

Explaining the Effects of Right Wing Populist Ads on Explicit and Implicit

Attitudes Toward Immigrants

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Abstract

Across Europe, the use of negative portrayals of immigrants in populist political advertising has dramatically increased. Right-wing populist parties apply public political poster ads that openly attack minorities and immigrants. This paper reports three experimental studies conducted with voters in Austria and Switzerland testing the underlying mechanisms and boundary conditions for the effects of right-wing populist ads on explicit and implicit attitudes toward foreigners. Findings revealed that populist ads lead to more negative explicit attitudes toward foreigners for voters with low educational degrees. This effect can be explained by the populist ads' ability to strengthen intergroup anxiety and negative stereotypes. Interestingly, these findings are independent from citizens' political ideology. In addition, we found that populist ads can also affect implicit attitudes for individuals with higher educational degrees. That is, people with higher education may control their openly expressed judgments in response to populist ads. However, they may still be susceptible to implicit attitudinal effects. We discuss how these findings help to understand the success of populist campaigns.

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Across Europe right-wing populist parties are on the rise. Parties such as the Austrian Freedom Party (Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs, FPÖ), the True Finns in Finland (Perussuomalaiset, PS), the Swiss People's Party (Schweizer Volkspartei, SVP), the Flemish Vlaams Belang, or the French Front National (FN) all share a number of common features: they strongly oppose established parties; they claim to act on behalf of "the people"; and they are anti-elitist (Art, 2007; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). The most defining element of these parties, however, is their resentment against an ethnically, nationally or religiously defined 'other' (Pelinka, 2013). Previous research has revealed that this anti-immigration standpoint is the unique selling point of right-wing populist parties (Boomgaarden & Vliegenthart, 2007; van der Brug & Fennema, 2007). In this context the use of negative portrayals of immigrants in political advertising has dramatically increased (Betz, 2013; Krzyzanowski, 2013; Marquart, 2013; Schemer, 2012; Ter Wal, 2002). European right-wing populist parties apply public political poster ads that openly attack minorities and immigrants. These negative portrayals and slogans have the potential to strengthen negative racial attitudes in the audience (Arendt, Marquart, & Matthes, 2015; Schemer, 2010). In Europe, political posters still remain the most important means of political advertising due to regulations in political advertising on television (Holtz-Bacha & Kaid, 2006). They are displayed prominently in public spaces and are therefore hard to avoid by the public (Dumitrescu, 2010). However, although these anti-immigrant populist poster ads may have damaging implications for processes of integration in Western democracies, little research has been done on their effects.

In most research available to date, scholars investigated the news coverage of minorities as an important cause of negative attitudes (e.g. Boomgaarden & de Vreese, 2007; Boomgaarden & Vliegenthart, 2007; Igartua & Cheng, 2009; Schemer, 2012, 2014). Still, it is important to note that political posters differ from news articles in several ways. Posters typically rely on simple

and strongly affective content because they need to convey the intended information quickly and effectively. Accordingly, posters depict foreigners in more blatant and simple ways compared to news articles or television spots. It can thus be theorized that the effects of news cannot be generalized to posters. Research on the effects of populist poster ads is therefore urgently needed.

Therefore, to investigate the effects of anti-immigrant right-wing populist ads, we conducted three experimental studies. In doing so, we refrained from using student samples since they do not warrant generalization to other more heterogeneous populations (Henry, 2008). Since previous studies suggest that formal education (Bos, van der Brug, & de Vreese, 2013) and political knowledge (Schemer, 2012) crucially influence people's susceptibility for populist communication, a sample, which allows for investigating these important moderators is needed. Therefore, we employed non-student samples in all our studies. Additionally, in one of our studies (Schmuck & Matthes, 2014), we focused on a population segment which is particularly vulnerable to political communication effects and hasn't been taken into account in extant research on populist communication effects: adolescents.

Overall, our research so far tested the underlying mechanisms and boundary conditions for the effects of populist political ads on explicit and implicit attitudes toward foreigners. In doing so, we explored the effects of varying degrees of emotionality (Matthes & Marquart, 2013) and different threat appeals (Schmuck & Matthes, 2014) on explicit as well as on implicit attitudes (Matthes & Schmuck, 2015) toward immigrants. At the heart of our research, we assume that formal education serves as a key moderator for the effects of right-wing populist ads.

