Blaming in the name of our people: how attitudinal congruence conditions the effects of populist messages communicated by traditional media, politicians, and citizens

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ABSTRACT

Social Network Sites (SNSs) provide a platform for different actors to directly communicate populist ideas. Politicians and citizens can bypass elite media by directly speaking to the people via social media. Although a growing body of research has investigated the effects of populist messages, extant research has not explicitly compared how the dissemination of populism by (1) traditional media, (2) politicians, and (3) ordinary citizens can activate populist attitudes on the demand-side of the electorate. Relying on a comparative experiment in three countries (the US, UK, and the Netherlands, $N = 1,096$), this paper shows that the effects of populist messages on populist attitudes are contingent upon four factors: (1) the likelihood of selecting populist content in real life, (2) relative deprivation, (3) political cynicism, and (4) identification with the "ordinary people" as a source of populist ideas. There are no direct effects of populist communication by the news media, citizens, or politicians. Source cues on their own thus do not make populist communication more or less persuasive. Together, this study shows that people are most likely to be persuaded by populist messages when these messages confirm dissent, source identification, and media exposure patterns.

Against the backdrop of the global electoral success of populism, a growing number of studies point to the pivotal role of online and social media in getting populist messages across (Engesser, Ernst, Esser, & Büchel, 2017; Ernst, Engesser, Büchel, Blassnig, & Esser, 2017). Social Network Sites (SNSs) are assumed to provide a supportive platform for populist politicians, who are enabled to directly communicate to their electorate whilst circumventing established media channels (e.g., Engesser et al., 2017; Ernst et al., 2017; Hameleers & Schmuck, 2017). Just like politicians, ordinary citizens frequently communicate populist sentiments via social media such as Facebook or Twitter (Hameleers & Schmuck, 2017). Against this backdrop, the main question this paper aims to

answer is: What are the effects of populist messages communicated by political versus nonpolitical actors via online media channels, and which segments of the electorate are most likely to be persuaded by populist messages?

This study aims to provide insights into important unexplored areas in populism research. First of all, in current high-choice online media settings, populist communication can be disseminated by different actors. Extant research already compared the effects of ordinary citizens and populist politicians as sources of populism (Hameleers & Schmuck, 2017), but did not compare the effects of online populism by citizens and politicians to news sources communicating populism independent of political actors – also known as media populism or populism *by* the media (Krämer, 2014; Mazzoleni, 2008). Even though content analytic research has not found strong support for an overall populist bias in mainstream media (e.g., Bos & Brants, 2014; Wettstein, Esser, Schulz, Wirz, & Wirth, 2018), we do see that references to populist cues in the media increased over time, and that citizens encounter populist worldviews in different news media (Hameleers & Vliegenthart, 2019). Therefore, it is important to compare the persuasiveness of populist ideas communicated by news media versus citizens and politicians.

Second, the role of attitudinal congruence as a mechanism driving the effects of populist communication has only been taken into account to a limited extent, and more implicitly as moderators of populism's effects (e.g., Aalberg, Esser, Reinemann, Strömbäck, & de Vreese, 2017; Matthes & Schmuck, 2017). The role of attitudinal congruence is especially relevant to consider in the context of populist communication – a discourse that does not yield universal support across society (e.g., Aalberg et al., 2017). Moreover, the ideational approach posits that the effects of populist frames on the activation of populist attitudes are conditional on the extent to which populist interpretations resonate with contextual opportunity structures (Hawkins, Carlin, Littvay, & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018). Due to the affordances of digital media, political actors and citizens can circumvent journalistic gatekeepers and directly engage with segments of the population that are most likely to perceive the message as attitudinal congruent – and therefore reach people that are most susceptible to persuasion. In this paper, we specifically regard political cynicism (Bos, van der Brug, & de Vreese, 2013) and relative deprivation (Elchardus & Spruyt, 2016) as dimensions of attitudinal congruence, as they correspond to susceptibility to blame attributions to the elites and in-group threat emphasized in populist communication.

Third, despite the fact that content analytic research has shown that populist messages can be disseminated by various professional and nonprofessional communicators in politics, media, and public opinion (e.g., Wettstein et al., 2018), we do not know which sources are most persuasive for which citizens. Although Hameleers and Schmuck (2017) found that right-wing populist politicians and ordinary citizens are most persuasive when supported by the

public, source support may play a different role for news sources that are less likely to establish an emotional or personal attachment to receivers. In addition, we do not know if findings from a Western European setting also apply to a bi-partisan and polarized media and political system where source identification may play a different role: Are the effects similar across Western European countries and the US?

Against this backdrop, this study investigates how attitudinal congruence and source support condition the persuasiveness of populist messages communicated by traditional news media, citizens, and politicians in three different countries: the UK, the US, and the Netherlands. The findings of this study demonstrate under which conditions different types of online populist communication activate or prime populist attitudes among citizens, hereby contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of populist cues spread by journalists, citizens, and politicians.

The effects of populist communication

Populist communication can be defined as a discourse, strategy, or style that emphasizes a binary divide in society and politics. Populism frames the ordinary people in opposition to the corrupt elites, who are accused of depriving the people of their cultural, political, or socio-economic status (e.g., Aalberg et al., 2017; Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). The emphasis on a societal divide between the ordinary people and the corrupt elites has been referred to as the essence of populism (e.g., Aalberg et al., 2017; Mudde, 2004; Taggart, 2000). Mudde (2004) emphasizes that populism is not a full ideology, which means that the divide between the people and the elites is the "thin" core of populism that can be supplemented by various host ideologies, such as nativism or anti-immigration framing in right-wing populism (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). In this paper, we specifically focus on online populist communication, which can be understood as populist communication spread via online channels – such as social media or online news websites – in which the emphasis on the antagonistic divide between the ordinary people and the "corrupt" elites is made salient. When populist framing is used in news articles independent of the populist ideas of other actors, we consider online populist communication as media populism (e.g., Krämer, 2014; Mazzoleni, 2008).

