The Power of Fear:

Examining the Persuasive Power of Fear-based Rhetoric on Social Media Audiences

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Abstract

This study explores whether exposure to fear-based versus non-fear-based political rhetoric differs in its immediate persuasive power on online audiences with varying political affiliations. The research is theoretically relevant as it challenges the conventional assumption that fear-based rhetoric universally enhances persuasiveness. The primary research question investigates how exposure to fear-based versus non-fear-based political rhetoric differ in their persuasive power on online audiences with contrasting political affiliations is investigated. Using a sample of 57 respondents, the study employed a 2x2 factorial design with a between-subjects component. Participants were exposed to either fear-based or non-fear-based messages regarding immigration and climate change. The findings reveal that fear-based rhetoric does not universally increase persuasiveness and is significantly influenced by the audience's political affiliation. Right-wing individuals were less persuaded by fear-based immigration rhetoric, while left-wing individuals found fear-based climate change rhetoric particularly persuasive. These results indicate that the effectiveness of political messages depends on how well they align with the audience's political values and priorities. The study underlines the importance of audience segmentation in political communication strategies and calls for a nuanced approach in creating effective political messages. Practical implications include the need for political communicators to adapt their messages to resonate with specific political groups to enhance persuasiveness effectively.

Keywords: Populism, Political Rhetoric, Fear-based Communication, Political Affiliation, Social Media.

Introduction

On November 22nd, 2023, during the House of Representatives elections in the Netherlands, the right-wing populist party PVV secured 37 seats, emerging as the leading party among all participating political parties. This marked the first instance of a radical-right party becoming the largest in the Dutch parliament, sparking widespread controversy and varying reactions as a result: While some viewed it as a significant political shift within the Netherlands, others judged it as a predictable manifestation of a broader trend of rising right-wing extremism in Western Europe. This movement in particular is corroborated by the recent rise in popularity of other nationalist and socially conservative parties such as the AfD in Germany, National Rally in France, PiS in Poland, and Fidesz in Hungary. These parties, recognised for their strong nationalism and anti-immigration stances, signal a noteworthy repositioning towards the political right across Western Europe, definitively demonstrating the (re)emergence of far-right populism in public discourse (Najimdeen, 2017).

However, the phenomenon of populism is not confined to right-wing alone. Left-wing populism, although currently less prevalent in the Netherlands, is recognised to have played a significant role in shaping political landscapes globally over time. Parties and movements such as Podemos in Spain, Syriza in Greece, and the former leadership of the Labour Party under Jeremy Corbyn in the UK have employed populist strategies to mobilise support. In general, left-wing populist entities are recognised to emphasise different social and political concerns, leaning towards implications such as economic inequality, social justice, and opposition to neoliberal economic policies (Katsambekis, 2016). These concerns, as is similarly the case with right-wing populism, resonate with factions of the population who are disillusioned by traditional political establishments (Stavrakakis et al., 2017).

The growing prevalence of populist ideologies in traditionally liberal societies necessitates an investigation into the underlying causes and observable changes in political orientation and voter preferences. Amidst economic and social crises, populism has adapted its political strategies to resonate with public sentiments (Najimdeen, 2017). Sociopolitical challenges such as job insecurity, loss of national autonomy, and increases in crime fuel public disaffection and pessimism (Political Democracy, Trust, and Social Justice, n.d.). Populist parties capitalise on these fears by offering simplistic solutions and constructing scapegoats, reinforcing collective stereotypes and images of the opposition, the 'others'. This approach also leads to populists actively appealing to a population's fears and anxieties as part of their communication strategy (Chevigny, 2003). Fear has proven to be an effective tool in political communication, as it decreases voters' likelihood to adhere to their usual political habits and opens them up to new ideas, helping smaller and extremist parties attract more supporters (Scheller, 2019). Expanding on the principle of fear appeal and its frequent recurrence in populist political communication tactics is crucial to comprehending the extent of its influence (Wodak, 2015).

A contributing factor to the expansion and increased exposure to (fear-based) populist rhetoric is the rise of political communication via social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and X (formerly Twitter), each providing new opportunities for populist movements to grow. Noteworthy in this respect is the ability of populist leaders to bypass institutional or traditional media outlets and directly reach and engage with potential supporters (Nadler, 2019). The evasion of established media and professional journalism allows populist movements to disseminate their views more freely, resulting in the mobilisation of increasing numbers of supporters (Nadler, 2019).

This study incorporates the role of social media platform X in disseminating and

reinforcing populist messaging. Given its significant influence on public opinion, X serves as a critical channel through which fear-based rhetoric reaches and affects the public. It is therefore essential to explore how both right-wing and left-wing populist movements utilise fear-based and non-fear-based communication strategies to persuade their audiences. By analysing the immediate impact of these messages on the Dutch population, one can assess their persuasive power and understand how they differentially affect online audiences with varying political affiliations. To encapsulate these assumptions, the following research question is applied:

How does exposure to fear-based versus non-fear-based political rhetoric differ in their persuasive power on online audiences with different political affiliations?

Investigating fear-based political rhetoric offers significant theoretical insights into the broader field of political communication. While the rise of right-wing populism has been extensively studied, the application of fear-based communication strategies across the political spectrum, including left-wing movements, remains largely underexplored. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by examining how fear-based rhetoric, regardless of political orientation, influences public opinion and assumed voter preference, whilst taking into consideration that populist communication styles can in fact be employed by all political parties, even those not traditionally considered populist (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007).

Practically, understanding the mechanisms and effectiveness of fear-based political rhetoric may potentially enhance the quality of online political discourse in the Netherlands. More specifically, insights from this study may assist social media platforms and political campaigners in recognising the impact of their messaging strategies and, more importantly, can

contribute to a greater public awareness of how political rhetoric influences opinions and behaviours.

Ultimately, this research seeks to analyse and assess the persuasive power of fear-based rhetoric compared to non-fear-based rhetoric, as well as to differentiate the use of fear-based rhetoric by right-wing and left-wing political movements in the Netherlands. By focusing on both right-wing and left-wing movements, this study hopes to provide a unique perspective on the ramifications of contemporary political communication. It also contributes to the broader discourse on populism by exploring the strategic use of fear in political messaging and its implications for public and political opinion within the Dutch context.

Theoretical Framework

This theoretical framework examines the intersection between populist fear-based and non-fear-based political rhetoric and their persuasive power on online audiences with different political affiliations. By investigating these dynamics, this segment aims to construct a theoretical conceptual framework for addressing the overarching research question at hand.

Populism

When characterising the term populism, research indicates an ongoing definitional debate regarding its precise meaning. However, an increasing number of scholars adopt an ideational approach, defining populism as a set of concepts portraying society as divided between 'the pure people' and 'the corrupt elite' (Rooduijn, 2013). This perspective asserts that political systems

should prioritise popular sovereignty, referring to the principle that the legitimacy and authority of governments derive from the consent and will of the people (Hawkins & Kaltwasser, 2022).

Populism is distinct from comprehensive ideologies such as fascism and liberalism. Unlike these ideologies, which encompass extensive sets of political, social, and economic beliefs, populism is often described as a thin-centred ideology (Silva et al., 2022). This means it has a narrow focus and typically appears in combination with other ideological principles. Such combinations are determined to be essential for promoting a political agenda that resonates with a broader public (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2018).

Moreover, combining populism with other ideologies allows populists to politicise public resentment or outrage for their own advantage. Consequently, various populist groups can be observed across different contexts, each merging populism with ideologies like nationalism, neoliberalism, and socialism, therefore recognising that populism is often blended with a 'thick' ideology to lend it more substance (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2018).

To reiterate, populism is a simplified (thin) ideology that puts a homogeneous group of 'the people' against elites and perceived threats. These threats are often depicted as undermining the rights, values, prosperity, identity, and voice of the general populace, and populist leaders presenting themselves as defenders of the people (Mudde, 2004). This narrative reduces populist politics to a straightforward conflict of 'good versus evil', portraying 'the people' in opposition to 'elites' or 'others' (Yilmaz & Morieson, 2022).

In political discourse, populism is defined differently depending on the movement. For instance, right-wing populism is characterised by its cultural and nativist foundation, often under the guise of protecting 'the nation from dangerous outsiders' (Mudde, 2007). Therefore, right-wing populists are often observed while actively discrediting minority groups (Rooduijn &

Akkerman, 2015). Conversely, left-wing populism is defined on a class basis, embracing an inclusive view of society instead. Unlike right-wing populists, they present themselves as the 'true representatives of the people' (Katsambekis, 2016).

Populist Communication on Social Media

In recent years, political communication has evolved into a 'hybrid media system', where various communication channels mix and influence each other (Schillemans, 2014). Within this landscape, populist politicians have found social media to be an especially effective tool for spreading their messages and reaching their audiences (Gerbaudo, 2018). As a result, platforms like X have become central to political communication, rivalling traditional news media in reach and influence.

