

ACTIVATING POPULISM : HOW NEGATIVE EMOTIONS INCREASE POPULIST ATTITUDES

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Abstract

This thesis focuses on the relationship between cognition and populist attitudes. Following the ideational approach to populism, this research contributes to the current literature by providing insights into how citizens form these attitudes. The study asks whether negative emotions and the use of blaming frames increase populist tendencies. Moreover, a combination of qualitative and quantitative analysis looks at the interactions between populist attitudes and support for populist candidates in Spain. With a qualitative approach, the thesis verifies what political leaders among the five major national parties in Spain use populist rhetoric. With a survey experiment instead, the thesis tests if and what emotions relate more with populism and if a blaming attribution strategy increases populist attitudes. Even with a small sample size ($N = 165$), the study is able to confirm the relation between populist attitudes and support for populist candidates and confirms the positive effect of the hypothesized mechanisms on populist attitudes. The thesis also offers interesting methodological insights for future research endeavors.

1. Introduction

In the past decade, populism became a hot topic in social sciences. The rise of new movements in Europe, the Brexit, and the election of Donald Trump in the United States turned the attention of many scholars to the study of populism. So far, most research concentrated on the supply side of the phenomenon, meaning the study of populist leaders (Hawkins 2009; Hawkins and Littvay 2019) and populist parties (Betz 1993; Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014), their rhetoric (Caiani and Graziano 2016) and communication strategies (Sagarzazu and Thies 2019).

In recent years the focus shifted towards the study of individuals as consumers of populist content (Castanho Silva, Vegetti, and Littvay 2017; Hameleers, Bos, and de Vreese 2018); As populist leaders see the world in a Manichean perspective, where politics should be an expression of the general will of the people and in which they, as leaders, are appointed to defend the people against an evil elite (Mudde, 2004, 543), so individuals own attitudes that reflect these ideas and vision of the world.

Diverse authors created measurement scales to capture populist attitudes cross-nationally (Akkerman, Mudde, and Zaslove 2014; Castanho Silva et al. 2020). These are becoming reliable instruments. Further attempts point to the direction of linking populist attitudes with preferences for populist parties (Van Hauwaert and Van Kessel 2018). While this emerging research agenda brought positive results so far it failed to investigate those mechanisms that trigger or mitigate populist attitudes and convince individuals to prefer populist parties to traditional ones.

Some authors started to fill this gap. For instance, Busby, Gubler, and Hawkins (2019) found out that those individuals considering problems in dispositional terms instead of situationally are more prompt to support populist political leaders. DeMas, McCoy, and Littvay (working paper) investigated the interaction between emotions and political rhetoric and verified whether positive or negative emotions influence subjects' populist attitudes.

While these results are promising, further exploratory research on the demand side of populism is needed to shed light on what is behind the formation of populist attitudes. This thesis is specifically interested in understating how negative emotions combined with blame attribution strategies impact populist attitudes and if these are associated with preferences for populist parties. The study argues that negative emotions and blame attribution are mechanisms that increase populist attitudes, when these are combined, they produce an interaction effect that further increases populist tendencies.

Moreover, the study is interested in understanding the relationship between populist attitudes and support for populist candidates. The thesis argues that those leaders that employ populist rhetoric receive support from citizens that score high on the populist attitudinal scale.

All these arguments are based on theories that consider populist ideas to be dormant (Hawkins, Rovira Kaltwasser, and Andreadis 2020). To be activated, populist attitudes require the right political context, usually an environment in which “failure of democratic governance can be attributed to an intentional elite behavior” (Hawkins, Rovira Kaltwasser, and Andreadis 2020,

286). Moreover, economic recession or short-term policy failures also favor the activation process. To translate into support for political candidates, however, populist ideas must be shared by political actors and citizens. Therefore, populist attitudes should be a predictor of support for populist candidates when political leaders utilize strong populist rhetoric.

To address these research questions and to test this argument, the article introduces the literature on cognition, emotions, and populist attitudes, it justifies the reasons behind choosing to conduct the study in Spain and offers insights on the populist supply-side of the country. It then presents the research design and introduces the experimental setting which is composed of three different treatments. With these, the thesis aims to verify whether the presence of negative emotions in subjects increases populist attitudes. Second, it verifies the mediating effect of blame attribution messages between the subjects' negative emotions and their populist attitudes. Finally, it tests the relation between populist attitudes and support for populist candidates. The research concludes with a discussion of the results and what these may imply for future research on populism.

2. Literature Review

Emotions alter and affect people's evaluative processes (Huddy 2013). Their effects influence how people gather information, how they evaluate and attribute responsibility and their subsequent behavioral responses. In sum, emotions influence people's political judgment. Some scholars tried to understand how emotions affect individuals' evaluative processes concluding that emotions influence political judgment in two distinct ways. First, citizens can use emotions as a piece of information to evaluate politics, parties, and proposals (Kühne et al. 2011). In this case, beliefs and feelings add one to the other in the global political evaluation. A second approach instead sees affective and cognitive information work together having an interactive effect. These moderate or mediate people's opinion formation. For instance, appraisal theories suggest that people react to stimuli based on conscious and pre-conscious evaluations of an event (Moors 2017; Moors et al. 2013). When the goals of an individual meet the evaluation of the environment this might generate positive emotions. On the contrary, if goals and evaluation of the environment mismatch, negative emotions arise and consequently influence the judgment an individual has of a certain event. In appraisal theory, therefore, cognition and affection work together to form political judgment.

To understand this process, it is necessary to investigate whether distinct emotions affect judgment differently. Anger and anxiety are, for instance, two kinds of emotions that appear to solicit different behavioral responses. Anger and anxiety are emotions that arise in response to threatening stimuli to one's environment (Weeks 2015). Although the evoking source is the same,

the two emotions bring the person who is experiencing them to answer differently to the stimuli. Anxiety leads individuals to seek new information (Valentino et al. 2008) and to re-evaluate previous beliefs (Weeks 2015). The reaction to the stimuli is aversive. As such, it normally increases support for conciliatory and precautionary policies. Experiencing anxiety can facilitate opinion change and demand for political actions, but it exposes and makes individuals more inclined to manipulation if the information they receive is untrue or biased (Brader, Valentino, and Suhay 2008).

Anger, instead, has been defined by scholars in several ways, mostly as a negative affect that comes by experiencing a forced interruption in the movement towards the desired goal (Berkowitz and Harmon-Jones 2004); as an experience of being intentionally hurt by the acts of someone else (Frijda 1986); or a feeling of displeasure associated with the blaming of others (Ortony, Clore, and Collins 1988). Different from anxiety, anger drives individuals to morally judge an event and to seek culpability for behaviors (Nguyen 2019) when a situation of injustice or a violation of certain standards took place (Carver and Harmon-Jones 2009; Weeks 2015).

