



Why so Radical? Nature, Causes, and Consequences of Radical Belief Systems

Alberto STEFANELLI

Proefschrift aangeboden tot het verkrijgen van de
graad van Doctor in de Sociale wetenschappen

Promotor: Prof. Dr. Bart Meuleman
Copromotor: Prof. Dr. Koen Abts

Onderzoekseenheid: Centrum voor Sociologisch Onderzoek (CeSO)

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1 CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION

1.1 Setting the Stage

In the last thirty years, radical movements have once again gained significance as a crucial electoral force across Europe. Radical parties spanning the entire political spectrum solidified their presence within their respective political systems. At times, they have garnered over 30 percent of the popular vote, with some successfully becoming part of the government. Illustratively, the Rassemblement National, led by Marine Le Pen, achieved its highest result, garnering over 40 percent of the popular vote during the second round of the 2022 French presidential election. In Italy, the far-right leader of Brothers of Italy, Giorgia Meloni, celebrated a victory last year after reaching 25 percent of the popular vote and becoming the new Prime Minister. Belgium witnessed the success of the Flemish right-wing populist party Vlaams Belang and the radical left Workers' Party during the last federal elections, collectively reaching 20 percent of the popular vote. In Germany, the radical right party Alternative for Germany declared itself a “major all-German party” after winning almost 20 percent in a recent state election ([Connolly, 2023](#)). Slovakia’s most recent national election saw the left-wing populist party of Robert Fico secure victory, becoming the most-voted party and leading the new government. Geert Wilders’s right-wing populist party has become the largest party in the Netherlands in the 2023 general elections, more than doubling its performance compared to the previous elections. Hungary’s populist Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, congratulating Wilders’s success, remarked, “The winds of change are here!” ([H. Sullivan, 2023](#)).

A similar trend is unfolding on the other side of the Atlantic. Radical candidates and organizations have become integral parts of the electoral landscape in some of the world’s largest democracies. The 2016 American election marked a pivotal moment in US history, witnessing the triumph of the right-wing populist candidate Donald Trump over Hillary Clinton. Despite facing various legal challenges and civil lawsuits, Trump dominates the Republican primary for the 2024 elections and is polling ahead of the current Democratic president, Joe Biden, in several swing states ([Goldmacher, 2023](#)). Brazil’s recent presidential election featured a competition between two populist candidates, resulting in Lula da Silva of the radical left-wing Workers’ Party defeating Jair Bolsonaro, the radical right-wing incumbent. In Venezuela, Hugo Chávez embraced a form of populism that appealed to the country’s marginalized and impoverished masses. He managed to be

re-elected for three consecutive terms and established his own party as one of the most influential even after his death. In Mexico, left-wing populist Andrés Manuel López Obrador secured over half of the popular vote in 2018, and his party is currently leading in the polls for the upcoming 2024 election. The recent Argentinian presidential race saw the victory of Javier Milei, a populist, anti-establishment, and “anarcho-capitalist” candidate who managed to gain the support of over half of the Argentine voters.

Recognizing that radical populist parties are “here to stay” ([Zaslove, 2008](#)), scholars are increasingly concerned about the consequences of their success. Existing literature links the success of radical actors to increasing levels of ideological polarization, hostility, and distrust against citizens or groups with opposing political beliefs ([Roberts, 2021](#)). In Europe, polarization increased significantly around World War II, and remained low until early in the 2000s, when it started to increase again ([Jennifer McCoy et al., 2022](#)). A similar pattern has been observed in Northern and Latin America. The underlying assumption behind this explanation is that the exclusionary nature of radical and populist parties creates a division within society, leading to dichotomous and rival political factions that start seeing each other as incompatible or even threatening. McCoy, Rahman, and Somer ([2018, p. 18](#)) aptly wrap up this dichotomization, defining polarization as “a process whereby the normal multiplicity of differences in a society increasingly aligns along a single dimension, cross-cutting differences become instead reinforcing, and people increasingly perceive and describe politics and society in terms of ‘Us’ versus ‘Them’.” This us-versus-them mentality, common to many modern radical ideologies, deepens societal cleavages and pushes radical and mainstream parties far apart in the programmatic space ([Pappas, 2014](#)).

In addition to increasing levels of ideological hostility and ‘tribalism’, scholars have linked the success of radical parties to governmental gridlock, erosion of democratic principles, and autocratization ([Mudde et al., 2012](#)). The violent scenes observed in Washington DC and Brasilia shortly after the defeats of Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro, respectively, carried out by supporters who did not accept the electoral results, are a teaser of the dire consequences that can follow from highly polarized political environments. In this context, distrust, hostility, and fear toward the “enemies of the people” can lead individuals to endorse exclusionary and illiberal practices against certain social groups. Paradoxically, these violations are said to be the name of democracy. For instance, in Europe, right-wing populist leaders have objected the right to wear the

Islamic headscarf on the grounds of protecting freedom of expression and women's rights but also justified limitations to freedom of speech for ethnic and religious minorities to defend Enlightenment values and core democratic principles (Moffitt, 2017). This underlies an instrumental understanding of democratic norms used by radical parties to propose a conditional and qualified model of democracy that serves the interest of "the people" against the rights of other social groups.

Despite scholars having extensively studied radical ideologies, what remains unclear is what exactly drives individuals to subscribe to radical ideologies and what are the consequences of political radicalism on citizen's attitudes and beliefs. The central aim of this dissertation is, thus, to investigate, conceptually and empirically, the motivations behind individuals embracing radical ideologies and analyze their impact on political judgments and attitudes toward democracy. It explores the multifaceted nature of radical belief systems, their determinants, their behavioral and social consequences, and how radical ideologies relate to democratic principles and liberal values. In the next section, I introduce the main theoretical concepts used throughout this work and develop a general model of radicalism that sheds light on the nature, causes, and consequences of modern radical ideologies.

1.2 Clarifying a Contested Concept

Echoing the research on the rise of fascism in Europe and right-wing extremism in the United States of the 1950s and 1960s (Arendt, 1968; Mosse, 1964), contemporary scholars have been intrigued by the ideological tenets of radical politics. The existing literature is characterized by the absence of a scholarly consensus on the conceptual boundaries and the core characteristics of the term. Different terms—such as anti-system (Zulianello, 2018), radical (Wagner & Meyer, 2017), extreme (Ellinas, 2020), populist (Mudde, 2004), anti-establishment (Schedler, 1996), protest (Morlino & Raniolo, 2017)—are used to refer to the same actors. Furthermore, even disregarding the semantic differences in the literature on radicalism, its constitutive elements vary greatly depending on historical variations, cultural contexts, and different socioeconomic factors. For example, Mudde (1996) provided an extensive list of the characteristics of right-wing populism, encompassing 58 distinct features.

The main challenge in defining political radicalism is, thus, to be explicit in its conceptualization without relying on a theoretical formulation that is too restrictive or limited to specific cases. The

first important factor is, thus, to conceptualize political radicalism as a phenomenon that is not located exclusively on the right side of the ideological spectrum. In contrast to the large pool of studies on right-wing extremism and populism, there have been few attempts to systematically study left-wing radicalism (Visser et al., 2014). One of the reasons is that radical left and radical right parties are seen as so fundamentally distinct in their perspectives on democracy that some scholars argue that considering both as “radical” is analytically incorrect (on this point, see Jungkunz, 2022). Some scholars even label parties at the edge of the left-wing spectrum as “New Left” while calling their counterparts “radical” right (Damhuis & Westheuser, 2024). Importantly, this has resulted in a general lack of literature on the potential similarities between left- and right-wing radical individuals regarding their configuration of beliefs (Rooduijn et al., 2017). This dissertation seeks to address the asymmetry in the theoretical and empirical research on radicalism by conceptualizing it as a system of beliefs that can be present on both the left and right sides of the ideological spectrum.

A second major ambiguity is the meaning of the terms “radicalism” and “extremism”. The terms are frequently conflated and used interchangeably, failing to provide a conceptual distinction between the two phenomena (de Lange & Mudde, 2005). Moreover, they are commonly employed in a pejorative and normative manner, depicting radical and extreme actors as inherently anti-democratic, prone to violence, and threatening economic and political stability (Bale et al., 2011). In this work, I steer away from a normative understanding of the terms and take an agnostic perspective, not framing them as inherently positive or negative. Furthermore, in line with Mudde (1996), I distinguish between the two concepts based on how they relate to democratic attitudes. Radicalism is conceptualized as a system of beliefs that may run counter to some of the values at the base of liberal democracy but accept the general notion of democracy. On the contrary, extremism can be understood as fundamentally anti-democratic. Extremists reject the constitutional aspects of democracy, popular sovereignty, and electoral representation. For instance, despite being distinct political ideologies, fascism and anarchism converge in their rejection of democracy as a valid system of governance and, thus, are characterized as extremist ideologies. This dissertation focuses on radicalism. One of its main objectives is to investigate the tension between the desire for systemic change advocated by contemporary radical ideologies and the constraints imposed upon it by established liberal democratic norms.

A third ambiguity in the existing literature concerns the use of the term “populism” and its ideological variants. The conceptual boundaries of the term have become increasingly overstretched, serving as a vague descriptor for vastly different phenomena (Aslanidis, 2016). At times, it is applied to political movements and challenger parties that share a little more than a vague appeal to the ordinary citizen (Sikk, 2009). Others use populism to characterize extremist views within political elites, authoritarian political regimes, or even anti-democratic movements (Malkopoulou & Moffitt, 2023). This ambiguity is further evident in the diverse conceptualizations, with scholars defining populism as an ideology (Mudde, 2004), a rhetorical style (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007), a discourse against hegemonic practices (Laclau, 2005), or a political strategy to mobilize and attract voter support (Weyland, 2001). This ambiguity not only dilutes the analytical value of the term but also hinders a more nuanced understanding of the various forms of non-mainstream and radical ideological thinking present in contemporary politics. In navigating these complexities, I advocate for a minimalistic yet sufficiently restricted definition of populism that centers around its undisputed core—a set of beliefs fundamentally contrasting mainstream views and the prevailing power structures to empower the interests of the “common people” against an ostensibly corrupt and self-serving group opposing them. Consequently, akin to Mudde’s (2010) approach, I consider populism a core element of contemporary radical ideologies on both the left and right sides of the political spectrum, using it in conjunction with the term radicalism to denote a broader non-mainstream system of beliefs.

The separation between attitudes and behaviors is another important conceptual distinction often overlooked in current literature. For a long time, political radicalism has been measured using behavioral indicators, typically violent behavior and radical vote choice. Although attitudes and behavior are often correlated, this relationship is far from perfect (Ajzen, 1991). Individuals might embrace radical ideas and advocate for substantial change in the status quo (Bertsou & Caramani, 2020) but do not express those tendencies through observable actions. Alternatively, they may vote for a radical party to protest against the current system or for tactical and strategic reasons (Morlino & Raniolo, 2017). Recent research also shows that behavioral outcomes such as vote for populist radical parties are prone to social desirability bias, leading to a severe underestimation of the portion of the population that subscribes to radical ideologies (Valentim, 2022). This dissertation makes a case for studying political attitudes, here understood as “relatively enduring orientations toward structures, roles, processes, and policies of governance” (Hennessy, 1970, p. 464). Conceptualized this way, attitudes reflect the underlying motivations and values that guide

individuals' political choices and preferences toward governance. When political attitudes are organized in relatively large and coherent patterns held together by some form of social or cultural constraint, they form ideological belief systems ([Converse, 1964](#)). According to this view, general beliefs and principles about how politics (should) work are the building blocks of political ideologies and allow us to uncover what guides individuals' ideological thinking. Consequently, this dissertation considers radicalism as a system of beliefs, a set of attitudes that inform how an individual sees the world but are not necessarily linked to behavioral outcomes.

1.2.1 Beyond Policy: Political Radicalism as a Way to Understand the Socio-Political World

Studying general ideas, values, and principles that guide one's understanding of government, society, and the distribution of power allows us to study radicalism as an ideological system. However, the debate around ideologies usually sees attitudes towards concrete policy positions as the central ideological elements of ideological systems. This strain of literature argues that radicals are usually located at the very ends of the political spectrum with relevant differences in terms of policy positions between left and right radical parties on issues such as national identity, family values, gender and sexual rights, and redistribution ([Tillie & Fennema, 1998](#)).

The radical right typically champions policies geared towards a strong safeguard of national identity and culture ([Betz & Johnson, 2004](#)). A recent example is the inclusion of the radical right Finns Party in Finland's four-party coalition government. Its inclusion resulted in a substantial reduction of refugee quotas, stricter criteria for work-related immigration and citizenship acquisition, and modifications to benefit systems for immigrants and permanent residents ([Anne-Françoise Hivert, 2023](#)). On the other side of the spectrum, the Spanish party Podemos, one of the biggest radical left parties in Europe, champions the cause of immigrant rights, criticized the European Union for its alleged infringement on human rights during the 2015 refugee crisis, and put forth various initiatives aimed at establishing a more secure pathway for immigrants entering Spain ([Sanders et al., 2017](#)).

Radical right and left parties often differ on their positions on family values ([Ignazi, 1992](#)), LGBTQ+ rights ([Kováts & Pető, 2017](#)), and abortion ([T. Akkerman, 2015](#)). The former Polish right-wing president Andrzej Duda has repeatedly denied legal recognition for same-sex couples and asserted that "LGBT is not people, it's an ideology" ([Alessio Dell'Anna & Matthew Holroyd, 2020](#)). Similarly, Hungary's right-wing populist government led by Viktor Orbán has allocated

additional funds to hospitals contingent on their commitment to refraining from performing abortions ([Carlo Martuscelli & Sarah-Taïssir Bencharif, 2022](#)). In Southern Europe, Francesco Acquaroli—governor of one of the Italian regions and a member of the radical party Brothers of Italy—also strongly opposes abortion, contending that it contributes to the “ethnic replacement” of the Italian population ([Donà, 2021](#); [Il Post, 2022](#)).

Conversely, the previous Greek government led by the populist radical left party Syriza enacted cohabitation agreements for same-sex couples and its new, openly gay party leader Stefanos Kasselakis, wove to legislate in favor of same-sex marriages and adoption if he wins the next Greek elections ([Smith, 2023](#)). In Spain, Podemos played a pivotal role in promoting two laws concerning transgender rights and stricter regulations for individuals convicted of sexual offenses ([Aitor Hernández-Morales, 2023](#)).

The two sides also contrast on their economic agenda. In contrast to its right-wing counterpart, the populist radical left often presents a stronger critique of capitalism, highlighting the need for an economic system that addresses income inequality and mitigates unfair wealth concentration ([March, 2007](#); [Rooduijn & Akkerman, 2017](#)). For instance, consider the economic agenda of the radical left party La France Insoumise, which advocates for a significant increase in the minimum wage, social welfare programs for disadvantaged citizens, and the implementation of price controls ([Ivaldi, 2019](#)). On the other hand, scholars contend that the ‘winning formula’ of radical-right populist parties involves a blend of neoliberal and authoritarian economic policy positions ([de Lange, 2007](#)). As an illustration, Busemeyer et al. ([2022](#)) find that supporters of radical right parties express a preference for so-called particularistic-authoritarian policies, endorsing moderate support for “deserving” recipients like the elderly, accompanied by limited social investment and support for disadvantaged individuals (on the same topic, see [Koen Abts et al., 2021](#)).

The divergence between radical left and right party agendas is further evident in the realm of climate protection. An increasing number of left-wing radical parties are integrating environmental concerns into their platforms, advocating for a departure from economic growth to preserve the environment. Notably, parties like the Dutch Green Left and the German party Die Linke increasingly emphasize issues like sustainable development, combating climate change, and preserving natural resources ([Alipour, 2023](#)). On the right side of the spectrum, radical right parties tend to approach climate protection with greater skepticism ([Schwörer & Fernández-García, 2023](#)). A notable example is the populist radical right party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) in

Germany, which has consistently denied the human impact on climate and rejected climate change ([Deleja-Hotko et al., 2019](#)).

Although radical right and left parties differ in their programmatic agenda, this dissertation moves away from a purely policy-based approach and sees radicalism as not limited to the policy endpoints of an ideological axis. This view is supported by recent evidence that policy positions are insufficiently robust to distinguish between moderate and radical ideologies or even right- and left-wing. First of all, research suggests the presence of different types of radicalism across the policy spectrum. For instance, Rooduijn ([2019](#)) shows that Eurosceptic positions are present only in a subset of the European populist right parties, underlying the presence of different policy agendas within the radical right party family. Second, racial parties often blur their policy positions, at times converging towards the center of the policy spectrum and minimizing the programmatic differences with other parties ([de Lange, 2007](#)). For instance, left-wing populist and mainstream parties are increasingly adopting more negative stances against immigration and Islam, blurring the differences with their right-wing counterparts ([Abou-Chadi & Krause, 2020](#); [Krause et al., 2023](#)). Forchtner ([2019](#)) shows that although climate protection is commonly associated with left-wing parties, some right-wing radical parties are increasingly sensitive to climate issues and are willing to fight global warming to “protect the homeland”. Some radical right parties, particularly in Northern Europe, are progressively embracing liberal stances on sexual and gender equality, often in opposition to Islam ([Spierings, 2021](#)).

Third, in some instances, populist radical parties disregard policy considerations and, instead, focus on non-positional dimensions of the electoral competition. For instance, during the 2016 US elections, Donald Trump—often characterized as the apotheosis of radical right populism ([Oliver & Rahn, 2016](#))—has often been described as inconsistent and more moderate on some of the issues typically endorsed by the Republican party ([Rahn, 2018](#)). In Europe, the radical right has progressively deemphasized the importance of economic issues ([Arzheimer & Berning, 2019](#)) or avoided a clear position on the economic dimension whatsoever, often taking vague and contradictory stances ([Rovny & Polk, 2020](#)). The incoherent and volatile policy agenda observed at the party level is mirrored by individual-level research. Radical voters are not particularly informed when it comes to policy issues ([Milner, 2020](#)), are generally disinterested in politics ([Spruyt et al., 2016](#)), and often diverge from the policy positions of their own party ([Pedrazzani & Segatti, 2021](#); [Pescia et al., 2019](#)). In other words, even more than their mainstream counterparts

(A. Campbell & Center, 1980), radical voters show only little interest in policy issues and low levels of knowledge of their content (for more, see Stanley & Cześniak, 2022).

Consequently, transitioning from policy positions to broader political concepts enhances the ability to discern the fundamental principles of radical ideologies. The focus on broader concepts prevents us from being swayed by temporal changes in electoral dynamics, including shifts in the overall ideological spectrum, changes in radical parties' programmatic agendas triggered by political crises, or fluctuations in policy priorities. For instance, several European radical parties, such as the Socialistische Partij in the Netherlands, have significantly changed their programmatic agenda over time on both the economic and cultural dimensions (Ramiro & Gomez, 2017; van Kessel, 2015). Another example is the French Rassemblement National (formerly Front National). Similar to other radical right parties (de Lange, 2007), its economic agenda progressively moved to the left, embracing protectionist stances and redistribution (Ivaldi, 2015). Focusing on deeply rooted beliefs about politics has the potential to enable long-term comparisons, providing more robust insights into the nature of radical beliefs. Additionally, given the variety of radical and populist movements in terms of their policy stances (Tarchi, 2016), studying general beliefs and principles enables us to uncover different varieties of radicalism that do not necessarily map into the traditional ideological divide. For instance, the distinction between inclusionary and exclusionary populism (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013) or the presence of anti-regionalist and independentist radical populist parties (Vampa, 2020).

1.3 Radicalism: A Multilayered System of Beliefs

My previous point emphasizes that the study of radicalism should have two components: one that defines the core characteristics and principles at the basis of radical ideologies and another that allows to distinguish different forms of radicalism, such as left or right radicalism or religious fundamentalism. Public opinion scholars see ideological beliefs as “a learned knowledge structure consisting of an interrelated network of beliefs, opinions, and values” (Jost et al., 2009, p. 310). Such organized structures of beliefs and values are typically measured using policy attitudes. Starting with Converse's (1964) work on belief systems, scholars distinguish between a center and a periphery of such organizational structure. According to this view, individuals have a set of issue-specific “constraints” that influence which opinions they hold and how coherent and integrated these opinions are. This line of research has also demonstrated that people's opinions on different political issues often do not align or form a cohesive ideology (Feld & Grofman, 1988).

Another way to conceptualize this ideology-belief framework is to see belief systems as less hierachal and more integrated. In contrast to a central set of policy attitudes that inform more peripheral opinions about distinctive political issues, belief systems are composed of two interrelated components. Moskowitz & Jenkins (2004) argue that belief systems should be understood as a multitier system composed of (1) a set of general structuring principles or orientations about politics and society and (2) concrete opinions about particular policy issues and topics. Similarly, Kerlinger's (1984) criterial referents theory argues that general principles about politics influence the salience individuals attribute to concrete positional issues, a process that creates different belief systems. Feldman (1988) advocates for studying the role of core beliefs and values in studying public opinion because they inform “policy positions, performance evaluations, and candidate evaluations” (p. 437). Likewise, Greenberg & Jonas (2003)—drawing on the work of Duckitt (2001), Tetlock (1983), and Altemeyer (1996)—suggest there are two ideological dimensions. One is a content-free dimension that comprises more general views about authority, politics, and representation. The second pertains to the left-right aspects of the electoral competition.

In this dissertation, I build on this framework to study political radicalism. As I argue in Chapter 2, hidden beneath concrete policy positions, radical ideologies are based on deeper-level dispositions about politics and society (Backes, 2007; McClosky & Chong, 1985; Mudde, 2007). According to this perspective, radical beliefs comprise two separate yet interconnected components. The first component comprises a general set of beliefs and values that constitutes the core of radical belief systems. Referred to as the ontological dimension, this component is shared among diverse radical ideologies, enabling us to distinguish between radical and non-radical ideologies (Laclau, 2005). The second dimension, termed ontic, is grafted into this ontological core. This dimension translates the ontological elements into issue-specific preferences linked to salient dimensions of electoral competition, therefore allowing us to differentiate between different types of radicalism, such as left- and right-wing radicalism or religious fundamentalism (Ezrow et al., 2014; Laclau, 1990).

1.3.1 The Ontological Core of the Radical Belief Systems

Despite scant theoretical and empirical research on the constitutive elements of political radicalism, there are good reasons to believe that radical ideologies converge on a set of ontological components about how politics and society should work. For instance, Rooduijn & Akkerman

(2017), using party manifestos, show that radical left and right parties in Europe exhibit similarities in their broad and abstract perspectives on politics. Both left and right radical parties prioritize challenging the “corrupt elites [that] neglect the interests of ordinary people” (p. 9). Similarly, based on a study of manifestos from six British parties between 1999 and 2015, March (2017) observes that left and right radical parties in the United Kingdom share the same overarching beliefs regarding power, politics, and authority, while maintaining substantial differences in their policy-oriented positions.

The seminal study of McClosky & Chong (1985) explicitly examines some of the ontological aspects of radical ideologies. While standing at opposite ends on many public policy issues, radical individuals embrace antagonistic and conspiratorial motives against the status quo. Their objective is to induce radical change not only on the governmental level or among the ruling elites but in the established political order as a whole (Ajanovic et al., 2018; see also, Gencoglu Onbasi, 2016). Morgan & Baert (2018) provide an excellent example of the constitutive importance of alternative and antagonistic ideas and demands. The Black Consciousness Movement in apartheid South Africa fought against racist structures by building an antagonistic frontier—a performance of counter-power—to oppose the morally corrupt White elite and dismantle the established structure of power. In sum, political radicalism is about the fight against the very rules and institutions that shape the contours of what is considered mainstream (Laclau, 2005).

Individual-level research also supports the idea that radicals on both sides have essential ontological commonalities when fighting against the status quo. A. Akkerman et al. (2017) show that, while voters of the Dutch populist radical right and populist radical left have different opinions on immigration and the economy, they both think that an evil political and economic establishment curtails the interests of the ordinary people. Comparable results emerge in Van Hauwaert & Van Kessel (2017). They argue that populism is central for supporters of both left- and right-wing radical parties regardless of their differences on the cultural and economic dimensions. The separation of the political world between “the people” and the “enemies of the people” underlies an inflexible and dogmatic way of seeing social and political affairs. In the words of McClosky and Chong, radical individuals on both sides of the spectrum “see political life as a conflict between ‘us’ and ‘them,’ a struggle between ‘good’ and ‘evil’ played out on a battleground where compromise amounts to capitulation and the goal is total victory.” (1985, p. 361).

More recent literature supports the claim that radical individuals—while differing on ontic issues—display a rigid adherence to certain ideas and principles expressed in a black-and-white and simplistic understanding of the social and political world. For example, Toner et al. (2013) discovered a connection between policy extremity and the extent to which individuals perceive their political beliefs as superior to others (Harris & Van Bavel, 2021; see also Rollwage et al., 2018). Similarly, van Prooijen & Krouwel (2019) found that political extremists derogate and refuse others' beliefs. This moral and absolute understanding of politics is often coupled with a simplistic and clear-cut understanding of complex political issues. For instance, van Prooijen et al. (2018) show that, while individuals on opposite sides of the ideological spectrum endorsed fundamentally different approaches to address the 2015 EU refugee crisis, they shared a common perception that the resolution to the migration crisis was relatively straightforward and simple.

These ontological similarities are exemplified by the recent government coalitions between radical populist parties that belong to different ideological blocks. For instance, the coalition between the Five Star Movement and the Lega in the aftermath of the 2016 Italian Election is an example of a government co-formed by parties that greatly differ in their ontic positions but share a similar understanding of how politics and representation should work (Basile & Borri, 2018). Similarly, the alliance formed by Syriza and ANEL in the aftermath of the 2015 Greek general elections indicates that radical parties on diametrically opposite sides of the left-right spectrum are willing to cooperate (Aslanidis & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2016). More recently, Slovakia's left-wing populist party Smer-SD, led by Robert Fico, is expected to form a coalition with two far-right populist parties, supporting the idea that these parties share certain commonalities on how politics is understood and interpreted (Le Monde, 2023). Given that existing research on the topic remains largely unsystematic, one of the objectives of this dissertation is to explore, theoretically and empirically, the constitutive ontological elements of political radicalism.

1.3.2 Varieties of Radicalism

The fact that general orientation and beliefs about politics constitute the ontological core of radicalism does not, by any means, mean that policy issues are irrelevant in the study of radicalism. As I previously mentioned, radical parties belonging to the same family share some ontic similarities. Yet, their positions vary greatly with wildly different programmatic agendas across space and time. How can we explain the substantial variation in terms of positional issues and their salience within the same party family? One explanation this work advances is that radical

candidates articulate ontological ideas differently based on what is relevant for their voters and, more generally, in structuring the electoral competition (e.g., [Hawkins et al., 2020](#)). As the salience of specific ideological dimensions varies between contexts, space, and time, radical leaders emphasize different aspects of the competition and, thus, different configurations of ontic beliefs emerge from the articulation of the ontological elements.

The importance of political leaders in the organization of ontic beliefs is emphasized in the literature on elite messages and source cues ([Domke et al., 2000](#)). This strain of research mostly comes from the United States. As a result, it pays particular attention to the effect of party cues. According to this view, political parties are central for organizing and shaping ideological belief systems and, more generally, the ideological space ([Zaller, 1992](#)). They provide interpretations of temporal and contextual changes, giving their voters a more or less coherent interpretative framework to help them understand the ever-changing dynamics of political conflict ([Martin & Desmond, 2010](#)). For instance, when a new issue arises, they provide voters with heuristics that facilitate their understanding of the issue at hand and propose a way to address related problems. In other words, political parties function as “ideological authorities” that shape how people interpret and relate to political cleavages and socioeconomic changes (on this point, see also the discussion on party realignment in the US in [B. A. Campbell & Trilling, 1980](#)).

However, partisan identities are less relevant in many other national contexts compared to the United States. In the more fragmented and volatile European party system, voters will also form political judgments based on other relevant socio-political identities ([Entman, 1993](#); [Lenz, 2011](#)). In relation to the argument presented in this dissertation, political leaders need to articulate the ontological components of radicalism in a way that aligns with other relevant aspects. For instance, an increasing body of literature shows that gender and sexuality identities are increasingly important in structuring ideological beliefs, especially in certain contexts such as some Northern European countries ([Cravens, 2020](#)). If a radical leader wants to appeal to LGBTQI+ voters, they should articulate the ontological component of radicalism in a way that favors LGBTQI+ rights or aligns with their material and symbolic interests. A prominent example is the attempt of some European right-wing populist parties to include gay citizens in the constitutive definition of “the people”, whose rights need to be protected against supposedly intolerant and homophobic Muslim immigrants ([Spierings, 2021](#)).

Systemic factors are also relevant in influencing belief organization. A high number of effective political parties ([Laakso & Taagepera, 1979](#)) or high political fragmentation can cross-pressure radical voters to adopt different and “inconsistent” sets of ontic beliefs ([Gidron, 2022](#)). Historical factors or events are also likely to impact how leaders articulate the ontic aspects of the competition. As an illustration, Dinas et al. ([2020](#)) reveals that the public display of the Spanish flag in the aftermath of the Catalan independence referendum had the effect of increasing approval for certain actions associated with Franco’s authoritarian regime. The symbolic relevance of the Spanish flag becomes a tool that political leaders leveraged to push a specific agenda, as evidenced by the explicit calls from Spanish right-wing party leaders urging citizens to showcase the national flag. Economic and political crises are also noteworthy factors that can shape the articulation of ontological elements into concrete ontic aspects. In Hungary, for instance, the populist radical right party led by Victor Orban advocated for debt relief in the context of the foreign currency loan crisis by framing the issue as a conflict between the malevolent international banking sector and the “deceived” Hungarian citizens ([Gyongyosi & Verner, 2021](#)). As the separatist movement of Quebec or the Belgian party Vlaams Belang exemplifies, the articulation of ontological issues in terms of specific ontic positions can also be influenced by strong linguistic and subnational identities.

These examples emphasize that ontological beliefs translate to ontic considerations depending on how leaders generate demands for radical approaches to represent and empower their voters, the salience of certain issues over others, and contextual and exogenous factors that influence the dynamics of the electoral competition. These factors are likely to influence the degree of ideological heterogeneity present both at the elite and mass levels. In line with this view, recent literature argues that there are different ‘varieties’ of radicalism that are “chameleonic, culture-bound, and context-dependent” ([Arter, 2010, p. 490](#)). For instance, while in Europe the exclusionary right-wing variant of populism targets mostly immigrants and national minorities ([Betz, 1994; Ignazi, 1992](#)), in Latin America, populism is linked with left-wing politics and an inclusionary vision of society ([Levitsky & Roberts, 2011](#)).

1.4 Political Radicalism and Polarization

One of the domains where the ontological components of radical ideologies may influence ontic judgments is citizens’ extremity in policy and party leader evaluations. Indeed, the rising levels of polarization observed in some Western democracies have been linked to the success of radical

parties (Pappas, 2014; Roberts, 2021). Polarization refers to a divergence of political opinions or attitudes between different societal groups. In political science, two main concepts have been identified: ideological and affective polarization. Borrowing from Sartori's seminal work (2005), ideological polarization is commonly understood as distance in a purely ontic sense, often along a single left-right dimension or a set of relevant policy issues. In its simplest form, ideological polarization can be measured as the distance between the policy positions of parties or their supporters (Dassonneville & Çakır, 2021). On the other hand, affective polarization is broadly defined as the tendency to increasingly dislike the opposing party to the point of seeing its elites and rank-and-file as a disliked and dangerous out-group (Iyengar et al., 2012). Affective polarization is generally measured using party feeling thermometers, as they capture the emotional intensity and hatred that can arise between different political groups (Druckman & Levendusky, 2019).

The rising levels of ideological polarization have been linked to the inability of mainstream parties to provide effective solutions to poor economic performance, globalization processes, and quick-paced cultural change (Casal Bertoa & Weber, 2016; Funke et al., 2016; Mouw & Sobel, 2001). Instead of representing the interests of their voters, traditional parties on both the left- and right sides of the spectrum have become progressively indistinguishable in their policy stances to the point of sharing “the same broad commitments in government, confining themselves to the same ever-narrowing repertoire of policy-making” (Mair, 2013, p. 53). From a spatial perspective, a representation gap forms when political parties converge towards the center of the ideological spectrum, but a part of their electorates have not aligned to their positions. This fuels discontent and distrust in the political system, generating electoral opportunities for populist and radical challenges. This process pushes those disaffected and unrepresented voters towards challenger parties at the margins of the ideological continuum. These parties can avoid compromises and propose more extreme or unconventional solutions to problems experienced by their electorate. As a result, the levels of ideological polarization accelerated in the past twenty years (Dalton, 2021), especially in national contexts parties were not able to provide effective solutions to the 2008 economic or the 2015 immigration crises (Gessler & Hunger, 2022).

The lack of policy congruence between mainstream parties and citizens emphasizes that populist radical parties' capability to mobilize voters is inevitably a process of cleavage construction (Roberts, 2021). This process refers to the deliberate emphasis on certain social, economic, or

cultural divisions within a society for political purposes. These divisions, known as cleavages, can include class, ethnicity, religion, regional, or other socio-political demarcations. Political actors, including radical parties, strategically construct or highlight these cleavages to mobilize support and shape public opinion. One of the main cleavages used by radical populist parties involves the strategic emphasis on divisions between “the people” and “the enemies of the people.” This creates a sense of belonging among “the people,” especially given that the electorate of radical parties often comprises social groups that feel marginalized, deprived, and powerless. This phenomenon is referred to as differentiation and triggers positive feelings for the in-group (e.g., the honest people) and—by contra—negative evaluations of the out-group (e.g., the corrupted political, cultural, and economic elites) (Tajfel et al., 1971). When individuals perceive that other groups are very different from them, they feel more strongly about their in-group attachment, leading to in-group favoritism, negative stereotyping, and out-group discrimination.

The fabrication of these “rival images” between different societal groups creates the illusion of irreconcilable differences between the people and their enemies (Jennifer McCoy & Rahman, 2016, p. 10). In line with this explanation, negative emotions toward mainstream parties have become stronger, making voters biased and angry toward the other side (Lilliana Mason, 2015). Recently, scholars have argued that this process can extend to other relevant identities that populist and radical leaders mobilize to construct the subject of ‘the people’. For instance, Hobolt et al. (2020) shows that significant political events such as the Brexit referendum—led by the right-wing populist party UK Independence Party—generated strong affectively polarized attitudes that “cross-cut long-standing partisan divisions.” Lacombe et al. (2019) shows that gun ownership—a salient issue during the 2016 US campaign—can form a district social and political identity that can cause individuals to develop negative affect towards opposing groups.

To summarize, the recent increase in polarization results from two concurrent processes. First, mainstream parties are blamed, rightfully or not, for being unresponsive and not representing the people. Second, radical parties exploit the citizens’ resentment and feeling of powerlessness to mobilize voters around new or old cleavages, emphasizing socio-political divisions, fostering in-group favoritism, and blaming the outgroup for the problems experienced by their electorate.

1.4.1 The Differential Effect of Radicalism on Ideological and Affective Polarization

The view that radicalism is intrinsically linked to polarization is rather common in the literature. Some scholars have even argued that polarization is “the absolutely most important element of populist rule” ([Pappas, 2019a, p. 212](#)). However, much of the current scholarship disregards that divisions over cultural, economic, and political issues are not always linked to increased polarization. For instance, Richardson, in their in-depth study of the European party systems, come to the conclusion that cleavages across social, cultural, and religious dimensions generate conflict without this being necessarily causative of policy extremity or strong party identification ([Richardson, 1991](#)). Furthermore, although literature indicates a moderate increase in affective polarization across Europe ([Harteveld, 2021](#); [Reiljan, 2020](#)), results are mixed, with some scholars finding stable, or even declining, levels of negative party affect in many European countries that experience a recent success of radical and populist parties ([Garzia et al., 2023](#)).

One of the reasons that may explain these contradicting results is that disagreement over certain aspects of electoral competition, like policy issues and affective rivalries, is intentional and strategic. Depending on programmatic consideration and contextual factors, political entrepreneurs may or may not emphasize the salience of certain topics. Political parties may press conflict on certain issues rather than seeking consensus if it provides electoral advantages. For instance, if parties diverge on immigration but share a similar stance on environmental issues, citizens are more likely to focus on immigration, providing advantages for parties with clear and credible positions on such issue. In such a scenario, a challenger party may adopt strong positions on climate protection, advocating for strict regulations on carbon emissions and higher investments in renewable energy. By doing so, the party aims to attract environmentally conscious voters and strategically create a divide between those who support ambitious environmental policies and those who are more skeptical of such measures. This argument is also valid for the non-positional and affective aspects of the competition. If party leaders focus on vilifying the other candidates rather than pressing disagreement on concrete policy proposals, it is likely that their voters will follow and will evaluate the competition based on more emotional and affective aspects. What is important here is that, as Lupu ([2015](#)) observes, citizens polarize “on one dimension without necessarily polarizing on another” (p. 335).

All of this to suggest that polarization needs to be studied as a multi-dimensional phenomenon and that citizens may polarize on different domains (ideological or affective) and experience issue extremity and partisan affect differently. Populist radical parties are a good example of the fact that polarization is conditional on contextual and programmatic considerations (Andreadis et al., 2018; Rico & Anduiza, 2019). Radical parties aim to realign the political field such that the competition maps onto a central cleavage that pits different actors on one side or the other of the “the people” versus “the enemy of the people” divide. Radical parties can pursue a differentiation strategy by pressing conflict on specific policy issues that map into this cleavage. For instance, in Europe, radical right parties may decide to pit the natives against non-natives and Muslims, polarizing the public on policy issues concerning immigration and religious liberties. In other contexts, radical parties may instead downplay the importance of policy disagreement (e.g., party programs are all the same) and focus on other, less policy-driven issues such as corruption or antagonism towards a vaguely defined trans-partisan establishment. This allows radical parties to appeal to a broader and more heterogeneous electorate, as testified by the strategy of position blurring employed by radical parties to appeal to voters with both conservative and liberal positions (Arzheimer & Berning, 2019; Ivarsflaten, 2005; Oesch & Rennwald, 2018; Rovny & Polk, 2020)

Populist radical parties may decide to pursue a polarizing strategy on the affective domain, eliciting “distrust, dislike, and contempt” for those groups on the other side of the cleavage (Gidron et al., 2020, p. 1). However, who belongs to the in-group and who is excluded depends on how radical parties articulate the us-versus-them cleavage (Caiani & Graziano, 2019). For instance, radical leaders can concentrate on defeating the economic elites, multinational corporations, and global superpowers and define the in-group as the honest working class that struggles against the domination of evil economic elites. In this case, affective polarization may develop against the top 1% rather than the other party members or ethnic minorities. On the contrary, polarization may happen in relation to the party establishment, which is considered to be responsible for frustrating the people’s interests, unfairly favoring certain groups, and preventing any real change. In this context, radical parties may shift the central dimension of political competition from ontic disagreement on a set of policy issues to a new cleavage opposing mainstream parties to radical and challenger forces. In line with these examples, in Chapters 3 and 4 of this dissertation, I argue that the way radical leaders exploit affective or ideological divisions depends on strategic and programmatic considerations.

1.5 Democratic Backsliding and Radical Ideologies

Academics and commentators have argued that democracies worldwide are experiencing a crisis in the forms of disdain for fundamental rights and democratic liberties. There are some good reasons to believe that liberal democracy is, at least, under stress. For the past 13 years, the number of liberal democracies declined by nearly 20%, passing from 42 to 34 ([Tai, 2022](#)). What is surprising is that while the number of liberal democracies has declined, coups d'état, vote fraud, and other openly anti-democratic actions are also declining. This change in how democracies erode underlies a distinctive aspect of contemporary backsliding: the disdain for democratic norms goes relatively unnoticed and erosion occurs without clear attacks on democratic institutions ([Bermeo, 2016a](#)).

A question that has been extensively debated in the academic literature is whether the success of radical parties is responsible for this new form of democratic backsliding. However, before delving into the relationship between radicalism and democratic erosion, any piece of writing that claims to analyze the supposed crisis of democracy should be clear about what democracy means to begin with ([Carey et al., 2019](#)). This is particularly crucial considering that scholars have used various and, at times, contrasting definitions of democracy ([Coppedge et al., 2011; Held, 2006](#)). Starting from Schumpeter ([1942](#)), democracy is defined as a system primarily characterized by competition for power through open elections (see also, [Collier & Levitsky, 1997; Schmitter & Karl, 1991](#)). Expanding on Schumpeter's definition of democracy, some scholars argue that elections should be not only competitive but also fair, free, and inclusive ([Boix et al., 2013; Geddes et al., 2014](#)). In addition to these electoral-centric perspectives, Dahl's ([1971, 1989](#)) definition of democracy extends these definitions to include civil liberties such as the freedom of assembly, expression, and information (also, see [Mill, 1978](#)). More recently, maximalist definitions of democracy include substantive aspects such as participation and effective governance. For instance, Amartya Sen's ([2017](#)) perspective extends beyond the formal structures of democracy to focus on factors contributing to human development, such as education and healthcare.

This work strikes a balance between minimalist and maximalist definitions of democracy that include an “undisputed” core of aspects that are common to most existing understandings ([Coppedge et al., 2020; Munck et al., 2020](#)). More specifically, following Dahl ([1971, 1989](#)), I identify three essential dimensions: separation of power and control over government by elected officials (checks and balances), free and fair elections and right to run for office (electoral fairness),

and freedom of expression and association (civil liberties). Building on this definition, I define backsliding as the gradual disdain for democratic safeguards in relation to (1) an independent parliament and juridical bodies, (2) a free and fair electoral process, and (3) the protection of liberal values such as freedom of expression and minority rights. In contrast with other work, this conceptualization avoids the “tautological definition of democratic backsliding as a decline in democratic quality” (Wunsch & Blanchard, 2023, p. 279) and allows for testable hypotheses concerning the relationship between populism and democratic erosion.

1.5.1 Radicalism and Democracy: An Ambivalent Relationship

Discussion surrounding the crisis of democracy often identifies the recent success of populist and radical parties as one of the main causes of contemporary democratic backsliding (Ruth-Lovell & Grahn, 2023). In many Western democracies, radical parties have gained considerable success. In some of these countries, such as Hungary and Turkey, populist leaders have substantially harmed the essential institutions of democracy by eroding checks on the government, undermining the judiciary's independence, and tightening the political control of the media (Svolik, 2019). Furthermore, radical populist candidates such as President Duda of Poland, President Chávez of Venezuela, and Prime Minister Orbán of Hungary secured re-elections despite their continuous assaults on core democratic values.

The prevailing narrative goes that radical and populist leaders pose an unprecedented and particularly perilous threat to the stability of liberal democracy (de la Torre & Ortiz Lemos, 2016). However, there are significant empirical and theoretical reasons to approach the purported democracy crisis with, at least some, skepticism. Despite the handful of examples of democratic erosion by radical and populist leaders (Guasti, 2020; Meijers & van der Veer, 2019), we lack a comprehensive understanding of the impact of populism across a wider range of regimes, different types of electoral systems, and regions. For instance, in the last Brazilian elections, the neo-elected president Lula da Silva, often defined as a left-wing populist, has been called “the savior of democracy” after a group of supporters of Brazil’s former President Jair Bolsonaro assaulted the Supreme Court and surrounded the presidential palace (Katy Watson, 2022). Furthermore, individual-level research presents mixed results, with some studies suggesting that radical voters are more intolerant and undemocratic (Lewandowsky & Jankowski, 2022), while others claim that, instead, they are more inclined to support democracy and deliberative forms of participation (Zaslove et al., 2021).

In addition, some scholars suggest that the impact of radical populist parties on democracy is exaggerated and conditional on pre-existing conditions. According to this view, the recent instances of backsliding can be seen as a “reverse wave” limited to those countries that were not fully consolidated democracies and were already struggling with fragile democratic institutions (Treisman, 2023). Another perspective argues that the challenge of radical populism to liberal democracy is a feature rather than an anomaly of contemporary democratic politics. The underlying assumption is that the current economic and political elites established a system that disproportionately benefited a small number of individuals and excluded minority groups from full political and economic participation (Canovan, 2002). The difficulties in coping with increasingly globalized and complex modern societies, exaggerated by the recent economic crisis, led individuals with relatively weaker socioeconomic positions to turn to radical ideologies in the hope of restoring the democratic promise. In this light, radical populism is a direct result of the current crisis of representation of democracy.

1.5.2 Backsliding as an Instrumental Strategy

A distinctive aspect of contemporary backsliding is that the erosion of democratic norms by populist and radical leaders is often portrayed as a defense of democracy itself (Bermeo, 2016b). At the height of the Brexit crisis, for example, the UK Parliament was shut down on the advice of Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who intended to circumvent parliamentary opposition to advance the will of the British people—an action later declared unlawful (Bowcott et al., 2019). The Tea Party’s impact on the agenda of the Republican Party in the United States is another example. The network of local and national groups herded the GOP toward anti-democratic stances, claiming to restore democracy in the interest of the American people (Skocpol & Williamson, 2016). The state of emergency declared by the Turkish radical right president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was passed by citing the need to protect Turkish democracy (Shaheen, 2018). In response to the 2016 coup attempt, Erdoğan suspended thousands of judges, civil servants, and academics. Numerous media outlets critical of the government were shut down, and several constitutional changes were passed to expand the powers of the president. Among many others, these examples show how populist leaders may take anti-democratic measures, paradoxically asserting their necessity in the name of democracy.

Although research on the topic is scarce, citizens too often consider such undemocratic behaviors as democratic (Krishnarajan, 2022). One explanation for this apparent paradox is that the way

citizens interpret democratic norms varies greatly. While current research shows that citizens agree on most of the procedural aspects of democracy (Ferrin & Kriesi, 2016), there is great variation in how broader and general concepts, like freedom of speech and minority rights, are translated into more concrete propositions about specific liberties (Prothro & Grigg, 1960). This variation is linked to the fact that democratic principles are often stacked against other, equally important, values. These other aspects can be so relevant that individuals are willing to give up or negate certain democratic rights in order to protect them. Indeed, research has repeatedly demonstrated that individuals often prioritize their ideological and partisan interests over safeguarding democratic principles (M. H. Graham & Svolik, 2020; Jacob, forthcoming; Saikkonen & Christensen, 2023). This tendency reveals that democratic values are not abstract concepts but values whose meaning is conditional on other aspects of political life. This implies that citizen's self-perceived "democratic" actions unknowingly contribute to democratic erosion by reshaping what democracy means.

Populist radical leaders actively pursue a strategy of redefinition of what is democratic and undemocratic. This process is embedded in the constitutive ontological elements of contemporary radicalism. Positive and morally superior characteristics are ascribed to the group one identifies with and, by contra, the out-groups are seen as a challenge to the interest and the identity of the in-group. This generates distrust and antipathy towards individuals who belong to the (countless) out-groups (Iyengar et al., 2019). At the same time, it leads individuals to believe that in-group members are rightfully "more entitled" to certain rights and liberties than out-group members (Akkerman, 2005). This particularistic and instrumental interpretation of democratic and liberal principles is functional in delegitimizing, marginalizing, or excluding certain social groups. For instance, a way for populist right-wing parties to achieve more restrictive measures against non-natives is to limit their political rights, as non-natives should not be entitled to influence the decisions of the majority of the native people.

It is important to consider that these violations happen when there is a perceived or actual need to reestablish "the will of the people" against practices and rules considered unfair or illegitimate. This implies that what is considered democratic or undemocratic depends on specific interpretations of the relations of subordination that radical ideologies are fighting against. Democratic institutions and democratic rights are instrumentally protected or dismantled to advance specific interests or, in the case of radical populists in power, to remove constitutional

limits on their power to save the country from external or internal enemies, as the state of emergency declared by Erdogan testifies. More broadly, when radical leaders convince citizens that they are unable to exercise their power, they may begin to advocate a radical variant of popular sovereignty where the will of the people is recognized at the expense of those groups that are considered unfairly advantaged by the elites and the current system of power. According to this view, how the discontent with the function of democratic institutions is articulated is, thus, dependent on which undemocratic approaches leaders propose to solve relevant political issues. Similar to what has been argued for polarization, this means that the way democratic principles are understood, interpreted, and ultimately applied is not universal but conditional on the dynamics of the electoral competition and pre-existing divisions. This is the focus of Chapter 5, where I add to the existing debate on the crisis of democracy by bridging the literature on radical ideology with the one on democratic erosion and showing that populist individuals support democratic norms only when they align with their ontic interests.

1.6 Cases and Data

This dissertation draws on different datasets from Europe, the US, and global comparative surveys to tackle a variety of questions related to the topics this Chapter introduced. Chapters 2 and 5 leverage original survey instruments that have been purposefully included in the 2019 Belgian National Electoral Survey (BNES) to measure the ontology of radicalism and general and concrete support for democratic norms. The 2019 wave of the BNES employs a multi-stage sampling approach, with municipalities nested within the three Belgian regions—Walloon, Flemish, and Brussels-Capital regions. The data is a register-based random probability sample of eligible Belgian voters for the 2019 national elections. The data were collected from December 2019 to October 2020 through computer-assisted face-to-face interviews.

Chapter 3 uses data from the 2016 American National Electoral Study (ANES), a well-established and high-quality survey conducted in the United States. The data were collected through face-to-face interviews and online self-administered questionnaires using a multi-stage sampling with regions nested in smaller geographical locations. Respondents are interviewed both pre- and post-election. The ANES includes a battery that measures populist attitudes and several other relevant variables related to policy and leader evaluations. This allows me to explore how populism relates to ideological polarization and affective hostility between members of opposing political parties.

To examine the relationship between populism and affective polarization across different contexts, Chapter 4 uses the data from Module 5 of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) titled “Democracy Divided? People, Politicians, and the Politics of Populism.” This module includes data from emerging and established democracies gathered through probabilistic samples of individuals aged 16 and above using self-administered web surveys. The CSES Module 5 includes the evaluations of all the major parties and a set of standardized questions concerning populism. This allows me to test whether populist individuals exhibit greater affective polarization compared to mainstream voters.

1.7 Overview of the Dissertation

The ensuing chapters present the research conducted for this dissertation, which is structured around four self-contained research articles that explore the concepts and questions introduced in this Chapter. Each chapter can be read independently as a standalone research article. As a result, there is some theoretical and empirical overlap between the chapters, which is unavoidable given the article-based nature of the dissertation. Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 have already been published in international peer-reviewed journals, namely *Contemporary Politics* and the *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, respectively. These Chapters are a reprint of the peer-reviewed version sent to the editor. Chapter 4 and 5 are currently under review. In addition, while the topic of the thesis is radical populist ideologies, as I previously explained, I often focus on populism as I use the term to denote radical and non-mainstream systems of beliefs.

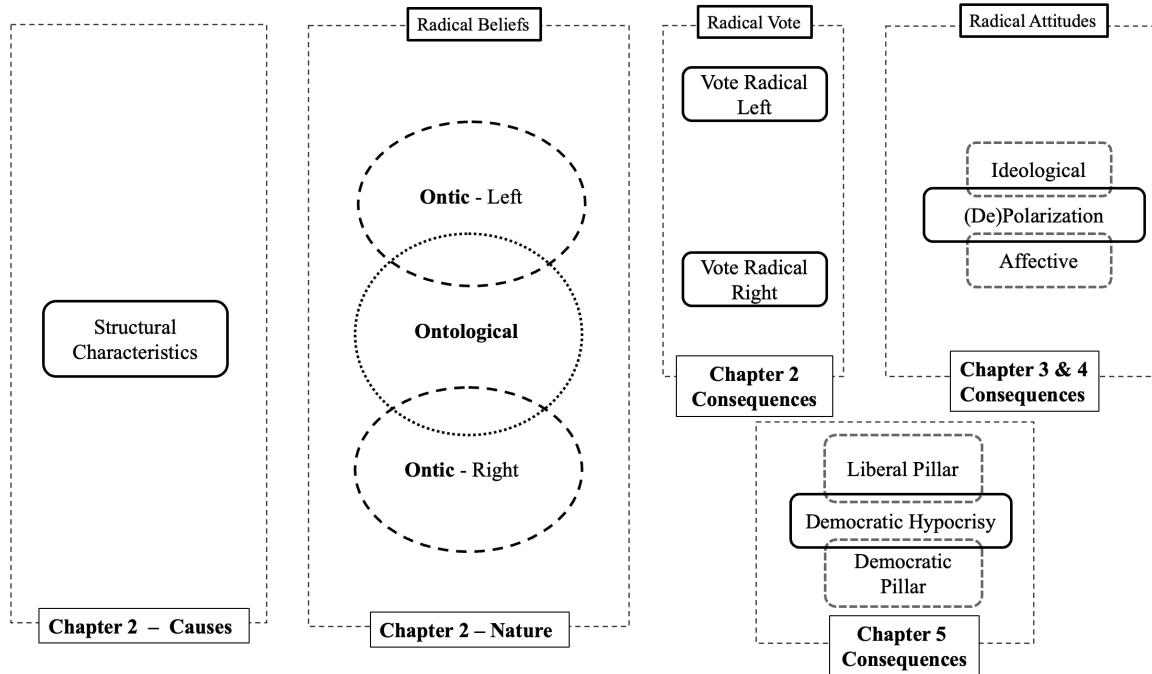


Figure 1.1: Overview of the chapters and their fit in the theoretical chain of the thesis.

