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„Populistization" of Mainstream Parties?

Populist, left and right-wing communication in Italy, Spain, Germany and Austria

Panel: El Populismo en el Sur de Europa

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1. A „populist Zeitgeist" in Europe

The rise of populist parties in Western Europe, which fight against the political establishment and claim to know what the people want, has brought about the thesis of the „populist Zeitgeist" in the European social sciences (Mudde 2004, 542).

The increasing electoral success of such political actors over the past decades can in fact hardly be denied (Lewis et al. 2018). However, according to Mudde, the populist Zeitgeist is not only about the electoral success of populist parties, but also refers to the reaction of established parties towards the populists. He assumes that mainstream parties adopt a populist rhetoric and claims due to the rise of populism:

> *[...] parts of the establishment will react by a combined strategy of exclusion und inclusion; while trying to exclude the populist actor(s) from political power, they will include populist themes und rhetoric to try and fight off the challenge. This dynamic will bring about a populist Zeitgeist, like the one we are facing today, which will dissipate as soon as the populist challenger seems to be over its top (Mudde 2004, 563).*

In a more recent article for The Guardian and based on some results from a study conducted by Team Populism[1] (Lewis et al. 2019), he reinforced this assumption: "More and more mainstream politicians are using "pro-people" and/or "anti-elite" rhetoric to win voters – in part to fight off electoral challenges from true populist actors" (Mudde 2019). Several other scholars argue in a similar way (Mazzoleni 2008, 57; Decker and Lewandowsky 2017, 22).

Yet, even though many scholars argue that a "populistization" (Manucci and Weber 2017, 4) of mainstream parties' communication can be observed, this is "rarely investigated empirically" (ibid., 1). The question whether mainstream parties actually make use of more populist communication strategies has hardly been investigated so far. Only a few studies directly or indirectly touch upon this question. Their main focus is the measurement of "people-centrism" and "anti-elitism" labeled as the two main features of populism. While this gives us insight into the general development of the usage of populist communication, it does not distinguish between left and radical right populism (Manucci and Weber 2017; Rooduijn, Lange, and van der Brug 2014). I seek to provide a more detailed view into the contagion effects, focusing on populist as well as specific right- and left-wing communication strategies. I further focus on a supposed contagion effect due to the electoral rise of *new* or *former unsuccessful* populist parties. In this respect, the so called "third wave of populist parties" refers on the one hand to the establishment of new non-right populist actors such as Podemos in Spain and the Movimento 5 Stelle (Five-Star-Movement, M5S) in Italy due to the European economic crisis

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[1] https://populism.byu.edu/.

in 2008/2009 (Pallaver, Gehler, and Cau 2018). On the other hand it refers to the remarkable success of the new German far-right populist party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) due to the so called "refugee crisis" in 2015/2016 (ibid). Moreover, I also assess the impact of shifts in public opinion on communicational shifts of mainstream parties. Public opinion has been taken into account by former research on party behavior but not by studies focusing on populism or populist communication strategies.

In what follows I address the question if mainstream parties become more populist and skeptical towards certain outgroups and immigration and towards economic actors due to the establishment of a new respective competing party in the party system, public opinion and due to other factors. In this respect I refer to assumptions deriving from spatial theory of party competition and issue evolution theory. In order to explain my findings, I also rely on aspects linked to country-specific political and institutional culture. I address the hypotheses of this paper mostly by descriptive and (some) inferential statistics as well as by theoretical discussions based on considerations from country-specific literature.

This paper is structured as follows: First my definition of populism and of populist and specific left- and right-wing communication strategies is described. Second, the theoretical background and hypotheses are presented. Third, the research design, including case and source selection is to be explained followed by a methodological section (fourth). I analyze election manifestos of mainstream parties in four countries using a content analytical approach. After illustrating the empirical results, I will discuss the findings and conclude with some further implications derived from the results of this paper.

2. Populism and populist communication strategies

In the early academic debate populism was seen as a contested term, hardly to define (Dubiel 1986; Ionescu and Gellner 1969). Nowadays however, there seems to be a „lowest common denominator" (Rooduijn 2014) most scholars can agree on. Anti-elitism and people-centrism – i.e. juxtaposing an immoral (political) elite and a good, homogeneous people whose will should guide the political agenda – can be described as main features of populism (Decker and Lewandowsky 2017; Mudde 2004; Wolinetz and Zaslove 2018).

There is less consensus on the question whether populism actually has ideological components and therefor can be considered a „set of basic assumptions about the world" (Hawkins, Riding, and Mudde 2012, 3). However, both the advocates of the ideological approach and their

opponents agree on a substantial issue: "the communicative, discoursive construction of an aggregate-level in-group or appeals and references to such a group lie at the very core of populism" (Reinemann et al. 2017, 16).

Several academics from communication sciences have started to understand populism first of all as a type of political communication (Jagers and Walgrave Stefaan 2007; Müller et al. 2017; Reinemann et al. 2017) and created thereby new perspectives for research on populism: „the focus now shifts from what constitutes the ideology of populism to how it is communicated" (De Vreese et al. 2018, 425). Populist ideas (or strategies) must be communicated in order to unfold their desired effect on the audience. Thus, populism is "mostly reflected in the oral, written, and visual communication of individual politicians, parties, social movements" (Reinemann et al. 2017, 13).

Within communication science there are three perspectives on populist communication (Engesser, Fawzi, and Larsson 2017). The first one asks *why* something is communicated and refers to the speaker and its intentions. Second, populist communication is about *how* something is communicated and refers to the style and language of communication such as negativism, a crisis rhetoric and an emotional tone (Ernst et al. 2019, 3). The last perspective is about the *content* of populist communication. This perspective refers to *what* is communicated. In this respect, populist communication is defined as "acts of communication aimed at expressing populist ideology by being conflictive toward the elite and advocative toward the people. Specifically, populist communication may be characterized as people-centrist, anti-elitist and aimed at restoring the sovereignty of the people" (Wirth et al. 2017, 7). Thus, these communication acts contain „statements by an actor toward other actors" (ibid., 3) and can be considered as actor-centered evaluations or claims.

Most of the empirical work deals with the content perspective as this paper does. In this respect I use the term "populist communication strategies" in order to refer to negative evaluations of the political elite and positive evaluations of the people (Manucci and Weber 2017; Ernst et al. 2017). While populist communication strategies are subject of investigation (Ernst et al. 2017; Manucci and Weber 2017; Müller et al. 2017), none of these studies attempted to measure specific left- and right-wing types of actor-centered critique. That's surprising since such communication strategies can be found among nearly all populist parties and derive from the underlying "host ideology" of the specific actor (Bakker et al. 2016). Some scholars argue that the host ideology is the actual core feature of so called populist actors while populist orientation can rather be neglected (Akkerman 2017; Rydgren 2017).

