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Ad populum arguments in a political context

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An appeal to the opinion of a lot of people or even to the majority of people – also known as *ad populum* argumentation – is often regarded as argumentation that is inherently fallacious. Nevertheless, politicians today often refer to ‘the will of the people’ and present this will as a relevant factor for decision-making in a democratic society. This paper addresses some considerations regarding the rationality of this type of *ad populum* argumentation.

KEYWORDS: *argumentum ad populum*, bandwagon variant, descriptive vs. prescriptive standpoint, fallacy, linguistic devices, political context, popular opinion, pragma-dialectical approach

1. INTRODUCTION

The *argumentum ad populum* is a well-known type of reasoning in argumentation theory; nevertheless, it has not yet received a great amount of attention in the literature. Many textbooks do mention the argument, but their accounts are most often rather short, boiling down to the conclusion that the fact that a lot of people hold a certain standpoint cannot guarantee the correctness of that standpoint. As an illustration, Copi & Cohen (1990, p. 104) cite Bertrand Russell, who says that because of the ‘silliness of the majority of mankind, a wide-spread belief is more likely to be foolish than sensible.’ One could therefore think that there is not much to remark about this type of argument other than that it is simply a fallacy. However, some authors say that a distinction should be made between rational and irrational instantiations of *ad populum* argumentation, e.g. Douglas Walton in his 1999 monograph called *Appeal to popular opinion*. In this paper I will explore this presumption.

I will start with a discussion of the question of whether *ad populum* arguments could be rational under certain conditions. To this end I will provide an overview of the norms that are mentioned by different authors in the literature. In this overview I will explicitly take into account the type of standpoint that is supported with the *ad populum* argument. Where ideas or concepts can be clarified by a translation into pragma-dialectical terminology (van Eemeren &

Grootendorst, 1992, 2004; van Eemeren, Grootendorst & Snoeck Henkemans, 2002), I will do this. My conclusion is that authors who hold the view that *ad populum* arguments are always fallacious adhere to an epistemological concept of this type of argument, which I believe does not occur in real discourse. Empirical research is needed in order to examine the drafting of naturally occurring *ad populum* arguments and the commitments that result from a particular formulation.

Before I proceed, it should be noted that the label '*ad populum* argument' is also in use for an appeal to the emotions of the public. This is the so-called 'mob appeal' (Walton, 1992, p. 82), referring to argumentation that makes use of expressive language and other devices calculated to excite an audience. The variant that is discussed in this paper concerns the argument that, because a large number of people hold a certain opinion, we should accept that opinion. This variant of *ad populum* argumentation is labelled the 'bandwagon' variant (Minot, 1981, p. 230; Freeman, 1995, p. 266; Govier, 2010, p. 162).¹

2. SINGLE VERSUS COMPLEX *AD POPULUM* ARGUMENTATION

Many examples and descriptions of an *ad populum* argument in the literature concern the so-called 'factual' type. This involves a variant in which a descriptive type of standpoint is supported. In such a standpoint, the proposition is of a factual nature, which means that it indicates an actual state of affairs – it indicates how things are (i.e. according to the arguer), either in the present, the past or the future. In this variant standpoints are defended that either read 'X is the case', 'X was the case', or 'X will be the case'.

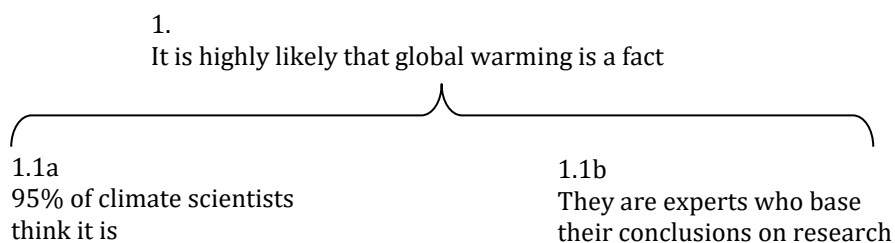
It can be deduced from the literature that it is not only descriptive standpoints that are connected to *ad populum* arguments. They can also support prescriptive standpoints, for example in contexts such as advertising and deliberation (Minot, 1980, p. 230; Nolt, 1984, p. 250; Johnson & Blair, 2006, p. 179; Govier, 2010, p. 161). After all, the aim of an *ad populum* argument used in these contexts is to ensure that the product is bought or that the course of action is followed. Thus, in these contexts we can expect a prescriptive type of standpoint, such as 'Buy X', or 'Action X should (or: should not) be carried out'.

