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On behalf of the people?

Perceptions, usage and effects of references to the people in political communication

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CHAPTER 3

3

Feeling represented, yet? How populist and non-populist cues in references to the people affect people's perceived representation

Abstract

In their aim to illustrate their responsiveness to the people, politicians utilize appeals to the people in their communication strategies. While invoking the people is traditionally associated with the context of populism, the use of references to the people is used by politicians across the ideological spectrum. Yet the effect this has on people's perceived representation remains unexplored. We combine theories of representation with those of people-centrism in political communication, testing the effect of populist (nationalist and oppositional) and pluralist cues in references to the people on citizens' perception of representation. In an experiment, we test respondents' perceived representation after being exposed to one of three types of cues in people-centric communication: two advocative cues (pluralist, nationalist) and one oppositional. A vignette study then replicates and supplements the experiment by adding party-cues and sources of information to the stimuli, simulating a more externally valid setting. Results from the experiment show that respondents felt more represented following statements with populist (i.e., nationalist and oppositional) cues. Taking party preference into account, results from the vignette study show that these effects held when the messages came from parties that the respondents favored while respondents reading messages from parties they did not like reported no significant differences between conditions. Respondents also indicated lower levels of perceived representation if politicians from a party they did not favor claimed direct conversations with the people as a source for knowing the people's will. These results serve as important evidence for the mechanisms at play in the relationship between responsiveness and democratic representation.

Introduction

The core of democracy is that the people elect their representatives and that those representatives will act in their (the people's) best interest. Representation, however, does not end there. Once the politicians take office, the people may (or may not) feel adequately represented. This relates to policy changes that reflect the politicians' responsiveness to the people but is also contingent on the way the politicians communicate with the people. In their aim to facilitate this perception of representation, politicians use references to the people to demonstrate their connection with and responsiveness to the people's demands (Dalton, 2013) and their capabilities of representing the people (Pitkin, 1967). Politicians can strategically use these references as markers for their (the politicians') legitimacy as representatives, signaling their attention to the people's needs. Thus, references to the people are an inherent part of (communicating) democratic representation. It therefore becomes crucial to examine the effects of these references to the people on citizens' perceptions of being represented.

References to the people are often pointed to as identifiers of populist rhetoric (e.g., Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Hamelaers, et al., 2016). While research on the implications of the rise of populist parties and policies is understandably high on the research agenda, the practical use of the term 'the people' by politicians across the entire political spectrum, as evidenced by some research, should not be overlooked. As studies confirm that populist communication strategies can be very effective in changing people's political attitudes (e.g., Bos et al., 2013; Hamelaers et al., 2016; Rooduijn et al., 2017), it is important to consider how different types of references to the people, as they are used by politicians across ideological boundaries, affect people's perceptions of being represented. The contribution of this paper lies in combining theories of representation with those of people-centrism in communication in order to test the effect of (populist and non-populist) cues in references to the people on citizens' perceptions of representation.

We do so by employing a two-study research design. In a first (experimental) study, we isolate three types of cues in references to the people and test how people respond to these in terms of perceived representation. This first step enables us to separate these communication features and examine their isolated effect on people's perceived representation. A subsequent (vignette) study replicates and supplements the experiment by taking into account party cues and party preference, as well as the use of different

sources of knowledge about the people, simulating a more externally valid setting (in which these messages come from real parties that people may or may not be sympathetic to). Thus, the paper contributes not only to the literature on political communication strategies, but also informs us on how these factors influence citizens' perception of representation – a key element in and the very foundation of representative democracy.

Theoretical framework

References to the people and representation

Political responsiveness to the preferences of the people is vital to representative democracy. This is evidenced by research showing congruence between changes in policy and changes in public opinion, demonstrating that public preferences tend to influence policy, rather than the other way around (Page & Sapiro, 1983; Hakhverdian, 2010). Communicating this responsiveness through references to the people and their needs therefore becomes vital in people's perception of being represented, as these feelings of being represented drive democratic satisfaction (Aarts & Thomassen, 2008).

In this sense, representation does not end with people choosing their representatives. Rather, it is a reciprocal relationship in which politicians also "choose" their constituents by making representative claims (Saward, 2006). In those claims politicians not only allege to know what the people need, but also define the people by targeting (a sector of) the population through their specific references to them. Through these references to the people, politicians identify with the people, position themselves within the in-group of the people and communicate their capabilities of serving that group, which, in turn, ideally elicits (in those constituents) a feeling of being represented.

However, a people-centric communication style is neither unique to, nor most commonly associated with, theories of representation in the recent past. Rather, references to the people and the representation of those people are seen as the 'minimal defining element' of populism (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; de Vreese et al., 2018, p.427). This is also in line with Jagers and Walgrave's (2007) definition of 'thin' populism, which is defined as a communication style that refers to the people, appeals to them, identifies with them, and pretends to speak on their behalf. Moreover, 'thicker' forms of

populist communication create a moral opposition between the people and corrupt others, often made up of the corrupt elite (Canovan, 1999; Mudde, 2004; Taggart, 2004) whose privilege detaches them from the real people (Abts & Rummens, 2007).

