International Journal of Public Opinion Research

doi:10.1093/ijpor/edaa033

Research Note

Bringing people closer to the elites: the effect of information on populist attitudes

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Western democracies have recently witnessed the increasing success of populist parties (Canovan, 1999; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Mudde, 2004). These parties have undergone extensive academic scrutiny (e.g., Inglehart & Norris, 2017; Ivarsflaten, 2008; Kriesi & Pappas, 2015; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018), providing us with detailed knowledge of their supporters (e.g., Bakker, Rooduijn & Schumacher, 2016; Oesch, 2008).

One key finding is that voters of populist parties themselves also hold populist attitudes (Akkerman, Zaslove & Spruyt, 2017). They, like populist parties themselves, tend to believe that a corrupt governing class stands in opposition to a "pure" people. Populists believe that politics should reflect a homogenous "will of the people" ignored by the existing elites (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). These populist beliefs stand in contrast to pluralism and liberalism (Akkerman, Mudde, & Zaslove, 2014). The presence of such beliefs among voters is generally concerning for supporters of liberal democracy. Populist attitudes are also clearly related to anti-elite attitudes (e.g., Pauwels, 2014; Ramiro, 2016). Indeed, scholars argue that a precondition for populist forces to thrive is that voters hold "an antiestablishment political identity" (Meléndez & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2019, p. 3).

If we accept that populist beliefs are normatively troubling, it is vital to understand how these beliefs emerge and whether they can be changed. Nevertheless, scholars have only recently turned their attention to what *determines* their strength among voters (e.g., Rico, Guinjoan & Anduiza, 2017; Rico & Anduiza, 2019; Spruyt et al., 2016), focusing instead on questions of measurement (e.g., Akkerman et al., 2014; Schulz et al., 2018; Wuttke, Schimpf, & Schoen, 2020) or on effects on vote choice (e.g., Akkerman et al., 2017).

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In this study, we provide novel evidence of what influences voters' populist attitudes, focusing on the role of information. Strong populist attitudes may often be seen as instinctive and emotional rather than as responses to the information environment. Although this is of course a false distinction (Marcus, Neuman, & MacKuen, 2000), those who see populism as irrational will be pessimistic about the possibility of changing such attitudes through reasoning and explanation. Here, we test for the first time whether there might nevertheless be a cognitive route to attitude change on populism. Specifically, we investigate whether information—specifically fact-based, positive message on politicians' daily activities—affects voters' populist attitudes. Given evidence of the persuasive power of political messages (Druckman & Lupia, 2016) and of individuals' reactions to fact-based information (Bolsen & Druckman, 2018; Guess & Coppock, 2020; Guilbeault, Becker & Centola, 2018; Hill, 2017; Vinæs Larsen & Leth Olsen, 2020; Wood & Porter, 2019), it may be that populist attitudes also respond to efforts at persuasion.

Moreover, we examine whether the way in which people process the information provided by political actors depends on emotional states (Clifford & Jerit, 2018; Marcus et al., 2000; Merolla & Zechmeister, 2018). Given that populist voters might be particularly likely to experience feelings of anger (Rico et al., 2017; Rudolph, forthcoming; Vasilopoulos, Marcus, Valentino, & Foucault, 2019), and that anger leads to superficial information processing (Huddy, Feldman, & Cassese, 2007), it might be possible that individuals with high levels of anger are less open to a cognitive route to persuasion. Thus, we explore whether emotional states moderate the effect of information.

Empirically, we use a large-scale survey experiment among a representative sample of Austrian voters. Austria is a suitable case given the strong success of a populist radical-right party, the Freedom Party, in recent elections. The experimental design includes six conditions in which information and emotion-induction manipulations are presented in isolation or in combination.

Our findings point to the existence of a cognitive route to attitude change on populism. Providing respondents with brief, fact-based, mildly positive information significantly, if modestly, reduces populist attitudes. However, this effect is not present among voters induced to be angry about politics. Analyses using observed, rather than induced emotions, support our experimental results.

These findings show that persuasion and explanation can reduce populist attitudes. The information environment is an important determinant of levels of populism. Yet, efforts to trigger affective reactions, particularly anger, may counter-act such efforts. Thus, the combination of persuasion and emotions explains how populist attitudes can change and why they may persist. These findings have implications for efforts to reduce the gap between citizens and elites, and for understanding how populist actors may disrupt such efforts through affective rhetoric. If the populist ideology claims to "take politics closer to the people" (Canovan, 2002), our study indicates that the opposite might also be possible, that is bringing the people closer to the political elites.

