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Emotional Dynamics of Populism and Its Non-Populist Alternatives:

Discussing the Role of Compassion and Pride[1]

Abstract: The paper discusses populist appeals to emotions in political communication, considering their role in the proliferation of political polarisation and radicalisation. Revisiting the Emotional Rescue Model of anger, enthusiasm, and fear, we considered pride and compassion low-arousal alternatives to populist storytelling. In the experiments, we tested how participants (n=364) respond to appeals to pride and compassion in their brain activity, emotional expressions, prosocial behaviour, attitude change, and memorisation. In the paper, we primarily discussed the results of the fMRI (neuroimaging) study and compared them with the previous studies on *authentic* pride, compassion, empathy, and reappraisal. Considering similarities in the activation of the superior and middle temporal gyri, temporal pole, inferior frontal gyrus, and dorsolateral prefrontal cortex, we argue that compassionate political narratives should be the most effective low-arousal alternative to populist storytelling. Moreover, stimulation of the reappraisal-related network in that group suggests that participants reframed emotional negativity into prosocial acts of caring and helping, also re-evaluating their attitudes.

Keywords: *populism, emotions, anger, fear, compassion, pride*

Introduction

From its re-emergence two decades ago, political scientists associate a new-wave political populism with the mobilising effect of emotional narratives (Ociepka, 2006, p. 99). Since then, the rationalised European discourse has been confronted with more emotional definitions of collective identities, and European politics has been reoriented towards narratives of belonging (Szatlach, 2007, pp. 70–71). Barry Richards (2010) noticed the emotional deficit in democratic political communication and suggested that the "effective management of emotional dynamics can lead to the development of supportive and creative relationships and a vigorous and enabling democratic ethos" (p. 349). However, populists win the battle over collective emotions. How they appeal to human feelings deteriorates democratic standards and inclusive societies as they adopt emotional narratives to consolidate their power, making space for conspiracy theories as an instrument of crisis management (Plenta, 2020, p. 525; Marczewska-Rytko, 2011).

Populist movements utilise social inequalities and uncertainties and promise security and stabilisation for the nation as a reward for destroying liberal democracies (Rak, 2021, pp. 58–59; Marczewska-Rytko, 1995). Jarosław Kuisz and Karolina Wigura (2020) noticed that conservative populists empowered disadvantaged groups and established a feeling of loss as the dominant collective sentiment, transforming personal disappointment into a lost faith in democracy. Thus, they reframed the *ressentiment*, making this "unpleasant moral feeling without specific addressees, which operates as a chronic reliving of repressed and endless vindictiveness, hostility, envy, and indignation" (Demertzis, 2006, p. 111) once again a powerful inspiration for populist politics of negativity. A combination of humiliation and resentment with moral superiority seems to be a defining feature of populism in general (Yilmaz & Morieson, 2021). The political mobilisation of populism roots in a transformation of repressed shame and anxiety into politics of anger and confrontation (Salmela & van Scheve, 2018).

The nature of social media and their influence on political campaigning (Stier et al., 2018; Iosifidis & Wheeler, 2018; Pérez-Curiel & Limón Naharro, 2019; Farkas & Bene, 2021) offered populists greenhouse conditions for growth in democracies. Political audiences were targeted with narratives on crises that only populists can repair, fuelled with fear, anger, nostalgia, humiliation, or patriotism (Moffitt, 2015). Societies in unconsolidated democracies particularly lack resilience to the populist manipulation of collective emotions, and there are several sources of that fragility: from unaddressed historical injustices and anti-elitist traditions up to a low level of trust in political institutions and organisations and conflicting economic interests within divided societies (Stępińska et al., 2020, pp. 211–212). Social media made it easier to take the unhealed trauma and the feeling of loss from unprivileged groups and transform them into anti-democratic narratives of conflict (Kulska, 2017, pp. 32–33) or anxiety (Taranu, 2015, p. 74).

In this paper, we review the emotional strategies of populist communication and their influence on democratic societies, discussing the Emotional Rescue Model and non-populist alternatives for emotional communication. We confront appeals to compassion and pride with populist narratives of anger, fear, or enthusiasm and consider if democratic leaders may use emotions as a successful strategy for political mobilisation. Then, we present the results of the experimental study to evaluate the effects of compassion and pride in political communication. We consider them alternatives to the expressive style of populist rhetoric dependent on high arousal performance (Barbeito Iglesias & Iglesias Alonso, 2021, p. 251).

