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Absolved from the neoliberal burden of responsibility: The effect of populist victim rhetoric on leader support

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Abstract

A common explanation for the success of populists is that they rhetorically shift blame for their followers' hardships toward "elites," therefore creating a culpable outgroup. However, we argue that there are two confounded effects at play here: shifting blame *toward* an outgroup and shifting blame *away* from oneself. Therefore, we theorize that above and beyond elite blame, victimization rhetoric heightens leader support because it specifically relieves followers of the pressure of having to take responsibility for negative life outcomes, especially when they subscribe to neoliberal competition ideology. Supporting our predictions, we show via a survey that victim rhetoric increases leader support while controlling for elite blame, especially among people subscribing to neoliberal competition ideology. In a subsequent experiment, we replicate the findings causally and show that the effect works by reducing perceived personal responsibility for negative life outcomes. Our results indicate that populist rhetoric involves shifting blame toward others and away from oneself. This can explain some of the conundrums that have plagued the literature, such as why elites also fall for populist rhetoric. We discuss our findings in relation to cultural differences and differences in left- versus right-wing populism.

KEYWORDS

leadership, neoliberalism, political communication, populism, victimhood

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INTRODUCTION

One of the most defining political movements worldwide in recent decades is the triumph of populism (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). Populist leaders have gained considerable support in a wide range of political spheres and areas: from several waves of mainly left-wing populism in Latin America to an abundance of far right nationalist or religious populist leaders and parties in Europe, the United States, and Asia. What unites these very different political movements is rhetoric inspired by populist ideology, according to which society is divided into two antagonistic groups: the "pure people" versus the "corrupt elite" (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 6).

Attempting to explain the success of such rhetoric, scholars have argued and tested the idea that populist leaders and their messages gain support by shifting the blame for their followers' real or perceived hardships toward "elite" outgroups (e.g., Bos et al., 2013, 2020; Busby et al., 2019; Hameleers et al., 2017; Jay et al., 2019; Mols & Jetten, 2016). This outgroup blame has been argued to create a sense of ingroup threat and a credible scapegoat for their followers, mobilizing the latter into political action (Bos et al., 2020; Hameleers et al., 2018). However, we suggest that this explanation for the effect of populist messages on support is incomplete for theoretical and empirical reasons. On a theoretical level, rhetoric that ostracizes high-status groups is a costly strategy for populists who also seek the support of high-status people. Additionally, such an explanation fails to account for the fact that large proportions of populist supporters are often high status themselves (Goerres et al., 2018; Jetten, 2019; Leviston et al., 2020; Pettigrew, 2017). Accordingly, previous empirical evidence is somewhat inconclusive (Bos et al., 2013, 2020; Busby et al., 2019; Hameleers, 2021), with some studies finding an effect of elite outgroup blame on support for the populist messenger (e.g., Bos et al., 2020) and others not (e.g., Bos et al., 2013). Thus, an open question remains about why and when populist rhetoric leads to leader support.

In summary, we theorize that by blaming the elite outgroup, populist leaders also emphasize their followers' victim role (Vollhardt, 2020). Thus, previous research has been inconclusive because it has confounded two psychological processes that are distinct, yet both inherent in the populist narrative of the struggle between the elites and the people: (1) elite outgroup blame, *shifting* blame to *others*; and (2) victimhood, *relieving oneself* from responsibility for negative life outcomes. In this study, therefore, we seek to disentangle the consequences of victimization from those of elite outgroup blame. While we argue that victimization leads to leader support (beyond elite outgroup blame), we also expect this effect to be especially strong among followers subscribing to neoliberal competition ideology, that is, the belief that free market–like competition is a natural, favorable tenet for most aspects of life and society (Bay-Cheng et al., 2015; Sandel, 2020). This is the case, we argue, because these individuals qua their ideology otherwise experience a heightened sense of personal responsibility for negative life outcomes, of which victim rhetoric absolves them (see Figure 1).

With the present article, we contribute to a growing body of literature on the psychology of populism in general (Jay et al., 2019; Obradović et al., 2020) and populist communication in particular (Bos et al., 2013, 2020; Busby et al., 2019; Hameleers et al., 2017; Mols & Jetten, 2016). By studying the effects of victimhood in political rhetoric, we show the importance of an aspect that is somewhat overlooked in the psychological studies of populism. Our results suggest that in previous research, the concept of elite outgroup blame has been confounded with victim rhetoric; thus, we help address inconclusive findings in the field. For example, our findings suggest that the reason some studies have found effects of elite outgroup blame on support for populist messengers and others have not may lie in their different emphases on, and operationalization of, victimhood as part of populist rhetoric: Previous significant results may, in reality, have been driven by victimhood instead of elite outgroup blame, whereas insignificant results may be explained by a lack of emphasis on victimhood in the studied populist rhetoric. However, because thus far victimhood has not been differentiated from elite outgroup blame,