Populist Attitudes and Persuasion

Beginning with seminal studies on public opinion (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955), many scholars have investigated how voter attitudes are influenced by the information received through the media and during elections campaigns. Some studies paint a

pessimistic picture, with citizens reacting mainly to negative messages, for instance (Soroka, 2006). Research on motivated reasoning suggests that people mostly process information to reinforce pre-existing attitudes, reducing the likelihood that information can change minds (e.g., Taber & Lodge, 2006). This makes it seem unlikely that populist attitudes can be modified via "pure" cognitive persuasion, using fact-based, neutral arguments.

Yet, a number of studies has recently provided evidence that citizens change their mind when confronted with fact-based messages (Druckman & Lupia, 2016). For example, citizens change their attitudes when provided with factual information about climate change (Bolsen & Druckman, 2018; Goldberg, van der Linden, Maibach, & Leiserowitz, 2019; Guilbeault et al., 2018), American politics (Hill, 2017), weapons of mass destruction in Iraq (Wood & Porter, 2019), or the crime rate (Vinæs Larsen & Leth Olsen, 2020). Citizens also change their attitudes in response to both positive and negative messages, even when these messages concern highly polarized topics (Guess & Coppock, 2020]).

Populist attitudes may also be susceptible to change when voters receive fact-based information that depicts politics in a positive light. In our experiment, voters read about politicians' activities, especially their willingness to engage with their constituents. We expect such information to reduce the appeal of populism by directly affecting the anti-elitist dimension of populist rhetoric. We expect positive information to close the gap between citizens and the elites, reducing populist attitudes:

H1: Positive information about politics and politicians reduces populist attitudes.

Emotions as Moderators of Persuasion Effects

Distinct emotions have distinct effects. Fear makes people more cautious, while anger makes individuals more aggressive and confident (Druckman & McDermott, 2008; Huddy et al., 2007; MacKuen, Wolak, Keele, & Marcus, 2010). Recent research links distinct negative emotional states, specifically anger, to populist attitudes and voting (Rico et al., 2017; Vasilopoulos, Marcus, Valentino, & Foucault, 2019). Anger is often linked to perceptions of intentional damage or hurt: if people are angry because they see elites as pursuing harmful behavior (Brader & Marcus, 2013), then they may be see populist attitudes as appealing: "the populist worldview strongly resonates with basic elements of anger" (Rico et al., 2017). In contrast, fear is only ambiguously linked with populist attitudes (Rico et al., 2017; Vasilopoulos, Marcus, Valentino, & Foucault, 2019).

We focus on how anger and fear moderate the way in which individuals process information. All processing of political information is affectively charged (e.g., Kunda, 1990; Taber & Lodge, 2006). As summarized by Redlawsk (2002, p. 1023), "when new information is encountered, the affect associated with relevant existing knowledge interacts with affect toward the new information to form a virtually instantaneous assessment of the new information."

Anger and fear influence political reasoning by encouraging different modalities of information processing. Anger leads to more superficial information processing (Huddy et al., 2007), and increased reliance on heuristic processing (Garry, 2014; MacKuen

Table 1.
Design of the Experiment

	No emotion induction	Anger induction	Fear induction
Information	Group 2 (information; $N = 484$)	Group 3 (information + anger induction; $N = 483$)	Group 4 (information + fear induction; $N = 485$)
No information	Group 1 (control; $N = 518$)	Group 5 (anger induction; $N = 515$)	Group 6 (fear induction; $N = 521$)

et al., 2010). People with high levels of anger are more likely to ignore relevant information (Marcus et al., 2000).

In contrast, individuals with high levels of anxiety are more likely to form their judgments based on careful consideration of the available information (Garry, 2014; MacKuen et al., 2010; Valentino, Banks, Hutchings, & Davis, 2009), to process information carefully (Brader, Valentino & Suhay, 2008; Merolla & Zechmeister, 2009), and to seek out and remember new information (Gadarian & Albertson, 2014).

Hence, the effect of information should be moderated by distinct emotions as follows:

H2a: The effect of information on reducing populist attitudes is lower among voters in an angry emotional state.
H2b: The effect of information on reducing populist attitudes is higher among voters in an anxious emotional state.

