Simple politics for the people? Complexity in campaign messages and political knowledge

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Abstract. Which parties use simple language in their campaign messages, and do simple campaign messages resonate with voters' information about parties? This study introduces a novel link between the language applied during election campaigns and citizens' ability to position parties in the ideological space. To this end, how complexity of campaign messages varies across parties as well as how it affects voters' knowledge about party positions is investigated. Theoretically, it is suggested that populist parties are more likely to simplify their campaign messages to demarcate themselves from mainstream competitors. In turn, voters should perceive and process simpler campaign messages better and, therefore, have more knowledge about the position of parties that communicate simpler campaign messages. The article presents and validates a measure of complexity and uses it to assess the language of manifestos in Austria and Germany in the period 1945–2013. It shows that political parties, in general, use barely comprehensible language to communicate their policy positions. However, differences between parties exist and support is found for the conjecture about populist parties as they employ significantly less complex language in their manifestos. Second, evidence is found that individuals are better able to place parties in the ideological space if parties use less complex campaign messages. The findings lead to greater understanding of mass-elite linkages during election campaigns and have important consequences for the future analysis of manifesto data.

Keywords: party competition; populism; campaigns; voter knowledge; quantitative text analysis

Introduction

One of the key determinants driving democracy and elections is how political elites link themselves and their preferences to the people (Dahl 1971; Downs 1957). A burgeoning literature seeks to understand the linkage between political elites and voters by analysing party positions and voters' perceptions thereof (Adams 2001; Budge et al. 2001; Laver et al. 2003; Slapin & Proksch 2008; Somer-Topcu 2015). Parties routinely communicate with voters when giving speeches, when drafting campaign materials such as their manifestos or when dueling with each other in televised debates. Yet current research mostly focuses on the positional adaptation of parties to voters and, in turn, how voters interpret such positional shifts. Thereby, the existing research largely neglects the style and tone politicians use when communicating with the masses (for notable exceptions, see Spirling 2015; Young & Soroka 2012).

One of the key observations of political pundits is that in many ways the styles of discourse seem to be changing radically in contemporary political campaigns. A case in point is Donald Trump's campaign during the 2016 American presidential campaign. Trump applied a simple and repetitive style of speech throughout his campaign.[1] In turn, observers of the presidential race quickly came to the conclusion that specifically his

simple style of speech making was a key strategic tool to seduce the masses. Despite the widespread public allegations that his simple style of speech might be a strategic tool to communicate campaign messages to voters, little scholarly work has looked into *who* employs simple campaign messages. In addition, the question of *how* simplicity might in turn affect voters has not been analysed and discussed in the scholarly literature so far.

Following the idea that the complexity of language matters for voters' perceptions of political parties and their positions, we examine the linguistic complexity of manifestos in two Western European multiparty systems: Austria and Germany. Theoretically, we first suggest that populist parties are more likely to rely on a simpler style of language in their campaign messages. A key aspect of populist strategies is to appeal to the people while largely rejecting the interests of the elite by arguing that these interests are not compatible with the preferences of the *populus*. By relying on simple language, populists can denunciate mainstream politics as unnecessarily complex and as technical jargon which tends to correlate with complex language. In this sense, linguistic simplicity helps the populist to exhibit the aloofness of the political elite. Second, we suggest that simpler language in campaign materials should, in turn, help the masses to better understand and perceive policy positions of political parties.

To measure the complexity of manifesto text, we validate and apply a generally accepted readability index (LIX) (Björnsson 1968). The text analysis of 175 party manifestos from 1945 to 2013 in Austria and Germany suggests that parties draft complex text loaded with technical jargon. We assume that this is because party elites are used to reading and discussing complex legislative text. Thus, they might themselves employ a style of writing that is full of technical jargon and low readability. However, we also uncover telling differences between parties. On average, populist parties write shorter sentences and use shorter words than other parties. Second, using voter and expert survey data from election studies, we provide a link between the complexity of campaign messages and political knowledge. We find that voters infer parties' general left-right placement more adequately if parties apply a simpler language in their campaign materials. In sum, we find strong evidence supporting our theoretical framework.

Our findings have important implications for understanding political discourse in modern democracies. First, we find that simplification of language helps parties communicate their position to voters. Thus, in many ways, the current political discourse might be too difficult to grasp and process for several voter strata. Second, the rise of contemporary populism might also force mainstream competitors to simplify their campaign messages while still aiming to deliver meaningful and fact-based policy cues in an effort to secure office and votes in the future. This suggests that the increasing electoral successes of populist parties could lead not only to changes of the policy content in political speech, but also to a different type and tone of political discourse.

The article is structured as follows. First, we review the literature on manifestos as well as the data and methods applied by scholars. Next, we present our hypotheses. Third, we discuss and validate our readability measurement. We then outline the model specifications, present our results and discuss how they relate to our theoretical expectations. The final section concludes.

Who produces simple messages and how it matters for voters

Contemporary research discusses a wide set of party strategies and their influence on the electoral success and failure of political parties. By far, the most scrutinised strategies in this context are ideological shifts by political parties (Adams 2012; Adams et al. 2005; Bischof & Wagner 2017; Downs 1957; Ezrow 2005; Ezrow et al. 2014; Kitschelt 1994). In addition, the salience parties attach to different issues (Klüver & Spoon 2015) and the ownership of specific issues are shown to persuade voters (Bélanger & Meguid 2008; Petrocik 1996). In line with this, research also suggests that parties at times aim to blur their positions (Bräuninger & Giger 2016; Lo et al. 2014; Rovny 2012a), a strategy that strives to present contradictory positions on the same policy issue.

Scholars increasingly aim to understand not only which strategies parties pursue, but also how voters' perceptions of parties are affected by these strategies. In general, studies suggest that voters adapt their perceptions of political parties in line with their positional shifts (Adams et al. 2011; Fernàndez-Vàzquez 2014; Fernàndez-Vàzquez & Somer-Topcu 2017; Somer-Topcu 2017). Recent studies emphasise that other strategies by political parties such as broadening their issue appeal have tangible consequences for voters' perceptions of parties. For instance, Somer-Topcu (2015) finds that parties gain votes if they broaden their issue appeal since voters perceive broadly appealing parties as closer to their own ideology.

However, considerably less effort has been made to scrutinise the style of language used in campaign messages. A growing body of literature has begun to investigate the type of language employed in campaign materials such as, for instance, the tone or sentiment in campaign messages (Haselmayer & Jenny 2016; Young & Soroka 2012). Furthermore, recent research from the United Kingdom found that representatives adapted the complexity of their speeches to appeal to new electors after the Great Reform Act (Spirling 2015). Unfortunately, this strand of literature largely neglects patterns of variation between parties' campaign messages and whether and how the style of language affects voters' perceptions of political parties.

The style of language employed in campaign materials may have important consequences for voters' perceptions of party positions. A simpler style of writing should ensure that policy messages are easier to detect, interpret and process both for voters and the media. Specifically, the media might pay more attention to policy messages that are simpler to communicate to the masses. Often, the media is more inclined to incorporate simple, catchy phrases instead of debating the meaning of lengthy and complex jargon. Hence, the coverage of political campaigns is likely to follow a media logic that means that the focus is on compelling stories that adjust style and grammar to the needs and wants of newsworthiness (Strömbäck & Dimitrova 2011; Takens et al. 2013). Parties might also have an interest in differing in the communicational styles they employ in their manifestos. Numerous empirical examples suggest that some parties and candidates communicate their policy positions in a simpler manner than others. For instance, the campaign materials produced by the Austrian Freedom Party (FPOE) usually rely on clear rhetoric and easy-to-grasp messages (Wodak & Pelinka 2002).

