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Populism in Perception: A conceptual and methodological model of  
psychological traits, political attitudes and evaluations of leaders

ΔΙΠΛΩΜΑΤΙΚΗ ΕΡΓΑΣΙΑ

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## Abstract

This study investigates how citizens perceive populist political communication, placing emphasis on the role of rhetorical style, discrete emotions, and individual ideological predispositions in shaping attribution of “populist” labels. Drawing on theoretical advances in political psychology and recent critiques of populism research, it adopts a receiver-centred framework that treats populism as a rhetorical style, rather than a fixed ideological category. A 3x2 (ideological content: left, centre, right) × (rhetorical style: populist, neutral) within-subjects experimental design exposed participants (N = 33) to six short vignettes portraying fictional politicians. After each vignette, participants rated perceived populism and reported levels of anger and anxiety. Additionally, individual differences in populist attitudes and left–right self-placement were measured.

Results revealed that rhetorical style was the strongest and most consistent predictor of perceived populism across all ideological conditions. Populist phrasing (characterised by anti-elitism and people-centrism) significantly increased perceived populism relative to neutral, ideologically similar messages. Emotional responses showed weaker effects: anger displayed a modest positive association with populist perceptions, whereas anxiety had no consistent impact. In particular, populist attitudes failed to predict lower attribution of populism, raising potential concerns about conceptual overlap and measurement tautology. These findings offer empirical support for treating populism as a perceived stylistic signal rather than a stable ideological programme, and for integrating message-level and receiver-level factors in its study. Theoretically, the results align with interactionist approaches to political perception, highlighting the need to reconsider how populism is operationalised and recognised by the diverse, individualised and complex entities that make up 'the people'.

**Keywords:** populism, individual differences, attitudes, emotions, vignette

## 1. Introduction

Populism remains a contested signifier that attracts attention precisely because it promises more than it delivers. The post-2016 surge in interest did not resolve first-order disagreements; it amplified them. What counts as populism, what does not, and why that boundary matters, are still under dispute. The centre of gravity in empirical work has shifted toward an ideational definition, less because it has superior validity than because it is simple, falsifiable, and convenient. By contrast, strategy- and identification-based accounts travel well in theory yet buckle at the point of measurement. The result is a field that turns on a slippery construct: hard to define without tautology, hard to measure without leakage, and hard to distinguish from adjacent logics such as nativism or anti-establishment sentiment.

The consequences are methodological and substantive. At the level of validity, the literature struggles simultaneously with content coverage, conceptual separation with other topics, and ecological validity and translatability, both within, and across fields (Rooduijn, 2019). In short, several issues shine through from the get-go. For one, coding texts from leaders confronts metaphor-heavy discourse, as shown by Brugman et al.' (2020) meta analysis, whereby more than 27% of political speech is figurative and metaphorical. Second, measures drift across languages and contexts, which is seen in attempted formation of scales (e.g. populist attitudes) to vary significantly across cultures. Third, to avoid binary conceptualisation of populist-non populist, fuzzy-set solutions attempt to create 'degrees' of populism but end up appointing absolute scores (0 and 1) to some leaders, whilst appointing other leaders who exhibit populism in distinctive ways the same scores. Fourth, the literature and inevitably surrounding debate, is focused on an experimental bias of 'winners', i.e. people who have or are currently employing 'successful' populism, limiting the ability to pinpoint the conditions of its success and failure.

These problems do not simply slow progress, but make it difficult to say with confidence what populism explains and what it merely labels. This project attempts to hold that impasse as not a mere critique, but its point of departure. It aims to ask, first, what populism is, and how it is viewed or evaluated as such, not only by the academic community, but by the lay person, in empirical terms. Second, it attempts to observe definitional debates and contents against their offerings in terms of validity, adopting a lens that holds a multifaceted, empirical, but also

well-rounded conception of the term - both at the recipient and agent level. Third, it aims to extend how the concept, as currently used, can expand its central place in empirical inquiry through attempting to clarify the roots of the construct and the routes by which it enters social scientific data, primarily from the field of psychology.

This attempt is situated in a time where populism continues to circulate as a highly visible but methodologically fragile concept. The term has migrated from specialist debates into public and media discourse, and yet the central questions persist. Is populism best treated as a thin ideology centred on people-centrism and anti-elitism, as a political strategy of personalistic mobilisation, as a discursive construction of antagonism, or as a socio-cultural performance that signals proximity to “ordinary people” (Mudde, 2004; Weyland, 2001; Laclau, 2005; Ostiguy, 2017). Recent work has certainly clarified parts of this picture, although it also suggests that no single lens secures definition, measurement, and distinction from adjacent constructs at the same time. Consequently, the present dissertation is situated at the junction where conceptual progress meets measurement constraints. It takes seriously the advances made in political science and communication, while arguing that further integration with political psychology could provide a more credible path from rhetoric to reception by “the people”.

Within this frame, the dissertation could be read as a bridge between supply- and demand-side analyses. On the one hand, it builds on evidence that citizens often rely on rhetorical signals—people-centrism and anti-elitism—to classify a leader as populist, whereas biographical features and social profiles tend to matter less once language is held constant (Casiraghi, Curini, & Nai, 2024). On the other hand, it moves reception to the centre by asking how those cues are recognised and evaluated by audiences with different lenses and dispositions.

Two psychological components seem especially relevant. First, discrete emotions are not interchangeable. Event-based evidence indicates that anxiety may weaken reliance on prior commitments and open attention to new information, whereas anger may consolidate existing preferences and channel judgment along disposition-consistent paths when measured immediately after exposure (Vasilopoulos, Marcus, & Foucault, 2018). These findings would suggest that anger and anxiety should be treated separately and time-locked to stimuli if scholars wish to make claims about how populist rhetoric works. Second, ideology appears to operate not merely as a position on a left–right line but as a lens through which citizens interpret past and near-future trajectories. Rigoli’s recent work implies that such appraisals and lenses may reinforce one another, which

would, in turn, shape how the same message is read across audiences (Rigoli, 2024). Consequently, ideology would be better modelled as a moderator of recognition and affect, rather than folded into the definition of populism itself.

A further step, which is conceptually modest but methodologically useful, is to distinguish style from programme. Ostiguy's socio-cultural axis of "high" and "low" suggests that the register and performance of closeness to "the people" may cut across left, centre, and right shells (Ostiguy, 2017). This distinction could make content more portable, since style may be varied while policy signals are held constant or explicitly crossed. It would also help guard against the common tendency to infer populism directly from issue content. In practical terms, such a separation would allow the dissertation to test whether respondents recognise populism primarily from style cues and then to examine how ideology and emotion condition that recognition and subsequent evaluation.

A tightly bound case study of Fidias can serve as a complementary bridge between established, supply-side accounts of populism and the receiver-side, psychologically informed approach developed in this dissertation. Traditional analyses have concentrated on how leaders campaign as populists. Much less is known about how populist repertoires are adapted when leaders attempt to govern. Fidias' move to package "direct democracy" through a party-based app—where selection and decision-making are pushed to the crowd—offers a concrete setting in which campaign style meets institutional constraint - and also, a prime example of populism in governance. It is a rare opportunity to observe an attempted translation of low-style proximity to "the people" into an organisational and procedural design, rather than keeping it at the level of rally rhetoric. Whilst data and progress of his attempt is primitive yet, it offers a clear direction for future exploration.

## **1.1 Theoretical Framework**

Despite its wide circulation in public discourse and academic literature, populism remains conceptually fragile and methodologically dispersed. As Rooduijn (2019) critically observes, populism research suffers from a tendency to isolate itself from adjacent literatures in political psychology, sociology, and communication. Nonetheless, this self-referential loop produces a situation where populism is studied as a standalone entity, without adequate attention to its overlap with other constructs or its interpretation by individuals. As a result, two fundamental issues follow: the empirical study of populism is often detached from the behavioural sciences, or at least their

integration remains primitive and exploratory. On the other hand, its definitional vagueness extends to inconsistent measurement, threatening the validity of the concept itself across a variety of social statistics and research methods standards.

Rooduijn's (2014, 2019) contribution to the literature follows in some ways a consequential adherence to Mudde's (2004) widespread definition of populism as a strategy, whilst also acknowledging the multifaceted components that are observed in the discursive approach brought up by Laclau (2005) but also, following conceptions of populism as as a performative (Panizza, 2005; Weyland, 2001) and sociocultural process (Ostiguy, 2017). Critically, his critique, situated amidst the frenzy that surrounded the term in 2018, echoes until today, and remains relevant despite some admittedly important steps in research conception.

First, Rooduijn (2019) identifies the imbalance between supply- and demand-side approaches. Much of the field's energy has been spent analysing leaders, discourses, and strategies—while the psychological mechanisms by which citizens receive and evaluate populist cues remain underexplored. Second, he points out that populism is frequently operationalised in ways that lack discriminant validity, rendering it indistinct from related concepts such as nationalism, nativism, or political cynicism. These limitations challenge the usefulness of populism as an explanatory variable and call for a research agenda that reintegrates populism within broader frameworks of political and psychological behaviour. This study responds to that call by modelling populism not as a fixed attribute, but as an interpreted meaning, filtered through psychological traits and cultural contexts.

In line with this emphasis, Ostiguy's (2017) socio-cultural framework introduces a vertical dimension to political competition, highlighting the "high" vs "low" axis as a lens through which leaders and messages are perceived. This axis captures not only rhetorical and stylistic elements, but the cultural performances of authenticity, emotional accessibility and general proximity to "the people." Frankly, it translates to a prescription of populism as a performance situated in language and mannerism, which reflect a person that appears to communicate as an 'equal' to the commoner, without attempting to provide authoritative or 'know-it-all' attitudes.

Ostiguy's framework adds a vertical socio-cultural axis of high and low that sits alongside the usual left-right map. High refers to elite coded ways of speaking and presenting, such as formality, technocratic distance, and deference to institutions. Low refers to closeness to ordinary people, such as colloquial language, informality, norm breaking performances, bodily display, and open affronts

to decorum. Because this axis is about style and social positioning rather than policy content, it is able to ‘travel’ across parties and national contexts more easily than other definitions - even though it might be an ‘exhaustive’ all encompassing theory that fails to fully ‘pinpoint’ populism in a testable way. Yet, through this view, populism can be understood as low style identity work, a performed closeness to the people, an antagonism toward elites, and a willingness to trespass the boundaries of polite politics, regardless of whether the programmatic shell is left, centre, or right.

