

Measuring a Moving Target?*

Populist Attitudes When Populists are In and Out of Power

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ABSTRACT In recent years research into populism has addressed the question of whether and how a latent dimension of populist attitudes can be measured, with various batteries of questions devised to operationalise it. However, given the centrality of anti-elitism to the measurement of populist attitudes, it suffers from a potential flaw: the impact of populist incumbency. Can we measure populist attitudes properly if populists are in power? This paper uses data collected in Poland during the PiS government (2020) and under the succeeding coalition (2025), employing a split sample approach testing different question wordings. The results reveal a fundamental “incumbency problem”: when PiS was in power, higher anti-elite attitudes predicted opposition support rather than populist support, with this relationship reversing when the opposition assumed power. While manicheanism showed stability across contexts, anti-elitism functioned as a context-dependent oppositional stance rather than a stable ideological disposition. These findings demonstrate that standard populism scales may systematically misidentify constituencies when populist parties govern, generating a challenge for how we measure populism at the demand side.

KEYWORDS populism; anti-elitism; measurement validity; survey methodology

Introduction

The rise of populist parties and movements in established democracies has prompted extensive scholarly attention to understanding the phenomenon from

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both supply-side and demand-side perspectives. While much early research focused on the characteristics and strategies of populist parties and leaders, recent years have witnessed growing interest in measuring populist attitudes among citizens. This shift reflects a theoretical understanding of populism as a latent attitudinal tendency that can be “activated” by political entrepreneurs under propitious circumstances.

These efforts have led to the development of cross-nationally validated batteries of questions for use in surveys of public opinion and vote intention, greatly improving our ability to measure populism across political contexts, make inferences about its socio-demographic and ideological correlates, and ascertain its impact on voting behaviour. One of the most significant of these is the 9-item scale developed by Castanho Silva et al. (2018).

However, while these scales function well in many cases, they may suffer from an important drawback in countries where populists are currently in power. The measures of anti-establishment attitudes - one of the three key components of populism, along with people-centrism and a Manichean outlook - are susceptible to what I term the “inc incumbency problem.” If populists are in opposition, the nature of “the establishment” is clear and unambiguous. If, however, populists are in power, the definition of the establishment becomes much more complex and potentially contradictory.

This paper addresses this methodological challenge by examining how different question wordings affect the measurement of populist attitudes in Poland, a country that experienced populist government under Law and Justice (PiS) from 2015 to 2023, followed by a coalition government led by the centrist liberal Civic Coalition (KO). Using data collected during the tenures of both governments, I test whether standard populism scales capture attitudes consistently regardless of who holds power.

The incumbency problem

As noted by Jungkunz, Fahey, and Hino (2021), many scales include references to a vaguely specified “elite” which can be interpreted quite differently by respondents in different countries or even within the same country at different times. Since anti-elitism is conceived as an essential dimension of populist attitudes, this limitation can be crucial for the validity of populism measurements.

The problem manifests in several ways. First, survey questions designed to measure attitudes toward the elite either leave it up to the respondent to define “the elite” or specify that they have politicians and the government in mind. While narrowing the definition to political elites may not necessarily be problematic for measuring populist attitudes, given that this subset of the elite is most often the subject of populist attacks, this ambiguity becomes problematic when trying to understand what is meant by political elites in a given context.

Second, when populists achieve power, their supporters may shift the targets of their anti-elite sentiments to other non-political elite groups such as journalists, academics, bureaucrats and corporate business leaders. This shift in target makes it difficult to maintain consistent measurement of anti-elite attitudes over time.

Third, the very meaning of anti-establishment sentiment changes when the populist party enters power, thereby becoming susceptible to being understood as part of the establishment. Supporters of populist parties in power may continue to hold anti-elite attitudes but direct them toward different targets, or they may moderate their anti-establishment views because their preferred party now controls the government.

