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Attractive or repellent? How right-wing populist voters respond to figuratively framed anti-immigration rhetoric

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Abstract: The rhetoric employed by right-wing populist parties (RWPPs) has been seen as a driver for their success. This right-wing populist (RWP) rhetoric is partly characterized by the use of anti-immigration metaphors and hyperboles, which likely appeal to voters' grievances. We tested the persuasive impact of figuratively framed RWP rhetoric among a unique sample of Dutch RWPP voters, reporting an experiment with a 2 (metaphor: present, absent) x 2 (hyperbole: present, absent) between-subjects design. Our findings challenge prevailing ideas about how supportive voters respond to RWP rhetoric: Figurative language did not steer voters more in line with RWP ideas but pushed their opinion further away. These unexpected boomerang effects mainly held for weakly identified voters. This suggests that RWPP voters support their party, not because of but despite their rhetoric. Being heard in their grievances, rather than told what to grieve about, seems to be a main driver for RWPP support.

Keywords: metaphor, populism, figurative framing, political persuasion

1 Introduction

Right-wing populism is on the rise in Western Europe. Over the years, right-wing populist parties like the Dutch Freedom Party (PVV), the Alternative for Germany

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(AfD), and the British UK Independence Party (UKIP) have become important political players (McDonnell and Werner, 2017). In a broad sense, populism can be defined as an ideology that separates society into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups: ‘the people’ and the ‘corrupt elite’, who fail to express the will of ‘the people’ (Mudde, 2017). For right-wing populism, this ‘thin’ populist ideology is combined with nationalism (De Cleen, 2017). Many right-wing populist parties (RWPPs) present outsiders and immigrants as threats to their nation’s identity, culture, and economic interests and blame established political elites for favoring the interests of outsiders over the rights of their presumed ‘own people’ (De Cleen, 2017; Ivars-flaten, 2008).

The rhetoric employed by RWPPs is considered important in fueling their electoral successes (Matthes and Schmuck, 2017). Right-wing populist (RWP) rhetoric has been characterized by the use of strong, vivid anti-immigration metaphors and hyperboles (Boeynaems, Burgers, and Konijn, 2021; Kalkhoven, 2015). RWP rhetoric likely appeals to their voters’ prior convictions, especially anti-immigration grievances, present among specific parts of the electorate (Hameleers, Bos, and de Vreese, 2018; Rydgren, 2008). Through their rhetoric, RWPPs can further foster feelings of discontent and impact political opinions of susceptible voters (Bos, van der Brug, and de Vreese, 2013; Krämer, 2014).

According to the ‘fueling discontent argument’ (Rooduijn, van der Brug, and de Lange, 2016), political discontent and exposure to (right-wing) populist messages can mutually reinforce each other over time. In this study, we add an extra component to the ‘fueling discontent argument’ and propose that the persuasive impact of figuratively framed RWP rhetoric depends on the strength with which voters identify with an RWPP. Voters who strongly identify with an RWPP might have developed an anti-immigration stance that does not need to be fueled further by populist metaphors and hyperboles: Their political opinion already strongly resembles RWP ideas (Berning and Schlueter, 2016; Westfall, Van Boven, Chambers, and Judd, 2015). Political opinions of voters who feel weakly attached to an RWPP, however, are likely more susceptible to the persuasive impact of RWP rhetoric (Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus, 2013; Hameleers, Bos, and de Vreese, 2017): There is still room for RWP rhetoric to fuel RWP ideas. Hence, we assume that voters who strongly identify with an RWPP respond differently to RWP rhetoric than those who identify weakly.

While RWPP voters have been subject to scholarly and public debates about the rising success of RWPPs, no experimental research has yet tested how they actually respond to RWP rhetoric. We report on an experiment in which we tested (a) how RWPP voters react to anti-immigration rhetoric, (b) how RWPP-identification strength is related to support for RWP policy, and (c) how RWPP-identification strength influences the persuasiveness of RWP rhetoric.

2 How right-wing populist rhetoric affects political opinion

RWP rhetoric often has a strong, negative focus on immigration (De Landtsheer, 2015; Hameleers et al., 2018). With their rhetoric, RWPPs can foster immigration grievances and other feelings of discontent, thereby steering the political opinion of parts of the electorate (Bos et al., 2013; Krämer, 2014). Generally, scholars consider RWPP rhetoric mostly persuasive for voters who, at least to some extent, share the worldview propagated by RWPPs (Krämer, 2014). By contrast, among voters who disagree with RWP ideas, the extreme rhetoric employed by RWPPs might evoke reactance and might steer their political opinion further away from RWP ideas (Boeynaems et al., 2021; Krämer, 2014).

