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# 4

**The Persuasive Power of Right-Wing Populist  
Rhetoric: How Figuratively Framed Populist  
Statements Affect Political Persuasion**

# The Persuasive Power of Right-Wing Populist Rhetoric: How Figuratively Framed Populist Statements Affect Political Persuasion

## Abstract

The rhetoric employed by right-wing populist politicians is considered important to their political success. Such populist rhetoric commonly contains figurative frames with metaphor and/or hyperbole. In two experiments ( $N_{\text{experiment1}} = 411$ ,  $N_{\text{experiment2}} = 407$ ), we tested when and how such figurative frames add to the intense and emotive character of populist statements and their subsequent persuasiveness. Results showed that different voters respond differently to figuratively framed right-wing populist rhetoric: General voters perceived figuratively framed populist statements as more intense and emotive than non-figurative statements, which caused boomerang effects by decreasing political persuasion. By contrast, right-wing populist voters were unaffected by rhetorical variations in populist statements. Our findings underscore how populist rhetoric can broaden the gap between voters and put in motion further polarization in our society.

*Keywords: populist rhetoric, figurative-framing effects, political persuasion, underlying mechanism, voter characteristics*

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## INTRODUCTION

Over the past decades, various Western countries witnessed an increase in electoral support for populist parties that manifest a nationalist, radical-right ideology (Hameleers, Bos & de Vreese, 2017). Populist politicians like Donald Trump (US), Marine Le Pen (France), Geert Wilders (Netherlands), and Heinz-Christian Strache (Austria) challenged established political patterns (Wodak & Krzyżanowski, 2017). The rhetoric employed by such populist leaders is generally seen as a decisive factor in their success (Hogan & Haltinner, 2015). With this research, we explored if the rhetoric employed by right-wing populist leaders can partly explain for their electoral success.

Populism is a contested concept, studied extensively from different perspectives, and defined in numerous ways (Mudde, 2017). We take an ideational perspective, which considers populism to be structured around an antagonism between two groups: ‘the pure people’ and ‘the culprit elite’ (Mudde, 2017). Populist politicians claim to represent the will of the common people against an illegitimately powerful ‘elite’ (Mudde, 2017). Most populist politicians combine this ‘thin’ ideology of populism, which lacks intellectual refinement and consistency, with other, ‘fuller’ ideologies, such as socialism (e.g., left-wing populism in Latin America; de La Torre, 2017) or nationalism (e.g., right-wing populism in Western Europe; De Cleen, 2017). Right-wing populist parties (RWPPs) perceive a group of outsiders and immigrants as a threat to their idealized nation, and blame the political elite for furthering the rights of these foreigners and immigrants to the detriments of the nations ‘own people’ (De Cleen, 2017).

The popularity of RWPPs has led to an increase in research on factors that explain their political success (Bos, van der Brug & de Vreese, 2013). One of these factors is the rhetoric employed by populist politicians (Matthes & Schmuck, 2017). RWPPs typically use strong, vivid metaphors and hyperboles to frame their political statements (Hogan & Haltinner,

2015; Kalkhoven, 2015). The use of metaphors and hyperboles might add to the highly emotive, exaggerated and blunt rhetoric that characterizes this rhetoric (Kalkhoven, 2015). Scholars generally agree that, at least for parts of the electorate, such rhetoric can be highly persuasive (Bos et al., 2013; Matthes & Schmuck, 2017).

This research responds to calls for more research on the reception of populist rhetoric among individual voters (Reinemann, Aalberg, Esser, Strömbäck & de Vreese, 2016). With two experiments, we examined how figuratively framed right-wing populist (RWP) rhetoric affects voters' political opinion. We tested how populist rhetoric affects emotions and perceptions of message intensity, and whether these responses served as underlying mechanisms for effects on political persuasion. We expected populist rhetoric to appeal to parts of the electorate, and tested whether voters' political affiliation influenced persuasive effects. Experiment 1 and Experiment 2 were identical in terms of design, procedure and measurement, but used a different set of populist metaphors and hyperboles to frame a typically RWP issue.

### *HOW POPULIST RHETORIC ATTRACTS VOTERS*

Metaphors and hyperboles are inherent parts of populist rhetoric (Hogan & Haltinner, 2015; Kalkhoven, 2015). Populist rhetoric typically creates or reinforces antagonism between an in-group of 'good people' and a culprit out-group, and promotes straightforward, oversimplified solutions to complex societal problems (Hameleers et al., 2017; Kalkhoven, 2015). RWPPs seem keen on using negative metaphors and hyperboles to justify oftentimes blunt and oversimplified policy proposals that promise to protect the in-group from an out-group threat (Charteris-Black, 2006).

Metaphors are "cross-domain mappings" that transfer elements of a source domain onto a target domain (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, pp. 203). For example, when Dutch politician Geert Wilders referred to immigrant men as 'Islamic testosterone bombs' (Lucassen, 2018), elements of the source

domain of weapons and aggressiveness were transferred onto the social category of immigrant men. This specific frame highlights only negative characteristics of a group of people, while it brushes away all good elements by inviting people to think of immigrant men as dangerous, (sexually) aggressive, and being controlled by hormones instead of their minds. As such, metaphors can be used to create or reinforce negative stereotypes and accentuate differences between the presumed 'good' people of the in-group and the presumed 'bad' people of the out-group (De Landtsheer, 2015).

Another type of figurative language that can add to the typical character of populist rhetoric is hyperbole. A hyperbole is an expression that is "more extreme than justified given its ontological referent" (Burgers, Brugman, Renardel de Lavalette, & Steen, 2016, p. 166). For example, Donald Trump claimed Mexico to be 'the second deadliest country in the world', and therefore argued that a border wall should be built to protect the US (Los Angeles Times, 2017). Such a hyperbolic frame can portray an issue or event as larger than it actually is (Norricks, 2004), and can be used to create a message that lacks nuance, leaves no room for contingencies, and appeals to emotions (Kalkhoven, 2015). By exaggerating threats and dramatizing issues (Doig & Pythian, 2005), hyperboles can contribute to legitimacy formation of populist policy proposals (Kalkhoven & De Landtsheer, 2016).

RWP rhetoric typically plays on emotions, like anger and fear, and promotes straightforward policies that are very specific and leave no room for contingencies (Hameleers et al., 2017). Metaphor and hyperbole can spark emotions by eliciting a vivid image (Charteris-Black, 2006; Claridge, 2010), and can increase perceived message intensity (i.e., the degree to which a statement differs from an objective, non-evaluative, statement; Hamilton & Stewart, 1993). Metaphors can activate connotations attached to intense and negative concepts, like war and other threats, and hyperboles can exaggerate danger and emphasize threats (Charteris-Black,

2006; Kalkhoven, 2015). Thereby, both tropes seem tools par excellence to create populist rhetoric that evokes negatively toned emotions and is perceived as intense (Charteris-Black, 2006). This leads to our first hypothesis:

*H1: Metaphor and hyperbole each increase (a) perceived message intensity of a populist statement, and each evoke (b) stronger negative emotions, and (c) weaker positive emotions than non-figuratively framed statements.*

The growing importance of social media, like Twitter and Facebook, created an opportunity for populist politicians to connect with their voters without having to move past gatekeeping journalists (Bracciale & Martella, 2017). While current research on the role of metaphor and hyperbole in populist rhetoric has mainly focused on their role in public debates (Charteris-Black, 2006; Musolff, 2017), questions about how populist rhetoric can affect individual reasoning remain largely unanswered (Reinemann et al., 2016). In general, metaphors can be persuasive in at least two different ways (Bowdle & Gentner, 1995). Some metaphors are novel, attract attention, and invite readers to adopt a new issue viewpoint. Others are conventional, likely go unnoticed, and influence opinion in a less notable way (Steen, 2011). The same holds for hyperboles (McCarthy & Carter, 2004).

