

# Winning Votes and Changing Minds: Do Populist Arguments Affect Candidate Evaluations and Issue Preferences?

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Populist rhetoric – presenting arguments in people-centric, anti-elite and “good vs. evil” frames – is said to be particularly successful in winning and binding voters. Yet, identifying the causal effect of populist rhetoric is complicated by its enmeshment with positions and issues that populists tend to emphasize. We use a survey experiment in the UK ( $n \approx 9,000$ ), randomizing the use of populist arguments across issues and positions to test their effect on voters’ candidate evaluations and issue preferences. We find that, on average, populist arguments have a *negative* effect on the electoral viability of candidates and no effect on voters’ issue preferences. However, when politicians speak to voters who already like them, populist arguments sway these voters’ issue preferences effectively. Among voters with strong populist attitudes, populist arguments also do not dampen politicians’ electoral viability. Populist rhetoric is thus useful in convincing and mobilizing supporters but detrimental in expanding electoral support.

**Keywords:** Populism, Persuasion, Candidate Support, Survey Experiment

The Pre-Analysis Plan can be accessed [here](#).

## 1. Introduction

Populist parties have been successful with a variety of policy programs ranging from the radical right, over centrist, post-materialist, and single-issue platforms, to the radical left. Yet, from the perspective of most scholars, what unites these parties, despite their programmatic differences, is a common thin-centered populist ideology that is most tangible in populist politicians' rhetoric in the public realm. Populist arguments are characterized by appeals to a fictitious and homogeneous group of "the people", and strongly worded criticism of "conspiring elites", which results in a "Manichean" worldview of politics as a constant fight between good and evil, "the people" and "the elites" (Mudde, 2004, 2007). This rhetoric is commonly referred to as "thin populism" which then interacts with "thicker" ideologies (such as nativism or socialism) and policies (Mudde, 2007). Scholars (e.g. Canovan, 1982, 1999; de Vreese et al., 2018; Moffitt, 2019) and pundits (e.g. Fisher, 2017; Goldhill, 2017; Healy & Haberman, 2015) alike have speculated to what extent this rhetoric explains populists' electoral success.

Previous work on populist persuasion has focused on populism as ideological stances rather than rhetoric (Neuner & Wratil, 2020; Silva et al., 2022), on populist framing of societal problems (Busby et al., 2019), or media messages (Bos et al., 2013; Hameleers et al., 2017; Hameleers & Fawzi, 2020; Sheets et al., 2016). Many of these studies are predominantly concerned with outcomes that are indirectly linked to electoral success, like group identities (Bos et al., 2020), blame attribution (Hameleers et al., 2017, 2018) or voters' perceptions of out-groups (Hameleers & Fawzi, 2020; Hameleers & Schmuck, 2017). Existing work either does not operationalize populism as a speech act, an utterance by politicians, or the outcome is not directly relevant to populists' electoral success. In contrast, here we test the appeal and persuasiveness of arguments advanced by politicians on outcomes closely related to electoral success, while holding constant the issues on which the arguments are being made and the side of the issues being argued for. Thereby, we connect the vast literature on the structural drivers of populist voting (e.g. Bornschieer & Kriesi, 2020; Inglehart & Norris, 2017; Kriesi, 2014;

Kriesi et al., 2006) with research on populist parties' communicative strategies (e.g. Dai & Kustov, 2022; de Vries & Hobolt, 2020).

We examine two routes for populist arguments to affect electoral outcomes, one indirect via issue preferences and one directly via candidate evaluations. First, populist arguments could be more successful in changing voters' *issue preferences* than non-populist arguments. Presenting, for example, a health care reform as the "will of the people" and condemning "greedy doctors" for long waitlists might make voters more supportive of the policy than an argument presented in a more neutral frame. The changed issue preferences could then translate into support for politicians who campaign on the issue. Second, populist arguments may directly make political candidates appear more appealing. They might change voters' *candidate evaluations* more than non-populist arguments. In other words, a candidate who praises "the people" and condemns "the establishment" might simply appear more likeable to voters.

Since politicians typically enmesh "thin" populist arguments with particular "thick" populist ideologies, policy platforms and positions (Hunger & Paxton, 2022; Neuner & Wratil, 2020), we conduct a survey experiment to isolate the causal effect of populist rhetoric. Specifically, we design a single-profile vignette experiment in which a hypothetical political candidate provides an argument on one out of nine different political issues. The arguments vary randomly in their direction (for or against) and in whether they contain populist rhetoric. Marginalizing effects over several issues is particularly important to exclude that any findings are due to a specific formulation of an argument (Blumenau & Lauderdale, 2022; Fong & Grimmer, 2021), as we are interested in general effects of populist rhetoric, not effects that are confined to particular issues. Importantly, we elicit voters' candidate evaluations and their position on the issue before *and* after reading the argument, thus implementing a pre/post design. This allows us to identify the *persuasion effect* of populist arguments, i.e. the within-individual change in issue preferences from pre- to post-treatment, and the *candidate re-evaluation effect* of populist arguments, i.e. the within-individual change in candidate

evaluations. In each case, we are interested in the relative size of these effects for populist vs. non-populist arguments. Following our pre-analysis plan, we examine several moderating variables: heterogeneity in candidate re-evaluation as a function of pre-treatment issue preferences, heterogeneity of persuasion effects as a function of pre-treatment candidate evaluations, heterogeneity in candidate re-evaluation and persuasion across political issues with varying salience and familiarity, and also as a function of a standard populism battery administered pre-treatment.

Our results reveal no difference in the average persuasiveness of populist vs. non-populist arguments. However, the zero average effect results from strong heterogeneity in conditional effects by whether respondents have a positive versus negative pre-treatment evaluation of the candidate who makes the argument. Populist arguments persuade respondents who are already inclined to vote for a candidate but work much less well with those that do not support the candidate pre-treatment. In contrast, non-populist arguments have roughly the same level of persuasiveness *irrespective* of the candidate's likability. Regarding candidate re-evaluation effects, we find that candidates who make a populist argument are on average punished for this (re-evaluated negatively), while non-populist arguments do not substantively affect the evaluation of candidates. Importantly, we also find heterogeneous treatment effects conditional on populist attitudes: candidates are punished significantly more for populist arguments by non-populist respondents than by those holding populist attitudes. In fact, respondents with very strong populist attitudes do not penalize candidates for making populist arguments but tend to reward them. None of our analyses provide evidence that the salience or familiarity of an issue would make a difference to either persuasion or candidate re-evaluation effects of populist versus non-populist rhetoric.

These findings have important implications for our understanding of political rhetoric in populist success. They suggest that engaging in populist rhetoric is a risky strategy for politicians because populist arguments hurt their electoral viability among most voters. Such arguments are convincing in shaping the issue preferences of supporters though, and they appeal to

voters with strong populist attitudes. Hence, populist rhetoric is effective at consolidating and mobilizing the pre-existing populist base but is counter-productive at winning over new voters.

