D3.3:

Results of online experiments: Testing the effects of populist narratives

WP3 – Narrative Analysis and ICT Tools

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Populism and Civic Engagement

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Introduction

Narratives are part of our everyday lives (Fisher, 1984). They exist in TV, movies, books, news broadcasts, political debates, as well as private conversations, computer games or scientific articles (Barthes, 1975; Bruner, 1991; Ryan, 2004). We remember, explain, and construct our identity, ideology, knowledge, real and fictional worlds through narratives (Fisher, 1984; Lyotard, 1984; Shenhav, 2006; Somers, 1994). As a tool of human communication, they are an important element of deliberative politics and democratic practice (Boswell, 2013; Patterson & Monroe, 1998). Thus, narratives are also used to communicate political ideas and generate support for political positions with voters – in all sections of the political spectrum. Structurally, narratives combine separate chronological events and actors to a dramaturgical plot (Abbott, 2014; Prince, 1980; Propp, 1928/2009; Ryan, 2007; Somers, 1994). The debate on a political issue often revolves around events and various actors and thus involves different points of view articulated in narrative form, typically resulting in conflicting narratives. Narratives can be specific for certain groups, e.g. climate activists, and they are involved in "larger processes of social identification and evaluation of social groups" (Wortham & Rhodes, 2015, p. 170). The very idea of democracy can be narrated in different ways, and illiberal or anti-democratic tendencies can be convincingly voiced through narratives, which is the case with populist narratives (Müller & Precht, 2019). Populist communication portrays an illiberal idea of democracy and pits a supposed corrupt elite against 'the people' while defaming democratic institutions and processes like free press, instead demanding a strong leader and an unrestricted rule of the people, effectively constructing a crisis of democracy (Aalberg & de Vreese, 2016; Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008b; de Vreese et al., 2018; Martinelli, 2016; Moffitt, 2015; Mudde, 2004; Pappas, 2016; Stavrakakis et al., 2018). Apparently, these ideas resonate with voters across Europe, as election results show (Taggart & Pirro, 2021).

There is another important element to narrative: a narrative can be persuasive and influence recipients' opinions, behaviour, and attitude (Braddock & Dillard, 2016; Oschatz & Marker, 2020) even if it does not draw on verifiable facts (Bruner, 1991; Ryan, 2007, p. 26) and rather constructs its own truth. Persuasion, the symbolic process of influencing or convincing someone towards attitude or behaviour change, i.e. whether they like, dislike, support or reject an idea or object, is based on communicative and affective processes and interaction (Sukalla, 2019, pp. 16–17). The key to narrative persuasion is the absorption or immersion into the narrative world (="transportation"), which reduces counter-arguing (Green & Brock, 2000; Moyer-Gusé, 2008; Moyer-Gusé & Dale, 2017; Slater & Rouner, 2002) and thus the recipients' resistance against the narrative perspective.

Experimental and quasi-experimental designs dominate persuasion research (Sukalla, 2019, p. 59). The team from Technische Universität Dresden (TUD) is the task lead for testing the effects and counter-effects of selected narratives in online experiments in EU-Horizon2020 Project "Populism and Civic Engagement" WP3, T3.5, and the present corresponding deliverable D3.3 reporting on the results of these experiments. This task involved the systematic testing of the effects and counter-effects of selected narratives on individuals as described in the grant agreement. Aiming to provide evidence about the effects of populist narratives on attitudes and participation intentions as well as potential counteracting effects of liberal democratic narratives, this study adopts an experimental approach. Selected empirical and theoretical types of narratives identified in T3.2 – adapted to appropriate stimulus material – were used for between-subject online experiments. In one series of studies, the treatment groups were exposed to media content containing populist, liberal democratic narratives, both (the liberal democratic narrative being the counter-narrative) or none. Our research question for this study is: How do political narratives engage audiences online? We focus on online media, since populists are especially active on social media because it allows them to circumvent traditional media gatekeepers (Engesser et al., 2017).

The dependent variable was the participants' interaction with the stimulus material (="audience engagement", Nelson, 2021), integrating additional predictors like media use, sociodemographic attributes and political attitudes such as political interest, as well as political participation into the study design. This design allows us to analyse the effects of narratives on populist attitudes and the attenuative properties of the respective counter-narratives. The results of the task will help us to evaluate the social effects of populism and to formulate policy recommendations on how to react to populist narratives.

Building on the results of WP3, we can state that populist parties benefit from a vacuum of political narratives. Political narratives should not be relinquished to populist parties. Liberal-democratic parties should develop positive narratives (in particular of a vision of the future, of heroism in pluralism, and of empowerment) and communicate them.
Populist narratives should not be left unanswered. Illiberal narratives should be publicly countered with narratives of liberal democracy promoting the relevance and desirability of checks and balances, rule of law, and of minority rights. This applies to policy actors, but also to all civic actors.

