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When Journalists Run for Office: The Effects of Journalist-Candidates on Citizens' Populist Attitudes and Voting Intentions

CRISTIAN VACCARI
Loughborough University, UK

This study analyzes how citizens respond to information about high-profile journalists who run for office for major political parties in Italy. An experiment embedded in the Italian National Election Studies 2018 preelection survey ($N = 1,533$) tested whether exposure to information about journalist-candidates affects citizens' levels of populist attitudes and voting intentions. Information on journalist-candidates led to statistically significant increases in populist attitudes, particularly when participants were told that journalists were running for all the main parties. By contrast, participants who were shown information about journalist-candidates did not increase their probability to vote for the parties that fielded those journalist-candidates. These findings suggest that political parties do not stand to gain substantial electoral benefits when they recruit journalist-candidates, but this practice increases citizens' perceptions that both journalism and politics do not serve their interests. Citizens remain attached to the idea that journalists should retain some distance from politics rather than aim to become politicians themselves.

Keywords: journalism, democracy, elections, populism, voting behavior

In many Western democracies, politicians' and journalists' careers sometimes overlap. Prominent politicians who are former journalists include U.K. Prime Minister Boris Johnson, the late former President of the European Parliament David Sassoli, former Canadian Liberal Party leader Michael Ignatieff, and former Indian Minister for External Affairs Mobasher Jawed Akbar. Much has changed since Max Weber (2009) claimed that working as a journalist "is like lead on the feet of the politicians" (p. 97). Media fragmentation and the blurring of the lines between politics and journalism encourage journalists and media pundits to "enter the field of politics with either their own organizations or with an organization that they construct thanks to the Internet" (Mancini, 2013, p. 51). Yet we know surprisingly little about how journalists' choices to run for office affect voters.

Journalist-candidates can be seen as symbols of collusion between media and political elites and may therefore exacerbate antielite sentiment, a key driver of populism (Mudde, 2004). However, because journalists are usually well-known personalities and competent communicators, they may enhance parties' electoral prospects. To shed light on these issues, this study presents the results of an experiment conducted

Cristian Vaccari: C.Vaccari@lboro.ac.uk

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in Italy, a Western democracy characterized by high integration between media and politics (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), common overlaps between the professions of journalist and politician (Ciaglia, 2013), and a fertile environment for populist political actors (Tarchi, 2008). The 2018 general elections provided a unique opportunity to study the effects of journalists running for office. In an election characterized by historically high levels of volatility, all three major parties selected nationally recognized journalists as candidates for their lists. In a survey experiment, participants exposed to information about these journalist-candidates reported significantly higher levels of populist attitudes, particularly antilite sentiment toward both politicians and journalists, when compared with the control group, which did not see such information. By contrast, information about journalist-candidates did not significantly increase participants' propensity to vote for the parties that had recruited them. Citizens' negative reactions to journalist-candidates highlight an underexplored way in which media may contribute to populism, defined here as *populism vindicated by the media*. The findings also shed light on relevant sources of support for populist ideas and reveal the enduring value of journalistic independence.

Literature Review and Hypotheses

The degree to which the career paths of journalists and politicians overlap is an important structural feature of media and political systems (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). However, we know little about how citizens react when journalists venture into electoral politics, apart from case studies of individual reporters who ran for office (e.g., Rafter & Hayes, 2015; Ruddock, 2006). To fill this gap, this study tests two hypotheses rooted in theory and research on media, populism, and voting behavior.¹

Journalist-Candidates' Effects on Populist Attitudes

Research has foregrounded the role of media in channeling, fostering, or countering populist political actors and ideas (Reinemann, Stanyer, Aalberg, Esser, & de Vreese, 2019). Studies have mainly focused on two themes. First, the extent to which news organizations cover populist politicians and issues, defined as *populism through the media* (Wettstein, Esser, Schulz, Wirz, & Wirth, 2018). Second, how news coverage echoes populist actors' styles and messages, for instance, antiestablishment biases and sensationalized coverage of complex issues, defined as *populism by the media* (Mazzoleni, 2008). Research has found that levels of populist attitudes can change depending on the information citizens are exposed to (Morisi & Wagner, 2021). However, scholars have mainly focused on the effects of messages conveyed to the public directly by politicians or indirectly via news coverage (Hameleers et al., 2018). By contrast, this study investigates a different way in which media may affect citizens' populist attitudes, defined as *populism vindicated by the media*. It occurs when media—or some prominent media figures—conduct themselves in ways that can be seen as upholding populists' arguments.

¹ An earlier version of this manuscript tested two hypotheses focusing on trust in journalists and politicians as outcomes. These variables were measured only posttreatment, unlike the measures of populism and probability to vote discussed here. The analysis yielded null findings for these hypotheses, which are not discussed here because of space constraints. Appendix 6 in the Supplemental Materials (available at https://osf.io/86f3s/?view_only=f2b3a557da834620828b08133481f72f) includes the results of these additional analyses.

Mudde (2004) defines populism as “an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite,’ and which argues that politics should be an expression of the . . . general will of the people” (p. 543). In Laclau’s (2005) formulation, populism emerges when the “logic of difference,” which recognizes that different groups have specific interests and functions, cedes ground to the “logic of equivalence,” which reduces all conflicts and interdependencies to the antagonism between a collusive elite and a unified people. Populism has also been described as a mode of communication (de Vreese, Esser, Aalberg, Reinemann, & Stanyer, 2018), a “political style that features an appeal to ‘the people’ versus ‘the elite,’ ‘bad manners’ and the performance of crisis, breakdown, or threat” (Moffitt, 2016, p. 45).

