

Speaking Populism: A framing experiment to test the activation of populist attitudes*

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ABSTRACT: When are populist beliefs activated and expressed? Does the activation of populist beliefs correspond with support for populist candidates? We test these ideas relying on theories about individuals' dispositions, framing, and populism. Using a nationally diverse sample of American adults, we conducted an experiment in March of 2016. In response to blaming (dispositional) frames, subjects expressed a greater amount of populism, as compared to a non-blame way of thinking. Additionally, this frame increased support for Bernie Sanders over Hillary Clinton. We conclude with a discussion of how these results inform current and future studies of populism.

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Introduction

Populism has increasingly gained attention in news media, with recent political events in both Europe and the United States (Foroohar 2016; Cohn 2016; Rahn and Oliver 2016). In the American presidential primaries, populism has been connected to major candidates in both political parties and is frequently mentioned in coverage of the election (Kazin 2016). Although populism has at times been discussed by American media in recent decades, in some ways, the current presidential primary represents a high point for interest in the role of populism in American electoral politics.

Survey research has previously documented that populist attitudes are widespread (in America and other places) (Akkerman, Mudde, and Zaslove 2014; Elchardus and Spruyt 2016; Hawkins, Riding, and Mudde 2012; Hawkins, Rovira Kaltwasser, and Andreadis 2016). Importantly, many of these studies occurred prior to the present political climate. While widespread populist beliefs do not always translate into populist movements or parties, they raise intriguing questions – when are populist ideas and beliefs activated in individuals? How do those beliefs translate into support for political parties and candidates?

We bring theories about individual level dispositions and framing to help explain when individuals express populist ideas; we test these theories with a nationally diverse experiment of American adults. We then trace these effects to more concrete political outcomes – support for presidential candidates. We find that blame-oriented ways of thinking (dispositional frames) can increase the populism individuals express and that this focus on blame increases support for Bernie Sanders among Democrats. The dispositional frames have the largest impact on candidate preferences those with low to moderate support for populist beliefs. We conclude our analyses with a few suggestions for future research on populism, including a series of subgroup analyses.

Concepts and Theory

Scholars increasingly argue that populism should be seen in ideational terms (de la Torre 2010; Laclau 2005; Mudde 2007; Panizza 2005). According to this view, which we share (Hawkins 2009; Hawkins 2010), populism is a Manichaean cosmology that sees the side of Good as a homogenous “will of the people” and Evil as a conspiring elite. We call parties and movements “populist” when they manifest this discourse, irrespective of any specific policy position or ideological orientation. Indeed, populist parties come in different ideological flavors depending on the particular positions they take, with left populists being more prominent in developing countries (e.g., Latin America) and right populists predominantly found in the advanced industrial democracies (North America, Western Europe) (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013). If there is any set of issues or policy positions they have in common, it is the tendency to see democracy in terms of popular sovereignty and to undervalue liberal institutions (Hawkins and Ruth 2015; Levitsky and Loxton 2013; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012).

In addition to populism, scholars point to at least two other relevant discourses: elitism and pluralism (Hawkins 2009; Mudde 2004; Ochoa Espejo 2011; Plattner 2010). While elitism shares the Manichaean worldview of populism and even much of its ontology,

which sees politics as a struggle between people and elite, it reverses the positions of these actors by seeing the elite as the enlightened and rightful holders of sovereignty, while viewing the people as ignorant masses prone to irrationality. Pluralism differs from populism along a different dimension. It lacks the Manichaeian worldview and is loath to ascribe evil intentions to any set of actors, preferring instead to acknowledge the natural existence of multiple points of view. Hence, it sees political conflicts as struggles against impersonal forces rather than against diabolical groups and individuals.

If populism is fundamentally about a unique set of ideas, then explaining why people vote for populist parties requires an individual-level argument about why voters would be attracted to the parties' discourse. Other features of populist parties may also matter for the choice—their positions on key issues, their economic performance when they were in power, leadership qualities of their candidates, etc.—but if we are trying to explain why people support *populist* parties (rather than conservative or liberal parties, incumbent parties, or parties with strong candidates) it is because we think that populist ideas have an independent causal impact.

Explanations of support for populist parties must also make sense of an important finding: the growing empirical literature on populism has found that populist attitudes are fairly widespread among voters. These attitudes are coherent, stable, and connect to vote choice (Akkerman, Mudde, and Zaslove 2014; Elchardus and Spruyt 2016; Hawkins, Riding, and Mudde 2012; Hawkins, Rovira Kaltwasser, and Andreadis 2016). However, populist parties are only infrequently successful, and the degree to which populist attitudes explain vote choice varies widely across countries (Anduiza, Guinjoan, and Rico 2016; Van Hauwaert and van Kessel 2016).

The causal explanation that we prefer borrows from an insight of psychology concerning the activation of personality traits. Many politically relevant traits are seen as dispositions that are only active in certain contexts (Feldman 2003; Mondak et al. 2010; Stenner 2005). We argue that populist ideas behave similarly, constituting a latent disposition that is only activated under certain conditions. We postulate three sets of conditions.

First, for voters as well as parties, populism intersects with other ideologies and issue positions. Voters with a populist set of attitudes (disposition) require not only the presence of a populist party to satisfy their demands, but a populist party that agrees with their other issue positions. This requires a supply of populist parties that match issue-based preferences (for example, a *right* populist party or a *left* populist one), and the supply sometimes fails.

Second, voters also require a context that makes their populist disposition salient. Populism is an argument about the failure of elites to satisfy democratic norms, so it becomes salient when there are widespread failures of governance. In lesser forms, this takes place when traditional governing parties become distant from the policy view of their traditional constituents, thus failing to offer responsible partisan government; this condition is likely to happen in programmatic party systems, where representation is largely issue based (Bornschieer 2016; Kenny 2016). It results in milder outbreaks of populism, since most of the state still functions and because traditional parties have a strong incentive and capacity to respond by adjusting their positions in the ideological

space. However, the more serious forms of populism emerge when traditional governing parties engage in systematic corruption that undermines the basic institutions of the state. This second condition is much more common in developing countries, where representation is often based on clientelism, or the conditional exchange of goods and services for political support. Such systems are not only prone to strong bouts of populism, but experience waves of populism more often as parties repeatedly struggle to avoid major policy crises.

Finally, and most important for our study, the activation of populist attitudes also requires that current crises be framed in a populist way, i.e., interpreted as the consequence of a corrupt, knowing elite that systematically uses its power to benefit itself at the expense of the people. While informed, creative voters can eventually make this connection themselves, the attribution can be catalyzed by other political actors that use populist rhetoric to interpret the political context.

This is the point where our research enters. Communications scholars have naturally focused on the role of framing in the activation of populist attitudes (Bos, Van Der Brug, and De Vreese 2013; Matthes and Schmuck 2015). While they generally find that framing matters, the specific rhetorical mechanisms that constitute the heart of the populist message and do the work of activation remain unclear. We share the view of Hameleers et al. (2016) that one of the most important mechanisms of populist framing is blame attribution. The populist message blames current problems on the intentional actions of an elite, or political actors with agency. Using the language of attribution theory, we would say that populist frames attribute problems to a dispositional factor in an out-group. Hameleers et al. find specifically that when an issue (unemployment) is framed as the result of a powerful political actor's decisions (the European Union or national government), the issue is more likely to arouse populist attitudes than when it is framed without any blame attribution.

However, we argue that frames can do more than attribute blame to the disposition of outside actors. Attribution theory points to the possibility of situational attribution, or the blaming of impersonal forces outside the control of the individual (Heider 1958). In fact, this is generally what pluralist discourses do in opposition to the Manichaeian discourse of populism: they identify problems such as corruption or failed representation, but attribute these to systemic causes such as negative colonial experiences, flawed electoral rules, or globalization.

While individuals are generally biased to make situational attributions to in-groups and dispositional attributions to out-groups (Hewstone 1990), we argue that a key function of framing is to alter these biases, either accentuating or diminishing them. Thus, there are at least two different types of frames that can produce opposite effects. The choice of politicians and activists hoping to deflect populism is not simply to avoid attribution, but to engage in attribution of a different kind. This leads to our first hypothesis:

H1 Failures of democratic governance framed in dispositional terms will activate populist disposition; framing in terms of impersonal forces will suppress the populist disposition.

