Working Paper

# Decomposing Populist Attitudes: Measurement Debates, Interactive Effects, and Conditional Influence

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## Introduction

Since the late 1990s, populism has expanded significantly in advanced democracies—in Europe, this phenomenon has been manifested through radical right-wing parties such as the UK Independence Party (UKIP), which drove Brexit, while the Alternative for Germany (AfD) successfully entered the German parliament; in the United States, it has been displayed through Donald Trump's "Make America Great Again" (MAGA) movement. Scholars increasingly attribute these developments to populist attitudes at the mass level: a combination of anti-elite sentiment and belief in the pure people that drives support for populist movements (Bartels, 2023; Kitschelt and McGann, 1997; Mudde, 2004; Moffitt, 2016).However,there is a key debate about how to measure these attitudes. Some scholars view populism as a multidimensional, non-compensatory construct that requires high scores on each dimension (such as anti-elitism and homogeneity). In contrast, others rely on simpler averages, which may conflate general discontent with genuine populist beliefs. Additionally, another unresolved question is: are populist attitudes stable traits or context-dependent reactions? Although some people consistently hold these views, many only display "latent" populist attitudes when activated by crises or scandals.

To address these questions and establish a foundation for integrated empirical research, this paper systematically reviews the major empirical literature in the fields of political attitudes and populist attitudes. This review paper is divided into three parts: First, I systematically examine the definitions and controversies of political attitudes (and ideologies) in classic political science literature, proposing a macro three-component model (stable attitudes, contextual activation, and measurement error). Second, I review the two major schools in populist attitude research—the ideational approach and the discursive approach—analyzing their definitions of populism, measurement strategies, and related empirical findings. The ideational approach more often views populism as already-formed stable attitudes and fo-

cuses on the consistency and stability of expression measurements, while paying less attention to the formation process. The discursive approach predominantly employs experiments and randomization designs to present the complete process from elite shaping to individual attitude expression, though it also has more subtle shortcomings.

This paper argues that the experimental research and populist framing analysis of the discursive approach can better explain the attitude instability and inconsistency found in the ideational approach, as these are essentially byproducts of differentiated reception and expression under elite shaping, and thus inherently unstable. Future research on populist attitudes could combine the scale measurements of the ideational approach with experimental designs to explore the potential dimensions of already-activated populist attitudes, rather than merely relying on observational data. More importantly, regardless of which method is employed, none has transcended the three-component model framed by early political attitude literature (stable trait, contextual state, measurement error), suggesting that to thoroughly update populist attitude research, deeper dialogue with broader public opinion and political science theories may be necessary.

## The Conceptual Challenge of Political Attitude Research

In early political science research, the ontological definition of political attitudes and ideologies was controversial. Scholars noted the fickleness and instability of ideologies. Mullins (1972) pointed out that ideologies have become increasingly important in political science, but at the same time, they have become increasingly ambiguous. Definitions often conflict with one another: some regard ideology as dogmatic belief, while others see it as political sophistication; some apply it to mainstream thought, while others apply it only to radical opposition thought (Gerring, 1997). Sartori (1970) opposes broadening concepts such as ideology to the point where they lose their distinguishing power and insists that conceptual formation must precede measurement. Some scholars have attempted to define ideology more precisely in response to these challenges. Mullins (1972) defines ideology as a logically coherent system of symbols that links people's understanding of the social world with plans to maintain or transform society. Ideology differs from mere opinion, propaganda, or cultural traits in its coherence, nature of guiding action, and clear intention to be implemented in practice. Political attitudes also present similar conceptual difficulties. Early research showed that many citizens' responses in elections and opinion polls fail to demonstrate clear and stable attitudes. Converse (1964) found that people's opinions appear random or inconsistent over time, and the correlation between the same person's answers to policy questions between surveys is only 0.3-0.4, almost like tossing a coin (Achen, 1975). This throws up a

radical idea: for many citizens, there is "no real political attitude" towards abstract policy issues. People may give their opinions when asked, but these opinions often do not represent attitudes and are of little significance to the respondents.

## 1. Stability and Change in Political Attitudes

Despite these conceptual uncertainties, scholars have developed a number of integration frameworks to try to explain how people form political opinions with limited knowledge or motivation. Sniderman and Tetlock (1986) suggest that citizens often rely on heuristics; psychological shortcuts such as group influence, moral rules, or a vague sense of left-right ideology to quickly form policy preferences.Individuals may not have a complete ideology, but rather match problems to the political cues that are most accessible, resulting in a political opinion that is superficially consistent but may change as new cues emerge. Achen's (1975) research on survey response highlights that small changes in question wording can produce significant "fluctuations" in panel data. Many respondents have relatively stable basic attitudes, but express inconsistent attitudes when faced with ambiguous survey prompts (Achen, 1975). Together,these models suggest that attitudes may be both contextually constructed and rooted in deeper dispositions.

A long-standing question is whether these attitudes are truly stable or fluctuate dramatically with the political environment. Converse (1964) argued that most citizens lack meaningful ideological structures and exhibit unstable policy views over time and across contexts. However, latent variable analyses by Achen (1975) and others show that the public's issue positions are more consistent than initially thought once measurement noise and error are taken into account. Political knowledge also matters: people who know more about politics tend to have more stable views that are constrained by ideology (Althaus, 1998). Nonetheless, even well-informed people update their positions when faced with new information, crises, or convincing elite discourse. Zaller's (1991) "reception-acceptance" model and his study of attitudes toward the Vietnam War provide key evidence. He found that when political elites were highly unified in the early stages of the Vietnam War (1964), political awareness was positively correlated with support for the war. As elite consensus began to disintegrate in 1966 and anti-war information in the media increased, the most politically aware liberals began to shift to an anti-war position, while conservatives with equal knowledge maintained their support (Zaller, 1991).By 1970, a complete ideological polarization pattern had formed, with high political awareness amplifying value-based differences (Zaller, 1991).This change not only demonstrates how attitudes are influenced by the information environment, but also reveals the complex role of political awareness under different states

of elite consensus.Therefore, mass attitudes are neither capricious random behaviors nor immutable stable states; rather, they respond conditionally to changing information while retaining some underlying structure rooted in personal predispositions.

