Backlash against Meat Curtailment Policies in online discourse: Populism as a missing link

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ABSTRACT

Given overwhelming evidence that current levels of meat consumption jeopardize human and planetary health, there is a need for governmental action to reduce meat consumption (i.e., Meat Curtailment Policies, or MCPs). However, few such policies are actually being implemented, in part due to fear of backlash. Better understanding the ideological underpinning of backlash is thus crucial for designing strategies that can further the much needed transition towards more plant-based diets. To address this issue, this study unravels the diverse ideological notions informing backlash in discourse against MCPs. Data consists of three news articles in right-wing publications and over 2700 corresponding comments, posted on Facebook in response to policy proposals to reduce animal protein consumption in the Netherlands. Analysis of the data is based on a framework for ideological discourse analysis, which enables the identification of ideological notions through recognizing semantic and formal structures in text. The research reveals that next to the well documented notions related to neoliberalism (e.g., freedom of choice) and carnism (e.g., meat is normal), populist notions are a significant ideological basis of backlash. In addition, ideological notions related to populism, such as anti-elitism, are interlocked with carnism and neoliberalism. The analysis contributes to a better understanding of the socio-political nature of backlash against MCPs. It suggests that while notions related to carnism can explain how people justify their meat consumption, such notions are only partly relevant for explaining resistance to MCPs. Such resistance is not just an individual response, but a theme around which groups of people converge, through shared ideologies.

1. Introduction

Governmental action to reduce animal protein consumption is widely perceived as necessary (Aiking & de Boer, 2018; Godfray et al., 2018; Graça et al., 2019). Livestock contributes greatly to global environmental problems and climate change (Poore & Nemecek, 2018; Steinfeld et al., 2006) and the volumes of meat consumption do not show a declining trend, despite the increased attention for vegan and vegetarian lifestyles (Dagevos et al., 2020). Even though the necessity to implement governmental measures to reduce meat consumption (i.e., Meat Curtailment Policies, or MCPs) is evident from this perspective, a lack of such policies persists worldwide (Changing Markets Foundation, 2018; Rust et al., 2020), due to concerns of governments as well as NGO's around interfering in people's lives, potential public backlash, and a loss of voters or donors (Bailey et al., 2014; Laestadius et al., 2014; Wellesley et al., 2015). This paper contributes to a better understanding of backlash against MCPs.

Current literature on a protein transition is heavily tilted towards the consumer acceptance of meat alternatives (e.g., Hartmann & Siegrist, 2017; Michel et al., 2021; Onwezen et al., 2020). This leads towards an individualized understanding of potential responses to changes in the availability of meat and meat replacers in the food environment. Based on findings that soft interventions (e.g., nudging) are likely to be accepted while strong interventions (e.g., taxes) might risk short-lived resistance, Wellesley et al. (2015) concluded that 'governments over-estimate the risk of backlash' (p. vii). However, while Wellesley et al. (2015) understand backlash foremost as an individual and rational response, backlash should also be seen as a dynamic socio-political phenomenon, that may become stronger when it becomes a theme around which groups of people converge, based on shared ideological notions.

In order to better understand backlash as well as its potential magnitude, it is therefore vital to unravel the ideological notions inspiring it. Ideology steers discourse and social practices and is therefore a potential promotor or inhibitor of social change. This is reflected in van Dijk's definition of ideology: 'foundational beliefs that underlie

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the shared social representations of specific kinds of social groups' (van Dijk, 2006, p. 119), which 'will influence their interpretation of social events and situations and control their discourse and other social practices as group members' (van Dijk, 2011, p. 380). Strikingly, right-wing ideology has been linked to meat consumption (Dhont & Hodson, 2014), to opposition against climate change mitigation policies (Hoffarth & Hodson, 2016) and meat reduction initiatives (Morris et al., 2014), and to more negative reporting about such initiatives (Morris, 2018). These studies suggest a higher likelihood to find backlash against MCPs on the right-wing of the political spectrum. Therefore, our aim is specified towards understanding backlash against MCPs in right-wing settings.

Research on governmental efforts to reduce meat consumption is still in its infancy (Graça et al., 2020; Whitley et al., 2018), partly because the lack of MCPs complicates studying real-world response to such policies. While available evidence points in the direction of carnism and neoliberalism as ideological inspiration of resistance against MCPs (Sievert et al., 2020), this paper shows that populism is a potentially powerful ideological resource as well. Moreover, various studies have found a link between populism and climate change scepticism (Forchtner et al., 2018; Huber, 2020) and hostility towards climate change mitigation policy (Lockwood, 2018). Given the current populist wave in societies throughout the world, with populism having an outsized influence in politics, media and social movements (Norris & Inglehart, 2019), there is a need to better understand what role populism plays in backlash against MCPs and how it is entangled with the other ideologies that were already identified in the literature to date. If populism is part of the ideological basis of backlash against MCPs, the potential strength of backlash may in fact be much larger than Wellesley et al. (2015) forebode.

Another factor that may contribute to backlash are online communication infrastructures that allow the formation of discourse communities (Swales, 1990) or affective publics (Papacharissi, 2014). As shown for other topics, social media networks enable populist group formation (e.g., Flew & Iosifidis, 2020; Gerbaudo, 2018). Additionally, (social) media content is notoriously polarized and exposure to it can exacerbate different forms of political polarization (Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021). Correspondingly, Garcia et al. (2019) showed that the launch of a Twitter campaign around the EATLancet diet – designed to feed the planet in an environmentally sustainable and healthy way – 'resulted in the formation of a new sceptical online community organizing around a new hashtag #yes2meat' (Garcia et al., 2019, p. 2154). The online discussion was not only highly polarized, but also moved the more ambivalent people towards a more outspoken, sceptical position over time (ibid). This arguably has a significant impact on how discourses around contested topics such as MCPs are shaped on and beyond social media.

Based on the above, our specific aim is to identify which ideological notions are salient in backlash discourse on MCPs in online right-wing publications and responses of their readers and disentangle how notions of populism, neoliberalism, and carnism interlock in such discourse. We analyse three news articles in right-wing publications and 2751 related Facebook comments. Using an analytical framework of ideological discourse analysis (van Dijk, 1998; 2000; 2006; 2011; 2013), we identify notions of carnism, neoliberalism, and populism, and patterns of interlocking, through analyzing discursive structures and strategies in the news articles and Facebook comments. In this way, we show how the ideological underpinning of backlash against MCPs in discourse in right-wing publications and corresponding comments can be understood, which will contribute to understandings of backlash against MCPs in general and aid in designing strategies that can further the transition towards more plant-based diets.

