Let's Talk Populist? A Survey Experiment on Effects of (Non-) Populist Discourse on Vote Choice

Rebecca C. Kittel*

Free University of Berlin & WZB Berlin Social Science Center

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Abstract

Populism research has found much scholarly and public attention alike in recent years. Most research has focused on how populism can be defined, assessed or even measured. Even though there are emerging studies on populist messages, few of them have paid attention on causally identifying ways in which discourse can affect support for populist actors. This article positions itself within this gap and aims to answer which discursive elements make (non-) populist messages appealing to varying groups of people. To answer this research question, I conducted a novel survey experiment on vote choice in Germany from December 2020 to January 2021 with N=3,325. Respondents were asked to choose between two candidate statements that displayed varying discursive elements. Thus, the experiment causally tested whether people-centric rhetoric, blame attributive languages or populist style focusing on language complexity drive the populist vote. Results show that a neutral form of blame attribution, namely towards politicians, had the highest probability of driving vote choice, irrespective of respondents' underlying ideological preferences or populist attitudes. Simple language nearly always has a negative effect on vote choice, whereas people-centrism adds a positive touch. These results show that there may be an increasing dissatisfaction with democracy that is voiced by blaming political elites for the malfunctioning of society.

Keywords: populism, language complexity, blame attribution, voting behaviour, survey experiment

*ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4226-2183, Email: rebecca.kittel@fu-berlin.de

Introduction

Populism is on the rise. In many countries, populist actors have become very successful and may even gain government representation (Ellger, 2023; Roberts, 2022; Spoon and Klüver, 2019; Vachudova, 2021). As such the right-wing populist party, *Party for Freedom*, became the largest party during the 2023 Dutch parliament election with a vote share of 23.7 percent. In Sweden, the right-wing populist party *Sweden Democrats* became the second largest force during the 2022 parliamentary elections and even entered a government coalition for the first time. And in Italy, Giorgia Meloni, the right-wing populist party leader of *Brothers of Italy*, became Italians first female Prime Minister in 2022.

Often, the success of populist parties is associated with democratic backsliding or challenges towards liberal democracy (Albertazzi and Mueller, 2013; Rummens, 2017; Urbinati, 2019). However, despite populism being studied from various angles (Hawkins et al., 2018; Mudde, 2004; Taggart, 2000), it is still not clear why and when different voters support populist candidates. One major element often associated with the success of populist actors is their discursive strategy (Aalberg et al., 2016; Aslanidis, 2018) as populist communication can have enormous effects on citizens' opinions and their political behaviour, including voting (Bos, van der Brug and de Vreese, 2013; Hameleers, Bos and de Vreese, 2017; Mueller, 2016; Reinemann et al., 2019; Wirz, 2018). Although some recent studies focus on the effect of blame attribution in populist discourse (Bos, Sheets and Boomgaarden, 2018; Bos et al., 2020; Busby, Gubler and Hawkins, 2019) or on which attitudes or pre-dispositions affect the populist vote (Akkerman, Mudde and Zaslove, 2014; Castanho Silva et al., 2018; Hieda, Zenkyo and Nishikawa, 2021), little is known about how elements of (non-) populist discourse causally affect voting behaviour.

Theoretical and empirical considerations suggest that blame attribution is not the only decisive element of populist discourse. Research also considers people-centric rhetoric (Meijers and Van Der Velden, 2022; Rooduijn and Akkerman, 2017) and language simplicity (Bischof and Senninger, 2018) as commonly used tools of populist rhetoric. Considering these still understudied elements when studying the effect of populist discourse

on citizens, this article asks what makes the populist appeal effective.

Focusing on varying discursive elements, I attempt to answer this research question by looking at different elements of populist and non-populist messages, testing their effect on vote choice. To this end, I conducted an extensive voter experiment in Germany between December 2020 and January 2021 (N=3,325).[1] The forced choice vignette experiment asked respondents to cast their vote choice between two candidate statements. These statements varied across the three discursive elements of blame attribution, people-centrism, and language complexity to capture different populist and non-populist messages.

Contrary to prior research with observational data, the results show that populist attitudes are not the main driver for populist voting but that blame attribution is the most decisive driver for vote choice. Blame attribution was measured with three ideological variants: left (blaming capitalists), right (blaming refugees) and neutral (blaming politicians). Ideology expressed through blame attribution corresponds highly with voters' vote intentions. This shows that ideology seems more decisive than populism in explaining vote choice. Simple language, on the other hand, in contradiction to its theoretical considerations, has an overall negative effect on vote choice. People-centrism has a positive effect on vote choice in most statement configurations. The results show that people tend to like politicians who create an in-group feeling and consider themselves part of the voter group. Surprisingly, the neutral version of blame towards politicians drives vote choice across all voter groups, not only voters with populist attitudes or vote intentions. These results suggest an overall dissatisfaction with the functioning of political systems and the work of politicians. The results also hold irrespective of voters' ideological preferences. Further, they are in line with other experimental studies showing that individuals' ideology preferences determine vote choice instead of populist attitudes (Dai and Kustov, 2022; Neuner and Wratil, 2022; Castanho Silva and Wratil, 2023). However, this study goes beyond these conjoint experiments as it not only tests people-centrism

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[1] The study was pre-registered with EGAP and can be accessed through the following link: `https://osf.io/7utsx`. Further, I received ethical approval from the European University Institute Ethics Committee on 14 December 2020.

and anti-elitism as elements of populism but adds even more attributes often associated with populism, such as blame attribution and simple language. Still, this analysis shows that various populist elements have a minimal effect on an individual's voting decision, showing that ideology is still the main driver for vote choice.

Even though the study was only conducted in Germany, results may also be applicable to other European countries with similar political systems. As Hauwaert and Kessel (2018) as well as Reinemann et al. (2019) have shown populist voters across several counties in Europe display similar characteristics and respond to similar patterns. Therefore, we can assume that the main results from this survey experiment also travel beyond Germany.

As such, this analysis contributes to the crucial debate on populism, its rising popularity in recent years, and the challenges it poses towards representative democracy. More broadly, this analysis contributes to the debate on vote choice and how certain discursive elements can influence voting behaviour. It provides a causal link between (non-) populist discourse and how it affects voters, showing that various voter groups respond surprisingly positively to similar language patterns.

Populist Discourse: Theoretical Considerations and Hypotheses

Researchers discussed many concepts when defining populism. Main research strands include populism as a strategy (Weyland, 2001), populism as an organisational form (Roberts, 2006) or a cultural style (Ostiguy, 2017). Most prominently, scholars have discussed the ideational approach established by Mudde (2004). Especially when analysing discursive elements of populism or populist communication strategies, scholars agree on core features included within the ideational approach (Hunger and Paxton, 2022). As such, this article is also based on the main assumptions of the ideational approach and combines them with ideas of how they can be enacted through language.

As such, discourse is not the only element that matters when defining populism.

However, scholars agree that it is impossible to understand populism without analysing its discursive patterns (Aslanidis, 2018). Given that specific language patterns are crucial for populism, they can be considered relevant for the success of populists. Therefore, we must understand how these language patterns affect voters and, more precisely, vote choice, if we aim to understand why populist actors have become more successful around the globe.

In this paper, I reconceptualise populism in terms of three elements displayed in populist discourse: people-centrism, ideologically-toned blame attribution, and language complexity. The first two elements consider the content side of the discourse, whereas the last element focuses on a stylistic element. I chose to analyse a combination of these three elements as they are referenced as key features in the literature on populism based on populism as discourse and the ideational approach. However, the three elements are often discussed separately instead of connected to each other. Therefore, I explain people-centrism, ideologically-toned blame attribution, and language complexity and discuss how the interplay of these three elements creates the theoretical foundation of populism.

People-Centric Rhetoric

Even though there is no unique and fully encompassing definition of populism, current scholarship from Western democracies largely agrees on the ideational approach towards populism (Rooduijn, 2019). This approach classifies the world of politics into a dualistic view of good versus evil. As such, populists claim to be the true democrats who defend the will of the common and "good" people against the corrupt and "evil" elites (Canovan, 1999; Mudde, 2004). Following the populist logic, the people and their sovereignty are the core of democracy, which is threatened by the elites; the people are considered the basis of good society (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2008; Mény and Surel, 2002).

