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## The public opinion effects of antisemitic elite cues: a survey experiment on the Hungarian Soros campaign

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### ABSTRACT

Right-wing populist leaders have long vilified left-wing activist George Soros to justify their policies. They accuse Soros and his organisations of being globalist elites who attack national sovereignty and traditional family values. The accusations themselves are loaded with antisemitic tropes. Despite this, it is unclear whether these populist, anti-elite messages effectively persuade citizens, or if antisemitic appeals specifically drive their impact. To answer these questions, we conduct a survey experiment in Hungary mimicking the Hungarian government's propaganda, which sometimes uses Soros as a symbol to mobilise support. We show that a random Soros' endorsement reduced policy support among pro-government respondents but increased it among anti-government ones. This suggests that Soros-bashing serves as a partisan cue in populist communication, helping to shape constituent preferences. However, overt antisemitic priming did not amplify the effects of Soros cues on policy preferences. These findings highlight the potential and limits of populist elite cueing.

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## Introduction

George Soros, a 94-year-old Hungarian-American billionaire with Jewish origins, has millions of admirers and detractors all around the world. To his fans, he is a shrewd financial investor, Holocaust victim and survivor, promoter of open society values, university founder, democratic activist, and generous philanthropist. To his critics, he is a much more nefarious figure. To the far left, he is a ruthless currency speculator and poster boy of unregulated capitalism. To the far right, he is the enemy of traditional family and religious values and radically pro-immigration.

Over the past two decades, nationalist populists like North Macedonian Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski, Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic, and Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor

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Orban have all run election campaigns on promises to stop the so-called “Soros agenda”. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan accused Soros of supporting opposition figures and journalists that were critical of his regime. Azerbaijan President Ilham Aliyev accused Soros of colluding with his Armenian rivals to attack his country. Partly due to Soros’ political activism in the United States, he has also become a favoured target of Donald Trump and the American far right.

The sheer variety of rhetorical attacks against him show that George Soros serves as a versatile scapegoat for populists in their political speech. The fact that he has attracted critics on both the right and the left all over the world suggests that George Soros is at least as important for what he symbolises as for what he has done. The ferocity of popular hatred against Soros, even in countries where he has not been active, has been galvanised using antisemitic tropes that suggest the threat of globalist, cosmopolitan elites (Kalmar 2020; O’Donnell 2021). At one time, antisemitic conspiracy theories featured the Rothschilds—a once-influential Jewish banking family in Europe. Today, however, Soros has overtaken the Rothschilds as the principal focus of antisemitic conspiracies theories. The “Stop Soros” campaigns that emerged in the 2010s have been called the most modern incarnation of antisemitism (Jenne, Bozóki, and Visnovitz 2022; O’Donnell 2021; Richardson and Wodak 2022; Santini, Salles, and Barros 2022).

With populist leaders and politicians increasingly engaging in anti-Sorosism, it behoves us to understand its effects on public opinion and its causes. Radical right populists worldwide base their support on orchestrating popular opposition against and across a range of policies. However, given that populists often lack programmatic consistency or clarity (Norris 2019), easily accessible cues – tapping into broader mental schemes and world-views – are vital in managing their supporters’ stances across loosely connected policies. Antisemitic, anti-elite cues built on ethnopopulist conspiracy frames (Pirro and Taggart 2022) are widespread discourse by populist actors. This article argues that the use of Soros and the underlying coded antisemitic tropes present an insight into citizens’ reactions to a general populist strategy and rhetoric for political persuasion and mobilisation.

No populist leader has so assiduously deployed anti-Sorosism as Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, who has made fearmongering over George Soros the core of his political strategy. During the 2018 national election, the government papered the country’s highways and subways with giant grayscale photos of Soros laughing—recalling antisemitic imagery of the interwar period featuring the ominous “laughing Jew” photos warning of Soros’ growing influence in Hungary. Soros was later depicted in posters with European Commissioner Jean-Claude Juncker, suggesting that Soros pulled the strings in the EU as well. In the run-up to the 2024 elections, the Fidesz government put up posters that showed Soros standing together with opposition politicians in support of the Ukrainian war against Russia.

The central component of Orban’s populist messaging is the periodic non-binding “consultations” with Hungarian citizens. In what amounts to push-polls, respondents are asked whether they supported policies after being told that Soros proposed them. To test the effectiveness of these “real life” cues—plus the antisemitic tropes that accompany them—we designed a survey experiment that mirrors the Soros-cueing in these National Consultations. The experiment was conducted with 2,300 Hungarian citizens and used a mixed-subject design: we randomly primed some respondents’ with an

explicit antisemitic statement before we measured their support for a battery of policy issues. While primed and non-primed subjects responded to queries about public policies, they were interrupted by a message noting that Soros endorsement of the policy measures in question.

The results of our experiment show that Soros cueing does indeed shift public opinion towards the government's position on a range of policies. Post-hoc analysis of partisan heterogeneity suggests that Soros references function as a negative partisan cue, further polarising pro- and anti-government policy preferences. Nonetheless, we were unable to show that this negative cueing works also, or partly through open antisemitic beliefs. In our discussion, we review the alternative explanations and potential methodological limitations that might account for this null result on the antisemitic mechanism. Overall, the study offers causal evidence for the public opinion effects of populist anti-elite cueing, and disconfirms an overt antisemitic mechanism.

### Background on the Hungarian case

"Anti-Sorosism" can be defined as "the modern synecdoche of Jewish world conspiracy" (Richardson and Wodak 2022). Anti-Soros rhetoric looms especially large in far right-wing media, where George Soros has been blamed for funding drug and human-trafficking, destroying nation-states, overthrowing governments, and starting wars. According to other theories, Soros works secretly with the UN and EU to undermine Western civilisation with mass immigration from non-Western societies. He has also been accused of destroying traditional heterosexual marriage, spreading Covid-19, introducing homosexuality to children, and promoting secularism and transgenderism in society.

