

The Populist Name Game: About Populism and Naming

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Abstract

For populist leaders, naming is an important political tool, helping them to consolidate their leadership while harming the legitimacy of their opponents. The article offers a theoretical framework explaining populist tactical uses of naming; how they name and misname their opponents. The explanation locates the naming tactics within the overall populist framework as a thin-centered ideology. The following three naming tactics are described and analyzed: (1) coining ridiculing nicknames, (2) appropriating existing nicknames, and (3) avoiding the opponent's name.

To substantiate the theoretical arguments, we discursively analyze these three tactics, as were employed by the former US president, Donald Trump, the prime minister of Israel, Binyamin Netanyahu, and the president of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin.

Keywords

populism, naming, discourse analysis, Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin

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Introduction

What are we without our names? Names, after all, represent and convey our identity to others. Yet, rarely, if ever, do we stop to think about our names—because we take them for granted. Naming becomes an issue when a group or individual decides to ridicule or humiliate another and tags them with a name that degrades them. In general, this is not an uncommon experience, though it mostly occurs in childhood. Conversely, we may be given names or nicknames that signify affection and warmth. However, at some point, a nickname will be normally shed, although it may be embraced and adopted as a semi-official name and identity. As adults, if we become tagged with a name we disapprove of, it may feel like naming appropriation in which we are robbed of our real name, causing a sense of social diminishment. It is precisely the public belittlement involved in misnaming that attracts populist politicians to use it when referencing opponents. Populists wield naming and misnaming as a political tool and perhaps a political weapon in order to gain the upper hand over their rivals.

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This article suggests a theoretical framework that can explain populist naming tactics while contextualizing them within the overall populist framework as a thin-centered ideology (Mudde, 2004). The following three naming tactics are described: (1) coining ridiculing nicknames, (2) appropriating existing nicknames, and (3) avoiding the opponent's name. These tactics all reflect the populist reasoning of leaders wishing to represent populist ideals and become the authentic voice of the people—by addressing their electorates in “leveling” and “common” speech, trying to create an impression of masculinity and being one of the people, and by distancing themselves from an allegedly corrupt elite and an unworthy establishment. The use of speech and naming in order to degrade and diminish their rivals serves all of these political maneuverings.

The following pages contain a discursive analysis of these three tactics which were used (and are still being used) by three populist leaders: the former US president, Donald Trump (Inglehart and Norris, 2016), the prime minister of Israel, Binyamin Netanyahu (Leslie, 2017), and the president of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin (Mamonova, 2021). The analysis examines written and spoken discourses in the source languages (English, Hebrew, and Russian). These three leaders were chosen because they represent different nations, different political cultures and structures, and different languages, and because each exhibits a different version of populism, hence allowing us a comparison and gaining a fuller understanding of the populist toolbox.

In order to compare the three leaders, we have examined them during the most volatile periods of their office: at election times in the US and Israel and during protest waves in Russia. We have focused on the elections (or the equivalent, namely the protests) while the leaders were in power since elections are a unique challenge for the populist leader, who both strives to portray himself as an outsider, as outside “the elite,” while at the same time enjoying power, which one might think would weaken his populist case. This challenge of trying to be an outsider while actually being an insider prompts the populist leader to use his political and populist toolbox to the full, including the use of naming tactics. Therefore, for Trump, we will focus on the 2020 election campaign, for Netanyahu, we will focus on the 2015 election campaign, and for Putin, we will focus on the protest waves in Russia in 2018 and 2020 which were the closest thing to substantial threat to Putin's rule, a challenge which would not normally have arisen at the voting booth.

In Trump's case, we focused our analyses on his speeches immediately before the 2020 elections, and in Netanyahu's case, we focused on his 2015 campaign, including speeches and interviews before the elections. Both candidates' speeches were screened for references to their opponents. In Putin's case, due to the specific nature of his avoidance tactic and the need to establish the absence of reference, we analyzed the full content of 39 different public speeches and appearances during the protest waves. In all three candidates' cases, we focused on their speeches and appearances immediately before the elections or the peak period of the protest waves (a period of 3 months). We specifically targeted those politically critical moments when leaders are at their most volatile and hence are sharpest in terms of their discursive tactics.

The article shows how the three leaders use three different naming tactics and explains the rationale for each tactic. The first section is a theoretical framework that discusses the politics of naming, and those rhetorical assets of naming that draw populist leaders to use it against their contenders. Armed with this theoretical framework, we then proceed to the empirical section, “Findings”, which discursively analyzes each of the populist leaders and their tactics. We then move to discuss the findings and conclude the article by raising questions for further research.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework consists of two sections. The first offers an analysis of the rhetorical assets in the practice of naming and the politics behind naming. The second section examines populism, focusing on those characters that are relevant to our study of naming and populism, and closing by depicting the three populist naming tactics analyzed in the findings chapter.

Naming

What are we without our names? Names represent and convey our identity to others. Yet, rarely, if ever, do we stop to think about our names—we take them for granted, forgetting that behind their private aura, there are hidden public, even political ramifications. Names signify not only personal identity. They also convey and signify ethnic and national identities, and quite often religious ones. More often than not, naming practices follow different generations and temporal customs and can also convey political affiliations. An example of this is naming offspring after admired political (or cultural and national) figures (Kulakowski et al., 2016). Often, at the risk of generalization, a person's name can reveal quite a lot: ethnic origin (Ahmed vs Cheng), gender (Miriam vs Hans), religious affiliation of her parents (Christiana vs Osnat), approximate age (e.g. Gladys and Cecil are unlikely to be Gen-Z), and often certain social traits, such as socio-economic status (Fryer and Levitt, 2004). Names, then, are not merely personal particulars, they are carriers of social categories. Moreover, and as shown below, they can also be powerful political apparatuses as well as sites of domination, resistance, and contestation.

