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### Public images of right-wing populist leaders: the role of the media

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## Chapter 4

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### AN EXPERIMENTAL TEST OF THE IMPACT OF STYLE AND RHETORIC ON THE PERCEPTION OF RIGHT-WING POPULIST AND MAINSTREAM LEADERS

*Manuscript under review<sup>1</sup>*

#### **Abstract**

It has often been argued that the communication strategies used by right-wing populists are key to their appeal to voters. However, prior studies found only rather limited across-the-board effects of communication strategies that employ a populist style and rhetoric. Across-the-board effects were only found for party leaders who appear to be more authoritative. In this study we focus on the conditionality of the effects of different communication strategies on the perceived effectiveness and the perceived legitimacy of one right-wing populist, and one mainstream leader. We use an experimental setup with a large-N representative sample of Dutch voters ( $n = 3,125$ ). The results show that the effects of populist communication strategies differ for the lower educated, the politically cynical, and the less efficacious. These groups of voters are more susceptible to persuasion by the populist style of the right-wing populist party leader. Results are discussed in the light of research on (right-wing) populism.

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<sup>1</sup> A revised version of this manuscript, co-authored by Wouter van der Brug and Claes de Vreese, is under review.

## Introduction

The growth of right-wing populist parties during recent decades, especially in Western Europe, has fostered research on this ‘exceptional’ and relatively new party family. Among the various research themes touched upon within this field are the potential pivotal role of party leaders for their parties’ success (Bos & Van der Brug, 2010; Van der Brug & Mughan, 2007), and the impact and role of the mass media (e.g., Boomgaarden & Vliegenthart, 2007; Koopmans & Muis, 2009). A third related theme combines these insights and draws on the specific populist rhetoric and style of these right-wing populist party leaders (Albertazzi, 2007, Bos, Van der Brug & De Vreese, 2010; Hawkins, 2009; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007) and the effects this supposedly has on the way they are perceived or evaluated (Bos, Van der Brug & De Vreese, 2011; Mazzoleni, Stewart & Horsfield, 2003).

This study digs deeper into this topic, and focuses on the “*reception* of the populist discourse among voters” (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007, p. 337). We know that certain parts of the electorate are more attracted to right-wing populist parties, but the exact mechanism at work is not clear. This chapter looks at this question and in doing so focuses particularly on education, political cynicism and political efficacy as moderators of communication strategy effects. We investigate whether the lower educated, the politically cynical and the less efficacious are more susceptible to the populist style and rhetoric.

We use an approach that has not been used before in the field of research on right-wing populism: an experiment. This allows us to establish the impact of three separate communication strategies. We focus on the effects of 1) the populist style, 2) the populist rhetoric and 3) authoritativeness (i.e., the extent to which a leader appears to be knowledgeable about the topics discussed) on the extent to which party leaders are perceived to be effective (i.e., able to affect policies or influence the public debate) and legitimate (not posing a threat to democracy). We make a comparison between a right-wing populist and a mainstream party leader. The experimental set-up contributes to the literature in three ways. First of all, the direct manipulation and specification of the three communication strategies allows us to conduct a strong causal test. Prior ‘in viva’ studies had to rely upon the communication strategies that politicians have actually used. Yet, we cannot know what the consequences would have been had they followed a different strategy.

How would the public react if a mainstream politician uses populist rhetoric? We cannot test that if mainstream leaders do not follow that strategy. An experiment, on the other hand, does provide the opportunity to manipulate the content of news messages and hence provides us with more opportunities to test the effects of media content. Secondly, this study gives us the opportunity to isolate and disentangle the individual effects of the three strategies. And finally, and most importantly, we can now examine the effects of possible individual-level moderators to gain a more in-depth understanding of why and whether certain individuals are more prone to be affected by (specific) right-wing populist communication strategies.

This study employs a 2x2x2x2 factorial design: absence and presence of populist style, rhetoric and authoritativeness varies and the main political actor varies over sixteen conditions: we use the party leader of the Dutch right-wing populist PVV as well as the chairman of the – mainstream – liberal VVD. This set-up takes into account all possible interactions between the three different strategies and allows us to determine whether the effects differ between right-wing populist and mainstream party leaders. We use an online representative sample of 3,125 members of the LISS Household Panel which were randomly assigned to each of the sixteen experimental groups. The results show that the three communication strategies do indeed resonate with particular parts of the (right-wing populist) electorate.

## **Communication strategies and perceptions of leaders**

In this chapter we focus on three communication strategies used by right-wing populist and mainstream party leaders, that are assumed to affect perceived effectiveness and legitimacy (Bos et al., 2011).

