The Conditional Association between Populism, Ideological Extremity, and Affective Polarization

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Abstract

In recent years there has been an increasing interest in whether populism is related to opinion extremity. Yet, research on the topic offers little direct evidence on whether and under which conditions populist ideas at the individual level are related to policy extremity and inter-party dislike. This paper aims to fill this gap by focusing on the reasons populist individuals hold more or less extreme opinions. Using data from the 2016 American National Electoral Study, I find that populist attitudes are a strong correlate of both ideological extremity and affective polarization, yet this association is conditional on respondent's party affiliation. Populism is related to higher levels of ideological extremity among Democrats and stronger negative leader evaluations among Republicans. This finding indicates that the relationship between populism and citizens' political judgements varies depending on the ability of populist leaders to make certain dimensions of the competition salient (i.e. ideological or affective) and exploit pre-existing ideological and partisan rivalries (i.e. party identity).

"Populism is the future of American politics. The question is whether it's right or left."

— Steve Bannon, in an interview for the Washington Post (2020)

Over the past three decades, populist parties and leaders have become a pivotal electoral force on both sides of the Atlantic. Their appeal has led many academics to speculate on what populism portends for national political systems. Most of the contemporary literature argues that populism is inherently polarizing and, thus, responsible for the increasing levels of ideological extremity and affective polarization (Abramowitz and McCoy 2019; Bekafigo et al. 2019). The underlying assumption is that populism is responsible for fostering a form of polarizing antagonism centered around an intellectually and morally superior in-group—"Us, The People"—and an evil and inferior out-group of impostors—"Them", the "establishment", the financial or intellectual "elites", or any combination thereof—who is acting against the people's "common will" and, thus, need to be defeated at any cost (Mudde 2004).

Although previous research has generally shown that populism is associated with voting for anti-establishment and radical candidates (Uscinski et al. 2021; Van Hauwaert and Van Kessel 2017; Rooduijn and Akkerman 2017), some studies suggest that its relationship with policy extremity and affective polarization is more ambiguous. During the 2016 US elections, Donald Trump—often characterized as the apotheosis of populism (Oliver and Rahn 2016)—has been often described as ideologically inconsistent, unclear, and more moderate on some of the issues typically endorsed by the Republican party (Ahler and Broockman 2015). In Central and Eastern Europe, centrist populist parties have gained considerable success using anti-corruption rhetoric, yet endorsing moderate socio-economic policies (Stanley 2017). Turning to affective polarization, in some European countries supporters of right-wing populist parties tend to display lower levels of partisan hostility compared to voters of mainstream parties (Kekkonen and Ylä-Anttila 2021). Westwood, Peterson, and Lelkes (2019) have also found that affective polarization did not increase during the 2016 US electoral cycle, despite being characterized by a strong populist discourse.

The reasons behind this ambiguity remain unclear. The goal of this article is thus to clarify,

theoretically as well as empirically, how populism is associated with policy opinions and leader evaluations among the mass public and party identifiers. The main argument is that the way populist individuals form political judgements is likely to vary depending on whether and how party leaders (de)politicize certain issues (i.e. ideological extremity), attack rival party leaders (i.e. affective polarization), and exploit pre-existing partisan rivalries (i.e. party identity). The reason is that populism is a flexible (and "thin-centered") set of ideas that can be used by candidates to either emphasize or de-emphasize the importance of certain elements of the competition depending on contextual factors and programmatic considerations. This implies that "populist polarization" is not ubiquitous but rather dependent on how (populist) leaders articulate traditional ideological and partisan divisions.

The proposed model is tested using the 2016 American National Electoral Study. The 2016 campaign is taken as a case study as the US has experienced, in the same election, the presence of markedly different articulations of populism. Trump's populism was centred on vilifying left-wing politics and established forms of expertise and authority. It was characterized by low levels of policy commitment (Fortunato, Hibbing, and Mondak 2018; Rahn 2018) and a high salience of affectively charged considerations against Hilary Clinton and the Democratic party (Abramowitz and McCoy 2019). On the contrary, within the Democratic campaign, the articulation of populist rhetoric was strongly influenced by Bernie Sanders. Sanders identified the economic elites as the people's enemy and focused on more concrete, tangible, and progressive policy proposals and less on negative evaluations of the other competing candidates (Lacatus 2019). This distinction allows testing how different articulations of populism relate to partisans' political judgements both on the ideological and affective domains.

Results from Structural Equations Modelling show that populist attitudes (i.e. the degree to which an individual agrees with populist ideas) are strongly associated with ideological extremity and affective polarization in the US mass public. Yet, this relationship is conditional on respondents' partisan identity. For Republicans, populist ideas are linked to the growing dislike with which

partisans view the opposing party, but they are independent of their level of ideological extremity. For Democrats, populism is related to more extreme ideological positions but, at the same time, less negatively charged evaluations of the out-party. This result is corroborated by an extensive series of robustness checks, both in terms of measurement and analytical strategies (see Appendix).

The key contribution of this article is twofold. First, while the connection between populism and extremity has mainly been explored by focusing on rather general issues such as racial resentment or personal economic conditions (Mutz 2018; Carmines, Ensley, and Wagner 2018; Donovan and Redlawsk 2018), this paper shows that populist attitudes account for a substantial portion of the variation in the levels of ideological extremity and affective polarization, even beyond the commonly investigated effects of ideological identity, perceived party polarization, political interest, political efficacy and race. Second, this work supports the idea that populist polarization may occur along distinct and independent analytical dimensions, depending on how populist leaders generate demand for populist approaches to solve societal issues and empower their voters.