As both an ideology and a mode of communication, populism pits elites against the people. What I define as *populism vindicated by the media* entails any behavior by media professionals that can be constructed as confirming this representation—not through how media cover politics but how they *relate* to it. In his analysis of how media policy failures paved the way for populism, Freedman (2021) argues that “existing institutions have all too often been identified with precisely the same power elites that populists claim they are seeking to challenge” (p. 417). Journalist-candidates exemplify this identification and, thus, increase the appeal of populist ideas.

While professional politicians are the elite *par excellence* in populist rhetoric, experts and journalists also feature prominently. When journalists run for office, they encourage citizens to conflate political and journalistic elites as a single “corrupt elite,” per Mudde’s (2004) definition, thus validating the “logic of equivalence” theorized by Laclau (2005). Indeed, this is exactly how populists portray journalists in their attacks against the media. Populists often lambaste reporters as lackeys of the politicians they are supposed to keep in check or as privileged elites detached from the people (Schulz, Wirth, & Müller, 2020). As defined by Krämer (2018), “antimedia populism” laments that journalism “betrays the people and conspires with, or is instrumentalized by, the ruling elite to manipulate the people” (p. 454). This criticism of the media, argues Waisbord (2018), is instrumental to populists’ rejection of “canonical principles of democracy—the watchdog role of the press, the division of powers, minority rights, and constitutional protection of public speech” (p. 25). Accordingly, citizens with high levels of populist attitudes also have more negative views of news media (Fawzi, 2019). Hence, the public might see journalist-candidates as confirming the populist *leitmotif* that media and political elites are in league together.

Journalist-candidates may also bolster populist attitudes because they violate expectations about how journalists should behave in a democracy. Laclau’s (2005) logic of difference is based on the separation between distinct societal demands and functions. Journalist-candidates invalidate the separation between the roles of journalists and politicians and, thus, evoke the logic of equivalence privileged by populism. The social contract theory suggests that, for journalism’s authority to be recognized, “there needs to be an agreement between . . . the journalists, the state, and the citizens on the role of journalism in society and the role performance of journalists” (Karlsson & Clerwall, 2019, p. 1186). Careful scrutiny of public officials by an independent press is crucial for the legitimacy of representative democracy (Keane, 2018). Hence, if citizens view journalists as violating the social contract on which their professional status and democratic responsibility are founded, citizens’ attitudes may become more negative not only toward journalists but also toward the political elites they are

supposed to scrutinize and the democratic institutions such scrutiny is meant to protect. In her analysis of the key functions of media in a democracy, Pippa Norris (2000) notes that “the key issue is whether the news media act as independent, fair, and impartial critics of powerful interests or whether abuses of public standards go unchecked” (p. 28). For journalism to perform these functions, it must be autonomous from politics or maintain what Hanitzsch (2007) defines as “power distance.”

There is abundant evidence that citizens in Western democracies value and expect journalistic detachment from politics. Studies of media systems as different as Austria (Riedl & Eberl, 2020), Germany (Loosen, Reimer, & Hölig, 2020), Israel (Tsfati, Meyers, & Peri, 2006), the Netherlands (van der Wurff & Schönbach, 2014), Sweden (Karlsson & Clerwall, 2019), and the United States (Willnat, Weaver, & Wilhoit, 2019) confirm that citizens demand that journalists be independent from political power. As an example, Riedl and Eberl (2020) surveyed citizens and journalists in Austria and found that both groups primarily expected a journalist to “be a detached observer” (p. 9). Citizens who assigned greater importance to this role showed higher levels of trust in political institutions but lower levels of satisfaction with democracy (Riedl & Eberl, 2020, p. 12). Hence, there may be links between how citizens assess journalists’ distance from power and key attitudes toward politics and democracy.

To some degree, however, the normative emphasis on journalistic detachment from power is a historical and contextual product of contexts where politics and media are relatively independent, such as the North Atlantic countries classified as “liberal” by Hallin and Mancini (2004). Since this analysis focuses on Italy, a “polarized pluralist” system where media and politics are historically intertwined, we need to interrogate the relevance of independence from politics as a professional norm and societal expectation in this context.

The Italian media system features high levels of media-politics parallelism, or “the degree to which the structure of the media system parallel[s] that of the party system” (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p. 27). Where parallelism is high and media closely reflect political cleavages, wannabe politicians often see journalism as a career path toward politics and the public may be less likely to see journalist-candidates as reprehensible. Another important feature that differentiates media systems is the degree of journalistic professionalism—the extent to which journalists are socially recognized as operating with autonomy, distinct professional norms, and a public service orientation (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, pp. 33–37). When the professional autonomy of journalists is low, as it has historically been in Italy, the public may see journalist-candidates as confirmation of the subalternity of reporters to external political forces.

Thus, Italians may be less likely to expect that journalists behave as independent observers than citizens in media systems with low levels of parallelism and high levels of professionalism. However, there is evidence that journalists’ autonomy is highly regarded even in systems characterized by strong ties between media and politics. For instance, the *Worlds of Journalism Study* showed substantial similarities in journalistic cultures across Anglo-Saxon and Western European democracies. “Monitorial” journalistic cultures in these countries emphasize that “journalism’s institutional independence from other powers is a defining element of democracy” (Hanusch & Hanitzsch, 2019, p. 297). According to WSJ data, the vast majority of Italian journalists espouse impartiality and independence: 86% agree it is important for journalists to be detached observers and 90% claim journalists should report things as they are, while

only 24% and 22%, respectively, affirm that journalists should influence public opinion and set the political agenda—all levels comparable to those found in countries where journalism is institutionally more detached from politics, such as Germany, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States (Hanitzsch, Hanusch, Ramaprasad, & de Beer, 2019). Considering that research shows that journalists and citizens have congruent expectations of journalism (Loosen et al., 2020; Riedl & Eber, 2020; Willnat et al., 2019), the fact that most Italian journalists uphold the value of independence from politics suggests that these views should be widely held among the public, too. Hence, in spite of high levels of political parallelism and low levels of journalistic professionalism, Italian citizens should see journalist-candidates as breaching norms of public conduct.