Consequences of Populist Appeals to Emotions

Emotions in campaigning may not immediately impact national politics. However, populists can transform political culture in a long long-term perspective (Jäger, 2020, p. 849), proliferate simplified political explanations, and open societies for future biased arguments (Petersen & Arceneaux, 2020). The emotional radicalism of populist movements utilises collective trauma as a foundation for narratives of anxiety, anger, and blame. Matthew Rhodes-Purdy and fellows (2021) declared that "populism is an aggressive and vindicative political tendency, and its potential as a source of some very unpleasant political behaviour is impossible to ignore" (p. 12).

Why populist appeals to emotions are a disadvantage to democratic development? Jacques Gerstlé and Alessandro Nai (2019, p. 22) suggested that populists share a fondness for aggressive campaigning, negativity, provocation, exaggeration, spectacular acts, and breach of political taboo, displaying 'bad manners' to contrast their communication with mainstream politicians (Nai, 2018; Moffitt, 2016). They transform public debate and proliferate conflict, controversies, conspiracy theories, and prejudices. Populist communication portrays social relations as dichotomous, where victimhood and responsibility are separated (Cadier & Szulecki, 2020, p. 998), shaping emotional needs further institutionalised in mainstream politics. Ali Bilgic and Athina Gkouti (2021) observed that "negative emotions, such as fear, anxiety, and anger, are manifested in policies, organisational structures, and budgets; they produce long-term effects and invoke more emotions" (p. 486).

Populist appeals to negative emotions are associated with political polarisation, radicalisation, and dissemination of violence. Ressentiment, despair, fear, and insecurity cause fragmentation and disintegration of society and devastate social ties with the sense of loneliness, reproducing an original trauma (Espinosa et al., 2016, p. 850). On the other hand, narcissism or chauvinism also may be a detriment to democracy and equality, as they transform collective pride into anti-social behaviours and hostility toward outgroups and minorities (Wildman, 2021, pp. 176–177; De Zavala et al., 2009; Scheller, 2019).

Emotional populism pressures liberal democracies, eroding the sense of security with radicalisation (Gøtzsche-Astrup, 2020). Emotional negativity serves as a platform where

violent ideologies may merge with the aggressive populist rhetoric of rage, hatred, and fear, delivering a normative legitimisation of vengeance towards adversaries (Leser & Spissinger, 2020, p. 326). Therefore, populist movements rearranged political conflict and have made it more about contradictory values, cultural practices, and emotional responses to stressful stimuli (Akkuş et al., 2019, p. 61). As a result, increasing frustration and anger are the emotional cost of interest in politics (Ford & Feinberg, 2020, pp. 125–126), resulting in both attempting to compromise different values and engaging in violent activities (Haines et al., 2016; Troy et al., 2013; Čehajić-Clancy et al., 2016; Goldenberg et al., 2016). Moreover, Alessandro Nai (2018) alerted that "beyond electoral outcomes, negative and fear-fuelled campaigns have also been seen as detrimental forces in modern democracies, fostering depressed turnout, cynicism, apathy, and a gloomier public mood" (p. 242).

The costs of emotional populism are the radicalisation of society, the promotion of xenophobia, and the proliferation of conspiracy theories (Dzięgielewska, 2021, p. 254). Populists reframe democratic constitutionalism based on the rule of law into illiberal democracies legitimised by the principle of the majoritarian advantage (Kubas, 2022, p. 265). The winner-takes-it-all rule has a powerful emotional impact on political communication. Simplified images are contrasting; thus, society considers political issues binary with limited space for compromise and deliberation (Kołodziejczak & Wrześniewska-Pietrzak, 2017). Appeals to emotions establish a loop of biased arguments, amplifications of anger, anxiety, or resentment, and ideological polarisation, which produces a new type of voters: populist individuals who "are less likely to engage in effortful information processing, more likely to be politically active, and more willing to support risky, unconventional, and eventually radical policies" (Rico et al., 2017, p. 457). As a result, ressentiment may flourish (Demertzis, 2006).

Passionate Populism and the Emotional Rescue Model

Managing emotional dynamics in political communication is essential for competition in democratic systems, even if it sometimes promotes populism or violent radicalisation. Emotions promote strong identities, strengthen cooperation, and increase political engagement, making political action a standard strategy of emotional regulation (Smirnov et al., 2010; Abramowitz, 2010). Eric Groenendyk and Antoine Banks (2014) considered the role of emotions in politics in their Emotional Rescue Model. It distinguished two separate routes to collective action – **anger** which increases participation, and **enthusiasm** which inspires reappraisal – and the demobilising route of **fear**, which targets undecided voters and the opposing side (Groenendyk & Banks, 2014, p. 360).

