

All Tarred with the Same Brush? A Comparative Study of Populist Support Predicting Conspiracy Thinking during the COVID-19 Pandemic

There exists a strong theoretical link between populist attitudes and conspiracy thinking, as both mindsets tap into the vessel of anti-establishment political orientations. We test whether core supporters of populist and extremist parties are more prone to believe in conspiracies than core supporters of mainstream parties. Additionally, we test if citizens that who perceive themselves ideologically more distant to the incumbent government are more conspiratorial than voters that perceive themselves closer to the incumbent(s). Using original data in 5 countries for 8 populist parties, we demonstrate that not all voters for populist parties are the same. If populist parties have government experience, their voters are less likely to engage in conspiracy thinking. Testing the relationship for specific conspiracy beliefs and generic conspiracy mentality while putting populist voters in the center advances the knowledge on how anti-establishment political orientations conditions political behavior.

Keywords: Conspiracy Beliefs, Support for Populist Parties, Comparative Analysis

Introduction

“After our victory, you can raise your heads and finally verbalize what you always believed in” according to Giorgia Meloni, leader of extreme right-wing populist party Fratelli d’Italia, in her speech five days before the 2022 Italian elections.¹ Some of these things Meloni’s followers “have always believed” are conspiracy theories, often propagated by Meloni herself. Her flagship conspiracies incorporate the idea that European bureaucrats are emissaries of George Soros² - evoking the classic anti-Semitic conspiracies of the extreme right (Bergmann 2018) -, or the creation of the Corona virus in a Chinese laboratory in 2015.³ While currently leading the largest party in Italian parliament, her party is certainly not the only one in the country that dedicates itself to spreading conspiratorial accounts. Two other populist parties – the similarly extreme-right Lega and the more centrist 5 Stars Movement - contribute to the spread thereof too (Berti and Loner 2021; Natale and Ballatore 2014). So have other extremist leaders in several European countries like France, Germany, Netherlands, Hungary, and Slovakia (Önnerfors and Krouwel 2021; Plenta

¹<https://twitter.com/rulajebreal/status/1572319161145229314?s=20&t=4b0nw05KE9YbpdZSiklXrg>

²<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/15/world/europe/giorgia-meloni-italy-right.html>

³<https://twitter.com/GiorgiaMeloni/status/1242875894387138563>

2020; Radnitz 2022), who exploit conspiracy theories for electoral reasons.

Conspiracies permeate the minds of citizens with extremists and populist attitudes with particular ease (Prooijen et al. 2022). Populist thinking - characterized by the Manichean thought that there is an evil elite silencing the voice of the real people (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017)- is fertile ground for thinking that the official accounts of major events are actual lies and deceit (Sutton and Douglas 2014). The link between populism and conspiracy belief has been evidenced with multiple studies (Castanho Silva, Vegetti, and Littvay 2017; Hameleers 2021; Van Prooijen 2018). A recent study conducted in more than 26 countries has shown that citizens of both political extremes, though mostly on the right, are more likely to believe in conspiracies than ideologically moderate citizens (Imhoff et al. 2022). Another study has shown such populist attitudes and conspiratorial mindsets are closely linked as both tap into similar anti-establishment sentiments (Prooijen et al. 2022).

Crises, and their disruptive effect on decision-making elites, are often reflected in the parallel rise of anti-establishment attitudes, populism and conspiracy theories. With the advent of the Corona virus, suspicions about its origin, its distribution and its very existence have been especially welcome among both populist leaders and voters (Berti and Ruzza 2022; Eberl, Huber, and Greussing 2021). Anti-science conspiracies and populism are a traditional marriage that has included skepticism about climate change, resistance to GMOs, or the anti-vaccine movement (Stecula and Pickup 2021). Geopolitical crises, such as Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, have also resulted in conspiratorial accounts from populist leaders, suggesting that globalists are attempting to replace the Christian people of Europe with more ‘docile immigrants’. Extremist, far-right and populist leaders see Putin’s Russia as a model to make Western democracies less pluralistic and ‘weak’ (Oliker 2017; Albertazzi and Mueller 2013; Tarchi 2015; Verbeek and Zaslove 2016; Eksi and Wood 2019; Weiss 2020).

