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To cite this article: Raffael Heiss, Christian von Sikorski & Jörg Matthes (2019): Populist Twitter Posts in News Stories, Journalism Practice, DOI: [10.1080/17512786.2018.1564883](https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2018.1564883)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2018.1564883>



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Published online: 15 Jan 2019.



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## Populist Twitter Posts in News Stories

### Statement Recognition and the Polarizing Effects on Candidate Evaluation and Anti-Immigrant Attitudes

Raffael Heiss<sup>a</sup>, Christian von Sikorski<sup>b</sup> and Jörg Matthes<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Center for Social & Health Innovation, MCI Management Center Innsbruck, Innsbruck, Austria; <sup>b</sup>Department of Psychology, University of Koblenz-Landau, Landau, Germany; <sup>c</sup>Department of Communication, University of Vienna, Vienna, Austria

#### ABSTRACT


Research in information processing suggests that the journalistic practice of embedding right-wing populist Twitter posts in news may stimulate political polarization. To test this notion, we conducted an online experiment ( $N=379$ ). We investigated how highlighted right-wing populist statements affected individuals from different ideological stances and whether potential effects were determined by Twitter-specific characteristics (Twitter frame, profile picture). We exposed participants to two articles, each including a statement by a politician of the Austrian Freedom Party. In the first group, the statements were not highlighted (control group). In the second and third group, the statements appeared as conventional block quotes either without (G2) or with (G3) a picture of the politician. In the fourth and fifth group, the statements were highlighted as Twitter posts, again either without (G4) or with (G5) a picture of the politician. Results revealed that all highlighting conditions increased statement recognition among left-wing individuals. However, the full Twitter post condition exerted the strongest effect. Higher recognition then decreased left-wing individuals' anti-immigrant attitudes and sympathy toward the right-wing populist candidate. Thus, embedding right-wing populists' Twitter posts may induce disconfirmation bias among left-wing voters and trigger a process in which they strengthen their initial attitudes.

#### KEYWORDS

Confirmation bias; disconfirmation bias; hybrid media system; political polarization; social media; populism

In recent years, social media have emerged as new important sources for political information. The free float of easily accessible first-hand information on Twitter has also become an attractive source for journalists, who are operating under financial constraints and time pressure (Lewis, Williams, and Franklin 2008; Schmuck et al. 2017). In this context, journalists have been increasingly drawing on information from Twitter in their TV news (Cameron and Geidner 2014; Moon and Hadley 2014), printed news (Brands, Graham,

**CONTACT** Jörg Matthes  joerg.matthes@univie.ac.at

 Supplemental data for this article can be accessed here <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2018.1564883>.

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and Broersma 2018; Broersma and Graham 2013; Moon and Hadley 2014; Paulussen and Harder 2014), and online news coverage (Bane 2017; Lecheler and Kruikemeier 2016). Broersma and Graham have shown that journalists frequently use Twitter posts of political actors and directly embed such posts into news stories to “illustrate news events” (2013, 450) and “to add flavour to a story” (2013, 450). Furthermore, Twitter provides journalists with quotes from political actors, which may otherwise be hard to obtain. This is especially true for *populist* politicians who are comparably reluctant to interact with mainstream news media which they perceive as dishonest and biased in their reporting (Jagers and Walgrave 2017). Recent research indicates that journalists seem to be especially prone to embed Twitter posts from right-wing populist actors in their coverage. The reason might be that such posts contain provocative statements, grabbing people’s attention and thus contributing to the commercial strategies of news organizations (Brands, Graham, and Broersma 2018).

This observation is critical in the context of increasing political polarization and the electoral success of right-wing populist parties. This is because if a provocative right-wing populist statement is prominently highlighted in a news article (e.g., as a Twitter post), individuals may be more likely to direct their attention to the exposed statement (Leckner 2012). This may amplify the polarizing potential of such messages for individuals at the ideological ends. For example, individuals at the right ideological end may feel supported by the encountered statements (Nickerson 1998; Taber and Lodge 2006), whereas individuals at the left end may feel challenged and engage in mentally defending their initial attitudes against the new information (Maheswaran and Chaiken 1991; Petty and Cacioppo 1979; Taber and Lodge 2006). Both processes might foster initial attitudes and thus induce polarizing effects. As we will outline in the theoretical section, visual exposition of right-wing populist statements (e.g., embedded Twitter posts) may boost this polarizing potential.

Although previous research has acknowledged the important role of embedding Twitter posts in news stories (e.g., Bane 2017; Brands, Graham, and Broersma 2018), the impact of this practice has not been systematically examined and thus remains largely unclear. More specifically, we have identified three research gaps. First, we generally lack research on new hybrid types of media coverage, especially how social media content in regular news may affect citizens’ attitudes (Brands, Graham, and Broersma 2018). Second, we lack experimental designs to study right-wing populists’ use of social media (Hameleers and Schmuck 2017). However, experimental research is best suited to trace causal effects and thus to unveil the psychological mechanisms which come into play when citizens process right-wing populist social media content. Third, and most importantly, no experimental research has dealt with the question of how highlighting populist statements (such as embedding Twitter posts) affect individuals’ attitudes. In fact, even though we know that journalists have increased their practice of including Twitter posts in their news coverage (Bane 2017; Brands, Graham, and Broersma 2018), we still don’t know how this practice may influence readers and whether potential effects may be induced by Twitter-specific characteristics (e.g., profile picture, Twitter frame). This study systematically addresses these research gaps and investigates the effect of highlighted right-wing populist statements in political news coverage.

