Do We All Long for the Past? Investigating Nostalgia as an Appealing Political Rhetorical Strategy

Abstract

This paper explores nostalgia's persuasive role in political rhetoric, examining its influences across the ideological spectrum. While typically associated with right-wing populism, we argue that nostalgia also resonates with the left. Currently, empirically this is hard to pick up on, as the often-used measures reflect a nostalgia in which the past is seen as a superior and homogeneous era that must be reclaimed. These dominant measures of nostalgia risk skewing findings toward conservative and populist associations, while failing to capture how nostalgia functions in more progressive or non-exclusionary political narratives. We, therefore, introduce a broader approach, encompassing sentimental longing for personal, in-group, or national pasts, regardless of what people are nostalgic for. This approach enables a fuller understanding of nostalgia's impact on campaign rhetoric. We find: (a) conceptual overlap between populism and a subtype of nostalgia grieving for a lost national identity; (b) voters across the ideological spectrum have nostalgic attitudes using this broader approach; and (c) while individuals are persuaded by nostalgic messages from those similar to them, such messages decrease support for in-party messages. This paper, thereby, emphasizes the necessity of comprehensively grasping nostalgia to fully comprehend its impact on political campaigning.

Keywords: *Nostalgia, Political Parties' Rhetoric, Campaign Messages, Measurement Models, Qualitiative Narrative Analysis, Experiment*

Populists thrive on slogans like "Make America Great Again!" (Donald Trump), "Take Back Control!" (UKIP), or "Turn back the clock to a time before the country was stolen from them" (US Tea Party). What these slogans share is twofold: (a) they criticize the present and long for a past that predates societal changes, and (b) they originate from right-wing populist movements. However, nostalgia is not exclusive to the right. Left-wing figures like Jean-Luc Mélenchon (*La France Insoumise*) also invoke the past as a source of hope (Buffery 2012). In fact, looking at the rhetoric of the US presidential campaign, Democrats have used nostalgia just as much as Republicans (Bonikowski and Stuhler 2022). For example, they frequently tap into pre-globalization nostalgia (Ballard-Rosa et al. 2024). Similarly, in the Brexit referendum, the Remain campaign framed EU membership as a continuation of Britain's historical trajectory (Gaston and Hilhorst 2018). More broadly, nostalgia has been a key feature of left-wing politics, often tied to past moments of social solidarity and economic security (Rigoli, 2025). Labour in the UK has invoked the postwar welfare state as a model for progressive change, while New Labour selectively embraced the legacy of the 1945 Attlee government. After the party's decline in the 2010s, strategists even suggested reconnecting with the traditional working class by appealing to nostalgia for a lost sense of community (Davis 2011, p.36). Rather than a retreat into the past, this kind of radical nostalgia serves as a way to critique the present and reimagine a better future.

This underscores a key point: Nostalgia is central to political communication, but its effectiveness varies. Although political actors across the spectrum use historical narratives as symbolic tools (Dinas et al. 2024; Rozenas and Vlasenko 2022; Lupu 2003; Forest and Johnson 2011), right-wing populists appear to wield nostalgic rhetoric with greater success. This raises a critical question: *When, and for whom, is nostalgia a persuasive rhetorical strategy?* Nostalgia, derived from Greek *nostos* (home) and *algia* (pain), is fundamentally about loss, whether framed as the pain of what is gone or the warmth of remembering (Pickering and Keightley 2006). This connection to loss seems to align with

conservatism, which seeks to preserve or restore traditional ways of life. Studies have in fact linked right-wing populism with nostalgic sentiments (e.g. Smeekes et al. 2021; Steenvoorden and Harteveld 2018; Elçi 2022; Versteegen 2023).

We argue that these findings are limited by how nostalgia is measured. First, widely used scales of collective nostalgia (Smeekes et al. 2015; Sedikides and Wildschut 2019; Wohl et al. 2020) often resemble nationalist measures of populist attitudes (e.g. Akkerman et al. 2014; Meijers and van der Velden 2022), conflating two distinct concepts.[1] Second, political leaders often fuse nostalgia with scapegoating, blaming out-groups, such as immigrants, minorities, or elites, for an imagined decline. Experimental studies mirror this by incorporating scapegoats in nostalgic narratives (van Prooijen et al. 2022; Elçi 2022)– yet, see van der Velden et al. (2025) for disentangling scapegoating and nostalgia. This strategy shifts the focus from real complexities to external blame, effectively aligning nostalgic appeals with specific issue positions (Bonikowski and Zhang 2023). Consequently, the link between nostalgia and right-wing populism may be driven not by nostalgia itself but by its nationalist framing and association with exclusionary issue positions.

Moreover, research shows that people from all ideological leanings experience nostalgia (Stefaniak et al. 2021; Lammers and Baldwin 2018). What differs, however, is what they are nostalgic for: Conservatives long for a homogeneous past, favoring social distance from out-groups—aligning with populist heartland values (Taggart 2004). Liberals, in contrast, are nostalgic for a more open, inclusive past, desiring less social distance from out-groups (Stefaniak et al. 2021). However, existing nostalgia scales capture primarily the former, homogeneity nostalgia, rather than the latter (Smeekes et al. 2015; Sedikides and Wildschut 2019; Wohl et al. 2020). In addition, nostalgia's psychological traits - its ability to provide comfort (Sedikides and Wildschut 2018; Routledge et al. 2011), motivate action (May 2017; Van Dijke et al. 2019), and even reduce prejudice between groups (Lammers and Baldwin 2018; Wohl et al. 2020) - make it a powerful tool for

[1]Though van Prooijen et al. 2022 found that manipulating populist attitudes influenced nostalgia, not vice versa.

persuasion.

We argue therefore that nostalgia is not just a right-wing strategy: it is a powerful rhetorical tool available to political actors across the ideological spectrum. We examine this by using the *VU Election Studies 2023* (Author, 2023) – a unique five-wave panel conducted between 11 January 2023 and 30 March 2023 in the Netherlands by KiesKompas, a Dutch-polling company. Our pre-registration, data and analytical materials can be found in our Online Compendium. We see the Netherlands as a hard test for the persuasiveness of nostalgia as an affective rhetorical style, because a) while increasing, affective polarization is not as high as in many other countries (Harteveld 2021; Reiljan 2020); and b) parties do not frequently engage in nostalgic rhetoric (Müller and Proksch 2023), i.e. voters are barely pretreated.

This paper consists of three studies that collectively validate our argument that nostalgic rhetoric functions as a strategic communication technique which can be used by politicians across the ideological spectrum. First, using PCA, we show that there is considerable overlap between reluctant nostalgia and populist attitudes, but not between populist attitudes and other forms of nostalgia. We thereby provide evidence for a wider conceptualization of nostalgia than has been used thus far in studies of political science and political communication. Second, using qualitative content analysis, we demonstrate that voters of populist parties score higher on reluctant nostalgia, but across the ideological spectrum, people hold especially playful and progressive nostalgic feelings. This means that previous work linking populism to nostalgia seems to take only into account a specific type of nostalgia, while other types of nostalgia might be more relevant for left-wing politics. Third, in a preregistered vignette experiment,[2] we show that overall respondents like nostalgic messages, but not more so than non-nostalgic messages. Although they do not think this is the right message for them, respondents do think that a nostalgic message is the best for people like them. This aligns with what is known

[2]Our Online Compendium combines the data and the preregistration.

as the third person effect in communication science and psychology, which means that people tend to perceive that mediated messages have a greater effect on others than on themselves, based on personal biases (Davison 1983). Exploring heterogeneous treatment effects, we show that nostalgic messages actually reduce support for messages coming from in-party campaigns, and that reduction is even stronger for conservative respondents.

