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Conceptualizing the Effects and Political Consequences of Populist Communication from a Social Identity Perspective

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8 The Persuasiveness of Populist Communication

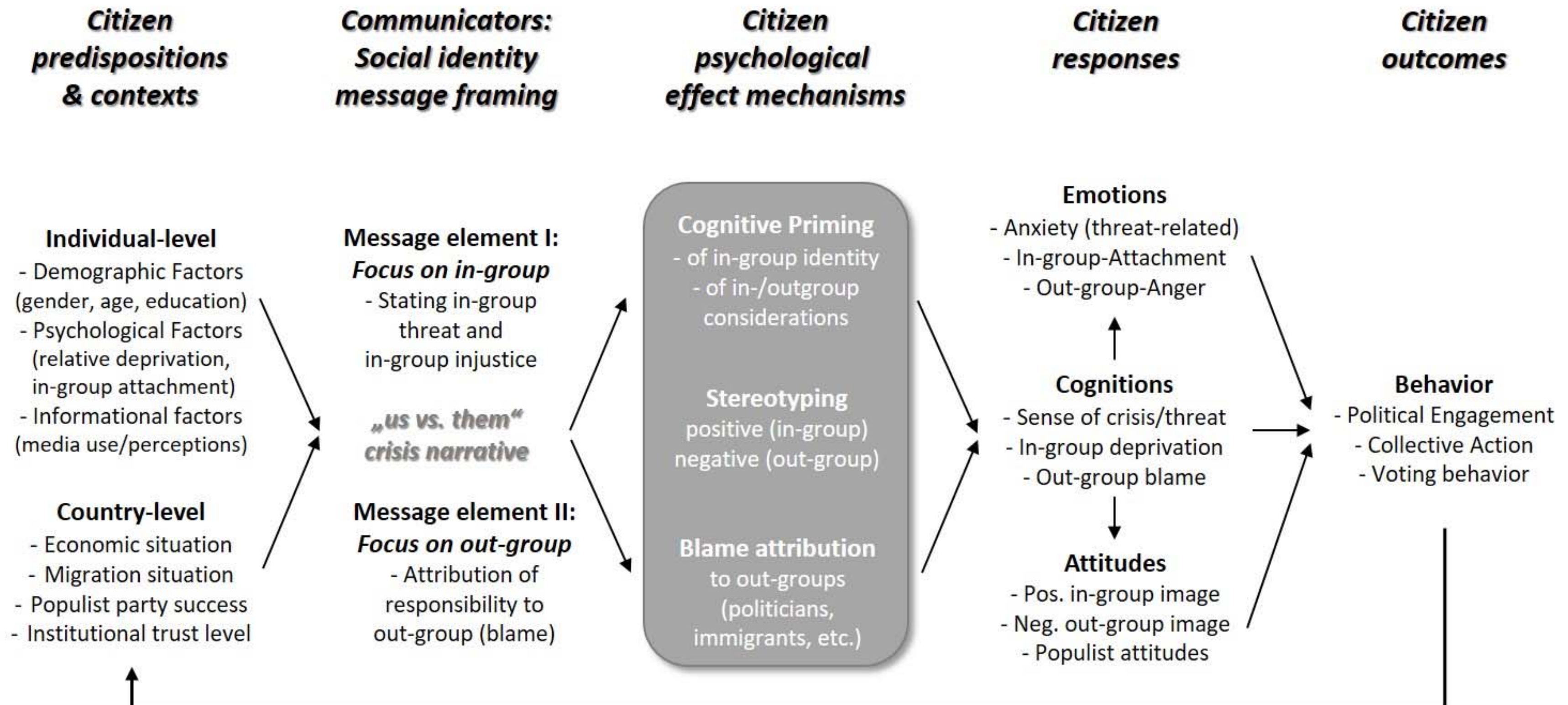
Conceptualizing the Effects and Political Consequences of Populist Communication from a Social Identity Perspective

Michael Hameleers, Carsten Reinemann, Desiree Schmuck, and Nayla Fawzi

Introduction

In the midst of the alleged global rise of populist ideas in politics, media, and society, a growing body of literature has argued that populist communication has important effects on citizens' opinions, emotions, and behaviors (e.g., Bos, Van Der Brug, & De Vreese, 2013; Hameleers, Bos, & de Vreese, 2017a; Müller et al., 2017; Schmuck & Matthes, 2017; Wirz, 2018). Some scholars even argue that the media's attention to populist politicians, and the actual use of populist ideas by the media, can be regarded as one of the central *causes* of populism's electoral success (e.g., Krämer, 2014; Mazzoleni, Stewart, & Horsfield, 2003). For this reason, it is no wonder that the field of populist communication research has gained in prominence and scope (e.g., Aalberg, Esser, Reinemann, Strömbäck, & de Vreese, 2017). Despite the growing interest by stakeholders and scholars, the psychological underpinnings of populist communication's effects remain under-theorized and under-studied, which has important ramifications for future empirical work that aims to dissect the persuasive elements of populist communication. Against this backdrop, this chapter aims to provide a comprehensive overview of (1) important individual and context-level factors that determine the audience's resistance or persuasion to populist communication; (2) the mechanisms by which populist communication affects receivers; (3) citizens' cognitive, attitudinal, emotional, and behavioral responses to populist political communication, and (4) long-term political consequences of exposure to populist communication. An overview of the relevant elements that we will discuss in detail below, can be found in Figure 8.1.