We suggest that populist parties have a particular interest in simplifying their campaign messages. At the core of a populist communication strategy lies the idea of splitting societies into 'the elite' and 'the people' (Jagers & Walgrave 2007: 323: Mudde 2004: 543). Hence,

a key aspect of populist strategies is to appeal to the people while largely rejecting the interests of the elite by suggesting that these interests are not compatible with the interests of the *populus*. Rather, these interests are the evil products of parasitic elites (Oliver & Rahn 2016: 190). By contrast, the populist vocalises the interests of ordinary and decent people (Canovan 1999: 5). Thus, appealing to the people is a necessary condition for populist strategies. Numerous definitions of 'populism' explicitly mention the idea that populists aim to simplify the political discourse to authenticate their representational efforts (Canovan 1999; Moffitt & Tormey 2014: 385–386; Oliver & Rahn 2016). Yet, as Mudde (2004: 542) notes, simplification is 'highly problematic to put into operation in empirical studies' and, hence, has often been neglected by previous research on populism. This may have led many scholars to drop the idea that linguistic simplification is a core strategy of populists. In this article, we attempt to reanimate this idea. We suggest that in order to fulfill their core strategy to split the 'the elite' and the 'decent people', populist parties tend to simplify politics and policy decision making.

First, using simple messages allows populist parties to demarcate themselves more clearly from mainstream competitors. The aforementioned illustration of Trump's strategy in the United States is just one of numerous examples underlining this argument. Populists try to simplify political discourses. Simple messages are at the core of their campaign strategies. As Taggart (2002: 76) correctly states: 'This means that populism, in what it says and the way it says it, strives for clarity, directness and simplicity.' By employing simple language, populists can denounce mainstream politics as unnecessarily complex and as mostly relying on technical jargon which tends to correlate with complex language. Thus, linguistic simplicity is a valuable tool for exhibiting the aloofness of the remaining political elite and fosters the impression of a strong bond between the populist and ordinary people. Thereby, simple language should suggest that populists understand the struggle and problems of 'ordinary' people's everyday life.

Second, using simple language ensures both that policy messages are clearer in positional terms for voters and that they are accessible to a larger portion of the public (Spirling 2015: 122–123). Thus, given that populists aim to represent the interests of 'the people', they are keen to guarantee the accessibility of their arguments to the entire population. Hence, being simple reinforces the populist's authenticity as a representative of the '*populus*'.

In contrast, mainstream parties and their leaders might pursue 'catch-all' strategies, as suggested by Kirchheimer (1966). While a catch-all strategy aims to maximise voter turnout across all social strata, the goal of these strategies is not to unite these strata against the elites. On the contrary, the core of such a strategy is to offer a wide set of policies seemingly interesting to all the different strata. As a result, mainstream parties have been characterised as acting as a cartel and converging ideologically (Katz & Mair 1995, 2009). This cartelisation leads parties to become engaged in a discourse using similar jargon and technical terms to ensure their survival. In this sense, mainstream parties construct hurdles hampering the possibilities for newcomers to become engaged in political discourses. Hence, we formulate the following hypothesis:

> *Populism Hypothesis*: Populist parties are more likely to simplify the language of their campaign messages.

Of course, this hypothesis immediately raises the questions if and how simplicity of campaign messages affects voters and their decision making at the polls. In fact, the assumptions leading us to formulate the 'populism hypothesis' implicitly suggest that simplicity affects how external actors, such as the media or voters, process the information provided by political parties. Indeed, based on research in communication and education, we have good reason to assume that textual complexity hampers the processing of information. For instance, research in linguistics shows that with increasing textual complexity, human beings are less likely to comprehend and memorise information from texts (Anderson 1983; Pitler & Nenkova 2008).

Translated into a political context, we have reason to assume that voters' political knowledge might be affected by the linguistic complexity of campaign materials. Prior to elections, parties draft and share a range of campaign materials aimed at increasing the popularity of candidates and the voters' knowledge about party goals (Van der Meer et al. 2015). During campaigns parties compete for voters' attention. Given that voters have limited resources, they will not invest much time and effort in understanding campaign materials by political parties. Thus, parties have to make sure that their messages stand out and stick with voters. Using simple language seems to be a straightforward tool for achieving a competitive advantage towards other parties.

Thus, *ceteris paribus*, simplicity should ensure that more voters are treated by campaign information, and along with it, these voters should be able to memorise information better. Furthermore, the media is also interested in repeating and discussing simple and catchy campaign messages. An excellent example is Trump's statements about building a wall at the Mexican border in order to stop illegal immigration. His messages on the matter were always based on simple language employing catchy phrases, and the media repeated these statements again and again. In turn, this message also stuck with his voters and was repeated in chorus by voters during his campaign events. Simple language should therefore facilitate voters' comprehension of the issues, policies and positions offered in an election campaign. As voters' possibilities to understand the policies offered in election campaigns increase, so too should their capacity to correctly place a party within the ideological spectrum.

Certainly, we are by no means suggesting that simplicity is the only or a necessary condition for voters to hold more knowledge about the content of party campaigns. Obviously, other factors such as blurring positions (Rovny 2012a,b) and the number of policies addressed (Bischof 2017; Greene 2016; Senninger 2017) should affect voters' knowledge as well.[2] Yet, we argue that if we hold such factors constant, simplicity should affect voters' knowledge on the overall ideological position of a party.

Party Placement Hypothesis: *Ceteris paribus*, simplification of campaign messages increases the likelihood that voters can correctly position parties in the ideological space.

Data and methods

Our primary data sources are election manifestos from all major political parties in Austria and Germany in the period 1945–2013. In total, we collected, validated and cleaned the manifestos of 27 parties across 39 elections, giving us a total of 175 manifestos for analysis.

Since most of our analysis also employs information from external datasets, we rely on the manifestos from ten major parties represented in parliament throughout most of their existence.[3]

