

**The Polarizing Impact of News Coverage on Populist Attitudes in the Public:
Evidence from a Panel Study in four European Democracies**

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Abstract

The study explores how news messages carrying parts of the populist ideology contribute to a polarization of public opinion about populism. It combines a content analysis of news coverage on two policy areas ($N = 7,119$ stories) with a two-wave panel survey ($N = 2,338$) in four European metropolitan regions (Berlin, Paris, London, Zurich). In three regions, unopposed media messages with a populist stance have a conditional effect on populist attitudes that depends on prior convictions. A higher dose of exposure to populist news coverage enhances both prior agreement and disagreement with populism. While the observed interaction patterns vary between regions, the general picture suggests that populist messages in the news foster polarization between public support and disapproval of populism.

Keywords: Populism, Media Effects, Public Opinion, Attitudes, News Media, Polarization.

In recent elections, citizens of many European countries have strongly supported populist parties and politicians, such as the Polish Law and Justice Party (51.5%), the Swiss SVP (29.4%) or the Freedom Party of Austria (49.7%). Other parts of the world have witnessed similar developments, with left-wing governments in Latin America (Waisbord, 2013) the current US President (Baggini, 2016). In search for reasons of the growing success of political populism, many authors have recently turned their attention to the diffusion of populist ideas through the news media (Reinemann, Aalberg, Esser, Strömbäck, & de Vreese, 2017; Krämer, 2014; Mazzoleni, 2008; Mazzoleni, Stewart, & Horsfield, 2003; Rooduijn, 2014).

However, empirical research on the effects of mediated populism on the audience is still at its initial stage. Extant studies have investigated the effects of media portrayals on the evaluation of populist leaders (Bos, van der Brug, & de Vreese, 2011, 2013), the effects of populist messages on anti-immigrant attitudes (Arendt, Marquart, & Matthes, 2015; Matthes & Schmuck, 2015; Sheets, Bos, & Boomgarden, 2016), and voting for populist parties (Sheets, Bos, & Boomgarden, 2016). Research has found evidence for differential effects of populist messages for different groups of citizens (Bos et al., 2013; Hameleers, Bos, & de Vreese, 2016). While it has been observed that the rise of populism contributes to a polarization of party systems and political debates (see, e.g. Afonso & Papadopoulos, 2015; Pappas, 2014), media effects studies have not yet explicitly addressed how news media, by spreading messages with a populist stance, could contribute to such a polarization. This is where the present study taps in.

We investigate how media messages lead to differential effects on populist attitudes depending on the prior degree of agreement with populism as a thin, anti-elitist ideology. Additionally, we explore this in a real-life setting. Whereas most existing media effects studies in the context of populism have been conducted as experiments (but, see, Bos et al., 2011) the data for the present research were collected in a panel survey in four European metropolitan regions. They are combined with a content analysis of news coverage on two issues that are crucial for populist parties: labor market and migration. While experiments can only detect effects of recent exposure to specific messages, a combination of survey and content analysis data enables researchers to investigate the cumulative effects of repeated exposure to a body of messages within the individual media diet. This method, thus, grants greater external validity, is able to consider long-term media effects, and has a broader focus.

Populism within News Coverage

Political populism is mostly regarded as a “thin ideology” (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008; Mudde, 2004) which refers to a rather narrow set of ideas about the world and does not offer a complete world-view (Mudde, 2004). In the case of populism, these ideas concern the structures of power in society (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008). Its core is an antagonism between the ‘good’, homogenous people and the ‘bad’ political elite. Accordingly, the people are deemed to be the legitimate sovereign which is obstructed and defrauded by the elite for egoistic reasons.

While this thin concept of populism describes the relationship between the people and the elite, populism can be combined with other ideologies such as socialism or nationalism (Rovira Kaltwasser, 2014; Mudde, 2004), which define the relationship of the people with different societal groups (e.g., immigrants or entrepreneurs). Authors therefore speak of thick or full populism when both components, i.e., derogation of the political elite and exclusionist views of other societal groups co-occur (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Reinemann et al., 2017; Rydgren, 2007). The present research follows the thin understanding of populism which presents the ‘lowest common denominator’ shared by all left- or right-wing manifestations of populism. This approach has been recommended because it enables researchers to compare their results for different manifestations of populism (Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012). Along this line, we define populism as “a thin ideology, which considers—in a Manichean outlook—society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, the positively connoted ‘pure people’ versus the negatively connoted ‘corrupt elite’, and postulates unrestricted sovereignty of the people” (Wirth et al., 2016, p. 15).

An increasing number of researchers argues that the news media play a crucial role for political actors who adapt a populist position (Krämer, 2014; Mazzoleni, 2008; Mazzoleni et al., 2003; Rooduijn, 2014). It is an ongoing discussion in this line of research whether instances of populism occurring in media content should be regarded

as strategies, frames, or styles (see, e.g., Bos et al., 2013, Caiani & della Porta, 2011; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). While terms such as strategy or frame imply intentionality by the media outlet (“media populism”, Krämer, 2014) or the politician who is cited populist notions might also be included in media messages without a strategic intention. However, from a media effects perspective these messages are meaningful as well. They might as well affect populist attitudes among the public. Therefore, the present study adheres to a broader concept of populist messages in the media which includes all kinds of statements within news reports that convey a populist stance—independent of their source and its presumable intentions.

As to the occurrence of populist messages in the news media, Mazzoleni (2008) has argued that there is a complicity between mass-market (or tabloid) media and populist actors. He suggests that such media outlets have a natural affinity towards populist messages because of their preference for sensationalism, scandals, and conflicts. Upmarket (or quality) media outlets, on the other hand, are deemed to more strongly agree with the positions of established politicians, and should, therefore, either oppose or ignore populist actors. Empirical research does not fully support this notion. A number of studies found that upmarket and mass-market newspapers do not differ with respect to the prevalence of anti-elitist and people-centrist statements or statements by populist politicians (T. Akkerman, 2011; Bos, van der Brug, & de Vreese, 2010; Herkman, 2015; Rooduijn, 2014). However, Herkman (2015) showed that populist politicians were portrayed in a more positive manner in mass-market outlets.

A recent content analysis (Engesser, Ernst, Büchel, & Esser, 2017) investigated the occurrence of populism in the press coverage of ten countries. In line with existing research, this study found hardly any differences between upmarket and mass-market newspapers. However, across countries populism is significantly more prevalent in weekly news magazines than in daily newspapers. These results were based on an

analysis of three different types of messages: *anti-elitist statements*, *people-centrist statements* and *claims for popular sovereignty*. Anti-elitist statements were most prominent whereas direct claims for popular sovereignty have only rarely been found. Moreover, results indicate that the different messages hardly occur simultaneously. Rather, statements pertaining to the different elements of the thin populist ideology seem to be spread in a fragmented manner through the news media. There are hardly any news items that convey the full populist idea and could thus be called ‘populist’ by themselves. Instead, single news pieces most often only speak to one element of the thin populist ideology. Along this line, Aslanidis (2017) has argued to discard dichotomous classification of messages and actors as either populist or non-populist. Instead, he proposes to apply a nuanced view that quantifies the occurrence of populist message elements within societal discourse on an aggregate level.