1.1. Carnism and the justification of meat consumption

Carnism and neoliberalism have been highlighted as important ideologies forming potential barriers for meat curtailment policy (Sievert

et al., 2020). According to Joy (2010), who coined the term, 'carnism is the belief system in which eating certain animals is considered ethical and appropriate' (p. 30). It relates to long standing discussions on the question why people eat meat (e.g., Adams, 1990; Fiddes, 1991). Carnism is theorized as a form of speciesism, which again is a type of anthropocentrism, meaning that animals are not only inferior to humans, but that some animal species are also inferior to others (Joy, 2010; Khazaal & Almiron, 2016).

Though rooted in animal rights studies, carnism has increasingly been included in the body of research with a more eco-political orientation; for example, as explanation for resistance against reduced meat consumption in studies about combating climate change via such reduction (Sievert et al., 2020; Stoll-Kleemann & Schmidt, 2017). More fundamentally, the idea of human dominion – over animals *and* the environment – is seen to provide a foundation for both meat consumption and climate change skepticism (Hoffarth & Hodson, 2016; Leite et al., 2019). Studies on media coverage of livestock production and consumption as a climate change issue have found discourses that reproduce and perpetuate ideological notions of anthropocentrism and carnism (Almiron & Zoppeddu, 2014; Kiesel, 2010; Morris, 2018; Singer, 2017). The study of Graça et al. (2020) is noteworthy, as their study is the only one of which we are aware to empirically study the connection of ideology to MCPs on a national level. They show that endorsement of human supremacy and attachment to meat, both carnist notions, explain lower support for MCPs in individuals (Graça et al., 2020).

Based on Joy's (2010) and van Dijk's (2006) conceptualization of carnism and ideology, respectively, we define carnism as the foundational belief system underlying meat consumption, which controls and organizes the most entrenched socially shared beliefs that meat is normal (it is expected of us, and taken for granted), necessary (for survival and to stay strong and healthy), natural (humans evolved to eat meat and naturally crave it), and nice (meat is tasty, fulfilling, or satisfying) (the latter belief 'nice' is an addition of Piazza et al., 2015). Piazza et al. (2015) empirically tested the 4Ns classification and found that meat eaters primarily rationalize and justify meat consumption with these four Ns, with Necessary being the largest category and Normal the smallest. Vegetarians endorse the category Natural more than other categories, which suggests that this notion is the 'most persistent and difficult to overturn' (Piazza et al., 2015, p. 125). While evidence for the prominence of these four notions in justifications of meat consumption is strong, much less is known on how these four Ns are expressed in backlash against MCPs.

1.2. Neoliberalism and the emphasis on freedom of choice

As indicated above, neoliberalism is a second ideology associated with resistance against reduced meat consumption. Singer (2017) conceptualizes neoliberalism as 'an economic doctrine of free market, free trade, government deregulation, privatization of social services and public goods, welfare cuts, and reduced taxation', and therefore envisioning 'a society governed by rational, apolitical, and self-correcting mechanisms' since the 1970s (Aune, 2001; Harvey, 2005 as cited in Singer, 2017, p. 349). This results in the abolishment of the so-called 'nanny state' and a shift in responsibility from governments to individuals and private organizations (Thorsen, 2010, p. 15). According to Harvey (2005), the hegemony of discourse that reproduces neoliberal ideology has led to a 'common sense basis on which the world is lived, interpreted, and understood' (as cited in Otero et al., 2015, p. 48).

Given the context of this paper, we highlight notions of freedom of choice and minimal governmental interference in individual affairs in our conceptualization of neoliberalism. Since the rise of neoliberal governance in the 1970s, the idea of freedom has come to be understood in terms of consumer choice (Johnston, 2008). The liberal notion of individual freedom has developed into a neoliberal notion that people are 'obliged to be free to understand and enact their lives in terms of

choice' (Rose, 1999, p. 187). According to Lury (1996), choice is central to thinking about autonomy and agency. Moreover, the form of a choice – 'I decide myself' – dominates any content (Verbrugge et al., 2018, p. 114).

Research on reduced meat consumption discusses consumer claims that fit within the neoliberal frame, emphasizing freedom of choice and personal entitlement. According to Singer (2017) and Morris et al. (2014), the reduction of meat is interpreted as a removal of choice and appears fundamentally incompatible with the notions of growth and freedom of choice in neoliberal market economy thinking. Correspondingly, several studies have suggested that meat restriction interventions may lead to the perception that individual freedom of food choice is restricted or eliminated (Emel & Hawkins, 2010; Lombardini & Lankoski, 2013; Milford & Kildal, 2019). Furthermore, a sense of personal entitlement to meat consumption is found to be an important barrier against reduced meat consumption (Graça et al., 2019). Also in discourse studies, notions of free choice have been observed in discourses on meat consumption and institutional meat reduction efforts (Morris, 2018; Morris et al., 2014; Sahakian et al., 2020).

1.3. Populism and centralizing 'the people'

While there has been ample attention for carnism and neoliberalism in the backlash against reduced meat diets, the role of populism is much less understood. This may be partly explained by a lack of scientific consensus on the conceptualization of populism. Mamonova and Franquesa (2020) outlined unclarities around populism being 'an ideology, a form of political mobilization, or a discursive frame' (p. 2). We follow Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017), who define populism as *'a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, "the pure people" versus "the corrupt elite," and which argues that politics should be an expression of the* volonté générale *(general will) of the people'* (p. 5). Populism is 'thin-centered', because it is almost always related to other 'thick-centered' ideologies (e.g., socialism or liberalism). This means that populism alone hardly ever gives thorough answers to political questions (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). Populism always has a 'host ideology', and currently it is often interlocked with neoliberalism (Pauwels, 2014).

Though populism may qualify as a 'full' ideology according to van Dijk's (2006) definition of ideology, populism defined as a 'thin-centered' ideology better fits the purpose of our study, as populism draws on more substantive ideologies explaining *what* the general will of 'the people' is or *why* 'the elite' is seen as corrupt. Thus, rather than identifying the distinct role of populism in backlash, it may be more relevant to see how it interacts with carnist and neoliberal ideological notions.

In our study, we include four notions of populism that follow from the definition above and that can be identified in discourse: people-centrism, exclusionism, anti-elitism, and institutional negativity (Hameleers & Vliegenthart, 2020; Pauwels, 2014). According to Pauwels (2014), the centrality of 'the people' might concern 'the people's voice, their identity, their values, their rights or their prosperity' (p. 195). People-centrism is interrelated with exclusionism, because 'the people', as a group imagined to share certain traits, is positioned against other groups that are considered not part of 'the people' (Pauwels, 2014). Anti-elitism encompasses the beliefs that elites are corrupt and self-interested, oppress the ordinary people, and prioritize the interests of other social groups; therefore, they are not considered suitable to represent the voice of the 'silenced majority' (Hameleers & Vliegenthart, 2020).