When metaphor and/or hyperbole are used to frame a political issue, these figurative frames can affect political opinion (Boeynaems, Burgers, Konijn & Steen, 2017). In framing theory, frames are typically defined as consisting of two elements: framing devices, which suggest a framework within which to view the issue, and reasoning devices, which provide justifications or reasons for a general position (Gamson & Lasch, 1983, p. 399). Traditionally, framing scholars have categorized figurative-language types (e.g., metaphor, hyperbole) under the heading of framing devices only (Gamson & Lasch, 1983). Recently, Burgers, Konijn and Steen (2016)

introduced a new perspective on this matter and argued that figurative language can work both as framing devices and reasoning devices: metaphor and hyperbole do not only add rhetorical flourish to a statement, they can transfer conceptual content as well (Burgers, Konijn & Steen, 2016). Thereby, figurative frames can fulfill one or more of the framing functions defined by Entman (1993): they can promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, problem evaluation, and/or a possible problem solution (Burgers, Konijn & Steen, 2016). For example, Trump's hyperbolic statement about Mexico promotes a presumed problem (e.g., Mexicans are presumed to be a threat) and promotes a solution to this problem (e.g., building a wall will keep the US safe). Such figurative frames likely affect how voters perceive an issue (Burgers, Konijn & Steen, 2016).

Thus far, we have focused on populist frames that comprise metaphor or hyperbole in isolation. Metaphor and hyperbole are distinct tropes (Carston & Wearing, 2015): while metaphor transfers elements of a source domain onto a target domain (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), hyperbole implies an evaluation along a qualitative or quantitative scale (Burgers, Brugman et al., 2016). Nevertheless, albeit being distinctive figurations, metaphor and hyperbole are readily combined (Carston & Wearing, 2015). RWP rhetoric is often associated with the occurrence of frames that combine metaphor and hyperbole (Kalkhoven, 2015). For example, Geert Wilders hyperbolically extended the metaphor a wave of immigrants into 'a tsunami of Islamization', when he referred to the number of Islamic immigrants coming to the Netherlands (NU.nl, 2006). Other examples of such hyperbolic metaphors came from Trump, who shaped an image of illegal immigrants as deadly creatures by comparing them to 'venomous snakes' (Independent, 2017), and from UKIP leadership Candidate Anne Marie Waters, who called Islam a 'killing machine' (BBC news, 2017). Thus, metaphor and hyperbole can be used to form three types of figurative frames: metaphorical frames (metaphor present, hyperbole absent),



hyperbolic frames (hyperbole present, metaphor absent) and combinatory figurative frames (metaphor present, hyperbole present).

Both metaphor and hyperbole can affect how voters perceive an issue (Boeynaems, et al., 2017; Kalkhoven & De Landtsheer, 2016). Moreover, frames that contain both metaphor and hyperbole combine the persuasive potential of the individual figures (Burgers, Konijn & Steen, 2016). Such a combinatory figurative frame contains two rhetorical operations at the same time, making it harder for critics to challenge the frame, which likely increases its persuasiveness. Therefore, combinatory figurative frames are expected to establish persuasive effects that reach beyond the impact of frames that contain only one type of figurative language (Burgers, Konijn & Steen, 2016). Thus far, scholars who studied the persuasive impact of combinatory figurative frames (e.g., ‘immigration is a natural disaster’; Charteris-Black, 2006) have purely focused on their metaphorical nature, and did not study the combinatory effects of these frames (Boeynaems et al., 2017). Moreover, such studies typically took a critical-discourse approach and looked mainly at the prominence of figurative frames in the public debate (Charteris-Black, 2006; Musolff, 2017).

Although it has been widely acknowledged that figurative language can be used to increase a message’s persuasiveness (e.g., Boeynaems et al., 2017; Sopory & Dillard, 2002), thus far, no experimental studies have tested the persuasiveness of these tropes in the context of RWP rhetoric. To test for the persuasive power of metaphor and hyperbole in the context of RWP rhetoric, and to empirically test whether the persuasiveness of figurative frames increases when metaphor and hyperbole are combined, we hypothesized that:

*H2: Populist statements framed with both metaphor and hyperbole combined are more persuasive than either metaphorically framed populist statements or hyperbolically framed populist statements, which in turn, are more persuasive than non-figurative frames.*

Scholars generally agree that, at least a part of, the persuasive power of populist rhetoric lies in its intense character and its emotive force (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Wirz, 2018). RWP rhetoric is designed to appeal to voters' emotions, and these emotions can mediate its persuasiveness (Wirz, 2018). Populist rhetoric draws on anger to emphasize that the culprit elite fails to defend the interest of 'the people', and plays on fear by highlighting threats to the idealized nation (Hameleers, et al., 2017). In general, both message intensity (Hamilton & Stewart, 1993), and emotions (Lecheler, Bos & Vliegenthart, 2015) can work as underlying mechanisms for framing effects.

The hypothesis that populist metaphors and hyperboles can be effective through affect is also supported by theories of persuasion and media-effects research. For instance, Meyers-Levy and Malaviya (1999) presented an updated model of the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) in which experiential processing (the notion that judgments can be based on process-generated sensations or experiences), is added as an important precursor to persuasion. Other research showed that emotions and affect add to persuasion in general (Konijn, 2008; Nabi, 2009), and specifically to the realism perceived in media messages, which further increased the attributed information value (Konijn, Walma van der Molen & van Nes, 2009). Rhetorical figures are likely to be processed through such an experiential route (van Mulken, van Enschot-van Dijk & Hoeken, 2005), and thus, their persuasive effects are likely to be influenced by the emotions they evoke (Konijn, 2008; Meyers-Levy & Malaviya, 1999; Nabi, 2009). This leads to our third hypothesis about the underlying mechanisms of figurative-framing effects:

*H3: The persuasive effects of figuratively framed populist statements are mediated by (a) perceived message intensity, (b) negative emotions, and (c) positive emotions.*

## *INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN VOTERS*

Although studies on populism generally emphasize the persuasive impact of populist rhetoric, populist statements typically appeal to only a part of the electorate (Bos et al., 2013; Krämer, 2014; Müller et al., 2017). The words of Dutch RWP politician Geert Wilders, for example, who compared male refugees to ‘Islamic testosterone bombs’, led to a heated public debate about the acceptability of such statements (Lucassen, 2018). While his supporters applauded Wilders, and small groups of supportive voters even disrupted city-council meetings about plans to accommodate asylum seekers, opponents highly criticized Wilders for his choice of words (Lucassen, 2018).

In general, when a political message goes against one’s beliefs (e.g., defends a political ideology opposite to that of the specific voter under consideration), this message is unlikely to be persuasive (Byrne & Hart, 2009; Meirick & Nisbett, 2011). Individuals who are faced with information that does not coincide with their worldview are likely to discredit this information in an attempt to solve the dissonance generated by this information (Festinger, 1957). Moreover, when a persuasive statement goes against a specific voter’s political ideology, or challenges this voter’s worldview, a boomerang effect can occur; the statement can steer recipient’s opinion further away from the statement (Byrne & Hart, 2009; Meirick & Nisbett, 2011). Extremely intense messages that go against the addressee’s beliefs, are likelier to backfire upon the sender than more neutral messages (Meirick & Nisbett, 2011). Thus, it seems unlikely that the persuasive effects of RWP rhetoric will hold for all voters (Meirick & Nisbett, 2011; Müller et al., 2017).

Research on the persuasive impact of RWP rhetoric suggests that its impact depends on prior convictions (Krämer, 2014; Müller et al., 2017). By highly appealing to voters’ social identity, populist rhetoric likely offers confirmation for those who identify with populist ideas, and, at the same

time, deters those who do not identify (Miller & Johnston Conover, 2015; Müller et al., 2017). Hereby, RWP rhetoric can put in motion a divergence of attitudes, where voters who disagree reject the populist's ideas even stronger, and voters who already agree will agree more strongly (Müller et al., 2017). This leads to our next hypotheses:

*H4a: For voters with a matching political affiliation, figuratively framed populist statements are more persuasive than non-figurative statements.*

*H4b: For voters with a mismatching political affiliation, figuratively framed populist statements are less persuasive than non-figurative statements.*

## METHOD

To test our hypotheses, we conducted two experiments investigating the impact of RWP metaphors and hyperboles on political persuasion. Experiment 1 and Experiment 2 used a similar design, procedure and instrumentation, but varied in terms of stimuli used, which increases the external validity and generalizability of our findings (Jackson, O'Keefe & Jacobs, 1988).