Conceptualizing Populism

Whitout the need for a complete list, scholars have most often defined populism as a "thin-centred" ideology (Mudde 2004), a rhetorical style that relies upon the appeal to the people (Jagers and Walgrave 2007), a discourse against hegemonic practices (Laclau 2005), or a political strategy to mobilize and attract voters' support (Weyland 2001). This study draws inspiration from the ideational definition of populism (Hawkins et al. 2018) and understands populism as a set of ideas that lies at the interception of three core components, namely negative affect towards the establishment (anti-elitism), the perception of the people as a homogeneous body with a uniform will (people centrism), and the moral separation of the world between "the good" and "the evil" (Manicheism). From this perspective, populism can be understood as a mental framework (or a discursive frame) for thinking about politics built around the antagonism between "Us, the People" and "Them, the establishment", which is considered responsible for silencing people's interests and preventing any real change (Mudde 2004).

Increasingly, researchers have started adopting the ideational definition "due to its conceptual clarity and proven empirical utility" (Erisen et al. 2021, 151). One of the reasons is that the ideational approach extends to the study of the demand-side of politics, making it the most promising to study populism attitudinally. Using the level of populist attitudes among voters, scholars have found that populism is related to a series of relevant outcomes such as voting intentions (Uscinski et al. 2021), political engagement and participation (Zaslove et al. 2020), conspiratorial thinking (van Prooijen et al. 2022), and political trust (Geurkink et al. 2020). The ideational approach also conceives populism to be, at least partially, orthogonal to incumbent status and left-right or liberal-conservative ideology (for a discussion, see Rooduijn 2019). Populist ideas can be used by incumbent and opposition, left- and right-wing, candidates to interpret the socio-political world and thus influence voters' political judgements. According to this view, populist individuals voting for different populist parties are likely to differ in their party leader assessments (Busby, Gubler, and Hawkins 2019) and policy-related preferences (Loew and Faas 2019).

The Conditionality of Populist Attitudes

My previous points emphasize that populist attitudes are associated with how individuals see ideological competition and judge competing candidates. However, the sole fact that individuals are more or less inclined to endorse populist ideas is not enough to influence politically-motivated judgements. To motivate attitudes and behaviour, populist leaders need to articulate populist ideas in relation to other elements of the political competition (Hameleers 2021).

This idea is not limited to populism. Scholars have argued that citizens' responsiveness to partisan discourse is dependent on the emphasis placed by party leaders on certain dimensions of the political competition (Zaller 1992). In general, voters will consider adopting certain positions if party leaders are able to make them important enough for their voters (Domke, Shah, and Wackman 1998). Translated to populism, this means that the way populist attitudes are related to political judgements is conditional on the way populist leaders generate demands for populist approaches to represent their voters (Dennison 2020). For instance, the importance of policy disagreement between different

parties may be downplayed by populist leaders (e.g., party programs are all the same) (Enyedi 2016), with the consequence that populist individuals may neglect differences over substantive policy dimensions and rather focus on other, less policy-driven, issues.

This general mechanism is dependent on whether leaders define the essential problem underlying an issue in a way that is in line with the interests of their voters (Lenz 2011). This implies that populist individuals will be likely to consider the leader's opinions if the leader's articulation of the "will of the people" matches, at least to some extent, their in-group interests and/or identity (Hameleers et al. 2021). For instance, populist attitudes among left-wing individuals may be mobilized when the political struggle is articulated using the opposition between the working class and the economic powers. By contrast, populist attitudes among right-wing individuals may have an effect on politically motivated judgments when natives are pitted against non-natives (Busby, Gubler, and Hawkins 2019; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013). In border terms, populist individuals are likely to be mobilized depending on the match between leader and voter partisan and/or ideological affiliation. Based on these premises, the connection between populist attitudes and political judgements will be likely conditional, varying according to the (perceived) salience of certain dimensions of the electoral competition (i.e. ideological or affective) and the match between voter and candidate in-group identity (i.e. party affiliation).

Populism and the (De-)politicization of Competition

Although research on the link between populist attitudes and policy opinions is still relatively scarce (for an exception see, Van Hauwaert and Van Kessel 2017), current literature suggests that the salience attributed to policy disagreement may vary depending on how leaders articulate the conflict between "the people" and "the elite".

On the one hand, populist leaders may emphasize the importance of policy disagreement between competing candidates in order to differentiate themselves from mainstream political parties (Kaltwasser et al. 2017). In this case, leaders politicize new or pre-existing issues that are portrayed as

responsible for the injustices experienced by the people and, thus, central to achieving a positive social change (Palonen 2009). Mainstream political forces typically disregard or ignore these issues because they are deemed morally unacceptable (e.g., the superiority of certain individuals based on their race or ethnicity) or unreasonable (e.g., the rejection of the current economic system) (Canovan 1981).

Populist leaders exploit this (perceived) lack of responsiveness and adopt clear and uncompromising positions on these issues in order to convince their voters that a real change is possible (Mudde 1995). This leads populist leaders to reject middle-of-the-road positions in favor of more extreme and unconventional positions (Mair 2002). For instance, the populist Argentinian president Néstor Kirchner effectively pursued a "re-politicization" of the Argentinian society by radically opposing the neo-liberal elites in order to empower the Argentinian people and achieve social justice (Levitsky and Roberts 2011).

On the other hand, populist leaders may de-emphasise the importance of policy disagreement in order to focus on other, non-policy related, dimensions of the competition. According to this view, populist ideas are "operationally-light" and characterized by policy "emptiness" and lack of programmatic significance (Taggart 2000; Stanley 2008; Rooduijn, de Lange, and van der Brug 2014; Worsley 1969; Enyedi 2016). The Italian Five Star Movement, for instance, gained popularity "taking vaguely broad positions [and] exclud[ing] potentially divisive issue from any programmatic document" (Pirro 2018, 453).