Not surprisingly, the public and political aspects of names are quite often rather hidden from the public eye. Pierre Bourdieu argued that naming is a component of social construction, and as such involves social magic. For Stefano Guzzini (2013), this means “the attempt to make things become reality by giving them a name (‘nominating’ them) and succeeding in the imposition of this new vision and division of social reality” (see also Adler-Nissen). The idea of labeling naming “social magic” aims to stress that the actions of the nominating agent are wrongly perceived as natural rather than political (Adler-Nissen, 2013: 9). This observation is related to the Bourdieusian understanding that within established fields knowledge, epistemic practices such as naming are doxic and unreflectively taken for granted (Poulio and Mérand, 2013).

There is another theoretical route to understanding the perceived naturality (and neutrality) of naming, which emerges when naming is compared with classification. Both naming and classifying are bounding practices, namely acts and processes of delineating categories from each other (Ish-Shalom, 2019). As such, both are essential for human thinking and communication (see also Guzzini, 2005). However, naming takes place in the private domain whereas classifying is a public act. Classifying is an act of broadening and generalizing. It is the relating of one event or entity to a larger class of events or entities (“George is a human being”). Naming is the obverse process. It is an act of narrowing and specifying, involving the delineation and marking off a specific event or entity from a larger class of events or entities (“This human being is George”). Consequently, classification as generalization is more official and publicly oriented, whereas naming as specifying is more informal and privately oriented. A state must engage in classification. For example, law, as the domain of general and public categories, cannot function without the generalization of classification. And so is the case with policies, which normally are

supposed to be generally applicable, and therefore rely on relating one event or entity to a larger class of events or entities. However, people need naming to establish social links and personal attachments. Hence, names are supposedly private and arguably mark the personal space where negative liberty reigns and politics has no say.

Notwithstanding this public understanding of names and naming as private properties and acts, Cultural Geography has turned the spotlight on naming, highlighting it as a political process of domination or resistance (see, for example, Azaryahu, 1986, 1996; Cohen and Kliot, 1992; Herman, 1999; Kearns and Berg, 2002; Rose-Redwood, 2008). And indeed, naming is no longer seen as a neutrally natural process but as a political act of appropriation, inclusion, and exclusion, as well as contestation and resistance. To name a place might be a manifestation of power relations and/or the declaration of resisting the existing power relations.

A case in point is Mount McKinley and its renaming as Denali in 2015 by President Barack Obama, in an effort to rectify past exploitation and cultural imperialism. In 1896, this mountain, which is the highest peak in the United States, was named after the presidential contender and later president, William McKinley, thereby erasing its original Native American name, Denali. This was a blunt act of colonial appropriation and obliteration of local Native American heritage and it is no surprise that President Obama understood that the act of restoring the name Denali was important for acknowledging and rectifying past mistreatments. Yet, the process was toilsome and politically taxing. The act of renaming started in 1975, when the whole surrounding park was named Denali National Park and Preserve, leaving only the mountain's name as an unrectified wound. Powerful political resistance from Ohio, where McKinley was born, blocked the renaming of the mountain itself until President Obama threw his political will and resources behind the plan (Ish-Shalom, 2019). Politics is part and parcel of naming (and renaming) a public monument.

Another naming issue concerns the names of the territory captured by Israel in 1967 or the names of areas in war-torn eastern Ukraine (Suslov, 2017). In the context of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, the names of the territories that Israel captured range from Judea and Samaria (which encapsulates Israel's claimed historical relationship between this region, the Jewish people, and the Old Testament) to Occupied Territories (highlighting the territories' illegitimate status). The controversies over the naming of these territories reflect two dichotomous ideological and historical world-views which produce different answers regarding what is or is not legitimate. We find the same situation in eastern Ukraine, where supporters of the separatist forces refer to the war-torn territories as Novorossiia (new Russia) to stress the claimed legitimacy of pro-Russian separatists.

Geographical naming and renaming disputes involve commemoration (Alderman, 2000; Azaryahu, 2012a; Brocket, 2021; Tretter, 2011), symbolic solidarity (Gnatiuk and Basik, 2023) diplomatic insult (Birnbau, 2023), gift giving (Sysiö et al., 2023), spatial domination (Hui, 2019; Wanjiu-Mwita and Giraut, 2020), contestation over territory or a colonial past (Koopman, 2012; Manatsha, 2014; Rose-Redwood, 2016; Saparov, 2023; Short and Dubots, 2022; Tucker and Rose-Redwood, 2015; Wu and Young, 2023), attempts to break from the past as in post-Nazi (Azaryahu, 1986, 2012b) and post-Soviet Europe (Bekus, 2023; Crețan and Matthews, 2016; Kovalov, 2022; Lazarenko, 2022; Light, 2004; Różycki, 2017), legitimization efforts (Madden, 2018; Mamvura, 2021), construction of national identity (Rajić, 2012), or representative of alienating gender politics (Nash, 1993; Rusu, 2022). There are also debates over the naming of historical events and military operations

(Ish-Shalom, 2011) and how these should be translated, for example, the debate over the naming of Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip in 2005, which eventually became known as the "Israeli disengagement" (Ayyad, 2023; Makoni et al., 2010) or even personal names (Chala and Gutama, 2019). Different discursive and naming approaches can also serve as symbolic defamation or denigration of places (Schwarze, 2022).

