

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Public trust and the populist leader: A theoretical argument

David Vitale¹  and Raphaël Girard²

¹Warwick Law School, Library Road, Coventry, CV4 7AL, United Kingdom

²Exeter Law School, Amory Building, Rennes Drive, Exeter, EX4 4RJ, United Kingdom

Email: david.vitale@warwick.ac.uk

Abstract

This article adds nuance to current understandings of the relationship between the populist leader and the public by using the concept of trust. Merging the literature on populism with the growing scholarship on trust from philosophy, psychology and other social sciences, it argues that following on from the populist leader's appeals to similarity, the populist–public relationship involves an intertwining of two forms of public trust: the public's trust in the populist and the public's trust in itself (what we term 'public self-trust'). Contrary to what political and constitutional theorists have recognized as a tension between public self-trust and the public's trust in its political representatives, we contend based on the scholarship on trust that in the populist–public relationship these two forms of trust can be mutually reinforcing. This mutual reinforcement, we suggest, has the potential to create a positive feedback loop of public trust that, given the value of public trust to political leaders, empowers the populist.

Keywords: authenticity; populism; public law; similarity; trust

1. Introduction

It has been suggested in the populism literature that the people have lost trust in established government.¹ They have become disenchanted with its officials and institutions (including mainstream political parties) in what some have called a 'crisis of

¹See M Canovan, 'Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy' (1999) *Political Studies* 2; P Norris, *Radical Right: Voters and Parties in the Electoral Market* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005); A Masala, 'Populism as the Crisis of Political Trust', in A Fabris (ed), *Trust: A Philosophical Approach* (Springer, Cham, 2020). For relevant work of a more empirical nature, see C Fieschi and P Heywood, 'Trust, Cynicism and Populist Anti-Attitudes' (2004) 9 *Journal of Political Ideologies* 289; D Doyle, 'The Legitimacy of Political Institutions: Explaining Contemporary Populism in Latin America' (2011) 44 *Comparative Political Studies* 1447; A Akkerman, A Zaslove and B Spruyt, "'We the People" or "We the Peoples"? A Comparison of Support for the Populist Radical Right and Populist Radical Left in the Netherlands' (2017) 23 *Swiss Political Science Review* 377; SM Van Hauwert and S Van Kessel, 'Beyond Protest and Discontent: A Cross-National Analysis of the Effect of Populist Attitudes and Issue Positions on Populist Party Support' (2018) 57 *European Journal of Political Research* 68; Y Algan et al, *Les origines du populisme: Enquête sur un schisme politique et social* (Seuil, Paris, 2019).

© The Author(s), 2022. Published by Cambridge University Press. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

representation'.² This generates an opening that the populist leader can exploit. At the same time, commentators on populism have recognized (sometimes explicitly, but usually implicitly) a trust that exists between the public and the populist leader. Populist leaders are said to portray themselves as 'one of the people', which persuades the people to perceive them as similar to the people (and in turn to perceive them as 'authentic').³ Following on from these populist appeals to similarity, the people then put 'an exaggerated amount of faith',⁴ or 'unquestioned trust', in the populist leader.⁵

Despite its recognition of such a trust between the public and the populist, the populism literature has done relatively little work on theorizing the functioning of this trust, including with reference to scholarship on trust from other disciplines.⁶ Antonio Masala, for example, has recently emphasized that, 'quite surprisingly, the problem of how populism compares to the issue of political trust seems extremely understudied'.⁷ This trust has significant implications for the relationship between the public and the populist leader (the 'populist–public relationship'). There is a broad consensus that public trust is valuable to political leaders because it can lend public support to their policies and promote compliance from the public without coercion.⁸ For these reasons, public trust is regarded as a 'political good'.⁹

²Canovan (n 1); H Kriesi, 'Is There a Crisis of Democracy in Europe?' (2020) 61 *Politische Vierteljahresschrift* 237; P Mair, 'Populist Democracy vs Party Democracy', in Y Mény and Y Surel (eds), *Democracies and the Populist Challenge* (Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2002); KM Roberts, 'Populism and Political Representation', in C Lancaster and N van de Walle (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of the Politics of Development* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2018); KM Roberts, 'Crises of Representation and Populist Challenges to Liberal Democracy' (2019) 4 *Chinese Political Science Review* 188; N Urbinati, 'A Revolt against Intermediary Bodies' (2015) 22 *Constellations* 47.

³F Panizza, 'Introduction: *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*', in F Panizza (ed), *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy* (Verso, New York, 2005) 24–28; C de la Torre, *Populist Seduction in Latin America* (2nd ed, Ohio University Press, Athens, OH, 2010) xix, 10, 66, 109; L Corrias, 'Populism in a Constitutional Key: Constituent Power, Popular Sovereignty and Constitutional Identity' (2016) 12 *European Constitutional Law Review* 6, 23–24; E Peruzzotti, 'El populismo como ejercicio de poder gubernamental y la amenaza de hibridación de la democracia liberal' (2018) 11 *Revista SAAP* 213, 215–216; M Valverde, 'Forms of Veridiction in Politics and Culture: Avowal in Today's Jargon of Authenticity' (2018) 11 *Behemoth* 96; M Kuo, 'Against Instantaneous Democracy' (2019) 17 *ICON* 554, 558–59; N Walker, 'Populism and Constitutional Tension' (2019) 17 *ICON* 515, 523, 527–28; C Fieschi, *Populocracy* (Agenda, Newcastle upon Tyne, 2019) 35–39, 157–616; P Diehl, 'Twisting Representation', in C de la Torre (ed), *Routledge Handbook of Global Populism* (Routledge, New York, 2019) 137–39; P Rosanvallon, *Le siècle du populisme : Histoire, théorie, critique* (Seuil, Paris, 2020) 153–55; M Kuo, 'Authenticity: The Ultimate Challenge in the Quest for Lasting Constitutional Legitimacy' (2020) 41 *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies* 265.

⁴G Pasquino, 'Populism and Democracy', in D Albertazzi and D McDonnell (eds), *Twenty-First Century Populism: The Spectre of Western European Democracy* (Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2008) 28.

⁵P Diehl, 'Populist Twist: The Relationship between the Leader and the People in Populism', in D Castiglione and J Pollak (eds), *Creating Political Presence: The New Politics of Democratic Representation* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2018) 112, 126; Diehl (n 3) 137–39. See also Masala (n 1).

⁶Most of the literature linking populism and trust is empirical in nature.

⁷Masala (n 1) 188.

⁸VA Chanley, TJ Rudolph and WM Rahn, 'The Origins and Consequences of Public Trust in Government: A Time Series Analysis' (2000) 64 *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 239; RJ Dalton, *Democratic Challenges, Democratic Choices: The Erosion of Political Support in Advanced Industrial Democracies* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2004) 159; P Norris, 'Conclusions: The Growth of Critical Citizens and Its Consequences', in P Norris (ed), *Critical Citizens: Global Support for Democratic Government* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1999) 264.

⁹JR Bruno, 'Vigilance and Confidence: Jeremy Bentham, Publicity, and the Dialectic of Political Trust and Distrust' (2017) 111 *American Political Science Review* 295, 297.

We seek to help fill this gap in the populism literature by merging that literature with the growing scholarship on trust from philosophy, psychology and other social sciences. Based on this merging, we argue that following on from the populist's appeals to similarity, the populist–public relationship involves an intertwining of two principal forms of public trust: the public's trust in the populist and the public's trust in itself (what we term 'public self-trust').¹⁰

Public self-trust is an understudied form of trust. So, in developing our argument, we also aim to advance conceptual understandings of public self-trust in the political context. In commenting on representative government, political and constitutional theorists have made vague references to public self-trust, recognizing what they regard as a tension between it and the public's trust in its political representatives ('political trust').¹¹ With greater public self-trust, it has been suggested, comes reduced political trust. James Bryce, in the *American Commonwealth*, warned that public 'self-confidence may easily pass into jealousy of delegated power, an undervaluing of skill and knowledge, a belief that any citizen is good enough for any political work'.¹² Alexis de Tocqueville, in *Democracy in America*, observed that when the people are 'placed on an equal footing' (as he saw American democratic participants), they 'are constantly brought back to their own reason as the most obvious and proximate source of truth', the consequence of this being that 'not only [is] confidence in this or that man ... destroyed, but the disposition to trust the authority of any man whatsoever'.¹³

While public self-trust may be in tension with public trust in *established* government actors, we contend that this tension does not arise in the populist–public relationship. Quite the reverse of tension, we submit that public self-trust and public trust in the populist can be mutually reinforcing: public self-trust can reinforce the public's trust in the populist, and vice versa. And this mutual reinforcement has the potential to create a positive feedback loop of public trust that, given the value of public trust to political leaders, empowers the populist: it can assist them in garnering public support for their policies and promoting public compliance.

To be clear, our argument in this article is theoretical rather than empirical. The scholarship on trust comprises two principal categories. First, there is a body of theoretical work. Scholars across the social sciences have conceptualized what trust is, have theorized how we can expect trust to function, and have made theoretically grounded predictions about the consequences of increased and decreased trust. Second, scientists have conducted empirical investigations of trust. In an effort to test untested theoretical arguments

¹⁰We say 'principal' forms of public trust because, as the literature on trust recognizes, trust arises in a rich social context or networks of relationships, and so other forms of public trust are undoubtedly involved: for a summary of this network understanding, see D Vitale, 'A Trust Network Model for Social Rights Fulfilment' (2018) 38 *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies* 706.

