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

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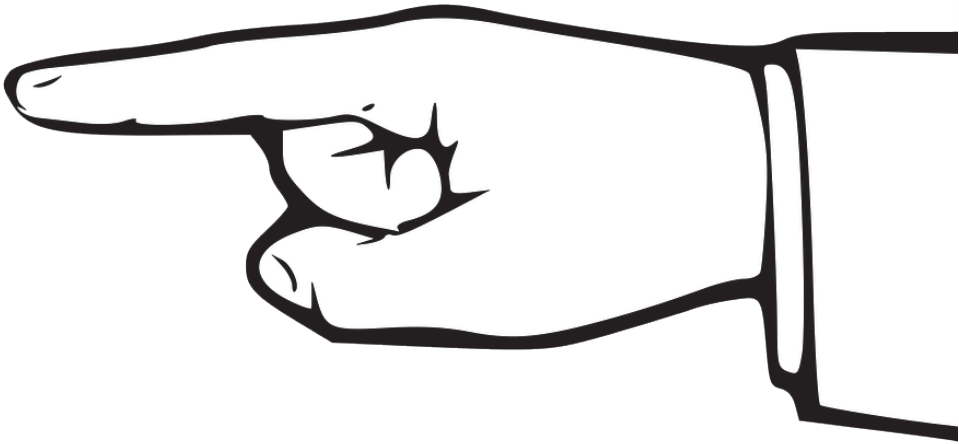
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## CHAPTER 6



# Selective Exposure to Populist Communication: How Attitudinal Congruence Drives the Effects of Populist Attributions of Blame<sup>26</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

It has been argued that populist communication only appeals to a specific group of citizens, who are higher in political distrust and perceived relative deprivation. At the same time, however, extant research has exclusively studied the effects of populist communication in forced exposure media environments. Responding to this discrepancy, we conducted two experiments ( $N = 562$  and  $N = 558$ ) in which we manipulated the core idea of populist messages – attributing blame – in forced and selective exposure media environments. Our results demonstrate that citizens higher in relative deprivation are indeed most likely to select populist messages. Irrespective of selective exposure, citizens' populist attitudes are only positively affected if the populist message is congruent with their prior feelings of relative deprivation. These results provide important insights for the polarizing potential of media populism in a fragmented media environment.

Populism has become influential in the political landscape of many democracies around the world. In recent years, the populist ideas expressed by a variety of actors and movements all around the globe have affected politics and society in important ways, potentially leading to a polarized electorate (e.g., Pappas, 2014). The core idea of populism revolves around the moral and causal divide between the blameless ordinary people and the culprit others (e.g., Hameleers, Bos & de Vreese, 2016; Mudde, 2004). The persuasiveness of such populist blame attributions forms the backdrop of this chapter: What are the effects of populist messages, and which citizens are most likely to select and be persuaded by them?

It has been demonstrated that exposure to populist communication affects citizens' political perceptions (e.g., Bos, van der Brug & de Vreese, 2013). Extant literature further pointed to the media as an important supply-side factor facilitating the dissemination of populist ideas in society (e.g., Bos et al., 2013; Mazzoleni, 2008; Mudde, 2010). Two explanations on the media's role in the spread of populism have been forwarded. First, driven by media logic, the media are said to offer favorable attention to the newsworthy ideas of populist politicians (e.g., Koopmans & Muis, 2009; Vossen, 2012). Second, journalists are assumed to actively frame issues along the lines of a populist distinction in society *themselves* (e.g., Rooduijn, de Lange & van der Brug, 2014; Krämer, 2014; Mazzoleni, 2008). This journalistic practice has been described as populism *by* the media or media populism (Bos & Brants, 2014; Krämer, 2014; Mazzoleni, 2008). This implies that the media, and not only politicians, engage in populist communication by actively stressing the moral and causal divide between the blameless people and the culprit others. Backed up by empirical evidence, we argue that such mediatized attributions of blame can be

regarded as a persuasive frame that activates populist schemata among receivers (Hameleers, Bos, & de Vreese, 2016; Krämer, 2014).

Such populist blame attributions may not convince all citizens. In line with selective exposure theory, people are only expected to self-select populist content if they have similar worldviews. Outside of experimental settings, people are thus only expected to expose themselves to populist content if their prior beliefs are congruent with it (Festinger, 1957). Therefore, traditional experiments that force participants into exposure to messages that they would normally not select themselves do not reflect the fragmented media environment of citizens (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008). But what prior beliefs drive people's selection of populist media content? What are the consequences of being forced into exposure to counter-attitudinal, populist messages?

To answer these questions, we conducted two online survey experiments ( $N = 562$  and  $N = 558$ ) in which selective exposure was linked to different types of media populism framing different societally relevant issues. This allowed us to investigate whether it is indeed the case that populist messages that attribute blame are most persuasive among the part of the electorate that self-selects these messages, driven by attitudinal congruence.

### **Populist Attributions of Blame in Media Populism**

Populism revolves around the construction of a societal divide between the ordinary citizens as a blameless in-group and culpable others as out-groups (e.g., Caiani & della Porta, 2011; Taggart, 2000). As the emphasis on this moral opposition between the “good” ordinary people and the “evil” other is central to all definitions of populism, we take this moral and causal relationship between “us” and “them” as point of departure in defining populist communication (e.g., Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Rooduijn, 2014).

Based on this definition, attributing blame to different morally opposed out-groups – either constructed *vertically* as the culpable elites or *horizontally* as evil societal out-groups – forms the ideational core of populist messages (e.g., Hameleers et al., 2016; Vasilopoulou, Halikiopoulou & Exadaktylos, 2013). Rooted in the construction of a crisis situation threatening the ordinary people, populist ideas articulate the divide between “us” and “them” by scapegoating various out-groups for causing the crisis while absolving the ordinary people of blame (e.g., Taggart, 2000).

Using this conceptualization of populism, we align ourselves with the literature on responsibility attributions, pointing to the persuasiveness of responsibility cues (e.g., Hewstone, 1989; Hobolt & Tilley, 2014). By simplifying politics into a matter of responsibility, citizens are provided with an influential heuristic cue that helps them to translate complex socio-political issues into black and white terms (Hewstone,

1989; Iyengar, 1989). Attributions of responsibility hereby fulfill an important role in citizens' political decision making, as they can heuristically use responsibility cues to punish the culprits (Marsh & Tilley, 2010).

