Article

Populist Disinformation: Are Citizens With Populist Attitudes Affected Most by Radical Right-Wing Disinformation?

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Abstract
Disinformation emphasizing radical populist narratives may threaten democratic values. Although extant literature has pointed to a strong affinity between disinformation and the populist radical right, we know little about the effects of such deceptive information. Against this backdrop, this article relies on an experiment in the Netherlands (N = 456) in which participants were exposed to radical right-wing populist disinformation versus decontextualized malinformation. Mimicking the participatory logic of disinformation campaigns in the digital society, we also varied the source of the message (a neutral news message versus a social media post of an ordinary citizen). Main findings indicate that exposure to radical right-wing populist messages can prime support for radical-right-wing issue positions, but ordinary citizen sources do not amplify disinformation's effects. Our findings indicate that malign populist messages may have a delegitimizing impact on democracy, irrespective of how they are presented.

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1. Introduction

The dissemination of political disinformation has been associated with severe ramifications for deliberative democracy (e.g., Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Marwick & Lewis, 2017; Waisbord, 2018). Especially (radical) right-wing populist actors have been accused of exploiting the mechanisms of social media to disseminate polarizing and misleading content to destabilize democracies, fuel polarized divides, or delegitimize the established political order (e.g., Marwick & Lewis, 2017). Although extant research has offered important insights into the effects of political disinformation (e.g., Barfar, 2019; Schaewitz et al., 2020), we know little about which segments of society are affected most by right-wing populist narratives expressed through disinformation. Against this backdrop, this article relies on an experimental design to assess the effects of different forms of dis- and malinformation. More specifically, we explore whether the effects of deceptive information are strongest for people with higher levels of existing populist beliefs.

In this article, we define disinformation as fabricated or manipulated information that aims to deceive recipients (e.g., Freelon & Wells, 2020; Hancock & Bailenson, 2021). In political contexts, deceptive information is often associated with right-wing populist narratives that stress a central opposition between ordinary people versus failing elites and dangerous others (e.g., Bennett & Livingston, 2018). More specifically, right-wing populists often use deceptive information to attack the established order (e.g., Marwick & Lewis, 2017). Next to looking at the affinity between disinformation and right-wing populist communication, this article will explore the effects of decontextualized malinformation, which we understand as the decontextualized use of factually accurate or authentic information used to cause harm (e.g., Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

The experiment is situated in the Netherlands, a Western European country with historically high levels of electoral support for radical right-wing populist parties (see e.g., Aalberg et al., 2017). In this context, we focus on an issue position owned by radical right-wing

populists: anti-immigration sentiments connected to a populist interpretation of socio-political reality. Making use of actual statements made by a moderate conservative politician (the former leader of the Christian Democrats), we randomly exposed participants to (a) a decontextualized authentic message in which right-wing populist statements were expressed (referred to as malinformation), (b) right-wing populist disinformation, and (c) an unrelated message based on authentic information (control condition). As a second factor, we varied the message's embedding (the speech was either embedded in a news article or endorsed by an ordinary citizen). As key dependent variables, we measure the perceived credibility of the message and its effects on political beliefs in line with the right-wing populist agenda that was emphasized.

Making use of this design, we experimentally explore the impact of right-wing populist disinformation, especially among citizens with existing populist beliefs related to the claims of the deceptive message. As malign actors may aim to polarize the electorate, and herewith strengthen existing cleavages in society (e.g., Freelon & Wells, 2020), they may mostly target deceptive information to citizens with a tendency to agree with their anti-establishment rhetoric. As an important contribution to the literature on populism and disinformation, we arrive at a more comprehensive understanding of how disinformation may feed on technological affordances and existing societal grievances to reinforce polarized divides in society.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Disinformation and (Radical) Right-Wing Populism

We understand disinformation as the intentional and goal-directed fabrication or manipulation of information (e.g., Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Freelon & Wells, 2020; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Different from misinformation, disinformation is intentionally false and deceptive. Thus, the creator or disseminator of disinformation (i.e., a foreign state) manipulates information with the intended outcome to deceive and make an impact on targeted recipients. We specifically look at disinformation in the political context, which may be created and disseminated to destabilize governments; reinforce distrust, cynicism, and polarization; or delegitimize the established political order by amplifying distrust and cynicism (e.g., Bennett & Livingston, 2018).

This specific form of disinformation is arguably prominent in radical right-wing populist narratives (e.g., Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Marwick & Lewis, 2017). Here, we understand radical-right-wing populism in terms of its ideational core. Its discourse combines populist ideas that emphasize the antagonistic divide between the ordinary people and the corrupt elites (e.g., Mudde, 2004) with a nativist anti-immigration agenda (e.g., Betz, 1994; Rydgren, 2005). Next to emphasizing

populism's core idea, then, right-wing populism cultivates an exclusionist narrative. Right-wing populism can refer to different out-groups, such as immigrants, ethnic minorities, or religious groups. It can further exclude people based on gender, sexual orientation, or other characteristics. As anti-immigration and nativism are very prominent features of right-wing populism in Europe and the Dutch case more specifically, we focus on the exclusion of immigrants and refugees in this article (e.g., Aalberg et al., 2017).