¹¹A de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (Henry Reeve trans, 1945) vol. 2, 4 [trans. of: *De la démocratie en Amérique* (first published 1840)], cited in R Levy, 'Breaking the Constitutional Deadlock: Lessons from Deliberative Experiments in Constitutional Change' (2010) 34 *Melbourne University Law Review* 805, 825; J Bryce, *The American Commonwealth* (1888), cited in A Vermeule, *The Constitution of Risk* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2014) 104. For the purpose of this article, we are concerned with political trust as public trust in political representatives as opposed to public trust in the system: for more on this distinction, see D Easton, *A Systems Analysis of Political Life* (Wiley, New York, 1965); D Easton, 'A Re-assessment of the Concept of Political Support' (1975) 5 *British Journal of Political Science* 435.

¹²Bryce (n 11).

¹³de Tocqueville (n 11).

or to understand more generally the social determinants and consequences of trust, they have examined the relationship between trust and a variety of variables. Our argument here falls into the former category of research. It does not offer an empirical investigation of trust. We advance, rather, a theoretical argument about how we can expect trust to function in the populist–public relationship. We root that argument in both the theoretical and empirical research on trust, extrapolating from the arguments developed and findings made in that research to the specific context of the populist–public relationship. Moreover, the extent to which our argument could be empirically investigated is questionable. For example, traditional measures of public trust (i.e. surveys) are often challenged for their ‘conceptual confusion’ (given different understandings of trust and its relationship with other related concepts like reliance and confidence) and for not accounting for the context specificity of trust (something we discuss briefly later).¹⁴ These difficulties are compounded by our suggestion that different forms of trust can mutually reinforce one another.

The article is organized as follows. In Part II, we offer a brief summary of how we understand ‘populism’ (as well as the ‘populist’), and the contribution that we seek to make to the populism literature. In Part III, we explain the notions of political trust and public self-trust, describing what it means for members of the public to both have trust in the populist and have trust in themselves. Then, in Part IV, we use the scholarship on trust to clarify how it is possible for public self-trust and public trust in the populist to mutually reinforce one another. This is followed by Part V, in which we describe the positive feedback loop of public trust that we envisage being created, along with its limitations. Section VI concludes the article.

II. What is populism? And who is the populist?

The populism literature offers countless definitions of the term. Cas Mudde, for example, defines populism as a ‘thin-centred 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 *volonté générale* (general will) of the people’.¹⁵ Jan-Werner Müller defines populism in his book *What is Populism?* as ‘a particular moralistic imagination of politics, a way of perceiving the political world that sets a morally pure and unified – but ultimately fictional – people against elites who are deemed corrupt or in some other way morally inferior’.¹⁶ Populism has also been defined, however, as a discourse,¹⁷ a mode of persuasion,¹⁸ a political strategy,¹⁹ a political

¹⁴ See KS Cook, R Hardin and M Levi, *Cooperation Without Trust?* (Russell Sage, New York, 2005) 164.

¹⁵ C Mudde, ‘The Populist Zeitgeist’ (2004) 39 *Government and Opposition* 541, 543.

¹⁶ J Müller, *What is Populism?* (University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, PA, 2016) 19–20.

¹⁷ P Aslanidis, ‘Is Populism an Ideology? A Refutation and a New Perspective’ (2016) 64 *Political Studies* 88; B de Cleen and Y Stavrakakis, ‘Distinctions and Articulations: A Discourse Theoretical Framework for the Study of Populism and Nationalism’ (2017) 24 *Javnost* 301, 310.

¹⁸ M Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion: An American History* (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 1998) 3, 5.

¹⁹ K Weyland, ‘Clarifying a Contested Concept: Populism in the Study of Latin American Politics’ (2001) 34 *Comparative Politics* 1, 14; H Betz, ‘Conditions Favoring the Success and Failure of Radical Right-Wing Populist Parties in Contemporary Democracies’, in Y Mény and Y Surel (eds), *Democracies and the Populist Challenge* (Palgrave, Basingstoke, 2002) 198; RS Barr, ‘Populism as a Political Strategy’, in de la Torre (n 3) 44.

style (or performance),²⁰ a political logic,²¹ a political phenomenon,²² a particular type of constitutional pathology,²³ a mode of political identification,²⁴ a representative process,²⁵ and a theory of social choice,²⁶ among others. At the same time, populism assumes various forms.²⁷

Given the many definitions and varieties of populism, our aim in this article is not to propose yet another definition or *re*-definition of the concept. It is, rather, to use the concept of trust to add nuance to current understandings of the populist–public relationship, relying on a Weberian ‘ideal-type’ of the populism concept. This ideal-type of populism, based on our reading of the literature, comprises two principal elements: first, a political frame divided into two opposing groups – between *gouvernants* and *gouvernés*, between *them* and *us*, more specifically between the ruling elite (or oligarchy) and the ‘pure’, ‘real’ or ‘ordinary’²⁸ people; and second, a rejection of mediated politics, and its intermediaries, as illegitimately and unjustly thwarting the expression of the popular (or general) will, the ‘will of the people’.²⁹

That said, the ideal-type of populism may assume different forms, depending on the circumstances. Our analysis therefore may not apply equally to all varieties of populism, right or left, bundled or unbundled.³⁰ In particular, our analysis is tied to the idea of the ‘populist’ or ‘populist leader’; however, not all populist movements or populist parties have a clear, strong and influential leader.³¹ By ‘populist’ we mean a leader who demonstrates characteristics or uses methods that are consistent with our understanding of populism as outlined above. It is important to recognize, however, that populism is not

²⁰B Moffitt and S Tormey, ‘Rethinking Populism: Politics, Mediatisation and Political Style’ (2014) 62 *Political Studies* 381, 381, 387, 389; B Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation* (Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA, 2017) 35. See also T Ginsburg and AZ Huq, *How to Save a Constitutional Democracy* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2018) 72.

²¹JB Ludis, *The Populist Explosion: How the Great Recession Transformed American and European Politics* (Columbia Global Reports, New York, 2016) 14.

²²de la Torre (n 3) 199.

²³NW Barber, ‘Populist Leaders and Political Parties’ (2019) 20 *German Law Journal* 129.

²⁴F Panizza, ‘What is Contested and What is Not in the Debate about Populism’, paper presented at the LSE Graduate Conference on Populism, 3 November 2017, referring to O Reyes, ‘Skinhead Conservatism: A Failed Populist Project, in Populism and the Mirror of Democracy’, in Panizza (n 3) 99.

²⁵N Urbinati, Me, *The People: How Populism Transforms Democracy* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 2019) 5.

²⁶M Tushnet and B Bugarcic, ‘Populism and Constitutionalism: An Essay on Definitions and Their Implications’ (2020) (working paper; accessible on SSRN).

²⁷B Bugarcic, ‘Could Populism Be Good for Constitutional Democracy?’ (2019) 15 *Annual Review of Law and Social Science* 41; CM Koch, ‘Varieties of Populism and the Challenges to Global Constitutionalism: Dangers, Promises and Implications’ (2021) 10 *Global Constitutionalism* 400; Tushnet and Bugarcic (n 25); M Tushnet, ‘Varieties of Populism’ (2019) 20 *German Law Journal* 382.

²⁸Other formulations include the ‘forgotten’ or ‘silent’ people.

²⁹For further elaboration of this ‘ideal-type’, see R Girard, ‘Populism, “the People” and Popular Sovereignty’, in M Cahill et al (eds), *Constitutional Change and Popular Sovereignty: Populism, Politics and the Law in Ireland* (Routledge, New York, 2020).

³⁰See D Fontana, ‘Unbundling Populism’ (2018) 65 *UCLA Law Review* 1482.

³¹One may think, for example, of anti-establishment, grassroots movements such as the Tea Party movement in the United States, Occupy Wall Street or the *Gilets jaunes* in France. Moreover, regarding political parties, some left-wing parties often characterized as ‘populist’, such as Podemos in Spain and SYRIZA in Greece, tend to be closer to leaderless grassroots movements than political parties singlehandedly led by a strong and influential leader.

all-or-nothing, but rather a matter of degree.³² Most, and perhaps all, democratic leaders demonstrate characteristics, or use methods, that we may characterize as ‘populist’. Thus, the ‘populist’, as we use the term in this article, captures many different types of leaders, although some will fit more easily than others owing to such characteristics or methods being more prevalent.

Lastly, we do not aim to make any strong normative claims about the value of populism. While many writers on populism have adopted a critical stance on the phenomenon and its implications, notably on constitutionalism,³³ others – most famously scholars of the Essex school, such as Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe – have characterized populism (more specifically its left-wing variant) as an ‘emancipatory force’ that is beneficial for democracy.³⁴ Populism has likewise been praised for its mobilization effects.³⁵ Some writers have even criticized the very use of the term ‘populism’ for its negative, pejorative and even disqualifying connotations.³⁶ Recognizing the risk of ‘self-idealization’ by ‘good democrats’,³⁷ we thus strive in this article not to make value judgments regarding populism.

III. What are political trust and public self-trust?

To understand both political trust and public self-trust, we must first understand trust more broadly. Trust is a relational concept.³⁸ This means that trust is not a disposition of

³²See B Stanley, ‘The Thin Ideology of Populism’ (2008) 13 *Journal of Political Ideologies* 95, 108; Barber (n 22) 134; Diehl (n 3) 131. See also TS Pappas, ‘Modern Populism: Research Advances, Conceptual and Methodological Pitfalls, and the Minimal Definition’, *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics* (2016), available at <<https://oxfordre.com/politics/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228637-e-17>>.

³³J Müller, ‘Populism and Constitutionalism’, in CR Kaltwasser et al (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Populism* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2017); P Blokker, ‘Populism as a Constitutional Project’ (2019) 17 *ICON* 535; P Blokker, ‘Populist Constitutionalism’, in de la Torre (n 3).

