To Like Is to Support? The Effects and Mechanisms
of Selective Exposure to Online Populist Communication
on Voting Preferences

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Social media have a central role in the electoral success of populist parties. Online populist discourse may be persuasive because it oftentimes combines two powerful cues: (1) It emphasizes an all-encompassing divide between "good" ordinary people and "corrupt" elites while (2) cultivating perceived relative deprivation. This article relies on two experiments (N = 1,114) to investigate how these cues affect populist party preferences when communicated via news websites (Study 1) and social network accounts of ordinary national citizens versus populist politicians (Study 2). To simulate citizens' high-choice media environment, the second study was situated in a selective exposure media environment. The results indicate that the combination of populist and deprivation cues is especially persuasive when citizens self-select a congruent message and when they identify with the source. The results of this study provide important insights into the role of social media in cultivating the electoral success of populist parties.

Keywords: attitudinal congruence, motivated reasoning, populism, populist voting, selective exposure, social network sites, source identification

With growing interest in the causes and consequences of populism, many scholars have recently gravitated toward an understanding of the electoral success of populist political parties in the light of supply-side factors (e.g., Aalberg, Esser, Reinemann, Strömbäck, & de Vreese, 2017). The media are, for example, regarded as a receptive forum for populist actors and their messages (e.g., Mazzoleni, Stewart, & Horsfield, 2003). In line with this argument, news values and media logic are assumed to resonate with populism's focus on people centrality combined with anti-elitism (e.g., Krämer, 2014). Social media in particular may be regarded as a key supply-side factor facilitating the spread of populist sentiments across society (e.g., Engesser, Ernst, Esser, & Büchel, 2017; Waisbord & Amado, 2017). Despite the field's growing interest in online populist communication, we know too little about the effects of direct populist self-communication on citizens' vote choice. Moreover, extant research has not demonstrated how the framing of relative deprivation, a factor associated with populism's electoral success, can augment the persuasiveness of populist messages.

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Responding to these discrepancies, this article relies on two experimental studies that investigate the effects of online populist communication that combines populist and deprivation framing on receivers' intentions to vote for populist political parties. The first experiment investigates the effects of media populism, or populism *by* the media (Krämer, 2014), and demonstrates that messages that emphasize how ordinary people are worse off than other groups in society have a positive effect on populist party preferences. As populist messages are not only communicated by news media, the second study manipulated Facebook messages by citizens and a right-wing populist politician (Geert Wilders) to explore the effects of online populist self-communication by different sources. The results show that populist messages have the strongest effects on populist intentions to vote when participants identify with the source and perceive the message as congruent with their prior attitudes—this is the case for both ordinary citizens and populist politicians.

Taken together, the two experimental studies provide novel insights into how computer-mediated populist messages spread by news outlets, politicians, or citizens affect receivers' voting preferences. Populist messages on online news websites are less effective than populist politicians' or citizens' messages distributed via Facebook. A key democratic implication of this research is that the high visibility of populist messages on the social network sites of many leading politicians—such as Trump or Wilders—may have contributed to their electoral successes, augmenting support among parts of the electorate that do not oppose them as a source, and agree with the attitudinal base of their core message.

The Intersection of Populist Communication and Relative Deprivation

Populism foregrounds an antagonistic perspective on (sociopolitical) reality: The in-group of ordinary, pure people is framed in opposition to corrupt elites (e.g., Laclau, 1977; Mudde, 2004; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). The elites are most saliently understood to be the established political order, such as politicians in government that have failed to respond to the people's needs and desires (e.g., Mudde, 2004). Populism typically refers to sentiments of in-group deprivation (e.g., Elchardus & Spruyt, 2016). This means that the corrupt elites, the central enemies of the people, are blamed for prioritizing other groups in society while neglecting their own electorate. In line with this reasoning, Kriesi et al. (2006) have defined the group of citizens to whom populist sentiments appeal as the "losers of modernization." Hence, because of the impact of modernization and accompanying technological developments in society, politics, and economy, a specific group of citizens cannot keep up, whereas other groups in society profit from resources that originally belonged to those that are now deprived.

These sentiments of being left behind are frequently synthesized in populist messages: The people are framed as being neglected by the corrupt elites, who are the central cause of the in-group's deprivation (Elchardus & Spruyt, 2016; Mudde, 2004). At the same time, different other groups in society, most saliently immigrants and/or the extreme rich, are allowed access to the scarce (economic, sociopolitical, or cultural) resources of the people. The allocation of resources is depicted as a zero-sum game: the more specific out-groups profit from the nation's resources, the more the in-group of ordinary people will suffer from the crisis. The corrupt elites are blamed for the deprivation of the people. Because they allow refugees to enter the nation, and because they provide them access to scarce resources that

should be reserved for ordinary people, the deprivation of the people will continue in the future. Against this backdrop, it is important to integrate relative deprivation and populist framing in populist communication literature to better understand how, and under which conditions, populist messages affect the electorate.

Selective Exposure and Avoidance of Populist Communication

In today's high-choice media environment, exposure to political communication should not be regarded as a certainty (e.g., Bennett & Iyengar, 2008). Indeed, especially in computer-mediated information settings, citizens have gained more agency to self-select specific media content or to avoid it altogether (e.g., Arceneaux, Johnson, & Murphy, 2012; Stroud, 2008). This key development in the current media environment has been termed selective exposure (Arceneaux et al., 2012; Stroud, 2008). In the context of political communication, selective exposure and avoidance have mainly been understood as the guiding influence of citizens' prior political attitudes on their selection of media content (e.g., Stroud, 2008). Although selection and avoidance describe different behaviors, they both relate to a similar underlying process as they are informed by a confirmation bias: Congenial content is likely to be selected, and uncongenial content is likely to be avoided. In other words, people are more likely to select content that reaffirms a positive and consistent image of the self, whereas they are likely to avoid content that challenges their self-perception (Stroud, 2008). Although some scholars have argued that people do not necessarily actively avoid all challenging information while selecting congenial information (e.g., Garrett, 2009), there is at least evidence indicating that people have a tendency to prefer attitudinally congruent information over incongruent messages (e.g., Iyengar & Hahn, 2009).

