



## UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

### They did it!

*The content, effects, and mechanisms of blame attribution in populist communication*

Hameleers, M.

#### Publication date

2017

#### Document Version

Other version

#### License

Other

[Link to publication](#)

#### Citation for published version (APA):

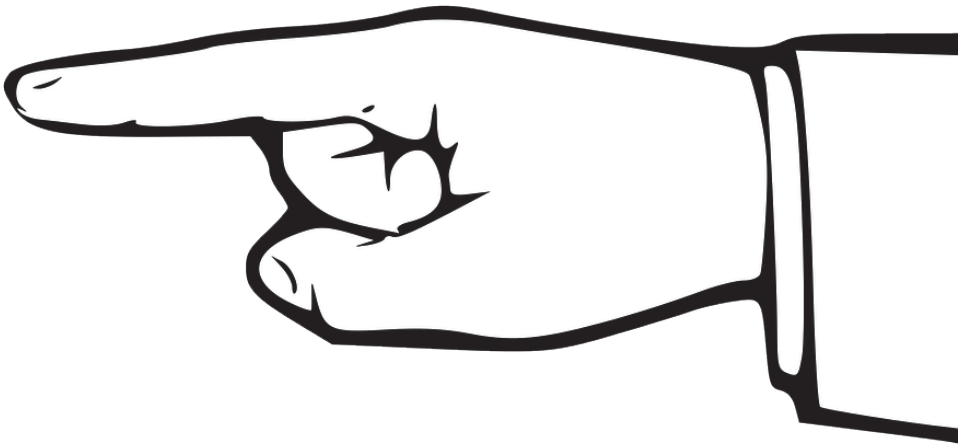
Hameleers, M. (2017). *They did it! The content, effects, and mechanisms of blame attribution in populist communication*.

#### General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

#### Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.



## Introduction

---

“The search for a scapegoat is the easiest of all hunting expeditions.”

— Dwight D. Eisenhower

A growing number of nations around the world have witnessed the rise of influential populist movements. In recent years, it seems that populist ideas are spreading like an oil slick across the most widely dispersed countries around the globe. The essence of populism – emphasizing the causal and moral opposition between the ordinary people and culpable others – can be articulated by different actors, such as politicians, citizens, or journalists. Examples of the expression of such populist ideas abound. In Europe, especially in the midst of the Brexit, financial, and refugee crises, populist sentiments that oppose the ordinary people and their will to failing politicians have prevailed in many countries. In the United States, the ideas communicated by Donald Trump that construct the divide between the ‘good’ American citizens and ‘evil’ others have sparked a heated societal debate, receiving both support and resistance throughout the globe. But what is the core idea expressed in populist communication that may incite populist sentiments among citizens? And what are the potential effects of exposure to such populist ideas?

In defining the ideational core of populism, I integrate two strongly related, yet unconnected, areas of research: causal attributions of responsibility (e.g., Hobolt & Tilley, 2014; Iyengar, 1991) and populist communication (e.g., Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). Synthesizing these areas of research, I define the essence of populist communication as the attribution of blame for the ordinary people’s problems to different opposed out-groups: either defined *vertically* as the elites or *horizontally* as societal out-groups, such as refugees or immigrants. In the context of a severe perceived threat to the ordinary people’s in-group, populist blame attributions emphasize a causal and moral interpretation of salient societal issues: the ordinary people are depicted as innocent and pure whereas the other is evil, and most importantly, causally *responsible* for the people’s malaise (de la Torre, 2000). Populist ideas thus essentially revolve about attributing blame to others while absolving “the people” of responsibility. Since extant research has pointed at the guiding influence of responsibility attributions on citizens’ political attitudes (Hobolt & Tilley, 2014; Iyengar, 1991), blame attribution may explain the pervasiveness of populism in politics, media, and society. This newly developed definition of populism’s ideational core builds further on extant literature that defines populism as a relational concept, focusing on the distinction between the “good” people and some “evil” other that poses a threat to the ordinary people (e.g., Akkerman, Mudde & Zaslove, 2014; Canovan, 1999; Mudde, 2007).

Previous research has provided important first insights into the effects of populist communication (e.g., Bos, van der Brug & de Vreese, 2011, 2013; Matthes & Schmuck,

2015). Bos et al. (2011, 2013) for example show that populist rhetoric targeted at the elites influences the perceived legitimacy of politicians, but only among the lower educated and politically cynical. Attaching an exclusionist component to populism's definition, it has been found that populist advertising blaming societal out-groups bolsters negative attitudes towards minorities and immigrants among the public (e.g., Matthes & Schmuck, 2015).

Despite this important foundational evidence, we know too little about what specific message characteristics central to populist communication influence the populist perceptions of *which* citizens, and how the persuasiveness of populist ideas can be interpreted from a theoretical perspective. These important, yet unexplored fields in populism research lead to the comprehensive three-fold question that forms the backbone of this dissertation: (1) How are populist blame attributions expressed in the media and (2) interpreted by citizens, and (3) how can populist blame attributions by the media affect citizens' political perceptions?

### **Why We Should (Still) Care About Populism**

In 2012, the former president of the European Council Herman van Rompuy referred to populism as the greatest threat to Europe, emphasizing that shifting blame to immigrants or the EU is not the solution for the problems Europe is facing (Pop, 2012). Rompuy's speech provides only one of many examples demonstrating how the buzzword populism has sparked public and scholarly debates around the world. Despite its frequent use, however, controversies about how to conceptualize the concept resonate in different scientific disciplines (see Aslanidis, 2015 for a comprehensive overview).

Although it could be argued that scholarly consensus on how to define the essence of populism has finally been reached, there is still no agreement on *who* can express the core idea of 'the good people versus the evil others' in *which ways* and to *what extent*. For this reason, important questions remain unanswered: Is populism a binary label that can be used to classify political parties with, or is it a matter of degree? Is it an ideology or merely a strategy or style? As these questions illustrate, with the rise of different manifestations of populist ideas in politics, media, and among citizens, the conceptual clarity of the concept keeps on fading. This disagreement is reflected in scholarly definitions of the concept. Some scholars have defined populism merely as a discursive style or rhetoric (e.g., Cranmer, 2011; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007) or a frame (e.g., Caiani & della Porta, 2011). This frame or style can then be applied by different populist or non-populist actors, suggesting the existence of a contagious populist zeitgeist in which different actors can engage in populism (Mudde, 2004). Populism has also been measured as a matter of degree, for example by exploring the extent to which populism exists as an individual-level attitude among voters (e.g.,

---

Akkerman et al., 2014; Rooduijn, 2014a), or by mapping the degree of populism in public debates (Rooduijn, 2014b).