One key reason for the prominence of social media platforms like X is their ability to allow politicians to bypass news journalists and communicate directly with the public, thereby enhancing self-promotion (Lilleker & Koc-Michalska, 2013). This direct line of communication enables politicians to present their views without the risk of media distortion. For populists, this is particularly beneficial as it allows them to criticise mainstream media for bias and gatekeeping, positioning themselves as outsiders to the traditional media system (Krämer, 2017). This tactic therefore enables populists to counter criticism from mainstream media and spin it in a way that is more favourable to their audience.

Furthermore, social media platforms like X foster a sense of immediacy, closeness, and direct accountability between populist leaders and their followers, enhancing the perceived intimacy and representation (Moffit, 2016). These platforms also ensure that politicians can reach their intended communities directly, promoting like-minded peer networks and fostering a

sense of community and belonging among followers, which is a critical aspect of populist identity politics (Klinger & Svensson, 2014). Moreover, the personalisation aspect of social media makes it particularly effective for populist communication (Ernst et al., 2019).

Political parties are generally more inclined to use populist-related communication on X than in e.g. political talk shows, with extreme parties employing higher amounts of populist key messages and stylistic elements on social media. This preference is due to the platforms' ability to disseminate their ideals and messages without any filtering or censorship (Ernst et al., 2019).

Fear-Based Rhetoric in Populist Online Communication

Research shows that populist communication often includes a discernible stylistic approach, characterised by colloquial, emotional, yet sometimes uncivil language. These stylistic features purposefully aim to resonate and connect with the general populace through their inherent differentiation from traditional political discourse (Ernst et al., 2019). Moreover, populist communication frequently adopts a fundamentally negative approach to strategically diminish support for opponents (Maier & Nai, 2022). In most cases, negative campaigning involves verbally attacking opponents rather than promoting one's own strengths, including policy-based attacks on rivals' programs and character-based attacks on their opponents' personal flaws (*Negative Campaigning*, n.d.).

A crucial element of the negativity in populist communication is the utilisation of fear-based rhetoric. This approach aims to reach and persuade undecided voters or followers of opponents by leveraging the impact of fear on information processing. Studies indicate that fear-induced information processing makes individuals more susceptible to persuasive

messaging, particularly when the message promises certainty or simple solutions to complex problems (Greipl et al., 2024).

This behavioural response is supported by Affective Intelligence Theory (AIT), which suggests that people seek more information when they face novel or threatening circumstances: Fear appeals become especially effective for persuasion when these fears are acknowledged before solutions are provided by populist communicators (Marcus et al., 2019). Naturally, fear and anxiety create vulnerabilities that can be exploited by extremist candidates to facilitate radicalisation among those exposed to their communication.

Radical populist movements exemplify this communication style, as they often capitalise on fear by offering scapegoats to shape and control the perception of threats, thereby mobilising support for their causes (Salmela & Von Scheve, 2017).

One of the most commonly recognised uses of fear-based rhetoric in this context is the issue of immigration. Political elites frequently use fear-inducing, heavily stereotyped language and imagery when discussing immigration to sway public opinion, making it a key factor in support for far-right parties in both the U.S. and Europe (Golder, 2016). Similarly, fear-based rhetoric is applied in the context of climate change, a subject particularly relevant to the political left, to mobilise support and action (Hulme, 2008).

The above overview indicates that fear-based rhetoric is a powerful tool in populist online communication. By leveraging the emotional and psychological impacts of fear, populist leaders can effectively persuade and mobilise their audience. This approach, while effective, also raises concerns about its impact on public discourse and the potential for increased polarisation and radicalisation within the political landscape.

Effects of Political Messaging

To effectively measure the potential impacts hypothesised in the research question, it is fundamental to clearly outline the dependent variables that will be assessed. This study applies fear-based rhetoric within a political framework to explore its effects, identifying two distinct dependent variables for measurement: (1) Persuasiveness of the Political Message - This variable involves an analysis of a politically charged piece of communication by a hypothetical candidate per subject (either immigration to represent the right, or climate change to represent the left), focusing on its persuasiveness; (2) Politician's Persuasiveness - This variable evaluates the extent to which respondents feel an affinity towards the political entity responsible for the message.

Both dependent variables are contributory in clarifying the immediate persuasive effects of fear-based and non-fear-based political communication.

Hypotheses

Based on the examination of the key concepts and the findings from the literature review, the following hypotheses are proposed. These hypotheses aim to investigate the relationships between the identified dependent and independent variables within the context of fear-based and non-fear-based political rhetoric.

Hypothesis One. As reported in the theoretical overview, earlier research discovered that fear-based rhetoric is designed to elicit strong emotional responses, which can significantly influence immediate opinions and enhance the perceived persuasiveness of the politician more strongly than non-fear-based rhetoric. Therefore, the first hypothesis is constructed as follows:

H1: Exposure to fear-based rhetoric will have a stronger impact on immediate opinion changes (Persuasiveness of the Political Message) and perceived persuasiveness of the politician (Politician's Persuasiveness) compared to non-fear-based rhetoric.

Hypothesis Two. Based on the assumption that Dutch right-wing individuals generally align more with fear-based communication tactics, which have been instrumental in their rise to power and are a prevalent tool used by the Dutch populist right, the second hypothesis puts forward that this group of respondents will find fear-based rhetoric on immigration more persuasive. This, in turn, is expected to lead to a more positive evaluation of both the message and the politician, leading to the following hypothesis:

H2: Right-wing individuals will find fear-based rhetoric concerning immigration more persuasive (Persuasiveness of the Political Message) and have a more positive response towards the politician (Politician's Persuasiveness) compared to left-wing individuals.

Hypothesis Three. In contrast to the second hypothesis, left-wing individuals are typically more concerned with subjects such as climate change and climate policies. They may find fear-based rhetoric on this issue more persuasive, resulting in a more positive view of the message and the politician. This results in a third hypothesis, stated as follows:

H3: Left-wing individuals will find fear-based rhetoric concerning climate change more persuasive (Persuasiveness of the Political Message) and have a more positive response towards the politician (Politician's Persuasiveness) compared to right-wing individuals.

Ultimately, this research study aims to explore the differential impacts of fear-based versus non-fear-based political rhetoric on online audiences with varying political affiliations. By examining key concepts and integrating findings from the literature review, relevant dependent and independent variables have been identified that inform the above hypotheses.

Conclusion

The theoretical framework and research model presented in this study provide a comprehensive approach to exploring the effects of fear-based and non-fear-based political rhetoric on online audiences. By examining key dependent variables - evaluation of the message and politician's persuasiveness - and considering the moderating role of political affiliation, this framework facilitates a nuanced analysis of political populist and fear-based communication strategies. The proposed hypotheses offer a foundation for testing how fear-based rhetoric can influence persuasiveness and public opinion, and how these effects may vary across different political groups.

Method

The primary objective of this research study was to measure the immediate effects of a single exposure to populist rhetoric on X - either fear-based or non-fear-based - on individuals' perception of persuasiveness. Consequently, a between subject experimental research design was employed, as this allowed for more precise insights into the persuasive power of the different types of political communication.

Research Design

This experimental research employed a combined 2x2 factorial and between-subjects design to test the formulated hypotheses. The 2x2 factorial design included two independent variables, each with two levels. The first independent variable was the type of rhetoric, distinguishing between fear-based and non-fear-based communication strategies. The second independent variable was the subject of the tweet, differentiating between the topics of immigration and climate change. Immigration was chosen to reflect its common use in right-wing populism, while climate change represented issues typically associated with left-wing political affiliations.

This design resulted in four experimental conditions: (1) fear-based rhetoric about immigration, (2) fear-based rhetoric about climate change, (3) non-fear-based rhetoric about immigration, and (4) non-fear-based rhetoric about climate change. The 2x2 factorial design enabled the researcher to examine both the main effects of the independent variables and their interaction effect. The main effects included the overall impact of fear-based versus non-fear-based rhetoric on participants' attitudes. The interaction effect explored whether the impact of the type of rhetoric interacted with the political affiliation of the respondent.

In addition to the 2x2 factorial design, the study employed a between-subjects design. Each participant was exposed to tweets about both immigration and climate change, within either the fear-based or non-fear-based rhetoric category. This meant that every participant experienced two different tweet conditions, allowing for direct comparisons within participating individuals. This design helped control for individual differences, increasing the sensitivity of the experiment and providing a more accurate assessment of the effects.

Research Procedure

The research was conducted through an online survey using the Qualtrics platform. To ensure the survey was accessible and relevant to the Dutch target population, it was administered in Dutch.

Each respondent was randomly assigned to one of two rhetoric conditions: fear-based or non-fear-based. Within their assigned rhetoric condition, participants viewed a tweet about immigration and a tweet about climate change. This procedure ensured a balanced design that facilitated the investigation of the effects of both fear-based and non-fear-based rhetoric on different political subjects.