## 2. Measurement Error

Another perspective views the apparent fluctuation in citizens' policy positions not as a result of real preference changes but as a consequence of how attitudes are measured in surveys. Jackson (1993) 's guessing model suggests that when faced with questions about policies such as those concerning Vietnam, many respondents have no clear position and therefore provide "fill-in-the-blank" answers; the attitude changes between different survey waves reflect differences in guessing among the same uncertain individuals rather than shifts in genuine opinions (Jackson, 1993).Ansolabehere et al. (2008) found that averaging multiple indicators within the same issue domain can significantly reduce random error: when combining ten or more indicators, the temporal and spatial stability of issue scales approaches that of party identification, revealing coherent and enduring preferences that are obscured by single-indicator analyses (Ansolabehere et al., 2008). Further extending this logic, Lauderdale et al. (2018) decomposed survey variation into ideological, personalized, and unstable components; across 13 high-attention American issues, only about one-seventh of response variance reflected a standard ideological dimension, three-sevenths was stable but issue-specific, and the remaining three-sevenths was purely unstable—they noted that this composite category includes both measurement error and temporary considerations (Lauderdale et al., 2018). Such research offers two key insights: first, once guessing and item unreliability are accounted for, public attitudes may be far more stable than classic single-question panel studies suggest; second, the stable components of opinions are often personalized rather than ideological, which cautions against forcing attitudes into a single left-right framework. Therefore, the instability observed in survey data should largely be viewed as methodological artefacts resulting from measurement error rather than evidence that voters lack meaningful, consistent views (Ansolabehere et al., 2008; Lauderdale et al., 2018; Saris and Sniderman, 2004).

$$y_{it} = \underbrace{\mu_i}_{\text{stable trait}} + \underbrace{s_{it}}_{\text{state / situational component}} + \underbrace{\varepsilon_{it}}_{\text{measurement error}} \quad [1] \tag{1}$$

[1]Following longitudinal "state–trait" models , each observed attitude can be decomposed into (i) a person-specific, time-invariant trait $\mu_i$, (ii) a time-varying state component $s_{it}$ that responds to events or emotions, and (iii) a random measurement-error term $\varepsilon_{it}$.

# The Ideational Approach to populist attitude

## 1. Conceptual Foundation: Populism as a "Thin-Centred" Ideology

Indeed, since populism at the individual level is conceptualized as a political attitude, it inevitably encounters the same definitional, stability, and measurement challenges outlined in classical attitude theory. In the ideological approach, populism is conceptualized as a "thin-centered" ideology characterized by a moral divide between a "good people" and a "bad elite" and the insistence that politics should express popular will in general (Mudde, 2004, 2007). This approach defines populism at the individual level as a weak belief system with core ideological components that lack comprehensive policy content while providing a simplified political framework. As a weak ideology, populism is dependent on a variety of "host" ideologies that provide the broader substantive content that allows populist ideas to manifest themselves in different ways in different contexts while maintaining the same core narrative (Mudde, 2007; Weyland, 2001). This conceptual flexibility explains why populism can be combined with European anti-immigration platforms and Latin American anti-imperialism. At the level of mass opinion, this worldview manifests itself in populist attitudes – a persistent tendency to interpret politics through the opposition of the people and the elite (Hawkins et al., 2018, 2019). These populist attitudes constitute the "demand side" of the populist supply-and-demand relationship, corresponding to populist leaders and parties as the "supply side" (Hawkins et al., 2018). This underlying populist tendency forms an emotional reservoir in society that exists even in the absence of an active populist movement and can be mobilized and activated when the political conditions are right.

When researchers adopt the ideational approach, the first ontological and definitional hurdle is whether survey-based "populist attitudes" merely re-label more generalised political discontent. Because the only minimal consensus is the people–elite dichotomy, one might ask whether the construct captures little more than diffuse negative affect or distrust of the political system (Andreadis and Ruth-Lovell, 2019). At the macro level, Bartels (2023) contends that, although Europe is widely portrayed as fertile ground for populism, no lasting mass ideological shift has occurred: popular alienation is episodic mainly, triggered by exogenous crises and policy stalemates, and fades once those crises recede. If this is the case, populist attitudes might simply be rebranding existing concepts like low external political efficacy or political distrust (Geurkink et al., 2019). A growing body of micro-level evidence, however, disputes this reductionist view. Using confirmatory-factor analyses on multi-national surveys, Geurkink et al. (2019) show that a three-factor model—treating populist attitudes, political trust, and external political efficacy as separate constructs—fits the data significantly better than one- or two-factor alternatives, demonstrating structural distinctiveness.

In predictive models of vote choice, populist attitudes remain a significant determinant of support for both left- and right-wing populist parties, whereas external political efficacy loses explanatory power. Crucially, the construct does not predict electoral abstention, underscoring that it is more than a diffuse form of political disengagement (Geurkink et al., 2019). Subsequent studies also point to distinctive psychological correlates among citizens high in populist attitudes(Balta et al., 2021; Erisen et al., 2021). Balta et al. (2021) and Erisen et al. (2021) find robust associations with conspiracy beliefs and exceptionally low institutional trust, implying a comprehensive moralised worldview about power and social order rather than a transient venting of frustration. Taken together, these findings buttress the claim that populist attitudes constitute an autonomous ideological orientation—one that not only repudiates elites but also advances a substantive position on who should rule (Balta et al., 2021; Erisen et al., 2021; Geurkink et al., 2019).

Seems tend to response to the critique that "populist attitudes" may merely be fleeting negative emotions or occasional reactions in crises, the ideational approach scholar has embarked on a more refined measurement engineering endeavour by employing multi-item scales, confirmatory factor analysis, and cross-cultural measurement invariance tests (measurement invariance), scholars appear to be striving to disentangle populism from fleeting emotions and establish its empirical status as a stable ideological complex. The latest scales developed by Akkerman et al. (2013) and Schulz et al. (2018) not only manipulate context, situation, and subject concurrently at the item-design stage, but also build on multi-country, multi-wave surveys.Through structural equation modelling, they compare the consistency of latent factor structures and assess Cronbach's $\alpha$ and $\omega$ coefficients to enhance internal validity and cross-sectional comparability (Elchardus and Spruyt , 2016; Spruyt et al., 2016; Schimpf et al., 2024; Van Hauwaert et al., 2019a; Weyland, 2001; Wuttke et al., 2020).Such work aims to:first, use multiple parallel questionnaires to reduce the risk of misinterpretation caused by exogenous shocks, avoiding the misreading of temporary dissatisfaction/anger as populist beliefs; second, examine the coherence and stability of respondents' responses across different items; providing empirical support for the notion that "populism = a structural belief system.

## 2. Measurement Engineering and Dimensionality Debate

Although the above measurements seem to have temporarily improved conceptual reliability and validity, the dimensionality of populism remains unresolved. The mainstream view regards anti-elitism and populism as its "hardcore" elements. At the same time, some scholars argue for including a binary opposition/anti-pluralism dimension to capture the moralized

worldview that simplifies politics into a "pure people-corrupt elite" dichotomy (Andreadis and Ruth-Lovell, 2019; Mudde, 2004; Van Hauwaert et al., 2019a). Cross-national comparative data show that these three dimensions are highly correlated statistically and may be approximated by a single-factor model; however, upon analyzing individual responses in depth, it was found that "high scores across all dimensions" are not common, and a significant proportion of respondents, while hostile toward elites, they do not necessarily endorse the supremacy of popular sovereignty, thereby exhibiting a "hybrid" or "semi-populist" belief structure (Elchardus and Spruyt , 2016; Mudde, 2007; Neuner and Wratil, 2020; Spruyt et al., 2016; Weyland, 2001). Recent studies employing hierarchical Bayesian models and latent category analysis further indicate that only when an anti-elite stance, the supremacy of popular sovereignty, and a binary opposition perspective coexist does populism exert a systematic and unique influence on political behaviour—including eroding institutional trust, reinforcing sustained support for radical parties, and increasing preferences for direct democratic tools (Neuner and Wratil, 2020; Wuttke et al., 2020; Schimpf et al., 2024).Based on this, the current criteria for measuring consensus increasingly shift toward "jointly necessary": only when both core dimensions are simultaneously met (and binary oppositions are incorporated in appropriate contexts) can an ideology be deemed "true" populist; the absence of either dimension is more likely to reflect emotional dissatisfaction or hybrid belief systems.