Figure 8.1 A model of individual effect processes in populist political communication



Citizens Predispositions and Contexts

In order to understand the effects of populist communication, it is crucial to assess the congruence of populist messages, the source, and the sensitivity of populist messages to contextual demand-side factors of the electorate. Recent empirical research has explored the effects of populist communication among a varied sample of citizens. Matthes and Schmuck (2017), for example, found that populist communication is most persuasive for citizens with lower levels of education. Bos et al. (2013) found that populist messages are particularly effective for the politically cynical. The empirical results of Hameleers & Schmuck (2017) further indicated that support of the source plays a pivotal role in the acceptance of populist messages: only citizens who feel close to or support the source, are positively affected by populist communication. Taken together, these studies clearly demonstrate that populist communication is most persuasive for a specific group of citizens for whom the message is congruent with their prior convictions, whereas it may even backfire among other citizens with incongruent views and may prime their already negative evaluations of populist viewpoints. Polarization may thus be fueled as a consequence of exposure to populist messages. Only when these priors are taken into account, can we start to predict the effects of populist communication.

Moreover, in the multifaceted nature of populist communication throughout the globe, there may be a plethora of contextual factors that differ between countries and that might affect individual susceptibility to persuasion by populist messages. It is therefore crucial to assess the extent to which populist communication resonates with both individual-level factors, and demand and supply-side opportunity structures which are salient among the electorate and within their environment (also see Aalberg et al., 2017). Therefore, in this section, we focus on three core

levels of resonance: (1) demographic factors; (2) psychological factors; and (3) country-level opportunity structures.

Individual Level: Demographic Factors

Many scholars have argued that populist discourse appeals to a group of citizens with a specific demographic profile (Kriesi et al., 2006; Mazzoleni, 2008). Specifically, populist voters have largely been described as a group of *lower educated citizens* (e.g., van Hauwaert & van Kessel, 2018). In addition, people who support populist ideas have been regarded as *younger* (e.g., Arzheimer & Carter, 2006; Minkenberg & Pytlas, 2012) and predominately *male* voters (Immerzeel, Coffé & van der Lippe, 2015; Ivarsflaten & Harteveldt, 2016). Combining various demographic characteristics, Kriesi et al. (2006) have conceptualized the populist electorate as the so-called “losers of modernization”. These “losers” are typically defined as a vulnerable group of citizens who are poorly educated, are of a lower social class, and have a lower income.

Due to external modernization and globalization processes, these citizens are argued to have lost out when compared to other groups, as they are no longer able to keep up (e.g., Kübler & Kriesi, 2017; Rodrik, 2018). Hence, they are perceived as victims of processes that are forced upon them from above. This is where the appeal of populism comes in. Populism introduces causes of modernization that threaten the ordinary people: the failing elites have caused the people’s deprivation and should therefore be punished. Populism is thus expected to be persuasive for those disadvantaged by modernization because it voices these “vulnerable” people’s concerns that they are being deprived by external forces propagated by the corrupt elites. This, for example, applies to countries in eastern Europe where the rapid dismantling of the welfare state resulted in high levels of inequality (e.g., Bustikova & Kitschelt, 2009). Additionally, right-wing populism is appealing to victims of modernization by promising to “undo” or avoid modern developments such

as cross-border migration or gender role flexibility (Minkenberg, 2003). On the left, the perceived gap between the poor and extreme rich offers breeding ground for the construction of populist divides.

Yet, the main body of empirical research predominately points to the key role of *education* (Ivarsflaten, 2005; Lucassen & Lubbers, 2012; Matthes & Schmuck, 2017; Norris, 2005; Schmuck & Matthes, 2015, 2017). Specifically, lower educated citizens are often most susceptible to the effects of populist messages, although the relative importance of this factor may differ between countries (e.g., Aalberg et al., 2017). There may be three key reasons that explain the role of education. First, the simplified discourse of populism that reduces social problems into black and white issues, may appeal most to citizens who might struggle with understanding more complex issues. The technocratic, often nuanced, coverage of information by mainstream communication may be less attractive than simplified populist messages, especially to those who do not follow general political news as closely as others. As a consequence, less knowledge of an issue will decrease the ability to process information as persuasion research has shown (Biek, Wood, & Chaiken, 1996; Schemer, 2012). Second, populist communication aims to speak to ordinary people as part of these people, using the words of the very people they seek to appeal to. Typically, working-class citizens are addressed with such discourse: those citizens who work hard but perceive they receive only little in return for their labor. These “ordinary people” referred to in populist communication, may therefore most closely resemble citizens at lower levels of education. Third, lower educated citizens may actually perceive themselves as being victimized by processes beyond their control, and may feel most fearful of threats that come from outside, such as the influx of migrants on the labor market. Hence, for these lower educated citizens, the threats cultivated by

populist communication may feel most “real” (Wagner & Zick, 1995; see also Rooduijn & Burgoon, 2018).

Individual Level: Psychological Factors

Although education may play an important role in understanding susceptibility to persuasion through populist messages, the actual psychological process underlying the fears, hopes, and anger of the populist electorate may be central to all demographic groups defined as vulnerable. Most saliently, a recent body of research has identified perceptions of *relative deprivation* as an important driver of populist sentiments (Elchardus & Spruyt, 2016; Spruyt, Keppens, & van Droogenbroeck et al., 2016; Gest, Reny, & Mayer 2018). Perceptions of relative deprivation can be defined as citizens’ belief that their in-group of ordinary people is relatively worse off than other groups in society. Such sentiments, again, relate to the social identification processes of inclusion and exclusion: the in-group of deprived people perceive they have lost out more than out-groups. This ties in with populist discourse. The culpable elites are attributed blame for only taking care of their own interests and neglecting the will of the ordinary people they should represent. Instead of responding to the will of their “own” citizens - the silenced majority of hard-working citizens - they prioritize the needs of others, such as the very wealthy or migrants. Populism thus responds to sentiments of relative deprivation: by assigning blame to the culpable out-groups that deprive the people, populist communication resonates with the losses experienced by the people (e.g., Kriesi et al., 2006; Kübler & Kriesi, 2017; Rodrik, 2018).

