UNIVERSITY OF AMSTERDAM

UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

They Are Selling Themselves Out to the Enemy! The Content and Effects of Populist Conspiracy Theories

Hameleers, M.

DOI
10.1093/ijpor/edaa004

Publication date
2021

Document Version
Final published version

Published in
International Journal of Public Opinion Research

License
CC BY-NC

Link to publication

Citation for published version (APA):
Hameleers, M. (2021). They Are Selling Themselves Out to the Enemy! The Content and Effects of Populist Conspiracy Theories. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, *33*(1), 38-56. https://doi.org/10.1093/ijpor/edaa004

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

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

UvA-DARE is a service provided by the library of the University of Amsterdam (https://dare.uva.nl)

Download date:25 Jun 2022

International Journal of Public Opinion Research Vol. 33 No. 1 2021
© The Author(s) 2020. Published by Oxford University Press on behalf of The World Association for Public Opinion Research.
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. For commercial re-use, please contact journals.permissions@oup.com
doi:10.1093/ijpor/edaa004 Advance Access publication 17 March 2020

They Are Selling Themselves Out to the Enemy! The Content and Effects of Populist Conspiracy Theories

Michael Hameleers

Amsterdam School of Communication Research (ASCoR), University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Abstract

Despite the alleged discursive affinity between populist rhetoric and conspiracy theories, we know too little about how populist conspiracies are communicated by politicians, and how these messages activate individual-level support for populist ideas. In this setting, this article reports on a qualitative content analysis of leading (radical) right-wing populist politicians' self-communication (Trump and Wilders) and an experiment in which the central content features of populist conspiracies are manipulated. The main findings indicate that populist conspiracy theories activate populist attitudes more than mere exposure to populist ideas. Together, this article shows how conspiracies are framed in populist actors' communication, and how these populist conspiracy frames can fuel support for populist ideology in society.

Many scholars have ascribed a central role to the media in explaining populism's electoral success (e.g., Aalberg, Esser, Reinemann, Strömbäck, & de Vreese, 2017; Krämer, 2014; Mazzoleni, 2008). Social network sites (SNSs), in particular, such as Facebook and Twitter, may provide a supportive channel for populists to directly express the core idea of populist rhetoric: cultivating a central socio-political divide between the ordinary people and the "corrupt" elites (e.g., Engesser, Ernst, Esser, & Büchel, 2017; Schmuck and Hameleerslarke, 2019; Waisbord & Amado, 2017). Populist politicians are, more than their mainstream competitors, taking advantage of the affordances of social media to bypass traditional media and express a direct relationship to the "silenced" ordinary people they claim to be part of (e.g., Jacobs & Spierings, 2018; Schmuck & Hameleers, 2019).

All correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Michael Hameleers, PhD, Amsterdam School of Communication Research (ASCoR), University of Amsterdam, Nieuwe Achtergracht 166, 1018 WV Amsterdam, The Netherlands. E-mail: m.hameleers@uva.nl

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/ijpor/article/33/1/38/5809088 by Universiteit van Amsterdam user on 09 July 2021

Although many scholars have used a communication approach to empirically demonstrate that populist messages are persuasive—potentially augmenting the perceived divide between the ordinary people and the culpable elite (e.g., Hameleers, Bos, & de Vreese, 2017; Matthes & Schmuck, 2017; Müller et al., 2017), we know too little about the discursive framing, and effects of, conspiracy theories combined with populism (but see Bergmann, 2019; Silva, Vegetti, & Littvay, 2017). Conspiracy theories can be defined as explanations of reality, situations, or events that refer to a plot or scheme in which "evil" forces of power are said to hide reality and the mechanisms of power from the people (e.g., Barkun, 2003). By framing blame to the elites, populist politicians can also emphasize that the elites are collaborating to plot a scheme against the people and their general will. Hence, populists may point to a hidden truth that the elite hide from the people to promote their own interests (e.g., Bergmann, 2019). In this article, we acknowledge that populism and conspiracy theories may also occur independently in the communication of political actors. This means that not all populist communication refers to a conspiracy theory, and not all conspiracies point to an antagonistic divide between the ordinary people and corrupt elites. Yet, in many cases, populist communication may involve references to conspiracies—for example, by emphasizing that the corrupt "evil" elites are responsible for the ordinary people's problems by deliberately covering up the reality to maintain the power discrepancy in society.

Despite increasing scholarly attention to the potential link between populism and conspiracy theories (e.g., Bergmann, 2019; Silva et al., 2017), we know too little about how such discourse may shape individual-level support for populist ideology. Against this backdrop, the aim of this article is twofold: (a) to better understand in what ways radical right-wing politicians cultivate conspiracy theories and (b) to understand the effects of communicating such populist conspiracies to the electorate.

Examples of the link between populist discourse and the cultivation of conspiracies abound. In the period leading up to the 2016 U.S. elections, Trump frequently referred to the system as "rigged", and claimed that the Fake News media and the Democrats collaborated to make him look bad, and lose the presidential elections. In Europe, the radical right-wing populist party leader Geert Wilders voices similar accusations. In his direct communication via Twitter, he frequently blames the elite for being involved in a scheme that stimulates the influx of dangerous migrants and Islam.

We can identify two central discursive relationships between populism and conspiracy theories. First of all, populism's antagonistic discourse stresses that society is divided by the corrupt elites versus the ordinary people (e.g., Canovan, 1999; Mudde, 2004). This resonates with the core features of a conspiracy theory, which cultivates a Manichean perspective on socio-political reality (e.g., Barkun, 2003; Oliver & Wood, 2014). Hence, conspiracy theories express that the "evil" outsiders are threatening the "good" in-group. Second, both populism and conspiracy theories emphasize distrust in established knowledge and truths. Populist actors frequently attribute blame to the media for being dishonest and biased—and the media elite may thus be regarded as part of the people's enemy (e.g., Fawzi, 2018; Schulz et al., 2018a). In conspiracy theories, mainstream knowledge and interpretations are also seen as a goal-directed way of distracting people from a hidden source of power (e.g., Fenster, 2008).

Taking these two relationships as point of departure, this article reports on two studies. First, a qualitative content analysis in the United States and the Netherlands is conducted to understand how leading radical right-wing politicians communicate

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/ijpor/article/33/1/38/5809088 by Universiteit van Amsterdam user on 09 July 2021

populist conspiracies via SNSs. The second study manipulates the core features of populist conspiracy theories to assess to what extent populism's Manichean discourse can be activated among voters. The main findings indicate that radical right-wing populists cultivate a pervasive divide between the ordinary people and the corrupt elites and/or dangerous others that are said to collaborate to hide their intentions and maintain the power discrepancy. Populist conspiracies activate congruent Manichean perceptions among the public. Together, this article provides first empirical evidence on how the resonance between populism and conspiracy reasoning may impact voters' perception of a societal divide between the "good" people and "evil" elites.