### ***Populist rhetoric, style and authoritativeness***

The *populist rhetoric* consists of an anti-establishment appeal or anti-elitism, and the celebration of the heartland, which is, according to Taggart (2000), a place “in which, in the populist imagination, a virtuous and unified population resides” (p. 95). Populism “considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’ and (...) that

politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people” (Mudde, 2004, p. 543).<sup>i</sup>

Research has shown that these substantive components of populism have to be set aside from *populist style* elements (Bos et al., 2010). Mainstream parties more easily adopt the presentation style of populists than the more substantive elements of their rhetoric. Populists, and their followers, claim to be reluctant politicians, who only engage in politics because of a perceived extreme crisis. (Mudde, 2004; Taggart, 2000). This corresponds with what Albertazzi (2007) calls “dramatization”: the “need to generate tension in order to build up support for the party (...) by denouncing the tragedies that would befall the community if it were to be deprived of its defences.” (p. 335) Another aspect of the populist style is “ordinariness” (Stewart et al., 2003, p. 228), “straightforwardness, simplicity and clarity”, (Taggart, 2000, p. 97), “man in the street communication styles” (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008, p. 2) and “friend versus foe” rhetoric (Weyland, 2001): populists use simple and strong language. A final aspect of the populist style is the emphasis on the strong (charismatic) party leader. Generally, populist movements are organized around a central leader, without whom the party organization would fall apart (e.g., Weyland, 2001). Moreover, these leaders often have authoritarian traits: they refer to themselves as the crisis manager and have an ambivalent relation with democratic leadership (Taggart, 2000).

The third communication strategy we focus on is *authoritativeness*, which refers to how knowledgeable a politician is about the political topics discussed. Because voters base their electoral preference (partially) on substantial grounds, it is essential for *all* party leaders to get their ideological message across; they have to be able to convey their position on a set of core issues (Bos et al., 2010). Moreover, voters prefer a party leader who is also able to convince others, especially within parliament or within the broader political realm. To be authoritative in this interpretation is thus expected to be highly related to being persuasive: to what extent can the party leader convince voters that he or she has a strong case, i.e., is credible (Hovland & Weiss, 1951)? We argue that party leaders are more authoritative when they use arguments and mention ‘facts’ when they elaborate on their viewpoints (O’Keefe, 1998). They can refer to statistics or other sources. A final aspect is the extent to which right-wing populists propose solutions to the problems raised: politicians who bring up problems and do not come with

suggestions to overcome them are perceived to have a lack of knowledge on the issues addressed. Landau et al. (2004) find that “when reminders of one’s vulnerability and mortality are highly salient” (p. 1137) support is higher for leaders that are able to help people manage their fears.

### *Perceived effectiveness and legitimacy*

We focus on two dependent variables concerning the public perception of the politicians covered in the experiment and draw on previous research on the public image of right-wing populist leaders in which two aspects were found to be important for their electoral success: effectiveness and legitimacy (Bos & Van der Brug, 2010).

Most electoral research indicates that voters make a reasoned choice when they vote, which means that they take into account the consequences of their choice (Lupia & McCubbins, 1998). Therefore, they prefer party leaders who are able to reach certain goals (Bos & Van der Brug; 2010, Van der Brug et al., 2005). Perceived *effectiveness* of party leaders is important for right-wing populists as well as mainstream leaders (Bos & Van der Brug, 2010) in order to be seen as a serious political contestant.

We also know that voters in general prefer party leaders who do not intend to radically change or overthrow the democratic representational system (Bos & Van der Brug, 2010; Van der Brug et al., 2005); they have to be perceived to be *legitimate*. However, because of the (fascist) anti-democratic and anti-constitutional legacy of some right-wing populist parties (Carter, 2005), these parties may be identified with the extreme right, which could lead voters to assess some right-wing populists as illegitimate. Even though potential voters for these party leaders may be critical of the political establishment, most of them will not want to see the democratic system endangered. It is therefore important for right-wing populist party leaders “(1) to make clear that they belong neither to the political establishment nor to the camp of anti-democratic forces; (2) to make credible that they do oppose the political elite – but the political elite only and not the liberal democratic system” (Schedler, 1996, p. 302).

### *An experimental test of the effect of communication strategies on leader perception*

In political science research the prominence and impact of experiments has grown in recent decades (Druckman, Green, Kuklinski, & Lupia, 2006). However, within the field of research on right-wing populism and/or media populism such a strong causal test has never been conducted. It is clear that right-wing populist leaders adopt a different approach of presenting themselves by using an idiosyncratic style or rhetoric (Bos et al., 2010; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007), and it is oftentimes assumed that this populist style and rhetoric is a decisive factor in determining the success, and the perception, of these politicians. At the same time research has shown that voters for these parties evaluate their leaders in the same way voters for mainstream parties do (Bos & Van der Brug, 2010), and that they have to appear to be authoritative, i.e., persuasive or knowledgeable, to be perceived to be effective, just as leaders of mainstream parties do (Bos et al., 2011). An experimental setup allows us to conduct a strong causal test and estimate communication strategy effects directly by means of experimental manipulation.

