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# Banana Populism: Exploring the Emotionally Engaging, Authentic, and Memeable Rhetoric of Populist Visual Communication

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## Abstract

This study conceptualizes “banana populism,” a novel analytical framework to examine how whimsical imagery functions in contemporary populism. Banana populism utilizes the ordinary—exemplified by the banana—for its ubiquity, inherent humor, and absurdity, transforming these elements into powerful political tools. These articulations effectively mainstream extreme ideologies, invite affective investment from broad publics, and delineate antagonistic frontiers by employing familiar cultural symbols and everyday objects, such as military attire or MAGA hats. Such performative elements not only enhance the authenticity of populist leaders but also make their messages more accessible and emotionally engaging, increasing their appeal and relatability. Furthermore, the memetic nature of banana populism underlines its adaptability and potency on social media, where these performances become part of a participatory and dynamic political discourse. This framework shows how seemingly innocuous visual articulations can profoundly impact political communication and identity formation in contemporary political landscapes.

## Keywords

banana populism, emotion, political communication, social media, visual populism

## Introduction

Boris Johnson once (spuriously) claimed that the European Union (EU) was regulating banana bendiness during his Brexit campaigning, distilling his claims about EU bureaucratic overreach into a shape familiar from everyone’s kitchen. The banana became an antagonistic articulation of the British us versus the EU them (Irwin & Tominc, 2023), inviting affective investment in a way that the cold language of bureaucracy simply cannot. This was not an isolated instance. Boris Johnson also posed with a fish, Donald Trump wielded his MAGA hats and Matteo Salvini posted about Nutella: all of these are memorable examples of visual populist political communication. While similar visual instances have occasionally appeared in the literature (e.g., Beck, 2023; Graham et al., 2021; Santamaría, 2020), we still lack systematic analyses or a theoretical framework to understand this facet of populism. Current research has yet to comprehensively address how populist visual communication crosses into the realm of the everyday and the absurd, often unintentionally inviting laughter through surprising juxtapositions and incongruity. Anchored in the discourse theoretical

(Laclau, 2005) and performative (Moffitt, 2016; Ostiguy et al., 2020) approaches to populism, we introduce the term “banana populism” to describe the integration of mundane, relatable elements into political discourse.

These articulations lend whimsy to populist movements while also constructing and reinforcing antagonistic divides between “us” and “them.” These articulations’ everyday nature helps them foster broad identification among potential followers by tapping into shared daily experiences and pleasures. We chose the banana as an analytical metaphor deliberately. Like the everyday objects deployed in populist performances, the banana combines ubiquity and ordinariness with the potential for absurdity when transported into political contexts. Its inherent capacity for lowbrow humor

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mirrors the often unintentionally amusing nature of these performances. While globally recognizable, the banana—like populist articulations themselves—takes on specific meanings in different cultural and ideological contexts. Rather than articulating the banana as a limiting factor—as with banana republics—we turn to bananas for their universality.

This contribution, at the nexus of visual social media and populism research, scrutinizes how everyday imagery bolsters populist narratives and (re-)produces antagonistic divides between “us” and “them” in the digital era. As the online world increasingly affects politics, populist leaders’ use of social media (audio-)visuals represents a nuanced adaptation, leveraging the reach and impact of online platforms. This aligns with the social media logic, which favors attention-grabbing, emotionally resonant, and highly shareable content. Moreover, the digital age and social media platforms produce political subjects who adapt to and employ this very logic to reproduce antagonistic frontiers.

In banana populism, everyday visuals shape collective identities and inform political sensibilities, just as Billig (1995) emphasizes the importance of repeated banal articulations in constituting a nation. However, while Billig focuses on how mundane symbols quietly reinforce nationalism, our framework examines how ordinary objects become extraordinary and explicitly political when transported into populist performances. These articulations, unlike Billig’s banal nationalism, draw attention to themselves through their absurdity. Leaders posting whimsical or “silly” content depart from traditional political communication but have become omnipresent. Importantly, this content is not deliberately humorous, but becomes funny because it deviates from typical political behavior. This unintentional humor through incongruity serves to humanize political figures and make their political messages more accessible and relatable. Our methodology, grounded in rhetoric performative discourse analysis (Palonen, 2018), dissects visual performances across media to explore their significance. This approach highlights how visual populism, particularly through the lens of the social media logic, influences our visual culture and political communication, often creating unintended comedic effects that contrast sharply with—yet also complement—traditional populist rhetoric.

