The (In)effectiveness of Populist Rhetoric: A Conjoint Experiment of Campaign Messaging

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Abstract

Is populism electorally effective and, if so, why? Scholars agree that populism is a set of people-centric, anti-pluralist, and anti-elitist ideas that can be combined with various ideological positions. It is difficult yet important to disentangle populism from its hosting ideology in evaluating populism's effectiveness and its potential conditional effects on the hosting ideology. We conduct a novel US conjoint experiment asking respondents to evaluate pairs of realistic campaign messages with varying populism-related messages and hosting policy positions given by hypothetical primary candidates. Although party-congruent policy positions are expectedly much more popular, we find that none of the populist features have an independent or a combined effect on candidate choice. We conclude by discussing the implications of populism's apparent ineffectiveness.

Keywords: Populism, Campaign Rhetoric, Conjoint Experiment, Vote Choice

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Introduction

Over the past two decades, populist parties and candidates have been gaining increasing electoral support across the world. Existing interdisciplinary literature agrees that populism is a multi-dimensional set of ideas that comprise people-centrism, anti-pluralism, anti-elitism, and moralism (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2018; Wuttke et al., 2020; Dai and Kustov, 2022). According to this definition, populism has little programmatic policy content itself, so it needs to be combined with other ideologies. As a result, it is easy to conflate the effects of populism with those hosting ideologies or related policy stances when they are employed together (Hunger and Paxton, 2022).

Despite the observed success of populist parties and candidates, recent survey experiments find that populist appeals are much less effective than programmatic policy priorities in attracting votes (Neuner and Wratil, 2020; Silva et al., 2022). These results further highlight the importance of disentangling these two distinct concepts when evaluating the effectiveness of populism. So, does combing populism with certain policy positions make populist claims-making or related policies more appealing to voters? How effective is populism compared to non-populist alternatives, such as those related to pluralism? Since populism is multi-dimensional, to what extent is the effect of populism based on each of its components or on their particular combination?

To determine which combinations of populist ideas and various ideological stances are most effective for candidate choice, we conduct a novel conjoint survey experiment. In our study, we ask our respondents from a nationally diverse US online survey (N = 1004/8032) to evaluate four pairs of realistic campaign messages by hypothetical primary candidates for their party in the next US House of Representatives elections. The campaign messages (paraphrased from real-world campaign ads) have been randomized to include the necessary components of populism (people-centrism, anti-pluralism, and anti-elitism), common economic and immigration-related policy stances, and relevant background candidate characteristics (profession, office experience). In line with the

populism literature, our general expectation has been a positive interaction effect between various components of populist messaging so that they are especially effective when combined together. We have also hypothesized that populist campaign messaging might be especially effective among those voters who hold populist attitudes.

Overall, although party-congruent policy positions are expectedly much more popular among the respondents, we find that none of the necessary components of populism have had an independent or a combined effect on candidate choice, including for those who hold populist attitudes themselves. As one may expect, Democratic respondents are much more likely to select candidates with pro-immigration and liberal economic positions while Republican respondents are more likely to select candidates with anti-immigration and conservative economic positions. In addition, we do not find any significant interaction effects of populism and various policy positions. We conclude by discussing the implications of these findings for understanding the role of populism in politics and its apparent (in)effectiveness.

Populism and Its Effectiveness

Although populism is still a contested concept, many scholars across disciplines have increasingly adopted a minimum "ideational" definition of populism over the past decade. According to this definition, populism is primarily a set of ideas depicting society as divided into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups–the "good" people and the "corrupt" elites–and emphasizing that politics should reflect the general will of the people (Mudde, 2004; Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2018; Hawkins et al., 2018). Unlike classical ideologies such as socialism or nationalism, populism lacks programmatic content and cannot be considered a full belief system (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2018). It can thus be combined with a wide range of "hosting" ideologies from across the left-right spectrum. When combined with nationalism, for instance, a more right-wing version

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of populism can target the country's immigrants, ethnic minorities, or the elites who side with these minorities as "the enemy of the people." At the same time, when combined with socialism, a more left-wing version of populism can instead portray the economic elites as the main culprit of society's problems. Within the ideational approach, scholars have studied populism as thin-centered ideological attributes of parties and candidates, public attitudes of individual voters, or claims-making in political discourse (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2018).

As populist parties from the left and right have gained significant voter support worldwide in the past decades, there have been significant research efforts to explain the reasons behind the electoral success of populist parties and candidates. Some scholars have investigated various individual attitudes, such as dissatisfaction with representative democracy, and structural factors, such as financial and immigration crises, that might fuel the demand for populism (Bakker et al., 2016; Akkerman et al., 2013; Kustov, 2023). However, since populism is always attached to other ideologies in practice, it has been difficult to disentangle its independent effects in observational studies.

For example, personal opposition to immigration is often found to predict support for right-wing populist parties, and lower socioeconomic status is often found to predict support for left-wing populist parties (Štětka et al., 2021; Van Hauwaert and Van Kessel, 2018). But these findings alone cannot say whether the electoral gains of populist parties have been accrued due to their related policy positions, populist ideas, or the combination of the two.

The two recent studies that have managed to separate "thin populism" from the policy positions of populist parties ("hosting ideology") in conjoint experiments find that policy positions, in and of themselves, have much larger effects on respondents' vote choice than populism (Neuner and Wratil, 2020; Silva et al., 2022). However, we still lack empirical evidence on the interaction between the components of populism

and their hosting ideologies. Building on this new strand of experimental research, in this paper we seek to further disentangle the effect of populism from the hosting ideology or particular policy positions, as well as explicitly test the possible interaction effect between the two. Besides the difficulty of separating populism from the hosting ideology in studying its effects, another complication concerns the multi-dimensional nature of populism. In particular, one may wonder whether and to what extent the potential electoral benefits of populism are due to a particular combination of some or all of its features.

Although parties or voters can only be considered "populist" if they express or hold all of the core components of populism (Wuttke et al., 2020; Hawkins et al., 2018), when one considers real-world political campaigns, the presence of all dimensions is much less common than the various combinations of two dimensions (Engesser et al., 2017). Similarly, only the most politically sophisticated voters hold consistent populist or anti-populist ideology (Spruyt et al., 2021). In other words, it is possible that it might be beneficial for political parties and candidates to only utilize or emphasize certain combinations of populism's main components.

Several recent experimental studies have investigated the effects of these components of populism on voter support and mobilization. Some scholars find that the morally charged anti-elitist rhetoric is the most appealing aspect of populist candidates, especially among those who are low in agreeableness (Silva et al., 2022; Bakker et al., 2021; Bos et al., 2020). At the same time, other scholars find that people-centrism is the most appealing populist aspect (Neuner and Wratil, 2020). However, it is still unclear whether each of these components is more effective in the presence of other components and certain policy positions.

Data and Methods

To test the effectiveness of populism and its various components vis-a-́vis its non-populist alternatives, in April 2022 we administered a nationally diverse US online survey experiment on Amazon MTurk (N = 1004) with quality controls recommended in the literature (Kennedy et al., 2020). Similar to analogous online surveys, our respondents were slightly more likely to be young, male, white, and educated than the general population. Still, 36% of our respondents identified as Republicans and 58% as Democrats (including leaners). 56% of our respondents also could be categorized as displaying populist attitudes (by at least weakly endorsing all three of populism's core components). For full descriptive statistics comparing our sample to a probability-based benchmark, see Table A3.