Resentment can be considered a subform of anger (Murphy and Hampton 1988). According to Walker (2004), resentment responds “to perceived threats, to expectations based on norms that are presumed shared in or justly authoritative for common life” (Walker 2004, 147). Similarly to anger, resentment is an emotion that seeks culpability for behaviors, but unlike the former, it also seeks a response from the offender or others with the intent of finding some common ground and

reestablish trust and respect between the actors so that norms and boundaries can again provide a sense of protection and reliability. Other authors (Murphy and Hampton 1988, 59-60) consider resentment a mix between anger and fear where the latter is triggered by the perturbing thought of having the offender considering permissible to lower the victim and treating him/her without respect.

Like anxiety, fear is an emotion that increases information seeking, however, compared to anxiety it does not lead to a re-evaluation of previous beliefs. Compared to anger, when fear is associated with uncertainty and lack of control it leads to taking risk-averse decisions. Anger instead tends to push individuals to make risk-taking choices (Lerner and Keltner 2001). Research revealed that sad people are more prone to detailed-oriented analysis and more thoughtful processes when they process information. However, compared to other negative emotions like anxiety or fear, it does not lead to seeking more information (Bless et al. 1990).

When confronted with the characteristics of populism, emotions are an important pillar of it. A widely accepted definition of populism is the one Cas Mudde provides. He delineates populism as “an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people.” (Mudde 2004, 543). Since populism sees the world in a Manichean perspective where evil and good forces clash, emotions are assumed to play part in populist attitude formation. Past research on emotions and

populism confirm this assumption and revealed associations between emotional states of anger and fear and a rise in populist attitude despite party preferences (Abadi et al. 2020; Hamелеers, Bos, and de Vreese 2017; Rico, Guinjoan, and Anduiza 2017) and a correlation between perceptions of socio-economic unfairness and resentment-indignation (Norris & Inglehart, 2018).

Contrary to this evidence, Nguyen found out that negative emotions of fear and anxiety are correlated mostly with right-wing movements and these “are more important for the maintenance of populist party support than for their initial activation” (Nguyen 2019). So far, research on emotions and populism has been developed through observational studies and the use of data panels. These highlighted contrasting results in the effects of emotions on populist attitude. Little room has been given to experimental methods yet (Busby, Gubler, and Hawkins 2019). As previously mentioned, a recent experiment conducted by DeMas, McCoy, and Littvay (working paper) shows the importance of positive and negative emotions in mediating populist attitudes. Similarly, this study aims at filling this gap and tries to identify a causal relationship between negative emotions populist attitudes, and support for populist parties.

3. Theory

3.1 Emotions and political attitudes

Through an observational study, Rico et al. (2017) investigated the relations between emotions and populism in Spain and found out that those who frequently experience higher levels of anger tend to display higher levels of populist attitudes. Through an online experiment instead, research demonstrated how populist communication elicits emotions more than pluralist messages and that anger is the most common emotion provoked by populist messages (Wirz 2018). Slightly different results are coming from the study of Abadi et al. (2020). When the authors analyzed observational data from nine European countries found out that emotions are a good predictor of populist attitudes. The authors suggest that anger, contempt, and anxiety are emotions associated with populist attitudes because they reflect the negatives feelings people have of their current socio-economic or socio-cultural status. While generally, all these emotions are good predictors compared to other factors, Abadi and his colleagues found that anxiety is the one that predicts better a higher populist attitude in individuals, more than anger or contempt.

If we compare the results of these studies, it is still quite unclear what specific emotion elicits a higher level of populist attitude. George Marcus (2003) argues, anxiety and anger have similar effects, and only in some specific cases and under certain conditions the two emotions can generate or emerge as a separate dimension of aversion. The different results had in the studies of Rico et al. (2017) and Abadi et. al. (2020) may be given by diverse objects of study. Overall, the

research expects that all negative emotions affect populist attitudes. However, the thesis expects that among fear, resentment, anxiety, and anger, the latter is the emotion that increases populist attitudes the most; this because it is the emotion that is commonly activated through populist speeches and messages (Wirz 2018). The exposure or the recall of a negative feeling or event makes the subject re-experience the negative state. Since negative emotions are associated with an increase in populist attitudes, the study expects that negative emotions lead to an increase in populist attitudes.

HP I: A negative emotional state increases populist attitudes.

HP Ia: Anger is the emotion that increases populist attitude the most.

3.2 Framing blame and populism

If one concentrates on research on populism and frames, what is known is the importance of emotional blame in populist communication (Hameleers, Bos, and de Vreese 2017). Hameleers and his colleagues found out that the characteristic of populist messages in blaming an elite increases the appeal for populism. Emotional blame is defined as “the causal attributions of responsibility that attribute negative qualities” to an agent (Hameleers et al. 2017, 872). While blame attribution is a common practice in politics, it is particularly salient for populism since it’s an ideology that portrays the world from a good/evil perspective. As previously highlighted, anger is the emotion that incites individuals to assign culpability for a certain behavior or event. Carver and Harmon-Jones (2009) consider anger an emotion that relates to an approach-oriented

motivational system, meaning that is an emotion in reaction to a stimulus of your brain to seek a change. Emotional blame is therefore a construct that should work more persuasively with those individuals experiencing a state of anger. Also, emotional blame can be applied to several issues as long as the message emotionally blames an elite that is commonly considered evil by populist forces (for instance, EU financial institutions) it can be assumed to have a homogenous effect on left and right-wing populists.

When confronting different types of messages Busby, Gubler, and Hawkins (2019) found out that frames encouraging to consider political problems in dispositional terms increase populist attitudes compare to considering the same in a situational way. Framing messages in a manner that pushes subjects to seek culpability towards other individuals or groups elicit populist attitudes more than messages that attribute blame to circumstances. Moreover, Busby and his colleagues found out that those participants that were exposed to dispositional frames were more likely to show support for candidates that are considered populists. Indeed, subjects expressed more support towards Donald Trump than Hilary Clinton while those subjects exposed to a situational frame express their support for the latter. The same goes when Clinton is compared to Bernie Sanders. Combining the evidence coming from previous studies on populist attitudes and blame attribution strategies leads this research to assume the following:

HP II: Blaming attribution frames increase populist attitudes.

Since theory considers anger a reaction to injustices and that this emotion pushes individuals to seek culpability, the emotional blaming treatment expects to increase populist attitudes.

