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

Hameleers, M.

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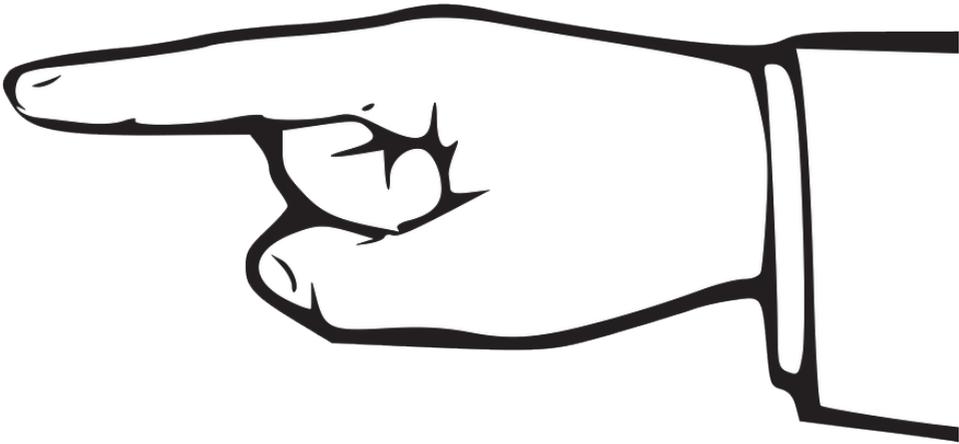
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## CHAPTER 5



5

# **Framing Blame: Toward a Better Understanding of the Effects of Populist Communication on Populist Party Preferences<sup>18 19</sup>**

<sup>18</sup> Manuscript under review.

<sup>19</sup> This chapter is based on the experiment reported in chapter 4, but focuses on a different dependent variable, moderators and mediator. Building on the results presented in Chapter 4, this chapter aims to disentangle the mechanism by which populist communication affects citizens' vote choice.

## ABSTRACT

Although previous research has argued that the media play a crucial role in populism's success, we know too little about *how* populist messages affect preferences for populist parties. To advance this knowledge, we conducted an experiment in which the core of populist rhetoric – constructing the people as innocent in-group opposed to the establishment as culprit out-group – was manipulated in newspaper articles. The findings indicate that when political elites are blamed for a salient national problem, people are *more* likely to vote for a populist party and *less* likely to vote for the largest party in government. Populist vote intentions are *indirectly* affected via blame perceptions. These findings offer important insights into the media's role in the electoral success of populism.

Populist political parties have become increasingly more popular over the last decades. In the Netherlands, for example, Wilders' right-wing Freedom Party became the third largest party in the general elections of 2010, winning 24 seats in parliament. On the left, Syriza made it into Greece's government in 2015. In Latin America, populism has been influential for more than a century (e.g., Kaufman & Stallings, 1991). The success of populist movements has not gone unnoticed by scholars, as a large body of research has started to explain populist success from both the supply-side of populist parties and communication (e.g., Jagers & Walgrave, 2007) and the demand-side of populist voters (e.g., Mudde, 2007).

On the supply-side, media coverage is argued to play a pivotal role in getting populist viewpoints across (e.g., Krämer, 2014). The issues addressed by populist parties are argued to be newsworthy, which enhances the visibility of populist actors and statements in the mass media (e.g., Boomgaarden & Vliegenthart, 2007; Rooduijn, 2014). People are assumed to be exposed to populist messages on a regular basis, which may affect how people think about politics and society in important ways (e.g., Krämer, 2014; Mazzoleni, 2008; Mudde, 2004). Mudde, for example, has claimed that media coverage has partially caused the success of populist parties. As other scholars have argued that populist communication is highly persuasive, the role of the media in populism's global electoral success should not be underestimated (Hawkins, 2010; Rooduijn, 2014).

Although scholars have increasingly emphasized the relevance of the media in populism's success, empirical research that causally related exposure to populist messages to populist voting is scarce (for exceptions, see Bos, van der Brug & de Vreese, 2011; Sheets, Bos & Boomgaarden, 2016). Despite these few examples, little is known about *how* populist messages affect populist voting. To arrive at a better understanding of the effects of populist messages on populist voting and the mechanisms underlying

these effects, this chapter investigates how messages that frame the ideational core of populism, the moral and causal opposition between the good people and the corrupt elites, affect people's intentions to vote for a populist party.

There are good reasons to assume populism is inherently about attributions of blame. Populist actors blame more targets than mainstream political actors do (Vasilopoulou, Halikiopoulou & Exadaktylos, 2013). Populist messages thus not simply revolve around the construction of the "good" people versus the "corrupt" elites, they also emphasize that the people are blameless victims whereas the corrupt elites are responsible for causing the problems experienced by the people. Attributions of responsibility are found to be persuasive: Messages that emphasize who is responsible for causing societal problems affect people's beliefs about credit and blame (Iyengar, 1991). Evaluations of responsibility, in turn, affect people's vote choice (Bellucci, 2014; Marsh & Tilley, 2010). Against this backdrop, responsibility attribution provides a relevant framework for understanding the effects of populist communication on vote choice. The central question this chapter aims to answer is *how* citizens' preferences for the successful Dutch populist Freedom Party and the largest party in government are affected by populist messages that blame the corrupt political elites for the problems of the heartland.