## Populist Twitter Posts and Polarization

Based on prior conceptualizations of right-wing populism (Jagers and Walgrave 2007; Mudde 2004), we define right-wing populism along three components: Social exclusion, anti-elitism, and people centrism. The *social exclusion* component may be considered as the most unique feature of right-wing populism and describes its tendency to ostracize social out-groups, most prominently immigrants. According to the RWP ideology, immigrants do not belong to the ordinary people (the in-group), which are defined along ethnic and national terms. For example, immigrants are portrayed to pose a constant threat to the cultural identity and economic prosperity of the in-group (Matthes and Schmuck 2017; Schmuck and Matthes 2015; also see Mudde 1999). Secondly, right-wing populists use an *anti-elitist* strategy and blame the political establishment, represented by the ruling parties, to act against the interests of the ordinary people. Finally, the *people centrism* component refers to a strategy in which populists heavily refer to the ordinary people, such as by praising their virtue or by blaming the elite for letting the ordinary people down (Jagers and Walgrave 2007; Mudde 2004; also see Ernst et al. 2017). Theoretical and empirical evidence indicates that social media, like Twitter, provide ideal channels for right-wing populist communication, as they are not perceived to be controlled by the “evil” elite, but are generated by the people (Bartlett 2014; Engesser et al. 2017).

Even though there is always a chance that left-wing voters may stumble across right-wing political posts by accident on social media, most citizens may follow and expose themselves to political actors which they support or identify with (Heiss and Matthes 2017). However, even the most liberal citizens may be exposed to right-wing politicians’ Twitter posts when such posts are cited or embedded in regular political news coverage. Twitter has been identified as an important information space on which journalists “identify sources” and “generate story ideas” (Houston et al. 2018, 2). However, research indicates that journalists may be most likely to select and use Twitter posts from populist candidates. For example, Brands, Graham, and Broersma (2018) have shown that 36.6% of all cited politicians in the Netherlands in 2012 belonged to the right wing-party PVV and that Geert Wilders (PVV leader) was with 59 cited tweets the most cited politician in the investigated time frame. One reason might be that populism thrives on the media logic, that is, populism strategically attracts media attention with provocative messages, negativity and dramatization (Plasser and Ulram 2003). Such content characteristics may also work on social media and the traditional media may report about political posts which reach a high number of people (Engesser et al. 2017). Thus, polarizing political posts, which are frequently shared or commented, may be most likely to receive media attention.

Political polarization describes a process in which individuals strengthen their original political position or attitude (Stroud 2010). Scholars have argued that Western democracies have experienced an increase in political polarization (Prior 2013). However, there is yet little research on the role of right-wing populism. The increasing popularity of right-wing populist parties and movements in Europe and also the United States may either be interpreted as an antecedent or a consequence of public opinion polarization. For example, right-wing populist movements may arise around issues which are emotionally loaded and highly polarizing. Individuals who feel to be unheard or underrepresented may then develop a strong resentment against the perceived mainstream, such as it has been

the case for the German Pegida (Patriotic Europeans against the Islamization of the West), a protest movement primarily against Islamization and mass immigration (Stier et al. 2017). However, a number of studies have also investigated how existing populist parties and politicians and their campaigns may increase political polarization (e.g., Hameleers and Schmuck 2017). In this study, we are interested in this second phenomenon, that is, how extreme positions spread by populist representatives may increase political opinion polarization.

## Theoretical Framework

Drawing on research in information processing, there is reason to believe that highlighting quotes of a political actor may influence individuals' *cognitive engagement* with the message. We used statement recognition as an indicator for cognitive engagement. Statement recognition measures whether individuals accurately remember the content of the quotes (i.e., the statements of the politicians). If individuals engage in central processing, they may score higher on statement recognition compared to when they engage in mere peripheral or no processing (Petty and Cacioppo 1986). Individuals may differ in terms of how accurately they remember the content of the statements for two reasons. First of all, highlighting content in news may simply increase the visual presence of the information and thus increases readers' attention. There is convincing evidence that readers look at larger news items earlier and for a longer time (Leckner 2012). This is also true for text boxes, especially when they include images (Leckner 2012). Beside the visual component, readers may also consider highlighted information as especially important, because journalists tend to highlight statements when such information is especially newsworthy or illustrative (Broersma and Graham 2013). Readers may thus also use highlighting as a heuristic to assess the relevance of a message (Petty and Cacioppo 1979). Both visual attention and relevance appraisal may increase systematic processing, through which information is more likely to be stored in memory.

H1: Highlighting a post in a news article will increase statement recognition.

Furthermore, research in social and political psychology has shown that individuals do not process political information independently from prior beliefs. In fact, how individuals process political information is conditional on the degree to which they confirm with the message (e.g., Lord, Ross, and Lepper 1979; Maheswaran and Chaiken 1991; Petty and Cacioppo 1979; Taber and Lodge 2006; Taber, Cann, and Kucsova 2009). Generally, there are two hypotheses which can be derived from existing research, a confirmation bias hypothesis and a disconfirmation bias hypothesis. First, research in selective exposure indicates that news consumers are inclined to expose themselves to news articles or news pieces in an article which accord with their preexisting attitudes (Knobloch-Westerwick et al. 2015; Stroud 2008, 2010). They then strengthen their preexisting attitudes because they process and store information which confirm their prior attitudes, leading to a confirmation bias (Taber and Lodge 2006). Thus, in situations in which individuals can freely choose and select information, they may be more likely to process information which is congruent with their preexisting attitudes and avoid information which challenges their attitudes. From this perspective, individuals which accord with a highlighted statement in a news piece may be especially

prone to elaborate this specific content more thoroughly compared to other contextual information.

