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Citation for published version (APA):
Hameleers, M., Schmuck, D., Schulz, A., Wirz, D. S., Matthes, J., Bos, L., Corbu, N., & Andreadis, I. (2021). The Effects of Populist Identity Framing on Populist Attitudes Across Europe: Evidence From a 15-Country Comparative Experiment. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, *33*(3), 491–510. https://doi.org/10.1093/ijpor/edaa018

The Effects of Populist Identity Framing on Populist Attitudes Across Europe: Evidence From a 15-Country Comparative Experiment

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Abstract

We investigate the effects of populist messages that (a) stress the centrality of
"ordinary" people, (b) shift blame to the "corrupt" elites, or (c) combine people
centrality and antielitist cues on 3 dimensions of populist attitudes: anti-elitism,
homogeneous people, and popular sovereignty. We conducted an extensive 15-coun-
try experiment in which we manipulated populist communication as social identity
frames ($N = 7,271$). Multilevel analyses demonstrate that messages stressing the cen-
trality of the ordinary people activate all dimensions of populist attitudes. In contrast,
anti-elite messages activate anti–elitism attitudes only for those individuals with lower
levels of education and extreme positions on the ideological left–right spectrum. Our
findings suggest that populist political communication plays a key role in activating
populist attitudes across Europe.

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Populism research has recently gravitated toward a consensus of populism as a thin-cored ideology or idea, in which the "good ordinary people" are framed in opposition to the "corrupt" elites (e.g., Mudde, 2004; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). Reasoned from a communicative perspective, we regard populism as the cultivation and expression of social identity frames. Social identity frames can be conceptualized as emphasis frames (see Cacciatore, Scheufele & Iyengar, 2016) that promote particular considerations regarding in-groups and out-groups. In line with the seminal conceptualization by Entman (1993), such considerations can relate to causes (i.e., blame) or consequences (i.e., victimization). This social identity approach to populism regards the ordinary people as an in-group, which is described to be threatened by the corrupt elites as well as "dangerous others" (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008; Mols & Jetten, 2016).

Based on the premises of the ideational approach to populism (e.g., Busby, Gubler, & Hawkins, 2019; Hawkins & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2019), we postulate that these frames can be effective in activating populist attitudes because they depict (a) the elites as an easily accessible culprit for various threats and (b) the people as a virtuous and homogenous in-group that is able to solve prevailing problems on its own behalf. These frames should have the strongest activating effects on populist attitudes if they are perceived as personally relevant and credible (e.g., Busby et al., 2019)—for example, because they resonate with national-level threats or individual-level perceptions of (economic) deprivation (e.g., Hawkins & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2019; Rico & Anduiza, 2019). As previous research has shown that some political actors rely more on the out-group frame and others more on the in-group frame (Ernst, Engesser, & Esser, 2017), we further investigate if exposure to specific frame components activates populist attitudes as a whole, or rather increases the accessibility of specific attitude dimensions.

Given the substantial heterogeneity in (populist) parties and contextual-level opportunity structures within Europe, the findings of previous research may not be generalizable (Aalberg, Esser, Reinemann, Strömbäck, & de Vreese, 2017). Therefore, we collected data in Western, Northern, Southern, and Eastern regions of Europe—national settings that differ on a number of important factors that may play a role in the reception of populist ideas (e.g., Aalberg et al., 2017). Among other things, Southern European countries have faced more severe consequences of recent European recessions than Western and Northern regions, and left-wing populism has been more pervasive in these regions compared with the success of right-wing populism in other regions. The perception of economic hardship on the country level may enhance the salience of populist attitudes (Rico & Anduiza, 2019)—and may therefore also correspond to the effectiveness of populist frames. The persuasiveness of populist identity frames may not only differ between countries, but can also vary on the individual level. In light of this, many studies have zoomed in on demand-side factors that influence the persuasiveness of populist messages, such as education, partisanship or (national) identification (e.g., Bos, van der Brug, & de Vreese, 2013; Schmuck & Matthes, 2017).

As key contribution of this study, we examine the effects of populist communication across a variety of Northern, Eastern, Southern, and Western European countries. We find that exposure to populist ideas can activate message-congruent populist attitudes, and that exposure to people-centric populist communication activates *all* dimensions of populist attitudes. Populist messages that stress the divide between the ordinary people and the corrupt elites only activate populist attitudes among people with more extreme ideological positions and lower levels of education. Together, these

findings indicate that exposure to populist ideas can activate populist interpretations of European citizens, but that these effects are most pronounced for citizens with lower education and more extreme political views.

In the *Populist Communication as a Social Identity Frame* section, we review literature on the persuasiveness of populist communication from a social identity perspective to formulate hypotheses on the direct effects of populist communication, and the role of formal education and ideological extremity on different dimensions of populist attitudes. Next, we introduce the method and measures used in our 15-country experiment. Findings and implications are discussed in the final sections of the article.

Populist Communication as a Social Identity Frame

Populist ideas emphasize a pervasive divide in politics and society (e.g., Mudde, 2004; Taggart, 2000). Specifically, the ordinary people are framed in opposition to the corrupt and self-interested elites (Mudde, 2004). These elites should represent the ordinary people's will, but the voice of the ordinary people is allegedly neglected or silenced in political decision-making (e.g., Canovan, 1999). A growing body of empirical research has studied populism from a communication perspective (e.g., Aalberg et al., 2017; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). Building further on this conceptualization, we approach populist communication as the expression of social identity frames. Populist social identity frames consist of two central components: (a) the emphasis on the corrupt elites as an out-group (the antielite frame) and (b) the reference to the homogenous and pure people as a self-determined in-group, whose will should be directly transposed into political decisions (the people centrality frame).