We rely on manifestos for several reasons. First and most importantly, manifestos ensure that we can cover all relevant parties since 1945 for both countries. All parties in Austria and Germany draft manifestos for each election, making these manifestos a well-suited resource covering all major campaign messages of political parties in both countries since 1945. Second, experts describe how parties take the process of drafting manifestos very seriously, investing time and resources to ensure completeness and quality (Adams et al. 2011: 373). Recently, this expert knowledge was supported by an MP survey in Austria (Eder et al. 2017). Third, unlike speeches, manifestos are drafted at the party level and thus outline the key policy proposals to structure the campaign and positions of leading members of the party. As such, manifestos also guide the content and positions of the personalised campaigns by their candidates (Eder et al. 2017). Given that parties are increasingly understood to be leadership-based and censored, party manifestos constitute an important tool for holding candidates accountable to the party line. Fourth, a minimal length is required to judge the complexity of the language employed. Many other campaign messages shared, for example, through social networks such as Twitter are too short to have their linguistic complexity evaluated. Fifth, previous research finds high correlations between manifestos and other campaign messages (e.g., speeches) both with regard to policy messages (Hofferbert & Budge 1992) and the style of language (Hawkins & Silva 2015). Especially for our analysis, the latter finding is of utmost importance as it highlights the fact that not only content, but also the tone and style used in speeches seem to be correlated with the texts parties produce (Hawkins & Silva 2015). Sixth, both anecdotal and empirical evidence (presented in the Online Appendix) shows that manifesto positions are actively debated in the media in both countries. During the last election in Germany in 2013, the so-called 'veggie day' was infamously picked up by the media from the manifesto of the Green Party. Yet, the idea of a 'veggie day' in German canteens was neither prominently placed in the Green's manifesto nor a major topic in their campaign efforts. Seventh, previous research suggests rather than empirically proves that voters are not actively seeking information from manifestos. In the Online Appendix, we provide evidence based on Google trend data highlighting that at times voters indeed actively search for a party's manifesto rather than for information about the candidate of a party.[4]

We decided to analyse Austria and Germany for three reasons. First, both countries are multiparty systems, sharing comparable trends and tendencies across time. Second, the official language in Germany and Austria is German. As we will explain in detail below, the reliability of our complexity measure crucially depends on the usage of the same language in our sample. Third and most importantly, both countries have experienced variation in populism throughout recent centuries. Thus, the key concept on which we theorise is subject to change both across time and across political parties.

Measuring complexity

We use a readability measurement that can be applied to the German language to evaluate linguistic complexity: Björnsson's readability index (LIX) (Anderson 1981, 1983; Björnsson

1968). This measurement and similar readability measures have been used frequently in other disciplines – especially in educational and linguistic studies. We decided to use LIX because previous research has shown that it generates reliable and valid evaluations of text complexity, specifically for the German language (Anderson 1983). Correlations with other indexes, such as the also commonly used Flesch-Kincaid score, have proven to be high (correlations ≈ 0.80) and we found similar correlations for our sample. Since LIX directly captures the complexity of language used in text, the measure is empirically and conceptually congruent with our theoretical concept of simplicity. Educational literature also agrees that the complexity of texts matters for educational development of school pupils in school (Anderson 1981, 1983; Björnsson 1968). This research shows that the comprehensibility of texts depends on the readability (complexity) of the sentence structure and the words used in the given text.

The first step when conducting quantitative research on text documents is to divide the text into units of analysis (*unitisation*). We decided to use the entire manifesto as the unit of analysis since the reliability of readability indexes hinges on a minimal requirement of text length. Using the entire manifesto as the unit of analysis ensures that we make use of as much information for each party and election year as possible. In a second step, we cleaned the manifesto texts.[5] Finally, we evaluated the readability (*complexity*) of each manifesto.[6] As introduced above, we relied on LIX:

$$\text{LIX} = \frac{W}{St} + \frac{100 * W_{7c}}{W} \tag{1}$$

with W being the number of words in the manifesto, St the number of sentences and W_{7c} the number of words with seven or more letters. Higher values on the LIX scale represent a higher level of complexity. In most instances, values between 25 and 70 are reasonable empirical outcomes for the German language. Texts with a LIX < 25 are considered very easy, around 40 normal and > 55 very difficult to read. One advantage of LIX is that it is based on characters within a sentence and not syllables. In particular, it is easier and more reliable to capture characters, even when using computer software. As such, LIX can be computed fairly quickly depending on computational powers – roughly one hour for the 145 manifestos we analyse.

For our sample, complexity ranges from 43.4 to 63.4 ($\mu = 54.7; \sigma = 3.9$). The least complex manifesto was drafted by the Austrian People's Party (OEVP) in 1983. In contrast, the German Free Democrats (FDP) wrote the most complex manifesto in 1980. Table 1 presents extracts from both manifestos.

The OEVP's manifesto relies on very short sentences, and most of the words used are short as well. In the extract, the OEVP uses an average of nine words per sentence, while the FDP uses 35. In general, the German language relies on longer sentences than the English language, but 35 words per sentence is long even for a sentence written in German. Furthermore, the FDP uses many words with a high number of characters, while the OEVP sticks to shorter words. As can be seen in Table 1, the two formulas utilised by the LIX index capture these stark differences in the complexity of language well.[7]

Table 1. Comparison of manifesto texts, (OEVP 1983 vs. FDP 1980)

OEVP, 1983

Uns ist jeder Arbeitsplatz wichtig.

Das gilt auch für den Arbeitsplatz am Bauernhof.

Die Bauern sichern die Selbstversorgung unseres Landes.

Wir dürfen nicht vergessen, dass die Landwirtschaft auch Umweltschutz ist.

Ich werde dafür sorgen, dass den Kleinen geholfen wird, die Konkurrenz der Großen zu überleben.

9 words per sentence; 24.44% w_{7c}

FDP, 1980

Wie unser Land unter maßgeblicher Beteiligung und Verantwortung der freien Demokraten in den siebziger Jahren

einen klaren innenpolitischen und außenpolitischen Kurs gehalten hat, so ist auch

für die achtziger Jahre eine langfristige Sicht und ein dauerhaftes geistiges Fundament unserer Politik notwendig.

Die Regierungsarbeit der freien Demokraten hat dazu beigetragen, daß in den siebziger Jahren innerer

und äußerer Frieden, wirtschaftliche und soziale Stabilität erhalten und ausgebaut werden konnten.

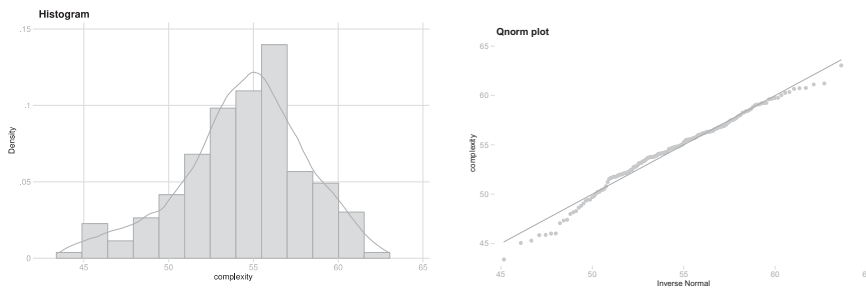*35 words per sentence; 38.57% w_{7c}*

Source: Walprogramme OEVP, 1983 & FDP, 1983.

Validation

Figure 1 shows that the complexity of manifestos in Germany and Austria is (approximately) normally distributed. Interestingly, most manifestos are difficult to understand. The most common values are between 52 and 58. Thus, parties often use complex language to communicate their campaign messages.