This study makes several important theoretical and empirical contributions. First, in the field of political communication, we theorize and find evidence that the central role nostalgia plays in political communication goes far beyond the concept of collective nostalgia (Smeekes et al. 2015; Sedikides and Wildschut 2019; Wohl et al. 2020). The nostalgic desire to "return to community" is present across the ideological spectrum, although often not only reluctant but also progressive and playful. All in all, nostalgia evokes a sense of belonging, which is pivotal for people to carry out their democratic citizenship (Blajer de la Garza 2023). Second, this paper contributes to research on rhetorical persuasiveness. Our empirical findings provide a nuanced understanding of the extent to which nostalgia can be effective in engaging voters. We show that even if thinking nostalgia is persuasive is a commonplace belief across voters from different ideologies, it does not increase the liking of in-party political messages. We posit that the findings of our research hold key implications for contemporary democratic societies and the well-being of individuals. Based on the shared misperception that nostalgia is an effective tool for political persuasion, political actors might be exacerbating social divisions and individuals' dissatisfaction. On one hand, nostalgia, particularly of the reluctant variety, has the potential to heighten inter-group tensions (Smeekes et al. 2015). This effect can polarize communities, as it often romanticizes a past that excludes certain groups, thereby exacerbating divisions within society. On the other hand, our results suggest that nostalgia can adversely impact individual well-being and the quality of social interactions (Sedikides et al. 2008; Juhl et al. 2010).

Does Longing for the Past Mobilize? And for Whom?

Numerous studies have empirically substantiated the connection between nostalgia, particularly on the political right, and the rise of populism (Smeekes et al. 2021; Smeekes et al. 2015; Steenvoorden and Harteveld 2018; Elçi 2022; van Prooijen et al. 2022; Versteegen 2023; Betz and Johnson 2004; Elgenius and Rydgren 2022; Elgenius and Rydgren 2019). However, a closer examination of the methodology and design of these studies reveals a potential conceptual overlap between nostalgia and populism, raising questions about the validity of their conclusions.

A critical look at how nostalgia is measured highlights that many survey items reflect a particular kind of nostalgia, one that presents the past as a superior and homogeneous era that must be reclaimed. This aligns with what (Boym 2001) terms restorative nostalgia, which frames the past as an absolute truth and seeks to restore a lost order. In many cases, these nostalgia measures echo nationalist and populist rhetoric, constructing an idealized image of 'the people', implicitly threatened by external forces. This mirrors the ideational approach to populism, where politics is framed as a battle between 'the pure people' and 'the corrupt elite' (Mudde 2004). Consequently, some survey instruments can inadvertently capture nationalist and nativist sentiments rather than nostalgia as a distinct emotional or psychological phenomenon (Akkerman et al. 2014; Meijers and van der Velden 2022).

However, Boym's 2001 framework also introduces reflective nostalgia, a form of nostalgia that does not seek to reconstruct the past but rather engages with it critically, embracing its contradictions and ambiguities (see also Davis 2011). This type of nostalgia – more introspective and adaptable – is largely absent from current political science measurements, which tend to privilege restorative nostalgia. As a result, the dominant measures of nostalgia risk skewing findings toward conservative and populist associations, while failing to capture how nostalgia functions in more progressive or non-exclusionary po-

litical narratives. This omission reinforces the assumption that nostalgia is inherently reactionary, obscuring its broader ideological versatility.

These methodological concerns are not merely theoretical. Mudde (2018) has argued that if collective nostalgia were operationalized to include socialist ideals – such as solidarity, economic justice, or social democracy – the populist left could express just as much identification with nostalgia as the populist right. Research suggests that politicians across the ideological spectrum employ nostalgic rhetoric (Müller and Proksch 2023), and that nostalgia is not an inherently conservative or right-wing emotion but rather a universal experience (Stefaniak et al. 2021). The fact that across the ideological isles, people experience nostalgia –albeit with different objects of longing – suggests that nostalgia is not a defining feature of populism or nationalism but a versatile rhetorical tool that political actors deploy to mobilize support. These concerns warrant a reassessment of existing evidence on nostalgia's impact on populist attitudes. If nostalgia measures primarily reflect national or restorative nostalgia, they may fail to account for the full spectrum of nostalgic experiences, leading to tautological findings where nostalgia appears inherently linked to populist attitudes simply because of how it is operationalized.

A more precise approach to measurement, one that distinguishes between ideologically differently connotated framings of nostalgia, would allow for a clearer understanding of when and for whom nostalgia is persuasive, disentangling its emotional power from its ideological applications. Based on these insights, an alternative framework, previously validated in sociology and marketing studies (Pickering and Keightley 2006; May 2017; Hartmann and Brunk 2019), expands the conceptualization of nostalgia to encompass three interrelated dimensions: reluctant, progressive, and playful nostalgia. *Reluctant nostalgia* is closely related to national identity, cultural heritage, and a sense of loss, and therefore resembles commonly used measures of collective nostalgia and the notion of Boym (2001) of restorative nostalgia. Often associated with right-wing populism, it frames the past as a superior era that must be restored. However, left-wing figures may

also invoke it, appealing to traditional working-class values. Whether through slogans such as 'Make America Great Again' and 'Take Back Control' or Mélenchon's references to France's revolutionary heritage, reluctant nostalgia transforms a vague sense of decline into a compelling call to action. It is particularly effective in reinforcing protectionist, nationalist, and sovereignty-focused positions by linking political change to the restoration of a past ideal. *Progressive nostalgia*, on the contrary, does not seek to return to the past but rather to learn from it, emphasizing continuity and adaptation. More common in left-wing and centrist discourse, it frames history as a foundation for progress rather than a lost golden age. Obama's use of civil rights history or Sanders' invocation of the New Deal illustrate how nostalgia can inspire forward-looking change. Instead of lamenting what has been lost, progressive nostalgia highlights past achievements to mobilize support for future reforms, positioning political movements as the continuation of long-standing struggles. *Playful nostalgia*, though seemingly apolitical, is frequently leveraged in political communication to enhance relatability and voter engagement. Unlike the other two forms, it is rooted in pop culture, shared generational experiences, and personal memories, rather than ideological narratives. Current politics thrives on this type of nostalgia, as seen in the use of memes by Kamala Harris to connect with younger voters. Spanish writer Ana Iris Simón found unexpected resonance with the political right due to her critiques of globalization and nostalgia for a simpler, pre-neoliberal way of life, ideas that conservatives reinterpreted through a nationalist and anti-progressive lens. Similarly, Merkel's references to her East German childhood served to reinforce broader political messages, such as anti-communist and pro-democracy rhetoric. While playful nostalgia need not drive ideological positions in the same way as reluctant or progressive nostalgia, it may strengthen its fine political branding, making candidates more relatable and fostering cultural bonds with voters.

Measuring nostalgia through a more nuanced framework allows for a deeper understanding of its role in political communication. This refined approach clarifies how different

forms of nostalgia function in ideological contexts, helping to assess their persuasive potential and effectiveness. It furthermore allows us to disentangle nostalgia from other concepts that are closely linked but conceptually disparate. Consequently, we put forward the hypothesis that nostalgia represents an attitude different from populist attitudes.

Hypothesis 1 (H1) *Populist attitudes are conceptually related to reluctant nostalgia, but not to other dimensions of nostalgia (i.e progressive and playful nostalgia).*

The universal nature of nostalgia stems from its psychological foundation, enabling it to resonate with a broad spectrum of individuals. These attitudes encapsulate both deeply personal past moments and culturally significant experiences. Nostalgia frequently manifests as a reaction to perceived in-group threats, often tied to social identity. When an in-group's stability is challenged, nostalgia emerges as a way to reaffirm the belief in the group's enduring core values, providing emotional solace amid change (Byrne 2007; Smeekes et al. 2015; Sani 2010). However, these nostalgic memories are rarely accurate reflections of past events. Instead, they are often idealized, emphasizing positive aspects while overlooking the less favorable ones (Pickering and Keightley 2006). Such idealized memories are not merely about returning to the past; they also act as a rejection of the future, particularly when comparisons with the present evoke feelings of relative deprivation (Gaston and Hilhorst 2018; Versteegen 2023).