We make a further argument not anticipated by Hameleers et al., which concerns the interaction of framing with active populist attitudes. Across any population, survey research shows wide variation in the strength of individual populist attitudes. We take from this that some individuals already have active dispositions that are being directed towards behavioral outcomes, such as voting, while other individuals have attitudes that are not yet active. Thus, we expect a ceiling effect: those with active populist attitudes are less likely to be moved in their behaviors and attitudes (e.g. stated vote choice, policy position) by dispositional frames, as their populist views are already salient, while those with milder populist attitudes are more likely to be moved as the frame can activate populism more strongly. This prediction is consistent with general theories of framing, which conclude that framing effects are weakest for those with the strongest attitudes (Druckman and Leeper 2012; Chong and Druckman 2013). This leads to our second hypothesis:

H2 The effects of the foregoing framing on political behavior and attitudes will be conditional on respondents' initial levels of reported (active) populist attitudes: Those with high reported populist attitudes will be little moved by the dispositional frame, while those with low initial levels will be most susceptible to this frame

Research Design

We test these hypotheses with an experiment conducted in March of 2016 (data collection finished on March 24th). Experimental methods provide us with a number of benefits as we examine our theory. First, experiments are one of a number of methods that allow researchers to explore specific motivations and mechanisms behind populism and populist movements. Populism can be a complex phenomenon in the real world, including politicians, citizens, rhetoric, and attitudes. We reduce this complexity to more deeply understand the different components of populism. In this, we join a growing group of researchers interested in understanding the precise processes behind populist parties, movements, and rhetoric (Rooduijn, van der Brug, and de Lange 2016; Hameleers, Bos, and De Vreese 2016). Second, experiments offer a way to make causal inferences about these processes through the use of randomization (Fisher 1935; Druckman et al. 2006). This allows us to more precisely test theories about populism with fewer concerns about self-selection and omitted variable bias.

Experiments do, however, have important limitations. Depending on how much variation is contained in the pool of subjects, experimental findings may not generalize to groups not included in the experiment at hand (Sears 1986; Druckman and Kam 2011). Experiments are also limited as they examine one part of a larger theory at one given point in time, sometimes failing to capture over-time dynamics or larger contextual variables. In our study, we address the first concern by including a diverse group of subjects (as explained below), and we acknowledge the second as we look at the broader implications of our findings. More details on both of these points can be found in the sections that follow. Even so, an experiment with high internal validity can serve as a key starting point for hypothesis testing. Later studies should explore the boundaries of the effects shown here.

To test our hypotheses, our experiment manipulated the framing of a political problem in a dispositional blame or situational blame way. The manipulation followed a measure of subjects' reported populist attitudes and a few other questions designed to maximize the space between the attitudes measure and the manipulation. The framing manipulation allows a test of our first hypothesis, while the measures of populist attitudes, in interaction with the frame, allow for a test of the second.

Participants

Participants were recruited from a nationally *diverse* panel of American adults provided by Qualtrics. While this pool of subjects is not nationally *representative*, it contains significant diversity with regards to political ideology, education, income, and other important demographic variables. Table 1 gives basic demographic distribution data on the overall sample. In total, we had 840 participants.

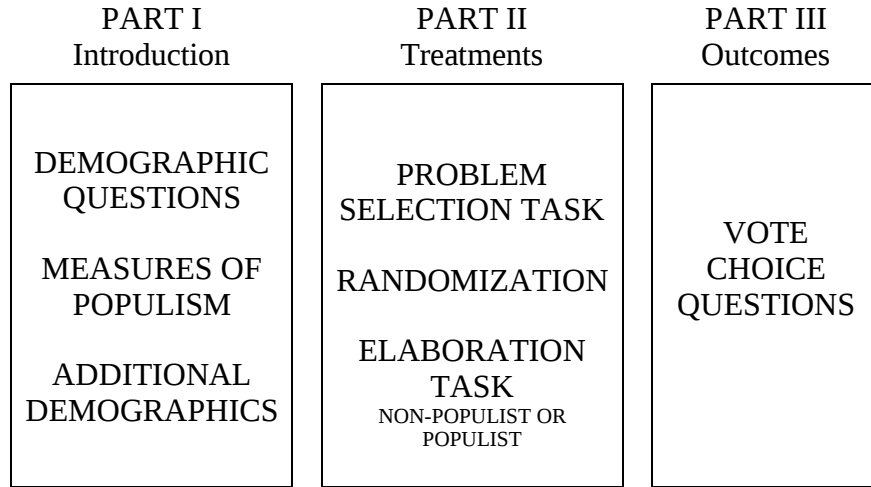
Table 1: Sample demographics

	<i>Percent of sample</i>
Liberal	27
Moderate	34
Conservative	39
Democratic	42
Independent	22
Republican	36
Female	52
White	78
	<i>Median</i>
Age	45-54
Income	Between \$35K and \$50K
Education	Some college

Procedure:

Broadly speaking, the experiment proceeded with three steps, as figure 1 illustrates.

Figure 1: Structure of the experiment



After agreeing to participate, participants completed a set of demographic items that helped determine which subjects were eligible for the experiment.¹ These included gender, income, education, ideology, and age. Next, participants answered a series of 15 items that measure individuals' populist attitudes. This inventory has been used and validated in the United States, the Netherlands, Chile, and in other countries (Akkerman, Mudde, and Zaslove 2014; Elchardus and Spruyt 2016; Hawkins, Riding, and Mudde 2012; Hawkins et al. 2014); the wording of these items can be found in the Appendix. This inventory is scored on a 1-7 scale, with 7 representing the highest levels of populism.

These items serve as the primary way to evaluate H2. Following these items, subjects completed additional demographic questions (including party identification, religiosity, and race) and an attention check designed to ensure they were reading questions carefully (Berinsky, Margolis, and Sances 2014).² The experimental treatment, which presents the test of the first hypothesis presented earlier, followed this attention check.

The treatment itself has two parts: a problem selection task and an elaboration task. In the first, subjects were asked to indicate which problem, from a set of nine, worried them the most.³ The problems were chosen to reflect political and social concerns that could potentially be seen as failures of democratic governance; without this, the frame would

¹ More specifically, these questions were used to obtain a nationally diverse sample, using quota sampling along the listed demographic characteristics.

² Our screener presented subjects with an error message when they failed to complete it correctly. Subjects were required to complete the item again until they responded correctly.

³ These problems included: the decline in our traditional values, the lack of direction in our government, environmental degradation, economic and social inequality, racism and the lack of tolerance, the negative state of our economy, the threat of terrorism, the high cost of health care, and the poor quality of education.

lack relevance, thus not meeting our first theoretical condition outlined above. We also used this portion of the treatment as a backdrop for the elaboration task, which contained the experimental manipulation. While we do not propose that these problems include every possible concern or failure, earlier pilot tests suggested that an overwhelming majority of subjects choose one of these nine options as most worrisome, even when presented with an “Other” and free response option. We take this as evidence that our list of problems covers a broad range of concerning issues that represent some potential failure of governance.

Following the problem selection task, subjects completed the second part of the treatment, the elaboration task, which involved random assignment to either the dispositional frame or the situational frame. This portion of the treatment asked participants to elaborate on the problem they selected earlier, attributing blame and discussing causes and solutions for those issues. These kinds of elaborative exercises have been used in unrelated studies to increase the strength of experimental treatments and have important cognitive and emotional effects (e.g., Valentino et al. 2008; Husnu and Crisp 2010; Ritchey et al. 2011).