Persuasive properties of populist narratives and counteracting effects of liberal democratic narratives

Populism has been on the rise in European democracies from the 20th century on and has brought several (mostly right wing) populist parties into parliaments (Aalberg & de Vreese, 2016, p. 3). Populism can be regarded as a 'thin' ideology that is based on the antagonism between the 'pure homogenous people' and the 'corrupt elite'. It propagates politics as the expression of the general will of the people (Mudde, 2004, p. 543). Populism is moralistic rather than programmatic and the distinction between the elite and the people is normative (Mudde, 2004, p. 544): "Populism presents a Manichean outlook, in which there are only friends and foes. Opponents are not just people with different priorities and values, they are evil! Consequently, compromise is impossible, as it 'corrupts' the purity [of the people]." (Mudde, 2004, p. 544). Therefore, populism is democratic, but not liberal (Pappas, 2016, p. 29). Since populists want to follow the will of 'the people', there is no room for democratic discussion and moderation. Instead of acknowledging society as divided by many different cleavages, populists see it as a single cleavage between a vast majority and the 'establishment' while encouraging polarization, and the discrimination of minorities. Populists claim to represent 'the people' – the majority – and incline toward majoritarianism (Pappas, 2016, p. 31).

Although generally not anti-democratic, populism is a challenge to democracy and European integration in several regards. Because of the 'thinness' of populist ideology, it can be combined with other, 'thick' ideologies like nationalism or socialism, leading to programmatic differences in populist parties and different views on who is included or excluded from the people or which elites and outgroups are blamed (Martinelli, 2016, p. 15). When combined with a nationalist ideology (i.e. right-wing populism), the reaffirmation of national sovereignty against the EU and anti-immigrant views are common, resulting in hostility toward the European project and its institutions (Martinelli, 2016, p. 15) and thus creating agitation against liberal-democratic and pluralist views. In some countries of the European Union, populist parties are now in government positions despite being originally anti-establishment (Taggart & Pirro, 2021, pp. 289–290). Not all populist parties in the EU are Eurosceptic, with pro-EU parties making up for one-fourth of the populist vote in recent elections, but a tendency towards Eurosceptic positions is clear (Taggart & Pirro, 2021, p. 291).

A specific rhetoric needed to further these ideas is also central to populism. Populism as a communication style refers to the people and pretends to speak in their name while stressing their sovereignty and popular will (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007, pp. 322–323). The enemy of the people is external and always "up there", above ordinary citizens. Besides the elite, often other outgroups like corporations or foreigners are blamed for the lamented misfortune of the people (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007, p. 324). Emotionalized blame attribution is central to populist communication (Hameleers et al., 2017), as well as protest against a supposed political status quo (Stavrakakis et al., 2018, p. 14; von Thadden & Hofmann, 2005, p. 7) and appropriately, one of the reasons for populist's electoral success (Backlund & Jungar, 2019). Populist communication aims at the simplification of complex political issues (Canovan, 1999; Moffitt, 2016).

Reasons for the success of populism are generally manifold, though as summarized in the PaCE report D1.1 concerning the political development of populism, "[t]he real causes of populist support comes not only from trigger events and background factors, but from how successfully a political leader or party can exploit crises" (PaCE D1.1, 2021, p. 122). Populists use language to construct a sense of urgency and crisis in light of recent political and societal developments, they need crisis and actively construct it with their communication methods (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008a, p. 5; Moffitt, 2015; Stavrakakis et al., 2018). Central to this performance of crisis and specific populist rhetoric is the frequent use of emotional and often times offensive and direct language (Betz, 2001; Canovan, 1999; Decker, 2004; Ociepka, 2005)

This is why we want to take a closer look at populist political communication. "(…) [P]opulist ideas must be communicated discursively to achieve the communicator's goals and the intended effects on the audience" (de Vreese et al., 2018, p. 425) and thus communication is central for the understanding of populism.

In recent years, political communication research has turned to the linguistic concept of narrative, which has become somewhat of a buzzword (just like populism) – an academic term adopted by the media and the political field which is frequently used inconsistently. There are many different definitions of narratives, but the way narratives functions in our everyday life is uncontested: Narratives are central to human's standard communication repertoire. We use narratives in all aspects of life (Barthes, 1975, p. 237) to both understand our reality and give it meaning (Fisher, 1984, p. 3; Freeman, 2015, pp. 21–22). It is a "human cognitive and discursive device for sense-making and for ordering one's life experiences" (Mildorf, 2010, p. 234). Narrative thus plays an important role in the formulation of traditional knowledge (Lyotard, 1984) as well as in shaping and expressing identity, perspective, and ideology (Shenhav, 2006, p. 245). Consequently, it is critical