Second, there is also evidence suggesting that individuals react especially strong when they are exposed to attitude-challenging political statements (Maheswaran and Chaiken 1991; Petty and Cacioppo 1979; Taber and Lodge 2006). This is because in such a situation mere marginal processing of the content may not create sufficient confidence to rely on pre-existing attitudes. Accordingly, research has shown that individuals who are exposed to attitude-incongruent arguments are more likely to engage in cognitive processes in which they mentally denigrate and counter the presented arguments and thus bolster their preexisting attitudes (Taber and Lodge 2006). For example, Taber, Cann, and Kucsova (2009) have shown that individuals who are exposed to attitude-incongruent political arguments took longer to process these arguments and listed generally more thoughts compared to individuals exposed to congruent arguments. Moreover, they were more likely to list disconfirming thoughts, i.e., thoughts which defended their initial attitude and mitigated the presented attitude-incongruent arguments.

However, as we investigate in this study, the degree to which individuals react with confirmation or disconfirmation bias in political news may also depend on *how* the message is presented. More precisely, if journalists give considerable space to provocative statements, individuals may react stronger to a message as compared to messages which are less visually prominent (Leckner 2012). This is because individuals may then perceive the argument to be more prevalent in the political discourse and that journalistic gatekeepers perceive them to be newsworthy. In this context, individuals who highly agree with the message may spend more cognitive resources on the statement because selective exposure and confirmation bias research suggests that individuals tend to selectively pick and elaborate on information pieces which confirm their attitudes. If such a piece is highlighted in a news text, they may immediately turn to this information, process it and thus strengthen their initial attitudes. However, citizens may also engage with highlighted content more thoroughly when they do not agree with the statement. The rationale behind this is that they encounter a situation in which a hostile political view is prominently presented in a news article, which literally forces them to engage with the statement. They thus may feel an even stronger need to mentally prepare their defense and elaborate more strongly upon the content of the statement (Taber, Cann, and Kucsova 2009).

Hence, we hypothesize that rightist and leftist individuals may be more likely to cognitively engage with the statements and thus better recognize the content compared to centrist individuals. Moreover, left-wing and right-wing individuals may also *differ* in terms of how well they recognize the statement content. We thus pose a research question on potential differences between leftist and rightist individuals.

H2: Highlighting will have a stronger effect on statement recognition among leftist compared to centrist individuals.

H3: Highlighting will have a stronger effect on statement recognition among rightist compared to centrist individuals.

RQ1: How do leftist and rightist individuals differ in terms of statement recognition?

Furthermore, we are interested in differences between different styles of highlighting. Whereas journalists have traditionally highlighted quotes of politicians using simple block quotes, Twitter posts appear in the Twitter specific post frame and often include a picture. These Twitter-specific characteristics may have different effects compared to traditional highlighting (i.e., mere conventional block quote). The reason why Twitter posts in news may have different effects could be that individuals can be sure that the statement is not somehow modified or adjusted by journalists (i.e., it is the authentic post taken from a politician's Twitter account). Moreover, the presence of the face of the politician (profile picture) may increase inner-voice effects, that is, individuals may mentally visualize the candidate speaking directly to them (see Yao and Scheepers 2011). In this study, we systematically examine the potential effects of highlighting information within a news story and test whether different types of highlighting (e.g., Twitter post versus a simple block quote) exert different effects.

RQ2: Do different highlighting styles (treatment conditions) have different effects?

Finally, we expect that systematic processing of the statement, measured as statement recognition, will have a polarizing effect between individuals with right- and left-wing ideologies. More precisely, for individuals with right-wing ideology, statement recognition will have a positive effect on candidate evaluation and on anti-immigrant attitudes. If individuals cognitively process attitude-consistent information, they may feel more confident about their initial attitudes and hence strengthen these attitudes. While we expect positive effects on these measures for rightist voters, we expect that statement recognition will have converse effects for individuals with left-wing ideology. This is because statement recognition is the outcome of in-depth elaboration and cognitive engagement with the content of the statement. If individuals process content which does not accord with their attitudes, they may recall their initial attitudes and strengthen these attitudes as a reaction to the exposure to attitude-incongruent information (Taber and Lodge 2006; Taber, Cann, and Kucsova 2009). Only in an event in which extensive new and highly convincing evidence is provided, individuals may in fact change their attitudes (Petty and Cacioppo 1979). However, there is little reason that a right-wing populist statement may include such convincing new evidence and may instead trigger disconfirmation bias among left-wing individuals. Thus, it follows:

H4: Statement recognition will (a) have a negative effect on candidate evaluation and anti-immigrant attitudes among individuals who are ideologically left and will (b) have a positive effect on individuals who are ideologically right.