We focus on right-wing populism in a communication context. Here, we regard the core communication style or frame of populism as the emphasis on the blameless people versus culpable elites, which entails the attribution of blame for negative outcomes to elite actors, such as the government or the EU (Hameleers et al., 2017). Populist communication may profit from the affordances of digital and social media. As social media allow for direct interaction with ordinary people whilst circumventing elites, social media in particular may offer a favorable setting for the communication of populist ideas (e.g., Blassnig et al., 2019; Engesser et al., 2017).

Arguably, the prevalence of disinformation should be understood within its own communication and political contexts and the rise of radical right-wing populist movements and sentiments (Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Waisbord, 2018). In line with this, distrust in the establishment, media organizations, and science have been reinforced and politicized by right-wing populist movements that attack the media, science, and other established institutions (e.g., Mede & Schäfer, 2020). Due to the high visibility of attacks on scientific institutions and the media, especially among right-wing populist supporters, the counter-factual statements of disinformation may in particular appeal to citizens that oppose the mainstream media, experts, and scientists. These alternative narratives can be understood as counter-factual or delegitimizing as they forward a position that runs counter to conventional empirical evidence and expert knowledge (e.g., Waisbord, 2018). Moreover, as it typically attacks expert consensus or factual knowledge disseminated by elites, for example by referring to expert knowledge as fake news or pseudo-science, disinformation narratives may delegitimize the establishment and attack conventional knowledge. As such disinformation narratives resonate with right-wing populism's focus on ordinary people and its opposition toward established knowledge and elite actors, counter-factual narratives are relevant to consider in a right-wing populist framework.

2.2. The (Relative) Credibility of Right-Wing Populist Disinformation

Disinformation comes in different forms and fabricated or manipulated content does not always completely deviate from the truth. Here, the distinction between disinformation and malinformation may be relevant to consider (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Whereas

disinformation uses false information to cause harm, malinformation relies on the truth but employs truthful information strategically to cause harm. The use of malinformation can be understood in the context of the truth-default theory (Levine, 2014), which postulates that people are more likely to accept the honesty of information than to doubt it unless suspicion is actively triggered. When elements of the truth are used to deceive, suspicion may be circumvented—which increases the likelihood that false information is accepted. Exploiting this bias, political actors can make (vague) linkages to truthful information in order to make lies seem believable or use truthful information to cause harm.

In this setting, we specifically compare completely fabricated content (disinformation in which a moderate political actor is shown expressing radical right-wing populist positions) to a political speech taken out of its original context (malinformation). We particularly focus on right-wing populist disinformation for which inaccurate information connecting immigration to violent crimes is paired with a right-wing populist issue position. We consider this as disinformation as it: (a) includes information that is factually inaccurate, false, and/or not substantiated with expert knowledge; and (b) it relates to the intended use of false or misleading information with a political agenda (e.g., Bennett & Livingston, 2018).

The question remains how credible and persuasive these different messages are. Extant research on disinformation found that false information is seen as relatively credible, especially when it relies on some aspects of the truth, repeats familiar content, or resonates with people's prior beliefs or available cognitive schemata (e.g., Hameleers, 2020; Schaewitz et al., 2020). However, we lack a baseline understanding of the relative credibility of disinformation versus malinformation and authentic unrelated messages that are more representative of a political actor's profile. Against this backdrop, we do not formulate directional hypotheses on the effects of disinformation versus authentic messages and malinformation. We rather introduce an exploratory research question to map the relative persuasiveness of (a) right-wing populist disinformation, (b) an authentic decontextualized political message with a right-wing populist position (decontextualized malinformation), and (c) an authentic unrelated message (control condition). More specifically, we ask:

RQ1: What are the effects of exposure to radical right-wing populist disinformation on (a) message credibility and (b) agreement with radical right-wing political views?

2.3. The Effects of Populist Disinformation on Different Levels of Populist Attitudes

In line with extant research, we understand the effects of right-wing populism as the *activation* of beliefs, mental maps, and associations that are cognitively acces-

sible and salient among receivers (e.g., Krämer, 2014; Müller et al., 2017). Specifically, exposure to messages that frame issues in populist ways is expected to activate accessible cognitive schemata that are related to these messages. We understand these schemata as prior levels of populist attitudes among receivers (see also Krämer, 2014). Populist attitudes—which we understand as the perception of an antagonistic societal and political divide between the pure people and the corrupt elite (e.g., Akkerman et al., 2014; Schulz et al., 2018)—can be seen as the "frames in mind" that correspond to the "frames in communication" that are emphasized in right-wing populist disinformation.

