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It's us against them: a comparative experiment on the effects of populist messages communicated via social media

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ABSTRACT

Populism has gained momentum all around the globe. Social media channels contribute to the success of populism by providing an attractive environment for both politicians and ordinary citizens to disseminate their political ideas. Building on previous research, this study argues that attributing blame to culprit others, such as immigrants or the political elites, for causing major societal problems facing the ordinary people is central to populism. By employing a 2×2 between-subjects comparative survey experiment, we investigated the effects of these blame attributions in populist online messages on citizens' exclusionist and anti-establishment populist attitudes in two Western European countries, Austria and the Netherlands ($N = 646$). Additionally, for the first time in extant research, we distinguished between populist politicians and ordinary citizens as communicators of populist messages. Results revealed that messages blaming the elites or immigrants bolstered citizens' populist attitudes, but only for those who supported the source of the message. For those who opposed the source, in contrast, populist blame attributions *reduced* populist attitudes. These findings help us to understand *how* the core element of pervasive populist messages – attributing blame – affects the populist attitudes of *which* citizens.

Throughout the globe, populism is on the rise. The media, and social media in particular, may have contributed to the spread of populist ideas among society in important ways (e.g., Bartlett, Birdwell, & Littler, 2011). On social media such as Facebook, both ordinary citizens and politicians are able to express their viewpoints on important societal issues, uncensored by the professional and ethical rules of the traditional mass media (Papacharissi, 2010). Capitalizing on this unbounded freedom of expression, ordinary citizens and politicians frequently use social media to stress the divide between the blameless, hard-working people as in-group and culprit others as out-groups. Doing so, they frequently disseminate a populist view among their audience (Engesser, Ernst, Esser, & Büchel,

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2016; Mudde, 2004; Taggart, 2000). The following Facebook message, posted on the US Tea Party's community page, provides an example of such a populist expression communicated by an ordinary citizen: 'Obama doesn't care about ordinary citizens! He only cares about illegals and terrorists!'.

The essence of populism revolves around the moral and causal divide between ordinary citizens as 'good' in-group and horizontally and vertically defined others as 'evil' and culprit out-groups (e.g., Canovan, 1999; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Mudde, 2004; Taggart, 2000). In line with this definition, the Facebook post quoted above can be defined as populist as it stresses who is morally good (e.g., ordinary citizens) and morally evil (e.g., Obama, illegal immigrants). In order to alleviate the people's crisis, the scapegoated out-groups deemed responsible for causing the crisis should be stopped.

Although previous research has generated important insights into the effects of such populist messages on people's attitudes and behavior (e.g., Bos, van der Brug, & de Vreese, 2013; Hameleers, Bos, & de Vreese, 2016; Schmuck & Matthes, 2015), we identify at least three important research gaps. First, existing research on the effects of populist communication has primarily focused on political advertising (Matthes & Schmuck, 2017; Schmuck & Matthes, 2015) or news media (e.g., Bos et al., 2013). However, in modern political campaigns, populist messages are not only communicated through traditional media channels, but are extensively disseminated via social media networks such as Facebook or Twitter (Bartlett et al., 2011).

Second, these social media networks do not only allow politicians to spread populist messages, but also provide the opportunity for ordinary citizens to express their opinions online and to reach an audience of like-minded others (Bartlett et al., 2011; Pingree, 2007). Yet, the effects of populist messages disseminated by ordinary citizens versus populist politicians on voters' political attitudes remain understudied.

Finally, comparative studies on the effects of populist communication in different countries are lacking. Across Europe, populist parties are on the rise. Still, the influence of populist communication on voters' attitudes may vary across different European countries, based on demand-side differences such as education (e.g., Matthes & Schmuck, 2017) or immigrant population (e.g., Schneider, 2008). Hence, there is a strong need for comparative research in this field.

To respond to these unexplored, yet important, areas in populism research, we conducted a 2×2 between-subjects comparative survey experiment on the effects of online populist communication in two Western European countries, Austria and the Netherlands ($N = 646$). In doing so, we compared the effects of online populist messages that attribute blame to either elites or societal out-groups. In addition, this study is the first to distinguish between populist politicians and ordinary citizens as communicators of populist messages.

The effects of populist blame attributions on social media

The core idea of populism entails the moral and causal construction of a divide between the 'good' ordinary people and 'evil' others, most saliently referred to as the corrupt elites or societal out-groups (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Mudde, 2004). The elites in government are, for example, blamed for not representing the people's will. Right-wing populism adds an exclusionist component to the people's opposition: societal

out-groups, such as refugees, are held responsible for depriving the native people on an economic and cultural-symbolic level (Mazzoleni, 2008). Populism thus constructs an antagonistic view on societal issues by emphasizing the divide between two homogenous groups: the in-group of the ordinary people and the out-group of culprit others (e.g., Mudde, 2004).

The other constructed in opposition to the blameless in-group of the people can be defined in different ways congruent with varying conceptualizations of populism (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). Most saliently, populism entails the opposition between ordinary, hardworking citizens and the corrupt establishment (e.g., Mudde, 2004). In line with this conceptualization, the elites are accused of only adhering to their own interests whilst being reluctant to take care of their electorate (Canovan, 1999). This type of populism has been labeled *anti-establishment populism* (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007).

The populist other can also be constructed *horizontally*, threatening the ordinary people from within the heartland (e.g., Akkerman, 2011; Krämer, 2014). In line with this conceptualization of populism, the 'good' native people are morally opposed to 'evil' societal out-groups, which pose an economic or cultural threat to the pure, innocent people of the heartland (Taggart, 2000). This second type of populism has been labeled *excluding populism* (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007).