Chapter 2 introduces the first empirical study of this dissertation. With co-authors Bart Meuleman and Koen Abts, in this chapter, we challenge the common idea that radical individuals are a more radicalized version of mainstream voters. Rather, we argue they have a markedly different understanding of politics and society. Theoretically, we distinguish between ontological and ontic aspects of belief systems and elaborate on how these elements can be used to study contemporary radicalism. We conceptualize the ontology of modern radicalism as composed of antagonist, dogmatic, and populist beliefs. Empirically, we employ a person-centered approach to classify individuals into different ideological profiles and quantify the prevalence of radical beliefs in the Belgian population. The chapter contributes to the current literature by showing that modern radicalism sits at the intersection of antagonist, dogmatic, and populist beliefs. The chapter also discovers a substantial amount of heterogeneity in how radical individuals combine these different elements, resulting in several nuanced and alternative non-mainstream belief systems. Using a large set of socio-demographic characteristics, we also explore how these different ideological profiles are stratified in the general population. In line with previous literature, results show that non-mainstream belief systems are more common in individuals with lower levels of education, who belong to the working class, distrust institutions and politics, and feel disregarded and abandoned by politics.

Chapter 3 explores how populist attitudes relate to policy extremism and affective polarization. Theoretically, I elaborate on the conditionality of populism, arguing that its effect on related political attitudes depends on the dynamics of electoral competition and how (populist) leaders strategically articulate pre-existing cleavages and political identities. Empirically, I use survey data from the 2016 US elections and apply Multi-Group Structural Equation Modelling to understand the relationship between ideological extremity, affective polarization, and populism across different partisan groups. Results show that populism is related to affective polarization among Republicans and policy extremity among Democrats. This chapter contributes to the literature by showing that the abstract elements of radical beliefs can have different effects on citizens' ontic considerations, confirming my theoretical intuition that populist polarization is a conditional and strategic phenomenon. It also highlights that ontic elements are important in studying radicalism. Yet, they are insufficient to explain why radical voters polarize across different dimensions of the electoral competition.

Chapter 4 builds on the findings of the previous chapter to investigate the relationship between populism and polarization in a large set of democracies. In the chapter, written together with Bruno Casthano Silva, we provide the most compressive theoretical elaboration to date of how populism may or may not be connected to affective polarization. Based on the existing literature, we argue that there are four potential mechanisms through which populism may be related to affective judgments: (1) the us-versus-them logic embedded with populist ideas, (2) the extreme and exclusionary political identity of far-right populist parties, (3) a backlash effect whereby those which oppose radical populist parties are as polarized as populist, and (4) negative partisanship meaning that populists individuals express a strong dislike for all the parties in the systems and, thus, are less polarized than the average voter. Fixed effect models using data from 25 elections in 21 countries reveal a curvilinear relationship between populism and affective polarization, wherein both populists and anti-populists exhibit high levels of affective polarization. The results reveal great heterogeneity across the selected cases. The chapter contributes to the debate on "populist polarization" in two ways. It challenges the assumption that populism is intrinsically linked to affective polarization and supports the conditionality argument, suggesting that the effect of populism on affective judgments is conditional on the dynamics of party competition and contexts.

Chapter 5, written together with Koen Abts and Bart Meuleman, shifts its focus on the relationship between populism and democracy. We argue that populist individuals are more likely to endorse a

qualified and particularistic understanding of democracy, conditional on whether certain democratic norms are perceived as being in the interest of “the people.” Theoretically, we argue that populism is linked to abstract support for freedom of speech as populist leaders can strategically use an unlimited conception of freedom as a counter-hegemonic device. Yet, we also contend that the application of freedom of speech principles is instrumental and depends on whether it benefits populists’ ideological interests. In line with our expectations, populist individuals on both sides of the ideological spectrum endorse freedom of speech in abstract terms but instrumentally trade it off for their ideological interests. This finding aligns with the conditionality argument and contributes to our understanding of the relationship between populism and democracy. It confirms that populism is associated with the rejection of democratic norms when they contrast with citizens’ ontic preferences.

Chapter 6 summarizes the findings of this dissertation and reflects their broader implications. I conclude with a discussion of the results and limitations of this dissertation, and suggest potential avenues for future research.

2 CHAPTER 2 - THE ONTOLOGICAL CORE OF POLITICAL RADICALISM. EXPLORING THE ROLE OF ANTAGONIST, DOGMATIC, AND POPULIST BELIEFS IN STRUCTURING RADICAL IDEOLOGIES

The electoral success of radical parties and politicians has stimulated scholars to study polarization and the spread of radical ideas across the ideological spectrum. Most public opinion research conceptualizes political radicalism as the “radicalization of people’s attitudes on single [policy] issues” (Baldassarri & Gelman, 2008, p. 2). The underlying assumption is that radical individuals organize their political ideas based on explicit preferences toward concrete policy considerations and, thus, their level of radicalism is captured by their position on this set of policies (Gomez et al., 2015; Tillie & Fennema, 1998; Van Der Brug et al., 2000).

Although this approach is useful to understand what ‘far-’ left and right voters stand for in terms of concrete policy preferences (Ezrow et al., 2014; Ortiz Barquero et al., 2022), defining political radicalism solely in terms of specific policy issues is not satisfactory (Joseph et al., 2009). After all, whether a particular position on a given policy can be considered radical is subject to continuous change, depending on the shifts in the ideological space and the dynamics of the electoral competition. As Sidanius (1985, p. 369) argues, “[B]elief in political and social equality of Blacks would most certainly have been a very ‘extreme’ idea in the America of 1776 and is now becoming a very moderate idea” (see also, Ellis, 2012; Jungkunz, 2022). Citizens might also become more or less extreme in their policy positions in response to changes in parties’ strategies (Erikson et al., 2001; Franklin & Wlezien, 1997), an electoral victory (Albert & Barney, 2018; DiSalvo, 2012), or extraordinary and shocking events (Atkeson & Maestas, 2012; Gershkoff & Kushner, 2005).

The fact that policy issues are consistently moving targets that refers to specific areas of an ideological space makes them insufficiently robust as a conceptual basis for the study of radical ideologies. To better understand the nature of political radicalism, it is necessary to go beyond “simplistic indicators like left-right self placement” or concrete positional issues such as the “support for racist movements” (Mudde, 2010, p. 1179; Rovny, 2013). Hidden beneath concrete policy positions, radical ideologies are based on deeper-level dispositions about politics and society (Backes, 2007; McClosky & Chong, 1985; Mudde, 2010). In this perspective, radical beliefs are formed by two separate, yet interrelated, components. The first one consists of a specific set of values that forms the nucleus of the ideological system. This **ontological** core is shared by different radical belief systems and differentiates radical from non-radical ideologies (Laclau, 2005).

Second, onto this ontological core, an **ontic** component is grafted. This second dimension is composed of a set of concrete issues that translate the ontological components into issue-specific preferences linked to more traditional dimensions of the electoral competition (e.g., left-right, secular-religious), therefore allowing the differentiation between different types of radicalism (e.g., left- and right-wing radicalism, religious fundamentalism) (Ezrow et al., 2014; Laclau, 1990).

This paper proposes a novel conceptual model that aims at improving both the conceptualization and measurement of the essential core of radical ideologies. We focus on the ontological structure of radical belief systems as a whole and argue that dogmatism, antagonism, and populism constitute its core elements. In order to scrutinize this ontological core empirically, we adopt a person-centred approach—a Latent Profile-Confirmatory Factor Analysis—which classifies individuals into different types of belief systems based on their endorsement of antagonistic, dogmatic and, populist views.

A person-centred approach is a label for a methodological approach that is an alternative to “variable-centred” approaches. Traditional variable-centred approaches focus on the unique effect of separate beliefs on a dependent variable. Consequently, they are not well suited to investigate how individuals combine different beliefs and ideas. In contrast, person-centred approaches focus on how individuals combine several beliefs together enabling different ideological profiles (i.e. belief systems) to spontaneously emerge (Meeusen et al., 2018). This has been proved to be a useful feature for studying ideological systems (Bertsou & Caramani, 2020; Daenekindt et al., 2017; Grunow et al., 2018; Lancaster, 2019; Pavlović et al., 2022; Pew Research Center, 2017b). Person-centred approaches enable us to identify distinctive ideological profiles, assess their structure, and quantify their prevalence in the general population. They also allow for the presence of non-linear patterns in the configurations of ideological content, effectively taking into account that individuals might hold contrasting positions (Broockman, 2016) or completely disregard certain ideological components (Roberts, 2021). Furthermore, by shifting the focus from separate attitudinal dimensions to ideological profiles as specific configurations of interconnected positions on key attitudinal dimensions, person-centred approaches allow us to explore the potential complexities in citizens’ different types of radicalism. The proposed model is tested using data from the 2019 Belgian National Election Study given that Belgium is the home of one of the strongest populist radical right parties in Western Europe and has recently experienced the electoral breakthrough of the populist radical left (Pilet, 2021).

2.1 Conceptualizing radical belief systems

2.1.1 Radical beliefs: Ontological vs. ontic components

Much of the literature on political radicalism focuses on its potential behavioural aspects (e.g., why people vote for radical parties) or on its policy implications (e.g., why radical voters endorse certain policies). Based on this premise, scholars often argue that the core features of political radicalism “are to a large extent in line with key tenets of mainstream ideologies” (Mudde, 2010, p. 1175) and that radical individuals deviate, more or less sharply, from a set of concrete issues organized on one (i.e., left-right) or multiple (e.g., cultural and economic) policy dimensions (Tillie & Fennema, 1998). According to this view, radical individuals can be (easily) distinguished from moderate citizens simply based their extremity on a set of relevant policy issues (Rooduijn & Akkerman, 2017; Simonovits, 2017; Spierings & Zaslove, 2015).

The emphasis on concrete policy stances—i.e., the ontic elements of a particular type of radicalism—renders it difficult to uncover the core ideological features that constitute the ontological foundations of radical ideological thinking. Although some previous research acknowledges the significance of general views about politics and society (i.e., the ontological dimension) (Haidt et al., 2009; Tavits, 2007), these essential elements are often overlooked in empirical investigations on radical ideologies. Thus, the primary objective of this study is to delve into the ontological structure of political radicalism, aiming to distinguish radical beliefs from other, more nuanced, configurations of attitudes present in left- and right-wing ideologies.

In our investigation, we integrate recent contributions from sociology, political psychology, and political science (Jost et al., 2009; Keskintürk, 2022; Moskowitz & Jenkins, 2004) with the work of Ernesto Laclau¹ (2005). We define radical ideologies as multi-dimensional belief systems that encompass an individual’s convictions, attitudes, and dispositions towards various concepts, ideas, or objects. These multilayered ideological systems are composed of both ontological and ontic elements (Laclau, 2005; McClosky & Chong, 1985; Mudde, 2010). The first and most central dimension is composed of a set of ontological elements that define radicalism as opposition to “the established structure of power” and as the antithesis of commonly accepted or mainstream political practices and values (Biglieri & Perelló, 2011; Canovan, 1999, p. 3; Laclau, 1990). These

¹ To be sure, we do not strictly adhere to Laclau’s own definition of radicalism, ontology, or populism but, rather, we partially borrow from Laclau’s works a series of theoretical intuitions that inform our understanding of how (radical)discursive practices are constantly constructed, contested, and transformed.

ontological elements are shared by different types of radical belief systems (i.e., left- and right-wing), but they do not provide concrete solutions to key social questions such as equality, freedom, justice, or redistribution of resources. Rather, they function as a formative device onto which specific ontic elements (e.g., issue-specific preferences) are grafted. In other words, they inform more concrete beliefs, structure individuals' general understanding of society, politics, and governance, and provide a way to fulfil political ambitions and goals.

On the other hand, the ontic represents the 'grounding' of the ontological elements into a set of already mobilized cultural, religious, and socio-economic cleavages that structure a given national political space ([Kriesi, 2014](#)). These ontic elements give substance and comprehensiveness to an ideological system and are contingent upon the articulation of the broader ideological and discursive content of a given space of representation ([Laclau, 2005](#)). For example, positions toward anti-immigration or racial inequality are not always relevant issues that differentiate what is considered radical from what is mainstream and, sometimes, not even what is left- or right-wing. In other words, the signification of the ontic elements is not fixed in advance. Rather, the extent to which these elements can be considered radical or moderate changes according to the articulation of the ontological content within a particular place and time ([Jost et al., 2009](#)).

2.1.2 *The (ontological) core of radical beliefs*

So far, we have argued that, regardless of their ideological collocation on a set of ontic issues, radical belief systems share some ontological similarity in the underlying logic of belief origination and organization that makes them fundamentally distinct from mainstream ideologies. Answering the question of which are the components that compose this ontological core², we conceptualize radicalism as an ideological framework that sees politics as centred around a conflict-seeking antagonism between a superior in-group and a 'ruling body' of hegemonic forces that are responsible for frustrating the demands of the former. We operationalize radicalism as an ideological system constituted by three ontological component, namely (a) antagonism, (b) ideological dogmatism (adversity to comprise), and (c) populism.

² Our goal is not to provide a comprehensive study of radical ideological thinking nor to account for the complexity of all forms, instances, and variants of radicalism. Similarly to what Mudde ([2010](#)) has done for populist radical right ideology, our purpose is to show that there are sound theoretical reasons to expect that contemporary political radicalism revolves around a few ontological elements that are shared by different types of radical individuals.

First, radical thinking can never be fully understood without considering the constitutive importance of **antagonism** towards the established structure of power (for a discussion see, Hansen, 2014). In political terms, antagonism is the tendency to oppose the *status quo* with the objective of inducing radical change not only at the governmental level, or among the ruling elites, but in the established political order as a whole (Sartori, 2005). Radical individuals and parties have been found to hold a sharply antagonistic view of politics and society (Gencoglu Onbasi, 2016; McClosky & Chong, 1985; Sauer & Ajanovic, 2016). Laclau explains antagonism through the existence of *the political* (Laclau, 1990). The political represents the “struggle over the very institutionalization of a given set of rules” (Hansen, 2014, p. 7). These rules are not fixed or predetermined but, rather, they emerge from the competition of diverse forces vying for dominance. Mainstream politics try to “empty” and depoliticize this process by installing a “cult of compromise” (Mouffe, 2005) that addresses social demands in a way that avoids unsettling the prevailing *status quo*. The political struggle is allowed but carefully confined within a center-ground that upholds the stability of the mainstream groups, discourses, or ideologies. This hegemonic order is continually challenged by radical forces that seek to establish alternative ideas and demands by creating an antagonistic frontier against the very rules and institutions that shape the contours of what is considered mainstream (Laclau, 2005). In other words, radicalism rejects the mainstream idea of consensus-building between different interests and societal groups and, instead, endorses ‘unreasonable’ practices to ensure that alternative viewpoints are not marginalized or suppressed (Mouffe, 2005; Mudde, 2010).

This tendency of being ‘unreasonable’ is linked with the concept of ideological **dogmatism**, which is the second ontological component of radical belief systems (for a review see, Zmigrod, 2020). Dogmatism is usually defined as “a relatively closed cognitive organization of beliefs and disbeliefs about reality” (Rokeach, 1956, p. 3) that results in the rejection of competing principles and ideas (Altemeyer, 2002). Research shows that (left- and right-wing) radical individuals tend to display dogmatic tendencies such as belief superiority, intolerance of different beliefs, and adversity to political compromise (Jessoula et al., 2022; Jost et al., 1999; McClosky & Chong, 1985; van Prooijen & Krouwel, 2017). This tendency is related to the need of establishing an ideological defence against other beliefs and to justify group-centric and uncompromising political practices (Toner et al., 2013). A certain degree of dogmatism is functional to the creation of the aforementioned antagonistic frontier. It serves to draw a (clear) moral distinction between what is “radical” and what is “mainstream”, “good” or “bad” (Gründl & Aichholzer, 2020; Mudde, 1995).

For radical individuals, the dominant institutions and the mainstream politicians are considered an impediment to any real and systemic change and, thus, are always erroneous or “untruthful”. The ideas of like-minded (radical) individuals (the in-group) are considered “pure”, good, honest, and virtuous and, thus, impossible to disprove or confute ([van Prooijen et al., 2015](#)).

In challenging the current societal and political, the tendency of considering certain values, goals, and ideas as the only legitimate ones is needed to create a new political subject—“Us, the People”—embedded within the notion of **populism**. Populism is the third ontological component of radical beliefs and, although it is not (always) a synonym of political radicalism ([Rooduijn et al., 2014](#)), it is recognized as an important ideological element in driving radical vote choice and motivating forms of radical antagonism towards the “ruling block” ([Hawkins et al., 2018](#)). This is because the subject of “the People” can function as a counter-hegemonic device. “The People” represents and unites various ‘unsatisfied demands’ and grievances with the ultimate aim of creating a subject capable of achieving a strong change and generating a new political order ([Biglieri & Perelló, 2011](#); [Hansen, 2014](#); [Laclau, 2005](#); [Tindall, 2022](#)). This is made possible by the fact that, within populist politics, the in- and out-group are “floating signifiers” that do not form a stable system of signification. “The people” and those who do not belong to the people are, in principle, “empty” and determined by the *condition of possibilities* of the political competition ([Kaltwasser & Hauwaert, 2020](#); [Laclau, 1977](#)). In his own definition of populism, Laclau seeks to vindicate the term populism from its negative connotations arguing that it is a vehicle for marginalized groups to have their voices heard and to challenge established elites ([Laclau, 2005](#)). This work partially diverges from this understanding. We argue that what unites the people is the dogmatic and “Manichean” dichotomy that explicitly justifies the superiority of the in-group (“We, the People”) at the expense of the out-group(s) (“Them, the enemy of the people”). Examples are the heroic struggle of the proletarians against the bourgeoisie; the nativist protection of the beloved nation from external enemies and parasites such as Muslims or immigrants; or the working-class anger at the millionaires and billionaire and their politics of austerity.

2.1.3 Towards a typology of belief systems: empirical expectations

Conceptually, the ontology of political radicalism is embedded in a form of constitutive antagonism towards the *status quo*, the rejection of political compromise and competing ideas, and the construction of “the people” and “the others” as nodal points for the articulation of a counter-hegemonic political order. Empirically, the question remains how individuals combine these

ontological elements of radicalism into different ideological profiles, how the different profiles are distributed across the general population, and whether individuals subscribing to a radical ideological profile tend to display characteristics that have been previously identified as important determinants of political radicalism. We tentatively formulate three expectations regarding the different ideological profiles potentially present among the Belgian mass public.

First, we expect to find an integrated radical profile consisting of individuals who combine, to a similar extent, higher levels of antagonistic, dogmatic and populist beliefs. We expect these individuals to be less educated, less interested in politics, more likely to perceive themselves as disadvantaged and vote for both radical left and radical right parties (Betz, 1994; Faye, 1972; Kaltwasser & Hauwaert, 2020; McClosky & Chong, 1985). We also expect that individuals who feel relatively deprived or disempowered are more likely to subscribe to the radical profile. The adoption of radical beliefs is functional to challenge the existing social, economic, or political order considered responsible for the injustices and inequalities that individuals or groups believe have left them behind. As previous research have shown (Cramer, 2016; Gest, 2016; Hochschild, 2018), this is an attempt to reclaim agency and demand recognition for peoples' concerns, often in opposition to the mainstream political establishment or societal norms.

Second, next to the integrated radical profile, we anticipate the existence of alternative ideological profiles consisting of individuals who adhere to one or more ontological elements of radicalism but do not subscribe to all of them. Similar to mainstream ideologies (Baldassarri & Goldberg, 2014), individuals might combine certain non-mainstream ideas but disregard or reject others effectively creating ideological subtypes that show alternative belief configurations (Lancaster, 2019). Although we do not have clear expectations, we believe some of these profiles share similar attitudes and demographic characteristics with the radical integrated profile depending on their degree of ideological similarity.

Third, we expect to find a 'Pro-system' profile that rejects antagonistic, dogmatic, and populist beliefs and represents the antithesis of the proposed model of radicalism. We anticipate individuals belonging to this profile to be more educated, interested in politics, and over-represented among the electorate of mainstream political parties.

2.2 Data, instruments, and modelling approach

2.2.1 Data

In order to construct a typology of radical belief systems, we use data from the 2019 Belgian National Election Study (BNES) ([Meuleman et al., 2020](#)). The 2019 wave employs a two-stage sampling design and is carried out among a register-based random probability sample of Belgians entitled to vote in the 2019 national elections. The data were collected, mostly, face-to-face by means of computer-assisted personal interviewing between December 2019 and October 2020. The total sample size consists of 1659 individuals with a minimum response rate of 37.5% (44.34% in Flanders and 29.68% in Wallonia and Brussels)³.

2.2.2 Instruments

To scrutinize the ontological core of political radicalism, three attitudinal measures were purposefully included in the BNES (Table 2.1). **Antagonism** is measured by two items that tap into the respondents' perceived need for an imminent and radical change of the entire system and not only the ruling elites. Ideological **Dogmatism** is assessed using three items referring to the rejection of others' ideas, ideological rigidity, and the superiority of one's own opinions ([Shearman & Levine, 2006](#)). **Populism** is measured using an adapted version of the scale developed by A. Akkerman et al. ([2014](#)). This measure taps into negative affect towards the establishment (anti-elitism) and the perception of the in-group as a homogeneous body with a uniform will (people centrism) ([Hawkins et al., 2018](#)).

Results from the CFA models indicate that antagonism, ideological dogmatism, and affinity with populism are distinct and independent concepts. Pairwise correlations between the indices are, on average, equal to $r = 0.40$ leaving plenty of room for testing the presence of different ideological configurations among the general public. Concerning the measurement quality of the used instruments, the model display good fit ($CFI \geq .95$, $RMSA \leq .06$, $SRMR \leq .08$) with standardized factor loadings ranging from .43 to .80. This indicates good reliability and validity of the used scales ([Hu & Bentler, 1999](#)).

³ Because of the outbreak of the COVID virus in the fall of 2020, the fieldwork was interrupted two times and terminated on October 31st, irrespective of the status of the data collection. This has led to a higher non-response rate compared to previous BNES rounds.

Table 2.1: Standardized factor loadings, latent variable correlations, and wordings of the items used to construct the typology of radical belief systems.

Item	Factor:	Factor:	Factor:
	Antagonism	Dogmatism	Populism
Only radical change can solve the problems of our society	.79	—	—
Not only the government but the entire system needs to change	.74	—	—
There is a clear line between what is good and what is bad	—	.43	—
There is only one correct way to think about most things	—	.91	—
Those with whom I do not agree are usually wrong	—	.43	—
People and not the politicians should take decisions	—	—	.71
People would be better represented by ordinary citizens	—	—	.74
Power should be returned to the people	—	—	.80
Better if politicians just followed the will of the people	—	—	.69
Ordinary people know better than politicians	—	—	.67
Correlation Antagonism	1	—	—
Correlation Dogmatism	.39	1	—
Correlation Populism	.47	.38	1

$$CFI = .96, RMSA = 0.055, SRMR = 0.036$$

To validate the typology of radical beliefs we use a large set of social-structural variables that allows us to assess how radical beliefs are stratified among the Belgian population. Sex refers to

the sex of the respondent assigned at birth and is a dichotomous variable (male and female). Age is recoded into 6 different categories and treated as continuous. Education is measured as the respondent's highest level of education (1. None – 10. University). Religious denomination is measured by three categories “Christian”, “Free-thinker”, and “Other Religion”. Due to the Belgian linguistic-cultural cleavage, we include a variable that distinguishes Flemish and Francophone Belgians. Subjective social class is measured using three categories: Working class, Low Middle class, and Higher Middle/Upper class. We also use a subjective measure of feeling of powerlessness (i.e., Some people feel disregarded or abandoned by politics, 1. Never - 5. Almost always) to capture a general feeling of frustration and dissatisfaction with the current representation mechanisms. Lastly, respondent's political interest is measured using three questions tapping into interest in politics, the tendency of following political news, and the frequency of discussing politics with friends.

To test how the resulting ideological profiles are related to radical voting, we included a variable measuring respondent's vote in the 2019 national Belgian elections. We recoded vote choice into three categories namely, mainstream, populist radical-right, and populist radical-left voters. Following Rooduijn et al. (2019), we define as populist radical left voters those citizens who voted for the Labour Party of Belgium (PVDA/PTB) and as populist radical right those who voted for Vlaams Belang (VB) and Parti Populaire (PP). An overview of the used instrument and the corresponding descriptive statistics are given in the Appendix.

2.2.3 Statistical modelling

To test the proposed theoretical model, we employ Latent Profile-Confirmatory Factor Analysis (LP-CFA) (Clark et al., 2013). LP-CFA belongs to the class of Factor Mixture Models and can be seen as a step forward compared to Latent Profile Analysis (LPA) since it combines the analytical advantages of person-oriented approaches with the increase in reliability and validity of the included constructs obtained from confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) (Hancock & Samuelsen, 2007). CFA corrects for measurement error in the model by assuming that covariance between a set of observed variables (e.g., a set of attitudinal questions) is explained by an unobserved latent variable (e.g., antagonism). After estimating a score for each individual in the sample on the three proposed latent variables (antagonism, populism, and dogmatism), the LP-CFA searches for types of individuals that show similarities in their scores on the latent variables. These unobserved types can be interpreted as different ideological profiles. This enables us to study the ideological

heterogeneity of the Belgian population and ensure that the extracted profiles and the different ontological elements can be compared and interpreted meaningfully (Lubke & Muthén, 2005). Additional methodological details on the LP-CFA model are reported in the Appendix.

In a next step, we validate the extracted profiles. Typically, this is done by examining the predictors of profile membership and/or how the extracted profiles relate to theoretically relevant outcomes (Spurk et al., 2020). To this end, we fit two sets of regressions. First, a multinomial logistic regression is used to explain to which ideological profile individuals belong by means of structural predictors. We employ a 3-step approach that takes into account the non-negligible classification error resulting from the LP-CFA (Asparouhov & Muthén, 2014). Second, we carried out a multinomial logistic regression with vote choice as the outcome and profile assignment as the main predictor of interest. As commonly done in voting behaviour literature, we control for political interest, religious denomination, institutional trust, Left-Right self-placement, and a set of relevant demographic characteristics (gender, age, education, migration background)⁴.

The analyses are carried out using post-stratification weights based on gender, age, and education. For the multinomial regressions predicting vote choice, the post-stratification weights are calculated also including voting behaviour. This accounts for the imbalance in turnout and levels of party support between the 2019 election results and the self-reported vote in the BNES survey. The models are fitted with Mplus 8.4 (L. K. Muthén & Muthén, 2017) using the package Mplus Automation (Hallquist & Wiley, 2018) and user-written functions in the R 4.0.5 programming language (R Core Team, 2019).

2.3 Results

2.3.1 Constructing a typology of radical beliefs: LP-CFA

To derive a typology of belief systems, we apply LP-CFA to the items measuring antagonism, dogmatism and populism. The first step of this analysis consists of determining the optimal number of latent profiles. The best fitting model is determined by examining the goodness-of-fit statistic in tandem with substantive considerations (B. Muthén, 2003). A minimum value in the BIC and AICC fit indices indicates the best-fitting solution (Nylund et al., 2007). Adjacent models should also be compared using the BIC between the $k - 1$ class model and a k class (ΔBIC) and the Vuong-Lo-

⁴ In this case, we do not include the place of residence of the respondent (French-speaking Belgium or Flanders) since it would be highly collinear with the vote for either populist right or left.

Mendell-Rubin likelihood ratio test (VLMR, [Lo et al., 2001](#)). In this latter case, a statistically significant p-value indicates that the k-class model should be preferred over the k-1 class model. Entropy is another fit measure that indicates how accurately the model is able to classify the observations into different classes. A value close to 1 indicates that the extracted classes are perfectly defined ([Nylund-Gibson & Choi, 2018](#)). Although no clear cut-off criterion exists ([Weller et al., 2020](#)), a value close to .80 is considered acceptable ([Wang et al., 2017](#)). Lastly, the number of sampled individuals in each class should be large enough to draw meaningful inferences and retain numerical stability. Solutions with classes containing less than 50 observations ([B. Muthén & Muthén, 2000](#)) or 5% of the sample ([Weller et al., 2020](#)) should be excluded or carefully examined. Based on the goodness-of-fit statistic reported in Table 2.2 and substantive considerations, the 6-profile solution is selected as the most exhaustive and adequate model to explore citizens' ideological profiles. More information on the procedure to select the best class solution is reported in the Appendix.

Table 2.2: Goodness-of-fit statistics for the estimated LP-CFA models

Classes	Parameters	AIC	BIC	Delta BIC	Entropy	VLRT p.value	Lowest N
1	20	45,557.77	45,665.55				1,618
2	24	42,694.67	42,824.01	2,841.54	0.82	0.0000	696
3	28	42,182.41	42,333.30	490.70	0.76	0.0001	367
4	32	41,808.78	41,981.23	352.08	0.76	0.2715	382
5	36	41,550.97	41,744.98	236.25	0.75	0.3139	136
6	40	41,291.47	41,507.03	237.95	0.79	0.1114	118
7	44	41,160.63	41,397.74	109.29	0.78	0.2484	37
8	48	41,058.06	41,316.73	81.01	0.78	0.2772	30
9	52	40,952.35	41,232.58	84.15	0.78	0.1630	30

In order to interpret the six latent ideological profiles, we compare their averages on antagonism, dogmatism, and populism. In addition to the interpretation of the class-specific averages, a series of plots (see Figure 2.1) depict the estimated latent means of antagonism, dogmatism, and populism expressed in standard deviation from the mean of the sample for each extracted class. In the plots, the vertical lines around the dots represent the 90% and 95% confidence intervals around the estimated latent means. The dashed horizontal zero line represents the sample mean for each

ontological component. When the confidence intervals in the plot do not include the dashed horizontal zero line, the estimated means are significantly different from the average of the sample. To ease the interpretation, I categorized the different profiles into 3 groups, namely, Integrated Radical, Alternative Non-mainstream, and Mainstream.

In line with our expectations, we find an integrated radical ideological profile (left plot in Figure 2.1), multiple non-mainstream ideological profiles that combine several (but not all) radical components (central plot in Figure 2.1), and two mainstream ideological profiles (right plot in Figure 2.1). Profile 1 corresponds to an integrated radical ideological profile in which all three proposed ontological components of radical thinking are present strongly and simultaneously (left plot in Figure 2.1). We label this profile **Radical**. It accounts for 17% of the total sample suggesting that the number of citizens endorsing the core ontological elements of radical ideology is by no means negligible. This indicates that political radicalism is a multi-dimensional phenomenon that lies at the intersection of a set of general and abstract ideas that contrasts with mainstream politics.

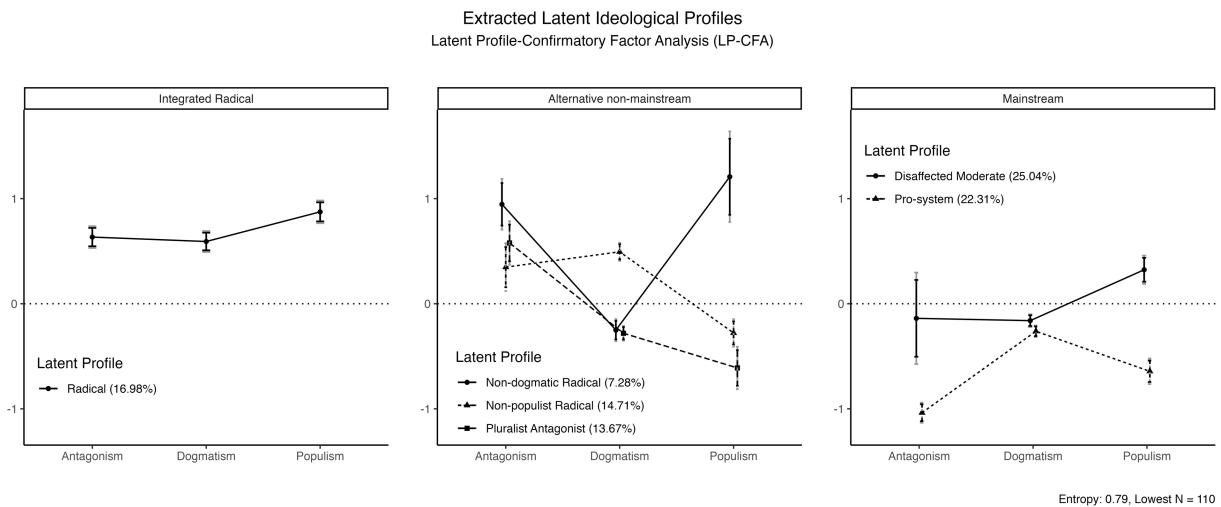


Figure 2.1: Estimated latent means expressed in standard deviation from the sample mean of each ontological component. Error bars represent 95% (grey) and 90% (black) confidence intervals around the estimated means.

Next to the integrated radical class, we detect three ideological profiles that contain some but not all ontological elements of radical thinking (central plot in Figure 2.1). Contrary to the general conceptualization of radicalism as a unidimensional and binary concept, this result shows that individuals may mix radical beliefs with mainstream beliefs. Profile 2 has the highest levels of populism and antagonism but shows a tendency towards accepting different ideas (lower than average on dogmatism). We label this class **Non-dogmatic Radical**. It represents 7% of the total

sample and indicates that antagonism can be strongly intertwined with populism but that individuals might be willing to compromise on some of their positions in order to achieve the desired social change. In line with previous theoretical work ([Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013](#)), this class might represent a more ‘inclusionary’ version of radical politics characterized by individuals who accept the presence of competing ideas and does not display a strong one-dimensional way of thinking.

Profile 3, **Non-populist Radical**, accounts for 14% of the sample and has below-average levels of populism but displays both antagonist and anti-compromise tendencies. The class represents a group of individuals who reject the *status quo* and traditional representation mechanisms based on the compromise between different groups and interests. However, individuals belonging to this class do not portray the elites as a negative out-group and they don’t think that the “popular will” is the ultimate source of political legitimacy. This class may represent a blend between technocratic governing and antagonist politicking where the interest of the social whole is achieved by rejecting the current system of government but not necessarily by fighting the political elites and empowering the “common people” ([Bertsou & Caramani, 2020](#)).

Profile 4, the **Pluralist Antagonist** class, accounts for 14% of the sample. This profile is composed of individuals who show high levels of antagonism but below sample-mean levels of populism and adversity to comprise. In this case, the need for a deep transformation of the current system might represent a strong but undefined opposition to the way politics and society are organized. The political struggle is decoupled from an “Us versus Them” logic where the empowerment of a specific group of people is contrasted with the imperative need of defeating the political elites.

Lastly, our study also reveals the presence of two more mainstream ideological belief systems that together account for approximately 50% of the surveyed respondents (right plot in Figure 2.1). Unsurprising, this finding proves that non-radical mainstream ideological thinking is the most prevalent way for citizens to organize ideological beliefs. We label one of these groups as **Pro-systems** as it is formed by individuals showing strong support for the *status quo* and mainstream political practices. Across the entire sample, the Pro-system profile accounts for 22% of the surveyed respondents. It has the lowest score on antagonism, dogmatism, and populism. In line with our expectations, the members belonging to this class reject the ontological components of radical beliefs and represent the antithesis of the Radical class.

We label the last class **Disaffected moderates** as it represents respondents who do not have strong and identifiable ideological positions but score slightly below average on dogmatism and antagonism and slightly above average on populism. In line with previous research on citizens' ideological profiles (Bertsou & Caramani, 2020, p. 23), the relatively large size (23.6%) of this group suggests that this group is likely to reflect a “general feeling of dissatisfaction and frustration with politics” without being outspoken radical⁵.

2.3.2 Comparing the different ideological profiles with the Pro-system class

To validate the profile solution, we employ regression analysis to investigate how profile membership is related to theoretically relevant predictors of political radicalism both in terms of background characteristics and general attitudes towards politics (Spurk et al., 2020). This allows us to understand how the extracted ideological profiles are stratified in the general population and assess whether certain factors make it more likely for respondents to endorse radical beliefs.

⁵ The presence of this class of individuals is not only relevant theoretically and in line with previous literature on the topic (for a discussion see, Kinder, 2006) . It also improves the validity of our typology by avoiding losing track of these individuals in averaged scores.

Table 2.3: 3-step multinomial logistic regression model predicting profile assignment (reference category: Pro-system profile). Standard errors (in parenthesis) and p-values reported on the logit scale.

Predictors	Radical		Non-dogmatic Radical		Non-populist Radical		Pluralist Antagonist		Disaffected moderate	
	Odds Ratio	p-value	Odds Ratio	p-value	Odds Ratio	p-value	Odds Ratio	p-value	Odds Ratio	p-value
Age	1.64 (0.159)	0.002	0.74 (0.190)	0.114	1.63 (0.172)	0.005	1.24 (0.167)	0.205	1.06 (0.143)	0.689
Education	0.43 (0.169)	0.000	0.83 (0.266)	0.493	0.42 (0.187)	0.000	0.95 (0.215)	0.813	0.65 (0.165)	0.009
Female (Ref: Male)	0.97 (0.266)	0.908	2.29 (0.372)	0.026	1.35 (0.278)	0.275	1.11 (0.283)	0.710	1.40 (0.239)	0.156
Non-native (Ref: Belgian)	1.64 (0.362)	0.174	1.53 (0.531)	0.423	0.96 (0.463)	0.930	0.54 (0.517)	0.239	1.45 (0.345)	0.280
French-speaking Belgium (Ref: Flanders)	13.14 (0.321)	0.000	10.52 (0.448)	0.000	17.55 (0.356)	0.000	7.99 (0.341)	0.000	2.84 (0.322)	0.001
PSC: Low Middle (Ref: Working Class)	0.41 (0.377)	0.017	0.51 (0.600)	0.266	0.67 (0.409)	0.320	0.66 (0.478)	0.389	0.74 (0.378)	0.418
PSC: Higher Middle/Upper (Ref: Working Class)	0.29 (0.432)	0.005	0.52 (0.607)	0.275	0.58 (0.444)	0.220	0.63 (0.473)	0.334	0.52 (0.394)	0.100
Christian (Ref: None)	1.52 (0.329)	0.200	1.09 (0.445)	0.840	1.35 (0.355)	0.393	0.97 (0.318)	0.921	1.14 (0.273)	0.638
Free-Thinker (Ref: None)	0.68 (0.531)	0.471	1.74 (0.558)	0.321	0.34 (0.631)	0.086	0.83 (0.464)	0.679	0.69 (0.435)	0.400
Other Religion (Ref: None)	2.10 (0.562)	0.187	1.31 (0.741)	0.715	0.51 (0.828)	0.413	0.94 (0.713)	0.936	0.56 (0.666)	0.391
Political interest	0.55 (0.152)	0.000	0.66 (0.217)	0.055	0.64 (0.169)	0.009	1.07 (0.162)	0.654	0.53 (0.140)	0.000
Institutional trust	0.42 (0.161)	0.000	0.26 (0.210)	0.000	0.53 (0.186)	0.001	0.44 (0.177)	0.000	0.45 (0.154)	0.000
Powerlessness	1.90 (0.139)	0.000	2.38 (0.237)	0.000	1.27 (0.143)	0.095	1.22 (0.152)	0.196	1.59 (0.123)	0.000

First, we focus on the comparison between the **Radical** and **Pro-system** profile. Results from the 3-step regression model presented in Table 2.3 suggest that respondents' level of education, age, and place of residence are associated with a higher propensity to belong to the Radical profile. In terms of odds, for each point increase in age, the odds of belonging to the Radical profile, instead of the Pro-system one, increase by a factor of 1.6, confirming past research on the topic ([Lubbers & Coenders, 2017](#)). On the contrary, for each point increase in education, individuals are, in terms of odds, 3.3 times less likely to belong to the Radical profile. This finding is in line with recent research on the general demographic characteristics of radical individuals and voters ([Lancaster, 2019](#); [Ramiro, 2016](#)). We also found that individuals who identify with the working class are over-represented in the Radical class, echoing previous research on working-class radicalism ([Lipset, 1983](#)). In terms of odds, individuals whose perceived social class is low middle and higher/upper are 2.4 and 3.2 times less likely to subscribe to the Radical profile, respectively. We also found that residing in French-speaking Belgium (versus Flanders) has a strong and positive impact on the likelihood of belonging to the Radical class. The fact that this effect is so strong is mainly driven by the fact that, in Wallonia and Brussels, the Pro-system profile is less prevalent compared to Flanders⁶. These are strong and substantial differences that underlie profound disparities in the dynamics of the political conflict between the Belgian regions that are the result of a gradual divergence in political, cultural, economic, and social factors ([Billiet, 2009](#); [De Witte & Klandermans, 2000](#)).

Turning to respondents' attitudes about politics, we found that radical individuals are less interested in politics as citizens belonging to the Pro-System profile and less likely to trust political institutions ([Geurkink et al., 2020](#)). For each standard deviation increase in Institutional Trust and Political Interest, respondents are respectively 3 and 1.7 times less likely to subscribe to the Radical profile compared to the Pro-system one. In line with previous research ([Koen Abts & Baute, 2022](#)), we also find that people who feel abandoned or disregarded by politics are 1.8 times more likely to subscribe to the Radical profile compared to the Pro-system one. It is also worth noting that religious denomination is not associated with the propensity to subscribe to the Radical profile,

⁶ For the sake of clarity, we report raw percentages for the class assignment. Approximately 30% of Flemish respondents belong to the Pro-system profile. On the contrary, only 13% of the French-speaking Belgians are considered pro-System. Concerning the radical profile, approximately 25% of the French-speaking respondents are considered radical while only 11% of the Flemish sample belongs to the radical profile.

confirming the declining importance of religion in structuring ideological beliefs among the Belgian population (Best, 2011; Norris & Inglehart, 2011).

Next, we contrast the Radical (vs Pro-system) profile with the other three non-mainstream (vs Pro-system) belief systems. This allows us to further validate the selected profile solution by assessing whether individuals belonging to any of these profiles are similar to the individuals belonging to the Radicals profile in terms of background characteristics and attitudes. In general, we notice that the patterns of significance and the magnitude of the coefficients follow, for the most part, the same trend, suggesting the presence of pronounced similarities among individuals subscribing to non-mainstream belief systems. Nonetheless, it is worth noting a few important differences: the Radical profile is the only ideological profile where working-class individuals are over-represented, females are more likely to subscribe to the Non-dogmatic Radical profile, and individuals belonging to the Non-dogmatic Radical and Pluralist Antagonist profiles are slightly younger and more educated.

2.3.3 Comparing radical right and left voters with mainstream voters

To validate the proposed typology, we also test if adhering to a particular ideological profile is predictive of radical vote choice and whether any difference exists between radical left and radical right voters in the propensity to subscribe to different ideological profiles.

Results from multinomial logistic regressions reported in Figure 2.2 reveal that radical vote choice is associated with the proposed typology of ideological beliefs⁷. Concerning radical right voting, we found that the odds of voting for a populist radical right party are 2.4 times higher for individuals belonging to the Radical profile compared to individuals who subscribe to the Pro-system profile. In line with our expectations, belonging to the Radical profile is one of the strongest predictors of radical right voting, even beyond the commonly investigated effects of political interest, religious denomination, gender, and migration background. In contrast with our theoretical expectations, the coefficient predicting vote for Populist Radical Left is small and highly insignificant indicating the people belonging to the Radical profile are not more likely to vote for the radical left when compared to individuals belonging to the Pro-system profile. This finding is consistent with research suggesting that left-wing voters, in this case even those who

⁷ The complete regression table including the controls is reported in the Appendix.

vote for radical parties, are less likely to fully commit to an integrated radical profile (e.g., Jost et al., 2003a).

Moving to the three alternative non-mainstream classes, we find that none of the extracted profiles predicts radical vote choice with the notable exception of the **Non-dogmatic Radical** profile. The Non-dogmatic Radical profile is positively associated with voting for both radical right and radical left. In terms of odds ratios, individuals belonging to the Non-dogmatic Radical profile are approximately three times more likely to vote for a populist radical party compared to a mainstream party, controlling for a large set of potentially confounding variables.

This result suggests the existence of different “types” of radical voters. Some voters of radical parties see politics as a conflict-seeking form of antagonism that rejects compromise-based practices, while others are more willing to accept compromise and competing ideas. This means that radical voters—and, specifically, radical right voters—should not be automatically associated with a holistic rejection of political compromise and, more in general, a rigid and dogmatic conception of politics (c.f. Jost et al., 2003b). At the same time, this finding underlines an important difference between the radical left and radical right electorate. The electorate of the radical left parties in Belgium, namely voters of PTB and PTBA, is formed, for the most part, by individuals with high levels of antagonism and populism who, nonetheless, reject dogmatic and anti-comprising tendencies. On the contrary, the electorate of populist radical right parties is split between radical individuals that are willing to accept political compromise and individuals who, despite being radical, are not. Similarly to what happens for ontic issues positions (Jessoula et al., 2022; Lancaster, 2019), this indicates the presence of a certain degree of beliefs heterogeneity among the radical electorate.

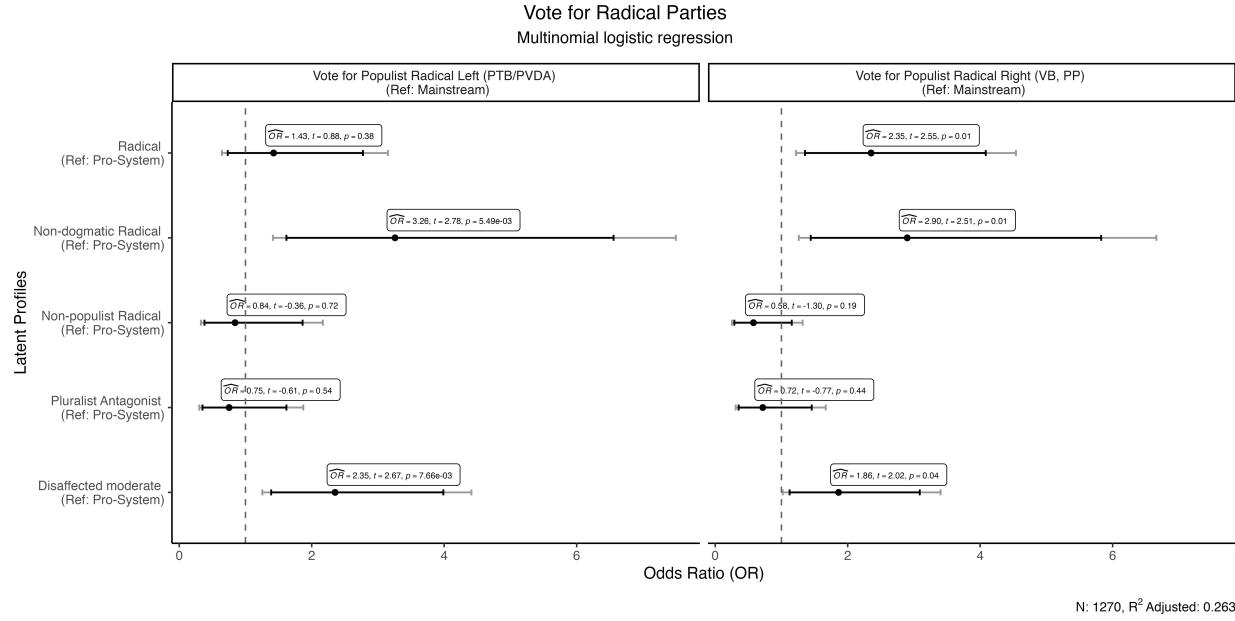


Figure 2.2: Effect of ideological profiles on vote choice controlling for all the other variables included in the model. Error bars represent 95% (black) and 90% (grey) confidence intervals around the estimated odds ratio. T- and p-values reported in the logit scale.

It is worth noting that individuals belonging to the **Disaffected moderate** profile are slightly more likely to vote for either radical left or right parties compared to the Pro-system profile. Although, at first sight, this result might appear surprising, it is in line with recent research on the generalized discontent that pervades contemporary political discourse (Bertsou & Caramani, 2020; Passarelli & Tuorto, 2018). Individuals subscribing to the Disaffected moderate profile are likely to represent a group of citizens that is disillusioned by traditional parties and, thus, they are likely to vote for radical parties to signal their frustration with how politics and representation work, and not necessarily because of the party's radical positions.

2.4 Conclusions

The paper conceptualizes the ontological nucleus of radical ideologies and quantifies its prevalence in the general population. Against the assumption that radical individuals are simply a more ‘radicalised’ version of mainstream voters (Spierings & Zaslove, 2015, p. 138), our results indicate that they are substantially different in the abstract and general ideas that compose their belief system (Mudde, 2010). We show that antagonist, dogmatic, and populist beliefs allow us to distinguish between radical and ‘Pro-system’ belief systems. Yet, we also discover a non-negligible amount of heterogeneity in the nucleus of political radicalism and differences across

radical left and radical right electorates. These findings support the idea that radicalism should not be reduced to a single (e.g., left-right continuum) or specific domain (e.g., anti-immigration) but should be rather studied as a complex and multi-layered ideological system centred around the ontological rejection of mainstream political practices (Laclau, 2005).

From this perspective, our study supports the idea that non-mainstream beliefs are not monolithic and binary ideological systems but rather fragmented ideologies subjected to different interpretations (Bertsou & Caramani, 2020; Lancaster, 2019). In addition to the Radical and Pro-system integrated profiles, we found different alternative ideological systems that combine some but not all ontological core elements of radical belief systems. This emphasises that individuals' understanding of politics and representation is not as straightforward as sometimes presented in the literature. Some individuals can endorse compromise-based practices but, nonetheless, see politics as a conflict-seeking form of antagonism against the political establishment and the current system of governance. Others might reject the *status quo* and compromise but have a positive view of the current political elites. This tendency contributes to explaining the widespread presence of 'flexible political identifications' (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012) in the past decades, as well as the success of radical 'thin' ideologies that often combine different ideological content to create alternative ideological narratives (Freeden, 2001).

Our paper also shows that even though the share of voters of radical parties and radical individuals might be similar, it does not mean, by any means, that they represent the same group of citizens (Rooduijn, 2017). We provide evidence that a non-negligible part of the electorate of both radical left and radical right parties is rather moderate, yet disaffected, by how politics works. As previous research suggests (Gomez et al., 2015; Mudde, 2010), this is likely to be connected to the growing electoral potential of populist radical parties that have become able to attract an ideologically heterogeneous coalition that also includes moderate, and even centrist, voters that express their discontent towards mainstream politics (Koen Abts et al., 2018; Kochuyt & Abts, 2017). We also show that radical voters are not "all the same" in terms of attitudes and ideological features. Compared to right-wing radical voters, radical left voters are less likely to endorse a black-and-white understanding of politics despite showing high levels of populism and antagonism (c.f., Greenberg & Jonas, 2003). This finding highlights that radical voters on opposite sides of the ideological spectrum do not differ only in terms of specific ontic elements (e.g., economic and

cultural issues) (Lancaster, 2019) but also ontologically in regard to the general and abstract principles that structure their belief system (Laclau, 1990; Mudde, 2007; Pierre Ostiguy & Casullo, 2017).

The theoretical distinction between the ontic and ontological dimensions in the study of belief systems highlights the importance of examining both the concrete policy manifestations and the underlying general and abstract principles that underpins radical ideologies. While this paper encourages researchers to transcend a purely policy-based approach to the study of radical ideologies, it does not focus on the ontic manifestations of different types of radical beliefs. Future research should integrate both ontic and ontological dimensions within a single explanatory model with the aim of understanding how these different components interact, structure, and give rise to different (radical) belief systems.

In spite of this limitation, our study have important implications for the study of radical ideological thinking, in general. While policy-based opinions are more strongly susceptible to contextual factors and temporal fluctuations, the approach presented in this study enables the identification of fundamental abstract beliefs that underpin more tangible expressions of political radicalism, such as voting behavior or extreme stances on specific political issues. We also show that these abstract and general beliefs are combined in different ways resulting in a non-negligible degree of ideological fragmentation. This implies that the mass public tends to organise political beliefs following different schemata or frameworks. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to understanding the core components of political radicalism and the combination and prioritization of certain ontological aspects is likely to inform and guide (radical) individuals' political attitudes and actions.

Consequently, to better understand political radicalism, the study of political ideology should, first and foremost, focus on the ontological elements of ideological beliefs and understand how individuals combine these ontological elements with other, more concrete and contextually defined, ontic elements (Federico & Malka, 2018; Jost et al., 2009). Doing so would allow for a more refined understanding of how ideological belief systems connect different political values to create meaningful ideological narratives and, in turn, how such systems are related to political choices.

3 CHAPTER 3 - THE CONDITIONAL ASSOCIATION BETWEEN POPULISM, IDEOLOGICAL EXTREMITY, AND AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION

“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 & 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 (Rooduijn & Akkerman, 2017; Uscinski et al., 2021; Van Hauwaert & Van Kessel, 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 & 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 & 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 & Ylä-Anttila, 2021). Westwood et al. (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 et al., 2018](#); [Rahn, 2018](#)) and a high salience of affectively charged considerations against Hilary Clinton and the Democratic party ([Abramowitz & 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 (Carmines et al., 2018; Donovan & Redlawsk, 2018; Mutz, 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.

3.1 Conceptualizing Populism

Without 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 & 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 intersection 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, p. 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, Cohen Rodrigues, 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 et al., 2019) and policy-related preferences (Loew & Faas, 2019).

3.1.1 *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 et al., 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 et al., 2019; Mudde & 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).

3.1.2 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 & 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 & 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 ([Enyedi, 2016](#); [Rooduijn et al., 2014](#); [Stanley, 2008](#); [Taggart, 2000](#); [Worsley, 1969](#)). 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, p. 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, p. 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*.

3.1.3 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 & 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 et al., 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 & 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 & 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 ([Jennifer McCoy et al., 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*.