While the US political system offers much less opportunity for organized populist parties than countries with proportional representation, it still provides ample opportunities for populist candidacies (Lee, 2019). Although populism is not a stable or consistent feature among the main parties in the US, populist campaigns have been common among political candidates across all parties in the US (Bonikowski and Gidron, 2016; Hawkins and Kaltwasser, 2018; Dai and Kustov, 2022). Therefore, the US case arguably provides a good opportunity to create realistic candidate profiles with a combination of various components of populism and policy positions in a single experiment.

The survey, which was fielded as a part of the broader omnibus study, first presented our respondents with a conjoint task vignette and four pairs of candidate choices, and, following a few unrelated questions, asked about their demographic characteristics and populist attitudes. Our conjoint experiment asked our respondents to choose their preferred candidate from four realistic US House primary candidate profile pairs for their party with randomized attributes (so that each respondent, in turn, selects 4 out of 8 distinct candidates). We focus on hypothetical primary contest since any choice of candidates in the general elections would come down to the candidates' partisan

identity, which we would like to avoid since it is not our primary variable of interest (Kirkland and Coppock, 2018).

Compared to previous conjoint experiments on the topic that introduce populism in the form of candidates' listed policy priorities (Neuner and Wratil, 2022; Silva et al., 2022), our study embeds the components of populism in the form of candidates' campaign message features. In other words, we study populism as claims-making in political communication (Bonikowski and Gidron, 2016; Dai and Kustov, 2022). Populist ideas embedded in campaign messages arguably make the overall conjoint procedure more realistic, and better resemble the information voters receive during elections. Our approach also enables us to better disentangle the potential electoral effects of populism and its components with various policy content from this content itself. We operationalize populism along the dimensions of people-centrism, anti-elitism, and anti-pluralism. In addition to populist messages, we specify the non-populist attributes using the direct ideological opposites of populism such as elitism and pluralism (for a detailed discussion of populism dimensions and operationalization, see Appendix B).

We also include policy positions (immigration and economy) and background candidate characteristics (age, profession, office experience, current polling). All candidate attributes were randomly selected from those discrete predefined levels. The main binary outcome was a forced choice from a given pair of candidate profiles (Hainmueller et al., 2014). The list of all conjoint attributes and their possible levels is presented in Table 1 below (for an example of a random conjoint pair, see Figure A7 in Appendix A):

As can be seen, each theoretically-distinct dimension of populist and non-populist elements had four distinct manifestations. These examples have been selected from real-world political campaigns. This helped us ensure the relative realism of our experiment despite the fictitious nature of our candidates (for a discussion of the benefits of abstraction in experiments, see Brutger et al., 2022).

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Table 1: List of conjoint speech attributes

Introductory vignette:

"The next election for the US House of Representatives will be held later this year in November. In the next few minutes, we are going to describe four pairs of potential candidates considering running in your party's primary for an open seat in your district. For each candidate, we will show you his or her background and campaign message highlights. Please remember that we are interested in your personal opinion. There are no 'right' or 'wrong' answers."

Candidate's Background:

Candidate [A / B] worked as a [*elite*: state official / government advisor / businessmen / lawyer / professor / journalist; *non-elite*: social worker / teacher / firefighter / farmer] before running for office. Candidate [A / B] has [never held an office before; held an office for many years] and is likely [leading / trailing] in the polls now. Here are Candidate [A / B]'s campaign message highlights:

Populist Rhetoric Features of Anti-Pluralism and People-centricity:

Anti-Pluralist & People-centric	*Pluralist & People-centric*	*Pluralist & Non-people-centric*
• I believe we, the people, share the same values and interests. • This campaign is not about me, it is about the American people. • I believe the government is to respond to the will of the people. • I am running to represent the voice of the American people.	• I will make sure to listen to all the different voices of the people. • I am running to defend all our rights, no matter our differences. • I will serve everyone in America regardless of their convictions. • I am running to represent our diverse American voices.	• I'll do what is best for America even if the people disagree. • I'm running to bring expertise back to politics in Washington. • I'll bring the best people to solve our problems in America. • As your representative, I will make sure to listen to the experts.

Populist Rhetoric Features of Moralism and Anti-establishment:

Moralist & Anti-establishment	*Non-moralist & Anti-establishment*	*Non-moralist & Pro-establishment*
• But there're bad people in Washington who don't care about Americans. • Sadly, the corrupt Washington elites only listen to special interests. • Sadly, Congress is full of insiders who only care about themselves now. • I'll protect Americans against all evil in Washington.	• I'll fix the mess in Washington for the sake of America. • Unfortunately, the government has created more problems than it has solved. • I believe politicians in Congress talk too much and take too little action. • Sadly, so many in Washington are out of touch with the American people.	• I believe that Washington needs more qualified people like me at the moment. • I believe our government is there to help people, even though it's not easy. • I trust our Congress is mostly full of honest people who care for Americans. • I'll work with all my colleagues in Congress who want what's best for Americans.

Immigration policy position:

Anti-immigration	*Pro-immigration*
• I strongly believe illegal aliens should be deported. • I believe American immigration laws are too generous. • I'm committed to securing American border at all cost. • I will make sure our immigration laws are enforced.	• I believe there should be a path to citizenship. • I believe our American immigration laws are too cruel. • I'm committed to making our immigration system more open. • I will make sure American immigration laws are humane.

Economic policy position:

Right: Low tax, low public goods	*Left: High tax, high public goods*
• I believe current tax rates discourage investment and they must be lowered. • I strongly believe America should encourage innovation by cutting taxes. • When I'm in office, we will boost our businesses by lowering taxes. • When I'm in office, we will get Americans off of welfare and back to work.	• I believe the richest 1% percent should pay their fair share of taxes. • I'll increase the current minimum wage to a living American wage. • When I'm in office, we will limit the unfair tax advantages for the rich. • When I'm in office, we will increase our efforts to help the poor in America.

Choice outcome:

"If you had to choose between these two candidates in the upcoming primary, who would you vote for? If neither of the two candidates appeals to you, please still indicate who you would rather vote for." [Candidate A / Candidate B]

To test our main empirical expectation regarding the effectiveness of populist rhetoric, we follow the conventional empirical approach and estimate average marginal component effects (AMCEs) of various attributes on candidate choice using simple linear regression with robust standard errors clustered by respondent. The AMCE represents the average difference in the probability of being chosen when comparing two different attribute values (e.g., a candidate who worked as a lawyer compared to a candidate who worked as a firefighter) where the average is taken over all other possible attribute combinations. To ensure our results are not driven by our choice of reference categories and to make valid subgroup comparisons, we also provide the estimates of marginal means in addition to AMCEs (Leeper et al., 2020).