Susceptibility to Populist Ads: The Role of Formal Education

There is clear evidence of a strong negative correlation between a respondent's formal education and his or her prejudice against ethnic minorities (Vergeer, Lubbers, & Scheepers, 2000; Wagner & Zick, 1995). For instance, Vergeer and colleagues (2000) observed that the

respondent's formal education level was the most important socio-structural characteristic in perceiving a threat from immigrants and ethnic minorities.

Given the strong existing support for the negative correlation between formal education and prejudice against ethnic minorities, we can assume that formal education may also moderate the effect of populist advertisements on people's overall attitudes (Cao, 2008). There is a wealth of research in the context of political communication which suggests that individual-level variables such as intelligence (McGuire, 1997), political knowledge (Delli Carpini, 2000), political awareness (Zaller, 1992), issue-specific knowledge (Biek, Wood, & Chaiken, 1996) or formal education (Cao, 2008) have the capacity to moderate communication effects. For instance, studies show that more intelligent as well as politically more attentive individuals are more likely to receive a message, but are less likely to be influenced by their persuasive content (McGuire, 1997; Zaller, 1992). In terms of political knowledge, studies show that knowledgeable citizens are less likely to change their opinions in the face of new but irrelevant or misleading information. However, if the new message is relevant or compelling to them better informed individuals tend to change their opinions more than less informed ones (Delli Carpini, 2000).

Furthermore, Wood, Kallgren and Preisler (1985) could show that recipients with higher levels of attitude-relevant information base their opinion change on the quality of message content while individuals with lower levels rely on heuristics and relatively superficial cues such as message length. A study by Schemer (2012) provides support for the assumption that issue-specific knowledge influences the persuasion process. Thus, it appears that the impact of media portrayals on attitudes toward immigrants is not universal; knowledgeable individuals seem to be more resistant to the influence of positive and negative news portrayals of immigrants. However, scholars have operationalized knowledge in many different ways.

In our studies, formal education was chosen as moderator for two important reasons. First, formal education is considered a form of issue-unspecific knowledge. It equips individuals not only with knowledge but also with the cognitive skills to acquire knowledge (Cao, 2008; Delli Carpini, 2000). Second, formal education can better explain a perceived economic threat from immigration than issue-specific knowledge since the level of formal education and socio-economic status of an individual are usually highly correlated.

In a first study (Matthes & Marquart, 2013) we investigated the effects of right-wing populist political advertising on people's affective and cognitive evaluations of immigrants. For this purpose, an experimental study with a non-student sample ($n = 137$) was conducted in Switzerland. We designed three different versions of right-wing populist political ads of the Swiss right-wing populist party SVP by varying the degree of emotionality. The political ad was embedded into the online edition of a Swiss newspaper to ensure a realistic setting. Participants in the low emotional condition were exposed to a political ad by the SVP with a slogan that aimed to transmit a threat by immigrants to Swiss citizens. In the moderate emotional condition a stereotypical picture of women in burkas was added on the ad. Finally, the political ad in the high emotional condition showed a child in a traditional Swiss dress crying in front of the women in burkas. Participants in the control group saw no stereotypical ad. The measurement of attitudes toward immigrants was threefold: Beside the assessment of cognitive and affective evaluations of immigrants after ad exposure the change in negative attitudes toward immigrants was measured by calculating the difference between the attitude before and after ad exposure.

The findings revealed that the high emotional ad enhanced both, negative cognitive as well as negative affective attitudes toward immigrants. However, these effects were qualified by people's formal education level. The results indicated that lower educated individuals were more easily persuaded by the message transported by the high-emotionalized ad. They changed their

attitude toward immigrants in a negative way, whereas higher educated people didn't adjust their opinion of immigrants in response to the populist ad (see Figure 1). Higher educated people in contrast rejected the political ad's message. Interestingly, the effects were independent from party predisposition.