3.2 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 et al., 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” ([Lilliana Mason, 2018, p. 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 & 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 et al., 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 et al., 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 & Barney, 2018, p. 1252](#)) or their policy-based opinions were in open contrast with Trump’s positions ([Barber & Pope, 2019](#)). In an analysis of the 2016 primaries, Dyck et al. ([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 & Barney ([2018](#)) show that Trump was supported, mainly, because of his “post-ideological” anti-establishment appeal (see also, [Abramowitz & Webster, 2018; Bankert, 2020](#)). This is confirmed by quantitative analyses of Trump’s campaign materials. Trump was disproportionately focused on critiquing the elites, regardless of their political sympathies ([D. A. Graham, 2016; Lacatus, 2019](#)). 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 ([Aswad, 2019; Lacatus, 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 & 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 & 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 et al., 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 & 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 et al., 2019; Savoy, 2018](#)).⁸ 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 & Lee, 2019](#)). On average, Democrats started to become more and more progressive on a number of substantive issues such as income redistribution, race, healthcare, diplomacy, and immigration ([Pew Research Center, 2017a](#)).

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.

⁸ 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 & 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.

3.3 Data, Instruments, and Modelling Approach

3.3.1 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.

3.3.2 Dependent Variables

Ideological extremity: This work conceptualizes ideological extremity as policy extremity or the degree to which an individual's positions "divege" 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 & Abrams, 2008), the traditional L-R continuum is particularly inadequate to measure policy opinions among populist individuals (Ahler & 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.⁹ To mitigate this problem, I extract a measure of latent ideological extremity from seven relevant policy issues typically asked in the ANES through Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) (Lelkes, 2016; Strickler, 2018).¹⁰

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.

⁹ Furthermore, recent research shows that L-R self-placement may be more a measure of socio-political identity rather than actual policy positions (Lilliana Mason, 2018).

¹⁰ 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.

Affective polarization: This work measures affective polarization as the extent to which citizens develop polarized evaluations of the competing party candidates (Lelkes et al., 2017).¹¹ 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 share¹². 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 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 candidates¹³.

¹¹ Recent research shows that, regardless of the usage of different operationalizations, most measures of partisan affect are highly correlated (for a discussion see, Druckman & 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 & 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, p. 132).

¹² 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 0 to 1.

¹³ 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

3.3.3 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 3.1). 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 A. Akkerman et al. ([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 3.1: Populist attitudes items, means, and standardized (std.) factor loadings Note: AE= anti-elitism, PC= people centrism, M= manicheism

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
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 ¹⁴ .	1.62	0.29

CFI = 0.98, SRMR = 0.025, RMSEA = 0.058

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.

¹⁴ The exact sub-dimension captured by this item is difficult to establish. For a discussion, see Wuttke et al. ([2020](#)) (Supplementary Files, p. XL) and Jungkunz et al. ([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.

As is commonly done, individuals who lean toward one of the two major parties are coded as partisans. To guard against potentially confounding factors¹⁵, 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 external¹⁶ 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.

3.3.4 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 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 ([L. K. Muthén & Muthén, 2017](#)) using the package Mplus Automation ([Hallquist & Wiley, 2018](#)) in the R 4.2 programming language ([R Core Team, 2019](#)).

¹⁵ As robustness, I calculated simple pairwise correlations between populist attitudes, ideological extremity, and affective polarization. Results are unchanged and reported in the Appendix

¹⁶ 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.

3.4 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 3.2 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 3.2: Regression table for the baseline model

	Ideological Extremity		Affective Polarization	
	Std. Coefficient (β)	p-value	Std. Coefficient (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
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 parentheses

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 3.2 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 ($\beta = -0.37$, $t = -5.26$, $p \leq 0.05$).¹⁷

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 3.2 are modified by allowing the coefficient of populism to vary across Democratic and Republican respondents.¹⁸ To ease the interpretation of the group-specific coefficients, I resort to marginal plots (Figure 3.1 and Figure 3.2)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 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

¹⁷ This confirms previous research that shows how Sanders's populist rhetoric was far less focused on negative evaluations of the other candidates (Staufer, 2020)

¹⁸ 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.

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.¹⁹

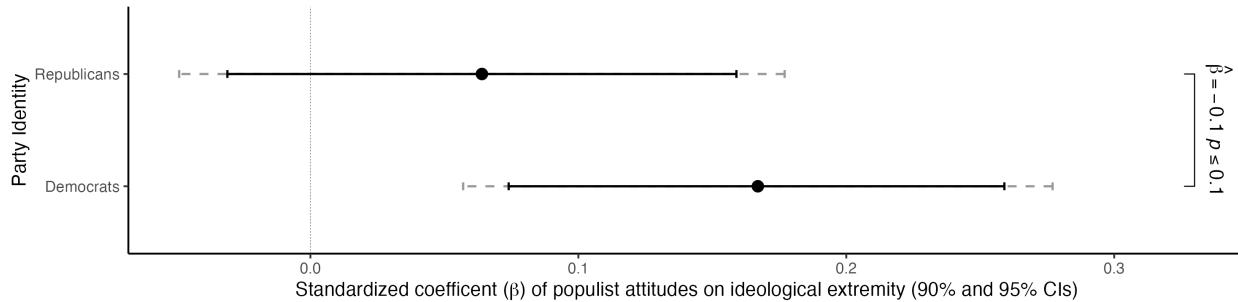


Figure 3.1: Coefficient of populism on ideological extremity for Republicans and Democrats, controlling for the other variables included in the model.

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 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.

¹⁹ 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.

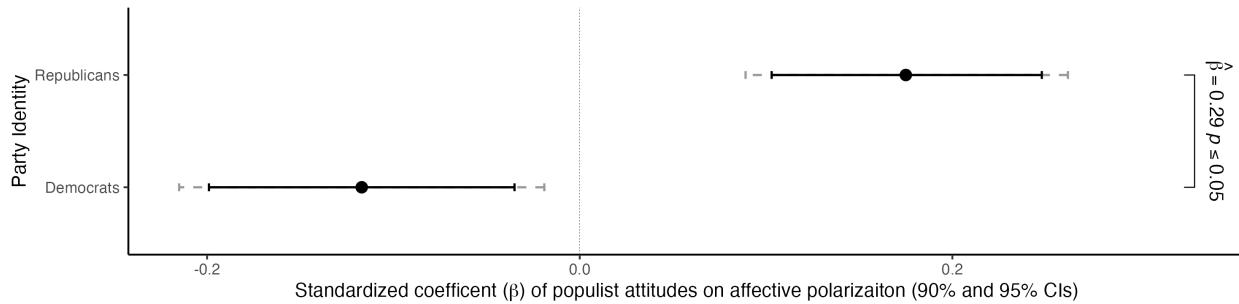


Figure 3.2: Coefficient of populism on affective polarization for Republicans and Democrats, controlling for the other variables included in the model.

3.5 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 & 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 & 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, 2017a](#)). 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 & Webster, 2016](#); [Bankert, 2020](#)).

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 et al. \(2019\)](#) 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 et al., 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 & 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.

4 CHAPTER 4 - UNAFFECTED POLARIZATION? POPULISM AND AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

"Let us stop the domino effect right this week, this Wednesday. The Domino effect of the wrong sort of populism winning in this world."

— Marc Rutte, the Prime Minister of the Netherlands (March 13, 2017 ([Samuel Osborne, 2017](#))

In recent years, populism and affective polarization have emerged as prominent phenomena, shaping the dynamics of electoral competition across the globe. Populist leaders have come to power in some of the largest global democracies, such as India, Brazil, and the United States. Concurrently, affective polarization—a deepening animosity and distrust towards the members of the rival political groups—has increased in some countries, most notably the United States. The observation that affective polarization seems to rise together with the success of populists has led many to suggest that the two phenomena should be connected (e.g., [Abramowitz & McCoy, 2019](#)). The underlying assumption is that populism promotes a brand of divisive antagonism revolving around the idea that a malevolent and morally inferior outgroup—referred to as the “establishment,” or the financial and intellectual “elites”—is working against the will of the people, and, thus, needs to be defeated at any cost.

Research on the topic, however, has found mixed results so far. Westwood et al. (2019) find no evidence of increased polarization in the United States in the lead-up to the 2016 elections, which saw a marked increase in populist rhetoric among both Republicans and Democrats ([Hawkins & Littvay, 2019](#)). Stefanelli (2023), looking at data from the United States, finds that affective polarization and populism seem to be related only among Republicans, while populist attitudes are rather associated with ideological extremism among Democrats. The picture remains unclear also in comparative research going beyond the US. For instance, Kekkonen & Ylä-Anttila (2021) finds that in Finland populist right-wing voters tend to be less negative about other rival parties compared to voters of mainstream parties. In a comparative study of nine European countries, Fuller et al. (2022) found that populism is weakly correlated to affective judgments in Italy and is not linked to affective polarization in Spain and the UK. Similarly, in a multi-country experiment conducted across several European countries, Hameleers & Fawzi (2020) found limited evidence supporting the notion that populist messages lead to citizen polarization along affective lines.

We contribute to this debate by testing whether populist citizens are more affectively polarized than non-populist ones, providing the most comprehensive theoretical and empirical account of the relation between these two phenomena so far. We argue that, based on existing literature, there are four mechanisms through which populism and affective polarization may, or may not, be connected among voters: a) attitudes, and the us-versus-them nature of populist discourse; b) populist party voting and its connection to radical ideologies; c) a backlash mechanism, whereby those which oppose populists are as polarized as populists themselves; and d) negative partisanship, which states that populist attitudes are *not* connected to affective polarization due to capturing a general dislike for all parties in the system.

We test the resulting hypotheses with data from Module 5 of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES), which includes a battery of questions to measure populist attitudes, as well as feeling thermometers towards parties which the literature has been using to measure affective polarization. Our findings indicate mostly a curvilinear relationship between populist attitudes and affective polarization, denoting that both those strongly populist and strongly anti-populist are more polarized, in line with the backlash argument. We also find evidence that populist attitudes in themselves, rather than being connected with higher polarization, are more linked to a negative evaluation of all parties in the system, in line with the negative partisanship argument by Meléndez & Rovira Kaltwasser (2019). Furthermore, we show that the connection between affective polarization and populism does not follow a generalizable pattern but rather manifests as an idiosyncratic phenomenon. We corroborate these results with an extensive series of robustness checks that employ different analytical strategies and operational measures of affective polarization and populism.

This article makes a dual contribution to the literature on populist polarization. First, this work supports the idea that affective polarization among populist voters is by no means a generalized feature of advanced democracies. The relationship between populism and affective polarization varies based on contextual factors and leaders' programmatic considerations, highlighting the complex and conditional nature of this connection. Second, we add to the existing studies showing that affective polarization is a relational phenomenon that tends to emerge concurrently among opposing societal and political groups. In instances where populism plays a prominent role in structuring the electoral competition, it can trigger emotionally charged counter-reactions among

mainstream voters who respond by depicting populists as a dangerous out-group that requires to be marginalized.

4.1 Populism and Polarization

Scholars have frequently defined populism through various conceptual lenses, conceptualizing it as a “thin-centered” ideology (Mudde, 2004), a rhetorical style emphasizing the appeal to the people (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007), a discourse opposing hegemonic practices (Laclau, 2005), and a political strategy for mobilizing voters (Weyland, 2001). In this paper, we draw upon the so-called “ideational definition” (Hawkins et al., 2018) and understand populism as a set of ideas that sees “the people” as a good, homogeneous, and unified entity with a “general will” that should be the principle and end of all politics. The people are opposed to an evil conspiratorial elite bent on oppressing and dominating the people for their interests and benefits (Canovan, 2004; Mudde, 2007). The division between people and the elites is considered a fundamental cleavage in politics, leaving little room for recognizing other legitimate differences of opinion or interests. Fundamentally, this division is moral, characterizing the people as inherently virtuous and the elite as intrinsically malevolent. Such perspective of politics is what led Hawkins (2010) to brand populism as a *Manichaean* discourse characterized by a dichotomous good-versus-evil view of politics.

Scholars tend to agree that the divisive and us-versus-them logic embedded within populist ideas is associated with heightened levels of political polarization (e.g., Pappas, 2014). Country-level analyses have found a connection between ideological polarization and the rise of populist parties (Bischof & Wagner, 2019; Silva, 2018), and previous research has generally shown that populism is linked to voting for anti-establishment and radical candidates (Mudde, 2004; e.g., Uscinski et al., 2021). In addition to policy disagreement, scholars recently started to argue that populism is also related to affective polarization across party lines (Jennifer McCoy et al., 2018). Affective polarization can be briefly defined as antipathy, dislike, anger, and even fear for members—both the elite and rank-and-file—of opposing parties, rooted in more than just policy disagreement across party lines (Gidron et al., 2020; Iyengar et al., 2019). Particularity, anger, and resentment towards the established political parties are considered a “motivating factor for populist mobilization” (Betz & Oswald, 2022, p. 122), responsible for accentuating the perceived moral

division between the common people and an ostensibly unscrupulous, evil, and self-serving out-group (Marx, 2020; Rico et al., 2017).

As we will argue in the following pages, there are four potential mechanisms connecting populism and affective polarization at the individual level. First, it may be that populist attitudes *per se* are polarizing since they capture politics as an us-versus-them affair. However, with recent research questioning the explanatory power of populist attitudes in themselves, an alternative hypothesis is that populism's association with polarization is primarily attributed to populist voting behavior. The influence of radical ideological preferences, elite cues, or exclusionary identity formation may be responsible for fostering negative affect toward political rivals. Third, populist parties may generate strong negative responses among those who oppose them, potentially leading to a backlash of polarization driven by anti-populist voters. Lastly, it may be that populism is linked to negative partisanship rather than polarization across party lines. The negative view that populists have of politics may translate into a broader aversion to all political actors rather than being directed toward a specific partisan out-group. We elaborate on each of these mechanisms below.

Attitudes

We call the first mechanism connecting populism and polarization the “attitudinal” argument. According to it, the populist division of society into the (good) people and the (corrupted) elite can fuel animosity between groups of citizens leading to what Jennifer McCoy & Somer (2019) call “pernicious polarization”. For someone who believes that politics is not dealing with legitimate differences of opinion but is rather a moral struggle, it is natural to develop a general animosity toward anyone not on their side, while sticking together with “the good ones” who belong to the same party or political group (Bos et al., 2021; Martínez et al., 2023). If this is the case, we should observe that citizens who hold more populist views of politics have a stronger sense of in-group belonging and out-group hostility, leading to higher levels of affective polarization. The “attitudinal” hypothesis therefore states the following:

H1: Populist attitudes are associated with higher affective polarization among individuals.

Recent research has shown that populist attitudes are related to hostile positions such as intolerance of different groups and opinions (Bos et al., 2021), dogmatism and rejection of political compromise (Plescia & Eberl, 2021; Stefanelli et al., 2023), and even the endorsement of political

violence (Uysal et al., 2023). While theoretically populist attitudes appear to be a promising explanation for the increase of affectively charged evaluations, the empirical evidence for this link remains mixed. For instance, Stefanelli (2023), looking at individual data from the United States, finds that the relationship between affective polarization and populism exists only among Republicans, while populist attitudes are rather connected with ideological extremism among Democrats. Even more so, to date, we lack systematic and broad comparative studies on the relationship between the two, reason why we start our analysis at this step.

Populist Voting

Although populist attitudes were initially found to correlate with populist voting in several countries (e.g. A. Akkerman et al., 2014; Van Hauwaert & Van Kessel, 2017), recent research has cast some doubts on this link. Castanho Silva et al. (2022), using observational data, show that populist attitudes were not related to support for the radical right populist Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil. Experimental research by Neuner & Wratil (2020), Silva et al. (2022), and Dai & Kustov (2023) shows that support for populist candidates is mostly, if not entirely, driven by (radical) ideological positions rather than populist attitudes.

According to Loew & Faas (2019), there are two types of voters of populist parties: those with radical positions, who vote for such parties because of their radicalism, and those with more moderate policy positions but high populist attitudes, who may vote for these parties due to their populism. Indeed, populist discourse has been consistently correlated to ideological extremism both among parties (Rooduijn & Akkerman, 2017) and voters (Marcos-Marne et al., 2022; Stefanelli et al., 2023) to the point that some authors argue that populist individuals can be distinguished from moderate citizens simply based on their extremity on a set of relevant policy issues (Spierings & Zaslove, 2015).

If populist voters tend to have more extreme ideological positions compared to mainstream voters, such positions may likely be driving their levels of affective polarization up (Algara & Zur, 2023; Rogowski & Sutherland, 2016; Webster & Abramowitz, 2017). Due to their extremism, populist voters may develop strong negative sentiments towards the majority and despise, or even hate, established parties for silencing people's interests. Moreover, populist parties often have a status as a pariah in democratic countries, so voting for them may lead to a stronger social identity built on the moral superiority of the in-group ("We, the People") at the expense of the out-group(s)

(“Them, the enemy of the people”). Being that the case, we should observe a relationship between voting for populist parties and affective polarization, or the “populist voting” hypothesis.

H2: Voters of populist parties have higher levels of affective polarization than voters of other parties.

The Backlash Argument

The fact that populist forces are often seen as a pariah by mainstream parties may drive affective polarization not only among populists but also among those who oppose them ([Stavrakakis, 2018](#)). Analogous to their populist counterparts, mainstream forces often employ strategies that marginalize and vilify populist actors. They characterize their demands as unreasonable, delegitimize their leaders and supporters, and construct institutional barriers as a strategic response to their influence and electoral success. According to this view, affective polarization is not restricted to populist voters alone but rather it is a relational and intertwined process that involves the simultaneous vilification of both populist and anti-populist forces ([Whitt et al., 2020](#)).

For instance, Harteveld et al. ([2022](#)) find that, while populist parties receive high levels of disapproval, they also evoke strong negative sentiments among moderate voters. Fuller et al. ([2022](#)) note that populism influence citizens’ affective evaluations both among mainstream and populist voters, indicating the presence of a symmetrical polarization across party lines. Gidron et al. ([2023](#)) observe that radical right populist parties receive markedly heightened levels of aversion that surpass what could be attributed to their policy positions, even after accounting for these parties’ extreme stances on immigration and national identity (on this point, see also [Jungkunz, 2021](#)). Based on survey experiments conducted in Sweden and Germany, Renström et al. ([2023](#)) suggest that moderate voters may feel threatened by populist radical right parties, which, in turn, prompts them to form polarized judgments of the competing parties. These studies collectively suggest that mainstream voters “can be equally—if not more—confrontational, vitriolic, and polarizing than its populist opponents” ([Stavrakakis, 2018, p. 51](#)).

If populist forces are perceived as dangerous and disruptive, one would expect to observe a curvilinear relationship between affinity with populism and affective polarization, wherein both those strongly aligned with populism and those vehemently opposed to it experience more

negatively charged evaluations of the rival parties. This proposition aligns with what we term the “backlash hypothesis”.

H3: Individuals on the upper or lower ends of populist attitudes have higher levels affective polarization than those with mild populist attitudes.

The Negative Partisanship Argument

Finally, Meléndez & Rovira Kaltwasser (2019) make a convincing argument that citizens with populist attitudes tend to have *negative partisanship* in relation to established political parties. According to this logic, populist individuals are inclined to cast their votes *against* mainstream parties rather than *for* a populist party, should they choose to vote at all (e.g. Anduiza et al., 2019; M. Murat Ardag et al., 2020b). This argument is in line with the idea that populism is linked to the repudiation of electoral politics as a way to challenge established party-driven mechanisms of interest aggregation (e.g., Mény & Surel, 2002).

If this is the case, populism may be connected to negative evaluations of all the competing political parties, as opposed to a positive evaluation of own party and negative judgment of all the others. In this case, populist individuals may still opt to vote for the “lesser evil”, yet they are likely to refrain from assigning high ratings to their in-party. This is primarily because they perceive political parties as untrustworthy, illegitimate, and fundamentally indistinguishable from one another. Our fourth hypothesis is thus that people with high populist attitudes exhibit a “hating-them-all” logic and, thus, do *not* show higher levels of affective polarization (for a conceptual distinction between negative partisanship and affective polarization, see Röllicke, 2023).

H4: Populist attitudes are related to a higher dislike for all parties in the party system.

4.2 Data and Measurement

4.2.1 Data

To test our hypotheses, we employed data from Module 5 of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) titled “Democracy Divided? People, Politicians and the Politics of Populism”. This module comprises data from various emerging and established democracies. The data are based on post-election nationally probabilistic samples of respondents aged 16 and older, primarily collected through self-administered web surveys. Along with other relevant attitudes pertaining to

politics, the CSES Module 5 encompasses a common module of questions related to populism, which allows us to assess whether populist citizens are more polarized than non-populist ones.

4.2.2 Case selection

We are interested in established democracies where party and leader evaluations are a meaningful aspect of electoral competition and democratic representation. To draw meaningful comparisons and increase the analytical leverage of the presented analysis, country cases were excluded based on two criteria. First, some countries (i.e., Greece, Ireland, Sweden) were excluded because not all items of the populism battery were asked—particularly, the one item that taps into the “Manichaean outlook” sub-dimension. This is particularly problematic for our analysis due to the fact that some hypotheses ground the association between populism and affective polarization precisely on the good-versus-evil side of populism. For this reason, those countries are not included. Second, we restrict our analysis to those countries where the populist attitudes battery performs relatively well—meaning that, based on confirmatory factor analysis models, the model fit of the scale is acceptable and factor loadings are above a minimal threshold. If the measurement model performs poorly, then it is not recommended to investigate further relationships, since we are not even sure what we are measuring to begin with. After this procedure, our data set covers a total of 25 elections in 21 unique countries²⁰. More details on the included country cases are reported in the Online Appendix.

4.2.3 Instruments

4.2.3.1 Dependent variables

Affective Polarization: This work measures affective polarization as the extent citizens develop polarized evaluations of the competing parties. Following Wagner (2021) we formalize affective

polarization as $Affective_i = \sqrt{\frac{\sum_{p=1}^P (like_{ip} - \bar{affect}_i)^2}{n_p}}$ where p is the party, i the individual

respondent, $like_{ip}$ the like-dislike thermometer score assigned to each party p by individual i, \bar{affect}_i is the average thermometer score by the individual i (see infra). According to this measure, a person exhibiting minimal affective polarization evaluates all political parties similarly,

²⁰ Canada and Iceland (2016) were excluded from the vote choice model due to the lack of a populist radical right party.

irrespective of whether their assessment is positive or negative. Conversely, someone characterized by a heightened degree of affective polarization provides distinct ratings for various political parties. We used all the available party or leader evaluations regardless of the size of the party²¹. In countries with two-party competition (i.e., USA), affective polarization is calculated as the difference between in- and out-party leader evaluations [Iyengar et al. (2012)]²². After excluding respondents who did not provide responses to a minimum of two like-dislike thermometer questions, the overall sample size amounts to 46625 participants.

Average affect: To assess respondents' overall sentiment toward the major political parties in each country-election, we computed the mean of all the party feeling thermometers. The measurement is represented as $\overline{Affect}_i = \frac{\sum_{p=1}^P like_{ip}}{n_P}$, where higher values indicate a more favorable outlook toward all the political parties in the system, while lower values correspond a more unfavorable evaluation. Unlike the affective polarization index, this measure allows us to test whether individuals, particularly those with stronger populist attitudes, are more inclined to hold general disapproval of all the parties, without necessarily exhibiting greater polarization in their evaluative judgments, thereby examining Hypothesis 4.

4.2.3.2 *Independent variables*

Populist attitudes: We follow previous literature on the topic and extract a measure of latent affinity with populism from the populist attitudes scale included in the CSES questionnaire (Table 4.1) through Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA). The scale was originally developed by the CSES planning committee (Hobolt et al., 2017) using items from the battery developed by Hawkins et al. (2012) and further expanded by A. Akkerman et al. (2014). Castanho Silva et al. (2020) have demonstrated that this scale operates in a similar manner and exhibits a correlation of $r > .8$ with other widely utilized populist attitudes scales. As the CSES scale displays an imbalance in favor of anti-elitism, we have adopted the approach proposed by Castanho Silva et

²¹ It is important to highlight that in the CSES data, feeling thermometers are exclusively administered for the seven most popular parties. Consequently, smaller parties, accounting for roughly less than 4% of the popular vote, have been excluded from the analysis. This approach prevents potential bias in the affective polarization index resulting from the inclusion of small, electorally insignificant parties that voters might be unfamiliar with or hold strong negative feelings towards.

²² For Switzerland, party evaluations are not asked and, thus, we use leader evaluations.

al. (2022), which involves selecting items with the highest factor loading for each sub-dimension. For robustness tests using different operationalizations and more comprehensive insights into the CFA models, including results from the invariance tests which show that the scale can be used in cross-countries regression models, we refer the reader to the Online Appendix.

Table 4.1: Populist attitudes scale and standardised (Std.) factor loadings.

Ref.	Item	Mean	Std. Loading
E3004_2 (AE)	Most politicians do not care about the people.	3.20	0.73
E3004_6 (PC)	people, and not politicians, should make our most important policy decisions.	3.34	0.48
E3004_1 (M)	What people call compromise in \ politics is really just selling out one's principles.	2.92	0.53
CFI=0.976, RMSEA=0.061, SRMR=0.025			

Note: AE= anti-elitism, PC= people centrism, M= Manicheism. Std. loadings based on the pooled sample. Fit indices were obtained from a metric model with fixed factor loadings across the different country cases.

Vote for populist party: We coded a respondent as populist if they cast their vote for a right-wing populist party. Extreme right-wing parties are also included in the analyses because our argument should apply also to radical right parties. We rely both on Cas Mudde's classification (2007) and the PopuList database (Rooduijn et al., 2019). In this way, we can include populist parties that emerged after the publication of Mudde's book (e.g., Vox in Spain). Furthermore, we incorporated non-voters into our sample to maintain statistical power and explore how affective polarization is stratified in the entire electorate.

Controls: To rule out potential confounders and account for the potential impacts of compositional differences between countries, we control for gender (Male, Female), age (continuous), and education (continuous, 9 categories). Descriptive statistics are reported in the Online Appendix.

4.2.4 Modelling approach

To test our hypothesis, we resort to OLS regressions with country-election fixed effects and cluster robust standard errors. The continuous variables are centred and standardized by subtracting the means of each country-election from the individual scores. All analyses apply weights such that the estimated coefficients are adjusted for (1) sampling design and non-response rate and (2) a weighting factors that divides the total weights for the whole sample by the weights of each country-election. This latter procedure provides equal weight for each country-election, irrespective of the number of surveyed individuals ([Abou-Chadi & Finnigan, 2019](#)).

To answer our hypothesis, we estimated two sets of models. The first set employs fixed-effect models to estimate a general measure of association between our key variables in the entire sample. By pooling the sample and introducing country-election fixed effects, we control for unobserved country-election-specific factors that might influence the outcome variable. The second set of models estimates country-election-specific coefficients interacting the independent variable of interest with the country-election fixed effects. This procedure is similar to estimating a regression model for each case. Still, it has the added advantage of increasing statistical power and considering the compositional differences between the included cases.

The factor models are estimated using the SEM package Lavaan ([Rosseel, 2012](#)) while the fixed-effect OLS regressions are fitted using the fixest package ([Bergé, 2018](#)) in the R version 4.2.1 ([R Core Team, 2019](#)). More details on the modeling approach are reported in the Online Appendix.

4.3 Results

We begin our analysis by examining the connection between affective polarization and a latent measure of populist attitudes. Table 4.2 shows that populist individuals do not exhibit more or less affectively polarized evaluations of the competing parties compared to individuals scoring lower on the populist attitudes scale. Notably, populist attitudes fail to explain any substantial amount of variance in the measure of affective polarization and the estimated coefficients are small and insignificant. This contradicts H1, which posited a positive relationship between populist attitudes and affective polarization.

Table 4.2: Fixed-effect Regressions

Dependent Variables:	Affective Polarization		Average Affect	
Model:	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Populist Attitudes	-0.0044 (0.0084)	-0.0049 (0.0077)		-0.2263 *** (0.0183)
Populist Attitudes Squared		0.0520 *** (0.0104)		
Vote: No vote (Ref: Mainstream parties)			-0.336 *** (0.0440)	
Vote: Populist Party (Ref: Mainstream parties)				0.050 * (0.0281)
Female (Ref: Male)	0.0208 (0.0155)	0.0233 (0.0157)	0.0226 (0.0151)	0.1202 *** (0.0175)
Education	0.0287 *** (0.0072)	0.0285 *** (0.0072)	0.0151 *** (0.0054)	-0.0041 (0.0136)

Age	0.0389 ** (0.0144)	0.0375 ** (0.0143)	0.0272 ** (0.0116)	-0.0359 ** (0.0158)
Fixed-effects				
Country-election	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Fit statistics				
Observations	46,625	46,625	46,625	46,625
R ²	0.38894	0.39047	0.42766	0.19322
Within R ²	0.00700	0.00948	0.06991	0.03015
Country-elections	25	25	25	25

Next, we move to H2, which examines whether the extreme ideological stances of radical populist parties contribute to the observed increase in affective polarization in certain countries. We do so by regressing the measure of affective polarization on vote choice. Our results provide only limited support for H2: voters of populist parties exhibit only marginally more polarized evaluations of competing parties in comparison to those who support mainstream parties ($\beta = .053, SE = .027$). Notably, both mainstream and populist voters demonstrate significantly higher levels of polarization in comparison to non-voters.

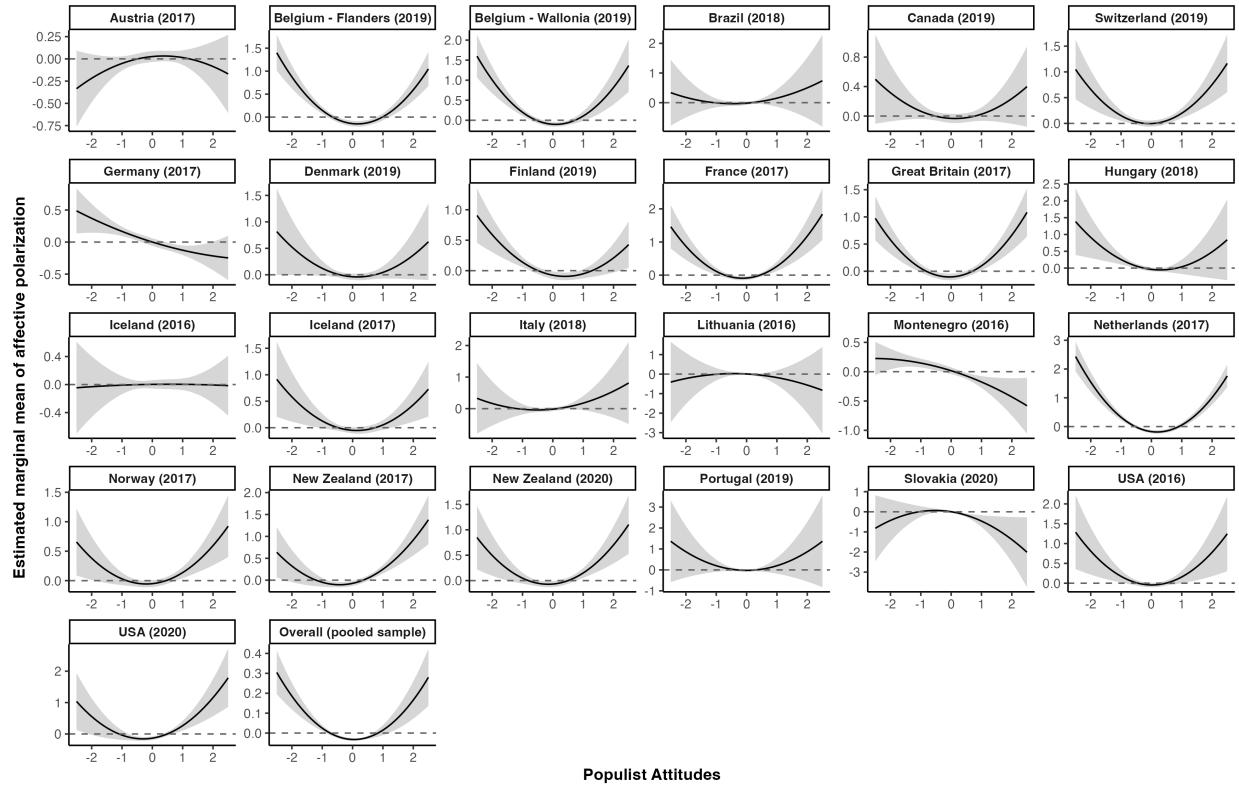
Moving on to H3, we replicate the model used to answer H1, this time including a polynomial term of degree 2 for the populist attitudes measure to capture non-linear effects. Results show a pronounced curvilinear effect of populist attitudes on affective polarization. Individuals scoring both low and high on the populist attitudes scale exhibit greater affective polarization when contrasted with those possessing an average level of affinity with populism. It is important to highlight that affectively charged evaluations are only present among individuals who score 1.5 standard deviations above or below the mean of the populist attitude scale, indicating that polarization is linked to either the strong acceptance or strong rejection of populism. These

findings lend support to H3, suggesting the presence of a backlash effect where both populist and anti-populist voters display heightened levels of affective polarization.

Finally, we observe that individuals with high affinity with populism show lower average affect levels, indicating that, on average, they hold more negative sentiments toward all political parties. The magnitude of the estimated coefficients in the average affect model is notably larger compared to those in the affective polarization model, hovering around 1/5 of a standard deviation. This finding, together with the limited support for the polarizing effect of populism, corroborates H4, which suggests that populist attitudes are linked to general disapproval of all the parties in the system rather than polarized and negatively charged evaluations of the out-party.

Subsequently, we proceed to evaluate the relationship between populism and affective polarization in each of the included cases. Our goal here is to see if the results are not driven by a handful of influential cases and to check for potential systematic differences across countries. To accomplish this, we estimate country-election-specific coefficients by introducing an interaction between our independent variable of interest and the country-election fixed effects.

Figure 4.1 reveals a relatively idiosyncratic cross-national pattern in the association between populist attitudes and affective evaluations. While in most country cases the effect of populist attitudes is curvilinear, the estimated coefficients of populist attitudes are often insignificant at conventional levels for most of the range of the populist attitudes scale. Furthermore, in Germany and Montenegro, we find a linear but negative relationship between populist attitudes and affective polarization. These findings confirm the observation we made in the pooled sample model, indicating that there is insufficient evidence to support the notion that individuals with a stronger affinity for populism exhibit heightened levels of affective polarization.

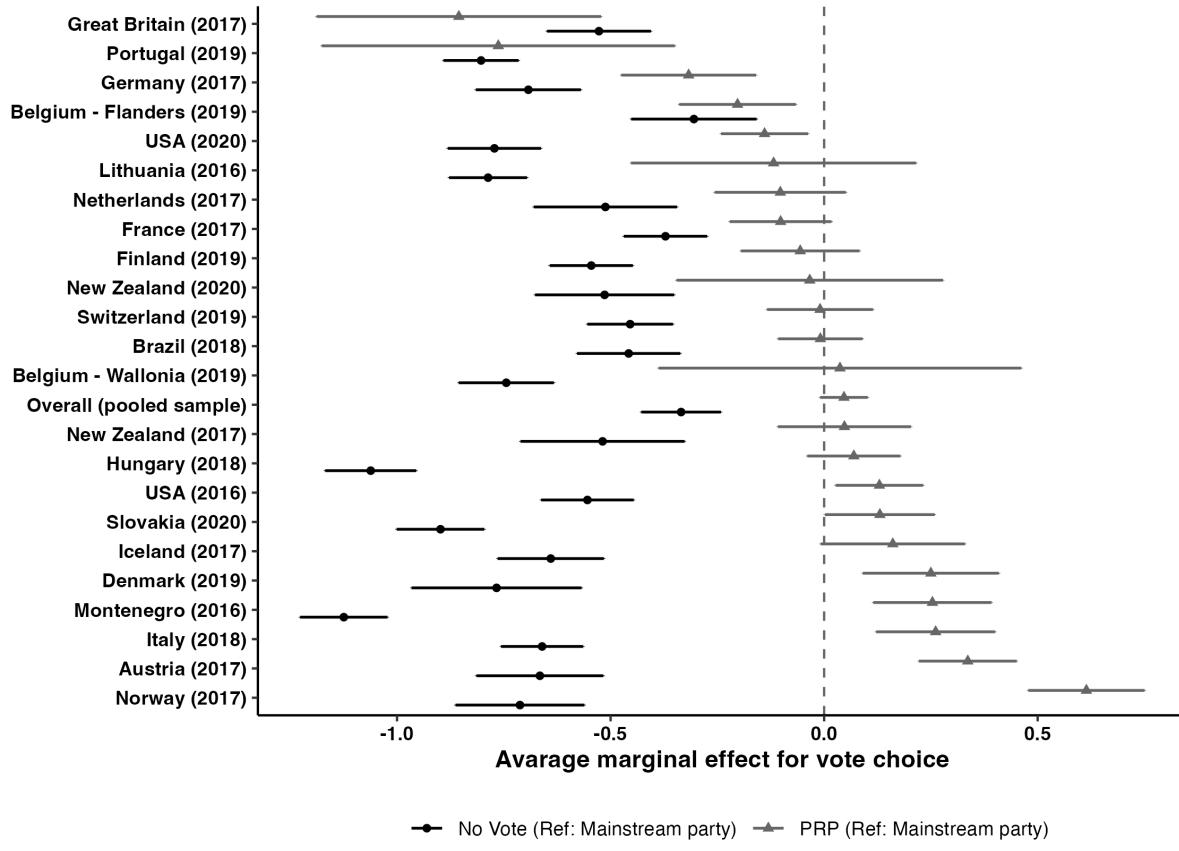


$R^2: 0.39$, Within $R^2: 0.009$, N: 46625. OLS regression with country-election fixed effects.

Figure 4.1: Marginal mean of affective polarization at different levels of populist attitudes, controlling for all the other variables included in the model. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals around the estimates. The estimated marginal effects are reported in the Online Appendix.

Moving to the vote choice model, Figure 4.2 reveals that, in most countries, the difference in affective polarization between mainstream and populist radical right party voters is minimal. Much like the results obtained for populist attitudes, the results reveal a substantial amount of heterogeneity across countries. In approximately half of the selected cases, the coefficient of voting for a populist party is statistically insignificant and hovers near zero, meaning that populist voters do not display higher levels of affective polarization when compared to voters of mainstream parties. In Great Britain (2017), Portugal, Germany, Flanders (Belgium), and the USA (2020), populist voters exhibit lower levels of affective polarization than citizens who vote for mainstream parties. In contrast, countries like the USA (2016), Denmark (2019), Montenegro (2016), Italy (2018), Austria (2017), and Norway (2017) display somewhat higher, although relatively moderate, levels of affective polarization among populist voters when compared to those who vote for mainstream parties. These results confirm the conclusions drawn from the pooled sample

model, further corroborating that there is limited evidence to substantiate the claim that populist vote is associated with a stronger inter-party dislike.



● No Vote (Ref: Mainstream party) ▲ PRP (Ref: Mainstream party)

$R^2: 0.434$, Within $R^2: 0.072$, N: 42770. OLS regression with country-election fixed effects.

Figure 4.2: Results of a random effect model predicting affective evaluations using vote choice, controlling for all the other variables included in the model. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals around the estimates. The full regression table is reported in the Online Appendix.

4.3.1 Robustness

In the Online Appendix, we perform several robustness and sensitivity tests. First, we employ alternative measures of affective polarization based on different operationalizations proposed by Wagner (2021) and Reiljan (2020). These results consistently aligned with the findings in the main paper, either remaining unchanged or indicating a linear and negative relationship between polarization and populist attitudes. Second, we use several alternative operationalizations of populist attitudes, including a sum score index, a CFA model that uses the entire CSES scale, and the non-compensatory approach proposed by Wuttke et al. (2020). These different models yield

results in line with the ones presented in the manuscript, with minor deviations that do not significantly impact the overall conclusions. Third, we operationalize the vote choice variable by including parties that are populist but lack the radical right component or have been classified as borderline cases according to Rooduijn et al. (2019) The results show minimal differences with overlapping confidence intervals between the two models. Fourth, we assess whether results are affected by controlling for additional confounding variables such as left-right self-placement, political interest, and internal political efficacy. We decided to exclude these variables from the main models since, in many countries, a substantial portion of the sample refuses to answer these questions, most notably the left-right self-placement question. These additional analyses indicate that these variables do not substantially alter the conclusions reached in our study.

4.4 Conclusions

As Adam Przeworski (1991) famously said, democracy is a system where parties experience electoral defeats and accept them. The violent scenes observed in Washington DC and Brasília shortly after the defeats of Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro respectively, carried out by supporters who did not accept the electoral results, are a teaser of the dire consequences that can follow from highly polarized political environments. Given that both of these presidents and other polarizing figures around the world are often considered populists, the pressing question is whether and how populism and affective polarization are connected. In this paper, we tackle this question for the first time from a wide comparative perspective, looking at data from 25 elections in 21 countries.

Our findings challenge the conventional notion that populism is intrinsically linked to affective hostility across party lines. Our results suggest that individuals with a high affinity with populism do not exhibit significantly higher levels of affective polarization compared to their non-populist counterparts. In fact, both populist and anti-populist individuals display higher levels of affective polarization. At the same time, those in the middle of the scale tend not to see the political world so much in in-group versus out-group terms. Notably, our analysis reveals that populist attitudes are associated with a lower average appreciation for all parties in the system, reflecting a broader sense of democratic discontent rather than affectively polarized evaluations of rival parties. Additionally, we observe distinct and idiosyncratic patterns in the selected cases, indicating that

the connection between populism and affective judgments noted in previous studies (Fuller et al., 2022) cannot be generalized to all Western democracies.

These results are important in several accounts. First, some could argue that the polarizing rhetoric of populist parties is responsible for an asymmetrical polarization in the electorate, with populist voters becoming polarized against all the other parties in the political system (e.g. Roberts, 2021). However, our results suggest that non-populists voters in most countries are polarized as much as populists are. Importantly, the marginal mean of affective polarization are similar for both populist and non-populist voters, indicating that populists do not harbor significantly more contempt for their out-party members and hold their in-party peers in notably higher regard when compared to non-populists. This suggests that—even if there may be a connection between the success of populist parties and the increasing levels of affective polarization—populists are not necessarily the only actors to blame.

Secondly, the increasing levels of affective polarization witnessed in some Western democracies may be the result of long-term dynamics of partisan (de)alignment (e.g., Lilliana Mason, 2015), rather than being solely attributed to populist discourse. Scholars link the emergence of populist parties to a decline in alignment between the policy positions of mainstream parties and voters' interests (e.g., Kriesi & Pappas, 2015). Populist parties capitalize on the discrepancy to garner support. However, when populist parties become integral to the political system—as is the case in many Western democracies—partisan and ideological affiliations are likely to realign. This realignment can potentially intensify the strength of these identities (Lilliana Mason, 2015), subsequently reinforcing affective polarization within the electorate.

Finally, the idiosyncratic patterns of association between populism and affective polarization observed in the selected cases suggests that the (de)polarizing effect of populist ideas hinges on how populist leaders mobilize support and secure votes. Depending on contextual factors and programmatic considerations, populist leaders may emphasize or de-emphasize affective elements of political competition, which, in turn, affects how citizens assess the competing candidates (Stefanelli, 2023). A better understanding of the conditions under which populism shapes emotionally charged evaluations can aid scholars in comprehending the circumstances in which populism function as a catalyst for fostering a highly charged and divisive political environment.

5 CHAPTER 5 - FREEDOM FOR ALL? POPULISM AND THE INSTRUMENTAL SUPPORT OF FREEDOM OF SPEECH

“Free speech is not an independent value but a political prize.”

— Stanley Fish (1994,102)

Although freedom of speech is considered a fundamental democratic value (Wike & Simmons, 2015), individuals are often willing to restrict other individuals’ right to express themselves freely (Petersen et al., 2011). Already sixty years ago, Prothro and Grigg studied this paradox by showing that the acceptance of free speech is generally high but “breaks down completely [when] broad principles are translated into more specific propositions” regarding the rights of specific groups (1960, p. 286).

This paper investigates a potential source of this discrepancy. Using a survey question and a split ballot experiment, we test whether populist individuals support freedom of speech in its abstract form but, at the same time, are willing to restrict other peoples’ rights based on their ideological interests. We argue that, in spite of a general commitment to abstract democratic values, populist individuals understand and apply these values in an instrumental way that favours their subjective understanding of what is “good” for democracy and society at large (Fish, 1994; Krishnarajan, 2022), a phenomenon that some scholars have called democratic hypocrisy (Simonovits et al., 2022).

In general terms, democratic hypocrisy can be defined as the tendency to endorse certain democratic values in abstract terms while, at the same time, applying them in a particular way that favours an individual’s interests and ideas about politics. We can observe this hypocritical understanding of democracy in the discourse of populist parties. Populist leaders tend to promote themselves as the “uncompromising defenders” of free speech and as a safeguard for “the liberty of the individual that [they] deem central to the liberal democracy” (T. Akkerman, 2005, p. 337). Even so, the liberal defence of democratic principles is often instrumentally used to advance a vision of democracy and society that justifies the importance of certain values over others (Griffin, 2000; Moffitt, 2017). For instance, in Europe, right-wing populist parties have objected to the right to wear the Islamic headscarf on the grounds of protecting freedom of expression and women’s rights (T. Akkerman, 2005) but also justified limitations to freedom of speech for ethnic and

religious minorities to defend Enlightenment values and core democratic principles ([Albertazzi & Mueller, 2013](#); [Moffitt, 2017](#)).

Recent research suggests that this paradoxical view of democracy stems from the fact that people disagree on what democratic liberties are or what they should entail ([Ignatieff, 2022](#); [Landwehr & Steiner, 2017](#)). We investigate this possibility by testing whether populist individuals understand freedom of speech not as a universal right but as a qualified and conditional norm. We argue that populist individuals see free speech as a counter-hegemonic device that can be used to advance the legitimate interests of “the people” and, thus, protect democracy ([Moffitt, 2017](#); [Mouffe, 2005](#)). This implies that when an issue is considered fundamental to the empowerment of the people, populist individuals tend to defend speech acts in the name of democracy. On the contrary, when a speech appears to undermine the will of the people, speech limitations are seen as legitimate and, thus, certain speeches can be negated to safeguard the interests of the people.

Belgium is taken as a case study for two main reasons. First, Belgium has one of the strongest populist radical right parties in Europe and has recently seen the success of left-wing populism. This allows us to test whether populist individuals from both sides of the ideological spectrum consider freedom and equality subordinated to other equally (or more) important values ([Mudde, 1995](#)). Second, most of the literature on the topic has focussed on the United States ([M. H. Graham & Svolik, 2020](#); [Prothro & Grigg, 1960](#); [Simonovits et al., 2022](#); among others, [Sniderman et al., 1989](#); [J. L. Sullivan et al., 1982](#)). Due to the US two-party extreme majoritarianism and partisan polarisation, the ‘hate and fear’ towards the positions of the rival party may generate stronger disdain for democracy ([G. Grossman et al., 2022](#)). On the contrary, Belgium has a proportional, highly fragmented, and volatile multi-party system with a substantial variation in how ideologically close or distant political competitors are ([Erkel & Turkenburg, 2022](#)). Further, the programmatic agenda and the position towards democracy of populist and mainstream parties in Belgium reflect those found in many other European countries. This enables us to provide valuable insights into the mechanisms behind democratic hypocrisy that are applicable, at least partially, to similar European countries.

We find that populism is associated with support for both abstract and situational freedom of speech but in divergent ways. Populist attitudes (i.e., the degree to which an individual agrees with populist ideas) are positively associated with support for freedom of speech in its abstract form.

At the same time, we find that affinity with populist ideas reinforces the tendency to differentiate between speech acts that align with or oppose respondents' ideological interests. Left-wing populist individuals are more likely to think that an individual should be allowed to hold a speech against multinational corporations. At the same time, they tend to deny the very same right for an individual holding a speech against immigrants. For right-wing individuals, the pattern is reversed. That is, populist attitudes are related to a higher tolerance for a speech against immigrants and, at the same time, a lower tolerance for a speech against multinational corporations.

The key contribution of this article is twofold. First, the acceptance of democratic norms has mainly been studied by focusing on background characteristics (e.g., education) ([J. L. Gibson, 2013](#)), political affiliations (e.g., party identity) ([Simonovits et al., 2022](#)), or policy preferences ([M. H. Graham & Svolik, 2020](#)). By bridging the literature on populism with the one on democratic hypocrisy, this paper shows that populism qualifies how citizens interpret and apply democratic norms. Second, this paper provides evidence that populist attitudes are an additional relevant component to understanding the trade off between democratic rights and ideological interests: populist individuals tend to endorse free speech in its abstract form, yet its concrete application is contingent on whether certain policies, actions, or behaviours are considered good for the people and, thus, for democracy at large ([Urbiniati, 2019](#)).

5.1 Populism and Democratic Norms

Populism is a profoundly contested concept, with scholars having defined it as a “thin-centred” ideology ([Mudde, 2004](#)), a rhetorical style ([Jagers & Walgrave, 2007](#)), or a political strategy to mobilise and attract voters’ support ([Weyland, 2001](#)). In this paper, we subscribe to the ideational approach, which defines populism as an ideological framework (or discourse) for thinking about politics centred around the antagonism between a morally superior in-group (“us, the people”) and an evil’ ruling block’ (“them, the enemy of the people”) that is responsible for frustrating the demands of the former ([Hawkins et al., 2018](#)). An important aspect of the ideational approach is that it conceives of populism to be orthogonal to left-right or liberal-conservative ideology, making it highly relevant to study whether populist individuals tend to protect a speech with which they already agree and *vice-versa* (for a discussion, see [Rooduijn, 2019](#)).

5.1.1 Populism and the Two-strand Model of Democracy

Scholars wonder whether and under which conditions populism is linked to the rejection of fundamental democratic norms (Kriesi, 2014; Mudde, 2021). On the one hand, some authors argue that populism is the purest form of democracy (Tännsjö, 1992). It can function as a “redemptive force” that promises to restore the proper functioning of the representative system by representing and empowering the ordinary people (Canovan, 1999; Kazin, 1998; Laclau, 2005; Taggart, 2002). From this perspective, populism represents a “democratic response to undemocratic liberalism” and, thus, it functions as a corrective to a democratic deficit (Mudde, 2021, p. 6). On the other hand, populism has been described as a dangerous threat to democratic values and incompatible with a tolerant and pluralist democracy (Urbinati, 1998; Weyland, 2020; see also, Koenraad Abts & Rummens, 2007). According to this view, populism is a “democratic disfigurement” that “fundamentally rejects any type of limitation on the power of the majority”, even when this means denying fundamental democratic values (Mudde, 2021, p. 581; Müller, 2014; see also, Taguieff, 1995).

Recent empirical work on the topic reflects this ambiguity. Some studies find that populist individuals are more supportive of democracy, referendums, deliberative forms of participation, and even some of the political opinions of their opponents (Bjånesøy & Ivarsflaten, 2016; Bos et al., 2021; Zaslove et al., 2021). At the same time, other studies find that they are more intolerant (Bos et al., 2021), less attached to the idea of living in a democracy (Bjånesøy & Ivarsflaten, 2016), less supportive of pluralism (Heinisch & Wegscheider, 2020), reluctant to accept political compromises (Plescia & Eberl, 2021), and more likely to disregard certain procedural aspects of democracy (Lewandowsky & Jankowski, 2022).

To better understand this apparent paradox, it is worth investigating the relationship between populism and the so-called two-strand model of democracy (Koenraad Abts & Rummens, 2007; Canovan, 1999; on this point, see Mény & Surel, 2002; Moffitt, 2017; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012; Panizza, 2005; Taggart, 2000). Within the two-strand model, democracy is understood as formed by two distinct pillars: a liberal pillar centred around the protection of individuals’ (and minority) rights and a democratic pillar which emphasises popular sovereignty and the popular will (Mouffe, 2009). Democratic practices combine both pillars, which are meant to keep each other in check.

The potentially abusive “tyranny of the majority” is limited by a set of rules that guarantees that the interests of certain individuals and groups are not curtailed (Dahl, 1989).

5.1.2 Populism and Freedom of Speech: Abstract Versus Situational Support

According to the two-strand logic, the interpretation and justification of democratic liberties depend on the emphasis placed on either the liberal or democratic pillar within the democratic process (Koenraad Abts & Rummens, 2007). Within the liberal tradition, free speech requires an “act of compromise”: freedom should not be tolerated when it offends others (Feinberg, 1987; see also Mill, 1978). Unlimited free speech is not freedom’s sanctuary but its enemy; thus, some “limit” should be applied to protect rights and freedoms. Consequently, freedom should and must be limited by a set of democratic procedures and legal controls that guarantee that certain groups or actions do not impair the value of tolerance, liberty, and equality (Rawls, 1999).

In contrast with this view, populism empathises the importance of the will of the majority (i.e., the democratic pillar) over the anonymous rule of law (i.e., the liberal pillar) (Mény & Surel, 2002). Populism sees the liberal pillar as an impediment to the democratic promise of citizens’ power and “tries to capitalise upon this dissatisfaction by reclaiming for the people the power that has been illegitimately taken from them” by the checks and balances inherent to the liberal representative system (Koenraad Abts & Rummens, 2007, p. 411). Further, in opposition to the liberal tradition, populism assumes that “the people” and “the majority” coincide. In this sense, the limitations imposed by the liberal pillar are not a way to protect democracy from the “tyranny of the majority” but rather an impediment to the realisation of the will of the people.

Seen in this light, speech limitations are seen as a way to “censor” the people and prevent them from questioning the legitimacy of certain political decisions (Moffitt, 2017). On the contrary, an unlimited and unconstrained form of freedom of expression gives voice to those issues that are otherwise curtailed (or perceived to be curtailed) by the current system of power (Laclau, 2005). As a result, populism claims that free speech “should be as broad as possible” to allow for the existence of different and non-mainstream opinions (Moffitt, 2017, p. 116). Consequently, it is likely that populist individuals, regardless of their ideological interests, are more likely to think that freedom of speech should be unlimited and unconstrained.