These notions of (1) responsiveness and representation, and (2) references to the people – either as a whole or as a homogenous unit in opposition with the (corrupt/elite) ‘other’ – serve as the main two pillars for this paper. What we seek to understand is how different cues in references to the people influence people’s perception of representation. As we have established, representation and responsiveness can be signaled through references to the people. In a populist framework, these references are to a homogenous *one* people, a uniform collective with similar political interests and features (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Mudde, 2004; Taggart, 2000). We examine how these types of cues in references to the people compare to non-homogenous, pluralist cues, which are marked by an explicit acknowledgement of the diversity of opinions and views of the people. In doing so, rather than abandoning the populist rationale, we take two competing ways of referring to the people – a homogenous approach rooted in populism, and a non-homogenous approach rooted in pluralism – and test their effects on people’s perceptions of being represented.

The role of communication

In order for politicians to reach the people, they rely on communication platforms across traditional and social media. As far as traditional media, homogenous and non-homogenous cues to the people are an important element to examine because media coverage tends to gravitate towards and favor populism in the rhetoric of party leaders (Bos, van der Brug & de Vreese, 2010). Populist politicians are also more likely to engage in communication that pits people against other actors, as well as use social media to reference the people directly, and use oppositional cues in those references (as illustrated in chapter two). Social media, in addition, is used by politicians to receive input, suggestions and ideas from the citizens (Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013) and to communicate to their constituents freely, without the restrictions of gatekeeping processes (e.g., Shoemaker et al., 2011; Soroka, 2012). This is important to note because populist communication can affect citizen’s perceived representation: populist rhetoric pointing to the shortcomings of the ordinary people can convince people that their will is not represented because the (elite) politicians are too removed from the people to represent them properly (Hameleers, 2018).

In terms of persuasive effects, references to the (homogenous) people and attacks against elites are known to lead to more political engagement (Hameleers et al., 2018), more political cynicism (Rooduijn et al., 2017) and affect vote intention (Bos, van der Brug & de Vreese, 2011).

Recent research has shown that such evidence of effectiveness of the communication strategies traditionally linked to populism encourages politicians who are entirely removed from populist ideologies to utilize these same strategies to connect to their constituents: In other words, rather than populism spreading across mainstream politics, tendencies towards more personalized communication is making normal political communication appear more like populism (chapter one). Despite this trend towards more personalized communication, the effects of those communication strategies have not been tested effectively outside of the populist framework, nor has this effect been studied as it pertains to citizens' perceived representation. While studies have examined the effects of populist rhetoric on, among others, mobilization (e.g., Hameleers & Schmuck, 2017), attitudes towards out-groups (e.g., Matthes & Schmuck, 2015; Schmuck & Matthes, 2017), party preference (e.g., Sheets, Bos, & Boomgaarden, 2016) and vote intention (e.g., Bos, et. al., 2011), we have yet to test the effect of (populist and non-populist) cues in references to the people on citizens' perceptions of representation.

STUDY 1: Effects of different cues in people-centrism on perceived representation

When we distinguish between different cues in references to the people, we do so along the homogenous and non-homogenous fault line. Non-homogenous cues to the people include neutral and pluralist cues. While neutral cues serve as a control group without any references to the people, *pluralist* references to the people are explicitly inclusive: everyone is part of the people, including the politicians themselves (Drury & Reicher, 2000; Mackie & Queller, 2000), despite implied or explicit differences within that group. This means that 'the people', as an aggregate term for the constituents addressed by the politician, can include people with different and even opposing viewpoints. These pluralist cues are also advocative references to the people. Homogenous cues in references to the people include nationalist cues and oppositional cues. *Nationalist* references to the people are advocative and focus on the in-group, referring to a homogenous 'one' people, in this case united under the notion of nativism (Vliegenthart, Boomgaarden, & van Spanje, 2012). Here, membership to the in-group, the

'us', is exclusive to those who belong the nationality of the politician and the people (s)he is addressing. *Oppositional* references to the people focus on the out-group, the 'them', referencing (in addition to the people) an explicit 'other', in many cases a (political, economic or corporate) elite outsider, that is opposed to the in-group of the people (e.g., Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017), creating an antagonism of 'us' vs. 'them'.

We start by examining an advocative, non-homogenous cue, in which politicians make reference to the people in a *pluralist* manner. Recent research shows that politicians interpret the term 'the people' to include 'everyone' (chapter one), which can be seen as efforts of referring to the people in a way in which all people feel a belonging and therefore feel addressed and heard. In other words: everyone can be part of 'the people' and a rhetorical 'us'. Research has shown that in-group belonging can have a persuasive and even mobilizing effect (e.g., Drury & Reicher, 2000; Mackie & Queller, 2000). These psychological factors play an important role in understanding the effectiveness of pluralist references to the people: Referring to the people in a pluralist manner invokes a belonging to a politicized in-group in which people may feel heard and understood. This leads us to predict that:

H1. Pluralist references to the people will yield higher levels of perceived representation than no references to the people.

