POPULISM, POPULIST CONSPIRACIES, AND KENYAN POLITICS: INVESTIGATING THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA

by

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation sought to map and dissect how communication and/or the media resonates with populism and populist rhetoric. Specifically, this project examined Kenyan media's receptivity to populist rhetoric, diffusion of populism in public debates through the opinion sections, and media framing of populism. Moreover, the dissertation explored the impact of populist communication strategies—the use of populist conspiracies—on Kenyan citizens.

The dissertation presents results from a content analysis and a survey experiment indicating that the Kenyan print media supply the "oxygen of publicity" to populist sentiments, albeit not prominently. The results further show that the opinion pages—serving as an essential part of public deliberation and a mediated site of the public sphere—are replete with populist sentiments. Additionally, the public positively frames populism while journalists discredit populist rhetoric. Lastly, populist content laced with conspiratorial cues does not significantly impact trust in institutions and intentions to engage in political activities. The dissertation—despite its limitations—provides an understanding of how Kenyan media and populism intersect and the potential effects of exposure to populist messaging.

Chapter 1

POPULISM AND THE MEDIA

William Ruto—then Kenya's Deputy President and now the president—tells a crowd at a campaign rally in Kenya's capital, Nairobi in January 2021: "*We are going to change this conversation. It is not going to be about ethnicities. It is not going to be about leaders. It is not going to be about power. It is not going to be about positions," Ruto paused: "It is going to be about hustlers—the ordinary people! It is going to be about enterprise—the "the wheelbarrow" conversation. It is going to be about jobs, for ordinary people! The Hustlers. We want an inclusive society where even the ordinary, even the wheelbarrow guy is part of the conservation in Kenya!*". (The Daily Nation, 2021).

Two days before the close of the official campaign period and as part of his campaign closing speech, William Ruto charged to an electrified crowd that: "*It is the people who hire and fire the government. It is not the system, it is not those in power, it is not the deep state, and it is not everything else we have been told all these years. It is the people, and in this election, the people of Kenya will confirm this, ordinary as they may be. Irrespective of where we come from, today we stand as a people and we have overcome the so-called system, the so-called deep state*" (Egbejule, 2022, n.p.).

Ruto's campaign rhetoric, laden with excellent oratory skills (Gaitho, 2022), was characterized—albeit anecdotally—by the ability to effectively speak in the name "of the people" while framing the electoral contest as a struggle between the will of the ordinary Kenyans vs that of a conspiring political elite. Ruto shrewdly shaped the Kenyan presidential campaign as a contest between the "hustlers" and "dynasties, monikers for the have-nots and the haves respectively (Onyango, 2021). The politician appealed to the "hustlers" a beetling social identity morphed into a political identity representing a wide array of young Kenyans working hard to make their lives better. Eventually, the "hustlers" became Ruto's political base morphing into a strong wave labeled "the hustler nation" (Gaitho, 2022).

The populist "Hustler Nation" narrative found fertile ground in the frustrations of many unemployed youth and Kenyans working in the informal sector gleaning a living from the tortuous working conditions exacerbated by a Covid-19 crippled economy (Kahura, 2022). Anecdotally, the canny Ruto capitalized on this anger, fury, and disgust targeted at malevolent elites whom he blamed for being responsible for the problems facing the people. Ruto's anti-dynasty/elite rhetoric targeted a group of unidentified political and business elites as well as government bureaucrats whom he accused of scheming to install a political puppet to ensure administrative continuity (Gaitho, 2022). Kenyan political pundits opined that William Ruto successfully weaved a narrative distancing himself from Kenyan politics despite having been one of the most influential politicians over the last two decades and projected himself as a potential people's "savior" (Gaitho, 2022).

William Ruto—by employing populism as a political mobilization strategy—made great political gains and eventually won the presidency. Political commentators opined that Ruto's presidential conquest and thus, his so-called "victory for the people" illustrates that the populist phenomenon had found its way into Kenyan mainstream politics (Gaitho, 2022; Kahura, 2022). At the same time, the populist surge in Kenyan politics has left scholars and pundits grappling with the potential impact of populism on the quality of Kenyan democracy and worrying about a possible totalitarian turn due to concerns that populists often have an mixed and often negative attitude toward representative democracy.

Comprehensively, however, the William Ruto question is not an isolated phenomenon. Rather, it is analogical to an additional charge in a denoting fuse illustrating a global resurgence in populism. A resurgence because at the turn of the new millennium, populist discourse had become mainstream in democratic societies, and thus "a popular zeitgeist" (Mudde, 2004, p. 542). However, this political specter seemed to have subsided before a tidal wave of populism re-emerged in the early to late 2010s when populist actors and parties—that were previously on the fringes of the political arena—started enjoying increased vote shares globally (Muis & Immerzeel, 2017). Populists gained prominence while achieving electoral success by pitting the "the ordinary people" against "the conniving elite " under the guise of defending the people's will and democracy (Moffitt, 2016). For example, Zambia's former police constable and nationalist Michael Sata rode the populist wave to win the presidency in 2011 (Resnick, 2019). In 2015, Nigel Farage and his populist UK pro-Brexit party won the referendum (Devine & Murphy, 2020). In 2016, Donald Trump—a populist

par excellence—won the US presidency and left an indelible mark in American politics (Gerbaudo, 2018). Three years later, the populist powder keg did not seem to go off when the far-right Brazilian nationalist and populist Jair Bolsonaro was elected the president (Araújo et al., 2020). Given these examples, it appears that "a spectre—populism— is {back} haunting the world" (Ionescu & Gellner, 1969), p.1).

The electoral success of populist actors and movements attests to the vitality of populism on a global scale. Increasingly, one can argue that populism is not perceived as a pathological form of democracy (as argued by Betz, 1994) but rather a popular zeitgeist (see Mudde, 2004) given that voters are being attracted to and by the ideology. Consequently, the academy has paid attention to public support and the swelling electoral success of populist movements to uncover the factors behind the upsurge (e.g., Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008). Research shows that downside economic turns, perceived threats of globalization such as increasing immigration and diversity, and extremist ideologies explain support for populist parties and movements (Muis & Immerzeel, 2017). The key thread in all these socio-economic and political "insurrections" speaks to the persuasive appeal of "power to the people" and thus, the people-centrist demand to protect the sovereignty of the masses and make the people supreme in the political process (Moffitt, 2016; Mudde, 2004; Resnick, 2019).

Research Question

Amidst this surge in populist discourse the world over, including its causes, manifestations, and consequences, however, one crucial factor has received limited attention. "The role of the media in the success or failure of the populist right-wing movements has received little serious attention in social scientific studies" (Mudde,

2007, p. 248). The scarcity of scholarly literature on the contributions of the media to the surge in populism is remarkable given that the media themselves are often "players" in the political game. As such, scholars e.g., Moffit (2016) posit that "the media can no longer be treated as a "side issue" when it comes to understanding contemporary populism. It must be put at the center of our analysis …" (p. 94). Other scholars have concurred arguing that we can fully understand populist discourse if the role played by the media and communication is appreciated (see Aalberg et al., 2017; Reinemann et al., 2019).

If the media—as shown by extensive political communication research—is a significant force in the political game, then I argue that it is important now more than ever to interrogate the intersection of media and populism. As populism becomes a contagion and spreads around the globe (Rooduijn, 2014), we need to understand its communicative aspects. A comprehensive understanding of populism cannot be understood without exploring the role of the media in this discourse. Thus, the key assumption driving this study is that the rhetorical elements of populism coupled with media coverage are arguably the keys to the persuasive allure of populism. With this in mind, this project seeks to investigate whether the media are potential catalysts of populist sentiments. That is, does the media give voice and platform to populist claims? Is there a form of "media complicity" that has contributed to the rise of populism, particularly in African democracies? Or do they act as the knights of the prevailing political system and order by restraining the diffusion of populism broadly construed? Also, if the media is receptive to populist views, what effects does exposure to the content have on political attitudes and behaviors (or intentions)?

Only recently has the news media been considered as a potential independent explanatory factor in the populist resurgence (see Koopmans & Muis, 2009; Manucci, 2017; Sheets et al., 2016; Vliegenthart et al., 2012). This body of research tells us that the spirit of populism gained prominence with the sprouting of populist anti-immigration parties and the attendant media attention (Aalberg et al., 2017). Although these studies highlight the need to consider the role of the media and thus provide a good foundation, I argue that at least three elements are missing from the current research.

First, previous studies of media portrayal of populism have largely focused on the portrayal of right-wing radical movements. This categorization and/or association does not embody the entire conceptualization of populism. Populism is a political ideology that cuts across the entire political divide from left to right (Hawkins, 2009; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). In other words, populism is not a preserve of the right-wing extremist Western political movements. The radical left has equally curved out its space in the public sphere globally (Resnick, 2019; Weyland, 2019). Indeed, "populism, thinly defined, has no political color; it is colorless and can be of the left and the right" (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007, p. 323). Although populism studies in Europe use the term to describe right-wing challenger parties, more recent Latin American studies have shown a rise in left-wing populist presidents (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012). Second, these studies did not empirically investigate a very important aspect of political news coverage- there is little interrogation of the key media effects including agenda setting, priming, and framing.

Third, these studies are nested in the European media and political systems,

and the Americas, which are unique and different from the rest of the world (see (Hallin & Mancini, 2012). Although a growing body of research has examined the relationship between media and populism, there is still scarce empirical evidence that can informed generalizable conclusions. Along this line, scholars (see Reinemann et al., 2019) encourage embracing explorations of the populist phenomenon, especially its manifestations in areas that have, thus far, been under-researched. I argue we need to go beyond "the usual suspects of academic literature" and Kenya provides such a context. I draw inspiration from and leverage the insight of previous literature to explore the nexus of media and populism in the context of a vibrant yet relatively young democratic context, Kenya.

Defining Populism

Although populism for a long time has been a contested concept (Mudde, 2019), scholars have converged on how to define populism (Bos et al., 2020; Pirro & Taggart, 2022; Rooduijn, 2019). Populism is broadly understood as both a political ideology (Mudde, 2004) on the one hand and/or a communication style on the other (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). The first approach conceptualizes populism as "*a thin-centered 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*" (Mudde, 2004, p. 543).

The second approach describes populism as a communication style i.e., "*a communication frame that appeals to and identifies with the people and pretends to speak in their name*" (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007, p. 322). Thus, it is about what is and

how it is being said. This dissertation explicates the populism phenomenon as a political communication style commonly adopted by political forces who: (i) may be out to disrupt the idea of politics and political campaigns as we know it and (ii) exploit populism and employ it as an expression of democratic malaise claiming they want to correct the ills of liberal representative democracy perpetuated by the conniving elites (Damiani, 2019; Weyland, 2019). Thus, I focus on populism or populist political communication as an opportunistic campaign strategy and/or a modern-day campaign gamble because it comes with potential political risks, yet it can equally lead to electoral success (Bonikowski & Gidron, 2016; Dai & Kustov, 2022).

Populist communication—as a communicative representation of the populist ideology—is a "*discourse, strategy, or style that emphasizes a binary divide in society and politics. It frames the ordinary people in opposition to the corrupt elites, who are accused of depriving the people of their cultural, political, or socio-economic status*" (Hameleers, 2020a) p. 668). It is characterized by incessantly talking about the people, glorifying, and advocating for this homogenous group, and demanding their unrestricted sovereignty while ostracizing political elites for the problems facing the people (Engesser et al., 2017; Ernst et al., 2019; Hameleers, 2020b)). At the very core of this communication-centered conceptualization, we can see that the emphasis is on what is communicated, i.e., the populist message. This definition, therefore, ties communication and the media together. With this in mind, it is surprising that very little academic attention has been paid to the role of the media or communication more broadly. This dissertation brings the media to the center of our understanding of populism. Why is the media important, one may ask?

Kenya, Populism, and the Media

Existing literature shows that the news media are generally taken to be the link between citizens, political parties, and party leaders (Vliegenthart et al., 2012). On the one hand, populist movements, actors, and parties largely depend on the news media to disseminate and amplify their populist messages, construct their public images, and thus, gain public visibility and support (Koopmans & Muis, 2009; Mazzoleni, 2008). Theoretically, the mass media plays a crucial role as the platforms for conveying and or disseminating populist political messages to the people (Krämer, 2014; Mudde, 2004). On the other hand, most voters do not interact with the candidates directly and instead depend on the mass media for information about the candidates, their positions on issues, as well as an impression of the candidates (Balmas & Sheafer, 2010). Thus, the media can be an important factor in populist message dissemination or populist communication, and consumption by the public.

Given that "the presence of populism in Africa remains relatively unexplained, and its appearance is only in some countries and at only some periods, but not others, is poorly understood" (Resnick, 2019, p. 317), this dissertation explores the potential ties between media coverage and populism in Kenya. New democracies like Kenya "offer political communication researchers a unique opportunity to study media effects in a setting where they ought to be at their strongest" (Tworzecki & Semetko, 2012, p. 1). Indeed, "the brevity of the democratic experience characterized by high electoral volatility, very high party system instability, and persistent weakness of civic associations" makes such democracies ideal contexts for "the manifestations of media effects" (Tworzecki et al., 2010, p. 157).

Against this background, I direct this study's empirical lens to Kenya, a country whose political history is an epic coupled with high drama. Right from her independence, the country's autocratic history through to the modern democratic state, Kenya has undergone a journey from state monopoly in the political and media domains to a phenomenal expansion of the democratic space and liberalization of media markets (Amutabi, 2013; Walsh et al., 2022). Authoritarianism had its way through political suppression, intimidation of journalists, and media co-option to run a state-sanctioned narrative (Kanyinga, 1994). However, the strong wave of demand for the expansion of the democratic space swept through the country in the 1980s to early 1990s leading to the adoption of a democratic political system that introduced competitive politics and an equally vibrant media scene (Amutabi, 2013).

One can, therefore, plausibly argue that Kenya is a young thriving democracy with relatively infant "interconnections between socio-cultural variables, group loyalties, political values, organizations, and patterns of behavior that characterize state—society relations in older democracies" (Tworzecki & Semetko, 2012a, p. 408). At the same time, individuals in young democracies such as Kenya may not have "the benefit of a lifetime of personal political experience that would make it less susceptible to being swayed by media messages" (Tworzecki & Semetko, 2012b, p. 157). This is why, in my view, a thriving democracy—like Kenya—provides a relevant context to conduct media effects research.

Furthermore, the story of political and media systems development in post—1990 Kenya is one of momentous transformation. In two decades, strict political censorship and paucity of choice gave way to unprecedented media freedoms, the

proliferation of broadcast and print media, and lively programming (Amutabi, 2013). Kenya's media scene is now described as highly competitive, technologically sophisticated, and perhaps the most innovative in Africa (Amutabi, 2013; BBC, 2021; Freedom House, 2020). Along the way, the revolutionary growth and media boom were accompanied by the rise and widespread adoption of blogs and social media as platforms of information dissemination and public engagement (Amutabi, 2013).

Although Kenya is now a model democratic state in the African continent (Ogolla, 2011) with a stable political system and vibrant media system (Amutabi, 2013; Freedom House, 2022; Mueller, 2020), we still do not know much empirically about the intersection between media and politics in such a young democracy. Thus, I concur with the assertation that "researching African media experiences and users is urgent now more than ever because of the rapidly changing media landscape on the continent in the last few decades …" and therefore, "there is a need to foreground the voices and experiences of Africans with a range of media forms more strongly" (Willems & Mano, 2017, p. 1—2). Hence, Kenya presents a novel context and a valuable avenue to foreground the experiences of audiences from the global south in their interactions with media content, understand their political attitudes and behaviors, and thus, expand our empirical understanding of populism research empirically and more broadly. More importantly, populism scholars are concerned that "the close ties between populism and authoritarianism raise questions of whether populism represents a challenge to the democratic process, even where it seems to marry peacefully with democratic discourse" (Mazzoleni, et al., 2003, p. 2). As such, it is important to look at the potential consequences of populism on young

democracies in Africa where the democratic institutions are weak, and they may not adequately counter—react to preserve the statutes and practices of pluralist liberal democracy.

Summary of Findings

I conducted a content analysis, a thematic analysis, and an experiment to explore the connections between populism and the media in Kenya. I examined four key themes as summarized below to achieve this broad objective.

1. *How receptive is the Kenyan print media to populist communication?*

Through a content analysis of three leading mainstream newspapers in Kenya, I show that the regular news stories and the forum articles supply the "oxygen of publicity" to populist sentiments. However, the media attention granted to populist claims is not pronounced. In other words, the space and platform provided for populists to ventilate their ideas through media coverage is not as extensive relative to the overall media content. As a consequence, the print media seems to play the gatekeeping role by controlling the gateway to the electoral marketplace. They do not stifle, nor do they amplify populist sentiments in Kenya.

2. *What is the nature of the public debate on public forums? Or how pervasive is populist discourse in the forum pages?*

I analyzed the editorials, opinion columns, and letters to the editor to interrogate the spread of the populist message among the Kenyan public. I show, using the results of the content analysis, that populist sentiments and or attitudes are widespread among the public. I argue that forum pages are an essential part of public deliberation and a site where the public expresses their opinions on the grand and the

mundane. Indeed, they are the mediated sites of the public sphere where the public voices their concerns, deliberate on public affairs, and express their opinions.

3. *How is populist rhetoric and/or populism framed?*

Through a thematic analysis, I show that whereas journalists are largely concerned with the potential impact of populist rhetoric on the stability of the Kenyan state and democracy and thus, portray populism as a threat, the public hold a divergent view. Columnists, political actors, and the ordinary public largely frame populism as a liberating force, democratizing power, and revitalizing tool seeking to cure the ills of representative democracy. Thus, we see the dual nature of populism where on the one hand populism is perceived as a means to fix the shortcomings of liberal democracy by giving voice to the marginalized, and on the other hand, populism is understood as a pathology of democracy and, therefore, a threat to liberal democratic order.

4. *What effect does exposure to populist conspiracies have on political attitudes and behaviors?*

Using the results of the content analysis, I manipulated populist content with conspiratorial cues to examine its potential impact on political trust and intentions to engage in political activities. Also, I examined whether the influence of exposure to populist conspiratorial content on these outcomes will be moderated by predispositions including political cynicism and political knowledge. The results indicate that populist content with conspiratorial content does not have a significant impact on trust in institutions and intentions to engage in political activities. Political knowledge, notably, is a significant moderator.

Organization of the Dissertation

The remainder of this dissertation is organized as follows. Chapter 2 discusses literature on news media, electoral campaigns, theoretical frameworks, and populism. Chapter 3 describes a content analysis of Kenyan print media, sampling, analysis, results, and discussion of the findings. Chapter 4 describes an online experimental study involving a manipulation of populist content with conspiratorial cues. In addition, the chapter offers the measures used, the results of data analysis, and a discussion of the findings concerning the effect of exposure to populist conspiracies on political attitudes and behaviors in Kenya. Chapter 5 draws conclusions linking the results to the extant literature and addresses the potential implications of the findings for the future study of the nexus between media and populism.

Chapter 2

NEWS MEDIA, ELECTORAL CAMPAIGNS, AND POPULISM

Does news media coverage of political campaigns matter? This question has generated extensive scholarly interest within political science and communication circles for decades. As such, scholars have invested considerable effort into understanding the role of the news media in covering the spectacle of political campaigns and the effects that can be expected from the coverage (Aalberg et al., 2017; Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Druckman, 2005; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Miller et al., 1998; Zoizner, 2021). This inquiry has been informed by the idea that most voters do not interact with the candidates directly and instead depend on the mass media for information about the candidates, their position on issues, as well as an impression of the candidates (Druckman, 2005; Iyengar & Kinder). Research shows that this media dependence on political information matters because the content consumed from these outlets influences audiences' political attitudes and behavior (Aalberg et al., 2017; Druckman, 2005; Shaw, 1999).

Political communication research documents that these subtle influences of media content on attitudes are a product of "the construction of news" (Gulati et al., 2004, p. 238), processes that have been formalized into cognitive theories of media effects including agenda—setting and framing: two theories relevant to the current

project. Thus, the following sections provide an overview of agenda—setting and framing theories, highlighting how they have been applied to the study of political campaigns. More importantly, I discuss the utility of the theoretical frameworks to our understanding of populism and populist discourse.

News Media and Agenda Setting

Agenda-setting theory posits that over time, "those issues emphasized in the news reports become the issues regarded as the most important by the public … the agenda of the news media becomes, to a considerable degree, the agenda of the public" (McCombs & Valenzuela, 2021, p. 2). Simply put, the media agenda influences the public agenda (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Although at its initial formulation the theory focused on issues that received prominent attention in the news media such as civil rights or inflation etc., and whether the public perceived the issues to be equally important (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987), the theory has been expanded to encompass the news media's tendency to make public figures such as political candidates and their messages prominent (McCombs & Valenzuela, 2021). This line of research tells us that when a political figure is salient in the media, the public perceives them and their messages as equally important (Kiousis & McCombs, 2004).

In the context of a political campaign, news media may signal (i) the important issues and (ii) the candidates to watch out for through extensive and prominent coverage (Kiousis & McCombs, 2004; McCombs & Valenzuela, 2021). As such, the media signals status by influencing "the importance assigned to issues and personalities in the media" (Winter & Eyal, 1981, p. 376). Along these lines, the news media selects, emphasizes,

and presents certain aspects of "what matters" to its audience (Gitlin, 1980), and hence, political figures must compete for voters' attention through media coverage.

We also know, based on previous research, that the news media does not only make certain issues/candidates/candidate traits prominent. The news media, through the selection of those particular issues/candidates/traits while obscuring others influence how they are interpreted and understood by the audience (Scheufele & Iyengar, 2014; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). According to Entman (2010), the news media can shape audience attitudes toward issues, candidates, and events by selecting some information and highlighting it while obscuring others. This subtle influence of the new media coverage of election campaigns, i.e., news framing, describes the "power of a communicating text" (Entman, 1993, p. 51).

News Media Framing

Mass communication literature is replete with varied definitions of news frames and framing. Gitlin (1980) defines frames as "persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection emphasis, and exclusion by which symbol handlers routinely organize discourse" (p.7). Gamson and Modigliani (1987) conceptualize frames as interpretive packages that assign meaning to an issue. At the core of this package is a "central organizing idea or storyline that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events, weaving a connection among them. The frame suggests what the controversy is about, the essence of the issue" (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989, p. 3). Entman (1993) on the other hand contends that to frame is to "select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or

treatment" (p. 52). Capella and Jamieson (1997) developed a definition that closely aligns with journalism practice by stating that framing is a way in which a "story is written or produced" (p. 39).

Media frames not only help determine which aspects of reality the audience focuses on, but they also cull "a few elements of perceived reality and assemble a narrative that highlights connections among them to promote a particular interpretation" (Entman, 2007, p. 164). Political communication research shows that rather than just covering "issues or facts" —for example during a political campaign season—the news media also carry their own biases, opinions, and political affiliations into their coverage of these issues (Entman, 2010). As such, framing can influence political attitudes and preferences as "each side has the potential to draw voters away from its opponents using frames for its position that may also appeal to the other side's voters" (Chong & Druckman, 2007, p. 114). Additionally, framing can be consequential because "by activating some ideas, feelings, and values rather than others, then, the news encourages particular trains of thoughts about political phenomena and lead audience members to arrive at more or less predictable conclusions" (Price et al., 1997, p. 483). Empirical evidence abounds supporting these arguments.

Strategic news framing has been shown to evoke political cynicism (Vreese, 2004), and exert a strong influence on public opinion (de Vreese, et al., 2011; Matthes, 2008). For example, news media framing of the EU expansion in terms of risk (potentially deleterious consequences of the EU expansion) and opportunity (potentially positive consequences of the enlargement) produced differential effects such that opportunity framing led to significant levels of public support for the enlargement

(Schuck & de Vreese, 2006). Exposure to positive framing of the EU affected voter's intentions toward Eurosceptic parties such that the more positive judgements a voter was exposed to, the less likely he/she was to cast a vote for the Eurosceptic party (van Spanje & de Vreese, 2014). When the news media amplifies a candidate's viability and electability, the audience is more likely to perceive the candidate as viable and electable (Jones et al., 2016). It did not matter whether the audience was exposed to satirical shows mocking the candidates or conservative-oriented talk shows that positively framed conservative candidates, or whether the coverage focused on the candidate's winning record (Jones et al., 2016). News media framing of immigrants and refugees as potential security threats, threats to the host cultures, and strain on the welfare state have led to waves of anti-immigrant attitudes across Europe (Kovář, 2023) and the United States (Guo et al., 2023).

To this end, framing has been described as one of the most overt manifestations of media power (Gulati et al., 2004) and its immense influence on electoral behavior, though subtle, is well documented (Capella & Jamieson, 1997; Jones et al., 2016). However, we still do not know how populism resonates with journalists, how journalists structure populist discourse, how the public interprets populism, and how they collectively assemble narratives about the phenomenon and discuss the essence of the issue. It is important, therefore, to investigate the nexus of media and populism because "without taking into account the communicative messages sent by political actors, media, or fellow citizens; without analyzing the media repertoires and the messages that reach citizens;... and without considering the way these messages are interpreted and the way these perceptions are moderated or mediated by different kinds of citizen predispositions, the

complex mechanisms behind the effects of populist communication will not be described and explained satisfactorily" (Reinemann et al., 2017, p. 381).

Populism and political campaigns

Election campaigns the world over have always been an object of much attention. On the one hand, we—the public—are usually fascinated by the stakes in the elections, the staggering budgets involved, the often-charged rhetoric, and the magnitude of the campaigns. The politicians, on the other hand, understand that much of their electoral success is contingent on being heard by as many people as possible and the public warming up to them. As such, political actors use every trick in the political playbook to garner media attention and, consequently, be heard in the mediated public debate (Vliegenthart et al., 2012). Politicians are convinced that getting in the news, particularly in a campaign season, is a matter of political "life and death". This explains why, for example, when Walter Mondale lost the 1984 US presidential election campaign to Ronald Reagan, he suggested that the main reason for his loss was due to "television which never warmed up to him nor did he warm up to television" (Schudson, 1995, p. 6). In sum, election campaigns usually turn into media spectacles (Farnsworth & Litcher, 2011).

Populism has become one of the most prominent political strategies deployed to attract media attention and mass mobilization (Bonikowski & Gidron, 2016; Dai & Kustov, 2022; Schmidt, 2020). Weyland (2001)—the main proponent of populism as a strategic political approach—views populism "as a political strategy through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government power based on direct, unmediated, noninstitutionalized support from large numbers of mostly unorganized followers" (p.14).