Research has shown that populist leaders also exploit the act of naming/renaming of spatial objects for political ends. Erdogan in Turkey (Ghulyan, 2019; Mişe, 2022) and Modi in India (Huju, 2022; Plagemann and Destradi, 2019; Rubdy, 2021; Singh, 2019; Sundar, 2023; Zia, 2022) actively promoted renaming locations and national monuments to consolidate their rule and increase support for their nationalistic agendas.

Heated political disputes arise in a whole spectrum of contemporary phenomena. They arose over the question of climate change and Europe's refugee crisis (Sigona, 2018), and in the naming of ethnic minorities (Mourad, 2021). Quite often, in the context of the politics of identity and the political struggle for equality in multiethnic societies, there is a growing demand by an identity group to own their naming. A good example of this is the road taken in the self-naming process of the African American and Native American communities, reflecting their journey toward self-emancipation (rejection of the term "Negro" during the second half of the twentieth century in favor of "Black" and "African American" (Martin, 1991)).

These insights regarding public monuments and spatial spaces also apply to the naming of people. Contrary to their personal appearance, individual's names are seldom private, nor purely personal and neutral. They rely on and resonate cultural and political significance and also function as the individual's public gateways. Names are an essential condition for granting and being granted recognition. They can therefore be highly political, and sites for contestation, and it is these features of names that make them an interesting subject for political research. Think of degradation. In general, degradation by naming names is not an uncommon experience, though it mostly occurs in childhood (Miceli and Castelfranchi, 2018). But as the analysis offered here demonstrates, degradation is not limited to childhood. It is a powerful political tactic, especially in our populist era, when naming is used to rob contenders of their real names, while expropriating recognition and political legitimacy, and engendering feelings of social diminishment. It is upon this phenomenon, of populist degrading naming, that we will focus. But first, let us explore populism and its features that make it politically special, and consider what motivates populist leaders to use naming as a political tool.

Populism

Notwithstanding the contested nature of populism, or probably because of it, one of the more widely embraced definitions of populism was advanced by Cas Mudde (2014), who adopts a minimal common denominator approach, and describes 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 argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people" (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018). As such populism has two key principles: anti-elitism and anti-pluralism (Destradi et al., 2021), which are manifested as a confrontation between the allegedly authentic and "ordinary people" and a corrupt and corrupting elite, which is the nemesis of the people. Other studies rightly emphasize the role of the strong leader, who leads the struggle against the elite while harnessing that struggle to gain

public support, and around whom a personality cult coalesces (Gidron and Hall, 2017; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018; Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012; Wajner, 2021). Thus, a large part of populism is a battle between “us” versus “them,” with confrontational politics centered around this foundational struggle.

The fact that populism is ideologically thin-centered can be a powerful tool that allows it to be grafted readily onto other ideologies (Mudde, 2004). The “thinness” of populism means that parties with a similar populist core can have different political ideologies. In fact, populism occurs across the entire spectrum of ideologies from left to right (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2013). Being “thin-centered,” populism also gives populist leaders a high degree of maneuverability. The nemesis, the “corrupted elite,” resembles the empty signifier (Laclau, 1996; Mitrani, 2021), allowing it to act as a sponge and absorb transient content according to the political needs of the populist politicians (Mudde, 2004) as they target courts, academia, political opponents, media, and so on (Mudde, 2004).

This last point on the maneuverability and flexibility of populism is very relevant to this research. Populist leaders can fill the “empty jar” (“the elite”) with new enemies in line with the populist leader’s calculated strategic decision to avoid specifying who is part of “the people” and who is part of “the elite.” Using the foundational struggle between the unspecified “people” and the unspecified “elite,” the leader, whose aim is to appear as a manifestation of the will of the people, can blame the fuzzy and shady forces of the elite for preventing the leader’s progress. In other words, the populist leader changes his scare-crows according to his transient needs (Mudde, 2004).

Populism benefits from social media (Engesser et al., 2017) and from the spread of information, which facilitates the spread of fake news (Gonawela et al., 2018). These social and technological changes have made it easier to portray the elite as corrupt and hypocritical (in some cases also to publish information that the traditional media may have refused to publish in the past; Engesser et al., 2017). The populist leaders’ efforts to deride “the elite” also often involve sidelining the traditional media and trying to outflank it by addressing the public through social media (Engesser et al., 2017; a good example of this was Vladimir Zelensky’s use of the social media in the 2019 Ukrainian presidential election and how Trump used it in the 2016 presidential election; Varshalomidze, 2019). Their extensive use of social media allows populist politicians to bypass the traditional media (with their fact-checking procedures and ethics) and speak directly and without censorship to “the people.” Social media is even more prone to “sound bites” than the traditional media and encourages shorter, catchier slogans, nicknames, and ad-hominem attacks, while aiming for “viral” exposure (Engesser et al., 2017). Social media are particularly useful for populist politicians who are often outsiders to the political establishment (e.g. Trump in his campaign in the Republican Party). Thus, populist politicians do well to enlist the less traditional channels of communication and use more provocative rhetorical tactics in order to gain media and public attention (Bartlett, 2014).

Such rhetorical tactics help them to project an image of strong representatives of the “true” and “authentic” voice of the people. Accordingly, they take pains to address their electorate in a “leveling” manner, using the language of the man and woman in the street to show they are on a level with their audience. For some, the goal is a strong “masculine” persona and to express the difference between them and the despised, corrupt elite. They would like to be seen as “outsiders,” as an anti-establishment power. By the same token, they want voters to regard their opponents as the obverse of popular ideals and so describe them disparagingly. Speech and naming tactics are part of their toolbox in this political maneuvering.