### *The moderating role of educational level, political cynicism, and political efficacy*

The use of an extensive survey experiment enables us to take a closer look at the conditional effects of the three communication strategies under investigation. We know from extant research that media or communication effects are oftentimes moderated by background variables. Moreover, with regard to right-wing populist parties (and their leaders) the question is still up in the air whether the specific populist style and rhetoric appeals to certain people specifically (e.g., Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). Therefore our main aim is to explore the extent to which these communication strategy effects are conditional upon individual-level characteristics of voters. In research on the support for right-wing populist parties several key background variables are used as explanations for the electoral success of these parties. It is, however, not clear *why* these specific voters feel more attracted to these parties. In this study we investigate whether this is the case because they are more susceptible to populist communication strategies.

In research on the demand-side explanations for right-wing populist party success there are several indications that the *lower educated* feel attracted to right-

wing populist parties. The ‘insecurity’ thesis supposes that the lower educated are more affected by the transition from an industrial to a post-industrial capitalist society (e.g., Betz, 1994), globalization, and mass immigration, and have therefore become “insecure about various aspects of their life (...) They seek salvation in the ‘simple messages’ of the populist radical right, which promises a clear identity and protection against the changing world” (Mudde, 2007, p. 223). Another reason is that, unlike individuals who received more education, their “populist radical right attitudes” are not replaced by “‘democratic’ or ‘tolerant’ values” (Mudde, 2007, p. 217). Moreover, in their statements right-wing populists oftentimes refer to the common man and try to speak their language. Albertazzi (2007), for instance, finds that the populist style is adapted to fit the needs of the heartland. And the heartland is typically occupied by the “man in the street”, “Average Joe”, “the ordinary man” who is often not that highly educated. It is therefore plausible that the populist style and rhetoric resonates more with the lower educated.

Moreover, in general, right-wing populist parties take an anti-political establishment (Schedler, 1996), antiparty or anti-elitist approach, blame mainstream political parties and elites for problems in society and argue that these mainstream parties and elites have lost the connection with ‘the people’. Consequentially, it is argued that these parties attract people who hold negative attitudes towards the political establishment (political resentment) (Betz, 1994). And indeed, voters for right-wing populist parties seem to hold strong anti-establishment sentiments (Knigge, 1998; Lubbers & Scheepers, 2000; Lubbers & Scheepers, 2001; Norris, 2005), or, are highly cynical. Consequentially, it is possible that “a populist discourse only attracts voters who *already* felt deserted by the political elites” (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007, p. 337), i.e. voters who show higher levels of *political cynicism*.

It has also been argued that it are mainly the *politically inefficacious*, i.e. the ones that have feelings of powerlessness, that feel attracted to populism (Belanger & Aarts, 2006) and it could therefore also be assumed that it are those voters are therefore also more affected by the populist style and discourse.

These considerations lead us to expect that a populist style and discourse will mainly exert effects on the *lower educated*, the *cynical*, and the *less efficacious*. Main effects, or across the board effects, will be estimated, but in the case of populist

style and discourse we do not expect these to exist. This leads to the following hypotheses:

*H1a: The effect of populist rhetoric on perceived effectiveness is positive for the lower educated, the more politically cynical and the less politically efficacious.*

*H1b: The effect of populist rhetoric on perceived legitimacy is positive for the lower educated, the more politically cynical and the less politically efficacious.*

*H2a: The effect of populist style on perceived effectiveness is positive for the lower educated, the more politically cynical and the less politically efficacious.*

*H2b: The effect of populist style on perceived legitimacy is positive for the lower educated, the more politically cynical and the less politically efficacious.*

Finally, we have no reason to expect the effect of authoritativeness to be moderated by education, cynicism or efficacy. This generic communication style is assumed to appeal to all voters, which is corroborated by a recent study that shows positive across-the-board effects for authoritativeness, on the perceived effectiveness of mainstream as well as right-wing populist leaders (Bos et al., 2011)<sup>ii</sup>. So, the last hypothesis is:

*H3: Being authoritative positively affects the perceived effectiveness of the right-wing populist or mainstream leader.*