Early studies in the US found an association between conspiracy belief and political party affiliation, with right-wing and conservative Republicans being more conspiratorial (Wright and Arbuthnot 1974; Oliver and Wood 2014), yet recent studies find less clear partisan patterns (Uscinski and Parent 2014). Logically, many voters are more likely to think that parties they did not support for are involved in malevolent activities than representatives of the party they support (Claassen and Ensley 2016), indicating in incumbent/party choice effect. Such effects are found

in Poland, where the radical right conservative government of *PiS* results in lower conspiracy belief on the right and more conspiratorial attitudes by supporters of the opposition parties. This incumbent/opposition effect may also be at play when we look at staunch left-wing opposition parties like the *Socialistische Partij* (SP) in the Netherlands and *Vänsterpartiet* (V) in Sweden, *Alternativet and Enhedslisten* (AE) in Denmark and *Die Linke* in German, whose supporters all show higher inclinations for conspiracy belief. Feeling that the party you support is structurally being excluded from power might trigger strong anti-establishment attitudes) Thus, because it is difficult to entangle whether it is the strength of political convictions (extremism) or the feeling that your party is excluded from executive power, we investigate both these explanations for strong anti-establishment sentiments of both populist and opposition parties, leading to the two guiding hypotheses of this paper:

H1: *Voters/supporters of populist parties and extremist parties will be more prone to conspiracy thinking than voters/supporters of system/mainstream parties*

H2: *Voters that see more distance between themselves and the incumbent government party/parties are more likely to believe in conspiracies than voters that position themselves closer to the incumbent(s)*

This study contributes to knowledge about the relationship between populism and conspiracy thinking in three ways. First, it puts the focus on populist voters rather than on populist attitudes. Although, as previous research has shown, the mindset explains part of the relationship between populism and conspiracies, the role of parties and leaders is also especially key. Not only because populist parties and leaders play an active role in the spread of conspiracies, but because we know that communications from like-minded political figures impact public opinion disproportionately, especially in times of high partisan animus (Lenz 2013; Mason 2018).

Second, our study considers conspiracies from two different perspectives. On the one hand, it focuses on conspiracy mentality - that is, the abstract tendency to accept the validity of conspiracies. This allows us to understand and compare the level of general conspiratorial thinking of voters of populist and non-populist parties. On the other hand, we also investigated the level of penetration of specific COVID-19 conspiracies, unique to the multiple ways in which they can be originated (Hartman et al. 2021).

Third, this study is comparative of voters of eight European populist parties, covering both Southern Europe (Vox in Spain, M5E, Lega and Fratelli d'Italia in Italy), Western Europe (SD in Sweden, RN in France and AfD in Germany), and Eastern Europe (PiS in Poland) at two points in time, before and after the outbreak of COVID-19.

Data, Measures, and Methods of Estimation

To investigate how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the relationship between support for populist parties and the belief in both specific conspiracies as well as a generic conspiratorial mentality, we have conducted two studies in six countries: Germany, France, Italy, Poland, Spain, and Sweden. The first study is conducted in November 2020 and the second study approximately a year later, in October 2021. The first data set is collected by Dynata and the second data set is collected by *KiesKompas*, both together with the *Instituto Cattaneo*. Quotas for age, gender, and education were included to ensure the representativeness of the sample. We have 6,013 respondents in the first study and 6,044 in the second study; i.e. about 1,000 respondents per country.⁴ We have used the recommendation of **Gerber and Green** to impute missing values with the mean value per country, and indicate if a variable has more than 10% missing values.