In this paper, we argue that such populist ideas can manifest themselves both as a characteristic of a political communication text (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007) and as a frame of reference that citizens can use to interpret societal issues. Such interpretations on the demand side of citizens have been labeled populist attitudes (e.g., Akkerman, Mudde, & Zaslove, 2014; Hawkins, Riding, & Mudde, 2012). Populist attitudes can be defined as the perceived antagonism between the in-group of the ordinary people and causally and morally opposed others – the elites for anti-establishment populist attitudes and societal out-groups for exclusionist populist attitudes.

The concept of attributing causal responsibility for negative outcomes – blame – is closely connected to populism (Hameleers et al., 2016). Studies found that messages that attribute blame guide citizens' political opinions (e.g., Iyengar, 1991). If a message emphasizes blame attributions to the government, for example, citizens follow suit by accepting this culprit out-group construction in their own political opinions (Tilley & Hobolt, 2011). But how can populist messages that attribute blame activate populist attitudes?

The underlying process by which blame attributions affect populist attitudes can be understood as media-based othering (Krämer, 2014). As a consequence of exposure to messages that shift blame from the innocent people to culprit out-groups, citizens may interpret societal issues in 'us' against 'them' oppositions *themselves* as well (Brader, 2005). This effect of media-based othering can be explained by psychological theories on social identity and stereotyping. Blame attributions emphasize a positive interpretation of the blameless in-group by activating negative stereotypes of the government and immigrants, who are deemed responsible for causing the people's problems (Tajfel, 1978). As an effect of exposure to such populist messages, positive stereotypes of the self and negative stereotypes of the culprit other may become chronically accessible among receivers (e.g., Dixon, 2008). In line with the findings of Richey (2012) on trait activation, exposure to populist political communication is therefore expected to stimulate and activate populist political perceptions.

Responsibility attributions articulated by populist actors have indeed been found to influence citizens' attitudes. For instance, a study by Hameleers et al. (2016) revealed that populist news messages blaming political elites negatively affect citizens' attitudes toward the establishment. Likewise, Hameleers et al. (2016) and Matthes and Schmuck (2017) found that populist political advertisements that attribute responsibility for societal problems to immigrants activated negative attitudes toward immigrants and minorities in the public. But how can social media provide a space for the expression of such blame attributions?

Social media increasingly play a more central role in political opinion formation as they take over some of the pivotal democratic roles of the mass media, such as providing information and differing viewpoints on pressing societal and political issues (Castells, 2007; Habermas, 2006; Nekmat, Gower, Zhou, & Metzger, 2015; Weeks, Ardèvol-Abreu, & de Zúñiga, 2015). Populist politicians capitalize on the powerful influence of social media on citizens' opinion formation by disseminating populist ideas such as attacking the elites, advocating for the people or ostracizing others on channels like Facebook and Twitter (Engesser et al., 2016).

Hence, in line with recent empirical findings and the mechanism explicated above, we hypothesize that in the context of social network sites:

> H1a. If the government is blamed, citizens will show more anti-establishment populist attitudes compared to when the government is not blamed.

> H1b. If immigrants are blamed, citizens will show more exclusionist populist attitudes compared to when immigrants are not blamed.

Populist messages on social media are not only disseminated by populist politicians. Rather, the technological advances of the Internet allow people to send messages themselves and to interact with other members of the audience using the same social media platforms (Pingree, 2007). Initial empirical evidence indicates that receiving messages from personal sources can be even more persuasive than messages from organizations (Nekmat et al., 2015). However, despite its high relevance, extant research has not yet compared the effects of citizen versus populist politician cues. Hence, we forward the following research question:

> RQ1: Are blame attributions to immigrants or the government more persuasive when articulated by a populist politician or by an ordinary citizen?

The central role of source identification

A large body of literature indicates that social identification plays a crucial role in the acceptance of political viewpoints among citizens. In order to maintain a positive perception of the self in relation to in-group belonging, citizens make judgments in a biased way (Tajfel, 1978). Specifically, people attribute positive qualities to their in-group and negative qualities, such as blame, to the out-group (Sniderman, Peri, de Figueiredo, & Piazza, 2000). As people are motivated by such forms of in-group serving bias, source identification may play a pivotal role in the effects of populist blame attributions communicated by populist politicians or ordinary people: when people experience the source of the blame attribution as their in-group, they are more likely to accept it than when the source is part of the out-group.

We therefore hypothesize the following:

H2a: Populist blame attributions to the government by a populist politician will result in more anti-establishment populist attitudes among those citizens who identify with the populist politician than among those who do not identify with the populist politician.

H2b: Populist blame attributions to immigrants by a populist politician will result in more exclusionist populist attitudes among those citizens who identify with the populist politician than among those who do not identify with the populist politician.

Source identification is not only crucial for the acceptance of messages communicated by politicians, it may also affect how online peers shape the political attitudes and behavior of others. Previous research reveals that persuasion hinges on individuals' consideration of both the type of source and its credibility perception at the same time (Nekmat et al., 2015). People are more likely to accept a message and to be persuaded by it, when the message is communicated by a source they support, like and feel similar to (Housholder & LaMarre, 2014). Hence, based on a similar mechanism conditioning the effects of messages communicated by populist actors, acceptance of blame attributions by an ordinary citizen is expected to be contingent upon identification with the source. We hypothesize:

H3a: Populist blame attributions to the government by an ordinary citizen will result in more anti-establishment populist attitudes among those citizens who identify with the ordinary citizen than among those who do not identify with the ordinary citizen.

H3b: Populist blame attributions to immigrants by an ordinary citizen will result in more exclusionist populist attitudes among those citizens who identify with the ordinary citizen than among those who do not identify with the ordinary citizen.

Comparing Austria and the Netherlands

Both countries included in the experiment provide relevant cases to study the effects of populist communication. They are both Western European countries that have witnessed the rise of successful right-wing populist political parties: the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) in Austria and the Party for Freedom (PVV) in the Netherlands. Furthermore, the political leaders of these political parties are both active and successful on social media. However, despite these similarities, both countries differ on some background characteristics of the electorate.