The second crucial factor that may need to be taken into account in populism research, is the actual *in-group attachment* people experience. Populist discourse constructs an in-group of the ordinary people opposed to various national and/or transnational “culprit” elites or societal out-groups (e.g., Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). In order for this discourse to stick, receivers of

populist messages should experience a sense of belonging to a deprived in-group of ordinary people in the first place. Hence, if people feel distanced form the ordinary people, why should populist messages that blame the elites for the *ordinary* people's problem, matter to them? The decisive mechanism of in-group attachment or partisanship has already been demonstrated in research on the effects of blame attribution (e.g., Hobolt & Tilley, 2014; Tilley & Hobolt, 2011), and has been labelled as a perceptual screen. This means that people assign responsibility in a biased way: the in-group is absolved of blame and attributed for successes, whereas the out-group is attributed blame and not credited for positive outcomes. Recent research on populist communication shows similar results: attachment to the ordinary people's in-group plays a role in the acceptance of populist blame attributions so that people accept blame frames when they do not feel close to the out-group attributed blame, and reject blame attributed to their in-group (Hameleers et al., 2017a). This also means that the stronger people's attachment to the ordinary people as an in-group, the stronger the perceived threat posed by the elites and societal out-groups. This is in line with empirical findings demonstrating that populist vote intentions of those with a stronger attachment to national identity and a weaker attachment to Europe (the culpable out-group), are affected most by populist blame attributions (Hameleers et al., 2017a).

The mechanisms of deprivation and in-group attachment share a key underlying principle: the attitudinal congruence of the populist messages is a key factor that needs to be taken into account. In other words, populist messages that resonate with people's attachment to a deprived in-group and perceived distance to culpable elites or out-groups, are most likely to be persuasive. Attitudinal congruence may also play a key role in the actual selection or avoidance of populist messages. In line with this, empirical research has demonstrated that citizens with stronger perceptions of relative deprivation are most likely to select populist messages (Hameleers, Bos & de

Vreese, 2017b). Moreover, the actual effects of these selected messages are strongest for people who perceive the message as congruent with their prior beliefs.

Individual Level: Informational Factors (Media Use and Perception)

In conceptualizing the media-populism relationship, some literature points to the specific media diets of citizens with populist perceptions (e.g., Mazzoleni, 2008). It has, for example, been argued that citizens with populist attitudes are more likely to consume tabloid and entertainment media, whereas they are more likely to avoid hard news and broadsheet media (Hameleers et al., 2017b). In addition, populist attitudes also foster more negative attitudes towards mainstream media (Fawzi, 2018). These media preferences can be explained based on the *resonance* of the core values of tabloid and entertainment media with populist viewpoints. Most centrally, tabloid outlets are assumed to give voice to the ordinary man on the street, circumventing elitist expert sources in news reporting (Hameleers et al., 2017b; Mazzoleni et al., 2003; Krämer, 2014). Associated with this, the style of these media outlets is assumed to revolve around conflict, negativity, dramatization, and emotionalization. This is congruent with populist communication styles that focus on ordinary people whilst circumventing elites (e.g., Krämer, 2014). Tabloid media should mirror the core values of people with populist attitudes.

The specific media diet of citizens with populist attitudes may thus be explained in the light of cognitive consistency and motivated reasoning (Festinger, 1957; Taber & Lodge, 2006). Citizens select media content and outlets that reassure their prior-held beliefs. As populism and tabloid/entertainment media align in their core values, it is important to take the media diet of citizens into account when attempting to understand the effects of populist communication on the electorate. The key expectation is that self-selected congruent populist media has the strongest effects on attitudes, emotions, and behaviors. In the longer term, people's prior populist perceptions may

motivate the selection of more congruent populist content, with the consequence of polarization or populist filter bubbles (e.g., Hameleers, Bos, & de Vreese, 2018a). But how does the persuasiveness of populist messages depend on the country where the message is selected and processed?

Country-Level Opportunity Structures

From a theoretical perspective, it has been argued that external supply-side structures that differ between countries, can have an impact on the effects of populist communication (Stanyer, Salgado & Strömbäck, 2017). This ties in with extant literature that has defined populism as flexible, adjusting its specific content to the crisis situation it attaches itself to (e.g., Mazzoleni et al., 2003). The actual persuasiveness of populist communication may therefore not only be contingent upon individual-level psychological or demographic factors. Variations in the supply-side opportunity structures may also play a key role in the appeal of populist communication (Esser at al., 2017; Stanyer et al., 2017; Hameleers et al., 2018b).

Therefore, it is important to assess the resonance of populist communication with the political, economic, and socio-cultural context in different countries. Several studies point to the fact that there are important differences between European countries based on their historical development, for example, between post-Communist and western European societies (e.g., Bustikova & Kitschelt, 2009; Minkenberg, 2017). Nevertheless, we see at least four key contextual factors central to the resonance of populist communication with real-life opportunity structures: (1) the perseverance of crisis situations on an economic level, (2) the salience of the issue of migration and/or minorities, (3) the success of left-wing and right-wing populist parties (potentially a reinforcing spiral being both cause and consequence), and (4) the levels of trust in institutions. Each of these factors will be outlined in the sections that follow.