The Emotional Rescue Model discussed three primary strategies for coping with political emotions. Humans experience fear and anxiety when their brain detects and responds to threats (LeDoux, 2015). The threat-sensitive surveillance system makes people ready to act, yet cautious, avoidant, and anticipating (Groenendyk & Banks, 2014, p. 362); thus, avoidance

is the first choice in fight-or-flight responses, especially when confronting authoritative power figures (Webster et al., 2016). However, fear-related careful observation makes people more open to new information and less dependent on habitual behaviours (Scheller, 2019, p. 601).

Groenendyk and Banks (2014) explained that "in contrast to fear, anger and enthusiasm should facilitate collective action because they encourage reliance on heuristic processes rather than a reconsideration of one's behaviour" (p. 362; Marcus et al., 2000). Positive emotions indicate pleasant and safe conditions, promote curiosity, and "by building people's personal and social resources, (…) transform people for the better" (Fredrickson, 2001, p. 224). Pleasant experiences broaden attention, increase creativity, reduce pain and stress, and stimulate human flourishing (Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005, p. 326; Fredrickson & Losada, 2005). Researchers observed the influence of emotional positivity on behaviour, cognition, attitudes, openness, social relations, and brain activity (Fredrickson, 2013; Chen et al., 2021).

On the other hand, anger indicates a possible action to overcome a threat and protect one's interests, even if it may implicate some risk. Nancy Luxton (2016) claimed that "anger in politics arises from the exquisitely clear conviction that something is wrong and that the existing order – the politics, the culture, the morals of the moment – must change" (p. 155). Appeals to resentment aim at the engagement of reciprocators in the collective protection of norms, values, beliefs, and identities. However, while stimulating audiences, anger also reduces cognitive effort and risk avoidance, promoting biased cherry-picking for confirmation of opinions (Wollebæk et al., 2019).

Brian E. Weeks (2015) compared the effects of anger with fear. He observed that "anxiety increases political information seeking, learning, and deliberation, whereas anger depresses each and promotes close-mindedness" (p. 702). Rage motivates anti-social and risk-seeking actions, inspires highlighting perceived injustices, and increases hostility, distrust, and polarisation (Wollebæk et al., 2019; Hasell & Weeks, 2016). Thus, emotional appeals do not work like pressing buttons in a brain's affective control station. The neurobiological roots of that effect are far more complicated – Lisa Feldman Barrett (2017, pp. 25–41) suggested that human emotions are not merely products of neural circuits; they are conscious experiences also constructed in the culture. At some point, emotional arousal becomes a cognitive process, and one's responses become more mindful than automatic.

The dynamics of fear, anger, and enthusiasm correspond with differences between positive and negative strategies in political communication, producing unique outcomes (Valentino et al., 2011, p. 160). Wirz et al. (2018) showed that these effects might alter political preferences, shared opinions, and collective feelings, promoting populism and radicalisation. Political narratives are not immune to misinformation, deception, and manipulation; thus, exaggerated emotional storytelling can disseminate prejudice, conspiracy theories, negativity, and pessimism (Landau et al., 2009). However, without the enhanced intensity of appeals to emotions, populist persuasion is less effective (Nai & Seeberg, 2018, pp. 426–427).

Compassion and Pride as Emotional Alternatives

Ernesto de León and Damian Trilling (2021) showed that reappraisal motivated by sadness might be more successful than anger in political communication as people's reconsideration of opinions may overcome the negative effect of low arousal on their willingness to act. However, the delivery regulates if depressing stories would initiate an emotional cascade of sorrow and anger or reappraisal and care (Zerback & Wirz, 2021). The first possibility establishes resentful loss prevention as a political motivation (López-López et al., 2020), while the second increases openness and a calm, compassionate response (Fridkin & Gershon, 2021).

Compassion involves concern for the suffering or the need of another person, feeling moved and touched, a desire to alleviate that suffering, a judgment about an antecedent, and activation of the brain's networks of motivation, caregiving, and social affiliation. It transforms the negativity of distress into the positivity of helping and caring, changing unpleasant and stressful situations into prosocial behaviour (Goetz & Simon-Thomas, 2017, pp. 3–5). In political action, compassion translates sadness into activism and promotes perspective-taking, inspiring protective behaviours (Gilbert, 2019).