Once relegated to remote corners of the internet, anti-Soros conspiracy theories have lately moved into the political mainstream (Santini, Salles, and Barros 2022). One case stands out, however: Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán chose the demonisation of George Soros as his core political strategy from 2016 onward. Orbán used the "Stop Soros" communications campaigns leading up to his third super-majority victory in 2018. The campaign focussed directly and viscerally on the person of George Soros. Orbán himself gave a speech claiming that "Uncle George" was an enemy that is "unlike what we are...not national but international". During the campaign, the government blanketed the country with billboards containing giant grayscale photos of Soros laughing – recalling antisemitic imagery of the interwar period featuring the "laughing Jew". Other billboards featured Soros manipulating liberal Hungarian politicians on the end of strings as a grand political "puppet master" operating his network of "mercenaries" or "soldiers" in the shadows as tools to execute his agenda. Soros was accused, among other things, of plotting to create a multi-ethnic, diverse society that are hostile to families, God, traditions, and national conservative values. Most remarkably, the government charged Soros with seeking to resettle 40 million refugees from the Middle East in Hungary.

Critics have accused the Hungarian government of running an openly antisemitic campaign. From the Israeli ambassador to Hungary<sup>1</sup> to the Pope<sup>2</sup> to George Clooney,<sup>3</sup> many have raised concerns about the anti-Jewish fear-mongering in the 2018 election campaign. Foreign leaders declared that the Hungarian government was trafficking in antisemitic tropes by featuring George Soros in images reminiscent of Nazi-style propaganda.

The BBC observed that “Many government posters have had anti-Semitic graffiti scrawled on them. The posters on the floors of Budapest trams were deliberately placed so passengers would have to tread on Mr Soros’s face”.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, there is little doubt that the “Stop Soros” campaign deployed antisemitic symbolism, partly by turning classic tropes on their head. Szilard Demeter, a strongman in cultural politics in Hungary, stated that Soros was a “liberal Fuhrer”, that Europe had become a “George Soros’ gas chamber”, and that “poisonous gas flows from the capsule of a multicultural open society”.<sup>5</sup>

The Fidesz government has also used anti-Sorosism in its push-polls on policies. Since it won its first two-thirds majority in 2010, Fidesz Prime Minister Viktor Orban began to administer “national consultations” to Hungarian citizens with the stated aim of initiating a direct dialogue with voters about the most important policy questions of the day. Critics of the National Consultations point out that these are hardly tools of deliberative democracy. The questions are nearly always phrased to produce answers that accord with the government’s preferred policies. The results of the consultations—announced by the government on its website—boast Soviet-like levels of support for Fidesz policies. The government routinely announces that over 90 percent of the public opposed policy X or policy Y according to their referenda. The fact that the survey questions are designed to get respondents to think positively about the government’s position, and negatively about the opposition’s preferred policy, has led experts to conclude that the National Consultations function mostly as a propaganda tool (Batory 2015; Svensson, Molnar, and Batory 2022).<sup>6</sup>

The consultations usually have a theme. During the 2015 “migration crisis”, the government held a consultation on Hungarian migration policy. During the pandemic, a consultation asked respondents to weigh in on their preferred Covid-19 mitigation strategies. After Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, a consultation was held on whether Hungary should support the war effort. The National Consultations have long been a centerpiece of Fidesz’ public opinion strategy. Overall, there have been eleven national consultations from 2010 to the time of this writing—averaging nearly one per year. Today, the consultation site is operated by the prime minister’s office (PMO) and funded by the state.

What is particularly unusual about these questions is not just their leading nature, but how George Soros has been connected to policy issues. Soros is the most commonly referenced single individual in the National Consultations (See an example on [Figure 1](#)). It would appear that the government has created negative public perceptions of Soros and instrumentalized them to persuade the Hungarian citizenry about policy issues.

What is less clear is whether the government’s strategy is effective, and if so, what elements make it so. To answer this question, we turn to our theoretical framework, which combines political communication research on political cues as well as latent attitude activation theory.

## Theoretical framework

To understand the logic of the Soros-bashing strategy, we draw significantly on cueing theory. In the most general terms, political cues anchor voters’ opinions across a range of issues. By providing a simple decisional heuristic, cues ease the cognitive burden of processing new information and allow the to formulation of opinions by connecting the specific issues to broader political predispositions such as values and beliefs (Eagly



Nemzeti Konzultáció 

# A SOROS-TERVRŐL

**Ne hagyjuk szó nélkül!**

KÉRJÜK, TÖLTSE KI AZ ALÁBBI KÉRDŐÍVET!

**1.** Soros György arra akarja rávenni Brüsszelt, hogy Afrikából és a Közel-Keletről évente legalább egymillió bevándorlót telepítsen az Európai Unió területére, így Magyarországra is.

Soros hosszú évek óta azon dolgozik, hogy megváltoztassa Európát és az európai társadalmakat. Célját más civilizációs háttérű embertömegek betelepítésével akarja elérni. Terve bemutatásakor így fogalmazott: „az előre látható jövőben az Európai Uniónak be kell fogadnia legalább egymillió menedékkérőt évente”. (Project Syndicate, 2015. 09. 26.) Hasonló álláspontot képvisel az Európai Parlament is. A testület támogatta az áttelepítési programokat, valamint a bevándorlási útvonalak létrehozását. (2015/2342 (INI))

Ön támogatja a Soros-tervnek ezt a pontját?  IGEN  NEM

**Figure 1.** An example of the National Consultation questions by the Hungarian government (2017). Title and Subtitle: *National Consultation about the Soros Plan. Let's not remain silent!* Statement I: George Soros wants to convince Brussels to re-settle at least one million migrants every year from Africa and the Middle East to the territory of the European Union, and Hungary. Statement: Soros has been working hard to change Europe and the European society. His aim is to re-settle people with different civilizational backgrounds in Hungary. He introduced his plan as follows: “In the near future, the European Union needs to admit at least one million asylum-seekers every year” (Project Syndicate, 2015.09.26). The European Parliament holds a similar stance by supporting relocation programmes and the creation of new migration routes (2015/2342 (INI)). Question II: *Do you support this element of the Soros-plan?*

and Chaiken 1993; Kam 2005; Popkin 1991; Zaller 1992). For the voting public, cues therefore offer information shortcuts (Downs 1957) that help voters clarify their positions issues without having to study them in detail (Leeper and Slothuus 2014). Cues can be particularly useful for shaping preferences when voters have low awareness about an issue or when the issue has low individual salience (Bakker, Lelkes, and Malka 2020; Converse 2000; Zaller 1992). Empirical research shows that voters, who behave as cognitive misers when it comes to public policy, use partisan cues to take positions (Pannico 2020).