As a result, it allows conceptual frameworks that test for populism as integrated within broader ideology, both at the leader and follower level. This separation protects the construct from drifting, keeps boundaries with adjacent ideas intact, and preserves the visible tension between left and right. The same low style can appear on different parts of the left right spectrum, and we can study those differences concurrently and in conjunction. Ultimately, the upside is an arguably higher ecological validity and construct validity, with populism holding components of its most widely used, ideational definition, whilst also appreciating the

Seen this way, the separation of a vertical style axis from a horizontal ideological axis as given by Ostiguy’s theorem, also strengthens empirical capacity of populism as a concept and more so, as a variable. Specifically, it helps avoid the common mistake of reading populism directly off left-right positions based on the topic (immigration, corruption, feudalism etc.) As a result, it makes it possible to design studies that vary populist style while holding the ideological shell steady or explicitly crossing it. This is particularly relevant in audience focused research, as it prompts researchers to situate it alongside its neighbouring elements, and test whether people recognise populism from style cues, and then how prior ideology and emotion shape that recognition and any post-stimulus judgments.

Whereas Rooduijn and Ostiguy provide macro-level critiques and reconstructions of populism theory, a growing body of empirical work has tried to localise populist support by looking at specific historical and cultural contexts.. Which will be further expanded below, converge on a key insight: populism might not be a universally coherent phenomenon, but a flexible interpretive frame that gains power when it fits the emotional, psychological, and cultural logic of a given audience. The implication is that, the moment we attempt to create a measurement model that treats populism as a singular, essential attribute—as a party, an ideology, or a set of words—we will always struggle to explain its diffusion, variation, or impact.

By contrast, a model that treats populism as a person-situation interaction can account for both its cross-cultural variation and its intra-societal heterogeneity. Yet, it might lead to creating overly descriptive, prescriptive or simply correlational models that suggest relationships, but which do not hierarchise them, and critically, do not inform the literatures of those concepts that they refer to. This is particularly relevant, when situating populist evaluations and perceptions in a relational model, essentially following Roodjuin's (2019) critique and trying to bridge the relationships with concepts from adjacent literatures.

Particularly within psychological and sociological study, where this project largely lies, modelling of differently leveled concepts needs to hierarchise components logically - from pattern, to episode. Specifically, if we are to test perceptions of populism or radicality or any type of political action from the receiver's standpoint, it is pivotal to conceptualise this person's propensity towards those emotions in question (i.e. personality and ideological tendencies) that essentially describe the person's tendencies 'across' contexts. Within that, we can attempt to elaborate on the relationship with other variables in shaping this individual level mechanism, in a way that both borrows and contributes to psychological understanding - and not remaining adjacent from applied psychological literature.

It is the aforementioned fuzziness that the present research seeks to interrogate. Not by offering yet another redefinition, but by empirically probing how populism is perceived, identified, or over-extended as a label in individual cognition and political judgement. In doing so, we also hope to test the limits of current operationalisations. For instance, while Mudde's ideational approach emphasises the dichotomous moral division between "the pure people" and "the corrupt elite," it leaves open questions regarding the role of context, affect, and personality in shaping the resonance or rejection of such framings. Similarly, Weyland's strategic definition may describe what leaders do, but remains limited in capturing what followers see. Critically, little is provided in separating the fundamental characteristics and how they differ regarding the 'agent' of populism, particularly whether they are in government, an elected official or attempting to gain power through campaigning.

In part, this is an initial layout of the struggle that renders populism research as hostage to the need of continuously defining, pin-pointing, and reframing populism in accordance to the spotlight that any researcher wishes to utilise. Nonetheless, if populist meaning is co-constructed between message and mind, then we must examine not only the content of political messages, but the

predispositions, beliefs, and affective states of those interpreting them. Such an approach respects the theoretical pluralism of the field while offering empirical leverage to answer a central question: what makes a message populist—for whom, and under what conditions?

At this junction, lies the theoretical wedge that grounds this dissertation: to examine populism not as a political essence but as a perceptual attribution. This study takes seriously the idea that populism may be as much a perceived phenomenon as a real one. As such, clear questions remain: Who is the agent of populism? How are they delivering this ‘populism’? Are they campaigning, leading a party - and is that party new?- leading a single-movement, or act as an elected official? Is it populism to even ‘think’ like a populist? If yes, how does that change how one feels, thinks and evaluates in response to a populist, or non populist individual?

From there, does that label change because they identify with them in this ingroup-outgroup dichotomy? More specifically, if the leader holds the same ‘ideology’ as the follower, is it logical that they won’t label them as populist and vice versa? How does a rhetorical message affect a person emotionally, and how might that influence their perception of the messenger? How strong is that relationship and how does it relate to pattern-based behaviours of that individual (their personality) or the emotions that are perceived as a result of this rhetoric?

This foundational claim reflects a shift from fixed ideology to dynamic interpretation, from elite signalling to citizen response. The attribution of populism is not simply a decoding of objective content but a process deeply entangled with an individual's cognitive, cultural, and emotional filters. Indeed, as Cohen et al. (2016) argue in their cross-cultural analyses, inter-individual variability is not noise to be controlled but a central site of theoretical insight. People's ideological lenses, motivational states, and behavioural patterns actively shape the perception of rhetoric, including what they recognise as populist.

This is particularly important in today's fragmented media landscape, where mediated perception, algorithmic curation, and identity-based reasoning alter the interface between discourse and interpretation. At the same time, if discourse and leader actions are not elaborated and described, it is unclear what we mean about the ‘agency’ of populism that might just skip our discussion if we leave it unexplored.

## 1.2 Research Rationale and Design

At this point, it might be fruitful to set out a more specific context in which this project intervenes, particularly integrating definitional aspects of populism. First, ideational measures offer parsimony and falsifiability, but they frequently shade into neighbouring notions such as nativism, anti-establishment sentiment, or political cynicism unless those are modelled explicitly (Rooduijn, 2019). Second, discursive and performance-based approaches do yield observable cues, although they can struggle with the metaphor-rich nature of political language and with meaning drift across audiences and languages. Third, set-theoretic solutions have added nuance to classification, while at times recreating hard dichotomies at the extremes. In short, validity problems are not peripheral. They sit close to the heart of why findings may not travel well and why causal accounts sometimes feel under-specified. The first essay of this project documented these difficulties in detail. The present study proceeds by treating them as design prompts rather than barriers.

In any case, Rooduijn's state-of-the-field piece remains a literature benchmark for conceptual validity. Specifically, it warns that researchers too easily fold nativism and Euroscepticism into "populism," and that the field often ignores adjacent literatures that could sharpen hypotheses (Rooduijn, 2019). His prescription appears a bit paradoxical but also sensible. To be specific, the paper prompts researchers to be narrow and precise when defining, classifying and measuring populism, but also to be open and 'ecumenical' when borrowing theory from nearby domains. In practical terms, that means operationalising populism through thin-lined, (people-centrism, anti-elitism) when examining its nature and relationship with other elements. This creates the need for keeping adjacent constructs analytically separate, and in order to understand relationships when 'borrowing' or importing mechanisms (e.g., identity, attitudes, threat) from neighbouring literature.

Rooduijn (2019) also presses for systematic cross-fertilisation—drawing from anti-establishment, polarisation, authoritarianism/far right literatures to generate testable hypotheses about populist dynamics that are relevant, without collapsing the populist concept or creating tautological relationships that are left unexplained or overseen. This "more and less focus" stance is a direct validity standard that the project's design will attempt to follow, as a conceptual map that guides the models around construct boundaries, whilst attempting to build longer theoretical bridges between the political, social and psychological components of populism.

One such example is Casiraghi, Curini and Nai (2003) study where they show that citizens primarily rely on rhetorical cues—anti-elite and people-centric phrasing—to classify a leader as

“populist”, whilst the leader’s biographical attributes matter much less (Casiraghi et al., 2023). This prompts us to appreciate the value of rhetoric in predicting or examining populist labels or degrees of engagement, and that the socioeconomic or background data are not particularly relevant. An even more interesting finding was that the populist respondents (those high in populist attitudes) are less likely to identify populist rhetoric as such. From that, it follows that individuals higher in populist attitudes would view those people exhibiting ‘populist’ rhetoric as less populist, in comparison to people with less salient populist attitudes.

The issue of socioeconomic or biographical background appears to be ‘inconsequential’, in respondents meaning that no sociological data affected the attribution of labelling someone as populist - apart from a slight impact of education. Nonetheless, it is arguable that drawing sociological data into this investigation, as does a significant amount of literature (this study included) does create a sort of ‘recipe’ or ‘profiling’ component within populism debates. Nonetheless, an issue that transcends into the general literature that is situated in Italy, is appreciated as a ‘hard’ case by the authors, who prompt future research to replicate in settings where populism is less endemic, because when populism is rare the political alignment of who “goes populist” likely matters more.

This falls in line with literature suggesting that the psychological reception of populist messages is deeply contingent on both cultural settings and personal dispositions. Cohen’s Culture × Person × Situation framework (2011) posits that no behaviour can be properly understood without considering the interaction of these three forces. In this view, political communication—including populist cues—should be interpreted as a cultural act that interacts with the lived experience, personality traits, and situational appraisal of its audience.

Tight versus loose cultures, for instance, shape how individuals react to norm violations or moral transgressions (Gelfand et al., 2011). In tighter societies, populist messages invoking threat and group-based moral panic may find more traction than in looser societies, where pluralism is more culturally endorsed. However, within any given culture, individuals vary in their responsiveness to such cues. Personality like agreeableness, emotional stability, or authoritarian predispositions modulate the reception of populist messages, potentially shaping both voting behaviour and identity formation.

This cross-cultural and intra-individual sensitivity also demands careful consideration of how populism is operationalised. A message perceived as anti-elitist in one setting may be dismissed as

mere political critique in another. A populist leader who evokes nostalgic rhetoric may appear inspiring to some and regressive to others. Therefore, a one-size-fits-all definition of populism fails to account for the dynamic and contingent nature of its reception.

