

## **Examining the Mobilizing Effect of Populist Political Communication: A Survey Experiment of Populist Communication Style across Three Policy Issues**

SIGNE RINGDAL BERGAN<sup>1</sup>

Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Norway

Do populist-framed messages mobilize citizens to engage with and participate in politics more than non-populist messages, and does this vary according to party preference? Based on a survey experiment, this article presents a study of the behavioral effects of populist and non-populist messages on political engagement among Norwegian voters. This article investigates three policy issues that represent salient political cleavages framed with populist communication style contrasted with similar messages that lack populist framing. The results show that Norwegian citizens are generally reluctant to share policy issues—populist or not. However, this changes when party preferences align with populist policy issues. Populist communication style is seen to be most effective among voters of left- and right-wing political parties.

*Keywords: populist communication style, politicized collective identity, survey experiment, behavioral intention, political engagement*

The success of populism is often measured in terms of the success of populist parties; consequently, empirical research on this matter has been traditionally centered on political parties that have been defined as populist by scholars (Akkerman, Zaslove, & Spruyt, 2017; Elchardus & Spruyt, 2016). On a theoretical level, populism as a thin ideology has gained the most support among scholars, and such support has often been applied in research that defines, categorizes, and describes political parties and leaders based on their characteristics (e.g., Mudde, 2007). The thin ideology of populism consists of ideas about society as morally divided into two: where “the good people” are portrayed as morally superior to “corrupt elite” (Mudde, 2007). Thin ideology must be connected to thicker ideologies, such as socialism or nativism, to get a political direction and turn into different types of populist ideologies, such as left-, or right-wing populism (Mudde, 2017).

However, the media coverage on Brexit leading up to the referendum in June 2016 (e.g., Zappettini & Krzyżanowski, 2019) and the rhetoric in the U.S. media (e.g., Wahl-Jorgensen, 2018) are a couple of

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Signe Ringdal Bergan: [signe.ringdal@ntnu.no](mailto:signe.ringdal@ntnu.no)

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examples that emphasize the relevance of studying populism on a different level as well—that is, as a communication phenomenon that political actors, media actors, or citizens may apply to gain support among the public (e.g., de Vreese, Esser, Aalberg, Reinemann, & Stanyer, 2018; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Laclau, 2005). Following de Vreese et al.'s (2018) conceptualization of populist political communication, this article defines populism as communication-centered (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007) and ideology-centered (Mudde, 2004), and populism is viewed as an ideological phenomenon that is activated and expressed through populist communication style.

By defining populism as a communication style, one can distinguish different types of populism, such as complete and anti-elitist populism (de Vreese et al., 2018). Complete populism consists of reference to the people, exclusion of an outgroup, and anti-elitism, while anti-elitist populism includes reference to the people and anti-elitism (de Vreese et al., 2018; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). Populist communication style may not only serve as a theoretical conceptualization but also as an analytical tool where it is possible to study commonalities and differences between different types of populist ideologies, such as left-wing, agrarian, and right-wing populism (de Vreese et al., 2018; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007).

The aim of this article is to study whether policy issues framed with populist communication style can better mobilize Norwegian citizens' willingness to engage in politics by sharing a policy issue with a friend online or by joining an online petition compared with similar policy issues without populist communication style. Most previous research that studies the relationship between populism and citizens usually focuses on countries that have a higher degree of political polarization and the presence of radical right-wing populist parties, such as Belgium (e.g., Elchardus & Spruyt, 2016; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007), the Netherlands (e.g., Akkerman et al., 2017; Hameleers, Bos, & de Vreese, 2017), or the United States (e.g., Levi, Sendroui, & Hagan, 2020). Norway differs by being an egalitarian country with a high level of trust among its citizens—where salient political cleavages are also present (Dalton, 2005; Eckstein, 2015). Therefore, it would be interesting to determine whether populist communication style can mobilize political engagement in a moderate political environment.

An emerging body of research within the field of media effects and populism focuses on the persuasiveness of populism, which has suggested that blame attributions (Busby, Gubler, & Hawkins, 2019; Hameleers et al., 2017), simplified rhetoric (Bos, van der Brug, & de Vreese, 2013; Rooduijn, 2014), and colloquial language (Breeze, 2020) are important aspects of communication that make populism attractive for citizens. Only a few studies have examined how populist communication style can mobilize political engagement among citizens. However, a comparative study of 15 countries indicated that anti-elitist populist framing on the topic of possible economic decline mobilizes political engagement among citizens, while messages framed with anti-immigration populist messages on the same topic are demobilizing (Hameleers et al., 2018). Based on the same data, Bos et al. (2020) found that anti-elitist populist messages on the topic of a potential economic decline not only mobilize political engagement but are also considered persuasive for citizens.

Although previous research has provided insights into the effects of populist messages, four shortcomings can be identified. First, most previous research has focused on how populist messages can persuade citizens, while the behavioral effects of exposure to populist messages are understudied aspects

of populist political communication (Hameleers et al., 2018). Following the conceptualization of Hameleers et al. (2018) and Bos et al. (2020), political engagement is viewed as a form of collective action and is based on political acts of sharing information about a policy issue with friends or online or by signing an online petition (e.g., Bimber, 2001). Only in a few other papers (e.g., Bos et al., 2020; Hameleers et al., 2018) is political engagement seen as a *consequence of exposure* to policy issues.