Anti-immigration rhetoric employed by RWP politicians has been characterized by the frequent use of at least two figurative language types: metaphor (De Landtsheer, 2015) and hyperbole (Kalkhoven, 2015). Metaphors are “cross-domain mappings” which transfer elements of source domains onto target domains (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). For example, a recent study demonstrated that, compared to literal messages, anti-immigration metaphors framing immigration as a disease increased support for anti-immigration attitudes and policies (Brown, Keefer, Sacco, and Bermond, 2019, Studies 1–2). Hyperbole is “an expression that is more extreme than justified given its ontological referent” (Burgers, Brugman, Renardel de Lavalette, and Steen, 2016, p. 166). Hyperboles can serve as an ideological strategy (Abbas, 2019) that exaggerates threats (Doig and Phythian, 2005) and thereby helps to mobilize support for RWP policy proposals (Kalkhoven and De Landtsheer, 2016).

Metaphors and hyperboles are tools to rhetorically create, or broaden, a gap between an in-group of national citizens and an out-group, which can be an established political elite, a group of perceived outsiders (e. g., immigrants or foreign cultures), or both (Musolff, 2017). Both types of figuration can be used to simplify and exaggerate societal issues and promote straightforward solutions to societal problems (Doig and Phythian, 2005; Musolff, 2017). Moreover, within RWP rhetoric, metaphor and hyperbole are oftentimes combined within a singular frame (Kalkhoven, 2015). For example, Geert Wilders hyperbolically extended the conventional metaphor *a wave of asylum seekers* into *a tsunami of asylum seekers*, when he referred to the number of refugees coming to the Netherlands (Roest, 2015). Because combinatory figurative frames contain multiple rhetorical operations, they can become relatively hard to challenge, which may increase their persuasive power compared to frames containing one type of figurative language (Burgers, Konijn, and Steen, 2016).

In general, metaphor and hyperbole can trigger emotional responses like anger and fear (Charteris-Black, 2006; Claridge, 2010). Similarly, various authors have observed that RWP rhetoric plays on negative emotions (e. g., Wirz, 2018) by suggesting that immigration threatens the nation and plays on anger by insinuating that political elites failed to defend the interest of the nation's presumed 'own people' (Hameleers et al., 2017). Recent studies have confirmed that populist rhetoric plays more on negative emotions than communication by mainstream political parties (Nai, 2021; Rico, Guinjoan, and Anduiza, 2020; Widmann, 2021). For instance, Nai (2021) shows that populist (vs. mainstream) election campaigns focused more on fear messages, especially when the political topic was presented in a conflict frame. By contrast, Rico et al. (2020) demonstrate that anger is an important driver of populist attitudes. Widmann (2021) reports on a content analysis of press releases and tweets by political actors which reveals that populist actors use more negative emotional appeals (e. g., anger, fear, sadness) and fewer positive emotional appeals (e. g., enthusiasm, hope) than mainstream political actors. In all, these studies demonstrate that populist rhetoric plays on negative (rather than positive) emotions, but the specific negative emotion that may be evoked can differ between specific contexts and settings.

Message intensity is another potential variable that could be of interest in explaining potential effects of figurative frames in RWP rhetoric. Message intensity refers to the degree to which a statement differs from an objective, non-evaluative, statement (Hamilton and Stewart, 1993). Thus, hyperbole and – at least some – metaphors can be seen as a form of intensification. Previous research has demonstrated that linguistic intensifiers can increase perceptions of message intensity (e. g., Burgers and de Graaf, 2013; Liebrecht, Hustinx, and van Mulken, 2019). Research has also demonstrated that messages that are perceived as more intense can be more persuasive than a neutral statement (e. g., Experiment 2 in Burgers and de Graaf, 2013; Bankhead, Bench, Peterson, Place, and Seiter, 2003; Hamilton and Stewart, 1993) but not always (e. g., Experiment 1 in Burgers and de Graaf, 2013). Nevertheless, we predict that figurative frames could increase message intensity, which – in turn – can boost the persuasiveness of RWP appeals.

In all, figuratively framed RWP rhetoric likely appeals to supportive voters, and hence can steer RWPP voters' opinion even more into line with RWP ideas (Krämer, 2014). Nevertheless, current experimental studies mainly focus on either student samples among which support for RWPPs is relatively low (Arendt, Marquart, and Matthes, 2015), or on samples that are representative for all voters (Bos et al., 2013; Hameleers et al., 2017; Matthes and Schmuck, 2015). Because of the multi-party systems common in Western-European countries, such samples likely include low percentages of RWPP voters (Oesch, 2008), which makes it hard to make claims about how *supportive* voters respond to typical RWP rhetoric. Therefore, we tested

how RWPP voters respond to typical RWP rhetoric in a controlled experiment for which we recruited a relatively large sample of RWPP voters from the Dutch population.

We expected that the metaphorical and hyperbolic frames used by RWP politicians steer the political opinion of RWPP voters more into line with populist ideas. Moreover, we expected these metaphorical and hyperbolic statements to be persuasive through perceptions of intensity (Kalkhoven and De Landtsheer, 2016) and emotiveness (Lecheler, Bos, and Vliegenthart, 2015; Wirz, 2018). Therefore, we hypothesized that:

H1: (a) Voters with an RWPP preference are more persuaded by anti-immigration frames comprising both metaphor and hyperbole than by frames that are either metaphorical or hyperbolic, which, in turn, (b) are more persuasive than non-figurative frames.