in the construction of political behaviour, in the interpretation of political reality and political communication (Patterson & Monroe, 1998, pp. 315–316). These political narratives refer to stories about larger groups, communities and nations, and are tied to cultural and institutional formations (Somers, 1994, p. 619). Sometimes, narratives become canonical or emblematic of a group, holding it together, and identifying those who are its members (Wortham & Rhodes, 2015, p. 172). These narratives can be contradictory or competing within a society (Boswell, 2013, p. 631; Fouroutan, 2014; Patterson & Monroe, 1998, p. 320). Conflicts can arise from the fact that narratives are normative. "By suggesting both what is a norm and what is a departure from the norm, all narrative suggests an interpretation of what the state of the world ought to be." (Patterson & Monroe, 1998, p. 321). Accordingly, narratives are frequently present in political debates in deliberative systems, offering different interpretations of significant events (Boswell, 2013, p. 621). If political actors want to change social conditions, they must consequently change the narratives which society tells itself (Patterson & Monroe, 1998, pp. 321–322). "Examinations of political discourse show that it relies extensively on narrative patterns" and "[t]he dominant role of narratives in political discourse is also based on the centrality of narrative in the formulation and maintenance of worldviews" (Shenhav, 2006, p. 246).

Narratives are essentially stories and the specific structure and characteristic linguistic elements make narratives distinguishable from similar concepts like frame or discourse. One of these elements is its eventfulness: Narratives incorporate the representation of events that are linked together within some kind of chronological order (Abbott, 2014, p. 317; Prince, 1980, p. 49) or temporal sequence (Labov & Waletzky, 1967, p. 13). This results in a general retrospective dimension of narrative (Freeman, 2015, p. 27). The narrative world is populated with intelligent individuals involved in these events (Ryan, 2007, p. 29); which means that narratives also involve social actors, often depicted as stereotypical or characters in a drama (hero, villain, etc.) (Boswell, 2013, p. 623). Together, the causal connection of events and actors form a plot – resulting in "causal emplotment" (Somers, 1994, p. 616), which is the necessary condition for narrative. Following the evaluation of literature from linguistics, communication science, and politics, we define narrative as follows: Narratives are patterns of interpretations assigning social actors to stereotypical roles and composing events to a dramatic plot (Labov & Waletzky, 1967; Patterson & Monroe, 1998; Prince, 1980; Propp, 1928/2009; Ryan, 2007; Somers, 1994). There is a universal quality to narratives, because "people of widely different cultural backgrounds frequently identify the same given sets as narratives and reject others as non-narratives" (Prince, 1980, p. 50).

As mentioned previously, the main functions of narrative include the interpretation and construction of reality and meaning (Bruner, 1991; Ryan, 2007), and are central to establishing cultural legitimacy (Ricœur, 1991). They show the speaker's perspective on "human happenings" (Bruner, 1991, p. 4). This relates closely to narratives being independent of fictionality (Ryan, 2007, p. 26): "The acceptability of a narrative cannot depend on its correctly referring to reality, else there would be no fiction. (…) Narrative 'truth' is judged by its verisimilitude (…)." (Bruner, 1991, p. 13). This leads us to the function of narrative we want to focus on here: persuasiveness. Persuasive effects of narratives have been of special interest to researchers over the past few decades, for example in journalism research (e.g. Shaffer et al., 2018). Since narratives are relevant to real and fictive worlds alike (Fisher, 1984, p. 2), they are also present in any form of media like film, newspaper articles, educational material, or policy papers (Elliott & Squire, 2017; Ryan, 2004, 2007, p. 26). Meta-analyses have shown that the exposure to narratives has a causal influence on persuasion regarding message recipients' beliefs, attitudes, intentions, and behaviours (Braddock & Dillard, 2016), and narrative messages are more persuasive than non-narratives, with long-term effects (Oschatz & Marker, 2020). Of course, this is also plausible for political opinions, which been shown to be affected in line with the narrative's plot (Wojcieszak & Kim, 2016, pp. 788–789).

Firstly, our study focuses on populist narratives in a fictive Facebook post. Kruikemeier et al. (2016) found that politicians' interactive online communication positively influences citizens' political involvement. Most German politicians and parliamentarians use Facebook (Kelm, 2020), but populist actors are especially active (Ernst et al., 2017). For populist parties, social media with its possibilities to connect directly with the electorate is an important platform to disseminate their opinions and political program since it functions without traditional media gatekeepers (Engesser et al., 2017; Krämer, 2017). Studies have shown that populist media messages lead to increased populist engagement and attitudes (Aalberg et al., 2016; Blassnig et al., 2019; Hameleers et al., 2017). We have outlined before that populism has gained traction in European countries, and being considered illiberal and a potential threat to democracy, actors using persuasive populist narratives comes with different risks as the "power of narrative carries with it the potential for abuse and manipulation" (Patterson & Monroe, 1998, p. 326). Hameleers and colleagues showed that populist messages on social media (e.g. blaming the elites for society's problems) bolstered these attitudes (Hameleers et al., 2017; Hameleers & Schmuck, 2017). Positive audience engagement – liking, sharing or supporting a post via comment translates to agreeing with the content of the post. Combining the persuasive power of illiberal populist messages in general with the power of

narratives, we argue that populist narratives will lead to higher audience engagement in an interactive social media environment (H1).

H1: A populist narrative engages audiences online.