Considering that framing effects are expected to occur when frames in communication can activate or trigger frames in mind (e.g., Chong & Druckman, 2007; Scheufele, 1999), we believe that the availability and accessibility of prior levels of populist attitudes make people more susceptible to persuasion by disinformation campaigns that echo people's populist anti-establishment beliefs. In line with this reasoning, we expect that right-wing populist disinformation has the strongest effects on message credibility and the activation of radical right-wing issue positions among people with more accessible populist attitudes. We therefore hypothesize:

H1: Exposure to right-wing populist disinformation has the strongest effects on (a) message credibility and (b) agreement with radical right-wing political views among participants with more pronounced levels of populist attitudes.

2.4. Inauthentic Coordinated Behavior: Embedding Disinformation on Social Media

Research on the effects of right-wing populist communication has found that the reliance on ordinary citizen cues is effective, especially when people identify with ordinary people as a source of information (Hameleers & Schmuck, 2017). We can explain this effect as a social identification mechanism: People are most likely to be influenced when they receive information from allegedly like-minded sources. When a source is seen as an in-group member, receivers may be more likely to accept the message than when such source cues are absent (Hameleers & Schmuck, 2017). Hence, when false information is presented as information coming from "people like me," receivers may be less likely to systematically verify the truthfulness of all statements.

The disinformation technique responding to this social identity mechanism has been referred to as the "misrepresentation of identities" (McKay & Tenove, 2021). By using inauthentic profiles falsely signaling like-minded social identities, news users may become unable to critically assess the political interests, biases, and agendas of the speaker, which offers disinformation agents an opportunity to deceive the public when relying on (inauthentic) cues of the "vox populi." In this

article, we look at (deceptive) references to ordinary people as the embedding of disinformation. This embedding entails the presentation of deceptive information as part of a (fake) social media post by an allegedly ordinary citizen. We expect that right-wing populist disinformation presented as authentic content coming from an ordinary citizen is more effective than disinformation presented as regular news by an unknown source. We hypothesize:

H2: Right-wing populist disinformation is seen as (a) more credible and (b) has stronger effects on agreement with radical right-wing political views when it is framed as a social media message from an ordinary citizen than an unknown media source.

2.5. The Effects of Embedded Disinformation on Different Levels of Populist Attitudes

Although (fake) references to the vox populi may be a powerful disinformation technique, it may not work across the board. As shown by Hameleers and Schmuck (2017), populist messages sent by an ordinary citizen are most effective when people can identify with this sender as part of their in-group. This can be explained as an in-group serving bias central in the social identity model of collective action: Messages that refer to a deprived group identity and salient scapegoats can mobilize in-group members to act on behalf of their threatened group identity (Van Zomeren et al., 2008). For individuals to be activated, however, they need to feel connected to the in-group allegedly threatened by the dangerous others. Thus, people need to identify with the deprived in-group of ordinary people.

We suggest that this identification can be tapped by people's populist attitudes. Hence, such attitudes capture people's identification with a homogenous in-group of ordinary people and this entity's opposition to the corrupt and culpable elite (e.g., Schulz et al., 2018). In addition, people with more pronounced populist attitudes prefer news coverage that focuses on members of the ordinary people whilst circumventing experts and elite actors (Hameleers, 2020). The affinity between right-wing populist disinformation distributed by members of the ordinary people should thus be most persuasive for citizens with populist attitudes, as such disinformation resonates with their views on reality. We, therefore, hypothesize:

H3: Right-wing populist disinformation allegedly distributed by the vox populi is seen as (a) more credible and (b) has stronger effects on agreement with radical right-wing political views among participants with more pronounced populist attitudes.

2.6. Context of the Study

Right-wing populist parties are electorally successful in the Netherlands (e.g., Aalberg et al., 2017). Dutch right-wing populist parties like the Freedom Party of Geert Wilders and Thierry Baudet's Forum for Democracy combine a populist communication style with nativist and anti-immigration sentiments. The leaders of these populist parties are very active on social media, and often share counter-factual narratives and disinformation online, for example, related to immigration or the Covid-19 pandemic (Hameleers, 2020). Against this backdrop, we can identify a strong affinity between disinformation and the populist right in the Netherlands: These populist leaders circumvent established knowledge and expert sources as they are regarded as part of the "corrupt" establishment. At the same time, they share counterfactual narratives that attack the established order, fitting their antagonistic communication style.

In this setting, we can argue that the Netherlands offers a realistic context to investigate the effects of disinformation using a right-wing populist frame. Considering that disinformation can be used to let mainstream politicians express extreme viewpoints (e.g., Dobber et al., 2020), we investigate the effects of right-wing populist disinformation allegedly coming from a mainstream political actor. We specifically make it seem as if a right-wing populist message containing factual inaccuracies (i.e., that violent crime rates are increasing because of immigration) comes from a conservative right-wing politician. The deliberate deception in the disinformation conditions is thus multifaceted: The source of the message is falsely attributed, and the statements are fabricated and based on inauthentic opinions and factually inaccurate information.