Other scholars (e.g., Barr, 2018) share a similar view. Barr (2018) considers populism as a "mass movement led by an outsider or maverick seeking to gain or maintain power using anti-establishment appeals and plebiscitarian linkages" (p.12). Similarly, Resnick (2015) concurs arguing that populism is perceived as a "an electoral strategy aimed at mobilizing voters to support a particular party," and one that "relies on a charismatic leader who fosters unmediated linkages with a mass of unorganized, marginalized communities" (Resnick, 2015, p.317). Indeed, many scholars now view populism as an opportunistic political mobilization strategy employed by politicians to gain political power through publicity stunts, dramatization, and newsworthiness (Bonikowski & Gidron, 2016; Engesser et al., 2017; Moffit, 2016).

Conceptualizing Populism

There is a robust debate among academics and most observers of populism about the conceptualization of populism. Whereas there have been contestations over its definition because of wide-ranging conceptualizations of populism as a political strategy (Barr; 2018; Weyland, 2001), a political ideology (Mudde, 2004), and a communication style (Jaggers & Walgrave, 2007), the ideational approach to populism has become increasingly popular in academic circles (Hameleers, 2020, 2021; Hameleers & Schmuck, 2017; Hameleers & Vliegenthart, 2020; Hawkins, 2009; Mudde, 2004, 2007; Pirro & Taggart, 2023; Rooduijn, 2014, 2018, 2019; Rooduijn & Pauwels, 2011). Mudde's (2004) ideational approach views populism as "*a thin-centered 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 peopl*e" (p. 1327). Thus, the two central elements of populism and/or populist ideology are "people-centrism" and "anti-elitism".

Populists propagate this societal "division" by employing rhetorical elements involving appeal to the people (people-centrism) and denigration of elites (anti-elitism) (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Schmidt, 2020). According to Jagers and Walgarave (2007), utilizing such rhetorical elements denotes the communicative aspects of populism. As such, Jagers and Walgrave argue that populism can be conceptualized as a style or "a communication frame that appeals to and identifies with the people and pretends to speak in their name… it is a master frame, a way to wrap up all kinds of issues" (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007, p. 322). In doing so, populists employ communication strategies featuring incessant focus on the people by "*talking about the people*" and thus, they regularly utilize words such as "the people, the public, the citizens, the voters, the taxpayer, the resident, the consumer, and the population" (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007, p. 323). Populists strive to portray themselves as pro-people (Taggart, 2000), that they care about their needs and are thus, the defenders of their sovereignty (Engesser et al., 2017). As such, perpetual references to the people forms the minimum defining feature of populism (Aalberg et al., 2017). This component of populist communication is referred to as people-centrism (Mudde, 2004).

People-centrism

People-centrism is central to populism (Schmidt, 2020). People-reference involves portraying the people as a homogeneous, collective entity without divisions (Rooduijn, 2014). As such, populist political actors worship and glorify the people (Mény & Surel, 2002). Populists claim that wisdom and sincerity reside with the common man

(Taggart, 2000). Along this vein, the people are bestowed with a catalog of virtues including intelligence, morality, charisma, purity, competence, and goodness (Taggart, 2000). Therefore, the people are absolved from being extremist, criminal, malevolent, racist, lazy, and undemocratic (Ernst et al., 2017). Understood as a political strategy (Barr, 2018), populist discourse then becomes a way for populists to "try to maintain a close relation to the people" (Engesser et al., 2017, p. 1112). Indeed, populist actors describe themselves as belonging to the people, caring for them, agreeing with the people, and thus, they claim to represent and embody the people (Ernst et al., 2017; Meny & Surel, 2002).

Populists claim to speak and advocate for the people (Rooduijn, 2019) and "regard the people's needs and demands as inviolable, and they place it above everything else in society." (Engesser et al., 2017, p. 1112). Populists, whose goal is to rupture the so-called exclusionary and exploitative elitist systems, "the demand for unrestricted popular power" (Engesser et al., 2017, p. 1111) or people's sovereignty (Mudde, 2004). Along this vein, populist actors emphasize that politics should be established on the idea of popular will and sovereignty (Meny & Surel, 2002). Therefore, populists argue in favor of granting the people—the silenced majority—the ultimate power within a given context such as an election (Ernst et al., 2017).

Scholars argue that populist sentiments featuring popular sovereignty serve as a reminder to the elites that the ordinary people are the absolute source of political influence in a democracy (Rooduijn, 2014; Taggart, 2000). Mudde (2019) contends that addressing the ideas and interests of the silent majority and the angry not only serves to unify but is also an attempt to "mobilize this majority against a defined enemy (e.g., the

establishment). Thus, people-centrism is not sufficient alone in defining populism. To be consistent with the ideational approach to populism, references to the people must always appear together with criticism of elites (Mudde, 2007). Hence, an anti-elitist impetus is the other core element of populism.

Anti-elitism

The idea of people-centrism implies and or is premised on the existence of "the other". "The other" in the populist discourse refers to the elites (Mudde, 2004) who the people are opposed to (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008). Elites are the people's core enemy or the people's "nemesis" (Mudde, 2004, p. 544) because they are accused of subverting the will of the people (Hawkins, 2009). The elites are said to be in the ivory towers of prosperity and pursuing their selfish interests at the expense of the masses (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). Populists accuse political elites of appropriating power from its legitimate owners, i.e., "the people" (Resnick, 2019). As such, populists implicate elites of depriving the people of their supremacy and, thus, elites should be denied sovereignty (Ernst et al., 2017). Populist actors feel a sense of urgency because the elites are said to be continuously conniving against the people and their influence should be curtailed immediately (Meny & Surel, 2002).

Scholars have theorized about who "the elite" are in populist discourse and concluded the elites are a moving target (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Mudde, 2019; Rooduijn, 2014). Elites can be economic groups such as capitalists, the media, political parties or the state intellectuals. However, the most pronounced group of elites are those in the political realm, i.e., political parties and their rich and powerful supporters, the so-called servants of imperial powers or the "political establishment" (Mudde, 2019;

Salgado et al., 2021). Looking at the anti-elitist impetus of populism, three underlying features can be seen.

First, populists blame the elites for the problems bedeviling the people (Hameleers, 2020). Elites are said to be working against the interests of the common man (Mudde, 2019). Along this vein, elites are harmful and a threat to the people because they are responsible for negative situations facing society (Ernst et al., 2017). Part of this negative situations include betrayal of the people, and accusations of appropriate themselves power that otherwise belong the people (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008). Second, populists contend that elites do not represent the people, that they are detached from their masses and thus, do not belong to the people, nor close to them, nor do they care or speak for the people (Ernst et al., 2017). Elites are, therefore, ostracized for abusing their power to "occupy, distort, and exploit democracy" (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008, p. 4). Consequently, and as its third anti-elitist characteristic, the elites are discredited as being corrupt, immoral, incompetent, hateful, lazy, undemocratic, selfish, unaccountable, and ignorant (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008; Meny & Surel, 2002; Rooduijn, 2014).

Populism, then, is seen as Manichean discourse characterized by a preoccupation with ostracizing and denouncing the elites while elevating the common people and their homogeneous needs (Engesser et al., 2017; Hawkins, 2009). Populism distinguishes between the *good* people, and their needs juxtaposed against the *evil* elites and their detrimental schemes. Populists propagate this moral dualistic struggle between the "people " and the evil elites through clever populist communication strategies characterized by the use of appealing emotional rhetoric (Ernst et al., 2019; Jagers &

Walgrave, 2007). Populists engage in populist political communication to shuffle the deck and redraw political maps globally. By demanding the people's sovereign power during specific contexts (e.g., election seasons) and thus advocating for "giving voice/power back to the people"', populists claim to offer legitimate political representation (Resnick, 2019). Examples abound illustrating this opportunistic political approach.

In Europe, populist political actors have reshaped political landscapes with populist movements. In France, Jean-Marie Le Pen used the slogan "Give voice to the people" during his campaigns to reinvigorate the masses to support his *Front National Party* (Baloge & Hubé, 2022). In 2017, Jean's daughter, Marine Le Pen used the populist campaign slogan "In the name of the people" in her run for the French Presidency (Geva, 2020). Geva (2020) argues that Marine's charismatic advocacy for the people significantly increased the vote share for the *Front National.* In the UK, the UK Independence Party led by Nigel Farage capitalized on popular populist Euroscepticism and hostility to British involvement in the EU to successfully lead Brexit (Devine & Murphy, 2020b). In the Netherlands, Pim Fortuyn's populist movement rose to prominence by exploiting public anxiety over mass immigration and claims of failure by the political elite to address these fears (Hameleers & Vliegenthart, 2020; Koopmans & Muis, 2009).

In the United States, political actors have used campaign sloganeering such as "the audacity of hope", "the future we can believe in", "law and order" etc. to unify "the people" (Savage, 2018). Trump and his supporters picked on the conspiratorial idea of the deep state and propagated the QAnon conspiracy theories claiming that there is a

lurking network of elites working to frustrate his politics, and his administration (Pirro & Taggart, 2023). In the Philippines, the Philippine populist autocrat, Rodrigo Duterte enjoyed high approval ratings among the public because he campaigned against drugs and traffickers: pushing the people's agenda (Ragragio, 2022). In Zambia, Michael Sata rallied disaffected and disenfranchised Zambians through his intense and rabble-rousing speaking style, demanding "respect to the people" (Resnick, 2015; 2019).

Given that the public does not interact with politicians and political campaigns directly but depends on the mass media for political information (Vliegenthart et al., 2012) and because political actors look at the media as institutions and means of communication (Kramer, 2018), it is important to examine the potential link between populism, populist actors, and the media.

Populist Rhetoric and the Media

Past literature tells us that there is a potential link between the media and the upsurge in populism (Ellinas, 2010; Mazzoleni, 2008). However, this association has received very little empirical attention (Moffitt, 2016; Reinemann et al., 2019). Journalists—acting as gatekeepers—decide on how to deal with populist discourse in the public arena. They can allocate more or less attention to populist sentiments. As such, the media can be both a friend and a foe to populist political parties and figures (Mudde, 2007). The media can be a friend by being friendly, empathetic, and receptive to populist sentiments and, therefore, provide positive media coverage (Mudde, 2007; 2019). It is assumed that the media can "give passionate attention to what happens in the usually animate precincts of populist movements" (Mazzoleni, 2008, p. 50). The media can also

be friendly to populist movements by legitimizing their claims and their organizations (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2018).

At an obvious level, media friendliness to populist movements can be seen in open and direct support for the populist actors. For example, the populist right-wing UK Independence Party (UKIP) received high media coverage leading up to the Brexit referendum (Devine & Murphy, 2020b). Indeed, "the British *Daily Express* was the unofficial newspaper for UKIP between 2013 and 2018" (Mudde, 2019, p. 75). Similarly, Mudde (2019) contends that Fox News turned into Trump's "media cheerleader" (p. 75). Although Mazzoleni (2008) postulates tabloid media— driven by commercial interests— "responds to market imperatives" leading to adoption of "sensationalistic coverage of events … and unsurprisingly give passionate attention to what happens in the usually animated precincts of populist movements" (p. 52), established, reputable, and often - newspapers appear to be receptive to the populist sentiments and normalize populist right-wing characters.

Normatively, mainstream news media are often the mouthpieces of the ruling elites (Ellinas, 2010). As a result of such close connections to elites, "they tend to adopt a law-and-order attitude and to use their journalistic weapons for the defense of the status quo when it comes under attack from anti-establishment forces, such as protest groups, and populist movements" (Mazzoleni, et al., 2003, p. 16). Along this vein, the mainstream news media may expressly combat and downplay the threats posed by protests or populists and hence, contain their spread (Mazzoleni, 2008; Salgado & Zuquete, 2017). However, one can argue that the mainstream media seems to be changing their tune and arguably normalizing populist sentiments. For example, the popular

Austrian daily newspaper, *NKZ*, provided “outsized media publicity" to the far-right populist Freedom Party-FPO (Ellinas, 2010, p. 62). Ellinas contends that *NKZ* had a soft spot for the populist party: it granted extensive coverage to the issues raised by the FPO, thus reinforcing and legitimizing the party's agenda. Ellinas (2010) argues that the mainstream conservative Austrian newspaper elevated the far-right populist party (FPO) by being receptive to their populist sentiments and providing the platform for the dissemination of populist sentiments.

Across the Atlantic, *The Wall Street Journal* has regularly published sympathetic opinion pieces on the far-right populist Dutch politician Geert Wilders, and the *WSJ* “even officially endorsed {Brazilian populist] Jair Bolsonaro in 2018” (Mudde, 2019, p. 75). Similarly, the *New York Times* has employed columnists and occasional op-ed writers who are sympathetic to the far-right (Mudde, 2019). Moreover, the presence and popularity of right-wing media, such as Fox News, provided the foundation for the rise of the Tea Party, and the spread of populist sentiments that were initially on the fringes of American politics (Jamieson & Cappella, 2008). In Spain, the news media emphasized the antagonistic divide between the people and the elites, the “us” vs. “them”, the idealized nation of virtuous people vs anti-elitism, thus giving prominence to Podemos, the left-wing populist party (Salgado et al., 2022). Similarly, the news media elevated populist actors and parties in Croatia by granting attention to their populist rhetoric (Mustapić et al., 2019).

When the media becomes amenable to populist movements, the readers and viewers are easily exposed to populist creed and rhetoric. Consequently, the public may “sympathize with the “underdog far-right politician who is unfairly attacked by the

arrogant media" (Mudde, 2019, p.75). Along this vein, the media can prime the audience with a sympathetic populist agenda and thus open up space and an opportunity for populist sentiments to spread (Koopmans & Muis, 2009). As such, populist sentiments may be reinforced, normalized, legitimized, and accepted by the public (Ellinas, 2010; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2018).

Conversely, the news media can deny the populist movements the necessary political oxygen, i.e., publicity, and be equally highly critical of their populist claims (Mudde, 2007). Indeed, "while the media might at times pander to racial stereotyping, in general, they can be hostile to the extreme populist right" (Eatwell, 2003, p. 60). For example, Portuguese mainstream media have been greatly impervious to the persuasvie appeal of populism: "For the most part, Portuguese media, particularly quality newspapers, and mainstream television channels, are hostile toward manifestations of political populism and try to critically deconstruct it" (Sagado & Zuquete, 2017, p. 242). Extreme right-wing Portuguese politicians have often found it difficult to get media coverage during their political engagements, and thus, their visibility in the public domain remains quite low (Salgado, 2019). Salgado (2019) found that in the Portuguese media, there is "almost complete absence of populist features of political communication in the news media coverage" (p. 90). Similarly, there is neglible empirical evidence of the presence of populist messaging in Irish election media coverage (Culloty & Suiter, 2019). In Germany, the news media has been highly critical, negative, and restraining of populist sentiments given the country's history (Ellinas, 2010; Moffit, 2016). Ellinas (2010) shows that the German press has consistently given very little to absolutely no coverage to populist parties and their policy positions.

With this in mind, the presidential campaigns in Kenya present a valuable discursive context to explore the dynamics of populist communication and its resonance with the Kenyans. Given the increasing mediatization of politics—which reflects the growing influence of the media over politics from the way the public gets political information to the way political actors communicate and present themselves (Stromback, 2008) and—if "the central dimensions of contemporary populism, including its causes and consequences for democratic politics, cannot be understood without addressing media and communication issues" (Waisbord, 2018, p.118), it becomes important to explore the potential affinity between the upsurge in populism and the media in Kenya. As such, I seek to examine the media as a potential platform for obtaining public visibility (Koopmans & Muis, 2009). Specifically, I explore the visibility of populist claims in the Kenyan news media. That is: Did the media coverage of the presidential campaigns, even if condemnatory, provide a platform for the dissemination of populist sentiments, and thus, give it the necessary political oxygen, i.e., publicity and importance? or in short: ***How receptive is the Kenyan media to populist claims? (RQ1).***

Populist rhetoric and public debate

Jagers & Walgrave's (2007) conceptualization of populism as a "communication frame that appeals to and identifies with the people and pretends to speak in their name" (p.322) — denotes that populism can be viewed more an attribute of a specific message (a Manichaean vision of society, i.e., the people vs the elites) rather than a characteristic of a political actor spreading the message. As such, political actors communicate populist messages to the public to mobilize the masses and potentially achieve electoral success. Such populist rhetoric and/or messages get to the public consciousness through the mass

media, particularly during an election season. Research shows that the mass media is the most important source of political information for the public (Koopmans & Muis, 2009) and is a tool for communication by politicians, even as social media gradually becomes relevant (Schmidt, 2020). Based on direct and mediated exposure to populist discourse as well as personal predispositions, persuasive populist messages can lead to certain outcomes. For example, populist messaging may encourage online and offline political talk about populism and issues associated with populist causes. Part of this discussion may occur as a form of public debate.

Public debate or the exchange of opinions among citizens is at the heart of liberal participatory democracies (Hoffman & Slater, 2007; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2004, 2007). In such an open political space, citizens can express their opinions on the mundane and the grand issues affecting them and their communities; some of which can be political. Given that a majority of citizens do not experience politics directly, and hence political experiences are mediated, the mass media has become a central space in which such public deliberations occur (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2007). Indeed, "the mass media have now become the principal institutions of the public sphere" … and thus, "it is through the mass media, rather than in face-to-face settings, that the sphere of private people come together as a public to discuss matters of common concern" (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2007, p. 3). Some of these common concerns could be ideas and feelings on politics which are expressed through the "mediated sites of public discourse" (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2001, p. 303). The opinion section of the newspapers is one of a few such sites (Hoffman & Slater, 2007; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2007). They include letters to the editor, editorials, op-ed pieces, and columns (Dunsmore & Hickerson, 2020; Hoffman & Slater, 2007; Nolan et

al., 2016; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2007).

Letters to the editor provide a space for ordinary citizens to directly express their thoughts on public issues, which makes this section of the newspaper "central to the functioning of the democratic system" (Hynds, 1991, p. 2). Dunsmore and Hickerson (2020) argue—in "Herbamasian" terms—that letters to the editor are at the heart of the public sphere; "a forum for public discussion of community concerns by ordinary citizens" (p. 2098). Indeed, this section of the newspaper has historically been seen as an indispensable public forum for debate (Hynds, 1991), "a place where democracy blossoms because regular citizens are allowed a voice of their own" (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2004, p.90). Letters to the editor are "transcripts of the town square … a debating society that never adjourns (Nader & Gold, 1988, p. 54) and have the potential to influence government action as they take on the agenda-setting role and by backing up the editorial voice in some cases (Nolan et al., 2016). The views of the masses published in this section of the newspaper—while they are far from being representative reflections of public opinion—are often viewed by the citizens, policymakers, and journalists alike as a good gauge of public thinking on a range of issues (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2004). As such, it is important to examine this content.

Compared to letters to the editor which are usually written by "ordinary citizens", editorials, and opinion columns are regularly written by "opinion leaders" including journalists, academics, writers, editors, and other professionals (Firmstone, 2019; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2004). As such, the authors of these sections tend to be more educated and thus nuanced in their writing relative to the writers of letters to the editor (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2004). Editorials, for example, "are the only place in a newspaper where the

opinions of a newspaper as an organization are explicitly represented" and these editorials "play a powerful role in constructing political debate in the public sphere" (Firmstone, 2019, p.1). They also provide the "most reliable way of measuring collective opinion of a newspaper as an entity" (Firmstone, 2019, p.7).

Previous research reveals that editorial pieces have fueled debates on geopolitical conflicts (Montiel & Dela Paz, 2020). Similarly, editorials are at their most persuasive during elections (Firmstone, 2019), and thus, editorial endorsements have been shown to influence political behavior (Druckman & Parkin, 2005; Kahn & Kenney, 2002). On the other hand, letters to the editor and opinion columns have been used as public forums to express discontentment with immigration in Australia, the US, and Canada (Dunsmore & Hickerson, 2020), and the Scandinavian states (Hovden & Mjelde, 2022). With this insight in mind, opinion pages of the newspapers from the editorials, opinion columns, and letters to the editor provide an opportunity to examine public debate among the citizenry on a range of other global socio-political issues. In this context, I interrogate the spread and dissipation of populist ideas and rhetoric among the public by exploring how these ideas are expressed in the forum pages of Kenyan newspapers by posing the following question:

RQ 2: How pervasive is populism in the opinion pages of Kenyan newspapers?

News Media Framing of Populism and Populist Rhetoric in Kenya

Journalists often play an interpretive role in their coverage of contemporary issues, a role that denotes media framing: a subtle media influence with real perceptual impact (D'Angelo, 2017). At the core of framing is "a central organizing idea or storyline, that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events, weaving a connection

among them. The frame suggests what the controversy is about, the essence of the issue" (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989, p. 143). Framing has a selective function because it emphasizes certain aspects of reality while pushing others into the background (Entman, 2010). Such emphasis is done using framing devices (Lecheler & De Vreese, 2011).

Framing devices include metaphors, examples, information, arguments, and catchphrases used to condense information and present an issue (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). Frames can be identified and examined by "the presence or absence of certain keywords, stock phrases, stereotyped images, sources of information and sentences that provide thematically reinforcing clusters of facts or judgments" (Entman, 1993, p. 52). They include "choices about language, quotations, and relevant information" (Shah et al., 2002, p. 367). Other scholars argue that frames include certain tones as packages to characterize a given issue (de Vreese, 2012).

The direction of news coverage by tone weaves together a narrative that promotes a particular interpretation (Entman, 2010) which influences voter behavior (Kahn & Kenney, 2002). Differences in the tone of coverage can shape candidate image perceptions, particularly, perceptions of politically relevant traits (Druckman & Parkin, 2005). Along this vein, Druckman and Parkin posit that a newspaper's tone used to cover a candidate shaped voters' electoral decision in the 2000 Minnesota senate campaigns. The avalanche of positive news media coverage of Pim Fortyun relative to his competitors in the Netherlands significantly boosted his electoral success (Koopmans & Muis, 2009). In the UK, Nagel Farage's right-wing UK Independence Party (UKIP) received disproportionately positive coverage for its pro-Brexit message relative to other parties and politicians (Murphy & Devine, 2020). The positive coverage was correlated

with public support for the pro-Brexit campaign. Positive news media tone significantly predicted positive evaluation of political candidates in Israel (Balmas & Sheafer, 2010). Khan and Kenney (2002) found that the tone of press coverage significantly influenced voter's evaluation of Minnesota senatorial candidates, especially among everyday newspaper readers. Overall, frames "invite people to think about an issue in particular ways" (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007, p. 19).

We know from previous research that news media can and do "frame actors as being good or bad politicians … and thereby provide evaluations of them and their performance" (Eberl et al., 2017, p. 1128). The news media can slant their coverage of political campaigns and political actors in various ways; some of which can be faint and arduous to notice or conversely, explicit and easy to detect (Kahn & Kenney, 2002). Research tells us, however, that "even subtle variations in the tenor of image narratives {have an} impact" (Druckman & Parkin, 2005, p.1032). It is plausible to argue, therefore, that by emphasizing some elements of populism and populist rhetoric while obscuring others, the news media can provide a way to understand and perceive populism and populists. By the use of "certain keywords, stock phrases, stereotyped images, sources of information, and sentences that provide thematically reinforcing clusters of facts or judgments" (Entman, 1993, p. 52), the news media can portray a populist discourse in a certain way. Along this vein, journalists can frame populist parties as part of the mainstream and acceptable rather than pariah and pathological parties (Esser et al., 2019).

In the context of populist politics, the media can be friendly, empathetic, and receptive to populist sentiments and, therefore, provide positive media coverage (Mudde, 2007). Indeed, the news media "can alter the parameters of partisan competition" not

only “by granting or denying access to political newcomers” (Mazzoleni, 2008, p. 50) but equally, through the subtle framing of political movements (Moffit, 2016). In the context of media framing, media friendliness can be seen through the choice of words and phrases used to describe political movements. For example, the mainstream Danish press positively described the populist party, the Danish People’s Party, as “a regular political adversary”, as “one of us” and thus, “not as radically different” (Hell & Hervik, 2008, p. 460). In Brazil, some mainstream newspapers normalized the far-right populist candidate Jair Bolsonaro despite highlighting his authoritarian leanings (Araujo & Prior, 2021).

The media can also actively shape populism coverage as a democratizing force or authoritarian. The argument that populism can be democratic is premised on the idea that populism emphasizes the will of the majority, which is a key tenet of liberal democracy (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012). Such a school of thought explains why populists often claim that they are out to defend the sovereign will of the majority; popular which will not be bypassed by the fraudulent and conspiring elites (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2018). Hence, populists “favor what is most often termed as minimal or procedural democracy, defined as popular sovereignty and majority rule” (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018, p.1670). These actors see populist ideologies as corrective mechanisms to the existing democratic malaise because populism can increase the participation of marginalized groups (Gricius, 2022).

In theory, therefore, populism can be portrayed as quasi-democratic because populism provides a voice for the marginalized thereby forcing greater accountability for the marginalized issues and policies (Gricius, 2022; Mudde, 2019). Moreover, some scholars have described populism as a strategic-political approach and hence, a campaign

strategy that “effectively” mobilizes the masses to turn out, an outcome that is normatively good for a democracy (Weyland, 2019). In doing so, populists reinvigorate the participation of the people in the political process (Gricius, 2022). One can, therefore, argue that the media can pick up on these positive frames and elevate populist parties and actors as close to people, advocating for them, and speaking on their behalf while giving voice to groups who feel marginalized by the political elites. Hence, populists can be framed positively as a force for good for reinvigorating political participation.

Conversely, populist actors are often portrayed as a threat to democracy in most European democracies (Ellinas, 2010; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2018). Journalists perceive the populists' preference for unmediated, minimal, or procedural democracy, and thus, their ambivalent relationship with the institutional mediators of liberal democracy as a cause for concern (Salgado & Zuquete, 2017). Indeed, populists express this ambivalence through disdain toward and systematic attacks on checks and balances, courts and the rule of law, the media, and the rights of minorities (Esser et al., 2019; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012; Resnick, 2019). For example, once Victor Orban was elected with a parliamentary majority in Hungary, the populist actor passed significant constitutional changes that limited media freedom and abolished checks and balances leading to a deterioration of Hungary’s democratic standing (Gricius, 2022). In Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro expressed outright contempt toward the media (Araujo & Prior, 2021). In Zambia, Michael Sata started bypassing the judiciary, the media, and even the legislature once he was elected and thus, he undermined democratic institutions in the process (Resnick, 2019).

The Portuguese media has employed this frame-populists as potentially authoritarian. The right-wing National Renovator Party-PNR in Portugal not only

received very scarce media coverage but was depicted as "an extremist group nostalgic for the former authoritarian regime (Marchi, 2013, p. 150). In the Philippines, the populist president Duterte was degraded as a potential autocrat in the early days of his presidency for his close ties with China's dictator Xi Jinping (Ragragio, 2022). The fears and concerns that populists can be authoritarian are largely informed by populists' claims such as "no institution has the right to constrain majority rule" (Mudde, 2019). As such, populists often end up attacking minorities, and crippling democratic institutions of checks and balances. Moreover, populists can be framed as threats to an informed public sphere, and thus, journalists can play the social responsibility of "calling out" falsehoods and hence, promoting an informed citizenry (Esser et al., 2019). In Sweden, the populist anti-immigration party-Swedish Democrats Party-has been consistently framed as an "unwelcomed *beast*… a devil in disguise, and a xenophobic movement (Hellström & Hervik, 2014, p. 458).