Populist Attitudes in the Public

Based on the conceptualization of populism as a thin ideology, measures of populist attitudes usually reflect two core elements of the populist ideology: *anti-elitism* and *demand for popular sovereignty* (Akkerman, Mudde, & Zaslove, 2014; Hawkins, Riding, & Mudde, 2012). Lately, it has been suggested to extend these two components, the definition of an antagonistic outgroup and the description of its relationship to the ingroup, by a third dimension that describes the ingroup: the *belief in a homogenous and virtuous people* (Schulz, Müller, et al., 2017). According to this approach, populist attitudes are defined by the individual support of all three ideas. By themselves, these dimensions are not necessarily populist.

Different studies have detected correlates of populist attitudes. For instance, it has been shown that individuals high in populist attitudes have a higher preference to vote for the two Dutch populist parties, the Party for Freedom, and the Socialist Party (A. Akkerman et al., 2014). Similarly, in Chile voters of leftist parties showed stronger

populist attitudes than those of other parties, which is a plausible finding in the context of South America (Hawkins & Kaltwasser, 2014). Moreover, recent research has demonstrated that populist attitudes are related to a preference for populist media messages (Hameleers, Bos, & de Vreese, 2017) and to the perception of hostile mainstream media (Schulz, Wirth, Wettstein, Wirz, & Müller, 2017). These findings suggest that there will also be media effects on populist attitudes.

Effects of Populism within News Coverage on Populist Attitudes

Recently, researchers have begun to investigate the effects of populist communication. For instance, Matthes and Schmuck (2015) as well as Arendt et al. (2015) have detected effects of right-wing populist advertising on anti-immigrant stereotypes. Bos et al. (2011) used a combination of panel survey data and content analysis to compare the effects of media content on the evaluation of populist vs. mainstream political leaders. Results indicate similar effects for both types of politicians. Populist actors are as dependent on beneficial media coverage as other political actors. An experiment by Sheets et al. (2016) demonstrated that anti-elitist or anti-immigrant populist media messages indirectly affect voting intentions for a populist party through anti-immigrant attitudes and political cynicism.

One weakness of the experimental approach is that it does not account for the fragmented distribution of populism that content analyses of news coverage have pointed to. Most existing experiments use thick populist stimuli that combine different elements of the thin populist ideology with exclusionist outgroup derogations. However, content analytical results suggest that most news items do not contain more than one reference to any element of the populist ideology. Nevertheless, these fragmented references to the populist ideology, that is rarely fully explicated in news media, are likely to affect public opinion towards populism. Krämer (2014) has argued that exposure to media messages that in one way or another speak to the populist ideology

should activate related cognitive schemata. This is in line with schema theory which suggests that human cognition is organized in the form of topic clusters (Bartlett, 1933; Brewer & Nakamura, 1984; Iran-Nejad, 1980). If one element of a cognitive cluster is made salient, the whole network of associations may be activated so that other parts of the cognitive cluster are co-activated. This is important since the predominant concept sees populist attitudes consisting of three subdimensions, namely *anti-elitism*, *demand for popular sovereignty* and the *belief in a homogeneous and virtuous people*. Research has shown that the different sub-dimensions of populist attitudes are strongly inter-related and form a common latent factor (A. Akkerman et al., 2014, Schulz, Müller, et al., 2017). For instance, if an individual is exposed to a media message that promotes an anti-elitist stance, this message will in the first place prime anti-elitist cognitions in the attitudinal structure. Subsequently, the activated anti-elitist attitudes might make salient related cognitions about the demand for popular sovereignty and the belief in a homogeneous and virtuous people. This way, even media messages which do not convey the populist ideology as a whole but only speak to one aspect of it are likely to affect populist attitudes in total. It can be assumed that the more frequently populist attitudes are cognitively activated by message exposure, the stronger these attitudes will become (Arendt, 2015). In line with this dose-response approach of media priming, we hypothesize:

H1: A relatively higher dose of exposure to statements that correspond to populism will increase populist attitudes over time.

While this assumption is based on a cognitive explanation, Hameleers et al. (2016) have argued that populist messages often aim at triggering emotions. Moreover, the authors show that populist messages have differential effects. In their study, the effects of emotionalized populist blame attributions were stronger for individuals with lower identification with their nation and with Europe. In a similar vein, Bos et al.

(2013) have shown that the effects of populist media messages on the evaluation of populist politicians are stronger for individuals with high political cynicism. Such differential effects of populist media messages have been assumed by Krämer (2014). He has suggested that receiving higher doses of populist messages from the media could induce reactance (Brehm, 1966) for parts of the audience. That is, repeated exposure could annoy individuals who do not identify with the populist worldview and thus increase their rebuttal of populism.

That way, the spreading of messages with a populist stance by news media could enhance societal polarization. Frequent media priming of the populist ideology could result in persuasion effects for individuals who generally agree with populist ideas and in reactance effects for those disagreeing with populist ideas. The driving force behind such differential effects might be social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Hameleers et al. (2016) as well as Krämer (2014) have argued that populist messages appeal to social identity. They construct a societal divide between the pure, homogenous people and societal elites. This offers confirmation for those identifying themselves with the concept of an oppressed people (Krämer, 2014). At the same time, however, individuals rather identifying with the societal mainstream and its existing political institutions are deterred (Hameleers et al., 2016). This speaks to a large body of research on societal polarization that has observed increasing divides in the US political landscape in terms of partisan affect and identification while issue positions are even converging (see, e.g., Iyengar, Sood, & Lelkes, 2012; Mason, 2013). Media messages promoting the populist ideology could contribute to such a polarization. Instead of traditional party differences, however, they emphasize another line of social demarcation: the distinction between those in favor of and against the current distribution of power within society. In line with these assumptions, we hypothesize:

H2a: For individuals with weak populist attitudes, a relatively higher dose of exposure to statements that correspond to populism will decrease populist attitudes.

H2b: For individuals with strong populist attitudes, a relatively higher dose of exposure to statements that correspond to populism will increase populist attitudes.

Method

In order to test our hypotheses we conducted a two-wave panel survey in four European regions. All four regions included an urban center as well as a its rural periphery: Berlin (with Brandenburg), London (with Buckinghamshire), Paris (with other departments of Île de France), and Zurich (with canton Zurich). The survey was complemented by a standardized content analysis of regional and national newspaper coverage on two issues in the period between the panel waves. Survey and content analysis data were combined on the basis of an individual matching of the media diet received by each respondent. We opted to limit our study to regional subsamples instead of a nationwide sample because the media outlets of one region are easier to identify and submit to a content analysis. However, the four subsamples combine urban centers as well as suburban and rural regions. Thus, they offer a culturally and politically diverse sample of individuals with different backgrounds.

We chose a multi-country approach for the present research in order to test the robustness of our findings in different national settings. For this purpose, it is desirable that the set of countries features a certain degree of similarity while being sufficiently different at the same time. Therefore, we selected four Western European democracies that have all witnessed an uprise of right-wing populist parties. In Germany, the *AfD* (“Alternative für Deutschland”; Berbuir, Lewandowsky, & Siri, 2015) has a rather young history but has been very successful in the latest federal elections. Moreover, in Germany there is also a left-wing party that is considered populist by some authors (*Die Linke*, see, e.g., Werz, 2013). In the United Kingdom, the “UK Independence Party”

(*UKIP*) has replaced the Liberal-Democrats as the third largest party in the 2015 general election (Clarke, Whiteley, Borges, Sanders, & Stewart, 2016). French “Front National” (*FN*) which has been founded in 1972 but has significantly gained success in recent years (Reynié, 2016). Leader Marine Le Pen received 21.5% in the first round of the 2017 presidential election. With 29.4%, Swiss *SVP* (“Schweizerische Volkspartei”) has been continuously successful for quite a while. In the 2015 Federal Elections, they gained the highest vote share of all parties for the fifth time in succession (Ernst, Engesser, & Esser, 2016). The history of populist parties, however, is not the only difference between the selected countries. In terms of their political system, they represent quite different types of democracies (Germany and Switzerland: consensus; France and UK: majoritarian) with various forms of government (Germany and UK: parliamentary, France: semi-presidential; Switzerland: directorial).