Due to the peculiarity of populist communication (Wirz 2018) and the function of blame attribution strategies in populist messages, the research hypothesizes that an elaboration task that leads participants to assign blame towards an elite increases populist attitudes. The effect of the blame attribution strategy is further increased when a negative emotional state is present. The research foresees to have an interaction effect between the two treatments, hence those subjects exposed to both manipulations should have, on average, a higher populist attitude than the control groups and those participants receiving only one treatment.

HP IIa: The effect is higher in subjects with an induced emotional state.

3.3 Populism and support for populist leaders

The study also hypothesizes that subjects scoring high on the populism attitudinal scale will be more likely to support candidates who tend to employ populist rhetoric. For instance, in the Spanish case, this will see subjects supporting Pablo Iglesias or Santiago Abascal, leaders or historical figures of Podemos and Vox España.

Hp III: Populist attitudes are positively associated with an increase in support for populist leaders.

This hypothesis is based on the argument that populist demand must meet a populist supply to manifest. In other words, populist ideas must be shared by political actors and citizens.

4. Case selection: Spain

The research selected Spain to test the above hypotheses. The case was selected because the political environment has both left and right-wing populist parties. To test this claim the researcher produced a content analysis of speeches and manifestos of the five major parties in the country (Partido Popular, Podemos, PSOE, Ciudadanos, and Vox).¹ This analysis found out that not only Podemos but also Vox is populist. Precisely, the latter mixes populist content with nationalist rhetoric.

4.1 Holistic grading

To code the speeches, the study employed a technique known as holistic grading and followed the coding scheme and guidelines of the Global Populism Database (GDP).² Instead of dissecting the speech in different paragraphs, this coding technique considers the entire meaning of the text and assigns an overall grade to it. Texts are assigned with a score between 0 and 2 (decimals are considered). A score of 2 means that the speech comes very close to the ideal populist discourse.

¹ This project was part of the course “Populism” held by Professor Levente Littvay at Central European University during the Winter term 2020/2021. The speeches were coded by Reka Szabo and Andrea Barbieri under the supervision of Professor Littvay and Semir Szebo (Teaching Assistant).

² To access the Global Populism Database follow the link :
<https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/LFTQEZ>

If a speech takes a score closed to 1, this includes clear populist elements. However, they are not applied consistently or non-populist elements (for instance pluralist or elitist rhetoric) are part of the discourse too. A score closed to 0 means that the speaker uses few if any populist elements. To ensure intercoder reliability, speeches are coded independently by two researchers.³ If the coding highlighted a discrepancy above 0.5 the speeches are followed by a reconciliation meeting to understand why and for what reasons the coders interpreted differently the texts.

4.2 Results

Table 1 - Average Populism Grade

	Ciudadanos	Partido Popular	Podemos	PSOE	Vox
Average	0.15	0.1	1.45	0	1.15
Grade					

To grade political parties, the two coders selected two speeches and a political manifesto. The campaign speeches come from the 2019 election, while the famous speeches are taken from the current electoral cycle. The manifestos comprehend both electoral and core party programs. The overall average grade confirms the hypothesis. While Ciudadanos, Partido Popular, and PSOE

³ Appendix B provides the Rubric template with related guideline.

have low grades and cannot be considered populist parties, Podemos and Vox show a score respectively of 1.45 and 1.15.⁴

4.3 Implications

These results have twofold meanings. First, these add new interesting insight into the Spanish party system. Podemos is a well-known populist party that in the last decade challenged the political status quo. Indeed, the party conducted since its foundation in 2014 several anti-corruption campaigns and fights against inequalities. Similar to other research outputs (Zienkowski and Breeze 2019) this analysis confirms the populist character of Podemos and the image of people the party supports. On Vox instead, little research has been produced and it was unclear whether the party can be considered populist or not. Vox was born at the end of 2013 as a result of a split from the Partido Popular with the intent of creating a right-wing neo-conservative movement. While with the elections in 2015 and 2016 Vox was not capable of winning seats, since 2018 it started to gain popularity, and the year after at the national elections it obtained 10% of the votes entering the parliament for the first time. The analysis provides evidence that Vox utilizes populist rhetoric alongside their right-wing nationalist perspective. Further research would be needed to

⁴ For detailed information on the grading see Appendix C.

confirm these results. For instance, speech analysis from 2013 up to today could shed light on how the party rhetoric and party ideology shift throughout time.

These results provide a good ground to test whether higher populism scores are associated with stronger support for populist parties. Indeed, Spanish citizens can opt and vote for parties that employ populist rhetoric on both sides of the left and right spectrum. In other words, the demand and supply sides match.

5. Experimental Design

5.1 Overview of the experiment

The study conducted a survey experiment in Spain to understand the effect of two mechanisms that are assumed to activate citizens' populist attitudes. The experiment was designed by following a two-by-two scheme, with three treatments and a control group. The subjects were exposed either to one of the following elaboration tasks, both or none. One elaboration task aimed at eliciting emotions. The second one intended to let the participant assign blame to individuals or groups being not capable of resolving an issue in the country.

Figure 1 – Research Design

		-		+	
Emotion	-	Control		Control + Blame Treatment	
	+	Emotion Treatment + Control		Emotion Treatment + Blame Treatment	

5.1.1 Emotion treatment

The first treatment consisted of evoking a negative emotion by asking the subjects to recall a time in which they have been treated unfairly. To elicit these, different methods exist (Banks and Valentino 2012; Lerner and Keltner 2001; Valentino et al. 2008). For instance, Banks and Valentino (2012) show images of facial expressions to induce fear, anger, and disgust. Since the aim is to verify that negative emotions increase populist attitudes, the study is not interested in inducing a specific emotion. To evoke a general negative state, the researcher considered it more appropriate to make the subjects appeal to a semantic field that recalls negative emotions, for instance, a situation in which the subject experienced unfairness or injustice. This widely used method in political psychology (Lerner & Keltner, 2001; Ottati et al., 2002) is the most reliable in these cases because it allows the participants to “free float” and therefore to imagine by themselves the situation of unfairness without that the researcher influence or induce any bias.

5.1.2 Blame attribution treatment

The second treatment consists of an elaboration task composed of a set of close and open-ended questions. Subjects are first exposed to populist rhetoric with the closed-ended question asking “which of the following problems that our country faces today . . . worries you the most” (Busby, Gubler, and Hawkins 2019). This question allows framing the issue from a country perspective, leading the participant to consider the problem affecting his/her own nation. The set of open-ended questions instead aims at guiding the subject to attribute blame to an individual or a group

for the problem they identified as the most worrying for their country. “What groups or individuals do you think are most responsible for [the selected problem]?” and “ why you think these groups or individuals are responsible and what should be done about them”. Compared to other methods considered by the researcher (for instance, a blame attribution strategy made of a blaming message and an image recalling hard socio-economic conditions), this allows the participant to assign blame to their own “evil” elite without the researcher interfering in this process. Furthermore, it provides qualitative data that can be analyzed to understand the most pressing issues for the participants are.