Hostility towards an institution and thus, *specific* elite groups, is generally not anti-elitist, but an expression of institutional negativity (Pauwels, 2014). Hostility towards the Climate Agreement in reference to the general will of 'the people' is strictly speaking not populism. However, populism is related to climate change skepticism (Forchtner et al., 2018; Huber, 2020) and opposition to climate change mitigation policy (Lockwood, 2018). Lockwood (2018) suggests that right-wing

populists are hostile towards the climate agenda, because it is seen as a universalistic and cosmopolitan elite project lacking representation of socially conservative and nationalistic interests and values. Therefore, we see institutional negativity as an indicator of populism, but only when it is embedded in broader discourse of anti-elitism and a distinction between us 'the people' and them 'the elite'.

While populism is an emerging theme in climate related research (Forchtner et al., 2018; Huber, 2020; Lockwood, 2018), strikingly, a discussion of populism is absent in scientific research about reduced meat consumption and plant-based diets. In some cases, notions of populism seem present, but are not explicitly stated. For instance, in discourse on livestock production on Facebook, Olausson (2018) identified suspicion towards authorities with a 'hidden agenda' targeting the livestock industry, and thereby threatening national traditions and identity. Additionally, right-wing authoritarianism, which is related to right-wing populism (Norris & Inglehart, 2019), is a strong predictor of increased acceptance of animal exploitation and consumption (Dhont & Hodson, 2014; Monteiro et al., 2017). Thus, there are some signals in the literature of a potential link between populism and backlash against MCPs. In this study, we further explore how populism is a factor in backlash against MCPs and how it interlocks with neoliberalism and carnism.

2. Methodology

2.1. Data collection procedures

The context of data collection consisted of proposed policies to reduce animal protein consumption in the draft Dutch national Climate Agreement (SER, 2018). In response to the policy proposals, Dutch newspaper *De Telegraaf* headlined on its front page 'Meat must be rationed: Climate Agreement meddles with Dutch eating customs'. This article stimulated a debate in traditional media (see e.g., Drayer, 2019; Kamsma, 2019) and the topic became trending on social media, with Dutch social media users commenting in strikingly negative terms (see e.g., EenVandaag, 2019).

To select data for this study, we searched for Facebook posts that were part of this online discussion. Insertion of the terms 'meat' and 'climate agreement' in the search bar of Facebook resulted in a total of 74 posts. Subsequently, we used five inclusion criteria in order to guard accurate comparison with *De Telegraaf* as a national right-wing news medium and to guarantee sufficient data for analysis: (1) on-topic; (2) *national* news medium; (3) *right-wing* news medium; (4) more than 200 comments on Facebook post; (5) written text. The inclusion criteria resulted in just three news articles which differ mainly by the type of news medium behind the Facebook account: daily newspaper 'De Telegraaf (DT)', public television broadcasting channel 'WNL', and weekly magazine 'Elsevier Weekblad (EW)' (De Telegraaf, 2019; Elsevier Weekblad, 2019; WNL, 2019). As the search resulted in a workable corpus of articles and related Facebook comments, we did not select further and included all articles and related comments that resulted from this procedure.

All Facebook comments related to the selected Facebook posts were exported to Excel files with the program 'ExportComments.com'. Some comments failed to be exported, because approximately 10–30% of comments were in private mode, some comments were spam, or the account of the commenter had been suspended or disabled (according to ExportComments.com). The final data consisted of the three news articles and a total of 2751 Facebook comments (see Table 1). The comments included in the paper were translated from Dutch to English. To guard anonymity of the Facebook users behind the accounts, we did not attach any identification features to the quotes.

2.2. Analytical procedures

The analytical procedures are based on the framework for ideological

Table 1
Numerical data of posted news articles on Facebook.

Medium	# Total Facebook (Fb) comments	# Direct Fb comments	# Fb comments on direct Fb comments
De Telegraaf	1580	1066	514
WNL	938	747	191
Elsevier Weekblad	233	179	54
Total	2751	1992	759

discourse analysis developed by Teun van Dijk (1998; 2000; 2006; 2011; 2013), which integrates multidisciplinary ideas from linguistics and cognitive, political, and social sciences, and combines elements of cognition, society, and discourse (van Dijk, 1998). In contrast to frameworks of critical discourse analysis that go beyond ideology (e.g., Fairclough, 1989; Gee, 2011), van Dijk's framework for ideological discourse analysis centralizes ideology and how it is expressed and reproduced by discourse. Ideological discourse analysis means 'the identification and interpretation of discursive structures and strategies as the expression and reproduction of group ideologies' (van Dijk, 2011, p. 394). For a comprehensive discussion of the assumptions the framework is based on, problems associated with ideological discourse analysis, open questions, and lacunae, the reader is referred to van Dijk (2006).

Typically, the overall discursive strategy in ideological discourse is a positive presentation of the ingroup and a negative presentation of the outgroup (van Dijk, 2000; 2011). This is done by emphasizing positive things about Us and negative things about Them or de-emphasizing negative things about Us and positive things about Them (also called the 'ideological square') (van Dijk, 2011). The overall strategy can be identified through discursive strategies that belong to either semantic or formal structures (van Dijk, 2000). Semantic structures refer to the semantics of ideological discourse, e.g., the use of negative terms or presenting groups as victims. Formal structures are linguistic and communicative resources that can (de-)emphasize things, e.g., through repetition or an active/passive sentence construction (van Dijk, 2011). Table 2 provides an overview of which discursive strategies we included in our study.

In line with Van Dijk's approach, first we determined the context of the communicative event through analyzing and comparing the actual MCPs in the draft Dutch Climate Agreement and the subjective constructs of the MCPs in the news articles. The second phase of analysis consisted of highlighting the discursive strategies from Table 2 in the text. Based on this step, we determined the various Us and Them groups in the news articles and related comments, as well as the positive and negative things said about those groups. In other words, using Van Dijk's terminology, we inductively identified various 'ideological squares'. The inductive approach in this phase means that the ideological squares identified followed the data and not a pre-existing framework, and enabled us to be open towards different ideological positions in the data. All data that was intelligible was coded. However, in this stage of the research, we excluded the comments that were in favor of MCPs, since the focal point of this research is backlash.

