

# Media Cues and Citizen Support for Right-Wing Populist Parties

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## Abstract

Right-wing populist parties are thriving across Europe. Their success is usually attributed to demand-side voter factors and supply-side factors explaining differences in success between countries and parties, such as the role of the media. This study focuses on the interplay of these factors and adds to the literature on media and political populism by (1) its individual-level focus, accounting for indirect effects, and (2) the use of an experimental design employing a party cue and two right-wing populist cues: an immigrant cue and an anti-politics cue. The authors find effects of certain cues on key attitudes driving right-wing populist support—anti-immigrant attitudes and political cynicism. Furthermore, through these attitudes, the cues indirectly affect probability to vote for such a party.

Right-wing populist parties are thriving across Europe, currently holding seats in national parliaments in most European countries. Explanations of the success of these parties focus on both the voters (demand-side) and on party and societal factors (internal and external supply-side). Usual demand-side explanations for the success of these parties are based on protest motivations or nationalism (for a review, see [Mudde, 2007](#)). On the external supply-side, it has been argued that the mass media can play a significant role in promoting the success of the populist right (Boomgaarden & van Spanje, 2012; [Ellinas, 2010](#); [Koopmans & Muis, 2009](#); [Mazzoleni, 2008](#)). The mass media are argued to provide legitimacy to the populist right by giving attention to these parties and their issues. The interplay between important demand-side factors and the mass media as one player on the supply-side is the focus of this study.

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While prior studies on media effects draw on macro-level data or qualitative accounts, there is little systematic evidence about how mass media coverage may affect support for the populist right on the level of the individual voter. Two exceptions come from Bos, van der Brug and de Vreese (2011, 2013). Yet, these studies focused on the *perception of populist leaders* and not on *support for populist parties*, more broadly. We extend this line of research with an experimental study, following the call for more systematic empirical evidence regarding the relationship between media coverage of and support for right-wing populism (Van der Brug & Fennema, 2007).

As said, aggregate-level studies have provided ample evidence for the impact of media attention on support for right-wing populist parties. Drawing inspiration from prior investigations that considered party cues to be important for the effects of media coverage on policy support, in general (Kam, 2005; Mondak, 1993; for populist parties, see also Vliegenthart, Boomgaarden, and van Spanje, 2012), we explore the impact of party cueing on individual voters. Our main interests, however, lie in the combination of this cue and features of “mediated populism,” or populism transported through mass media content (Mazzoleni, 2008). Populism is typically defined with regard to two common features: anti-elitism and representation of the common people (Canovan, 1999). The latter is often characterized by strong national favoritism and hostility toward immigrants (Betz, 1994; Ignazi, 2002; Mudde, 2007; Zaslove, 2008). Our experimental design draws on these two aspects of populist politics and its mediatization, exploring the effects of the distinct party cues and also in concurrence with cues related to anti-elitism and to identity out-groups, specifically immigrants. We explore the effects of these cues on right-wing populist-party support, as well as on the two key drivers of such support, anti-immigrant attitudes and political cynicism. This method allows us to test whether populist media cues affect party support directly, or *via* these attitudinal antecedents. While we do not find direct effects on party support, we do find that populist media cues, when combined with party cues, indeed affect anti-immigrant and cynical attitudes and indirectly boost one’s likelihood to vote for the populist far-right. These findings add a detailed micro-level perspective to the study of media effects in this area of research.

### Right-Wing Populist Parties<sup>1</sup>: Explanations for Success

Academic definitions of populism vary, but tend to agree on two defining elements of populist parties: a central focus on “the people” and an

<sup>1</sup>The literature remains unclear on the appropriate terminology—“populist,” “right-wing populist,” or “anti-immigrant”—for these parties. While some argue for a clear distinction between different parties falling under this category, other use these terms rather interchangeably. These debates are beyond our scope; for precision’s sake, we focus on “right-wing populist parties,” but understand them also to involve anti-immigrant platforms and sentiments.

accompanying anti-elitism (Canovan, 1999). “The people” tends to mean a homogenous group of citizens, the virtuous ordinary people, the backbone of society (Zaslove, 2008). Populism proclaims to express their true interests (Mudde, 2004) and to ensure their political representation. This is not a benign classification, however: “Ordinary people” are juxtaposed against “dangerous others” who pose a threat to their interests (Canovan, 1999, p. 3–5). In right-wing populism, such others are not just the “corrupt elite” (Mudde, 2004, p. 543), but also immigrants and anyone else not belonging to an idealized, traditionalist vision of the ordinary citizen. This populism, then, combines an anti-elitist rhetoric with in-group, typically nationalistic, favoritism. With the latter often leading to harsh opposition to immigration, populist parties are often found on the extreme right of the political spectrum (Betz, 1994; Ignazi, 2002; Zaslove, 2008).<sup>2</sup> Far-right parties appear to have firm common ground in their resentment toward immigrants (Veugeliers & Chiarini, 2002). The populist right parties thus belong to the broader party family of anti-immigrant or anti-immigration parties (Fennema, 1997; Van der Brug & Fennema, 2007) or extreme right parties (Giugni & Koopmans, 2007; for a discussion see also Mudde, 2007). While not all anti-immigrant parties are right-wing populist, all right-wing populist parties do seem to be anti-immigrant/immigration.