For political elites, political cues therefore serve as a valuable tool of persuasion and mobilisation; they use cues to steer constituent preferences on a diversity of policy issues. Evidence show that voters adopt elite and party positions (Lenz 2012), even when those shift rather suddenly (Bisgaard and Slothuus 2018). We argue that cueing is especially important for populists, and in circumstances of polarisation. First, populist politicians might rely more on cues in their communication because of populism’s *thin* ideological core (Mudde 2004; Stanley 2008). Populists often have relatively ambiguous or self-contradictory programmatic positions (Norris 2019). Furthermore, populist governments are also characterised by policy unpredictability (Bartha, Boda, and Szikra 2020). Therefore, populists’ cues – that tap into larger mental frameworks and discourse such

as conspiracy theories (Pirro and Taggart 2022) – can offer a “glue” between seemingly unrelated and substantively unmotivated policy positions and changes.

Second, with the rise of partisan affective polarisation (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012) and negative partisanship (Abramowitz and Webster 2018), out-group cues, such as the one involving Soros, offer especially high potential for managing the in-group public opinion. Increasingly, partisans choose sides based on their group identities, often against or regardless of their ideological motivations (Dias and Lelkes 2022; Mason 2018). Cues enhance partisans’ motivations to take identity consistent positions (Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus 2013). Consistently, populist communication heavily relies on conspiracies that are built around the polarised, Manichean struggle between in- and out-groups (Pirro and Taggart 2022). By tying fears of an outgroup from *beyond*, such as immigrants, with fears of elites from *above*, such as the EU, UN, IMF, or “global elites” such as Soros, they construct a super-threat that requires ruthless executive action (Jenne 2018, 546) bolstering support for radical policy changes across a whole range of issues (Haggard and Kaufman 2021; McCoy, Rahman, and Somer 2018; Vachudova 2021).

Regarding our case, the populist and illiberal Orban routinely demagogued the opposition by using out-group and anti-elite cues. In this framing, globalist elites such as Soros and EU leaders are a part of an international cabal to destroy the Hungarian nation and culture. In this discourse, Soros serves as a signifier of elite threats to the nation. By tying Soros to policies the government dislikes, populists can mobilise popular support for their favoured policies. This populist communication strategy offers a way for the government to shape the policy opinions of the public without going into the substance of the policy. By engineering favourable results on these referenda, populist governments can claim that their policies enjoy mass popular support. To test for the effects of this communication strategy, we pose the following hypothesis.

*H1: Pairing policy proposals with Soros cues depresses the public support for these policies.*

Assuming that this cueing is effective, the question then arises why Soros is such a productive figure for right-wing populist discourse. Specifically, we seek to test whether antisemitism makes him an effective scapegoat. To understand the role of antisemitism in far right populist communication, we must first understand how it influences political opinion.

Scholars have long argued that antisemitism is a latent cultural code that distinguishes Jews (out-group) from the majority population (in-group), configuring them as a societal threat (Bauer 1994; Langmuir 1996; O’Donnell 2021). While the “old” antisemitism focuses on negative stereotypes about Jewish people as a hostile or unclean out-group that preys upon Christian or Islamic national majorities, since World War II and the founding of Israel in 1949, the so-called “new” antisemitism has become more prevalent.

In the new antisemitic worldview, Jews are a powerful elite out-group that dominates nations through control of the media, business, culture, and politics. In *Culture of Critique*, an antisemitic text widely circulated in contemporary right-wing circles, Jews (a historical out-group) use endogamy and in-group favoritism to create heterogeneous societies in which Jews can “hide in plain sight” (MacDonald 1998). To do so, they use their outsized power and influence over the institutions of society to promote multiculturalism, social progressivism, and policies of mass immigration. In this modern antisemitic narrative, Jews are powerful purveyors of national erosion and decadence. They blur ethnic

identities and undermine national (traditional) family values. This code is communicated through images and language that convey antisemitic tropes of influential and well-connected Jews who manipulate politics and societies through fifth columns or shadowy networks (Fox and Topor 2021).

There is little doubt that anti-elite and in specific anti-Soros conspiracies are using antisemitic tropes (Kalmar 2020; Pirro and Taggart 2022; Plenta 2020). This applies to the Hungarian “Stop Soros” propaganda campaign as well. Our study, on the other hand, seeks to test whether Soros cues work by activating amongst the public overt antisemitic beliefs that powerful Jews are engaged in the degradation of the state and society and must be “stopped”.

Furthermore, according to the automatic attitude activation theory (Fazio 1995; Fazio et al. 1986), if an individual holds a strong and accessible opinion about an object, such as representative members of the out-group, a mere exposure to that object can instantly and unconsciously trigger the associated attitudes in other contexts.

We argue that the Hungarian public’s repeated and long exposure to the negative campaign created strong and accessible antisemitic associations to Soros, the attitude object. Therefore, we expect Soros cues to induce an automatic retrieval of antisemitic attitudes. These, in turn, bias how the connected information, the policies, are interpreted and evaluated. In other words, we argue that Soros cues influence policy opinions through “dog whistling”: sending a wink or nudge at a specific subpopulation (Tillyris 2024) for the activation of prejudiced attitudes.