In the third phase, ideological squares were thematically coded, using an iterative procedure of back and forth between data and literature about ideology deemed relevant to formulate themes (see for example Braun & Clarke, 2006). As previous research had indicated the relevance of neoliberalism and carnism as ideologies, this literature was initially incorporated in this phase of thematic coding. As not all ideological segments could be coded with those two ideologies, we went back to the literature and added populism. While some singular statements could possibly also be interpreted as expressions of other ideologies (e.g., fascism, racism, or nationalism), within the broader corpus those ideologies were not salient. Given the nature of the data, consisting mostly of short comments, such distinct and dissimilar statements did not have enough context to interpret them. Therefore, we did not include other ideologies. With those three ideologies, we were able to thematically code all ideological squares that had emerged in the inductive phase. In this iterative process, we refined themes into two levels; overarching themes (the three ideologies) and subthemes (the notions within those ideologies).

With the ideologies, as well as the specific notions of these ideologies, identified in the third phase, we were able to perform a last step of axial coding. In this fourth phase we identified the ways in which notions from different ideologies were interrelated. Thus, we could determine how ideologies are interlocked in backlash discourse.

3. Findings

3.1. Populism and polarization between the (climate) elite and the people

In discourse that expresses populism, a distinction between in- and

Table 2
Discursive strategies of semantic and formal structures (Adapted from van Dijk, 2000).

Semantic structures		Formal structures	
Discursive strategy	Explanation	Discursive strategy	Explanation
Polarization	Categorization of in- and outgroup, and allies or opponents	Repetition	Used to draw attention to positive meanings about the ingroup and negative meanings about the outgroup
Actor description (including authority and victimization)	A description of groups or individuals (e.g., names, functions, roles, actions)	Examples and illustration	To illustrate a proposition, to give proof or evidence, or to serve as a premise.
Lexicon and lexicalization	Choosing (self-made) negative terms for outgroup and positive for ingroup	Number game	The use of numbers and statistics to imply or show objectivity and argue against opinion
Hyperbole and dramatization	The use of semantic rhetorical tools to enhance meaning and exaggerating the facts in one's favor	Sentence syntax	Active/passive construction may emphasize/ de-emphasize negative or positive agency of a group
Topics and topoi	Topics are the macrostructure of a text and basic meaning of discourse. Topoi are arguments, taken for granted and as self-evident, that are standardized to a degree they do not require further explanation. E.g., topos of (financial) burden.	Rhetorical questions	A property of an interactional framework
Comparison	Comparisons mostly between the in- and outgroup, but also between situations.		
Norm expression	Expressing norms of the group		
Evidentiality	Evidence for knowledge or opinion		
Local meanings	Granularity (broad vs detailed); generalization (general vs particular); implication (explicit vs implicit); vagueness (vague vs precise)		

outgroups centers on 'the people' versus 'the corrupt elite'. In the news articles, the Climate Agreement was clearly positioned as the outgroup. In the Facebook comments, we predominantly found three distinct outgroups: the (drafters of the) Climate Agreement, a broader pro-climate group, and the (political) elite, which are intermittently and mostly implicitly characterized as corrupt.

All three news articles use the discursive strategy of polarization; they polarize between 'the Dutch' (also called: 'we', 'the people', 'citizens') and '(the drafters of) the Climate Agreement', referring to the Climate Council.

> 'Meat must be rationed. <u>Climate Agreement</u> meddles with <u>Dutch</u> eating customs. <u>The Dutch</u> may prepare for a meat ration. If it is up to <u>the drafters of the Climate Agreement,</u> meat disappears from the plate five out of seven days a week.' (De Telegraaf [DT])

> 'Climate Agreement restricts meat: "Only twice a week"'. 'If it is up to <u>the drafters of the Climate Agreement,</u> <u>we</u> only eat meat twice a week.' (WNL)

> 'I am willing to reduce meat consumption for the climate … According to <u>the drafters of the draft Climate Agreement, the Netherlands</u> should start with a so-called protein transition to reduce the use of animal products.' (Elsevier Weekblad [EW])

In the news articles, institutional negativity is expressed through portraying the Climate Agreement in strikingly negative terms. The Climate Agreement is given an active voice to emphasize its negative agency, even though the content of the articles only covers a small part of the actual Climate Agreement. To put this into perspective, three pages in the 226 pages draft Climate Agreement are devoted to consumption issues. This signals that the articles do not solely report negatively about the MCPs, but about the institution that drafted the proposed policies. This is also visible in the construction of a framing of the whole Climate Agreement being restrictive. Not only the MCPs are framed as restrictive, but also the Climate Agreement they are part of.

> 'The meat dictate of climate pope Ed Nijpels is an addition to the climate proposals to remove gas supply from houses, to install heat pumps, and to pamper buyers of expensive electric cars.' (DT)

The 'meat dictate of climate pope' is striking, because it may originate from the *Dictatus Papae* of pope Gregory VII. According to Colomer and McLean (1998), this dictate 'asserted the primacy of the pope over political powers' (p. 5). This would mean that the reporter of DT describes Ed Nijpels – chair of the Climate Council – metaphorically as someone who tries to expand his power from the area of climate issues to the entire country. The word 'climate pope' may also denote a comparison between combating climate change and religion. Moreover, bringing forward the chair of the Climate Council, instead of the chair of the special consortium Agriculture and Land Use, that developed the proposal for MCPs, signals institutional negativity. Additionally, the part about 'pampering' buyers of expensive electric cars implies corruption through a prioritization of the needs of specific [rich] groups in society. These are clear expressions of institutional negativity within the news articles. As stated above, institutional negativity can be an indicator of populism, but only when it is embedded in broader anti-elitist sentiment. The negativity in the news articles is still rather focused on the specific institution behind the Climate Agreement and is not clearly embedded in a broader anti-elitism.

Anti-elitism becomes much broader in the Facebook comments. Markedly, an addition of two outgroups is found in the Facebook comments: a general pro-climate group, that ostensibly goes beyond the (drafters of the) Climate Agreement, and the political elite. In the comments, a broad lexicon is used for this broader pro-climate group:

> 'environmental fascists', 'environmental Nazis', 'climate harpers', 'environmental harpers', 'climate mafia', 'climate hysteria', 'climate weirdos',

'climate rascals', 'the green revolt', 'the green hysteria', 'a group of green elite madmen', 'climate madness', 'environmental freaks', 'climate rioters', 'environmental knights', '"climate improvers"', 'idiotic green sniffers', 'climate dictatorship', 'ideological climate alarmism', 'environmental fanatics', 'the green madness', 'environmental terrorism', 'climate extremists', 'insane green poopers', 'all those climate gurus' (Examples selected from multiple comments)

Some of these word compositions are non-existent in official Dutch lexicon and could be considered lexicalization. For example, the Dutch dictionary professional den Boon (2019) proclaimed the word 'climate harper' ('*klimaatdrammer*') as Word of the Day and defines it as '(unfavorable) someone who insists on the need for – in the eyes of critics draconian – climate measures' (den Boon, 2019).