Nationalist and oppositional references to the people are carved out according to agreed-upon markers of populist communication research (Mudde, 2004; Schulz, Müller, Schemer, Wirz, Wettstein and Wirth, 2018): references to the people stem from the belief in people being homogenous and virtuous, as well as having unrestricted popular sovereignty (e.g., Hawkins, Riding & Mudde, 2012; Wirth, et al., 2016) with *nationalist* elements rooted in the addition of nativism of right-wing associations of many populist parties and communication strategies (e.g., Aalberg et al., 2016; Boomgaarden & Vliegenthart, 2007; Bos et al., 2013; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). Nativism and nationalist identity are shown to be effective identity cues (Vliegenthart, et al., 2012). References to the people in a advocative, homogenous and nationalist manifestation can facilitate a belonging to an in-group by making the term 'the people' seem inherently inclusive while excluding those who do not fit the clear, nationalist criteria. In terms of effectiveness, there is a documented link between in-group attachment and the effectiveness of the communication strategies in

question (Mudde, 2004; Hameleers et al., 2016; Hameleers, Reinemann, Schmuck, & Fawzi, 2019). Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), for example, consists of the notion that populist rhetoric frames exaggerate intra-group homogeneity, making those who subscribe to it feel part of a seen and listened-to whole. Hence, invoking and propagating this in-group attachment through nationalist cues provides a tangible and desirable group to belong to, activating those nationalist in-group attachments and invoking a connection with the politician belonging to the same in-group.

H2. Nationalist references to the people will yield higher levels of perceived representation than (a) pluralistic references to the people and (b) no references to the people.

Oppositional references to the people are based on the populist notion that elites are corrupt and seen as a source of betrayal of the people (e.g., Akkerman, Mudde, & Zaslove, 2014; Krämer, 2014; Ruzza & Fella, 2011). This takes the notion of in-group identity a step further by explicitly creating an out-group, a 'them'. This enables politicians to identify themselves and the people not only as belonging to the same, explicitly defined and therefore exclusive in-group, but this group can now also be defined by a common enemy. Here, in-group attachment is constructed by defining those who are *not* part of the in-group, and therefore are inherently against the implied 'us' (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). The notion of relative deprivation is a useful parallel, here: people perceive their in-group as being relatively worse off than an identified out-group who is to blame for the misfortunes of the people (Elchardus & Spruyt, 2016; Gest, Reny & Mayer, 2018; Hameleers et al., 2019; Spruyt, Keppens & van Droogenbroek, 2016). Not only does this help strengthen in-group attachment, and by extension the connection to the politician belonging to that same in-group, but in the political communication context it implies that the politician using these communication strategies will advocate for and on behalf of the people belonging to the same in-group against the out-group culprits. We therefore argue that:

H3. Oppositional references to the people will yield higher levels of perceived representation than (a) pluralistic references to the people and (b) no references to the people.

Method

Design and stimuli

The experiment allows us to test the impact of different cues in references to the people in political communication on people's perception of representation. This is done through a 4x1 between-subjects experimental design in which respondents see a fictional newspaper excerpt of an interview with an anonymous politician. Respondents are shown a short description of an issue about the release of funds for housing repairs in the province/city of Groningen. They are then introduced to a (fake) debate about the release of those funds and indicate, on a 7-point scale, whether they are for or against the release of the funds (1=strongly disagree, 2=strongly agree). Respondents are then exposed to congruent political appeals that vary in the way the politician refers to the constituents. Participants who indicated that they are *against* the release of the funds will be randomly assigned to one of four conditions in which politicians are shown to argue *against* the release of the funds. Participants who indicated that they *support* the release of the funds were randomly assigned to one of four experimental conditions in which politicians also *support* the release of the funds. Thus, only congruent arguments are shown in order to ensure that respondents accept the argument and do not reject representative capacities based on differences in issue-standpoints (Arnesen & Peters, 2018). Participants who do not have an opinion were randomly assigned to an experimental condition from either an opposing or supporting argument⁷. The political affiliation of the politician remains completely obscure. In three of the four conditions the politicians voiced his/her concern for the people and in their justification for their concern, while the cue in reference to the people varies. The fourth condition is neutral and does not include explicit references to the people, serving as a control condition⁸. The selection of the issue and the conditions was pilot-tested to ensure the credibility of the stimuli.

Sample and procedure

A total of 1043 Dutch respondents were recruited in February 2021 ($M_{\text{age}} = 48.32$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 17.04$; $M_{\text{PoliticalInterest}} = 4.30$, $SD_{\text{PoliticalInterest}} = 1.56^9$; $M_{\text{PoliticalAlignment}} = 6.29$, $SD_{\text{PoliticalAlignment}} = 1.92^{10}$). Representative quotas were set for age, gender and

7 375 (12%) of the respondents fell into this category.