Many studies have investigated the effects of populist messages on receivers' attitudes, emotions, or behavioral intentions (e.g., Bos et al., 2013; Matthes & Schmuck, 2017; Müller et al., 2017; Wirz, 2018). As postulated in the ideational approach to populism (e.g., Busby, Gubler, & Hawkins, 2019; Hawkins et al., 2018), exposure to populist ideas may activate or prime populist perceptions in voters. Populism is most persuasive in situations where it is used to credibly interpret a situation as a central divide between the ordinary people and

culpable elites (Hawkins et al., 2018). We follow the ideational approach and expect that the persuasiveness of populist ideas is contingent upon the extent to which populist worldviews are personally relevant and credible. Here, we define populist attitudes as individual-level perceptions of an antagonistic divide between the ordinary people and the corrupt elites (e.g., Schulz et al., 2018).

In line with the premises of social identity framing, messages that emphasize an in-group threat should appeal to citizens that feel personally addressed by the threat, and perceive the out-group as a credible scapegoat for their problems (e.g., Gamson, 1992; Polletta & Jasper, 2001). In this paper, we specifically regard political cynicism (Bos et al., 2013) and relative deprivation (Elchardus & Spruyt, 2016) as dimensions of attitudinal congruence that make populist cues more personally relevant. Hence, the more people distrust the political establishment, and the stronger perceived in-group deprivation, the more personally relevant populist interpretations that emphasize a divide between the people and the elites should be.

Finally, as we manipulate the source of populism as central independent variable, it is important to assess the role of source support or liking on the persuasiveness of populist cues (Hameleers & Schmuck, 2017). Although these factors may also correspond to congruence with other types of discourse (i.e., a lack of trust in other groups of citizens), we believe that these perceptions make the in-group threat and elitist scapegoat central in populism more personally relevant, which, in turn, should activate populist attitudes.

Likelihood of selection, political cynicism and perceived deprivation

Likelihood of selecting populist messages

People's media choices oftentimes follow a confirmation bias (e.g., Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2017). This means that people are most likely to approach information that confirms their prior held beliefs. Exposure to attitudinal congruent content, in turn, reinforces the beliefs people already hold on a certain issue (Stroud, 2008). This bias can be explained as resulting from the desire to avoid cognitive dissonance (e.g., Festinger, 1957). Specifically, to avoid discomfort caused by exposure to incongruent messages, people should approach content in line with their prior attitudes, or avoid incongruent content.

This self-selection bias, and the attitude-reinforcing effect of exposure to congruent content, can also be applied to populist communication. Hence, exposure to populist messages should have the strongest effects on populist attitudes among people that would normally also select these messages. This causal relationship can be understood as a reinforcing spiral. In other words: populist attitudes may both be a cause and consequence of exposure to

attitudinal-congruent populist messages. People with populist attitudes are known to prefer certain media platforms and types of information that align with their worldviews (Hameleers, Bos, & de Vreese, 2017), meaning that populist attitudes are an antecedent of exposure to populist communication. This also implies that, after exposure to populist content that activates people's populist attitudes, a stronger tendency to approach more populist communication may be cultivated. Exposure to congruent populist worldview may, in turn, further reinforce existing populist attitudes (Müller et al., 2017). We first of all hypothesize: Populist communication has stronger effects on populist attitudes for people that are likely to select similar content in their daily newsfeed than people that are likely to avoid such content (H1).

Perceived relative deprivation

Relative deprivation can be defined as people's perception that their in-group is relatively more victimized and neglected than other societal groups, such as refugees or immigrants (e.g., Elchardus & Spruyt, 2016). People who feel relatively deprived perceive that other groups or individuals get more than they in fact deserve: others are allowed to profit at the expense of the in-group. The populist storyline thus addresses the threat experienced by people higher in perceived relative deprivation (Elchardus & Spruyt, 2016). People who feel that they are left behind whilst others are allowed to profit should thus be most susceptible to populist arguments that address the experience of disenchantment. Against this backdrop, we introduce the following hypothesis: Populist messages have the strongest activating effects on populist attitudes for people with more pronounced perceptions of relative deprivation (H2).

Political distrust

Populist messages attribute blame to the established political order. These attributions of blame should be most credible and relevant for people that actually distrust the establishment. In line with this reasoning, Bos et al. (2013) found that politically cynical citizens are most susceptible to persuasion by populist arguments. Different from relative deprivation, which taps into the experience of in-group injustice, perceptions of political cynicism and distrust are related to the out-group threat cultivated in populist communication: the more people distrust the political establishment, the more likely they are to accept attributions of blame to the elites they distrust. People who distrust the elites should regard the elites as a more credible scapegoat than people who trust politicians (Gamson, 1992; Polletta & Jasper, 2001). We therefore hypothesize: Populist communication has stronger effects on populist attitudes for people with more political distrust/cynicism than people who have more trust in politics (H3).

The role of source support

In this paper, we explicitly compare the persuasiveness of media populism (Bos & Brants, 2014; Krämer, 2014; Mazzoleni, 2008) to online populist communication disseminated via social media (e.g., Engesser et al., 2017). The affordances of digital media ecologies allow politicians, citizens, and news media to *directly* communicate populist sentiments to their audience. Yet, online populism has mainly been studied as the social media strategies of politicians, who use social network sites such as Twitter or Facebook to circumvent journalistic elites and to directly speak to the ordinary people (e.g., Engesser et al., 2017; Waisbord & Amado, 2017).