Strikingly, in the lexicalization of the quoted examples, negativity or hostility towards pro-climate groups is already implied. Next to that, in some lexicon, notions of populism (institutional negativity or anti-elitism) and neoliberalism (individual freedom and minimal governmental interference) are interlocked, e.g., in 'climate dictatorship' and 'environmental fascists'. However, identifying specific groups that are given these negative names is difficult, as they could refer to political elites with a climate change agenda, the drafters of the Climate Agreement, or anyone who regards climate change as an important issue. Not all lexicon above can be identified with certainty as the expression of anti-elitism or institutional negativity. Nevertheless, the sceptical position regarding climate change and climate policy that is implicated in such negative terms (e.g., 'idiotic green sniffers' or 'climate extremists') is relevant, as such skepticism is related to populism (Forchtner et al., 2018; Huber, 2020; Lockwood, 2018).

The addition of the political elite as an outgroup is especially remarkable. Polarizing between the people (denoted as e.g., 'we', 'citizens', 'the Dutch', 'the folk', 'the ordinary man') and the (political) elite (denoted as e.g., 'elite', 'politicians', 'government', 'the Netherlands', or 'the Hague'), and describing it in negative terms, shows more clearly an expression of people-centrism and anti-elitism. For example:

> 'Climate Agreement prescribes <u>we</u> must eat meat only twice a week. MUST is behind the door! Meddle with your own <u>money-guzzlers of this corrupt elite gang in The Hague!</u>' (DT)

> 'As long as <u>politicians</u> still fly 20x per year instead of taking the train. As long as <u>politicians</u> are driven around in a diesel car instead of an electric one. As long as they themselves eat threatened fish species and meat daily. For that long <u>the average Dutchman</u> will become the victim of a <u>group green elite weirdos!!</u>' (DT)

> '<u>The Netherlands,</u> country of not allowed. One cannot even decide whether to breathe or not. What a sh*tty country it has become. Everything because of CO2 emissions [..] But it is the way to steal money from <u>people's</u> pockets' (WNL)

> 'It is disgusting how they impose everything on <u>the ordinary man,</u> and <u>we</u> swallow everything what these morons in <u>the Hague</u> do' (WNL)

Anti-elitism is further expressed by describing the Dutch government as always wanting to be 'the best boy in class', comparing with policy or contribution to environmental issues of other countries, corresponding with a polarization between environmentally "good" and "bad" countries (Olausson, 2018). Commenters mention the Dutch government gives the Dutch a hard time, sow fear with propaganda, and that their promises are 'hot air' (DT).

The suggestion that the MCPs will only count for 'the people', and not for 'the elite', is arguably most revealing of people-centrism and anti-elitism, because it implies a corrupt and self-interested elite that does not represent the interests of 'the people':

> 'Just as for example climate harper Rob Jetten chronically flies all around the world while he teaches 'us' a lesson about pollution that 'we' cause,

the meat ration will count for 'all the others', and thus not for Our Leaders 👆*'* (DT)

'Just introduce food stamps again and the rich are allowed to eat whatever they want, right mister Rutte … ' (DT)

'And certainly grasshoppers the rest of the days, while the elite eats beef steak 😂😂😂😂*'* (DT)

'Only when the elite flies less, installs less swimming pools, eats less caviar and drinks less red wine, and also lives like we do, only then and not earlier 😂😂😂😂*'* (WNL)

Furthermore, outgroups are abundantly characterized as crazy, using negative lexicon to describe the supposed craziness. It is important to note that this characterization could not be linked to institutional negativity or anti-elitism in all cases; in some cases the analysis is limited to the identification of a hostility or negativity towards a non-specific outgroup. However, since the Facebook commenters are responding to a news article about the Climate Agreement, it is fairly safe to interpret this negative lexicon as referring to the drafters of the agreement.

'idiots', 'haywire', 'morons', 'madmen', 'retarded', 'cuckoo', 'deranged', 'kooks', 'nuts', 'seriously ill', 'out of their minds', 'bunglers', 'retarded morons', 'sick spirits', 'fools', 'completely out of control', 'a screw loose', 'insane', 'derailed', 'imbeciles', 'mentally ill' (Parts selected from multiple comments)

'They have gone <u>*completely haywire*</u> *over there in the Hague'* (DT)

'The Netherlands is going <u>*crazy*</u>*, this government has* <u>*totally lost it*</u>*. I call this pestering citizens!'* (WNL)

In terms of exclusionism, the news reporters address 'the Dutch', but implicitly appeal to the meat-eating people and therefore exclude people that refrain from meat consumption from this ingroup. In the Facebook comments, vegetarians and vegans are even more explicitly excluded through descriptions in negative terms, e.g., 'intrusive' (DT), 'people that do not eat meat look like ghosts, so white, like they are going to die soon' (DT), 'No meat, and I will start hunting on vegans … ' (WNL). Furthermore, a broader category of left-wing parties or adherents is also excluded from the ingroup in Facebook comments: 'left riffraff', 'left propaganda', 'left freaks', 'left hippies', 'left idiots', 'a disgusting left country', 'left Gestapo', 'left patronizing policy', 'left green climate idiots', 'left weirdos, 'left fascists' and

'What an incredible bullsh*t!! Get rid of green left and that other left-wing misery!!' (WNL)

While a distinction is made between 'the Dutch' or 'the people' and the elite or the institutions, the ingroup is seen to be meat eating. People who do not eat meat or who have left-wing views are positioned as an outgroup, in opposition to the ingroup, which is 'the people'. This not only supports literature about right-wing adherents engaging more in meat consumption (Dhont & Hodson, 2014) and opposing climate change mitigation policy (Hoffarth & Hodson, 2016), but also suggests that climate and meat reduction policy are considered left-wing affairs.