Neuroscience differentiates two compassionate responses: empathy and cognitive reappraisal. Empathy activates the amygdala, hypothalamus, ventral striatum/nucleus accumbens, *globus pallidus*, anterior insula, anterior cingulate cortex (ACC), and ventromedial prefrontal cortex (vMPFC); reappraisal is associated with the supramarginal gyrus, middle and superior temporal gyrus, (inferior) frontal and middle frontal gyrus, and temporoparietal junction (Chierchia & Singer, 2017, pp. 251–253). The first network enhances positive responses to personal distress; the second network decreases negative affect – yet, both result in prosocial actions: helping victims and charity (Klimecki et al., 2013; Weng et al., 2013). However, in their meta-analysis, Jeffrey Kim et al. (2020) limited the compassion-related network to the anterior insula, ACC, the basal ganglia, thalamus, midbrain periaqueductal regions, and (inferior) medial and middle frontal gyri.

Compassion influences attention, working memory, impulse inhibitory control, and human motivation (Gilbert et al., 2018, p. 16; Fuochi et al., 2018). It mediates the cognitive transformation of negative emotions into positive actions and emotional resilience, promoting openness and inclusiveness (Bloom, 2017). Increased prosocial behaviour and motivation in compassionate caring suggest that compassion is a natural emotional regulation strategy, integrating affective empathy and cognitive reappraisal in altruism (Stevens & Taber, 2021).

Pride – like enthusiasm – is a positive emotion; thus, it is associated with stimulating prosocial behaviour, including kindness and openness (Wang et al., 2019, p. 4). Regarding pride, Yeon-Ju Hong et al. (2019) suggested that it may relate to "multiple brain networks related to empathy, reward, and emotion regulation as well as the ToM network" (p. 8), involving more robust activation of the ventrolateral prefrontal cortex (vLPFC), dorsolateral

prefrontal cortex (dLPFC), posterior STG, temporoparietal junction, insula, and striatum. However, scholars consider two different clusters of pride: *authentic,* associated with accomplishment and confidence, and *hubristic,* constituted by arrogance and egocentrism (Tracy & Robins, 2007). Feng Kong et al. (2018) observed differences between clusters, and they associated *authentic* pride with the bilateral activation of the (posterior) superior temporal gyrus (STG), while *hubristic* pride with the left orbitofrontal cortex and posterior cingulate cortex.

When the neural network of pride is activated, how does it influence the audience? Experiencing pride increases cognition and attention, perceived happiness, openness, and creativity and inspires prosocial and coherent behaviour (Sandi & Haller, 2015, p. 299; Moody & Zhao, 2020). Gina Gustavsson and Ludvig Stendahl (2020, p. 465) argued that in consolidated democracies, national pride might enhance public trust, activism, and inclusive patriotism. Along with hope and joy, it improves learning and memorising abilities, the perception of the studied topic, and engagement (Amran & Bakar, 2020, p. 5948). It neutralises the negative effect of stress on learning and long-term memory, as inspiring low-arousal relaxation reverts cortisol-induced consolidation of information related to the stressor (Hidalgo et al., 2019). However, there is a darker side of pride – *hubristic* pride might be associated with prejudice, racial discrimination, the denial of counter-arguments, distrust, and more robust support for far-right populists (Strother et al., 2017, p. 312; Lubbers & Coenders, 2017).

Experimental Framework

In the series of experiments, we wanted to determine if appeals to compassion and pride in political communication produce different outcomes. We arranged three parallel versions of a story on a fictitious hero of the "Solidarity" movement and concluded with an evaluation of Poland's democratic transformation. We recorded versions with a professional actress as a narrator and edited recordings into six paragraphs (approx. 30 seconds each) with distinct endings (6–10 seconds), which served as our experimental manipulation. Participants were randomly assigned to enjoy one version of the narrative – neutral for the control group, positive for the pride-related group, and negative for the compassion-related group.

There were no exclusion criteria for consensual adult participants in the general experiment; medical and psychological contraindications were listed as exclusion criteria for the fMRI study in the online recruitment survey. We recruited 364 participants, including 75 persons assigned to the fMRI study – participants were randomly assigned to conditions: control group (n=121), pride-related group (n=121), and compassion-related group (n=122), while in the neuroimaging study, all groups included 25 participants each.

