Examining the Social Side of Populism through Behavioral Games

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ABSTRACT

Recent research at the microlevel gives us insights into what activates citizens' populist attitudes. However, we know less about what induces populist behavior or action, especially cooperative action in a party or movement. We explore the social side of populism through an experimental research design involving behavioral games, together with a new priming exercise based on sentence unscrambling. We discuss two pilot studies in light of our expectations; we seek feedback from our peers on the various parts of the design itself as we prepare to move forward. Using this experimental structure, we hope to speak to other areas of the conference and offer possibilities for a more generalized framework of experimental design for the study of populism.

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In many ways, the causes of populism remain obscure. Scholars studying parties and countries have suggested a series of explanations rooted either in sociological theories concerning the impact of globalization on voter demands (Kriesi et al. 2012), or historical theories emphasizing the impact of colonial legacies on corruption and democratic governance (de la Torre 2010; Hawkins 2010). The implication of these studies is that most voters have similar cognitive processes and that their preferences can easily be read from social context.

However, efforts to understand populism at the individual level have lagged behind. Recent research gives us some insights into what makes individuals support populist parties and movements. We know, for example, that populist attitudes are common (Akkerman, Mudde, and Zaslove 2014; Hawkins, Riding, and Mudde 2012), and that the framing provided by leaders is essential for activating and directing those attitudes (Bos, Van Der Brug, and De Vreese 2013). Our understanding of populist framing continues to develop, and recent research suggests that a key mechanism in populist frames is the ability to attribute blame to specific actors with agency, rather than impersonal forces and events (Hawkins et al. 2014a).

However, we know less about what induces populist *behavior* or *action.* In the context of populism, this usually means support for an actual party or movement. Current experiments and survey research show a willingness or intent to support populist candidates or causes, but in these tests no actual vote is cast, no real money or time is given to another human being. Self-reports may therefore misrepresent populist attitudes as they involve only survey responses rather than more realistic, costly choices. Thus, the social side of populism—what makes a person join with others to support an actual populist cause—has not been explored.

Without laying aside current insights into attitudes and framing, we want to explore what drives populist behavior in this expanded way. Putting it differently, we propose to explore the *social* side of populism with the help of *behavioral games.* In the following we report our results from two pilot studies implemented at the Political Science Research lab at Northwestern University, with a particular focus on the different research designs employed. Although results seem to point in the right direction, they also suggest major problems with our experimental design. We thus take this as an opportunity to present what we have learned so far from our endeavor and hope to gain valuable feedback on where to go next with targeted questions for our audience.

As with other papers at this conference, we proceed on the basis of an ideational definition of populism. Specifically, we define populism as a political discourse in which politics is seen as a Manichaean struggle between the will of ordinary citizens and a conspiring elite (de la Torre 2010; Laclau 2005; Mudde 2004). Because this definition is shared by other participants, we do not say anything further about this definition here.

Activating Populism: The Mechanism

The starting point for our underlying causal mechanism is recent micro-level explanations for populism, which have emphasized the framing effect of populist discourse in triggering latent populist attitudes (Bos, Van Der Brug, and De Vreese 2013). To this, we add the understanding that attitudes often require contextual triggers, which serve to activate existing latent dispositions (e.g., Chanley 1994; Tett and Guterman 2000; Cesario et al. 2010). More specifically, we focus on perceived normative threat as a catalyst in activating populist perspectives (as has research on

authoritarianism and political tolerance; see Feldman 2003; Hetherington and Weiler 2009; Stenner 2005; Gibson and Gouws 2003).

We also begin with the assumption that populism is best regarded as a latent set of individual attitudes or dispositions. Of course, there will be variation in these latent attitudes and dispositions, which will be mediated by both observable (such as education, wealth etc.) and unobservable (such as personality traits etc.) variables. Nonetheless, most individuals ascribe to a number of populist attitudes (Akkerman, Mudde, and Zaslove 2014; Hawkins, Riding, and Mudde 2012).

For co-operation with co-activists, in a first step, these latent attitudes and dispositions must be activated. They must be activated in the mind, made salient by some context or life experience. More specifically, to provide the successful context for the activation of populist attitudes, a perceived normative threat to the community must be present. This threat can take many forms. Examples include an increase in migration from different cultural backgrounds threatening the perceived cultural homogeneity of a community; a change in the economic context posing a challenge to existing community livelihoods or homes; or a proposed change to community decision-making structures potentially undermining community autonomy.[1]

However, normative threats do not automatically activate latent populist dispositions. This type of threat is a necessary, but insufficient, condition for the activation of populism. Once a normative threat is present, the extent of latent populist activation depends on how this threat is framed. Similar to previous work (Bos, Van Der Brug, and De Vreese 2013), we suggest that populist language by politicians, co-activists, and the media is a powerful trigger that activates latent attitudes among individuals. This language works in two ways: first, by attributing blame to knowing agents (rather than impersonal forces) who can be seen as part of a political elite, and second, by showing that a large number of citizens (the democratic subject) are endangered by the threat. Of course, not all populist discourse will activate latent populist attitudes; in this regard, we differ from other studies which imply that framing can act in isolation. Rather, we see an interaction between threat and framing. Populist language and discourse can facilitate the activation of populism by aiding individuals to frame an existing threat as a consequence of elite conspiracy—but without a credible threat, populist language will ring hollow or nonsensical.

Once populist attitudes are aroused and directed towards a threat, the next step is cooperation and participation with like-minded individuals. Typically, this action takes the form of a populist party or movement. What determines when individuals join in this cooperation and participation? Social movement theory provides some insights. For example, prominent social movement theorists have highlighted the incentives to overcome collective action problems to form and build movements and coalitions (e.g. Levi and Murphy 2006). Other micro-level explanations for social movement success have focused on the affinity and shared views of

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[1] In fact, we think that only certain types of normative threats are suitable for populist framing and action. Populism is a reaction to perceived violations of *democratic* norms of citizenship, or the idea that as citizens we are entitled to equal treatment before the law if we fulfill our own democratic obligations. And it requires a credible claim that the threat is a result of elite design. Some normative threats will not "count" here because they fail to invoke one of these conditions. For example, environmental degradation is often the result of a collective action problem for which all citizens are responsible; terrorist threats are created by an external force that is not really an elite; and the decline in traditional values is the result of a large number of citizens changing their beliefs.

activists (e.g. Milstein 2004). In this scenario, activists initially come together because of a shared bond, usually their common identification and framing of a problem or threat.

We think it is reasonable to expect that among individuals with activated populist attitudes, cooperation with co-activists will occur when these co-activists are perceived as sharing similar populist attitudes. Similar populist attitudes, in terms of blame attribution and framing of perceived normative threats, will help establish shared identities and bonds that will allow for increased co-operation. Therefore, we hypothesize that *individuals with populist attitudes will be more inclined to cooperate with co-activists when those co-activists express similar populist attitudes.*[2]

Figure 1 depicts this causal mechanism. Here, *T*, the treatment, casually affects *Y*, the outcome variable (co-operation with co-activists or not), through the mediator *M*. *M* represents framing and discourse, which creates or directs the sense of fear as a consequence of the perceived normative threat and transmits the causal effect of the treatment on to *Y*. *N* is an observed mediator, and represents the similarity in attitudes of co-activists. Where co-activists have/express similar populist attitudes, and where discourse and language have framed the threat in a populist manner, then activist co-operation and by extension, movement success will occur. In contrast, lacking framing or a co-activist with similar attitudes, then the causal effect of *T* will be undermined. The direct line between *T* and *Y* represents all other mechanisms (Imai et al. 2011, 768).
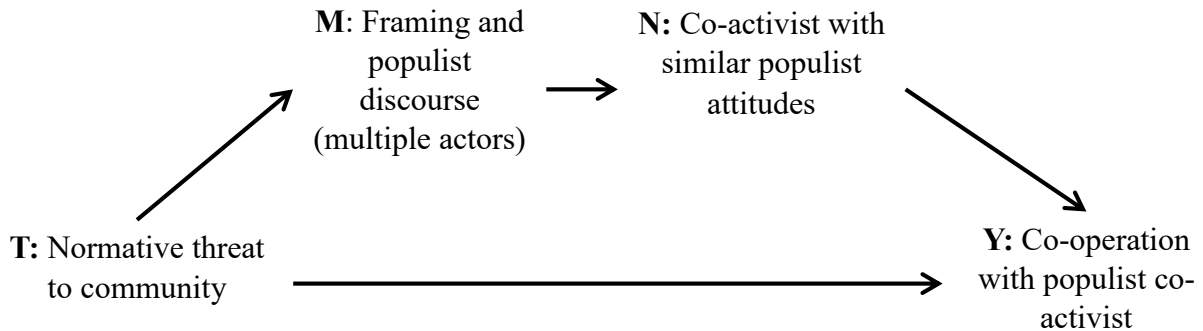

Figure 1: The Causal Mechanism

Experimental Design and Procedures

As pointed out, we propose testing this model through well-established behavioral games in a laboratory setting. We opt for behavioral games because we are specifically interested in the social side of the causal mechanism (in Figure 1, outcome Y).