First, citizens' level of education has been allocated a central role as populist ideas have been found to appeal most to lower educated citizens (e.g., Bos et al., 2013; Matthes & Schmuck, 2017). Because Austria has a lower educated electorate than the Netherlands (Eurostat, 2014a), populist ideas may receive more support in Austria than in the Netherlands. Moreover, Knigge (1998) found that rising levels of immigration contribute significantly to the success of right-wing populist parties in Western Europe. As Austria has a higher number of non-Western immigrants than the Netherlands, it can tentatively be expected that support for populist ideas is stronger in Austria than the Netherlands (Eurostat, 2014b). Finally, political dissatisfaction may play an important role for anti-establishment populism in particular (Mudde, 2004). As citizens in Austria have been found to have significantly more distrust in politicians and the government than citizens in the Netherlands (Eurostat, 2014b), anti-establishment populism may have stronger roots in Austria than the Netherlands.

Thus, the reviewed literature on the demand side of Austrian and Dutch citizens suggests that Austrian citizens may be more likely to have exclusionist or anti-establishment populist attitudes compared to Dutch citizens. However, extant research does not explicitly predict differences in the *susceptibility* to the effects of populist messages between countries. Regarding the differences in effects, we therefore forward the following research question:

RQ2: Do the effects of populist blame attributions (a) to the government or (b) to immigrants on (a) anti-establishment populist attitudes or (b) exclusionist populist attitudes differ in Austria and the Netherlands?

Method

Experimental design

In both countries, the design of the experiment was identical. The experimental design concerned a 2×2 between-subjects factorial experiment with a control group. The first factor concerned a populist blame attribution cue: either immigrants or the government were blamed for negative developments on the highly salient issue of the economy. Blame attributions clearly articulated the moral and causal divide between the victimized ordinary people and the culprit others. The second factor concerned the sender of the message: the message was either communicated by the populist leader himself or by a member of 'the ordinary people'.

Sample

This experiment is based on a diverse sample of Austrian and Dutch citizens ($N = 646$). The data were collected by an international research organization. In both countries, the sample reflects the two countries' variance in educational level, age and gender. In Austria, 334 participants completed the experiment. The mean age was 41.74 years (SD = 12.90) and 51.5% was female; 73.4% was lower educated, 15.3% was higher educated and 11.4% had a moderate level of education. In the Netherlands, 312 participants completed the study. Their mean age was 44.93 years (SD = 14.38) and 49.4% was female. Regarding level of education, 35.5% was lower educated, 21.4% was higher educated and 42.9% had a moderate level of education.

Procedure

The experiments were conducted online. First, informed consent was assessed. Next, participants completed a pre-test consisting of background, moderating and control variables. Upon completion, participants were randomly assigned to one of the four experimental conditions or control group and watched two Facebook posts, which they had to read for at least 30 seconds. Next, participants had to complete a post-test survey measuring the dependent variables. At the end of the questionnaire, manipulation checks for blame attribution and source were assessed. After completion, participants were thanked and debriefed. They received a financial incentive from the panel agency.

Stimulus material

The questionnaire and stimuli were first developed in English. The basic questionnaire and stimuli were translated by native speakers in both countries, and reviewed and compared by researchers with a basic understanding of both languages. In case of doubt, German and Dutch sentences were translated back to English to find an equivalent translation that worked in both languages. The stimulus material in all groups consisted of two Facebook posts, which resembled actual Facebook posts (see Appendix 1 for an example of the stimuli). In the politician source condition, we adapted real Facebook posts by Heinz-Christian Strache (Austria) and Geert Wilders (the Netherlands). In the citizen source condition, we used a picture of an ordinary citizen taken from an online image database. The first post contained a short text and a picture, which was identical across conditions and depicted a decline in income for ordinary citizens. In the immigrants blame attribution condition, a line on top of this picture says: 'Extreme low wages: In 2020 Austrian/Dutch people will work for ridiculously low wages because of the continuing influx of migrants. While migrants are getting richer, the Austrians/the Dutch are getting poorer.' In the governmental blame attribution condition, the line says: 'Extreme low wages: In 2020 Austrian/Dutch people will work for ridiculously low wages because the governmental financial policy is failing. While the government is getting richer, the Austrians/the Dutch are getting poorer.' In the control condition, the source was an unrelated statistical institution (Statistik Austria or the Central Bureau for Statistics) and the line said: 'Extreme low wages: According to a newly released report of the agency, Austrian/Dutch salaries will be lower in 2020. Our findings on wage declines are consistent with a longer run trend in wage stagnation.'

The second post contained a short text describing a fictitious report by the national statistics office revealing that the welfare state will be under strong pressure in the next 5 years. Similar to the first post, the text either blamed immigrants ('Immigrants who get health care for free are responsible for exploding costs in the health care of our country') or the government ('Our self-interested government in charge is responsible for exploding costs in the health care of our country') for the pressing healthcare costs. In the control condition, the report was presented without mentioning blame attributions.

The Facebook messages were introduced by referring to the source of the message in a short text explaining that both ordinary citizen and politicians express themselves online and that they will be exposed to an example of such expressions.

Measures

Populist attitudes

We used Confirmatory Factor Analyses to estimate the hypothesized two-dimensional structure of populist attitudes, consisting of anti-establishment and exclusionism (see item wordings in Appendix 2). The model fit of the two-dimensional model was satisfactory in both the Dutch ($\chi^2(31) = 41.99$, $\chi^2/df = 1.36$, $p = .09$; RMSEA = .03, 90% CI [.00, .05]; CFI = .96) and Austrian experiment ($\chi^2(30) = 43.13$, $\chi^2/df = 1.44$, $p = .06$; RMSEA = .04, 90% CI [.00, .05]; CFI = .99). The convergent validity was also satisfactory, as all standardized regression weights were above .70 (Kline, 2011). The correlation between

both factors was .72 in the Netherlands and .62 in Austria. In both country models, fit declined significantly and substantially when comparing the two-dimensional model to a one-dimensional one. This points to a satisfactory discriminant validity. Based on these outcomes, populist attitudes were measured on two 7-point scales: one 4-item measure of anti-establishment populist attitudes (Cronbach's $\alpha = .84$, $M = 4.88$, SD = 1.35) and one 6-item measure of exclusionist populist attitudes (Cronbach's $\alpha = .93$, $M = 4.38$, SD = 1.72).