The Resonance of Populist Discourse and Conspiracy Theories

Populism can be defined as an idea or thin-centered ideology that cultivates a Manichean divide in politics and society: The ordinary people are framed in opposition to the corrupt and evil elite (e.g., Canovan, 1999; Mudde, 2004). The elites, and/or "dangerous" others in right-wing populism, are held accountable for depriving the ordinary people on different levels: they allegedly take away resources on a material, political, and symbolic level (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008). The attribution of blame to elitist actors is thus central in populist interpretations (Hameleers et al., 2017).

Manichean discourse also lies at the heart of conspiracy reasoning (Barkun, 2003; Fenster, 2008; Oliver & Wood, 2014). Although the actual nature of conspiracies may greatly vary, there are three central elements to a conspiracy theory (see e.g., Barkun, 2003). First of all, the source and causes of deviant or novel phenomena in socio-political reality is attributed to hidden, goal-directed, and evil forces. An example is the recent debate on vaccines. Conspiracy theorists argue that large pharmaceuticals and political elites are covering up the truth that vaccines are unsafe because they have to protect the large profits they make on vaccines.

Second, conspiracy theorists interpret political events, such as the vaccine debate or the refugee crisis, as a Manichean "good versus evil" struggle (Barkun, 2003; Hofstadter, 1996). Conspiracy theorists perceive historic events as a consequence of a planned conspiracy played out by forces of evil that overrule the good and innocent (e.g., Hofstadter, 1996). The motives of the elite remain hidden but are intrinsically evil in nature: They plot a scheme that disrupts the "good" forces in society. Populism is based on a similar Manichean outlook: The ordinary people are seen as "good" and the elites are seen as "evil" and corrupt (Mudde, 2004).

Third, conspiracies point to a hidden truth and the perception that the mainstream and most visible interpretation of (historic) events is simply a way to cover up power discrepancies (Barkun, 2003). Conspiracy theorists may, for example, believe (or at least claim to believe) that climate change and pro-vaccine experts are fake, and only promote their "alternative" realities to hide a severe power discrepancy between the people and the elites. In a similar vein, people with populist attitudes tend to regard the media and mainstream sources of knowledge as biased and dishonest (Fawzi, 2018; Hameleers et al., 2017; Schulz et al., 2018b). In other words, populists may believe that the truth is *deliberately* hidden from the people by presenting a fake reality.

Populist communication does not always co-occur with conspiracy theories. In a similar vein, conspiracy theories do not have to be populist by definition. More specifically, none of the three elements of a conspiracy theory are inherently populist, albeit the

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/ijpor/article/33/1/38/5809088 by Universiteit van Amsterdam user on 09 July 2021

Manichean "good versus evil" structure aligns closely to populist rhetoric. Referring to the ordinary people, a central element of populist rhetoric, is not a defining characteristic of conspiracy theories. To provide an example, conspiracies that refer to the 9/11 terrorist attacks as a scheme plotted by the government to create an external enemy may correspond to the three elements of a conspiracy theory, but it may not be populist as this conspiracy does not refer to the divide between the ordinary people and corrupt elites.

When populist rhetoric and conspiracies do come together, the thin ideology of populism is supplemented by references to elements of a conspiracy theory. Specifically, *populist conspiracies* refer to the Manichean divide between the good ordinary people and the evil elites, deliberately hidden sources of power, and schemes plotted by the corrupt elites to maintain the power discrepancy between the people and the elites. Although we focus on (radical) right-wing populist politicians in this article, this does not mean that all communication by these actors is inherently populist in nature.

Although the connection between populism and conspiracy theories has been identified on the demand-side of populist voters (Silva et al., 2017), we know little about how (right-wing) populists communicate conspiracy theories to the people. SNSs in particular may offer a supportive platform for populists to communicate their conspiracy theories and the populist divide between the people and the elite. Among other things, populists can bypass elite institutions by using SNSs (e.g., Engesser et al., 2017; Ernst, Engesser, Büchel, Blassnig, & Esser, 2017; Schmuck & Hameleers, 2019). In doing so, they do not only establish a direct bond to their followers but also circumvent the elites they hold accountable for plotting a scheme against the people.

In this setting, the first study of this article aims to inductively explore the key features of conspiracy theories expressed by two leading (right-wing) populist leaders: Wilders in the Netherlands and Trump in the United States. Two sensitizing research questions guide this empirical endeavor: Which elites and out-groups are involved in conspiracies against the people, and in what ways are they held accountable for hiding the truth (*RQ1*)? Second, in what ways are different conspiracy theories integrated in a Manichean opposition between the ordinary people and the culpable elites (*RQ2*)?

Although this article focuses on right-wing populism, it can be noted that populist conspiracies can also be constructed in left-wing populism. Hence, economic elites or corporations—enemies for left-populists—can also be juxtaposed to the people (although left-populists have a more inclusionary understanding of the people). Similar to right-wing populist conspiracies, the elites can be held accountable for deliberately covering up the truth to silence the people. The choice to focus on right-wing populism in this article is informed by the national settings and the theoretical affinity between conspiracies, post-truth politics and radical right-wing populism identified in the literature (Bennett & Livingston, 2018).

Study 1

For the first study, an in-depth qualitative content analysis of Twitter data collected in the United States (the official page of Donald Trump) and the Netherlands (the official page of Geert Wilders) was conducted to explore if populist conspiracy constructions occurred in direct communication of leading right-wing populist politicians, and if so, how this discourse was constructed. Here, it should be emphasized that the inductive

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/ijpor/article/33/1/38/5809088 by Universiteit van Amsterdam user on 09 July 2021

analysis was based on theoretical reasoning but remained open to contradictory and conflicting findings (i.e., populism and conspiracy reasoning may not co-occur).

Method Study 1

Data collection and sampling. Python was used to scrape original Twitter posts of Trump and Wilders. Retweets and likes, as well as visual or video-only content, were excluded for reasons of parsimony. The sample frame was chosen purposefully. More specifically, we aimed to discursively analyze politicians' discourse in a routine and an election period. In the Netherlands, the election period was operationalized as the most recent general elections in March 2017. For the pre-election sample, Tweets posted by Wilders in the 3 months prior to the election were scraped (December 1, 2016 through March 1, 2017). To contrast this with a routine period, Tweets posed between September 1, 2017 and December 1, 2017 were scraped. The 3 months pre- and 3 months post-election sample yielded 1,634 Tweets. Results were not restricted by key word search, topics, or specific debates.