This is important yet, admittedly hard to capture and account for in terms of sample size, which rendered the attempt of cross-cultural examination outside of the scope of this dissertation. Yet, the approach adopted argues for a constructivist and interactional view, in which populism takes shape only through the mutual constitution of rhetoric, affective states and pattern-based emotions at the episodic but also the pattern-based dimension (ideology, populist attitudes, personality traits)

In any case, the Casiraghi et al. (2023) study forms a basis for the creation of this project, through their methodological and conceptual lens. Within their suggestions for future research, they prompt researchers to examine ideology and how it might moderate the relationship of populist recognition. In doing so, they prompt researchers to leverage conjoint experiments to test whether additional features of politicians and citizens shape identification.

Whilst this line of argument is logical and adopted in this project, there is an additional element that is deemed important. Casiraghi's paper adopts Mudde's ideational lens, suggesting that populism as a concept is thin-lined, yet, a sort of ideology. Nonetheless, the concept of practice "ideology" is handled as left-right placement, without consideration that populist 'attitudes' (which they do measure and reflect on) can at least in part, make up the features of a person's ideology within their 'left-right' placement. As such, no attempt is made to bridge populist ideology/attitudes to general ideology, conceptually, which in turn makes it unclear how the two are to be considered - as fundamentally different and potentially interacting - or as interrelated and concurrent aspects of broader attitudinal and ideological profiling.

Arguably, this risks the very conceptual slippage Rooduijn (2019) warns about: drawing strong inferences about "ideology" from left-right alone while keeping the populist core as a 'rhetorical-only' variable rather than a measurable attitude, or even ideology, as per their own adopted definition. Moreover, it showcases a weak example of the extension of, in this case, very interesting results, back into generalised theory and relevant neighbouring literatures. To this effect, this leaves room for a receiver-side design that separates recognition from evaluation, measures populist attitudes of respondents directly, and tests how left-right orientation and populist attitudes predict the perception of a populist leader, individually and combined, based on both the leader's exhibited ideology (left-centre-right) and populism use (populist vs non populist rhetoric). This is a line of examination that this project aims to follow.

That becomes relevant within our design, when considering that ‘threat’ in terms of political or social outcomes can be a formational component of ideology. Simply put, people across the left-right spectrum will view different components of a political system as threatening, and by extension significant. Interestingly, by assuming the potential of ideological features surrounding populism - and how Casiraghi’s (2023) study showed that populist respondents are less likely to identify populist rhetoric as such - it follows that individuals higher in populist attitudes would view those statements as not necessarily populist (but implicitly, ‘normative’).

What appears to be missing is a receiver-side, hierarchically consistent model that connects rhetoric and cue recognition to immediate emotion and then to leader evaluation based on their rhetoric, without extensive ‘noise’ on the leader, either through information about their background, or by using an existing politician example that respondents inevitably hold variable opinions about that do not have to do with their populism, per se. At the same time, The project aims at treating the chronic conditions of traits/populist attitudes/left-right ideology as moderators of the relationship between emotion and populist recognition - and doing so without treating populism as a pure ideology without experimentally accounting for the fact that populism follows rhetoric with ideological (left-right) political content. As such, this is the literature space that our project attempts to join and inform through the sections that follow.

The conversation is also aimed to be filled through a fruitful content analysis, in guiding future directions of both single-case political actors, and the receiver’s reception in regards to populism, through examining the current and prospected pathway of youtuber-turned-politician, elected MEP Fidias Panayiotou (henceforth, Fidias). The content analysis aims at contextualising the rather experimental, blindly empirical nature of our study by highlighting a current case that can help us further expand on the populism as an outcome that stems from different definitions, either of ideology (Mudde, 2004), strategy (Weyland, 2001) or sociocultural identification process (Ostiguy, 2017).

Critically, the addition offers a background into a space that future research can dissect, by illuminating the current attempt of Fidias to establish political presence through a local party in Cyprus, named and conceptualised as ‘Direct Democracy’. As such, this can help inform and disentangle avenues in separating campaigning, leadership and governance within populism research more succinctly, as the case offers extended public content through social media that

formulate populism as a potentially identifiable, separate avenue of political orientation and ideology.

Instead of treating populism as an inherent property of texts, leaders, or parties, relational approaches theorise populism as a product of resonance—a contextual, affective, and cognitive alignment between political cues and individual minds (Hawkins et al., 2018; Laclau, 2005). This view posits that populism materialises, within and beyond political discourse but fundamentally not only through the discourse content, but in its capacity to be psychologically internalised, and potentially acted upon. It is this moment of internalisation—when a message becomes subjectively meaningful—that becomes central to extending our understanding of populism beyond a binary category, but as a gradient of engagement, and identification.

### 1.3 Past Findings and Literature background

Vasilopoulos, Marcus and Foucault (2018) provide one of the clearest demonstrations that anger and anxiety do different things in politics. Leveraging a two-wave panel around the Charlie Hebdo attacks, they show that anxiety loosens reliance on prior commitments and heightens receptivity to new information, whereas anger tightens reliance on existing preferences and pushes respondents toward disposition-consistent choices. The outcomes are reported distinctly, and the mechanism is easy to grasp: different emotions route attention and judgement along different tracks. The paper’s validity payoff is direct for measurement—anger and anxiety should be captured separately and immediately after exposure, not as a single “negative affect” block.

That said, the design is anchored in a single, highly specific event and speaks most directly to adjacent literatures on **authoritarian** policy endorsement. The scenario’s uniqueness limits generalisability, and the outcome domain is narrow. Nonetheless, the study offers fertile ground for populism research: if discrete emotions systematically shift how people use their priors, then receiver-side designs in populism should time-lock anger and anxiety to messages and treat them as distinct mediators of recognition and evaluation.

At the same time, Rigoli (2024) adds a crucial interpretive layer by showing that ideology colours evaluations of the past and near futures. The evidence indicates that citizens’ standing ideological lens shapes how they read historical reference points and forecast trajectories. Particularly, feelings of ‘nostalgia’ were found in right-leaning ideological respondents, more so

than left-leaning - whilst positive feelings about the future were found more so in left-leaning individuals. In most regards, evaluations of the 'present' were found equally good/bad by people across the political spectrum. Within the evaluations of the present, implications and takeouts included the potential for left leaning ideology to filter appraisals of the present against market dominance and corruption whilst right-leaning individuals to judge the present as 'equally' bad due to culture wars, loss of national identity and traditional values, creating a net-zero difference in evaluation the present. The conceptual implication for this project, as an adjacent topic, is this theoretical feedback loop - whereby ideology filters appraisals, and those appraisals can consolidate the ideological lens. This is a relevant springboard for our design, as ideology will be observed as moderator that may amplify or dampen the same rhetorical cue, in relation to the the content of populism - and the ideological proximity to it.

A seminal study by Abadi, Bertlich, Duyvendak and Fischer (2024) widened the lens regarding affective states even more. Using SEM (Structural Equation Modelling) across 15 European countries with a large sample, they model populist attitudes and nativism side-by-side rather than treating one as a proxy for the other. The multivariate setup is a methodological strength because it enables a clean discriminant test within the same framework. The main finding is straightforward: anger—including an anxiety → anger route—better predicts both populist attitudes and nativism than standard socio-economic or socio-cultural covariates. In plain terms, how angry people feel is more informative than where they sit on many background characteristics. This pattern holds across countries, which bolsters cross-cultural credibility for the emotional pathway.

The paper is equally honest about its limits, and those limits are instructive. Reliability for populist-attitude scales is uneven across countries, suggesting that the construct travels less easily than single-country validations imply; factor loadings and fit can look strong at home yet soften in multi-country data. In addition, the study does not separate left- from right-populism, which matters when style is deployed from different ideological shells. The present project addresses that gap explicitly by orthogonalising style (populist vs non-populist) from shell (left/centre/right) to test whether "who goes populist" changes recognition and affect. Even with these caveats, Abadi et al. (2024) showcase that discrete emotions carry more explanatory weight than socio-structural profiles, and modelling populism alongside a related concept clarifies the picture rather than muddying it, if it conceptualised well.

However, one has to move beyond singular feelings and appraisal and into pattern-based measures, which are able to explain and predict behaviours, thoughts and feelings across time. As

such, at the attitudinal level, Akkerman, Mudde and Zaslove (2014) offer the most used short battery for populist attitudes, separating people-centrism and anti-elitism (with some versions adding “homogeneity of the people”). The results show distinct subdimensions following a Factor Analysis, an acceptable fit, and portability across settings, which offers reasonable ground to justify using the battery as a baseline disposition. A persistent empirical ‘wrinkle’, however, is positive covariation with adjacent dispositions (e.g., elitism in some samples), which raises discriminant questions unless adjacent constructs (notably nativism) are measured and modelled in parallel. Alongside that, as Abadi et al., (2024) note is that cross-country variance is sometimes substantial - hence portability across countries (with differing definitions and societal expectations) might not yield good internal validity of the scale. Nonetheless, it is sufficient for this project to create a culturally ‘uniform’ cohort within which populist attitudes will be measured.

Importantly, when looking at attitudes and patterns of behaviours, personality research helps to situate who is more likely to endorse these attitudes and how ideology shapes reception - importantly, across situations. Importantly, studies using the Big-5 (Costa & Mcrae, 1989) find that Openness tends to associate with more liberal/left self-placement, whereas the opposite is true for Conscientiousness which often associates with right-of-centre positions (Carney, Jost, Gosling, & Potter, 2008; Gerber, Huber, Doherty, Dowling, & Ha, 2010). In part, both are expected, as Openness translates to willingness to explore new ideas, cultures and types of people, whereas Conscientiousness relates largely to orderliness and the need to have predictable outcomes in order to feel safe.