With the above discussion in mind, I pose the following research question: ***How does the Kenya news media frame populism and populist rhetoric? (RQ3).***

Chapter 3

CONTENT ANALYSIS

This project involves two related studies with two sources of data. The first study uses newspaper content related to the 2022 presidential campaigns in Kenya. The second study utilizes the findings from Study I and employs an online survey experiment involving Kenyan participants. First, I will describe the data collection procedures for the newspaper content.

Sampling

I conducted a systematic content analysis to assess whether the media provides "free publicity" to populist claims, the diffusion of populist ideas in the public, and the framing of populist discourse. Thus, I examined how political actors, and their communicative elements resonate with journalists and media, and how the Kenyan print media outlets deal with populist rhetoric. Also, I interrogated how the Kenyan media and the Kenyan public alike frame populism and populist communication. I selected three newspapers in Kenya using multiple criteria, namely, (i) newspapers with a national circulation, and thus (ii) the most popular, (iii) they are fierce competitors, and overall, (iv) they are considered the major newspapers in Kenya (Ekdale & Tully, 2019; Onyebadi, 2012; Reuters Institute, 2021). The three newspapers are *The Daily Nation*, *The Standard*, and *The Star*.

The Daily Nation is a daily newspaper produced and circulated by the Nation Media Group. *The Daily Nation* is the most popular newspaper and has the most extensive weekly reach in Kenya (Ekdale & Tully, 2019; The Reuters Institute of Digital Journalism, 2021). *The Standard* is a daily newspaper produced and circulated by the Standard Media Group and is the second most popular newspaper by reach, popularity, and readership (Ekdale & Tully, 2019). *The Star* is the third most popular newspaper with a national circulation and is considered a political newspaper for its heavy focus on politics (The Reuters Institute of Digital Journalism, 2021). The Star is produced and circulated by the Radio Africa Group.

The content for the present study was collected using a constructed-week technique (See Riffe et al., 2005). Riffe, Lacy, and Fico (2005) posit that the news media are subject to production routines and publication cycles. In other words, some days tend to have more news and information than other days of the week. As such, Riffe et al. (2005) recommend taking such systematic variations in news content into consideration during sampling for inference. Overall, a constructed week sampling takes into account the systematic variations in news production. To create a sample week, Riffe, Lico, and Lacy (2005) recommend "randomly selecting an issue for each day of the week" (p. 113). With this in mind, I "constructed" 2 weeks covering 5 months and a week (March 1st - August 7th), the official presidential campaign period in Kenya as announced by the electoral commission of Kenya.

Every day of the week was randomly selected, i.e., two Mondays, two Tuesdays, two Wednesdays, etc. for each newspaper. To identify the news articles published on each day of the week for the period under study; one Sunday, one Monday, one

Tuesday, one Wednesday, one Thursday, one Friday, and one Saturday was randomly selected from a pool of identified days of the week. To create each constructed week sample, I took all the days of the week for every month and I placed the same days of the week (e.g. Sundays) into a hat. I randomly drew a day out of the hat and repeated this procedure until I got 2 constructed weeks for the three publications.

To access the news stories for analysis, I subscribed to the online versions of the three daily newspapers. Although computer assisted analysis makes it easy to analyze large amounts of data, it comes with several drawbacks including problems with the validity of the automated applied measures (Neuendorf, 2017). As such, I preferred manual coding. The manual selection of articles procedure from the three publications was followed to ensure all the articles collected for analysis met the selection criteria.

Codebook and coding procedure

To create the codebook, previous studies with conceptualizations and operationalizations of the key variables of interest were consulted. The construction of the codebook was an involving, long, and arduous process that required iterative revisions until I and an additional coder were both comfortable with the coding scheme. The revisions continued until the moment the actual coding started. One coder participated in a extensive training session that included trial coding of the newspaper articles that were not part of the final sample. Once the training was complete, practice coding was conducted, and consensus was reached on the codebook only when coding was of acceptable coefficient and quality, then actual coding commenced. The coder—independent of the primary researcher—was randomly assigned to code 21 days out of the 42 days (i.e., 7 randomly selected days for every 2 constructed weeks per newspaper

publication). The unit of analysis was the individual news story.

Article selection

Stage 1: **Election news stories.** The first selection criterion was that the article had to distinctly focus on the presidential campaigns. The news articles should make references to the presidential candidates, political parties, or their coalitions. Research has shown that information and comments from non-partisan sources (e.g., journalists) are more influential in shaping and predicting public opinion relative to partisan sources (Farnsworth & Lichter, 2011) and this may justify limiting the analysis to campaign news items only. On the other hand, editorials explicitly show a newspaper's stance on any given issue, publication of columnists' opinions may subtly show a newspaper leaning on a theme/issue (Mudde, 2019). As such, campaign news items, opinion pieces (or columnists/columns), letters to the editor, and editorial pieces were also sampled for analysis. Regular news stories were coded separately from opinions, editorials, and letters to the editors. Some content such as news stories focusing on the lower-level races such as governorships and senate were excluded during data collection if they did not make references to the presidential campaigns.

Stage 2. A coder was trained to identify whether the article was a news story or an article on the forum pages. Opinion pages refer to editorials, opinion columns, and letters to the editor, (see Hoffman & Slater, 2007). Food and sports commentaries, profile or feature stories, travel columns, entertainment and celebrity stories, children's stories/corners, relationships, and lifestyle stories were excluded from analysis (See table 3 for the inclusion and exclusion criteria). Krippendorff Alpha (which controls for chance agreement) was calculated using a ReCal online calculator to check for

agreement between coders on whether the article was a news story or a forum article. The reliability was high (α = .94).

Table 1 Criteria for the inclusion and exclusion during content selection

Included	Excluded
Must mention presidential campaign, presidential candidates (or their coalitions)	Sports and food commentaries/stories
Must mention the presidential candidate's spouses/families, or running mates, only if in reference to the presidential campaign	Stories about the presidential candidates unrelated to the presidential campaigns
Letters to the editor (about the presidential elections/campaigns)	Graphics and photos only pieces
Editorials about the presidential campaigns	Lower-level electoral contests (e.g., senate races) without references to the presidential campaigns
Opinions (columnists), in reference to the presidential campaigns	
Lower-level electoral contests (e.g., senate	Entertainment/lifestyle/celebrity stories

races) with references to the presidential campaigns	World news

Measurement and Reliability

Populism. Two key indicators of populism were coded: *people centrism* and *anti-elitism*. In coding for people centrism, we included such references to the people as conceptualized n literature above, references to the people's virtues including charisma, morality, credibility, intelligence, competence, consistency, and claims of the people's sovereign will. Scholars have recommended that since it can be challenging to find "valid single-word indicators of populism" (see Mudde, 2004, 2007; Rooduijn & Pauwels, 2011), we also used specific word combinations that refer to the "ordinary people" in the populist discourse such as "hardworking taxpayer." (Hameleers & Vliegenthart, 2019).

Coding for populism can be difficult because of the "awkward" conceptual slipperiness that often characterizes the utility of populism. However, in this study, we acknowledge that although every political campaign involves placing the people at the center of the political process, political populism is distinct in its conceptualization of the people and their monolithic needs. People-centrism, as a fundamental dimension of populist ideology, argues that "politics should be an expression of the general will of the people" (Mudde, 2004, p. 543). Its emphasis lies in placing people at the center of the political decision-making process. The popular will of the pure people is thus centralized and emphasized through populist communication strategies. Whether we understand populism a political communication style (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Moffit,

2016), a political mobilization strategy (Dai & Rostov, 2022), or a discourse (Hawkins, 2009), there is a connection between these different conceptualizations: they all consider placing the people and their will at the center of all political processes as the minimal understanding of populism.

In other words, the central rhetorical factor for every populist actor is the indispensable significance of the centrality of "the people" and their will (Meny & Surel, 2002). Therefore, populism does not only refer to any unconnected political rhetoric aimed at winning the popular vote, but it is also an ideology that at the very minimum is defined by its emphasis on the centrality of and advocating for the people. As such, people-centrism may form the basic defining feature of populism, but people-centrism and anti-elitism "cannot be understood separately from each other because populism concerns the *specific* [antagonistic] *relationship* between the two" (Rooduijn, 2014, p. 690).

The central question in this coding process is interrogating whether the media echo populism intended by politicians, or it is more about how journalists interpret the populist rhetoric. Whereas the former assumes that the media is receptive to populism, the latter is based on the notion of journalists being populist themselves. Indeed, it has been theorized that the media can provide publicity to populist sentiments because of the newsworthiness of the tone, style, and conventional approach of populist actors (Mazzoleni, 2008). It is assumed that the "media's thirst for the salacious and entertaining headlines and soundbites that populist actors provide make populism and the media good bedfellows" (Moffit, 2016, p. 70). Mazzoleni (2008) refers to this as media populism—where the media becomes responsive to popular tastes and demands

of specific audiences: those with an inclination for populist sentiments. On the other hand, certain predispositions such as harboring populist attitudes and cynicism toward elites may potentially influence journalists to provide positive coverage of populist movements (Mazzoleni, 2008).

Distinguishing between political populism spread through the media and populism by the media is, however, difficult. Moreover, negative, or critical coverage of populist rhetoric may not be bad at all. Media hostility toward populism through the critical deconstruction of populist rhetoric can have a positive effect by increasing the visibility of the populist actors and sentiments and may, ultimately trump the negative effect of the tone of the coverage. Indeed, if the media pander to negative tonality, it may significantly reverberate the populist message among a wider audience. In this project, we did not focus on the tone of coverage. Rather, we interrogated the general receptivity of the media to populist sentiments by coding the attention given to the two fundamental dimensions of populism: people-centrism and anti-elitism.

Against this background, we coded for whether the news stories reported references to "the people"[1] as conceptualized above. If one or more of the references to the people were reported in the news articles, the article was coded as 1; if not, it was coded as 0. Specifically, instructions were provided in the coding scheme to check for the following: *In the article*, Does the journalist mention politician's references to the people? (In the forum articles) Does the author refer to the people? As they talk about "the people ": do they {political actors/article authors} emphasize the people's virtues?

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[1] We (the coders) included references to "the people" using an extensive list of words that could refer to the people. See the list in the appendix.

Do they glorify and praise the people for being intelligent, charismatic, moral, credible, competent, and consistent? That the people are not lazy, extremist, criminal, racist, stupid, malevolent, and undemocratic. As they refer to the people, do they describe them as having common desires, problems, and concerns? Do they praise the people's achievements? saying that the people are not responsible for anything bad or negative, that the people are not a burden/threat? More so, do political actors—as reported by the journalists—project themselves as being close to the people? that they speak for the people? that they know the people? that they represent the people and embody the people? that they belong to the people?

A subset of newspaper articles was randomly selected and coded for reliability (43% or 173 news articles). I calculated Krippendorf's alpha using the ReCal online calculator, and the reliabilities ranged from **α** = .77 to 1.00 across the three publications (**α** = .77 for *The Standard,* **α** = .86 for *The Daily Nation,* and **α** = 1.00 for *The Star*). Similarly, if a letter to the editor, an opinion column, or an editorial piece made references to "the people " as conceptualized in the codebook, the article was coded as 1 and 0 if no references were made. Krippendorf's alpha was calculated after randomly selecting 30% of the editorials, letters, and opinions (or 41 articles) and the intercoder reliability ranged from **α** = .68 to .98 across the three newspaper publications (**α** = .68 for *The Standard,* **α** = .78 for *The Daily Nation,* and **α** = .98 for *The Star*).

Anti-elitism

The second fundamental dimension of populism is the emphasis placed on the perceived people's enemy, the elites. We coded for descriptors used about elites as reported by the journalists as well as in the editorials, letters to the editor, and opinion

columns of the publications. Specifically, instructions were provided in the coding scheme on how to code anti-elitism. We asked the following questions.

In the article. Does the author/journalist criticize the elites [the rich and powerful in politics, media, business, and security}? Does the author/journalist describe the elites as corrupt, harmful, conspiring, and conniving against the people? Are the elites said to be immoral, arrogant, undemocratic, and ethnically biased? That they are the cause of the problems facing the people? Are they accused of distorting and exploiting democracy? Are the elites accused of being responsible for the ills facing the people? that they ignore the will of "the man in the street" and are only concerned with their own interests? Are they described as being detached from the people? not understanding the people and their needs? not advocating for the people? not caring about the people's needs? that elites do not belong to the people?

An article was coded as 1 if there were anti-elitist references in the articles as operationalized in the code book and 0 if there were no references. A subset of the articles (30%) was randomly selected and coded for reliability. Krippendorf's alpha was calculated using the ReCal online calculator. Reliability ranged from α = .81 to 1.00 for the news stories and α = .71 to 1 in the editorials, opinions, and letters to the editor.

Content Analysis Results

In this section, I focus on the descriptive results in answering the research questions. First, I will discuss how journalists in Kenyan newspapers deal with populist rhetoric. Second, I examine the magnitude of the diffusion of populism in the forum pages of the newspapers. Third, I discuss how the populist phenomenon is framed by journalists and the general public in the media.

A total of 540 articles were coded in the three newspapers. *The Standard* featured—albeit marginally—the most articles (*n* = 203), comprising 38% of the total sample. *The Daily Nation* closely followed, with 196 articles, or 36% of the sample. *The Star* had the least number of articles with 141 articles or 26% of the sample. See **Table 2** for the frequencies (or Figure 1.0).

Table 2 **S**ample distribution of newspaper content

Newspaper/Content	**News items**	**Editorials, Opinions, and Letters to the editor**	**Total**
The Daily Nation	150	46	196
The Standard	141	62	203
The Star	112	29	141
Total	403	137	**540**

By type of content, most of the articles (*n* = 403) were regular news stories comprising 75% of the sample relative to 137 forum articles (editorials, opinion columns, and letters to the editor) or 25% of the sample. Looking at the forum articles (*n* = 137), opinion columns were the most prominent (*n* = 89) with *The Standard* publishing a majority of the opinion pieces (*n* = 42 or 47% of the opinion pieces), followed by *The Daily Nation* (*n* = 25 or 28% of the sample), and lastly, *The Star* (*n* = 22 or 25% of the sample).

Table 3 Sample distribution of forum articles per newspaper

Newspaper/Content	Editorials	Opinions	Letters to the Editor	Total
The Daily Nation	4	25	17	46
The Standard	2	42	18	62
The Star	3	22	4	29
Total	9	89	39	**137**

The newspapers published 39 letters to the editor: *The Standard* (*n* = 18 or 46% of all letters to the editor), *The Daily Nation* (*n* = 17, or 44%), and lastly, *The Star* (*n* = 4, or 10% of all letters to the editor). In terms of the editorials (*n* = 9), the three newspapers published almost the same number of editorials; *The Daily Nation* published the majority (*n* = 4, or 44% of all the editorials), followed by *The Star (n* = 3 or 33% of the sample) and, *The Standard* (*n* = 2 or 22% of all the sample).

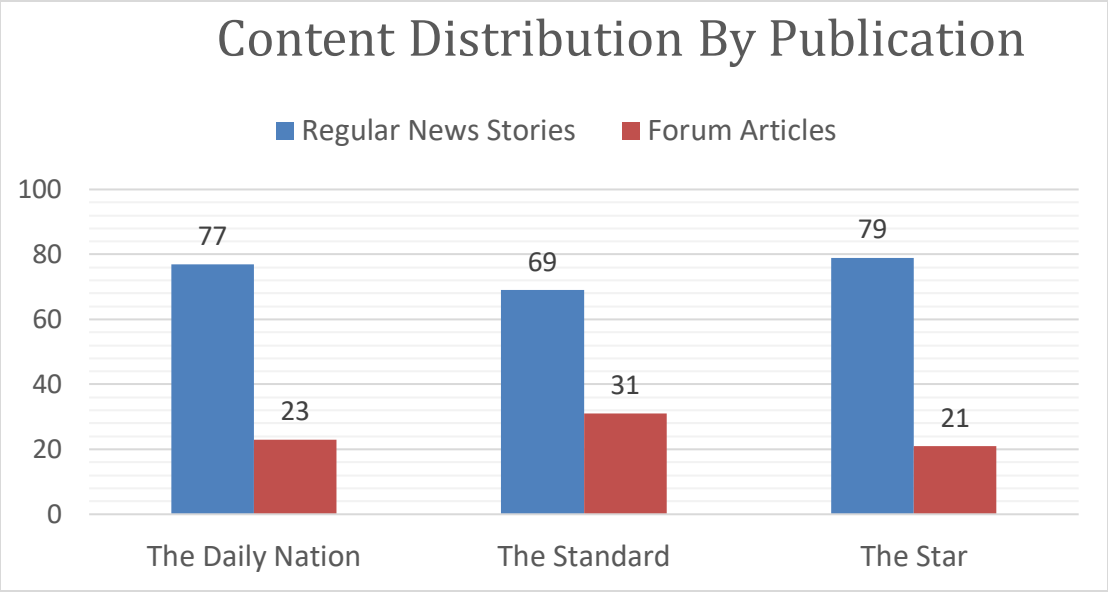

Figure 1 Sample distribution of articles by type of content in newspapers[2]

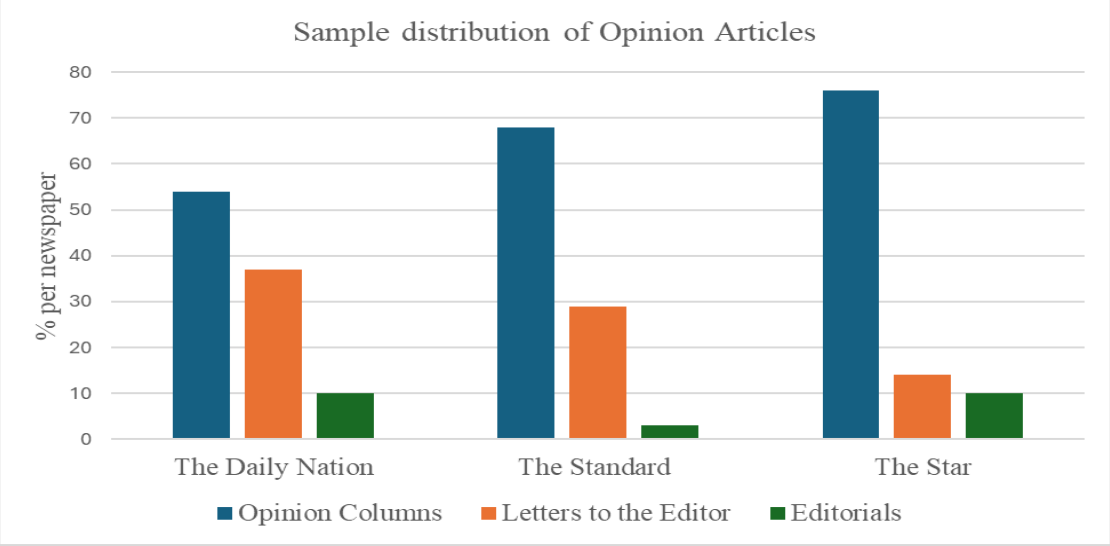

Figure 2 Sample Distribution of Opinion Articles[3]

[2] Distribution of percentages based on the total sampled content (e.g., 79% of content in *The Star* represent regular news stories)

[3] Distribution based on percentages relative to the specific content (e.g., 54% of the content in the Daily Nation represents the opinion columns)

Media and Populism (RQ1)

To interrogate how populist actors and their populist communicative messages echo with journalists as well as how Kenyan print media channels approach populist discourse, I posed the overall question: *Did the media coverage of the presidential campaigns, even if condemnatory, provide a platform for the dissemination of populist sentiments, and thus, gave it the necessary political oxygen, i.e., publicity and importance?* More formally, I posed: *How receptive is the Kenyan media to populist claims?* ***(RQ1).*** Past empirical findings have shown that populism as a communication phenomenon is often disseminated in a fragmented manner by political actors (see Engesser et al., 2017). Thus, one can argue that references to one dimension of populism may tacitly refer to or even prime a related populist dimension. For example, populist references to the failed representation of the common man coupled with emphasizing the centrality of the people may imply an attack on the political elites. As such, while the two dimensions may be related, populist ideas are often spread in a fragmented manner. Further, people-centrism and anti-elitism can plausibly have varied standing in journalistic coverage and thus, it is important to code them independently. Although people-centrism and anti-elitism could occur in the same article, we coded the frequency of people-centrism and anti-elitism separately.

In this study, we observed the patched nature of how populist ideas are disseminated. Notably, sentiments portraying the two elements of the thin political ideology were fragmented. In other words, there were barely any news items that had the "full populist ideology", i.e., both people centrism and anti-elitism. However, for

articles with the two elements, we coded the article "people centrist" if an article had more references to people centrism relative to anti-elitism, and vice versa.

Looking at the distribution of the two dimensions of populism, the content analysis revealed that 227 articles (97 = opinion pages, 130 = news stories[4]), or 42% of the total sample made references to or contained populist ideas through the populist rhetoric of the political actors, or populist ideas stemming from the authors of the articles. In terms of the populist dimensions, people centrism was by notably the most commonly utilized populist dimension as it occurred in almost two-thirds of the articles with populist references (*n* = 64% or 96 news stories & 49 forum articles). Compared to the total number of articles with populist references, anti-elitism occurred in 36% of the sampled articles (34 news stories and 48 forum articles). As such, people-centrist sentiments were the most prominent relative to anti-elitist claims. See Figure 3 below.

In the second step, I compared the occurrence of populist messages in the three publications. *The Standard* published the articles with the highest number of references to populist ideas, which comprises 43% of the sampled articles with references to populism (*n* = 98; 59 news stories & 39 forum articles). *The Daily Nation* closely followed with 71 articles or 31% of the articles (41 news stories & 30 forum articles) and lastly, *The Star* published 58 articles, or 26% of the articles with references to populist messages (30 news stories and 28 forum articles). See Figure 3.

In the second step, I compared the occurrence of populist messages in the three publications. *The Standard* published the articles with the highest number of references

[4] The "originators" of the populist rhetoric in the news stories were political actors. The journalists were the source of the populist message in the editorials, while the general public were the source of the rhetoric in the letters to the editor and the opinion columns.

to populist ideas, which comprises 43% of the sampled articles with references to populism (n = 98; 59 news stories & 39 forum articles). *The Daily Nation* closely followed with 71 articles or 31% of the articles (41 news stories & 30 forum articles) and lastly, *The Star* published 58 articles, or 26% of the articles with references to populist messages (30 news stories and 28 forum articles). See Figure 3.

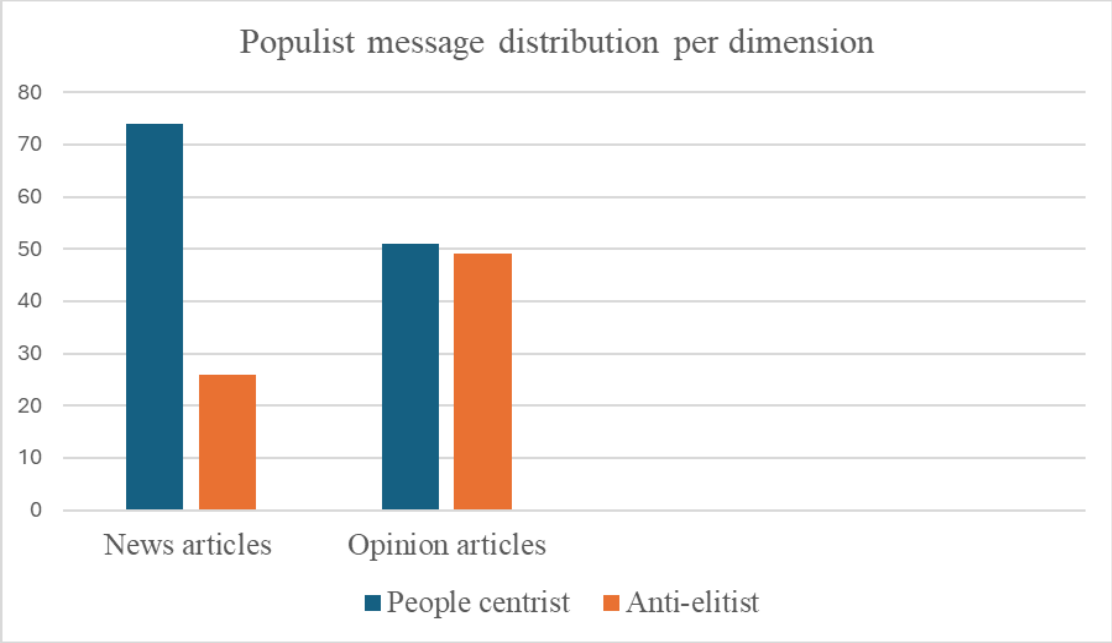

Figure 3 Overall distribution of populist messages by dimension[5]

Beyond the descriptive analyses above, Chi-Square tests revealed statistically significant differences between the three publications in terms of their receptivity to populist views and or content. Significant differences between the newspapers were observed. Overall, *The Standard* published populist views and or rhetoric significantly more than *The Star* ($\chi^2 = 5.78$, $df = 1$, $p < 0.05$), Cramer's V = 0.21, indicating a medium effect size. In contrast, *The Daily Nation* published significantly more

[5] The distribution is based on the type of content (e.g., 76% of populist content in the news stories were people-centrist).

references to populist content relative to *The Standard* ($\chi^2 = 4.08$, $df = 1$, $p < 0.05$), Cramer's V = 0.16, which also reflects a medium effect size. A Chi-square goodness of fit test revealed that although *The Daily Nation* published more populist views than *The Star*, the difference was not significant ($\chi^2 = 0.48$, $df = 1$, $p > 0.05$).