The same strategy was applied in the United States. Here, the key electoral event was the U.S. presidential elections (November 8, 2016). Again, the 6-month sample frame consisted of an election period (August 1, 2016 to November 1, 2016) and a routine period with a 5-month delay after the election results (May 1, 2017 to August 1, 2017). As Trump tweeted substantially more than Wilders in this period, an initial sample of 1,600 Tweets was randomly generated. In a cyclic-iterative process of data collection and analysis (e.g., Braun & Clarke, 2013), this sample was supplemented with a randomly generated sample of 200 Tweets. The analysis of the initial Tweets was compared to the themes emerging from the additional sample. As the analysis of the 200 additional Tweets did not point to new emerging dimensions or themes corresponding to the sensitizing questions, the point of theoretical saturation was achieved after 1,800 Tweets (e.g., Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Analysis. The analysis followed a combined approach of discourse analysis and the three steps of coding central to grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). A combination of selective and line-by-line coding was used. More specifically, this means that the full sample of 3,434 Tweets was closely read and re-read, but only relevant Tweets corresponding to the sensitizing questions were coded line-by-line. More specifically, during the first stage of coding, all 3,434 Tweets were coded for the presence of any reference to an element of populist communication and/or a conspiracy theory. Following Engesser et al. (2017), we acknowledged that populism is spread in a fragmented way. We coded for the presence of (a) people centrism references; (b) anti-elitism; and/or (c) the exclusion of societal out-groups. Similarly, the presence of any element or indicator of a conspiracy theory was coded by looking at the three elements of a conspiracy theory identified by Barkun (2003): (a) references to a Manichean worldview; (b) references to hidden forces of power; and (c) interpretations indicating that power discrepancies are covered up by spreading lies and/or presenting alternative worldviews. These elements of populist rhetoric and conspiracy theories were used as a filter to select content to be coded in depth. Not all elements had to be present, and the actual nature of the statements that satisfied these theoretical concerns was analyzed in the next step.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/ijpor/article/33/1/38/5809088 by Universiteit van Amsterdam user on 09 July 2021

During the second stage of coding, 512 (234 in the Netherlands and 278 in the United States) Tweets that contained references to (elements of) populism and/or conspiracy theories were completely coded (line-by-line coding). First, as part of the open coding step, relevant segments were highlighted and labeled based on the insights relevant for the sensitizing questions. These open codes, for example, corresponded to (a) Manichean discourse; (b) references to (un)truthfulness; (c) conspiracy theories; and (d) hidden truths (i.e., this is what they are *not* telling you). Second, open codes were raised to a higher level, merged or grouped during focused coding. In this step, core themes were distinguished from lower order indicators (i.e., attributions of Fake News were seen as indicators of untruthfulness). Finally, relationships between emerging themes were identified during axial coding (i.e., Manichean discourses were related to conspiracy theories).

Quality checks. A second independent coder unfamiliar with the theoretical framework analyzed 20.0% of all Tweets that were coded line-by-line. Using the same general sensitizing questions, the main themes identified by the second coder wee similar to the themes identified by the principal investigator. Differences were discussed until complete agreement was achieved (discrepancies between initial coding mainly revolved around the classification of anti-elitist discourse as conspiracies during focused and axial coding). Finally, agreement on coding procedures to deal with these more complicated cases was established. As a second quality check (triangulation), a different and more recent timeframe was sampled in both countries (April 2018). Within these 4 weeks, 100 Tweets per country were randomly selected and analyzed. The results did not point to novel themes.

Results Study 1

The relative salience of the different discourses is depicted in Table 1 (as a proportion of all Tweets scraped during the first step of data collection). First, 14.7% of all sampled Tweets contains a reference to populism, conspiracy reasoning, or a combination of both discourses. Although the differences are not substantial, populist elements occur more frequently than conspiracy reasoning or a combined emphasis on populist and conspiracy elements. Yet, we can see that populist elements and conspiracy reasoning co-occur frequently. The breakdown of these numbers point to some interesting differences between Trump and Wilders. Whereas Wilders is most likely to communicate Tweets with an explicit populist element—Trump is more likely to combine populism

Table 1
An Overview of the Relative Salience of Populist Elements and Conspiracy Reasoning

	References to populist elements	References to conspiracy theories	Combined populist conspiracies	Total
Trump	72 (36.7%)	90 (53.6%)	85 (57.4%)	278 (8.1%)
Wilders	124 (62.3%)	78 (46.4%)	63 (42.6%)	234 (6.8%)
Total	196 (38.3%)	168 (32.8%)	148 (28.9%)	512 (14.7%)

Note. Cell entries display proportions of the total sample of Tweets ($N = 3{,}434$).

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/ijpor/article/33/1/38/5809088 by Universiteit van Amsterdam user on 09 July 2021

with conspiracy reasoning than to refer to either populist interpretations or conspiracies. How do these differences take shape when we look at the in-depth analysis of Trump's and Wilders' rhetoric that contains references to populist elements and/or conspiracy theories?

Distinguishing "their" lies from "our" truths. The first central theme is the cultivation of an epistemic cleavage between accurate worldviews of the in-group and the lies of the dishonest out-group that *deliberately* hides the truth. In the routine period, Trump emphasized that the Fake News media should be regarded as the biggest enemy of the people. These media were accused of *deliberately* distorting reality: "@NBCNews purposely left out this part of my nuclear quote. Dishonest!" Trump also blamed the news media for prioritizing coverage of his political opponent, indicating that the media demonstrate a bias against his own party: "I thought that @CNN would get better after they failed so badly in their support of Hillary Clinton however, since election, they are worse!"

In the Netherlands, Wilders emphasized how the media—and the left-wing media in particular—are looking away and are actively *denying* reality. Wilders expressed how they were "blind" to see the real problems of the native people: "Politicians and the media are blind for the violence caused by the Moroccan community." The main theme of denying reality and propagating a dishonest worldview by looking away was not only attributed to the (left-wing) media. More specifically, Wilders also attributed blame to the political elite that failed to acknowledge the most pressing issue of Dutch society: dangerous immigrants, and Islam in particular: "I have to address these issues threatening our country. Just because those that look away, like Rutte [prime minister] do not dare to stress that the Islam is the cause of our problems." Together, the first element of populist conspiracies vocalized by both political leaders entails the cultivation of a dishonest opinion climate, in which both the media and politicians deliberately spread lies and look away to "hide" the real facts that matter to the ordinary people.

Populist conspiracies: the enemy hides the truth to promote hidden agendas. References to populism and conspiracy theories were oftentimes combined. Especially in the election period, Trump frequently blamed his political opponent (Clinton) and the Fake News media for being part of a "rigged" elitist outsider that threatens ordinary people. More specifically, Trump pointed to a conspiracy between the mainstream media he distrusted (i.e., the New York Times, CNN, Google) and the Democrats—who were plotting a scheme to prevent Trump from winning the elections. Hence, these actors were accused of hiding or burying facts to protect the Democrats: "Wow, Twitter, Google and Facebook are burying the FBI criminal investigation of Clinton. Very dishonest media!" Moreover, in the period leading up to the elections, unspecified "hidden" sources that helped the Democrats win the elections were connected to schemes that would prevent Trump to win the elections: "Why didn't Hillary Clinton announce that she was inappropriately given the debate questions—she secretly used them! Crooked Hillary."

Clinton was also accused of supporting or collaborating with dangerous immigrants and terrorists: "Crooked Hillary launched her political career by letting terrorists off the hook." She was also accused of taking in as many dangerous immigrants as possible:

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/ijpor/article/33/1/38/5809088 by Universiteit van Amsterdam user on 09 July 2021

"Wow, just came out on secret tape that Crooked Hillary wants to take in as many Syrians as possible. We cannot let this happen—ISIS!"