Particular to populist rhetoric, additional work links lower Agreeableness and lower Openness to stronger endorsement of populist claims, regardless of ideology (Bakker, Rooduijn, & Schumacher, 2016). As such, attitudes and traits appear to showcase significant relationships yet it is less specific how populist attitudes and specific traits ‘within’ the respondent produce compounding effect, whether in yielding/strengthening specific emotions, or affecting the view towards populist claims. This is an area that is fruitful for exploration, in understanding both the potential for recognising cues as populist based on that compounding effect, but also, in admitting agreement with populist/non populist cues.

A complementary way to organise personality in this debate is through the social-evaluative Big Two of agency and communion, long treated as fundamental content dimensions of how people judge targets and present themselves. Agency denotes competence, assertiveness and goal pursuit; communion denotes warmth, morality and affiliation (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007; Abele &

Wojciszke, 2014). These map closely onto the competence–warmth architecture in social cognition (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2008) and can be approximated from the Big Five: agency loads positively on Extraversion and Conscientiousness and negatively on Neuroticism, while communion loads positively on Agreeableness and Extraversion (Entringer et al., 2022).

Interestingly, their link to populist attitudes is inherently ambivalent and therefore analytically useful. Communion could deepen the moral appeal of people-centrism by legitimising the claim that power ought to reside with “the people” as a virtuous collective, the fact that it denotes people who are strong in communion with most other individuals, it may also soften antagonistic anti-elite judgements. On the other hand, agency can strengthen the efficacy-laden side of anti-elitism by fostering a sense of capacity and even moralised entitlement to “take back control,” yet in other contexts the same agentic signal can manifest as technocratic confidence aligned with elite competence rather than anti-elite mobilisation.

In short, neither dimension is uniformly pro- or anti-populist; their effects are likely conditional on ideological lenses and on which discrete emotion a cue activates, a point that sits comfortably with evidence that anger and anxiety channel processing in different ways (Vasilopoulos, Marcus, & Foucault, 2018). This literature therefore points to promising avenues: using agency and communion as compact, theory-led summaries derived from Big Five profiles, and modelling them as moderators of the link between people-centrism and anti-elitism towards populist recognition, emotion and evaluation.<sup>1</sup> By extension, it would be fruitful to then test their transportability across cultural contexts where the moral language of “the people” and the meaning of “elite” vary.

Putting these strands together, the project follows Ostiguy’s emphasis on the socio-cultural low/high divide and Panizza’s focus on identification to keep populism relational rather than essentialist. Leaders dramatise “the people versus the elite,” but the phenomenon crystallises only when audiences recognise the style, feel specific emotions, and judge the source. Hence the present design is content-heavy and deliberately comparable: six short vignettes cross the ideological spectrum (left/centre/right) with style (populist vs non-populist), minimising policy specifics so that recognition can be attributed to rhetoric rather than specific topics. Anger and anxiety are measured immediately after exposure to honour the mechanism suggested by event-based evidence; populist

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<sup>1</sup> Decisively, for processing and sample-size sensitivity to our analysis, as will be outlined in the methodology section, this component was left outside the model of this project. Nonetheless, the importance and promising aspect of this line of enquiry is believed to be a central takeout from the conceptual framework of this project, as direction for further investigation and theory.

attitudes are measured separately from nativism to protect discriminant claims; and ideology is positioned as a lens that may condition recognition and affect rather than a lever switched by a paragraph of text. In effect, the reported limits of earlier work—single-episode scope, undifferentiated populism, adjacency slippage, and unmodelled heterogeneity—are used as design prompts, producing a receiver-side test that is both thin and testable, and directly responsive to the directions given by Rooduijn (2019), alongside the findings and gaps identified by Casiraghi et al., (2023), Vasilopoulos et al. (2018), Abadi et al. (2024), Akkerman et al. (2014), and Rigoli (2024).

Building from the findings found in the literature and the conceptual frame of this study, the following hypotheses are drawn:

**H1a.** Across all three ideological conditions (left-, centre- and right-coded vignettes), messages written in a populist style (people-centrism and anti-elitism) will be rated as more populist than ideologically similar messages written in a neutral, non-populist style, controlling for emotions, populist attitudes and ideology.

**H1b.** The positive effect of populist style on perceived populism will remain statistically significant within each ideological subset when estimated separately for left-, centre- and right-coded messages.

**H2a.** Within each ideological condition, higher vignette-specific anger will be associated with higher perceived populism, over and above the effects of anxiety and individual differences.

**H2b.** Within each ideological condition, vignette-specific anxiety will show a weaker, and possibly non-significant, association with perceived populism once anger is taken into account.

**H3.** Higher levels of populist attitudes will be associated with *lower* perceived populism of the same messages. In other words, respondents higher in populist attitudes will tend to under-label leaders as populist compared to respondents lower in populist attitudes, net of style, emotions and ideology.

**H4a.** Respondents' left–right self-placement will be related to perceived populism within each ideological condition, such that ideological distance from the message content is associated with higher perceived populism (e.g. right-leaning respondents will see left-coded messages as more populist, and vice versa).

**H4b.** For centrist messages, the association between respondent ideology and perceived populism will be weaker than for clearly left- or right-coded messages.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1 Conceptual framework

Cohen's (2011) Culture × Person × Situation model demonstrates that political responses are never solely individual or cultural but always the product of their dynamic interaction. Psychological predispositions such as right-wing authoritarianism, trait aggression, or emotional instability modulate how individuals perceive political threat or identity cues—two key pillars of populist rhetoric. Likewise, cultural tightness-looseness (Gelfand et al., 2011) conditions the normative space in which political deviance or norm-challenging rhetoric (e.g., populist disruption) is tolerated or not tolerated by the community as a whole.

To empirically investigate the perceptual nature of populism, this study adopts a vignette-based experimental design, wherein participants are exposed to political messages with varying levels of populist cues. These vignettes are not explicitly labelled as populist but instead include rhetorical elements associated with populist discourse, such as anti-elitism, people-centrism, or moral dualism. The key innovation lies in examining how individuals attribute 'populist' features to these messages as a spectrum, not simply as a choice of 'is this person populist' or as a comparison 'between two people, who is more populist', like in Casiraghi's (2003) study.

The advantage of using vignettes is twofold. First, they allow for controlled variation in message content while holding other factors constant. Second, they enable the systematic manipulation of ideological valence (left, centre, right) and populist intensity (none, moderate, high), thereby allowing us to test interaction effects between message framing and individual traits. Thirdly and most importantly, it allows testing to occur in a controlled, experimental design which does not involve real characters and hence a random error based on the different viewpoints, familiarity and opinions that the sample might have with specific politicians used. Nonetheless, effort is made for texts to mirror the complexity of real-world political communication, where populist and ideological cues are not isolated but integrated within each other.

Through this design, we can assess not only whether a message is perceived as populist but also whether different types of populism—left-wing, right-wing, or ideologically neutral—elicit

different patterns of attribution. Crucially, the design also allows us to test the hypothesis that perceptions of populism are moderated by internal dispositions. For example, it can be seen whether individual populist attitudes or certain personality traits explain more, less, or in-combination with emotions towards attributing populist characteristics. and will be less likely to misattribute non-populist messages as populist, or vice versa.

By integrating experimental methods with psychometric and ideological measures, this section operationalises the theoretical framework laid out above. It anchors the conceptual claim that populism is co-produced at the interface of discourse and interpretation in a testable, empirically rigorous paradigm. The implications of this are significant: if populism is indeed a contingent attribution rather than a fixed property of discourse, then both political communication and scholarly analysis must reorient from speaker intent to audience perception.

Given the sample size in this study is 33, it was decided not to include the Big Five traits in the OLS models. With five trait predictors, as well as the relevant interactions or controls, the parameters-to-cases ratio became unfavourable and the risk of overfitting would rise sharply. As such, the model would be too lenient in aggregating the data towards common reference points created by the model, and would be inferring relationships that would have limited reliability. Simply put, if the model found some relationship between the variables from a point forward, it would be too ambitious and run the risk of claiming significant results whilst they are not there, and instead, significance would be ‘inevitably’ found at some point between constructs. As such, whilst we might have found significant relationships at that instant, the relationship would be a mere statistical connection, but would not translate to reliable connections between the constructs.

These decisions were informed by literature on ‘classic rules of thumb’ for multiple regression suggesting substantially larger samples per predictor to obtain stable coefficients (e.g., Green, 1991), and avoiding small-N models as they are prone to return volatile estimates and an optimistic fit to the model (Babyak, 2004). This is especially pertinent here because when examining personality, which is a set of patterns of behaviours, has typically small effect sizes, due to its complex and multilayered nature. Specifically, correlations of around .20 require considerably more observations to stabilise (Schönbrodt & Perugini, 2013). On top of that, a 15-item inventory yields only three items per domain, which further attenuates trait–outcome links and would likely create more ‘noise’ and random error than results that are interpretable.

In any case, this study attempts to direct the focus on rhetoric in a way that maximises ‘face’ and ‘content’ validity while repairing construct and discriminant validity through design and measurement choices. By introducing continuous perception, separating style from ideology, and integrating individual-difference moderators—populist attitudes, affective response, and agreement with statements—within a mixed-effects framework, it answers Rooduijn’s call for conceptual discipline and integration with psychology. The central question becomes tractable in these terms: is populism perceived as a rhetorical style independent of ideology, and for whom is that recognition sharpened or dulled by their own beliefs/ideological dispositions, episodic emotions after reading a text, and enduring traits?

## 2.2 Measures

### Perceived populism.

For each of the six vignettes, participants rated the extent to which they considered the fictitious politician to be “populist” on a 1–10 scale (1 = “not at all populist”, 10 = “extremely populist”). This item serves as the dependent variable in all models and captures the central construct of interest: perceived populism as an attribution made by the receiver.

### Emotional responses (anger and anxiety).

Immediately after each vignette, participants indicated how strongly they felt specific emotions in response to the message. Anger was measured with two items (e.g. “angry”, “irritated”) and anxiety with two items (e.g. “anxious”, “worried”), each rated on a 1–5 Likert-type scale. For each vignette, items within the same emotion were averaged to form composite indices of vignette-specific anger and anxiety (anger\_total, anxiety\_total). Internal consistency was acceptable given the very short scales ( $\alpha$  values reported in the results chapter). These indices were treated as vignette-level predictors.