The direct target of the populist naming-ridicule is the opposition leadership. This is somewhat different from the usual practice in democratic politics and campaigning in which politicians try to show how different they are from each other. Populist politicians endeavor to show that they are different—not from a specific political opponent but from the establishment in general and from society’s mainstream practices and norms. Second, populist leaders challenge not only specific weaknesses in their opponents, but their entire legitimacy as candidates for high office. They do this through portrayal of their rivals as antagonistic to the people’s will and hence illegitimate. Populist campaigning is thus not about contestation but about neutralizing and delegitimizing every shred of opposition and dissent.

Naming tactics pursue different objectives to achieve the same central goal of delegitimizing the opponents: (1) to show the leader’s “simplicity,” “common” touch, and closeness to the people; (2) to create an anti-establishment position; (3) to implicitly deny the legitimacy of their opponent (who represents the corrupt elite); (4) to stress their unwillingness to “play by the rules” set by the elites; (5) to stress that their political rivals are not “one of us” but represent the corrupt elite.

In the “Findings” section, we will follow three such tactics, each pursuing some or all of these objectives. The first tactic is through ridicule and the misnaming or coining of a belittling nickname for opponents. Clear examples are the epithets applied by President Trump to his opponents: Sleepy Joe (Biden) and Crooked Hillary (Clinton). The second tactic is calling an opponent by an existing nickname, which, in a non-political context would be a neutral name, but when used politically can be very damaging, resonating as having negative characters, thus delegitimizing the opponent for the high office. As will be demonstrated below, Netanyahu excelled in this tactic, using it effectively against his two opponents: Isaac “Bougie” Herzog and Tziporah “Tzipi” Livni. The third naming tactic is avoidance, thus ignoring the individual qualities of the opponents, obliterating them as legitimate candidates. This route was taken by Putin.

Findings

We proceed now to the “Findings” section, in which we will analyze empirically and discursively three populist leaders and the naming tactics they embraced to delegitimize their contenders. First, there is Donald Trump and his coining of ridiculing nicknames. Second, there is Benjamin Netanyahu and the way he appropriates existing nicknames, using them to belittle his competitors, and finally, Vladimir Putin and the avoidance of using his opponents’ names.

Coining Nicknames: Donald J. Trump

Trump’s favorite tactic for addressing his political rivals is ridicule. This involves misnaming or creating novel nicknames for his opponents. In his rallies and speeches, Trump often used humor to ridicule others, his “performances” sometimes reminiscent of stand-up. For instance, when Mark Bloomberg ran in the Democratic primaries, Trump kept referring to him as “Mini-Mike” ridiculing his height (and highlighting the disparity of height between the two; Moore, 2020). At the 2020 Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC), Trump (2020a) did not suffice with calling Bloomberg “Mini-Mike” but for comic effect and to uproarious laughter and loud applause, he squatted behind the podium to show that Bloomberg was “small.” Minutes later, he also targeted Elizabeth

Warren, mocking her claim of Indian heritage by calling her “Pocahontas,” adding, “I have less Indian blood in me than she has, and I have none” (Trump, 2020a).

During his presidency, Trump used this tactic often. Even after election, he carried on calling Hillary Clinton “Crooked-Hillary” and continued using all manner of nicknames to belittle his political rivals. For example, when addressing the Senate following his acquittal in the impeachment trial, he referred to Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer as “Crying-Chuck” (Kirby, 2020), moving to “Crooked-Hillary,” “Crazy-Pocahontas,” and called candidate Mayor Buttigieg, “Mayor Pete,” commenting derisively that “no one” can pronounce his last name (Trump, 2019). In the same speech, Trump addressed the Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi, as “Crazy Nancy Pelosi” and called Joe Biden, the subsequent Democratic Party’s candidate, “Sleepy Joe,” which became a kind of a battle cry when the latter won the Democratic nomination and became Trump’s (2019) opponent.

Two addresses by Trump during his second campaign (while in office) exemplify his tactic of ridiculing rivals with the derisory nicknames he coined. Both speeches were delivered in front of Trump supporters in the crowd and on stage. The rallies also included GOP representatives. It is difficult to assess the actual number of supporters present but Trump and his team claimed it was high, especially compared to Biden’s. Some local news put the number of attendees as high as 5000 (Holzmann and Falsone, 2020) and 15,000 (Pynakker, 2020), respectively. Both rallies were held close to election day on which Trump (2020b, 2020c) would face the Democratic party candidate, Joe Biden. The first rally took place in Allentown, Pennsylvania and the second in Bullhead City, Arizona. These two addresses are important for us as they show Trump at an extremely decisive and unpredictable moment. After 4 years in power, Trump was now facing the moment of truth and the threat of losing this valuable prize. Importantly, he was still in office, possibly the most powerful office in the world—and at the apex of the very elite pyramid to which he clearly belonged. It would seem not to be a very auspicious position from which to attack the country’s elite. However, by continuing to use the ridiculing language and naming tactic, Trump was sending a clear message to his audience that he was still a man of the people which he claimed was under attack from some an (imaginary) Other—the Elite. It is for this reason that Trump’s addresses during his second campaign are so important, and these two addresses, which are rich in nicknames, are both characteristic of Trump and very telling.