To the extent that there is a coherent theoretical framework explaining the success of populist parties, it converges on the observation that structural developments in some Western societies translate into individual motivations to vote for the populist right. While some contend that processes of modernization and globalization provide fertile ground for populist parties (Betz, 1994; Minkenberg, 1998), others argue that societies in crisis, in particular economic or political crisis, are susceptible to right-wing populism (Kriesi, 1995). A third group contends specifically that changes in the ethnic composition of society, including those caused by mass immigration, tend to encourage right-wing populism (Golder, 2003; Mudde, 2007). In sum, theory asserts that certain groups within certain societies are more prone to vote for the populist right because they see themselves as being threatened by societal processes. On a related note, these societal processes also highlight the declining representative function of mainstream political parties (Kriesi 2014; Mudde, 2004). Right-wing populism, then, is thought to cater to those citizens who perceive themselves to have lost in some regard during the process of globalization—lost jobs, lost cultural capital, lost national identity, and so forth. The macro-level tests of these theoretical accounts, however, are not

<sup>2</sup>We acknowledge the academic debate on left-wing populism (Dahrendorf, 2003; Decker, 2008; March & Mudde, 2005; March, 2007), but here choose to focus on right-wing populism only.

uniformly supportive, are hard to empirically justify, and sometimes lack explicit translation into micro-level dynamics (Mudde, 2007).

Beyond these socio-structural, external supply-side explanations, demand-side motivations of individual voters are also part of the framework explaining right-wing populist success. In particular, two explanations derive from the literature and can be subsumed under the umbrella of right-wing populist attitudes (Mudde, 2007, p. 219): nativist anti-immigration attitudes and anti-establishment sentiments. Scholars advocating the first explanation argue that right-wing populist party support is based primarily, if not entirely, on ideological and issue agreement with the party (Ivarsflaten, 2008; Oesch, 2008; Van der Brug, Fennema & Tillie, 2000), meaning that, in particular, individuals' immigration-related attitudes should be the primary driver of support for these parties. Mudde (2007, p. 221, italics in original) explains that "within the electorate of populist radical right parties more people are nativists (*quantity*) and they are more nativist (*quality*) than within the electorates of other parties." The second explanation is that voting for right-wing populist parties is also about protesting the (political) establishment; in this case, political cynicism and anti-establishment (or "anti-politics") sentiments are key drivers of populist voting (Betz, 1994; Knigge, 1998; Norris, 2005; Walgrave & de Swert, 2004). Indeed, cynicism has been shown to play a crucial, and sometimes increasing, role in driving support for these parties (Cutts, Ford & Goodwin, 2011; Schumacher & Rooduijn, 2013). Because of these strong effects, we assume that voters for right-wing populist parties are largely driven both by anti-immigrant attitudes and by protest or cynical attitudes.

A potential problem with such a general individual-level explanatory framework lies in the fact that latent populist attitudes—anti-immigrant and anti-politics sentiments—do not necessarily lead to votes for far-right populist parties. That is, there is a missing theoretical link between individual motivations and societal conditions that engender right-wing populist movements. We see the media as being (a central part of) this link. That is, many citizens might inwardly experience some level of negativity toward immigrants or the political establishment; such expressions may depend not only on personal factors but also the external environment—in our case, the media's *priming* of such factors in political discourse. We therefore think of the mass media as one external supply-side factor that may, depending on the type of coverage, prompt citizens to be more likely to experience these attitudes, and then also to express them by supporting a right-wing populist party.

The role of the media in explaining the success of populist parties has only been a focus of academic attention since the turn of the century. The main

conclusion appears to be that mass media are an indispensable tool for political populism. Media provide a stage for populists by spreading their message, but more importantly they provide mediated legitimacy by way of framing issues and actors as politically viable—particularly important for less mainstream parties. By giving them media access (illustrated by, e.g., Mazzoleni, Stewart, & Horsfield, 2003; Rydgren, 2004), the media “confer legitimacy and authority to political newcomers and (...) dispel voter doubts about their electoral viability” (Ellinas, 2010, p. 210). Indeed, empirical research has indicated that there are several ways in which the media can make or break right-wing populist parties. For example, literature suggests that the degree to which right-wing populist parties and their leaders are covered in the news is related to popular support (Vliegenthart et al., 2012), though such visibility results are not uniform (Koopmans & Muis, 2009; Lubbers & Scheepers, 2001).

More germane to this study is literature based on the issue ownership thesis, which shows that the salience of right-wing populist parties and their topics in the media (such as immigration, integration, or Islam), as well as anti-politics sentiments in media coverage (such as populist and/or cynical sentiments driven by the media's adversarial stance toward politicians (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999; Mazzoleni, 2008), can contribute to the electoral success of these parties (Boomgaarden & Vliegenthart, 2007; Walgrave & de Swert, 2004). The present study attempts to translate these macro-level findings into an experimental design, and to fuse both sets of literature—on attitudinal and media-based drivers of populist support—into one study. We turn now, therefore, to a discussion of the role of media cues in affecting party support.

Theoretically, then, we attempt to help close the gap between demand-side factors of support and the external supply-side environment as provided by the mass media. If mass media coverage mentions a right-wing populist party, and in conjunction highlights populist issues, it may well be that populist attitudes are augmented or galvanized, to the benefit of the populist right. Thus, while we do not claim to solve the complicated puzzle of the success of right-wing populism, or to address all relevant factors, we hope to show how experimental research on media coverage and populist attitudes can contribute to closing the gap between individual and structural factors.

### Media Cues, Priming, and Issue Ownership

The media play an essential role in political discourse by making salient certain actors and topics over time, promulgating certain interpretations of issues

over others, and cueing the public to think about certain actors and issues and in certain ways (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). Media cues, in this study, are understood to be simple references within a news text that can bring to mind, or prime, specific issues, groups, topics, or political parties. Classic media priming literature suggests that such cues are then brought to the forefront of voters' minds when making electoral decisions (Dalton, Beck, & Huckfeldt, 1998; Iyengar, Kinder, Peters, & Krosnick, 1984; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). The implication is that if an issue, or likewise, a party, is perceived as important at the moment of decision, then perceptions of how parties are doing *vis-à-vis* that issue will affect voters' choices.