³⁴See E Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (Verso, New York, 2007); C Mouffe, ‘The “End of Politics” and the Challenge of Right-wing Populism, in Populism and the Mirror of Democracy’, in Panizza (n 3); C Mouffe, *For a Left Populism* (Verso, New York, 2019).

³⁵RS Jansen, ‘Populist Mobilization: A New Theoretical Approach to Populism’ (2011) 29 *Sociological Theory* 75, 82.

³⁶For Jacques Rancière, for instance, critiques of populism hide a modern expression of the hatred of democracy: ‘ce nom commode masque et révèle en même temps le grand souhait de l’oligarchie: gouverner sans peuple, c’est-à-dire sans division du peuple: gouverner sans politique’. See J Rancière, *La haine de la démocratie* (Fabrique, Paris, 2005) 88. See also C Colliot-Thélène, ‘Quel est le peuple du populisme?’, in C Colliot-Thélène and F Guénard (eds), *Peuples et populisme* (PUF, Paris, 2014) 11. That said, it is also worth noting that many, especially in the United States, tend to perceive the epithet in a more positive way.

³⁷Mouffe (n 34) 55. See also C de la Torre, ‘Global Populism: Histories, Trajectories, Problems and Challenges’, in de la Torre (n 3) 7.

³⁸SP Shapiro, ‘The Social Control of Impersonal Trust’ (1987) 93 *American Journal of Sociology* 623; J Coleman, *Foundations of Social Theory* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1994); KS Cook and R Hardin, ‘Norms of Cooperativeness and Networks of Trust’, in M Hechter and K Opps (eds), *Social Norms* (Russell Sage, New York, 2001); KS Cook and A Gerbasi, ‘Trust’, in P Hedstrom and PS Bearman (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Analytical Sociology* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2009). Although by far the most prevalent view in the literature, it is not universally accepted that trust arises in a three-part relationship: see P Faulkner, ‘The Problem of Trust’, in P Faulkner and T Simpson (eds), *The Philosophy of Trust* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2017).

an individual actor, but rather a property of a social relationship. That ‘trust relationship’ comprises three parts – a trusted actor (or trustee) (A), a trusting actor (or truster) (B), and some defined matter (X) – where the relationship takes the form of ‘B trusts A with respect to X’.³⁹

While it is well recognized that trust operates at multiple levels, including the affective and behavioral levels, our focus in this article is on trust at the cognitive level. In other words, we are interested in trust at the level of thoughts or beliefs held by the truster (as opposed to the truster’s emotional response or actions towards the trustee). Consequently, we define trust in terms of expectations that are held by the truster (B) about the behavior of the trustee (A). To say that B ‘trusts’ A with respect to the relevant matter (X) means, at least very generally, that B holds positive expectations about A with respect to X: specifically, B holds positive expectations about A’s motivations towards B, and about A’s competence.⁴⁰ In the case of political trust, for example, B in the three-part relationship represents members of the public, and A represents the public’s political representatives – either established government actors or the populist. So to say that the public trusts an established government actor or the populist means the public has positive expectations about that actor’s motivations and competence.

Self-trust is a form of trust.⁴¹ Hence, like trust, self-trust is relational.⁴² In the case of self-trust, however, the truster (B) and the trustee (A) are one and the same. The truster is therefore in a relationship with their own self.⁴³ That said, the relationship is of the same form as with other cases of trust: the relationship thus takes the form of ‘the truster trusts their own self with respect to X’. In the specific case of public self-trust, the truster and the trustee represent a member of the public, and what is at issue is the trust held by that member of the public in their own self.

To be clear, by public self-trust we do not mean the trust that members of the public have in one another – what we may call ‘social trust’. Public self-trust refers, rather, to the trust that each member of the public has in their own self, generalized across a given population. Consequently, to say that the public trusts itself (or has self-trust) signifies that each member of the public, generally speaking, trusts their own self. It does not mean that each member of the public trusts their fellow members of the public. That would constitute social trust. And while we recognize that social trust has relevance for political trust, that is not our focus in this article.⁴⁴

³⁹Cook and Hardin (n 38); Cook and Gerbasi (n 38).

⁴⁰For conceptual work supporting this general understanding of the concept of trust, see B Barber, *The Logic and Limits of Trust* (Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, 1983) 15–21; N Luhmann, ‘Familiarity, Confidence, Trust: Problems and Alternatives’, in D Gambetta (ed), *Trust: Making and Breaking Cooperative Relations* (Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1988) 97; P Sztompka, *Trust: A Sociological Theory* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999) 26; J Barbalet, ‘A Characterization of Trust, and Its Consequences’ (2009) 38 *Theory and Society* 367, 371–72.

⁴¹T Govier, ‘Self-Trust, Autonomy, and Self-Esteem’ (1993) *Hypatia* 99,105–06; C McLeod, *Self-Trust and Reproductive Autonomy* (MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2002) 37.

⁴²T Govier, *Dilemmas of Trust* (McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montreal, 1998) 91; K Jones, ‘The Politics of Intellectual Self-Trust’ (2012) 26 *Social Epistemology* 237, 245. See also S Goering, ‘Postnatal Reproductive Autonomy: Promoting Relational Autonomy and Self-Trust in New Parents’ (2009) 23 *Bioethics* 9, 14–15.

⁴³Goering (n 42) 14.

⁴⁴For a general discussion of social trust and political trust, see K Newton, ‘Social and Political Trust in Established Democracies’, in Norris (n 8) 179.

For a truster to trust their own self means they have positive expectations about their motivations and competence.⁴⁵ A truster with self-trust expects that they will have the integrity, willingness and ability to do something: they expect that they have the character to do it, and are willing and competent to do it, having both the knowledge and skillset required. Self-trust is context-specific, however, with the context defined by X.⁴⁶ As philosopher Trudy Govier explains, ‘No one trusts herself absolutely and in every respect’; we trust ourselves, rather, in specific domains or with defined tasks.⁴⁷ Accordingly, whether a truster expects that they will have the necessary motivations and competence depends on the relevant context.

The context within which we are dealing in this article – in relation to both political trust and public self-trust – is politics, broadly defined. More specifically, the relevant context is political decision-making. The political decisions that are at issue pertain to a wide array of political areas, ranging from the economy, social welfare and immigration to national security and foreign affairs. In the case of public self-trust, therefore, we are concerned with the trust that members of the public have in themselves in terms of making political decisions of this sort. So, extrapolating from the above discussion, to say that a member of the public trusts their own self with respect to politics means that they expect to have the integrity, willingness and competence to make political decisions of the above-identified sort. They consider that they are a person of sufficient character to make the relevant political decisions, are willing to do so, and are competent in the relevant area, having both the knowledge and the skillset required.

It should be noted that our concept of public self-trust overlaps with the idea of ‘internal political efficacy’.⁴⁸ The latter has been defined as ‘the belief that one has the competences “to understand, and participate effectively, in politics” ... to achieve the desired outcomes by an efficient use of one’s capacities and resources’.⁴⁹ From this definition, we can see that internal political efficacy captures, at least to a significant extent, the competence component of public self-trust. However, public self-trust is broader than internal political efficacy: it additionally has a motivational component, reflecting a person’s expectations about their integrity and willingness to make the relevant political decisions. Thus, the two are related, but not the same.

IV. The mutual reinforcement of public self-trust and public trust in the populist *The public’s ‘similarity-based’ trust in the populist*

To begin our discussion of this mutual reinforcement, we agree with the existing populism literature that the public’s trust in the populist is rooted primarily in the populist’s appeals to similarity. As we have noted, the populist–public relationship involves an element of similarity. Populists portray themselves as ‘one of the people’, persuading the people to

⁴⁵Govier (n 41) 110; K Jones, ‘Trust as an Affective Attitude’ (1996) 107 *Ethics* 4, 7–8.

⁴⁶Govier (n 41) 106; Govier (n 42) 92.

⁴⁷Govier (n 42) 92.

⁴⁸See GV Caprara et al, ‘Perceived Political Self-efficacy: Theory, Assessment, and Applications’ (2009) 39 *European Journal of Social Psychology* 1002; SC Craig, RG Niemi and GE Silver, ‘Political Efficacy and Trust: A Report on the NES Pilot Study Items’ (1990) 12 *Political Behavior* 289; G Rico, M Guinjoan and E Anduiza, ‘Empowered and Enraged: Political Efficacy, Anger and Support for Populism in Europe’ (2020) 59 *European Journal of Political Research* 797.

⁴⁹Rico, Guinjoan and Anduiza (n 48) 799. See also T Kim, ‘The Impact of Election Outcome on Internal Political Efficacy: The Role of Contextual Factors’ (2021) 74 *Electoral Studies* 1, 2.

perceive them as similar to them and in turn as ‘authentic’, in contrast to the ‘unauthentic’ political elite. Through these appeals to similarity (and following on from them, appeals to authenticity), populists encourage the people to identify with them as a leader. Therefore, the people are ‘led to find themselves in the character of the populist leader and thus believe that he is their messenger.’⁵⁰

As an extreme form of such appeals to similarity, some populist leaders claim to be the people’s incarnation. José María Velasco Ibarra, the five-time Ecuadorian President, for example, ‘thought of himself as the embodiment of the people.’⁵¹ Abdalá Bucaram, another former President of Ecuador, also presented himself as the ‘embodiment of the people’s will that stood above and beyond any democratic institution or procedure.’⁵² And more recently, Hugo Chávez frequently used language of this incarnation variety. At a 2012 rally in the state of Anzoátegui, Chávez exclaimed, ‘I am a people, I feel embodied in you!’⁵³

However, populists will not always go so far as to claim that they incarnate the people. That said, they will convey the message that they are the ‘voice of the people’, and consequently the only legitimate representative of the people. Former US President Donald Trump often said in his speeches that he was the ‘voice’ of the ‘forgotten men and women of [the] country’ and that he was ‘with you – the American people.’⁵⁴ In his inaugural address, he claimed that his election meant that ‘we are transferring power from Washington, DC and giving it back to you, the American People.’⁵⁵ He also clearly identified himself as the people – or at least their sole legitimate representative – adding, ‘What truly matters is not which party controls our government, but whether our government is controlled by the people. 20 January 2017 will be remembered as the day the people became the rulers of this nation again.’⁵⁶ Similarly, former British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, flanked with ‘The People’s Government’ signs, said during his election victory speech in December 2019: ‘You [the people of this country] voted for all these things, and it is now this government, the people’s government, it is now our solemn duty to deliver on each and every one of those commitments.’⁵⁷

The populist’s message in this regard can also be implicit. In their communications, the populist will show that they are ‘a person, often with habits and tastes similar to those of the people.’⁵⁸ In doing so, the populist engages in what Pierre Ostiguy has called a ‘flaunting of the low’,⁵⁹ showing the public that they are ‘more authentic than the “old” politicians.’⁶⁰ Bucaram, for instance, drew on ‘popular culture and humor to attack the

⁵⁰Kuo (n 3) 558.