Panel Survey: Procedure and Measures

The two waves of the panel survey were conducted in April 2014 and March 2015. The data were gathered through an online questionnaire. Respondents were recruited from online-access panels, applying a quota procedure with regard to age and gender. The first panel wave consisted of samples of 1.600 respondents for the Berlin, London, and Paris regions and 2000 respondents for the Zurich region. The slightly larger sampling rate for the Zurich region was applied in order to have one somewhat larger subsample that would allow more fine-grained analyses of subgroups. As a consequence of the long time period between the two panel waves the panel mortality ranged between 37.0% (Zurich) and 60.0% (Paris). The remaining sample consists of $n = 649$ participants for the Berlin area (54.5% female; age: $M = 45.80$; $SD = 13.27$), $n = 845$ respondents from the London area (41.9% female; age: $M = 51.41$; $SD = 13.37$), $n = 640$ participants from the Paris region (61.9% female; age: $M = 47.40$; $SD = 13.51$), and $n = 1260$ respondents for the Zurich region (47.1% female; age: $M = 51.74$; $SD =$

14.00). In terms of education, the sample features a slight overrepresentation of respondents with a tertiary educational degree (Berlin: 43.3%; London: 55.7%; Paris: 58.0%; Zurich: 45.6%) as compared to the 2014 OECD data where values range between 27% for Germany and 42% for the UK. However, all subsamples still contain a considerable amount of respondents with lower education levels.

Populist attitudes. Populist attitudes were measured in both panel waves using a five-item short version of a recently developed populist attitudes inventory (Schulz, Müller, et al., 2017). Survey participants rated all items using 5-point Likert scales ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*. *Anti-elitism* and *belief in a homogenous and virtuous people* were assessed with two items each. One item dealt with the *demand for popular sovereignty*. Table 1 gives an overview of all items. Moreover, it includes the results of paired sample *t*-tests that indicate changes in the items' mean values between the two panel waves within the four metropolitan regions. The items yielded a good internal consistency (Cronbach's α_{w1} between .68 and .76; Cronbach's α_{w2} between .72 and .76). They were thus modelled as a latent factor in further analyses.

[Table 1 about here]

Media exposure. To enable the assignment of individually encountered populist messages within media content, we assessed respondents' exposure to all media outlets included in the content analysis using a list-frequency technique (Andersen, de Vreese, & Albæk, 2016). From a list of newspapers and magazines, each respondent indicated which outlets he or she was using to receive political information on a three-point scale (0 = *not at all*; 1 = *one to three days a week*; 2 = *four to seven days a week*). For magazines and weeklies, the scale was adapted (1 = *one to two times a month*; 2 = *three to four times a month*). This three-step scale is a somewhat coarse approximation to actual exposure. However, research by Prior (2009) indicates that self-assessing media

exposure in retrospect is a rather complex task for respondents that might result in biased estimates. This is a serious issue for all linkage analyses (Scharkow & Bachl, 2016). In light of these findings, we opted not to use a more fine-grained measure of exposure in order to reduce error variance that might result from false memory. In doing so, we accept that our measure can only be regarded as an approximation to respondents' actual exposure.

Control variables. Additionally, we measured a range of covariates in order to control predictors of populist attitudes in Wave 1. Respondents reported *age*, *gender*, *household income*, and highest *educational degree*. The latter was re-coded into a three-point ordinal scale that is comparable across countries following the classification of the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED), i.e., primary, secondary, and tertiary education. Moreover, respondents were asked to self-assess their *political interest* using a scale from 1 = *not at all interested* to 5 = *very interested* and their *political orientation* on a scale from 1 = *left* to 11 = *right*. Additionally, political orientation was re-coded to also assess *political extremity*. For this purpose, we applied a scale from 0 to 5 where the middle of the original scale was assigned the value 0 and both its minimum and maximum received the new maximum value of 5.

Content Analysis: Procedure and Measures

In addition to the panel survey, a content analysis of a range of printed news media outlets was performed. Because of the dynamic news environment of the world-wide web it is hardly possible to reliably assess exposure to online news with survey data (Scharkow, 2016). Because of that, we decided to omit online news outlets in the content analysis. Much of the news content that is spread online can also be found in the respective media outlets' print versions (see, e.g., Ghersetti, 2014) so that the print coverage should give a good impression of populist statements within news coverage in general. Against this background, concentrating on print content seems justifiable for

the purpose of investigating news coverage effects. For print outlets, it can be more reliably assessed which respondents are exposed to which messages.

Moreover, we decided to investigate issue-related media coverage instead of election coverage. Namely, we included all articles addressing the issues of migration or labor market policies. These two issues were selected because they represent policy areas which are very important to either right-wing (immigration) or left-wing (labor market) political actors. The media sample for each metropolitan region consisted of two large national quality newspapers of different political stances (Berlin: *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*; London: *The Guardian*, *The Times*; Paris: *Le Monde*, *Le Figaro*; Zurich: *Tages-Anzeiger*, *Neue Züricher Zeitung*), two tabloid newspapers (Berlin: *Bild*, *B.Z.*; London: *The Sun*, *Daily Mirror*; Paris: *20 Minutes*, *Metro*; Zurich: *Blick*, *20 Minuten*), two weekly news magazines (Berlin: *Der Spiegel*, *Focus*; London: *The Economist*, *The Spectator*; Paris: *L'Express*, *Le Point*; Zurich: *Weltwoche*, *WOZ*) as well as a varying number of regional newspapers. This selection was tailored to represent the different elements of the print news market in the respective metropolitan regions. Since the number of newspaper articles addressing the two issues was too high for an analysis of the complete sample, random samples were drawn from the pool of articles from each news outlet. The sampling rate for the different titles depended on the number of available texts, with an average of 14%. A total of 7,119 articles were included in the analysis.

For each news story, we analyzed all statements from all sources. For each statement, it was coded whether it featured one or more of a series of references to the thin populist ideology. These message types were derived from the three-dimensional conceptualization of thin populism that includes the sub-dimensions *anti-elitism* (e.g., “[He] claimed that the drastic reductions in investigations and prosecutions of illegal gangmasters showed how little the government cared about ending workplace

exploitation”), *people-centrism* (e.g., “I’m very impressed by the way that people are getting to work and I thank them for their patience”) and *sovereignty* (e.g., “We must change our political system to give the citizen more power and the government less”).

They are summarized in Table 2.

[Table 2 about here]

Moreover, we also coded whether a statement by another speaker within the same article contradicted the respective statement. All instances in which another statement came to a different evaluation of the same target, evaluated the speaker of the populist statement negatively, or contradicted the statement explicitly were regarded as contradictions. This was the case for 12.8 % of all populist statements. We assumed that contradiction severely limits a statement’s potential effects upon its readers. That is why we decided to consider only unopposed statements for all further analyses.