Such ideas also relate to literature on issue ownership, showing that perceived importance of a given issue at election time, combined with perceived competence of a given party to deal with that issue, impact individual decisions to vote for a particular party (Bélanger & Meguid, 2008; Green & Hobolt, 2008; Walgrave, Lefevere, & Tresch, 2012). Issue ownership literature dates back quite some time (Budge & Farlie, 1983; Petrocik, 1996) but has received more attention recently as scholars attempt to clarify its mechanism. While original studies focused primarily on the idea that some parties are perceived as more competent to handle a given issue, newer studies also emphasize the importance of issue salience, as well as the degree to which a party is associated with a given issue in the first place (see Walgrave, Tresch & Lefevere, 2013, for an overview). In this latter work, judgments of competence and issue salience—*via* priming—are essentially combined: First, voters may have perceptions of a given party's competence to address a specific issue, and second, that issue may be primed by the media as important and therefore may prompt voters to support the owning party.

The current study takes an approach that essentially combines this literature on priming and issue ownership, examining the effects of media cues that prime relevant populist topics within the context of an owned issue connected to a cued party. Specifically, we present media cues about two right-wing populist topics—immigrants and anti-politics—to respondents within a news article about street crime, an issue arguably owned by the right-wing populist party in question (Walgrave & de Swert, 2004). The issue context is held constant, and these two topics are cued within the news article in conjunction with a party cue. We now explain each cue in more detail, elaborating further about the mechanism by which we expect the cues to affect attitudes toward the populist far right.

### The Role of Party Cues

In general, it has been argued that party cues help voters to efficiently cope with, structure and make sense of the complex political world around them.

By relying on partisan cues, the rational voter minimizes information costs (Downs, 1957) “while still producing relatively well-grounded political opinions” (Mondak, 1993, p. 188). Party cues thus act as information shortcuts, especially in low informational or motivational contexts (Lau & Redlawsk, 2001; Rahn, 1993). There is some debate in the literature over whether such party cues dominate other information in their effects on opinion (Cohen, 2003; Rahn, 1993) or whether policy information, political awareness, and other factors condition the effectiveness of party versus issue cues (Boudreau & MacKenzie, 2014; Bullock, 2011; Druckman, Peterson, & Slothuus 2013; Nicholson 2011; Slothuus & de Vreese, 2010). In line with prior literature, it is argued that adding a party cue may increase people’s motivation to process the information, and therefore, they will also be motivated to process the information included in the right-wing populist cues (see below). Moreover, with regard to right-wing populist parties, in particular, it was shown that increasing visibility of the party in news coverage was related to stronger public support (Vliegenthart et al., 2012). Thus, party cueing may not only add to the effectiveness of the populist cues, but it might also be effective in its own right. To explore these dynamics, we present a simple party cue in isolation and in conjunction with the two populist cues discussed below. However, given the ambivalent findings in the literature on party cues and a lack of clear theoretical guidance, we pose the following research question:

*RQ1: Does a party cue prompt greater right-wing populist support?*

### Right-Wing Populist Media Cues

Within this coverage of populist parties, we are interested in the extent to which specific right-wing populist cues might enhance the impact of the party cue. Indeed, there has been discussion in the issue ownership literature addressing the fact that voters must also buy into the idea that the party in question is competent, or best-suited, to deal with its main issues (Walgrave et al., 2013). To test this idea, we offer a novel approach by presenting right-wing populist cues within the media text cueing the party, which implies such competence. In this paper, we include the two main right-wing populist issues.

As noted, many right-wing populist parties promulgate a platform of anti-immigrant nationalism. Likewise, the visibility in news of immigration as an issue has been correlated with the success of right-wing populist parties (Boomgaarden & Vliegenthart, 2007; Walgrave & de Swert, 2004). Translating these macro-level findings to our study, we present an immigrant cue—mentioning immigrants or not—in the context of a story about street crime. We expect such an immigrant cue in a news article to prompt more



support for the cued right-wing populist party because a populism-relevant topic will now be salient within the context of an owned issue. Following the priming and issue ownership logic, this may prompt respondents to perceive the populist party as relevant and best-suited to deal with the “problem” of immigrants. This leads to our first hypothesis:

*H1: Participants who are presented with an immigrant cue will express more support for the cued right-wing populist party.*

Turning to anti-politics cues, recall that critique of a country’s political and economic elites is a defining feature of right-wing populism (Schedler, 1996). By distinguishing themselves from the political establishment, populist parties seek to attract voters who are equally dissatisfied. The media can also play a critical role here: Mazzoleni (2008) touches upon the idea that the cynical and anti-political attitude of the media, *vis-à-vis* political parties, might lead to the diffusion of political discontent. If it is the case that such anti-political storytelling (Adriaansen, van Praag, & de Vreese, 2012) leads to an increase in political cynicism, this rising discontent could play into the hands of populist parties. Similar to the case of immigrants, we expect that by highlighting anti-political considerations, a media text makes negativity toward the political establishment a salient aspect for voting, thus prompting support for the party best-suited to deal with the establishment—again, the cued right-wing populist party (Bos et al., 2013). We therefore present our second hypothesis:

*H2: Participants who are presented with an anti-politics cue will express more support for the cued right-wing populist party.*