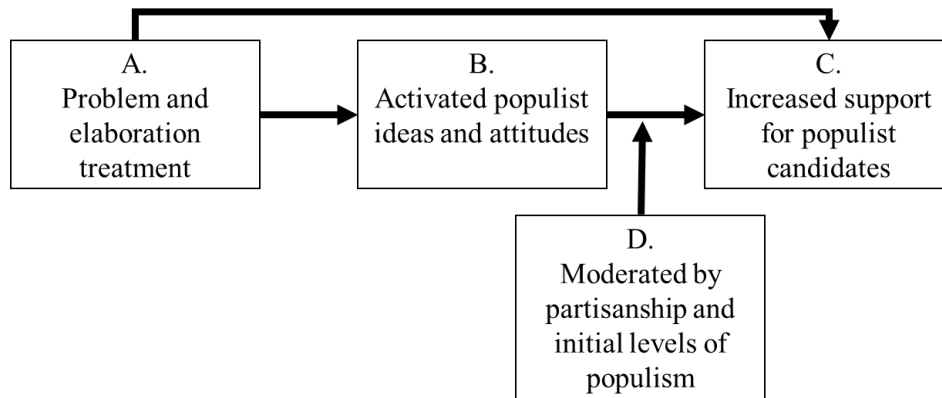
The dispositional and situational frames differed only their instructions to participants on *how* to elaborate on the problem they had chosen. In the situational frame condition, subjects were asked to discuss the “events or circumstances” that they felt were responsible for the problem they selected. They were then asked to discuss why those events or circumstances were responsible and what should be done in response to the situation. In contrast, the dispositional frame treatment asked subjects what “groups or individuals” were responsible and then used an identical follow-up about why those actors were responsible and what should be done. Thus, the dispositional frame focused subjects on specific political groups and actors who caused the problems they selected, encouraging blame attribution and dispositional group thinking. The appendix contains the exact wording of these items. In addition to these two conditions, we also included a third comparison group where subjects neither selected a problem nor completed the elaboration task. This group of subjects serves as another control group in the analyses that follow.

Following the elaboration task, the subjects completed a few additional questions, including a measure of vote choice for various political candidates for president of the United States of America. Because the experiment ran during the recent heated presidential primary season in the US, this was a particularly relevant context in which to measure vote choice. Thus, stated vote choice serves as our primary outcome of interest. Participants were first asked the party primary in which they intended to vote and then indicated the candidate in that party they planned to support. Subjects who did not select a party primary (by indicating that they were unsure or did not know) were asked about all candidates from both parties. In these questions, we asked about all of the candidates who had not yet suspended their campaigns.⁴ Following these candidate choice questions, we asked a series of feeling thermometers and political questions not relevant to our hypotheses or analyses in this paper and ended the experiment. Qualtrics then compensated participants for their time.

⁴ This included the following Republicans: Donald Trump, Ted Cruz, Marco Rubio, and John Kasich. The following Democrats were included: Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders

This particular design allows us to examine some of the different steps on the causal pathway suggested by our theory, illustrated in figure 2.

Figure 2: The path from populist attitudes to populist support



As Figure 2 suggests, we expect both partisanship and reported/active levels of populist attitudes (recorded pre-treatment) to moderate the effects of our framing treatment. As measures of these variables are included before the treatment and are not randomized, our causal inferences in these areas will be limited. They are nonetheless important in understanding how populism relates to candidate selection.

The treatment in part A prompts textual responses during the elaboration task; we code these open responses for their populist content, and use them as a way to evaluate B in the diagram above. Two research assistants coded these open-ended responses for two elements of populist rhetoric – the attribution of blame to a specific elite actor and a mention of the collective people (often mentioned as “we” or “the people”). We combined these two codes into a single measure of populism that took the value of 1 when a subject mentioned *both* components of populism (the conspiring actor and the people) and 0 when the subject mentioned only one or none. Both coders had high inter-coder reliability in this process.⁵

While we cannot make clear mediational inferences regarding the path from A to B to C due to the design of our experiment (Bullock and Ha 2011; Imai, Keele, and Tingley 2010), we examine the paths from A to B, from A to C, and from B to C to determine if the results of our experiment are consistent with the relationships illustrated in Figure 2.

Results

In this section, we explore the results of our experiment on two main dependent variables – expressed populism and support for a populist candidate (Bernie Sanders). We do so in a way that tests our two hypotheses and examines the proposed links in figure 2.

⁵ For the first measure, the mention of a bad elite, the two coders had a raw percent agreement of 92.5% and a Cohen’s kappa of .85—a high level of intercoder reliability. For the second indicator, the mention of a good people, the two coders had a raw percent agreement of 91.3% but a Cohen’s kappa of only .51. This latter result was largely because most coded values here were negative—there are many fewer mentions of a good people—and so the expected agreement was 82.3%.

Expressed populism

We begin with our first hypothesis, restated below.

H1 Failures of democratic governance framed in dispositional terms will activate populist disposition; framing in terms of impersonal forces will suppress the populist disposition.

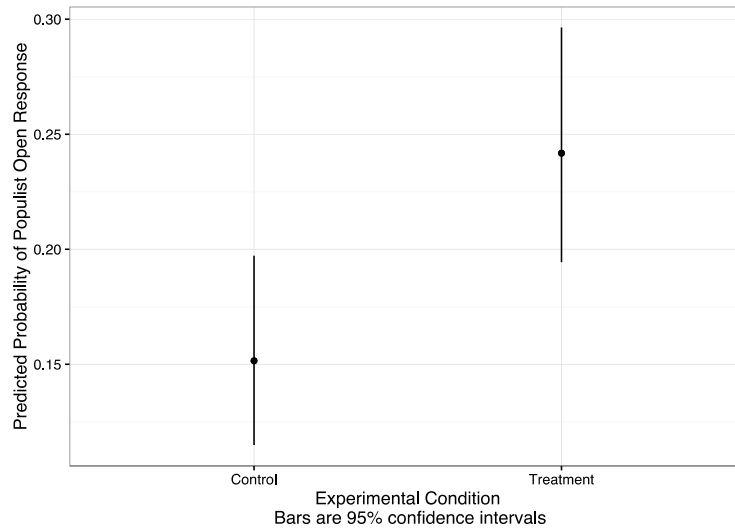
To test this hypothesis, we employ the coded content of individual open responses after the framing treatments as our dependent variable. Recall that these open responses were coded as either populist (coded as a 1) or not (coded as a 0). We thus estimate a logit model that regresses this measure on the treatment variable (1 = dispositional frame; 0 = situational frame). Because we are using the open-ended responses as our key dependent variable, we use the situational frame as our baseline/control (we cannot use the pure control, as these individuals did not participate in this part of the experiment). Later analyses will show that the situational frame and pure control are virtually identical one to another, supporting the use of the situational frame as a baseline.

Before estimating the model, we ran extensive random imbalance checks, finding no evidence for imbalance for any of our measured covariates across the situational and dispositional conditions.⁶ As such, we do not include covariates as controls any of the following models. All models were estimated with Huber-White robust standard errors.

Given the difficulty of interpreting logit coefficients directly, Figure 3 presents the results of our first model graphically. See Table 1 in the appendix for the full results from the model. Figure 3 shows the predicted probability that individuals assigned the dispositional blame frame (treatment condition) will include populist content in their open responses, compared to the probability of such content arising from individuals in the situational blame treatment condition, which we here simply label as the control condition.

⁶ The covariates we checked for balance include political ideology, party identification, sex, education levels, age, socio-economic status, pre-treatment populism levels and pre-treatment authoritarianism levels.

Figure 3: Effect of the dispositional treatment on populist response



As Figure 3 illustrates, the difference between the two conditions is about 9 percentage points, representing both a substantively significant and statistically significant difference. This provides compelling evidence for the link between A and B in our theory (Figure 2) presented earlier, and suggests that simply encouraging individuals to think of governance failure in a dispositional blame framework way can indeed engender more populist responses.

This suggests that political actors who encourage citizens to think in dispositional terms about political problems can increase the amount of populism those citizens express. Although our evidence provides only initial support for such a process, this interaction between political elites and individuals has implications for the tone of elections and the content of citizens' demands. When Bernie Sanders states, for example, that "Wall Street and the billionaire class has rigged the rules"⁷, he may encourage voters to express more populism themselves.

Support for populist candidates

We have shown thus far that the dispositional treatment is indeed capable of motivating individuals to think of governance failure in populist terms. This provides initial evidence for our first hypothesis. But what of the second hypothesis? Does this framing effect go beyond simply activating populist thoughts, to influencing things like support for populist candidates (link A to C in Figure 2)?