To integrate responsibility attributions into populist discourse, we focus on attributions of responsibility for causing negative outcomes: *blame*. Such attributions of blame are found to guide citizens' political opinions in important ways (Iyengar, 1989; Hobolt & Tilley, 2014; Tilley & Hobolt, 2011). Specifically, if certain politicians are attributed blame, citizens evaluate them in more negative terms and are less likely to vote for them (Marsh & Tilley, 2010). It has been demonstrated that the media play an important role in the effects of blame attributions, as the framing of societal issues in terms of "who has done it" influences citizens' own perceptions of blame (e.g., Iyengar, 1991).

In populist messages, blame can be attributed to different out-groups deemed responsible for the ordinary people's problems (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). First, blame can be attributed to the elites (e.g., Mudde, 2004; Rooduijn, 2014). The most salient elitist enemies that are blamed for causing the people's problems are the politicians in government, who are accused of not representing the ordinary people and their will (e.g., Hawkins, 2009; Mudde, 2004). Populist messages can also emphasize a societal divide between the native people as blameless in-group and horizontally opposed others as culpable out-groups (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). This right-wing populist divide entails the interpretation that refugees, immigrants, ethnic minorities, welfare-state profiteers, and all other out-groups living amongst the people, are responsible for causing the problems of the native ordinary citizens, such as an increasing crime rate or a declining economy. But how are such populist interpretations embedded in media coverage?

Articulating the populist core idea of in-group favoritism and out-group hostility lies at the heart of media populism (Krämer, 2014; Mazzoleni, 2008). Media populism can be defined as journalists' active reconstruction of populist ideas, who act independently of the political actors associated with populism (Krämer, 2014). These populist ideas are most saliently reflected in the journalistic interpretation of a divide between the "silenced majority" of ordinary citizens and the corrupt elites or culpable out-groups (e.g., Caiani & della Porta, 2011). In line with the literature on interpretative journalism, media populism prescribes a central role to agency in journalistic news reporting. This implies that, beyond disseminating the hard facts of events, journalists who engage in media populism actively emphasize an interpretation of the background, causes, moral evaluations, and treatment recommendation when reporting on the news (e.g., Salgado & Strömbäck, 2011).

Building further on this, we explicitly mark the distinction between different types of media populism in which different out-groups are attributed blame for causing the

heartland's crisis: anti-elites media populism and monocultural media populism (see Chapter 3).

### **The Effects of Populist Communication on Populist Interpretations**

Populist ideas are not only communicated by politicians or journalists, citizens can interpret issues along the lines of populist distinctions themselves as well (e.g., Akkerman et al., 2014; Rooduijn, 2014). Such individual-level populist attitudes tap into citizens' sentiments of a causal and moral divide between the ordinary people and culprit others. Similar to our proposed conceptualization of media populism, we distinguish between two dimensions of populist attitudes that mark the 'people versus an out-group' divide: anti-establishment populist attitudes and exclusionist populist attitudes (see Chapter 2).

The process by which populist messages affect populist attitudes can be described as "media-based othering" (Krämer, 2014). As a result of exposure to messages that attribute blame to elites or societal out-groups, citizens may interpret issues in congruent 'us' versus 'them' frames as well. This effect can be interpreted in the light of the psychological mechanisms of social identity and stereotyping (e.g., Sniderman et al., 2000; Tajfel, 1978). These mechanisms postulate that positive images of the in-group and negative stereotypes of the out-group become chronically accessible among receivers (e.g., Dixon, 2008). Exposure to populist messages may thus stimulate and activate populist attitudes among the public, which is in line with the literature on trait activation (Richey, 2012). But which citizens are likely to select and be persuaded by populist attributions of blame?

### **Selective Exposure to Media Populism**

In the era of increasingly more fluid and user-controllable media diets, exposure to specific media messages cannot be taken for granted (e.g., Bennett & Iyengar, 2008; Stroud, 2008). Indeed, audience members have become increasingly more active in selecting content that fits their own beliefs. This selection bias of the active audience was already acknowledged over 60 years ago, and has originally been associated with a decreasing trend in the strength of media effects (e.g., Hovland, 1954; Klapper, 1960). In recent years, with the rise of the internet and its accompanying technological affordances, people have become even more able to decide *when* they want to be exposed to *what* content.

Responding to this changing media landscape, a growing body of literature points to selective exposure as an important factor that needs to be taken into account in media effect studies (e.g., Arceneaux, Johnson & Murphy, 2012; Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Lavine, Lodge & Freitas, 2005). Selective exposure can be defined as the guiding influence of people's prior beliefs on their selection of media content

(Stroud, 2008). Recent literature contends that, when offered the choice, people are most likely to expose themselves to pro-attitudinal as opposed to counter-attitudinal content. Because of this selection bias, media effects should occur among people that actually *choose* to expose themselves to specific media content.

The psychological underpinnings of selective exposure are rooted in theories of cognitive consistency (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009). In line with this, people are expected to select novel information based on their prior beliefs (Festinger, 1957). Doing so, people pay attention to information that confirms their prior attitudes and beliefs while circumventing information that is counter to their priors. In line with this, people's desire to adhere to their prior beliefs weighs more than getting it right, or making the most accurate decision based on an elaboration on all the factual information available to them (Taber & Lodge, 2006). These selection biases are psychologically explained by people's intrinsic motivation to reduce cognitive dissonance. Although not necessarily conscious, people engage in selective processing strategies that avoid or counter argue inconsistent information (Festinger, 1957).

The pervasiveness of selective exposure has been a topic of fierce academic debate as empirical evidence of its occurrence is mixed (e.g., Stroud, 2008). Two decades ago, the evidence for the existence of selective exposure was largely regarded as weak and unconvincing (e.g., Freedman & Sears, 1965; Zaller, 1992). More recently, and situated in the high-choice media environment, scholars have by and large dealt with the methodological limitations of earlier approaches and provided more support for the existence of selective exposure (e.g., Hart et al., 2009). But what are the potential ramifications of selective exposure for the study of the effects of populist expressions by the media?