Disruptive societal changes, such as significant migration flows, are particularly likely to elicit nostalgic responses. While much of the existing research in political communication and psychology has concentrated on how nostalgia reinforces nativist in-group versus out-group dynamics (Smeekes et al. 2021; Elçi 2022), a broader perspective from social psychology and sociology underscores that in-group threats are not limited to cultural or national dimensions. For instance, the decline of the working class also represents a significant in-group disruption, sparking nostalgic attitudes tied to socioeconomic identity (Heath et al. 2022).

Furthermore, recent findings challenge the assumption that nostalgia is inherently tied to specific political ideologies. Rather than being predominantly associated with conservatism or populism, nostalgia has been shown to correlate more strongly with individual personality traits (Stefaniak et al. 2022). This suggests that nostalgia's appeal transcends ideological divisions, functioning as a universal emotional mechanism that resonates across the political spectrum. This broader understanding of nostalgia's psychological and sociological roots gives rise to our next expectation:

Hypothesis 2 (H2) *Citizens, irrespective of their ideological leanings, exhibit nostalgic attitudes.*

Political campaigns often leverage the power of nostalgia to resonate with voters. Slogans such as Donald Trump's 'Make America Great Again' and Geert Wilders' 'The Netherlands Ours Again' evoke collective memories of an idealized past while simultaneously implying a present decline for certain segments of the population. However, this rhetorical tactic is not limited to right-wing politics. Left-leaning campaigns, such as those of Die Linke in Germany and Mélenchon in France, have also embraced nostalgic themes. The joint campaign slogan "Netherlands Moving Forward Again" by PvdA-GroenLinks during the Dutch elections in 2023 further demonstrates how nostalgia can be used across the political spectrum.

These instances highlight that political parties, regardless of ideology, recognize the universal appeal of nostalgia in enhancing the persuasiveness of messages. The power of nostalgia lies in its ability to tap into deeply rooted grievances, both economic and cultural, while signaling that political candidates share core values and social commitments with their constituents (Baron et al. 2023). These grievances have been linked to the rise of populist support (Ivarsflaten 2008; Bale et al. 2010; Steenvoorden and Harteveld 2018), and exposure to nostalgic populist rhetoric has been shown to increase populist attitudes (Elçi 2022; van Prooijen et al. 2022). Even liberal values, when framed nostal-

gically, can foster greater support and reduce group-based disagreements (Lammers and Baldwin 2018).

Research by Smeekes et al. 2021 posits that nostalgia functions as a master frame for right-wing populist parties, directly addressing cultural grievances. However, nostalgia's influence extends far beyond populist or nativist boundaries. Political actors across the ideological spectrum capitalize on nostalgia's emotional appeal to legitimize or delegitimize policies and cultivate national pride. Nostalgic appeals often construct a moment in the past as idealized, presenting it as a benchmark against which the present is found lacking. These constructions, delivered through brief and multivocal statements, creatively blend frames drawn from the prevailing political culture (Bonikowski and Zhang 2023). In particular, nostalgic rhetoric is especially favored by challenger parties in the US (Bonikowski and Zhang 2023).

A longitudinal analysis of European party manifestos (1946-2018) underscores the ubiquity of nostalgia, revealing its use throughout the political spectrum, although with greater prevalence among culturally conservative parties (Müller and Proksch 2023). This broad application underscores the effectiveness of nostalgia as a rhetorical tool in political communication. Its potency lies in its universal appeal and its ability to evoke emotional resonance, making political messages more affective, persuasive, and palatable to a wide range of voters. Our argument is that nostalgia works rhetorically in much the same way: By framing political messages in nostalgic terms, they become more engaging and broadly resonant. This leads us to the following expectation:

Hypothesis 3 (H3) *A nostalgically framed political message will increase support for the message vis-a-vis a non-nostalgically framed political message.*

Data, Measurement & Method

To investigate whether nostalgic communication is a feature of populist rhetoric or whether it is a persuasive rhetorical style for all voters, we use the VU Election Studies 2023 (Author, 2023). This is a five-wave panel survey, conducted between 11 January 2023 and 20 March 2023 by KiesKompas, a Dutch-polling company. The panel is conducted by KiesKompas' VIP panel, a group of dedicated panel members, who do not receive compensation. The panel is an opt-in sample, yet representative based on demographic variables. The data presented in this paper comes from the first and the fourth wave – 11 January 2023 till 18 January 2023 and 7 till 14 March 2023. During the first wave, participants were asked about their political preferences, their nostalgic attitudes, their populist attitudes, and were asked to fill in an open-ended question about what time in the past they are nostalgic for, among other questions. In the fourth wave, we included an experiment in order to disentangle nostalgic messages from ideological ones. In the first wave, 2,185 participants completed the survey, in the fourth wave, 1,560 participants completed the survey. These waves were chosen because of availability in the broader election project. We have used the recommendation of Gerber and Green (2011) to impute missing values with the mean value per wave, and indicate whether a variable has more than ten percent missing values.[3] While there are more sophisticated methods for imputation, e.g. machine learning techniques (Thomas and Rajabi 2021), the difference in results do not outweigh the efforts. We report results with imputed missing values, but our Online Compendium also presents analyses without imputed values, and these results are substantively similar.

[3]Our analytical code is available on our Online Compendium: https://anonymous.4open.science/r/nostalgia-populism-6B2D/README.md

Study 1 & 2: Observational Data

We use the first wave of the VU Elections Studies data to a) employ a measurement model (PCA) to establish the conceptual overlap between populist attitudes and reluctant measures of nostalgia, i.e. those conceptions of nostalgia that are coherent with nationalism; and b) explore the various other conceptions of nostalgia originating from the sociological and marketing literature.

Variables for Measurement Models. We measure *populist attitudes* using nine statements assembled by KiesKompas based on a meta-analysis of all populist items (KiesKompas 2020). Table 1 displays these nine items as well as the mean and standard deviation of these items. Participants were asked on a five-point Likert scale, where `1` equals fully disagree and `5` equals fully agree, the extent to which they agreed with those statements.[4] We subsequently measure *nostalgic attitudes* using the question *"Below are some things that have changed in the last 50 years. Do you think these things make modern life worse or better?"* (Heath et al. 2022). We use eleven items, displayed in Table 1, that are scored on *makes life worse* (value of `1`), *makes no difference* (value of `2`), or *makes life better* (value of `3`). Based on arguments made in other fields (Richards et al. 2019), the measures are expected to consist of three different, but related, subcategories. Nostalgia attitude items `3`, `6`, and `9` are expected to indicate a more playful, and less political, form of nostalgia. Agreement (or indicating that life is better off with these circumstances; indicated by a higher score) with nostalgic attitude items `1`, `2`, and `11` would indicate a progressive, and potentially left-leaning, form of nostalgia. Reversely, lower scores on nostalgic attitude items `4`, `5`, `7`, `8`, and `10` are indicative of a more reluctant, and thus closely tied to nationalistic, form of nostalgia.

[3]* indicates that the term 'people' is an inclusive notion of the people – 'mensen' in Dutch, translated as humans in English.

[3]** indicates that the term 'people' is an exclusive notion of the people.

[4]Statements `3` and `5` are reversed coded.

Table 1: Variables used in Measurement Models.