I argue, that one can distinguish specific left and radical right communication strategies from populist ones, by focusing on the targets that are object of negative evaluations. While populist communication is about blaming the political elite, left- and right-wing actors have further enemies or targets of criticism (Corbetta 2013; Sauer, Krasteva, and Saarinen 2018; Schwörer 2016). This is illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1: Addressees of populist, left and right-wing actor-centered critique

	Populist actor-centered evaluations	*Left actor-centered evaluations*	*Radical right actor-centered evaluations*
Positive evaluation of the people	+	+/-*	+/-**
Negative evaluation of the political elite	+	+/-*	+/-**
Negative Evaluation of economic actors/the rich	+/-	+*	+/-
Negative evaluation of outgroups/immigrants	+/-	-	+**

+ mandatory trait; - not mandatory; +/- not mandatory but possible.
* mandatory for left-wing *populist* communication
** mandatory for radical right *populist* communication

Regarding left parties or movements, due to their socialist host ideology, economic actors such as bankers, managers, private companies and the profiteers of capitalism are portrayed as evil and thus evaluated in a negative way (Pelinka 2013, 7; Wirth et al. 2016, 11). The actor-centered critique of actors from the radical right is addressed above all to specific cultural, religious and ethnic groups or migrants (Corbetta 2013; Sauer et al. 2018; Schwörer 2016) due to their nativist ideology "which holds that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group ("the nation") and that nonnative elements (persons and ideas) are fundamentally threatening to the homogenous nation-state" (Mudde 2007, 19). In the methodological part I present a specific content analytical approach that allows measures of populist, left and right actor-centered evaluations and claims.

3. Spatial and issue evolution theory

At the heart of many theoretical work regarding party behavior lies the Downsian spatial theory of party competition (STPC) that claims that parties are rational vote seekers (Downs 1957). STPC focuses on shifts of policy positions and has been modified especially by Bonnie M. Meguid (2005, 349), claiming that "parties do not compete on all issues in the political space

in every election". Recent studies have therefore focused on the impact of fringe (or niche) parties that promote a particular issue – such as anti-immigration or green parties (Akkerman 2015; Bale et al. 2010; Schumacher and van Kersbergen 2016; van Spanje 2010).

While spatial theory focuses on shifts of policy positions, issue evolution theory (IET) is about the question "which political conflicts will be translated into issues on the political agenda" (Meijers 2017). Thus, the main research question that emerges from issue evolution theory is, on which issues parties emphasize and how the salience of issues changes in the face of party competition, public opinion or other circumstances. Even though, STPC and IET address slightly different aspects of party competition, both are interested in party behavior changes and use similar or the same assumptions.[2] The following hypotheses derive from IET and STPC and are applied to the measurements of this study

Hypotheses

First, there is strong empirical evidence, that the success of competitor parties causes an absorption of a promoted policy position and/or an engagement in the promoted issue of the rival party (Meijers 2017; Spoon, Hobolt, and Vries 2014; van Spanje 2010). The electoral success of niche parties "exerts some pressure on mainstream parties" (Abou-Chadi 2014, 423) and forces them to respond to policy positions of the former. The same might be true for communication strategies. That means that the center-left and center-right might increase their use of populist, specific left and right communication strategies when the respective competing party is gaining success (all hypotheses are illustrated in Table 2).

Second, while this hypothesis has been tested by several scholars, the research design of this paper is partially based on a similar but different one. One could argue that especially the electoral success of *new or former unsuccessful* political parties should exert pressure on mainstream parties. While electoral success of already existing and well-known fringe parties, might exert some pressure on the established parties, this is not unusual and happens regularly. However, the rise of a new or unknown party – its (expectable) entry in parliament – is an extraordinary situation for the whole party system and might cause much more pressure. However, since there it still is to be explored "how parties adjust their ideologies in response to

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[2] Studies, such as Spoon, Hobolt, and Vries (2014), based on IET assumed that parties are willing to change when competitor party's electoral success is high and that the ideological affiliation of competing parties plays a role (for the latter see also Green-Pedersen and Mortensen (2015)). The same is true for studies, such as van Spanje (2010) and Meijers (2017) which use a spatial approach.

an alternative type of party behaviour […]: namely, the entry of new parties into the party system" (Adams and Somer-Topcu 2009, 842), I cannot rely on results of former studies.

Public opinion is seen as another crucial factor that influences party behavior: "Of all the factors that possibly affect party policy change, the most thoroughly examined is the expectation that changes in public opinion cause parties to change their positions" (Fagerholm 2016, 505). Even Mudde (2013) assumes – nearly a decade after the release of his "populist Zeitgeist" article – that public opinion has a stronger impact than party competition as such. Regarding populist, left and right-wing communication that means that parties might use more populist, specific right- and left-wing evaluations and claims, when respective populist sentiments, migration-related and 'left-wing' moods increase within the population. In this respect I rely on data from Eurobarometer (distrust in political parties and parliament; salience of economic situation and immigration) which is available for all cases and time units. I admit that these items do not measure directly evaluations of the political elite, economic actors and immigration. However, the aim of this study is to assess whether public opinion *has* an impact on party communication and not *which* public moods in detail are responsible for communicative shifts of political parties. Therefore, the items from the Eurobarometer can at least be seen as a proxy for populist, specific left and right-wing sentiments in society.

Furthermore there is empirical evidence, that parties are more responsive to parties from the same ideological party family (Abou-Chadi 2014; Adams and Somer-Topcu 2009; Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2015; Spoon, Hobolt, and Vries 2014). The main argument here is, that parties adjust their policies or main issues to competing parties whose voters resemble the own electorate regarding certain patterns because a radical shift towards a totally different position (or rhetoric) might cause a loss of votes from the core constituency. The issues radical right parties and voters promote and prefer are more similar to what center-right voters and mainstream parties favor than to the agenda of social democrats (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen 2015; Walgrave and Swert 2007). I expect that specific right-wing communication strategies – in our case negative evaluations of certain outgroups and immigration – might influence mainly the communication of center-right mainstream parties.

Table 2: Hypotheses regarding the increase of populist, specific left and right-wing communication strategies

Independent variable	Hypotheses
Success of respective competing party	H1a: All mainstream parties adopt more populist communication when competing populist parties gain electoral support
	H1b: All mainstream parties adopt more left communication when competing left parties gain electoral support
	H1c: All mainstream parties adopt more right-wing communication when competing far-right parties gain electoral support
Entry of unknown successful competing party	H2a: All mainstream parties adopt more populist communication when a former unknown populist party becomes a new relevant competitor
	H2b: All mainstream parties adopt more left communication when a former unknown left party becomes a new relevant competitor
	H2c: All mainstream parties adopt more right-wing communication when a former unknown right-wing party becomes a new relevant competitor
Public opinion	H3a: All mainstream parties adopt more anti-elitist communication when distrust in political parties and institutions increase within society
	H3b: All mainstream parties adopt more left communication when the economic situation of the country becomes a more salient issue for the population
	H3c: All mainstream parties adopt more right-wing communication when immigration becomes a more salient issue for the population
Similar party family	H4a: Both, center-right and center-left mainstream parties use and adopt populist communication to a similar extent.
	H4b: Center-left mainstream parties use and adopt more left communication than the center-right
	H4c: The center-right mainstream parties use and adopt more right-wing communication than the center-left.

Social democratic parties might also become more critical towards immigration (van Spanje 2010) but to a lesser extent due to their solidarity with vulnerable and "less well-to-do" groups like refugees (Hinnfors, Spehar, and Bucken-Knapp 2012, 589). On the other hand, left-wing communication strategies – in our case negative evaluations of economic actors – might be more adopted by center-left mainstream parties which are more skeptical towards the power of big enterprises and more in favor of redistribution than the center-right (Hinnfors, Spehar, and Bucken-Knapp 2012). Populist communication consisting of people-centered and anti-elitist rhetoric, is neither left nor right but applicable to all types of political actors and 'host ideologies'. Therefore I assume, that a contagion effect regarding populist communication strategies affects all mainstream parties, regardless of their ideology.