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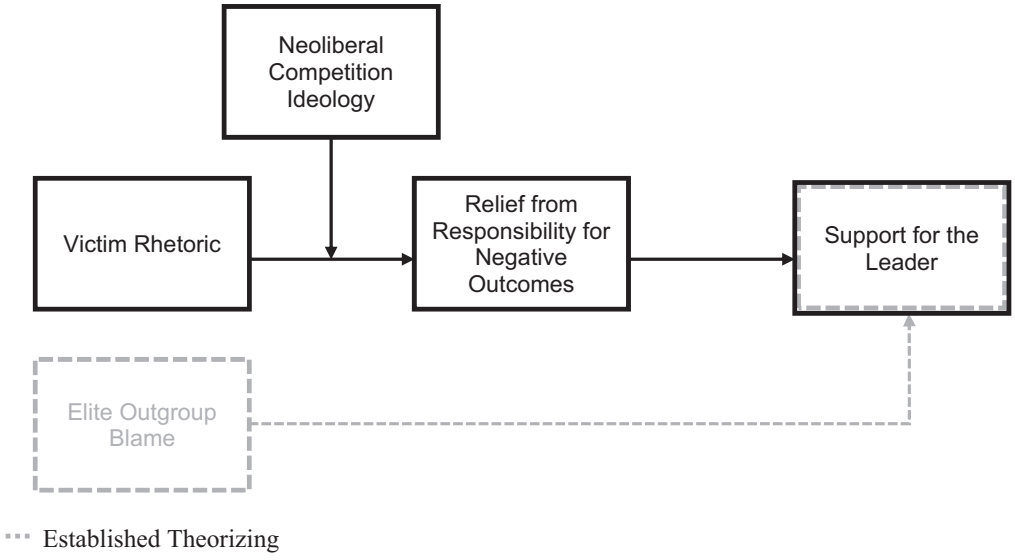


FIGURE 1 Theoretical model.

we do not know which one of the two mechanisms drove these effects. As such, the present article is the first to show not only that victimhood plays a significant role in explaining the success of populist rhetoric but also that it does so beyond the effects of scapegoating, as well as when and why it does so. The present results therefore pave the way for future research analyzing populist rhetoric by showing the importance of teasing apart the effects of victimhood (i.e., absolving oneself of responsibility) from elite outgroup blame (i.e., shifting responsibility to others). On a practical note, the present findings can help practitioners better decipher populists' communication strategies and, accordingly, help defuse the potential threat to society and democracy that populism presents.

The complex effects of populist rhetoric: Why elite outgroup blame is confounded with victimhood

Populist rhetoric can be found in countries across the world, endorsed by leaders as different as India's Narendra Modi, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey, and Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines. Especially in Europe, many populists gain support based on a far right agenda, such as the prime minister of Italy, Giorgia Meloni, or Hungary's Viktor Orbán (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). In Latin America, a region with a strong populist tradition, most populists espouse far left views, with prominent examples being Hugo Chávez in Venezuela and Bolivia's Evo Morales (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). Although *the* populist voter does not seem to exist (Rooduijn, 2018), a range of studies has examined the predictors of populist party support on the demand side (i.e., the electorate), such as authoritarianism, attitudes toward immigration (Rooduijn, 2015), or populist attitudes (Geurkink et al., 2020; Van Hauwaert & Van Kessel, 2018). Marcos-Marne (2021) showed that basic human values can predict populist support. For example, individuals valuing security are more likely to support populist parties on the right. Focusing on the supply side, many scholars contend that populist leaders' messages frame elites as an outgroup that threatens the audience's ingroup, the "ordinary people" (Bos et al., 2013, 2020; Busby et al., 2019; Hameleers et al., 2017; Jay et al., 2019; Mols & Jetten, 2016). It is speculated that portraying elites as scapegoats and enemies of the people may create a

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sense of injustice and negative emotions that populist messengers can subsequently harness for their use (e.g., Bos et al., 2020; Hameleers et al., 2017). Indeed, a range of qualitative evidence shows that the notion that elites are to blame is a central tenet in populist communication, such as that of the Flemish right-wing populist party Vlaams Blok (Flemish Block; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007), the Dutch Party for Freedom (PVV), or Australia's One Nation (Mols & Jetten, 2016).

However, there are theoretical and empirical reasons to question the notion that the success of populist rhetoric is mostly founded on elite outgroup blame. First, theoretical deliberations cast doubt on the idea that elite outgroup blame explains the success of populist rhetoric. Perhaps most importantly, blaming elites is a costly and therefore potentially harmful rhetorical strategy. Attacking elites, thus making them an outgroup, is likely to reduce the chance of receiving support from high-status individuals and everyone else who identifies with this ostracized outgroup (Haslam et al., 2020). For example, in a study by Hameleers et al. (2017), populist messages that blamed the European Union or the Dutch government for economic problems were not perceived as persuasive by participants who identified with Europe or the Netherlands, respectively. Similarly, in studies by Bos et al. (2020) and Hameleers (2021), elite outgroup blame persuaded only individuals who perceived themselves to be relatively deprived. In reality, populist movements are often significantly supported by high-status individuals, such as Germany's Alternative for Germany (AfD; Goerres et al., 2018), the Brexit movement, and the case of Donald Trump (Jetten, 2019). Second, a politician claiming to be anti-elitist is likely perceived as lacking credibility. After all, politicians, however unconventional, are usually part of the elite in the eyes of most citizens (Hameleers, 2021; Mangset et al., 2019; however, see Castanho Silva [2019] for possible exceptions). Finally, while there are some examples of successful populists who deliberately exclude major parts of the electorate (e.g., the Freedom Party of Austria [FPÖ] or the Swiss People's Party [SVP]; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017), ample research indicates that instead of excluding social groups, successful leaders are intent on and apt at crafting an identity that includes nearly all potential followers and minimizes the proportion of people excluded (Haslam et al., 2020; Reicher & Hopkins, 1996).

Underlining these theoretical arguments, empirical findings regarding the effect of elite outgroup blame on leader support are inconclusive. On the one hand, a range of studies suggests that populist messages communicating elite outgroup blame do indeed increase support for a populist messenger (Bos et al., 2020; Busby et al., 2019; Hameleers et al., 2018). Hameleers et al. (2018), for instance, showed in an experiment that participants exposed to newspaper articles blaming elites for economic problems were more likely to support the Dutch PVV. Similarly, the results of an experiment conducted in 25 European countries (Bos et al., 2020) indicated that populist messages blaming elites for economic downturns increased agreement and support, the latter among individuals who felt relatively deprived. Finally, a study by Busby et al. (2019) showed that individuals who were experimentally "nudged" into blaming outgroups for the country's problems were more likely to support populist leaders on both the left (Bernie Sanders) and the right (Donald Trump). This, however, only held for participants who were generally low in populist attitudes (Busby et al., 2019).