Second, few studies examining political engagement related to populist messages have focused on anti-elitist and anti-immigration messages about a single issue (e.g., Bos et al., 2020; Hameleers et al., 2018). This article moves forward by investigating three different policy issues with and without populist communication style: immigration, economic redistribution, and rural policy. In policy issues that contain populism, populist communication style and political cleavages vary according to the policy issue, which distinguishes this work from previous studies on the behavioral effects of political engagement.

This article also differs from earlier research by viewing populist communication style through various political cleavages (e.g., Lipset & Rokkan, 1967). For instance, anti-elitist populism is presented through two different political cleavages, the owner-worker cleavage and the center-periphery cleavage. Anti-elitist populism expressed through owner-worker cleavage may be communicated by traditional left-wing populist parties, while anti-elitist populism presented through center-periphery cleavage is most likely communicated by agrarian parties, such as the Norwegian Center Party. This article also aims to demonstrate that studying populist communication through political cleavages is helpful in comparing populist and non-populist communication styles.

Similarly to van Stekelenburg and Klandermans (2014), this article starts with the theoretical premise that "political cleavages mold mobilizing structures and mobilizing potentials" (p. 180). This article takes it further and examines whether populist communication style has a more mobilizing effect on political engagement when political cleavage and policy issues resonate with each other, compared with policy issues that do not contain populist communication style.

Last, previous research has suggested that a resonance between the topic of a policy issue and voting preference is important for mobilizing collective action among citizens (van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2014). However, it is still unclear whether populist communication style triggers voters' willingness to engage politically when exposed to populist policy issues that resonate with their party's issue position, compared with similar policy issues without populist communication. This study, based on a survey experiment ( $n = 2027$ ), attempts to test this idea based on policy issues on economic redistribution and voters of left-wing parties, rural policy and voters of the agrarian party, and immigration policy and voters of the right-wing party.

In line with social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), theory of politicization of collective identity (Simon & Klandermans, 2001), populist communication style (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007), and political cleavages (Lipset & Rokkan, 1967), this article studies whether policy issues framed with populism that attempt to unite citizens under the banner of "the people" by excluding and framing other societal groups as outgroups are more effective at mobilizing political engagement than similar messages without populist framing. To understand populist communication style's mobilizing effect, this article focuses on the

politicization of collective identity as conceptualized in social psychology (e.g., Simon & Klandermans, 2001). Therefore, this study is able to test whether identity politics may mobilize political engagement among Norwegian citizens. Furthermore, this article seeks to examine the extent to which populist messages that match voters' preferences mobilize political engagement more effectively than identical messages without populist communication style.

### **Niche Parties and Political Cleavages That Influence the Norwegian Party System**

Like most European countries, Norway has a multiparty system, which consists of various political parties varying in size, political direction, and political cleavage(s). Because of the aim of this study, this article focuses on niche parties with clear issue positions related to the policy issues studied in this article. These include the wing parties: the Progress Party (Fremskrittspartiet) on the political right and the Socialist Left Party (Sosialistisk Venstreparti) and the Red Party (Rødt) on the political left. Because the wing parties are placed on the outer ends of the left-right dimension, they may be most inclined to apply populist communication style compared with the mainstream parties, Labor Party (Arbeiderpartiet) and Conservative Party (Høyre), which aim to appeal to the mainstream voter (Aardal, Bergh, & Haugsgjerd, 2019). In addition, the Center Party (Senterpartiet) is included as a niche party that owns issues related to the center-periphery and urban-rural political cleavages. Because mainstream parties appeal to a broader set of issues, they focus less on these specific policy issues than niche parties (Aardal et al., 2019).

The first policy issue, immigration, is the most important for the right-wing populist Progress Party and its voters, as is the case for other right-wing populist parties in Europe (Ivarsflaten, 2008). The Progress Party can be viewed as a moderate neoliberal right-wing populist party (Jupskås, 2017) and is regarded as one of the most electorally successful right-wing populist parties in Western Europe, which has been in government for two terms (Jungar & Jupskås, 2014). Some researchers call the Progress Party's political position a "winning formula" because the political party can function in government and cooperate with other political parties in a coalition government despite being a right-wing populist party (Jungar & Jupskås, 2014). Immigration policy can be related to a "new" political cleavage, which researchers suggest is due to changes caused by globalization and modernization called cultural cleavage (e.g., Kriesi et al., 2006). The cultural cleavage consists of a stronger emphasis on cultural protectionism where negative communication toward immigration and an emphasis on closed national borders are central components. Such communication has contributed to the success of right-wing populist parties in Western Europe (e.g., Kriesi et al., 2006).

The next policy issue, economic redistribution, is represented by the left-wing parties, the Socialist Left Party, and the Red Party. The left-wing parties are not regarded as traditional populist parties: however, at the time of the study, they had a firm stance against Norwegian membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the European Union (EU), and the European Economic Area (EEA) Agreement. On the issue of redistribution of economic resources, the left-wing parties are more uncompromising on the issue compared with the more mainstream Labor Party, which also shares this issue position. The redistribution of economic resources may be viewed as representing the owner-worker cleavage, which is the most important cleavage for left-wing parties (e.g., Lipset & Rokkan, 1967).