Although patterns of selective exposure and avoidance have predominately been studied in a U.S. setting of partisan political news (e.g., Iyengar & Hahn, 2009), an extension to the European context is highly relevant. More specifically, empirical research has pointed to specific media perceptions and preferences of citizens with populist attitudes in Europe (Fawzi, 2018; Hameleers, Bos, & de Vreese, 2017a; Schulz, Wirth, & Müller, 2018). People with stronger populist worldviews tend to regard the mainstream media as biased against their views (Schulz et al., 2018). People with populist attitudes also tend to negatively evaluate the media, arguing that they are part of the dishonest elites (Fawzi, 2018). In light of these hostile media perceptions, citizens with populist attitudes prefer media content that circumvents the elites and centralizes the voice of ordinary people (Hameleers et al., 2017a). Although people with populist perceptions, or populist politicians, sometimes engage with incongruent content, they show a tendency to be more supportive of congruent content, and less supportive, or even critical toward, content that is not in line with their perceptual screens.

Against this backdrop, it can be argued that people are more likely to select populist messages when they have congruent prior attitudes (Hameleers, Bos, & de Vreese, 2018; Stroud, 2008; Taber & Lodge, 2006). This attitudinal base entails relative deprivation and political cynicism. Populist messages that emphasize that the "corrupt" elites cannot be trusted, and that immigrants and rich minorities are profiting from ordinary people's resources, can be regarded as congruent for people with lower levels of trust in politics, politicians, and the government in general. People with higher levels of trust in politics and government should, however, selectively avoid populist messages that are incongruent with their

prior attitudes. Moreover, people who do not perceive an out-group threat of minority groups that deprive ordinary citizens should be less inclined to select deprivation-framed populist messages than people who do perceive such a threat. Against this backdrop, we hypothesize the following:

H1a: *Participants with prior attitudes congruent with populist and deprivation-framed messages (political cynicism and relative deprivation) are more likely to select populist messages than are people with incongruent priors.*

H1b: *Participants with incongruent prior attitudes are more likely to avoid populist messages altogether.*

Based on the mechanisms of motivated reasoning and social identification, we expect that source liking and support play a role in the selection of populist content by ordinary citizens and politicians (Hameleers & Schmuck, 2017). When people do not identify with ordinary citizens or populist actors, they may not perceive references to the "people versus the corrupt elites" as credible. Because populist communicators express closeness to ordinary people, citizens who do not identify with the speaker should be likely to avoid content disseminated by these actors (Aalberg et al., 2017). Against this backdrop, we hypothesize the following:

H2a: *Participants are more likely to select populist messages by a populist politician if they like and support rather than oppose this politician.*

H2b: *Participants are more likely to select populist messages communicated by an ordinary citizen if they identify with this ordinary citizen.*

The Effects of Populist and Deprivation Cues

Various empirical studies have indicated that populist communication can affect receivers' political attitudes (e.g., Hameleers et al., 2018; Matthes & Schmuck, 2017) or even behavioral intentions (Hameleers, Bos, & de Vreese, 2017b). The mechanisms behind the effects of populist communication can be explained in light of social identity framing (e.g., Mols, 2012). More specifically, populist messages cultivate an identity of ordinary citizens who are not personally responsible for the deprivation they are facing. Rather, the political out-group of the corrupt elites is held responsible for the problems of the homogenous in-group of the people. In line with social identity theory, people have an intrinsic desire to maintain their positive self-image (Tajfel, 1978). To do so, negative qualities are likely to be attributed to external factors or to out-groups distant from the in-group. The populist story line that blames elites thus resonates with a positive, consistent image of self-belonging to the innocent people of the heartland.

This in-group serving bias may explain the effectiveness of populist messages. In a related line of research on mobilization as a consequence of social identity framing, studies have demonstrated that collective action or in-group mobilization can be primed when people perceive that their in-group is threatened (e.g., van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008). This indicates that when an out-group threat

is made salient, people are motivated to act on behalf of their in-group to avert this threat (e.g., Simon & Klandermans, 2001). Social identity framing research points to the perception of an unfair treatment by political elites as an important component of a perceived threat to the in-group's status (e.g., Simon & Klandermans, 2001; van Zomeren et al., 2008). In the midst of such an out-group threat, one relatively "easy" and influential way to restore the in-group's power imbalance is to vote for populist political parties that promise to restore the people's status by removing the corrupt elites (Aalberg et al., 2017). Here, we can distinguish between left-wing and right-wing populist parties that may both cultivate a distinction between ordinary people and elites that fail to represent them. Against this theoretical backdrop, the following can thus be hypothesized:

H3a: *Exposure to populist cues on social network sites will increase the likelihood of voting for a right-wing populist party.*

H3b: *Exposure to populist cues on social network sites will increase the likelihood of voting for a left-wing populist party.*

The emphasis of an out-group threat and in-group deprivation is augmented when populist cues and relative deprivation co-occur in a single message. The desire to take action may be bolstered by such politicized identity cues (Simon & Klandermans, 2001). In messages that combine populist and deprivation cues, the "corrupt" elites are not only scapegoated for their alleged misconduct, they are also blamed for allowing other groups in society to deprive ordinary people from what they deserve (Elchardus & Spruyt, 2016). Populist-deprivation messages thus emphasize that the threat to the people comes both from within (immigrants, other out-groups) and above the people (the elites in their ivory towers). As a consequence of such a severe multifaceted threat, the people should even be more likely to take action to restore the status of their in-group (Simon & Klandermans, 2001). When emphasizing that the elites fail to represent the people while other groups in society are profiting, in-group mobilization should be primed. To restore the people's status, right-wing populists that claim to end the people's deprivation should be preferred—people should thus be likely to vote for them.