However, using social network sites, the people that are said to be "silenced" are also empowered to speak on behalf of their deprived in-group (Hameleers & Schmuck, 2017). Using social media, they can thus attempt to resolve the power discrepancy between their silenced in-group and the unresponsive elites. Hameleers and Schmuck (2017) found that populist messages spread by citizens and politicians can be effective when these sources are supported. Yet, for populism spread by news sources, different mechanisms may apply. In addition, it remains an open question whether these mechanisms apply to left- and right-wing issues across multiparty and bipartisan national settings. In the next section, we therefore explicate the different mechanisms related to source support for the different communicators considered in this paper.

Trust in mainstream media outlets

For populist communication disseminated by traditional media to be effective, it is important to consider the extent to which people actually trust these established media outlets. If people distrust mainstream media channels, they may not be persuaded by messages that originate from these sources. We thus hypothesize: Populist communication disseminated by traditional online news media is more persuasive for people at higher levels of media trust than people at lower levels of media trust (H4).

Approving the politician as a credible source of political news

Populist politicians express closeness to the ordinary people by speaking the people's voice and by raising the concerns the people are facing. Different from the established political order, they present themselves as ordinary people with similar concerns, fears, and hopes as the people they claim to represent. Previous research has indicated that populist messages communicated by (populist) politicians are most persuasive when people support the source (Hameleers & Schmuck, 2017). An explanation can be derived from social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978). If politicians are regarded as part of people's in-group, they may be seen as more

positive, credible, and reliable than when they are perceived as distant from the in-group. We hypothesize that the effects of populist communication by politicians on populist attitudes are stronger for people who support the politician than people who do not support the source (H5).

Identifying with the ordinary people

Content analyses of populist and anti-immigration discourse by citizens on Facebook demonstrate that citizens communicate their views to people they perceive as part of their in-group (Ouellette & Banet-Weiser, 2018). In other words, people tend to share their populist sentiments with like-minded others, connecting with imagined communities of ordinary people they feel close to. In line with this reasoning, empirical evidence indicates that the effects of populist communication sent by members of the ordinary people are strongest when people identify with ordinary citizens (Hameleers & Schmuck, 2017).

The premises of social identity framing can be extrapolated to the conditioning role of source support on the activation of populist attitudes. People that are susceptible to persuasion by populist identity frames are likely to identify with an in-group of ordinary people. Likeminded citizens who share their dissent may be the most credible sources of populist messages: they voice the collective deprivation of the ordinary people as part of this in-group. We therefore hypothesize: Populist communication by ordinary citizens has the strongest activating effects on populist attitudes for people that identify with the ordinary people (H6).

Comparing the effects of populist communication across contexts

The hypotheses on populism's persuasiveness are tested in different national settings. The country selection is based on a most-different systems design: a country with a successful prototypical right-wing populist party in opposition (The Netherlands) is compared to the surge of radical right-wing populism in a bipartisan non-European setting (US) and a national setting in which populist ideas can mostly be connected to a specific polarizing political development – the Brexit (UK). Although these cases are different in terms of (1) the political and media system, (2) the presence of populism in the opposition or establishment and (3) contextual factors such as perceived distrust in politics and the media, they may all offer favorable opportunity structures for the expression of populist ideas.

In the Netherlands, right-wing populism has been electorally successful from the 00 s onwards (Aalberg et al., 2017). At the time of data collection, Geert Wilders' Freedom Party (PVV) is the most influential and electorally successful right-wing populist party in the Netherlands. Although Britain may have a less well-established history of influential populism, the UKIP (United Kingdom Independence Party) has been relatively successful in 2015 (Aalberg

et al., 2017). This success was, however, quite short-lived. In the period surrounding the 2016 elections, populism has been used to describe politics and public opinion in the US. Yet, although the election of Trump to U.S. presidency in 2016 may have sparked the debate on U.S. populism, the classification of Trump as a populist politician is not uncontested. He communicates populist viewpoints that express a divide between the people and the elites, but the in-group he refers to does not systematically include "the ordinary people". In addition, being part of the establishment, his blame attributions are not systematically targeted at the political elites.

Populist ideas can be used to frame different topics salient in politics, media, and society. Two influential topics that can be framed in populist ways are the redistribution of society's resources and crime. These issues are, to a large extent, owned by populist politicians (Aalberg et al., 2017) – and these issues can be regarded as a suitable opportunity structure for populist framing. Hence, issues corresponding to the welfare state and the redistribution of resources can credibly be framed in terms of an opposition between the deprived ordinary people and the elites that neglect the people by not offering access to the resources they are morally entitled to. Crime is a topic that has mostly been associated with issue ownership by right-wing populists, whereas distributing resources can be assigned to left- and right-wing issue positions (Aalberg et al., 2017). To investigate if populist attributions of blame to the elites are equally credible when attached to different topics, this experiment varies populist communication applied to the issue of the welfare state (decreasing health care budgets) and crime (increasing crime rate).

Method

Design

The set-up of the experiment was equal in all three countries, and relied on a 2 (Populist communication: no populist cues versus populist cues) × 3 (Source: online news source versus Twitter account politician versus Twitter account citizen) *between-subjects* and 2 (topic: decreasing health care budgets versus increasing crime rate) *within-subjects* factorial design. The absence of populist communication (neutral framing) and the fictional (neutral) news source was regarded as the control condition. A graphical depiction of the conditions is included in Table 1.