Poland provides an ideal case for examining the extent to which the incumbency problem creates a problem for the measurement of populist attitudes. During its time in office between 2015 and 2023, PiS implemented numerous policies consistent with populist rhetoric, including attacks on judicial independence, media ownership restrictions, and confrontations with European Union institutions.

PiS's political appeal relied on its ability to position itself as representing "ordinary Poles" against various elite groups, including liberal intellectuals, European bureaucrats, and opposition politicians. Winning power did not necessarily negate the party's claim to speak on behalf of those neglected by those elite groups. Populists can often translate the sense that the mainstream elite sees them as illegitimate usurpers of power into a siege mentality when in office, explaining to their voters that the elite is conspiring to remove the rightful representatives of the people from power. Nevertheless, the ambiguities of anti-elite forces holding executive power create potential contradictions when measuring the populist attitudes of voters. The 2023 electoral defeat of PiS and its replacement by a coalition government led by the Civic Platform provides an opportunity to examine how the measurement of populist attitudes changes when populists move from government to opposition.

Measuring populist attitudes

The development of valid and reliable measures of populist attitudes has been a central concern in recent populism research. Early attempts at measurement often relied on single items or ad hoc batteries that lacked theoretical grounding or cross-national validation. A significant breakthrough came with the work of Castanho Silva et al. (2018), who developed and validated a 9-item scale based on the three core components of populist attitudes: anti-elitism, people-centrism, and Manichean thinking.

Existing research using this scale has demonstrated that populist attitudes are stronger among individuals who feel unfairly treated, are not represented by existing political parties, experience situations of crisis with anxiety and anger, consume news with populist framing, and are predisposed to believing in conspiracies. Those with stronger populist attitudes are more likely to vote for populist parties.

However, the scale's reliance on anti-elite sentiment as a core component creates potential measurement problems when populist parties achieve power. The standard formulation asks respondents to evaluate statements about "the government" or "people running the government" without specifying whether this refers to the current incumbents or political elites more generally.

Recent research has begun to identify and address the incumbency problem in populism measurement. Jungkunz, Fahey, and Hiro (2021) demonstrate that populist attitude scales perform differently in countries where populist parties are in power compared to those where they remain in opposition. Their analysis of Hungary, where the populist Fidesz party has governed since 2010, shows that standard anti-elite measures fail to predict support for the governing populist party.

Several solutions have been proposed to address this problem. One approach involves including various types of elites in the scale rather than focusing exclusively on political elites. Another involves specifying the elite only vaguely to allow respondents to interpret the concept according to their own understanding. A third approach, which I test in this paper, involves explicitly specifying whether questions refer to current incumbents or political elites in general.

The intuition behind this approach is that if populist attitudes are a set of ideological dispositions that are activated in specific contexts, then varying those contexts should affect how those attitudes are activated, both as a coherent set of attitudes and as a predictor of politically-relevant behaviours.

When populists are out of government, populist attitudes as measured using the standard Castanho Silva battery of questions should be more coherent as a set of attitudes ($H1a$) and more predictive of voting for populist parties ($H1b$) than when populists are in power. In particular, we expect to find that anti-elite attitudes are coherent and correlate positively with the people-centric and Manichean elements of populism, and that each of these elements clearly predicts voting for a populist party - in the present case, for PiS.

If the incumbency problem matters, then we expect to find that the relationships hypothesised in the previous two hypotheses vary depending on how questions about the elite are phrased. Emphasising the association of the elite with the *present government* should result in the anti-elite aspect of populism being significantly less associated with the people-centric and Manichean elements of populism when populists are in power ($H2a$), and in anti-elitism becoming significantly less predictive of voting for populists when they are in power ($H2b$).

On the other hand, emphasising the association of the elite with *all governments*, regardless of who is in power at a given time, should mitigate the extent to which populist incumbency affects the answers respondents give. In this case, I expect the coherence of anti-elite attitudes and their correlation with people-centric and Manichean elements of populism to be similar regardless of whether populists are in power or not ($H3a$) and for anti-elitism to be similarly predictive of voting for populists regardless of whether they are in power or not ($H3b$).