3. Method

3.1. Design

To test our hypotheses, we rely on an online survey-embedded experiment with a 2 (information exposure: right-wing populist malinformation versus right-wing populist disinformation) × 2 (source: ordinary citizen versus neutral news outlet) + control (unrelated authentic message) between-subjects design. The manipulated disinformation message forwarded the right-wing populist issue position that immigrants are dangerous, and that elite actors are responsible for negative developments related to crime rates and immigration. The statements were said to come from a Dutch political actor who was quoted in the message (see scripts in Appendix A of the Supplementary File).

We can consider this message as disinformation for different reasons. First of all, the Dutch political actor allegedly expressing the right-wing populist message has never expressed the position that immigrants are "dangerous" or likely to commit violent crimes. In addition, the message talks about the fact that "people from outdated societies that we bring into our country in great numbers are likely to commit violent crimes such as rape

and robbery." However, it has been proven that undocumented immigrants do not commit more violent crimes than native citizens (e.g., Light et al., 2020)—a pattern that also holds for the Dutch context. The message thus lacks facticity as the claims are not based on expert knowledge or empirical evidence (Vraga & Bode, 2020). In addition, the message is intentionally false as deceptive claims on immigration are wrongly attributed to a politician who never expressed any of these viewpoints. Although intentional manipulation is difficult to establish empirically, the researchers have taken on the role of disinformation creators to intentionally fabricate a right-wing populist speech that is not based on expert knowledge or empirical evidence.

We contrast the right-wing populist disinformation message to a related authentic malinformation message with a similar ideological slant and a control message formatted in the same way but without an ideological message resonating with disinformation (a message on progress thinking in the Dutch setting). We consider the decontextualized message on immigration as malinformation as the viewpoints are based on authentic material actually expressed by the political actor associated with the statements. However, these statements are taken out of their context. The most extreme fragment of the speech is used to make it seem as if the political actor has a strong nativist and populist perspective on immigration. Again, although intentionality is difficult to assess, the researchers have decontextualized these statements deliberately and used real information (i.e., statements once expressed by the political actor) to make the politician seem more extreme in his viewpoints than he actually is.

As this decontextualized message strongly resonates with the manipulated message, we can use it to clearly differentiate between the effects of disinformation (fabricated statements not expressed by the actor but reflecting a right-wing populist viewpoint) and malinformation that is not manipulated (actual viewpoints once expressed by the actor). By contrasting these right-wing populist messages to a less ideologically colored and more neutral message on a different issue expressed by the same actor (the control condition), we can also contrast right-wing populist statements to statements without this ideological slant. As the control condition offers a more representative snapshot of the politician's actual values and viewpoints, we use this condition to contrast the right-wing populist messages in the mal- and disinformation conditions with more neutral and less-extreme issue positions.

Both the mal- and disinformation conditions contain a blame attribution, which has been regarded as a central element of populist communication (e.g., Busby et al., 2019; Hameleers et al., 2017). More specifically, elite actors and immigrants are attributed responsibility for causing negative developments related to crime rates. As this attribution is not based on empirical evidence or expert knowledge on crime rates or immigration, and

as it can be regarded as an intentional attack on immigrants as a generalized out-group, we can also regard it as intentionally harmful information that lacks an empirical basis.

When designing the stimuli, we aimed to maintain a balance between internal and external validity. More specifically, the right-wing populist disinformation conditions were developed by creating misleading and deceptive statements strongly resonating with the actual viewpoints communicated by right-wing populist actors in the Netherlands. Furthermore, false information typically voiced in right-wing populist communication (i.e., connecting immigrants to violent crimes while there is no empirical evidence for these claims) was added to the narrative. Striving for external validity, these disinformation messages were matched with right-wing populist statements voiced by the depicted politician (malinformation). Although this means that there are differences between the disinformation and the malinformation condition, there is a close linkage between the issue (immigration) and positions (anti-immigration and anti-establishment) across the mal- and disinformation conditions. As disinformation does not only differ from existing information based on facticity but also intentions, it was insufficient to simply add false information to existing statements voiced by the political actor.

3.2. Sample

Data collection was outsourced to the research company Kantar Lightspeed, which uses voluntary opt-in panels representative of the national population across multiple countries; 80.5% of all participants entering the survey link also completed the full study. The total number of completes was 456, which was close to the targeted outcome of 450 valid completes based on the a-priori power analysis (0.80 with an alpha of 0.05 and small effect sizes found in similar studies on the effects of populist communication). Of the valid responses, 54.4% were female and 18.6% had a lower level of education, whereas 32.9% were higher educated. The mean age of participants was 48.80 (SD = 15.26). These distributions by and large represent the variation in the Dutch population, and soft quotas were used to obtain a balanced and varied sample.