Integrating the research on populism and attributions of responsibility, we conducted an online between-subjects experiment ( $N = 721$ ). In this experiment, we manipulated the populist core idea of the opposition between the blameless people and the culprit elites by framing blame; either as causal responsibility attributed to the political elites in the EU and the national government or by attributing no blame (also see Chapter 4). The results of our study indicate that populist messages that revolve around blame attribution to the elites lead to stronger preferences for the populist Freedom Party. People with a stronger tie to national identity and a weaker tie to Europe are most likely to align their right-wing populist party preferences with populist messages. These findings allow us to better understand via *which* message characteristics the media contribute to the success of populist political parties.

### **The Effects of Populist Communication on Party Preferences**

Populism is characterized by its antagonistic construction of reality. Populist ideology holds that society is divided into two homogenous groups: the people versus the elites. This binary opposition also involves an important moral component as the people are constructed as the innocent in-group, which is betrayed by the evil out-group of the corrupt elites (e.g., Canovan, 1999; Mudde, 2004; Ziller & Schübel, 2015).

The populist distinction between the good people and the corrupt elites can also be emphasized, or framed, in media messages. Mazzoleni (2003) and Krämer (2014)

refer to the concept of media populism to describe the process by which the media actively construct the populist discourse. Reasoned from this conceptualization, it has been argued that media outlets, such as tabloid newspapers, engage in populism *themselves* (e.g., Mazzoleni, 2003). The media may actively engage in populist news coverage by framing issues in binary oppositions of the innocent people versus the corrupt elites (Caiani & della Porta, 2011). By means of populist framing, the media can emphasize a specific causal interpretation by shifting blame from the people to causally responsible others (Entman, 1993). We therefore define the populist master frame as the emphasis on causal interpretations that attribute blame to the corrupt elites who are not representing the “blameless” people and their will (also see earlier chapters).

Media-initiated blame attributions are found to affect citizens’ interpretation of societal issues in important ways (Iyengar, 1991; Kühne, Weber, & Sommer, 2015). Specifically, when actors are framed as responsible for causing political issues, they are more likely to be perceived as a negative influence (Iyengar, 1989). It has also been demonstrated that evaluations of responsibility affect people’s vote choice: If citizens believe that the government is responsible, they are *less* likely to vote for it (Bellucci, 2014; Marsh & Tilley, 2010). Because populist messages are assumed to activate negative schemata of the “culprit” elites among receivers, people who are exposed to populist blame frames are most likely to turn to populist political parties that oppose these elites as well (Vasilopoulou et al., 2013).

Attributions of responsibility are related to populism in important ways. In populism, “the people” are represented as the innocent in-group betrayed by the corrupt political elites (e.g., Canovan, 1999). Attributions of responsibility that shift blame for negative outcomes from the “good” citizens to the “evil” politicians, relate to a similar process of social differentiation by constructing the people as the innocent in-group victimized by the culpable other. Such attributions of causal responsibility for negative outcomes thus touch upon the core definition of populism. Populist blame attribution attaches a moral component to the distinction between the centrality of the ordinary citizens and the culprit elites: the ordinary people are blameless and powerless whereas the elites are evil and have too much corrupting power. But *how* can such blame frames affect people’s preferences for political parties?

Research on attributions of responsibility indicates that when responsibility is attributed to the government or the EU, people are likely to accept this culprit out-group construction in their political attitudes (Hobolt, Tilley, & Wittrock, 2013). Populist actors point their finger to their political opponents in the government and the EU more frequently than mainstream politicians do (Vasilopoulou et al., 2013). Hence, populist parties, more than others, emphasize how the establishment has

damaged the people's heartland (Mols & Jetten, 2014). As blame attributions are frequently articulated in the speeches of populist parties, people should associate these parties with blame attributions as they articulate the causal and moral divide between "us" and "them".

Previous research indeed found that people align their political opinions with responsibility attributions (e.g., Hobolt et al., 2013). Therefore, populist attributions of blame should result in preferences for political parties that are known to attribute blame to the political elites themselves. Preferences for the largest party in government, in contrast, should be *lower* for citizens exposed to messages that blame the elites. In line with this reasoning, the central hypotheses of this study are: H1a. Populist blame attributions *positively* affect populist party preferences. H1b. Populist blame attributions *negatively* affect governmental party preferences.

## WHO ARE MOST LIKELY TO BE AFFECTED BY POPULIST MESSAGES?

### Political Cynicism

Extant research on the demand-side of populism frequently refers to citizens' political discontent and distrust as motives to vote for populist political parties (e.g., Van Kessel, 2011). Populist parties are known for their articulation of distrust in the political establishment (Canovan, 1999). Doing so, they are not only shifting blame for negative outcomes to the government or the EU, they also emphasize that these institutions cannot be trusted as they do not represent the people's will. People with a cynical view on politics share this critical worldview, because they also believe that the establishment is not listening to the common voter's will.

In line with this, Bos, van der Brug and de Vreese (2013) found that populist communication only affects the perceived legitimacy of (right-wing) populist actors among the politically cynical. We therefore expect that the effects of populist blame attributions on voting intentions will be strongest for the politically cynical. Specifically, among these citizens, exposure to populist attributions of blame will lead to *more* preference for a populist party (H2a) and *less* preference for the largest party in government (H2b).

### Exclusionist Identity Attachment

Research on attributions of responsibility indicates that citizens assign credit or blame in a biased way: Parties close to the individual are not blamed for negative outcomes whereas opposed parties are not rewarded for positive outcomes (e.g., Marsh & Tilley, 2010). In line with this reasoning, people's attachment to the in-

group opposed to the out-group is likely to affect the way in which they process information on responsibility.