These conceptual differences first manifest in inconsistent measurement strategies:since populist attitudes are composed of three core elements—anti-elitism, the primacy of popular sovereignty, and a binary moral opposition—that are mutually exclusive, using a single score to intuitively describe the degree of populist attitudes in a given individual requires ensuring that the aggregation logic does not undermine this structure (Ansolabehere et al., 2008; Akkerman et al., 2013). The current standard approach is to aggregate scores from a series of statements, such as "Politicians are all talk and no action" or "The people, not politicians, should make the most important decisions," and then sum or take the arithmetic mean of these scores (Ansolabehere et al., 2008; Akkerman et al., 2013; Castanho Silva et al., 2019a).Such indicators often achieve high internal consistency, with Van Hauwaert and Van Kessel (2017) reporting Cronbach's $\alpha$ values close to 0.9 across nine countries, seems providing a compelling unified scale for subsequent research. However, compensatory arithmetic inherently weakens conceptual precision: a score of 5 on a 0–10 scale could stem from moderate agreement with all items or from strong resonance with anti-elite projects coupled with outright rejection of popular sovereignty projects; the latter lacks a coherent populist worldview yet is equated with the former by the scale. Wuttke et al. (2020) systematically tested five sets of scales across twelve countries, demonstrating that this "measure-concept

mismatch" significantly overestimates the size of the so-called "moderate populist" base. When non-compensatory aggregation methods such as the lowest threshold for each dimension, geometric mean, or component product were used instead, most previously significant effects were reduced or even reversed (Goertz, 2006). Those measurement problem is more severe in geographical regions lacking electoral and public opinion research infrastructure, where scholars often use questions about attitudes toward immigration, direct democracy, or vague anti-government sentiments as proxy indicators of populism. The results artificially expand the concept's boundaries, increase the weight of anti-elite sentiments, and degrade the index to a crude measure of general political dissatisfaction (Castanho Silva et al., 2019b).

In response to the various limitations exposed by cumulative rating scales, scholars once looked to latent variable method[2] (CFA, IRT) to improve measurement accuracy. These latent variable methods estimate underlying traits through statistical models that extract common variance across multiple observed indicators, weighting each item according to its relationship with the latent construct (Bollen and Lennox, 1991; Elchardus and Spruyt , 2016; Schulz et al., 2018).However, this approach also faces major challenges (Bollen and Lennox, 1991). First, reflective structures are incompatible with formative attributes. CFA and IRT treat each item as an "expression" of a single latent factor, weighting responses based on statistical weights. Under this framework, even if a dimension scores extremely low, as long as the weights of other dimensions are sufficiently high, the overall latent variable score can remain high, reintroducing compensatory logic (Wuttke et al., 2020). However, in theory, anti-elitism and the supremacy of popular sovereignty are mutually necessary and irreplaceable elements. If mistakenly treated as reflective indicators, even the best statistical fit indicators cannot resolve the conceptual mismatch issue (Erisen et al., 2021; Wuttke et al., 2020). Second, cross-cultural applications reveal insufficient item discrimination and shifts in meaning (Van Hauwaert et al., 2019b). Minor differences in political terminology and translation details can alter item meanings: expressions related to "the people" may evoke sacred symbols in some national contexts.In contrast, in others, they become official jargon.While Van Hauwaert and Van Kessel (2017) found that the scale items generally supported cross-country comparability in their item functionality analysis, they noted that in countries with low political trust, some anti-elite items received nearly unanimous high agreement, rendering these items ineffective in distinguishing respondents; Erisen et al. (2021) compared Italy and Turkey and also found that even when using the same six-item scale, the average values

[2]CFA refers to Confirmatory Factor Analysis, a statistical technique that tests whether measures of a construct are consistent with a researcher's understanding of that construct's nature. IRT stands for Item Response Theory, which focuses on the relationship between individuals' responses to specific test items and the trait being measured. "Reflective" models assume that items are caused by the latent construct, while "formative" models assume items cause or define the construct (Bollen and Lennox, 1991)

of each sub-dimension and their associations with psychological characteristics still showed significant differences. Although scholars expressed cautious optimism about cross-cultural comparability in their meta-analysis of multiple studies, they emphasized that the three-level invariance of the measurement structure must be revalidated each time the scale is used in a new cultural context (Van Hauwaert et al., 2019a,b; Wuttke et al., 2020).

## 3. Temporal Dynamics and Contextual Activation

However, current evidence and conflicts may point to populist attitudes being more plastic and responsive to short-term forces. While scholars have indeed separated populist attitudes from general political dissatisfaction and low efficacy through rigorous designs in cross-sectional data, this does not fundamentally rule out the possibility that populism may be a temporary emotional fluctuation and shift exacerbated by exogenous events (Van Hauwaert et al., 2019b) . Dissatisfaction may be triggered by exposure to populist campaign rhetoric and surge in the short term. Until recently, longitudinal evidence has been lacking to resolve the "pre-existing tendency" versus "plasticity" hypothesis. Schimpf et al. (2024) analyzed six waves of panel data from Germany between 2017 and 2021 and found that populist attitudes are "neither completely fixed nor completely volatile." At the aggregate level, the distribution of populist attitudes in the public remains relatively stable, but significant fluctuations exist at the individual level. During this period, over two-thirds of respondents changed their responses to populist-related questions at least once (Schimpf et al., 2024). Only about one-third of individuals maintained stable populist attitudes across all waves—suggesting that populism does function as a stable trait among a subset of citizens (Schimpf et al., 2024). For another group, populist beliefs fluctuate over time, implying stronger situational dependence (Schimpf et al., 2024). Notably, the study found that when populist attitudes remain stable within individuals, their influence on political behaviour (such as voting choices) is stronger, while fluctuations in populist attitudes have weaker predictive power (Schimpf et al., 2024). This suggests that for some people, populism serves as a persistent tendency guiding their political behaviour, but for many others, it may be a transient state influenced by contemporaneous factors.