## 2. Populist Persuasion

The rhetoric of politicians that are commonly referred to as “populists” has gained a great deal of attention in the last decade, but research in this area goes back much further. Already some of the earliest modern publications on populism by Canovan (1982, 1999) hint at the importance of populist rhetoric for understanding populist success. More recently, work by Dai and Kutsov (2022), Moffitt (2019), de Vreese and colleagues (2018) have argued in a similar vein that populists’ success is linked to their political communication. This idea is particularly prominent in the public debate about populism in which journalists frequently speculate that the success of populist candidates is linked to the rhetoric that these politicians employ (e.g. Fisher, 2017; Goldhill, 2017; Healy & Haberman, 2015).

In this study, we employ an ideational understanding of populism as a “thin ideology” that can manifest in political communication. This populist ideology is formed of appeals to a fictitious and homogeneous group of “the people”, and frank criticism of conspiring and evil “elites” and “the establishment”. This dichotomy then results in a “Manichean” worldview of politics as a constant fight of good and evil, “the people” and “the elites” (Mudde, 2004, 2007). This conceptualization of populist rhetoric is different from, for example, Moffitt’s understanding (Moffitt, 2019; Moffitt & Tormey, 2014), who treats populism as a performance that is characterized by elements like “bad manners” and narratives of “crisis, breakdown, and threat”. In other words, populist messages here are defined by their *content* rather than by their *style*.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This is not to say that a populist style does not matter. On the contrary, there is some experimental evidence that factors related to these performative elements such as emotionality (Brader, 2005) might alter persuasion effects.

Given the widespread suspicion that populist rhetoric matters, there is surprisingly little research that tests the effects of populist arguments on voters. One important branch of the literature that is an exception in this regard is work on populism in the media. Hameleers et al. (2017), for instance, show that when voters are confronted with a newspaper article in which the EU gets blamed in a populist and emotional way, voters evaluate that organization more negatively. Sheets and colleagues (2016) use a similar design to show that such media narratives also work when societal out-groups get blamed. Bos et al. (2013) also use news stories as stimulus material to show that populist elite cues might help radical right politicians in gaining legitimacy and that this effect is stronger among the politically cynical. Hameleers and Schmuck (2017) replicate this finding in the context of populist messages communicated via social media. Bos et al. (2020) extend this argument to include not only emotionalized blame attribution but also group cues against immigrants and political elites to test a strategy they call “populist identity framing”. They find anti-establishment elite cues to be particularly successful among people who are poor. These papers have made important contributions by testing different communication strategies that are frequently linked to populist politicians and by showing that these strategies can potentially affect how voters make sense of politics.

Notwithstanding the importance of these findings, two important gaps in the literature remain: First, these studies overwhelmingly present populist cues not as rhetorical statements made by politicians but rather as media frames or opinions of institutions or anonymous experts. This is an important gap because the source of an elite cue matters for how citizens perceive the cue (e.g. Arceneaux, 2008; Bisgaard & Slothuus, 2018; Nicholson, 2011; Slothuus & Bisgaard, 2021; Slothuus & de Vreese, 2010). Second, they do not link populist statements to the electoral success of politicians. Busby and colleagues (2019) overcome the latter challenge in the American context by showing that framing policy problems in a populist manner can increase support for populist candidates. However, these authors too do not present populism as the rhetoric of a politician. Finally, populist cues have also drawn attention of political psychology scholars: Bakker and colleagues (2016) find that populism resonates

particularly strong with people who score low on certain character traits such as agreeableness. More recently, Bakker and colleagues (2021) also use a conjoint experiment in the American context to show that candidates might be able to increase their electoral fortunes by adopting anti-establishment positions. Neuner and Wratil (2020) as well as Castanho-Silva and colleagues (2022) use a similar research design to understand the causal effect of “thick” populist policies and “thin” populist priorities on vote intention for political candidates. These authors find that some populist anti-immigration and pro-redistribution positions increase candidate popularity. However, none of these studies operationalizes populist rhetoric independently from actual policies *and* links it to authentic candidates at the same time.

Taken together, this evidence suggests that populist arguments might play an important role, for instance, in shifting blame, re-enforcing group identities, or gaining legitimacy. However, the size and direction of these effects as well as their relevance for persuasion and candidate evaluation, central tenets of electoral politics, remain unclear. Here, we explore whether populist arguments can alter persuasion and candidate evaluation effects. As we have no unequivocal *ex ante* expectations about the direction of these effects, the main aim of our experiment is to create many different situations under which populist arguments *could* potentially make a difference. The persuasion literature presented in the following guides us in this endeavor.

### **3. Persuasion and Candidate Re-Evaluation**

Political scientists and political practitioners have long been interested in the extent to which arguments made by politicians are successful in changing voters’ preferences on political issues and evaluations of the politicians themselves. For political scientists, this primarily matters to explain the formation of public opinion, whereas politicians want to understand what arguments make candidates and policies appealing to voters. Previous research on public opinion and candidate choice has identified a variety of factors that explain why some

arguments are more persuasive with respect to the issues they address and why some make candidates more appealing than others.

### *Candidate Support Effects*

One widely held view in the literature on the efficacy of elite messaging is that the extent to which citizens update their issue preferences is influenced by the source of the respective cue and their relationship to it (Arceneaux, 2008; Arceneaux & Kolodny, 2009; Bisgaard & Slothuus, 2018; Druckman, 2001; Lupia, 1994; Mondak, 1993; Nicholson, 2011; Slothuus & Bisgaard, 2021; Slothuus & de Vreese, 2010). Citizens are more likely to accept and follow messages sent by elites they support. For example, politicians might frame policies in response to a global pandemic as a necessity to protect the vulnerable or alternatively as an inappropriate limitation of personal freedoms, but to a large extent which view citizens will eventually adopt depends upon which explanation the politicians they approve of support (e.g. Carsey & Layman, 2006; Kam, 2005; Mondak, 1993; Slothuus & de Vreese, 2010; Zaller, 1992) . Especially in the US, this argument is made in the context of partisan identities but there is evidence that such effects exist in the absence of party labels (Campbell & Cowley, 2014). These findings suggest that an argument made by a politician who receives strong support by a voter should be more powerful in changing this voters' preferences than an argument by another politician who receives less support, all else equal.

### *Attitude Strength Effects*

The potential of an argument to change citizens' opinions is also moderated by the substantive policy the cue deals with. Previous research on issue voting and framing effects suggests that people respond to elite cues differently based on the extent to which they have strong or weak prior beliefs for a specific issue.<sup>2</sup> Such priors include information about the specific issue (e.g.

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<sup>2</sup> For an overview of the Psychology literature on attitude strength see Howe & Krosnick (2017).