Dependent Variables. We measure first the beliefs in specific conspiracies, in this case conspiracies on COVID-19, measured in both studies and secondly, included in study 2, we measure a generic conspiracy mentality. **Covid Conspiracy Beliefs** is measured with four statements⁵ where people are asked to rate them as **true** (value of 1) or **false** (value of 0). We have created an additive index, where a value of 4 indicates a high belief in Covid conspiracies, and a value of 0 indicates that a respondent has no Covid conspiracy beliefs. **Generic Conspicay Mentality** is measured using the PICOM scale (Bruder et al. 2013), which consists of five items⁶ for which participants have to assess the likelihood 11-point Likert scale ranging from certainly not likely

⁴For an overview of all variables in the studies, as well as the descriptive information on both studies, see the Online Appendix and our Online Research Compendium – anonoomyzed for the review process.

⁵These statements are 1) *the virus is a biological weapon intentionally released by China*; 2) *5G technology is causing the Corona virus to spread faster*; 3) *the Corona virus has been spread by multinational pharmaceutical companies, now ready to make huge profits by selling vaccines*; 4) *the Corona virus is a hoax*.

⁶These items are 1) *Many very important things happen in the world, which the public is never in-formed about*; 2) *Politicians usually do not tell us the true motives for their decisions*; 3) *Government agencies closely monitor all citizens*; 4) *Events which superficially seem to lack a connection are often the result of secret activities*; 5) *There are secret organizations that greatly influence political decisions*.

(value of 0) till certainly likely (value of 10). We have scaled the items using the mean score. Table A.1 in the Online Appendix (OA) demonstrates the descriptive information and Figure A.1 in the OA visualizes the Cronbach’s alpha per country for both dependent variables.

Independent Variables of Interest. To test support for populist parties (H1), we use four separate indicators: **Populist Party Identity**, **Populist Vote Last Election**, **Populist Vote Intention**, **PTV for Populist Party**. **Populist Party Identity** is measured using the question *Do you consider yourself to be close to any particular party? If so, which party do you feel close to?* If the parties *AfD* (Germany), *Resamblément National* (France), *Lega Salvini Premier*, *Movimento 5 Stelle*, *Fratelli d’Italia* (Italy), *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* (Poland), *Vox* (Spain), or *Sverigedemokraterna* (Sweden) are selected, respondents get a value of 1 and otherwise a value of 0. The same measurement is applied to respondents indicating that they either have voted or are intended to vote for these parties to measure **Populist Vote Last Election** and **Populist Vote Intention**. To measure **PTV for Populist Party**, we apply a 11-point scale for the parties indicated above, where a value of 0 indicates that a respondent is very unlikely to ever vote for this party, and a value of 10 indicates that a respondent is very likely to ever vote for this party. Table A.2 in the OA demonstrates the descriptive information per party. **Populist Identity** and **Populist Vote Last Elections** is available in both studies, the other two measures are only available in Study 2.

To focus on the anti-elite aspect of populism (H2), we look at the ideological distance from the government. We measure this using eight operationalizations of this concept: we look at the mean and median ideological distance of the government parties as determined by the respondents as well as determined by the sample, culminating into four measures. We use the absolute distance between ideological left-right self-placement and party placement on an 11-point scale (value of 0 indicates left, value of 10 indicates right). We do the same for a specific Covid 11-point scale⁷. These eight measures are only available for study 1. Tables A.3, A.4, and A.5 in the OA demonstrate the descriptive information per country.

Control Variables. In our analysis, we control for demographic information (gender, age, education, income, religion, job) as well as political background variables (trust in politics, ideological

⁷*In your opinion, in the context of a pandemic crisis, is it better to establish all the restrictions that could preserve public health or is it better to leave economic activities open to protect jobs? Please answer on a score from 0 (preserve public health) -10 (leave economic activities open to protect jobs).*

position on economic left-right scale and cultural progressive-conservative scale, and evaluations and prospects of the economy). Tables A.5 till A.17 in the OA demonstrate the descriptive information per country.