H2: Persuasive effects of figuratively framed right-wing populist statements are mediated by (a) evoked negative emotions (anger, fear, sadness) and (b) perceived message intensity.

3 How RWPP-identification strength shapes political persuasion

According to the ‘fueling discontent argument’, policy dissatisfaction and exposure to populist messages can mutually reinforce each other over time (Rooduijn et al., 2016). In general, voters who feel threatened by an out-group of immigrants are likely to support a political party that acknowledges their fears and concerns and promotes a strong anti-immigration policy (Berning and Schlueter, 2016; Rydgren, 2008). Feelings of discontent, for example, about current immigration policies, can therefore explain why voters support an RWPP (Ivarsflaten, 2008). At the same time, the strong anti-immigration rhetoric employed by RWPPs can further fuel this political discontent, and hence strengthen anti-immigration attitudes and reinforce RWPP support (Rooduijn et al., 2016). In addition, the strength with which supporters feel connected to their RWPP affects their political opinion in at least two ways: (1) directly and (2) indirectly by moderating their responses to RWP rhetoric.

First, RWPP-identification strength can *directly* influence political attitudes and voting behavior (Druckman et al., 2013; Miller and Johnston Conover, 2015). Party identification can shape voters’ social identity, which is the part of an individual’s self-concept that is derived from an emotionally valued group membership (Tajfel, 1981). Voters who strongly identify with a political party consider themselves members of an in-group (Miller and Johnston Conover, 2015; Tajfel, 1981), which might influence their thoughts and behavior and may lead to in-group favor-

itism and out-group derogation (Krämer, 2014; Miller and Johnston Conover, 2015). When RWPP-identification strength increases, group threats are interpreted as threats to the self, judgments become further biased, and while the out-group is blamed for everything that goes wrong, the in-group is absolved of all blame (Miller and Johnston Conover, 2015; Westfall et al., 2015). Thus, voters who strongly identify with an RWPP are most likely to feel (personally) threatened by an out-group of immigrants, which might result in even more support for an RWPP and its anti-immigration policy. Following this line of reasoning, political attitudes that initially defined voters' choice for an RWPP can be further strengthened when voters start to feel strongly connected to this RWPP (Druckman et al., 2013; Miller and Johnston Conover, 2015).

To test whether support for an RWPP policy is indeed related to the strength with which voters feel connected to their favorite RWPP, we propose:

H3: RWPP-identification strength is positively related to political persuasion.

Second, by moderating how RWPP voters respond to figuratively framed RWP rhetoric, RWPP-identification strength might *indirectly* affect political opinion. Voters who strongly identify with an RWPP might have developed an anti-immigration stance that does not need to be fueled by RWP rhetoric: Their political opinion already strongly resembles RWP ideas (Berning and Schlueter, 2016; Westfall et al., 2015). The political opinion of voters who feel weakly attached to an RWPP, however, is likely more susceptible to the persuasive impact of RWP rhetoric (Druckman et al., 2013; Hameleers et al., 2017): There is still room for RWP rhetoric to fuel political opinion (Hameleers et al., 2017). Therefore, we hypothesize that:

H4: RWPP-identification strength moderates the persuasive effects of figuratively framed right-wing populist statements, so that voters who weakly identify with an RWPP are more responsive to figuratively framed populist statements than voters who strongly identify with an RWPP.

4 Method

Participants

To recruit a sample of RWPP voters, we used a panel from a Dutch research company. This company had demographic information of all potential participants, including voting preferences. The survey was only distributed among voters who indicated to have voted for the Freedom Party (PVV) or Forum for Democracy (FvD)

in the 2017 National Elections. Both PVV (with 20 out of 150 seats, the second-largest party in the House of Representatives) and FvD (two seats in the House of Representatives) have been characterized as RWPPs with a strong anti-immigration focus (Hameleers, 2017). We checked whether the demographic information on RWPP preference collected earlier by the research company was still correct by asking participants to list their favorite political party out of all thirteen parties currently elected to Dutch Parliament. Participants who indicated that they favored any other party than PVV or FvD were dropped. Other inclusion criteria were that participants had to have completed secondary school, have the Dutch nationality, and be native speakers of Dutch.

A total of 519 participants completed the online study. Sixty participants were dropped because they indicated they favored a political party other than PVV or FvD, and nineteen participants were excluded because they had not completed secondary school. Thirty participants were excluded because they did not pass a simple reading check (i. e., could not name any relevant keywords from the populist statement they read as stimulus material). This left 410 unique participants for analysis, all of whom had Dutch nationality and were native speakers of Dutch (PVV preference: 286, FvD preference: 124; 54.6 % male, $M_{\text{age}}=59.98$ years, $SD_{\text{age}}=11.95$, range=23–86 years). Participants were evenly distributed across experimental conditions regarding age, $F(3,406)=.23$, $p=.88$, gender, $\chi^2(3)=.10$, $p=.99$, and RWPP-identification strength, $F(3,406)=.62$, $p=.60$.