*H2: Soros elite cues depress policy support because they activate antisemitic attitudes in citizens.*

## Experimental design

A major challenge in testing the aforementioned hypotheses is the latent nature of the underlying cognitive process. In response, we develop a sequential priming experiment where we randomly and independently manipulate the strength or accessibility of the antisemitic attitudes (Fazio 1995) and the presence of the attitude object as well (Soros cue). Then, we observe their combined effects on respondent support for several policies.

In the following, we introduce the experimental case study that was designed to directly test the antisemitic activation hypothesis behind the effectiveness of Soros cues in driving public opinion.<sup>7</sup> First, we justify further our study site, Hungary. Then, we introduce the details about the experimental sampling, measures, and treatment. Finally, we lay out the analysis plan for the crucial experimental comparisons and the test of the hypotheses.

## Study site

There are several reasons why we chose Hungary as the site for testing our Soros cueing hypotheses. First, Soros is a widely known and prominent public figure in Hungary – almost entirely owing to the long-standing anti-Soros campaign of the Orban government (Jenne, Bozóki, and Visnovitz 2022). Second, the level of antisemitism amongst the Hungarian public is relatively high by global comparison. The 2019 global ADL survey reports that 42 percent of Hungarians have at least some antisemitic attitudes;

67 percent agreed that “Jews have too much power in the business world”, and 71 percent that “Jews have too much power in international financial markets”. According to another study, Hungary had among the highest levels of affective antisemitism in Europe, having increased significantly from the 2000s to the 2010s (Kovacs and Fischer 2022). Hence, if Soros-cueing works, and through antisemitism, we would likely to observe it in Hungary, making it a crucial case study (Levy 2008).

Finally, by mimicking a “real life” campaign of Soros cueing, our experiment has high external validity. Since 2015, there have been numerous attempts by the government to shape public opinion in push-polls featuring Soros cues. This means we have a unique opportunity to run a highly realistic survey experiment. However, we acknowledge the possibility that the long, previous exposure of the public to Soros can dampen its potential effectiveness in the repeated, experimental circumstances.<sup>8</sup> In other words, the opinions could have already solidified on issues where Soros cues were already weaponized. We tackle this issue by embedding cues in novel policy contexts as well – where the government has not already deployed Soros cues.

### Sample

We ran the experiment with 2,300 Hungarian respondents online. Our experimental sample was provided by Kutatocentrum, the largest Hungarian survey vendor that offers online representative panels using population quotas. After administering an informed consent form, we included an attention check in the beginning of the survey to filter out low quality survey responses. Respondents who failed this check did not proceed with the survey. The survey also recorded a set of demographic variables on the subjects’ gender, age, education level and domicile. We include the summary statistics in Appendix Section A.1. Furthermore, we also measured some attitudes pre-treatment: respondents’ partisanship and the strength of their partisan identity (Huddy, Mason, and Aarøe 2015).<sup>9</sup>

### Outcome measures

In the main part of the survey, we asked people’s opinions on nine different policy issues, which are summarised in Table 1.<sup>10</sup> These issues ranged from energy politics to foreign policy, immigration, and drug legalisation.

Our selection of policy issue outcomes for testing the cueing effects was motivated by two considerations. First, while most of the issues have a distinct, international and cultural character, which might bear less relevance for an average voter, they have a common important attribute for the cueing theory: they are encompassed by the Hungarian governments’ broader ideological framing about globalism and transnational governance versus nation-state sovereignty. As we posited in the theory section, Soros can be seen as an effective shortcut to anchor policy preferences or substantive issues to this conflict. Second, many of these policies have been used in *actual* national consultations, lending high external validity to the type of issues we measure.

From a generalizability point of view, the multiple outcomes offer numerous advantages. First, it prevents idiosyncratic effects that might be present for a single or few policy items. Second, it allows for variation in policy technicality or complexity. Third, it

**Table 1.** The table shows the policy item (1), the mean policy support in the full sample (2), the mean difference in the opposition respondent's policy support compared to the government party respondents (3), and the question wording.

Outcome item	Mean [SD]	Gov-Opp [SE]	Wording "Do you support or oppose..."
1. Aid to Africa	45.7 [26.1]	-1.1 [2.5]	...increasing state aid for the African poor?
2. Boycott Israel	47.6 [19.0]	-0.5 [1.8]	...boycott of Israeli companies for the Israeli government's treatment of Palestine?
3. Freedom of civil society	60.3 [30.6]	-25.5*** [2.5]	...that civil organisations could work in Hungary without the government's interference?
4. Eviction of tenants	62.0 [29.0]	-6.9* [2.8]	...those measures which make it more difficult for banks to evict those cannot pay their mortgage?
5. Subsidies for minorities	66.2 [24.9]	-4.7* [2.3]	...the state subsidies for underprivileged minorities?
6. Withdraw NATO forces	62.4 [23.0]	-3.4 [2.5]	...the pulling out of Hungarian military forces from abroad?
7. Allow more Syrian refugees	34.2 [27.6]	-17.6*** [2.5]	...the easing of restrictions on providing asylum for Syrian immigrants?
8. Increase renewables	82.3 [18.7]	-4.5*** [1.8]	...an increase in government investments in renewable energy resources?
9. Legalize marijuana	36.5 [32.2]	-15.9*** [3.1]	...the legalisation of marijuana?
<i>Pooled Policy</i>	<i>55.15</i> <i>[29.9]</i>	<i>-8.8***</i> <i>[1.0]</i>	

allows for an individual-level variation in issue salience. Fourth, as we mentioned previously, some of these policies' connection to Soros is novel,<sup>11</sup> and therefore we can limit respondents' pre-exposure to cueing. Altogether, these outcome variations enable us to test the effect of Soros cues on public opinion while accounting for potential heterogeneity by policy characteristics.<sup>12</sup>