This definition captures the recognisable features scholars agree on, that is, the "us" vs. "them" mentality. This understanding is transmitted through their rhetoric and plays a major role in how populists communicate worldwide. I will refer to this rhetorical strategy in this article as people-centric rhetoric. This rhetoric strategy underlines that populist

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actors use "us" to talk about the common people for whom they understand themselves as advocates. Following the populist worldview, the common people are usually classified as a sovereign, homogeneous, pure and virtuous group (Akkerman, Mudde and Zaslove, 2014). Populists aim to create an in-group feeling that common people can feel part of. Consequently, they use the reference of the "other" to create an opposing entity. This reference helps the "us"-group or in-group to demarcate itself better, but it also creates a "them"-group or out-group that can be opposed and blamed for societal or political problems. Populist actors align these groups with their populist view of a dualistic world. This worldview is transmitted vociferously through their rhetoric, underlining that people-centric rhetoric is a significant element of populist discourse.

Even though using people-centric rhetoric or references to the "us"-group is a strong characteristic of populist discourse, populist actors do not uniquely apply it. Mainstream actors also use people-centric rhetoric in their messages to create a feeling of proximity to their electorate. Thus, people-centric rhetoric can be understood as a discursive element that populist and mainstream actors employ. Nevertheless, populist actors tend to over-emphasise this element and speak to people who are more responsive to it. Thus, I expect a positive effect of people-centric rhetoric in political messages across all voter groups. However, populist actors benefit even more from the use of people-centric rhetoric. This leads to the following hypothesis.[2]

People-Centrism Hypothesis (H1): *People-centric rhetoric positively affects vote choice in general, but it has an even stronger effect among individuals with populist vote intentions or attitudes.*

Blame Attributive Language

Besides the fundamental division of "us" vs. "them", scholars argue that populist actors exploit social identity frames to emphasise in- and out-groups even more (Bos et al., 2020).

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[2]The hypothesis is slightly reformulated than it was initially from when in the pre-analysis plan, but the meaning has remained the same. For more details, see the Appendix A

Commonly, populist actors aim to underline in-group favourability and out-group hostility. Using discursive elements, they create a subjective sense of unfair treatment among people of the in-group enacted through people of the out-group or society (Elchardus and Spruyt, 2016). Identifying a group of people by creating an opposing group of people makes them feel more attached to their own group, as it creates a clear identification within group boundaries.

According to social psychological theory, populist actors apply psychological micro-mechanisms that create identity through discourse. Thus, I rely more precisely on social identity theory in this analysis. Commonly, social identity theory argues that an in-group creates a positive assessment of its own group in demarcation from the other (out-) groups. Additionally, the theory points out that in-group members usually share emotional involvement and achieve social consensus within the group (Tajfel and Turner, 2004), which unites them as group members.

In relating these assumptions to people who are prone to populist ideas, research shows that such individuals often have problems with finding a positive social identity (Spruyt, Keppens and Van Droogenbroeck, 2016). As the world has become more complex, people have struggled to find their role and identity in it – or as Rostbøll (2023) puts it: "many people have lost their formerly secure feelings of identity and status, and they are increasingly turning their frustration at their loss toward the political system by supporting populist parties and leaders" (Rostbøll, 2023: 2). Huddy (2001) emphasises that it is, therefore, important to consider identity choices. She emphasises that choosing to be part of a group voluntarily increases self-esteem and group cohesion leading to higher in-group identification but also more discrimination against out-groups (Huddy, 2001: 139) (see also Perreault and Bourhis (1999) and Turner et al. (1984)). Thus, when people choose to support a populist party or movement, it is because they have lost part of their former identity or feel disappointed by an in-group they used to be part of. These negative feelings unite them and let them create a new identity – an identity of disappointment in the current political system or, more broadly, society in general. Populist actors are aware of their supporters' disappointment. They use this disappointment

strategically to form a new identity and in-group among these people.

As such, blame attribution is added as an additional layer to people-centric rhetoric. It forges identity through an in-group vs. out-group understanding of the world. The most generic form of blame attribution is blame against politicians or, more broadly, against the political system. Commonly, all populists blame politicians as it helps populist actors to create a generic out-group that can be held accountable for the malfunctioning of society. Usually, blame against politicians is detached from any ideological placement. Therefore, blame attribution against politicians can be seen as a neutral version of populist blame attribution and can serve to detect the general functioning of populist rhetorical strategies. However, blaming politicians without using any form of people-centrism is not generically populist. Mainstream actors can also blame other political elites in their discourse. Therefore, it is essential to highlight that populist rhetoric consists always of both elements, people-centrism as well as anti-elitism (Mudde, 2004).

As blame attribution is enacted through language, it can be considered to produce framing effects (Busby, Gubler and Hawkins, 2019). Thus, it is important to notice that framing effects can be enforced through pre-dispositions, such as values that accompany blame-attributive language. Individuals' underlying attitudes or values can affect how much certain frames influence them. Chong and Druckman (2007) point out that "individuals who have strong values are less amenable to frames that contradict those values" (Chong and Druckman, 2007: 111). If individuals are juxtaposed with the different arguments of an issue, they commonly choose the alternative closer to their pre-existing values and underlying principles (Sniderman and Theriault, 2004). This can be related to populist rhetoric and, more precisely, blame attribution. Individuals with underlying populist attitudes will accordingly respond more to frames that build up on these pre-dispositions. Thus, individuals who share populist attitudes will favour frames from populist actors that apply these rhetorical strategies. Thus, individuals who share populist attitudes or vote intentions should be more likely to vote for a candidate who blames political elites for societal problems. This leads to the following hypothesis.[3]

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[3]This hypothesis was not part of the pre-analysis plan, nor were H2b and H2c. They are, however, closely related to work by Bos et al. (2020) and Hameleers, Bos and de Vreese (2017).

Politician-Hypothesis (H2a): *Blame attribution against politicians positively affects vote choice for people with populist vote intentions or attitudes.*

So far, I have discussed populist actors as one unity. However, as outlined earlier, populism is often attached to a host ideology. Populism is commonly combined with radical right and radical left ideologies (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2012). Even though, it is essential to note that centrist parties can also adopt populist strategies, such as the *Five Star Movement* in Italy. However, in this analysis, I will focus on populist actors and their supporters from the radical left and the radical right, as these are the parties that most commonly adopt populist stances (Akkerman, Mudde and Zaslove, 2014).

As such, blame attribution varies depending on the host ideology of a populist actor. By referencing certain in- and out-groups, populist actors can direct their ideological positioning. As left-wing (populist) actors usually apply a discourse that centres around social class, they often create an out-group that consists of the economic elites or simply "the rich". Right-wing (populist) actors, on the other hand, apply an ethic and nativist-guided discourse. They usually target immigrants and/or refugees as an out-group and blame them for the malfunctioning of various societal problems. Thus, ideological differences can be emphasised and even strengthened by blaming a chosen other.

However, the success of blame attribution fostered by populist parties on the left or the right will correlate with voters' ideological pre-dispositions, just as attributing blame to political elites does too. Consequently, placing blame on immigrants and/or refugees will mostly affect people who already have existing right-wing attitudes or vote intentions. Correspondingly, attributing blame to economic elites will attract individuals with left-wing attitudes or vote intentions. This leads to the following two hypotheses:[4]

Migration-Hypothesis (H2b): *Blame attributions against refugees positively affect vote choice only for individuals who share right-wing populist vote intentions or attitudes.*

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[4]As emphasised in H1a, these two hypotheses have not been part of the original pre-analysis plan.