## Method

We designed an online experiment with five groups and recruited a quota sample, fairly representing the Austrian population in terms on age, gender, and education ( $M_{\text{Age}} = 40.80$ ,  $SD_{\text{Age}} = 14.94$ ; 50.02% male; 13.19% university degree, 22.96% college-bound high school degree).<sup>1</sup> We employed a multiple message design, exposing participants to two news articles, each including a populist statement of Norbert Hofer, a well-known politician from the right-wing populist *Austrian Freedom Party*. Norbert Hofer was also a candidate in the Austrian presidential election 2016, in which he gained 48% of the Austrian vote share. Thus, he represents a large share of conservative voters. All



groups saw the same statements, but we manipulated the appearance of the statements. After completing the survey, participants were debriefed and fully informed about the treatment and the purpose of the study. The first statement was “*Dear Government: We are not the world’s social welfare office. Refugees & immigrants cost the Austrians 2 billion Euros each year. Too much!*” The second statement was “*160,000 immigrants have crossed the Italian border this year, and Islamists among them. The Austrian people are let down by the government.*”

The first group (G1, control group) saw these statements as quotes in the running text. The font size of the quotes was not different from the rest of the running text. The second group (G2) was exposed to the same articles, but with *highlighted* quotes which appeared as conventional block quotes (indented free-standing blocks in the text). The third group (G3) saw the same articles with the same highlighted quotes as G2, but participants were additionally exposed to a picture of Norbert Hofer aside the highlighted quotes. In groups four and five, the quotes appeared as Twitter posts amid the running text either without (G4) or with (G5) the profile picture included in the Twitter post. This presentation allows us to draw conclusions about whether potential effects only occur because of textual highlighting, new visual information (candidate picture) or social media information (Twitter layout). See Appendix for details.

The statements were embedded in a neutral news report from the Austrian newspaper *Kurier*, which is known as a relatively neutral outlet, but still one of the top three national newspapers in Austria. The others are a Tabloid right-wing newspaper (*Kronen Zeitung*) and a quality left-wing newspaper (*Der Standard*). We also tested the relative neutrality of the *Kurier* by calculating the partial correlations between individuals’ ideology and their use of all three most read national newspaper in Austria. While the use of the *Kronen Zeitung* was positively related ( $r = .28, p < .001$ ) and the use of *Der Standard* negatively related to individuals’ right-wing ideology ( $r = -.25, p < .001$ ), the use of *Kurier* was unrelated to respondents’ ideology ( $r = -.03, p = .57$ ).

We conducted a treatment check in which we asked respondents whether the statement of Norbert Hofer was highlighted in the news articles (control group served as the reference group). The treatment check was successful for G2 ( $b = 0.70, p < .05$ ), G3 ( $b = 1.18, p < .001$ ), G4 ( $b = 1.43, p < .001$ ), and G5 ( $b = 1.11, p < .001$ ). Furthermore, the respondents correctly recalled whether the statements came along with a picture and whether they were presented in a Twitter frame.

Each participant in the experiment was randomly assigned to one of the five experimental groups. Randomization checks were successful for age ( $F = .64, p = .63$ ), gender ( $\chi^2(4) = 3.52, p = .47$ ), education ( $\chi^2(8) = 9.11, p = .33$ ), political interest ( $F = .40, p = .81$ ), and ideology ( $F = .29, p = .88$ ). We follow Darlington and Hayes (2016) and also control for these covariates in our models.

## Measures

If not stated otherwise, variables were measured on a 7-point scale (range = 1–7). To measure anti-immigrant attitudes ( $M = 4.53, SD = 2.03, \alpha = .93$ ), we asked respondents whether they agree that (a) immigrants cost our country too much money, which should be better invested in our people, (b) our borders should be closed for immigrants, and (c) immigrants are the cause of many problems in our country (see Hameleers, Bos,



and de Vreese 2017). Candidate evaluation was measured using a feeling thermometer approach (range =  $-50$ – $50$ ). We asked respondents to rate how they feel when they think about Norbert Hofer. They could choose a position on the feeling thermometer (see Marcus, Neuman, and MacKuen 2017). To measure statement recognition ( $M = 2.17$ ,  $SD = 1.31$ , range from 0 to 4) we conducted a recognition test, asking respondents: According to Norbert Hofer, (a) how many refugees have crossed the Italian border this year, (b) what kind of people are among the refugees which cross the border, (c) what are the costs for refugees per year, and (d) which of the following claims appeared in the statements of Norbert Hofer. Each of these questions was followed by four to five possible answers (one being correct), including an “I don’t know” option. We summed up the correct responses, resulting in a 5-point scale (reaching from 0 to 4). Ideology ( $M = 3.87$ ,  $SD = 1.37$ ) was assessed with a standard left-right scale, asking respondents to place themselves on the scale according to their political orientation. We recoded the variable so that individuals who scored 4 (= median) on the 7-point scale were categorized as center (37.73%), individuals who scored between 1 and 3 as left (34.83%), and individuals who scored between 5 and 7 as right (27.44%). Political interest ( $M = 4.50$ ,  $SD = 1.83$ ) was measured by asking citizens how interested they were in politics.