The survey began with participants administering demographic data. Participants were also required to provide their general opinions on immigration and climate change through a series of statements designed to indicate their initial views on these subjects.

Following this, participants were exposed to tweets that varied by both rhetoric type and subject matter. As previously mentioned, depending on their group, participants were exposed to either fear-based or non-fear-based tweets about immigration and climate change. After each tweet exposure, participants responded to a series of statements, divided into two segments according to the dependent variables designed to evaluate the immediate impact of the tweet: "Persuasiveness of the Political Message" and "Persuasiveness of the Political Figure". This process was repeated for both subjects (immigration and climate change) with each their own fictional politicians.

Respondents were asked to judge each statement based on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The use of a seven-point scale was intended to improve the reliability of the responses and ensure as much accuracy in responses as possible.

Measures

The measures section can be divided into three main segments: demographic data, pre-exposure opinions, and post-exposure evaluations. Below is an elaboration on each segment, detailing the specific types of statements and questions included.

Demographic Data

The survey began with collecting demographic data to contextualise the participants' responses and ensure a representative sample. Participants were asked about their age, gender, level of education, voting behaviour during the last election and their current political affiliation. This data was required for understanding the individual background of each of the respondents.

General Opinion on the Subject (Pre-Exposure)

Participants were then required to provide their opinions on a series of general statements about immigration and climate change to indicate their initial views on these subjects. For instance, they were asked to respond to statements such as "I am very concerned about the impact of immigration on Dutch society (Originally: Ik maak me grote zorgen over de impact van immigratie op de Nederlandse samenleving)" and "Stricter climate policies should be a priority for political parties (Originally: Een strenger klimaatbeleid moet een prioriteit zijn voor politieke partijen)". These initial opinions served as a baseline to compare any changes post-exposure.

Post-exposure Evaluations

Following exposure to the tweets, participants responded to two sub-segments of statements designed to evaluate the immediate impact of the tweet: the persuasiveness of the tweet itself and the persuasiveness of the political figure behind it. These segments played a key role in understanding the overall influence of the tweet's rhetoric.

The first segment, the persuasiveness of the political message, included statements aimed at capturing participants' emotional responses, agreement with the tweet's content, and credibility perceptions. Examples of these statements are "The tweet convinces me of the importance of the subject (Originally: De tweet overtuigt mij van het grote belang van het onderwerp)" and "The information in the tweet is credible (Originally: De informatie in de tweet is geloofwaardig)". These statements were designed to assess how convincing and trustworthy participants found the tweet, thereby measuring the immediate persuasive power of the political message itself.

The second segment, persuasiveness of the political figure, focused on evaluating the participants' perceptions of the politician who authored the tweet. Statements such as "Pieter Hoekstra [the fictional political figure] comes across as convincing in his political communication (Originally: Pieter Hoekstra komt overtuigend over op basis van zijn politieke communicatie)" and "I can imagine following Pieter Hoekstra on X or other platforms (Originally: Ik kan mij voorstellen dat ik Pieter Hoekstra op X of andere platformen ga volgen)" were included. These statements aimed to measure how participants perceived the politician's credibility, leadership qualities, and overall persuasiveness, which are decisive in understanding the impact of the rhetoric on the perception of political figures.

All in all, these segments provided a detailed understanding of how different types of political rhetoric (fear-based vs. non-fear-based) influenced participants' attitudes toward the

subjects (immigration and climate change) and their perceptions of the political figures behind the messages.

Manipulation and Stimuli Design

The stimuli were manipulated based on real-life examples from X, selecting tweets from prominent Dutch right-wing and left-wing politicians. The criteria for selecting tweets included distinguishing between fear-based and non-fear-based rhetoric and analysing the description and tone concerning immigration and climate change.
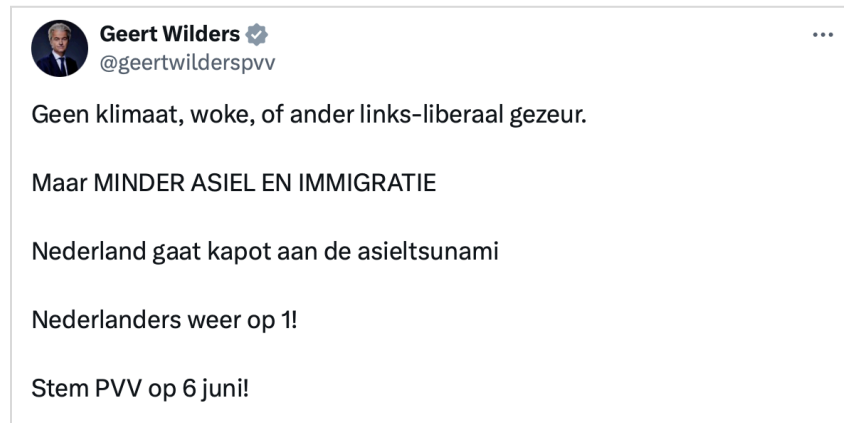
Stimuli on Immigration

For the tweet concerning fear-based communication, examples were taken from public tweets posted by the Dutch nationalist and former leader of the Dutch right-wing party PVV. As can be seen in Figures 1 to 3, Geert Wilders provided a prime example of using fear-based rhetoric in his tweets.

For example, the sample tweet in Figure 1 clearly leveraged fear-based rhetoric by using dramatic and emotional language and imagery to convey a sense of imminent threat. The phrase "asylum tsunami" served as a metaphor for an overwhelming, destructive force. Wilders' communication style and language was purposefully designed to create fear and urgency, suggesting that the influx of asylum seekers was an uncontrollable disaster that would lead to the destruction of the Netherlands. By positioning asylum seekers as a direct threat to the nation and prioritising "Dutch people first," one can confidently assume that the tweet aimed to incite a defensive reaction among its audience, prompting them to support the PVV as a means of self-preservation.

Figure 1

Fear-based tweet by dutch politician Geert Wilders on immigration

Note. This tweet was selected with the purpose to inspire the researcher during the creation of the stimuli. Translated into English, the tweet states: "No climate, woke, or other left-liberal nonsense. But LESS ASYLUM AND IMMIGRATION [.] The Netherlands is being destroyed by the asylum tsunami [.] Put Dutch people first! Vote PVV on June 6th!".

A second example, as shown in Figure 2, employed fear-based rhetoric by emphasising the negative consequences of asylum seekers on multiple fronts: economic, social, and cultural. The depiction of the Netherlands as "overcrowded," "costing billions," and experiencing a "huge housing shortage" portrayed asylum seekers as a source of numerous societal problems. The phrase "seem like occupied territory" used hinges on militaristic language to suggest that the presence of asylum seekers was akin to an invasion, further increasing a sense of threat. The urgency in "This must stop quickly" and "No concessions" underscored a zero-tolerance stance, appealing to the audience's desire for decisive action against the perceived threat.

Figure 2

Fear-based tweet by dutch politician Geert Wilders on immigration

Note. This tweet was selected with the purpose to inspire the researcher during the creation of the stimuli. Translated into English, the tweet states: "I can no longer bear to see the growing influx of asylum seekers. Our country is overcrowded, it costs billions, we have a huge housing shortage, and more and more towns and cities look like occupied territory. The Netherlands is unrecognisable. Everywhere are asylum seeker centres. This must stop quickly. Zero concessions. I've had enough.".

Figure 3 is an example of the usage of fear-based rhetoric by framing the influx of asylum seekers and the actions of Islamists as a direct threat to European and Dutch sovereignty. The mention of "one big caliphate" invoked fears of cultural and religious domination, while "flooded with 1000 asylum seekers per week" suggested a near to uncontrollable situation. By juxtaposing these threats with the perceived obsession of left-wing politicians and media with PVV and Wilders, the tweet implied that these threats were being underestimated or de-prioritised by the establishment. This, in turn, positioned the PVV and Wilders as the 'true defenders against these existential threats', and as such, encouraged support through fear.

Figure 3

Fear-based tweet by dutch politician Geert Wilders on immigration

Note. This tweet was selected with the purpose to inspire the researcher during the creation of the stimuli. Translated into English, the tweet states: "In Hamburg, Islamists are demanding that Europe becomes one big caliphate. The Netherlands is being flooded with 1000 asylum seekers per week and a crazy mandatory law. But left-wing politicians and media are obsessed with #PVV + #Wilders. It won't help[;] we will become much bigger!".

In all three tweets, fear-based rhetoric was used to paint a picture of imminent danger and societal collapse due to immigration and asylum seekers. By leveraging strong emotional appeals and alarming imagery, these tweets aimed to disrupt the audience's usual belief systems and elicit a sense of urgency and defensiveness, thereby persuading them to align with the political stance being promoted.