Economic-Elite-Hypothesis (H2c): *Blame attribution against economic elites positively affects vote choice only for individuals who share left-wing populist vote intentions or attitudes.*

Populist Style

A long tradition in research on populism has pointed out that a decisive characteristic of populist actors is communicating simply (Canovan, 1999; Mudde, 2004; Aalberg et al., 2016). This communication style is moreover enforced through a populist world view and political strategies, or, "populism's tendency not only to communicate in a simple and direct manner, but also to offer solutions that are direct and simple" (Moffitt and Tormey, 2014: 387). Populism often provides a simple and attractive alternative for the more complex and contradictory ideas of liberal democracies (Mudde, 2007). As such, populist actors apply a simple view of the world, which is often based on in- and out-group thinking, resulting in "us" vs. "them" rhetorical strategies. Additionally, they position themselves as the grounded alternative for the current political or economic establishment. Thus, people should perceive populists as the simple and maybe even crude, but honest, alternative to the ruling elites that common people perceive as being too pretentious. Populists' simple communication style signals these political strategies and ideas. Hameleers, Bos and de Vreese (2016) underline that "the communication style of populists distinguishes itself by using simple and direct language, one-liners, and provocative statements directed toward the elite and other out-groups" (Hameleers, Bos and de Vreese, 2016: 147).

Next to qualitative evidence, scholars have also attempted to measure the language complexity of populist actors quantitatively. Bischof and Senninger (2018) show that manifestos of populist parties use simpler language than non-populist parties. Decadri and Boussalis (2019) even provide causal evidence and emphasise that MPs who change parties adapt their language complexity depending on whether they are part of a populist party or not. MPs of populist parties use significantly simpler language than MPs of non-

populist parties. In the U.S. context, Oliver and Rahn (2016) have shown that Donald Trump used simpler language than his competitors in the 2016 presidential election. Other empirical results, however, reveal a more mixed picture. By analysing the speeches of political leaders, McDonnell and Ondelli (2020) show, for example, that populist leaders sometimes even use more complex language than non-populist leaders.

Nevertheless, given the idea that simpler language leads to politics that are easier to comprehend and that voters would rather vote for someone whom they can understand as they can more easily hold that politician to account (Bischof and Senninger, 2018), I will still consider simple language as having a generally positive effect on all voters, and voters with populist attitudes in particular. The theoretical considerations about populist behaviour enforce these assumptions even though the results regarding their usage are contradictory. This leads to the final hypothesis.[5]

Simple-Language-Hypothesis (H3): *Simple language positively affects vote choice in general, but it has an even greater effect on people with populist vote intentions or attitudes.*

Germany as a Case and Sample Strategy

The survey experiment was implemented in Germany, which can be considered an ideal case because of the recent success of populist actors in this country. Currently, both a left-wing and a right-wing populist party are represented in the German Bundestag: *Die Linke* (The Left)[6], which is considered a left-wing populist party, and *Alternative for Germany* (AfD), which is a right-wing populist party (Rooduijn, 2019). Thus, I studied individuals who support populist parties with opposing ideological positions in a comparative setting. Additionally, the German party system covers a broad range of parties' ideological positions, including the extreme positions covered by the Left and

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[5]This hypothesis combines hypotheses H1 and H2 of the pre-analysis plan.

[6]*Die Linke* has recently experienced some level of splintering in the German *Bundestag*. Since October 2023, a discussion about a party emerged, and in January 2024, Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance – Reason and Justice or Alliance (German: Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht – Vernunft und Gerechtigkeit (BSW)) was founded as splinter party of *Die Linke*. During the period of the survey experiment, *Die Linke* was still a very stable party and unified in the German *Bundestag*, so I do not expect that this has any effect on the results.

the AfD, but also, in general, more moderate ideological positions like the Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU) or Social Democrats (SPD).

In addition, the mixed electoral system in Germany has allowed me to frame the candidate choice experiment in the form of candidate voting decisions (see Neuner and Wratil, 2022). In German national elections, citizens cast two votes. The first vote is for a direct candidate. Through the so-called *Erststimme*, voters directly select a candidate in their electoral district following a first-past-the-post formula. The second vote is for a party and is commonly referred to as *Zweitstimme*. This survey experiment models the vote of the *Erstimme* and creates a somewhat realistic scenario.

Other features that we should consider when looking at Germany as a case are possible regional differences as well as voter characteristics. Germany's history may drive regional differences as the country was divided into East Germany (German Democratic Republic - GDR) and West Germany (Federal Republic of Germany - FDR) until 1990 with two different political systems. Electorally, populist parties are currently more assertive in East Germany than in West Germany (Loew and Faas, 2019). Significantly, the AfD became very successful in Eastern German federal states like Saxony.

When looking at voter characteristics, we can observe that ideological proximity, as well as populist attitudes, characterise voters of both parties. Hansen and Olsen (2022) argue that anti-immigrant ideology is a stronger predictor for AfD vote choice than socio-demographic variables. They also find that negative attitudes towards political elites are increasing the probability of voting for the AfD. Similar results are found for voters of the Left. Goodger (2023) finds that also policy proximity to left-leaning policies predicts vote choice for the Left. These results are in line with other studies when analysing support for left-wing and right-wing populist parties in Europe (Hauwaert and Kessel, 2018; Reinemann et al., 2019). As such, the results presented in the analysis are not only relevant to the German case but can also travel beyond that and may be especially applicable to other countries in Europe with similar political systems.

In total, 3,325 respondents were surveyed. The sample is drawn from a large online panel provided by the survey company Lucid. Lucid provides access to a pool of people

across Germany with varying ages and educational backgrounds, ensuring a somewhat representative sample of the German population. The mean age of the final sample is 45.3, with 51.7 percent female and 48.3 percent male respondents. The survey was conducted between mid-December 2020 and mid-January 2021. I also asked respondents about essential characteristics. As such, I was able to control for regional differences between East and West Germany as well as educational variation.

Research Design: Paired Vignette Experiment

To shed light on the effect of populist and non-populist rhetorical strategies and which elements are the driving factors, I conducted a paired vignette experiment in Germany between December 2020 and January 2021 with a sample size of 3,325 respondents. This gave me 9,975 vignette ratings, as each respondent had to answer three choice tasks. Paired vignette designs follow the same logic as paired conjoint experiments and allow researchers to estimate the causal effects of multiple treatment components (Hainmueller, Hopkins and Yamamoto, 2014). Compared to conjoint experiments, vignette designs are presented in a text form instead of a table format (Hainmueller, Hangartner and Yamamoto, 2015). Therefore, this design seemed most suitable to test the effect of political statements with varying populist and non-populist rhetorical strategies. Respondents read two short paragraphs with varying attribute levels in this design specification. The paired vignette design is particularly beneficial for answering the stated research question of how elements of (non-) populist discourse causally affect voting behaviour. It allows the treatments to vary across different discursive elements. Thus, combinations of rhetorical and stylistic features in political statements can be modelled and their causal effect tested. A translated English version of the questionnaire is presented in Appendix C.[7] Below, I will describe the dependent and independent variables and possible moderators.

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[7]The German version of the treatment (statements) is shown in Appendix D.

Table 1: Paired Vignette Design

Attribute	Level	Dimension
Language Complexity	- easy language complexity (according to readability score) - average language complexity (according to readability score)	2
Blame Attribution Towards	- political elites - refugees - economic elites - no blame attribution	4
People-Centrism	- yes - no	2

Dependent Variable - Vote Choice

In this newly designed survey experiment, respondents were presented with three pairs of fictional candidates' statements that use varying populist rhetorical strategies and language complexities. These pairs were randomly drawn from a pool of 16 differently framed statements. Then, respondents were asked to state for which candidate's statement from the pair they would rather cast their vote. Therefore, respondents' vote preference is the dependent variable following the logical structure of conjoint/vignette experiments.

Respondents were also asked to state how much they could imagine voting for each candidate in the pair. Thus, respondents could state whether it is very unlikely that they would vote for a candidate (1) or very likely that they would vote for a candidate (7).[8] The task was repeated three times for each respondent. To minimise associations of existing candidates as well as their parties and to include statements that might not occur in reality, I study vote choice for candidates rather than parties and do not provide party labels (see Neuner and Wratil, 2022).

