Abstract

Despite most studies emphasizing negative emotional appeals as a key characteristic of populism, a growing body of research indicates that populist parties are shifting towards significantly more positive appeals. This paper analyzes the construction of positive emotional rhetoric by populist candidates in the 2022 French presidential campaign. Focusing on the far-left candidate Jean-Luc Mélenchon and the far-right candidate Marine Le Pen, this study aims to decipher how these actors evoke three positive discrete emotions, namely joy, hope and trust, in their official propaganda materials. To proceed, the official propaganda materials for the 2022 presidential election (including candidacy announcements, professions of faith, and short or long broadcasts) were analyzed in an explanatory sequential mixed methods design. The initial quantitative phase employed the National Research Council (NRC) Lexicon to assign the three positive emotion categories to the dataset. Subsequently, qualitative content analysis produced eight campaign themes which were further delineated into twenty-four codes. These codes were then attributed to the sentences that scored for the three positive discrete emotions. To proceed with the analysis of distinctions between the far-left and the far-right populist strategic use of positive emotions, three hypotheses were formulated. These hypotheses guided the categorization of prominent emotion types and focal codes invoked by the two candidates. The findings of this study have implications for future research on positive emotional appeals and suggest that the candidates strategically invoke positive emotions in alignment with populist-left and right-wing ideology.

Keywords: populism; French elections; political campaign; positive emotions; NRC Lexicon.