### *PARTICIPANTS*

Participants were recruited online, from a nationally representative database of a large Dutch research company. Participants who met our inclusion criteria (Dutch nationality, Dutch mother tongue, completed secondary school, eligible to vote in the Dutch elections) were redirected to one of the two online experiments. None of the participants of Experiment 1 participated in Experiment 2.

Experiment 1. A total of 460 participants completed the online survey. Forty-nine participants were discarded because they did not pass a simple reading check (i.e., could not name any relevant keywords from the

statement they read). This left 411 unique participants for analysis (230 males, 181 females,  $M_{\text{age}} = 52.53$  year,  $SD_{\text{age}} = 13.63$ , range = 19-71 years).

Experiment 2. A total of 456 participants completed the online survey. Forty-nine participants did not pass the reading check This left 407 unique participants for analysis (248 males, 159 females,  $M_{\text{age}} = 52.00$ , year,  $SD_{\text{age}} = 12.63$ , range = 19-71 years). In both experiments, participants were evenly distributed across experimental conditions regarding age, gender, education level, and political affiliation on the left-right spectrum<sup>13</sup>.

### *DESIGN AND STIMULUS MATERIALS*

Both experiments had a 2 (populist metaphor: present, absent)  $\times$  2 (populist hyperbole: present, absent) between-subjects design. Participants read a short populist statement that was supposedly made by an anonymous Dutch politician. The fictitious statement comprised a policy proposal to reduce the influx of (economic) refugees into the Netherlands. We chose this topic, because a strong anti-immigration focus is what typically characterizes RWPPs (Bos & Brants, 2014; de Cleen, 2017). Variations of the populist statements for the two experiments were created for this study, but were based on actual Dutch public discourse in news media.

Experiment 1. Participants were exposed to a short statement in which a politician gave a negative evaluation of refugees, presenting the argument that many refugees come to the Netherlands solely for economic reasons. The populist metaphors were based on a comparison between economic refugees and fortune seekers (Trouw, 2015), and contained metaphorical references to welfare benefits as ‘a pot of gold’ and to the Netherlands as ‘the land of milk and honey’. In the condition with populist hyperboles, exaggerations like ‘everyone knows that’ and ‘ultra-strict

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<sup>13</sup> Experiment 1: age,  $F(3,407) = .79$ ,  $p = .50$ , gender,  $\chi^2(3) = 2.99$ ,  $p = .39$ , education,  $\chi^2(15) = 9.37$ ,  $p = .86$ , and political affiliation on the left-right spectrum,  $F(3,407) = .43$ ,  $p = .73$ . Experiment 2: age,  $F(3,403) = .63$ ,  $p = .60$ , gender,  $\chi^2(3) = 2.05$ ,  $p = .56$ , education,  $\chi^2(15) = 7.77$ , and political affiliation,  $F(3,403) = .88$ ,  $p = .45$ .

asylum policy' were used. The condition with metaphors and hyperboles included combinations like 'the gigantic pot of pure gold' and 'the promised land'.

Experiment 2. Participants were presented with a short statement in which a politician argued that stricter asylum policies are needed to prevent economic refugees from disadvantaging the Netherlands. The populist metaphors were based on a metaphorical comparison between economic refugees and thieves (RTL Nieuws, 2015), and contained metaphorical references to economic refugees as 'a gang of asylum seekers' and to the costs of sheltering refugees as 'our country has been robbed'. In the condition with populist hyperboles, exaggerations like 'incredibly disadvantaged' and 'by all means necessary' were used. The condition with populist metaphors and hyperboles contained combined expressions like 'our country has been plundered' and 'an organized gang of asylum seekers'.

To check whether our manipulations were successful, and to verify that – with the exception of the target metaphors and hyperboles – the statements did not contain any other metaphors or hyperboles, we analyzed our statements with established and reliable linguistic procedures for metaphor and hyperbole identification (MIPVU: Metaphor Identification Procedure Vrije Universiteit; Steen et al., 2010; HIP: Hyperbole Identification Procedure; Burgers, Brugman et al., 2016).

Not all metaphors are the same, and not all metaphors are processed in a similar way (Bowdle & Gentner, 2005). Metaphors can be processed in two ways, either by comparison or by categorization, and it is argued that a metaphor needs to be processed by comparison in order to be able to shift a recipient's perspective (Bougher 2012; Steen, 2011). This means that the recipient needs to actively compare source and target to get to the metaphor's intended meaning (Steen, 2011). Therefore, we conducted a pretest, in which we tested whether our metaphors were likely processed by comparison or not. The pretest ( $N = 82$  participants, 63.2% female,  $M_{age} =$

30.65,  $SD_{age} = 13.26$ , range = 18 – 61) showed that metaphorically framed statements evoked images related to the source domain of the metaphors, which indicates that these metaphors were likely processed by comparison. Moreover, since many hyperboles have become so ingrained in our everyday language that they go unnoticed and may lose their impact (Claridge, 2010; McCarthy & Carter, 2004), we tested whether our hyperbolic stimuli affected perceived message intensity. Based on the outcome of the pretest, we optimized the stimulus materials. An overview of the stimuli (original Dutch statements and English translations), and a complete report of the pretest is presented in Appendix 5 and can be retrieved from Digital Appendix A ([bit.ly/2Honuxx](http://bit.ly/2Honuxx)).

## MEASURES

The same measurements were used for both experiments. Political persuasion was operationalized through three constructs: (1) policy attitude, (2) evaluation of the politician and (3) likelihood to vote for the politician.

*Policy attitude* was tapped by asking participants to indicate on 7-point semantic differential scales (based on Hartman, 2012) to which extent they thought the proposed policy would be (1) unfavorable or favorable for the Netherlands, (2) unnecessary or necessary for the Netherlands, (3) negative or positive for the Netherlands, (4) a bad or a good idea for the Netherlands ( $\alpha_{exp1} = .97$ ,  $\alpha_{exp2} = .97$ ).

*Evaluation of the politician* was measured with a feelings thermometer on which participants could indicate how unfavorable (cold) or favorable (warm) (sliding scale, 0-100) they felt about the politician (Ditonto, Lau, & Sears, 2013).

*Likelihood to vote for the politician* was tapped by asking participants with 7-point rating scales how likely they would (1) vote for the politician, (2) vote for the politician if elections were held today (Fernandes, 2013;  $r_{exp1} = .99$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $r_{exp2} = .99$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

*Perceived message intensity* was measured by asking participants to rate on 7-point semantic differential scales to which extent they perceived the statement as forceful (not forceful – very forceful), extreme (not extreme – very extreme), intense (not intense – very intense), and exaggerated (not exaggerated – very exaggerated). The first three items were derived from the perceived language intensity scale (Hamilton & Stewart, 1993). Since hyperbole can be defined as an expression that is more extreme than justified given its ontological referent (Burgers, Konijn & Steen, 2016), we added a fourth item that asked to which degree participants felt the statement to be exaggerated. Scale-reliability was low for the four items ( $\alpha_{\text{exp1}} = .56$ ,  $\alpha_{\text{exp2}} = .61$ ). After removing the item ‘forceful’, reliability was sufficient ( $\alpha_{\text{exp1}} = .70$ ,  $\alpha_{\text{exp2}} = .74$ ; Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

*Emotions* were measured with 7 items on 7-point slider scales. Participants rated to which extent they felt the following discrete emotions when reading the statement: anger, fear, contentment, enthusiasm, hope, compassion, and sadness (Lecheler, et al., 2015).

*Perceived novelty* and *perceived aptness* were measured as control variables. Some scholars proposed that aptness is a prerequisite for the ‘success’ of a metaphorical frame (Steen, 2011; Thibodeau & Durgin, 2011). Aptness reflects the degree to which a metaphor captures important topic features; a figurative comparison can be perceived as apt or not, depending on the quality of the cross-domain mapping (Pierce & Chiappe, 2008; Thibodeau & Durgin, 2011). Moreover, recipients can perceive a hyperbolic statement as apt or not, depending on the extent to which they feel the exaggeration fits the context (Claridge, 2010; McCarthy & Carter, 2004).