4. Research design

As already mentioned in the introduction, only few studies measure populist communication strategies over time in order to find evidence for a populist contagion effect. Those who do could not find strong support for the contagion thesis (Manucci and Weber 2017; Rooduijn, Lange, and van der Brug 2014). However, none of them considered the entry of new successful populist parties or shifts in public opinion as potential conditions for a populistization of mainstream parties' communication. The research design of this paper takes these potential causes into account. Therefore, I selected countries with new successful populist parties, including those from the far right and from the left because populist *and* specific left and far-right communication strategies are investigated in this paper. There are currently three of such parties in three different countries: Podemos in Spain (left and populist), the 5-Star Movement (M5S) in Italy (neither right nor left but populist) and the Alternative for Germany (AfD, radical right and populist) (Rooduijn et al. 2019). Furthermore I include Austria as a second central-European case with similar (low) degrees of distrust in political institutions as in Germany (compared to southern European Italy and Spain) and with a new (temporary) successful populist party during the election campaign in 2013: Team Stronach.

As sources I choose election manifestos. Election programs for national general elections are selected, because they are comparable and available over time and considered as "the only documents in regionally fragmented party organizations that offer a univocal position" (Manucci and Weber 2017, 4). The focus is on election manifestos of "mainstream parties". As far as I know there is no concept in the literature of mainstream parties. In this paper I refer to them as the two parties which dominated party competition within the respective country in terms of votes before the first entry of the new successful populist party.[3] Besides the AfD as a populist radical right party, also Die Linke was included in the study which is characterized as a left-wing populist party (Rooduijn et al. 2019). In Austria, the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) and the Alliance for the Future of Austria (BZÖ) are selected as populist radical right parties. Team Stronach is considered a populist but neither far-right nor left party (ibid.).

Since I want to assess if populist, specific left and right-wing communication spread over time, I select a longitudinal approach. The programs are analyzed in four consecutive elections in

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[3] Spain: People's Party (PP); Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE); Italy: Center-right alliance (Forza Italia (FI)/The People of Freedom (PdL), National Alliance (AN), Northern League),the center-left alliance (Democratic Party (PD) and smaller parties); Germany: Christian Democratic Union of Germany (CDU) (together with its sister Party Christian Social Union in Bavaria, CSU), Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD); Austria: People's Party (ÖVP) and the Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ).

order to observe developments within the single countries. At least two of these units are elections free from new populist/left/right-wing competitors, i.e. before the new respective party was considered a relevant political competitor. Overall 54 election manifestos of 16 different parties/coalitions are analyzed. Table 3 summarizes the cases and time units selected for the analysis of election manifestos.

Table 3: Case selection for the election manifestos

	Time units	Parties
Spain	2008; 2011; 2015; 2016	PP; PSOE; Podemos (2015, 2016); Cs (2015, 2016), IU (2008, 2011, 2015)
Italy	2006; 2008; 2013; 2018	Center-right (FI/PdL; LN; FdI); Center-left (PD + others) M5S (2013, 2018)
Germany	2005; 2009; 2013; 2017	CDU/CSU; SPD AfD (2013, 2017); Die Linke
Austria	2006; 2008; 2013; 2017	ÖVP; SPÖ; FPÖ; BZÖ (2006, 2008); Team Stronach (2013)

5. Method

The election manifestos are analyzed using a non-computer based content analysis which is the most common way to measure populist communication so far (Ernst et al. 2017; Manucci and Weber 2017; Müller et al. 2017; Rooduijn, Lange, and van der Brug 2014). The unit of measurement is the sentence. Rooduijn, Lange, and van der Brug (2014, 566) criticize this idea "because populist claims are usually presented in multiple sentences". However, in contrast to their approach, in this study sentences don't have to be both, people-centered as well as anti-elitist in order to be coded. The two elements are coded separately, and the first pre-tests revealed that these populist communication strategies can actually be found in the single sentence. The populismscore is calculated by the mean of people-centered and anti-elitist sentences.

As already mentioned above, several communication strategies are measured based on claims and evaluations towards certain actors. Regarding populism, such actors are the people (positive evaluations/claims) and the political elite (negative evaluations/claims). Only references to the whole people (the citizens, the population) and the whole political elite (the parties, the politician) are coded and not evaluations of certain subgroups within the people (women, workers) or within the political elite (specific politicians, certain parties).

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Left communication strategies are directed against economic actors, the rich and profiteers of capitalism (negative evaluations/claims). References to single enterprises or individuals were not coded but only evaluations of at least a group of actors (financial industry, bankers). Right-wing communication strategies evaluate cultural, religious, ethnical groups or immigrants in a negative way. In this respect also negative evaluations of individuals were coded, when certain cultural, religious or ethnical traits were mentioned (Muslim faith, Arab origin) or the status as refugee or immigrant was named. While the first pre-tests revealed that mainstream parties raise claims against certain outgroups to some extent, it also turned out that they criticize immigration as an issue much more often. Therefore, I decide to code negative evaluations of immigration as a non-actor-centered form of critique as well. The category system I use in order to measure these communication strategies can be found in the appendix.

6. Results

Table 4 illustrates the mean values for all time units of each party. The new populist parties (M5S, Podemos, AfD, Team Stronach) are indeed much more populist than the mainstream parties of the respective country.[4] Regarding the 'traditional' left-wing actors in Spain (IU) and Germany (Linke) these are only slightly more populist than the respective mainstream parties. According to my measurements, the AfD is the most populist of all parties, but what dominates their discourses is right-wing communication.[5] Among none of the political parties under investigation populist communication is dominating but rather left- or right wing communication strategies, except Team Stronach. I proceed with the verification of the hypotheses regarding populist, left and right-wing communication strategies for each country.

Contagion of populist communication strategies

H1a suggests that mainstream parties use more populist communication strategies when the respective populist parties gain electoral success. I selected the accumulated vote intention of all parties labeled as populist in the literature (Rooduijn et al. 2019) for the month before data collection.[6]

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[4] Again, the populismscore is the mean of anti-elitist and people-centered communication.

[5] The Italian Northern League (LN) is part of the center-right electoral alliance and does not publish its own election manifesto.

[6] Regarding Italy data from the "Termometro Politico" has been used which calculates the monthly mean of the surveys conducted by leading opinion research centers. Regarding the Spanish parties data from the leading "Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas" (CIS) was used, for Germany I selected data from "Infratest Dimap" and

Table 4: Results of content analysis of election manifestos (mean values for all time units)

	Party/coalition	Populist communication	Left communication	Radical right communication
Italy	PD	0,88 (0.67)	1,39 (1.52)	0,47 (0.56)
	FI/PdL + LN	1,57 (0.23)	0,26 (0.52)	2,27 (1.75)
	M5S	2,86 (2.71)	3,81 (2.72)	0,94 (1.33)
Spain	PSOE	1,3 (0.41)	1,31 (0.63)	0,25 (0.4)
	PP	1,05 (0.47)	0,25 (0.14)	0,45 (0.54)
	Ciudadanos	0,92 (0.3)	1,23 (0.51)	0,045 (0.063)
	IU	1,24 (0.17)	3,39 (1.58)	0
	Podemos	2,03 (0)	3,99 (1.66)	0
Germany	SPD	0,31 (0.12)	2,16 (0.71)	0,1 (0.14)
	CDU/CSU	0,3 (0.12)	0,39 (0.24)	0,6 (0.41)
	Linke	1,1 (0.42)	6 (2.13)	0
	AfD (2017)	3,88	1,72	10,45
Austria	SPÖ	0,33 (0.24)	1,94 (1,48)	0,38 (0,43)
	ÖVP	0,63 (0.37)	0,36 (0,26)	2,12 (1,72)
	FPÖ	1,64 (1.41)	2,89 (3,89)	11,45 (3,34)
	BZÖ	1,91 (2.18)	2,11 (2,28)	7,69 (0,4)
	Team Stronach	3,82	2,05	0,58

Standard deviation in brackets.

