



# Emotions in Politics: Populism's Win?

Lisa S. Villadsen<sup>1</sup>,  
[lisas@hum.ku.dk](mailto:lisas@hum.ku.dk)

1) Associate Professor, Ph.D., Head of Section Dept. of  
Communication Section of Rhetoric  
University of Copenhagen.

## Abstract

The essay critically engages a political newsletter which problematically invokes rhetoric in a populist project by making the argument that emotions are a legitimate and sufficient guide to settling political questions, and by implication that facts often are unnecessary in political decision making. Arguing at the meta level--less about political issues and more about the way to reach and justify political positions--the text is a rhetorically adept defense of a populist approach to politics. The analyzed text is an illustration of populist-inflected rhetoric and, in virtue of its "theoretical" nature, also a blueprint for a particular kind of political culture informed by a populist epistemology which on central points is at odds with ideals of deliberative democracy. Analysis of the text reveals that it sets up its argument in a way that perpetuates the reason/emotion dichotomy that has marred the Western tradition and rhetorical studies for centuries; only it does so in an inverted version that promotes the role of emotions at the expense of knowledge. "People vs. elite" appeals recognizable from populism inform this move in an "emotions vs. academic/technocratic knowledge" version, and the newsletter's disarming

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tone and its implicit appeals to notions of “common sense” are discussed. The analysis in this essay suggests that populist ideas can be presented in ways that mimic mainstream or “high” political discourse. It is argued that the adoption of populist rhetoric in mainstream politics calls for critical attention by rhetorical theorists and critics.

## Introduction

The rise of populism – whether right- or left-leaning – in contemporary politics around the world testifies to political discontent building on ideas that explain pressing societal problems as arising from a deeply conflictual relation between “the people” against “the elite.” Much valuable research has been done to identify and characterize populism and populist discourse. Following an academic discussion about whether populism is characterized by a set of particular ideas or a certain worldview or not (a “thick” or a “thin” ideology) (Laclau, 2005; Mudde, 2004; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013, 2017), more recent scholarly contributions have suggested that populism should be understood as a political style with its own communicative characteristics (Ostiguy, 2009, 2017; Moffitt, 2016). Across the myriad definitions of populism there seems to be some general agreement that if anything, populism is a form of politics that appeals to people primarily on an emotional level. As David Zarefsky notes, there is a deeply emotional quality to populism as it responds to a sense of urgency allowing the deferment of calm consideration and deliberation (forthcoming 2020).

Take, for example, this anecdote about the shifting valorization of knowledge and facts in political discourse from the early days of President Trump’s presidency. Following a press conference where former White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer accused the media of misrepresenting the turnout for Trump’s inauguration and in turn presented falsities to support his claim that Trump’s inauguration had been witnessed by a record number of people, counselor to the President Kellyanne Conway the following day defended Spicer’s statement saying that it was based on “alternative facts.” She later defended the phrase defining it as meaning “additional facts and alternative information.” Anybody can misspeak, but in light of the photo documentation and transit information clearly showing a notably smaller turnout for Trump’s inauguration compared with Obama’s many people saw Conway’s touting of “alternative facts” as a real-life example of Orwellian speech patterns such as “blackwhite” (the ability to believe that black is white, to know that black is white, and to forget that one ever believed the contrary) and “good duckspeak” (automatic, vocal support of political orthodoxies).<sup>1</sup> Banal, even petty, as it may seem to bicker about the size of an audience, the anecdote is interesting because it illustrates how gainsaying factual evidence was found to be politically expedient, but not more so than there was still a perceived need to pay lip service to the authority of facts (albeit “alternative” facts) in determining a matter.

With the above in mind, I focus in this essay on the implications for rhetorical studies of arguably the greatest victory of populism: its reintroduction of appeals to emotion as a sovereign principle in political debate and the concomitant suspicion against fact-based evidence or expert opinion. I discuss a text that takes a clear stand on the matter and makes the argument that emotions are a legitimate and sufficient guide to settling political questions, and by implication that facts often are unnecessary in political decision making. This point merits attention from scholars of rhetoric because it would seem that, finally, a prominent politician has understood some of the central tenets of rhetoric: that persuasion is multi-dimensional, that politics is normative, and that the ideological and ethical bases of

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<sup>1</sup> According to Wikipedia, within four days from the interview, sales of George Orwell’s novel *1984*, famous for its “newspeak” – a language intended to limit individualized expression and freedom of thought – exploded and in just four days 9,500 copies were sold, making it the number one bestseller on Amazon.com ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alternative\\_facts](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alternative_facts)).

these norms are emotional as much as they are informed by reason. The fact that the text, remarkably for a short political weekly newsletter, invokes Aristotle and some of his ideas about rhetoric to argue for the superiority of emotions is further reason for rhetoricians to consider it.