3.2. Restriction of the people's free choice

While populist notions, and constructions of the people versus an elite or institution, are prominent in the backlash discourse, the analysis also supports the idea that it is a thin-centered ideology that becomes interlocked with more substantive ideologies, such as neoliberalism. While there were plenty comments that contained just a carnist or neoliberal notion, populist notions were usually combined with one or both of those host ideologies. An analysis of the semantic structures relating to polarizations is again insightful in this respect. Regarding the ingroup, a remarkable pattern in the Facebook comments is polarization

between 'I' and 'They'. A sizeable number of people uses first person pronouns (I, me, my, mine) in combination with third person pronouns (they, them). In van Dijk's (2011) framework of ideology, the distinction is 'us' versus 'them', and in the definition of populism it is 'the people' versus 'the elite'. The 'me' versus 'them' distinction implies a viewpoint from the personal perspective rather than from the group perspective. Elites or specific elite groups are not always obstructions of the centrality of 'the people', but of the centrality of the individual and their individual freedom of choice (neoliberalism) and meat eating customs (carnism).

In the news articles, neoliberalism functions as the host ideology of, and therefore interlocks with, populism in portraying the Climate Agreement as restrictive and therefore, as a governmental body interfering in people's free choice. Institutional negativity is mostly expressed by discourse on restricting meat to two days a week. The DT article strikingly used and framed a quote of the Netherlands Nutrition Centre 'meat once or twice a week at most' – which is an estimation of what the MCPs would mean in practice by the year 2050. The quote is (1) reformulated, e.g., 'meat disappears from the plate five out of seven days a week', (2) reinterpreted, e.g., 'Two meat balls per week, that is all that remains.', and (3) translated into one word (in Dutch), e.g., 'meat ration' ('vleesrantsoen') and 'meat dictate' ('vleesdictaat'). WNL and EW adopted the hyperbole 'meat ration', which is exemplary for connecting institutional negativity to notions of neoliberalism. A ration limits free choice, which is reflected by the first definition of 'ration' in the Oxford Dictionary: '[countable] a fixed amount of food, fuel, etc. that you are officially allowed to have when there is not enough for everyone to have as much as they want, for example during a war'. Next to that, WNL used Dutch figurative speech '*aan banden leggen*', which means 'pruning his power, limiting' and 'it refers to the strap that chains a dog, limiting his freedom of movement' (Historical linguist N. van der Sijs, personal communication, August 5, 2020). WNL and EW use more neutral language than DT; however, both WNL and EW based their articles on the text of DT without nuancing or critically examining the copied statements or quotes, which equally indicates framing of MCPs as restrictive.

In the Facebook comments, a pattern of interlocking notions of populism and neoliberalism is most prominent. This pattern is visible in the characterization of 'the elite' as meddlesome, patronizing, harping, and taking away. Though populism is not always evident in separate comments expressing freedom of choice (comments in which self-determination is emphasized range between 'I decide that', 'I decide how much meat I eat', 'I decide what I eat', 'I decide how I live' or 'Nobody decides for me'), neoliberal notions start to interlock with populist notions of institutional negativity and anti-elitism when the emphasis on self-determination is directed towards the Climate Agreement itself or the political elite. For example:

'The day the government starts determining what we eat, is the day they should be impeached very quickly, booh 😡*'* (WNL)

'I decide if I smoke, imbibe or eat meat. Meddlesome f*cking cabinet.' (WNL)

Furthermore, notions of populism and neoliberalism are interlocked when limited freedom, that is a supposed result of MCPs, is understood in a broader context of governmental rules and restrictions in general. A recurring response is: 'We're not allowed to do anything anymore' (DT), 'All those rules!' (DT) or 'We are being lived' (DT). These responses are topoi (standard taken for granted arguments that are considered sufficient as a premise to accept a conclusion), strategically used as premises in the argument that the government is authoritarian. It is often unclear what rules and restrictions the commenters talk about; a few cues are rules and restrictions regarding cooking on gas, electric cars, and smoking: 'So meat will become the new smoking?' (EW).

The discontent with governmental rules and restrictions in general,

and the corresponding limitations in individual freedom, is also shown with hyperbolic comparisons between the Netherlands and authoritarian structures and dictatorships (e.g., totalitarianism, communism, and fascism) and countries (e.g., Russia, China, North-Korea, and the former Soviet-Union), of which some are the topos of history-as-lesson. For example:

'It's slowly starting to look like a situation we had a long time ago. Something with dictatorship …. .' (DT)

'Do we live in a free country … can we make our own choices???? I slowly get the scary idea we live in a dictatorship' (DT)

'Riddle … what is the difference between the Netherlands and China? Well?' (DT)

Moreover, some commenters refer to the historical period of the second World War (history-as-lesson). Commenters emphasize the lack of freedom in this period of history and question whether the outgroup will control the 'meat ration' with 'meat stamps', referring to food stamps to buy groceries during the times of war. Next to meat stamps, other mentioned consequences of the proposal are a meat police, illegal trade, a meat tax, and a control at people's houses. Thus, dominant moves that reveal interlocks between neoliberalism and populism are to picture the Netherlands or the Dutch government as authoritarian.

Backlash against MCPs as embedded in backlash against (climate) policy indicates that response to MCPs is related to how people position themselves against other policy and top-down decision-making that affects individual freedoms and personal lives and customs. Therefore, it is vital to study backlash in a broader policy context. Moreover, in backlash against MCPs, the aspect of meat consumption seems to disappear to the background when an external party as the Climate Council or the government discourages or 'restricts' it. This indicates that notions of populism and neoliberalism are more salient than notions of carnism when governments are involved. In the quote below carnism is even explicitly questioned.

'Of course we should eat less meat, but that counts for everybody. Not only for the citizen, but also for the elite, who won't eat any ounce less.' (EW)

3.3. Carnism and the freedom to eat what is normal

The freedom that is desired, or felt to be under threat from the climate agreement, is a freedom to consume in ways that are considered normal. Throughout the news articles, words such as 'restrict' and 'ration' are connected to 'eating customs'. This is reinforced by photographs of meat balls and beef steak. Hyperboles, dramatization, and repetition play an important role in the construction of meanings of restriction and the 'normal' eating practices being under threat. In the Facebook comments, this normality is underlined by expressing the norm of daily meat consumption and by asking rhetorical questions about vital bodily functions, suggesting equivalence with meat eating.

