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# We Are the People and You Are Fake News: A Social Identity Approach to Populist Citizens' False Consensus and Hostile Media Perceptions

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**Abstract**

This study aims to investigate the relationships between citizens' populist attitudes, perceptions of public opinion and perceptions of mainstream news media. Relying on social identity theory as an explanatory framework, this paper argues that populist citizens assume that public opinion is congruent with their own opinion and that mainstream media reporting is hostile toward their own views. To date, only anecdotal evidence suggests that both assumptions are true. The relationships are investigated in a cross-sectional survey with samples drawn from four Western European countries ($N$ = 3,354). Multi-group regression analysis supports our hypotheses: False consensus and hostile media perceptions can clearly be linked to populist attitudes in all four regions under investigation. Moreover, our findings show a gap between hostile media perceptions and congruent public opinion perceptions, which increases with increasing populist attitudes to the point that the persuasive press inference mechanism is annulled.

*Keywords*: populist attitudes, populism, hostile media perceptions, false consensus, social identity theory

# We Are the People and You Are Fake News: A Social Identity Approach to Populist Citizens' False Consensus and Hostile Media Perceptions

Various European and U.S. elections of the past decade illustrate a rather great demand for populism at the citizen level. Populist parties gain a notable share of the vote in many Western countries, and their potential influence on liberal democracy is intensively discussed (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012; Waisbord, 2018). These developments are paralleled by an increase in research devoted to populist attitudes, which reflect the support for populism on the individual level (Schulz et al., 2017). With the general aim to learn more about those who potentially vote for populist parties, studies have collected information on populist citizens' sociodemographics, general attitudes, and voting preferences (e.g., Akkerman, Mudde, & Zaslove, 2014; Rooduijn, 2017; Schulz et al., 2017; van Hauwaert & van Kessel, 2017), as well as about their personality (Bakker, Rooduijn, & Schumacher, 2016), their media preferences (Hameleers, Bos, & Vreese, 2017b) and specific psychological dispositions (Elchardus & Spruyt, 2016; Steenvoorden & Harteveld, 2017). However, quite a lot remains unknown regarding the question of what unites populist voters, especially because most studies are single-country studies that focus on either left- or right-wing populism only (Rooduijn, 2017). Therefore, it is difficult to deduce comprehensive conclusions about the general character of populist citizens.

However, anecdotal evidence points to as yet unstudied characteristics that populist citizens may share. Specifically, news reports about populist politicians and populist citizens suggest that hostile media perceptions and false consensus beliefs could unify those who support populist ideas. For example, media reports document chants of "We are the people" at demonstrations for populist movements as well as attacks against the media by populist actors or their followers, calling them fake news or system media (e.g., Jamieson, 2017; Somaskanda, 2017). Additionally, theoretical work speaks to the possible importance of anti-

media rhetoric (Krämer, forthcoming) and opinion majority claims (Taggart, 2000) for populism at the communicator level. In combination with the observations captured within anecdotal evidence, these theoretical accounts motivate the assumption that populism, hostile media perceptions, and false consensus beliefs can also be connected at the citizen level.

This article therefore focuses on the following three research questions. First, are hostile media perceptions and congruent public opinion perception constant companions of populist attitudes, or does anecdotal evidence distort the impression of the populist conception of these entities? Second, if these relations are systematic, do they also travel across country borders? Third, how can theory account for a co-occurrence of populist attitudes, hostile media perceptions and false consensus beliefs? This article is devoted to developing responses to all three questions. While the last question will be addressed on a theoretical level, the first and second question will undergo empirical testing.

To find a theoretical explanation for the posited relationships between populist attitudes, congruent public opinion beliefs, and hostile media perceptions, this article builds on a social identity approach to populist attitudes. Specifically, we will discuss the proposed relations as consequences of identification with the in-group of the people. Thereby, we develop a theoretical framework that relies on a large body of studies dedicated to social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), false consensus (Ross, Greene, & House, 1977) and hostile media perceptions (Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985). Moreover, we will also draw on previous research devoted to populist communication (e.g., Reinemann, Aalberg, Esser, Strömbäck, & Vreese, 2017), which is discussed as the provider of cues regarding the specific understanding of the in-group and out-group(s).

With this approach, we aim to integrate the investigation of populist attitudes into research that is at the core of communication science. Interestingly, for example, our assumptions contrast findings regarding the persuasive press inference. While several studies show

that public opinion is often inferred from media tone perceptions as a function of beliefs in media effects on others (cf., Gunther, 1998; Gunther & Chia, 2001), we argue below that this mechanism might not be applicable for populist citizens. We will use the social identity approach to populist attitudes to explain this potentially unique relationship between hostile media perceptions and false consensus beliefs in the case of populist citizens.

Research on both false consensus and hostile media perceptions has identified a large number of critical consequences that these perceptions may have for liberal democracies. For example, hostile media perceptions relate to the unwillingness to accept democratic decisions (Tsfati & Cohen, 2005), increased minority alienation (Tsfati, 2007), decreased political participation (Feldman, Hart, Leiserowitz, Maibach, & Roser-Renouf, 2015; Moy, Torres, Tanaka, & McCluskey, 2005), acceptance of incivility (Post, 2017), and corrective actions that may result in opinion polarization (Rojas, 2010). The most profound consequence of false consensus effects may be that members of groups that rely on false consensus have a stronger willingness to express their own opinions (Glynn, Hayes, & Shanahan, 1997; Matthes, Knoll & Sikorski, 2018). This may make their group appear stronger in number than it actually is, which has respective implications for public opinion formation processes (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). If hostile media and false consensus perceptions co-occur with populist attitudes, their potential threat to liberal democracy could multiply.

To address the two empirical aims mentioned above, we rely on survey data gathered in four European greater regions: Berlin, Zurich, Paris, and London, as well as their respective surrounding rural areas. Populist attitudes are treated as a predictor for opinion and media perceptions in a multi-group regression analysis. Our correlational findings demonstrate that the hypothesized perceptual pattern is stable in all four countries: as a person's populist attitudes strengthen, the public opinion climate is perceived to be more congruent with their own

opinion and the mass media's tone is perceived to be more incongruent with their own opinion. Moreover, we established evidence for a gap between hostile media and congruent public opinion perceptions that increases with increasing populist attitudes to the extent that the persuasive press inference mechanism is annulled for those with strong populist attitudes. The social identity framework for populist citizens' perceptions of media and public opinion offers ideas for underlying psychological mechanisms that could cause these perceptions. In the following, this approach will be introduced.