In sum, journalist-candidates upset the widespread expectation that reporters should be independent from the public officials they scrutinize. This norm violation dovetails with the populist logic of equivalence, corroborates populists' antielitist and antimedia rhetoric, and may thus enhance the perception that journalists and politicians are part of the same cabal that conspires against the will of the people. These considerations suggest the first hypothesis:

H1: Exposure to information about journalist-candidates will increase levels of populist attitudes among citizens.

Journalist-Candidates' Effects on Voting Behavior

Journalist-candidates may be effective vote-getters and, thus, enhance the electoral prospects of the parties that recruit them.

Political scientists define candidate quality as "an individual's experience and personal characteristics that contribute to running an effective campaign" (Bond, Fleisher, & Talbert, 1997, p. 284). High-quality candidates are more popular and receive more votes (Squire, 1995). Candidate quality is often operationalized as experience in elective office (Jacobson, 1989), but more nuanced definitions also emphasize attractiveness and skill. According to Krasno and Green (1988), attractiveness entails "qualifications for office" and skill involves "the ability to organize and conduct an effective campaign" (p. 921). One indicator of attractiveness is whether a candidate enjoys "celebrity status" (Krasno & Green, 1988, p. 923). As politics and journalism are increasingly intertwined with celebrity culture (Boydston & Lawrence, 2020), high-profile journalists sometimes become celebrities (Conboy, 2014). Celebrity journalists take advantage of high name recognition among the public, friendly relationships with news organizations, and strong communication skills—all qualities that should elicit positive voter responses (Rafter & Hayes, 2015, p. 220). Hence, citizens should become more likely to vote for parties that field high-profile journalists when they are made aware of this fact. These considerations motivate the second hypothesis:

H2: Exposure to information about journalist-candidates will increase citizens' propensity to vote for the parties for which journalists are running.

Context, Data, and Measures

Context

This study was conducted during the 2018 Italian general election. Two contextual aspects should be relevant to the hypotheses tested here: the prevalence of journalist-candidates and recent changes in the electoral law.

The 2018 Italian general elections were peculiar even by Italian standards, as three major parties spanning the left-right spectrum recruited well-known journalist-candidates. While this practice had been common for the main center-right party, *Forza Italia*, and not unprecedented for the main center-left party, *Partito Democratico*, it was a sea change for the populist Five Star Movement (*MoVimento 5 Stelle*), as hostility against the media had been one of its signature issues (Tronconi, 2015). The campaign took place in a climate of ever-growing citizen discontent and detachment from traditional parties, which resulted in the lowest turnout and the third-highest level of electoral volatility in the history of Italian general elections (Chiaramonte, Emanuele, Maggini, & Paparo, 2018). In this uncertain competitive environment, parties may have seen the recruitment of high-profile journalists as an opportunity to expand their uncertain electoral appeal. Still, these candidacies may have caused less of a shock in Italy than in countries that lack a tradition of revolving doors between news and politics. As is common across most Western democracies, Italian parties often employ former journalists as media and public relations advisers. What is comparatively exceptional is the frequency with which Italian journalists run for public office and, when elected, embark on full-fledged political careers. A comparative analysis found that journalists (together with lawyers) were the most represented profession in the Italian Parliament, in contrast with Germany and the United Kingdom (Ciaglia, 2013). Journalists constituted 8.6% of the Italian Chamber of Deputies' members elected in 2006, 8.9% in 2008, and 12.9% in 2013—the highest since 1948 (Verzichelli, Marino, Marangoni, & Russo, 2020). Because the Italian electorate is comparatively more used to journalist-candidates, the strength of the effects investigated here is likely to be lower than in other Western democracies and monitorial journalistic cultures.

The electoral law changed four months before the 2018 election and entailed a mixed system in which each voter could cast two ballots—one for a candidate in a single-member district and one for a short, blocked party list in a multimember district (Pedrazzani & Pinto, 2018). Hence, the system placed some emphasis on candidates running in single-member districts, but it discouraged voters from focusing on candidates featured in blocked lists for multimember districts—which assigned two-thirds of seats. Because the electoral law did not emphasize the roles of candidates, the effects of information on journalist-candidates measured in this study should be smaller than in elections based on more candidate-centric rules.

Data

The two hypotheses discussed above were tested in a survey experiment embedded in the Italian National Election Studies (Itanes) 2018 preelection survey.² The survey employed a rolling cross-section

² Supplemental Materials (SM) for this article are available on the Open Science Foundation website at https://osf.io/86f3s/?view_only=f2b3a557da834620828b08133481f72f.

design implemented by Ipsos on an opt-in online panel. Data were collected from January 15–March 3, 2018, with a collaboration rate of 41%. The questionnaire included a core set of questions followed by rotating additional modules. Respondents took on average 20 minutes to complete the core questionnaire, which measured sociodemographic characteristics, political attitudes, media use, political participation, and voting behavior.³

The module that contained the experiment was completed by 1,533 respondents (about 100 per day) from February 5 to 21, 2018. A comparison between key sociodemographic characteristics of the sample and the Italian voting-age population is available in Appendix 1 in the supplemental materials (SM). As is often the case with nonprobability online panels, the sample overrepresents people with tertiary education and underrepresents those with primary education. Women and citizens 25–54 years of age are also overrepresented. The geographic distribution of the sample, however, matches that of the population. While these differences are not negligible, studies have shown that results of survey experiments conducted on nonprobability samples tend to replicate nationally representative population-based samples (Mullinix, Leeper, Druckman, & Freese, 2015).