In this case, policy extremity is "not essential to populism" to the point that populist "programmatic positions may not even be markedly different from those of mainstream parties" (Roberts 2021, 6). The main goal of populist leaders is not to adopt clear and uncompromising positions but rather to create a "chain of equivalence" between contrasting and cross-cutting interests. This is achieved by downplaying differences over concrete policy issues and, instead, empathizing similarities between the struggle of different social categories or groups (Laclau 2005). In this way, a set of alternative demands can emerge and crystallize into a new political subject, "Us, the People", that is functional

to oppose the current political establishment (Canovan 1981)

To summarize, the way populist ideas are related to ideological extremity may differ. When populist leaders downplay the importance of policy disagreement between different alternatives, policy extremity may be independent of voters' level of populism or may be negatively related to populist attitudes. In contrast, when populist leaders refuse middle-of-the-road positions and instead politicize new or unconventional positions, it is likely that their followers will endorse more extreme ideological positions. This expectation can be restated as follows:

Expectation 1: When policy disagreement is made salient, populist attitudes are linked to more extreme ideological positions and *vice-versa*.

Populism and Affective Polarization

In addition to ideological extremity, scholars have recently started to investigate the extent to which populism is related to sentiments of antipathy and anger towards the leadership and the rank-and-file of the rival party (Abramowitz and McCoy 2019; Whitt et al. 2020). This phenomenon is termed affective polarization and is linked to the tendency of party supporters to increasingly dislike, distrust, or even avoid the members of the opposing political group to the point of seeing them as a dangerous out-group (Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012).

Little direct evidence exists on the relationship between populist attitudes and leader evaluations. Yet, there are good theoretical reasons to believe that the way populism is related to affectively motivated judgements depends on the way populist leaders articulate the struggle between the in- and out-group (Hameleers and de Vreese 2020). In terms of populist politics, the categories of the in-group – "the people" – and the out-group – "the enemy of the people" – are "empty" and can assume different connotations. In a two-party system, the in-group is likely to coincide with one's own partisan group. However, the definition of the "enemy" is dependent on the references to power, status, and hierarchical positions used to construct populism's antagonistic frontier (Hameleers and de Vreese 2020). This means that who is "the enemy of the people" is shaped by the inclusion or

exclusion of particular subjects-positions into and from the out-group.

On the one hand, populist leaders may emphasize the moral distinction between the in- and out-party and depict political rivals as the main obstacle to achieving a real and systemic change. The in-party is composed of "pure", "ordinary", and "honest" people. On the contrary, the out-party is portrayed as a "usurper" of the popular sovereignty, a "puppet" in the hand of the global economic, cultural and political elites, uncaring, dishonest, erroneous, and self-interested. In this case, negative attitudes towards the political out-group are likely to be stronger, leading to higher levels of affective polarization (McCoy, Rahman, and Somer 2018).

On the other hand, when the opposition to non-political elites (e.g., the "arrogant corporations") takes a more central role within populist ideology, it is likely that the out-group is identified in other, not strictly partisan, structures of power and authority (March 2017). The out-group is still considered malign and ill-intentioned. However, in such a scenario, populist ideas do not rely on the notion that the out-party and its leader(s) are the main (or only) source of injustice and, thus, they need to be defeated at any cost. Hence, populist individuals will be less likely to display strong sentiments of antipathy and anger towards the party they do not vote for or identify with. To sum up, I expect the following:

Expectation 2: When the opposition towards the elites of the rival party is made salient, populist attitudes are linked to higher levels of affective polarization and *vice-versa*.

The US as a Case Study

One of the most distinctive features of the 2016 US election was the populist, yet ideologically unconventional, nature of Donald Trump's political campaign (Carmines, Ensley, and Wagner 2016). Scholars have described Trump as a right-wing populist candidate due to his strong positions on (illegal) immigration and certain economic issues (Mudde 2019). For instance, he promised to bring back outsourced jobs from oversea locations, insisted on the importance of having better trade deals (especially with China), proposed to build a wall with Mexico, and advocated the implementation

of travel bans (for an overview, see Staufer 2020). Yet, for the most part, his campaign has been defined as "post-ideological" and "devoid of coherent policy prescriptions" (Mason 2018, 281). In contrast to Sanders and Clinton, Trump was regularly criticized for being unable to provide concrete policy details (Aswad 2019), changing positions on major policy issues (Ehrenfreund 2016), being more moderate compared to other GOP candidates (Ahler and Broockman 2015; Barro 2015), and holding vague and generic stances (Grunwald 2016).

Scholars argue that Trump could get away with an inconsistent, vague, and less conservative agenda because policy considerations were relatively unimportant during the 2016 Republican campaign (Fortunato, Hibbing, and Mondak 2018). Using official press releases and tweets published on his official account, Lacatus (2019) found that Trump's campaign—despite being nativist in tone—was mostly focused on non-policy elements (e.g., the critique of the Washington elites). This is made explicit by Trump's campaign advisers who believed that elections are "not won or lost on policy […] it [is] as a waste of time to try to fill his head with facts and figures" (Healy, Chozick, and Haberman 2016).