Independent Variable and Treatment - Statement Variations

To measure the effect of the three elements of populist discourse (people-centric rhetoric, blame attributive language, and populist style), different fictional statements of politi-

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[8]So far, this measure is not included in the analysis.

cians are framed. All statements focused on the worsening of Germany's current labour market situation. This issue is well suited to analyse various discursive elements on the effect of vote choice. First, the labour market is a less politicised issue by radical left or radical right actors in comparison to topics like immigration or crime. In fact, political actors from both sides of the ideological spectrum highlight the current labour market situation in similar ways and with similar intensity. This allows me to frame statements that evoke comparable interest among voter groups from both sides of the political spectrum. Second, the labour market provides us with a national and European dimension (Kriesi et al., 2008) and has been proven as a suitable policy issue for survey experiments that test the effect of different populist frames (Hameleers, Bos and de Vreese, 2017). As the labour market situation affects a country's economic well-being, it produces common interest among various groups of people.

Even though all statements focus on the worsening of the labour market, they apply different rhetorical strategies to emphasise populist and non-populist language as well as left-wing, right-wing and centrist positions. As populist rhetoric is commonly emphasised through people-centric language that opposes an out-group (which could be political elites, economic elites (left-wing populism), or refugees (right-wing populism) depending on the populists' host), ideology, the attribute levels of the statements vary among these dimensions. The statements include phrases like "our situation" and "we" to frame people-centric rhetoric. Non-people-centric rhetoric, on the other hand, employs neutral frames like "the situation". Blame attribution is used to model left-wing and right-wing rhetorical strategies. Populist actors commonly use blame attribution to evoke opposing feelings by citizens against elites (Hameleers, Bos and de Vreese, 2018; Busby, Gubler and Hawkins, 2019). Thus, left-wing populism is modelled through people-centric language, attributing blame to economic elites. Right-wing populism is modelled through people-centric language that attributes blame attributions to refugees.[9]

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[9]I refer to refugees instead of immigrants in the treatment for two main reasons. First, in 2015, Germany experienced the so-called refugee crisis, making refugees a salient out-group. Second, the AfD is mostly blaming refugees instead of immigrants. Therefore, refugees are the out-group that is blamed for the most in the German case by the right-wing populist actor. As such, the reference to refugees in the treatment seemed most appropriate.

To illustrate how people-centrism and blame-attributive language are used commonly in populist rhetoric, I selected an example from an excerpt of a parliamentary speech given by Gottfried Curio, MP for the AfD in the German *Bundestag* on 22. November 2017:

> "[...]The influx with low-skilled individuals plus planned family reunification does not stabilise the labour market and pension system; instead, it increases unemployment and reliance on social benefits, especially in an increasingly digitised working world. The goal should be to increase the birth rate. An activating family policy, as demanded by us, would take priority instead of replacing our own people. This means Billions for our families instead of alimentation and integration for non-permanent or currently difficult placeable migrants [...]"

On the one hand, the quote shows how a right-wing populist MP uses people-centric rhetoric, that is, "our own people" and "our Families". On the other hand, it shows a real-world example of how a right-wing populist party blames refugees/migrants for challenging the labour market. Therefore, the example shows how the survey experiment captures real-world discussions held in the German parliament (*Bundestag*).[10]

In addition, the different combinations of the statements are framed on two occasions: once applying average language complexity and once applying simple language complexity. Language complexity is assessed through readability scores. Readability scores allow one to estimate how complex a text is to read. I apply the LIX readability score developed by Björnsson (1968). This measure is beneficial for German text (Anderson, 1981). Moreover, Bischof and Senninger (2018) show that it is very applicable in German-speaking political contexts. LIX calculates the complexity of a text by calculating the sum of the average sentence length and the percentage of long words (more than seven letters). In detail, LIX is calculated in the following way:

$$LIX = \frac{W}{S} + \frac{100 * 7W}{W}$$

with W indicating the number of words in a text and S being the number of sentences. Thus, the first part of the equation indicates the average sentence length. $7W$ indicates

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[10]The original German version of the statement is presented in Appendix B. Further, a quote from the same debate topic of the left-wing populist party *The Left* is also presented in Appendix B.

the number of words with seven or more letters. Lower LIX scores display less complex texts. Readability scores between 25 and 70 display reasonable language complexity for the German language. Scores below 25 are considered very easy, around 40 are expected and more than 55 difficult (Bischof and Senninger, 2018: 479).

For the survey experiment, statements that are framed using simple language complexity display a LIX score of between 26 and 35. Statements with average language complexity display a LIX score of between 43 and 55. I abstained from using (over)complex language in the statements as the average language complexity in the German parliament has a score of 48 on the LIX score and only very occasionally above 55 on the LIX score, especially in the last legislative period (Kittel, 2023). The LIX scores for each statement are presented in the Appendix E. I also report the commonly used Flesch-Kincaid score and the SMOG.de score that is adopted for the German language. Both scores show similar results to the LIX score.

In total, 16 statements are framed, varying across the three attributes: language complexity, people-centrism, and blame attribution. An overview of all attributes and their corresponding levels is presented in Table 1. The complete list of the English version of statements is presented in Appendix C.1.

Figure 1 shows the English translation of statements presented to respondents who participated in the online survey experiment. It shows two randomly drawn combinations out of the 16 statement variations. Respondents had to choose either Candidate A or Candidate B. The original German version of these two statements is presented in Figure 1 in Appendix D. The statement of Candidate A displays simple language complexity, people-centrism and places blame on economic elites (Statement No. 6). The statement of Candidate B shows average language complexity, no-people-centrism, and places blame on refugees (Statement No. 11 in Appendix C.1, section on Treatment Combinations).

Moderators - Political Attitudes and Personal Characteristics

Following the stated hypotheses, I am also interested in whether varying statements have a different effect depending on respondents' populist attitudes and ideological positions.

Figure 1: English Version of the Candidate choice question (dependent variable), Statement 6 (left-hand side) and Statement 11 (right-hand side) in Appendix C.1.

If you had to choose between these two candidates in the Bundestag election in September, who would you vote for?

If neither of the two candidates appeals to you, please still indicate who you would rather vote for.

Candidate A

Our labour market situation has deteriorated. The rich are preventing our citizens from having a good life again. Many have lost their jobs. The rich are to blame. They only care about themselves. They only want to increase their wealth. They are selfish and corrupt. We have to act now. We must protect our future jobs. Our citizens must be protected.

Candidate B

The labour market situation has deteriorated in recent months and refugees are preventing people from returning to a good standard of living. Many people have lost their jobs and it is the refugees who are responsible for the current situation. They are difficult to integrate, far too demanding and are damaging the current labour market by taking away the few jobs that are currently still available. Action must be taken now to secure future jobs.

Candidate A ○

Candidate B ○

Accordingly, it is assumed that ideological as well as populist attitudes moderate the effect of language simplicity. Thus, respondents are asked different questions to measure their ideological attitudes, vote intentions, and populist attitudes.

To measure respondents' ideological attitudes and vote intentions, I used classical ideological placement measures as well as vote intention questions. Thus, respondents were asked for whom they would vote if elections were to take place today. This serves as the main moderator variable throughout the main analysis. However, I also ask respondents to position themselves on an ideological scale from 0 (extreme left) to 10 (extreme right). Respondents who indicate a value below or equal to 2 are considered left-wing voters. If they also display a thin populist factor above 1, they are considered left-wing populists. A value of above or equal to 8 displays a right-wing position. If respondents also display a value above 1 for the thin populist factor, they are considered right-wing populists. A

value in between these extremes is regarded as a centrist position, which can, however, also be combined with thin populist attitudes. Results with the ideological placements are presented in Appendix G.

To measure respondents' underlying *thin* populist attitudes, I referred to a battery of eight political claims based on claims used by Neuner and Wratil (2022) in a similar setting. Initially, the claims were introduced by Akkerman, Mudde and Zaslove (2014) and have also been validated by other studies (see Castanho Silva et al., 2020). Appendix C presents the complete list of political claims. Respondents had to identify on a 1 (fully agree) to 4 (fully disagree) Likert scale how much they coincide with each political claim. Respondents could also decide not to answer any of the given claims. For the analysis, the data was recoded from 2 (fully agree) to -2 (fully disagree) with 0 for no information. Afterwards, a factor analysis was conducted to create a single factor that describes if a respondent is considered populist or not. Values from the eight batteries were combined to create this factor. If the factor shows a value above 0, the person is considered to have underlying thin populist attitudes. If the factor falls below 0, the respondent is considered to have no thin populist attitudes. This measure was used and validated in a similar survey experiment by Neuner and Wratil (2022).