The last policy issue, rural policy, has also been an important aspect of Norwegian politics for decades. The tension between the urban and the rural districts has been actualized through the merger of the municipalities (the municipal reform) and the centralization of health care services (Slottemo, 2018). The saliency of regional debate was mirrored in the parliamentary elections in 2017, when the Center Party became the fourth-largest party in Norway. The Center Party is not regarded as a populist party: However, it has been observed as applying populist rhetoric (e.g., Andersland, 2021; Sjøli, 2019) and is regarded as having a hard Eurosceptic stance (Batory & Sitter, 2004). The center-periphery and urban-rural cleavages are the main focus of the Norwegian Center Party (Slottemo, 2018).

The status and influence of rural policy in national politics distinguishes Norway from other European countries (Baldersheim & Fimreite, 2005; Lipset & Rokkan 1967). The exception is the True Finns Party (from 1995, the Finns Party), founded in 1959 in Finland, which was an agrarian populist party that applied anti-elitist populism within the center-periphery cleavage (Norocel, 2017). However, in 1995, the party changed its focus to a cultural cleavage.

The three types of policy issues—immigration, economic redistribution, and rural policy—are based on central political cleavages that have influenced Norwegian politics for decades (Lipset & Rokkan, 1967). Compared to many European countries and the United States, Norway differs because of its high trust in the population and moderate polarization (Dalton, 2005; Eckstein, 2015). Therefore, this article can study the mobilizing effect of populist communication style on policy issues related to salient political cleavages without extreme polarization. In this regard, the Norwegian case differs from most previous studies on populism and might be considered a difficult case and a hard test, which can tell us more about the mobilizing effect of populist communication style on political engagement.

### **Mobilizing Political Engagement Through Populist Communication Style**

How citizens are mobilized to engage in collective action has been a central question in social science (Taylor & Whittier, 1992). Previous research has found group identity to be the binding link between grievances and collective action among individuals (Taylor & Whittier, 1992; van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008). To examine whether populist communication style might be more effective in activating citizens to become willing to engage in politics, this article will go further into social identity theory and the intergroup dynamics of politicized collective identity.

Social identity is a group member's perception of a social group's shared values, norms, and beliefs (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Turner & Reynolds, 2012). Individuals can espouse numerous different social identities that are regarded as latent and activated by a context (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). When activated, social identity can influence individuals' behavior and interactions with others (Turner & Reynolds, 2012). Because social identity is regarded as an important part of individuals' self-concept, group members want to distinguish their social identity as being different or better than other social identities (Mols & Weber, 2013; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). It has been suggested that social identity may also be viewed as fulfilling basic emotional needs, such as a need to belong, to be like other individuals and to be positively differentiated from others (Mason, 2018; Spruyt, Keppens, & van Droogenbroeck, 2016).

Some identities can be regarded as politicized social identities that are constructed and activated through communication (Klandermans, 2014; Polletta & Jasper, 2001). If politicized social identity is successfully activated, it becomes salient in the minds of groups of individuals. When this occurs, the politicized social identity becomes a politicized collective identity—a shared group consciousness among group members (Klandermans, 2014; Sturmer & Simon, 2004; van Zomeren et al., 2008). The process of politicization occurs through communication by various actors, such as politicians, media actors, and citizens (Hameleers et al., 2018; Laclau, 2005; Polletta & Jasper, 2001). For instance, in populist political communication, political actors may describe the common interests of the politicized collective identity of the people and express their closeness to the people by speaking in their name (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). This activation of the collective identity of the people is within populist communication style called “empty populism,” which is regarded as essential for populist communication style (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). Politicization strengthens the collective identity by self-discrimination of the ingroup and discrimination of an outgroup (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2014).

In populist political communication, the politicized collective identity of the people is perceived as a group of morally good citizens who share a grievance caused by the morally corrupt elite or outgroup (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). Boundary markers promote awareness of a grievance afflicted on the ingroup and, at the same time, promotes awareness of who the people are by expressing who the “others” are (Taggart, 2000; Taylor & Whittier, 1992).

Anti-elitist populism can be framed through different political cleavages. For instance, anti-elitist populism communicated through owner-worker cleavage may frame the elite as not only morally corrupt but also economically corrupt. The elites are accused of sharing or protecting the interests of a special interest group such as “corrupt” bankers, the wealthy, or capitalist, who are depriving the people (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Taggart, 2000). Anti-elitist populism presented through an owner-worker cleavage is often communicated by left-wing populist parties based on a left-wing populist ideology (e.g., Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Mudde, 2017). Previous research has suggested that anti-elitist populism on the topic of possible economic decline has a mobilizing effect on citizens’ willingness to share messages (Bos et al., 2020; Hameleers et al., 2018).

Anti-elitist populism presented through center-periphery cleavage may frame the elite as “city leaders” who do not understand the struggles of the people in the rural districts and therefore cannot represent the people. In addition, the elite may be portrayed as protecting a special interest group, such as a supranational union (i.e., the European Union). Supranational unions may be framed as depriving the people of necessary resources in rural areas.

In complete populism, the political elite is said not only to be looking out for themselves but also aiming to protect a minority group that represents a threat to the people (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). In such communication, the collective identity of the people is attributed to characteristics that are the opposite of those of the political elite and characteristics that contrast specific minority groups in terms of nationality, ethnicity, or religion. Complete populism communicated through cultural

cleavage is often applied by right-wing populist parties in Europe (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007) based on a right-wing populist ideology (e.g., Mudde, 2007).

Both anti-elitist and complete populism frame a divided society where there is a collective experience of injustice and of whoever is responsible for the injustice. In the collective action framing literature, injustice and responsibility frames are suggested to be important for mobilizing collective action, as they can transform abstract issues into personal ones (Gamson, 1992; Polletta & Jasper, 2001). Prior research suggests that group members with politicized identities are viewed as motivated to engage politically on behalf of their group because they are primed toward a specific issue (Sturmer & Simon, 2004; van Zomeren et al., 2008).