### ***Differences between party leaders***

By comparing the effects of communication strategies on the perception of one right-wing populist leader with the perception of one mainstream party leader, we also assess the difference between the two leader types. It could be argued, that the first four hypotheses only hold for the right-wing populist party leader. When he uses a populist style or rhetoric it is congruent with his political standing. However, it is not clear how using a populist rhetoric or populist style affects the perceived effectiveness and legitimacy of the mainstream leader. Is there no effect? And if there is an effect, in which direction? And how does this resonate among different groups of voters? Finally, as recent research suggested we expect no differences between both leader types when it comes to the effect of

authoritativeness. Because we have no ground for a hypothesis in this regard, we pose a research question:

*RQ1: Are there any differences between the effects of the three communication strategies on the image of the right-wing populist leader compared to the mainstream leader?*

## Experimental setup

To investigate the effects of the style and rhetoric on the perception of and support for right-wing populist and mainstream leaders, we conduct an online survey experiment among a representative sample of Dutch citizens. This has several advantages over laboratory experiments: the experimental setting reflects the everyday life of the respondents more closely and scores higher on mundane realism, which ensures higher external validity, and the non-obtrusive environment minimizes the experimenter effect and social desirability effects (Arceneaux, 2010, McDermott, 2002).

### *Design*

In a between-subjects, post-test only experimental survey design, we randomly assigned individuals to one of sixteen conditions. To gain further insight in the effects of populist style, populist rhetoric, and authoritativeness on the perceived legitimacy and effectiveness of (right-wing populist and mainstream) politicians, we presented respondents with one of sixteen versions of a short realistic news item on one right-wing populist leader - Geert Wilders, the party leader of the Dutch right-wing populist party PVV – and one liberal political leader – Stef Blok, the chairman of the Dutch liberal VVD. These two political leaders were chosen because they only differ in one regard, their political orientation, whereas other characteristics, such as their political position, and their standing on the policy topic in the news item, are comparable. Absence and presence of populist style and rhetoric and authoritativeness varies. Our 2x2x2x2 experimental setup results in sixteen conditions, illustrated in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1: Experimental Conditions

Dimensions	Wilders	Blok
Control	1	9
Populist Style	2	10
Populist Rhetoric	3	11
Authoritativeness	4	12
Populist Style + Populist Rhetoric	5	13
Populist Style + Authoritativeness	6	14
Populist Rhetoric + Authoritativeness	7	15
Populist Style + Populist Rhetoric + Authoritativeness	8	16

*Sample*

In this chapter use is made of data of the LISS (Longitudinal Internet Studies for the Social sciences) panel administered by CentERdata (Tilburg University, The Netherlands). The LISS panel data were collected by CentERdata through its MESS project funded by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research. The LISS panel is a representative sample of Dutch individuals who participate in monthly Internet surveys. The panel is based on a true probability sample of households drawn from the population register. Since this is an effects study, the representativeness of the sample for the Dutch population is not an important issue. Yet, the fact that we have a probability sample ensures that we have sufficient variation in the moderating variables education, cynicism and efficacy. Households that could not otherwise participate are provided with a computer and Internet connection. A longitudinal survey is fielded in the panel every year, covering a large variety of domains including work, education, income, housing, time use, political views, values and personality.

All LISS panel members aged 16 years and older were selected to participate in the survey. A total of 4,851 individuals completed the survey. The response rate was 70.3% (AAPOR RR1). In order to ensure independency of observations we only used those respondents that were the first member of their household to complete the survey. Moreover, we only included participants who spent at least 5 seconds reading the stimulus text. This left us with 3,125 respondents<sup>iii</sup>.

### *Experimental procedure*

The procedure of the experiment is as follows. First, all respondents completed a short pre-test questionnaire, including possible moderators of the main effects, with items on populism, political cynicism and political knowledge. Then, participants read one news article in which the content was manipulated so as to contain (combinations of) populist rhetoric, populist style and authoritativeness (see Appendix E for texts of the news items). Third, participants received a post-test questionnaire asking for possible mediators, and the perception of one of the two politicians, including items on the perceived effectiveness and legitimacy of Geert Wilders and Stef Blok<sup>iv</sup>. A between condition randomization check on age, gender and left-right self-placement performed at the outset of the analysis revealed successful randomization with no between-group differences. The treatment and control groups did not differ with regard to educational level ( $F(15,3102) = 1.439, p = 0.120$ ), political cynicism ( $F(15,3109) = 0.835, p = 0.638$ ), and political efficacy ( $F(15,2830) = 0.638, p = 0.846$ ), our pre-intervention moderator variables.

