

Popular-science description of the research project

The project “Measuring Populism: a pilot study to improve existing questions” deals with the measurement of populist attitudes. As populist parties have become more prominent in contemporary democracies, researchers have attempted to conceptualise and measure populist attitudes among the voting public to understand whether people vote for populist parties because of their populism, or for other reasons. While significant work has been done in developing questions to measure populist attitudes over the last few years, current questions suffer from an important drawback: they assume that populists are in opposition rather than in power. If populists are in opposition, the nature of “the establishment” that populists are opposed to is clear. If, however, populists are in power, the definition of the establishment is much more ambiguous. This results in several of the populism questions performing less well in countries where populists are in government.

To address this problem, this project aimed to design a new set of questions that is theoretically less susceptible to the aforementioned problem because it makes reference to general attitudes towards political elites rather than to those currently holding power. To test these questions, a representative survey of Polish adults was commissioned. The carrying out of this survey was delayed due to the onset of the coronavirus crisis, so the data have not yet been fully analysed, but an initial survey of the data indicates that several of the new questions perform well as measures of populist attitudes, regardless of whether they refer specifically to the current government or to political elites in general. These results will make a significant contribution to the literature on populist attitudes at a time when more and more populists are entering power, providing scholars with alternative questions to measure attitudes that are having a substantial impact on liberal democracies.

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