## A Social Identity Approach to Populism

Researchers have argued that populism (Krämer, 2014; Reinemann et al., 2017), hostile media perceptions (Hartmann & Tanis, 2013; Reid, 2012) and public opinion perceptions (e.g., Mullen, Dovidio, Johnson, & Copper, 1992) are related to social categorization and social identity. Hence, social identity theory provides a fruitful framework within which links between populist attitudes, public opinion and media perceptions can be established.

Social identity and self-categorization theories base their argument on the human need for a positive social identity (e.g., Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, & Flament, 1971; cf., Turner, 2000). Social identity accompanies personal identity as components of the human self-concept and defines the self as a member of different social groups. Within the process of social categorization, individuals identify with different groups. If a specific group membership is made salient, the desire to achieve, maintain or enhance a positive value linked to this group membership is triggered (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). This process involves social comparisons that serve to identify in-group superiority over respective out-groups. Specifically, the salience of a group membership sets the individual's perceptions to accentuate intragroup similarities regarding positive attributes that the in-group shares (in-group favoritism) and to emphasize in-

tergroup differences regarding negative attributes that the out-group shares (out-group discrimination) (Kelly, 1989; Rubin & Badea, 2007; Turner, 2000; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987).

Central to the process of social categorization is the mechanism of depersonalization. When following group prototypes, individuals no longer perceive people as distinctive individuals but as better or worse approximations of the group prototype. The perception of others and the perception of the self are depersonalized. Depersonalization has a notable effect on the self, as it causes "thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and behavior to conform to [the] prototype of the in-group" (Hogg & Reid, 2006, p. 10). Salient social categorizations—the offer of social categories to which one can adhere—causes these social identity mechanisms to unroll. In the following, we will link insights from research on populism to the ideas of social identity theory to show that populism is just this kind of offer.

**Social Categories Established by Populism**

This article follows an ideational approach to populism that has been strongly applied in the fields of political science (e.g., van Kessel, 2015) and communication science (e.g., Aalberg, Esser, Reinemann, Strömbäck, & Vreese, 2017; Wirth et al., 2016). According to this approach, populism is understood as a thin political ideology. This ideology understands society to be split into two homogeneous groups: the pure people and the corrupt elite. The former is assumed to be defrauded by the latter in that the latter does not follow the principle of popular sovereignty as the ideology indicates it should (Mudde, 2004). Populism can develop into a thick ideology (e.g., right-wing or left-wing populism) as soon as full ideologies such as fascism or socialism are added to it (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2015).

However, independent of how the ideology is enriched, the antagonistic relation between the people and the political elite always is a key element of populism. This is acknowledged by different definitions of or operationalization approaches to populism (e.g., Canovan,

1981; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; March, 2017; Müller, 2016; Reinemann et al., 2017; Weyland, 2001). This distinction is also particularly relevant for the upcoming argument.

The antagonism between the people and the elite is often illustrated by the phrase 'us versus them'. Thereby, the 'us' stands for the pure people and the likeminded, such as the populist politician, i.e., the in-group. 'Them' refers to out-groups, most notably, the political elite currently running the government, but minorities such as immigrants or religious groups are also often named in this respect (e.g., Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Wirth et al., 2016). The populist ideology thus sketches a very definite social structure that consists of merely two groups: one that is good and one that is bad (also "Manichean outlook" of populism; e.g., Mudde, 2004, p. 544). With that, populism follows a form of "identity politics" (Müller, 2016, p. 3): It offers clear social categories along which self-categorization can unfold.

For populism to exert this potential, its ideas must be publicly diffused. The means for this diffusion is populist communication, which is employed mainly by populist political actors (e.g., Ernst, Engesser, Büchel, Blassnig, & Esser, 2017) but also occurs within media coverage (Krämer, 2014). Populist communication is defined as a set of features or elements of communicative messages that resonate with the populist ideology. Its core messages are therefore related to the people, to the political elite, and to popular sovereignty (March, 2017; Reinemann et al., 2017; Wirth et al., 2016). They directly mirror the thin definition of the populist ideology and together promote the populist division of society: the social categories of the good people and the evil political elite. As populism is defined to be adaptable to other concepts, we argue that populist communication must also be addressed as an extendable concept. For example, in order to describe more distinguished shapes of populism, it might seem useful to regard exclusionist messages (cf., Reinemann et al., 2017, p. 24), opinion majority claims (cf., Taggart, 2000), and anti-media rhetoric (cf., Krämer, forthcoming) as additional elements of populist communication. This idea will be further addressed below.

**Populist Attitudes and the Identification to the In-Group of the People**

Citizens who support the core ideas of populism are identified as those who hold populist attitudes (Akkerman et al., 2014). More specifically, they hold anti-elitist attitudes, believe in a homogeneous and virtuous people and show a high demand for popular sovereignty (Schulz et al., 2017). They have internalized the Manichean divide of society that is promoted within populism and self-categorize as group members of the people. Accordingly, they view the political elite as malicious and the people as a virtuous unity and feel that they belong to the latter. Prior research has shown that populist attitudes can be reinforced by the core messages of populist communication (Müller et al., 2017). Moreover, repeated exposure to media representations of the societal divide promoted by populism is argued to trigger identification with the in-group of the people and foster the "development of schema-based in-group or out-group bias in the perception and evaluation of social phenomena" (Krämer, 2014, p. 55).

To date, the literature on populism still lacks a profound discussion of the potential consequences of identification to the in-group of the people—that is, to what degree this specific identification can stimulate generalized attitudes, biased perceptions or comprehensive categorizations regarding diverse societal entities. In this context, several authors have referred to the term "populist worldview" or have described populism as a "mental map" to express the idea that populist attitudes do not come alone but their internalization by the individual has consequences for the perception and comprehension of political and social reality (Elchardus & Spruyt, 2016; Hameleers, Bos, & Vreese, 2015; Hawkins, 2010; Krämer, 2014; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2015).