Lecheler et al., 2009) as well as the ability of citizens to link arguments made about that issue to their economic or moral core values (Carmines & Stimson, 1980; Pollock et al., 1993). These prior beliefs, which can be a consequence of biased information seeking, have been shown to alter voters' reactions to new information significantly (Druckman et al., 2012; Druckman & Leeper, 2012). Carmines and Stimson (1980) use abortion in the US as an example of such a "strong-priors issue". Abortion is relatively easy to understand, can be linked easily to moral core values, and voters receive strong elite cues for it on a regular basis. Voters will thus be reluctant to change their opinion on abortion because of a single elite cue, whereas they will be more inclined to update their preferences on an issue they are less familiar with. Against this backdrop, voters' preferences on issues that are familiar and salient should be more stable and harder to manipulate than their preferences on issues that are unfamiliar and not salient (*ceteris paribus*).

In direct contrast, regarding candidate evaluations we expect that respondents will update their evaluations *more* when the argument they are confronted with deals with an issue that they have strong priors on and less for an issue that they have weak priors on (Bélanger & Meguid, 2008; Fournier et al., 2003; Howe & Krosnick, 2017; Rabinowitz et al., 1982). On an issue where a participant does not have a strong view, there is less reason for that participant to re-evaluate a candidate who takes one versus the other position. Hence, we do not expect respondents to update as much on candidates based on statements about such issues (*ceteris paribus*). We expect the strength and direction of this effect to be moderated by the alignment of preferences and the argument made, so that respondents will update their candidate evaluations positively if the candidate makes an argument that is aligned with their issue preferences and negatively if the argument is not aligned with their preferences.

#### *Preference Alignment Effects*

Finally, there is a long-lasting scholarly debate – essentially starting with Downs – about the relationship between the policy positions that candidates promote and voters' responses to

them.<sup>3</sup> Tomz and van Houweling (2008), and many other studies, show that most voters prefer candidates who promote policy positions that are like their own preferences. Against this backdrop, voters on average will re-evaluate a candidate more positively if that candidate makes an argument they agree with and re-evaluate a candidate more negatively if that candidate makes an argument they do not agree with (*ceteris paribus*).

Thus far, we have discussed well-known mechanisms from the literatures on persuasion and candidate support. To summarize: We expect elite messaging to be particularly successful in changing voters' issue preferences if arguments are made by candidates that voters approve of or deal with issues that voters do not have strong priors for. For candidate re-evaluation, we expect voters to prefer candidates who make an argument that they agree with, and we expect voters to change their evaluation of a candidate more if that candidate makes an argument about an issue they have strong priors on. These hypotheses are summarized in Table 1. The main purpose of this study is to investigate whether populist rhetoric changes persuasion and evaluation effects on average, as well as any of the aforementioned conditional effects.

Persuasion Effects		Candidate Re-Evaluation Effects	
Candidate Support Effect	More Candidate Support → Stronger Persuasion Effect	Preference Alignment Effect	Alignment of Preferences and Argument → Positive Candidate Re-Evaluation
Attitude Strength Effect	Weak Issue Priors → Stronger Persuasion Effect	Attitude Strength Effect	Weak Issue Priors → Weaker Candidate Re-Evaluation (Moderated by Alignment)

Table 1: Hypothesized conditional persuasion effects in the absence of populist arguments.

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<sup>3</sup> For a review see (Grofman, 2004).

#### 4. Research Design

Analyzing whether populist arguments follow a different logic than non-populist arguments is difficult using observational data, as the occurrence of populist arguments in the real world is usually confounded by expressing certain policy positions, addressing certain issues, or arguing based on certain ideologies (Hunger & Paxton, 2022; Neuner & Wrátil, 2020). Moreover, voters might self-select into exposure to populist arguments, e.g. through news consumption. To overcome these challenges, we conduct a pre-registered single-profile vignette survey experiment on a nationally representative sample of voters in the UK (n = 8890) including 36 different arguments randomized across 9 issues by 2 argument directions by 2 levels of populist vs. non-populist argumentation. The survey was administered as part of YouGov's standard political omnibus in the UK in March 2022.

The UK is a particularly suitable case to study the effects of populist arguments due to their widespread presence in recent political discourse (e.g. Scotto et al., 2017). In particular, there is a "high propensity of 'Mainstream Populism'" (March, 2017, 283) in the UK. Both, Labour and Conservatives regularly engage in populist rhetoric (e.g. Alexandre-Collier, 2022; Bale, 2013; Watts & Bale, 2019). In the recent past, both parties were led by politicians – Jeremy Corbyn and Boris Johnson – who are widely seen as examples of populist leaders (Alexandre-Collier, 2022; Demata, 2020). This allows us to credibly assign populist vs. non-populist arguments to fictitious political candidates. It makes it less likely that respondents will instantly associate populist arguments with one political party, which could potentially bias results. If instead we conducted a similar experiment in the US, for example, one concern would be that populist rhetoric might be perceived more credible when coming from a GOP politician, or might signal that an unlabeled politician was from the GOP. Similarly, in other European countries respondents would foremost associate populist statements with radical left or right parties when seeing populist statements. Against this backdrop, we argue that by conducting the experiment in the UK context we can increase the external validity of our findings, as

presented vignettes will strike respondents as realistic and will provide weak signals regarding the party of unlabeled politicians.

#### 4.1 Pre-Treatment

First, respondents are asked a three-question populist attitudes battery originally developed by Castanho Silva et al. (2019). We follow their recommendation and pick three of their suggested survey items (the one most strongly associated with each subdimension of the scale) to measure populist attitudes among voters in its conceptual breadth. The order of these questions is randomized.<sup>4</sup>

Next, participants are asked for their preferences on one randomly selected political issue from a set of 9. All issues were selected based on three different criteria: First, they were chosen to create variation in the strength of prior attitudes across issues. We rely upon previous survey experimental work on issue stability and issue-voting to identify which issues are strong, medium and weak prior issues (Hanretty et al., 2021). These authors have conducted a three-wave survey to estimate within-individual opinion stability for different issues. They find, for instance, that foreign aid is an issue that voters have very stable preferences for. We take this as evidence that respondents' preferences on this issue are harder to change than, for example, their preferences on a subsea electricity cable to Iceland. While the former has been a salient issue in the UK, the latter is de facto absent from political competition so that people will tend to have weaker priors. The second criterion is that it is plausible for candidates from various parties to make arguments for and against each issue statement. Neither is one of the issues typically considered as "owned" by one of the two big parties, nor is one of the issues linked to recent populist movements and parties. This is to ensure that we do not introduce possible biases into the experiment that could result from participants associating certain positions or arguments with one of the major parties. Finally, we also ensured that on each issue it is conceivable for candidates to make arguments for

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<sup>4</sup> The full questionnaire can be found in Appendix E.

and against all these issue-statements. The issues are listed in Table 2, including our pre-registered assessment of people’s average attitude strength on them. Respondents rate the respective issue-statement on a standard five-point agree-disagree scale.