To validate our measure, we compared the results for our manifesto corpus with different types of texts. We tried to select texts for which the German-speaking public holds strong prior views about the complexity of the texts. We collected texts from two newspapers, three literature examples and one science example.[8] The dotplot at the bottom in Figure 1 reports the complexity of these examples and facilitates a comparison with our manifesto corpus. The *Bild* is a daily tabloid that relies on simple and often lurid language. In contrast, the *Zeit* is a weekly news outlet, which enjoys a high reputation for substantiated and high-quality journalism. The LIX scores for both outlets support the priors showing lower complexity for the *Bild*. The literature examples further underline the validity of the measure. While the fairy tale ('Cinderella') is very easy to understand, Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* is more complex. Franz Kafka's *The Trial* lies somewhere in between these two classics. Many readers of Kafka's work would suggest that reading and understanding him is often cumbersome. However, this is not the case because Kafka uses a complex style of writing, but rather because the plots and interpretation of his work is challenging. Thus, Kafka is a perfect example to further underpin the validity of the complexity measure since the simplicity of his language is well captured by the LIX. Finally, we include a political essay by the German philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Habermas, which is the most complex text in our sample, as expected. The complexity of our sample of manifestos is slightly more complex than Mann's *Death in Venice*, but still easier to read and process than Habermas'
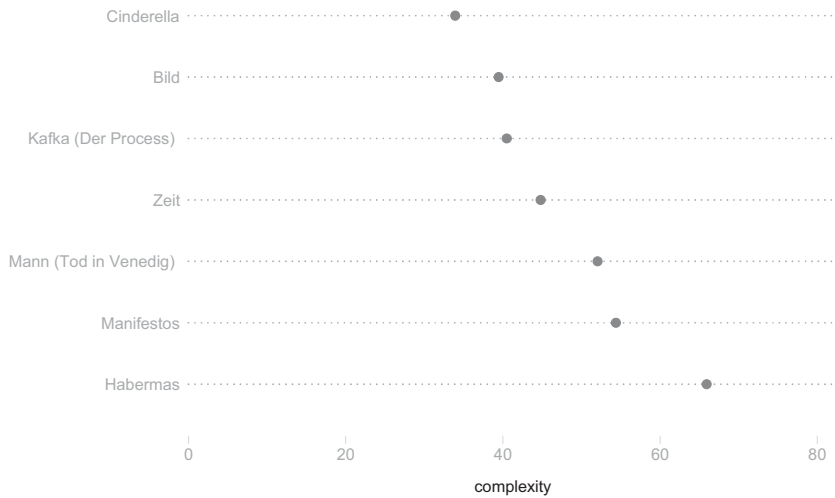
Figure 1. Distribution of complexity scores, Germany and Austria, 1945–2013.

work. In sum, LIX supports our prior understanding about the complexity of these selected texts. Readers tend to struggle more with a political text about the future of democracy by Habermas than with a tabloid. Overall, manifestos are difficult to comprehend.

Independent variables

Our first hypothesis states that populist parties are more likely to simplify the language of their campaign messages. Building on definitions provided by Mudde (2004: 543), we suggest that populism perceives the society to be split into two homogeneous and opposing groups: the people and the elite. In line with Mudde (2004), we define 'populism' as consisting of two components: anti-elitism and people-centrism. We then follow Pauwels (2011) and Rooduijn and Pauwels (2011) and rely on the populism measure they use and validate in their studies. More specifically, we utilised quantitative text analysis, which is a dictionary approach to measure populism (Grimmer & Stewart 2013: 268–269). We counted how often a set of pre-defined words were used in each party manifesto (please consult Table 4 in the Online Appendix for an overview of the keywords and Table 5 in the Online Appendix for an

overview of the mean populism score for each party included in our study). Then, we divided the number of populist words in a manifesto by the total number of words to account for the varying lengths of party manifestos. Since this results in a heavily right-skewed variable, we log standardised the variable (Gelman 2008).[9] Higher values indicate that political parties are more populist according to the language they use in their manifestos. The measure has been extensively validated and proved to be a consistent method to measure populism, particularly for the German case (Rooduijn & Pauwels 2011: 1276–1279).[10]

We also used a set of controls. First, previous research suggests that party organisation might drive the style and tone of how party manifestos are written (Harmel 2016). Some political parties give activists more influence on the programmatic development of the party (activist-dominated), while others largely exclude activists from substantial decisions (leadership-dominated). Activist-dominated parties tend to be policy-seekers (Adams et al. 2006; Lehrer 2012; Schumacher et al. 2013; Strøm 1990). Putting more weight to the programmatic and ideological development of a party should also lead to a more careful drafting of party manifestos (Dolezal et al. 2012). Activists, then, are less likely to rely on technical jargon. They tend to be less informed about the particularities of specific policies and are therefore more likely to frame policies in a simpler and clearer manner.

We employ two measurements to account for the fact that party organisation might influence the complexity of manifesto messages. First, we make use of the most recent expert survey data on party organisation from the Democratic Accountability and Linkages Project conducted by Herbert Kitschelt (Kitschelt & Freeze 2011). The measure relies on a question specifically asking about the activists' influence on the programmatic development of the party. In addition, we use the Laver and Hunt expert survey on party organisation (Laver & Hunt 1992). We provide more detailed information about the two measures in the Online Appendix. In both instances, a higher value on the variable indicates a more activist-dominated party, while lower values indicate a more leadership-based party. Similar measures have been used in several fairly recent studies as well (e.g., Meyer 2013; Schumacher et al. 2013).[11]

Second, incumbency usually increases the resources a party has at its disposal. Subsequently, this might lead to a professionalisation of party organisation. Incumbent parties might use their resources to hire media and communication agencies that support them with expertise when drafting campaign material (Dolezal et al. 2012). Such professionalisation of campaigning should lead to a higher readability of campaign texts and so we use a dummy variable to control for incumbency.[12] A similar argument can be made for the experience of political parties, which is why we decided to control for party age in years.

Third, the votes a party achieves on election day matter. In fact, in Austria and Germany, the number of votes achieved directly translates into the financial resources a party receives as funding from the state. Thus, we also control for party size by using a party's vote share from the previous election.

Fourth, we control for parties' left-right placement to account for potential systematic differences in the drafting process of manifestos between left- and right-wing parties. We use the RILE scale from the MARPOR data.[13] The RILE scale is a general measure of parties' left-right ideology capturing 26 positional issue codes from the MARPOR data and

has been extensively used and validated (Budge et al. 2001; Klingemann et al. 2006; Volkens et al. 2012).

Finally, early elections and longer manifestos should lead to less comprehensible manifestos. Regarding the former, political parties will enjoy less time to re-draft and fine-tune the language used in manifestos. Thus, we control for the total length of manifestos as well as whether the manifesto was drafted for an early election.

Model specifications

We estimate a model in which the complexity of manifestos is the dependent variable. Populist rhetoric on the party level is our main independent variable. In addition, we include several control variables, such that:

$$\text{Complexity}_{it} = b_0 + b_1 \text{ populist}_{it} + b_2 \, \Gamma\mathbf{Z}_{i,t} + \epsilon_{it} \tag{2}$$

with i indexing parties and t election years, respectively; $\Gamma\mathbf{Z}_{i,t}$ being the remaining controls and ϵ_{it} the error term.

Since the data are time-series cross-sectional – each party being observed over a maximum of 21 elections – the Gauss Markov assumptions of standard ordinary least squares (OLS) regression analysis are violated. Yet, autocorrelation tests reveal that the null hypothesis of no serial correlation cannot be rejected.[14] Further test statistics show that the data are homoscedastic and stationary.[15] We decided to run models with clustered standard errors for each country-election combination. Furthermore, as unobserved heterogeneity potentially infringes the results, we include a country fixed effect for Austria in our models. This also helps to control for the marginal differences in the German language between Germany and Austria. We also report a model that adds a lagged dependent variable to the model as well as a model with party fixed-effects. To test for robustness, we run models with panel-corrected standard errors (PCSE) combined with a Prais-Winsten transformation to address potential issues of heteroscedasticity, serial correlation within party_i and contemporaneous correlation (correlation of the errors of party_i and party_j at time t, respectively.

