Populism and Polarization: A Nostalgic Narrative of 'Us' and 'Them'

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Abstract

The ascendancy of populism in contemporary political discourse has introduced a narrative steeped in nostalgia, evoking images of a revered national past and delineating a stark division between the 'authentic us' and the 'alien them'. While these messages resonate with a substantial portion of the citizens, they concurrently foster identity-driven animosity and derogation. In a pre-registered experiment in The Netherlands (data collection between January and March 2023), we dissected the influence of nostalgic narratives and scapegoating on societal sentiments, revealing their pivotal role in exacerbating current levels of polarization. Our findings underscore the nostalgic narratives' potential in shaping affective sentiments towards ideological and social in-groups, while also influencing sentiments towards out-groups. Messages featuring scapegoats were found to intensify sentiment towards in-groups, while simultaneously diminishing sentiments towards out-groups. This research illuminates a crucial mechanism underpinning the ebb and flow of identity-based sentiments. We demonstrate that nostalgic discourse, particularly when intertwined with scapegoating, serves as a powerful catalyst for the intensification of in-group affinity and the exacerbation of out-group aversion. In essence, our study underscores the far-reaching implications of nostalgic narratives in perpetuating societal animosity and polarization, shedding light on a critical facet of contemporary political discourse.

Keywords: *Populist Discourse, Nostalgia, Polarization, Framing Experiment, Open Science*

Introduction

During its initial rise, the emergence of populism primarily raised concerns stemmed in its tendency to instill anti-elitism and anti-immigration sentiments, thereby politicizing the very essence of politics (Mudde 2004; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013; Hunger and Paxton 2022). Becoming the most consistently successful new party family in Western Europe after World War II, populist parties have firmly entrenched themselves in the political landscape of numerous EU countries (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013). This is underscored by recent electorate success by parties like the Party for Freedom in the Netherlands, the National Rally in France, or the Alternative for Germany (AfD), thereby challenging the traditional establishment. These populist leaders largely rely on rhetoric that relies on the attributing the blame for current political crises to "the establishments", consisting of the traditional political elite as well as facets of globalization, including international institutions and increases in the number of immigration (Bos and Brants 2014; Dai and Kustov 2022; Schumacher et al. 2022). Current social, economic, and political landscapes provide an opportune environment in which charismatic leaders can portray themselves as a "voice of the people" by exploiting economic anxieties, cultural concerns, and the issue of immigration to further their own political agendas (Bos and Brants 2014; Busby et al. 2019; Schwörer 2022). Finding themselves broadly dissatisfied with mainstream politics and seeking to restore a sense of national identity, some voters look to populist in hopes of being offered an alternative that addresses their grievances (Akkerman et al. 2017; Hameleers and Fawzi 2020).

In this paper, we contend that an enduring populist zeitgeist is manifesting itself through the politicization of out-groups, leading to increased affective polarization. In times of several contemporaneous salient societal divisions, we now witness a proliferation of different potential out-groups than can be targeted and vilified, thereby departing from the once singular focus on migrants as the scapegoat (Van Spanje 2011). Next to the

Brexit debate (Tilley and Hobolt 2023; Hobolt et al. 2021), the controversy over Catalan independence (Balcells and Kuo 2023), or diverging positions regarding COVID-19 countermeasures (Bor et al. 2023a), clashes between pro- and anti-environmentalists, NIMBYs and their opponents (Devine-Wright 2009), as well as conflicting stances on vaccination and abortion rights offer ample opportunity for tensions to arise (Wagner and Eberl 2022; Bor et al. 2023b; Crawford et al. 2022). Additionally, we explore how nostalgia operates as a narrative vehicle, creating a dichotomy between a perceived idyllic past and a purportedly troubled present, wherein the respective out-groups are held responsible for societal decline (van der Velden et al. 2023). This narrative strategy is exemplified in political discourse where leaders evoke a romanticized version of the past, emphasizing traditional values and cultural homogeneity (Smeekes et al. 2021; Bonikowski and Stuhler 2022). This selective recall of history serves to reinforce a sense of belonging among certain groups while reinforcing the perception that out-groups are responsible for the perceived deterioration of societal norms and values.

In our study, we formulated hypotheses focusing on the impact of nostalgic and scapegoating messages on affective sentiments toward ideological social in-groups and out-groups. To test our hypothesis, we have conducted a pre-registered experiment (see here) within the VU Election Studies 2023](van der Velden 2023). This is a five-wave panel survey, conducted between 11 January 2023 and 20 March 2023 (i.e. pre- and post regional elections) by KiesKompas, a Dutch-polling company. Our experiment is embedded in the fourth wave of the data collection by van der Velden (2023). Descriptively, we observed that supporters of particular ideologies exhibited varying degrees of warmth towards specific social groups. For example, leftward on the political spectrum correlated with more positive sentiments towards groups associated with progressive ideologies. However, hypothesis testing revealed nuanced findings. Nostalgic and scapegoating messages did not significantly increase support for social in-groups overall, except for a defensive affective reaction observed among progressive voters. Moreover, the study indicated that a purely

nostalgic message could foster understanding for some ideological out-groups, making progressive voters more empathetic to narratives from right-wing voters and Christians. However, when combined with scapegoating, the affective sentiment towards out-groups decreased, signifying a more pronounced out-group derogation. These findings provide a nuanced understanding of the intricate interplay between nostalgic and scapegoating messages and their differential impact on affective sentiments toward social in-groups and out-groups.