The news stories were coded by a team of 87 intensively trained coders who agreed satisfactorily with a gold standard prepared by the project leaders (in total: 92.3% agreement; Cohen’s $\kappa = .72$) and pairwise among each other (in total: 83.2%, Cohen’s $\kappa = .64$). All coders had to pass an initial reliability test (five news items and 137 statements) during training. Additionally, a concealed reliability test (29 news items and a multitude of statements) was conducted during the regular coding sessions. All coders were native speakers or at least very proficient (C2-level degree) in the language they coded.

Matching of Survey and Content Analysis Data

The data from the content analysis for each media outlet were used to compute impact values reflecting the extent to which each individual respondent was likely to be confronted with unopposed statements featuring one of the coded message types corresponding to populism within the coverage they were exposed to 30 days prior to the second wave of the survey. Each respondent was matched with a score representing this amount of coverage. This score was calculated by first computing the number of

unopposed populist statements for each text published within this 30-day period. Using the sampling rate of each title, the number of articles per medium was extrapolated to a 100%-sample of the respective outlet. Each respondent was then assigned the scores for the media they used, weighted by their self-reported media use frequency. Titles used 1-3 days per week (or 1-2 issues per month for weeklies) were weighted with a factor 0.5 whereas media outlets used 4 or more days per week (or more than two issues per month for weeklies) were weighted with a factor 1.0. Each respondent was only assigned the media content up to the day of their second participation in the survey. News articles published after completion of the survey were not included.

As the number of statements assigned to the respondents exhibited a strongly skewed distribution, the logarithm of this score was used for all further analyses. Respondents who did not use any of the coded news outlets on a regular basis were excluded since the data do not contain any information about their media diet's content. The remaining sample consisted of $n = 406$ respondents for the Berlin region (62.5% of all Wave 2 respondents), $n = 506$ respondents for the London region (59.9% of all Wave 2 respondents), $n = 412$ respondents for the Paris region (64.4% of all Wave 2 respondents), and $n = 1014$ respondents for the Zurich region (80.5% of all Wave 2 respondents).

Data Analysis

Analyses were conducted with the software package MPlus 7.3 using maximum likelihood estimation and the full information maximum likelihood procedure to handle missing values. Since we assume that populist attitudes as well as media effects on these attitudes greatly depend on national contexts, we treated the subsamples of the four metropolitan regions separately in the analyses.

In a first step, we tested our measurement model of populist attitudes in all four subsamples and for the data from both panel waves. Corresponding to the internal

consistency tests already performed results of these confirmatory factor analyses indicated that the five populist attitude items that we used converge to one latent factor for all four subsamples and both points in time. Thus, we proceeded to calculate structural models. In order to account for measurement invariance over time (Schemer, Kühne, & Matthes, 2014), factor loadings of like items were fixed at the same values for both latent factors within all models. First, we calculated a structural model for each metropolitan region in which populist attitudes in the second panel wave were predicted by populist attitudes in the first wave and the dose of unopposed populist statements received. The impact of control variables was assessed for populist attitudes at Wave 1 since we assumed that these variables represent stable constructs whose influence does not change over time. The model resulted in an acceptable fit for all four metropolitan regions (Berlin: $\chi^2(101) = 159.79, p \leq .001$; CFI = .97; RMSEA = .036; SRMR = .040; Paris: $\chi^2(101) = 237.47, p \leq .001$; CFI = .90; RMSEA = .057; SRMR = .051; London: $\chi^2(101) = 288.46, p \leq .001$; CFI = .90; RMSEA = .061; SRMR = .059; Zurich: $\chi^2(101) = 390.02, p \leq .001$; CFI = .93; RMSEA = .053; SRMR = .048).

In order to finally test the interaction effect between the dose of unopposed populist statements received through the news media and prior populist attitudes that was assumed in H2a-b, we additionally calculated a latent moderation model for each metropolitan region following the LMS approach suggested by Klein and Moosbrugger (2000). This procedure allows the integration of an interaction term of an observed and a latent variable. The resulting model is depicted in Figure 1.

[Figure 1 about here]

Since the LMS approach uses raw data instead of the variance-covariance structure, no chi-square or related fit statistics are available to assess model fit. However, since the models with and without interaction term are nested, their fit can be compared using likelihood-ratio tests.

Results

Results of the Content Analysis

Before testing the hypotheses with the models described above we want to give a brief overview about content analytical results. The data indicate differences in the amount of newspaper articles that contain unopposed statements corresponding to the populist ideology between the four metropolitan regions. In the Paris media sample, 20.4% of all coded texts included at least one such statement, while for the Berlin region this was only true for 8.6% of the articles that were coded. The London (15.2%) and Zurich (13.1%) media samples range between these values. These differences between the regional subsamples are significant ($\chi^2(3) = 91.68, p \leq .001$). Only a small share of articles per subsample contained more than one unopposed statement corresponding to populism (Paris: 2.5%; London: 1.4%; Zurich: 1.1%; Berlin: 0.4%).

Results of the Panel Survey

Table 3 gives an overview of the parameters of the estimated structural equation model without the interaction effect (as depicted in Figure 1). Results indicate that the four metropolitan regions differ greatly in terms of predictors of populist attitudes at Wave 1. For the London sample, political orientation is very important with left-leaning individuals exhibiting stronger populist tendencies. In the Paris and Zurich samples, however, right-leaning respondents show stronger support of populist statements. In Berlin, Paris, and Zurich, age is positively related with populist attitudes. In Paris and Zurich, higher political interest is associated with lower populist attitudes whereas only in the Berlin sample political extremity is a predictor of high populist attitudes. Higher income leads to lower populist attitudes in the Berlin and Zurich subsamples. The same is true for a higher educational level. This relationship also holds in the London sample.

[Table 3 about here]

In H1 it was assumed that a higher dose of exposure to statements that correspond to populism leads to an increase in populist attitudes. However, results indicate that this is not the case. There is no unconditional effect of the dose of exposure to such statements on populist attitudes at Wave 2 in any of the four metropolitan areas. Thus, H1 has to be discarded. In H2a, we hypothesized that for individuals with weak populist attitudes exposure to a higher dose of populist statements would further decrease populist attitudes. Moreover, in H2b, it was hypothesized that for individuals with strong populist attitudes, this would further increase populist attitudes. This was tested using the latent moderation model described above. As a first step, we conducted likelihood-ratio tests that compare the model fit of these LMS models with the original structural models without interaction term. Results suggest that the moderation model fits the data better than the main-effects models in three of the four subsamples (Berlin: $D(1) = 4.00$; $p \leq .05$; Paris: $D(1) = 7.86$; $p \leq .01$; Zurich: $D(1) = 6.36$; $p \leq .05$). For the London subsample, however, this is not true ($D(1) = 1.56$; *n.s.*).

[Table 4 about here]

Table 4 contains the model results for the latent moderation model that includes a conditional effect of the dose of unopposed statements corresponding to populism that depends on prior populist attitudes. In three of the four subsamples, there is a significant interaction effect (Berlin: $B = 0.077$; $SE = 0.037$; $p \leq .05$; Paris: $B = 0.089$; $SE = 0.025$; $p \leq .001$; Zurich: $B = 0.083$; $SE = 0.031$; $p \leq .01$). In line with the results of the likelihood-ratio test, results indicate that no such interaction can be found in the London sample ($B = -0.084$; $SE = 0.068$; *n.s.*). Thus, H2a-b have to be rejected for London. A comparison of the R^2 values for the models reported in Tables 3 and 4 reveals that the amount of additionally explained variance through inclusion of the interaction term is at a low level in the other three subsamples. Nevertheless, the data provide evidence of a conditional effect of exposure to statements with a populist stance.