The corrupt elites that is, the populist out-group, is framed as posing a threat to the people from above. The elites are accused of only being interested in staying in their ivory tower, neglecting the voice of the silenced people far away on the streets (e.g., Taggart, 2000). Populist communication frequently frames the national government as an elitist out-group (e.g., Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). This means that the political establishment is held responsible for not listening to the voice of ordinary voters, and is failing to represent the electorate. The elitist out-group can however also be economic, which is salient in the communication of many left-wing populist actors.

Populism's cultivation of an elitist out-group can be connected to the theoretical underpinnings of social identity framing (Gamson, 1992; Polletta & Jasper, 2001). Social identity frames create a salient threat to the people by constructing credible scapegoats that can be held accountable for the people's experienced dissent. In creating a culpable out-group, populism thus simultaneously constructs an in-group of ordinary citizens that are *not* part of the elites (e.g., Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). In assigning negative qualities to the elitist out-group, populism thus reassures a positive and internally consistent image of the in-group's self, be it politically, economic or socio-cultural. The context in which identity is constructed or perceived may determine which self-concept is most relevant (e.g., Mols, 2012). In the setting of populist communication, the social identity of a community of hard-working and honest ordinary people that are not represented by the self-interested elite may become most salient.

Here, it is important to note that we restrict our conceptualization of populism to its ideational core (Mudde, 2004). Although we believe that the exclusion of societal out-groups, such as immigrants on the right wing, can be an important supplemental

component of populism (e.g., Jagers & Walgrave, 2007), these ideas enrich or extend the core idea that is central to populism irrespective of its political host ideology: the central divide between the ordinary people and the culpable elites.

The Effects of Populist Identity Framing on Message-Congruent Populist Attitudes

The ideational approach posits that populist attitudes can be regarded as pre-existing mental maps or worldviews that exist as dormant interpretations in individuals that need to be awakened or activated by the context (e.g., Busby et al., 2019). In this article, we argue that exposure to populist ideas can, in the right context, activate populist attitudes. Two psychological mechanisms are involved in this process. First, repeated exposure to derogatory (or positive) images of an out-group (or in-group) leads to the activation of related stereotypes (implicit stereotypes), which can be a rather automatic process. Second, through the application process, these stereotypes could consciously be appropriated and used in overtly expressed judgments (explicit stereotypes captured in populist attitudes; Kawakami, Dovidio, & van Kamp, 2007; Ramasubramanian, 2007). Exposure to media messages that prime key associations of groups and attributes that are already somewhat familiar to people could serve as "cognitive shortcuts to immediately and easily activate the cultural stereotypes associated with the group" (Ramasubramanian, 2007, p. 251), which could ultimately lead to enhancing (populist) attitudes, as "negative stereotypes and intergroup anxiety are generally stronger predictors of negative attitudes than realistic or symbolic threats" (Matthes & Schmuck, 2017, p. 5).

It can thus be expected that populist identity frames activate different components of perceptions of the self and others. These components correspond to what has been conceptualized as *populist attitudes* (e.g., Akkerman, Mudde, & Zaslove, 2014; Schulz et al., 2017). Populist attitudes reflect the degree to which individuals agree with the populist ideology; thus, the perception that the elite is bad, the people are good, and consequentially the people and not the elite should have political power. It can be expected that populist identity framing affects all of these aspects. First, the construction of the elite as an out-group may contribute to stronger antielitism attitudes through the priming of negative stereotypes about the elite. Second, the construction of the people as an in-group associated with positive stereotypes may enhance the perception of the people as a virtuous and homogeneous group. Third, in light of the threat that the in-group is confronted with, the motivation to act against the threat may contribute to a preference for popular sovereignty.

As recent empirical research points to the multidimensionality of populist attitudes (e.g., Schulz et al., 2017) and the fragmented spread of subcomponents of populist ideology through the media (e.g., Engesser, Ernst, Esser, & Büchel, 2017), we zoom in on the effects of different populist identity frames on different dimensions of populist attitudes. We should regard these effects as activating existing mental maps and schemata among receivers (e.g., Busby et al., 2019). Populist attitudes are thus not "created" by exposing people to populist frames, but populist attitudes are pre-existing patterns of interpretation that can be activated by framing components of the ideational core of populism (Hawkins & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2019). Against this backdrop, we introduce a first set of hypotheses. First, we assume that populist messages that blame the elites for

negative outcomes (anti-elite frame), will enhance anti-elitism attitudes (H1). Second, we assume that populist messages praising the in-group of the hard-working ordinary people (people centrality frame) will enhance (a) the perception of a homogeneous people and (b) the preference for popular sovereignty (H2).

Social identity frames should be most credible when they cultivate a salient in-group threat (i.e., the ordinary people as innocent victim) and identify a scapegoat that can be connected to this collective threat (i.e., the corrupt elites caused our crisis). Therefore, we expect that the combination of populism's emphasis on antielitism and people centrality will have the strongest effects on populist attitudes. More specifically, we assume that the effect of the anti-elite frame on (a) anti-elitism attitudes increases with the presence of the people centrality frame and that the effect of the people centrality frame on (b) the perception of a homogenous people, and (c) the preference for popular sovereignty increases with the presence of the people centrality frame (H3).

The Role of Education in the Susceptibility of Populist Arguments

The ideational approach predicts that populist frames activate populist attitudes when these individual-level attitudes can be made accessible worldviews among voters (e.g., Busby et al., 2019). In this article, we argue that predispositions and worldviews that resonate with the threats cultivated in populist messages can make people more susceptible to populist framing. This is empirically confirmed by Rico and Anduiza (2019), who found that populist attitudes are more salient in settings where people perceive that their country is facing economic hardships.