Our paper makes a distinctive contribution in several key areas. Firstly, we provide a novel perspective on the contemporary zeitgeist, integrating discourse and social groups, particularly out-groups, into the analysis. By emphasizing the role of out-groups, we shed light on a critical dimension that has been previously overlooked in understanding the dynamics of the prevailing zeitgeist. Secondly, we contribute by examining how existing research has either succeeded or failed to capture the essence of the zeitgeist. Through a critical evaluation of prior literature, we identify gaps and limitations, offering a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. This contributes to the academic discourse by enhancing the conceptual framework surrounding the zeitgeist and its manifestations in contemporary politics. Lastly, our paper delves into the evolution of the populist narrative. We highlight the dichotomous and simplistic narratives employed by populist elites and demonstrate how this narrative strategy, initially successful within populist circles, has transcended ideological boundaries. This spillover effect has led to its adoption across the entire political spectrum, indicating a noteworthy shift in the political landscape. By elucidating this phenomenon, our paper offers valuable insights into the broader implications of the populist narrative, its adaptability, and its impact on contemporary political discourse.

A Nostalgic Narrative of 'Us' and 'Them'

The antagonistic portrayal of social structures is arguably a central characteristic of the current climate of heightened affective polarization. Classic partisan rivalries have evolved, with ideological identities becoming more prominent (Oshri et al. 2022; Ellis and Stimson 2012). Voters increasingly align themselves with ideological labels like liberal or left-wing, rather than with specific political parties. These ideologies often divide citizens along lines similar to the Republican-Democrat divide in the US, creating stark distinctions such as right versus left, frequently characterized as 'woke' (Comellas and Torcal 2023). Bantel (2023) notes that in Europe, party affect primarily orbits around three ideological spheres: Left, right, and radical right, a trend also observed in Finland (Kekkonen and Ylä-Anttila 2021). Additionally, specific issues can foster strong "us versus them" dynamics, serving roles akin to partisan identities. Examples include the Brexit debate, the controversy over Catalan independence (Balcells and Kuo 2023) and positions regarding COVID-19 countermeasures (Bor et al. 2023a). Other significant divides include pro- and anti-environmentalism, Brexit Leavers versus Remainers (Tilley and Hobolt 2023; Hobolt et al. 2021), NIMBYs against their adversaries (Devine-Wright 2009), and conflicting stances on vaccination and abortion rights (Wagner and Eberl 2022; Bor et al. 2023b; Crawford et al. 2022). These identities further exacerbate the complex landscape of societal divisions.

In the expansion of antagonisms across social groups, populists find an opportune environment to thrive. Mudde's (2004) dominant ideational approach conceptualizes populism as a thin-centered ideology seldom existing in isolation. Instead, it tends to affiliate itself with a broader host ideology, thereby displaying contextual sensitivity (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013). This ideological framework creates a Manichean tension within society, fundamentally dividing it into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups (Mudde 2004; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013): The morally righteous "us" juxtaposed against the evil

"them". While scholarly investigation often focuses on the populist dichotomy between the perceived homogeneous people and the perceived malevolent elite (for overviews, see Noury and Roland 2020; Berman 2021; Hunger and Paxton 2022), the adaptability inherent in the thin-centered populist ideology and its contextual sensitivity allows political leaders espousing populist rhetoric to broaden the definition of out-groups deemed as malevolent, thus framing them as threats to their envisioned societal ideal. Traditionally, immigrants have been frequently depicted as an external source of malevolence, supposedly corroding the fabric of society (for overviews, see Shehaj et al. 2021; Van Spanje 2011). However, in these times of intense group-based polarization, populists from various spectrums are employing new tropes to articulate their outgrouping narratives as previously mentioned.

Thus, within the realm of communication, populist elites exhibit a distinct propensity to delineate distinct in- and out-groups. Conversely, other non-populist elites utilize communication strategies to construct a narrative aiming toward an ideal societal framework; however, their adaptability is often constrained by ideological limitations in comparison to the more flexible approach of populist elites. Scholars specializing in populist communication have highlighted the prevalence of emotionally charged rhetoric in numerous communication studies (Aalberg et al. 2016). These analyses often rely on rhetoric designed to evoke profound emotional responses, aiming to resonate deeply with the audience while consistently emphasizing the sovereignty of the people (Schumacher et al. 2022). Populist rhetoric inherently revolves around asserting the existence of a severe political crisis that poses an existential threat to ordinary citizens. This rhetoric vehemently vilifies the out-group, allocating blame onto them (Schumacher et al. 2022). Recent studies have underscored the efficacy of nostalgia as a potent vehicle employed within this narrative construction (Elçi 2022; van Prooijen et al. 2022; Smeekes et al. 2021).