### Stimuli

Turning to our treatment strategy, we deployed a mixed-subject randomisation: On one hand, we randomised half of the respondents to receive an explicit antisemitic priming statement in a between-subject fashion. The other half of the respondents received no statements. We are acutely aware of the ethical implications of introducing such an antisemitic treatment in a general population survey. Such priming techniques can reinforce existing racial discrimination, or cause distress in respondents from the affected groups. We wanted to make sure that our treatment does not cross the established ethical lines of anti-semitism research. Hence, for our treatment, we selected a mildly re-phrased version of three questions asked in the annual Global Index of Antisemitism survey of the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) designed to measure antisemitic prejudices in the public globally (1. "Jews have too much control over the media." 2. "Jews have too much power in the business world." 3. "Jews have too much control and influence on Wall Street."). These survey questions are well established, oft used, but also no less priming or triggering than our treatment. Our

priming sentence was worded as follows: “Many think today that the Jews have too big influence over the financial markets, the business world and the media”.<sup>13</sup>

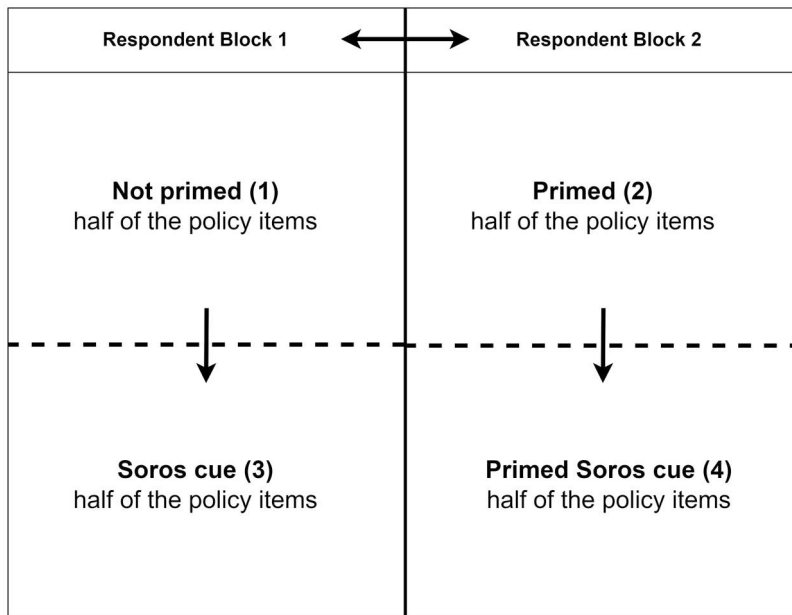
Then, both groups proceeded to the policy support questions. These questions were interrupted halfway by an endorsement of George Soros for the subsequent policy measures, providing the within-subject component of the design.<sup>14</sup> A coin flip decided whether a given policy item was shown before or after the cue.

In addition, we also asked every respondent – independent if they received the priming or not – to fill in the full antisemitism index questionnaire from the ADL survey.<sup>15</sup> This both served as an observational measure for antisemitism–complementing our causal mechanism test through priming– and a manipulation check for the effectiveness of the priming itself in eliciting antisemitic attitudes.

### *Hypotheses testing*

Altogether, this resulted in four experimental groups (Figure 2): (1) a true control group made up of the pre-cueing stage policy support responses from the unprimed half of the sample, (2) an only priming group, made up of the pre-cueing stage responses from the primed half of the sample, (3) an only cued group, made up of the post-cueing stage responses of the unprimed half of the sample, and finally, (4) a cued and primed group, made up of the post-cueing stage responses from the primed half of the sample.

To test the effectiveness of unprimed Soros cueing, we compare policy support between group 1 and group 3. To test for antisemitic activation, we compare the outcomes between group 3 and 4. First, we expect cues to depress overall policy support (H1). Second, we expect this effect to be amplified in the case of the primed group (H2).



**Figure 2.** Experimental groups.

For the main analysis, we stacked the data by policy items (nine per respondent) and treated them as pooled outcomes. To test the treatment effects, we ran multi-level linear regression models (MLM), which included a treatment group indicator, a random intercept for the respondent ID, and a random intercept and random slope for the policy item, which allowed us to account for a potential, item-level heterogeneity in the cueing and priming effects when calculating the average treatment effects. We ran the models both with and without the individual-level covariates.

## Results

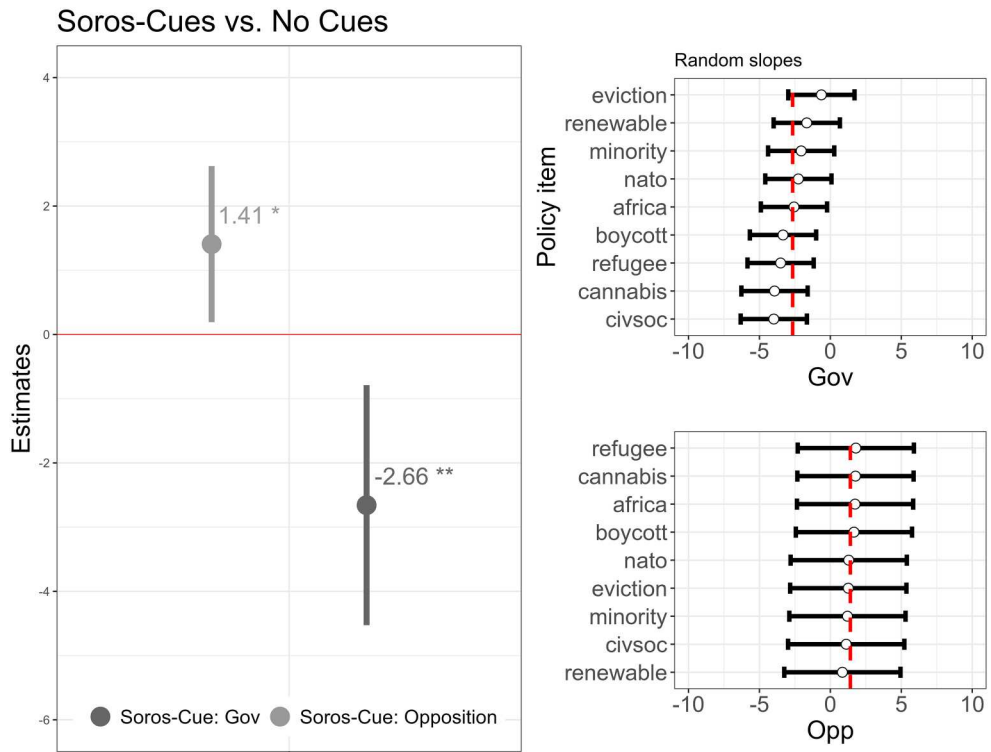
We now proceed to the results. First, we test for the effects of Soros-cueing on policy support (H1). Second, we test whether those effects are influenced by the respondents' randomly elicited levels of antisemitism (H2).