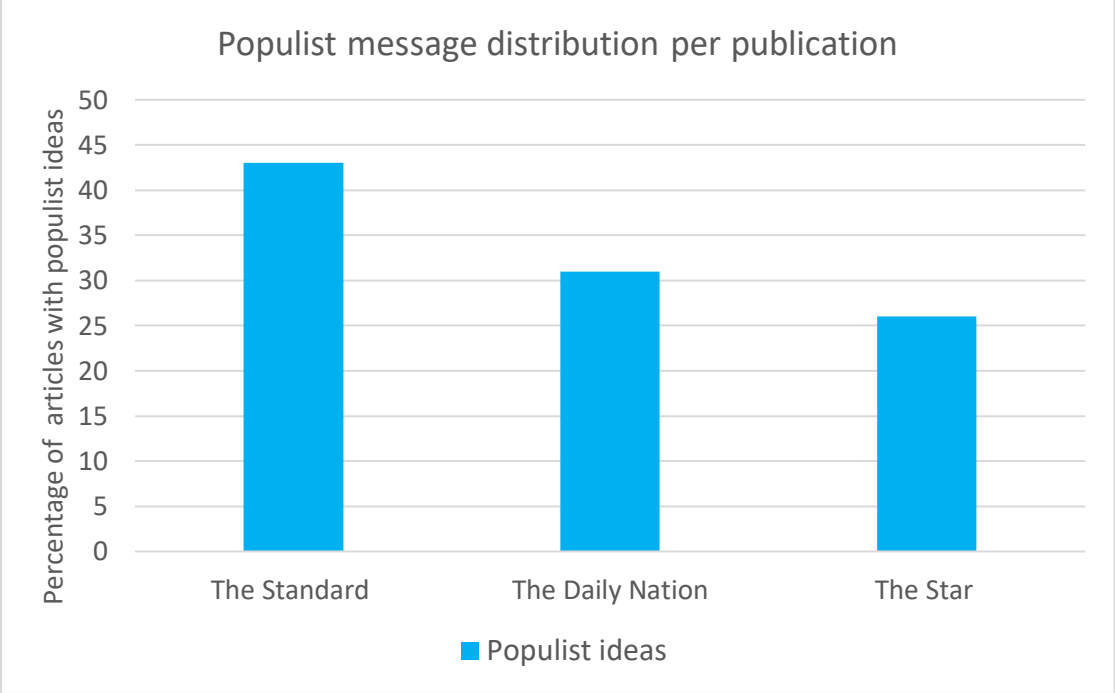

Figure 4 Distribution of overall populist messages in newspapers[6]

I also tested whether there were any significant differences between news items and opinion articles in their propensity to publish populist content. Significant differences between news and forum sections were determined by using a percentage of the overall mentions as expected frequencies. Overall, populist content was published significantly more in the news section ($n = 130$; 57% of the total sample with populist

[6] Percentages relative to the articles with references to populist ideas ($n = 227$).

ideas) relative to the forum pages which published 97 articles (43% of the total sample with populist views), a significant difference ($\chi^2 = 4.80$, $df = 1$, $p < .05$).
Put together, newspaper articles with references to populism and populist ideas form relatively half of the total sampled articles across the three publications, with statistically significant differences detected across the three publications. The print media directly reported the populist actor's rhetoric, slogans, and ideological perspectives thus heightening their public visibility through the news stories. Indirectly, the newspapers provided a window of opportunity for political pundits, commentators, and citizens to disseminate and magnify their populist messages through a professionally produced platform—the forum pages. Through these two avenues (news stories and forum pages), we see populism lending itself to one distinct perspective: *populism through the media.* Kenyan mainstream print media—through almost half of the sampled articles—and significantly more in the news stories relative to the forum—provided a small window of opportunity for populist actors to ventilate their ideas and thus, spread populist sentiments to the wider public.

One can argue that the Kenyan print media is moderately receptive to populist rhetoric given that only 42% of the newspaper articles published content with populist ideas. At the same time, there is little to no attempt by journalists to critically deconstruct the ideas through a harsh or negative tone, nor is there any significant negative framing of the phenomenon as will be shown in the subsequent sections below. Overall, the news articles became albeit moderately conveyor belts or simple transmitters of populist rhetoric involving the centrality of and closeness to the people in the political process juxtaposed with the conniving plans of the elites.

To reiterate, the Kenyan print media appears—though less prominently—to supply a platform for populist ideas thereby boosting the dissemination and amplification of populist messages stemming from both the general public and political elements. However, the Kenyan print media seems not to have opened their gates entirely to populism sentiments. In other words, they do not ignore per se nor do they amplify populist messages. Nonetheless, the relatively low prominence of populist ideas suggests that the media may not provide populists with a discursive opportunity to ventilate their ideas.

Public Debate in the Opinion Pieces (RQ2)

The second research question asked: what is the nature of the public deliberations on and diffusion of populism in the media? To measure the magnitude of populism in public forums in the media, we collected and analyzed opinion articles in the three leading Kenyan newspapers. We coded for the two central indicators of populism like the coding in the news stories. Two constructed weeks were used to sample the newspaper content capturing the opinion columns, editorials, and letters to the editor. Only those forum articles that focused on the presidential campaigns were selected for coding and analysis. The unit of analysis was the news article. Here, we coded whether the article contained one or both of the two fundamental dimensions of populism: people-centrism or anti-elitism.

Intercoder reliability was assessed with Krippendorf's alpha (Krippendorff, 2004). 30% of the editorials, letters, and opinions (or 41 articles) were randomly selected and the intercoder reliability ranged from α = .68 to .98 (α = .68 for *The Standard*, α = .78 for *The Daily Nation,* and α = .98 for *The Star*) for people-centrist

references. Reliabilities for anti-elitist references ranged from **α** = .71 to 1 in the editorials, opinions, and letters to the editor across the three newspaper publications (**α** = .71 for *The Daily Nation,* **α** = .84 for *The Standard,* and 1 for *The Star*).

Populism in the forum pages appeared to be largely driven by anti-elitism (*n* = 52, or 54% of the total forum articles). *The Star* published the majority of the opinion pieces with anti-elitist messages (*n* = 20, 38% of the forum pages with anti-elite ideas), followed by *The Standard* (*n* = 17, 33%), and lastly, *The Daily Nation* (*n* = 15, 29%). There was a more people-centrist populist rhetoric in the commentaries published in *The Standard,* (*n* = 22, 49% of all articles with people-centrist references), followed by *The Daily Nation* (*n* = 15, 33%), and lastly, *The Star* (*n* = 8, 18%). **Figure 5 is based on these percentage calculations.**

In the opinion pages, approximately two-thirds of all the opinion columns (*n* = 61 or 69% of all opinion articles) contained populist messages; 79% of all letters to the editor (*n* = 31) and 6% of all the editorials (*n* = 5). From a theoretical perspective, the concern here is who the originators of the populist messages and ideas are and how diffused the populist ideas appear to be among the general public. Opinion columns—authored by academics, lawyers, political pundits, and commentators—and letters to the editor are the most prominent category of sources of populist ideas. Journalists are by far the least source of populist ideas through the editorials. This shows that media actors (journalists) rarely construct populist messages themselves in the Kenyan context.

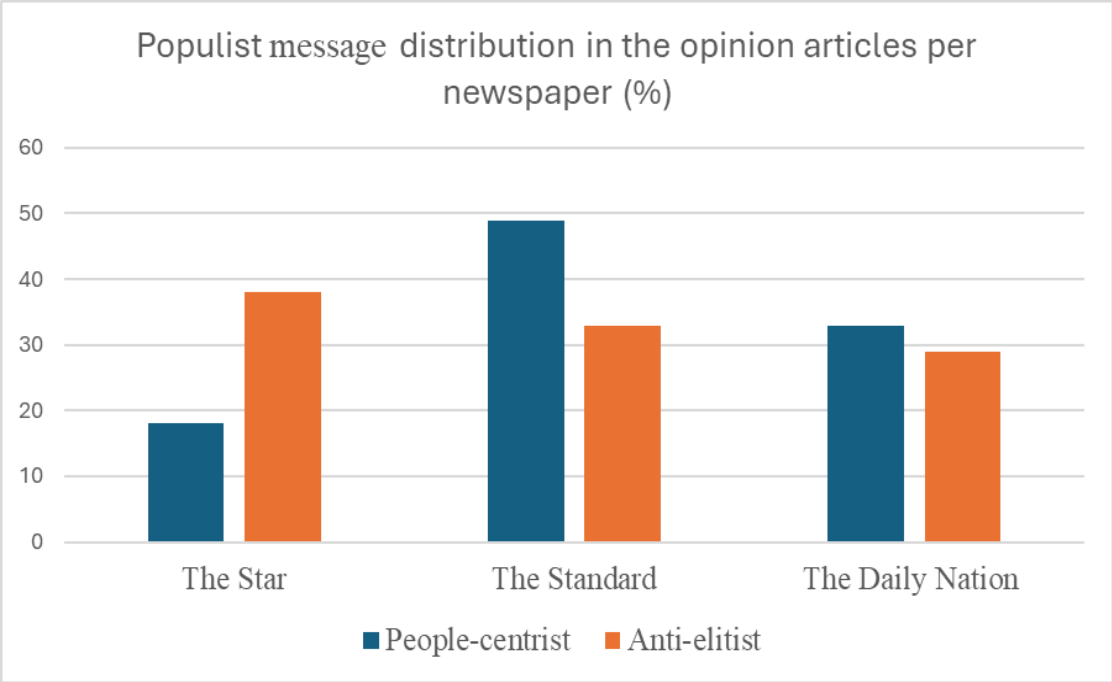

Figure 5 Populist message distribution by type in the newspapers

The chi-square test revealed, however, that there were no significant differences between the three publications in terms of their reception and publishing of populist views on the forum pages, ($\chi^2 = 5.31$, $df = 2$, $p = .07$). Nonetheless, we can see that in terms of the diffusion of the populist message among the public, the two forums (Letters to the Editor and Opinion Columns) which provide a discursive opportunity for the general public to voice their concerns through the mediated public debate, are rife with populist messaging.

Content analysis of these sections of the newspapers demonstrates that ordinary Kenyans and professionals alike engaged in deliberations about Kenyan politics and elections through these mediated sites of the public sphere. The analysis further reveals that in the course of these deliberations, the public voiced and shared their populist ideas extensively as evidenced by references to populist messages in opinion columns

and the letters to the editor. The fact that these two platforms in the opinion section of the newspapers published contained populist messages reveals that the populist phenomenon is diffused to a large extent among the public.

Although "the people" engaged in public discourse through the letters to the editor, public contribution to the overall populist discourse is almost dwarfed by those of the opinion writers who are often more influential in swaying public opinion. Nonetheless, there is evidence that the Kenyan public employs populist ideas in their media contributions evidenced by 79% of all letters to the editor containing populist ideas.

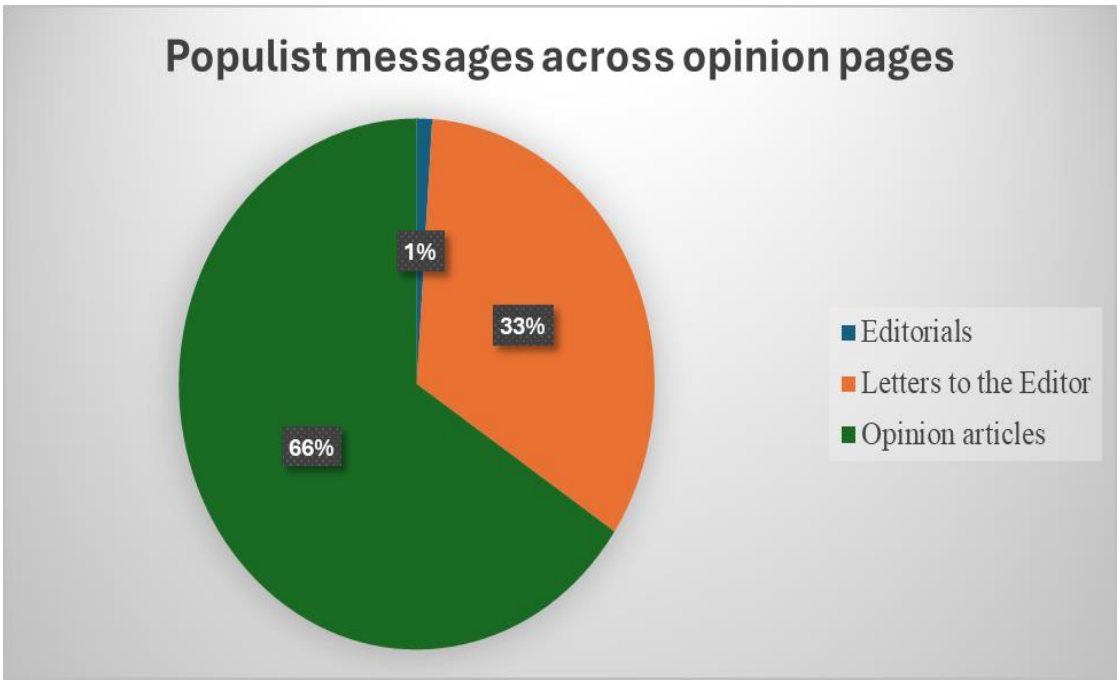

Figure 6 Populist ideas in the forum pages/articles

Framing populism (RQ3)

Descriptive content analysis revealed that media actors and citizens alike spread the thin-centered ideology albeit to different degrees. The next logical question that I explored in this project was how do these actors ascribe meanings to populism? Or in other words, *how is populism framed?* This section presents the results of a qualitative (inductive) analysis to interrogate the nature of journalistic and public narratives on populist discourse. The analysis illustrates how journalists, political actors, and opinion authors (columnists)—"who are considered opinion-makers and have privileged access to media outlets" (Reinemann et al., 2017, p. 36)—appropriate populist discourse.

I chose a qualitative thematic analysis to locate the parts of the media text through which journalists and the public contextualized populism in Kenya. Thematic analysis involves "identifying and describing explicit ideas within the data, that is, themes" (Guest, McQueen, & Namey, 2014, p. 11). Thematic analysis was the most appropriate technique to interpret the print media text and thus obtain an understanding of how journalists and the public in Kenya make sense of the populist phenomenon: "It is still the most useful {technique} in capturing the complexities of meaning within a textual dataset and is the most commonly used method of analysis in qualitative research" (Guest, McQueen, & Namey, 2014, 11). Moreover, frames are "latent structures of meaning surrounding a topic and infuse a text" and thus, it requires an analyst to identify appropriate *framing devices* (Chong & Druckman, 2014, p. 14). In addition, proponents of frame analysis suggest using qualitative techniques to examine subtle framing in smaller datasets (see Van Gorp, 2007). Given that the sample of the articles in the current project is relatively small (n = 227), a qualitative approach was

more feasible to arrive at an interpretive understanding of the meaning of the published texts in the leading Kenyan print media. The dataset consists of articles regarding populist discourse in the three Kenyan newspapers, namely, *The Daily Nation*, *The Standard*, and *The Star*.

Although the thematic analysis procedure is deceptively simple, given that it involves; (i) reading the texts verbatim, (ii) identifying possible themes, (iii) comparing and identifying structure between themes, and (iv) constantly checking them against the data (Bernard & Ryan, 1998), the process is arduous, rigorous, and iterative. For the analysis, we began by reading each article in the dataset to become acquainted with the journalistic and public narratives on populism. After the initial close reading involving scrutiny of the keywords, metaphors, and catchphrases in the published texts to identify the frames, four key themes capturing patterned associations of words and propositions emerged. The emergent themes describe the frames used to indicate the ways the journalists and Kenyan alike describe populism in their media contributions. These themes or frames are populism as a threat, populism as democratizing, populism as a liberating force, and populism as revitalizing. We used these frames to analyze the rest of the sample while documenting any themes that emerged as we read and analyzed the remaining sample. One other frame emerged, populism as charlatanism.

Frames

In populism *as a threat frame,* populism is understood as a danger to the prevailing political stability and democratic order. Within this frame, the cosmic struggle between the downtrodden in Kenya—or the hustlers and economic and political elites, is seen as a threat to the harmonious co-existence of the Kenyan people.

More importantly, it is viewed as threatening the democratic standing of the country.

Populism is framed positively *as democratizing* because it mobilizes the often-marginalized segments of society. Essentially, populists are described as giving voice to those at the periphery of the Kenyan political process.

Populism as a liberating force constructs populists as redeemers of the people from the "yoke" of elite exploitation and manipulation. In this frame, populism is used as a label to describe a movement of liberation and freedom, economically and politically.

Populism as a revitalizing frame closely relates to the democratization and liberation frames. Populism is represented as a new style of politicking aimed at reinvigorating politics by breathing fresh ideas into a political malaised system.

Politics as charlatanism frames the thin-centered ideology pejoratively as an empty rhetorical style that is laced with catchy rhetoric yet devoid of any intellectual nuances. The frame carries with it negative connotations associated with simplistic solutions to complex problems. Populist rhetoric is described as empty statements that do not lead to any tangible solutions.

Populism as a Threat

Journalists, through their editorials, expressed concerns over the stability of the country and the future of Kenyan democracy due to the populist rhetoric espoused in the campaign trails. The editorials called on the political class— especially William Ruto, Uhuru Kenyatta, Raila Odinga, and Rigathi Gachagua; the most prominent Kenyan politicians—to exercise restraint and play by the rules of the game. Essentially, editorials underscored the potential detrimental impact associated with the charged

rhetoric of "us" vs "them", the "dynasties" vs the "hustlers", antagonistic rhetoric, and embracing outrageous antics that tend to give the politicians greater visibility in the public. The following excerpts from the three publications provide examples of this.

The Daily Nation published on June 7th, 2022, an editorial, "*Candidates must pledge to campaign peacefully*". In the editorial, the newspaper urged the presidential contenders to conduct "issue-based campaigns" and ensure the elections are "conclusive, with losers conceding defeat and the winner a gracious victor". The editorial seems to have been in response to the charged rhetoric expressed by two of the leading presidential candidates on their campaign trail. On the one hand, Raila Odinga had called on his supporters to shun "*madoadoa*", a Kiswahili word that is harmless at its face value since it refers to stains in a garment that can be washed with a good detergent. However, the use of the word "*madoadoa"* has a connotative meaning in the Kenyan political parlance. It may be a subtle threat to political actors and or even communities that do not toe certain political lines. It can be interpreted to even mean a call to physical attacks and harm. However, when put in context, Raila Odinga used the boisterous word to work up the crowd during the rally and also as an urge to vote for political candidates within his party and not those from the opposing party, and thus, keep the party "clean and free from stains". Nonetheless, the rhetoric drew condemnation across the board from the clergy, academics, the opposing political faction, and the media (Gaitho, 2022). On the other hand, William Ruto, in railing against the establishment and the structural forces that maintained poverty and exclusion, had incessantly called on the people to "turn up, vote, protect the vote, and shame the deep state". One can argue that the populist call to arms against the hidden

schemes of the system and the deep state could threaten the security and the overall stability of the democratic experiment, and hence, the editorial.

One month later, on July 4th, 2022, *The Star* published a news headline "*Fiery Uhuru, Ruto war could benefit Raila*" describing the escalating verbal run-in between the former president Uhuru Kenyatta and his deputy at the time, William Ruto. The president's allies—who also supported Raila Odinga's candidature against Ruto—called out Ruto for threatening the country's stability with an "us" vs "them", the people vs the elites, the hustlers vs the dynasties rhetoric. Here, the hustlers refer to the poor Kenyans while the dynasties are the richest, well-connected political oligarchs represented by the Kenyatta and Odinga families. Yet it is the editorial released by the same publication on the same date—"*Uhuru, Ruto brickbats raising political tension"*— that illustrates the concerns about the emotionally charged nature of populist rhetoric. *The Star* drew attention to the fact that political campaigns should be devoid of vitriol and incitement to an issue-based campaign that is not divisive.

The Standard, concerned about the ever-rising political tension, released an editorial a week before the general elections: *It's the wrong time to raise political temperature.* The editorial, while acknowledging the politicians' need to throw in everything but the kitchen sink in attempts to appeal to the undecided voters, responded to the ugly turn that had shaped the presidential campaigns. The editorial was a counter to allegations by William Ruto and his running mate Rigati Gachagua that unnamed political operatives together with President Uhuru Kenyatta were after their lives. *The Standard* referred to the allegations as "reckless, irresponsible, and a recipe for trouble" and thus called on the leaders to "tone down and urge their supporters to vote

peacefully". Similar concerns were raised by ordinary Kenyans.

In a Letter to the Editor published by *The Daily Nation* on August 3rd, 2022, a Kenyan urged fellow compatriots to "avoid polarizing figures and demagogues" who were spreading hate. He called on the leading political figures to "tone down the violent rhetoric to cool the already high temperatures" and, about the political elites, to rise above "selfish interests". Another citizen, on August 6th, 2022, wrote to the editor that "media freedom is immutable". The author alluded to the attacks on the media by the political class as biased and working for "certain people". The letter calls out the contempt for the press as a mediator of liberal democracy and thus expresses fears of potential hostility toward the media that may deteriorate toward repression of the independent press. However, there is a caveat to this interpretation.

Although the receptivity of the news media to populism coupled with its diffusion in public spaces may constitute a sign of trouble for the Kenyan democracy, none of the analyzed articles project populism as primarily aimed at the destruction or a complete reconfiguration of the Kenyan democratic experiment. Certainly, populists claim that the political process has been exploited by the rich and mighty, that the elites have rigged it, that the people's enemies have kidnapped democracy and thus, they want in some ways to regenerate democracy. However, there were no frames depicting populists and populism as proponents of an alternative political model like authoritarianism. Rather, populists are portrayed as reformers who try to be in command of the present democracy although one driven by giving back the power to "the people", and hence populism is also framed as a democratizing force.

Populism as a Democratizing

The key theme that emerged from the newspaper content was the perception of populism as a force for good in liberal democratic politics. Politicians, political commentators, academics, and the general public projected populist discourse as a means to inclusionary politics. The authors argued that the new political style promises a more participatory model of political engagement: that the people who have been marginalized from the political process can get a voice in mainstream politics out of populist mobilization. The forum pages in particular framed the political candidates employing populist rhetoric as defenders of democratic ideals and values. A substantial number of forum articles drew attention to the exclusion and marginalization of certain populations of Kenyan society. As such, some of the observers hoped that the populist mobilization by charismatic populists would give voice to the marginalized and promote a more robust democratic system.

On March 10th, 2022, *The Daily Nation* published an opinion piece titled "*Why the marginalized must now take their place in polls".* The columnist begins with an anti-elitist message calling out the "elite club of billionaire businessmen" who "do not sit and wait for Kenyans to elect its next leader: they interview presidential candidates then settle on one, who they give their moral and financial support during the election". Disenchanted with this trend, the author then poses the question: "*Why don't we see the underprivileged Kenyans doing the same? Why are people who live in villages, informal settlements, and peri-urban areas not on the negotiating table when Kenya's political future is carved?*". Here we see the experience of disillusionment along with grievances of political patronage perpetuated by the political and economic elites has provided a

discursive opportunity for "the people" to take back control through increased participation in the political process.

Manifestations of populism are illustrated by urging "the people", who may not be rich in the purse but have what politicians crave for—the numbers—to use this advantage to demand their sovereign will and need to be prioritized. The columnist opines, "*It is high time we remind our political leaders that we are their bosses and not the other way round. That if they don't respect and work for us, then this time, we shall right the wrongs in the ballot*". This charged anti-elitist and people-centric rhetoric elevates the needs and the power of the people arguing that if the silent majority mobilize as they have done, then they can be heard, and their concerns will form part of the agenda. Moreover, the disappointment with elites has provided a space for calls for increased participation by the downtrodden, the poor, and the disenfranchised.

The Standard, on April 18th, 2022, published an opinion article titled *"Why won't the silent majority rise and challenge the status quo*?". The article is reminiscent of the 1969 rousing silent majority speech by former US President Richard Nixon when he appealed to "the great silent majority of my fellow Americans" to speak up and take charge of things. The author of the Kenyan opinion article wonders why "d*espite so much not going right; patronage, bad politics, mismanagement …, a majority of Kenyans are silent …the silent majority are seemingly unmoved*". The author posits that Kenyans must rise and imagine a new Kenya, which will "*only be possible when the power of the people—the silent majority—rises over the power of the politicians and the ruling elite*". The opinion article is not only a populist call for "the people" to take up their place in the Kenyan politics parlance, but more importantly, a call for the silent

majority to participate in the democratic process. Thus, the author expresses discontent with political apathy and or political malaise and posits that the time is ripe for the people to exercise their democratic rights and participate in their democracy.

A letter to the editor published by *The Star* on March 1st, 2022, refers to the voters as "supreme" who should turn up in numbers and vote for the party whose manifesto focuses on "the people". The party in question here is the one represented by William Ruto and his "Hustler" narrative or the "Hustler movement". Along this vein, another opinion piece published by the same newspaper on March 29th calls out "voter apathy as the bane of democracy". The author, however, urges the voters to choose parties and candidates whose focus "is on those at the bottom of the pyramid." Similarly, a member of the public wrote to the editor on August 6th, 2022, with the message "you have no reason not to vote on Tuesday". The writer presents an amorphous aggregate of "the people" with contrasting "clear choices" where on one side lies the status quo and on the other, a new way of doing things, "the bottom-up way". He concludes by asking those who have felt disenfranchised for a long time to show up and be counted on by being part of the new bottom-up movement.

On August 6th, 2022, *The Daily Nation* granted space to the four presidential candidates to address the electorate. William Ruto opined that "our movement is about bringing all citizens together in the noble struggle to build a Kenya for everyone: a more inclusive society, a more just government, and more prosperous economy where no one is left behind" (para. 1). To achieve his vision of a united, secure, and prosperous Kenya, Ruto charged that the party he leads "is for every Kenyan …the hustler nation… Kenyans who want an accountable political system that is citizen-

centered, not one rigged to benefit a few". A clear sign of his belief in populist mobilization is illustrated by his claim that "Kenya Kwanza" Swahili for *Kenya First,* a political coalition he built, "is a movement where citizens of Kenya have mobilized around the democratization of the economy, equal opportunity, the dignity of work and the pursuit of from the bottom-up economic model". Thus, William Ruto projects himself as a defender of the idea of bringing the people to the center of the Kenyan political project.

Munyoru Buku**,** a prominent columnist opines for *The Daily Nation,* June 26th, that "let the people decide". The people, in this case, include women, youth, and people with disabilities who have perennially faced hurdles, particularly the electoral type. Thus, Buku opined that one faction of the political divide had recognized these marginalized populations of the society and was intent on involving them in mainstream politics. As such, Buku framed the populist "Hustler" a nickname used by William Ruto to endear himself to the constituencies and projected himself as a "common man" and as the candidate disrupting the conventional elite-driven political arrangements and offering a more authentic form of political representation for the previously excluded constituencies. Indeed, Buku argues that the mantra of the "Hustler Nation" is that "the people on the fringes of the economy must be fully involved" in the affairs of the nation, starting with elections.

Populism as a Liberating Force

Anti-elitism, one of the defining features of populism, is based on the idea that societal elites have usurped people's power and used it to distort and exploit democracy (Engesser et al., 2017). Along this vein, elites are said to manipulate the electoral

process for their selfish interests including perpetuating their hold on power (Rooduijn, 2014). Thus, populists invoke the will of the people and defy appropriation of the will of the people by unresponsive elites. Consequently, populists claim that they endeavor to "give the power back to the people" (Hawkins, 2009). The analysis of the newspaper content reveals that indeed populism is portrayed as a liberating response to the rule of the Kenyan elites that have kidnapped the will of the people.