H1: Individuals scoring high on scales of populist attitudes are more likely to support freedom of speech in its abstract and unconstrained form.

Although populism may support an unconstrained form of freedom of expression, its commitment to freedom may be hypocritical and contingent on specific values that are considered worth defending (Laclau, 1996). The emphasis placed on the majority criterion means that “a part of the people (often a very large one) becomes a *non-people*, an excluded part” (Sartori, 1987, p. 32 *original emphasis*). The values of the in-group (i.e. “the people”) are the only ones contributing to the “greater good” and a “moral regeneration” of politics and democracy (Berlin et al., 1968; Müller, 2016). On the contrary, the positions of the others (i.e., “the non-people”) are, at least to a certain degree, illegitimate (König & Siewert, 2021). The rival camp is seen as a threat to the in-group’s interests and, in a broader sense, a limit to achieving what is good for democracy (Hameleers & de Vreese, 2020; Kazin, 1998). This implies that rights can be negated when certain values or actions are incompatible with the “will of the people”. Or that democratic liberties should be protected only when they are perceived as “fair”, for instance when they represent the positions of the majority (i.e., “the people”) (Landwehr & Harms, 2020; Werner, 2020).

This provides populist individuals with a qualified and conditional understanding of what is (il)legitimate and (un)democratic, potentially allowing the justification of democratic eroding behaviours such as the rejection of freedom of speech (Gaines et al., 2007). In concrete terms, the (hypocritical) tendency to deny or defend free speech depends on the ideological content that substantiates the “will of the people” (Andreadis et al., 2018; Hameleers et al., 2021). Generally speaking, left-wing populism is centred around the struggle of the proletariats or the underclass against the bourgeoisie, the rich, the capitalists, and the big multinational corporations (March, 2017). On the other hand, right-wing populism centers on safeguarding the native population against external threats, such as Muslims or immigrants (Mudde, 2013).

We test this thesis by assessing whether populist individuals tend to instrumentally support freedom of speech based on their ideological dispositions. We expect that the concrete application of free speech varies according to (1) the ideological content of a speech, (2) the respondent’s ideological interests, and (3) their affinity with populist ideas. The underlying assumption herein is that populist attitudes reinforce the tendency for democratic hypocrisy—that is, endorsing

speeches aligned with the respondent's ideological interests while rejecting those considered objectionable.

Concretely, among the political right, we expect populist attitudes to strengthen support for speeches that advance the idea that the native population should be allowed to treat immigrants as an inferior and dangerous out-group while weakening the support for speeches that are against pro-business policies. Among the political left, we anticipate populists to be more likely to support free speech when it favours the working class as opposed to the “top 1%”, the capitalists, and the big multinational corporations. At the same time, we expect that they are less likely to do so when a speech contains anti-immigrant discourse.

H2a: Individuals scoring high on scales of populist attitudes are more likely to allow a speech that is in line with their ideological interests.

H2b: Individuals scoring high on scales of populist attitudes are more likely to deny a speech that is against their ideological interests.

In practice, this means testing whether the direction and magnitude of the coefficient of populist attitudes on the probability of allowing a speech vary across the ideological content of the speech itself and different ideological groups.

5.2 Data, instruments, and modelling approach

5.2.1 Data

To test our hypothesis, we use original survey instruments that we purposefully designed and included in the 2019 wave of the Belgian National Election Study (BNES). The 2019 wave employs a multi-stage sampling design with municipalities nested within the three main Belgian regions (i.e., Walloon, Flemish, and Brussels-Capital regions). Conducted within a register-based random probability sample of eligible Belgian voters in the 2019 national elections, the data were predominantly collected through face-to-face interactions using computer-assisted personal interviewing from December 2019 to October 2020. The total sample size for this study consists of 1077 respondents with a response rate of 37.47% (44.34% in Flemish Region and 29.68% in Walloon and Brussels-Capital regions).

5.2.2 Instruments

5.2.2.1 Dependent variables

Abstract support for freedom of speech: We measure abstract support for freedom of speech using a question that asks respondents whether they agree or disagree (5-point scale) with the statement that “every individual should say what he/she wants, even if this hurts others”. This question has been designed to resolve some of the conceptual limitations of traditional measures of support for free speech principles. First, following the recommendation of James L. Gibson & Bingham (1982), the measure aims at “specify[ing] a freedom of speech continuum which is independent of any particular group and which reflects the sort of value conflict typically observed in free-speech dispute” (1982, p. 606). This allows us to measure support for freedom of speech in a context (i.e., Belgium) where the state does not sanction individuals for expressing their opinions unless they openly incite violence or segregation²³. Second, the item avoids priming respondents with the word “freedom of speech” due to its potentially normative leading connotation. To allow for the comparison of the coefficients with the other main dependent variable of interest (see infra), the question has been dichotomised such that respondents are either coded as supporting or rejecting abstract free speech²⁴.

Situational support of freedom of speech: To measure how individuals concretely apply freedom of speech when other ideological interests are at stake, we use a split ballot experiment that randomises the object of criticism of a hypothetical speech (Lindner & Nosek, 2009). We followed recent literature and selected two salient and representative issues of the contemporary Left-Right divide (M. H. Graham & Svolik, 2020). The respondents are presented with a text indicating that a “speaker at a public gathering, on television, or on the internet holds a speech against

²³ Our conceptualisation largely follows the interpretation of the Belgian law regarding freedom of speech. UNIA—the federal agency responsible for promoting and protecting fundamental democratic rights—states, “In Belgium, you are entitled to free speech. This means that you can say many things, even if others experience them as shocking, disturbing or hurtful”. ([Limits of Free Speech, 1993](#)). This conceptualisation may not be suitable in contexts where free speech regulations are stricter than in Belgium (e.g., Germany). In these contexts, the question should ask directly about state sanctions against people who express their opinions.

²⁴ The original question is asked on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “1. Completely disagree” to “5. Completely agree”. The item has been dichotomised as against (1-3) and in favour (4-5) of free speech. The midpoint of the scale (i.e., neither agree nor disagree) has been included in the against category to be sure to capture those individuals who are (strongly) in favour of free speech in its abstract form. Using the 5-point variable as continuous or ordinal does not change any of the results. Results are reported in the Appendix.

[immigrants/multinational corporations]”. Subsequently, each respondent is asked whether the speech “should be stopped” or “should not be stopped”²⁵. This measure provides respondents with a clear choice scenario (i.e., allow or stop the speech), effectively measuring respondents’ willingness to deny freedom of speech in a concrete, yet not normatively charged, situation. It also taps into a situational and instrumentally-motivated understanding of freedom of speech without a priori imposing particular ideological interests or priming the respondent with noxious political groups.

5.2.2.2 *Independent variables*

Populism: Populist attitudes are assessed using an adapted version of the scale developed by A. Akkerman et al. (2014)²⁶. The scale captures adverse emotions directed toward the political establishment and the perception of the in-group as a unified entity with a homogeneous will that should the center and the end-all of politics. It correlates at $r > .8$ with other commonly used populist attitudes scales and functions similarly (for details, see [Castanho Silva et al., 2020](#)).

Table 5.1: Populist attitudes scale and standardised (Std.) factor loadings.

Item	Std. Loadings (λ)
People and not the politicians should take decisions.	.716
People would be better represented by ordinary citizens.	.753
Power should be returned to the people.	.806
Better if politicians just followed the will of the people.	.663
Ordinary people know better than politicians.	.671

Ideological position: We measure respondents’ ideological preferences using the traditional 10-point Left-Right (L-R) self-placement item. To ease the interpretation of the results and take into account the potential non-linearity in the relationship between populism and ideological self-

²⁵ The item is a binary choice question. Respondents who mentioned “I don’t know” (approximately 5% of the sample) have been excluded from the analysis. The group is too small to draw any meaningful inference.

²⁶ We use the shortened version of the scale with slightly adjusted wording to ensure comparability between the French and Dutch translations of the items.

identification (Lilliana Mason, 2018), we recoded the L-R self-placement indicator in three categories, namely Left (0-3), Centre (4-6), and Right (7-10)²⁷.

Control variables: We control for a set of potentially confounding variables. We include sex assigned at birth²⁸ (i.e., Male, Female), education (Low, Medium, High), age (6 categories and treated as continuous), an index measuring political efficacy (e.g., “Things are so complicated I don’t know what to do”), whether a respondent identifies with a party (Yes, No), and region of residence (i.e., Flemish Region, French-speaking Belgium). These variables have been included since previous research suggests that individuals with relatively weaker socioeconomic positions and who feel powerless are more likely to deny the rights of other groups (van Doorn, 2014). The question wording of all the used items and their respective descriptive statistics can be found in the Appendix.

5.2.3 Modelling approach

To test our hypothesis, we employ Multi Group-Structural Equation Modelling (MG-SEM). This technique has two main advantages compared to traditional regression analysis. First, it takes random measurement error into account by assessing whether a given latent construct (e.g., populist attitudes) is properly measured through a set of survey items (i.e., a set of relevant attitudinal questions). Second, it ensures that our main independent variable of interest (i.e., populist attitudes) is measured and interpreted in the same way across different groups of respondents, in this case, left-, right-wing, and centrist respondents.

In this paper, two latent variables have been estimated, namely populism and political efficacy. The confirmatory factor analysis model shows good fit ($CFI = .98$, $RMSA = .052$, $SRMR = .028$) with factor loadings ranging between $\lambda_{min}^{max} = 0.68, 0.81$. This indicates that both latent variables are properly measured and operationalised (Hu & Bentler, 1999). Metric equivalence is achieved for both latent factors ($\Delta\chi^2 p \geq .05$, $\Delta CFI \leq -.10$, $\Delta RMSA \leq .015$, Chen, 2007),

²⁷ As robustness, we fit a model adding a measure of the strength of ideological self-placement by folding in half the L-R self-placement measure (L. Mason, 2018). This rules out the possibility that the results are driven by those ideologically extreme respondents who place themselves at both ends of the scale (i.e., 0 and 10). Results are unchanged and reported in the Appendix.

²⁸ This measure is obtained directly from the municipal-level registry data used to construct the sampling frame.

meaning that the estimated latent constructs are understood in the same way across the different ideological groups included in the study (i.e., left-, right-wing, and centrist respondents).

A probit regression is used to estimate the effects on support for abstract and situational freedom of speech (measured as dichotomous variables). We included the same control variables in both models, even if the question measuring situational freedom of speech is a split ballot experiment. This choice allows for two important advantages. First, although the coefficients between the two models are not directly comparable, including the same set of controls gives us a general idea of the pattern of significance and the magnitude of the estimated coefficients across the two models. Second, since the split-ballot experiment does not manipulate either ideological interests or populist attitudes, the inclusion of a set of background variables rules out the possibility that the differences in the coefficients between left- and right-wing populists are due to compositional differences. A model without the control variables is reported in the Appendix.

The regression coefficients have been transformed to marginal probabilities by keeping the continuous predictors at their sample mean and averaging over all the categorical variables included in the model (Long, 1997). The coefficients represent the effect of a 1 standard deviation increase in our independent variable of interest on the probability that the outcome is equal to 1. For instance, if populist attitudes increase by 1 standard deviation, the probability of endorsing abstract freedom of speech/allowing a speech increases by X percentage points. All the models are estimated using the SEM package Lavaan (Rosseel, 2012) in the R 4.1.x programming language (R Core Team, 2019).

5.3 Results

To test whether populist individuals are more likely to endorse freedom of speech in its abstract and unconstrained form, we fit a model where we regress abstract support for freedom of speech on the measure of populist attitudes. Results reported in Figure 5.1 show that for each point increase on the populist attitudes scale, an individual is, on average, 5-percentage points more willing to support free speech in its abstract and unconstrained form ($t = 4.1, p \leq 0.05$). Although populism accounts for a relatively small proportion of the variance in the measure of abstract support for freedom of speech, the estimated coefficient is substantially relevant: there is approximately a 20-percentage point difference between the beginning and the end of the populist attitudes scale, revealing a non-negligible association between populism and support for abstract

freedom of speech. This result also holds when controlling for respondent's L-R ideology, political efficacy, and a set of relevant demographic characteristics. This means that populist attitudes are positively associated with support for freedom of speech in its abstract form across a substantial portion of the Belgian population and for individuals on both sides of the ideological spectrum. This finding provides evidence for H1: populist individuals are more likely to support freedom of speech in its abstract form, accounting for respondents' background characteristics and a set of potential confounding variables. The full regression table and a series of nested models are reported in the Appendix.

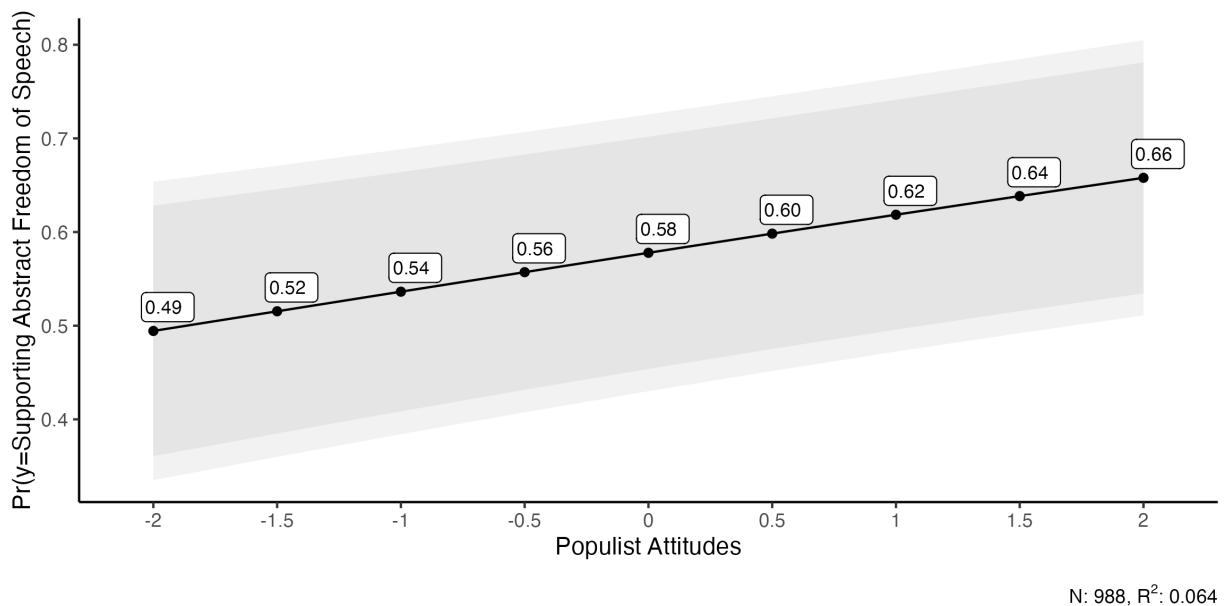
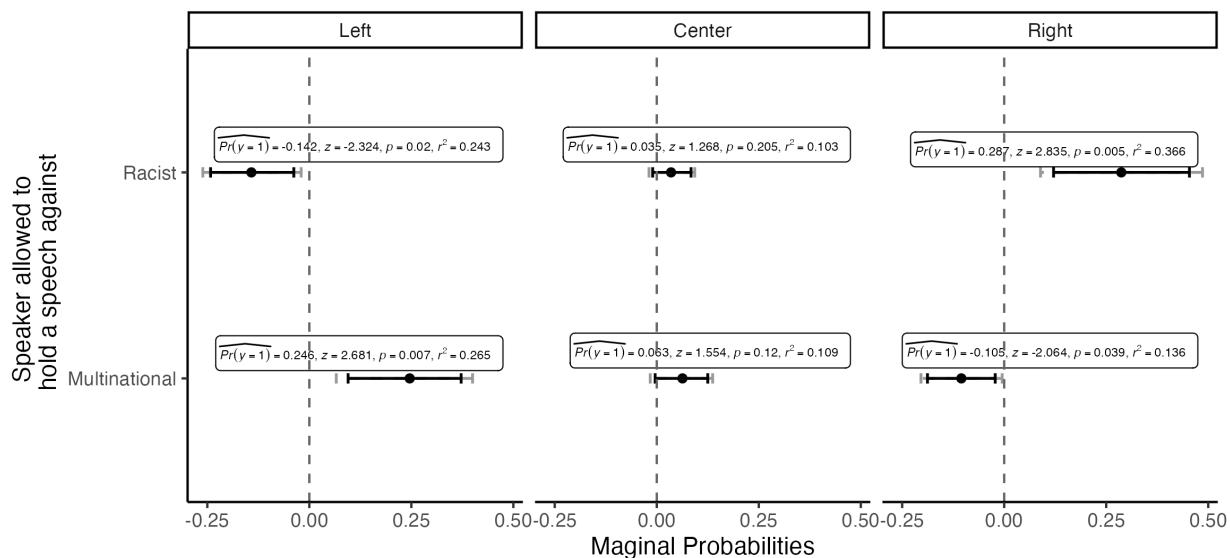


Figure 5.1: Predicted probabilities for abstract support for freedom of speech, controlling for all the other variables included in the model. The dependent variable is the question asking whether 'every individual should say what he/she wants' (dichotomised). Ribbons represent 90% and 95% confidence intervals around the model-estimated probabilities. The full regression table is reported in the Appendix.

Next, we test whether freedom of speech is understood differently when it is applied to concrete situations in which particular ideological interests are at stake. To do so, we ran a regression where the conditional freedom of speech measure (i.e., the split-ballot experiment) is regressed on the measure of populist attitudes. A multi-group model with six groups is estimated to capture the variation across both the target of the speech (i.e. immigrants/multinational corporations) and ideological groups (left-, right-wing, and centrist respondents). This provides us with the marginal

coefficients of populist attitudes on the propensity to allow or deny a particular speech for each ideological group²⁹.

In addition to interpreting the group-specific coefficients, we resort to marginal coefficient plots (Figure 5.2). The plots depict the increase in the probability of allowing a speech in terms of percentage points for each 1 standard deviation change in the populist attitudes scale. In the plots, the horizontal lines around the dots represent the 90% and 95% confidence intervals around the estimated probabilities. If the confidence intervals depicted in the plot exclude the vertical zero line, it indicates that the estimated coefficients are statistically significant for the particular group/speech pairing. The respective regression table and an additional series of nested models are reported in the Appendix³⁰.



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Figure 5.2: Coefficient of populist attitudes on allowing ideologically motivated speeches, controlling for all the other variables included in the model. The dependent variable is the split-ballot experiment in which the object of criticism varied (i.e., immigrants and

²⁹ In a traditional regression setting, this procedure is identical to estimating a three-way interaction between populist attitudes, the categorical measure of ideological preferences (i.e., left-, right-wing, and centrist respondents), and a variable indicating whether the speech was against multinationals or immigrants.

³⁰ Similarly to what we did in Figure 5.1, we also calculated the probability of allowing a speech against immigrants or multinational corporations (split-ballot experiment) across the different ideological groups (Left, Centre, Right) and categorical levels of affinity with populism (Low, Average, High). Unsurprisingly, the estimates (obtained from a GLM probit model) mirror the marginal coefficients of the multi-group SEM model and are reported in the Appendix.

multinational corporations). Error bars represent 90% and 95% confidence intervals around the estimates. The full regression table is reported in the Appendix.

In general, the results reveal strong heterogeneity in the patterns of association but strong similarities in how left- and right-wing populist individuals trade off free speech for their ideological interests³¹. Although coefficients are not directly comparable with the ones obtained from the model for abstract freedom of speech, the explanatory power of populism is larger when situational freedom of speech is concerned. However, its magnitude is asymmetrical across the different speech acts: they are stronger for those issues that are traditionally associated with left- (i.e., multinational corporations) and right-wing (i.e., immigration) populism.

Concerning right-wing voters (right-hand side of Figure 5.2), the coefficient of populism is positive and highly significant for the speech against immigrants. A point increase on the populist attitudes scale is associated with a 29-percentage point increase in the probability of allowing a speech against immigrants, controlling for all the other variables included in the model ($t = 2.8, p \leq 0.05$). However, among the same right-wing individuals, populist attitudes are associated with an increase in the probability of denying a speech act that favours multinational corporations. Each additional point on the populist attitude scale corresponds to a 10-percentage point decrease in the probability of allowing an individual to hold a speech against multinational corporations ($t = 2.1, p \leq 0.05$).

Moving to left-wing respondents (left-hand side of Figure 5.2), the coefficients are similar in magnitude but reveal a reverse pattern. The coefficient of populism is positive and significant when left-wing respondents are asked whether to allow a speech against multinational corporations. For each point increase in the populist attitudes scale, left-wing individuals are, on average, 25-percentage points ($t = 2.7, p \leq 0.05$) more likely to think that the speech should be allowed. On the contrary, we found that among left-wing respondents, populist individuals are more likely to deny the right to hold a speech against immigrants. Each additional point increase

³¹ We find that L-R ideology alone (Left, Centre, Right) correlates only moderately with the propensity of allowing ideologically motivated speeches, confirming the importance of populist attitudes in explaining the connection between ideological interests and the concrete application of free speech. The probabilities of endorsing a speech against immigrants or multinational corporations across the different ideological groups are reported in the Appendix.

on the populist attitudes scale corresponds to a 14-percentage point ($t = 2.3, p \leq 0.05$) increase in the probability of thinking that a speech against immigrants should be stopped.

Next, we calculate the explained variance (R^2) of populism for the conditional freedom of speech question. The R^2 increases, on average, by 8 percentage points when populist attitudes are included in the model. This further confirms that populism is an important correlate of whether citizens are willing to allow or deny ideologically motivated speech acts. Finally, it is worth noting the coefficient of populism is smaller and insignificant for centrist voters. This result is in line with related literature: ideological interests and traditional L-R host ideology are important factors in the articulation of populist struggle (Silva et al., 2022).

These results show that, both among left- and right-wing individuals, those who score high on the populist attitudes scale are more willing to trade off democratic liberties for their ideological interests and less likely to tolerate speeches that are against their ideological interests. This pattern provides support for both H2a and H2b. Populist individuals do not support speech acts unconditionally. Rather, they tend to defend freedom of speech only when it is in line with their ideological interests and deny it when it is against their ideological preferences. In sum, populist attitudes are found to reinforce the tendency for democratic hypocrisy.

5.4 Conclusions

This paper sheds light on the ambivalent relationship between populism and freedom of expression that has been long discussed in the theoretical literature on the topic (Koenraad Abts & Rummens, 2007; Canovan, 1999; Mény & Surel, 2002; Moffitt, 2017). We find that populist individuals on both sides of the ideological spectrum tend to endorse a more “unlimited” and unconstrained form of free speech according to which individuals should be allowed to say what they want (Moffitt, 2017). However, using a split ballot experiment where we randomly manipulate the target of the speech act (i.e., immigrants and multinational corporations), we found that populist individuals tend to instrumentally protect or deny free speech based on their ideological preferences.

Right-wing populists are more willing to protect individuals who speak against immigrants but, at the same time, they tend to deny free speech when the object of criticism involves multinational corporations. This confirms the constitutive importance of nativism and pro-business ideology in the instrumental support for democratic liberties among right-wing populist individuals (Betz,

1994; Kokkonen & Linde, 2021). On the contrary, left-wing populists are more likely to allow a speech against multinational corporations. Yet, they are more inclined to deny the same right when the speech is against immigrants. This suggests that socioeconomic issues are a salient dimension of left-wing populism to the extent that populist individuals on the left side of the ideological spectrum are willing to protect free speech only when it facilitates the fight against the dominant economic powers (March, 2017). These findings reveal that for populist individuals, freedom of expression is not a neutral, context-free value but rather a norm in tension with other relevant social, cultural, and economic issues.

Our findings underline that supporting freedom of speech in the abstract does not always generate more tolerant behaviour in situations where respondents' ideological interests are at stake. Individuals' substantive commitment to democracy should be investigated taking into account the intrinsic tension between democratic practices and other, equally important, values (Rostbøll, 2010). In line with recent literature, we documented the tendency of right-wing individuals to interpret and justify certain democratic norms instrumentally (Huber & Schimpf, 2017; Kokkonen & Linde, 2021). We add to this literature by showing that the propensity of left-leaning individuals to be more tolerant compared to right-wing individuals may have undergone a shift, at least, among the most populist part of the electorate (c.f., Altemeyer, 1996; Davis & Silver, 2004; Lindner & Nosek, 2009; Sniderman et al., 1989). Similarly to their ideological counterparts, left-wing populist individuals think that individuals with opposite political ideas should not be allowed to express their opinions publicly, perhaps to avoid spreading and legitimising certain ideas that are considered dangerous or harmful for democracy (Orazani et al., 2020).

This finding supports the idea that both left- and right-wing populist individuals apply the same logic when protecting or denying free speech. To advance specific ideological interests, populism presents certain norm-eroding practices as necessary (and, thus, legitimate). In this sense, the willingness to protect or reject democratic norms is instrumentally motivated: what is democratic and undemocratic is understood in a way that helps them to advance the interests of "the people" and struggle against what is considered unfair or oppressive (G. Grossman et al., 2022; Krishnarajan, 2022). In other words, the ideological interests of populist individuals influence how freedom is understood, articulated, and, ultimately, applied.

On a more theoretical level, our work adds to the literature that investigates how ideologically different groups of voters have different normative understandings of democracy (Ferrín & Hernández, 2021; König & Siewert, 2021; Landwehr & Steiner, 2017). Right-wing populist individuals may interpret and apply liberties to control and prevent societal change. In this conception, democratic norms are used to prevent individuals from challenging the current economic system and preclude the enfranchisement of the non-native population. On the contrary, populist individuals on the left side of the ideological continuum may understand democratic liberties as an instrument of change. In this case, democratic norms are used to struggle against the mainstream economic (capitalist) system and empower disenfranchised minority groups (i.e., immigrants). These different understandings of democracy underlay the inclination of populist individuals to “save democracy” by curtailing the very rights they aim to safeguard (Marcus et al., 1995).

The slippage between abstract commitment to civil liberties and their concrete application underlines “that the exercise of rights generates costs” that, at times, are so significant that citizens are willing to give up or negate certain rights (Peffley et al., 2001). This may help us understand the nature of public support for freedom of speech and the increasing levels of polarisation across developed democracies (Jennifer McCoy et al., 2018). Free expression and tolerance are not unlimited and unconditional. Instead, they are in continuous conflict with other values that, at times, can be considered even more fundamental (Peffley et al., 2001). When a political issue becomes salient in voters’ minds (e.g., ‘they steal our jobs’), the relative importance of other considerations (e.g., protection of immigrants’ rights) may decrease based on how politicians employ particular ideological content and the way in which citizens integrate it into their attitudes and political judgements (Ciuk & Yost, 2016; Fossati et al., 2022). From this perspective, those voters attracted by the divisive and antagonist nature of populism may instrumentally use democratic liberties to justify a divisive and polarising rhetoric against certain out-groups, effectively increasing societal polarisation.

Although we are confident that the results presented in this paper are useful to better understand the ambivalent relationship between populism and democratic liberties, they do not provide, by any means, strong bases for causal claims. Even if we randomly manipulated the speech target, the direction of the causality between populism, abstract understanding, and concrete application of

freedom of speech is difficult to establish³². That is, individuals more likely to see freedom of speech as “situational” may have been attracted by the rhetoric of populist candidates and parties and, thus, have become more populist.

Our results should also not be interpreted as evidence that populism *always* undermines freedom of expression. We find no evidence that centrist populist individuals—the largest ideological group in our sample—refuse to support free speech when it is against their interests. Furthermore, despite being quite representative of the contemporary Left-Right divide, our results may be specific to the chosen target of the speech. It may be that left-wing individuals display a form of “inclusionary intolerance” that entails limiting the rights of those who threaten the rights of immigrants but not of other minority groups (e.g., Muslims) ([M. Grossman & Hopkins, 2016](#)). The higher propensity of right-wing populists to limit a speech against multinational corporations may not translate to other redistributive policies (e.g., higher corporate tax). Additional research should investigate whether democratic hypocrisy is limited to specific ideological motivations or depends on the perceived severity of the speech violation.

Despite these limitations, this work establishes that populist ideas matter greatly, not only for understanding the nature of public support for freedom of expression but also for the study of other civil liberties. Our results support the idea that democratic liberties are intrinsically subjected to a certain degree of instrumentalisation ([Fish, 1994](#)). This implies the presence of disagreement over the limits and the meaning of certain values that can generate potential conflicts in the interpretation of democratic norms ([Rostbøll, 2010](#)). For instance, recent survey data show that individuals disagree on whether a speech is hateful and harmful and, thus, whether it should be legally permitted ([Ekins, 2017](#)). Given its relevance for contemporary democracies, studying how populism interprets democratic norms might help explain why and how voters and party leaders revise democratic principles in light of other relevant norms. Ultimately, this may help us to better understand when and under which conditions individuals are willing to put a price on fundamental democratic rights.

³² This is due to the fact that we could only randomly manipulate the object of criticism of the speech (i.e., immigrants/multinational corporations) and not respondents’ populist attitudes or ideological preferences.

6 CHAPTER 6 - CONCLUSIONS

This dissertation sets out to investigate the nature, causes, and consequences of radical ideologies at a time when populist radical parties are succeeding across Western democracies. Against diverse historical contexts, electoral systems, and socio-economic circumstances, both left- and right-wing radical parties garnered the support of large parts of the electorate. As a result, they have become an integral part of the party systems of many advanced democracies. The societal consequences of their success are diverse and can pose potential threats to democracy. This dissertation investigates political radicalism by embracing a comprehensive approach to the study of radical and non-mainstream ideologies. It does so by answering the following questions:

- What constitutes the core of contemporary radicalism, and how do radical individuals organize different ideological elements?
- How are radical ideologies connected to ideological and affective polarization?
- Why are radical individuals more likely to endorse a majoritarian and illiberal understanding of democracy?

This study has four major implications for political scientists wrestling with issues of radicalism and democracy. In what follows, I theorize the main findings of this dissertation and its contributions in face of the broader literature on radical ideologies, polarization, and democratic backsliding. In the last part, I address this dissertation's limitations and indicate venues for future research.

6.1 A Need for a More Refined Understanding of Political Radicalism

Scholars in the fields of political science and sociology have studied the causes and consequences of radical ideological thinking by focusing on the supply- and demand-side elements of the competition. Supply-side factors refer to the strategies and mobilization capacity of radical parties as well as contextual conditions, events, or institutional elements that potentially facilitate their rise and success. For instance, scholars have focused on the level of federalism of a polity ([Huysseune, 2002](#)), the presence of a proportional or majoritarian electoral system ([Carter, 2002](#)), or the active marginalization and exclusion of radical parties from governmental coalitions (a so-called cordon sanitaire) ([Koen Abts, 2015](#)). In addition, supply-side literature focuses on party

positioning, looking at the ability of parties on the left- and right-fringe of the electoral space to attract those voters disappointed with mainstream parties (Krause, 2020; Mair, 2009).

Demand-side literature usually looks at the reasons why voters are attracted by radical parties. Most of the work in this area has investigated cultural and economic grievances. These include increasing income inequality (Han, 2016), wage stagnation (Oesch, 2008), unemployment (Golder, 2003), and the fear that the (majority) group's language, religion, or customs are under threat (Ignazi, 1992; Minkenberg, 2000). For instance, Donald Trump's popularity in rust-belt states during the 2016 presidential election was linked to his appeal to what he called the "losers of globalization". These voters expressed anger toward the seemingly unresponsive Washington elites that were considered responsible for the outsourcing of jobs, the decline of local industries, and rapid demographic and cultural changes (Stiglitz, 2017). According to this view, radical voting is motivated by material conditions and policy considerations, similar to the reasons voters use when casting a vote for mainstream parties (Van Der Brug et al., 2000).

Recently, scholars are increasingly recognizing that looking at the supply- and demand-side in isolation does not provide a clear and comprehensive picture of the causes and consequences of the success of radical ideologies (e.g., Mols & Jetten, 2020). The underlying reason is that social, political, and economic grievances (demand-side) do not directly translate into voting for (radical) political parties. They need to be discursively and strategically articulated by political leaders (supply-side) with the aim of mobilizing voters, convincing them to adopt certain interpretative frameworks, and propelling political change. Consequently, instead of juxtaposing supply and demand perspectives, this dissertation aims to integrate their insights into a broader conceptual model with the goal of providing a more refined understanding of contemporary political radicalism. I do so by (1) shifting the attention to the role of general ideological and content-free elements that compose political radicalism, rather than focusing merely on concrete policy issues. Second, it (2) highlights the relevance of studying the connection between voters' ideological beliefs (demand-side) and contextual factors related to the dynamic of the electoral competition (supply-side) and (3) investigates the resulting conditional and contextual influence of radical politics on citizens' attitudes and behaviors. By focusing on these three dimensions, this dissertation contributes to resolving some of the limitations in the existing literature.

6.2 The Ontological-Ontic Nexus

To address the first research question—namely, what ideological elements constitute the core of modern radicalism—this dissertation urges to focus on deeper-level ontological elements linked to how individuals understand and interpret the socio-political world. In contrast with some of the existing literature, this dissertation argues that support for radical parties is not “unideological” or “irrational” (Pappas, 2019b), nor that radical voters are mere “extreme” or “fringe” versions of their mainstream counterparts. Instead, I argue that radical individuals possess a distinct understanding of politics and society centered around the rejection of mainstream political practices and a strong critique of the political systems, and not just a dislike for the government or the political elites (Sartori, 2005). Starting from this theoretical critique, Chapter 2 asked what truly constitutes contemporary radicalism, and dove into its constitutive components to resolve the conceptual and empirical ambiguity concerning its fundamental characteristics. I found that both left- and right-wing radical voters combine populism with a strong antagonism against the entire political system (i.e., the status quo) and high levels of dogmatism and ideological rigidity. The Chapter also reveals that a substantial portion of the electorate endorses political radicalism even if they do not vote for left or right-wing radical parties. This suggests the presence of a “radical reservoir” of voters that can be potentially mobilized by political entrepreneurs able to appeal to the ontological elements of radicalism and mobilize voters’ social, economic, and cultural grievances.

Second, the thesis contributes to the literature on radical ideologies by showing that opposition to mainstream political practices is not based on a monolithic and uniform set of beliefs. Instead, it reveals significant heterogeneity in how individuals combine different ontological elements, allowing for the presence of different typologies of non-mainstream belief systems. Conceptually, this finding aligns with Lakoff’s work on the “radial structure” of (political) concepts (Collier & Mahon, 1993; Lakoff, 1987). Simply put, Lakoff proposed that instead of thinking of concepts as inflexible categories tied to strict rules and conditions, we should see them as based on prototypes. Consider, for example, the concept of a “bird.” Most people would imagine something like a robin as the most prototypical kind of bird, even though a penguin is just as much of a bird. In other words, Lakoff’s theory postulates that concepts are flexible and fuzzy. They contain a multitude of elements, some closer and others farther from the prototype. Conceptually, this implies the presence of a radial structure with varying degrees of centrality. This perspective acknowledges

the flexibility and variability in how people organize and categorize the world around them, recognizing that not all elements are equally important in how people make sense of politics. In relation to the Chapter's findings, this perspective suggests that not all types of radicalism share the same ontological elements; neither do they endorse them to the same extent. Instead, certain elements may only show up in specific instances of political radicalism or particular contexts. In other words, different radical and non-mainstream ideologies may share one or multiple elements, and the presence of these shared elements can mutually reinforce the importance of certain beliefs over others.

The dissertation empirically shows the presence of different manifestations of political radicalism. It reveals that voters of radical left parties in Belgium possess highly antagonistic and populist beliefs but do not embrace a rigid and dogmatic conception of politics. This finding mirrors the seminal work of Tetlock (1983), later expanded by Jost et al. (2003b), on the rigidity-of-the-right. According to this strain of research, right-wing ideologies, and especially their radical manifestations, are linked to intolerance toward opposite ideas and a black-white view of politics. They reduce the socio-political world into fixed categories usually centered around the moral categories of the “good” and the “evil.” (see also Rokeach, 1960). More recent work shows that the association between dogmatic intolerance and radical ideologies is complex and nuanced (Costello et al., 2023) but that, nonetheless, radical right individuals are consistently more likely to endorse a rigid, dogmatic, and simplistic understanding of politics (Toner et al., 2013).

In exploring the heterogeneity in belief organization between right- and left-wing voters, we move towards the ontic aspects of political radicalism, that is, those concrete societal issues or broader ideological labels that allow us to distinguish between different ideologies. This argument mirrors recent research on different varieties of populism. For instance, Mudde & Kaltwasser (2013), building upon Filc (2009), delve into the distinctions between inclusionary and exclusionary populism. Notably, they argue that left-wing populism, unlike its right-wing counterpart, rejects a political vision that sees certain groups (like immigrants) as morally inferior and “evil” (see also Jami, 2023). In line with Lakoff’s argument, ideological variations are related to the fact that certain ontological elements are only present in specific contexts, conditional on specific features of the electoral conflict. Drawing from here, the ideological variations observed between right- and left-wing radical voters in Belgium may be the result of an increasingly salient universalism-

particularism divide among right-wing voters. This is especially so in the Dutch-speaking region of Belgium, where the radical right is particularly strong (Gaasendam, 2020). The observed variation is linked to how the “others” are defined: when the out-group is constructed using ontic differences in religion, ethnicity, gender, or sexual expression—rather than the economic left-right divide—the “other” is seen as inferior, unfairly advantaged by the political elites, and a threat to the values and ideas of the ordinary people. Combined with the ontological elements, the intersection of these dimensions may produce different ontic configurations ranging from left-libertarian to right-authoritarian.

Additionally, the dissertation found that non-mainstream belief systems are linked to various social and political grievances. This finding confirms previous literature on the success of radical parties among individuals with weaker socio-structural positions (Golder, 2016; Spruyt et al., 2016). At the same time, we also discover substantial heterogeneity in the socio-economic characteristics of individuals with radical and non-mainstream ideologies. This finding suggests that support for political radicalism is present in a large and variegated segment of the electorate. Although this dissertation only partially explores the “causes” that lead individuals to subscribe to radical ideologies (see Limitations), this result sheds some light on why radical parties have become capable of appealing to two distinct groups of voters concurrently: those “left behind” by the current economic systems who experience financial difficulties and those enjoying more advantageous socio-economic positions but who feel frustrated by how the current system works (Mols & Jetten, 2017). In fact, a growing line of research has pointed out the presence of a “wealth paradox” whereby radical parties attract disproportionate numbers of middle-class and relatively wealthy voters (Mols & Jetten, 2017; Mudde, 2007). In this regard, the appeal of radical parties may be rooted in a feeling of status and economic insecurity in which individuals feel deprived both in relation to the out-group (Koen Abts & Baute, 2022) and compared to a glorious, idealized, past (van Prooijen, Rosema, et al., 2022).

Overall, these findings show that if we are to delve deeper into the ideological tenets of radicalism, it becomes essential to focus on its diverse manifestations, investigate borderline cases, and study different conceptual varieties. This requires a multidimensional approach that allows for the emergence of different and multifaceted typologies rather than a dichotomous understanding, as often done in the literature on radical voting behavior.

6.3 The Strategic Use of Polarization on the Affective and Ideological Domains

Chapter 2 sets the stage for allowing a certain degree of flexibility and variability in how people understand the socio-political world. It kicks off from the notion that the ontological elements of radical belief systems manifest in a set of concrete ontic issues. These ontic elements translate the ontological components into issue-specific preferences linked to more traditional dimensions of the electoral competition (e.g., left-right, secular-religious) (Ezrow et al., 2014; Laclau, 1990). Although the work presented in this dissertation does not directly explore the ontic aspect of the competition (see Limitations), the conceptual distinction between ontological and ontic provides a useful framework for connecting supply- and demand-side explanations.

One of the topics explored by previous literature investigating the supply side is the role of charismatic leaders (Eatwell, 2006; McDonnell, 2016). Although scholars disagree on the importance of charisma (Pappas, 2016), leaders' charisma can help radical and populist movements to represent and embody "the people", as testified by the success of the French Poujadisme, Argentinian Peronismo, and Venezuelan Chavismo. However, an analytically important element of radical leadership is leaders' "well-crafted strategic performance" (Wodak, 2015, p. 125). This dissertation builds on this strain of literature to look at how radical leaders articulate the political conflict to shape voters' attitudes. I argue that political leaders adopt specific narratives to mobilize electoral support and provide their followers with a particular interpretation of facts or events. These "counter-narratives" are used to expand the scope of the conflict to new or pre-existing issues (Ivarsflaten, 2008), build cross-cutting identities around divisive issues (Rydgren, 2002), and assign responsibility for the problems experienced by the people (Koen Abts & Baute, 2022). In doing so, radical leaders are able to mobilize old divisions or construct new cleavages to create an "antagonist frontier" that frames politics in terms of victims and heroes, villains and allies (Laclau, 2005).

While the existing literature has shed some light on how radical parties read and influence public opinion (Moffitt, 2015; Mols & Jetten, 2014; Wodak, 2019), it remains unclear how leaders shape and construct narratives to generate demands for change. Chapter 3 fills this gap by showing how populist leaders can mobilize political identities to create new cleavages and influence voters' political judgments. Using data collected from the 2016 American National Electoral Study, the Chapter shows that the relationship between populist attitudes and political judgments is not

uniform but depends on how leaders articulate the cleavage between “the people” and their enemies. Specifically, the Chapter suggests that the way populist individuals form political judgments varies based on how party leaders (de)politicize specific issues, attack rival party leaders, and exploit pre-existing partisan rivalries. The results show that in the 2016 US elections, populism is linked to ideological extremity among Democrats and affective polarization among Republicans, highlighting that populist voters who belong to different partisan groups can polarize on different dimensions. What these dimensions are depends on how political divisions are constructed and interpreted by political leaders

The presence of this form of asymmetrical polarization is linked to strategic considerations: leaders may choose to “politicize” new or existing issues to differentiate themselves from mainstream parties or “depoliticize” the conflict and instead focus on other, non-policy-oriented, dimensions of the competition ([De Sio & Lachat, 2020](#)). Chapter 3 takes Donald Trump’s campaign as an ideal-typical example of a depolitization strategy on the traditional Liberal-Conservative policy domain. His 2016 campaign has often been described as lacking ideological clarity, inconsistent, and more moderate on some of the issues typically endorsed by the Republican party ([Ahler & Broockman, 2015](#); [Barro, 2015](#)). For instance, he promised to protect Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid ([Klein, 2017](#)) and proposed universal health care paid by the government, in open opposition to the traditional stances of the Republic party ([Diamond, 2015](#)). In terms of economic policies, despite being often inconsistent, he broke with the traditional Republican dogma and pledged to raise the top income tax rate ([Tani, 2015](#)). On cultural issues, he praised Planned Parenthood ([Krieg, 2016](#)) and said that he “absolutely” endorse exceptions for rape and incest in abortion restrictions, which other Republican candidates (i.e., Rubio and Walker) opposed ([Barro, 2015](#)). The policy-light and inconsistent nature of Trump’s campaign was used to downplay the importance of policy disagreements between voters belonging to different socio-political groups or bearing different policy interests in order to broaden Trump’s electoral appeal.

On the other hand, Sanders’ electoral campaign is an example of a polarization strategy. Sanders emphasized the importance of policy disagreement between competing candidates, including his own party’s candidates. He advocated more progressive views on concrete policy issues concerning income redistribution, race, healthcare, diplomacy, and immigration. This politicization allowed Sanders to gain the support of a large part of the Democratic party, which

was largely dissatisfied with the moderate positions endorsed by its leadership. This allowed Sanders to win approximately 40 percent of the vote of those who voted in the Democratic primaries, a portion similar to those Republicans who supported Donald Trump during the primaries. While Trump supporters voted for him even if they thought that his policies were “ineffective or even impossible” ([Albert & Barney, 2018, p. 1252](#)), Sanders’ voters cared about substantive issues and pushed the establishment candidate of the Democracy party, Hillary Clinton, to take more progressive positions on a series of relevant policy issues ([Noel, 2016](#)).

6.4 Polarization as a Contextual and Relational Process

The results of Chapter 3 suggest that polarization is a deliberate process of shaping or accentuating societal and political divisions that populist leaders can use to mobilize their voters by selectively emphasizing certain aspects of the electoral competition. This raises the question of how leaders articulate ontological and ontic issues when appealing to voters. This work argues that the way leaders accentuate or downplay political divisions depends on relational and contextual dynamics, and thus, it is the result of both demand-side and supply-side factors. In Chapter 3, for instance, I suggested that Trump and Sanders were both constrained by the dynamics of the two-party system (supply-side) in their populist appeals. They had to resort to pre-existing partisan identities to appeal to voters and shape relevant political judgments (demand-side). In other national contexts, perhaps less influenced by partisan loyalties, leaders can strategically mobilize or demobilize voters on dimensions of the electoral competition beyond existing party cleavages. For instance, they may (de)emphasize Transsexual rights or climate protection to create divisions among the public around the issue of gender identity or stimulate a sense of urgency concerning the climate. The strategic emphasis placed on certain aspects of the competition shifts the salience of political issues and, thus, alters how individuals form political judgments.

This was the focus of Chapter 4, which underlies how “populist polarization” is both a contextual and relational process. The Chapter contends that the connection between populism and affective polarization may (or may not) be driven by four main factors. First, the us-versus-them nature inherent in the populist worldview. Second, the radical party voting and its association with radical policy positions. Third, a backlash mechanism, wherein those opposing populists become as polarized as the populists themselves. Finally, the negative partisanship hypothesis posits that populism may not be linked to affective polarization as it captures a general disapproval of all

parties within the political system. Using data from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems from 25 elections in 21 countries, the findings indicate that populist attitudes, instead of being directly associated with heightened affective polarization, are more correlated with a negative assessment of all political parties in the system, consistent with Meléndez and Rovira Kaltwasser's argument on negative partisanship (2019). Moreover, the Chapter demonstrates that the link between affective polarization and populism does not follow a uniform pattern but presents itself as a context-specific phenomenon.

In a broader sense, these findings align with the literature on the so-called “activation” of latent attitudes that has recently become popular in the study of populism. The idea that certain attitudes are contextually activated is not new (Morris et al., 2003). It has been advanced for a series of different attitudes such as authoritarianism (e.g., Stenner, 2005), in-/out-group thinking (e.g., Zick et al., 2008), ethnic self-identity (e.g., Forehand & Deshpandé, 2001), and personality traits (e.g., Gerber et al., 2011). In short, this strain of literature argues that certain messages or events can stimulate or “activate” attitudes that otherwise remain unexpressed. The underlying assumption is that the general principles people use to interpret the socio-political world—e.g., the “latent” ontological elements of radicalism—are socialized or learned structures that can be present, to a certain extent, in everyone. Hawkins et al. (2019, p. iii) explain that these attitudes remain “dormant” until leaders actively articulate them in conjunction with other relevant aspects of the competition, for instance, by attributing blame to others (e.g., the political elites) for the problems experienced by “the people” (e.g., economic hardship) and advocating a radical change in the status quo (also see Koen Abts & Baute, 2022). In line with the argument I developed in Chapter 4, this implies that the ontological elements of radicalism are not inherently tied to affective polarization, although they may be linked to a general feeling of disdain for established party politics (M. Murat Ardag et al., 2020a; Hawkins et al., 2020). Instead, they may, or may not, shape citizens’ political judgments based on how leaders articulate them in conjunction with other (ontic) elements of political conflict. These elements include historical, institutional, or socio-economic factors such as political scandals (de la Torre, 2010), systematic corruption (Hanley & Sikk, 2016), economic and political crises (Moffitt, 2015), and the response of mainstream political actors to challenger parties (Heinisch et al., 2021).

The latter point is another relevant aspect explored in Chapter 4. I show the (idiosyncratic) presence of a nonlinear relationship between populist attitudes and affective polarization, suggesting that both those strongly endorsing populism and those vehemently opposing it tend to exhibit higher levels of polarization. It posits that when mainstream political forces perceive populists as disruptive or dangerous, they may respond with strategies that marginalize and vilify populist actors. The response of mainstream parties, in turn, can lead to heightened levels of negative sentiments and polarization among both supporters and opponents of populism. This phenomenon can be seen as a “backlash” effect that implies a reaction or counteraction to the rise of populism. In this context, individuals who oppose populism may become equally, if not more, confrontational, vitriolic, and polarized in their attitudes toward both populist leaders and their supporters. This is linked to the tendency of mainstream forces to employ tactics to delegitimize populist demands, characterize populist leaders and their followers negatively, and even construct institutional barriers to counteract the influence of radical parties.

This result highlights the importance of connecting supply-side (i.e., the dynamic resulting from the opposition between mainstream and radical forces) with demand-side (i.e., the stratified presence of populist attitudes) elements rather than using an “either-or” approach that focuses on isolating variables. Furthermore, the argument presented in this thesis provides some support for the idea that the ontological elements of radicalism structure the political competition and can be strategically exploited by different actors—i.e., mainstream and radical parties—to influence citizens’ affective judgements, and, ultimately to mobilize electoral support ([Marcos-Marne et al., 2020](#)).

6.5 Populism and the Instrumental Understanding of Democratic Principles

The major finding of Chapters 3 and 4, by and large, is that leaders strategically articulate citizens’ demands to shape their ontic preferences and attract support. This implies that different segments of the electorate care about different issues and aspects of politics. In addition to politicians’ messaging and cues, the variation in the salience of different issues is related to citizens’ material interests, moral convictions, and political identities. This interpretation aligns with previous work on issue salience (e.g., [Bélanger & Meguid, 2008](#)) that has argued that voters will vote for a party on two conditions: if they think an issue is important enough for them and if they believe that their stances are not adequately represented. Existing evidence suggests that this mechanism informs

how individuals think about economic (Kriesi & Pappas, 2015), cultural (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018), and environmental issues (Lockwood, 2018), as well as how they perceive democratic norms and democratic governance (Heinisch & Wegscheider, 2020). The role of issue salience and ideological interests and their impact on how radical individuals understand democracy was further explored in Chapter 5.

The Chapter addressed the question of why radical individuals tend to endorse democracy-in-principle but reject democracy-in-practice. I focus on freedom of speech—a relevant democratic norm that populist and radical leaders often instrumentally curtail in order to advance their ideological interests (Kenny, 2020). The Chapter argues that populist leaders often present themselves as champions of free speech. Yet, their commitment to such principle is instrumental, serving a specific vision of democracy. Using survey questions and a split-ballot experiment, I show that populist individuals support freedom of speech as an abstract principle but apply it selectively based on their ideological interests and the ideological content of the speech, a phenomenon that I term democratic hypocrisy. Left-wing populists are more tolerant of speeches against multinational corporations but less tolerant of speeches against immigrants, while right-wing populists show the opposite pattern.

These findings suggest that the way citizens understand democracy is dependent on (1) their affinity with a populist understanding of politics (i.e., the ontological supremacy of “the people” against their “enemies”), (2) their interests and pre-existing policy convictions (i.e., ontic interests), and (3) the way politicians instrumentally interpret democracy to appeal to their voters (i.e., leaders’ strategic considerations). The underlying idea is that leaders propose solutions to economic and cultural grievances that reinterpret democratic norms in majoritarian and anti-pluralistic terms. Voters observe politicians’ behaviors and take them as cues to make sense of democracy. This interpretation is in line with recent literature on democratic backsliding. For instance, Bartels (2023) argues that European citizens have not become more willing to dismantle democratic institutions compared to the past. Instead, they have been influenced by the ability of populist leaders to re-articulate the meaning of democracy in exclusionary and illiberal terms. This leads to a progressive shift of the democratic status quo towards an instrumental and conditional understanding of democratic principles.

Based on these findings, populism is likely to impact how individuals balance their ideological interests against democratic principles. This underlies the presence of varying degrees of importance assigned to different political issues across different segments of the electorate. Immigration is arguably a salient issue for right-wing citizens attracted by populism. Left-wing radical voters, on the other hand, are more likely to emphasize the fight against multinational corporations and business profit. Yet, the symmetrical disdain for freedom of speech on both sides of the ideological spectrum suggests that the support for undemocratic norms is related to how different ideological interests are pitted against each other. This idea challenges Truman's argument ([Truman, 1971/1951](#)) that citizens expect the other side to behave according to the "rules of the game" even in the face of strong disagreement on relevant policy issues. One of the possible explanations for this phenomenon is that certain ontic elements have become so salient that individuals perceive them as fundamental for democracy (e.g., the defense of national interests against immigrants). Paradoxically, this leads individuals on both sides to tolerate increasingly severe transgressions to safeguard democracy from the other side's supposedly anti-democratic measures. Emblematic was the 2020 election in the United States, where Republicans accused Democrats of rigging the election, and far-right movements acted on the desire to protect democracy by storming the parliament, thus disrupting the democratic process itself.

All things considered, this dissertation maintains that the ontological elements of radical belief systems matter for how citizens form political judgments and interpret democratic norms. It demonstrates that the way these ontological elements inform ontic beliefs about concrete policy and political judgments is contextual and conditional on both supply- and demand-side aspects of the competition. Building on this notion, the results presented in this dissertation suggest three conditions through which radical beliefs can inform political attitudes and behaviors. The first condition is that voters should experience grievances about the political, economic, or social situation in their country or proximate social environment. Grievances generate anger and resentment in those segments of the population who feel threatened, marginalized, or left behind by the political elites and the economic system. Second, a politician or party should articulate such grievances in a way that matches, at least partially, the interests or identity of their constituency. The articulation of such grievances is based on a particular interpretation of the socio-political world informed by an antagonistic, dogmatic, and populist understanding of politics. This helps create a boundary demarcation between those who fight the system and those positioned as the

‘enemy’ or ‘other.’ Third, how leaders articulate such grievances and how voters respond to leaders’ cues and interpretations depends on specific contextual conditions such as party positioning, variations in political (sub)cultures, or specific institutional and historical elements, among others. These mechanisms are relational and result from the interaction of different actors, such as political parties, social movements, interest groups, and opinion leaders. Altogether, these elements are responsible for shaping voters’ policy interests, affective judgments, and how citizens interpret and apply democratic rights.