Findings suggest that higher perceived threats from immigrants of people with lower education might explain this finding. The integrated threat theory (Stephan & Stephan, 2000) suggests that perceived economic and symbolic threats induce negative attitudes toward immigrants. Both types of threats may be more salient for lower educated individuals. However, this study included only symbolic threat appeals in populist advertising. Thus, we didn't know how economic threat appeals would affect people's attitudes toward immigrants. Therefore, in a second study we distinguished between these two threat appeals in right-wing populist advertising.

Moreover, previous research has shown that young voters in particular favor right-wing populist parties (Betz, 1994; Bottos et al., 2014; Lucassen & Lubbers, 2012; Minkenberg & Pytlas, 2012). However, most studies on political advertising effects on young people apply student samples (Kaid, et al., 2007; Kaid, Fernandes, & Painter, 2011), which do not allow taking into account important moderators such as education. Thus, our second study addressed adolescents, a population segment, which is especially vulnerable to political communication effects.

Symbolic Threats, Economic Threats, and the Effects on Young Citizens

Right-wing populist parties often make use of two different persuasive strategies: *economic* and *symbolic* threat appeals. Economic threats on the one hand refer to the material well-being of the in-group (Stephan et al., 1998). The aim of this strategy is to gain the voter's support by triggering anxiety about the costs of immigration. Symbolic threats, in contrast, aim to transfer

the feeling that the in-group's system of values is being undermined by immigrants (Stephan et al., 1998). Right-wing populist political ads applying symbolic threat appeals often transfer a distorted picture of specific social groups and religions. Since perceived threats play an important role in the formation of negative attitudes toward immigrants, an elaborated consideration of these threat appeals' effects is warranted.

In addition, investigating the effects of right-wing populist campaigns on young adults is of crucial importance since young citizens are especially vulnerable to political advertising. They often do not have established political attitudes, thus their attitudes towards issues and candidates are more open to the influence of political parties (Adriaansen, van Praag, & de Vreese, 2011). Since young adulthood is an important stage for establishing political orientations and forming opinions (Gniewosz, Noack, & Buhl, 2009), young citizens are an attractive target group for political actors. In the context of right-wing populism, the extent to which young people's attitudes are influenced by right-wing populist advertisements deserves special attention because decisions made in adulthood may have lasting effects (Perry, Sibley, & Duckitt, 2013).

To examine the effects of right-wing populist advertisements on young people's attitudes toward immigrants we conducted an experimental study with 162 Austrian adolescents between 16 and 19 years (Schmuck & Matthes, 2014). Similar to our first study, we aimed at examining the moderating role of formal education. For this purpose, pupils from different Austrian school types were recruited. Participants with lower education levels were in an apprenticeship occupation and attended vocational schools ($n = 84$). Participants with higher education levels were recruited from a high school ($n = 78$), which is usually followed by university. The study took place in the class rooms.

Within the experimental study, pupils viewed three political advertisements in each condition (control, symbolic threat, economic threat). In the control condition participants did not

view a stereotypical populist ad; instead they viewed a neutral ad by the Austrian Freedom Party (Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs, FPÖ) (with no cue to immigrants) as well as two bogus political advertisements unrelated to the dependent variables. Participants in the symbolic threat and economic threat treatment groups were exposed to one stereotypical poster ad by the FPÖ and the same two bogus ads. The ads were modified for the study but resembled original political ads by the Swiss SVP and the Austrian FPÖ.

The findings of this study revealed that threat appeals did not equally affect all young adults. Again, we found a moderating effect of the individuals' formal education level – however, this time for the economic threat appeal. Economic threat appeals increased negative attitudes toward immigrants of less educated young adults, whereas those with higher education were resistant to the effects of the same appeal (See Figure 2). Thus, the findings suggest that populist ads, which focus on threatened resources due to immigration, were more powerful among young adults who were less educated. This might be explained by their career situation. Early education leavers usually face more difficulties in the labor market compared to those who continue their studies (Bottos et al., 2014). The economic threats were, therefore, very real for young adults with lower education. However, symbolic threat appeals in right-wing populist advertising did not depend on the formal education level of adolescents. When exposed to a right-wing populist ad, which made symbolic threats from immigrants salient all adolescents expressed more negative attitudes toward immigrants. Again, the effects were independent from party predisposition.

