

**Investigating the Effects of Populist Communication: Design and Measurement  
of the Comparative Experimental Study**

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## Introduction

The following two chapters in this volume report the findings of a large-scale comparative online survey experiment conducted in 15 countries. Designing such comparative research is challenging, and many methodological choices geared at equivalence whilst being sensitive to country-level differences have to be made in all steps of the process. This balance between equivalence and credibility is especially challenging to maintain when manipulating populist communication as the key independent variable. Specifically, some countries have been confronted with a large influx of refugees; in other countries, populist actors may more credibly construct threats to the ordinary people on an economic base (e.g., Aalberg et al., 2017). In other words, the culpable actors in the populist “blame game” are different between settings, and may respond more or less credibly to the actual socio-cultural and economic situation central in the countries considered. The homogeneity of the people or the corruption of the elites may have a different substance in Italy compared to Germany. Moreover, the consequences of the economic recession have been combatted successfully in some countries, whereas Southern European countries are still faced with new economic challenges. The specific timing of the experiment poses yet another set of challenges, as some European countries were in the forefront or aftermath of elections.

This chapter aims to elaborate on these methodological choices, starting with the design and ending with quality checks and analyses strategies employed to prepare and analyze the large dataset. Finally, the process of data collection in this research project will be translated to specific methodological recommendations for future endeavors that aim to dissect the effects of (populist) communication on a diversified international electorate.

### Design: Manipulating the divide between us and them

This experimental study aims to extend previous conceptualizations of populist communication by offering a comprehensive manipulation of populist ideas on the left and right wing (e.g., Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). More specifically, in this experiment, we regard populism as a discursive social identity frame that consists of various elements and their interactions: (1) people centrality cues; (2) anti-elitist cues; (3) left-wing out-group cues and (4) right-wing out-group cues. The combination of these cues can be extrapolated to six different forms of populism that were manipulated in this experiment (see Table 1). Specifically, the 3×2 between-subjects design manipulated (1) empty populism; (2) anti-elitist populism; (3) right-wing exclusionism; (4) right-wing complete populism; (5) left-wing exclusionism and (6) complete left wing populism. These populist conditions were contrasted with control groups that either (1) provided a factual story devoid of anti-other references or (2) a story with anti-elite cues without people centrality references.

The topic of the stimuli was constant across all countries: foreseen decreases in purchasing power were connected to the various out-groups in an online European news setting. The template of all stimuli was based on *Euronews*. To maintain equivalence, the source was also held similar across conditions and countries. A fictional foundation on the European level (*FutureNow*) connected the development of decreasing purchasing power to the different populist cues in the various experimental conditions. The decisions of topic and source were driven by the rationale for equal credibility across a diversified European setting: future declines in purchasing power are not connected to actual noticeable differences in current developments, and are vague enough to not be directly connected to the real-life economic situation (i.e. purchasing power is a specific outcome of the economic situation, and not per se related to actual declines in the economy). Moreover, this development can credibly be connected to scapegoating



### People-Centrist or Empty Populism (Condition 1)

References to the centrality of the ordinary people is the minimal condition for the expression of populist ideas to be identified (e.g., Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Canovan, 1999). In the first condition, references to the ordinary people were manipulated by emphasizing how the in-group of ordinary citizens is victimized by the development of decreasing purchasing power. Because of forces beyond their control, the threat of decreasing purchasing power will become stronger over time. Urgency was highlighted: the article emphasized that action is needed to avert the threat to the common citizens of the respective countries. This people centrality condition was developed in line with the centrality of in-group injustice and threat in social identity framing (e.g., Gamson, 1992; Polletta & Jasper, 2001).

### Anti-Political Elite Populism (Condition 2)

This type of populism connects to the thin-ideology or ideational core of populism (Mudde, 2004). In line with this conceptualization, the articles using this populist cue emphasizes the antagonistic divide between the “innocent” ordinary people and the “corrupt” and culpable political establishment. Hence, the national politicians in the European countries were explicitly attributed blame for the threat of declining purchasing power facing the people. Because of their self-interests, and because of their failure to represent the ordinary citizens, common national citizens will have less money to spend in the nearby future. This populist condition further emphasizes that the people are united in their will, good values and opposition. Specifically, the article says that national citizens have worked hard to combat the former crisis, whereas the elites are blocking their unified goals towards more welfare by letting these efforts go to waste.