On August 7th, 2022, 2 days before the presidential elections in Kenya, *The Daily Nation,* published a news article titled "*The DP's messianic moment at last rally to big day*". The story captures the last campaign rally by William Ruto who was then Kenya's Deputy President—leading presidential candidate—and now Kenya's President. One can argue that the word choice in the story's headline is conspicuously metaphoric. The use of the word "messianic" is parallel to the Biblical story of an anointed king or the "liberator" who was destined to come to the "chosen" nation of Israel as an emancipator of her people from the iron fist rule of the Roman empire. The lead goes on to evoke religious references: "*Ruto's 'Hustler' narrative cuts to the bone, especially when delivered powerfully. As he talked, his words turned into something else. They gained life and floated over the stadium like the pregnant clouds of this August day. Followers hang onto the words with religious dedication {and as Ruto delivered his final pitch to the voters} he was not campaigning, he was preaching*".

Ruto's populist claims, as highlighted in the news story, illustrate his "vision" to rid "the people" from the grip of the elites whom he accuses of depriving the people of their political, and or socio-economic status. Ruto shrewdly tapped on his oratory

prowess to advance a conspiracy theory by identifying, ostracizing, and blaming the so-called powerful and secretive figures for the evils facing the people. As such, he urged his followers to join him in the "liberation movement" against the high cost of living, corruption, extra-judicial killings, and other ills perpetuated by "the high and mighty". It is this high and mighty that Ruto incessantly referred to as the deep state and the system "*who will not stop us… the will of the people will be supreme because it is they that have the power to hire and fire governments*".

The Standard Newspaper, on the same day, reported that "*Ruto has over the years turned his woes into sympathy from the public while the onslaught from state operatives has only seemingly emboldened his resolve to seek the presidency*". Ruto's ability to appeal to the masses while fashioning the contest as a battle between the axis of evil represented by the elites and the good people enabled him to create a cult-like following that turned his campaign rallies into a yellow-colored sea of humanity. The itinerant traders, hawkers, artisans, a majority of small-scale traders, and unemployed youth formed the core of his populist "Hustler Nation", a nation of the populace that viewed him as a potential redeemer from economic hardships, corruption, and unemployment. Ruto himself claimed he wanted to liberate "the Hustlers" from exploitation by a few. Notably, the "Hustler Nation" gospel had been preached throughout the campaign period.

William Ruto—after falling out with his boss then President Kenyatta and at the height of his woes with powerful state functionaries—went all out appealing to the transcendence of God while evoking the biblical undertones of the story of Daniel and his friends. Ruto, during his endorsement as the presidential candidate for the United

Democratic Alliance in March 2022, emphatically stirred a full auditorium claiming "*we will not bow to you…*" about the deep state. He further charged: "*we will not worship you … we worship the living God in heaven … we worship no human being… You may control the levers of power … but we believe in God the all-powerful … we submit to God the all-powerful*". Ruto powerfully used spiritual narratives turned into political expressions urging his supporters to refuse to be muted by the fury of the system with a promise of liberation for all his supporters. Thus, Ruto predominantly combined religious appeals and ultimately urged voters to be patient because "freedom is coming".

A columnist writing for *The Daily Nation* opined on August 6th, 2022, that Ruto's {populist} plan, which "i*s not coming from the upstairs; the ideas are from the bottom-up, from the people will rescue Kenya from capture by 'smooth thieves'"*. Similar sentiments were shared in another opinion piece published by *The Standard:* "*Ruto's bottom-up economic model is a new paradigm, it is about freeing people from ethnic politics and leader-centered politics*". Similarly, *The Standard's* opinion piece on March 1st titled "*Kenya will be much better with Raila's 'Third Liberation' ideas"* highlights Odinga's long political career shaped by his fight for a more democratic Kenya. The author describes Odinga's movement for democracy in the early 1990s which led to the expansion of Kenya's democratic space as the second liberation after the first liberation of the country from British influence. Thus, the author posits that Odinga's new fight is about an "economic revolution" geared toward uplifting the lives of the average Kenyans. As such, Odinga would plan to liberate "the people" economically.

Populism as Revitalizing

A sub-theme that emerges from the reading of the portrayal of populism is the reinvigorating nature of populism. Politicians, journalists, and the public alike perceive populist rhetoric and ideas as a departure from the conventional style of politics, a political renewal in some ways, and or a rapture and disruption of democratic politics as we know it. That populism is a means of breathing fresh ideas into the political system. A close reading of the texts reveals a sense of disillusionment with democratic expectations which have served to create a basis for grievances that have been capitalized by savvy populist actors. As such, charismatic leaders call for renewal and profound political reforms to include the marginalized. The calls are echoed by journalists and the public.

The Daily Nation, on August 7th, 2022, builds the image of a movement never seen before in Kenyan politics. The reporter writes that the Ruto-led "Hustler movement" has been mesmerized by his "Hustler narrative" which "c*uts to the bone, especially when delivered powerfully, the way he (Ruto) has learned to"* (para. 7). A business professor at a Kenyan University, Kimani Gachuhi, concurs. He opines in a *Standard* opinion piece on July 10th, 2022, that "*the hustlers are winning the battle on all fronts. Ruto's message has captured the imagination of the people, and the new sheriff in town is capturing hearts and minds*". Gichuhi further contends the people "are attracted to the bottom-up economic model, a new idea whose time has come".

Ruto the candidate equally framed his populist narrative encapsulated by the "Hustler Nation", a colloquial expression that he claimed embraces the down-trodden in the society and is an embodiment of the hardworking spirit of the Kenyan people, an

untapped resource that can lead the country to greater heights. Throughout his campaigns, Ruto framed his new approach as a people-centered paradigm and thus portrayed himself as being close to the people. He fashioned the movement as being at the forefront of championing their needs and concerns. He stated:

"*I have had special moments to be able to engage consistently with ordinary people. As Deputy president, I've worked directly with wananchi {the people}, going to meet them in their places of work, markets, and villages, and have practiced listening more and speaking less. We have brought the new way of doing things*" (*The Daily Nation*, March 15, 2022, para. 12).

A columnist concurs with the new style of politicking, the political reawakening in some ways. Munyori Buku, a prominent political commentator, wrote an opinion piece in *Daily Nation* titled "*Ruto's revolutionary plan will give the economy the much-needed impetus"*. In the article, Munyori Buku argues that one candidate has changed the conversation in Kenyan politics from being "leader to people-centered." In other words, proponents of populism appear to be inherently skeptical of the prevailing representative democratic order and the economic policies to fulfill the demands placed on it. As such, populists seek to reform political institutions and economic policies by bringing in "new dimensions" of predominantly direct democracy and economic models to reinvigorate society.

Buku opines that Ruto "*began a crusade to overhaul independent Kenya's 60-year-old trickle-down economic model that has left millions of Kenyans behind. He has espoused the bottom-up economic approach that has blazed the country like wildfire*." Similarly, Dr. Irungu Kangata, a law professor at a Kenyan university, surmised in

another forum article published by *The Daily Nation* on the same day that "*Ruto promises something new, the bottom-up economic mode*l".

Although almost every electoral campaign is a spectacle in and of itself, ordinary Kenyans took note of the uncommon political hysteria and frenzy generated by the "Hustler" narrative. A high school teacher wrote a letter to the editor of *The Star* on May 20th, 2022, noting; "hate him or love him, William Ruto has injected unprecedented excitement into the political scene in Kenya. He has become a bit of a cult, especially among the youth". The author, while acknowledging that for a long-time ethnic identity has played a key role in political mobilization, observes that "there is a paradigm shift from the traditional "*mtu wetu*" (our own) or ethnic blocs-based politicians as we know it".

Populism as Charlatanism

Newspaper commentaries portrayed the emotional and simplistic solutions offered to complex socio-economic problems as foolish hopes of appealing to the heart. Indeed, populism appears to embody simplistic solutions and is notoriously slippery about tangible political content. A political pundit wrote an opinion piece for *The Standard* on June 18th, 2022, titled "*Unpacking the cocktail of bravado and lies*" where he labels populist promises made by sly politicians as empty and aimed at appealing to an increasingly fickle electorate. Thus, we can see populism being pointed out as a "thin" rhetorical style with a preference for simplistic policy solutions. Populist defense of what they term "common sense" in addressing complex economic problems in Kenya appears to lack the intellectual nuances required.

The confluence of oratory prowess and the nice and catchy yet likely-to-be

unworkable policy solutions alarmed a columnist writing for *The Star*. The author argues in a May 20th, 2022, article that (populist) candidates "use hazy deceptive words, promise transformations, yet they are based on mysterious panacea". The columnist contends that ideas like the "bottom-up economic model" and Ruto's Renaissance gospel-themed "the Hustler nation" are devoid of any intellectual rigor and discourse.

The populist disdain for the political and economic structures that exist is palpable, and the "Hustler narrative" of direct democracy and bottom-up economics are projected as a means to help the Kenyan on the street in shaping his or her destiny. The call for a more direct participatory democracy of bringing people into mainstream decision-making processes is vague. Indeed, William Ruto while preaching his populist message appears to purposefully attempt to make the job of finding compromises, striking bargains, and negotiating policy deals-tasks that often require creative thinking and patience-seem unnecessary by offering simplistic, and seemingly common-sense solutions to difficult and complex problems. Modern democracy and economics need to rely on experts and institutionalized knowledge in dealing with complex problems. However, populists have a leery attitude toward such ideas. Instead, populists project expertise as another form of elitism, and thus, populism threatens to create ignorant policy driven by anger and skepticism.

Moreover, the portrayal of the prevailing political order as something elites have distorted to suit their selfish interests and thus, the need to bring the people directly into the center of the political process cunningly suggests that this is the panacea. In other words, it appears that presumably, more participatory politics begets

the solutions to many of Kenya's most pressing problems. Consequently, there is an apparent underplay of the important elements such as crafting policies and building consensus, elements that are necessary to arrive at tangible solutions. One could therefore argue that Ruto has mastered the art of political charlatanism.

Conclusion

Systematic knowledge of how journalists deal with populists' and their communicative strategies and how media outlets deal with populist sentiment is negligible. The results of the content analysis reveal key takeaways about the role of Kenyan print in connecting populist actors, populist rhetoric with citizens, the degree of diffusion of populist ideas among the general public, and how journalists react to populism and structure populist content in a way that may have an impact on how populism is perceived by the public.

Media's Reaction to Populist Rhetoric

Content analysis revealed that the Kenyan print media provided a relatively substantial space and platform for the dissemination of populist ideas to the general public. The analysis showed that in terms of the share of newspaper articles with references to populist views, almost half of the sampled published content had references to populist sentiments with significant differences across the publications. As such, one can argue that the Kenyan print media are moderately receptive to populist rhetoric and do not actively engage in populism themselves. Overall, this finding provides evidence suggesting that the Kenyan print media, though not prominently, gave way to populist views to reach the wider public and thus created a relatively favorable opportunity structure for populist actors to ventilate their ideas.

Diffusion of Populist Ideas

The results from the content analysis reveal that populist messages have found their way into public deliberations through several participatory forums provided by the print media. In other words, there is a diffusion and, equally, a dissemination of populism ideas in the mediated sites of the public sphere. The analysis of the forum pages revealed that almost two-thirds of all published forum articles (letters to the editor, editorials, and opinion columns) contained references to populist views. The fact that two-thirds of all letters to the editor—a forum where the public gathers for a shared conversation on public affairs—published deliberations rife with populist ideas suggests: (i) there is widespread diffusion of populist views among "regular" Kenyans and (ii) "ordinary" Kenyan citizens feel very strongly about populism. Although robust public deliberations on populism can be expected during an electioneering period when the letters were published and a time when populist discourse tends to be prominent (Rooduijn, 2014), the results map the contours of the populism specter in Kenya. Through the letters to the editor, we see the Kenyan public actively propagated not only a dualistic vision of the society espoused by populist Kenyan politicians, they also largely positively framed the populist "Hustler" movement (as shown in the qualitative analysis). As such, one can argue that the public positively evaluated populism in the context of Kenyan politics.

Two key threads emerge from the prominent publication of letters to the editor replete with populist content. First, studies show that letter writers tend to harbor more extremist views relative to those often held by the general public (Kerr & Moy, 2002. In turn, media editors tend to advantage provocative and extremist media contributions

since they are more likely to arouse public debate (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2004). At the same time, publishing such content may suggest that although the quality of the contributions in the letters may not always match the standards of the editors, the editors may be reluctant to reject them. Editorial decisions seem to favor minimal intervention in the content of letters from ordinary Kenyans. Speculatively and in contrast, editors may reject content that threatens the country's harmony and stability as shown by their negative framing of populism or content that does not meaningfully contribute to public debate. Plausibly, providing the stage for the public to debate on the grand and the mundane could be the only way to ensure an open debate about the issues faced and cared for by the public. Interviews with journalists to understand their decision-making process on the publication of such content can help tease out this conjecture. This could be an avenue for future qualitative investigations.

The second thread that we can glean from the publication of the letters to the editor is a caveat. Although the letters to the editor may spur public debate and possibly heighten public attention, and although citizens who contribute through the letters come from different backgrounds (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2001), they are by no means a public opinion barometer. Indeed, "there is considerable evidence that letter writers are demographically and politically unrepresentative of the general public" (Sigelman & Walkoz, 1992, p. 944). Similarly, Wahl-Jorgensen (2004) argues that other than the letters being "far from being a microcosm of a diverse society, a forum for the voiceless", the letters section "appears to be dominated by groups with a relatively narrow range of interests" (p. 92). These groups often air views that are more extreme and more provocative than those of the general population (Kerr & Moy, 2002).

Extending these arguments to the Kenyan context, one can argue that despite a majority of the letters being replete with populist views, they could be representative of only the population with sectional extreme political views: the populace that holds a radical perspective of the Kenyan society, people who harbor populist views. Future studies could examine the demographic, attitudinal, and behavioral characteristics of the authors.

The opinion columns—authored by the more educated and influential opinion figures including academics, lawyers, and political pundits—employed populist messages in their media contributions. This is surprising given that these figures are often highly educated and normatively not inclined to express populist sentiments (Mudde, 2019). It is even more interesting given that these cultural "elites" are often the target of attacks by populist actors blaming them as part of the causes of the problems facing "the people" (Rooduijn, 2014, 2018). Yet, as shown by content analysis, they expressed populist views largely sympathetic to the populist cause, as illustrated by their positive framing of populism. It begs the question: could it be that cultural elites, by being more prone to express populist messages relative to the ordinary Kenyans, do not necessarily conventionally perceive populism? It appears that opinion writers do not see populism as posing an intrinsic danger to the representative liberal Kenyan democracy. Indeed, how populism was framed affirms this perception.

Framing Populism

Populism was prominently framed in positive terms. The thin-centered ideology was portrayed as a means to democratize democracy, a revitalizing, and reinvigorating force to cure the malaise occasioned by the democratic order. In other words, populism

is seen as a means to foster the inclusion of the demands of the marginalized in society. Thus, populism can be positive in terms of political mobilization and participation. Citizens who feel that their concerns have been largely ignored by the political elites can get a voice and thus be involved in the political process. At the same time, populism can pose a threat to the stability of the democratic experiment through the often highly charged rhetoric and the spread of conspiracy theories. Overall, the perception of populism in Kenya may not be entirely pathological since it may come with positive effects.

Next: Study II: Populism, Conspiracy Theories, and Political Legitimacy

Study II utilizes the results of Study I which show that the news media, whether it be through the regular news items or the forum pages, are receptive to populist claims. We have seen those political actors propagating one of the populist dimensions (anti-elitism) emphasized the existence of powerful figures working to usurp and manipulate the will of the people. anti-elitism, in this sense, is laced with conspiratorial thinking involving secretive schemes and plots by the mighty against the powerless people. This radical protest as a means of rallying political support illustrates the merging of populism and conspiratorial thinking and hence, populist conspiracy theories. Study II uses survey experiments to explore the potential impact of exposure to conspiratorial populist communication.

Chapter 4

POPULISM, CONSPIRACISM, AND THE MEDIA (AN EXPERIMENT)

Content analysis revealed two significant findings. First, mainstream Kenyan newspapers are relatively receptive to populist views, both directly and indirectly. Directly, the journalists reported—through the news stories—populists' rhetoric, slogans, and ideological perspectives, thus heightening their public visibility. The analysis showed that hard news captured and disseminated populist sentiments to the general public. Indirectly, the newspapers provided a window of opportunity for political pundits, commentators, and citizens to disseminate and magnify their populist views through a professionally produced platform: the forum pages. The two news platforms—hard news and forum pages—are different in their presentation of information. Normatively, "hard news often purports to be fair, balanced, and objectively grounded in criteria such as the prevention of personal bias, fact-opinion separation, and the inclusion of opposing viewpoints" (Greenberg, 2000, p. 521). In contrast, forum pages are not bound by claims to uniform technical criteria. Rather, "they are overtly biased viewpoints that are not intended to be objective, fair, or balanced" (Greenberg, 2000, p. 521). Opinion pages (editorials. Op-eds, and letters to the editor) as subjective accounts, "assume an important communicative function by contributing to the media's role of formulating certain preferred viewpoints about the word" (Greenberg, 2000, p. 519).

The second important finding illustrates that anti-elitist attitudes drove public debate on the opinion pages. The viewpoints expressed in opinion discourse blended evaluative propositions about populism with subjective beliefs about political elites to drive their narratives. Looking specifically at the discourse in the forum pages: a space that "brings about the feelings in citizens that they have a forum and that their participation in it is necessary for democracy to work" (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2001), p. 124), we note that newspaper articles were rife with populist discourse cultivating a Manichaean boundary between the "good" people and the "conniving" elites.

Specifically, Kenyan political actors accused elites—particularly political elites who are in control of the levers of power—of obstructing the needs and goals of the deprived people. The public echoed these sentiments in their media contributions. Essentially, the opinion discourses took sides by subjectively evaluating populism and populist rhetoric, but they also explained the populist phenomenon in ways that deal with attributing responsibility. The forum pages were primarily blame-oriented. Contributors to the opinion section argued that *real* political power does not seem to reside with leaders elected democratically but with some secretive lurking political actors that continue to hold self-appropriated powers and exploit the power to undermine the people's sovereign will. Ordinary Kenyans—through the letters to the editor—and opinion columnists accused elitist actors of trying to manipulate the elections, deprive "the ordinary people" of their democratic right to choose their preferred leader, and thus, install their candidate of choice: a candidate portrayed as unable to represent the silenced majority of the people. It is here that the "paranoid style of politics" clearly comes to the fore (Hofstadter, 1966)

American political scientist Hofstadter (1966) postulated that the paranoid style represents "a way of seeing the world and of expressing oneself" where the "feeling of persecution is central and it is indeed systemized in grandiose theories of conspiracy" (p. 4). Furthermore, Hofstadter (1966) argued that the central perception of the paranoid style is the fear of a "vast, insidious, preternaturally effective conspiratorial network designed to perpetrate acts of the most fiendish character" (p. 14). Such a passage fittingly describes the anti-elitist populist narratives characterized by conspiracy-mongering that shaped presidential campaign rhetoric in Kenya. For example, one presidential candidate charged in a campaign rally that: "*It is the people who hire and fire the government. It is not the system, it is not those in power, it is not the deep state, and it is not everything else we have been told all these years. It is the people, and in this election, the people of Kenya will confirm this, ordinary as they may be. Irrespective of where we come from, today we stand as a people, and we have overcome the so-called system, the so-called deep state*" (by Ruto) (Egbejule, 2022).

The passages above capture two key elements. First, we see populism par excellence illustrated by identifying the enemy—the target of attacks and blame—the powerful or the so-called "deep state" or "the system," while emphasizing the centrality of the people in the political process. At the same time, there is an implicit claim that a malignant covert elite—the deep state or the system—is engaged in a sinister plot of trying to manipulate the country's politics through vote rigging. As such, one could argue that there is a second element at play beyond simple populism; conspiracism or advancing a conspiracy theory. Here, we not only see that populist communication and conspiracism can occur independently but by interrogating communication of populists,

we can observe a combination of populist communication with references to a conspiracy; for example, by claiming that the deep state or the system—often labeled "the establishment"—are orchestrating schemes against the people. As shown in the content analysis, populist narratives laced with conspiratorial reasoning composed of a deep state were disseminated and amplified primarily in the opinion pages.

The Deep State Conspiracy Theory

The idea of a deep state depicts a conspiratorial mindset systemized by "the belief that society is not ruled by its official authorities, but instead, by a secret band of hidden potentates, such as a bureaucratic class controlling everything behind the scenes" (Bergmann, 2018), p. 35). Conspiracists describe the hidden potentates as composed of influential politicians and bureaucrats across different branches of government, including the military, spy agencies, and even those in organized crime (Bergmann, 2018; Hellinger, 2019). Donald Trump and his political circle in the United States elevated the debate about a sinister hidden force comprising a "covert secret elite who are systematically, and in a coordinated manner, manipulating the country's politics and government" (Bergmann, 2018, p. 35). Trump called it the "establishment," a cabal that was hell-bent on rigging the election in favor of his competitors (Pirro & Taggart, 2023).

Although political scientists and journalists have long dismissed the conspiratorial belief of the existence of an American "deep state" (Hellinger, 2019), studies show that the idea of a deep state has evolved into a sprawling conspiracy given the fact that almost half of the Americans believe in the idea of a deep state (ABC, 2017; Newall, 2020). This belief has gradually risen with the precipitous decline of public trust in political actors, societal elites, and mainstream public institutions (Hellinger, 2019). Hellinger argues that

many Americans suspect that economic downturns and gross wealth inequalities are not just unfortunate consequences of globalization and dynamic economic processes but are results of schemes fostered by the rich and powerful against the majority of ordinary people. This argument aligns with Hofstadter's (1966) work on the paranoid style, which centralizes the rise of populism during times of economic challenges.

Looking at populism, populists rise to prominence by taking advantage of the public's anxieties and frustrations and identifying an enemy as the scapegoat for the economic conditions (Rooduijn, 2014). In the United States, the people's enemy is often the "establishment," also referred to as "the deep state," as well as the wealthy, who form part of a permanent bureaucratic structure perceived to be capable of thwarting congressional or presidential policies (Hellinger, 2019; Pirro & Taggart, 2023). Although deep-state conspiracy predates Trump, members of his administration (such as Steve Banon) picked up the idea to describe a perceived "collusive and coordinated activity covertly used to forward a particular agenda or to thwart an existing agenda" (Pirro & Taggart, 2023, p. 420). The conspiracy sprawled with Trump's supporters strongly arguing that "there is a secret army of lurking malcontents lurking deep within the bowels of government whose goal is to drive Trump out of office" (Temple-Raston, 2020, para. 1). QAnon turned out to be a collection of such connected conspiracy theories which entered the political mainstream and have been entrenched into the narratives of populist discourse (Pirro & Taggart, 2023).

Although we increasingly see the confluence of these two elements—populism and conspiracy theories in populists' political rhetoric—we know very little about the potential political effects of populism together with conspiracy theories on the public,

particularly in emerging democracies. Reinemann, Mathes, and Sheafer (2017) lament that "despite populism gaining increasing scholarly attention," a review of the literature reveals that "our knowledge about the effects of populist communication on citizens is still scant" (p. 381). For this reason, Reinemann et al. posit that "without taking into account the communicative messages sent by political actors, media, or fellow citizens; without analyzing the media repertoires and the messages that reach citizens;... and without considering the way these messages are interpreted and the way these perceptions are moderated or mediated by different kinds of citizen predispositions, the complex mechanisms behind the effects of populist communication will not be described and explained satisfactorily" (p. 381).

Study I, therefore, painted a picture of the communicative aspects of populism by analyzing populist content in news media narratives. The analysis of the hard news revealed that journalists reported on the ideological perspectives of populists while disseminating their populist slogans and rhetoric to the public. The content analysis further illustrated that the opinion pages—as mediated sites of public debate—are rife with populist discourse exalting the "ordinary people" and ostracizing malevolent elites. The anti-elitist rhetoric particularly targeted a cabal of government bureaucracy labeled the "deep state" or "the system,": Thus, populism merged with conspiracism.

Against this background, study II utilizes a survey experiment that manipulates populist media content with conspiratorial cues to investigate its impact on political outcomes empirically. This study aims to investigate the potential effects of exposure to populist and conspiracist content in the Kenyan news media on political attitudes and

behavioral outcomes. In the sections below, I discuss how populism and conspiratorial reasoning resonate and the potential effects of populist conspiracies.

Populism

So far, we have a clear understanding of populism. A brief review shows us that, in recent years, there has been a convergence in the definition of this concept. Many scholars now converge on the idea that populism can be defined as a "thin-centered ideology" (Mudde, 2004) in which the good people are positioned against an evil elite (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008; Hawkins, 2009; Mudde, 2007; 2004; Rooduijn, 2014). As an ideology, populism "*considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' vs 'corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the general will of the people"* (p. 543). As a concept, therefore, populism has a Manichaean vision of a society where on one side lie the blameless good people, their sovereign will and absolute sovereignty, and on the other side lie the elites who are blamed for problems facing the people (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008; Mudde, 2004).

In this section, I will focus on the second constitutive element of populism: anti-elitism. This is because the content analysis revealed that anti-elite attitudes drove the discourse on the forum pages. Attribution of responsibility and or blame to elites is central to populist communication (Hameleers et al., 2017). Populists accuse the corrupt elites of causing a crisis in the heartland, such as high unemployment rates, dire economic conditions, and being ignorant of the challenges facing the ordinary people (Rooduijn, 2014). Along this vein, populist political communicators emphasize that the elite, as secretive as they are, have captured the state and its machinery and used it to pursue its interests at the expense of the people (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012). This

Manichaean discourse, common in populist rhetoric, "also lies at the heart of conspiracy reasoning" (Hameleers, 2021, p. 40). Thus, we see a resonance between populism and conspiratorial thinking.

Conceptualizing Conspiracism

A conspiracy theory refers to "an explanation of historical, ongoing, or future events that cites as a main causal factor a small group of powerful persons, the conspirators, acting in secret for their benefit against the common good" (Uscinski & Parent, 2014, p. 32). Notably, these explanations—which tend to favor certain narratives over others (Miller et al., 2016)—are portrayed as a consequence of the actions and inactions of a group of people (Bergmann, 2018). Scholars argue that for these explanations of events to be valid, the said conspirators must hold either real or perceived positions of power (Bergmann, 2018; Silva, Vigetti, & Littvay, 2017). In the environmental realm, for example, conspiracy theorists claim that climate change is a hoax, claiming that scientists are fabricating their data to be consistent with a particular narrative and or outcome, or global warming is a tale being advanced by government, or that climate change is an invention and or myth created and spread by government and environmentalists seeking to create a new world order (Douglas & Sutton, 2008). Conspiracy theories (Henceforth CTs) are equally rife in the political domain. For example, many CTs emerged during the UK Brexit referendum including claims that the voter registration website was deliberately crashed by the government to extend the registration deadlines and allow more anti-Brexit voters to register and that the mainstream media such as the BBC colluded with the Remain Campaign to place pro-

European Union propaganda in the media (Jolley et al., 2022). Current research suggests CTs share certain features regardless of the context in which they emerge.