⁵¹de la Torre (n 3) 66.

⁵²Ibid 109 and xix.

⁵³‘Yo soy un pueblo, yo me siento encarnado en ustedes!’ in Bolivariana Televisión, available at <www.youtube.com/watch?v=XPE4ymgVfT8>.

⁵⁴Donald Trump’s 2016 nomination acceptance speech, ‘Full text: Donald Trump 2016 RNC Draft Speech Transcript’ (21 July 2016), available at <www.politico.com/story/2016/07/full-transcript-donald-trump-nomination-acceptance-speech-at-rnc-225974>.

⁵⁵President Donald Trump’s 2016 inaugural address, The White House, ‘The Inaugural Address’ (20 January 2017), available at <www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/the-inaugural-address>.

⁵⁶Trump (n 55).

⁵⁷See ‘Election Results 2019: Boris Johnson’s victory speech in full’ (London, 13 December 2019), available at <www.bbc.co.uk/news/election-2019-50777071>.

⁵⁸Masala (n 1). See also Diehl (n 3) 138–39.

⁵⁹P Ostiguy, ‘Populism: A Socio-Cultural Approach’, in CR Kaltwasser et al (n 33).

⁶⁰Masala (n 1) 193.

well-established “white” elites and champion the dignity and self-worth of his supporters.⁶¹ A more recent example is Trump’s use of Twitter, with his tweets written in simple language and regularly containing misspellings, typos and other linguistic errors.⁶² ‘The strength of Trump’s populist language,’ it is said, ‘lies in its openness ... It’s the way people talk when the inhibitors are off.’⁶³

As noted, the populist’s appeals to similarity encourage the people to identify with them as their leader. To be clear, we do not mean identification in the way that commentators like Ernesto Laclau and Francisco Panizza have used the term. For them, the populist, by serving as an ‘empty signifier’ in tandem with their appeals to similarity, confers a political identity on the people. He ‘constructs and gives meaning to “the people” as a political actor’.⁶⁴ By identification we mean, rather, a second, more ‘personal’ form of identification along the lines described by Paula Diehl. As Diehl has said, this form of identification, stemming from the people’s perception that the populist is similar to them, supplies the populist’s ‘relationship to the people with sympathy and enables the followers to recognize themselves in the leader’.⁶⁵

The populism literature has recognized, implicitly or in some cases explicitly, that owing to such identification, there exists a trust between the public and the populist. Diehl, for instance, has argued that ‘identification provides the ground for political legitimization of the leader’, establishing ‘an emotional bond between leader and people’ and promoting ‘an almost unquestioned trust’.⁶⁶ Antonio Masala has likewise said that in the populist–public relationship, ‘the dynamics of trust ... [move] along the simplistic line of identification, of similarity’.⁶⁷ For Masala, the people reason, ‘I trust those who are similar to me; I choose those who look like me as my representatives, because they know what I need and I can trust them, and only them.’⁶⁸

The psychological literature supports the idea that such identification can form the basis of public trust in the populist. Psychologists call this ‘similarity-based’ trust. It has been shown that individuals are more likely to trust those they perceive as similar to themselves.⁶⁹ The reverse is also true: those who are trusted are seen as more similar to the truster.⁷⁰ Therefore, in telling the public that they are ‘one of the people’, explicitly or implicitly, the populist highlights their similarities to the public. And if the people

⁶¹de la Torre (n 3) xviii.

⁶²M Oppenheim, ‘Trump’s Aides Deliberately “Inserting Grammatical Errors into His Tweets to Mimic His Style”’, *The Independent* (London, 22 May 2018), available at <www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/trump-twitter-typos-aides-insert-white-house-a8363661.html>.

⁶³G Packer, ‘The Left Needs a Language Potent Enough to Counter Trump’, *The Atlantic* (Washington, DC, 6 August 2019), available at <www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/08/language-trump-era/595570>.

⁶⁴Francisco Panizza, ‘Populism and Identification’ in CR Kaltwasser et al (n 33) 406.

⁶⁵Diehl (n 5) 127–28.

⁶⁶See Diehl (n 3) 134, 139.

⁶⁷Masala (n 1) 192.

⁶⁸Ibid.

⁶⁹See C Ziegler and J Golbeck, ‘Investigating Interactions of Trust and Interest Similarity’ (2007) 43 *Decision Support Systems* 460; I Fischer, ‘Friend or Foe: Subjective Expected Relative Similarity as a Determinant of Cooperation’ (2009) 138 *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 341. See also P Öberg, S Oskarsson and T Svensson, ‘Similarity vs. Homogeneity: Contextual Effects in Explaining Trust’ (2011) 3 *European Political Science Review* 345.

⁷⁰See H Farmer, R McKay and M Tsakiris, ‘Trust in Me: Trustworthy Others are Seen as More Physically Similar to the Self’ (2014) 25 *Psychological Science* 290.

perceive the populist to be similar to them, they are more likely, based on the psychological research, to trust the populist.

That said, it should be recognized that the public's trust in the populist is not rooted *exclusively* in such identification. For instance, to the extent that the populist may be characterized as a 'charismatic leader', they may build trust in their followers as such leaders do – 'through personal example and risk taking and through unconventional expertise'.⁷¹ Also, the public's trust in the populist may be rooted in the populist's trustworthiness. They may have shown that they have the relevant motivations and competence, making trust in them 'warranted'⁷² or 'intelligent'.⁷³ But because neither charismatic leadership nor trustworthiness is inherent to populism, we submit that these are not the primary sources of the public's trust in the populist.⁷⁴

Public self-trust can reinforce the public's trust in the populist

Based on our reading of the scholarship on trust, we suggest that public self-trust can reinforce the above 'similarity-based' trust between the public and the populist in two specific ways. The first is via a process that we can call 'trust transfer'. Put simply, it is possible for the people to transfer the trust that they have in themselves onto the populist. This conclusion follows on from applying to the populist–public relationship what has been called 'trust transfer theory'. This theory proposes that a truster's trust in one actor can be transferred onto another actor.⁷⁵ Transfers of trust explain how we draw conclusions about others we do not know when we first meet them. A truster can transfer trust from a person they already know and trust to a person they do not know, and so do not yet trust. This occurs when the latter person is perceived to be related to the former. A successful transfer of trust 'from one entity to another' therefore 'relies on the unknown target being perceived as related to the source of the transferred trust',⁷⁶ with the perception of relatedness by the truster dependent on the perceived similarity of the unknown target to the trusted actor.⁷⁷ If the two are perceived as similar to each other, they will likely be perceived as related, with a transfer of trust being likely.

⁷¹JA Conger, 'Charismatic Leadership', in MG Rumsey (ed), *The Oxford Handbook of Leadership* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2012) 381. See also Max Weber's classic account of charisma in M Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology* 1134 (1922) [edited by G Roth and C Wittich]. On the affinities and dissimilarities between populist leadership and charismatic leadership, see L Viviani, 'A Political Sociology of Populism and Leadership' (2017) 8 *Società Mutamento Politica* 279, 294–97.

⁷²ME Warren, 'Democratic Theory and Trust', in ME Warren (ed), *Democracy and Trust* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999); M Warren, 'Trust and Democracy', in EM Uslaner (ed), *The Oxford Handbook of Social and Political Trust* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2018).

⁷³O O'Neill, *A Question of Trust* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002); O O'Neill, 'Trust, Trustworthiness and Accountability', in N Morris and D Vines (eds), *Capital Failure: Rebuilding Trust in Financial Services* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2014).

⁷⁴C Mudde and CR Kaltwasser, 'Populism and Political Leadership', in RAW Rhodes and P 't Hart (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Political Leadership* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2014). See also Viviani (n 71).

⁷⁵B Uzzi, 'The Sources and Consequences of Embeddedness for the Economic Performance of Organizations: The Network Effect' (1996) 61 *American Sociological Review* 674; K Stewart, 'Trust Transfer on the World Wide Web' (2003) 14 *Organization Science* 5; D Belanche, 'Trust Transfer in the Continued Usage of Public E-Services' (2014) 51 *Information & Management* 627.

⁷⁶Stewart (n 75) 6.

⁷⁷Ibid 6–7.