Economics, especially behavioral economics, has increasingly relied on these kind of games to examine individuals' preferences, assumptions about rationality, attitudes towards risk,

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[2] Although we do not directly test it here, social movement theory (e.g. McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001) also highlights the importance of brokerage, that is, brokers who bring together those of similar disposition into a single movement. Populist politicians play such a role. They knit together individuals of similar attitudes, and frame perceived threats in such a way as to foster relational mechanisms.

and strategic interactions (Smith 1976; Henrich et al. 2001; Levitt and List 2007; Cesarini et al. 2009). The typical procedure in behavioral games is to give the subjects a set of instructions and monetary incentive to set up an interaction with another person (or computer).

These kinds of stylized games come with many benefits. Experimenters exercise a high degree of control over subjects' preferences, the immediate context, and the nature of social interactions. In the context of our studies, the benefits of these kinds of games are twofold: they provide us with a way to gauge populist behavior that is meaningful to subjects, and they allow us to tightly control the context in which subjects make these choices. Our design incorporates the benefits from the traditional economic approach with tactics frequently used in psychologically-oriented experiments (Dickson 2011). We thus use these games as way to establish behavior effects from populism in a way that goes beyond self-reported preference for candidates or hypothetical votes. The central question of our experimental approach therefore is how the interaction of populist discourse and populist framing with a populist partner impacts cooperative behavior.

We used these games in two different experiments, testing the mechanisms described in Figure 1. Both experiments were carried out at the Political Research Lab at Northwestern University. In the sections below, we describe the design and results of these experiments.

Experiment 1: Research Design

We devised a lab experiment with a 2 x 2 design to explore the nexus of threat, attitude activation, and behavior. This involved two different treatments. The first treatment was not a test of the social argument outlined here, but part of an earlier pilot attempt to explore the subtleties of populist discourse. It aimed at manipulating the subject's own activation of populist attitudes through a priming exercise– a sentence unscrambling exercise of our own design – to arouse the subjects' populist attitudes. The second treatment—and the real test of the social argument— exposed the subjects to their partners' discourse or interpretation of a threat, which either used a populist frame (the treatment) or a pluralist one (the control). Across all treatments, we held threat constant.

Our subject pool consisted of 174 undergraduate students from courses related to political science and political science research from Northwestern University. These individuals are not representative of the population of the United States nor of university students generally; however, the pool of subjects contains nontrivial amounts of variation in political ideology and demographic characteristics. The experiment was conducted in the spring of 2015.

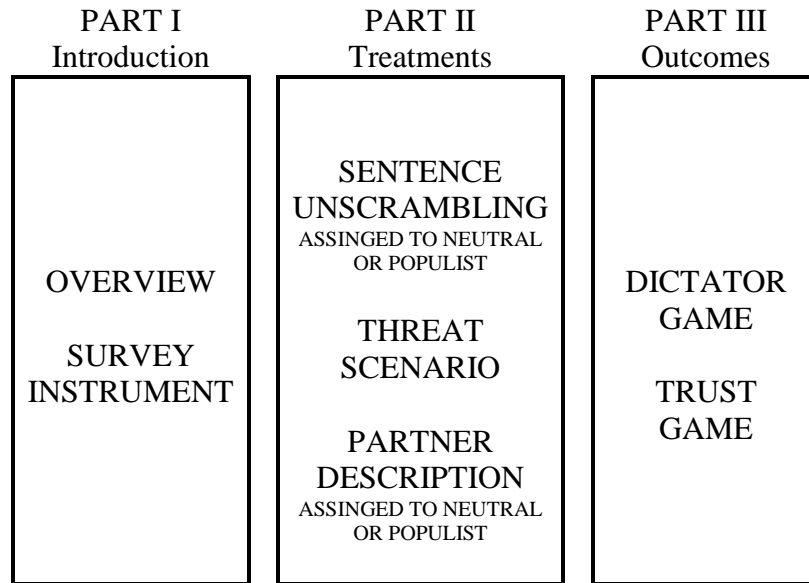| PART I Introduction	PART II Treatments	PART III Outcomes
OVERVIEW SURVEY INSTRUMENT	SENTENCE UNSCRAMBLING ASSINGED TO NEUTRAL OR POPULIST THREAT SCENARIO PARTNER DESCRIPTION ASSINGED TO NEUTRAL OR POPULIST	DICTATOR GAME TRUST GAME

Figure 2 Parts of Experiment 1

Figure 2 lays out the general structure of the experiment, which consisted of three parts; in all three, subjects completed the experiment in isolation from other participants and the study administrators. Part I began upon arrival to the lab, when participants were told that they would complete several tasks during the experiment. Following this brief overview, subjects completed an introductory survey instrument measuring relevant individual-level characteristics, such as demographic information and other control variables to rule out competing explanations. The survey also included an inventory of 15 items on subjects' explicit populist attitudes. This inventory has been used and validated in the United States, the Netherlands, Chile, and in other countries (Hawkins, Riding, and Mudde 2012; Hawkins et al. 2014a; Akkerman, Mudde, and Zaslove 2014). It provides an important control for the level of populist attitudes that subjects have prior to the experimental treatments. The text of these items can be found in the sample of the instrument in the Appendix.

Part II of the experiment consisted of the actual treatment manipulations. There were two sets of treatments in this design. The first, the priming task, relied on the unscrambling of sentences to prime ideas connected to populism and this place the treatment group in a 'populist' frame of mind.[3] In general, priming treatments work by activating ideas and concepts in subjects' minds as they complete the priming tasks, which here involved constructing a meaningful sentence with four out of five given words in a scrambled order (Srull and Wyer 1979). As subjects interact with the words and sentences in what is labeled as a language task, they are influenced by the content of the sentences. Ideas related to the topics of those sentences then

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[3] See appendix for examples and the introductory statements to this task. In both conditions, either control or treatment, subjects were introduced to the task, walked through two examples, and then proceeded to the phrases of interest.

become more accessible during later portions of the study, going on to influence evaluations and behaviors unrelated to the primes themselves (Higgins 1996).[4]

For these priming treatments, participants at their terminals were randomly assigned to a control and a treatment group. Both groups had to complete the task of constructing a meaningful sentence, a task described to participants as a language, reading, and grammar task. The control group received neutral words embodying pragmatic discourse, while the treatment group received populist phrases.

Following this priming exercise, subjects received the second, social treatment. To start the treatment, each participant was asked to read a short vignette designed to create a sense of threat within a populist frame. This task was presented to subjects as helping to prepare them to work with their partners. Due to the nature of populism, which requires a struggle and a blame attribution to a responsible group of people, our study required a credible, serious threat attributable to some elite figures that also applied equally to all of the experimental subjects. We therefore aimed at developing a threat scenario that would be relevant to our specific group of subjects, all of whom were Northwestern students.

Previous (unrelated) research indicated that participants in the Northwestern lab perceived a sense of threat in relation to academic issues and their future prospects after graduation.[5] Based on this information, we presented students with a threat that stated that the reputation of Northwestern had been suffering and that, as a result, Northwestern graduates were having greater difficulties finding employment. To increase credibility, the scenario cited reputable media articles as the source of their information and provided specific statistics. The full text of the threat follows below:

> *"As you know, Northwestern traditionally has had a strong reputation for academic excellence and a good reputation among prospective employers. However, in the last ten years, the reputation of Northwestern has been suffering. According to the US News and World Report College Rankings and the Times Higher Education World University Rankings, Northwestern's ranking has steadily fallen each year. Importantly, employers have begun to notice. A recent article in the Washington Post has shown that in the last ten years, the graduate employment rate (i.e. those graduates who find employment within the first six months after graduating from Northwestern), has fallen by 17 percent. In the last ten years, for those who do find employment after graduation, the average starting salary has fallen by nearly 20 percent. These facts suggest that individuals like you may face significant problems in finding well-paid employment after graduation. All reports suggest that this situation is only going to get worse."*

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[4] The efficacy of the task of unscrambling sentences has been demonstrated repeatedly in the social sciences. They have been used to prime subjects with different ideas—such as stereotyping and prejudice (Banaji, Hardin, and Rothman 1993; Eagly and Mladinic 1994; Müller and Rothermund 2012), meritocracy (McCoy and Major 2007) and puritanism (Uhlmann et al. 2011)—and also to test the effects of valence framing on political attitudes (Bizer and Petty 2005).

