The People as 'Volk' or 'Bürger?' The Implications of Ethnic and Civic Conceptions of the People for the Measurement of Populist Attitudes *

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Populists believe in the sovereignty of the people. Yet, the people can be construed in ethnic terms or in civic terms. Using a novel wording experiment in Germany (N=6,713), we examine ethnic or civic conceptions of 'the people' affect respondents' adherence agreement to key populist attitude items. We find that there are small, but statistically significant differences between items framed in an ethnic and a civic manner – and that this differs per item. This relationship is significantly moderated by respondents' degree of exclusive national identity and voting behaviour for the radical right. Our findings suggest that the way in which the people is conceptualized has important implications for the measurement of populist attitudes.

Keywords: Experiment, Populist Attitudes

Introduction

Populism puts 'the people' central in political decision-making. It's central claim is that political power should reside with the people, as opposed to the elites Mudde (2004). To study populist beliefs at the individual level, scholars recently developed the populist attitude scale Castanho Silva et al. (2020). Research on both the individual and the party level has found that populism is a diverse phenomenon, applicable to inclusive left-wing ideologies and exclusionary right-wing ideologies Van Hauwaert and Van Kessel (2018). Indeed, populism is thought to be a thin-centred ideology that is usually attached to 'full' ideologies, such as socialism or nationalism (Mudde 2004). As a result, the concept of populism remains agnostic about who constitutes the people.

In civic terms, we can think of the people as 'citizens' (e.g., Almond and Verba 1963). In ethnic terms, 'the people'can refer to a more cultural understanding of *folk*. While in some cultural contexts, there is no strong semantic difference between 'the people' and 'citizens' (e.g. in the English-speaking world), in other contexts, such as the Germanic one, 'the people' (i.e., *das Volk*) has a strong ethnic connotation. In the 1800s, the term *Volk* and *völkisch* became strongly associated with an ethnic and racial conception of 'Germanness.' After World War I, the terms *Volk* and *Volksdeutsche* were used to describe a ethnically and culturally homogeneous German diaspora, who were citizens of different states after the Versailles Treaty of 1919 (Gosewinkel 2003).

Scales of populist attitudes have mostly relied on ethnic conceptions of the people Schulz et al. (2018). At the same time, populist attitude scales have often been inconsistent in juxtaposing the elites with 'the people' or with 'citizens.' For instance, the scale proposed by Akkerman, Mudde, and Zaslove (2014) primarily refers to 'the people.' Yet one item in the Akkerman, Mudde, and Zaslove (2014) scale contrasts 'the citizen' with 'politicians' (`POP4`) - an item that nonetheless contributes significantly to the latent construct of populism (Van Hauwaert, Schimpf, and Azevedo 2020). What is more, 'the people' has been translated differently in different translations of the

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populist attitude scale. For instance, in the French context 'the people' has been translated as *le peuple* in some items, but as *les citoyens* in other items (Ivaldi 2018). Yet another study of French citizens refrains from using either *le peuple* or *les citoyens*, choosing the more neutral *les gens* instead (Castanho Silva et al. 2020). In Italian, 'the people' is sometimes referred to as *il popolo*, and sometimes as *le persone* (Castanho Silva et al. 2020).

This begs the question whether a civic or ethnic conception of the people matters for the measurement of populist attitudes. On the (far) right, 'the people' is often construed in ethnic, cultural, or even racial terms. On the left, 'the people' is often conceived of in more civic or economic terms. Ideally, however, populist attitude scale capture populist ideation across different ideological predispositions (see the critique of Castanho Silva et al. (2020) of populist item scales including nativist items). Using a wording experiment in Germany (`N=6,713`), we examine whether an ethnic or a civic conception of the people affects respondents' agreement with the two items of the populist attitude scale that directly juxtapose 'the people' with the elites. We further examine whether far right voters and respondents with a exclusive national identity respond differently to ethnic conceptions of the people. In addition, we examine whether the differences found affect the overall latent construct of populist attitudes (EXPAND/SPECIFY LATER). Given the more pronounced ethnic connotation with the concept of 'people' or *Volk* in the German language, the German case is particularly suitable to tease out differences between ethnic and civic conceptions of the people in key populist attitude items.