Against this backdrop, the intention to vote for right-wing populist parties that communicate message-congruent politicized stereotypes should be higher when people are exposed to deprivation cues compared with messages that do not rely on such framing. We therefore hypothesize the following:

H3c: *Populist messages that use deprivation cues results in stronger right-wing populist intentions to vote than messages without such deprivation cues.*

The Role of Attitudinal Congruence and Source Identification

Research on social identity framing postulates that social identity frames are more likely to mobilize citizens when the scapegoat is credible and when members of the in-group perceive a threat to their status (e.g., Gamson, 1992). Based on the principles of motivated reasoning (Festinger, 1957), it may thus be argued that the same mechanisms that drive selective exposure to populist communication also drive its persuasiveness. People with stronger perceptions of relative deprivation

and higher levels of political distrust may perceive the populist message as more personally relevant and credible, and are therefore more likely to be activated by people-centric and anti-elitist content. We therefore hypothesize the following:

H4:   *The effects of populist and deprivation messages on populist vote intentions are strongest when they are congruent with participants' prior attitudes.*

Like attitudinal congruence, the liking or support of the source plays a central role in the persuasiveness of political messages (e.g., Nekmat, Gower, Zhou, & Metzger, 2019). The underlying mechanism can be explicated in light of social identification (e.g., Tajfel, 1978). Specifically, when people perceive the messenger as part of their in-group, they are more likely to uncritically accept the message. When they oppose the source, in contrast, they should be more skeptical toward the message. Hence, in-group serving biases result in the perception that in-group members are more reliable, trustworthy, and honest, whereas out-group members are seen as dishonest and insincere (e.g., Tajfel, 1978). Such identity concerns should especially be relevant for populist messages that rely on identity framing to stress how ordinary people should be central in political decision making, whereas the elites and other groups in society are blamed for the people's problems (e.g., Mols, 2012). When the messenger is perceived as being part of this group of ordinary people, or when he or she actively voices the concerns of this neglected in-group, the populist message should have the strongest mobilizing effects on populist voting. Against this backdrop, we hypothesize the following:

H5a: *The effects of populist and deprivation-framed messages on populist intentions to vote are strongest when people identify with the populist politician.*

H5b: *The effects of populist and deprivation-framed messages on populist intentions to vote are strongest when people identify with the ordinary citizen.*

Method

Design of the Experiments

The effects of populist communication and deprivation framing are first studied as exposure to media populism in a forced exposure information setting (Study 1). The design of this first experiment concerns a 2 × (populist cues: yes versus no) × 3 (relative deprivation cues: deprivation vs. gratification vs. absence cues) between-subjects factorial design. The group sizes were equal. Participants were randomly assigned to the conditions. The control condition was the condition without populist or deprivation/gratification cues.

Although the traditional notion of media populism may imply that citizens come across populist content incidentally when exposed to news media, selective exposure is crucial to consider in the setting of online populist communication by citizens and politicians. Responding to this, the design of the second study was a 2 (select populist or nonpopulist cues: populism and deprivation vs. gratification) × 2 (select messenger: populist leader vs. citizen) × 3 (attitudinal congruence of the cues: congruent vs. counter

vs. moderate) plus neutral control between-subjects factorial experiment. People thus had the choice to select on the level of content and source. A counterattitudinal message indicates that the populist or gratification cues are incongruent with people's preexisting levels of deprivation and cynicism, whereas a proattitudinal message is regarded as congruent with prior attitudes. In the second experiment, we controlled for the drivers of selective exposure and avoidance to populist content.

Sample

For both experiments, a large international polling firm (SSI/Dynata) collected the data among a representative sample of Dutch citizens (Study 1: $N = 361$; Study 2: $N = 753$). The final samples in both studies approached national representativeness of the voting population in terms of age (Study 1: $M = 41.63$ years, $SD = 15.09$; Study 2: $M = 42.53$ years, $SD = 14.25$), gender (Study 1: female = 55.1%; Study 2: female = 56.8%), and education (Study 1: 27.1% higher, 18.6% lower, 37.7% moderate; Study 2: 33.9% higher, 23.5% lower, 42.6% moderate). The online fieldwork was completed in four days. Participants in Experiment 1 could not participate in Experiment 2, and vice versa. In Study 1, 361 out of 524 completed the survey (completion rate = 68.9%). The completion rate was lower for Experiment 2 (45.1%). This was mainly because participants could not participate in both experiments; they were thus screened out when attempting to participate in the second experiment.

Procedure

Both experiments were completed in an online survey environment. Participants started with the ethical informed consent form, and proceeded to the pretreatment survey that included items for demographics, moderators (attitudinal congruence), and political attitudes. In Study 1, participants were randomly assigned to one of the six conditions after the pretest. In Study 2, participants were randomly assigned to either the forced control or the selective exposure media environment. Here, they were forwarded to a social media screen where they could click on the social media post of their preference (populist, nonpopulist, either communicated by Geert Wilders or an ordinary citizen). After reading the shown (Study 1) or self-selected (Study 2) item, participants were forwarded to the posttreatment test. Here, participants completed items measuring the dependent variable (voting intentions) and manipulation check items. The complete procedure lasted for about 15 minutes (Study 1: $M_{min} = 16.13$, $SD = 17.75$; Study 2: $M_{min} = 17.32$, $SD = 22.82$).