Sample

The same international research organization simultaneously recruited a varied sample of participants in all three countries. The fieldwork was conducted in the final week of September 2018, and data collection was

Table 1. Overview of the 2 × 3 between-subjects design.

Populist communication	Source		
	The media	Politician	Ordinary citizen
No	(1) control condition	(3) no populism by politician	(5) no populism by citizen
Yes	(2) populism by the media (media populism)	(4) populism by politician	(6) populism by ordinary citizen

The first cell was regarded as a control condition as this message did not contain a reference to a specific media source. Populist framing of the two issues was absent in these conditions. Topic was a within-subjects factor. In all conditions, participants were exposed to one message on the health care situation (welfare) and one message on the increasing crime rate (crime).

completed within three days. The total number of completes in the Netherlands was 332 (completion rate = 97.3%). In the UK, 388 participants completed the survey (completion rate = 78.3%). The total number of completes for the US was 376 (completion rate = 88.7%). (total $N = 1,096$). For each country, the sample distributions are included in Table 2. The sample distributions reflect the variety in the respective countries in terms of educational level, gender, and age (deviations are within 5–10% of census data). The research agency was instructed to recruit a representative sample of participants on more factors, such as region, ideology, income, and previous voting behavior. Although the sample is not representative in the strictest sense, the sample reflects variety on variables of interest in the effects of populist communication. Regarding the ideology scale, for example, participants in the Netherlands are substantially more likely to identify themselves as "other" – which reflects the Dutch multiparty system and the less central role of partisan ideologies compared to the US and the UK.

Independent variables and stimuli

All participants were exposed to two online news messages. A cover story told participants that they would see a screenshot of an online newsfeed – which

Table 2. Sample distributions in the Netherlands, UK, and US.

Sample characteristics		Country			
		The Netherlands	The UK	The US	Total
Age	18–39	28.3	26.7	24.4	26.4
	40–59	51.7	61.2	56.8	56.6
	>60	20.1	12.1	18.8	17.0
Gender	Male	50.5	46.1	45.7	47.4
	Female	49.5	53.9	54.3	52.6
Education	Low	14.3	12.7	35.8	21.3
	Mid	47.7	53.6	36.9	45.9
	High	38.0	33.6	27.3	32.8
Ideology	Liberal	20.4	38.8	31.8	30.4
	Conservative	18.8	27.0	37.5	28.0
	Other	60.8	34.2	30.7	41.6

Cell entries reflect percentages the total number of completed responses.

was either from Twitter (the ordinary citizen and politician conditions) or an online news environment (the media populism conditions). The first independent variable, populist communication, was manipulated by adding populist framing to a baseline news story on austerity measures in national health care or increasing crime rates. More specifically, the ordinary people was framed as a relatively deprived in-group, and the "corrupt" elites were explicitly blamed for the deprivation of the ordinary people (e.g., Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008). This manipulation was present in both the headline and the main body of the stimuli. For the health care situation, the populist header was formulated as follows: "New healthcare reform report shows how self-interested elites cause worsening healthcare – ordinary American/Dutch/British people victimized by controversial policies". For the topic of increasing crime rates, the header reads as follows: "Recent increases in our crime rate are caused by elites that protect refugees instead of our own American/Dutch/British people". The main body of the articles reflected more references to a central divide between the ordinary people and the culpable, corrupt elites (see Appendix A for stimuli). These references were absent in the non-populist control conditions. Negativity, article length, number of arguments, and other factors were held constant between the populist and non-populist conditions.

The second independent variable, the source of the populist message, was manipulated by varying the endorsement of the news message. In the politician source conditions, the populist or non-populist message was communicated via the Twitter feeds of Trump, May, or Wilders (see Appendix A). The headline of the article was the actual content of the Tweet, and the full article was shared as an image (exactly the same article as the media populism conditions). This format, by which politicians shared a news message from a different source via social media, corresponds to the ways in which politicians communicate via Twitter in real life. In the ordinary citizen condition, the format was exactly the same, with one important difference: a fictional ordinary (male) citizen communicated the message. The name and profile picture was held constant across all three countries (this source was found to be equally credible in all countries, and was regarded as a real member of the ordinary people based on pilot tests).

Procedure

The procedure was identical across countries. The panel company invited respondents to access the survey via a link distributed via e-mail. ensure the quality of responses, eligible participants are only allowed to stay on the panel's survey environment for 45 minutes, and are not allowed to participate in different studies on a single day. After accessing the survey environment, participants completed an informed consent procedure. In the next step, they completed the pre-treatment questionnaire, which included measures on

demographics, their preexisting attitudes, and source evaluations. The next block randomly assigned participants to one of the six conditions. In these treatment blocks, participants saw two online media messages, posted as part of a newsfeed. After reading the newsfeed, they were forwarded to the post-treatment survey block, which included measures for the dependent variables and the manipulation checks. Participants were debriefed and thanked for taking part in the survey.

Manipulation checks

At the end of the post-treatment block, participants were asked to indicate whether they recognized the manipulations of populist communication and source. The manipulation check for populist communication first of all asked participants to indicate whether the message contained references to the ordinary people ($F(1, 1016) = 39.13$, $p < .001$). This indicates that people in the populist conditions were significantly more likely to perceive the people-centric populist framing of the article ($M = 4.98$, $SD = 1.58$) compared to people in the other conditions ($M = 4.22$, $SD = 1.61$). The manipulation of the culpable elites as a cause of the ordinary people's problems was also successful ($F(1, 1016) = 46.80$, $p < .001$). This means that participants in the populist conditions were significantly more likely to perceive the article as shifting blame to the culpable elites ($M = 4.83$, $SD = 1.55$) compared to the non-populist conditions ($M = 4.16$, $SD = 1.59$).