Design and materials

The experiment had a 2 (anti-immigration metaphor: present, absent) x 2 (anti-immigration hyperbole: present, absent) between-subjects design. Participants read a short statement from an anonymous politician, promoting a stricter asylum policy to reduce the influx of economic refugees to the Netherlands. The statements were created for research purposes¹ but were based on actual Dutch public discourse in news media. The metaphors were based on a comparison between economic refugees and thieves (e. g., economic refugees form *a gang of asylum seekers, our country has been robbed*; RTL Nieuws, 2015). In the condition with hyperboles, exaggerations like *incredibly disadvantaged* and *by all means necessary* were used. The condition with metaphors and hyperboles comprised expressions like *an organized gang of asylum seekers* and *our country has been plundered*. Online Appendix A

¹ This set of stimuli was also used in, and pretested for, an experiment with different participants (i. e., a representative Dutch sample), reported in Boeynaems et al. (2021).

(<https://osf.io/g5v2u/>) provides an overview of the stimuli (both the original Dutch stimuli and an English translation).

Measures

Political persuasion was operationalized through three constructs: (1) policy attitude, (2) evaluation of the politician, and (3) likelihood to vote for the politician.

Policy attitude was tapped by asking participants to indicate on slider scales (0–100) to which extent they thought the proposed policy would be (1) unfavorable or favorable for the Netherlands, (2) unnecessary or necessary for the Netherlands, (3) negative or positive for the Netherlands, (4) a bad or a good idea for the Netherlands (based on Hartman, 2012; $\alpha = .80$).

Evaluation of the politician was measured with a slider scale ranging from 0 to 100 on which participants could indicate how unfavorable (cold) or favorable (warm) they felt about the politician (Ditonto, Lau, and Sears, 2013).

Likelihood to vote for the politician was tapped by asking participants with slider scales (0–100) how likely they would (1) vote for the politician, (2) vote for the politician if elections were held today (Fernandes, 2013; $r = .96$, $p < .01$).

Perceived message intensity was measured by asking participants to rate the extent to which they perceived the statement as forceful, extreme, intense, and exaggerated (slider scales, 0–100). The first three items were derived from the perceived language intensity scale (Hamilton and Stewart, 1993). Because hyperbole is defined as an expression that is more extreme than justified given its ontological referent (Burgers, Brugman et al., 2016), a fourth item was added which asked to what extent participants felt the statement to be exaggerated. Scale-reliability was low ($\alpha = .41$). Based on correlation analyses, we combined the items ‘extreme’ and ‘exaggerated’ into one item: perceived extremity ($\alpha = .81$; $r = .69$, $p < .001$). The other two items, ‘intense’ and ‘forceful’, were analyzed separately.

Emotions were measured with seven separate items. We asked participants to rate on slider scales (0–100) to which extent they felt one or more of the following emotions when reading the statement: anger, fear, sadness, contentment, enthusiasm, hope, and compassion (Lecheler et al., 2015).

To measure *RWPP-identification* strength, we asked participants to indicate on slider scales (0–100) to which extent they consider themselves to be a convinced adherent of their preferred political party (Bankert, Huddy, and Rosema, 2017).

Perceived novelty and *perceived aptness* were measured as control variables. We took novelty and aptness into account because they are described as important factors that can influence figurative-language effects (Thibodeau and Durgin, 2011). Novelty reflects the degree of unfamiliarity with the figurative expression, while

aptness reflects the degree to which a recipient believes a figurative statement captures important topic features (Thibodeau and Durgin, 2011). We measured perceived novelty and aptness by asking participants to rate how novel (0=very novel to 100=very conventional) and apt (0=very inappropriate to 100=very appropriate) they perceived the politician's choice of words to be (Pierce and Chiappe, 2008). For our analyses, we recoded the scores of novelty such that a higher score indicates that a metaphor was perceived as more novel.

Demographic variables. Finally, we asked participants for their age, gender, and education level in commonly accepted ways.²

Procedure

Data were collected online through Qualtrics (www.qualtrics.com). After computer-based random assignment to one of the four experimental conditions, participants read a short introduction and were asked for informed consent. Next, they were presented with a short populist statement. After reading the statement, we included a reading-check question to determine whether participants have read the text. Then, after measuring political persuasion, participants indicated how intense they perceived the statement to be, and to what extent the text affected certain emotions. We subsequently measured the control variables of novelty and aptness and asked demographic questions. Finally, participants were thanked for participation and were redirected to the research company's website to collect their reward.