Figure 1-4 shows the development of populist communication strategies over time regarding the four countries. Regarding the center-right in Italy and in Austria there seems to be some kind of relationship between these two variables and for Spain there is at least no contrary trend.[7] In Germany however, populist communication strategies develop independently from the electoral success off supposed populist parties. Figure 1-4 also illustrates the period when the new successful populist party participated for the first time in a national election (vertical line) and was considered a new relevant competitor by the other parties (H2a). In Italy and Spain, the graphs of both mainstream parties indeed increase during this time unit. Especially the center-left increases its populist communication strategies. In Austria only the center-right uses more populist communication strategies in 2013 and in Germany such communicative content even decreases in 2017. Thus, for the Spanish and Italian case, there is at least no

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for the Austrian parties I refer to the monthly mean of opinion polls calculated based on data provided by the website https://www.strategieanalysen.at/umfragen/.

[7] It should be considered that the Spanish People's Party did not publish a new election manifesto in 2016. That's the reason why the values for 2015 and 2016 are the same.

contrary evidence that the entry of a new successful populist party contributed to a populistization of mainstream parties' political communication. For the German and Austrian case however, this hypothesis should be rejected.

Figure 1-4: Populist communication and vote intention for populist parties (PP)
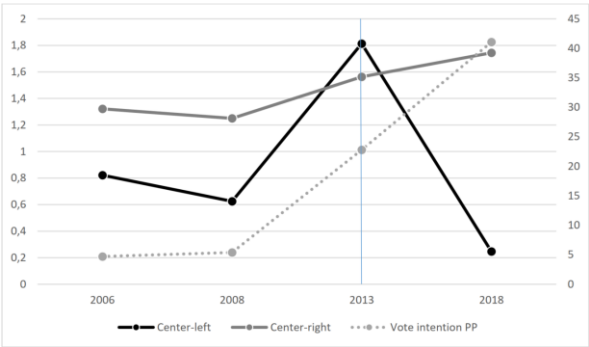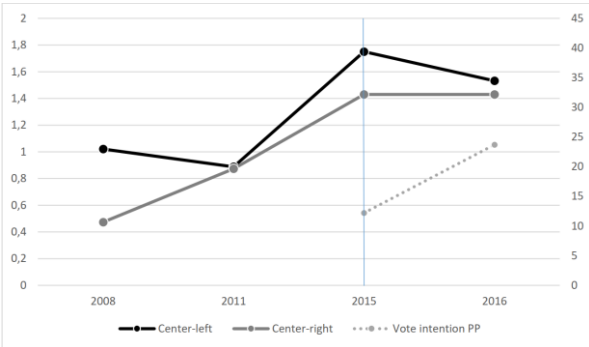
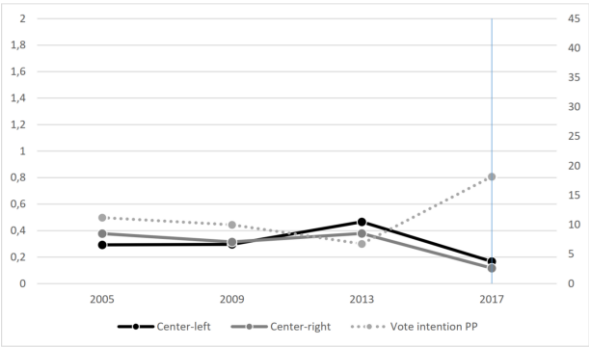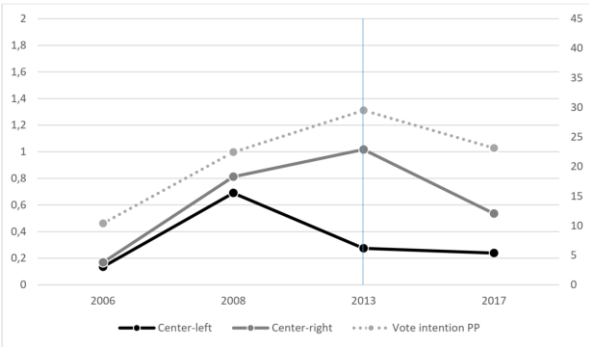*Figure 1: Italy*

Figure 2: Spain

Figure 3: Germany

Figure 4: Austria

Regarding hypothesis 3a, public opinion is thought to influence populist communication strategies of mainstream parties. However, only data somewhat close to anti-elitist moods could be found in opinion surveys for all countries. Therefore, Figure 4-6 shows the development of anti-elitist (and not populist) communication strategies of the mainstream parties and of distrust in political parties and the national parliament (mean value; Eurobarometer data).

In Austria but especially in Germany anti-elitist communication strategies are mostly absent and are not at all correlated with moods in society. In Italy and Spain however, there seems to be a considerable correlation between distrust in institutions and anti-elitist communication strategies among both mainstream parties. Figure 5 and 6 suggest that public opinion has a stronger impact on party behavior regarding populist/anti-elitist communication strategies than

the electoral success of competing populist parties – however restricted to the southern European countries.

Figure 5-8: Anti-elitist communication and public moods
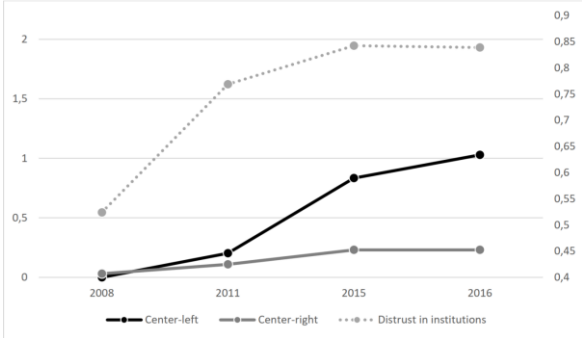
Figure 5: Italy
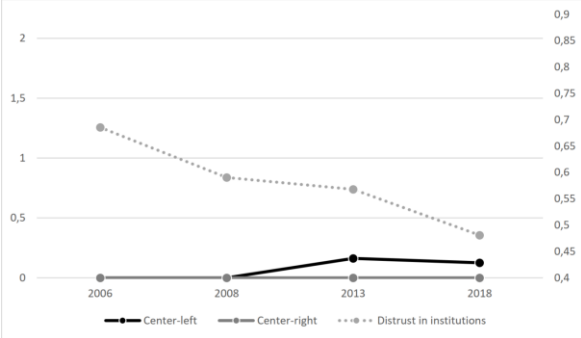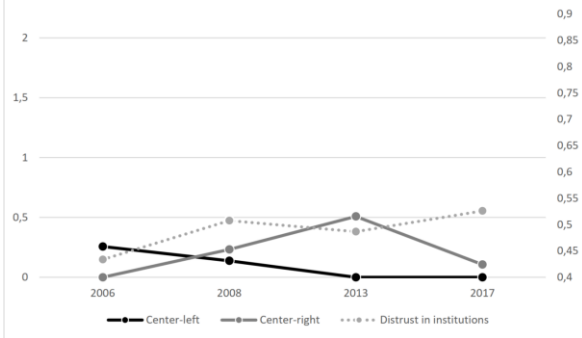

Figure 6: Spain

Figure 7: Germany

Figure 8: Austria

There is even a statistically significant (r=0,61) cross-national effect as figure 9 illustrates (non-standardized values). This is partially due to the fact that German and Austrian mainstream parties do hardly use anti-elitist communication strategies and that in these two societies, distrust in institutions is less widespread. Thus, specific public moods seem to trigger anti-elitist communication among mainstream parties.