Novelty has been depicted as a success factor of figurative language as well (McCarthy & Carter, 2004; Steen, 2011). Novel metaphors (in contrast to conventional ones) are likely to be processed by comparison; recipients have to actively compare source and target domain to get to the metaphor’s intended meaning (Bowdle & Gentner, 2005). Novel metaphors, and hyperboles, attract attention and provide recipients with new issue



viewpoints (McCarthy & Carter, 2004; Steen, 2011). Therefore, we measured perceived novelty and aptness by asking participants to rate how novel (1 = very novel – 7 = very conventional) and how apt (1 = very inappropriate – 7 = very appropriate) they perceived the choice of words of the politician (Pierce & Chiappe, 2008). For our analyses, we recoded the scores of novelty such that a higher score indicates that a metaphor was perceived as more novel.

*Demographic variables.* We asked participants for their age, gender, education level, and political affiliation in commonly accepted ways. Political affiliation was measured in two ways: (1) by asking participants to indicate their political position on the left-right spectrum on a slider-scale from 0 (far left) to 10 (far right), and (2) by asking participants to select their favorite Dutch political party from a list with all 13 political parties receiving at least one seat in the Dutch House of Representatives in the 2017 general elections.<sup>14</sup>

## PROCEDURE

Data were collected online through Qualtrics ([www.qualtrics.com](http://www.qualtrics.com)) via a large Dutch research company. After computer-based random assignment to one of the four experimental conditions, participants read a short introduction and were asked for their informed consent. Next, they were presented with a short populist statement (see materials). After reading the statement, they were asked to describe what images the political statement evoked, including a reading check. When the answer indicated that the text was not read properly (e.g., when a participant could not mention the general topic or keywords of the text), we discarded this participant from

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<sup>14</sup> In both experiments, we also measured perceived political persuasion by asking participants to evaluate how they thought others would rate the items of policy attitude, evaluation of the politician and likelihood to vote (Golan, Banning & Lundy, 2008). We also asked participants to evaluate the statements' tone of voice with an open-ended question, and to indicate the approximate political position of the politician. These items fall outside the scope of this study, and are not include in our analyses. No further variables were measured.

our analyses. Then, we asked participants how intense they perceived the statement to be, what their opinion about the tone of voice was, and to what extent the text affected certain emotions. Thereafter, we measured the control variables of novelty and aptness and asked several demographic questions. Finally, participants were thanked for participation and were redirected to the research company's website to collect their reward.

## RESULTS

Experiments 1 and 2 differed in terms of stimuli. However, the experiments employed similar designs and measurements and tested the same hypotheses. Therefore, data of Experiment 1 and Experiment 2 were analyzed in a similar way. Results are presented per hypothesis: for each analysis, we provide the results of Experiment 1 and Experiment 2 successively. After hypotheses testing, we compared the effect sizes of both experiments by checking for similarity in their direction, magnitude, and confidence intervals. Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1. Appendix 6 presents a correlation matrix for both experiments (the correlation matrix can also be retrieved from Digital Appendix B, [bit.ly/2Honusx](https://bit.ly/2Honusx)).

Table 1  
*Mean Scores (and Standard Deviations) of Message Intensity, Emotions, Novelty, Aptness, Policy Attitude, Evaluation of the Politician, and Likelihood to Vote*

Experiment 1 (N = 411)	No metaphor			Metaphor		
	No hyperbole	Hyperbole	No hyperbole	No hyperbole	Hyperbole	Hyperbole
Message intensity	3.74 (1.18)	4.46 (1.33)	4.31 (1.41)	4.84 (1.46)		
Negative emotions						
Fear	2.77 (1.45)	2.94 (1.50)	3.08 (1.76)	3.64 (1.77)		
Anger	3.79 (1.76)	3.70 (1.89)	3.91 (2.03)	4.32 (1.93)		
Sadness	2.91 (1.70)	3.32 (1.91)	3.48 (1.91)	3.44 (1.74)		
Positive emotions						
Enthusiasm	3.86 (1.92)	3.33 (1.88)	3.75 (1.98)	3.36 (1.97)		
Hope	4.12 (1.78)	3.58 (1.89)	3.66 (1.94)	3.40 (1.89)		
Contentment	4.27 (1.84)	3.46 (1.98)	3.74 (2.00)	3.30 (1.92)		
Other emotions						
Compassion	3.53 (1.73)	4.46 (1.33)	4.31 (1.41)	4.84 (1.46)		
Control variables						
Novelty	3.23 (1.76)	3.86 (1.84)	3.56 (2.07)	3.89 (2.03)		
Aptness	4.74 (1.93)	3.90 (2.10)	3.71 (1.77)	3.83 (2.20)		
Political persuasion						
Policy attitude	5.37 (1.62)	4.90 (1.72)	5.06 (1.92)	4.73 (1.95)		
Evaluation of the politician	64.61 (27.19)	53.60 (28.98)	55.82 (32.42)	49.04 (32.54)		
Likelihood to vote	4.38 (1.96)	3.59 (2.17)	3.73 (2.14)	3.41 (2.23)		

Experiment 2 (N = 407)	No metaphor		Metaphor	
	No hyperbole	Hyperbole	No hyperbole	Hyperbole
Message intensity	4.24 (1.32)	4.40 (1.37)	5.05 (1.36)	5.13 (1.39)
Negative emotions				
Fear	3.24 (1.71)	3.16 (1.62)	3.66 (1.72)	3.55 (1.84)
Anger	4.04 (1.78)	4.19 (1.77)	4.65 (1.83)	4.56 (1.96)
Sadness	3.62 (1.78)	3.41 (1.83)	4.13 (1.73)	3.91 (1.93)
Positive emotions				
Enthusiasm	3.35 (1.80)	3.44 (1.93)	3.01 (1.80)	2.88 (1.92)
Hope	3.52 (1.82)	3.39 (1.94)	3.00 (1.79)	2.85 (1.87)
Contentment	3.47 (1.76)	3.46 (1.87)	3.19 (1.88)	2.82 (1.92)
Other emotions				
Compassion	3.45 (1.65)	3.10 (1.58)	3.37 (1.78)	2.97 (1.83)
Control variables				
Novelty	3.58 (1.70)	3.85 (1.93)	5.18 (1.69)	4.84 (1.97)
Aptness	3.95 (1.97)	3.88 (2.07)	2.90 (1.92)	3.12 (2.17)
Political persuasion				
Policy attitude	4.79 (1.94)	4.47 (2.00)	4.49 (1.93)	4.24 (2.11)
Evaluation of the politician	53.97 (30.31)	50.46 (32.49)	42.83 (32.94)	40.04 (35.27)
Likelihood to vote	3.56 (2.09)	3.41 (2.16)	3.17 (2.12)	2.94 (2.32)

*Note.* Except for attitude towards the politician, which was measured on a scale from 0 – 100, all variables were measured on 7-point scales; higher scores indicate higher intensity, more negative emotions, more positive emotions, higher perceived novelty, higher perceived aptness, a more positive attitude towards the proposed policy, a more positive attitude towards the politician, and a higher likelihood to vote for the politician.

## HYPOTHESES TESTING

First, we tested whether populist metaphor and hyperbole affected message intensity, negative emotions, and positive emotions (H1). For each experiment, we used a 2 x 2 ANOVA to test whether populist metaphor and hyperbole affected message intensity. Consequently, we used a 2 x 2 MANOVA with populist metaphor and populist hyperbole as independent variables and emotions as dependent variables. The different emotions (negative emotions: anger, fear, sadness; positive emotions: enthusiasm, hope, contentment; other: compassion)<sup>15</sup> were treated as discrete variables (cf. Lecheler et al., 2015). For the purpose of readability, we present the statistical results of our analyses in Table 2.

### Experiment 1

*Message intensity.* Both populist metaphor, and hyperbole, increased message intensity. No interactions between populist metaphor and hyperbole were found.

