Populism and Its Informational Consequences:
Exploring Links between Populist Attitudes,
Social Media News Use, and the News Finds Me Perception

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Abstract

Abundant studies have theorized a positive association between people's populist attitudes and an increased used of social media to consume news, which will be mostly driven by individuals' engagement with news that reflect their people-centered and anti-elitist understanding of politics. However, such general connection remains elusive. This research seeks to further clarify this strand of the literature by incorporating people's belief that important political information will find them without actively seeking news – *News Finds Me perception* (NFM). Relying on representative online survey data from two European countries that differ regarding the ideological political supply side of populism (Italy and Portugal), main results suggest that citizens who hold stronger populist attitudes will develop stronger NFM. Furthermore, results also reveal a mediating effect of social media news use on the effects of populist attitudes over NFM. That is, those who hold populist attitude tend to use social media to get exposed to public affair news, which in turn, explains the development of the NFM. These results emphasize the importance of systematically exploring citizens populists' attitudes within today's social media, social networks, and complex information resources systems.

1.   Introduction

Scholars' interest on the relationship between populism and social media seems quite logical considering the rapid (re)emergence of populist forces around the globe, and the extended use of social media across countries. While abundant approaches to this topic exist (Engesser et al., 2017; Ernst et al., 2019; Jeroense et al., 2021; Müller & Schulz, 2021; Reinemann et al., 2016; Schulz, 2019; Stier et al., 2020) two main broad questions seem to be attracting academic attention. First, do populist politicians use social media more often to spread their messages? And second, do populist individuals consume political news from social media to a higher extent? This paper looks to shed light over the second question, for which it puts together the concepts of populist attitudes, social media news use, and the *News Finds Me* perception (NFM).

Overall, empirical studies have found no straightforward relationship between populist attitudes and social media use in comparative terms (Jeroense et al., 2021; Schulz, 2019; Stier et al., 2020). While a general expectation existed that populist people will use social media more often, such theoretical assumption remains empirically elusive. In fact, findings from political communication point out to the importance of considering different social media and different patterns of use to understand whether and how individuals ranking higher on populist attitudes use more social media, especially for news. Besides further exploring the general connection with new data, this paper takes a step back at it, and explores whether demand-side populism correlates with perceptions reflecting a higher propensity to think that information will come from peers, often from social media, without much active effort involved. That is, with people's perception that they can remain well-informed about public affairs without actively seeking news, as news will find them anyway through peers and social networks (NFM) (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017). To test this proposition, we build upon an original and demographically diverse survey data collected online in Italy and Portugal, two Southern European countries with a very different situation regarding supply-side populism. While relevant populist parties exist in Italy that compete from different places within the left-right axis (Caiani & Graziano, 2019), populism has not been so systematically used by political parties in Portugal and it has been combined more often with only left-wing ideologies (Gómez-Reino & Plaza-Colodro, 2018).

In line with previous research, we find no conclusive evidence for the association between populist attitudes and social media news. However, we find a cross-country positive association between populist attitudes and NFM as well as support for a mediation mechanism existing between populist attitudes and NFM. Our results evidence that the association between demand-side populism and social media may be operating through more intricate pathways than initially expected, and advice for further research considering mediating mechanisms and reinforcing effects.

2.   Literature review

Although literature on populism has experienced a bloom in recent years (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2018; Rooduijn, 2019), theoretical discussions around the term long predate more recent and more empirical scholarly efforts (Canovan, 2004; Ionescu & Gellner, 1969; Laclau, 2005). In fact, a wide range of definitions of populism exist (Aslanidis, 2015; Dornbusch & Edwards, 1991; Mudde, 2004; Weyland, 2001), each one with its own emphasis. This is well exemplified in early work by Ionescu and Gellner (1969), who spoke of an essentially *contested* term. However, nowadays, and while the situation has not reached an absolute definition convergence, there is a growing consensus around the ideational approach to populism, especially among political science scholars (Hawkins, Carlin, et al., 2019; Hawkins & Kaltwasser, 2017; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2018).