Attitude	**Items**	**Means**	**St. Dev**
Populist Attitudes 1	You know right away if someone is good or bad if you know what their political affiliation is	1.8	0.84
Populist Attitudes 2	People who have a different political opinion than me are just ill-informed*	2.0	0.88
Populist Attitudes 3	People who have different political views than me are not immediately bad people (Reversed Coded)*	1.7	0.82
Populist Attitudes 4	Politicians should always listen carefully to people's problems*	4.3	0.77
Populist Attitudes 5	Politicians need not spend time among ordinary people to do their jobs (Reversed Coded)**		
Populist Attitudes 6	The will of the common people should be the highest principle in politics**	3.1	1.25
Populist Attitudes 7	Against their better judgment, politicians promise more than they can deliver.	4.1	0.90
Populist Attitudes 8	What is called 'compromise' in politics is really just betraying your principles.	2.6	1.20
Populist Attitudes 9	A strong head of government is good for the Netherlands, even if it stretches the rules a bit to get things done.	2.8	1.23
Nostalgic Attitudes 1	More economic inequality	1.2	0.47
Nostalgic Attitudes 2	Fewer working class politicians	2.4	0.70
Nostalgic Attitudes 3	New ways of communication, such as Facebook or Instagram	2.3	0.73
Nostalgic Attitudes 4	Greater ethnic diversity in Dutch villages and cities	1.4	0.60
Nostalgic Attitudes 5	Fewer people attending church	1.6	0.79
Nostalgic Attitudes 6	New technological devices such as cell phones	2.0	0.66
Nostalgic Attitudes 7	More same-sex couples	2.0	0.66
Nostalgic Attitudes 8	More women working instead of staying at home	2.4	0.81
Nostalgic Attitudes 9	More choice in TV and entertainment	2.2	0.60
Nostalgic Attitudes 10	More immigrant and female politicians	2.6	0.66
Nostalgic Attitudes 11	More young people going to college	2.0	0.74

Coding of Open Ended Question. Respondents where also asked the open ended question *What moment in history do you most long for?* After an initial close reading of the first 100 responses, we identified recurring themes in how respondents desribed the past they longed for. Based on these recurring patterns, we created a codebook consisting of the following nostalgic categories: personal youth, solidary society, pre-polarized society, pre-industrialized society, colonialism, anti-Europe, and nationalism. Table 2 shows the different categories together with an illustrative example of an open-ended question response according to the respective category. To assess the inter-coder reliability, a total of 50 responses to the open-ended questions were coded by two independent coders. This resulted in reliability values using Krippendorff's α of `0.85`.

Table 2: What moment in history do you most long for?.

Category	**Example Quote**
Colonialism	The Golden Age
Euroskeptic	Before the European unification and our Florin/Guilder!
Nationalism	The moment when the Netherlands was not yet flooded with different languages, cultures, and dubious norms and values.
Solidary Society	To the moment when we said hello to each other on the street and people looked out for each other. Nowadays everyone lives on his/her own island.
Personal Youth	To my childhood, you knew nothing, no war or whatever.
Pre-Industrialized Society	Prehistoric times: Possibly man could have developed in a different way, which would have benefited nature.
Pre-Polarized Society	Towards a democracy with less polarization and fewer political parties.

Study 3: Experimental Data

In a follow-up study, conducted with the same participants as the observational study, we conduct an experiment in which we cue nostalgic values, to test our core argument that nostalgia is a rhetorical style political actors across the ideological spectrum have in

their toolkit to successfully persuade voters.

Experimental Procedure. The experimental procedure was as follows (visualized in Figure 1): We first split up participants into an ideological group – either left-wing progressive or right-wing conservative. We do this because the object of what people are nostalgic for differs from the ideological positions (Stefaniak et al. 2021; Lammers and Baldwin 2018). Based on ideological self-selection, using a five-point Likert scale to classify whether respondents would classify themselves as *very progressive*, *progressive*, *center*, *conservative*, or *very conservative*, we classified people into belonging to either a left-wing progressive or right-wing conservative leaning group. For each ideological group, we created messages based on the narratives coming from open-ended questions, as well as on the reviewed literature in sociology and marketing. Respondents who categorize themselves as center, conservative, or very conservative were shown the right-wing conservative treatments.[5] Respondents that categorize themselves as progressive, or very progressive were shown progressive treatments from the left side. Messages can be nostalgic or not – creating two experimental groups; see our Online Compendium. We randomly divided respondents across conditions to see a nostalgic or non-nostalgic campaign message (see Figure 1), telling respondents that a party close to their position is testing campaign material for the next Dutch elections. An example of the treatment text for a left-wing voter including nostalgia reads as follows:

Looking back, we remember a time when solidarity, workers rights, and respect for the environment were paramount. People lived a slow and peaceful life in harmony with nature, valuing community over individualism. Today, we see a world plagued by pollution, polarization, and stress. Let's create a world where workers' rights are protected again, the environment is re-cherished, and the well-being of all people is prioritized again over the interests of a select few.

[5]As a robustness check, we run the analyses with and without the people who classify themselves as centrists, and this does not substantively affect the results.

Figure 1: Overview of Experimental Procedure.

Dependent Variables. To test the support for nostalgic messages in H3, we first asked respondents on an eleven-point scale, where `0` is totally disagree and `10` is totally agree, to what extent they agreed with the statement they just read (i.e., the experimental treatment). As a follow up, we asked respondents to select the campaign message their in-party should pick because a) it fits you best; b) it fits the general Dutch voters best; and c) it fits left-wing/ right-wing voters best. Respondents could select any of the four texts we created for the experiment (see our Online Compendium).

Control Variables. Based on a balance test (see our Online Compendium for details), we included unbalanced demographic covariates as well as the ideological tone of the experimental message, and whether it was a nostalgic message into our analysis.

Methods of Estimation

We used PCA and Pearson's Rho correlation to test H1. We used descriptive statistics and a t-test for H2. For H3, we used simple OLS regressions. All analytical material is published in our Online Compendium.

Message Support and Nostalgic Rhetoric

To systematically assess our key argument that nostalgic rhetoric is a strategic rhetorical style that can be used by politicians of all ideological stripes to bolster support for their messages, we first empirically demonstrate that the so-far theorized and demonstrated relationship between populist support/ populist attitudes and nostalgia is based on a conceptual overlap between a particular vision of the past (i.e. a homogeneity-focused society) and populism, both being routed in nationalistic attitudes and the idea of a society focussed on homogeneity. Second, we descriptively explore the types of nostalgic attitudes people have and whether these attitudes, in a broader conception than the homogeneity-focused society one, is primarily preserved for those with populist attitudes/supporters of populist parties. Finally, leveraging an experimental design, we cue nostalgic values to test our core argument that nostalgic rhetoric is persuasive across different ideological positions.

Study 1: Do Populism and Nostalgia Measure the Same?

To measure the empirical overlap between *Populist Attitudes* and *Nostalgic Attitudes* (H1), we performed a Principal Component Analysis (PCA), using all nine populist and eleven nostalgic survey items.[6] Before running the measurement model of all nostalgic and populist measures, the nostalgia items were examined more closely in a separate analysis (see our Online Compendium)[7] The PCA loadings (covariance) demonstrate that

[6]Before conducting the PCA, we did calculated a correlation table, see our Online Compendium, showing that the two items on populist items that encompass the core dimensions of *sovereignty of the people* and an *anti-elitist*, and *anti-pluralist*, is negatively correlated with a nostalgic factor that would indicate a high degree of progressiveness (as the responses on these survey items illustrate that respondents view higher shares of ethnic minorities as en improvement etc.).