### Populism Theory

We emerge from the discursive and performative approaches to populism, which view it as *form*. Ernesto Laclau’s (2005) post-foundational approach to populism underpins the discursive approach, conceptualizing populism as a “mode of articulation,” heightened by affect, that splits society into two antagonistic camps, an “us” and an “Other.” Formal approaches to populism argue that various “discursive repertoires” (Vulović & Palonen, 2023) fill the empty *form* of populism with the specific *content* that makes up each movement, like nationalism (Brubaker, 2020) or tribalism

(Hartikainen & Szebeni, 2024). The discourse-theoretical approach has the advantage of considering populist articulations across the ideological spectrum, from extreme right (e.g., Hartikainen, 2023) to left-wing (Katsambekis, 2016). This approach also emphasizes that populism exists on a spectrum (Brubaker, 2017), so even politicians considered to be “mainstream” may rely on populist articulations to varying extents.

The related performative approach to populism sees populism as something that is *done*. Moffitt (2016) conceptualized populism as a style appealing to “the people” against “the elite,” using “bad manners,” and evoking “crisis, breakdown, or threat.” Ostiguy (2017) similarly views populism as the antagonistic “flaunting of the ‘low’” (p. 74). These rest on an understanding of discourse as performative, creating the effects it names (Butler, 2011), and encompassing both linguistic and extra-linguistic (Laclau, 2005) articulations. Actions, such as visiting a border fence or using inflammatory rhetoric about migrants, can articulate a crisis, performatively bringing it into being. Seen through this perspective, populist leaders articulate “the people” and the “Other” with their clothes, their accents, their social media posts, the monuments they erect, or the government offices they choose to (de)fund.

The discourse-theoretical and performative approaches’ integration in populism research is well-established. Ostiguy and Moffitt (2020) discuss the “performative turn” in populism research as an extension of Laclau’s (2005) discursive view of populism. This approach recognizes that “stylistic” elements of political performance are crucial in forming (e.g., Ekström & Morton, 2017) and sustaining populist movements through affective ties. Discourse-theoretical approaches to populism analyze various forms of performances beyond just words. Examples include Santamaría (2021) on left-wing populists’ intimate social media videos, Salojärvi (2020) on Finnish politician Timo Soini’s soccer scarf, and Szebeni and Salojärvi (2022) on Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán’s use of masculine imagery. These all elucidate how populist leaders articulate the content of their movements and their antagonistic frontiers, filling the empty populist form.

The leader’s importance to the movement is a key feature linking these approaches. For Laclau (2005), the leader is an empty signifier, embodying the whole movement while paradoxically taking on an excess of meanings for his followers and thus becoming empty of any particular meaning. Ostiguy and Moffitt (2020) disagree with Laclau’s claim that the leader is “empty” as a signifier, arguing that the populist leader becomes an “overflowing” signifier, taking on an abundance of coexisting meanings with which followers might identify. These differing approaches agree that a populist leader’s performative discursive articulations offer myriad options with which followers may identify, leading to broader identification with the leader and the movement. They also rest on an understanding of the populist leader as

an embodiment of the movement (e.g., Szebeni & Salojärvi, 2022), so their performative articulations constitute not only themselves, but also their “people” in a populist context.

In this article, we highlight one category of populist performative articulations: the banal, the ridiculous, and the playful. Following Ostiguy and Moffitt (2020), we claim that these performances offer points of identification that exist alongside others rather than displacing them. However, we argue that they provide a unique affective charge, driving identification with populist movements. They invite affective investment from a wider group of potential followers, including those who claim no interest in “politics” as such but who might feel drawn to signifiers that draw on the normal pleasures of their everyday lives. This form of us-building helps to articulate the leader as one of the people through whimsical affective elements, and just as populist articulations might occur in political movements not typically classed as populist, even mainstream politicians may rely on it to some extent. Banana populism, we argue, offers a “warm, fuzzy feeling,” bringing followers “in on the joke.” This approach does not negate other affective elements in populist movements like *ressentiment* (Salmela & Capelos, 2021) or collective memory (Cento Bull, 2016), but complements them, highlighting an as yet unexplored avenue of affective investment.

In other words, banana populism does not provide the only affective ties in any given movement, but rather offers a qualitatively different type of affective tie from those explored in the previous research. Previous studies of “banal populism” have describing it as either the routine usage of “the people” as a signifier in everyday populist communication (Hellström, 2013) or the everyday presence of signifiers that articulate “the people” on a populist and nationalist basis (Cossarini, 2021). With banana populism, however, we move beyond the everyday presence of divisive symbols or populism as the politics of the transgressive low (Ostiguy, 2017) to discuss ridiculous juxtapositions in populist politics and how they offer additional avenues of affective identification.