The 2016 Democratic presidential primaries in the United States provided an ideal test case for this hypothesis. By the time of our survey experiment, it featured just two candidates: Bernie Sanders, the most populist candidate in a half-century to find significant support among the constituents of the Democratic Party, and Hillary Clinton, a

⁷ This statement comes from Sanders's website; see <https://berniesanders.com/issues/income-and-wealth-inequality/>

strong “establishment,” non-populist alternative.⁸ At this point in the election cycle, Sanders was still very much in the running for the nomination. It was in this context---a context in which we expect individuals took their response more seriously---that we presented Democrats with what looked like just another vote choice poll, asking them if they would vote for Clinton or Sanders.

In our experiment, we asked the Republicans about their vote choice as well, but exploring the effect of framing on populist candidate support for these candidates is much more difficult. This is due mainly to the fact that there was not one overwhelmingly populist candidate. Trump later in the campaign began to adopt some populist rhetoric, mainly focusing on “corrupt elites,” but at the time of this paper writing, had said very little about the other component of populism: the “good people.” Cruz was quite similar. As a result, the choice between Republican candidates is a more complex one, that does not provide a stark decision between populist and nonpopulist options.

We took the responses from Democrats in our sample and created two dichotomous (1 = yes, 0 = no) dependent variables, one for Clinton, and one for Sanders. Individuals were forced to choose one or the other; they could not indicate both. Given there were just two choices, a move away from Clinton often meant a vote for Sanders, and vice-versa.⁹

We use these dependent variables as a means to test our second hypothesis:

H2 The effects of framing on political behavior and attitudes will be conditional on respondents’ initial levels of reported (active) populist attitudes: Those with high reported populist attitudes will be little moved by the dispositional frame, while those with low initial levels will be most susceptible to this frame, increasing in reported populism levels.

Here we suggest that the dispositional frame should have its largest effect on the candidate preferences¹⁰ of individuals with low populism levels – those who are not “activated” yet. In this context, this means that we suggest that the right frame can motivate ostensibly low-populist Democrats to support the populist candidate (Sanders). Those with active populist beliefs should already be voting for him, so we should observe a ceiling effect among this group.

⁸Although there is some debate over whether or not Sanders brings together a populist coalition (Rahn and Oliver 2016), we are currently conducting an analysis of campaign speeches from the primary elections, using the technique first described in Hawkins (2009). We find very high levels of populism in Sanders’ discourse; Clinton, in contrast, has very low levels. Given the ideational definition we use here, which focuses on the Manichaeian qualities of the discourse and the juxtaposition of the will of the common people with a conspiring elite, we think that readers familiar with the campaign rhetoric of these politicians will agree with this depiction. For a similar argument, see (Kazin 2016).

⁹ While it was possible for respondents to select “None of these” or “Don’t know”, we find strong evidence that subjects are switching from Clinton to Sanders, rather than moving to these ambivalent categories (see figures 4 and 5).

¹⁰ Our hypothesis (H2) refers to political behavior and attitudes; here we look at one such outcome – candidate preferences. Future studies should explore how these same dynamics influence other kinds of politically important outcomes.

To test this hypothesis, we estimate two simple vote choice models (one for Clinton, one for Sanders), regressing the dichotomous vote choice dependent variables on the interaction between the framing treatments and pre-treatment populism levels. We once again estimate a logit model with robust standard errors and do not include additional covariates as imbalance controls, given no evidence of random imbalance.

In these models, we have two potential baselines to which we can compare the effects of the dispositional framing treatment: 1) the “pure control” condition, where individuals were not exposed to any type of threat or framing manipulation, but taken instead directly to the vote choice questions, and 2) the “situational blame” treatment. We thus estimate two models for each of Clinton and Sanders, where the treatment variable in the first is dispositional frame (1) vs. pure control (0), and in the second is dispositional frame (1) vs. situational frame (0). As we noted at the outset of the paper, we expect that that these two controls will not differ one from another in their effects on support for populism, as the situational frame should not activate any populist sentiment.

Figures 4 and 5 present the results from these models graphically (see Table 2 in the Appendix for the statistical results used to generate these figures). Once again, we present predicted probability plots, showing the predicted probability of voting for Clinton (Figure 4) and Sanders (Figure 5), conditional on pre-treatment reported populism levels. Note that these figures include only Democrats. The figures include both baselines to which we compare the effect of the dispositional blame treatment, the “pure control” and the situational blame treatment.

Figure 4: Predicted Probability of a Vote for Clinton

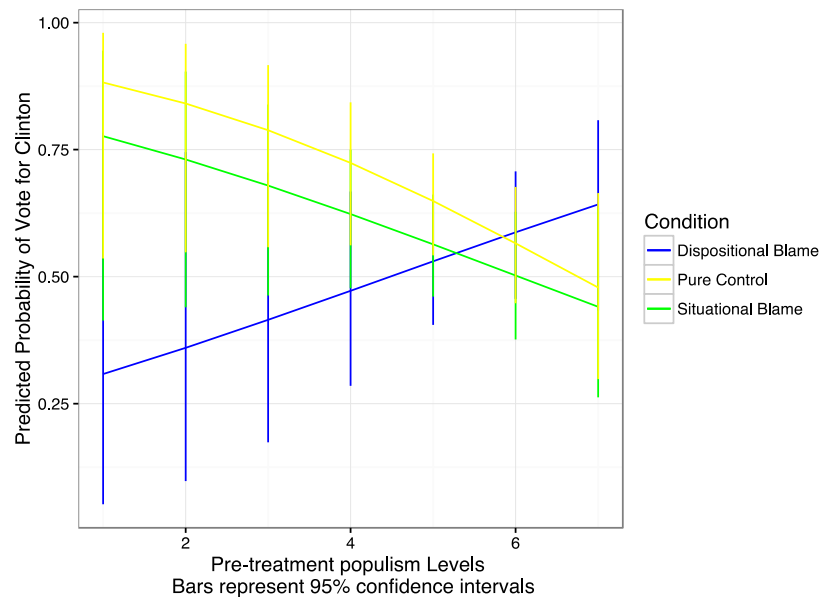
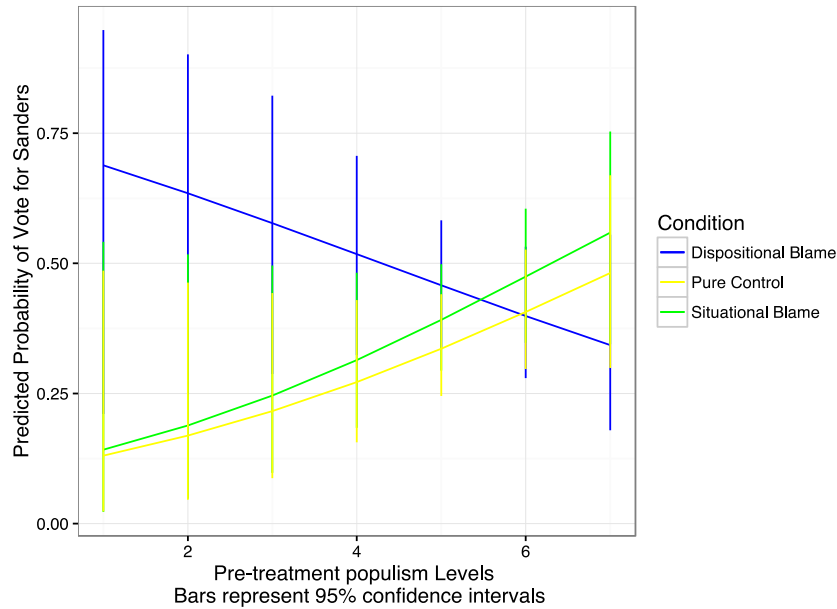


Figure 5: Predicted Probability of a Vote for Sanders



A few results immediately jump out. First, the situational blame treatment and the “pure control” are statistically and substantively indistinguishable one from another. They follow exactly the same pattern, suggesting that the situational prime does indeed have no effect on changing populist support at the individual level. This is a striking finding, particularly given that individuals in this treatment saw the same threats and were asked to talk about them just like those in the dispositional blame treatment. The only difference between the two lies in the instructions participants were given for how to frame, or discuss, these threats.