On the other hand, an earlier study by Bos et al. (2013) did not find an effect of elite outgroup blame on leader support. Moreover, some findings on the contingent effects of elite outgroup blame found in earlier research contradict each other. For example, Busby et al. (2019) found that populist messages were especially persuasive for individuals who were low in populist attitudes, whereas Hameleers (2021) and Bos et al. (2020) suggested the opposite. In sum, there are theoretical and empirical reasons to question the notion that the success of populist rhetoric is mostly founded on elite outgroup blame.

To address these inconsistencies, we argue that the populist narrative of the struggle between "ordinary people" and "corrupt elites" contains another important psychological mechanism that explains the success of populist rhetoric but has not yet been conceptually differentiated

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from elite outgroup blame: addressee victimhood. The idea that "the people," and, therefore, the audience for populist messages, are victims is logically entrenched within the classic populist narrative scapegoating allegedly corrupt, evil, and immoral elites. Accordingly, populist messengers and leaders often portray their audience as victims, such as "losers of modernization" (Hameleers & de Vreese, 2020, p. 261), "silent" and "forgotten" (Lamont et al., 2017, p. 154), or victims of reverse discrimination (Leviston et al., 2020). Indeed, victimhood was also present to varying degrees in most of the aforementioned studies' conceptualizations and operationalizations of elite outgroup blame, such as the excerpts from the communication by Vlaams Blok: "And so it is clear that the Flemish majority in this country is once again ignored" (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007, p. 342). Likewise, the experimental manipulation of elite blame by Bos et al. (2020, 12), a fictitious news article, contained clear elements of victimhood: "So many people in [country] are working so hard every day to have a good life. There is something profoundly wrong when these efforts do not pay off." However, because the authors did not, theoretically and empirically, separate elite outgroup blame from victimhood, it is unclear which of the two drove the mobilizing effects that were found (Bos et al., 2020). Interestingly, in an earlier experiment, Bos et al. (2013) used a different manipulation for elite outgroup blame, which did *not* increase support for the populist source of the message. Again, aspects of victimhood were present, but they were somewhat subtler, such as "the hardworking Dutchmen are not able to do without oil from the Middle East and Russia" (Bos et al., 2013). Therefore, it seems possible that the effects found in the recent study (Bos et al., 2020) were in reality driven by victimhood, which may explain the lack of significant findings in the earlier study (Bos et al., 2013). To resolve this ambiguity and advance our understanding of populist rhetoric, in the present study, we aim to disentangle the effects of elite outgroup blame from those of victim rhetoric.

Notably, populism is a non-compensatory construct (Wuttke et al., 2020): Depending on one's definition, it consists of a range of factors, such as anti-elitism, support for popular sovereignty, or a Manichean outlook on society (Wuttke et al., 2020), and a leader can only be classified as populist if they endorse *all* aspects of populism, at least to a certain extent. Accordingly, the use of anti-elite/victim rhetoric alone, as discussed throughout this article, does not qualify a political leader as populist. Consequentially, the present theoretical notions and findings regarding anti-elite and victim rhetoric relate to (practically all) populist leaders but may also apply to other nonpopulist leaders endorsing such rhetoric.

The potential positive effects of being (called) a victim

Being a victim is usually a highly aversive experience and can have severe negative psychological consequences (Ok et al., 2021). However, there is a body of evidence suggesting that victim status can also be beneficial for an individual (e.g., Gray & Wegner, 2011; Major et al., 2003; Ok et al., 2021). For example, victimhood is related to decreased responsibility for negative life outcomes and deeds, from the perspectives of both observers (Gray & Wegner, 2011) and the individual claiming victimhood (e.g., Major et al., 2003). For example, perceiving oneself as a victim of discrimination can increase psychological well-being because it reduces perceptions of personal responsibility for negative outcomes in life (Major et al., 2003).

This dynamic can be explained by moral typecasting theory (Gray & Wegner, 2009), which builds on premises from cognitive psychology postulating that humans generally perceive each other not in isolation but based on their relationships with others. These relationships are mentally represented in idealized schemas, according to which moral relationships involve at least two agents: One person, the moral agent, performs the moral act, and the other person, the moral patient, receives and/or experiences it. More importantly, Gray and Wegner (2009) show that, in the minds of most people, moral relationships are by definition asymmetrical and therefore mutually exclusive: A moral agent can *do* right and wrong but not experience

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it. At the same time, a moral patient can *experience* a moral act but not commit it. Consequently, moral patients (i.e., victims) are perceived to be much less responsible for their actions, whether they are moral or immoral (Gray & Wegner, 2009, 2011). Thus, having victim status can be beneficial in the sense that it reduces perceived responsibility for negative outcomes.

In sum, previous theorizing and empirical findings suggest that victim status can have beneficial psychological consequences because it potentially reduces perceived responsibility for negative outcomes, which may explain why victim rhetoric can have favorable consequences for a leader. However, an open question remains as to when, or with whom, this effect is likely to be present. In other words, who is especially likely to desire relief from responsibility for negative life outcomes? The answer to this question, we argue, lies in a widespread, potentially pressuring, ideology that emphasizes competition and personal responsibility.