This category of performative articulations, we argue, is different from purposeful jokes, satire, or intentional humor, all of which have been studied extensively in various political contexts (e.g., Duffy & Teruggi Page, 2013; Koivukoski et al., 2024). Research has recognized how populist actors use humor to connect with and expand their audience (e.g., Sakki & Martikainen, 2021). This humor, often manifesting through satire or irony, can unite or segregate individuals (Billig, 2005), and subtly mainstream divisive ideologies (e.g., Schwarznegger & Wagner, 2018). While humor in Internet memes reflects a deeper layer of populist communication (Hakoköngäs et al., 2020), we focus on unanticipated humor. In banana populism, ridiculousness arises not from crafted jokes but from the spontaneous and unforeseen blending of the political with the prosaic that introduces an element of whimsy into the high political arena. This aligns

with the Incongruity Theory of humor (e.g., Morreall, 2024), which posits that humor arises from situations that do not fit into the patterns that we expect. Most simply, we argue that banana populist articulations are not intentionally funny in the way that satire, parody, or jokes are, but rather that they create situations where humor arises from incongruity, absurdity, and ridiculousness.

We further suggest that banana populist articulations land differently for different observers, depending on whether they fall among the populist leader’s “people” or not. Those among the people might consider themselves “in on the joke” and therefore be laughing with the politician; those among the Other might laugh *at* rather than *with* the politician. Repeated exposure to similar humorous articulations as supporters meme them and opponents denigrate or parody them then serves to entrench these identities, articulating the people in an antagonistic relationship to the Other in a populist framework. We thus argue that the whimsy and ridiculousness of banana populism can become an essential way to both articulate and reinforce—through memes and repetition—the antagonism that is at the core the discourse-theoretical understanding of populism (Laclau, 2005). This proposition demands a nuanced understanding of humor in populist discourse, emphasizing gripping visual content on social media.

### *Visual Populism and Social Media*

Visuals, from photos to memes, have become key in political discourse, shaping, reinforcing, or changing narratives (Bucy & Joo, 2021). They convey messages, evoke emotions (Powell et al., 2021), and mobilize support (Casas & Williams, 2019), making them crucial in creating distinct antagonistic populist narratives. Visual imagery has long intertwined with politics, serving as a tool of both statecraft and dissent (Hariman & Lucaites, 2007). Social media now plays a pivotal role for populist leaders, offering decentralized communication channels that bypass traditional institutions (Bauer, 2024). Social media helps populist politicians disseminate “fragmented” ideologies (Engesser et al., 2017) and creates the illusion of direct connections with supporters (Moffitt, 2018), benefiting populist politicians relying on personalization (Bracciale & Martella, 2017) and authenticity (Enli & Rosenberg, 2018). Populist leaders use social media to post content that garners engagement, leveraging algorithms that prioritize sensational, emotional, or controversial content (Gerbaudo et al., 2023). Visuals are critical in these strategies, emphasizing authenticity (Szebeni & Salojärvi, 2022), authority (Sonnevend & Kövesdi, 2023), expertise (Hartikainen, 2021), and connection with the common person (Mendonça & Caetano, 2021).

Repeatability and virality are crucial for successful visual articulations on social media. Social media platforms not only allow leaders to disseminate banana populist content but also create spaces where followers actively participate in

meaning-making through remixing, sharing, and creating derivative content. Memes—easily shareable, repeatable, and often emotionally engaging—are perfect for the rapid dissemination loops favored by social media algorithms (Bebić & Volarevic, 2018). They condense political messages into concise, engaging content that resonates with online culture (Wagner & Schwarzenegger, 2020). When followers transform leaders' posts into memes or create their own content using similar whimsical elements, they strengthen their attachment to the movement through active participation rather than passive consumption (Leiser, 2022). This user-driven meme culture not only simplifies complex ideologies but also enhances direct engagement by leveraging visuals' power to evoke emotions, and create lasting impacts (Grabe & Bucy, 2009; Powell et al., 2021). This participatory dimension adds layers of meaning to banana populist performances: a leader's "silly" moment becomes a template for collective expression of political identity (Johann, 2022). Memes democratize political conversation by enabling widespread public participation, making them essential in populist communication. A vibrant meme culture forms the basis for "banana populism," where politicians blend the mundane with the political, creating unexpected yet impactful connections.