6.6 Limitations and Future Research

While this dissertation addresses problems in the existing literature on radical ideologies, it also opens up new questions and avenues for future research. One crucial question discussed in this thesis is how we could move away from a normative categorization of individuals and voters as “radical” or “non-radical” to better understand the complexities of political radicalism. This dissertation argues that we should move towards a multidimensional framework that considers multiple components (i.e., ontic and ontological) and their interactions. Although I lay down a general framework that allows for the exploration of non-mainstream belief systems as integrated and multidimensional constructs, further research should explore the degree of integration and cohesion that define the broader radial structure of radicalism (Lakoff, 1987). First, we should investigate how the proposed ontological concepts of modern political radicalism relate to other values, attitudes, and beliefs that contrast mainstream politics. For instance, the analyses did not include measures related to threat sensitivity, negativity bias, authoritarianism, conspiratorial beliefs, group-oriented thinking, and social dominance orientation, even though all these factors have been identified as important features of contemporary political ideologies (Hibbing et al., 2014; Jost, 2017; Osborne et al., 2023).

Second, it is important to explore how these different ideological elements relate to and reinforce each other. For example, this dissertation’s conceptualization of political radicalism partially diverges from the literature on non-compensatory ideological systems. According to this viewpoint, a concept should be defined by a restricted set of elements that should all be present simultaneously and to the same extent (Wuttke et al., 2020). This conceptualization emphasizes the necessity of seeing radicalism as composed of a limited set of ideological principles, more or less invariant throughout time and across space. Exploring these two aspects would provide

important answers on the diversity of political radicalism and, thus, allow us to have a more balanced assessment of its impact on related political attitudes and democracy.

This dissertation also explored the ontic expression of the ontological component of radicalism in relation to political polarization and support for freedom of speech. Yet, how individuals translate ontological elements to ontic components remains largely unexplored both in this dissertation and in the existing literature. A more systematic and comprehensive understanding of the ontological-ontic nexus of political radicalism would provide crucial answers on the degree of flexibility and consistency of radical ideologies. For instance, research has shown that right-wing radical individuals combine culturally progressive attitudes on civil rights with economic conservative positions such as market deregulation and free trade ([De Sio & Lachat, 2020](#)). On the other side, the radical left often combines equalitarian and anti-capitalistic positions with nationalistic, Eurosceptic, and exclusionist tendencies ([Halikiopoulou et al., 2012](#); [van Elsas et al., 2016](#)). Yet, whether different ontic configurations are also possible for other elements (e.g., environment protection and anti-immigration) has received far less scholarly attention and is an important venue for further research. Studying how radical voters combine and interpret ontic issues and how these different combinations relate to the ontological aspects of political radicalism would provide important insights into how cross-pressured radical voters perform trade-offs between salient issues. Take, for example, the endorsement of protectionist-nationalist policies that benefit the national community at the expense of economic prosperity deriving from promoting competitive markets, trade, and immigration. Expanding this line of research is crucial for gaining a deeper comprehension of the electoral dealignment and realignment processes witnessed in numerous European democracies in recent years.

Another limitation concerns the topic of belief origination and what shapes citizens' propensity to embrace radical ideologies. In line with previous literature, this dissertation argues that grievances originating from weaker structural positions lead people to subscribe to radical ideologies. However, this thesis also showed that people's affinity with political radicalism cannot be accounted for in terms of purely material and structural forces. This argument has been made in several scholarly works that highlight that individuals who find it challenging to adapt to swift and profound societal, cultural, and economic shifts—the so-called “globalization losers”—turn to radical ideologies in an attempt to maintain their group position, social status, cultural identity,

and political power (Teney et al., 2014). Research found that these voters are in relatively favorable positions but find it hard to keep their social status and are worried about their future (Blee & Creasap, 2010; Ramiro & Gomez, 2017). This apparent paradox may be explained by individuals' feelings of resentment (i.e., a combination of anomie, status insecurity, and powerlessness) linked to group relative deprivation rather than individual deprivation (Koen Abts & Baute, 2022). In this view, feelings of resentment may mediate the relationship between radical beliefs and socio-structural characteristics (i.e., gender, age, education, social class, income, and precariousness). Shifting attention to the mediating role of resentment could provide relevant answers on whether voters are disaffected with the current system of governance because of an accumulation of frustration rooted in an unfair discrepancy between what is and what ought to be.

The focus on resentment and frustration also underlies the critical role of culture, an aspect this dissertation has largely disregarded and is overwhelmingly absent in the current literature on radical ideologies (for an exception, see Morgan, 2022). The underlying idea is that people may subscribe to certain ontological aspects because of their early socialization or specific cultural-historical features. Literature on authoritarianism, for instance, has pointed out that stricter parental styles influence a large set of political attitudes later in life (Adorno et al., 1951; Fraley et al., 2013). Strong family ties are another element that remains largely unexplored in the current literature, even if earlier research has pointed out their importance in shaping individuals' adherence to the status quo and individualism (Fukuyama, 1995; Putnam et al., 1993). Additionally, recent literature highlights the importance of relevant political events during formative years. For instance, Daniele, Aassve, and Le Moglie (2023) show that Italian citizens exposed to corruption scandals in the early 1990s when they were relatively young continue to exhibit substantially lower confidence in institutions and are more inclined to support radical parties. Similarly, Fazio (2023) leverages variation to protests in 1968 in Europe to show that higher exposure to protest and political antagonism in those years leads to higher anti-government attitudes and an increase in the probability of voting for radical populist parties. Further, culture plays a role in shaping radical identities from another angle. More and more research identify that radical ideas can become the object of entertainment. People turn topics such as racism or anti-Semitism into humorous memetic images, videos, and whole websites (Merrin, 2019; Tuters & Hagen, 2020). Take, for example, the Daily Stormer, a neo-Nazi website. The website hosts "memetic Mondays", a weekly online event where its members collectively construct and

disseminate memes far and wide. The entertainment in radical ideas is not only gained from creating such content, but also from seeing how much attention it can capture. Although in its inception, this relatively new line of research is an important avenue for better understanding the importance of cultural transmission and contextual factors in explaining why individuals endorse radical ideologies.

In line with my previous point, this dissertation also found substantial variation in the relationship between populism and affective polarization. This suggests a complex—yet conceptually fertile—variation in how voters respond to programmatic considerations and leaders’ strategies. While these findings cast some light on the complex relationship between radicalism and citizens’ opinions, an important aspect that ought to be explored is the temporal variations in the levels of polarization. As a general framework to study public opinion change, scholars rely on the so-called thermostatic model of public option ([Wlezien, 1995](#)). The model posits that voters are responsive to proposed or actual policies, and elites are receptive to public demands. The model assumes the presence of a cyclical equilibrium in the relationship between public opinion and policymaking. If a policy moves away from the median voter (i.e., polarization), there will be a reaction among some parts of the public (i.e., a “backlash” effect) that will push the policy back to the center of the policy spectrum. For instance, if politicians propose stricter and stricter anti-immigration laws, citizens mobilize against them and force politicians to revert some of the positions previously taken.

In their seminal study, Soroka & Wlezien ([2010](#)) demonstrate that the thermostatic model is applicable across different domains and contexts. Most importantly, they show that the public does not need to be fully informed to react to policy changes. For example, voters may infer that anti-immigration laws are stricter, or the number of immigrants is declining, if a right-wing populist party is in the government or has achieved considerable electoral success. Assuming that the model holds, the absence of a strong effect of populism on polarization presented in Chapter 4 may be related to the fact that in many countries, populist radical parties have already become an integral part of their respective party systems. This implies that radical voters’ demands are fulfilled, and, in turn, the importance of ideological disagreement or affective hostility becomes less relevant. This leads to a decrease or the absence of polarization. Such reasoning also aligns with the literature on the ‘normalization’ of populist radical right parties ([Mudde, 2010](#)). According to this

view, these parties are no longer perceived as ‘the other’ but as a ‘legitimate adversary’. The absence of strong differences in the levels of polarization between mainstream and radical voters could be related to the fact that these parties and their ideas have become less stigmatized and more widely accepted ([Valentim, 2022](#)). Consequently, voters see radical parties not as ‘extreme’ and anti-democratic, but rather as legitimate political opponents whose political ideas coexist along with those of traditional mainstream parties.

Another possibility compatible with the thermostatic explanation is that the status quo has already shifted towards more radical positions. In this scenario, there is a broad consensus among voters on a certain issue, with high levels of agreement on both ends of the spectrum. Take as an example the gradual move of mainstream parties towards more extreme and conservative positions towards immigration. In this scenario, political parties converged on a consensual yet more radical position, reaching a new equilibrium where the status quo has shifted. Future research should investigate whether the public and politicians have continued to move in the same direction, a phenomenon that could indicate a shift in the broader political culture.

The thermostatic model also suggests that voters can simultaneously agree on certain issues while disagreeing on others, even if these issues belong to the same dimension (i.e., cultural and economic). For instance, in Latin America, the salience to immigration is often marginal, and radical right populist parties usually do not advocate for more restrictive anti-immigration measures, resulting in the absence of polarization over immigration-related issues. However, issues such as organized crime have gained salience in the last few years, as demonstrated by the strong emphasis on law and order of many Latin American populist leaders ([Laterzo, 2023](#)). This is relevant because emerging literature suggests that convergence on one set of issues can be counterbalanced by heightened polarization on other topics in order to implement a differentiation strategy. Future research should investigate these temporal shifts and, for instance, analyze how radical parties differentiate themselves from their mainstream counterparts. An illustrative case study is how radical left parties across Europe reacted to the 2008 economic crisis. Radical left parties may have deemphasized the liberal cultural agenda proposed in the 1980s and 1990s and, instead, polarized the public on issues related to globalization processes in order to differentiate themselves from the neoliberal agenda of mainstream and radical right parties ([Vowles & Xezonakis, 2016](#)).

Looking at both the demand and supply side longitudinally would help researchers better understand whether and how radical leaders use polarization to antagonize one segment of the electorate to mobilize another. Additionally, it would help explain how radical leaders construct the notion of dividedness to mount political conflict between different societal groups and, thus, foster affective hostility. This should be investigated by integrating both the demand- and supply-side explanation and examining how radicalism is “performed” based on different contextual aspects such as macro-economic conditions, share of different ethnic groups, geographic features, religious traditions, and historical and cultural legacies such as colonialism.

Public option’s temporal and relational dynamics are also relevant in studying how and why radicalism is linked to a progressive disdain for democratic norms and institutions, a phenomenon linked to democratic backsliding. In this dissertation, I provide some insights into the erosion of democratic norms that can result from populists’ hypocritical understanding of democracy. Departing from here, there are two crucial aspects worth exploring in relation to how radicalism poses a threat to modern democratic institutions. A first overlooked aspect is that the progressive normalization of illiberal practices by radical actors has the potential to permeate the entire party system over time. Grillo & Prato (2023) demonstrate that if a politician with anti-democratic tendencies gets elected, but refrains from acting as undemocratically as citizens anticipated, citizens may support the candidate because they supposedly prove to be more democratic than initially expected. In line with the earlier argument regarding polarization, democratic erosion unfolds progressively and goes relatively unnoticed as the status quo gradually tilts towards increasingly illiberal positions.

Despite the lack of systematic research, there are good reasons to believe that the “mainstreaming” and “normalization” of illiberal principles are becoming more likely among political elites. In the United States, for example, Democrats attempted to gerrymander the New York electoral district for their electoral advantage (Fandos, 2023). Concerns about the restriction of democratic liberties are also on the rise in Belgium. The current Secretary for Asylum and Migration—a member of the Christian Democratic Party, which is typically perceived as a moderate and pro-democratic force—was convicted for an illegal policy that violates the rights of asylum seekers (Walker, 2023). These examples, among several others, illustrate a pattern of “illiberal contagion,” whereby the entire party system shifts toward an increasingly illiberal status quo. Future research should

investigate how and why politicians of both radical and mainstream parties have progressively shifted towards a conception of democracy marked by anti-pluralist, majoritarian, and unmediated preferences for political representation. This line of research should focus on the macro dynamics of democratic backsliding, paying particular attention to the evolution of elite discourse concerning the rights of specific groups and how such discourse is influenced by relevant political events such as the 2015 migration crisis (Barlai et al., 2017).

Another noteworthy gap in the existing literature is the lack of explanation regarding the role of non-institutional radical groups. Despite the number of oppositional and radical movements having tripled in less than 15 years (Ortiz et al., 2022), it remains unclear whether and how they fuel contemporary forms of reciprocal radicalization and, in turn, increase anti-democratic attitudes. In theoretical terms, Disch (2021, pp. 138–139) argues that we must study oppositional groups “not [only] by their responsiveness to what is ‘out there’ but by the way that they divide the social field, mount political conflict, and solicit political identification”. To illustrate, consider the widespread backlash against gender-related issues in various democracies, including the United States, Indonesia, and Italy. Munson (2009) shows that many of those who joined the pro-life movement in the United States started as somewhat agnostic about abortion but progressively embraced more illiberal attitudes in response to the growing opposition they faced. In other words, their experience of stigma led them to “politicize their lives” (Becker, 1963). This indicates that opposing radical movements can potentially foster forms of ‘reciprocal radicalization’ linked to increasingly polarized attitudes on how democratic norms are interpreted and applied. Future research should study backsliding relationally and longitudinally, considering how rival groups struggle over different interpretations of democracy.

Altogether, this dissertation highlights that the nature, causes, and consequences of radical ideologies should be studied as a meta-process resulting from the interconnectedness between citizens, institutions, elites, and cultural, temporal, and contextual dynamics. Future research should leverage different theoretical perspectives, combine supply and demand side explanations in a single explanatory model, and integrate insights from micro-, meso-, and macro-level politics. Doing so would allow us to better understand how their interplay impacts citizens’ attitudes and evaluations and, more in general, the broader patterns that underpin radical discursive practices. Studying these intricate dynamics is challenging yet undeniably essential for unraveling key

questions and advancing knowledge in the contemporary debate on political radicalism. All of the above to answer: why, in the end, so radical?

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8 APPENDICES

Appendix: The Ontological Core of Political Radicalism. Exploring the role of Antagonist, Dogmatic, and Populist Beliefs in Structuring Radical Ideologies

This Appendix provides additional information and robustness checks for the analyses carried out in the manuscript. All the materials that are required to replicate the figures and the tables present in the text (custom-programmed R functions, R scripts, and Mplus scripts) are accessible through the author's public [GitHub profile](#). The data used for the paper can be requested and used according to the terms of use defined by the [ISPO](#), the data provider.

We used R version 4.2.1 ([R Core Team, 2022](#)) and the following R packages: bookdown v. 0.28 ([Xie, 2016, 2022](#)), data.table v. 1.14.8 ([Dowle & Srinivasan, 2023](#)), fastDummies v. 1.6.3 ([Kaplan, 2020](#)), flextable v. 0.7.3 ([Gohel, 2022](#)), ggrepel v. 0.9.1 ([Slowikowski, 2021](#)), ggstatsplot v. 0.9.4 ([Patil, 2021](#)), glue v. 1.6.2 ([Hester & Bryan, 2022](#)), gt v. 0.8.0 ([Iannone et al., 2022](#)), gtsummary v. 1.6.1 ([Sjoberg et al., 2021](#)), here v. 1.0.1 ([Müller, 2020](#)), knitr v. 1.44 ([Xie, 2014, 2015, 2023](#)), labelled v. 2.9.1 ([Larmarange, 2022](#)), latex2exp v. 0.9.4 ([Meschiari, 2022](#)), lavaan v. 0.6.15 ([Rosseel, 2012](#)), ltm v. 1.2.0 ([Rizopoulos, 2006](#)), MplusAutomation v. 1.1.0 ([Hallquist & Wiley, 2018](#)), nnet v. 7.3.17 ([Venables & Ripley, 2002](#)), officer v. 0.6.2 ([Gohel, 2023](#)), patchwork v. 1.1.1 ([Pedersen, 2020](#)), performance v. 0.10.2 ([Lüdecke et al., 2021](#)), reshape2 v. 1.4.4 ([Wickham, 2007](#)), rmarkdown v. 2.25 ([Allaire et al., 2023; Xie et al., 2018, 2020](#)), semoutput v. 1.0.2 ([Tsukahara, 2023](#)), sjlabelled v. 1.2.0 ([Lüdecke, 2022](#)), survey v. 4.1.1 ([Lumley, 2004, 2010, 2020](#)), tidyLPA v. 1.1.0 ([Rosenberg et al., 2018](#)), tidyverse v. 2.0.0 ([Wickham et al., 2019](#)).

LP-CFA model

Model specification

LP-CFA model belongs to the broader class of Finite Mixture Models (FMM). In this paper, the LP-CFA model is similar to the model proposed by Magidson & Vermunt ([2001](#)) and referred to as FMM-1. In the FMM framework, this model corresponds to the EEI (equal volume, equal shape [and undefined orientation]) model ([Scrucca et al., 2016](#)). In the literature on FMM, the employed modelling approach is described as hybrid modelling with a non-parametric factor distribution due to the absence of within-in class variability of the latent factors ([Hancock & Samuelsen, 2007](#)).

The model is specified with a diagonal within-class covariance matrix with latent factor variances set to zero and loadings and intercepts equality across classes. This ensures that the different factors

are being measured the same way across all the estimated classes. The main difference between the used LP-CFA model and a FMM-1 model is that the item intercepts across the different classes are held to 0. This allows to estimate a latent mean for each class and has the additional advantage that, since all the variables are centered and standardized, the estimated latent means can be interpreted as the standard deviation from the average of the sample on that specific latent factor (in this case, the proposed ontological components of radical beliefs).

This approach has four clear advantages compared to traditional methods that employ mean comparison and presuppose observed subgroups to be homogeneous. First, unlike traditional factor analysis, the LP-CFA does not assume that individuals belong to a single homogeneous population. Rather, it classifies individuals into different latent classes while taking into account the heterogeneity of the estimated latent factors. Second, it simultaneously assesses the reliability and validity of the estimated latent variables and the unobserved similarities between individuals on such constructs. This provides a more precise classification of individuals into different ideological profiles. Third, the used LP-CFA does not impose normality on the factor distribution, an important advantage when studying radical belief systems where the probability density functions are usually log-normal. Lastly, LP-CFA models can be employed to assess the relationship between a set of background variables and the extracted profiles while taking into account the potential classification error (Asparouhov & Muth'en, 2014). This improves the reliability of the estimates and provides more accurate insights on which specific sub-groups of respondents are more likely to subscribe to certain ideological profiles.

The model is fitted using a multi-stage optimization process that combines expectation–maximization (EM) and maximum likelihood (ML) estimation with robust standard errors. Since LP-CFA models (like any other mixture model) are known to converge on local, rather than global solutions, random draws and perturbations are used in the estimation procedure (Asparouhov & Muthen, 2019). To ensure that the best log-likelihood is replicated at least 10 times and, thus, the maximization function has reached a global, rather than a local, maxima, we adjust upward the number of the initial stage starts in the EM step (500 random starts with 15 iterations) and in the final likelihood step of the ML estimation (125 random stars with 500 iterations) (Ferguson et al., 2020) Results on model fit and convergence can be found in the Mplus .out files on the author's public [GitHub profile](#).

Profile enumeration and robustness

The procedure for determining the optimal number of latent profiles has been performed following the recommendations in Muth'en (2003), Nylund-Gibson & Choi (2018), and Schmidt et al. (2021). The results of the VLMR test suggest that a 4-class solution would be sufficient to describe our data in a parsimonious manner. Log-likelihood-based fit indices (e.g., BIC), however, continue improving for each additional extracted class, suggesting that a larger number of profiles provides additional explanatory power. However, it is known that, with large sample sizes, the continuous improvement in log-likelihood-based fit indices can lead to an overestimation of the number of classes needed to accurately describe the data (Weller et al., 2020). In these cases, an elbow plot and the corresponding drop in BIC between the $k - 1$ class model and a k class model (ΔBIC) can be used to assess the best-fitting model (Nylund-Gibson & Choi, 2018). The plot suggests that the biggest decrease in log-based measures for any model with more than 4 classes is between the 5- and 6-class solution with small gains in log-likelihood after the 6-class solution.

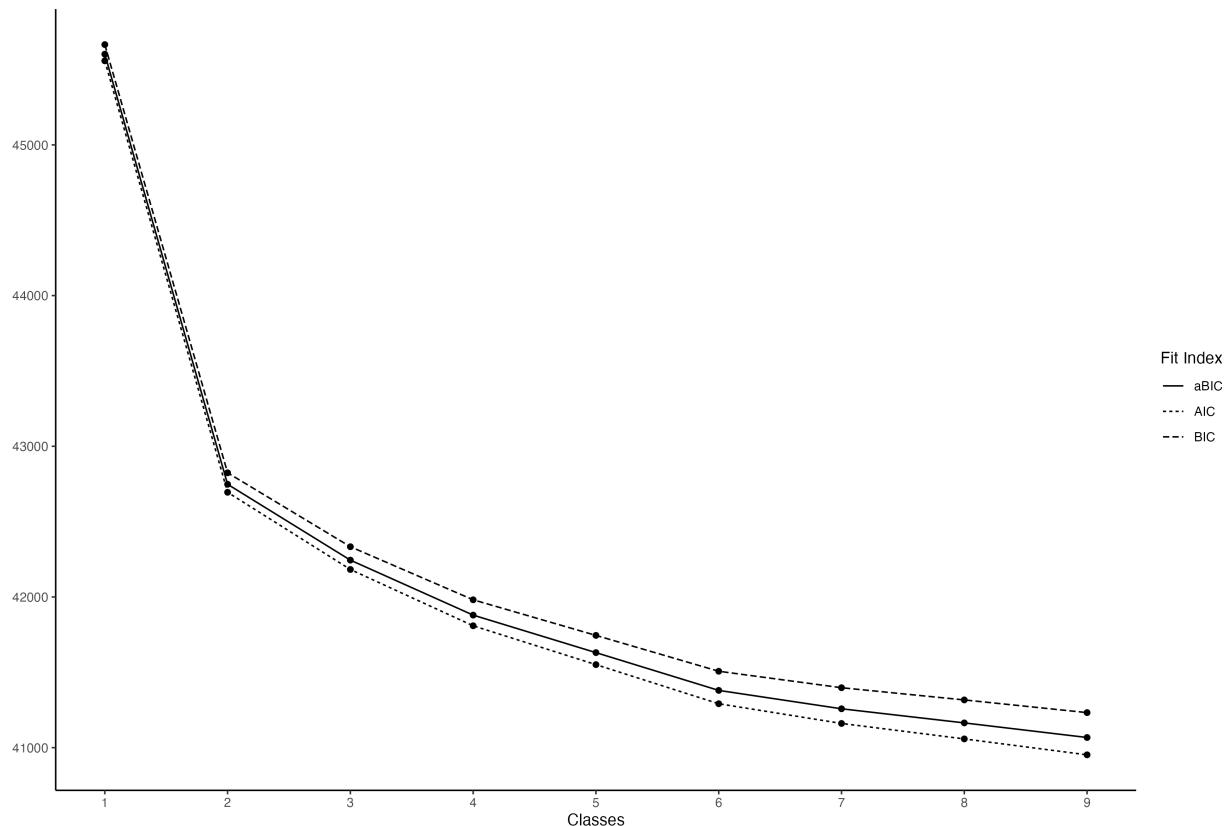


Figure 1: Scree plot for aBIC, AIC, BIC

We also rely on substantive considerations to assess the differences in the extracted profiles between the various class solutions (Schmidt et al., 2021). In order to do so, we plotted every class solution with more than 4 classes such that we could assess whether the extracted ideological profiles were meaningfully different from each other. In this case, we do not label the extracted classes so that the enumeration corresponds to the order in which the LP-CFA model extracts the various profiles. Figure 2 reveals that the 6-class model is the most adequate model: it extracts ideological profiles that are meaningfully different from each other without over- or under-fitting the data. The 7-class model does not present meaningful differences with the selected 6-class solution. It adds a 7th profile with similar means to Profile 1 extracted in the 6-class model. On the opposite, the results from the 5-class solution suggest that the model is under-extracting the number of classes with the absence of a class that scores high on antagonistic beliefs but has below-average levels of dogmatic and populist beliefs. In addition, the selected 6-class solution shows the highest entropy for any model with more than 4 classes and presents a sufficiently large number of individuals in the smallest class ($n = 110$).

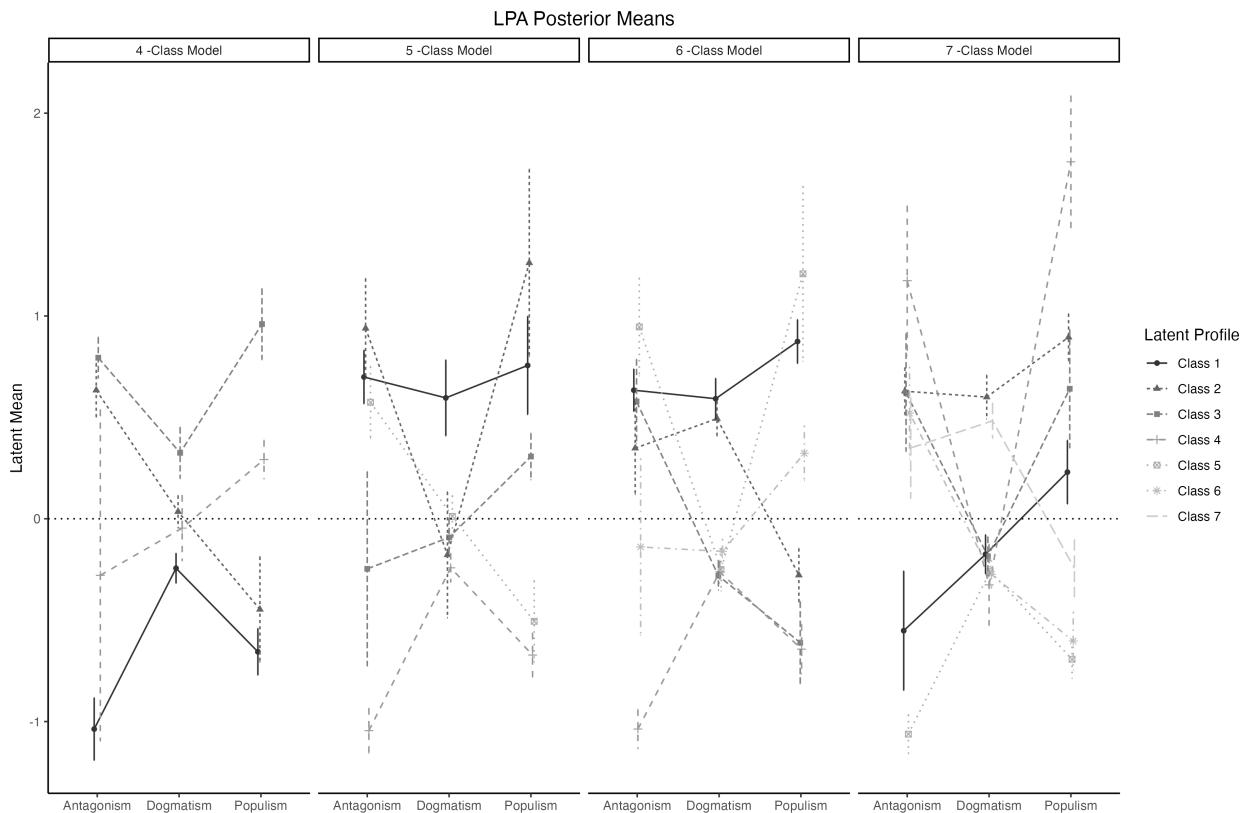


Figure 2: Latent Profile Plots for models with more than 3 classes

Multinomial regression results predicting vote choice using class assignment

The table reports the results of the model depicted in Figure 2 in the manuscript. The comparison column reports the p-value for the test of equality between the coefficients in the Populist Right and Populist Left columns calculated using the Delta method. As commonly done, the effects reported in the manuscript are always computed on the scale of the linear predictor (Lenth et al., 2021). This is because the transformation of the logit coefficients to odds ratio changes the standard deviation required to compute the significance of the regression coefficients.

	DV: Populist Right (Ref: Mainstream)		DV: Populist Left (Ref: Mainstream)	
	Logit	p-value	Logit	p-value
Intercept	0.44 (0.88)	0.62	1.37 (0.99)	0.17
Radical (Ref: Pro-system)	0.86 (0.34)	0.01	0.35 (0.40)	0.38
Non-dogmatic Radical (Ref: Pro-system)	1.06 (0.42)	0.01	1.18 (0.43)	0.01
Non-populist Radical (Ref: Pro-system)	-0.55 (0.42)	0.19	-0.17 (0.48)	0.72
Pluralist Antagonist (Ref: Pro-system)	-0.33 (0.43)	0.45	-0.28 (0.46)	0.54
Disaffected moderate (Ref: Pro-system)	0.62 (0.31)	0.04	0.86 (0.32)	0.01
Female (Ref: Male)	0.18 (0.21)	0.39	-0.38 (0.23)	0.10
Age	-0.20 (0.07)	0.00	-0.17 (0.07)	0.02
Education	-0.21 (0.05)	0.00	0.01 (0.06)	0.92
Non-belgian (Ref: Belgian)	-0.30 (0.32)	0.36	0.15 (0.30)	0.61
PSC: Low Middle (Ref: Working Class)	0.11 (0.26)	0.66	-0.65 (0.28)	0.02
PSC: Higher Middle/Upper (Ref: Working Class)	-0.47 (0.31)	0.13	-1.07 (0.34)	0.00
Political interest	-0.12 (0.12)	0.33	0.20 (0.13)	0.13
Institutional Trust	-0.82 (0.19)	0.00	-0.55 (0.22)	0.01
L-R self-placement	0.44 (0.05)	0.00	-0.20 (0.05)	0.00
Christian (Ref: None)	-0.49 (0.22)	0.03	-0.60 (0.27)	0.02
Free-thinker (Ref: None)	-0.85 (0.42)	0.04	-0.12 (0.35)	0.73
Other religions (Ref: None)	-0.97 (0.51)	0.06	-0.25 (0.42)	0.55

Instruments

Table 1: Items used to in the LP-CFA model

Item Ref.	Label	Question
q76_1	Antagonism	Only radical change can solve our societal problems (1. Completely disagree – 5. Completely Agree)
q76_2	Antagonism	Not only the government, but the entire system should be replaced (1. Completely disagree – 5. Completely Agree)
q77_1	Dogmatism	There's a clear line between good and evil (1. Completely disagree – 5. Completely Agree)
q77_2	Dogmatism	There's only one way to handle most things (1. Completely disagree – 5. Completely Agree)
q77_3	Dogmatism	People who disagree with me are usually wrong (1. Completely disagree – 5. Completely Agree)
q67_1	Populism	People and not the politicians should take decisions (1. Completely disagree – 5. Completely Agree)
q67_2	Populism	People would be better represented by ordinary citizens (1. Completely disagree – 5. Completely Agree)
q67_3	Populism	Power should be returned to the people (1. Completely disagree – 5. Completely Agree)
q67_4	Populism	Better if politicians just followed the will of the people (1. Completely disagree – 5. Completely Agree)
q67_5	Populism	Ordinary people know better than politicians (1. Completely disagree – 5. Completely Agree)

Table 2: 3-step predictors, and control variables

Item Ref.	Label	Question
age6	Age	Respondent's age (Recoded in 6 categories, continuous)

Item Ref.	Label	Question
q13	Education	Respondent's highest level of education (1. None – 10. University)
q2	Gender	Respondent's assigned sex at birth (1. Man, 2. Woman)
q18, q19	Race	Respondent's family ethnic background (Recoded as Belgian, Non-Belgian)
region	Place of residence	Respondent's place of residence (1. French-speaking Belgium, 2. Flanders)
q18	Social class	Respondent's self-perceived social class (recode as Working class, Low Middle class, and Higher Middle/Upper class)
q21	Religious denom.	Self-identified religious denomination (recode as None, Catholic, Free-thinker, Other Religions)
q36	Pol. interest (index)	Interest in Politics (reversed, 1. No Interest – 5. Very Interested)
q37_1	Pol. interest (index)	Discuss politics with friends (reversed, 1. (Almost) always – 5. Never)
q37_2	Pol. interest (index)	Follows politics in media (reversed, 1. (Almost) always – 5. Never)
q66_1	Trust (index)	Trust in the legal system (1. Very little confidence – 5. A great lot of confidence)
q66_2	Trust (index)	Trust in the national police (1. Very little confidence – 5. A great lot of confidence)
q66_3	Trust (index)	Trust in the press (1. Very little confidence – 5. A great lot of confidence)
q66_4	Trust (index)	Trust in political parties (1. Very little confidence – 5. A great lot of confidence)
q66_5	Trust (index)	Trust in parliament (1. Very little confidence – 5. A great lot of confidence)

Item Ref.	Label	Question
q66_6	Trust (index)	Trust in the king (1. Very little confidence – 5. A great lot of confidence)
q66_7	Trust (index)	Trust in the government (1. Very little confidence – 5. A great lot of confidence)
q66_8	Trust (index)	Trust in the trade unions (1. Very little confidence – 5. A great lot of confidence)
q66_9	Trust (index)	Trust in science (1. Very little confidence – 5. A great lot of confidence)
q64	Powerlessness	Some people feel disregarded or abandoned by politics. (1. Never – 5. Always)
q24	Radical vote	Vote choice in the 2019 federal elections (recoded as Mainstream, Radical Left, Radical Right)

Descriptives

Variable	N	N = 1,406
Age (age6)	1,403	
Mean (SD)		4.08 (1.66)
Median (IQR)		4.00 (3.00, 6.00)
Range		1.00 - 6.00
Education (q13)	1,406	
Mean (SD)		7.26 (2.44)
Median (IQR)		8.00 (6.00, 9.00)
Range		1.00 - 10.00
Left-Right Orientation (q57)	1,366	
Mean (SD)		5.02 (2.20)
Median (IQR)		5.00 (4.00, 7.00)
Range		0.00 - 10.00
Antagonism (q76_1)	1,386	
Mean (SD)		3.18 (1.01)
Median (IQR)		3.00 (2.00, 4.00)
Range		1.00 - 5.00
Antagonism (q76_2)	1,386	
Mean (SD)		3.34 (1.04)
Median (IQR)		4.00 (3.00, 4.00)
Range		1.00 - 5.00
Dogmatism (q77_1)	1,388	
Mean (SD)		3.05 (0.97)
Median (IQR)		3.00 (2.00, 4.00)
Range		1.00 - 5.00
Dogmatism (q77_2)	1,397	
Mean (SD)		2.51 (0.99)

Variable	N	N = 1,406
Median (IQR)		2.00 (2.00, 3.00)
Range		1.00 - 5.00
Dogmatism (q77_3)	1,403	
Mean (SD)		2.10 (0.83)
Median (IQR)		2.00 (2.00, 2.00)
Range		1.00 - 5.00
Populism (q67_1)	1,400	
Mean (SD)		2.96 (1.04)
Median (IQR)		3.00 (2.00, 4.00)
Range		1.00 - 5.00
Populism (q67_2)	1,400	
Mean (SD)		3.00 (0.99)
Median (IQR)		3.00 (2.00, 4.00)
Range		1.00 - 5.00
Populism (q67_3)	1,397	
Mean (SD)		2.63 (0.99)
Median (IQR)		2.00 (2.00, 3.00)
Range		1.00 - 5.00
Populism (q67_4)	1,394	
Mean (SD)		2.87 (1.01)
Median (IQR)		3.00 (2.00, 4.00)
Range		1.00 - 5.00
Populism (q67_5)	1,399	
Mean (SD)		2.51 (0.96)
Median (IQR)		2.00 (2.00, 3.00)
Range		1.00 - 5.00

Variable	N	N = 1,406
Sex at birth (q2)	1,406	
Man		775 / 1,406 (55%)
Woman		631 / 1,406 (45%)
Political Interest (q36, q37_1, q37_2)	1,394	
Mean (SD)		3.04 (0.93)
Median (IQR)		3.00 (2.33, 3.67)
Range		1.00 - 5.00
Place of Residence (region)	1,406	
Flanders		880 / 1,406 (63%)
Wallonia		526 / 1,406 (37%)
Ethnic background (q18, q19)	1,405	
Belgian		1,183 / 1,405 (84%)
Other		222 / 1,405 (16%)
Religious Denomination (q21)	1,400	
None		393 / 1,400 (28%)
Christian		784 / 1,400 (56%)
Free-thinker		127 / 1,400 (9.1%)
Others		96 / 1,400 (6.9%)
Radical Vote Choice (q24)	1,406	
Mainstream		1,187 / 1,406 (84%)
Populist Left		97 / 1,406 (6.9%)
Populist Right		122 / 1,406 (8.7%)
Institutional Trust (q66_x)	1,339	
Mean (SD)		2.99 (0.56)
Median (IQR)		3.00 (2.56, 3.33)
Range		1.22 - 5.00

Variable	N	N = 1,406
Powerlessness (q64)	1,385	
Mean (SD)	2.91 (1.04)	
Median (IQR)	3.00 (2.00, 4.00)	
Range	1.00 - 5.00	
¹ n / N (%)		

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

This Appendix provides additional information and robustness checks for the analyses carried out in the manuscript. The data used for the paper is public and accessible according to the terms of use defined by the ANES, the data provider (<https://electionstudies.org/data-center>). All the materials that are required to replicate the figures and the tables present in the text (custom-programmed R functions, R scripts, and Mplus scripts) are accessible through the author's public [GitHub profile](#). The R [Version 4.2.1; R Core Team (2022)] packages used for the data preparation and the visualizations are the following: *citr* [Version 0.3.2; Aust (2019)], *dplyr* [Version 1.0.9; Wickham et al. (2022)], *egg* [Version 0.4.5; Auguie (2019)], *fastDummies* [Version 1.6.3; Kaplan (2020)], *filestrings* [Version 3.2.3; Nolan and Padilla-Parra (2017)], *forcats* [Version 0.5.1; Wickham (2021)], *ggplot2* [Version 3.4.1; Wickham (2016)], *glue* [Version 1.6.2; Hester and Bryan (2022)], *gridExtra* [Version 2.3; Auguie (2017)], *here* [Version 1.0.1; Müller (2020)], *knitr* [Version 1.39; Xie (2015)], *MplusAutomation* [Version 1.1.0; Hallquist and Wiley (2018)], *naniar* [Version 0.6.1; Tierney et al. (2021)], *papaja* [Version 0.1.1.9001; Aust and Barth (2022)], *psych* [Version 2.2.5; Revelle (2022)], *purrr* [Version 0.3.4; Henry and Wickham (2020)], *readr* [Version 2.1.2; Wickham, Hester, and Bryan (2022)], *readstata13* [Version 0.10.0; Garbuszus and Jeworutzki (2021)], *rmarkdown* [Version 2.14; Xie, Allaire, and Grolemund (2018); Xie, Dervieux, and Riederer (2020)], *stringr* [Version 1.4.1; Wickham (2022)], *tibble* [Version 3.1.8; Müller and Wickham (2022)], *tidyverse* [Version 1.3.2; Wickham et al. (2019)], and *tinylabels* [Version 0.2.3; Barth (2022)]. The *Mplus* [Version 8.4; Muthén and Muthén (2017)] output (i.e. .out) files containing the full model specifications and details about model convergence can be also found on the author's public GitHub profile.

Models reported in the manuscript

Graphical representation of the structural model

The structural part of the model specification is plotted in a SEM graph. For this purpose, I use the R package *semPlot* (Epskamp et al. 2019). Observed variables are indicated as squares and latent variables as circles. The edges refer to the connections between the different variables included in the model and are used to specify relationships between variables. Dashed edges indicate fixed parameters (i.e., first factor loading fix to 1 and variances of categorical indicators). Error

variances are displayed as curved double-headed arrows. For the sake of clarity, I plotted the measurement part (see *infra*) separated from the structural part.

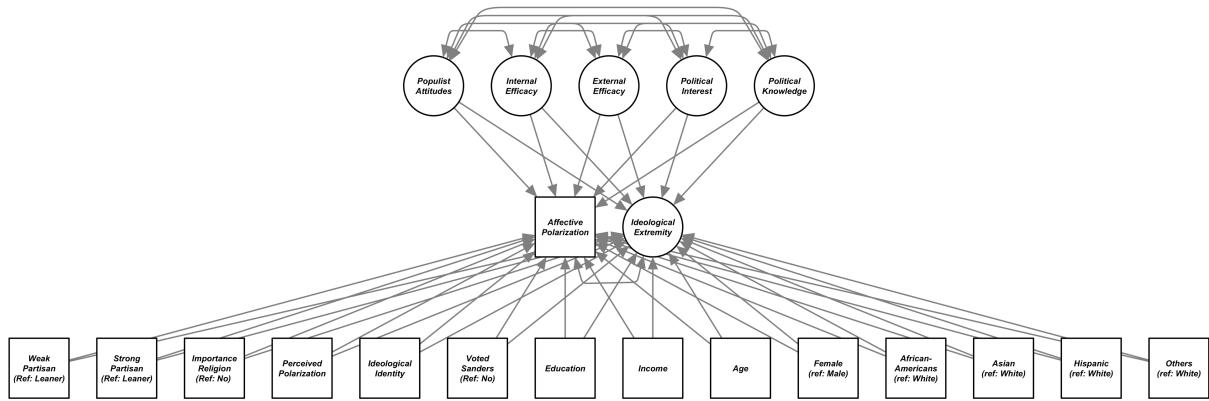


Figure 1: Graphical representation of the (structural) model reported in Table 2, Figure 1, and Figure 2 of the manuscript.

Models for the marginal plots

These are the results for the coefficients of populism reported in Figure 1 and Figure 2 of the manuscript.

Table 1: Regression table for the coefficients of populist attitudes on ideological extremity displayed in Figure 1 and Figure 2.

	Democrats		Republicans	
	Std. Coefficient (β)	p-value	Std. Coefficient (β)	p-value
Populist Attitudes	0.167 (0.056)	0.003	0.064 (0.058)	0.269
Internal Efficacy	0.181 (0.096)	0.061	0.186 (0.099)	0.061
External Efficacy	0.014 (0.051)	0.783	0.015 (0.053)	0.783
Political Interest	0.044 (0.076)	0.568	0.045 (0.079)	0.568
Political Knowledge	-0.026 (0.063)	0.682	-0.026 (0.065)	0.682
Perceived Polarization	0.080 (0.031)	0.010	0.082 (0.032)	0.009
Strength Ideological Identity	0.355 (0.038)	≤ 0.001	0.344 (0.037)	≤ 0.001

Education	-0.043 (0.035)	0.219	-0.039 (0.032)	0.222
Income	-0.026 (0.040)	0.510	-0.026 (0.039)	0.509
Age	-0.133 (0.034)	≤ 0.001	-0.135 (0.034)	≤ 0.001
Weak Partisan (Ref: Leaner)	0.003 (0.075)	0.965	0.003 (0.077)	0.965
Strong Partisan (Ref: Leaner)	0.108 (0.078)	0.169	0.111 (0.081)	0.169
Importance Religion (Ref: No)	0.075 (0.065)	0.248	0.078 (0.068)	0.250
Voted for Sanders (Ref: No)	0.052 (0.095)	0.584	0.054 (0.099)	0.585
Female (ref: Male)	-0.077 (0.058)	0.179	-0.080 (0.059)	0.179
African-Americans (ref: White)	0.196 (0.157)	0.211	0.202 (0.163)	0.216
Asian (ref: White)	0.034 (0.126)	0.788	0.035 (0.130)	0.789
Hispanic (ref: White)	0.200 (0.101)	0.048	0.206 (0.103)	0.045
Others (ref: White)	0.417 (0.143)	0.004	0.431 (0.145)	0.003

N=2316, Log-likelihood=-75079.3, AIC=150426.61, BIC=151196.78

Notes: All continuous variables are standardized. Beta coefficients for Populist Attitudes are allowed to vary across partisan groups. Robust std. errors in parenthesis.

Table 2: Regression table for the coefficients of populist attitudes on affective polarization displayed in Figure 1 and Figure 2.

	Democrats		Republicans	
	Std. Coefficient (β)	p-value	Std. Coefficient (β)	p-value
Populist Attitudes	-0.117 (0.050)	0.019	0.175 (0.044)	≤ 0.001
Internal Efficacy	0.198 (0.076)	0.009	0.184 (0.070)	0.008
External Efficacy	-0.004 (0.041)	0.924	-0.004 (0.038)	0.924
Political Interest	0.022 (0.059)	0.709	0.020 (0.055)	0.710
Political Knowledge	-0.019 (0.056)	0.740	-0.017 (0.052)	0.740
Religiosity	0.005 (0.023)	0.843	0.004 (0.018)	0.843
Perceived Polarization	0.197 (0.026)	≤ 0.001	0.183 (0.023)	≤ 0.001
Strength Ideological Identity	0.115 (0.023)	≤ 0.001	0.101 (0.021)	≤ 0.001
Education	-0.036 (0.029)	0.211	-0.030 (0.024)	0.213

Income	-0.039 (0.028)	0.165	-0.034 (0.024)	0.164
Age	0.076 (0.025)	0.003	0.070 (0.023)	0.003
Weak Partisan (Ref: Leaner)	0.158 (0.065)	0.015	0.147 (0.060)	0.014
Strong Partisan (Ref: Leaner)	0.706 (0.061)	≤ 0.001	0.658 (0.056)	≤ 0.001
Voted for Sanders	-0.340 (0.070)	≤ 0.001	-0.317 (0.064)	≤ 0.001
Female (ref: Male)	0.080 (0.045)	0.076	0.074 (0.042)	0.076
African-Americans (ref: White)	-0.128 (0.097)	0.185	-0.119 (0.090)	0.187
Asian (ref: White)	-0.148 (0.127)	0.245	-0.138 (0.119)	0.246
Hispanic (ref: White)	0.053 (0.079)	0.502	0.050 (0.074)	0.503
Others (ref: White)	-0.084 (0.111)	0.449	-0.078 (0.103)	0.448

N=2316, Log-likelihood=-75079.3, AIC=150426.61, BIC=151196.78

Notes: All continuous variables are standardized. Beta coefficients for Populist Attitudes are allowed to vary across partisan groups. Robust std. errors in parenthesis.

Measurement models

In the manuscript, six latent variables are estimated, namely ideological extremity, populist attitudes, political interest, political knowledge, and internal and external political efficacy. Results from the CFA models reveal good reliability and validity of the used scales with relatively high factor loadings ($CFI \geq .95, RMSA \leq .06, SRMR \leq .08$) (Hu and Bentler 1999). Metric equivalence is achieved for every latent factor included in the model ($\Delta\chi^2 p \geq .05, \Delta CFI \leq -.10, \Delta RMSA \leq .015$) (Chen 2007) meaning that the estimated latent constructs are understood in the same way across Democratic and Republican respondents.

Invariance testing

All the used latent constructs reach metric invariance allowing the comparison of the coefficients of populism across Democratic and Republican respondents (Chen 2007).

Table 3: Invariance testing for the populist attitudes scale.

Model	Δdf	$\Delta\chi^2$	p-value	AIC	BIC	CFI	SRMR	RMSEA
Configural				54746.976	54964.973	0.944	0.037	0.057

Model	Δdf	$\Delta\chi^2$	p-value	AIC	BIC	CFI	SRMR	RMSEA
Metric	5	8.155	0.15	54748.284	54936.003	0.941	0.04	0.052
Scalar	5	293.881	0	55150.573	55308.016	0.784	0.08	0.09

Table 4: Invariance testing for the ideological extremity scale.

Model	Δdf	$\Delta\chi^2$	p-value	AIC	BIC	CFI	SRMR	RMSEA
Configural				67134.517	67395.228	0.975	0.026	0.024
Metric	6	10.527	0.11	67140.913	67364.38	0.971	0.031	0.024
Scalar	6	284.104	0	67607.512	67793.734	0.758	0.071	0.063

Table 5: Invariance testing for political interest, internal and external efficacy.

Model	Δdf	$\Delta\chi^2$	p-value	AIC	BIC	CFI	SRMR	RMSEA
Configural				48172.668	48421.007	0.958	0.044	0.069
Metric	3	2.062	0.5596	48169.348	48399.516	0.957	0.045	0.065
Scalar	3	5.028	0.1698	48171.574	48383.571	0.956	0.045	0.059

For political knowledge, metric invariance cannot be tested. This is due to the fact that, to identify the model, the residual variances of the dichotomous manifest indicators (i.e., 1. Incorrect, 2. Correct) need to be set to 1. Nonetheless, the latent construct of political knowledge shows excellent goodness of fit for the scalar invariance model.

Table 6: Invariance testing for political knowledge (IRT parametrization).

Model	Δdf	$\Delta\chi^2$	p-value	AIC	BIC	CFI	SRMR	RMSEA
Configural				-	-	0.968	0.036	0.045
Scalar	6	2.546	0.89	-	-	0.980	0.038	0.022

Confirmatory Factor Analysis results

For populism, the residual variances of the items measuring each of three sub-dimensions of populism (anti-elitism, people-centrism, and manicheism) are allowed to covary to account for the common variance that is unexplained by the unidimensional structure of the CSES populist

attitudes scale (Wells 2021). This choice accounts for the fact that populist attitudes are considered a multidimensional construct (among others, see Wuttke, Schimpf, and Schoen 2020)

For political efficacy, the residuals of item V162216 (internal political efficacy) and V162217 (external political efficacy) are allowed to covary to account for the conceptual and semantic similarity of the questions that tap both into the responsibility of the government in undermining citizens' political efficacy.

These adjustments improve the reliability of the measured constructs and the precision of the estimated coefficients of populism (Wells 2021). However, since the covariance matrix is only slightly adjusted, this choice has no substantial impact on the results presented in the paper. For sake of space parsimony, the models where the error correlations are not estimated are not shown. A CFA is estimated for each separate construct. When not possible for identification reasons (e.g., efficacy), the reported fit indices are obtained including multiple constructs.

Table 7: Factor loadings from each CFA model.

	Std. factor loadings	p-value
Ideological Extremity		
V161178	0.56	≤ .001
V161181	0.41	≤ .001
V161184	0.53	≤ .001
V161189	0.58	≤ .001
V161198	0.53	≤ .001
V161201	0.33	≤ .001
V161204x	0.34	≤ .001
CFI=0.969 RMSE=0.027 SRMR=0.025		
Populism		
V162259	0.47	≤ .001
V162260	0.80	≤ .001
V162262	0.65	≤ .001

	Std. factor loadings	p-value
V162264	0.43	$\leq .001$
V162265	0.68	$\leq .001$
V162267	0.29	$\leq .001$
CFI=0.979 RMSE=0.058 SRMR=0.025		
Internal efficacy		
V162217	0.51	$\leq .001$
V162218	0.56	$\leq .001$
External efficacy		
V162215	0.72	$\leq .001$
V162216	0.77	$\leq .001$
Political Interest		
V162256	0.86	$\leq .001$
V162257	0.83	$\leq .001$
Political Knowledge		
V161513	0.60	$\leq .001$
V161514	0.49	$\leq .001$
V161515	0.56	$\leq .001$
V161516	0.49	$\leq .001$
CFI=0.976 RMSE=0.021 SRMR=0.030		

Table 8: Estimated correlation between populist attitudes and the other latent variables included in the model.

Latent variable	Correlation	Robust std. error	p-value
Political Knowledge	-0.21	0.038	$\leq .001$
Political Interest	-0.13	0.024	$\leq .001$

Latent variable	Correlation	Robust std. error	p-value
Internal Efficacy	-0.21	0.033	$\leq .001$
External Efficacy	-0.61	0.021	$\leq .001$

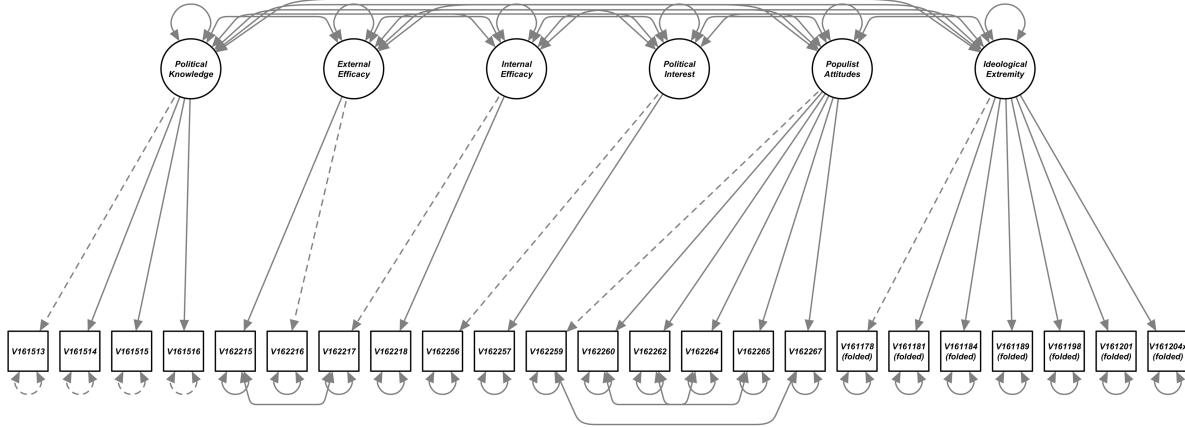


Figure 2: Graphical representation of the measurement model (CFA).