### *Stimulus material*

The stimulus material consisted of one news article per condition on the intention of the recently formed government to build a new nuclear power station. In the story either Geert Wilders or Stef Blok showed his approval of this policy plan displaying authoritativeness and/or a populist style and/or using a populist rhetoric. The news article is constructed, which ensures a high amount of control: “the use of real news coverage would minimize the commensurability across conditions” (Lecheler et al, 2009, p. 407). Through the consultation of journalists we made the effort to give the articles the language and structure of Dutch news coverage so as to achieve realistic experimental conditions (Gaines, Kuklinski, & Quirk, 2007). Moreover, the constructed article is based on real journalistic coverage and official party documents. Basic information is kept similar between the conditions: the first few sentences are identical. Also, the number of sentences is identical. The manipulations were inserted in the texts by adding words to some of the sentences. One paragraph in the news story points to varying levels of populist rhetoric and style, and authoritativeness. The operationalization of these

communication strategies is based on Bos et al. (2010). The stimulus material is presented in Appendix E.

### *Manipulation check*

In a pilot study among college students ( $n = 493$ ), participants, after the reading the stimulus material, were asked to indicate on a 10-point scale to what extent the politician in the article a. used sources to substantiate his opinion; b. used figures to ground his opinion (a. and b. indicating authoritativeness); c. used exaggerations; d. formulated his opinion without making differentiations (c. and d. indicating populist style); e. criticized leftist activists; f. talked about the common man, or the man in the street (e. and f. indicating populist rhetoric). Even though the manipulation check showed successful manipulation (F-tests showed significant differences between the expected condition and the control group on the anticipated variables<sup>v</sup>), we manipulated the difference between the populist style condition and the populist rhetoric condition even stronger in the final experiment.

### *Measures*

Our two *dependent* variables are direct measures of the effectiveness and legitimacy of both party leaders included in the analysis, each of which was measured with two items on 10-point scales. Cronbach's alpha for Effectiveness was .779. The items are summarized in an index ( $M = 11.95$ ,  $SD = 3.67$ ). Cronbach's alpha for Legitimacy was .623. These items are also summarized in an index ( $M = 11.13$ ,  $SD = 4.18$ ).

### *Moderators*

Educational level was measured with an item tapping educational level on a 6-point scale ( $M = 3.56$ ,  $SD = 1.52$ ). Political Cynicism was measured with four items tapping political cynicism on a 10-point scale. The items are summarized in a factor score ( $M = 0.00$ ,  $SD = 1.00$ ) ranging from -3.02 to 2.38. Confirmatory factor analysis also showed that the four items load on the same factor, factor loadings range from .747 to .837, and Cronbach's alpha for Political Cynicism was .809. External Political Efficacy was measured with three items tapping external political efficacy on a 2-point scale. The items are summarized in a factor score ( $M = 0.00$ ,  $SD = 1.00$ ) ranging from -0.88 to 1.67. Confirmatory factor analysis also

showed that the three items load on the same factor, factor loadings range from .750 to .864, and Cronbach's alpha for External Political Efficacy was .766. All three variables were centred around their mean in order to use them in interaction terms<sup>vi</sup>.

## Results

The mean analysis for perceived effectiveness shows no significant mean differences ( $F(7,3108) = 0.879, p = 0.522$ ). Similarly, the mean analysis for perceived legitimacy shows no significant mean differences ( $F(7,3108) = 0.697, p = 0.674$ ). Comparable results are found for the perception of both leaders separately.

In table 4.2 we proceed with a regression analysis in which the three communication strategies of the 2x2x2x2 experiment are included as separate variables: the direct effects of the three communication strategies on the perceived effectiveness of Stef Blok and Geert Wilders are given. And whereas the first two models reveal no significant effects from our independent variables, the third model shows that when we take a closer look at the difference between the two party leaders we find a significant interaction between the dummy 'Wilders' and 'authoritativeness'. This indicates that when Blok displays his knowledge on this specific topic it positively affects the extent to which respondents perceive him as effective ( $B = 0.453, SE = 0.162$ ), whereas when Wilders is authoritative this has no significant effect on his perceived effectiveness ( $B = 0.079, SE = 0.159$ ). H3 is therefore only supported for the mainstream leader. In the fourth model we find that the effect of using a populist rhetoric is moderated by populist style, *but* this moderation differs between Wilders and Blok. A further examination of the significance of the simple slope (see Jaccard, Turrisi, & Wan, 1990) of populist rhetoric on effectiveness for different levels of populist style and party leader (see Table 4.3) indicates that using a populist rhetoric has no significant positive or negative effect on the perceived effectiveness of Wilders, irrespective of him using a populist style. However, it does have a significant positive impact on the perceived effectiveness of Blok, *provided that* he also uses a populist style ( $B = 0.520, SE = 0.235$ ).<sup>vii</sup>