To simplify the presentation of our results, our main specification recodes pro-immigration and liberal economic stances as party-congruent for those who identify as Democrats and anti-immigration and conservative economic stances as party-congruent for those who identify as Republicans (with 5% of pure Independent respondents dropped from the analysis). For our subgroup analyses, in addition to partisan identification, we measure the respondents' populist attitudes using a previously validated set of questions from Akkerman et al. (2013) and Wuttke et al. (2020) adjusted for the US context. In line with Wuttke et al. (2020), we define "populists" as only those respondents who at least weakly endorse all core components of populism. For the full list of items, see Appendix C. For power analysis, see Appendix D.

Analysis and results

Our main results are summarized in Figures 1-3 below. Figures' left panel indicates the average marginal component effects of various components of populist rhetoric alongside other factors, while the right panel indicates the average choice probabilities given these factors. Table 1 provides the detailed coefficients for the models in Figures

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1-3 (model 1). Figures A1-3 provide an original coding of policy positions and an alternative coding of our two complex populist-related conjoint treatments as the four simpler, mutually exclusive binary attributes with no change in the underlying results. For other robustness checks, see Appendix E.

Figure 1: Effects of using various features of populist rhetoric on candidate choice
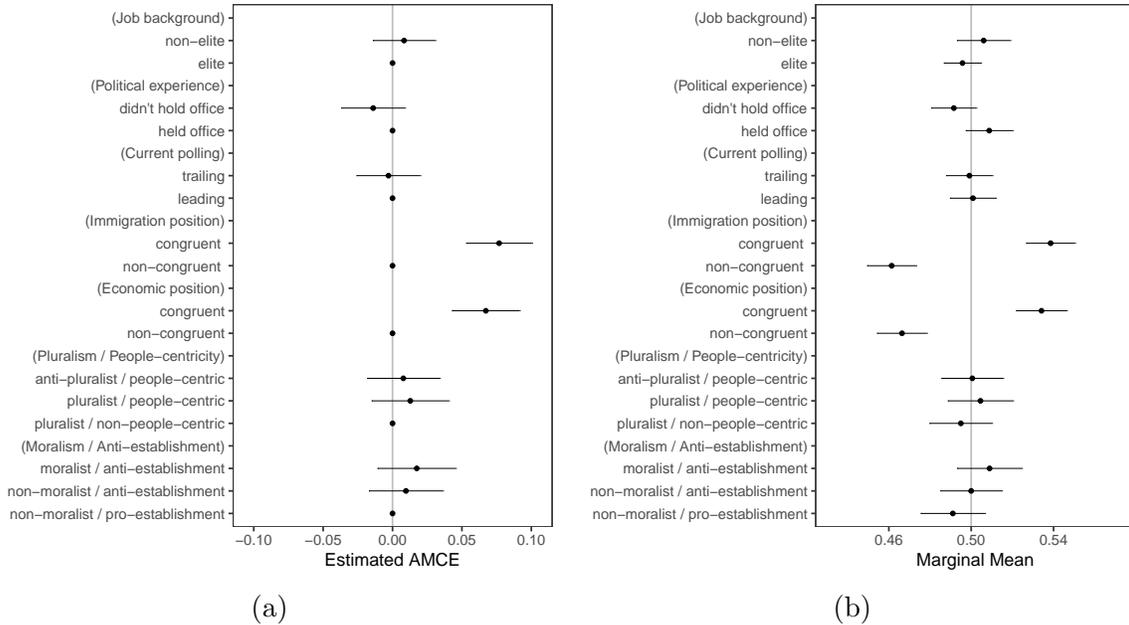
(a)   (b)

The plot shows the AMCE and marginal mean estimates of the randomly assigned profile and speech attributes on candidates' probability of being selected. Estimates are based on the baseline OLS model of the original MTurk sample. Bars represent 95% CIs. Robust standard errors are clustered by respondent.

Overall, as can be seen from Figures 1 and A1, populist rhetoric does not have a statistically significant effect on candidate choice. At the same time, the effects of policy stances are both statistically and substantively significant. A candidate with a party-congruent stance on immigration and the economy has a respectively 7-8 percentage point higher probability of being selected. Importantly, this holds true regardless of the use of populist rhetorical elements in their campaign message (see Tables A1 and 2). Unlike populist rhetoric, these sizable effects of either economic or immigration issue positioning are also robust to Holm-Bonferroni correction for multiple comparisons

across all 128 coefficients and models tested in this paper ($p < 0.01$). The magnitude of these effects is also comparable to the estimates for congruent issue positioning uncovered in the previous candidate choices experiments (e.g., Graham and Svolik, 2020; Silva et al., 2022).

Of course, the lack of statistical significance or the failure to reject the null hypothesis does not necessarily imply that populist rhetoric has no effect. To test whether there is a practical null effect, we follow the recent methodological literature and consider the "two one-sided test" (TOST) procedure (Lakens et al., 2018). In particular, we test for equivalence against the AMCE interval of ± 0.04, which is the minimum effect size that can be considered of substantive political significance given our experimental design. Since the observed confidence intervals for all possible populist features compared to non-populist features are fully contained in this interval, we consider this as evidence for the null practical effect of populist rhetoric.

We then test whether the effects differ among certain subgroups of voters such as among those who hold populist attitudes (Figures 2, A2, and A6). Interestingly, we see that such people are somewhat less sensitive to economic policy. Nonetheless, populists are not more responsive to populist rhetoric than non-populist voters. This holds true across various operationalization of populist attitudes (see Appendix A).

To further test whether there is an interaction effect between populism and various policy positions, we interact recoded populism variable with the recoded party congruent positions and the original immigration and economic policy positions (see Table 2). Populist messages are the ones that contain all of the anti-pluralist, people-centric and moralized anti-elitist attributes. We also report results from models with interaction terms between each of the binary components of populism and policy positions in Table A2. We find no significant interaction effects between populist rhetoric and policy positions (regardless of their operationalization). There is also no interaction between any of populism's components and policy positions. All in all, the populist rhetoric

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Figure 2: Effects of using various features of populist rhetoric by populist attitudes
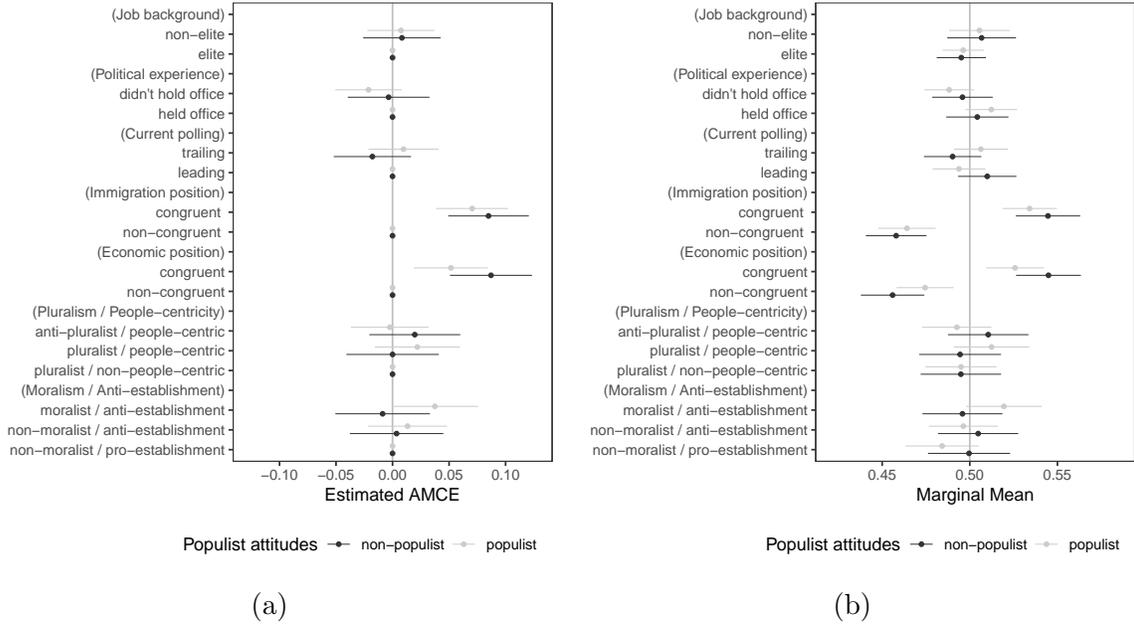
(a)   (b)