In his speech to the campaign rally in Allentown, PA, 8 days before the election Trump pounded his rivals with derogatory nicknames. He fired the first “Sleepy Joe Biden” nickname only seconds into the speech. In order to impress upon his audience the dangerous liberalism of Biden’s running mate, Kamala Harris, Trump used the “Crazy Bernie” nickname, which he borrowed from his first campaign, in order to link Harris to Sanders, the candidate who symbolized for the right the dangerous radicalism of the Democrats. In Allentown, he used the “Crazy Nancy” nickname to describe Nancy Pelosi and referred to representative Adam Schiff as “Shifty Schiff.” But, he reserved his worst rhetorical missiles for his main rival, Biden, pounding away with the most deprecating epithet:

. . . in the national poll we’re leading against Sleepy Joe Biden, we’re leading. And that’s a Rasmussen poll. Head to head. No, we’re leading head to head against Sleepy Joe . . . Sleepy Joe has betrayed Pennsylvania . . . President Xi from China, President Putin from Russia, Kim Jong-Un, North Korea, and I could name forty others. They’re sharp as a tack. They don’t want to deal with Sleepy Joe . . . Sleepy Joe wants to keep the whole country in lockdown . . . Does China want Sleepy Joe to win? They own him. They own Sleepy Joe.

Trump refers to Biden as “Sleepy Joe” or “Sleepy Joe Biden” 17 times. What is more, in an effort to establish transference between Biden and his nickname in the audience’s mind, Trump explains the “rationale” for the nickname. He mentions a foreign leader who did not wish to have to work with Biden, because, “. . . as the leader said, Well, I hope you win because we don’t want to deal with somebody that sleeps all the time.”

When comparing his own ability to deal with the pandemic compared with Biden’s, he invoked another nickname to undermine Biden, “1% Joe,” which was brilliantly tailored to the issue at hand:

his chief of staff said that . . . they were grossly incompetent, they had no idea what to do, and now they’re telling us how to handle a much more lethal problem. Amazing. I wonder if that chief of staff is still around, he probably said it when he assumed Joe couldn’t win. When Joe ran, because he was always 1% Joe, we used to call him 1% Joe

Two days later, Trump led a rally in Bullhead City, AZ, where he continued to bludgeon with these customized nicknames. Again, he invoked the “Crooked Hillary,” name, but his main focus was on Biden:

A vote for Sleepy Joe Biden, and he is a sleepy guy . . . Sleepy Joe Biden, with all the corruption, all the theft . . . she was a lot smarter than Sleepy Joe . . . He had about 20 people there. Barack Hussein. Which was about 10 people more than Sleepy Joe had yesterday . . . With Sleepy Joe, there’d be no graduations, no weddings, no Thanksgiving . . . I don’t think Sleepy Joe would be a good fighter. Do you?. . . if you had Sleepy Joe as your president, it would have taken you four years to have a vaccine . . . And I am not liked very much by those drug companies. So, when you see those ads, one after another, they make Sleepy Joe look like peanuts compared to the drug companies.

In the speech, Trump calls Biden “Sleepy Joe” or “Sleepy Joe Biden” 13 times and again tries to connect Biden with fatigue and weakness. He tells his old story about the foreign leader who thought Biden seemed sleepy which he bolstered by agreeing with it himself, saying explicitly “. . . and he {Biden} is a sleepy guy.” He then proceeds to make to other allegations, connecting Biden and the Democratic Party with “big tech,” the “fake news media,” and involvement in “tremendous corruption” tied to big Silicon Valley money, namely the financial elite. Second, with reference to Dana White, the president of the mixed martial arts Ultimate Fighting Championship, who was at the rally, Trump, not only criticized Biden’s political abilities but also his physical chops,

But Sleepy Joe, I don’t think Sleepy Joe would be a good fighter. Do you? I asked Dana before. One gentle little touch to the face and he’s down. He’s down and he wouldn’t get up very quickly either, would he?

By naming Biden “Sleepy Joe,” Trump not only tries to contrast his own vitality with Biden’s ostensible sluggishness but also queries his fitness for president. Note that although the United States has no upper cap on the age of the president, older candidates are vulnerable to attack because of their age and mental and physical stamina and partly because in the American system, the vice president automatically assumes office if the president dies. This is a very attractive rhetorical song for a populist politician to

sing as the (not too) subtle argument is not only that the contender represents the elite and not the people, but worse than that he could well die in office and be succeeded by an unelected president with less claim to represent the people's will.

Trump also implies that as a sleepy weakling president, Biden would be too dozy to resist the attempts of an unelected elite to influence and co-opt him to their own sectorial agenda and interests. He hints that Biden would be inept and ineffectual, scarcely more than a puppet serving a corrupt and treacherous elite which is against the authentic American people.

Appropriating Nicknames: Benjamin Netanyahu

The prime minister of Israel, Benjamin "Bibi" Netanyahu, often uses the second, tailored tactic in order to lambast his rivals. When running against Isaac "Bougie" Herzog and Tziporah "Tzipi" Livni, he constantly used their nicknames in an effort to contrast them sharply with himself and underscore their unfitness for office. He positions himself as a politician whose life's mission is to protect the state of Israel. With his deep masculine baritone, he poked fun at Livni and Herzog, whom he portrayed as ineffectual and, in Herzog's case, even feminine, politicians, incapable of defending Israel's security. The naming tactic that Netanyahu used was driven by popular Israeli social, political, and cultural conventions. Thus, when Netanyahu points to Livni's womanhood, he is referencing common historical chauvinistic and militaristic thinking in Israeli society, implicitly holding the fact that she was a woman against her, maintaining that she lacks the masculine nerve and coolheadedness needed to face grave security challenges. Using the name *Tzipi*, the diminutive form of *tzipor*, meaning "bird" in Hebrew, was highly instrumental for conjuring someone who is lightweight, feminine, defenseless. A seminal example arose toward the end of the campaign. In a sensible and rational move, Livni announced that she would waive her rotation agreement with Herzog in order to reassure the sizable floating vote. Reacting to this, Netanyahu declared she was "panicking": "I think they are in a great panic . . . they cannot withstand pressure" (Nahmias, 2015a).