Neoliberal ideology and its interaction with victim rhetoric

Although definitions of neoliberal ideology encompass a range of elements, such as general opposition to government interference or an idealization of free markets and rational, self-interested actors (Azevedo et al., 2019; Bay-Cheng et al., 2015), we specifically focus on an aspect that is argued to lie at the core of all of the above and, therefore, the ideology of neoliberalism: competition. Neoliberal societies are characterized by a "culture of competition" (Ehrenberg, 2010, p. 183) in which governmental regulations are minimized because they are believed to disrupt the inherent fairness of free market competition (e.g., Azevedo et al., 2019; Bröckling, 2015; Sugarman, 2015). According to neoliberal ideology, humans are entrepreneurial entities and, therefore, in constant competition with one another (Bröckling, 2015; Sandel, 2020; Scharff, 2016; Sugarman, 2015). A widespread concern regarding neoliberal ideology is that participating in allegedly fair market competition implies that both successes and losses are earned (Bay-Cheng et al., 2015; Ehrenberg, 2010; Salmela & von Scheve, 2017; Sandel, 2020). Thus, in neoliberal ideology, negative life outcomes are often unfairly ascribed to personal shortcomings. Whoever loses in an allegedly fair competition is perceived to deserve it, which leads to psychological pressure and distress (Ehrenberg, 2010; Layton, 2014; Salmela & von Scheve, 2017; Sandel, 2020; Sugarman, 2015). Building on these notions, we argue that neoliberal competition ideology plays a crucial role in the current surge of populism around the world (Salmela & von Scheve, 2017; Sandel, 2020). More specifically, we hypothesize that individuals subscribing to neoliberal competition ideology are especially likely to support a leader endorsing victim rhetoric. Being granted victim status can remove some pressure to "win the game." If the competition is unfair, one cannot be blamed for losing it. Thus, a leader who acknowledges the victimhood of individuals who subscribe to neoliberal competition ideology relieves these individuals from the burden of having to take responsibility for negative outcomes in their lives. We argue that this reduced responsibility for negative life outcomes increases their support for the leader. Addressing this dynamic empirically is vital because one could argue for a contrary hypothesis: It might appear plausible that populist rhetoric emphasizing victimhood is *less* appealing to individuals subscribing to neoliberal competition ideology because a victim identity would run counter to their ideology's imperative of making one's way in a competitive world (Bröckling, 2015). However, we argue that this is unlikely because in populist rhetoric, the victim identity is not claimed by the individuals themselves, which could conflict with the neoliberal imperative to "take responsibility" but *granted* by a political leader. This victim identity, therefore, comes at no psychological or reputational costs. Thus, building on a range of studies and notions (Becker et al., 2021; Salmela & von Scheve, 2017; Sandel, 2020) indicating that neoliberal competition ideology can have severe negative psychological consequences, we argue that individuals subscribing to neoliberal competition ideology are *especially* likely to seek the psychological relief that victimhood offers.

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Hypothesis 1. Victim rhetoric is positively related to leader support above and beyond elite outgroup blame, especially among individuals who subscribe to neoliberal competition ideology.

Hypothesis 2. The interaction effect of victim rhetoric and neoliberal competition ideology on leader support, above and beyond elite outgroup blame, is mediated by perceived responsibility for negative life outcomes.

Study overview

We designed the present research project following the "full research cycle" recommendations by Mortensen and Cialdini (2010), according to which social psychological research ideally involves (1) the recognition of a relevant and/or interesting phenomenon in the "real world," (2) the establishment of the main effect of interest in its natural environment, and (3) the validation of this effect and testing of its underlying mediation effect in a controlled, experimental setting. Accordingly, in Study 1, we first tested our base theory, Hypothesis 1, in a naturalistic environment via a field survey, in which we showed participants a real political speech by the populist leader Donald Trump. In Study 2, we aimed to establish the causality of the hypothesized effect in a controlled experimental setting while obtaining more insights into the psychological mechanism (Hypothesis 2). Moreover, Study 2 served to examine the generalizability of the findings from Study 1 by exploring anti-elite/victim rhetoric in general, beyond the specific case of Donald Trump. By constraining the mediation analysis to the controlled experimental setting in Study 2, we also followed recommendations from a range of studies arguing against mediation analysis based on cross-sectional data (Maxwell & Cole, 2007; O'Laughlin et al., 2018; Shrout, 2011). Most notably, testing the interaction rationales further corroborates the theoretical point on the mechanism at play (i.e., the mediator; Jacoby & Sassenberg, 2011; Spencer et al., 2005).

STUDY 1: FIELD STUDY

To avoid consistency effects or measurement reactivity (French & Sutton, 2010)—that is, the measurement of the moderator (neoliberal competition ideology) and control variables affecting measurements of the independent variable (victim rhetoric) and dependent variable (leader support)—we ran a time-lagged study with two time points. We were specifically concerned that questions regarding demographics, such as income, race, or education, might affect perceptions of victimhood and thus confound our results, as earlier findings by Nelson and Morrison (2005) suggest. Moreover, we expected a confounding effect of the neoliberal ideology scale on perceptions of victimhood, as the latter is generally "discouraged" by the former (Layton, 2014; Scharff, 2016). Thus, at time point 1, we measured the moderator variable neoliberal competition ideology and demographics (see below). One week later, at time point 2, the remaining variables were measured. By measuring the independent and dependent variables simultaneously, we accounted for the possibility that the effects of victim rhetoric may dissipate over time (Podsakoff et al., 2012).

Method

Participants

We recruited participants via Prolific, a UK-based online subject pool. We determined our sample size using the software G*Power 3 (Faul et al., 2007), according to which 395

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participants are required to detect small effects (Cohen's $f^2 = .02$) with a power of .80. To account for potential dropouts, we aimed to recruit a total of 415 participants, all of whom received £1.81 (approximately $2.24) as compensation. To ensure we reached the desired number of participants across both studies, we invited 602 participants for the first part. We invited all of these participants to the second part of the study a week later and stopped issuing invitations as soon as the predefined 415 participant slots were filled. We required all the participants to reside in the United States, to have a minimum age of 21 years, and to be native English speakers. Eleven participants were excluded because they failed one of two attention checks (i.e., items asking participants to click on a specific number to signal that they were paying attention to the instructions). Of the final sample of 404 participants, the mean age was 44.05 years ($SD = 14.49$), 48% identified as female (50% as male, 2% other), 82% identified as White (6% as Black, 3% as Hispanic/Latin, 9% other), 59% held a bachelor's degree or higher, 8% reported being unemployed, and the median household income category ranged from $55,001 to $65,000.