Experimental Design

Our experiment was fielded in the 2017 Austrian National Election Study Internet Panel (Wagner et al., 2018). Populism is a relevant phenomenon in Austria: the right-wing populist Freedom Party of Austria was very successful in the recent national election on October 15, 2017, subsequently becoming part of a coalition government.

The panel ran from June 2017 (Wave 1) until December 2017 (Wave 6). The election took place on 15 October, between Waves 4 and 5. A total of 3,006 eligible Austrian voters took part in Wave 6, in which the experiment was fielded. The number of Wave 1 participants was 4,020. The sampling procedure is based on a stratified, quota sample that guarantees representativeness of the Austrian electorate with regard to age, gender, gender × age, region, education, household size, and population size. A small number of new respondents were added in Waves 4 and 6 to top up the sample.

In Wave 6, the respondents were randomly assigned to one of six experimental conditions (Table 1). Each condition included around 500 respondents.

Those assigned to the control condition (Group 1) and the information condition (Group 2) were first asked to describe their general thoughts about politics and politicians in Austria:

> Now think in general about Austrian politics and the Austrian politicians. Please write down everything that comes to your mind.

The control group then answered populist attitude questions. The respondents in Group 2 instead proceeded to the information treatment, a short text of around 130 words listing some basic facts related to parliamentarians. The text resembles the type of public-utility information that can be found on nonpartisan websites of political institutions (original wording in German in Supplementary Appendix SC):

> In Austria, Members of the National Council have different duties, not just participating in legislation. An important part of their work is direct contact with citizens, especially within their own constituency. On average, MPs spend about half of the week in the constituency.
> Deputies also take time to answer questions from citizens and give talks in the constituency. Nearly half of the MPs spend five or more hours a week processing and answering voter requests.
> Members of the National Council can be contacted easily and quickly via e-mail or telephone. MPs hold many talks with citizens in the context of work in their constituencies. Members often also welcome voters in the parliament building itself. Normally, appointments can easily be made with the deputies themselves or with their parliamentary staff.

To test whether the effect of information differed depending on the respondents' emotional states, in Groups 3 and 4 we induced feelings of either anger or fear, before showing the same text provided to Group 2. Those assigned to the anger induction condition (Groups 3) were asked to recall something that made them angry about Austrian politics, while those assigned to the fear induction condition (Group 4) were asked to recall something that made them anxious:

> Now think in general about Austrian politics and the Austrian politicians. When you think about politics and politicians, what makes you [angry and upset/afraid and nervous]? Please write down everything that comes to your mind.

Last, we included also two residual conditions in which the respondents did not read any text, but were only induced to recall feelings of anger (Group 5) or fear (Group 6). These conditions allow us to isolate the *net* effect of the information treatment in the presence of emotions, which might be particularly important in case the effects of emotions and information cancel each other out. For example, it might be the case that anger makes people more populist, while information makes people less populist, thus leading to an observed null effect, which would mask the underlying opposite effects. We opted for a bottom-up manipulation of emotions (Lerner & Keltner, 2001; Valentino et al., 2009; Valentino, Brader, Groenendyk, Gregorowicz, & Hutchings, 2011), an effective way for inducing emotional states (Albertson & Gadarian, 2016).

We also test how emotions moderate the effects of information by relying also on self-reported sentiments about politics from Wave 3. The respondents were asked to what extent, on a scale from 0 to 10, they felt confident, worried, upset, anxious, hopeful, and angry when thinking about the current political situation. Following correlation analysis (Supplementary Appendix Table SB1), we rely on the combined responses to "upset" and "angry" as a measure of anger rescaled from 0 to 1 ($N = 2{,}414$ $M = 0.58$, $SD = 0.28$), and the response to "anxious" as a measure of fear also rescaled from 0 to 1