Because social identity is important for individuals' self-concept, group members might want to change the situation if their collective identity is given a negative value evaluation by themselves and others. A discrepancy in power between collective identities can be attempted to be solved by changing the power relation between ingroup and outgroup through collective action (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Therefore, the political act of sharing a populist message that attributes blame to other collective identities can be a way for group members to change the power relations between collective identities (Hameleers et al., 2018; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Similar to Hameleers et al. (2018) and Bos et al. (2020), this article studies citizens willingness to share a populist or non-populist policy issue with friends online or to join an online petition. The first hypothesis is as follows:

*H1: Policy issues framed with populist communication style will mobilize more political engagement than identical policy issues without populist communication style.*

### **Mobilizing Voters of Niche Parties**

Populist communication style might be all the more mobilizing for voters of niche political parties that own the policy issues included in this study. This article applies the concept of party preference, which is delineated to the political party the respondents want to vote for in the upcoming parliamentary election. Previous research has shown that Norwegian voters are stable in their basic political preferences (Aardal et al., 2019). Prior studies have shown that party choice is often based on a match between demand-side and supply-side factors (e.g., Akkerman et al., 2017; Thomassen, 2005). For instance, voters' preferences and worries are important demand-side factors, while supply-side factors consist of characteristics of the political parties, such as issue positions, communication styles, ideologies, and the political cleavages they represent.

Mason (2018) argues that "partisan identity can be separated from issue preference and the identity element can be powerful motivator of human judgment, emotion and behavior" (p. 148). These are interesting points; however, research has shown that concepts such as party identification and vote choice cannot easily be distinguished from each other in European multiparty systems compared to the United States' two-party system (Thomassen & Rosema, 2009). The authors argue that this may be due to the differences in political systems. In addition, because the niche parties "own" the policy issues studied in this article, the salient policy issues should be important for voters' support of the parties.

Research within social psychology suggests that political cleavage determines what cause may mobilize an audience and which audience is to be mobilized (van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2014). By studying two separate demonstrations about the same policy issue presented through two different political cleavages, the authors found that resonance between political cleavage, the framing of the issue, and citizens' issue positions is important in mobilizing citizens to collective action. This article goes further by testing whether populist communication style may make voters more willing to engage politically when there is resonance between political cleavage, the topic of the policy issue, and citizens' party preferences in comparison to similar policy issues that do not contain populist communication style. Therefore, the last hypothesis is as follows:

*H2: Voters are more mobilized by policy issues on the main issues espoused by their political party framed with populist communication style than by identical messages framed without such a communication style.*

### **Method**

The survey experiment was developed in collaboration with the Electoral Research Programme at the Institute of Social Research, the Department of Political Science at the University of Oslo, and Statistics Norway. Statistics Norway drew a representative probability sample of 10,000 respondents from the electoral roll (Bergh & Karlsen, 2021). The experiment was part of an election campaign panel conducted in four periods: once before the election campaign, twice during the campaign, and once after the Norwegian parliamentary election held on September 11, 2017 (Bergh & Karlsen, 2021). The survey experiment discussed here was included in the third period of the panel, which ran from August 29 to September 5, 2017.

### ***Sample and Experimental Design***

The experiment was conducted on a sample of 2,153 respondents aged 18 years or older; the average age was 52 years, and 47% of the respondents were female. Political preferences were reported by 83% of the respondents ( $n = 1,788$ ), with 27% reporting a Labor Party association, 27% reporting a Conservative Party association, 11.5% reporting a Progress Party association, 11% reporting a Center Party association, 6.1% reporting a Socialist Left Party association, and 3% reporting a Red Party association.

The experiment employed a fully randomized  $2 \times 3$  between-subjects design, which consisted of six randomized groups and a control group. The six fully randomized groups received messages about economic redistribution policy, rural policy, and immigration policy. Three of the groups were exposed to a message on one of the three policy issues framed with populist communication style, while the other half received the message without such framing. The control group received a simple statement with encouragement to vote in the upcoming election. A randomization test showed that the seven stimuli groups did not differ significantly in terms of gender ( $F_{6, 2153} = 1.2, p = .304$ ), age ( $F_{6, 2153} = 0.979, p = .438$ ), education ( $F_{6, 2149} = 0.888, p = .503$ ), or party preference ( $F_{6, 1788} = 1.063, p = .383$ ), which indicated successful randomization.