Experimental Design

Participants were randomly assigned into one of five groups: four treated groups and a control group. Randomization was effective (see Appendix 4 in the SM), and the sample was split almost evenly among the five groups.

The four treated groups were asked if they were aware of specific journalists running for three major parties: center-left *Partito Democratico* (PD), center-right *Forza Italia* (FI), and populist Five Star Movement (*Movimento 5 Stelle*, M5S).⁴ Of the four treated groups, three saw the names and brief job descriptions of two journalists running for a single party. For instance, the question for M5S read:

We will now talk about the candidates for Parliament. Have you heard that among the candidates for the Five Star Movement there are journalists like Emilio Carelli, former editor of *Sky Tg 24*, and Gianluigi Paragone, who was previously vice chair of *Rai1* and *Rai2* and presenter of “The Cage” on *La7*?⁵

These questions aimed to remind respondents who already knew, and to inform those who did not, that these journalists were running for one of the main parties. The fourth treated group saw the names of journalists running for all three parties:

³ The core questionnaire is available on the Itanes website at <http://www.itanes.org/questionari-itanes/>, under “2018”.

⁴ The M5S topped the poll with 32.68% of the vote in the House of Deputies, and the PD came second with 18.76%. The third most voted party was *Lega*, which received 17.35%, beating its coalition ally FI at 14%. Most preelection opinion polls had predicted FI would receive more votes than *Lega*.

⁵ *Sky Tg 24* is the news program of *Sky TV*, Italy’s leading satellite television network. *Rai1* and *Rai2* are the two main public service television channels. *La7* is one of the main national broadcast channels.

We will now talk about the candidates for Parliament. Have you heard that among the main party candidates there are journalists such as Tommaso Cerno, coeditor of *la Repubblica*, Giorgio Mulè, editor of *Panorama*, and Gianluigi Paragone, former presenter of "The Cage" on *La7*?⁶

All the information on journalist-candidates reported in the questions was accurate and public knowledge.

Members of the control group were asked whether they knew who the candidates were in their constituencies, without mentioning any of them: "We will now talk about the candidates for Parliament. Do you know who the main parties' candidates for the House and Senate are in the constituency where you reside?"⁷ Appendix 2 in the SM reports the question wording for all treatments.

Respondents could answer "Yes," "No," or "I don't know" to these questions. Appendix 3 in the SM discusses participants' answers, which will not be included in the analyses because the purpose of the question was to prime participants rather than estimate their knowledge. Respondents subsequently answered questions measuring populist attitudes and probability to vote for the three parties mentioned in the treatments. At the end of the survey, participants were debriefed about the reasons they were asked these questions.

Outcome Measures

The survey measured populist attitudes based on three items, introduced by the question:

How much do you agree with these statements?

- Politicians in Parliament must follow the will of the people.
- I would rather be represented by an ordinary person than by a career politician.
- Journalists are too close to powerful groups to inform ordinary people.

The statements were presented in random order, and respondents could answer: "Strongly agree," "Somewhat agree," "Neither agree nor disagree," "Somewhat disagree," or "Strongly disagree." The first two items were adapted from the battery of populism indicators validated by Akkerman, Mudde, and Zaslove

⁶ *La Repubblica* is Italy's main daily newspaper of left-wing orientation. *Panorama* is the flagship magazine of center-right leader Silvio Berlusconi's editorial group.

⁷ Because parliamentary candidates in local constituencies varied depending on where participants lived, being asked about local candidates may have elicited different reactions among control group participants depending on where they resided. To gauge whether this was the case, Appendix 7 in the SM assesses the correlation among the dependent variables and the geographic areas and population size among participants in the control group. All the analyses, with two small exceptions, show no significant relationship between participants' residence and their responses to the questions measuring their populist attitudes and their probability to vote for the parties that fielded journalist-candidates. Therefore, the control group provides a valid and reliable baseline for these outcome measures.

(2014). The third item was designed to capture antielitist attitudes specifically toward journalists that, as discussed earlier, may be elicited by journalist-candidates. Research on populism usually employs a broader set of measures to represent this multifaceted attitudinal complex (Akkerman et al., 2014; Wuttke, Schimpf, & Schoen, 2020). The indicators of populism employed in this study capture popular sovereignty and antielitism but not other key components, such as the belief in a homogenous people or the contrast between good and evil. This limitation is partly compensated by the inclusion of a novel indicator designed to gauge opposition to journalists as elites, which is relevant for this study.

The three measures of populism are correlated with one another strongly enough (Cronbach's $\alpha = .72$) that they can be combined into a single index, as is common in studies of populist attitudes (e.g., Akkerman et al., 2014, Fawzi, 2019). The three variables were recoded into a 0–4 range and added into a 0–12 index of populism (mean = 8.67, median = 9, s.d. = 2.43). This is a compensatory approach, as respondents can have high values on the index even if they score relatively low on one of its three components. However, Wuttke and colleagues (2020) demonstrate that this strategy only partially captures the distinctive features of populism. Appendix 5 in the SM replicates all the analyses presented in the Findings section based on an index of populism constructed using a noncompensatory method (Wuttke et al., 2020, p. 362). The results are entirely consistent with those presented here.