[5] A description of this research can be found in a paper by Busby (2015). The relevant results from that study are available upon request.

The vignette containing the threat scenario was then followed by a brief task asking the subjects to discuss "what group or individual is responsible" for the threat and "what should be done about them." This procedure was designed to frame the threat in a populist way and made our claims about their interaction partner more credible (more explanation on this follows). In other studies, we have used these questions successfully to frame normative threats in a populist way (Hawkins et al. 2014b; Hawkins et al. 2014c). The precise wording of these questions can be found in the Appendix.

After the vignette and text-response items, subjects were instructed to "wait a moment" while their partner completed the two free response items with relation to the threat vignette. They were then presented with one of two possible descriptions of their partner,[6] which served as the second treatment.

The control group was told that their partner attributed the threat to their future job prospects as a consequence of the global economic downturn. This partner thus did not attribute any blame to any actors; in fact, the partner was described as feeling that "casting blame will not help the situation". The treatment group, in contrast, was told that their partner attributed this employment threat to the elite university administration, who diverted funds from research and tuition towards management pay rises.[7] The full text of the partner descriptions follows below, with the populist version in bold.

> "Here is some information about the person you will be interacting with for this portion of the study. This information comes from their responses to the previous two questions.
>
> Your partner is also a student at Northwestern and will face many of the same problems that you will after graduation. With regards to this situation, your partner believes that these changes in future prospects for Northwestern graduates have [**been created by the selfish choices of university officials in the central administration. Your partner believes that the drop in academic standards in Northwestern can be traced to how money for research and tuition, over the last few years, has been diverted to increase the salaries of management. Your partner feels the problem is the direct result of bad choices by these groups and these individuals' focus on themselves rather than the students of the university** / simply been created by the economic downturn and global recession. Graduates from Northwestern, and indeed other universities, face a much tougher and competitive economic climate now than a decade

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[6] These instructions are for the purposes of experimental realism only—subjects viewed the responses that they are randomly assigned to view as part of the second treatment. These games were described to the subjects as interactions with another experimental participant; however, they received computer responses. This was to ensure that the actions of subjects did not influence other subjects and to encourage the participants to take the games seriously. All subjects were debriefed about the nature of this interaction following the end of the survey.

[7] However, as it is false, this kind of story required a detailed debrief to ensure that subjects are informed of the true actions of the administration and of the complete nature of the experimental treatments. The text of that debrief can be found in the appendix.

ago. Your partner feels this problem is no one's fault and that casting blame will not help the situation]."

		Partner treatment	
		Control	Treatment
Priming exercise treatment	Control	Neutral prime, Pluralist partner	Neutral prime, Populist partner
	Treatment	Populist prime, Pluralist partner	Populist prime, Populist partner

Figure 3 Treatment Design

Figure 3 shows the distribution of subjects across control and treatment groups suggested by our first research design. While all participants received the same threat, participants in the upper left cell were not primed with populist ideas in the initial unscrambling exercise nor did they encounter a populist partner. Subjects assigned to the lower right cell on the other hand were primed with populist ideas in the unscrambling exercise and interacted with a populist partner. Finally, those in the cells on the lower right and on the upper left received either a populist prime in the form of unscrambling sentences or were teamed up with a populist peer. The aim of experimental design therefore was to better understand the mediating effects of prior populist attitudes/activation on encountering a populist partner.

After reading the partner descriptions, subjects proceeded to Part III of the study. In this part they played two games widely used in behavioral economics: a Dictator Game and a Trust Game. For these games, each participant was given 20 tokens (10 tokens per game). At the conclusion of the experiment, subjects could exchange their tokens for an Amazon gift card.[8] The reward added a touch of realism to the games and incentivized subjects to take them seriously.

In our version of the Dictator Game (Kahneman, Knetsch, and Thaler 1986; Forsythe et al. 1994), participants were asked to freely and anonymously distribute their tokens between themselves and the partner described in their specific vignette. Participants then indicated how many tokens they gave to themselves and how many to their described partner. Hence, the participant's outcome in this game depended only on their own actions. In principle, this game establishes the base level of altruism subjects play these games with. After playing this game, subjects were then informed of their token total, and reassured that these tokens would be given to them at the end of the experiment.

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[8] Each token could be translated into $0.10 on the Amazon gift card.

Participants immediately proceeded to playing the Trust Game (Berg, Dickhaut, and McCabe 1995; Cesarini et al. 2008; Iyengar and Westwood 2014; Johnson and Mislin 2011).[9] As this game is more complex, subjects first received instructions on how to play the game with two explicit examples. The subject was again asked how many tokens they would like to assign to their partner, but this time the number of tokens they gave was immediately quadrupled, and the partner (the computer) then could return some of these tokens to the subject. In our version of the game, the computer could "choose" to keep the entire quadrupled amount or share half of this reward with the original subject.

After the subjects indicated how many tokens they would give to themselves and to their partner, they were again asked to "wait a moment" while their partner (the computer) decided what to do. The computer software then assigned each subject to have a partner who shared the tokens with the subject. Subjects were then informed how many tokens they had won, how many tokens they had from both games, and asked to provide their email address so that they could be emailed their winnings.

At the end of the experiment, participants completed a post-instruction quiz and received a de-brief.[10] The purpose of the post-instruction quiz was to gauge the extent to which participants understood the game; these items can be found in the Appendix. The de-brief explained that the partner was fictitious and provided the subject with correct data about the university while explaining that the data they received in the experiment was false.

Experiment 1 Results

Based on our theoretical priors and our experimental design, we expected to see the highest amount of co-operation and trust among participants that were primed with populist sentences in the unscrambling task and paired with a populist partner. We expected the lowest level of co-operation or trust among those respondents that received neutral sentences in the unscrambling task and non-populist partners. We also expected populist subjects to prefer populist partners, no matter the priming treatment. We were unsure of how the effects of the sentence priming task and populist partners would compare, and therefore did not have firm expectations for conditions where individuals had the priming treatment and a non-populist partner or no priming treatment and a populist partner.

In order to compare these groups, we look at the number of tokens individuals gave to their partners in both the Dictator and Trust games.[11] Using these dependent variables, we do not find evidence for effects from our treatments; that is, we do not see different patterns of token-giving based on the treatments subjects received. This can be seen visually in the bar graphs that follow in figures 4 and 5. In these graphs, a 0 condition refers to neutral sentences in the unscrambling exercise and a 1 condition to populist sentences.

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[9] The exact text of this game and instructions can be found with the questionnaire materials in the appendix. The original trust game varied somewhat in that subjects were told the amount they gave would be tripled and that no description of the partner was provided.

[10] The text of this de-brief can be found in the appendix.