Research design

To test these hypotheses, I employed a split-sample experimental design using survey data collected in Poland at two time points: 2020 (during the government of the populist PiS) and 2025 (under the post-PiS coalition government led by KO). In both surveys, respondents were randomly assigned to one of three experimental conditions, each receiving a different version of the populism battery.

The three conditions were *original CS variables* (the standard Castanho Silva battery with the original question wording), *present government* (the CS questions with the three anti-elite questions modified to explicitly reference the current government), and *non-specific* (the CS questions with the three anti-elite questions modified to reference all governments and political elites regardless of who is in power). The people-centrism and manichean items remained unchanged across conditions.

The *original CS* items for the anti-elite dimension included:

- The government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves
- Government officials use their power to try to improve people's lives [reverse coded]
- Quite a few of the people running the government are crooked

The *present government* condition modified these to:

- The current government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves
- Current government officials use their power to try to improve people's lives [reverse coded]
- Most of the people currently running the government are crooked

The *non-specific* condition used:

- Governments are always pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves
- Regardless of who is in power, government officials use their power to try to improve people's lives [reverse coded]
- Most governments consist mainly of crooked people

Data were collected through representative online surveys of Polish adults. Both surveys used quota sampling and post-stratification weights to ensure representativeness across key demographic variables including age, gender, education and region of residence.

The analysis proceeds by examining the relationships between the key dimensions of populism per split group in both years, and then examining the relationships between those dimensions and propensity to support either a populist party (PiS) or its main non-populist adversary (KO).

I follow Wuttke et al. (2020) in treating populism and the three dimensions implied in the Castanho Silva operationalisation as a Goertzian non-compensatory concept. Traditional additive scaling assumes that high scores on one dimension can compensate for low scores on another. However, this leads to inconsistent

composite measures. For example, the anti-elitism variables measure the extent to which respondents agree, on a scale from strongly disagree = 1 to strongly agree = 5, that (a) the government is run by a few big interests who are looking out for themselves, and (b) most of the people running the government are crooked, and also the extent to which respondents *disagree*, on a reverse-coded scale, that government officials use their power to try to improve people's lives.

A fully anti-elitist position consists of scores of 5 on each dimension, after reverse coding. If a respondent strongly agrees (5) with the first two claims, but moderately agrees (2) with the latter, this yields an average of 4 on the dimension of anti-elitism. Yet so does a situation where a respondent moderately agrees with the first two claims and moderately disagrees with the third. As expressions of anti-elitism, these stances can hardly be said to be equivalent, and yet additive scaling treats them as such. Similarly, a respondent who has an overall score of 5 on the people-centric and manichean dimensions but only 2 on the anti-elitism dimension cannot be said to be populist to the same extent as a respondent who has a score of 4 on each of the three dimensions.

The Goertzian approach addresses this problem by using the minimum value of the three questions that comprise each subdimension to give the score for that subdimension, and then the minimum value of each subdimension to give the overall populism score. This is more consistent with the idea that to be populist one must hold people-centric, anti-elitist and manichean views at the same time.

Using the Goertzian measures of dimensions as the basic variables of interest, in the following analysis I first correlate each of the dimensions with each other per split sample, per year. I also correlate each of the dimensions with the populism variable to show the extent to which each dimension relates to the overall index of populism. I then estimate two multinomial regression models, one per year, in which vote choice is regressed on each of the dimensions of populism with an interaction for the split sample group to which the respondent belongs. These models allow me to estimate the predicted probability of voting for PiS or KO conditional on levels of the dimensions of populism and, in the case of the anti-elitism dimension, conditional on question wording.

Results

The analysis reveals significant differences in the relationships between dimensions, in the overall coherence of the populism dimension, and in how populist attitudes predict voting behaviour across experimental conditions and time periods.