When Netanyahu launched the Likud party campaign, he established a tone of contempt and ridicule through reference to his rivals' immature sounding nicknames (Somberg, 2015). "The real election is between the Likud, led by me, and 'Tzipi' and 'Bougie'. And I just ask you—are these the people to defend Israel? Will they stand up to Hamas? Hezbollah? Iran?" (Netanyahu, 2015a). Each question was met with a resounding and overwhelming "No!" from the audience, followed by Netanyahu's sarcastic laughter. The derisive tone of Netanyahu's speech clearly aimed to show how preposterous this idea was, worthy of nothing but ridicule and unqualified dismissal. His gestures, laugh, eye-rolling, and sarcastic hand spreading, were all rhetorical devices to portray Herzog and Livni as unfit to at the country's helm.

This disrespect was also conspicuous in an official campaign video published by Netanyahu's team, which jokes about Tzipi Livni in a video about ordering pizza. In it, a customer orders a pizza called the "Bougie Pizza" and is disappointed to discover that it was not only much more expensive than he had been led to believe, but also came with life-size cardboard cutout of Tzipi Livni. The video also played on chauvinistic themes. When the customer knocks over a lamp when carrying the cardboard Tzipi, he says, "She's

already ruining the house,” and the video ends with him showering with the cutout inside the shower, and complaining, “How did I get stuck with you ‘Tzipi?’” (Netanyahu, 2015b).

Ridiculing the idea that Livni and Herzog could be responsible for Israel’s security was one of the favorite themes of Netanyahu’s campaign. By means of Netanyahu’s oratory, their nicknames “Tzipi” and “Bougie” are transformed into pejorative terms, which resonate a weakly inadequacy. Netanyahu’s campaign continuously compared him, Mister Security, the former commando officer, with his rivals, Livni, who is a woman, and Herzog who has a high-pitched voice. By constantly calling him Bougie, Netanyahu skillfully portrayed Herzog as a bit juvenile, and certainly not mature enough and responsible enough to offer the security the way (Bibi) Netanyahu can. And here is one of the mysteries of rhetoric, names, and politics. There is nothing endogenously serious in the nickname Bibi, not in and of itself, and not when compared with Bougie and Tzipi. But Netanyahu never hesitates from using Bibi and his nickname does him no harm. Quite the opposite. He skillfully fills the empty signifier “Bibi” with a unique and important mix of both being a man of the people and being a masculine source of security and statecraft. Whereas Tzipi and Bougie are subject to derision and dismissal as political lightweights, Bibi held the winning lottery ticket in Israeli politics. Netanyahu also successfully tagged and condemned the entire political camp of the left, blaming it for the public’s disillusionment with the peace process, portraying the left as a bunch of traitors or useful idiots.

These themes are all observable in an interview by Netanyahu close to the elections, which was peppered liberally with the two pejorative nicknames. On that occasion, he described several hypothetical threats to the security of Israel and asked a series of rhetorical questions stressing the ineffectuality of “Tzipi and Bougie”: “Who will protect us against that? Tzipi and Bougie? Can they? Do they even want to?” (Cesana and Tochfeld, 2015). The same tactic was also applied industriously long after the elections, for example, in a speech before the Knesset, when Netanyahu attacked Herzog’s ostensible naïveté:

On Sunday ... the members of the “Avoda” (Israeli Labour) party, decided that the two-state solution cannot be actualized in the current situation, sounds familiar? Good morning, Bougie! I’m happy you woke up. Good morning, Avoda, Welcome to the Middle East! The alarm clock has rung and perhaps you’ve finally started to understand where we live (Azulay, 2016).

These trends and tactics peaked in an interview on the Israeli web news site, Walla, 2 days before the 2015 election, when Netanyahu bombarded his listeners with the names “Bougie” and “Tzipi” which they had already been hearing ad nauseum. Within just 16 minutes and 40 seconds, Netanyahu said the names “Bougie” and “Tzipi” 10 times and 9 times respectively and on all of the 9 times that he referred to “Tzipi” he tied her to Herzog as in, “‘Tzipi and Bougie’ or ‘Bougie and Tzipi’” (Nahmias, 2015b). In addition to the other reasons discussed earlier, this pairing wished to underline still further that Livni was an intrinsic and even leading member of the duo (by mentioning her name first), stressing her lack of popularity and her possible detriment to Herzog’s candidacy.

There is no better way to wrap up this section, than Netanyahu’s own words in this interview right before the elections:

With the help of the Arabs, Bougie and Tzipi will form a left-wing government . . . People should understand one simple thing, that they will get Tzipi and Bougie here. They should understand that there is a worldwide effort to crown the left and replace a right-wing government headed by me with a left-wing government headed by Tzipi and Bougie . . . We did so many things, and Tzipi and Bougie? What have they done?

Avoidance: Vladimir Putin

The Russian case clearly differs from the other two. In one form or another, Vladimir Putin has been in power since 2000. During this time, democratic institutions and processes were profoundly weakened (McFaul, 2018). Compared with Trump and Netanyahu, Putin faces fewer challenges in the voting booth. This greatly affects how his naming and reference to his opposition. Unlike Trump and Netanyahu, Putin appears less in public and is far less likely to be challenged by the press after his speeches. In recent years, repression of the opposition has largely eliminated systemic opposition, in practice leaving Russia with only a non-systemic opposition. This authoritarian climate has created an entirely different political context from that in which Netanyahu and Trump operate. Putin functions in a non-democratic context, which influences the texts produced in it and allows Putin to disregard his opponents as much as possible and prevent them from achieving public relevancy and legitimacy.