Independent Variables and Stimuli

In Study 1, the stimuli were presented as online news articles without a source. The formatting was based on a combination of templates from existing online news channels, without revealing source cues. Like the layout, the topic was held constant across conditions. All stimuli described the implications of the coalition agreement for the labor market situation. The article in the control condition (1) discussed a factual analysis of the recent national coalition agreement in terms of the changing labor market situation. The populist condition (2) used the same message, but emphasized the populist opposition between hard-working ordinary citizens and the corrupt elites. The elites were framed as the culpable other and were held responsible for the worsening labor market conditions. The relative deprivation condition (3) stressed that ordinary people were

worse off than other groups in society. In the populist and relative deprivation condition (4), the in-group threat was framed as being even more severe: The elites were not only depicted as self-interested and corrupt, they were also blamed for the relative deprivation of the in-group. Because societal out-groups were allowed to profit from all kinds of benefits, the people were worse off than other groups in society. In the relative gratification condition (5), the people as an in-group were framed as relatively better off than other groups in society. Finally, the combination of a gratification and populist cue (6) entailed the interpretation that "ordinary people" were currently better off than other groups in society, but because of the failing "corrupt" elites, the future situation of ordinary people was still uncertain. All manipulations were framed in the header and main body of the articles.

Study 2 used the same populist and relative deprivation message, the counterattitudinal gratification message, and the control condition. The exact same text was used, but now applied to realistic Facebook posts. The source was varied: The message was sent by either a member of the in-group (an ordinary citizen) or a populist leader that speaks on behalf of the people (Geert Wilders). Participants were allowed to select a populist message (the content combined populist and deprivation cues) or a nonpopulist message (nonpopulist content combined with gratification cues) and were also free to select the source of this message. They thus had four social media options in total.

Manipulation Checks

The manipulation of emphasizing causal responsibility to the elites for the worsening condition of the labor market situation succeeded—Study 1: $F(5, 360) = 14.11$, $p < .001$; Study 2: $F(4, 748) = 49.51$, $p < .001$. In other words, participants exposed to populist cues were significantly more likely to perceive the article as attributing blame to the elites than were participants exposed to nonpopulist cues. In a similar vein, the populist conditions were seen as containing more references to the centrality of ordinary people than the nonpopulist conditions—Study 1: $F(5, 360) = 3.34$, $p = .006$; Study 2: $F(4, 748) = 9.57$, $p < .001$. The manipulation of relative deprivation cues—Study 1: $F(5, 360) = 26.58$, $p < .001$; Study 2: $F(4, 748) = 50.75$, $p < .001$—and gratification cues—Study 1: $F(5, 360) = 51.39$, $p < .001$; Study 2: $F(4, 748) = 42.48$, $p < .001$—also succeeded. Participants exposed to deprivation or gratification framing were substantially and significantly more likely to perceive the article as framing "ordinary people" as respectively worse or better off than other groups in society.

Dependent Variable

In the posttest survey, participants rated the likelihood they would vote for particular political parties. We included the main Dutch political parties, with various left-wing versus right-wing ideology and populist versus mainstream positions. Party preferences were measured on a 0 to 100 scale (0 = *I think I will never vote for this party*; 100 = *It is very possible that I will vote for this party*). Based on the aims of the experiments, two political parties were of key interest: the right-wing populist Freedom Party (PVV; Study 1: $M = 32.60$, $SD = 37.07$; Study 2: $M = 34.67$, $SD = 36.76$) and the left-wing Socialist Party (SP; Study 1: $M = 35.00$, $SD = 23.46$; Study 2: $M = 32.46$, $SD = 32.94$).

Measures Attitudinal Congruence

In Study 2, we included a measure for the attitudinal congruence of the Facebook post. Specifically, in the pretreatment survey, participants completed a 8-item scale tapping into perceptions of relative deprivation versus gratification (Cronbach's α = .94, *M* = 4.50, *SD* = 1.37). Questions included items such as "If we need anything from the government, ordinary people like us always have to wait longer than others." Based on participants' scores, we computed the attitudinal congruence of the post. Specifically, the relative deprivation stimuli were coded as congruent with prior attitudes if participants scored between 5 and 7 on the gratification-deprivation scale and were coded as incongruent when they scored between 1 and 3. The counterattitudinal gratification message was coded as congruent when participants scored 1 through 3 and incongruent when they scored 5 through 7. Based on earlier research on selective exposure and motivated reasoning, we controlled for participants with moderate attitudes (scoring 4 on the scale; see, e.g., Arceneaux et al., 2012). Although the measurement of attitudinal congruence before the treatments may have primed populist perceptions, the role of this factor is constant across conditions. In addition, relative deprivation and populist perceptions are related, but are not the same concepts (see, e.g., Elchardus & Spruyt, 2016).

Measures Source Identification

In a battery of survey items, participants had to assess the extent to which they identified with various actors present in politics and society (7-point scales). We included the politicians of all major parties and members of fellow national citizens in this battery. For our analyses, we were interested in the extent to which participants identified with the populist source Geert Wilders (*M* = 4.37, *SD* = 2.80) and Dutch citizens in general (*M* = 4.95, *SD* = 1.26). To assess whether the ordinary citizen (Study 2) was seen as a credible source, and that participants actually regarded him as a member of the ordinary people group, different tests were conducted. First of all, in a pilot test, people had to rate different sources on different characteristics. In this test, Michael Meijer was, more than other fictional citizens, regarded as being part of the ordinary people group. In the main study, after exposure to the stimuli, we asked participants to rate the extent to which "Michael Meijer" and Wilders should be regarded as ordinary citizens. On a 7-point scale, the mean was 5.21 (*SD* = 1.72). Participants were substantially less likely to regard the other source as part of ordinary people (*M* = 3.40, *SD* = 2.15). Finally, both sources were regarded as relatively credible (*M* = 4.44, *SD* = 1.44), and there were no differences in credibility scores between sources.

Results

Selective Exposure and Avoidance to Populist Communication

To estimate the likelihood of selective exposure to populist communication on social network sites (SNSs), a logistic regression model predicting selective exposure and avoidance to the various proattitudinal populist and counterattitudinal gratification conditions was estimated (see Table 1).