5.1.3 Sampling

Participants were recruited through Facebook advertisement tool. Through FB ads, the social media platform gives the chance of targeting and refining the population of interest according to a set of parameters chosen by the researcher. Demographic parameters (age, gender, location, country of origin, etc.) set through FB ads advertise the research among the targeted population. Different studies are using this tool because it allows reaching subjects easily, obtaining large samples in a short amount of time, and with relatively low costs. Further tuning to increase the representativeness of the study is done with a set of demographic questions asked after the subjects agreed to take part in the experiment. The survey was advertised and remained online between May 18, 2021, and June 06, 2021, collecting 165 responses. To advertise the survey, the researcher spent 280 euros on FB ads. The study launched three different advertising campaigns. Two of them were through Facebook posts on an ad hoc page called “Encuestas de Investigación”. One instead,

was an advertising campaign through feeds in which people were asked to click on the survey link. Considering that the answer to the survey was not compensated and that the budget to advertise the survey was little, the collection of 165 responses relative to the amount spent can be considered successful.

5.1.4 Procedure

Participants first completed the procedure of informed consent. After, a battery of demographic questions subjects answered questions to measure the populism attitudes before the treatment. Participants were then randomly assigned to the treatment conditions and the control group. The survey platform - Qualtrics – automatically overviewed and performed the procedure. It divided the participants following the two by two scheme. All four groups were set to have equal size. The participants assigned to the two combined treatments were first asked to recall the situation of unfairness and then was exposed to the elaboration task assigning blame to an elite. Two other groups were only exposed to one of the treatments while the control groups received no treatment and were asked to immediately answer to the post-treatment survey. Next, the subjects completed a questionnaire aimed at measuring populist attitude, voting preference/party support, and their emotional state.

5.2 Measures

5.2.1 Populist attitudes

The survey items come from the attitude scale created by Castanho Silva et al. (2019). According to a recent study (Castanho Silva et al. 2020), this scale is the most valid in terms of cross-national resilience. To respect the definition of populism, a populist subject must, at the same time, believe in people centrism, anti-elitism and have a Manichean conception of society. To ensure that the study can consider subjects populist these have to score above a certain threshold on all three categories. The subjects have to agree or disagree on a 5 point Likert scale with a total of nine items. Since subjects can react differently to negative and positive statements, the items are divided between the two forms. The study checks populist attitudes at the beginning and the end of the survey to increase the validity of the study. The first battery of questions is composed by three questions coming from Castanho Silva et al. (2019) scale and four “holistic” additional populist items (seven items in total). All the items are asked in Spanish.

Table 2 - First Battery of Questions Measuring Populist Attitudes.

<i>Holistic populist items</i>
Hol1. The influential always exploit the common people.
Hol.2 Only those who seek power who, contrary to the ordinary people, are anything but decent.
Hol3. Spanish people deserve better people than immoral decision-makers who leech them off.
Hol. 4Most decision-makers are driven by good intentions like myself.

Castanho Silva et al. (2019) scale
Ppl0. The will of the people should be the highest principle in this country's politics.
Ant0. Quite a few of the people running the government are crooked.
Man0. The people I disagree with politically are just misinformed.

Table 3 - Second Battery of Questions Measuring Populist Attitudes.

Castanho Silva et al. (2019) scale
Manichean Outlook :
Man1. You can tell if a person is good or bad if you know their politics.
Man2. The people I disagree with politically are not evil.
People Centristism :
Ppl1. Politicians should always listen closely to the problems of the people.
Ppl2. Politicians don't have to spend time among ordinary people to do a good job.
Anti-elitism :
Ant1. The government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves.
Ant2. Government officials use their power to try to improve people's lives.

The two by two design with measures of the dependent variable pre and post-treatment allows tracing subjects' attitudinal change throughout the study, something that in post-only designs is not possible. For this reason, these have generally low precision. The issue with pre and post-treatment measures of the dependent variable is the suspicion the study might arise in

participants by asking the same questions in a short period of time (Mutz 2011). However, the authors brought evidence that such a design does not influence participants (Clifford, Sheagley, and Piston 2021). To play conservatively and avoid the risk of altering treatment effects, the questions regarding the dependent variable varied from the one asked in the post-treatment battery but they referred to the same attitudinal scale created by Castanho Silva and his colleagues (2019). In this way, the study is able to have a measure of populist attitude before the treatments without having to ask the same questions twice. The main assumption is that if the populism score pre-treatment is correlated with the populism score post-treatment, these scores are comparable.

5.2.2 Voting preference and party support

To measure the subjects voting preference and party support the survey presented a feeling thermometer for party candidates at the national elections, asking the participants to rate on a scale from 0-100 how much they like or dislike them. A second alternative measure was to ask subjects to indicate which party they intend to vote for and to which party, among those in the parliament they feel closer to.

Table 4 - Question Measuring Party Preference and Party support.

If the general election were being held today, and the parties were as below, for whom would you vote? (list of parties)
On a scale of 0-100 assess how much you like the following candidates (list of candidates).

5.2.3 Emotional state

To register the emotional state experienced by the participants the study asked to score on a five-point scale to what extent they were feeling a set of emotions. This measure helped to understand what the participants felt like after they were exposed to the treatment. It also gives the opportunity to verify the difference between the emotions felt by the control group and the treated groups.

Table 5 - Question Measuring Subjects Emotional state.

On a five-point scale (at all – a lot) how much are you feeling the following emotions? Angry Disappointed Disgusted Ignored Resentful Sad Grateful Happy Satisfied
--

5.3 Expected results

For Hypothesis 1, the research expects negative emotions to increase populist attitudes. Likely, anger will be the most recalled emotion by participants since theory suggests that anger is the reaction to a situation of injustice or unfairness (Carver and Harmon-Jones 2009). Regarding Hypothesis 2, this assumes that an elaboration task that leads participants to assign blame towards

elites increases populist attitudes. The effect of the blame attribution strategy is further increased when a negative emotional state is present. The research foresees to have an interaction effect between the two treatments, hence those subjects exposed to both manipulations should have, on average, a higher populist attitude than the control groups and those participants receiving only one treatment.