### Right-Wing Exclusionist Populism (Condition 3)

Moving from the emphasis on vertical to horizontal out-group oppositions, the third level of populism attributed blame to immigrants threatening the ordinary people from *within* (see Jagers & Walgrave, 2007, for a similar conceptualization of exclusionism). Specifically, profiting

immigrants were blamed by the spokesperson of the foundation for future declines in the ordinary people's purchasing power. The threat to the ordinary people was cultivated by emphasizing that immigrants exploit the system, and demand too many resources from their host country – which deprives the in-group of ordinary citizens.

#### Right-Wing Complete Populism (Condition 4)

Populist cues are oftentimes combined in a single message (e.g., Jagers & Walgrave, 2007).

Indeed, many right-wing populist actors around the globe emphasize the divide between the people and others on both a vertical (i.e. the corrupt political elites) and horizontal (i.e. immigrants) level. Therefore, in this experimental condition, the complete right-wing populist discourse was represented by blaming *both* the political elites and immigrants for future declines in purchasing power: the elites were described as corrupt and self-serving, and migrants were accused of exploiting the system. In addition, the combination of scapegoats was cultivated by highlighting the argument that the elites allow immigrants to profit from the people's resources – a line of argumentation that ties in with the emphasis of perceived relative deprivation central to populism's appeal (e.g., Elchardus & Spruyt, 2016).

#### Left-Wing Exclusionist Populism (Condition 5)

As an important next step in comparative populism research, it is crucial to acknowledge that the people may not only be opposed to out-groups on a right-wing level (e.g., Ramiro, 2017).

Especially in a diversified European setting, many countries have been associated with the rise of populist movements on the left-wing. In this experimental setting, it is therefore important to incorporate the ordinary people's oppositions to "dangerous" others on the left-wing, most saliently the extreme-rich minorities. In our experiment, the extreme rich (wealthiest 1%) can credibly be scapegoated for declines in purchasing power. This manipulation entailed that the spokesperson of the foundation FutureNow emphasized that the super-rich only care about

themselves, filling their own pockets at the expense of the common national citizens that work hard in order to make a decent living.

### Complete Left-Wing Populism (Condition 6)

In the final variation of the independent variable, an explicit connection was drawn between the political elite and the extreme-rich out-group. In this condition, populist cues emphasized that both the political elites and the extreme rich are to blame for countries' future decline in purchasing power. Similar to the right-wing complete populist cues, the political elites serve the interest of the extreme rich minority, rather than the majority of ordinary people they should represent.

### Control Conditions (Conditions 7 and 8)

These experimental conditions were contrasted to two control conditions. The first control condition reported on the development of declining purchasing power without attributing blame to out-groups, and without stressing the centrality of ordinary citizens. In the other control condition, the political elites were held responsible for the future decline in purchasing power. However, they were not blamed for causing threats to the ordinary people. Including this control condition then allows us to tease out the effect of populist communication compared to the mere presence of anti-elite sentiments.

## Experimental Procedures

### Sampling and Sample

The programming of the online surveys was centralized and supervised in the Netherlands. The same researcher also supervised translations and equivalence across countries. Specifically, an English mother template of the online survey was programmed and hosted in Qualtrics and copied in 15 different versions for every country member. The individual country members translated the survey and uploaded their native version of the stimuli and the

questionnaires. The country members were also in charge of the data collection. Two international and currently collaborating panel companies were used for 8/15 cases: Survey Sampling International and Research Now. There were a number of exceptions. Greece used a panel consisting of a national database of voluntary contributors maintained by the School of Political Sciences, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki; Romania worked with Questia; Norway used the panel of YouGov, and Sweden relied on the panel of the national Laboratory of Opinion Research. Finally, France, Switzerland and the United Kingdom used a sample from the panel ResponDi Germany. Despite the national differences in the selected data collection partners, all companies used the same mixed resources in composing their sample database, and all companies allowed us to compose a quota sample to approach a nationally representative sample on age, gender and education. To ensure similarity, a strict document with panel company recommendations was composed prior to selecting the panel company. This varied sample allowed us to tease out both contextual country differences and individual-level differences within the countries. After launching the questionnaires, the survey procedure, quotas and timings were again supervised centrally in the Netherlands to ensure equal procedures across countries.