Table 1 presents the correlations between the Goertz dimensions across all conditions and years. *Hypothesis 1a* predicted that populist attitudes would be more coherent when populists are out of power. The results provide mixed support. While some inter-dimensional correlations improved from 2020 to 2025, the changes were more modest than expected. Anti-elite attitudes showed the strongest relationship with people-centrism across all conditions (overall mean $r = 0.208$), but this relationship remained relatively stable across time periods (2020 mean: 0.199; 2025 mean: 0.217; difference: +0.018).

The most notable improvement occurred in the relationship between anti-elite attitudes and manicheanism, which increased substantially from 2020 to 2025 (mean change: +0.077). This was particularly pronounced in the *present government* condition, where the correlation shifted from -0.031 in 2020 to 0.130 in 2025 (+0.161). The people-centrism / manicheanism relationship also showed modest improvement (+0.053 overall).

Hypothesis 2a predicted that emphasising association of elites with the present government would reduce attitude coherence when populists are in power. This hypothesis receives strong support. In 2020, the Present government condition exhibited the most problematic correlations, including negative relationships between anti-elite attitudes and manicheanism (-0.031) and between people-centrism and manicheanism (-0.042). These negative correlations indicate a fundamental breakdown in the expected structure of populist attitudes when respondents were asked specifically about the incumbent populist government.

Hypothesis 3a predicted that non-specific elite references would maintain coherence regardless of incumbency. This hypothesis receives partial support. While the *non-specific* condition avoided the most severe problems seen in the *present government* condition during 2020, it still showed weaker correlations than the *original CS* condition.

The relationships between individual dimensions and the overall populism scale reveal important insights about measurement stability. Manicheanism consistently showed the strongest correlation with overall populism across all conditions and time periods (mean $r = 0.696$), with remarkable stability between years. Anti-elite attitudes showed the second strongest relationship with populism (mean $r = 0.384$), with modest improvement from 2020 to 2025 (+0.046). People-centrism showed the most variation across conditions and the weakest overall relationship with populism (mean $r = 0.160$).

Table 1: Correlations of populism dimensions and populism index

Year	Group	AE/PC	AE/M	PC/M	AE/Pop	PC/Pop	M/Pop
2020	Orig. CS	0.219	0.119	-0.007	0.391	0.196	0.708
2020	Present gov.	0.254	-0.031	-0.042	0.367	0.145	0.654
2020	Non- specific	0.125	0.001	0.020	0.326	0.081	0.726
2025	Orig. CS	0.257	0.082	0.051	0.360	0.211	0.732
2025	Present gov.	0.212	0.130	0.013	0.484	0.135	0.660
2025	Non- specific	0.183	0.107	0.065	0.377	0.190	0.697

The overall patterns indicate that the dimensions of populism do not strongly correlate with each other at the overall level. When using these measures to predict voting behaviour, it becomes clear that one of the reasons why populist

attitudes lack coherence across the population in general is because of the association of anti-elitism with the current government.

Figures 1, 2 and 3 reveal striking patterns in how populist attitudes predict voting across the experimental conditions. The quantities of interest here are differences in the predicted probabilities of voting for KO or PiS, conditional on levels of the variable in question. Where the difference is positive (above the zero line), there is a higher predicted probability of voting for KO over PiS. This is marked with orange credible intervals. Where the difference is negative (below the zero line), there is a higher predicted probability of voting for PiS over voting for KO. This is marked with blue credible intervals. Where there is no statistically significant difference, the credible intervals are black.