In line with this, previous research has argued that populist ideas appeal to a specific group of citizens. Specifically, the right-wing populist electorate has mainly been described as lower educated citizens (e.g., Schmuck & Matthes, 2017). The appeal of populist ideas among citizens with lower levels of education can be explained from the social identity perspective foregrounded in this article. The sense of in-group injustice emphasized in social identity frames may be most credible for lower educated citizens. These citizens may experience the threats to their culture, norms, values, and economic situation as most severe and realistic. They may for example compete with the scapegoated horizontal out-groups in right-wing populism, and they may perceive the corrupt elites as most distant from their "ordinary" lives as blue-collar workers. Although most empirical research has looked at education in the setting of right-wing populism (Schmuck & Matthes, 2017), we believe that the same mechanisms are applicable to left-wing populist ideas: these ideas cultivate a similar antagonistic worldview between ordinary people and culpable elites. Although left- and right-wing populism differ in their host ideologies, these subtypes of populism both cultivate threats that may be most personally relevant for lower educated voters (i.e., banks, greedy managers, or corporations that deprive the people).

Further, populism's emphasis on simplification and common sense (e.g., Mazzoleni, 2008; Rooduijn, 2014) may predominantly attract voters for whom politics and multilevel governance is most complicated. Hence, the simplified discourse of populism helps citizens at lower levels of formal education to make sense of political issues (Schmuck & Matthes, 2017). Against the backdrop of the strong resonance of populist identity frames with the mental images salient among especially

lower educated citizens, we forward the following hypothesis: Populist identity frames should have stronger effects for lower compared with higher educated citizens (H4).

Ideological Positions and the Persuasiveness of Populist Communication

In this article, we argue that the *extremity* of citizens' left- or right-wing ideological positions may be an important component augmenting the effects of exposure to populism's core ideas. This ties in with the growing focus on the resonance of populist ideas with voters' perceptions on *both* the left and right wing, tapping into different levels of inclusionism and exclusionism (e.g., Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013).

Specifically, both the left and the right end of the ideological spectrum can be associated with issue positions that cultivate pervasive societal divides. On the left, sentiments of exclusionism may relate to the perceived divide between ordinary people and the economic and political establishment. On the (extreme) right, the nativist people as a unity is seen in opposition to horizontally opposed societal out-groups. In line with the mechanisms of priming and trait activation, extreme issue positions on the left and right can make mental schemata of the "good" people and the "culpable" others more salient. The mental maps of populist identity frames and more extreme left and right values thus align—and tap into a network of interrelated associations. People with stronger left- or right-wing issue positions should thus be more sensitive to populist arguments. Against this backdrop, we can introduce the following hypothesis: The effects of populist messages on corresponding populist attitudes will be *stronger* for individuals at the extreme ends of the ideological spectrum compared with individuals in the middle of the ideological spectrum (H5).

The large-scale comparative scope of this research enables us to assess how populist communication activates the attitudes of citizens throughout Europe (also see Aalberg et al., 2017). The rationale for the comparative design can best be described as the selection of countries based on the "most-different" cases inclusion criterion (e.g., Meckstroth, 1975). More specifically, previous research on the effects of populist communication has mainly focused on Western democracies, and we know too little about how these results can be transferred to different regions. In this experimental study, we include a variety of Western, Eastern, Southern, and Northern European countries, hereby investigating the extent to which the alleged persuasiveness of populist communication is applicable to European countries that greatly vary in the contextual-level opportunity structures they provide for populist communication to root (Aalberg et al., 2017; Reinemann et al., 2019).

In this setting, the ideational approach to populism predicts that differences across national settings can make populist frames more or less effective (e.g., Hawkins & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2019). In Southern European settings, for example, the financial crisis may have had more severe consequences on people's lives than in Western and Northern Europe. For this reason, populist frames that juxtapose the ordinary people to the self-interested elites may be more personally relevant as they cultivate the threat people are actually experiencing (Rico & Anduiza, 2019). Yet, individual-level differences and perceptions may be more influential than objective country-level factors. This is confirmed by empirical findings on populist attitudes by Rico and Anduiza (2019).

Populist attitudes are not necessarily the consequence of economic situations, but rather the socio-tropic perception of how the people's country is performing economically. Against this backdrop, the aim of the large-scale comparative experiment is to identify whether the alleged persuasiveness of populist ideas mainly identified in Western democracies hold in a comparative set-up with most different cases.

Method

We test our hypotheses with a multinational experiment. We selected the countries for this study based on the assumption that populist movements and parties should be influential at the national level to varying degrees. For this reason, we included a variety of Northern, Southern, Western, and Eastern European countries that can be associated with different levels of electorally successful left- and right-wing populism, and for which the relative success or failure of political populism has been connected to different demand- and supply-side factors (Aalberg et al., 2017). The countries included in the research design also differed regarding their social structure, political system, media system, and their economic situation. Thus, identifying the effects of populist political communication in different social-cultural and -economic contexts should increase the generalizability of our findings.

Sample

This experiment is based on a diverse sample of citizens in 15 countries: Austria ($N = 537$), France ($N = 534$), Germany ($N = 411$), Greece ($N = 522$), Ireland ($N = 396$), Israel ($N = 470$), Italy ($N = 420$), the Netherlands ($N = 372$), Norway ($N = 444$), Poland ($N = 559$), Romania ($N = 650$), Spain ($N = 470$), Sweden ($N = 520$), Switzerland ($N = 521$), and the United Kingdom ($N = 445$; $N_{\text{total}} = 7,271$). Different research organizations collected the data in the first months of 2017. The research organizations were instructed to apply the same procedures regarding recruiting, sampling, presentation of the survey and data collection in each country. Quota sampling on age, education, and gender was employed in each country to achieve a varied sample that reflected each country's population as close as possible. Although these procedures do not result in nationally representative samples, we believe that the variety on relevant indicators (i.e., education) enables us to assess the persuasiveness of populist communication among different segments of the population. The final sample is diverse with regards to age ($M = 45.84$, $SD = 15.28$), education[1] ($M = 2.24$, $SD = 0.71$), political interest[2] ($M = 4.65$, $SD = 1.71$), and ideology[3] ($M = 5.06$, $SD = 2.54$); 49.8% of the participants were female[4] (for more information, see Supplementary Appendix SA).