Robustness

Estimated factor scores and 4-item ideological extremity scale

The lack of association between populism and ideological extremity among Republican identifiers could be related to the fact that, overall, Republicans are more ideologically extreme compared to Democrats. This would mean that there is less variance to be explained by populist attitudes among Republican identifiers (i.e., ceiling effect), hence the small and insignificant coefficient of populist attitudes. To rule out this possibility, I calculated the mean and the variance of ideological extremity across the two partisan groups for the metric invariance model. Although from a substantial point of view comparing the latent means from a metric model is not very informative, this procedure allows me to understand whether the distributions of the estimated factor scores are significantly different across the two partisan groups. To obtain the distribution on the untransformed 4-point scale, I fix the intercept of one of the items (standard of living, V161189) to 0.

Results indicate small differences in the distribution of the latent measure of ideological extremity across the two partisan groups. Republicans are slightly less extreme than Democrats ($\Delta M = 0.43, p \leq 0.001$) with estimated means of $\widehat{M} = 1.23$ and $\widehat{M} = 1.66$, respectively. Both means are

close to the mid-point of the scale and the difference in the estimated variances ($\sigma = 0.39$ for Republicans, $\sigma = 0.35$ for Democrats) is small and insignificant ($\Delta\sigma = 0.042$).

This suggests that the lack of association between populism and ideological extremity is unlikely to be caused by a ceiling effect. Republicans do not have a much higher baseline level of ideological extremity. Instead, they show lower levels of extremity as estimated by the CFA metric model. Furthermore, the latent factor of ideological extremity does not have a very low variance for Republicans and the variances across the two partisan groups are statistically indistinguishable from each other. This is further confirmed by visually comparing the distribution of the factor score across the two groups as done in Figure 3. The distributions overlap for the most part, with a slightly more right-skewed distribution for Democratic identifiers.

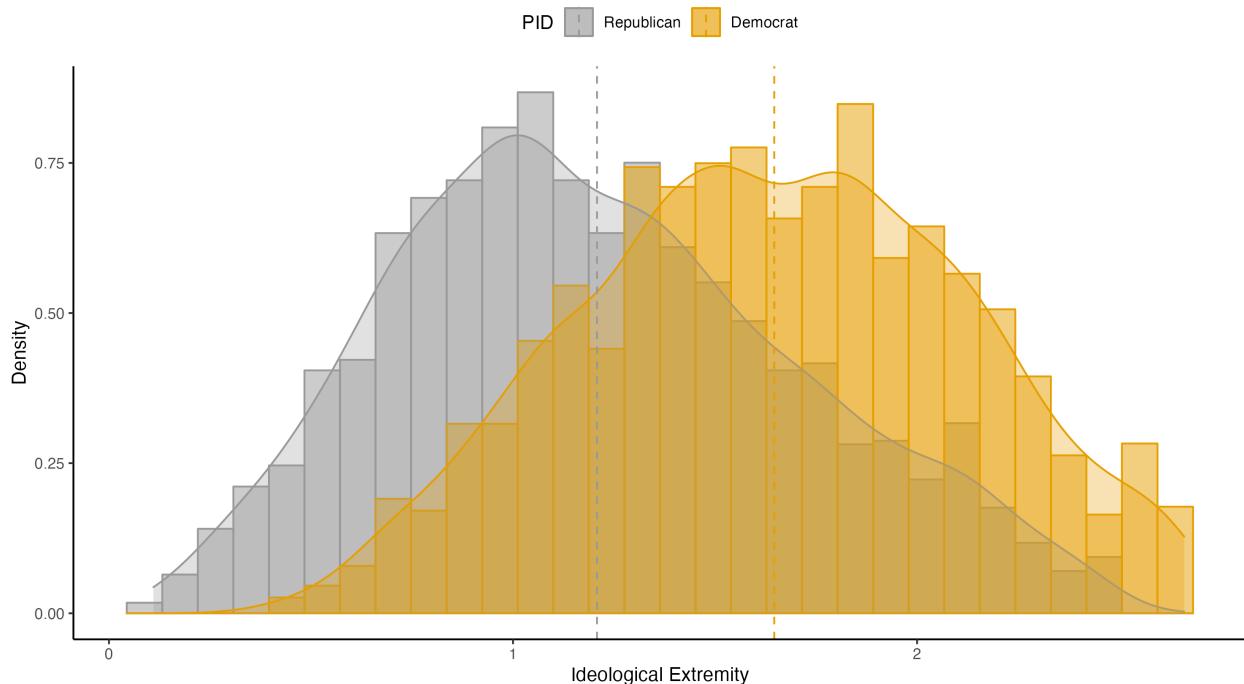


Figure 3: Predicted factor scores for the ideological extremity scale for Republicans and Democrats.

As an additional robustness check, I fit a model that uses a 4-item measure of ideological extremity. This set of items is selected excluding those questions with the largest mean difference across the two partisan groups ($\Delta M \geq 0.3$). The excluded policy items are the ones referring to standards of living (V161189), environmental protection (V161201), and affirmative actions (V161204x). Results remain unchanged and are reported in Figure 4.

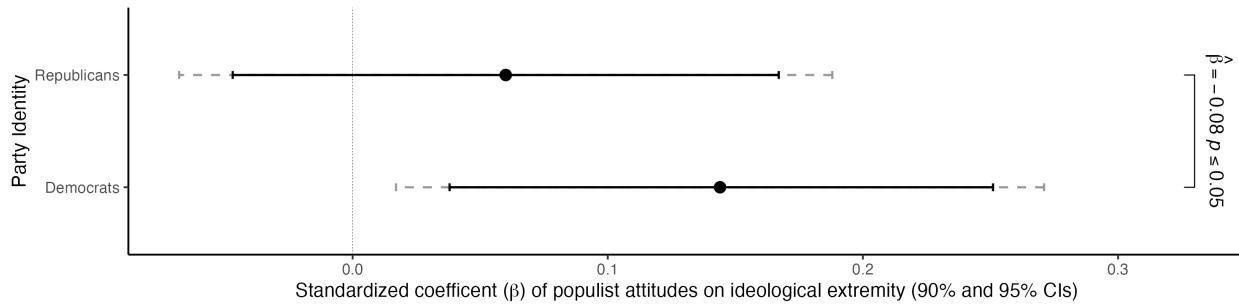


Figure 4: Coefficient of populist attitudes on ideological extremity (4-item), controlling for the other variables included in the model.

Free trade and immigration (cultural threat)

While the invariance tests confirm that individuals on opposite sides of the ideological spectrum understood in the same way to the used policy items, issues related to free trade and cultural threat coming from immigration may have been more salient for the most populist part of the Republican electorate. Consequently, two models have been fitted to the data using as dependent variable (1) a question tapping into the degree to which each respondent favors or opposes free trade agreements (V162176x) and (2) an item measuring whether the respondent thinks “America’s culture is generally harmed by immigrants” (V162269). These items do not tap into policy opinions (they instead measure attitudes) and have different scales and, thus, have not been included in the main analysis. Results reveal that both coefficients are negative but rather small and insignificant. Even using questions tapping into attitudes related to two of the most relevant dimensions of Trump’s campaign, I find no association between populist attitudes and extremity.

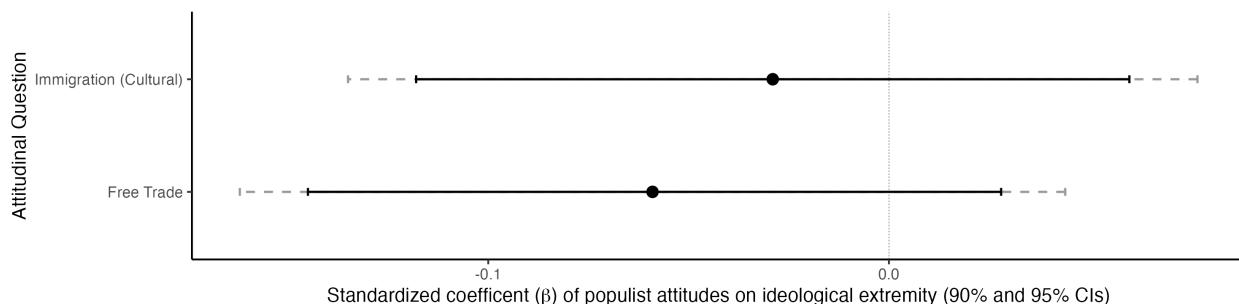


Figure 5: Coefficient of populist attitudes on attitudinal extremity for Republican identifiers, controlling for the other variables included in the model.

Marginal coefficients of populist attitudes using sum-score indices and OLS regression

Instead of using the MG-SEM approach, I estimated two OLS models using traditional sum scores indices for each of the latent constructs included in the model. In this case, ideological extremity is measured by subtracting each issue item score from the sample average of the same issue and, then, averaging over the entire set of policy items. In this way, the individual scores reflect the extremity of each individual adjusted for the sample preferences. I employed the R package “survey” (Lumley 2020) to take into account the stratified nature of the ANES sample and adjust the estimated standard errors accordingly. I then calculated the marginal coefficient of populism on ideological and affective extremity for Republican and Democratic identifiers using the R package *emmeans* (Lenth et al. 2021). The patterns of significance and the size of the association between populist attitudes, ideological extremity, and affective polarization are similar to the ones obtained from the MG-SEM model.

Table 9: Marginal coefficients of populist attitudes on ideological extremity using sum score OLS regression.

PID	Marginal effect	Robust std. Error	p-value
Democrats	0.086	0.033	0.0080
Republicans	0.043	0.035	0.2142

Table 10: Marginal coefficients of populist attitudes on affective polarization using sum score OLS regression.

PID	Marginal effect	Robust std. Error	p-value
Democrats	-0.109	0.030	≤ 0.001
Republicans	0.187	0.033	≤ 0.001

Pairwise correlations

Simple pairwise correlations for each partisan group also show the same pattern of association. This means that none of the included control variables change in a significant way the estimated coefficients.

Dependent Variable	Democrats	Republicans
Ideological Extremity	0.11 ($p - value \leq .05$)	0.04 ($p - value \geq .10$)
Affective Polarization	-0.09 ($p - value \leq .05$)	0.13 ($p - value \leq .05$)

Alternative measures of affective polarization

As with other concepts in the social sciences, scholars measure (and conceptualize) affective polarization in different ways. In this work, I follow recent literature on the topic and measure affective polarization using leader evaluations (Druckman et al. 2021; Garrett, Long, and Jeong 2019; Lelkes 2021; Mason 2015; Rogowski and Sutherland 2016). This is a better choice than using party evaluations since, in the US context, evaluations of relevant political figures (i.e., party leaders) are better suited to capture partisan affect compared to other measures. Druckman and Levendusky explain that “when scholars use items that measure feelings toward ‘parties’, [as compared to candidates] they are capturing attitudes toward elites more than toward voters” or broader political groups (2019, 7, italic mine).

The main analysis uses what it is referred to in Wagner (2021) as the “spread of like-dislike scores” measure for the four political candidates running in the 2016 election. 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 0 to 1. 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 with a high level of affective polarization has very different ratings for the different candidates.

In addition to this measure, the results are replicated using (1) the difference between the thermometer ratings of Trump and Clinton (Lelkes, Sood, and Iyengar 2017), (2) a measure of extremity of obtained by folding the out-party thermometer on its natural mid-point (50°), and (3) the difference in trait ratings (e.g., intelligent) between the out- and in-group candidate (i.e. Trump and Clinton) (Miller and Conover 2015). In line with previous research (Druckman and Levendusky 2019), these measures are highly correlated with each other and do not substantively change the results of any of the analyses. Results are reported below.

Differences in thermometer ratings (1)

In this model, affective polarization is measured using the difference in thermometer ratings between Donald Trump and Hilary Clinton (e.g., [Lelkes, Sood, and Iyengar 2017](#)). The estimated coefficients are virtually the same.

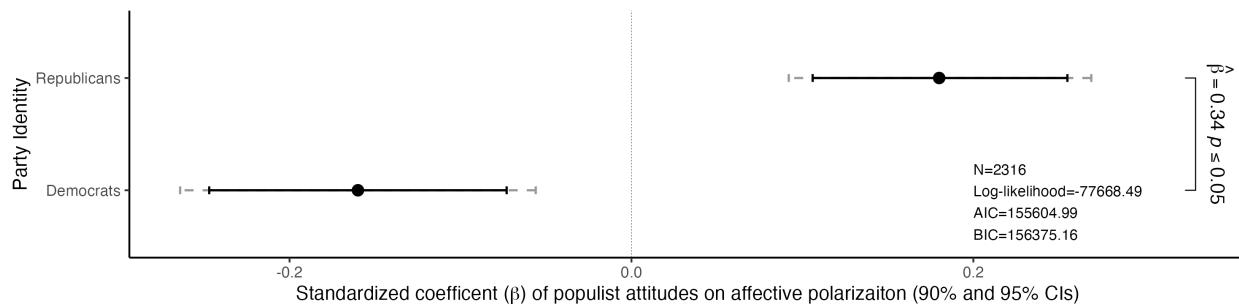


Figure 6: Coefficient of populist attitudes on the difference in thermometer ratings for Republicans and Democrats, controlling for the other variables included in the model.

Extremity of negative leader evaluations (2)

In this model, affective polarization is measured by folding the out-party thermometers on their natural mid-point (50) to gauge the extremity of negative affective evaluation of the out-party leader. The estimated coefficients are similar to the ones obtained using other measures of affective polarization.

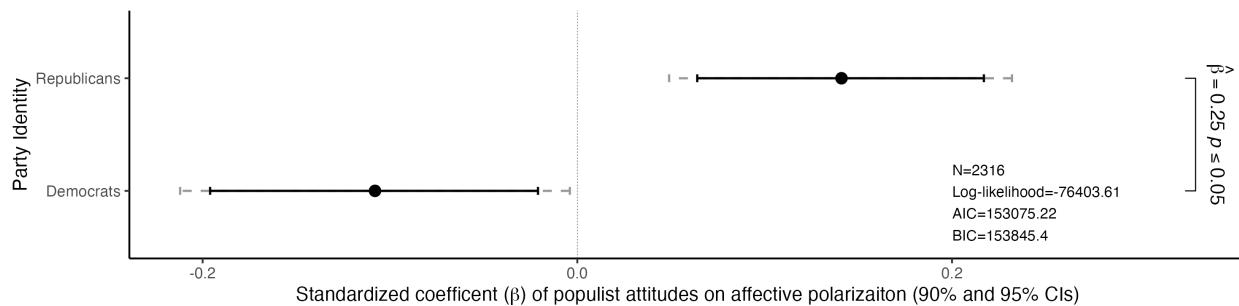


Figure 7: Coefficient of populist attitudes on the extremity of negative thermometer ratings for the out-party candidate, controlling for the other variables included in the model.

Trait ratings (3)

The main analysis has been replicated using a latent measure of negative candidate affect measured using items that ask whether the respondent thinks that the out-party candidate (Trump and Clinton) cares about “people like you”, is knowledgeable, and honest (for a similar approach see,

Miller and Conover 2015). Results remain unchanged confirming the validity of using feeling thermometers to measure affective polarization.

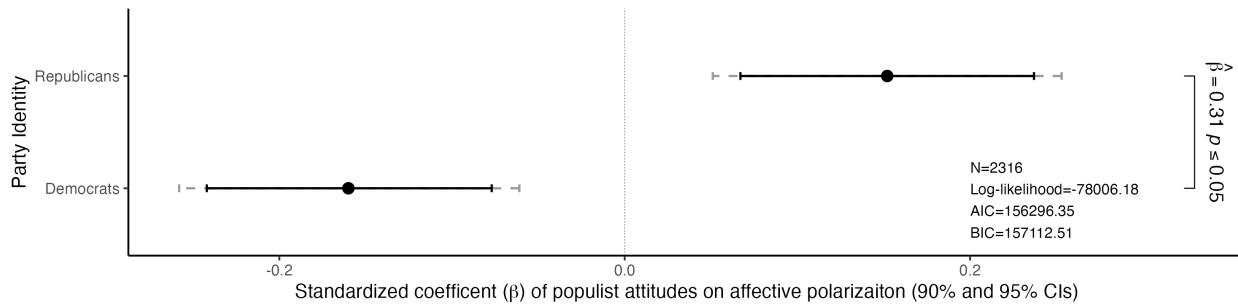


Figure 8: Coefficient of populist attitudes on negative evaluation of candidate traits for Republicans and Democrats, controlling for the other variables included in the model.

Alternative measures of populist attitudes

5-item measure of populist attitudes

The exact sub-dimension captured by the item that states “The will of the majority should always prevail” (V162267 in the original ANES documentation) is difficult to establish. Wuttke, Schimpf, and Schoen (2020) (Supplementary Files, p. XL) argue that the question measures the “challenge [of populism] to representative democracy” (*italic mine*) which is related to “the anti-pluralist component of a Manichean worldview” (Jungkunz, Fahey, and Hino 2021, 6). Yet, the item has the lowest standardized loading ($\lambda = 0.25$) on the latent factor measuring populist attitudes and comparative work has shown that it “does not seem to be related to the concept of populist attitudes quite that much” (Jungkunz, Fahey, and Hino 2021, 9). For these reasons, I fit a model that excludes this item. Unsurprisingly, the results are the same. This is due to the low contribution of the excluded item (V162267) to the variance of the latent factor.

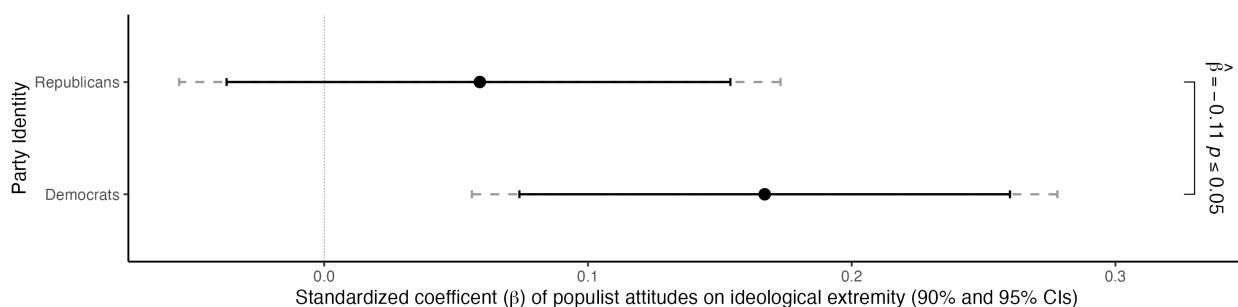


Figure 9: Coefficient of populist attitudes (5-item) on ideological extremity, controlling for the other variables included in the model.

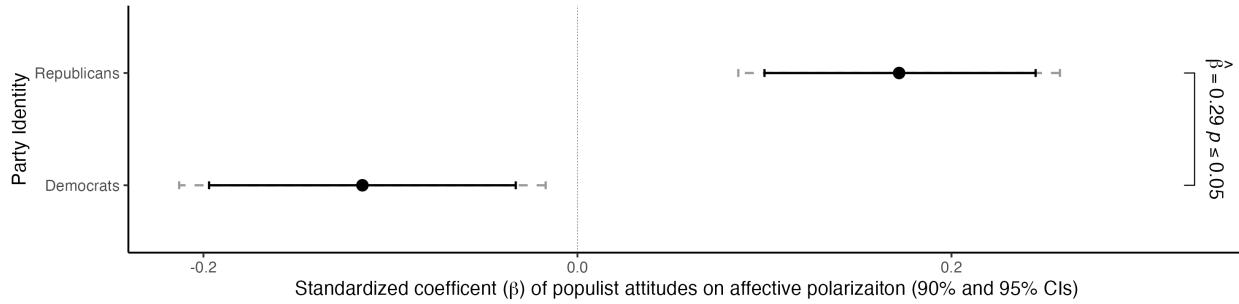


Figure 10: Coefficient of populist attitudes (5-item) on affective polarization, controlling for the other variables included in the model.

3-item measure of populist attitudes

Although, conceptually, populism strongly revolves around the powerless-powerful vertical dimension, the CSES scale is unbalanced in favor of anti-elitism. This is because the CSES battery has been designed to measure, first and foremost, “attitudes about elites” (Hobolt et al. 2017) that are correlated with but not equal to populism. To ensure that the results are robust to different specifications of populist attitudes, I estimate a latent populism measure using the approach proposed by Castanho Silva, Fuks, and Tamaki (2022). This measure uses the items with the highest factor loading for each sub-dimension of the populist attitudes scale (V162259, V162260, V162264). The results are consistent with the ones obtained using the 6-item populist measure with slightly larger coefficients in the expected direction for ideological extremity.

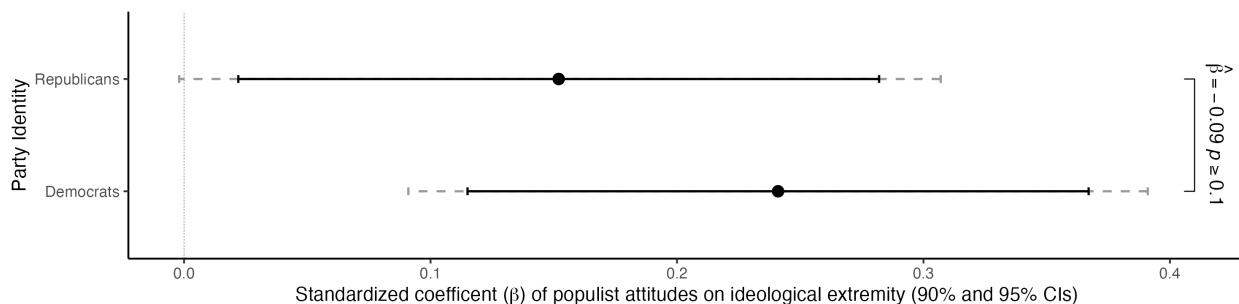


Figure 11: Coefficient of populist attitudes (3-item) on ideological extremity, controlling for the other variables included in the model.

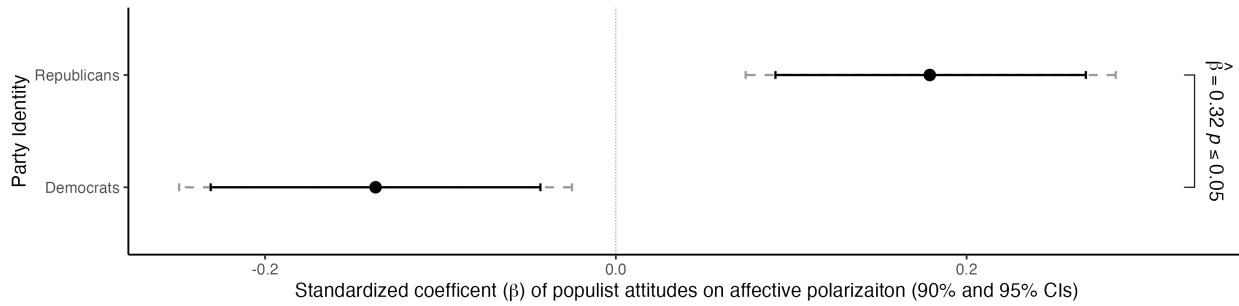


Figure 12: Coefficient of populism attitudes (3-item) on affective polarization, controlling for the other variables included in the model.

Entire sample (Republicans, Democrats, Pure Independents) model

A model has been fitted using the entire sample (instead of only Republican and Democratic identifiers) and, thus, including respondents who identify as pure independents (i.e., not leaning towards neither the Democratic nor the Republican party). Given that the variance covariance matrix needs to be symmetrical across the different groups, the indicator measuring the strength of partisan identity has been omitted from the model (independents cannot be “weak” or “strong” partisans). Unsurprisingly, the coefficients presented in the paper for Democrats and Republicans remain unchanged.

Although this article focuses only on partisans, it is worth briefly examining the relationship between populism, ideological extremity, and affective polarization among respondents who identify as pure independents. Heaney (2016) suggests that pure independents tend to place greater focus on issues positions due to their disinterest in the more partisan aspects of the political competition (e.g., affective leader evaluations). Our findings indicate that populism may help explaining Heaney’s argument. First, the results reveal that the relationship between populism and affective polarization for pure independents is insignificant at conventional levels. Second, I found that pure independents who score high on the populist attitudes scale are more ideologically extreme than pure independents who score low on the same scale. The coefficient for populism is also substantially larger if compared to the one estimated for Democrats or Republicans. Motivated by the hope of changing the *status quo*, populist individuals who refuse any party affiliation may do so because they think that the mainstream parties are not extreme (or unambiguous) enough in terms of issue positions. Although these results are noteworthy, the size of the pure independents group is small ($N=264$) and thus, extreme caution needs to be used when interpreting the results

presented above. I encourage other researchers to focus on how populist ideas among independent voters impact their political judgments.

Table 11: Regression for ideological extremity including pure independents.

	Democrats		Independents		Republicans	
	Std. Coefficient (β)	p-value	Std. Coefficient (β)	p-value	Std. Coefficient (β)	p-value
Populist Attitudes	0.131 (0.056)	0.020	0.366 (0.090)	≤ 0.001	0.023 (0.058)	0.698
Internal Efficacy	0.219 (0.098)	0.025	0.211 (0.095)	0.027	0.228 (0.101)	0.025
External Efficacy	-0.026 (0.051)	0.615	-0.025 (0.050)	0.616	-0.027 (0.053)	0.614
Political Interest	0.024 (0.077)	0.751	0.024 (0.074)	0.750	0.025 (0.080)	0.751
Political Knowledge	-0.052 (0.057)	0.361	-0.050 (0.055)	0.360	-0.054 (0.059)	0.358
Perceived Polarization	0.101 (0.028)	≤ 0.001	0.118 (0.033)	≤ 0.001	0.104 (0.029)	≤ 0.001
Strength Ideological Identity	0.363 (0.035)	≤ 0.001	0.279 (0.033)	≤ 0.001	0.355 (0.034)	≤ 0.001
Education	-0.035 (0.034)	0.308	-0.034 (0.034)	0.318	-0.032 (0.032)	0.311
Income	-0.028 (0.038)	0.458	-0.028 (0.037)	0.455	-0.028 (0.037)	0.457
Age	-0.098 (0.032)	0.003	-0.089 (0.029)	0.002	-0.100 (0.033)	0.003
Importance Religion (Ref: No)	0.034 (0.062)	0.580	0.033 (0.060)	0.579	0.036 (0.065)	0.581
Voted for Sanders (Ref: No)	0.086 (0.096)	0.370	0.083 (0.092)	0.370	0.089 (0.100)	0.374

	Democrats		Independents		Republicans	
	Std. Coefficient (β)	p-value	Std. Coefficient (β)	p-value	Std. Coefficient (β)	p-value
Female (ref: Male)	-0.042 (0.056)	0.447	-0.041 (0.054)	0.449	-0.044 (0.058)	0.447
African- Americans (ref: White)	0.185 (0.148)	0.211	0.179 (0.147)	0.224	0.192 (0.155)	0.215
Asian (ref: White)	0.087 (0.122)	0.475	0.084 (0.118)	0.475	0.091 (0.127)	0.476
Hispanic (ref: White)	0.237 (0.099)	0.017	0.229 (0.098)	0.020	0.246 (0.101)	0.015
Others (ref: White)	0.343 (0.147)	0.020	0.331 (0.143)	0.021	0.356 (0.151)	0.018

N=2562, Log-likelihood=-83713.9, AIC=167715.79, BIC=168557.98

Notes: All continuous variables are standardized. Beta coefficients for Populist Attitudes are allowed to vary across partisan groups. Robust std. errors in parenthesis.

Table 12: Regression for affective polarization including pure independents.

	Democrats		Independents		Republicans	
	Std. Coefficient (β)	p-value	Std. Coefficient (β)	p-value	Std. Coefficient (β)	p-value
Populist Attitudes	-0.123 (0.053)	0.020	-0.101 (0.085)	0.237	0.151 (0.046)	≤ 0.001
Internal Efficacy	0.221 (0.077)	0.004	0.201 (0.069)	0.004	0.213 (0.073)	0.004
External Efficacy	0.003 (0.040)	0.945	0.002 (0.036)	0.945	0.003 (0.038)	0.945
Political Interest	0.022 (0.060)	0.711	0.020 (0.055)	0.712	0.021 (0.058)	0.712
Political Knowledge	-0.018 (0.055)	0.737	-0.017 (0.050)	0.737	-0.018 (0.053)	0.737

Perceived Polarization	0.232 (0.024)	≤ 0.001	0.256 (0.025)	≤ 0.001	0.223 (0.022)	≤ 0.001
Strength affective Identity	0.193 (0.023)	≤ 0.001	0.140 (0.017)	≤ 0.001	0.175 (0.021)	≤ 0.001
Education	-0.069 (0.031)	0.027	-0.063 (0.029)	0.028	-0.059 (0.027)	0.028
Income	-0.021 (0.027)	0.438	-0.020 (0.025)	0.435	-0.019 (0.025)	0.437
Age	0.116 (0.027)	≤ 0.001	0.100 (0.023)	≤ 0.001	0.110 (0.025)	≤ 0.001
Importance Religion (Ref: No)	0.050 (0.047)	0.282	0.045 (0.042)	0.282	0.048 (0.045)	0.281
Voted for Sanders (Ref: No)	-0.385 (0.071)	≤ 0.001	-0.017 (0.182)	0.927	-0.370 (0.068)	≤ 0.001
Female (ref: Male)	0.102 (0.045)	0.022	0.092 (0.041)	0.023	0.098 (0.043)	0.022
African-Americans (ref: White)	-0.069 (0.096)	0.471	-0.063 (0.088)	0.472	-0.067 (0.093)	0.473
Asian (ref: White)	-0.206 (0.129)	0.111	-0.186 (0.118)	0.114	-0.198 (0.124)	0.112
Hispanic (ref: White)	0.037 (0.082)	0.649	0.034 (0.074)	0.648	0.036 (0.079)	0.649
Others (ref: White)	-0.148 (0.117)	0.207	-0.134 (0.105)	0.204	-0.142 (0.112)	0.206

N=2562, Log-likelihood=-83713.9, AIC=167715.79, BIC=168557.98

Notes: All continuous variables are standardized. Beta coefficients for Populist Attitudes are allowed to vary across partisan groups. Robust std. errors in parenthesis.

Varying coefficient of voting for Bernie Sanders across partisan groups

This model allows the coefficient of voting for Bernie Sanders to vary across partisan groups to rule out the possibility that Sanders's primary voters are driving the results due to their more extreme opinions. The results remain unchanged. This confirms the theoretical intuition that

populism is driving ideological extremity in a substantial portion of the Democratic party and not only among Sanders's voters.

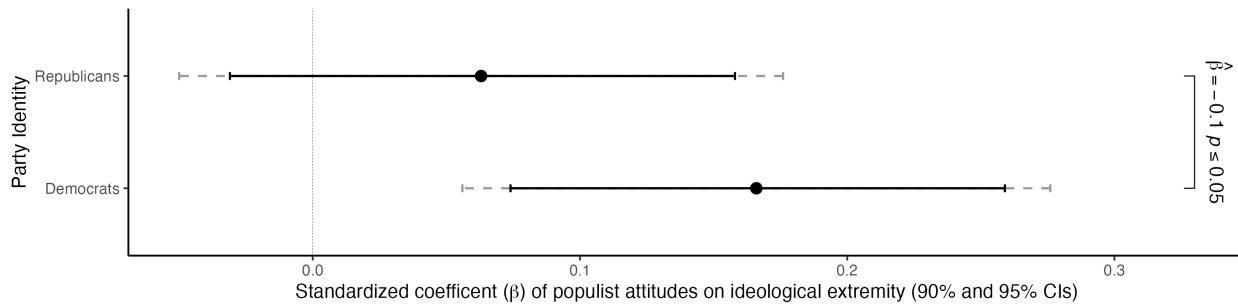


Figure 13: Coefficient of populist attitudes on ideological extremity allowing the coefficient of voting for Sanders to vary across partisan groups and controlling for the other variables included in the model.

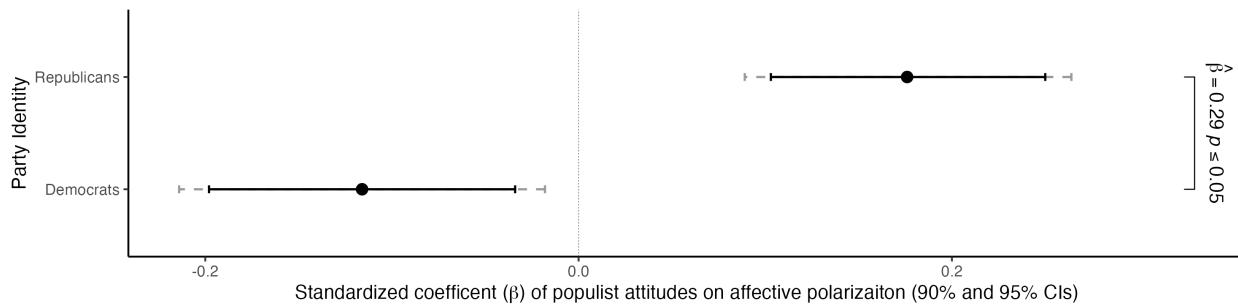


Figure 14: Coefficient of populist attitudes on affective polarization allowing the coefficient of voting for Sanders to vary across partisan groups and controlling for the other variables included in the model.

Exclusion of external political efficacy

To check for the potential impact of multicollinearity between the latent factor of external political efficacy and populist attitudes (Geurkink et al. 2020), a model without political efficacy has been fitted to the data. The coefficients are the same as the ones obtained from the model with the inclusion of external political efficacy.

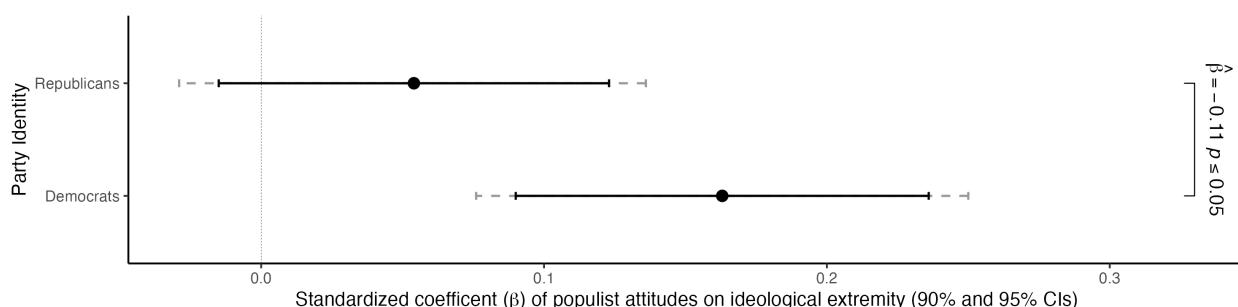


Figure 15: Coefficient of populist attitudes on ideological extremity, excluding external political efficacy and controlling for the other variables included in the model.

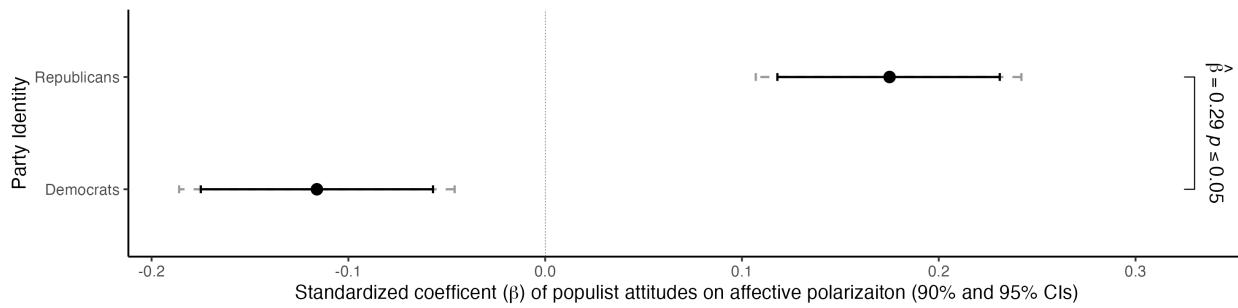


Figure 16: Coefficient of populist attitudes on affective polarization, excluding external political efficacy and controlling for the other variables included in the model.

Instruments

Table 13: Policy items used to construct the ideological extremity factor.

Item Ref.	Label	Question
V161178	Services	1. Govt should provide many fewer services – 7. Govt should provide many more services
V161181	Defense	1. Govt should decrease defense spending – 7. Govt should increase defense spending
V161184	Medical insurance	1. Govt insurance plan – 7. Private insurance plan
V161189	Standard of living	1. Govt should see to jobs and standard of living – 7. Govt should let each person get ahead on own
V161198	Help people blacks	1. Govt should help Blacks – 7. Blacks should help themselves
V161201	Environmental protection	1. Regulate business to protect the environment and create jobs – 7. No regulation because it will not work and will cost jobs
V161204x	Affirmative actions	1. Favor a great deal – 7. Oppose a great deal

Table 14: Partisan affect items used to construct the affective polarization indices.

Item Ref.	Label	Question
V161086	Thermometer for Democratic candidate (Clinton)	0° – Very cold or unfavorable feeling - 100° – Very warm or favorable feeling
V161087	Thermometer for Republican candidate (Trump)	0° – Very cold or unfavorable feeling - 100° – Very warm or favorable feeling
V161088	Thermometer for Libertarian candidate (Johnson)	0° – Very cold or unfavorable feeling - 100° – Very warm or favorable feeling
V161086	Thermometer for Green Party candidate (Stein)	0° – Very cold or unfavorable feeling - 100° – Very warm or favorable feeling
V161160 (Democratic), V161165 (Republican)	Robustness: Trait out-party candidate: really cares	1. Extremely well – 5. Not well at all
V161161 (Democratic), V161166 (Republican)	Robustness: Trait out-party candidate: knowledgeable	1. Extremely well – 5. Not well at all
V161162 (Democratic), V161167 (Republican)	Robustness: Trait out-party candidate: honest	1. Extremely well – 5. Not well at all

Table 15: Populist attitudes items

Item Ref.	Label	Question
V162259	Manicheism	Compromise in politics is selling out on one's principles (1. Agree strongly – 5. Disagree strongly)
V162260	Anti-elitism/People centrism	Most politicians do not care about the people (1. Agree strongly – 5. Disagree strongly)

Item Ref.	Label	Question
V162262	Anti-elitism	Politicians are the main problem in the U.S. (1. Agree strongly – 5. Disagree strongly)
V162264	People centrisim	People not politicians should make most important policy decisions (1. Agree strongly – 5. Disagree strongly)
V162265	Anti-elitism	Most politicians only care about interests of rich and powerful (1. Agree strongly – 5. Disagree strongly)
V162267	-	The will of the majority should always prevail (1. Agree strongly – 5. Disagree strongly)

Table 16: Party Identity (PID, grouping variable) and control variables.

Item Ref.	Label	Question and data manipulation procedure
V161158x	PID	Party identification (Recoded as Democrat, Republican, Robustness: Pure independent)
V161158x	Strength PID	Strength Party identification (Recoded as Leaner, Weak partisan, Strong partisan)
V162260	Primary vote	Candidate voted in the Presidential primary (Recoded as Voted/No vote for Sanders)
V162289	Strength Ideological self-placement	Liberal-Conservative respondent's self-placement (Recoded folding on the mid-point of the scale)
V162287	Respondent's placement of the Democratic Party	Left-right Democratic Party placement (0. Left – 10. Right, used to calculate perceived party polarization by subtracting the two indices and taking the absolute value)
V162287	Respondent's placement of the Republican Party	Left-right Republican Party placement (0. Left – 10. Right, used to calculate perceived party polarization by

Item Ref.	Label	Question and data manipulation procedure
		subtracting the two indices and taking the absolute value)
V161241	Religiosity	Religion important part of respondent's life (Yes, No)
V162256	Political interest	Respondent interest in politics (1. Very interested – 4. Very interested)
V162257	Political interest	Follows politics in media (1. Very closely – 4. Not at all)
V162215	External efficacy	Public officials don't care much what people like me think (1. Agree str. – 5. Disagree str.)
V162216	External efficacy	People like me don't have any say about what the government does (1. Agree str. – 5. Disagree str.)
V162217	Internal efficacy	How often do politics and government seem so complicated that you can't really understand what's going on? (1. Agree str. – 5. Disagree str.)
V162218	Internal efficacy	How well do you understand the important political issues facing our country? (1. Agree str. – 5. Disagree str.)
V161513	Political knowledge	For how many years is a United States Senator elected that is, how many years are there in one full term of office for a U.S. Senator? (recoded as 1. Incorrect, 2. Correct)
V161514	Political knowledge	On which of the following does the U.S. federal government currently spend the least? (recoded as 1. Incorrect, 2. Correct)
V161515	Political knowledge	Do you happen to know which party currently has the most members in the U.S. House of Representatives in Washington? (recoded as 1. Incorrect, 2. Correct)

Item Ref.	Label	Question and data manipulation procedure
V161516	Political knowledge	Do you happen to know which party currently has the most members in the U.S. Senate? (recode as 1. Incorrect, 2. Correct)
V161267	Age	Respondent's age
V161270	Education	Respondent's highest level of education (1. Less than 1st grade – 16. Doctorate degree)
V161361x	Income	Respondent's income
V161342	Gender	Respondent's self-identified gender ('Other' excluded)
V161310x	Race	Respondent's self-identified race (Recoded as White, African American, Latino, Asian, Other)

Descriptive statistics

Table 17: Descriptive statistics for the main analysis sample.

Variable	N	N = 3,668
Ideological extremity (services, V161178, folded)	3,187	
Mean (SD)		1.35 (1.05)
Median (IQR)		1.00 (1.00, 2.00)
Range		0.00 - 3.00
Ideological extremity (defense, V161181, folded)	3,233	
Mean (SD)		1.31 (1.05)
Median (IQR)		1.00 (0.00, 2.00)
Range		0.00 - 3.00
Ideological extremity (medical, V161184, folded)	3,294	
Mean (SD)		1.73 (1.12)
Median (IQR)		2.00 (1.00, 3.00)
Range		0.00 - 3.00
Ideological extremity (standard living, V161189, folded)	3,298	
Mean (SD)		1.50 (1.07)
Median (IQR)		1.00 (1.00, 2.00)
Range		0.00 - 3.00
Ideological extremity (blacks, V161198, folded)	3,276	
Mean (SD)		1.61 (1.13)
Median (IQR)		2.00 (1.00, 3.00)
Range		0.00 - 3.00
Ideological extremity (environment V161201, folded)	3,116	
Mean (SD)		1.68 (1.09)
Median (IQR)		2.00 (1.00, 3.00)
Range		0.00 - 3.00

Ideological extremity (affirmative actions, V161204x, folded)	3,635
Mean (SD)	1.59 (1.29)
Median (IQR)	2.00 (0.00, 3.00)
Range	0.00 - 3.00
Affective Polarization (index)	3,652
Mean (SD)	29.00 (13.36)
Median (IQR)	29.81 (19.28, 41.29)
Range	0.00 - 49.65
Political knowledge (senators, V161513)	3,511
Incorrect	1,969 / 3,511 (56%)
Correct	1,542 / 3,511 (44%)
Political knowledge (spending, V161514)	3,573
Incorrect	2,540 / 3,573 (71%)
Correct	1,033 / 3,573 (29%)
Political knowledge (house, V161515)	3,526
Incorrect	897 / 3,526 (25%)
Correct	2,629 / 3,526 (75%)
Political knowledge (senate, V161516)	3,521
Incorrect	1,114 / 3,521 (32%)
Correct	2,407 / 3,521 (68%)
Populism (M1, V162259)	3,136
Mean (SD)	1.88 (1.15)
Median (IQR)	2.00 (1.00, 3.00)
Range	0.00 - 4.00
Populism (AE1, V162260)	3,146
Mean (SD)	2.22 (1.12)

Median (IQR)	2.00 (1.00, 3.00)
Range	0.00 - 4.00
Populism (AE2, V162262)	3,146
Mean (SD)	2.18 (1.09)
Median (IQR)	2.00 (1.00, 3.00)
Range	0.00 - 4.00
Populism (PC1, V162264)	3,140
Mean (SD)	2.45 (1.16)
Median (IQR)	3.00 (2.00, 3.00)
Range	0.00 - 4.00
Populism (AE3, V162265)	3,146
Mean (SD)	2.53 (1.07)
Median (IQR)	3.00 (2.00, 3.00)
Range	0.00 - 4.00
Populism (-, V162267)	3,133
Mean (SD)	1.59 (1.23)
Median (IQR)	2.00 (1.00, 3.00)
Range	0.00 - 4.00
Education (V161270)	3,640
Mean (SD)	11.28 (2.32)
Median (IQR)	11.00 (10.00, 13.00)
Range	1.00 - 16.00
Income (V161361x)	3,505
Mean (SD)	15.76 (8.01)
Median (IQR)	17.00 (10.00, 23.00)
Range	1.00 - 28.00

Age (V161267)	3,577
Mean (SD)	50.06 (17.62)
Median (IQR)	51.00 (35.00, 64.00)
Range	18.00 - 90.00
Importance Religion (V161241)	3,652
Non important	1,227 / 3,652 (34%)
Important	2,425 / 3,652 (66%)
Gender (V161342)	3,625
Male	1,708 / 3,625 (47%)
Female	1,917 / 3,625 (53%)
Race (self-identification, V161310x)	3,643
White	2,651 / 3,643 (73%)
African American	347 / 3,643 (9.5%)
Asian	117 / 3,643 (3.2%)
Hispanic	364 / 3,643 (10.0%)
Others	164 / 3,643 (4.5%)
Primary vote (V162260)	3,661
Other candidates	3,308 / 3,661 (90%)
Sanders	353 / 3,661 (9.6%)
Perceived party polarization (V162260)	2,995
Mean (SD)	5.58 (2.95)
Median (IQR)	6.00 (4.00, 8.00)
Range	0.00 - 10.00
Strength ideological identity (V162289)	2,949
Mean (SD)	1.36 (0.95)
Median (IQR)	1.00 (1.00, 2.00)

Range	0.00 - 3.00
Party ID (V161158x)	3,668
Democratic Party	1,939 / 3,668 (53%)
Republican Party	1,729 / 3,668 (47%)
Strength Party ID (V161158x)	3,668
Leaner	990 / 3,668 (27%)
Weak partisan	1,067 / 3,668 (29%)
Strong partisan	1,611 / 3,668 (44%)
Interest in politics (V162256)	3,151
Mean (SD)	1.92 (0.82)
Median (IQR)	2.00 (1.00, 2.00)
Range	0.00 - 3.00
Follow politics in media (V162257)	3,149
Mean (SD)	1.84 (0.80)
Median (IQR)	2.00 (1.00, 2.00)
Range	0.00 - 3.00
External Efficacy (publ. officials, V162215)	3,150
Mean (SD)	2.44 (1.09)
Median (IQR)	2.00 (2.00, 3.00)
Range	1.00 - 5.00
External Efficacy (no say, V162216)	3,148
Mean (SD)	2.78 (1.24)
Median (IQR)	3.00 (2.00, 4.00)
Range	1.00 - 5.00
Internal Efficacy (too complicated, V162217)	3,147
Mean (SD)	3.25 (1.05)

Median (IQR)	3.00 (2.00, 4.00)
Range	1.00 - 5.00
Internal Efficacy (understanding, V162218)	3,151
Mean (SD)	2.12 (0.94)
Median (IQR)	2.00 (2.00, 3.00)
Range	0.00 - 4.00

¹n / N (%)

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Appendix: Unaffected Polarization? Populism and Affective Polarization in comparative perspective

The data used for the paper is public and accessible according to the terms of use defined by the [Comparative Study of Electoral Systems \(CSES\)](#), the data provider. All the materials that are required to replicate the figures and the tables present in the text (custom-programmed R functions and R scripts) are accessible through the author's public GitHub profile (ANONYMOUS).

We used R version 4.2.1 (R Core Team [2022](#)) and the following R packages: fixest v. 0.11.1 (Bergé [2018](#)), ggeffects v. 1.2.2.13 (Lüdecke [2018](#)), gtsummary v. 1.6.1 (Sjoberg et al. [2021](#)), here v. 1.0.1 (Müller [2020](#)), huxtable v. 5.5.2 (Hugh-Jones [2022](#)), kableExtra v. 1.3.4 (Zhu [2021](#)), latex2exp v. 0.9.4 (Meschiari [2022](#)), Matrix v. 1.6.0 (Bates, Maechler, and Jagan [2023](#)), modelsummary v. 1.4.2 (Arel-Bundock [2022](#)), patchwork v. 1.1.1 (Pedersen [2020](#)), semTools v. 0.5.6 (Jorgensen et al. [2022](#)), tidyverse v. 2.0.0 (Wickham et al. [2019](#)), xtable v. 1.8.4 (Dahl et al. [2019](#)).

Regression tables for Figure 1 and Figure 2 (manuscript)

Random-effect regression results predicting affective polarization using populist attitudes and vote choice

The coefficients can be used to calculate the marginal means reported in Figure 1 (Populist attitudes), and Figure 2 (Vote choice) of the manuscript. Since we interested in the marginal means for each country case, the standard errors for these random slope models are not clustered at the country-year level. This ensures that the standard errors of the slope estimates are calculated correctly (for more info on how the standard errors are calulcated see, Bergé [2018](#)).