*Emotions.* The MANOVA showed overall main effects of populist metaphor and populist hyperbole on emotions. Subsequent univariate analyses showed that populist metaphor increased the negative emotions of anger, fear, and sadness, but did not affect the positive emotions of contentment, enthusiasm and hope, or compassion. Populist hyperbole increased the negative emotion of fear, decreased the positive emotions of contentment, enthusiasm, and hope, and did not affect other emotions. No interactions between populist metaphor and hyperbole were found.

Results were in line with H1: message intensity and negative emotions (fear, anger, sadness) were increased by both metaphor and hyperbole, and positive emotions were decreased by hyperbole.

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<sup>15</sup> Factor analyses supported dividing emotions into two factors: negative and positive emotions. Only compassion did not fit either of these factors. See Appendix 7 or digital Appendix C ([bit.ly/2Honusx](http://bit.ly/2Honusx)) for a full report.

## Experiment 2

*Message intensity.* Populist metaphor increased message intensity. No effect of hyperbole, and no interaction effect between metaphor and hyperbole was found.

*Emotions.* We found an overall main effect of populist metaphor on emotions. Subsequent univariate analyses showed that metaphor increased the negative emotions of anger, fear, and sadness, and decreased the positive emotions of contentment, enthusiasm, and hope. Compassion was not affected. No effects of hyperbole, and no interaction effect between metaphor and hyperbole on emotions were found.

For populist metaphor, results were again in line with H1: populist metaphors increased message intensity and negative emotions (fear, anger, sadness), and decreased positive emotions (enthusiasm, hope, contentment). However, H1 is not supported for populist hyperboles which had no effect on message intensity and emotions (positive or negative). In sum, most results supported the direction of H1. Both metaphor and hyperbole can add to the emotive and intense character of RWP statements.

Next, we tested our hypothesis concerning the main effects of figuratively framed populist statements on political persuasion (H2). A 2 (populist metaphor: present, absent)  $\times$  2 (populist hyperbole: present, absent) MANOVA with the dependent variables policy attitude, evaluation of the politician, and likelihood to vote for the politician was conducted.

Experiment 1. We found no effect of populist metaphor on political persuasion, Pillai's Trace = .014,  $F(3,405) = 1.95$ ,  $p = .12$ , whereas populist hyperbole did affect political persuasion, Pillai's Trace = .02,  $F(3,405) = 3.02$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .02$ . Subsequent univariate analyses showed that populist hyperbole negatively affected policy attitude,  $F(1, 407) = 4.96$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .01$ , evaluation of the politician,  $F(1, 407) = 8.81$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .02$ , and

likelihood to vote for that politician,  $F(1, 407) = 6.97, p < .01, \eta_p^2 = .02$ . No interaction effect between metaphor and hyperbole was found, Pillai's Trace = .01,  $F(3,405) = .67, p = .57$ .

Experiment 2. In contrast to Experiment 1, we found an effect of populist metaphor on political persuasion, Pillai's Trace = .05,  $F(3,401) = 6.42, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .05$ . Separate univariate analyses revealed negative effects of metaphor on evaluation of the politician,  $F(1, 403) = 10.92, p < .01, \eta_p^2 = .03$ , and likelihood to vote for the politician,  $F(1, 403) = 3.94, p < .05, \eta_p^2 = .01$ , but not on policy attitude,  $F(1, 403) = 1.87, p = .17$ . We found no effect of populist hyperbole on political persuasion, Pillai's Trace = .01,  $F(3,401) = .80, p = .50$ , and no interaction effect between metaphor and hyperbole, Pillai's Trace = .001,  $F(3,401) = .16, p = .92$ .

For both experiments, we found that reading a figuratively framed populist statement (vs. a non-figurative statement) made the general voter less positive about the populist politician and the proposed policy. These results contradict H2, which predicted figuratively framed populist statements to be more persuasive than non-figurative populist statements. However, as outlined in our introduction, processing populist messages apparently is less straightforward than sometimes assumed, which is further examined below.

Table 2

Results of 2 (Metaphor: Present, Absent) x 2 (Hyperbole: Present, Absent) Analyses of Variance with the Distinct Emotions (H1), Message Intensity (H1), and the Control Variables Novelty and Aptness (Additional Analyses) as Dependent Variables

		Experiment 1				Experiment 2				
H1 Testing		DV	df	Error df	F	p	df	Error df	F	p
Metaphor	Message Intensity		1	407	12.87	<.001***	1	403	32.72	<.001***
	Emotions (MANOVA)		7	401	2.85	<.01**	7	397	2.38	<.05*
	Fear				9.71	<.01**			5.56	<.05*
	Anger				3.84	.05*			7.35	<.01**
	Sadness				3.79	.05*			7.82	<.01**
	Enthusiasm	1	407		.04	.83	1	403	5.95	<.05*
	Hope				2.97	.09			8.30	<.01**
	Contentment				3.33	.07			6.36	<.05*
	Compassion				2.28	.12			.37	.64
	Message Intensity		1	407	21.95	<.001***	1	403	.73	.39
Hyperbole	Emotions (MANOVA)		7	401	2.37	<.05*	7	397	1.08	.37
	Fear				5.11	<.05*				
	Anger				.76	.39				
	Sadness				1.09	.30				
	Enthusiasm	1	407		5.67	<.05*				
	Hope				4.72	<.05*				
	Contentment				10.54	<.01**				
	Compassion				.61	.44				
	Message Intensity		1	407	.58	.45	1	403	.73	.39
	Emotions (MANOVA)		7	407	1.99	.06	7	397	1.08	.37



		Experiment 1				Experiment 2			
Additional analyses testing									
IV	DV	df	Error df	F	p	df	Error df	F	p
Metaphor	Control Variables (MANOVA)	2	406	.60	.55	2	402	27.78	<.001***
	Novelty					1	403	51.37	<.001***
	Aptness							20.14	<.001***
Hyperbole	Control Variables (MANOVA)	2	406	5.38	<.01**	2	402	.07	.93
	Novelty	1	407	6.27	<.05*				
	Aptness			10.73	<.01**				
Metaphor x Hyperbole	Control Variables (MANOVA)	2	406	.34	.71	2	402	1.85	.16

\* Significant at  $p < .05$  level, \*\* significant at  $p < .01$  level, \*\*\*significant at  $p < .001$  level

## UNDERLYING MECHANISMS

We expected message intensity, negative emotions, and positive emotions to mediate the impact of figuratively framed populist statement on political persuasion (H3). Message intensity and the distinct emotions (negative, positive) correlated with all elements of political persuasion. Therefore, we carried out mediation analyses using the Process macro v3.0 for SPSS statistics (Hayes, 2017; Model 4; 5,000 bootstrap samples). For mediation to be possible, the independent variable should directly affect the proposed mediator (Hayes, 2017). We thus only conducted mediation analyses if our independent variables (populist metaphor, populist hyperbole) affected the proposed mediators. Since indirect effects were highly similar for the three constructs of political persuasion, for readability purposes, we used the composite variable ‘political persuasion’ (the mean of the standardized measures of policy attitude, evaluation of the politician and likelihood to vote;  $\alpha_{\text{exp1}} = .94$ ,  $\alpha_{\text{exp2}} = .94$ ) as dependent variable for our mediation analyses. Mediation analyses are presented in Table 3. Results of mediation analyses with the distinct constructs of political persuasion as dependent variables are presented in Appendix 8 and can be retrieved from Digital Appendix D ([bit.ly/2Honusx](https://bit.ly/2Honusx)).

Experiment 1. Mediation analysis showed significant indirect negative effects of populist metaphor on political persuasion, via perceived message intensity and negative emotions (fear and sadness). Moreover, mediation analysis showed a significant indirect negative effect of populist hyperbole on political persuasion, via message intensity, negative emotions (fear), and positive emotions (enthusiasm, hope, and contentment).

Experiment 2. Mediation analysis showed significant indirect negative effects of populist metaphors on political persuasion, via perceived message intensity, via negative emotions (fear, anger, sadness), and via positive emotions (enthusiasm, hope and contentment).