I am motivated by the idea that politics and the field of rhetoric must resist ceding the terrain of emotion to the pyrotechnics of demagoguery and populism or they run the risk that balanced, ethical rhetorical argumentation ends up being considered tame and uninspiring. Such an effort can take practical, theoretical, and critical forms. I address the theoretical aspect briefly below, but my purpose in this essay is primarily critical, namely to provide an analysis of a newsletter promoting an argument that would implicate rhetoric in what I consider illiberal use of emotional appeals. Before we turn to the newsletter, a few more words on the theoretical interest that frames the reading are in place.

## Populism: A Wake-Up Call to Rhetorical Studies

Researchers from a range of fields have discussed the nature of populism as a political trend as well as its merits and problems. Some thinkers, e.g. Ernesto Laclau (2005) and Chantal Mouffe (2018), theorize populism as an emancipatory project for the great majority of people who feel abused by economic and political institutions and powerless in resistance against them. While some elements of populism arguably can be legitimate (e.g. lending a voice to underserved population groups and protesting technocratic rule) and may have positive effects on the political life of a community (e.g. mobilizing political interest more broadly), other scholars, e.g. Müller, regard populism as an essentially illiberal political project because it operates with a notion of ‘the people’ that is exclusionary and promotes a postulated univocal “will of the people” at the expense of deliberative ideals and the possibility of political compromise (Müller, 2016; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013). Due to populism’s moralistic (rather than ideological) basis, it lends itself to antagonistic and vilifying discourse as several discourse analysts have demonstrated (Wodak, 2015, 2019; Wodak, et al., 2013). Although academic disagreement on how to evaluate populism persists, a common assessment is that populism poses a threat to liberal democracy due to its antagonist attitude to core principles of deliberative democracy (Saurette, Gunster, 2011; Müller, 2016). In European popular discourse the term populism is often negatively loaded and used to refer to politicians who offer overly simplistic answers to complex questions, and who appeal to particular in- and outgroup agendas such as “people vs. elite” or “nationals vs. foreigners.” The fact that very few politicians or political parties have used the term populism to describe their own project seems to confirm the negative valorization associated with the term populism. As we shall see later it is a term even a politician from a nationalist, anti-elite, anti-Muslim, anti-immigration, anti-EU party balks at having attributed to his party.

To the extent that the advance of populism in politics around the world rides on its use of emotional appeals, it poses a particularly interesting challenge to the field of rhetoric studies. Since the time of Aristotle, rhetoric scholars have been teaching and writing that appeals to emotion in persuasive discourse are not only effective but indeed necessary. As Aristotle says in the *Rhetoric*, “[t]he emotions are those things through which, by undergoing change, people come to differ in their judgments” (2.1.8). The important thing about Aristotle’s view of emotions is that emotions are not just expedient in terms of effectiveness, they are also considered integral and thus legitimate and valuable in the deliberative process. Aristotle understood that emotions are modes of relating to the facts of the world. They are never random but tied to our perception of facts: “things do not seem the same to those who are friendly and those who are hostile, nor [the same] to the angry and the calm but

either altogether different or different in importance” (2.1.2). We find a similar thought in Simon Haines’s book *Renegotiating Ethics in Literature, Philosophy, and Theory* where he suggests that judgment happens in a meeting of cognition and a kind of emotional grasp informed by sensory and moral impulses. In short: “the moment of judgment (krisis), which is also a moment of recognition, of the sudden feeling of really understanding something, lies literally within your sensory, imaginative, and moral apprehension of it (aesthesia)” (p. 28). Importantly, although Aristotle considers the art of rhetoric morally neutral and thus useful for good as well as for bad, his discussion of emotions is informed by his virtue ethics, and therefore allows for evaluation by norms regarding relevance and degree. Anger, for example, can be legitimate in someone who has been slighted or cheated, but unreasonable if directed at the wrong person or if disproportional or too long-lasting.

Rhetoric is not alone in claiming the centrality of emotions to a healthy political culture. Martha Nussbaum is an example of a philosopher who has argued against conceiving of emotions as separate from and often a threat to reason, claiming instead that emotions are integral to making sound decisions. In her book *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* she writes about the necessity of cultivating emotions in politics: “If we think of emotions as essential elements of human intelligence... this view entails that without emotional development, a part of our reasoning capacity as political creatures will be missing” (2003, p. 3). In her later book, *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice*, Nussbaum offered two reasons why it is important to engage emotions in politics: “All political principles, the good as well as the bad, need emotional support to ensure their stability over time, and all decent societies need to guard against division and hierarchy by cultivating appropriate sentiments of sympathy and love” (2013, p. 2-3). Again, we see a normative approach to emotions in political life: they must be appropriate, and in Nussbaum’s view that means conducive to democratic principles and a commitment to a more just and inclusive society.