The manipulations on the source level also succeeded. Specifically, citizens recognized politicians ($F(1, 1016) = 170.94$, $p < .001$) and citizens ($F(1, 1016) = 26.44$, $p < .001$) as sources of the conditions that included a specific source cue. Participants were substantially and significantly *less* likely to attribute the media populism condition to any explicit source. Finally, on a 7-point scale, all messages were perceived as relatively credible ($M = 4.56$, $SD = 1.86$, with no significant differences between conditions). Post-hoc randomization checks further confirmed that the random allocation to the conditions was successful: there were no significant differences in the distribution of the sample between the six conditions.

Finally, the conditions did not differ on perceived likability/source support or realism (measured as the extent to which people perceived the article as realistic content). The extent to which participants supported the platform of the message was similar across conditions ($F(5, 1005) = .816$, $p = .586$). In addition, irrespective of the differences between source cues, participants in the different conditions rated the item as similar forms of realistic online news coverage ($F(5, 1005) = .653$ $p = .659$).

Interaction effects between conditions and countries on all manipulation check items were non-significant. Inspecting the descriptive statistics, it can be confirmed that the manipulations worked equally well across countries, and all

stimuli were perceived as equally credible and part of everyday online news coverage in all three settings.

Dependent variable

Populist attitudes were measured with four different items, which formed a unidimensional scale (Cronbach's α = .82, M = 4.86, SD = 1.31). Items include statements such as (measured on 7-point Likert scales) "The ordinary people instead of politicians should make our most important policy decisions" (see e.g., Schulz et al., 2018). A multiple-group Confirmatory Factor Analysis (grouped on country-level) was used to assess the dimensionality of the scale – and both discriminatory and convergent validity scores indicated that a one-dimensional fitted the data best in all countries (compared to a model that distinguished people centrality from anti-elitist items). We do not find support for a multidimensional scale (Schulz et al., 2018) – which may be due to the lower number of items used in this study.

Moderators

Likelihood of self-selection
We asked people to indicate how likely it was that they would select similar content in their newsfeed "If you think about the messages displayed earlier, how likely is it that you would select information like this yourself? This could be on television, radio, newspapers or online." (1 = it is very unlikely that I would select information like this myself, 7 = It is very likely that I will select this type of information myself).

Relative deprivation and political cynicism/distrust
Exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses demonstrated that both constructs that measure the attitudinal congruence of populist communication formed different, unidimensional scales (r = .67). Political cynicism was measured with three items on 7-point scales (e.g., Political parties are only interested in my vote, and not my opinion) (Cronbach's α = .85, M = 5.16, SD = 1.40, item measures adopted from Bos et al., 2013). Perceptions of relative deprivation were measured with nine statements measured on a 7-point scale (e.g., I never got what I in fact deserved; It's always the other people who profit from benefits offered by the government; People like us are always disadvantaged, similar items were used by Elchardus & Spruyt, 2016) (Cronbach's α = .92, M = 4.82, SD = 1.29). We used a mix of egoistic and fraternalistic measures of deprivation – which formed a unidimensional scale.

Support of the source

The messages' congruence with preexisting source support levels was measured with three different items – one item for each source manipulated in the experiment. The items were formulated as follows: "Now, we would like to ask you to indicate to what extent you support and feel connected to the following persons and organizations that play a role in our society". The battery that followed contained the targeted as well as filler items. Measured on a 7-point scale, source support for the political actors was low ($M = 2.96$, $SD = 2.03$). Participants supported online news media somewhat more ($M = 3.50$, $SD = 1.70$). People were most likely to support ordinary citizens ($M = 4.80$, $SD = 1.50$). There was one significant difference between countries: British citizens were less likely to support May ($M = 2.54$, $SD = 1.75$) than U.S. citizens supported Trump ($M = 3.38$, $SD = 2.20$). Similar items for source support were used by Hameleers and Schmuck (2017).

Analyses

OLS-regression models were used to test the hypotheses. As there are only three observations on the country level, we did not run multilevel models but rather included the countries as dummies. The UK was the reference category. To assess whether ideology, support for (political) sources, and partisanship would bias participants' responses to the content of the experimental stimuli, we controlled for these prior attitudes as robustness checks. The results remain stable – although ideology, partisanship, and prior-levels of support do correspond to populist attitudes. The effects reported below are similar when we include preexisting political preferences and (ideological) identifications in the models.

Results

The effects of populist messages at different levels of attitudinal congruence

As a first step, we investigated how the effects of exposure to populist messages on the activation of populist attitudes were conditioned by likelihood of self-selection, relative deprivation, and political cynicism (H1-H3). As robustness check, socio-demographics that differ across the three countries were included as controls. This yielded similar results as when these are not included in the models. The OLS-regression model depicted in Table 3 first of all shows variation in populist attitudes across countries. Compared to the reference country UK, populist attitudes are more pronounced in the US and *less* in the Netherlands. Table 3 (Model I) further shows no significant main effect of the populist or source conditions: populist attitudes are not activated unconditionally.

In the next step, the three levels of attitudinal congruence are included. H1-H3 can be supported based on the positive interaction effects of all levels of

Table 3. The impact of populist communication on populist attitudes at different levels of message congruence.