3.3. Independent Variables and Stimuli

In our experiment, we exposed participants to a fabricated message that was said to be based on the statements of a former political actor in the Netherlands. The message—either presented as an online news article or endorsed by an ordinary citizen on Facebook—talked about how the native people's norms and values should be protected at all costs against foreign influences. In line with a right-wing populist communication strategy, the message explicitly blamed immigrants and corrupt political elites for failing to represent the ordinary people (e.g., Hameleers et al., 2017). The message

contains disinformation as it is based on deliberately false statements (i.e., immigrants connected to violent crimes) that are not based on empirical evidence or expert knowledge. The message is created with the intention to deceive and make a mainstream political actor look more similar to a right-wing populist politician than he actually is. The fabricated message is included in Appendix A of the Supplementary File.

This message was either presented in the format of an online news message without clear source cues or a Twitter post by an ordinary citizen. In this latter case, we mimic the participatory logic of disinformation campaigns (Starbird, 2019), which often (inauthentically) refer to ordinary people to signal authenticity and the "vox populi" in online settings (Lukito et al., 2020). In line with this, we did not use the image of a real citizen but rather used an AI-generated profile picture, which is similar to the strategy typically used by troll armies that set up fake profiles of seemingly real citizens taking part in public debates.

3.4. Dependent Variables

After exposing them to the different conditions, we asked participants to indicate the extent to which they deemed the messages credible. We more specifically asked them to rate the message's credibility on three different levels: (a) the statements/content of the message, (b) the source of the message, and (c) the presentation and style of the message. All items were tapped with scales ranging from 1 (*not credible at all*) to 7 (*very credible*). The three credibility indices formed a reliable scale (Cronbach's alpha = 0.905) and were re-coded into a seven-point mean credibility scale ($M = 3.77$, $SD = 1.45$).

To tap agreement with the manipulated message's statements, we used the following battery of items: (a) Immigrants in our country are responsible for violent crimes, (b) we should protect our nation from foreign influences, (c) the traditions of other cultures are backwards, (d) immigrants pose a threat on our culture, (e) we should take more action to preserve our norms and values, and (f) political elites are failing to protect and safeguard the native norms values and traditions (Cronbach's alpha = 0.931, $M = 4.37$, $SD = 1.56$). These items are based on the measurement of anti-immigration perceptions previously also used in effect studies on right-wing populism or anti-immigration framing (e.g., Matthes & Schmuck, 2017). They reflect stereotypical evaluations of the out-group that are adjusted for the context of this study.

3.5. Moderator: Populist Attitudes

We measured populist attitudes as individual-level support for people-centrism and anti-elitism. We specifically used the following items (all measured on seven-point *completely disagree–completely agree* scales): (a) The ordinary people instead of politicians should make the most important decisions in our country, (b) politicians in government are corrupt, and (c) politicians in government make decisions that harm the interests of the ordinary people (Cronbach's alpha = 0.821, $M = 4.01$, $SD = 1.41$). Although extant literature has used more comprehensive multidimensional scales of populist attitudes (Schulz et al., 2018), we use a one-dimensional scale to capture the essence of populism. As this one-dimensional scale has been demonstrated to be valid and reliable, and strongly related to right-wing populist voting in Europe (e.g., Silva et al., 2020), we believe it is useful for our endeavor. Similar to existing conceptualizations of populist attitudes, we differentiate between populist attitudes and nativist or anti-immigration beliefs that are related to the right-wing host ideologies of populism. The significant correlation between populist attitudes and anti-immigration beliefs ($r = 0.345$, $p < 0.001$) indicates that populist attitudes are related to anti-immigration perceptions. Yet, as radical right-wing worldviews and populist attitudes are different constructs, we did not use a one-dimensional measure of right-wing populist attitudes. Our results further confirm that populist attitudes can resonate with both left-wing and right-wing perceptions. People on the extreme fringes of both the left and right-wing self-placement scale demonstrate equally high levels of populist attitudes ($M = 5.14$, $SD = 1.25$ versus $M = 5.17$, $SD = 1.75$, respectively).

3.6. Procedures and Manipulation Checks

Participants entered the survey experiment through a link provided by the research company. First of all, they completed an informed consent procedure (all data collection and procedures were approved by the university's ethical review board). Upon agreement, they were forwarded to a basic question block measuring demographics and general perceptions of politics and society (including the moderator). In the next step, they were randomly assigned to one of the conditions (equal group sizes and randomization checks ensured that the groups did not differ in composition regarding age, gender, education, political preferences, and populist attitudes). Upon reading the stimuli (the minimum forced exposure time was 30 seconds as pilot tests revealed that this was the minimum reading time required), participants were forwarded to the final block measuring the two dependent variables. In this final block, they were also carefully debriefed: All the deceptive statements were fact-checked and additional information was offered to participants in order to comprehensively refute the deceptive message they were exposed to.

In Appendix B of the Supplementary File, an elaborate description of various validity and manipulation checks is included. Among other things, the manipulation checks confirm that the stimuli were perceived as intended and that the disinformation condition is more likely to be associated with deceptive and false

statements than the messages based on authentic statements (the control and malinformation conditions). The checks also show that populist arguments were associated with the dis- and malinformation condition, but not the control condition.