Another line of research opts for populism as a strategy that different actors can use to achieve a certain goal, such as gaining electoral success or maximizing media attention (e.g., Barr, 2009; Weyland, 2001). This conceptualization of populism presupposes that populism is something that can be switched on or off depending on the goals of a certain actor. If a politician in government, for example, wants to shift blame from the national level to the European Union, he or she can use populism as a strategy to frame blame. In that case, the in-group of the nation including the national government is framed as a victim of higher-order politics whereas the EU is held responsible for causing the people's crisis.

Currently, the most dominant and widely cited approach conceptualizes populism as a thin-centered ideology, which can be supplemented by all sorts of host ideologies (e.g., Mudde, 2004; Stanley, 2008). In this reading, the "thin" ideology of populism revolves around the opposition of the ordinary people to the culpable elites. This ideological core can, depending on contextual differences, be enriched by host ideologies on both the left and right-wing, such as nativism on the right or economic inclusionism on the left. This definition of populism contends that the people's opposition to societal out-groups, most saliently immigrants, refugees or ethnic minorities, is not a defining component of populism. Rather, being opposed to these out-groups is part of the host ideology. Although defining populism as a thin-cored ideology has clear merits when applied to the populism of political parties and politicians, its ideological premises become contested when conceptualizing populism as a phenomenon detached from such political actors. For example when conceptualizing populism as individual-level attitudes or as an aspect of political communication, as increasingly done by scholars conducting research on populism (e.g., Rooduijn et al., 2014).

An important discrepancy in the ideological approach is that the people's opposition to vertical out-groups is part of the thin-ideological core whereas their opposition to horizontal out-groups is not, while it can be argued that both phenomena are part of the same underlying blame-shifting mechanism. In other words, attributing blame lies at the heart of the populist opposition between 'us' and 'them', irrespective of the out-group deemed responsible. Moreover, when ideology is defined in its strictest sense, conceptualizing populism in ideological terms would not allow to study it as a matter of degree. This premise contradicts a vast amount of empirical research that did *not* actually study populism as a binary on-off category (e.g., Hawkins, 2009; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Pauwels, 2011; Rooduijn et al., 2014). In other words, a lot of empirical studies contend that they define populism as a thin-cored ideology while they may not be accepting the epistemological consequences of their definition.

Taken together, the competing approaches to studying the phenomenon populism have resulted in a variety of inconsistencies that has prevented a real consensus to be established among scholars working on populism. Let me highlight the most important unresolved inconsistencies here. First, there is no agreement on whether populism is a binary concept or a matter of degree. Some authors for example simply classify certain political parties or politicians as populist or non-populist (e.g., Heijne, 2011). Others propose an index of empty and full populisms (e.g., Jagers & Walgrave, 2007), whereas yet another body of literature proposes to identify populism based on a set of even more detailed indicators, such as the presence of charismatic leadership (e.g., Hawkins, 2009; Taggart, 2000).

Second, it is unclear *who* can be populist. Should populism be reserved to describe political parties and politicians, or should it also be extrapolated to journalistic media, and can citizens themselves also be populist? Because there is no real consensus on where to locate populism, authors also disagree on which materials should be analyzed to map populism. Most research discursively analyzes the content of party manifestos or speeches to quantify the populism of political actors (e.g., Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Rooduijn, 2014b). Others employ a content analysis of different materials to reveal populist frames in the media (e.g., Caiani & della Porta, 2011). And yet another approach is to provide an in-depth description of various indicators of populism to argue that certain politicians are populist, whereas others are not (e.g., Hawkins, 2009).

A potential solution to circumvent these inconsistencies and disagreements is to abandon the concept altogether. Arguments in favor of this position may highlight that populist ideas that construct an opposition to the culprit elites are already captured in related concepts, such as anti-establishment or political cynicism. On the right, people's opposition to welfare-state profiteers can also be classified using welfare chauvinism. And expressing the out-group threat of immigrants and refugees may simply tap into nativist or anti-immigration sentiments. In other words, this opposing line of argumentation emphasizes that we do not need the contested concept of populism to describe the phenomenon of people's opposition to the elites or societal out-groups. But why *should* we still care about populism?

I do believe that we should not abandon such an important concept only because of practical reasons or ontological disagreements. Rather, I consider it an important challenge for current and future research to resolve the inconsistencies in conceptualizing populism. Taken together, there are two key reasons why populism remains a highly relevant concept: (1) the fact that populism actually describes a phenomenon substantially different from alternative phenomena and (2) the availability of a comprehensive solution for the ontological puzzle in defining the essence of populism.

---

First, there is more to populism than simply opposing out-groups or criticizing the elites. Populism is a relational concept with an important moral and causal component, which sets it apart from alternative, more technocratic anti-other concepts. First of all, populism constructs the in-group of the people as a homogenous, morally superior entity (Canovan, 1999; Mudde, 2004). Their will, culture, norms and values should be central, and not “polluted” by the potentially “evil” influences of the elites or societal-out-groups. The out-group, in contrast, is attributed blame for causing the powerless people’s problems or crisis situation. Reasoned from a populist mindset, *because* the elites and societal out-groups are only adhering to their own interests whilst being blind to the ordinary people’s concerns, they have *caused* the crisis threatening the ordinary people. These moral and causal interpretations set populism apart from other (anti-other) concepts that may be equated with it.

Second, the lack of conceptual consensus can be resolved by acknowledging that populist ideas can be detached from the political actors typically associated with them (also see Rooduijn et al., 2014). In this reading, various actors can express more or less populism by communicating the discursive genus of the blameless people’s opposition to culpable others. In this dissertation, I take this ideational approach in order to move beyond the foregrounded debated classifications and their accompanying conceptual confusion. Specifically, this dissertation’s focus is on how the core idea of populism – the binary opposition between the people as morally superior in-group and different forms of culpable out-groups – can manifest itself in different ways both as characteristic of the message (i.e. the media or politicians’ political communication) and as a characteristic of receivers of messages (i.e. citizens who make sense of societal issues).