The need to share emotionally charged events and information has been shown repeatedly (Nabi & Green, 2015, p. 151). Accordingly, we also hypothesise that populist-voting users engage more with such emotionally charged content as aligned with their own views (H2).

H2: The populist narrative's engagement effect is stronger for followers of populist parties.

We want to investigate as well, whether the persuasive properties of narratives can work with counter-attitudinal messages. Wojcieszak and Kim (2016) have shown that narrative evidence outperformed numerical evidence in encouraging individuals to accept information about a group they disliked. This can also be applied to attitudinal changes and the perception of social norms, since narratives can help reduce resistance and counterarguing while facilitating observational learning and identification with the narrative's characters (Hinyard & Kreuter, 2007, p. 785). Nonfictional narrative stimuli can affect belief change (Braddock & Dillard, 2016). This means that the effects that populist narratives have on already existing attitudes (like in so-called echo-chambers of social media) could be mitigated by a counter-narrative, at least when it comes to liking or sharing a populist narrative on social media. According to Pappas (2016, p. 23), populists are the foes of liberalism, which is why we test a liberal-democratic narrative as a counter-narrative against populism (H3).

H3: The populist narrative's engagement effect is attenuated by a liberal-democratic counter-narrative.

Method and measures

To test our hypotheses, we relied on a 2 (populist narrative vs. no populist narrative) × 2 (liberal democratic narrative vs. no liberal democratic narrative) between-subjects experimental design (including a control group which answered the questionnaire without receiving a narrative stimulus). Participants were drawn from a national sample of adults with permanent residency in Germany who were part of an online panel recruited by a professional survey company (Dynata); the language of the survey was German. To achieve a sample approximate to the German population, gender and age quotas were implemented. The survey was administered in November 2021 where Germany was in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, a time of increased ideological polarization concerning attitudes towards welfare state efficiency and political trust within the population (Ares et al., 2021).

Before recruiting the panel participants, we completed several pretests; the first being a technical pretest to make sure the stimulus material was displayed in a readable way, and two further pretests focusing on scale validity and reliability using a snowball principle first and then recruiting a large student sample (n=432) with a revised survey. Although the sample was skewed towards younger, liberal and educated individuals, the found effects were highly similar.

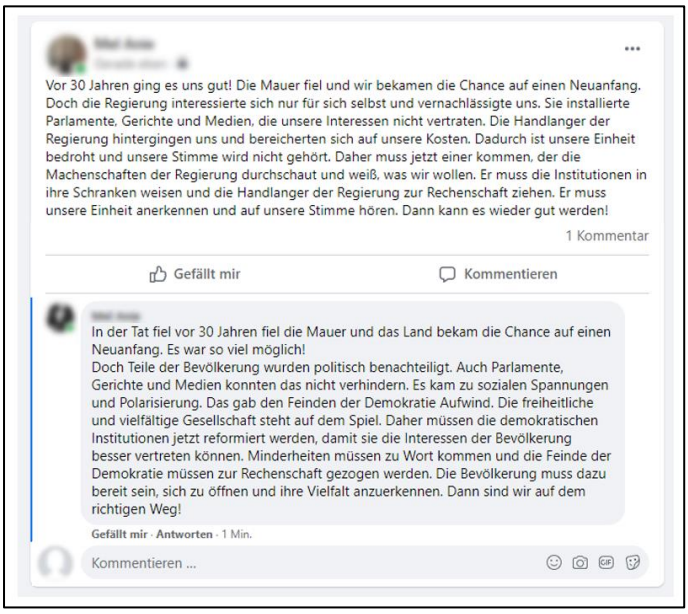
Overall, the final study sample consisted of n=1004 completes, with 51% female and 49% male respondents in various age groups. The modal education level was a completed apprenticeship. 20.9% of the sample identified as politically left on a 10-point scale while (values 1-4) 11.4% were neither right nor left in their reported political affiliation (values 5-6). 18.2% of respondents belong to the political right (values 7-10).

Sampling variation can generate covariate imbalance, so we controlled for a number of possibly confounding variables. All subjects answered questions about sociodemographic information. Then, they answered questions about online media use and frequency of use (e.g. social media, online news media, and alternative media sources), because this may have an effect on engagement with the narrative as well as possible interaction with political posts in general. The items for social media use scale together (Cronbach's Alpha = .93) on one factor. The reasons for social media use showed two factors best described as "communication/information" (Cronbach's Alpha = .90) and "entertainment" (Cronbach's Alpha = .85). The participants were also asked about their general interest in politics, the likelihood to vote for the main German political parties and their political affiliation on the left-right scale. Levels of political interest as well as ideological self-placement on a left-right axis are standard predictors of political participation (Theocharis & Lowe, 2016, p. 1473).

The subjects were then randomly assigned to see a stimulus in the form of an anonymized politician's Facebook post with either a populist narrative (*n*=250), a liberal democratic narrative (*n*=251) or the populist narrative with the liberal democratic narrative (*n*=255) as a comment beneath it (see Fig. 1). The instruction was to read the post carefully, as there were follow-up questions to answer.