In a similar vein, although populism can be both inclusionary and exclusionary, national identity attachment may play a biasing role for populist attributions of blame. The ordinary native people can be perceived of as the imagined community of the blameless in-group (Taggart, 2004). The quest for belonging to this community may motivate people to vote for right-wing populist parties that promise to regenerate feelings of belonging to the in-group (e.g., Fennema, 2005; Mols & Jetten, 2014). Especially those citizens that feel close to the nation are expected to feel attracted to populist rhetoric that taps into these sentiments of belonging. Against this backdrop, we expect that the right-wing populist vote choice of people with stronger national identity attachments is affected most by populist attributions of blame.

Just like populism, social identity is a relational process (Tajfel, 1978). Indeed, right-wing populist voters are characterized by their *exclusionist* perception of social identity (e.g., Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008; Caiani & della Porta, 2011). People who are likely to support right-wing populist movements view people outside their nation as a threat to national identity. Europe and European integration can be understood as such a threat to the nation state (Carey, 2002). Against this backdrop, we expect that the effects of blame attributions on propensity to vote for a right-wing populist party are strongest at *higher* levels of national identity attachment (H3a) and *lower* levels of European identity attachment (H3b). Taken together, the effects should be strongest for citizens with an *exclusive* identity attachment (H3c).

### **The Mechanism behind the Effects of Populist Blame Frames**

Ceteris paribus, we hypothesized that mediatized populist attributions of blame to the elites affect people's preferences for political parties. However, the underlying mechanism may be less direct. Research on attributions of responsibility found that blame assigned to political actors activate negative stereotypes about these actors (Hewstone, 1989). Extrapolated to populist blame attributions, populist messages that attribute blame to the EU or the national government may enhance people's beliefs that the national government or the EU are responsible for causing the problems of their heartland (see Chapter 4). These negative perceptions may in turn be used to hold the government accountable at the elections: The responsible political elites are punished and populist parties that are known to be critical of these corrupt political elites are rewarded at the ballot box.

In line with this reasoning, we expect that attributions of blame in populist communication activate blame perceptions towards the political elites in the national government and the EU. Since citizens do not always have access to factual information on causal responsibility (e.g., Cutler, 2004; Hewstone, 1989),

these blame perceptions are subsequently used as informational cue when forming a preference for political parties (see also Marsh & Tilley, 2010). H4: The effects of populist blame attributions on populist party preferences are mediated by blame perceptions.

## METHOD

### Design

This chapter reports the results of an experiment with a 3 (Populist blame attribution: the EU versus the national government versus no blame attribution) between-subjects factorial design with control group (also see Chapter 4).

Respondents were randomly assigned to one of the experimental groups. We compared elitist blame attribution with the no-blame control groups<sup>20</sup>. As robustness check, we also analyzed the hypothesized effects for both blame attribution conditions separately. Although the results point in the similar direction, the effects for blame attributed to the government are highly significant whereas the effects for blame attributed to the EU are only marginally significant.

### Participants

The sample reflected national variation regarding age, gender, voting behaviour and educational level as close as possible, albeit our sample has an overrepresentation of younger and higher educated citizens (see Appendix 5.B for comparison census data). Research Now collected the data from a nationally representative panel. Eligible participants over 18 years old were invited via e-mail and could voluntarily opt-in for the online survey experiment by clicking on a link. They were compensated with credits. To ensure participants were both willing and able to read the experimental stimuli, we used a screening question. Only participants that complied with this instruction were used for subsequent analyses. 37.9% of all respondents were retained in the analyses ( $N = 721$ ). The selection of participants may have biased our findings, as people who were unwilling or unable to read texts and comply to instructions are underrepresented. However, for the online experimental manipulations to succeed, we needed to ensure that participants were actually exposed to the treatment. The

<sup>20</sup> The experiment contained another factor that was omitted in this study: the emotional style, which was manipulated into anger and fear. We controlled for this factor in all analyses. We report on the outcome of this factor in Chapter 4. As robustness check, we compared the effects of blame attribution for both emotional styles separately. The effects pointed in the same, hypothesized, direction. Overall, the effects for fear were stronger than the effects for anger, which supports the findings presented in Chapter 4.

mean age of the participants was 47.24 years ( $SD = 16.62$ ) and 52.9% were female.

### **Procedure**

After accessing the online survey environment, participants were presented with information on the study and were asked to give their consent. Next, they completed the screening question. Participants were randomly assigned to the experimental conditions or the control group. In all conditions, they were exposed to a similar online newspaper article that contained the treatment or control condition. The newspaper article was visible for at least 30 seconds. Only after this time, participants could proceed to the post treatment questionnaire. After they finished, they were debriefed and thanked for their cooperation. The complete procedure lasted for approximately 15 minutes.

### **Stimuli**

Participants in all conditions were exposed to a newspaper article about the worsening Dutch labour market situation. The external validity was optimized by using existing online newspaper articles of Dutch news websites as template for the stimuli. The articles were thoroughly pre-tested in a pilot study ( $N = 137$ ). We manipulated populist blame attribution by emphasizing that the ordinary Dutch people's crisis on the labour market was caused by either the 'incompetent' and 'failing' EU or the national government. These levels of governance were attributed blame for causing the worsening labour market situation facing the ordinary people. In the control condition, the same news story was presented. However, this version did not connect the societal development to the populist opposition between the people and the establishment.