### **What about the Potential Effects of Populist Communication?**

This dissertation thus postulates that the core idea of populist blame attribution can be used to describe journalistic populist communication on the sender-side and interpretations of citizens on the receiver-side. To provide an example of a journalistic interpretation along the lines of populism’s ideational core: On the 13th of June 2016, the largest British tabloid newspaper the Sun published a front-page article in which they actively constructed the divide between the ordinary people and the culprit elites, as illustrated by the following quote: “The Sun urges everyone to vote LEAVE. We must set ourselves free from dictatorial Brussels. Throughout our 43-year membership of the European Union it has proved increasingly greedy, wasteful, bullying and breathtakingly incompetent in a crisis”. In this article, the EU is blamed for being incompetent in their attempts to solve the native people’s crisis. Because ‘they’ are, greedy, wasteful, bullying and incompetent, ‘our’ nation has not been able to recover from the crisis.

On the receiver-side, citizens also frequently express populist ideas by emphasizing the opposition between their blameless in-group and opposed out-groups. The following quote posted on the Facebook community *The Netherlands in Revolt* provides an example of such a populist expression by an ordinary citizen: “Our elderly people and the chronically ill are unable to work. Because of this government, they are not getting enough to even survive. If it’s up to this government, we can all die”. The source of this quote, an ordinary citizen, emphasized the opposition between the vulnerable members of the in-group that are abandoned to their fate *because* the elites in government do not care about their well-being.

Now that I have argued how populists ideas can – and should – be detached from specific political actors, the next step is to explore how populist ideas expressed by the media can be related to the populist interpretations of citizens. In order to do so, I propose a causal link between two important, yet largely isolated areas in populism research: media populism or populism *by* the media (e.g., Krämer, 2014; Mazzoleni, 2008) and populist attitudes (Akkerman et al., 2014; Hawkins, Riding & Mudde, 2012).

The tentative evidence supporting such a causal link between the populism of the media and the populist interpretations of citizens mainly stems from the literature on responsibility attribution. Extant literature on causal responsibility attributions demonstrates that messages that attribute blame indeed guide citizens’ political opinions in congruence with the targets attributed causal responsibility (Hobolt & Tilley, 2014; Iyengar, 1991). If a message emphasizes blame attributions to the European Union, for example, citizens follow suit by accepting this culpable out-group construction in their own political opinions (e.g., Tilley & Hobolt, 2011). Against this backdrop, this dissertation tests the central causal expectation that populist blame attributions emphasized in media content affect the populist attitudes of citizens in message-congruent ways. But what provides the most fertile soil for these ‘us against them’ constructions to root?

### **The Roots of Populist Blame Attributions**

It has been theoretically argued and empirically supported that the perception of a crisis situation is a paramount contextual factor for populist ideas to root in society (e.g., Elchardus & Spruyt, 2012; 2016; Taggart, 2000). To provide a few examples, the Brexit movement, the Tea Party, Trump, and various politicians in Europe refer to the refugee or migrant ‘crisis’ to justify their attributions of blame. Following their line of reasoning, ‘our’ heartland may face an economic and cultural crisis because ‘we’ are swamped by culprit others. To avoid this crisis from ruining the heartland, ‘they’ should be eliminated. Hence, populism’s process of social differentiation and blame attribution is rooted in and concretized by referring to a threat posed by a



---

crisis. But what may be the underlying psychological mechanism that aligns people with such crisis constructions?

In line with recent empirical research, this dissertation argues that the appeal of such populist ‘us’ versus ‘them’ constructions is rooted in receivers’ feelings of relative deprivation (e.g., Elchardus & Spruyt, 2016). Relative deprivation can be defined as a perceived unfair distribution of society’s common resources: ordinary people ‘like us’ never get what they deserve from society, whereas ‘others’ always seem to profit without giving anything in return (e.g., Hogg et al., 2010). The in-group is thus perceived of as being worse off than others living amongst them in society.

Populism and relative deprivation can be connected in the light of the ‘losers of modernization hypothesis’ (e.g., Elchardus & Spruyt, 2016; Kriesi et al., 2006; Kriesi, 2014). Moving beyond the traditional demographic profiles of populist citizens, this thesis can be extrapolated to the *perception* of losing out relative to others. In line with this reasoning, people who experience to have lost something that naturally belonged to them, but has been taken away by profiting others, are appealed most to populist ideas.

A perceived crisis forms the foundational base for the brickwork of perceived relative deprivation: the deprived ordinary people hold the belief that their in-group is victimized more by the crisis than the culpable others that caused the crisis in the first place. In the midst of societal crisis such as the threat of economic decline, these vulnerable, deprived people should be appealed to populist ideas that voice their grievances of being worse off (Elchardus & Spruyt, 2016). The persuasiveness of populist blame attributions may thus be rooted in perceptions of relative deprivation. Those who believe their in-group is worse off than other groups, are appealed most to messages that blame others for depriving the people from what they are morally entitled to.

### **The Supply-side and Demand-side of Populist Communication**

Extant research has predominately focused on the supply-side of populist expressions by studying populist ideology (e.g., Stanley, 2008), rhetoric (e.g., Rooduijn & Pauwels, 2011), or communication styles (e.g., Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). A recent, but growing line of research has started to study the appeal of populist ideas on the demand-side, most saliently by measuring the populist attitudes of voters (e.g., Akkerman et al., 2014; Hawkins et al., 2012), or by identifying antecedents that make citizens more or less susceptible to persuasion by populist arguments (e.g., Oesch, 2008).

These two lines of research have developed more or less independently, providing important, yet isolated insights into the populist ideas of actors on the supply-side

or the demand-side of communication. As an important next step, this dissertation provides insights into *both* the supply-side of populist ideas communicated by the media and the demand-side of citizens' populist attitudes. Moving beyond one-sided approaches, I will further explore the causal relationships between *both* sides of the populist discourse. This dissertation's integration of supply-side and demand-side approaches to the precise study of populism is graphically depicted in Figure 0.1.

As can be seen in Figure 0.1, two key concepts on the supply-side are studied and integrated: populist blame attribution and the expression of this ideational core *by* the media, also referred to as media populism (e.g., Bos & Brants, 2014; Mazzoleni, 2008) or populist communication (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). On the demand-side, I will investigate how these populist ideas resonate with citizens' individual-level attitudes. Such populist attitudes are subsequently regarded as a dependent variable when exploring the media effects of populist communication. Attitudinal congruence refers to the hypothesized mechanisms by which the independent variable populist blame attribution affects citizens' populist perceptions. In the sections that follow, the key concepts on the supply-side and demand-side depicted in Figure 0.1 will be defined in more detail.