Trust transfer theory follows on from the socially constituted nature of trust. There is a prevailing line of thinking across disciplines in the social sciences that trust arises in a rich social context, and that trust in any given relationship depends on the other relationships that comprise the social context in which the relationship is embedded. This idea has been expressed, in one form or another, by scholars in sociology,⁷⁸ economics,⁷⁹ philosophy,⁸⁰ political theory,⁸¹ and management,⁸² among other fields. With trust transfer, the truster's relationship with the unknown actor depends on the truster's relationship with the trusted actor who is perceived as similar to the unknown actor. The two actors' similarity to each other, in tandem with the truster's trust in the trusted actor, assists the truster to ultimately trust the unknown actor.

While trust transfer theory has never been applied, to our knowledge, to the case of self-trust, we submit that there is no reason why it should not apply. Writers on self-trust have recognized that self-trust, as a form of trust, is socially constituted.⁸³ And this theory, as we said, follows on from the socially constituted nature of trust. In the case of self-trust, the trusted actor (i.e. the actor trusted by the truster) is the truster. Thus, applying trust transfer theory to self-trust, where the truster perceives an unknown actor – like the populist – as similar to them, they are likely to transfer their self-trust onto that unknown actor. Consequently, applied to the populist-public relationship, the people, given their perception that the populist is similar to them, can transfer the trust that they have in themselves onto the populist leader.

This may seem to overlap significantly with the above-described similarity-based trust. After all, the transfer of trust is rooted in the people's perception that the populist is similar to them. We submit that the two are not, however, one and the same. We say this because a truster, like a member of the public, may reasonably trust a trustee, like a political representative, who they perceive to be similar to them, even though they do not trust their own self with respect to politics. The truster may not, for instance, think they have the knowledge or skillset to make relevant political decisions. If that member of the public, however, does have self-trust with respect to politics, their perception that the relevant political representative is similar to them can reinforce their trust in the representative via the above-described trust transfer. Accordingly, we may say that the public's perceived similarity to, and identification with, the populist can promote public trust in the populist, both directly, via similarity-based trust, and indirectly, via trust transfer.

Second, we suggest that public self-trust can reinforce the similarity-based trust between the people and the populist by insulating that trust from challenges. The self-trust literature has recognized that one of the benefits of self-trust is its capacity to

⁷⁸MS Granovetter, 'The Strength of Weak Ties' (1973) 78 *American Journal of Sociology* 1360; Shapiro (n 38); Coleman (n 38); J Pixley, *Impersonal Trust in Global Mediating Organizations* (1999) 42 *Sociological Perspectives* 647; Cook and Gerbasi (n 38).

⁷⁹M Granovetter, 'Economic Action and Social Structure: The Problem of Embeddedness' (1985) 91 *American Journal of Sociology* 481; P Dasgupta, 'Trust as a Commodity', in Gambetta (n 40).

⁸⁰AC Baier, *Moral Prejudices: Essays on Ethics* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1995).

⁸¹R Cotterrell, 'Trusting in Law: Legal and Moral Concepts of Trust' (1993) 46 *Current Legal Problems* 76; M Levi, 'A State of Trust', in V Braithwaite and M Levi (eds), *Trust and Governance* (Russell Sage, New York, 1998) 95.

⁸²J Sydow, 'Understanding the Constitution of Interorganizational Trust', in C Lane and R Bachmann (eds), *Trust Within and Between Organizations: Conceptual Issues and Empirical Applications* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1998).

⁸³Govier (n 41) 117. See also Goering (n 42) 15.

facilitate trust in others – that is, self-trust and trusting others are not necessarily mutually exclusive.⁸⁴ Granted, self-trust and trust in others can be in tension with one another. Such is the tension between public self-trust and political trust recognized by theorists such as Bryce and de Tocqueville. This tension does not, however, necessarily follow, especially where there is pre-existing trust between the truster and the trustee. As Govier has explained, self-trust ‘can support and enhance trust in others’.⁸⁵ By trusting their own self, the truster is better able to trust others because they trust their own judgement.⁸⁶ Trusting oneself involves ‘making a prediction about the quality of [one’s] judgments, evaluations, capabilities, and choices’.⁸⁷ Thus, in trusting their own self, the truster makes a positive assessment about their judgements, evaluations, capabilities and choices. And this facilitates the truster’s trust in others, insulating that trust from third-party challenges.

Applying this ‘trust-insulating’ idea to the populist–public relationship, by trusting themselves, the people trust their judgments and evaluations, including those regarding the populist. Put simply, the people, owing to their self-trust, trust the similarity-based trust that they have in the populist. They trust their expectations – rooted in their perceived similarity of the populist to them – that the populist has the integrity, willingness and competence to make the relevant political decisions. And so, when others – such as the political elite or mainstream media – challenge that trust in the populist by presenting information to the contrary, the people’s self-trust, according to this idea, can insulate their trust in the populist. When the people hear criticism of the populist, calling into question the populist’s integrity, willingness or competence to make relevant political decisions, their self-trust supports their reliance on their earlier assessments of the populist’s motivations and competence, reinforcing the trust that they have in the populist.

Public trust in the populist can reinforce the public’s self-trust

At the same time, we suggest that the public’s trust in the populist can reinforce the public’s self-trust. This likewise follows on from the socially constituted nature of trust. In his influential book *Foundations of Social Theory*, sociologist James Coleman has argued that trust-based relationships exist in structures he has called ‘systems of trust’, and the trust that a truster has in a trustee depends on the system or systems of trust in which their relationship exists.⁸⁸ Coleman’s ‘systems’ encompass groups of two- or three-party relationships. He has identified three such systems in his work: mutual trust, intermediaries in trust and third-party trust. A mutual trust system involves two actors being in two trust-based relationships with one another, with each actor occupying the role of truster and trustee in one of those relationships. In an intermediary in trust system, an actor outside the immediate trust-based relationship acts as both the trustee for one party to the trust-based relationship and as truster for the other party, thereby serving as an

⁸⁴Govier (n 41).

⁸⁵Govier (n 41).

⁸⁶See NN Potter, ‘Narrative Selves, Relations of Trust, and Bipolar Disorder’ (2013) 20 *Philosophy, Psychiatry, & Psychology* 57, 58.

⁸⁷Potter (n 86) 58.

⁸⁸Coleman (n 38).

intermediary. A third-party system involves a truster accepting a promise from a third party to aid in their transaction with the trustee.

Coleman's intermediary in trust system has relevance for our analysis here. The above-described process of trust transfer is an example of an intermediary in trust system: the truster serves as an intermediary in their relationship with the populist. Another intermediary, specifically identified by Coleman, is what he has called 'the advisor', an actor outside the immediate trust-based relationship who advises the truster to trust the trustee. The truster's relationship with the advisor promotes the truster's trust in the trustee because the truster 'trusts the advisor's judgment, leading him to place trust in the ability and integrity of the trustee'.⁸⁹ For example, at the time *Foundations of Social Theory* was published (in the early 1990s), Coleman identified the mass media as an increasingly influential 'advisor' in contemporary societies.⁹⁰ In particular, he said that the mass media's exposure of 'defects in the trusted elites' could lead to the 'withdrawal of public trust in the elites'.⁹¹ In fact, empirical research has substantiated the media's ability to impact people's trust in political actors.⁹²

We suggest that, in the same way that the media can serve as an 'advisor' to the public and impact public trust, so can the populist. The populist is an 'advisor' because the people (or at least a subset of them) trust the populist. The people therefore trust the 'advice' that the populist gives them. If the populist tells the people to trust a third party, to the extent that they trust the populist they will follow the populist's advice and trust that third party. And by the same token, if the populist advises the people to distrust a third party – as the media, according to Coleman, frequently advised the public to distrust the trusted elites – to the extent that they trust the populist, they will distrust that third party.

The latter helps explain how populists can exacerbate the so-called 'crisis of trust' we are witnessing between the public and established government actors. By criticizing established government actors as corrupt, immoral and incompetent, as populists characteristically do, populists advise the public to distrust those actors. Again, to the extent that the public trusts the populist, the public will follow that advice. Recent empirical research supports this conclusion. It has been shown that populist parties can 'fuel' political discontent.⁹³ The research shows that populist parties, further to any mobilization of distrustful individuals in the first place, promote discontent or distrust, generating a 'spiral of distrust'.⁹⁴ Marc Hooghe and Ruth Dassonneville, for instance, have explained that, 'Having chosen [a populist] party subsequently acts to decrease one's level of trust in politics even further. The result is a spiral of distrust, where distrust and protest voting enforce each other.'⁹⁵

⁸⁹Ibid 181.

⁹⁰Ibid 194.

⁹¹Ibid 194.

⁹²See JS Nye, Jr and PD Zelikow, 'Conclusion: Reflections, Conjectures and Puzzles', in JS Nye Jr, PD Zelikow and DC King (eds), *Why People Don't Trust Government* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1997) 261–75; R Gunter and A Mughan, *Democracy and the Media: A Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000) 16–20.

⁹³W van der Brug, 'How the LPF Fuelled Discontent: Empirical Tests of Explanations of LPF Support' (2003) 38 *Acta Politica* 89; M Hooghe and R Dassonneville, 'A Spiral of Distrust: A Panel Study on the Relation between Political Distrust and Protest Voting in Belgium' (2018) 53 *Government and Opposition* 104.

⁹⁴Hooghe and Dassonneville (n 93) 125.

⁹⁵Ibid.

Coleman's 'advisor' idea, we submit, can likewise be applied to the case of self-trust, as a form of trust. Applying the idea to self-trust, an actor – like the populist – can serve as an advisor on the truster's relationship with their own self, and in turn reinforce the truster's self-trust. The truster's self-trust is reinforced because they trust the advisor and so, where the advisor advises the truster to trust their own judgement, they follow the advisor's advice.⁹⁶ If we apply this thinking to the populist–public relationship, just as the populist can promote public distrust in established government actors by advising the public that those actors are corrupt, immoral and incompetent, they can promote public self-trust by advising the people to trust themselves. And to the extent that the people trust the populist, they will follow the populist's advice and so trust themselves.