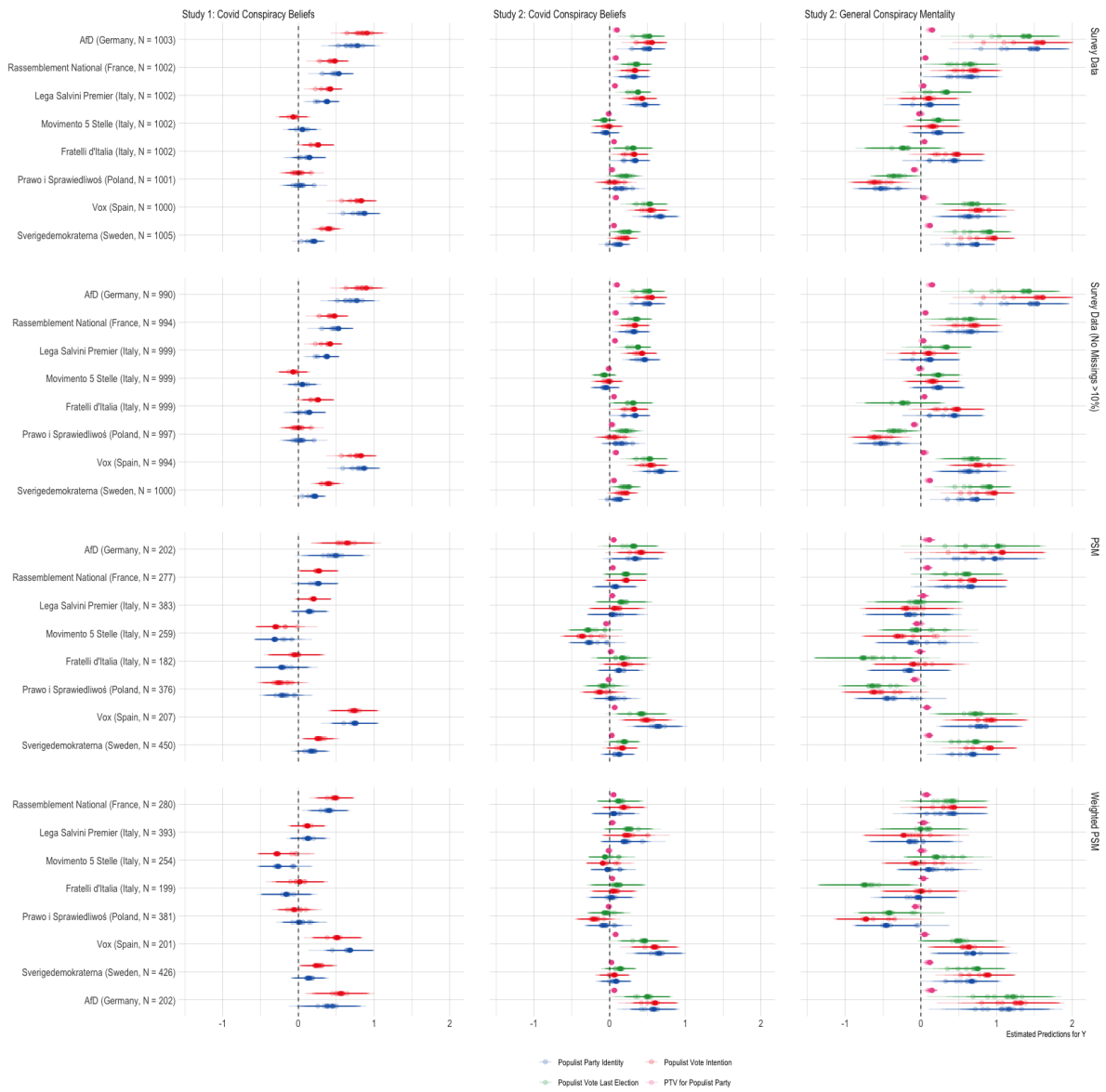
Methods of Estimation. Since we construct several options to measure our theoretical constructs, choosing which ones or which combinations to include in the main analyses and robustness checks typically comes with researchers’ degrees of freedom (Simmons, Nelson, and Simonsohn 2016). Therefore, our data does not consist of a single data set necessary to test our hypotheses, but to multiple alternatively processed data sets, depending on the specific combination of choices — a many worlds or multiverse of data sets (Simonsohn, Simmons, and Nelson 2020, 702). Each combination of independent variables can lead to different outcomes of the statistical model. Hence, rather than modeling some separate ‘single data sets’, we choose to model the multiverse of data sets (Simonsohn, Simmons, and Nelson 2020), also referred to as the specification curve p (Steege et al. 2016). Moreover, there are stricter and less strict ways to handle observational data for effects analysis. We use OLS regressions on four different processed data sets: the survey data with imputed missing values, the survey data with row-wise deleted missing values; propensity-score matched data; and weighed propensity-score matched data. We use the R package `specr` (Masur and Scharkow 2020) to estimate the effect of each different combination of independent variables to explain belief in conspiracies.