Ultimately, I decided to use vote intention instead of *thin* populist attitudes in the main analysis. As Wuttke, Schimpf and Schoen (2020) propose, "populist attitudes should be treated as an attitudinal syndrome that is more than the sum (or average) of its subdimensions" (Wuttke, Schimpf and Schoen, 2020: 372). Following their advice, vote intention seems to be the overall accurate choice as it incorporates whether people have a preference for populist actors or not, a point that sits at the core interest of this analysis. Results based on the populist attitudes scale are presented in Appendix G.

Finally, respondents were also asked about certain demographic characteristics. They were asked to report their age, educational background, occupation, and area of residency within Germany. [11] These characteristics were asked to generate a representative sample of the German population.

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[11]Results based on demographic characteristics are presented in Appendix E.

Results

The Average Voter

First, we will look at the effect of individual and combined rhetorical elements on the average voter. As such, I will analyse which rhetorical elements, individually or in combination, increase a candidate's likelihood of being voted for. These results will show which rhetorical elements the average voter responds to the most.

As paired vignette experiments follow a similar logic to conjoint experiments, they can be analysed using similar estimation techniques. To analyse the results of this survey experiment, I follow the recent advice by Leeper, Hobolt and Tilley (2020) and present the results as Marginal Means (MMs) instead of the commonly in conjoint/vignette experiments used Average Marginal Component Effects (AMCE). MMs are especially beneficial when presenting subgroup results of conjoint/vignette experiments (see Neuner and Wratil, 2022). As this analysis aims to detect the effect of language complexity across different subgroups of people, MMs are considered the best strategy to present the results. The interpretation of MMs in a forced paired vignette design is straightforward. It gives the probability that a profile will be chosen given that the attribute value x is present, marginalising across all other attribute values.[12]

Figure 2 displays MMs using the full sample for all attribute levels. The blue vertical line shows the 0.5 probability of a candidate being chosen. Thus, the estimate on the left of the line indicates that the attribute level negatively affects the chosen candidate. The estimate on the right of the line instead positively affects candidate support. This shows that populist framing has different effects across the general voting-eligible population in Germany. It is also demonstrated that people-centric language has, on average, a positive effect on candidate vote choice, supporting the People-Centrism-Hypothesis (H1). Furthermore, it shows that the average voter favours candidates that use average language complexity compared to simple language complexity. This contradicts the Simple-Language Hypothesis (H3). The highest positive effect on candidate vote choice

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[12]I use the *cregg* package in R. It calculates MMs as survey-weighted means with appropriate standard errors

Figure 2: Marginal Means of Attribute Levels without Subgroup Division
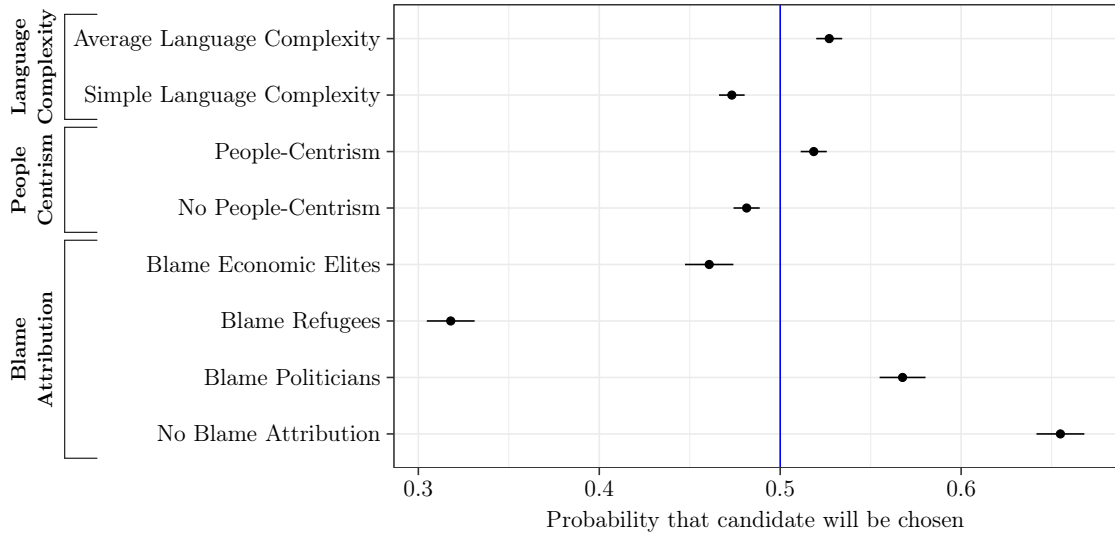
Note: Marginal Means are displayed with 95 percent confidence intervals.

is achieved when no blame is attributed. Thus, on average, people are not attracted by blame-attributing rhetoric. However, blaming politicians also has a positive effect on vote choice. This already hints towards mixed results for the blame attribution hypothesis listed under H2.

Figure 3 also shows MMs for the full sample. However, instead of the individual attribute levels, it displays the interacted attribute levels, therefore creating a more realistic view of which message combinations work best. Also, this shows which populist messages work best as they usually constitute a combination of the three rhetorical elements of people-centric rhetoric, blame attributive language, and populist style. Thus, Figure 3 shows individuals' voting decisions for all 16 political statements.

The results also show that if we do not control for any underlying attitudes, individuals, on average, favour statements that do not attribute any blame, that use people-centric rhetoric, and average language complexity. However, statement combinations attributing blame to politicians, whether these use people-centric rhetoric or not, score among the second highest combination types and positively affect vote choice. As before, statement combinations that blame economic elites had either no or a negative effect on vote choice,

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Figure 3: Interactions of Attribute Levels for all Voters: Marginal Means
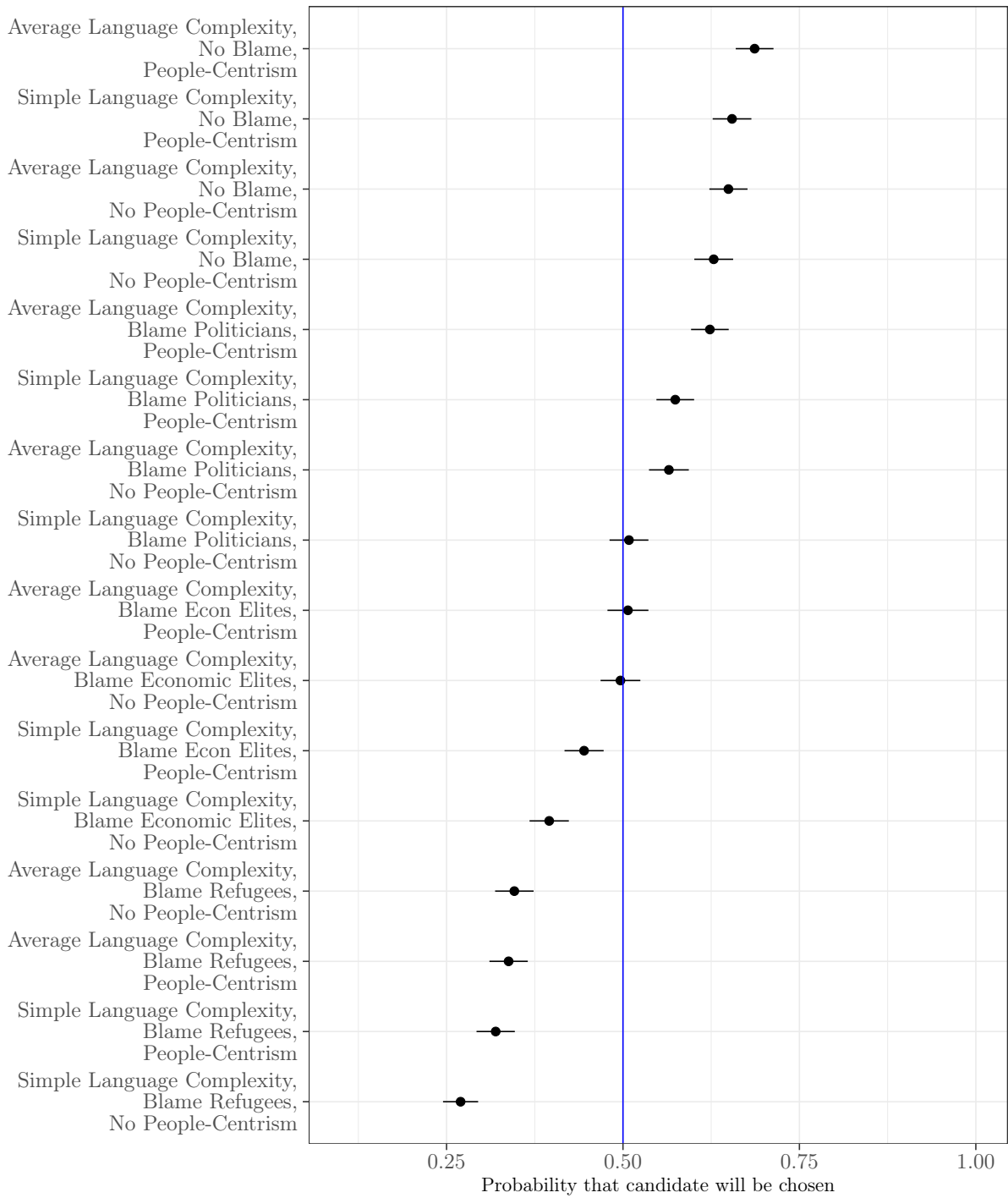
Note: Marginal Means are displayed with 95 percent confidence intervals.