The populist narrative stimulus was constructed drawing from empirical types of populist narratives emerged from task 3.2. The narrator usually depicts the antagonism of a corrupt elite and common people as dramaturgical characters and connects them to several events resulting in a narrative plot (see Deliverable 3.1). The selection of the first narrated event is a crucial point in the content design of a narrative. It is relevant whether an event in the past or in the present is chosen as the starting point. "[P]olitical perception of a person who begins his or her national story with a mythical past and tells the collective future in terms of a 'strong nation' will probably differ from a person who begins his or her story with the establishment of the modern state and prefers a future of 'civil equality'" (Sheafer et al., 2011, p. 315). Characteristic of populist narratives is the recurrence on a mythical "heartland" (Taggart, 2000), which the populists want to restore. The plot of the populist stimulus was chosen to revolve around the German reunification in 1990, since this was the moment in recent German history with the most positive connotations. The populist narrative takes on an illiberal tone focusing on corruption within democracy, diminishing democratic institutions and calling for a strong leader acting as the 'voice of the people', as is common for populist communication and ideology (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008a, pp. 4–5). It focuses on the restoration of the alleged loss of popular sovereignty through the populist leader.

Figure 1. Stimulus for experimental group 3 depicting a post with a populist narrative text and a comment with a liberal-democratic narrative.



German populist narrative	Vor 30 Jahren ging es uns gut! Die Mauer fiel und wir bekamen die Chance auf einen Neuanfang. Doch die Regierung interessierte sich nur für sich selbst und vernachlässigte uns. Sie installierte Parlamente, Gerichte und Medien, die unsere Interessen nicht vertraten. Die Handlanger der Regierung hintergingen uns und bereicherten sich auf unsere Kosten. Dadurch ist unsere Einheit bedroht und unsere Stimme wird nicht gehört. Daher muss jetzt einer kommen, der die Machenschaften der Regierung durchschaut und weiß, was wir wollen. Er muss die Institutionen in ihre Schranken weisen und die Handlanger der Regierung zur Rechenschaft ziehen. Er muss unsere Einheit anerkennen und auf unsere Stimme hören. Dann kann es wieder gut werden!
English translation	30 years ago, we were well off. The wall came down and we had the chance of a new start. But the government was only interested in itself and neglected us. It installed parliaments, courts and the media, which do not represent our interests. The henchmen of the government betrayed us and enriched themselves at our expenses. Thereby our unity is threatened and our voice is not heard. That's why somebody must come who sees through the intrigues of the government and calls the henchmen of the government to account. He must acknowledge our unity and listen to our voice. Then, everything can work out!

The liberal-democratic narrative uses the same plot as the populist narrative but instead of an illiberal view, it depicts a pluralistic and inclusive view of democracy, calling for a reform of democratic institutions instead of a strong leader.

German liberal-democratic narrative	30 Jahren fiel die Mauer fiel und das Land bekam die Chance auf einen Neuanfang. Es war so viel möglich! Doch Teile der Bevölkerung wurden politisch benachteiligt. Auch Parlamente, Gerichte und Medien konnten das nicht verhindern. Es kam zu sozialen Spannungen und Polarisierung. Das gab den Feinden der Demokratie Aufwind. Die freiheitliche und vielfältige Gesellschaft steht auf dem Spiel. Daher müssen die demokratischen Institutionen jetzt reformiert werden, damit sie die Interessen der Bevölkerung besser vertreten können. Minderheiten müssen zu Wort kommen und die Feinde der Demokratie müssen zur Rechenschaft gezogen werden. Die Bevölkerung muss dazu bereit sein, sich zu öffnen und ihre Vielfalt anzuerkennen. Dann sind wir auf dem richtigen Weg!
English translation	30 years ago, the wall came down and the nation had the chance of a new beginning. So much was possible! But parts of the population were politically disadvantaged. Even parliaments, courts and the media were not able to prevent it. Social tension and polarization followed. The enemies of democracy profited from this. Liberal and diverse society is at stake. This is why the democratic institutions need to be reformed to represent public interests in a better way. Minorities need to get a voice and the enemies of democracy need to be held accountable. The people need to be willing to accept their diversity. Then, we will be on the right path!

After seeing a stimulus, all participants were asked how like they would engage with the post (negative/positive comment i.e. support, like, share, unfollow), following Nelsons (2021) proposed measures of journalistic audience engagement: audience attentiveness (e.g. via shares, and comments), online discussion (e.g. commenting, user-generated content), and civic participation (e.g. voting, demonstrating) (Nelson, 2021, p. 2356). Engaging with the post indicates the level of agreement with the content and could show more accurately if the respondents' attitude is similar to the content of the narrative. This complements attitudinal questions, because these cannot reflect the perceived content of the narrative fully. As a control variable, the respondents were asked if they were interested in the topic the post was about, and several questions directed at the topic of the stimulus were included as a manipulation check, to see if the respondents read it carefully. The next question was directed at the effect of political engagement and concerned the subject's intention of undertaking different activities like going to a political demonstration, posting political messages online or signing a petition. As there is no standard battery of combined questions for online and offline political participation, we operationalised offline and online political participation as having three components: traditional, extra-institutional, and civic participation using items from Chan (2016, p. 440). The responses scale together (Cronbach's alpha = 0.88) and a factor analysis showed that all items loaded one factor.