A great deal of the literature on *ad populum* arguments conveys the opinion that these arguments are always fallacious, notwithstanding the type of standpoint they support. This view is often illustrated with the fact that history provides many examples of many people believing matters that afterwards appeared to be false. For example, for a long

¹ Literally, this argument is called, according to Govier (*ibidem*): 'the fallacy of jumping on a bandwagon'.

time people believed the earth was flat (Kahane, 1984, p. 56) and in a certain period Hitler's ideas were very popular (Toulmin, Rieke & Janik, 1984, 146). However, one might wonder whether *ad populum* arguments cannot sometimes provide some reason, some indication to accept a standpoint, albeit provisionally. As for the factual type – the type containing a descriptive standpoint – one could wonder whether it does not say something that the large majority of climate scientists claim that there is evidence for global warming. To just brush aside such a claim would be too simplistic. Similar cases are discussed by Walton (1999, pp. 201-205; 2006, pp. 91-93), who concludes that they consist of a combination of *ad populum* arguments and other types of argument, such as *position to know arguments* or *appeals to expert opinion*. It is the combination with these other types of argument that makes these instantiations of *ad populum* argumentation more reasonable.

In reply to Walton's analysis of these examples, however, Godden (2008) argued that these do not match what he calls the 'basic form' of *ad populum*. According to Godden, the cases discussed by Walton are not just plain *ad populum* arguments where '(...) the argument from popularity alone provides good reasons to accept its conclusion' (*ibidem*, p. 109). In pragma-dialectical terms, Godden distinguishes between complex *ad populum* argumentation, i.e. the cases discussed by Walton, and single *ad populum* argumentation, where the appeal to the view of a lot of people is the only element of the argumentation. According to Godden, Walton's examples draw their rationality from additional premises that are presupposed in the argumentation, namely that the group of people referred to are experts.² My (pragma-dialectical) analysis of the appeal to climate scientists makes that clear:³

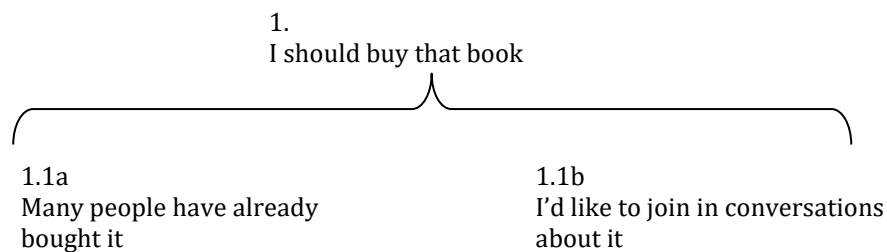


² In this respect, Godden also mentions another example, i.e. one that is discussed in Walton, Woods & Irvine (2004, p. 37). In that example, the argument would actually consist of an instance of inference from the best explanation.

³ See for the pragma-dialectical method for reconstructing argumentation Van Eemeren, Grootendorst & Snoeck Henkemans (2002, Ch. 5).

As Godden argues, and I agree with him, the cases discussed by Walton (and likewise my example about climate scientists) cannot negate the judgement that *single ad populum* arguments supporting a descriptive standpoint ‘do not provide an adequate reason for accepting the conclusion’ (*ibidem*, p. 108).