Table 4.2: Regression Model Predicting Perceived Effectiveness

Variables	Model I	Model II	Model III	Model IV
(Constant)	11.827 (0.131)***	11.838 (0.146)***	9.734 (0.162)***	9.875 (0.180)***
Authoritativeness	0.225 (0.131)†	0.225 (0.131)†	0.453 (0.162)**	0.445(0.162)**
Populist Style	-0.022 (0.131)	-0.045 (0.188)	0.035 (0.162)	-0.259 (0.232)
Populist Rhetoric	0.051 (0.131)	0.029 (0.183)	0.218 (0.162)	-0.057 (0.224)
Populist Style + Populist Rhetoric		0.045 (0.263)		0.578 (0.325)†
Wilders			4.169 (0.227)***	3.923 (0.252)***
Wilders * Authoritativeness			-0.374 (0.227)†	-0.373 (0.227)
Wilders * Populist Style			-0.265(0.227)	0.252 (0.325)
Wilders * Populist Rhet			-0.364 (0.227)	0.126 (0.317)
Wilders * Populist Style * Populist Rhetoric				-1.012 (0.455)*
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0	0	0.251	0.252

Note. Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients; Standard errors between brackets.; †p<0.10, <0.05, \*\*p<0.01, \*\*\*p<0.001; n = 3,115.

Table 4.3: Simple Slope of Populist Rhetoric on Effectiveness for Different Values of “Party leader” and “Populist Style”

Populist Style	Wilders	Blok
Populist Style Absent	0.069 (0.225)	-0.057 (0.224)
Populist Style Present	-0.365 (0.226)	0.520 (0.235)*

Note. Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients; Standard errors between brackets; †p<0.10, \*p<0.05, \*\*p<0.01, \*\*\*p<0.001

Table 4.4 shows the direct effects of populist rhetoric and populist style on perceived legitimacy. Again, when we look at the differences between the two party leaders in model III we find that style effects vary. Using a populist style negatively affects the perceived legitimacy of Blok ( $B = -0.404, SE = 0.200$ ), yet it

has no significant effect on the perceived legitimacy of Wilders ( $B = 0.293$ ,  $SE = 0.197$ ).

Table 4.4: Regression Model Predicting Perceived Legitimacy

Variables	Model I	Model II	Model III	Model IV
(Constant)	11.306 (0.129)***	11.327 (0.148)***	12.845 (0.171)***	12.871 (0.195)***
Populist Style	-0.110 (0.150)	-0.156 (0.214)	-0.404 (0.201)*	-0.461 (0.286)
Populist Rhetoric	-0.230 (0.150)	-0.274 (0.209)	-0.124 (0.201)	-0.177 (0.277)
Pop Style + Pop Rhet		0.090 (0.299)		0.111 (0.402)
Wilders			-3.106 (0.242)***	3.122 (0.278)***
Wilders * Populist Style			0.697 (0.281)*	0.733 (0.402)
Wilders * Populist Rhetoric			-0.176 (0.281)	-0.143 (0.392)
Wilders * Populist Style * Populist Rhetoric				-0.071 (0.563)
Adjusted R	0	0	0.118	0.118

Note. Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients; Standard errors between brackets; <sup>†</sup>p<0.10 \*p<0.05, \*\*p<0.01, \*\*\*p<0.001; n = 3,115

In Table 4.5 we turn to our first moderated effect. The simple slope of populist rhetoric on effectiveness for different educational levels shows that there is no significant effect of populist rhetoric on the perceived effectiveness of Blok or Wilders, for the people with low or average education. However, for the highly educated we find a positive effect of populist rhetoric on the perceived effectiveness of Blok, and no significant effect on the perceived effectiveness of Wilders<sup>viii</sup>. This goes against our expectation that the effect of using a populist rhetoric would be *positive* among the lower educated (H1a).

In Table 4.6 we see that using a populist style only negatively affects the perceived legitimacy of Blok for people with an average or higher than average education. However, it is only for the lower educated that we find a positive effect from populist style on the perceived legitimacy of Wilders. These findings are in line with our expectation that the effect of using a populist style on legitimacy would be positive among the lower educated (H2b).

Table 4.5: Simple Slope of Populist Rhetoric on Effectiveness for Different Values of “Party leader” and “Educational Level”

Educational Level	Wilders	Blok
Low Educational Level	-0.032 (0.224)	-0.164 (0.229)
Average Educational Level	-0.162 (0.158)	0.203 (0.161)
High Educational Level	-0.292 (0.224)	0.569 (0.228)*

Note. Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients; Standard errors between brackets; †p<0.10 \*p<0.05, \*\*p<0.01, \*\*\*p<0.001

As for the moderating effect of political cynicism, the results show a larger negative effect from populist style on the perceived legitimacy of Blok for the less and average cynical. The people that are highly cynical on the other hand display a weak *positive* effect from populist style on the perceived legitimacy of Wilders. Again, these results are in line with our expectation that the effect of populist style on legitimacy would be positive for the politically cynical (H2b).