The last part of the survey consisted of populist attitude questions. The main elements of populist attitudes are anti-elitism (or anti-establishment) and people-centrism (or pro-popular sovereignty) and therefore anti-pluralism (Mudde, 2004, p. 543; Vehrkamp & Merkel, 2020, p. 21). Populist attitudes are measured with eight validated items taken from the German populism barometer (Vehrkamp & Merkel, 2020), an annual project measuring political opinions. The previously tested items represent the current research standard and incorporate all three dimensions of populism (anti-elitism, people-centrism, popular sovereignty). Only in combination, they can show a populist understanding of democracy and politics (Vehrkamp & Merkel, 2020, p. 16). The questionnaire then ended with an open field for comments.
The control group (n=247) received no stimulus and corresponding questions and were lead directly to the questions directed at political engagement, populist attitudes and the open field for comments. The last page of the survey contained a debriefing in compliance with the ethical requirements for the PaCE project, stating that all texts were fictional and not posted by real people.

Our manipulation check asking content-related questions to all treatment groups yielded similar results. In general, we can say that the most important activity of narrative engagement – comprehension (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009, p. 341) – was successful.

Results

To test the effect of the stimuli we ran a multiple regression model comparing treatment to control group with positive audience engagement (like, share, support of the narrative through comment) as the dependent variable. The total explained variance (R^2) for the overall model was 27 %, indicating a high goodness-of-fit according to Cohen (1988). The model is statistically significant with all experimental groups ($F(14, 628) = 16.37$, $p < .001$). The control group is not included, since it did not allow to answer questions directed at the stimulus.

Generally, there was no overall effect of any narrative in any treatment group. This means that the findings do not support H1 (A populist narrative engages audience online). However, looking more closely at subgroups of participants, we can see effects that support H2: Figure 2 shows that the positive audience engagement for the populist narrative is highest for followers of the right-wing populist AfD.

Figure 2. Positive Audience Engagement Index of populist narrative by propensity to vote.

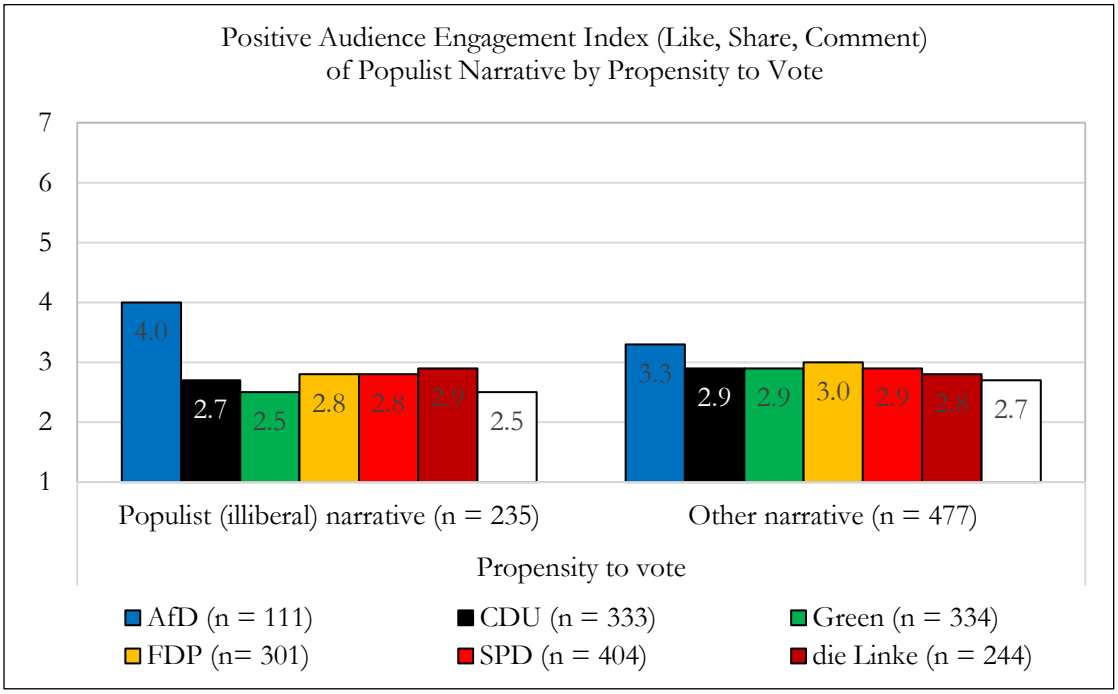


Table 1. OLS regression of positive audience engagement (like, share or positively comment)