irrespective of whether other elements were included or excluded in the political message. The same holds for statements that blame refugees. They produce an overall negative effect on vote choice. In addition, the results show that simple language always has a

more negative effect than average language complexity, no matter which framing valence is used. On the other hand, people-centrism always has a more positive effect on vote choice.

The results also hold when we control for geographical differences. In Appendix G (Figure 5 and Figure 6), I show a sub-group analysis of citizens living in the regions of the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) and the former Federal Republic of Germany (FDR). I control for regional differences as the AfD is electorally stronger in federal states belonging to the former GDR. However, there are no statistically significant results between the two regions. The results show that people living in the former GDR and the former FDR regions do not react differently to the various discursive elements. We can only observe a slightly more positive effect on blame towards refugees for citizens living in the former GDR. However, these results are minor and not statistically significant. As such, the results hold across regions and are not driven by geographical patterns.
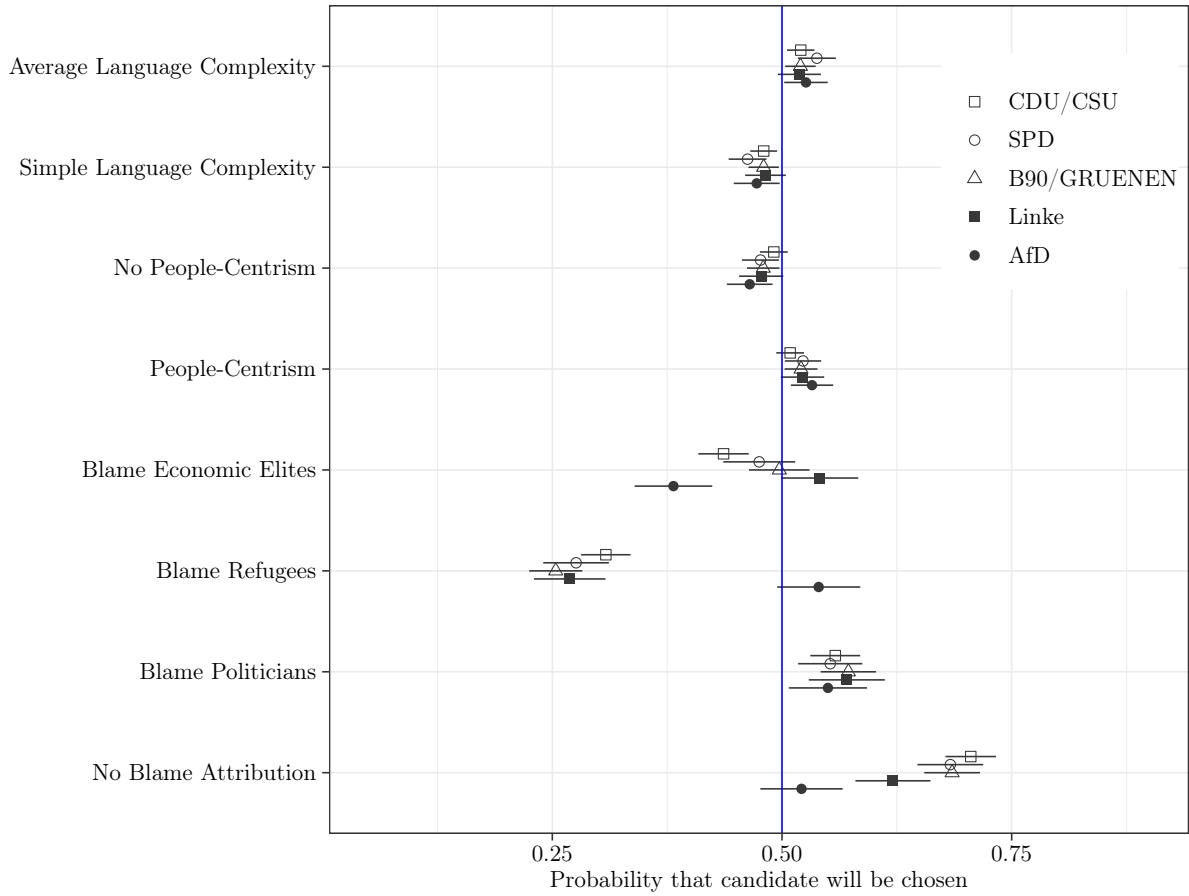
Populist Voters vs. Non-Populist Voters

Now, we will turn to the interaction effect between different statement elements and people's ideological preferences, namely their vote intentions. Therefore, depending on people's vote intention, I will compare which statement combinations increase candidates' vote share. As such, we can analyse if populist voters (AfD and Linke voters) are likelier to vote for candidates that employ more populist and ideological radical rhetorical elements.

Figure 4 shows the full sample divided by individuals' vote intentions on the survey day. Most interestingly, the results show that blame attribution seems to be the most decisive driver of vote choice. The results show that blame against refugees in a political message positively affects right-wing populist voters in Germany (AfD voters). For all other voters, it has a negative effect. Similar results can be observed for political messages that blame economic elites. They drive the vote choice for left-wing populist voters (Linke voters) but have a zero to negative effect on all other voters. This shows confirmation for H2b and H2c. Blame against politicians has a surprisingly positive effect for all voter groups. Thus, voters generally respond positively to political messages that blame

Figure 4: Marginal Means by Party Groups

Note: Marginal Means are displayed with 95 percent confidence intervals.

politicians. This contradicts hypothesis H2a. No blame attribution, however, scores highest among non-populist party voters. Also, the results show that people-centrism and average language complexity positively affect all party voters on average. This supports the People-Centrism-Hypothesis (H1) and refutes the Simple-Language-Hypothesis (H3).