<b>Issue-Statement</b>	<b>Strength</b>
The minimum sentences for knife crimes and carrying a knife should be increased.	Strong priors
The amount of money spent on foreign aid should be reduced significantly due to the covid crisis.	Strong priors
Vaccinations against the novel Coronavirus (Covid-19) should become mandatory in the UK.	Strong priors
Zero hour contracts should be illegal.	Medium priors
Immigrants moving to the UK should have to pay an annual surcharge for using the NHS.	Medium priors
The construction of a high-speed rail network should be prioritised over other infrastructure investments.	Medium priors
The production of essential food in this country (flour, eggs, butter, milk, etc.) should be subsidised.	Weak priors
A special tax (“sugar tax”) should be introduced for products that are harmful when consumed in excess, such as soft drinks or chocolate.	Weak priors
A subsea electricity cable to connect with Iceland’s geothermal power supplies should be constructed.	Weak priors

*Table 2: Issue-Statements used and their pre-registered strength.*

Afterwards, participants are introduced to a hypothetical candidate profile and asked to evaluate the candidate on a five-point scale.<sup>5</sup> The profiles contain a brief description of the candidate and a picture to induce variation in the extent to which respondents support the candidate and to increase the ecological validity of our findings – two such profiles are presented in Figure 1. The information respondents receive in these profiles is similar to what voters might learn about a candidate from a campaign leaflet or a brief TV interview; namely, the candidate’s name, gender, age, family background, profession, political experience and cues about their ethnicity. Similar stimulus material was used, for instance, by Kirkland and Coppock (2018) to assess what attributes voters pay attention to in non-partisan elections. We construct these profiles by randomly combining different text elements with pictures of real political candidates from regional elections in Canada. In total, the candidate profiles broadly

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<sup>5</sup> The scale reaches from “This is the kind of candidate I would never want to vote for” to “This is the kind of candidate I would definitely want to vote for.”

resemble the distribution of candidates present in reality (Lamprinakou et al., 2017) so that the ratio of, for example, male/female or white/minority candidates shown in the experiment is similar to their distribution in the real world.<sup>6</sup>

#### 4.2 Treatment – Operationalization of Populist Arguments

Next, participants are shown an argument made by the respective candidate for which we randomize whether the respective argument is populist or not as well as its direction (for/against). All arguments contain populism's three core elements: people-centrism, anti-elitism and a Manichean worldview (Mudde, 2004, 2007). One of the key challenges when testing populist rhetoric in a survey experiment is to develop arguments that meet the academic criteria for being considered sufficiently populist while also being realistic and not revealing the purpose of the study. We read speeches and campaign materials from politicians of all British parties to identify the most common forms of populist arguments present in political discourse and include arguments that are common across the party spectrum.

People-centrism – operationalized through references to “British”, “hard-working”, “ordinary” and “honest people” – is extremely common across the entire party spectrum in the UK (March, 2017). Demata (2020) shows that terms such as “British” and “Britain”, which one might associate with the political right, are also among the most used terms in the discourse of the Labour party and their former leader Jeremy Corbyn. The author concludes that the combination of populism and nationalism is an important manifestation of populism in British politics on both sides of the political spectrum. Hence, taking heed of the UK context, our populist arguments contain plausibly realistic people-centric appeals with references to “the British people”, irrespective of the party of a candidate. This choice also reflects Halikiopoulou

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<sup>6</sup> Please consult Appendix D for further details on the distribution of candidates in the experiment.

and colleagues' (2012) finding that nationalism is the “common denominator” that “cuts party lines” on the radical left and the radical right in many European countries (504).

Similarly, UK parties also display striking similarities in their use of anti-elitist rhetoric: Jeremy Corbyn, for instance, used to speak about “taking down the establishment” while, Nigel Farage (former Brexit and UKIP party leader) frequently said that his party “[does] not trust the establishment” (Hyde, 2019), and Boris Johnson engaged in an “anti-parliament narrative” in which “parliamentarians were not [...] portrayed as representatives but as enemies of the people” (Alexandre-Collier, 2022, 538). Even prime ministers did not shy away from using anti-elite rhetoric, like Theresa May, when she attacked “international elites” and “citizens of nowhere” (May, 2018), or Liz Truss, who created the image of an abstract, evil elite formed by “militant unions, vested interests, [...] talking heads, [and] Brexit deniers [...]” (Truss, 2022). In combination with the people-centric elements of our arguments, these narratives form what populism scholars refer to as “Manichean worldview”, an understanding of politics as struggle between good and evil, “the people” versus “the elites”.

In the experiment, we present “elites” such as “politicians” or “bureaucrats” as “international” “useless” and “out-of-touch” – terms frequently used on both sides of the political spectrum in the UK. Not least since Brexit, scholars have pointed out an existing “Nationalist-Globalist policy divide” in the UK. Scotto et al. (2017), for instance, argue that “nationalist viewpoints, when juxtaposed against Globalist outlooks, are salient [...], encompass left-right economic concerns and may portend a new era in British political culture” (38). Thus, the anti-elite components of our populist arguments are – again – designed to increase the external validity of our findings. However, we acknowledge that our focus on external validity for the UK context may negatively affect another form of external validity, namely the generalizability of our findings to other country cases, where the manifestations of populist rhetoric may differ (e.g. in Southern Europe or Latin America).

We incorporate the populist elements in the first and third parts of the candidate’s statement. The second part is kept constant across rhetorical types, providing a clear statement as to

whether the candidate is making the case *for* or *against* something (i.e. the direction of the argument). Our stimulus material for the NHS surcharge issue is presented in Table 3; the material for all issues is in Appendix C.

	<b>Pro</b>	<b>Contra</b>
<b>Populist</b>	<p><i>Our beloved NHS does not benefit from immigration. Hard-working British people built the NHS, and immigrants get to use it immediately when they come here.</i></p> <p><i>Therefore, immigrants should have to pay a surcharge to use the NHS.</i></p> <p><i>Heartless, lazy bureaucrats and out-of-touch politicians must start listening to ordinary people. Take our taxpayers' concerns seriously!</i></p>	<p><i>Our beloved NHS benefits from immigration. Immigrants contribute to it immediately when they come here through their taxes, just like hard-working British people.</i></p> <p><i>Therefore, immigrants should not have to pay a surcharge to use the NHS.</i></p> <p><i>Heartless, lazy bureaucrats and out-of-touch politicians must stop playing politics on the back of ordinary people's lives!</i></p>
<b>Non-Populist</b>	<p><i>Overall, the NHS does not benefit from immigration. Immigrants impose an additional burden on the NHS from the moment they arrive in this country.</i></p> <p><i>Therefore, immigrants should have to pay a surcharge to use the NHS.</i></p> <p><i>The government should design an immigration regime that avoids harm for taxpayers and the NHS to secure the future of the health sector.</i></p>	<p><i>Overall, the NHS benefits from immigration. Immigrants contribute to the NHS through their taxes from the moment they start working in this country.</i></p> <p><i>Therefore, immigrants should not have to pay a surcharge to use the NHS.</i></p> <p><i>The government should design an immigration regime that avoids harm for immigrants and the NHS to secure the future of the health sector.</i></p>

Table 3: Example arguments presented to respondents on the NHS surcharge. Texts for all arguments are in Appendix C.