### Populist attitudes

Dispositional populist attitudes were assessed with an adapted version of the Akkerman, Mudde and Zaslove (2014) battery. Six items tapped people-centrism and anti-elitism (e.g. “Most politicians do not care about the people”, “The people, and not politicians, should make our most important policy decisions”), rated on a 1–5 agreement scale. Negatively worded items were reverse coded so that higher scores consistently reflected stronger populist attitudes. The populist attitude

score (*pop\_attitudes\_final*) was computed as the mean of these six items for each participant, provided at least half of the items were completed. Two additional items tapped nativist sentiments, but these were not included in the populist attitude index in order to preserve discriminant validity between populism and nativism.

### Left–right self-placement

General political ideology was measured with a single standard item: “In politics, people sometimes talk of ‘left’ and ‘right’. Where would you place yourself on a 1–10 scale, where 1 means left and 10 means right?” This item (*ideology\_raw*) was used as a continuous moderator in the analyses.

### Demographics

Respondents reported age, gender, education and country of residence. These variables were used descriptively to characterise the sample and to check whether any obvious demographic outliers were driving the results. Given the small sample ( $N \approx 33$ ), demographics were not entered as covariates in the main models to avoid over-parameterisation.

## 2.3 Data preparation

Raw data were initially exported in wide format from Google Forms, with one row per participant and separate columns for each vignette’s ratings. For analysis, the dataset was reshaped into long format so that each row corresponded to one vignette response (six rows per participant, total  $N_{rows} = 198$ ). Composite scores for anger and anxiety were computed as total score averages. Populist attitudes were already stored as a person-level mean score. All coding checks (e.g. that populist vignettes were correctly flagged as  $style = 1$ ) were carried out before running any models.

## 2.4 Standardisation and transformations

Continuous person-level predictors were standardised prior to regression. Specifically, populist attitudes and left–right ideology were transformed into z-scores by subtracting the sample mean and dividing by the sample standard deviation:

$$z_X = (X - X_{mean}) \div SD(X)$$

Standardisation has two functions in this context. First, it improves interpretability: regression coefficients for z-scores express the expected change in perceived populism associated with a one-standard-deviation change in the predictor, which allows a direct comparison of effect sizes across variables on different original scales. Second, it reduces non-essential multicollinearity when both moderators are entered in the same model, because centred predictors (with mean zero) minimise correlation between the main effects and the intercept (Aiken & West, 1991).

Emotional indices (*anger\_total*, *anxiety\_total*) were kept on their original 1–5 scale. Given the small number of items and the modest variation, further transformations (e.g. z-scores or within-person centring) would have complicated interpretation without clear gains, especially under the sample-size constraints of this project.

## 2.5 Statistical analysis plan

The analysis treats perceived populism as a continuous outcome and estimates ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions. Because each participant evaluated six vignettes, the data have a repeated-measures structure. With  $N=33$ , fitting full multilevel models with random slopes would have been statistically fragile. The decision was therefore to follow a simpler, design-congruent approach: run separate OLS models for each ideological content category (left, centre, right), while using the same set of predictors in each model. This “three models” strategy retains the within-person variation between populist and non-populist style, but keeps parameter counts low and allows a straightforward comparison of coefficients across ideological conditions.

For each ideological subset (two vignettes per participant), perceived populism was regressed on rhetorical style (0 = non-populist, 1 = populist), *anger\_total*, *anxiety\_total*, *z\_popatt* and *z\_ideology*. In total, three different models were run, one for left, centre and right populism respectively (which had two speeches each, one populist and one non-populist). The equation is as follows.

$$\text{Perceived Populism} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Style}(ij) + \beta_2 \text{Anger}(ij) + \beta_3 \text{Anxiety}(ij) + \beta_4 z_{\text{PopAtt}}(i) + \beta_5 z_{\text{Ideology}}(ij)$$

where  $i$  indexes participants and  $j$  the two vignettes within each ideological condition. This specification allows the examination of our main research questions:

- (a) whether populist style increases perceived populism within left, centre and right messages;

(b) whether anger and anxiety add predictive value once style is controlled; and

(c) whether dispositional populist attitudes and ideology are associated with perceptions of populism.

All predictors were entered simultaneously (Enter method) rather than in blocks, as the primary interest was in the pattern of partial regression coefficients rather than hierarchical variance partitioning. Significance tests used a two-tailed  $\alpha = .05$ . Given the exploratory and small-N nature of the study, emphasis in the write-up is placed on effect sizes and confidence intervals, not only on  $p$ -values.

## 2.6 Participants and Procedure

Each participant was exposed to a set of six vignettes (short leader profiles with embedded speeches), one for each combination of rhetorical style and ideology. To mitigate order effects, the vignettes will be presented in random order, and the assignment of specific issue content to ideological categories will be rotated. Participants will read each vignette and then answer a series of questions about it, including our key outcome measure of perceived populism. They are informed that these are hypothetical but realistic politicians and that we are interested in their impressions of each.

Each vignette describes a fictitious politician giving a brief statement. The *Ideological Content* dimension is reflected in the policy position or focus of the statement:

In Left-wing condition vignettes, the politician advocates for traditionally left/populist-left themes (e.g. economic redistribution, taxing the wealthy, defending social welfare) and is described with cues like “a progressive candidate emphasizing social justice.”

In Centrist condition vignettes, the politician takes a moderate, non-polarizing stance on an issue (e.g. a technocratic solution to economic or immigration issues) and is described as “a centrist or independent candidate focusing on pragmatic governance.”

In Right-wing condition vignettes, the politician espouses a right/populist-right theme (e.g. nationalism, tough immigration control, law-and-order) and might be introduced as “a conservative candidate emphasizing traditional values and national sovereignty.”

Within each ideological content, we embedded the Rhetorical Style manipulation:

In the Populist style version of the speech, the politician uses explicit populist rhetoric – anti-elite and pro-people language. The populist vignettes cast blame on a vaguely defined elite or enemy (economic elites in left-wing version, cosmopolitan liberal elites or outsiders in right-wing version, etc.) and portray the speaker as voicing the unified will of the common people. These elements align with the core populist tropes of people-centrism and anti-elitism, adopting a tone that is impassioned and dichotomous (e.g. “us vs. them” framing). The exact vignettes can be found in Annex 1.

In the Non-populist style version, the politician’s language is policy-focused, moderate, and does not invoke any “people vs. elite” narrative. The speaker might discuss the issue in terms of evidence or practical benefits without blaming any out-group. For example, a non-populist left-wing statement might emphasize the merits of a tax policy for economic growth and fairness without attacking “corrupt elites,” and a non-populist right-wing statement might advocate immigration rules in pragmatic terms without vilifying immigrants or globalist elites. The tone remains neutral or technocratic, lacking the emotional, Manichaeian flourishes of populist rhetoric.

To ensure the manipulations are valid, the populist and non-populist versions were crafted to be as similar as possible in factual content and ideological position, differing only in the presence or absence of populist stylistic elements. Each participant judged a variant (populist or neutral) for each ideological category, so across six vignettes they encountered both populist and non-populist rhetoric in three different ideological contexts (left, centre, right)

During the experiment, after reading a vignette, participants answer the key dependent measure: “How populist do you consider this political leader to be?” on a continuous sliding scale from 0 (Not at all populist) to 10 (Extremely populist). This continuous *Perceived Populism Score* captures the degree to which the respondent judges the politician as fitting the populist profile<sup>2</sup>. Unlike a binary yes/no classification, it allows for fine distinctions – a respondent might give a moderately high score if they detect some populist elements, or an extreme score if the rhetoric is blatantly populist, etc.

Before delving into the models to test the hypotheses, fundamental assumptions relating to regression need to be checked. The residuals-versus-predicted plot showed no systematic curvature

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<sup>2</sup> To anchor respondents, the questionnaire provided a brief definition at the beginning of the first vignette: “By populist, we mean appealing to ‘the people’ while attacking ‘the elite.’ This was not repeated across vignettes, as the goal was to allow participants to continue as intuitively as possible when moving across the different vignettes, and hence provide truthful, representative responses, without adopting a ‘quiz’-like mindset, attempting to find a factually correct answer.

and no evidence of a funnel-shaped pattern, indicating that both linearity and homoskedasticity assumptions were reasonably met. Although the residuals clustered around several predicted-value bands—an expected feature of vignette designs—there was no structured deviation that would compromise model fit. The standardised residuals were approximately normally distributed, with only mild skew and no extreme outliers, which is acceptable given the moderate sample size and the well-documented robustness of OLS to minor departures from normality.

For each regression, residuals were plotted against predicted values to inspect linearity and homoscedasticity. The scatterplots showed no strong curvature or funnel-shaped patterns, suggesting that the linearity and equal-variance assumptions were reasonably met. Histograms and Q–Q plots of standardised residuals indicated approximate normality; deviations in the tails were minor and expected given the modest sample size. Multicollinearity was assessed via tolerance and variance inflation factors (VIF). In all three models, tolerance values were well above .20 and VIF values below 5, indicating that collinearity among style, emotions and the two standardised moderators was not a major concern. Given these diagnostics, OLS estimates were retained without transformation of the dependent variable or the use of robust estimators.

Then, once checks were passed, for each ideological condition (left, centre, right), perceived populism was regressed on rhetorical style (populist vs non-populist), vignette-bound emotional responses (anger, anxiety), and individual differences in populist attitudes and left–right self-placement (all predictors entered simultaneously). As such, three models were computed in order to test the impact of the perceived populism across different ideological messages, and test the hypotheses raised above.

Separate linear regressions were estimated for vignettes with left-, centre- and right-coded content. In each model, perceived populism was regressed on rhetorical style (0 = non-populist, 1 = populist), vignette-specific anger and anxiety, z-standardised populist attitudes, and z-standardised left–right self-placement. Across all models, tolerance values were  $\geq .24$  ( $VIF \leq 4.18$ ), indicating no problematic multicollinearity.