[11] We also performed these analyses only on subjects who demonstrated that they understood the game and completed the unscrambling tasks correctly; these alternative analyses do not improve the results or provide much insight over the comparisons across all subjects.
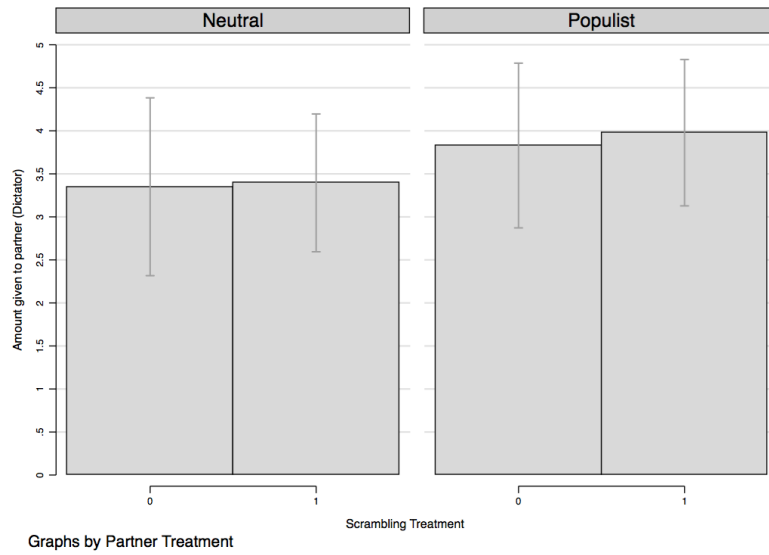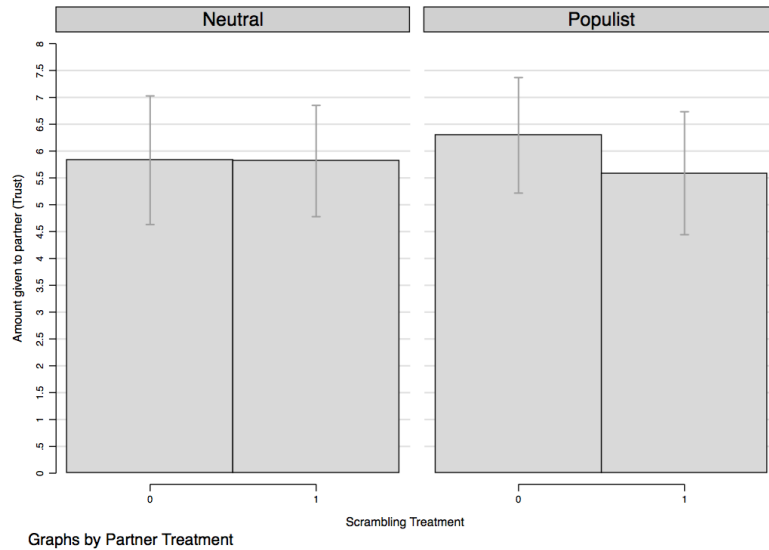
Figure 4: Dictator Game results

Figure 5: Trust Game results

Prior to running this experiment, we suspected that the effects of the treatments might depend on the subjects' populist beliefs. Therefore, we anticipated an interactive effect between the treatment conditions and agreement with the populist inventory mentioned earlier. Despite this anticipation, we see little evidence of treatment effects once we incorporate subjects' populist beliefs, as indicated by figures 6 and 7. The x-axis in these figures displays the prior level of populist attitudes in the subjects while the y-axis measures the number of tokens offered to the subjects' partner.

The only encouraging result of these analyses is the top right quadrant of figures 6 and 7, which suggests that when subjects did not receive a populist prime and interacted with a populist

partner, the level of subjects' prior populist attitudes was related to how many tokens they gave to their partner. This relationship held for both types of games, although the amount of uncertainty in these tests is high. Otherwise, the results of experiment 1 did not confirm our expectations. It seems especially clear that the unscrambling exercise failed to have any effect in the expected direction. This required us to revisit the design of our treatments and dependent variables, leading us to our second experiment.
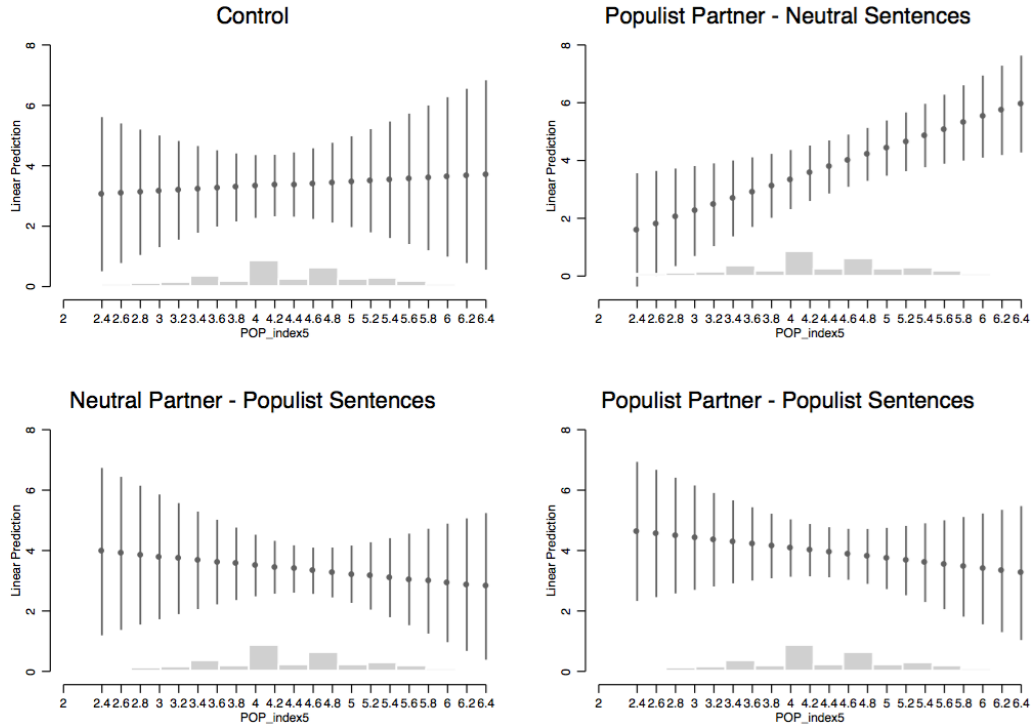

Figure 6: Dictator Game and Populist beliefs
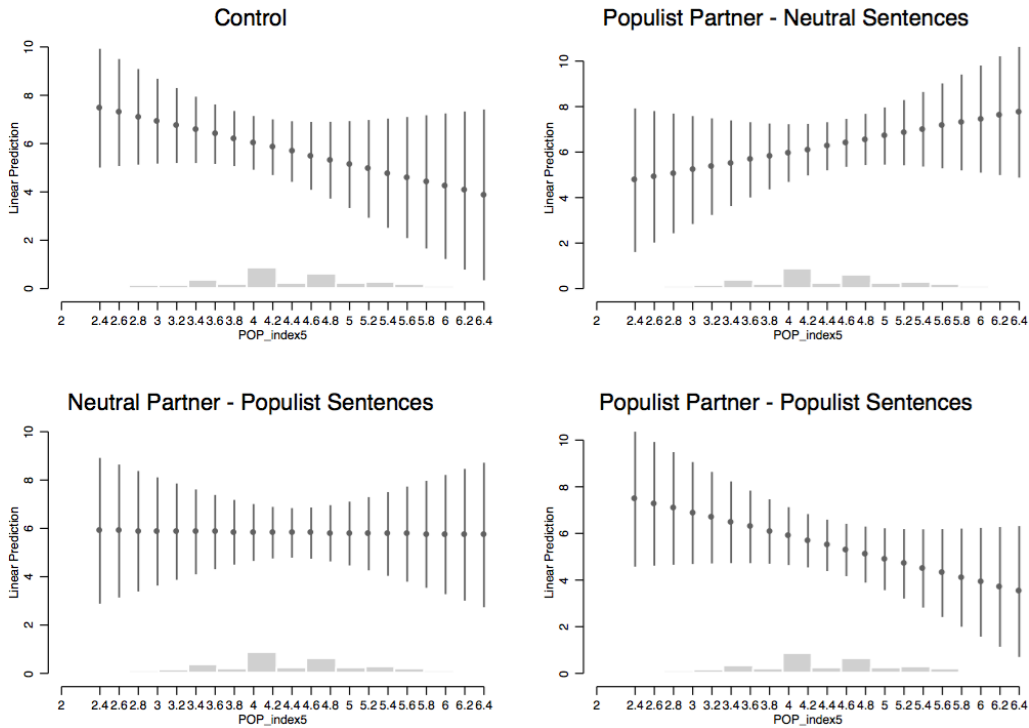
Figure 7: Trust Game and Populist beliefs

Experiment 2: Research Design

In order to better understand the causal mechanisms laid out in Figure 1, we carried out a second experiment at Northwestern University using another sample of undergraduate students from large political science courses. The sample was somewhat smaller, with a total N of 153. Experiment 2 was carried out in the fall of 2015.

In an attempt to clarify the results of experiment 1, we made as few changes as possible between the two experiments. However, there were several elements of our first study that seemed either ineffective or problematic. As a result, the study procedure for experiment 1 remained the same with the following exceptions.