Selective exposure can result in a polarization of beliefs (e.g., Stroud, 2008). The argumentation behind this view is as follows: as people with certain viewpoints expose themselves to congruent information, their beliefs will be reinforced driven by the search for cognitive consistency. In addition, people become immune for attitudinal change by incongruent information. Although people may already hold a certain belief, deliberate exposure to congruent views may thus bolster their priors (e.g., Iyengar & Hahn, 2009). Aligning ourselves with this view on the polarizing potential of selective exposure, we expect that people who self-select attitudinal congruent populist content are persuaded most by populist attribution of blame. But what prior beliefs are most likely to guide people's selection of media populism?

### **How Perceptual Biases Drive the Effects of Populist Communication**

Although not uncontested, it has been argued that populism appeals to people that can be categorized as the 'losers of modernization' (e.g., Kriesi et al., 2006). Moving beyond such demographic characteristics to describe the populist audience, we argue

that populist messages appeal to people who *perceive* themselves to have lost out more than others in society. These vulnerable people should be appealed most to populist sentiments that voice *their* grievances (Elchardus & Spruyt, 2016).

In line with this reasoning, the attitudinal filter of selective exposure to media populism can be described as relative deprivation: the perception that the out-group opposed to the people's in-group unfairly receives economic and cultural resources at the cost of the in-group of the ordinary citizens (Derks, 2006; Elchardus & Spruyt, 2012; 2016). Put differently, relative deprivation entails the perception of an unjust distribution of the society's wealth: the ordinary people 'like us' never get what they deserve from society, whereas 'others' always seem to profit (e.g., Hogg et al., 2010). Relative deprivation has been connected to populism in important ways (e.g., Elchardus & Spruyt, 2012; 2016). In line with this, empirical evidence demonstrated that people with populist attitudes experience strong feelings of relative deprivation (e.g., Elchardus & Spruyt, 2016). Relative deprivation can thus be regarded as a salient prior belief driving people's selection of attitudinal-congruent populist media content. Against this backdrop, we hypothesize: The more people experience feelings of relative deprivation, the more likely they are to self-select into exposure to congruent pro-attitudinal populist media content (H1).

It has been argued that populist cues that highlight the opposition between 'us' and 'them' are highly persuasive because they simplify complex societal and political issues into matters of who has done it, while absolving the ordinary people of any blame (e.g., Hawkins, 2010; Mudde, 2004; Rooduijn, 2014). The in-group can thus maintain a positive self-concept by attributing blame to others. This persuasive appeal has also been identified in studies on responsibility attributions (e.g., Hobolt & Tilley, 2014). We therefore hypothesize that exposure to pro-attitudinal populist content leads to stronger populist attitudes than exposure to pro-attitudinal non-populist content (H2).

We postulated that prior beliefs of relative deprivation drives the selection of populist content. In line with the premises of selective exposure theory, this implies that the media effects of populist blame attributions should occur most for those people who feel most deprived. For these people, the populist message is congruent with their priors. Motivated by a desire to avoid cognitive dissonance, their populist attitudes should be bolstered most (Festinger, 1957). Our final hypothesis therefore reads: People exposed to attitudinal congruent populist content are persuaded most by media populism (H3).



## STUDY 1

### Method

**Design.** To investigate *how* selective exposure and attitudinal congruence drive the effects of populist communication, we employed two experiments. The first experiment focuses on anti-elites media populism. The design concerned a 2 (Exposure to media populism: forced vs. selective exposure)  $\times$  3 (Populist attitudinal stance: pro vs. counter. vs. balanced) + 3 (self-select non-populist attitudinal stance: pro vs. counter. vs. balanced) + control between-subjects factorial design. Because of the asymmetry in the number of cells, we allocated relatively more participants to the choice than the forced exposure conditions (Feldman et al., 2013). Within the forced exposure conditions, participants were randomly assigned to one of the experimental groups or the control condition. In the choice conditions, participants self-selected into one of the six experimental groups or the control group.

**Sample.** The survey experiments are carried out on a diverse sample of Dutch citizens recruited by an international polling agency. The samples are by and large representative of the voting population in terms of age, gender, and level of education. The first study was completed by 562 participants. Their mean age was 49.29 years old ( $SD = 14.84$ ). 46.7% was male and 53.3% was female. 24.5% of the participants was lower educated, 31.2% was higher educated, and 44.3% had a moderate level of education.

**Procedure.** The experiment was conducted online. After the informed consent procedure, participants completed a pre-test including measures for demographics, moderating variables, and control variables. Participants were randomly allocated to either the forced or selective exposure media environment. In the selective exposure environment, participants were allowed to select one of the seven alternative news items. This environment was similar to actual news websites in the Netherlands. Next, they were exposed to the stimulus they selected themselves. In the forced exposure conditions, participants were randomly assigned to watch one of the three populist stimuli or the control stimulus. The selected or forced news item was visible for at least 30 seconds.

After reading the news item, participants were forwarded to the post-test survey. This survey contained measures for the dependent variables and manipulation checks. The average response time was 15.64 minutes ( $SD = 20.28$ ), of which 54.26 seconds were devoted to reading the stimuli ( $SD = 31.29$ ). Once participants completed the survey, they were directed to the panel company environment, where they received vouchers as incentive.

**Independent variables and stimuli.** In the selective exposure conditions, choice was manipulated by presenting participants with a cover story describing that

people may prefer some news items above others available to them. To simulate their everyday media environment, participants were told that they should select one preferred article out of a list of alternative online articles. By clicking on a link showing the article's headline, they were forwarded to their preferred article. In the forced exposure conditions, the cover story explained that people's everyday media environment exists of a plethora of alternative news stories, and that they were exposed to one of these many options. The topic of the stimuli was the decreasing health care budget. This topic was chosen as it represents current anti-elites populist framing (Houtman & Achterberg, 2010).

In line with extant research on selective exposure, the articles' attitudinal stance was manipulated into pro-attitudinal, counter-attitudinal, and balanced content (see Feldman et al., 2013). Pro-attitudinal messages connected the negative development to the elites, whereas counter-attitudinal messages connected it to the in-group. In the pro-attitudinal conditions, the elites were either simply connected to the negative development of the decreasing health care budget (non-populism) or explicitly blamed for taking away the ordinary people's resources (populism). In the counter-attitudinal conditions, the ordinary people *themselves* were connected to the development (non-populism) or explicitly blamed for causing the out-group's problems (populism) (see example stimuli in Appendix 6.A)

Populist blame attribution was manipulated by emphasizing the ideational core of populism in the article's framing of the news event: the causal and moral opposition between the 'good' blameless ordinary citizens and the culprit, 'evil' elites (e.g., Mudde, 2004; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). To do so, the populist stimuli for example referred to 'our' own people in need and 'our' tax money as the blameless in-group. The elites in government were attributed blame for the ordinary people's problems by stressing how they are corrupt, self-interested, and unable and unwilling to care for the ordinary people.