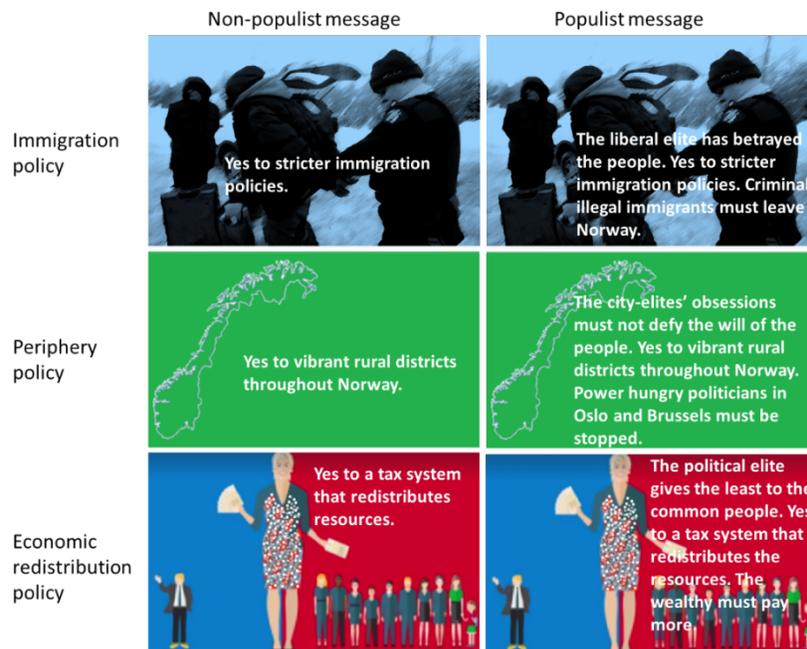
As noted, the control stimulus was a simple statement encouraging recipients to vote in the upcoming election. At first glance, it could be argued that the control group might not be neutral regarding the dependent variable of political engagement. However, this article does not study the propensity to vote, but rather studies differences in political engagement by exposure to populist and non-populist policy issues. Thus, it is important to keep the control stimulus in mind when reading the results section. However, the main aim of this article is to compare topical pairs of stimuli groups: immigrant policy framed with and without complete populism and rural policy and economic redistribution policy framed with and without anti-elitist populism.

### ***Stimuli***

As shown in Figure 1, the first pair of messages concerns immigration policy. The first stimulus on immigration policy reads, "Yes to stricter immigration policies." The stimulus has a negative stance on immigration policy, but it does not contain populist communication style (e.g., Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). In contrast, the next stimulus on immigration policy contains complete populism (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007), where the "liberal elite" was blamed for betraying "the people" by protecting "criminal illegal refugees."

The second pair of messages is about rural policy. The stimulus without populist communication style simply states, "Yes to vibrant rural districts throughout Norway" (see Figure 1). This is a statement that few Norwegian citizens would disagree with. In contrast, the corresponding populist stimulus portrays a situation in which "the will of the people" is defied by not only the political elite but also by the supranational elite. In terms of populist communication style, this message is regarded as anti-elitist populism presented through the center-periphery and urban-rural cleavages. On an ideological level, it can be regarded as agrarian populism (e.g., Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Lange & Rooduijn, 2015).

The last stimulus pair concerns the economic redistribution policy. The populist stimulus blames the political elite, who protect the wealthy at the expense of the people. This is regarded as anti-elitist populism through owner-worker cleavage, which is often applied by left-wing populist parties (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). The non-populist stimuli in Figure 1 state, "Yes to a tax system that redistributes resources."



**Figure 1. Non-populist and populist stimuli.\* Source: Aalberg, Maurer, and Karlsen (2019, p. 120). \*Translated to English by the author.**

### Measures

The dependent variable, political engagement, aims to measure behavioral intent about political engagement. The political engagement scale is based on answers to three questions: "How likely is it that you would share this post on Facebook, Twitter, or other social media?" "How likely are you to talk to a friend about this post?" and "How likely is it that you would sign an online signature campaign that supports this message?" The original response scale, ranging from 1 ("very willing") to 7 ("very unwilling"), is reversed so that higher scores correspond to a higher willingness to share the message. A principal component analysis was carried out and showed that all three items loaded on the same factor: 0.78–0.84. The political engagement scale was constructed as the mean score of the three items. The internal consistency was satisfactory (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.74$ ). The overall mean is 2.2 (standard deviation = 1.46), which shows that citizens are, on average, somewhat reluctant to share messages. It would have been interesting to study the results of the three components of political engagement disaggregated; however, the number of respondents does not allow this.

The stimuli variable included six stimuli groups and one control group, with 284–296 respondents in each group. The variable was applied in its original form with the control group as the reference category in the regression analysis.

Party preference is based on two questions that were asked pretreatment. The participants were first asked whether they had decided which party they intended to vote for in the upcoming parliamentary

election. Those who answered “Yes” were asked which party they planned to vote for. Those who were undecided were asked which party they would most likely vote for. The answers to the two questions were then merged into the detailed party preference variable, which was recoded into four party groups: 1. Socialist Left Party and Red Party; 2. Center Party; 3. Progress Party; 4. other parties (Labor Party, Conservative Party, Christian People’s Party (Kristelig Folkeparti), Green Party (Miljøpartiet de Grønne), and Liberal Party (Venstre Parti)). It would be interesting to differentiate respondents who have a strong party preference against those who have a weak party preference. However, this is not possible because of the low number of respondents when introducing party interactions.

## Results

In Table 1, three models are presented, with political engagement as the dependent variable. In the first model, the six stimuli groups were compared with the control group, which received a message encouraging citizens to vote in the upcoming election. The regression constant (2.45) was the mean political engagement for the control group. As expected, the regression coefficients for all six stimulus groups were negative; that is, the respondents were less inclined than the control group to share the policy issues to which they were exposed, regardless of whether those policy issues were presented with or without populist communication style.