[1]Measured on a 3-point scale, indicating having completed low, medium, and high level of education.
[2]Measured on a scale from 1 (*not interested at all*) to 7 (*very interested*).
[3]Measured on a scale from 0 (*Left*) to 10 (*Right*).
[4]Supplementary Appendix reports key background characteristics of the respondents in the various countries.

Table 1.
Overview of the Conditions

| People centrality | Antielite | |
	No	Yes
No	(1) Control	(2) Antielitist frame
Yes	(3) People centrality frame	(4) Combined frame

Experimental Design

The experimental design was identical in all 15 countries (also see Hameleers et al., 2018). We systematically varied the presence and absence of the in-group (i.e., the hard-working ordinary citizens) and the out-group (i.e., the political elite), resulting in a 2 × 2 between-subjects experiment (see Table 1). All messages dealt with the (fictional) declining purchasing power of citizens in the future. The topic and source of the message were held constant in all conditions. Participants in the (a) control condition were exposed to a factual story only, with no in-group or out-group present ($N = 1,881$); (b) the antielite frame condition blamed the "self-interested" and "unresponsive" political elites for the negative outcome (i.e., antielite frame) ($N = 1,852$); (c) the people centrality frame condition emphasized the in-group of the ordinary hard-working people in addition to the factual story ($N = 1,772$); and (d) the combined condition contained both frames ($N = 1,766$).

We extensively pretested the stimuli and questionnaire using convenience samples in two countries which were selected based on the variation of selection criteria. Based on the outcomes of two pilot studies in Germany ($N = 264$) and Greece ($N = 1,565$), we further improved the stimuli and questionnaire to increase their credibility irrespective of contextual differences between countries. The rating of stimuli credibility was similar across conditions (control: $M = 4.15$, $SD = 1.62$; antielitism: $M = 4.14$, $SD = 1.83$; people centrality: $M = 4.17$, $SD = 1.76$; combined: $M = 3.92$, $SD = 1.80$).

Procedure

All 15 experiments were conducted online. Upon giving their informed consent, participants completed a pretest consisting of demographics, moderator variables, and control variables. In a next step, we assigned participants randomly to one of the four[5] conditions and exposed them to an online news item, which was visible for at least 20 s. A randomization check indicated successful randomization revealing that the four conditions did not differ significantly with respect to age ($F_{3, 7,190} = 1.63$, $p = .08$), gender ($F_{3, 7,261} = 0.27$, $p = .87$), education ($F_{3, 7,238} = 2.03$, $p = .11$), and political interest ($F_{3, 7,266} = 0.43$, $p = .88$). The randomization check for political ideology revealed a significant effect ($F_{3, 7,370} = 2.70$, $p = .044$). This significant effect was produced by an unequal distribution of missing values for the variable political ideology across countries.

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[5]The experiment originally consisted of eight conditions the respondents were randomly allocated to (see Hameleers et al., 2018).

After applying multiple imputation,[6] no significant effect could be found for political ideology.

After stimulus exposure, participants completed a posttest survey assessing the dependent variables and manipulation checks. Upon completion, participants were debriefed and thanked. They received a financial incentive from the panel agencies—which rewarded the time spent on the survey with a marked-conform reward (about 2 euro/10 min, except for Greece, where a voluntary noncommercial opt-in panel was used).

Stimuli

We first developed the questionnaire and stimulus materials in an English mother version, which was translated by native speakers in all countries. In all countries and conditions, a news item on a fictional online news outlet called "news" served as stimulus material. The news item's text was accompanied with an image showing a wallet and a hand, which was equal across all conditions (see Supplementary Appendix SB). In all conditions, a fictional foundation called *FutureNow* was the source of the message. In the experimental conditions, we manipulated the typology of populist communication as outlined in the theoretical framework (see Table 1 for an overview of the conditions). The control condition (a) entailed a neutrally framed article on declining purchasing power, focusing on the facts of the development only without any reference to people centrality frames and without blaming the elites as responsible. The antielite frame condition (b) added the political elite as out-group, blaming them for the expected development. The people centrality condition (c) added a description of the national in-group as hard-working and as a victim of the situation. In the combined condition (d) both frames were present, thus, the self-interested elites were blamed for depriving the hard-working ordinary people (see Supplementary Appendix SB).

Measures

Based on Schulz et al. (2017), we examined populist attitudes by measuring three subdimensions: anti-elitism attitudes, support for popular sovereignty, and belief in a homogenous people.

Antielitism attitudes. The first dimension of populist attitudes—anti-elitism attitudes—was measured with four items, asking respondents to what extent they agreed with the following statements: "Politicians in government are corrupt," "Politicians make decisions that harm the interests of the ordinary people," "MPs in Parliament very quickly lose touch with ordinary people," "Politicians are not really interested in what people like me think," on a scale from 1 (*completely disagree*) to 7 (*completely agree*; $M = 5.25$, $SD = 1.42$, $\alpha = 0.87$).