4. Results

4.1. Effects of Populist Disinformation on Credibility and Radical Right-Wing Issue Positions

As a first step, we explored the extent to which exposure to right-wing populist disinformation was perceived as credible (RQ1a) and primed support for congruent radical right-wing issue positions (RQ1b) compared to the two authentic messages (the malinformation message versus the control condition). Analyses of variance show a non-significant main effect of exposure to the conditions on credibility: $F_{(4,451)} = 2.10$, $p = 0.079$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.018$. Inspecting the Bonferroni corrected mean-score comparisons, there are no significant differences in perceived credibility between any of the control versus treatment conditions. The largest albeit non-significant difference is found between the control ($M = 4.07$, $SD = 1.33$) and the right-wing populist disinformation condition without ordinary citizen cues ($M = 3.55$, $SD = 1.57$).

The effect of exposure to the right-wing populist disinformation conditions versus the control condition on the activation of support for radical right-wing issue positions is non-significant by conventional standards: $F_{(4,451)} = 2.23$, $p = 0.065$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.019$. However,

the corrected pairwise mean score comparison reveals a significant difference in the activation of support for radical right-wing issue positions between the control condition ($M = 3.97$, $SD = 1.66$) and the malinformation message with a radical right-wing framing ($M = 4.64$, $SD = 1.49$; 95% Confidence Interval (CI) [−1.33, −0.005]). Answering RQ1, then, there are no significant differences in the perceived credibility between right-wing populist disinformation and authentic statements expressed in the stimuli. However, participants who are exposed to right-wing anti-immigration messages (malinformation) are more likely to hold radical right-wing views than participants exposed to the control condition.

4.2. Populist Attitudes as Moderator of Right-Wing Populist Disinformation's Effects

In the next steps, we investigated the moderating role of participants' prior populist attitudes on the effects of right-wing populist disinformation. We specifically predicted that right-wing populist disinformation has the strongest effects on (H1a) message credibility and (H1b) agreement with radical right-wing political views among participants with more pronounced levels of populist attitudes. The OLS-regression models included in Table 1 and Table 2 summarize the outcomes of the analyses for credibility assessment and agreement, respectively.

The interaction model included in Table 1 (Model III) offers support for H1a: The effects of right-wing populist disinformation on the perceived credibility of the shown article are strongest for participants with more pronounced populist attitudes. This effect is significant,

Table 1. The effects of disinformation on credibility moderated by populist attitudes.

	Model I (N = 456)			Model II (N = 456)			Model III (N = 456)			Model IV (N = 456)		
	B	SE	β	B	SE	β	B	SE	β	B	SE	β
(Constant)	4.99	0.11		3.32	0.22		3.59	0.27		3.59	0.27	
Disinformation	−0.44	0.19	−0.15*	−0.49	0.18	−0.17**	−1.12	0.44	−0.40**	−1.10	0.52	−0.37*
Ordinary citizen	−0.29	0.18	−0.10	−0.30	−0.18	−0.11	−0.29	0.18	−0.10	−0.29	0.18	−0.10
Disinformation × ordinary citizen	0.32	0.28	0.09	0.37	0.28	0.10	−0.39	0.28	0.11	0.18	0.67	0.05
Populist attitudes				0.17	0.05	−0.17***	0.10	0.06	0.10	0.11	0.06	0.10
Populist attitudes × disinformation							0.18	0.09	0.26*	0.15	0.11	0.22
Populist attitudes × disinformation × ordinary citizen										0.05	0.15	0.06
Adjusted R^2		0.011			0.037			0.042			0.040	
F		2.67*			5.38***			4.94***			4.13***	
F for change in R^2					13.23***			3.09*			0.11	

Notes: Two-tailed tests; unstandardized (B) and standardized (β) regression weights; analyses are checked for multicollinearity; *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$.

Table 2. The effects of disinformation on radical right-wing attitudes moderated by populist attitudes.

	Model I (N = 456)			Model II (N = 456)			Model III (N = 456)			Model IV (N = 456)		
	B	SE	β	B	SE	β	B	SE	β	B	SE	β
(Constant)	4.32	0.12		2.72	0.22		2.80	0.27		2.80	0.27	
Disinformation	0.13	0.20	0.04	0.02	0.19	0.01	−0.18	0.45	−0.06	−0.04	0.53	−0.01
Ordinary citizen	0.12	0.20	0.04	0.10	0.18	0.03	0.10	0.18	0.03	0.10	0.18	0.03
Disinformation × ordinary citizen	−0.27	0.30	−0.07	−0.15	0.28	−0.04	−0.15	0.28	0.04	−0.44	0.69	−0.11
Populist attitudes				0.41	0.05	0.37***	0.39	0.06	0.35***	0.39	0.06	0.35***
Populist attitudes × disinformation							0.05	0.10	0.07	0.02	0.12	0.02
Populist attitudes × disinformation × ordinary citizen										0.07	0.15	0.08
Adjusted R^2		−0.005			0.129			0.127			0.126	
F		0.27			17.79***			14.25***			11.89***	
F for change in R^2					70.20***			0.24			0.22	

Notes: Two-tailed tests; unstandardized (B) and standardized ($β$) regression weights; analyses are checked for multicollinearity; *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.001$.

albeit moderate in size. Table 2 (Model III) shows that this effect does not hold for agreement with radical right-wing issue positions measured after the stimuli: H1b is thus not supported.