Results

Table 2 presents our regression results, showing the relationship between populist rhetoric and manifesto language complexity. The model presented in the first column is our baseline model without any control variables. It shows that populist rhetoric has a negative and statistically significant coefficient estimate. Hence, parties that apply a more populist rhetoric tend to have lower scores on the manifesto complexity measure. This finding supports our first hypothesis and is robust across several model specifications. Column 2 shows coefficient estimates from a model with the full set of control variables. Please note that from this model onwards the number of observations becomes smaller as we restrict our sample to all parties included in the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP) data (Volkens at al. 2012) and covered by Kitschelt's expert survey data (please consult Table 3 in the Online Appendix for a full list of parties included). Party organisation also has a statistically

Table 2. Do populist parties use simpler language in their manifestos? Yes

	(1) baseline	(2) controls	(3) CFE	(4) LDV	(5) FE
Populist rhetoric	−4.088* (1.802)	−8.018** (2.415)	−8.047** (2.390)	−7.653** (2.484)	−7.980** (2.544)
Party organisation		−9.051** (2.658)	−9.048** (2.674)	−8.409** (2.681)	
Party age		−0.0482* (0.020)	−0.0484* (0.019)	−0.0487* (0.020)	−0.0590** (0.021)
Incumbent		0.651 (0.602)	0.644 (0.607)	0.556 (0.566)	0.671 (0.720)
Votes$_{t-1}$		−0.0297 (0.020)	−0.0297 (0.020)	−0.0208 (0.021)	−0.167** (0.054)
Left-right placement		−0.0167 (0.013)	−0.0167 (0.013)	−0.0136 (0.013)	−0.00283 (0.019)
Σ words		0.000148* (0.000)	0.000149* (0.000)	0.000151* (0.000)	0.000155** (0.000)
Early election		0.268 (0.566)	0.234 (0.577)	0.282 (0.637)	0.308 (0.679)
Austria			0.0702 (0.536)	0.110 (0.574)	
Complexity$_{t-1}$				0.140 (0.102)	0.0438 (0.087)
Constant	54.97 (0.371)	67.79 (3.809)	67.77 (3.856)	59.05 (7.151)	57.88 (5.459)
Observations	175	126	126	126	126
R^2	0.028	0.273	0.273	0.290	0.228
Adjusted R^2	0.023	0.223	0.216	0.228	0.107

Note: Clustered standard errors by election in parentheses. *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.001$.

significant negative effect on complexity in manifesto measures. This implies that parties that are more activist-centred apply less complex language. While most control variables are in line with our expectations, the estimated coefficient for incumbency is positive but indifferent from zero across all model specifications. In fact, incumbency might lead parties to engage with more and new topics. This might then lead parties to be less precise and simple in their language. However, similar to our assumptions in the last section, party age has a significant decreasing effect on complexity. Similarly, we find that the vote share at the last election has a negative coefficient, which suggests that increases in resources across all parties impact on the complexity of language in manifestos. Thus, the results underpin the suggestion that more resources lead to simpler language. Furthermore, left-right positions based on the MARPOR measurement have a negative effect. This suggests that the more right a party is placed on the left-right scale, the less complex its manifesto will be. Yet, this effect is small in size and not significant across all the model specifications we estimated. The model in column 3 adds country fixed effects. Column 4 presents results from a model that introduces a lagged dependent variable. Finally, in column 5, we control for party confounders that are time invariant by using the fixed effects estimator. Even when we employ this rather conservative test, we find support for our hypothesis that populist parties are more likely to rely on a simpler language in their manifestos.

We conducted several robustness tests to further investigate the stability of the estimated populism effect (see Table 6 in the Online Appendix). First, instead of relying on a populism measure based on textual analysis, we constructed a dummy variable based on qualitative evaluations of populism from Kessel (2015). Second, the literature partly suggests that the drafting and writing of manifestos underwent significant changes from the 1970s onwards (Harmel 2016; Hansen 2008). Therefore, we re-estimated our models using only manifestos drafted after 1970. Third, instead of using Kitschelt's expert survey to judge party organisations, we used the Laver and Hunt expert survey. Finally, we included a squared

measure of the RILE score that accounts for the possibility that especially extreme parties on the fringes of the political spectrum apply simple language. In all instances, our key finding that populism correlates with more simplicity remains significant and comparable in size of the coefficient.

To better understand the significance of our central finding, Figure 2 illustrates the marginal effect of populist rhetoric on manifesto complexity based on model 2. It shows how the mean predicted value of manifesto complexity decreases with increasing values of populist rhetoric while keeping all other independent variables constant at their means. On average, a party with no populist rhetoric at all has a manifesto complexity score of around 55, while parties with high values of populist rhetoric score significantly lower on manifesto complexity. This result holds true when we use a third-order polynomial fit to the data (see Figure 5 in the Online Appendix).

Coefficient estimates and the certainty around them depend highly on sample size. Since the first part of our analysis deals with a relatively small number of observations, we decided to further substantiate our findings by building on statistical simulation techniques (King et al. 2000). We simulated our outcome variable by taking 1,000 random draws from a multivariate normal distribution defined by the model coefficients and covariance matrix of our regression estimates reported in Table 2. Then, we changed the values of our populism rhetoric measure into three different counterfactual scenarios (the tenth and ninetieth percentiles and the mean).[16] The results of the simulations are presented by plotting the distribution of the simulated expected values in the bottom panel in Figure 2. The distributions of expected values based on simulation techniques lend further support for our previous findings: Populist parties are significantly more likely to apply simpler language in their manifestos. The distributions of the tenth percentile (green, dashed line in Figure 2) and the ninetieth percentile (blue line in Figure 2) are significantly different from each other.

To further underpin our results, we decided to investigate populist rhetoric and language complexity developments of the party that is considered the most populist in our sample: the Austrian Freedom Party. The literature broadly agrees that the party became increasingly populist under the leadership of Jörg Haider (Knight 1992). According to our theoretical conjecture we should see that the party decreases the complexity of its manifestos during the Haider period, and at the same time, applies more populist language. Figure 3 plots the mean standardised measures of populist rhetoric and manifesto complexity. Indeed, we find the expected pattern. The first manifesto after Haider became party leader in 1986 clearly marks a positive shift in populist rhetoric. At the same time, the manifesto complexity decreases substantially compared to 1983. In the following years, the manifesto complexity decreases even more while the number of populist key terms in the manifestos of the FPOE remains on a high level until Haider leaves the party after an internal disagreement.