5 Results

Hypothesis testing

Direct effects on political persuasion (H1). First, we tested for the direct effects of populist metaphor and hyperbole on political persuasion. Descriptive statistics

² We also measured perceived political persuasion: Participants were asked how they thought *other* people would rate the items of policy attitude, evaluation of the politician, and likelihood to vote (Golan, Banning, and Lundy, 2008). Moreover, we asked participants to indicate their own approximate political position on a left-right scale as well as the approximate of the politician. These items, however, fall outside the scope of this study and are therefore not included in the current analyses. No further variables were measured.

Table 1: Mean scores (and standard deviations) of message intensity, negative emotions, positive emotions, other emotions, control variables, and political persuasion.

(N = 410)	No metaphor		Metaphor	
	No hyperbole	Hyperbole	No hyperbole	Hyperbole
<u>Message intensity</u>				
Intensity	66.63 (23.95)	59.64 (25.39)	66.99 (21.67)	69.49 (24.02)
Forcefulness	80.45 (18.95)	74.31 (20.06)	74.89 (19.96)	78.69 (20.20)
Extremity	25.15 (22.72)	24.61 (21.53)	37.23 (24.63)	35.33 (26.98)
<u>Emotions</u>				
Fear	23.83 (30.09)	27.52 (29.70)	31.66 (29.64)	27.38 (28.11)
Anger	35.90 (35.95)	29.08 (30.01)	40.58 (33.69)	38.83 (33.31)
Sadness	26.07 (30.95)	20.74 (25.72)	30.20 (29.06)	29.14 (30.07)
Enthusiasm	73.59 (28.35)	67.13 (30.16)	67.10 (30.55)	66.20 (29.74)
Hope	70.99 (32.35)	61.61 (30.48)	64.75 (29.55)	65.74 (32.35)
Contentment	73.73 (29.59)	65.60 (33.01)	66.93 (31.47)	66.49 (30.97)
Compassion	40.05 (33.43)	36.02 (30.21)	42.15 (31.23)	39.15 (29.59)
<u>Control variables</u>				
Novelty	14.78 (16.82)	22.81 (22.32)	29.17 (24.56)	31.72 (28.18)
Aptness	86.39 (16.90)	82.58 (18.01)	72.81 (23.90)	72.53 (25.98)
<u>Political persuasion</u>				
Policy attitude	90.38 (15.28)	88.12 (16.06)	85.53 (18.37)	87.13 (15.43)
Evaluation of the politician	84.92 (20.37)	82.61 (24.14)	82.17 (21.45)	79.70 (23.86)
Likelihood to vote	83.39 (21.28)	83.06 (23.07)	80.43 (22.03)	79.38 (25.05)

Note. All variables were on scales from 0 to 100; higher scores indicate higher intensity, more negative emotions, more positive emotions, higher perceived novelty, higher perceived aptness, a more positive attitude towards the proposed policy, a more positive attitude towards the politician, and a higher likelihood to vote for the politician.

are presented in Table 1. A 2×2 MANOVA with anti-immigration metaphor and hyperbole as independent variables and the three constructs of political persuasion (policy attitude, evaluation of the political candidate, likelihood to vote for the politician) as dependent variables showed no effects of populist metaphor and populist hyperbole on political persuasion and no interactions between populist metaphor and hyperbole (see Table 2). Therefore, we rejected H1.

Emotions and message intensity as mediators (H2). For mediation to be possible, the independent variable has to directly affect the potential mediator (Hayes, 2018). Therefore, to test H2, we first tested for the impact of anti-immigration metaphor and hyperbole on emotions and message intensity. A 2×2 MANOVA with anti-immigration metaphors and hyperboles as independent variables and the different

Table 2: Results of 2 (metaphor: present, absent) x 2 (hyperbole: present, absent) analyses of variance with the distinct emotions (H1), message intensity (H1), and the control variables novelty and aptness as dependent variables (DVs).

IV	DV		df1	df2	F	p	η_p^2
Metaphor	Political persuasion	MANOVA	3	404	1.33	.27	.01
		MANOVA	3	404	8.66	<.001***	.06
	Message intensity	Intensity			4.70	<.05*	.01
		Forcefulness	1	406	0.09	.76	<.001
		Extremity			22.69	<.001***	.05
	Emotions	MANOVA	7	400	1.14	.34	.02
		MANOVA	2	405	15.72	<.001***	.07
	Control variables	Novelty			25.39	<.001***	.06
		Aptness	1	406	30.38	<.001***	.07
	Hyperbole	Political persuasion	MANOVA	3	404	.62	.61
Message intensity		MANOVA	3	404	0.41	.73	.003
Emotions		MANOVA	7	400	1.02	.42	.02
		MANOVA	2	405	3.65	<.05*	.02
Control variables		Novelty	1	406	5.24	<.05*	.01
		Aptness	1	406	.91	.34	.002
Metaphor x Hyperbole	Political persuasion	MANOVA	3	404	.61	.61	.01
	Message intensity	MANOVA	3	404	2.48	.06	.02
	Emotions	MANOVA	7	400	1.29	.26	.02
	Control variables	MANOVA	2	405	.72	.49	.004