Populists necessitate a compelling narrative to channel their antagonistic depictions, and

they often do so by contrasting the perceived decay of the present—where purported enemies abound—with an idealized, pristine past where such issues were nonexistent, essentially employing nostalgia. Nostalgia, derived from the Greek words *nostos* (home) and *algia* (pain or sorrow), encapsulates a complex blend of sentiments, representing both a "pain of loss" and a repository of "pleasant memories". Irrespective of its more positive connotation as a "pleasant memory" or the poignant aspect as a "pain of loss", nostalgia fundamentally revolves around the notion of loss (Pickering and Keightley 2006). At its core, nostalgia can be comprehended as an individual-level emotion—a tender yearning for one's past, typically focusing on the innocence of childhood or the formative years of adolescence (Marchegiani and Phau 2013). This psychological interpretation predominates in individualistic frameworks. However, within the realm of social sciences, the emphasis often shifts to collective nostalgia. Defined as an emotive attachment or fond sentiments associated with perceiving oneself as a member of a group, collective nostalgia is grounded in idealized perceptions of the group's history or past events (Baldwin et al. 2018). These events often have direct connections within the in-group's shared experiences. The recollection of such events is commonly transmitted through collective memory, perpetuated within families, documented in literature, or disseminated through mass media narratives (Kao 2012). The emergence of collective nostalgia is frequently linked to a perception among individuals that their group enjoyed a superior status or quality of life in the past compared to the present circumstances (Cheung et al. 2017). Despite its abstract nature, collective nostalgia tends to exhibit a remarkable consistency among individuals within the same cultural group and generation, reflecting shared experiences and cultural influences (Kao 2012).

Nostalgia, with its intricate blend of sentimental reminiscence and a sense of loss, intertwines with the dynamics of in- and out-groups, delineated in the seminal work of Tajfel et al. (1979). The concept of collective nostalgia (Smeekes et al. 2015; Smeekes et al. 2021; van Prooijen et al. 2022), shaped by idealized perceptions of the past, often finds

resonance within group identities. These nostalgic yearnings, rooted in shared historical events and cultural experiences, can reinforce the distinctions between in-groups and out-groups. We argue that political elites make hay of the nostalgic discourse by framing these identities as either an in- or an out-group, and implicitly or explicitly shifting blame to the out-groups for unwanted changes in society. Thereby, this phenomenon can be interwoven with the phenomenon of affective polarization (Iyengar et al. 2019), where the amplification of group identities and the accentuation of differences between in-groups and out-groups contribute to societal divisions. Collective nostalgia, when harnessed within the context of polarized societies, might serve as a catalyst, exacerbating group divisions by magnifying perceived differences and reinforcing the sense of a glorified past for the in-group while alienating the out-group further.

Thus, given nostalgia's tendency to either subtly suggest an idealized past where out-groups were minimized or to explicitly scapegoat them in contrast to the present where these out-groups are prominent, we anticipate that populist nostalgic narratives are a significant driver of affective polarization. These narratives target political and social groups perceived as enemies or allies, delineating a stark 'us versus them' scenario that politicians can exploit. This exploitation serves not only to solidify in-group loyalty but also to deepen the divide between the in-group and perceived out-groups, thereby intensifying societal polarization. We therefore test the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1a (H1a) *Nostalgic messages will increase affective sentiment for ideological social in-groups.*

Hypothesis 1b (H1b) *Messages mentioning scapegoats will increase affective sentiment for ideological social in-groups.*

Hypothesis 2a (H2a) *Nostalgic messages will decrease affective sentiment for ideological social out-groups.*

Hypothesis 2b (H2b) *Messages mentioning scapegoats will decrease affective sentiment for ideological social out-groups.*

Data, Measurement & Method

Data. To investigate a nostalgic narrative of 'us' and 'them' accross ideological lines, we have conducted a pre-registered experiment (see here) within the VU Election Studies 2023 (van der Velden 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 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. 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.

Experimental Set-Up. We conduct an experiment in which we cue, and randomly assign participants to, nostalgic values and scapegoats, to test our hypotheses (H1a–H2b) about the affective consequences of nostalgic and scapegoating messages for social in- and out-groups. 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. Figure 1 demonstrates that voters that vote for more conservative parties – ranked according to KiesKompas – displayed in the top-lines of Figure 1 also position themselves as more conservative as well as voters supporting progressive parties position themselves as more progressive.