	Model I (n = 1,096)			Model II (n = 1,096)			Model III (n = 1,096)		
	B	SE	β	B	SE	β	B	SE	β
(Constant)	4.92	.01		4.54	.13		5.19	.13	
Country: Netherlands	−.48	.10	−.16***	−.45	.10	−.16***	−.24	.09	−.09**
Country: United States	.19	.09	.07*	.18	.01	.07*	.29	.08	.10***
Populist communication	−.05	.09	−.02	−.05	.09	−.02	−2.02	.17	−.77***
Likelihood self-selection				.11	.02	.15***	.03	.03	.04
Relative deprivation				−.07	.10	−.03	−.90	.12	−.34***
Political distrust/cynicism				.04	.10	.01	−.77	.13	−.30***
Populist communication× selection							.11	.04	.18**
Populist communication× deprivation							1.62	.17	.59***
Populist communication× distrust							1.60	.18	.59***
Adjusted R^2	.04			.06			.28		
F	9.12***			9.11***			39.02***		
F for change in R^2				8.77***			111.28***		

*$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.001$
The reference category for populist communication is the absence of populist cues. Two-tailed tests. Unstandardized (B) and standardized (β) regression weights. Analyses are checked for multicollinearity.

congruence depicted in Table 3, Model III. First of all, in support of H1, the more likely people are to select populist content in their everyday media environment, the stronger the effects of populist communication on their populist attitudes. The results also offer support for H2: populist messages have the strongest effects on activating populist attitudes for participants with more pronounced perceptions of relative deprivation. Finally, H3 can also be supported. More cynical participants are more likely to be activated by exposure to populist cues than less cynical participants. This interaction effect is plotted in Figure 1. On the left-hand side of this figure, it can be noted that exposure to populist communication has a significant *negative* effect for people lower in cynicism, and a significant *positive* effect among more cynical participants.

If we look at the robustness of these effects across different countries, we see that the effects are similar across national settings. The interaction effects between the countries and exposure to populist communication are insignificant (the UK was used as reference category). More specifically, the following interaction effects were found for the Netherlands ($B = .30$, $SE = .17$, $p = .073$) and the United States ($B = .08$, $SE = .16$, $p = .614$). Three-way interaction effects between country, exposure to populist communication and attitudinal congruence were also non-significant, irrespective of the reference category used.

The conditionality of populism's effects on identification with and support of the source

In the next step, we estimated OLS-regression models in which we compared the effects of populist communication by different sources, whilst taking participants' preexisting levels of source support and identification into account
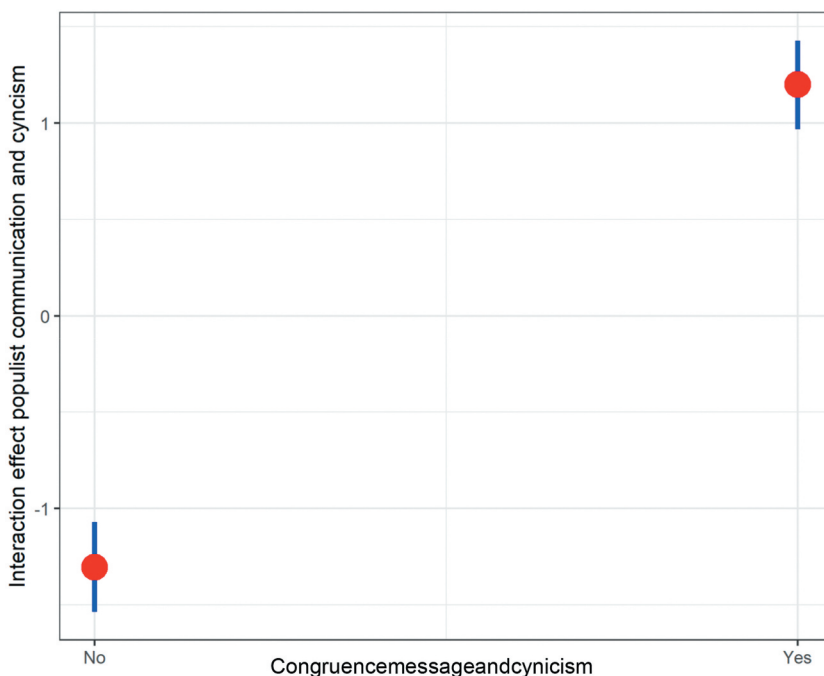
Figure 1. Marginal effect plot of the interaction effect of political cynicism and exposure to populist communication. The left panel shows a significant, negative effect when the message is incongruent, and the right panel shows a significant, positive effect when the message is congruent. For this visualization, congruence meant that people were higher in political cynicism (M + SD). Alternative re-coding of attitudinal congruence yielded similar effects. N = 1,096.

(Table 4). All levels of source support were measured prior to exposure to the populist or non-populist messages. First of all, it can be observed that populist communication by the media, ordinary citizens, or politicians does not unconditionally prime populist perceptions (Model I). This implies that we need to zoom in on the congruence of source cues to get a more comprehensive overview of the political consequences of populist communication.

Regarding the moderating role of media trust (H4), we do not find that people with higher levels of trust in traditional media sources are persuaded most by media populism or populism by the media (Table 4, interaction effects in Model III). The effect is the same for all countries. The results thus do not provide support for H4: prior levels of media trust do not affect the persuasiveness of populist communication disseminated by traditional (online) news media.