### Cueing effects

The left panel of [Figure 3](#) summarises the effects of the Soros-cueing treatment on the pooled policy support. The plot visualises the change in the mean level of policy support (y-axis) for responses where the subjects had already received the Soros cue (only cued group) compared to the stage when respondents had not received the endorsement yet (control group). The mean changes are represented by the point estimates with 95 percent confidence intervals. The reference values of the control group are represented by the horizontal line at zero. We visualised separately the effects for the pro- (darkgrey) and anti-government (lightgrey) subset of the sample.<sup>16</sup> To reiterate, these groups include only those respondents who were *not* primed with the antisemitic statement. In this test, we were curious about the “raw” effect of the cueing (H1) without the activation of antisemitism (H2).

Consistent with H1, a Soros endorsement reduced pro-government respondents' support for that policy. Pooled figures of policy support were approximately 2.6 percentage points lower when Soros' endorsement was provided compared to unendorsed policy proposals. Interestingly, Soros-cueing had the *opposite* effect on respondents who reported support for the political opposition: their pooled policy support increased by approximately 1.4 percentage points as a result of the Soros endorsement. Both effects were statistically significant at the conventional, 95% confidence level.

At first glance, these results seem to indicate only a small change in the public opinion on policies. However, we deem these effects substantial for two reasons. First, Soros cueing increased the policy preference gap between the partisan groups. The primary effect of the Soros campaign was not persuading the public as a whole, but inducing further partisan polarisation across policy issues. If we consider the approximately 9 percentage points average difference between government and the opposition baseline policy opinions from the control group ([Table 1](#)), Soros cueing increased the original gap by almost half. Second, given the long exposure of the public to the Soros propaganda, it is surprising that a one-shot treatment exerted an additional influence on opinions in such an over-saturated context. On the other hand, this hints at how powerful an opinion heuristic Soros has become after years of intense government campaigning.



**Figure 3.** Left: The figure plots the estimated effects of the Soros-cueing on policy support. The zero line represents the mean policy support of the unprimed control group (1). The point estimates represent the Soros cue group without the antisemitic priming (3) broken down for government- and opposition-leaning respondents. Standard errors are adjusted for the clusters indicated by the random intercepts. Right: The figures plot the random slope coefficients for the effect of Soros cues on support by policy item. The dashed vertical lines represent the average treatment effect:  $-2.66$  for the government sample and  $+1.41$  for the opposition sample. All figures' estimates are calculated from the mixed-effect regression models. The full numeric results can be found in Appendix B.1.

We now investigate the context in which Soros cues are most effective by looking closer at the policy issue-level treatment effects. The cues, in theory, could have a significantly more positive or negative effect on certain policy items compared to the average treatment effects. We tested this possibility by examining the random slope coefficients – extracted from the main, mixed-effect regression model (Appendix B.1.3) and plotted on the right panel of Figure 3. For the pro-government respondents, there is some variation in cueing effects across the different policy items. Soros cues showed slightly more negative effects for issues that could be seen as relevant for the “transnational” cleavage in politics such as civil society, marijuana use, and refugees (Hooghe and Marks 2018). This corresponds well to the governments’ communication frames and narratives about Soros, depicting him as the representative of liberal internationalism and globalisation. However, we also observe that the negative effect of cues is robust across most issues. The only exception is the question about eviction, where government voters are substantially

more likely to support the policy as a result of Soros cueing. We believe this is due to a measurement error.<sup>17</sup> In contrast, there is almost no variation in the effects across policies when it comes to opposition voters: in general, Soros cues increased policy support for every issue (right panel of [Figure 3](#)).