'Well, I will continue eating meat 7 days a week. Nobody prescribes what I eat, how much I eat or when I eat. I decide that.' (DT)

'Are we still allowed to breathe?' (DT)

'Will they also decide whether or not I can poop 😰 f**k off with those retarded things' (DT)

'How often can I have intercourse with my wife? Just a question in between.' (DT)

Comparing meat consumption to basic necessities, such as breathing, defecating, and having intercourse, may indicate the carnist notions that meat is normal, natural, and necessary. The rhetorical questions can also be interpreted as hyperbolic comparisons to emphasize the

"ridiculousness" of the MCPs. Breathing and defecating is argued to be bad for the environment, because people exhale CO_2 and consume water and toilet paper (e.g., 'Soon we will only be allowed to breathe one time per minute due to CO_2 emissions' [WNL]). Restricting this would be ridiculous, just as restricting meat consumption would be ridiculous, because it is such a normal activity. The value of freedom and consumption of meat are also centralized through, mostly hyperbolic, examples of how to maintain freedom of choice and meat customs in a situation of a 'meat ration'. Facebook users comment about buying meat in neighboring countries, hoarding and freezing, emigrating, self-domesticating and slaughtering, or becoming a cannibal. For example:

'We will get meat from Germany. They are not this insane over there.' (DT)

'Shall we rebuild grandpa's garage into a mega freezer?' (DT)

'It's time to deepen my knowledge about emigration. My government disgusts me.' (WNL)

'If there's no meat anymore, we will slaughter it ourselves no problem. They won't take away my meat and especially not because of that climate nonsense' (DT)

'Go on with "pestering citizens" and we will become cannibals!! 😀🤣' (WNL)

The carnist notion that meat consumption is normal and the neoliberal notion of freedom of choice are integrated in these examples, because both meat consumption and individual freedom are maintained. These integrations are not only found in hypothetical future situations, but also in describing short-term actions (e.g., 'I'm going to read all the responses with three nice chops on my plate (snack)' [DT] and 'Later I'm going to hoar up on a couple of kilos of spareribs ☺' [DT]) and in invigorating resistance by emphasizing *more* or *extra* meat ('I say extra meat 😋' (DT), 'The more they talk about it, the more I eat meat, bunch of idiots' (DT), or 'I eat meat 8 days a week.!!!! 👍' (DT).

In the examples quoted above, carnism and neoliberalism could also be seen as the substantive ideologies that populism draws from. Formulations such as 'pestering citizens' and 'my government disgusts me' could be seen as an expression of either institutional negativity or anti-elitism. Next to patterns where populist notions were combined with neoliberal or carnist notions, there were also comments where all three ideologies were combined. Such a threefold combination was expressed in the idea that 'the people' are restricted in their free choice by Them 'the elite' to eat according to their normal food customs, in which meat is an essential as well as tasty component.

'F*ck off with that sh*tty Climate Agreement. Those idiots are not going to tell me how and what I eat, how I should live. I decide that myself. That whole Climate Agreement only exists to turn the Netherlands into a dictatorial state, not more! Knocking money out of people's pockets. We in the Netherlands don't have to hold on to an agreement. We do things our own way. And of course every day a piece of meat! 😡😡👇👇😡😡 👇 👇 👇' (DT)

While notions that meat is necessary and natural are implicitly present, for example in rhetorical questions, it is striking that explicit expression of these carnist notions is sparse in the Facebook comments. Zooming in on the notion that meat is necessary, the news articles even reflect shifting ideas about the necessity of meat. While one article reflects the common carnist notion of meat being necessary, another emphasizes that it is healthy to reduce meat consumption.

'Anyone who rejects meat on ideological grounds and without knowledge of essential nutrition is at great risk.' (Food scientist Frédéric Leroy quoted in DT)

'I believe people themselves decide how much meat they eat. Though it is of course quite healthy to cut down a little.' (State Secretary of Economic Affairs and Climate Mona Keijzer quoted in WNL, EW)

The justification that meat is necessary may still apply in moderate meat consumption. However, it is remarkable that health benefits of meat reduction are emphasized over health benefits of meat consumption in two of the news articles, while notions that meat is normal and nice are expressed more widely and firmly.

4. General discussion and conclusions

This study investigated how ideological notions are expressed and interlock in backlash against MCPs. Our analysis demonstrates that three ideologies, carnism, neoliberalism, and populism are salient in online right-wing discourse against MCPs. Such ideologies are not distinct in discourse, as many comments, though very small, combine ideological notions from two or three ideologies. The research identified specific patterns of interlocking between ideological notions. The most dominant pattern of interlocking is between the populist notions of anti-elitism and institutional negativity with the neoliberal notion of freedom of choice. Specifically, the Climate Agreement or the (political) elite are seen as obstructions to individual freedom of choice. Also, not only MCPs are seen as infringements on freedom of choice, but the broader (climate) policy context of the Netherlands is seen as limiting the people's freedom (e.g., as 'patronizing' and 'dictatorial'). Strikingly, the topic of meat is often absent in such comments. The focus lies on governmental bodies 'restricting' free choice in a more general sense.

Carnism was also interlocked with both populist and neoliberal notions. For instance, the carnist notion of meat being normal was underlined with reference to Dutch food customs. In other comments, the notion of meat being normal was coupled with the idea of freedom of choice. Thus, comments highlighted concern about MCPs limiting the choice to eat what is normal. Analysis of the comments lastly resulted in a pattern of interlocking in which notions from all three ideologies were combined. The notions of freedom of choice and meat being normal, and a polarization between an ingroup 'the people' and an outgroup 'the elite' were combined in the idea that governmental bodies obstruct the freedom to eat according to the normal Dutch foodways, in which meat plays a central role. While carnist and neoliberal notions could be identified as self-standing, as in references to meat being nice, or choice being valued for its own sake, populist notions link such ideas with powerful ideas of in- and outgroups, namely the elite versus the people.

Previous research has identified the salience of carnism and neoliberalism in resistance against MCPs (Sievert et al., 2020). Our findings demonstrate the importance of populist notions next to those ideologies. In the introduction we stated that if populism is part of the ideological basis of backlash against MCPs, the potential strength of backlash may in fact be much larger than Wellesley et al. (2015) forebode. The populist imagination of defending Us 'the people' against Them 'the corrupt elite' could be seen as amplifying the significance of the infringement of MCPs on free choice, or tasty and normal food respectively. Moreover, our findings align with research exploring linkages between populism and hostility towards climate policy (Lockwood, 2018). Thus, the outcomes of our study cast doubt on the suggestion of Wellesley et al. (2015) that governments overestimate backlash.

Similar to evidence on institutional meat reduction efforts (e.g., in canteens), our study indicates that MCPs risk resistance when they are perceived as limiting or eliminating freedom of choice (Emel & Hawkins, 2010; Lombardini & Lankoski, 2013; Milford & Kildal, 2019). The analysis shows that freedom is understood in terms of consumer choice, which aligns with theoretical approaches to neoliberalism of Johnston (2008) and Rose (1999). In line with Verbrugge et al. (2018), the emphasis on self-determination and the absence of further argumentation could be interpreted as the form of the choice – the freedom to make the choice: 'I decide myself' – being more important than the content.