The low salience of concrete policy commitments is also confirmed by research on Trump's supporters. A large portion of the GOP endorsed Trump even if they considered his policy proposals "ineffective or even impossible" (Albert and Barney 2018, 1252) or their policy-based opinions were in open contrast with Trump's positions (Barber and Pope 2019). In an analysis of the 2016 primaries, Dyck, Pearson-Merkowitz, and Coates (2018) found that traditional ideological considerations were unrelated to voting for Trump and that the differences between moderates and conservatives were unremarkable. All in all, this corroborates Wendy Rahn's argument that describes Trump's populism as lacking a substantive "host" ideology (2018), a position in line with previous work on populism as a hollow ideology in terms of concrete policy considerations (Taggart 2000).

Instead of policy motivations, Albert and Barney (2018) show that Trump was supported, mainly, because of his "post-ideological" anti-establishment appeal (see also, Abramowitz and Webster 2018; Bankert 2021). This is confirmed by quantitative analyses of Trump's campaign materials.

Trump was disproportionately focused on critiquing the elites, regardless of their political sympathies (Lacatus 2019; Graham 2016). His main targets were the political, economic, and cultural establishment that supported Hillary Clinton and the Democratic party (Lacatus 2019). In this sense, Clinton functioned as a catalyst for Trump's populist rhetoric. Clinton and her supporters were blamed for (many of) the injustices experienced by the American people (Saul 2017). Seen in this light, the political competition took the form of a Manichean rivalry between the arrogant, corrupted, and uncaring liberal Washington establishment, personified by Hilary Clinton, and the hard-working Americans, represented by Donald Trump.

In contrast with the "policy-light" and affectively charged nature of the Trump campaign, the Democratic campaign was more focused on policy issues. This is highlighted in the analysis of Bernie Sanders and Hillary Clinton campaigns (Lacatus 2019; Aswad 2019). During the primaries, Sanders articulated a comprehensive economic and cultural agenda that opposed the *status quo* and challenged Clinton to her left (for an overview, see Zurcher 2016). For instance, Sanders proposed a single-payer healthcare system with universal healthcare coverage for all American citizens, a more progressive position compared to the Obama and Clinton proposals. Sanders was openly critical of new trade deals (e.g., NAFTA), which he considered detrimental for the American working class. Sanders also proposed to "break up" the big banks into smaller ones and pledged to draft new regulations against speculative financial activities.

Sanders combined concrete and progressive policy proposals with a strong populist message aimed at creating an alliance of the "the 99%" against the political and economic establishment (Hawkins and Littvay 2019). Similarly to Trump, the establishment was described as a homogeneous entity that frustrates the collective interests of the people. However, unlike Trump, it was not portrayed as a specific partisan out-group that threatens the ordinary people. Instead of personally attacking and presenting other candidates as "morally illegitimate" and "incompetent" (Staufer 2020), Sanders focused on opposing the dominant system of power and the current economic system to give voice to the American people.

Sanders failed to become the Democratic party nominee and, thus, it would be inaccurate to assume that his rhetoric had the same impact as Trump's campaign on the electoral competition. However, Sanders' populist message is likely to have had a substantial influence on the Democratic party agenda and, particularly, on the most populist segment of the Democratic party electorate (Stein 2016; Yglesias 2016). Sanders was almost as popular as Clinton during the primaries: he won 23 states and gained 45 per cent of the Democratic primary vote. In the primaries, Sanders' voters were consistently more to the left of Clinton supporters on a wide range of issues (Jones and Kiley 2016). The Democratic party was worried that a share of Sanders' supporters would not have supported Clinton in the general election (Koenig 2016). To retain support from more progressive—and perhaps populist—Democratic party voters, Clinton moved to the left of President Barack Obama during the last phase of the presidential campaign (Schaffner, Macwilliams, and Nteta 2018). For instance, she became more critical of the Trans-Pacific Partnership, strongly insisted on raising the minimum wage to 15 dollars, and even took a stance in favour of a stricter separation between the banking sector and the "Washington Bureaucracy": all issues that were central in Sanders's primary campaign (Stein 2016).

Clinton also started to adopt a more direct and plain-spoken tone in her campaign that "co-opt[ed] some of the political style from Sanders" (Thomas and Lerer 2016). Similarly to Sanders, the higher salience of concrete policies in Clinton's campaign was coupled with a less affectively charged rhetoric. Clinton refrained, most of the time, from personally attacking Donald Trump and his supporters and instead accused him of diverting the attention from more substantial and less symbolic issues (Busby, Gubler, and Hawkins 2019; Savoy 2018).[1] Perhaps as a consequence of Sanders's more ideologically oriented and less affectively charged campaign, views among Democrats and Democratic-leaning voters changed sharply towards the end of the 2016 presidential campaign (Goff and Lee 2019). On average, Democrats started to become more and more progressive on a number

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[1] To be sure, in a speech at the end of her campaign, Clinton described Trump's supporters as a "basket of deplorables". However, this type of rhetoric was not common in her electoral campaign to the point that Clinton immediately expressed regret for saying that (Tatum and Merica 2016). As public opinion data suggest (Pew Research Center 2019), it is unlikely that this specific event had a substantial impact on partisan affect among the Democratic party base.

of substantive issues such as income redistribution, race, healthcare, diplomacy, and immigration (Pew Research Center 2017).

Therefore, it is likely that in the 2016 campaign, the way populist attitudes are associated with policy extremity and affective polarization differ based on the partisan identity of an individual. On the one hand, populist attitudes among Democratic party supporters are presumably associated with a higher salience of more tangible and progressive policy considerations, rather than the mere "hate and fear" towards Donald Trump. On the other hand, populist attitudes among Republican identifiers are likely to be connected to more negatively charged evaluations of the out-party candidate but less to policy extremity.