### 4.3 Post-Treatment

After the treatment, respondents are again asked for their opinion on the respective issue and prompted to evaluate the candidate in the light of the argument made. These questions use the same wording and scales as the pre-treatment questions. We randomize whether respondents are first asked about their opinion on the issue or their opinion on the candidate. While asked these questions, respondents could still see the candidate profiles and the arguments. Screenshots for two candidates and the two outcome questions are displayed in Figure 1.

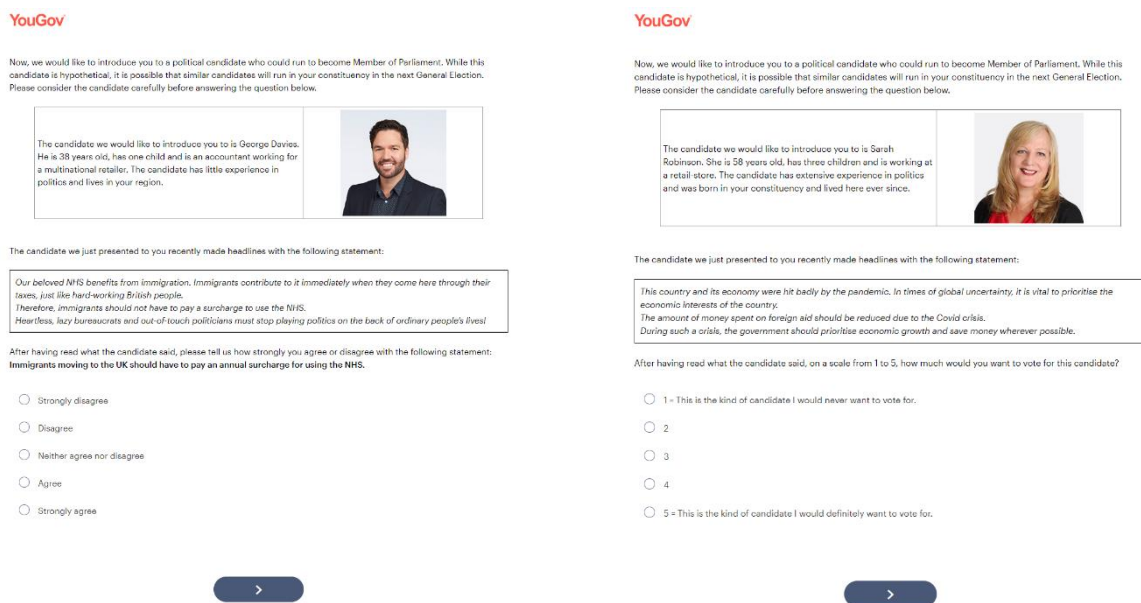


Figure 1: Screenshots of the main survey page (the order in which post-treatment questions were displayed was randomized)

### 4.4 Estimation Strategy

We elicit voters' candidate evaluations and their position on the issue before and after the statement to assess the effect of the populist argument (pre/post design). We thus have two outcome variables: First, we are interested in the persuasion effects of populist arguments, i.e. the within-individual change in issue preferences from pre- to post-treatment. Second, we are interested in the candidate re-evaluation effects of populist arguments, i.e. the within-individual change in candidate evaluations from pre- to post-treatment. For both outcomes we are interested in the relative effect of populist statements in comparison to non-populist statements, holding constant the substantive issue the argument deals with and which side of

that issue the argument presented was on. The statement as main treatment thereby randomly varies in whether it contains populist rhetoric and in the candidate's position on the issue.

Our estimation strategy follows the recommendation by Gerber and Green (2012) to model the post-treatment outcome with the pre-treatment outcome being a control variable in a simple regression analysis. This approach produces more precise estimates than a simple "difference in means" estimator that neglects information about the pre-treatment outcome as well as the "difference in differences" estimator that uses the difference between post-treatment and pre-treatment outcome as dependent variable. Repeated measures designs like ours are rarely used in survey experiments, as some scholars worry about their propensity to create demand effects or consistency pressures. However, Clifford et al. (2021) find very little evidence that these fears are valid, concluding that "conventional wisdom has been too conservative" (1061) in regard to survey experiments using repeated measures. By including the pre-treatment outcome as a right-hand-side variable we enable the regression models to flexibly determine their importance for predicting the outcomes (i.e., we do not constrain their regression parameter to 1 as the "difference in differences" estimator would). This is particularly important given that our outcome variables are measured on limited scales, where some regression to the mean is inevitable as pre-treatment outcomes at the scale extremes cannot become more extreme post-treatment. We refer to this strategy as analyzing average "changes" and "shifts". What we mean by this are changes, net of the general pattern of regression to the mean, that we observe by conditioning on the pre-treatment measures of the same variable.<sup>7</sup> Since we include arguments for nine different issues in this experiment, the observations in our data are clustered. We present jackknife standard errors by policy issues to account for potential issue-level heterogeneity.

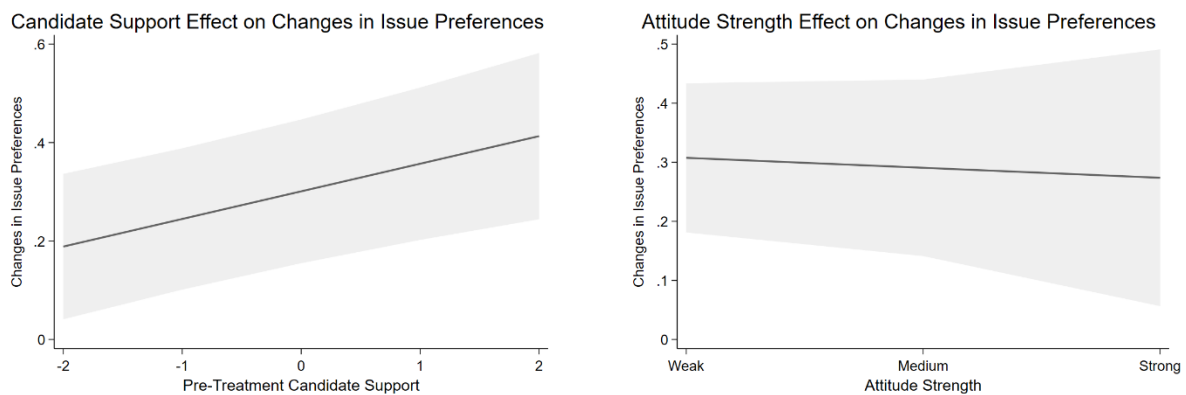
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<sup>7</sup> For the exact model specifications please refer to the Pre-Analysis Plan in Appendix B.