Regarding H4a – center-left and center-right mainstream parties should use populist communication strategies to a similar extend – this can rather be confirmed. Table 5 illustrates the mean of populist communication strategies used by center-right and center-left mainstream parties. Furthermore, it illustrates the pearson correlation coefficient for populist communication strategies and vote intention of populist parties (PP) as well as for anti-elitist communication and people's distrust in institutions. Center-right mainstream parties are slightly more populist than center-left parties. What is not illustrated in the table is the fact that the

populismscore of the center-right consists mostly of the people-centrism item while center-left parties are slightly more anti-elitist than the center-right. This might also be one reason why the latter are more responsive to respective "anti-elitist" public moods. A statistically significant cross-national correlation between the use of populist communication and vote intention of populist parties does not exist.
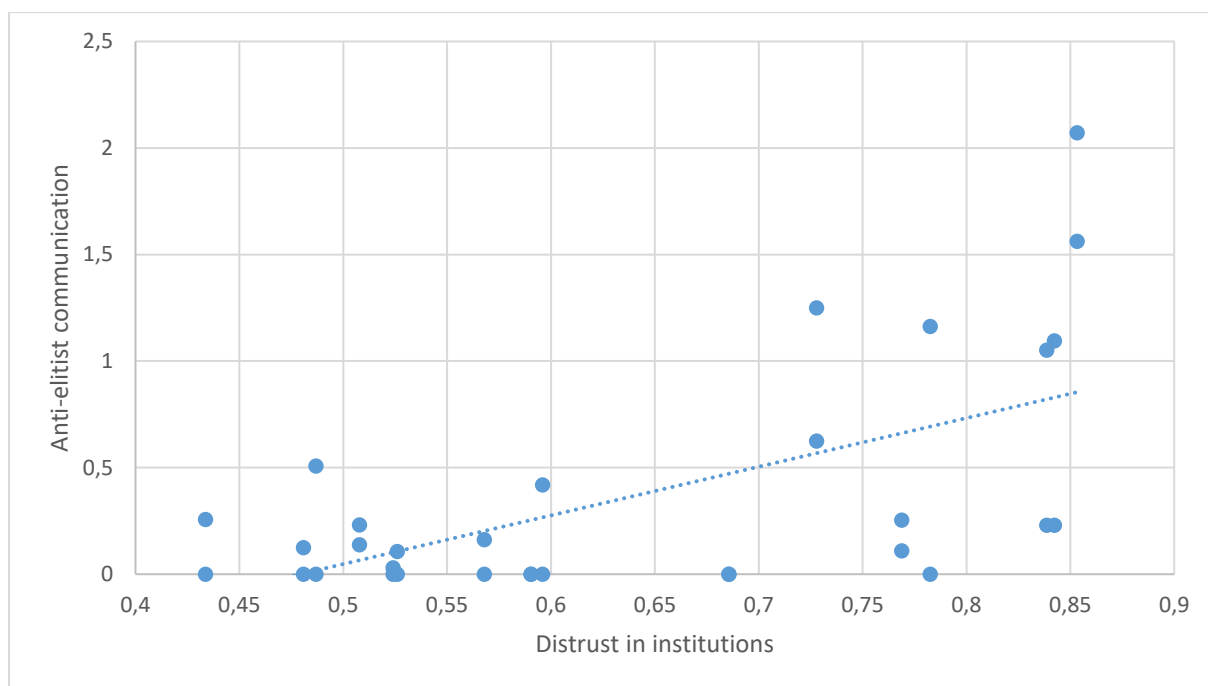
Figure 9: Anti-elitist communication and public moods (cross-national scatterplot)

Table 5: Populismscores by party type and pearson indices

	Mean of populist communication strategies	Correlation vote intention PP	Correlation (anti-elitism) distrust in institutions
Center-right (n=16)	0,86 (SD=0,54)	0,4 (0,13)	0,54* (0,03)
Center left (n=16)	0,7 (SD=0,5)	-0,12 (0,66)	0,68** (0,004)

Note: ***$p < 0.001$, **$p < 0.01$, *$p < 0.05$. Standard error in brackets in the last two columns.

Contagion of left communication strategies

According to H1b mainstream parties should evaluate economic actors or higher classes more often in a negative way, when the respective left party (LP) gains electoral success. However, in none of the countries under investigation this is the case (Figure 10-12; no left party in Austria). There are only some hints that the entry of the M5S in Italy had some effects on respective communication strategies of mainstream parties (H2b). The same can't be observed

for the Spanish case however: The mainstream parties' usage of left communication strategies seems to be totally independent from the success or emergence of respective left parties. The same is true for German mainstream parties. Thus H1b should rather be rejected and H2b might only be true for the Italian case.

Figure 10-12: Left communication strategies and vote intention for left parties (LP)
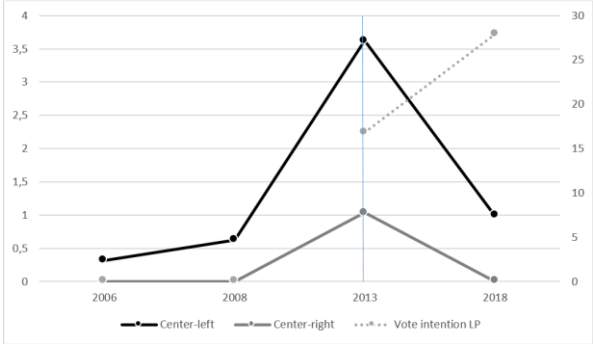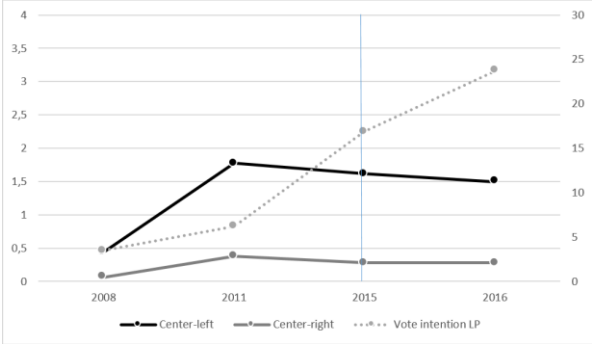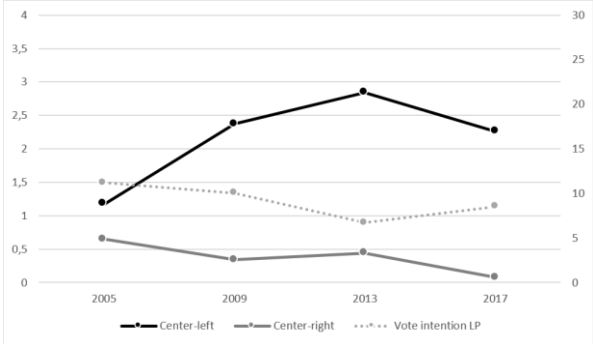
Figure 10: Italy

Figure 11: Spain

Figure 12: Germany

Hypothesis 3b claims that public opinion affects the amount of left communication strategies among mainstream parties. Unfortunately, Eurobarometer does not ask directly about the evaluations of economic actors. Therefore, only the salience of the economic situation of the country (valuated as one of the two most important issues facing the own country at the moment) could be found as somewhat close to 'left moods'. However, this item seems to be indeed a good proxy for left moods: Except in Germany, there seems to be a considerable relation between left-wing communication and shifts in public opinion in all countries (Figure 13-16). Thus, it can be stated that public opinion again seems to have a stronger impact on mainstream parties' communication than party competition.