First, it can be argued that populist communication – constructing an in-group of deprived people opposed to the corrupt elites – is most effective when there is a problem situation the elites can be blamed for. In other words, in order to instill a sense of threat on the in-group of ordinary people, the "crisis" of the ordinary people should relate to a "real" situation that can be interpreted as being caused by the enemies of the ordinary people. Populist discourse would be less convincing if the economic situation of a country were to be, in actual fact, strengthening (e.g., Inglehart & Norris, 2016; Kübler & Kriesi, 2017; Rodrik, 2018; but also see Roodujin & Burgoon, 2018).

Citizens living in countries that have suffered severe consequences from the economic recession, for example austerity measures or rising levels of unemployment, may experience the populist message as congruent with their prior attitudes. They are facing a decline in their welfare, and they suffer from consequences of phenomena beyond their control. Hence, in the light of the discussed theories of social identity and individuals' intrinsic desire to maintain consistency and positive self-esteem, situations of economic crisis may stimulate the attributions of blame to out-groups. In order to maintain their positive self-concept of a blameless ordinary citizen, people may scapegoat the elites for causing the decline in their economic situation. Populist communication that shifts blame for economic issues to the elites and extreme rich groups in society in particular, may have the strongest effects in countries that have witnessed the most severe consequences of the economic recession (e.g., Inglehart & Norris, 2016; Kübler & Kriesi, 2017; Rodrik, 2018; Roodujin & Burgoon, 2018).

Second, the salience of the immigration issue resonates strongly with right-wing populist communication that constructs immigrants and refugees as a threat to the prosperity and/or cultural purity of the native people. Populist messages that blame refugees for depriving the people may be less realistic in countries that have not received a lot of refugees. Although populism taps into

perceived threats and fears, the cultivation of these threats may resonate less when out-groups are less relevant. Such messages do, however, relate strongly to the situation in countries with rising levels of immigration. In these countries, the perceived influx of refugees may be seen as a real threat to the well-being of the native people. Populist messages may vocalize this threat by highlighting that migrants are responsible for taking the jobs, and further poses a threat on the welfare state privileges and cultural superiority of the native people. In other words, perceptions of relative deprivation should be cultivated more in countries with higher numbers of migrants, refugees, and ethnic/religious minorities. Populist communication should consequentially be more effective as it resonates with this attitudinal base (e.g., Roodujin & Burgoon, 2018).

As a third salient factor, the familiarity of populist discourse may play a role in the persuasiveness of populist communication. Voters in countries with a history of successful populist political parties have become familiar with the specific language of populist communication. Populist communication emphasizes constructions of reality similar to that of populist politicians. Hence, the binary construction of the good people versus the corrupt elites, resonates with populist political discourse. Consequentially, against the backdrop of framing and priming theory, populist reality constructions are easily accessible in the minds of citizens living in countries with successful and highly visible populist parties. This argument may, however, contain a partially spurious element that needs to be addressed in empirical research. It can be argued that populist political parties are successful in various countries because of the presence of the other supply-side opportunity structures discussed here. More specifically, the presence of a severe economic crisis or the increasing influx of refugees may cause *both* the success of populist political parties, and the persuasiveness of populist communication. The "true" contextual factor that plays a role may then be

the political, cultural, or economic climate rather than the actual success of populist political parties.

As a final country-level contextual factor, the aggregated levels of trust citizens have in established institutions, may play a role in the effectiveness of populist communication. It can, for example, be argued that citizens living in countries with declining trust levels in institutions such as political parties, governments, the mass media, banks, or supranational institutions, may be attracted most to populist communication that voices anti-establishment sentiment. In other words, populist messages exploit distrust towards institutions by emphasizing that elitist institutions are corrupt and self-interested. This means that, on a country level, distrust in institutions creates fertile soil for the roots of populism. Countries with higher trust levels should, on the whole, have a lower chance of succumbing to persuasion by the populist messages since their electorate are less likely to perceive the establishment as an actual threat. For citizens in these countries, populist messages that attribute negative qualities to the establishment, most saliently corruption, do not resonate with the overall evaluation of the establishment as trustworthy.

All contextual factors, again, boil down to the same principle: populist communication should have the strongest effects when it responds to a perceived sense of threat and deprivation. These levels of threat and deprivation can be understood on a country-level by taking important supply-side opportunity structures into account. But which characteristics of populist communication resonate with a perceived sense of threat and deprivation? The next chapter focuses on message framing of populist political communication.

Communicators: Social Identity Message Framing

Populist messages can be communicated by different kinds of actors (parties, politicians, media and journalists, citizens) and through various channels of communication. They may be found, for example, in party platforms and rally speeches, in TV ads and on party posters, in news reports and opinion pieces, and in social media posts and online forum commentaries (e.g., Aalberg et al., 2017). But wherever it may appear, populist communication entails the framing of political and societal issues in terms of a divide between the "good" ordinary people, and the "evil" others (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). These out-groups can be differentiated from the people on a horizontal level (e.g. migrants, Muslims) and on a vertical level (e.g. political elite, managers). The binary construction of reality – "us" versus "them" – connects to social identity framing (Mols, 2012). In line with the premises of social identity, individuals can identify with different selves. These different self-concepts may be dependent on the social context (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). To provide a few examples, a context in which individuals are exposed to national symbols, rituals, or ceremonies, may trigger the self-concept of belonging to the nation-state. Likewise, a context in which the centrality of the hardworking people's political will is expressed, may promote belonging to a *political* self (Tajfel, 1978; van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008). Being flexible or 'chameleonic' in nature, populist communication may resonate with various conceptions of the self (Mazzoleni et al., 2003). Populist ideas that attribute blame for the ordinary people's problems to the "corrupt" elites may, for example, promote identification with a *politicalized* in-group of ordinary citizens who do not feel represented by the government (van Zomeren et al., 2008).