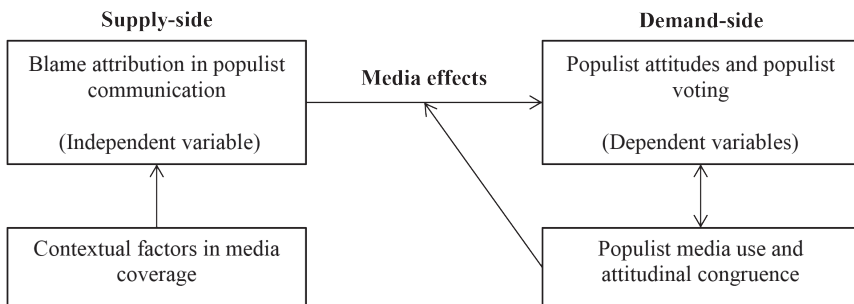


Figure 0.1 Conceptual model of the dissertation

---

## **Blame Attribution as a Populist Master Frame**

First, I will more precisely explain how populist attributions of blame form the genus of the populist ideas expressed in political communication. Attributions of blame can be regarded as the populist master frame: an overarching interpretation used to wrap up all sorts of societal issues into a causal and moral opposition between ‘us’ and ‘them’. By introducing this definition, this dissertation explicitly links the traditionally separated literatures of responsibility attributions and populism. Zooming in on both bodies of literature, striking similarities can be identified. As will be discussed here, the integration of responsibility attribution and populist communication is particularly important for understanding the *persuasiveness* of populist messages among citizens.

It has been argued that attributing responsibility for negative outcomes and attributing credit for successes plays a central role in citizens’ understanding of and participation in representative democracy (Gomez & Wilson, 2008; Malhotra & Kuo, 2008). By attributing causal responsibility for negative developments – blame – citizens can punish responsible political actors for not functioning properly. This form of political participation can be explained in the light of accountability: people who believe that the political establishment is culpable will not vote for them at election times.

Throughout this dissertation, attributing causal responsibility is conceptualized as the process by which the media and citizens attribute blame to actors deemed responsible for negative societal developments, such as the refugee crisis or the crisis on the labor market. Related to the conceptualization of exclusionist and anti-establishment populism (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007), different out-groups can be attributed blame. First, *vertically* constructed out-groups ‘above’ the people can be blamed. These are for example the national government, the European Union or elitist experts. Second, horizontally opposed societal out-groups ‘amongst’ the people can be blamed, such as immigrants, refugees or profiteers from the welfare state.

Attributions of blame are argued to be highly persuasive (Iyengar, 1989; 1991; Tilley & Hobolt, 2011). They are persuasive because they offer simple solutions to complex political problems: when the culprits will be punished, the crisis will be alleviated. Moreover, in line with the premises of social identity theory, citizens can use blame attributions to absolve their own in-group of responsibility: by shifting blame from the in-group of the ordinary citizens to out-groups, people are reassured of a positive, blameless self-concept (Tajfel, 1978). Populist blame attributions may thus provide citizens with an important heuristic cue that helps them to make sense of complex political issues whilst maintaining a positive image of the self.

The process of social differentiation central to attributions of responsibility also forms the backdrop of populist ideas (e.g., Laclau, 1977; Taggart, 2000). Populist ideas, just like blame attributions, emphasize a certain causal interpretation of societal issues by highlighting which actors have caused a negative development (Laclau, 1977). Consequentially, negative characteristics of blame are shifted from the innocent in-group of the ordinary people to the culprit out-groups. In a similar vein, I define the ideational core of populism as the construction of a causal and moral divide between the in-group of the ordinary people and horizontally or vertically defined out-groups.

In the definition of populism in the light of blame attributions, I separate populist blame attribution from causal responsibility attributions by emphasizing *both* the causal and *moral* component of the divide between the ordinary people and opposed out-groups. In line with this, beyond shifting blame to the culprit elites or societal out-groups, populist attributions of blame attach a *moral* component to this divide: the in-group is morally good and superior whereas the opposed out-group is evil, unjust and threatening (de la Torre, 2000). In populism, the ‘good’ in-group and the ‘evil’ out-group are both regarded as homogenous entities, separated by a large moral distance (Mudde, 2004).

Taken together, at the core of populist ideas, the people are depicted as the blameless in-group whereas the out-groups are attributed responsibility for causing the people’s problems, such as the refugee or economic crisis. The master frame of populist blame attribution can be used to interpret all sorts of pressing societal issues (Caiani & della Porta, 2011). Using this frame, the people are depicted as relatively powerless: the vertical out-group of the corrupt politicians, for example, fails to represent their will. As these “evil” others are not listening to the people, the heartland of the “good” ordinary people will remain in crisis. The only solution is to remove the culprits from the heartland, so that the nation can become great again.

The media can express such populist interpretations by means of framing. Media framing entails the process by which journalists reconstruct societal issues into patterns of interpretation that are intended to be meaningful for the receiving audience (e.g., Scheufele, 1999, Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). According to Entman (1993), emphasis frames can be conceptualized along the lines of four separate frame-elements, which all attach a specific interpretation to different aspects of the framed issue. These four frame-elements are: the problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation. The ideational genus of populism most explicitly links up to the first three frame-elements: *Causal* responsibility for the *problem* situation defined as a negative societal development is *morally* shifted from the good people to the evil others. We can thus illustratively

---

define this populist frame as “The evil others are to blame for the crisis facing the good, innocent people of the heartland”.

Such populist frames can be used by journalists who report on societal issues in the media. By actively engaging in populist framing, journalists are assumed to contribute to populism *by* the media, also defined as media populism (Krämer, 2014; Mazzoleni, 2008). By engaging in media populism, journalists themselves frame issues in terms of a moral and causal divide between the common people and the culprit others. Media populism, then, can be defined as the media’s expression of populist ideas, independent of the political actors typically associated with populism (see Krämer, 2014). Such populist media framing is for example used in an article of the British newspaper the Sun, which actively stressed the populist divide between ordinary British citizens and the EU in the midst of the Brexit campaign: “If we stay, Britain will be engulfed in a few short years by this relentlessly expanding, German dominated federal state. For all David Cameron’s witless assurances, our powers and values WILL be further eroded” (The Sun, 2016). By means of populist framing, journalists of the Sun draw on their agency to interpret Europe as a negative issue along the lines of the moral and causal opposition between the native British people as in-group and the self-interested and corrupt politicians in the nation and European Union as vertically opposed out-groups.