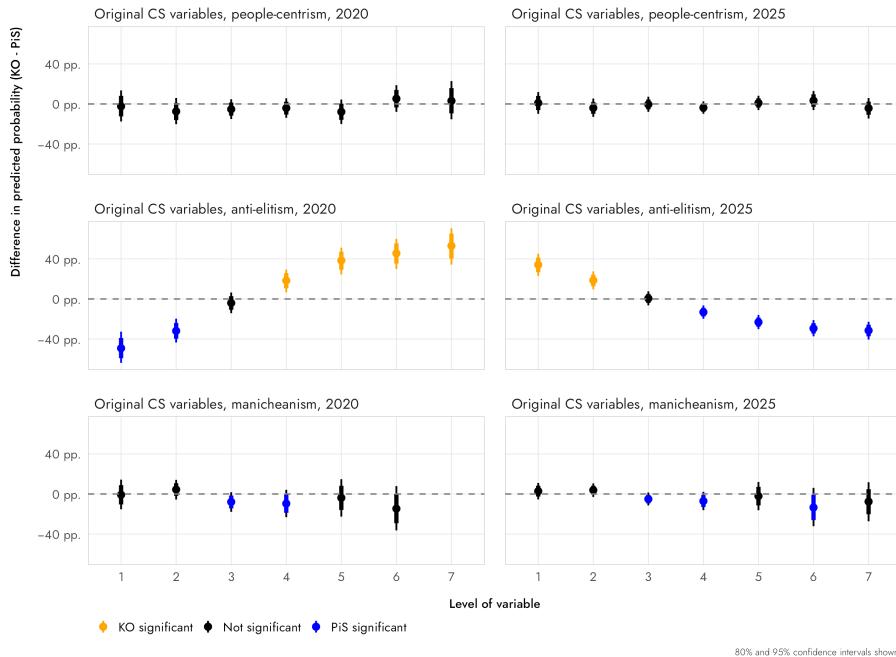


Figure 1: Differences in predicted probabilities of voting for KO or PiS (original CS variables)

Where the *original CS* variables are concerned, neither people-centric attitudes nor manichean attitudes reliably and consistently differentiate the two parties' electorates. However, there is a clear and dramatic effect in the case of anti-elitism. In 2020, when PiS was in power, the predicted probability of voting for KO was over 40 percentage points lower among those with the lowest levels of anti-elitism, and over 40 percentage points higher among those with the highest levels of anti-elitism. In 2025, when KO was the main party of government, anti-elitist attitudes became much more predictive of support for PiS.

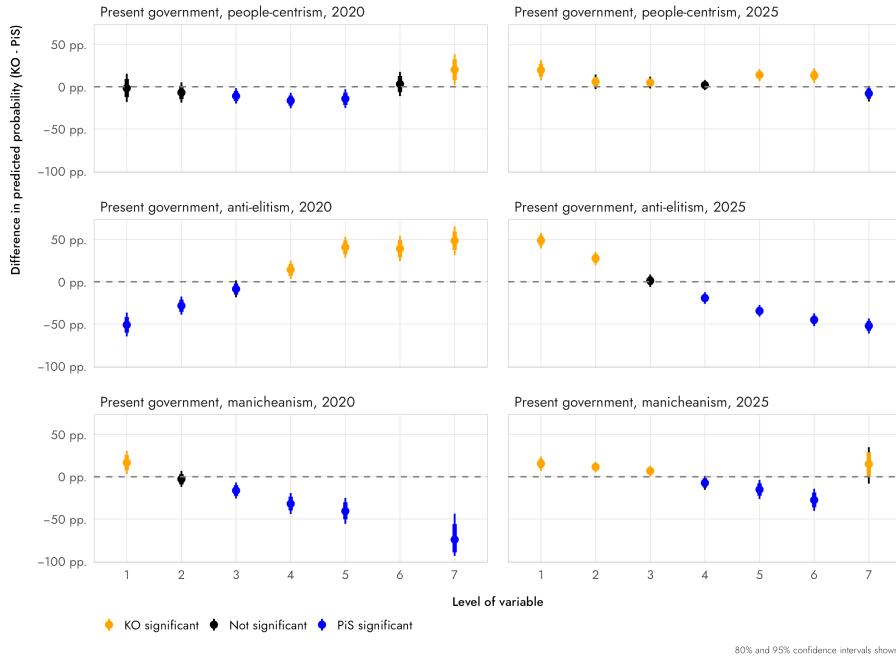


Figure 2: Differences in predicted probabilities of voting for KO or PiS (present government variables)

These patterns are intensified when the question wording explicitly concerns the present government. In 2020, those with the lowest levels of anti-elitism were 50 percentage points more likely to vote for PiS, while those with the highest levels of anti-elitism were 50 percentage points more likely to vote for KO. In 2025, this relationship ran in almost precisely the opposite direction.