Finally, we will look at message combinations, individuals' underlying attitudes, or vote intentions. This produces a close, realistic assessment of how underlying ideological attitudes affect how people respond to political messages. The results for message combinations, including people-centric rhetoric, are presented in Figure 5, Figure 6, and Figure 7. Figures including all statement combinations (with and without people-centric rhetoric) are presented in Appendix F (Figure 2 to Figure 4). The results are split into three figures (five graphs) due to better graphical representation. The most interesting

Figure 5: Interactions of Attribute Levels with Statement Numbers (only Showing People-Centric Statements): Marginal Means for SPD and CDU/CSU Voters
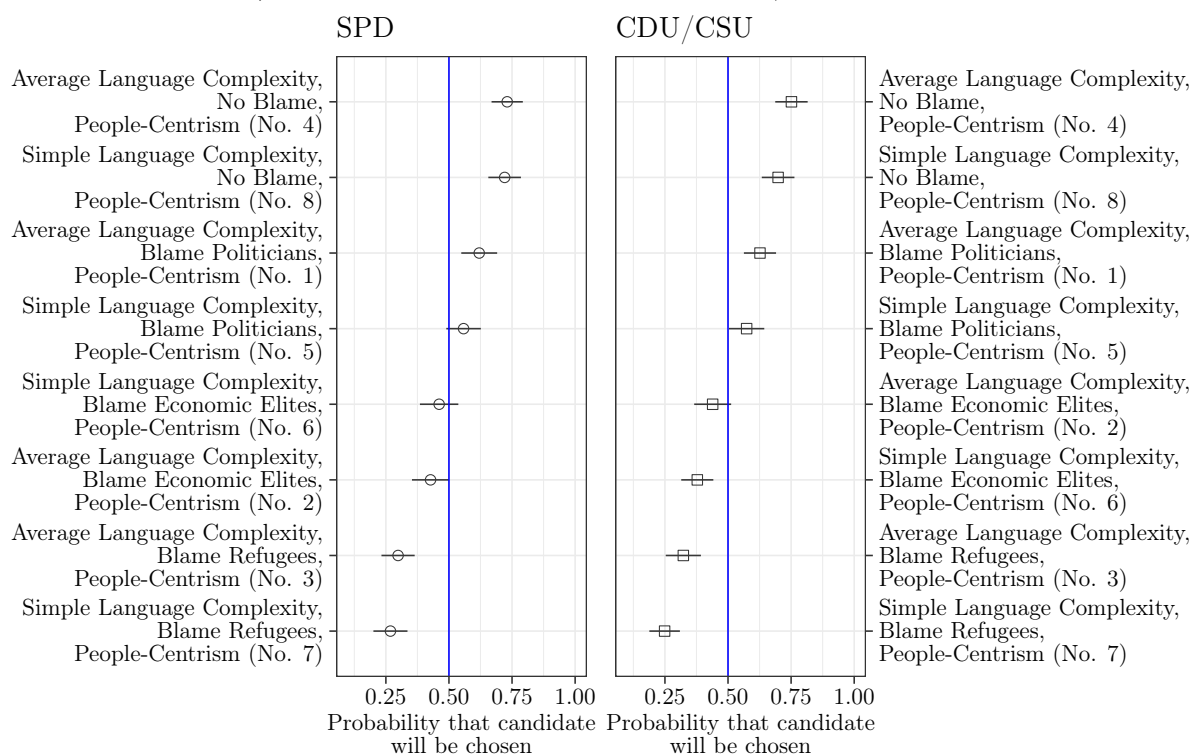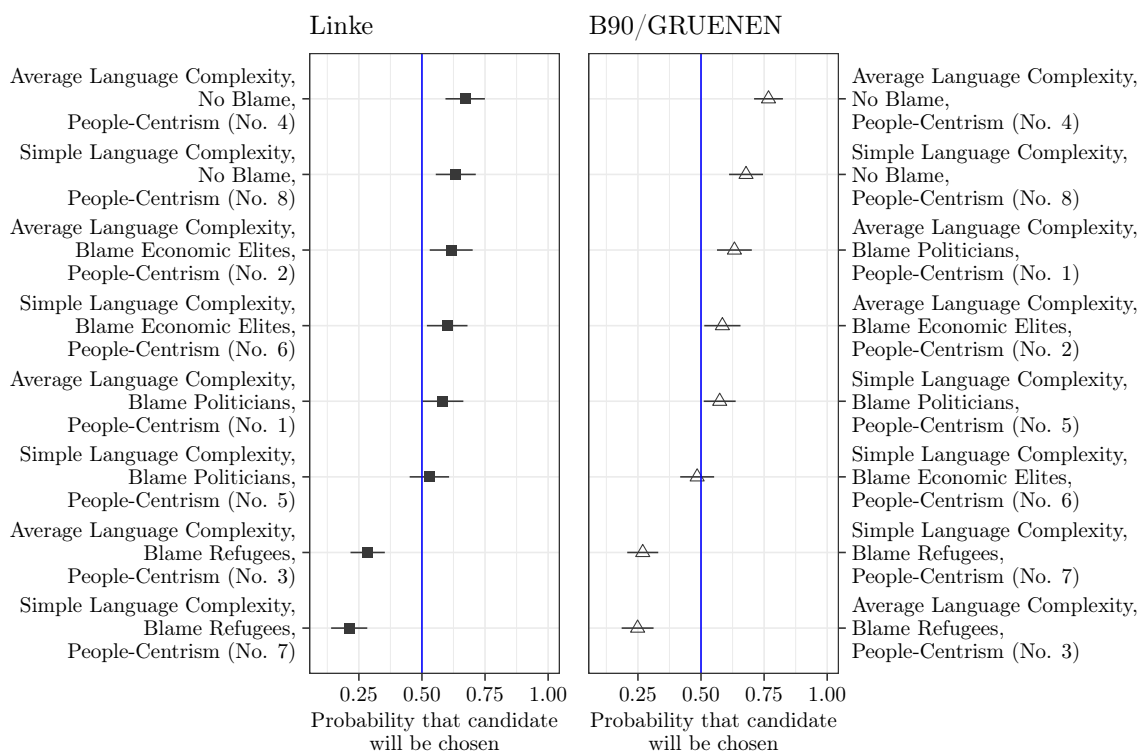

Note: Marginal Means are displayed with 95 percent confidence intervals.

results are that blame attribution against refugees again has a positive effect only for people who intend to vote for the AfD (right-wing populist party). However, in combination with people-centrism and simple language, this political statement has the highest positive effect on people who intend to vote for the AfD. This shows that it is not an individual component of a political statement but rather the combination of all three populist discursive elements that make people with corresponding attitudes turn towards these parties. This is supported even further when we look at statements that do not include people-centric rhetoric. For these statement combinations (see Appendix F, Figure 4), AfD-oriented people have a lower chance of casting their vote for that candidate and become even negative for the combination of simple language, blame against refugees, and lack of people-centric rhetoric. This shows that this particular combination seems to affect vote choice. As such, it is important to consider various aspects and their effect when discussing populist discourse.

The results of the three figures also show that the combination of average language

Figure 6: Interactions of Attribute Levels with Statement Number (only Showing People-Centric Statement): Marginal Means for Linke and B90/GRUENE Voters
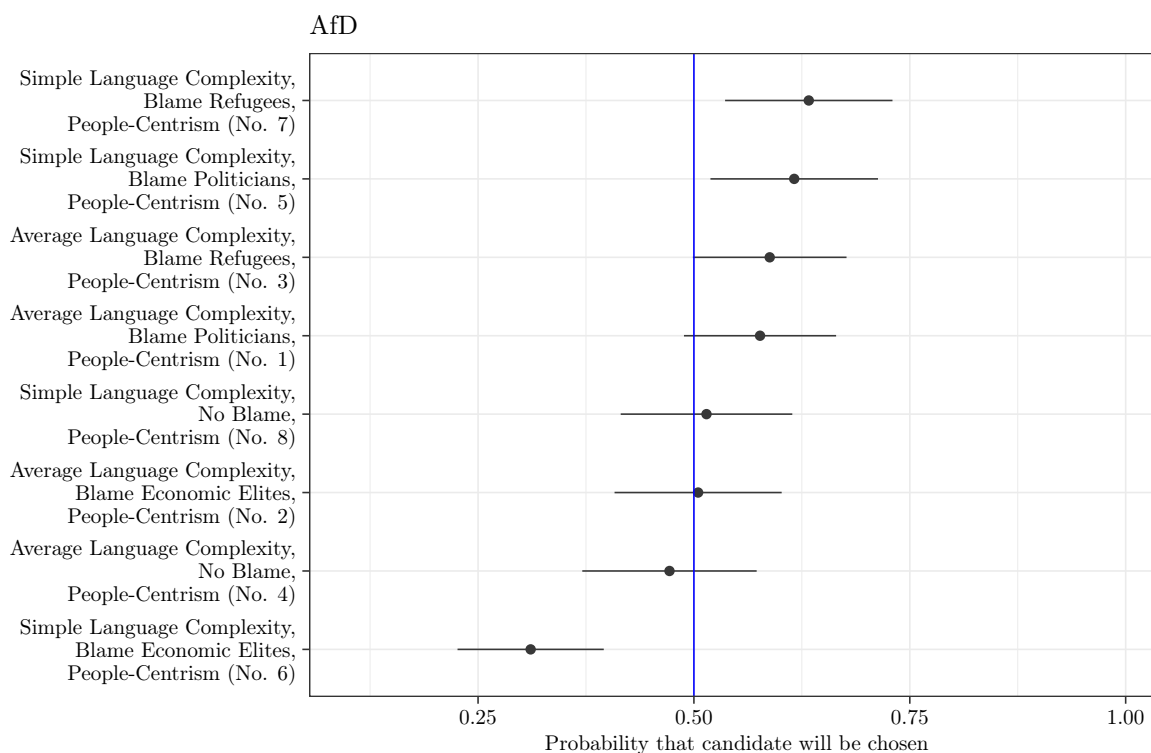