As a result of these examples, an immigration-related fear-based tweet by fictional right-wing political candidate "Pieter Hoekstra," created to represent the right during this research study (Figure 4), read as follows: "Wake up the Netherlands! Our streets and neighbourhoods are overrun by uncontrolled immigration, and the housing shortage has become unbearable. The Netherlands is unrecognisable! It is time to reclaim our country and protect it

from this invasion. Immigrants flood into our country, threaten our culture and security! Say NO to this chaos! #BordersClosed #NetherlandsFirst" (Original: Word wakker Nederland! Onze straten en buurten worden overspoeld door ongecontroleerde immigratie, en het woningtekort is ondraaglijk geworden. Nederland is onherkenbaar! Het is tijd om ons land terug te eisen en te beschermen tegen deze invasie. Immigranten stromen ons land binnen, bedreigen onze cultuur en veiligheid! Zeg NEE tegen deze chaos! #GrenzenDicht #NederlandEerst).

Figure 4

Fear-based tweet by (fictional) politician Pieter Hoekstra on immigration

Note. This tweet was created for the purposes of this study and does not represent any real individual or actual tweet.

Similar to the inspiration tweets, the fictional fear based tweet used dramatic and alarmist language to create a sense of imminent threat and urgency. Phrases like "our streets and neighbourhoods are overrun by uncontrolled immigration," "the housing shortage has become unbearable," and "The Netherlands is unrecognisable" echoed the same kind of catastrophic language found in the previous tweets. The tweet employed imagery and metaphors to amplify

the sense of threat. The description of immigration as an "invasion" and the use of the word "flood" to describe immigrants coming into the country were similar to the metaphors used in Figure 1, referring to the term "asylum tsunami" and Figure 3, "flooded with 1,000 asylum seekers per week". These metaphors were used to paint images of uncontrollable forces, intensifying the perceived threat. Moreover, the fictional tweet in Figure 4 emphasised the cultural and security threats posed by immigration. Phrases like "threaten our culture and security" and "reclaim our country" were aligned with the themes in the previous tweets that portray immigrants as a danger to national identity and safety.

In contrast, the non-fear-based rhetoric tweets displayed in Figure 5 on page 24 focused on policy and a slightly more constructive discourse. For instance, the non-fear-based tweet on immigration by the same fictional politician stated: "The Netherlands is experiencing an increase in immigration that is putting pressure on our housing market and cultural values. It is crucial that we manage our borders effectively and prioritise the interests of Dutch citizens. We must strive for solutions that do justice to our traditions. #BordersStrong #NetherlandsFirst" (Original: Nederland ervaart een toename in immigratie die onze woningmarkt en culturele waarden onder druk zet. Het is cruciaal dat we onze grenzen effectief beheren en prioriteit geven aan de belangen van Nederlandse burgers. We moeten streven naar oplossingen die recht doen aan onze tradities. #GrenzenSterk #NederlandVoorop).

The language in the fictional non-fear based tweet is more neutral and less alarmist. It uses phrases like "experiencing an increase in immigration" and "putting pressure on our housing market," which are factual and less emotionally charged than "overrun by uncontrolled immigration" and "housing shortage has become unbearable." Thus creating a more analytical

Figure 5

Non-fear-based tweet by (fictional) politician Pieter Hoekstra on immigration

Note. This tweet was created for the purposes of this study and does not represent any real individual or actual tweet.

tone. In addition, the imagery is less dramatic. The tweet avoids sensationalist terms like "invasion" and "flood" or "tsunami", instead choosing more neutral descriptions. It addresses challenges rather than immediate threats, making the message less about inciting fear and more about manageable issues. Besides, the portrayal of immigrants is less inflammatory. It acknowledges concerns about cultural values without depicting immigrants as a direct threat, and calls for a "solutions that does justice to our traditions", suggesting a constructive approach rather than an urgent defensive stance.

Stimuli on Climate Change

Similar content was researched in order to create the fear-based and non-fear-based stimuli about the subject of climate change. For inspiration, content by party member of the Dutch left-wing party GroenLinks-PvdA, Jesse Klaver, was analysed.

The first tweet, as displayed in Figure 6, employed fear-based rhetoric by highlighting the urgency of climate change. Phrases like "our climate, our nature, and our health are at stake" evoked a sense of immediate threat to personal and environmental well-being. The claim that there were "only 10 years to stop a climate crisis" added a sense of impending doom, urging voters to act quickly by supporting a political party that prioritised climate policy.

Figure 6

Fear-based tweet by dutch politician Jesse Klaver on climate change

Note. This tweet was selected with the purpose to inspire the researcher during the creation of the stimuli. Translated into English, the tweet states: "Our climate, our nature, and our health are at stake. The upcoming cabinet must prioritise climate policy because we have only 10 years to stop a climate crisis. Vote GreenLeft on March 15-17. #MoreSustainability #MoreGreenLeft".

The second tweet used stronger fear-based rhetoric. The phrase "the Earth will become an uninhabitable planet" was applied as a dramatic prediction that invoked existential fear about the future of the planet, suggesting that failure to act now would result in catastrophic consequences. The expression "for us, enough is enough" conveyed a sense of frustration, positioning the party as the only reasonable choice against the inadequate climate change policies of the current Dutch cabinet. The tweet narrowed down on fears about the inadequacy of current climate policies and the urgent need for immediate, drastic action.

Figure 7

Fear-based tweet by dutch politician Jesse Klaver on climate change

Note. This tweet was selected with the purpose to inspire the researcher during the creation of the stimuli. Translated into English, the tweet states: "If we don't put everything on the line, the Earth will become an uninhabitable planet. The next 5 years are crucial. For us, enough is enough. We cannot agree with the cabinet's climate policy, which we know will not meet the climate goals.".

The third content example displayed in Figure 8 combined immediate crisis rhetoric with a sense of governmental betrayal and hypocrisy. This approach exemplified populism, as it

distinctly separates the general population from the 'elite'. The assertion, that "the climate crisis is here and now" underlines the immediacy of the threat, while the contrast between governmental encouragement to reduce fossil fuel use and the simultaneous provision of €37.5 billion in fossil fuel subsidies portrayed the government as acting against public interest.

Figure 7

Fear-based tweet by dutch politician Jesse Klaver on climate change

Note. This tweet was selected with the purpose to inspire the researcher during the creation of the stimuli. Translated into English, the tweet states: "The climate crisis is here and now. And while our government encourages us to use fewer fossil fuels, it simultaneously gives €37,5 billion in fossil subsidies to big companies each year. Utterly foolish. #StopFossilSubsidies.".

Based on the previous examples on climate change, the fear-based climate change tweet by the fictional political candidate "Saskia Meijer" in Figure 9, created to represent the left

during the research study, stated: "Our country is on the brink of disaster due to uncontrolled climate change. The climate crisis threatens our health, safety, and economy. The Netherlands, largely below sea level, is at high risk of flooding. We must now pull out all the stops to keep our country liveable. Reject those who ignore this crisis. Strong together, act now! #ActOnClimate #ClimateCrisis" (Original: Ons land staat op de rand van een ramp door ongecontroleerde klimaatverandering. De klimaatcrisis bedreigt onze gezondheid, veiligheid en economie. Nederland, grotendeels onder zeeniveau, loopt groot risico op overstromingen. We moeten nu alles op alles zetten om ons land leefbaar te houden. Wijs degenen af die deze crisis negeren. Samen sterk, nu handelen! #ActOnClimate #Klimaatcrisis).

Figure 8

Fear-based tweet by (fictional) politician Saskia Meijer on climate change

Note. This tweet was created for the purposes of this study and does not represent any real individual or actual tweet.

The fictional tweet too employed similar strategies to evoke a sense of urgency and threat. It clearly set a fear-inducing tone by suggesting that the Netherlands was on the brink of disaster due to uncontrolled climate change. This opening statement immediately established the severity and immediacy of the threat. Moreover, the tweet outlined specific consequences, highlighting that the climate crisis threatened health, safety, and the economy. This made the threat personal and comprehensive, touching on multiple aspects of daily life. By focusing on the unique vulnerability of the Netherlands, the tweet made the threat more relatable and immediate to the Dutch audience. In addition, an urgent call to action was included, stressing that immediate and drastic measures were necessary to prevent disaster. This was combined with a critique of those who downplayed or ignored the issue, creating a clear separation between responsible action and dangerous negligence.

The non-fear-based climate change tweet by "Saskia Meijer" as seen in Figure 10, however, focused on positive actions and collaborative efforts instead: "The Netherlands, with its unique location largely below sea level, has much to gain from effective climate measures. The climate crisis affects our health, safety, and economy. Let us join forces to combat further climate change and keep our country safe and liveable for future generations. It's time to act! #ActOnClimate #ClimateCrisis" (Original: Nederland, met zijn unieke ligging grotendeels onder zeeniveau, heeft veel te winnen bij effectieve klimaatmaatregelen. De klimaatcrisis heeft invloed op onze gezondheid, veiligheid en economie. Laten we de handen ineenslaan om verdere klimaatverandering tegen te gaan en ons land veilig en leefbaar te houden voor toekomstige generaties. Het is tijd om te handelen! #ActOnClimate #Klimaatcrisis).