Empirical Analysis

To test whether an ethnic or civic framing of the people affects respondents' agreement with key populist items we conduct a wording experiment. Wording experiments have been used in political science to assess how different question phrasing affects respondents' perceptions of concepts such as issue ownership (Walgrave et al. 2016), climate change (Schuldt, Konrath, and Schwarz 2011), and party identity (Sanders, Burton, and Kneeshaw 2002). We rely on a nationally representative sample of German citizens over 18 years old (`N=6,713`). The sample is from an online panel provided by the survey company Respondi. Quotas for age, gender, and education were included to ensure the representativeness of the sample. We have 3,348 respondents in the group that received the ethnic phrasing and 3,365 respondents in the group with the civic phrasing. This large sample size allows us to detect also small effects of question wording differences.

To examine whether civic conceptions of the people elicit different responses than ethnic concepts, we experimentally vary the wording of two of the six items in the scale proposed by Akkerman, Mudde, and Zaslove (2014), see Table .1. In the original Akkerman et al. scale deployed in the Netherlands, the items `POP1` and `POP2` were phrased in ethnic terms (i,e., with reference to *het volk*). We randomize whether respondents received a ethnic framing (i.e., with reference to 'the people; or *das Volk*) or a civic framing (i.e., with reference to 'citizens,' or *Bürger*). The upper two items in Table .1 shows the differences in wording for the two items `POP1` and `POP2` in English and German. All the other items were kept constant.[1]

Figure .1 shows the results of a difference of means test for the two treatment groups (ethnic vs. civic wording) for both items. There is a statistically significant difference in respondent agreement with the ethnic and civic conception of the people. When 'the people' is conceived as *das Volk* respondents are more likely to agree with the item's statement compared to the civic wording of *Bürger*. Yet, as the results show, the difference is small in substantive terms.

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[1]Our intention was to also vary the wording of the item `POP4`. Yet, due to an unfortunate translation error in Qualtrics, we cannot use the item `POP4` in our analysis. However, robustness checks in the Appendix XXX shows that removal of the item does not strongly affect the overall latent construct.
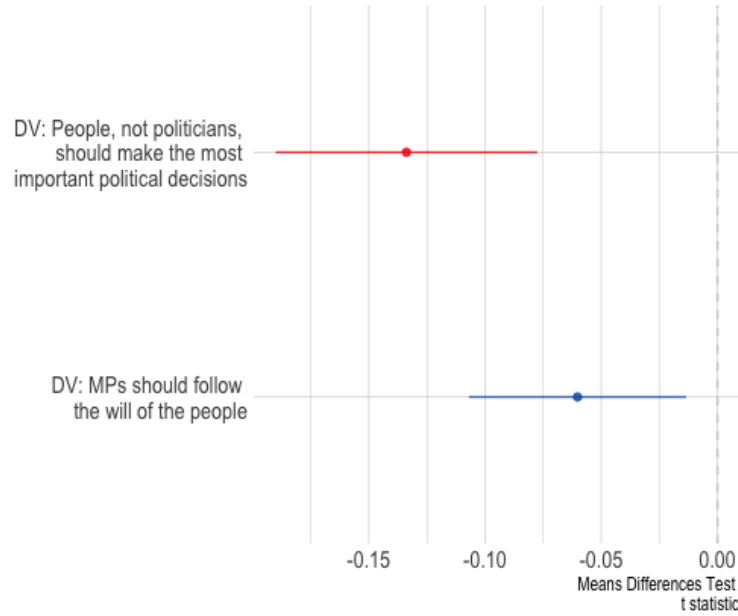
Table .1: Akkerman et al Populist Attitudes Scale