The plot shows the AMCE and marginal mean estimates of the randomly assigned profile and speech attributes on candidates' probability of being selected by respondents' populist attitudes. Estimates are based on the baseline OLS model of the original MTurk sample. Bars represent 95% CIs. Robust standard errors are clustered by respondent.

of any form does not seem to impact the electoral effectiveness or attractiveness of immigration and economic policies.

As a common exploratory analysis, we also break down our results by partisanship (Figures 3 and A3). Overall, there is some indication that Democrats are relatively more sensitive to policy positions vis-a-́vis populist rhetoric. Specifically, unlike those who lean Democrat, the choices of Republican respondents appear to be almost equally driven by candidates' economic positions and anti-establishment rhetoric. However, none of these subgroup differences are statistically significant when one accounts for multiple comparisons.

Table 2: Effects of policy and populist rhetoric on vote choice

| | Probability of selection | |
	(1)	(2)
Job background (non-elite)	0.010	0.008
	(0.011)	(0.011)
Political experience (none)	−0.017	−0.014
	(0.011)	(0.012)
Current polling (trailing)	−0.001	−0.002
	(0.011)	(0.012)
Immigration policy (anti)	−0.036*	
	(0.013)	
Economic policy (right)	−0.038*	
	(0.013)	
Immigration (congruent)		0.073**
		(0.013)
Economic policy (congruent)		0.072**
		(0.013)
Populist rhetoric	0.016	0.020
	(0.031)	(0.031)
Immigration policy (anti) : Populist rhetoric	−0.006	
	(0.035)	
Economic policy (right) : Populist rhetoric	−0.006	
	(0.036)	
Immigration (congruent) : Populist rhetoric		0.029
		(0.036)
Economy (congruent) : Populist rhetoric		−0.040
		(0.036)
Observations	8,032	7,616
Adjusted R^2	0.002	0.010

The table shows the AMCEs of the randomly assigned profile and speech attributes on candidates' probability of being selected. Robust standard errors clustered by respondent are given in parentheses, *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001.

Figure 3: Effects of using various features of populist rhetoric by partisanship (original coding)
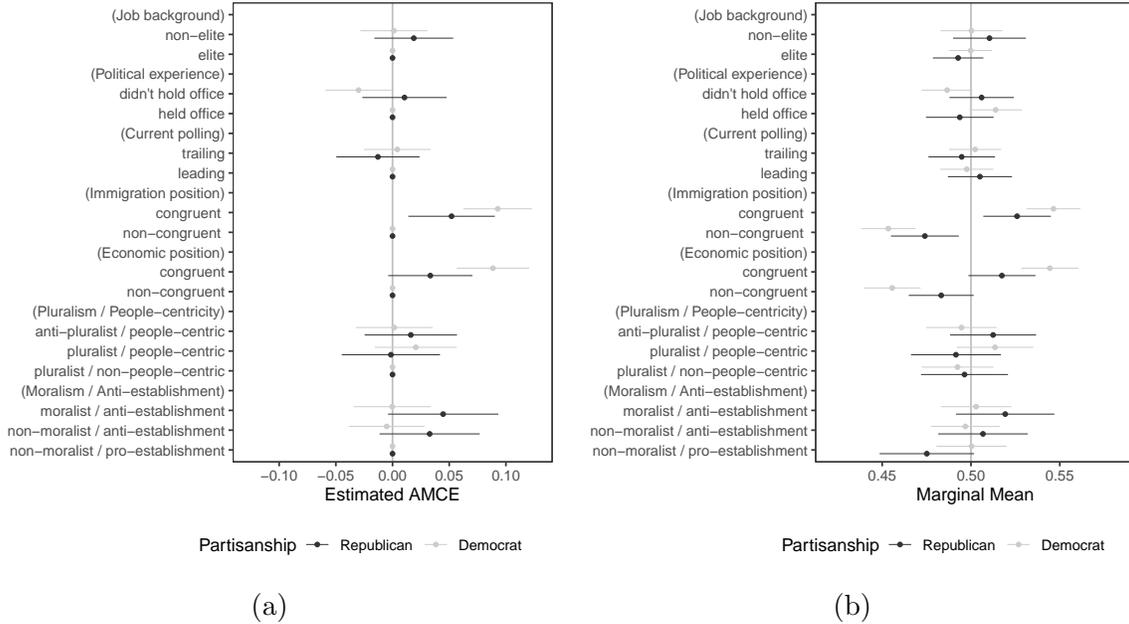
(a)   (b)

The plot shows the AMCE and marginal mean estimates of the randomly assigned profile and speech attributes on candidates' probability of being selected by respondents' partisanship. Estimates are based on the baseline OLS model of the original MTurk sample. Bars represent 95% CIs. Robust standard errors are clustered by respondent.

Discussion

These findings have important implications for our understanding of the role of populist rhetoric in politics and its apparent (in)effectiveness. Fascinated by the rise of populism over the last several decades, many commentators have attributed its success to a particular rhetorical style that may be appealing to a substantial part of the electorate. Our experimental results suggest that a substantial part of the appeal that populists have may actually lie in their substantive policy positions (which are hard to disentangle in available observational data). In that sense, while some attributed the electoral success of Donald Trump in 2016 to his populist style, it is possible that his appeal was more related to his (rhetorical) moderation on economic issues and the emphasis on immigration issues.

Similar to previous conjoint experiments (Neuner and Wratil, 2022; Silva et al., 2022), we also do not find that populist rhetoric is particularly appealing to those who hold populist attitudes. Importantly, our study was conducted during the Biden administration (while these previous studies were conducted during the Trump administration), which indicates that the null effects hold regardless of whether the incumbents themselves are populist (Jungkunz et al., 2021). In line with previous research on democratic attitudes (Graham and Svolik, 2020), our paper also suggests that congruent substantive policy positions are the most important factor for vote choice.

Of course, our research is not without limitations. First, our sample is arguably not large enough to reliably detect three-way and small two-way interaction effects even when they exist. Second, our results may be potentially driven by the conjoint design choices, including the paired task and/or particular speech examples. While it is important to see further replications of our study, the current results do suggest that populist rhetoric is unlikely to be effective in itself, especially compared to candidate issue positioning. In this respect, future research would benefit from considering larger and/or more targeted samples, as well as other possible conjoint and vignette experimental designs.