Table 2.
Populist-Attitude Items

Item	Source	All respondents		Control group only	
		Mean (SD)	*N*	Mean (SD)	*N*
1. When people talk about "compromises" in politics, they actually mean selling out their own principles	Akkerman et al. (2014), POP7	5.94 (2.64)	2,859	5.93 (2.71)	494
2. Most politicians only care about the interests of the rich and powerful	CSES Module 5	6.61 (2.62)	2,884	6.72 (2.52)	496
3. Most politicians are trustworthy	CSES Module 5	6.73 (2.41)	2,878	6.86 (2.42)	495
4. The parties are the main problem in Austria	CSES Module 5, modified	5.64 (2.87)	2,870	5.83 (2.76)	491
5. The people, and not the politicians, should make our most important political decisions	Akkerman et al. (2014), POP2	6.32 (2.93)	2,878	6.35 (2.83)	492
6. I would rather have an independent citizen as a Member of the Parliament than a party member	Akkerman et al. (2014), POP4 modified	6.35 (2.81)	2,864	6.43 (2.87)	493
7. Corporations and not the government determine politics	Akkerman et al. (2014), POP8 modified	6.34 (2.54)	2,873	6.69 (2.55)	494

Note. Possible answers: *completely disagree* (0), *somewhat disagree* (2.5), *neither agree nor disagree* (5), *somewhat agree* (7.5), *completely agree* (10). Reverse scores for item 3. CSES = Comparative Study of Electoral Systems project.

($N = 2{,}414$ $M = 0.42$, $SD = 0.29$), which we then interact with treatment assignment. These items allow us to test H2a and H2b using an observed (instead of an experimentally induced) measure of emotions.

All the respondents then answered questions on populist attitudes, followed by measures of emotions as a manipulation check (Supplementary Appendix SB). We aimed to capture in particular the anti-elitist dimension of populism. Following previous studies (Akkerman et al., 2014; Rico et al., 2017), we use a minimal definition of populism that could be captured with seven agree–disagree items (Table 2; recent work

on populist attitudes addresses multiple issues relating to measurement that could not be considered at the time this survey was conducted [e.g., Castanho Silva, Jungkunz, Helbling, & Littvay, 2020; Van Hauwaert, Schimpf, & Azevedo, 2018; Wuttke, Schimpf, & Schoen, 2020). Given that the items are strongly correlated (Cronbach's alpha = 0.80), we created an additive index of all items, after reversing item 3 and recoding "Don't know" answers to 5 ("neutral"). We obtain essentially the same estimates after removing "Don't know" answers (Supplementary Appendix Tables SA2). We inverted the scores of the index and normalized them to range from 0 to 10. Using the first component from a principal component analysis of the populist-attitude battery produces substantially the same results as the additive index (Supplementary Appendix Table SA3).

Results

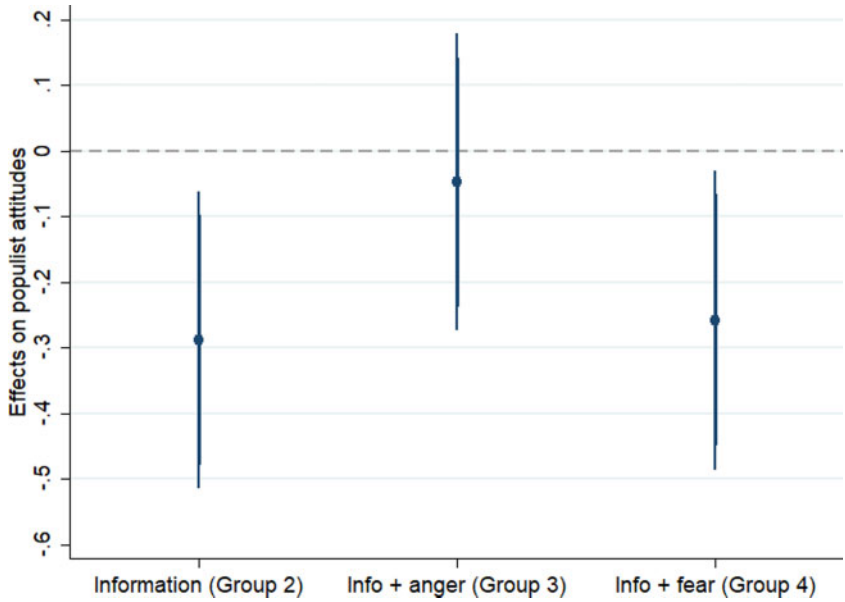
We run linear regression models that include control variables to increase the precisions of the treatment estimates (Angrist & Pischke, 2008, pp. 23–24; Gerber, Green, & Shachar, 2003, p. 547). We control for gender, age, education, household income and region. Acknowledging, however, that adding covariates might reduce the robustness of the models (Mutz & Pemantle, 2015, p. 203; Kam & Trussler, 2017), in Supplementary Appendix Tables SA2 and SA3 we present models without covariates, whose estimates are substantially the same as those presented below. Balance tests also indicate some small differences between control group and treatment conditions regarding the distribution of these variables, specifically on age and education (Supplementary Appendix Table SA1); however, further analyses showed that treatment effects do not differ conditional on either variable.