### Priming effects

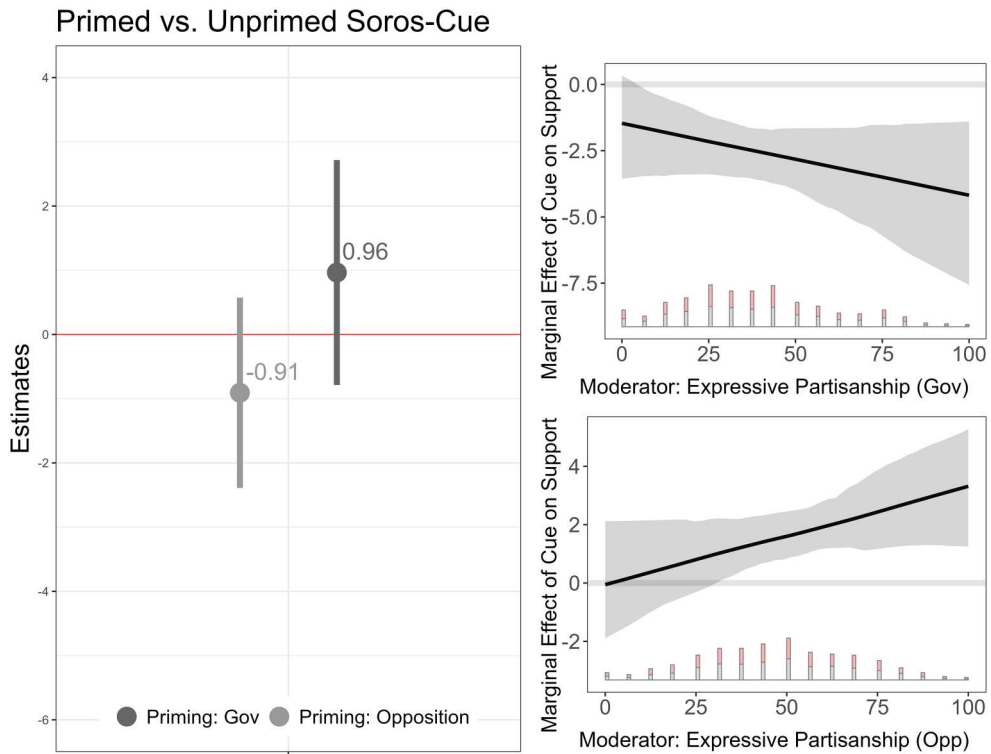
We now test the hypothesis that Soros-cueing works by activating antisemitic attitudes, creating a negative view of the connected policies. First, it is important to note that our prime increased respondent's self-reported antisemitism moderately. The only primed group expressed on average 1.5 percentage points higher level of antisemitism than the control group on the ADL scale.<sup>18</sup>

However, our priming did not amplify the cueing effects – either for government or for opposition supporters. The left panel of [Figure 4](#) compares the mean difference in the pooled policy support after cueing (y-axis) for respondents who were exposed to the anti-semitic statement before the outcome measures compared to those who were not (zero line). For government supporters, the priming actually seems to have attenuated the influence of the Soros cues, although this is not a statistically significant effect. For the opposition supporters, the experimentally-induced antisemitism seems to have depressed support for the policy when combined with a Soros endorsement, as expected. However, this effect is also statistically insignificant.<sup>19</sup>

### Additional checks

We also interacted the cueing treatment – for a subsample of experimental groups included in the test for H1 – with the self-reported, observational measure of antisemitism, but found no support for the second hypothesis either.<sup>20</sup> Lastly, we also tested whether the issue type mattered for the antisemitic mechanism, and we checked the effect of priming in the case of “transnational” issues only which were shown to be influenced more negatively by the cues for government respondents.<sup>21</sup> We found no evidence that our antisemitism prime amplified the effects of cues in these cases either.<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, a post-hoc analysis suggests that what mattered for the intensity of the cueing effect was the respondents' strength of partisan identity. The right panel of [Figure 4](#) shows the results of a non-parametric test of the interaction (Hainmueller, Mummolo, and Xu 2019): Both for pro-government (more negative) and anti-government respondents (more positive) we find larger treatment effects, suggesting that Soros cues interpreted through partisan lenses.<sup>23</sup> This is otherwise in line with our theory about the role of populist cues in partisan motivated reasoning and driving further polarisation.

Finally, both the cueing and priming results are robust to a number of different regression specifications, in the case of the government voters: first using ordinary least squares fixed-effect models, second, using a mixed effect models without any individual-level controls, and third, using an alternative operationalisation of the outcome variable and a logit model with dichotomous policy support outcome. The cueing effect is not statistically significant at the 95 percent confidence level in the simple OLS and logit specification for the opposition voters, however. Details are in the Appendices B.1.1–B.1.4 and B.2.1–B.2.4.



**Figure 4.** Left: the figure plots the estimated effect of Soros-cueing on respondents' policy support in the primed group (4). The zero line represents the non-primed Soros-cue group (3). The full numeric results can be found in Appendix B.2. Right: Figures show the marginal effect of Soros cue on policy support conditional on the level of expressive partisanship estimated via interflex, using robust standard errors (Hainmueller, Mummolo, and Xu 2019). All figures' estimates are calculated from the mixed-effect regression models.

## Conclusion

Anti-globalist, anti-elite rhetoric has become a staple in the populist rhetorical toolkit and has been used for persuading the public of certain policy positions. Based on the cueing theory, we hypothesise that this communication is successful in depressing policy support because it provides citizens with a decision-making anchor or heuristic through which they they form stances on policy issues without imposing a cognitive burden on them.

Past studies have not yet tested for the effectiveness of this populist strategy in shaping public opinion. In this article, we reported the results of a survey experiment designed to test the effects of a populist communication strategy we call "Soros cueing" in Hungary, where it has been deployed in "real life". The survey questions themselves mimicked Orban's periodic national consultations.

The survey asked respondents about their support across a range of policy issues, randomly displaying the questions with and without Soros-cueing. Furthermore, since populist communication that includes anti-elite cues such as Soros-bashing is known to traffic in antisemitic tropes, we additionally tested for whether Soros cues are more influential

because they activate citizens' latent antisemitic beliefs. We tested this mechanism via a priming strategy during which we randomly exposed respondents to an antisemitic prime – using a standard question from antisemitic prejudice surveys – beforehand the policy measures and the Soros cues. Finally, we compared the policy support across the resulting treatment groups.

We found that while Soros cues do indeed depress support for policies among pro-government people, they actually increase support for policies among anti-government respondents. This means that Soros cues have a polarising effect on public opinion across a range of issues. Furthermore, we uncovered no evidence that these shifts are related to antisemitic attitudes: priming respondents beforehand with an antisemitic statement did not amplify the effects of Soros cues. On the other hand, we did find that the mechanism is partly driven by citizens' strength of partisan identity. Both strongly-identifying government supporters and strongly-identifying opposition supporters displayed larger treatment effects, albeit in opposite directions.