Second, for individuals high in reported pre-treatment populism levels (the activated populists prior to any experimental treatment), the dispositional blame treatment has no discernable effect on support for both candidates. We find no statistical differences in predicted levels of support across any of the three conditions for those with pre-treatment populism levels greater than 5 (on the 7-point scale). This is evidence of the ceiling effect we anticipated earlier in the manuscript. It is interesting to note that this ceiling effect seems to land right about where polls put support for both Sanders and Clinton at the time of the survey: with predicted support for Clinton running around 55%, and for Sanders around 45% (Dugan and Newport 2016). Given the nationally-diverse nature of our sample, this is what we would expect.

Finally, and most important for our theory here, the real differences across treatment and control are observed for those low in reported pre-treatment levels of populism, those with levels < 3 on the 7-point scale. Here the pattern is clear: those exposed to the dispositional blame treatment are much *less likely to vote for Clinton* than those in the control conditions (both the pure control and the situational blame condition) and much *more likely to vote for the populist candidate, Sanders*. That the figures are almost perfectly inverted images of each other is no surprise, given the zero-sum tradeoff between voting for one or other produced by a two-person race. These effects are highly

statistically significant.¹¹ Just as importantly, they are substantively large, with differences in both cases spanning as much as 50% of the scale.

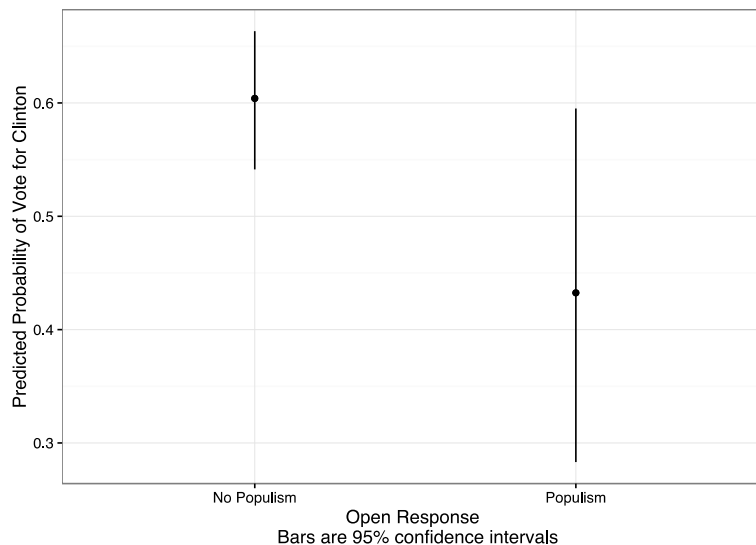
Connecting expressed populism to populist candidates

These results provide strong initial support for our second hypothesis, and the A to C link proposed in our theory (Figure 2). We have now shown evidence for the A to B link, and the A to C link. But what of B to C?

To test this link, we estimate two simple regressions: one regressing vote choice for Clinton on the open-ended responses coded for populist content, and the other regressing vote choice for Sanders on the same. In both models, we limit our sample once again to Democrats. In both models, the dependent variable (as well as the independent variable) is dichotomous, so we again estimate both using logistic regression.

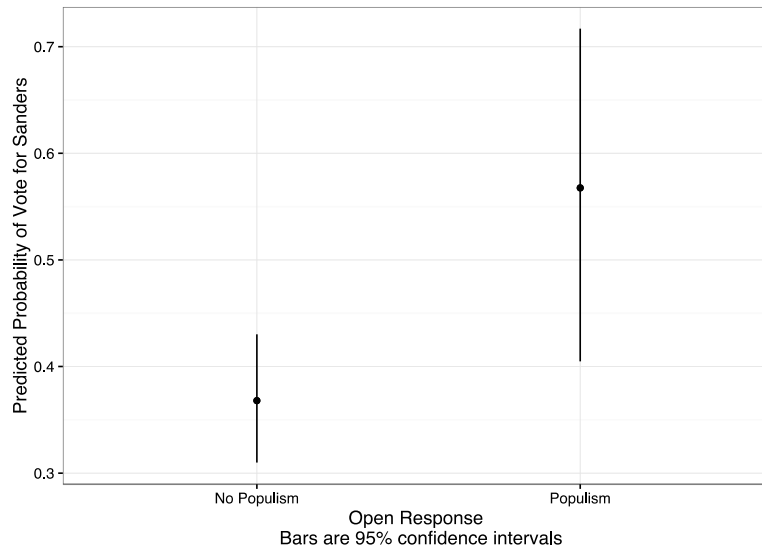
Table 3 in the appendix presents the full results from each model. Here we once again present the key results graphically, showing the probability of an intended vote for Clinton (Figure 6) and Sanders (Figure 7) for individuals with populist content in their open response, compared to those without such content.

Figure 6: Predicted Probability of a Vote for Clinton



¹¹ Note that 95% confidence intervals can overlap as much as 40% before the difference between the estimates drops out of statistical significance (see Schenker and Gentleman 2001; Cumming and Finch 2005).

Figure 7: Predicted Probability of a Vote for Sanders



Here again, we find strong evidence: reported populism levels in the open-response questions are indeed strong predictors of intention to vote for Clinton and Sanders. Those who have populist content in their open responses are roughly 20% less likely to vote for Clinton, and roughly 20% more likely to vote for Sanders. Given that much of the populist content was a result of the dispositional blame treatment (recall our evidence for the A to B link shown earlier), this additional evidenced for the B to C link suggests a strongly mediated relationship. However, we note that the causal inferences in our analysis of the B to C link are limited as subjects were not randomly assigned to different levels of expressed populism; that is, there are a number of factors, besides assignment to the dispositional or situational frame, that might lead one to express support for Clinton or Sanders. While our random assignment of the frame ensures that differences in expressed populism are unrelated to anything but the frame assignment, it does not similarly protect against spurious relationships regarding the relationship between expressed populism and vote preference (e.g., Imai, Keele, and Tingley 2010).¹² Despite this, the findings in figures 6 and 7 are strongly consistent with the mediated relationship and general theory, as outlined in Figure 2.

Discussion

These findings have important implications for our diagram in figure 2. Although we cannot make strong causal conclusions about the entire diagram (due to the design of our experiment and the nature of mediated casual inferences), the evidence we find is consistent with the causal path we outlined.

Specifically, we find strong evidence that a dispositional frame blaming political elites for political problems can provoke increased amounts of populism in respondents. In a practical sense, this suggests that actions by political actors and movements to attribute blame can serve to raise the level of populism in a political contest by prompting

¹² More direct mediational analyses, along with the accompanying sensitivity analyses, are ongoing.

individuals to think and voice populist ideas. A focus on the impersonal, or situational, causes of political troubles does not generate this kind of reaction. The amount of populism people express, then, is both a function of the messages by political elites and the way those messages interact with the ideas in citizens' minds.

In addition, we find that framing and blame attribution can have important consequences for political behavior, influencing individuals to prefer populist candidates. The effects of different ways of thinking about political problems do not stop at mere rhetoric; people translate those activated views into candidate preferences. The activation of populist rhetoric, then, can serve as an influential campaign tactic to bolster electoral and political support.

In understanding these results, the problem selection portion of the treatment may be more important than the preceding discussion suggests. Recall that this portion of the experiment asked subjects (those not in the control condition) to select a problem that worried them and then complete the elaboration task with regard to that problem. The results, as presented, do not incorporate any portion of the problem selection task; that is, the effects discussed earlier are averaged over the problems that participants selected.

However, there are reasons to suspect that some of the problems in this list are more connected to populism than others, and that the effects of the treatments may be different when considering various political domains. Racism and intolerance, for example, is an important problem for portions of the American population, but is not generally discussed within a populist framework. Economic and social inequality, on the other hand, is frequently referenced in a populist way. As such, we might expect the effect of the treatment to vary based on the problems individuals selected. Figures 1 through 9 of the Appendix recreate figure 3 of the main text for each of the nine problems subjects were presented with.

The design of our experiment does not allow us to make causally identified inferences between the problems individuals selected (to do so would require randomization or some other technique to neutralize potential confounding variables). However, while we cannot definitively establish that the differences between these graphs are due to the problems subjects selected, we take the variation in the graphs to suggest that various political problems have varied implications for populist attitudes. Note that the number of subjects in each graph varies widely, as do the confidence intervals for each group.