The first hypothesis states that policy issues using populist communication style should mobilize more political engagement than identical policy issues without such framing. The contrasts between populist- and non-populist-framed messages on policy issues based on regression analysis are presented in Table 2. The overall contrast for all three issues is close to zero and clearly not statistically significant. The next section presents the contrasts for each pair of policy issues. The contrast for economic redistribution policy was positive and statistically significant ( $p = .003$ ). The positive sign indicates that the populist-framed message is more engaging than the non-populist one. The next contrast for rural policy is also statistically significant but with a negative sign ( $p = .008$ ), indicating that the non-populist version of the message is the most engaging. The contrast for immigration policy is close to zero and clearly not statistically significant. Thus, only the contrast for economic redistribution policy lends support to the first hypothesis.

**Table 1. Regression Analysis of Political Engagement by Populist Stimuli and Party Preference.**

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
	<i>b</i> ( <i>SE b</i> )	<i>b</i> ( <i>SE b</i> )	<i>b</i> ( <i>SE b</i> )
<i>Constant</i>	2.448 (0.09) ***	2.310 (0.09) ***	2.508 (0.11) ***
<i>Stimuli</i> (control group= ref.)			
Economic redistribution policy	-0.562 (0.12) ***	-0.493 (0.13) ***	-0.587 (0.15) ***
Economic redistribution (populism)	-0.199 (0.12)	-0.164 (0.13)	-0.365 (0.15) *
Rural policy	-0.167 (0.12)	-0.099 ((0.13)	-0.305 (0.15) *
Rural (populism)	-0.483 (0.12) ***	-0.454 (0.13) ***	-0.732 (0.15) ***
Immigration policy	-0.236 (0.12) *	-0.249 (0.13)	-0.492 (0.15) ***
Immigration (populism)	-0.261 (0.12) *	-0.319 (0.13) **	-0.672 (0.15) ***

<i>Party preference (Other parties = ref)<sup>a</sup></i>			
Progress Party	0.582 (0.11) ***	-0.011 (0.26)	
Center Party	0.543 (0.11) ***	-0.152 (0.28)	
Socialist Left and Red Party	0.413 (0.12) ***	-0.086 (0.34)	
<i>Stimuli x party interaction<sup>b</sup></i>			
Economic redistribution*Left		1.046 (0.45) *	
Economic redistribution pop*Left		1.822 (0.48) ***	
Rural policy*Center		1.617 (0.38) ***	
Rural pop*Center		1.564 (0.41) ***	
Immigration policy*Progress		1.704 (0.38) ***	
Immigration pop*Progress		2.163 (0.37) ***	
<i>R<sup>2</sup></i>	<i>0.015</i>	<i>0.042</i>	<i>0.125</i>
<i>N</i>	<i>2,027</i>	<i>1,781</i>	<i>1,781</i>

*Note. b:* Unstandardized regression coefficients. *SE:* Standard errors are reported in parentheses. *R<sup>2</sup>:* multiple correlation coefficient. <sup>a</sup> Reference category: Other parties = Labor Party, Conservative Party, Christian People's Party, Green Party, and Liberal Party. <sup>b</sup> The stimuli by party interaction includes 18 parameters, and the *F* test for the stimuli x party interaction:  $F_{(18;1753)} = 8.82, p < .001$ . Only the core interaction coefficients are reported in the table. \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

In Table 1, Model 2, party preference with four categories is added: (1) the Progress Party, (2) the Center Party, (3) the Socialist Left Party and Red Party, and (4) other parties (reference category). Since party preference was not reported for all, the number of respondents was reduced to 1,781. The coefficients for all three-party groups are positive and statically significant; this indicates that the respondents with party preference for the Progress Party, the Center Party, and the Socialist Left/Red Party are more willing to share messages than the reference group, including party preference for the two largest parties: the Labor Party and the Conservative Party. The contrasts for Model 2 reported in Table 2 are quite similar to those for Model 1 and require no further comments.

The second hypothesis suggests that voters are more mobilized by populist policy issues than by non-populist policy issues on the main issues espoused by their own party. To test this hypothesis, the stimuli by party preference interaction are added in Table 1, Model 3. This interaction includes 18 parameters, of which the six core parameters combine populist and non-populist stimuli for the three-party categories. The *F* test reported in the table shows that the interaction is statically significant ( $F [18, 1753] = 8.82, p < .001$ ).

The predictions from Model 3 are shown in Figure 2. Voters of the Socialist Left Party or Red Party seem to be more mobilized to engage politically with the populist-framed policy issue on economic redistribution than voters of other parties. The economic redistribution policy issue without populist framing also mobilizes more political engagement among voters of the left-wing parties than among voters of other parties. The Center Party voters were more willing to share messages on rural policy than voters from other parties, but they were less willing to share the populist-framed than the non-populist framed policy message. Finally, voters of the Progress Party were more willing than voters of other parties to share both types of