What does Godden’s criticism imply for *ad populum* arguments supporting a *prescriptive* standpoint (cases that Godden did not consider)? Both Walton (1999, p. 34 ff.) and Kahane (1984, p. 57) write that it could be reasonable for an individual to decide that she wants to buy a bestseller or to see a blockbuster, just because she knows that her taste coincides with popular taste or with majority taste.⁴ Or because she wants to be able to join in conversations about books or films that everyone is talking about. Indeed, these may be good reasons for an individual to take this action. But, again, this is not because of the *ad populum* itself, but because of the additional reasons provided. In these examples, too, it is not the appeal to popularity alone that supports the prescriptive standpoint ‘I should buy the book’ or ‘I should see the movie’. Other considerations such as wanting to join in conversations are part of the argumentation as well, as is apparent from the following reconstruction:



It may thus be concluded that there is a group of *ad populum* arguments that are not fallacious. This group involves complex argumentation, in which the reason that a lot of people endorse the standpoint supports the standpoint in combination with an additional reason, that ‘bolsters’ the argumentation (Walton, 2006, p. 92) and therefore removes the fallaciousness.

3. NORMS FOR AD POPULUM ARGUMENTATION IN A POLITICAL CONTEXT

⁴ See also Walton (1999, Ch. 2) for more cases involving a prescriptive standpoint.

One might conclude from the above that a single *ad populum* argument is always fallacious. That an opinion is held by many people can never guarantee its correctness. Nevertheless, one could wonder whether this is also true for 'political' *ad populum* arguments containing a prescriptive standpoint concerning a policy proposal. After all, should there not be some relation between how people in a society think about certain societal developments on the one hand and actual policy making on the other? Johnson & Blair (2006, p. 179) remark, for instance, that it would be strange if public opinion were largely to deviate from the laws that shape society. Minot (1980, p. 230) expresses it even more strongly: '(...) in a democratic society, the desire of the populace is the means for deciding an issue' [underlining is original]. These remarks imply that *ad populum* arguments can be legitimately used by arguers in a discussion on policy proposals.

One of the authors paying particular attention to *ad populum* appeals used by politicians is Andone (2015). She discusses argumentation in which a European politician refers to the political barometer in order to sustain her standpoint that more should be done about equal rights for men and women:

Gender equality is a long-lasting commitment for the EU. The results of a recent Eurobarometer show that nearly all Europeans agree that equality between women and men is a fundamental right, and a large majority of citizens believe that tackling inequality between women and men should be a priority for the EU. [underlining is mine, HJ]
([http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/seance_pleniere/comppte_rendu/revise/2015/03-09/P8_CRE-REV\(2015\)03-09_XL.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/seance_pleniere/comppte_rendu/revise/2015/03-09/P8_CRE-REV(2015)03-09_XL.pdf))

Andone has some doubts with regard to the rationality of the *ad populum* appeal in this particular example, but it is her view that rational instantiations of popularity appeals in a political context are possible.⁵ She (2015, p. 1) strengthens this claim by citing some authors from political and social theory who have stated that an appeal to the majority is an important element in democratic decision-making

⁵ If I understood Andone correctly, the strategic function of *ad populum* appeals used by politicians is that they are a means to evade the burden of proof. That is, when a politician appeals to majority opinion, the commitment to this opinion lies with this majority, and not with the politician who referred to it. Because the politician's audience is part of the majority appealed to, the likelihood of criticism being expressed is minimised. Andone argues that further research should make clear whether the politician's evasion of the burden of proof is a fallacious practice.

(Lomax Cook, Barabas & Page, 2002; Holzinger, Reinhard & Biesenbender, 2014).