	B	Beta	*p*
(Constant)	1.56		.000
Gender (male)	0.37	**.11****	.002
Age (years)	-0.02	**-.20*****	.000
Education	-0.04	-.04	.293
Political interest	0.08	**.08***	.034
Social media use	0.22	**.25*****	.000
Political alignment (right-wing)	0.11	**.14*****	.000
Populist (illiberal) narrative	-0.01	.00	.967
Populist (illiberal) narrative + liberal-democratic counternarrative	0.36	.10	.153
Populist (illiberal) narrative * propensity to vote AfD	0.27	**.19*****	.000
Populist (illiberal) narrative * propensity to vote Green	-0.01	-.01	.891
Liberal-democratic narrative * propensity to vote AfD	0.09	.07	.117
Liberal-democratic narrative * propensity to vote Green	0.21	**.19*****	.000
Populist narrative + counternarrative * propensity to vote AfD	0.14	**.10***	.021
Populist narrative + counternarrative * propensity to vote Green	0.00	.00	.994

Note. $R^2 = .27$, $F(14, 628) = 16.37$; *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$

Looking at the coefficients for the model (see Table 3), we found a significant effect on positive audience engagement for both gender and age. Younger people were more likely to indicate that they would positively comment (support), like or share the post with any narrative (β=-.20, $p < .001$), as well as respondents identifying as male (β=.11, $p < .01$). Social media activity was the best predictor for positive audience engagement, as people more active on using social media would also more likely share, like or positively comment on the post (β=.25, $p < .001$). Although the narratives did not have an overall effect, we found that participants who reported their political alignment towards more right-wing politics were more likely to support, like and share the narratives (β=.14, $p < .001$). Political interest ("In general, how interested are you in politics?", scaled 1 for "not at all" to 7 "very interested") also had a small effect (β=.08, $p < .05$). Very interesting to us was that the propensity to vote for the AfD, a populist party, moderated the effect on positive audience engagement for the populist (illiberal) narrative significantly (β=.19, $p < .001$). The affiliation with the Green party, a liberal-democratic party (which the AfD has often considered their biggest enemy or most contrary to their own positions) showed to moderate positive audience engagement of the liberal-democratic narrative (β=.14, $p < .001$). These findings support H2 (The populist narrative's engagement effect is stronger for followers of populist parties) to the extent that only these subgroups show an engagement effect. Our third hypothesis concerned the effect of the liberal-democratic narrative when posted beneath the populist narratives, so participants in this experimental group read both narratives after one another (H3: The populist narrative's engagement effect is attenuated by a liberal-democratic counternarrative). The analysis suggests that when followers of the AfD were confronted with both narratives, the positive audience engagement effect of the populist narrative was nearly halved (β=.10, $p < .05$ from β=.19). These findings support H3.
To summarize, our results clearly show an engagement effect for the populist narrative for certain groups.

Discussion

Populism has become challenging to democracies all over Europe. Using populist communication as a strategy to collect votes has become very effective for political parties (Aalberg et al., 2016; Taggart & Pirro, 2021). Political communication, like any form of human communication, relies on narratives to show the narrators perception of social reality. Narratives have also been shown to influence political attitudes and behaviours more effectively than non-narrative communication. Populist narratives, especially when spread quickly through social media while circumventing traditional media gatekeepers, have the potential to further illiberal-democratic ideas in recipients. Particularly with young people, social media has become an important channel to engage politically, but "(…) reading, liking, and sharing populist messages which simplify political problems, fuel cynicism, and promote negative stereotypes may not positively influence young adolescents' political socialization" (Heiss & Matthes, 2017, p. 1409). Social media algorithms favour content with high audience engagement such as commenting, liking and sharing, leading to the continued spread of often highly engaging populist content. On the other hand, the persuasive properties of narratives could possibly mitigate harmful populist content with the help of liberal-democratic narratives when brought into online discussions, showing a different point of view on the same subject.