Source identification/support

We asked participants to rate every source of the Facebook post – the statistical bureau, the populist party leader and the ordinary citizen. Participants rated the following qualities of the source: independence, sincerity and knowing what is going on in society. In addition, we asked participants to what extent they believed their own views of reality are similar to or different from the source. These items were computed into a 7-point scale identification index for all sources: the statistical bureau (Cronbach's $\alpha = .92$, $M = 4.13$, SD = 1.41); the populist politician in the immigrants-blame condition (Cronbach's $\alpha = .94$, $M = 3.96$, SD = 1.77); the populist politician in the government-blame condition (Cronbach's $\alpha = .92$, $M = 3.96$, SD = 1.78); the ordinary citizen in the immigrants-blame condition (Cronbach's $\alpha = .93$, $M = 3.99$, SD = 1.64) and the ordinary citizen in the government-blame condition (Cronbach's $\alpha = .92$, $M = 3.92$, SD = 1.56).

Controls

We assessed support for the populist politicians H.C. Strache and Geert Wilders in all experimental conditions using one item on a 10-point scale asking how favorable participants rated the respective politician. Identification with ordinary citizens was gauged with eight items (e.g., Lubbers, 2008) (see item wordings in Appendix 2) (Cronbach's $\alpha = .92$, $M = 4.95$, SD = 1.37).

Manipulation checks

The manipulation of populist blame attribution was successful for both blame attributed to the government ($F(4, 641) = 53.64$, $p < .001$) and immigrants ($F(4, 641) = 67.39$, $p < .001$) (see Appendix 2 for item wordings). This means that participants in the government-blame conditions were significantly more inclined to believe the Facebook post attributed blame to the government than in the other conditions. Likewise, participants in the immigrants-blame conditions were significantly and substantially more inclined to believe immigrants were deemed responsible in the post. In the control condition, participants were most likely to believe that no one was held responsible in the Facebook messages ($F(4, 641) = 14.52$, $p < .001$).

Manipulation check items for the source were also successful: the statistical bureau ($F(4, 641) = 142.04$, $p < .001$); populist politicians ($F(4, 641) = 443.99$, $p < .001$) and ordinary citizens ($F(4, 641) = 402.12$, $p < .001$) were all indicated correctly in most of the cases (see Table A1, Appendix 2).

Analyses

We used OLS-regression models to estimate how populist attributions of blame communicated by populist politicians versus ordinary citizens affected participants' populist attitudes on two dimensions. Condition was dummy coded with the control group as the reference group. The interaction terms were modeled by including multiplicative terms of condition and the moderator *source support*. The moderator was mean centered prior to computing the products between the experimental conditions and source support to reduce multicollinearity (Hayes, 2013). We controlled for country, support for Wilders/Strache (measured prior to stimuli exposure in all experimental conditions) and identification with ordinary citizens (measured prior to stimuli exposure in all experimental conditions) in all analyses.

Tables 1 and 2 present the results for each dimension separately. To ensure that the experimental conditions did not differ significantly on important dispositional and attitudinal characteristics, we included a *post hoc* randomization check on age, gender, education, Facebook use, voting behavior, governmental support and relative deprivation. A series of chi-squared tests revealed no significant differences across conditions for age ($\chi^2(200) = 226.92$, $p = $ n.s.), gender ($\chi^2(4) = 3.90$, $p = $ n.s.), education ($\chi^2(8) = 8.73$, $p = $ n.s.), support for Wilders/Strache (Austria: $\chi^2(36) = 32.95$, $p = $ n.s., the Netherlands: $\chi^2(36) = 31,32$, $p = $ n.s.), identification with ordinary citizens ($\chi^2(96) = 69.86$, $p = $ n.s.), Facebook use ($\chi^2(32) = 35.46$, $p = $ n.s.), voting behavior (Austria: $\chi^2(32) = 17.81$, $p = $ n.s.; the Netherlands: $\chi^2(56) = 46.92$, $p = $ n.s.), governmental support ($\chi^2(72) = 64.59$, $p = $ n.s.) and relative deprivation ($\chi^2(72) = 87.03$, $p = $ n.s.).

Results

Direct effects of populist attributions of blame

We expected that, ceteris paribus, blame attributions guided participants' populist attitudes in a message congruent way (H1). As can be seen in Table 1 (Model I), the

Table 1. OLS-regression model predicting anti-establishment populist attitudes.

Variable	Model I (n = 646)			Model II (n = 646)		
	B	SE	β	B	SE	β
Politician immigrant	−.05	.14	−.02	−.09	.14	−.03
Politician government	.13	.14	.04	.09	.14	.03
Citizen immigrant	.05	.14	.01	.00	.14	.00
Citizen government	.22	.14	.07	.18	.14	.05
Source support	.33	.03	.40***	.06	.08	.07
Country (Netherlands)	−.15	.10	−.06	−.18	.09	−.07⁺
Prior support for Wilders/Strache	.06	.02	.13**	.04	.02	.10*
Prior identification with ordinary citizens	.11	.04	.11**	.12	.04	.12**
Politician immigrant × source support				.35	.09	.21***
Politician government × source support				.24	.09	.14*
Citizen immigrant × source support				.40	.10	.22***
Citizen government × source support				.34	.10	.17**
Adjusted R^2	.30			.32		
F for change in R^2	35.10***			5.28***		

Notes: Two-tailed tests. Unstandardized and standardized regression weights.
⁺$p < .10$.
*$p < .05$.
**$p < .01$.
***$p < .001$.