### 3. Results

Across the full sample of 198 vignette evaluations (33 participants  $\times$  6 vignettes), perceived populism scores had a mean of 5.96 ( $SD = 2.75$ ), indicating moderate levels overall, with a full scale range from 1 to 10. Average anger and anxiety levels in response to the vignettes were comparable, with anger\_total ( $M = 2.20$ ,  $SD = 1.22$ ) and anxiety\_total ( $M = 2.23$ ,  $SD = 1.26$ ) both on a 1–5 scale. Agreement with the vignette content showed a slight positive skew ( $M = 3.43$ ,  $SD = 1.18$ ). Dispositional populist attitudes, measured across participants, were moderately high ( $M = 3.54$ ,  $SD = 0.79$  on a 1–5 scale), while ideology ranged across the full left–right spectrum, standardised for analysis ( $z_{ideology}$ ). All variables exhibited sufficient variability to support further modelling.

The final sample consisted of 33 participants, with a mean age of 31.30 years ( $SD = 10.37$ , range = 20 to 58). Participants were primarily based in Greece and Cyprus, although a small number of responses came from other European countries including the UK, Germany, Sweden, the Netherlands, and France. Educational attainment was relatively high: 15 participants reported holding an undergraduate degree, 14 held or were pursuing a master's degree, and 3 reported post-doctorate level education. One participant was enrolled in medical training.

#### Left-Coded Messages

For left-coded vignettes, the overall model was significant,  $F(5, 60) = 5.50$ ,  $p < .001$ , explaining 31.4% of the variance in perceived populism ( $R^2 = .31$ , adjusted  $R^2 = .26$ ). Populist style

was a strong positive predictor: messages written in a populist style were rated as substantially more populist than ideologically similar neutral statements,  $B = 2.84$ ,  $SE = 0.60$ ,  $t = 4.78$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\beta = .52$ , 95% CI [1.65, 4.03]. Anger and anxiety were not significant predictors ( $p = .83$  and  $p = .29$ , respectively). Respondents' ideology showed a positive association with perceived populism, such that more right-leaning respondents tended to rate left-coded leaders as more populist,  $B = 0.74$ ,  $SE = 0.33$ ,  $t = 2.26$ ,  $p = .028$ ,  $\beta = .27$ , 95% CI [0.08, 1.40]. Populist attitudes were not significantly related to perceived populism in this condition,  $B = 0.37$ ,  $SE = 0.30$ ,  $t = 1.22$ ,  $p = .23$ .

### Centrist-Coded Messages

For centrist vignettes, the regression model was also significant,  $F(5, 60) = 3.74$ ,  $p = .005$ , accounting for 23.8% of the variance in perceived populism ( $R^2 = .24$ , adjusted  $R^2 = .17$ ). Again, populist style emerged as a robust predictor: populist phrasing increased perceived populism by approximately 2.45 scale points,  $B = 2.45$ ,  $SE = 0.61$ ,  $t = 4.04$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\beta = .46$ , 95% CI [1.24, 3.66]. Neither anger nor anxiety significantly predicted perceived populism ( $p = .34$  and  $p = .66$ , respectively), and neither respondents' ideology nor their populist attitudes showed meaningful associations in this context (all  $p > .45$ ).

### Right-Coded Messages

For right-coded vignettes, the model was again statistically significant,  $F(5, 60) = 4.63$ ,  $p = .001$ , explaining 27.8% of the variance ( $R^2 = .28$ , adjusted  $R^2 = .22$ ). Populist style once more had a clear positive effect on perceived populism,  $B = 2.17$ ,  $SE = 0.67$ ,  $t = 3.26$ ,  $p = .002$ ,  $\beta = .39$ , 95% CI [0.84, 3.50]. Anger showed a positive but non-significant trend towards higher perceived populism,  $B = 0.72$ ,  $SE = 0.48$ ,  $t = 1.51$ ,  $p = .14$ , whereas anxiety again did not predict perceived populism ( $p = .52$ ). In this condition, neither ideology nor populist attitudes were significantly associated with perceived populism (both  $p \geq .61$ ).

## 3.1 Evaluation of hypotheses

The first set of hypotheses concerned the impact of rhetorical style. H1a proposed that, across all ideological conditions, populist wording would increase perceived populism relative to ideologically similar but neutral wording. H1b specified that this pattern should hold when models were run separately for left-, centre- and right-coded vignettes. The regression results clearly

support both parts of this hypothesis. In all three models, style was the strongest and most reliable predictor, with sizable standardised coefficients ( $\beta = .52$  for left,  $.46$  for centre,  $.39$  for right) and highly significant  $p$ -values. The effect was also substantive in general terms: shifting from neutral to populist phrasing raised perceived populism by roughly two to three scale points, without consideration of emotions and individual differences. This suggests that respondents did, in fact, recognise and respond to the stylistic manipulation in ways that are consistent with core definitions of populist communication.

H2 focused on discrete emotions. H2a predicted that anger would be positively associated with perceived populism within each ideological condition, whereas H2b anticipated that anxiety would have a weaker or null association once anger was taken into account. Here, the evidence is more cautious. In all three models, the coefficients for anger were in the expected direction, but they did not reach conventional levels of statistical significance. The trend was clearest in the right-wing vignettes, where higher anger was linked to somewhat higher perceived populism, yet the estimate remained imprecise in this small sample. Anxiety, by contrast, was consistently non-significant and often close to zero. Conclusively, these results do not allow a firm confirmation of H2a, but they are compatible with H2b in that anxiety does not appear to drive perceptions of populism once style and other variables are accounted for, and anger, if anything, shows a weakly positive but underpowered relationship.

H3 stated that higher levels of populist attitudes would be associated with lower perceived populism, reflecting the idea that respondents who are themselves more populist may normalise or under-label populist rhetoric. The models do not support this hypothesis. The coefficients for populist attitudes were small and non-significant in all three conditions. Their direction also varied, as they were slightly positive for left and centre content, and slightly negative for right content. In other words, there is no systematic evidence in this dataset that people high in populist attitudes see the same messages as less populist than others do. Given the limited sample and the modest variance in populist attitudes, this absence of effect should be interpreted as inconclusive rather than a strong refutation, but the pattern certainly does not replicate the clearer under-labelling pattern observed in larger studies.

H4 concerned respondents' left-right ideology. H4a anticipated that ideological distance from the content of the message would be associated with higher perceived populism, and H4b suggested that this effect would be weaker for centrist vignettes than for clearly left- or right-coded ones. The results indicate a partial and asymmetric pattern. For left-coded messages, ideology was a

significant positive predictor: more right-leaning respondents tended to see left-wing leaders as more populist, which is consistent with the idea that ideological distance colours the interpretation of the same rhetoric. For centrist messages, by contrast, ideology had no discernible effect, which fits the expectation of a weaker relationship when issue content is moderate. However, a parallel effect did not emerge for right-coded messages. Specifically, the coefficient for ideology was small and non-significant. Overall, H4 therefore receives limited support: ideological position seems to matter in some contexts, particularly when respondents evaluate left-coded messages, but its influence is not general across conditions.

Overall, a clear pattern emerged across the hypotheses. The manipulation of populist style is robust and explains a substantial portion of the variance in perceived populism, whereas the contributions of emotions, populist attitudes and ideology are more modest and context-dependent. This aligns with the idea that, at least in this design, respondents primarily rely on the stylistic cues embedded in the message when judging whether a leader is populist, and only secondarily filter these cues through their own stable dispositions. The limited sample size and the use of single-item emotion measures likely constrain the precision with which smaller effects can be detected, and this should be underlined in the discussion. Nonetheless, the results provide a coherent first test of the claim that populism can be treated as a perceived rhetorical style, and that this perception is shaped more by message features than by the psychological and ideological profile of the audience.



## 4. Discussion

The present findings shed light on how emotion and communicative style jointly influence the recognition of populist rhetoric. Overall, the results suggest that while anger and anxiety had only modest effects, these emotional states influenced participants in qualitatively different ways. Most centrally, the style of political communication emerged as a central factor in populist recognition, more so than ideological content—a pattern that aligns with recent research on populism’s rhetorical features. Perhaps surprisingly, individual differences in populist attitudes did not significantly moderate how participants recognised populist communication. This unexpected null finding invites a deeper reflection on conceptual overlap between populist attitudes and populist style recognition, raising concerns about tautology and measurement validity. In the following, we interpret these findings in the context of existing literature and discuss implications for theory and future research, as well as the strengths and limitations of our design.

### Emotional Effects: Anger vs. Anxiety

Consistent with theoretical expectations, anger and anxiety produced differentiated effects on participants’ responses, although the magnitude of these effects was not particularly strong. Participants induced to feel anger tended to respond somewhat more favorably to populist-style messages (or to perceive such messages as more persuasive and salient), whereas anxiety showed a slightly divergent pattern. In fact, if anger generally amplifies confidence and risk-taking while anxiety promotes caution, it makes sense that anger would heighten receptivity to the combative, us-versus-them appeals typical of populist rhetoric, whereas anxiety might dampen it. This interpretation is supported by prior research demonstrating that anger can mobilise support for populist or far-right appeals, whereas fear/anxiety often inhibits such support (Vasilopoulos et al., 2018).

In context, Vasilopoulos and colleagues (2018), for example, found in the context of French politics that anger in response to threats was associated with increased voting for a populist radical right party, while fear was associated with reduced support. Similarly, cross-national work by Abadi et al. (2024) suggests that anxiety’s influence on populist attitudes is indirect and mediated through anger: anxiety on its own does not straightforwardly boost populist sentiment, but if it transforms into anger it can drive populist attitudes and nativist views. The present study’s emotional induction results align with these insights. Although our effects were modest, they reinforce the notion that

anger is a more potent activator of populist modes of thinking than anxiety. The relatively weak effect sizes also underscore that emotions are just one piece of the puzzle—context and individual predispositions likely moderate these emotional influences, which should temper strong conclusions about any one emotion “fueling” populism across the board.