Finally, the survey measured respondents' intended voting behavior for each of the three main parties that fielded journalist-candidates. It employed the probability to vote format (Van der Eijk & Franklin, 1996), which is best suited to capture treatment effects in a crowded and fluid electoral market. The question wording was:

Of all the various parties we have in Italy, each would like to have your vote in the future. Regardless of how you think you are going to vote in the next election, how likely is it that you may vote for the following parties in the future? For each of them, use a scale from 0–10, where 0 means "Not at all likely" and 10 means "Very likely."

The question was followed by the names of PD, FI, and M5S in random order. The mean probability to vote for PD was 3.2 and the median 3, and 212 (13.7%) respondents declined to answer. The mean probability to vote for FI was 2.4 and the median 0, and 197 (12.7%) did not answer. The mean probability to vote for M5S was 4.1 and the median 4, with 199 (12.8%) nonresponses.⁸

Pretreatment Measures

Both populism and probability to vote were also measured before the experiment in the core questionnaire. The pretreatment questions on populist attitudes asked participants to express their agreement with eight different statements, including the three measured posttreatment.⁹ The pretreatment probability to vote (PTV) questions asked participants to estimate their likelihood to vote for six different

⁸ These results are consistent with the outcome of the election (see note 4 above).

⁹ Cronbach's α among the three pretreatment measures that were repeated posttreatment was .67.

parties, including the three measured posttreatment. Hence, the analyses can control for the pretreatment levels of the dependent variables, thus yielding more robust estimates of the treatment effects.

Measuring the pretreatment levels of the dependent variables may have primed some participants on the importance of these issues and elicited demand effects, consistency pressures, or interactions with the treatment (Clifford, Sheagley, & Piston, 2021). However, these threats to experimental validity should be minor. First, in the pretreatment questions, these items were part of larger batteries, which should have diluted their salience. Second, as recommended by Montgomery, Nyhan, and Torres (2018), there was a sizable distance in the survey between the pretreatment and posttreatment measures of the same variables (p. 773).¹⁰ Third, the questions that were asked immediately before the experiment addressed different topics from the treatments and the outcome measures: economic conditions, household composition, and religious attendance. Finally, repeated measure designs such as the one employed here yield more precise estimates than between-subjects designs, where the outcomes are measured only posttreatment (Clifford et al., 2021).

Analytical Strategy

Because random assignment was successful, the potential confounding effects of variables other than the treatments have been neutralized. Hence, simple analysis of variance (ANOVA) is appropriate to assess the relationships between exposure to the treatments and levels of populist attitudes (H1) and intention to vote (H2). Repeated measures ANOVA controlling for the pretreatment values of the dependent variables supplement these analyses. For each hypothesis, the next section provides two sets of comparisons: the first differentiates between participants exposed to *any* of the four treatments and the control group; the second compares participants exposed to *each* of the four treatments and the control group. With respect to H1, the analysis compares the treated groups based on the average values of both the additive index of populism and each of the three indicators that constitute it.

Findings

Effects of Journalist-Candidates on Populist Attitudes

To assess whether exposure to information on journalist-candidates affected populist attitudes (H1), Figure 1 plots average levels of populist attitudes among respondents exposed to any treatment versus the control group (left panel) and among respondents in each of the five groups (right panel).

As shown in the left panel of Figure 1, average levels of populism were consistently higher among treated participants than in the control group (treated groups average = 8.76, s.d. = 2.37; control group average = 8.34, s.d. = 2.64). The relationship is statistically significant ($F = 7.25, p = .007, \eta^2 = .005$), and it remains significant with a repeated measures ANOVA that includes pretreatment measures of

¹⁰ After answering the pretreatment PTV questions, participants had to provide 37 additional answers before the experiment. After answering the pretreatment questions measuring populist attitudes, participants had to provide 12 additional answers before the experiment.

populism ($F = 21.9, p < .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .005$). In sum, exposure to information about journalist-candidates increased levels of populist attitudes among participants.

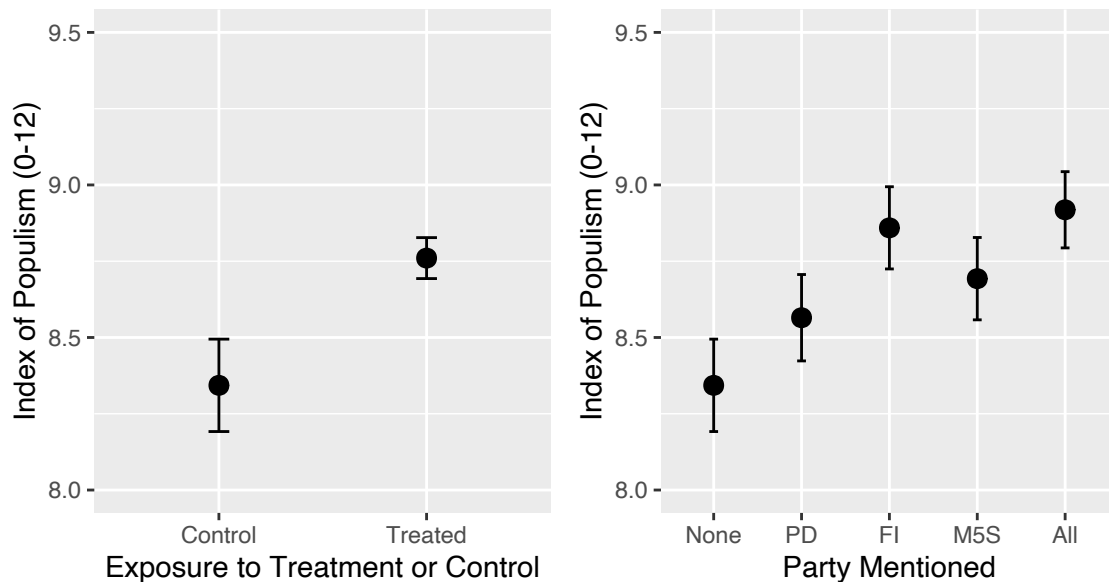


Figure 1. Levels of populist attitudes conditional on exposure to information on journalist-candidates (means with standard errors).