What does this mean for the role of elite cues in populist communication? Our findings offer evidence for Soros cues working through partisan, motivated signalling (Bakker, Lelkes, and Malka 2020; Leeper and Slothuus 2014) – where Soros provides an orienting anchor for respondents seeking to express in-group loyalty along the partisan lines. This suggests that populists can utilise negative out-group signalling to increase further the us-versus-them divides in society (McCoy, Rahman, and Somer 2018) and to mobilise their in-groups on key policy issues, often aiming at eroding liberal democracy (Haggard and Kaufman 2021).

What does this mean for the role of antisemitic out-group scapegoating in populist communication? While many have argued that the Soros campaign had a sweeping effect on the Hungarian public due to latent antisemitic prejudices, our results paint a more nuanced picture. We find no evidence here that antisemitic activation drives the effects of Soros cues on policy preferences. However, this may reflect the postmodern nature of contemporary antisemitism, in which antisemitic tropes retain their power but have become delinked from Jews themselves.

This effect cannot be tested through our design, using conventional survey measures of antisemitic attitudes, however: while the new antisemitism could work in a latent way, our priming has been undertaken overtly. Crucially, if these ideas made explicit, some–otherwise latently antisemitic–people could reject them, partly due to social desirability (Mendelberg 2001, 2008; Terkildsen 1993). Second, contemporary populist campaigns that deploy antisemitic symbolism rarely include crude messaging about Jews, in a kind of way “erasing” them, as in the case of Soros himself (O'Donnell 2021). For example, contemporary antisemitic tropes make references toward “globalists” and “cosmopolitans” while deploying imagery and slogans from Nazi propaganda. For these reasons, we acknowledge the limitations of our design, and advise readers against over-interpreting our findings as proving that “Stop Soros” campaigns have nothing at all to do with antisemitism. At the same time, we encourage researcher to develop experimental designs that can tackle this problem and thereby help us to understand the appeal of anti-globalist messaging by populist governments around the world.

## Notes

1. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-40554844>.
2. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/hungary-pope-says-anti-semitism-fuse-must-not-be-allowed-burn-2021-09-12/>.
3. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/dec/05/george-soros-orban-turns-to-familiar-scape-goat-as-hungary-rows-with-eu>.
4. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-40554844>.
5. <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/11/30/sense-of-impunity-lies-behind-hungary-officials-antisemitic-attack-on-soros/>.
6. Populist, authoritarian or other illiberal leaders have also been known to use referenda to legitimize their pre-selected policies (Barr 2009; Collin 2019; Dennison and Turnbull-Dugarte 2022; Diehl 2018) in order to secure popular legitimacy while circumventing democratic institutions. For instance, Russian President Vladimir Putin engineered a referendum in 2014 to justify the annexation of Crimea. Further West, Catalan separatists organised a referendum in 2017 to demonstrate mass popular support for secession from Spain. The Catalan leadership has for years argued that the positive results in the referendum is a mandate for Catalan national independence despite the low voter turnout.
7. The experiment was *not* pre-registered.
8. We thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.
9. It was measured on a 1–5 scale. Items were transformed to a 0–100 scale, where the higher scores indicate stronger attitudes. The index items were averaged. For the exact wording, see Appendix Section A.4.
10. All items were measured on a 1 to 5 scale (strongly disagree–strongly agree). We later transformed them to a 0–100 scale, where higher scores indicate higher policy support.
11. Even though Soros or his organisations endorsed positions in these issues elsewhere.
12. However, we acknowledge that these issues might have not been the *most* salient to the respondents at the time of the data collection, and therefore, we cannot test the *general* effectiveness of the cueing strategy on policy opinions.
13. We believe that the benefits of our study – especially in uncovering latent forms of antisemitism, such as anti-Soros rhetoric – outweigh the potential harms of exposing people to such questions or statements. To further mitigate potential harms, we offered an opportunity for respondents to elaborate on the antisemitic attitude priming sentence. We also provided the contact information of the researchers to the survey respondents if they wanted to contact the study later. Furthermore, participants were also asked to share their opinions on the statement to allow them to express possible discomfort or dissatisfaction, mitigating possible long-term harm.
14. See the details of the stimuli in Appendix A.5.
15. See the exact wording in the Appendix Section A.5.2, and on ADL's website: <https://global100.adl.org/about/global100>.
16. The point estimates are based on the treatment group coefficients from the main regression model, including the mixed-effect variables and covariate controls. See the full numeric results in Appendix B.1.3.
17. Respondents might have identified Soros' position in the opposite direction as intended – as in allowing banks to evict people who cannot pay their mortgages.
18. See the numeric results in Appendix B.3., We also cross-validated our sample against a high-quality representative survey on the antisemitic attitudes within the Hungarian population (Kovacs and Fischer 2022) in Appendix A.2.
19. The coefficient were taken from the main regression model including mixed-effects and controls. See the full numeric results in Appendix B.2.3.
20. See Appendix B.4.
21. Included policy items: foreign aid to Africa, cannabis legalisation, immigration, civil society.
22. See Appendix B.5.
23. The test of interaction was also performed based on the main, mixed-effect regression model in Appendix B.1.3.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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## Data availability statement

Replications files are available at: <https://osf.io/8x4y6/files/osfstorage>.

## Competing interests

At the time of the research, all authors were affiliated with Central European University which was founded by George Soros. This had no influence on what was reported.

## Compliance with ethical standards

The study was conducted in full compliance with Central European University's *Ethical Research Policy and Guidelines*. At the time of data collection, projects led by students were exempt from full institutional review with supervising faculty exercising ethical oversight. At a later date, a replication study with an identical research design planned for the United States has passed the full review of the Ethical Research Committee. Unfortunately, this data collection yielded all null results, likely due to the lower prevalence of anti-Soros discourse, and hence, it is omitted from this study.

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