The foregoing is relevant because populists, alongside their message that established government actors are corrupt, immoral and incompetent, frequently convey to the public a message of public self-trust. Put simply, they encourage members of the public to trust themselves with respect to politics. Sometimes this message of public self-trust is made explicitly – for example, an explicit message of public self-trust was made to the British public in the campaign that preceded the 2016 UK European Union membership ('Brexit') referendum. In a Sky News question and answer session entitled 'EU: In Or Out', then-Justice Secretary Michael Gove, in making a case for the United Kingdom to leave the European Union, stated, 'I'm not asking the public to trust me; I'm asking the public to trust themselves.'⁹⁷ However, the populist message of public self-trust is not typically explicit; more frequently, it is implicit. By this we mean that the populist does not necessarily use the terminology of 'trust' itself, but rather encourages the public to trust itself by speaking to the previously identified elements of self-trust – that is, integrity, willingness and competence. The populist leader conveys to the people that they have the integrity, willingness and competence to make the relevant political decisions, and in the process, the populist undermines the necessity of established government, including its various intermediaries and institutions.

Self-trust's first two elements of integrity and willingness align with the Manichean rhetoric that characterizes populism. In the rhetoric, the populist portrays the people as virtuous, righteous and morally pure. He 'pit[s] the pure, innocent, always hard-working people against the corrupt elite who do not really work (other than to further their narrow self-interest)'.⁹⁸ The elite – the populist Other – is pictured, as we noted earlier, as 'immoral', in the sense that 'they actually work only for themselves (as opposed to the common good)'.⁹⁹ There is even, at times, a religious or quasi-religious element to this rhetoric. Speaking at a Texas roundtable in 2020, for instance, Trump described Americans as 'good and virtuous people'.¹⁰⁰ Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has similarly depicted the Turkish people as virtuous and pious, juxtaposing them against an

⁹⁶See also Govier (n 41) 117.

⁹⁷H Mance, 'Britain Has Had Enough of Experts, Says Gove', *Financial Times* (London, 3 June 2016), available at <www.ft.com/content/3be49734-29cb-11e6-83e4-abc22d5d108c>. For a video of the interview, see 'Michael Gove – "EU: In Or Out?"' (3 June 2016) *Sky News*, available at <<https://news.sky.com/video/michael-gove-argues-for-the-uk-to-leave-the-eu-in-a-live-sky-q-a-10303640>>.

⁹⁸J Müller, "'The People Must Be Extracted from Within the People": Reflections on Populism' (2014) 21 *Constellations* 483, 485.

⁹⁹*Ibid.* 486.

¹⁰⁰'Trump Cites "Bad Apples" but Defends Nation's Police', *New York Times* (11 June 2020), available at <www.nytimes.com/video/us/10000007187411/trump-cites-bad-apples-but-defends-nations-police.html>.

allegedly immoral, corrupt and greedy foreign financial elite. Erdoğan has said that ‘if they have dollars, we have our people, our righteousness and our God’.¹⁰¹

Implicit in this rhetoric is the Rousseauian claim that the general will of the people (*volonté générale*), in contrast to the will of all (*volonté de tous*), is ‘unchanging, incorruptible and pure’.¹⁰² In Hugo Chávez’s inaugural address in 2007, for example, he stated that, ‘All individuals are subject to error and seduction, but not the people, which possesses to an eminent degree of consciousness of its own good and the measure of its independence.’¹⁰³ Owing to this consciousness, Chávez said, the people’s ‘judgment is pure, its will is strong, and none can corrupt or even threaten it’.¹⁰⁴ Because the general will of the people is incorruptible, it follows that the people should be making the political decisions that affect their lives. The politician, in this rhetoric, must be ‘enlightened enough to see what the general will is, and charismatic enough to form individual citizens into a cohesive community that can be counted on to will it’.¹⁰⁵ This idea, in turn, is conveyed to the public by the populist. Chávez, in the 2007 inaugural address, emphasized that, ‘Nothing ... is in greater agreement with the popular doctrine than to consult with the nation as a whole regarding the chief points upon which governments, basic laws, and the supreme rule are founded.’¹⁰⁶

The message conveyed by the populist to the public through this Manichean rhetoric is, we suggest, one of public integrity and willingness to make political decisions. The populist communicates to the public that the ‘corrupt’, ‘immoral’ and ‘self-interested’ elite cannot and will not deliver the political outcomes that are in the people’s interests. Trump, for example, blamed the suffering of ‘innocent people’ on the ‘political system lack[ing] the will, or the courage, or the basic decency to enforce our laws – or worse still, [selling] out to some corporate lobbyist for cash’.¹⁰⁷ Only the good and virtuous people, with their ‘incorruptible’ will, according to the populist’s message, can and will deliver the outcomes that are in the people’s interests. The people therefore have both the integrity and willingness to so deliver.

The competence element of self-trust – that the public has the knowledge and skillset to make political decisions – is conveyed by populists in a few forms. First, as part of their criticism of the elite, populists make statements that minimize the value and necessity of expert knowledge and skills for political decision-making. Central to the populist discourse is the idea that political power has been unnecessarily, and even unjustly, taken away from the people and placed in the hands of intermediaries, including experts. Consider, for instance, Trump’s pre-election statement at a 2016 rally in Wisconsin that ‘the experts are terrible’.¹⁰⁸ Responding to criticism he had received that he ‘doesn’t have experts’ on foreign policy, Trump minimized the value and necessity of expertise in this

¹⁰¹ AJ Yackley, ‘Erdoğan Calls on Turks to Buy Lira in “Economic War”’, *Financial Times* (London, 10 August 2018), available at <www.ft.com/content/f33b9b90-9c8c-11e8-9702-5946bae86e6d>.

¹⁰² J Rousseau, *On the Social Contract*, Book 4, Chapter 1 (Maurice Cranston trans., 1968).

¹⁰³ H Chávez, 2007 inaugural address, cited in C Mudde and CR Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2017) 17.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ M Canovan, *The People* (Polity Press, Cambridge, 2005) 115.

¹⁰⁶ Chávez (n 103).

¹⁰⁷ Trump (n 54).

¹⁰⁸ N Gass, ‘Trump: “The Experts are Terrible”’, *Politico* (Washington, DC, 4 April 2016), available at <www.politico.com/blogs/2016-gop-primary-live-updates-and-results/2016/04/donald-trump-foreign-policy-experts-221528>. For the full video, see Fox 10 Phoenix, available at <www.youtube.com/watch?v=a5e1TPpSaE>.

area, saying ‘I know what’s happening’. He noted that ‘all these people [i.e. former presidents and politicians] have had experts’ and, he continued, ‘look at the mess we’re in with all these experts we have’. Further minimizing the value and necessity of foreign policy experts, Trump suggested that no experts would be better than the experts relied upon to date, remarking, ‘Supposing I didn’t have one [a foreign policy expert], would it be worse than what we’re doing now?’ Michael Gove’s statement ‘asking the public to trust themselves’ regarding the Brexit referendum was likewise made in the context of minimizing the value and necessity of experts. Gove famously said, ‘the people of this country have had enough of experts’, singling out experts ‘from organizations with acronyms’.¹⁰⁹ He criticized the experts for being ‘consistently wrong’ and advocated that the public ‘take back control of our destiny from those organizations’. In a later interview seeking to clarify his comments, he continued to undermine expertise.¹¹⁰ Gove encouraged the public to challenge every ‘settled consensus’ among experts and to ‘always look for the dissenting voice’.

Second, but relatedly, populists make statements that validate the public’s knowledge of political matters. The populist suggests to the people that their knowledge of political matters, including matters of public health and economics, is equivalent or superior to that of experts. A good example are the old political sayings that ‘the voter is always right’ and ‘the people know best’. Such sayings, or some variant, have been used by several leaders, including most recently the former leader of the Welsh Brexit party, Mark Reckless.¹¹¹ When asked in July 2020 whether there should be a second Wales-wide lockdown to address COVID-19, Reckless responded, ‘We think it’s much better to trust people’s judgment. The individual knows best.’ This political saying, as Peter Schuck has said, ‘goes well beyond a grudging, realistic recognition that in a democracy the voters have the last word’ but rather, ‘elevates the wisdom of popular judgments’ and recognizes ‘their superiority to those of the experts’.¹¹² It suggests that policy-making by public opinion is superior to evidence-based policy-making. In the case of Reckless, the message conveyed to the public was that its judgement as to whether a second lockdown was necessary to prevent the spread of COVID-19 was better than the knowledge and analysis of public health experts. Gove, in his commentary on experts, similarly validated the British public’s knowledge of Brexit and its repercussions: he suggested that, rather than rely on experts, we should have ‘faith in the British people to make the right decision’.¹¹³ Likewise, in his tweets rejecting expert knowledge on climate change (what he and his followers call ‘climate nonsense’), Geert Wilders, the leader of the Dutch Party for Freedom, has likewise promoted the common sense of the ordinary people.¹¹⁴

These statements reflect an ‘anti-intellectualism’ that valorizes the experience-based common sense of the common people over the technocratic rule of experts.¹¹⁵ The populist, rather than valuing expertise, celebrates what Pierre Rosanvallon has described

¹⁰⁹Gove (n 97).

¹¹⁰‘Michael Gove on the Trouble With Experts’ (3 March 2017) Chatham House, available at <www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/michael-gove-trouble-experts>.

¹¹¹J Williams, ‘Brexit Party’s Election Campaign to Scrap the Senedd’ (London, 12 July 2020), available at <www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-politics-53371014>.

¹¹²P Schuck, *Limits of Law: Essays on Democratic Governance* (Routledge, New York, 2018) 71.