A similar view seems to be held by Oswald & Hart (2013, p. 10) when they discuss an example of a British politician referring to the will of the people in order to sustain the standpoint that immigration numbers should be limited:

- The majority of British people (...) are united on this issue.
- Everyone wants new people to settle as long as numbers are limited.
- Talk to people and whatever their background, religion or the colour of their skin – they ask the same thing: ‘Why can't we get a grip on immigration?’ These are the people who are always ready to welcome genuine refugees to Britain, or families who want to work hard and make a positive contribution to our country.
- But I've lost count of the times that British people of ethnic backgrounds have told me that firm but fair immigration controls are essential for good relations.
[underlining is mine, HJ]

Although these authors provide a negative assessment of their example, they, too, seem committed to the idea that *ad populum* appeals could be rational under certain conditions. One of these conditions is that there should be evidence for the claim that a lot of people hold the alleged standpoint.

It is Walton's book on appeals to popularity where some considerations can be found concerning this 'democratic' popular appeal. These are the following:

- Questions can be raised with regard to the reliability of opinion polls (Walton, 1999, pp. 2-10, p. 125). This is an interesting elaboration on the criterion – mentioned by Oswald & Hart (see above) – that the number of people referred to should be sustained with evidence. According to Walton, a lot can go wrong in such a survey, i.e. whether a representative sample has been carried out, or whether the way the questions have been formulated is unambiguous and not misleading.
- In decision-making, it is important to exercise caution with regard to the tyranny of democracy (*ibidem*, p. 11; this concern was already mentioned by Toulmin, Rieke and Janik in 1984, p. 146).⁶ After all, the idea that public opinion should be reflected in the laws of a society is not the only aspect of a democracy. Another

⁶ Walton draws this from Tocqueville; Toulmin, Rieke and Janik from J.S. Mill.

characteristic is that minorities should not be discounted by majority opinion.

- Nothing changes so quickly as public opinion, which makes it a less reliable foundation on which to base legislation (Walton, *ibidem*, p. 11).⁷

To these considerations I would like to add a consideration taken from an essay by Jan-Werner Müller on populism (2016, p. 41). Müller says that it is often politicians themselves who are responsible for public opinion – for what the public thinks or feels. Müller gives the example of the following quote, uttered by Turkish President Erdogan in July 2016: ‘What do my people want? They want the death penalty!’ Erdogan started the discussion about the death penalty himself and has been a strong proponent of such a policy.

Looking at this list of considerations regarding the rationality of *ad populum* argumentation supporting a prescriptive standpoint, it strikes me that they can easily lead to a negative evaluation of political *ad populum* arguments. In principle it seems to be a good idea to take public opinion into account when discussing policy making. However, there are a lot of pitfalls, which do not speak in favour of the use of *ad populum* arguments in deliberations on particular issues. In my view, there is a lot to say for Walton’s final judgement about these arguments, which is that they can never be the only reason for following a certain policy. They could provide *some* weight supporting a policy proposal, but independent, substantive reasons should always be considered and weighed (see also Anderson, 1979, pp. 720-721). The conclusion must then be that *ad populum* argumentation is often very weak, but not fallacious per se. It may function as an indication for accepting a prescriptive political standpoint, but this indication should, amongst other things, be considered in the light of different interests and the rule of law.

It should be noted that the situation I have been discussing here is whether an *ad populum* argument could be a good argument to use in a political *discussion*, e.g. when it is used by one politician against a fellow politician or in an attempt to convince an audience. My remarks about the inadequacy of an *ad populum* argument in such a discussion does not have any consequences for the legitimacy and sufficiency of a majority vote in institutionalised decision-making, for example by means of a referendum.

4. THE VIEW THAT *AD POPULUM* ARGUMENTATION IS ALWAYS FALLACIOUS

⁷ This concern is also drawn from Tocqueville.