All newspaper articles were equal in length and only the independent variables varied between conditions. All sources, statistics, situations, styles, and lay-out were held constant between conditions. One could argue that our manipulations were relatively weak in terms of some definitions of populist rhetoric as highly dramatized, simplified, focused on common sense, and hostile (e.g., Mudde, 2004; Uitermark et al., 2012; Taggart, 2000). However, extant literature does not agree on whether such elements are necessarily populist, or just potential facilitators of the core populist message revolving around the 'good' people versus the 'evil' elites. In line with these identified central content features, and the consensus of the populist core as the opposition between the ordinary people and the corrupt elites, we therefore only manipulated populist blame attributions.

### Manipulation Checks

The manipulation of populist blame attribution to the establishment was successful:  $F(1,713) = 50.22, p < 0.001$ . In the blame attribution conditions, participants were significantly more likely to believe the newspaper article framed the worsening labour market situation as a development caused by the establishment ( $M = 5.01, SD = 1.23$ ) than in the no blame attribution conditions ( $M = 4.30, SD = 1.41$ ).

### Dependent Variable

Participants were asked to rate the likelihood they would ever vote for a particular political party. For each of the main Dutch political parties, participants estimated the likelihood they would ever cast their vote on this particular party on a 0 to 100 scale (0 *I think I will never vote for this party*, 100 *It is very possible that I will once vote for this party*). Two political parties were of main interest: the right-wing populist party PVV<sup>21</sup> ( $M = 30.38, SD = 36.28$ ) and the largest party in government VVD<sup>22</sup> ( $M = 34.19, SD = 33.46$ ).

### Moderators

**Political distrust/cynicism.** Political distrust/cynicism was measured with five items measured on a 7-point scale (Bos & van der Brug, 2010) (see Appendix 5.A). An exploratory factor analysis provided support for a unidimensional structuring of political distrust/cynicism. One component with an eigenvalue of 2.91 explaining 58.1% of the variance was extracted as the optimal solution. Based on this outcome, a scale of political distrust/cynicism was constructed ( $M = 4.49, SD = 1.14, \text{Cronbach's } \alpha = 0.81$ ). Higher scores on the scale indicate more cynicism/distrust in politics<sup>23</sup>.

**Exclusionist identity attachment.** Social identity attachment was measured with two scales both consisting of three items measured on a 7-point scale: Dutch identity attachment ( $M = 5.43, SD = 1.26, \text{Cronbach's } \alpha = 0.92$ ) and European identity attachment ( $M = 3.84, SD = 1.49, \text{Cronbach's } \alpha = 0.86$ )<sup>24</sup>. The items are included in Appendix 5.A.

21 We excluded the Socialist Party (SP) because extant literature has not reached consensus whether this party is actually populist.

22 The other governmental party, PvdA, is not included because it has a smaller share in government than the VVD. Moreover, the VVD has delivered the prime-minister, which makes this party most visible as the government.

23 For the interaction plots, the threshold value for higher cynicism was set at 4.01. Analyses with alternative recoding (e.g.,  $M \pm SD$ ) yielded similar results.

24 For the interaction plots, the threshold value for higher attachment was also set at 4.01. Analyses with alternative recoding (e.g.,  $M \pm SD$ ) yielded similar results.

## Mediator

**Perceptions of the establishment's responsibility.** After exposure to the stimuli and prior to the assessment of the dependent variable, participants were asked to indicate which actors, situations or institutions *they* themselves believed were causally responsible for the worsening labour market situation described in the newspaper article. Following Iyengar's (1991) approach, participants' perceptions of blame were measured with an open-ended question, which was formulated as follows: *The article you just read argued that the labour market situation is worsening in 2015 and 2016. One could think of many potential causes for this, and people differ greatly in their perceptions of causes. Can you describe who or what you feel is most responsible for causing this situation? You can list all your thoughts in the space provided below.*

The responses to this question were recoded into two categories: 1 *blame attributed to the elites*, 0 *blame not attributed to the elites*. Inter-coder reliability was assessed for a sample of 141 (20.0%) randomly selected open-ended questions that were coded by two independent coders. Krippendorff's alpha was .86, which points to a satisfactory reliability.

## Randomization Check

A between-conditions randomization check on the control variables was conducted, which did not reveal significant differences between experimental conditions on controls<sup>25</sup>.

## Analysis

We used linear regression analyses to test hypotheses 1 through 3. We used two analysis strategies to test the mediation model described in hypothesis 4. First, we used Structural Equation Modelling with maximum likelihood estimation. Second, we estimated the causal mediation model with the R-package "Mediation" (Tingley et al., 2014). For this analysis, we estimated the model with robust standard errors and Quasi-Bayesian Confidence Intervals. 1000 simulations were used to estimate the model.

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<sup>25</sup> The test of the control variables revealed no significant differences between conditions. Age ( $\chi^2(384) = 372.97, p = \text{n.s.}$ ), gender ( $\chi^2(6) = 2.77, p = \text{n.s.}$ ), education ( $\chi^2(12) = 12.70, p = \text{n.s.}$ ), political efficacy EU ( $\chi^2(36) = 39.02, p = \text{n.s.}$ ), Dutch political efficacy ( $\chi^2(36) = 47.65, p = \text{n.s.}$ ), previous vote ( $\chi^2(30) = 29.94, p = \text{n.s.}$ ), attitudes towards the labour market ( $\chi^2(36) = 42.06, p = \text{n.s.}$ ), and exposure to the news ( $\chi^2(42) = 35.79, p = \text{n.s.}$ ).