### *Banana Populism*

In defining "banana populism," we build on Ostiguy and Moffitt's (2020) idea of the leader in a populist movement as an overflowing signifier. We view banana populism as one avenue of affective identification, defining it as a category of performative articulations that merges the mundane with the political through whimsical, playful, and often absurd articulations, encouraging public identification and involvement on an affective level. These articulations create antagonistic frontiers, evoke emotions, and often mainstream extreme or fringe ideas, while underpinning the authenticity of the populist politician. While this article focuses on visual manifestations of banana populism, the framework could extend to other performative modes including rhetoric and text. A populist leader's style of speech, recurring phrases, or descriptions of everyday activities or textual social media posts could similarly transport the ordinary into political contexts. However, we argue that visual elements are particularly potent for banana populist articulations given their immediate affective impact and high potential for memetic spread across social media platforms.

Banana populist articulations use cultural symbols and everyday objects, often either already rich in meaning (like military attire) or endowed with significance through recent actions (such as MAGA hats), to craft resonant political messages. These articulations weave together various articulations of "the people" and the "Other," further articulating antagonistic frontiers through playfulness. By drawing on familiar symbols and objects, these articulations delineate

"us" and "them" more accessibly and with more relatability to more diverse audiences. Moreover, these articulations evoke positive emotions, such as warm, fuzzy feelings, amusement, nostalgia, and a sense of belonging. The whimsical and playful nature of these performances creates a shared experience of laughter and enjoyment, fostering a sense of community and defining an "us" through political-cultural discourse. The amusing nature of these articulations makes them memorable and ripe for repetition, embodying the replication and transformation central to memes (Shifman, 2013). Banana populism can also mainstream fringe ideas by integrating extreme ideologies into familiar and relatable imagery, making unconventional political ideas more acceptable and appealing (Brown & Mondon, 2021). These seemingly innocuous performances mask deeper political narratives, allowing them to seep into mainstream discourse without triggering any defenses against extremity. Here, the previously mentioned emotional engagement is critical, as it lowers barriers against accepting complex or even extreme political positions, wrapping radical messages in humor and relatability.

Banana populism also builds populist politicians' authenticity, articulating them as genuine and relatable. This resonates with Ostiguy's (2017) concept of "the low" or Moffitt's (2016) description of "bad manners," where populist leaders embrace informal or crude communication to appeal to voters. However, banana populist articulations are not limited to "low" culture; they can also employ "high" articulations, as long as they appear authentic to the leader's persona and the audience's expectations. Finally, banana populist articulations thrive on the logic of social media and are inherently memeable. Easily appropriated, remixed, and circulated online (Mortensen & Neumayer, 2023), these performances leverage recognizable cultural symbols infused with new political meanings. This process spreads their message and encourages a participatory engagement where the audience actively contributes to the movement's evolving narrative.

### **Method**

Our methodological approach aligns with qualitative cultural analysis traditions that prioritize understanding "complexity, depth, variation, or context surrounding a phenomenon" rather than achieving statistical representation (Gentles et al., 2015, p. 1782). We approach banana populism as a political-cultural phenomenon that manifests across different contexts and platforms. Rather than attempting systematic sampling, we purposefully chose illustrative examples that demonstrate how populist leaders deploy everyday objects and situations for political effect. This approach reflects van Manen's (2014/2023) argument that systematic sampling criteria may be inappropriate for certain forms of cultural analysis, particularly when examining phenomena that emerge through cultural practices and meanings. Our analysis combined deductive and inductive elements: while we began with

**Table 1.** Analytical Dimensions of Banana Populism.

Dimension	Description
Antagonistic frontiers	This dimension captures how visual elements are employed to delineate clear antagonistic frontiers between the in-group (“us”) and the out-group (“them”), reinforcing the populist articulation of division. Examples include the use of national symbols or cultural references that create a strong “us vs. them” dynamic.
Inviting affective investment through emotional imagery	This category explores how populist leaders become overflowing signifiers by linking themselves with symbols laden with multiple, coexisting meanings, inviting diverse followers to affectively invest in the movement. It discusses how populist leaders use warm and comforting imagery to create engaging visual narratives and offer various modes of affective investment. It also highlights situations where leaders inadvertently become humorous by engaging in atypical actions for politicians.
Mainstreaming	This dimension explores how banana populist articulations integrate fringe or extreme ideas into the mainstream discourse by using familiar and relatable visuals, potentially making such ideas more acceptable and widespread among the public. These visuals can help to normalize and legitimize otherwise extreme or unconventional political ideas.
Authenticity	This dimension focuses on the portrayal of authenticity (or inauthenticity) in populist performances, analyzing how visuals construct a “genuine” connection with the audience or highlight discrepancies in perceived authenticity. It includes the use of personal or cultural symbols that enhance the leader’s image as one of the people. This category also explores how different leaders employ either low (ordinary) or high (elite) imagery to assert authenticity, depending on which approach resonates more authentically with their projected public persona and their audience’s expectations.