By tracing populist citizens' perceptions of public opinion and the media, we will investigate elements of this populist worldview in greater detail. We argue that false consensus and perceptions of a hostile media follow group psychological mechanisms triggered by an identification to the people. Moreover, populist communication is argued to specify in-group

and out-group prototypes. Specifically, opinion majority claims and anti-media rhetoric employed by populist leaders are discussed to accentuate in-group and out-group characteristics. Drawing on the approaches of false consensus and the hostile media effect we outline below how the interplay of populist cues and in-group identification with the people makes way for these biased perceptions to unfold.

## We Are the People! Populist Attitudes and False Consensus Perceptions

The concept of the people is central to populism (Taggart, 2000). According to the populist ideology, the people is a homogeneous and virtuous group, a coherent entity of a generally good character that shares the same values and interests (Mudde, 2004; Wirth et al., 2016). By defining the people as such, populism constructs a homogeneous in-group to which individuals can adhere. However, this alone does not explain why individuals who identify with the group of the people should project their own opinion onto the whole population and believe that their opinion has a majority status, as anecdotal evidence currently suggests.

**Definition of the in-group in populism.** We argue that opinion majority claims, as an additional feature of populist communication, contribute to this perceptual bias. In general, an in-group's self-understanding is promoted by prototypical in-group members (Hogg & Reid, 2006; Mols, 2012; Reicher & Hopkins, 1996). To populism, these are the "charismatic leaders" (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008, p. 5). In their reference to the people, they spread an understanding of the people as being virtuous and homogeneous. This claim to people-centrism has been identified as a fundamental element of populist communication (Bos, van der Brug, & Vreese, 2010; Reinemann et al., 2017; Rooduijn, 2014; Wirth et al., 2016).

However, the populist narrative is not limited to this message alone. The populist actor further defines the people as a "silent majority" (cf., Taggart, 2000, p. 92) whose opinions are not heard but suppressed by the ruling political elite. We argue that these majority cues to a more fine-grained self-understanding of the people are easily internalized by those who have

identified as in-group members of the people. This argument is supported by the notion that individuals "learn their biases" from role models (Wilder, 1986, p. 292). Indeed, the identification with a group increases the persuasiveness of attitudes or group norms promoted by in-group leaders. A reason for this is the individual motivation to accord behavior and attitudes with those of other, especially prototypical, in-group members through the process of depersonalization (Hogg & Reid, 2006). Therefore, if a person self-categorizes as a member of the people, he or she should be more likely to adopt populist opinion majority claims and accordingly believe in the numerical superiority of the own group.

**False consensus as a response to in-group threat.** In general, research has shown that individuals very quickly overrate congruency of their own opinions with a majority (see research on false consensus, e.g., Ross et al., 1977; projection hypothesis, e.g., Holmes, 1968; looking glass perception, e.g., Fields & Schuman, 1976). This distortion has a functional value for the individual in that humans generally like to be right (Festinger, 1954). Certainty regarding the correctness of one's own attitudes increases when they are seen to be shared by others (Holtz & Miller, 1985). False consensus is therefore a means by which "one can be reassured of the normality and appropriateness of one's positions" (Hoorens, 1993, p. 130).

While humans generally tend to believe that others share their views, different circumstances have been identified under which this bias is even more likely to occur. For example, false consensus perceptions are elicited by attitude strength (Wojcieszak & Price, 2009) or by low perceived in-group status. Regarding the latter, members of groups with minority status regard themselves as being in the unbearable position of their opinions being under attack by stronger out-groups. In this situation, false consensus helps members of low-status groups to self-enhance: it fosters the feeling of in-group strength and allows group members to understand themselves as part of a cohesive social whole (see also in-group homogeneity effect; Kelly, 1989; Lee & Ottati, 1995). As a consequence, opinions held by the own group appear

more powerful to in-group members (Spears, van der Pligt, & Eiser, 1985). Finally, individuals who are part of minority groups also tend to overestimate consensus for their position out of a need for social support, while those with majority positions rather underestimate consensus (Marks & Miller, 1987; Sanders & Mullen, 1983).

According to the populist narrative, the people is also a group under threat by the evil political elite in that it is constantly suppressed with no access to power. In comparison to the political elite, the people's group status is thus low on the dimension of power. Furthermore, many opinions held by populist actors and parties, for instance those regarding issues such as migration or homosexuality, are often delegitimized as being immoral, reactionary, politically incorrect, or extreme by other actors in the public debate (Herkman, 2015; Koopmans & Muis, 2009; Taggart, 2002). Therefore, there is no doubt that populist standpoints are under attack. Moreover, research on populist attitudes shows that populist citizens hold high levels of collective relative deprivation (Elchardus & Spruyt, 2016; Hameleers et al., 2017b). This feeling results from the perception of belonging to a group with low status. Against this background, individuals who have strongly internalized this vision of the people could be prone to projecting their own opinion onto others in order to strengthen their in-group's status and confirm their impression of having legitimate yet suppressed positions.

Accordingly, the in-group of the people fits a precondition of false consensus perceptions regarding the feeling of being under threat. Thus, in addition to the influence of populist majority claims, these psychological mechanisms also likely have the potential to explain false consensus perceptions by populist citizens. We thus formally hypothesize the following:

H1: As a person's populist attitudes become stronger, he or she becomes more likely to perceive public opinion as congruent with his or her own standpoint.

**You Are Fake News! Populist Attitudes and Hostile Media Perceptions**

The relevant out-group to thin populism is the political elite, that is, the politicians currently running the government. Whether on national or supranational level, the political elite is blamed for all types of problems and—most of all—is blamed for depriving the people in that they ignore its will. However, depending on the specific form of populism, other societal actors with an elitist status are also construed as a burden to the people. For instance, intellectuals, administrations (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007), or, as predominant within left-wing populism, the wealthy (Wirz, 2018) are often defined to be accomplices of the establishment politicians. Another actor against whom populist actors vent their anger on is the mass media. Donald Trump's reproach to CNN, calling the outlet 'fake news', can serve as a primary example of hostile media attitudes expressed by a populist actor (Jamieson, 2017). In the following, we will discuss how accusations such as these can contribute to a perception of the mass media as being an out-group to the people. Afterwards, we will rely on research devoted to the hostile media effect and discuss how these elite cues on media bias may facilitate self-categorization processes that further pave the way toward hostile media perceptions.