Table 1. Logistic Regression Model Predicting Selection and Avoidance of Populist and Nonpopulist Communication on SNSs.

Conditions	Populist-deprivation Wilders (*n* = 229)		Populist-deprivation citizen (*n* = 193)		Gratification Wilders (*n* = 152)		Gratification Citizen (*n* = 179)	
Variables	*B* (*SE*)	95% CI *OR*	*B* (*SE*)	95% CI *OR*	*B* (*SE*)	95% CI *OR*	*B* (SE)	95% CI *OR*
(Constant)	−2.12 (0.68)**		−0.46 (0.72)		−2.64 (0.87)**		−1.77 (0.75)	
Age	0.01 (0.01)	[0.99, 1.02]	−0.01 (0.01)	[0.98, 1.00]	−0.02 (0.01)*	[0.97, 1.00]	0.01 (0.01)	[0.99, 1.02]
Gender (male)	0.25 (0.19)	[0.88, 1.87]	0.28 (0.21)	[0.89, 1.98]	0.17 (0.25)	[0.73, 1.93]	−0.25 (0.22)	[0.51, 1.19]
Education	−0.11 (0.14)	[0.69, 1.18]	0.18 (0.14)	[0.91, 1.59]	0.28 (0.18)	[0.93, 1.88]	0.10 (0.15)	[0.83, 1.47]
Political interest	0.12 (0.06)*	[1.01, 1.30]	−0.03 (0.07)	[0.85, 1.12]	−0.15 (0.09)	[0.73, 1.02]	0.01 (0.08)	[0.87, 1.17]
Left-right placement (right)	0.10 (0.04)**	[1.03, 1.20]	−0.05 (0.04)	[0.88, 1.03]	−0.07 (0.05)	[0.84, 1.02]	0.02 (0.04)	[0.94, 1.11]
Political trust	−0.30 (0.08)***	[0.63, 0.89]	−0.22 (0.09)*	[0.81, 1.18]	0.17 (0.10)	[0.95, 1.47]	0.27 (0.10)**	[1.09, 1.56]
News exposure	−0.08 (0.06)	[0.82, 1.03]	0.03 (0.06)	[0.91, 1.16]	−0.03 (0.08)	[0.84, 1.12]	−0.08 (0.07)	[0.80, 1.06]
Identification Wilders	0.24 (0.09)**	[1.06, 1.51]	0.06 (0.11)	[0.85, 1.32]	−0.10 (0.12)	[0.72, 1.14]	−0.45 (0.13)**	[0.49, 0.81]
Positive affect Wilders	0.09 (0.06)	[0.97, 1.24]	−0.22 (0.08)**	[0.69, 0.93]	0.21 (0.08)**	[1.05, 1.44]	−0.08 (0.08)	[0.80, 1.08]
Identification refugees	−0.16 (0.07)*	[0.74, 0.98]	0.07 (0.08)	[0.85, 1.30]	0.01 (0.09)	[0.85, 1.21]	0.19 (0.08)*	[1.03, 1.41]
Identification richer groups	0.23 (0.08)**	[1.08, 1.46]	−0.19 (0.08)*	[0.70, 0.97]	0.12 (0.09)	[0.93, 1.35]	0.05 (0.08)	[0.90, 1.23]
Identification ordinary citizens	0.08 (0.08)	[0.94, 1.26]	0.08 (0.08)	[0.92, 1.27]	−0.03 (0.10)	[0.79, 1.19]	−0.18 (0.09)*	[0.70, 1.00]
Identification government	−0.20 (0.09)*	[0.69, 0.96]	−0.08 (0.09)	[0.77, 1.11]	0.10 (0.11)	[0.89, 1.36]	0.20 (0.09)*	[1.01, 1.48]
Nagelkerke R^2	0.274		0.107		0.103		0.254	
χ^2 (*df*)	159.69 (13)***		51.22 (13)***		41.57 (13)***		132.39 (13)***	

Note. N = 753. CI = confidence interval; *OR* = odds ratio. Two-tailed tests. Unstandardized regression weights. Standard errors (*SE*s) reported between brackets. The reference category is the control category. *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001

Regarding the selection of populist messages by Wilders, we first see significant, positive effects of political interest, right-wing self-placement, identification with the politician Wilders, and identification with richer groups in Dutch society on selective exposure. This supports H1a. Table 1 also provides insights into the drivers of selective avoidance of Wilders' direct populist communication. Specifically, higher levels of trust in the government, stronger identification with refugees coming to the Netherlands, and identification with politicians in government all increase the likelihood that people avoid messages by Wilders, which is in line with H1b.

Participants were also offered the choice to select populist communication by a member of the in-group of "ordinary people." As shown in Table 1, the results indicate that trust in government, a positive evaluation of Geert Wilders, and identification with richer groups in society significantly predict selective avoidance of such content.

Against this backdrop, it can be concluded that the patterns of selection or avoidance of populist content are different for Geert Wilders vis-à-vis an ordinary citizen. Specifically, when people feel close to Wilders, they are more likely to select the party leader's populist messages and avoid messages communicated by ordinary citizens. This supports H2a. Lower levels of political trust drive selective exposure to populist communication of both the populist leader and the ordinary citizen. This supports H2a and H2b.

The Effects of Populist Communication in Forced Exposure Media Settings

The direct effects of exposure to online populist news on voting preferences are depicted in Table 2.[1] First, voting preferences for the right-wing populist PVV are significantly and substantially higher in the deprivation-framed online news message (M = 39.66, SD = 36.42) compared with the control (M = 26.49, SD = 32.86). Although messages that rely on explicit populist cues also positively affect voting preferences for the PVV, the effects of such cues fails to reach statistical significance, which does not support H3a. The results only provide support for H3c: Messages emphasizing that ordinary people are victimized more than other groups in society positively affect voting preferences for a right-wing populist party. Messages that rely on populist and gratification cues negatively affect voting preferences for the left-wing populist party SP (see Table 2). Specifically, messages emphasizing that ordinary people are threatened by the corrupt elites, but are still better off than other groups in society, negatively affect vote intentions for the SP ($M_{pop.gratification}$ = 29.48, SD = 33.42; $M_{control}$ = 40.10, SD = 34.18).