### The Role of Anti-Immigrant Attitudes and Political Cynicism

Beyond hypothesizing these direct effects on party support, we also expect that the cues may affect the two main drivers of right-wing populist party success reviewed above: anti-immigrant attitudes and political cynicism. In fact, taking into account the role of these attitudinal variables may further our understanding of dynamics at play between media stimuli and outcome variables (McLeod, Kosicki & McLeod, 2002). As discussed earlier, we take the position that both identity considerations (i.e., anti-immigrant attitudes) and anti-political sentiments (i.e., cynicism) drive right-wing populist voting (Lubbers & Scheepers, 2001; Schumacher and Rooduijn, 2013; Van der Brug, 2003). Because our media cues were designed to tap into these aspects, we hypothesize that each cue also affects its relevant attitudinal domain. Put simply, each cue should have an effect on its relevant attitude: An immigrant cue (in this negative story context) should prompt anti-immigrant attitudes (by priming negativity toward immigrants), and an anti-politics cue should prompt



more cynical attitudes (by priming generally anti-elitist/anti-establishment topics).<sup>3</sup> Our hypotheses are as follows:

*H<sub>3</sub>: Participants who are presented with an immigrant cue will express more negative attitudes toward immigrants.*

*H<sub>4</sub>: Participants who are presented with an anti-politics cue will express more cynical attitudes.*

As a final step, we pull together the observations above and pose a second research question about the possibility of indirect effects of the cues on our party support measure. Given that *H<sub>3</sub>* and *H<sub>4</sub>* hypothesize direct effects of the cues on the two main drivers of right-wing populist support, it seems logical that the media cues also affect party support indirectly through these two key drivers. Therefore, in addition to expecting direct effects in *H<sub>1</sub>* and *H<sub>2</sub>*, we also expect indirect effects as a result of *H<sub>3</sub>* and *H<sub>4</sub>* and the findings of prior studies demonstrating the importance of anti-immigration and anti-politics sentiments in explaining the vote for right-wing populist parties (Lubbers & Scheepers, 2001). Given the conceptual and empirical complexity of showing indirect effects, we opt to pose a simple research question here rather than theorize such indirect effects:

*RQ2: Do the topical cues, in conjunction with party cues, indirectly affect right-wing populist party support via anti-immigrant attitudes and/or political cynicism?*

The theoretical model underlying the research questions and hypotheses is represented visually in Figure 1.

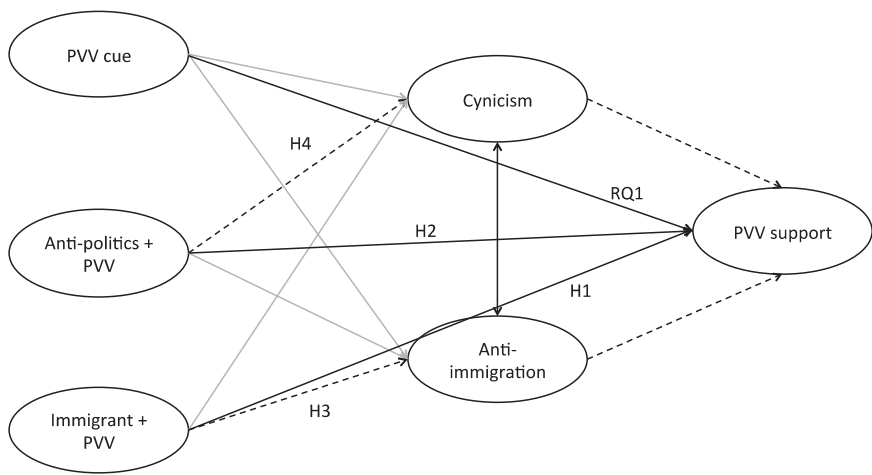
## Method

### Context and Sample

We conducted an online survey experiment with a representative sample of Dutch adults. The Netherlands is an opportune case for such research, because it is characterized by unprecedented levels of electoral volatility and remarkable electoral successes of right-wing populist parties. In the current political landscape, it is the PVV (Partij voor de Vrijheid, or Freedom Party), organized around its leader Geert Wilders, that puts right-wing populism on

<sup>3</sup>An alternative interpretation—derived solely from issue ownership literature—would be that the cueing of a relevant issue (e.g., immigrants or anti-politics) would prompt support for the party only among those voters who judge the party to be competent to address the immigration issue. This would imply that voters' attitudes toward immigrants, and their cynicism, might moderate the effect of the cues on their support for the far-right party. We favor a more priming-centered approach for two reasons: First, all experimental conditions included the owned issue of street crime, so we do not have a clean test of the presence of one owned issue versus another; second, we believe that literature showing that the salience of these topics in media content prompts populist party support (Adriaansen et al., 2012; Boomgaarden & Vliegenthart, 2007; Walgrave & de Swert, 2004) leaves open the possibility that these attitudes are affected by media content, and not simply attitudinal moderators.

Figure 1  
*Theoretical model. Dashed lines show indirect effects (RQ2), gray lines show controls*



the political agenda. The PVV fits squarely within literature’s conceptualizations of right-wing populism, and has been categorized as such in the literature. This categorization draws on theoretical observations and empirical analysis of party manifestos and media coverage (Bos & Brants, 2014; Rooduijn, de Lange & Van der Brug, 2014a; Vossen, 2010). In that sense, the PVV resembles other successful European right-wing populist parties that focus strongly on nativism and anti-immigration issues (such as the Freedom Party of Austria, or FPÖ, and France’s National Front, or FN; Fennema, 1997; Mudde, 2007), and that put themselves outside the political establishment (such as the British National Party, or BNP; Rooduijn et al., 2014a). The PVV therefore represents a crystallization of the key cues at play in this study.