Individual-level analysis

The second step of our analysis links manifesto complexity with the ability of voters to locate parties within the ideological space. We compiled a dataset that combines election survey and expert survey data. Election survey data stem from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES). To test the robustness of our individual-level analysis we use expert survey data from two different sources, the CSES and the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES). CSES

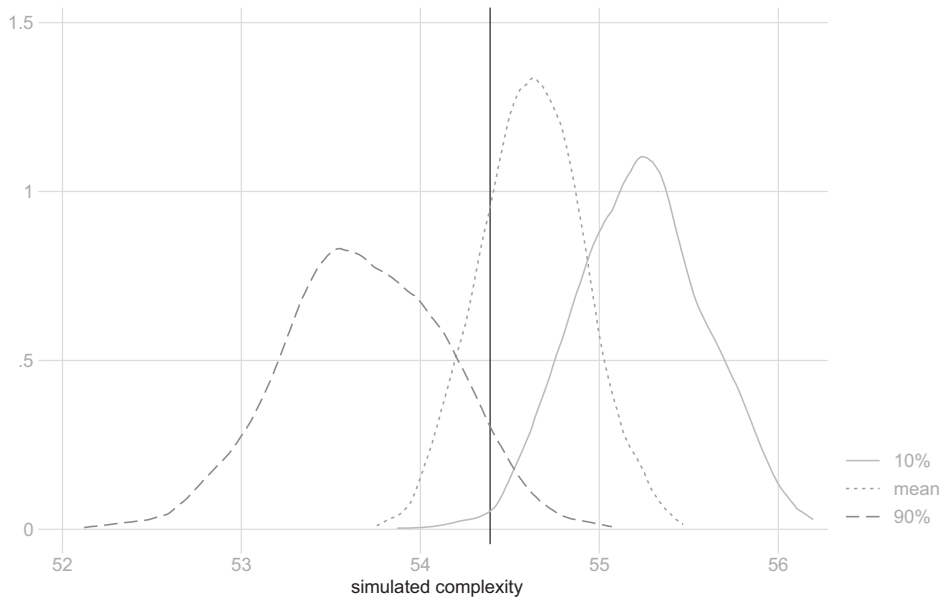**The relationship between populism & simple language**
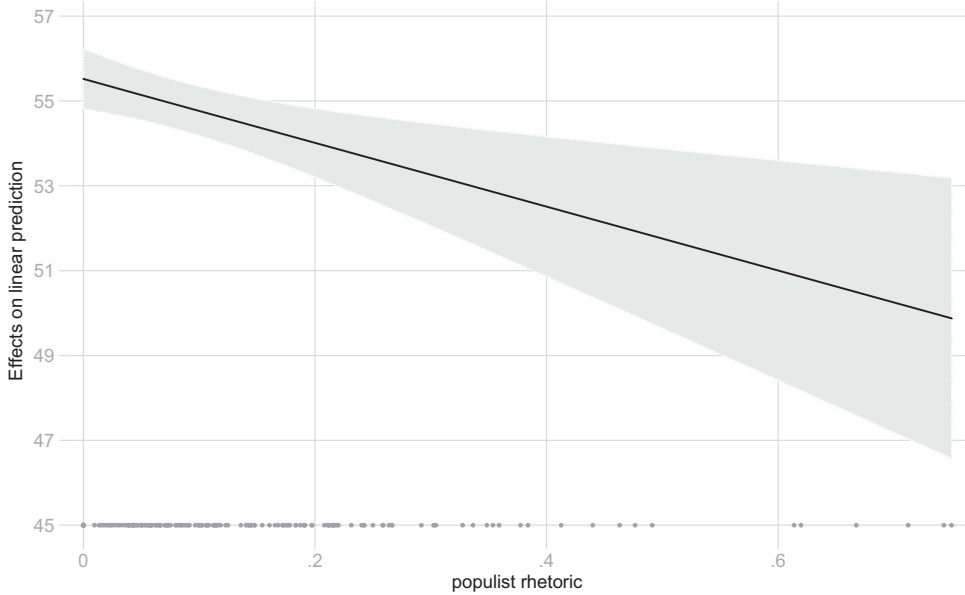
Simulations

Figure 2. Marginal effect of populist rhetoric on manifesto complexity (upper panel). Simulated levels of manifesto complexity for three different specifications of the key explanatory variables, mean, 10 and 90 percentiles (lower panel).
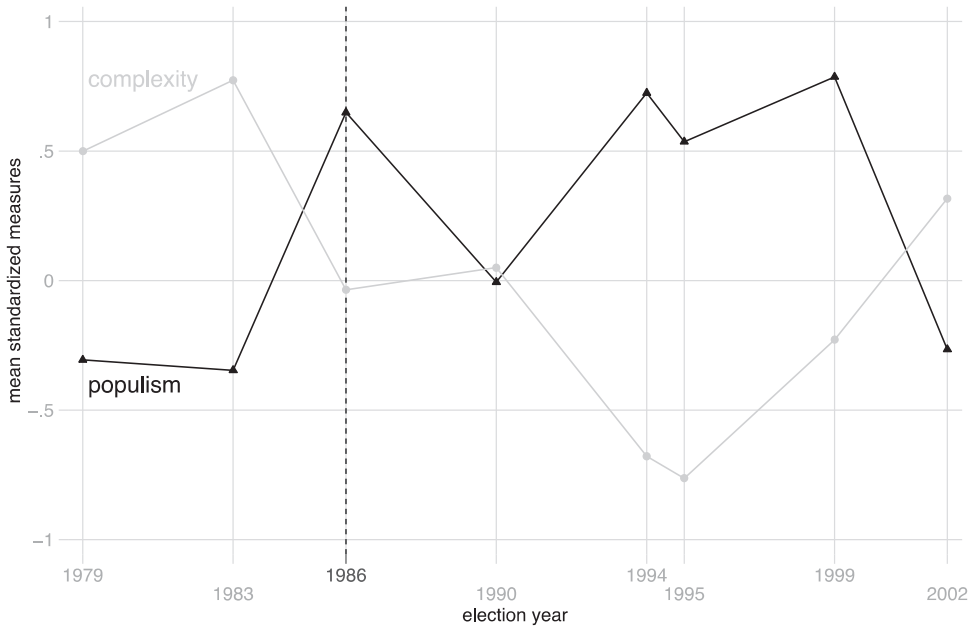
Figure 3. The development of populism and complexity during Haider's years in the FPOE.

data for Germany covers the period 1998–2009 – that is, four elections in the years 1998, 2002, 2005 and 2009. Data for Austria are only available for the elections in 2008 and 2013. To link election survey data and CHES data we use the most recent CHES data before each election.

The dependent variable is the absolute distance between survey participants' left-right placement of each party and the expert placements of the same parties. Thus, party placements from political experts are considered 'true' party positions. Both individuals and experts were asked to position political parties on a scale ranging from 0 (left) to 10 (right). The question on positioning parties in the CSES reads as follows: 'In politics, people sometimes talk of left and right. Where would you place [party name] on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means the left and 10 means the right?' Similarly, the CHES expert survey asks participants: 'We now turn to a few questions on the ideological positions of political parties in [country]. Please tick the box that best describes each party's overall ideology on a scale ranging from 0 (extreme left) to 10 (extreme right).' Mass and expert survey questions ask for the exact same tasks, and we should therefore see similar results using distances between CSES respondents and CSES experts and CSES respondents and CHES experts.