The results further demonstrate that framing issues in populist ways does not affect voting preferences for mainstream political parties (see Table 2). Against the backdrop of the alleged contagiousness of populist discourse to mainstream political parties, most saliently the People's Party for Freedom (VVD) and the Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA) party, it can thus be concluded that populist messages do not affect voting preferences for mainstream political parties—at least not in forced exposure online news environments.

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[1] Although regression analyses are reported in this article, factorial statistical analyses (ANOVAs) yield the same results.

Table 2. Ordinary Least Squares Regression Model of Direct Effects of Online Populist Communication on Vote Intentions.

	VVD (*n* = 361)			PVV (*n* = 361)			CDA (*n* = 361)			SP (*n* = 361)		
	B	*SE*	β	*B*	*SE*	β	*B*	*SE*	β	*B*	*SE*	β
(Constant)	27.22	4.15		26.49	4.66		27.67	3.67		40.02	4.36	
Deprivation	7.01	5.91	.08	13.17	6.64	.13*	3.78	5.23	.05	−4.75	6.22	−.05
Gratification	2.34	5.94	.03	10.68	6.67	.11	−1.20	5.25	−.02	5.34	6.25	.05
Populism	.05	5.99	.01	2.78	6.73	.03	−.87	5.30	−.01	−2.89	6.30	−.03
Pop. deprivation	2.64	5.97	.03	4.34	6.70	.04	−7.50	5.27	−.10	−1.62	6.27	−.02
Pop. gratification	4.39	5.94	.05	5.31	6.67	.05	1.10	5.25	.01	−10.62	6.20	−.12*
Adjusted R^2		.01			.02			.01			.02	
F		.40			1.10			1.00			1.40	

Note. VVD = People's Party for Freedom; PVV = Freedom Party; CDA = Christian Democratic Appeal; SP = Socialist Party. Two-tailed tests. Unstandardized (*B*) and standardized (β) regression weights. No controls were added in these models.
*$p < .05$.

Selective Exposure to Populism in High-Choice Social Media Settings

In the next steps, we estimated ordinary least squares regression models (bootstrapping) to estimate the role of congruence on both the attitudinal (Table 3) and source level (Table 4)[2] on the effects of populist communication. Crucially, although all analyses controlled for the perceptions that predicted selective exposure or avoidance of populist communication, we are not able to control for (unmeasured) differences between groups. Therefore, it should be stressed that the evidence presented here is not based on a random allocation to groups but rather is endogenous to selection.

Based on the outcomes of Study 1, our analyses focused on voting preferences for the right-wing PVV and the left-wing SP. Table 3 shows that participants who selectively exposed themselves to populist content by Wilders are substantially more likely to vote for the PVV (*M* = 56.88, *SD* = 34.28) than are citizens who selected nonpopulist content (*M* = 34.39, *SD* = 37.27). Those who selected the most incongruent message—gratification cues by an ordinary citizen—are least likely to vote for the PVV (*M* = 13.63, *SD* = 24.87). These results confirm H3a.

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[2] As a validity check, we first assessed whether participants in the self-selected populist conditions differed from participants in the other conditions. After confirming that the self-selected populist group did not differ from other groups in terms of political attitudes and demographics other than those described in the models, we assessed whether the treatment effects of the selective exposure conditions were driven by either source support and attitudinal congruence or by exposure to the stimuli. These additional analyses indicate that there is an independent effect of exposure to the stimuli, and that this effect is stronger for people with congruent issue attitudes and source support. Controlling for perceptions and demographics that may relate to prior attitudes, the effects still hold.

Table 3. Effects of Selective Exposure to Populist Cues and Congruence on Preferences to Vote for the Right-Wing Freedom Party.

	Model 1 (*n* = 753)			Model 2 (*n* = 753)			Model 3 (*n* = 753)		
	B	*SE*	β	*B*	*SE*	β	*B*	*SE*	β
(Constant)	34.40	2.66		35.01	2.72		34.39	2.57	
Propopulist Wilders	22.49	3.48	.28***	21.09	4.15	.26***	1.63	4.84	.02
Propopulist Citizen	−14.01	3.85	−.15***	−14.67	4.25	−.16**	−23.23	4.66	−.25***
Countergratification Wilders	5.45	4.36	.05	4.88	4.46	.04	18.40	4.63	.16***
Countergratification Citizen	−20.77	3.77	−.23***	−21.54	4.13	−.24***	−12.91	4.41	−.14**
Moderate prior attitudes				−3.76	3.60	−.04	.02	3.43	.00
Congruence prior attitudes				1.82	3.21	.03	29.07	4.99	.39***
Pop. Wilders × Congruent Priors							72.71	8.60	.80***
Pop. Citizen × Congruent Priors							61.56	8.91	.49***
Grat. Wilders × Congruent Priors							−72.71	8.60	−.37***
Grat. Citizen × Congruent Priors							−45.01	6.91	−.37***
Adjusted R^2	.197			.198			.285		
F	47.15***			31.88***			34.34***		
F for change in R^2				1.27			31.41***		

Note. Two-tailed tests. Unstandardized (*B*) and standardized (β) regression weights.
**p < .010. ***p < .001.

Contrary to our expectations, participants who selected populist messages communicated by an ordinary citizen were less likely to vote for a right-wing populist political party compared with people who selected nonpopulist messages (see Table 3). The results further demonstrate that participants who selected counterattitudinal gratification cues communicated by Wilders were not more likely to vote for Wilders' PVV. If the same cues are communicated by an ordinary citizen, however, populist party preferences are negatively affected (see Table 3). Together, these results partially support H3a: Selective exposure to populist messages positively relate to populist party preferences, but only if Wilders is the source.