Trump contrasted his own version of reality with the lies and dishonesty of his political opponent. According to Trump, the reality that his party was winning was deliberately hidden by the pro-Democrat media: "We are winning and the press is refusing to report it. Don't let them fool you—get out and vote! #DrainTheSwamp on November 8th!" According to Trump, the Democrats were using "tricks" to prevent his victory: "Major story that the Dems are making up phony polls in order to suppress Trump. We are going to WIN!" References to the truth were frequently contrasted with the hidden agenda and schemes plotted by political opponents and the mass media: "ISIS has infiltrated countries all over Europe by posing as refugees, and @HillaryClinton will allow it to happen here, too! #BigLeagueTruth."

In the Netherlands, the populist conspiracy connecting the corrupt elite to other enemies that were said to plot a scheme against the honest people was mainly interpreted as a hidden collaboration between elitist actors and immigrants. Wilders, for example, blamed the prime-minister for secretly collaborating with the enemy (the Turkish president Erdogan)—hereby betraying the country and showing the elite's hatred: "Rutte—the fake leader that forces Marrakesh upon us—is secretly chatting with Erdogan, the Turkish dictator that calls Dutch people fascists and Nazi's. Our government really hates the Netherlands." For Wilders, the motive for elites and the media to lie and distort reality is to silence his Freedom Party, preventing him to voice society's real problems: "Lies and betrayal. All proven. This smells from all angles. They try to do all they can to silence the leader of the opposition party [Wilders himself]." The enemy was not always specified, but always referred to an elitist out-group, which was mostly left-wing: "They try to silence our party. The police facilitates their actions, a Freedom Party-hating District Attorney politics led by a corrupt VVD [governmental party] minister judged by left-wing judges."

Wilders' populist conspiracies also corresponded to a sense of *relative deprivation* of the ordinary, vulnerable people in the country. Hence, the elite only looked after themselves and other groups in society, and they sold out their principles by residing with the enemy: "If you are a bank director, multinational or asylum seeker, this government will help you. But if you are sick and vulnerable, you are neglected. It cannot get more uncivil than this." The elites were accused of working together with corporations by offering financial resources at the cost of the ordinary people: "The government supports the multinationals and shareholders with millions. Ordinary Dutch citizens are bleeding because of these schemes."

In Wilders' cultivation of populist conspiracies, two main constructions of dishonesty stand out: the attribution of blame for *betraying* the ordinary people and the theme of *selling out principles* by looking away. Regarding this second dimension, the largest and most important problem allegedly denied and hidden by the elites was Islam, and different elitist actors were blamed for prioritizing the needs of dangerous Islamic immigrants: "Because cowards and capitulating Islam-lovers are looking away, and you, Rutte [the prime-minister] ensure that Jihadists can walk around in freedom, our families are at risk of becoming the victim of you failing policies." Wilders even blamed the government for offering support to "terrorists clubs" that rape, torture, and execute innocent people. Yet, the most pressing issue that the elite hide from the people remains their deliberate support and facilitating role in helping dangerous immigrants to enter the country.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/ijpor/article/33/1/38/5809088 by Universiteit van Amsterdam user on 09 July 2021

Conclusion of Study 1

Populist conspiracies that are communicated by the two prototypical radical right-wing leaders in this study involve three out-groups that are allegedly working together to hide the truth and to promote their own political agenda: (a) the left-wing or mainstream media; (b) political elites or opposed parties; and (c) "dangerous" others, such as immigrants or refugees with an Islamic background. Beyond cultivating a boundary between the ordinary people and the corrupt elite, both Trump and Wilders referred to conspiracies, or hidden schemes used to damage them or the people: the "dishonest" media were deliberately supporting the elite by hiding the truth and facts from the people. The elites resided with the enemy by protecting dangerous immigrants at the cost of the security of their own people.

Both politicians cultivated a Manichean boundary between the honest people and the corrupt elites, and the media and immigrants were said to be involved in a scheme to damage the people and those that try to protect this vulnerable in-group. The main difference between findings from the United States and the Netherlands is the source of the hidden, evil forces. Where Trump mainly blamed the Fake News media for helping the other party win, Wilders mostly blamed the elite and, albeit to a lesser extent, the media for denying the real problems of the ordinary people. Yet, the populist conspiracies in both countries share a central element: the threat of immigration in the United States and the Netherlands persists because political opponents reside with the enemy whilst neglecting their own people.

Not all elements of these populist conspiracies may be directly applicable to the communication tactics of left-wing populist actors in different regions of the world, such as Latin America or Southern European countries. This study indicates that shifting blame to different elitist actors for "hiding" reality and depriving the people of the truth is central to populist conspiracies expressed by right-wing populist actors. Although empirical research is needed to assess the transferability of these findings to left-wing populist actors, it is plausible that populist actors on the left and right both hold the elites responsible for misleading the ordinary people. In addition, the Manichean divide between the honest and good people versus evil sources of power can theoretically be related to left-wing populist ideas. Future research may rely on comparative research including different prototypical cases of left- versus right-wing populist to further investigate the overlap and discrepancies between populist conspiracies in different contexts.

Study 2: The Effects of Populist Conspiracies on Populist Attitudes

Although previous research has provided systematic evidence of populism's persuasiveness on attitudes, emotions, or even behaviors (Bos et al., 2019; Hameleers et al., 2018; Müller et al., 2017; Schmuck & Matthes, 2017; Wirz, 2018), there has been no systematic research on the effects of populism and conspiracy reasoning *combined*. An important difference between populist communication and populist conspiracy theories is *how* different elites or out-groups are together accused of deliberately plotting a scheme against the ordinary and relatively deprived people. The results of Study 1 show that populist ideas and conspiracy theories may be expressed independently, but, when looking at the communication of right-wing populist actors, populist communication is often also combined with a reference to a conspiracy—for example, by indicating that the evil

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/ijpor/article/33/1/38/5809088 by Universiteit van Amsterdam user on 09 July 2021

elites are plotting a scheme against the ordinary people to hide the sources of power domination. But how may populist and conspiracy cues—both independently and as integrated communication tactic—activate populist attitudes among citizens?

Populist communication has been regarded as persuasive as it simplifies the political order in an ell-encompassing divide between the people and the elites whilst promoting easily accessible and external scapegoats that can be held accountable (e.g., Hameleers et al., 2017). Populist messages that emphasize that the corrupt elites are to blame for problems experienced by the ordinary people may make mental images of the "corrupt" elites and "good" people accessible by priming a persuasive social identity frame (e.g., Bos et al., 2019). The social identity frames emphasized in populist discourse may activate or prime congruent mental schemata as they introduce a credible scapegoat whilst stressing the need for the ordinary people to mobilize (e.g., Gamson, 1992). In other words, when relative deprivation and blame attribution is framed, receivers of populist communication should be likely to accept populist content to avert the threat to their in-group's status and prosperity.