All Tarred with the Same Brush?

To investigate whether supporters of populist parties are tarred with the same brush when it comes to their conspiracy thinking, Figure 1 demonstrates that this is not the case. While supporters of the German *Alternative für Deutschland*, French *Rassemblement National*, Italian *Lega Salvini Premier*, Spanish *Vox*, and Swedish *Sverigedemokraterna* behave in the same way: Compared to non-supporters, they report higher levels of Covid Conspiracy beliefs (left- and middle columns of Figure 1) as well as higher levels of general conspiracy mentality (right column of Figure 1) across the different modeling techniques.⁸ Supporters of the Italian parties *Fratelli d’Italia* and

⁸The Italian *Lega Salvini Premier* has insignificant results for some of the models, but the majority of the models predicting the relationship between supporting *Lega Salvini Premier* and general conspiracy mentality is significant and positive.

Figure 1: Support for Populist Parties Predicting Conspiracy Thinking



Movimento 5 Stella and the Polish *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* however, show a different pattern. For supporters of *Movimento 5 Stella* and *Fratelli d'Italia*, we do not find a statistically significant relationship with conspiracy thinking across measures and modeling techniques; neither for the Covid specific one, nor the general mentality. For supporters of *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*, Figure 1 shows no significant relationship with Covid conspiracy beliefs across measures and modeling techniques, yet a negative and significant relationship with general conspiracy mentality. This indicates that those who support the Polish populist are less likely to have a general conspiracy mentality. This difference between the behavior of supporters for *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*, *Movimento 5 Stella* and *Fratelli d'Italia* and the supporters of the other European populist parties could be the government experience of these parties.⁹ They could therefore be perceived as part of the evil elite, and those who are prone to conspiracy thinking, do not vote anymore for these parties. Overall, we see support for H1 in Figure 1. However, the stricter the causal modeling in the third and fourth row (Propensity Score Matching (PSM) and Weighted PSM) of Figure 1 shows that only for Spain (supporters of *Vox*) and Germany (supporters of *Alternative für Deutschland*) the relationship between populist support and conspiracy thinking is robust across measures. One other notable result of Figure 1 is that measuring populist support with **propensity to vote** yields smaller effects than using **vote recall**, **vote intention** or **party identity** questions.