The balanced stimuli articulated a mixed interpretation: both the Dutch people and the government were connected to the development (non-populism) or blamed for it (populism). All other factors were kept constant across conditions.

**Manipulation checks.** The manipulation of populist blame attribution was successful ( $F(1, 226) = 71.45, p < 0.001$ ). This means that participants in the elitist blame attribution conditions were significantly more likely to believe that the article attributed responsibility to the elites ( $M = 5.39, SD = 1.34$ ) than participants in the other conditions ( $M = 3.74, SD = 1.60$ ). Participants in the ordinary people blame conditions were more likely to believe that the ordinary people were blamed ( $M = 4.76, SD = 1.81$ ) than in the other conditions ( $M = 3.23, SD = 1.84$ ). The manipulation of selective exposure also succeeded ( $F(1, 553) = 206.21, p < 0.001$ ), which indicates that participants in the selective exposure conditions were

significantly more likely to perceive they had the choice to self-select an article ( $M = 5.49$ ,  $SD = 1.45$ ) than those in the forced exposure conditions ( $M = 3.53$ ,  $SD = 1.72$ ).

### Measures

Unless explicitly described otherwise, all items were measured on 7-point scales (1 *completely disagree*, 7 *completely agree*).

**Populist attitudes.** We used Confirmatory Factor Analyses to estimate a two-dimensional structure of populist attitudes, consisting of anti-establishment and exclusionist populist attitudes. The two-dimensional model fitted the data well:  $\chi^2(28) = 35.80$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 1.28$ ,  $p = 0.148$ ; RMSEA = 0.02, 90% CI [0.00, 0.04]; CFI = 0.99. All standardized regression weights pointed to a satisfactory convergent validity. The model's discriminant validity was also satisfactory, and the correlation between both factors was .58. Model fit declined substantially and significantly when the correlation between factors was constrained to be one. Participants' populist attitudes were measured on two different seven-point scales: a four-item anti-establishment populism scale (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .82$ ,  $M = 4.37$ ,  $SD = 1.29$ ) and a six-item scale of the exclusionist dimension (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .94$ ,  $M = 3.90$ ,  $SD = 1.69$ ) (see Appendix 6.B for items).

**Relative deprivation.** We expected that perceived relative deprivation would drive participants' selection of populist media content (also see Elchardus & Spruyt, 2012; 2016). We measured perceived relative deprivation on a five-item seven-point scale (see Appendix 6.B) (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .92$ ,  $M = 4.33$ ,  $SD = 1.42$ ). In addition, we included measures of alternative explanations, such as political cynicism (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .88$ ,  $M = 4.82$ ,  $SD = 1.42$ ), governmental trust (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .92$ ,  $M = 3.02$ ,  $SD = 1.44$ ), and issue agreement (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .64$ ,  $M = 5.42$ ,  $SD = 1.21$ ).

**Controls.** The design of the forced exposure conditions assured a random assignment to treatment and control conditions, assignment thus not resulted in differential attrition (Mutz & Pemantle, 2011). As random assignment was not the case for the selective exposure conditions, we performed a between-conditions randomization check on the variables gender, age, education, left-right self-placement, and news exposure. We did not find any significant differences on the distribution of these variables across the experimental conditions, both within the forced exposure and selective exposure conditions in both experiments.

### Pilot study

The manipulations and stimuli were extensively pre-tested in two pilot studies: one pilot study among a convenience sample of university students ( $N = 52$ ) and one among a diverse sample of Dutch citizens ( $N = 137$ ). Participants rated the stimuli

as credible ( $M = 4.62$ ,  $SD = 1.65$ ) and similar to everyday media content ( $M = 5.09$ ,  $SD = 1.31$ ). All manipulations succeeded. Participants found it more likely that the article was published on an online news website ( $M = 5.56$ ,  $SD = 1.74$ ) than any of the other outlets. For this reason, we framed the articles as online news stories in both studies.

## Results Study 1

**Drivers of selective exposure to media populism.** First, we assessed the likelihood of self-selection into one of the six different experimental conditions compared to the control group as reference (see Table 6.1). The results of the logistic regression analyses indicate that those participants with stronger perceptions of relative deprivation were more likely to self-select into pro-attitudinal populist media content than participants with weaker perceptions of relative deprivation. Next to this, participants with higher formal education were *less* likely to self-select into pro-attitudinal populist content. This effect was, however, only marginally significant ( $p = .062$ ). In the light of these findings, hypothesis 1 can be supported: The more people experience feelings of relative deprivation, the more they are inclined to self-select populist media content.

**Table 6.1** Binary logistic regression model predicting drivers of selective exposure to anti-elites populist and non-populist content

Conditions Variables	Pro-Populist		Pro-non-populist		Counter-populist		Counter-non-populist	
	B (SE)	95% CI OR	B (SE)	95% CI OR	B (SE)	95% CI OR	B (SE)	95% CI OR
(constant)	-4.14 (1.36)**		-2.35 (1.27)		-1.12 (1.69)		-1.15 (1.34)	
Age	0.01 (0.01)	[0.98, 1.03]	0.01 (0.10)	[0.99, 1.03]	-0.01 (0.01)	[0.97, 1.01]	-0.01 (0.01)	[0.97, 1.01]
Gender	0.18 (0.30)	[0.66, 2.15]	0.52 (0.28)	[0.98, 2.91]	-0.33 (0.41)	[0.32, 1.62]	-0.36 (0.32)	[0.37, 1.30]
Education (higher)	-0.73 (0.39)	[0.23, 1.03]	0.03 (0.30)	[0.57, 1.86]	0.07 (0.45)	[0.45, 2.60]	0.34 (0.33)	[0.73, 2.71]
Deprivation	0.61(0.15)***	[1.36, 2.49]	-0.09 (0.13)	[0.72, 1.17]	0.26 (0.20)	[0.88, 1.91]	-0.03 (0.15)	[0.73, 1.30]
Issue Agreement	0.05 (0.16)	[0.77, 1.42]	0.07 (0.14)	[0.82, 1.41]	-0.14 (0.20)	[0.59, 1.28]	-0.01 (0.16)	[0.73, 1.35]
Governmental trust	-0.06 (0.12)	[0.75, 1.19]	-0.03 (0.12)	[0.77, 1.23]	0.07 (0.16)	[0.78, 1.48]	0.10 (0.13)	[0.86, 1.42]
Political cynicism	-0.12 (0.15)	[0.67, 1.19]	-0.02 (0.13)	[0.76, 1.28]	-0.25 (0.19)	[0.53, 1.13]	0.02 (0.16)	[0.75, 1.39]
Nagelkerke $R^2$	0.17		0.03		0.04		0.03	
$\chi^2$ (df)	37.90 (7)***		5.65 (7)		5.32 (7)		5.29 (7)	