Table 2. OLS-regression model predicting exclusionist populist attitudes.

Variable	Model I ($n = 646$)			Model II ($n = 646$)		
	B	SE	β	B	SE	β
Politician immigrant	−.18	.16	−.04	−.23	.16	−.05
Politician government	−.13	.16	−.03	−.18	.16	−.04
Citizen immigrant	−.03	.17	−.01	−.09	.16	−.02
Citizen government	.00	.17	.00	−.07	.16	−.02
Source support	.34	.04	.32***	.02	.09	.02
Country (Netherlands)	.13	.11	.04	.11	.11	.03
Support for Wilders/Strache	.22	.02	.39***	.19	.02	.34***
Prior identification with ordinary citizens	.12	.04	.10**	.14	.04	.12**
Politician immigrant × source support				.54	.11	.25***
Politician government × source support				.31	.11	.15**
Citizen immigrant × source support				.45	.11	.19***
Citizen government × source support				.22	.11	.09+
Adjusted R^2	.43			45		
F for change in R^2	6.92***			7.65***		

Notes: Two-tailed tests. Unstandardized and standardized regression weights.
+$p < .10$.
*$p < .05$.
**$p < .01$.
***$p < .001$.

experimental conditions in which blame was attributed to the government did not significantly affect populist attitudes on the anti-establishment dimension, which does not provide support for H1a. Blame attributions to immigrants did also not significantly affect exclusionist populist attitudes (see Table 2). These results are not supportive of H1b.

Next, we set out to compare the effects of sender cues (RQ1). We found that citizen cues were not significantly more persuasive than populist politician cues for the anti-establishment dimension or the exclusionist dimension (see Table 1, Model I). Additionally, source support exerted significant positive effects on anti-establishment attitudes ($b = .33$, SE $= .03$, $p < .001$) and exclusionist attitudes ($b = .34$, SE $= .04$, $p < .001$).

The central role of support and identification with the source

In the next step of the regression analyses, we included the interaction between the experimental conditions and the extent to which the source of the message was supported by participants. We expected that blame attributions by populist politicians would result in more populist attitudes among those who supported the source (H2).

As can be seen in Table 1 (Model II), our results reveal a positive and significant interaction effect between blame attributions to the government communicated by a populist politician and source support on *anti-establishment* attitudes ($b = .24$, SE $= .09$, $p < .05$). This means that, among those who supported the populist politician and his ideas, blame attributions to the government activated anti-establishment populist attitudes. This supports H2a. It should be noted that blame attributions to immigrants also positively and significantly affected anti-establishment populist attitudes among those who supported the populist source ($b = .35$, SE $= .09$, $p < .001$), which points to a spill-over effect of blame attributions to populist attitudes toward the establishment.

The interaction effects of source support and blame attributed by a populist politician on *exclusionist* populist attitudes (H2b) point to similar results. As demonstrated by the

significant interaction effect in Table 2 (Model II), attributions of blame to immigrants communicated by a populist politician activated exclusionist populist attitudes among citizens with higher levels of source support ($b = .54$, SE $= .11$, $p < .001$). This provides support for H2a. Again, a spill-over effect occurred. When blame was attributed to the government, participants at higher levels of source identification also scored higher on *exclusionist* populist attitudes ($b = .31$, SE $= .11$, $p < .01$). In the next step, we assessed how identification with the ordinary citizen as a sender of the Facebook post conditioned the effects of populist attributions of blame (H3). As can be seen in Table 1, the two-way interaction effect between governmental blame attributions by an ordinary citizen and identification with the source on *anti-establishment* populist attitudes was significant and positive ($b = .34$, SE $= .10$, $p < .01$). This means that the more participants identified with the ordinary citizen, the stronger the effects of blame attributions to the government on anti-establishment populist attitudes. These results provide support for H3a. Again, a spill-over effect of blame attributions to immigrants on anti-establishment populist attitudes was identified ($b = .40$, SE $= .10$, $p < .001$).

In line with H3b, we found a significant and positive two-way interaction effect of ordinary citizens' immigrants blame attribution and source identification on the exclusionist dimension of populist attitudes ($b = .45$, SE $= .11$, $p < .001$). This means that the more participants identified with the ordinary citizen who attributed blame to immigrants on his Facebook page, the stronger their exclusionist populist attitudes. This provides support for H3b: populist blame attributions to immigrants by an ordinary citizen resulted in more exclusionist populist attitudes among those citizens who identify with the ordinary citizen than among those who do not identify with the ordinary citizen. Albeit less substantial compared to the other two-way interaction effects, a spill-over effect was again identified: the ordinary citizens' articulation of blame to the government also resulted in stronger exclusionist populist attitudes among those participants who identified with him ($b = .22$, SE $= .11$, $p = .05$).

