................................. 3

Figure 4: Heuristic model of science-related populism............................................................. 10

Figure 5: Extended model of science-related populism (added: the populist leader)......... 14

Figure 6: Radar charts illustrating ad hoc evaluations of the success potential of
science-related populism in Switzerland ................................................................................. 16

Figure 7: Extended model of science-related populism (added: the populist leader
and the others) ......................................................................................................................... 19

Figure 8: Schematization of science-related populism and potential counter-concepts........ 23