This suggests that the real effects of dispositional/situational framing on populist rhetoric and support has contextual limitations. This was not unanticipated by our theory: the activation of populist attitudes requires populist framing, but it also requires a threat or problem that can be seen as evidence for a failure of democratic accountability. Real political elements, such as the content of various issues and the connotations of different problems, can dramatically moderate the effects presented in the previous section. We suggest future study of these factors, using studies designed to examine these points directly rather than our exploratory analyses.

Conclusion

In sum, we find evidence for the parts of our causal story, as illustrated by figure 2. First, the way individuals think about political problems and failures of government influences the amount of populism they express. Connecting political problems to actors and groups increases the amount of populism individuals express, in comparison to more situational attributions of blame. We thus find support for our first hypothesis. Political elites, the media, and other actors may have the ability to influence populism in the public at large in the way they frame and discuss political issues.

Second, we find that thinking in a dispositional-blame way influences individuals' vote preferences – among Democrats, thinking about groups and individuals to blame increases support for Bernie Sanders over Hillary Clinton among those with low to moderate levels of populism. This lends support to our second hypothesis.

Third, we find suggestive evidence that one potential mediator of the candidate results is expressed populism. While we cannot make more rigorous causal inferences, our data are consistent with a mediated relationship from dispositional-blame thinking to expressed populism to support for a populist candidate. Future research is needed to more definitively establish this mediated relationship.

Our data also have a number of implications for the future study of populism and framing. The main analyses presented in the paper reaffirm the role of latent populist attitudes and the importance of blame attributions in activating those views. To existing studies, we add the finding that those already high in populism seem less prone to the effects of blame attribution (as it relates to candidate preferences). It is therefore important to understand which individuals are most likely to be influenced by a specific populist frame. Our subgroup analyses also suggest, albeit tentatively, that populism may work differently within different domains. Not all political problems are equally suitable tools for populist actors and movements; more research is needed to determine when different problems become more or less potent.

Our research suggests a number of intriguing extensions. One fruitful avenue for future research is to examine different ways of encouraging dispositional blame – are some framing tactics more potent than others? Research on framing has a number of insights about *frame strength* (Chong and Druckman 2007; Klar, Robison, and Druckman 2013) that could be applied here to determine the comparative success of different ways of encouraging blame attributions. Another insight from research on framing deals with *competition between frames* (Druckman 2004; Chong and Druckman 2013) – in the real world, messages rarely occur in isolation, and the dynamics of interactions between frames would provide a number of advances for research on populism. For example, future experiments could demonstrate when populist frames overwhelm concurrent elitist or pluralist messages, as all three can exist in the same political environment.

More broadly speaking, it is also unclear how these results export to other contexts – changes in time or politics may moderate or expand these findings. We recommend comparative replications of this work that casts a wide net to understand these mechanisms more completely. Populism is an important political discourse that has political relevance across the world; our experiment only speaks to the current political environment in the United States.

Appendix

Pre-treatment populism measures:

These items were measured as follows:

Next, we would like to know some of your political views. 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.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

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.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

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.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Table 1: Effects of Dispositional Treatment on Populist Open Response

	Populism
Intercept	-1.723*** (0.162)
Treatment (Dispositional = 1)	0.580** (0.215)
N	570
Log Likelihood	-277.318
AIC	558.637

*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001

Robust standard errors in parentheses

Table 2: Effects of Dispositional Treatment on Intended Votes for Clinton and Sanders

	Clinton		Sanders	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Intercept	1.493 (0.956)	2.364* (1.072)	-2.138* (1.065)	-2.199* (1.064)
Treatment (Situational Control)	-2.532 (1.615)		3.171 (1.686)	
Treatment (Pure Control)		-3.403* (1.686)		3.231 (1.685)
Pre-treatment Populism	-0.247 (0.180)	-0.350 (0.196)	0.339 (0.199)	0.304 (0.195)
Treatment (Sit)*Populism	0.479 (0.296)		-0.580 (0.309)	
Treatment (Pure)*Populism		0.582 (0.306)		-0.544 (0.306)
N	180	186	180	186
Log Likelihood	-122.136	-122.622	-119.874	-121.693
AIC	252.273	253.243	247.749	251.385

*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001

Robust standard errors in parentheses

Table 3: Effects of Populist Open Response on Vote Choice

	Clinton (1)	Sanders (2)
Intercept	0.422** (0.130)	-0.541*** (0.132)
Populist Content (1 = Yes)	-0.694 (0.357)	0.813* (0.358)
N	287	287
Log Likelihood	-193.147	-189.778
AIC	390.293	383.556

*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001

Robust standard errors in parentheses

P-value on Populist Content for Clinton = 0.052

Table 4: Problems selected by subjects

Round 7	Situational	Percentage	Dispositional	Percentage
(1) the decline in our traditional values	32	10.77%	39	14.29%
(2) the lack of direction in our government	32	10.77%	40	14.65%
(3) environmental degradation	20	6.73%	12	4.40%
(4) economic and social inequality	33	11.11%	27	9.89%
(5) racism and the lack of tolerance	20	6.73%	17	6.23%
(6) the negative state of our economy	48	16.16%	39	14.29%
(7) the threat of terrorism	56	18.86%	45	16.48%
(8) the high cost of health care	45	15.15%	38	13.92%
(9) the poor quality of education	11	3.70%	16	5.86%
Total:	297	100.00%	273	100.00%

Note: The numbers in the table correspond to the numbers in the graphs below.