[7]This is done as these measures have thus far not been used in much of political science or political communication literature. A confirmatory factor analysis of the nostalgic items overall offers the expected results: The Nostalgic items that refer to media and entertainment load together on one factor, while the items that would suggest either a more reluctant/nationalistic or progressive attitude (depending on the value of the response) are split into two separate factors which significantly and positively correlate with each other.

for each latent construct, two indicators contribute most to the measure. For Populist Attitudes, it is the antipluralist item *"What is called 'compromising' in politics is really just betraying your principles"* and the anti-establishment item *"The will of the common people should be the highest principle in politics"*. For Reluctant Nostalgia, it is thinking that compared to 50 years ago, the changes in ethnic diversity in Dutch villages and cities, and more immigrant and female politicians made the world worse of than before, i.e. being nostalgic for the times when this was not the case. These items already indicate some overlap with issues that populist parties are typically issue owners.

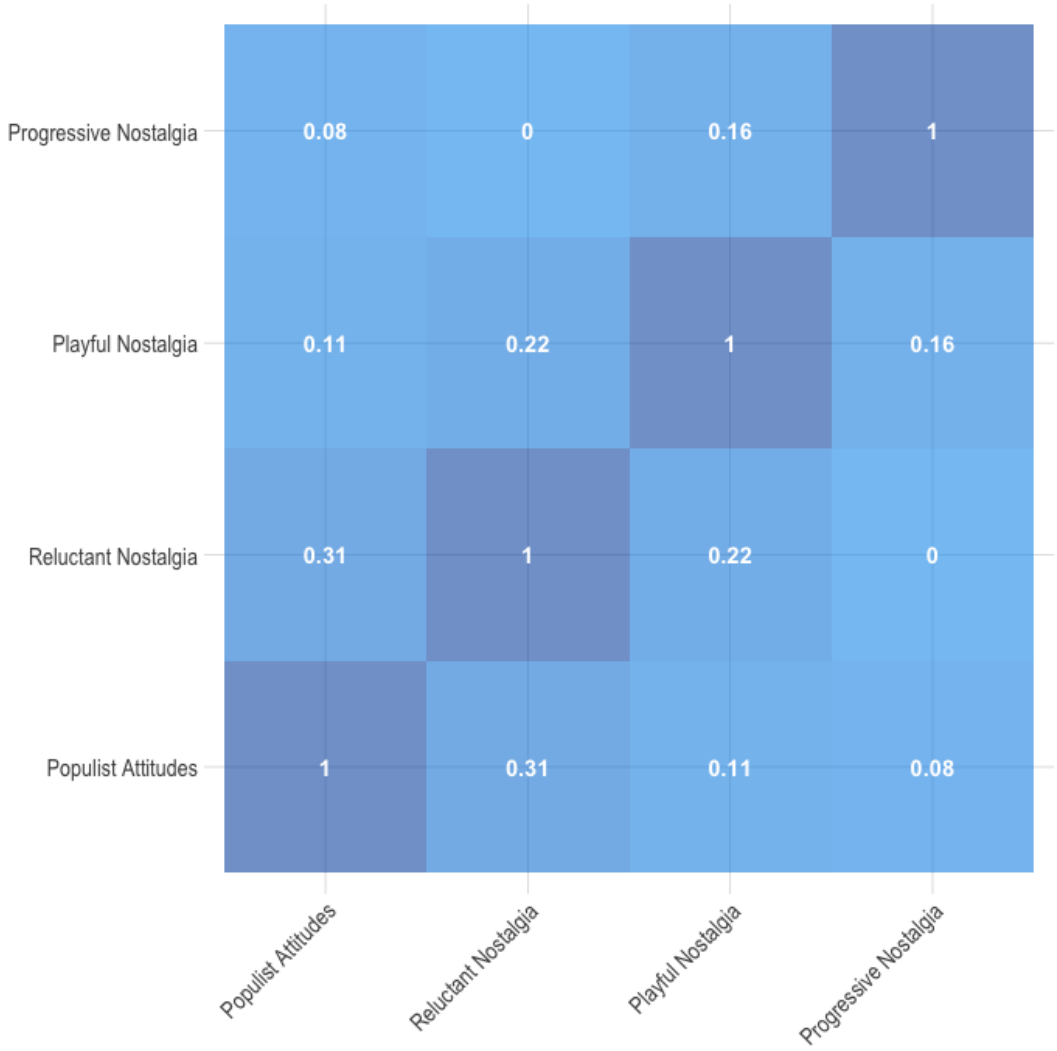
Looking at the covariance between the latent variables, we do not see a high level of covariance between populist attitudes and reluctant nostalgia. The covariance between those two is highest among the latent variables, hence higher than for the other conceptions of nostalgia, but a covariance of `0.03` is small. However, the correlations between the scales of reluctant nostalgia and populist attitudes is `0.3`, and thus more sizeable (visualized in Figure 2). The correlations between the other two latent conceptions of nostalgia and populist attitudes are considerably lower and not statistically significant.

Although the results of the measurement model do not uniformly conclude that populist attitudes and reluctant nostalgia exhibit the expected strong conceptual overlap, we do provide some evidence that both are tapping onto the same dimension and therefore assert that nostalgia as a concept should be inspected broader than just as a rhetorical device for populists.

Study 2: Who is Nostalgic for What?

Given the myriad ways in which societies undergo change, it is not uncommon for individuals to perceive the disappearance or gradual erosion of familiar ways of life across multiple dimensions. Empirical evidence, as depicted in Figure 3, supports this notion. Figure 3 presents data on both the open-ended survey question (left panel) and the nos-

Figure 2: Correlations between Populist Attitudes and Dimensions of Nostalgia.



talgic attitude items (right panel) for the full sample, as well as for respondents oriented to the left-wing, center- and right-wing. Analyzing Figure 3, it becomes evident that right-wing respondents experience more nostalgia than other ideological groups. Looking at the full sample's open-ended responses (left-pane of Figure 3), the most prevalent narratives among respondents, when asked about the period in history they long for the most, are their own personal youth (referred to as *playful nostalgia*), a solidary and pre-polarized society (referred to as *progressive nostalgia*). These narratives are mentioned

by about 30% of the participants in our sample.

In contrast, only a small fraction of participants (5% or less) mention narratives associated with *reluctant nostalgia*, such as *nationalism*, *colonialism*, or *Euroskepticism*.[8] Examining the right-panel of Figure 3, which showcases the frequency of nostalgic attitude items ranked as having "made life worse" by respondents, we observe a similar pattern compared to the open-ended narratives. The right panel reveals that the majority of participants consider the progressive nostalgic items "more economic inequality" and "fewer working-class politicians" as negative developments. Nevertheless, similar to the responses to the open-ended questions, we observe consistent patterns of nostalgic attitudes across all respondents and even among those who support populist parties.[9] These descriptive findings suggest that all voters possess some level of affinity towards certain forms of nostalgia. Consequently, political parties could potentially enhance the resonance of their messages by leveraging this rhetorical strategy. Furthermore, it is evident that certain types of nostalgia resonate more strongly with specific segments of voters due to conceptual overlap.

Looking into the profiles of the nostalgic voters, we see that about fifteen percent of the male respondents report narratives that can be seen as reluctant, i.e. the time in history they most long for can be classified as colonial, nationalistic or euroskeptic, whereas only six percent of women report such narratives. However, the biggest categories for men are a tie between their personal youth (27.7%) and a solidary society (27.6%). For women, it is a tie between the time that the country was not as polarized (31%) and the country was still a solidary society (30.7%). Longing for the preindustrialized times is most popular among the respondents between the age of 20 and 40, whereas longing

[8] We have also compared populist voters to all voters. In this comparison, we see that all narratives on nostalgia are present, and can be observed more or less in the same frequency for populist voters. Nonetheless, the reluctant nostalgia items seem to be a bit more frequently mentioned by populist voters. An independent t-test confirms this: Populist voters are more likely to mention a reluctant nostalgic narrative than non-populist voters; respectively 19% vs. 7%, p-value <.05.