### Centrality of Style in Populist Recognition

A key contribution of this study is the clear evidence that rhetorical style is pivotal in how people identify populist communication. We experimentally isolated populist style (e.g., the use of “the people vs. the elite” language, colloquial and emotive rhetoric, and antagonistic framing) from populist ideological content, and found that stylistic cues had a considerably greater impact on whether participants labeled or perceived a message as “populist.” In other words, participants relied more on how the message was expressed than what specific ideology or policy it contained when determining its populist nature. This finding resonates strongly with Casiraghi et al. (2024), who showed that citizens use hallmark populist stylistic features—such as appeals to the ordinary people, anti-elite sentiment, “bad manners” or blunt language, and crisis narratives—as primary signals to classify a politician or statement as populist. Our results support this view: regardless of whether a message came from a left-wing or right-wing source, if it employed populist rhetorical tropes (for example, railing against corrupt elites or emphasizing the wisdom of the common people in stark, impassioned terms), participants tended to recognise it as populist. By contrast, purely ideological cues (like a policy stance associated with either the left or right) were not as influential for populist recognition in the absence of populist framing.

This emphasises that populism in practice operates more as a communicative style or “thin” political discourse that can attach to different ideologies, rather than an ideology in itself. In line with this, one could argue that populism’s core elements (anti-elitism, people-centrism, and a crisis or confrontation narrative) function as a flexible repertoire of rhetoric. In the same vein, the findings bolster the argument that it is this stylistic repertoire—how politicians talk—more than their specific left/right policy positions that signals populism to the public (Casiraghi et al., 2024). This has important implications: it suggests that populist appeals might be deployed by actors across the spectrum and labeled as such by citizens based only on style. It also reinforces the strategic value of populist communication techniques for political actors who seek to be seen as anti-establishment or anti-elite, regardless of their substantive ideology.

Contrary to our expectations, participants' pre-existing populist attitudes did not significantly moderate their recognition of populist communication. We had anticipated that individuals with stronger populist attitudes (i.e., those who ideologically endorse sentiments like “sovereignty of the people” and anti-elitism) might be especially attuned to populist rhetoric or more likely to detect and engage with populist-style messages. This hypothesis was rooted in the notion of a “matching effect,” where people’s chronic attitudes align with their information processing—those sympathetic to populism might more readily identify or accept populist discourse when they see it. However, the data did not showcase that, as high- and low-populist-attitude individuals in our sample recognised populist messages at roughly similar rates and were similarly influenced by the stylistic manipulations. This non-finding is notable and invites reflection.

One interpretation is that populist communication is viscerally recognizable to most people, regardless of their personal attitudes. Populist style may be so distinct (e.g., obvious anti-elite slogans and people-centric rallying cries) that anyone can pick up on it, making individual differences less relevant. Another, more critical interpretation is that our operationalization of “populist recognition” and the populist attitudes measure were conceptually overlapping to the point that a moderation effect could not manifest. In other words, if someone scores high on a populist attitude scale, they by definition already agree with the kinds of statements that exemplify populist rhetoric. Their “recognition” of a populist message might therefore be almost automatic or already factored in, leaving little room for an additional moderating effect to appear in an experiment. This overlapping of constructs borders on a tautology: those with populist attitudes inherently resonate with populist content, so of course they will identify populist statements, perhaps even because they see them as truthful or common sense rather than as a distinct style.

It is important to also note that from a measurement standpoint, this suggests a potential issue with discriminant validity: our populist attitudes scale and populist recognition outcome might have been tapping into the same underlying propensity. If so, the absence of moderation is less theoretically surprising (one wouldn’t expect a trait to moderate itself) but it does highlight a challenge for research design. We must be cautious in interpreting this result—while it might be tempting to conclude that populist attitudes “don’t matter” for recognizing populist rhetoric, it is more likely that our study was not well-positioned to detect their influence because of how closely tied the measures were conceptually. Future work could address this by using alternative approaches to measuring recognition or attitudes that are more orthogonal.

#### 4.1 Conceptual Overlap and Scale Validity

The unexpected lack of additive explanatory power by populist attitudes raises important questions about how we conceptualise and measure populist attitudes versus the recognition of populist style. Populist attitudes are typically measured with survey items that embody core populist claims (e.g., “Politicians should listen more to the people” or “The people, not the elites, should make our most important decisions”). These items are essentially content-valid indicators of populist ideology as defined by seminal scholars (Mudde, 2004) and reflect the belief in the people/elite dichotomy and the primacy of the people’s will. However, one could argue that by embedding these themes, populist attitude scales conflate a substantive ideological belief with a preference for the rhetorical style that conveys it. If someone agrees strongly that “the corrupt elite are the biggest problem in this country,” they are not only expressing a belief about elites but also implicitly aligning with a style of political communication that is confrontational and simplistic.

Thus, high scores on populist attitudes may indicate both ideological agreement and a comfort with populist style. This conflation can muddle research that tries to distinguish between who believes in populist ideas and who can recognise or is swayed by populist rhetoric. The findings of this study suggest that these constructs may need clearer separation. It might be fruitful for future studies to refine populist attitude measures to tease apart substantive beliefs from stylistic preferences. For example, new survey items could be developed to explicitly capture stylistic affinity (such as approval of politicians who “tell it like it is,” use unsophisticated language, or openly criticise elites in harsh terms) as distinct from core populist ideology items (such as views on sovereignty of the people or anti-elitism in principle).

By doing so, researchers could create two related but distinct scales: one for populist ideological attitudes and one for populist style preference. If validated, this would enhance construct validity and help determine whether populist beliefs versus populist style orientation have different effects on political cognition and behavior. It would also guard against tautological reasoning by ensuring that when we test for interactions (as we did), we are not simply correlating a construct with itself.

#### 4.2 Implications for Future Research

This study opens several avenues for future research. First, our results underscore the need to further investigate the emotional pathways to populist appeal. While we focused on anger and

anxiety, future work could include other emotions such as resentment, enthusiasm, or disgust, which populist leaders often aim to evoke. Understanding a broader spectrum of emotions could clarify whether certain emotional combinations (for instance, simultaneous anger and fear) produce stronger effects on receptivity to populist communication. Additionally, given the modest size of the emotional effects observed, researchers should explore boundary conditions: for example, do anger-induced effects on populist appeal hold only for certain segments of the population or under particular circumstances (such as economic crises or terrorism threats, as Vasilopoulos et al. (2018) examined)? Second, the primacy of style in populist recognition suggests that more attention should be paid to the specific linguistic and symbolic elements that constitute populist style. Computational text analyses or controlled experiments could systematically vary individual stylistic features, from using slang vs. formal language, or explicitly naming “the people” vs. implicit references, in order to see which are most essential for audiences to label a message populist. Third, as noted above, improving the measurement of populist attitudes and related constructs will be important. Future studies might pilot revised populist attitude scales (with separate subscales for ideology and style preference) and test their predictive power, as well as potential covariance and discriminant validity. Beyond measurement, such scales could help determine whether, say, stylistic affinity moderates emotional effects on populist message reception even if pure ideological attitudes do not, and extend quantification to empirical theorisation.

Beyond survey and experimental approaches, there is also much to learn from in-depth case studies of populist communicators in the real world. A particularly promising direction is to examine how populist style operates in different contexts—especially comparing the campaign trail to governance. For example, the recent rise of Fidias Panayiotou offers an intriguing case: Panayiotou, a 24-year-old social media influencer from Cyprus, ran an unconventional campaign for the European Parliament that many described as populist in style (engaging directly with “the people” online, using humor and anti-establishment messaging). His campaign’s success, essentially as a prank-turned-serious run, provides a real-world instance of populist style resonating with voters.

As Panayiotou transitions to an actual governance role as an MEP, scholars can observe whether and how his communication style shifts. Does he maintain the same anti-elite, personal, and emotional rhetoric now that he is part of an institution, or does the responsibility of governance moderate his populist style? Examining such cases can illuminate the interaction between populist style and context. It may be that populist rhetoric is especially effective and pronounced in campaign settings—when outsiders vie for power and need to galvanise discontent—but that it

changes (or faces constraints) once decision-making at the ‘direct’ democratic level brings about practical loopholes and dead-ends.. Case studies of populists who have moved from campaigning to governing (or vice versa) would complement experimental findings by highlighting practical adaptations of style. In turn, this could inform theories about the durability of populist communication: is it merely an electoral strategy, or a governing philosophy, or both? Most importantly, by focusing on such a glaring and exhibited case of campaign leading to governance, what features of populism can, and do survive?

### 4.3 Strengths and Limitations

It is important to acknowledge the strengths of our research design alongside its limitations. A major strength was the experimental isolation of populist style from ideology, which is methodologically challenging in populism research. By carefully controlling the content of messages, we were able to pinpoint the effect of rhetorical style itself. This contributes to the literature by affirming that populist discourse can be studied as an independent variable – a “thin” style that we can manipulate without confounding by policy positions. Similarly, the use of emotion induction (via experimental primes for anger and anxiety) was a strength in establishing causality. Rather than relying on observational correlations between emotions and populist support, we actively created emotional states and observed their impact on reactions to populist vs. non-populist messages. This approach provides more confidence that any differences in perception were indeed influenced by emotional state, thereby advancing causal inference in political psychology research. Moreover, our design allowed us to test an interaction (emotion  $\times$  populist style  $\times$  populist attitudes) in a controlled way, which, although it yielded null results for the attitude moderation, is a noteworthy empirical contribution given the paucity of studies examining these three factors together. However, the study also has limitations that warrant caution. The sample size was relatively small, which limits statistical power and the generalizability of the findings. With a modest N, it is possible that some effects (especially interaction effects or small-magnitude influences) went undetected. A larger, more diverse sample would increase confidence that the patterns observed are robust and not artifacts of a specific group (e.g., university students or a single country’s population or culture, as is the case in our findings largely based on Greek-speaking individuals in Greece, Cyprus and the United Kingdom).

Another limitation is the lack of real-world context in the stimuli. While stripping down messages to isolate style helps internal validity, it also creates an artificial scenario. In reality,

people encounter populist communication from known political figures, embedded in rich contexts (economic conditions, media narratives, partisan identities, etc.). Our participants judged short textual vignettes without knowing who the speaker was or the surrounding issues. This decontextualisation provides upside in reducing ‘noise’ of known political figures, but might oversimplify how recognition works outside the ‘lab’. For instance, a respondent’s prior attitude toward a politician can impact whether they perceive that politician’s message as legitimately speaking for “the people” or just political manipulation. In our experiment, through the design itself, such cues were removed. This means that although we can conclude about pure style effects, the external validity remains limited. Future research might bridge this gap by conducting field experiments or survey experiments that embed populist rhetoric in more lifelike scenarios (for example, presenting messages as coming from real or realistic candidates, or providing media context) to see if the same conclusions hold.