The ideational approach considers populism as a set of ideas that emphasizes three core components: anti-elitism, people-centrism, and a Manichean outlook of politics (Hawkins, Kaltwasser, et al., 2019). A major advantage of the ideational approach for empirical studies is that its emphasis on ideas allows considering populism as an ideology or a discourse (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2018). A second advantage, crucial for this research, is that populism can be gradually considered both from a demand and supply-side perspective. That is, parties and politicians may occupy a space in a continuum between populism and non-populism attending to their discourses, but citizens could also be located at some point of the continuum attending to their preferences regarding anti-elitism, people-centrism, and Manicheism. To put it into different words, populist discourses exist (supply-side), but so do populist attitudes (demand-side) (Hawkins, Kaltwasser, et al., 2019).

As scales to measure populist attitudes were refined (Akkerman et al., 2014; Hawkins et al., 2012; Schulz et al., 2018), so did our understanding of their causes and consequences. Populist attitudes have been associated with feelings of deprivation and declinism (Elchardus & Spruyt, 2016), anger (Rico et al., 2017), ideological radicalism (Marcos-Marne et al., 2021), and have been found to positively predict voting for populist parties (Hawkins, Kaltwasser, et al., 2019; Marcos-Marne, 2020; van Hauwaert & van Kessel,

2018). However, an ongoing and relevant discussion persists on the connections between populist attitudes and media use. This link is important, for in the context of social media, the role of news may be to further divide the political realm and society into "us, the people," versus "them, the elites," supporting the way politicians and citizens negotiate important informational resources comprising both supply and demand facets of populism (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2020).

Looking at traditional media, populist attitudes have been associated with a higher likelihood of consuming news, especially TV and tabloid ones (Schulz, 2019), which gives support to the idea that populist politics can actually be more sophisticated than initially tought (Stanley & Cześnik, 2021; van Kessel et al., 2021). On the other hand, the relationship between populist attitudes and social media consumption seems far less clear (Jeroense et al., 2021; Müller & Schulz, 2019; Schulz, 2019; Stier et al., 2020).

A general expectation in this subfield was that populist individuals would use social media more often, especially to surveille political content, an idea built upon three main components (Jeroense et al., 2021). First, social media facilitates that people connect with like-minded individuals. Second, social media use speaks well to the dichotomy people-elites, as it enables an informative space that is not so constrained by the agenda of mainstream media, often distrusted by populist individuals (Fawzi, 2019; Fawzi & Mothes, 2020; Schulz et al., 2020). Third, populist politicians are often said to use social media more systematically, and, even if this is not unchallenged, the perception that this is true would be enough for populist individuals to turn to social media more frequently. However, and as announced before, the general relationship between populist attitudes and social media use continues to remain elusive. Populist attitudes have been found to correlate negatively with social media political use in The Netherlands (Jeroense et al., 2021), and only positively with Facebook usage, rather than Twitter, in a comparative study of 11 countries (Schulz, 2019). Considering there is an interest in the accumulation of empirical material to be able to better understand the relationship described above, including evidence from less scrutinized countries as observations (i.e., Portugal and Italy), we ask again in this paper:

> RQ1. *What is the association between people's populist attitudes and their frequency of social media use for news?*

While the general relationship between demand-side populism and social media is still contested, more populist individuals are nevertheless more likely to use *alternative media with an affinity to populism* (Müller & Schulz, 2021). This supports the expectation that social media news use in more populist individuals can be conditioned by how they perceive the media environment beyond traditional clear-cut divisions between digital and offline/mainstream sources (Stier et al., 2020). Basically, social media may not be a single homogeneous ecosystem that is consistently more often used by populist people, and different patterns of use with distinct effects may coexist within the general social media network. To shed additional light on the online news preferences of individuals with strong populist attitudes, we incorporate the concept of NFM.