On a more general level, populist communication may promote a self-concept of deprived ordinary citizens: because the elites do not care for the people they should represent, but rather they prioritize the needs of other groups in society, the ordinary people are relatively worse off

than others (Elchardus & Spruyt, 2016; Engesser, Fawzi, & Larsson, 2017). Right-wing populist ideas may additionally trigger a national self-concept of native ordinary citizens who are threatened by foreign elements or national ethnic or religious minorities that compete for social and cultural resources. Irrespective of these contextual differences, populist communication constructs a self-concept of the ordinary people in the context of a situation defined as a severe crisis (e.g., Taggart, 2000). In populist discourse, crisis situations are, for example, defined as the influx of migrants into Europe, austerity measures that deprive ordinary citizens of their welfare privileges, or the crisis of the failed representation by elites in general. By constructing such crisis sentiments, populist ideas consolidate attachment to a homogenous in-group of citizens who are *victimized* by out-groups.

The construction of a deprived in-group and a salient out-group threat in populist communication, is strongly related to the framework of blame or causal responsibility attribution (Gomez & Wilson, 2008; Malhotra & Kuo, 2008; Tilley & Hobolt, 2011). In populism's simplified discourse, responsibility for the people's problems is shifted to the corrupt elites or societal out-groups (Vasilopoulou, Halikiopoulou, & Exadaktylos, 2014). Depending on the specific boundary construction in populist communication, out-groups are held responsible for threats posed to the in-group. Populist messages shift responsibility from the "good" people to "evil" others (e.g., Hameleers et al., 2017a; Vasilopoulou et al., 2014). In that sense, populist communication introduces external causes for the crisis situation threatening ordinary people which might even be itself constructed by populists. This strongly resonates with the premises of social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978) and cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957). From a psychological perspective, individuals are assumed to have a strong desire to maintain their positive and consistent self-esteem. This desire can be translated into specific message processing strategies: positive attributes are assigned

to the in-group people identify with, and negative attributes are assigned to the out-group. Populist communication taps into this processing bias. Specifically, populist ideas highlight that the ordinary people (the in-group) is not responsible for the problems they are facing, whereas the corrupt elites can be identified as external causes (out-group). In that sense, populist communication resonates with individuals' desire to maintain cognitive consonance by consolidating a positive image of the self as belonging to the ordinary people. At the same time, populist communication helps citizens to make sense of political and societal developments by using this attractive "us versus them" framing of societal issues which makes attributions of responsibility easier, and consequent emotions of anger, more likely.

Citizens: Psychological Effect Mechanisms

Many scholars have argued that messages that rely on populist cues are very effective in changing citizens' political opinions, or even behavior (Bos et al., 2013; Hameleers et al., 2017a; Schmuck & Matthes, 2017). Yet, the psychological explanations behind the persuasive appeal of populism, are still underdeveloped. Previous research has identified several mechanisms that explain the deeper psychological process of the effects of populist messages. Among those, three theoretical concepts may help to explain the effects of *populist social identity framing*: (1) cognitive priming of social identity, (2) stereotyping, and (3) blame attributions. These processes have crucial implications for citizens' emotional and attitudinal responses, as well as for behavioral outcomes. Therefore, in the next steps, we outline the contributions and intersections of these three concepts, to better understand the psychological mechanisms by which populist communication affects receivers' attitudes, emotions, and behavior.

Cognitive Priming of Social Identity

A first basic mechanism by which populist messages may influence citizens, is the cognitive priming of social identity. Research on social identity shows that individuals are always part of various social categories and therefore have multiple social identities (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). As these identities often compete and intersect with each other, situational cues, which make certain identity aspects more salient than others, are crucial to the perception of one's belonging to social groups (Major & O'Brien, 2005).

Political messages serve as important situational cues which prime different aspects of social identity by making certain aspects more salient and neglecting others (Reinemann, Aalberg, Esser, Strömbäck, de Vreese, 2017). In line with the literature on trait activation and cognitive priming (Richey, 2012), this means that populist messages that emphasize a binary societal divide of the "good people versus the elites", may prime congruent schemata among those exposed to such messages. Populist communication constructs an in-group of ordinary hard-working citizens, which corresponds to a politicalized image of the self as belonging to a silenced majority of hard-working people (Caiani & della Porta, 2011). It has even been argued that this politicalized in-group is actively constructed by means of communication as an "imagined community" (e.g., Laclau, 2005; Moffit & Tormey, 2014). Populist communication emphasizes that this in-group is threatened: either the elites or horizontal out-groups deprive the ordinary people of what they deserve, be it economically, culturally, or politically (e.g., Elchardus & Spruyt, 2016). In this context, the flexibility of in-group or people constructions in populist communication, allows for the freedom of interpretation. Hence, different citizens may feel attracted to different constructions of "their" deprived people, which may influence their subsequent attitudinal, emotional, and behavioral responses, as will be explained later in this chapter.