Assessing the effects of the treatments on the individual indicators of populism adds nuance to this overall finding. When we focus on the statement “Politicians in Parliament must follow the will of the people,” the effects of exposure to any treatment are in the predicted direction (treated groups average = 3.29; control group average = 3.21) but not significant (simple ANOVA $F = 2.11, p = .15, \eta^2 = .001$). However, the relationship is significant when including the pretreatment levels of the dependent variable (repeated measures ANOVA $F = 4.2, p = .041, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .003$). With respect to the statement “I would rather be represented by an ordinary person than by a career politician,” the difference between all treated groups and the control group is larger (2.60 versus 2.41), and the relationship is significant in both the simple ANOVA ($F = 6.43, p = .011, \eta^2 = .004$) and the repeated measures ANOVA ($F = 18.1, p < .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .012$). Finally, the treatments’ combined effect on agreement with the statement “Journalists are too close to powerful groups to inform ordinary people” is also significant (treated groups average = 2.87; control group average = 2.72; simple ANOVA $F = 5.7, p = .017, \eta^2 = .004$; repeated measures ANOVA $F = 13, p < .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .008$). Participants exposed to information about journalist-candidates increased their hostility toward both political and journalistic elites. Support for sovereignty of the people also increased, but the relationship was weaker, and significant only when controlling for pretreatment levels of this attitude.

Disaggregating responses by the four treatments sheds further light on these dynamics. As shown in the right panel of Figure 1, levels of populism were consistently lower in the control group than in each treated group. Populist attitudes were highest among participants exposed to information on journalist-

candidates running for all three parties. The simple ANOVA reveals that the relationship between the group to which participants were randomly assigned and the index of populism is significant ($F = 2.82, p = .024, \eta^2 = .004$). The Tukey's Honest Significance Test, however, shows that the only significant difference is that between participants who saw information about candidates running for all the major parties and the control group ($\Delta = .57$ [95% C.I. = .04, 1.11], $p = .027$). The repeated measures ANOVA including the pretreatment value of the index confirms that the relationship is significant ($F = 8.55, p < .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .007$). The Tukey test shows significant differences for three pairwise comparisons among participants exposed to information about journalists running for (a) all major parties ($\Delta = .57$ [95% C.I. = .26, .88], $p < .001$), (b) FI ($\Delta = .51$ [95% C.I. = .21, .82], $p < .001$), and (c) M5S ($\Delta = .35$ [95% C.I. = .04, .65], $p = .015$), all compared with the control group. The difference between participants exposed to information about journalists running for all parties and for PD was also significant ($\Delta = .35$ [95% C.I. = .04, .66], $p = .015$).

The results are, again, congruent across different measures of populism. With respect to "Politicians in Parliament must follow the will of the people," the differences across experimental groups are not significant in the simple ANOVA ($F = 1.71, p = .14, \eta^2 = .004$) but they are in the repeated measures ANOVA ($F = 3.4, p = .008, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .009$). The Tukey test for the repeated measures ANOVA highlights significant differences between participants exposed to information about journalist-candidates in all parties and (a) the control group ($\Delta = .14$ [95% C.I. = .01, .28], $p = .04$) and (b) participants exposed to information on journalist-candidates running for PD ($\Delta = .14$ [95% C.I. = .01, .28], $p = .04$). Similarly, as regards "I would rather be represented by an ordinary person than by a career politician," the differences are not significant in the simple ANOVA ($F = 1.95, p = .099, \eta^2 = .005$), but they are in the repeated measures ANOVA ($F = 5.51, p < .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .014$). The Tukey test for the latter analysis highlights significant differences between participants exposed to information about journalists running for (a) all the major parties ($\Delta = .25$ [95% C.I. = .09, .40], $p < .001$), (b) M5S ($\Delta = .20$ [95% C.I. = .05, .38], $p = .003$), and (c) FI ($\Delta = -.17$ [95% C.I. = .02, .32], $p = .019$), compared with the control group. Finally, agreement with the statement "Journalists are too close to powerful groups to inform ordinary people" differed significantly based on the groups participants were assigned to (simple ANOVA $F = 2.71, p = .029, \eta^2 = .007$), but the only significant pairwise difference was between those who saw information about FI and the control group ($\Delta = .22$ [95% C.I. = .02, .43], $p = .02$). Again, the relationship was stronger in the repeated measures ANOVA ($F = 6.18, p < .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .016$). The Tukey test reveals significant differences between participants exposed to information about (a) all parties ($\Delta = .19$ [95% C.I. = .05, .33], $p = .002$) and (b) FI ($\Delta = .22$ [95% C.I. = .09, .36], $p < .001$), compared with the control group, as well as between FI and PD ($\Delta = .14$ [95% C.I. = .003, .28], $p = .04$).