theoretical concepts from populism literature that informed our selection of examples (e.g., antagonistic frontiers, authenticity), we remained open to inductively identifying new patterns and mechanisms through our close reading of cases. This iterative analytical process allowed us to refine our understanding of how banana populism operates while remaining attentive to emerging themes and variations in our examples.

To understand banana populism, we use an exploratory qualitative approach grounded in Laclaudian discourse theory (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001). This theory rests on the understanding that a discourse is made up of relationally defined elements whose meaning is constantly changing through the process of articulation, that is, any linguistic or extra-linguistic act that modifies the relationship between discursive elements. Methods based on this framework direct us toward analyses of “privileged discursive points” (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001, p. 112) like nodal points, which provide structure to a discourse by partially fixing the meaning of related discursive elements, or floating signifiers (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001, p. 113), which hold different meanings depending on which discourse they appear in. Through these, we can see how the antagonistic frontiers essential for Laclaudian populism (Laclau, 2005) emerge and are maintained.

Specifically, we take our cues from rhetoric performative discourse analysis (Palonen, 2018), a method designed to track discursive articulations within a poststructuralist framework with primarily visual material (e.g., Salojärvi, 2020; Salojärvi et al., 2023). We focus on populist leaders, viewing them as embodiments of their respective movements; even though social media managers may craft their posts, these posts present the political leaders as the public version of themselves that they want followers to see (Marichal, 2013) and that comes to constitute the “people.”

We analyze visual material’s role in meaning-making, specifically in shaping the articulation of the “us” and the “Other” within populist discourses, considering the spatio-temporal context of our examples to understand the meanings of relationally defined discursive elements. To structure our analysis, we have identified several key dimensions that capture the various facets of banana populism that we use as the so-called “sensitizing concepts” (Van Brussel et al., 2019) to structure our analysis. These dimensions, while overlapping, highlight the different aspects of the visual material and guide our results section for a systematic exploration of banana populism. Table 1 outlines these analytical dimensions and their descriptions.

## Empirical Analysis

### *Antagonistic Frontiers*

Banana populism articulates antagonistic frontiers through exclusionary visuals that define the “us” versus “them” of populist movements. For instance, Trump’s MAGA hat exemplifies this as an overflowing signifier: despite being incongruous with his Manhattan businessman image, the hat became ubiquitous at rallies and enables supporters to display their allegiance while engaging in “fashion activism” in liberal spaces (Thompson, 2021). Its strong affective identification and memetic potential extended internationally, as seen when Czech prime minister Babiš wore a MAGA-inspired “Silné Česko” (Strong Czechia) hat after visiting the White House in 2019. By doing so, Babiš not only aligned himself with Trump’s political messaging but also inherited the complex web of affect attached to the MAGA brand. This connection introduced a layered affective element to his persona, enabling potential followers to identify with Babiš

through the shared emotional landscape of Trump's movement. The end of Babiš' MAGA connection also points to the purpose it served all along. Babiš changed his profile picture and distanced himself from the MAGA-inspired hat after the January 6th Capitol assault (Muller & Hovet, 2021) as the increasingly negative connotations following the attempted coup and assault on democracy began overshadowing any positive aspects he sought to convey.

Banana populism can also articulate antagonistic frontiers on a more ad hoc basis. For example, Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán has worn traditional *Kazakh attire* on certain occasions. This aligns with Turanist narratives, which call for stronger "eastern relations" and assert cultural and linguistic ties to Turkic nations rather than to Europe. This wardrobe choice invites playful affective investment from those who subscribe to Turanist ideas, while visually excluding those who view Hungary's place in Europe as an important part of their (national) identity. Similarly, former UK prime minister Boris Johnson used memorable visual symbols to draw antagonistic frontiers. In 2019, he posed with a *smoked kipper* to criticize EU regulations on British fishermen. The fish, which he claimed came from a disgruntled fisherman who resented EU regulations, presented an easily graspable mode of affective investment for those who already held anti-EU sentiments, while alienating those who did not. This was part of a broader strategy, as Johnson's social media during the 2019 general election featured a visit to Grimsby Fish Market, where he was *photographed with freshly caught sturgeon*. His Instagram post connected the fish with the claim that he would "take back control of our waters," firmly positioning the fish as a symbol of the antagonistic divide over Brexit by implying that those against him were somehow threatening the fisherman (also in the photo) who caught the sturgeon. These instances further underscore the power of fish as an element in populist communication, as they can juxtapose the "ordinary" against the "elite" and *catch* people's attention by making the material stranger and thus more gripping.