The participants for the online experiment were recruited through the political research branch of the commercial polling company, TNS NIPO. The company offers representative samples<sup>4</sup> of the Dutch population that are drawn from an online panel into which people are also recruited offline,

<sup>4</sup>Our sample characteristics indeed mirrored those of the population. Gender was evenly distributed at 51.1% male (compared to 50.7% male in the population). The sample age ranged from 18 to over 80 years old; the distribution mirrored the population within the same age range: 30.1% of the sample was between 20 and 39 years of age (compared with 33.8% of the population); 46.2% was between 40 and 64 years of age (compared with 48.8 % of the population); and 20.3% was over 65 (compared with 17.3% of the population). Education and income levels were also distributed very similarly to population statistics, with equivalent proportions in various categories; and finally, reported vote in 2012 mirrored the actual 2012 election results, with the most reported sample votes indeed going to those parties that won the largest percentage of actual votes (CBS Netherlands, <http://www.cbs.nl/en-GB/menu/publicaties/boeken/statistisch-jaarboek/archief/2013/2013-a26-pub.htm>).

including some 60,000 members. Respondents receive a small financial compensation for completing the survey. A total of 890 participants completed the questionnaire, for a completion rate of 87%. After eliminating respondents who were not Dutch citizens, as well as those in experimental conditions not included in this paper, we were left with 369 respondents. All respondents were distributed randomly between conditions, which had (after deletion) between 78 and 111 respondents each. Subsequent analysis showed that demographic variables like age, sex, education, and vote in 2012 did not differ significantly between conditions, suggesting that the random assignment was successful.

## Procedure and Measures

Participants were asked to read a news story that included only a party cue ( $n=78$ ), a combination of a populist cue with a party cue (immigrant \* PVV,  $n=84$ ; anti-politics \* PVV,  $n=97$ ), or no cue (as control,  $n=111$ ). Thus, there were four conditions in total. The manipulated newspaper article was about the issue of street crime by young delinquents in the Netherlands and the debate was about installing closed-circuit camera systems. The article was designed to look as though it had been excerpted from a real (online) newspaper. The headline, lead, and second paragraph were manipulated to include the relevant cues. An image and the text of the manipulations are available in [Appendix A](#). A manipulation check during a pilot study revealed that respondents in each cue condition were significantly more likely to correctly recall which cues were included in their article.<sup>5</sup>

After reading the news story, participants answered a set of questions. Their support for the PVV was measured *via* a question asking the probability that they would ever vote for the PVV on a 7-point scale from very unlikely (1) to very likely (7) ( $M=2.31$ ,  $SD=1.99$ ) (see e.g., van der Eijk, 2000, for the usefulness of the propensity-to-vote measure for research on smaller fringe parties). Political cynicism was assessed *via* five items related to external efficacy, on a 7-point agree/disagree scale, such as “politicians don’t care what people like me think” ( $\alpha=.84$ ;  $M=4.97$ ,  $SD=1.18$ ). Immigrant attitudes were assessed *via* three items (again on 7-point agree/disagree scales) related to the threats foreigners pose to Dutch culture, such as “foreigners make the Netherlands a worse place to live” ( $\alpha=.86$ ;  $M=4.14$ ,  $SD=1.38$ ). Respondents completed the survey by answering a few key demographic

<sup>5</sup>The  $F$ -tests ranged from 1.917 to 17.278 ( $df=11$ ; we had additional conditions in the pilot study, which accounts for the higher  $df$ ), and all significantly differed from 0. For example, in answer to the question: “Which of the following parties was mentioned in the article – PVV,” there was a significant difference between all conditions in which the party PVV was mentioned and the other conditions. The post hoc results for the anti-politics condition did not reach significance, and thus in the full version of the experiment, this manipulation was strengthened.

items. After they finished, participants were debriefed. The full text of the vote intention, cynicism, and immigrant attitude items (in English) is available in [Appendix B](#).

## Structural Equation Model

After basic analyses testing the direct effects of our cues on cynicism, anti-immigrant attitude, and right-wing populist party preference, we used a simple structural equation path model with latent variables ([Bollen, 1989](#)) to tentatively test the indirect effect of our cues. Our exogenous variables are the cues and the cue combinations manipulated in our experiment. Endogenous variables are cynicism, anti-immigrant attitudes, and right-wing populist party preference.

## Results

To test whether the cues affect party preference for the PVV ( $H_1$  and  $H_2$ ) and anti-immigrant attitudes and cynicism ( $H_3$  and  $H_4$ ), we conducted a simple analysis of variance. [Table 1](#) shows the mean comparisons of the different conditions. Only the  $F$ -test for political cynicism is significant, and post hoc analyses reveal significant differences at the 0.10 level between the PVV cue only condition on the one hand and the anti-politics/PVV and immigrants/PVV conditions on the other. These results indicate that we only find corroboration for  $H_4$ , showing that embedding an anti-politics cue within a PVV story increases political cynicism. We also find that embedding the immigrants cue within a PVV story increases political cynicism. However, these initial results suggest that we need to reject  $H_1$ – $H_3$ .

We took a second look at the effects of the cues on party support for the PVV, anti-immigrant attitudes, and cynicism with an ordinary least squares (OLS) linear regression analysis ([Table 2](#)). In this regression analysis, we created dummy variables for the cues, collapsing across conditions,<sup>6</sup> which allows us to estimate the effect of the cue instead of the condition. The analyses show that, regarding  $RQ_1$ , there are no direct effects from the party cue on support for the PVV. Moreover, we find no impact of the right-wing populist cues embedded within the party cues, leading to a rejection of  $H_1$  and  $H_2$ .

We do find, however, significant and interesting results regarding the two key drivers of right-wing populist support—anti-immigrant attitudes and political cynicism. Model B2 tests the combined cue effects on anti-immigrant attitudes and shows a significant positive effect of the combined anti-politics/party cue on anti-immigrant attitudes. Thus, while we did not find support

<sup>6</sup>For instance, we assigned cases a 1 on PVV if they were either in the PVV cue condition, the PVV + immigrant cue condition, or the PVV + anti-politics cue condition.