## RESULTS

### Direct Effects of Blame Attributions on Party Preferences

In line with hypothesis 1a, participants' intention to vote for the populist Freedom Party PVV was positively and significantly affected by populist attributions of blame:  $b = 6.53$  ( $SE = 3.17$ ),  $p = 0.040$ , 95% CI [0.30, 12.75],  $R^2 = 0.01$ . This means that participants who were exposed to populist messages that blamed the establishment were significantly more likely to vote for the right-wing populist party PVV than people exposed to a message that did not use the blame frame (see also Table 5.1). Participants were significantly *less* likely to vote for the largest governmental party VVD when exposed to populist attributions of blame:  $b = -5.71$  ( $SE = 2.83$ ),  $p = 0.040$ , 95% CI [-11.28, -0.15],  $R^2 = 0.01$ . Based on these results, H1b can also be supported. Exposure to messages that actively engage in populism by framing attributions of blame resulted in *increasing* support for the populist party PVV and *decreasing* support for the largest party in government. In the next steps, we will assess how these effects are moderated by political cynicism and identity attachment, respectively.

**Table 5.1** Mean scores of voting intentions for no blame attribution versus blame attribution

	<i>No blame attribution</i>	<i>Blame attribution</i>
PVV (populist party)	26.66 <sub>a</sub> (34.88)	33.19 <sub>b</sub> (37.11)
VVD (governmental party)	37.50 <sub>a</sub> (34.06)	31.78 <sub>b</sub> (32.85)

*Note.* Propensities to vote for political parties were measured on a scale ranging from 0 to 100. Standard deviations are reported between brackets. Means with differing subscripts within rows differ significantly at the  $p < .05$  level based on independent samples t-tests.

### Are the Politically Cynical Most Susceptible to Persuasion by Populist Messages?

To assess whether the effects of populist blame attributions are strongest for the politically cynical, we estimated a multiple linear regression model (see Table 5.2). Although the model with the interaction effect fitted the data well, ( $F(3, 527) = 24.97$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $R^2 = 0.12$ ), the interaction effect of populist blame attribution and political cynicism on propensity to vote for the populist party PVV was not significant (see Table 5.2). This means that blame attributions did not have a stronger effect on populist party preferences for the politically cynical. These results are not supportive of H2a.

Although political cynicism does not significantly moderate the effects of populist messages on *populist* party preferences, we did find a significant *negative* interaction effect of political cynicism and populist blame attribution on propensity to vote for the government (see Table 5.3). In support of H2b, the politically cynical are thus *less* likely to vote for the government when exposed to populist attributions of blame (see Figure 5.1).

**Table 5.2** Regression model predicting the effects of blame attribution and political distrust/cynicism on propensity to vote for a populist political party (PVV)

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Model I</i>	<i>Model II</i>
(constant)	-4.84 (3.74)	-4.88 (3.71)
Blame	3.95 (2.93) <sup>†</sup>	3.95 (2.98) <sup>†</sup>
Cynicism	10.68 (1.27) <sup>***</sup>	10.46 (2.05) <sup>***</sup>
Blame x Cynicism		0.35 (2.62)
Adjusted $R^2$	0.121	0.122
$F$ for change in $R^2$		0.02

<sup>†</sup> $p < 0.10$ ; \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

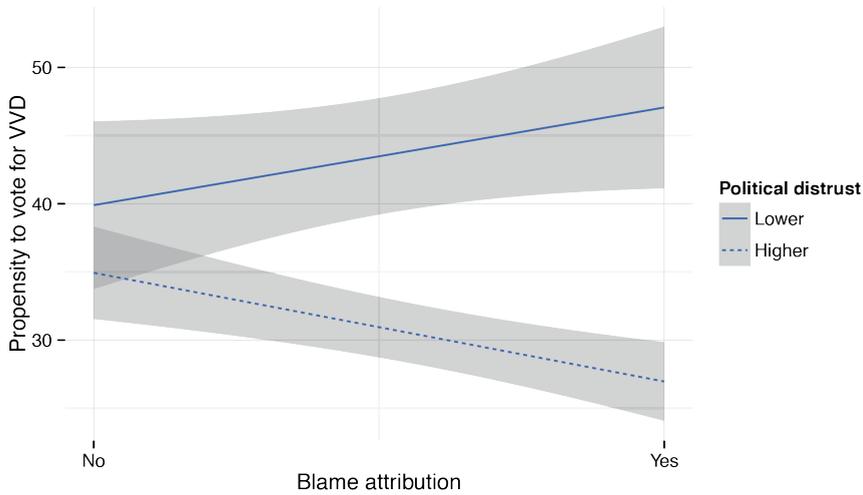
Note. Two-tailed tests. Unstandardized regression weights. Standard errors reported between brackets.

**Table 5.3** Regression model predicting the effects of blame attribution and political distrust/cynicism on propensity to vote for the governmental party VVD

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Model I</i>	<i>Model II</i>
(constant)	-2.05(3.50)	-0.60 (3.54)
Blame	-5.91 (3.13)*	-6.69 (3.15)*
Cynicism	-8.24 (1.22) <sup>***</sup>	-4.47 (2.00)*
Blame x Cynicism		-6.19 (2.51)*
Adjusted $R^2$	0.076	0.086
$F$ for change in $R^2$		6.06*

\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

Note. Two-tailed tests. Unstandardized regression weights. Standard errors reported between brackets.



**Figure 5.1** Interaction effect of blame attribution and political distrust/cynicism on propensity to vote for the governmental party VVD.