In a similar vein, across all three countries, populist messages that are disseminated by a politician are not more effective for participants that support this source. However, an interesting difference between countries can be observed: populist messages are actually most persuasive for people that support the *populist* source in the Netherlands (Wilders). More specifically,

the interaction effect between populist communication and support for Wilders as populist source is significant and *positive* in the Netherlands (B = 1.73, SE = .49, Beta = .23, p < .001, 95% CI [.78, 2.27]). The interaction effect between source support and populist communication is *negative* and significant in the UK: (B = − 1.21, SE = .49, Beta = − .16, p = .015, 95% CI [−2.18,.24]). Finally, the effect is not significant in the US (B = 0.06, SE = .35, Beta = .01, p = n.s., 95% CI ([−.63, 76]). To conclude, the conditioning role of source support pans out differently in the three countries: supporting the right-wing populist politician Wilders positively impacts the persuasiveness of populist messages. Support for the former British prime-minister diminishes this effect, and support for Trump in the US does not play a role for the persuasiveness of populist communication. We thus see different roles of source support in the different national settings: not all sources are equally persuasive when they use populist arguments.

Finally, we investigated the impact of identifying with the "ordinary" people – the relatively deprived in-group addressed in populist messages (H6). Here, we do see a stable and strong significant effect across all three countries (Table 4, Model III). More specifically, people who identify strongly with the ordinary people in their country are affected more by populist messages than people who do not experience such high levels of identification with their fellow citizens (also see Figure 2). Hypothesis 6 can thus be supported in all countries.

Table 4. The impact of populist communication on populist attitudes at different levels of source congruence.

	Model I (n = 1,096)			Model II (n = 1,096)			Model III (n = 1,096)		
	B	SE	β	B	SE	β	B	SE	β
(Constant)	4.96	.08		5.35	.13		5.38	.13	
Country: Netherlands	−.45	.10	−.16***	−.46	.10	−.16***	−.45	.10	−.16***
Country: United States	.19	.09	.09*	.16	.09	.06	.14	.09	.05
Populism by the media	−.01	11	−.03	−.01	.12	−.02	.07	.16	.02
Populism by politician	−.14	.11	−.04	−.22	.12	−.06	−.30	.15	−.09*
Populism by citizen	.00	.10	.00	−.09	.11	−.03	−.46	.15	−.13**
Media trust				−.11	.09	−.04	.05	.11	.02
Support politician				−.19	.09	−.07*	−.21	.10	−.07*
Support ordinary people				−.23	.09	−.09**	−.43	.11	−.16***
Media populism × media trust							−.15	.25	−.03
Politician populism × support politician							.28	.25	.04
Citizen populism × support ordinary people							1.01	.25	.17***
Adjusted R^2	.04			.05			.06		
F	22.28***			9.22***			7.76***		
F for change in R^2				5.14**			6.47***		

*p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001
Reference category is no populism by the media. Two-tailed tests. Unstandardized (B) and standardized (β) regression weights. Analyses are checked for multicollinearity.
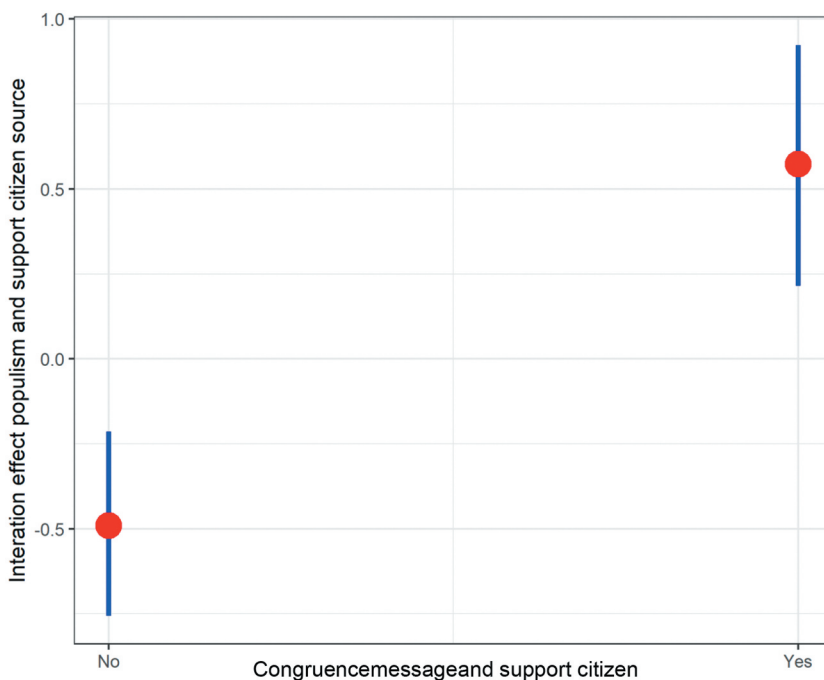
Figure 2. Marginal effect plot of the interaction effect of support for citizen sources and exposure to populist communication. The left panel shows a significant, negative effect for participants that do not support the source, and the right panel shows a significant, positive effect for participants that do feel close to the ordinary people. $N = 1,096$.

We additionally estimated the three-way interaction effects between likelihood to select populist content × populist communication × source. The effects of these interaction effects are not significant: Irrespective of whether the populist message came from the media, citizens, or politicians, the interaction effect between likelihood of selection and exposure to populist communication was unspecified for the source of the message. To account for differences between source and platform cues across conditions, a robustness check was conducted in which source familiarity and attitudes toward Twitter and SNSs were taken into account. These analyses also include prior attitudes toward the politician, news coverage, and citizens. The results are the same when these factors are accounted for.

Discussion

In the US, UK, and the Netherlands, populist communication that emphasizes a binary societal divide between the "good" people and the "corrupt" elites does not unconditionally activate populist attitudes. These findings are in line with the ideational approach to populism: populist ideas activate populist attitudes in situations and cases where populist arguments are credible interpretations of reality (Hawkins et al., 2018).