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Online Appendix

Appendix A: Tables and Figures

Figure A1: Effects of using various features of populist rhetoric and other attributes (alternative coding)
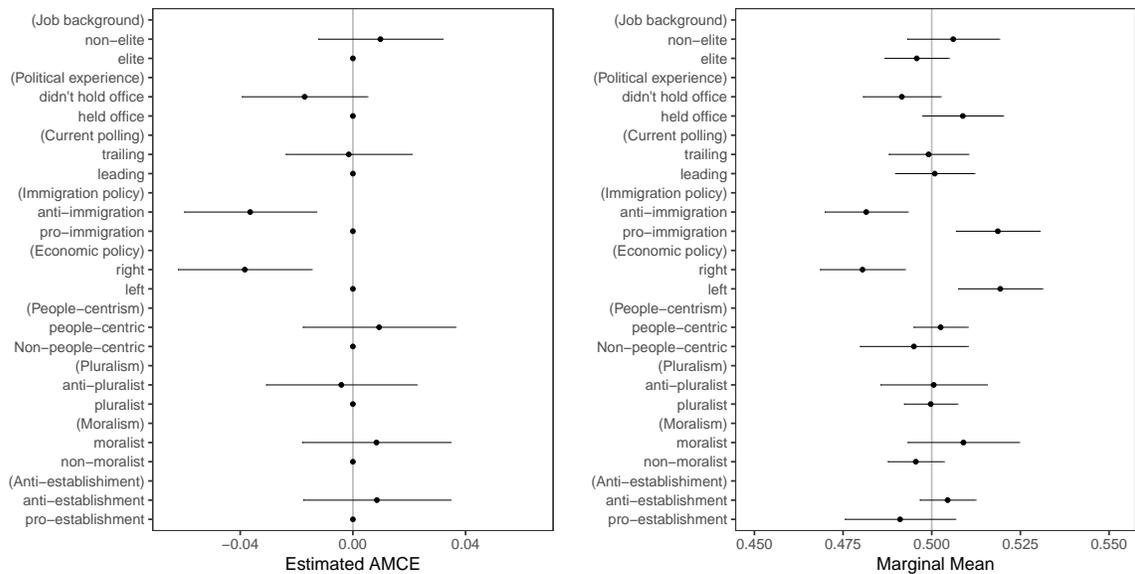
The plot shows the AMCE and marginal mean estimates of the randomly assigned profile and speech attributes on candidates' probability of being selected. Estimates are based on the baseline OLS model of the original MTurk sample. Bars represent 95% CIs. Robust standard errors are clustered by respondent.

Figure A2: Effects of using various features of populist rhetoric by populist attitudes (alternative coding)
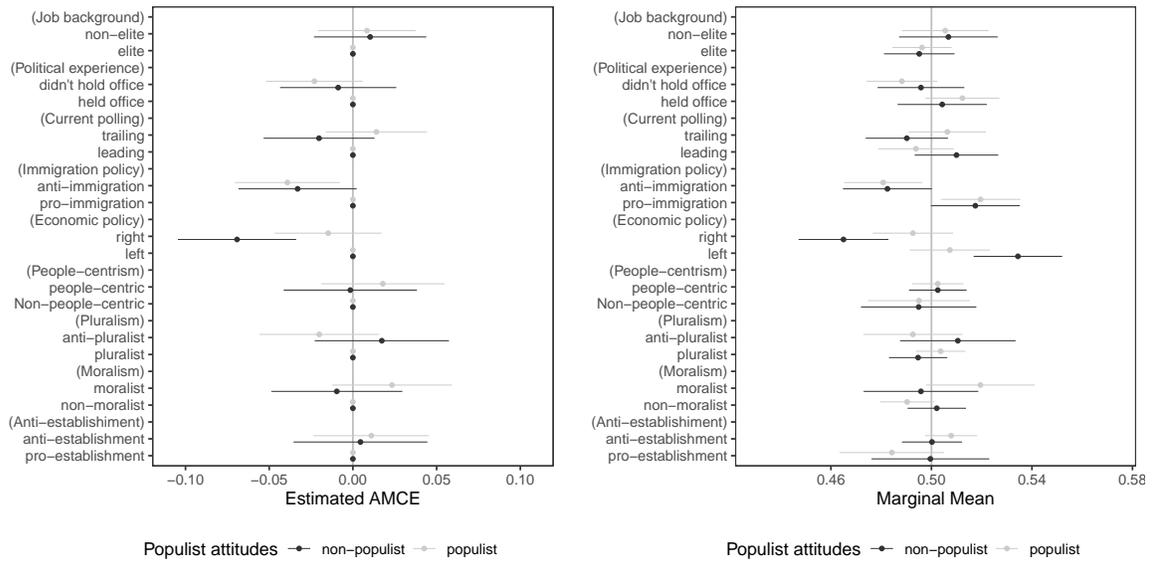
The plot shows the AMCE and marginal mean estimates of the randomly assigned profile and speech attributes on candidates' probability of being selected by respondents' populist attitudes. Estimates are based on the baseline OLS model of the original MTurk sample. Bars represent 95% CIs. Robust standard errors are clustered by respondent.

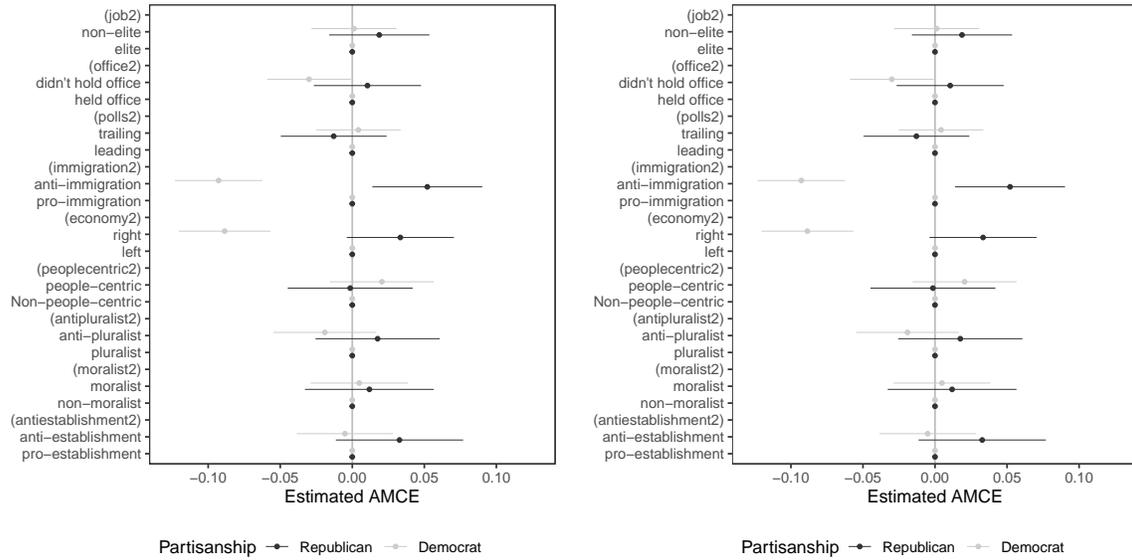Figure A3: Effects of using various features of populist rhetoric by partisanship (alternative coding)

The plot shows the AMCE and marginal mean estimates of the randomly assigned profile and speech attributes on candidates' probability of being selected by respondents' partisanship. Estimates are based on the baseline OLS model of the original MTurk sample. Bars represent 95% CIs. Robust standard errors are clustered by respondent.