In this experimental study, we wanted to show how political narratives could influence audience engagement in an online media environment (RQ). We tested different narrative stimulus material in a 2 × 2 between-groups experimental design, where one group received a populist narrative as a stimulus, one group received a liberal-democratic narrative, one group received both a populist and a liberal-democratic narrative, and one group did not read any narrative as a control group. The primary activity of narrative engagement is comprehension (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009, p. 341), which we controlled through a successful manipulation check. Although the recipients understood the narrative stimuli, not all of them engaged with them. There are several potential moderators of persuasion that could help to interpret the results of this study. Our first hypothesis was that the populist narrative engages audiences online (H1). This hypothesis was rejected: we could not find a larger overall effect of the populist narrative compared to the other treatment groups. One of the reasons might be that many citizens can have specific expectations for politicians' social media communication (Nabi & Green, 2015). Post length, references to competitors, negative or positive emotions, and humour are drivers of user engagement (Heiss et al., 2019, p. 1509). Although narratives are more persuasive than non-narrative messages, one single narrative may not be enough to lead to higher engagement, especially when there is no illustrating picture involved. Since politics and especially populism increasingly rely on personalization (Bracciale et al., 2021), the anonymity of the stimulus posts may be a reason for the missing effect: the participants may agree with the message but hesitate to share, comment on, or like a post of a politician whose political affiliation they do not know. Additionally, the narrative characters for identification (Hinyard & Kreuter, 2007, p. 785; Igartua, 2010) may be too vague: the protagonist, the setting and the vividness generate different effects (Banerjee & Greene, 2012). Our narrative stimuli might not generate enough character involvement, since it did not identify real people as characters in the narrative. It relied on generalization, naming "the people", "henchmen" etc., instead of naming existing political actors and thus creating a more personalised narrative with more potential for narrative involvement (Nabi & Green, 2015) or immersion. "When audience members become immersed in a narrative, they are less likely to counterargue against its key messages, and when they connect to characters in the narrative, these characters may have greater influence on the audience members' attitudes and beliefs." (Hinyard & Kreuter, 2007, p. 785). This relates to emotional flow, which influences narrative engagement and, in consequence, narrative persuasion (Nabi & Green, 2015). "[N]arratives are well suited to evoke emotions. They typically address emotion-evoking events (e.g., some type of conflict or obstacle faced by a character followed by resolution), and, thus, good narratives should evoke concomitant emotional responses in audiences." (Nabi & Green, 2015, p. 142). The type of emotion is not important, while emotional arousal is (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2009, p. 341). Emotionalized blame attributions influence blame perceptions and populist attitudes (Hameleers et al., 2017), but when nobody specific is blamed, the stimulus might not be able to evoke enough emotional and thus narrative involvement.

Similar to this explanation is missing narrative immersion: due to the length of the narrative stimuli, narrative immersion might only occur when addressing existing beliefs, which may have been the case for followers of the AfD, as the results for H2 (The populist narrative's engagement effect is stronger for followers of populist parties) show. This could also be explained by story relevance (Caputo & Rouner, 2011) as a factor, because AfD followers with a tendency towards populist content find issues of democracy more relevant to them, while others do not particularly engage with generalized statements about democracy.

Disfluency might also play a role in narrative engagement. Being able to smoothly process a narrative usually leads to increased persuasion, because recipients focus on the narrative rather than critical thinking (Walter et al., 2021, p. 715).

When pre-existing beliefs are strong, disfluent narratives might be promising to change attitudes because it can have a mainstreaming effect on attitudes: As Walter et al. (2021, p. 733) show, "partisans on both sides of the issue reported more moderate attitudes after their certainty was attenuated by the disfluent narrative". This is in line with our findings, as the narrative did not lead to higher engagement overall, while only engaging recipients with beliefs in line with the populist narrative's content who might have been able to process the narrative smoothly. When confronted with the counterattitudal narrative, they were less inclined to like, share or positively comment on it, which suggests less agreement with its content (as recognised in testing of H3).

Another point might be the missing ideological thickness to the narrative, which consists only of pure populist ideology and communication. There is no right or left wing populism indicated, but populist parties have recently turned to positions that are more radical. In Germany, "moderate" populism is less prevalent while extreme right-wing populism is on the rise (Vehrkamp & Merkel, 2020, p. 6). Heiss and Matthes (2020) have shown that anti-immigrant references were significant in predicting engagement with Facebook posts of populist actors in Germany (Heiss & Matthes, 2020, p. 312). Another finding from an earlier study showed that lower educated and male students were more likely to follow right wing populist actors on Facebook (Heiss & Matthes, 2017), which supports our findings as well. Our regression analysis showed that younger male participants were more likely to share, comment or like the populist narrative. Additionally, social media activity was the strongest predictor for positive audience engagement. This means that other recipients might agree with the presented narratives but rarely engage with content on social media in general. In conclusion, young, male and active people are the ones potentially adding to the success of populist narratives, although Facebook use can have negative consequences on reports of offline and online forms of political and civic participation, as one study finds (Theocharis & Lowe, 2016). This kind of activity is also rewarded: one "(…) form of post-message influence linked to emotional arousal and desire for emotional shifts may come in the form of social sharing, which may enhance a message's influence not only for the individual, but for their social network" (Nabi & Green, 2015, p. 151). Against this backdrop, our finding that liberal-democratic narratives can mitigate this kind of engagement with populist allows the recommendation to not leave populist narratives uncommented without counter-narratives focusing on liberal democracy. This leaves us with three practical suggestions: 1) Social media platforms should be aware of the way political opinions are expressed and work towards ways to regulate or indicate potentially harmful content, 2) policy makers can demand these kinds of regulations, and 3) the general public should feel encouraged that challenging populist narratives on social media platforms can be successful (as long as they feel safe and comfortable to do so).
To replicate our results, the team from PLUS (University of Salzburg) modified our survey and adapted the content of the narratives to fit the context of Austria. The team from CLS in Bulgaria also translated the survey and modified it accordingly. This might help to validate our results across two other cases in Europe.

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