## 5. Results

### 5.1 Persuasion Effects

First, we inspect whether our survey prompts provoked the responses we predicted in the absence of populist rhetoric, which serves as a manipulation check. From pre- to post-treatment, respondents' issue preferences on average changed 0.49 units on a five-point scale (ranging from -2 to 2) in either direction. The standard deviation of the change is 0.84. Participants did not simply repeat their pre-treatment responses. As the left panel in Figure 2 shows, we find that higher pre-treatment candidate support predicts greater persuasive power of an argument (holding the argument direction fixed) (see table 6, Appendix A). However, we find little evidence that arguments on issues that we expected respondents to have strong priors on are less persuasive than arguments on issues that we expected respondents to have weak priors on holding the argument direction constant (right panel Figure 2, see table 7 in Appendix A).



*Figure 2: The average effects of candidate support and attitude strength across treatment and control. The argument direction is fixed at 1. Predictions of post-treatment issue preference based on models 6 and 7 in Appendix A; 95% confidence intervals as shaded areas, constructed from standard errors Jackknifed by policy issue.*

Next, we consider the persuasion effects of populist rhetoric (i.e. their ability to change respondents' issue preferences). We do not find a statistically significant difference between populist and non-populist arguments. Averaging across all issues and all candidates, we observe that populist arguments are equally successful in changing respondents' issue preferences. In Table 4 below, the *Argument Direction* coefficient captures the baseline

persuasion effect for non-populist arguments and the interaction effect of *Treatment\*Direction* reveals the additional effect of an argument being populist rather than non-populist. This interaction coefficient is close to zero and statistically insignificant: populist and non-populist arguments have similar persuasive effects on issue positions.

	(1)
	Issue Preferences $t_1$
Treatment * Direction	0.001 (0.029)
Argument Direction	0.091* (0.039)
Issue Preferences $t_0$	0.669*** (0.016)
Intercept	0.007 (0.043)
<i>N</i>	8890
$R^2$	0.463
adj. $R^2$	0.462

Standard errors Jackknifed by policy issues in parentheses

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

Table 4: The persuasion effect of populist arguments

Next, we assess whether the populist argument effect varies conditional on pre-treatment candidate support. We want to assess whether candidates who are supported by respondents pre-treatment are more successful in changing their issue preferences when employing populist arguments than equally liked candidates who make non-populist arguments. Indeed, we do find evidence for heterogeneity conditional on pre-treatment candidate support (see left panel of Figure 3). Populist arguments made by candidates who receive strong pre-treatment support are more persuasive than non-populist arguments made by equally supported candidates and populist arguments made by candidates who receive little pre-treatment support are less persuasive than non-populist arguments (*ceteris paribus*). By using populist rhetoric candidates appear to particularly persuade voters that already support them, whereas they are less persuasive with voters that do not already support them, compared to using non-populist rhetoric (see table 8 in Appendix A).

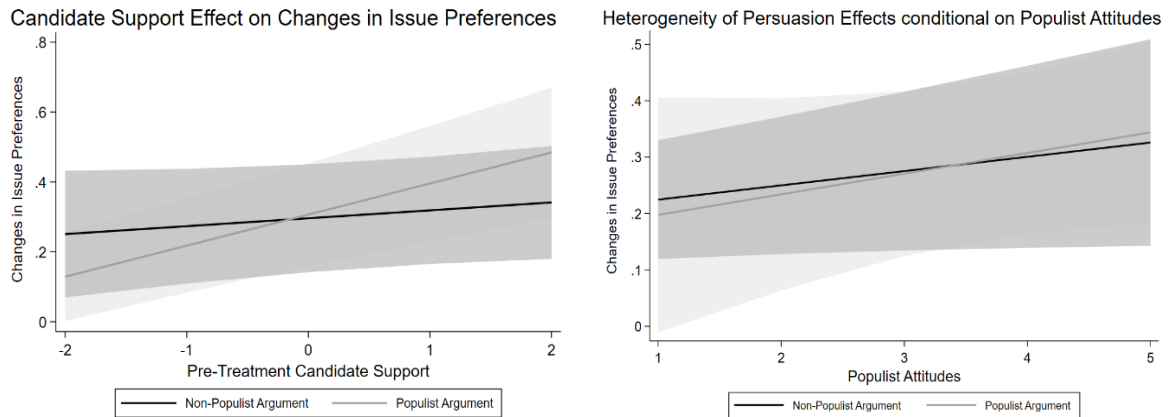
Hence, populist arguments are “polarizing” as they have more varied effects depending on how voters perceive the politician who makes the populist argument. This suggests that the power of populist arguments lies in mobilizing and appealing to own supporters rather than

persuading other voters. The importance of this finding becomes particularly apparent when comparing it to the heterogeneity in treatment effects based upon populist attitudes among voters, which we measure through the pre-treatment populist attitudes battery (see right panel of Figure 3). To do so, we interact an equal-weights index of our measure with the treatment. We do not observe any heterogeneity conditional on the presence of populist attitudes in voters (see table 12, Appendix A). Even among voters who tend to share populist views, populist arguments are not more persuasive, when marginalizing over different levels of pretreatment candidate support.<sup>8</sup> This suggests that the persuasive power of populist arguments is primarily a function of voters' approval of the politician making the argument, rather than varying propensity to respond to populist rhetoric across the population.<sup>9</sup> Finally, we inspect whether the persuasion effects of populist arguments are moderated by the familiarity and salience of the issue the argument deals with. Holding all else constant, we do not find evidence that the persuasion effects of populist arguments vary conditional on the strength of prior attitudes (strong, medium or weak as operationalized in our Pre-Analysis Plan) that respondents have on the respective issue (see table 10, Appendix A). The treatment effects appear constant across all issues included in this experiment (see table 11, Appendix A).

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<sup>8</sup> These results are robust to different specifications of the populist attitudes measure (see table 13, Appendix A).

<sup>9</sup> Some work has highlighted the importance of "charisma" for populist leadership (e.g. McDonnell, 2016), we explore whether there are certain attributes, including being male, white, or experience that could explain candidate support as well as the persuasiveness of populist arguments. However, we do not find heterogeneous treatment effects for any of these attributes (see table 9 in Appendix A). This underscores that the persuasiveness of populist arguments seems to depend on how voters view a certain candidate rather than on certain candidate characteristics.



*Figure 3: The effects of pre-treatment candidate support and populist attitudes. The argument direction is fixed at 1. Predictions of post-treatment issue preference based on models 8 and 12 in Appendix A; 95% confidence intervals as shaded areas, constructed from standard errors Jackknifed by policy issue.*

In summary, we do find evidence for a link between candidate support and the persuasive power of populist arguments. Candidates who are supported pre-treatment are more successful in changing respondents' issue preferences when making an argument in a populist way while disliked candidates are particularly unsuccessful in changing respondents' preferences when talking in populist terms. The persuasive power of populist arguments therefore seems to be a function of candidate support. While we do not find much evidence that would suggest that candidates can persuade large parts of the electorate by engaging in populist rhetoric, they might be able to build support for their issue positions by persuading those who already view them favorably.