The final dataset is composed of country samples as follows ( $N = 16,549$ ): Austria ( $N = 1,138$ ), France ( $N = 1,192$ ), Germany ( $N = 991$ ), Greece ( $N = 1,116$ ), Ireland ( $N = 951$ ), Israel ( $N = 1,016$ ), Italy ( $N = 1,056$ ), the Netherlands ( $N = 934$ ), Poland ( $N = 1,368$ ), Spain ( $N = 1,010$ ), Sweden ( $N = 1,063$ ), Switzerland ( $N = 1,134$ ), United Kingdom ( $N = 1,103$ ), Norway ( $N = 1,009$ ), and Romania ( $N = 1,468$ ). To ensure the quality and validity of the responses, we have removed the answers of 2,050 respondents that did not pay close attention from this dataset (see explication below for the full quality check procedure). The total number of valid respondents



used in the analyses reported in the subsequent chapters is thus 14,499. All data were collected in the first months of 2017 by SSI and Research Now. These two companies received the centrally programmed surveys and were instructed to apply equal standardized procedures regarding recruiting, sampling, stimulus presentation, survey layout and data collection. Equivalence was further assured by using the same survey flow, randomizations and layout in the programming of all countries. The final dataset used for the analyses represents a varied sample of citizens in Europe regarding their age ( $M = 46.05$ ,  $SD = 15.33$ ), gender (50% female), low/mid/high education ( $M = 2.24$ ,  $SD = 0.71$ ), political interest ( $M = 4.69$ ,  $SD = 1.70$ ) and left-right ideological self-placement ( $M = 5.07$ ,  $SD = 2.55$ )

#### Questionnaire, Stimulus Presentation, and Randomization Checks

All survey experiments were administered in the online environment of the panel companies. In the Qualtrics survey environment, participants first of all gave their informed consent. In the next block of the pre-treatment survey, participants completed items asking for demographics, political preferences and issue positions. They then proceeded to the treatment blocks. Here, a survey script randomly assigned them to one of the six treatments or the two control groups. The randomization further ensured that all eight groups were equal in size. In all eight conditions, participants read an online news item in their native language. Based on extensive pilot testing in Greece and Germany, 20 seconds was found to be the absolute minimum reading time for the stimuli. Therefore, participants were forced to read the text for at least 20 seconds. They were however free to take a longer time to go through the texts. After reading the news item, participants proceeded to the post-treatment survey. This survey block included items on the dependent variables and manipulation checks. After having completed the final item of this post treatment test, participants were debriefed and thanked for their answers. In most countries, a financial compensation was provided to all participants that completed the survey.

The randomization check items demonstrate that the eight conditions differ significantly with regards to age, albeit the differences are small ( $F(7, 14357) = 2.18, p = .03$ ). However, randomization succeeded looking at gender ( $F(7, 14479) = .25, p = .97$ ), education ( $F(7, 14445) = 1.19, p = .31$ ), political interest ( $F(7, 14484) = 1.46, p = .18$ ), and ideology ( $F(7, 13052) = 1.54, p = .15$ ). As the minimal differences in the composition of age are not regarded as crucial to the effects measured by the experiment, the age difference, which may be due to chance, is not seen as problematic.

### Manipulation checks

The post-treatment survey block contained questions on the manipulation of our central independent variable. In this block, respondents were asked to consider the statements mentioned in the news item. After allowing them some time to contemplate on the article they just read, participants were asked to rate the extent to which they thought a number of statements were applicable to the text they read on a scale from 1 (this does not apply at all) to 7 (this fully applies). They were explicitly instructed to rate the content of the experimental materials independent of their own actual opinions and behaviours. Overall, the manipulations succeeded.

First of all, exposure to the people centrality cue, which displayed the people of the specific country as being deprived and victimized by declining purchasing power, significantly and substantially increased the likelihood that participants perceived the article as emphasizing the notion of the people as hardworking citizens ( $M = 4.86, SD = 1.75$ ) compared to the visibility of people centrality cues across the two control groups ( $M = 3.79, SD = 1.77, b = 1.07, SE = .03, p < .01$ ). Second, the anti-elite cue manipulation also succeeded. Specifically, exposure to anti-elite cues made people aware of politicians framed as culprits in the online article ( $M = 5.38, SD = 1.61$ ) compared to the control condition without anti-elitist cues ( $M = 4.07, SD = 1.90, b = 1.31, SE = .03, p < .01$ ). Similarly, exposure to the left-wing exclusionist cue resulted in the

perception that the article blamed the wealthy minority for declines in purchasing power ( $M = 5.29$ ,  $SD = 1.69$ ) compared to the conditions without these populist cues ( $M = 3.49$ ,  $SD = 1.87$ ,  $b = 1.81$ ,  $SE = .04$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Finally, our results provide evidence that participants perceived the article to shift blame to immigrants when they were exposed to the immigrant cue ( $M = 5.31$ ,  $SD = 1.83$ ) as compared to reading articles in which this cue was absent ( $M = 2.92$ ,  $SD = 1.80$ ,  $b = 2.40$ ,  $SE = .03$ ,  $p < .01$ ). To conclude, across all countries, participants recognized the framing of populist cues in the news articles. The manipulations of the proposed typology of populism were thus successful.