8 See Appendix G for experimental manipulations.

9 Political Interest measured on a 7-point scale (1=not at all interested; 7=very interested)

10 Political Alignment measured on an 11-point scale (1=extreme left; 11=extreme right)

education¹¹, as well as an attention check which screened out respondents who were not reading the questions closely. For the experiment, respondents read the description of the issue described above. They were then assigned to one of four conditions of a congruent statement by a politician. We conducted a randomization check, and the randomization was successful, except for political alignment¹². Participants answered three questions pertaining to the politician's perceived connection to the people, his/her perceived concern for the people and the politician's intent to represent the people's will.

Measurement

We examined participants' levels of perceived representation using three indicators: responsiveness, connection and representation. Respondents indicated, on a 7-point scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), to what extent they thought the politician succeeded in 1) including the people in his considerations about the issue, 2) understanding the concerns of the people, and 3) appearing capable of representing the people. A factor analysis indicated that correlations between items ranged from Pearson's $r=.69$ to $r=.73$ with factor loadings ranging between $.898$ and $.909$ and an Eigenvalue of 2.43 , suggesting that the measures form a strong scale. A representation variable was created using the average of the scores from the three indicator variables above.

Results Study 1

To test our hypotheses for the experiment, which examined the effect of different cues of references to the people on respondent's perceived representation, we estimated a hierarchical multiple regression model that tests the effect of these cues while controlling for political and populist attitudes, as well as issue importance (Table 3.1).

Pluralist references to the people. The multiple regression analysis showed that there are no significant differences between the pluralist condition and the other conditions¹³. The data therefore does not support hypotheses that predicted that pluralist references to the people yield higher levels of

11 Gender: 50.3% male, 49.4 % female; education: 27.8% low educational level, 37.7% medium educational level, 34.5% high educational level.

12 Political alignment was added as a control variable in the final models, as the randomization was not successful. We also controlled for issue factors (model 4 and 5) such as perceived issue importance, issue agreement and what condition the respondents were exposed to (for or against the release of the funds).

13 See Appendix I (Table I1) for regression table showing the differences between pluralist and other conditions in their effects of cues in reference to the people on perception of representation.

perceived representation than no references to the people (H1) and that nationalist (H2b) and oppositional (H3b) references to the people yield higher perceived representation than pluralist references to the people.

Table 3.1: Hierarchical regression model showing the differences in effect of cues in reference to the people on perception of representation.

	Model				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Experimental Condition					
Plural	.07 (.10)	.10 (.10)	.11 (.10)	.13 (.10)	.12 (.09)
National	.18 (.10)	.22* (.10)	.25* (.10)	.22* (.09)	.23* (.09)
Oppositional	.20 (.10)	.22* (.10)	.24* (.10)	.25** (.09)	.25** (.09)
Political Attitudes					
Political Interest		.11*** (.02)	.11*** (.02)	.06* (.02)	.06* (.02)
Political alignment		-.03 (.02)	-.04* (.02)	-.01 (.02)	-.01 (.02)
Pro-People Populism			.21*** (.04)	.18*** (.03)	.18*** (.03)
Anti-elite Populism			.01 (.04)	-.09* (.04)	-.09* (.04)
Issue Factors					
Issue importance				.05 (.03)	.05 (.03)
Issue agreement				.31*** (.03)	.25*** (.04)
Issue exposure (pro/con)					.34* (.14)
Observations	1043	1043	1043	1043	1043
Constant	4.61*** (.07)	4.27*** (.17)	3.47*** (.24)	2.02*** (.25)	2.00*** (.25)
R ²	.01	.03	.06	.18	.19
R ² change	.00	.03	.06	.18	.18

Note: Neutral experimental condition used as reference variable. Unstandardized regression weights. Standard errors reported within brackets.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Nationalist and Oppositional references to the people. The regression did show significant difference between the neutral condition and both the nationalist, and oppositional conditions, confirming Hypothesis 2b and Hypothesis 3b. The effects of nationalist cues were significant ($B = .22$; $SE = .10$) when controlling for political attitudes and issue factors (see Table 3.1). The differences in the levels of reported representation in the nationalist condition were therefore significantly higher than in the neutral

condition. Perceived levels of representation are also higher in respondents in the oppositional condition than in those in the neutral condition. The difference between the oppositional and neutral conditions is approaching significance in the first model but was highly significant, in models 4 and 5. The effect sizes here are similar to those in the nationalist condition in the first model and slightly higher in the last two models, where all controls were accounted for.

It should be noted that the explained variance in the dependent variable is low. Even though the explained variance increases with each model, the maximum variability in the data that is accounted for by the model remains low ($R^2=.19$). Nevertheless, considering the complexity of this dependent variable and the additional factors that comprise a person's sense of being represented, the significant effects when the kind of reference to the people is manipulated are not to be dismissed.