[Figures 2-4 about here]

Whether this significant interaction effect supports H2a-b cannot be judged from the model parameters alone. Therefore, we plotted the relationship of the focal predictor variable (i.e., exposure to messages corresponding to populism) and populist attitudes at Wave 2 for different levels of the moderator (i.e., prior populist attitudes), namely for values of one standard deviation below and above the mean. These plots can be found in Figures 2-4. For all three subsamples, the plots yield support for H2a. In the Berlin and Paris samples, the dose of unopposed statements with a populist notion significantly reduces populist attitudes for those respondents who already exhibited low prior agreement with populism. The same effect can also be observed in the Zurich sample though not as clearly. H2b finds mixed support. In the Zurich sample, the dose of unopposed populist statements received from news coverage significantly increases populist attitudes for those respondents who already ranged high in populist attitudes at Wave 1. For the Berlin sample, a similar tendency can be found. The plot for the Paris sample, however, fails to indicate such an effect. Thus, H2b has to be rejected for Paris.

Discussion

The present study adds to research that investigates the news media's role in the recent uprise of political populism. We used a real-life setting to explore how media messages that convey parts of the populist ideology polarize populist attitudes in the public. The present study combined a two-wave panel survey in four Western European regions with a content analysis of news coverage on two policy areas that are crucial for populist political actors: migration and labor market. We focused on effects of the dose of statements with a populist stance that were not contradicted within the article they appeared in. Moreover, we assumed that the influence of such unopposed statements in the media could depend on media users' prior attitudes toward populism.

The results confirm this assumption. In none of the four regions under investigation do the data support an unconditional effect of populist media messages on populist attitudes. However, there is evidence for a conditional effect that depends on prior attitudes towards populism. In three regions under investigation, there is a significant interaction effect between the dose of unopposed populist messages received through the media and prior populist attitudes on populist attitude change. The strongest effect was found for the Paris metropolitan region which was also the subsample with the highest amount of populist statements. Only for the London region, no media effect has been found. This might be explicable by the fact that in this subsample there was hardly any change in populist attitudes between the two panel waves (see, Table 1).

For the Zurich region, results indicate that both respondents with strongly populist and strongly anti-populist prior convictions changed their populist attitudes in response to the dose of messages with a populist stance they received. Anti-populists became less populist and populists became more populist if they were exposed to a larger amount of such messages. The Paris subsample displayed a similar pattern, though the persuasion effect among pro-populist media users did not show as clearly as in Zurich. For the Berlin subsample, reinforcing media effects were only obtained for people scoring low in prior populist attitudes. This might be explicable by the fact that populism has a longer tradition in France and Switzerland than in Germany. A persuasive effect of populist messages spread through the media might become more likely if populism is already established in a political system. Otherwise, populist messages might be regarded somewhat off-limits. Besides, also two methodological explanations might account for the mixed picture: First, the change of populist attitudes between the two panel waves is stronger in the Zurich and the Paris sample than in Berlin (see, Table 1). This means, there is more variance to explain within these two

subsamples. Second, the Zurich subsample turned out larger than the subsamples of the other three regions. This makes it easier to detect even small effects.

The amount of variance explained by the conditional media effect is rather low (between one and two percent). However, this does not necessarily indicate that news coverage influences populist attitudes only to a small amount. It has to be kept in mind that only parts of the respondents' media diet was assessed in the present study, namely print newspapers' and news magazines' coverage on two specific policy areas. Additionally considering television and online news and coverage about other political issues would probably lead to detecting stronger media effects. Moreover, we investigated the effects using a real-life setting instead of lab experiments. This method has considerable advantages in terms of external validity. But it comes with the downside that a lot of external factors cannot be controlled (Poindexter & McCombs, 2000). This produces error variance in the dependent variable and makes effects harder to detect. Consequently, a recent simulation study demonstrates that this method might underestimate actual media effects (Scharkow & Bachl, 2016).

Nevertheless, the data of the present research should be interpreted with care. The evidence stems from a limited number of Western European countries. For these countries, however, the present results suggest that the interplay of populism and the media might contribute to a polarization of societies. The more messages with a populist stance are unopposedly spread by the media the more likely it seems that opinion camps on both ends of the populist attitude scale become more extreme. The more populism is present as an ideology in societal discourse the harder it gets for an individual to have a moderate position towards this worldview. Whether a person is in favor of or against populist ideas might that way increasingly become a matter of social identity. This supports the notion that populist messages appeal to social identity processes (Hameleers et al., 2016; Krämer, 2014).

The dynamics between populism and social identity processes will thus have to be more thoroughly explored by future research. The present results indicate that media coverage plays an important role in these processes. Populism is a communication phenomenon that uses social identity appeals to polarize the audience. As populist political actors continue to be successful, linking populist communication to societal polarization is thus an important future avenue for communication research. More specifically, future studies should include the reactance perspective that has been introduced by Krämer (2014) and has first been empirically tested in the present research. Existing message effect studies almost exclusively considered persuasive effects of populist communication. However, the present analyses have shown that defense-motivated reactance effects of individuals disagreeing with the populist message might be the stronger and more robust effects of populist communication.

This observation has implications for the question how to evaluate populism and its societal impact. It is an ongoing discussion in the research literature whether populism and populist communication should be judged as having mainly negative societal consequences or whether it could also be seen as a functional corrective within the political landscape (Kaltwasser, 2014; Laclau, 2005; Mudde, 2004). If populist communication mainly deterred citizens from an anti-elitist worldview this could be seen as a positive effect. However, since reactance and persuasion effects of populist communication often appear to occur simultaneously for different individuals the case becomes more complicated. The result is a polarization of public sentiment on this question. While, traditionally, polarization is regarded as increasing partisanship within different camps of a party system (Baldassarri & Gelman, 2008; Fiorina & Abrams, 2008; Iyengar et al., 2012; Mason, 2013), the populist ideology introduces another societal divide: the alleged antagonism between the ruling, corrupt elite and the upright people. In doing so it bridges traditional divides. It brings established mainstream

parties and their partisans closer together and leads to the strengthening of the political center as a homogenous camp. At the same time it bridges gaps between different types of anti-elitist movements from both ends of the traditional political left-right axis. In promoting such a new cleavage the spreading of populist ideas through the news media ultimately increases the problem of a fragmented population in democratic systems and, thus, ultimately to social disintegration and growing conflict. This is the opposite of what the populist ideology claims to offer when referring to the homogenous people it purports to represent.

Limitations and Future Research

As all research, also the present study does not come without limitations. Our study was the first field-based approach to assess media effects on populist attitudes. We had to be selective with respect to specific media outlets, issues, and samples. Future research will have to further investigate these effects considering other media outlets, issues and samples. For instance, it will need to more explicitly study message effects for individuals with lower education which are specifically susceptible to populist messages (Bos et al., 2013). Also, the present study was limited to Western European democracies with strong right-wing populist parties. Results may differ for other political and cultural settings. Future research will therefore have to explore whether the polarizing effect of populist messages also holds in the context of other countries. In a similar vein, future research on the effects of populist messages will need to consider social media channels. Not only are these platforms a preferred information source for younger audiences who are an attractive target group for populist parties. They also offer political actors a direct way to address potential voters, bypassing professional journalists (Engesser, Ernst, Esser, & Büchel, 2016).