## Results

We ran moderated regressions to test our hypotheses. We calculated interaction effects between the treatment group variables and the ideology variable. For the treatment effects, the control group (G1, non-highlighted condition) served as the reference group. For the categorical ideology variable (left-center-right), we used individuals at the ideological center as the reference group. Table 1 (Model 1) shows the main effects of the treatment conditions, indicating no significant main effects on statement recognition (H1). Model 2 shows the effects of the treatment groups on statement recognition conditional on individuals’ ideology (H2 and H3). The model indicates that the effect of the full twitter condition (vs. the control group) is significantly different for left-wing voters compared to centrist voters. In a second model (not shown in the Table), we also tested the effects using right-wing individuals as the reference category. In this model, we find that the effects of G3 (block quote with picture;  $b = 1.28$ ,  $SE = 0.54$ ,  $p = 0.019$ ), G4 (Twitter post, no picture;  $b = 1.25$ ,  $SE = 0.54$ ,  $p = 0.022$ ) and G5 (full Twitter post;  $b = 1.67$ ,  $SE = 0.54$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ) are significantly different among left-wing voters compared to right-wing voters. The effect of group 2 (block quote, no picture) did not reach statistical significance.

In a second step, we also calculated the conditional effects of the treatments across the ideological groups. We only found significant effects among left voters, that is, all highlighting conditions (vs. the control group) significantly boosted recognition among left voters. However, conditions which included a picture – i.e., group 3 ( $b = 0.91$ ,  $SE = 0.35$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ) and group 5 ( $b = 1.17$ ,  $SE = 0.35$ ,  $p = 0.0009$ ) – had stronger effects compared to the conditions without pictures – i.e., group 2 ( $b = 0.78$ ,  $SE = 0.34$ ,  $p = 0.02$ ) and group 4 ( $b = 0.86$ ,  $SE = 0.36$ ,  $p = 0.02$ ).

Figure 1 graphically depicts these effects. As suggested by the conditional effect analysis, highlighting increased statement recognition among individuals with left-wing ideology. This effect is especially strong for the full twitter condition (G5, Twitter frame and

**Table 1.** OLS regressions predicting statement recognition, candidate evaluation and anti-immigrant attitudes.

	Statement recognition <i>b</i> ( <i>SE</i> )	Statement recognition <i>b</i> ( <i>SE</i> )	Anti-immigrant attitudes <i>b</i> ( <i>SE</i> )	Candidate evaluation <i>b</i> ( <i>SE</i> )
Age	0.01 (0.005)	0.01 (0.005)	0.02*** (0.01)	0.15 (0.10)
Gender	0.16 (0.14)	0.15 (0.14)	0.01 (0.18)	−0.40 (3.08)
High Education <sup>a</sup>	−0.13 (0.20)	−0.10 (0.20)	−0.72** (0.26)	−10.00* (4.49)
Medium Education <sup>a</sup>	0.26 (0.16)	0.32+ (0.16)	−0.76*** (0.21)	−12.04*** (3.62)
Political Interest	0.07+ (0.04)	0.08+ (0.04)	−0.11* (0.05)	−0.96 (0.86)
Left (vs. Center)	0.58*** (0.16)	−0.10 (0.35)	−2.01*** (0.44)	−35.20*** (7.66)
Right (vs. Center)	0.26 (0.17)	0.62 (0.39)	0.18 (0.49)	12.64 (8.59)
G2 (vs. G1)	0.37+ (0.21)	0.23 (0.33)	−0.86* (0.41)	−15.47* (7.17)
G3 (vs. G1)	0.31 (0.21)	0.20 (0.34)	−0.26 (0.42)	−2.86 (7.36)
G4 (vs. G1)	0.28 (0.21)	0.21 (0.35)	0.64 (0.44)	−7.84 (7.59)
G5 (vs. G1)	0.21 (0.21)	−0.21 (0.33)	−0.13 (0.41)	3.43 (7.22)
Recognition <sup>b</sup>			0.18+ (0.10)	2.87 (1.78)
Left*G2		0.55 (0.48)	1.09+ (0.61)	23.15* (10.54)
Right*G2		−0.25 (0.54)	1.34* (0.67)	7.93 (11.70)
Left*G3		0.71 (0.49)	0.96 (0.62)	17.06 (10.76)
Right*G3		−0.57 (0.53)	0.40 (0.67)	7.70 (11.69)
Left*G4		0.65 (0.50)	−0.57 (0.64)	12.56 (11.10)
Right*G4		−0.60 (0.53)	−0.10 (0.67)	11.68 (11.65)
Left*G5		1.38** (0.48)	0.40 (0.62)	3.15 (10.78)
Right*G5		−0.29 (0.53)	1.15+ (0.66)	2.02 (11.50)
Left*Recognition <sup>b</sup>			−0.42** (0.15)	−7.67** (2.70)
Right*Recognition <sup>b</sup>			−0.02 (0.16)	−0.46 (2.84)
Constant		0.96** (0.36)	5.00*** (0.45)	12.27 (7.91)
Observations	379	379	379	379
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.05	0.07	0.39	0.34