As Figure 1 shows, exposure to positive information influenced the respondents (Group 2 vs. Group 1). Reading the fact-based text about politicians' activities reduced voters' support for populism by around 0.3 points on the 0–10 scale. A simple reminder of day-to-day activity of politicians "closed" the perceived gap between voters and politicians, confirming our first hypothesis (H1). Nevertheless, the effect is relatively modest. However, it is worth stressing that it occurred after reading a very short text, which included basic, factual statements.

The effects are also robust to alternative specifications of the populist-attitude index (see Supplementary Appendix Tables SA3 and SA6). In Supplementary Appendix Table SA6, we conducted separate regression models on each item of the populist-attitude battery. The coefficients associated to the information condition are consistently negative across all items, although the effects are statistically significant only in relation to items 2, 4, and 6. When we remove those who spent too little or too much time reading the text we obtain substantially the same results (Supplementary Appendix Table SA4).

Information, however, does not change the respondents' mind when they are induced to recall feelings of anger about politics. Further analysis shows, first, that information does not influence populist attitudes when anger is present (see Supplementary Appendix Figure SA1). Second, an alternative approach would be to test whether the effect of information differs when anger is not induced (Group 2 vs. Group 1) compared to when anger is induced (Group 3 vs. Group 5). If we follow this approach, we find that the effect is lower among the anger-induction group (by 0.26–

Figure 1.
Average treatment effects on populist attitudes. Note. *Linear regression coefficients relative to control group (value 0 on Y-axis), controlling for covariates (Supplementary Appendix Table SA2, Model 2). Outcome variable: populist attitudes, additive index rescaled from 0 (min) to 10 (max). Thin/thick vertical bars correspond to 95%/90% confidence intervals.*

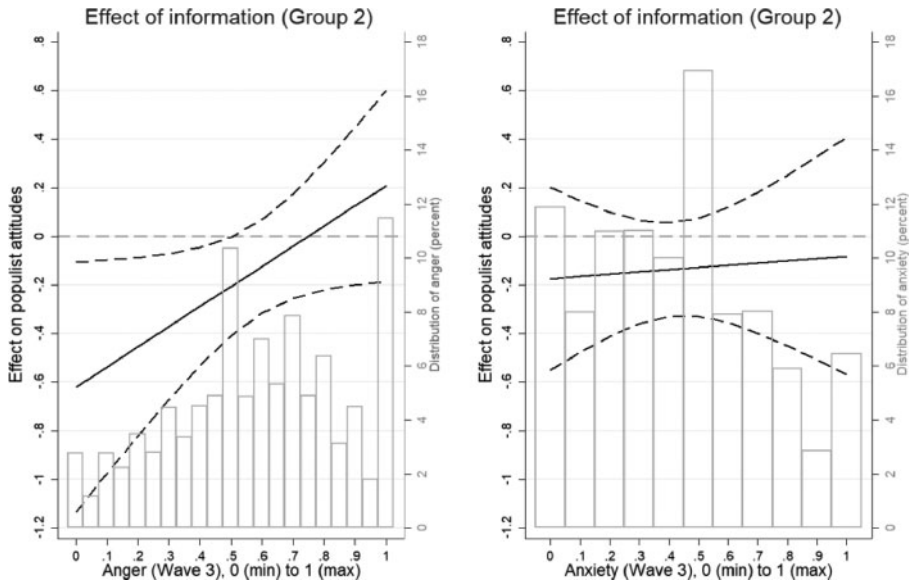


0.30 points); for this demanding test, the difference in effects falls just above conventional threshold of statistical significance ($p < .08$ and $p = .12$, depending on model specifications; see Supplementary Appendix Table SA2, Panel B). This analysis confirms our expectation that the effect of information on reducing populist attitudes is lower among angry voters, in line with H2a.