First, we removed the priming task as a treatment. The results from our first experiment suggested that the priming task was not working as we had anticipated and was introducing noise, rather than the expected effect, into our results. We opted to simplify our design by removing this component and simply asking all subjects the unscrambling items at the end of the experiment. These items are therefore no longer treatments; we decided to include them only to observe if they reliably worked as measures of activated populism, after the threat treatments.[12]

Upon further reflection and some feedback from student focus groups, we also determined that our partner descriptions were not credible as responses from a fellow participant in the study. As a result, we redrafted our treatments to be more colloquial and concise. The

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[12] We do not report findings on these unscrambling dependent variables, as the pattern of responses raised more questions than it answered. More details on these analyses are available from the authors upon request.

statements below give the text of the redesigned partner descriptions (populist treatments are in bold):

> Here is some information about the person you will be interacting with for this portion of the study. This information comes from their responses to the previous two questions.

> Your partner is also a student at Northwestern and will face many of the same problems that you will after graduation. With regards to this situation, your partner said:

> **"These changes in future prospects for Northwestern graduates have been created by the selfish choices of the central administration. The administrators created this mess by diverting money for research and tuition to increase their own salaries. This problem is the direct result of bad choices by the administrators and their focus on themselves rather than on helping students like us."** / "These changes in future prospects for Northwestern graduates have been created by the economic downturn and global recession. Graduates from Northwestern, and other universities, face a much tougher and more competitive job market now than a decade ago. This problem is no one's fault, and casting blame won't resolve the situation or help Northwestern graduates."

Other than these two changes, experiment 2 was identical to experiment 1. We used the same threat treatments, populism measures, and behavioral games from our first study. Figure 8 displays the structure of our second experiment, which now has only two treatment conditions (neutral partner or populist partner).
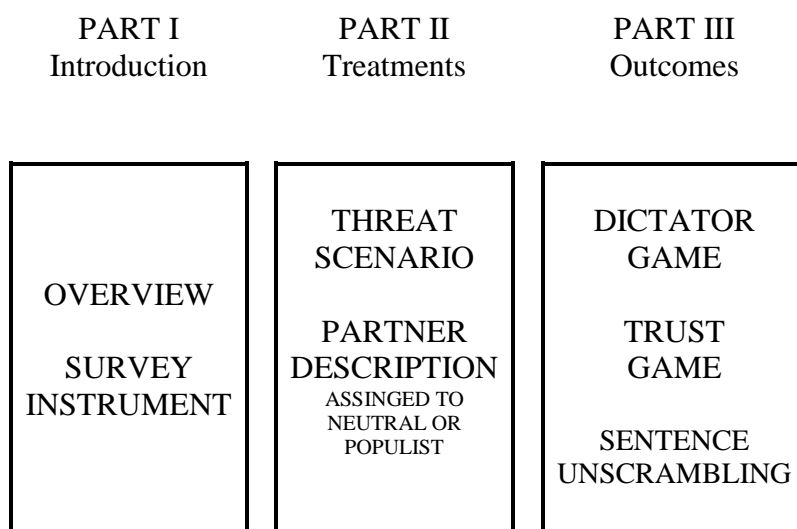
PART I	PART II	PART III
Introduction	Treatments	Outcomes

OVERVIEW SURVEY INSTRUMENT	THREAT SCENARIO PARTNER DESCRIPTION ASSINGED TO NEUTRAL OR POPULIST	DICTATOR GAME TRUST GAME SENTENCE UNSCRAMBLING

Figure 8: Parts of experiment 2

Experiment 2: Results

Going into experiment 2, we hoped to see a few improvements over study 1. Primarily, we hoped that removing the sentence-unscrambling task would remove some of the noise in our results. We also hoped for increased precision, as we had a larger number of individuals in each experimental condition. That is, with only one treatment, a populist partner versus a non-populist

partner, we expected to see higher levels of trust and co-operation among those participants exposed to the populist partner, relative to those exposed to the non-populist partner.

Unfortunately, we saw few improvements between our first and second experiments. As figures 9 and 10 show, we still saw no statistically different patterns of behavior between the treatment groups for either game. In these figures, a 0 partner assignment refers to a nonpopulist partner while a 1 partner references a populist partner. If anything, these results are even more suggestive of a null treatment effect.
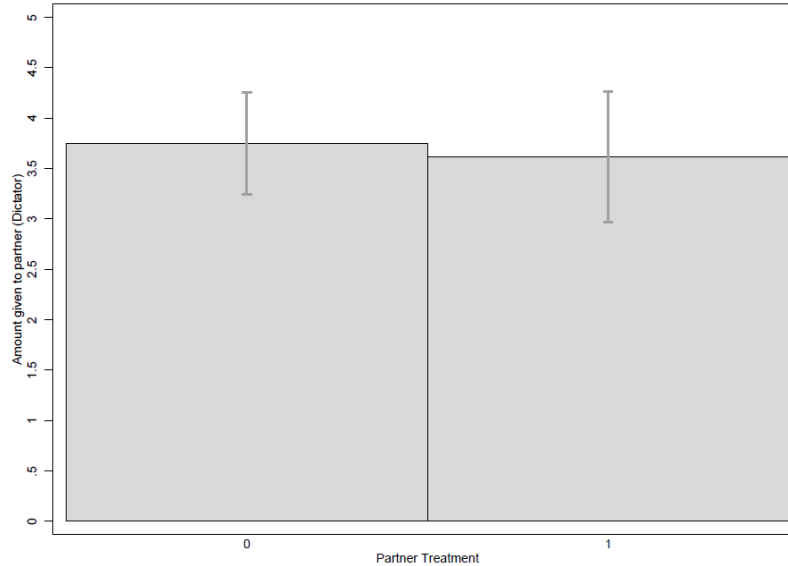
Figure 9: Experiment 2 Dictator Game Results
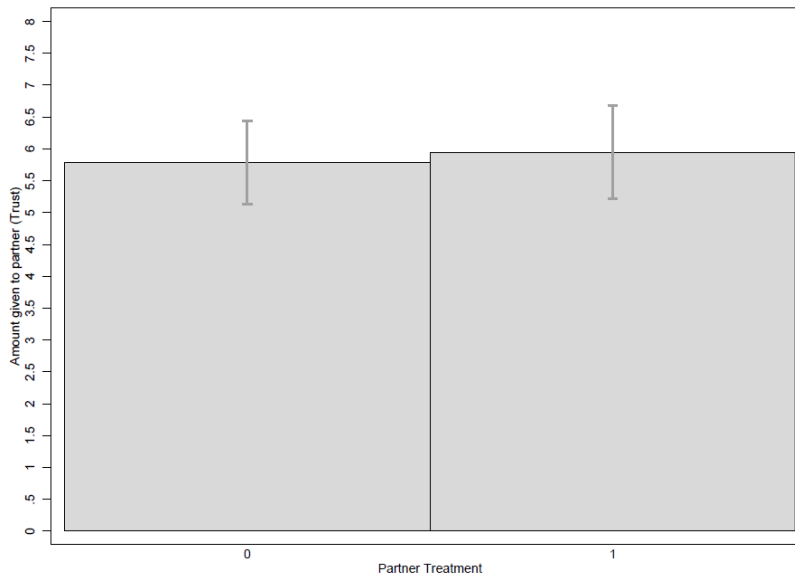
Figure 10: Experiment 2 Trust Game Results