Comparative studies likewise show that the "expression" and political relevance of populist attitudes vary with national context (Hawkins et al., 2018). For example, Hawkins et al. (2018) compare Chile and Greece—two countries with similarly high mean levels of populist attitudes but starkly different party systems (Chile's weak vs. Greece's strong populist-party presence)—and find that populist attitudes translate into electoral support only where a viable populist supply exists. They also found that in Greece when populist

political discourse was prominent and major parties campaigned on populist platforms, populist attitudes among the public could be firmly translated into votes for populist candidates (Hawkins et al., 2018). In Chile, however, despite high scores for populist attitudes among many citizens, these attitudes had weak predictive power over voting behaviour (Hawkins et al., 2018). This may be because there were fewer populist options available, and other issues dominated voting choices (Hawkins et al., 2018). This activation effect suggests that populist attitudes may lie dormant until specific contexts trigger them—for example, a charismatic populist leader or a referendum that pits the public against the establishment may suddenly make populist beliefs politically prominent. In the U.S. context, Luo (2024) further demonstrated the incumbency effect on populist tendencies using two rounds of nationally representative panel data from 2016 and 2020: After Trump's election, his supporters' populist attitudes significantly declined, while those of the opposition camp rose simultaneously. This finding suggests that populists coming to power may mitigate the anti-elite anger of their original supporters but intensify resentment among opposition groups, thereby highlighting the high sensitivity of populist attitudes to political opportunity structures and regime turnover (Luo, 2024).

The primary debates within the ideational approach remain confined to the three dimensions identified in classical political attitude research: stability, instability, and measurement error. While debates over ontology, complex latent variable method, and the development of potential variables have indeed somehow enhanced internal validity, a fundamental limitation persists. Ideational approach emphasizes the consistency and stability of individual's populist attitude expressions, yet it severely overlooks the processes and underlying mechanisms of how populist attitudes form at the individual level. As mentioned earlier, the transnational heterogeneity of populist attitudes and the evolutionary trajectories of populist parties highlight the importance of focusing on the processes of attitude formation. Without understanding these processes, explanations of attitude expressions—whether viewed as stable or unstable—may introduce systematic measurement errors, thereby undermining internal validity. As Schimpf et al. (2024) points out, populism may occupy a middle ground, its manifestations neither entirely fixed nor entirely random.

Table 1: Key Populist Attitude Items in Major Observational Surveys

| **Survey Project** | **Representative Survey Items** |
|---|---|
| ANES (USA) | "I would rather be represented by a **citizen** than by a specialized politician."<br>"What people call 'compromise' in politics is really just **selling out** one's principles." |
| BES (UK) | "The politicians in Parliament need to **follow the will** of the people."<br>"Politics is ultimately a struggle between **good and evil**." |
| GLES (Germany) | "The differences between the **people** and the so-called **elite** are greater than the differences within the people."<br>"The people should have the **final say** on important political issues." |
| ESS (Europe) | "Most politicians **do not care** what ordinary people think."<br>"What people call **compromise** is betraying principles." |
| Eurobarometer | "**Referendums** are a good way to decide important political issues." |
| CSES Modules | "Politicians are **corrupt** (as a group)."<br>"Compromise in politics is **selling out**." |
| Other Studies | "The **political class** only looks after **itself**, not the people."<br>"Ordinary people **share the same values** and interests." |

Note: Most surveys use 5-point Likert scales, though some employ 4 or 7-point scales. Survey periods range from approximately 1990-2020.

# The Discursive Approach of Populism and Populist Attitudes

Another perspective on populism and the formation of its attitudes is the discursive approach (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; Moffitt, 2016). It is not entirely opposed to the ideational approach but rather an extension and deepening of it. Both acknowledge that the thin-centered ideological framework of the "people-elite" binary opposition is at the core of populism; the difference lies in the fact that the discourse approach emphasizes that populism lacks a concrete program, and its essence is a rhetorical notion of "virtuous and homogeneous people" opposing "corrupt and self-serving elites" (Hunger and Paxton, 2021; Moffitt, 2016). These core concepts can attach themselves to various "thick" host ideologies (such as nationalism or socialism) while maintaining their independence during the attachment process (Hunger and Paxton, 2021). Therefore, the discourse method views populism as a flexible rhetorical framework in the hands of political actors rather than a complete ideology or fixed party type; it operates in practice by highlighting the conflict between the people and the elite (Neuner and Wratil, 2020).

## 1.The populist attitudes as products of framing effects and their activation mechanisms

This rhetoric uses "attributional narrative frames" to simplify complex political and economic issues into moralized, emotional binary oppositions: one side is the morally legitimized "pure people," and the other is the demonized "corrupt elite" or "threatening outgroups" (Bos et al., 2020; Busby et al., 2019; Chong and Druckman, 2007; Hawkins et al., 2018). Chong and Druckman (2007) considers frames in political communication as cognitive structures or narrative methods used to organize, explain, and present information, influencing people's understanding and evaluation of political issues by emphasizing certain aspects while downplaying others. According to this "highlight–exclude" logic, frames first draw public attention to a limited subset of possible considerations and then alter the relative weight those considerations receive in subsequent evaluations. In the populist variant, the crucial dimension that is foregrounded is moral culpability: the message recasts heterogeneous grievances as evidence of a single, intentional betrayal perpetrated by a definable adversary, thereby relegating structural or contextual explanations to the periphery (Busby et al., 2019). Rather than offering a detailed causal analysis, the frame supplies a morally intuitive shortcut—someone stands behind every social ill—so that subsequent judgements pivot on the perceived virtue of "the people" versus the vice of "the elite" or other out-groups (Bos

et al., 2020; Hawkins et al., 2018). Chong and Druckman (2007) points out that the key to how frames influence political attitudes lies in three psychological mechanisms: accessibility (whether a dimension can quickly come to mind), availability (the ease with which that dimension can be retrieved from memory), and relevance (how much weight audiences are willing to assign to its persuasiveness). Populist attribution frames significantly enhance accessibility through moralized language and emotional appeals; strengthen availability by simplifying the "people-elite" opposition to reduce retrieval costs; and increase relevance by resonating with real dissatisfaction and relative deprivation. This information processing path ultimately reduces trust in existing institutions and intermediaries, and instead increases sympathy for anti-establishment, quick and simple solutions.

Under the discursive approach, scholars tend to employ experiments, because such designs enable systematic manipulation of a frame's content, intensity, and order. This approach allows researchers to observe, at the individual level, how exposure to a populist blame narrative triggers the three cognitive processes identified by Chong and Druckman (2007): accessibility, availability, and relevance, and thereby re-weights the considerations that individuals use when forming political judgments. The ultimate outcome is a measurable rise in populist attitudes. In what follows, I outline the two principal pathways through which a populist frame can be activated and converted into mass-level support.