The acceptance of populist communication's premises can be understood as the *activation* of populist attitudes (e.g., Hameleers et al., 2017; Müller et al., 2017; Schulz et al., 2018a). Populist attitudes can be understood as the people's perception of a Manichean and antagonistic societal outlook that juxtaposes the ordinary people with the evil, corrupt elites. As positive associations of the people and negative perceptions of the elites are primed in populist communication, people's populist attitudes should be activated when they are exposed to populist messages. This general expectation is confirmed in different effects studies on populism (e.g., Bos et al., 2019; Hameleers et al., 2017; Müller et al., 2017; Rico, Guinjoan, & Anduiza, 2017). Even though exposure to mere populist ideas in the media may not "create" or "change" alignment with populist ideology, there is evidence that populist attitudes can be activated by exposing people to populist (media) content. The first hypothesis therefore reads as follows: Exposure to populist communication activates populist attitudes (*H1*).

What does a conspiracy theory add to the equation? First of all, the relative out-group threat is augmented when different out-groups are *together* held accountable for deliberately plotting a scheme against the people. When the out-group threat increases, people should be more likely to engage with populist social identity frames (e.g., Bos et al., 2019; Hameleers et al., 2018). Second, perceptions of a threatening crisis should be stronger when the truth is said to be hidden by different "evil" outsiders that work together to harm and damage the "good" people. Populist conspiracies thus emphasize a stronger sense of deprivation than populist communication alone, which should also result in a stronger motivation to engage with identity frames (e.g., Gamson, 1992). Based on this, we hypothesize that exposure to populist communication with conspiracy reasoning has a *stronger* effect on activating populist attitudes than populist cues alone (*H2*).

Method Study 2

The second study entails a survey-embedded online experiment with a 2 (Populist communication: present vs. absent) × 2 (Conspiracy theories: present vs. absent) between-subjects factorial design. The storyline and framing of the stimuli were informed by Study 1. More specifically, decreasing resources for the in-group of native people was

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/ijpor/article/33/1/38/5809088 by Universiteit van Amsterdam user on 09 July 2021

used as the central storyline in the four fictional versions of an online newspaper article. Healthcare was chosen as a topic, which was politicized to emphasize the people's deprivation. Specifically, the treatment stated that healthcare budgets were declining for the ordinary people. The control or reference group was the condition in which references to a populist worldview and conspiracy theories were absent. Here, it can be argued that populist rhetoric can be applied to many different issues and ideologies. For this experiment, a topic that by itself does not directly align with a right-wing populist agenda was chosen. Hence, healthcare is not necessarily "owned" by the left- or right-wing, but the specific framing of the issue can reflect left- or right-wing agendas. In addition, it can credibly be presented in a populist framework in which the ordinary people are deprived from care *because* of the corrupt elites and the conspiracies they are involved in.

Sample. The sample was collected by an International polling firm that maintains a nationally representative voluntary opt-in panel composed of different sources. Eligible participants (voting population) were invited via the panel's email system to participate in this study. The sample strategy aimed to include participants from different regions and political preferences and was geared toward national representativeness. Although the recruiting procedures are non-random, participants within strata were randomly selected. The completion rate was 84.3%. We also assessed whether this rate was similar across different conditions. There are no significant or noteworthy differences between conditions: the rates ranged between 84.8% in the control, and 83.1% in the populism-only condition. *Post hoc* randomization checks further ensured that the distribution of demographics—such as age, gender, and education—was equal across groups. The mean age of participants was 42.14 years ($SD = 15.02$). A total of 45.6% was female. The lower educated represented 20.3% of the sample, and 24.9% was higher educated. The sample was balanced regarding political ideology: 3.3% identified as extreme left, and 2.5% as extreme right. Merging the four most extreme left and right scale points, 24.4% was left-wing and 27.3% right-wing.

Independent variables. All stimuli consisted of a negatively framed article on the healthcare situation in the Netherlands. The article stated that there was less budget available, which resulted from recent coalition agreements. The source of the articles was neutral (and constant across conditions) but reflected the lay-out of a real online news article (see Supplemental Materials Appendix A for stimuli). The stimuli were extensively pre-tested with a varied convenience sample. All versions were found to be (equally) credible, and the arguments in the manipulations were recognized in the pilot test.

In the neutral or control condition, the healthcare developments were reported in a distant, factual way: Healthcare budgets were declining overall, but there was no specific domain that was hurt most by recent developments. This version did not include any causes or interpretation of this development, and simply argued that more insights were needed.

In the "empty" conspiracy condition, the development was connected to a hidden truth that the people were deliberately deprived of. The healthcare development was interpreted as a negative development and, although elites were not explicitly blamed or connected to this development, the article hinted at a hidden agenda or plot that was

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/ijpor/article/33/1/38/5809088 by Universiteit van Amsterdam user on 09 July 2021

hurting the ordinary people. Other groups in society, immigrants managers and extreme-rich, were involved in the plot: According to the article, they were allowed to profit more than the people. It may be argued that this conspiracy condition already hints at one element of populism: people-centrism. However, the people were not explicitly juxtaposed to the elites, which means that the core opposition central in populist framing was not present in the article.

In the populist condition, references to a conspiracy or hidden truth were not included. Yet, the development was interpreted in populist terms: The "corrupt" elites were held responsible for causing this negative development, which was posing a severe threat on the well-being of the ordinary people. The ordinary people were said to be left behind by the self-interested elite. Finally, in the populist conspiracy condition, the hidden truth and deprivation of the ordinary people by a plot was connected to the Manichean opposition central in populist discourse: The corrupt elites were explicitly connected to schemes plotted against the ordinary people. By siding with the enemy, they were depriving the ordinary people of what they were morally entitled to. Populist and conspiracy cues were thus combined.

Dependent variable. Populist attitudes were measured with a four-item scale (i.e., "Politicians in government are corrupt" and "Politicians in government make decisions that harm the interests of the ordinary people" (items adapted from e.g., Akkerman, Mudde, & Zaslove, 2014; Schulz et al., 2018a). The one-dimensionality of the scale was confirmed by confirmatory factor analysis: separating the scale into measures corresponding to people centrism and anti-elitism resulted in substantially less optional data fit indices. The mean of the scale was 4.36 ($SD = 1.30$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .794$).

Procedure. Participants accessed the online survey environment via the email invitation of the panel company. They first of all gave informed consent, and then proceeded to the pre-treatment questions (demographics, deprivation, cynicism, and overall political evaluations). A randomizer assigned participants to the control or experimental conditions (equal group sizes). Participants read the stimuli (mean exposure time = 58.74 s, $SD = 37.88$ s) and could click "next" to go to the post-treatment survey, where they completed the dependent variable items and manipulation checks. Participants were thanked, debriefed, and forwarded to the website of the panel company after they completed the final items.