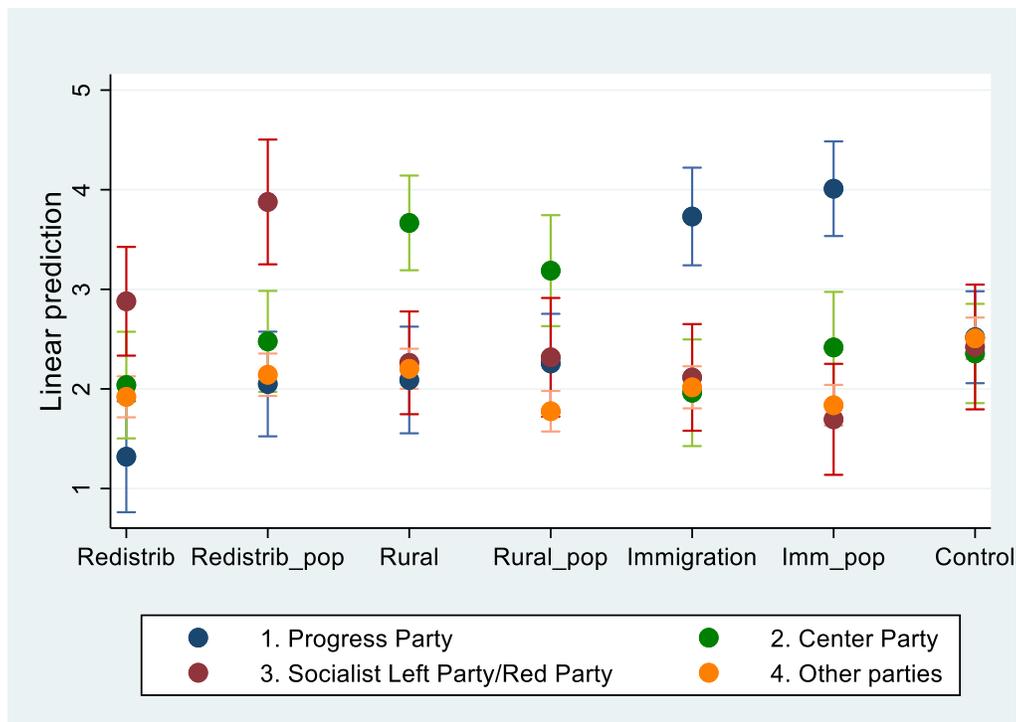
messages on immigration policy, and they were somewhat more willing to share populist than non-populist framed messages.

**Table 2. Contrasts Between Populist and Non-Populist Framed Messages on Three Policy Issues, Based on the Regression Analysis in Table 1.**

	<i>d</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>F(df1, df2)</i>	<i>p</i>
<b>Model 1 (N = 2020):</b>				
Overall contrasts for all three issues	0.023	0.201	0.01 (1, 2020)	.911
Economic redistribution policy	0.363	0.121	8.99 (1, 2020)	.003
Rural policy	-0.315	0.119	6.98 (1, 2020)	.008
Immigration policy	-0.025	0.121	0.04 (1, 2020)	.838
<b>Model 2 (N = 1771):</b>				
Overall contrast for all three issues	-0.097	0.222	0.19 (1, 1771)	.662
Economic redistribution policy	0.328	0.131	6.31 (1, 1771)	.012
Rural policy	-0.355	0.126	7.90 (1, 1771)	.005
Immigration policy	-0.071	0.128	0.30 (1, 1771)	.582
<b>Model 3 (N = 1753):</b>				
Overall contrast: all three issues and three-party groups	1.181	0.712	2.75 (1, 1753)	.097
Economic redistribution policy—Socialist Left/Red	0.775	0.449	2.97 (1, 1753)	.085
Rural policy—Center Party	-0.053	0.401	0.02 (1, 1753)	.895
Immigration policy—Progress Party	0.458	0.379	1.46 (1, 1753)	.226
Wing party preference vs other party preferences (contrasts 2 and 4 combined)	1.234	0.588	4.40 (1, 1753)	.036

*Note.* *d*= contrasts of marginal linear predictions based on regression analysis in Table 1. Positive values indicate that the populist-framed policy issue is the most engaging. *SE*: Standard errors, *F* (*df1*, *df2*): *F* test (degrees of freedom), *p*: probability value of the *F*-statistic.

In Table 2, Model 3, detailed contrasts relevant to the second hypothesis are tested. The first is the overall contrast between all three issues and the three-party categories. The sign of the contrast is positively consistent with the hypotheses but is not statistically significant ( $p = .097$ ), and neither are the contrasts for each of the three-party categories: economic redistribution policy for the Socialist Left Party or Red Party ( $p = .085$ ), rural policy for the Center Party ( $p = .895$ ), and immigration policy for the Progress Party ( $p = .226$ ). Since the contrasts for the Socialist Left/Red and the Progress Party have the predicted sign, a combined contrast for the wing parties was tested and found to be statistically significant ( $p = .036$ ).



**Figure 2. Political engagement by stimuli and party preference. Predictions from Model 3 in Table 1 with 95% confidence intervals.**

Note. Other Parties = Labor Party, Conservative Party, Christian People's Party, Green Party, and Liberal Party.

## Discussion

The aim of this article was to study whether populist communication style mobilized more political engagement among Norwegian citizens compared with similar messaging without populist communication style. Political engagement is delineated as the behavioral intention to share a policy issue with a friend or on social media or to sign an online petition. The survey experiment tested three different policy issues presented with and without populist communication style: immigration policy framed by complete populism through cultural cleavage (right-wing populism), rural policy framed by anti-elitist populism through center-periphery cleavage (agrarian populism), and economic redistribution policy framed by anti-elitist populism through owner-worker cleavage (left-wing populism).

The results presented in this article indicate that the message on economic redistribution policy with anti-elitist populism had a more mobilizing effect on political engagement than messaging without populist framing. This finding concurs with those of previous studies (Bos et al., 2020; Hameleers et al., 2018), which indicated that anti-elitist populist messages on possible economic decline had a mobilizing effect on political engagement.

The current article found no difference in arousing engagement between immigration policy issues with or without populist communication style. Previous research has found that immigration policy issues related to economic decline have a demobilizing effect on political engagement (Hameleers et al., 2018). For rural policy, the current article found the non-populist version to be more engaging than the populist version.