Conclusion Study 1

The aim of the first study was to examine the effects of different cues in references to the people on the people's perceived level of representation. While not all anticipated effects were found, the experimental data show that there are some observable effects of people-centrism on the perceived levels of representation if different cues are used to address the people. Respondents felt more represented if they read a statement that constructed the people by outlining their belonging to a specific in-group (nationality) and defined a common enemy as an out-group (the opposition) than if they read a neutral statement. This is in line with populist theories and research that suggest that references to the people are rooted in the belief that people are homogenous and virtuous, often times in opposition with a commonly unidentified 'other'. While these elements are well established as part of the populist communication literature, our data suggest that they also contribute to people's feeling of being represented.

While it is insightful to examine these communication strategies in an experimental setting, a question of external validity is raised. In other words, would these findings hold in a more externally valid setting, where the identity of the communicating politician is known, e.g., where party cues are considered as well? The second study of this paper aims to answer this question.

STUDY 2: The effects of sources and party-preference on perceived representation

It is one thing to test the effects of communication strategies using an experimental setting where the parties are anonymized and the contents of the message can be isolated. While that yields to insightful findings on the effects of these communication strategies, it is not how citizens experience political communication. Whether they listen to a speech, see a tweet, or read the newspaper – citizens will most likely always know *who* is making the political claims. In other words, when we experience ‘political communication’, we know who the communicating politician is. This is imperative for the forming of our opinions about the statements made and the politician making them.

When party preference is taken into account, people are more likely to adopt the positions of their preferred party/politician out of sheer loyalty and trust that those parties/politicians have their (the people’s) best interest at heart (Bartels, 2000; Zaller, 1992). Research has shown that political beliefs and trust are shaped, at least in part, by political identification (see Bartels, 2002; Campbel, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960; Jacoby, 1988;). Those party preferences can therefore be key factors in how communication from politicians is perceived and can often point to the conditionality of communication effects. In this second study, we can examine this conditionality and uncover whether the content (i.e., the different cues in reference to the people) or the sender (in the form of a political party that people support or not) is mainly driving feelings of representation.

Party cues can come in the form of an identifiable association between a policy or a statement and a political party or actor. Within the scope of political communication – and this paper, specifically – these cues are most likely to be associated with the origin of the statement – i.e., the politician making the statement. If party preferences can influence political behavior, we would like to extend this theory and test whether it also has an influence on perceived representation.

Research Question 1: How does party-preference moderate the relationship between cues in references to the people and people’s perceived representation?

The importance of studying references to the people can also be connected to related fields that study the role of *information sources* to understand the content and effects of (political) communication. If politicians argue to be the best representatives of the people, the people's feeling of being represented may be contingent on what sources of information the politician's notion of the people's will is based on. In other words, the study does not only look at the source/sender of the message (RQ1) but also what source for information the sender is using for the information communicated within the message (RQ2). For example, in the realm of news media research, the reliance on (and reference to) certain information sources, and how this affects interpretations, is a key approach to understanding journalistic processes (e.g., Gans, 1979; Hanitzsch, 2004; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). If we translate this to the context of political communication and populism, we can uncover how political elites rely on information sources to generate a perception of the people (chapter one) and how they use these sources and information to formulate political statements where they (strategically) communicate their support for the concerns of the people. Especially since politicians claim to speak on behalf of the people, the source of their information about the people's needs can be an important communicative element.

Chapter one found that politicians rely (among other things) mostly on their gut feeling and on information obtained from speaking to the people to inform themselves about what the people want - i.e., what is best for the people. Referencing these sources explicitly when making statements about the people's needs perhaps adds to the credibility of the politicians' representative claims, making them sound less like empty political statements and more like concrete reflections of the public's opinion. Research on authoritativeness shows, for example, that successful (populist) leaders were more authoritative in the news (Bos et al., 2010). In other words, the more politicians appear knowledgeable about what they are talking about, the better they are perceived to be able to represent the electorate. We therefore also explore how the use of sources of information - such as an inherent political 'gut feeling' or direct conversations with the (ordinary) people - affect the people's perceived representation.

Research Question 2: How do references to different sources of information about the people's will affect people's perceived representation?

Method

Design and stimuli

The same respondents as in the first study were introduced to a new issue for the vignette study: EU funds for COVID-19 relief. In this issue, it is claimed that the Netherlands, as well as other EU countries, will have to pay a large amount of money for EU security updates due to the COVID-19 health regulations. This issue was chosen (and pre-tested) to represent a salient issue that respondents can recognize easily but obscure and complex enough so that respondents may not have pre-formed opinions about. Respondents were exposed to tweets (specifically created for this study) from politicians responding to this issue. For the stimulus material, 60 tweets were created that varied in party (5 conditions), type of reference to the people (4 conditions) and source of information (3 conditions).