## 2.Activation Mechanisms

The first lever through which framing exerts its influence is cognitive attribution. Experimental evidence shows that a populist blame frame has a direct, causal impact on citizens' perceptions of responsibility. By unequivocally locating the roots of social and economic problems in a stigmatised actormost commonly "corrupt elites" or "self-serving politicians"—such a frame induces respondents to adopt a markedly different template for interpreting political information(Busby et al., 2019; Rooduijn et al., 2021). In a six-country survey experiment, Rooduijn et al. (2021) reported that exposure to an anti-elite vignette increased the probability that participants identified politicians, rather than structural forces, as the principal cause of the national decline. Because distrust of office-holders is a core element of the populist belief system, this cognitive realignment produces a measurable increase on the standard populist-attitudes index (Rooduijn et al., 2021). Single-country replications confirm the result: respondents who read an attribution-laden passage are significantly more likely to endorse statements such as "Most politicians are out of touch with ordinary people," whereas a richly contextualised control text yields no comparable change (Dai and Kustov, 2023). Crucially, these shifts are concentrated among individuals whose pre-treatment attri-

butions were weak or ambiguous, a pattern consistent with Chong and Druckman (2007)'s claim that framing effects peak when prior beliefs have not yet crystallised. Counterfactual evidence further underscores the amplification produced by precise blame attributions. In a study of U.S. voters, Dai and Kustov (2023) first provided all participants with a detailed policy background, enabling them to evaluate responsibility based on verifiable information. When the subsequent narrative relied only on the vague label of "Washington elites," neither anti-elite sentiment nor the overall populist-attitude score changed, irrespective of respondents' initial level of populism (Dai and Kustov, 2023).This finding corroborates the notion that a blame frame's efficacy hinges on the clarity and credibility of its target: once the information environment allows audiences to interpret events through a more exact factual lens, generic elite attribution loses much of its persuasive force.

The second, affect-centred activation pathway operates through threat appraisal: populist leaders recast economic or cultural change as an imminent, uncontrollable danger posed by an out-group, thereby fusing fear and anger into a coherent anti-out-group stance. At the macro-economic level, quasi-experimental work that treats the surge of Chinese imports as an exogenous shock shows that West-European districts suffering steep rises in unemployment tend to shift toward nationalist and far-right parties (Colantone and Stanig, 2018). Further survey evidence indicates that, prompted by elite rhetoric, voters interpret these losses as hostile action by "globalising outsiders" rather than as impersonal market forces (Colantone and Stanig, 2018). Micro-level experiments corroborate this sequence: when respondents imagine a severe recession, heightened fear and anger strengthen perceptions that immigrants endanger national welfare and, in turn, raise scores on a standard populist-attitudes scale (Rhodes-Purdy et al., 2021). Cultural threat follows the same logic, in Dutch experiments, a single cue that attributes welfare pressure to Muslim minorities is sufficient to shift attitudes and fuse fiscal, security, and identity concerns into a unitary anti-immigrant dimension (Sniderman and Hagendoorn, 2009). Even in the absence of material shocks, rapid liberalisation and multiculturalism can trigger a "cultural backlash," because dominant groups perceive status erosion (Norris and Inglehart, 2019); cross-national panel data show that alienation from national tradition and rural resentment often coalesce into broader populist coalitions (Margalit et al., 2024). Formal modelling further indicates that when growing diversity undermines the majority's social reputation, otherwise moderate citizens may rationally endorse punitive policies to restore hierarchical order (Wolton, 2024)
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The cognitive-attribution and threat-appraisal levers outlined do not produce uniform treatment effects; their success hinges on whether the culprit singled out by elites resonates with the specific resentments lying dormant in the audience. A 15-country vignette experi-

ment by Bos et al. (2020) makes the point vividly: when civil disorder was blamed on corrupt politicians, respondents who felt relatively deprived not only endorsed the proposed policy more strongly but also expressed greater willingness to act politically; the identical vignette blaming immigrants left these same respondents unmoved and even dampened the mobilisation of materially secure citizens. Thus, exposure to populist rhetoric does not mechanically inflate populist attitudes—it triggers a spectrum of resistance, neutrality, or backlash depending on the blame target and the audience's grievance profile. Observational studies corroborate the idea of conditional matching. Voters with high baseline populist attitudes are likelier to endorse populist candidates at the ballot box, suggesting a potential "natural alignment" between supply and demand (Castanho Silva et al., 2022).Yet experiments that vary the content of populist appeals show that this symmetry is far from automatic. When citizens high in populism view harsh anti-elite ads, they exhibit markedly stronger partisan hostility—"liking" radical attacks and polarising affect more sharply—whereas mainstream voters confronted with the same messages react with aversion (Nai and Maier, 2024). Taken together, the evidence implies that anger converts into a mobilising social identity only when two conditions coincide: (1) the message targets a widely stigmatised culprit, and (2) the audience possesses a latent store of resentment that renders the attribution psychologically coherent. If either condition is absent, the identical rhetoric will likely fizzle or even backfire.

These detailed experimental findings also remind us that populist supply does not always "precisely match" existing demand but exhibits significant heterogeneity and interaction effects.In joint experiments in Germany and the United States, messages containing anti-elite or "people-centered" themes had almost no difference in their effects on audiences with high or low populist attitudes (Neuner and Wratil, 2020; Castanho Silva et al., 2022).Moreover, when prompted with the idea that "mainstream political parties have failed," the increase in populist attitudes was primarily observed among those with initially low populist attitudes. In contrast, those with high populist attitudes remained largely unaffected (Castanho Silva et al., 2022; Dai and Kustov, 2023). These results suggest that the influence of populist discourse cannot be predicted based on a single baseline populist attitude but is constrained by more complex psychological and cognitive differences within the audience. To uncover the origins of this heterogeneity, the following sections will further explore how potential moderating variables such as political intolerance, political efficacy, and political maturity shape the interaction between the supply and demand of populism.

As shown in Table 2, the effectiveness of populist framing can be viewed as a triple interaction: Threat Salience × Audience Susceptibility × Attribution Precision. The matrix's bottom-right cells (marked with green checkmarks) represent the "optimal condition combination"—high threat salience, sufficient audience resentment reserves, and clear at-

tribution targets—where populist messages most likely trigger mobilization. When threats are strongly suggested but attribution remains vague (yellow cells), the effect becomes only "partially effective"; other scenarios result in negligible effects or backfire (blank cells). Political intolerance, political efficacy, and political sophistication serve as key moderating variables, translating threat cues and attribution information into differentiated emotional and behavioral responses.

Table 2: Conditional Effectiveness of Populist Rhetoric

| **Threat Salience** | **Audience Suscept.** | **Attribution Precision** | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | Attr = 0 | Attr = 1 |
| Low (0) | Low (0) | – | – |
| | High (1) | – | – |
| High (1) | Low (0) | – | – |
| | High (1) | Partial | ✓ |

*Note.* Attr = attribution precision (0 = vague blame, 1 = precise blame). Threat = threat salience (0 = low, 1 = high). Suscept. = audience susceptibility (0 = low, 1 = high).
Populist rhetoric is most effective (✓) when precise blame attribution coincides with a highly salient threat and a susceptible audience. If threat cues are strong but blame remains vague, only a partial effect is observed (yellow cell). All other combinations yield null results or backlash (see Colantone and Stanig, 2018; Rhodes-Purdy et al.,2021).