**Figure 1:** Face-Validity of Self-Selection into Ideological Positions.
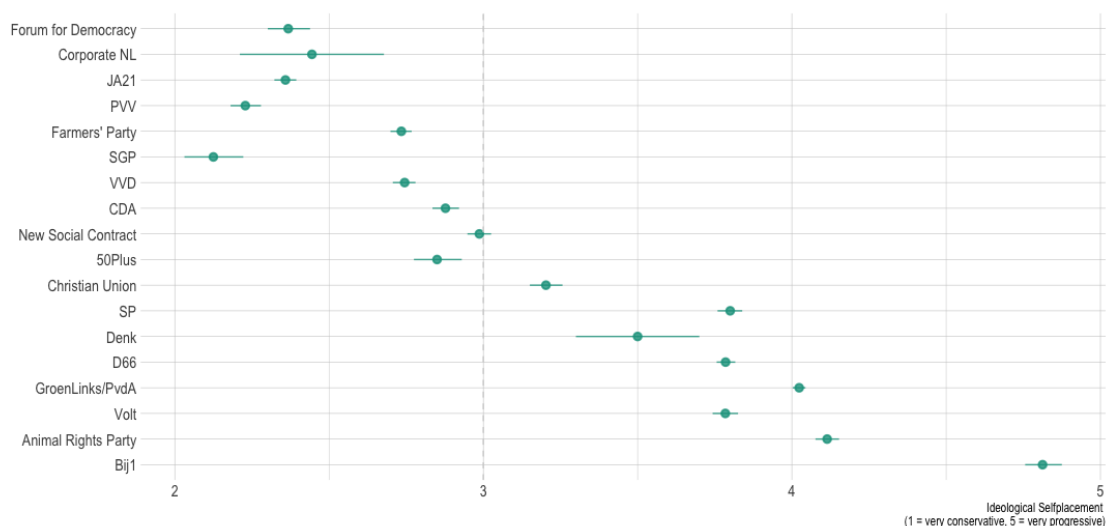
For each ideological group, we randomized respondents into seeing one of four different potential campaign messages that a party of that ideology is testing for the next Dutch elections. The messages were created by the authors based on the narratives coming from the open-ended questions in Wave 1 of the Panel Study as well as based on the reviewed literature in sociology and marketing (Pickering and Keightley 2006; May 2017; Hartmann and Brunk 2019). Messages can either be nostalgic or not, as well as consist of a scapegoat or not – creating four experimental groups, see our Online Compendium. Respondents that categorize themselves as conservative or very conservative get the right-wing conservative treatments. Respondents that categorize themselves as center, progressive, or very progressive are shown the left-wing progressive treatments. An example of the treatment text for a left-wing voter including nostalgia and a scapegoat 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, caused in large part by large corporations, contamination lobbyists and neo-liberal policymakers. It's time to hold them accountable again for their actions and reclaim those values of solidarity, respect, and peace that made our world a better place. 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.

Dependent Variables. To test the affective consequences for nostalgic and scapegoating messages, we measure affective sentiment towards nine social in- and out-groups. We asked respondents the extent to which they experience positive or negative feelings towards big companies, Christians, climate activist, immigrants, left-wing people, materialistic people, Muslims, neo-liberal politicians, right-wing people, and people living on state support. This affecive sentiment ranges from 0 (very negative) to 10 (very positive). As pre-registered, we consider the left-wing progressive ideological in-groups (and right-wing conservative ideological out-groups) to exists of climate activists, immigrants, left-wing people, Muslims, people who get state subsidies, and the right-wing conservative ideological in-groups (and left-wing progressive ideological out-groups) are: big companies, Christians, materialistic people, neo-liberal politicians, and right-wing people. Figure 2 shows the distribution and the average affective sentiment towards social groups of the message per experimental treatment. The distributions indicate that, on average, all social groups are more liked by one ideological group than by the other – with scores of 5 and lower for the disliked social group and 6 and higher for the liked social group. At the same time, we see that there is not much variation in support for the social group between the messages.

Methods of Estimation. We use simple OLS regression to test our hypotheses. Based