The measurement of media exposure is another limitation of the present study, that applies to all linkage analyses (Scharkow & Bachl, 2016). By asking respondents

about their frequency of exposure to different news outlets on a three-step scale we applied a measure that was deemed to minimize error variance from false memory. In reducing error variance we accepted that media exposure was only assessed by approximation. For survey-based research, it is impossible to be completely sure whether a respondent was exposed to exactly the news pieces that he or she was assigned through the applied matching procedure. This is a downside to the method in general. Thus, our research should be complemented by experimental studies that try to reproduce the observed polarizing effect of fragmented references to the thin populist ideology within news coverage.

Moreover, despite considering countries with strong right-wing populist parties, we focused on a thin concept of populism. It does not consider potential effects of exclusionist statements (Akkerman, 2011) that explicitly derogate societal groups other than the political elite. Future studies should therefore investigate how exclusionism plays into the observed polarization effect. They should also address the role of the source more thoroughly. Our analysis has considered all statements with a populist stance that have not been contradicted. In doing so, we did not explore moderating effects of the speaker: Do populist statements by journalists result in different effects than those by mainstream or populist politicians? What role does the recipients' source evaluation play? How do different types of contradiction interfere with message effects? Additional research should consider the cognitive and emotional mechanisms that are triggered by specific forms of representations of populism within media coverage.

Finally, the present study has unveiled effects of media messages on individuals who already exhibited pro- or anti-populist convictions. It remains open how media coverage affects those individuals who range in the middle of the populist attitude scale. It can be assumed that some of those individuals might rather be deterred and some might rather be attracted by a strong dose of populist statements in their media diet.

Future studies will need to look at this question more closely and should try to identify additional moderators of these two different directions of media effects.

Conclusion

The variety of avenues for future research indicates that the present study can only be seen as a starting point. Populism is on the rise in political party systems worldwide—and so are populist messages in political communication. Journalists as well as established political actors have to develop ways of dealing with them. Political communication research thus has to more extensively engage with questions of how populist statements conveyed through media coverage affect public opinion. This helps to improve our understanding of the recent polarizing dynamics of societies and political systems. The present study has offered first hints in this respect. It suggests that the more populist messages are spread by the news media without contradiction the more divided public opinion becomes in its support or disapproval of populism.

This can be read as an update on the idea that there is an “unintended complicity” of populism and the news media (Mazzoleni, 2008). However, it is not as originally conceptualized that by spreading populist messages news coverage primarily creates support for the populist idea in the public. Rather, news coverage fosters support and disapproval of populism among different parts of the public. Thereby, it helps populist political actors to polarize societies. This is a consequential finding for research on societal polarization. It suggests that by means of communication populism might in fact be able to establish a new societal cleavage bridging traditional partisan gaps. Communication research will have to critically accompany this process with a specific focus on the role of the media. It should provide answers on how journalists and other societal actors could deal with populist communication in a socially responsible way.

Furthermore, the present results support the notion that the thin populist ideology is rarely represented as a whole within individual news items. However, the

present study has also shown that this fragmented occurrence does not mean that populism in the news goes without effects. Future experimental research on the effects of populist communication will need to reflect the fragmented nature of populism in the news when constructing stimuli. The effects observed here also speak to media priming research more generally. They offer evidence for an indirect priming effect through which media messages affect cognitive concepts that are not directly addressed within a message but are related to the addressed concepts in individuals' cognitive structures. Moreover, the present results should further encourage media effects researchers to concentrate on differential message effects. They add to a large body of research indicating that the same media message can not only have differently strong effects on different individuals but even effects in completely different directions.

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Tables

Table 1

Items Measuring Populist Attitudes and their Change over Time

	w1 <i>M (SD)</i>	w2 <i>M (SD)</i>	Change <i>t (df)</i>
<u>Berlin metropolitan region</u>			
“MPs in Parliament very quickly lose touch with ordinary people“	4.11 (0.90)	4.10 (0.91)	0.14 (648)
“Politicians are not really interested in what ordinary people like me think”	4.01 (1.01)	3.89 (1.07)	3.14** (648)
“The differences between ordinary people and the so called elite are much greater than the differences between ordinary people”	3.84 (1.01)	3.90 (1.01)	-1.23 (648)
“Ordinary people share the same values and interests”	3.17 (1.04)	3.06 (1.03)	2.54* (648)
“The people should be asked whenever important decisions are taken”	3.89 (1.09)	3.97 (1.10)	-1.96* (648)
<u>London metropolitan region</u>			
“MPs in Parliament very quickly lose touch with ordinary people“	4.09 (0.94)	4.09 (0.93)	0.04 (846)
“Politicians are not really interested in what ordinary people like me think”	3.84 (1.06)	3.84 (1.04)	0.04 (846)
“The differences between ordinary people and the so called elite are much greater than the differences between ordinary people”	3.87 (0.99)	4.06 (0.96)	-5.35*** (846)
“Ordinary people share the same values and interests”	3.03 (1.03)	3.00 (1.02)	0.73 (846)
“The people should be asked whenever important decisions are taken”	3.73 (1.00)	3.72 (1.10)	0.34 (846)
<u>Paris metropolitan region</u>			
“MPs in Parliament very quickly lose touch with ordinary people“	4.05 (0.94)	4.19 (0.93)	-3.23*** (639)
“Politicians are not really interested in what ordinary people like me think”	3.97 (1.03)	4.03 (1.01)	-1.41 (639)
“The differences between ordinary people and the so called elite are much greater than the differences between ordinary people”	3.77 (0.99)	4.00 (0.97)	--4.96*** (639)
“Ordinary people share the same values and interests”	3.48 (0.96)	3.22 (1.00)	6.08*** (639)
“The people should be asked whenever important decisions are taken”	3.62 (1.12)	3.80 (1.08)	-4.59*** (639)

	w ₁ <i>M (SD)</i>	w ₂ <i>M (SD)</i>	Change <i>t (df)</i>
<u>Zurich metropolitan region</u>			
“MPs in Parliament very quickly lose touch with ordinary people”	3.50 (1.02)	3.56 (1.00)	-2.18* (1259)
“Politicians are not really interested in what ordinary people like me think”	3.32 (1.12)	3.38 (1.10)	-2.11* (1259)
“The differences between ordinary people and the so called elite are much greater than the differences between ordinary people”	3.48 (1.10)	3.51 (1.12)	-0.81 (1259)
“Ordinary people share the same values and interests”	3.16 (1.01)	2.92 (1.05)	7.53*** (1259)
“The people should be asked whenever important decisions are taken”	3.88 (1.09)	3.83 (1.13)	1.87 (1259)
* $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$; *** $p \leq .001$			

Table 2

Operationalization of Populist Message Types

Dimension	Populist Message Type	Categories
Anti-Elitism	Discrediting the elite	The elite is accused of being malevolent, criminal, lazy, stupid, extremist, racist, undemocratic etc. The elite is being name-called. The elite is denied of morality, charisma, credibility, intelligence, competence, consistency etc.
	Blaming the elite	The elite is described as being a threat/burden, as being responsible for a negative development/situation, or as having committed a mistake or crime. The elite is described as not being an enrichment or as not being responsible for a positive development/situation.
	Detaching the elite from the people	The elite is described as not belonging to the people, not being close to the people, not knowing the people, not speaking for the people, not caring for it or not performing everyday actions.
People-Centrism	Stressing the people's virtues	The people is bestowed with morality, charisma, credibility, intelligence, competence, consistency etc. The people is cleared from being malevolent, criminal, lazy, stupid, extremist, racist, undemocratic etc.
	Praising the people's achievements	The people is described as being an enrichment or as being responsible for a positive development/situation. The people is described as not being a threat/burden, not being responsible for a negative development/situation, or as not having committed a mistake or crime.
	Stating a monolithic people	The people is described as sharing common feelings, desires, or opinions.
	Demonstrating closeness to the people	The speaker describes himself as belonging to the people, being close to the people, knowing the people, speaking for the people, caring for the people, agreeing with the people, or performing everyday actions. The speaker claims to represent or embody the people.
Restoring Sovereignty	Demanding popular sovereignty	The speaker argues for general institutional reforms to grant the people more power (by introducing direct-democratic elements or increasing political participation). The speaker argues in favor of granting more power to the people within the context of a specific issue (e.g. election, immigration, security).
	Denying elite sovereignty	The speaker argues in favor of granting less power to the elite within the context of a specific issue (e.g. election, immigration, security)