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

*Note.*  $N = 346$ . CI = confidence interval; OR = odds ratio. Two-tailed tests. Unstandardized regression weights. Standard errors reported between brackets. The reference category for the reported conditions is the control category

**The effect of populist cues.** As can be seen in Table 6.2 (Model I), self-selection into populist content has a positive and significant effect on anti-establishment populist attitudes. This positive effect of selective exposure to pro-attitudinal content was also found for non-populist cues, albeit weaker. Selective exposure to balanced populist content also had a positive effect on anti-establishment populist attitudes. Against this backdrop, H2 is partially supported: selective exposure to pro-attitudinal populist blame attribution positively affected participants' anti-establishment populist attitudes. Although this effect was stronger than exposure to non-populist pro-attitudinal content, exposure to non-populist pro-attitudinal messages also had a significant positive effect on populist attitudes.

**The role of attitudinal congruence.** We constructed a variable that indicates whether the stimulus chosen by or shown to the participant was congruent with his or her prior perceptions of relative deprivation. For someone lower in relative deprivation, for example, counter attitudinal messages were coded as congruent with this participant's priors.

As indicated by the significant and positive two-way interaction effect of pro-attitudinal populist content and congruence (Table 6.2), participants forced into congruent pro-attitudinal populist content had significantly higher anti-establishment populist attitudes than those forced into incongruent populist blame attributions. Specifically, these participants scored 5.48 ( $SD = 1.20$ ) on the populist attitudes scale. For those participants for whom the stimulus was incongruent, populist attitudes were substantially and significantly lower ( $M = 3.86$ ,  $SD = 1.34$ ).

In the selective exposure conditions, we also see a significant positive two-way interaction effect of populist blame attribution to the elites and attitudinal congruence (Table 6.3). Participants that self-selected into attitudinal congruent populist attributions of blame to the elites had stronger anti-establishment populist attitudes ( $M = 5.50$ ,  $SD = 1.12$ ) than those who self-selected into exposure to incongruent pro-attitudinal populist content ( $M = 4.35$ ,  $SD = 0.89$ ) or congruent counter-attitudinal populist content ( $M = 3.57$ ,  $SD = 0.84$ ).

It support of hypothesis 3, participants exposed to attitudinal congruent elitist blame attributions are persuaded most by populist messages. It must be noted, however, that attitudinal congruence rather than freedom of self-selection drives the effects of populist blame attribution: the anti-establishment populist attitudes of participants who were forced into attitudinal congruent populist messages were also positively affected by the stimulus.

**Table 6.2** Effects of populist blame attribution to elites on anti-establishment populist attitudes within forced exposure conditions

	Model I (n = 213)			Model II (n = 213)			Model III (n = 213)		
	B	SE	$\beta$	B	SE	$\beta$	B	SE	$\beta$
(Constant)	4.65	0.17		4.65	.17		4.65	.16	
Pro-populist	-.36	.25	-.12	-.38	.26	-.13	-.80	.25	-.26**
Counter-populist	-.10	.25	-.03	-.16	.29	-.05	.53	.30	.18
Balanced-populist	-.22	.26	-.07	-.22	.26	-.07	-.22	.24	-.07
Attitudinal congruence				.01	.27	.03	-1.12	.34	-.35**
Pro-populist $\times$ congruence							2.76	.52	.53***
Adjusted $R^2$	.01			.01			.11		
F	.72			.60			6.31***		
F for change in $R^2$				.13			28.81***		

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

*Note.* Two-tailed tests. Unstandardized (B) and standardized ( $\beta$ ) regression weights. The interaction effects between attitudinal congruence and the other experimental conditions were non-significant and omitted from this model for reasons of parsimony.

**Table 6.3** Effects of populist blame attribution to elites on anti-establishment populist attitudes within selective exposure conditions

	Model I (n = 346)			Model II (n = 346)			Model III (n = 346)		
	B	SE	$\beta$	B	SE	$\beta$	B	SE	$\beta$
(Constant)	3.59	.16		3.56	.16		3.59	.15	
Pro-populist	1.42	.22	.43***	1.35	.24	.41***	.76	.27	.23**
Counter-populist	.50	.28	.11	.42	.31	.09	.78	.31	.16*
Balanced-populist	1.09	.27	.25***	1.09	.27	.25***	1.09	.26	.25***
Pro non-populist	.63	.21	.20**	.60	.22	.19**	.74	.22	.23**
Counter non-populist	.64	.23	.18**	.56	.26	.15*	.92	.27	.25**
Balanced non-populist	.69	.24	.18**	.69	.24	.18**	.69	.24	.18**
Attitudinal congruence				.13	.18	.05	-.42	.22	-.15
Pro-populist $\times$ congruence							1.57	.37	.38***
Adjusted $R^2$	.11			.11			.15		
F	7.82***			6.76***			8.53***		
F for change in $R^2$				.49			18.43***		

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

*Note.* Two-tailed tests. Unstandardized (B) and standardized ( $\beta$ ) regression weights. The interaction effects between attitudinal congruence and the other experimental conditions were non-significant and omitted from this model for reasons of parsimony.

## STUDY 2

Our first study revealed that the effects of exposure to populist media content are driven by attitudinal congruence: only those participants exposed to messages congruent with their priors are persuaded by populist attributions of blame. By explicitly taking attitudinal congruence into account in the design of the second experiment, we are able to more precisely investigate how attitudinal biases drive the effects of populist communication.