To hold issue agreement constant and the vignette design as simple as possible, all variations of the tweets were opposed to the issue of releasing more funds. The tweets contain the same four conditions of references to the people as the experimental conditions, as well as identifying sender information (political party representative) and source of information (gut feeling, conversations with people or no source of information). Based on the Chapel Hill Expert Survey, five parties were chosen on the basis of their left-right alignment. Two parties from the left (GL, SP), two from the right (VVD, PVV) as well as a center party (CDA) were selected to provide maximum variety while keeping the vignettes to a manageable number. The party leader from each one of those parties was chosen as the representative of the party. To illustrate, a tweet with oppositional references to the people and 'gut feeling' as the source condition sounded as follows:

"My gut feeling tells me that the Dutch people are against paying someone else's bill. While they are profiting, we are left behind. Before we can worry about them, we have to help the ordinary Dutch people! #unitedagainstthem"^{14,15}.

¹⁴ Italics added in the manuscript to highlight the manipulated conditions. No focus was drawn to the conditions in the actual stimulus material.

¹⁵ See Appendix H for sample vignettes

Procedure

The data for the vignette study was collected concurrently with the data for the experiment. After completing the questions for the experiment, participants were prompted to read about the issue pertaining to the vignette study (EU funds for COVID-19 security updates). Participants were then shown politicians' reactions about this issue in the form of tweets. Here, participants were randomly assigned to one of 20 decks containing three tweets that vary in political party, source of information and reference to the people. Using SAS software, each deck of tweets was randomized and curated to contain different conditions of each variable. The D-efficiency of the randomization was 100, indicating a most efficient design (Auspurg & Hinz, 2014) so that there was no overlap in content other than the sentiment of the opposition to the issue. At the beginning of the survey, participants indicated their likelihood of voting for each of the parties in the Dutch parliament (1= not at all likely; 7 = very likely). The political-preference dummy variable was created by taking the scores for the parties used in the vignettes and coding all parties that scored 4 or higher as 'preferred parties'. For each tweet, participants responded to the same three questions as in the experiment, measuring the perceived connection of the politician to the people ($M=4.33$, $SD=1.49$), the politician's concern for the people ($M=4.37$, $SD=1.52$) and the politician's capability to represent the people's will ($M=4.34$, $SD=1.52$). After these questions, participants were debriefed.

Results Study 2

To test if and how party preference moderates the relationship between people-centric communication and people's perceived levels of representation (RQ1), we conducted a multilevel analysis to account for successive exposure of multiple vignettes to the same respondent. Because participants were exposed to three tweets, the data was stacked to reflect all responses to tweets as separate responses, resulting in 3129 observations. Multilevel modeling was used to account for consecutive responses by the same respondents. Table 3.2 shows the overall responses, as well as differences between respondents' reactions to messages from their preferred parties and from parties they did not favor. Responses in the *overall* column are results for all responses without party-preference taken into account (Model 1), and party-preference as a control variable (Model 5). Responses in the *congruent party* column represent results for all responses to tweets that originated from a party they favored. Responses in the *incongruent party* column represent results for all responses to tweets that originated from a party they did not favor.

Party-congruence and representation (RQ1). In order to examine party-preference as a variable, a party-congruence dummy variable was used. Perhaps unsurprisingly, respondents viewing messages from parties they support show higher levels of perceived representation than those viewing messages from parties that they do not support ($B=.38$, $SE=.05$). Nevertheless, the experimental conditions of people-centrism account for significant differences for party-congruent responses while this is not the case for party-incongruent responses. Even though there is no significant interaction effect¹⁶, analyses suggest an interaction between party-congruence and representation once the data are split up between the two groups (see Table 3.2).

The split between the congruent and incongruent parties was made in order to highlight the differences between responses to tweets from favored parties and responses to tweets from not favored parties. Because measuring representation can be very complex, interaction effects can go undetected in designs with fewer than 200 vignettes (Auspurg & Hinz, 2014). With separate analyses, differences in the effects between exposure to congruent and incongruent parties can therefore be illustrated more clearly. Results for the congruent exposures show similar patterns to the experimental study: compared to the neutral condition, effects of nationalist and oppositional cues were significant in all (but one, for the nationalist cues) models for party supporters. Effects of the nationalist condition ($B=.34$; $SE=.09$) held throughout the models including control variables similar to the experimental design (Models 1-4: political interest, left-right alignment, populism indicators and interest in the issue).