Figure 9

Non-fear-based tweet by (fictional) politician Saskia Meijer on climate change

Saskia Meijer ✓ @saskiameijer · 4m · · ·

Nederland, met zijn unieke ligging grotendeels onder zeeniveau, heeft veel te winnen bij effectieve klimaatmaatregelen. De klimaatcrisis heeft invloed op onze gezondheid, veiligheid en economie. Laten we de handen ineenslaan om verdere klimaatverandering tegen te gaan en ons land veilig en leefbaar te houden voor toekomstige generaties.

Het is tijd om te handelen! #ActOnClimate #Klimaatcrisis

Note. This tweet was created for the purposes of this study and does not represent any real individual or actual tweet.

The second tweet on climate change was less fear-based, as it framed the issue in a more positive light by highlighting the benefits of effective climate measures for the Netherlands, rather than emphasising imminent danger. This approach created a constructive tone that encouraged proactive behaviour without immediately inducing panic. In addition, the tweet adopted a collaborative and inclusive tone: By encouraging people to "join hands" to combat climate change, it purposefully created a sense of community and shared responsibility. This contrasted with fear-based rhetoric, which is often seen to isolate individuals by creating a sense of urgency and alarm. Moreover, the absence of dramatic or alarming language was influential. Terms such as "disaster," "crisis," or "urgent threat" were deliberately missing, reducing the sense of immediate fear. Instead, the tweet used measured and balanced language, making the

message more agreeable and less anxiety-inducing. Overall, the tweet maintained a balanced and constructive approach, aiming to inspire action through positive reinforcement and collective effort.

Subject Matter of the Stimuli

Immigration and climate change were suitable subjects for the stimuli designs in this study because they were highly relevant issues that evoked strong emotional responses across different political affiliations. As a result, these topics were frequently used in political rhetoric to mobilise support and highlight ideological differences. The selected example tweets that inspired the manipulated stimuli, by illustrating how fear-based messaging was constructed to emphasise threats and urgent action, highlighted the appropriateness of the two subjects and served as an instrument to test the hypotheses in this research design.

Ethical Considerations

Given the potentially distressing nature of the subjects (immigration and climate change), ethical considerations were taken into account. Participants were informed of the study's purpose and ensured anonymity and confidentiality. They were also provided with the option to withdraw from the study at any time.

Recruitment and Sample

Convenience sampling was used to distribute the survey via the researcher's personal network, word of mouth, as well as social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, LinkedIn, and Facebook. The survey targeted individuals over 18 years of age with Dutch

nationality or residency and the right to vote. Participants were encouraged to share the questionnaire within their networks, specifically avoiding the close network of the researcher to minimise bias. The target was to recruit 150 participants, aiming to have 120 suitable for analysis, with an equal distribution of respondents across different political affiliations.

Sample Demographics

The sample for this study was diverse in terms of age, gender, education, and political affiliation, therefore providing a comprehensive basis for analysis.

Age Distribution. The participants' ages ranged widely, with nearly half of the sample (47.4%) comprising young adults aged 18-30 years. The sample also included individuals aged 31-40 years (10.5%), 41-50 years (7.0%), 51-60 years (10.5%), and those above 60 years (12.3%).

Gender Distribution. Gender distribution within the sample was relatively balanced. Females constituted 54.4% of the sample, while males made up 43.9%. An additional 1.8% of participants preferred not to disclose their gender.

Educational Background. The educational background of the participants varied considerably, with an observable accumulation in higher education. The sample included individuals with qualifications ranging from secondary education to postgraduate degrees. More precisely, 8.8% of participants had completed VMBO, LBO, VBO, or MAVO; 15.8% had attained HAVO or VWO qualifications; 10.5% held MBO qualifications; 22.8% had completed

HBO; and 40.4% had attained university-level education (WO), with an additional 1.8% holding postdoctoral or PhD qualifications.

Political Affiliation. Political affiliation among the participants was diverse, covering a broad spectrum of Dutch political parties. The distribution included significant representation from GroenLinks-PvdA (10.5%), D66 (8.8%), VVD (14.0%), and Volt (21.1%). Other affiliations included SP (1.8%), CDA (3.5%), NSC (1.8%), ChristenUnie (1.8%), PVV (5.3%), JA21 (1.8%), BBB (12.3%), PvdD (8.8%), and DENK (3.5%). Additionally, 5.3% of participants indicated that they would not vote. The highest affiliation included VVD, reflecting substantial representation of right-wing preferences. To facilitate analysis, a combined political affiliation variable was created, categorising participants as left-wing, right-wing, or non-voting. This revealed that a majority of the participants (54.4%) identified as left-wing, 40.4% as right-wing, and 5.3% as non-voting.

In general, the demographic profile of the sample was characterised by a balanced gender distribution, a substantial representation of young adults, and a high level of educational attainment. Politically, the sample included a broad spectrum of affiliations, with a slight skew towards left-wing orientations.

Analysis

To address the research question, a Repeated Measures ANOVA was deemed the most appropriate statistical approach. This decision followed a series of preparatory steps to ensure the dataset's suitability for such analysis. Initially, the dataset was imported from Qualtrics into

SPSS and refined by removing incomplete responses, reducing the sample size from 97 to $N = 57$ participants to enhance data quality.

Variable Creation

In preparation for the analysis, new variables were created, and existing ones were recoded to facilitate accurate and valid interpretations. Dummy variables representing left-wing, right-wing, and non-voting affiliations were generated based on participants' political responses. These were subsequently consolidated into a single variable (Combined_Left_Right), categorising political affiliation into left-wing (1), right-wing (2), and non-voting (0). Additionally, mean variables were calculated for various scales to streamline the analysis process. For instance, within the fear-based rhetoric group, mean scores were created for "Persuasiveness Immigration Tweet (FB)" and "Persuasiveness Right-wing Politician (FB)." Similar mean variables were created for the non-fear-based rhetoric group and the climate change topic. This approach facilitated a more coherent analysis of the different rhetorical strategies employed. A composite variable was also developed to encapsulate the rhetoric conditions, distinguishing between fear-based and non-fear-based messages for each subject.

Frequency Tables and Descriptive Statistics

To understand the distribution of responses and the central tendencies of key variables, frequency tables and descriptive statistics were generated. This step allowed for the inspection of mean values, standard deviations, and the number of valid cases across different groups and conditions, providing a solid foundation for further analysis.

Repeated Measures ANOVA

The primary analysis involved conducting Repeated Measures ANOVAs to explore the impact of rhetoric type on persuasiveness across different political affiliations. The first Repeated Measures ANOVA assessed the effect of rhetoric type on the persuasiveness of tweets among different political groups. The within-subjects factor, Rhetoric_Type, had four levels: Fear-based Immigration, Non-fear-based Immigration, Fear-based Climate Change, and Non-fear-based Climate Change. The between-subjects factor, Combined_Political_Affiliation, differentiated political affiliation groups. A similar analysis was conducted to examine the effect of rhetoric type on the persuasiveness of politicians, using the same between-subjects factors.

Reliability

To ensure the reliability of the individual scales used in this study, Cronbach's alpha was applied to assess the internal consistency of the individual scales. The results indicated high reliability for all scales: The scale that measured the persuasiveness of the fear-based immigration tweet revealed an alpha of .962, while the scale measuring persuasiveness of the fear-based, right-wing inspired politician displayed an alpha of .938. The scale that was created to investigate the persuasiveness of the fear-based climate change tweet showed an alpha of .963, meanwhile, the scale accounting for the persuasiveness of the fear-based, left-wing inspired politician generated an alpha of .951. For the non-fear-based scales, the persuasiveness of the non-fear-based immigration tweet displayed an alpha of .945, and the persuasiveness of the non-fear-based, right-wing inspired politician displayed an alpha of .943. Finally, the scale that researched the persuasiveness of the non-fear-based climate change tweet computed an alpha of

.922, while the scale measuring the persuasiveness of the non-fear-based, left-wing inspired politician showed an alpha of .854.

These alpha values indicated that the scales used in this study are reliable and consistent.

Conclusion

This research model systematically investigated the immediate effects of fear-based versus non-fear-based political rhetoric on online audiences with varying political affiliations. By examining opinions on two subjects, evaluation of messages, and perceived persuasiveness of politicians, this research design provides a substantiated framework to uncover the effects of opposing political communication strategies.

Results

The analyses chosen for this study were purposefully aligned with the research design and hypotheses. Primarily, descriptive statistics ensure data quality and provide an overview of the data. The creation and recoding of variables simplified the representation of political affiliation, and transformed the individual measurement scales into combined mean variables. Meanwhile, a Repeated Measures ANOVA facilitated a relevant examination of the impact of rhetoric type and political affiliation on persuasiveness. The use of multivariate tests and tests of within-subjects effects provided comprehensive insights, whereas estimated marginal means offered a clear interpretation of the results. These analyses collectively ensured a befitting examination of the research questions and hypotheses at hand.