Figure A4: Effects of using various features of populist rhetoric and other attributes (for each of the four candidate pairs)

(a) Pair one

(b) Pair two

(c) Pair three

(d) Pair four

The plot shows the AMCE estimates of the randomly assigned profile and speech attributes on candidates' probability of being selected. Estimates are based on the baseline OLS model of the original MTurk sample. Bars represent 95% CIs.

Figure A5: Effects of using various features of populist rhetoric and other attributes (attentive respondents only)
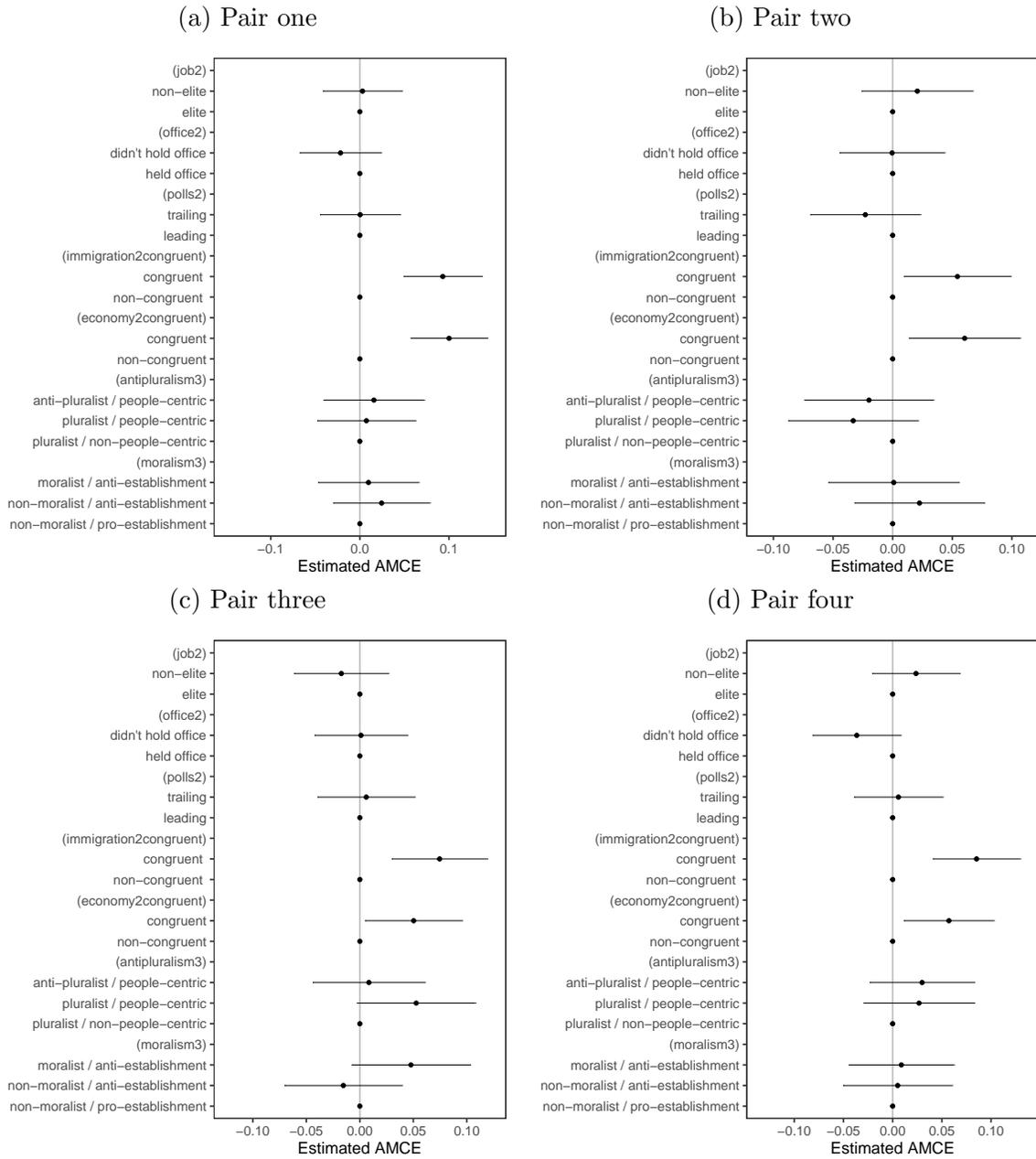

The plot shows the AMCE and marginal mean estimates of the randomly assigned profile and speech attributes on candidates' probability of being selected. Estimates are based on the baseline OLS model of the original MTurk sample. Bars represent 95% CIs.

Figure A6: Effects of using various features of populist rhetoric by strong populist attitudes
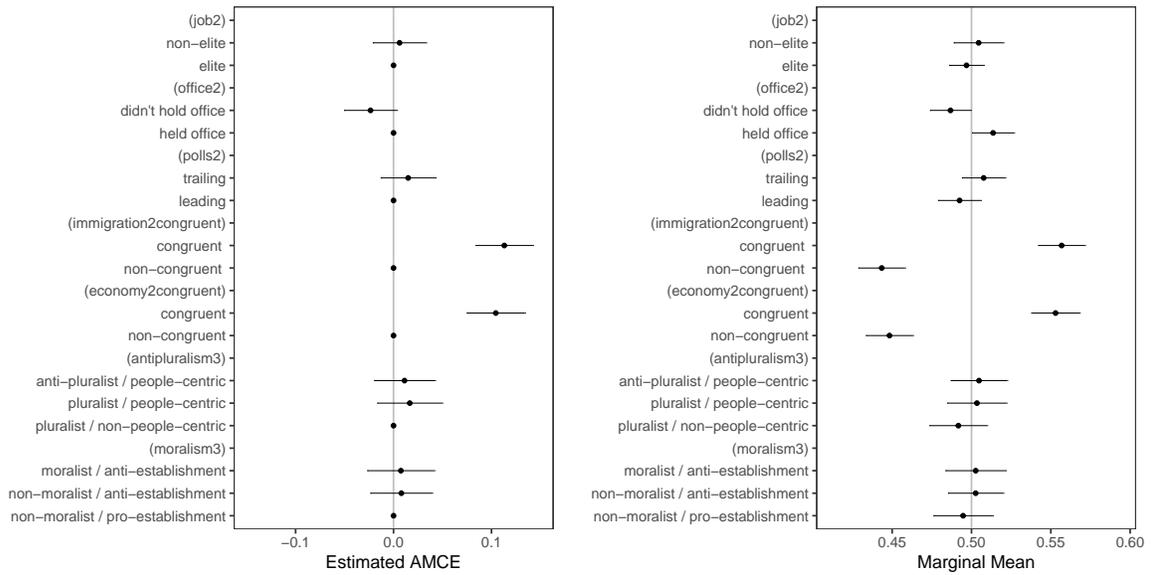