**Figure 2:** Affective Sentiment for Social Groups.
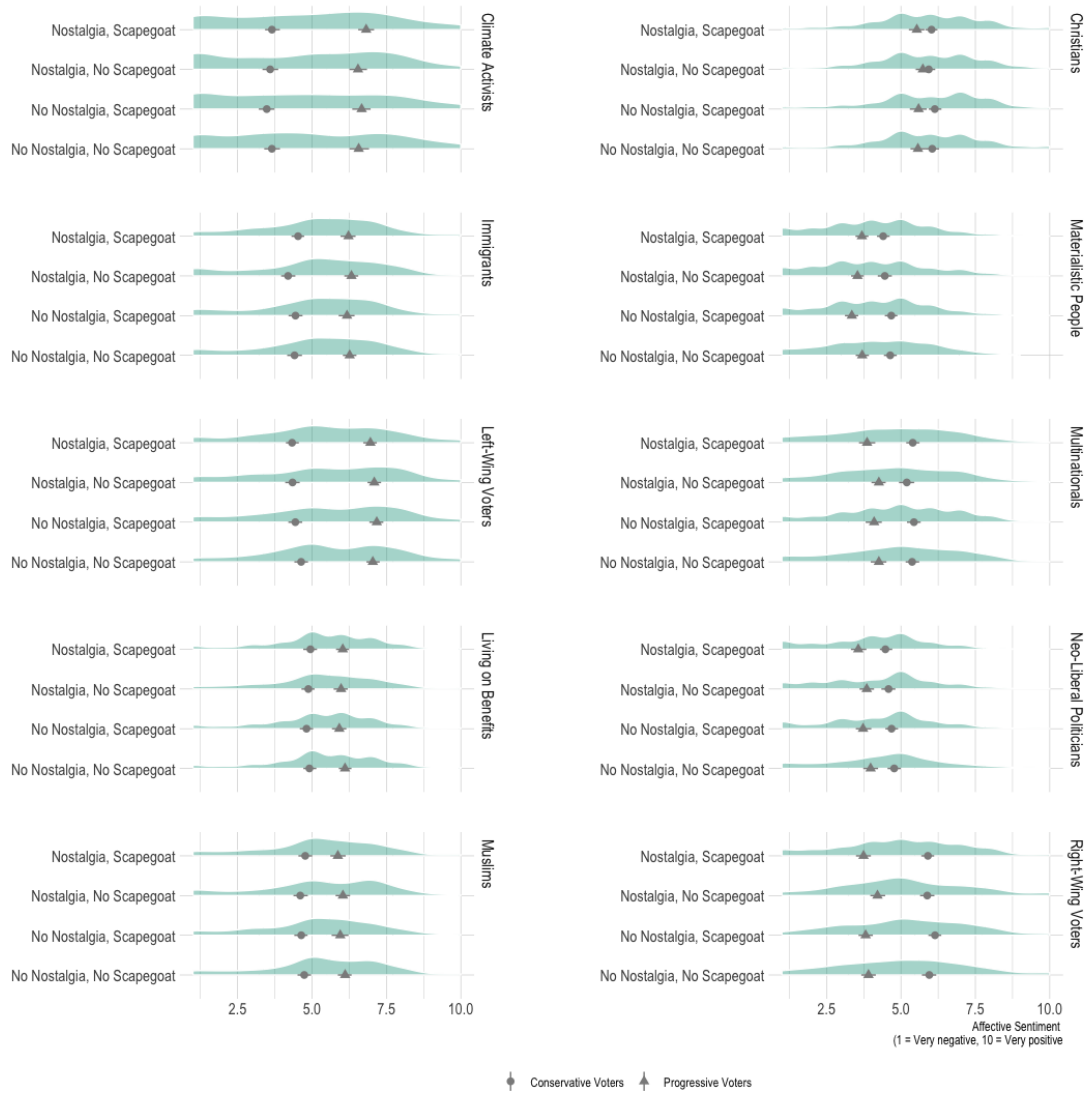
on a balance test (see our Online Compendium), we included only the unbalanced demographic co-variate urbanization into our analysis. In the results section, we only present the visualized coefficients of the experimental treatment, the full regression tables are presented in our Online Compendium.

Affective Consequences of a Nostalgic Narrative

First, we delve into the descriptive analysis of attitudes towards social groups across political ideology, displayed in Figure 3. Examining the sentiments of right-wing conservative supporters towards social groups reveals an expected trend. Supporters of this ideology express greater warmth towards groups such as Christians, multinationals, neo-liberal politicians, and fellow right-wing voters. However, nuanced variations exist among these sentiments. Notably, the warmth towards right-wing voters exhibits the most linear variation as one moves from left-wing progressive party supporters to their right-wing counterparts. It is noteworthy that Christians garner a generally positive sentiment across the political spectrum, with Christian democratic parties and SGP, the Dutch orthodox Christian party, exhibiting the warmest feelings. Additionally, it is interesting to observe that materialistic individuals, neo-liberal politicians, and multinationals do not receive uniformly positive evaluations even from right-wing party supporters. Turning our attention to the right side of Figure 3, a similar narrative unfolds. The more leftward on the political spectrum, the more positive the sentiments towards social groups associated with progressive ideologies. Notable entities receiving favorable evaluations include climate activists, immigrants, Muslims, individuals living on benefits, and other left-wing voters. However, nuances in sentiment exist within this category as well. Some groups, such as individuals living on benefits, receive relatively neutral evaluations from right-wing supporters. Conversely, climate activists, immigrants, Muslims, and left-wing voters are viewed with varying degrees of antipathy by the right. This analysis establishes a crucial baseline for our subsequent examination of treatment effects, as it outlines the reference point for changes in sentiments that may arise.