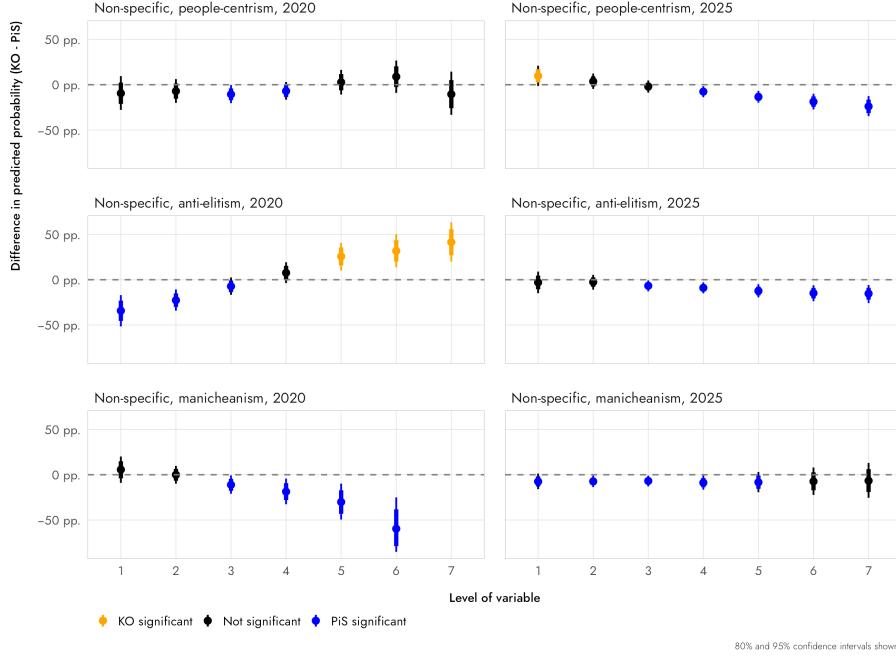


Figure 3: Differences in predicted probabilities of voting for KO or PiS (non-specific variables)

While the non-specific wording of anti-elitism items did not show a different effect in 2020, in 2025 it was much less significant in its influence. While those with higher levels of anti-elitism were around 15 percentage points more likely to vote for PiS, at low levels of anti-elitism there were no statistically significant differences.

These results show that anti-elitism is a substantially more powerful predictor of voting for Poland's two major parties than either people-centrism or manicheanism, and that it largely varies depending on which of those parties is in power. Hypothesis 1b suggested that the *original CS* battery of populist attitudes would be more predictive of voting for populists when populists are not in power. This is only the case with respect to anti-elitism, and the fact that when populists are in power these attitudes are strongly predictive of voting *against* populists suggests that anti-elitism functions independently of populism rather than as a component part of a broader ideological tendency.

The results in the case of the present government battery of questions support this conclusion. Hypothesis 2b predicted that emphasising the present government in the anti-elitism questions would make anti-elitism significantly less predictive of voting for populists in power. This is indeed the case. However, if emphasising the association of the government with the elite compounds the

relationships observed for the *original CS* battery of questions, *de-emphasising* this association does not correspondingly mitigate those relationships. Against hypothesis 3b, which expected that *non-specific* references to the elite would result in anti-elitism predicting support for populists regardless of which party was in power, we find no such consistent relationship.

Discussion

These findings provide evidence for the existence of an “incumbency problem” in measuring populist attitudes. The measurement of populist attitudes - even when using measures that have been extensively validated elsewhere - is not merely sensitive to political context but can be systematically distorted when populist parties hold power. Rather than functioning as a stable component of populist ideology, anti-elitism appears to operate as a context-dependent oppositional stance. When PiS was in power in 2020, higher levels of anti-elite attitudes predicted support for the mainstream opposition party (KO) rather than the populist incumbent. This relationship reversed almost entirely when KO assumed power in 2025, with anti-elitism again predicting PiS support.