Figure 1: The decline in our traditional values

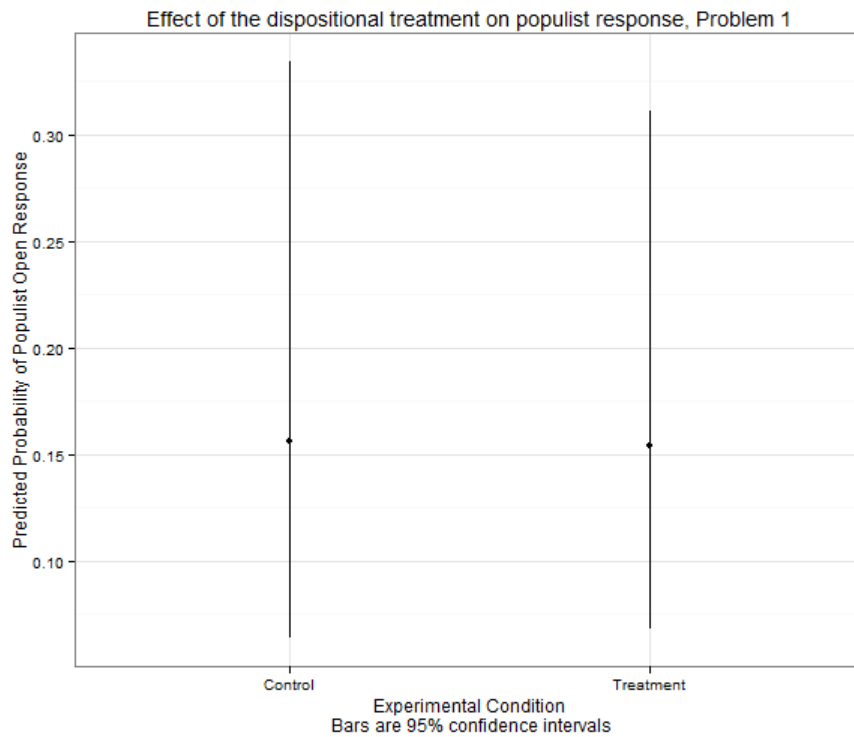


Figure 2: The lack of direction in our government

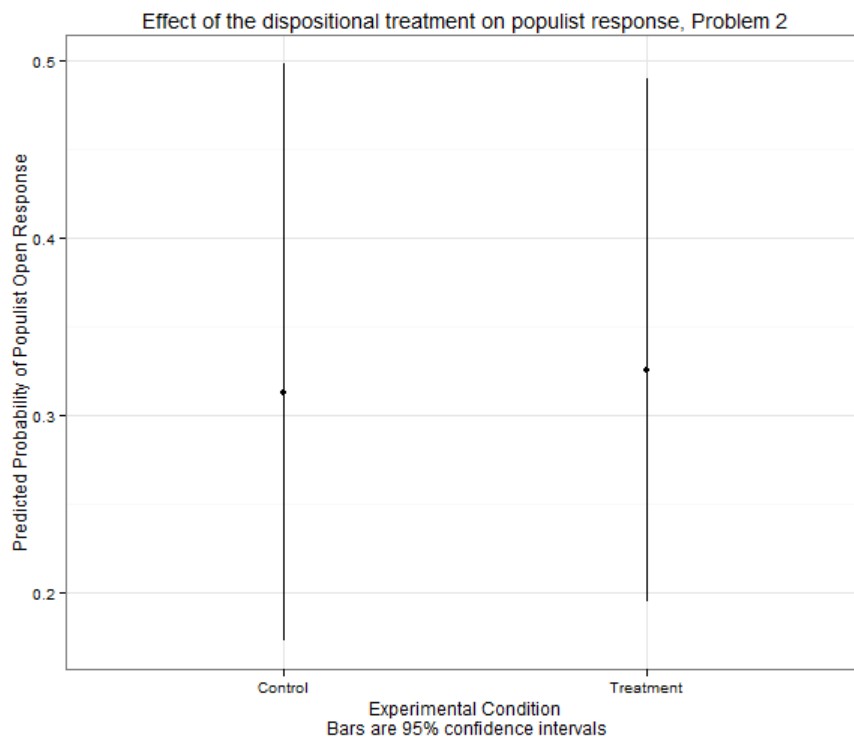


Figure 3: Environmental degradation

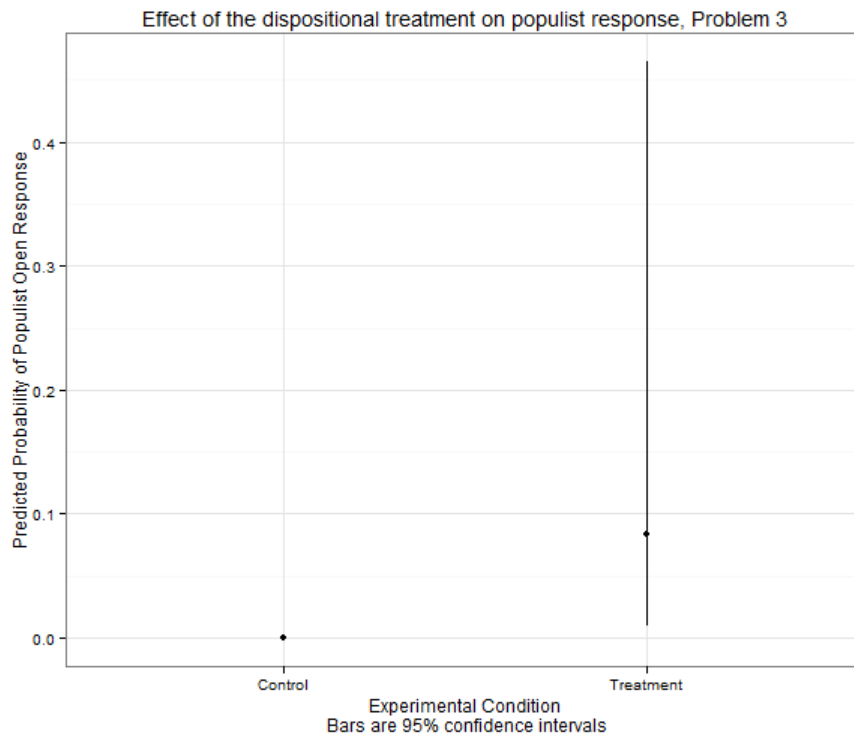


Figure 4: Economic and social inequality

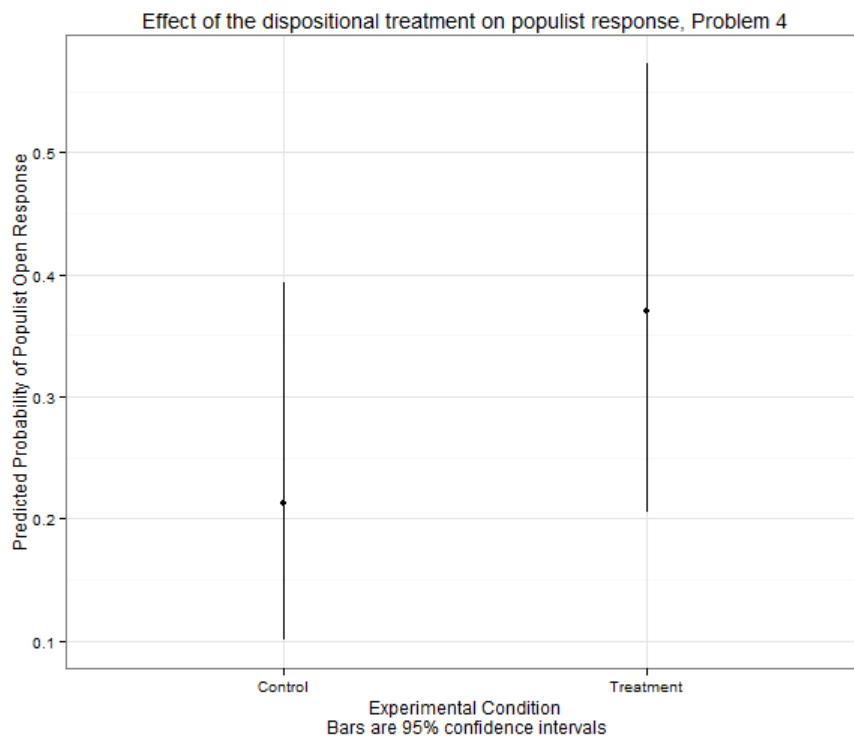


Figure 5: Racism and the lack of tolerance