Table 3

Model Parameters of the Structural Equation Model

	Berlin <i>B (SE)</i>	London <i>B (SE)</i>	Paris <i>B (SE)</i>	Zurich <i>B (SE)</i>
<u>Predictors of populist attitudes at w1</u>				
Age	0.011*** (0.003)	0.001 (0.002)	0.006* (0.003)	0.005*** (0.001)
Gender (=female)	0.208** (0.066)	0.015 (0.048)	0.002 (0.068)	-0.051 (0.031)
Income	-0.031** (0.010)	-0.007 (0.008)	-0.005 (0.015)	-0.015** (0.005)
Education	-0.185*** (0.038)	-0.110* (0.045)	-0.052 (0.057)	-0.111*** (0.029)
Political interest	0.000 (0.037)	0.005 (0.024)	-0.075* (0.031)	-0.042* (0.017)
Political orientation	0.020 (0.015)	-0.039*** (0.010)	0.040*** (0.012)	0.039*** (0.007)
Political extremity	0.074** (0.023)	-0.013 (0.016)	0.002 (0.021)	0.014 (0.011)
<i>R</i> ²	.23	.07	.09	.12
<u>Predictors of populist attitudes at w2</u>				
Populist attitudes at w1	0.849*** (0.049)	0.779*** (0.034)	0.933*** (0.078)	0.905*** (0.035)
Dose of unopposed statements corresponding to populism	-0.012 (0.024)	0.017 (0.039)	-0.021 (0.016)	-0.017 (0.013)
<i>R</i> ²	.67	.61	.62	.75
<i>n</i>	461	506	412	1014

* $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$; *** $p \leq .001$

Table 4

Model Parameters of the Latent Moderation Model

	Berlin <i>B (SE)</i>	London <i>B (SE)</i>	Paris <i>B (SE)</i>	Zurich <i>B (SE)</i>
<u>Predictors of populist attitudes at w2</u>				
Populist attitudes at w1	0.842*** (0.049)	0.824*** (0.055)	0.946*** (0.084)	0.902*** (0.036)
Dose of unopposed statements corresponding to populism	-0.045 (0.040)	-0.026 (0.037)	-0.029 (0.030)	0.011 (0.018)
Populist attitudes w1* dose of statements	0.077* (0.037)	-0.084 (0.068)	0.089*** (0.025)	0.083** (0.031)
<i>R</i> ²	.68	.62	.64	.76
<i>n</i>	461	506	412	1014

* $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$; *** $p \leq .001$

Figures

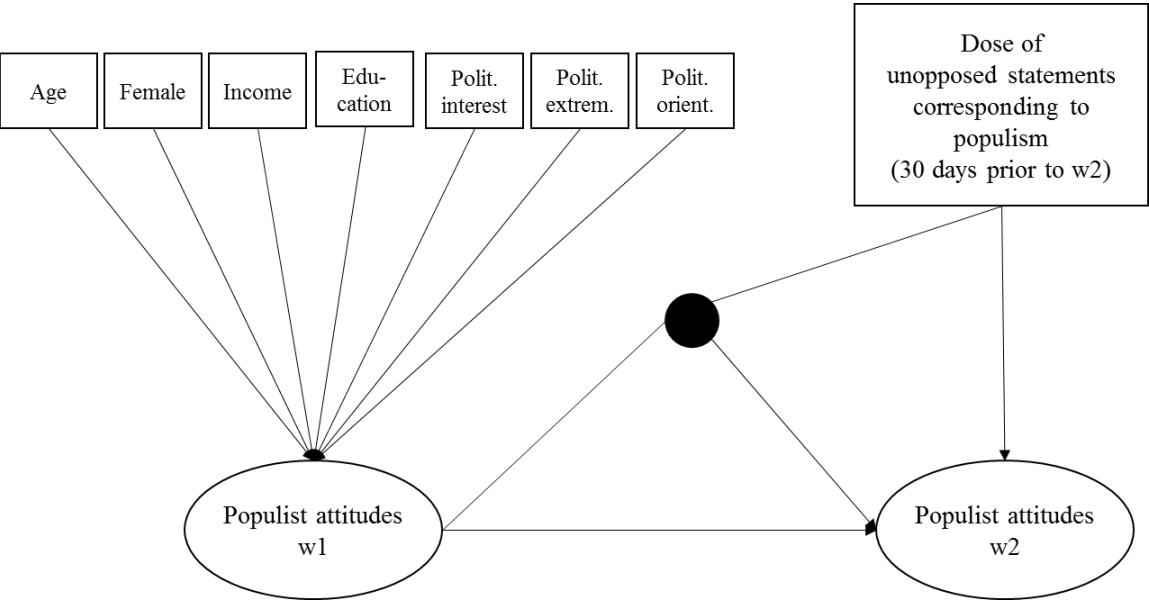


Figure 1. Latent moderation model explaining populist attitudes at w2.