NFM reflects the individuals' belief in that "they can indirectly stay informed about public affairs through general internet use, information received from peers, and connections within online social networks" (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017, p. 3). As such, NFM has been theorized as higher order construct with three subdimensions: being informed (epistemic dimension), not-seeking (motivational dimension), and reliance on peers (instrumental dimension) (Song et al., 2020). Often seen as a byproduct of media environments with many choices, high levels of NFM do not entail an active avoidance of news. Far from that, individuals ranking high on NFM are particularly receptive to new information gathered using social media, especially when this comes from peers (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2020). In fact, the instrumental dimension of NFM reflects that people ranking high on it tend to believe they can delegate the acquisition of information to their online and social network peers (Song et al., 2020). It is here that we see the connection with populist attitudes.

First, regarding the instrumental, peer reliance dimension of NFM, individuals with strong populist attitudes are more likely to perceive the existence of a homogeneous and kind-hearted people that, just like them, oppose to evil elites, and are more likely to distrust mainstream media (Fawzi, 2019; Fawzi & Mothes, 2020; Schulz et al., 2020). Second, and tapping into the epistemic (being well-informed) and motivational (not seeking) dimensions of NFM, the Manichean and schematic understanding of politics that is inherent to populism may be well connected with the assumption that good/complete information is attainable without looking for it at all. To be clear, we do not claim there is a single causal path between individuals´ Manicheism and NFM, but rather a situation of elective affinity between subdimensions. Importantly, we believe populist attitudes will antecede NFM (and not the other way around) because of the general understanding of politics that populism entails, connected with the shortcomings of representative democracy (Canovan, 2004), and due to empirical research suggesting the relative stabilty of populist attitudes, even if they do not always have electoral consequences (Hawkins, Kaltwasser, et al., 2019;

Marcos-Marne, 2021). Accordingly, we expect that: *Individuals with stronger populist attitudes will display higher levels of NFM (H1).*

To finish this theoretical section, we will also consider an additional aspect, whether the relationship between populist attitudes and NFM is mediated by social media news use. This is important because previous studies have found social media news use consistently predicts NFM. That is, individuals ranking high on NFM may be more likely to use social media but using social media for news is a stronger and more powerful predictor of NFM, according to evidence from longitudinal studies (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017). Should we ignore this potential mediating mechanism, we might end up missing relevant information about the connection between social media and demand-side populism. We expect that social media will positively mediate the effects of people's populist attitudes over the proliferation of NFM. However, due to the exploratory nature of our approach, and looking to shed additional light on the relationship initially set in RQ1, we ask:

RQ2. *Is the relationship between populist attitudes and NFM mediated by social media news use?*

3. Data and Methods

This study relies on original online survey data collected in Italy and Portugal during November 2020 by Netquest. Both samples (Italy $n = 1000$; Portugal $n = 1055$) were drawn aiming for representativeness, accounting for demographic key elements such as age, gender, and territorial location of respondents (quota sampling within an opt-in panel). Our variables, otherwise stated, are measured on 1 to 10 on a Likert scale. To minimize potential measurement error arising from missing data from some subjects, we used multiple imputation at item-level before computing the final constructs of interest (Eekhout et al., 2014; Gottschall et al., 2012). With the purpose of matching the Likert scales, we fixed the minimum and maximum values per variable and rounded the final imputed values to 1 as constraints during the procedure. Only two variables in both countries suffered from above 10% missing cases, '*Ideology*' (Italy: 16.9%; Portugal 13.9%) and '*Household inco*me' (Italy: 13.7%; Portugal: 11.9%), and both perform as controls in our analyses. Five imputations were generated in SPSS using Markov chain Monte Carlo (MCMC) method (MacKay & Mac Kay, 2003; Schafer, 1999). Guided by summarizes on missingness in the data and summaries how values were imputed, all analyses in the results section were conducted over the third imputation dataset.

3.1. Independent, Mediating and Criterion Variables

This study's independent variable of interest is *populist attitudes*. Following previous research (Akkerman et al., 2014; Silva et al., 2020), we utilized a six-item construct that averages respondents' agreement with the following questions: 'Politicians in the Parliament must follow the will of the people.', The most important decisions should be made by the people and not by the politicians', 'I would rather be represented by a citizen than by an experienced politician', 'Political differences between the elite and the people are greater than the differences that exist within the people', 'Elected politicians speak a lot and do very little', 'In politics, it is called 'agreement' what it truly means to give up your own principles'. These items are measured in a Likert scale from 1 to 5. (Italy: Cronbach's α = .82; $M = 3.79$; $SD = 0.71$; Portugal: α = .75; $M = 3.71$; $SD = 0.70$).