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[6] We have applied the method Multivariate Imputation by Chained Equations available in the R package mice on three variables of the dataset: (a) country, (b) government approval, and (c) political ideology. the first variable had no missing values, the second had six missing values, and the third variable had 775 missing values and we have used the five imputations (the default number of imputations in mice).

Belief in a homogenous people. The second dependent variable—belief in a homogeneous people—was measured relying on three items, asking respondents to what extent they agreed with the following statements: "Ordinary people are of good and honest character," "Ordinary people all pull together," "Although the [country members, e.g., British] are very different from each other, when it comes down to it, they all think the same," "Ordinary people share the same values and interests" on a 7-point scale, running from 1 (*completely disagree*) to 7 (*completely agree*; $M = 4.33$, $SD = 1.44$, $\alpha = 0.86$).

Support for popular sovereignty. Support for popular sovereignty was measured using three items. Respondents were asked to what extent they agreed, on a scale from 1 to 7, with the following three statements: "The people should have the final say on the most important political issues by voting on them directly in referendums," "The people should be asked whenever important decisions are taken," and "The politicians in Parliament need to follow the will of the people" ($M = 5.47$, $SD = 1.45$, $\alpha = 0.87$).

Political ideology. Political ideology was assessed before stimulus exposure with one item: "In politics, people sometimes talk of 'left' and 'right'. Where would you place yourself on this scale, where 0 means left and 10 means right?" ($M = 5.06$, $SD = 2.54$).

Ideological extremity. A dummy variable was computed to assess ideological extremity. The two lowest (0–1) and the two highest (9–10) points of the political ideology self-placement scale were used as a proxy for ideological extremity (coded as 1) as opposed to all other scale points (coded as 0). Those values were chosen as they indicate a deviation of 1.5 *SD*s from the mean.

Manipulation checks. After being exposed to the stimulus material and the post-test measures, participants were subject to five manipulation checks. F-tests indicate that the conditions which manipulated people centrality significantly differed from the other conditions with regard to the extent the story described (a) the people of the country as hardworking, $F(1, 7139) = 645.14$, p = .000, (b) a situation in which the national citizens will be affected by the economic developments described $F(1, 7160) = 53.39$, p = .000, and (c) a threat to the well-being of the people $F(1, 7156) = 81.62$, p = .000. In addition, the antielitist conditions differed significantly from the other conditions in the extent to which they ascribe responsibility for the purchasing power to politicians $F(1, 7156) = 81.62$, p = .000. Overall, these findings show that the manipulations were successful.

Data Analysis

The dataset has a hierarchical structure, as it consists of samples in 15 different countries. Thus, observations are nested within countries. To test our hypotheses in all country samples simultaneously and to control for the dependency of the observations, we ran multilevel models using the *lme4* package for *R* (Bates, Maechler, Bolker, & Walker, 2015). Specifically, we estimated a random intercept model, in which slopes were fixed and intercepts were allowed to vary. This allows us to test the impact of explanatory variables at the level of the individual respondent as well

as at the country-level on the response variable measured at the lowest level (Hox, Maas, & Brinkhuis, 2010). We discuss findings for individual countries and country-clusters in more detail in Supplementary Appendix SE.

Before testing our hypotheses, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis to test the factor structure of the three dimensions of populist attitudes (see Supplementary Appendix Table SA2 for factor loadings). Based on Schulz et al. (2017), we modeled the three underlying dimensions antielitist attitudes, belief in a homogenous people, and support for popular sovereignty as first-order factors and populist attitudes as second-order factor, which indicated a good model fit (χ^2 = 1,150.232, df = 41, p < .001; CFI (Comparative Fit Index) = 0.97; TLI (Tucker Lewis Index) = 0.97, RMSEA (Root Mean Square Error of Approximation) = 0.06, 90% CI [0.058, 0.064]). The hierarchical multidimensional model of populist attitudes also revealed a significant better fit than a 1D model of populist attitudes ($\Delta\chi^2$ = 16,333, df = 3, p < .001). We also tested measurement invariance of the three dimensions across countries (see Supplementary Appendix Table SA3). Different robustness checks confirmed the validity of the dimensional structure used throughout this article (see Supplementary Appendix SD). The scale performs equally well in all countries.

Results

The Effects of Populist Identity Frames

First, we tested the effect of populist messages that blame the elites for negative outcomes (i.e., anti-elite frame) on anti-elitism attitudes (H1). Table 2 (Model I) shows that anti-elite frames significantly activated congruent anti-elitism populist attitudes (b = 0.06, SE = 0.03, p < .05), which provides support for our first hypothesis. However, anti-elite frames had no significant effect on the dimensions of belief in a homogenous people (Model III) and preference for popular sovereignty (Model V).

Furthermore, we tested the impact of the people centrality frames on individuals' perception of a homogeneous people (H2a) and preference for popular sovereignty (H2b; see Table 2). We found that people centrality had a significant, positive effect on belief in a homogenous people (b = 0.07, SE = 0.03, p < .05, Model III) as well as on preference for popular sovereignty (b = 0.09, SE = 0.03, p < .01, Model V). H2 is therefore supported. In addition to those effects, we found that people centrality frames activated anti-elitism attitudes (b = 0.09, SE = 0.03, p < .01, Model I). Finally, we found no significant effects of the combined anti-elite and people centrality frame on anti-elitism attitudes (b = .03, SE = 0.06, p = n.s., Model II), perception of a homogeneous people (b = 0.10, SE = 0.07, p = n.s., Model IV), and preference for popular sovereignty (b = −0.02, SE = 0.07, Model VI). These findings indicate that H3 is not supported by the data.