When we incorporate the effect of different levels of populist attitudes, we see roughly the same pattern of effects as we did in experiment 2 (this is evidence in figures 11 and 12). However, the confidence levels are much larger, suggesting that we have not benefited from the

increased sample size in each condition. Even controlling for subjects' prior populist attitudes, we do not see reliable treatment effects.
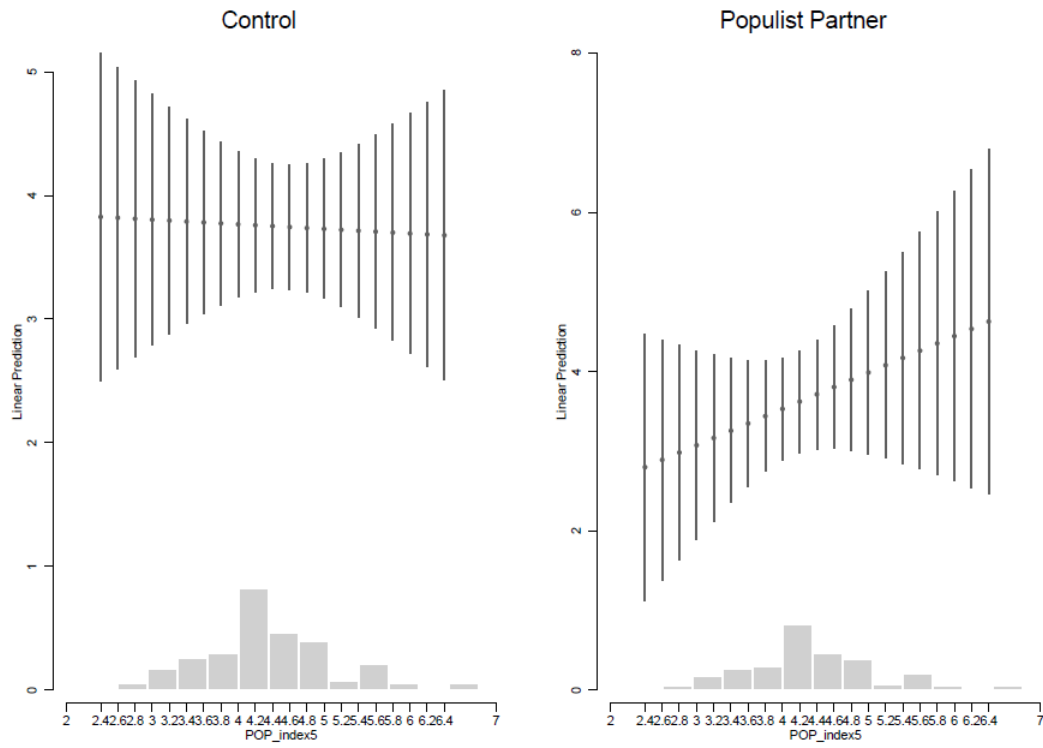

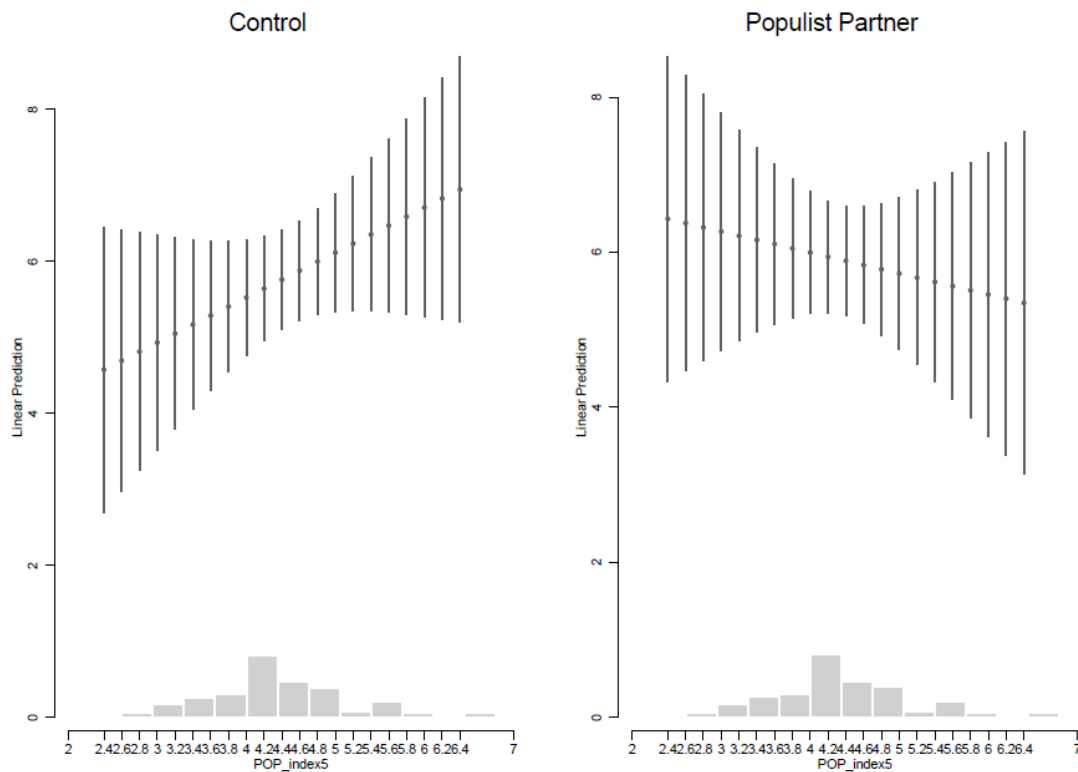Figure 11: Experiment 2 Dictator Game and Populist Beliefs

Figure 12: Experiment 2 Trust Game and Populist Beliefs

What went wrong? Discussion and lingering questions

The primary motivation of our two experiments was to explore the social side of populism. We set out with the intention of trying to understand why, and how, as individuals, we are induced to engage in populist action, particularly cooperative action in a party or movement. As is obvious from our design, we have not examined every factor that is important in predicting support for a populist movement or the social cooperation necessary to sustain populist organizations. This is due to practical constraints and our desire to strip the experiments down to the essentials, to help us make clear, causal inferences. Right now we are at a crossroads with this experimental design. We are hoping that you can help point us in the right direction.

Our first experiment, with our priming exercise and populist partner, was designed to activate our subjects' populist dispositions. Our results tantalizingly suggested that we might be on the right path with our description of the partners; however, as discussed, our results were noisy, and the priming exercise failed to have any effect in the expected direction.

Our second lab experiment was designed in response to the results of the first round. We dropped the priming exercise and stuck to a single treatment involving a populist or non-populist partner. While this upped our sample size, the results were no less noisy.

So what went wrong? Our hunch is that there are at least two problems with the experiment. One of these lies with the threat scenario. Theoretically, we understand populism as a reaction to perceived violations of *democratic* norms of citizenship, or the idea that as citizens we are entitled to equal treatment before the law if we fulfill our own democratic obligations. For

populism to be activated in an experimental setting, this requires a credible claim that the threat is a result of elite design. Our sense is that our threat at Northwestern University is too diffuse, with too long a time horizon for current students, and too disconnected from the realm of democratic politics. Likewise, the university administration may simply be too impersonal a force. In a nutshell, it is difficult for students to attribute blame on the basis of an already nebulous threat scenario to the university administration, which for students may just not represent a credible actor with attributable agency. As such, our experiment design is not properly reflecting our expected causal mechanism.

Second, we discovered that students were struggling to understand the games. Most students we spoke with misunderstood the Dictator Game, thinking it was sequential and expecting their partner to take a turn in a second round; these students indicated they would have given a smaller payment to their partner if they had known there was only one round of this game. Likewise, many students based their payout in the Trust Game on what they had given in the Dictator Game, as a way of compensating for perceiving mistakes. Thus, payments in both games were probably biased. (On a side note, most students indicated that they understood the Trust game better, possibly because it included examples)

Heading into this conference, we are left with a number of questions as we prepare to launch our next experiments. We hope to design a new experiment and administer this version in both Northwestern and Oxford. Our ultimate goal is to use our experimental design paradigm to look for similar patterns of behavior in other political settings, including (but not limited to) Latin America and other parts of Europe and to manipulate other elements of the social interaction with a populist partner. We welcome your feedback on any part of our design, with a special consideration towards the following areas.

Threat Treatments

As discussed, it is possible that our threat scenario was not entirely convincing or, simply, not threatening enough. This could either be due to the specific threat selected or have to do with the administrative elite of a university not necessarily constituting a "known agent" to students. To explore this and other possibilities we have been holding some informal focus groups at BYU and Oxford about our threats. From these focus groups with students at Oxford, two major threats that students perceive as important include student debt and repayments; and at least in the immediate term, accommodation in the city (for a subsample of students). For the Northwestern sample, we have also been considering moving to a student loan/debt-based threat. Would these types of threats seem credible to you? How might this part of the treatment be improved?