Social media news use is used as dependent and mediating variable. To measure it respondents were asked four questions about the frequency with which they use social media platforms with the purpose of acquiring news (Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and others such as Instagram or YouTube) (Italy: Cronbach's α = .78; $M = 4.93$, $SD = 2.35$; Portugal: α = .77; $M = 4.09$, $SD = 2.11$).

NFM is the main criterion variable of the study. Following previous research (Gil de Zúñiga & Cheng, 2021; Song et al., 2020), we measured respondents' perception of being well-informed about current news and public affairs without any effort as the news will eventually reach them, by means of a six-item construct. This construct averages the following questions: 'I rely on my friends to tell me what's important when news happen.', 'I can be well-informed even when I don't actively follow the news.', 'I do not worry about keeping up with news because I know news will finds me.', 'I rely on information from my friends based on what they like or follow through social media.', 'I do not have to actively seek news because when important public affairs break, they will get to me in social media.', 'I'm up-to-date and informed about public affairs news, even when I do not actively seek news myself.' (Italy: Cronbach's α = .81; $M = 5.08$; $SD = 1.9$; Portugal: α = .76; $M = 4.87$; $SD = 1.68$).

3.2.   Control Variables

Regarding political antecedents, we controlled for *left-right ideology* (1 = left, 10 = right; Italy: *M = 5.73*, *SD* = 2.75; Portugal: *M = 5.03*, *SD* = 2.28), and *political trust* (Italy: Cronbach's α = .89, *M* = 4.27, *SD* = 1.97; Portugal: *α* = .87, *M* = 4.38, *SD* = 1.77). The latter construct averages respondents' degree of trust in the following institutions: The "Parliament", the "political class", "political parties", "President of the Republic" (question not included in Portugal), "armed forces", and the "European Parliament". For media antecedents, we controlled for *traditional news use*, which averages respondents' use of TV, newspapers, radio, and online media for news (seven items in total) (Italy: Cronbach's α = .79; *M* = 6.38, *SD* = 1.91; Portugal: α = .78; *M* = 6.14, *SD* = 1.78). Last, we controlled for a set of sociodemographic variables referring to respondents' *age*, *gender*, *education*, and *household income*.

To unravel the proposed theoretical connections, we conducted a set of hierarchical Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regressions, one per country (Italy and Portugal), and a third one with pooled data from both countries. Finally, we conducted a regression-based mediation analysis over the pooled data to estimate whether there is an indirect effect of the populist attitudes on the NFM perception via social media news use, while accounting for the control variables included in the OLS models. Mediation analysis was run with PROCESS macro, Model 4 in SPSS (Hayes, 2018).

4.   Results

The results of our first OLS regression model (Table 1) show that the more individuals hold populist attitudes, the more they tend to consume news in social media in both the Italian (β = .081, $p < .05$) and the pooled models (β = .053, $p < .05$). However, the relationship does not reach statistical significance in Portugal (β = .016, $p > .10$). Therefore, and in line with previous research, we find no clear connection between populist attitudes and social media news use that is consistent across countries (RQ1). Among the controls included to predict social media news use, we find a consistent effect of age (negative) and traditional news use (positive).

On the other hand, results included in Table 2 evidence the connection between populist attitudes and NFM (H1). Individuals ranking higher on populist attitudes show greater levels of NFM using data from data from Italy (β = .143, $p < .001$, total R^2 = 11.6%), Portugal (β = .075, $p < .05$, total R^2 = 10.6%), and the pooled model (β = .112, $p < .001$). Among the controls, we see a consistent positive effect of political trust (β = -.113 $p < .01$) (more trusting individuals rank higher on NFM) and social media news use (β = .268, $p < .01$) (using more social media for news predicts higher levels of NFM). Conversely, and consistent with prior studies, traditional news use is negatively related to NFM (β = -.084, $p < .01$), meaning that those who consume news on TV, Radio and Newspapers (online and offline) tend to believe less that the news will find them with no active effort. Social media news and traditional news use are rigorous controls for the relationship proposed, as they are strong predictors of NFM (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017).