**Definition of the out-group in populism.** The attribution of blame to elites is another core element of populist communication (Hameleers, Bos & de Vreese, 2017a, 2017c). Judged from a self-categorization perspective, this delineation of out-groups is central to the definition of the in-group (Turner et al., 1987). Moreover, contrasts between in-group and out-groups are emphasized when out-groups are depersonalized and seen as homogeneous (Wilder, 1984). For populist communication to be successful, the creation of despicable out-groups is thus as important as the accentuation of appealing features of the in-group.

The mainstream media are not randomly chosen by the populist leader as an opponent to the people. Theoretical work on populism offers clear ideas on where the mainstream media stand within populisms' relational network. The mainstream media can be understood as a specific interpretation of the elite (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007) and specifically, as a conspiring

agent of the established politicians (Mazzoleni, 2003). The media are blamed for biased reporting in favor of the political elite and are reproached for not fulfilling their democratic function as the Fourth Estate. This perspective on the media—in which they are considered a part of an elite conspiracy—has been coined "anti-media populism" (Krämer, forthcoming).

To the best of our knowledge, only two empirical studies to date investigate anti-media populism on the content level. In an analysis of Belgian political parties' broadcasts, Jagers and Walgrave showed that only the "all-out populist party" (2007, p. 331), Vlaams Blok, led an anti-media discourse, whereas other parties did not engage in such criticism. Additionally, Holt (2016) recorded representatives from Swedish alternative media expressing the deep conviction that the mainstream media lie and have joined forces with the elite.

With messages of this type, populist actors declare the mainstream media to be a dangerous out-group to the people. Importantly, this declaration is all-encompassing, as it includes all mainstream media, not only particular outlets. The media as an institution form a group from which one must dissociate in order to keep one's own social identity positive. Audience members who self-categorize as members of the people should easily internalize this additional message and understand it as a view that is generally held by the in-group (cf., Hogg & Reid, 2006). Accordingly, citizens with populist attitudes should categorize the media in general as part of their out-group. This categorization can have significant effects on how content spread by these media is perceived. Research devoted to the hostile media effect describes and investigates precisely such mechanisms.

**Hostile media perceptions as a response to in-group threat.** According to this line of research, strong partisans tend to perceive media reports that address issues of personal importance as hostile (Vallone et al., 1985). A self-categorization explanation for this effect was introduced by Reid (2012), who showed that hostile media perceptions occur only if partisan identities are salient and when the message source belongs to the out-group. This effect is

stronger as individuals' identification with the in-group becomes stronger (Arpan & Raney, 2003). In addition, low in-group status, especially if perceived as being illegitimate, was found to amplify hostile media perceptions (Hartmann & Tanis, 2013). Following this line of research, low status is already threatening per se, and accordingly, members of low-status groups are especially sensitive to any additional threat imposed, for example, by media coverage. Hostile media perceptions are also reinforced by individuals' belief in strong influences of media messages on others (Gunther & Storey, 2003). In the context of the hostile media effect, especially high-reach media are presumed to have the ability to shape public opinion in a direction that is favorable to the out-group, which would pose a clear threat to the status of the in-group (Hartmann & Tanis, 2013).

Taken together, there are at least four reasons why populist citizens likely show hostile media perceptions. First, anti-media rhetoric employed by populist actors declares the mainstream media to be an out-group to the people; this expression could serve as a cue to those who have internalized the populist ideology and turn them into highly skeptical consumers of mainstream news. Second, the populist identity could be made salient as soon as a news item is devoted to mainstream political affairs, independent of particular political issues, because populism is directed against the political establishment in general. Individuals with strong populist attitudes should thus react very sensitively to any news content that features established political actors. Third, the perceived low political status of populist citizens could further prompt their perceptions of the mass media in a hostile direction. Hostile media perceptions particularly result if the low in-group status is perceived to be illegitimate, which should be—as outlined above—the case among populist citizens. Fourth, the declared enemy of the people is high-reach media outlets what could increase the presumed influence of these media on others. The threat that these media pose should accordingly be perceived as quite momentous, and hence, hostile media perceptions should increase.

H2: As a person's populist attitudes strengthen, he or she becomes more likely to perceive the mainstream media's reporting as incongruent with his or her own standpoint.

**The Gap between Perceived Media Tone and Public Opinion**

With the argument above, we postulate that as a person's populist attitudes strengthen, that person will more strongly perceive public opinion to be congruent and the media to be incongruent with his or her own standpoint. In combination, both these predictions describe a gap between congruent public opinion perceptions and hostile media perceptions that should grow with increasing populist attitudes.

The general perceptual pattern described by this gap is in line with findings presented by a series of studies on individual media and public opinion perceptions. It was demonstrated several times that strong partisans show a strong positive relationship between their own opinion and perceived public opinion, which is explained by projection, as well as a strong negative relationship between their own opinion and perceived media opinion, which is explained by hostile media perceptions (e.g., Gunther & Chia, 2001; Gunther & Christen, 2002; Gunther, Christen, Liebhart, & Chia, 2001). In addition, these studies revealed a persuasive press inference, which describes the individual tendency to infer public opinion from the perceived media tone as a function of beliefs in media effects on others (Gunther, 1998). While the persuasive press inference did not disband the projection of one's own opinion onto public opinion, it offset projection at least to some extent (cf., Gunther & Christen, 2002).

As we suggest an increasing gap between perceived congruent public opinion on one hand and perceived incongruent media on the other, we also imply that the persuasive press inference might be weaker (if not annulled) among populist citizens. According to the social identity approach followed in this article, an explanation for this phenomenon could lie in populist citizens' conception of the people as an in-group. This in-group is, following the

populist narrative, very homogeneous and positively charged, which could translate into exceptionally strong perceived communalities with the people among those that identify with this group. Correspondingly, research on presumed media effects on others has demonstrated a social distance corollary: as an individual perceives a group of others to be more similar to the self, this group will be perceived as less susceptible to media influences (cf. Duck, Hogg & Terry, 1995; Reid & Hogg, 2005; for a meta-analysis, see Sun, Pan, & Shen, 2008). Moreover, populism sketches the people as a very intelligent group that acts according to common sense (Taggart, 2000). Thus, individuals who regard the people as their in-group should be motivated to believe in weak media effects on this group as a function of perceived similarities and because of the group's intelligence, which should protect the group from simply believing the disinformation spread by the manipulative enemy. For these reasons, the persuasive press inference mechanism is likely weaker for populist citizens, which should lead the gap between hostile media and congruent public opinion perceptions to widen rather than to shrink. We therefore assume the following:

H3: As a person's populist attitudes strengthen, the difference between perceptions of congruent public opinion and of a hostile media increases.