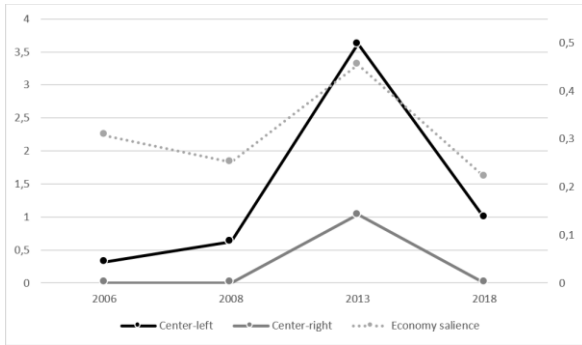*Figure 13-16: Left communication strategies and economy salience*
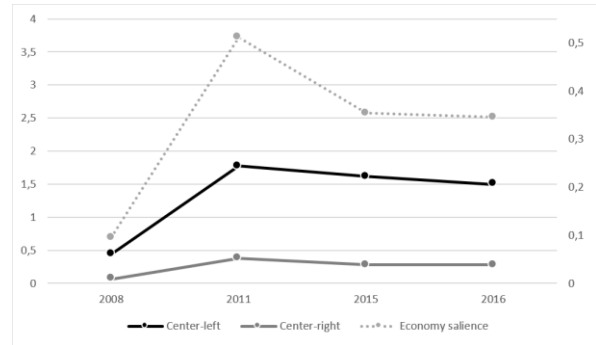
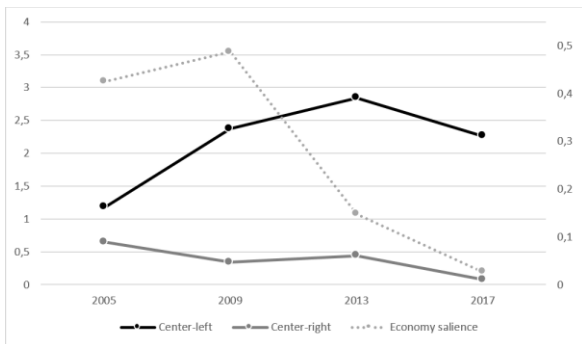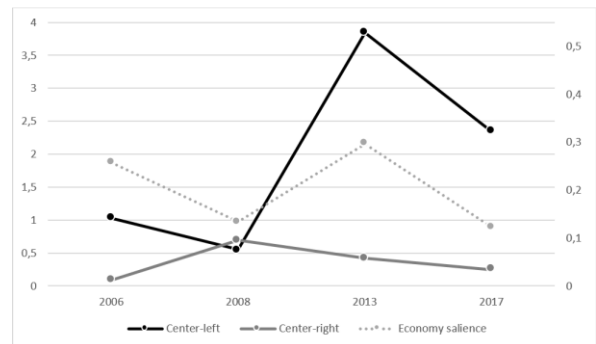*Figure 13: Italy* | *Figure 14: Spain*

Figure 15: Germany | *Figure 16: Austria*

Interestingly, this strong correlation between "left moods" and left communication strategies totally disappears if we presume a general cross-national relation between this two variables. This is because in Spain, left issues are very salient in society but parties hardly use left communication. In Germany and Austria however, left issues are not salient in society but parties use left communication strategies to a higher degree.

Hypothesis 4b can be confirmed for all cases as Figure 13-16 show: Center-left mainstream parties are more prone to use or adopt negative evaluations of economic actors than the center-right. There is some evidence that also the center-right increases its usage of left communication strategies due to shifts in public opinion (especially in Italy and Spain), but only in a very moderate way. Table 6 shows that center-left parties use a higher amount of left communication strategies than the center-right but there is no statistically significant cross-national correlation between these communicative content and vote intention of LP or respective public moods.

Table 6: Left communication scores by party type and pearson indices

	Mean of left communication strategies	Correlation vote intention LP	Correlation public salience economic issues
Center-right (n=16)	0,32 (SD=0,3)	0,03 (0,91)	0,4 (0,12)
Center left (n=16)	1,97 (SD=1,7)	0,02 (0,94)	0,2 (0,45)

Note: ***p < 0.001, **p < 0.01, *p < 0.05. Standard error in brackets in the last two columns.

Contagion of right-wing communication strategies

Starting again with H1(c), mainstream parties should raise negative claims or evaluations against "unnative" outgroups and immigration more often, when the respective far-right party gains electoral success. Figures 17–19 illustrate the development of such communication strategies (against outgroups + against immigration) and the vote intention of all relevant far-right parties (accumulated for the Italian LN and FdI; no far-right party in Spain).

For the Italian and Austrian center-right there seems to be some correlation in this respect. Especially during the rise of the LN in 2018, the Italian center-right became more critical towards immigration and immigrants. However, unlike in Germany and Austria, the Italian radical right parties are part of the center-right coalition and might exert an even stronger influence on the electoral coalition and its program. In Germany, the center-right and to a smaller extent also the center-left became more critical towards outgroups/immigration in their communication when the AfD was considered a relevant competitor (H2c). Thus, there seems to be some evidence, that the entry of new or the exceptional rise of existing radical right parties 'forces' the established party to adjust their communication in this respect.

Figure 17-19: Right-wing communication strategies and vote intention for radical right parties (RRP)
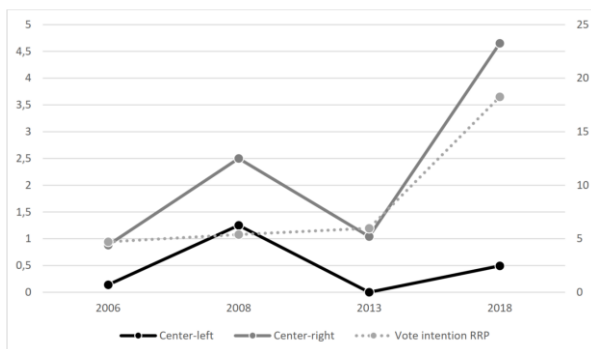
Figure 17: Italy
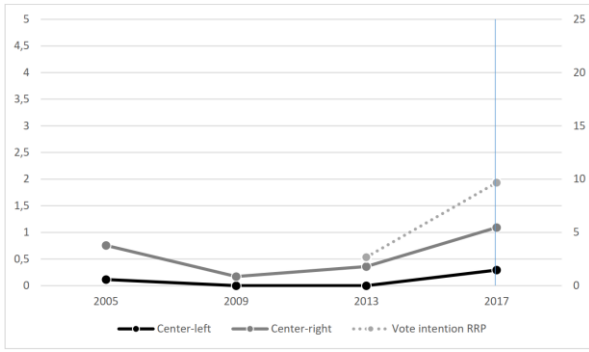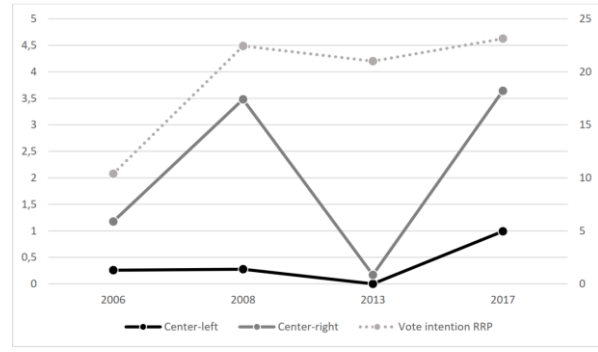
Figure 18: Germany

Figure 19: Austria

Regarding H3c, there should be a correlation between public moods and the usage of specific right-wing communication strategies. Figures 20-23 illustrate the development of right-wing communication over time and the public salience of the immigration issue (again, valuated as one of the two most important issues facing the own country at the moment) and provide strong evidence for this hypothesis.