To test whether a nostalgic narrative of 'us' and 'them' has polarizing consequences, we present the results of our pre-registered experiment. We have explored whether our results, presented below, are conditional upon ideology, and party support, but we do not

**Figure 3:** Social Groups & Ideological Position.
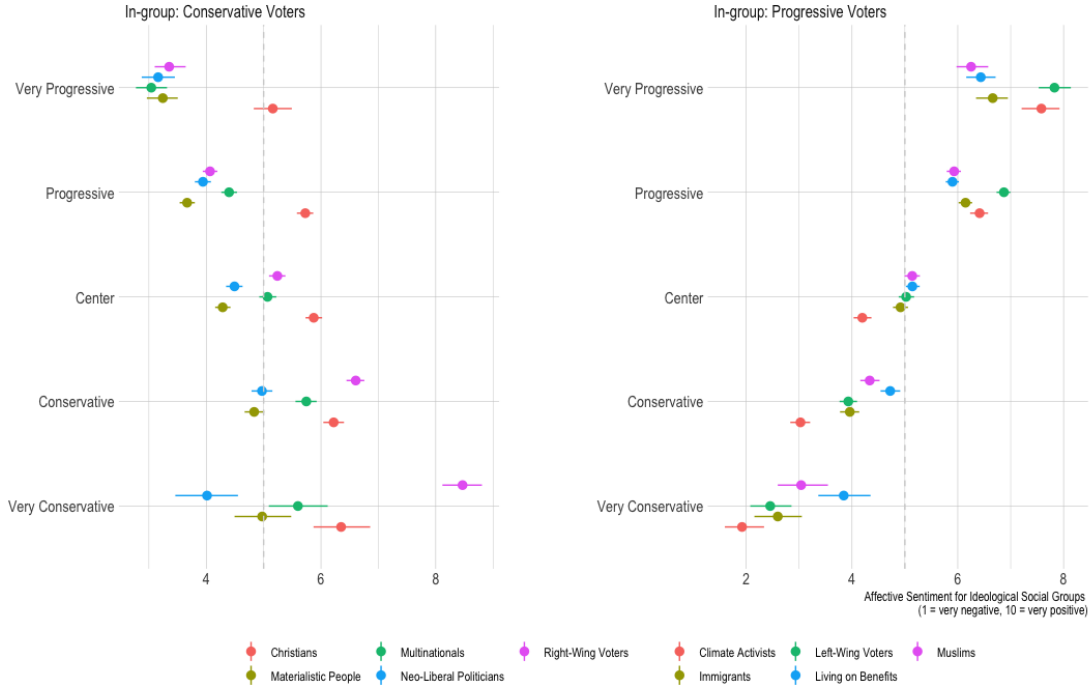
find evidence for these heterogeneous relationships (see our <mark>Online Compendium</mark> for the results. Figure 4 demonstrates the support for social in-groups based on the treatment message. In general, we see that neither nostalgic messages (H1a) nor scapegoating messages (H1b) statistically significantly increase the support for social-in-groups. An exception can be found on progressive voters. While the effects are null for groups such as left-wing voters or immigrants, progressive voters seem to feel more negative about Muslims after receiving a nostalgic scapegoating message, while they seem to feel more positively towards climate activists when the same message is released to them. In other words, while there is a defensive affective reaction for climate activists, a nostalgic and scapegoating rhetoric pushes progressive voters to feel more antipathy for Muslims. This could indicate that while both groups are generally seen more positively by progressives, the climate activists are seen as an ingroup that resists nostagic and scapegoating pushes. Muslims on the other hand, are probably seen more as strategic allies for which at least

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some voters of the left signal instrumental and fragile positive feelings.

Conservative voters also show an interesting pattern. Under the nostalgic message treatment, especially when it also includes scapegoating, they seem to reduce their likability for neoliberal politicians, multinationals, and materialistic people. This pattern could indicate that even if these groups are not the principal outgroups for conservative voters, they are seen as partly responsible for the nostalgic decline feeling. This observed trend suggests that, while these identified groups may not serve as the primary out-groups for conservative voters, they are nonetheless implicated as contributors to the perceived sense of nostalgic decline. The implications of this pattern underscore the nuanced dynamics at play within the conservative voter demographic. The reduction in likability towards entities associated with neoliberalism and materialism underlines a complex interplay of sentiments. It may suggest that, within the narrative of nostalgic decline, these entities are perceived, at least in part, as influential agents contributing to the overall discontentment experienced by conservative voters. In a broader context, the findings shed light on the multifaceted nature of conservative voter attitudes. The juxtaposition of defensive inclinations when scapegoats are cued, extending to both in-groups and allies, and the subsequent dissatisfaction and negativity evoked by induced nostalgia, provides valuable insights into the malleability of conservative sentiment. This nuanced response may signify a delicate balance within the conservative voter psyche, wherein defensive alliances coexist with discontentment, particularly under the influence of nostalgic messaging cues.