### Dependent variables: from assigning blame to populist voting

To advance existing research on the effects of populist communication, it is important to make a distinction between cognitive, attitudinal and behavioral outcomes as potential consequences of exposure to populist cues (also see Theory Chapter in this volume). In line with this, the next two chapters in this volume offer insights into the effects of populist cues on blame perceptions, stereotypes, populist attitudes and populist vote intentions. The exact conceptualization and measurement of these variables is explained in more detail in the corresponding chapters. The following section will provide a brief overview of the scope of these dependent variables.

#### Blame Perceptions

The first set of dependent variables concern blame perceptions, which can be regarded as a cognitive outcome. Specifically, this first dependent variable aims to tap into message acceptance: do citizens actually follow suit if populist messages assign blame to the elites or other out-groups? Or do they challenge populist framing? Blame perceptions were measured on different levels of political and economic elites, as well as out-groups on the left- and right-wing. Chapter 9 provides more details on the exact measurement of blame perceptions.

## Stereotypes

The second perceptual outcome variable concerns stereotypical perceptions of “the people” and “the other”. To measure the extent to which participants agreed with traits assigned to various actors in society, a battery of items that tapped into positive and negative associations regarding different groups in society were included. These were all framed as generalized attributes, and participants had to assess the extent to which they agreed with these different traits (e.g., lazy, trustworthy, see Chapter 9 for details on measurement).

## Attitudes

In the chapter by Andreadis et al, we move on to attitudinal and behavioral consequences of exposure to populist cues. First of all, to assess populist attitudes, participants’ perceived divide between “the people” and “the other” was measured, as well as their belief in a homogenous in-group of ordinary people. The measures tap into various components of a populist worldview on the receiver-side, and are based on existing measurement efforts, such as documented in Akkerman et al., (2014) and Schulz et al. (2017). These measures were extended with items that tapped into the perceptions of a divide between ordinary people and others on a horizontal level, so-called “exclusionist” measures (see Chapter 10 for details).

## Voting Intentions

Finally, the experiment aims to provide insights into how exposure to populist framing may activate behavioral intentions, in Chapter 10 operationalized as the likelihood of voting for political parties. Importantly, a distinction between populist and non-populist parties was made, which allows us to assess the divergent impact of populist cues on voting for the scapegoated political elites or the populist challenger that owns the issue of attributing blame to the elites. Chapter 10 provides extensive details on the categorization of populist parties throughout Europe, and the measurement of vote intentions for these various parties.

## Quality control procedures

Survey research, and experimental research in particular, faces the threat of satisficing (Krosnick, 1991). This means that participants do not take sufficient effort to complete the survey items, and rather see the survey as a task they have to complete in a limited timeframe, receiving payment in return. This problem is especially prominent for surveys that are administered without the physical presence of the researcher (Baker et al., 2010). Low quality responses may in particular be a threat for large scale polling firms – such as in this experiment – where people are paid for completing tasks. Hence, the data collection of this experiment is at risk of poor quality responses due to satisficing (Hillygus, Jackson, & Young, 2014).

Fortunately, extant literature provides a plethora of tools to deal with this issue of inattentive or professional participants (e.g., Baker et al., 2010). Three techniques in particular are relevant for this experimental project: (1) screening out participants with extremely short survey completion times; (2) identifying patterns of straight lining in batteries or matrices of survey questions and (3) identifying systematic patterns of non-response. In addition to these three measures, the experiment reported in this volume relies on the distribution of responses to the manipulation check items to further assess the attentiveness of participants (Oppenheimer, Meyvis, & Davidenko, 2009).

Regarding the assessment of short completion times, we rely on the “scanning threshold” method (Andreadis, 2012, 2014). This approach aims to offer a realistic minimum completion time by taking the number of characters in the text and the fastest “scanning” reading pace into account. Applying this tool to this experimental study, we found that the bare minimum response time was 412 second. Participants with a lower completion time were flagged.

For straight lining as undesired survey behavior, we identified three survey matrices for which similar answers to all items in the grid would not be realistic (i.e. we did not include items

expected to load on a single underlying dimension or scale). Again, respondents were flagged if they demonstrated patterns of straight lining (respdiff in Stata was used as an analytical tool to identify patterns of straight lining).