Each survey respondent enters the dataset as many times as the number of parties included in the given election study.[17] This means that we look at distances between respondents and experts for each individual party and not the aggregated disagreement between the two. The resulting data have a dyadic structure with voter-party pairs. Furthermore, the dyad-level data have a hierarchical structure because the main variables are measured at different levels. While the dependent variable is measured at the voter level, the main independent variable (i.e., parties' manifesto complexity score) is measured

at the party level. We use multilevel analysis with random intercepts for the party and party-election levels of the data to account for the hierarchical structure. In addition, we control for respondents' education, political knowledge and self-placement on the left-right scale. Education is an ordinal variable that differentiates between eight levels of education from primary school (1) to doctoral degree (8). The variable that measures individuals' levels of political knowledge contains answers to three different political information survey items. The questions concern the name of ministers or the current level of unemployment. The variable ranges from 0 to 3 depending on how many correct answers the individual respondent was able to give.

In addition, we include two important control variables measured on the party level. First, 'portfolio diversity' measures the number of issues that a party is addressing in its campaign communication. It might be that the ideological position of niche and populist parties that usually campaign on a smaller number of issues is easier to identify than the position of other parties that campaign on a larger set of issues. The variable is based on the entropy index Shannon's H and represents the effective number of issues addressed in a party manifesto (ENMI) (Greene 2016). On average, parties have an ENMI score of 9.01. Second, we also present results from a model that accounts for government experience of political parties. We measure government experience for each year and party by dividing the sum of all previous incumbency years by the total number of years. The variable has a continuous measurement and ranges from 0 (never in government) to 1 (always in government). We believe that government experience matters to respondents' knowledge about political parties as members of government receive much more media attention than the opposition. All models also include country fixed effects.[18]

Do voters find it easier to position parties that apply less complex language? Table 7 in the Online Appendix presents detailed results for our multilevel models. The models in columns 1–3 use the distance between party placements from CSES respondents and party placements from CSES experts as the dependent variable. The results in columns 4–6 are based on the distance between CSES respondents and CHES experts. Figure 4 zooms in on the coefficient estimates of our main independent variable (i.e., manifesto complexity). It shows that manifesto complexity has a statistically significant positive coefficient. This implies that higher values of manifesto complexity are associated with greater distances between party placements from respondents and party placements from experts. Hence, we find support for our second hypothesis. Individuals are better able to position political parties correctly if they apply less complex language in their campaign messages. In addition, we see that the results are robust for most model specifications, such as using alternative expert survey data or including measures for portfolio diversity and the government experience of political parties. Only in model 6 does the coefficient estimate of the complexity variable not reach a conventional level of statistical significance.

In sum, the finding suggests that voters' perceptions of ideological party positions not only depend on individual-level factors, such as the level of education or political knowledge, but also on a diverse range of party-level factors. In addition to established explanations, we provide new evidence that parties can partly influence how voters perceive party positions by employing a different style and tone in their campaign messages. Thus, our findings add substance to those of earlier studies suggesting that voters' can perceive and correctly interpret the positional movements of political parties (Adams et al. 2011; Somer-Topcu
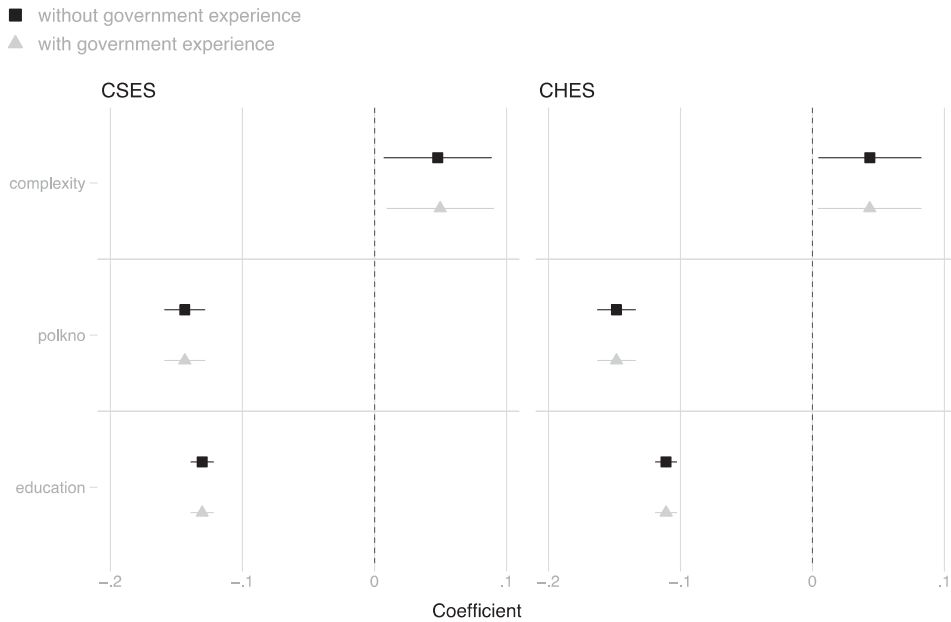
Figure 4. Coefficient plot, how complexity helps voters to correctly place parties ideologically.
Notes: Dependent variable is the absolute distance between party placements from respondents and experts on a 0 (left) to 10 (right) scale. All models include random intercepts for the party and party-election levels as well as country fixed effects. Additional covariates are: respondents' left-right self-placement and parties' portfolio diversity.

2015). In fact, these findings might at least partly depend on how parties communicate their positional shifts to voters.

Conclusion

Language is arguably the most important transmitter between political elites and the masses. Politicians use natural language to convince citizens of their proposals and ideas. They hold speeches at rallies, argue in televised debates or express their policies in written materials such as electoral manifestos and informational leaflets. While social science research has used the content of these party messages to make sense of parties' positions in the ideological space, we have relatively little knowledge about the language applied by politicians and parties. However, choice of language seems to matter. Followers of the 2016 election campaign in the United States found that the style of political messages tends to influence the degree to which citizens become aware of the policy ideas of the two candidates.

This article provides a first insight into how the linguistic style employed by political parties might affect voters' perceptions of parties. Our ambition in this study is to analyse the complexity of political messages at full volume. First, we want to know whether we can actually observe interesting differences in the complexity of language between political parties in a multiparty setting. We therefore theorise about the incentives for political parties

to apply simple language in their campaign messages. We identify populist parties as the most obvious actors to make strategic use of simple language as it fits their aspiration to address the common people and differentiate themselves from the elite. To test our conjecture, we validate and apply a readability measurement to determine the complexity of electoral manifestos from political parties in Austria and Germany over a time period of more than 50 years. Our results from time-series cross-sectional regression analysis and simulations reveal a robust negative effect of populism rhetoric on the complexity of campaign messages.

In a second step, we want to know whether this difference in linguistic complexity is of any meaning for citizens. We use mass and expert surveys to study whether citizens are better able to judge the positions of political parties that apply more simple campaign messages. Indeed, we find support for this link. The language used by parties to express their policies resonates with voters' political knowledge about these policy positions. Clearly, future research should invest in further analysing the effects of simplicity for voters' perception and knowledge about political parties; specifically, the causal relationship between the two, which we cannot capture in our observational analysis presented here. For instance, in a randomised survey experiment researchers might hold party positions constant while varying the simplicity of campaign messages (Fernàndez-Vàzquez 2016). Using such a research strategy, one could carefully carve out the interactions between positional contents and linguistic complexity. This is an interesting aspect of the theoretical puzzle that our analysis was not able to address in its entirety. In addition, by studying alternative campaign materials, such as leadership speeches, future research could test if relying on other campaign materials would lead to similar conclusions. In contrast to manifestos, speeches are given by individual politicians, who might adapt their tone of speech to their audience (Spirling 2015). Using speeches could give us larger variations of tone and style within the same party. Thus, our reported party effects might indeed vary depending on the coherency of the speeches given by the party leadership before an election.