The crucial role of source support is further illustrated in Figures 1 and 2. As can be seen in Figure 1, populist blame attribution resulted in more anti-establishment populist
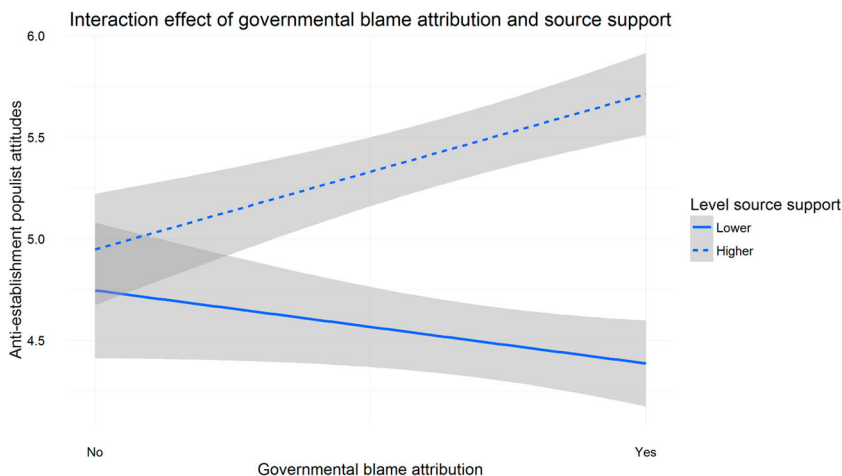

Figure 1. Interaction effect of blame attribution to the government and source support on anti-establishment populist attitudes.
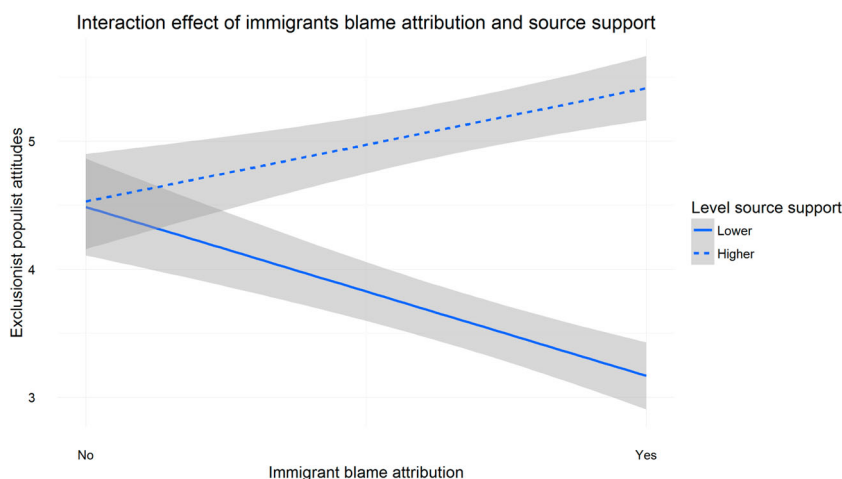
Figure 2. Interaction effect of blame attribution to immigrants and source support on exclusionist populist attitudes.

attitudes among those with higher levels of source support and lower anti-establishment populist attitudes for lower levels of source support. Likewise, when blame was attributed to immigrants, the effects on exclusionist populist attitudes were only positive at higher levels of source support (see Figure 2). To further investigate the moderating role of source support, we probed the interaction effects on all levels of source support using PROCESS (see Hayes & Matthes, 2009). We found that governmental blame attributions by a populist politician only affected anti-establishment attitudes among those with high levels of source support (above 5.20 on the 7-point scale) (ranging from $b = .38$, $p < .05$ to $b = .81$, $p < .01$), while for those below 5.20, the effect was not significant. Similarly, the results revealed that governmental blame attributions by an ordinary citizen only had a significant impact on anti-establishment attitudes among those who highly identified with the citizen (above 4.60 on the 7-point scale) ($b = .38$, $p < .01$ to $b = 1.19$, $p < .001$), while the effect on anti-establishment attitudes was negative for those with very low levels of support for the citizen (below 1.9) ($b = -.53$, $p < .05$ to $b = -.83$, $p < .01$).

Likewise, immigrant blame attributions by a populist politician bolstered exclusionist populist attitudes among those with high levels of source support (above 5.50) ($b = .43$, $p = .05$ to $b = .95$, $p < .01$). However, exclusionist populist attitudes were reduced among those who opposed the politician (below 3.1) ($b = -.40$, $p < .05$ to $b = -1.12$, $p < .001$). Similarly, immigrant blame attributions articulated by an ordinary citizen increased exclusionist populist attitudes for those with high levels of source support (above 4.90) ($b = .37$, $p = .05$ to $b = 1.21$, $p < .001$) and reduced exclusionist populist attitudes for those with low levels of source support (below 3.10) ($b = -.35$, $p < .05$ to $b = -1.20$, $p < .001$).

Taken together, these results indicate that support of the source indeed plays a pivotal role in understanding the persuasiveness of populist attributions of blame. Only when participants accepted the source, either a populist politician or an ordinary citizen, their populist attitudes were stronger in the experimental conditions compared to the control condition in which blame was not attributed. At lower levels of source support, *negative*

associations regarding populist framing were thus activated, leading to *lower* scores on the populist attitudes scales.

Differences between Austria and the Netherlands

We expected that participants in Austria had stronger populist attitudes on both dimensions than participants in the Netherlands. Regarding the anti-establishment dimension, Austrians indeed have marginally significant more populist attitudes than Dutch participants ($b = −.18$, SE = .09, $p = .05$) (see Table 2, Model II). For the exclusionist dimension, there is no significant difference ($b = .11$, SE = .11, p = n. s.) (see Table 2, Model II). Thus, overall, Austrians do not have significantly more exclusionist populist attitudes than Dutch citizens.

Next, we investigated whether the *effects* of populist blame attributions differ in Austria and the Netherlands (RQ2). We did so by computing the three-way interaction effects of blame attribution, source support and country, which we included in an additional regression model (not shown in the tables for clarity reasons). Regarding the effect of blame attributions to the government on anti-establishment populist attitudes, we see no significant country differences (politician condition: $b = .10$, SE = .11, p = n.s.; citizen condition: $b = .07$, SE = .13, p = n.s.). For the exclusionist dimension, the results also point to non-significant differences in effects of blame attributions to immigrants on exclusionist populist attitudes between both countries (politician condition: $b = .08$, SE = .11, p = n.s.; citizen condition: $b = .05$, SE = .13, p = n.s.). In other words, the two-way interaction effects of blame attribution and source support did not differ significantly between Austria and the Netherlands. Thus, the effects of populist blame attributions on anti-establishment populist attitudes and exclusionist populist attitudes are similar for Austria and the Netherlands, which answers RQ2.