Table 1  
*Mean Differences Between Treatment Groups*

Cue	Party preference PVV		Anti-immigrant attitudes		Cynicism	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
PVV cue	2.31 <sup>a</sup>	2.04	3.85 <sup>a</sup>	1.29	4.69 <sup>a</sup>	1.15
Immigrant + PVV cue	2.12 <sup>a</sup>	1.92	4.21 <sup>a</sup>	1.29	5.17 <sup>b</sup>	1.05
Anti-politics + PVV cue	2.54 <sup>a</sup>	2.01	4.28 <sup>a</sup>	1.49	5.12 <sup>b</sup>	1.12
Control	2.26 <sup>a</sup>	1.98	4.18 <sup>a</sup>	1.41	4.89 <sup>ab</sup>	1.31
<i>F</i> ( <i>p</i> )	.699	(.553)	1.544	(.203)	3.030	(.029)
<i>N</i>	369		369		361	

Notes. Different superscripts denote significant post hoc differences using Bonferroni adjusted pairwise comparisons ( $p < .10$ ). All tests are two-tailed.

Table 2  
*Regression Analyses*

	PVV preference		Anti-immigrant attitudes		Cynicism	
	Model A1	Model A2	Model B1	Model B2	Model C1	Model C2
PVV cue	.071 (.225)	.046 (.294)	−.048 (.157)	−.322 (.204)	.116 (.136)	−.201 (.174)
PVV + immigrant cue		−.189 (.312)		.352 (.217)		.484 (.185)**
PVV + anti-politics cue		.228 (.302)		.427 (.210)*		.434 (.179)*
Constant	2.261*** (.189)	2.261*** (.189)	4.177*** (.131)	4.177*** (.131)	4.886*** (.114)	4.886*** (.113)
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	−.002	−.002	−.002	.004	−.001	.017
<i>N</i>	369	369	369	369	361	361

Notes. Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients, standard errors within parentheses.  $n = 369$ . † $p \leq .10$  ( $t$  value  $\geq 1.64$ ); \* $p \leq .05$  ( $t$  value  $\geq 1.96$ ); \*\* $p \leq .01$  ( $t$  value  $\geq 2.57$ ); \*\*\* $p \leq .001$  ( $t$  value  $\geq 3.29$ ). All tests are two-tailed.

for  $H_3$ —the combined immigrants/party cue did not affect anti-immigrant attitudes—we see that those respondents who received an anti-politics cue (combined with a party cue) were more likely to express more negative attitudes toward immigrants than respondents who did not receive such a cue, by a margin of 0.427 on a 7-point scale.

Turning to political cynicism, we see relatively similar patterns. Model C2, which includes the combined PVV/immigrant cue and PVV/anti-politics cue, shows that the anti-politics cue in the presence of a simultaneous party cue

prompts increased cynicism, supporting  $H_4$ . If both are present in the stimulus, respondents score 0.434 points higher on a 7-point scale. Additionally, we find that political cynicism also increases 0.484 points when respondents are confronted with an immigrants cue within a PVV story.

These results indicate that our right-wing populist media cues affect the two key explanatory variables of populist-party support, but do not seem to affect PVV party support itself. These results hint at an indirect, rather than direct, cue effect on populist-party support, in line with  $RQ_2$ . To test this, we did an exploratory structural equation modeling analysis. We acknowledge that a cross-sectional experiment with no direct manipulation of the mediator does not allow us to formally test the indirect effect of our cues on preference for the PVV (Bullock, Green, & Ha, 2010; Imai, Keele & Tingley, 2010), but previous research into the antecedents of populist party success (Lubbers & Scheepers, 2001; Schumacher & Rooduijn, 2013; van der Brug, 2003) do give us confidence to assume that anti-immigrant attitudes and political cynicism are important antecedents of our dependent variable. We therefore proceeded to estimate the indirect effects of the populist media cues on PVV support, through anti-immigrant attitude and political cynicism.

We first tested the theoretical model (Figure 1), excluding the direct effects of our cues (reflected in  $H_1$ ,  $H_2$ , and  $RQ_1$ ) on the dependent variable party preference, as the first analyses show we should not expect direct effects. Because this first model had a poor model fit ( $\chi^2(46) = 70.22$ ,  $p = .012$ ), we examined the modification indices. These indicated that freeing the covariance between two different exogenous error terms ((Cov) Cyn2 \* Cyn5,  $MI = 18.362$ , and subsequently (Cov) Cyn1 \* Cyn3,  $MI = 10.084$ ) would lead to a better model fit.<sup>7</sup> This model fits the data well.<sup>8</sup> The chi-square test of the model fit is quite good: 43.68 (44),  $p = .485$ . Other fit indices less sensitive to sample size confirm this: RMSEA = 0.000,  $p_{close}$  (the probability that RMSEA is smaller than 0.05) = 0.999, Tucker–Lewis index = 1.000, and comparative fit index = 1.000. We also looked at the omission of possible insignificant parameters. However, the only candidates are the structural parameters leading from some of the cues to the latent constructs of political cynicism and anti-immigration attitudes (Table 3). As we need to compare the (combined) cue effects to the baseline of no cue, we cannot omit these parameters from the model.

Figure 2 shows the parameters in the model. As in the regression analysis, we find direct effects from our cues on the two populist attitudinal variables,

<sup>7</sup>All parameters of the structural model can be found in Appendix C.