SPSS Output 1 - Persuasiveness of Tweets

Multivariate Tests

The analysis of the persuasiveness of tweets using multivariate tests revealed several key findings. First, the multivariate tests for the Rhetoric_Type_Factor, including Pillai's Trace, Wilks' Lambda, Hotelling's Trace, and Roy's Largest Root, were all non-significant with $F(3, 54)$ = 1.202, p = .310. This indicated that there was no significant difference in the persuasiveness of tweets across different rhetoric types (fear-based vs. non-fear-based). However, the interaction between Rhetoric_Type_Factor and Combined_Political_Affiliation was significant, $F(6, 110)$ = 2.825, p = .012. This suggested a significant interaction effect between the type of rhetoric and political affiliation, indicating that the impact of fear-based versus non-fear-based rhetoric was different for people with different political affiliations.

Between-Subjects Effects

The tests of between-subjects effects further supported these findings. The main effect of the Rhetoric_Type_Factor was not significant, $F(1, 56)$ = 0.827, p = .366, suggesting no overall main effect of rhetoric type on tweet persuasiveness. However, the interaction between Rhetoric_Type_Factor and Combined_Political_Affiliation was significant, $F(2, 56)$ = 11.221, p < .001, indicating a significant interaction effect. This finding suggested that the persuasiveness of the rhetoric changed significantly based on whether the person was left-wing, right-wing, or non-voting.

Estimated Marginal Means

For the Combined_Political_Affiliation variable, non-voting individuals had a mean persuasiveness score of 3.833, left-wing individuals had a mean score of 4.070, and right-wing

individuals had a mean score of 3.439. This indicated that left-wing individuals found the rhetoric more persuasive on average, while right-wing individuals found it less persuasive. For the Rhetoric_Type_Factor, fear-based rhetoric had a mean score of 4.033, while non-fear-based rhetoric had a mean score of 3.529. On average, fear-based rhetoric was found to be more persuasive than non-fear-based rhetoric.

SPSS Output 2 - Persuasiveness of Politicians

Multivariate Tests

The analysis of the persuasiveness of politicians using multivariate tests revealed that the Rhetoric_Type_Factor was non-significant, $F(3, 54) = 0.601$, $p = .615$, indicating no significant main effect of rhetoric type on politician persuasiveness. However, the interaction between Rhetoric_Type_Factor and Combined_Political_Affiliation was, in fact, significant, $F(6, 108) = 3.020$, $p = .009$, therefore indicating a significant interaction effect. This suggested that the impact of the type of rhetoric on politician persuasiveness varied significantly depending on people's political affiliation.

Between-Subjects Effects

The tests of between-subjects effects confirmed these findings. The main effect of Rhetoric_Type_Factor on politician persuasiveness was not significant $F(1, 56) = 0.035$, $p = .854$, suggesting no overall main effect. However, the interaction between Rhetoric_Type_Factor and Combined_Political_Affiliation was determined to be significant instead, $F(2, 56) = 12.489$, $p < .001$.

Estimated Marginal Means

The estimated marginal means for the Combined_Political_Affiliation variable showed

that non-voting individuals had a mean persuasiveness score of 4.107, left-wing individuals had a mean score of 4.357, and right-wing individuals had a mean score of 3.994. This indicated that left-wing individuals found the politicians more persuasive on average, while right-wing individuals found them less persuasive. For the Rhetoric_Type_Factor, fear-based rhetoric had a mean score of 4.269, while non-fear-based rhetoric had a mean score of 4.036. On average, fear-based rhetoric was found to be more persuasive than non-fear-based rhetoric.

Evaluation of Research Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1 - Impact of Fear-based Rhetoric

The results did not support a significant main effect of rhetoric type (fear-based vs. non-fear-based) on the persuasiveness of tweets or politicians. However, the significant interaction effect between rhetoric type and political affiliation suggested that the impact of fear-based rhetoric varied depending on political affiliation.

Hypothesis 2 - Right-wing Individuals and Immigration Rhetoric

Contrary to the hypothesis, right-wing individuals rated the fear-based immigration tweets and politicians as less persuasive compared to left-wing individuals. Therefore, the second hypothesis was rejected. This finding contradicted the expectation that right-wing individuals would find fear-based immigration rhetoric more persuasive.

Hypothesis 3 - Left-wing Individuals and Climate Change Rhetoric

The results supported the hypothesis that left-wing individuals found fear-based climate change rhetoric more persuasive compared to right-wing individuals. The interaction effects confirm that political affiliation influenced the perceived persuasiveness of fear-based rhetoric on climate change.

Conclusion

These findings highlight the complexity of the interaction between rhetoric type and political affiliation, underscoring the importance of considering these factors in persuasive communication strategies.

Discussion & Conclusion

The following segment addressed the main findings in relation to the overarching research question, which formed the foundation of the study. The discussion provided a focused interpretation of the previously reported results and explored the theoretical contributions and implications, while also highlighting any limiting factors that may have influenced the research outcomes to any degree.

Main Findings

This study aimed to determine whether exposure to fear-based versus non-fear-based political rhetoric differed in its persuasive power on online audiences with different political affiliations. To address this overarching research question, it was essential to interpret and discuss the three hypotheses that broke down this primary inquiry.

Based on the first hypothesis, the study revealed that fear-based rhetoric did not universally enhance the immediate persuasiveness of either the tweet or the political figure. Instead, its effectiveness was dependent on the general political views of the audience. This finding suggested that the persuasive power of political rhetoric was not solely reliant on whether it was fear-based or non-fear-based, as previously hypothesised, but was significantly influenced by the audience's political affiliation.

Moving on to the second hypothesis, the findings unexpectedly indicated that right-wing individuals might not respond as positively to fear-based immigration rhetoric as initially assumed. Instead, the results showed that left-wing individuals found such rhetoric more persuasive. Plausible explanations for this could include overexposure to this type of rhetoric among right-wing respondents, leading to a measurable level of desensitisation. This specific finding emphasised the complexity of audience responses to fear-based rhetoric, suggesting that right-wing audiences might be more critical or sceptical of fear-based messaging on immigration than previously assumed. Nonetheless, this insight was valuable for understanding how different political affiliations responded to specific rhetorical strategies and how factors other than fear-based rhetoric might contribute to the effectiveness of political communication.

Lastly, the results for the third hypothesis aligned with the broader research question and the initial assumption that fear-based rhetoric on climate change was particularly persuasive to left-wing individuals. It underlined the idea that the subject of the rhetoric - in this case, climate change - interacted with the audience's political views and significantly affected the perceived level of persuasiveness. This finding indicated that left-wing audiences were more receptive to fear-based messaging on climate-related issues, which could be interpreted as a critical insight for political communicators when strategising the effectiveness of their messages.

Collectively, the findings from these three hypotheses addressed the research question by illustrating that the persuasive power of fear-based versus non-fear-based political rhetoric was not consistent across all audiences, but varied significantly based on political affiliation. Specifically, the study revealed that fear-based rhetoric did not inherently enhance persuasiveness among all audiences. Instead, it was more effective when aligned with the audience's political priorities and values. The findings indicated that right-wing individuals

might be less responsive to fear-based immigration rhetoric than anticipated. While the exact reasons for this remained unclear, it suggested a need for further research that included more nuanced or differently framed messages. Meanwhile, left-wing individuals were more persuaded by fear-based climate change rhetoric, indicating a stronger alignment between their political values and the subject of the fear-based messages. Fear-based rhetoric that emphasised the urgency and potential catastrophic consequences of climate change resonated strongly with their pre-existing concerns, making such messages more persuasive.

In summary, these insights highlighted the critical role of audience segmentation and broader external influences in political communication. Yet, they equally underscored the importance of adapting rhetorical strategies to align with the specific political affiliations of different audience groups.

Theoretical Contribution

This study contributed to the theoretical understanding of political communication by demonstrating that the effectiveness of rhetorical strategies was not simply based on the rhetoric type (fear-based vs. non-fear-based) but was significantly influenced by the political affiliation of the audience. The outcomes of this research study, particularly the rejection of the second hypothesis, contradicted the traditional assumption that fear-based rhetoric invariably enhances persuasiveness among all recipients. The finding that fear-based immigration rhetoric was less persuasive to right-wing individuals called for a reevaluation of the assumptions underlying fear appeal theories in political contexts and communication strategies. It challenged the notion that a right-wing populist audience inherently desired or was significantly affected by fear-based

rhetoric. This assumption, derived from the frequent use of fear-based language by populist and extreme right groups, was proven incorrect in the context of this research study.