Note: Marginal Means are displayed with 95 percent confidence intervals.

complexity, blame against politicians, and people-centrism produces a highly positive effect on candidate vote choice among all voter groups. These results are rather surprising, as they contradict the Politician-Hypothesis (H2a) that assumes blaming politicians will only positively affect voters with populist attitudes or vote intentions. But also for SPD and CDU/CSU voters, blame attribution scores positively in many statement combinations (see Figure 5). In addition, they show that individuals who do not cast a populist vote respond positively to elements of populist discourse. People, on overage, seem to blame politicians for societal problems. Blaming economic elites or refugees, on the other hand, depends on the corresponding underlying attitudes of the individual or, more precisely, their vote intention.

These results are also confirmed when we look at populist attitudes instead of vote intentions. As a robustness check, I created thin and thick populist attitudes scales following Neuner and Wratil (2022). Appendix G shows results for people displaying left-wing populist attitudes, right-wing populist attitudes or centrist no attitudes (Appendix

Figure 7: Interactions of Attribute Levels with Statement Numbers (only People-Centric Statements): Marginal Means for AfD Voters

Note: Marginal Means are displayed with 95 percent confidence intervals.

G, Figure 9 and Figure 10). The results show that the preferred blame attribution is highly connected to people's ideological preferences. Further, the results confirm that simple language is usually less preferred than average language complexity in all statement combinations. When looking at the division between populist and non-populist people without controlling for any ideological preferences, we can observe that no blame or blame towards politicians has a positive effect on either group. Even though blame towards politicians scores higher among people with populist attitudes (Appendix G, Figure 9 and Figure 10)

In addition, a sub-sample of N = 1,748 respondents was analysed. The sub-sample was created through an attention check that was asked of respondents and only included respondents who read all statements that were presented to them. For the attention check, respondents were asked to state to whom each of the six candidates attributed blame. Thus, respondents were asked six times to indicate whether blame was attributed to political or economic elites, refugees, or nobody. Respondents who answered at least

five of six questions correctly were included in the sample. This measure considers that respondents could have had one slip of the pen but, in general, read all of the statements.[13] Results of the sub-sample are nearly equivalent to the full sample results.

Discussion and Conclusion

Populist messages consist of various discursive elements that make them successful among various voter groups. However, not every element is equally successful for every person. This depends very much on people's underlying attitudes and vote intentions. While previous observational work could not detect causal claims on the effect of discursive strategies on vote choice, this article contributes to this gap by showing how different voter groups are attracted to different discursive strategies. The analysis gives new insights into how particular discursive elements causally affect vote choice and, more precisely, which populist elements also affect voters who ultimately would not intend to vote for a populist party. Thus, this experiment showed the following four results.

First, it showed that people-centric rhetoric works among all voter groups; it does not solely appeal to populist voters. This may be due to the pleasant feeling of being part of a group. People-centric rhetoric incorporates people who usually like to belong somewhere. These results also show that, overall, people prefer a more inclusive language in comparison to technocratic communication. As such, people seem to be more attracted by a populist discourse which includes them as actors compared to technocratic discourse which explains from above (Caramani, 2017). As these results hold for all voter groups, they also provide important implications for non-populist and mainstream actors. We can imply that overall, people seem to prefer a bottom-up approach in which they are included in the discourse instead of a top-down approach in which politicians claim to be ultimate experts who have complete answers to problems. Therefore, non-populist actors can benefit from using a more inclusive and people-centric rhetoric in their communication with voters.

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[13]Another technique would be to only include all candidate pairs that respondents correctly marked. This would, however, lead to an uneven number of respondent observations.

Second, the results show that the "neutral" version of blame attribution – namely towards politicians – increases vote choice among all voter groups. These are rather surprising results, as blame-attributive language is considered an element of populist discourse. Even though no blame attribution in candidates' statements usually generates the highest likelihood of a candidate being elected by non-populist voters, these results show that populist dynamics and elements of their rhetorical strategies are effective for a large group of voters. People seem to be "discontent, not only with politics but also with societal life in general" (Spruyt, Keppens and Van Droogenbroeck, 2016: 335). Thus, certain populist discursive elements affect even non-populist voters more quickly than expected. However, more research is necessary to reveal if non-populist actors are aware of these mechanisms and use them or if a general increase in dissatisfaction and distrust in politicians has led to these results.

Third, voters' ideological preferences have a higher effect on vote intentions than underlying populist attitudes. These dynamics are often understudied in the discussion in research on populism. Nevertheless, this experiment has shown that underlying ideological attributes have an effect if people respond to targeted blame attribution and define their vote choice more than just their general populist attitudes. This may also open up discussions on whether populism and ideology from the left and the right should be more often discussed as co-existing instead of neglecting one or the other. Populist rhetoric is, after all, very much primed by its host ideology.

Fourth, the paper showed that against all expectations, simple language has a negative effect on vote choice in nearly all political statement combinations and for all voter groups. These results contradict the expected result but align with similar results found by Bischof and Senninger (2021). They hint at the fact that people may prefer politicians who speak with average language complexity, as they assign them more competence. However, this can also be specific to the German case and German language peculiarities.

As it is not only relevant to understand what effect certain discursive elements have on vote choice but also how long-lasting and persuasive they may be, we can relate the results to research on persuasion effects in political communication. Research has

shown that persuasion strategies in campaigns often have strong but short-lived effects on voting behaviour (Gerber et al., 2011). Interpreting these findings in relation to this survey experiment leads us to assume that (populist) discursive strategies may affect voters in the short run and can influence election results. Discursive strategies may not change voters' underlying ideological preferences in the long run, though. If we consider that blame attribution towards refugees or capitalists only positively affected voters that already displayed underlying right-wing or left-wing ideological attitudes respectively, we can assume that other factors may affect ideological change for voters. In a broader scope, these results imply that underlying ideological preferences primarily drive vote choice. As such, populist actors may not convince people who do not already share their ideology to vote for them by just applying a blame-attributive discourse. This shows that language does affect people. However, instead of changing attitudes quickly, language instead reinforces them. Nevertheless, these are only interpretations based on earlier research results. More research testing the long-lasting effects on certain discursive elements would be necessary to receive binding results.

Even though the survey experiment was only conducted as a single case study in Germany and the German language displays unique linguistic characteristics, results can travel beyond that case. As discussed earlier, scholars have shown that similar cross-country experiments testing voting behaviour and populist attitudes are often similar across Western European countries. Given that party systems across Europe, especially Western Europe, are relatively similar, there is little reason to believe these results do not hold beyond Germany.

Analysing different discursive elements of populist and non-populist discourse and their effects on various voter groups has shown that language can be used strategically to affect vote choice. It has also shown that peoples' underlying attitudes greatly affect how a message is perceived. A general dissatisfaction with the functioning of the political systems – or at least how politicians work – seems to lead to a general acceptance of blaming political elites for societal problems. Emerging research shows too that all kinds of parties use anti-elite rhetoric strategically, often depending on their electoral circum-

stances (Licht et al., 2024). Future work should focus further on the interplay of parties'
strategic use of anti-elite rhetoric and how this affects voting behaviour. This will help
to disentangle the challenges advanced democracies may face in the future.

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