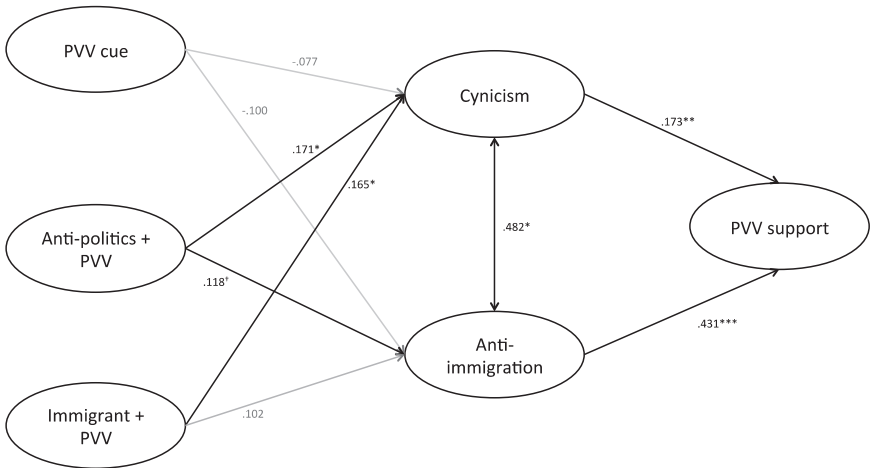
<sup>8</sup>We also estimated a model in which we included direct paths from the cues to the party support. However, comparing the Akaike information criterion and the Bayesian information criterion gave us sufficient confidence that the current model fits the data better (AIC = 11889.62, BIC = 12079.629 in the model with cue effects on populist party support; AIC = 11887.59, BIC = 12065.969 in the model without cue effects on populist party support).

Table 3  
Total Effects Matrix of Cues on PVV Support

	Unstandardized effect (SD)	Standardized effect
Anti-immigrant attitude	.614 (.087)***	.431***
Cynicism	.272 (.097)**	.173**
PVV cue	−.245 (.167)	−.057†
Immigrant + PVV cue	.339 (.179)†	.072†
Anti-politics + PVV cue	.364 (.175)*	.081*

Notes.  $n=357$ . † $p \leq .10$  ( $t$  value  $\geq 1.64$ ); \* $p \leq .05$  ( $t$  value  $\geq 1.96$ ); \*\* $p \leq .01$  ( $t$  value  $\geq 2.57$ ); \*\*\* $p \leq .001$  ( $t$  value  $\geq 3.29$ ). All tests are two-tailed.

Figure 2  
Parameters of the structural model. Path coefficients indicate standardized regression coefficients.  $n=357$ ; † $p \leq .10$  ( $t$  value  $\geq 1.64$ ); \* $p \leq .05$  ( $t$  value  $\geq 1.96$ ); \*\* $p \leq .01$  ( $t$  value  $\geq 2.57$ ); \*\*\* $p \leq .001$  ( $t$  value  $\geq 3.29$ ). All tests are two-tailed



and the analysis also shows that these variables indeed have a significant and strong impact on the party support dependent variable of interest.

The total effects matrix (i.e., the list of the indirect and direct effects of the cues on party support, Table 3) shows that the combined cues have a significant indirect effect on the dependent variable. The combination of an immigrant cue and a PVV cue leads to a 0.339 increase in party preference. The combined anti-politics/PVV cue is a larger predictor, leading to a 0.364 increase in party preference. Thus, in response to RQ2, we tentatively conclude that our cues do appear to indirectly affect party support.



## Discussion

Given the success of right-wing populist, anti-immigrant parties in Europe, scholars need to further understand the role that media play in either boosting or undermining support for these parties by cueing relevant political topics (Van der Brug & Fennema, 2007). Our study examines the effects, on an individual level, of various populist media cues on populist-party support. We found that a party cue in and of itself does not affect party support, nor does it affect the attitudinal drivers of populist-party support. However, we also looked at the impact of two relevant media cues—an immigrant cue and an anti-politics cue, both combined with a party cue—on support for right-wing populist parties. We found that these populist cues directly boosted support for two key drivers of right-wing populist-party support: anti-immigrant attitudes and political cynicism. And while direct effects of the cues on party support were absent, we did find tentative evidence of indirect effects, through these key drivers, of the cues on party support. This result is consistent with findings suggesting the crucial role of both cynicism and immigration attitudes in driving right-wing populist support (Cutts et al., 2011; Schumacher & Rooduijn, 2013). Our study shows the potential power of news media to boost such attitudes, even with fairly innocuous coverage of relevant issues and topics, thereby contributing to populist-party success. By taking into account effects of media coverage on populist attitudes and the indirect effect of media on party support, we provide a small-but-important step toward understanding the interplay between what prior studies have identified as the most important demand-side factors of populist support and one aspect of the external supply-side, the mass media (Mudde, 2007). Our findings demonstrate the value of using an experimental design to further our understanding of how structural features and voters interact when it comes to support for right-wing populist parties.

A few points merit further attention. First, cueing of the party of interest had no effect in isolation, but only when the substantive cues were also mentioned. Thus, a right-wing populist party does not necessarily gain from simply being present in the news (Vliegenthart et al., 2012). Rather, the combination with substantive populist cues seems to be most powerful. This finding is interesting and suggests that perhaps there is some parameter of party visibility that could be maxed out in news coverage; the PVV and its party leader are fairly prominent players in Dutch political news (Van Praag & Brants, 2014), and continual visibility could perhaps lessen the effects of simple party cues on audiences. More complex cue combinations are perhaps more relevant, then, for parties that already gain plenty of media attention. This result also confirms findings on the power of party cues in conjunction with substantial policy information (Boudreau & MacKenzie, 2014; Druckman et al., 2013). Future studies should explore for which citizens these sorts of cue combinations are

particularly effective, and under what circumstances. It may well be that party cues as such are effective in the rise of right-wing populist parties (Bos et al., 2011; Mudde, 2007), but once these parties are an established part of the political scene, including media coverage, substantive cues are needed for further success. A final possible explanation is based on the issue chosen for the stimulus: It could be that the party cue is not effective within an owned issue context, but is effective when it is placed within a non-owned issue context.