Manipulation checks. Perceived exposure to populism was assessed by asking whether people perceived the message's cultivation of the ordinary people and the corrupt elite held responsible for the people's problems ($M_{control} = 3.70$, $SD = 1.59$, $M_{populism} = 5.50$, $SD = 1.40$, $M_{conspiracy} = 4.13$, $SD = 1.78$, $M_{combined} = 5.43$, $SD = 1.11$, $F(3,237) = 18.79$, $p < .001$). The manipulation check for conspiracy theories asked whether the article referred to a hidden truth that was covered up ($M_{control} = 3.90$, $SD = 1.64$, $M_{conspiracy} = 5.14$, $SD = 1.42$, $M_{populism} = 4.48$, $SD = 1.66$, $M_{combined} = 5.08$, $SD = 1.86$, $F(3,237) = 11.72$, $p < .001$) and whether a scheme was plotted by evil forces of power ($M_{control} = 3.40$, $SD = 1.61$, $M_{conspiracy} = 5.22$, $SD = 1.38$, $M_{populism} = 4.29$, $SD = 2.05$, $M_{combined} = 5.36$, $SD = 1.63$, $F(3,237) = 17.62$, $p < .001$). All manipulations succeeded. It can be noted that participants in the combined conditions perceived populist and conspiracy cues equally well. In the independent

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/ijpor/article/33/1/38/5809088 by Universiteit van Amsterdam user on 09 July 2021

conditions, however, the difference between perceiving populist and conspiracy cues was significant in the expected direction.

Results of Study 2

The direct effect of populist conspiracies. First of all, we expected that exposure to the Manichean ideology central in populist discourse would activate participants' populist attitudes (*H1*). The mean score comparisons between conditions depicted in Table 2 support this hypothesis. Populist attitudes are significantly higher for participants exposed to the populist treatment compared to the control. This is further corroborated by the results of the regression model depicted in Table 3 (Model I). Yet, if we look at the confidence intervals plotted in Figure 1, we do see that the estimate of the interval crosses the zero-line. Participants exposed to a populist interpretation of decreasing healthcare budgets thus have higher populist attitudes compared to participants exposed to the neutral control condition, but we have to interpret the main effect

Table 2
Mean Scores of Populist Attitudes Across Conditions

Condition	Mean populist attitudes		
	M	*SD*	*N*
Control condition	4.02_a	1.22	63
Populist communication only	4.44_b	1.31	61
Conspiracy theory only	4.40_a	1.24	58
Populist conspiracy theory	4.58_b	1.38	59
F, Df (3,237)	2.91*		
Partial η^2	.034		

Note. Means with differing subscripts differ significantly ($p < .05$), based on pairwise corrected *t*-tests in which the control group is compared to the experimental conditions. Populist attitudes are measured on a 7-point scale. *$p < .05$ (two-tailed).

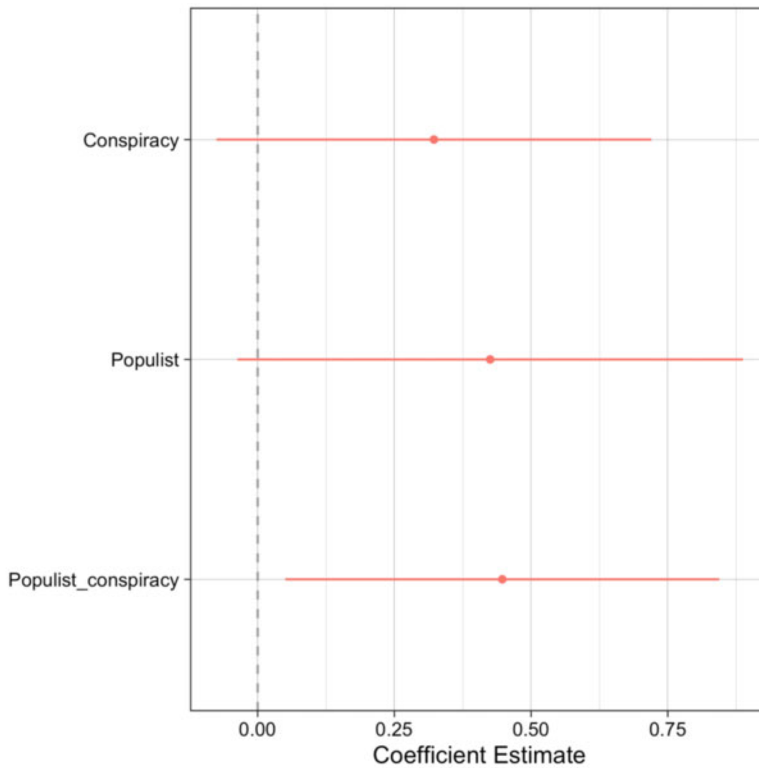
Table 3
Regression Model Predicting the Effects of Populist Conspiracies on Populist Attitudes

	Model I ($n = 240$)		
	B	*SE*	β
Constant	4.03	0.16	
Populism	0.42	0.23	.14
Conspiracy	0.37	0.23	.12
Populist conspiracy	0.52	0.22	.18**
Adjusted R^2	.011		
F	2.92*		
F for change in R^2			

Note. Two-tailed tests. Unstandardized (*B*) and standardized (β) regression weights. Control condition is the reference category. *$p < .05$; **$p < .01$.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/ijpor/article/33/1/38/5809088 by Universiteit van Amsterdam user on 09 July 2021

Figure 1
Marginal effects plot comparing the three experimental conditions to the control



of exposure to populist communication with care. Exposure to conspiracy theories alone, that is, news on healthcare budgets without a Manichean ordinary people-versus-elite construction, does not significantly activate participants' populist attitudes (see Table 3 and Figure 1). However, the explicit combination of populist framing and conspiracy reasoning has a significant, positive effect on the activation of populist attitudes (Table 3). This means that when decreasing budgets for healthcare are framed as a conspiracy in which the corrupt elites prioritize the needs of "dangerous" others that are protected, and when the people are threatened by the enemy, people's populist attitudes are significantly higher compared to the control condition.

We further expected that the combination of populist discourse and conspiracy reasoning would have a stronger effect than exposure to populist ideas alone (*H2*). The regression coefficients plotted in Figure 1 provide partial support for this expectation. More specifically, the effect of the combined populism and conspiracy condition on populist attitudes is stronger than the populist-only condition (Table 3). The mean score comparisons depicted in Table 2 further support the expectation that the difference between the control group and the populist conspiracy condition is larger than the difference between the control group and the populist-only condition. Yet, the difference between the populist conspiracy and the populist-only condition is not significant

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/ijpor/article/33/1/38/5809088 by Universiteit van Amsterdam user on 09 July 2021

if we look at the corrected pairwise mean score comparisons. However, as can be seen in Figure 1, the confidence interval of the regression coefficient shows that the effect of populist conspiracies is significantly different from zero, whereas mere exposure to populism crosses the line. Together, the results thus offer partial support for hypothesis 2. Populist attitudes are most substantially activated when people are exposed to the populist conspiracy condition, but the mean difference between populism-only and populist conspiracies is not significant.

Discussion

Despite the alleged affinity between populist rhetoric and conspiracy theories (Bergmann, 2019; Silva et al., 2017), there is too little systematic research on the construction of populist conspiracies by politicians, and the effects of such discourse on populist attitudes. Against this backdrop, the aim of this article was twofold: (a) to provide in-depth insights into the discursive framing of populist conspiracies by leading right-wing populist actors (Trump and Wilders) and (b) the effects of such discourse on the activation of attitudes related to populist conspiracies: populist attitudes.