## 5.2 Candidate Re-Evaluation Effects

The second, direct route for populist arguments to influence candidates' electoral performance is by changing a candidate's appeal. Whereas populist arguments might not be particularly successful in changing voters' preferences about issues, they might affect how voters' view the politician making a populist argument. We conceptualize this route as candidate re-evaluation effects. Averaging across treatment and control conditions, we observe stronger candidate re-evaluation effects than persuasion effects in this experiment. On average, respondents change their opinion on a candidate by 0.75 units on a 5-point scale in either direction. Given a pre-treatment standard deviation of 0.89 this average movement between

pre-treatment and post-treatment is large. One likely reason that the candidate re-evaluation effect is greater than the persuasion effect is that the arguments in our experiment deal with a *real* political issue while the candidates are *hypothetical*. Respondents should be more willing to change their evaluation of a hypothetical candidate than their preference on a real issue.

We find that candidates who make an argument that is aligned with respondents' preferences get re-evaluated positively while candidates who make arguments that are not aligned with respondents' preferences get penalized (left panel Figure 4). This serves as a manipulation check and shows that respondents correctly link candidates with issue statements and update their candidate preferences in a sensible manner. As with persuasion effects, we do not find evidence that arguments on issues that respondents have strong priors for make respondents change their candidate evaluations more than arguments on issues that respondents have medium or weak priors for (right panel Figure 4).

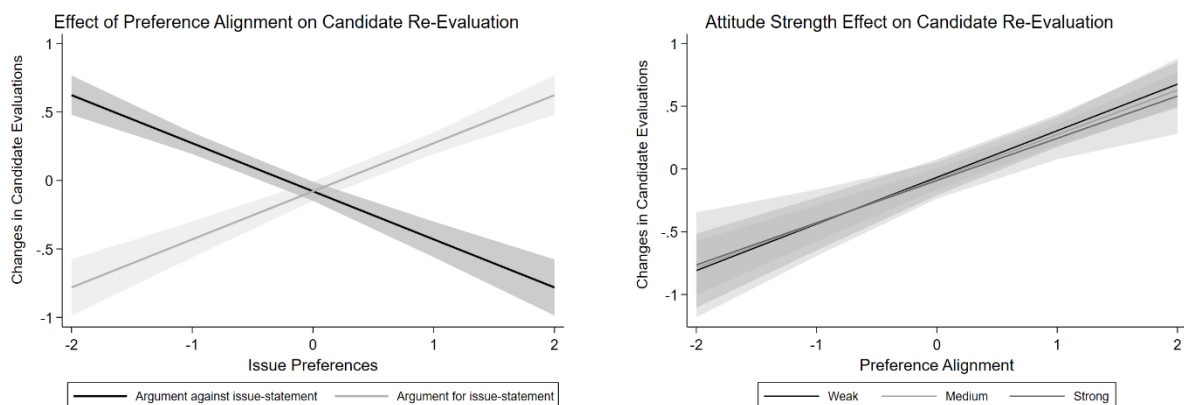


Figure 4: The average effects of preference alignment (argument direction \* pre-treatment issue preferences) and attitude strength. Predictions of post-treatment candidate evaluations based on models 14 and 15 in Appendix A; 95% confidence intervals as shaded areas, constructed from standard errors Jackknifed by policy issue.

Our main interest is to assess whether populist arguments have systematically different candidate re-evaluation effects than non-populist arguments. Averaging across all conditions, we find that candidates who make a populist argument are re-evaluated more negatively than candidates who make a non-populist argument. The *Treatment* coefficient in Table 5 shows that while this effect is relatively small (-0.06), it is significant. This demonstrates that populist

arguments are a risky strategy for candidates and that employing such rhetoric can hurt candidates on average. While the results from some previous studies have indicated that populist rhetoric may only have positive effects on subgroups of voters (Bakker et al., 2016 & 2021; Bos et al., 2013), in our design even the average effect across the entire voting population is significantly negative. This resonates with some recent work on the populist supply side that investigates under what conditions politicians engage in populist rhetoric and stresses the considerable risks of the populist rhetorical strategy (Dai & Kustov, 2022; Gennaro et al., 2019; Levy et al., 2020). This literature argues that some parts of the electorate are demobilized by populist rhetoric because they shy away from candidates who engage in such rhetoric. Our results provide further evidence for such a mechanism showing that populist arguments can backfire electorally.

	(1) Candidate Evaluation $t_1$
Treatment	-0.066* (0.027)
Candidate Evaluation $t_0$	0.489*** (0.020)
Intercept	0.037 (0.042)
$N$	8890
$R^2$	0.197
adj. $R^2$	0.197

Standard errors Jackknifed by policy issues in parentheses

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

Table 5: Candidate re-evaluation effect of populist arguments

Next, we explore whether this average negative effect of populist rhetoric varies conditional on the alignment between the position advocated for in the argument and the pre-treatment preferences. One might think that voters are willing to tolerate populist arguments if they propose a policy that they agree with. Or, vice versa, it seems plausible, that voters are particularly willing to penalize a candidate who uses populist arguments to advocate a policy that they do not agree with. However, we do not find evidence for such an interaction. This indicates that populist rhetoric is indeed a potentially problematic strategy that even under otherwise favorable conditions is not particularly useful for improving candidate re-evaluation (see table 16, Appendix A).



Next, we assess whether the effect of populist arguments on candidate re-evaluation is moderated by whether respondents typically hold strong or weak attitudes on the issue. We seek to understand whether issues that we assume voters to have strong priors on (those that are salient and familiar) are more suitable for populist arguments than issues that we assume voters to have weak priors on (those that are unfamiliar and technical). However, when using the pre-registered classification of issues, we do not find any evidence for heterogeneity by assumed attitude strength (see table 17, Appendix A) or across the different issues tested (see table 18, Appendix A).

Finally, we analyze heterogeneity in treatment effects conditional on respondents' populist attitudes. Given that populist arguments – on average – were shown to have negative candidate re-evaluation effects, we seek to understand whether these effects vary between different segments of the electorate. We find that the effect of populist arguments on respondents' candidate re-evaluation is indeed moderated by the extent to which the respective respondent holds populist beliefs (see table 19, Appendix A)<sup>10</sup>. Candidates who make populist arguments get penalized the most by respondents with less populist attitudes whereas respondents with pronounced populist attitudes do not penalize candidates for making populist arguments (see Figure 5). In fact, the conditional effects for candidate re-evaluation among those with very strong populist attitudes (approx. 18 % of the sample) are estimated as slightly positive under the linear model we use. These results should be interpreted with caution: they show that voters with less populist attitudes clearly and substantially penalize candidates who make populist arguments, but there is some uncertainty whether those with strong populist attitudes slightly reward or are neutral with respect to populist versus non-populist arguments.