The Impact of Education and Ideological Extremity

In the next steps, we tested whether individual-level moderators affected the effects of populist frames on populist attitudes (H4). We added the interaction effect of the populist frames and individuals' formal education in the model using two dummy variables, moderate education (vs. low education) and high education (vs. low education; see Table 3). To ensure that the effects are not contingent on other individual-level variables, we controlled for age, gender, and political ideology in all models. Model I shows

Table 2.
Multilevel Model of Impact of People Centrality and Antielitism on Populist Attitudes

	Antielitism		Belief in a homogeneous people		Preference for popular sovereignty	
	(Model I)	(Model II)	(Model III)	(Model IV)	(Model V)	(Model VI)
Intercept	5.15 (0.16)****	5.16 (0.16)****	4.27 (0.08)****	4.29 (0.09)****	5.38 (0.12)****	5.38 (0.12)****
Level 1 fixed effects						
People centrality frame	0.09 (0.03)***	0.08* (0.04)	0.07** (0.03)	0.02 (0.05)	0.09*** (0.03)	0.10 (0.05)**
Antielite frame	0.06 (0.03)**	0.05 (0.04)	0.06* (0.03)	0.01 (0.05)	0.04 (0.03)	0.05 (0.05)
Antielite Frame × people centrality frame		0.03 (0.06)		0.10 (0.07)		−0.02 (0.06)
Random effects						
Country-level variance (intercept)	0.39	0.39	0.09	0.09	0.22	0.22
Residual variance	1.63	1.63	1.98	1.98	1.90	1.90
Groups/observations	15/7,269	15/7,269	15/7,248	15/7,248	15/7,254	15/7,254
Log likelihood	−12,134.36	−12,136.13	−12,790.47	−12,791.11	−12,653.73	−12,655.52

*$p < .10$, **$p < .05$, ***$p < .01$, and ****$p < .001$.

Table 3.
Multilevel Model Testing the Moderating Impact of Education

	Antielitism		Belief in a homogeneous people		Preference for popular sovereignty	
	(Model I)	(Model II)	(Model III)	(Model IV)	(Model V)	(Model VI)
Intercept	4.76 (0.19)****	4.74 (0.19)****	3.98 (0.12)****	3.98 (0.13)****	5.10 (0.16)****	5.07 (0.17)****
Fixed effects						
People centrality frame	0.16 (0.08)*	0.20 (0.11)*	0.16 (0.09)*	0.16 (0.12)	0.10 (0.09)	0.16 (0.12)
Antielite frame	0.21 (0.08)**	0.25 (0.11)**	0.10 (0.09)**	0.10 (0.12)	0.15 (0.09)*	0.21 (0.12)*
Antielite frame × people centrality frame		−0.08 (0.16)		−0.01 (0.18)		−0.12 (0.18)
High education	−0.21 (0.08)**	−0.20 (0.09)**	−0.49 (0.09)****	−0.47 (0.10)****	−0.36 (0.09)****	−0.36 (0.10)****
Moderate education	0.04 (0.08)	0.07 (0.09)	−0.25 (0.09)***	−0.23 (0.10)**	−0.07 (0.09)	−0.05 (0.10)
Age	0.01 (0.00)****	0.01 (0.00)****	0.005 (0.00)****	0.005 (0.00)****	0.01 (0.00)****	0.01 (0.00)****
Gender	0.04 (0.03)	0.04 (0.03)	−0.08 (0.03)**	−0.08 (0.03)**	0.03 (0.03)	0.03 (0.03)
Ideology	0.02 (0.01)****	0.02 (0.01)****	0.08 (0.01)****	0.08 (0.01)****	0.02 (0.01)***	0.02 (0.01)***
People centrality frame × moderate education	−0.08 (0.09)	−0.16 (0.13)*	−0.07 (0.10)	−0.12 (0.14)	0.03 (0.10)	−0.01 (0.14)
Antielite frame × moderate education	−0.17 (0.09)*	−0.24 (0.13)*	0.00 (0.10)	−0.04 (0.14)	−0.12 (0.10)	−0.16 (0.14)
People centrality frame × high education	−0.09 (0.10)	−0.10 (0.13)*	−0.12 (0.10)	−0.16 (0.14)	−0.06 (0.10)	−0.07 (0.15)
Antielite frame × high education	−0.22 (0.10)**	−0.23 (0.13)*	−0.10 (0.10)	−0.14 (0.14)	−0.19 (0.10)*	−0.20 (0.14)
Antielite frame × people centrality frame × moderate education		0.03 (0.19)		0.08 (0.21)		0.04 (0.21)
Antielite frame × people centrality frame × high education		0.14 (0.19)		0.09 (0.20)		0.08 (0.20)
Random effects						
Country-level variance	0.41 (0.64)	0.41 (0.64)	0.08 (0.29)	0.08 (0.28)	0.24 (0.49)	0.24 (0.49)
Residual variance	1.59 (1.26)	1.59 (1.26)	1.84 (1.36)	1.84 (1.36)	1.86 (1.37)	1.86 (1.37)
Groups/observations	15/6,398	15/6,398	15/6,395	15/6,395	15/6,399	15/6,399
Log likelihood	−10,621.86	−10,625.11	−11,068.97	−11,071.90	−11,125.36	−11,128.21

*$p < .10$, **$p < .05$, ***$p < .01$, and ****$p < .001$.