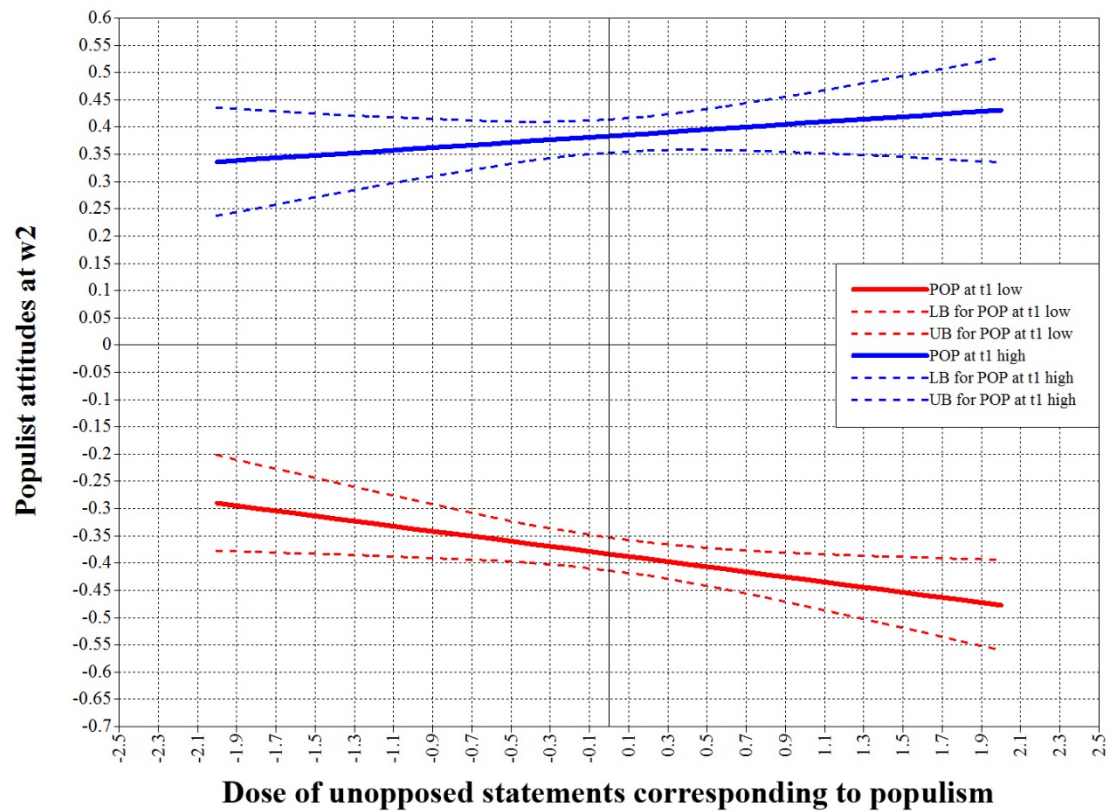


Figure 2. Plot of the interaction for the Zurich subsample.

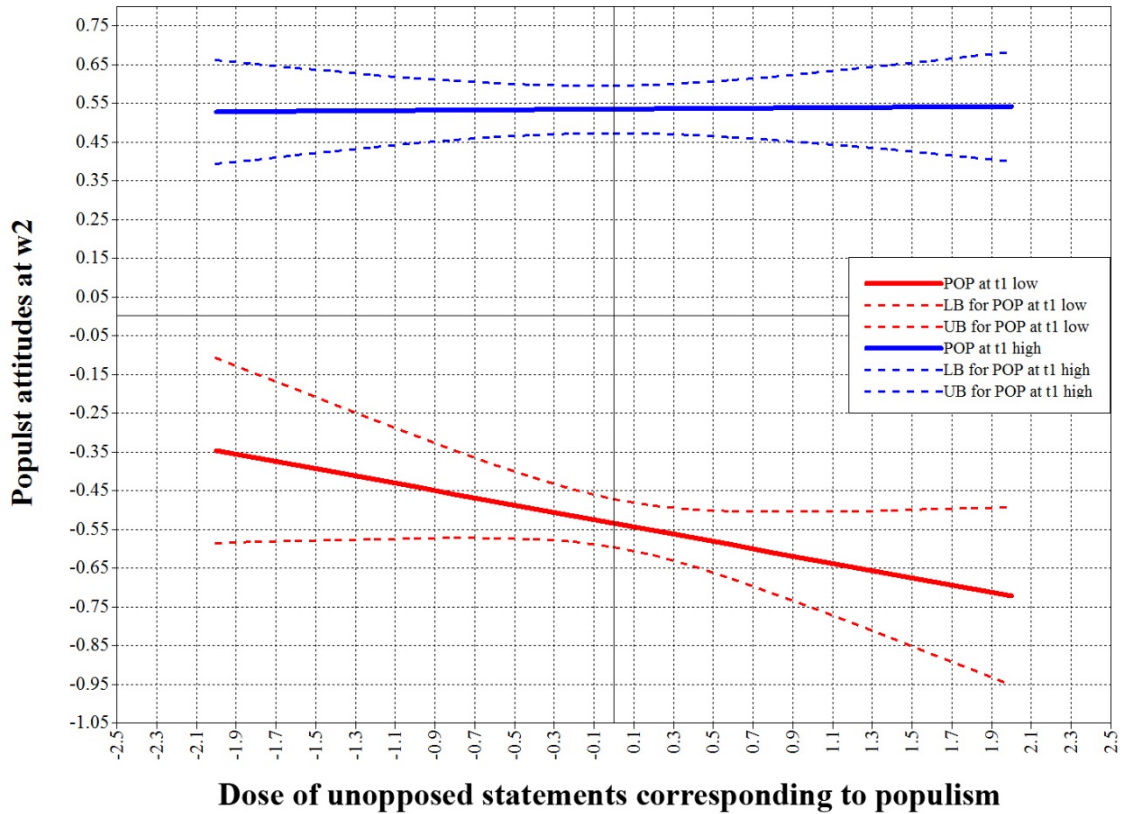


Figure 3. Plot of the interaction for the Berlin subsample.

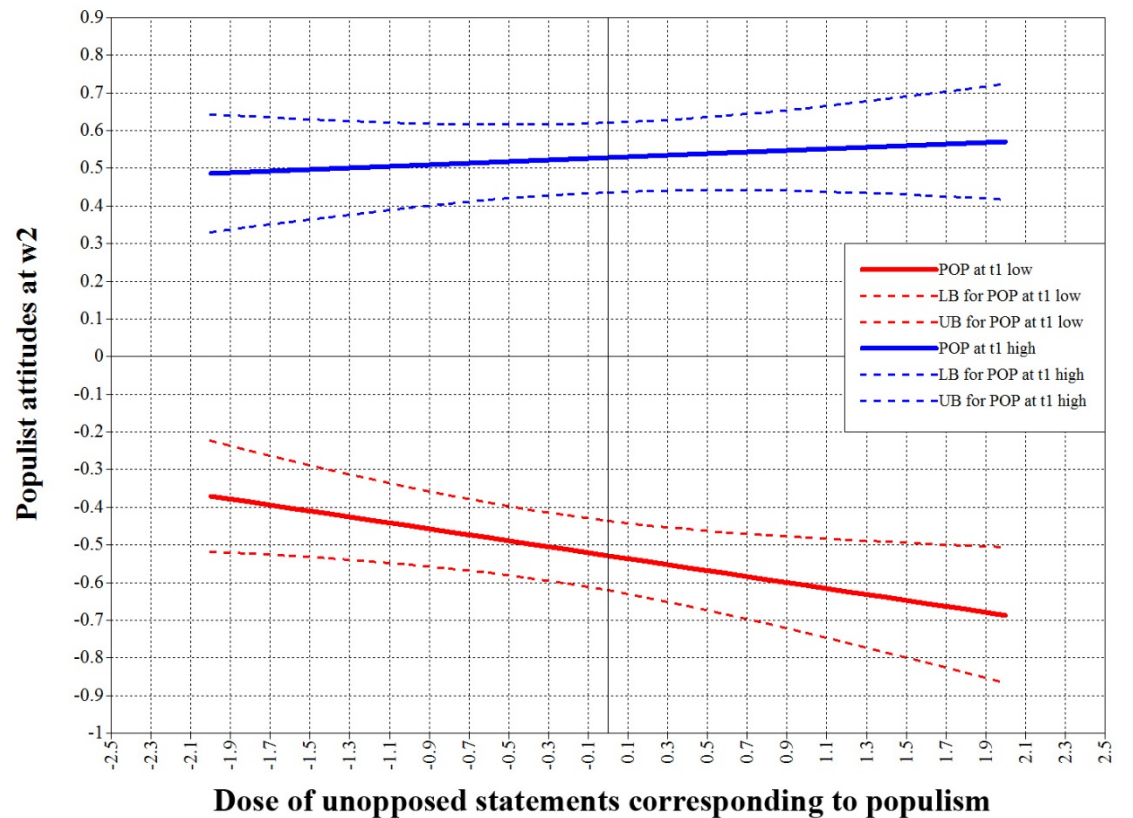


Figure 4. Plot of the interaction for the Paris subsample.

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