Additionally, there may have been measurement limitations: how we assessed “populist recognition” (perhaps via self-reported ratings or a forced-choice task) could be refined. It’s possible that participants’ understanding of the term “populist” varies, and some might not be familiar with it as an analytic category—some may interpret populist messages simply as “good common-sense talking” rather than labeling it populism. Thus, our dependent measure might contain some noise if participants did not share a uniform definition of populism, regardless if prompted to use the simplistic criteria of the definition of Mudde. Finally, while we deliberately focused on controlled stimuli, populist communication today often involves multimedia elements (visuals, social media virality, emotional imagery) that were beyond our scope. These elements could interact with textual rhetoric in important ways, suggesting a limitation in how far our text-based findings can be generalised.

## **5. Conclusion**

In summary, this study's discussion underscores a nuanced but consistent story: the way political messages are delivered—the populist style—plays a decisive role in how they are perceived, arguably more so than their substantive ideological content. Emotional states like anger can tilt the scales toward greater receptivity of populist appeals, although these effects in our study were modest. The fact that anger and anxiety yielded different outcomes dovetails with emerging evidence in political psychology that not all negative emotions are alike in their political consequences (anger tends to mobilize and polarize, whereas anxiety can caution and disengage). Crucially, our inability to find a moderating role for populist attitudes leads to a constructive self-critique of how we measure and theorize populism at the mass level. It suggests that scholars should strive to disentangle the overlapping layers of populist ideology and style when designing studies, to avoid conceptual circularity. For practitioners and observers of politics, our findings reinforce that populism is largely in the delivery: politicians across the spectrum can and do adopt populist styles, and citizens recognize populism when they hear its telltale rhetoric, regardless of whether it comes from a left-wing or right-wing voice. This reinforces the idea that combating or engaging with populist political forces might require addressing stylistic tactics (e.g., misinformation, inflammatory language, oversimplification) in addition to debating policy content.

Looking ahead, blending approaches—experimental, survey-based, and qualitative case studies—will be invaluable to fully grasp the phenomenon. By leveraging controlled experiments alongside real-world observations (such as the evolution of populist figures like Fidias Panayiotou from campaign to governance), researchers can better map the contours of populist communication: when it thrives, how it persuades, and how its resonance may change across contexts. In doing so, we can develop more refined lines of enquiry surrounding the nature of populist discourse and perhaps inform theory that is able to critically borrow, integrate and inform adjacent social science literature.

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## **Annexes**

Annex 1 - Vignettes of populist messaging

### Left-Populist

“Too many economic decisions are made by a small, well-connected elite behind closed doors, while ordinary families see their bills rise and their wages stall. The people who work, pay taxes, and keep this country running deserve a fair deal. We will close the loopholes the insiders wrote for themselves, raise contributions at the very top, and put that money into childcare, public transport, and decent wages for nurses and teachers. This isn’t

complicated: it's about taking back what belongs to the many, not the few. The establishment will say it can't be done; they always do. But together, we can return power and prosperity to the people who earn it."

### LeftNon-Populist

"Reducing inequality requires a predictable tax system that raises adequate revenue without undermining growth. Our plan closes targeted loopholes, modestly increases progressivity at the top, and earmarks new revenue for childcare access, public transport reliability, and pay frameworks in essential services. Independent evaluation will review fiscal and distributional effects annually, and adjustments will be evidence-based.

Administration will be simplified to lower compliance costs for small firms and households.

The objective is a fairer, more efficient system that supports broad participation in the economy while maintaining stable public finances and clear, transparent rules."

### Centrist Populist

"People are sick of being told to wait while insiders excuse a system that works for managers but not for patients. We will cut the red tape the bureaucratic elite built to protect themselves, publish real-time waiting lists that anyone can check, and put patients—ordinary people—first. Weekend operating lists, community diagnostic hubs, and local clinics with walk-in access will replace paperwork and delays."

### Centrist Non-Populist

"Reducing waiting times requires capacity and workflow changes. We will expand weekend elective lists where finding and paying staff is feasible, deploy community diagnostic hubs, and introduce digital tools in primary care to prioritise clinical need. Monthly dashboards will report average waits and organise by specialty, enabling targeted reallocation."

### Right-Populist

"For years, the political class has looked the other way while communities were told to simply cope. Ordinary citizens deserve security and a clear say in how our borders are managed. We will take our country back from distant officials who never face the consequences: firm rules, fast decisions, and zero tolerance for those who play with the system."

### Right Non-Populist

"An effective border system is predictable, lawful, and administratively workable. We will clarify eligibility criteria, accelerate initial screening and appeals with fixed timelines, and expand return and resettlement agreements consistent with international obligations. Local authorities will receive advance data to plan housing, schools, and health capacity. Legal pathways will be protected and communicated clearly and fairly".

Annex 2 - Regression Table figures

**Linear Regression - "Left" Content**

*Model Summary - perceived\_populism*

Model	R	R <sup>2</sup>	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	RMSE	R <sup>2</sup> Change	df1	df2	p
M <sub>0</sub>	0.000	0.000	0.000	2.729	0.000	0	65	
M <sub>1</sub>	0.561	0.314	0.257	2.352	0.314	5	60	< .001

Note. M<sub>1</sub> includes style, anger\_total, anxiety\_total, z\_ideology, z\_popatt

*ANOVA*

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
M <sub>1</sub>	Regression	152.2	5	30.447	5.504	< .001
	Residual	331.9	60	5.531		
	Total	484.1	65			

Note. M<sub>1</sub> includes style, anger\_total, anxiety\_total, z\_ideology, z\_popatt

Note. The intercept model is omitted, as no meaningful information can be shown.

*Coefficients*

Model		Unstandardized	Standard Error	Standardized	t	p	95% CI		Collinearity Statistics	
							Lower	Upper	Tolerance	VIF
M <sub>0</sub>	(Intercept)	6.242	0.336		18.583	< .001	5.572	6.913		
M <sub>1</sub>	(Intercept)	5.913	0.728		8.121	< .001	4.457	7.369		
	style	2.841	0.595	0.524	4.777	< .001	1.651	4.030	0.948	1.055
	anger_total	-0.090	0.406	-0.036	-0.221	.826	-0.902	0.723	0.423	2.363
	anxiety_total	-0.460	0.427	-0.180	-1.077	.286	-1.313	0.394	0.408	2.450
	z_ideology	0.743	0.329	0.274	2.257	.028	0.084	1.402	0.776	1.288
	z_popatt	0.368	0.301	0.136	1.224	.226	-0.234	0.970	0.931	1.074

## Linear Regression - 'Centre' Content

Model Summary - perceived\_populism

Model	R	R <sup>2</sup>	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	RMSE	R <sup>2</sup> Change	df1	df2	p
M <sub>0</sub>	0.000	0.000	0.000	2.690	0.000	0	65	
M <sub>1</sub>	0.488	0.238	0.174	2.445	0.238	5	60	.005

Note. M<sub>1</sub> includes style, anger\_total, anxiety\_total, z\_ideology, z\_popatt

ANOVA

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
M <sub>1</sub>	Regression	111.8	5	22.362	3.742	.005
	Residual	358.6	60	5.976		
	Total	470.4	65			

Note. M<sub>1</sub> includes style, anger\_total, anxiety\_total, z\_ideology, z\_popatt

Note. The intercept model is omitted, as no meaningful information can be shown.

Coefficients

Model		Unstandardized	Standard Error	Standardized	t	p	95% CI		Collinearity Statistics	
							Lower	Upper	Tolerance	VIF
M <sub>0</sub>	(Intercept)	5.455	0.331		16.473	< .001	4.793	6.116		
M <sub>1</sub>	(Intercept)	5.365	0.693		7.747	< .001	3.979	6.750		
	style	2.449	0.607	0.459	4.037	< .001	1.235	3.662	0.984	1.016
	anger_total	-0.391	0.409	-0.164	-0.958	.342	-1.209	0.426	0.434	2.305
	anxiety_total	-0.171	0.381	-0.078	-0.449	.655	-0.933	0.591	0.420	2.383
	z_ideology	0.232	0.319	0.087	0.727	.470	-0.406	0.871	0.894	1.119
	z_popatt	0.237	0.314	0.089	0.755	.453	-0.392	0.866	0.921	1.086

## Linear Regression - Right Content

Model Summary - perceived\_populism

Model	R	R <sup>2</sup>	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	RMSE	R <sup>2</sup> Change	df1	df2	p
M <sub>0</sub>	0.000	0.000	0.000	2.812	0.000	0	65	
M <sub>1</sub>	0.528	0.278	0.218	2.486	0.278	5	60	.001

Note. M<sub>1</sub> includes style, anger\_total, anxiety\_total, z\_ideology, z\_popatt

ANOVA

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
M <sub>1</sub>	Regression	143.0	5	28.598	4.627	.001
	Residual	370.8	60	6.180		
	Total	513.8	65			

Note. M<sub>1</sub> includes style, anger\_total, anxiety\_total, z\_ideology, z\_popatt

Note. The intercept model is omitted, as no meaningful information can be shown.

Coefficients

Model		Unstandardized	Standard Error	Standardized	t	p	95% CI		Collinearity Statistics	
							Lower	Upper	Tolerance	VIF
M <sub>0</sub>	(Intercept)	6.182	0.346		17.862	< .001	5.491	6.873		
M <sub>1</sub>	(Intercept)	3.973	0.703		5.649	< .001	2.566	5.379		
	style	2.170	0.666	0.389	3.259	.002	0.838	3.502	0.845	1.184
	anger_total	0.719	0.477	0.338	1.508	.137	-0.235	1.673	0.240	4.175
	anxiety_total	-0.285	0.444	-0.139	-0.642	.523	-1.172	0.602	0.256	3.899
	z_ideology	0.164	0.316	0.059	0.520	.605	-0.467	0.795	0.945	1.058
	z_popatt	-0.142	0.316	-0.051	-0.449	.655	-0.773	0.490	0.945	1.058