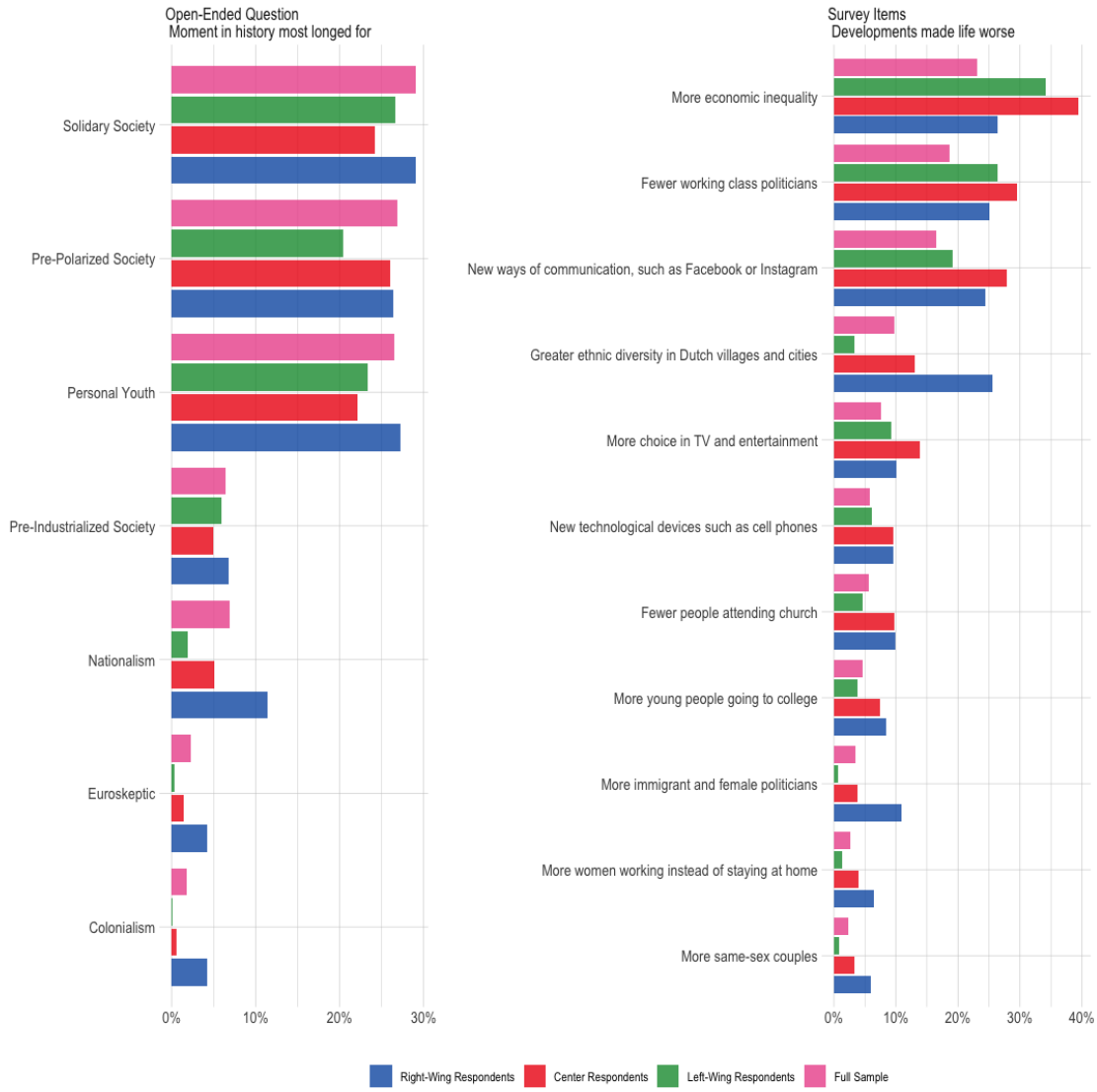
[9] Also here, we see that populist voters are more likely to rate items that are aligning with reluctant nostalgia as *"Make life worse"* than other voters; respectively 36% vs. 19%, p-value <.05 based on an independent t-test.

for a solidary society and one's youth is most popular under voters between 50 and 70. Longing for one's personal youth is also most popular in that age category. Reluctant nostalgic narratives are most popular among voters with medium levels of education, living in medium to nonurbanized areas in the north and west of the country. Reluctant nostalgia (colonialism, eurosceptism, and nationalism) is more popular among those who identify as more right-wing, whereas the average of the other types of nostaglia are more or less equally distributed across the ideological spectrum, with an average of `5` – the exact middle point.

Delving more into *what* people say in their the nostalgic narratives, it is remarkable to see that people long for both very defined moments in the past, such as the Fall of the Berlin Wall on the ninth of November in 1989 or Mandela's prison release on the eleventh of February 1990, as well as for less defined moments in time, such as the Post WW-II times in the Netherlands (*Wederopbouw*), the time before Social Media had seemingly penetrated our society, or before the Russian invasion in Ukraine. This not only shows a differentiation in times in history, but also in how defined we remember the past. Regardless of the concreteness of the moment, most people have a romanticized view on the past. For example, the people who long back for the Post WW-II times in which the country had to reconstruct itself, mention the positive mentality that permeated society, without mentioning the economic hardship that most Dutch actually went through during that time. Statistics of that time show that the average spendable income was more than 15k a year lower than it is today. Such findings resonate with what Shiller (2020) has called economic narratives: Objectively societies collectively have never been wealthier than they are today, yet the stories that drive economic events seem to tell a different tale. The same holds for those who long for the times when the Guilder was still the Dutch national currency; this is a romanticized idea of wealth, as the Dutch society is a net-earner for the Euro transition.

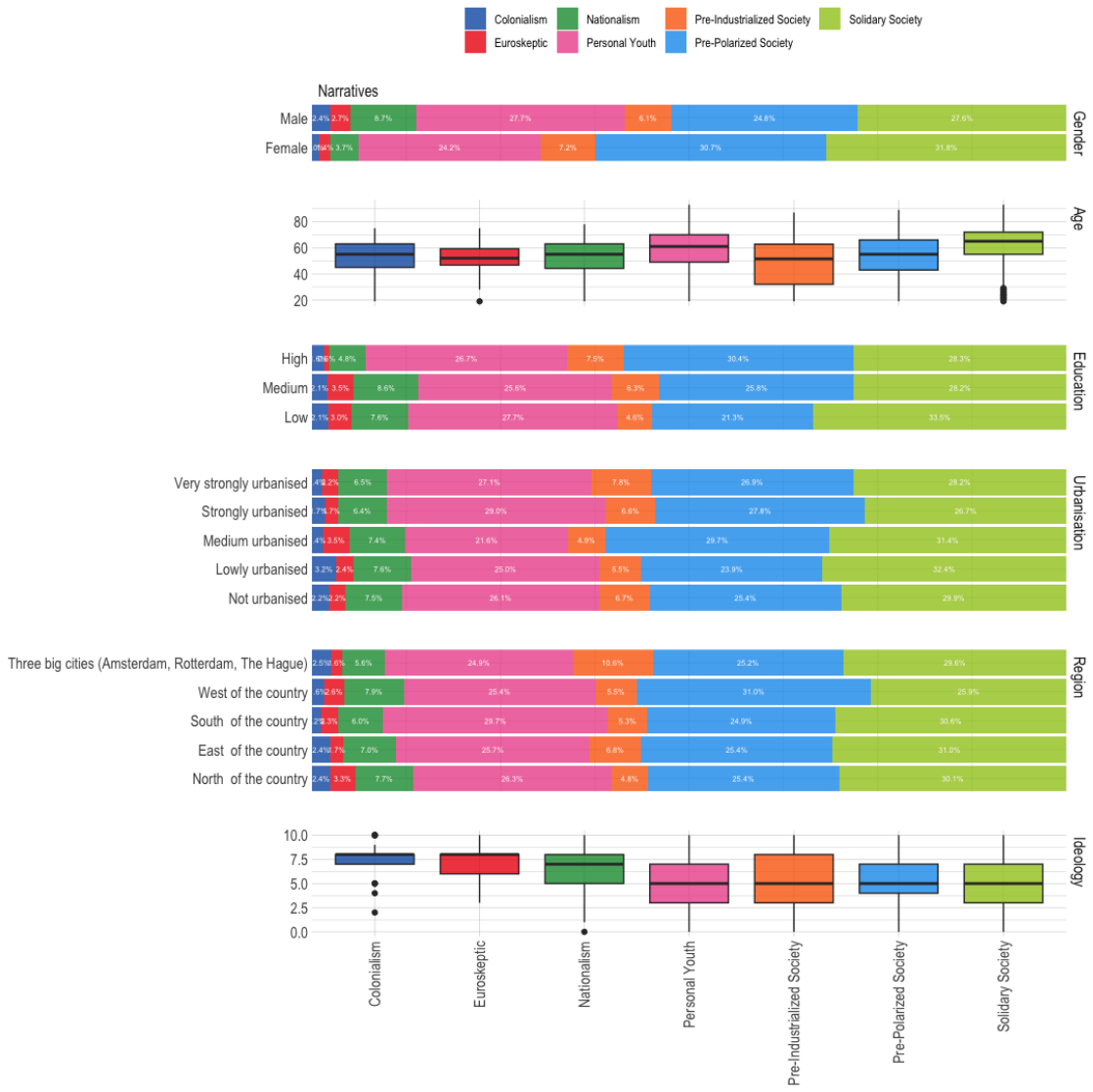
Another prominent example for the data in which romanticizing and cherry-picking in the