The populist ideas expressed by interpreting journalists may take on different shapes depending on the construction of the out-group that is attributed blame for the people’s problems. For this reason, this dissertation will propose a refined conceptualization of media populism that distinguishes between different constructions of the people’s enemy. The conceptualization of media populism introduced in this dissertation will then be used to investigate the dynamics between populist ideas expressed on the supply-side and populist attitudes interpreted on the demand-side. To do so, we first have to understand *how* ‘the people’ can be more or less populist *themselves*.

### **Conceptualizing Populist Attitudes**

As touched upon earlier, this dissertation aims to provide insights into the intersections between populist ideas expressed on the supply-side of the media and the populist perceptions of the people on the demand-side. To more precisely assess this causal relationship, it is insufficient to only make a fine-grained distinction between different types of populist communication. Rather, we also have to take the variety in populist sentiments on the demand-side into account. Therefore, moving beyond traditional one-dimensional conceptualizations of populist attitudes (e.g., Akkerman et al., 2014; Hawkins et al., 2012; Rooduijn, 2014a), this dissertation introduces a more refined conceptualization to structure the populist attitudes of citizens on the demand-side.

In conceptualizing this dimensional structure, I will distinguish between different ways in which the central populist ‘us versus them’ divide can be interpreted by citizens. First, I follow traditional empirical research that has measured populist attitudes as the perceived divide between the ordinary people as in-group and *vertically* opposed elites as out-groups (Akkerman et al., 2014). This uni-dimensional approach has typically measured populist attitudes in line with the premises of populism as a ‘thin ideology’ that emphasizes the divide between the ‘good’ people and the ‘corrupt’ elites.

Next to shifting blame from the hardworking people to ‘evil’ elites, however, populist ideas can also point the finger at societal out-groups that are assumed to have caused the in-group’s problems on a cultural-symbolic or economic level (de Koster et al., 2013; Elchardus & Spruyt, 2016). In order to integrate this salient right-wing populist component into a more refined conceptualization of citizens’ populist attitudes, I aim to extend traditional measures of populist attitudes by incorporating exclusionist interpretations of the ‘people versus an out-group divide’. In doing so, this dissertation’s revisited multidimensional model of populist attitudes should be better able to map the attitudinal structure underlying populist ideas expressed on both the left and right wing of the political spectrum (e.g., Zaller, 1992).

### **Populist Media Use**

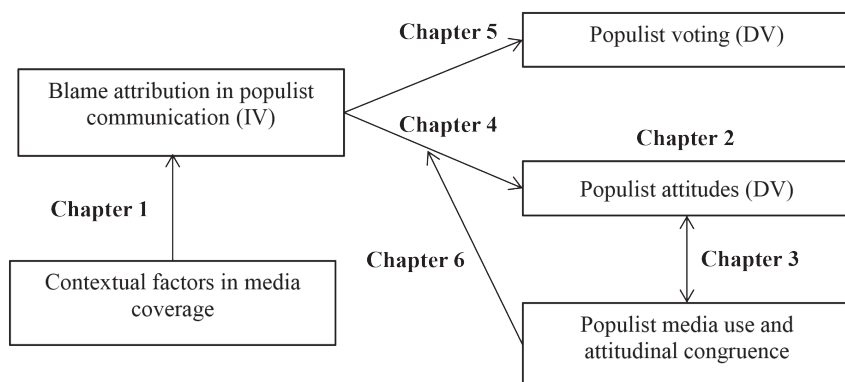
Although a growing body of literature has pointed to the particular media diet of populist voters (e.g., Mazzoleni, 2008), we still know too little about what specific media preferences are manifest amongst citizens with populist attitudes on different dimensions. After mapping the attitudinal structure of citizens’ populist attitudes, the next step of this dissertation is therefore to investigate *what* media are attractive for citizens with stronger populist attitudes. Doing so, this dissertation investigates to what extent citizens with populist attitudes on different dimensions are appealed to, and inclined to select, attitudinal-congruent media content.

The assumptions regarding the relationship between the media and populism are mostly based on the premise that tabloid newspapers pay more and more favorable attention to populist viewpoints than broadsheet newspapers (e.g., Mazzoleni, 2008). In line with this, people who expose themselves to tabloid media content are argued to be more aligned with populist ideas than those who use broadsheet media (Mazzoleni et al., 2003). The allegedly tabloidized media preferences of populist voters can best be understood as the existence of a parallelism between the core ideas of populism and tabloid media. In contrast to broadsheet newspapers, tabloids are assumed to maintain a stronger relationship with the mass audience and a weaker relationship to established political parties (e.g., Art, 2006; Klein, 1998).

Therefore, in line with the centrality of ordinary people emphasized in populist ideas, tabloids are assumed to devote more attention to the worldviews of ordinary citizens than broadsheets. Deriving from the premises of selective exposure, citizens are expected to self-select political content that reflects their prior interpretations of societal issues (Stroud, 2008). Because populist attitudes articulate the perceived centrality of common citizens while marking the opposition to culprit others, tabloid content that foregrounds attitudinal-congruent interpretations should consequentially be most appealing to voters with such attitudes (e.g., Mazzoleni et al., 2003). Next to reading tabloid newspapers, populist voters have been categorized by their preferences for entertainment-based opposed to hard-news content preferences (e.g., Klein, 1998). Just like the essential ideas of populism, entertainment content should provide a central stage for ordinary citizens and their experiences, while circumventing or discrediting elite sources.

Besides empirically testing these theoretical claims of the appeal of tabloid and entertainment media among citizens with populist attitudes, this dissertation also aims to further develop the link between the proposed typology of media populism and the multidimensional structure of populist attitudes. Based on selective exposure's premise that people self-select media content that fits their prior beliefs, people should prefer and select media content that frames issues in ways congruent with their own frames of reference. These attitudinal congruent messages should, in turn, be most persuasive.

## OUTLINE OF THE DISSERTATION



**Figure 0.2** Structuring of chapters in the dissertation

Throughout the chapters of this dissertation, I approach the supply-side and demand-side of populism, and their causal relationships, in the way as depicted in Figure 0.2. In the first chapter, I zoom in on the supply-side of the media: how are journalists constructing the central populist idea of attributing blame in the media? In the second and third chapter, I focus on the demand-side of interpreting citizens: In what ways are ‘the people’ populist themselves? And to what media are such populist citizens attracted to? In the fourth and fifth chapter, I investigate the causal relationship between supply-side and demand-side populisms using an experiment, in which I assess the effects of populist blame attribution on the sender-side on the receiver-side of the people: are people’s populist attitudes affected by exposure to populist messages? And in what ways can populist messages make people more inclined to vote for populist parties and less likely to vote for the government? The final two experiments in Chapter 6 respond to an important development in the study of media effects: selective exposure. Doing so, I aim to assess whether populist communication only results in persuasion among those with attitudinal-congruent views. In addition, this experimental set up allows us to shed more light on the question whether forced exposure to populist messages results in reactance among citizens with counter attitudinal priors.