Finally, we would like to determine whether the proposed relations travel across borders—that is, if false consensus and hostile media perceptions can be connected to populist attitudes in different countries. This research question will be approached using cross-country comparisons between four metropolitan regions. Specifically, we will compare the relation of populist attitudes, media and opinion perceptions in Berlin, Zurich, London and Paris. If the social psychological mechanisms are at work as proposed above, populist citizens in the chosen regions will likely classify public opinion and the mass media in the same ways, particularly because populist communication was demonstrated to play an important and influential role in the mediated political discourse in these four countries (Müller et al., 2017).

RQ1: Do the proposed relationships between populist attitudes, public opinion perceptions and media perceptions reflect general perceptual patterns that are employed by populist citizens in different countries?

## Method

### Data

This study is a secondary data analysis that relies mainly on the second wave of a two-wave panel survey fielded in April 2014 (1st wave) and March 2015 (2nd wave). The survey was conducted by a market research institute, and respondents were recruited from an online access panel following a quota procedure regarding sex and age. Data were gathered in four European cities and their surrounding rural areas: Berlin and Brandenburg; Germany ($N$ = 640); Paris and Île-de-France, France ($N$ = 640); Zurich and canton of Zurich, Switzerland ($N$ = 1250); and London and Buckinghamshire, United Kingdom ($N$ = 824). Complete data were obtained for 3,354 participants. Completion rates for the first panel wave range between 87.5 percent (Paris) and 92.8 percent (Switzerland). Due to panel mortality, which ranged between 37% in Zurich and 60% in Paris, the empirical distributions of age and sex slightly deviate from population data (Berlin: $M_{age}$ = 45.9, $SD$ = 13.1, 55% female; Paris: $M_{age}$ = 47.7, $SD$ = 13.1, 61.9% female; Zurich: $M_{age}$ = 51.8, $SD$ = 13.8, 47.2% female; London: $M_{age}$ = 51.5, $SD$ = 13.2, 41.6% female). Thus, influences of age and sex were controlled for in all analyses.

### Measures

**Public opinion perceptions.** Public opinion perceptions were measured via three items for which participants had to indicate how strongly they perceive their own opinion about a country's politics to be shared by others. Items did not focus on opinions toward a specific policy or person but asked for opinions regarding a country's politics in general. This approach was chosen because the populist ideology does not blame the political elite for a failure regarding a specific political issue but expresses a general criticism of all politics run

by the political elite. Values ranged from 1 (*do not agree at all*) to 5 (*agree completely*). Thus, high scores indicate that a person believes public opinion to correspond to personal views regarding a country's politics in general, whereas a low score indicates the opposite. The items were sufficiently reliable (Cronbach's Alpha = .84), allowing for the computation of a mean index. This index was normally distributed in all four country subsets ($M_{Berlin}$ = 3.17; $SD$ = 0.82; $M_{Paris}$ = 3.18; $SD$ = 0.89; $M_{Zurich}$ = 2.99; $SD$ = 0.79; $M_{London}$ = 3.15; $SD$ = 0.84; see Table A1 and A2 in the Online Appendix for a complete measurement report).

**Media perceptions.** The perceptions of the degree of congruency or incongruence between the mainstream media's reporting and one's own opinion was measured via 4 items ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The measurement was taken from Matthes (2012, see also Eveland & Shah, 2003; Hwang, Pan, & Sun, 2008) and adapted to the context of our study. Parallel to how the public opinion measurement was established, we asked for an overall evaluation of the media coverage regarding a country's politics and not regarding specific issues. Importantly, the measurement tapped for opinion hostile media perceptions including the ego-perspective, which enables us to directly detect whether our respondents feel that the media are on their side (i.e., support their own opinion) or not. The measures are thus very adequate for the social identity approach to populist attitudes and populist perceptions that we follow within this article. The four items were consistent to a satisfactory degree (Cronbach's Alpha = .84), and a mean index was computed. To simplify the interpretation of the results, we reversed the index so that high values yield a congruent media perception (as high values on the public opinion perception measure also indicate opinion congruent perceptions) and low values indicate incongruent media perceptions ($M_{Berlin}$ = 2.64; $SD$ = 0.89; $M_{Paris}$ = 2.50; $SD$ = 0.73; $M_{Zurich}$ = 2.94; $SD$ = 0.84; $M_{London}$ = 2.57; $SD$ = 0.79; see Table A1 and A2 in the Online Appendix for a complete measurement report).

**Perceptual gap.** To depict the perceptual gap between media perceptions and public opinion perceptions, we computed a third dependent variable as a difference score for public opinion perceptions and media perceptions. Media perception scores were subtracted from public opinion perception scores. As both original variables ranged from 1 to 5, values of the gap variable range from -4 to +4. A score of -4 occurs if a person perceives public opinion to strongly diverge from the personal view (score of 1 on the public opinion variable) and if that person simultaneously perceives the media to report very much in line with his or her personal view (score of 5 on the media perception variable). A score of +4 occurs if a person perceives public opinion to correspond to the personal view (score of 5 for the public opinion variable) and if that person simultaneously perceives the media to report very incongruently with his or her personal view (score of 1 for the media perception variable). In both cases, the difference in perceptions of the media and public opinion will be at its maximum. Coming from both ends of the scale, the perceptual gap decreases toward the scale midpoint of 0. A score of 0 indicates that a person does not perceive a difference between how media reporting leans and how public opinion leans with reference to his or her own opinion. ($M_{Berlin} = 0.53$; $SD$=1.35; $M_{Paris} = 0.69$; $SD = 1.25$; $M_{Zurich} = 0.05$; $SD = 1.2$; $M_{London} = 0.57$; $SD = 1.21$).