### The Role of Exclusionist Identity in the Media Effects of Populist Blame Attributions

In support of H3a, the effect of blame attributions on propensity to vote for the right-wing populist party PVV is positive at higher levels of national identity attachment (see Table 5.4). Moreover, the effect of blame attributions on populist party preference is negative at higher levels of European identity attachment. This effect is, however, not significant.

The interaction effects of blame attribution and identity attachment on propensity to vote for the Freedom Party PVV are graphically depicted in Figure 5.2 and Figure 5.3. As shown in Figure 5.2, participants with a *stronger* attachment to national identity in the blame attribution condition were more likely to vote for the PVV compared to stronger attached participants in the no blame attribution condition. For weaker attached, the effect was the other way around. In other words, for people with a weaker national identity attachment, blame attribution resulted in a *lower* intention to vote for the PVV compared to no blame attribution. For higher levels of national attachment, in contrast, blame attribution resulted in a *stronger* preference

for the PVV. As can be seen in Figure 5.3, participants with a *weaker* attachment to European identity in the blame attribution condition were more likely to vote for the PVV compared to weaker attached participants in the no blame attribution condition. Blame attribution had no effects for participants with a stronger attachment to Europe. In other words, the graphs suggest that the vote choice of participants with an *exclusive* perception of identity were most strongly affected by populist attributions of blame.

As can be seen in Table 5.4, the three-way interaction effect of blame attribution with national and European identity attachment on populist party preference is negative and marginally significant. As shown by the dashed line on the left-side of Figure 5.4, participants with an *exclusive* identity attachment are indeed affected strongest by blame attributions. A comparison of the mean scores also indicate that the effect of blame attribution on populist party preference is *strongest* amongst those with an *exclusionist* social identity: In the no blame condition, these participants have a mean populist party preference of 28.79 ( $SD = 35.88$ ). In the blame condition, this was substantially and significantly higher ( $M = 50.08$ ,  $SD = 39.87$ ;  $t = 3.97$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , 95% CI [-31.85, -10.73]). In contrast, participants with a stronger or weaker attachment to both the nation and Europe and participants with a weaker attachment to the nation and a stronger attachment to Europe were *not* affected significantly by populist attributions of blame, which supports H3c.

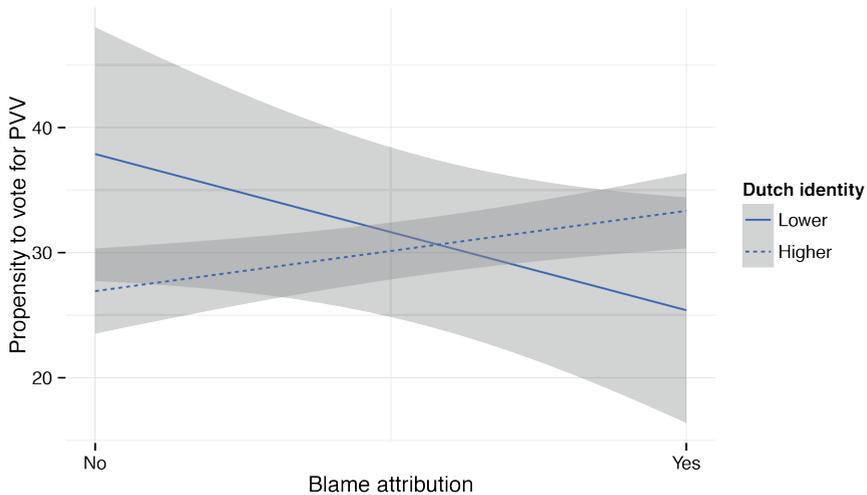
Overall, the results indicate that the vote choice of especially participants with a *stronger* attachment to national identity are affected by populist blame attributions, which supports H3a. We found no significant evidence for the prediction that voting intentions of participants with a weaker attachment to Europe were affected by populist messages, which does not provide much support for H3b. In support of H3c, the results indicated that citizens with an exclusive perception of identity were affected most by populist blame frames.

**Table 5.4** Regression model predicting the effects of blame attribution and identity attachment on propensity to vote for a populist political party (PVV)

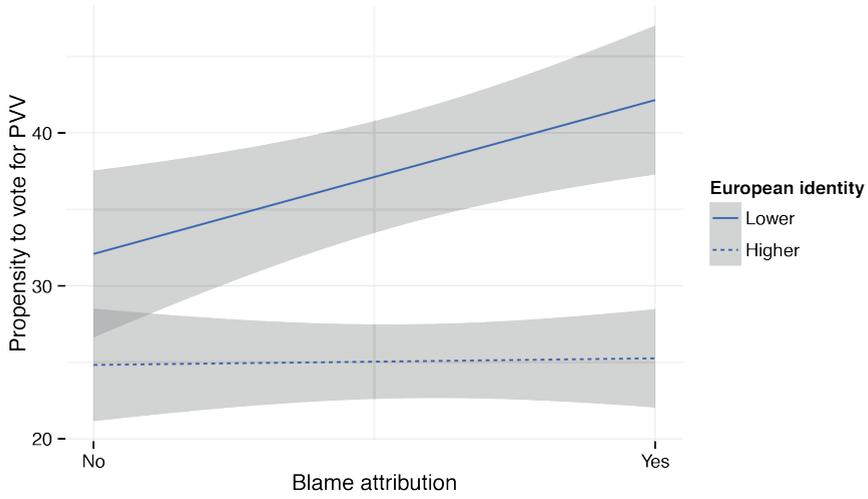
<i>Variables</i>	<i>Model I</i>	<i>Model II</i>	<i>Model III</i>
(constant)	-7.18 (3.78) <sup>†</sup>	-6.96 (3.77) <sup>†</sup>	-6.96 (3.77) <sup>†</sup>
Blame	5.43 (3.48) <sup>*</sup>	4.86 (3.48) <sup>†</sup>	5.53 (3.48) <sup>*</sup>
Dutch identity	3.90 (1.22) <sup>**</sup>	1.03 (1.90)	1.03 (1.90)
European identity	-7.44 (1.01) <sup>***</sup>	-5.86 (1.64) <sup>***</sup>	-5.86 (1.63) <sup>***</sup>
Blame x Dutch identity		4.86 (2.47) <sup>*</sup>	3.81 (2.53) <sup>†</sup>
Blame x European identity		-2.67 (2.08)	-2.62 (2.01)
Blame x European identity x Dutch identity			-1.54 (0.85) <sup>†</sup>
Adjusted <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.099	0.103	0.109
<i>F</i> for change in <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>		2.29 <sup>†</sup>	3.25 <sup>*</sup>