* Significant at .05 level, ** significant at .01 level, *** significant at .001 level

emotions (fear, anger, sadness, enthusiasm, hope, contentment, compassion) as dependent variables revealed no direct or interaction effects of populist metaphor and hyperbole on emotions. Next, a second 2 x 2 MANOVA with anti-immigration metaphors and hyperboles as independent variables and the different constructs of perceived message intensity (intensity, forcefulness, extremity) as dependent variables showed no effect of populist hyperbole on perceived message intensity and no interaction between metaphor and hyperbole. However, the MANOVA did reveal an effect of anti-immigration metaphor on perceived message intensity. Univariate

analyses showed that populist metaphors increased a statement's intensity and extremity but not its forcefulness.

These analyses showed that, as expected, metaphorically framed RWP statements were perceived as more intense and extreme than non-metaphorical statements. However, contrary to our expectation, we found no effects of metaphors on emotional responses and no effects of hyperboles on voters' emotions and perceived message intensity.

Next, we tested whether political persuasion was indirectly affected via intensity and extremity, using the Process macro v3.3 for SPSS statistics (Hayes, 2018; 5,000 bootstrap samples, see Table 3). Mediation analyses revealed no indirect effects of populist metaphors on political persuasion via intensity. However, via extremity, we found indirect negative effects of populist metaphors on all three constructs of political persuasion. Metaphorical statements were perceived as more extreme than non-metaphorical statements, which, in turn, negatively influenced voters' evaluation of the proposed policy, their evaluation of the political candidate, and the likelihood that they would vote for the politician. While we expected extremity to *add* to a statement's persuasiveness, results showed an indirect *negative* effect, via extremity, on political persuasion. This means that when statements were perceived as (too) extreme, this pushed RWPP voters' political opinion away from RWP ideas. These findings contradict H2.

The role of RWPP-identification strength (H3, H4). A 2 (anti-immigration metaphor: absent, present) x 2 (anti-immigration hyperbole: present, absent) MANCOVA with RWPP-identification strength as a covariate included in the statistical model showed a significant main effect of RWPP-identification strength on political persuasion, Pillai's Trace=.17, $F(3,400)=26.46$, $p<.001$, $\eta_p^2=.17$. Voters who strongly identify with an RWPP scored higher on policy attitude, $F(1,402)=46.46$, $p<.001$, $\eta_p^2=.10$, evaluation of the politician, $F(1,402)=37.98$, $p<.001$, $\eta_p^2=.09$, and likelihood to vote for the politician, $F(1,402)=56.01$, $p<.001$, $\eta_p^2=.12$. This supports H3 that RWPP-identification strength is positively related to political persuasion.

Against expectations, our analysis revealed no interaction effects of RWPP-identification strength with metaphor, Pillai's Trace=.004, $F(3,400)=.58$, $p=.63$, hyperbole, Pillai's Trace=.01, $F(3,400)=1.27$, $p=.29$, or metaphor and hyperbole combined, Pillai's Trace=.02, $F(3,400)=2.18$, $p=.09$.

We further explored whether RWPP-identification strength affected indirect effects of populist metaphors on political persuasion, via extremity and intensity (see Online Appendix B, <https://osf.io/g5v2u/>). We found no moderating effects of RWPP-identification strength on the indirect effects of figuratively framed statements, via intensity, on political persuasion. However, in line with H4, moderated mediation analyses showed that the indirect effects of populist metaphors on polit-

Table 3: Indirect effects of figuratively framed populist statements on political persuasion via extremity, novelty, and aptness.

IV	Mediator	DV	<i>b</i>	<i>SE B</i>	95 % CI
Metaphor	Extremity	Policy attitude	-1.76	.56	[-2.95, -.78]*
		Evaluation of the politician	-3.87	1.01	[-5.93, -2.03]*
		Likelihood to vote	-4.93	1.24	[-7.56, -2.76]*
Metaphor	Intensity	Policy attitude	.38	.29	[-.02, 1.10] ^{ns}
		Evaluation of the politician	.34	.32	[-.15, 1.10] ^{ns}
		Likelihood to vote	.20	.29	[-.27, .92] ^{ns}
Metaphor	Novelty	Policy attitude	-3.02	.67	[-4.36, -1.78]*
		Evaluation of the politician	-3.87	1.03	[-6.05, -2.01]*
		Likelihood to vote	-4.50	1.08	[-6.78, -2.58]*
Metaphor	Aptness	Policy attitude	-3.87	.76	[-5.44, -2.46]*
		Evaluation of the politician	-6.35	1.27	[-8.93, -3.89]*
		Likelihood to vote	-7.12	1.40	[-9.96, -4.54]*
Hyperbole	Novelty	Policy attitude	-1.34	.63	[-2.65, -.16]*
		Evaluation of the politician	-1.71	.81	[-3.40, -.24]*
		Likelihood to vote	-1.99	.94	[-3.92, -.25]*

Note. DV = dependent variable. We used the Process macro v3.0 for SPSS statistics (Hayes, 2018) with 5,000 bootstrap samples for all our mediation analyses. Each indirect effect was tested with a distinctive mediation analysis that included one mediator at a time.