The results only partially support H3b. Compared with the selection of nonpopulist cues, only participants who selected populist content communicated by the Facebook profile of an ordinary citizen were more likely to vote for the SP. The findings demonstrate that populist communication relate to preferences for the PVV and SP in different ways: When people select Wilders as a source, they are more likely to vote for the PVV. When they select the ordinary citizen as a source, participants are more likely to vote for the SP.

We further predicted that populist cues are most effective when people expose themselves to attitudinally congruent content (H4). First, Table 3 (Model 3) shows that this mechanism of motivated reasoning indeed applies to the propensity to vote for the PVV. Specifically, participants who self-selected attitudinally congruent populist content are more likely to vote for a right-wing populist party. The same

processing bias can also be observed for selective exposure to nonpopulist content. As shown in Table 3 (Model 3), participants who selected additionally congruent gratification messages are least likely to vote for the right-wing populist PVV. Taken together, the results provide partial support for H4. Participants with congruent prior attitudes are more likely to vote for populist parties that address their prior levels of perceived deprivation and distrust, but this is only for intentions to vote for the right-wing populist PVV.

Table 4. Effects of Selective Exposure to Populist Cues and Congruence on Preferences to Vote for the Left-Wing Socialist Party.

	Model 1 (n = 753)			Model 2 (n = 753)			Model 3 (n = 753)		
	B	SE	β	B	SE	β	B	SE	β
(Constant)	34.90	2.64		34.59	2.70		34.59	2.70	
Propopulist Wilders	2.11	3.46	.03	3.93	4.33	.05	2.45	6.30	.03
Propopulist citizen	10.78	3.83	.13**	12.26	4.53	.15**	4.29	6.45	.05
Countergratification Wilders	1.59	4.34	.02	2.52	4.54	.03	.43	5.30	.08
Countergratification citizen	8.58	3.75	.10*	9.37	3.96	.11*	13.41	4.37	.16**
Moderate prior attitudes				1.95	3.16	.02	2.56	3.17	.03
Congruence prior attitudes				−2.10	3.10	−.03	−17.59	32.88	−.27
Pop. Wilders × Congruent Priors							17.13	33.46	.22
Pop. Citizen × Congruent Priors							25.54	33.55	.27
Grat. Wilders × Congruent Priors							20.01	33.66	.14
Grat. Citizen × Congruent Priors							5.44	33.33	.05
Adjusted R^2	.011			.010			.013		
F	3.06*			2.18*			1.96*		
F for change in R^2				.44			1.61		

Note. Two-tailed tests. Unstandardized (B) and standardized (β) regression weights.
*p < .050. **p < .010.

The Perceptual Screen of Source Support

Regarding intentions to vote for the PVV, the results indicate that source support only plays a moderating role when the message is communicated by an ordinary citizen (see Table 5, Model 3). Specifically, participants who identify with the populist in-group of ordinary citizens are persuaded most by selective exposure to messages that blame the elites for the deprivation of the people. This supports H5b. Interestingly, the two-way interaction effect of selective exposure to Wilders' populist cues and source support is significant and negative, which indicates that the more participants identify with Wilders, the less likely their vote intentions for the right-wing populist PVV are predicted by selective exposure to populist content. This does not support H5a, and is more likely a consequence of a ceiling effect. This finding also reveals a discrepancy between selection biases and persuasion: People who support Wilders are more likely to select his populist communication, but are not more likely to vote for his party when they selected populist messages communicated by him. Irrespective of the actual populist content of the message, people who support Wilders are already substantially more likely to vote for the PVV than are people who do not identify strongly with this party leader (see Table 5, Model 2).

Table 5. Effects of Selective Exposure to Populist Cues and Supporting Source on Preferences to Vote for the Right-Wing Freedom Party.

	Model 1 (*n* = 753)			Model 2 (*n* = 753)			Model 3 (*n* = 753)		
	B	*SE*	β	*B*	*SE*	β	*B*	*SE*	β
(Constant)	34.39	2.66		-.83	3.81		1.61	4.52	
Propopulist Wilders	22.49	3.48	.28***	8.25	2.75	.10**	18.06	4.40	.22***
Propopulist citizen	−14.01	3.85	−.15***	−3.10	2.81	−.03	−31.49	9.02	−.33***
Countergratification Wilders	5.45	4.36	.05	.45	2.93	.01	−1.83	5.74	−.02
Countergratification citizen	−20.77	3.77	−.23***	−4.03	2.75	−.04	−12.15	9.00	−.13
Moderate prior attitudes				−2.25	2.37	−.02	−1.98	2.37	−.02
Congruence prior attitudes				1.25	2.11	.02	2.23	2.20	.03
Identification Wilders				14.49	.47	.75***	15.41	.62	.79***
Identification ordinary citizens				−1.80	.63	−.06*	−2.88	.76	−.10***
Pop. Wilders × ID Wilders							−2.83	1.02	−.16**
Pop. Citizen × ID Citizen							5.72	1.75	.31***
Grat. Wilders × ID Wilders							.50	1.45	.02
Grat. Citizen × ID Citizen							1.78	1.72	.10
Adjusted R^2	.197			.655			.663		
F	47.15***			179.49***			124.14***		
F for change in R^2				249.25***			5.24***		

Note. Two-tailed tests. Unstandardized (*B*) and standardized (β) regression weights.
**$p < .010$. ***$p < .001$.

Against this backdrop, our results provide support for H5b, but not H5a: People are more likely to vote for the right-wing populist PVV if they identify with the in-group of relatively deprived ordinary citizens, but support for Wilders does not make his populist cues more effective.