Finally, the thesis expects to see a positive relationship between populist attitudes and support for leaders who utilize populist rhetoric. Therefore, support for Pablo Iglesias (Podemos) and Santiago Abascal (Vox), should reveal a positive and statistically significant relationship with the post-treatment populism score.

5.4 Analysis plan

The study plans to test the results of the experiment with a series of multiple linear regressions. For Hypothesis 1 the study runs a series of regressions with as an outcome the post-treatment populism score. The independent variables are the different emotional states. The regression analysis to verify Hypothesis 2 sees the populist attitude score as the main outcome of the model, the independent variables are the experimental group indicators. The study also controls for basic demographic questions. The number of missing responses on the demographic questions is one of the limitations of the study. Regression analyses are conducted with and without control indicators to increase the sample size of the regression model. To verify Hypothesis 3, the study runs a

regression analysis to verify if populist scores predict support for populist leaders. Therefore, populist scores are the independent variable with control for demographic characteristics; the outcome variable is the support for each candidate.

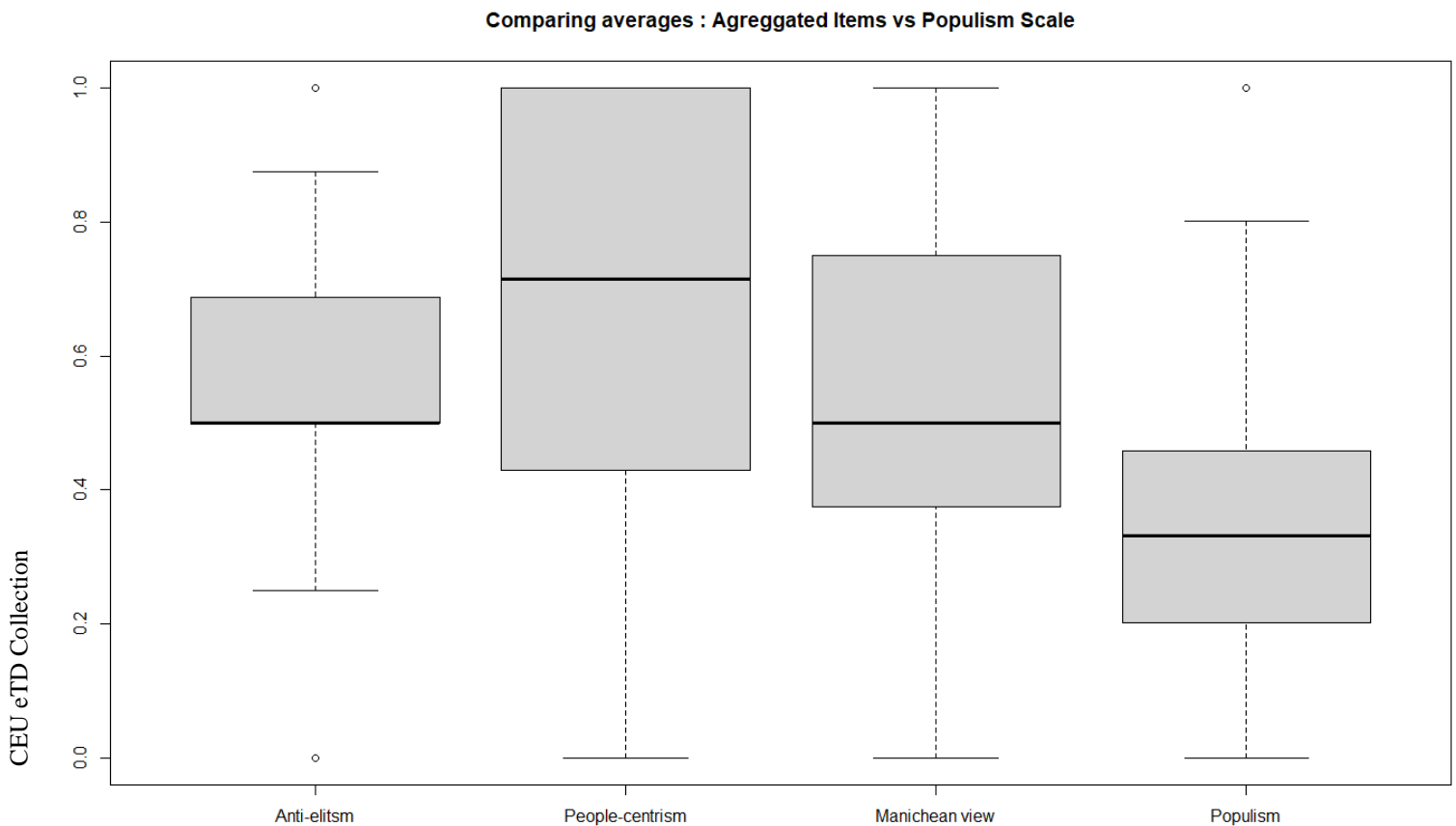
6. Analysis

6.1 Data description

In total 165 subjects took part in the survey experiment with only a small number ($N = 20$) that either decided to not participate after entering the survey page or that decided to withdraw before completing the survey. The study evenly recruited and respect the gender balance (54% male). It also recruited individuals of different ages. However, a greater amount of individuals in the 50-69 category responded to the survey (43% of the sample). Most of the respondents considered themselves to have a regular socio-economic condition (43% of the respondents). The population was assigned to the treatments equally according to their demographics. The outcome was properly registered for all the participants since the questions regarding the populism score and the emotional state had to be answered in order to move on with the survey. The forced response may have led some participants to withdraw from the study if they did not feel comfortable answering the questions, but this mechanism ensured the data collection, especially with a small N size for a survey experiment.

The battery of questions regarding the populism scale is scored on a five-point scale. In line with the ideational theory of populism, if a respondent is not positive on all three components, they will not appear as populist. The boxplots show the factor score of the three components and the populism score. For this table, the populism scores are normalized on a 0-1 scale. The populism score is a normalized multiplicative scale in which each factor was multiplied with the others.

Figure 2 - Distribution of Post-Treatment Populism Score and its Component Factors. N= 135



6.2 Results

6.2.1 Hypothesis II and Hypothesis IIa.

To reduce variance, the research considered constructing a pre-treatment populist score based on a mix of items coming from the Castanho Silva attitudinal scale and other more generic items to integrate the scale. Before starting the regression analysis, the researcher checked the mean scores of the pre-treatment populist attitude indexes for each treatment group and the control group. These means resulted to be similar. Therefore, the study assumed that these groups had similar populist attitudes before the manipulations.

The second step in order to confirm the assumption that the pre-treatment populist attitudinal scale measured the same outcome as the post-treatment populist scale was to verify that the pre-treatment index was correlated to the post-treatment populist index.