Stereotyping In- and Out-Groups

Closely related to cognitive priming of social identity, is the activation of in-group and out-group stereotypes. Stereotypes can be defined as simplified mental images that help individuals to interpret the diversity of their social reality (Greenwald et al., 2002). When applied to out-groups these mental pictures are often negative. Populist messages are likely to perpetuate these negative stereotypes by cumulatively priming associations of out-groups such as the elites, or social out-groups with specific negative attributes (Arendt, 2013; Matthes & Schmuck, 2017). For instance, populist messages that cumulatively blame the national government for rising levels of unemployment among ordinary people, may lead to the development of stereotypical memory traces such as the image of corrupt, self-interested elites that deprive the ordinary people whilst prioritizing the needs of other groups in society. At the same time, populist messages may also activate positive stereotypes of the ordinary people who are not responsible for the problems they are facing. By marking the boundary between the good "us" and the evil "them", populist communication thus consolidates positive stereotypes of ordinary citizens opposed to culpable others.

Schema theory (e.g., Brewer & Nakamura, 1984) postulates that once an element of a cognitive cluster is primed, the complete extended network of interrelated associations may be activated (e.g., Brewer & Nakamura, 1984). For instance, populist messages that attribute blame to the elites for causing austerity measures in elderly care, may prime all the negative stereotypes people have towards the elites: they only take care of themselves, they fill their own pockets, and most of all, they do not represent the ordinary people. Once developed, these beliefs can become easily accessible as a result of repeated exposure to populist communication for subsequent political decisions or evaluations of political parties, as activation spreads through the cognitive networks of individuals (Higgins, 1996). As a result of repeated exposure to populist communication, the easily accessible stereotypes can be used as heuristic cues for subsequent attitude formation.

Blame Attribution to Out-Groups

Finally, populist messages make blame attributions to out-groups more salient, which is strongly related to the framework of blame or causal responsibility attribution (Gomez & Wilson, 2008; Malhotra & Kuo, 2008; Tilley & Hobolt, 2011). Reasoned from the framework of responsibility attributions, it is argued that crediting and blaming the government are key phenomena in democratic decision-making (e.g., Tilley & Hobolt, 2011). By punishing the government for failures, citizens can hold the established political order accountable for their actions. Attributions of responsibility, like populism, help citizens to comprehend their complex political environment (e.g., Arceneaux, 2006; Cutler, 2004). Importantly, research on attributions of responsibility has demonstrated that citizens' political opinions are guided by information on responsibility. If the national government is blamed for depriving the hardworking citizens, they are more likely to have negative attitudes towards the national government (Hobolt & Tilley, 2014). These explanations help citizens to make sense of political issues by finding external causes for internally experienced problems such as unemployment or perceived injustice. The framework of blame attributions may thus be helpful in understanding the effects of populist communication on attitudes, emotions, and behavior.

Citizens: Cognitive, Emotional, and Attitudinal Responses

Taken together, the three presented mechanisms may first of all result in certain cognitive responses in that they elicit specific perceptions of social reality and attributions of responsibility to certain groups (and institutions). These cognitive responses may then have crucial implications for citizens' further emotional and attitudinal responses. These responses may subsequently result

in specific behavioral outcomes. These potential consequences will be explained in the next sections.

Cognitive Responses

Generally, we can assume that *cognitive priming of social identity, negative stereotyping,* and *blame attributions* triggered by an "us vs. them" crisis narrative can enhance perceptions of in-group threat, deprivation, and/or out-group blame (e.g., Simon & Klandermans, 2001). In fact, research has shown that both the media and politicians have the ability to influence perceptions of real-world conditions such as the state of the economy (e.g., Lischka, 2015; Bisgaard & Sloothuus, 2018), or certain groups such as immigrants (e.g., Seate & Mastro, 2016). Also, the media may generate diverging views and even misperceptions among different segments of the population depending on the media diet and information environment citizens choose (e.g., Cacciatore et al., 2014). These perceptions and attributions can then elicit certain emotional responses, and generate or strengthen certain attitudinal responses.

Attitudinal Responses

First, perceptions of in-group threat, deprivation, and out-group blame may alter citizens' attitudinal responses. When confronted with in-group threats and perceived deprivation elicited by populist communication, people may deal with these threats by adjusting their attitudes toward their in-group and relevant out-groups in order to maintain a positive self-concept (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). In-group threats may be alleviated in two ways, either by enhancing positive attitudes toward one's own in-group (*in-group favoritism*), or by devaluing the out-group that poses the threat. Under the perception of threat, members of the out-group are perceived as uniform and more homogeneous than the in-group (*out-group homogeneity effect*), which is related to prejudice and negative out-group attitudes (Judd & Park, 1988). Additionally, blame attributions to out-

groups are likely to affect citizens' attitudes. Previous research suggests that attribution of responsibility provides a powerful psychological cue for the formation of favorable attitudes toward the in-group, and hostile attitudes toward the out-group (Hobolt & Tilley, 2014; Krämer, 2014). In the context of populism, blame attributions have been found to be a powerful predictor for populist attitudes (Hameleers, Bos, & de Vreese, 2016).