Similarly, the findings contributed to the understanding of audience resistance to persuasive messages. By showing that right-wing individuals were less persuaded by fear-based immigration rhetoric, the study highlighted the concept of resistance, where audiences may reject messages that conflict with their pre-existing beliefs and inherent resistance to being told what to do or believe. This resistance occurred when individuals felt that fear-based rhetoric was attempting to control their attitudes or behaviours: a phenomenon that frequently correlated with the values of right-wing individuals in previous studies and research. This specific interpretation may contribute to the broader theoretical understanding of purposeful resistance to persuasion, which can be a useful insight when developing effective political communication strategies.

Theoretical Implications

Within the context of the findings of this study, it was safe to assume that the interaction effect played a significant role in measuring the persuasiveness of fear-based rhetoric. Therefore, theoretical models that measured fear appeals may have been advised to incorporate variables related to audience characteristics, such as political affiliation, to accurately predict the persuasiveness of fear-based messages. This perspective, however, challenged the standard 'one-size-fits-all' approach often captured in fear appeal literature. Instead, it suggested a more nuanced theory that accounted for a diverse audience by incorporating multiple variables that highlighted individual differences, rather than basing assumptions on a limited set of generalised indicators.

Given the differential impact of fear-based rhetoric on left-wing versus right-wing

individuals, the findings may have had implications for theories on populist communication strategies. The results suggested that the effectiveness of populist rhetoric might vary not only by the emotional content but also by the audience's susceptibility to fear-based communication. Consequently, this insight could deepen existing theoretical observations on populism by emphasising the conditional and somewhat unpredictable nature of populist appeals.

Likewise, the results of the study implied that political communicators must carefully consider the ideological preferences of their target audiences when creating messages. This again suggested that a one-size-fits-all approach may have been less effective than adapting messages to resonate with specific political groups. Based on this observation, theoretical models might benefit from incorporating strategies for message customisation based on audience segmentation. However, when it came to the practical application of personalisation and customisation on social media platforms like X, it was important to note that such efforts might be difficult, as exposure was less controllable, making generalisation to some degree seem logical.

Limitations

There were several pertinent limitations that emerged during the completion of this study that needed to be addressed. One significant factor that may have negatively impacted the study's outcomes was the sample size, specifically the number of respondents eligible for analysis. The initial goal was to collect responses from approximately 150 participants, with the expectation that around 120 responses would be usable for data analysis. However, despite extensive efforts by the researcher, only 97 responses were collected, of which just 57 cases were appropriate for analysis. This small sample size reduced the statistical power of the study, increasing the likelihood of Type II errors, where true effects of fear-based versus non-fear-based political

rhetoric on different political affiliations might have gone unnoticed. Additionally, the increased risk of sampling bias meant that these results might not accurately reflect the diversity of the broader population. Consequently, the findings regarding the persuasiveness of political rhetoric might not have been applicable to the wider population with varying political affiliations, therefore limiting the study's general applicability.

Furthermore, the absence of a pilot or pre-test may have influenced the study's outcomes. A pre-test could have assisted in identifying flaws in the study design ahead of time, thereby enhancing the overall credibility of the research findings. Without this preliminary step, unvalidated instruments may have been used, leading to tools that did not accurately measure persuasiveness or political affiliation, and thus producing invalid conclusions. However, with the aid of Cronbach's alpha, it was determined that each individual scale had an alpha of .854 or higher, suggesting that the internal consistency of the scales was reasonably reliable.

Additional limitations included the lack of variables accounting for a more individualised perception of how the stimuli design may have affected each respondent. Variables that measured for example media consumption, personal experiences related to the subject, or factors providing a better understanding of why respondents supported specific political parties might have added further nuance and clarification to the overall results.

The experimental setting also might not have fully captured the complexity of real-world political communication and its distribution on online social media platforms. Consequently, participants' responses to hypothetical tweets in a survey may have differed from how they would react to real-life instances of exposure. Due to the study's aim to measure immediate effects, only a small number of two manipulated stimuli were shown. The lack of consistent exposure over a longer period of time may have prevented respondents from being influenced or

becoming accustomed to the types of rhetoric. This contrasted with typical exposure on social media, where users frequently encountered media and communication in high volumes and over extended periods.

Addressing these limitations in future research will enhance the potency and applicability of the findings.

Recommendations for Future Research

As stated in the main findings, the results indicated that right-wing individuals might be less responsive to fear-based immigration rhetoric than anticipated. While the exact reasons for this remained unclear, it suggests a need for further research that includes more nuanced or differently framed messages. By analysing how different social media platforms beyond X (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, or TikTok) influence the effectiveness of fear-based and non-fear-based rhetoric, for example, valuable insights could be gained. Each platform has unique features and differences in demographics, causing the effectiveness of political messages to potentially vary considerably.

Beyond fear-based rhetoric, future research could explore the impact of other emotional appeals such as hope, anger, or empathy on political persuasiveness. Understanding how different emotions interact with political affiliation to influence message effectiveness could enrich the theoretical framework of emotional appeals in political communication. This could also provide an explanation for why right-wing supporters are less affected by fear-based communication and might be more susceptible to other emotional appeals.

Furthermore, by focusing on the Dutch political context, this study provides insights into how cultural and national contexts shape the effectiveness of political rhetoric in the Netherlands. However, findings based on one cultural context might not directly apply to all

cultures and countries. Therefore, it is advised to conduct more context and country-specific research to develop theories that account for cultural variations in political communication.

Lastly, future research should investigate the potential long term effects, rather than just the immediate effects, of exposure to fear-based versus non-fear-based rhetoric. Examining how repeated exposure over time influences persuasiveness and whether desensitisation occurs would provide valuable insights into the time-related dynamics of political communication. In reality, this approach would more accurately mimic real-life exposure to social media, where users frequently encounter media and communication over extended periods of time.

By addressing these areas, future research can build on the findings of this study and contribute to a deeper understanding of the complexities involved in political communication.

Conclusion

This study aimed to explore whether exposure to fear-based versus non-fear-based political rhetoric differed in its persuasive power on online audiences with different political affiliations. The findings indicated that the effectiveness of rhetorical strategies was influenced by the political affiliation of the audience, rather than being solely dependent on the type of rhetoric. Specifically, fear-based rhetoric did not universally enhance persuasiveness, and its impact varied notably across different political groups.

The results revealed that right-wing individuals might have been less responsive to fear-based immigration rhetoric than initially assumed, while left-wing individuals found fear-based climate change rhetoric particularly persuasive. These insights challenged the traditional assumption that fear-based rhetoric was universally effective and emphasised the need for a more nuanced approach in political communication strategies.

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Appendix

AI - Tooling

During the preparation of this work the author used ChatGPT in order to ensure a coherent structure and maintain high standards of academic writing. After using this tool/service, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and took full responsibility for the content of the work.

Contents of the Questionnaire (in Dutch):

Introduction

Geachte Deelnemer,

Hartelijk dank voor uw bereidheid om deel te nemen aan dit onderzoeksproject. Dit onderzoek wordt uitgevoerd als onderdeel van een afstudeeropdracht voor de bacheloropleiding Communicatiewetenschap aan de Universiteit Twente. Tijdens het onderzoek worden de reacties van Nederlanders op twee politieke tweets onderzocht.* Lees de volgende informatie zorgvuldig door voordat u verder gaat.

Doel van het onderzoek

Het doel van dit onderzoek is om de onmiddellijke reacties van Nederlandse volwassenen op politieke tweets te analyseren. De tweets in het onderzoek zijn fictief.

Procedure van het onderzoek

Het invullen van deze vragenlijst neemt ongeveer 10 minuten van uw tijd in beslag. U begint met het verstrekken van enkele achtergrondgegevens. Vervolgens krijgt u stellingen voorgelegd die betrekking hebben op een maatschappelijk thema, gevolgd door een tweet van een politicus over het thema. U wordt gevraagd de tweet te beoordelen op overtuigingskracht en uw indruk van de politicus die de tweet heeft geplaatst. Daarna wordt een tweede thema met een bijbehorende tweet gepresenteerd, waarna u vergelijkbare stellingen beantwoordt over de tweede tweet.

Vrijwillige deelname

Uw deelname is geheel vrijwillig. U bent vrij om u op elk moment terug te trekken uit het onderzoek zonder dat u hiervoor een reden hoeft op te geven.

Privacy

Dit onderzoek verzamelt geen persoonlijk identificeerbare informatie. Alle antwoorden worden anoniem verwerkt. De volledig anonieme resultaten kunnen eventueel worden gedeeld met andere onderzoekers of worden gepubliceerd in een openbare database. Ze kunnen ook worden gebruikt in toekomstig onderzoek over soortgelijke onderwerpen.

Uw rechten als deelnemer aan het onderzoek

Als u vragen heeft over uw rechten als onderzoeksdeelnemer, of zorgen over dit onderzoek wilt bespreken met iemand anders dan de onderzoeker, neem dan contact op met de secretaris van de ethische commissie van de faculteit Behavioural, Management and Social Sciences (BMS): ethicscommittee-bms@utwente.nl.