Discussion

Populist ideas have gained momentum all around the globe. Sparked by the visibility and success of political parties and their leaders, previous research has extensively studied populism on either the supply side of politicians and their party communication (e.g., Jagers & Walgrave, 2007) or the demand side of the electorate (Hameleers et al., 2016; Matthes & Schmuck, 2017; Mazzoleni, 2008). In this experiment, we aimed to advance this knowledge by investigating how the core idea of populism – attributing blame to elites or societal out-groups – communicated by populist politicians and ordinary citizens in Austria and the Netherlands via social media affect the populist attitudes of citizens.

We found no support for direct effects of populist blame attributions on populist attitudes. However, in line with our expectations, support of the populist politician or identification with the ordinary citizen was crucial in accepting the message: people only accepted populist ideas when they identified with the sender communicating them (Housholder & LaMarre, 2014). In line with previous findings in political communication research (Meirick & Nisbett, 2011), our results indicate that populist messages on social media can even provoke a backlash: when people strongly opposed the message's source they responded with reactance. Their *negative* associations with populist ideas were thus activated. This key finding is in line with the literature on in-group serving bias (e.g., Lenz, 2009).

Furthermore, for the first time in populist communication research, we tested whether the effects of populist messages differ for populist politicians and ordinary citizens. Encountering political messages communicated by ordinary citizens, such as friends, acquaintances, like-minded others or unknown strangers, is a common phenomenon on social media channels (Weeks et al., 2015). For all these groups, the level of identification with the source may differ and crucially influence the reader's susceptibility to a message (Nekmat et al., 2015). In line with this assumption, our findings showed that only when people identified with the citizen, they were persuaded by the populist attributions of blame communicated via his Facebook profile. This finding indicates that perceived similarity with a source is a crucial determinant for message acceptance on social media (Housholder & LaMarre, 2014).

The results of this study provide important insights for the literature on media populism in the light of online self-communication (Castells, 2007). The assumptions of the effects of populism by the media have predominately been based on traditional, offline media (Krämer, 2014; Mazzoleni, 2008). At the same time, however, empirical research has not provided convincing evidence for the existence of a populist bias in the coverage of such media outlets (Akkerman, 2011). On social media, populist ideas are more likely to be expressed, both by ordinary citizens and populist politicians (Bartlett et al., 2011). Against this backdrop, it makes more sense to study the effects of media populism in the context of social media than offline media that are less prone to provide a platform for populist expressions.

The centrality of source support can be explained by the peculiarities of Facebook as a social medium. Companies like Facebook and Google often employ filtering algorithms that predict which content a customer will be most likely to view and endorse. Likewise, friend-suggestion algorithms tend to propose only like-minded individuals as potential online contacts. Consequently, people are most likely to read Facebook messages of their friends and the political actors they like or follow on Facebook (Housholder & LaMarre, 2014). This tentatively provides evidence for the external validity of this experimental study: outside of the experimental setting, people are also most likely to be persuaded by sources that they actually know and support on Facebook.

As we used a two-dimensional measure of populist attitudes, this study enabled us to more precisely investigate the overlap between the supply side and demand side of populism. Doing so, our findings demonstrate to what extent populist messages that distinguish between exclusionist and anti-establishment populism actually tap into such a differential attitudinal structure among citizens (Zaller, 1992).

Our results indicate that people not always responded to populist blame attributions in attitudinal-congruent ways. This finding can be explained in the light of complete populism (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). Following the definition of complete populism, many populist actors, including the populist politicians included in this experiment, are known to be populist on *both* the exclusionist and anti-establishment dimension. Just like in this experiment, they may express exclusionist populist ideas in one message, whereas they disseminate anti-establishment populism in other messages. On the receiver side, citizens may therefore associate specific populist ideas as indicators of complete populism: they may extrapolate blame attributions to the establishment or immigrants to populist perceptions in general.

This study aimed to compare the effects of online communication between Austria and the Netherlands. Although we found Austrians to have slightly higher resentments toward the establishment, our results indicate that citizens in Austria and the Netherlands are equally susceptible to online populist messages. A potential explanation is that both countries do not differ that substantially in the actual demand side and supply side of populism: both are relatively wealthy Western European countries with the presence of a successful right-wing complete populist party. The differences that do exist, for example, in level of education and political distrust, may not be as large as expected. In any case, it is unlikely that they condition the effects of populist attributions of blame.

This experimental study has a few potential shortcomings. First, it focused on only two countries that may be regarded as largely similar. Future research should extend this research to non-European countries or countries with successful left-wing populist parties, which may provide further information on the contextual factors underlying the persuasiveness of populist messages.

Another limitation concerns the focus on one single online medium: Facebook. Populist politicians and ordinary citizens are also known to communicate their viewpoints via other social media, such as Twitter. The choice to focus on Facebook was based on concerns of reality: the politicians in both countries are visible most on Facebook, and the interpretation of societal issues in terms of populist blame attribution of both ordinary people and populist politicians is more realistic on Facebook than a more condensed, fact-based medium as Twitter.

A further limitation is that, although we controlled for participants' Facebook use and the extent to which they followed populist politicians, we did not explicitly take selective exposure into account in this experimental study (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008). However, to some extent, our results do provide insights into selection biases: the blame attribution message was likely to be counter-attitudinal for participants who opposed the source and pro-attitudinal for participants who identified the source (Stroud, 2010).