Surprisingly and against what previous theory suggested, the Pearson correlation score shows a weak association between the populism pre-and post-treatment scores (0.05). The study tried to understand what components of the populism pre-treatment index did not work as expected but as it is displayed in the following table, both, the holistic components and the items coming from the Castanho Silva populist scale had a weak correlation.

Table 6 – Correlation Scores Populist Attitudes

Correlation Scores with Populism Post-treatment index	
Pre-treatment index	-0.057
Castanho Silva	0.012
Holistic items	-0.092

These results do not allow to confirm the assumption and therefore the pre-treatment populist score cannot be used to reduce the variance of the populism post-treatment scale.

The third step before running the regression analyses was to verify the distribution of the post-treatment scores. This revealed that the distribution was heavily skewed. For this reason, the study decided to apply a log transformation to the post-treatment populist scale which reduced the skewness and allow the variable to mimic a normal distribution.

Three elements composed the regression. A dependent variable (the populism score), the independent variables (the three different treatments), and the demographic characteristics that functioned as control items. Due to data missingness and to avoid a small N for the model, the researcher decided to run two different regression analyses one with control for demographic and the other without. The table below shows the results with the control for demographic.⁵

⁵ Appendix E reports the results of the model without the control for demographic items.

Table 7 – Comparison between Treatments

Table - Effect of Treatments on Populism

Treatment Type		Coef.	
Emotion + Blame attribution		0.56**	
Blame attribution		0.46**	
Emotion		0.61***	
N	76	Total	76

OLS Coefficients. ***= $p < 0.005$ ** = $p < 0.01$. *N* excludes invalid response participants and invalid treatment participants.

The multiple regression analysis shows that all three treatments have statistically significant results. This confirms Hypothesis II, the Blame attribution strategy is associated with an increase in populist attitudes. Instead, Hypothesis IIa is not confirmed, while the double elaboration task is associated with an increase of populist attitudes, the interaction effect is of smaller size when compared to the emotion treatment alone.

6.2.2 Hypothesis I

The study progressed with its analysis by investigating the relations between populist attitudes and emotional states. To analyze the relation between emotions and populism score, the researcher ran a regression analysis with the outcome the populism score and as an independent variable each emotional state. It also controlled for demographic characteristics. All scores were normalized on a scale between 0-1 before running the model. The results in the table below show that anger is

the emotional state that is strongly associated with an increase in populist attitudes (99% confidence level). Also, resentment has a positive association with populism. Among the positive emotions, the only emotional state that displays statistically significant results is the negative association between populism and satisfaction. The remaining emotions are not significantly associated with populism in either direction. The thesis also verified if the treatments increased the negative emotional state of the participants, but the analysis did not carry any significant result.

Table 8 – Effect of Emotions on Populism

Table Effect of Emotions on Populism	
	Coef.
Angry	0.15***
Resentful	0.12*
Disappointed	0.05
Sad	0.01
Ignored	0.07
Disgusted	0.007
Grateful	-0.09
Satisfied	-0.11.
Happy	-0.002
N	76

OLS Coefficients with Standard Errors in parentheses. * = $p < 0.005$
 * = $p < 0.05$. = $p < 0.1$. N excludes invalid response participants &
 invalid treatment participants.

6.2.3 Hypothesis III

Finally, the study analyzed the association between post-treatment populism scores and feeling for candidates. The qualitative speech coding analysis revealed that Pablo Iglesias (Podemos) and Santiago Abascal (Vox) employ populist rhetoric more than other leaders. In this section, the study is interested to verify if populist scores predict support for leaders that employ populist rhetoric. To do so, the researcher ran a regression analysis with the outcome being the support for leaders. The independent variable was the post-treatment populism score. The study also controlled for generic demographic characteristics.

Table 9 – Populism Scores and Feeling for Candidates

Table Populism Scores and Feeling for Candidates			
Left-Wing parties	Coef.	Right-Wing parties	Coef.
Pablo Iglesias	0.57*	Santiago Abascal	0.0009
Pedro Sanchez	0.11	Inés Arrimadas	-0.05
		Pablo Casado	-0.15
N	78		78
OLS Coefficients. * = $p < 0.05$. N excludes invalid response participants and invalid treatment participants.			

The regression analysis indicates that a higher level of populist attitude leads to an increase of support for the leader of Podemos (estimate of 0.57). This result is statistically significant. On the contrary, the remaining results do not display any statistical significance. Surprisingly, for

Pedro Sanchez higher level of populist attitudes is positively associated with support for the candidate. The same goes but with a milder effect with Santiago Abascal. This result suggests that further research on Vox is needed. For Pablo Casado and Inés Arrimadas instead the coefficient results to be negative.

7. Discussion

This thesis extends the existing literature on emotions and populism in several ways. First, it confirmed the expectation (Rico et al. 2017) that anger is the emotion that is associated with an increase of populist attitudes. Contrary to other studies, despite resentment, this analysis cannot confirm that other emotions are having an effect on populism. This result might be given by the study design or the small N of the survey experiment. The study was able to confirm Hypothesis II and only partially Hypothesis IIa. The blame attribution strategy resulted in having a milder effect on populist attitudes compared to the other two treatments. A limitation might have been the “free-floating” mechanism on the elaboration task. By letting subjects choosing their own evil instead of inducing the blame towards a precise elite, might have led participants to blame individuals or groups outside of politics with the effect of mitigating the treatment effect.

The double elaboration task instead produced a positive effect on the dependent variable. The analysis confirmed the interaction effect between the emotion eliciting task and the blame attribution strategy. However, the double elaboration task did not generate a stronger effect compared to the single Emotion treatment.

Surprisingly, the pre-treatment populist exhibited no correlation with the post-treatment measure. The research advises future studies to re-test these items in a different context to verify if these work cross-nationally. Indeed, while in this study they were not correlated other tests set

up in countries different from Spain showed a correlation between the items asked in the pre-treatment and those asked in the post-treatment.

Regarding the association between populist attitudes and support for candidates, the study revealed that higher scores in populist attitudes are associated with support for Pablo Iglesias (Podemos). This confirms the hypothesis that populist attitudes are a predictor of support for populist candidates. Focusing on Santiago Abascal and Vox, further research is needed. While the study finds a clear relation between Iglesias and populism score, the results for Santiago Abascal are mild and not statistically significant. In other words, while for the former leader of Podemos demand and supply-side match, it seems that for Abascal other explanatory variables rather than populism would work better to predict its support.