Still, much like unwanted endorsements in the political world, rhetoric potentially faces the embarrassment of having populist discourse confirm common perceptions of rhetoric as the art of demagoguery. How can scholars of rhetoric affirm the acknowledgement of emotion as a legitimate source in political decision-making without “handing over” rhetoric as just the art of pandering and manipulation? One step would be to clarify how the rhetorical tradition’s approach to emotions assumes that they are part and parcel of reasoned argumentation and that it combines considerations of effectiveness with normative standards typically taken from theories of deliberative democracy. But more work is needed. It is a paradox in rhetorical studies that there is a dearth of research on populism since it is not only a topic of significant contemporary public and academic interest but also a topic that in significant ways involves the age-old charge against rhetoric: that it is essentially an art of manipulation and demagoguery. With the exception of Patricia Roberts-Miller’s important work on demagoguery, including the popular book *Demagoguery and Democracy*, surprisingly little scholarly attention has been paid to this topic and to populism. Ryan Skinnell and Lilian Murphy write that “rhetoricians... still have much work to do because their grappling with the terms demagogue and demagoguery has not been a progressive, cumulative project, nor even a consistent one” (p. 226). The two authors’ recent guest edited issue of *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* is a welcome and valuable effort to begin to fill this lacuna, not least because it discusses the theme in the context of political environments, asking not just what demagoguery is, but what its conditions for emergence are. The special issue, however, does not address the closely related topic of populism – even though the word is used as a synonym for demagoguery (p. 226) and shares many of the characteristics mentioned for demagoguery, including “us” vs. “them” thinking and “unidimensional” argumentation (p. 229). Perhaps this lack of an

explicitly stated relationship between populism and demagoguery is to some extent a matter of geographical perspective. Whereas populism in the US has mainly been associated with particular a political movement in domestic politics in the 20th century, political scientists in Europe and elsewhere have adopted the term to refer to political movements characterized by strong leadership, a people vs. elite logic, and erosion of democratic institutions. Several of the politicians mentioned by Skinnell and Murphy as examples of demagogues--Le Pen, Erdogan, Orbán, Duterte, and Bolsonaro--would thus be considered populist figures in other disciplines. It may be that demagoguery is so closely akin to what scholars like Benjamin Moffitt and Pierre Ostiguy call *populist style* that they are in effect two terms describing the same phenomenon. This is, however, a question in need of more extensive inquiry than this essay allows.

## Politics is First and Foremost About Emotions

My more modest purpose here is to critically engage a text which problematically invokes rhetoric in a populist project. By so doing I also respond to a matter also raised by Skinnell and Murphy (2019), namely that in addition to coming to a better understanding of the rhetorical workings of demagoguery/populism, rhetoricians also need to study the conditions and the rhetorical culture that give rise to it (p. 229). The text analyzed below (and found at the end of this essay) sheds light on both aspects; it is an illustration of populist-inflected rhetoric and, in virtue of its “theoretical” nature, also a blueprint for a particular kind of political culture informed by a populist epistemology which on central points is at odds with ideals of deliberative democracy. Analysis of the text reveals that it sets up its argument in a way that perpetuates the reason/emotion dichotomy that has marred the Western tradition for centuries; only it does so in an inverted version that promotes the role of emotions at the expense of knowledge. I also show how “people vs. elite” appeals recognizable from populism inform this move in an “emotions vs. academic/technocratic knowledge” version, and I discuss the newsletter’s disarming tone and its implicit appeals to notions of “common sense.”

The text under discussion is a 567 word newsletter published on July 25, 2017 on the website of the Danish People’s Party in the section “Kristian’s weekly newsletter” [Kristians ugebrev].<sup>2</sup> The Danish People’s Party [Dansk Folkeparti] is a value conservative, welfare positive party with a clear anti-immigration and anti-EU profile, and has until recently been considered the most populist among the established political parties in Denmark with its combination of nationalism and anti-elitism.<sup>3</sup> According to my experience, the typical Danish People’s Party voter is an older, non-urban man with a lower range income with limited or no secondary education. Founded in 1995, the Danish People’s Party has grown almost consistently until the most recent election (June 2019) and managed to influence Danish politics to the extent that views (especially on immigrants and Muslims) that were considered outlandish 20 years ago are now mainstream in Danish politics. With 21% of the popular vote earned in the 2015 general election the party until recently<sup>4</sup> was the second largest representation in the Danish Parliament, only surpassed by the Social Democrats. Moreover, the party’s welfare-for-Danes agenda is so dominant that its closest competitors to the left (the Social

<sup>2</sup> <https://politiken.dk/indland/politik/folketingsvalg2015/art5580388/Sådan-ser-Dansk-Folkeparti-vælgeren-ud>. The translation of the newsletter is by the author. All subsequent English quotations of this newsletter are from this translation.