Table 3  
*Partially Standardized Indirect Effects of Figuratively Framed Populist Statements on Political Persuasion via Message Intensity, Emotions, and Aptness*

Experiment 1 (N = 411)					
IV	Mediator	DV	b	SE B	95% CI
Metaphor	Message intensity		-.24	.07	[-.38, -.11]*
	Fear		-.10	.04	[-.18, -.04]*
	Anger		-.09	.05	[-.18, .002]
	Sadness		-.09	.05	[-.18, -.002]*
Hyperbole	Message intensity	Political persuasion	-.31	.07	[-.44, -.18]*
	Fear		-.08	.04	[-.15, -.01]*
	Enthusiasm		-.17	.07	[-.32, -.03]*
	Hope		-.15	.07	[-.29, -.01]*
Control variables	Contentment		-.24	.07	[-.38, -.10]*
	Aptness		-.27	.08	[-.43, -.11]*
Experiment 2 (N = 407)					
IV	Mediator	DV	b	SE B	95% CI
Metaphor	Intensity		-.40	.07	[-.53, -.26]*
	Fear		-.05	.03	[-.11, -.01]*
	Anger		-.11	.04	[-.19, -.03]*
	Sadness		-.11	.04	[-.20, -.03]*
Hyperbole	Enthusiasm	Political persuasion	-.18	.07	[-.32, -.03]*
	Hope		-.19	.06	[-.31, -.06]*
	Contentment		-.18	.07	[-.32, -.04]*
	Aptness		-.37	.08	[-.54, -.22]*

Note. Each indirect effect was tested with a distinctive mediation analysis that included one mediator at the time.

\* Significant indirect effect (confidence interval does not include zero)

As predicted (H3), effects of figuratively framed populist statements on political persuasion were mediated by message intensity, negative emotions, and positive emotions. However, where we expected, based on our theoretical review, statements that are perceived as intense and emotive to positively affect political persuasion, findings showed the reverse. For the general voter, figuratively framed populist statements were not persuasive. Rather, they pushed voters' opinion further away from the politician and the proposed policy. When figuratively framed populist statements were perceived as intense, when they increased negative emotions, or decreased positive emotions, this negatively affected voters' evaluation of the politician and the proposed policy. To test whether different voters respond differently to figuratively framed populist statements, we explored whether voter characteristics influenced figurative-framing effects.

#### *INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN VOTERS*

To test H4, which predicted political affiliation to influence the effects of figuratively framed populist statements on political persuasion, we conducted a 2 (metaphor: present, absent)  $\times$  2 (hyperbole: present, absent) MANCOVA, with voters' political position on the left-right spectrum as a covariate, and the three items of political persuasion as dependent variables. By including voters' political affiliation in the statistical model, we tested for interaction effects between our independent variables and voter differences in political affiliation. In both experiments, we found a significant main effect of political affiliation on political persuasion (Experiment 1: Pillai's Trace = .32,  $F(3,401) = 62.56$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .32$ ; Experiment 2: Pillai's Trace = .29,  $F(3,397) = 53.11$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .29$ ). In both experiments, more right-wing voters scored higher on policy attitude (Experiment 1:  $F(1,403) = 125.91$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .24$ ; Experiment 2:  $F(1,399) = 120.95$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .23$ ), evaluation of the politician (Experiment 1:  $F(1,403)$

= 186.30,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .32$ ; Experiment 2:  $F(1,399) = 156.62$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .28$ ), and likelihood to vote for the politician (Experiment 1:  $F(1,403) = 147.24$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .27$ ; Experiment 2:  $F(1,399) = 116.56$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .23$ ). However, in both experiments, we found no 2-way or 3-way interactions with political affiliation and metaphor and/or hyperbole.<sup>16</sup>

Thus, results from both experiments did not support H4: political affiliation did not moderate the persuasive impact of figuratively framed populist statements. Rather, we showed direct effects of political affiliation on political persuasion (see also Matthes & Schmuck, 2017), regardless of the figurative framing of populist statements.

#### ADDITIONAL ANALYSES

The role of perceived novelty and perceived aptness.

Two characteristics of figurative language, novelty and aptness, are argued to influence its persuasiveness (Steen, 2011, McCarthy & Carter, 2004). Therefore, we explored whether these characteristics influenced the relations between populist metaphors and hyperboles and political persuasion. See Table 1 for descriptive statistics and Table 2 for the statistical analyses. First, we tested for the direct effects of populist metaphor and hyperbole on novelty and aptness.

*Experiment 1.* A MANOVA revealed an overall effect of populist hyperbole. Hyperbole decreased perceived aptness, and increased perceived novelty. No effect of populist metaphor and no interaction effects between metaphor and hyperbole were found.

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<sup>16</sup> In both experiments, we found no significant interaction effects between metaphor and political affiliation, Experiment 1: Pillai's Trace = .01,  $F(3,401) = 1.89$ ,  $p = .13$ ; Experiment 2: Pillai's Trace = .01,  $F(3,397) = .84$ ,  $p = .47$ , between hyperbole and political affiliation, Experiment 1: Pillai's Trace = .01,  $F(3,401) = 1.00$ ,  $p = .39$ ; Experiment 2: Pillai's Trace = .02,  $F(3,397) = 2.30$ ,  $p = .08$ , or between the interaction Metaphor x Hyperbole and political affiliation, Experiment 1: Pillai's Trace = .01,  $F(3,401) = 1.82$ ,  $p = .14$ ; Experiment 2: Pillai's Trace = .01,  $F(3,397) = .91$ ,  $p = .44$ .

*Experiment 2.* A MANOVA showed an overall effect of populist metaphor. Metaphor decreased perceived aptness, and increased perceived novelty. No effect of populist hyperbole and no interaction effects between metaphor and hyperbole were found.

Next, because novelty and aptness were highly correlated with political persuasion, we conducted additional mediation analyses (Process v3.0; Hayes, 2017) to test whether novelty and aptness mediated the effects of figuratively framed populist statements on political persuasion. Indirect effects are presented in Table 3. For experiment 1, populist hyperboles had a negative indirect effect on political persuasion via perceived aptness, and for Experiment 2, populist metaphors had a similar effect. Novelty did not mediate the impact of figuratively framed populist statements on political persuasion. In all, results show that when populist rhetoric is perceived as not apt, a boomerang effect occurs in that figurative frames push voters' political opinion away from populist ideas.

#### The role of populist-party affiliation

With 13% of total votes in the 2017 national elections, Geert Wilders' Freedom Party (PVV) became the second largest political party in the Netherlands. Populist newcomer Forum for Democracy (FVD, led by Thierry Baudet) received 1.8% of total votes and won two seats in the Dutch House of Representatives. Since both PVV and FVD can be characterized as right-wing populist parties with a strong anti-immigration focus (Wodak & Krzyżanowski, 2017), we conducted additional analyses to examine how voters who support PVV or FVD respond to our stimuli. Since each experiment by itself had not enough power, we merged the data from Experiment 1 and 2, selected PVV and FVD supporters ( $N_{\text{total}} = 161$ ;  $n_{\text{exp1}} = 86$ ,  $n_{\text{exp2}} = 75$ ), and repeated our analyses conducted for the hypotheses testing above. To control for possible variations caused by differences between experiments, we used 'experiment' as a control variable.