In the last section, single *ad populum* argumentation supporting a prescriptive standpoint in a discussion on policy making is regarded as a weak but not per se fallacious argument. This view competes with another approach, also supported in argumentation theory, that any *ad populum* argument, no matter what kind of standpoint it supports, is always fallacious. Johnson & Blair (2006) seem to represent this approach by making a distinction between *ad populum* arguments on the one hand and the application of democratic principles on the other. One such principle is that in certain situations it can be agreed by the participants that decisions – e.g. about how to proceed – should be based on a majority vote. Whereas this principle consists of a *procedural* rule with regard to majority opinion, an *ad populum* argument is based on a *criterial* rule, i.e. that majority opinion is a criterion of the ‘truth or plausibility’ of that opinion (*ibidem*, p. 178). Only the latter is fallacious.

A similar distinction is made between *ad populum* appeals and applying ‘the principle of popular sovereignty’ (Johnson & Blair, *ibidem*, p. 179). The latter refers to the idea that laws should be based on the will of the populace. It is applied when a majority vote in an election gets particular political consequences, e.g. law-making. According to Johnson & Blair, such an application is not the same as an *ad populum* appeal, because in the latter case, the standpoint is defended that the voters’ opinion is the ‘correct’ view:

But the vote does not prove that the majority was correct in its opinion. It would be quite consistent to acknowledge the authority of the vote while maintaining that the majority was wrong. (*ibidem*)

In conclusion: an application of the democratic principles described above does not imply a judgement about the soundness of the decision gained by a majority vote, whereas an *ad populum* argument does. An *ad populum* argument is supposed to imply that the fact that a lot of people prefer a certain decision makes this decision ‘correct’. This interpretation of *ad populum* arguments is also expressed in Johnson & Blair’s formalisation of these arguments as ‘Everyone believes that P is true, therefore P is true’ (*ibidem*, p. 176). (Although the authors do not say this explicitly, one should presumably read ‘correct’ instead of ‘true’ in situations where a prescriptive standpoint is at stake.)

In my opinion, this view is problematic. It entails that in a discussion about policies any appeal to the opinion of the majority constitutes a fallacious *ad populum* argument. The fallaciousness stems from the fact that in such an argument the majority is supposed to function as a criterion of the correctness of the standpoint. But why

would we attribute this interpretation of an *ad populum* argument to an arguer? Why can't we interpret an *ad populum* in a discussion in a procedural way, as I did in the former section? When an arguer – e.g. a politician in parliament or just someone having a discussion with a friend – defends the standpoint that the government should adopt policy X because a lot of people think it is the best course of action, why can't she just mean that the view of a large group of people is a relevant consideration in political decision-making? I really don't see why this arguer would be committed to the view that the fact that the amount of people holding a preference for this policy makes this policy the 'correct' one in a criterial sense.

Moreover, Johnson & Blair's view becomes all the more problematic if we look at how *ad populum* arguments are formulated in real discourse. When do these arguments ever fit an abstract scheme like 'Everyone believes that P is true, therefore P is true'? Does this kind of *ad populum*, by which it is concluded that the standpoint is true or correct, exist at all? First of all, arguers often leave the standpoint of *ad populum* argumentation implicit, as – paradoxically – Johnson and Blair have observed themselves (*ibidem*, p. 177).⁸ But even if the standpoint has been explicitly expressed, how can we know whether the arguer was committed to a criterial or a procedural interpretation of her appeal to a lot of people? In a corpus study that I carried out on the speeches of Geert Wilders, a Dutch anti-immigration politician, Wilders never concludes from his appeals to the people that they render his standpoint correct.⁹ On the contrary, one way in which Wilders refers to the will of the people is by stating his own view and then adding that he is not the only one who has this opinion, as in 'I want fewer Moroccans, and that's what many other Dutch people think'. Or he labels himself expressly as the spokesman for a lot of people, as in 'On behalf of all those millions of Dutch people that you no longer represent, I say ...'. Another technique is to not even mention his own opinion any more, but simply to state that a lot of people find this or that, according to opinion polls, e.g. 'Two-thirds of the Dutch people are against immigration'. A final technique looks like the former but the difference is that the actual number referred to remains vague: 'A lot of people are against immigration'.