The Use of Behavioral Games

One major component of our design is the use of behavioral games as our primary dependent variable. This differs dramatically from existing studies of populism, which primarily rely on support for candidates or the expression of populist attitudes. We see the benefit of these games in their real-world costs, making them better proxies for everyday political behavior. In addition, they allow us to gauge social trust and interactions in a way that traditional surveys do not. However, there is clearly something happening across our Dictator and Trust Games. For this reason, and to simplify tasks for participants, we have decided to drop the Dictator Game in our next round of experiments. We think it will be clearer for participants if they only have to consider a one-behavioral game. We also hope it generates cleaner results. Should we be

considering anything else in conjunction with these games? Is there anything we need to add? More context? More information? Will one game suffice?

Sample Size

We did not seem to benefit much from the increased sample size in study 2. The confidence intervals remained very large. Do you think this might suggest anything about the effect size? Are we dealing with very small effects or is simply a reflection of the inadequacy of our threat?

Priming Task

We have now dropped our priming/sentence unscrambling task. Any thoughts on this will be helpful.

We look forward to your feedback on these and any other issues.

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Appendix:

Selected survey questions, including the priming exercise, partner treatments, and behavioral games:

A number of demographic items, such as race/ethnicity, party identification, income, etc. will vary by context. Those questions have been omitted here. Additionally, some items may refer to American political institutions; in the Oxford study, those terms will be replace to fit the British electoral system.

Q152 Do you identify with a particular religious group?

○ Christianity-Protestant
○ Christianity-Catholic
○ Christianity-Evangelical
○ Christianity-Other
○ Islam
○ Judaism
○ Buddhism
○ Hinduism
○ Sikhism
○ Agnosticism/Atheism
○ Other _____
○ None/Not Religious

Q81 What is your sex?

○ Male
○ Female
○ Other _____

Q83 Please select your age.

BYA408_15 To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
The politicians in Congress need to follow the will of the people.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
The people, not the politicians, should make our most important policy decisions.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
The political differences between the people and the elite are larger than the differences among the people.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
What people call "compromise" in politics is really just selling out on one's principles.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Q104 To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
It is important to listen to groups with different opinions.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Diversity limits my freedom.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Politicians should lead the people, not follow them.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Our country would run better if decisions were left up to non-elected, independent experts.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Politics is ultimately a struggle between good and evil.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Democracy is about achieving compromise among differing viewpoints.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Q305 To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I'd rather be represented by an ordinary citizen than an experienced politician.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Politicians talk too much and take too little action.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
The power of a few special interests prevents our country from making progress.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Our country would run better if decisions were left up to successful business people.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Priming Task

Q504 The next set of questions is an unrelated task involving reading, grammar, and language skills. Using the following groups of words and the spaces below, please create a complete sentence with **only four of the five words**. Please do not write in any punctuation marks (. , ? ! etc.)--use only the words provided in the task.

A number of the words may refer to political or social issues; don't worry if you agree or disagree with them, just create the first sentence that comes to you. Please work as quickly as

possibleQ505 The following is an example to help you get started. You might see these words:

country is a slept America

One sentence from these words would be "America is a country".

With the words that follow, please create sentences following the example above.

Q499 Let's get started with a couple of practice sentences. Using only four of the five words below, please create a sentence:

I roar to ran school

_____

Q501 The most common sentence from the previous words is: "I ran to school". Don't worry if this is different from what you entered; just keep working as quickly as possible. Here's another set of practice words. Keeping the first example in mind, please make a sentence using four of the five words below.

wet will forget tomorrow be

_____

Q503 The most common sentence from the second example is "tomorrow will be wet". Again, don't worry if your answer was slightly different as this was just another practice.

We will now move on to complete the actual word and grammar tasks. Please keep the first two examples in mind as you make four word sentences out of the given five words.

Half of the subjects will be randomly assigned to complete the following items

Q461 Please create a sentence using four out of the five words.

people govern the should remove

_____

Q463 Please create a sentence using four out of the five words.

the weekend deceive people elites

_____

Q465 Please create a sentence using four out of the five words.

politicians sell usually from out

_____

Q469 Please create a sentence using four out of the five words.

lose quickly politicians fireplace touch

_____

Q471 Please create a sentence using four out of the five words.

right are tree people the

_____

Q169 Please create a sentence using four out of the five words.

made he startling dinner the

_____

Q171 Please create a sentence using four out of the five words.

laugh he did upended not

_____

Q173 Please create a sentence using four out of the five words.

started the has upwards game

_____

Q179 Please create a sentence using four out of the five words.

children in down parks play

_____

Half of the subjects will be randomly assigned to complete the following item instead of the ones above.

Q473 Please create a sentence using four out of the five words.

the is fenced good weather

_____

Q475 Please create a sentence using four out of the five words.

laugh he did upended not

_____

Q477 Please create a sentence using four out of the five words.

upstairs the from is kitchen

_____

Q479 Please create a sentence using four out of the five words.

children in down parks play

_____

Q481 Please create a sentence using four out of the five words.

warm team the made she

_____

Q169 Please create a sentence using four out of the five words.

exciting aged is travel very

_____

Q171 Please create a sentence using four out of the five words.

on timed apples grow trees

_____

Q173 Please create a sentence using four out of the five words.

started the has upwards game

_____

Q179 Please create a sentence using four out of the five words.

made he startling dinner the

_____

Q92

Thank you for completing the sentence-unscrambling task. We are now going to ask you to make some decisions about dividing up money between yourself and another participant in our study who may or may not be in the room with you right now. However, before we do that, we want to give you some information about them. In order to do this, we are asking each participant in our study to read about an issue and respond to a couple of questions about it. This is so you can

know a bit about your partner before interacting with them. We will share your responses with them, and you will see what your partner thought about the issue described below:

As you know, Northwestern traditionally has had a strong reputation for academic excellence and a good reputation among prospective employers. However, in the last ten years, the reputation of Northwestern has been suffering. According to the US News and World Report College Rankings and the Times Higher Education World University Rankings, Northwestern's ranking has steadily fallen each year. Importantly, employers have begun to notice. A recent article in the Washington Post has shown that in the last ten years, the graduate employment rate (i.e. those graduates who find employment within the first six months after graduating from Northwestern), has fallen by 17 percent. In the last ten years, for those who do find employment after graduation, the average starting salary has fallen by nearly 20 percent. These facts suggest that individuals like you may face significant problems in finding well-paid employment after graduation. All reports suggest that this situation is only going to get worse.

Q120 What groups or individuals do you think are most responsible for this situation regarding housing at Oxford/Northwestern and its graduates? (Please limit your response to a few words)

_____

Q124 In at least a few sentences, explain why you think these groups or individuals are responsible and what should be done about them.

_____

Q127Please wait a moment while you partner completes their responses to the previous two questions. When they have finished, the next arrow will appear below.

Ten seconds pass before the button appears in order to make the claims about the partner more credible.

Half of the subjects will be randomly assigned to then see this paragraph:

Q93 Here is some information about the person you will be interacting with for this portion of the study. This information comes from their responses to the previous two questions.

Your partner is also a student at Northwestern and will face many of the same problems that you will after graduation. With regards to this situation, your partner believes that these changes in future prospects for Northwestern graduates have been created by the selfish choices of university officials in the central administration. Your partner believes that the drop in academic standards in Northwestern can be traced to how money for research and tuition, over the last few years, has been diverted to increase the salaries of management. Your partner feels the problem is the direct result of bad choices by these groups and these individuals' focus on themselves rather than the students of the university.

The remaining half of the subjects will see this paragraph instead of Q93

Q94 Here is some information about the person you will be interacting with for this portion of the study. This information comes from their responses to the previous two questions.

Your partner is also a student at Northwestern and will face many of the same problems that you will after graduation. With regards to this situation, your partner believes that these changes in future prospects for Northwestern graduates have simply been created by the economic downturn and global recession. Graduates from Northwestern, and indeed other universities, face a much tougher and competitive economic climate now than a decade ago. Your partner feels this problem is no one's fault and that casting blame will not help the situation.

All subjects proceed to these questions.

Behavioral Games:

Q96 We are now going to ask you to play two games with your partner. You will interact with them through this computer.

You have a total of 20 tokens assigned to you, and you will use 10 of them for each of two games. At the end of this experiment, you can exchange these tokens for an Amazon gift card; one token is equal to $0.10 on this card. If you have 10 tokens at the end of this experiment, for example, you will receive a card for $1.00. If you have 100 tokens, your card will be worth $10.00. We will email these cards to you within two weeks of your participation in this study.

Let's proceed with the first game.