Hence, the results suggest a somewhat different pattern than our first study. In contrast to our first study's findings, this time threats to the cultural identity affected all participants irrespective of their education level suggesting that adolescents differ from adults in their susceptibility to cultural or symbolic threat appeals. Whereas highly educated adults didn't adjust

their attitudes in response to symbolic threat appeals in right-wing populist ads, adolescents changed their attitudes toward immigrants in a negative way.

This might be explained by a greater openness of young adolescents' political attitudes and orientations to the influence of political communication effects (Adriaansen et al., 2011). In contrast to adolescents, higher educated adults might reject these appeals because they are simply too blatant. Huber and Lapinski's (2006, p. 435) found that racial appeals in advertisements were "deemed bad for democracy" by higher educated individuals when these appeals were too explicit. Higher educated people may reject these extreme stereotypic messages by consciously embracing widespread egalitarian norms and suppressing negative stereotypes (Arendt, 2012; Burgess et al., 2011; Huber & Lapinski, 2006).

However, controlling the influence of explicit negative stereotypes on attitudes does not mean that these threat appeals do not influence individuals' automatic affective reactions toward immigrants. Previous research has shown that mass-mediated stereotypes may also influence individual's automatic gut reactions toward immigrants, their so-called implicit attitudes (Arendt, 2012; Greenwald, Nosek, & Banaji, 2003). Some studies even observed an effect on implicit attitudes, but not on explicit attitudes (Burgess et al., 2011). Hence, sole reliance on explicit measures may lead to wrong conclusions about the effects of stereotypical media content. For instance, the activation level of negative associations regarding immigrants may be high even though an individual considers them as inadequate (Devine, 1989; Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2006). When investigating stereotypical content it is therefore of crucial importance to take into account both, explicit and implicit attitudes. Therefore, in a third study we explored the effects of right-wing populist attitudes on explicit as well as on implicit attitudes.

Effects on Explicit as well as Implicit Attitudes

Although our first two studies have enhanced our understanding of negative attitudes toward immigrants in response to right-wing populist political advertisements there remained some important research gaps. First, the two studies have revealed that formal education plays a crucial role when investigating populist ads' effects. However, the designs of these studies did not allow for an examination of the underlying mechanisms, which might explain *why* right-wing populist ads shape citizens' attitudes toward foreigners. Second, right-wing populist ads may not only have an impact on overtly expressed judgments (explicit attitudes) but may also influence automatic "gut reactions" toward immigrants (implicit attitudes). With regard to the moderating role of formal education this distinction is especially important: Higher educated people may control their openly expressed judgments in response to populist ads while they may still be susceptible to implicit attitudinal effects. However, so far political advertising research has mostly neglected the measurement of automatically activated, implicit attitudes.

Prior research on the formation of negative attitudes toward immigrants has revealed that perceived symbolic and economic threats as well as negative stereotypes and fear of interaction with immigrants can strengthen negative attitudes toward foreigners (Stephan et al., 2005). Although scholars have provided support for each of these threats, the findings suggest that for prejudicial attitudes toward subordinate groups negative stereotypes and intergroup anxiety are generally stronger predictors of negative attitudes than realistic or symbolic threats (Stephan et al. 1998).

Regular exposure to stereotypic messages like those transmitted by anti-immigrant populist advertising may contribute to the development of stereotypical memory traces, which can easily be re-activated (e.g., primed) by subsequent exposure (Arendt, Marquart, & Matthes, 2015). Moreover, political poster ads of anti-immigration parties typically depict foreigners in a threatening or violent context or they transmit a threat posed by immigrants by emphasizing the

dissimilarity of culture and religion. These negative portrayals may increase the fear of interactions with the out-group. Consequently, we expected that right-wing populist advertising would evoke both, negative stereotypes and intergroup anxiety, which in turn influence negative attitudes toward immigrants. However, we also assumed that these effects would be stronger for lower educated individuals. First, we expected the effects of right-wing populist ads to be weaker for people with higher education because they are more likely to control or suppress the blatant stereotypes in anti-immigrant advertisements (Hansen & Hansen, 1988; Huber & Lapinski, 2006). Second, we assumed that individuals with less knowledge or education were more likely to consider affect when forming judgments than are higher educated individuals (Petty & Wegener, 1999). Thus, populist political ads may elicit stronger intergroup anxiety for lower educated compared to higher educated individuals.