The weakening of Russia's media independence, combined with increasing media control by the Kremlin and Putin as the leading political figure of the last 20 years, have resulted in a near government monopoly over the media, its content and coverage (Gehlbach, 2010). In other words, the Kremlin effectively controls the media and what is communicated through it. Therefore, there is no need for Putin to produce resonating soundbites with the aim of capturing the media's attention. Hence, it is no wonder that Putin's tactic for naming and referring to his opposition is very different from that of Netanyahu and Trump.

Since the election challenges in Putin's Russia are nominal, or else nonexistent, there is a case-selection problem. It makes no sense to focus on election campaigns as with Trump and Netanyahu, so let us examine two events which closely approximate political contestation and are comparable to the contestation of a democratic election. They are the two protest waves in 2017 and 2020 which were seen as a serious challenge to Putin's rule. The protest wave in 2017 consisted of anti-corruption demonstrations against the then Prime Minister Medvedev (Eremenko, 2017). However, even though two-thirds of the population believed that Putin was directly responsible for the widespread corruption (Radio Liberty, 2017), he hardly ever mentioned the demonstrations. In some speeches, when it could be argued that he was alluding to them in a roundabout way, he usually spoke of the importance of "keeping public order in the country" (Putin, 2017a). However, his speeches, at this time, all refrained from mentioning the opposition leaders, either by directly or indirectly. For example, speaking in St Petersburg on 2nd June 2017, Putin (2017b) only mentioned corruption once, and then he only referred to Moldova, not Russia. In an "open line" with journalists on 15th June 2017, Putin (2017c) alleged that the opposition "speculates on problems" without proposing solutions and again omitted the names of any oppositional leaders. Putin's silence on the opposition leaders in other public appearances, speeches, and interviews from the period is deafening. Analysis shows that in 30 speeches and interviews that Putin gave between March 2017 and July 2017 (at the height of the protests) (see Appendix 1), he avoided speaking the name of the opposition leaders.

The second protest wave followed an assassination attempt on Opposition leader Alexei Navalny (Roth, 2021). While the demonstrations attracted close attention in Russia and abroad, Putin largely avoided referring to the protests in his speeches and rarely spoke of them in interviews. On 17th December 2020, in an "open-line"

with journalists, Putin (2020) responded to accusations that he had ordered Navalny's poisoning. In that interview, Putin steadfastly refused to speak Navalny's name, referring to him instead as "that patient from the Berlin clinic" and accusing him of working for the Central Intelligence Agency, though he added, "That does not mean he needed to be poisoned. Who needs him? If it was needed, it would have been done."

An interesting point is that Putin argues that opposition leaders attack him to promote the false perception that they are his equal:

This trick is essentially to attack first-degree persons and in this manner, for those who do it, to stretch themselves up to their level and say—"look this is my equal, I am a person of the same caliber, treat me in such and such a way."

On analyzing Putin's (2020) statement through the lens of the theoretical framework presented here, we can understand the reasoning behind Putin's naming and addressing tactic. According to Putin, when you refer to an opponent by name you are granting them public legitimacy, and for Putin, the most efficient tool against any attempt at legitimacy is not to mock opponents by calling them childish nicknames, but by erasing them with a blanket of anonymity, by rubbing out their name. In a separate address regarding the poisoning of Navalny on 16th June 2021, Putin (2021) referred to him as either, "the aforementioned citizen," "that man," or "that gentleman." We thus find that in nine speeches and interviews between January 2021 and May 2021 (at the height of the protests), (see Appendix 1) he never once referred to Navalny by name.

Putin's tactic in naming and referring is therefore an avoidance tactic in which he deliberately evades from mentioning his opponents, or referring to them by their actual name, thus denying them the level playing field of legitimacy. Putin's tactic is to create two levels of legitimacy. The first level is the one inhabited by Putin with Medvedev and members of the United Russia Party to whom he refers in public by name. The second level is the cadre of nameless opposition leaders which are dismissed as unworthy of state or public attention. (After the acceptance of this manuscript Mr. Navalny's died in a penal colony in Russia, following his death Putin addressed Navalny by name, calling him "Mr. Navalny" (thrice in one event), highlighting the connection between Putin's naming tactics and the perception of danger to his rule).

Discussion

The findings have shown that populist leaders use at least three naming tactics, and that the reasoning behind the three tactics is informed by populist principles and by the need of populist leaders to portray their contenders as the enemy of the people and its authenticity. The tactics are also motivated and shaped by local cultural sensitivities and political structures. The three naming tactics identified and analyzed are as follows: (1) coining ridiculing nicknames, (2) appropriating existing nicknames, and (3) avoiding the opponent's name.

The first naming tactic, used by President Trump, operates through ridicule and involves misnaming or coining a belittling nickname for opponents. As noted, populist leaders seek to demonstrate that they will not be playing by the establishment's rules, either in essence or style. Ridicule can be a tool which serves to distance the populist leader from the establishment's norms and etiquette and to elevate themselves above

other candidates. Ridicule is often combined with humor in the hope of gaining a viral audience and helping to embed denigration in the public consciousness. President Trump perfected this tactic and, as can be seen by the epithets applied by him to his opponents, like Sleepy Joe (Biden), Crazy Nancy (Pelosi), and Crooked Hillary (Clinton).