* Indirect effect is significant with at least $p < .05$ (95 % confidence interval does not include zero).

^{ns} not significant

ical persuasion via extremity were influenced by the strength with which voters identify with the RWPP. As RWPP-identification strength increased, these negative indirect effects via extremity diminished. Thus, the extreme character of the statements especially pushed the political opinion of weakly and moderately identified RWPP voters away from the advocated RWP policy. Voters who strongly identify with an RWPP, however, supported the politician promoting an anti-immigration ideology, even if they considered the rhetoric to be extreme.

Additional analyses: The role of novelty and aptness

We analyzed whether the control variables of perceived novelty and perceived aptness influenced the persuasive impact of figuratively framed populist statements. A 2 (populist metaphor: absent, present) x 2 (populist hyperbole: present, absent) MANOVA with novelty and aptness as dependent variables showed effects of metaphor and hyperbole (see Table 2). Metaphors decreased aptness and increased novelty. We showed that hyperboles also increased novelty but not aptness. No interaction effects between metaphor and hyperbole were found.

Novelty and aptness both correlated with the three constructs of political persuasion (see Online Appendix C, <https://osf.io/g5v2u/>). Therefore, we conducted mediation analyses to test whether novelty and aptness mediated the impact of figuratively framed populist statements (see Table 3).³ Results showed that voters were less positive about the politician and the proposed policy when they perceived the metaphorical statement as inappropriate and/or novel. Anti-immigration hyperbole had a negative indirect effect on political persuasion via perceived novelty.⁴

6 Conclusion and discussion

In this study, we investigated how RWP voters respond to RWP rhetoric. Our results indicate that the (extremely) negative anti-immigration metaphors used by RWP politicians can put off RWPP voters. Instead of increasing a statement's persuasiveness, metaphors and hyperboles indirectly pushed RWPP voters' political opinion further away from RWP ideas. We would expect such boomerang effects to occur for voters whose worldview does not align with RWP ideas but not for RWPP voters themselves (Boeynaems et al., 2021; Krämer, 2014). Even among supportive voters, RWP politicians can exceed the limits of acceptable language use, resulting in lower support. However, these negative indirect effects of metaphors and hyperboles on political persuasion were statistically small, and, regardless of the way the statement is framed, RWPP voters were highly supportive of the politician and the proposed anti-immigration policy. Thus, also when RWPP voters disapproved the met-

³ Although multicollinearity tests suggested no problems with multicollinearity, we conducted separate mediation analyses for perceived novelty and aptness because of the high correlation ($r = -.81$) between novelty and aptness.

⁴ We further analyzed whether RWPP-identification strength influenced these indirect effects and found that this was not the case (see Online Appendix D, <https://osf.io/g5v2u/>, for a complete report).

aphors and hyperboles used to frame political statements, they still supported the general thrust of the statement.

An important reason why voters support a non-governing populist party (either left-wing or right-wing) is dissatisfaction with traditional politics, as a form of protest against established political parties and their policies (Birch and Dennison, 2019). For RWPP voters, this political dissatisfaction is largely based on anti-immigration sentiments (Ivarsflaten, 2008; Oesch, 2008). When anti-immigration attitudes are an important factor in defining voters' electoral choices, the promise of strong anti-immigration measures will likely be positively received, even when the use of extremely negative figurative language slightly tempers this enthusiasm. Our results support this idea by showing high overall rates on political persuasion. When looking at political landscapes across Western Europe, RWPPs take up the strongest stance on immigration by far, as compared to other political parties (van Spanje, 2010). Thus, even when RWPP rhetoric slightly decreases voters' support, the ideological distance between RWPPs and other political parties might be too large for voters to swap party preference (van Spanje and van der Brug, 2009).

We hypothesized that the extent to which figuratively framed RWP statements affect voters' political opinion depends on the strength with which these voters identify with an RWPP. We expected mildly supportive voters to be most susceptible to the persuasion by typical RWP anti-immigration rhetoric. We showed that RWPP-identification strength indeed influenced the effects of figuratively framed RWP statements on political persuasion, but effects were not in the expected direction. We found instead that the indirect negative effects of metaphors and hyperboles on political persuasion mainly held for voters who weakly or mildly supported an RWPP but not for those who strongly supported an RWPP.

In general, voters tend to expose themselves to information that matches their worldviews (Hameleers et al., 2018). Thus, when voters more strongly support anti-immigration stances, they are more likely to expose themselves to RWP anti-immigration rhetoric (Hameleers et al., 2018; Miller and Johnston Conover, 2015). When individuals are repeatedly confronted with an intense and emotive stimulus, such as the highly negative metaphors used by RWP politicians, they can become habituated or desensitized: The stimulus loses its emotive 'force' (Tryon, 2005). Given our results, it seems plausible that processes of desensitization and habituation occurred for the RWPP voters who strongly identified with an RWPP and less likely for voters who weakly identified with an RWPP.