	Populist attitudes	Vote choice
Intercept	-0.406*** (0.018)	2.147*** (0.041)
Populist Attitudes	0.013 (0.016)	
Populist Attitudes Squared	-0.017 (0.020)	
Female (Ref: Male)	0.023*** (0.005)	0.050*** (0.012)
Education	0.021*** (0.003)	0.010** (0.003)
Age	0.001 (0.002)	0.000 (0.000)

Belgium - Flanders (2019)	-0.006
	(0.024)
Belgium - Wallonia (2019)	0.022
	(0.023)
Brazil (2018)	-0.146***
	(0.023)
Canada (2019)	0.006
	(0.024)
Switzerland (2019)	-0.229***
	(0.024)
Germany (2017)	0.154***
	(0.024)
Denmark (2019)	0.184***
	(0.023)
Finland (2019)	0.019
	(0.024)
France (2017)	0.086***

Great Britain (2017)	(0.023)
	0.053*
	(0.024)
Hungary (2018)	-0.006
	(0.023)
Iceland (2016)	-0.048*
	(0.023)
Iceland (2017)	-0.013
	(0.023)
Italy (2018)	0.030
	(0.023)
Lithuania (2016)	-0.133***
	(0.023)
Montenegro (2016)	0.047*
	(0.023)
Netherlands (2017)	-0.061**
	(0.023)
Norway (2017)	0.060**
	(0.023)
New Zealand (2017)	0.028
	(0.023)
New Zealand (2020)	0.120***
	(0.024)
Portugal (2019)	-0.229***
	(0.023)
Slovakia (2020)	0.071**
	(0.023)
USA (2016)	1.247***
	(0.023)
USA (2020)	1.637***

(0.023)

Populist Attitudes X Belgium - Flanders (2019)	-0.033 (0.022)
Populist Attitudes Squared X Belgium - Flanders (2019)	0.099*** (0.026)
Populist Attitudes X Belgium - Wallonia (2019)	-0.030 (0.026)
Populist Attitudes Squared X Belgium - Wallonia (2019)	0.115*** (0.033)
Populist Attitudes X Brazil (2018)	0.031 (0.042)
Populist Attitudes Squared X Brazil (2018)	0.065 (0.062)
Populist Attitudes X Canada (2019)	-0.021 (0.025)
Populist Attitudes Squared X Canada (2019)	0.054+ (0.032)
Populist Attitudes X Switzerland (2019)	-0.002 (0.025)

Populist Attitudes Squared X Switzerland (2019)	0.107*** (0.032)
Populist Attitudes X Germany (2017)	-0.057* (0.022)
Populist Attitudes Squared X Germany (2017)	0.025 (0.025)
Populist Attitudes X Denmark (2019)	-0.019 (0.028)
Populist Attitudes Squared X Denmark (2019)	0.055 (0.039)
Populist Attitudes X Finland (2019)	-0.046* (0.023)
Populist Attitudes Squared X Finland (2019)	0.062*

	(0.027)
Populist Attitudes X France (2017)	0.017
	(0.028)
Populist Attitudes Squared X France (2017)	0.132*** (0.037)
Populist Attitudes X Great Britain (2017)	-0.004 (0.023)
Populist Attitudes Squared X Great Britain (2017)	0.102*** (0.027)
Populist Attitudes X Hungary (2018)	-0.069* (0.034)
Populist Attitudes Squared X Hungary (2018)	0.119* (0.052)
Populist Attitudes X Iceland (2016)	-0.011 (0.028)
Populist Attitudes Squared X Iceland (2016)	0.022 (0.031)

Populist Attitudes X Iceland (2017)	-0.024
	(0.029)
Populist Attitudes Squared X Iceland (2017)	0.070*
	(0.033)
Populist Attitudes X Italy (2018)	0.029
	(0.034)
Populist Attitudes Squared X Italy (2018)	0.061
	(0.057)
Populist Attitudes X Lithuania (2016)	-0.040
	(0.045)
Populist Attitudes Squared X Lithuania (2016)	-0.020
	(0.096)
Populist Attitudes X Montenegro (2016)	-0.089***

Populist Attitudes Squared X Montenegro (2016)	0.004
	(0.026)
Populist Attitudes X Netherlands (2017)	-0.051*
	(0.025)
Populist Attitudes Squared X Netherlands (2017)	0.131***
	(0.028)
Populist Attitudes X Norway (2017)	0.007
	(0.026)
Populist Attitudes Squared X Norway (2017)	0.061+
	(0.031)
Populist Attitudes X New Zealand (2017)	0.043+
	(0.025)
Populist Attitudes Squared X New Zealand (2017)	0.084**
	(0.032)
Populist Attitudes X New Zealand (2020)	0.010
	(0.025)
Populist Attitudes Squared X New Zealand (2020)	0.084*
	(0.033)
Populist Attitudes X Portugal (2019)	-0.011

	(0.045)
Populist Attitudes Squared X Portugal (2019)	0.131
	(0.093)
Populist Attitudes X Slovakia (2020)	-0.115** (0.040)
Populist Attitudes Squared X Slovakia (2020)	-0.083 (0.077)
Populist Attitudes X USA (2016)	-0.052+ (0.030)
Populist Attitudes Squared X USA (2016)	0.314*** (0.046)
Populist Attitudes X USA (2020)	0.144***

	(0.030)
Populist Attitudes Squared X USA (2020)	0.357*** (0.045)
Vote: No vote	-0.514*** (0.098)
Vote: PRP	0.255*** (0.075)
Vote: Mainstream parties X Belgium - Flanders (2019)	0.200*** (0.047)
Vote: No vote X Belgium - Flanders (2019)	0.447*** (0.129)
Vote: PRP X Belgium - Flanders (2019)	-0.238* (0.107)
Vote: Mainstream parties X Belgium - Wallonia (2019)	0.313*** (0.046)
Vote: No vote X Belgium - Wallonia (2019)	0.144 (0.113)
Vote: PRP X Belgium - Wallonia (2019)	0.082

	(0.285)
Vote: Mainstream parties X Brazil (2018)	-0.210*** (0.060)
Vote: No vote X Brazil (2018)	-0.257* (0.111)
Vote: PRP X Brazil (2018)	-0.466*** (0.080)
Vote: Mainstream parties X Canada (2019)	0.168*** (0.046)
Vote: No vote X Canada (2019)	0.169 (0.119)
Vote: Mainstream parties X Switzerland (2019)	-0.264***

Vote: No vote X Switzerland (2019)	-0.292** (0.106)
Vote: PRP X Switzerland (2019)	-0.535*** (0.098)
Vote: Mainstream parties X Germany (2017)	0.539*** (0.049)
Vote: No vote X Germany (2017)	0.481*** (0.118)
Vote: PRP X Germany (2017)	0.112 (0.095)
Vote: Mainstream parties X Denmark (2019)	0.527*** (0.046)
Vote: No vote X Denmark (2019)	0.449** (0.157)
Vote: PRP X Denmark (2019)	0.468*** (0.120)
Vote: Mainstream parties X Finland (2019)	0.304*** (0.051)
Vote: No vote X Finland (2019)	0.316**

	(0.105)
Vote: PRP X Finland (2019)	-0.029
	(0.106)
Vote: Mainstream parties X France (2017)	0.472*** (0.054)
Vote: No vote X France (2017)	0.609*** (0.104)
Vote: PRP X France (2017)	0.097 (0.094)
Vote: Mainstream parties X Great Britain (2017)	0.384*** (0.046)
Vote: No vote X Great Britain (2017)	0.293*

	(0.118)
Vote: PRP X Great Britain (2017)	-0.922*** (0.232)
Vote: Mainstream parties X Hungary (2018)	0.401*** (0.077)
Vote: No vote X Hungary (2018)	-0.305** (0.103)
Vote: PRP X Hungary (2018)	0.350*** (0.079)
Vote: Mainstream parties X Iceland (2016)	0.009 (0.046)
Vote: No vote X Iceland (2016)	0.010 (0.116)
Vote: PRP X Iceland (2016)	-0.680***

	(0.189)
Vote: Mainstream parties X Iceland (2017)	0.111* (0.047)
Vote: No vote X Iceland (2017)	0.097 (0.118)
Vote: PRP X Iceland (2017)	-0.070 (0.106)
Vote: Mainstream parties X Italy (2018)	0.221*** (0.060)
Vote: No vote X Italy (2018)	0.122 (0.105)
Vote: PRP X Italy (2018)	0.258** (0.083)
Vote: Mainstream parties X Lithuania (2016)	-0.022 (0.051)
Vote: No vote X Lithuania (2016)	-0.274**

Vote: PRP X Lithuania (2016)	-0.346** (0.111)
Vote: Mainstream parties X Montenegro (2016)	0.415*** (0.049)
Vote: No vote X Montenegro (2016)	-0.374*** (0.108)
Vote: PRP X Montenegro (2016)	0.444*** (0.107)
Vote: Mainstream parties X Netherlands (2017)	0.062 (0.047)
Vote: No vote X Netherlands (2017)	0.172 (0.140)
Vote: PRP X Netherlands (2017)	-0.253** (0.094)
Vote: Mainstream parties X Norway (2017)	0.216*** (0.047)
Vote: No vote X Norway (2017)	0.214 (0.131)
Vote: PRP X Norway (2017)	0.406***

	(0.107)
Vote: Mainstream parties X New Zealand (2017)	0.183*** (0.046)
Vote: No vote X New Zealand (2017)	0.231 (0.154)
Vote: PRP X New Zealand (2017)	-0.010 (0.118)
Vote: Mainstream parties X New Zealand (2020)	0.418*** (0.045)
Vote: No vote X New Zealand (2020)	0.449** (0.139)
Vote: PRP X New Zealand (2020)	0.158

	(0.216)
Vote: Mainstream parties X Portugal (2019)	0.024
	(0.054)
Vote: No vote X Portugal (2019)	-0.462***
	(0.100)
Vote: PRP X Portugal (2019)	-1.176***
	(0.276)
Vote: Mainstream parties X Slovakia (2020)	0.217**
	(0.066)
Vote: No vote X Slovakia (2020)	-0.039
	(0.108)
Vote: PRP X Slovakia (2020)	0.224**
	(0.079)
Vote: Mainstream parties X USA (2016)	3.567***
	(0.056)
Vote: No vote X USA (2016)	2.245***
	(0.107)
Vote: PRP X USA (2016)	3.738***

		(0.084)
Vote: Mainstream parties X USA (2020)	4.961*** (0.055)	
Vote: No vote X USA (2020)	3.002*** (0.108)	
Vote: PRP X USA (2020)	4.287*** (0.084)	
<hr/> Num.Obs.	46637	46637

