

Applications of Attribution Theory

“Populism involves the attribution of blame to the political elite.”

Andreas Schedler (2024) “Again, What is Populism?” *Review of Democracy* February
<https://revdem.ceu.edu/2024/02/01/again-what-is-populism/>

“...the pattern of dispositional blaming is one of the key rhetorical features that distinguishes populism from alternative political discourses. Psychologists refer to populism’s form of blaming as a type of dispositional attribution, or an argument ascribing causality to the intentional behavior of knowing individuals (Heider 1958).

This type of blame attribution is central to populist rhetoric, with populists often talking of elites who knowingly abuse the system for personal gain at the expense of the people. The result is the demonization of elites coupled with aglorification of “the people.”

Dispositional attribution stands in contrast to what attribution scholars call situational attribution, or the blaming of impersonal forces outside the control of the individual. Indeed, the latter is especially associated with pluralist discourse, an alternative that also values popular sovereignty but accepts differences of opinion and avoids demonizing opponents (Mudde 2004; Ochoa Espejo 2011).

In contrast to populist rhetoric, pluralist rhetoric often attributes problems such as corruption or failed representation to systemic causes such as globalization or technological change, and it tends to criticize rather than demonize political opponents.

Ethan C Busby, Joshua R. Gubler and Kirk A. Hawkins (2019) “Framing and Blame Attribution in Populist Rhetoric.” *The Journal of Politics* 81 (2).

Populism can be connected to responsibility attribution... In Western Europe, this entails attributing blame to national as well as European levels of governance. 872

This populist frame taps into the causal interpretation as well as the moral evaluation of issues as the in-group is perceived of as morally good and absolved of responsibility while “they” are evil and causally responsible. 874

Social identity theory explains ... attitudes toward the in-group and out-group (Tajfel, 1978). This theory argues that the experience of belonging to the in-group forms a crucial part of people’s self-concept. As people want to maintain a positive self-concept, they are biased in their judgments and attribute negative qualities (e.g., blame) to the out-group that is perceived as significantly different (Tajfel, 1978) 875

In line with this mechanism, people are expected to only accept blame attributed on the national level when they do not feel close to their nation. When people do feel connected to their nation, accepting frames that attribute blame on the national level is inconsistent with their positive self-concept. Likewise, we expect that people will only blame the EU when they are not attached to European identity. These effects are explained by in-group serving bias 875

The results indicate that blame perceptions were influenced by populist blame frames. This implies that when blame was attributed to the EU, citizens followed suit by blaming the EU. ...Populist communication that attributes blame to the national government needs to use an emotional style to be effective, whereas populist communication influences blame perceptions toward the EU by mentioning that the EU is responsible for causing the problems of the heartland. We interpret this as evidence that EU attitudes may be more volatile and prone to change by informational cues on responsibility. In contrast, opinions on the national government may be more stable, needing the populist cultivation of negative affect. 889

Hameleers, M., Bos, L., & de Vreese, C. H. (2017). “‘They did it’: The effects of emotionalized blame attribution in populist communication.” *Communication Research*, 44(6), 870-900.

https://pure.uva.nl/ws/files/28166398/They_did_it.pdf