Data, Instruments, and Modelling Approach

Data

In order to investigate whether and how ideological extremity and affective polarization are related to populist attitudes, I employ the 2016 American National Election Study (ANES). The total sample size consists of 3668 individuals.

Dependent Variables

Ideological extremity: This work conceptualizes ideological extremity as policy extremity or the degree to which an individual's positions "diverge" from the center of the policy spectrum (Lelkes 2016). Although ideological extremity is typically measured using the Left-Right (L-R) self-placement scale (Fiorina and Abrams 2008), the traditional L-R continuum is particularly inadequate to measure policy opinions among populist individuals (Ahler and Broockman 2015). Populist individuals tend to integrate issues on both sides of the L-R spectrum and, thus, may be polarized over different and ideologically contrasting issues.[2] To mitigate this problem, I extract a measure of latent ideological extremity from seven relevant policy issues typically asked in the

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[2]Furthermore, recent research shows that L-R self-placement may be more a measure of socio-political identity rather than actual policy positions (Mason 2018).

ANES through Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) (Lelkes 2016; Strickler 2018).[3]

The policy items are presented on a 7-point scale where each point is labelled numerically, and the ends display the extreme of the policy continuum using a text label (e.g., "1. Greatly decrease defense spending" – "7. Greatly increase defense spending"). Each item is then folded in half and the absolute values are taken. This results in a 4-point scale where 0 is the most moderate position and 3 is the most extreme position on both ends of the continuum. The items tap into whether the government should (1) prioritize government services or decrease government spending, (2) increase or decrease defence spending, (3) have an active or passive role in healthcare, (4) guarantee jobs and acceptable standard of living, (5) help Blacks, (6) regulate business to protect the environment or provide no regulation, and (7) implement affirmative actions in universities.

Affective polarization: This work measures affective polarization as the extent to which citizens develop polarized evaluations of the competing party candidates (Lelkes, Sood, and Iyengar 2017).[4] This measure is based on 101-point feeling thermometers asking respondents to express how they feel about different party leaders. The scale is labelled numerically and displays six text labels describing the intensity of the evaluation (e.g., "$0°$ – Very cold or unfavorable feeling", "$50°$ – No feeling at all", "$100°$ – Very warm or favorable feeling").

Following Wagner (2021), affective polarization is calculated as the average absolute difference in feeling thermometers relative to each respondent's average candidate thermometer score, weighed by the candidate vote share[5]. According to this measure, an individual with low affective polarization rates all the candidates similarly, regardless of a positive or negative score. In contrast, an individual

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[3]As a robustness check, I estimated a series of OLS models using sum scores instead of factor scores. The results (reported in the Appendix) remain unchanged.

[4]Recent research shows that, regardless of the usage of different operationalizations, most measures of partisan affect are highly correlated (for a discussion see, Druckman and Levendusky 2019). In the US context, evaluations of relevant political figures such as party leaders are better suited to capture partisan affect compared to other measures (Druckman and Levendusky 2019). As Mason explains, this is because the US presidential elections are centered around candidates that come to represent "the traits of the ingroup as a whole" (2015, 132).

[5]This is referred to in Wagner (2021) as the "spread of like-dislike scores" measure. It is formalized as $Affective_i = \sqrt{\frac{\sum_{c=1}^{C} V_c(like_{ic} - \overline{like_i})}{n_c}}$ where c is the candidate, i the individual respondent, $like_{ic}$ the like-dislike thermometer score assigned to each candidate c by individual i, $\overline{like_i}$ is the average thermometer score by the individual i, V_c is the vote share of each candidate measured as a proportion from to 0 to 1.

with a high level of affective polarization has very different ratings for the different candidates.

This approach yields a more accurate measure of affective polarization that is better suited to study its relationship with populist attitudes. First, the usage of differences in scores mitigates the problem of differential item functioning, namely the tendency of some individuals—perhaps the most populist ones—to have overall negative evaluations of all the competing candidates or to attribute to in- and out-group candidates similar (unfavourable) scores. Second, since thermometers are asked for every candidate in the competition (i.e., Trump, Clinton, Johnson, Stein), this measure takes into account that partisans—especially the most populist ones—may have negative feelings towards the political in-group but positive evaluations of third-party candidates[6].

Independent variables

Concerning the populist component of this study, I follow previous literature on the topic and extract a measure of latent affinity with populism fitting a CFA on the populist attitudes scale included in the ANES questionnaire (Table 1). The scale has been developed by the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) planning committee (Hobolt et al. 2017) using items from the battery developed by Akkerman, Mudde, and Zaslove (2014). Castanho Silva et al. (2020) show that the scale functions similarly and correlates at $r > .8$ with other commonly used populist attitudes scales.

Table 1: Populist attitudes items, means, and standardized (std.) factor loadings

	Item	Mean	Std. loadings
AE1	Most politicians do not care about the people.	2.26	0.47
AE2	Politicians are the main problem in the United States.	2.23	0.80

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[6]As robustness, the main analysis was also replicated using only Trump and Clinton scores by taking (1) the difference between the thermometer ratings of Trump and Clinton, (2) the out-party thermometer folded on its natural mid-point (50°), and (3) candidates' trait ratings (e.g., intelligent). These measures are highly correlated with each other and do not substantively change the results of any of the analyses. Results are reported in the Appendix.