Discussion

Responding to the growing electoral success of populism throughout the globe, recent empirical research has devoted extensive attention to the effects of populist communication. In trying to decipher the mechanisms underlying populism's success, research indicates that vulnerable groups in society (e.g., Kriesi et al., 2006) or those who feel they get less than they deserve (e.g., Elchardus & Spruyt, 2016) appeal most to populism. Moreover, recent research indicates that populist citizens have stronger hostile media perceptions and preferences for content that empowers the ordinary citizen (Fawzi, 2018; Schulz et al., 2018). Integrating these literatures, it may be argued that populist communication is persuasive because it introduces an in-group threat by cultivating social identity and assigning blame to credible scapegoats (Mols, 2012). In two experiments, this article aimed to integrate relative deprivation and populist framing while taking the current fragmented media environment into account. To what extent can populist and deprivation-framed messages affect voting preferences in forced and selective media environments?

Confirming theories of cognitive dissonance and motivated reasoning (e.g., Festinger, 1957; Taber & Lodge, 2006), the results indicate that citizens are more likely to select populist messages when they

have congruent prior attitudes. In line with arguments forwarded in extant literature, populist cues are more likely to be selected when people distrust the elites, feel close to the deprived people, and see themselves as victims of a changing world (e.g., Elchardus & Spruyt, 2016; Kriesi et al., 2006). Based on this experimental study, we can thus confirm literature that indicates that people with populist prior attitudes select, and are persuaded by, messages that circumvent the elites (e.g., Fawzi, 2018). For this group of people, the populist message may be most relevant, as it cultivates the in-group threat they experience (Mols, 2012).

In support of the polarizing potential of self-selected congruent political communication (e.g., Stroud, 2008), exposure to congruent populist and deprivation-framed messages has a positive effect on populist party preferences. Incongruent messages may even have the opposite effect, meaning that a large group of citizens may counterargue political content (Druckman & Bolsen, 2011). This finding has important implications for democracy. It shows that citizens who are sensitive to populist arguments could place themselves into filter bubbles (e.g., Pariser, 2011) or echo chambers (e.g., Sunstein, 2009). Here, they can shut themselves off from those who disagree with their worldview and are only open to reassuring populist content. This self-selected congruent content, in turn, guides their populist voting behavior. However, as some empirical research has shown that the recently voiced worries about filter bubbles are not always justified (e.g., Zuiderveen Borgesius et al., 2016)—and as citizens do not always actively avoid cross-cutting exposure (Garrett, 2009)—these interpretations can be nuanced. Citizens may encounter populist or nonpopulist content that does not align with their perceptual screens. However, this study indicates that people demonstrate a confirmation bias when responding to populist content: The message is more likely to activate intentions to vote when it confirms their perceptual screens.

The results of this article indicate that selective exposure and confirmation biases may also have electoral consequences outside of the U.S. (e.g., Iyengar & Hahn, 2009), although polarization along partisan lines is less applicable to the multiparty setting of this study. In Europe, the presence of populist messages on social media (e.g., Engesser et al., 2017) may have far-reaching political consequences, as such messages seem to cultivate a severe in-group threat and sense of deprivation, which can only be restored by voting for populist parties.

This article further shows that source identification plays a central role in the acceptance or rejection of populist arguments. In line with previous research (e.g., Hameleers & Schmuck, 2017; Housholder & LaMarre, 2014), the second experiment demonstrates that populist cues have the strongest effects when people can identify with the source. This again corresponds to the reality of online populism (Engesser et al., 2017; Waisbord & Amado, 2017). Populist politicians are likely to vent populist arguments via their own social media channels, where they are followed by people who agree with their message. Circumventing journalists and directly reaching deprived people, such messages may be highly effective: those who feel close to the populist actor are likely to behave in message-congruent ways. In line with literature on selective avoidance, not all citizens are active in countering or avoiding challenging information (e.g., Garrett, 2009).

This study has some limitations. First, and most important, the results predicting the relationship between selective exposure to populist communication and choice of vote in Study 2 are not based on

randomization—the relationships between self-selected exposure and intentions to vote should thus be interpreted with care. However, the results of the Study 1, which are based on a random allocation between groups, confirm the correlational patterns identified in Study 2: The effects of populist communication on intentions to vote are conditional on confirmation biases. Future research may opt for a different design with repeated measures to show changes in voting perceptions on the individual level. Second, the manipulations of populist content mainly reflected right-wing populist interpretations, emphasizing the elites' failed representation and deprivation from migrants. Although the extreme rich were also connected to the people's deprivation, migrants were seen as the strongest in-group threat. Future research should further test the effectiveness of different left-wing and right-wing populist cues. Next, the experiment was conducted in a single country, in which populist communication strongly resonates with the opportunity structures offered in the political context (e.g., Aalberg et al., 2017). Future research should compare how populist communication affect voting preferences in countries with different levels of populist success. In addition, the ordinary citizen used in this experiment may not have been equally credible for all participants. Future research may rely on a different approach by randomly exposing people to populist messages from different members of ordinary people—who, for example, differ in terms of age and gender. Yet people rated the ordinary citizen as a credible member of the people. As a limitation of this study, it can be argued further that people do not normally see the social media content of complete strangers. However, the sharing options of social media such as Facebook result in incidental exposure: People can see messages from unknown sources that are liked and shared by people in their own network. Future research may assess the extent to which messages distributed via weak versus strong ties may have an impact on the credibility and persuasiveness of populist content. Finally, the selective exposure conditions offered a limited selection of media choices, neglecting nonpolitical content and messages from different political sources. Future research may also offer participants the option to select messages from nonpopulist political actors.

Despite these limitations, this study offers first insights into how populist voting can be affected by exposure to online populist communication in the current high-choice and fragmented social media environment. Against the backdrop of the high visibility of populist politicians on social media, such as Donald Trump and Geert Wilders, this study demonstrates that such online communication can have an impact on the voting choice of citizens, especially when they already tend to agree with the content and source of the message.

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