7.1 Limitations and potential solutions

Looking back at the research design and at the data collection process, the survey experiment encountered several issues. First of all, the study saw a low rate of responses. Although the budget for the study was modest, the data collection expected to recruit a higher number of participants. To overcome this issue while using the same instruments (including Facebook ads) and the same budget, the researcher could either reduce the amount spent on ads but providing monetary incentives to participants or change the campaign strategy creating an entertaining survey and improving the visual quality of the advertisement feeds.

Second, the study suffered from a weak correlation between the proxy measure of the outcome variable and its post-treatment measure. While this can be considered a complementary issue, to overcome it, the study could ask participants to evaluate the same items pre-and post-treatment. This would allow using a difference in different design to verify the treatment effect of the manipulations. Assuming that it would have possible to recruit a larger sample, the study could have added four other groups, the three treatments, and a further control group. The subjects participating in this group would have had to answer to the same populist items before and after the manipulation. In this way, the study would have had a backup plan in case the proxy measure would have not worked.

Finally, the blame attribution elaboration task showed a smaller effect compared to the emotion treatment. This might have been caused by its design. If there would be a chance of re-testing the study, the researcher could adapt a different treatment mechanism. For instance, the study could assign participants to read a short newspaper article blaming a precise elite (for instance the government) for the poor result of the country on a specific issue. Pre-treatment controls of party affiliation and issue position and a compliance check would corroborate the treatment. In this way, the participants would be exposed to a blaming strategy that involves a politicized issue, providing a homogeneous treatment effect.

8. Conclusion

8.1 Summary of the thesis

As populist movements rose in most Western countries, so did the attention scholars provide to this phenomenon. The thesis was interested in understanding different aspects of the populist demand-side, notably those factors that activate populist attitudes and the relation between populist attitude and support for populist candidates. In particular, the study tested with a survey experiment whether two cognitive mechanisms increase populist tendencies. With an elaboration task focused on recalling a situation in which the subject was treated unfairly, the first treatment aimed to provoke negative emotions in participants. The second treatment instead consisted of another elaboration task this time intending to push participants to assign blame towards a group of individuals who are the source of a problem in their country. This second treatment mimicked the strategy used by populist leaders who tend to polarize society and identify groups to whom assign blame for the issues in society. The thesis also concentrated on the five major Spanish national parties and identified with a speech analysis who among the Spanish political leaders adopt populist rhetoric. Afterward, it tested through the data collected with the survey experiment if leaders who employ populist rhetoric receive support from subjects who tend to score higher on the populist attitudinal scale.

8.2 What we learned

In line with the ideational approach to populism, the thesis argued that populist attitudes can be activated when the right stimuli are presented. These, I argue, can also be artificially constructed in a survey experiment by replicating mechanisms used by political leaders in their rhetorical speeches, in this case eliciting negative emotions and blaming elites.

Although some limitations are given by the data collection, the regression analyses show that variance in results between the treatment groups and the control group exists. The three treatments displayed statistically significant results, with emotions – in particular anger – being associated with higher populist attitudes scores.

Regarding the association between populist attitude and support for populist candidates, the data analysis partially supported the findings coming from the speech coding analysis. Although in the qualitative analysis Santiago Abascal resulted adopting populist rhetoric, the thesis could not find statistically significant results between populist attitudes and support for the leader. Instead, regarding Pablo Iglesias, the thesis confirmed the hypothesis that populist attitudes are positively associated with support for a populist leader.

Similar to other research findings (Busby, Gubler, and Hawkins 2019; Hawkins, Rovira Kaltwasser, and Andreadis 2020), the thesis confirmed the hypothesis that populist attitudes are dormant and these can be activated. The small but substantial contribution the study makes

enriches this branch of the literature interested in understanding how citizens' populist tendencies form.

Appendix A – Supplementary Material

- Survey items PDF file. URL :

https://ceuedu-my.sharepoint.com/:b:/g/personal/barbieri_andrea_student_ceu_edu/ETET3PEVRYpCittgAueAis0BiPcL5QJa9VNg-kX7Bet0kA?e=gvtb4J

- Dataset collection Excel file. URL :

https://ceuedu-my.sharepoint.com/:x:/g/personal/barbieri_andrea_student_ceu_edu/ERaM-3L_AuxKIYjgugqMb24Bjh6-fuaKZlsAK2UggtVI6g?e=jQHhz4

- Code script of the statistical analysis in *R Studio*. URL :

https://ceuedu-my.sharepoint.com/:u:/g/personal/barbieri_andrea_student_ceu_edu/EfdO43hGcE9JgqnZZZ9_T7cBwDnnx7Ms-OwXvEN4vsyTQQ

Appendix B - Rubric - Speech Coding Template

Country:
Name of speaker:
Date of speech:
Type of speech:
Place of speech:
Grader:
Date of grading:

Final Grade (delete unused grades):

2 A speech in this category is extremely populist and comes very close to the ideal populist discourse. Specifically, the speech expresses all or nearly all of the elements of ideal populist discourse, and has few elements that would be considered non-populist.

1 A speech in this category includes strong, clearly populist elements but either does not use them consistently or tempers them by including non-populist elements. Thus, the discourse may have a romanticized notion of the people and the idea of a unified popular will (indeed, it must in order to be considered populist), but it avoids bellicose language or references to cosmic proportions or any particular enemy.

0 A speech in this category uses few if any populist elements. Note that even if a manifesto expresses a Manichaean worldview, it is not considered populist if it lacks some notion of a popular will.

Populist	Pluralist
It conveys a Manichaean vision of the world, that is, one that is moral (every issue has a strong moral dimension) and dualistic (everything is in one category or the other, “right” or “wrong,” “good” or “evil”) The implication—or even the stated idea—is that there can be nothing in between, no fence-sitting, no shades of grey. This leads to the use of highly charged, even bellicose language.	The discourse does not frame issues in moral terms or paint them in black-and-white. Instead, there is a strong tendency to focus on narrow, particular issues . The discourse will emphasize or at least not eliminate the possibility of natural, justifiable differences of opinion.
The moral significance of the items mentioned in the speech is heightened by ascribing cosmic proportions to them, that is, by claiming that they affect people everywhere (possibly but not necessarily across the world) and across time. Especially in this last regard, frequent references may be made to a reified notion of “history.” At the same time, the speaker will justify the moral significance of his or her ideas by tying them to national and religious leaders that are generally revered.	The discourse will probably not refer to any reified notion of history or use any cosmic proportions. References to the spatial and temporal consequences of issues will be limited to the material reality rather than any mystical connections.