### Method

**Design.** The design of the second experiment concerns a 4 (attitudinal congruence: pro-congruent vs. pro-incongruent vs. counter-congruent vs. counter-incongruent)  $\times$  2 (choice: populist vs. non-populist framing) + 3 (Forced exposure: pro-populism vs. counter-populism vs. control) between-subjects factorial design. Participants were divided into congruent versus incongruent issue publics based on their pre-exposure scores on a measure of perceived relative deprivation connected to the out-group threat depicted in the stimuli. Moderates were randomly assigned to congruent versus incongruent stimuli. In line with Arceneaux et al. (2012), we controlled for them in the analyses.

**Sample.** The experiment was completed by 558 participants with a mean age of 49.15 years ( $SD = 16.09$ ). 47.5% was male and 52.5% was female. 23.7% of the participants was lower educated, 32.8% was higher educated, and 43.5% had a moderate level of education.

**Procedure.** The procedure regarding the pre-test was similar to study 1. After the pre-test, participants completed the following item on a 7-point scale *before* they were randomly allocated to attitudinal incongruent versus congruent conditions: “People who are not originally from the Netherlands, are profiting more from all kinds of benefits in society than Dutch citizens” ( $M = 4.58$ ,  $SD = 1.90$ ). The sample was divided into pro-attitudinal publics (scores ranging from 5 through 7); counter attitudinal publics (scores ranging from 1 through 3) and moderates (scoring the midpoint on the scale). All these groups were randomly assigned to the pro- and counter attitudinal forced and choice conditions.

**Independent variables and stimuli.** The second experiment focused on increasing crime rates in the light of immigration, a salient monocultural, right-wing populist issue (Houtman & Achterberg, 2010). Selective exposure was manipulated by presenting participants with a cover story describing that people may prefer some news items above others available to them. Participants were told that they should select one preferred article out of two alternative online articles. One article was framed in a populist way, whereas the other article was framed in a non-populist way

(see examples in Appendix 6.A). In the forced exposure conditions, participants were randomly assigned to either populist or non-populist stimuli.

Informed by the results of study 1, attitudinal stance was manipulated into a pro-attitudinal versus a counter-attitudinal framing of the issue – either highlighting that migrants or Dutch people were associated with the increasing crime rate discussed in the article. Based on their scores on the relative deprivation measure, we assigned participants to congruent and incongruent pro- and counter- attitudinal conditions at a 1:1 rate.

In the pro-populist blame attribution condition, migrants were accused of profiting from the native people's collective wealth, and for not respecting the norms and values of the Dutch people. Rather, they were accused of stealing the resources that belonged to the hardworking ordinary people. In the counter-populist blame attribution condition, culpable Dutch people were accused of taking resources away from the hardworking ordinary people: because they are profiting from the hardworking people's labor, the ordinary people are deprived. In the non-populist conditions, Dutch people and migrants were connected to the increasing crime rate, but not blamed for stealing and taking away resources from the native ordinary people. All other factors were kept constant across conditions.

**Manipulation checks.** The manipulation of populist blame attribution to migrants was successful ( $F(1, 553) = 157.25, p < 0.001$ ). Participants in the blame attribution conditions were significantly more likely to believe that the article attributed responsibility to migrants ( $M = 5.68, SD = 1.23$ ) than participants in the other conditions ( $M = 3.71, SD = 1.77$ ). The manipulation of selective exposure also succeeded ( $F(1, 553) = 87.44, p < 0.001$ ). Participants in the selective exposure conditions were significantly more likely to perceive they were offered the choice to self-select an article ( $M = 4.81, SD = 1.58$ ) than participants in the forced exposure conditions ( $M = 3.50, SD = 1.72$ ).

**Measures.** We used the same measures as reported in study 1. Again, the CFA-model for populist attitudes demonstrated good model fit:  $\chi^2(27) = 43.87, \chi^2/df = 1.63, p = 0.021; RMSEA = 0.03, 90\% CI [0.01, 0.05]; CFI = 0.99$ . The correlation between factors was .69 and model fit declined substantially and significantly when the correlation between factors was constrained to be one. Participants' populist attitudes were measured on two different seven-point scales: anti-establishment (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .82, M = 4.23, SD = 1.34$ ) and exclusionism (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .94, M = 4.14, SD = 1.71$ ).



## Results Study 2

### Selective exposure to attitudinal congruent populist versus non populist cues.

As illustrated in Table 6.4, participants who self-selected into pro-attitudinal populist blame attributions scored higher on exclusionist populist attitudes ( $M = 5.64$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ) than participants who self-selected congruent pro-attitudinal *non*-populist content ( $M = 4.85$ ,  $SD = 1.13$ ). In support of hypothesis 2, these results indicate that, *ceteris paribus*, people exposed to populist cues have higher populist attitudes than people exposed to non-populist cues.

**Attitudinal congruence and monocultural media populism.** In Table 6.5, we see a significant and positive two-way interaction effect of the pro-populist stimuli and attitudinal congruence. This indicates that, in the forced exposure conditions, exclusionist populist attitudes are significantly higher among participants exposed to attitudinal congruent than those exposed to attitudinal incongruent populist blame attribution. The results further indicate a significant and *negative* two-way interaction effect of exposure to counter-attitudinal populist stimuli and attitudinal congruence. Participants at lower levels of relative deprivation exposed to a populist message that blames the native people for the increasing crime rate have *lower* exclusionist populist attitudes compared to participants who are exposed to incongruent pro-populism (also see Table 6.4 for mean score comparisons).

As can be seen in Table 6.6, the two-way interaction effect of populist blame attribution to migrants and attitudinal congruence is also positive and significant in the selective exposure conditions. This means that when participants higher in relative deprivation are exposed to populist attributions of blame to migrants, their exclusionist populist attitudes are stronger than in the other conditions.

In the selective exposure conditions, the analyses further point to a significant, *negative* two-way interaction effect of the selection of counter-populist content and attitudinal congruence (see Table 6.6). This indicates that people who self-select into counter populist content that fits their prior attitudes of lower relative deprivation have *weaker* populist attitudes compared to participants that self-select into incongruent counter populism (see Table 6.4 for mean score differences). In support of H3, participants exposed to attitudinal congruent monocultural media populism have stronger exclusionist populist attitudes than participants exposed to incongruent populist communication (see Figure 6.1).