To test these assumptions, we conducted another experimental study with 199 non-student participants (Matthes & Schmuck, 2015). The study was conducted as an online survey-embedded experiment among Austrian citizens. To assess the role of formal education three educational groups were created: Individuals with university degree (highly educated group), individuals with higher-level school degree (moderately educated), and individuals with secondary school or apprenticeship (lower educated group). Similar to our second study we aimed at distinguishing between the effects of right-wing populist ads with economic and symbolic threat appeals. However, the economic condition had to be dropped from the analysis due to invalid stimuli.

Participants in the control condition were exposed to commercial advertisements while those in the symbolic threat condition viewed three modified populist ads by the Austrian FPÖ with pictures of Muslim immigrants to evoke a cultural threat from immigrants. Immigrants of Muslim countries are often perceived as a particular threat due to supposed lacking compatibility

with the national culture (Appel, 2012; Rydgren, 2007). Moreover, several European right-wing populist parties (such as the SVP, Front National, FPÖ, or Vlaams Belang) have used political ads depicting Muslim immigrants or women in burkas in their electoral campaigns. As one major innovation of this study, we introduced the notion of implicit attitudes. There are strong grounds to theorize that populist campaigns do not only affect citizens' explicit judgments, but also their automatic gut feelings toward foreigners. The strength of the automatic associations was measured using an online version of the Implicit Association Test (IAT) that is based on the paper version (Arendt, 2010; Greenwald et al., 1998)

As could be expected from our first two studies, our findings showed that right-wing populist ads affected explicit attitudes of those with lower formal education but not of those with moderate or high education. They did so by activating negative stereotypes and intergroup anxiety. Prior studies have shown that negative stereotypes and intergroup anxiety are the most consistent predictors of negative attitudes toward foreigners (Stephan et al., 1998). Our results corroborated these findings: Negative stereotypes and intergroup anxiety were strong predictors for negative attitudes toward immigrants. Furthermore, ad exposure and education also interacted in their effects on implicit attitudes. Yet, this time, not people with lower but people with *higher* educational degrees showed significant effects on implicit attitudes. Individuals with lower educational degrees already scored very high in the control condition, therefore a further increase might have been less likely.

Hence, perfectly in line with our first study, we found that symbolic or cultural threat appeals in right-wing populist advertising were more powerful in shaping explicit attitudes for individuals who are less educated. Beyond this finding, however, this study revealed that higher negative stereotypes and intergroup anxiety in response to anti-immigrant appeals in populist advertising mediate the effect on explicit attitudes. Thus, these mechanisms provide an

explanation for the different effects on attitudes toward immigrants of higher and lower educated individuals. However, the most important implication of this study is that education does not protect the electorate from populist campaigns: Even those with high education are affected, albeit in more subtle ways.

Conclusion

In sum, our research so far has shown that right-wing populist campaigns have the potential to shape citizens' attitudes toward immigrants. Within three experimental studies we tested the underlying mechanisms and boundary conditions such as the advertisements' degree of emotionality and type of threat appeal for populist ad effects on explicit and implicit attitudes. In line with prior research (e.g. Bos et al., 2013) our studies revealed that individuals with lower formal education were especially vulnerable to populist communication effects. Beyond this finding, we found that evoked stereotypes and intergroup anxiety are underlying mechanisms of populist ad effects and may explain why lower educated are more susceptible to those communication forms. According to the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), individuals with less ability and motivation to process complex information rely on heuristic cues to a higher degree. Simple slogans and stereotypical pictures can be considered as heuristic cues, as no substantial arguments are present. Individuals with lower education may have less knowledge about immigration and may consequently have less cognitive resources and less motivation to counter-argue those ads compared with people with higher educational degrees. As they are less motivated to arrive at an accurate judgment about minorities and less inclined to correct prejudicial thoughts, they are less likely to suppress evoked negative stereotypes or intergroup anxiety than people with higher education (Schemer, 2012).