<sup>3</sup> Two new parties, Nye Borgerlige [New Conservatives] and Stram Kurs [“Tight Course”, author’s own transl.], currently challenge the Danish People’s Party as the most populist party in Denmark with blanket rejections of status quo political systems combined with extreme anti-immigration profiles and nationalistic agendas.

<sup>4</sup> In the general election June 5, 2019, The Danish People’s Party lost a stunning 21 seats in Parliament, some to the two new anti-immigration parties, some to the Social Democrats whose strict immigration policy has been shaped to retain voters who sympathize with Danish People’s Party anti-immigration stance.

Democrats) and the right (The Liberal Party) have adapted their policies on key topics such as immigration and welfare to be almost overlapping with those of the Danish People's Party.



*Peter Skaarup, MP*<sup>6</sup>

This particular newsletter received more media attention than most, likely as a result of its unusual topic in combination with a slow news period (summertime).<sup>5</sup> Although these newsletters typically set out the party's position on current affairs, this text is remarkable in that it almost takes the form of a brief popular lecture on the rather abstract topic of the place of emotions in politics. Arguing at the meta level--less about political issues and more about the way to reach and justify political positions--the text is a rhetorically adept defence of a populist approach to politics.

Authored by Peter Skaarup, MP and leader of the Danish People's Party's Parliamentary group, the newsletter follows a trajectory from the more abstract to the more specific.

The first part of the argument unfolds from a universal perspective (the way humans are physiologically/psychologically wired to interact with their surroundings) then moves to an historical perspective (the beginning of human civilization) and ends with the western intellectual tradition. It then narrows to the topic of politics and the need to reject expert knowledge as necessary. The reason given for this is that all citizens are equally qualified to partake in politics (by simply accessing their emotions). The final paragraph focuses on the widespread disaffection with politicians and explains it with reference to elite groups' ignoring of the people's wishes, illustrated by examples of political topics where the Danish People's Party defines itself in opposition to the political establishment. The newsletter ends with a call for recognition of the interconnection between political leadership and the populace and their feelings.

Skaarup's overall claim is that it is wrong to overrule or disparage the influence of emotions on our way of making decisions and navigate in a modern society. Drawing on history ("since the first primitive societies..."), on philosophy and rhetoric ("The Greek philosopher Aristotle..."), and on contemporary science ("New Danish research...") Skaarup builds the argument that "we are all born to be 'experts' in politics" because it requires "neither an academic exam nor any particular degree of knowledge to make decisions about what the Danish society should look like." Emotions, Skaarup explains, helped our forefathers determine how the result of the day's hunt should be distributed and help us today decide "how crime should be punished," how much students should get in state stipends, and "who can get welfare." Asserting that "there is no correct result in politics--only feelings and viewpoints," Skaarup goes on to explain that concepts such as true and false or good and bad do not belong in politics (the former, he explains, is a matter for science; the latter for ethics). And therefore, he argues, politics "should not be made into science." To bolster this claim he cites "new Danish research" for having shown that feelings make us engaged as citizens in democracy. On this ground Skaarup rejects any notion that it be "less fancy or even downright

<sup>5</sup> In addition to newspaper coverage, the newsletter was taken up by the Danish Broadcast Corporation tv program "Detektor". In this clip on the program's Facebook page the journalist met Peter Skaarup in the building that houses the Danish Parliament and asked him, "Why is it not important what is factually true?" <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=10155000983395949>

<sup>6</sup> Obtained from <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:DF-Skaarup.jpg>

bad form” to let one’s emotions rule in political questions. Linking the topic closer to current public debate, Skaarup then mentions that “certain politicians, intellectuals and journalists” are prone to “forget” that participation in politics “requires neither an academic degree nor any special degree of knowledge to make decisions about what the Danish society should look like” and that they are “too busy lecturing the Danes about what they ought to think” when what they should be doing is listening. He links the widespread disaffection with politicians to their “ideological castles in the air, condescending analyses, and political correctness” and to people not feeling listened to and their concerns not being taken seriously. By way of conclusion, Skaarup calls for a halt to the thinking that there is a contradiction between political leadership and reason on the one hand and on the other involvement of “the Danes” and their feelings.