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<sup>10</sup> For alternative specifications of the populist attitudes measure see table 20, Appendix A.

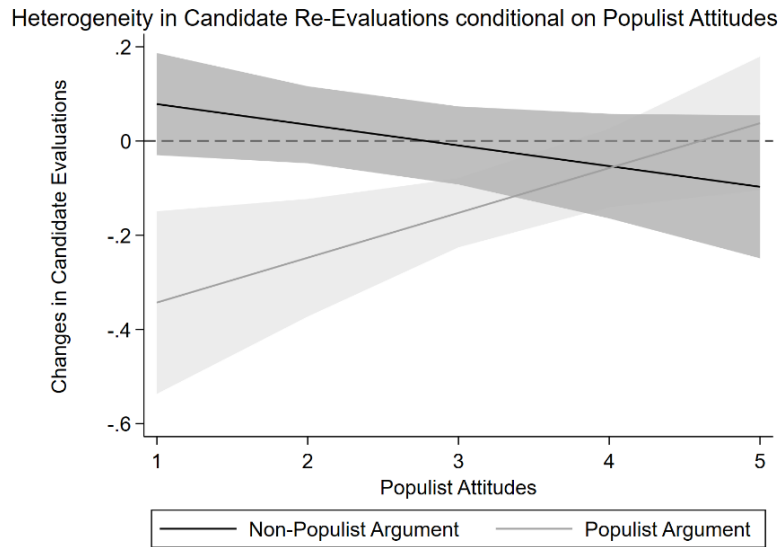


Figure 5: Heterogeneous re-evaluation effects for candidates making populist arguments conditional on populist attitudes of respondents. Predictions of post-treatment candidate evaluations based on model 19 in Appendix A; 95% confidence intervals as shaded areas, constructed from standard errors Jackknifed by policy issue.

## 6. Discussion

The core findings from this survey experiment are that the persuasion and candidate re-evaluation effects of populist arguments are limited and conditional. On average, across the various conditions tested, populist arguments have neither stronger persuasion nor stronger candidate re-evaluation effects than non-populist arguments. The persuasion effects of populist arguments vary substantially by candidate support. Candidates with high pre-treatment support are the most successful in changing respondents' preferences by talking populist, candidates with little support are the least successful. We conclude that populist arguments are somewhat "polarizing" along the lines of candidate support. They have different effects depending on how voters perceive the politician who makes the populist argument. We interpret this as evidence that the power of populist arguments is to mobilize and appeal to supporters rather than to persuade other voters.

At the same time, the results with respect to candidate re-evaluation indicate that candidates who make populist arguments get penalized by most respondents. We observe important variation in these effects conditional upon the extent to which the respective respondent holds populist attitudes: Candidates making a populist argument are primarily penalized by

respondents who hold less populist attitudes while those with strong populist attitudes do not penalize them and might even reward them. So, even if politicians should fear being penalized by most voters for using populist arguments, they might be able to appeal to a certain subset of the electorate by engaging in populist rhetoric. This demonstrates that populist arguments are certainly not a one-size-fits-all solution for candidates to improve their electoral fortunes, they are rather useful for appealing to particular subsets of the electorate at the risk of alienating the majority.

These results make three important contributions to the understanding of the role of populist arguments in populist candidates' success. First, previous scholarly work has found populist arguments, amongst other factors, to matter for blame attribution, group identities, and societal outgroups. While these factors undoubtedly have downstream effects on the electoral success of populist candidates, we contribute by showing a more direct link between populist arguments and the electoral performance of political candidates. Second, by showing that populist attitudes moderate the appeal of populist arguments, we also contribute to the literature that is concerned with the measurement of populist attitudes in voters (e.g. Akkerman et al., 2014; Castanho Silva et al., 2019, 2020). The results of this experiment demonstrate that populist attitudes of citizens matter for candidate evaluation – but not issue persuasion – and that measuring these attitudes is thus an important endeavor. To the best of our knowledge, we are the first ones to show that populist attitudes matter for voters' perceptions of candidates who make populist arguments and thus add to a literature that so far was primarily concerned with how certain character traits, such as low agreeableness, moderate the effects of populist messages. Third, our results matter for observational research on the presence of populist rhetoric in elite discourse too. Recent work has argued that politicians engage in populist rhetoric selectively (Dai & Kustov, 2022) due to the (assumed) serious risks associated with such rhetoric (Gennaro et al., 2019; Levy et al., 2020). We show that such risks exist and that politicians ought to be careful when and how they engage in populist arguments. We show that for most voters, populist arguments are either equally or less persuasive and appealing than non-populist arguments. This also demonstrates why populist

rhetoric in most countries is particularly present among the discourse of smaller radical parties and less common among the discourse of mainstream parties which appeal to wide electorates.

Although our experimental design allows us to isolate the effects of populist arguments and to identify *some* mechanisms of populist arguments, our design choices naturally involve limitations. We randomize, for example, the attributes of the candidates who make populist arguments. However, populist candidates in reality are more likely to have some attributes than others. Similarly for issues and positions: we present populist arguments on various issues although in practice populist arguments will be more common for some of these than for others. We also do not manipulate how radical the positions promoted in the arguments are. To us, the benefits of isolating the effects of populist rhetoric or “thin populism” from these factors that they are enmeshed with in real life outweigh the potential disadvantages for the purposes of this study. While political scientists could assess the combined effects of populist arguments and radical positions on certain issues observationally, it is impossible to separate these different elements without an experiment. We therefore see the isolation of populist rhetoric from its potential confounders as a strength of this research design rather than as a shortcoming.

Several directions for future research are suggested by our results, or by considering alternative design choices that we did not adopt. First, given that the persuasion effects of populist arguments vary conditional on pre-treatment candidate support it is worth asking if there are specific attributes that enable candidates to persuade with populist arguments. In addition to those tested here, future research should investigate whether there is something like a populist archetype due to party membership, the profile of a politician as an “outsider”, or the adoption of radical policy positions. Second, the heterogeneity in treatment effects for candidate re-evaluation based on populist attitudes raises the question of what causes such populist attitudes. Tracing populist attitudes back towards their possible political, economic, cultural, or psychological roots will help understand where the demand for populism in democratic party competition comes from. Third, this experiment has tested the effects of “thin

populism”. While this is the core defining feature of populist arguments, it is certainly not the only element that makes populist rhetoric stand out. Previous research has described populist rhetoric for instance as particularly emotional and aggressive (Widmann, 2021), simple (McDonnell & Ondelli, 2020) and backwards oriented (Elçi, 2022). It is thus important to assess how these elements interact with “thin populism” in the rhetoric of populist politicians.

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