Variable	Wording ENG	Wording DE
POP1	The politicians in the German Bundestag need to follow the will of the [people/citizens].	Die Abgeordneten des Deutschen Bundestags müssen dem Willen [der Bürger/des Volkes] Folge leisten
POP2	The [people/citizens], not politicians, should make the most important political decisions	[Die Bürger/Das Volk], und nicht die Politiker, sollte(n) die wichtigsten politischen Entscheidungen treffen
POP3	I would rather be represented by an ordinary citizen than by a professional politician.	Ein Bürger würde besser meine Interessen vertreten als ein Berufspolitiker
POP4	The political differences between elites and the people are greater than the differences among citizens	Die politischen Unterschiede zwischen den Eliten und [den Bürgern/dem Volk] sind größer als die Unterschiede (zwischen Bürgern)
POP5	Elected officials talk too much and take too little action	Die Politiker reden zu viel und machen zu wenig
POP6	What people call 'compromise' in politics is really just selling out on one's principles	Was in der Politik Kompromiss genannt wird, ist in Wirklichkeit nur ein Verrat von Prinzipien

How does the effect of an ethnic conception of the people vis-à-vis a civic conception vary across respondents? The left-hand panel of Figure .2 shows the results of an OLS regression analysis with the an interaction between the treatment and a variable measuring whether or not the respondent voted for the far right party *Alternative für Deutschland*. We see that far right voters show much more agreement to items POP1 and POP2 when it is phrased in an ethnic way. These effects are substantial and statistically significant. [ADD ONE SENTENCE ABOUT THIS].

In a next step, we examine whether respondents with lower and higher levels of exclusive national identity are affected differently by the treatment. Inspired by Mader, Pesthy, and Schoen (2021), we measure exclusive national identity using a four-item additive scale on a 5-point Likert scale, which asks respondents to rate how important the following aspects are to be considered German: being born in Germany (a), having German ancestors (b), being able to speak German (c), and sharing share German manners and norms (d). The right-hand panel of Figure .2 shows the interaction between the treatment and the exclusive national identity variable on the two items. Overall, we see that the difference between an ethnic and civic wording is only statistically significant for respondents with higher levels of exclusive national identity (ca. >2.5 on the exclusive national identity scale). Both the analyses from the left and right-hand panel of .2 suggest that far right voters and respondents with an exclusive national identity interpret 'the people' (*das Volk*) in an ethno-cultural way.

So how does an ethnic and civic framing of the items POP1 and POP2 affect the latent construct of populism? A graded Item Response Theory (IRT) analysis (see also Van Hauwaert, Schimpf, and Azevedo 2020) moreover shows that POP1 and POP2 contribute slightly more information to the
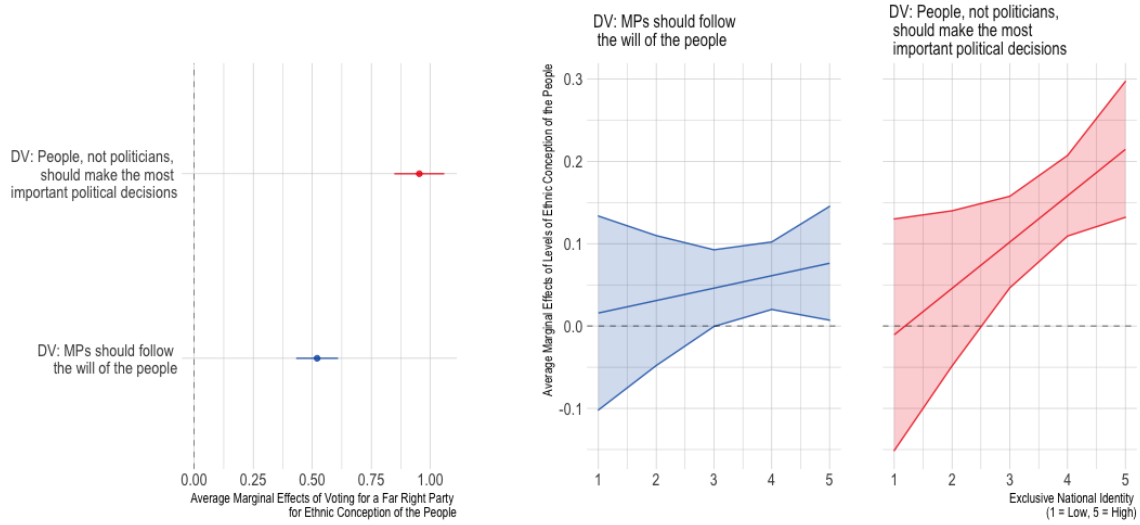
Figure .1: Results: H1