The results of the inductive analysis of Tweets communicated by Trump and Wilders demonstrate that both political leaders express populist conspiracies in which they refer to (a) a hidden truth that is deliberately covered up by elites to achieve a certain goal and (b) collaborations between evil forces that work together in order to damage and harm the political leaders. In that sense, the direct communication of both actors resonates with populist communication tactics (e.g., Aalberg et al., 2017; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007) as well as conspiracy theories (e.g., Barkun, 2003). Advancing populism research, this study demonstrates that in the direct communication of (radical) right-wing leaders on SNSs, both communication tactics oftentimes converge, which supports literature on the affinity between both discourses (e.g., Bergmann, 2019; Oliver & Wood, 2014).

Our findings also support the notion that populism is a chameleonic discourse—which clings on to different cultivated crises and threats (e.g., Mazzoleni, 2008). The "corrupt" elite can mean different things in different settings, and politicians may strategically tailor their conspiracies depending on the context. More specifically, a discursive shift in Trump's populist conspiracies in the election and routine period can be identified. In the pre-election period, Trump mainly attributed blame to the Democrats and media that opposed his viewpoints. After the elections, Trump assigned blame to the media—who were accused of not covering his success accurately whilst trying to bring him down. Wilders, in contrast, was part of the opposition in both the election and routine period. In both periods, his most salient enemy was the political establishment that resided with dangerous out-groups to prioritize their needs and desires above the ordinary people.

Populist conspiracies can be linked to hostile media perceptions (e.g., Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985) and the salience of post-truth relativism in the current high-choice information setting (Van Aelst et al., 2017). First of all, the leading politicians both emphasized that some media outlets were biased against their views, and tried to damage the people and their party to achieve a certain goal. These hostile media perceptions tied in with perceived disinformation, or the attribution of blame to the media for deliberately distorting reality to mislead the people (e.g., Fawzi, 2018). In

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/ijpor/article/33/1/38/5809088 by Universiteit van Amsterdam user on 09 July 2021

their conspiracies, populist actors delegitimize the media and journalism as a practice and hereby stress that the media are part of the people's enemy. According to both Trump and Wilders, they are deliberately lying to the people. But do receivers of populist conspiracies actually buy the fake realities and populist conspiracies spread via social media?

It can be argued that anything goes in today's post-factual information era. As long as information resonates with people's perceptual screens, veracity seems to matter less than attitudinal consonance (e.g., Thorson, 2016; Van Aelst et al., 2017). In the second experimental study, we assessed the extent to which people's populist attitudes could be activated by exposure to the essence of populism (the opposition between the people and the elite) enriched with a conspiracy theory (the enemies collaborate to damage the people with a hidden truth). Supporting extant research on the persuasiveness of populist communication (e.g., Aalberg et al., 2017; Hameleers et al., 2017; Matthes & Schmuck, 2017; Müller et al., 2017)—we found that exposure to populist ideas can prime message-congruent populist attitudes. Extending this work, we also found that populist conspiracies prime populist attitudes more substantially than populist ideas alone.

Our findings are in line with research that found that exposure to populist communication can activate or prime populist attitudes (e.g., Aalberg et al., 2017; Müller et al., 2017). Advancing this literature, we found that referring to a conspiracy or a hidden truth deliberately kept away from the ordinary people can make populist communication even more persuasive. Future empirical endeavors may further assess if these effects are conditional on certain predispositions and attitudinal lenses of receivers. Among other things, it has been argued that populist ideas have the strongest effects among the politically cynical (Bos et al., 2013), the relatively deprived (e.g., Aalberg et al., 2017) or people with lower levels of formal education (Matthes & Schmuck, 2017). Although it reaches beyond the scope of this article to test for underlying processes, future research may provide a more comprehensive overview of which segments of the population are most likely to be affected by populist conspiracies.

This article is not without limitations. First of all, our discourse analysis focused on just two (radical) right-wing leaders in two different countries, hereby limiting the transferability of the findings to other right-wing and left-wing populist parties across the globe. Yet, we do believe that the parties analyzed present two different cases of right-wing populism and reveal a common core that would also apply to other populists that cultivate a central opposition between the ordinary people and the culpable elite on different levels (i.e., political, media, organizational). Future research may conduct more research in the setting of left-wing populism to explore how conspiracies are constructed from a different ideological perspective: What kind of "hidden truths" may be assigned to failing and "evil" elites on the right of the political spectrum? Second, our experimental study was limited to just one topic in just one country. Although the core elements defined in Study 1 were used in the treatments, future research needs to assess how populist conspiracies involving different enemies (the media, organizations) on different topics can activate the populist perceptions of receivers. Third, the independence of the manipulations of conspiracy theories and populist communication may be questioned. The conspiracy condition referred to the people—hereby potentially priming other populist elements. Although we believe that populist communication is defined by marking a central divide between ordinary people and corrupt elites, we do

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/ijpor/article/33/1/38/5809088 by Universiteit van Amsterdam user on 09 July 2021

suggest that future research may more carefully isolate the independent variables of populism and conspiracy theories. Finally, as some of the effects reported in this article are rather small, it may be interesting for future research to include different dependent variables—such as vote intentions, emotional responses, or policy preferences. It can even be argued that the effects of populist cues on populist attitudes are mediated, for example, by emotional responses or issue agreement triggered by the populist conspiracy messages.

Despite these limitations, this article provides important insights into the ways in which the combination of populist discourse and conspiracy theories can be an effective communication tactic to activate populist perceptions among voters in a post-factual information era: Cultivating a pervasive divide between the honest people and the lying enemies can be a viable strategy in times when veracity may be less decisive than pointing out enemies of the people.

Supplementary Data

Supplementary Data are available at *IJPOR* online.

References

Aalberg, T., Esser, F., Reinemann, C., Strömbäck, J. & de Vreese, C. H. (2017). *Populist political communication in Europe*. London: Routledge.

Akkerman, A., Mudde, C. & Zaslove, A. (2014). How populist are the people? Measuring populist attitudes in voters. *Comparative Political Studies*, *47*, 1324–1353. doi:10.1177/0010414013512600

Albertazzi, D., & McDonnell, D. (2008). *Twenty-first century populism*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

Barkun, M. (2003). *A culture of conspiracy: Apocalyptic visions in contemporary America*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Bennett, W. L. & Livingston, S. (2018). The disinformation order: Disruptive communication and the decline of democratic institutions. *European Journal of Communication*, *33*, 122–139. doi:10.1177/0267323118760317

Bergmann, E. (2019). *Conspiracy & populism: The politics of misinformation*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Bos, L., van der Brug, W. & Vreese, C. H. (2013). An experimental test of the impact of style and rhetoric on the perception of right-wing populist and mainstream party leaders. *Acta Politica*, *48*(2), 192–208. doi:10.1057/ap.2012.27

Bos, L., Schemer, C., Corbu, N., Hameleers, M., Andreadis, I., Schulz, A.,. . .Fawzi, N. (2019). The effects of populism as a social identity frame on persuasion and mobilization: Evidence from a 15-country experiment. *European Journal of Political Research*. doi:10.1111/1475-6765.12334

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2013). *Successful qualitative research: A practical guide for beginners*. London: Sage.