Mocht u tijdens of na uw deelname vragen of opmerkingen hebben over het onderzoek, dan kunt u ook direct contact opnemen met de onderzoeker.

Met vriendelijke groet,

Renée Kamphuis

Contact: r.j.m.kamphuis@student.utwente.nl

*Indien u niet stemgerechtigd bent in Nederland, zal de vragenlijst automatisch worden afgesloten. Het is voor de resultaten van dit onderzoek van belang dat de deelnemersgroep duidelijk gespecificeerd is.

Written Confirmation

Hierbij bevestig ik dat ik de informatie over dit onderzoek heb gelezen en begrepen. Ik geef vrijwillig toestemming om deel te nemen aan dit onderzoek. Ook begrijp ik dat ik op elk moment kan stoppen met het onderzoek zonder opgave van reden. Indien u niet akkoord gaat, wordt uw deelname hierbij beëindigd.

Answer Options:

- Ja, ik ga akkoord.
- Nee, ik ga niet akkoord.

Demographic Questions (Pre-Exposure):

1. Wat is uw leeftijd?

    a. Open Answer

2. Wat is uw geslacht?

    a. Vrouwelijk

    b. Mannelijk

    c. Non-binair

    d. Zeg ik liever niet.

3. Wat is het hoogste opleidingsniveau dat u heeft voltooid?

    a. Geen formele opleiding.

    b. Basisonderwijs

    c. VMBO / LBO / VBO / MAVO

    d. HAVO / VWO

    e. MBO (Middelbaar Beroepsonderwijs)

    f. HBO (Hoger Beroepsonderwijs)

    g. Universitair (WO - Wetenschappelijk Onderwijs)

    h. Postdoctoraal/PhD

4. Heeft u momenteel het recht om tijdens Nederlandse verkiezingen te stemmen? Indien u niet stemgerechtigd bent in Nederland, zal de vragenlijst automatisch worden afgesloten.

Het is voor de resultaten van dit onderzoek van belang dat de deelnemersgroep duidelijk gespecificeerd is.

    a. Ja, ik ben stemgerechtigd in Nederland.

    b. Nee, ik ben niet stemgerechtigd in Nederland.

5. Op welke politieke partij heeft u tijdens de meest recente parlementsverkiezingen gestemd?

    a. GroenLinks-PvdA

    b. SP (Socialistische Partij)

    c. D66 (Democraten 66)

    d. CDA (Christen-Democratisch Appèl)

    e. NSC (Nieuw Sociaal Contract)

    f. ChristenUnie

    g. VVD (Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie)

    h. PVV (Partij voor de Vrijheid)

    i. FvD (Forum voor Democratie)

    j. JA21

    k. BBB (BoerBurgerBeweging)

    l. Volt

    m. PvdD (Partij voor de Dieren)

    n. SGP (Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij)

    o. 50Plus

    p. DENK

    q. BIJ1

    r. Anders, namelijk…

        i. Open Antwoord

    s. Ik heb niet gestemd.

6. Op welke politieke partij zou u stemmen als er morgen parlementsverkiezingen zouden zijn? U mag maximaal drie opties kiezen.

    a. GroenLinks-PvdA

    b. SP (Socialistische Partij)

    c. D66 (Democraten 66)

    d. CDA (Christen-Democratisch Appèl)

    e. NSC (Nieuw Sociaal Contract)

    f. ChristenUnie

    g. VVD (Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie)

    h. PVV (Partij voor de Vrijheid)

    i. FvD (Forum voor Democratie)

    j. JA21

    k. BBB (BoerBurgerBeweging)

    l. Volt

    m. PvdD (Partij voor de Dieren)

    n. SGP (Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij)

    o. 50Plus

    p. DENK

q.   Ik zou niet stemmen.

Statements on Perception on Immigration

Answer options per statement range from "Strongly agree - Agree - Somewhat agree - Neutral - Somewhat disagree - Disagree - Strongly disagree".

Statements:

- Ik maak me grote zorgen over de impact van immigratie op de Nederlandse samenleving.

- Een strenger immigratiebeleid moet een prioriteit zijn voor politieke partijen.

- Ik ervaar regelmatig frustratie door de problemen die door immigratie ontstaan.

- Ik praat vaak over immigratie met mensen zoals familie, vrienden of collega's.

- Ik maak me zorgen dat immigratie de manier waarop we leven in Nederland zal veranderen.

- Het frustreert mij als een strenger immigratiebeleid geen prioriteit krijgt van de overheid.

Statements on Perception on Climate Change

Answer options per statement range from "Strongly agree - Agree - Somewhat agree - Neutral - Somewhat disagree - Disagree - Strongly disagree".

Statements:

- Ik maak me grote zorgen over de impact van klimaatverandering op de Nederlandse samenleving.

- Een strenger klimaatbeleid moet een prioriteit zijn voor politieke partijen.

- Ik ervaar regelmatig frustratie door de problemen die door klimaatverandering ontstaan.

- Ik praat vaak over klimaatverandering met mensen zoals familie, vrienden of collega's.

- Ik maak me zorgen dat klimaatverandering de manier waarop we leven in Nederland zal veranderen.

- Het frustreert mij als een strenger klimaatbeleid geen prioriteit krijgt van de overheid.

Statements on Persuasiveness of Tweet (Immigration)

Answer options per statement range from "Strongly agree - Agree - Somewhat agree - Neutral - Somewhat disagree - Disagree - Strongly disagree".

Statements:

- Ik vind de inhoud van de tweet overtuigend.

- Pieter Hoekstra maakt een terechte opmerking in zijn tweet.

- De tweet overtuigt mij van het grote belang van het onderwerp.

- De manier waarop Pieter Hoekstra de tweet heeft geformuleerd, maakt deze overtuigender.

- De informatie in de tweet is geloofwaardig.

- De tweet motiveert mij om mij verder in het onderwerp te verdiepen.

- De tweet inspireert mij om actie te ondernemen vóór een strenger immigratiebeleid.

- De inhoud van de tweet sluit aan bij mijn persoonlijke waarden.

- Na het lezen van de tweet voel ik meer urgentie om mij tegen immigratie in te zetten.

Statements on Persuasiveness of Tweet (Climate Change)

Answer options per statement range from "Strongly agree - Agree - Somewhat agree - Neutral - Somewhat disagree - Disagree - Strongly disagree".

Statements:

- Ik vind de inhoud van de tweet overtuigend.

- Saskia Meijer maakt een terechte opmerking in haar tweet.

- De tweet overtuigt mij van het grote belang van het onderwerp.

- De manier waarop Saskia Meijer de tweet heeft geformuleerd maakt deze overtuigender.

- De informatie in de tweet is geloofwaardig.

- De tweet heeft mij overtuigd om me verder in het onderwerp te verdiepen.

- De tweet inspireert mij om actie te ondernemen vóór een strenger klimaatbeleid.

- De inhoud van de tweet sluit aan bij mijn persoonlijke waarden.

- Na het lezen van de tweet voel ik meer urgentie om mij voor het klimaat in te zetten.

Statements on Persuasiveness of Political Figure (Pieter Hoekstra, Right-Wing):

Answer options per statement range from "Strongly agree - Agree - Somewhat agree - Neutral - Somewhat disagree - Disagree - Strongly disagree".

Statements:

- Pieter Hoekstra komt overtuigend over op basis van zijn politieke communicatie.

- Pieter Hoekstra komt betrouwbaar over in zijn uitspraak op X.

- Deze tweet toont leiderschapskwaliteiten van Pieter Hoekstra.

- Pieter Hoekstra lijkt in staat om complexe politieke uitdagingen aan te gaan.

- Ik vertrouw erop dat Pieter Hoekstra effectief kan bijdragen aan de regelgeving rond immigratie in Nederland.

- Ik kan mij voorstellen dat ik Pieter Hoekstra op X of andere platformen ga volgen.

- De tweet motiveert mij om meer te weten te komen over Pieter Hoekstra en zijn partij.

Statements on Persuasiveness of Political Figure (Saskia Meijer, Left-Wing)

Answer options per statement range from "Strongly agree - Agree - Somewhat agree - Neutral - Somewhat disagree - Disagree - Strongly disagree".

Statements:

- Saskia Meijer komt overtuigend over in haar politieke communicatie.

- Saskia Meijer komt betrouwbaar over in haar uitspraak op X.

- Deze tweet toont leiderschapskwaliteiten van Saskia Meijer.

- Saskia Meijer lijkt in staat om complexe politieke uitdagingen aan te gaan.

- Ik vertrouw erop dat Saskia Meijer effectief kan bijdragen aan de regelgeving rond klimaat in Nederland.

- Ik kan mij voorstellen dat ik Saskia Meijer op X of andere platformen ga volgen.

- De tweet motiveert mij om meer te weten te komen over Saskia Meijer en haar partij.