The six chapters are originally written as stand-alone research articles. For this reason, the introductions and theoretical frameworks of the included chapters overlap on some points. The different chapters do, however, deal with the specific components highlighted in the outline of Figure 0.2.

### Research Questions

The conceptual building blocks and their interactions presented in this introduction are guided by this dissertation’s three-fold research question: (1) How are populist blame attributions expressed in the media and (2) interpreted by citizens, and (3) how can populist blame attributions by the media affect citizens’ political perceptions? This conceptual question can be broken down into six substantial research questions that this dissertation aims to answer in the subsequent chapters. First, I study journalists’ role in framing attributions of blame in newspapers, which links up to the first part of the three-fold question centralized in this dissertation:

1. *To what extent and how are journalists engaging in media populism by framing blame in populist ways?*

The second part of the dissertation aims to understand how populist attitudes are structured among the public:

2. *What is the dimensional structure underlying the populist attitudes of citizens?*

Using this conceptualization of populist attitudes, the next chapter investigates the



---

particularities of the media diet and media preferences of citizens with populist attitudes by posing the following research question:

3. *What are the media diets and preferences of citizens with populist attitudes?*

The final part of the dissertation's three-fold question is addressed in the three chapters that follow. First, I investigate how populism's central content feature of attributing blame to the elites affects citizens' blame perceptions and populist attitudes:

4. *To what extent and how does emotionalized blame attribution affect citizens' blame perceptions and populist attitudes?*

Looking beyond blame perceptions and populist attitudes, the next chapter aims to shed more light on the media effects of populism on political party preferences:

5. *How are preferences for populist parties affected by populist blame attributions?*

In the final chapter, the causal relationship between media populism and populist attitudes is investigated again, but now in the context of the contemporary fragmentized media environment, in which selective exposure is expected to play a central role:

6. *What is the role of selective exposure and attitudinal congruence in conditioning the effects of populist blame framing?*

### **Dissertation Context**

The data for the empirical studies reported in this dissertation are gathered in the Netherlands. To set the stage, it is important to outline a short history of populist uprisings in the Netherlands here. Populism has played a central role in Dutch politics since the 2000s. The rise and fast decline of Pim Fortuyn's right-wing populist party LPF (List Pim Fortuyn) in 2002 marks the start of influential Dutch populism (e.g., Schafraad et al., 2010). Although the success of this party was extremely short-lived, the LPF was the first populist political party that succeeded in obtaining a large share of the vote in the general elections, eventually obtaining 26 seats in parliament. After Fortuyn was assassinated in 2002, the Dutch political landscape witnessed a relatively quiet period, with a disintegrating LPF, and various new and smaller populist parties, for example One Netherlands, and the Party for the Netherlands.

Electoral successful right-wing populism re-entered the political stage with Geert Wilders' Freedom Party (PVV) in 2005. In 2010, the PVV managed to become the third largest party in the national elections, obtaining 24 seats in parliament. During the last decade, next to the continuing success of the PVV, various populist parties such as Verdonk's right-wing Proud of the Netherlands (Trots op Nederland), Thierry Baudet's Forum for Democracy and the 50 plus party (targeted at the senior native population) entered Dutch politics in the slipstream of the PVV, albeit with less electoral success at the time of writing.

As this dissertation zooms in on one particular country as the context for all studies, the consequences of this case study need to be discussed here. Importantly, the Netherlands has predominately faced influential populism on the right-wing. Although some authors may argue that the Socialist Party (SP) used to be a left-wing populist party (e.g., March, 2007; Rooduijn et al., 2014), recent electoral influence of Dutch populism has mainly been reserved to the right-wing (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007).

However, attributing blame to the establishment is a key feature of all forms of Dutch populism, whereas attributing blame to societal out-groups may not always be present. In other words, the focus on elitist blame attribution in Chapter 4 and 5 is externally valid in the context of this dissertation. Moreover, in Chapter 6, the effects of blame attribution to both the elites *and* immigrants are studied. In addition, as I study populist ideas independently of political actors, the success of populist political parties in the Netherlands may be of less importance. What is important, however, is the fact that populist ideas that oppose the people to both the elites and societal out-groups are highly salient in Dutch political opinion.

The media landscape of the Netherlands provides a suitable context to study the contents, effects, and underlying mechanisms of populist blame attributions. As the supply-side of Dutch media offers a variety of tabloid, quality, entertainment, and hard news outlets, we can test the predictions regarding the contextual factors surrounding the presence of media populism, as well as the appeal of different media types among voters with populist attitudes. Moreover, as citizens in the Netherlands have the opportunity to choose between a large selection of content on a daily basis, the context provides a generalizable case study to investigate the role of selective exposure to populist messages. Therefore, the findings of this dissertation are likely to be valid for other countries with a diversified media environment.

Some limitations of the focus on a single country context need to be emphasized here. First and foremost, the content analysis of media populism may reveal different journalistic patterns when applied to contexts that differ from the case study reported in Chapter 1. The role of interpretative journalism, for example, may be different in countries with less clear distinctions between tabloid and quality media outlets.

Regarding the insights gathered from nationally representative survey data (Chapter 2 and Chapter 3), populist attitudes may be structured differently in countries that differ in socio-political context. In countries that have witnessed more severe economic consequences of the recession, for example, people's opposition to economic elites may be more salient. Citizens living in countries that did not receive many migrants during the refugee crisis, may have weaker populist attitudes towards societal out-groups. Despite these contextual differences, the dimensional structure of populist attitudes proposed in this dissertation aims to be general enough to be substantiated with such country-specific meanings. And as it measures populist

---

attitudes as a matter of degree, citizens can be placed on different locations on the scales, without influencing the actual structure underlying their populist attitudes.