First, the pervasive alternative explanation of events is coordinated acts of secretive groups, not by unconnected individuals. Second, these groups are portrayed as having sinister goals aimed at achieving an intended outcome that benefits certain privileged groups or individuals: outcomes that are not beneficial to the whole society. Third, these are as secretive schemes, not products of spontaneous acts, and fourth, they are seen as plots planned in secret with no public involvement (Bergmann, 2018; Miller, et al., 2016; Silvio, Vigetti, & Litvay, 2017; Uscinski & Parent, 2014). Thus, we can see the first among many ways in which populism and CTs relate belief in hidden plots by evil forces against the people.

Connecting Populism with Conspiracism

As Silva, et al. (2017) stated, "To make a musical analogy, one could maintain that if populism is the *theme*, then many CTs are *variations* on the theme" (p. 425). Scholars contend that this connection stems from several features shared by the two phenomena. First, populists and conspiracy theorists have an inclination for Manichaean narratives where on the one hand, lie the blameless good people and on the other hand are the powerful elites in society are working against the people (Bergmann, 2018; Rooduijn, 2019). Conspiracy theorists stress the existence of shadowy and powerful actors "usually more powerful than the average citizen, [who] are engaging in the wide-ranging, 'black-boxed' activities to which individuals can attribute insidious explanations to an event" (Miller et al., 2016, p. 826). The influential forces are said to be working against the people and are thus described as powerful and malevolent (Miller et al., 2016). As such,

the preference for Manichaean narratives reflects “the epistemic cleavage” between the two phenomena: the perception that political and social outcomes are a consequence of the “struggle between the forces of good and the forces of a knowing, diabolical evil” (Hameleers et al., 2020, p. 7).

In addition to Manichaean narratives, the worldviews of populism and CTs closely align. They both see schemers plotting against the masses, powerful conspirators manipulating society while harboring enormous, and ordinary citizens as victims of the orchestrated acts (Pirro & Taggart, 2023). Hence, they both side with the victims—“the people”—claiming that the people have been subjugated by a secretive power bloc. In addition to this perceived sense of victimhood, relative deprivation ties the two phenomena together. Deprivation stems from a belief that one group disfavors another group: that the elites have encouraged mass immigration that disadvantages local populations (Spruyt et al., 2016). As such, native populations feel that they are losing jobs and other economic opportunities to immigrants and “undeserving” elements of society. Overall, “populist conspiracism is concerned with the power discrepancy between the people and the elites” (Hameleers, 2020, p. 4).

Populists and conspiracy theorists alike have a great deal of distrust in elites. The distrust stems from nurturing a belief that influential elements are clandestinely plotting to “usurp political or economic power, violate established rights, hoard vital secrets, or unlawfully alter government institutions" (Uscinski & Parent, 2014, p.12). This is typical of conspiratorial thinking, yet it is also a belief common in populist precincts. Populists cast doubt on the expertise and competence of the said elites and challenge their claims to authority (Ylä-Anttila, 2018). Studies have shown, for example, that populism is at the

center of Covid-19 conspiracy beliefs as “the complex nature of the Covid-19 pandemic makes it an ideal playground for populist’s opposition to scientific and political elites" (Eberl et al., 2021, p. 272). Along this vein, some have argued that conspiracy theories thrive where there is deep cynicism toward the political elites, and where actors are perceived as selfish and apathetic to people’s needs (Fenster, 2008). Cynicism toward established democratic institutions and procedures lies at the heart of populism (Rooduijn, 2014). As such, populism and conspiracy theories both arise from and encourage distrust toward the status of affairs (Hameleers, 2021).

Opposition toward anything official also connects populism and conspiracy theories. In other words, widely accepted knowledge and truths—whether in politics, science, or everyday life—are viewed as a means of throwing off people from the actual source of influence and truth (Fenster, 2008). As a consequence, the media—as sources of information—are accused of being biased and deceptive (Schulz, 2019). For example, political actors like Donald Trump tend to regard the mainstream media as hostile and biased and thus, an “enemy of the people" (Schulz et al., 2018). Populists argue that the media and other sources of factual information are part of a systematic and coordinated campaign to present a distorted reality (Bergemann, 2018).

Fenster (2008) suggests that CTs are “a populist theory of power, an expression of populist protest” (p. 8). In this regard, Fenster posits that a skeptical view of the official and verified version of events can be “viewed as a form of radical populist discourse, where a secret elite is perceived to be manipulating economic, political, and social relations” (Bergemann, 2018, p.66). CTs and or populism are seen as political strategies, a means to rally popular support (Miller et al. 2016). Along this line, CTs serve as a

means to an end to populist movements. CTs are and can be tools of mobilization that allow populists to explain the problems facing the people and their movements (Miller, et al. 2016; Siva, et al., 2017). Furthermore, populists use CTS to "cope with the pressure of governing" (Pirro & Taggart, 2023, p. 414).

When populism and conspiracy theories converge, the thin-centered populist ideology is augmented by references to secretive evil forces with a common goal. This gives rise to populist conspiracy theories that speak of the Manichaean divide between the good people and the evil elites (Silva, et al., 2017). With this discussion in mind, Study II examines the combined effect of populism with conspiratorial cues on political attitudes and intended behaviors Specifically, I test the effects of exposure to populist conspiracies on political trust and political engagement because—normatively—democracies function best when its subjects are engaged and feel that they government is doing the right thing.

Populist Conspiracies, Political Trust, and Engagement

Although research has empirically demonstrated that populist messages shape attitudes and behaviors (Hameleers & Schmuck, 2017; Matthes & Schmuck, 2017; Wirz et al., 2018), we know very little about the potential influence of conspiracy theories together with populism on political attitudes and behaviors (or intentions) (but see Hameleers, 2021; Silva et al., 2017). The central question here and which study II seeks to address is: how does populism combined with conspiracy theories collectively shape political trust and engagement? Thus, the aim of this experimental study is twofold: (i) to understand how populist conspiracy theories influence institutional trust, and (ii), to understand the effects of populist conspiracy on political engagement. Trust and

engagement are two normatively good political outcomes for democracy, particularly young and growing democracies.

The limited scholarship on the effects of CTs shows that CTs can change people's attitudes (Douglas & Sutton, 2008). For example, Butler et al. (1995) demonstrated that individuals who viewed the Oliver Stone film *JFK* containing a conspiracy theory about the assassination of President F. Kennedy were reported less likelihood to endorse the conspiratorial narrative in the film relative to individuals who had not watched the video. Douglas and Sutton (2008) examined the third-person effects of conspiracy ideations describing the death of Princess Diana and found significant positive effects on third-person attitudes. More research has shown that exposure to CTs can stimulate inaction. For instance, exposure to anti-vaccine CTs reduces vaccination intentions (Jolley et al., 2017), and exposure to CTs about climate change significantly reduces enthusiasm and likelihood to participate in climate-positive behaviors (Jolley & Doughlas, 2014). Socially, exposure to conspiracy theories associated with the government has been shown to correlate with likelihood engage in unlawful activities in the future (Jolley et al., 2019). Belief in certain CTs may also be associated with prejudice; for example, exposure and belief in Jewish CTs were associated with anti-Israeli attitudes (Swami, 2012).

Politically, research shows that CTs can influence political behaviors and attitudes and that this influence is moderated by people's existing predispositions. Einsten et al. (2015) demonstrated that exposure to CTs diminishes public confidence in public institutions, even when the CTs are not related to the public institutions. Along the same vein, Kim and Cao (2016) found that exposure to a video presenting landing in the moon

as a government scheme cultivates public distrust toward the goverment. A survey study condcuted in 11 countries involving 12,000 participants found that endorsing general political CTs encouraged cyncism toward political institutions (Mari et al., 2021).

Extending the nexus to populism and political trust, studies have consistently found a negative correlation between populism and political trust (Rooduijn, et al., 2016; Rooduijn, 2018). Above and beyond riding the wave of public disillusionment with mainstream politics, populists fuel political mistrust (Rooduijn, et al., 2016). Moreover, populists dismantle and discredit democratic institutions by arguing that such institutions are under capture by elites who are self-serving and corrupt (Rooduijn, et al., 2016). Such emotionalized populist attribution of responsibility activates public distrust in democratic institutions and procedures (Hameleers et al., 2018; Rooduijn, et al., 2016). Thus, one could argue that political mistrust is both a driving factor and an aftereffect of populist discourse. Indeed, studies show that exposure to and reception of anti-system messages can damage citizen's attitudes toward the political system. In line with these observations, I expect that:

H1: ***Exposure to populist conspiracies will have a negative effect on political trust.***

Political scientists have interrogated the association between CTs and political behaviors and found that conspiracy ideation has a relationship with political engagement. For example, Butler et al. (1995) experimentally demonstrated that individuals who watched the conspiracy film *JFK* reported significantly reduced willingness to participate in political activities either through political donations or voting.

People who score high in conspiratorial ideation are less likely to "register to vote, to actually vote, display signs, or donate to campaigns" (Uscinski & Parent, 2014, p. 5). In the UK, Jolley and Douglas (2014) documented the influence of exposure to government-related CTs on political engagement and found that belief in CTs claiming that the British government was embroiled in the 7/7 London terrorist attacks and the demise of Princess Diana coupled with the claim that U.S. federal government had a hand in the 9/11 attacks on the New York World Trade Center significantly lessened the participant's willingness to be involved in civic and political activities. Similarly, when the phrase "conspiracy" was infused as a cue on a public survey concerning media coverage of the 2012 U.S. presidential campaigns where half of the respondents received the cue and the other half did not, it significantly influenced those who had a greater propensity for conspiratorial thinking (Uscinski et al., 2016). Positive effects have also been documented. Conspiracy ideation has been shown to significantly predict engagement in political protests in Japan and Germany toward a nuclear phase-out (Imhoff & Bruder, 2014). Whereas these studies are based on an observational design, they indicate that conspiracy ideation may engender behavioral patterns that challenge the status quo.

As for populism, research suggests that populist messages are highly persuasive and have a strong influence on political attitudes (see Hameleers & Schmuck, 2017; Matthes & Schmuck, 2017). In an extensive comparative experiment involving 16 European countries, scholars found that populist communication has strong politically mobilizing effects (Hameleers et al., 2018). In other words, populist cues that primed a politicized social identity (i.e., the ordinary people) and delineated an outgroup threat—

the elites—as the scapegoat for the problems facing the people significantly encouraged political engagement. Similarly, populist ads have been shown to significantly strengthen intergroup anxiety and negative stereotypes among Austrian citizens leading to more adversarial attitudes toward immigrants and consequently, increased support for anti-immigrant populist parties (Mathes & Schmuck, 2017). Similar conclusions on the impact of populist messages on anti-immigrant attitudes have been documented in Switzerland, France, Germany, and the UK (Wirz et al., 2018). Furthermore, populist messages affect political party preference such that atrributing blame to elites for problems facing the people mobilizes voters to engage in protest voting by supporting a populist party (Hameleers, Bos, & de Vreese, 2018).

Populist messages are politically persuasive and mobilizing because populist political communication relies on a simplified discourse of "us" vs "them," the good people vs the corrupt elite, a binary divide that can be compelling as it aligns with the hopes and fears of the ordinary people (Rooduijn, 2014). The socio-political construction of good people vs corrupt elite can be linked to social identity theory and framing. According to the assumptions of the social identity theory, individuals can identify with different social identities (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). For example, exposure to key national symbols like a flag may trigger the identity of belonging to a particular country or state. Similarly, populists' construction of a homogeneous group of people opposed to "corrupt" elites may, for example, prime cognitive a sense of attachment with the in-group, i.e., the ordinary citizens (Elchardus et al., 2016). The construction of the in-group is politicized by emphasizing that they are threatened by self-centered elites or other out-groups such as immigrants (Hameleers et al., 2018). Moreover, the in-group sense of

attachment engenders the acceptance of messages absolving the people from failures while at the same time attributing the people for success. On the other hand, elites and other constructed out-groups like migrants are blamed for the problems facing the common people (Hameleers, et al., 2017).

Populist construction of in-group threat from elites or out-groups serves to entrench a sense of perceived deprivation among the members of the in-group (Hameleers, et al., 2018). Essentially, populist communication emphasizes that the in-group of ordinary people are living in poor conditions relative to other groups in the society such as immigrants or asylum seekers because of the said elites and or outgroups (Elchardus & Spruyt, 2016). Such populist sentiments are connected to the premises of the social identity theory and, specifically, the us versus them, exclusion vs inclusion (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), arguments that are both central to populist discourse (Elchardus & Spruyt, 2016). The construction of a politicized identity of the ordinary people coupled with a sense of deprivation leads to attributions of responsibility to the elites (Hameleers, et al., 2017).

In-group threat and perceived deprivation can also trigger collective action (Van Zoomeren et al., 2008). According to Van Zoomeren and colleagues (2008), populists mobilize ordinary people against threats from outgroups such as elites because of perceived deprivation. Concerning populist discourse, anti-elitism explicitly emphasizes the ordinary people as an in-group is threatened and as a response, the ordinary people should mobilize to engage politically and protect their interests (Elchardus & Spruyt, 2016). In a nutshell, populist communication can encourage political engagement by elevating public perception of a disadvantaged in-group as a politicized identity.

Looking at populist communication with embedded conspiratorial reasoning, there is reason to believe that populist conspiracies can equally cultivate politically mobilizing effects. Victor Orban, the populist prime minister of Hungary, demonized Islamic immigrants as a conspirational strategy for ethnic substitution or white genocide while blaming mainstream political actors in Hungary for colluding with the Clinton Foundation and George Soros for the endeared him to right-wing voters (Pirro & Taggart, 2023). Similarly, Donald Trump's accusations of the "establishment" or "deep state" and the need to "drain the swamp"—coupled with the QAnon conspiracy—captivated his base (Pirro & Taggart, 2023).

Similarly, Islamophobic conspiracy theories—which are common in right-wing populist movements—may have helped promote political outcomes such as Brexit (Swami et al., 2018). Implicit in these right-wing popular support for Orban, Trump captivating his base with deep-state and QAnon conspiracies, and the Islamophobic conspiracies in the UK is that right-wing populism laced with conspiratorial elements appears to have engendered electoral success by mobilizing voters (Pirro & Taggart, 2023). To test this theorizing, I expect that:

H2: Populist messages with conspiracist cues will lead to more intended political engagement relative to neutral messages without conspiracist cues.

Moderating Factors

I draw on previous work showing that individual interpretation of information is influenced by predispositions (Zaller, 1992). As such, I posit a set of expectations in this study that we can expect certain factors to tamper with the influence of populist

conspiracies on institutional trust and political engagement. Given the political nature of many CTs describing the government schemes with heinous goals (Miller, et al., 2016) and the conceptualization of populism as a political communication style (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007), one would expect political orientation variables such as political cynicism and sophistication to moderate the hypothesized relationships.

First, politically sophisticated individuals tend to be among the most politically engaged citizens (Brady et al., 1995). Politically knowledgeable individuals possess a network of organized and accessible information that enables them to be active citizens in their democracy (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). Looking at the association between political knowledge and conspiratorial thinking, some argue that politically sophisticated individuals are less likely to endorse conspiracies and political rumors relative to the less sophisticated individuals (Berinsky, 2021). Indeed, political sophistication predicted reduced endorsement of Covid-19 conspiracy theories (Vitriol & Marsh, 2018). Along the same lines, "the more knowledgeable and engaged people are in politics, the less stock they put into anti-scientific claims and CTs that challenge the established political order" (Enders, et al., 202, p. 599).

Some political scientists argue in constrast that political knowledge bestows an individual with the ability and the motivation to connect CTs and political worldviews and thus, flesh out conspiratorial belief systems (Miller, et al., 2016). According to Miller, et al. (2016), political sophisticates tend to engage in politically motivated reasoning because they "can make connections between abstract principles and more concrete attitudes and are therefore more fully able to notice the implications of specific attitudes for their worldviews" (p. 827). Moreover, they posit that knowledgeable

individual—people who are more politically interested, aware, and have strong political attitudes—are often motivated to hold on to their attitudes, and thus, knowledge of politics is positively correlated with belief in CTs.

Similar debates animate scholarship on the association between populism and political sophistication. On one side, some scholars argue that there is an "uninformed populist"—a voter with populist attitudes, less politically knowledgeable, and primarily from a low socio—economic status (Rooduijn, 2018). The supposed correlation between support for populist causes and low political sophistication comes from the nature of populist discourse itself. Populists propagate simplistic solutions to often complex socio-economic, and political problems (Ernst, et al., 2017; Rooduijn, 2014). In other words, populist proposals often lack the intellectual rigor required and tangible responses to the numerous problems affecting "the people". The stereotype of the uninformed populist postulates that such individuals are receptive to populist messages because these messages are characterized by simplicity (Elchardus & Spruyt, 2016). Hameleers et al. (2019) contend that "the simplified discourse of populism that reduces social problems into black and white issues may appeal most to citizens who might struggle with understanding more complex issues" (p. 146).

A counter hypothesis of an "informed populist" suggests that supporters of populist movements harbor a "politically sophisticated approach to contemporary political realities" (Stanley & Cześnik, 2022, p. 46). These are critical citizens or dissatisfied democrats who "adhere strongly to democratic values but find the existing structures of representative democracy … to be wanting" (Norris, 1999, p. 3). As such, they are politically active, motivated, and informed yet attracted to anti-establishment

populists. Given that political sophisticates have the cognitive ability and motivation to endorse CTs and in line with the informed populist hypothesis, I expect that:

H3: ***Among political sophisticates, exposure to populist conspiracies will lead to greater intended political engagement relative to the less sophisticated individuals.***

Populists thrive in environments replete with public distrust of public institutions (Rooduijn et al., 2016). They cultivate a climate of cyncism and distrust toward government officials and democratic processes (Canovan, 1999). Populists scapegoat institutions and political actors for their ineffective representation of the people (Hawkins, 2009; Rooduijn, 2014). Similarly, people haboring cynical political views are likely to share this cynical worldview since they also believe that political elites do not care about their will or needs (Ernst, et al., 2017). Along this vein, research demonstrate that populist communication is most persuasive to individuals whose prior convictions are consistent with populist messaging. Bos et al. (2013) contend populist messages often find fertile grounds in and are popularly received by politically cynical people (Bos et al., 2013). Attributing blame to elites for the problems facing the people are not only attitudinally incongruent for politically distrusting citizens but that the political cynical are most susceptible to persuasion by populist messages (Hameleers et al., 2018).

Political science literature has demonstrated a similar role of cynicism in conspiratorial ideation. Studies show that individuals scoring high on political distrust have a greater propensity to endorse CTs (Miller et al., 2016). For example, anti-vaccination beliefs, beliefs that Obama is a Muslim, and the 9/11 trutherism were found to be negatively related to political trust (Golberg & Richey, 2020). The association

between CTs and cynicism can be seen when we look at the content of CTs which implies that a small cabal of powerful and malign elites shapes world events and political systems (Miller, et al., 2016). They suggest that mediators of liberal democracy such as the media and the systems of checks and balances are part of the enablers of the problems facing the people. Given that such institutions cannot be trusted, the people should withdraw from conventional political processes and or take nontraditional forms of collective action. It is not surprising, therefore, that CTs reverberate with populist discourse which project "the people" as innocent victims of the establishment forces.

With this discussion in mind, one would expect to find that citizens cynical of political actors and institutions are persuaded by populist conspiracies. Consistent with previous studies demonstrating the politically alienating effect of political cynicism (Hetherington, 1998), one would also expect greater cynicism to negatively predict engagement in political activities. However, if populist communication is politically persuasive and mobilizing (Hameleers et al., 2017; Mathes & Schmuck, 2017) and if political conspiracy ideation is captivating to cynical audiences (Pirro & Taggart, 2023), then I hypothesize that:

> *H4: P**olitical cynicism will moderate the effect of viewing populist conspiracies on political engagement, such that individuals who score higher on political cynicism will express greater intended political engagement***.

Online Survey Experiment

Although observational designs are often convenient for conducting political communication research, these designs are bedeviled with serious threats to causal inferences (Arceneaux, 2010). As such, I draw on a technique that combines the external validity of observational designs and the internal validity of an experimental design: a survey experiment. Accordingly, this study employs an online survey experiment to interrogate the potential impact of populist conspiracies on political trust and political engagement.

Data Collection

The data for this study comes from two sources. First, a German research firm with a panel of Kenyan respondents was contracted to collect data (N = 259). Given limited financial resources and significant delays in getting large samples, snowball sampling was also used. An additional online survey was administered via Qualtrics between August 30th and October 1st, 2023 (N = 235). Overall, the two sources produced 494 responses. For snowball sampling, I shared the survey through social networking sites including WhatsApp, Instagram, and Facebook. Participants were requested to complete the survey and refer the survey to other individuals in their networks. Responses were kept anonymous with respondents being given a separate link to fill in their cell phone number into a raffle for a chance to receive one of 10 gift cards of $10 phone credit. Data collection began after getting approval from the University of Delaware's IRB (protocol #2088668—1).

Experimental Design

This study employed a between-subjects experimental design embedded in the online survey. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions such that subjects read one of two versions of a simulated news article created to resemble an actual news story. In the first group, respondents read a simulated news story with a populist conspiracy, while the second treatment condition was a story without an embedded populist conspiracy, which served as the control condition. The appendix contains the two simulated news stories. For the experiment, the stories were created to resemble an actual online news story as it would appear on https://nation.africa/kenya- the host website of *The Daily Nation,* the leading Kenyan newspaper. Details including background color, design, and appearance were designed to resemble any story that can be found on the newspaper's website. (See Appendix A).

Procedure

Participants were provided with brief information about the objectives of the study and were asked to give their consent. Next, respondents answered questions about their media use, political interest and affiliation, political discussion, political sophistication, cynicism, and demographics (explained in "measures," below). Then, participants were randomly assigned to experimental conditions with either a populist conspiracy or a not. Here, participants were informed that they would read a short news article produced by a daily newspaper about politics. To encourage the participants to read the article, there was a minimum forced exposure time of 30 seconds. This period has been tested in previous research (see Powell, et al., 2015) and is long enough for the participants to interact with the stimuli while also short enough for fast readers to not be frustrated. Finally, respondents completed questions asking about their trust in political

actors and institutions and their intentions to engage in political activities.

Measures

Media use. News consumption was measured by asking respondents: "How often do you get news from the following sources? (1 = never, 4 = everyday):

Television news viewing **(***M* = 3.44, *SD* = .83). TV news consumption was measured with a single item.

Newspaper reading*:* News consumption using the newspapers was measured by asking respondents how often they got their political news diet from the newspapers (*M* = 1.96, *SD* = .97) (4 = never, 1 = every day: recorded). All respondents except those who answered "never" were subsequently asked how often they read *The Daily Nation* (*M* = 2.03, *SD* = .90), *The Standard* (*M* = 2.77, *SD* = .92), and *The Star* (*M* = 2.57, *SD* = .1.00) (1 = never, 4 = every day). This was done to check how often the participants read newspapers analyzed during the content analysis. The four newspaper items were averaged into an index (*M* = 6.55, *SD* = 1.83, **α** = .76). Respondents were also asked how often they got political news from **radio** (*M* = 3.02, *SD* = 1.06: (1 = never, 4 = every day), **online** (*M* = 1.28, *SD* = .66:4 = never, 1 = every day: recoded) and **social media** (*M* = 3.55, *SD* = .82: 1 = never, 4 = every day).

The survey included several demographic measures including age (*M* = 29.10, min = 18, max = 69), sex (male =55% , female = 40%, did not disclose = 5%), education (10% = high school, 21% = diploma/associate degree, 60% = bachelor's degree, 7% = masters, 2% = PhD), political affiliation (Azimio La Umoja = 32%, Kenya Kwanza =

41%, Independent = 24%, others = 3%[7]). There are two major coalitions in Kenya: Azimio (Swahili for "Resolution for Unity") and Kenya Kwanza (Swahili for "Kenya First"). There are multiple parliamentary parties under each coalition. Monthly household income was measured on a 7-point ordinal scale from less than Kshs. 50,000 through Kshs. 200,000 or more (mode and median = 2, Kshs. 50,000-75,000).

***Political interest*:** Participants were asked to indicate their levels of interest in politics and public affairs on a 5-point scale (1= not at all interested, 5= extremely interested) (M = 3.22, SD = .97).

***Political discussion*:** Participants were asked "How often do you talk about politics with family or friends?" (M = 3.35, SD = .93) (1 = never, 5 = often)

Political Trust

One of the key dependent variables in this study is political trust. Using measures adapted from the Afrobarometer survey, respondents were asked: "How much trust do you have in each of the following?" *The President* (M = 2.73, SD = 1.19), *Members of parliament* (M = 2.42, SD = .98), t*he electoral commission of Kenya* (M = 2.69, SD = 1.27) and *the ruling party* (M = 2.50, SD = 1.15) on a five-point scale ranging from "none at all" (coded as 1) and "a great deal" (coded as 5). These items were averaged to create an index (M = 8.32, SD = 3.09, α = .84)

Political engagement

Similarly, intentions to engage in political activities were measured using items adapted from the Afrobarometer annual surveys. We employed several questions from

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[7] There two major political formations in Kenya: Kwenya Kwanza (the ruling coalition) and Azimio (the opposition)

the Afrobarometer survey to measure engagement in political activities. From this list of questions, we used 6 items and adopted a 5-point Likert scale (1 = extremely unlikely, 5 = extremely). Specifically, respondents were asked about their likelihood to attend a campaign rally (M = 2.55, SD = 1.40), work for a political candidate or a party (M = 3.08, SD = 1.34), persuade others to vote for a certain candidate or party (M = 3.07, SD = 1.45), contact an elected official (e.g., a member of parliament or member of county assembly) (M = 2.89, SD = 1.43), join others to request government action (M = 3.33, SD = 1.41), and demonstrate/protest (M = 2.24, SD = 1.38). The 6 items were averaged to create an index, (M = 15.30, SD = 4.52, $\boldsymbol{\alpha}$ =. 63).