latent construct when the items are ethnically phrased, as opposed to a civic framing (see Figure XX and XX in the Appendix). Overall, however, the overall level of information yielded by the two latent constructs of populism are similar. This is not surprising, given that we varied the wording of 'the people' only in two items of the full @akkerman2014 item battery.

Therefore, also overall difference between a latent construct of populism with two ethnically framed items and a latent construct with two civically framed items is small. We find no statistically significant difference between the two constructs estimated using Confirmatory Factor Analysis (see Figure XX and Table XX in the Appendix). In terms of model fit, both constructs show very similar goodness-of-fit statistics (i.e., CFI, BIC, RMSEA, and SRMR). Interestingly, however, both the 'ethnic' and the 'civic' scale show a satisfactory model fit (`CFI > 0.9`; `RMSEA < 0.08`; and `SRMR < 0.02`).

Figure .2: Results: H2

Conclusion

Existing populist attitudes scales have been inconsistent in using 'ethnic' or 'civic' conceptions of the people. Using a wording experiment we examined whether German respondents presented with an ethnic framing of 'the people' (*das Volk*) answered key populist attitude items differently than respondents who recevied an ethnic framing of 'the people' as citizens (*Bürger*).

We find that there are statistically significant differences between the two wordings. An ethnic conception of the people, overall, yielded more agreement with the items in question. This is effect is particularly pronounced for voters of the far right. The difference between an ethnic and a civic conception of the people was also only significant for respondents who adhered a moderate to high level of exclusive national identity. This finding is highly suggestive of the 'ethnic' interpretation of 'the people' – at least in the German language.

Nevertheless, we found that a civic or an ethnic wording of items referring to 'the people' makes little difference in a latent construct that also comprises other items that were kept constant. Yet, while this might make little difference in a latent construct that also comprises items that do not solely rely on items that juxtapose 'the people' with the elite, it is likely to be more consequential in survey batteries that predominantly include items contrast 'the people' with elites to measure populist attitudes (for an overview of different batteries, see Castanho Silva et al. 2020). The populist attitude scales proposed by Schulz et al. (2018) and Stanley (2011), for instance, contain references to 'the people' in 7/9 and 7/8 of the items, respectively.

Importantly, the degree to which 'the people' is understood in denoting a specific ethno-cultural group likely differs across countries. This type of differential item interpretation might therefore lead to measurement invariance when used in cross-national research (Castanho Silva et al. 2020). In other words, if the ethno-cultural connotation of the the people varies across countries, this may hamper cross-national application of populist attitude scales that include multiple items referring to 'the people.' In fact, in a comparison of different populist attitudes scales Castanho Silva et al. (2020) find that the scales by Schulz et al. (2018) and Stanley (2011) perform worse than the

scale proposed by Akkerman, Mudde, and Zaslove (2014). To empirically establish whether differential interpretations of 'the people' matters for measurement invariance, it would be worthwhile replicating this study for different countries. In addition, it would be worthwhile in replicating this analysis for different scales than the Akkerman, Mudde, and Zaslove (2014) scale.

One can argue theoretically that 'the people' captures the meaning of the concept of populism better than 'citizens.' After all, it populism assumes the people to be a homogeneous entity. Yet, our findings suggest that also a civic framing of the concept yields a satisfactory model fit when estimating a Confirmatory Factor Analysis. In addition, our results suggest that an ethnic framing of the citizens runs the, albeit small, risk overestimating the degree of populist attitudes among more nativist citizens. To avoid priming respondents with an ethnic conception of the people, future studies should consider using a civic conception of ' 'citizens vs. the elite" when measuring populist attitudes.

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