Few would disagree with the overall points in Skaarup’s argumentation: Indeed, general dissatisfaction with politicians can probably be explained in part by a sense of alienation between ordinary people and a seemingly faceless technocratic rule; it is as misguided to pit reason against emotion as it is pitting political leadership against those led; and as political theorist Bryan Garsten argues in his book *Saving Persuasion* (2006) feeling personally, emotionally involved in civic matters probably makes for more engagement and better judgment. All in all, Skaarup here levels an accurate and relevant criticism against mainstream politics as it is driven by economic and neoliberal principles. This criticism is also relevant for academic fields such as political theory and rhetoric to the extent that they have ignored or downplayed emotion in theoretical work on public deliberation and related topics.<sup>7</sup>

In Skaarup’s text these points are, however, part of a larger framework that is less generally persuasive. Underneath the lecture-like defence of an intuitive approach to politics and the manifesto-like call for the involvement of “ordinary people” and their sentiments, the text reads as a response to an implied criticism of the Danish People’s Party as being populist (anti-expertise, anti-elite) and as an impassioned justification for the party’s particular approach to politics. The clear, albeit unstated, implication is that the Danish People’s Party represents precisely the attitude called for: a focus on the feelings of their voters and a healthy scepticism of technocratic politics. The text thus presents not just a view on the place of emotions in decision making, but an argument for the legitimacy of the Danish People’s Party and its approach to politics. As such it is a skilful defence of a populist approach to politics.

## Epistemological Populism

In the following section I introduce the concept of epistemological populism and discuss the newsletter’s implied audience to show how it gains rhetorical force by means of this approach to knowledge claims. The concept driving the reading is *epistemological populism* which I introduce after a brief description of the text. I aim to demonstrate how the text’s championing of emotions in politics serves two purposes: it is partly a defensive move to counter criticism of the party (addressed primarily to longtime party members) and partly a move to legitimize the party and its emotional, anti-expertise approach to politics (addressed primarily to hesitant sympathizers). In one sense, the newsletter is playing it both ways. It acts as a detached defence of emotions and as an exercise in epistemological populism.

Remarkable for a text on the indispensability of emotions in politics, the newsletter uses no emotive adjectives and mentions no feelings--with the exception of the Danish

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<sup>7</sup> In the field of rhetoric there are now several strands of research that promise to remedy this oversight, including recent work on affect and new materialisms.

neologism “politician disgust” [politikerlede].<sup>8</sup> The text seemingly forwards its claim on the basis of reasoning and well-rounded learning. This paradox is the key to understanding its power.

A place to begin is with the view of rhetoric Skaarup presents with his mention of Aristotle, who is invoked for his description of humankind as a political animal, “*zoon politicon*,” and for his account of (two of) the rhetorical modes of appeal, *logos* and *pathos*. Skaarup does not mention the word rhetoric (possibly because that word may carry negative connotations to his readers), but presents Aristotle’s teaching about the modes of appeal as part of his philosophical musings about the nature of mankind. The effect is, however, that Skaarup perpetuates a skewed version of rhetoric as primarily working through emotional appeals, paying only lip service to logos appeals (in the form of superficial references to history and science). Skaarup omits Aristotle’s concept of ethos (the credibility of the source), thereby misrepresenting the philosopher’s point about the interdependency of persuasive appeals. All the while he makes use of ethos appeals, presenting himself as a man of learning and experience who has the best interest of his voters at heart, and who can call political foul play when he sees it. As suggested, the newsletter has a lecture-like tone and also in other respects mimics academic argumentation--most clearly in its references to sources outside itself. Even at a structural level, the text complies with traditional ideals about formal textual qualities: it is clearly structured (past, present, future) and clearly argued with easily identifiable claims, warrants, and backings (Toulmin), as well as argument markers such as *hence* [derfor, altså], *therefore* [derfor], and *even though* [selvom]. It also draws on short examples and other clarifying elements, e.g. *thus* [da også], *in other words* [med andre ord], *namely* [nemlig]. At the same time the text is kept in relatively simple language with clear syntax, short sentences, and few foreign words. The appeals to higher learning are kept at a general level; the “contemporary research” referenced is without specification of the scientific field or the nature of the research. In this way, the letter projects a rationality that plays on traditional logos-oriented appeals but does not mention the exact nature of the research or any kind of nuance. The result of this rather sophisticated combination of pathos and ethos appeals is a text that is sophisticated in its persuasive appeal: in structure, style, and content it pretends to make logos appeals while in fact relying primarily on emotional appeals. The author’s stance can be characterized as one of “common sense cool,” and after a discussion of the text’s underlying approach to knowledge claims I shall return to how this stance informs Skaarup’s relation to the implied audiences.