Beside the effects of right-wing populist ads on the general population, we also investigated how these ads affect a target group, which is especially attractive for right-wing populist parties:

young people. Populist parties are still highly supported by young voters in many countries (see Bottos et al., 2014 for an overview). Moreover, their attitudes towards issues and candidates are more open to the influence of political parties than those of adults (Adriaansen, et al., 2011). Indeed, we found that adolescents were especially susceptible to populist advertising effects. While for adults only those with lower education were affected by symbolic threat appeals, the education level was irrelevant for the symbolic ad effects on adolescents. In contrast, for economic threat appeals the same pattern as in our other studies was revealed: Only those with lower education changed their attitudes in a negative way. Since we compared pupils, which were already employed with pupils attending high school, these findings seem very comprehensible. However, our third study's findings suggest that the lacking effect on explicit attitudes does not mean that higher educated individuals aren't affected by those ads at all. On the contrary, subtle advertising effects on implicit attitudes may especially be present for people with higher educational degrees. That is, our spontaneous reactions or gut feelings cannot be controlled by our deliberative efforts. In other words, such advertising effects fall below our radar. How we can overcome such subtle influence remains an open question. However, our findings stress the necessity of including explicit as well as implicit measures in research on right-wing populist campaigns.

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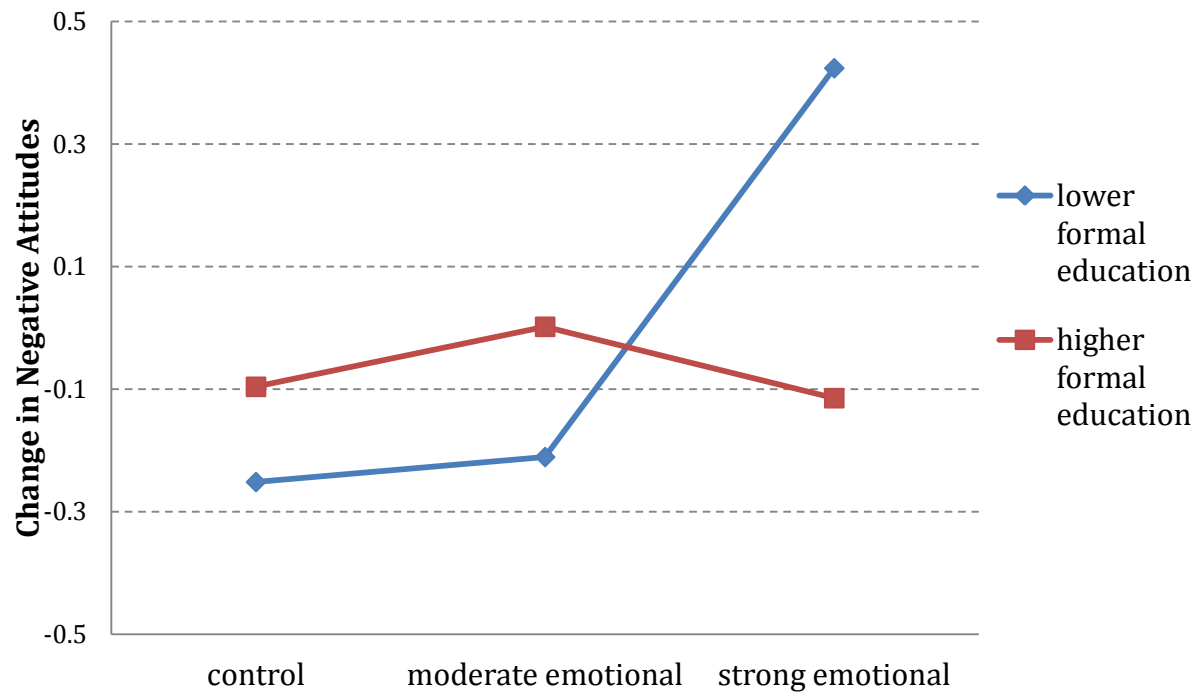


FIGURE 1

The effects of emotional right-wing populist ads on attitude change by education

Note. Higher values denote that attitudes became more negative.