Emotional Responses

Second, emotional responses are likely to be altered by populist messages. Indeed, experimental research has demonstrated that populist cues elicit emotional responses which drive the persuasiveness of populist communication (Wirz, 2018). By stressing in-group threat and deprivation, populist political communication makes group memberships salient, which may lead to specific kind of emotions that arise when people identify with a group and respond emotionally to events that affect that group: intergroup emotions. Intergroup emotion theory (Smith & Mackie, 2008) suggests that group-based appraisals or interpretations of an intergroup event (e.g., perceived in-group deprivation) determine specific group-based emotions (e.g., anger or resentment). Notions of group-based emotion are theoretically based in social identity. When people identify with their in-group, or social identity is otherwise salient, they are more likely to make intergroup comparisons and hence, experience negative emotions in the case of perceived injustice on the basis of their social identity (van Zomeren et al., 2008). Following appraisal theories (Frijda, 1986; Lerner & Keltner, 2000, 2001), specific patterns of such appraisals will trigger specific emotions. These emotions may be experienced on behalf of the group, as a function of group membership, irrespective of whether the individual self is affected or not. Individuals who identify with a group may feel that *they* are threatening *us,* or *we* feel angry at *them* (Smith & Mackie, 2008). For example, populist communication portraying a strong out-group that harms the in-group (suggesting

that the in-group does not have sufficient resources to cope with the threat) should invoke anxiety or fear. In contrast, when the in-group is appraised as having the resources to deal with the threat posed by an out-group, theoretically, anger is the emotion most likely to be triggered (Smith & Mackie, 2008). Yet, thinking of oneself as part of a particular group or social identity may also elicit positive emotions (such as group-based pride or enthusiasm) that are based on group membership. Populist political communication may contribute to these positive emotions by stressing the virtues of the people (Taggart, 2000). Based on appraisal theories (Frijda, 1986; Lerner & Keltner, 2000, 2001), these intergroup emotions may, in turn, motivate people to take action on behalf of their group, for instance confronting an out-group, affiliating with in-group members, or supporting government policies that have an impact on entire social groups (Smith & Mackie, 2008).

Citizens: Behavioral Outcomes and Longer-term Political Consequences

Cognitive, emotional, and attitudinal responses to populist political communication may alter citizens' behavioral outcomes. Reasoned from the premises of social identity framing, the perception of an in-group threat is expected to mobilize citizens (e.g., Ellemers, 1993; Postmes et al., 1999; van Zomeren et al., 2008). Specifically, when people experience that their in-group is disadvantaged by an out-group such as the corrupt elites, they are motivated to engage politically and take collective action on behalf of their deprived in-group (e.g., Simon & Klandermans, 2001). Political engagement and action may take various forms, from interpersonal offline discussions and commenting on social media platforms, to organizing online petitions and taking part in demonstrations. Populist communication, for example, constructs this in-group threat as a severe power discrepancy between the mighty and corrupt elites and the deprived powerless people who

are unfairly treated by the established political order (e.g., Van Zomeren et al., 2008). People thus need to take action on behalf of the in-group to avert the threat from outside.

Beyond this, empirical research has also shown that out-group blame attributions can guide citizens' voting intentions (Bellucci, 2014; Marsh & Tilley, 2010). Applied to populism, research has demonstrated that messages that blame the "corrupt" elites for the problems experienced by ordinary people, indeed affect preferences for political parties (Hameleers, Bos & de Vreese, 2017c). The mechanism by which populist messages affect populist voting intentions can be explained as follows. First, populist messages identify external causes for the problems people are facing, and herewith reassure a positive image of the self. By making complex political matters comprehensible in terms of "who did it", populist messages affect receivers' perceptions of blame. These blame perceptions activated by populist blame framing may be used as an informational cue when citizens need to arrive at voting preferences (Hameleers et al., 2017c). In other words, populist blame attributions offer important cues for citizens to decide who should be punished and who should be rewarded at the ballot box: the populist challenger that promises to restore the purity and prosperity of the people. Specifically, populist communication emphasizes that the government should be punished, which lowers people's preferences for coalition parties (Hameleers et al., 2017c). At the same time, these messages are congruent with the ideational core communicated by populist political parties. Blame frames, just like populist politicians, articulate a simplified solution to the people's problems: the elites should be removed, and the only solution to restore the ordinary people's heartland and welfare is to vote for populist political parties. In line with this mechanism, empirical evidence demonstrates that people who are exposed to populist communication are more likely to vote for populist political parties.

Political Consequences

The outcomes described in Figure 8.1 can be interpreted in their political consequences in the longer term. Most research on the effects of populist communication has looked at relatively short-term effects. Extant research, for example, focused on the activation or cultivation of populist perceptions, emotional responses, and stereotypical beliefs (e.g., Bos et al., 2013; Hameleers et al., 2017a; Matthes & Schmuck, 2017; Wirz, 2018). Some research has already pointed to more far-reaching democratic consequences, most notably polarization (e.g., Müller et al., 2017) and (populist) voting (Hameleers et al., 2017c). In this chapter, we argue that the mechanisms described in our process model (Figure 8.1) can be extrapolated to understand these longer-term political consequences that have crucial ramifications for democracies throughout the European continent.

First of all, populist messages may cultivate polarization by reinforcing both positive and negative prior perceptions related to populism. This means that people who oppose populist viewpoints may be strengthened in their opposition as a consequence of exposure to populist communication (e.g., Hameleers et al., 2018a). For these citizens, populist messages may backfire, as they actually result in *lower* agreement with the content compared to exposure to non-populist appeals (e.g., Hameleers & Schmuck, 2017). At the other end of the polarized divide, citizens with congruent populist prior attitudes become strengthened in their congruent convictions (e.g., Müller et al., 2017). In line with the mechanism of motivated reasoning, this means that citizens process political information in line with prior perceptions (Taber & Lodge, 2006). Congruent populist cues are accepted without being subject to critical examination, whereas incongruent populist cues are rejected or counter-argued. This process also explains the feedback loop added in Figure 8.1. Citizens with favorable and stronger populist priors should be more likely to be positively affected by populist communication, incongruent non-populist priors should result in negative effects. This means that negative or positive populist prior perceptions (left-side Figure 8.1) may respectively

weaken or augment populist attitudes of citizens (right-side Figure 8.1). But how do these processes play out in the informative field?