The notion of *epistemological populism* helps explain the text’s ambivalent appeal to knowledge and how Skaarup turns an alleged weakness in his party (over-reliance on emotions at the expense of expert knowledge in the party’s politics) into a virtue. Several scholars have pointed out how one significant aspect of populism’s dichotomization of “the people” versus “the elite” concerns knowledge and expertise and their place in politics. Paul Saurette and Shane Gunster have labelled this *epistemological populism* and characterize it as a framework that employs “a variety of populist rhetorical tropes to define certain types of individual experience as the only ground of valid and politically relevant knowledge” (203). They further describe how epistemic populism is discursively created by means of various rhetorical techniques and assumptions: a) the valorisation of specific types of experience as particularly reliable sources of legitimate knowledge and the extension of this knowledge authority to unrelated issues; b) the privileging of emotional intensity as an indicator of the reliability of opinions; c) the use of populist-inflected discourse to dismiss other types of knowledge as elitist and therefore illegitimate; d) the appeal to “common sense” as a

<sup>8</sup> Elsewhere in this text I have used the translation “disaffection with politicians” for the same phrase, but here a literal translation underscores the strong feeling involved.



discussion-ending trump card (199-204). Skaarup employs all these strategies to varying degrees. He celebrates personal, intuitive assessment as an age-old basis for decisions affecting the community and uses populist-inflected discourse to dismiss the contributions of knowledgeable actors (“certain politicians, intellectuals, and journalists”) as “[i]deological castles in the air, supercilious analyses and political correctness”; and appealing to common sense as a discussion-ending trump card. As for using emotional intensity as an indicator of reliability and the appeal to common sense, we noticed that there are no direct appeals to emotions we shall see that Skaarup’s affective commitment comes out via sarcasm regarding mainstream politics’ reactions to the Danish People’s Party’s main agenda points. The central attention getting feature of the text, however, is that Skaarup, contrary to the expectations of the readers of the newsletter and party supporters, here seems to speak in the language of those whom he would combat. This plays out in the text’s conspicuous performance of logos appeal: the theoretical topic, the “emotions vs. knowledge” theme, the chronological overview, the citing of epistemic authorities ancient and contemporary, the explanatory tone with examples and elaborations of abstract points all contribute to the “lecture”-like tone. Skaarup (who is a high school graduate with no higher education, but dresses and behaves like “elite” politicians) in this way performs a kind of a rational approach usually associated with mainstream parties on what Ostiguy calls the “high” (a socio-cultural and political-cultural manner of self-presentation characterized by good manners, composure, high learning, and a rationalist or ethically oriented discourse) (Ostiguy 2009; Ostiguy, 2017, p. 6). Skaarup’s epistemological populism is thus far from being crass (or on Ostiguy’s “low,” an approach to politics characterized by language using slang or folksy expressions and more raw, culturally popular tastes (Ostiguy 2017, p. 7), but builds the persona of a knowledgeable and sensible politician with an authentic respect for the population’s concerns. This knowledgeable, experienced, and almost avuncular ethos also comes about through tone: Skaarup strikes a balance between acting calm and reasonable (demonstrating a reflexive stance) and venting frustration against the political establishment (signalling that he is a man of the party). We could call it “common sense cool.” With remarks about politicians and intellectuals being “busy lecturing” the people, and the flat rejection of the notion that it is “less fancy” or “bad tone” to allow emotions in politics, the letter clearly plays on a “people vs. elite” logic along the lines of epistemological populism. This manner of address partakes in Saurette and Gunster’s characterization of populist epistemology in that it “valorizes notions of ‘the people’ and the common sense that is attributed to them” and also involves an attack on the ‘elitist’ views held by academics and political progressives” (p. 203). And when Skaarup writes, “There is no correct answer in politics--just emotions and opinions. Concepts like true and false or good and evil simply do not belong in the political space. True and false belong in the world of science, and good and evil is a question of morals,” he echoes what Silvio Waisbord characterises as the populist view of truth, namely something that does not exist as a common good, but is an “ideological illusion of liberalism” (p. 29). This hostility to the mainstream also comes out in the mentioning of the Danish People’s Party’s hot button issues (crime, border control, EU, social welfare, and political correctness) in this almost ranting passage where discontent is piled upon discontent:

*When the Danes want permanent border control it is rejected with dubious arguments about it not helping to reduce border crossing crime, when the Danes’ skepticism regarding the EU for three decades has been misinterpreted with the explanation that the EU positive referendum campaigns must have failed (understood: the Danes could not possibly really want less EU), or when the need for a tax reform is promoted even though the Danes want*

*social welfare more than tax cuts, well, then it is no wonder that the Danes feel ignored.*

The piling up of complaints and Skaarup's polemical rendition of the condescending attitude of mainstream politicians echo and affirm a sense of frustration among the party's voters that their political position is not taken seriously by mainstream politicians.