Our findings support the hypothesis that RWPP-identification strength is positively related to political persuasion. If voters more strongly identify with an RWPP, they show stronger support for a politician who advocates stricter anti-immigration policy. While we can assume that voters who support an RWPP are, a priori, in favor of stronger anti-immigration policy (Berning and Schlueter, 2016), we showed

that voters who feel strongly connected to an RWPP were more supportive of a politician who promotes stricter anti-immigration measures than voters who feel weakly connected to an RWPP. Since RWPP-identification strength did not serve as an independent variable in our experiment, we cannot make causal claims about the effects of RWPP-identification strength on political opinion and behavior. Future research could explore how the extent with which voters feel connected to an RWPP shapes political opinion over time.

Overall, it seems that the use of extreme and negative figurative language involves a risk for RWPPs. Its extreme character can deter even supportive voters and hence decrease RWPP support. However, indirectly, the extreme rhetoric employed by RWPPs might contribute to their success. Because of their extreme stances, RWPPs are oftentimes excluded from politics by established parties, who publicly distance themselves from RWPP ideas (van Spanje and van der Brug, 2009). At first sight, it seems to be an effective strategy to ban extreme political parties from the political arena. However, parliamentary opposition parties that experienced electoral success generally do not suffer from being ostracized by other parties. Rather, being excluded from the political arena can further fuel their success (van Spanje and van der Brug, 2009). When supportive voters, especially strongly identified voters, feel that their RWPP is threatened, this might further strengthen their support for this RWPP (Westfall et al., 2015). Thus, rather than directly steering political opinion more in line with populist ideas, the extreme language employed by RWPPs might serve as a tool to indirectly gain electoral support. With their extreme rhetoric, RWPPs reinforce the distinctiveness between political parties and broaden the gap between supportive and opposing voters (Boeynaems et al., 2021; van Spanje and van der Brug, 2009). Thereby, the typical rhetoric employed by RWPPs can put in motion further polarization of societies, which might eventually completely shut down the political and societal dialogue about immigration and other political issues, creating strongly divided nations.

A number of caveats have to be mentioned. First, our study focused specifically on anti-immigration rhetoric, which is one of the main priorities of Western-European RWPPs (Bos and Brants, 2014). Thus, for the voters within our sample, anti-immigration attitudes were likely an important reason why they voted for an RWPP in the first place (Ivarsflaten, 2008). This can explain the high average scores on all three constructs of political persuasion across experimental conditions, indicating potential ceiling effects. It might be that these, a priori, anti-immigration attitudes were so strong that there was little room left for metaphors and hyperboles to boost RWPP support (Hameleers et al., 2018). Since the political ideas of RWPPs reach further than just immigration policy (Ivarsflaten, 2008), future research could test for the persuasive impact of metaphors and hyperboles to frame societal issues that are not as highly debated and as politically charged as immigration. In addition,

future research could not only focus on other issues but also seek to replicate our results using different figurative frames in the context of RWP rhetoric.

While it is commonly theorized that RWP rhetoric derives its persuasiveness from its ability to spark negative emotions like anger and fear (Hameleers et al., 2017; Rico et al., 2020), our findings do not support this hypothesis. We found no effects of anti-immigration rhetoric on emotions for RWPP voters. Furthermore, both anger and fear were negatively correlated to political persuasion in our sample of RWPP voters, which goes against current theories (Hameleers, 2017; Matthes and Schmuck, 2017). This suggests that the relation between political rhetoric, emotions, and persuasion might be more complex than is oftentimes theorized (Lecheler et al., 2015; Matthes and Schmuck, 2015; Wirz, 2018). Voter perceptions and individual differences (e. g., RWPP identification) influence the extent to which political rhetoric is perceived as intense and emotive, and thereby affects its persuasiveness. Future research could focus on the mediating role of emotional responsiveness and voters' perceptions as well as the boundary conditions under which such indirect persuasive effects of RWP rhetoric on political persuasion take place.

To conclude, we showed that RWPP voters respond differently to anti-immigration rhetoric than often assumed (Hameleers et al., 2018; Krämer, 2014). The idea that voters who share a right-wing ideology respond positively to RWP rhetoric is not supported by our data. Rather, even supportive voters can be pushed away by the extreme language used by RWP politicians, in similar ways as the general population (Boeynaems et al., 2021). These findings underscore the importance of testing assumptions about the persuasiveness of RWP rhetoric among different sub-groups of voters. We showed that, rather than being persuaded by RWP rhetoric, RWPP voters seem to be triggered by the promise of stronger anti-immigration policy, regardless of how that promise is phrased. It seems that being heard and acknowledged in their grievances, rather than being told what to grieve about, is a main driver of RWPP support.

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