While notions that meat consumption is natural and necessary are dominant in justifications of meat consumption (Piazza et al., 2015), backlash in contrast predominantly draws on notions of meat being normal and nice. This is a surprising result, especially because Piazza et al. (2015) suggest that 'beliefs about the naturalness of eating meat may be the most persistent and difficult to overturn', as they found that this notion was most endorsed across dietary groups, also in the group of vegetarians. In contrast, our findings show that in discourse on MCPs, the notions that meat is natural and necessary are much less salient. This can possibly be explained by the focus on reduction to two days a week. Hence, we can speculate that, in discourse on MCPs focused on eliminating meat consumption, notions of naturalness and necessity are likely to be expressed more prominently and explicitly. Simultaneously it is important to take into account that the emphasis on those notions is interlocked with populism and neoliberalism.

Our research has several limitations. The findings of this paper are limited to three ideologies, carnism, neoliberalism, and populism. Given the character of most of the data –relatively small comments – and in line with Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach to thematic analysis, we included notions of ideology that were salient in the full corpus, and not those that had too little context to interpret them as ideology. In addition, we focused on right-wing articles and Facebook comments in response to a single event where MCPs were suggested. Therefore, we cannot argue with certainty there are no other ideologies expressed in other online right-wing discourse against MCPs. Additionally, due to our approach to only select news articles in right-wing publications, our study is limited in distinguishing between right- and left-wing populism, while both are related to climate change skepticism (Huber, 2020). Furthermore, though news articles posted on Facebook function as response stimulation, which is comparable to stimulus material used in focus-group studies (Olausson, 2018), the outcomes of this study cannot be directly translated to offline discourse and behavior. Inherent characteristics of social media, such as possible trolls, bots, and provocation to gain 'likes', pose problems in translating ideological underpinnings from online to offline communication.

Though there is an urgent need to decrease meat consumption, governments seem hesitant to take action in fear of backlash. A better understanding of backlash is crucial to move towards the implementation of policies that decrease the consumption of meat. Our findings underline the complex socio-political dynamics of the protein transition. Where research has suggested that backlash may be overstated (Wellesley et al. (2015) and peters out after implementation of meat reduction interventions (Lombardini & Lankoski, 2013), our research suggests that populist, neoliberal, and carnist ideology informs backlash and helps form groups that identify and interact with each other, in part through online communication infrastructures.

The involvement of populism in backlash is especially challenging. Populism is currently a strong motor of resistance against policy, including policies to reduce COVID-19 outbreak and immigration policies. As soft interventions (nudges) and positive interventions ('try insects as food') appear insufficient to reach the required protein transition, more intrusive policies that limit the accessibility of meat (meat free canteens, meat tax) seem inevitable, but also seem likely to inspire backlash rooted in populism and neoliberalism.

The research extends the food transition literature by pointing towards the importance of group dynamics, such as in online communication platforms, and shared ideology in backlash against food transitions. While carnism and neoliberalism have been considered before, incorporating populism in the explanation of backlash against MCPs is urgent as it helps to explain polarization of in- and outgroups – with the in-group conceived of as an homogenized 'the people' – to carnist notions of meat being normal and to the notion of a government interfering in free choice. It also points towards the identification with foodways as part of a national heritage.

Further research into the relationship between populism and backlash against MCPs in offline settings is hindered by the rare

implementation of MCPs, making it a hypothetical issue for most people. In future research, ethnographic approaches that unravel the interrelatedness of online with offline interaction and discourse surrounding MCPs can give more clarity on whether backlash against MCPs expressed online is consistent with backlash expressed offline. For instance, there is a need to gain an understanding of groups that take action to prevent the implementation of initiatives such as meat free canteens. At the same time, quantitative, population-level methodologies can give a better understanding of the magnitude of potential backlash, as well as of the group in favor of MCPs. In addition, such research could clarify the relationships between the full scale of feelings about MCPs (positive and negative) and the level of agreement with a range of ideological statements drawn from carnism, neoliberalism, and populism.

In conclusion, our research has shown the importance of populist ideology next to carnism and neoliberalism. In the backlash discourse we analyzed, opposition to MCPs is explicitly seen as a collective interest and it simultaneously shapes such a collective, pitching 'the people' (who are seen as meat eaters with certain meat based food customs) against an elite or top-down, meddling institution. The current focus on individual acceptance or rejection of a reduced meat diet underestimates the power of socio-political group formation through shared ideologies in the context of MCPs.

Ethical statement

The study did not undergo ethical review by an ethical commission. Ethics approval was not required.

The data is derived from public accounts on Facebook, and thus not password protected or stored in private Facebook groups. The comments were obtained via www.ExportComments.com, which provides a service to export Facebook comments to an Excel file. The service does not export comments from suspended or disabled accounts or accounts in private mode. The latter means that all collected comments can be seen by Facebook accounts without friends. We ourselves copied the comments to a Word file, which was eventually uploaded in the tool MaxQDA. Thus, the data analysis was done with the Word file with comments in public mode, of which the Facebook user can "reasonably expect to be observed by strangers" (Townsend & Wallace, 2016 in Mancosu & Vegetti, 2020).

The GDPR forbids processing of political opinions and philosophical beliefs (Art.9 (1)). In the paper, comments are coupled to (political) ideology; however, the outcomes of the study are interpretations of the researchers. Also, Facebook comments do not necessarily reflect the true beliefs of the people behind the Facebook accounts. Moreover, the GDPR rule does not apply to scientific research if the researcher 'respect[s] the essence of the right to data protection and provide[s] for suitable and specific measures to safeguard the fundamental rights and the interests of the data subject" (Art.9(2)(j)). We have taken two effective measures as specified in Art. 89.

First, to protect anonymity of the Facebook users, we did not attach any identification features to the quotes in the article. In the Excel files, the Facebook accounts are pseudonymized by ExportComments.com with a numeric profile ID (Art. 98(1)(3)).

Second, the purposes of the study could be fulfilled by further processing of the data that did not permit the identification of data subjects (Art. 98(1)(4)).

Author contributions

All authors have made an appropriate scholarly contribution to the work described:

First author: conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis, investigation, writing – original draft.

Second author: conceptualization, writing – review & editing, supervision, funding acquisition.

All authors have seen and approved the final version of the

manuscript being submitted.

Data availability

All data used in the study is available upon request. The first author has full access to the data reported in the manuscript.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

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