Our findings also have important implications for research linking citizens' political knowledge with party behaviour. Following our results, the tone and style of language employed by political parties is a frequently neglected determinant affecting how parties and voters communicate with each other. Populism is on the rise in many advanced democracies and so is the simplification of campaign messages. Campaign strategies by the United Kingdom Independence Party during the BREXIT campaign, Donald Trump's run for the presidency in the United States, the recent presidential race between the Front National and the Republicans in France all show similarities; the rise of populist mobilisation seems to challenge mainstream politics. Specifically, the threat of rising populism in Europe might force mainstream parties to balance their policy content more carefully with the style and tone they are using to communicate their positions effectively to the masses.

Acknowledgements

Supporting Information

Additional Supporting Information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher's web-site:

Table 3: Parties & elections covered in the analysis
Table 4: Dictionary to measure populist rhetoric, based on Rooduijn and Pauwels (2011: 1283)
Figure 5: The relationship between populism[3] & simple language
Table 5: Mean values for populism measure
Table 6: Robustness: Do populist parties use simpler language in their manifestos? Yes
Table 7: Is it easier for voters to position political parties that use simple language in their manifestos? Yes
Figure 6: Does the press in Germany talk about manifestos? Yes
Figure 7: Do voters search for manifestos before elections? Yes
Figure 8: Do voters search more often for manifestos or candidates before elections? Depends

Notes

1. For presidential hopefuls, simpler language resonates: Trump tops GOP field while talking to voters at fourth-grade level, *Boston Globe*, 20 October 2015 (available online at: www.bostonglobe.com/news/politics/2015/10/20/donald-trump-and-ben-carson-speak-grade-school-level-that-today-voters-can-quickly-grasp/LUCBY6uwQAxiLvvXbVTSUN/story.html); Donald Trump woos Republicans by speaking at a 4th grade level, *Esquire*, 21 October 2015 (available online at: www.esquire.com/news-politics/news/a39031/trump-fourth-grade-level/); Schumacher and Eskenazi (2016).
2. Indeed, an interaction effect might be thinkable: Two messages with the same positional clarity might resonate differently with voters depending on linguistic complexity. Such an interaction effect is not directly testable with our design for several reasons. One reason is because we do not observe two parties in our data using the same positional clarity while employing different linguistic complexities. Yet, using the existing measure for blurring based on the CHES data (Rovny 2012a,b), we do not find support for such an interaction effect. Thus, such an interaction effect could constitute an interesting starting point for a survey experimental design. Including this design and a theoretical discussion of it here would, however, go beyond the article's scope.
3. Please consult Table 3 in the Online Appendix for a detailed overview of the parties and elections covered in our analysis.
4. The critical reader might still note that we have reason to assume that voters are mainly affected by party communication through the media. Thus, instead of analysing manifestos, one would be better

off analysing party cues as presented in the media. However, our theoretical link leading to our 'party placement' hypothesis suggests that just like voters, the media will be affected by the complexity of campaign messages. If this assumption holds true, party cues in the media will partly be selected based on the complexity of campaign messages. Thus, relying on media data would lead to a biased sample of information that over-represents simple and catchy party cues such as the Green Party's 'veggie day'. In fact, previous research provides evidence that the salience of party positions is not validly covered by the media (Helbling & Tresch 2011).

5. We collected most manifesto texts as PDF documents, transformed them to TXT documents and cleaned the texts. Cleaning is especially tedious for the German language because of the Umlaute, which are usually misinterpreted by most automated text transformation tools. Some older manifesto texts needed to be typeset manually (at least partially). The last step of the cleaning process was composed of a careful inspection of the sentence structures. We also treated headings as sentences in all manifestos.

6. We used the KoRpus package in R to estimate the complexity.

7. Notice that the OEVP manifesto begins with a personal statement by the party leader. Thus, we did not mistakenly use a speech instead of the manifesto. This practice is common in the Austrian case.

8. Regarding the newspapers, we collected three texts on different topics (politics, sports and random choice).

9. We added '1' as a constant to ensure that '0' is not undefined, since 'log(0) = undefined'.

10. We note that we employ a continuous measure of the populist discourse while our theoretical section differentiates between populist and mainstream parties. A defining feature of populism is populist discourse by which parties aim to appeal to the people. Yet, all parties attempt to appeal to the people and thus potentially apply a populist strategy. We thus believe that a continuous measure best captures our theoretical conjecture. Nevertheless, we address the conceptual mismatch and also employ a binary measure in our robustness test to provide evidence that our findings do not hinge on using a continuous classification. Furthermore, the use of the term 'populist party' significantly increases the readability of our theory section.

11. The variable from Kitschelt's data ranges from 1 to 1.6 with a mean of 1.26. The variable based on the Laver and Hunt expert survey ranges from 7.44 to 24.05 and has a mean of 14.28. Expert surveys come with several issues, such as the uncertainty about the information experts use to answer survey questions (Bakker et al. 2015; Benoit & Laver 2006). However, expert surveys still picture the most reliable and valid measure for party organisation up until today. On top of this, expert surveys are stagnant over time, while parties' organisational structures might very well have changed over time. Yet, we address this issue by employing two different measures taken at two different points in time (1990 and 2008–2009). Furthermore, we undertook robustness tests by restricting the sample to different time periods employing both measures.

12. As correctly pointed out by one of the reviewers, the opposite assumption could also be made: Incumbents may have more complex positions, which might require more space to communicate and translate into more complex messages.

13. We divided the right-left scale by ten to ease interpretation.

14. To be precise, a pooled Wooldridge test (Wooldridge 2013) is not significant, and thus the null hypothesis of no autocorrelation cannot be rejected. Since H_0 tests for no autocorrelation, not rejecting H_0 does not entitle us to accept H_A. We decided to proceed with caution and to also control for an AR-1 autocorrelation structure in our robustness test. The standard errors of these models are also more conservative when compared to models not controlling for autocorrelation, even though the p-values do not extensively differ from each other.

15. Breusch-Pagan and Cook-Weisberg tests for heteroscedasticity were employed and cannot reject the null hypothesis of constant variance. Significant unit-roots tests (Fisher-type test based on ADF test) reveal that the data are stationary.

16. The tenth percentile represents a share of 0 per cent populist terms in the manifesto, while the ninetieth percentile states 0.31 per cent populist terms. Other covariates are fixed at their mean. Please note that both panels in Figure 2 use the absolute values of populism and not the logarithm to ease interpretation.

17. The parties included in the first and second parts of the analysis are not identical as smaller parties in Austria (i.e., the Liberals and Liste Hans-Peter Martin) are not included in the CSES study.

18. Table 7 in the Online Appendix provides results from further model specifications. In models 3 and 6, we account for party extremism as respondents might have a more accurate knowledge of party placements if a party is more extreme.

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