Finally, mediation analysis over pooled data reveals an indirect effect of populist attitudes on the NFM through social media news use (β = .036, se = .017, 95% *CI* = [.003 - .07]). Figure 1 shows the direct and indirect paths, based on the OLS regression unstandardized coefficients reported by PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2018). This can be read as people reporting populist attitudes further consume news in social media, which in turn, explains the proliferation of NFM. Having populist attitudes positively relates to NFM, directly and indirectly.

5.   Discussion and Conclusion

While theoretical expectations existed about a clear-cut relationship between populist attitudes and social media news use, this connection has proved to be more convoluted than expected. Individuals displaying stronger populist attitudes tend to use social media for news more often only in some countries, and/or depending on the specific platforms considered as social media source. Our results for RQ1 are in line with these findings, as we find a significant relationship in one of the countries (Italy), and the pooled model, but not in Portugal. Crucially, we believe party-system differences in our sample are likely not related to these results. Even if populist attitudes are not electorally activated, which may happen if no party is expressly recurring to populist mobilization (Hawkins, Kaltwasser, et al., 2019), the relationship with social media news could still exist. This is so because the proposed connection reflects a public opinion-media consumption pattern (populist attitudes-social media news), rather than a public opinion-electoral behavior one (populist attitudes-voting, which is indeed dependent on electoral activation). Therefore, we believe our results, and those before ours, are better explained because the empirical association is indeed blurry, and not so much because particular responses in our sample. Possible explanations for it are the broad range

of motivations behind social media news use, which is far from exclusive of populist individuals, but also the different understandings of social media among individuals, not all of them along the lines of anti-elitism and people-centrism. In a nutshell, the antecedents and understandings of social media are likely to be too rich to be exhausted by the populist-social media connection.

Taking this into account and looking for a better understanding of how populist individuals interact with online environments we hypothesized a positive association between populist attitudes and NFM. This relationship taps into the foundations of the populist-social media connection, as it combines anti-elitism, people-centrism and a Manichean outlook, but it is more specific and seems to better refer to demand-side populism alone. In line with it, we find a positive association between populist attitudes and NFM that works in all tested models (Italy, Portugal, and the pooled model), confirming H_1. Importantly, the effect remains even after controlling for powerful predictors of NFM such as demographics, and social media and traditional news use. Furthermore, in response to RQ2, part of the association between populist attitudes and NFM seems mediated by social media news use, which suggests the effects of populist attitudes on social media use may be less visible than initially expected.

Our paper is a first attempt to explore the association between populist attitudes and NFM. By doing that, it contributes to a larger stream of literature revolving around the populism-social media connection. However, our approach does not come without limitations, and three main aspects must be mentioned here. First, we build upon the operationalization of populist attitudes by Akkerman et al. (2014). While this among the most widespread measures of populist attitudes in social sciences, and despite of its theoretical and empirical usefulness (Silva et al., 2020), it is not the only operationalization available. As differences exist depending on how populist attitudes are measured (Silva et al., 2020), further studies will be needed to confirm our results. In a similar vein, our comparative study focuses on two countries of Southern Europe. We believe our main findings should hold with data for other countries, because we suggest general association that is likely to be independent of concrete political contexts. However, that is only a possibility until more studies confirm it. Last, we theorize a causal path that goes from populist attitudes to social media news use and NFM, but mutual reinforcing dynamics are likely to exist between these variables. Therefore, studies using longitudinal data will be particularly useful to put our assumptions and results to an additional empirical test. Further studies along these lines will not only matter to satisfy academic curiosity, as understanding populists' media diets is of the highest relevance to deal with far reaching democratic consequences of widespread populist attitudes.

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7. Appendix

7.1. Tables

Table 1. OLS Regression Model 1 - Predicting Social Media News Use.