<sup>†</sup>*p*<0.10; <sup>\*</sup>*p*<0.05; <sup>\*\*</sup>*p*<0.01; <sup>\*\*\*</sup>*p*<0.001

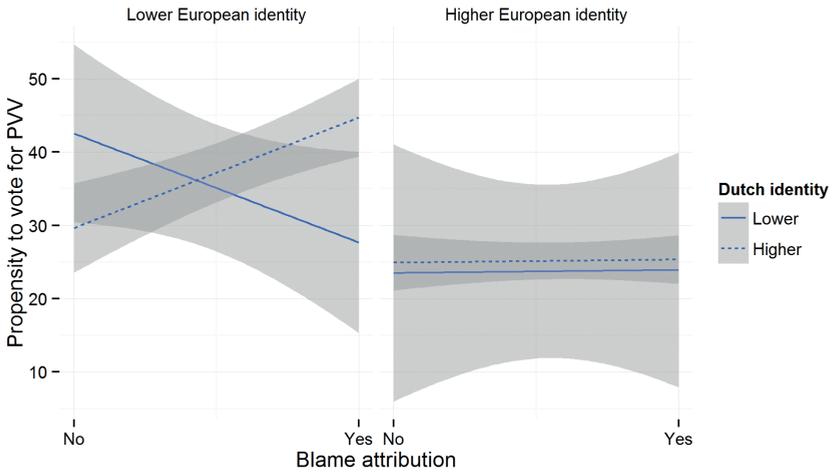
Note. Two-tailed tests. Unstandardized regression weights. Standard errors reported between brackets.



**Figure 5.2** Interaction effect of blame attribution and Dutch identity attachment on propensity to vote for the populist party PVV.



**Figure 5.3** Interaction effect of blame attribution and European identity attachment on propensity to vote for the populist party PVV.



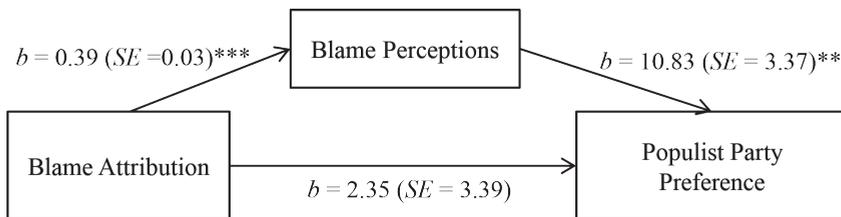
**Figure 5.4** Three-way interaction effect of blame attribution and exclusionist identity attachment on propensity to vote for the populist party PVV.

**The Potential Underlying Mechanism of the Effects of Populist Messages**

In hypothesis 4, we set out to explore the mediating role of blame perceptions on the effects of populist blame frames on vote choice. The estimated mediation model (Figure 5.5) shows that the effect of populist messages that frame blame to the elites on propensity to vote for the populist Freedom Party was indeed mediated by citizens’ perceptions of blame. The full mediation model fits the data well:  $\chi^2(1) = 0.48, p = 0.489$ , CFI = 1.00, RMSEA = 0.00, 90% CI [0.00, 0.05]. Adding the direct effect from blame attributions to propensity to vote for the populist freedom party did not significantly affect model fit:  $\Delta\chi^2(1) = 0.48, p = 0.489$ .

Populist attributions of blame had a significant, positive effect on citizens’ blame perceptions ( $b = 0.25, SE = 0.03, p < 0.001$ ). The proportion explained variance of this mediation model ( $R^2$ ) was 0.15. Blame perceptions, in turn, had a significant positive effect on participants’ propensity to vote for the right-wing populist party PVV ( $b = 10.88, SE = 4.14, p = 0.009$ ). The proportion explained variance of this outcome model ( $R^2$ ) was 0.03. The direct effect of populist attributions of blame on populist party preference was not significant in this mediation model ( $b = 2.35, SE = 3.38, p = n.s.$ ). The standardized indirect effect of populist attributions of blame on propensity to vote for the Freedom Party PVV via blame perceptions was 0.058 ( $0.384 * 0.150$ ).