Table 4.6 also shows that external political efficacy moderates the effect of populist style on legitimacy. Only the less efficacious are positively affected by the populist style of Wilders. These findings again lend support for H2b: The effects of populist style on perceived legitimacy are more positive for the lower educated, the more politically cynical and the less politically efficacious<sup>ix</sup>.

We are now able to answer our RQ1 on the differences (and similarities) between the two party leaders when it comes to the structure of our results, and the overall answer has to be that effects are often in the opposite direction. With regard to the main effects, our analyses show no effects of the three communication strategies on the perceived effectiveness and legitimacy of Wilders, whereas we do find several significant strategy effects on the public image of Blok: positive *and* negative. Moreover, with regard to the conditionality of the communication strategy effects, results show that whereas the populist style has *more* positive effects on the perceived legitimacy of Blok among the lower educated, the cynical and the less efficacious, the effects of this populist communication strategy are not significant within these groups of voters, while it does when it comes to the perceived legitimacy of Wilders. In other words, the results lend support to H2b for Wilders, but not for Blok. Moreover, for Blok we do find the opposite from what we expected: for the higher educated and the less cynical we

find significant negative effects from populist style on perceived legitimacy. Finally, whereas using a populist rhetoric only has a positive effect on the perceived effectiveness of Blok among the highly educated, it has the most negative effect, although not significant, on the perceived effectiveness of Wilders within the same group.

Table 4.6: Simple Slope of Populist Style on Legitimacy for Different Values of “Party Leader”, and “Educational Level”, “Political Cynicism”, and “External Political Efficacy”

	Wilders	Blok
Low Education Level	0.791 (0.278)**	-0.154 (0.285)
Average Education Level	0.274 (0.197)	-0.417 (0.200)*
High Education Level	-0.242 (0.279)	-0.681 (0.283)*
Low Political Cynicism	-0.030 (0.282)	-0.598 (0.276)*
Medium Political Cynicism	0.279 (0.196)	-0.428 (0.200)*
High Political Cynicism	0.588 (0.274)*	-0.257 (0.285)
Low External Political Efficacy	0.723 (0.288)*	-0.351 (0.300)
Medium External Political Efficacy	0.276 (0.205)	-0.385 (0.210)†
High External Political Efficacy	-0.171 (0.291)	-0.419 (0.296)

Note. Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients; Standard errors between brackets; †p<0.10 \*p<0.05, \*\*p<0.01, \*\*\*p<0.001

## Discussion

In this study we directly tested the effects of three communication strategies used by a right-wing populist and a mainstream leader on the perceived effectiveness and legitimacy of these leaders in an on-line survey experiment. We argued that it is highly unlikely that communication style effects are across-the-board, and designed a study in which conditional effects could be tested. We focused on three moderators: education, political cynicism and political efficacy. We tested the effects of three aspects of communication strategies: the use of a populist style, the use of populist rhetoric and authoritativeness. We discuss the conclusions for each of these in turn.

The results show that using a populist style *does* positively affect the perceived legitimacy of right-wing populist party leaders, *but only for the lower educated, the politically cynical, and the less politically efficacious*. In other words: exactly those voters that are overrepresented among the supporters of right-wing populist parties are positively affected by the specific populist style these politicians use. Clearly, populists are successful in appealing to these groups of voters when using a populist style.

These findings are also in line with theories and research on political communication effects. The cognitive framework model for instance proposes that that the higher educated have more effective defence mechanisms against media influences, and are therefore less affected by media messages (Iyengar, Peters, & Kinder, 1982; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). The lower educated, on the other hand, are more susceptible to media effects, such as agenda-setting and priming effects. And Dancey (in press) argues, and finds supportive evidence for this claim, that political cynicism can colour how individuals interpret information. Finally, it has been found that more motivated, (politically) engaged citizens are more prone to pursue a central route to evaluating information (Chong and Druckman, 2007; Dancey, in press) and resist the information in a media message, whereas the less efficacious are “more likely to use uncritically the considerations that have been made accessible through exposure” (Jackson, 2011, p. 81).