Hence, we do not find any support for H1a and H1b. The analysis of our pre-registered experiment, as depicted in Figure 4, aimed to assess whether a nostalgic narrative framing 'us' and 'them' engenders polarizing consequences, particularly concerning the support for social in-groups. Contrary to our expectations, neither nostalgic messages (H1a) nor scapegoating messages (H1b) exhibited statistically significant increases in support for social in-groups across the general population. In conclusion, the lack of support for H1a and H1b in our study provides valuable insights into the nuanced dynamics

Figure 4: Predicted Affective Sentiment for Social In-Groups.
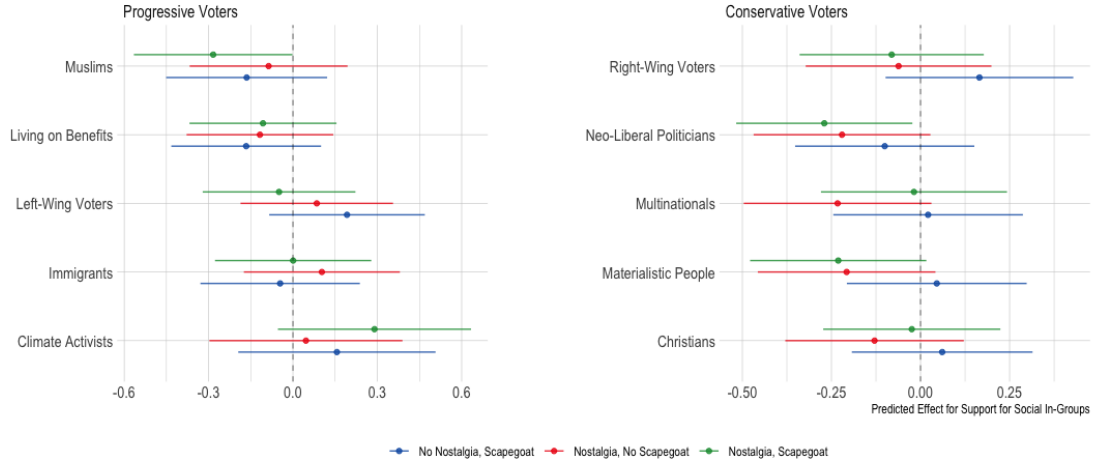
of political messaging and its differential impact on diverse voter groups. It is crucial to recognize these subtleties in understanding the complexities of political sentiment and avoid broad generalizations about the existence of a populist zeitgeist based on the examined experimental conditions.

Figure 5 demonstrates the support for social out-groups based on the treatment message. Here we see more varied results. Looking at the left-panel of Figure 5, we see that for nostalgic messages (red coefficients), the affective sentiment increases for the social groups right-wing voters, and Christians (later not statistically significant). Indicating that a "purely" nostalgic message could foster more understanding for some ideological out-groups. This could indicate how nostalgic messages could make progressive voters more empathetic with right-wing voters' narratives, as well as Christians. However, if political parties combine the nostalgic message with a scapegoat (green coefficients), the affective sentiment towards out-groups decreases: Progressive voters become more negative about right-wing voters (not statistically significant), neo-liberal politicians, multinationals, and Christians (not statistically significant). Only a scapegoating message (in blue) decreases the sentiment towards right-wing voters, neo-liberal politicians, multinationals,

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Christians, and materialistic people – with only the latter being statistically significant.

Looking at the right-panel of Figure 5, we see that nostalgic messages (red coefficients) are more effective in creating out-group derogation. Conservative voters are feeling less positive about Muslims, people living on benefits, left-wing voters (statistically significant), immigrants, the government (statistically significant), and climate activists. In most cases, people feel even colder towards these groups if they are exposed to a scapegoating only message (in blue) – this is not the case for immigrants and the government. Combining a nostalgic message with a scapegoating message (green coefficients) only polarizes towards left-wing voters.