The effects of populist communication on populist attitudes are conditional on (1) the likelihood of self-selection or familiarity with populist content; (2) the resonance of populist attributions of blame with pre-existing levels of deprivation and political cynicism; and (3) identitarian alignment. First, people that would normally also select online populist messages are affected most by exposure to attitudinally congruent content, which is in line with the political consequences of selective exposure (e.g., Stroud, 2008). This pattern may, however, be a reinforcing spiral, and the reversed causal order is also plausible: the stronger people's populist attitudes, the more likely they are to select like-minded content. Exposure to populist arguments corresponds to a stronger susceptibility to populist arguments, but activated populist attitudes also make selection of populist messages more likely. Second, people with lower levels of political trust may regard the elites as a more credible scapegoat – political distrust thus resonates with the populist construction of the out-group. Finally, preexisting levels of perceived relative deprivation tap into attachment with the in-group of the vulnerable citizens. For these people, populist messages that cultivate the divide between the victimized people and the culpable establishment resonate most with their mental schemata of being worse off than other groups in society.

The mechanisms of confirmation-biased processing of populist arguments were somewhat less central on the source level. More specifically, supporting traditional media as a source of news did not impact the persuasiveness of media populism. Identification with the politician only conditioned the effects of populist communication in the Netherlands. A negative effect of source support was found in the UK. In the US, supporting Trump did not play a role in the persuasiveness of populist communication. Finally, in all three countries, supporting the ordinary people who disseminated populist messages via their social media platforms did have a strong, positive effect on the persuasiveness of populist cues. Taken together, identification with like-minded ordinary people plays a central role in the reception of populist messages on social network sites, whereas populism *by* the media does not activate or prime populist attitudes among people with lower or higher levels of media trust.

The differential effects found for support of politicians in the three countries may be explained when looking at the relative position of the three political leaders in each country. In the Netherlands, Wilders can be regarded as a (radical) right-wing populist leader (Aalberg et al., 2017). His profile, and the associations Dutch citizens have with Wilders and his Freedom Party, strongly align with the populist messages manipulated in this experiment. In other words, the source cues and the populist content aligned with voters' expectations in the Netherlands, which may explain the significant conditioning role of source support in the Dutch setting. In the UK, Theresa May may not have been regarded as a credible source of populist attributions of blame to the elites. As a prime-minister at the time of data collection, she was part of the

elites held responsible in populist communication. People who support the former prime-minister may thus regard the populist messages as incongruent with their preexisting issue attitudes.

How do our findings connect to the growing literature on media populism or populism by the media (Krämer, 2014; Mazzoleni, 2008) and populist communication expressed via social media (Engesser, Fawzi, & Larsson, 2017)? First of all, populism communicated by traditional (fictional) media is not as effective in activating populist schemata as theorized. Yet, this may in part be explained by the fact that a non-existing fictional news source was used in this experiment, and that the media can play different roles in incorporating populist messages in their reporting, for example, by giving a stage to political actors without framing issues in populist terms themselves (e.g., Wettstein et al., 2018).

The findings consistently indicate that attitudinal congruence drives the persuasiveness of populist communication, at least when populist attitudes are regarded as the central outcome variable. In line with selective exposure litera-ture, polarization of political worldviews may be regarded as a key political consequence of exposure to attitudinally congruent content (e.g., Müller et al., 2017; Stroud, 2008). More specifically, people who are already aligned with the attitudinal basis populist communication tend to be most likely to self-select populist communication in their daily media environments.

Exposure to populist communication may thus shape and augment populist echo chambers: virtual spaces in which people with aligning views are exposed to reassuring content, which further polarizes their issue attitudes and con-firmation biases. These findings do indicate that ideologically similar segments of society that share their frustration, distrust, and sense of deprivation are persuaded by populist arguments whereas others are not susceptible to such rhetoric. Although evidence for the existence of filter bubbles is not conclusive (Zuiderveen-Borgesius et al., 2016), these findings indicate that these disen-chanted people are in "fringe bubbles": people with congruent issue positions may be likely to select more populist content, which reinforces the populist worldviews they already hold.

This research has some limitations. First, the finding that populist commu-nication only has a conditional impact on populist attitudes may in part be driven by the conceptualization of the dependent variable. Other research has demonstrated that populist communication can have a direct effect on other outcomes (Aalberg et al., 2017). Populist attitudes may be a more or less stable trait that is only primed by populist messages when populist issue positions are chronically accessible. In that regard, it is interesting for future research to investigate whether populist messages have different effects for people with lower and higher levels of preexisting populist attitudes (Busby et al., 2019). A second limitation may be the indirect measure of selective exposure. Although we tapped into selective exposure by directly asking for the

likelihood of selective exposure to populist messages, future research may manipulate and measure selection in a more direct way, for example by offering the choice between populist and non-populist alternatives of news items on the same issue. In addition, future research should investigate the potentially reinforcing spiral of selective exposure and populism's effects – as the activation of populist worldviews may motivate selection of congruent populist content.

Another limitation of this study is that we are unable to control for all potential differences between citizen, politician, and media sources. To enhance external validity, real politicians were used as sources. However, they differ on a number of factors that were not accounted for, but may still affect the persuasiveness of messages, such as age, status, and realism. Finally, although this research is one of the few comparative endeavors, the effects were only tested in a limited number of countries that may be associated with increasing polarization and populist success to different extents. Future research may conduct similar experiments including more countries, and different forms of online communication in different settings that may provide a discursive opportunity structure for persuasive populist communication.

Despite these limitations, this research provides a comprehensive overview of the role of different levels of attitudinal congruence on the impact of populist messages in different countries, which may explain the important role allocated to social media in the global electoral success of populist parties.

Disclosure statement

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