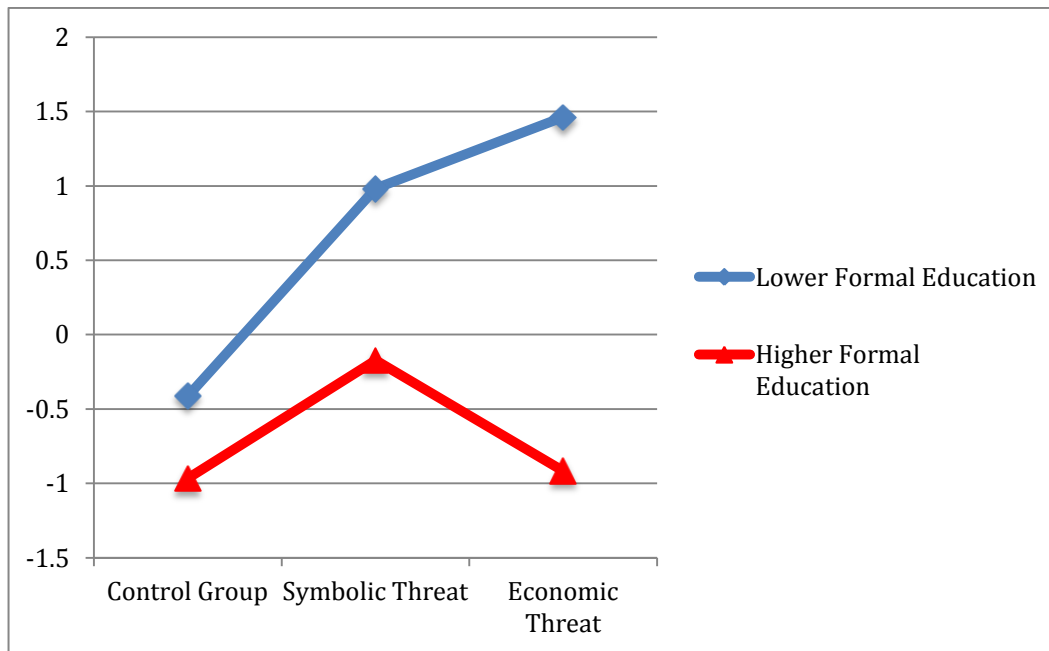


FIGURE 2

The effect of symbolic and economic threat appeals on attitude change toward immigrants as a function of formal education level.

Note. Higher values denote that attitudes became more negative. $N = 162$ ($n_{\text{control}} = 55$, $n_{\text{symbolic}} = 58$, $n_{\text{economic}} = 49$)

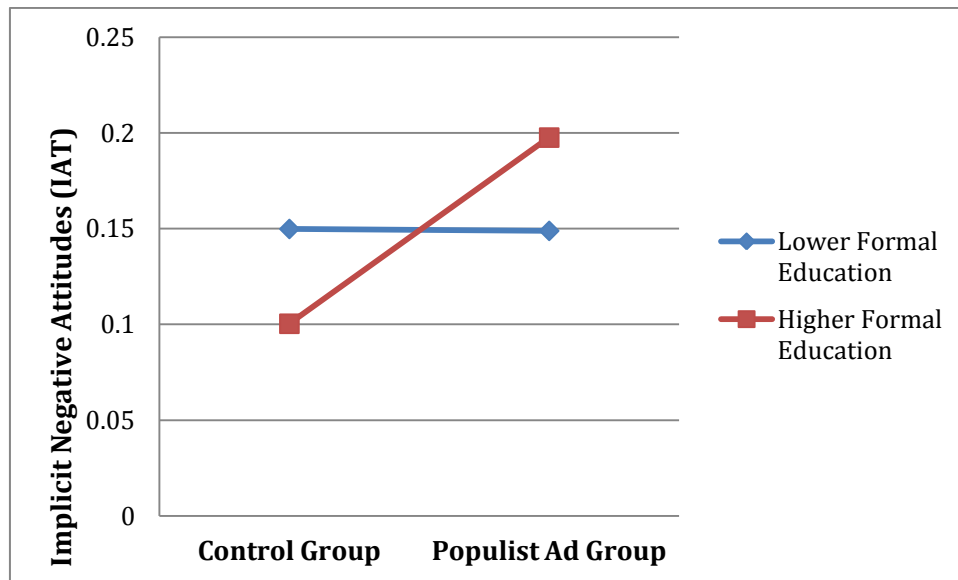


FIGURE 3

Effects of Right-Wing Populist Ads on Negative Implicit Attitudes by Formal Education