We mainly recruited young adults (18–64, M=28.7 years, SD=8.48) of both genders (222 females, 141 males, and one undisclosed). Participants were rewarded with 100 PLN after

the experiment. The randomisation was adequate. Differences between participants in the control and experimental groups on tested variables, including empathy, political preferences, attitudes towards public remembrance, and interest in history, were insignificant.

All participants completed questionnaires on attitudes towards public remembrance, empathy, and political preferences in Polish (CAWI) – responses were measured from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Participants were invited to the lab at least one week later, where they watched the 3-minute-long recording in silence. Then, we asked them to complete the second set of questionnaires, including a self-report on engagement, interest, and experienced emotions, the test of information presented in the story, and the retest of attitudes towards public remembrance. Finally, participants were informed that they might donate any amount of their reward to support care for former anti-communist activists. However, in the neuroimaging study, participants listened to the recording with headphones inside the scanner, followed by a resting state analysis; besides different delivery of stimulation, we used the same experimental procedure.

The research design focused on three dependent variables in the general experiment: memorisation of presented information, attitude change towards public remembrance, and prosocial behaviour. In the fMRI study, we analysed participants' brain activity using Discovery MR750 3T System (GE Medical Systems LLC) and FLS FEAT (fMRI Expert Analysis Tool) v. 6.0 for data processing and analysis. Moreover, we analysed the collected data using basic statistics, analysis of variance, regression, and correlations to identify significant differences and associations between variables.

Results

This paper addresses the hypothesis on the possible activation of compassion-related and pride-related neural networks in political communication and conscious evaluation of audience arousal. We predicted that different versions of the narrative would produce distinct responses, resulting in differences in self-reported states and emotions. We noticed significant differences between groups (ANOVA, F=3.526, p<.05) in the combined effect of manipulation (*behaviour* x *attitude change* x *memorisation*), which suggests that even three-minute-long stimulation with emotional manipulation in the last quarter of each paragraph influences receptiveness to political narratives. Moreover, regression analysis showed that emotional dynamics altered the narrative's combined effect, attitude change, and emotional assessment.

The fMRI study identified significant differences in neural activity during the experimental manipulation, presented in Figure 1. In the control group, excitement was limited, and ingroup similarities were significantly reduced – stimulation activated left (posterior) middle temporal gyrus (MTG), (posterior and anterior) superior temporal gyrus (STG), left *planum polare*, and left Heschl's gyrus (primary auditory cortex). The effect of the pride-related

narrative was similar, yet more substantial, and it was limited to the (posterior) MTG, right (posterior) STG, left *planum temporale*, and left Heschl's gyrus. The compassion-related narrative produced the highest incitement and the most significant similarities, activating (posterior and anterior) MTG and STG, left temporal pole, left *planum temporale*, right middle frontal gyrus, right inferior frontal gyrus (*pars opercularis* – the Broca area), and right precentral gyrus. We may notice activation of the authentic pride-related network in all groups, including posterior STG (Kong et al., 2018). However, the compassion-related network was stimulated only in the case of a compassionate narrative, which increased incitement in frontal gyri (Kim et al., 2020). The results suggest that the reaction resulted from cognitive reappraisal rather than empathetic responsiveness (Chierchia & Singer, 2017).
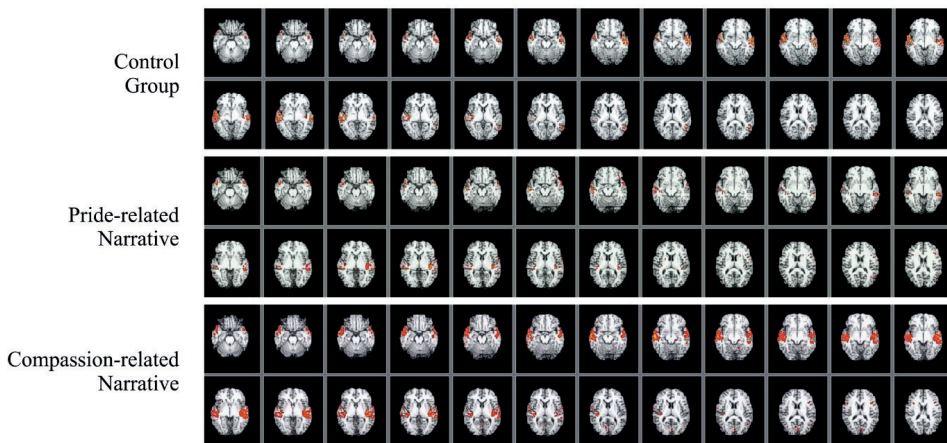

Figure 1. Neural activity while listening to the story (n=75, 25 participants in each condition)
Source: FEAT (FMRI Expert Analysis Tool) v. 6.00 (Reported by Dr. Aleksandra Wypych).