## **Data**

This dissertation draws on four data collections to investigate the contents, effects, and underlying mechanisms of populist communication in different communication contexts. The first chapter reports a quantitative content analysis for which the data was collected and coded by the National Center of Competence in Research on ‘Challenges to Democracy in the 21st Century’ (NCCR Democracy), funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation. Using this dataset, we specifically focused on six newspapers to investigate how the framing of blame is present in the journalistic styles of these media outlets ( $N = 867$ ).

Second, we draw on a survey with a representative sample of Dutch voters collected by TNS NIPO ( $N = 809$ ) to assess how the populist attitudes of citizens are structured. In the next step, we use this dataset to explore the appeal of populist media content among voters with populist attitudes.

Third, to assess the causal relationship between blame framing used by the media and the populist attitudes of citizens, we draw on an online survey experiment. The data were collected by the panel company Research Now ( $N = 721$ ). In the next step, we draw on this data to investigate how populist blame frames affect vote choice, and we explore the causal mechanism underlying this effect.

The fourth data collection also concerns experimental data, this time taking selective exposure into account. The data of this experiment was collected by Survey Sampling International and consists of two separate experiments ( $N = 1,120$ ).

## **Key Contributions**

This dissertation aims to advance the understanding of populism and populist communication in a multitude of ways. First, by explicitly linking the ideational core of populism to the literature on responsibility attribution, a more refined conceptualization of populism is foregrounded. As a second key contribution, this dissertation aims to provide more insights into the media’s and journalists’ role in framing populist ideas on the supply-side. More specifically, the existence of the active use of populist ideas expressed by the media, or media populism, has previously only been based on limited empirical evidence (Akkerman, 2011; Bos & Brants, 2014; Rooduijn, 2014b) or theoretical assumptions (e.g., Krämer, 2014). In this dissertation, in contrast, I investigate the contextual factors surrounding its presence in the media as well as its appeal among interpreting citizens.

Third, to better understand how such ideas resonate on the demand-side of interpreting citizens, this dissertation foregrounds a multidimensional approach to measuring populist

attitudes, which extends the tradition one-dimensional conceptualization of the perceived divide between the good people and the corrupt elites (e.g., Akkerman et al., 2014).

The final key contribution of this dissertation is that it empirically investigates the media effects of populist ideas expressed *independently* of populist actors (also see e.g., Rooduijn et al., 2014). I first experimentally manipulated emotionalized populist blame attributions to assess how populist attitudes, blame perceptions, and party preferences can be affected by populist attributions of blame framed in populist communication. The second experiment takes selective exposure into account by offering receivers the opportunity to self-select attitudinal congruent populist content. These experimental studies are one of the first contributions that investigate both the effects and underlying mechanisms of exposure to populist content (see for exceptions Bos et al., 2013; Rooduijn, de Lange & van der Brug, 2016).

---

## REFERENCES

- Akkerman, T. (2011). Friend or foe? Right-wing populism and the popular press in Britain and the Netherlands. *Journalism, 12*, 931-945.
- Akkerman, A., Mudde, C., & Zaslove, A. (2014). How populist are the people? Measuring populist attitudes in voters. *Comparative Political Studies, 47*(9), 1324-1353.
- Albertazzi, D., & McDonnell, D. (2008). *Twenty-first century populism: The spectre of Western European democracy*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Arceneaux, K., Johnson, M., & Murphy, C. (2012). Polarized political communication, oppositional media hostility, and selective exposure. *Journal of Politics, 74*(1), 174-186.
- Art, D. (2006). *The Politics of the Nazi Past in Germany and Austria*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Aslandis, P. (2015). Is populism an ideology? A refutation and a new perspective. *Political Studies, 64*(1), 88-104.
- Barstow, D. (2010, Feb 16). Tea party lights fuse for rebellion on right. *New York Times*, p. A1.
- Bos, L., & Brants, K. (2014). Populist rhetoric in politics and media: A longitudinal study of the Netherlands. *European Journal of Communication, 29*(6), 703-719.
- Bos, L., van der Brug, W., & de Vreese, C. H. (2011). How the media shape perceptions of right-wing populist leaders. *Political Communication, 28*(2), 182-206.
- Bos, L., van der Brug, W., & de Vreese, C. H. (2013). An experimental test of the impact of style and rhetoric on the perception of right-wing populist and mainstream party leaders. *Acta Politica, 48*(2), 192-208.
- Caiani, M. & della Porta, D. (2011). The elitist populism of the extreme right: A frame analysis of extreme right-wing discourses in Italy and Germany. *Acta Politica, 46*(2), 180-202.
- Canovan, M. (1999). Trust the people! Populism and the two faces of democracy. *Political Studies, 47*, 2-16.
- De Koster, W., Achterberg, P., van der Waal, J. (2013). The new right and the welfare state: The electoral relevance of welfare chauvinism and welfare populism in the Netherlands. *International Political Science Review, 34*(1), 3-20
- De la Torre, C. (2000). *Populist Seduction in Latin America*. Athens: Ohio University Press.
- Duckitt, J., & Sibley, C. G. (2010). Personality, ideology, prejudice, and politics: A dual-process motivational model. *Journal of Personality, 78*(6), 1861-1894.
- Elchardus, M., & Spruyt, B. (2012). The contemporary contradictions of egalitarianism: an empirical analysis of the relationship between the old and new left/right alignments. *European Political Science Review, 4*(2), 217 - 239.
- Elchardus, M., & Spruyt, B. (2016). Populism, persistent republicanism and declinism. An empirical analysis of populism as a thin ideology. *Government and Opposition, 51*(1), 111-133.
- Entman, R. M. (1993). Framing: toward clarification of a fractured paradigm. *Journal of Communication, 43*(4), 51-59.