As robustness check, we additionally estimated the causal mediation model with the R-package “mediation” (Tingley et al., 2014). Because this package allows to use a large number of simulations to estimate the model, the estimation process may be considered as more reliable. Again, we found that the effect of populist attributions of blame on propensity to vote for the populist party PVV was significantly mediated by participants’ blame perceptions. The Average Causal Mediation Effect (ACME) indicated that the mediation model was highly significant ( $b = 2.92, p < 0.001, 95\% CI [1.01, 4.94]$ ). The Average Direct Effect (ADE), however, was non-significant: ( $b = 1.49, p = 0.49, 95\% CI [-3.21, 6.04]$ ). The total effect was significant: ( $b = 4.41, p = 0.04, 95\% CI [0.28, 8.64]$ ). These findings indicate that 62.0% of the total effect of blame attribution on PVV preferences was mediated by blame perceptions, which supports H4.



**Figure 5.5** Mediation model demonstrating the mediating role of blame perceptions on the effects of blame attributions on populist party preferences. \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

## DISCUSSION

Populist political parties have become influential throughout the world. From India to the Americas to Europe, populism has been successful on both the left and right end of the political spectrum. Many scholars have argued that the media play a pivotal role in the success of populist parties (e.g., Mudde, 2004, Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Krämer, 2014). Still, we know little about what specific elements of populist messages affect the voting intentions of which citizens (e.g., Mazzoleni, 2003; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007).

To advance our understanding of the effects of populist messages, we conducted an online survey experiment in which we manipulated the ideational core of anti-elitist populism: the construction of the people as blameless in-group opposed to the culprit elites as out-groups. We found that citizens who are exposed to populist messages that attribute blame to the elites in the national government or the EU are more likely to vote for the right-wing populist Freedom Party PVV. In contrast, populist messages negatively affected people's propensity to vote for the largest party in government. Populist messages may thus polarize citizens' political opinions, as exposure to the core populist message makes people less aligned with the government and more aligned with populist challengers.

We expected that some citizens are more likely to be affected by populist attributions of blame than others. First, we expected the effects to be strongest among the politically cynical (Bos et al., 2013). However, we found no evidence that the politically cynical are most likely to align their party preferences with populist blame attributions. This unexpected finding can be explained by taking a closer look into the data. Comparing populist party preferences between the lower and higher cynical, we found that the politically cynical are more than *twice* as likely to cast their vote on the populist Freedom Party compared to the lower politically cynical. As they already aligned their vote choice with the belief that the government and the EU are responsible for causing the heartland's problems, the politically cynical may not need the media to persuade them.

We also expected that populist messages would affect especially those citizens with an exclusionist perception of social identity. Our findings partially supported this expectation. People who feel attached to the nation-state, the imagined community of the populist heartland (Taggart, 2004), are most likely to vote on a right-wing populist party when exposed to populist messages that frame blame. Attachment to European identity negatively affected the relationship between populist messages and populist party preferences. These findings are in line with previous research arguing that citizens with a stronger attachment to the nation feel most threatened by the out-groups that populist rhetoric constructs as enemies (e.g., Mudde, 2004). Citizens with an exclusive perception of social identity may thus feel attracted to right-wing populist parties as

they promise to revive the national identity while blaming the government, the EU and immigrants for causing the cultural, social and economic threats of the heartland at crisis (Fennema, 2005).

In the context of national-EU multilevel governance, citizens may not always know who is responsible for causing political problems (e.g., Arceneaux, 2006; Cutler, 2004). Therefore, attributions of responsibility are an important cue when citizens form their own perceptions of blame. Building on this process, this chapter explored how the effects of populist blame attributions were mediated by perceptions of blame. In line with our expectations, we found that blame attributions first needed to be accepted by citizens in order to influence voting preferences, which is in line with previous research that studied the relationship between blame perceptions and vote choice (e.g., Marsh & Tilley, 2010).

The mediating role of blame perceptions can be interpreted as an effect of negative stereotyping (e.g., Dixon, 2008; Hewstone, 1989). Attributions of blame activate negative stereotypes about the establishment (Hewstone, 1989). In turn, these negative evaluations are used to hold the government accountable at the elections, which is again in line with research on responsibility attributions (e.g., Malhotra & Kuo, 2008; Key, 1966; Hood, 2007).

This study has some potential shortcomings. First, media populism may entail more than constructing culprit out-groups of the establishment opposed to a blameless in-group of the national people. Our manipulation of populist attributions of blame excluded multiple optional features of populist communication, such as centrality of charismatic leadership, personalization and dramatization (e.g., Houwen, 2012). Moreover, we did not assess the effects of blame attribution to right-wing populism's most salient out-group: immigrants (see Chapter 6). Incorporating these characteristics could have changed our findings. However, we have found effects on populist party preferences simply by manipulating the core of populist rhetoric. Incorporating more features of populism may simply strengthen the effects.

Another shortcoming is our focus on one single country-dependent context. We only assessed how the preference for a Dutch right-wing populist party was affected by, technically, anti-establishment populism. Preferences for left-wing populist parties or populist parties outside of Europe may be affected in different ways. Still, we believe that populism's ideational core is similar across context. Populist rhetoric across countries and across the left-right spectrum is rooted in the binary opposition between the pure people and the culprit others. Therefore, we believe that our findings can be generalized to other countries and other types of populism. By conducting comparative studies of different types of populism in different countries, future research may more thoroughly explore differences in the effects of media populism across political systems and countries.

Despite these limitations, this study has advanced the understanding of how populist communication may affect which citizens' party preferences in important ways. Although many questions remain to be answered in future research, we are one step closer in understanding the role of the media in explaining populisms' electoral success.

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