In the control group, exposition to the narrative produced similar bilateral activation of STG with local maxima Z=3.24 in the (right) anterior, Z=3.12 in the (left) posterior, and Z=3.09 in the (right) posterior division. The results suggest that non-emotional political communication initiates language processing, affective prosody comprehension, deductive reasoning, and *authentic* pride. In the pride-related group, the activity of STG was similar only in the (right) posterior division (Z=3.27), associated with experiencing *authentic* pride (Kong et al., 2018). In the compassion-related group, similarities in the activation of STG were even higher, with local maxima Z=4.21 in the (right) anterior, Z=4.48 in the (left) posterior, and Z=4.10 in the (right) posterior division. Therefore, in all groups presentation of the narrative made participants proud but appeals to emotions increased similarities in *authentic* pride.

The compassion-related group similarities were not limited to the temporal lobe (STG, MTG, and Heschl's Gyrus) and the *planum temporale* (part of Wernicke's area). We

noticed the activation of the inferior frontal (*pars opercularis*) and middle frontal gyri (dLPFC: Z=3.21), part of the network identified by Jeffrey Kim et al. (2020). Moreover, in the compassion-related group, we noticed similar stimulation of STG, MTG, inferior frontal and middle frontal gyri, and (left) temporoparietal junction – besides the supramarginal gyrus, all areas relevant for compassionate reappraisal (Chierchia & Singer, 2017). Moreover, activation of the (left) temporal pole suggests emotional processing of possible threats based on narrative speech and comprehension (Herlin et al., 2021). It proves that compassionate political communication initiates the most complex response, including language processing, attribution of intentions to others, threat evaluation, reasoning, and emotional regulation based on a reappraisal.

Conclusion

This paper discussed non-populist emotional communication alternatives as replies to populist appeals to anger, enthusiasm, or fear. We presented the results of the experimental study on the influence of *authentic* pride and compassion in political storytelling, focusing on the assessment of observed in-group similarities in brain activity. Applying the fMRI study in political research (Jost et al., 2014; Rutkowski & Ziółkowski, 2021) opened an opportunity to investigate if appeals to pride and compassion produce different responses than a neutral narrative. Moreover, neuroimaging offers the possibility to understand how broad the response to the stimuli is.

The neutral story involved superior and middle temporal gyri, mainly responsible for language processing and comprehension but also experiencing *authentic* pride. Feeling proud was more profound in the pride-related group, but a shared response was quite similar to the control group; it suggests that participants might differ in more emotional reactions to the story. *Authentic* pride was present in the compassion-related group. However, the compassionate narrative produced the most potent effect on the participants, activating the threat evaluation and the reappraisal networks, which increased emotional responsiveness to the stimuli.

Therefore, in political communication, appeals to compassion offer broader possibilities than pride as an alternative to high-arousal populist emotions (Wawrzyński, 2015). Thus, the more sympathetic approach to political storytelling may strengthen the legitimisation of democracies and prevent the proliferation of populist narratives of *ressentiment*, which challenge promoted collective identities (Marszałek-Kawa & Wawrzyński, 2016). Compassion seems more efficient in regulating emotional responses to political action, transforming negativity into caring, advancing civic education (Wawrzyński & Marszałek-Kawa, 2018, p. 107), and preventing it from populist dependency on high arousal performance (Barbeito Iglesias & Iglesias Alonso, 2021; Rico et al., 2017).

Effective appeals to compassion redirect an emotional cascade of sorrow, anger, and anti-social behaviours to reappraisal, care, and prosocial behaviours, regulating how emo-

tional negativity might influence political action (Zerback & Wirz, 2021). The combined effect of manipulation on behaviour, attitude change, and memorisation proved that the compassionate narrative had a broader and more consistent influence on participants; at the same time, appeals to pride were far more dependent on pre-existing beliefs. Therefore, our findings suggest that compassion, reappraisal, and empathy should be considered effective alternatives to populist appeals to emotions in political communication as they produce strong and consistent responses among audiences (Fridkin & Gershon, 2021; de León & Trilling, 2021; Strauss et al., 2016).

Acknowledgements

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