- Fennema, M. (2005). Populist parties of the right. In J. Rydgren (Ed.), *Movements of Exclusion: Radical right-wing populism* (pp. 1-24). New York: Nova Science Publishers.
- Gamson, W. A., & Modigliani, A. (1989). Media discourse and public opinion on nuclear power: A constructionist approach. *American Journal of Sociology*, 95(1), 1-37.
- Gomez, B. T., & Wilson, J. M. (2008). Political sophistication and attributions of blame in the wake of hurricane Katrina. *Publius*, 38(4), 633–650.
- Hawkins, K. A., Riding, S. & Mudde, C. (2012). Measuring populist attitudes. (Political Concepts Committee on Concepts and Methods No. 55). Mexico City: C&M.
- Hawkins, K. A. (2009). Is Chávez populist? Measuring populist discourse in comparative perspective. *Comparative Political Studies*, 42(8), 1040-1067.
- Heijne, B. (2011). The Netherlands: Prosperity and populism. *World Policy Journal*, 28(2), 30–33.
- Hobolt, S. B., & Tilley, J. (2014). *Blaming Europe? Responsibility without accountability in the European Union*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hogg, M. A., Meehan, C., & Farquharson, J. (2010). The solace of radicalism: Self uncertainty and group identification in the face of threat. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 46(6), 1061–1066.
- Iyengar, S. (1989). How citizens think about national issues: A matter of responsibility. *American Journal of Political Science*, 33, 878–900.
- Iyengar, S. (1991). *Is anyone responsible? How television frames political issues*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Jagers, J., & Walgrave, S. (2007). Populism as political communication style: An empirical study of political parties' discourse in Belgium. *European Journal of Political Research*, 46(3), 319-345.
- Klein, U. (1998). Tabloidised political coverage in Bild-Zeitung. *Javnost/The Public*, 5, 79–93.
- Krämer, B. (2014). Media populism: A conceptual clarification and some theses on its effects. *Communication Theory*, 24, 42-60.
- Kriesi, H-P. (2014). West-Europa Het toenemende belang van de culturele dimensie. In M. Bovens, P. Dekker, & W. Tiemeijer (Eds.), *Gescheiden werelden?* (pp. 59–78). Den Haag: SCP en WRR.
- Kriesi, H-P., Grande, E., Lachat, R., Dolezal, M., Simon Bornschie, S., & Frey, T. (2006). Globalization and the transformation of the national political space: six European countries compared. *European Journal of Political Research*, 45(6), 921-957.
- Laclau, E. (1977). Towards a theory of populism. In: *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory*. London: New Left Books.
- Lenz, G. S. (2009). Learning and opinion change, not priming: Reconsidering the priming hypothesis. *American Journal of Political Science*, 53(4), 821–837.
- Malhotra, N., & Kuo, A. G. (2008). Attributing blame: The public's response to Hurricane Katrina. *Journal of Politics* 70(1), 120-135.

- 
- March, L. (2007). From vanguard of the proletariat to Vox Populi: Left-populism as a shadow of contemporary socialism. *SAIS Review of International Affairs*, 27(1), 63–77.
- Matthes, J., & Schmuck, D. (2015). The effects of anti-immigrant right-wing populist ads on implicit and explicit attitudes: A moderated mediation model. *Communication Research*, (ahead-of-print).
- Mazzoleni, G. (2008). Populism and the Media. In D. Albertazzi & D. McDonnell (Eds.), *Twenty-First Century Populism: The Spectre of Western European Democracy* (pp. 49-64). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Mazzoleni, G., Stewart, J., & Horsfield, B. (2003). *The media and neo-populism: A contemporary comparative analysis*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Moffitt, B. (2014). How to perform crisis: A model for understanding the key role of crisis in contemporary populism. *Government and Opposition*, 50(2), 189–217.
- Mudde, C. (2004). The populist zeitgeist. *Government and Opposition*, 39, 542–564.
- Mudde, C. (2007). *Populist radical right parties in Western Europe*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Oesch, D. (2008). Explaining workers' support for right-wing populist parties in Western Europe: Evidence from Austria, Belgium, France, Norway, and Switzerland. *International Political Science Review*, 29, 349-373.
- Pop, V. (2012, April 25). Van Rompuy: 'Winds of populism' threaten free movement. The EU Observer. Retrieved from <https://euobserver.com/justice/116032>
- Rooduijn, M. (2014a). Vox populismus: a populist radical right attitude among the public? *Nations and Nationalism*, 20(1), 80-92. doi: 10.1111/nana.12054
- Rooduijn, M. (2014b). The mesmerising message: The diffusion of populism in public debates in Western European media. *Political Studies*, 62(4), 726-744.
- Rooduijn, M., & Pauwels, T. (2011). Measuring populism: comparing two methods of content analysis. *West European Politics*, 34(6), 1272-1283.
- Rooduijn, M., van der Brug, W., & de Lange, S. L. (2016). Expressing or fuelling discontent? The relationship between populist voting and political discontent. *Electoral Studies* 43, 32-40.
- Rooduijn, M., de Lange, S. L., & van der Brug, W. (2014). A populist zeitgeist? Programmatic contagion by populist parties in Western Europe. *Party Politics*, 20(4), 563-575.
- Ruzza, C., & Fella, S. (2011). Populism and the Italian right. *Acta Politica*, 46(2), 158-179.
- Schafraad, P. H. J., Scheepers, P. L. H., & Wester, F. (2010). Coverage of the far right in three Dutch newspapers. Characteristics and trends 1986-2004. In F. Virchow (Ed.), *The media and the far right* (pp. 34-61). Frankfurt, Germany: Peter Lang.
- Scheufele, D. A. (1999). Framing as a theory of media effects. *Journal of Communication*, 49(1), 103–122.
- Stroud, N. J. (2008). Media use and political predispositions: Revisiting the concept of selective exposure. *Political Behavior*, 30(3), 341-366.
- Taggart, P. (2000). *Populism*. Buckingham & Philadelphia: Open University press.

- Taggart, P. (2004). Populism and representative politics in contemporary Europe. *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 9(3), 269-288.
- Tajfel, H. (1978). Social categorization, social identity, and social comparisons. In H. Tajfel (Ed.), *Differentiation Between Social Groups*. London: Academic Press.
- The Sun (2016, June 13). SUN SAYS We urge our readers to beLEAVE in Britain and vote to quit the EU on June 23. *The Sun*. Retrieved from <http://www.sun.co.uk/>.
- Tilley, J., & Hobolt, S. B. (2011). Is the government to blame? An experimental test of how partisanship shapes perceptions of performance and responsibility. *Journal of Politics*, 73(2), 316-330.
- Uitermark, J., Oudenampsen, M., Van Heerikhuizen, B., & Van Reekum, R. (2012). Populisme en de sociologische verbeelding [Populism and the sociological imagination]. *Sociologie*, 8(1), 3-12.
- Vossen, K. (2010). Populism in the Netherlands after Fortuyn: Rita Verdonk and Geert Wilders compared. *Perspectives on European Politics and Society*, 11(1), 22-38.
- Weyland, K. (2001). Clarifying a contested concept: Populism in the study of Latin American politics. *Comparative Politics*, 34(1), 1-22.
- Zaller, J. R. (1992). *The nature and origins of mass opinion*. New York: Cambridge University Press.