4.3. Effects of Right-Wing Populist Disinformation From the Vox Populi

We predicted that right-wing populist disinformation would be more credible (H2a) and yield stronger effects on agreement with radical right-wing issue positions (H2b) when it is framed as a social media message from an ordinary citizen than presented as originating from an unknown media source. First of all, the post-hoc pairwise mean-score comparisons of the one-way ANOVA estimated for the main effects offer no support for these hypotheses. More specifically, disinformation is rated as more or less equally credible when it comes from an unclear source reflecting a news outlet (M = 3.56, SD = 1.63) as when it is allegedly shared by an unknown ordinary citizen (M = 3.58, SD = 1.45), which offers no support for H2a. Likewise, H2b is not supported. Hence, disinformation has similar effects when communicated by the unclear news source (M = 4.46, SD = 1.58) or the ordinary citizen (M = 4.30, SD = 1.66). The OLS regressions in Table 1 and Table 2 (Model I) confirm these findings: There are no significant interaction effects between exposure to disinformation and ordinary citizen cues on credibility (Table 1) or agreement with radical right-wing issue positions (Table 2).

We finally predicted a three-way interaction effect between exposure to disinformation, ordinary source cues, and populist attitudes, so that especially disinformation coming from seemingly ordinary people would have the strongest effects among participants with more pronounced populist attitudes (H3). Our findings offer no support for this hypothesis. More specifically, the three-way interaction effect is non-significant for both credibility (Table 1, Model IV) and agreement with radical right-wing issue positions (Table 2, Model IV).

5. Discussion

This article aimed to test the alleged persuasive affinity between disinformation and right-wing populism. Our main findings indicate that radical right-wing populist disinformation is perceived as slightly less credible than authentic information, but this effect is non-significant. However, we did find support for an effect of exposure to decontextualized malinformation on the activation of congruent radical right-wing issue positions: Authentic but decontextualized malinformation that frames immigrants as a threat to national security whilst offering a populist frame of reference can succeed in triggering support for radical right-wing views among the public.

These findings have potentially worrisome implications. Although most research has pointed to indirect effects of disinformation exposure (e.g., Schaewitz et al., 2020; Zimmermann & Kohring, 2020) and a stronger difference in perceived credibility across authentic information and disinformation (Hameleers et al., 2020), we found that right-wing populism may succeed in priming radical right-wing views across the board. This may be in line with the aims of disinformation agents,

who aim to sow discord, raise cynicism, and fuel anti-establishment views in democracies throughout the globe (e.g., Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Marwick & Lewis, 2017). We show that these agents do not even have to fabricate information to reach this goal: The mere decontextualization of statements voiced by political actors, also referred to as malinformation (e.g., Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017), may be sufficient to steer political opinions in the targeted direction. The elective affinity between right-wing populism and disinformation identified in extant literature (e.g., Waisbord, 2018) may thus also be understood as an effective communication tactic for malign actors that want to sow discord and amplify people's opposition to out-groups and the established order in (Western) democracies. As populist blame attributions that simplify reality into an all-encompassing divide between "us and them" are found to be persuasive (Hameleers et al., 2017), the framing of blame may be an influential style for disinformation messages that aim to attack established knowledge and empirical facts of conventional knowledge.

We also found that right-wing populist disinformation has the strongest effects on credibility for people with more pronounced populist attitudes. This is in line with the motivated reasoning framework as a mechanism for the persuasiveness of radical right-wing populist communication (e.g., Hameleers, 2020) and findings of earlier work indicating that disinformation is most effective when it taps into existing beliefs (e.g., Schaewitz et al., 2020). We can also explain this as the prevalence of a truth bias among people with issue-congruent prior beliefs (Levine, 2014): When the content of the right-wing populist message aligns with people's existing populist worldviews, they may be less likely to detect deception as suspicion is not activated or primed. Hence, the manipulated message may be similar to the information that is typically consumed by citizens with populist attitudes, who tend to get their information from alternative right-wing platforms that are known for disseminating similar content (Müller & Schulz, 2021). We can thus explain the relatively higher credibility of the radical right-wing populist disinformation message among this group as a consequence of the higher familiarity and similarity of the deceptive message.

Our findings did not, however, point to such a conditional relationship for agreement with radical right-wing positions. This may be explained as a ceiling effect: Citizens with stronger populist attitudes in a national setting where populism is associated most with the radical right (e.g., Aalberg et al., 2017) are already very likely to hold anti-immigration and nativist viewpoints that are voiced in the deceptive message. Exposure to a single piece of disinformation may not further activate or strengthen these beliefs that are already chronically available and salient when making political judgments.