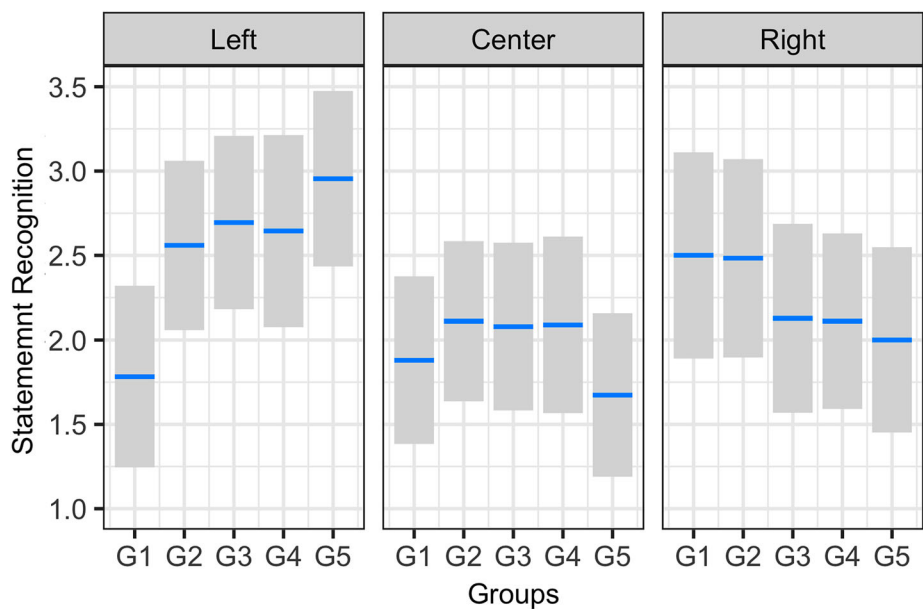
Note: <sup>a</sup> Low Education is the reference group. <sup>b</sup> Statement recognition is mean centered. G1 = no highlighting (control condition), G2 = block quote without picture, G3 = block quote with picture, G4 = Twitter frame without picture, G5 = Twitter frame with picture.

+  $p < 0.1$ ; \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

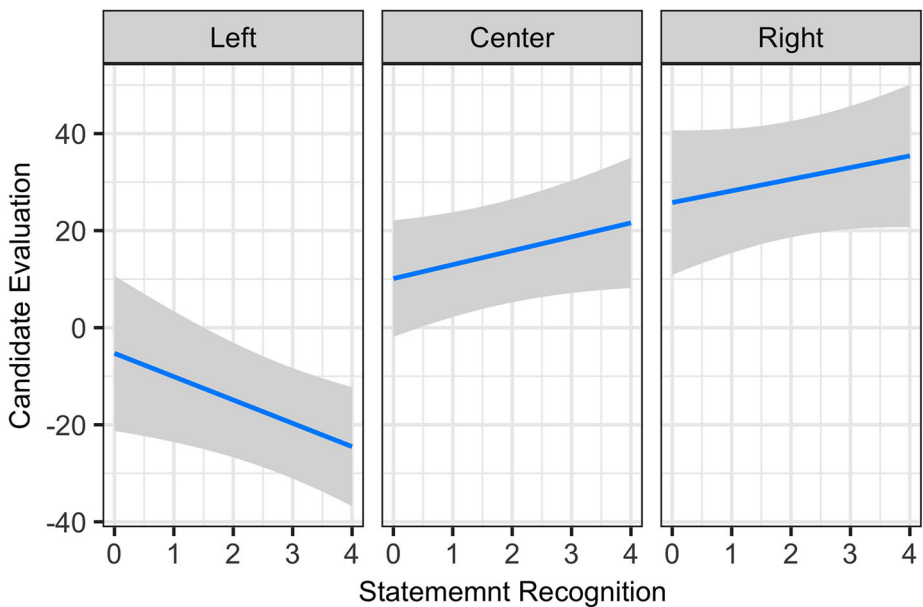
candidate picture). For right-wing individuals, recognition levels even decreased, however, this decrease was not significant.

In the third and fourth model (Table 1), we tested the effects of recognition on candidate evaluations and anti-immigrant attitudes. We found that the relationships between statement recognition and these outcome variables were significantly moderated by ideology (H4). Figures 2 and 3 depict the nature of these interaction effects. They show that the effect of recognition on these two outcomes is significantly different for left-wing individuals compared to centrist or rightist voters. Left-wing voters significantly decreased their anti-immigrant attitudes as well as their evaluation of Norbert Hofer if they correctly recognized the content of his statements. For both outcomes, right-wing individuals slightly strengthened their anti-immigrant attitudes and their sympathy toward Norbert Hofer, though these conditional effects did not reach statistical significance.

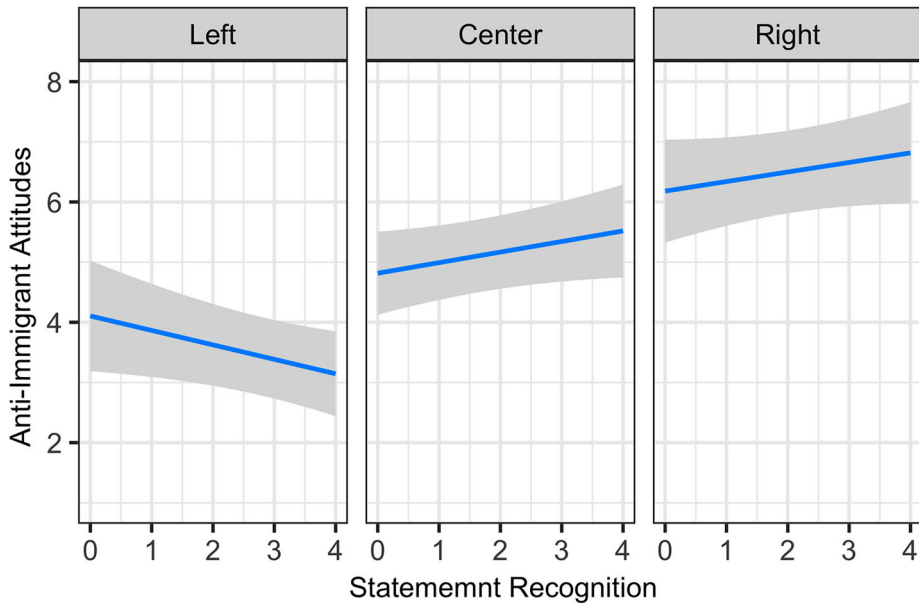
Next, we conducted moderated mediation analysis by calculating Quasi-Bayesian confidence intervals using 5,000 simulations (see Imai, Keele, and Tingley 2010; Tingley et al. 2014). We only found significant indirect paths for left-wing individuals: We found an indirect effect of G5 via statement recognition on candidate evaluation (lower CI = −12.371, upper CI = −0.697). We found similar effects for G4 (lower CI = −9.997, upper CI = −0.174), for G3 (lower CI = −10.382, upper CI = −0.396) and for G2 (lower CI = −9.229,