Table 4.
Multilevel Model Testing the Moderating Impact of Ideological Extremity

	Antielitism		Belief in a homogeneous people		Preference for popular sovereignty	
	(Model I)	(Model II)	(Model III)	(Model IV)	(Model V)	(Model VI)
Constant	4.94 (0.18)****	4.93 (0.18)****	4.38 (0.11)****	4.39 (0.11)****	5.15 (0.15)****	5.13 (0.15)****
Fixed effects						
People centrality frame	0.09 (0.03)***	0.10 (0.05)**	0.08 (0.04)**	0.05 (0.05)	0.12 (0.04)***	0.16 (0.05)***
Antielite frame	0.01 (0.03)	0.02 (0.05)	0.05 (0.04)	0.03 (0.05)	0.02 (0.04)	0.06 (0.05)
Antielite frame × people centrality frame		−0.03 (0.07)		0.05 (0.08)		−0.09 (0.08)
Age	0.01 (0.00)****	0.01 (0.00)****	0.01 (0.00)****	0.01 (0.00)****	0.01 (0.00)****	0.01 (0.00)****
Gender	0.03 (0.03)	0.03 (0.03)	−0.11 (0.03)***	−0.11 (0.03)***	0.03 (0.03)	0.03 (0.03)
High education	−0.34 (0.05)****	−0.34 (0.05)****	−0.59 (0.05)****	−0.59 (0.05)****	−0.46 (0.05)****	−0.46 (0.05)****
Moderate education	−0.08 (0.05)	−0.08 (0.05)	−0.27 (0.05)****	−0.26 (0.05)****	−0.09 (0.05)*	−0.10 (0.05)*
Ideological extremity	0.12 (0.07)	0.15 (0.08)*	0.09 (0.08)	0.14 (0.09)	0.48 (0.08)****	0.50 (0.09)****
People centrality frame × ideological extremity	−0.00 (0.08)	−0.08 (0.12)	0.08 (0.09)	−0.01 (0.13)	−0.16 (0.09)*	−0.21 (0.13)*
Antielite frame × ideological extremity	0.17 (0.08)**	0.10 (0.12)	0.03 (0.09)	−0.06 (0.12)	0.01 (0.09)	−0.05 (0.12)
Antielite frame × people centrality frame × ideological extremity		0.15 (0.16)		0.18 (0.18)		0.12 (0.18)
Random effects						
Country-level variance	0.40 (0.63)	0.40 (0.63)	0.08 (0.29)	0.08 (0.29)	0.23 (0.48)	0.23 (0.48)
Residual variance	1.59 (1.26)	1.59 (1.26)	1.87 (1.37)	1.87 (1.37)	1.84 (1.36)	1.84 (1.36)
Groups/observations	15/6,398	15/6,398	15/6,395	15/6,395	15/6,399	15/6,399
Log likelihood	−10,611.24	−10,613.57	−11,122.82	−11,124.15	−11,084.80	−11,086.70

*p < .10, **p < .05, ***p < .01, and ****p < .001.

that the effect of the anti–elite frame on anti-elitism attitudes is weaker for individuals with high formal education compared with those with low formal education ($b = -0.22$, $SE = 0.10$, $p < .05$).[7] All other effects did not reach the conventional level of significance. Thus, H4 can only partially be supported.

Next, we tested whether ideological extremity moderated the effects of the populist frames on populist attitudes. Table 4 (Model I) shows that there is a significant interaction effect of the anti–elite frame and ideological extremity on anti-elitism attitudes ($b = 0.17$, $SE = 0.08$, $p < .05$) indicating that the effect of the antielite frame on antielitism attitudes is *stronger* for those individuals with a more extreme political ideology. No other interaction effects of ideological extremity with the populist frames were found. Thus, H5 can only be supported for the anti–elite frame.

Additional Analyses

We finally investigated whether exposure to specific frame components also activate populist attitudes on an aggregate level. To that aim, we ran all analyses with the aggregated populist attitude scale (all items merged into one scale) (see Supplementary Appendix Table SA4). Supplementary Appendix Table SA4 (Model I) shows that both anti–elite frames ($b = 0.05$, $SE = 0.02$, $p < .05$) and people centrality frames ($b = 0.09$, $SE = 0.02$, $p < .05$) significantly activated aggregated populist attitudes. However, the results show no significant interaction effect between the anti–elite frames and the people centrality frames ($b = 0.04$, $SE = 0.05$, $p =$ n.s.; Supplementary Appendix Table SA4, Model II).

We also tested whether individual-level moderators affected the effects of populist frames on aggregated populist attitudes. Supplementary Appendix Table SA4 (Model III) shows that the effect of the anti–elite frame on aggregated populist attitudes is weaker for individuals with high formal education compared with those with low formal education ($b = -0.17$, $SE = 0.08$, $p < .05$). Results show no other interaction effects with education (Supplementary Appendix Table SA4, Models III and IV). With regard to ideological extremity, we found no significant interaction effects on aggregated populist attitudes (see Supplementary Appendix Table SA4, Models V and VI).

Finally, the country-specific results (discussed in detail in Supplementary Appendix SE) reveal that the aggregate results reported in this article are reflected in the majority of countries, although the effects are not significant in some country clusters. Re-running the analyses for all separate country samples, the results either show significant positive effects of the populist frames on the three dimensions of populist attitudes that are in line with the aggregated results, or nonsignificant effects, which can be explained by the lower statistical power in the country samples. There are no significant negative effects of the populist frames on populist attitudes with one exception: In Italy, the anti–elite frame resulted in lower preference for popular sovereignty ($b = -0.28$, $SE = 0.14$, $p = .041$.). Overall, the patterns of the aggregate analyses are mirrored in most individual countries.

Discussion

In an extensive experimental study involving 15 countries, we found that populist identity frames activate message-congruent populist attitudes. Surprisingly, people-

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[7]The interaction effect is also significant when the covariates (gender, age, and political ideology) are not in the model.

centrality frames did also activate anti-elitism attitudes although these traits were not explicitly expressed in those frames. This is in line with the premises of schemata theory (e.g., Richey, 2012). An important implication of our findings is thus that only referring to the "empty" signifier or minimal definition of populism, people centrism (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007), is enough to activate populist attitudes. As referring to the centrality of the ordinary people and their homogenous will has become mainstream in politics, this finding is potentially worrisome. Specifically, referring to the centrality of the ordinary people can foster people's anti-establishment perspectives, and thus increase political cynicism and distrust.