	Item	Mean	Std. loadings
AE3	Most politicians care only about the interests of the rich and powerful.	2.55	0.65
PC1	The people, and not politicians, should make our most important policy decisions.	2.24	0.43
M1	What people call compromise in politics is really just selling out one's principles.	1.92	0.68
-	The will of the majority should always prevail[7].	1.62	0.29

Note: AE= anti-elitism, PC= people centrism, M= manicheism

As is commonly done, individuals who lean toward one of the two major parties are coded as partisans. To guard against potentially confounding factors[8], I control for the strength of party and ideological identity, perceived party polarization , whether the respondent voted for Bernie Sanders during the Democratic primary race, religiosity, political interest, internal and external[9] political efficacy, race, and a battery of relevant demographic characteristics (age, gender, education, income). The exact questions, their descriptive statistics, and a graphical representation of the full structural model can be found in the Appendix.

Modelling Approach

To test my expectations, I resort to Multi Group Structural Equation Modelling (MG-SEM), a technique that combines factor analysis and multiple group regression analysis. MG-SEM has three clear advantages compared to traditional regression analysis. First, it reduces the measurement error by assessing whether a given latent construct (e.g., ideological extremity) is properly measured by a set of questions that share common variance (e.g., a battery of policy issues). Second, MG-SEM

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[7]The exact sub-dimension captured by this item is difficult to establish. For a discussion, see Wuttke, Schimpf, and Schoen (2020) (Supplementary Files, p. XL) and Jungkunz, Fahey, and Hino (2021) (p.9). Consequently, I avoid assigning a specific sub-dimension to the item and, as robustness, I replicate the analysis excluding it. The results remain unchanged and are reported in the Appendix.

[8]As robustness, I calculated simple pairwise correlations between populist attitudes, ideological extremity, and affective polarization. Results are unchanged and reported in the Appendix

[9]Although populism and external political efficacy are considered independent concepts (Geurkink et al. 2020), to rule out potential multicollinearity issues, a model excluding external political efficacy is fitted to the data. Results remain unchanged and are reported in the Appendix.

ensures that a latent construct is measured and interpreted in a similar manner across different groups of respondents (i.e., Democrats and Republicans). Third, it allows for the inclusion of multiple dependent variables in a single model ensuring that the estimated coefficients are uncontaminated by the existing correlation between ideological extremity and affective polarization. More details on CFA models, including results from the invariance tests, are reported in the Appendix.

To compare the coefficients, all the variables are centered and standardized such that the regression coefficients (β) represent the expected deviation from the sample average in the outcome variable for every standard deviation change in the regressor. All the analyses are carried out including post-stratification weights and taking into account the complex sampling design of the ANES data. The models are fitted with Mplus 8.4 (Muthén and Muthén 2017) using the package Mplus Automation (Hallquist and Wiley 2018) in the R 4.2 programming language (R Core Team 2022).

Results

I now turn to investigate whether populist attitudes are linked to more or less extreme policy positions. I first focus on the US mass public as a whole disregarding, for the moment, the potential differences between Democratic and Republican identifiers. Results from the baseline model reported in Table 2 show that endorsing populist ideas is related to more extreme opinions on a wide range of relevant policy issues. For each point increase on the populist attitudes scale, an individual is 0.11 standard deviations more ideologically extreme ($t = 3.42$, $p \leq 0.05$). Rather surprisingly, populism is one of the most important correlates of ideological extremity and its association with policy extremity is stronger than the one with internal political efficacy, political knowledge, religiosity, and perceived polarization. Therefore, I can conclude that populist individuals are more ideologically polarized compared to non-populist individuals, accounting for respondents' background characteristics and a large set of potentially confounding variables.

Table 2: Regression table for the baseline model

	Ideological Extremity		Affective Polarization	
	Std. Coefficent (β)	p-value	Std. Coefficent (β)	p-value
Populist Attitudes	0.110 (0.048)	0.022	0.020 (0.044)	0.652
Internal Efficacy	0.203 (0.099)	0.040	0.177 (0.075)	0.019
External Efficacy	0.016 (0.051)	0.757	-0.006 (0.041)	0.891
Political Interest	0.027 (0.078)	0.725	0.043 (0.058)	0.452
Political Knowledge	-0.043 (0.064)	0.505	-0.013 (0.055)	0.807
Perceived Polarization	0.084 (0.031)	0.008	0.197 (0.026)	≤0.001
Strength Ideological Identity	0.353 (0.038)	≤0.001	0.115 (0.024)	≤0.001
Education	-0.056 (0.035)	0.116	-0.034 (0.029)	0.231
Income	-0.025 (0.040)	0.531	-0.029 (0.028)	0.299
Age	-0.129 (0.033)	≤0.001	0.076 (0.025)	0.002
Weak Partisan (Ref: Leaner)	0.003 (0.077)	0.972	0.133 (0.065)	0.041
Strong Partisan (Ref: Leaner)	0.104 (0.079)	0.190	0.688 (0.062)	≤0.001
Importance Religion (Ref: No)	0.073 (0.064)	0.260	-0.001 (0.047)	0.987
Voted for Sanders (Ref: No)	0.064 (0.095)	0.501	-0.370 (0.071)	≤0.001
Female (ref: Male)	-0.086 (0.058)	0.135	0.093 (0.045)	0.040
African-Americans (ref: White)	0.192 (0.157)	0.221	-0.149 (0.098)	0.129
Asian (ref: White)	0.016 (0.128)	0.899	-0.141 (0.127)	0.266

Notes: N=2316. All continuous variables are standardized. Std. errors in pharentesis

	Ideological Extremity		Affective Polarization	
	Std. Coefficent (β)	p-value	Std. Coefficent (β)	p-value
Hispanic (ref: White)	0.201 (0.103)	0.051	0.041 (0.080)	0.609
Others (ref: White)	0.398 (0.142)	0.005	-0.072 (0.107)	0.505

Notes: N=2316. All continuous variables are standardized. Std. errors in pharentesis