Figure 20-23: Right-wing communication strategies and immigration salience
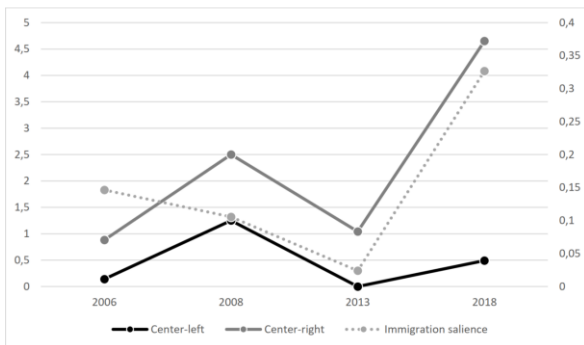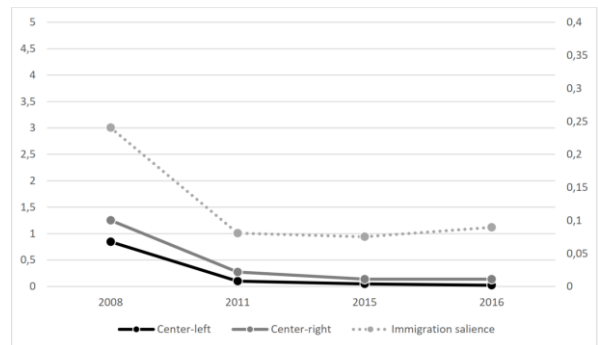

Figure 20: Italy

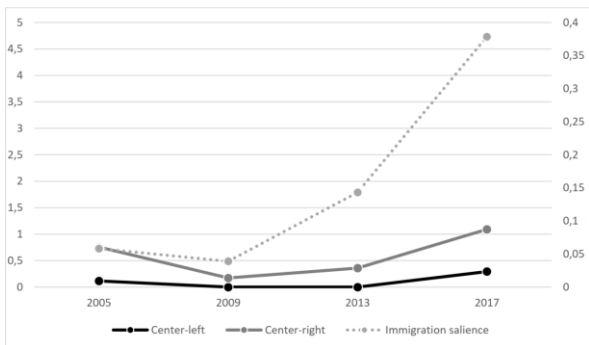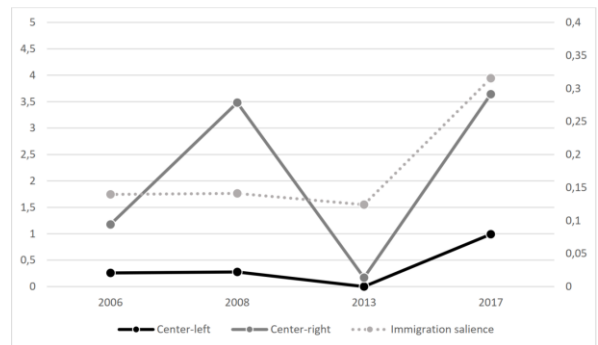
Figure 21: Spain

Figure 22: Germany

Figure 23: Austria

However, that does not mean that electoral success of radical right parties has no influence but it rather can be considered as a further explanation. The rise of right-wing communication strategies of the Austrian center-right in 2008 cannot be explained by public moods but by the strong increase of votes for radical-right parties. On the other hand, the communicative shift in 2017 might rather be due to the increased salience of the immigration issue in society. Regarding the graphs of these figures there is evidence for this hypothesis in all four countries. Even in Spain where a radical right party is absent this can be observed.

Figure 24: Right-wing communication and immigration salience (cross-national scatterplot)
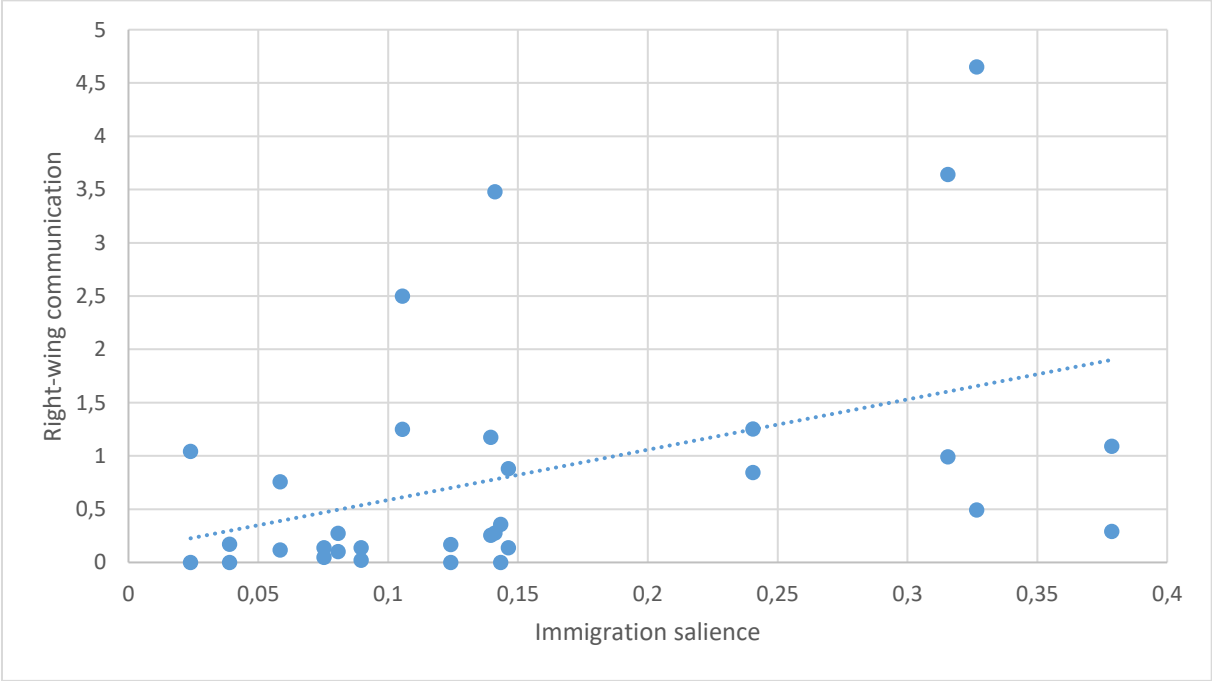
Unlike left-communication, also statistically significant cross-national effects can be observed regarding public moods and right-wing communication strategies. Figure 24 shows the scatterplot (non-standardized values) and fitted values. It can be seen that mainstream parties tend to use more right-wing communication strategies when immigration is a salient topic in society (r=0,43), even though there are some outlying cases.