**Table 6.4.** The effects of populist and non-populist stimuli on anti-establishment populist attitudes at different levels of attitudinal congruence (monocultural media populism)

	Lower in relative deprivation			Higher in relative deprivation			F	Partial $\eta^2$
	Congruent			Incongruent				
	Counter-populism	Counter-non-populism	Pro non-populism	Pro-populism	Pro non-populism	Counter-populism		
Choice	2.74 <sub>a,x</sub> (1.48)	2.35 <sub>a</sub> (1.14)	2.35 <sub>a,x</sub> (1.19)	5.64 <sub>b,x</sub> (1.02)	4.85 <sub>c</sub> (1.13)	5.10 <sub>c</sub> (1.13)	24.04***	.38
Forced exposure	2.12 <sub>a,y</sub> (1.13)	-	2.82 <sub>b,y</sub> (1.29)	5.09 <sub>c,y</sub> (1.50)	-	5.04 <sub>c,x</sub> (1.37)	25.78***	.28
Control	2.27 <sub>a</sub> (0.97)	-	-	5.09 <sub>b</sub> (1.47)	-	-	-	-

\*\*\* =  $p < .001$ 

Note.  $N = 555$ . Standard deviations are reported in parentheses below the means. Means with differing first subscripts within rows and differing second subscripts within columns differ significantly at the  $p < .05$  level based on post-hoc independent samples t-test. From top to the bottom, the  $F$ -values represent: (1) the main effect of the experimental conditions in the selective exposure conditions; (2) the main effect of the experimental conditions within forced exposure.

**Table 6.5** Effects of populist blame attribution to migrants on exclusionist populist attitudes within forced exposure conditions

	Model I (n = 277)			Model II (n = 277)			Model III (n = 277)		
	B	SE	$\beta$	B	SE	$\beta$	B	SE	$\beta$
(Constant)	4.13	.12		4.20	.15		4.08	.15	
Pro-populist	.34	.23	.08	.38	.24	.09	-1.26	.36	-.28**
Counter-populist	.14	.22	.03	.21	.29	.05	1.25	.26	.30***
Moderates				-.80	.56	-.08	-1.73	.51	-.16**
Attitudinal congruence				-.14	.19	-.04	.10	.22	.03
Pro-populist $\times$ congruence							2.18	.45	.43***
Counter-populist $\times$ congruence							-3.31	.44	-.45***
Adjusted $R^2$	.01			.01			.21		
F	1.13			1.17			18.14***		
F for change in $R^2$				1.20			51.48***		

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

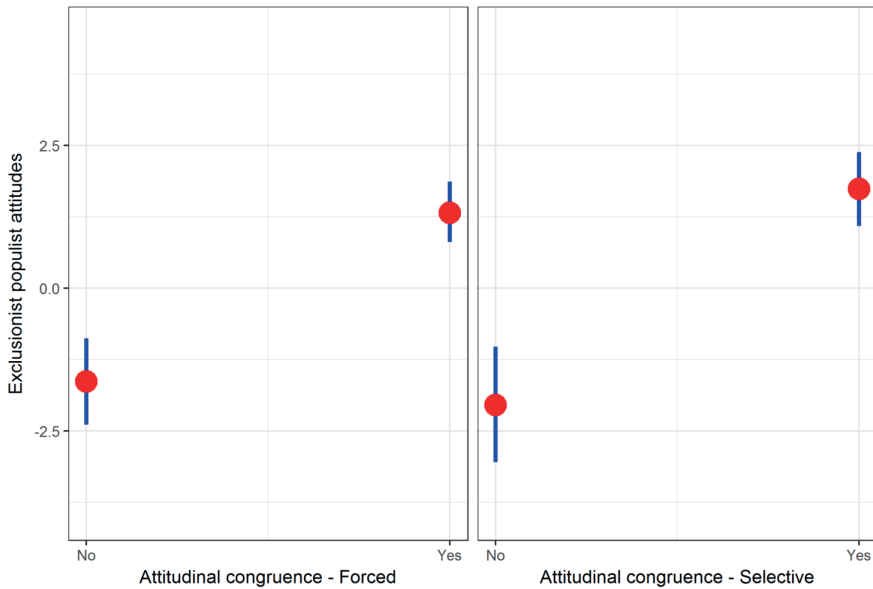
*Note.* Two-tailed tests. Unstandardized (B) and standardized ( $\beta$ ) regression weights. The interaction effects between attitudinal congruence and the other experimental conditions were non-significant and omitted from this model for reasons of parsimony.

**Table 6.6** Effects of populist blame attribution to migrants on exclusionist populist attitudes within selective exposure conditions

	Model I (n = 281)			Model II (n = 281)			Model III (n = 281)		
	B	SE	$\beta$	B	SE	$\beta$	B	SE	$\beta$
(Constant)	4.38	.13		4.52	.17		4.58	.16	
Pro-populist	.39	.30	.07	.38	.23	.07	-2.24	.51	-.39***
Counter-populist	-.22	.33	-.04	-.29	.33	-.05	.69	.41	.11
Pro-non-populist	-.75	.26	-.15**	-.81	.25	-.16**	-.81	.25	-.16**
Counter-non-populist	-.20	.24	-.04	-.29	.25	-.06	-.31	.23	-.07
Moderates				-.91	.54	-.09	-.97	.51	-.09
Attitudinal congruence				-.19	.19	-.05	-.32	.19	-.09
Pro-populist $\times$ congruence							3.61	.56	.55***
Counter-populist $\times$ congruence							-2.22	.59	-.24***
Adjusted $R^2$	.02			.02			.14		
F	3.11			2.63*			9.26***		
F for change in $R^2$				1.65			28.06***		

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

*Note.* Two-tailed tests. Unstandardized (B) and standardized ( $\beta$ ) regression weights. The interaction effects between attitudinal congruence and the other experimental conditions were non-significant and omitted from this model for reasons of parsimony.



**Figure 6.1** Marginal effect plots for interaction attitudinal congruence and populist blame attribution in forced and selective exposure conditions. Dots represent regression weights and lines represent 95% confidence intervals.  $N = 558$ .