This pattern is particularly pronounced when these questions explicitly reference the current government, underlining that populist supporters exclude their preferred party from their conception of “the government” when that party holds power. However, emphasising the relationship between the current power-holders and the elite only slightly increases the effect already seen with the *original CS* battery of questions. This underlines the key problem with the latter: respondents already tend to associate mention of the government with the elite more generally. While there is some evidence that this association may be mitigated by explicitly referring to “all governments” in an attempt to prompt respondents to think more generally about elites, this evidence is insufficient to suggest that the problem can readily be fixed.

The results challenge the theoretical assumption that anti-elitism functions as a stable dimension of populist attitudes. Instead, they suggest that it may be better understood as an oppositional orientation that targets whoever currently holds power. The stability of the relationship between manicheanism and overall levels of populism contrasts sharply with the contextual variability of anti-elite attitudes. This suggests that while manichean thinking may represent a genuine ideological disposition, anti-elitism functions more as a reactive stance shaped by immediate political circumstances.

These findings have clear implications for how we conceptualise populism as a political phenomenon on the demand side. The conventional tripartite definition of populism - comprising anti-elitism, people-centrism, and manicheanism - assumes these dimensions form a coherent ideological syndrome. However, the above analysis suggests this coherence breaks down precisely when it should be most relevant: when populist parties achieve their goal of gaining power. This interpretation helps explain the “siege mentality” often observed among populist movements in power. If populist supporters systematically exclude their preferred party from evaluations of “the elite” or “the establishment,” this cognitive frame-

work allows them to maintain their anti-establishment identity while supporting governing parties.

These findings also raise concerns about the validity of comparative populism research that includes countries with populist governments. If anti-elite attitudes predict opposition rather than populist support when populists govern, cross-national studies may systematically misclassify political constituencies, leading to erroneous conclusions about the nature of support for populists. Similarly, longitudinal studies tracking populist attitudes across changes in government may confuse measurement artifacts with genuine attitudinal change. The consistency of these patterns across different question wordings suggests that the incumbency problem is not merely a function of ambiguous language but reflects deeper cognitive and motivational processes among populist supporters.

Several limitations constrain the generalisability of these findings. The analysis focuses on a single country with a specific type of populist party (radical right) and a particular context of intense affective polarisation. Different political systems, populist party characteristics, or democratic traditions may produce different patterns. Future research should extend this experimental approach to other country contexts to establish whether the incumbency effect identified here is indeed a broader tendency, or simply an idiosyncratic feature of the Polish case. Panel studies tracking the same individuals across changes in government could help separate incumbency effects from other sources of attitude change. Qualitative research exploring how populist supporters conceptualise “the elite” and “the establishment” could assist with reframing questions to capture an essential element of a stable populist disposition - if such a thing indeed exists.

Conclusion

The evidence presented here demonstrates that measuring populist attitudes is indeed like “measuring a moving target”, but a target whose movement follows predictable patterns related to political context rather than representing random measurement error. Anti-elite attitudes appear to function as oppositional stances that consistently target incumbent power, while other dimensions of populism show varying degrees of stability.

These findings suggest that future populism research must develop context-sensitive measurement approaches that account for the political environment in which attitudes are measured. This may require moving beyond the assumption that populist attitudes represent stable individual characteristics toward understanding them as contextually activated frameworks that gain meaning through interaction with specific political circumstances.

Rather than viewing the incumbency problem as a methodological inconvenience to be solved through better question wording, researchers should recognize it as a fundamental feature of populist attitudes that provides important insights into how populist movements maintain their oppositional character even when they achieve political power. Understanding this dynamic is crucial not only for accurate measurement but for comprehending the broader implications of populist governance for democratic politics.

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