Yet, even though there are effects of populist *style*, our analyses do not show any effect of the populist *rhetoric*. As our “populist rhetoric” manipulation resembles the operationalization of “thin populism” in the Jagers and Walgrave (2007) study, we can now answer the ‘reception question’ they pose in their conclusion by stating that our analyses do not show any positive reception of the right-wing populists ‘thin populism’ by voters, whether their attitudes align with the populist frame or not. Moreover, we do find a positive effect of populist rhetoric on the *perceived* effectiveness of the mainstream leader among the highly educated. A possible explanation is that there is a third-person effect at work: the higher educated, i.e., the possibly more rational voters, might be more apt to believe that *others* will be persuaded by the populist rhetoric.

That we do not find any (main or conditional) effects of using a populist rhetoric on the image of the right-wing populist leader, is striking, however. There are two possible explanations for this. The first is that effects might be more long-

term and need repeated exposure in order to build up. And a second explanation relates to the fact that attitudes towards Wilders might be too established to find significant effects: there is a “ceiling” to the effects we may find. Whereas our mainstream leader, Stef Blok, is relatively new to the Dutch political front stage: he was elected as the chair of the parliamentary fraction of the VVD as late as October 2010, Geert Wilders, the leader and founder of the right-wing populist PVV, on the other hand, has been the centre of (media) attention since he left the VVD in September 2004. It is therefore plausible that attitudes towards Wilders are more established, which leads to smaller effect sizes.

As for authoritativeness our results only corroborate the findings of Bos et al. (2011) when it comes to the perceived effectiveness of Blok: when he appears to be more knowledgeable he is perceived to be more influential. In general we can say that the effect of authoritativeness is fairly across the board, although it might differ across party leaders (Funk, 1999), whereas a populist style is received differently by different types of voters. On a critical note it could be argued that survey experiments have many limitations (Gaines et al., 2007), such as a lack of external validity. However, an important asset of this particular study is that it builds on a previous study in which long-term effects were examined in a real-life setting (Bos et al., 2011). That the current results point in the same direction shows the robustness of our findings.

We similarly find no direct effect of using a populist style or rhetoric on the perceived effectiveness and legitimacy of the right-wing populist party leader: “using a populist style [or rhetoric] does not harm right-wing populists, yet it does not help them either” (Bos et al., 2011, p. 197). They argue that whereas no direct effect is found, using a populist style and rhetoric may indirectly positively affect the perception of right-wing populist leaders by ensuring prominence in the mass media. And we add to this knowledge with the finding that using a populist style *is* positively received by some voters.

With regard to the differences between the two leader types, findings point into opposite directions. And even though our results differ in some ways from the ones Bos et al. find, conclusions are in line: “Whereas mainstream party leaders are evaluated negatively when they act in a populist manner, right-wing populist leaders are not punished for it” (2011, p.197), a striking result in the current “populist zeitgeist” in which “populist discourse has become mainstream in the

politics of western democracies” (Mudde, 2004). And again, we can add to this knowledge: while we find that indeed potential voters for right-wing populist parties are more susceptible to the populist style when used by a right-wing populist party leader, this is not the case for mainstream leaders. The lower educated, the politically cynical and the less efficacious are not more susceptible to a populist style when they use it. To take it even further: these mainstream leaders *are* punished for it, by those voters that make up an important part of their constituency: the higher educated and the less cynical.

Finally, we want to address one important point. This experiment shows that even a minimal manipulation of a limited number of words results in significant effects, especially among certain groups. This is a significant indication that repeated and consistent use of populist communication strategies can possibly lead to even stronger effects, particularly among parts of the electorate that are susceptible to it.

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> Some authors mention a third aspect of the populist rhetoric: exclusionism. This element is not included in this study, because it is not an element of populist rhetoric per se, but it is typical for radical right-wing populists. This conceptualisation has also been labelled ‘thick’ populism (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007).

<sup>ii</sup> We have no reason to expect authoritativeness to affect perceived legitimacy.

<sup>iii</sup> The data were collected in February 2011.

<sup>iv</sup> Dependent upon the condition.

<sup>v</sup>  $F(3,492)$  varies from 6.057 to 80.786,  $p=.000$ .

<sup>vi</sup> For the exact wording of the items, see Appendix E.

<sup>vii</sup> A further examination of the interaction effect between populist style and populist rhetoric shows that populist style is not moderated by the presence or absence of populist rhetoric, i.e., the simple slope of populist style does not significantly differ from zero for all values of populist rhetoric and the dummy Wilders.

<sup>viii</sup> The extended tables on which table 4.5 and 4.6 rest are given in Appendix F. We also tested whether interactions had an “inverted U-shape distribution”, i.e., whether style effects were different or larger for the average educated. This yielded no significant results.

<sup>ix</sup> That we find similar effects for the lower educated, the politically cynical and the less efficacious is probably (partially) due to the fact that these variables are correlated.