Except for populist-framed messages on economic redistribution policy, the findings presented in this article show that populist communication style does not generally have a more mobilizing effect on political engagement than policy issues without populist framing. Thus, the first hypothesis received only support for one of the three policy issues. This generally low mobilizing effect of populist framing was consistent with the findings of other studies that suggest that overall, citizens do not identify with a populist worldview (e.g., Bos et al., 2020; Hameleers, Bos, & de Vreese, 2018).

The second hypothesis suggests that voters were more mobilized by populist policy issues than by non-populist policy issues on the main issues espoused by their own party. This was tested by adding a stimuli group through party statistical interaction (see Figure 2 for predictions from the model). None of the three contrasts between populist and non-populist communication style—on economic redistribution policy for Socialist Party or Red Party voters, on rural policy for Center Party voters, and on immigration policy for Progress Party voters—were statistically significant, although the signs for the wing parties were positive, which was consistent with the hypothesis. The combined contrast for the wing parties was, however, statistically significant at the 0.05 level.

The lack of statistical significance for the individual comparisons may well be due to the low number of respondents involved in each comparison, resulting in low statistical power (e.g., Gelman & Carlin, 2014), which is expected with an interaction term consisting of 18 parameters in a sample of less than 2,000 respondents. In cases with low statistical power, it is tempting to think that a much larger sample would lead to stronger confirmation of the hypotheses. However, it is important to keep in mind that the signs of the coefficients may also change. Taken together, these findings provide some support for the second hypothesis regarding wing parties: Voters of wing parties were more mobilized than voters of other parties. For instance, the supporters of left-wing parties were more mobilized to engage politically when exposed to the populist policy issue than non-populist policy issue on economic redistribution. Correspondingly, the voters of the right-wing party were more mobilized to engage politically when exposed to populist policy issue than the non-populist policy issue on immigration.

This study offers empirical, methodological, and theoretical contributions to the study of populist communication and political engagement. This article showed, as Jagers and Walgrave (2007) and de Vreese et al. (2018) pointed out, that populist communication style is a good analytical tool for studying populism. Defining populism as a communication style enables a systematic examination and comparison of the mobilizing effect of political engagement on three different policy issues that represent three different political cleavages. Populist communication style makes it possible to study different populist ideologies. For instance, this article studied two types of anti-elitist populism, anti-elitist populism through owner-worker cleavage (left-wing populist ideology) and anti-elitist populism through

rural-urban, periphery-center cleavage (agrarian populist ideology), and complete populism through cultural cleavage (right-wing populist ideology).

In addition, this article distinguishes underlying mobilization processes in populist communication style that can mobilize political engagement. The empirical findings suggest that construction and politicization of the collective identity of the people, emphasizing a divided society where there is a shared injustice among the ingroup and at the same time appointing a scapegoat who is responsible for the injustice, mobilizes political engagement when aimed at voters of left- and right-wing parties who are exposed to policy issues that align with their preferred party. These findings suggest that party preference is an important ingredient when studying the mobilizing power of populist communication style on political engagement.

Populism is highly context sensitive (Taggart, 2000). This article provided the first comprehensive assessment of three policy issues and populist communication style that resonate with each other theoretically in the study of populism and political engagement. Theoretically, complete populism fits with the policy issue of immigration on cultural cleavage, while anti-elitist populism is theoretically aligned with the policy issues of economic redistribution on owner-worker cleavage and rural policy on center-periphery and urban-rural cleavages. This was a big advantage theoretically and methodologically, where populist communication style differs between different types of policy issues.

While previous studies have applied the same issue to both anti-elitist populism and complete populism (e.g., Hameleers et al., 2018), this present study also moved forward based on the contribution of van Stekelenburg and Klandermans (2014) by researching whether populist communication style mobilized more political engagement when there was resonance between political cleavage, policy issues, and political preference compared with similar non-populist policy issues. The findings suggested that a resonance between political cleavage, policy issues, populist communication style, and party preference mobilized political engagement among supporters of wing parties. It would be interesting to see whether this mechanism would be stronger in countries with more polarization. Therefore, more research is needed in different contexts that consider the alignment between various policy issues, political cleavages, and the type of populist communication style when creating populist stimuli for survey experiments.

### **Limitations**

Applying hypothetical stimuli may weaken the external validity of experiments. In real life, citizens are subjected to multiple frames through the media that compete for the audience's attention (Barabas & Jerit, 2010). Measuring a phenomenon in survey experiments requires that the "natural noise" be filtered out. However, filtering out "noise" may reinforce the remaining frames, resulting in stronger effects (Barabas & Jerit, 2010). External validity was increased by designing stimuli that looked similar to Facebook posts originally posted by niche political parties.

A possible limitation is the design of non-populist stimuli. Stimuli without populist communication style do not include detailed arguments as the populist stimuli do. Future research should take this into account when designing stimuli so that populist and non-populist stimuli are more similar in length. The

stimuli did not include a specific political speaker, which may be a limitation, as previous research has indicated that a speaker may strengthen or weaken citizens' agreement with a message (Bos et al., 2013). There may also be a concern regarding the validity of the dependent variable, where there is a difference between reporting a willingness to share a message and sharing a message. However, this is a natural limitation when conducting survey experiments.

Nevertheless, this study provided important new nuanced knowledge that the ability of populist political communication to mobilize citizens toward political engagement depended not only on the policy issue at hand but also on the political leanings of the audience.

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