Figure 3: Types of Nostalgic Narratives.



past occurs is that both left-wing and right-wing long back for the times when both the people as well as the state cared for fellow citizens. Some people refer to defined political moments, such as enacting policies or laws to dismantle the welfare state, others refer to cabinets, or just to a "time when". People long for the time that society was so safe and communal that locking your house was not needed, and also for times of the height of the Dutch welfare state, juxtaposing this with the dismantling thereof under neo-liberal policy choices. While this seems like a rather left-wing position, scholars (Reeskens and

Figure 4: Support for Nostalgic Messages.



Van Oorschot 2012; Careja and Harris 2022) have shown that sometimes this longing for welfare distribution is based on so-called welfare chauvinism – referring to the perception of immigrants as less deserving of welfare compared to natives. This welfare chauvinism can be more commonly observed among populist supporters. This indicates that nostalgic rhetoric is also utilized as a "dog whistle"; i.e. using suggestive language in political messaging to garner support from a particular group without provoking opposition (Bonikowski and Zhang 2023).

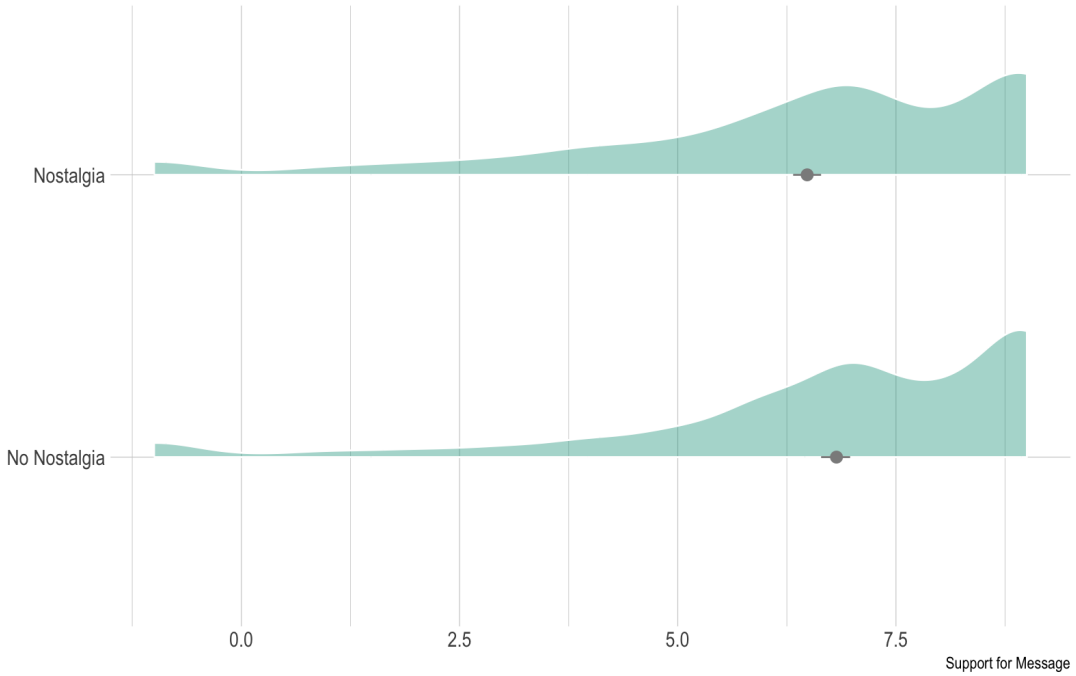
A third prominent narrative refers to the pre-social media area. People indicate that they long for the times before polarization and social unrest, expressing that before the advent of Social Media, it was possible to enter a meaningful conversation instead of the current online public spaces that are noisy, overcrowded fora where no meaningful conversation can be held. This resonates with recent studies (Nematzadeh et al. 2019; Cotter and Thorson 2022) on how people experience online platforms, in which they are often exposed to too much information to process. This phenomenon is coined *information cacophony*. The jarring noise of many, discordant voices offering up information, under conditions of low media trust and an absence of a pre-defined epistemic hierarchy of sources, makes it difficult for people to know what to believe. Cotter and Thorson 2022 demonstrate that people's strategies for evaluating information are deeply entangled with the sociality and emotionality of the experience of information cacophony.

Study 3: Is Nostalgia an Appealing Rhetorical Style for Political Parties?

To test whether nostalgia is an effective campaign strategy, we present the results of our experiment. Figure 5 shows the distribution and the average support of the message per experimental treatment. The distributions indicate that, on average, both messages were liked, with a score of `7` or higher and a distribution tilted to the upper end of the scale.

To test H3, Figure 6 demonstrates the effectiveness of a nostalgic campaign message. The upper-panel of the Figure shows the results of the pre-registered experiment and the lower-panel shows the exploratory analysis effects. Compared to messages that do not have a nostalgic frame, messages framed with a nostalgic frame gathered significantly less support. The coefficient of `-0.37` indicates that the support for the message goes down by a third of a point on the scale if the message is nostalgic, versus not nostaglic. This is a relatively small effect. As a robustness check, we have conducted the same analysis