Importantly, this tone contributes to the creation of a particular kind of rapport with the readers central to populism (Ostiguy, 2009, p. 2). This rapport rests on the text's construction of its audience, and we now turn briefly to consider the nature of this construction. Throughout the text, connections between the abstract topic and the reader are made, most manifestly via the collective pronoun "we" (referring to mankind), and from the third paragraph with increasing frequency specific reference to Danish politics and Danish citizens. Notably this is done in a totalizing way, using the definite form "the Danes" nine times, each time suggesting that Danes are a homogenous group who share the same views on all political topics. The rapport with the readers is further established via the tone undergirding the surface lecture. Even though the text is relatively mild mannered (no explicit invective, no swear words) compared to Moffitt's (2016) characterization of populism's "bad manners" as "a coarsening of political rhetoric" (p. 44), Skaarup nevertheless performs a "disregard for 'appropriate' modes of acting in the political realm" also mentioned by Moffitt such as the sarcastic tone apparent in snide comments such as "certain politicians" and "ideological castles in the air." Similarly, we recognize elements of what Ostiguy would suggest as markers of the "low" in the tone of address, e.g. "busy lecturing" and the rejection of the alleged charge that allowing feelings to guide politics is "less fancy" or "downright bad tone"--all of which works to support the text's organizing principle of "elite" versus "the people."

Finally, when Skaarup exclaims, "And politicians who take the concerns of the Danes seriously are accused of being populists" readers of the text will understand the allusion to, and reaction against, a common theme in mainstream Danish political commentary about the Danish People's Party being populist.<sup>9</sup> This language is clearly defensive, but Skaarup maintains an air of coolness by not deigning to engage in explicitly defending the party, yet at the same time clearly signalling indignation on behalf of the party and suggesting that the accusation adds injury to insult. Underneath the polished presentation there is, in fact, a strong feeling of resentment. In Ostiguy's terms, Skaarup performs "the low" in a "high" manner, thereby presenting a version of his party suitable to justify its politics to middleclass voters who sympathize with the party's agendas but are hesitant to be associated with its social profile as the party of uneducated people and "village fools." At the same time, it offers long-time members a seemingly rational justification for both their approach to politics and their resentment.

## Thoughts and Rhetorical Implications

In the opening of this essay, I suggested that populism presents a particular challenge or opportunity for rhetoric to rethink and articulate the role of emotion in political discourse. The newsletter analyzed illustrated how a key insight of rhetorical theory, the centrality of emotion in persuasion, was appropriated in a manner that at first glance seemed plausible, but on closer examination turned out to not only distort rhetorical teachings, but also imply a controversial approach to politics.

<sup>9</sup> In 1999, a former Prime minister, Poul Nyrup Rasmussen, speaking at the lectern in the Danish Parliament, famously declared that the party, no matter how much effort was made, would never become "housebroken" [stuerene]. ([http://www.stm.dk/\\_p\\_7628.html](http://www.stm.dk/_p_7628.html)). See also <https://tv.tv2.dk/video/cGlhc3R1ZXJlbg>

Skaarup's overall point, that emotions alone are *enough* as a guide in politics, is, however, flawed and makes a caricature of political deliberation as something you can feel your way through. There is a reason why political institutions have been set up to not let intuition, or in Daniels Kahneman's (2011) terms "fast thinking," have the day but instead allow for "slow" thinking, i.e. testing of assumptions, critical reflection, opposing accounts, etc., also. Even if one does not see the faultiness in Skaarup's claim that matters of true and false and good and evil do not belong in politics (but in science and ethics respectively), just thinking one step further along one of his opening examples, e.g. how to punish crime, will soon reveal its weakness: In practical politics feelings, e.g. about the severity of different crimes and appropriate reactions to them, differ and without recourse to knowledge about societal impact, recidivism, etc. and ethical considerations about retaliation and justice, the prospects of resolving on a particular kind of punishment would be dim. Or put in different terms, if emotions are the only guide in politics, that makes the key tasks in passing legislation, namely negotiation and compromise, all but impossible since emotions by this view are "natural" and as such nonnegotiable because they are expressions of common sense. This view of the absolutism of (a particular group's) emotions is consonant with populism's general approach to notion of "the people's" values and interests; they are seen as given and morally correct as is and therefore not up for discussion. To argue that emotions form a sufficient basis for political action is thus problematic because it ignores the existence of diversity of opinion and feeling and obscures a host of principles informing rhetorical and democratic traditions including the acceptance of opposing views, the fact of conflicting interests, and the usefulness of argumentation in reaching political solutions that work for a diverse populace. A belief in the superiority of emotions as a guide in politics risks ignoring and blocking dissent by assuming that there is a "natural" and universally shared view of things. To be true to the deliberative ideals built into the democratic tradition, one needs to be wary of positions that delegitimize dissent and the inventive potential when differing views meet in democratic debate.