The item non-response quality procedure entailed that participants with less than 2/3 of the items completed were flagged for their skipping behavior. The final flag was placed for participants with missing answers on the manipulation check items, or an answer pattern that does not perform better than correct answers by chance.

Taken together, these flags provided different indicators or suboptimal response quality. As decision rule, cases were only deleted if they were flagged in at least two of the four indices. This conservative procedure ensured that we only removed cases when confident that the response pattern was actually poor, and that this decision was not driven by chance. In total, 2,050 responses were removed, and the cleaned data consists of 14,499 respondents.

## Analyses

The merged comparative dataset consists of samples that were collected in 15 different countries. For this reason, the data has a hierarchical structure: observations on the individual level (the participant) are nested within countries. To test the effects of populist cues on our dependent variables in all country samples simultaneously whilst controlling for the dependency of the observations on the country level, we have run multilevel models using the software package Stata. Although it may be argued that 15 cases on the second level is a relatively low number for multilevel models, we have established the validity of estimates according to various standards (i.e. non-zero variance, normality assumptions). In all the mixed-effects models reported in the following book chapters, the intra-class correlation coefficients varied between .07 and .21. This index shows that more than seven percent of the variability in the dependent variables are due to the country level in which the individuals are nested. At the same time, the within-country

differences are still much larger than between-country differences. The analyses per country (see Chapter 9 and Chapter 10 in this volume) are conducted using OLS regressions.

## Conclusion

Conducting large-scale comparative research is not without its problems. Issues of equivalence of item wordings, sample composition and applicability of the study to diverging contexts pose a challenge to any kind of comparative research. Experimental comparative research poses additional challenges in the stages of design and measurement. In particular, the process of developing equally credible, yet context-neutral stimuli that connect to the socio-economic developments in a diversified European setting has been one of the major challenges in the experimental research described in this volume. However, the European setting offers some form of unity, be it in the availability of European news settings and the extent to which real-life economic situations can be attached to all countries in Europe. Based on this common ground, the experiment reported in the next chapters of this volume manipulated a European-wide development of declining purchasing power, using an unbiased relatively neutral fictional European foundation as source.

The experimental design has different limitations that can be translated into specific recommendations for future comparative experiments. First of all, the logistic procedures of centralizing programming and data collection can further be improved by hiring one international panel company that collects data in all countries in exactly the same timeframe using exactly the same recruiting procedures. Although this research used similar companies that were carefully instructed to use the same procedures, some minor differences in approaches have posed challenges on the post-data collection procedures of data quality and equivalence checks.

Moreover, the selection of a fitting topic in 15 countries that can credibly be used to assign blame to all out-groups may have resonated stronger with some countries than others.

Hence, the left-wing out-group of the extreme rich may fit stronger in Greece and Italy than in Germany and Austria. In these countries, the anti-immigration cue may resonate stronger with the dominant discourse in media and society. Still, the ideational core of populism – emphasizing the divide between the ordinary people and the culpable elites – has been salient in all settings, and thus provides common ground for understanding the effects of populist communication in different settings. Future comparative research may further tailor the manipulations and topics to enhance the resonance with the actual common ground in discourse prevalent in media and society. Hence, in line with literature on the mobilizing potential of social identity frames, the populist stimuli should provide (1) a connection to the perceived deprivation of the electorate; (2) a credible scapegoat for this threat and (3) appropriate and easily accessible tools to overcome this threat (e.g., Polletta & Jasper, 2001). An implication of these considerations is that a comprehensive manipulation of populist cues on the left and right may not be equally credible across different countries, and therefore not equally persuasive. A pragmatic solution to this problem is to always measure and control for the credibility and perceived relevance of the experimental stimuli.

The design of this experiment aims to provide comprehensive insights into the effects of populism in the setting of great variety of successful left-wing and right-wing populist parties in Europe, ranging from more successful left-wing populism in Southern Europe (i.e. Greece) and more successful anti-immigration right-wing populism in the Western part of the continent (i.e. Austria and the Netherlands). Hereby, this study extends research that either focused on a subset of populist elements and/or countries (e.g., Hameleers et al., 2017). In this unique comparative experiment, populist oppositions between the people and the others are manipulated on two levels: the ‘vertical’ elites and ‘horizontal’ out-groups on both the left (the rich) and right (the



immigrants). Moreover, for the first time in populist communication research, the effects of these populist identity frames are studied on cognitive, attitudinal and behavioral outcomes.

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