Canovan, M. (1999). Trust the people! Populism and the two faces of democracy. *Political Studies*, *47*, 2–16. doi:10.1111/1467-9248.00184

Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory*. London: Sage.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/ijpor/article/33/1/38/5809088 by Universiteit van Amsterdam user on 09 July 2021

Engesser, S., Ernst, N., Esser, F. & Büchel, F. (2017). Populism and social media: How politicians spread a fragmented ideology. *Information, Communication & Society*, *20*, 1109–1126. doi:10.1080/1369118X.2016.1207697

Ernst, N., Engesser, S., Büchel, F., Blassnig, S. & Esser, F. (2017). Extreme parties and populism: An analysis of Facebook and Twitter across six countries. *Information, Communication & Society*, *20*, 1347–1364. doi:10.1080/1369118X.2017.1329333

Fawzi, N. (2018). Untrustworthy news and the media as "enemy of the people?" How a populist worldview shapes recipients' attitudes toward the media. *International Journal of Press/Politics, 24, 146–164*. doi:10.1177/1940161218811981

Fenster, M. (2008). *Conspiracy theories: Secrecy and power in American Culture*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Gamson, W. A. (1992). *Talking politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Glaser, B. G. & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Chicago, CA: Aldine.

Hameleers, M., Bos, L. & de Vreese, C. H. (2017). They did it: The effects of emotionalized blame attribution in populist communication. *Communication Research*, *44*, 870–900. doi:10.1177/0093650216644026

Hameleers, M., Bos, L., Fawzi, N., Reinemann, C., Andreadis, I., Corbu, N.,. . .Weiss-Yaniv, N. (2018). Start spreading the news: A comparative experiment on the effects of populist communication on political participation in 16 European countries. *International Journal of Press/Politics*, *23*, 517–538. doi:10.1177/1940161218786786

Hofstadter, R. (1996). *The paranoid style in American politics and other essays*. Cambridge: MA.

Jacobs, K. & Spierings, N. (2018). A populist paradise? Examining populists' Twitter adoption and use. *Information, Communication & Society*, 22, 1681–1696. doi: 10.1080/1369118X.2018.1449883

Jagers, J. & Walgrave, S. (2007). Populism as political communication style: An empirical study of political parties' discourse in Belgium. *European Journal of Political Research*, *46*, 319–345. doi:10.1111/j.1475-6765.2006.00690.x

Krämer, B. (2014). Media populism: A conceptual clarification and some theses on its effects. *Communication Theory*, *24*(1), 42–60. doi:10.1111/comt.12029

Matthes, J. & Schmuck, D. (2017). The effects of anti-immigrant right-wing populist ads on implicit and explicit attitudes: A moderated mediation model. *Communication Research*, *44*, 556–581. doi:10.1177/0093650215577859

Mazzoleni, G. (2008). Populism and the media. In D. Albertazzi & D. McDonnel (Eds.), *Twenty-first century populism* (pp. 49–64). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Mudde, C. (2004). The populist zeitgeist. *Government and Opposition*, *39*, 542–564. doi: 10.1111/j.1477-7053.2004.00135.x

Müller, P., Schemer, C., Wettstein, M., Schulz, A., Wirz, D. S., Engesser, S. & Wirth, W. (2017). The polarizing impact of news coverage on populist attitudes in the public: Evidence from a panel study in four European democracies. *Journal of Communication*, *67*, 968–992. doi:10.1111/jcom.12337

Oliver, J. E., & Wood T. J. (2014). Conspiracy theories and the paranoid style(s) of mass opinion. *American Journal of Political Science*, *58*, 952–966.

Schmuck, D., & Hameleerslarke, M. (2019). Closer to the people: A comparative content analysis of populist communication social networking sites in pre- and post-Election

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/ijpor/article/33/1/38/5809088 by Universiteit van Amsterdam user on 09 July 2021

periods. *Information, Communication & Society,* doi: 10.1080/1369118X.2019.1588 909(online first)

Schmuck, D. & Matthes, J. (2017). Effects of economic and symbolic threat appeals in right-wing populist advertising on anti-immigrant attitudes: The impact of textual and visual appeals. *Political Communication*, *34*, 607–626. doi:10.1080/10584609. 2017.1316807

Schulz, A., Müller, P., Schemer, C., Wirz, D. S., Wettstein, M. & Wirth, W. (2018a). Measuring populist attitudes on three dimensions. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, *30*, 316–326. doi:10.1093/ijpor/edw037

Schulz, A., Wirth, W. & Müller, P. (2018b). We are the people and you are Fake News: A social identity approach to populist citizens' false consensus and hostile media perceptions. *Communication Research, 47, 201–226.* doi: 10.1177/0093650218794854

Silva, B. C., Vegetti, F. & Littvay, L. (2017). The elite is up to something: Exploring the relation between populism and belief in conspiracy theories. *Swiss Political Science Review*, *23*, 423–443. doi:10.1111/spsr.12270

Rico, G., Guinjoan, M., & Anduiza, E. (2017). The emotional underpinnings of populism: How anger and fear affect populist attitudes. *Swiss Political Science Review*, *23*, 444–461. doi:10.1111/spsr.12261

Thorson, E. (2016). Belief echoes: The persistent effects of corrected misinformation. *Political Communication*, *33*, 460–480. doi:10.1080/10584609.2015.1102187

Vallone, R. P., Ross, L., & Lepper, M. R. (1985). The hostile media phenomenon: Biased perception and perceptions of media bias in coverage of the Beirut massacre. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *49*, 577–585. doi: 10.1037/0022-3514.49.3.577

Van Aelst, P., Strömbäck, J., Aalberg, T., Esser F., de Vreese C., Matthes J.,. . .Stanyer, J. (2017) Political communication in a high-choice media environment: a challenge for democracy? *Annals of the International Communication Association*, *4*(1), 3–27. doi:10.1080/23808985.2017.1288551

Waisbord, S. & Amado, A. (2017). Populist communication by digital means: presidential Twitter in Latin America. *Information, Communication & Society*, *20*, 1330–1346. doi:10.1080/1369118X.2017.1328521

Wirz, D. S. (2018). Persuasion through emotion? An experimental test of the emotion-eliciting nature of populist communication. *International Journal of Communication*, *12*, 1114–1138. doi:10.5167/uzh-149959

Biographical Note

Michael Hameleers (PhD, University of Amsterdam) is Assistant Professor in Political Communication at the Amsterdam School of Communication Research (ASCoR), Amsterdam, The Netherlands. His research interests include populism, framing, (affective) polarization, disinformation, and the role of social identity in media effects.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/ijpor/article/33/1/38/5809088 by Universiteit van Amsterdam user on 09 July 2021