It is my impression, not only from this corpus study but also from examples that I gathered from other contexts, that arguers

⁸ As an illustration, they give the example of a discussion where one of the discussants maintains that smoking marihuana should be forbidden because it is harmful. In this discussion, the other discussant could reply by saying: 'Oh, come off it! Nobody believes that nowadays!' In doing so, the standpoint that marijuana is not harmful is left to the interpretation of the hearer.

⁹ The corpus consists of speeches by Geert Wilders published on his party's website pvv.nl.

formulate *ad populum* appeals in such a way that they can never be pinned down on a line of reasoning saying that because a lot of people agree with them, this makes their standpoint true or correct. In order to examine this claim, we need to shift our attention from abstract schemes like 'Everyone believes that P is true, therefore P is true' to naturally occurring arguments and find out how *ad populum* arguments are formulated in real discourse. Presumably, many real-life instantiations of *ad populum* argumentation can be regarded as the result of strategic manoeuvring with presentational choice (cf. van Eemeren 2010, Ch. 4). The strategy lies in the fact that, on the one hand, the ways these arguments are formulated makes it hard to accuse the arguers of committing a fallacy. They can always respond to such an accusation by saying that they did not intend the number of people to imply that their standpoint is correct. They can always say that they meant that it does at least say something about a particular matter if so many people have a certain opinion, and that it would be wrong to ignore this opinion. On the other hand, these formulations are strategic because the reference to a lot of people evokes our natural inclination to join the majority. Oswald & Hart (2013, p. 6) explain that '[a]d populum operates on the back of conformity bias', which means that joining the group gave us evolutionary advantage and is therefore engrained in our cognitive capacities. As Jackson (1995) has already observed, this human predisposition would explain our tendency to be misled by *ad populum* arguments.

5. CONCLUSION

What can we conclude about the rationality of *ad populum* arguments? For an answer we have to make a distinction between single and complex *ad populum* argumentation. When additional reasons are added in order to justify the appeal to the majority because of specific circumstances, the argumentation, which has then become complex, does not have to be fallacious per se. With regard to single *ad populum* argumentation, we have to distinguish between the kinds of standpoints that it defends. *Ad populum* arguments supporting a *descriptive* standpoint are always fallacious. In my view, this judgement does not hold for a *prescriptive* standpoint. It is true that there are several drawbacks regarding the use of majority opinion in deliberation. However, *ad populum* arguments in a political context cannot be dismissed as fallacious per se. I concluded on the basis of a survey of the literature – mostly Walton (1999) – that *ad populum* arguments supporting a prescriptive standpoint in a political context can be regarded as insufficient but still rational. This means that the standpoint they support needs additional, substantive support.

A discussion of Johnson & Blair's approach (2006), claiming that *ad populum* arguments are also fallacious if they defend a prescriptive standpoint, showed that these authors use a criterial interpretation of the appeal to a lot of people. It is not very realistic, however, to assume that *ad populum* arguments in this understanding can be encountered in real discourse. Even if arguers believe their inciting standpoints to be true or correct, they cannot be held to be committed to such a belief if they did not say this explicitly. In order to test this claim, an empirical investigation is needed of what arguers actually do say when uttering an *ad populum* argument. I believe that it is highly useful to shift our attention to how arguers draft *ad populum* argumentation in real discourse. An analysis of a small corpus of speeches by the Dutch politician Geert Wilders yields the impression that different categories can be distinguished demarcated by variation in linguistic means.

Follow-up research should be conducted to examine systematically whether the four categories that I distinguish in this paper are exhaustive. Furthermore, for each of these categories it should be ascertained to which line of reasoning an arguer can actually be held committed. To this end, we need to invoke the help of linguistics. A linguistic approach could open new ways for developing criteria to meet the urgent need for evaluation of *ad populum* arguments. In light of increasing populism in international politics, I believe it is necessary to get to grips with the value of appeals to 'the will of the people'.

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