Procedure

In the first part, the participants agreed to a study consent form; then, they received a short welcome note and the neoliberal competition scale (Bay-Cheng et al., 2015). Afterward, control variables and demographics were surveyed (see below). Finally, the participants were redirected to the Prolific website. One week later, we invited the participants back for the second part of the study. After again presenting the consent form and welcome note, we showed all the participants, as general stimulus material, a video of an excerpt of a speech by former US president Donald Trump (PBS NewsHour, 2016). In the speech, recorded at the 2016 Republican National Convention in Cleveland, Ohio, Trump accepted his nomination as the party's presidential candidate. The video was 3:25 minutes long and contained, in approximately equal parts, elements of elite outgroup blame and victim rhetoric. An example of elite outgroup blame is "these [powerful special interests] have rigged our political and economic system for their exclusive benefit." An example of victim rhetoric is "every day I wake up determined to deliver a better life for the people across this nation that [sic] have been ignored, neglected, and abandoned."

Materials

Perception of victim rhetoric

To measure the perception of victim rhetoric, we adapted the Victim Signaling Scale (VSS) by Ok et al. (2021). The VSS is designed to measure expressions of victim claims made by the alleged victims. With slight adjustments, we created a scale indicating the extent to which the participants felt that, in the previously viewed speech excerpt, Donald Trump had portrayed them as victims; a sample item is "Spoke about how people who share [their] identity are criminalized by society." The scale consisted of 10 items with a Likert scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*; $\alpha = .91$).

Leader support

We measured support for the leader through four items asking the participants how likely they were to support Donald Trump in various ways. Two of the items ("share Donald Trump's

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views on social media [or elsewhere]" and "defend Donald Trump in a discussion") were based on the mobilization scale by Bos et al. (2020). To make the scale more applicable to the context of political leadership, we added two items: "make a donation for Donald Trump" and "vote for Donald Trump." All the items were measured on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (*very likely*) to 7 (*very unlikely*; $\alpha = .94$).

Neoliberal competition ideology

To measure the moderating effect of neoliberal competition ideology, we used the Natural Competition subscale of the Neoliberal Beliefs Inventory (NBI; Bay-Cheng et al., 2015). The scale consists of five items using a Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) and, according to the authors, measures the neoliberal belief that competition is beneficial, fair, and natural. A sample item is "People should be allowed to compete to ensure that the best person wins" ($\alpha = .87$).

Elite outgroup blame

We created a scale consisting of five items asking the participants to what extent, from their point of view, Donald Trump had blamed elites for negative things happening to the country and/or its citizens in the speech excerpt, using a scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 7 (*always*). An example item is "Talked about how the elites contributed to the country's troubles" ($\alpha = .97$).

Covariates

We controlled for several potentially confounding variables that are known to be related to discrimination and/or relative deprivation and are therefore likely to be related to perceived victimhood (Schmitt et al., 2014): education, age, gender, employment status, income, and ethnic group. We also controlled for political party identification and political leaning (right- versus left-wing in social and economic matters) as potential predictors of leader support in the case of Donald Trump (Pettigrew, 2017). Finally, because victimhood is strongly associated with morality (Ok et al., 2021), we also controlled for the extent to which the participants perceived the leader as portraying them as moral, thus ensuring that the found effects could be explained by victimhood and not by the possibility that participants perceived the populist leader as viewing them as especially moral beings. Notably, including or omitting these covariates did not indicate a major influence on the magnitude or pattern of effects. The effects of victim rhetoric and neoliberal competition ideology on support for the leader remained significant and in the same direction. Therefore, we will present results without these covariates but controlling for elite outgroup blame to show the effect of victim rhetoric over and above elite outgroup blame. The results including covariates are available upon request from the first author.

Results

For all the handling of the data, we used the software package Stata 15 (StataCorp., 2017). See Online Appendix A for the correlations of the study variables. To test Hypothesis 1, we ran ordinary least squares regression. Supporting our prediction, we found the predicted interaction effect of victim rhetoric and neoliberal competition ideology on support for the leader

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while controlling for elite outgroup blame. As depicted in Table 1, the interaction effect between victim rhetoric and neoliberal competition ideology was significant ($b = .48$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .09$) when controlling for elite outgroup blame. The interaction plot in Figure 2 shows that over and above elite outgroup blame, victim rhetoric was positively related to leader support, especially among participants scoring high on neoliberal competition ideology (1 *SD* above the mean, $b = 1.36$, $p < .001$, $\beta = .69$), compared to people low on this ideology (1 *SD* below the mean, $b = .41$, $p < .001$, $\beta = .21$). Thus, Hypothesis 1 is supported. Elite outgroup blame had no significant effect on leader support ($b = .03$, *ns*).

STUDY 2: EXPERIMENT

In Study 2, beyond seeking to provide causal evidence, we also tested the mediation mechanism proposed in Hypothesis 2. Additionally, we aimed to examine whether the conclusions drawn in Study 1 could be replicated and extended to a more general political context beyond the

TABLE 1 Study 1: Relationships of victim rhetoric, neoliberal competition ideology, their interaction, and elite outgroup blame with support for the leader.