16 See Table 3.2, footnote 11

Table 3.2: Multilevel model showing the differences in effect of types if people-centrism and source perception of representation in congruent parties and incongruent parties

	Model					
	Overall		Congruent parties		Incongruent parties	
	(1)	(5)	(1)	(5)	(1)	(5)
People-centrism						
Plural	.00 (.06)	.10 (.07)	.10 (.09)	.09 (.09)	-.04 (.08)	-.04 (.08)
National	.18** (.05)	-.06 (.07)	.34*** (.09)	.16 (.10)	.09 (.08)	.08 (.09)
Oppositional	.17** (.06)	.02 (.08)	.27** (.09)	.25** (.09)	.13 (.09)	.13 (.08)
Source						
Gut	.02 (.05)	-.01 (.06)	.02 (.07)	-.03 (.07)	.00 (.06)	-.00 (.06)
People	-.11* (.05)	-.16** (.06)	-.07 (.07)	-.09 (.07)	-.14* (.06)	-.14* (.06)
Political issues						
Party Congruence ¹⁷		.02 (.10)				
Political Interest		-.02 (.02)		.00 (.03)		-.04 (.03)
Political Alignment		.05** (.02)		.04 (.02)		.05* (.02)
Pro-People Populism		.08* (.03)		.07 (.04)		.09* (.04)
Anti-elite Populism		.20*** (.03)		.23*** (.05)		.17*** (.04)
Issue Factors						
Tweet Interest		.12*** (.02)		.08* (.03)		.11*** (.03)
Order_2		.09** (.02)		.17*** (.04)		.03 (.04)
Order_3		.05** (.02)		.05* (.02)		.04 (.02)
Observations	3129	3129	1196	1196	1933	1933
Constant	4.29*** (.06)	2.16*** (.23)	4.37*** (.08)	2.29*** (.29)	4.25*** (.06)	2.40*** (.28)
ICC	.451	.411	.539	.100	.440	.412
LL null model	-5222.122	-5151.790	-1947.957	-1911.182	-3332.146	-3300.815
LL full model	-5222.122	-5151.791	-1947.914	-1911.062	-3332.144	-3300.810

Note: Neutral experimental condition used as reference variable. Unstandardized regression weights. Standard errors reported within brackets. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

This was also the case for oppositional references to the people. Although the effect size was slightly smaller ($B = .27$; $SE = .09$), the effects of the oppositional conditions remained highly significant through all models. Anti-elite populism also was a significant predictor of perceived levels of representation ($B = .23$; $SE = .05$). There were no significant main effects for

17 Interaction effects were tested with Party Congruence**Cues* and Party Congruence**Source*. None of the interactions with cues were significant, with only the interaction of Party Congruence**Oppositional Cue* approaching significance ($p = .072$). The interaction effect of Party Congruence**Source* was significant for "the people" as a source ($B = -.16$, $SE = .06$, $p = .01$).

respondents exposed to incongruent parties. For responses to tweets from disliked parties, none of the experimental conditions yielded significant results. Populism traits did stand out as one of the only predictors of the level of perceived representation, as well as the interest in the issue.

Source (RQ2). Table 3.2 also shows small differences in the effect of sources of knowledge on the perceived level of representation. In contrast to stating no source for their knowledge about what is best for the people, politicians who cite the people themselves as a source evoke lower levels of representation in the overall responses ($B = -.16$; $SE = .06$). When the analysis is split into responses to congruent and incongruent party tweets, these effects only hold for responses to incongruent parties. This means that respondents reacting to a tweet from a politician outside of their political preference report lower levels of perceived representation if that politician cites the people as his/her source of information rather than citing no source of information. This effect holds including all controls ($B = -.14$; $SE = .06$).

Conclusion Study 2

The data from the vignette study show that the effects of the experimental design hold for the overall dataset, as well as for responses to messages from congruent parties. For this group (congruent party), different cues for referencing the people yielded a variation in respondents' perceived levels of representation. Similar to the experimental findings, respondents felt more represented by a politician using nationalist and oppositional cues as opposed to neutral references to the people (given that the politician belongs to a preferred political party). References to the people from politicians outside their political preferences seemed to have no effect on the respondents. In answer to our first RQ, we can conclude that nationalist and oppositional cues in references to the people are only effective if politicians use them in communication with citizens who already have a relatively high level of support for them. In other words, while these cues can aid politicians in appearing/communicating to be a good representative to citizens who are favorable of their party, it is unlikely that nationalist or oppositional cues in references to the people will persuade citizens who are *not* favorable of the politician of his/her capabilities to represent them.

What did matter for the incongruent party group was the reference to a source of knowledge about the people's will. The level of perceived representation dropped significantly if participants were exposed to a tweet from a politician they did not favor, and if that politician claimed that conversations

with people informed him/her about what is best for the people. This was not the case for those responding to a tweet from a party they *do* favor. While overall effects of references to sources of knowledge are limited, in specific instances they do have an impact on respondents' perceived level of representation: they can have an adverse effect. When politicians claim that they know what is best for the people based on their conversations with the (ordinary) people, those who are not sympathetic toward the party may become skeptical about the statement and in turn decrease their evaluation of the politician's capabilities of representing them.

Discussion

References to the people are key in communicating representation. Politicians address the people to demonstrate their responsiveness to the people's needs (Dalton, 2013). These references to the people are commonly associated with populist communication, where research has demonstrated the effectiveness of this communication strategy (e.g., Bos et al., 2013; Hameleers et al., 2018; Rooduijn et al., 2017). As a key contribution to this literature, we set out to examine cues in referencing the people on an outcome variable heretofore unexplored: respondents' perceived levels of representation.