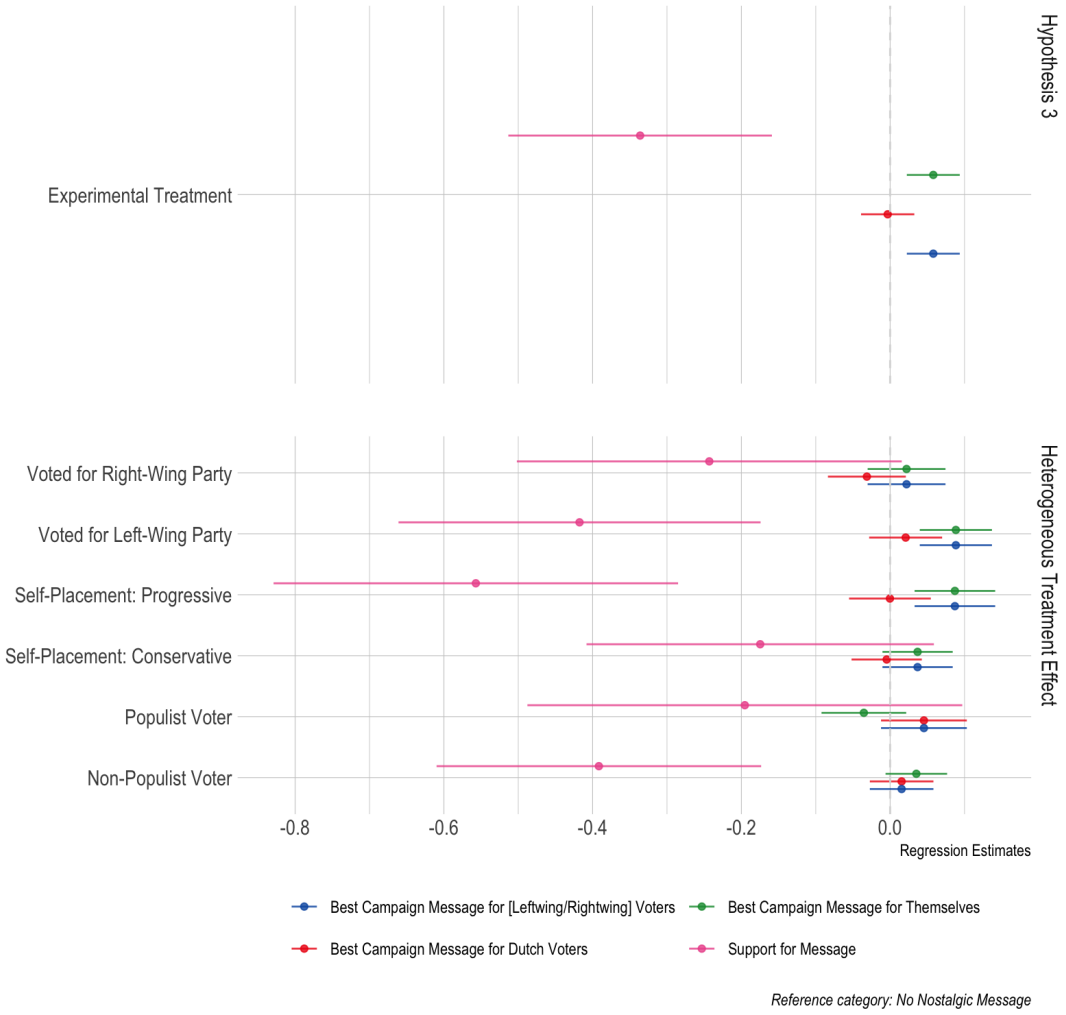
Figure 5: Support for Nostalgic Messages.



without the centrist, as they where forced into the conservative treatment. The results, reported in the Online Compendium, are not affected by this choice.

We also, however, explored a different set of dependent variables, asking respondents which message would be the the best campaign message for oneself, the Dutch voters, and your ideological congruent group of voters (either left-wing progressive or right-wing conservative). The results hereof, presented in Figure 6, show that actually, nostalgic campaign messages are liked more for the ideological in-group as well as for the respondent, and they are statistically significant. Hence, we do not find evidence for our third hypothesis that nostalgically framed political messages increase support for the message vis-a-vis non-nostalgically framed political messages. The lower-panel of Figure 6 shows that right-wing and populist voters do not like the nostalgic message for themselves, compared to the non-nostalgic message.

Figure 6: Support for Campaign Messages.



Conclusion

Nostalgic narratives takes center-stage in political communication, whether that is populist claiming that to regain former glory we need to go back to a more homogeneous society – a not so subtle dog whistle for anti-immigration and discriminatory policies – or left-wing politicians defending anti-globalist stances by appealing to a desire to "return to community". Most research examining the role of nostalgia in political communication zoom in on the relationship with populism. We identify two problems in this line of re-

search, both rooted in the measurement of nostalgia; i.e. conceptual overlap between the used measurement of nostalgia and populism through nationalism as a confounding concept and the collusion of nostalgic rhetoric and issue position by scapegoating a societal group (e.g. immigrants).

To overcome this measurement issue, we show that we need a broader conceptualization of nostalgia to understand nostalgia's role in political communication. We leveraged a novel data set (Author, 2023) to conduct three studies: 1) employing measurement models; 2) using qualitative content analysis; and 3) coducting an experiment. By using a multi-dimensional measure of nostalgia, tested and validated in the fields of sociology and marketing studies (Pickering and Keightley 2006; May 2017; Hartmann and Brunk 2019), we demonstrate that indeed voters of populist parties score higher on reluctant nostalgia, but across the ideological spectrum people hold especially playful and progressive nostalgic feelings. This means that previous work that linked populism to nostalgia seems to take only into account a specific type of nostalgia, while other types of nostalgia might be more relevant for left-wing politics. Moreover, by separating the nostalgic rhetoric from the scapegoating messages, we show that overall respondents like nostalgic messages, but not more so than non-nostalgic messages.

This article makes two broader contributions. First, our findings indicate that we cannot understand the central role nostalgia plays in political communication by using the common but more narrow definition of collective nostalgia (Smeekes et al. 2015; Sedikides and Wildschut 2019; Wohl et al. 2020). Given the myriad ways in which societies undergo change, it is not uncommon for individuals to perceive the disappearance or gradual erosion of familiar ways of life across multiple dimensions. We therefore expand the current understanding of nostalgia by incorporating three levels; reluctant, progressive, and playful nostalgia. We show the importance of assessing measurement validity (Adcock and Collier 2001), especially discriminant validity, when drawing conclusions about the empirical relationships between two phenomena. Our findings thus underscore the complex

interplay between nostalgia and political ideologies, shedding light on how individuals' emotional connections to the past can influence their political attitudes which we cannot empirically observe with the narrow measurement of collective nostalgia.

The second contribution is linked to political persuasion and the impact of nostalgic messages on political campaigns. Using nostalgic rhetoric is a form of employing symbols in politics (Dinas et al. 2024; Rozenas and Vlasenko 2022; Lupu 2003; Forest and Johnson 2011). Moreover, it further shows how politicians can play with the temporal component in their communication (Müller 2022). This underscores the importance of understanding reference point framing in political communication. By playing with a point in history as a reference, different sentiments get mobilized across the ideological spectrum. Yet, it always evokes a desire for communty, which is a core element of democratic citizenship (Blajer de la Garza 2023). Moreover, our experiment unveils that people tend to believe that others who share their sentiments will be persuaded by nostalgic messages, but they themselves are not swayed by such messages. This finding aligns with the concept of the third-person effect in communication and psychology (Davison 1983; Gunther 1991), highlighting a discrepancy between how individuals perceive the influence of nostalgic content on themselves and on others. In a rapidly changing society everyone can feel comforted by a nostalgic yearning for the past (Ballard-Rosa et al. 2024; Sedikides and Wildschut 2018; Routledge et al. 2011). At the same time, szabo2022sharing shows that nostalgic messages may not be as efficient in terms of user engagement and response as previously thought This insight into the third-person effect underscores the importance of considering individual differences and psychological biases in the design of political campaigns.

An important implication of our research is the revelation that the widespread adoption of nostalgic narratives by populist actors could stem from a misperception of these narratives as more effective than other rhetorical strategies. This insight is crucial, given that evidence links reluctant nostalgia not only to increased resentment between social groups

(Smeekes et al. 2015) but also to adverse effects on personal well-being (Sedikides et al. 2008), and an amplification of existential threats (Juhl et al. 2010). Building on these findings, we invite future researchers to examine the extent to which not only populist actors but also mainstream political parties and media outlets employ nostalgia, including its playful and progressive variants, to engage and attract voters. The differential impacts of these nostalgia types on societal cohesion and individual well-being merit closer investigation.

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