**Figure 1.** Differences in estimated mean values of statement recognition across the experimental groups and for individuals with different ideology. Grey area around means indicates 95% confidence intervals (see Table 1, covariates are set to their median and mode values). Note: G1 = no highlighting (control condition), G2 = block quote without picture, G3 = block quote with picture, G4 = Twitter frame without picture, G5 = Twitter frame with picture.



**Figure 2.** The relationship between statement recognition and candidate evaluation for individuals with different ideology. Grey area indicates 95% confidence intervals (see Table 1, covariates are set to their median and mode values).



**Figure 3.** The relationship between statement recognition and anti-immigrant attitudes for individuals with different ideology. Grey area indicates 95% confidence intervals (see Table 1, covariates are set to their median and mode values).

upper CI =  $-0.071$ ). With regard to anti-immigrant attitudes, we found an indirect effect of G5 (lower CI =  $-0.666$ , upper CI =  $-0.012$ ) and for G3 (lower CI =  $-0.556$ , upper CI =  $-0.0004$ ). However, we did not find indirect effects on anti-immigrant attitudes for G4 (lower CI =  $-0.528$ , upper CI =  $0.0007$ ) and G2 (lower CI =  $-0.501$ , upper CI =  $0.008$ ).

Finally, it should be noted that we also tested the model with ideology as a numerical variable yielding the same results as with the categorical variable used in the main analysis.

## Discussion

This study investigated the effect of embedding Twitter posts in political news coverage, an increasingly used practice among political journalists (e.g., Bane 2017; Broersma and Graham 2013). Our findings lend support to the assumption that highlighted right-wing populist statements (most importantly full Twitter posts) in news may increase existing gaps between citizens at the left and the right ideological end. This is because left-wing voters reacted to such messages with disconfirmation bias and strengthened their initial attitudes. We found that any highlighting style may induce this effect, but observed stronger effects for more pronounced highlighting, such as when the statements included a candidate picture. These findings are critical, because journalists nowadays rely on social media posts as new information sources and frequently embed these posts in their news coverage.

This study provides first evidence that highlighting provocative right-wing populist statements may specifically induce a disconfirmation bias among leftist voters, that is,

leftist voters tend to better recognize highlighted right-wing populist statements (see [Figure 1](#)). This is in line with psychological findings indicating that individuals tend to process attitude-incongruent messages more thoroughly (Maheswaran and Chaiken 1991; Taber, Cann, and Kucsova 2009). The reason is that they engage in a mental process in which they prepare defending arguments and, in doing so, elaborate more intensely on the message they have received. This process may be stimulated through highlighting, because individuals may think that journalists give incongruent opinions more space for a reason (Broersma and Graham 2013). More specifically, they may perceive that such opinions are higher up on the journalistic agenda and the public discourse and may thus feel a greater need to mentally engage with and mitigate the presented arguments.

Furthermore, we assumed that statement recognitions, in turn, may increase attitude polarization because individuals on the ideological ends may strengthen their baseline attitudes. In line with that notion, statement recognition was negatively related to candidate evaluation and anti-immigrant attitudes among left-wing voters. In addition, statement recognition was positively (though not significantly) related to candidate evaluation and anti-immigrant attitudes among rightist voters (see [Figures 2](#) and [3](#)). Hence, we only found significant indirect paths from highlighting to candidate evaluation and anti-immigrant attitudes via statement recognition for left-wing individuals. These indirect paths were weakest for the less pronounced highlighting conditions (G2 and G4) and failed to reach statistical significance for these two groups when predicting anti-immigrant attitudes. To sum up: Highlighting did not increase statement recognition among right-wing individuals and even if right-wing individuals recognized the content of the statements correctly, they did not significantly strengthen their initial attitudes. However, left-wing voters elaborated highlighted statements more thoroughly and developed lower levels of anti-immigrant attitudes and candidate evaluations upon it. These effects were stronger for more pronounced highlighting conditions which also included a candidate image (G3 and G5). Thus, based on this evidence, we conclude that highlighted right-wing populist statements primarily mobilized left-wing voters against the populist right.

Drawing on research in confirmation bias, we would have expected rightist individuals to be more likely to turn to, interpret and store highlighted right-wing populist statements compared to centrist individuals. We did not find evidence that highlighting would increase statement recognition more strongly among right-wing compared to centrist individuals. In fact, the effects of highlighting on statement recognition were even negative for rightist individuals, though these effects did not reach significance (see [Figure 1](#)). Thus, the assumptions of selective exposure and confirmation bias may not explain the effects of highlighting. If congruent information is highlighted in news, individuals may be even less likely to process it, for example because a quick heuristic assessment is sufficient to confirm that their own views are appropriately represented in the news. Furthermore, since the journalists have visually exposed an already familiar, congruent view, they may be more likely to immediately turn to the surrounding content to find out how the journalists interpret the quote and whether they present any counterarguments which challenge their policy preferences.