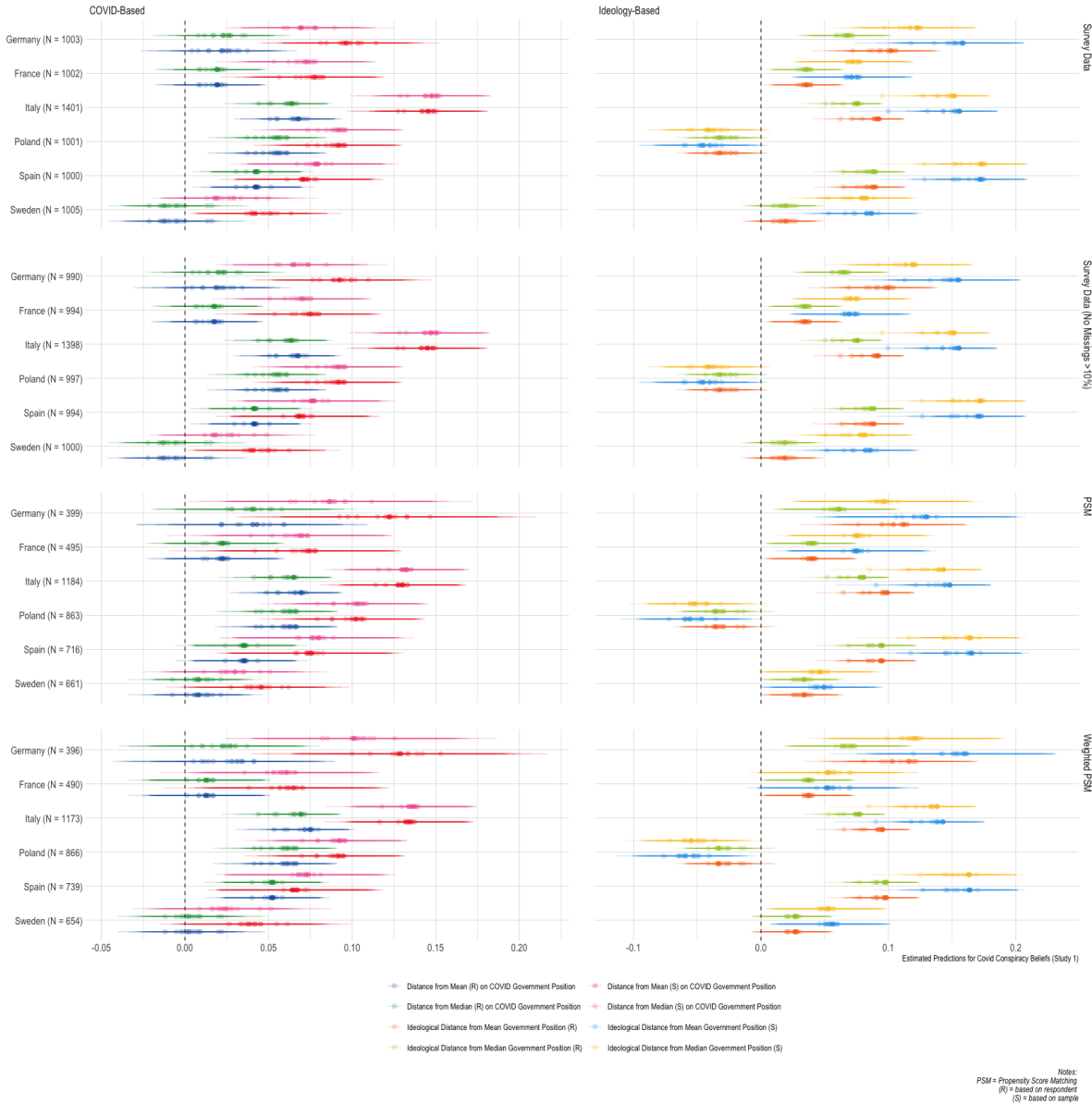
To delve a bit deeper into the relationship between government experience of parties and conspiracy thinking, we run a regression predicting conspiracy thinking with distance towards the government position based on Covid policies in the left column of Figure 2 and based on ideology (left-right) in the right column of Figure 2. Regardless of modeling choices, we see for most operationalizations of the independent variable **distance from the government** based on Covid policies¹⁰ that there is a positive and significant relationship. This indicates that those who position themselves further away from the government, i.e. those who deflect from the elite, are more likely to believe in Covid-related conspiracies. This effect is most pronounced in Italy, which was the country that was hit hardest with Covid-19 in its first wave, and therefore where the restrictions set by the government were strictest. Looking at the right-hand side of Figure 2, we see that for

⁹ *Fratelli d'Italia* is a split off of Berlusconi's party *Il Popolo della Libertà* which governed Italy between 2008 and 2011.