A second populist naming tactic that we found being used by prime minister Netanyahu, is calling an opponent by an existing nickname, which, in a non-political context would be a neutral sounding name, but which can be politically damaging if it resonates in the national culture as undesirable or having negative connotations, thus fixating the opponent as ill-fitting for high office. This tactic differs from the aforementioned as it uses an existing nickname and is highly sensitive to context, namely the national and public background, or to use the Habermasian term, “the common lifeworld” as the social and cultural background, that is shared by the members of society, hence enabling communication and understanding (Bjola and Kornprobst, 2011), as well as connotations and resonations. The main element which comes into play with this tailored tactic is the rival’s personal characteristics and their experience. For example, a leader with a young or feminine-sounding voice would be addressed by the populist leader with a nickname that belittles the candidate, and makes them appear lacking in forcefulness and unsuitable for the responsibility of ensuring the nation’s security.

In this and the previous tactic, the leader’s tone when uttering the rival’s name is key. What seems a neutral nickname in writing can assume very negative connotations when spoken and will become forever linked to the candidate, including when their name appears in texts. For example, Benjamin “Bibi” Netanyahu made a habit of calling several of his opponents by their nicknames. That was the case with Isaac “Bougie” Herzog and Tziporah “Tzipi” Livni. Arguably, the nickname Bibi is no better than the nicknames Bougie and Tzipi. But significantly, when Bibi comes tagged as Mister Security and has a very authoritative baritone, in contrast to “Tzipi” who has a feminine-sounding name and is a woman and Bougie who is a dove with a sort of high-pitched voice, then Bibi becomes identified as the masculine provider of security and the latter two by comparison seem nothing but feminine insecure leftists.

The third naming tactic, used by Putin, is avoidance. Here the populist leader chooses to avoid naming the rival and simply ignores their existence. This tactic is particularly suitable in an authoritarian political structure, and its success is dependent on the leaders having significant control over political and communication assets. There may be various reasons for using this tactic. One is the leader’s wish to limit the rival’s media exposure, reasoning that any publicity, including negative publicity, would benefit them. A second consideration (which does not exclude the first) is the attempt to establish two levels of legitimacy: one for the populist named leader, the other, which is inferior, contains those nameless candidates.

These three naming tactics cover quite a lot of ground in the political landscape of populism and can help us to understand some of the reasons for its recent electoral and political successes, which, as scholars have shown, do not necessarily indicate broad acceptance of the populist agenda. The success of this agenda, in other words, stems to a large extent from its rhetoric, which includes naming tactics. Populist tactics succeed by allowing populist leaders to project themselves as strong representatives of the “true” “authentic” voice of the people. Thus, they speak about and name their opponents in a way that achieves “leveling,” just as laypersons would, in an effort to establish an image of themselves as authentic and as outsiders compared with the elites and the institutionalized political system, while often also projecting themselves as masculine and strong. In

the same stroke, these same naming tactics, each in their own way, portray their rivals as weak, lacking in leadership skills, and unrepresentative of the people, and therefore illegitimate candidates for high office.

Conclusion

Naming tactics are another tool in the populist arsenal. When referring to and addressing their rivals, populist leaders use different tactics, depending on the leader's circumstances, characteristics, and political situation, in order to galvanize support for the political struggle. Populist leaders prefer a non-standard style of communicating, including naming, as it helps to contrast them with their rivals while challenging the elite and status quo. The following three such tactics are identified here: (1) coining ridiculing nicknames, (2) tailoring the use of an existing nickname, and (3) avoidance. All three tactics allow leaders to either present their rivals as members of the elite or challenge their claim to be representatives of the people, while ridiculing and diminishing them to delegitimize their claim to rule.

A nation's system of government, its culture, history, structure, language, and nuances, the specificities of the political challenge facing the leader's rule, their personality, and the features of their rival (e.g. gender, personal background, voice, appearance, and others personal attributes) all influence the naming tactic chosen by the populist leader. Thus, Vladimir Putin used the tactic of avoidance, while Netanyahu and Trump, finding themselves in nail-biting electoral campaigns, chose the more confrontational naming tactic. And yet and as stressed throughout this article, the three types of tactic are united by a populist rationale. They well-integrated within the populist arsenal and serve the populist ideals of ostensibly representing the authentic voice of the people and oppose the voice of an allegedly corrupted elite and unworthy establishment. The use of speech and naming as a means of degrading and diminishing opponents serves populist leaders well in their political maneuvering.

Future research could identify additional populist naming tactics that share the same reasoning. And we note that there is more at stake than merely identifying the tactics and the political reasoning behind them. Future research could have several objectives: to compare the tactics of populist leaders with the tactics of non-populist leaders; to determine whether the tactics are used by other leaders beside populist politicians, and to examine whether they influence political communication across the political spectrum. Future research could also ask the following: What happens when two (or more) populist leaders compete with each other, what tactics do they use, and do these tactics transcend national borders and affect how these and other populist leaders address foreign leaders. Perhaps most importantly, future research could examine the effects of these tactics—do they really contribute to the popularity of populist leaders, and conversely, do they diminish their popularity? and in the longer run, do they cause a deterioration in the quality of political discussion?

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Appendix I

List of Putin's speeches and appearances lacking direct mention of opposition leaders between March 2017 and July 2017:

- Putin V (2017) Совместная пресс-конференция с Президентом Турции Реджепом Тайипом Эрдоганом [Joint Press Conference with the President of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdoğan]. *Kremlin.ru—President of Russia*, 10 March. Available at: http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/press_conferences/54023 (accessed 17 December 2022).
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List of Putin’s speeches and appearances lacking direct mention of opposition leaders between January 2021 and May 2021:

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