### *Inviting Affective Investment Through Emotional Imagery*

This section examines how banana populist articulations create affective investment, contributing to the populist leader as an overflowing signifier (Ostiguy & Moffitt, 2020). We focus on the warm and fuzzy affect that we discussed above as a quintessential element of banana populism. One example of this is a *social media post of Orbán at work* with a tub of traditional Hungarian pickles, which connected with the public through cultural nostalgia while excluding those who reject this traditionalist vision of Hungary. The sight of Orbán carrying homemade pickles in Parliament created incongruous humor through its exaggerated normalcy, transforming an everyday object into a political prop that blended warmth and national pride with subtle exclusion.

Similarly, recognizable fashion can also add layers of emotion to political movements. By embracing the yellow Brazilian football jersey (Mendonça & Caetano, 2021), a staple of national pride, former Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro not only aligned himself with a beloved national pastime but also claimed the positive emotions linked with this emblem for himself. This act of repurposing blurred the lines between the personal joy of football fandom and the political landscape, embedding Bolsonaro's movement within the universally recognized symbol of Brazilian identity. This approach created a joyfully playful bridge between Bolsonaro and the broader public, leveraging the memetic power of fashion to embed political messages within the fabric of everyday life. Co-opting the jersey for his side of the antagonistic divide also opened up the possibility that people who feel drawn to the football team and agnostic toward Bolsonaro might identify more with him as a fellow supporter of Brazilian football. The jerseys, thus, were yet another avenue of identification emanating from Bolsonaro as an overflowing signifier.

Political pets also frequently appear as elements inviting affective investment. Czech right-wing leader Tomio Okamura *shared photos with dogs on Facebook*, both showcasing his love for dogs in a dog-loving country and criticizing then-Prime Minister Babiš for delaying an anti-animal abuse bill. This articulated Okamura as connected with the Czech nation through the shared love for dogs, opening up his movement beyond its typical topics like immigration and the EU. Babiš also often features his dogs *Ella* and *Gigi* in his social media communication, often without any political messaging attached. The posts tend to elicit positive comments about Babiš' qualities as a leader based on the love of animals that the photos articulate. They also articulate him, one of the richest men in Czechia, as just another guy who loves to hang out with his dogs, leveling him with his supporters and drawing them in with the warm and fuzzy affect. These animal appearances provide an emotional, behind-the-scenes look into the politician's life and promote memes and sharing, enhancing the politician's appeal (Laineste et al., 2022).

### *Mainstreaming*

In visual populism, mainstreaming is the process of integrating fringe or extreme ideologies into the mainstream public discourse through the deployment of familiar and relatable imagery. This use of visual elements normalizes and legitimizes unconventional political ideas, making them more acceptable and appealing to a broader audience. This mainstreaming process, as described in Gramsci's (1971) "war of position," operates at a symbolic and discursive level. It aims to normalize discourses that were previously considered morally repulsive or unacceptable, such as xenophobic, nationalistic, and exclusionary ideologies, through persistent visual articulation. Food-based articulations are a common

technique. Far-right AfD politician Beatrix von Storch posted a photo of herself *eating a Döner*, a German favorite of Turkish origin despite her usual xenophobic rhetoric, articulating herself as someone open to certain forms of multiculturalism. The innocuous appearance of enjoying a common food item masks the underlying extremist ideologies, making them more acceptable to the public. Similarly, fashion can mainstream populist identities. The *dark-green tie featuring golden retrievers* that Alexander Gauland, another AfD ex-leader, pairs with a tweed-jacket, softens his radical image by linking meanings associated with golden retrievers to Gauland's extreme ideology. This playful yet powerful visual element normalizes extremist positions and constructs a populist identity, allowing followers to connect with the movement through an approachable and "memeable" symbol.