¹⁰ For some models using the distance based on the respondents mean or median position from the government, we find insignificant results for the supporters of the German *Alternative für Deutschland*, the French *Rassemblement National*, and the Swedish *Sverigedemokraterna*.

all countries but Poland, there is a significant and positive relationship between placing yourself further from the government on an ideological left-right scale and conspiracy thinking. While the effect differs in size, this finding holds across modeling techniques and operationalizations. For Poland, governed by the populist party *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*, we see the opposite. The further you place yourself from the government, despite it being a populist, i.e. anti-elite, party, the more likely you are to be prone to conspiracy thinking. This holds across modeling techniques and operationalizations.

Figure 2: Distance towards Government Predicting Conspiracy Thinking



Conclusion

Previous research found a relationship between extremist and populist attitudes, especially at the political right-wing, and belief in conspiracies. This paper delves deeper into this association between anti-establishment sentiments – both part-and-parcel of populism and conspiracy belief – by bringing partisanship into the equation. A fundamental factor to understand this linkage lies in the pivotal role populist leaders play in proselytizing conspiracies. Hence, we assess to what extent conspiratorial mindsets and support for eighth populist parties is related in five European countries: *AfD* (Germany), *Resamblement National* (France), *Lega Salvini Premier*, *Movimento 5 Stelle*, *Fratelli d'Italia* (Italy), *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* (Poland), *Vox* (Spain), or *Sverigedemokraterna* (Sweden). Our theory revolves around two axes: first, based on the common anti-elitist character of populism and conspiracy thinking, we hypothesize that supporters of extreme-right populist parties are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories. Second, we reason that this relationship is conditioned by the incumbency or opposition status of these populist parties. If populists are the (political) incumbent, populist voters will be less likely to believe in conspiracies hatched by ‘evil elites’. To test our assumptions, we model a multiverse of operationalizations of our key concepts, capable of iterating different tests of the same assumptions. We vary the way we measure the independent variable (voting intention, recall and vote propensity), the dependent variable (using a general conspiracy mentality measure as well as beliefs in COVID conspiracies) and the statistical models. The results yield conclusions that confirm our first hypothesis. Regardless of the model we use, in general we find that populist support predicts belief in conspiracies. However, we find important variations from this general rule. Three parties deviate: *Lega* and *M5S* in Italy and *PiS* in Poland. This seems to suggest that where right-wing extreme parties stand a chance of forming a government – either singlehandedly or in a coalition – its supporters feel that the elite is replaceable and not consistently working against them. ‘Their’ party is or can become an incumbent. Supporters of parties with much less (national) coalition and governing potential – such as *Vox* and *AfD* - have the highest inclinations to believe in conspiracies.

A more robust test of our second hypothesis is our assessment of self-placement in relation to the incumbent parties to see if closeness to government reduces conspiracy belief. Consistent with our expectations we find that in Spain, Sweden, Germany and Italy placing yourself far from the

government indeed predicts conspiratorial attitudes. This is particularly strong in Italy, where there was an imposed (or not directly elected by voters) government. Poland, where the populist *PiS* governs, is the odd one out: here it is actually those who support the populists are less inclined to belief in conspiracies.

The results have four implications for students of populism and conspiracy thinking. First, that populist voting is consistently indissociably from belief in conspiracies. Second, that in most cases COVID conspiracies are a similar predictor of general conspiracy thinking, reinforcing pre-existing political divisions rather than creating new ones. Third, that at the moment populists come to power, as in the Polish case, the association between populism and conspiratorial thinking weakens or reverses. Fourth, and finally, the extent to which disruptive crises impact on the country may weaken the link between populism and conspiracy beliefs, as in the Italian case where support for *Fratelli d'Italia* or *M5S* shows a weak relationship with conspiracy thinking. In future studies, it would be interesting to delve deeper into the differences between populist electorates and the factors that cause these differences, especially in countries like Italy with an increasingly fragmented electorate.

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