Next, I move to the association between populist ideas and affective polarization. Overall, I find that populist attitudes are not associated with negative party affect. Results reported in Table 2 reveal that the coefficient of populist attitudes on candidate affect is very small and highly insignificant ($\beta = 0.02$, $t = 0.44$, $p \geq 0.05$). In this case, it is worth mentioning that Sanders's primary voters are, on average, substantially less polarized compared to the rest of the sample ($\beta = -0.37$, $t = -5.26$, $p \leq 0.05$).[10]

These results reveal that the association between populist attitudes and political judgements follows different explanatory mechanisms depending on the dimension (i.e. ideological or affective) under scrutiny. In order to test whether these patterns of association are conditional on the partisan identity of an individual, the models reported in Table 2 are modified by allowing the coefficient of populism to vary across Democratic and Republican respondents.[11] To ease the interpretation of the group-specific coefficients, I resort to marginal plots (Figure 1 and Figure 2)s. The plots depict the impact of a 1 unit (i.e. standard deviation) change in the populist attitudes scale on ideological or affective extremity across different partisan groups. In the plots, the horizontal line around the dot represents the 90% and 95% confidence intervals around the estimated coefficient. When the confidence intervals in the plot do not include the vertical zero line, the estimated coefficients are significant for that specific partisan group. Each comparison is associated with a vertical segment on the right side of the plot that joins the coefficients of the two partisan groups and reports the difference in the coefficient of populism ($\hat{\beta}$).

The group-specific coefficients reveal strong differences across the two partisan groups. Concerning ideological extremity, the coefficient of populist attitudes among Democratic identifiers is positive and highly significant. A point increase on the populist attitudes scale is associated with 0.17 ($t = 2.9$, $p \leq 0.05$) standard deviations increase in ideological extremity making populist attitudes

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[10]This confirms previous research that shows how Sanders's populist rhetoric was far less focused on negative evaluations of the other candidates (Staufer 2020)

[11]This approach is identical to adding an interaction between populist attitudes and party identity and estimating the marginal coefficient of populism. As robustness, an OLS model with an interaction between party identity and the populist attitudes scale is fitted to the data. Results remain unchanged. More details on the advantages of the used approach are reported in the Appendix.

the strongest predictor of policy extremity among Democratic respondents after the strength of respondent's ideological identity. This suggests that Democratic identifiers who endorsed populist ideas subscribed to more progressive and extreme positions on a large set of relevant issues. The association holds even accounting for Sanders's potentially polarizing appeal among Democratic identifiers. This indicates that populist ideas are linked to ideological extremity in a substantial part of the party base and not just among Sanders's voters.[12]
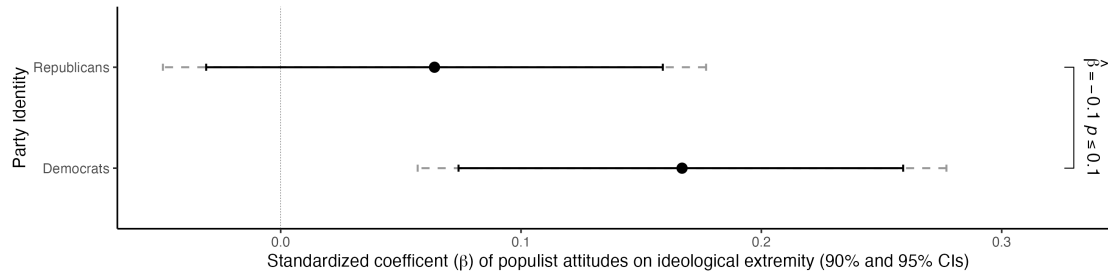

Figure 1: Coefficient of populism on ideological extremity for Republicans and Democrats, controlling for the other variables included in the model.

In contrast, the coefficient for populism among Republicans is small and statistically insignificant at conventional levels ($\beta = 0.06$, $t = 1.12$, $p \geq 0.05$). This finding reveals that the association between populism and ideological extremity among Republican identifiers is limited, confirming what was hypothesized before. I can conclude that populist individuals identifying with the GOP do not hold more extreme opinions on a large set of issues traditionally endorsed by the Republican party.

Moving to affective polarization, the results reveal a reverse pattern. For each additional unit on the populist attitudes scale, Democrats are 0.11 standard deviations less polarized ($t = -2.3$, $p \leq 0.05$) while Republicans are 0.17 standard deviation more polarized ($t = 3.96$, $p \leq 0.05$). This reverse pattern of association reveals the presence of divergent evaluative processes among different segments of the electorate. Populist attitudes among Republican identifiers are associated

[12]As robustness, I allowed the coefficient of voting for Sanders to vary across partisan groups. This rules out the possibility that the association between populist attitudes, ideological extremity, and affective polarization among Democrats is driven by those partisans whose latent populist dispositions were activated by Sanders' populist rhetoric. All the results remain unchanged and are reported in the Appendix.

with a negative and polarized perception of the out-party leader. In contrast, Democrats who score high on the populist attitudes scale hold less negative evaluations of the out-party candidate.
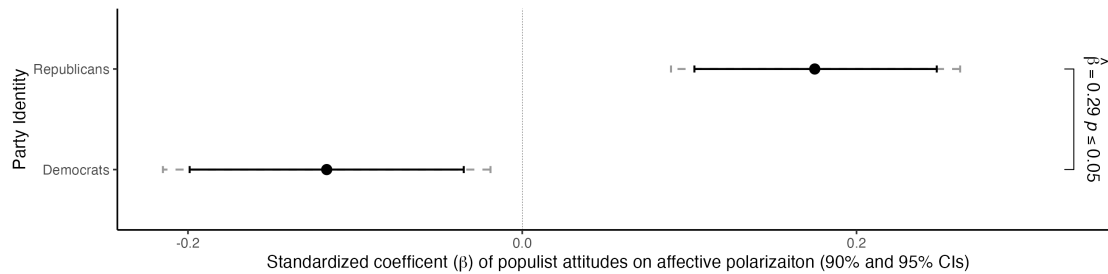

Figure 2: Coefficient of populism on affective polarization for Republicans and Democrats, controlling for the other variables included in the model.