**Populist attitudes.** Populist attitudes were measured using a 12-item scale that was introduced by Schulz et al. (2017). In sets of four items, the scale depicts three facets of populist attitudes: anti-establishment, popular sovereignty, and the homogeneity and virtuousness of the people. Survey participants rated all items using 5-point Likert scales ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*), which are reflected by a higher-order factor of populist attitudes. The z-scores of that higher-order factor were used for the analyses (see Table A1 and A2 in the Online Appendix for a complete measurement report).

**Controls.** We included political orientation, political extremity, political interest, age, sex, and education as controls in our analyses. In the countries under investigation, the strongest populist force comes from the right of the political spectrum, with the Alternative for Germany in Germany, the Front National in France, the Swiss People's Party in Switzerland and the UK Independence Party in Great Britain (van Kessel, 2015). We therefore expect right-wing political orientation, measured via a single item scaled from 1 (*left*) to 11 (*right*), to better relate to our outcome variables than left-wing political orientation. Furthermore, as research has shown that strong attitudes or involvement enhance false consensus (Wojcieszak & Price, 2009) and hostile media effects (Vallone et al., 1985), we included political extremity as a control to rule out the possibility that relationships between populist attitudes and our dependent variables are due only to strong populist attitudes. To investigate the role of political extremity, we recoded the political orientation measure so that its outer ends now indicate political extremity (value 6), while its former midpoint now represents moderate political attitudes (value 1). Additionally, political interest could function as involvement and reinforce both hostile media perceptions and congruent public opinion perceptions. Hence, this variable, measured via a single item from 1 (*not at all interested*) to 5 (*very interested*) was also inserted. These controls, as well as age, sex, and education, were added to all models in order to assess the relative strength of the relationship between populist attitudes and the respective outcome variables and to control for bias due to samples that are not fully representative (see Table A2 in the Online Appendix for a complete measurement report and Table A3 for bivariate correlations between all variables).

## Analyses

First, we conducted a principle axis factor analysis (PAF) to check whether populist attitudes can be empirically distinguished from public opinion and media perceptions. Sec-

ond, we run three multi-group regression analyses using the 1.1-12 version of the lmr4-package for R, which can be used to fit linear mixed-effects models (Bates, Mächler, Bolker, & Walker, 2015). The three different outcome variables were regressed onto the same predictor variables within varying-intercept models (Gelman & Hill, 2009). Slopes were fixed to take into account that respondents are nested within different countries. To determine whether the proposed relations are equal in the regions under investigation, we freed the slopes for populist attitudes and compared this model to the varying-intercept model.

## Results

Within a preparatory analysis 19 items (3 on opinion perceptions, 4 on media perceptions, and 12 measuring populist attitudes) were entered into a PAF using the promax rotation method. The analysis clearly demonstrates that the relevant constructs are empirically distinct both across and within the separate regions (see Table A1 in the Online Appendix).

The first multi-group regression is run with public opinion perceptions as an outcome in order to test for H1. The results are summarized in Table 1. Populist attitudes are significantly—and in this case, positively—related to congruent public opinion perceptions ($\beta = .31$; $p < .001$). Accordingly, as a person holds stronger populist attitudes, that person will more strongly perceive public opinion to be in line with his or her own opinion. This result confirms H1. In addition, political orientation, education, and sex are found to significantly relate to public opinion perceptions. The results show that congruent public opinion perceptions are also explained by female sex ($\beta = -.05$; $p < .001$), low education ($\beta = -.07$; $p < .001$) and, to a comparably strong degree, by right-wing political orientation ($\beta = .24$; $p < .001$). As a person leans more strongly toward the political right, that person will more strongly perceive public opinion to be congruent with his or her own opinion.

[Table 1 here]

Our second hypothesis stated that populist citizens perceive the media reporting to be hostile toward their own opinion. Table 1 shows that this hypothesis is confirmed. We find a strong negative and significant relation between populist attitudes and media perceptions. That is, as a person holds stronger populist attitudes, that person will perceive the media to be less congruent ($\beta = -.32$; $p < .001$). Political interest ($\beta = -.04$; $p < .05$) and political orientation ($\beta = -.04$; $p < .05$) also proved to be significant predictors of media perceptions.

Our final hypothesis investigated the gap variable, that is, the difference score between media perceptions and opinion perceptions as an outcome. The hypothesis said that the difference in perceiving the media as incongruent toward one's own standpoint and perceiving public opinion to be congruent to one's own standpoint is greatest for those with strong populist attitudes. The results are summarized in Table 1. This hypothesis is also confirmed, with populist attitudes being the strongest predictor for the gap variable ($\beta = .41$; $p < .001$). As a person more strongly supports populist ideas, his or her evaluations of media and public opinion will diverge more. Thus, to very populist citizens, these two entities are considered to be in strong opposition.[1] After populist attitudes, political orientation is again the second

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[1] The results presented so far point to the question of whether populist citizens still infer public opinion from their perceived media tone perceptions, as presumed by research on the persuasive press inference (cf. Gunther & Chia, 2001). If social identity mechanisms drive hostile media tone perceptions and congruent public opinion perceptions, then maybe the persuasive press inference is switched off among populist citizens. In order to offer a test for this particular question, we run a mediation analysis. The analysis confirms the results of H1 and H2 and shows no significant relation between media perceptions and public opinion perceptions. This finding indicates that indeed, populist citizens do not seem to make persuasive press inferences (see Online Appendix Table A4 for detailed results).

strongest predictor included in this analysis (β = .18; $p < .001$). Furthermore, low education (β = -.05; $p < .01$) and stronger political interest (β = .05; $p < .01$) are related to the gap as well.

For all three outcome variables, we find that populist attitudes are the strongest predictor.[2] As a person more strongly supports populist ideas, he or she more strongly perceives the media's reporting as hostile toward his or her personal standpoint and more strongly perceives the public opinion to be in line with his or her own standpoint. Following populist attitudes, right-wing political orientation holds the next greatest share of explained variance for media perceptions, public opinion perceptions, and the gap. This can be connected to the dominance of right-wing populist forces in the regions under investigation (van Kessel, 2015). However, it is remarkable that populist attitudes, which represent only the core of the populist ideology and depict no tendency toward either the political left or the political right, explain the greatest share of variance in public opinion and media perceptions. To ascertain whether the observed relationships are not caused merely by populist citizens' strong attitudes, political extremity was included as a control. Yet, political extremity did not relate to any of the three outcome variables (Table 1).[3]

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[2] This remains true if we use indicators for populist attitudes that no longer contain the dimension that is most conceptually similar to the respective outcome. For the first model, we omitted anti-elitist attitudes so that only the homogeneity and the popular sovereignty dimensions account for variance in media perceptions. For the second model, we excluded the homogeneity dimension so that only anti-establishment and popular sovereignty were linked to public opinion perceptions. In both cases, the results remain almost completely equal. Most importantly, the coefficients for populist attitudes remain by far the strongest by comparison.