Pets, especially cats, are another visual tool employed by far-right politicians like Marine Le Pen in France and Geert Wilders in the Netherlands to soften and humanize their images. During the 2017 presidential campaign Le Pen's shift in imagery included appearing in a *skirt on campaign posters*—a departure from the traditional neutral attire of female French politicians—and articulating her as more feminine (Belhadi, 2022) to attract women voters. Le Pen's transformation extended to her social media presence and her now-discontinued blog, "Notes of Hope," where she frequently appeared in scenarios that articulated her gentler side: *holding kittens, petting calves, walking on the beach, and holding more cats*. These visual articulations blend the personal with the political, and, as with Gauland, articulate the warmth and cuteness associated with those actions in connection with her, distancing her from the harshness often associated with far-right politics and broadening her appeal. Dutch right-wing leader Geert Wilders employed a similar approach with his appearance on a children's TV news program, "Cuddling cats with Geert Wilders," before his successful showing in the 2023 Dutch parliamentary elections. This example underscores how mainstreaming through visual populism utilizes everyday, relatable elements to mask and normalize extremist ideologies. Through food, fashion, or pets, populist leaders craft visuals that resonate on a personal level, making their political messages more accessible and acceptable to a wider audience.

### Authenticity

Central to banana populism is authenticity, which bridges populist leaders and the "authentic people" they claim to represent (Caiani & Padoan, 2020). Leaders emphasize their "ordinariness" through everyday symbols and behaviors that resonate with people's experiences, often using informal communication to distinguish themselves from traditional elites (Bucy et al., 2020; Ostiguy, 2017). For example, leaders like Salvini and Bolsonaro employ "food populism" through relatable cultural symbols, from Nutella references to ordinary bread rolls with condensed milk (Mendonça &

Caetano, 2021; Santamaría, 2020). Banana populist articulations, however, are not limited to portraying the "low," as long as they appear authentic. For example, technocratic populist Babiš shared his *truffle-hunting adventures* and attendance at *upscale wine festivals* on social media, while former UK Independence Party (UKIP) and Brexit Party leader Nigel Farage promoted *Farage-branded gin in Union Jack colors*, offering a more upscale alternative to the typical pub pint that still retains its essential "Britishness." While these activities are not "low" culture, they still contribute to articulating these politicians' authentic images by offering glimpses into their personal lives.

Clothing choices can also play a role in constructing and maintaining authenticity. After his 2002 election loss, Hungarian PM Viktor Orbán swapped his suits for checked shirts, symbolizing his turn to the *plebs* (Palonen, 2018). Since regaining power, though, he rarely appears not in a suit—the symbol of professionalism and (masculine) power (Szebeni & Salojärvi, 2022). This core image of authenticity is occasionally supplemented by strategic cosplay for specific occasions, such as his signature *black jacket and boots* that contribute to articulating an ongoing crisis at Hungary's southern border fence. By adapting his attire to different political scenarios while maintaining a consistent underlying persona, Orbán reinforces his authenticity; he not only talks about defending borders but also "looks the part," portraying himself as the nation's defender.

Militarism and military attire have also become central to Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky's social media presence since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, when he transitioned from his usual suit and tie to a signature military green uniform (Sánchez-Castillo et al., 2023). While this consistent military aesthetic serves a serious purpose—symbolizing national resilience and unity—it takes on additional meaning when Zelensky appears in military attire even during *international appearances* far from any war zone. The consistency of this serious performance across all contexts introduces an element of the absurd: a president conducting high-level diplomatic meetings in casual military wear rather than traditional diplomatic attire. This dynamic helped spawn the phenomenon we term "warbae," where people on TikTok, for example, shared images and videos of President Zelensky, fawning over him with statements like, "the fact that he is standing with his people. SO HOT 🔥." His memeable display of hegemonic masculinity, articulated through militarism and the traditional notion of man as the "defender," strongly resonated with international audiences.

Inauthentic military visuals, however, do not hold the same power. French president Emmanuel Macron attempted to re-enact Zelensky's war-torn aesthetics in his warless office, appearing in a *hoodie with an unshaven look*, a starkly different image from his usual elegant style. In doing so, Macron attempted to articulate himself as linked to Zelensky, another defender of the good, as Russia ramped up its

full-scale invasion of Ukraine, but the lack of affective charge behind the look and its lack of authenticity (why, after all, would Macron suddenly need a hoodie?) made it far less resonant than Zelensky's. This contrast highlights the importance of authenticity in banana populist performances. Zelensky's military attire resonated due to the genuine crisis in Ukraine, while Macron's imitation—which still retained the incongruous humor of banana populism—fell flat because it lacked authenticity. An instance from Babiš' 2023 presidential campaign further illustrates the pitfalls of inauthentic performances in banana populism. While politicians often use endearing elements like pets to appear more relatable, Babiš's *promise to adopt the elderly dachshund mix Lojza* if elected was widely perceived as a calculated move and a *misuse of Lojza* rather than a genuine gesture. This backfired, much like Macron's attempt to adopt Zelensky's aesthetic, because it crossed the line from authenticity into perceived manipulation. Both cases demonstrate that banana populism thrives when it authentically integrates into a leader's broader communicative performance but falters when it appears as disconnected or manufactured. The success of these articulations depends not just on their individual execution but on their coherent integration into the leader's established political narrative and style.