Conclusions

This paper is one of the first to test whether and how populist attitudes are associated with policy extremity and leaders' evaluations. The results provide evidence that populism is an additional important component to explain citizens' extremity along ideological and partisan lines. It also shows that populism can coexist with different political positions but its relationship with politically motivated judgements varies depending on which dimension of the electoral competition a leader chooses to (de)empathise.

Populist attitudes among Republican identifiers are linked to a strong dislike towards the out-party candidates, yet they are independent of respondents' levels of ideological extremity. This result reflects the nature of Trump's campaign. Trump de-emphasized the importance of many of the policy issues traditionally associated with the GOP party platform and instead focused on vilifying Hillary Clinton who came to personify the "Washington elites" and their "special interests". This confirms past theoretical work on the "de-politicizing" nature of populist rhetoric when it is decoupled from policy considerations (Taggart 2000). Furthermore, it corroborates the (rather surprising) finding of Barber and Pope (2019). Although in the 2016 election populist attitudes are related to voting for Trump (Uscinski et al. 2021), the authors show that many GOP voters disregarded policy-based considerations and unconditionally supported Trump (Barber and Pope 2019).

For those Democratic party identifiers who hold strong populist attitudes, the appeal of substantive and more radical policies is stronger, yet populist attitudes tend to be associated with lower levels of affective polarization. This is likely to be related to the different articulation of populism within the Democratic party campaign. Clinton and Sanders focused more on concrete policy considerations and less on affective evaluations of the other candidates. This result helps elucidate why a portion of the Democratic party become more progressive on a set of policy issues during the 2016 campaign (Pew Research Center 2017). It could also explain why Democrats, in spite of the highly polarizing campaign, did not hold more negative evaluations of the out party candidate compared to previous electoral cycles (Abramowitz and Webster 2016; Bankert 2021).

More generally, this study reveals that populist polarization is not necessarily symmetric across different segments of the electorate (Whitt et al. 2020). Populist individuals may disregard certain issues historically associated with their own party and focus on a singular and encompassing cleavage characterized by the imperative need of defeating the out-party. Others may attach more importance to traditional policy considerations as a consequence of the increased salience of certain aspects of competition politicized by (or pitted against) the party they identify with. The presence of these opposite patterns may contribute to explaining why, at the aggregate level, Westwood, Peterson, and Lelkes (2019) found that the 2016 electoral cycle is not linked to a decrease or increase in ideological polarization and negative party affect, even though the 2016 campaign was characterized by a strong populist and dichotomizing discourse.

The evidence presented in this paper does not provide, by any means, a basis for strong causal claims. That is, the causal effect of populist attitudes on policy extremity and negative leader evaluations cannot be established using cross-sectional survey data alone. The theoretical framework presented in this paper leads us to expect that populist attitudes are stable dispositions that are antecedent to political judgements (Schumann et al. 2021) and, thus, the way leaders activate them is responsible for the heterogeneity observed across the different partisan groups. However, with the data at hand, it is impossible to test such an assumption and, thus, it is important to acknowledge that causal

effect can run in the other direction. Partisans with more extreme positions and negative leader evaluations may become attracted by populist rhetoric and, consequently, become more populist. Or the negative relationship between populist attitudes and affective evaluations observed among Democratic respondents may indicate that a portion of the Democratic party base subscribed to populist ideas because of a positive evaluation of Donald Trump. In line with previous literature on the topic, the relationship is most likely reciprocal (Rico, Guinjoan, and Anduiza 2017). Populist attitudes are likely to influence and be influenced by other attitudes and dispositions.

The presented analyses are also limited in terms of generalizability. In the US, populist candidates cannot easily bypass party politics by forming a new party as Berlusconi did in Italy or Chavez did in Venezuela. To succeed they must not only appeal to voters' populist demands but also make use of existing party attachments. This means that populist individuals may have been more receptive to leaders' cues because of their long-standing partisan attachments, something that may not happen in other settings. The observed patterns of association may also be the result of a counter-reaction to the positions taken by the (populist) leader from the opposite side and may not replicate in contexts where populism is a less relevant dimension of the competition. In addition, while the used policy items represent fairly well the conflict that took place during the 2016 campaign, a different set of issues could yield different results. For instance, policy issues related to post-materialistic and cultural aspects of the competition may be less relevant for the most populist part of the Democratic party, as suggested by the more ambiguous positions of Sanders on these issues (Stern 2015).

Even if the used data limit our ability to extend the presented results beyond the 2016 US presidential elections, this study does establish that the way populist attitudes relate to political judgements may vary depending on the dynamics of the electoral competition. This finding has potentially relevant implications for the study of electoral behaviour and democratic representation. When a political issue becomes salient in voters' minds—such as the populist juxtaposition of "the people" versus "the establishment"—the relative importance of pre-existing divisions may increase or decrease depending on how leaders use specific ideological content and how citizens incorporate it into their

attitudes and evaluations (Ciuk and Yost 2016). Taking this into account can help scholars explain changes in electoral dynamics, such as the declining importance of traditional issue positions in structuring the electoral competition in certain electoral contexts.

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