The results thus confirm that exposure to information on journalist-candidates significantly increased levels of populism, particularly antielitism directed toward both politicians and journalists. Overall, then, H1 is supported.

Effects of Journalist-Candidates on Voting Intentions

Figure 2 illustrates the relationship between exposure to information on journalist-candidates and the PTV for the parties that recruited them (H2). Information on journalists running for a party did not increase the PTV for that party, with the partial exception of PD. The relationship between exposure to the

treatment and the PTV for PD is not significant in the simple ANOVA ($F = 1.85, p = .12, \eta^2 = .006$) but is significant in the repeated measures ANOVA ($F = 6.7, p < .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .021$). A Tukey test reveals four significant differences in pairwise comparisons from the latter analysis. Compared with the control group, participants saw their probability to vote for PD increase when they were told about journalists running for (a) PD ($\Delta = .39$ [95% C.I. = .01, .77], $p = .037$) and (b) M5S ($\Delta = .38$ [95% C.I. = .02, .76], $p = .036$). However, when participants were told that all major parties were fielding journalist-candidates, they were less likely to vote for PD than those who were told about journalists running only for (a) PD ($\Delta = -.56$ [95% C.I. = $-.94, -.19$], $p < .001$) and (b) M5S ($\Delta = -.56$ [95% C.I. = $-.93, -.19$], $p < .001$).

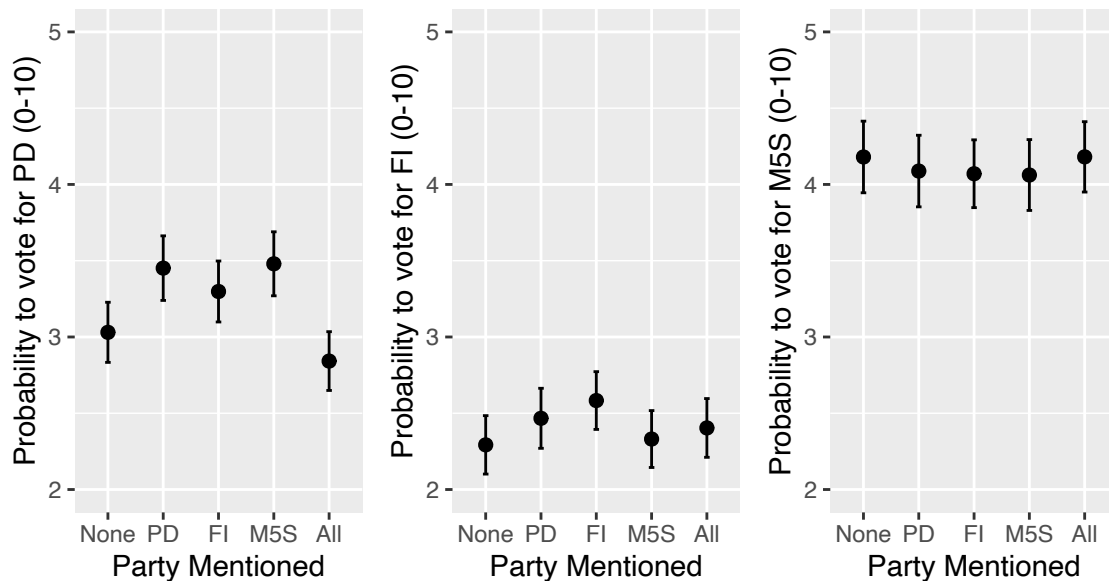


Figure 2. Probability to vote for PD, FI, and M5S conditional on exposure to information on journalist-candidates (means with standard errors).

The relationship between exposure to any treatment and the probability to vote for FI, however, is not significant, irrespective of whether we control for pretreatment levels of PTV (repeated measures ANOVA $F = 1.63, p = .17, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .005$) or not (simple ANOVA $F = .37, p = .83, \eta^2 = .001$). The same goes for the probability to vote for M5S (repeated measures ANOVA $F = 1, p = .40, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .003$; simple ANOVA $F = .07, p = .99, \eta^2 = .000$).

Overall, then, the data do not provide sufficient support for H2. There is no substantial evidence that information about journalist-candidates increased participants' probability to vote for FI and M5S. Only information about journalist-candidates running for PD and M5S slightly increased PD's electoral chances.

One possible explanation for this finding is rooted in political psychology. Left-wing PD voters may exhibit lower levels of need for closure or aversion toward ambiguity (Webster & Kruglanski, 1994), as is generally common among progressives (Jost, 2017). Since journalist-candidates introduce ambiguity in the

distinction between two normally separate roles, information on reporters running for their preferred party may have been less disturbing for ambiguity-tolerant PD voters (Young, 2019). A second possibility is that PD supporters might have been well disposed toward the particular journalist-candidates recruited by their party and thus reacted favorably to information about them, which may not have been the case for the journalist-candidates fielded by the other two parties. By the same token, M5S supporters may have reacted negatively when they were told that the party that previously scolded journalists for cozying up with politicians had also selected journalist-candidates. Turning toward PD, which to some extent competed for the M5S vote, may have been a way to channel this frustration.

Limitations

Before discussing the main implications of the findings, some limitations need to be acknowledged.

First, this is a single-country case study, whose results may not automatically apply to other political and media systems. Replicating this study in countries with different characteristics, ideally in a comparative research design, would shed further light on the boundary conditions of the effects documented here.

Second, the nonprobability sample employed for this study does not warrant generalizations of the results to the Italian voting-age population, although research demonstrates the external validity of experiments conducted on these types of samples (Mullinix et al., 2015).