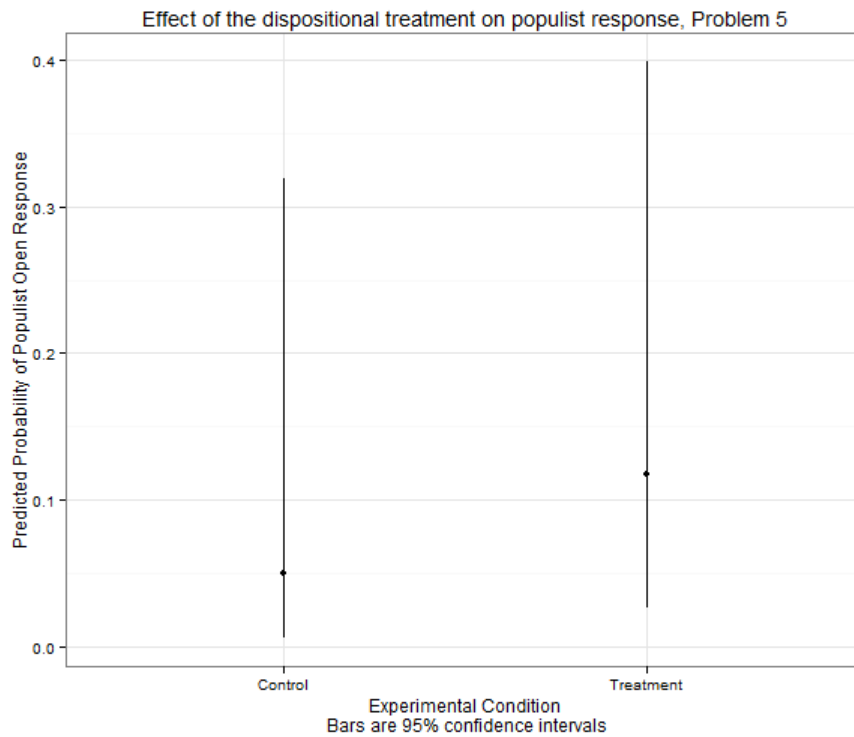


Figure 6: The negative state of our economy

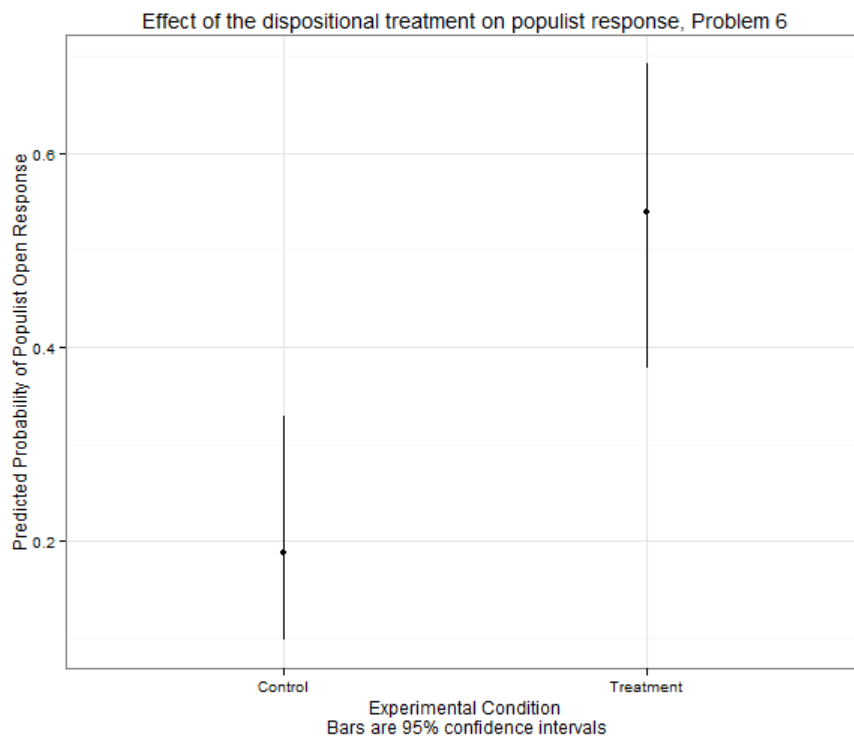


Figure 7: The threat of terrorism

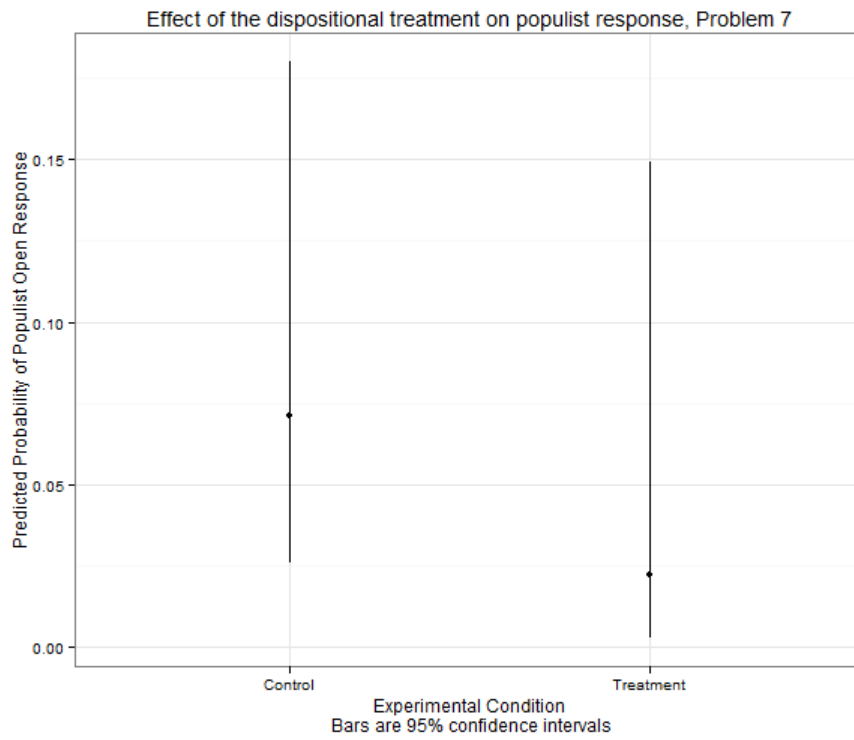


Figure 8: The high cost of health care

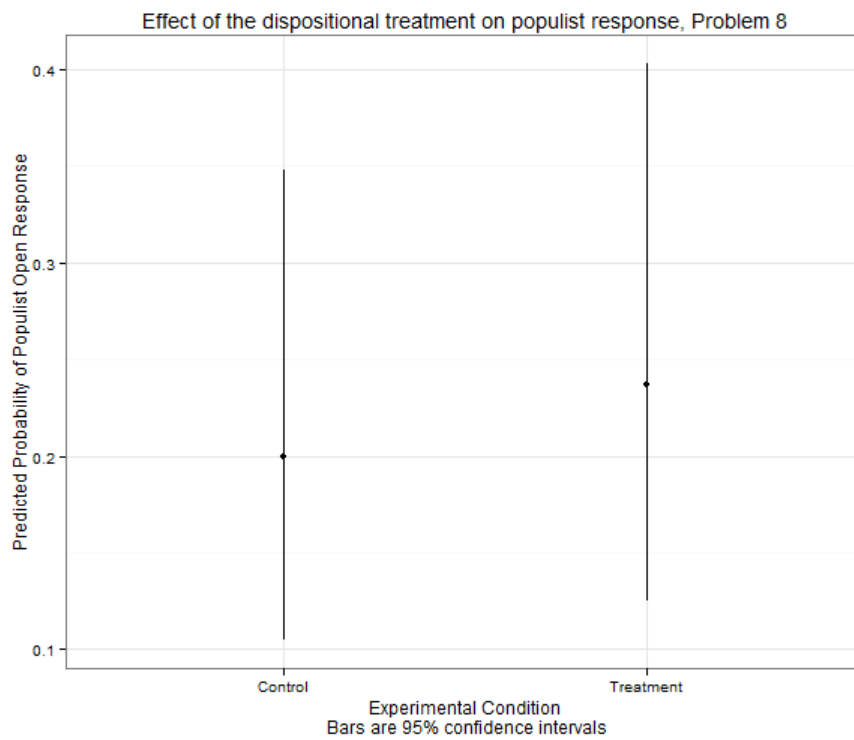
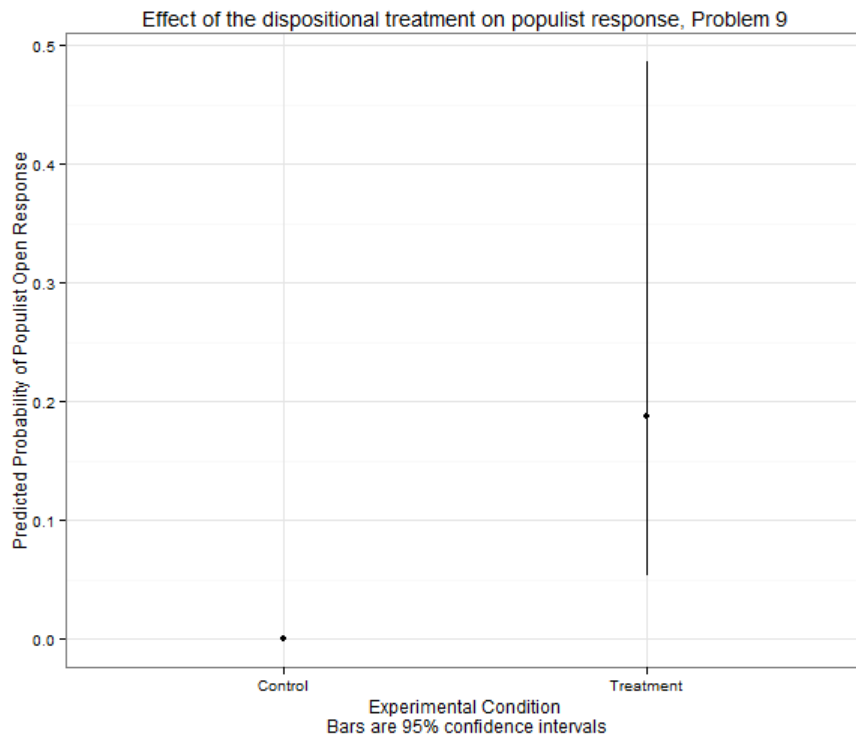


Figure 9: The poor quality of education



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