Variable	*b*	*SE*	*t*	*p*	95% CI
Constant	2.16	0.08	27.63	<.001	[2.01, 2.31]
Victim rhetoric	0.89	0.08	10.93	<.001	[0.73, 1.05]
Neoliberal competition ideology	0.67	0.08	8.70	<.001	[0.52, 0.82]
Victim rhetoric × neoliberal competition ideology	0.48	0.07	6.40	<.001	[0.33, 0.62]
Elite outgroup blame	0.03	0.08	0.32	.750	[−0.13, 0.18]

Note: Total $N = 404$.
Abbreviation: CI, confidence interval.

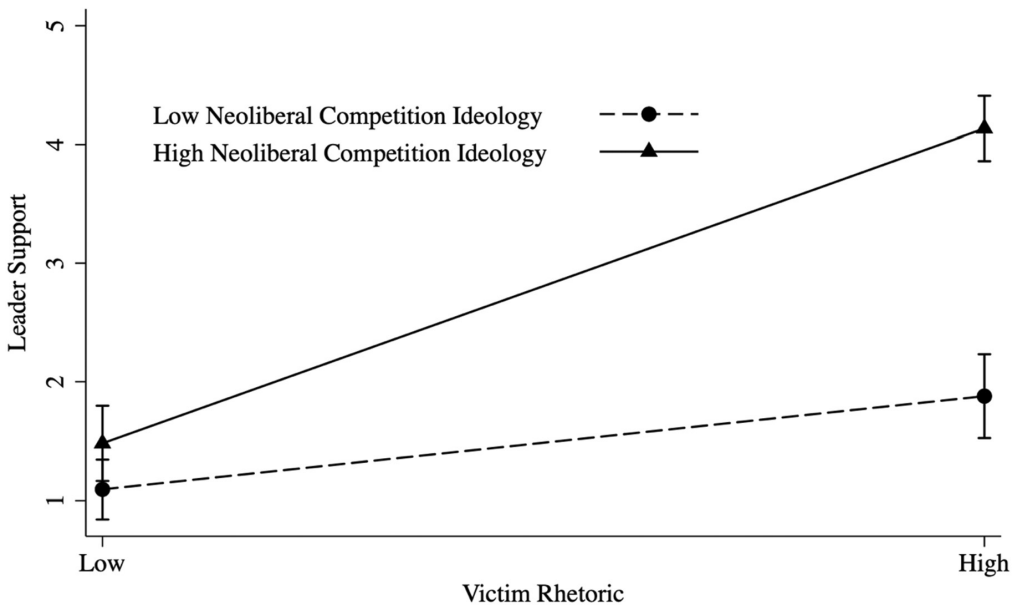


FIGURE 2 Study 1: Interaction effect of victim rhetoric and neoliberal competition ideology on support for leader, controlling for elite outgroup blame.

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specific case of Donald Trump's rhetoric. For this reason, we presented a speech by "Leader X'," with no further specification or hints of, for example, the demographics, political background, or leaning of said leader.

Method

Participants

We recruited 377 participants from Prolific who participated in the study in exchange for £1.15 (approximately $1.60). We determined our sample size by building on an extensive power analysis by Fritz and MacKinnon (2007), according to whom a minimum of 368 participants is required to detect small to medium-sized mediation effects via bias-corrected bootstrapping. Again, we required all the participants to be US residents, native English speakers, and at least 21 years old. Seven participants were excluded because they failed an attention check. Of the remaining 370 participants, the average age was 39.05 years ($SD = 12.67$); 44% identified as female (55% male, 1% other), 79% identified as White (8% as Black, 4% as Hispanic/Latin, 9% other), 67% held a bachelor's degree or higher, and the median household income category ranged from $65,001 to $75,000.

Procedure

After signing a study consent form and reading a short welcome note, the participants filled in the scale measuring the examined moderator neoliberal competition ideology. Then the participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions: (1) victim rhetoric, (2) elite outgroup blame, (3) victim rhetoric *and* elite outgroup blame, and (4) control condition (see Table 2 for an overview of the conditions). The design thus followed a 2 × 2 between-subjects design, similar to Bos et al. (2020). After the manipulation, the participants were asked to complete the scales measuring the mediator variable, perceived responsibility for negative life outcomes, followed by the dependent variable, support for the leader. Finally, some demographics were surveyed (age, gender, education, household income, ethnic group, and political party affiliation).

Materials

Victim rhetoric and elite outgroup blame manipulation

We created four vignettes that were introduced to the participants as "an excerpt of a speech by 'Leader X'," a former US political leader" (see Online Appendix B). No further information was given, and we made sure to avoid any hints about the leader's demographics or political background (e.g., right- versus left-leaning). In the victim rhetoric conditions, the leader portrayed

TABLE 2 Study 2: Overview of the conditions.

	Elite outgroup blame	
Victim rhetoric	**No**	**Yes**
No	Control condition	Elite outgroup blame condition
Yes	Victim rhetoric condition	Victim rhetoric *and* elite outgroup blame condition

Note: See Online Appendix B for details.

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the followers as victims in the sense that they were allegedly "oppressed," "attacked," "disadvantaged," and ignored. An exemplary excerpt is "I recognize how you are struggling. How you barely make ends meet. How it is nearly impossible for you to achieve your goals and dreams. And nobody seems to care. Nobody talks about this."

Building on Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017), in the two elite outgroup blame conditions, the leader emphasized that "corrupt" and "immoral elites" were to blame: for example, "They don't care about anyone but themselves. These elites are corrupt and immoral, and they only serve their own interests." In the control condition (no victim rhetoric and no elite outgroup blame), the speech was about the signing of an act regarding "America's aviation sector."

We took several measures to ensure that the four conditions were as similar as possible while at the same time aiming to maximize the credibility, and therefore external validity, of the manipulation. The structure and wording of the sentences were kept similar whenever possible. All four vignettes had a similar length (i.e., between 124 and 132 words). All the conditions closed with some neutral remarks regarding further points on the agenda.

Leader support

We measured support for the leader with the same scale as in Study 1; however, instead of "Donald Trump," the items now simply mentioned "this leader" ($\alpha = .93$).

Neoliberal competition ideology

We again used the Natural Competition subscale of the Neoliberal Beliefs Inventory (Bay-Cheng et al., 2015; $\alpha = .82$).

Perceived responsibility for life outcomes

We used four items building on the Attribution of Responsibility for Positive and Negative Outcomes Scale (Brewin & Shapiro, 1984). An example is "My misfortunes have resulted mainly from the mistakes I've made." The items were measured on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*; $\alpha = .88$).

Results

Following recommendations (Fayant et al., 2017; Hauser et al., 2018), we conducted a manipulation check with an independent sample ($n = 101$) on Prolific. By doing so, we avoided the possibility that the manipulation check itself could exert an additional manipulation or demand effect. The participants were randomly assigned to one of the four experimental conditions used in the main study. The results indicate that the manipulation was successful. Participants in the victim rhetoric condition ($M = 4.16$, $SD = .22$) perceived the leader to be portraying them as victims (measured by the victim rhetoric scale used in Study 1; Ok et al., 2021; $\alpha = .90$) to a significantly greater extent than participants in the elite outgroup blame condition ($M = 2.88$, $SD = .23$, $t(49) = 4.10$, $p < .001$) or the control condition ($M = 1.78$, $SD = .20$, $t(49) = 8.16$, $p < .001$). The manipulation of elite outgroup blame was also successful. Participants in the elite outgroup blame condition ($M = 5.98$, $SD = .18$) perceived the leader to be blaming elites (measured by the elite outgroup blame scale used in the main study; $\alpha = .98$) more than participants in the victim rhetoric condition ($M = 3.80$, $SD = .42$, $t(49) = -4.74$, $p < .001$) and participants in the

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control condition ($M = 2.46$, $SD = .35$, $t(48) = 8.98$, $p < .001$). These results thus support the validity and efficacy of the manipulation used in the present study.

Hypothesis 2 predicted that above and beyond elite outgroup blame, victim rhetoric leads to heightened leader support via reduced perceived responsibility for negative outcomes, especially for individuals who subscribe to neoliberal competition ideology. To test this, we used structural equation modeling (SEM) and calculated (1) the interaction effect of victim rhetoric and neoliberal competition ideology on perceived responsibility for negative outcomes and (2) the effect of the latter on leader support while controlling for the interaction term between victim rhetoric and neoliberal competition ideology. Moreover, in both paths, we controlled for elite outgroup blame and its interaction terms with both the independent variable (victim rhetoric) and the moderator (neoliberal competition ideology; see Online Appendix C for a table of the SEM estimates). As expected, we found a significant interaction effect of victim rhetoric and neoliberal competition ideology on perceived responsibility for negative life outcomes ($b = -.42$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .03$; see Figure 3 and Online Appendix C). A simple slope analysis showed that victim rhetoric led to a decrease in perceived responsibility for negative life outcomes only for individuals who subscribed to neoliberal competition ideology (1 *SD* above the mean, $b = -.58$, $p = .001$, $\beta = -.45$). There was no significant effect for individuals scoring low on neoliberal competition ideology (1 *SD* below the mean, $b = .27$, $p = .128$, $\beta = .21$). Moreover, in line with our predictions, perceived responsibility for negative life outcomes was negatively related to leader support ($b = -.20$, $p = .037$). To test Hypothesis 2, we calculated the significance of the index of moderated mediation (IMM), following the bootstrapping procedures recommended by Hayes (2018; 10,000 repetitions) while interpreting 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals. Supporting Hypothesis 2, the IMM was significant, $b = .08$, 95% CI [0.006, 0.22], indicating that while controlling for elite outgroup blame, the mediation effect of victim rhetoric on leader

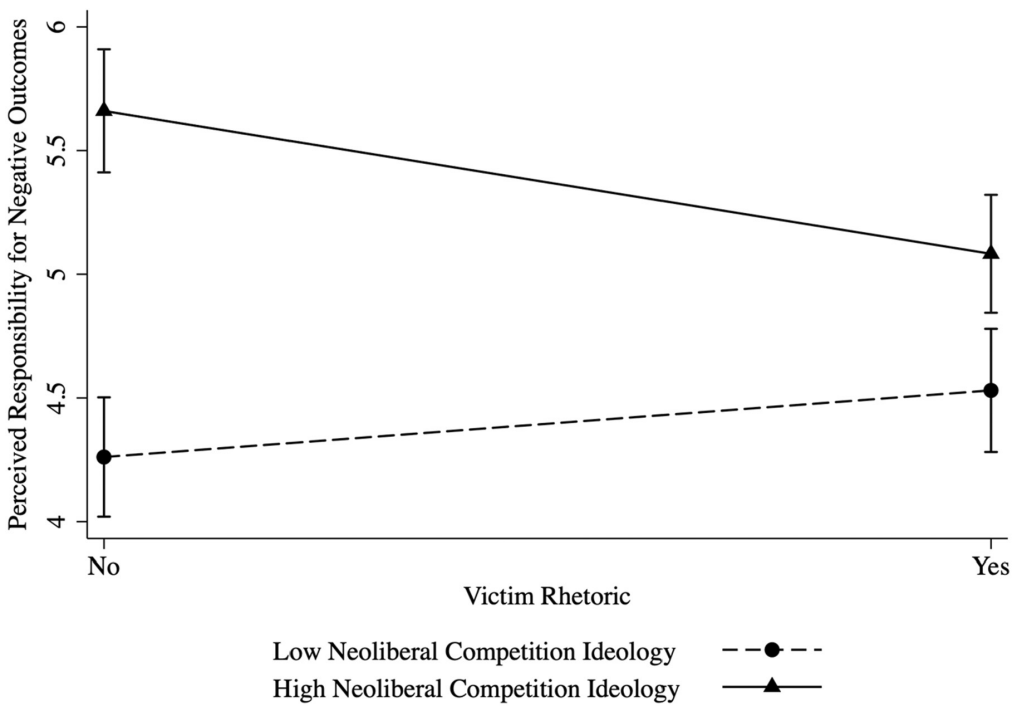


FIGURE 3 Study 2: Interaction effect of victim rhetoric and neoliberal competition ideology on perceived responsibility for negative life outcomes, controlling for elite outgroup blame.