Although Manichaeism, the discourse is still democratic, in the sense that the good is embodied in the will of the majority, which is seen as a unified whole, perhaps but not necessarily expressed in references to the “voluntad del pueblo”; however, the speaker ascribes a kind of unchanging essentialism to that will, rather than letting it be whatever 50 percent of the people want at any particular moment. Thus, this good majority is romanticized, with some notion of the common man (urban or rural) seen as the embodiment of the national ideal.	Democracy is simply the calculation of votes. This should be respected and is seen as the foundation of legitimate government, but it is not meant to be an exercise in arriving at a preexisting, knowable “will.” The majority shifts and changes across issues. The common man is not romanticized, and the notion of citizenship is broad and legalistic.
The evil is embodied in a minority whose specific identity will vary according to context. Domestically, in Latin America it is often an economic elite, perhaps the “oligarchy,” but it may also be a racial elite; internationally, it may be the United States or the capitalist, industrialized nations or international financiers or simply an ideology such as neoliberalism and capitalism.	The discourse avoids a conspiratorial tone and does not single out any evil ruling minority. It avoids labeling opponents as evil and may not even mention them in an effort to maintain a positive tone and keep passions low.
Crucially, the evil minority is or was recently in charge and subverted the system to its own interests, against those of the good majority or the people. Thus, systemic change is/was required, often expressed in terms such as “revolution” or “liberation” of the people from their “immiseration” or bondage, even if technically it comes about through elections.	The discourse does not argue for systemic change but, as mentioned above, focuses on particular issues. In the words of Laclau, it is a politics of “differences” rather than “hegemony.”
Because of the moral baseness of the threatening minority, non-democratic means may be openly justified or at least the minority’s continued enjoyment of these will be seen as a generous concession by the people; the speech itself may exaggerate or abuse data to make this point, and the language will show a bellicosity towards the opposition that is incendiary and condescending, lacking the decorum that one shows a worthy opponent.	Formal rights and liberties are openly respected, and the opposition is treated with courtesy and as a legitimate political actor. The discourse will not encourage or justify illegal, violent actions. There will be great respect for institutions and the rule of law. If data is abused, it is either an innocent mistake or an embarrassing breach of democratic standards.

Overall Comments (just a few sentences):

Appendix C - Populist Score - Spanish Party System

The two tables show the results coming from the speech analysis performed by the two coders.

Coder I

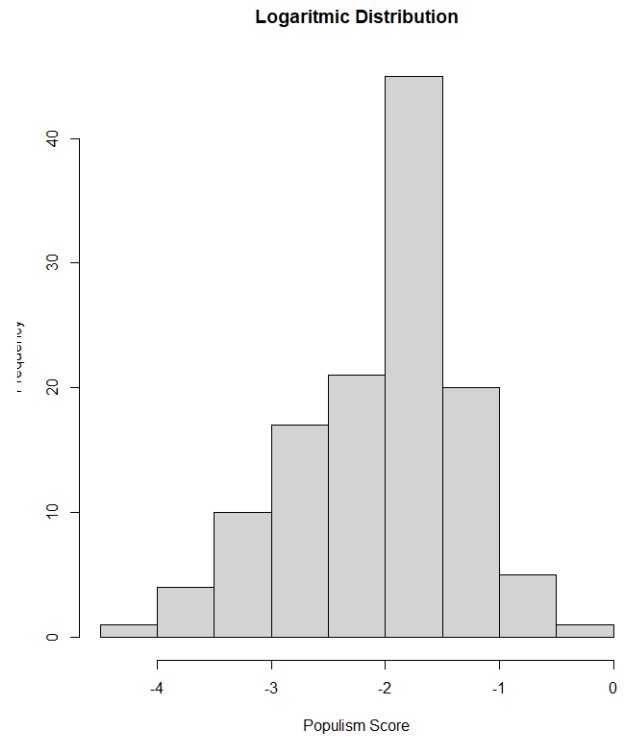
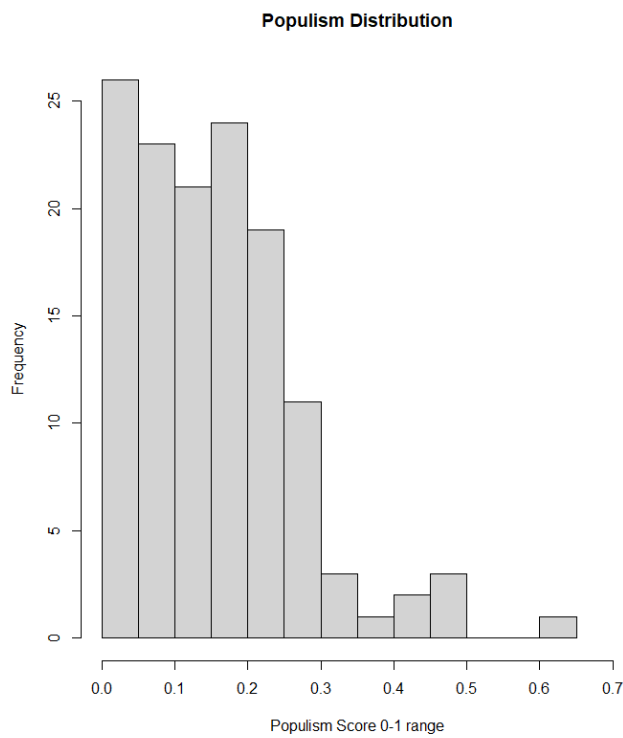
	Partido				
	Ciudadanos	Popular	Podemos	PSOE	Vox
Manifiesto	0	0	1.5	0	1.7
Famous Speech	0.2	0	1.7	0	0.8
Campaign Speech	0.2	0.3	1.4	0	1.1
Average Grade	0.1	0.1	1.5	0.0	1.2
Average of the system			0.6		

Coder II

	Partido				
	Ciudadanos	Popular	Podemos	PSOE	Vox
Manifiesto	0.2	0.2	1.3	0	1.5
Famous Speech	0	0	1.5	0	0.5
Campaign Speech	0.3	0.2	1.5	0	1.3
Average Grade	0.2	0.1	1.4	0.0	1.1
Average of the system			0.6		

Appendix D – Post-treatment distribution

The two histograms show the distribution of the post-treatment populist score before and after the logarithmic transformation.



Appendix E – Effect of treatments on populist attitudes

Treatments without control for demographics	Coef.	Treatments with control for demographics	Coef.
Emotion + Blame attribution	0.41**	Emotion + Blame attribution	0.56**
Blame attribution	0.07	Blame attribution	0.46**
Emotion	0.32*	Emotion	0.61***

OLS Coefficients. * = $p < 0.05$ ** = $p < 0.01$ *** = $p < 0.001$. Effect of treatment is compared to the control group. *N* excludes invalid response participants.

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