Even though the differences between different highlighting styles (the treatment conditions) were rather weak, there was some evidence that that G2, representing the

traditional highlighting type (i.e., a mere block quote), exerted the weakest polarizing effect between left-wing and right-wing individuals. The reason might be that the inclusion of a picture and the Twitter post frame may attract more visual attention compared to a simple block quote and may also relate the statement more closely to the speaker (Leckner 2012; Yao and Scheepers 2011). However, the differences in the effect sizes were rather small and not significant. Thus, our study provides little evidence that the highlighting effects may only occur for statements which include Twitter-specific characteristics. However, the fact that journalists may visually expose right-wing populist statements more frequently through embedding Twitter posts in news stories, the polarizing impact of such visually exposed statements may have increased over the past years.

Our findings contribute to recent research which seeks to explain how new journalistic practices affect political polarization among the electorate. The common belief suggests that exposure to partisan information drives polarization by reconfirming individuals' pre-existing attitudes (Stroud 2010) while hardly challenging these attitudes (Mutz 2002). However, political polarization may also arise from exposure to visually exposed cross-cutting opinions which appear in regular news coverage, specifically when such cross-cutting opinions radically contrast one's own opinion. If people are exposed to such information, they may hardly reverse their own attitudes, but may strengthen their initial attitudes through disconfirmation bias (Taber, Cann, and Kucsova 2009). This may happen because strongly incongruent views may attract attention from readers. Attracting attention is a key strategic concern of news media – especially in the highly competitive online environment (Schmuck et al. 2017). Thus, populist candidates may use social media not only to reach their followers on social media, but also to disseminate their content throughout a hybrid and increasingly entwined media system (Chadwick 2017).

Yet, besides resulting in disconfirmation bias, exposure to attitude-challenging Twitter posts in news stories may also increase citizens' hostile media perceptions (Vallone, Ross, and Lepper 1985). That is, individuals may perceive a particular news article as biased against their own position and in favor of an antagonist's position resulting in (relative) hostile media effects (Gunther and Liebhart 2006). Connecting these two strands of research would be a valuable avenue for future research and studies should examine if Twitter posts in news may actually contribute to news recipients' hostile media perceptions.

## Limitations

As it is the case for any experimental study, this study comes not without limitations. First of all, we used only one political candidate in our stimulus material and specifically a candidate which is less controversial compared to other candidates (e.g., Geert Wilders in the Netherlands or HC Strache in Austria). This is because Norbert Hofer tends to use rather moderate language and even reached almost 50% in a national election in Austria. Future research may replicate our findings with different and more controversial candidates. Secondly, we only investigated the effect of right-wing populist Twitter posts. The proposed effects may similarly occur for rightist individuals which are exposed to radical left-wing statements. This, however, needs to be tested in future research. Third, we limited our stimulus material to the issue of refugee policy. We did so because

refugee and immigration issues are well known to be the most important issue in right-wing populist campaigning. However, such issues are also highly controversial and emotionally loaded issues and future research needs to test the effects found in this study across different issues. Fourth, we were only able to observe short term effects in this experimental situation. These effects may only transform into long-lasting effects if individuals are repeatedly exposed to similar content (see Higgins 1996). Thus, we could not directly test, but only infer about potential polarizing consequences. Future studies may also test this notion using prolonged exposure experiments. Finally, we used the comparably neutral Austrian newspaper (*Kurier*) in which we presented the Twitter post. However, the news context may of course also influence how the Twitter posts affect readers. For example, a right-wing populist Tweet embedded in a conservative newspaper may have different effects compared to a right-wing populist Tweet in a highly liberal newspaper. Furthermore, the news content around the embedded statement (e.g., the framing of the topic or the presence of opposing views) may also influence how people process and respond to right-wing populist statements. These conditions, however, can hardly be tested in a single experimental design, but need to be tested in separate studies and also across national contexts.

## Conclusion

This study contributed to our understanding of the societal impact of the increasingly used journalistic practice of using right-wing populist Twitter posts in regular news coverage. Our findings have important theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, we contributed to research on disconfirmation bias. Specifically, we have shown that *visually exposed* cross-cutting political views may indeed increase disconfirmation bias in individuals. From a practical perspective, embedding right-wing populist Twitter posts may hence increase political polarization, because frequent exposure to such posts may strengthen left-wing voters' initial political attitudes over time. This is a critical finding, because journalists are increasingly using politicians' Twitter posts as easily accessible and eye-catching information sources in an increasingly competitive online environment. However, if journalists highlight provocative right-wing populist statements frequently in their news stories, they may induce resentment among leftist voters against right-wing populist actors. To some degree, the news media may thus support right-wing populist strategies which rely on conflict rather than compromise and thrive on an emotionalized "we against them" logic in a polarized political climate.

## Note

1. Note that college degrees are less common in Austria compared to other countries (e.g., the U.S.). According to the Austrian Statistical Office, some 13% of Austrians held college degrees and around 18% held degrees from college-bound high schools – a degree from such schools formally entitle graduates to enroll at a university. All others completed apprenticeships, vocational schools or compulsory schools.

## Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.



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