¹¹³Gove (n 97).

¹¹⁴M Hamelers, ‘Populist Disinformation: Exploring Intersections Between Online Populism and Disinformation in the US and the Netherlands’ (2020) 8 *Politics and Governance* 146, 152.

¹¹⁵See R Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (Cape, London, 1964) 34.

as *'l'instinct des humbles'* (the instincts of the humble), an instinctive sense of the general will.¹¹⁶ The by-product of this celebration is what Tom Nichols refers to as the 'death of expertise': it is not an 'indifference to established knowledge', but 'a positive *hostility* to such knowledge'.¹¹⁷ The populist's message validating the public's knowledge of political matters is, it has been argued, problematic because the majority of the public has limited knowledge of these matters.¹¹⁸ Some writers have thus suggested that what the populist 'celebrates' is, in fact, 'ignorance'.¹¹⁹

By conveying the messages of public self-trust detailed above, populists act as 'advisors' to members of the public in their trust relationship with themselves. They advise the people to trust themselves. Following on from this, to the extent that the public trusts the populist, the populist can reinforce the public's trust in itself with respect to politics. Whether explicit or implicit in nature, these populist messages of public self-trust, when conveyed by a trusted leader, reinforce expectations in the public that they have the integrity, willingness or competence to make the relevant political decisions. Take the populist message of public competence, for example. Comments like those outlined earlier, which undermine the value and necessity of expertise for political decision-making and confirm the public's knowledge of political matters, should generate expectations from the people that they are competent to make political decisions. Rather than rely on experts and evidence-based policy-making, the people come to expect that they have sufficient knowledge and intellectual ability to make the relevant political decisions, whether the decision pertains to Brexit, climate change, or the COVID-19 public health crisis. The people thus, we submit, 'come to have trust in [their] cognitive abilities as their reliability is confirmed by their results being seconded by trusted figures'.¹²⁰

Our suggestion that the populist can reinforce the public's self-trust finds support in empirical research. Psychologists have long found that people display an 'overconfidence bias': they overestimate their knowledge of a given topic.¹²¹ That said, several studies have found that such overconfidence biases, specifically with regard to political knowledge, are *especially high* in those who support populist parties.¹²² One study found that individuals with far-right and far-left political views, when asked about the EU refugee crisis, perceived the political solution to the crisis to be simpler, experiencing 'more judgmental

¹¹⁶Rosanvallon (n 3) 119. Rosanvallon refers specifically to the populism of Maurice Barrès, but the idea can, we think, be transposed to other contexts.

¹¹⁷T Nichols, *The Death of Expertise: The Campaign Against Established Knowledge and Why It Matters* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2017) 20.

¹¹⁸For a summary of relevant work, see I Somin, *Democracy and Political Ignorance: Why Smaller Government is Smarter* (Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2013); I Somin, 'Trust and Political Ignorance', in Fabris (n 1).

¹¹⁹Somin (n 118). See also P Stephens, 'The perils of a populist paeon to ignorance' *Financial Times* (London, 23 June 2016), available at <www.ft.com/content/bfb5f3d4-379d-11e6-a780-b48ed7b6126f>.

¹²⁰Jones (n 42) 245.

¹²¹See L Rozenblit and F Keil, 'The Misunderstood Limits of Folk Science: An Illusion of Explanatory Depth' (2002) 26 *Cognitive Science* 521. See also Vermeule (n 11) 105 for some discussion in the political context.

¹²²K Toner *et al*, 'Feeling Superior is a Bipartisan Issue: Extremity (Not Direction) of Political Views Predicts Perceived Belief Superiority' (2013) 24 *Psychological Science* 2454; J van Prooijen, APM Krouwel and J Emmer, 'Ideological Responses to the EU Refugee Crisis: The Left, the Right, and the Extremes' (2018) 9 *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 143; J van Prooijen and APM Krouwel, 'Overclaiming Knowledge Predicts Anti-Establishment Voting' (2020) 11 *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 356.

certainty about their domain-specific knowledge of this event, than moderates'.¹²³ They did not, however, have more knowledge. Another study found that individuals with 'anti-establishment sentiments' had more confidence in their knowledge about an EU treaty designed to establish stronger political and economic connections between the European Union and Ukraine.¹²⁴ These individuals likewise did not have more knowledge than their more moderate counterparts. The investigators concluded that those 'who vote against the establishment ... are particularly likely to overestimate and overclaim their own knowledge'.¹²⁵ Additionally, but closely related to such studies, recent research has also established a link between populist attitudes and internal political efficacy.¹²⁶

The above studies suggest that supporters of populist parties, rather than have more knowledge of political matters, simply have more self-trust – specifically, more trust in their own competence when it comes to politics. Granted, it may be argued that supporters of populist parties, independent of the populist's message of public self-trust, have more self-trust. That is, these members of the public start off with more self-trust, leading them to support populist parties. This may be true; nonetheless, given the analysis we have provided in this section of the article, in tandem with applying Coleman's 'advisor' idea to the case of self-trust in the populist–public relationship, there is good reason to conclude that the populist's message of public self-trust can reinforce any pre-existing self-trust in members of the public.

V. A positive feedback loop of public trust

Let us take stock of where we are. As explained in Part IV, we have suggested that owing to trust transfer and insulation from third-party challenges, it is possible for public self-trust to reinforce public trust in the populist. Further, we have suggested that, given the populist's role as the public's 'advisor' together with the populist's frequently conveyed message of public self-trust, it is also possible for public trust in the populist to reinforce public self-trust.

The product of these two reinforcements is, we submit, a positive feedback loop of public self-trust and public trust in the populist. And as we noted earlier, given the recognized value of political trust to political leaders, it empowers the populist, capable of garnering the populist support for their policies and compliance from the public. Based on the scholarship on trust, however, this feedback loop should not be unbreakable. It should be possible for one or more parts of the loop to break down, and when this happens, public trust in the populist leader may diminish. For example, where the people's perception of the populist's similarity to them fades, the feedback loop should break down. This is so because both the similarity-based trust rooted in similarity and identification, as well as the self-trust-based trust rooted in trust transfer, are dependent on the people perceiving the populist as similar to them. If the people no longer perceive the populist as similar to them, it follows that they will no longer identify with the populist, and thus will no longer transfer the trust that they have in themselves onto the populist.

The case of former Ecuadorian president Abdalá Bucaram, we suggest, offers an example. Bucaram's 1996 presidential campaign was based largely on appeals to

¹²³van Prooijen, Krouwel and Emmer (n 122) 148.

¹²⁴Ibid.

¹²⁵Ibid 361.

¹²⁶Rico, Guinjoan and Anduiza (n 48).

similarity, notably by presenting himself as a person from humble origins, as a candidate who ‘not only understood the people, but belonged to *el pueblo* [the people]’.¹²⁷ He claimed that as a political outsider, he too had suffered, notably because he had been discriminated against by the elite as the son of Lebanese immigrants.¹²⁸ By doing so, he distanced himself from the elite while highlighting his similarities to the public – particularly the poor, Indigenous people and other groups said to be regularly despised and discriminated against by the ruling elite and oligarchy. Bucaram also used simple language, dressed casually in jeans and guayaberas, and even fully embraced and championed the nickname *el loco*, which could be translated as ‘the madman’.¹²⁹ Without necessarily having a clear plan or manifesto, he assured the public that he had the ‘honesty, virility, and good will’ to personally solve Ecuador’s problems, including poverty and housing, compared with the dishonest, effeminate and corrupt elite.¹³⁰ Bucaram was elected president of Ecuador on 7 July 1996. On 5 February 1997, however, less than six months after his election, two million people – roughly the same number of people who had voted for him – took to the streets to demand his dismissal or resignation. Owing in large part to rumours of corruption and the replacement of his plan for increased social spending with neoliberal and poorly planned economic policies, Bucaram lost the support of many groups who had originally supported him, including workers and labour unions.¹³¹ With an abysmal 12 per cent approval rating as of early 1997,¹³² Bucaram was no longer seen as part of *el pueblo*, nor as *el loco que ama* (‘the madman who loves’) who was free from the diktats of the economic elite. And on 6 February 1997, only a day after the general strike and mass protests had begun, he was removed from office by Congress on the basis of his alleged ‘mental incapacity’ – with no evidence to that effect.¹³³ The people, we suggest, no longer saw Bucaram as similar to them. And with this perception of similarity no longer present, their trust in him diminished.

Another way in which the feedback loop should be able to break down is where the people’s trust in themselves begins to falter. As the self-trust literature recognizes, misaligned or excessive self-trust in one’s competence, for instance, can be corrected by explicitly overriding the misalignment – that is, by ‘bring[ing] to our attention that, here and now, we are in a zone of incompetence’.¹³⁴ The hope, Karen Jones has identified, is that ‘override consistently enough, and long enough, and one will finally come to have good judgment in the domain in question and so come to have merited self-trust where previously one did not’.¹³⁵ Accordingly, if the people are presented with sufficient evidence to explicitly override their expectation that they have the required knowledge and skillset to make decisions in a given area of politics, they may no longer trust themselves, at least not in that particular area of politics. They may come to the realization that in that area they are in a ‘zone of incompetence’.

¹²⁷ de la Torre (n 3) 91.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid 89–91.

¹³⁰ Ibid 92.

¹³¹ Ibid 98–101, 107. See also A Gerlach, *Indians, Oil, and Politics: A Recent History of Ecuador* (Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, MD, 2003) 85–90.

¹³² Gerlach (n 130) 86.

¹³³ Ibid 98; de la Torre (n 3) 80.