Yet, information does reduce populist attitudes when voters are induced to be anxious about politics (Group 4), although the effect is substantially the same as when information alone is presented (Group 2). The lack of a stronger effect, as predicted by H2b, might depend on the fact that fear and information *separately* reduce populist attitudes (although the effect of fear alone is not significant, see Supplementary Appendix Table SA2), so that the additive effect of information is smaller when fear is present. Further analysis confirms that the effect of information in the presence of fear (Group 4 vs. Group 6) does not differ significantly from the effect of information in the absence of induced emotions (Group 2 vs. Group 1; see Supplementary Appendix Table SA2, Panel B). Providing information to anxious voters might not have a strong effect on reducing populist attitudes because they might already be less populist than other, non-anxious voters. An alternative explanation is that information makes anxious voters more ambivalent in their attitudes (Groenendyk, 2016) so that it has a smaller, average effect on reducing populist attitudes. Thus, we cannot confirm our H2b.

Last, we exploited the panel survey to test the moderating effect of emotions on information by interacting treatment conditions with respondents' prior emotional states

Figure 2.
Average treatment effects of information (Group 2) by pretreatment emotions. Note. *Left-hand Y-axes: Average marginal effects of Group 2 (information) versus control group (value 0) based on Linear regression models interacting group assignment with pretreatment feelings of anger and anxiety measured in Wave 3 (Supplementary Appendix Table SA5, Model 2). Dotted lines correspond to 90% confidence intervals. Right-hand Y-axes: distribution of feelings of anger and anxiety measured in Wave 3 (percentages).*



(Figure 2). The results for feelings of anger (left panel) confirm the findings from experimental manipulations: information reduces populist attitudes, but only among voters who were *not* angry about politics, thus adding further evidence that the effect of information on reducing populist attitudes is lower among angry voters (H2a). However, as the average marginal effects in the right panel show, the effect of information does not depend on whether voters were anxious about politics. Regardless of whether we use experimentally induced emotions or observed self-reported emotions, we find that anger moderates the effect of information.

Conclusion

Positive, fact-based information reduces populist attitudes. This points to a "cognitive route" to attitude change in this domain. This is especially noteworthy as populist attitudes are often seen as views that do not respond to constructive engagement and fact-based explanations.

However, the effect of information depends on the prior emotional state of individuals: angry respondents were less likely to react to the information by changing their populist attitudes. This is true for induced and for observed, self-reported emotional states.

Our findings have implications for understanding populism. Providing information may reduce anti-elitist populism, but these efforts may be more fruitful in less emotionally charged contexts. When voters are angry, they respond less to new information. Efforts to improve citizen evaluations of the political system will therefore fail if voters are angry.

This research implies that we need to know more about what causes anger about politics (though see, e.g., Petersen, 2010; Wagner, 2014). A frequently voiced concern is that populist leaders try to trigger specific emotional reactions in the electorate (Widmann, 2020), leading to increased populist attitudes and, in turn, greater support for populist parties. Emotions emerge not just through individual-level processes, but depend also on how social groups and leaders develop interpretations of events and their causes (Lerner & Keltner, 2001; Mols, 2012). Our findings show that triggering anger may have substantial effects on voter attitudes more by changing information processing rather than by shaping attitudes directly. Moreover, our research highlights the particular role that anger plays for populist attitudes. This is perhaps unsurprising: anger often emerges when outside actors are blamed for events (Brader & Marcus, 2013), so there is an intrinsic link with the anti-elite views that form part of populism (Rico et al., 2017). Our findings also underline the need to distinguish anger from anxiety in understanding the link between emotions and populism.

Finally, we encourage further research on how information influences populist attitudes (see, e.g., Busby, Gubler, & Hawkins, 2019; Hameleers & Schmuck, 2017; Hameleers, Bos, & de Vreese, 2017). For example, we used one type of information stimulus and bottom-up induction of emotions; future work could study a broader variety of information. Given the continuing importance of populist attitudes, more work should study how these views emerge and change. In addition, we need more comparative work on how results travel to different contexts.

Supplementary Data

Supplementary Data are available at *IJPOR* online.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank colleagues at the Department of Government for comments on an earlier version of this article. The authors also thank the Austrian National Election Study for the opportunity to include this experiment in Wave 6 of the 2017 panel survey.

Funding

The survey used in this article was funded by ACIER – Austrian Cooperative Infrastructure for Electoral Research financed by the Federal Ministry of Science, Research and Economy (BMWFW) [Scheme: Hochschulraum-Strukturmittel 2016].

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