## 3. Heterogeneity in experimental effects - Audience/context

Experimental studies of populist framing usually estimate the average treatment effect (ATE) for the overall population. This aggregate focus can obscure important heterogeneity: when researchers ignore individuals' prior dispositions, they risk underestimating a frame's true impact on different audience segments. As Chong and Druckman (2013) note, framing effects hinge on recipients' pre-existing psychological and cognitive characteristics, so they are unlikely to operate uniformly across all citizens. If an experiment fails to measure such mediators, random assignment will balance them across conditions, but it will also average away their influence. The resulting null or modest overall effect may mask pronounced positive effects in some subgroups and near-total resistance in others. A similar logic applies to unmeasured mechanisms. Without data on anger, blame attribution, or related processes, we cannot determine whether a frame shifts attitudes by intensifying emotional reactions, sharpening causal attributions, or both. At a more macro level, overlooking contextual moderators—counter-frames, repeated exposure, or competing information—creates a gap between laboratory conditions and the information environment that citizens actually face,

undermining external validity (Chong and Druckman, 2013; Rico et al., 2020). Systematically identifying and measuring these moderating factors serves two purposes: it sharpens causal inference by clarifying how frames work and reveals for whom and under what circumstances populist rhetoric is most persuasive—or likely to fade over time.

This potential heterogeneity and the possible presence of mediating/interactive effects can be traced back to Zaller (1991)'s "reception-acceptance-sampling" model, where the factors people consider when expressing their views are a subset of the elite signals they receive, which are accepted in the context of their prior beliefs, and sampled due to their current salience (Zaller, 1991). We can precisely locate the power of populist narratives in the psychological "bucket" that stores these considerations. However, whether populist blame narratives can rise to the top of this "bucket" does not depend solely on the degree of information exposure. It mainly depends on the degree of filtering of three intertwined individual tendencies closely associated with populism.

Converse (1964) revealed a hierarchical structure in citizens' political cognition, dividing voters into five "conceptualization levels." At the top are "ideologues," who use abstract ideological principles to organize politics; at the bottom are "voters without policy content" who lack even the most basic policy understanding abilities (Converse, 1964). Subsequent research consistently shows that most citizens cluster at lower levels, with political views largely unfiltered by ideology and preferences notably unstable (Converse, 1964; Luskin, 1990). Since political sophistication is closely related to education level, participation, and information acquisition, it provides a useful perspective for explaining heterogeneity in forming populist attitudes. Sophistication affects both the amount of information people absorb and their critical processing of that information (Luskin, 1990). With their larger cognitive "reserves," information-rich groups are better able to question populist claims. At the same time, simplified attribution narratives and lack of resources easily influence less sophisticated groups to refute them. In contrast, political efficacy determines the emotional power of anti-elite information: those with lower external efficacy, who believe "the system ignores people like me," are particularly attracted to anti-establishment narratives because these narratives echo their existing sense of alienation (Campbell et al., 1976; Geurkink et al., 2019). Although such citizens often display political apathy, once populist narratives provide a clear path to "punish the elite," apathy can transform into mobilizing anger.

Therefore, I theorize that a key source of heterogeneity in populist attitude research likely emerges from the interaction between sophistication and efficacy after exposure to populist rhetoric. Based on existing research, we can hypothesize that highly sophisticated but low-efficacy citizens are informed but powerless, prone to "informed anger": they can identify systemic flaws and target their dissatisfaction, making them particularly sensitive

to anti-elite appeals.Individuals with low sophistication but high efficacy display moderate optimism, which weakens radical accusations against the elite; their trust in institutional responsiveness reduces their need for scapegoats. When sophistication and efficacy are both high, citizens combine analytical ability with basic trust, forming a dual barrier against extreme populist rhetoric.But when both traits are low, information scarcity intertwines with powerlessness, producing audiences most susceptible to populist narratives. Especially when such groups are first exposed to populist rhetoric,this greatly increases their priors. Notably, recent experiments and cross-national surveys report that higher internal efficacy can intensify populist attitudes—partly by channelling anger over economic conditions—contrary to my earlier expectation that low efficacy would be the primary trigger(Rico et al., 2020). This mixed pattern highlights the importance of the *efficacy* → *anger* → *populism* channel while also exposing a gap in the evidence: so far, no study has orthogonally manipulated sophistication and efficacy together, leaving the full scope of their interaction untested.

Political intolerance adds a third interactive filtering mechanism to the heterogeneity and receptivity of populism at the individual level. Political intolerance is unwillingness to grant civil or political rights to unpopular or threatening groups. Sniderman and Tetlock (1986) 's research work demonstrate that citizens who already view outgroups as cultural threats are more likely to accept narratives that attribute social problems to these groups; intolerance thus provides a ready cognitive shortcut for blame attribution (Sniderman and Tetlock, 1986). In Sniderman and Hagendoorn (2009) 's decoupling experiment in the Netherlands, simply adding a "minority groups" label to security and economic concerns increased the correlation coefficient between various threat perceptions from 0.24 to 0.49, indicating that political intolerance can integrate previously scattered anxieties into a coherent xenophobic position. Claassen (2016) 's research on "group entitlement" further extends this logic. When individuals perceive their group's status as threatened, intolerance generates anger and increases willingness to support punitive actions against alleged culprits in laboratory experiments. Anger is a crucial mediating variable that drives individuals to interpret populist narratives in the second populist framing mechanism. Gibson and Gouws (2005)'s panel study in South Africa emphasizes the political consequences: highly intolerant respondents exposed to elite signals (justifying exclusionary behaviour) changed their attitudes and became more willing to restrict outgroups' civil liberties. These findings collectively suggest that the mechanism of intolerance, like low political sophistication or low efficacy, may amplify the persuasiveness of populist rhetoric by increasing posterior probabilities and reinforcing citizens' existing biases. Among audience groups with both acute political alienation and deeply rooted intolerance, anti-elite and anti-outgroup messages mutually reinforce each other, producing the strongest downstream effects on attitudes and mobilization.

Chong and Druckman (2013) point out that in real-world political contexts, multiple competing information sources are often accompanied by repeated exposure. If experimental designs fail to simulate these conditions, they may overestimate the strength and persistence of framing effects. Without subsequent "reinforcement," the influence of framing diminishes over time, making it difficult to generalize experimental findings that ignore information competition and the time dimension to real-world political discourse (Chong and Druckman, 2013). In particular, existing research has largely failed to assess counter-frames effectiveness in populist discourse. Once a populist frame is internalized by individuals, its dichotomous and moralizing narrative significantly raises the threshold of post-verification evidence required to overturn existing prior beliefs, making counter-frames less effective than populist narratives in rapidly and simplistically reshaping attribution. However, external shocks do not necessarily exacerbate anti-elite populism. Colantone and Stanig (2018)'s quasi-natural experiment showing that Chinese import competition significantly increased average populist tendencies in Southern and Central European countries with high political polarization; however, in Northern European countries with high welfare and trust, the same shock triggered a "rally around flag effect," enhancing the appeal of elite-led nationalist narratives of unity. In other words, crises can fuel populist mobilization or be reframed by mainstream elites as a shared national task to address external challenges. The direction they take depends on the regulatory role of information competition structures and the institutional trust environment.