In addition to the effects of populist frames on the subdimensions, we also tested whether these frames activate populist attitudes on an aggregate level. We found that both anti-elite frames and people centrality frames activated aggregated populist attitudes independently of each other, while the combination of the two frames did not exert stronger effects than the independent frames. Thus, either referring to the people or attacking the elites is sufficient to activate populist attitudes in general. These results are quite worrisome as they suggest that fragmented populist message elements are powerful enough to activate not only specific subdimensions of populist attitudes, but also populist attitudes in general.

Individuals with lower education were more susceptible to anti-elite messages. Highly educated individuals are more likely to perceive themselves as belonging to the establishment themselves, and as a consequence, anti-elitism frames may be a threat to their very own identity. We also found that the effect of the anti-elitism frames on aggregated populist attitudes was stronger for lower compared with higher educated individuals. Thus, education seems to "protect" people from the influence of anti-elitism frames. This is in line with extant research that has identified education as an important demand-side factor explaining the persuasiveness of populist communication (e.g., Schmuck & Matthes, 2017). Furthermore, our findings reveal that anti-elite messages have stronger effects on anti-elitism attitudes among those individuals on the fringes of the political spectrum. We can therefore conclude that anti-elite populist ideas work for the left and right wing, although the underlying processes may differ when it comes to the politically *extreme* left and right.

The people centrality and the anti-elitist frame enhanced populist attitudes independent of each other. This suggests that each frame has distinct effects, mainly because they tap theoretically separate dimensions of populist attitudes (e.g., Schulz et al., 2017). In line with a growing body of research on the multidimensionality of populist attitudes (e.g., Hameleers, Bos, & de Vreese, 2017; Schulz et al., 2017), it is therefore important to distinguish between different message elements that can activate different components of populist perceptions, depending on the attitudinal congruence of the message. As this study focused on the effects of extensive in- and out-group frames, future research could further disentangle the effects of different populist claims within these frames on the dimensions of populist attitudes. In addition, this study conceptualized frames as the independent variable, which has been called "framing in communication" (see Scheufele & Tewksbury 2007). Future studies should also look at "frames in mind," understanding audience frames as the dependent variable.

It needs to be noted that our findings represent aggregate results across all 15 countries. Separate country-specific analyses mirrored the aggregate results, although the effect of antielite populist communication on preferences for popular sovereignty was

negative and significant in Italy. This may be explained by the presence and rapid decline of antielite sentiments and calls on sovereignty in the public sphere and political arena (i.e., the five-star movement [M5S]). The M5S has been successful, but failed to deliver the promises to restore popular sovereignty. For this reason, anti-elite messages (as conveyed by M5S) may be less credible interpretations in Italy compared with some other countries. We leave it up to future empirical research to provide more detailed and comprehensive finding of the factors driving different effects in different settings. Hence, we recommend future research to more thoroughly explain why the effects of populist identity frames are different across national settings—for example, based on real-life economic or social factors.

In terms of real-life implications, our findings show that mere exposure to populist messages may activate individual-level support for populist ideas. As previous research indicated that populist attitudes correlate strongly with populist vote intentions (e.g., Akkerman et al., 2014), the activation of populist attitudes may increase support for populist parties. Yet, our experiment reports the short-term effects of exposure to one single message, and may therefore not directly resemble real-life news exposure. However, we do believe that our experiment offers insights into the mechanisms by which populist communication can influence citizens. If news consumers are repeatedly exposed to (online) populist messages that frame a divide between the people and the elites, these perceptions may become chronically accessible as interpretations.

These insights need to be weighted with a number of limitations. From a theoretical point of view, we only investigated the effect of out-group frames involving the elite, and neglected out-group frames involving horizontal out-groups, which might have different effects on the dimensions of populist attitudes. Yet, although the exclusion of these out-groups may be relevant to consider, it has mostly been regarded as a host ideology that can supplement the ideational core of populism (Mudde, 2007). On the methodological side, it needs to be noted that we only studied the impact of one specific populist topic and used a single-message design which limits the generalizability of our findings to populist news as a whole. By the same token, since we used the same news outlet, *News*, in all countries, we are unable to take source effects into account. Effects of populist messages may vary depending the credibility of the source, especially when it comes to terms such as "mainstream media" or "fake news." Related, populist and anti-elitist frames communicated by a spokesperson of a foundation may not be credible for all citizens. However, in an era of posttruth politics and the abundance of "alternative" media sources that claim to be legitimate news sources—people can actually be exposed to populist frames spread by sources that are said to be legitimate spokespersons of organizations.

Here, it also needs to be stressed that the effect sizes of the experiment were relatively modest—or even nonsignificant in some countries. However, the fact that mere exposure to one single message can activate populist attitudes can be extrapolated to real-life political consequences. More specifically, if citizens select and attend to populist communication on a regular basis, the cumulative exposure moments may add up to the longer term activation of populist attitudes. These populist attitudes may become highly accessible as mental schemata when citizens need to arrive at political decisions. Notwithstanding these limitations, our study demonstrates that populist messages do exert considerable effects on citizens' attitudes, and they do so across countries. We observed the strongest (i.e., unmoderated) effects for people-centrality frames underling

the importance of the notion of hard-working ordinary people in populist discourse. Yet, overall, the effects depend on the framing of the message, the predispositions of the electorate as well as contextual characteristics of countries.

Supplementary Data

Supplementary Data are available at *IJPOR* online.

Funding

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