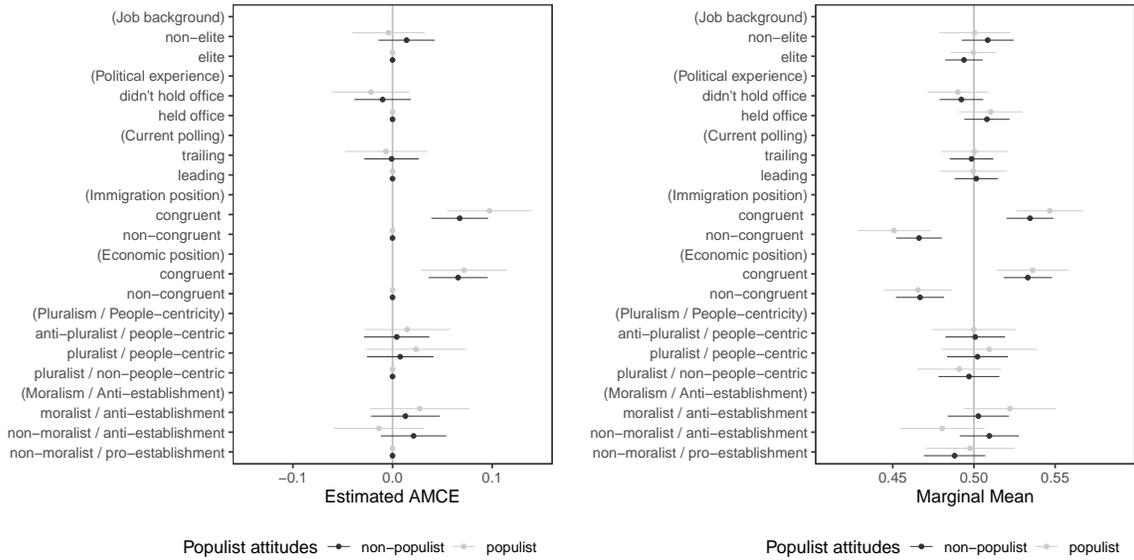The plot shows the AMCE and marginal mean estimates of the randomly assigned profile and speech attributes on candidates' probability of being selected. Estimates are based on the baseline OLS model of the original MTurk sample. Bars represent 95% CIs.

Table A1: Effects of various candidate and speech characteristics on vote choice

	Probability of selection			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Job background (non-elite)	0.008	0.009	0.009	0.008
	(0.011)	(0.011)	(0.011)	(0.011)
Political experience (none)	−0.014	−0.014	−0.014	−0.013
	(0.012)	(0.012)	(0.012)	(0.012)
Current polling (trailing)	−0.003	−0.003	−0.003	−0.002
	(0.012)	(0.012)	(0.012)	(0.012)
Immigration policy (congruent)	0.077**	0.077**	0.077**	0.077**
	(0.012)	(0.012)	(0.012)	(0.012)
Economic policy (congruent)	0.067**	0.067**	0.067**	0.067**
	(0.012)	(0.012)	(0.012)	(0.012)
Pluralist / People-centric	0.013	0.012	0.0004	−0.0001
	(0.014)	(0.025)	(0.030)	(0.029)
Anti-pluralist / People-centric	0.008	0.004	0.013	0.017
	(0.013)	(0.024)	(0.028)	(0.029)
Non-moralist / Anti-establishment	0.010	−0.009	0.013	−0.015
	(0.014)	(0.024)	(0.030)	(0.029)
Moralist / Anti-establishment	0.017	0.032	0.059	0.005
	(0.014)	(0.024)	(0.031)	(0.028)
Partisanship (Democrat)			0.025	
			(0.023)	
Populist Attitudes (Populist)				−0.020
				(0.023)
Pluralist / People-centric : Non-moralist / Anti-establishment		0.037	0.037	0.037
		(0.034)	(0.034)	(0.034)
Anti-pluralist / People-centric : Non-moralist / Anti-establishment		0.020	0.020	0.020
		(0.034)	(0.034)	(0.034)
Pluralist / People-centric : Moralist / Anti-establishment		−0.036	−0.037	−0.037
		(0.035)	(0.035)	(0.035)
Anti-pluralist / People-centric : Moralist / Anti-establishment		−0.008	−0.008	−0.008
		(0.035)	(0.035)	(0.035)
Pluralist / People-centric : Democrat			0.020	
			(0.029)	
Anti-pluralist / People-centric : Democrat			−0.016	
			(0.027)	
Non-moralist / Anti-establishment : Democrat			−0.036	
			(0.028)	
Moralist / Anti-establishment : Democrat			−0.044	
			(0.030)	
Pluralist / People-centric : Populist				0.022
				(0.028)
Anti-pluralist / People-centric : Populist				−0.023
				(0.027)
Non-moralist / Anti-establishment : Populist				0.011
				(0.028)
Moralist / Anti-establishment : Populist				0.047
				(0.029)
Observations	7,616	7,616	7,616	7,616
Adjusted R^2	0.010	0.010	0.010	0.010

The table shows the AMCEs of the randomly assigned profile and speech attributes on candidates' probability of being selected. Robust standard errors clustered by respondent are given in parentheses, $^*p<0.05$; $^{**}p<0.01$; $^{***}p<0.001$.

Figure A7: Example of a random conjoint task

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Candidate A worked as a journalist before running for office. Candidate A has held an office for many years and is likely leading in the polls now. Here are Candidate A's campaign message highlights: *"I'll bring the best people to solve our problems in America. I believe that Washington needs more qualified people like me at the moment… I believe American immigration laws are too cruel… When I'm in office, we will boost our businesses by lowering taxes."*

Candidate B worked as a firefighter before running for office. Candidate B has held an office for many years and is likely trailing in the polls now. Here are Candidate B's campaign message highlights: *"I believe we, the people, share the same values and interests. I'll work with all my colleagues in Congress who want what's best for Americans… I believe there should be a path to citizenship… When I'm in office, we'll get Americans off of welfare and back to work."*

If you had to choose between these two candidates in the upcoming primary, who would you vote for? If neither of the two candidates appeals to you, please still indicate who you would rather vote for.