## Model 1: Elite–Mass Dynamic Interaction

### Basic Setup

Time is discrete, $t = 0, 1, \ldots, T$. Two elite types—*populist* ($P$) and *mainstream* ($M$)—compete for votes. The mass public comprises $N$ citizens indexed by $i$, each with a trait vector

$$\theta_i = (s_i, e_i, t_i) \in [0, 1]^3,$$

where $s_i$ is political sophistication, $e_i$ political efficacy, and $t_i$ political tolerance.

### Elite Strategic Choice

Elite $j \in \{P, M\}$ selects a frame $f_{jt}$ to maximise expected support:

$$\max_{f_{jt}} \; U_j(f_{jt}, f_{-j,t}) = V_j\Big(\sum_{i=1}^{N} P_i(\text{Support}_j \mid f_{jt}, f_{-j,t}, \theta_i, \Omega_t)\Big) - C_j(f_{jt}),$$

with $\Omega_t$ an exogenous shock (economic, cultural, etc.).

For $P$, the frame is a triple $f_{Pt} = (A_t,\ T_t,\ M_t) \in [0,1]^3$, denoting **A**ttribution precision, **T**hreat salience, and **M**oral polarisation.

### Individual Response Function

Citizen $i$'s probability of supporting $P$ is

$$P_i(\text{Support}_P \mid f_{Pt}, \theta_i, \Omega_t) = \Phi\Big(\beta_0 + \beta_1\, G(f_{Pt}, \theta_i) + \beta_2\, \Omega_t + \beta_3^{\top}(\Omega_t \odot \theta_i) + \varepsilon_i\Big),$$

where $\Phi$ is the standard normal CDF and

$$\begin{aligned} G(f_{Pt}, \theta_i) = {} & \alpha_1 A_t(1 - s_i) + \alpha_2 T_t(1 - t_i) + \alpha_3 M_t e_i \\ & + \alpha_4 A_t T_t + \alpha_5 s_i e_i t_i. \end{aligned} \tag{2}$$

Empirical expectations: $\alpha_1, \alpha_2, \alpha_3 > 0$.

### Equilibrium Analysis

A Nash equilibrium $\big(f_{Pt}^*, f_{Mt}^*\big)$ satisfies

$$f_{Pt}^* = \arg\max_{f_{Pt}} U_P(f_{Pt}, f_{Mt}^*, \Omega_t), \quad f_{Mt}^* = \arg\max_{f_{Mt}} U_M(f_{Pt}^*, f_{Mt}, \Omega_t).$$

Define the critical–shock threshold $\bar{\Omega}\big(\mathbb{E}[\theta]\big)$. If $|\Omega_t| > \bar{\Omega}$, the game can shift from a mainstream- to a populist-dominant equilibrium.

[Frame Adoption Threshold] Populist elites supply a high–intensity frame $(A_t, T_t, M_t) \to 1$ iff $B\,\mathbb{E}_i\big[G(f_{Pt}, \theta_i)\big] > C_P$, where $B$ is the vote–to–utility conversion factor.

## Model 2: Individual-Level Attitude Formation with Heterogeneous Effects

### Micro-Foundation of Attitude Change

Citizen $i$ decides whether to adopt populist attitudes ($a_{it} \in \{0, 1\}$) by maximising

$$U_{it}(a_{it}) = a_{it}\Big[\underbrace{\text{Cognitive}_{it} + \text{Emotional}_{it} + \text{Social}_{it}}_{\text{Benefits}}\Big] - a_{it}\ \text{Cost}_{it}.$$

$$\text{Cognitive}_{it} = \psi_1 A_t(1 - s_i) + \psi_2 \text{SimpleNarr}_i, \tag{3}$$

$$\text{Emotional}_{it} = \psi_3 T_t \, \text{Anxiety}_{it}(1 - t_i), \tag{4}$$

$$\text{Social}_{it} = \psi_4 \, \text{PopShare}_{i,t}, \tag{5}$$

$$\text{Cost}_{it} = c(s_i) \left| \text{NewBelief}_{it} - \text{Prior}_{it} \right|^{\rho}, \ \rho > 1. \tag{6}$$

**Threshold and Cascade Effects**

Adoption occurs when

$$a_{it} = 1 \quad \Longleftrightarrow \quad \text{FrameInt}_{Pt} \geq \tau_i(s_i, e_i, t_i),$$

with threshold

$$\tau_i = \tau_0 + \tau_s s_i + \tau_e e_i + \tau_t t_i + \tau_{se} s_i e_i + \tau_{st} s_i t_i + \tau_{et} e_i t_i + \tau_{set} s_i e_i t_i.$$

If the adopter share $P_t \equiv \frac{1}{N} \sum_i a_{it}$ exceeds $\bar{p}$, effective frame intensity rises via social amplification:

$$\text{FrameInt}_{it}^{\text{eff}} = \text{FrameInt}_{Pt} + \kappa \max(0, \ P_t - \bar{p}).$$

## Model 3: Measurement Model with Non-Compensatory Structure

**Latent Variable Structure**

True populism requires three components to clear dimension-specific cut-points:

$$\text{TruePop}_i = \mathbf{1}\{A_i > \tau_1\} \, \mathbf{1}\{S_i > \tau_2\} \, \mathbf{1}\{M_i > \tau_3\}.$$

Stack latent scores $\mathbf{z}_i = (A_i, S_i, M_i)^\top$:

$$\mathbf{z}_i = \Lambda \, \xi_i + \Delta \, \eta_i + \varepsilon_i,$$

with common factor $\xi_i$, dimension factors $\eta_i$, and error $\varepsilon_i$.

**Observed Indicators**

For item $k$ measuring dimension $d(k)$:

$$y_{ik} = \alpha_k + \beta_k \, z_{i,d(k)} + \gamma_k \, \text{Context}_k + \varepsilon_{ik}.$$

**Compensatory vs. Non-Compensatory Scores**

$$\text{Compensatory:} \quad P_i^{\text{mean}} = \frac{1}{K}\sum_{k=1}^{K} y_{ik}; \tag{7}$$

$$\text{Non-compensatory:} \quad P_i^{\text{geom}} = \left(\prod_{d=1}^{3} z_{id}\right)^{1/3}, \quad P_i^{\min} = \min_d z_{id}. \tag{8}$$

**Bayesian Updating with Strong Priors**

Given prior $p_0 = P(\text{Elite corrupt})$ and counter-evidence $E$,

$$P(\text{Elite corrupt} \mid E) = \frac{P(E \mid \text{corrupt})\, p_0}{P(E)},$$

so large $p_0$ (due to repeated frames) implies that even strong $E$ shifts posterior only modestly.