Moderating Variables

Political knowledge*:* I took the normative approach that has been consistently used in previous literature. The procedure involves asking respondents about their grasp of civic and candidate/issue knowledge (see Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Hoffman, 2019). Using items adapted from Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996), I asked participants three questions about civic knowledge and four questions about candidate knowledge. For civics knowledge—the fundamentals of how the government works, awareness of the key people in politics and thus, "the primary way of assessing political knowledge in contemporary political communication research" (Hoffman, 2019, p. 10)—I asked respondents three questions: "which branch of government has the final responsibility to determine if a law is constitutional or not?" (M = .66, SD = .46), "which political party has the majority of members in the national assembly?" (M = .84, SD = .37), and "how much of a majority is required to impeach the president?" (M = .29, SD = .45). For candidate issue knowledge, participants were asked: "which political party favors the

bottom-up economic model?" (*M* = .96, *SD* = .19): thinking about current office holders, which office is held by the following? Martha Koome (*M* = .94, *SD* = .24: correct= chief justice), Musalia Mudavadi (*M* = .89, *SD* = .31: correct = Prime Cabinet Secretary), Amazon Kingi (*M* = .76, *SD* = .43: correct = Speaker of the Senate).

Researchers have demonstrated that whereas women tend to answer "I don't know" to questions about political knowledge, men tend to guess their responses (Kenski & Jamieson, 2000; Kenksi, 2000). These scholars recommend controlling for this guessing tendency by summing up "incorrect answers" with "don't know responses". Moreover, some scholars (e.g., Mondak & Canache, 2004) code "I don't know" responses as incorrect responses. In the same manner, I coded correct responses as 1 and incorrect + "I don't know" responses as 0. However, the 7 items did not scale reliably (**α** = .56). As such, I dropped 3 items (the body charged with declaring the constitutionality of a law, the numbers required to impeach the president, and the coalition that favors the bottom-up economic model). I averaged the four remaining items to create an index of political knowledge (*M* = 2.08, *SD* = .53, **α** = .62). Although the coefficient is under the standard .70 level, it falls within the acceptable minimum level of reliability (Wrench et al., 2018).

Political cynicism. Cynicism is defined as "a lack of confidence in and a feeling of distrust toward the political system, including public officials and institutions" (Pinkleton & Austin, 2001, p. 324). Cynicism, conceptualized in this manner, overlaps with political distrust (**α** = -.60). Using attitudes toward political actors as a proxy for attitudes toward the larger political system, this study tapped into political cynicism by asking the respondents to indicate, utilizing a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*), if they would agree/disagree that politicians are honest

with the media and the public[8] (*M* = 4.13, *SD* = 1.11), politicians look out for the interests of the public before they look out for their interests (*M* = 4.05, *SD* = 1.37), politicians lose touch with life in the real world after they are elected (*M* = 4.22, *SD* = 1.08), I'm frustrated with the way government works (*M* = 3.86, *SD* = 1.26), I'm disgusted with politics in this country, (*M* = 3.73, *SD* = 1.28), and I'm satisfied with the way government works (*M* = 3.73, *SD* = 1.28). These measures were adapted from previous literature (see Pinkleton & Austin, 2001). The seven items scaled reliably and were averaged into an index of political cynicism (*M* = 3.73, *SD* = 1.28, **α** = .72).

[8] Items adopted directly from Pinkleton & Austin (2001)

Table 4 Descriptive statistics

Variable	***Central Tendency***	***SD***	***C. alpha***
Age		29.10	8.11
Gender	male = 55%		
Education	median:		
	Bachelors		
Household income	median:		
	Kshs. 50,000-75,000		
TV news use	3.44	.83	
Newspaper news use	3.05	.97	
The Daily Nation	2.97	.90	
The Standard	2.77	.92	
The Star	2.43	1.00	

Table 4 cont.

Newspaper index	6.54	1.83	.76
Radio news use	3.02	1.06	
Online news use	3.72	.66	
Social media news use	3.55	.82	
Political interest	3.22	.97	
Political Discussion	3.35	.93	
Political cynicism (index)	3.73	1.28	.72
Political knowledge (index)	2.08	.53	.62
Political affiliation			
Azimio	32%		
Kenya Kwanza	41%		
Independent	24%		
Other	3%		

Results

Hypothesis 1 predicted that exposure to populist messages with conspiratorial cues would have a negative effect on political trust. To test this hypothesis, a one-way analysis of covariance was conducted, with experimental conditions as the independent variable and political trust as the dependent variable. Media use, political orientation (political interest, discussion, affiliation, cynicism, and knowledge), and demographics were entered into the model as covariates. As shown in **Table 5,** the ANCOVA indicated that, after controlling for the covariates, exposure to populist conspiracies did not significantly influence public trust in political actors and institutions, $F(1, 425) = .59$, $p > .05$. As such, H1 was not supported.

Hypothesis 2 predicted that populist messages with conspiracist cues will lead to a greater likelihood of engaging in political activities relative to neutral messages without conspiracist cues. A second ANCOVA was conducted to test this hypothesis. Covariates were the same as for H1. The ANCOVA—shown in **Table 6—**revealed a non-significant main effect of exposure to populist conspiracies on the likelihood to engage in political activities $F(1, 371) = 3.36$, $p > .05$, after controlling for the covariates. As such, H2 was not supported.

Table 5 One-way ANCOVA for the effect of populist conspiracies on political trust (main and interaction effects)

	df	Mean Square	F	*p*
Model	1	101.61	17.55	.001**
Treatment (experimental condition)	1	9.28	1.60	.20
Demographics				
Age	1	4.71	.81	.37
Sex	1	7.17	1.24	.27
Education	1	.86	.15	.27
Income	1	.58	.01	.92
Media use				
TV news	1	.88	.15	.22
Newspaper news	1	8.76	1.51	.22
Radio	1	9.93	1.72	.19
Online news	1	12.93	2.23	.14
Social media news	1	.37	.06	.80

Table 5: One-way ANCOVA for Effect of Populist Conspiracies on Political Trust (Main & Interaction Effects) Cont.

Political orientation					
	Political interest	1	.38	.07	.80
	Political discussion	1	23.88	4.13	.04*
	Political cynicism	1	1346.00	.07	.001**
	Political knowledge	1	.32	.06	.81
	*Political affiliation (*Ref: Kenya Kwanza = 1)				
	Azimio	1	575.24	127.71	.001**
	Independent	1	188.87	3.66	.001**
	Other	1	16.49	3.66	.06
Interaction Effects					
	Treatment X knowledge	1	3.92	.87	.35
	Treatment X cynicism	1	2.95	.66	46

Note: ** = $p < .001$, * = $p < .05$

Table 6 One-way ANCOVA for the effect of exposure to populist conspiracies on political engagement

		df	Mean Square	F	*p*
Model		1	122.87	8.60	.001**
Treatment (experimental condition)		1	47.94	3.34	.07
Covariates					
Demographics					
	Age	1	55.57	3.85	.05*
	Sex (male = 1)	1	16.96	1.17	.28
	Education	1	43.05	2.99	.09
	Income	1	79.49	5.52	.02*
Media use					
	TV news	1	210.36	14.60	.001**
	Newspaper news	1	178.80	12.41	.001**
	Radio news	1	183.10	12.71	.001**
	Online news	1	4.84	.34	.56
	Social media news	1	187.08	12.98	.001**

Table 6: One-way ANCOVA for Effect of Populist Conspiracies on Political Engagement cont.

Political orientation				
Political interest	1	921.07	63.92	.001**
Political discussion	1	115.19	7.80	.001**
Political cynicism	1	191.35	13.28	.001**
Political knowledge	1	.58	.04	.84
Political affiliation (Ref: Kenya Kwanza = 1)				
Azimio	1	6.33	.46	.50
Independent	1	13.97	1.0	.33
Other	1	5.12	.36	.55
Interaction Effects				
Treatment X knowledge	1	63.41	4.44	.04*
Treatment X cynicism	1	10.07	.70	.40

Note: ** = $p < .001$, *5 = $p < .05$

Hypothesis 3 predicted that among political sophisticates, exposure to populist conspiracies will lead to greater intended political engagement relative to the less sophisticated individuals. To test whether political knowledge exacerbates political engagement, I added the interaction between experimental condition and political knowledge to the main effect model. The ANCOVA—shown in **Table 6—**reveals that the coefficient of the interaction term (treatment X knowledge) demonstrates that political knowledge moderates the relationship between exposure to populist messaging and political participation ($\beta = 4.44$, $p < .05$). **Figure 7** displays this interaction effect. The graph shows that the less politically sophisticated individuals reported greater likelihood to engage in political activities when exposed to populist messaging with conspiratorial cues relative to more politically sophisticated individuals. These findings indicate that although exposure to populist conspiracies leads to greater levels of political participation, such effects are greater for less knowledgeable individuals than for political sophisticates. Although the findings indicate a significant moderating effect of political knowledge, the direction of the effect is contrary to the one hypothesized. As such, H3 is partially supported.

Hypothesis 4 predicted that political cynicism will moderate the effect of exposure to populist conspiracies on political engagement such that individuals who score higher on political cynicism will express greater intended political engagement as a function of exposure to populist conspiracies. As shown in **Table 6** this hypothesis was not supported as there was no statistically significant interaction effect between exposure to populist conspiracies and cynicism on the likelihood to participate in political activities, F (1, 122.87) = 8.60, $p > .05$.

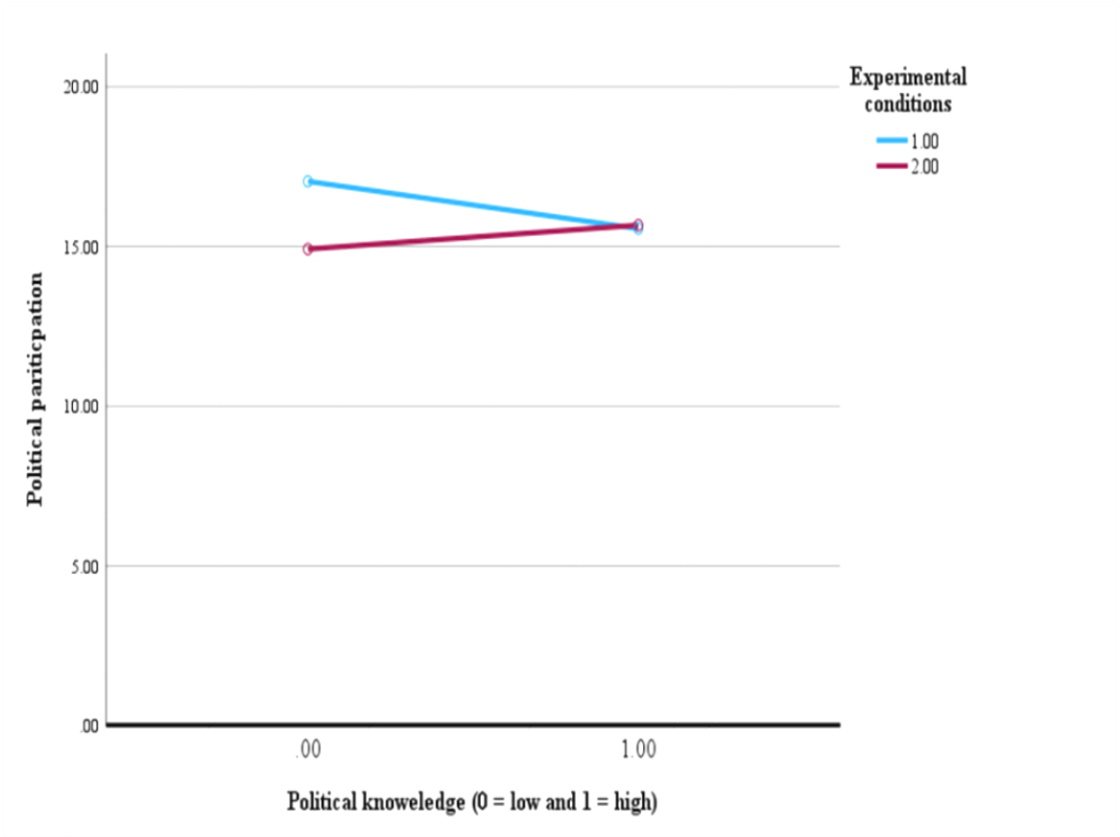

Figure 7 The effect of exposure to populist conspiracies on political participation, adjusted for political knowledge. (*1= populist conspiracy cues present, 2 = no populist conspiracy cues*).

Discussion

Study II assessed the potential effects of exposure to populist conspiracies on public trust in political institutions and intentions to engage in political activities. Additionally, I sought to find out whether political cynicism and political knowledge moderate the hypothesized impact of exposure to populist content with conspiratorial cues on political engagement. As it turns out, exposure to populist CTs does not influence

public confidence in political institutions and actors nor does it translate to intentions to (dis) engagement in political activities among Kenyan participants. Notably, however, political knowledge tampers the influence of exposure to populist content laced with conspiracies on political engagement.

Extant literature suggests that populism and conspiratorial reasoning can independently produce widespread negative consequences on the democratic enterprise including public distrust in experts and institutions, and disengagement from political activities (see Douglas et al., 2019; Douglas & Sutton, 2018; Einstein & Click, 2015; Jolley & Douglas, 2014; Rooduijn, 2018; Uscinski & Parent, 2014; Uscinski et al., 2016). The central question in this study was: could these concerns about the quality of democracy be a product of the cultivation of distrust through populist conspiratorial rhetoric? The findings of this study suggest the contrary. Populism combined with conspiratorial ideation does not significantly influence political trust and intention to engage in political activities among Kenyan subjects.

This begs the question of the potential explanations for these non-significant effects. First, it is plausible that media exposure may not significantly influence outcomes because there are potentially more powerful forces that could influence political attitudes and behaviors in Kenya. For example, ethnicity is a powerful mobilizing force in Kenyan political competition (Cheeseman, 2021; Mueller, 2020). Ethnicity is deeply entrenched in the Kenyan political parlance. As such most Kenyans are "motivated to vote for co-ethnic political elites" (Kipkoech, 2023, p. 879) because "winning or losing the presidency is understood not simply as a personal gain or loss but an ethnic one" (Mueller, 2020, p. 344). Possibly, ethnic identities and cleavages trump the influence of

exposure to populist conspiracies on political outcomes including trust in institutions and intentions to engage in political activities.

A second potential explanation is that, plausibly, the attitudes of Kenyans toward political actors and institutions as well as intentions to engage in politics could reflect perceived corruption in public service, subjective evaluations of government performance, and poor economic conditions in Kenya. Whereas these conditions may provide fertile grounds for populist actors to rise and employ conspiratorial reasoning in their discourse, these socio-political factors could play an even more significant role in shaping political trust and engagement in politics relative to opportunistic political messaging. Political scientist Mark Hetherington (1998) argues that at the heart of political trust is public perception that "government is producing outcomes consistent with public expectations" (p. 9). The public expects the government to deliver public goods and services, to be fair and accessible, and for government officials to perform their duties in a competent, impartial, and unselfish way (Hetherington, 1998). Public distrust, therefore, grows out of a sense of the government's inability to meet these expectations. It, therefore, might suggest that government performance could be one among many other strong explanatory factors of public trust in public officials and institutions and even willingness to participate in political activities.

Perceived corruption in government has an equally corrosive effect on political trust. Whether perceived or real, corruption can corrode government legitimacy because it leads to disillusionment with public officials (Jiang & Zhang, 2021). Similarly, prevailing economic conditions are a strong predictor of trust in government including willingness to engage (Jiang & Zhang, 2021.). Research shows that it matters less

whether the public assessment of economic performance is grounded on objective economic indicators or subjective attitudes (Citrin & Stoker, 2018). According to Citrin and Stoker (2018), public trust in the government is often high when the public appraise the government positively and low when they assess the government negatively. Essentially, economic deterioration brings down public confidence in government and leads to public cynicism on the capability of public officials to tackle economic challenges and successfully run the economy. Overall, positive economic performance increases public faith in the government as a whole and elevates trust in the government officials. As such, the public can reward political actors with re-election for sound economic policies and punish them for economic downturns. Along these lines, government performance and perceived corruption have been shown to significantly predict public trust in the Kenyan government and tamper the relationship between media use and political trust (Kipkoech, 2023). One can, therefore, argue that these subjective factors—that were not controlled for in the current study—may have a stronger influence that may surpass the impact of exposure to populist conspiracies on trust and intentions to engage in politics.

Perhaps the most interesting finding is that political knowledge significantly moderated the influence of exposure to populist conspiracies on political engagement. This finding may suggest that the less politically knowledgeable Kenyans are susceptible to populist messaging laced with conspiratorial cues. Potentially, the framing and topic of populist conspiracies (the ability of a lurking deep state out to influence election outcomes) could be persuasive and thus mobilizing because they are attitudinally congruent with the audience's predispositions including a disdain for political elites such

as the “Deep State”. Research shows that people are more likely to accept and be mobilized by messages that align with their underlying attitudes (Hameleers, 2021; Stroud, 2008**).** Indeed, Stroud (2008) posits that individuals are more likely to look for and selectively consume information that is consistent with and reinforces their pre-existing beliefs to avoid cognitive dissonance. Secondly, it is possible that populist communication involving populist conspiracism could have primed cognitive self-identification with the ordinary citizens, perceived as an in-group in populist quarters (Elchardus & Spruyt, 2016). Populists actors frame as victims of an elite conspiracy to deprive them of their sovereign will (Engeseer et al., 2017). Consequently, when populists prime this threat from elitist actors, it may translate into an in-group sense of attachment that ultimately engender the acceptance of such messages absolving the people from failures, attributing the people for success, and blaming elites for the problems.

The moderating effect of political knowledge, in some ways, could buttress conventional wisdom of an "uninformed populist” which assumes that political interest and awareness is a critical variable explaining the association between populist appeals and political behavior (Stanley & Czesnik, 2022). The uninformed populist is perceived as a citizen who believes that “to complicate an issue is to attempt to obfuscate it, while to speak plainly is hallmark of the trustworthy politician” (Stanley & Czesnik, 2022, p. 43). As such, it does not come as a surprise that conventional knowledge dictates that populist parties tend to rely on uniformed “protest voters and votes” (Moffitt, 2016). It appears that in Kenya, the less politically savvy individuals are moved significantly more than the sophisticated citizens. Thus, although this finding may support the stereotype of

populism as “politics for the uneducated simpletons from rural backwaters of forgotten industrial towns who have been manipulated by populist Svengalis and hopeless idealistic and unrealistic political naifs” (Moffitt, 2018, p. 9), other studies in Europe have found that it is the politically sophisticated individuals harboring populist attitude—the informed populists—who report greater likelihood to support populist parties (Stanley & Czesnik, 2022). To argue, therefore, that populist messaging may find favor among populations who find populism to be simple and unsophisticated, is to assume that such populations are characterized by simplicity as the case may be more nuanced and contextual. Future studies should explore the relationship between populism and political knowledge further.

Although political cynicism was a significant predictor of public trust in institutions and intentions to engage in political activities, it was non-significant moderator of the influence of exposure to populist conspiracies on political engagement. This finding contradicts previous studies which have found that populist communication produce the strongest impact among politically cynical individuals (Bos et al., 2013). This may speak to the stronger effects of contextual and demographic factors in Kenya like ethnicity, economic conditions, etc. that cancel out the influence of cynicism as a predisposition. Future research studies may assess other predispositions that may tamper with such effects. For example, populist messaging may strongly influence those with a greater sense of relative deprivation (Aalberg et al., 2017), a sense of victimhood (Pirro & Taggart, 2023), and those who are less formally educated (Mathes & Schmuck, 2017).

The next chapter summarizes the findings of this dissertation while highlighting the limitations and implications thereof.

Chapter 5

GENERAL DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

When scholars review studies on populism and posit that populism is on the rise, they often make references to the rise to prominence of Nigel Farage and Brexit in 2016 (Devine & Murphy, 2020b), Donald Trump's presidential victory in 2016 (Gerbaudo, 2018b), the strong showings of Marie Le Pen in the 2014 and 2017 French Presidential campaigns (Geva, 2020), as well as several other electoral triumphs by populist actors and parties across the West (Maher, et al., 2022). But we have witnessed a populist contagion where populism has found its way into the politics of the global south. In Africa, for example, populist rabble-rousers have rallied popular support and won electoral contests while deploying populism as a mobilization strategy: the exaltation of the "ordinary man", claims of close relations with the people coupled with the demonization of elites. Arguably, "we are living in populist times" (Moffit, 2016, p. 1) not just in the Americas and Europe but also in Africa.

Consequently, the deployment of populism as a campaign strategy in African politics has attracted scholarly attention (e.g., Cheeseman, 2021; Resnick, 2017; 2019; Weyland, 2021). Some have examined the potential drivers behind this specter and documented that disillusionment with institutions of representations and mechanisms of

accountability, disenchantment with mainstream parties, and persistently high unemployment among the youth have provided fertile grounds for populism to take root (Cheeseman, 2021; Resnick, 2019). Despite this insightful African scholarship on populism, there is a noticeable lack of understanding of the communicative elements of populism. In other words, the nexus between the media and populism in Africa has not been fully explored. Yet, scholars often argue that "populism and the media make good bedfellows" (see Mazzoleni, 2014, p. 4). Given the absence of systematic and theoretical or empirical work on this relationship, this dissertation aimed to explore the nexus between news media coverage of elections and populist politics in Kenya.

More specifically, I sought to examine the role played by communication and the media in the upsurge of populism. Along this vein, I interrogated whether the media are potential catalysts of populist sentiments. That is, does the media give voice and platform to populist claims? Relatedly, how widespread are populist ideas among the Kenyan public? And how does the media frame populist sentiments? These questions were informed by assumptions that there could be (i) a form of "media complicity" that has contributed to the rise of populism, particularly in growing democracies, or (ii) the media act as the knights of the prevailing political system and order by restraining the diffusion of populism, broadly construed. Thus, I conducted a content analysis of the three leading mainstream newspapers in Kenya to analyze the receptivity of the Kenyan news media to populist content, the pervasiveness of populist ideas and rhetoric in the forum pages, and the media framing of populism and populist rhetoric. Relatedly, I utilized the results from the content analysis to experimentally manipulate populist content with conspiratorial

cues to understand its impact on political trust and intentions to engage in political activities in Kenya.

I chose Kenya as a site for this empirical investigation for two reasons. First, Kenya has in the recent past witnessed an upsurge in populism, thus making it a relevant context to explore the phenomenon. Second, Kenya has been labeled one of the beacons of democracy in the African continent. However, the rise in populist movements and eventual electoral success of a populist figure has left pundits, commentators, and academics grappling with the potential impact of populism on the quality of Kenyan democracy and worrying about a possible totalitarian turn due to concerns that populists often have a conflicted and or dubious attitude toward liberal democracy. Therefore, examining the potential role of the vibrant media ecology in Kenya and the prominence of populism is warranted. In the following sections, I summarize the findings from these studies.

Media's receptivity to populist rhetoric

I began by analyzing print media receptivity to populist discourse. Content analysis revealed that in terms of the share of newspaper articles with references to populist views, almost half of the sampled published content had references to populist sentiments, with significant differences across the publications. As such, we can see that mainstream print media created a relatively favorable platform and structure for populist actors to express their ideas and provided a space and platform for populist views to reach the wider public. Whereas this finding may speak to the media's amity, empathy, and responsiveness to populist rhetoric, and thus, the media's complicity in amplifying populist ideas in Kenya by giving "passionate attention to what happens in the usually

animate precincts of populist movements" (Mazzoleni, 2008, p. 50), Kenyan journalists also appear to play their gatekeeping role. On the one hand, published content reveals a certain level of sympathy for the populist's public agenda. On the other hand, the amount of print space granted to populist content by Kenyan journalists is not as prominent relative to the overall media content, which may suggest some level of hostility toward populist discourse. However, future research should qualitatively evaluate journalists' attitudes toward populist discourse to provide a nuanced understanding of this coverage pattern.

The Kenyan print media appear to be opening "the gate" to the electoral "marketplace" for political actors by disseminating persuasive populist appeals to the larger public. At the same time, however, the Kenyan print media have not been overshadowed by populist actors and are thus equally "closing" this publicity gate. Journalists are still in control, in some ways, of the oxygen of publicity given that they do not publish extensively content laden with populist ideas: there is an element of moderation at play in the Kenyan newsrooms. As such, one can conclude that the Kenyan media— in Mudde's (2007) terms—are both a "friend" and a "foe" to populist movements in Kenya. Moreover, this finding contributes to populist communication literature showing that it is not only tabloids and commercial television as elaborated by Mudde (2007) that provide a space for disseminating populist discourse, but mainstream newspapers also play a role. Future studies, however, should also extend this investigation to new media—especially— social media which could have an affinity to populism's rhetorical persuasion given that populists tend to utilize these unmediated new technologies to reach their constituents (Engesser et al., 2017).

Theoretically, this finding not only illuminates the pattern of print media coverage of populist rhetoric in the global south, but it may also suggest that the media simply cannot avoid a movement if its polling performance and public support is high. Ruto consistently polled high and was considered one of the front-runners for the Kenyan presidency. Some pollsters even predicted that Ruto would win the elections (Kisia, 2022) The salience of such a candidate in the public and the subsequent publishing of populist sentiments associated with his political movement may suggest that the print media was and is attracted to the unusual populist behavior characterized by drama, emotions, and abrasiveness. Competition for advertising revenue may force media outlets to give privilege the sensational and thus disseminate populist discourses (Ellinas, 2010). At the same time, the novelty and the perceived outsider position of a populist actor may have provided a high news value that assured the candidate (then) of prominence.

Press coverage of populism in Kenya—through its receptivity to populist rhetoric may closely align with the propositions underlying Mazzoleni et al.'s (2003) model of media support during the rise and existence of populist actors and parties. According to the model, the first phase—the ground-laying phase—is often defined by public disillusionment and consequently, the media may encourage a political atmosphere that facilitates the growth and spread of populist sentiments. Media attention during the next insurgent phase gradually increases because populist messages align with commercialized media ecology, where an affinity for the sensational drives the media. In the model, both "the ground-laying and insurgent phases occur during the early growth of populist movements" (Mazzoleni, Stewart, & Horsfield, 2003, p. 133). William Ruto ran for the presidency for the first time in 2022 with a new party that was less than two years

old since its inception, unlike his main challenger, Odinga, who was running for the fifth time. Plausibly, media space granted to Ruto's populist rhetoric seems to reflect the insurgent and ground-laying phase of his populist movement. Future studies should test the life cycle model within the Kenyan media and political context to prove its validity about populist movements in the global south. Indeed, Mazzoleni (2014) has called for further research in different countries to test the model.

Let us ponder further on the media's relatively moderate receptivity to populist views and their potential consequences in Kenya. Practically, media coverage of populist claims and the granting of salience to populist actors and issues legitimizes their claims and organizations (Ellinas, 2010; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018). In other words, providing publicity to populist actors and their ideas elevates their voices, grants credibility to their causes, and normalizes populist sentiments. Thus, the media can make fringe populist parties part of the mainstream and acceptable rather than pariah and pathological (Esser et al., 2017). Moreover, when the media becomes amenable to populist movements, the readers and viewers are exposed to populist rhetoric (Boomgaarden & Vliegenthart, 2009). Along this vein, the media can prime the audience with a sympathetic populist agenda, thus opening up space and an opportunity for populist sentiments to spread (Koopmans & Muis, 2009). As such, populist sentiments may be reinforced, normalized, legitimized, and accepted by the public (Ellinas, 2010; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2018). An analysis of the forum pages revealed that populist ideas and sentiments are diffused among the public.