¹³⁴ Jones (n 42) 248.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

The COVID-19 public health crisis, we submit, presents an illustration. In responding to the crisis, Trump and Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro adopted a populist message of public self-trust: they minimized the value and necessity of expertise in addressing the virus and adopted an anti-intellectual rhetoric that valorized common sense. Contrary to expert public health advice, they downplayed (at least initially) the seriousness of the virus, equating it with the flu; promoted the use of the anti-malarial drug hydroxychloroquine as a treatment;¹³⁶ resisted the imposition of lockdowns to minimize the virus's spread; and quickly lifted any such lockdowns.¹³⁷ At the end of 2020, the United States and Brazil had two of the highest number of COVID-19 cases globally, as well as COVID-19-related deaths. These numbers stood in stark contrast to those reported in other countries where expert advice had been followed. And this juxtaposition, we submit, evidenced to the people who had originally trusted Trump and Bolsonaro that, contrary to their message of self-trust, the people do not always 'know best'. In a complex matter like COVID-19, common sense is not preferable to expert knowledge and analysis. The people are not competent to make decisions regarding COVID-19, including how to minimize the virus's spread; they are in a 'zone of incompetence'.

While there is no empirical evidence to support a reduction in public self-trust with regard to COVID-19, we do have evidence of low public trust in Trump and Bolsonaro with respect to the crisis in 2020. We also have evidence of relatively higher levels of public trust in US and Brazilian public health authorities during that period. For example, public approval of Trump's handling of the crisis reached a new low in July 2020, with just 32 per cent of respondents supporting his strategy (down from 44 per cent in March).¹³⁸ And another July 2020 survey found that whereas two-thirds of respondents did not trust the information Trump provided about COVID-19, two-thirds of respondents *did* trust the information provided by Dr Anthony Fauci – the Chief Medical Advisor to the President.¹³⁹ In fact, in a recent study of political trust and the COVID-19 crisis, researchers found that of four jurisdictions examined (Australia, Italy, the United Kingdom and the United States), public trust in Trump's management of the crisis was the lowest.¹⁴⁰ For example, 53 per cent of American respondents agreed or strongly agreed that Trump was 'handling the coronavirus outbreak poorly'. This contrasts with the numbers for Australian and Italian respondents – 19 and 30 per cent, respectively – regarding former Prime Minister Scott Morrison (Australia) and former Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte

¹³⁶See B Brooks, 'Like the Flu? Trump's Coronavirus Messaging Confuses Public, Pandemic Researchers say', Reuters (13 March 2020), available at <www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-mixed-messages/like-the-flu-trumps-coronavirus-messaging-confuses-public-pandemic-researchers-say-idUSKBN2102GY>; M Reverdosa, R Pedroso and T John, 'Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro Tests Positive for COVID-19 After Months of Dismissing the Seriousness of the Virus', CNN (7 July 2020), available at <<https://edition.cnn.com/2020/07/07/americas/brazil-bolsonaro-positive-coronavirus-intl/index.html>>.

¹³⁷I Kottasová and N Croker, 'The US, Brazil and Others Lifted Lockdown Early. These Charts Show Just How Deadly that Decision Was', CNN (3 July 2020), available at <<https://edition.cnn.com/2020/07/03/health/coronavirus-lockdown-lifting-deadly-charts-intl/index.html>>.

¹³⁸J Pace and H Fingerhut, 'AP-NORC Poll: US Course at Record Low, Trump Sinks on Virus', AP News (New York, 27 July 2020), available at <<https://apnews.com/43a096bc2bcf376de04b696c5143ee99>>.

¹³⁹S Sarkis, 'People Trust Fauci More Than Trump. And Trump Hates It', *Forbes* (19 October 2020), available at <www.forbes.com/sites/stephaniesarkis/2020/10/19/people-trust-fauci-more-than-trump-and-trump-hates-it>.

¹⁴⁰W Jennings et al, 'Political Trust and the Covid-19 Crisis: Pushing Populism to the Backburner?' *Democracy 2025*, available at <<https://www.democracy2025.gov.au/documents/Final%20Pushing%20populism%20to%20the%20backburner.pdf>>.

(Italy), both of whom adopted a more evidence-based approach, relying on experts. Additionally, 57 per cent of American respondents agreed or strongly agreed that Trump ‘[u]sually act[ed] in his own interests in his handling of the coronavirus outbreak’, again in contrast to Australian and Italian respondents (31 and 20 per cent). The researchers concluded that ‘[o]verall it appears that the leadership styles of Morrison and Conte are viewed as benevolent and competent, whereas Trump’s reputation is of self-interest’.¹⁴¹ We see a similar pattern in Brazil. In June 2020, for example, 55 per cent of Brazilians evaluated Bolsonaro’s performance in the outbreak as ‘bad’ or ‘terrible’, up from 18 per cent in mid-March 2020.¹⁴² And in a March 2020 survey, whereas only 35 per cent of Brazilians called Bolsonaro’s handling of the crisis ‘good’ or ‘great’, 55 per cent supported the performance of former Health Minister Luiz Henrique Mandetta.¹⁴³

We suggest that the above evidence of low public trust in Trump and Bolsonaro with respect to the COVID-19 crisis, and relatively higher levels of trust in health authorities such as Fauci and Mandetta, is consistent with a break in the trust feedback loop in the United States and Brazil. Americans and Brazilians may have been decreasingly convinced of their competence in this complex area of politics and, following on from this, they may have been less trusting of their populist leaders. That said, in making this suggestion, we want to highlight two points. First, not all members of the public will be convinced of their incompetence. And so, as the above evidence demonstrates, we can expect that there will still be members of the public who trust the populist. When it comes to being misinformed, ‘people resist change’.¹⁴⁴ ‘Unless they are “hit between the eyes” with the right facts, they continue to judge policy on the basis of their mistaken beliefs.’¹⁴⁵ And, given that the public receives information from various sources, including the populist and the media, for some their self-trust may be more resistant to change. Second, we must not conflate the public’s trust in the populist with its overall *approval* of the populist.¹⁴⁶ While members of the public may not trust a populist such as Trump or Bolsonaro with respect to the COVID-19 crisis (as we have conceptualized trust, in terms of motivations and competence), they may nonetheless approve of the populist for many reasons. For instance, an August 2020 poll found that Bolsonaro’s approval rating was at its highest, with 37 per cent of those surveyed viewing his government as great or good (compared with 32 per cent in June 2020).¹⁴⁷ However, Bolsonaro’s spike in popularity coincided with his government’s introduction of an emergency relief program for low-paid and informal workers totalling more than 250 billion reais (US\$47 billion). According to a Datafolha pollster, three-fifths of the gain in Bolsonaro’s approval came from low-income informal workers who were targeted by the emergency relief program.

¹⁴¹Ibid 25.

¹⁴²See Pesquisa XP/Ipespe (9–11 June 2020) 22, available at <https://conteudos.xpi.com.br/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Pesquisa-XP_-2020_06-v2.pdf>.

¹⁴³‘COVID-19 pandemic: Brazilians Have Greater Trust in the Health Than in President Bolsonaro’ *Mercopress* (4 April 2020), available at <<https://en.mercopress.com/2020/04/04/covid-19-pandemic-brazilians-have-greater-trust-in-the-health-than-in-president-bolsonaro/comments>>.

¹⁴⁴JH Kuklinski *et al*, ‘Misinformation and the Currency of Democratic Citizenship’ (2000) 62 *The Journal of Politics* 790, 810.

¹⁴⁵Ibid.

¹⁴⁶For example, Niklas Luhmann stressed the distinction between ‘trust’ and ‘positive or negative attitudes toward political leadership’: Luhmann (n 40) 95. See also Barber (n 40) 75–81.

¹⁴⁷‘Brazil’s Bolsonaro Approval Rating at Highest Despite Coronavirus: Poll’, Reuters (14 August 2020), available at <www.reuters.com/article/us-brazil-politics-idUSKCN25A1JX>.

Accordingly, continued approval of Trump and Bolsonaro from the public does not disprove our claim of a break in the feedback loop.

VI. Conclusion

In this article, we have sought to provide some nuance to current understandings of the populist–public relationship with reference to the growing scholarship on the concept of trust. In doing so, the article makes two key contributions to the literature on populism.

First, the article advances conceptual understandings of the understudied concept of public self-trust in the political context. To date, references to public self-trust in the political and constitutional theory literature have been vague, suggesting a tension between it and public trust in political representatives. Despite such references, the concept of public self-trust has been significantly under-theorized. Because this form of trust is of relevance to populism (we have argued in this article specifically for the populist–public relationship), it is imperative that we have a clearer understanding of what public self-trust means. Such an understanding offers a necessary foundation for further study into the role played by this form of trust in populism.

Second, by filling what we consider to be a significant gap in the populism literature, this article theorizes the functioning of public trust in the populist–public relationship. As we have noted, while the populism literature does recognize a trust in the populist–public relationship, usually linking it to the people’s perception that the populist is similar to them, it has done little more to theorize the functioning of this trust. We have argued that following on from the populist’s appeals to similarity, the populist–public relationship involves an intertwining of public trust in the populist and public self-trust that can ultimately create a positive feedback loop of public trust. This theorization not only provides greater nuance to the role played by similarity in the populist–public relationship but, owing to the recognized value of public trust to political leaders, it contributes to our understanding of the populist’s power. It suggests that similarity is part of a larger puzzle with regard to trust in the populist–public relationship. And if we do not appreciate the entire puzzle, we cannot capture the full power of the populist’s messages.

Acknowledgments. We are grateful to the two anonymous reviewers, as well as Ming-Sung Kuo, Nicola Lacey, Cora Lacatus, Jo Murkens, Christine Schwöbel-Patel and Jacob van de Beeten, for their helpful comments on previous drafts. Any errors are our own.

Competing interests. The authors declare none.