## Model Integration and Empirical Predictions

**Prediction 1 (Conditional Framing).** Frame efficacy rises with the triple interaction $A_t \times T_t \times (1 - \text{avg}\, s_i e_i t_i)$.

**Prediction 2 (Heterogeneous Response).** Adoption probability is highest for the low-$s$, low-$e$, low-$t$ quadrant.

**Prediction 3 (Measurement Sensitivity).** Non-compensatory scores classify fewer "moderate populists" but display stronger correlations with populist vote-choice.

**Prediction 4 (Dynamic Stability).** Attitude persistence equals $\Pr(\xi_i > \tau)/(1 - \rho)$; higher $\rho$ or stronger traits $\xi_i$ imply more stable political behaviour.

This integrated framework bridges ideational and discursive perspectives, specifies precise equilibrium thresholds for elite framing, and yields falsifiable individual-level and aggregate predictions.

Table 3: Integrated Framework of Populist Framing Effects

| Dimension | Components | Effects on Populist Appeal |
|---|---|---|
| **Message Characteristics** | Attribution clarity and credibility | Specific, credible attributions (e.g., "corrupt politicians") more effective than vague ones (e.g., "Washington elites") |
| | Threat frame intensity | Messages activating fear and anger more mobilizing than pure responsibility attribution |
| **Receiver Characteristics** | Political sophistication | Moderates acceptance of cognitive attribution; high sophistication provides stronger cognitive resistance |
| | Political intolerance | Amplifies perception of out-group threats; enhances emotional activation effects |
| | Political efficacy | Bidirectional moderation depending on message characteristics and personal attribution tendencies |
| **Contextual Conditions** | Existing information environment | Detailed factual information reduces effectiveness of vague attributions |
| | Socioeconomic environment | Actual economic or cultural shocks enhance/weaken credibility of threat narratives |

# Conclusion: An Integrated Framework for Populist Attitude Research

In conclusion, this paper systematically reviews the empirical literature in the field of populist attitudes, starting from the framework outlined by classic ideology and political attitude literature. The main schools are the ideational and discursive approaches. In fact, these two schools are quite consistent in ontology, both tending to believe that populist attitudes reflect psychological and cognitive support for a binary thin ideology of people vs. elite. The main differences lie in mechanisms and research methods. The ideational approach focuses on the stability of already formed populist attitudes and uses various conceptually and statistically rigorous processes to measure these attitudes, looking for consistency and stability. Indeed, the literature has found that there is always a group of people who hold stable populist attitudes, regardless of how the measurement questions and the political environment in which the questions are presented change or how cumbersome and rigorous statistical methods are used to synthesize these attitudes, this group of people consistently report stable populist attitudes. But these individuals are always a minority under the ideational approach. More research has found that some attitudes become unstable under broader changes in the political environment or changes in questionnaire items. Of course, measurement error is very common in the ideational approach. The problem with the ideational approach is that it does not clearly present the formation process of populist attitudes, but starts measuring stability directly from the later stage. If someone interprets the unstable populist attitude expressions under the ideational approach as changes in the strength of elite narrative shaping, ideational scholars seem to have no tools to defend their ontology.

In another direction, experimental literature under the discursive approach, starting from an assumption of supply and demand balance in the political market, and with the help of framing, priming, and persuasion theories in political communication, presents a complete process from elite discourse to individual-level reception more clearly. Experimental methods eliminate the influence of confounding variables. Populist attitudes may largely be attributed to elite shaping. But current experimental literature may overlook two issues. First, the filtering process of individual-level heterogeneity in receiving populist information is not presented in detail; some political, and psychological traits may be more helpful or resistant to the transformation of populist discourse into attitudes. This situation is particularly serious if experiments do not measure these possible mediating/moderating variables but average them through random assignment, then we find it difficult to know these subtle mechanisms. In addition, few literature studies how mainstream elite (non-populist) frames compete with populist frames and the possible strength of such counter-framing effects. In

the future, Bayesian models may be used to achieve this, especially if populist attitudes as a prior probability are strong, then the posterior requires larger and more thorough evidence to overturn the prior probability, and whether existing counter-frames can do this is unknown.

Bringing everything together, the ideational/discursive approach ultimately fits within the classical state–trait paradigm of attitude research. Any observed populist-attitude score for individual $i$ at time $t$ can be decomposed as:

$$\text{Populist Attitudes}_{it} = \begin{cases} \mu_i & \text{(stable trait)} \\ \phi_{it} & \text{(context-reactive state)} \\ \varepsilon_{it} & \text{(measurement error)} \end{cases} \tag{1}$$

The stable trait ($\mu_i$) represents a durable moral vision opposing "corrupt elites" to "the pure people" — the kernel identified by the ideational approach. The context-reactive state ($\phi_{it}$) captures situational activation by campaigns, crises, or elite cues and accounts for the empirical fluctuations documented across election cycles and countries. Finally, the measurement error ($\varepsilon_{it}$) subsumes wording noise, response styles, and mode artefacts; it is assumed that $\mathbb{E}[\varepsilon_{it}] = 0$ and uncorrelated with $\phi_{it}$.

In this unified framework, the positioning and complementarity of the two research approaches become clearer. The ideational approach primarily focuses on capturing the $\mu_i$ component, the stable trait component. Its complex scale design, factor analysis, and measurement invariance tests all aim to identify and measure those enduring populist tendencies that form an individual's lens for interpreting the political world. This partly explains why ideational approach researchers are concerned with cross-contextual consistency and measurement reliability, as they are essentially tracking a relatively stable ideological tendency. The discursive approach, in contrast, places its research emphasis on the $\phi_{it}$ component, highlighting the crucial role of contextual activation and elite shaping. Through carefully designed experiments, the discursive approach reveals how populist attitudes are activated by specific frames, threat cues, and attribution narratives—these attitudes may appear weak or silent during dormant periods but rapidly amplify under appropriate triggering conditions. This explains the frequently observed activation effects and incumbency effects in cross-national comparisons and longitudinal studies—they reflect the nature of $\phi_{it}$ fluctuating with changes in the political environment. Regarding the $\varepsilon_{it}$ measurement error component, the two methods adopt different but complementary strategies.

Recommendations for future analysis are that ideational and discursive approaches provide useful perspectives. Research on populist attitudes may first use experimental methods to trigger populist attitudes, followed by scales and latent variable methods to explore un-

derlying structures. This approach ensures we are measuring what we intend to measure. Although this may be costly, especially in terms of experimental design implementation, further exploration may break free from the constraints of the frequency school and contribute to the internal validity of populist attitudes in observational studies using Bayesian methods, among others. However, this remains unclear at present. In summary, research on populist attitudes remains meaningful, but absolute transparency regarding issues of validity and reliability must be maintained in all cases.

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