Figure 5: Affective Sentiment for Social Out-Groups.
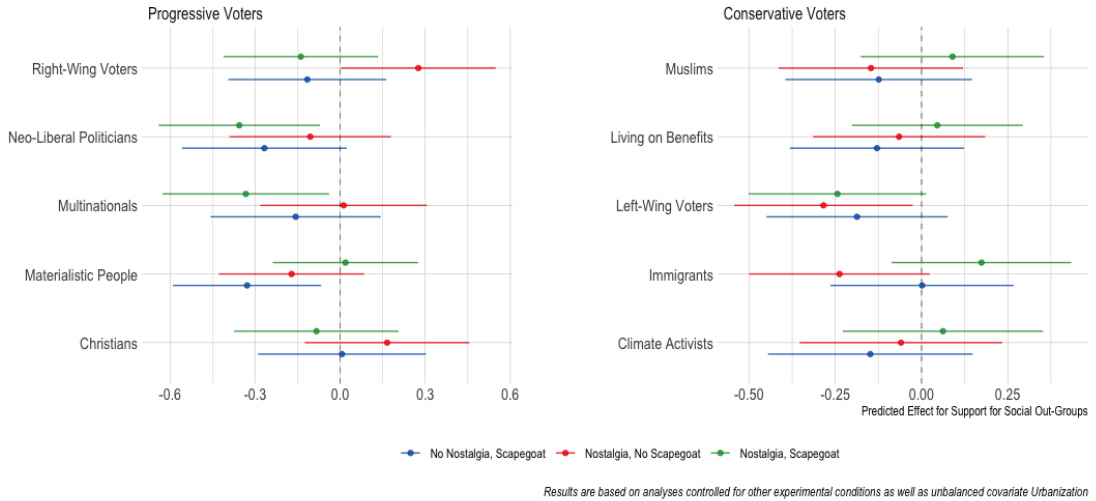
Hence, we do not find a conclusive support for H2a and H2b – for some groups nostalgic and scapegoating messages do decrease the affective sentiment, but not for all theorized out-groups. In light of these results, it is essential to acknowledge the complexity of the impact of political messaging on affective sentiment towards social out-groups. Our study does not decisively indicate the presence of a populist zeitgeist based on the examined experimental conditions. The nuanced and varied responses observed underscore the importance of considering contextual factors and the diverse nature of political attitudes

within the broader population.

Conclusion

In this paper, we contend that an enduring populist zeitgeist is manifesting itself through the politicization of out-groups, leading to increased affective polarization. Our experimental findings revealed a nuanced and intricate relationship between nostalgic messaging, affective polarization, and sentiment towards in-group and out-group entities. Contrary to expectations, our results indicate that the inclusion or exclusion of a scapegoat in nostalgic messages does not consistently amplify affective polarization towards the out-group or enhance positive sentiments towards the in-group. The complexity of our study is underscored by the identification of specific sub-groups that exhibit distinct responses to nostalgic messages. Notably, progressive voters emerged as a group demonstrating heightened negativity towards Muslims in the context of a nostalgic scapegoating message, while concurrently expressing more positive sentiments towards climate activists. This differential impact on sub-groups suggests that the influence of nostalgic messaging is contingent on individuals' pre-existing beliefs and affiliations. The implications of these findings extend beyond the scope of our study, emphasizing the need for further exploration into the intricate dynamics of nostalgic messaging and its implications for affective responses within diverse political and social contexts.

Our study sheds light on the complexity inherent in the concept of a social in-group, particularly within the context of progressive voters. While Muslims and climate activists both fall within the categorization of the in-group for progressive voters, our results show a notable variation in the warmth of feelings towards these sub-groups. The finding that progressive voters harbor warmer sentiments toward climate activists compared to Muslims challenges conventional assumptions about the homogeneity of in-group perceptions. This nuanced perspective underscores the need to move beyond a monolithic

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understanding of social in-groups and acknowledges the existence of internal distinctions that influence individuals' affiliations and affective responses. The identification of variability within the in-group has broader implications for social psychology and intergroup relations, prompting further inquiry into the multifaceted nature of in-group dynamics and the factors contributing to divergent attitudes towards sub-groups within a shared identity.

We also acknowledge a notable limitation related to the description of social groups employed in our research design. A potential source of ambiguity arises from the possibility that certain social groups were not delineated with absolute clarity, leaving room for participants to interpret and associate these groups based on their individual perceptions and preconceptions. Instances such as categorizing individuals as "materialistic people" or "non-liberal politicians" might have lacked precision in definition, potentially influencing participants' understanding and responses. Furthermore, the concept of "non-liberal politicians" may pose a challenge for participants with lower political knowledge or interest, introducing an element of subjectivity in their interpretations. As such, the limitations inherent in the specificity and clarity of social group descriptions underscore the need for careful consideration and refinement in future research, ensuring that the operationalization of social categories is meticulously crafted to mitigate any potential confounding effects on participant responses.

In conclusion, our examination of populist rhetoric's reliance on creating in- and out-group divisions, often utilizing the out-group as a scapegoat, aligns with recent research emphasizing the pivotal role of nostalgia in this narrative construction (Elçi 2022; van Prooijen et al. 2022; Smeekes et al. 2021). However, our findings suggest that the effectiveness of this narrative may be contingent on the political context, notably the prevalence of populist radical right ideologies in the Netherlands. Given the established nature of right-wing populism compared to its left-wing counterpart, Dutch voters may have developed a familiarity with nostalgic elements in populist narratives, particularly

from conservative parties. This contextual nuance prompts a reconsideration of the universal efficacy of nostalgia as a vehicle for populist narratives. Our study suggests the possibility that the characteristics constituting an effective vehicle for populist narratives might differ between ideological factions, raising intriguing questions about the nuanced interplay of nostalgia and political ideology in shaping public perception and response to populist rhetoric. Future research should delve into these contextual dynamics to unravel the complex interrelationships between ideological orientations and the persuasive power of nostalgic components within populist discourse.

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