## Conclusion

This study introduces “banana populism,” as a framework for analyzing how populist politicians use everyday imagery in political discourse. By incorporating mundane objects like bananas, into political narratives, politicians can add warmth and humor that helps broaden their appeal beyond traditional supporters. These visual articulations, while seemingly trivial, are also important elements of “the ontic diversity of discursive or material contents that fill the form” (Vulović & Palonen, 2023, p. 12) and help delineate the antagonistic frontier of any given populist movement. Examples, like Trump's MAGA hats or politicians' use of pets, demonstrate how everyday objects can generate emotional connections with (pawtential) supporters while complementing traditional political messaging.

On the banana populist menu, humor and warmth are essential ingredients that transform the typically austere face of politics into something more approachable. This “wink and nod” approach not only humanizes leaders but also contributes to mainstreaming extreme political positions (Brown & Mondon, 2021). By embedding radical ideas in familiar, non-threatening imagery like döner kebabs or dog neckties, populist movements can bypass traditional ideological defenses, making extreme views more palatable to the general public under a guise of humor or normalcy.

The inherently engaging nature of banana populism thrives in today's social media-driven political sphere, where audiences actively participate by sharing and creating memetic content. When Orbán posted about his homemade

pickles, for instance, the response revealed banana populism's power to unite and divide: supporters shared their own experiences with pickle-making, while critics created memes mocking the absurdity of a head of state bringing tupperware to Parliament. Similarly, Trump supporters have transformed the MAGA hat into countless creative variations, from local versions (“Make [City] Great Again”) to issue-specific adaptations (“Make Space Great Again”). This participatory dynamic transforms the public from mere consumers into co-creators of the populist message, fostering communities around shared jokes and symbols that amplify political messages beyond traditional campaign strategies.

This study advances the field by offering a more comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding how seemingly trivial, everyday elements come to underpin the affective power of populist politics. While existing scholarship has addressed authenticity (e.g., Hartikainen, 2021; Lübke, 2021), charm (Sonnevend, 2024), relatability (e.g., Block & Negrine, 2017), and emotions (e.g., Salmela & von Scheve, 2018), it often stops short of explaining how these qualities collectively become accessible and meaningful to audiences. By foregrounding the role of mundane objects, subtle humor, and familiar cultural references—rather than overt comedy or explicit political messaging—our work demonstrates how an integrative lens of “banana populism” can congeal affective bonds that broaden a movement's reach. This approach highlights the micro-level symbolic processes that foster an environment for the dissemination and normalization of otherwise extreme positions. In doing so, we not only extend the current understanding of populist (visual) rhetoric into less examined, more banal cultural domains, but also offer an enriched vocabulary for analyzing previously disparate insights. In naming and theorizing this phenomenon as “banana populism,” we provide a distinct conceptual anchor that not only unites various strands of research but also encourages scholars to recognize and critically engage with these everyday, often-overlooked tactics as a coherent political vocabulary.

This inquiry lays the groundwork for future research that explores these performances further, especially within more varied cultural contexts, in the Global South, and from gendered perspectives. We also invite further, more systematic investigations into the nuances of banana populist communication from the strategic or political communication approaches, particularly studies that engage with the silly, the bizarre, and the whimsical dimensions that research has largely ignored. Future research could also explore the possibility that parasocial relationships with politicians—forms of psychological attachment developed through mediated interactions (Cohen & Holbert, 2021)—might be intensified by the affective charge in banana populist articulations. Such studies promise to enrich our understanding of the diverse strategies in populist rhetoric, offering a more comprehensive view of global populist trends and their influence on political landscapes. In addition, while our framework

highlights the importance of participatory dynamics in banana populist communication, future research should more deeply examine how audiences engage with, transform, and circulate these whimsical performances through social media. Our analysis primarily focused on leader-produced content, but the ways followers remix and recontextualize these performances warrant systematic investigation.

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