Third, the experimental manipulations cannot disentangle the effects of being exposed to information about *any* journalist-candidates running for any party from the effects of the *specific* journalist-candidates who ran for the three parties that recruited them in 2018. Five of six of the journalists were men, a condition that reflected the reality on the ground but may have affected the results. The effects, or lack thereof, may be partly explained by the celebrity status and public personae of some of the journalist-candidates mentioned in the treatments rather than their being journalists per se. Future research should more precisely disentangle the mechanisms that may explain the results documented here.

Fourth, the posttreatment measures of populism included only three items and covered only two dimensions—antielitism, targeted toward both politicians and journalists, and popular sovereignty. Future research should employ richer scales to better capture this complex attitudinal syndrome.

Fifth, as shown by the low η^2 coefficients reported above, the effects detected, albeit significant in some cases, are all of small magnitude (as is common in communication research and in studies of the effects of information on populist attitudes; see Morisi & Wagner, 2021; Rains, Levine, & Weber, 2018). However, these effects have been estimated based on a single exposure to a relatively mild treatment, so repeated exposure to more attention-grabbing and emotion-eliciting information on journalist-candidates may lead to larger cumulative effects (Funder & Ozer, 2019). As journalist-candidates tend to feature heavily in campaign news coverage, this is not an unrealistic scenario.

Finally, cross-sectional data cannot establish whether the effects persist over time. Once elected, journalists may be increasingly perceived as professional politicians, which might gradually reduce their novelty and, thus, their effects on public opinion.

Conclusions

When journalists run for office, they expose the complexity of the media-politics nexus in contemporary democracies, the porous boundaries between journalists and the power holders they cover, the fragility of journalistic professional standards, and the value of key democratic norms. Journalist-candidates may have some important effects on citizens and democracy.

On the one hand, this study has not provided any systematic evidence that political parties that recruit journalist-candidates reap substantial electoral rewards. To be sure, even if the null effects detected in this survey experiment held in the real world, there might still be other valid reasons for parties to coopt journalists. First, journalist-candidates generate news coverage, as their former colleagues are likely to see them as newsworthy. Second, journalists possess relevant skills in news management and communication, as well as valuable relationships with news organizations and other journalists, which can benefit their party and fellow party candidates. Third, some journalists develop domain expertise in the beats they cover (for instance, in business, economics, or public health), and parties may find such knowledge useful in government. Fourth, parties may recruit journalists to signal support for their democratic functions or to reward their advocacy work. While this study cannot provide any insight into the *indirect* and *nonelectoral* benefits of recruiting journalist-candidates, it suggests that parties may not stand to gain substantial *direct electoral* advantages. Short-term party self-interest alone does not justify this practice.

In contrast, journalist-candidates should be cause for concern from the standpoint of democratic support. By boosting citizens' populist attitudes, particularly antielite sentiment, journalist-candidates may compound populist challenges to the legitimacy of representative institutions (Kriesi & Pappas, 2015; Norris & Inglehart, 2019). Voters become more hostile toward both political and journalistic elites when they see that politicians coopt those who are supposed to scrutinize them and that journalists become part of the power circles they are meant to hold accountable. In other words, citizens remain attached to normative ideals that espouse the importance of the Fourth Estate as a check on elected officials. From this perspective, increases in negative evaluations of political and journalistic elites, albeit consistent with populist ideology and rhetoric, may be adequate responses to problematic behaviors by those groups.

Whether the theories and findings discussed here apply only to journalists or extend to other professional groups is another intriguing puzzle. Parties occasionally enlist nonpolitical candidates drawn from various elites—businesspeople, corporate executives, scientists, civil society leaders, comedians, sportspeople, artists, and officers of independent authorities such as the judiciary, civil service, and regulatory bodies. Do voters punish these choices in similar ways as documented here for journalist-candidates, or is journalism exceptional in the responsibilities the public attributes to it? While scholars have explored the changing "boundaries of journalism" (Carlson & Lewis, 2015), answering these questions may help illuminate the "boundaries of politics" in contemporary democracies.

Future research could also apply the framework presented here to analyze how citizens respond to political compromise and reconciliation. When a formerly independent candidate joins an official party, or when a radical politician collaborates with moderate rivals, do citizens conclude that all elites end up rubbing one another's shoulders and that populists and outsiders are right to denounce cooperation as collusion? This a key question for democratic governance, which to some degree requires intralite negotiation and compromise.

This study makes conceptual and empirical contributions to research on populism and the media. So far, scholars have investigated mainly how news media provide visibility to populist parties and issues (*populism through the media*) and how news coverage amplifies populist claims and rhetoric (*populism by the media*). The results presented here highlight a third avenue, *populism vindicated by the media*, which results from media representatives' conducts that may be seen as validating populist claims. Journalist-candidates breach the separation between journalism and politics, which is one of the foundational norms of democracy that populists aim to dismantle. As explained by Waisbord (2018), "Populism has no room for the notion that speaking truth demands a healthy distance from politics. . . No one can be outside politics. Everyone is in one camp or the other. Autonomy is false" (p. 30). The results of this study suggest that citizens recognize journalist-candidates as vindicating these key tenets of the populist worldview.

Journalists will no doubt continue to foray into electoral politics in the future. However, to the extent that voters take notice, they do not treat a journalist as just another candidate. In the eyes of citizens, reporters who pursue political careers forsake their professional duty to scrutinize power holders and, thus, weaken important democratic norms. To some degree, voters consider the legitimate career choices of journalist-candidates as betrayal of journalism's societal responsibilities.

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