[3] To better evaluate the influence of political extremity we run all models including political extremity but excluding populist attitudes. The results show that political extremity

Finally, we freed the slopes for populist attitudes in the model that uses the gap variable as an outcome to determine whether the detected perceptual patterns are equal in all four regions under investigation (RQ 1). The results show that random effects for populist attitudes are very similar in strength and range between 1.12 in Paris to 1.37 in Berlin. Thus, populist attitudes remain the strongest predictor for the gap variable in all four country samples. The comparison of the varying-intercept model with the varying-intercept varying-slope model via Akaike's information criterion reveals no notable changes (Table 1).[4] Hence, we find the detected populist perceptual patterns are parallel in the four regions.

## Discussion

Across Europe, populist parties are gaining influence. Their supporters have filled the streets and online comment forums, claiming to hold majority status and behaving in a hostile fashion—in words and actions—toward politicians and the media. So far, no studies have investigated whether these observations are systematic, that is, whether anti-media attitudes and opinion majority beliefs can be empirically linked to populist attitudes. This study set out to provide an extensive theoretical framework and empirical evidence of a relationship between populist attitudes, false consensus and hostile media perceptions in four countries.

We find clear systematic patterns. First, as a person's populist attitudes strengthen, he or she is more likely to sense a similarity between his or her own opinion and public opinion. Second, a person's perceptions of the media turn increasingly hostile as his or her populist attitudes strengthen. Moreover, the difference in perceiving public opinion to be congruent with

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exerts a significant influence on hostile media perceptions when populist attitudes are excluded ($b$ = -0.02; $t(3354)$ = -2.28; $p$ <.05) but still political extremity does not relate to the other two outcome variables (see also the bivariate correlations in Table A3).

[4] This is also the case for model comparisons of the other two models.

one's own standpoint and perceiving the media to be hostile increases with increasing populist attitudes. This pattern was demonstrated in all four country samples.

These results and the social identity framework for populist attitudes developed in this article can help us to better understand populist citizens and the social dynamics connected to populism and populist communication. As noted by Rooduijn (2017), the extant literature on populist attitudes lacks evidence about commonalities among populist citizens since most studies have been set in single countries and have focused on either left- or right-wing populist attitudes. By applying a measurement for populist attitudes that traces support to the thin ideology of populism and that links this measure to media and public opinion perceptions in four countries, we demonstrated that hostile media perceptions and false consensus perceptions are unifying characteristics of populist citizens. These perceptions are potentially driven by social identity mechanisms, as suggested by our theoretical analysis.

Additionally, our findings contribute to basic communication research. As shown by our analysis, the persuasive press inference mechanism seems to be annulled if hostile media perceptions and congruent public opinion perceptions are each driven by populist attitudes. We argued that this finding might be connected to the fact that the people, who constitute public opinion, are conceived of as the in-group by populist citizens and the in-group is seen as less susceptible to media messages (cf. Reid & Hogg, 2005). However, this finding does not imply that populist citizens do not generally make persuasive press inferences. Conversely, populist citizens might well infer opinions of others from perceived mediated opinions, but only if those others are not the people (i.e., the in-group). Clearly, further research is needed to learn more about populist citizens' beliefs in media effects on others.

**Limitations and Future Research**

Naturally, this study has limitations, and the findings must be read in light of these shortcomings. First, the social identity mechanisms that were proposed to underlie the observed relations were not tested in this study. Future research should gather empirical information about populist communication that refers to the people as the majority or to the media as agents of the political elite. Media effects studies should test how such messages affect citizens' public opinion and media perceptions through the process of in-group identification. As long as these avenues are not pursued, the social identity approach to populist attitudes and its consequences as outlined herein will remain only a possible explanation for the identified perceptual patterns. Furthermore, for this exploration, we had to rely on cross-sectional data and no question of causality can hence be approached. Future research will have to follow up on the ideas presented in this article with either longitudinal or experimental designs in order to detect eventual causalities between populist attitudes, hostile media and false consensus perceptions, as well as the relationships between these factors and their assumed predictors: exposure to populist communication and identification with the people.

Moreover, clarification is needed regarding the psychological foundations of demand-side populism. Within this article, we have inter alia referred to this as a mental map or worldview without fully resolving what these concepts are psychologically. We assume that—in the broadest sense—the populist worldview serves as a cognitive and affective framework that influences how incoming information about different societal entities is processed. This study has identified hostile media perceptions and opinion majority beliefs as elements of this worldview, however, further conceptual efforts are needed to carve out the concepts specificities and borders.

Further limitations concern our sample. The survey was run in four Western European regions. In all these countries, populism is strongly linked to the political right. The observed patterns should therefore also be investigated in countries where the dominant populist force

comes from the political left. If the concept of thin populism has empirical value, populist citizens should show the same perceptual patterns, regardless of the political context in which they live. The fact that the proposed relationships were found to be similar in all four country samples while controlling for political orientation can be interpreted as a first indicator of their general significance. It also has to be acknowledged that the sample is not fully representative. Respondents were recruited from online access panels, preventing those who do not have Internet access from participating. Moreover, we used data from the second wave of a panel survey, and dropouts from the first wave are likely systematic. However, we found the distributions of age and sex to remain close to population data, and we controlled for them and other relevant variables in all the analyses. At last, we have data from four metropolitan areas rather than national data. While we can argue that respondents' backgrounds are diverse because we have surveyed both city districts and surrounding rural districts, metropolitan areas should not be regarded as petri dishes for nation states. Rather, we can assume that polarization crystallizes in these regions. It should be recognized that the relations discovered herein might differ in contexts characterized by consensus rather than polarization.