*Emotions.* First, we tested whether populist metaphors and hyperboles affected emotions for this selection of voters. A 2 x 2 MANCOVA with the distinct emotions as dependent variables and experiment included in the statistical model as a covariate, revealed no significant effect of populist metaphor, Pillai's Trace = .08,  $F(7,147) = 1.82$ ,  $p = .09$ , no effect of populist hyperbole, Pillai's Trace = .06,  $F(7,147) = 1.38$ ,  $p = .22$ , and no interaction effect between metaphor and hyperbole, Pillai's Trace = .04,  $F(7,147) = .90$ ,  $p = .51$ . We found no effect of 'experiment', Pillai's Trace = .07,  $F(7,147) = 1.57$ ,  $p = .15$ .<sup>17</sup>

*Message intensity.* A 2 x 2 ANCOVA showed no effects on message intensity of populist metaphor,  $F(1,153) = .57$ ,  $p = .45$ , populist hyperbole,  $F(1,153) = .003$ ,  $p = .96$ , and no interaction between metaphor and hyperbole,  $F(1,157) = .14$ ,  $p = .75$ . Again, results showed no effect of 'experiment',  $F(1,157) = 1.31$ ,  $p = .26$ .<sup>18</sup>

*Political persuasion.* Next, we conducted a similar MANCOVA with the dimensions of political persuasion as dependent variables, and 'experiment' as a covariate. For right-wing populist-party supporters, figuratively framed populist statements did not affect political persuasion. No effects of populist metaphor, Pillai's Trace = .03,  $F(3,154) = 1.56$ ,  $p = .20$ , populist hyperbole Pillai's Trace = .03,  $F(3,154) = 1.49$ ,  $p = .22$ , and no interaction effects between metaphor and hyperbole, Pillai's Trace = .02,

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<sup>17</sup> Without controlling for 'experiment', the MANOVA revealed an effect of metaphor on emotions, Pillai's Trace = .14,  $F(7,151) = 3.54$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .14$ . Univariate analyses showed that metaphor affected contentment,  $F(1,157) = 5.29$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .03$ , hope,  $F(1,157) = 5.13$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .03$ , compassion,  $F(1,157) = 7.57$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .05$ . We found no effects of hyperbole, Pillai's Trace = .04,  $F(7,151) = .97$ ,  $p = .46$ , and no interaction effect of Metaphor x Hyperbole on emotions, Pillai's Trace = .05,  $F(7,151) = 1.09$ ,  $p = .38$ .

<sup>18</sup> Without controlling for 'experiment', the ANOVA only revealed an effect of metaphor on message intensity,  $F(1,157) = 4.33$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = .03$ , but not of hyperbole,  $F(1,157) = .51$ ,  $p = .47$ , or the interaction Metaphor x Hyperbole,  $F(1,157) = .74$ ,  $p = .39$ .

$F(3,154) = .86, p = .46$ , were found. Again, no effect of ‘experiment’ was found, Pillai’s Trace = .004,  $F(3,154) = .23, p = .88$ .<sup>19</sup>

A final MANCOVA was conducted to test whether figuratively framed populist statements affected perceived novelty and perceived aptness. No effects of populist metaphor, Pillai’s Trace = .02,  $F(2,155) = 1.26, p = .29$ , populist hyperbole, Pillai’s Trace = .003,  $F(2,155) = .26, p = .78$ , and no interaction effects between metaphor and hyperbole, Pillai’s Trace = .005,  $F(2,155) = .38, p = .69$ , were found. However, ‘experiment’ did affect novelty and aptness, Pillai’s Trace = .09,  $F(2,155) = 7.27, p < .01$ . Overall, the statements from Experiment 1 were perceived as less novel and more apt than the statements from Experiment 2. To be able to compare these results to the rest of the electorate, we conducted the same analyses for all voters who did not support PVV or FVD ( $N = 682$ ). These analyses showed similar findings as the hypotheses tests with all participants. A detailed report of these analyses is presented in Appendix 9 and can be retrieved from Digital Appendix E ([bit.ly/2Honusx](http://bit.ly/2Honusx)).

In all, our findings showed that, where the general voter perceived figuratively framed populist statements as more intense and (negatively) emotive than non-figurative statements, right-wing populist voters did not. Moreover, where populist metaphors and hyperboles pushed the opinion of non-populist voters away from the populist statements, they did not affect the political opinion of right-wing populist voters.

## *A COMPARISON OF EFFECT SIZES*

To draw conclusions about the persuasive impact of populist metaphor and hyperbole across experiments, we compared direct and indirect effects

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<sup>19</sup> Without controlling for ‘experiment’, the MANOVAs did not reveal any effects of type of statement on political persuasion (metaphor: Pillai’s Trace = .03,  $F(3,155) = 1.58, p = .20$ ; hyperbole: Pillai’s Trace = .03,  $F(3,155) = 1.43, p = .46$ ; interaction Metaphor x Hyperbole: Pillai’s Trace = .02,  $F(3,155) = .89, p = .45$ ), or on novelty and aptness (metaphor: Pillai’s Trace = .02,  $F(2,156) = 1.47, p = .23$ , hyperbole: Pillai’s Trace = .001,  $F(2,156) = .04, p = .96$ ; interaction Metaphor x Hyperbole: Pillai’s Trace = .004,  $F(2,156) = .29, p = .75$ ).



of both experiments. Table 4 presents an overview of the effect sizes (and their confidence intervals) of all direct effects of populist metaphor and hyperbole (for the whole population). Table 3 shows the partially standardized indirect effects (and their confidence intervals), which are considered to be a decent measure to compare the magnitude of mediation effects (Hayes, 2017). Across experiments, all direct and indirect effects were in the same direction, and the vast majority of effects must be interpreted as small.<sup>20</sup> Except for two effect sizes<sup>21</sup>, all confidence intervals overlap, which indicates that effects are similar for both experiments.

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<sup>20</sup> Following Fritz, Morris and Richler (2012), we interpreted effects  $<.01$  as small,  $<.06$  as medium, and  $>.14$  as large.

<sup>21</sup> Metaphor had a stronger effect on novelty in Experiment 2 than in Experiment 1, hyperbole had a stronger effect on message intensity in Experiment 1 than in Experiment 2.

Table 4  
*Overview of the Effect Sizes and Their Confidence Intervals of the Direct Effects for Both Experiments*

IV	DV	Experiment 1 (N = 411)		Experiment 2 (N = 407)	
		$\eta_p^2$	90% CI	$\eta_p^2$	90% CI
Message intensity		.05***	[.009, .063]	.08***	[.039, .118]
	Fear	.02**	[.005, .052]	.01*	[.001, .038]
	Anger	.01*	[.00, .031]	.02**	[.003, .044]
	Sadness	.01*	[.00, .030]	.02**	[.003, .046]
Positive emotions	Enthusiasm	<.01	[.00, .006]	.02*	[.001, .039]
	Hope	.01	[.00, .027]	.02**	[.004, .048]
	Contentment	.01	[.00, .028]	.02*	[.002, .041]
Other emotions	Compassion	.01	[.00, .024]	<.01	[.00, .012]
	Policy attitude	.01	[.00, .022]	<.01	[.00, .022]
Political Persuasion	Evaluation of the politician	.01*	[.001, .035]	.03**	[.007, .057]
	Likelihood to vote	.01*	[.0004, .031]	.01*	[.0005, .031]
Control variables	Novelty	<.01	[.00, .017]	.11***	[.068, .162]
	Aptness	<.01	[.00, .018]	.05***	[.019, .085]

		Experiment 1 (N = 411)		Experiment 2 (N = 407)	
IV	DV	$\eta_p^2$	90% CI	$\eta_p^2$	90% CI
	Message intensity	.05***	[.022, .089]	<.01	[.00, .015]
	Fear	.01	[.001, .036]	<.01	[.00, .011]
	Negative emotions	<.01	[.000, .015]	<.01	[.00, .027]
	Anger	<.01	[.000, .017]	<.01	[.00, .019]
	Sadness	<.01	[.001, .038]	<.01	[.00, .002]
	Positive emotions	.01*	[.001, .035]	<.01	[.00, .014]
	Hope	.01*	[.006, .055]	<.01	[.00, .017]
	Contentment	.03**	[.00, .014]	<.01	[.001, .035]
	Other emotions	<.01	[.001, .035]	.01*	[.00, .023]
	Compassion	.01*	[.004, .049]	<.01	[.00, .017]
	Policy attitude	.02**	[.002, .043]	<.01	[.00, .015]
	Evaluation of the politician	.02**	[.002, .040]	<.01	[.00, .006]
	Likelihood to vote	.02**	[.006, .056]	<.01	[.00, .009]
	Novelty	.02*			
	Aptness	.03**			

*Note.* Partial eta squared ( $\eta_p^2$ ) cannot drop below zero. Therefore, the hypothesis test is one-sided and we should examine  $100(1-2\alpha)\% = 90\%$  confidence intervals (following Steiger, 2004). Confidence intervals for partial eta squared were calculated with the R package MBESS (Kelley, 2018).