Dictator Game

Q95 The first game is played as follows: You have 10 tokens assigned to you for this game. You will receive 10 new tokens to play the next game and will be given the total from both games after the end of the experiment.

You will now decide how many of the 10 tokens to offer to your partner. You could give some, all, or none of the 10 tokens. You get to keep all the tokens not given to your partner. Your partner gets to keep all the tokens you offer.

If you have any questions please ask the moderator now.

Below, please select the number of tokens you wish to keep in the box labeled "tokens to me." Select the tokens you wish to go to your partner in the box labeled "tokens to my partner."

_____ to me
_____ to my partner

Q107 Thank you for playing that game with your partner. They now have [amount specified in the previous question] tokens. You now have earned [amount specified in the previous question] tokens, which will be credited towards your Amazon gift card.

Please continue to the next game.

Trust Game

Q559 You will now play another game with your partner. You now have 10 more tokens to play this new game. You will be given the total from both games, *this one and the previous one*, at the end of the experiment.

You have the opportunity to give a portion of these 10 tokens to your partner. You could give some, all, or none of the 10 tokens. Whatever amount you decide to give to your partner will be quadrupled before it is passed on your partner.

Your partner then has the option of either sharing with you one half of whatever quadrupled amount they received or to keep the entire quadrupled amount themselves. Once the game is over, you receive whatever you kept from your original 10 tokens, plus anything shared with you by your partner. Your partner receives four times what you gave them, minus whatever they returned to you.

We will now run through some examples to help familiarize you with the game.

Example 1 Imagine that you give 5 tokens to your partner. We quadruple this amount, so your partner gets 20 tokens (4 x 5 = 20). Now you have 5 tokens and your partner has 20 tokens. Your partner now has to decide whether to share this amount with you. Suppose your partner decides to share the tokens with you. At the end of the game you will have 15 tokens (5 + 10) and your partner will have 10 tokens.

Example 2 Imagine that you give 5 tokens to your partner. We quadruple this amount, so your partner gets 40 tokens (4 x 5 = 20). Now you have 5 tokens and your partner has 20 tokens. Your partner now has to decide whether to share this amount with you. Suppose your partner decides not to share the tokens with you. At the end of the game you will have 5 tokens and your partner will have 20 tokens. You will have lost the tokens you shared with him or her.

If you have any questions please ask the moderator now.

So, below, once again please put the number of tokens you wish to keep in the box labeled "tokens to me." Put the tokens you wish to go to your partner in the box labeled "tokens to my partner."

_____ to me
_____ to my partner

Q112 Thank you for playing the game. Please wait a moment while your partner decides what to do. When they have decided, the next arrow will appear below. You may then proceed.

Fifteen seconds pass before the button appears in order to make the claims about the partner more credible.

Subjects then see the following outcome:

Q572 Your partner has decided to give you half of their tokens. They now have an additional [amount given *2] tokens. You now have an additional [amount kept +amount given*2] tokens, which will be added to the [amount already earned] tokens that were already on your Amazon card.

This gives you a total of [subject's total tokens] tokens or $ [subject's total] on your card. Your partner will be given [partner's total] tokens.

We will email this amount to you. We have recorded your award. Please enter your email so we can send you your Amazon gift card. We cannot send you the gift card without your email address. If you would prefer not to receive this award, please leave this space blank.

_____

Q98 Thank you for completing the games! Now, we are going to ask you to quickly answer the following questions about the games you played, and then we are finished. You will see a brief informational page and will receive your Amazon gift card sometime in the next two weeks.

Q99 In the first game, what was the minimum number of tokens you could have given to your partner?

Q105 In the second game, what was the minimum number of tokens you could have given to your partner?

Q100 In the second game, what was the maximum number of tokens you could have given to your partner?

Q101 In the first game, what would have happened if you had decided to share 10 tokens with your partner? How many tokens would they have then received?

Q104 In the second game, what would have happened if you had decided to share 6 tokens with your partner? How many tokens would they have then received?

Q102 In the second game, if you had decided to share 4 tokens with your partner, and they decided to share what they received with you, how many tokens would you each end up with at the end of the second game (in other words, after they decided to share their tokens with you)?

    In tokens, you would have had..._____
    In tokens, your partner would have had..._____

Q103 In the same scenario, if they decided to keep the tokens, how many tokens would you end up with at the end of the second game? Remember, you would have chosen to give them 4 tokens.

    In tokens, you would have had..._____

Debrief

Thank you for taking part in our experiment. In this experiment, we wanted to see what might motivate people to be more responsive to certain kinds of political ideas and organizations. Thus, the experiment is primarily about testing the causes of cooperation with other activists in a social setting.

Many kinds of individual attitudes or dispositions must be activated and then directed towards a cooperative effort. This set of attitudes is normally activated by some of threat. In this experiment, to activate these sentiments, we presented you with a threat that related to Northwestern and your future career prospects after graduation.

This **threat** was **not real**. Northwestern **has not been slipping down university rankings**, so please do not worry. In fact, it remains one of the best universities, not only in the United States, but also in the world. This **position** is very **stable**. If anything, the international **ranking** of Northwestern has actually **improved**.

For example, the actual Northwestern rankings from the Times Higher Education World University Rankings are as follows:

Academic Year	Ranking
2014/2015	21
2013/2014	22
2012/2013	19
2011/2012	26
2010/2011	25

Source: http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/world-university-rankings/2010-11/world-ranking/institution/northwestern-university

In the 2015 US News and World Report National College Rankings, Northwestern is ranked number **13 nationally**.

Likewise, the statistics we gave you about your job prospects after graduation and your likely average monthly earnings were **created for the experiment** are **not true** either.

According to statistics from the graduating class of 2013, **94 per cent** of all graduates were either in some form of employment or further study one year after graduation. This is extraordinarily high.

In addition, Northwestern graduates continue to earn one of the highest average salaries of all university graduates, globally. The typical average early-career salary is US$54,200. Of course, this varies by degree subject, but it means the earning potential of new Northwestern graduates is ranked 128 out of a total of 1223 colleges. That places Northwestern graduates in the **top 10 per cent** of all graduate earners.

And finally, job satisfaction among Northwestern graduates **is also among the highest**, according to numerous surveys.

With a graduation rate of 94 per cent, this means that Northwestern students have an excellent probability of graduating from one of the top universities in the world, with excellent career prospects and earnings potential. This has remained remarkably consistent over time.

For those of you in our treatment group in our experiment, you were presented with a partner who blamed the university administration for the threat we presented you with. **This is not true and nor is your partner real.** We wanted to explore whether individuals would be more inclined to cooperate with co-activists when those co-activists express these blame-oriented attitudes. That is why some of you received this description of your non-existent partner.

The reality is quite different. Northwestern administrative salaries are very much in line with the national average. For example the mean salary for an administrative assistant in Northwestern is US$44,486, which is actually **4 per cent below the national average**. In contrast, the mean salary for the same position at the University of Chicago is US$47,207. Northwestern has one of the best student-faculty ratios in the US, at 7 students for every one academic, a ratio akin to that of Harvard, and better than universities such as John Hopkins (10:1), Brown (8:1) and Cornell (9:1).

Additionally, you were told that your partner decided if they would share their tokens with you or keep them all for themselves. As you interacted only with a computer, you were assigned to get tokens back from your partner according to the rules of the game.

If you have any further questions, please ask the moderator and we do our best to answer them for you

Sources:

Beyond Northwestern: the undergraduate class of 2013, available at
http://issuu.com/northwesternucs/docs/2013_post_graduation_issuu

PayScales at http://www.payscale.com/research/US/School=Northwestern_University/Salary

US News and Report College Rankings, available at
http://colleges.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-colleges/northwestern-1739

Glassdoor at www.glassdoor.com/Salary/Northwestern-University-Administrative-Assistant-III-Salaries-E3919_D_KO24,52.htm and also at http://www.glassdoor.com/Salary/University-of-Chicago-Administrative-Assistant-Chicago-Salaries-EJI_IE3016.0,21_KO22,46_IL.47,54_IM167.htm

This information then follows on a separate page to ensure that subjects do not overlook this question:

If you so choose, you may opt to withdraw your responses from this study. If you do so, you will still receive the gift card you earned earlier, and you will still receive credit for participating in this study. Please indicate below if you would like to withdraw your responses from this study. **Failure to mark an option will result in your responses being EXCLUDED in the data for this study.**

- Please include my responses in this study
- Please remove my responses from this study