Diffusion of Populist Ideas

Results from the content analysis reveals that populist messages have found their way into public deliberations through several participatory forums provided by the print

media. In Habermasian terms, these forums have blossomed into mediated sites of the public sphere where media, the public, and democracy intersect giving a platform for regular citizens and the "elites" to voice their opinions on the grand and the mundane. The fact that almost half of the articles in the forum section—a forum where the public gathers for a shared conversation on public affairs—published deliberations rife with populist ideas suggests: (i) there is widespread diffusion of populist views among "regular" Kenyans, and (ii) "ordinary" and cultural elites Kenyan citizens feel very strongly about populism.

My findings illustrate that populist ideas espousing a Manichean vision of a society characterized by ordinary people and malevolent political elites have become pervasive in Kenyan society. Whereas this may speak to the frustrations of many people on the stagnating economy, persistent youth unemployment, and the struggles of everyday life, it could also suggest that populist communication has found fertile ground in the Kenyan public and has become an effective campaign strategy (see Dai & Kustov, 2022). Moreover, we saw that Kenyans pejoratively expressed their frustrations at and toward political elites for trying to usurp their power to elect their leaders of choice. They criticized and ostracized political elites calling for the common people to rise and be counted.

The practical implications of the widespread ideation of populism stem from its potential political consequences. First, populist communication may engender political polarization. Consistent with the assumptions of selective exposure and avoidance and motivated political reasoning, as citizens consume content consistent with their prior populist attitudes and thus, their prior beliefs become reinforced. (Muller, et al., 2017).

Conversely, in this polarized divide, individuals who find populist sentiments deviant and detestable may also become strengthened in their opposition to populist ideas. For this group, they may consume incongruent populist content to find weaknesses in populist lines of argumentation and thus, strengthen their opposition. For the former, populist content may serve to gratify their confirmation bias (Hameleers, et al., 2019). This conjecture, however, is advanced with a caveat.

We would expect the impact of populist communication to largely occur from habitual exposure rather than from single-message use. This would be consistent with the premises of the Reinforcing Spirals Model which postulates that media use serves as (i) a predictor of individual attitudes and behaviors and (ii) an outcome variable influenced by attitudes and behaviors. As such, the processes of media selection and effects of exposure to the selected media content are dynamic and mutually reinforcing. In the current study, it is possible and plausible that populist attitudes will predict the consumption of populist media content, and populist media content will reinforce populist attitudes. This reinforcing spiral perspective highlights the need for longitudinal modeling in future studies to explore this conjecture.

Second, repeated exposure to populist messages with conspiratorial cues may encourage preference for populist movements and parties while encouraging opposition to non-populist parties (Hameleers, et al., 2017). If the electorate is constantly exposed to messages persuading them that corrupt elites are responsible for problems facing the heartland, the public is likely to coalesce together and penalize them at the ballot. The populist, in contrast, is likely to be rewarded. But this inclination toward populist parties may come with adverse consequences if the trend in other African countries is anything

to go by. Populists emphasize the people and representation; yet, when populists come to power, they develop a contempt for civil liberties and democratic institutions. Resnick (2019) argues that one of the most consequential outcomes of populist actors in governance is risk to democratic institutions that are perceived by populists as hindrances to the expression of sovereign will. For example, the populist Zambia candidate-turned-president Michael Sata undermined the judiciary, prevented the opposition from holding public rallies, clamped down on civil society, and closed independent newspapers (Resnick, 2019). Whether the same pattern of authoritarian governance will be seen in Kenya under a populist president remains to be seen, but it appears quite possible.

Framing Populism

Systematic analyses of published literature document the recognition of framing as a concept and its use in communication research (Borah, 2011). Borah's (2011) analysis of a decade's literature illustrates that framing theory continues to inspire research on various topics, themes, and contexts. Although we now have a comprehensive understanding of frame production, antecedents of frames, connections between framing and other cognitive media effects theories, as well as its effects on attitudes, framing theory continues to show its heuristic value in new frontiers. In the current case, I sought to "diagnose" the meanings associated with framing in Kenya.

I analyzed how the public and journalists construct populism by focusing on the recurring themes, emphasis, and wording. Notably, frames can be detected through the recurring themes as well as the salient wordings in a text. Hall (1975) posits that "the significant item may not be the one which continually recurs, but the one which stands out as an exception from the general pattern-but which is also given, in its exceptional

context, the greatest weight" (p. 15). In conceptual terms, my findings highlight the tensions and dichotomies between the journalistic interpretation of populism and the public understanding of the phenomenon.

My research demonstrated that ordinary Kenyans and cultural elites framed populism in largely positive terms. The convergence of public understanding of populism as a force for good by the Kenyan public seems to mirror the positive connotations carried by Latin American populism (see de la Torre, 2019). South American manifestation and understanding of populism carries with it an emancipative and empowering connotation, contrary to populism in Europe which is often portrayed as a threat to democracy (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012). Additionally, populist movements in Latin American usually focus on expanding and entrenching democratic procedures and outcomes (de la Torre, 2019). As such, populist movements are seen as inclusive and progressive in this region of the world. Indeed, the Kenyan public perceives and equally articulates the positive aspects of populism, including its liberating power, its revitalizing, and democratizing nature.

This research showed that journalists, however, painted a negative picture of populism through the editorials. Journalists resisted populism by calling out the charged and divisive populist rhetoric. These media professionals portrayed populism as a potentially malign force that may lead to polarization, and in some cases even fearmongering. As such, I argue that editorials served the political purpose of rebelling against populism, and thus, Kenyan journalists continue to play their social and political roles. However, this action was not pronounced or particularly extensive. If the media are to act as the knights of the prevailing democratic order by stifling the pervasiveness of

populist appeals, then future studies should interrogate how the media can protect the public from divisive populist agendas. Notably, the editorial stance(s) did not carry any significant positive framing of populism. However, the Kenyan public will expect more from the Kenyan press with calls for a more proactive approach including pushing fact-checking and media literacy to counter political charlatanism. This can be one way of re-imagining the potent influence of the media in truly informing the public, holding the political elites accountable, and thus, re-establishing its democratic potential.

Notably, some media contributors could see through the capricious and slippery nature of populist promises. Some members of the public deconstructed the populist discourse as a force that cheapen public debates overly simplifying public sues that may require intellectual nuance. Populism was described as ignoring the "real" problems and thus, populism is a foolish hope of appealing to the heart. Moreover, the populist portrayal of the prevailing political order as something elites have distorted to suit their selfish interests and thus, the need to bring the people directly into the center of the political process cunningly suggests that this is the panacea. Thus, some segments of the public denounced this form of charlatanism involving an apparent underplay of important governance elements such as crafting policies and building consensus, elements that are necessary to arrive at tangible solutions.

Theoretically, negative media framing may not be necessarily bad at all. Let me demonstrate this using three examples in different national contexts. Portuguese media are unsympathetic to appearance of political populism and criticize any appearance by equating it with overly emotional approach, simplicity, and simple-mindedness (Salgado & Zuquete, 2017). Consequently, Portuguese media have influenced how populism is

understood by the general public: it is viewed as a threat that may erode democratic gains. Overall, the media has curbed its spread (Salgado & Zuquete, 2017). In Sweden, however, the populist Social Democrats party received intense media attention which produced a positive effect on the party's poll numbers relative to those of other parties (Stromback et al. 2019). Media coverage of the Social Democrats, however, was negative. Similarly, the heightened media attention granted to the Swiss People's Party in Switzerland translated into the party with the greatest voter base (Esser et al., 2019). In the same manner, the party's media coverage was negative. The outcomes in Sweden and Switzerland suggest that the positive effect of increased media visibility can trump the negative effect of negative framing.

Looking at the Kenyan scenario, there was no extensive negative portrayal of populist rhetoric in the print media. However, the largely positive framing of the discourse by the Kenyan public may suggest that any amount of media visibility, framing notwithstanding, can influence public attitudes. Thus, future empirical studies will a more comprehensive picture of the intricacies of populist political communication in Kenyan politics and its effects on the citizens. Insights from political and media psychology will help us understand which demographic groups are more susceptible to persuasive populist rhetoric and which political and media variables play a role.

Furthermore, public and journalistic understanding of populism in Kenya reflects the polarized and inconsistent use of the concept in the current literature. On the one hand, populism has been conceptualized as a sign of demagoguery (Weyland, 2001), a pathology of democracy (Taggart, 2000), and described as sign of decline in democratic institutions (Rooduijn, 2018). On the other hand, however, some have argued that these

pejorative and disparaging connotations of populism and populist rhetoric are unfair (see Aslanidis, 2017)). Along this vein, another school of thought exists on the construction of populism. Some scholars perceive populism as a means to cure democratic malaise, give voice to the marginalized, and mobilize the political malaise constituents (Aslanidis, 2017; Weyland, 2021).

Populist conspiracism and political attitudes/behaviors

Despite the rising interest in conspiracy theories as a tool for advancing populist ideologies, there is a comparable lack of empirical research on their association and impact. The experiment in this study sought to contribute empirically toward addressing this gap by underscoring the entry of conspiracy theories into Kenyan populist political discourse. Content analysis revealed that conspiracy theories were a feature of Kenyan politics due to populists' conspiracism and growing prominence. The manipulation of these two concepts to interrogate their combined effect on political attitudes and behaviors did not, however, produce any significant results.

Previous studies have found that exposure to CTs tends to have a corrosive effect on public trust in institutions (Einstein & Click, 2015; Jolley & Douglas, 2014; Kim & Cao, 201; Mari et al., 2022; Uscinski et al., 2016) and produced mixed effects on political engagement (Butler et al., 1995; Imhoff & Bruder, 2014; Jolley & Douglas, 2014; Lewandowski et al., 2013, Uscinski & Parent, 2014). At the same time, studies have shown that exposure to and reception of anti-system messages can be detrimental to citizen's attitudes toward the democratic system (Bartlett & Miller, 2010; Hameleers et al., 2018; Rooduijn et al., 2016) and can stimulate political engagement (Hameleers et al., 2018; Imhoff & Bruder, 2014). Looking at the combined effects of these two concepts,

however, we see that they do not promote, nor do they inhibit trust in political institutions or intentions to engage in political activities in Kenya.

Above and beyond placing this study among an emerging body of literature that discusses links between populism and conspiracy theories, my findings confirm existing research regarding the moderating role of predispositions in media effects research (see Aalberg et al., 2017; Bos et al., 2013; Mathes & Schmuck, 2017; Uscinski et al., 2016; Zaller, 1992). Political knowledge significantly moderated the impact of exposure to populist conspiracies on political engagement. As such, this finding is consistent with "folk" wisdom that the less politically knowledgeable individuals may find populist rhetoric persuasive because "to complicate the issue is to obfuscate it, while to speak plainly is a hallmark of the trustworthy politician" (Stanley & Czesnik, 2022, p. 43). Additionally, it may also reinforce the argument that stems from the very nature of populism. Some scholars argue that populism relies on simplistic narratives that do offer intellectual nuance nor practical solutions to numerous problems facing the people (Moffit, 2018; Rooduijn, 2018). This argument further suggests that because populism is simple and unsophisticated, then populist elements and their supporters are equally simple and unsophisticated. We need more studies in future to tease out these links to provide a more nuanced understanding of political knowledge and populism.

Given that conspiracism is seen as a "populist theory of power" (Fenster, 2008, p.8) centering on "who has power and what they do with when no one can see" (Uscinski, 2019, p. 48), future research could examine the functional utility of conspiracism beyond electoral contests. Essentially, the next logical question would be: if populists utilize CTs to rise to power, do they also use CTs while in power? Are conspiratorial narratives still

relevant while populists are in power and/or running governments? Is populist conspiracism a means to rally the people, and regain, and sustain their support? Empirical investigations in this line would illuminate the particular functions that CTs serve in the populist playbook.

Limitations

The two studies making up this dissertation have some limitations. The content analysis involved only one form of media, newspapers. Future empirical endeavors may expand the analysis to include TV, online news, tabloids, and social media. Some have theorized that tabloids tend to favor populist sentiments because they align with their commercialized logic for sensational content relative to quality newspapers (Mazzoleni, 2008, 2003). Others have argued that commercial television (e.g., in Poland) tends to adopt an anti-elite communication style while actively rallying disenchanted people while promising them legitimate representation (Stepinska et al., 2017). Additionally, social media has provided platforms for populists to sidestep traditional media gatekeepers and directly communicate with sympathetic audiences (Engesser et al., 2017). Future studies should explore this increasingly growing link.

Second, the content analysis zoomed in on a relatively short period (6 months) and during an election season. The short period during the height of electoral campaigns—which are media spectacles—may lead to biased results because populist ideas could be salient during such periods. As such, there is a need to explore how media coverage of populism unravels during routine periods outside of election times and thus, provide a picture of the trends in coverage and development of populist communication over time. In line with this, future research may combine survey and experimental research with longitudinal designs for a systematic tracking down of populist

communication and media coverage of populist movements. Longitudinal analysis of individual-level media consumption and changes in attitudes and behaviors will illuminate our understanding of the complex nexus between populism, the media, and citizens.

Third, the experiment involved a single-message treatment. Although single-message experiments are beneficial (Hunter et al., 1989), single-message designs can lead to generalizability problems (Jackson & Jacobs, 1983) and confound messages and treatment (Slater, 1991). As such, Slater postulated that whereas multiple message designs may still have systematic confounds, this design helps to reduce the problems associated with a potential third variable. With such concerns in mind, future studies may conduct experiments with message replications that may provide greater consistent in the estimation of experimental effects.

Concluding Remarks

In a 2022 special issue regarding populism and global crises, editors (see Maher et al., 2022), bemoaned the dearth of research from the global south stating that "although many articles investigate cross-national differences, there is very little research from the global south. Instead, there is a Eurocentric element in this Special Issue, and we invite readers to consider this before generalizing the findings herein." (p. 825). I hope that despite the limitations discussed above, this dissertation has moved the needle toward a more comprehensive understanding of the nexus between media, populism, and the citizens in the global south.

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APPENDIX

Appendix A Survey Flow

Media use

1. How often do you get news from the following sources? (Nearly every day, a few times a week, a few times a month, less often, never)
    a. Television
    b. Print newspapers
    c. Online newspapers
    d. Radio
    e. Internet (e.g., Tuko.co.ke, Citizen Digital, KTN news digital).

2. i. How often do you get **political news** from the following newspapers in print format? (Nearly every day, a few times a week, a few times a month, less often, never)
    a. The Star
    b. The Standard
    c. The Daily Nation

ii. How often do you get **political news** from the following newspapers in a digital format? (**online)** (Nearly every day, a few times a week, a few times a month, less often)

a. The Star

b. The Standard

c. The Daily Nation

3. How often do you use each of the following social media platforms to follow **political news**? (Nearly every day, a few times a week, a few times a month, less often, never)

a. Facebook

b. Twitter

c. YouTube

d. Instagram

e. TikTok

Political Orientation

1. How interested would you say you are in politics?

a) Not at all interested

b) Not very interested

c) Somewhat interested

d) Very interested

e) Don't know

2. How much trust do you have in each of the following: The president, Members of Parliament, The electoral commission of Kenya, and the ruling party? (not at all, only a little, to some extent, rather very much, very much).

3. On political parties, people talk a lot about Azimio, Kenya Kwanza, or Independent.

   Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a supporter of:

   a. Azimio Coalition
   b. Independent
   c. Kenya Kwanza Coalition
   d. Not supporting any coalition [skip to 3 if this is selected]

b. Based on your response above, please indicate how you identify:

   i. Strong Kenya Kwanza

   ii. Weak Kenya Kwanza,

   iii. Independent leaning Kenya Kwanza

   iv. Independent

   v. Independent leaning Azimio

   vi.Weak Azimio

   vii. Strong Azimio

4. How often do you discuss politics and current with friends, family, or acquaintances? (Always, very frequently, occasionally, rarely, very rarely, Never)

5. Please indicate whether you strongly agree, agree, neither agree or disagree, disagree, or strongly disagree with the following statements

    a. Politicians are honest with the media and the public

    b. Politicians look out for the interests of the public before they look out for their own interests

    c. Politicians lose touch with life in the real world after they are elected

    d. I'm frustrated with the way the government works

    e. I'm disgusted with politics in this country

    f. I'm satisfied with the way the government works

The following questions asks about your understanding of Kenyan politics

6. Which branch of government has the final responsibility to determine if a law is constitutional or not?
7. Do you happen to know which party has the most members in the National Assembly?
8. How much of a majority is required for the National Assembly to impeach the president?"
9. Which politician coalition favors the bottom—up economic model (Correct = Kenya Kwanza)

Now think about the current political office holders and select the best answer. If you don't know the answer to a question, simply select the 'Don't Know' response.

a. What office does Martha Koome hold? (correct = Chief Justice)

a. What office does Amason Kingi hold? (correct = Speaker of the Senate)

b. Do you happen to know what job or political office is now held by Musalia Mudavadi? (correct, prime cabinet secretary)

Demographic questions

1. How do you identify?
    - Male
    - Female
    - Prefer to self—describe
    - I do not wish to disclose
2. What year were you born? _____
3. What is your ethnicity? _____
4. Please indicate your highest level of achieved so far
    - High school
    - Diploma
    - Bachelor's or its equivalent (CPA, CPS, etc.)
    - Master's
    - Ph.D.
5. Thinking back over the last year, what was your family's monthly income?
    a. Less than Kshs. 50, 000

b. Kshs. 50, 000—80,000

c. Kshs. 80,000—110,000

d. Kshs. 110,000—150,000

e. Kshs. 150,000—200,000

f. Over Khs. 200,000

EXPERIMENTAL CONDITION (Appendix B & C)

Please read the following news articles and then click on the arrow to continue. You will be able to click after 30 seconds, please take some time to read the article.

Political trust

The following section asks about your confidence in political actors and institutions. How much trust do you have in each of the following? (none at all, a little, a moderate amount, a lot, a great deal)

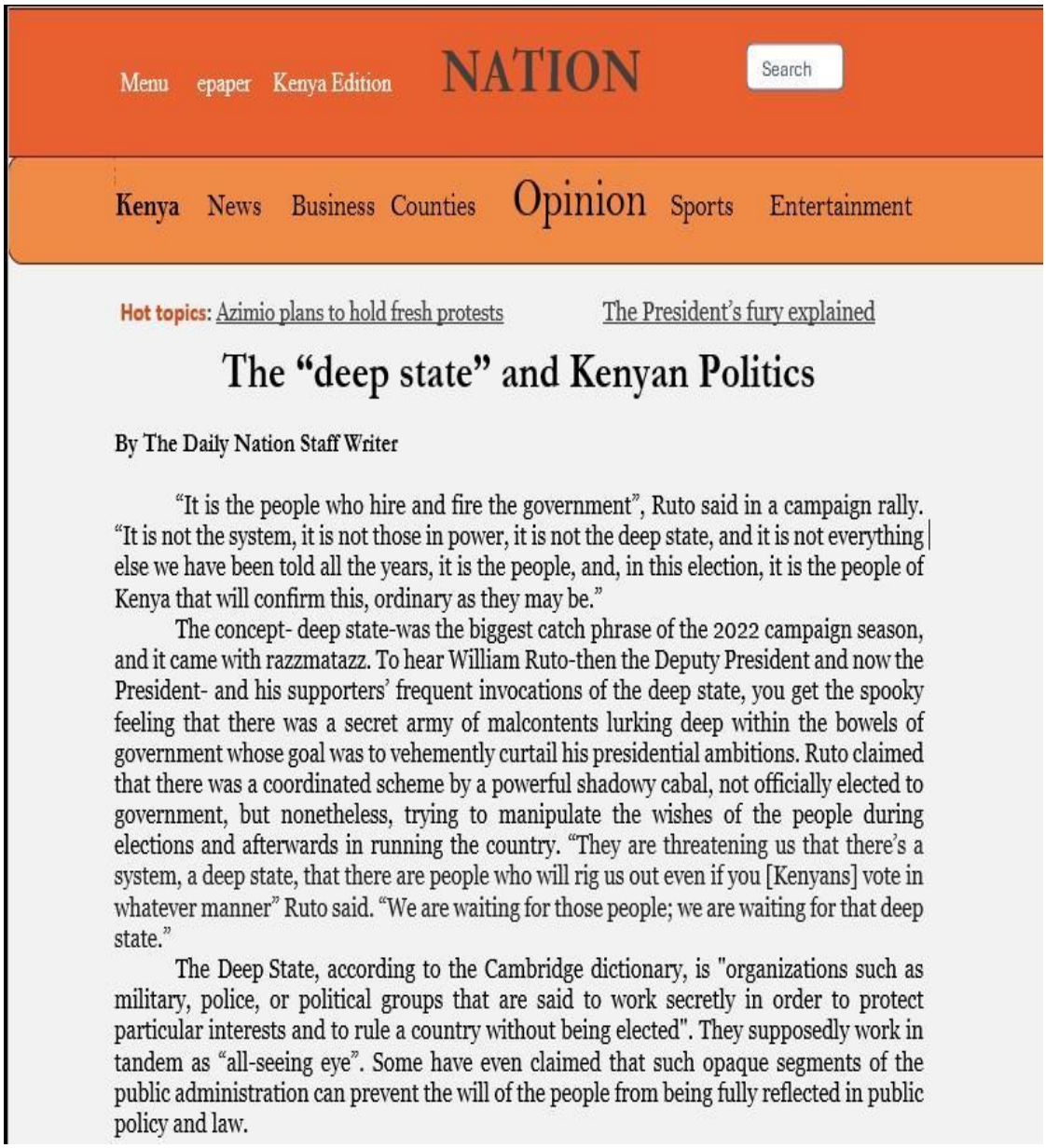
- The president
- Members of parliament
- The electoral commission
- Kenya Kwanza Coalition

Political Engagement

Let's talk about involvement in political activities. How likely are you to engage in the following political activities? (extremely likely, somewhat likely, neither likely or unlikely, somewhat likely, extremely likely)

- Attend a campaign/political rally
- Work for a political candidate or party
- Contact an elected official
- Persuade others to voter for a certain candidate or party
- Join others to request government action
- Participate in a demonstration or protest

Appendix B- Experimental condition (populist conspiracy)



Menu epaper Kenya Edition **NATION** Search

Kenya News Business Counties **Opinion** Sports Entertainment

Hot topics: Azimio plans to hold fresh protests The President's fury explained

The "deep state" and Kenyan Politics

By The Daily Nation Staff Writer

"It is the people who hire and fire the government", Ruto said in a campaign rally. "It is not the system, it is not those in power, it is not the deep state, and it is not everything else we have been told all the years, it is the people, and, in this election, it is the people of Kenya that will confirm this, ordinary as they may be."

The concept- deep state-was the biggest catch phrase of the 2022 campaign season, and it came with razzmatazz. To hear William Ruto-then the Deputy President and now the President- and his supporters' frequent invocations of the deep state, you get the spooky feeling that there was a secret army of malcontents lurking deep within the bowels of government whose goal was to vehemently curtail his presidential ambitions. Ruto claimed that there was a coordinated scheme by a powerful shadowy cabal, not officially elected to government, but nonetheless, trying to manipulate the wishes of the people during elections and afterwards in running the country. "They are threatening us that there's a system, a deep state, that there are people who will rig us out even if you [Kenyans] vote in whatever manner" Ruto said. "We are waiting for those people; we are waiting for that deep state."

The Deep State, according to the Cambridge dictionary, is "organizations such as military, police, or political groups that are said to work secretly in order to protect particular interests and to rule a country without being elected". They supposedly work in tandem as "all-seeing eye". Some have even claimed that such opaque segments of the public administration can prevent the will of the people from being fully reflected in public policy and law.

Appendix C-Experimental condition (No populist conspiracy)

Menu epaper Kenya Edition NATION Search

Kenya News Business Counties Opinion Sports Entertainment

Hot topics: Azimio plans to hold fresh protests The President's fury explained

The "People" and Kenyan Politics

By The Daily Nation Staff Writer

"WE ARE GOING TO CHANGE this Conversation', William Ruto tells a crowd in Nairobi's Dagoretti suburb in 2022. 'It is not going to be about "tribes". It is not going to be about leaders. It's not going to be about power. It's not going to be about positions," He paused. "It is going to be about the hustlers – the ordinary people! It is going to be about enterprise – the wheelbarrow conversation. It is going to be about jobs, for ordinary people! We want a united, inclusive society where even the ordinary, even the wheelbarrow guy is part of the conversation in Kenya!' The crowd erupted in jubilation.

The words of William Ruto on the campaign trail in 2022 captured the stakes of the 2022 election as he made his appeal to 'the hustlers', a prominent social and political identity that many Kenyans have come to claim. Ruto's words, spoken with a sense of razzmatazz, addressed a broad spectrum of young Kenyans who have found their pathways towards adulthood, independence and self-accomplishment obstructed by a lack of economic opportunity.

The Hustler narrative cut to the bone especially when delivered in a powerful. When he talks to a crowd, words turn into something else. They float and gain a life of its own, hanging over the listeners like pregnant clouds. His loyal followers-the hustlers-often hang onto his words with religious dedication. He can deliver speeches with excellent oratory he has mastered.

Appendix D- IRB /HUMAN SUBJECTS APPROVAL

Institutional Review Board
210H Hullihen Hall
Newark, DE 19716
Phone: 302-831-2137
Fax: 302-831-2828

DATE:	August 25, 2023
TO:	Gilbert Kipkoech
FROM:	University of Delaware IRB
STUDY TITLE:	[2088668-1] Assessing the influence of exposure to populist communication on political attitudes
SUBMISSION TYPE:	New Project
ACTION:	DETERMINATION OF EXEMPT STATUS
EFFECTIVE DATE:	August 25, 2023
REVIEW CATEGORY:	Exemption category # *(2)*

Thank you for your New Project submission to the University of Delaware Institutional Review Board (UD IRB). According to the pertinent regulations, the UD IRB has determined this project is EXEMPT from most federal policy requirements for the protection of human subjects. The privacy of subjects and the confidentiality of participants must be safeguarded as prescribed in the reviewed protocol form.

This exempt determination is valid for the research study as described by the documents in this submission. Proposed revisions to previously approved procedures and documents that may affect this exempt determination must be reviewed and approved by this office prior to initiation. The UD amendment form must be used to request the review of changes that may substantially change the study design or data collected.

Unanticipated problems and serious adverse events involving risk to participants must be reported to this office in a timely fashion according with the UD requirements for reportable events.

A copy of this correspondence will be kept on file by our office. If you have any questions, please contact the UD IRB Office at (302) 831-2137 or via email at hsrb-research@udel.edu. Please include the study title and reference number in all correspondence with this office.

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD