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ARTICLE

Populism and Polarization: A Nostalgic Narrative of 'Us' and 'Them'

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Abstract
The vast presence of populism in contemporary political discourse has introduced a narrative steeped in nostalgia, evoking images of a revered national past and delineating a stark division between the 'authentic us' and the 'alien them'. While these messages resonate with a substantial portion of citizens, they concurrently foster identity-driven animosity and derogation. In a pre-registered experiment in the Netherlands (with data collected between January and March 2023), we distinguish the influence of nostalgic narratives and scapegoating on societal sentiments, revealing their pivotal role in exacerbating current levels of polarization. Our findings underscore the potential of nostalgic narratives to shape affective sentiments towards ideological and social in-groups, while also influencing sentiments towards out-groups. Messages featuring scapegoats were found to intensify positive sentiment towards in-groups, while simultaneously diminishing positive sentiment towards out-groups. This research underscores a crucial mechanism underpinning the ebb and flow of identity-based sentiments. The results indicate that nostalgic discourse, particularly when intertwined with scapegoating, can serve as a catalyst for the intensification of in-group affinity and the exacerbation of out-group aversion. In essence, our study underscores the far-reaching implications of nostalgic narratives in perpetuating societal animosity and polarization and sheds light on a critical facet of contemporary political discourse.

Keywords: populist discourse; nostalgia; polarization; framing experiment; open science

Populist parties across Europe have gained momentum by capitalizing on anti-elitist and nostalgic narratives which frame the present as a deviation from an idealized past while attributing blame to societal out-groups. In times of several contemporaneous salient societal divisions, nostalgia behaves as a vehicle for different potential out-groups that can be targeted and vilified, thereby departing from the single focus on migrants as the scapegoat (van Spanje 2011). Alongside the Brexit debate about the

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United Kingdom leaving the European Union (Hobolt et al. 2021; Tilley and Hobolt 2023), the controversy over Catalan independence in Spain (Balcells and Kuo 2023), or diverging positions regarding Covid-19 countermeasures (Bor et al. 2023a), clashes between pro- and anti-environmentalists, Nimbys (people who object to development in their neighbourhood, that is, 'not in my back yard') and their opponents (Devine-Wright 2009), as well as conflicting stances on vaccination and abortion rights, offer ample opportunity for tensions to arise (Bor et al. 2023b; Crawford et al. 2022; Wagner and Eberl 2022). Populist parties often exploit widespread dissatisfaction with the status quo, positioning themselves as alternatives to mainstream politics (Hinterleitner et al. 2024; Inglehart and Norris 2016; Taggart 2018). As voices of the people, populist leaders invoke a romanticized version of the past (Elçi 2022; Smeekes et al. 2015, 2021; Van Prooijen et al. 2022), emphasizing cultural homogeneity and traditional values while casting blame on the establishment and out-groups, such as immigrants, for societal grievances (Hunger and Paxton 2022; Mudde 2004; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013). This nostalgic rhetoric has become a hallmark of the populist strategy, as it effectively resonates with voters' insecurities and longing for a simpler, idealized time.

The interplay between nostalgia and scapegoating forms a powerful rhetorical strategy that potentially exacerbates affective polarization – the phenomenon where individuals develop warmer feelings towards their own political group and colder feelings towards opposing groups, leading to heightened animosity and reduced willingness to compromise (Iyengar et al. 2019) – by targeting ideological and social groups. We argue that nostalgia operates as a narrative vehicle that creates a dichotomy between an idyllic past and a troubled present, with out-groups portrayed as responsible for the decline. This mechanism strengthens in-group cohesion while fostering hostility towards perceived adversaries. By linking nostalgic narratives with scapegoating, populist leaders amplify these divisions, deepening societal fractures and intensifying emotional antipathy between groups. Building on existing literature (Bonikowski 2017; Hameleers et al. 2017; Smeekes and Verkuyten 2017; Wodak 2015), this study integrates insights from research on affective polarization, nostalgia and populism to clarify how nostalgic narratives and scapegoating mechanisms intensify affective polarization.

In times of societal uncertainty and division, nostalgic messaging becomes a powerful tool for mobilizing support and amplifying polarization. Nostalgia implicitly suggests an idealized past with diminished out-group influence, while scapegoating explicitly attributes societal decline to these groups. Together, these mechanisms reinforce affective polarization by intensifying positive emotions towards in-groups and negative emotions towards out-groups.

In our study we go beyond the traditional focus on affective polarization between the ideological left and right to encompass broader social groups that individuals identify with or oppose, broadening the scope of analysis to include diverse societal dynamics. Our novel theoretical argument is that nostalgic narratives act as a dual mechanism, implicitly invoking an idealized past while explicitly scapegoating out-groups as the root of contemporary societal issues. This duality serves as a potent driver of affective polarization by simultaneously strengthening in-group identity and vilifying out-groups. To examine the effects of nostalgic and scapegoating messages on affective polarization, we conducted a pre-registered experiment embedded in the fourth wave of the Vrije Universiteit (VU) Election Studies 2023 (Van der Velden et al. 2023). This five-wave panel survey, conducted between 11 January and 20 March 2023 by

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Kieskompas, a Dutch polling company, focused on the pre- and post-regional election period in the Netherlands (Van der Velden et al. 2023). The Netherlands was chosen as a test case due to its relatively low levels of affective polarization and limited prevalence of nostalgic rhetoric, making it a challenging yet insightful context for studying these mechanisms (Harteveld 2021; Müller and Proksch 2024).

Our study makes several key contributions to the literature on populism, nostalgia and affective polarization. First, we provide a novel perspective on the contemporary political Zeitgeist by linking nostalgia and scapegoating with group affect. This integration sheds light on how these narratives shape in-group and out-group dynamics, offering a comprehensive framework for understanding their role in contemporary politics. Second, we critically evaluate prior research on affective polarization and populism, identifying gaps and providing insights into the nuanced effects of nostalgic rhetoric. Third, we highlight the evolving nature of populist narratives, which have transcended ideological boundaries to influence political discourse across the spectrum (Bonikowski and Stuhler 2022; Tilley and Hobolt 2023). By elucidating the dual role of nostalgia as both a sentimental and a polarizing force, this article advances our understanding of its impact on political behaviour. In doing so, it contributes to the ongoing discourse on the intersections of nostalgia, scapegoating and affective polarization, offering valuable insights for scholars and practitioners alike. Our findings underscore the need for further research into the emotional mechanisms underpinning populist rhetoric and their broader implications for democratic societies.

A nostalgic narrative of 'us' and 'them'

The antagonistic portrayal of social structures is arguably a central characteristic of the current climate of increased affective polarization. Affective polarization refers to the growing emotional divide between opposing political or ideological groups, characterized by heightened in-group favouritism and increased hostility towards out-groups (Iyengar et al. 2019). Unlike ideological or political polarization, which focuses on disagreements over policies or ideologies, affective polarization captures the social and emotional dimensions of group dynamics (Dias and Lelkes 2022; Hartman et al. 2022; Jost et al. 2022). This phenomenon is evident in individuals' negative perceptions of out-groups and positive bias towards in-groups, even when substantive ideological differences are absent (Mason 2018). This distinction is crucial because it underscores the role of social identity in driving polarization independently of policy disagreements.

Classic partisan rivalries have evolved, with ideological identities becoming more prominent (Ellis and Stimson 2012; Oshri et al. 2022). Voters increasingly align themselves with ideological labels like 'liberal' or 'left-wing', rather than with specific political parties. These ideologies often divide citizens along lines similar to the Republican–Democrat divide in the United States, creating stark distinctions such as 'right versus left', with the latter being frequently characterized as 'woke' (Comellas and Torcal 2023). In Europe, party affect primarily orbits around three ideological spheres: left, right and radical right (Bantel 2023; Kekkonen and Ylä-Anttila 2021). Additionally, specific issues can foster strong 'us versus them' dynamics, serving roles akin to partisan identities. Examples include the Brexit debate (Hobolt et al. 2021; Tilley

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and Hobolt 2023), the controversy over Catalan independence (Balcells and Kuo 2023) and positions regarding Covid-19 countermeasures (Bor et al. 2023a). Other significant divides include pro- and anti-environmentalism, Nimbys against their adversaries (Devine-Wright 2009) and conflicting stances on vaccination and abortion rights (Bor et al. 2023b; Crawford et al. 2022; Wagner and Eberl 2022). These identities amplify societal divisions, complicating the landscape of polarization.

In the expansion of antagonisms across social groups, populists find an opportune environment to thrive. Cas Mudde's (2004) ideational approach conceptualizes populism as a thin-centred ideology that seldom exists in isolation. Instead, it tends to affiliate itself with a broader host ideology, thereby displaying contextual sensitivity (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013). This ideological framework creates a Manichaean tension within society, fundamentally dividing it into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups (Mudde 2004; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013): the morally righteous 'us' juxtaposed against the evil 'them'. Scholarly investigation often focuses on the populist dichotomy between the perceived homogeneous people and the perceived malevolent elite (for overviews, see Berman 2021; Hunger and Paxton 2022; Noury and Roland 2020). Yet the adaptability inherent in the thin-centred populist ideology and its contextual sensitivity allows political leaders espousing populist rhetoric to broaden the definition of out-groups deemed malevolent, thus framing them as threats to their envisioned societal ideal. Traditionally, immigrants have been frequently depicted as an external source of malevolence, supposedly corroding the fabric of society (for overviews, see Shehaj et al. 2021; van Spanje 2011). However, in these times of intense group-based polarization, populists are employing new tropes to articulate their out-group narratives.

Populist politicians exhibit a propensity to delineate distinct in- and out-groups. Conversely, non-populist politicians utilize communication strategies to construct a narrative aimed at an ideal societal framework; however, the adaptability of such strategies is often constrained by ideological limitations in comparison to the more flexible approach of populists. Scholars specializing in populist communication have highlighted the prevalence of emotionally charged rhetoric in numerous communication studies (Aalberg et al. 2016; Widmann 2021). This kind of rhetoric is designed to evoke profound emotional responses, aiming to resonate deeply with the audience while consistently emphasizing the sovereignty of the people (Schumacher et al. 2022). Populist rhetoric inherently revolves around asserting the existence of a severe political crisis that poses an existential threat to ordinary citizens. This rhetoric vehemently vilifies the out-group, allocating blame to them (Schumacher et al. 2022). Recent studies have underscored the efficacy of nostalgia as a potent vehicle employed within this narrative construction (Elçi 2022; Smeekes et al. 2021; Van Prooijen et al. 2022).

Populists need a compelling narrative to channel their antagonistic depictions, which they often achieve by contrasting the perceived decay of the present – where purported enemies abound – with an idealized, pristine past where such issues were non-existent, essentially employing nostalgia. Nostalgia, derived from the Greek words *nostos* (home) and *algia* (pain or sorrow), encapsulates a complex blend of sentiments, representing both a pain of loss and a repository of pleasant memories. Regardless of its more positive connotation as a pleasant memory or the poignant aspect as a pain of loss, nostalgia fundamentally revolves around the notion of loss (Pickering and

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Keightley 2006). At its core, nostalgia can be understood as an individual-level emotion: a tender yearning for one's past, usually focusing on the innocence of childhood or the formative years of adolescence (Marchegiani and Phau 2013). This psychological interpretation predominates in individualistic frameworks. However, within the realm of the social sciences, the emphasis often shifts to collective nostalgia. Defined as an emotive attachment or fond feelings associated with perceiving oneself as a member of a group, collective nostalgia is grounded in idealized perceptions of the history or past events of this group (Baldwin et al. 2018). These events often have direct connections to the in-group's shared experiences. Recollection of such events is commonly transmitted through collective memory, perpetuated within families, documented in literature or disseminated through mass-media narratives (Kao 2012). The emergence of collective nostalgia is frequently linked to a perception among individuals that their group enjoyed a superior status or quality of life in the past compared to the present circumstances (Cheung et al. 2017). Despite its abstract nature, collective nostalgia tends to exhibit a remarkable consistency among individuals within the same cultural group and generation, reflecting shared experiences and cultural influences (Kao 2012).

Nostalgia, with its intricate blend of sentimental reminiscence and a sense of loss, is intertwined with the dynamics of the in- and out-groups, delineated in the seminal work of Tajfel and Turner (1979). The concept of collective nostalgia (Smeekes et al. 2015, 2021; Van Prooijen et al. 2022), shaped by idealized perceptions of the past, often finds resonance within group identities. These nostalgic yearnings, rooted in shared historical events and cultural experiences, can reinforce the distinctions between in-groups and out-groups. Nostalgia often implies more than a simple longing for the past – it also frames the present as a deviation from this ideal state. This deviation requires explanation, and scapegoating emerges as a complementary mechanism by which blame for societal decline is attributed to specific out-groups. By constructing these groups as obstacles to reclaiming the past, scapegoating translates the implicit contrasts of nostalgia into explicit narratives of blame. This process not only reinforces the in-group's cohesion but also sharpens its boundaries by portraying out-groups as threats or antagonists. We argue that political elites make hay of the nostalgic discourse by framing these identities as either an in- or an out-group and implicitly or explicitly shifting blame to the out-groups for unwanted changes in society.

Thus, the interaction between nostalgia and scapegoating has significant implications for affective polarization (Iyengar et al. 2019). Nostalgia intensifies emotional attachment to the in-group by evoking pride and solidarity, while scapegoating amplifies hostility towards out-groups by framing them as responsible for societal decline. Together, these mechanisms contribute to affective polarization by deepening emotional divides between groups, strengthening in-group favouritism and exacerbating out-group hostility (Iyengar et al. 2019). Importantly, while nostalgia can function independently of scapegoating, its polarizing effects are potentially heightened when coupled with explicit out-group blame.

Building on our argument, we contend that nostalgic narratives are not merely rhetorical devices but pivotal tools in the populist strategy to deepen societal divisions, exploiting affective polarization by framing out-groups as obstacles to reclaiming an idealized past. These narratives wield significant emotional power, fostering a sense

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of in-group unity through shared memories of a glorified history while simultaneously amplifying hostility towards those cast as responsible for societal decline. By intertwining nostalgic appeals with scapegoating, populist actors transform collective longing into a mechanism of exclusion, reinforcing intergroup boundaries and intensifying animosities. Existing research on populist rhetoric has significantly advanced our understanding of how out-groups are constructed and mobilized, particularly in contexts where immigrants or elites are depicted as threats to societal cohesion (van Spanje 2011). However, much of this work has centred on these traditional or static out-groups, often overlooking the fluid and evolving nature of these categorizations in response to shifting political and social dynamics. Recent developments illustrate how nostalgic narratives are increasingly coupled with scapegoating to target a broader spectrum of social groups (Balcells and Kuo 2023; Bor et al. 2023b; Wagner and Eberl 2022). This adaptability allows populist rhetoric to reframe grievances and identify new out-groups, reinforcing affective polarization in diverse and evolving contexts. By examining the dynamic interplay between nostalgia and scapegoating, we highlight their dual role in shaping polarization. Together, these mechanisms extend beyond political rhetoric, deepening societal divisions and posing challenges to democratic cohesion. Understanding how these narratives are mobilized in evolving contexts provides critical insights into the mechanisms driving contemporary polarization. We therefore test the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1a (H1a): *Nostalgic messages will increase affective sentiment for ideological social in-groups.*

Hypothesis 1b (H1b): *Messages mentioning scapegoats will increase affective sentiment for ideological social in-groups.*

Hypothesis 2a (H2a): *Nostalgic messages will decrease affective sentiment for ideological social out-groups.*

Hypothesis 2b (H2b): *Messages mentioning scapegoats will decrease affective sentiment for ideological social out-groups.*

Data, measurement and method

Data

To investigate the nostalgic narrative of 'us versus them' across ideological lines, we conducted a pre-registered experiment (see https://aspredicted.org/YST_2GH) within the framework of the VU Election Studies 2023 (Van der Velden 2023). The study utilizes a five-wave panel survey administered between 11 January 2023 and 20 March 2023 by Kieskompas. The survey was conducted with members of the Kieskompas VIP panel: a dedicated group of respondents who voluntarily participate in research without financial compensation. Although the panel was based on an opt-in sample, it was representative of the population in key demographic variables. This article draws on data from the first and fourth waves of the survey. The first wave, conducted from 11

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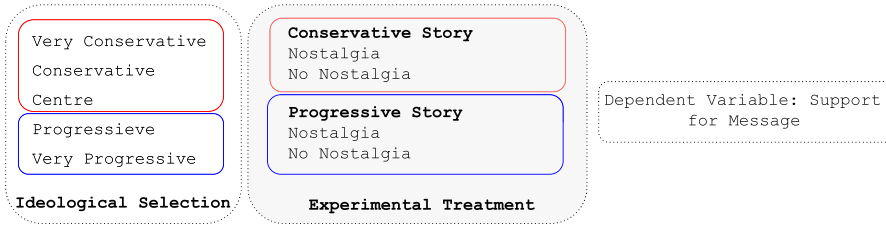


Figure 1. Overview of Experimental Procedure

to 18 January 2023, collected information on participants' political preferences, nostalgic attitudes and populist orientation. The fourth wave, conducted from 7 to 14 March 2023, incorporated an experiment designed to disentangle the effects of nostalgic messages from ideological content. A total of 2,185 participants completed the first wave of the survey, while 1,560 completed the fourth wave. To address missing data, we followed the recommendations of Alan Gerber (2011), imputing missing values using the mean value within each wave and flagging variables with more than 10% missing data.

Experimental set-up

To examine the affective consequences of nostalgic and scapegoating messages on social in-groups and out-groups, we conducted an experiment designed to cue participants with nostalgic values and scapegoats. The participants were randomly assigned to different conditions within this framework, as shown in Figure 1.

The first step in the experimental set-up involved classifying participants into ideological groups based on their self-identified political orientation. Participants reported their ideological stance on a five-point Likert scale, indicating whether they considered themselves very progressive, progressive, centrist, conservative or very conservative. This classification was critical because specific objects of nostalgia which people look back on fondly are known to differ between ideological positions (Lammers and Baldwin 2018; Stefaniak et al. 2021). Individuals who identified as 'centre', 'conservative' or 'very conservative' were grouped into the 'conservative' category, while those who identified as 'progressive' or 'very progressive' were assigned to the 'progressive' category. While we acknowledge that ideological in-/out-grouping can occur at various levels of granularity (from party factions to broader ideological camps), our study focuses on the primary division between the progressive and conservative ideological spheres. This division is substantiated by research indicating that European citizens, even in highly fragmented contexts, tend to align affectively within two main blocks (Bantel 2023; Hagevi 2015; Kekkonen and Ylä-Anttila 2021; Simón 2020).

For each ideological group, we developed tailored messages to reflect the narratives most relevant to their respective ideological positions. These narratives were derived from two primary sources: open-ended responses collected earlier in the study and existing literature in sociology and marketing. The open-ended responses provided direct insights into the themes and symbols the participants associated with nostalgia (see Van der Velden et al. 2023), while the literature offered a broader theoretical

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foundation to shape these messages. Specifically, insights from studies on the modalities of nostalgia, the role of belonging and the sociocultural dimensions of nostalgic messaging informed the construction of the experimental stimuli (Hartmann and Brunk 2019; May 2017; Pickering and Keightley 2006).

The experimental design followed a 2 × 2 factorial framework. The messages varied along two key dimensions: whether they invoked nostalgia or not, and whether they included a scapegoating element or not. This set-up resulted in four distinct experimental groups, allowing us to disentangle the effects of nostalgia and scapegoating independently and in combination. The participants of the two groups were presented with messages specifically tailored to resonate with their ideological perspective (right-wing conservative or left-wing progressive). These messages emphasized either nostalgia or scapegoating or both nostalgia and scapegoating or neither nostalgia nor scapegoating, depending on the assigned condition.

To ensure the robustness of the findings, additional analyses were conducted to account for the potential influence of the participants who identified as centrists. These analyses involved running the data both with and without centrists, and the results demonstrated that the inclusion or exclusion of this group did not substantively affect the outcomes (see the Supplementary Material, Online Appendix C). For further details about the experimental design and procedures, see the Supplementary Material, Online Compendium and Online Appendix A.

We randomly assigned the participants to see just one of four different potential campaign messages (see Figure 1), telling them that a party close to their position was testing campaigning material for the next Dutch elections. Figure 2 demonstrates that the participants who voted for more conservative parties (as ranked by Kieskompas), displayed in the top lines of Figure 2, also positioned themselves as more conservative, and the voters who supported more progressive parties positioned themselves as more progressive. An example of the treatment text for a left-wing voter, including nostalgia and a scapegoat, reads as follows (see Online Appendix A for all the treatment texts):

> *Looking back, we remember a time when solidarity, workers' rights and respect for the environment were paramount. People lived a slow and peaceful life in harmony with nature, valuing community over individualism. Today, we see a world plagued by pollution, polarization and stress, caused in large part by large corporations, contamination lobbyists and neoliberal policymakers. It's time to hold them accountable again for their actions and reclaim those values of solidarity, respect and peace that made our world a better place. Let's create a world where workers' rights are protected again, the environment is re-cherished, and the well-being of all people is prioritized again over the interests of a select few.*

Dependent variables

To examine the affective consequences of nostalgic and scapegoating messages, we measured the participants' affective sentiment towards 10 social in-groups and out-groups. Specifically, we asked them to indicate the extent to which they experienced positive or negative feelings towards the following groups: big companies, Christians,

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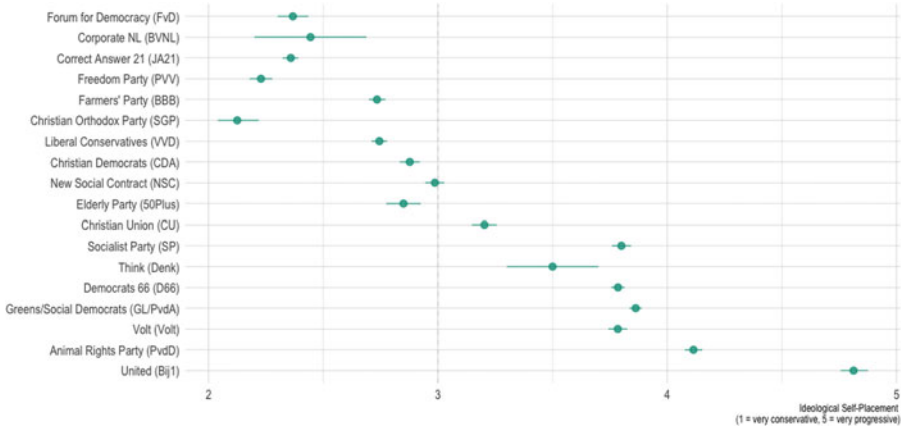


Figure 2. Baseline of Self-Placement into Ideological Positions

climate activists, immigrants, left-wing people, materialistic people, Muslims, neoliberal politicians, right-wing people and people living on state support. These groups were referenced in the treatment texts as scapegoats for each ideological group.

While none of these groups is exclusively or equally associated with a particular ideological position, they are all commonly scapegoated for contemporary political issues. This aligns with research demonstrating how ideological groups are increasingly tied to social identity groups, through either identification with or 'disidentification' from them (Westheuser and Zollinger 2024; Zollinger 2024).

Affective sentiment towards these groups was measured on a scale from zero (very negative) to 10 (very positive). We considered the left-wing progressive in-groups (and the right-wing conservative out-groups) to include climate activists, immigrants, left-wing people, Muslims and people receiving state support. Conversely, we considered the right-wing conservative in-groups (and the left-wing progressive out-groups) to include big companies, Christians, materialistic people, neoliberal politicians and right-wing people.

The correlation between alignment with conservative in-groups (and progressive out-groups) and the participants' ideology was 0.3, while the correlation between alignment with progressive in-groups (and conservative out-groups) and the participants' ideology was 0.5. The lower correlation for conservative in-groups suggests greater heterogeneity in how conservatives relate to their supposed in-groups, compared to the stronger alignment with their in-groups found among progressives.

These correlation values indicate a moderate alignment between the participants' ideological self-identification and their affective attitudes towards the designated in-groups and out-groups. In other words, the individuals with a conservative ideological orientation tended to have more favourable feelings towards their in-groups (e.g. big companies and Christians) and less favourable feelings towards their out-groups (e.g. climate activists and immigrants). The individuals with a progressive ideological orientation exhibited the same trend in feelings towards their own in-groups

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and out-groups. Although the correlation values are not exceptionally high, they provide sufficient evidence to support the categorization of these groups as ideological in-groups and out-groups for the purposes of this study.

Methods of estimation

We used a multilevel model with the participants clustered in social groups to test our hypotheses. Based on a balance test (see the Supplementary Material for our Online Compendium and Online Appendix B), the only unbalanced demographic covariate we included in our analysis was 'urbanization'. In the Results section, we only present the visualized coefficients of the experimental treatment (see our Online Compendium for the full regression tables).

Affective consequences of a nostalgic narrative

First, we delve into the descriptive analysis of attitudes towards social groups across political ideology. Figure 3 shows the attitudes towards social groups held by members of conservative and progressive groups, which provide a baseline for the subsequent analysis. It indicates a clear pattern of affective polarization: the left panel shows clearly that right-wing voters (pink dots) are rated most negatively by individuals identified as 'very progressive' and most positively by individuals identified as 'very conservative'. Similarly, the right panel shows that left-wing voters (green dots) are rated most positively by individuals identified as 'very progressive' and most negatively by individuals identified as 'very conservative'. This aligns with the definition of affective polarization (Iyengar et al. 2019), as the conservative participants evaluated their in-group (i.e. right-wing voters) more positively than their out-group (i.e. left-wing voters), while the progressive participants evaluated their in-group (i.e. left-wing voters) more positively than their out-group (i.e. right-wing voters).

Beyond the left–right distinction, our examination of the sentiments of right-wing conservative supporters towards other social groups revealed a similar trend: greater warmth towards Christians, multinationals (many of which have a significant presence in the Netherlands), neoliberal politicians and fellow right-wing voters. However, nuanced variations exist within these sentiments. Notably, the most linear variation in warmth towards right-wing voters can be seen as one moves from left-wing progressive party supporters to right-wing conservative party supporters. It is noteworthy that Christians garnered a generally positive sentiment across the political spectrum. Additionally, materialistic individuals, neoliberal politicians and multinationals did not receive uniformly positive evaluations, even from right-wing party supporters.

Turning our attention to the right side of Figure 3, a similar narrative unfolds. The more politically left-leaning the participants, the more positive their sentiments towards social groups associated with progressive ideologies. Notable entities receiving favourable evaluations include climate activists, immigrants, Muslims, individuals living on benefits and other left-wing voters. However, nuances in sentiment exist within this category as well. Some groups, such as individuals living on benefits, received relatively neutral evaluations from right-wing supporters. Conversely, climate

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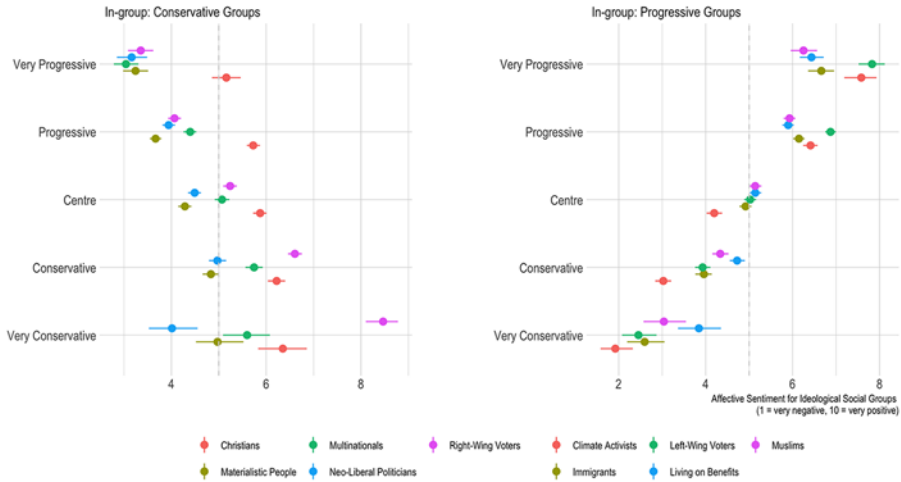


Figure 3. Descriptive Analysis of Social Groups

activists, immigrants, Muslims and left-wing voters were viewed with varying degrees of antipathy by the right.

Figure 4 shows the distribution and average affective sentiment towards the social groups of the message per experimental treatment. Social in-groups were more liked than out-groups – with scores of five and lower for the disliked social group and six and higher for the liked social group. The distributions indicate that, on average, the progressive voters liked their in-group more than the conservative voters liked their in-group, regardless of the experimental treatment. However, there was no difference between progressive and conservative voters regarding their social out-groups: they both disliked them equally. Again, there was little variation in levels of support for the social out-group between the messages. This analysis establishes a crucial baseline for our subsequent examination of the effects of the treatment, as it outlines the reference point for changes in sentiments that may arise.

To test whether a nostalgic narrative of 'us and them' has polarizing consequences, we present the results of our pre-registered experiment. The left-hand panel in Figure 5 demonstrates the support for social in-groups based on the treatment message. In general, neither the nostalgic messages (H1a) nor the scapegoating messages (H1b) resulted in a statistically significant increase in affective sentiment for the social in-groups. While the effect of the scapegoating messages (H1b) went in the hypothesized direction, it was not statistically significant. The nostalgic messages actually did elicit a statistically significant effect, but in the opposite direction to the hypothesis (H1a): being exposed to a nostalgic message (versus a non-nostalgic message) made the participants feel colder towards their in-group. Hence, we did not find any support for H1a or H1b. The analysis of our pre-registered experiment, as depicted in Figure 5, aimed to assess whether a nostalgic narrative framing of 'us' and 'them' engenders polarizing consequences, particularly concerning the support for social in-groups.

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Figure 4. Affective Sentiment for Social Groups

To look deeper into this, we ran separate analyses for progressive and conservative voters per social group and found that the progressive voters were an exception (see Online Appendix C). When progressive voters received a nostalgic scapegoating message, although this did not materially affect their feelings towards groups such as left-wing voters and immigrants, it did seem to make them feel more negative about Muslims and more positive about climate activists. This could indicate that while both groups are generally seen more positively by progressives than by conservatives, climate activists are seen as an in-group that resists nostalgic and scapegoating pushes, whereas Muslims are probably seen more as strategic allies for whom at least some voters of the left signal instrumental and fragile positive feelings. Conservative voters also showed an interesting pattern. Under the nostalgic message treatment, especially when it also included scapegoating, they had a less positive response to neoliberal politicians, multinationals and materialistic people. This pattern could indicate that even if these groups are not necessarily out-groups for conservative voters, such voters may still see them as partly responsible for the decline perceived through their nostalgic lens. The implications of this pattern underscore the nuanced dynamics at play within the conservative voter demographic. In a broader context, the findings shed light on the multifaceted nature of conservative voter attitudes.

In conclusion, the lack of support for H1a and H1b in our study, as well as the subgroup analyses, provide valuable insights into the nuanced dynamics of political messaging and its differential impact on diverse voter groups. It is crucial to recognize these subtleties in order to understand the complexities of political sentiment and to avoid broad generalizations about the existence of a populist Zeitgeist based on the examined experimental conditions.

The right-hand panel in Figure 5 demonstrates support for social out-groups after exposure to nostalgic and scapegoating messages. The nostalgic messages (H2a) had no effect on how the participants felt towards their social out-groups: the coefficient

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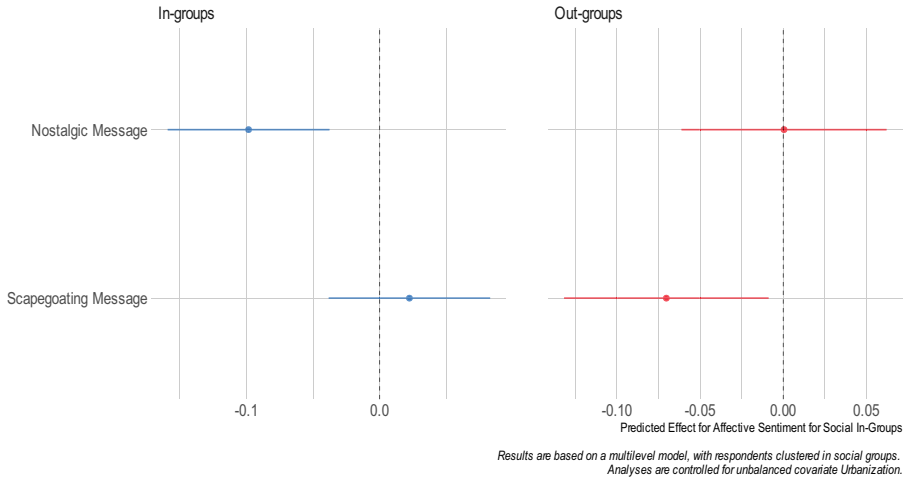


Figure 5. Predicted Affective Sentiment for Social Groups

is zero. The scapegoating messages (H2b), however, did have the hypothesized polarizing effect: they made the participants colder towards their out-groups. This is an indication that a 'purely' nostalgic message could foster more understanding towards some ideological out-groups and that any scapegoating element in a nostalgic narrative could diminish any positive affective sentiment towards the out-groups achieved by the nostalgic appeal. In essence, this suggests that people feel more affectively polarized towards their out-groups when they are exposed to a message that puts the blame on someone else.

Online Appendix D presents the subgroup analyses for conservative and progressive voters. The data show that the nostalgic messages (red coefficients) were associated with an increased affective sentiment towards right-wing voters and Christians (the latter without statistical significance). Combining the nostalgic message with scapegoating (green coefficients) decreased the affective sentiment towards out-groups: the progressive voters became more negative towards right-wing voters (without statistical significance), neoliberal politicians, multinationals and Christians (without statistical significance). Only a scapegoating message (in blue) decreased the sentiment towards right-wing voters, neoliberal politicians, multinationals, Christians and materialistic people – with only the latter being statistically significant.

Hence, while our data do not support H2a, they do support H2b. The subgroup analyses show a more nuanced pattern: nostalgic and scapegoating messages decreased the affective sentiment towards some, but not all, of the groups theorized as out-groups. In light of these results, it is essential to acknowledge the complexity of the impact of political messaging on affective sentiment towards social out-groups. Our study does not decisively indicate the presence of a populist Zeitgeist based on the examined experimental conditions. The nuanced and varied responses observed underscore the importance of considering contextual factors and the diverse nature of political attitudes within the broader population. We explored whether our results are conditional

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upon ideology, party support, populist attitudes, education and gender, but we did not find evidence for a relationship between nostalgia or scapegoating and affective polarization.

Conclusion

In this article, we argue that a persistent populist sentiment is fuelling the politicization of out-groups, resulting in heightened affective polarization. Central to this phenomenon is the mainstreaming of nostalgia as a prevalent rhetorical device, serving as a conduit for altering group affect. Specifically, we hypothesized that nostalgic messaging, whether explicitly mentioning scapegoats or not, would amplify affect for social in-groups while diminishing affect for social out-groups. Our experimental findings revealed a more nuanced relationship than that hypothesized between nostalgic messaging, affective polarization, and sentiment towards in-group and out-group entities.

Contrary to our initial expectations, nostalgic messaging did not significantly impact feelings towards out-groups, but it did decrease affect for the participants' in-groups. This suggests that nostalgia does not exacerbate negative sentiments towards already disliked groups but that it fosters a pessimistic sentiment across all social groups (including in-groups), which in turn depolarizes citizens by reducing the emotional distance between in-groups and out-groups. Regarding scapegoating, our results aligned more closely with our expectations. While scapegoating did not yield a statistically significant effect on attitudes towards social in-groups, it seemed to prompt markedly more negative attitudes towards social out-groups. This finding corroborates previous theoretical insights regarding how politicians can foment social animosity by targeting specific social groups as the source of current social issues (Iyengar et al. 2019).

These findings contribute to our understanding of contemporary politics. We observe that nostalgic narratives, whether or not they contain an element of scapegoating, exert a substantial influence on individuals' sentiments towards social groups. Interestingly, nostalgia itself appears to depolarize individuals by fostering a pervasive negativity towards social groups in general, including in-groups. This insight is crucial for the ongoing academic discourse on affective polarization, as we demonstrate that heightened negative affect and affective polarization need not necessarily coexist. It underscores the normative query regarding priority – whether the goal is to reduce the emotional distance between social groups, in which case nostalgia proves an effective tool, or to mitigate negative affect towards specific groups, a purpose which nostalgia operates against. In essence, our study contributes to the call for greater clarity in delineating the independent consequences of nostalgia and its relationship with affective polarization (Wagner 2024).

Additionally, we underscore the pervasive impact of scapegoating narratives, which, even without bolstering in-group pride, heighten negativity towards the out-group. The fact that we observe the negative out-group effect only for scapegoating messages but not for nostalgic messages suggests that nostalgia may not inherently exacerbate out-group derogation. Rather, it appears that explicit targeting of an out-group is necessary for nostalgia to have such an effect. This underscores the need for further

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exploration of nostalgia, its components and its applicability to diverse contexts. While our study only examines the effects of nostalgic messages on ideological in-groups, it is plausible that such messages, even when aimed at motivating in-group voting, may reach individuals from other political affiliations and influence them. Future research should delve into this aspect.

In conclusion, our examination of the reliance of populist rhetoric on creating divisions between in-groups and out-groups, often utilizing the out-group as a scapegoat, aligns with recent research emphasizing the pivotal role of nostalgia in this narrative construction (Elçi 2022; Smeekes et al. 2021; Van Prooijen et al. 2022). Our study sheds light on how nostalgic messaging reinforces affective negativity, although only against the in-group. This implies that nostalgia attenuates divisions within society by making citizens colder towards all social groups, including those groups of which they are members. However, our results confirm our expectation that scapegoating intensifies negative sentiments towards social out-groups. The absence of a similar negative effect of nostalgia on out-groups suggests that some of the effects attributed to nostalgia may hinge on the explicit identification of perceived culprits of social decline in nostalgic narratives. Ultimately, our findings underscore the critical need to scrutinize the impact of rhetoric on societal attitudes and behaviours. We urge policymakers and citizens alike to consider the broader implications of nostalgic narratives in the political arena.

Supplementary material. The supplementary material for this article can be found at https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2025.10020.

Data availability. The Online Compendium is available at https://github.com/MarikenvdVelden/populism-polarization-nostalgia.

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