Regarding H4c it is assumed that center-right parties use more right-wing communication strategies than the center-left and should be more responsive to respective public moods and the electoral success of far-right parties. Table 7 provides clear evidence for this hypothesis. Unsurprisingly and as already illustrated in Figure 19-22, center-right mainstream parties use a much higher amount of right-wing communication strategies than the center-left and they are

more responsive to "immigration moods" and to the electoral success of radical right parties (RRP) than the center-left. In this respect, the pearson correlation index of right-wing communication strategies and vote intention for RRP reveal a statistically significant effect and an even higher value than regarding the correlation of right-wing communication and public moods.

Table 7: Right-wing communication scores by party type and pearson indices

	Mean of right-wing communication strategies	Correlation vote intention RRP	Correlation public salience immigration issue
Center-right (n=16)	1,36 (SD=1,43)	0,69** (0,003)	0,58* (0,02)
Center left (n=16)	0,3 (SD=0,39)	0,26 (0,32)	0,48 (0,06)

Note: ***p < 0.001, **p < 0.01, *p < 0.05. Standard error in brackets in the last two columns.

6. Discussion of the findings

Table 8 summarizes the findings for the analysis. They provide strong support that public opinion is the main factor influencing party communication. It is true that there are some hints that a considerable success of party competitors (entry of new successful populist, left or far-right party and the success of populist and far-right-parties) might influence the communication of mainstream parties. However, considerable electoral gains of competing parties provide rather an additional explication for communicative shifts, when public opinion is not a sufficient condition of change (like right-wing communication strategies of the Austrian center-right).

The row belonging to H3 in the table shows numbers in bold. That means that the relationship between specific public moods and communicative shifts seems to be particular strong. The table does not illustrate cross-national effects which do also exist for anti-elitist and right-wing communication.

On the country-level, mainstream parties seem to be most responsive to immigration moods. This can be observed in all four countries. Left-wing communication increases in all countries except Germany. Anti-elitist communication appears to be influenced by public opinion as well – except in Germany and Austria where such "anti-elitist moods" are less widespread. However, while German parties do neither react to the rise of populist competing parties, this can be observed in Austria which might also be due to the fact, that competing populist parties are much more successful in terms of votes than the AfD in Germany. Specific institutional culture of the German party system might be a further explanation. Within the country-specific

literature there can be found some arguments, that populist communication never played a significant role within the party system of the Federal Republic (Decker 2012) while Italy on is known as "laboratory of populism" (Tarchi 2015, 7) where mainstream political parties are thought of using populist rhetoric (Verbeek, Zaslove, and Rooduijn 2018, 198). Also Spanish parties are sometimes thought to use anti-elitist or populist communication strategies (Del Pozo 2018; Maestre 2016; Sanders, Berganza, and Miguel 2017, 249). Furthermore, data from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) suggest that German parties are the least anti-elitist among the countries under investigation (Bakker et al. 2015; Polk et al. 2017). My own measurements illustrate that even more clearly: Compared to mainstream parties from the other countries– including Austria – German mainstream parties have the lowest populismscores (Table 4). Thus, one could argue while the conflict between the political elite and the common people is much more developed in Spain and Italy (and even in Austria) such a populist cleavage does not exist (yet) in Germany. The success of the AfD in the 2017 election triggered anti-immigration but not populist communication strategies of the mainstream parties. The AfD might be perceived first and foremost as an anti-immigration or nativist party from the far right and less as a primarily populist party attempting to disempower the political elite. The dominating cultural cleavage in Germany might also explain why German mainstream parties are neither responsive to certain left moods in society. Indeed, the German center-left and center-right only adopt right-wing communication strategies.

Table 8: Summary of tested hypotheses

	Pop.	**Left**	**Right**
H1: Success of respective competing party	2 / 4 IT; AUT (C-R)	1 / 3 IT	3 / 3 IT; GER; AUT
H2: Entry of new respective competing party	3 / 4 IT; SP; AUT (C-R)	2 / 2 IT; SP	1 / 1 GER
H3: Public opinion	2 / 4 IT; SP	**3/ 4** IT; SP; AUT (C-L)	**4 / 4**
H4: Similar party family	3 / 4 IT; SP; AUT	**4 / 4**	**4 / 4**

Numbers in bold = strong evidence

Hypotheses 4 can also be confirmed: Center-left mainstream parties are more responsive to left-wing parties/public moods or do at least use such communicative content more often than center-right mainstream parties. On the other hand, the center-right is more prone to use right-wing communication strategies than the center-left. It is also true that populist communication

strategies are used to a similar degree by center-right and center-left parties. However, taking a cross-national perspective, center-right parties are slightly more populist than the center-left.[8]

7. Conclusion

This paper found evidence that populist communication is contagious for at least one of the mainstream parties in each country – except Germany. Thus, the "populist Zeitgeist" thesis could rather be confirmed. Furthermore, in all countries mainstream parties adopt right-wing communication due to specific public moods and – except in Germany- also left-wing communication.

At first glance it might seem surprising that especially election manifestos reflect populist communicative shifts of mainstream parties because former studies did not find evidence for a contagion effect of populist communication in election programs. However, there are several explanations in this respect. Most likely it is because neither Rooduijn et al. (2014) nor Manucci and Weber (2017) consider public opinion as a factor that influences populist communication. Furthermore no consecutive elections has been selected by former studies, what means that there is sometimes a large time span between the time units. This is particular true for Manucci and Weber who select only one election manifesto per decade. During this time parties might have changed due to external factors or personal shifts inside of the party (Fagerholm 2016). This problem might have emerged also in this study, but since I selected only consecutive elections as time units, such issues might be less influential. Last but not least, the findings also depend highly on the measurement of populism. I measure anti-elitist and people-centered communication strategies independently from each other while the two former studies only coded such claims and evaluations as anti-elitist, that also contain references to the people. However, making the political elite responsible for a negative situation or claiming its disempowerment does not necessarily require a reference to the people.

Does the fact that mainstream parties become more populist threatens democracy? This paper does not directly touch upon this question. Having a deeper look at the quality of mainstream parties' populist statements I would rather reject this assumption. Anti-pluralism – claiming that the own party is the only legitimate actor – and illiberalism - questioning division of power and constitutional rights - are mentioned as the main threat of populism for democracy. I

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[8] This is due to the fact that the center-right refers more often to the people than the center-left. On the other hand, the center-left is more anti-elitist than the center-right.

couldn't find statements from mainstream parties that can be coded in one of these categories. Anti-elitist communication consists mostly of claims for cutting some privileges and costs, for more transparency and stricter rules of conduct for politicians. On the other hand people should be considered more, should have more influence in politics and are sometimes portrayed as unfairly treated. Such claims and evaluations do not directly pose a threat for democracy. One could even argue that it is desirable that parties refer more often to the people as the democratic sovereign. The fact that mainstream parties also increasingly speak out against immigration and for the expulsion of "unnatives" – portrayed as criminal, intolerant, a financial problem or just "different" – is a different issue. A high number of statements portraying certain outgroups and immigration in a negative way suggests that immigrants, Muslims and other minorities are first and foremost a threat and problem for the "natives". This narrative might be a bigger threat for democracy and certain minority groups especially when used not only by fringe parties but by the political mainstream since such attitudes might be reflected also within society.

However there is still a lack of empirical research focusing on how a populistization of parties' communication is reflected qualitatively. Furthermore, it still is to be investigated if parties increasingly use populist communication on Twitter, Facebook, in speeches or in other communication channels. Thus, while this paper can be considered a contribution to the current contagion debate, there is still a lot to do for empirical research.

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