One could argue that the effects found in this study are not driven by exposure to stimuli, but rather by support of the source. We do, however, believe that this alternative explanation can be ruled out. We measured support for populist politicians and identification with ordinary citizens, the 'vox populi', in both countries *before* exposure to the stimuli in all conditions. We found that after controlling for the effect of support for populist politicians and identification with ordinary citizens, the interaction of a populist message and source liking activates populist attitudes. Thus, not only the liking of ordinary citizens or populist politicians per se but being exposed to a populist message by a source citizens feel similar to activates populist attitudes. Populist attitudes are thus not unconditionally bolstered when people like the source. Rather, source support can be understood as a necessary condition for populist messages to activate populist attitudes.

Related to this, we did not include an experimental condition that combined a neutral source with blame attributions. However, a neutral source such as a statistical office that attributes blame to immigrants or the government would have been rather unrealistic. Thus, to avoid threats to the external validity, we refrained from using such a condition in the present study.

All in all, this study has demonstrated that support of and identification with the source plays a pivotal role in the acceptance of online populist communication that blames immigrants or political elites. When people do *not* like the source, their *negative* attitudes towards

populist ideas are activated. Blame attributions expressed by ordinary citizens and populist politicians can thus both be persuasive, as long as the receiver perceives the sender as part of his or her imagined community: the in-group of the populist heartland.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

Figure A1. Example of stimulus materials for the immigrants (above) and government (below) blame attribution and ordinary citizen source condition (Dutch context).
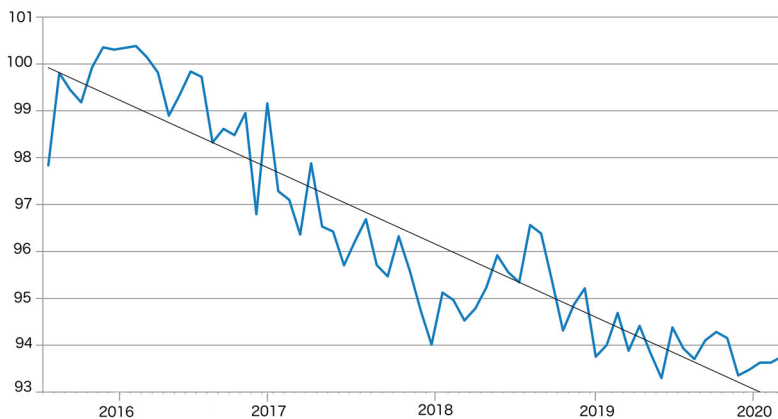
Michael Meijer heeft een link gedeeld.
2 uur · 🌐

Extreme inkomensdaling: In 2020 zullen Nederlanders voor belachelijk lage lonen moeten werken vanwege de onstuitbare instroom van migranten. Terwijl de migranten in ons land zich verrijken, worden onze eigen mensen in Nederland alleen maar armer!!

Inkomensdaling in Nederland

Beschikbaar inkomen voor huishoudens per hoofd, *Index 2016 = 100*

Het Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek presenteert een nieuwe studie over de inkomensontwikkeling in Nederland.
WWW.CBS.NL

👍 Leuk   💬 Reactie   ➤ Delen

Michael Meijer heeft een link gedeeld.
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Onze zelfzuchtige regering is verantwoordelijk voor de exploderende kosten in de gezondheidszorg van ons land! Volgens de cijfers gepresenteerd in het nieuwe "Health of Welfare" rapport van het CBS, zal de verzorgingsstaat onder grote druk komen te staan in de komende 5 jaar. Door het falen van de regering zullen we niet langer in staat zijn om de drukkende kosten van gezondheidszorg te dekken. Het is belachelijk dat onze regering niet in staat is om alle Nederlandse burgers toegang te geven tot de gezondheidszorg!

Hier is de link naar het genoemde rapport: http://www.cbs.nl/statistiek/health-of-welfare

👍 Leuk　　💬 Reactie　　➤ Delen

Appendix 2. Items measuring populist attitudes

Items were measured on a 7-point Likert scale (1 *completely disagree,* 7 *completely agree*).

Anti-establishment populist attitudes. (1) The ordinary people instead of politicians should make our most important policy decisions; (2) Politicians in government are corrupt; (3) Politicians make decisions that harm the interests of the ordinary people; (4) The ordinary people should have more influence in political decision making than corporations that only want to make profits.

Exclusionist populist attitudes. (1) Immigrants are threatening the purity of our culture; (2) Immigrants cost our country a lot of money that should rather be invested in our own people; (3) Our borders should be closed for immigrants; (4) Immigrants are responsible for a lot of our nation's problems; (5) Social benefits such as unemployment benefits and health insurance benefits are given to people who don't really deserve it; (6) People who are not originally from our country, have no rights to receive our social benefits.

Identification with ordinary citizens. (1) I feel very warmly towards the Austrian fellow citizens/the Dutch fellow citizens; (2) I care for most other Austrian/Dutch people; (3) I feel a lot of affection for Austria/The Netherlands; (4) I have a strong sense of belonging to Austria/The Netherlands; (5) Being Austrian/Dutch is an important part of my self-identity; (6) Austrian/Dutch citizens have a number of things in common with each other; (7) I am proud to be a citizen of Austria/The Netherlands.

Items measuring manipulation checks

We used the following question for the manipulation check of blame attribution: Could you remember who was deemed responsible for the decline in wages mentioned in the Facebook post? The categories were as follows: the government, immigrants, no one, don't remember.

For the source, the following question was used: Could you remember who posted the Facebook message? The categories were as follows: The statistical bureau, the populist politician, an ordinary person, don't remember. In Table A1, the distribution of scores on the manipulation check items are provided for all experimental conditions.

Table A1. Distribution scores manipulation checks across conditions.

Condition check	Control	Immigrants blame + populist source	Government blame + populist source	Immigrants blame + citizen source	Government blame + citizen source
Government blame	.17	.11	.53	.10	.66
Immigrants blame	.14	.64	.18	.64	.05
Populist source	.00	.89	.83	.02	.02
Citizen source	.03	.04	.01	.83	.89