\* Significant at  $p < .05$  level, \*\* significant at  $p < .01$  level, \*\*\*significant at  $p < .001$  level

## CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The aim of the current research was to explore how figuratively framed populist statements affect voters, and how voter characteristics moderate these effects. We tested whether metaphor, hyperbole, and their combinations accounted for the typically intense and emotive character of populist rhetoric, and whether a voter's political affiliation influenced its persuasive impact. Our results showed that RWPP voters responded differently to figuratively framed populist statements than other voters.

In line with H1, we found that, for the voter population as a whole, figuratively framed populist statements were perceived as more intense and emotive than non-figurative frames. As expected, both populist metaphors and hyperboles increased the intensity of populist statements, and added to their emotive force. However, for voters who indicated to support an RWPP, this worked differently: figuratively framed populist statements were not perceived as more intense and emotive than non-figurative statements. Moreover, RWPP voters, in contrast to other voters, perceived populist metaphors and hyperboles as conventional and appropriate to use in the immigration debate. When people are repeatedly exposed to an intense and emotive stimulus, they can become desensitized: the stimulus may then lose its intense and emotive force (Tryon, 2005). Hence, it might be that these processes of habituation and desensitization specifically hold for RWPP voters; they are likely regularly exposed to, and possibly make frequent use of, typically populist metaphors and hyperboles (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009). Thus, for them, in contrast to other voters, populist rhetoric seems part of their common repertoire.

Contrary to our predictions (H2), figuratively framed populist statements were not more persuasive than non-figurative statements. In fact, populist metaphors and hyperboles pushed the political opinion of the general voter away from populist ideas. These boomerang effects were mediated by message intensity and emotions, which is in line with H3.

However, contrary to our expectations, figuratively framed statements indirectly pushed voters' political opinion further away from populist ideas. The strong individual effects of populist metaphors and hyperboles on message intensity and emotions can explain why we did not find populist statements that combine metaphor and hyperbole, to be most persuasive, as was proposed by Burgers, Konijn and Steen (2016).

Although the typically intense and emotive rhetoric employed by populist leaders is generally seen as a decisive factor for their success (Hogan & Haltinner, 2015; Wodak & Krzyżanowski, 2017), our findings do not directly support this idea. For the voter population as a whole, figuratively framed populist statements that were perceived as intense and emotive established a boomerang effect. The notion that messages that go against one's beliefs are unlikely to be persuasive (Meirick & Nisbett, 2011; Byrne & Hart, 2009), can explain our findings. Moreover, our results support the idea that when a political statement goes against one's beliefs and is perceived to be intense, the extreme character of the statement increases the chance that it will backfire upon its sender (Meirick & Nisbett, 2011).

Boomerang effects have been attributed to different types of persuasive messages, varying from health campaigns to political policy proposals (Byrne & Hart, 2009), however, to the best of our knowledge, no current studies show that figurative language can account for such boomerang effects (Boeynaems, et al., 2017). Rather, it has been argued that metaphors might be tools to circumvent boomerang effects because of their ability to increase the emotive character of a message without causing a negative reaction in the receiver (Bowers & Osborn, 1966). Our findings go against this idea, and show that, within the context of RWP rhetoric, metaphors and hyperboles can steer opinion away from the position advocated in the political message.

We hypothesized these boomerang effects to occur for voters with a mismatching political ideology (H4). However, it seems that the political

affiliation of the majority of voters deviated to such an extent from RWP ideology, that, for the voter population as a whole, populist metaphors and hyperboles caused boomerang effects. When we isolated the group of voters with an RWPP affiliation, we found that these voters responded differently to typical populist rhetoric than other voters. Although we expected these voters to be persuaded by RWP rhetoric (Krämer, 2014), their political opinion was not affected at all.

At first sight, our findings suggest that the typically intense and emotive rhetoric employed by populist politicians cannot be seen as a factor that explains their success. However, by pushing the opinion of voters with opposing ideas farther away from their own ideas, populist leaders broaden the gap between populist voters and other voters, which might indirectly benefit populist success (Krämer, 2014; Müller et al., 2017). Voters who feel offended by the intense and emotive rhetoric that goes against their beliefs (Müller et al., 2017) are likely to express themselves against the RWPP and its constituency (Miller & Johnston Conover, 2015). When RWPP voters, in turn, feel that their in-group, their group leader, and/or their shared ideology are threatened, their party identification might be strengthened (Westfall, Van Boven, Chambers & Judd, 2015). Moreover, when these voters perceive a greater polarization between their in-group of right-wing populist voters and the out-group of other voters, they are more likely to engage in all forms of political action, including voting for their favorite politician (Miller & Johnston Conover, 2015; Westfall et al., 2015).

#### *LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH*

This research focused on figurative-framing effects in the context of right-wing populism. Therefore, our findings are limited to this specific context. We presented participants with a concrete, highly debated, and politically charged issue (Musolff, 2017), and voters who sympathize with refugees might have felt offended by the extreme and negative language

that was used (Müller et al., 2017). Our results confirm that RWP rhetoric typically appeals to the negative emotions of anger and fear (Hameleers et al., 2017). However, metaphors and hyperboles might spark positive emotions as well, for example, when they are used to create political frames with a positive valence (Lecheler et al., 2015), or when they are used in a non-political context, like advertising (van Mulken et al., 2005). Such positive emotions can mediate figurative-framing effects in different ways (Lecheler et al., 2015). Future research should explore, for different political issues and within different contexts, how metaphor and hyperbole affect different positive and negative emotions, and to what extent these emotions mediate figurative-framing effects.

We aimed to isolate the effects of populist metaphor and hyperbole on emotions, perceived message intensity, and political persuasion. Therefore, we controlled for the influence of source by using fictitious stimuli from anonymous politicians. However, since party-identification can play an important role in shaping and reinforcing political attitudes (Miller & Johnston Conover, 2014), future research could explore if, and how, source can influence figurative-framing effects, for example by attributing identical political statements to different, known, politicians or political parties.

In our experiments, populist metaphors and hyperboles did not affect RWPP voters. It might be that, for these voters, populist rhetoric resonates with, rather than steers, existing political opinion. While the current study tested for the causal effects of populist message characteristics on political attitudes, future research can explore a reverse relation and examine if populist rhetoric attracts a specific group of voters. Such a relation was suggested by recent cross-sectional studies that did not find increased anti-immigration attitudes in response to the rise of RWPPs in Europe (Bohman & Hjerm, 2016; Berning & Schlueter, 2016), and argued that anti-immigrant attitudes precipitate rather than follow voters' preference for RWPPs (Berning & Schlueter, 2016). These cross-sectional studies, however, cannot

claim causal effects and more experimental research is needed to further unravel the (causal) relations between the use of typical RWP rhetoric and support for RWPPs.

The majority of the effects we report can be classified as “small” (Fritz et al., 2012). This seems to contradict studies that describe the persuasive impact of figurative frames as strong, for example by claiming that extended metaphors are the “homeruns of persuasion” (Thibodeau, 2016). Such claims, however, are primarily based on the criterion of significant p-values, and, by refraining from reporting and interpreting effect sizes, too far-reaching conclusions are easily drawn (Cumming, 2014). Our findings suggest that readers should draw more cautious conclusions about the impact of figurative language in a political context.

To conclude, we showed that RWPP voters respond differently to figuratively framed RWP statements than other voters. Contrary to current theories (Bos et al., 2013; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007), populist rhetorical figures did not increase direct support for populist politicians among voters with a matching political ideology. Among voters with a mismatching political ideology, we found boomerang effects, which were hitherto not attributed to the use of metaphors and hyperboles. Our findings do not necessarily indicate that using populist metaphors and hyperboles is without effect. Rather, populist politicians can use metaphors and hyperboles to broaden the gap between supportive and opposing voters and thereby put in motion further polarization in our society.



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