The results of the two studies (N=1043) indicate that, looking along the fault lines of homogenous cues that are based in populist rhetoric and non-homogenous cues that are pluralist in nature, nationalistic and oppositional cues in references to the people elicit higher levels of representation than no cues to the people, while pluralist cues do not seem as effective. Messages with nationalist and oppositional cues to references to the people led to an increased feeling of representation than neutral messages. In line with populist literature, this shows that, in addition to political attitudes (e.g., Matthes & Schmuck, 2015), mobilization (e.g., Hameleers & Schmuck, 2017) and vote intention (e.g., Bos et al., 2011), homogenous cues to the people can also affect perceptions of representation. While the aforementioned studies set the groundwork for the paper at hand, they take a feeling of representation for granted. This paper adds to the literature by explicitly measuring this variable.

Besides cues referring to a (social) in-group of the people, cues to a common enemy also prove to be an effective identity cue that has an effect on how represented respondents feel, which is somewhat reflective of research on populist identity framing (Bos et al., 2020). This shows populist communicators' reliance on persuasive strategies that include social group cues and that can affect mobilization and persuasion. This is reflected in the findings of both studies, as respondents felt more represented by politicians using oppositional references to the people than those communication in neutral terms.

The results of the vignette study provide some nuance to these findings. Taking into account a more externally valid setting and the respondents' preferences for parties/politicians, the results show that homogenous cues can aid politicians in communicating to be a good representative to citizens (who are favorable of his/her party). It is unlikely, however, this will be the case for citizens who are *not* favorable of the politician's party. This adds to literature and studies on populist cues as (1) those do not take party preferences into account, and (2) often restrict themselves to populist parties. Thus, a notable contribution of the paper lies not only in testing the effect of (populist and non-populist) cues in references to the people on citizens' perceptions of representation, but specifically also in taking into account party preferences and considering a more diverse political context.

The study also shows that references to sources of knowledge should be used with caution: Convincing voters and supporters that their politician/party of preference is aware of, and informed about, their (the people's) needs does not seem to require any justification for this knowledge (in the form of sources of 'gut feeling' and 'conversations with people', at least). However, claiming to know what is best for the people through talking directly to the people, can only backfire (with people who are not supporters of the party making those claims). These citizens feel even less represented because they might grow suspicious of the politician's source of information and his/her credibility and authoritativeness as a representative.

These results have important ramifications for understanding how references to the people can affect people's perceptions of representation. Crucially, the data show that this delicate feeling of being represented – an indicator of the essence of representative democracy – is shown to be susceptible to simple tweaks in the way the people are addressed. Populist cues in references to the people prove to be most effective, in line with

research on the persuasive effect of those communication strategies (e.g., Hameleers et al., 2018). It also points to the trend of mainstream political communication adapting these strategies as a way of more personalized communication (chapter one).

The findings can also contribute to the representation literature and highlight how references to the people can facilitate the responsiveness between politicians and the people. We know, for example, that people's satisfaction of democracy is driven by their perception of representation (rather than accountability) of politicians (Aarts & Thomassen, 2008). This is important to consider from a communication point of view: while it is established that politicians are responsive to the people's needs (Page & Sapiro, 1983; Hakhverdian, 2010), people may not perceive it as such. It is therefore the manner in which this responsiveness is communicated, and the cues that are used in the reference to the people, that can help facilitate a perception of this responsiveness.

There are some limitations to our studies that may inspire new research in the field of representation and political communication. Individual-level moderating factors were not taken into account in this study. We know, for example, that people with a lower level of education and lower income and social class are more likely to be affected by populist rhetoric (e.g., Spruyt et al., 2016). These individual level characteristics all signal a vulnerability in people which can make them feel left behind in the political decision-making processes (Hameleers et al., 2019; Matthes & Schmuck, 2015). They do not feel acknowledged or heard by politicians but rather as a forgotten part of the population on which political decisions are imposed (Hameleers et al., 2019). This makes them especially susceptible to communication styles that give them a feeling of agency and belonging (e.g., Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Spruyt et al., 2016). This is something that future research can take into account.

A second key limitation is that the variables in the vignette study are minimal, in order to keep the design as simple as possible. Only two sources of information are included ('gut' and 'conversations with the people'), and only five political parties were chosen to represent a wide political spectrum. Further research could benefit from examining other sources of information (i.e., polls and research). Research could also benefit from a design in which respondents view their actual favorite/least favorite party, simulating an even more externally valid design.

A third limitation is that the experiment and vignette studies both relied on issues that were fabricated and respondents had no strong prior opinions about. Much like party-preference, which can be a key factor in how communication from politicians is perceived, opinion about issues may have the same effect. We encourage future research to explore the strengths of the effects these cues in references to the people have when mainstream, polarizing issues are at hand.

However, because our study is among the first to explore the effects of these cues on the perceived level of representation, we regard the findings of our study as important evidence for the mechanisms at play in responsiveness and democratic representation.