○ Candidate A

○ Candidate B

→

Table A2: Effects of policy and populist rhetoric (components) on vote choice

	Probability of selection	
	(1)	(2)
Job background (non-elite)	0.010	0.009
	(0.011)	(0.012)
Political experience (none)	−0.017	−0.014
	(0.011)	(0.012)
Current polling (trailing)	−0.002	−0.002
	(0.011)	(0.012)
Immigration policy (anti)	−0.049	
	(0.025)	
Economic policy (right)	−0.051⁺	
	(0.026)	
Immigration (congruent)		0.087**
		(0.025)
Economic policy (congruent)		0.080*
		(0.026)
Pluralist / People-centric	0.024	0.026
	(0.032)	(0.031)
Anti-pluralist / People-centric	−0.008	0.018
	(0.031)	(0.030)
Non-moralist / Anti-establishment	−0.037	−0.031
	(0.032)	(0.030)
Moralist / Anti-establishment	0.032	0.058
	(0.031)	(0.031)
Pluralist / People-centric : Non-moralist / Anti-establishment	0.040	0.038
	(0.034)	(0.034)
Anti-pluralist / People-centric : Non-moralist / Anti-establishment	0.015	0.021
	(0.033)	(0.034)
Pluralist / People-centric : Moralist / Anti-establishment	−0.043	−0.037
	(0.034)	(0.035)
Anti-pluralist / People-centric : Moralist / Anti-establishment	−0.023	−0.008
	(0.034)	(0.035)
Immigration policy (anti) : Pluralist / People-centric	0.013	
	(0.027)	
Immigration policy (anti) : Anti-pluralist / People-centric	0.043	
	(0.027)	
Immigration policy (anti) : Non-moralist / Anti-establishment	0.006	
	(0.027)	
Immigration policy (anti) : Moralist / Anti-establishment	−0.025	
	(0.028)	
Economic policy (right) : Pluralist / People-centric	−0.041	
	(0.028)	
Economic policy (right) : Anti-pluralist / People-centric	−0.010	
	(0.027)	
Economic policy (right) : Non-moralist / Anti-establishment	0.051	
	(0.028)	
Economic policy (right) : Moralist / Anti-establishment	0.038	
	(0.028)	
Immigration (congruent) : Pluralist / People-centric		−0.005
		(0.028)
Immigration (congruent) : Anti-pluralist / People-centric		−0.017
		(0.027)
Immigration (congruent) : Non-moralist / Anti-establishment		−0.003
		(0.028)
Immigration (congruent) : Moralist / Anti-establishment		−0.005
		(0.028)
Economy (congruent) : Pluralist / People-centric		−0.024
		(0.029)
Economy (congruent) : Anti-pluralist / People-centric		−0.013
		(0.027)
Economy (congruent) : Non-moralist / Anti-establishment		0.047
		(0.028)
Economy (congruent) : Moralist / Anti-establishment		−0.047
		(0.029)
Observations	8,032	7,616
Adjusted R²	0.003	0.011

The table shows the AMCEs of the randomly assigned profile and speech attributes on candidates' probability of being selected. Robust standard errors clustered by respondent are given in parentheses, *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001.

Table A3: Descriptive Statistics (MTurk, n = 1004/8032 vs ANES 2020 Benchmark)

Statistic	ANES Mean	Mean	St. Dev.	Min	Pctl(25)	Pctl(75)	Max
Age	49.92	38.35	11.38	18	30	44	78
Female	0.52	0.38	0.49	0	0	1	1
White	0.69	0.79	0.41	0	1	1	1
College+	0.37	0.78	0.42	0	1	1	1
Republican	0.42	0.36	0.48	0	0	1	1
Democrat	0.46	0.58	0.49	0	0	1	1
Populist	—	0.56	0.50	0	0	1	1

Appendix B: Operationalization of Populism and its Components

Following the theoretical literature, our experiment operationalizes populism along the dimensions of people-centrism, anti-elitism, and anti-pluralism. Unlike previous studies that only included populist attributes (Neuner and Wratil, 2022; Silva et al., 2022), we also include elitist and pluralist attributes, populism's direct opponents, as the non-populist attributes (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017). People-centrism specifies that people should be the only legitimate source of political power. Elitism, on the other hand, considers the elites should make political decisions. People-centrism is a shared feature between populism and liberal democracy. However, unlike liberal democracy's pluralist view of the people, populist understanding of the people is homogenous and virtually pure (anti-pluralist) (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017). In other words, there are two types of people-centrism: pluralist and anti-pluralist. Therefore, we include three categories of attributes in the people-centrism dimension: pluralist people-centrism, anti-pluralist people-centrism, and elitism.

Anti-elitism, the other core component of populism, is not simply about criticizing the status quo or the establishment (Müller, 2017). Elites, as the opposite of the pure people, in populism are morally corrupted and intentionally subverting the people's interests. The distinction between the people and the elite in populism is purely moral (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017). In other words, a populist anti-elitist message should be morally charged (Bonikowski and Gidron, 2016; Bonikowski and Zhang, 2023). However, one can criticize the status quo or the establishment without vilifying the elite. We, therefore, include three categories of attributes in the anti-elitism dimension: moralized anti-establishment, non-moralized anti-establishment, and pro-establishment.

Following the multi-dimensional theoretical structure of populism (Wuttke et al., 2020), a campaign message is only considered populist when it contains all of the anti-pluralist, anti-elitist, and anti-pluralist attributes.

Appendix C: Power Analysis

According to our calculations, our conjoint design with the resulting effective sample size of 8032 provides 90% statistical power to detect a small effect (AMCE > 0.06) and near 80% statistical power to detect a smaller effect of substantive significance ¿ 0.04 of the target 3-level substantive attributes at $\alpha = 0.05$ with a near zero probability that estimated coefficients have incorrect signs (Stefanelli and Lukac 2020). For the possible interaction of two populism treatments or their possible heterogeneity by populist attitudes, given the proportion of populism treatment (1/3) and the distribution of populist attitudes ($\sim 1/2$), our design can only reliably detect interaction effects greater than 0.07 with 80% power (Schuessle and Freitag 2020).

References

Stefanelli, Alberto, and Martin Lukac. 2020. "Subjects, trials, and levels: Statistical power in conjoint experiments." (https://mblukac.shinyapps.io/conjoints-power-shiny/).

Schuessler, Julian, and Markus Freitag. 2020 "Power analysis for conjoint experiments."

(https://markusfreitag.shinyapps.io/cjpowr/).

Appendix D: Survey instrument

Populist attitudes [binary variable, defined as 1 if and only if respondents agree with all three subcomponents of populism)]

"How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?" (Strongly disagree; Somewhat disagree; Neither agree nor disagree; Somewhat agree; Strongly agree)

Anti-pluralism:

- "Ordinary people share the same values and interests"

- "Ordinary people are of good and honest character"

People-centrism:

- "The people, not the elites, should make our most important policy decisions"

- "The politicians need to follow the will of the people"

Moralized anti-elitism:

- "The government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves"

- "Quite a few of the people running the government are crooked"

Partisanship [binary variable: Republican or Democrat, including leaners]

"Which of the following categories best describes your political affiliation?" (Democrat; Republican; Independent; Other)

[if Independent] "Would you say that you are..." (Independent, lean Republican; Independent, do not lean towards either party; Independent, lean Democrat")

Appendix E: Robustness checks

We conduct a number of robustness checks with no change in the underlying substantive conclusions. First, decompose our two complex populist-related conjoint attributes into the four simpler, mutually exclusive binary variables as an alternative conceptualization (see Figures A1-3). Second, we replicate our subgroup analysis by populist attitudes with the stronger, more exclusive definition of these attitudes in which the respondents have to strongly agree with all six populist items (see Figure A6). Third, we test for the possible carryover and profile order effects by restricting our sample to each of the candidate pairs (see Figure A4 and interacting the profile order with the attribute effects (not shown). Fourth, we restrict our sample to the 70% of respondents who passed a relatively demanding attention check (see Figure A5).[1]

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[1]The question fielded at the end of the omnibus survey was worded as follows: "In the survey, you read about:" (Information Theory, Critical Race Theory, Theory of Knowledge, Theoretical Rationality). The second option was the correct one.