As important null-finding, we show that embedding disinformation as "vox populi" on social media may not amplify its effectiveness, despite the prevalence of this strategy in digital disinformation campaigns (e.g., Lukito et al., 2020). Contrary to the social identity model of collective action assuming that populist messages may be most effective when they emphasize a threat to the in-group of likeminded citizens (e.g., Bos et al., 2020), we did not find that the effects of populist disinformation were stronger when delivered by a seemingly ordinary citizen. One potential explanation for the lack of effects is that participants may not closely identify with the ordinary source cue used in this experiment. Indeed, right-wing populist messages are found to be more effective when communicated by ordinary people, but only when people feel similar to or like this source (Hameleers & Schmuck, 2017). Another explanation is that the endorsement used in this experiment was not embedded in people's actual social media environment but as part of the experimental module. In real life, disinformation from social bots, influencers, and/or trolls is embedded in actual social media feeds, which may not prime suspicion and may therefore be more effective. In that sense, the lack of effects may also be due to the limited ecologic validity of the experimental setup.

Our findings have important implications. First of all, the alleged affinity between radical right-wing communication styles and disinformation may also correspond to an effective disinformation tactic of strategic decontextualization through malinformation, which can succeed in delegitimizing the established order by fueling support for issue positions at the fringes of the political spectrum. We further show that populist attitudes as an individual-level factor may enhance the credibility but not the persuasiveness of disinformation campaigns on the radical right. This may indicate that the (micro)targeting of disinformation to vulnerable segments of the population (e.g., Dobber et al., 2020) may not always succeed in amplifying socio-political cleavages. Finally, our findings indicate that citizens are generally not very good at detecting deception (see also e.g., Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Although the statements presented in disinformation were rated as less credible than authentic information, the difference was rather small.

Our study also has practical implications. As we show that radical right-wing populist disinformation can trigger support for congruent radical right-wing issue positions, it is potentially important to prevent and counter such forms of disinformation, for example through pre-bunking or inoculation strategies (e.g., Roozenbeek & van der Linden, 2019) and fact-checks (e.g., Nyhan et al., 2019). Here, it may be important to teach citizens how to recognize deceptive statements resonating with radical and extremist issue positions, for example, by revealing the manipulation techniques, ideological biases, and intentions underlying right-wing populist disinformation and malinformation. For such interventions to be effective, it is important to not cause reactance among vulnerable segments of society inclined to support radical or extreme-right issues positions. These citizens may perceive the intervention as an attack on their beliefs.

These interventions may require different preventative and regulatory frameworks that can help citizens to correctly recognize disinformation. Platforms may devote more attention to flagging suspicious content and clearly show their users for what reasons certain content may be inaccurate or motivated by deceptive goals. Next to this, they should offer more transparency on how they target citizens with like-minded information. As citizens with populist attitudes may find congruent disinformation most credible, it is important that more transparency is offered on how they are targeted by algorithms and recommender systems, revealing that the reality shown to them is not the dominant opinion in society. Considering that the credibility of disinformation does not differ substantially from authentic information, interventions should also enable citizens to more clearly differentiate between trustworthy and authentic information versus manipulated and deceptive content. Media literacy programs, for example, should not exclusively focus on how citizens should detect disinformation, but also offer comprehensible tools for how news users can find trustworthy and authentic content.

Despite offering important insights into the effects of radical right-wing populist disinformation, this study comes with a number of limitations. First of all, the experiment focused on one "most likely" case of disinformation on the radical right. It remains to be seen how well these findings travel to other issues, national settings, or issue interpretations. Although we have zoomed in on a very likely case of radical right-wing populism that is prominent in the communication of far-right movements in Europe, the transferability and robustness of our findings can be assessed further in future research. We should also note that disinformation can come in different shapes and forms. For this experiment, we fabricated a political speech by merely including opinions and viewpoints that were not authentic. Although untrue information was referred to as factually correct, and although expert knowledge and empirical evidence were lacking, the messages did not contain many references to false claims. We recommend future research to focus more on the difference between disinformation and authentic information by varying the facticity and falsity of the messages—for example, by including more inaccurate numbers on immigration and crime rates in the disinformation condition. We should also note that the control condition did not deal with the same issue and positions as the experimental stimuli. Although the inclusion of a decontextualized message based on real statements did resonate strongly with the fabricated claims (the malinformation condition), future research may use control conditions that more strongly match disinformation. For example, it may be useful to contrast a factually accurate message on immigration with disinformation where factually accurate information is replaced with deceptive content. However, as we used political speeches from a specific mainstream political actor as

a starting point, equivalence between conditions was more difficult to achieve.

Despite these limitations, this article has offered new evidence of the persuasiveness of disinformation resonating with delegitimizing narratives on the far-right, and the role of prior populist attitudes in the credibility of such narratives. As such politized content may fuel support for undemocratic radical viewpoints—even when such content is only based on a decontextualization of the truth—it is important to assess how malign radical right-wing populist messages can be pre- or debunked in digital media settings.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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