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support via perceived responsibility for negative life outcomes was indeed moderated by and thus dependent on neoliberal competition ideology (Hayes, 2018). The indirect effects at high and low values (1 *SD* above/below the mean) of the moderator provided further support for the hypothesized direction of effects. For participants who subscribed to the neoliberal ideology of competition, victim rhetoric led to a decrease in perceived responsibility for negative life outcomes, which in turn was related to heightened leader support, $b = .11$, 95% CI [0.01, 0.30], above and beyond elite outgroup blame. There was no such indirect effect for participants who scored low on neoliberal competition ideology, $b = -.06$, 95% CI [−0.24, 0.01]. In sum, Hypothesis 2 is considered supported. We conducted additional analyses examining at which level of the moderator (neoliberal competition ideology) the indirect effect of victim rhetoric on leader support reached significance (see Online Appendices D and E). Our analysis revealed that victim rhetoric increased leader support via reduced responsibility for negative life outcomes among participants who scored at least .55 standard deviations above the mean, $b = .07$, 95% CI [0.001, 0.22], on neoliberal competition ideology. Thus, victim rhetoric increases leader support (via reduced responsibility) among high and moderate adherents of neoliberal competition ideology.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The present article examines why populist rhetoric revolving around an alleged struggle between "the people" and "the elites" leads to support for political leaders. Whereas previous accounts explained this effect via elite outgroup blame (i.e., shifting blame *toward* others), we hypothesized that above and beyond that, populist leaders gain support because they portray followers as victims (i.e., shifting blame *away* from them) and that this effect is especially prevalent among individuals subscribing to neoliberal competition ideology (Hypothesis 1). We find support for this hypothesis in a survey. Moreover, we show in a controlled experimental setting that this effect is mediated by a reduction in perceived responsibility for negative life outcomes, thereby supporting Hypothesis 2. In other words, above and beyond elite outgroup blame, victim rhetoric decreases perceived responsibility for negative life outcomes, especially among individuals subscribing to neoliberal competition ideology. This reduction in responsibility results in increased support for the leader.

Our results thus indicate that in previous research, elite outgroup blame has likely been confounded with victimhood, two mechanisms that are compatible yet independent. Given that, at least in Study 1, including victim rhetoric in the equation led to a nonsignificant effect of elite outgroup blame, it seems possible that in some of the previous findings, victimhood was driving the alleged effects of elite outgroup blame because victim status absolves an individual of responsibility for negative outcomes and therefore can have beneficial effects for alleged victims (Gray & Wegner, 2011).

The present findings show that rhetoric that "merely" portrays followers as victims without denigrating specific outgroups increases support for political leaders. Focusing on victimhood may therefore help citizens reinterpret and better understand certain populist messages from the past or in the future. For example, victimhood may help explain support for rhetoric containing conspiracist or racist narratives, which often contain substantial victimhood elements, such as claims of being the victim of a great replacement conspiracy (e.g., Nera et al., 2022).

To gain a better understanding of victim rhetoric, it is important for future researchers to examine its effects in different social contexts. In both studies presented here, highly educated participants were overrepresented, signifying a limitation to the generalizability of our results. However, the reported interaction effects of victimhood and neoliberal competition ideology did not interact with education (at any education level). Thus, our results suggest that they do not differ by education. Relatedly, more research is needed to examine to what extent the present

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findings are generalizable to a non-Western or, specifically, left-wing populist context. This is particularly necessary because the country where our studies were conducted, the United States, has had its own particular experience with populism, as most countries do. We suspect that the present claims can be generalized to other societies permeated with neoliberal ideology, with populist leaders from the left *and* right. First, in Study 2, we found evidence for our hypothesis in a setting with rhetoric that was neither specifically left- nor right-wing. Second, anti-elitism, and therefore victim rhetoric, can be found in nearly all populist discourses (Wuttke et al., 2020). Moreover, given that, as stated above, anti-elitism/victim rhetoric may also be endorsed by non-populist leaders (Wuttke et al., 2020), it seems likely that the present mechanism can be generalized to political communication in general, beyond the context of populism.

The present results have important practical implications. They can not only support, for example, practitioners in media or education in deciphering and decreasing the power of populist appeals and threats to democracy but also support individuals' resilience and society as a whole in building more democratic frames to discuss political matters (Busby et al., 2019). Relatedly, the present results shed new light on the interplay between populism and neoliberalism and, therefore, on the question of who is susceptible to populist rhetoric (and why). Thus, the present results can help guide policymakers by emphasizing that to combat populist appeals, it is important to counteract neoliberal competition ideology and its manifestations in society, whether in welfare systems, organizations, or educational systems. Based on the current findings, it appears that although they may endorse neoliberal competition ideology, many individuals seem to be struggling with the potential pressure that its responsibilization entails, a struggle for which populist victim narratives appear to offer some relief.

In sum, the present findings indicate that victim rhetoric can play a significant role in explaining the support for populist leaders in the Western world. For future scholars and practitioners alike, it is important to pay attention to how populists craft victim narratives to their advantage.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data for both studies have not been made publicly available but can be obtained by emailing the corresponding author. The design and analysis plan for this study were not preregistered.

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