Second, we saw considerable spillover effects of both cues—the immigrant cue had effects on cynicism, and the anti-politics cue had effects on anti-immigrant attitudes. Perhaps there is some level of issue conflation surrounding this particular party, given the prominence of both the anti-politics and anti-immigrant topics in its platform. For example, by implicating both the PVV and its anti-elite critique in a story about crime, respondents may have made the leap to implicitly assuming that the youths in question were also those youths targeted by the PVV's platform: immigrant youths. Likewise, respondents reading a story about the PVV's attention to immigrant street criminals might have inferred some of the PVV's anti-elitist, cynical stance from the article itself. This possibility would imply that respondents might possess cognitive schema (Lau & Redlawsk, 2001) that link these two issues together, and link them to the party in question (see also associative issue-ownership, Walgrave et al., 2012). Therefore, cueing one element within this schema may cue the other relevant elements. While our manipulation check suggests that the cues were perceived appropriately (thus, respondents did not recall a story cue that was not present), a more subtle cognitive spillover effect seems plausible but, unfortunately, not testable with our design. Future studies that probe respondents' processing of these messages more deeply might be better-suited to observe these mechanisms.

It is worth noting, however, that the anti-politics cues seemed to carry more weight than immigrant cues in our analyses, more consistently affecting both cynical and anti-immigrant attitudes. We expect that—like the party cue alone—this fact may have also had to do with the general level of exposure respondents may have had to these types of cues outside our experimental context. Immigrant cues and discussions of immigration policy are commonplace in recent Dutch political news (as all over Europe) (Breeman et al., 2008). This over-exposure to the topic may dampen the effects of the cues on our respondents, who are nearly inoculated against such discourse. Therefore, the combination of party and anti-politics cues seems to be both the least common and most effective type of cue. Additionally, the anti-politics cue might have a stronger effect because of its negative and cynical nature. These types of news appear to be more attractive (Trussler & Soroka, 2014) and have a stronger impact than positive cues, probably because of psychophysiological responses (Soroka & McAdams, 2012).

This discussion naturally leads us to consider the external validity of our findings beyond our experimental context. We consider this topic from two angles: first, from the relevance of our topic and models in the real world, and second, from the methodological perspective regarding the generalizability of our experimental findings to the broader population. Regarding the first point, our findings certainly should be relevant for our thinking about media coverage in the broader political context. As noted earlier, the PVV shares many characteristics with other prominent right-wing populist parties in Europe. Furthermore, the media coverage we used in our manipulations is a fair representation of news coverage on these topics and cueing this party. That we saw these effects occur after a single exposure to such content is quite striking. Furthermore, it is worth keeping in mind that these cues were not embedded in a message that advocated for the party in any way. Rather, the messages implied that the party in question was urging action (or frustrated by inaction) on this issue. There is little reason to suspect that these dynamics should be limited to the party in question or to this particular issue; it seems that any discussion of a far-right populist party, a populist media cue, and an owned issue—media content that is very likely to regularly occur in any country with a well-established populist party—could reasonably prompt increased cynicism. Future research should determine the extent to which this actually applies to other European populist parties, other owned issue contexts, and even other ideological stances entirely.

The second angle pertains to issues of experimental design, more generally. Classic concerns about the external validity of experiments relate to the fact that unrepresentative samples of respondents necessarily participate in manipulated, artificial environments. While our experiment did ask respondents to read an article they would not otherwise have read, we were able to test our stimuli among a rather broad and inclusive sample of the Dutch population. Furthermore, participants read the article in a natural, non-laboratory environment (i.e., on a computer of their choosing on their own time). We therefore feel reassured that the effects identified here are not sample-specific and not entirely artificial. Certainly, one should not declare these findings universally valid outside the experimental context. However, most media messages are embedded in broader texts of other news stories, commentary, and even advertising messages, all of which can serve to dampen or enhance the effects of a single message. Field experiments should follow-up on this study to see whether our findings do indeed hold outside our controlled context.

Moreover, if we think about right-wing populist parties, one can argue that there are real-world factors that impact whether such parties will get covered in the first place (Bos et al., 2011). These factors could include, for example, the media savviness of a party's leaders, their perceived legitimacy, the extremity of their standpoints, or even the ideological stance of a given

news outlet (Mazzoleni, 2008). These considerations, all of which serve to complicate right-wing populism's supply-side environment, should also be kept in mind when one thinks about the generalizability of this study to other contexts. More specifically, there are good reasons to expect that only more established, successful, or accepted populist parties will be covered in combination with their anti-political utterances. Consequently, the current study provides a more in-depth look into the mechanism described in a study by Rooduijn, de Lange, and Van der Brug (2014b), in which they show that support for a populist party leads to more discontent because of the anti-political message of these parties.

Future research should build upon this study in several additional ways. First, it is important to replicate these findings within a different and, ideally, non-owned and non-negative story context to see if they hold regardless of the topic of the story. Beyond adjusting the story topic, this work should be replicated in other contexts with other right-wing populist parties. While we do not expect the key variables to change dramatically in different contexts, both the electoral volatility in The Netherlands and the relative success of the PVV in particular over the past years may play a role in our findings. Therefore, replication in a non-Dutch context is important. And finally, cross-validation with a greater number of self-reported behavioral intention measures, or even actual voting behavior, would certainly strengthen the research. As an attempt to fill several gaps in the literature, however, this study provides support for the notion that news media, by cueing relevant political topics, can, perhaps inadvertently, increase cynicism, anti-immigrant attitudes, and support for right-wing populist parties among voters. Political elites, journalists, and citizens should take caution, then, about the potential effects of immigrant and anti-politics discourse in the news.

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