One of the many ways in which rhetorical theory can contribute to the general understanding of populism is to continue the work on how affective and emotional impulses interact with and indeed are integral to what would traditionally have been called reason. As Carlton Clark and Lei Zhang remind us, "without some degree of emotional appeal, reasonable arguments supported by facts do not persuade or move us" and we must therefore both internalize and labor to disseminate the fact that the cognitively and the emotionally oriented parts of our brain in fact work in concert and not in opposition to each other (2019, p. 3). David Gruber has contributed importantly to this effort by bringing the insights of experimental psychology and neuroscience studies into rhetorical studies and suggested what he calls a "Stronger Affective Defense of Rhetoric", namely one that prioritizes the body and its degrees of affectability (2016). Building on such scholarship, rhetorical critics have an important task in showing how there is no binary distinction between populist and non-populist rhetoric, but that most political discourse partakes in some of the elements attributed to populism. This suggests a need for more research on the viability of distinguishing between "essential" and "accidental" populist discursive characteristics. As the analysis in this essay showed populist ideas can be presented in ways that mimic mainstream or "high" political discourse. Similarly, the study of the adoption of populist rhetoric in mainstream politics calls for scrutiny. These will be different in different geographical settings. The text analyzed in this essay could e.g. form the ground for research about domestication of populism in Western Europe and how this discourse is adopted by mainstream parties competing with populist parties. One particularly interesting strategy to focus on is "common sense" appeals in various manifestations (the

liberal version often claims to be “the only reasonable solution” or “the best solution for all”) because of their ambiguous nature; they are attractive by virtue of their simplification of complex issues, but as Saurette and Gunster (2011) suggest such appeals have “significant political impacts insofar as [their] epistemic inclusions and exclusions make certain political positions appear self-evident and others incomprehensible and repugnant” (p. 196), or in other words: that problematically assume consensus on social and political issues in a given society. In addition to discussing the implications for public debate culture of this rhetoric, rhetoricians are also positioned to offer constructive and viable reactions to populist rhetoric. At this political moment there is significant public interest in learning about how to engage in public debate, and rhetoricians are perfectly positioned to transform theoretical and critical insights into practical advice and useful guidelines, particularly with regard to what kind of evaluative criteria are appropriate in rhetorical practice that embraces emotional or affective appeals.

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## Translation of the newsletter, by Lisa S. Villadsen

### **Politics is first and foremost emotions.**

Every day we are bombarded by countless news. The many impressions place high demands on our brain that has to process it all. Were it not for our well-developed sensory apparatus it would be difficult for us to relate to the many complex issues we are presented with each day. For example, the sensory apparatus helps us determine how crime should be punished, how big student stipends should be, or who can get welfare. There is, thus, a kind of meaning to emotions because they reflect earlier life experiences. This is the reason why one should not neglect or diminish the role of emotions in our way of making decisions and navigate in modern society.

Since the first primitive societies humans have made use of emotions when political decisions had to be made. When our ancestors had to decide how the day's kill was to be distributed, if the sick and injured should also have a part of the kill, or if he who slayed the animal should have a greater share than the others, they relied on their feelings. In fact, the Greek philosopher Aristotle described man as *zoon politicon* (sic) – a political animal. By this he meant that man is made to think politically and solve problems together. With his modes of appeal *Logos* (reason) and *Pathos* (emotion) he put into words the reasonableness of considering emotions on par with reason as a natural part of man's political nature.

We are in other words all born to be “experts” in politics. It therefore requires neither an academic degree nor any special degree of knowledge to make decisions about what the Danish society should look like. Something which certain politicians, intellectuals, and journalists tend to forget. They are busy lecturing the Danes about what they think when in fact they ought to listen more. And politicians who take the concerns of the Danes seriously are accused of being populists.

Politics should not be made into science. There is no correct answer in politics – just emotions and opinions. Concepts like true and false or good and evil simply do not belong in the political space. True and false belong in the world of science, and good and evil is a question of morals. That it should be less fancy or downright bad form to allow one's emotions to reign in political matters is, paradoxically, disconfirmed by science. New Danish research has thus shown that emotions among other things is what makes us rational, well-informed citizens in democracy. We involve ourselves more in political questions when we can feel them.

In recent years we have seen a growing distrust with politicians. This is very much due to the fact that citizens are not sufficiently listened to. Ideological castles in the air, supercilious analyses and political correctness should take a backseat to the themes that the Danes find relevant. When the Danes want permanent border control it is rejected with dubitable arguments about that it will not work to bring down border crossing crime, when the Danes' skepticism regarding the EU for three decades has been misinterpreted with the explanation that a given EU positive referendum campaign must have failed (understood: the Danes could not possibly really want less EU), or when the need for a tax reform is postulated even though the Danes want social welfare more than tax reliefs, well, then it is no wonder that the Danes feel ignored.

This is why we have to get away from the idea that there is a contradiction between political leadership and reason and involving the Danes and their feelings.

Kind regards,  
*Peter Skaarup*



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