Finally, we did not focus on citizens with low populist attitudes. However, our findings should motivate future research to investigate this group as well. Most intriguing might be the question of whether the mediated populist schema also triggers self-categorization processes among non-populist citizens. It could be possible that these citizens also start to employ the 'us versus them' frame and view those who support populism as members of an out-group. This thought is supported by Müller et al. (2017), who found reactance effects among non-populist citizens when their media diet was saturated with populist messages. That populist supporters are often stigmatized as angry and uneducated can count as anecdotal evidence for out-group hostility following self-categorization as a non-populist citizen.

## Conclusion

Despite its limitations, the present study contributes to an improved understanding of populist citizens in three ways. First, this study is the first to demonstrate a systematic link between populist attitudes, congruent public opinion perceptions, hostile media perceptions, and the distance between the two latter. Populist attitudes proved to be the strongest predictor compared to a series of control variables, such as political orientation or political extremity. Second, these perceptual patterns were found in four metropolitan areas, which indicates that they are not linked to a country-specific discourse but might rather be part of a general populist attitude syndrome. Third, the article introduced a social identity approach to populist attitudes, which proved to be a useful explanatory framework for populist citizens' false consensus and hostile media perceptions.

Overall, we described a dangerous interplay between citizens' identification to the ingroup of the people and their respective responses to populist claims and mechanisms, as described by research on false consensus and hostile media effects. The societal consequences of these biased perceptions still deserve discussion and further investigation. The populist mistrust in the mainstream news media in terms of the ability to report fairly and accurately about politics is likely followed by a turn toward alternative media (Downey & Fenton, 2003; Tsfati & Peri, 2006) and a growing distrust in democracy as a whole (Tsfati & Cohen, 2005). Importantly, whereas media skepticism has always been linked to reporting about specific issues or conflicts, it has become a general accusation among populist citizens. Accordingly, political arguments for different positions will hardly be listened to by populist citizens, which may challenge an inclusive democratic discourse (cf., Sunstein, 2002).

The false consensus that was demonstrated among populist citizens likely leads these individuals to overestimate their status in society. This can have great value for minorities, who can increase their influence via this mechanism (cf., van Avermaet, Mugny, & Moscovici, 1985). By projecting their own opinion onto others, populist citizens gain the impression

of large social support for their opinions, which also lends reassurance regarding their position's appropriateness. One of the most important sources that could correct this belief—the mass media—is disqualified as a lying agent of the disdained political elite.

Given the growing success of populist parties in almost all modern democracies combined with outrage against political and media elites, further research in this domain is highly important. More specifically, the dynamics of a potentially reinforcing spiral between populist attitudes, false consensus and hostile media perceptions should be explored in more detail. A deeper analysis will enable researchers and practitioners in the domains of media and politics to develop a better understanding of how populist citizens make sense of the world. Ultimately, this insight should help to develop measures that prevent further societal polarization in populist and anti-populist camps.

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Table 1

*Fixed and Random Effects for Media Perceptions, Opinion Perceptions and the Gap Variable*

| | Media Perceptions | | | | Opinion Perceptions | | | | Gap | | | | Gap | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | β | *b* | *SE* | *t* | β | *b* | *SE* | *t* | β | *b* | *SE* | *t* | β | *b* | *SE* | *t* |
| *Fixed effects* | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Intercept | **-.05** | 2.98 | .13 | 22.64 | **.03** | 2.81 | .10 | 28.48 | .06 | -0.18 | .19 | -0.92 | .06 | -0.17 | .19 | -0.88 |
| Age | -.02 | 0.00 | .00 | -1.30 | -.01 | -0.00 | .00 | -0.46 | .01 | 0.00 | .00 | 0.64 | .01 | 0.00 | .00 | 0.63 |
| Sex (male) | -.02 | -0.03 | .03 | -0.94 | **-.05** | -0.09 | .03 | -3.28 | -.02 | -0.06 | .04 | -1.59 | -.02 | -0.06 | .04 | -1.57 |
| Education (high) | .00 | -0.01 | .03 | -0.27 | **-.07** | -0.12 | .03 | -4.50 | **-.05** | -0.11 | .04 | -2.91 | **-.04** | -0.11 | .04 | -2.89 |
| Political Interest | **-.04** | -0.03 | .01 | -2.22 | .03 | 0.02 | .01 | 1.79 | **.05** | 0.06 | .02 | 2.85 | **.05** | 0.05 | .02 | 2.76 |
| Political Orientation (r.) | **-.04** | -0.01 | .01 | -2.35 | **.24** | 0.08 | .01 | 15.17 | **.18** | 0.10 | .01 | 12.18 | **.18** | 0.10 | .01 | 12.14 |
| Political Extremity | -.02 | -0.01 | .01 | -1.49 | -.01 | -0.01 | .01 | -0.69 | .01 | 0.01 | .01 | 0.59 | .01 | 0.01 | .01 | 0.52 |
| Populist Attitudes | **-.32** | -0.63 | .03 | -19.13 | **.31** | 0.62 | .03 | 19.53 | **.41** | 1.26 | .05 | 27.21 | **.41** | 1.25 | .08 | 15.22 |
| *Random intercepts* | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Berlin | -.10 | 2.95 | | | .15 | 2.91 | | | .17 | -0.04 | | | .17 | -0.03 | | |
| Paris | -.25 | 2.82 | | | .06 | 2.83 | | | .21 | 0.01 | | | .21 | 0.02 | | |
| Zürich | .30 | 3.28 | | | -.16 | 2.65 | | | -.31 | -0.64 | | | -.31 | -0.63 | | |
| London | -.16 | 2.90 | | | .08 | 2.85 | | | .16 | -0.05 | | | .16 | -0.04 | | |
| *Random effects for populist attitudes* | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Berlin | | | | | | | | | | | | | .51 | 1.37 | | |
| Paris | | | | | | | | | | | | | .31 | 1.12 | | |
| Zurich | | | | | | | | | | | | | .46 | 1.32 | | |
| London | | | | | | | | | | | | | .36 | 1.19 | | |
| $R^2$ *adj.* | | .17 | | | | .22 | | | | .30 | | | | .30 | | |
| AIC | | | | | | | | | | 10072.95 | | | | 10073.48 | | |

*Note.* $N$ = 3,354 for all models; Effects significant at $p < .05$ are in boldface.