Predictors	Social Media News Use		
	Italy	**Portugal**	**Pooled Countries**
Block 1: Demographics			
Sex (female = 1)	.07*	.027	.064**
Age	−.184***	−.225***	−.217***
Education	−.038	−.037	−.155***
Household Income	−.097**	−.066*	−.051*
ΔR^2	3.1%	3.00%	4.4%
Block 2: Political Antecedents			
Ideology	.055	.003	.040#
Political Trust	.054	−.001	.030
ΔR^2	1%	0.1%	0.6%
Block 3: Media Antecedents			
Trad. News Use	.312***	.296***	.311***
ΔR^2	9.1%	8%	9%
Block 4: Variable of Interest			
Populist Attitudes	.081*	.016	.053*
ΔR^2	0.5%	0.00%	0.2%
Total R^2	13.8%	11.1%	14.3%

Note: Sample size: Italy = 1000; Portugal = 1055; pooled countries = 2055. Cell entries are OLS standardized Beta (β) coefficients. # p < .10; * p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p <.001.

Table 2. OLS Regression Model 2 - Predicting News Finds Me Perception.

Predictors	News Finds Me Perception		
	Italy	**Portugal**	**Pooled Countries**
Block 1: Demographics			
Sex (female = 1)	−.017	−.016	−.016
Age	.113***	−.114***	−.005
Education	−.121***	−.045	−.029
Household Income	.02	−.017	−.023
ΔR^2	2.8%	2.57%	0.7%
Block 2: Political Antecedents			
Ideology	.054#	.040	.054*
Political Trust	.093**	.116**	.113***
ΔR^2	.8%	0.8%	0.9%
Block 3: Media Antecedents			
Social Media News Use	.257***	.272***	.268***
Trad. News Use	−.073*	−.078*	−.084**
ΔR^2	6.3%	6.6%	6.5%
Block 4: Variable of Interest			
Populist Attitudes	.143***	.075*	.112***
ΔR^2	1.7%	0.5%	1%
Total R^2	11.6%	10.6%	9.2%

Note: Sample size: Italy = 1000; Portugal = 1055; pooled countries = 2055. Cell entries are OLS standardized Beta (β) coefficients. # p < .10; * p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p <.001.

7.2. Figures

Figure 1. Mediation Analysis for Portugal and Italy Pooled Data.
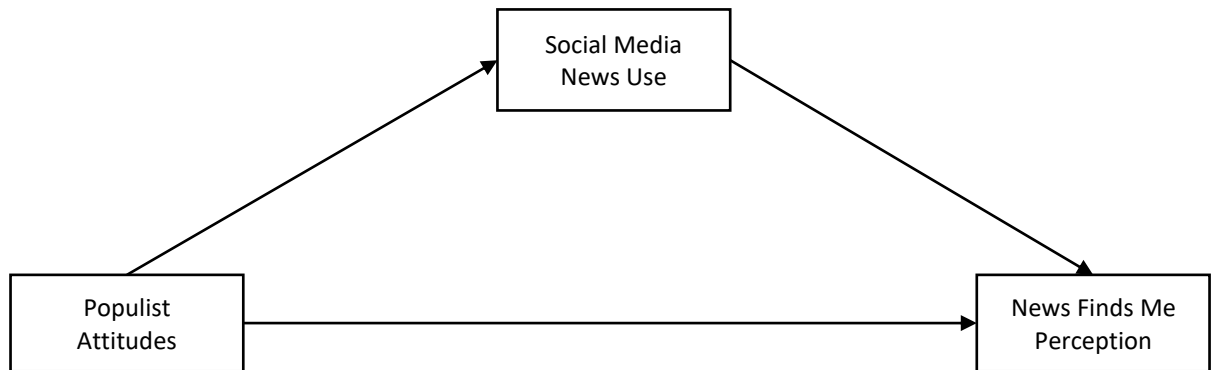
Note*:* Sample size = 2055. Path cells are unstandardized coefficients. Bootstrap samples for CI: 5000 simulations. The model includes the same controls and predictors as Model 2 (Table 1). The point estimate of the *indirect effect* (a × b) is .036, *se* = .017, 95% *CI* = [.003- .07]; and of the *total effect* (c) is .318, *se* = .06, 95% *CI* = [.199 - .436]. CI = confidence interval.