## DISCUSSION

In the midst of the rise of persuasive populist ideas throughout the globe, a growing body of literature has pointed to the key role of the media in disseminating the populist message to the people (Krämer, 2014; Mazzoleni, 2008; Mudde, 2004). This literature has also assumed that those people who selectively expose themselves to populist messages form a specific type of audience. Specifically, those attracted to populist communication are described as a discontented (e.g., Mazzoleni et al., 2003; Rooduijn et al., 2016) and relatively deprived group of citizens (Elchardus & Spruyt, 2016). Yet, at the same time, the scarce body of literature that has studied the effects of populist communication has done so in a forced exposure environment (e.g., Bos et al., 2013). Therefore, an important discrepancy in populism research is that despite the assumptions about the peculiarities of the audience susceptible to persuasion by populist communication, there are no studies that actually simulate a selective exposure media environment. Advancing this line of research, this chapter presents two experiments that do take selective exposure and attitudinal congruence into account in dissecting the effects of populist communication.

In line with extant literature indicating that citizens with higher perceptions of relative deprivation are more likely to hold populist perceptions (Elchardus & Spruyt, 2016), we found that relative deprivation is the main driver of selective exposure to pro-attitudinal populist blame attributions. In the midst of an increasingly more fragmented media environment (e.g., Stroud, 2008), the findings presented in this chapter demonstrate that people who self-select into populist communication differ substantially from those who circumvent such content. In line with recent literature, it are indeed the citizens who feel relatively deprived that expose themselves to populist messages (Elchardus & Spruyt 2016).

It was however not selective exposure but attitudinal congruence that conditioned the effects of exposure to media populism on populist attitudes. In both forced and selective exposure media environments, populist blame attributions only affected the populist attitudes of people for whom the message was congruent with their priors. Based on the evidence from the experiments presented in this chapter, the role of giving people the freedom to self-select into media exposure is outweighed by exposure to a message that is in line with their prior attitudes. Hence, our results raise the question whether future research should take the effort to methodologically simulate a selective exposure environment if dividing the sample into congruent and incongruent issue publics has the same effect on the outcomes.

This methodological note does not mean that selective exposure does not play a role in conditioning the effects of media populism on the populist perceptions of the electorate. Backed up by the empirical evidence from our first experiment, exposure to attitudinal congruent populist media content is most likely to occur among citizens higher in relative deprivation. For these citizens, media populism confirms their priors of being deprived by some culprit other opposed to the ordinary people. This finding is in line with the theory on motivated reasoning (Lodge & Taber, 2013; Lord, Ross & Leeper, 1979). Outside of the experimental setting, then, it is unlikely that people for whom the populist message is counter to their priors actually expose themselves media populism.

This key finding has important implications for the polarizing effect of exposure to attitudinal congruent populist content. People who avoid populist content because it counters their priors are not affected by populist communication. When these people are forced into exposure to populist content, however, the message can even have a backlash. In that case, their negative priors towards populist interpretations are activated by the counter-attitudinal populist message. Those citizens that are higher in relative deprivation already have higher populist attitudes. Yet, exposure to congruent populist content activates their priors, resulting in a bolstering of their existing populist attitudes. We interpret this as evidence for the polarizing potential of media populism in a fragmented media environment (Stroud, 2008). Indeed,

exposure to messages that articulate the causal and moral divide between ‘us’ and ‘them’ widens the societal gap in society pitting those with populist interpretations against those who feel distant from such worldviews.

This chapter provides valuable contributions to the literature on media populism or populism *by* the media (e.g., Bos & Brants, 2014; Krämer, 2014). In line with Krämer’s (2014) theoretical expectation, the results of our experiments indicate that populist interpretations by the media activate populist schemata among receivers. Building further on the theses on the effects of media populism, it should be noted that such activations of congruent populist schemata only occur among people with existing populist worldviews. People with different priors may resist or counter-argue persuasion by media populism. This key role of attitudinal congruence in conditioning the effects of media populism can be interpreted in the light of the selective attribution mechanism also identified in studies on responsibility attribution (e.g., Hobolt & Tilley, 2011).

Our studies bear some limitations that may be dealt with in future research. First and foremost, we could not randomly assign participants to the selective exposure conditions, which limits the causal conclusions that can be drawn from the choice conditions. Against this backdrop, we have to acknowledge that choice experiments result in more realistic treatment effects at the cost of introducing a self-selection bias because randomization is not achieved. Improving external validity thus comes at the cost of internal validity (e.g., Gaines & Kuklinski, 2011). However, as we accounted for the most important factor that drives selective exposure to media populism – relative deprivation – in addition to a post-hoc randomization check, we do believe that we have at least partially dealt with this concern. Moreover, the findings in the forced and selective exposure conditions point to similar patterns regarding the conditioning effect of attitudinal congruence, which further strengthens our belief that no other biases are driving the effects in the selective exposure conditions.

An important consideration in the experimental design of selective exposure studies concerns the number of options offered to participants (see Feldman et al., 2013 for a comprehensive overview). Our first experiment aimed to provide an extensive selective exposure media environment, offering seven options including balanced and populist and non-populist content in pro- and counter-attitudinal framings. In the second experiment, choice was limited to only two options. A potential limitation of this design is that whereas traditional selective exposure experiments mostly offer participants a choice between pro- counter- and balanced attitudinal content, our second experiment only offers choice between populist and non-populist content already framed in congruent or incongruent ways. To more closely simulate a real-world high-choice media environment, future research may include different options in the selective exposure environment relevant to the effects of media populism, such

as offering a choice between tabloid and broadsheet media outlets (e.g., Mazzoleni, 2008).

Another limitation concerns the potential of ceiling effects found after exposure to populist messages among issue publics. Independent of the stimuli, people with similar perceptions of relative deprivation have stronger populist attitudes (in line with the findings presented in Chapter 3). On the measured scales, there was not much room for the stimuli to further boost their populist attitudes.

Despite these limitations, the studies presented in this chapter are to first to demonstrate how the effects of media populism are driven by attitudinal congruence. In showing that populist communication is only selected by and persuasive for those higher in relative deprivation, this chapter provides an important contribution to the literature that has argued that those citizens appealed to populist messages form a specific type of audience that can be distinguished from those who circumvent populist coverage. Hence, in the midst of the revival of the populist zeitgeist, this chapter demonstrates which part of the electorate is most likely to expose itself to populist messages to further bolster their priors, with eventually paramount societal and democratic implications in terms of a polarization between the populist and non-populist electorate.

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