In Europe's current high-choice, diversified, and fragmented media setting, selective exposure and avoidance may play central roles in the polarizing potential of populist communication (Hameleers et al., 2018a). Specifically, people who only select like-minded news become strengthened in their prior attitudes – meaning that opposing camps or issue-publics become further separated over time (Stroud, 2008). The political consequences of populist communication are thus the result of *repeated* patterns of selection or avoidance. Hence, experimental research has shown that exposure to a single message can have a short-term effect on cognitions, attitudes, emotions, or behavior. In real life, it can be expected that long-term effects are the consequence of habitual exposure. Populist cues thus have a cumulative effect on various outcome variables. Over time, positive in-group and negative out-group stereotypes become more accessible among people who expose themselves to populist sources and populist messages on a daily basis. Likewise, people with prior attitudes that are incongruent with populism, may systematically avoid populist content. And if they *do* select incongruent populist content, they may do so to strengthen their disagreement – for example by finding weaknesses in populist lines of argumentation.

Another political consequence of exposure to populist message is the cultivation of stronger preferences for populist parties and a strengthened opposition to mainstream parties (Hameleers et al., 2017c) (see Figure 8.1). Hence, when people agree with populism's ideational core that the "corrupt" elites in their nation are responsible for their deprivation, they should be more likely to punish them at election times. The populist challenger, however, should be rewarded: populist parties throughout Europe promise to restore the in-group's status and avert their

perceived injustice by removing the corrupt elites. In sum, a key political and democratic consequence of populist communication can thus be seen as *stronger* vote intentions for populist parties, and *weaker* vote intentions for mainstream parties (Hameleers et al., 2017c).

Conclusion

In the midst of a growing public and scientific interest in the effects of populist discourse on society, this chapter aimed to explore the mechanisms by which people are persuaded by populist communication. Although a growing body of research has explored the effects of populist communication on citizens' political opinions, the answers to at least three important questions remain underdeveloped: (1) what are the psychological mechanisms behind the effects of populist communication? (2) Who actually selects populist content and who is persuaded by it? And, finally, (3) how does populist communication resonate with the real-life opportunity structures salient in different countries? Besides extensive theorizing, these questions will need to be answered by large-scale comparative empirical research, for which this chapter has provided practical recommendations.

Starting with theory, this chapter aimed to provide in-depth insights into the mechanisms behind the persuasiveness of populist communication. Integrating the theoretical frameworks of social identity, blame attribution, and negative stereotyping, the crucial mechanisms behind the effects of populist communication can be understood as the construction of a positive self-image of the blameless people opposed to a culprit out-group of the elites, or threatening others. Populist communication constructs a deprived in-group of ordinary people who are not deemed responsible for the collective crisis they are facing. To restore the positive self-concept of the people's community, the in-group of the hardworking people, blame is attributed to external actors: the out-

groups that can take on a different shape in populist discourse. Based on the premises of cognitive consonance, populism can be regarded as especially persuasive because it reassures a conception of the good blameless self whilst marking the boundary between the self and threatening others.

Yet, this “populist blame frame” may not be favored by all. The various mechanisms discussed in this chapter can be reduced to one crucial factor: attitudinal congruence. Regarding selection, it can be expected that populist messages are only selected by people with prior attitudes congruent with populist communication. Based on theories of motivated reasoning and selective exposure, people are most likely to self-select into exposure when they agree with the message. More specifically, citizens who feel attached to the in-group of deprived ordinary citizens, and those who feel distant toward the elites and/or societal out-groups, are most likely to select populist communication. Again, this mechanism is a matter of identity and congruence. Out of a desire to avoid cognitive dissonance, people select messages that agree with their worldviews (e.g., Festinger, 1957).

The actual *persuasiveness* of selected populist messages is, again, rooted in the resonance of the populist message with people’s prior attitudes. Identification with the nation-state, Europe, and the deprived ordinary people, play a key role in the effects of populist messages. Crucially, populist messages can even result in a boomerang effect among those citizens who do not agree with the populist messages. Importantly, the process by which political attitudes are affected, either in a negative or positive direction, can be explained by trait activation or schema theory. Political perceptions, such as populist attitudes, negative stereotypes, or political participation, are not created by populist attitudes, but rather primed or activated by messages that contain populist arguments.

One other factor is crucial to take into account: the resonance of populist communication with real-life opportunity structures. On a country level, this means that populist communication that frames blame to the economic elites, may have the strongest effects on political evaluations in countries that faced severe consequences of the crisis. Messages that blame immigrants for the ordinary people's problems may have the strongest effects in countries that dealt with the influx of a great number of immigrants, such as Germany. Resonance can also be understood as the success of populist political parties in various countries. Hence, citizens living in countries with a stronger representation of populist parties should be more familiar with populist discourse. Amongst these citizens, the populist message may activate easily accessible schemata of populist framing.

In the multifaceted nature of populist communication on the European continent, this chapter has offered some recommendations for future research that aims to dissect the effects of, and mechanisms behind, the spread of populist communication. The chapters that follow take an important next step in populism research by zooming in on an important part of this research agenda. Specifically, the next chapters report a large-scale empirical project: a 15-country comparative experiment in which different forms of left-wing and right-wing populism are manipulated. In the next chapters, both cognitive, attitudinal, and behavioral outcomes of exposure to populist messages, are investigated. This comprehensive project offers first, answers to key comparative questions that exist in the great body of research that has started to provide explanations for the spread of populism throughout the globe.

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