+ p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Reference category for country fixed effect = Austria

~~~~~

### ***Fixed-effect regression results predicting affective polarization using vote choice***

The coefficient reported in the table are the pooled sample results displayed in Figure 2 of the manuscript (i.e., vote choice model, Overall (pooled sample)). The pooled sample results using populist attitudes as a predictor are reported in the manuscript.

---

|                               |                               |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Dependent Variable:<br>Model: | Affective Polarization<br>(1) |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|

---

#### Variables

|                                                |                        |
|------------------------------------------------|------------------------|
| Vote: No vote (Ref: Mainstream parties)        | -0.3349***<br>(0.0450) |
| Vote: Populist Party (Ref: Mainstream parties) | 0.0464*<br>(0.0269)    |
| Female (Ref: Male)                             | 0.0200<br>(0.0157)     |
| Education                                      | 0.0168***<br>(0.0055)  |
| Age                                            | 0.0284**<br>(0.0120)   |

---

#### Fixed-effects

|         |     |
|---------|-----|
| Country | Yes |
|---------|-----|

---

#### Fit statistics

|              |        |
|--------------|--------|
| Observations | 42,770 |
|--------------|--------|

|                                |         |
|--------------------------------|---------|
| $R^2$                          | 0.43434 |
| Within $R^2$                   | 0.07185 |
| Size of the 'effective' sample | 23      |

Clustered (Country) standard-errors in parentheses

Signif. Codes: \*\*\*: 0.01, \*\*: 0.05, \*: 0.1

Table A2: Results from fixed-effects regression predicting average affect using vote choice

### ***PRP included in the analysis***

To identify populist radical right (i.e., far-right) parties, we began by following the classification of Mudde (2007) and Norris (2005). Next, we consulted the PopuList database Rooduijn et al. (2019) to include parties that were not covered in Mudde and Norris' publications (e.g., the Partido Social Liberal (PSL) in Brazil) and determine their party family classification. We included only parties that are classified both as populist and far-right and excluded borderline cases. See infra for a robustness model where we include borderline cases and parties classified only as populist. Further, in the CSES, feeling thermometers for party and leaders are asked only for the 7 most popular parties/coalitions and, thus, small parties with less than 4% of the popular vote cannot be included in the analysis. Canada and Iceland (2016) are also excluded from the vote choice model due to the lack of a populist party. Additionally, due to a lack of enough observations, we decided to exclude radical left populist parties such as La France Insoumise (FI) and populist parties without a clear ideological position along the left-right continuum such as the Italian Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S)

### ***Measurement models***

In order to measure an individual's level of affinity towards populism, we utilize Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) models. CFA has two main advantages over traditional sum-score indices. Firstly, it reduces measurement errors by evaluating whether a specific latent construct (i.e., populist attitudes) is accurately measured by a set of questions that share common variance (i.e., a series of attitudinal items related to populism). Secondly, CFA guarantees that a latent construct is measured and interpreted in the same across various groups of respondents, in this case, respondents interviewed in different countries. Results from the CFA model reveal good reliability and validity of the 3-item populist attitudes scale (*CFI* .95, *RMSA* .06, *SRMR* .08) with relatively high factor loadings for the pooled model ( $\lambda$  .5) (Hu and Bentler 1999).

### **Standardized loadings for each country case**

We report the standardized factor loadings ( $\lambda$ ) obtained from a CFA configural model for each of the country cases included in the analysis. In line with the CFA fit indices reported in the manuscript, the majority of the included country cases have acceptable factor loadings ( $\lambda > .5$ ), except for Slovakia, Portugal, and Lithuania. In these countries, the item related to Manicheism has a lower factor loading of  $\lambda < .3$ . Despite this, we have decided to keep these countries in the sample since their  $\lambda$  is above the selected threshold (see Country cases selection section).

| Country                   | Item                      | Std. Loading ( $\lambda$ ) |
|---------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------|
| Austria (2017)            | Anti-elitism (E3004_2)    | 0.78                       |
| Austria (2017)            | People centrism (E3004_6) | 0.45                       |
| Austria (2017)            | Manicheism (E3004_1)      | 0.59                       |
| Belgium - Flanders (2019) | Anti-elitism (E3004_2)    | 0.73                       |
| Belgium - Flanders (2019) | People centrism (E3004_6) | 0.58                       |
| Belgium - Flanders (2019) | Manicheism (E3004_1)      | 0.77                       |
| Belgium - Wallonia (2019) | Anti-elitism (E3004_2)    | 0.72                       |
| Belgium - Wallonia (2019) | People centrism (E3004_6) | 0.6                        |
| Belgium - Wallonia (2019) | Manicheism (E3004_1)      | 0.43                       |
| Brazil (2018)             | Anti-elitism (E3004_2)    | 0.49                       |
| Brazil (2018)             | People centrism (E3004_6) | 0.35                       |
| Brazil (2018)             | Manicheism (E3004_1)      | 0.42                       |
| Canada (2019)             | Anti-elitism (E3004_2)    | 0.66                       |
| Canada (2019)             | People centrism (E3004_6) | 0.45                       |
| Canada (2019)             | Manicheism (E3004_1)      | 0.57                       |
| Switzerland (2019)        | Anti-elitism (E3004_2)    | 0.74                       |
| Switzerland (2019)        | People centrism (E3004_6) | 0.4                        |
| Switzerland (2019)        | Manicheism (E3004_1)      | 0.62                       |
| Germany (2017)            | Anti-elitism (E3004_2)    | 0.75                       |
| Germany (2017)            | People centrism (E3004_6) | 0.61                       |
| Germany (2017)            | Manicheism (E3004_1)      | 0.75                       |
| Denmark (2019)            | Anti-elitism (E3004_2)    | 0.74                       |

|                      |                           |      |
|----------------------|---------------------------|------|
| Denmark (2019)       | People centrism (E3004_6) | 0.48 |
| Denmark (2019)       | Manicheism (E3004_1)      | 0.39 |
| Finland (2019)       | Anti-elitism (E3004_2)    | 0.7  |
| Finland (2019)       | People centrism (E3004_6) | 0.57 |
| Finland (2019)       | Manicheism (E3004_1)      | 0.66 |
| France (2017)        | Anti-elitism (E3004_2)    | 0.72 |
| France (2017)        | People centrism (E3004_6) | 0.5  |
| France (2017)        | Manicheism (E3004_1)      | 0.39 |
| Great Britain (2017) | Anti-elitism (E3004_2)    | 0.77 |
| Great Britain (2017) | People centrism (E3004_6) | 0.55 |
| Great Britain (2017) | Manicheism (E3004_1)      | 0.62 |
| Hungary (2018)       | Anti-elitism (E3004_2)    | 0.7  |
| Hungary (2018)       | People centrism (E3004_6) | 0.44 |
| Hungary (2018)       | Manicheism (E3004_1)      | 0.29 |
| Iceland (2016)       | Anti-elitism (E3004_2)    | 0.85 |
| Iceland (2016)       | People centrism (E3004_6) | 0.35 |
| Iceland (2016)       | Manicheism (E3004_1)      | 0.53 |
| Iceland (2017)       | Anti-elitism (E3004_2)    | 0.72 |
| Iceland (2017)       | People centrism (E3004_6) | 0.35 |
| Iceland (2017)       | Manicheism (E3004_1)      | 0.57 |
| Italy (2018)         | Anti-elitism (E3004_2)    | 0.46 |
| Italy (2018)         | People centrism (E3004_6) | 0.37 |
| Italy (2018)         | Manicheism (E3004_1)      | 0.49 |
| Lithuania (2016)     | Anti-elitism (E3004_2)    | 0.78 |
| Lithuania (2016)     | People centrism (E3004_6) | 0.4  |
| Lithuania (2016)     | Manicheism (E3004_1)      | 0.2  |
| Montenegro (2016)    | Anti-elitism (E3004_2)    | 0.84 |
| Montenegro (2016)    | People centrism (E3004_6) | 0.61 |
| Montenegro (2016)    | Manicheism (E3004_1)      | 0.46 |
| Netherlands (2017)   | Anti-elitism (E3004_2)    | 0.72 |

|                    |                           |      |
|--------------------|---------------------------|------|
| Netherlands (2017) | People centrism (E3004_6) | 0.6  |
| Netherlands (2017) | Manicheism (E3004_1)      | 0.77 |
| Norway (2017)      | Anti-elitism (E3004_2)    | 0.81 |
| Norway (2017)      | People centrism (E3004_6) | 0.42 |
| Norway (2017)      | Manicheism (E3004_1)      | 0.56 |
| New Zealand (2017) | Anti-elitism (E3004_2)    | 0.69 |
| New Zealand (2017) | People centrism (E3004_6) | 0.47 |
| New Zealand (2017) | Manicheism (E3004_1)      | 0.59 |
| New Zealand (2020) | Anti-elitism (E3004_2)    | 0.71 |
| New Zealand (2020) | People centrism (E3004_6) | 0.43 |
| New Zealand (2020) | Manicheism (E3004_1)      | 0.59 |
| Portugal (2019)    | Anti-elitism (E3004_2)    | 0.63 |
| Portugal (2019)    | People centrism (E3004_6) | 0.39 |
| Portugal (2019)    | Manicheism (E3004_1)      | 0.24 |
| Slovakia (2020)    | Anti-elitism (E3004_2)    | 0.7  |
| Slovakia (2020)    | People centrism (E3004_6) | 0.43 |
| Slovakia (2020)    | Manicheism (E3004_1)      | 0.26 |
| USA (2016)         | Anti-elitism (E3004_2)    | 0.61 |

### Invariance Testing

To ensure the robustness of our measurement model across the different countries, we performed a measurement invariance testing. This procedure guarantees that populist attitudes are measured in a comparable way across the different country-elections included in the study. The results of the invariance testing indicate that the latent factor of populist attitudes reaches metric invariance, thereby enabling us to compare the coefficients of populist attitudes on affective polarization and average affect across the different country-cases (Chen 2007).

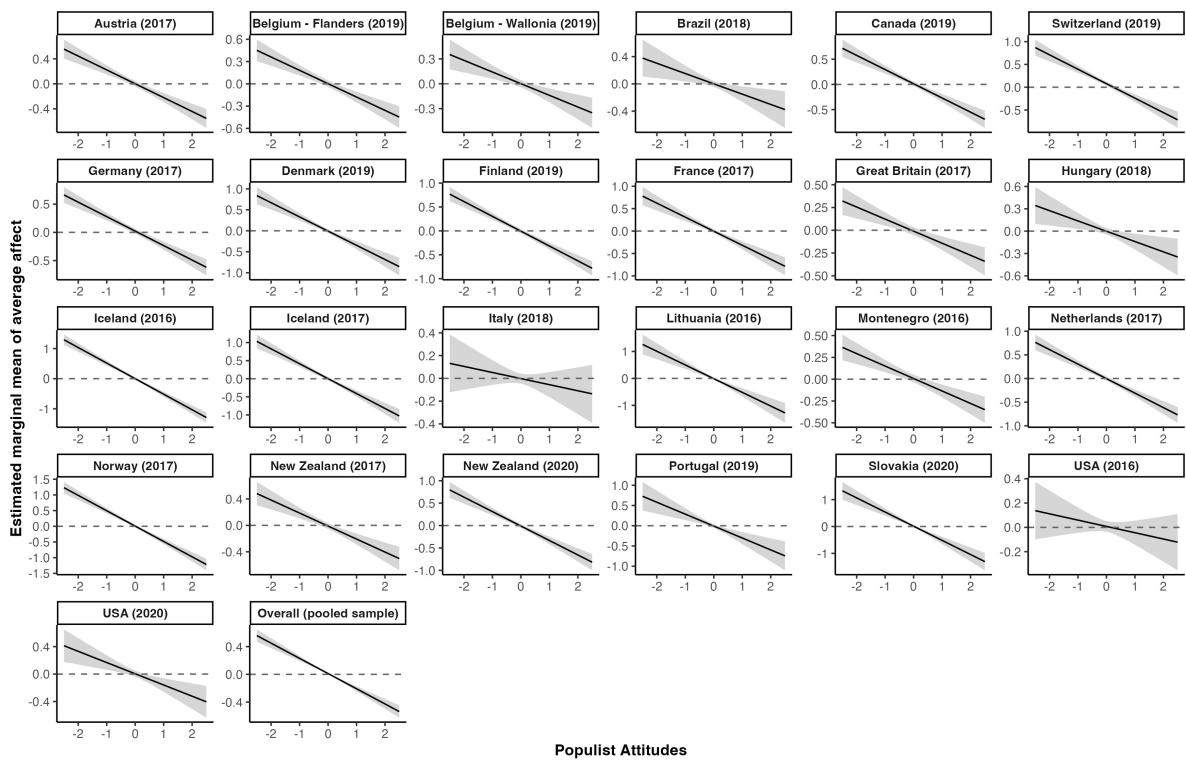
| Model      | df    | $\Delta df$ | CFI  | $\Delta CFI$ | RMSEA | $\Delta RMSEA$ | SRMR | $\Delta SRMR$ |
|------------|-------|-------------|------|--------------|-------|----------------|------|---------------|
| Configural | 0.00  |             | 1.00 |              | 0.00  |                | 0.00 |               |
| Metric     | 46.00 | 46.00       | 0.97 | 0.03         | 0.06  | 0.06           | 0.03 | 0.03          |
| Scalar     | 92.00 | 46.00       | 0.61 | 0.36         | 0.17  | 0.11           | 0.10 | 0.07          |

## Robustness

### Average affect random slope model

This additional model estimates the marginal mean of average affect at varying levels of populism. Although there are some difference in the magnitude of the estimated coefficients, the results suggest a consistent negative correlation between populist attitudes and average affect in almost all the selected country cases. The only two exceptions are Italy and USA (2016) where the relationship is negative but fail to reach statistical significance at conventional levels (i.e.,  $\leq 0.05$ ).

Figure A1: Marginal mean of average affect at different levels of populist attitudes, controlling for all the other variables included in the model. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals around the estimates.



### Alternative measures of affective polarization

The manuscript uses the so called spread-of-score measure to capture affective evaluations in multiparty systems among the entire electorate Wagner (2021). The used measure recognizes that respondents can have positive evaluations of more than one party, effectively allowing to capture affective polarization in contexts where polarization may happen between blocks of parties (e.g., left-wing Vs. right-wing, mainstream vs. non-mainstream) rather than between one party and the other parties. It also allows us to assess affective polarization among voters who hold positive or

negative evaluations towards certain parties but do not identify with or have a single-peaked ranking preference for any one party.

Although the selected measure "is superior [to other measures] if we want a measure that capture the empirical reality of affect patters in multi-party systems" (emphasis ours, Wagner 2021, p. 5), we decided to re-estimate the main models using (1) a weighted measure spread-of-score measure that takes into account parties' vote shares, (2) a measure based on the mean distance from the most-liked party (3) and a measure of partisan polarization that relay on the distance between in-and out-party evaluations.

### ***Weighted spread-of-score measure***

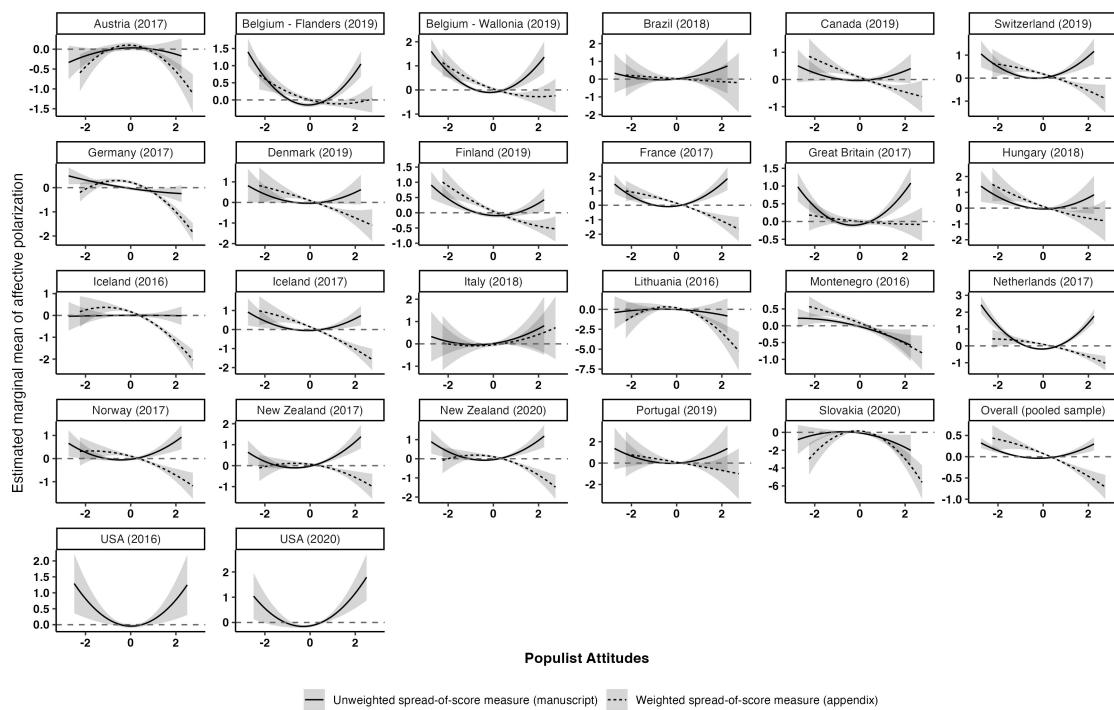
In the spread-of-score measure used in the main analysis, the same weight is given to each party evaluated by the respondent. An alternative approach is to weigh the index based on the size and relevance of the parties. The reasoning behind this is that larger

parties play a more important role in electoral competition and governmental formation. Thus, if a voter strongly dislikes big parties, their level of affective polarization should be more severe.

While weighting may be a better method for measuring the overall level of affective polarization in a political system, it is not suitable for evaluating the relationship between populism and affective polarization at the individual level. The weighted index tends to undervalue the ratings given to small parties like populist and populist radical right parties. For example, if a Belgian voter rates the Parti Populaire (PP), a populist radical right party, 9 and all other parties 0, their affective polarization should be high. However, using the weighted spread-of-score measure, their score on the affective polarization index would be very low. This is because the PP received less than 4

The empirical results confirm that downweighting the contribution of populist parties to the spread-of-score measure is not appropriate for studying affective polarization among populist individuals. When using populist attitude as a predictor, the relationship becomes linear, indicating lower levels of affective polarization for individuals with a high affinity for populism. In the vote choice mode, the estimated coefficients tend to move towards the negative territory. For instance, in Belgium - Wallonia (2019), the relationship becomes negative because Parti Populaire received less than 4% of the vote. In contrast, in countries such as Hungary or Flanders, where populist radical parties received a significant portion of the popular vote, the relationship between populist vote and affective polarization becomes stronger.

Figure A2: Marginal mean of affective polarization (weighted spread-of-score measure) at different levels of populist attitudes, controlling for all the other variables included in the model. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals around the estimates.



■ Unweighted spread-of-score measure (manuscript) ■ Weighted spread-of-score measure (appendix)

OLS regression with country-year fixed effects.

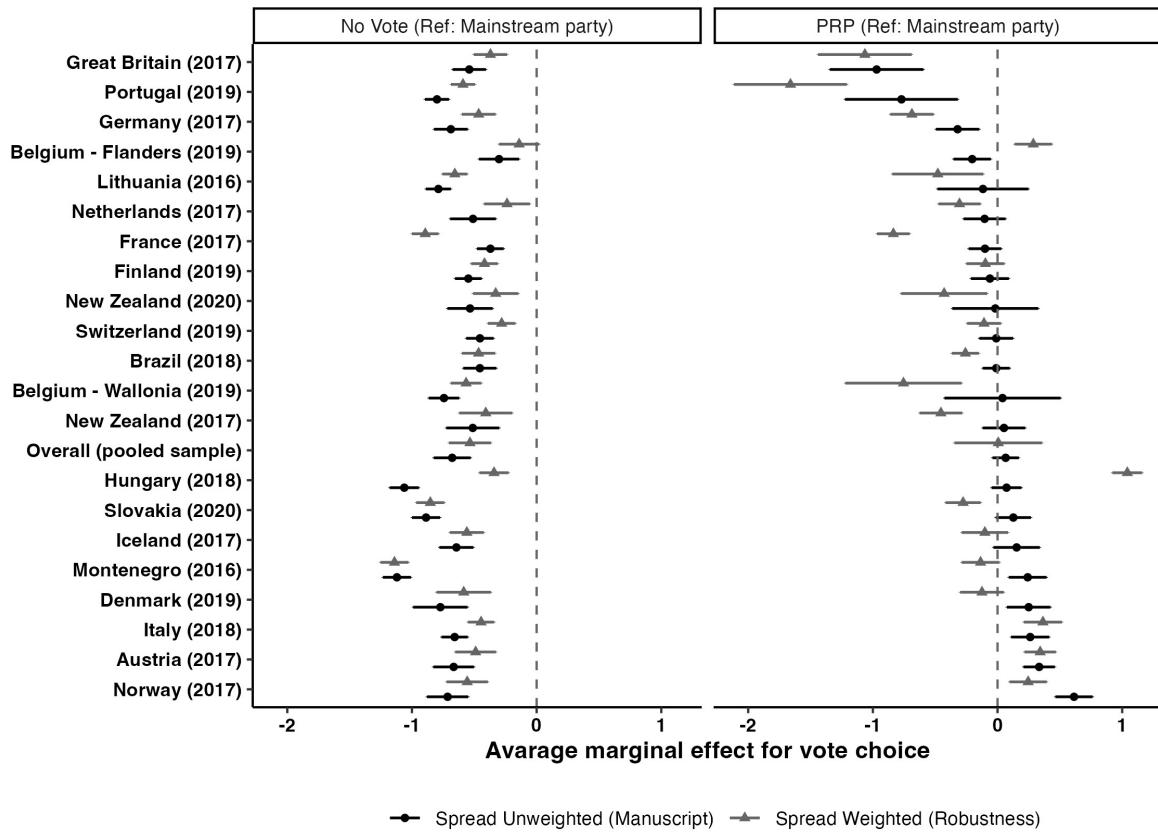


Figure A3: Marginal effect of vote choice on affective polarization (spread-of-score measure and weighted spread-of-score measure), controlling for all the other variables included in the model. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals around the estimates.

### ***Mean distance from the most-liked party***

An alternative way to conceptualize affective polarization focuses on the average affective distance from the respondent's most-liked party. This approach assumes a positive identification with one party with the presence of a single-picked ranking preference. Respondents who rate two or more parties as the "most-liked" (e.g., both at 10) are excluded from the calculation. It is worth noting that this measure tends to inflate the coefficient for populism in countries where populist voters have positive evaluations of more than one PRP as a way to express political discontent. For instance, if a non-polarized populist voter assigns 10 to both Front National (FN) and Debout la France (DLF) and 7 to all the other parties, they would be excluded from the analysis. In our case, this corresponds to a 26% reduction in the sample size that passes from 44528 to 32783

respondents. In line with Wagner (2021), we recommend using the spread-of-score measure to calculate affective polarization in multi-party systems.

Figure A4: Marginal mean of affective polarization (mean distance from the most-liked party) at different levels of populist attitudes, controlling for all the other variables included in the model. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals around the estimates.

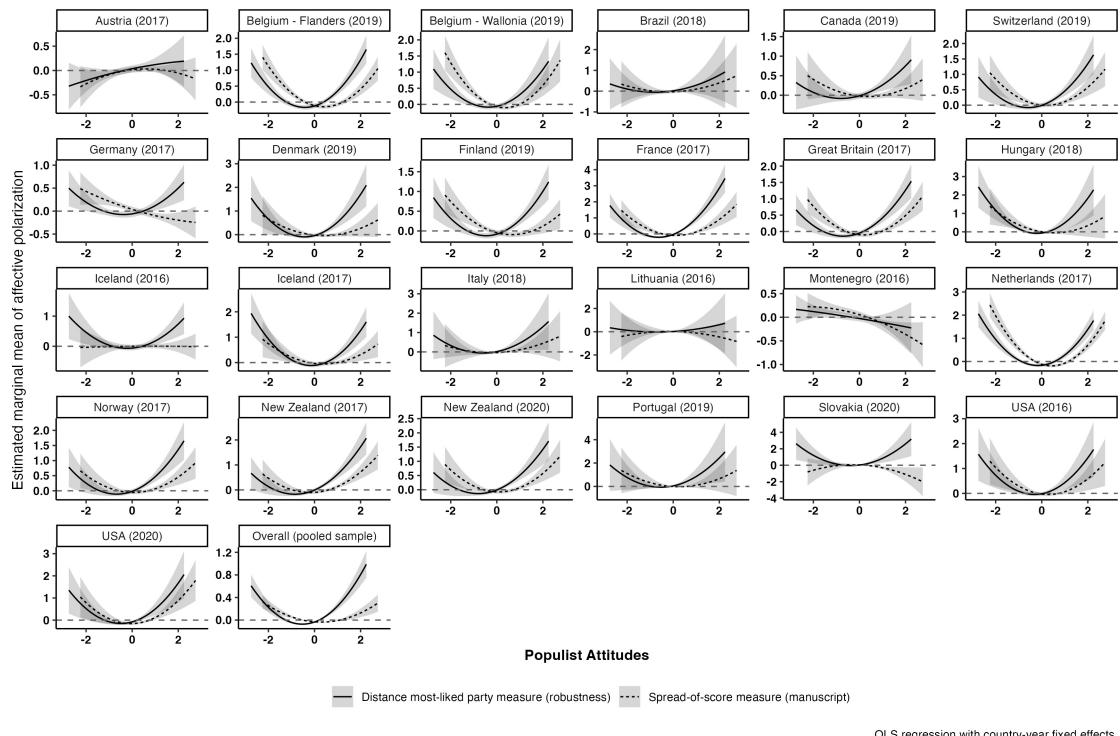
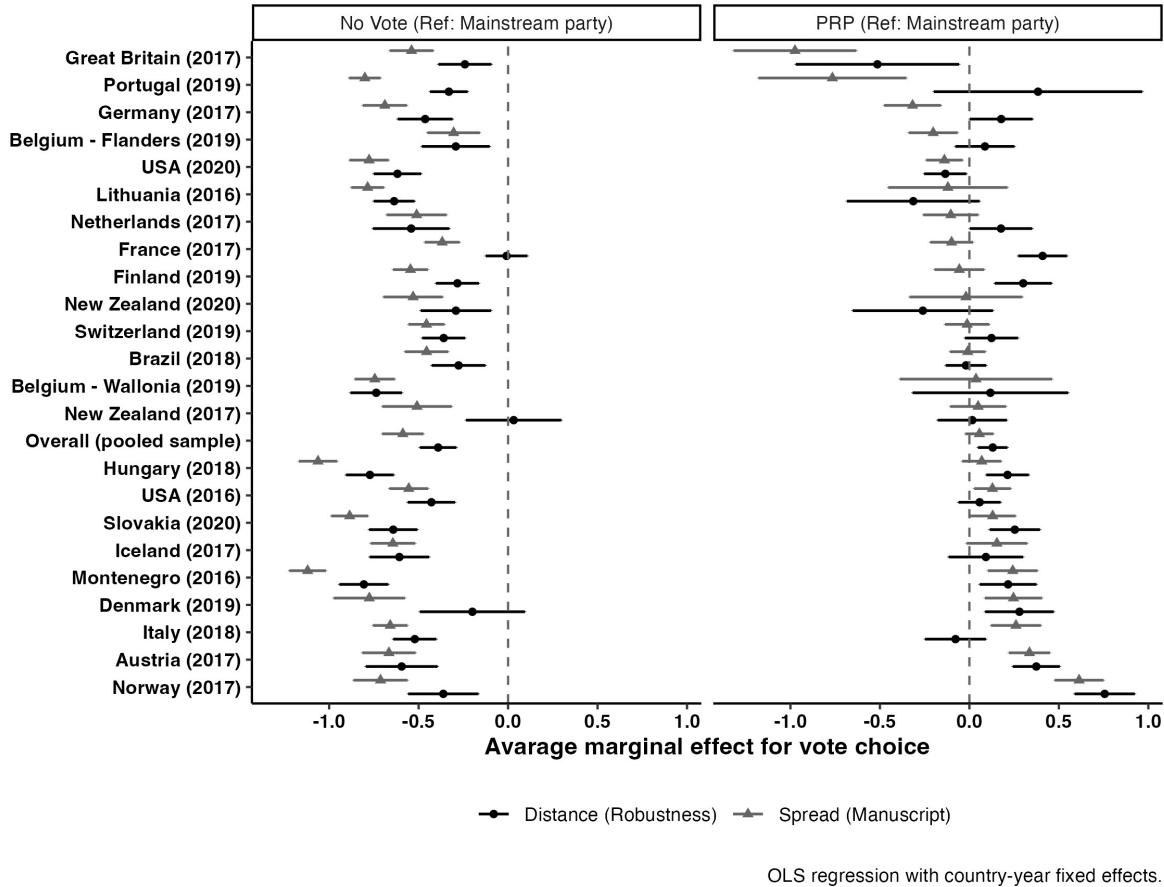


Figure A5: Marginal effect of vote choice on affective polarization (spread-of-score measure and distance from the most-liked party), controlling for all the other variables included in the model. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals around the estimates.



### ***Mean distance from the in-party (only partisans)***

An even more restrictive measure of affective polarization is the one proposed by Reiljan (2020). The measure is identical to the Wagner (2021)'s mean distance measure but instead of focusing on the most-liked party, it calculates affective polarization only for respondents who identify with a party. As a result, approximately 40% of the sample is excluded from the analysis, making this measure unsuitable for measuring affective polarization among the entire electorate. Additionally, this measure assumes that respondents rate their in-party higher than any other party, and excludes respondents who rate their in-party lower than other parties.

Since Reiljan's measure only focuses on partisans, it cannot be compared to the results reported in the manuscript. However, it is important to note that using Reiljan's measure did not significantly alter the results. The model using populist attitudes as a predictor remained largely unchanged. In the vote choice model, only 34% of the selected country cases showed a positive association between Reiljan's partisan index and voting for a PRP. In 17% of the cases, the relationship was negative and statistically significant, while in the remaining 49%, the relationship was insignificant and closer to zero. These results suggest that populist voters are not necessarily more polarized, and even among populist partisans, affective polarization.

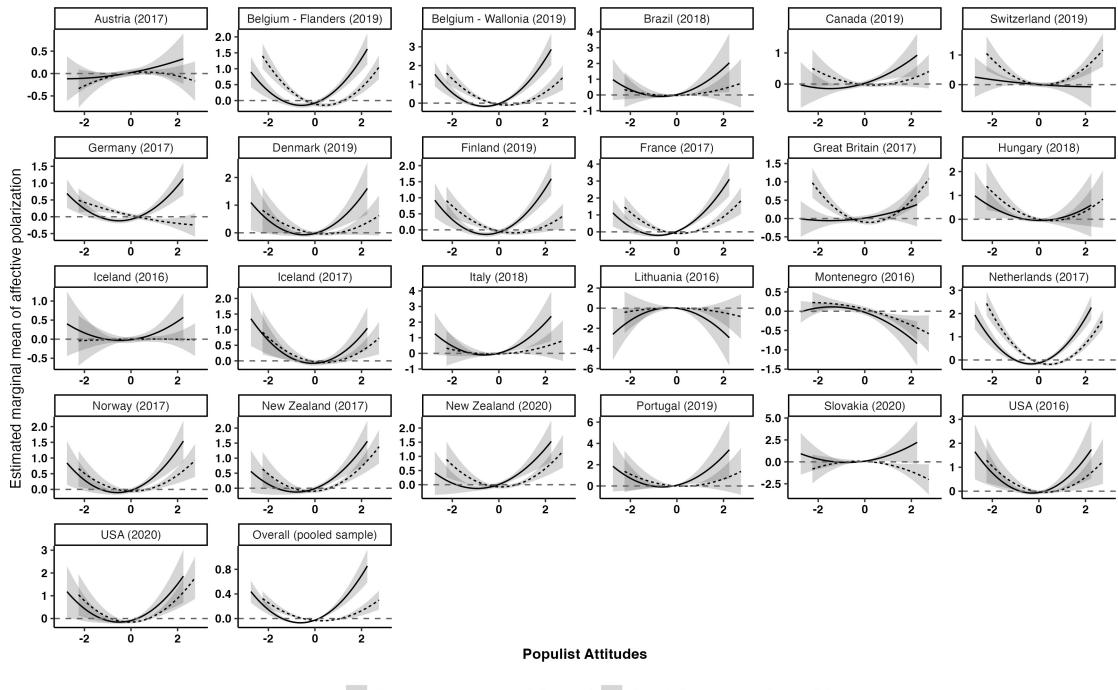
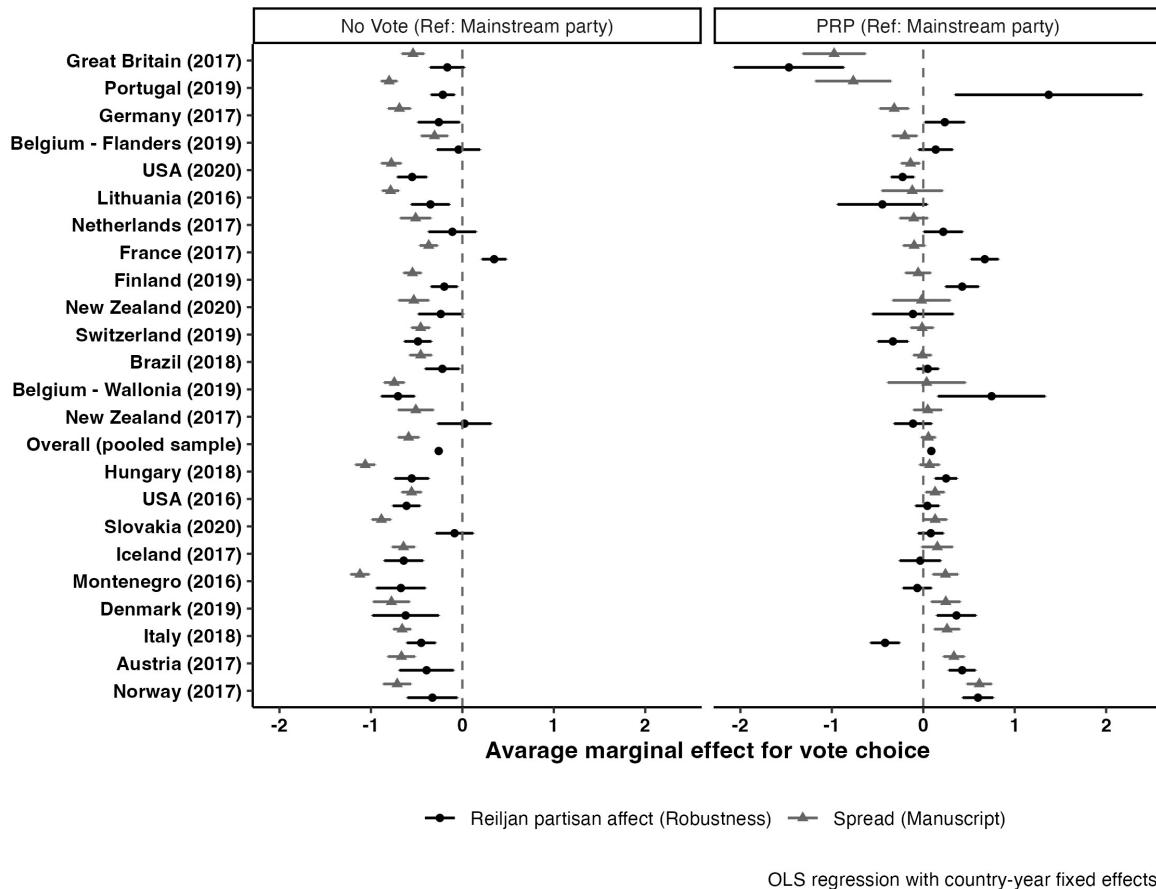


Figure A6: Marginal mean of affective polarization (mean distance from the in-party, (Reiljan 2020)) at different levels of populist attitudes, controlling for all the other variables included in the model. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals around the estimates.

Figure A7: Marginal effect of vote choice on affective polarization (spread-of-score measure and mean distance from the in-party, (Reiljan 2020)), controlling for all the other variables included in the model. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals around the estimates.



### Alternative measures of populist attitudes

Although, conceptually, populism strongly revolves around the powerless-powerful vertical dimension, the CSES scale is unbalanced in favour of anti-elitism. This is why, in the manuscript, we follow the approach proposed by Castanho Silva, Fuks, and Tamaki 2022 and employ the items with the highest factor loading for each sub- dimension of the populist attitudes scale. To ensure that the results are robust to different specifications of populist attitudes, we replicate the model presented in the manuscript using (1) a latent populist attitudes measure that uses all the 6-item items include in the CSES battery and (2) an non-compensatory index based on a Goertzian concept structure and a (3) a sum score index.

### **6-item measure of populist attitudes**

In order to derive a measure of populism from the CSES battery, we fit a CFA model with fixed loadings across the country cases. While the factor loadings for the 6-item model are satisfactory, the fit indices for the configural model do not reach the criteria recommended by (Chen 2007). Thus, the optimal measurement strategy would be to use the 3-item model, as we did in the manuscript. Nonetheless, we re-estimate the main models presented using the factor scores obtained from the 6-item model. The results are largely consistent with the ones obtained using the factor scores from the 3-item model. This means that the inclusion of additional anti-elitism items in the populist attitudes scale does not substantially impact the patterns of association and the explained variance reported in the manuscript.

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| <b>Item</b>                                                                                  | <b>Mean</b> | <b>Std. Loading</b> |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|---------------------|
| E3004_2 (AE) Most politicians do not care about the people.                                  | 3.20        | 0.79                |
| E3004_6 The people, and not politicians, should make our most important policy decisions.    | 3.34        | 0.49                |
| E3004_1 What people call compromise in politics is really just selling out one's principles. | 2.92        | 0.46                |
| E3004_3 (AE) Most politicians are trustworthy                                                | 3.32        | 0.55                |
| E3004_4 (AE) Politicians are the main problem in [COUNTRY]                                   | 2.90        | 0.72                |
| E3004_7 Most politicians care only about the interests of the rich and powerful.             | 3.31        | 0.77                |

CFI=0.94, RMSEA=0.073, SRMR=0.061

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Note: AE= anti-elitism, PC= people centrism, M= Manicheism. Std. loadings based on the pooled sample. Fit indices obtained from a metric model with fixed factor loadings across the different country cases.

Table A6: Populist attitudes items, means, and standardized (Std.) factor loadings across the entire sample

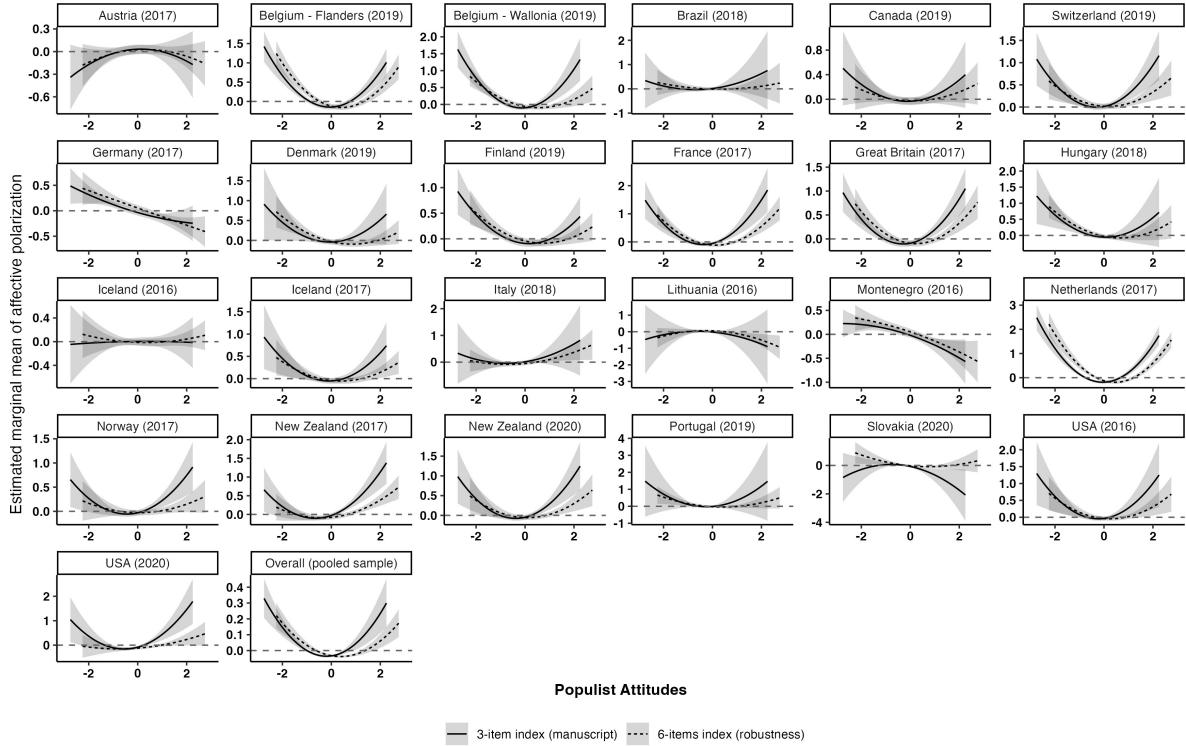
| Dependent Variables:<br>Model: | Affective Polarization<br>(1) | Average Affect<br>(2) | Average Affect<br>(3)  |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|
| <b>Variables</b>               |                               |                       |                        |
| Populist Attitudes             | -0.0074<br>(0.0079)           | -0.0080<br>(0.0074)   | -0.2210***<br>(0.0195) |
| Populist Attitudes Squared     |                               | 0.0352***<br>(0.0064) |                        |
| Female (Ref: Male)             | 0.0207<br>(0.0155)            | 0.0231<br>(0.0156)    | 0.1247***<br>(0.0176)  |
| Education                      | 0.0281***<br>(0.0073)         | 0.0281***<br>(0.0073) | -0.0123<br>(0.0139)    |
| Age                            | 0.0386**<br>(0.0145)          | 0.0373**<br>(0.0144)  | -0.0421**<br>(0.0160)  |
| <b>Fixed-effects</b>           |                               |                       |                        |
| Country                        | Yes                           | Yes                   | Yes                    |
| <b>Fit statistics</b>          |                               |                       |                        |
| Observations                   | 46,663                        | 46,663                | 46,663                 |
| R <sup>2</sup>                 | 0.38899                       | 0.39055               | 0.20239                |
| Within R <sup>2</sup>          | 0.00709                       | 0.00962               | 0.04121                |
| Size of the 'effective' sample | 25                            | 25                    | 25                     |

Clustered (Country) standard-errors in parentheses

Signif. Codes: \*\*\*: 0.01, \*\*: 0.05, \*: 0.1

Table A7: Fixed-effect Regressions

Figure A8: Marginal mean of affective polarization at different levels of populist attitudes (6-item



model), controlling for all the other variables included in the model. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals around the estimates.

### **Goertzian concept structure (Wuttke et al.)**

In traditional CFA models the resulting individual (factor) scores are a (weighted) geometric or linear combination of the items used to construct the scale. Intuitively, this means that the items are considered as partly interchangeable. This approach is adequate for calculating one-dimensional compensatory indices. Wuttke, Schimpf, and Schoen (2020) argues that for non-compensatory multidimensional concepts (such as populism) traditional factor models may be inadequate. The reason lays in the fact that populism is considered a non-compensatory concept that lays in the intersection between anti-elitism, people-centrism, and Manicheism. In other words, an individual should be considered populist if "they accept anti-elitist views and a Manichean outlook and believe in unrestricted popular sovereignty" (Wuttke, Schimpf, and Schoen 2020, p.6).

To mitigate this problem, Wuttke, Schimpf, and Schoen (2020) suggest taking the lowest value of the different sub dimensions as a conservative solution. Since the scale used in the main analysis includes one item per dimensions, we took the lowest value of the 3 items included in the populism scale. Results remain largely unchanged providing evidence that the general association between populism and affective evaluations holds using different measurement strategies. However, it is

worth noting that, in some country cases, the relation become more linear with lower levels of affective polarization for respondents scoring high on the populist attitude scale.

This may be due to the fact that the Wuttke et al. approach measures different sub-dimensions of populism across included country cases. For example, in the Netherlands, around 70% of the respondents assign the lowest value to the anti-elitism item (E3004\_2). This implies the index is a measure of anti-elitism for most Dutch respondents included in the CSES rather than populism. As the Wuttke et al. operationalization is highly unbalanced for certain sub-dimensions of populism across different countries, we believe that the proposed 3-item CFA approach is better suited for studying the relationship between populist attitudes and affective polarization in a comparative perspective.

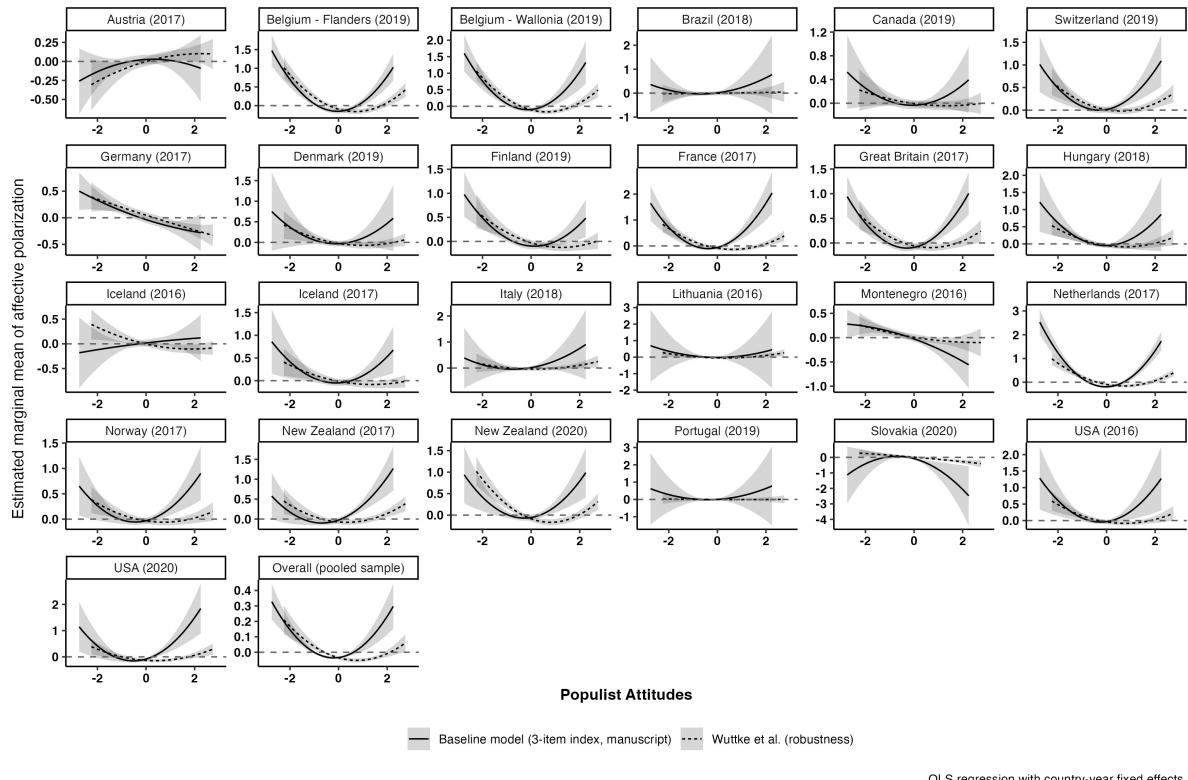
| Dependent Variables:<br>Model: | Affective Polarization<br>(1) | Average Affect<br>(2)  | Average Affect<br>(3)  |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|
| <b>Variables</b>               |                               |                        |                        |
| Populist Attitudes             | -0.0130***<br>(0.0045)        | -0.0298***<br>(0.0063) | -0.0807***<br>(0.0136) |
| Populist Attitudes Squared     |                               | 0.0288***<br>(0.0067)  |                        |
| Female (Ref: Male)             | 0.0198<br>(0.0149)            | 0.0226<br>(0.0154)     | 0.1238***<br>(0.0181)  |
| Education                      | 0.0192***<br>(0.0052)         | 0.0187***<br>(0.0052)  | 0.0218<br>(0.0142)     |
| Age                            | 0.0008<br>(0.0043)            | 0.0006<br>(0.0042)     | -0.0038<br>(0.0042)    |
| <b>Fixed-effects</b>           |                               |                        |                        |
| Country                        | Yes                           | Yes                    | Yes                    |
| <b>Fit statistics</b>          |                               |                        |                        |
| Observations<br>44,194         | 44,194                        | 44,194                 |                        |
| R <sup>2</sup>                 | 0.38652                       | 0.38865                | 0.18188                |
| Within R <sup>2</sup>          | 0.00245                       | 0.00591                | 0.01348                |
| Size of the 'effective' sample | 25                            | 25                     | 2                      |
|                                |                               |                        | 5                      |

Clustered (Country) standard-errors in parentheses

Signif. Codes: \*\*\*: 0.01, \*\*: 0.05, \*: 0.1

Table A8: Fixed-effect Regressions

**Figure A9:** Marginal mean of affective polarization at different levels of populist attitudes (Goertzian concept structure), controlling for all the other variables included in the model. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals around the estimates.



### **Sum score index of populist attitudes**

Instead of using the factor scores from the CFA model, we use a sum scores index of populist attitudes. The index is an unweighted combination of the 3 items measuring populist attitudes that does not take into account any measurement difference between the selected country cases. Although results remain virtually unchanged, in the manuscript we report the more precise results obtained using the extracted factor scores.

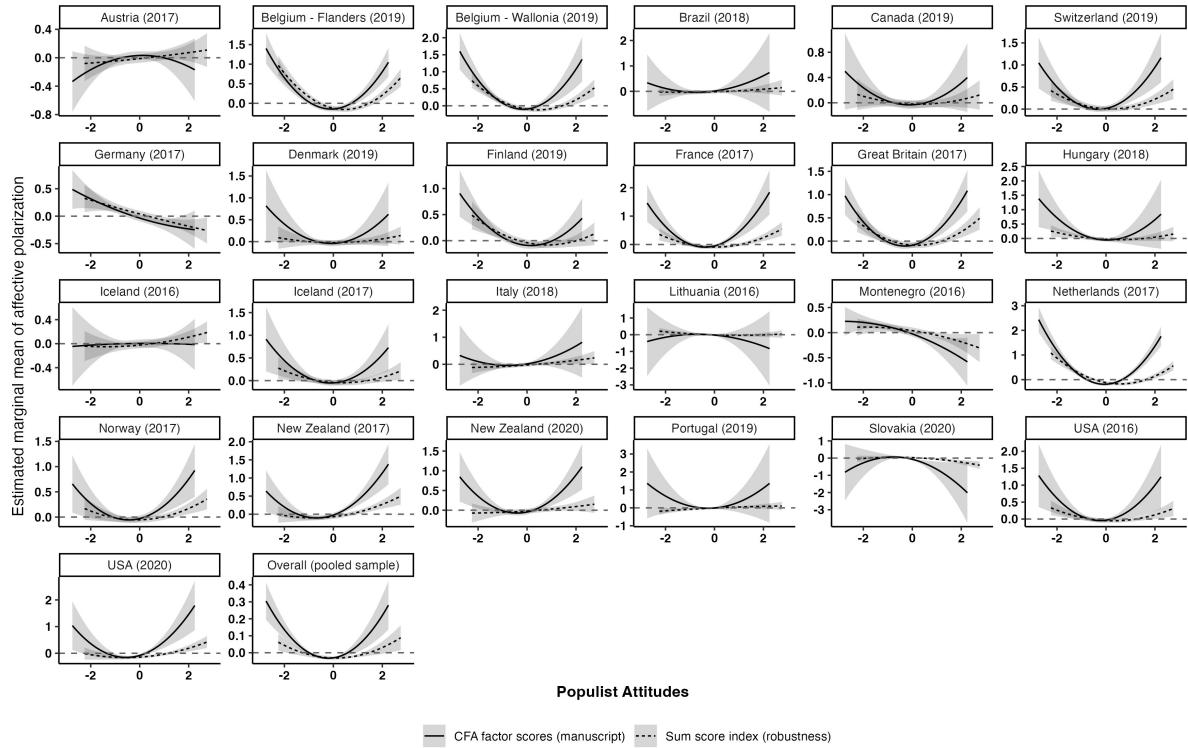
| Dependent Variables:<br>Model: | Affective Polarization<br>(1) | Average Affect<br>(2) |                        |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|
| <b>Variables</b>               |                               |                       |                        |
| Populist Attitudes             | 0.0037<br>(0.0057)            | 0.0052<br>(0.0063)    | -0.1182***<br>(0.0111) |
| Populist Attitudes Squared     |                               | 0.0169***<br>(0.0052) |                        |
| Female (Ref: Male)             | 0.0211<br>(0.0155)            | 0.0222<br>(0.0157)    | 0.1163***<br>(0.0177)  |
| Education                      | 0.0301***<br>(0.0072)         | 0.0298***<br>(0.0071) | 0.0079<br>(0.0142)     |
| Age                            | 0.0389**<br>(0.0144)          | 0.0381**<br>(0.0143)  | -0.0387**<br>(0.0155)  |
| <b>Fixed-effects</b>           |                               |                       |                        |
| Country                        | Yes                           | Yes                   | Yes                    |
| <b>Fit statistics</b>          |                               |                       |                        |
| Observations                   | 46,625                        | 46,625                | 46,625                 |
| R <sup>2</sup>                 | 0.38895                       | 0.38985               | 0.18669                |
| Within R <sup>2</sup>          | 0.00702                       | 0.00847               | 0.02230                |
| Size of the 'effective' sample | 25                            | 25                    | 25                     |

Clustered (Country) standard-errors in parentheses

Signif. Codes: \*\*\*: 0.01, \*\*: 0.05, \*: 0.1

Table A9: Fixed-effect Regressions

Figure A10: Marginal mean of affective polarization at different levels of populist attitudes (sum)



score index), controlling for all the other variables included in the model. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals around the estimates.

### **Alternative operationalization of PRP voting**

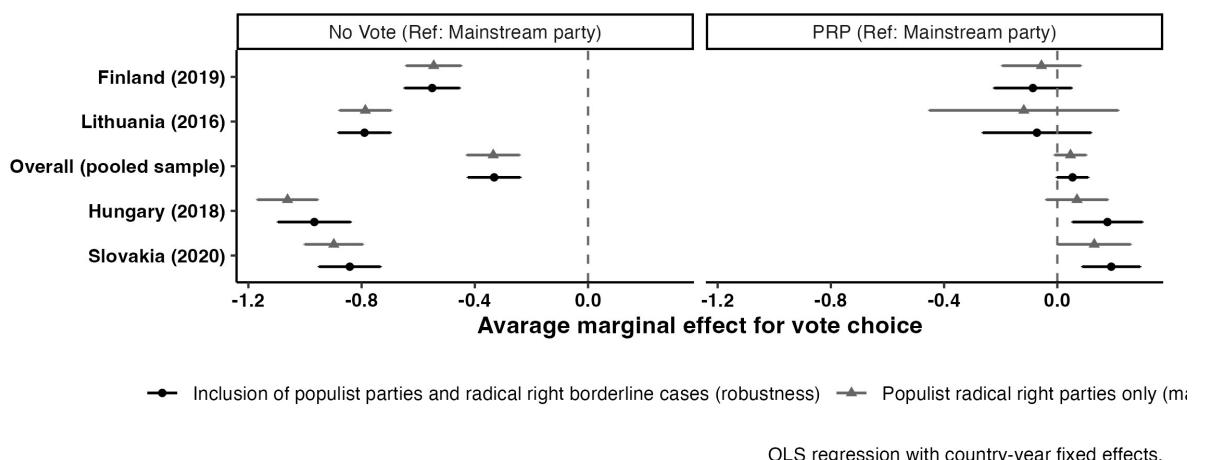
#### **Vote choice model using only populist radical right parties**

As previously stated, the analysis presented in the manuscript includes only those respondents who voted for parties that are classified both as far-right and populist. We do so because we expect that the radical positions of these parties is what drives affective polarization (H2). To ensure the robustness of our analysis, we replicated our main model including those parties that lack the radical right component or have been classified as borderline cases according to Rooduijn et al. (2019). This resulted in the inclusion of Sininen tulevaisuus (SIN) in Finland, Partija tvarka ir teisingumas (PTT) in Lithuania, Jobbik Magyaporszagert Mozgal (Jobbik) in Hungary, and Obcyajni ludia a nezavisle osobnosti (OLaNO) in Slovakia.

The results show small differences and overlapping confidence intervals between the two models. However, it is worth noting that the estimated coefficients are slightly higher and reach

significance in Slovakia and Hungary. This could be related to the role of OLaNO and Jobbik in their respective party systems. In the 2020 Slovak elections, OLaNo became the most-voted party. It was seen as the primary opponent of Smer, a populist party led by Robert Fico which has been involved in several corruption scandals. As a result, Prime Minister Fico and his cabinet resigned in March 2018. OLaNo mainly focused on anti-corruption and anti-elitism, which could have led to stronger negative evaluations of Smer among its voters. In the 2018 Hungarian election, Jobbik was seen as the main opponent of Fidesz, the incumbent party led by Viktor Orbán. Jobbik's leader at the time, Gábor Vona, moved away from the traditional far-right positions of Jobbik and promised to resign if he did not bring the party to victory. This "ultimatum" strategy may have polarized its voters leading to more negative evaluations of its main opponent Fidesz.

Figure A11: Marginal effect of vote choice on affective polarization with borderline populist radical right parties, controlling for all the other variables included in the model. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals around the estimates.



### Potential confounders

To rule out the possibility that a third variable can bias the relationship between populism and affective polarization, we replicated the main analysis presented in the manuscript including (1) the respondent's L-R self-placement scale, (2) a measure of internal political efficacy and (3) respondent's self-reported level of political interest.

### Left-Right self-placement

In the main models reported in the manuscript, we decided to not include left-right self-identification. The reason is that in certain country cases, there is a large number of respondents who did not answer the question, such as in Montenegro where approximately 50% of the respondents did not answer the LR self-identification question. However, the L-R political orientation of a respondent could distort the true relationship between populism and affective polarization in case (1) affinity with populism is stronger among a specific ideological group (e.g., right-wing respondents having higher levels of populist attitudes) and/or (2) whether L-R ideology is a strong predictor of affective polarization. Including the L-R scale do not alter any of the presented results suggesting that the estimated coefficients are consistent across the entire L-R ideological spectrum.

Figure A12: Marginal mean of affective polarization at different levels of populist attitudes with and without LR self-placement, controlling for all the other variables included in the model. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals around the estimates.

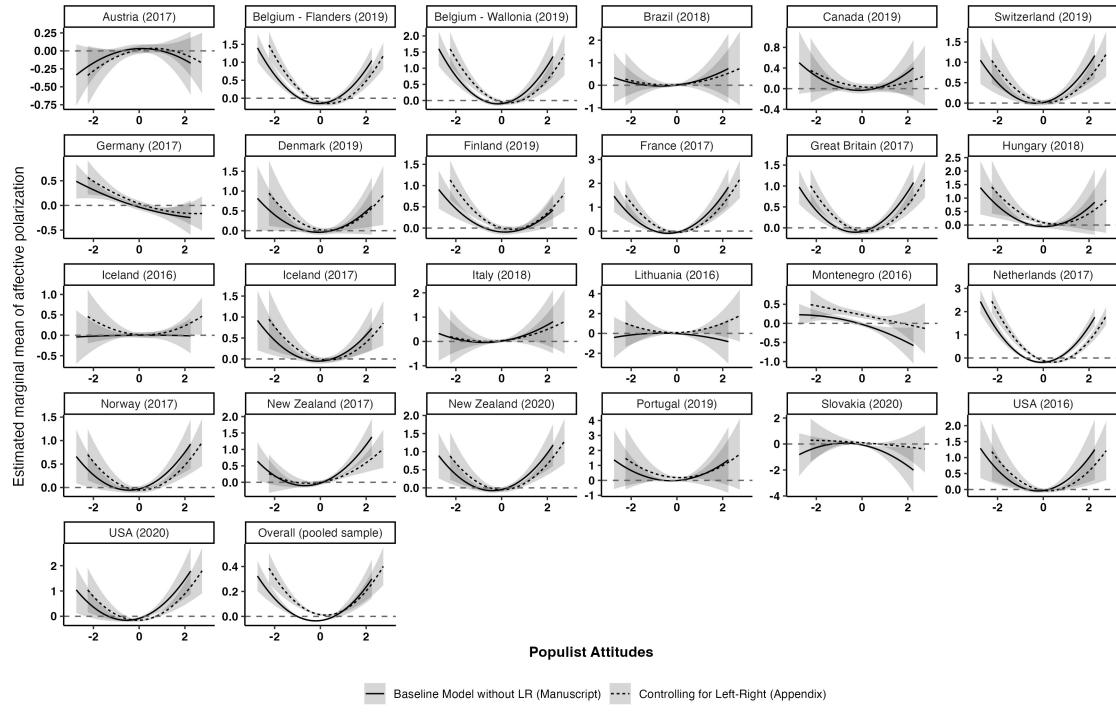
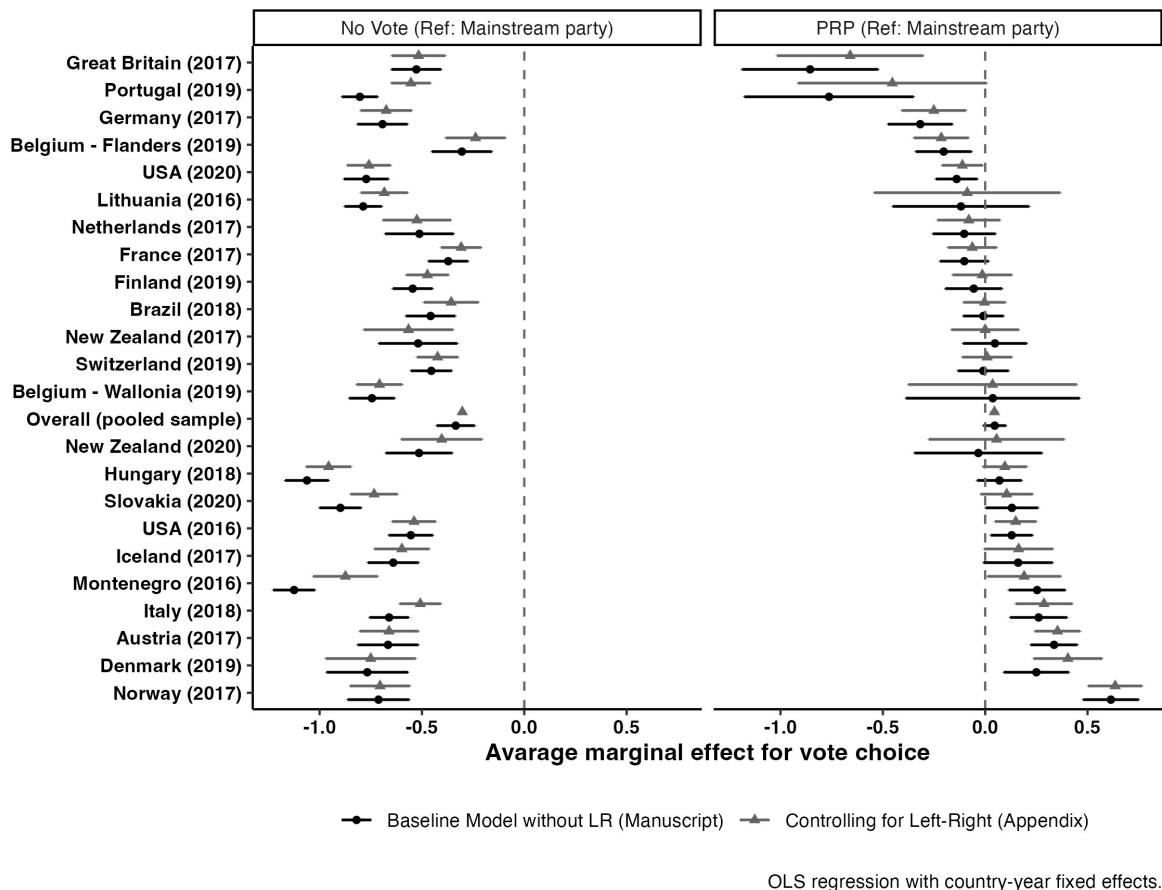


Figure A13: Marginal effect of vote choice on affective polarization with and without LR self-placement, controlling for all the other variables included in the model. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals around the estimates.



### ***Internal political efficacy***

Another potential confounder is the ability of respondents to understand how politics works. Populism is often associated with those who have lower levels of formal education and feel excluded from politics. If respondents struggle to comprehend political issues or find politics too complex, they may view all political parties or candidates as the same, which could lead to lower levels of affective polarization. This implies that the presented results may be driven by internal political efficacy and not populist attitudes or populist vote choice. Including internal political efficacy in our analyses does not change the estimated coefficients, indicating that the observed relationship between populism and affective judgments holds for individuals with both high and low levels of internal political efficacy.

Figure A14: Marginal mean of affective polarization at different levels of populist attitudes with and without internal political efficacy, controlling for all the other variables included in the model. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals around the estimates.

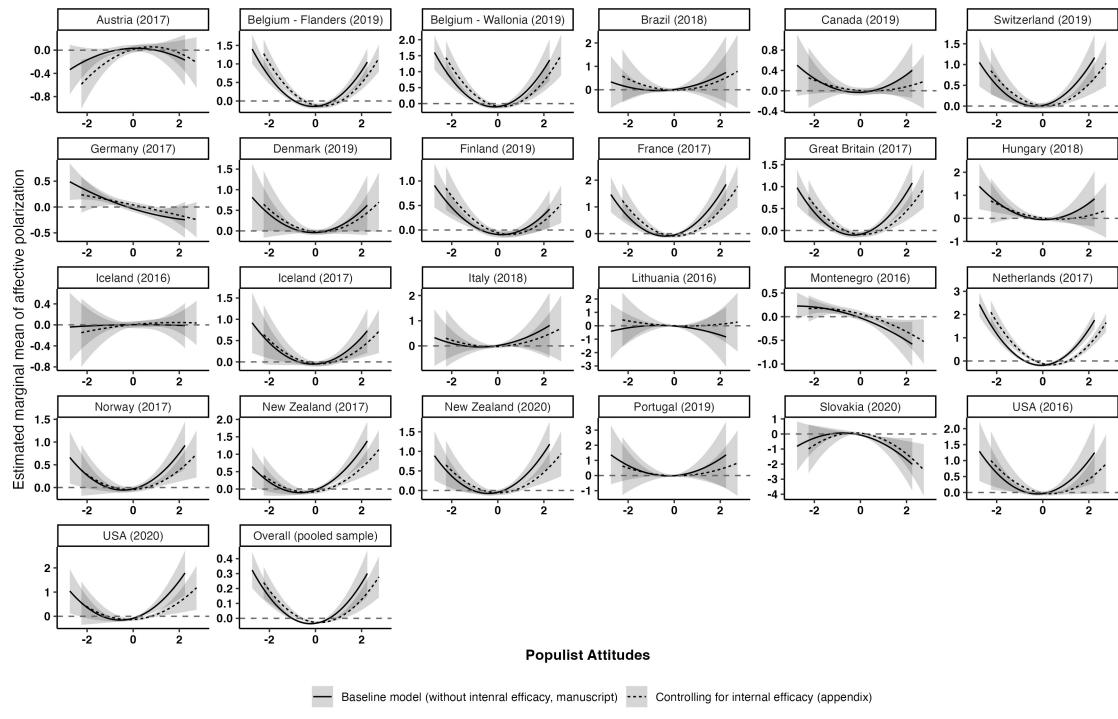
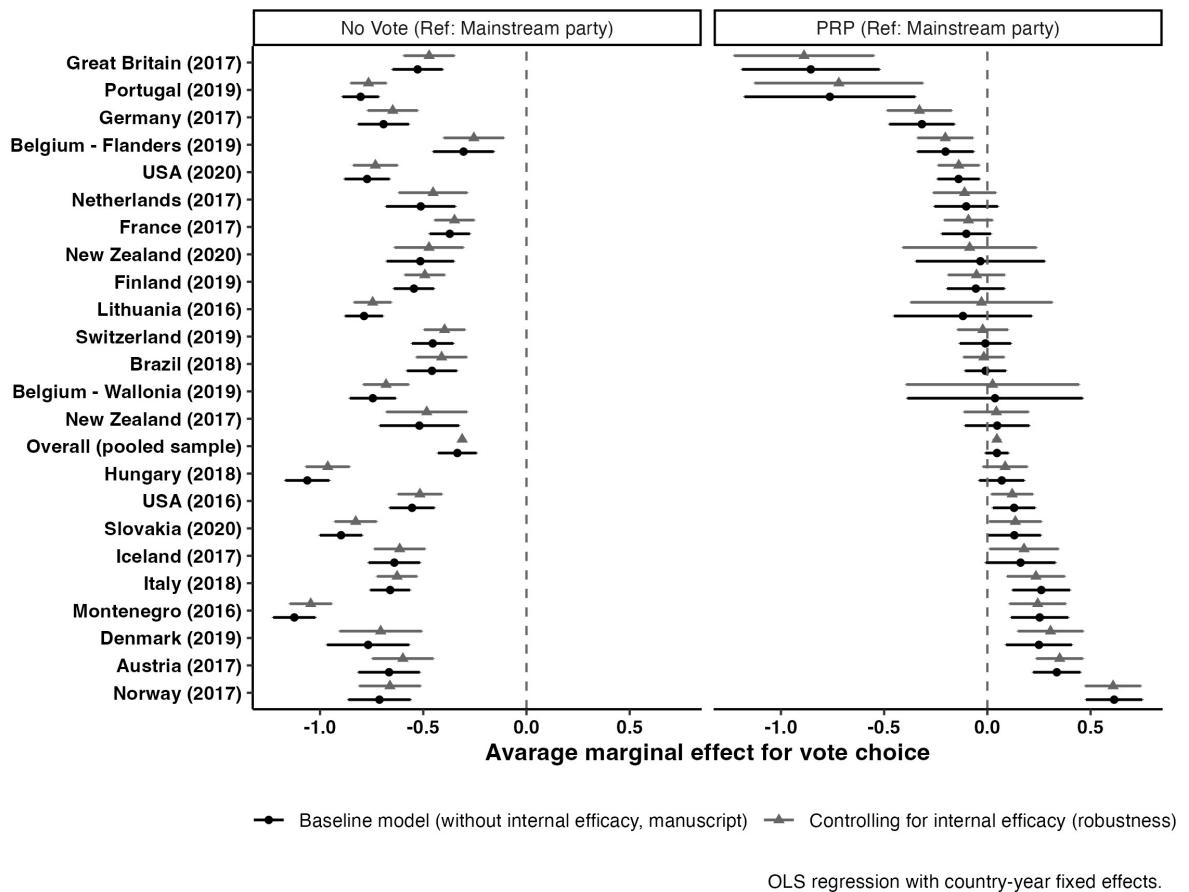


Figure A15: Marginal effect of vote choice on affective polarization with and without internal political efficacy, controlling for all the other variables included in the model. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals around the estimates.



### **Political interest**

The link between populism and affective polarization may be influenced by the individual's interest in politics. Similar to internal political efficacy, (populist) respondents who are not interested in politics may be unable to differentiate between political parties and, thus, they may display lower levels of affective polarization. To guard against this possibility, we fit an additional model that includes a measure of political interest. Our results remain the same, indicating that the coefficient of populist attitudes and populist vote choice is not affected by political interest.

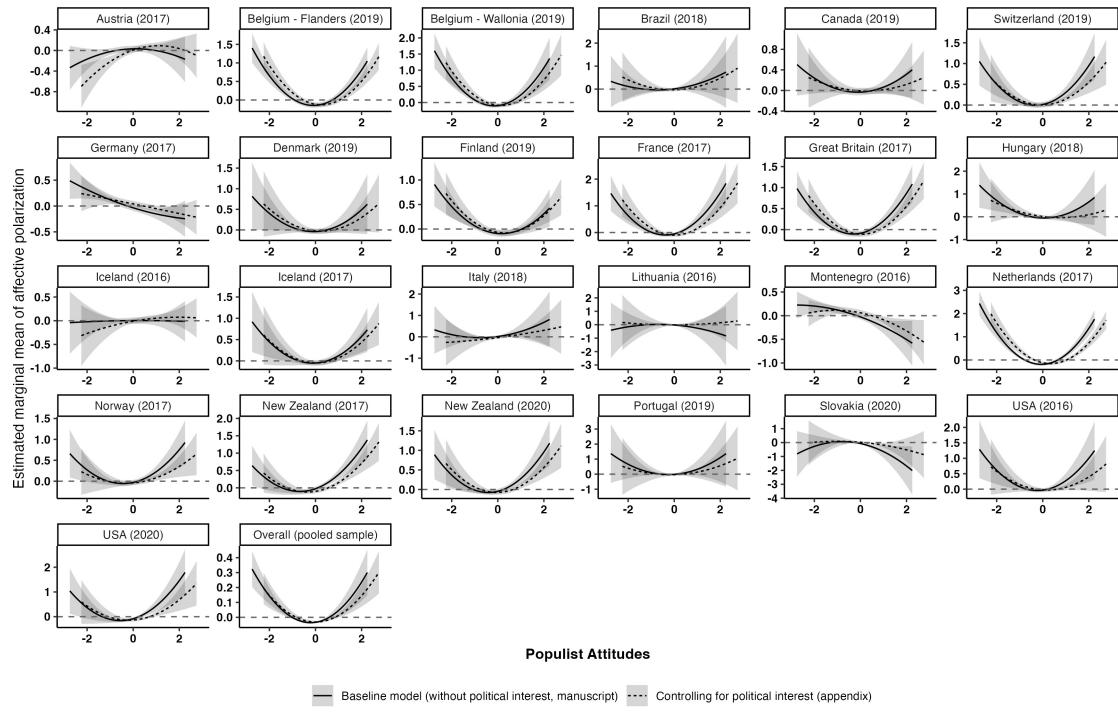


Figure A16: Marginal mean of affective polarization at different levels of populist attitudes with and without political interest, controlling for all the other variables included in the model. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals around the estimates.

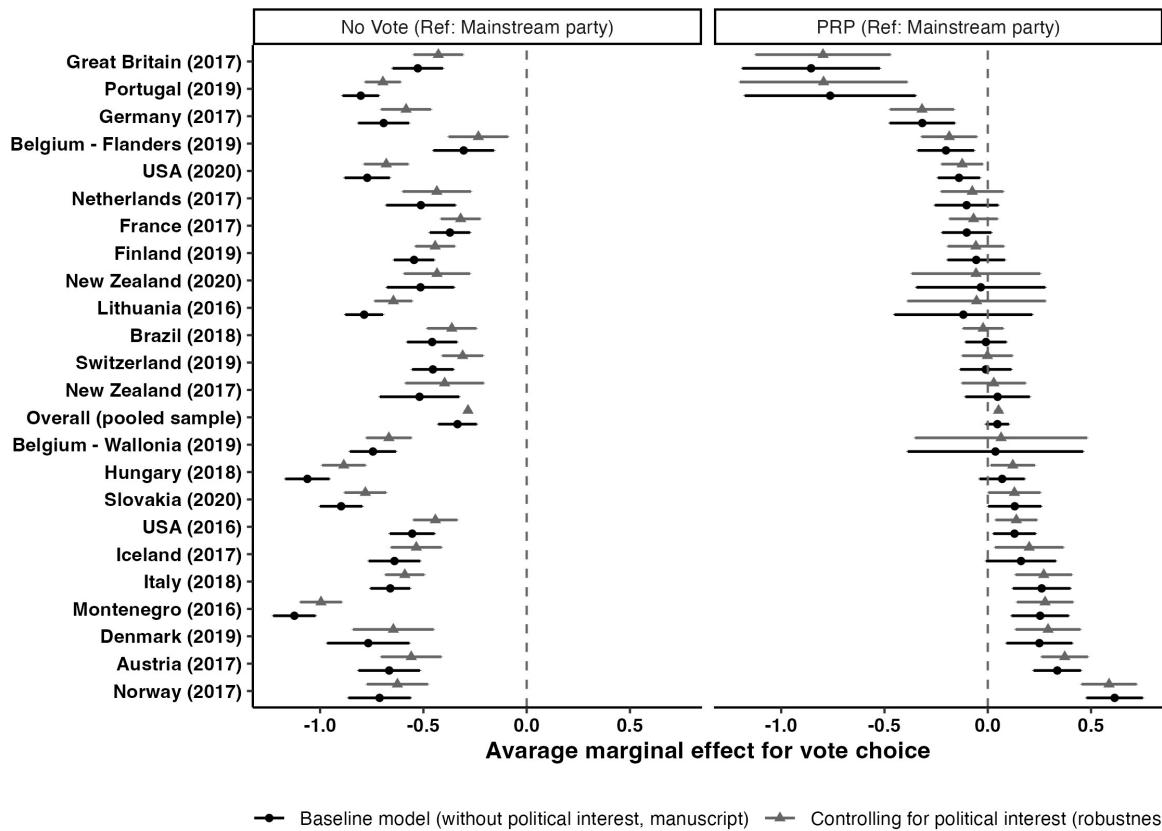


Figure A17: Marginal effect of vote choice on affective polarization with and without political interest, controlling for all the other variables included in the model. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals around the estimates.

## Descriptives

| <b>Variable</b>                                              | <b>N</b>          | <b>N = 51,37</b> |
|--------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|------------------|
| <b>Spread-of-score party</b>                                 | 44,287            |                  |
| Mean (SD)                                                    | 2.43 (1.18)       |                  |
| Median (IQR)                                                 | 2.50 (1.67, 3.18) |                  |
| Range                                                        | 0.00 - 5.00       |                  |
| <b>Spread-of-score leader (only for Switzerland and USA)</b> | 48,829            |                  |
| Mean (SD)                                                    | 3.22 (2.43)       |                  |
| Median (IQR)                                                 | 2.62 (1.74, 3.67) |                  |
| Range                                                        | 0.00 - 10.00      |                  |
| <b>Average party affect</b>                                  | 44,891            |                  |
| Mean (SD)                                                    | 4.38 (1.57)       |                  |
| Median (IQR)                                                 | 4.50 (3.50, 5.29) |                  |
| Range                                                        | 0.00 - 10.00      |                  |
| <b>Average leader affect (only for Switzerland and USA)</b>  | 49,360            |                  |
| Mean (SD)                                                    | 4.50 (1.65)       |                  |
| Median (IQR)                                                 | 4.50 (3.50, 5.44) |                  |
| Range                                                        | 0.00 - 10.00      |                  |
| <b>Weighted spread-of-score party (robustness)</b>           | 40,741            |                  |

|                                                                                   |                   |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|
| Mean (SD)                                                                         | 1.92 (0.72)       |
| Median (IQR)                                                                      | 1.86 (1.53, 2.26) |
| Range                                                                             | 0.00 - 3.95       |
| <b>Weighted spread-of-score leader (robustness, only for Switzerland and USA)</b> | 48,829            |
| Mean (SD)                                                                         | 2.83 (2.45)       |
| Median (IQR)                                                                      | 1.98 (1.58, 2.55) |
| Range                                                                             | 0.00 - 10.00      |
| <b>Mean distance most-liked party (robustness)</b>                                | 36,121            |
| Mean (SD)                                                                         | 5.59 (2.37)       |
| Median (IQR)                                                                      | 5.39 (3.87, 7.17) |
| Range                                                                             | 1.00 - 10.00      |
| <b>Mean distance most-liked leader (robustness, only for Switzerland and USA)</b> | 33,700            |
| Mean (SD)                                                                         | 5.46 (2.22)       |
| Median (IQR)                                                                      | 5.24 (3.98, 7.00) |
| Range                                                                             | 1.00 - 10.00      |
| <b>Mean distance in-party (robustness)</b>                                        | 29,048            |
| Mean (SD)                                                                         | 5.05 (2.42)       |
| Median (IQR)                                                                      | 5.00 (3.33, 6.67) |
| Range                                                                             | 0.00 - 10.00      |

|                                                                                 |                   |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|
| <b>Mean distance in-party leader (robustness, only for Switzerland and USA)</b> | 29,945            |
| Mean (SD)                                                                       | 4.92 (2.75)       |
| Median (IQR)                                                                    | 4.71 (2.86, 7.00) |
| Range                                                                           | 0.00 - 10.00      |
| <b>Populism (E3004_2, Anti-elitism)</b>                                         | 50,023            |
| Mean (SD)                                                                       | 3.21 (1.27)       |
| Median (IQR)                                                                    | 3.00 (2.00, 4.00) |
| Range                                                                           | 1.00 - 5.00       |
| <b>Populism (E3004_6, People centrism)</b>                                      | 49,653            |
| Mean (SD)                                                                       | 3.34 (1.27)       |
| Median (IQR)                                                                    | 4.00 (2.00, 4.00) |
| Range                                                                           | 1.00 - 5.00       |
| <b>Populism (E3004_1, Manicheism)</b>                                           | 48,363            |
| Mean (SD)                                                                       | 2.92 (1.21)       |
| Median (IQR)                                                                    | 3.00 (2.00, 4.00) |
| Range                                                                           | 1.00 - 5.00       |
| <b>Populism (robustness, E3004_3, 6-item model)</b>                             | 49,893            |
| Mean (SD)                                                                       | 3.33 (1.16)       |
| Median (IQR)                                                                    | 3.00 (2.00, 4.00) |

|                                                            |                       |
|------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Range                                                      | 1.00 - 5.00           |
| <b>Populism (robustness, E3004_4, 6-item model)</b>        | 49,505                |
| Mean (SD)                                                  | 2.92 (1.27)           |
| Median (IQR)                                               | 3.00 (2.00, 4.00)     |
| Range                                                      | 1.00 - 5.00           |
| <b>Populism (robustness, E3004_7, 6-item model)</b>        | 49,855                |
| Mean (SD)                                                  | 3.32 (1.26)           |
| Median (IQR)                                               | 4.00 (2.00, 4.00)     |
| Range                                                      | 1.00 - 5.00           |
| <b>Populism sum score index (robustness, 3-item model)</b> | 50,501                |
| Mean (SD)                                                  | 3.09 (0.96)           |
| Median (IQR)                                               | 3.00 (2.33, 3.67)     |
| Range                                                      | 0.33 - 5.00           |
| <b>Populism Wuttke index (robustness, 3-item model))</b>   | 47,509                |
| Mean (SD)                                                  | 2.35 (1.10)           |
| Median (IQR)                                               | 2.00 (2.00, 3.00)     |
| Range                                                      | 1.00 - 5.00           |
| <b>Vote Choice</b>                                         | 51,037                |
| Non-voters                                                 | 11,647 / 51,037 (23%) |

|                                                        |                       |
|--------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Mainstream voters                                      | 30,990 / 51,037 (61%) |
| PRP voters                                             | 8,400 / 51,037 (16%)  |
| <b>Respondent's sex assigned at birth (E2002)</b>      | 50,868                |
| Male                                                   | 24,448 / 50,868 (48%) |
| Female                                                 | 26,420 / 50,868 (52%) |
| <b>Respondent's education (E2003)</b>                  | 49,786                |
| Mean (SD)                                              | 5.16 (1.93)           |
| Median (IQR)                                           | 5.00 (4.00, 7.00)     |
| Range                                                  | 1.00 - 9.00           |
| <b>Respondent's age</b>                                | 50,272                |
| Mean (SD)                                              | 50.78 (17.72)         |
| Median (IQR)                                           | 52.00 (36.00, 65.00)  |
| Range                                                  | 16.00 - 100.00        |
| <b>Interest in politics (robustness, E3001)</b>        | 50,764                |
| Mean (SD)                                              | 2.80 (0.90)           |
| Median (IQR)                                           | 3.00 (2.00, 3.00)     |
| Range                                                  | 1.00 - 4.00           |
| <b>Internal political efficacy (robustness, E3003)</b> | 49,964                |
| Mean (SD)                                              | 3.64 (1.08)           |

|                                                      |                       |
|------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Median (IQR)                                         | 4.00 (3.00, 4.00)     |
| Range                                                | 1.00 - 5.00           |
| <b>Left-Right self-placement (robustness, E3020)</b> | 44,981                |
| Mean (SD)                                            | 5.32 (2.55)           |
| Median (IQR)                                         | 5.00 (4.00, 7.00)     |
| Range                                                | 0.00 - 10.00          |
| <b>Country-year cases (E1004)</b>                    | 51,037                |
| Austria (2017)                                       | 1,203 / 51,037 (2.4%) |
| Belgium - Flanders (2019)                            | 1,084 / 51,037 (2.1%) |
| Belgium - Wallonia (2019)                            | 730 / 51,037 (1.4%)   |
| Brazil (2018)                                        | 2,506 / 51,037 (4.9%) |
| Canada (2019)                                        | 2,889 / 51,037 (5.7%) |
| Denmark (2019)                                       | 1,418 / 51,037 (2.8%) |
| Finland (2019)                                       | 1,598 / 51,037 (3.1%) |
| France (2017)                                        | 1,830 / 51,037 (3.6%) |
| Germany (2017)                                       | 2,032 / 51,037 (4.0%) |
| Great Britain (2017)                                 | 984 / 51,037 (1.9%)   |
| Hungary (2018)                                       | 1,208 / 51,037 (2.4%) |
| Iceland (2016)                                       | 1,295 / 51,037 (2.5%) |

|                    |                       |
|--------------------|-----------------------|
| Iceland (2017)     | 2,073 / 51,037 (4.1%) |
| Italy (2018)       | 2,001 / 51,037 (3.9%) |
| Lithuania (2016)   | 1,500 / 51,037 (2.9%) |
| Montenegro (2016)  | 1,213 / 51,037 (2.4%) |
| Netherlands (2017) | 1,903 / 51,037 (3.7%) |
| New Zealand (2017) | 1,808 / 51,037 (3.5%) |
| New Zealand (2020) | 1,725 / 51,037 (3.4%) |
| Norway (2017)      | 1,792 / 51,037 (3.5%) |
| Portugal (2019)    | 1,500 / 51,037 (2.9%) |
| Slovakia (2020)    | 1,003 / 51,037 (2.0%) |
| Switzerland (2019) | 4,645 / 51,037 (9.1%) |
| USA (2016)         | 3,648 / 51,037 (7.1%) |
| USA (2020)         | 7,449 / 51,037 (15%)  |

---

n / N (%)

Table A10: Descriptive Statistics

## **Appendix: Freedom for All? Populism and the Instrumental Support of Freedom of Speech**

All the materials that are required to replicate the figures and the tables present in the text (i.e., R scripts) are accessible through the author's public GitHub profile (ANONYMOUS).

### ***Regression tables and nested models***

The nested models are reported with the main purpose of showing that the uncertainty of the coefficient of populist attitudes on the propensity to allow a speech does not substantially change when control variables are added to the model. In all the estimated models, the coefficient of populism is significant for both Left and Right-wing respondents, confirming the robustness of the results reported in the main text.

It is worth noting that the coefficients are not directly comparable across the different nested models. This is due to the nature of the probit estimation<sup>33</sup>. The probit model assumes that there is a continuous latent (unobserved) random variable  $y^*$  that underlies the binary structure of the dependent variable. Since the variance of  $y^*$  changes when new variables are added to the model, the magnitudes of all the  $\beta$  will change even if the added variable is uncorrelated with the original variables. This makes it misleading to compare coefficients when different independent variables are added to the model ([Long 1997](#)).

### ***Universal support for freedom of speech***

#### ***Nested SEM models for probability of endorsing abstract freedom of speech***

The regression table for Figure 1 in the main text. The estimates reported in Figure 1 are obtained from the model with the complete set of control variables (3rd column). Estimates are from a SEM model using the entire sample. In line with previous research ([Grossman et al. 2022](#)), the results reveal that, regardless of their ideological collocation, partisans are less likely to support freedom of speech in its abstract and unconstrained form. Efficacy is also linked to a higher propensity of

---

<sup>33</sup> Lavaan does not currently support other types of link functions (i.e., logit) with using the Diagonally Weighted Least Squares (DWLS) estimator required to model binary dependent variables ([Yves Rosseel 2020](#)).

endorsing abstract freedom of speech. On the contrary, high levels of educational attainment are linked to lower levels of support for abstract freedom of speech.

*Table 1: Regression table for Abstract Freedom of Speech (Figure 1). Estimates are from a SEM model.*

| Universal Freedom of Speech (y=1, 56%)  |       |              |        |              |        |         |
|-----------------------------------------|-------|--------------|--------|--------------|--------|---------|
|                                         | Pr    | p-value      | Pr     | p-value      | Pr     | p-value |
| Populist attitudes                      | 0.101 | $\leq 0.001$ | 0.084  | $\leq 0.001$ | 0.062  | 0.002   |
| French speaking Belgium (Ref: Flanders) |       |              | 0.085  | 0.054        | 0.085  | 0.076   |
| Female (Ref: Male)                      |       |              | -0.031 | 0.493        | -0.045 | 0.350   |
| Age                                     |       |              | -0.042 | 0.079        | -0.037 | 0.142   |
| Education: Medium (Ref: Low)            |       |              | -0.122 | 0.062        | -0.126 | 0.064   |
| Education: High (Ref: Low)              |       |              | -0.171 | 0.008        | -0.171 | 0.010   |
| Party Membership (Ref: No)              |       |              |        |              | -0.268 | 0.007   |
| Left-wing (Ref: Centre)                 |       |              |        |              | -0.009 | 0.883   |
| Right-wing (Ref: Centre)                |       |              |        |              | -0.035 | 0.545   |
| Internal Efficacy                       |       |              |        |              | 0.063  | 0.011   |
| R <sup>2</sup>                          |       | 0.03         |        | 0.044        |        | 0.064   |
| Sample Size                             |       | 988          |        | 988          |        | 988     |

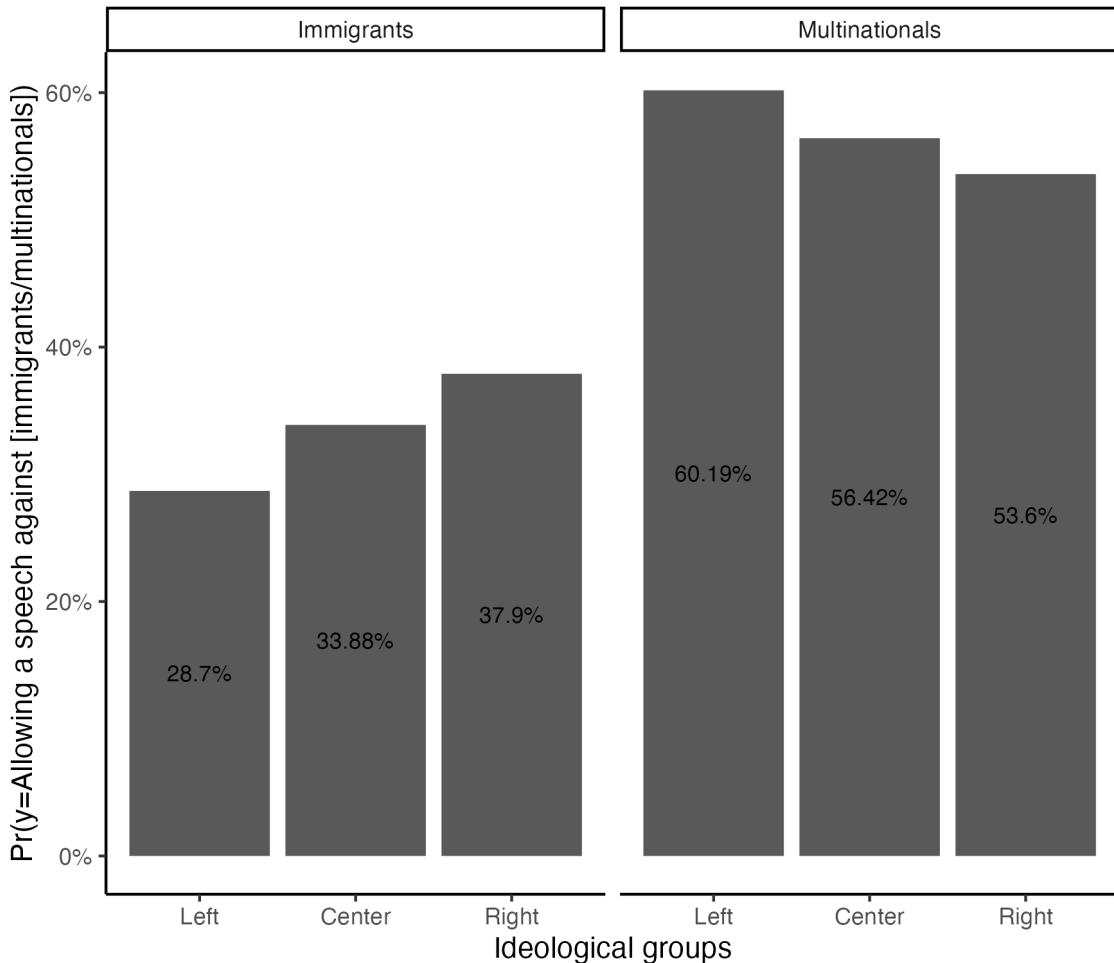
Notes: Coefficients are not directly comparable since the variance of  $y^*$  changes when new variables are added to the model.

### ***Situational (ideologically motivated) freedom of speech (split-ballot experiment)***

#### ***Probability of allowing a speech across different ideological groups***

We calculated the raw probability of allowing a speech against immigrants and multinational corporations across different ideological groups (Left, Centre, Right). Although we observe some differences across the different ideological groups, these remain relatively small compared to the ones obtained when introducing populist attitudes (see infra). This further confirms that it is the

interaction between populism and ideological interests that explains the hypocritical tendency of protecting or rejecting freedom of speech.



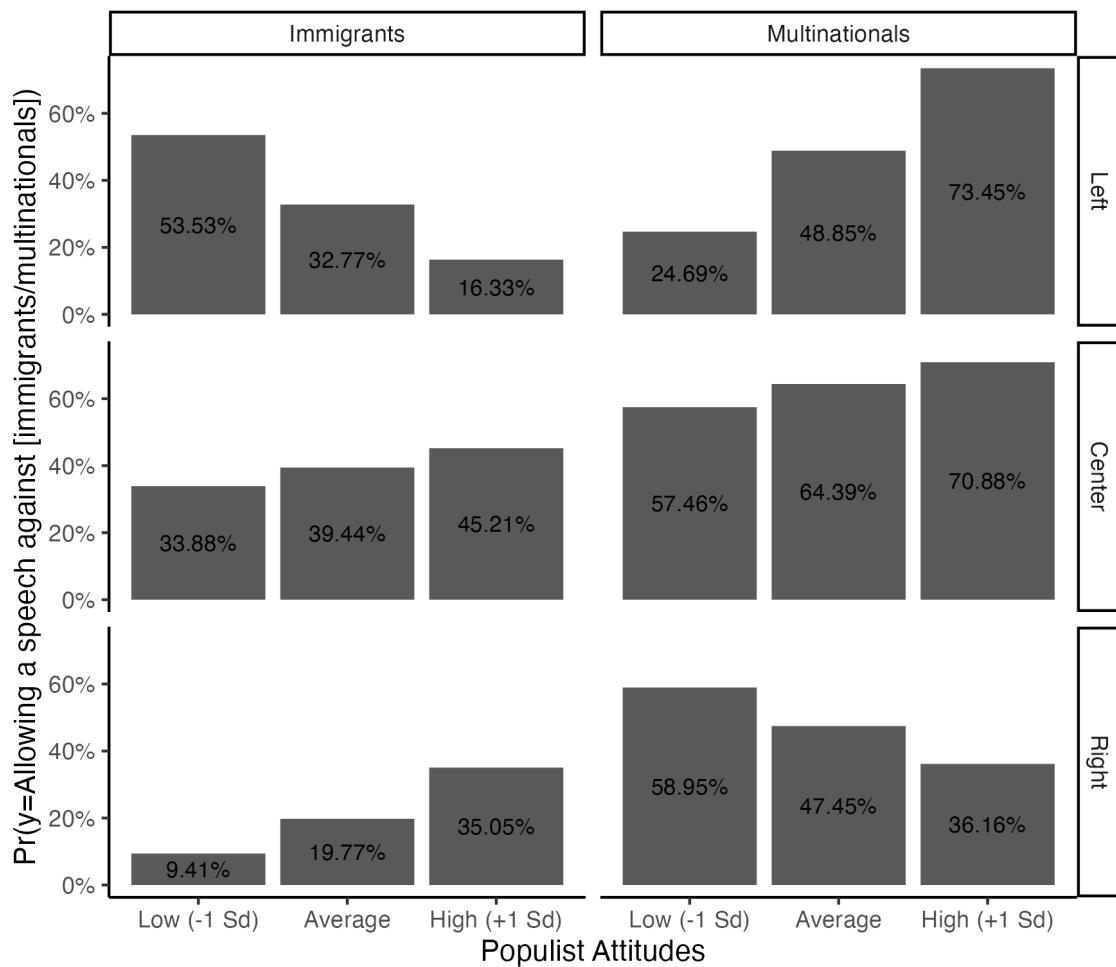
*Figure 1: Proportion of respondents who said that a speech against immigrants or multinational corporations should be allowed (split-ballot experiment) for the different ideological groups.*

#### **Probability of allowing a speech across different ideological groups and categorical levels of affinity with populism (GLM probit)**

We fit a probit model with an interaction between populist attitudes, the categorical measure of ideological preferences (i.e., left-, right-wing, and centrist respondents), and a variable indicating whether the speech was against multinationals or immigrants. This allows us to calculate the probability of allowing a speech across different ideological groups (Left, Centre, Right) and levels of affinity with populism (Low, Average, High). The categorical measure of populism is obtained by taking the standard deviation (-1/+1 Sd) from the average of the populist attitudes scale. For

instance, an individual who scores 1 standard deviation below the mean (-1 Sd) of the populist attitudes scale is considered to have a low affinity with populist ideas.

Although not directly comparable, the difference in probability between the categorical measure of populism within each group corresponds to the marginal coefficients of populism reported in the main article. The results are largely confirmed, suggesting the validity of our modelling strategy and of the presented results.



*Figure 2: Probability of allowing a speech against immigrants or multinational corporations (split-ballot experiment) across the different ideological groups (Left, Centre, Right) and levels of affinity with populism (Low, Average, High). Estimates obtained from a GLM probit model, controlling for all the other variables included in the model.*

***Nested SEM multi-group models for the marginal coefficients of populism on the probability of allowing a speech***

Regression tables for the SEM multi-group model. The estimates reported in Figure 2 in the main text are obtained from the 3rd column of each table with the complete set of control variables.

**Immigrants: Right-wing**

Table 2: Regression table for ideologically-motivated freedom of speech (Figure 2)

| Conditional Freedom of Speech (Split-ballot) |       |         |        |         |        |         |
|----------------------------------------------|-------|---------|--------|---------|--------|---------|
|                                              | Pr    | p-value | Pr     | p-value | Pr     | p-value |
| Populist attitudes                           | 0.068 | 0.018   | 0.200  | 0.002   | 0.281  | 0.004   |
| French speaking Belgium (Ref: Flanders)      |       |         | -0.046 | 0.841   | -0.156 | 0.603   |
| Female (Ref: Male)                           |       |         | -1.101 | ≤0.001  | -1.283 | ≤0.001  |
| Age                                          |       |         | -0.063 | 0.608   | -0.057 | 0.708   |
| Education: Medium (Ref: Low)                 |       |         | -0.264 | 0.472   | -0.369 | 0.396   |
| Education: High (Ref: Low)                   |       |         | -0.324 | 0.378   | -0.439 | 0.327   |
| Party membership (Ref: No)                   |       |         |        |         | -0.776 | 0.073   |
| Internal efficacy                            |       |         |        |         | -0.303 | 0.026   |
| R <sup>2</sup>                               |       | 0.031   |        | 0.293   |        | 0.363   |
| Sample Size                                  |       | 988     |        | 988     |        | 988     |

Notes: Coefficients are not directly comparable since the variance of  $y^*$  changes when new variables are added to the model.

**Immigrants: Left-wing**

Table 3: Regression table for ideologically-motivated freedom of speech (Figure 2)

|                                         | Conditional Freedom of Speech (Split-ballot) |         |        |         |        |         |
|-----------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|---------|--------|---------|--------|---------|
|                                         | Pr                                           | p-value | Pr     | p-value | Pr     | p-value |
| Populist attitudes                      | -0.074                                       | 0.002   | -0.100 | 0.016   | -0.142 | 0.020   |
| French speaking Belgium (Ref: Flanders) |                                              |         | -0.056 | 0.738   | -0.103 | 0.750   |
| Female (Ref: Male)                      |                                              |         | -0.354 | 0.044   | -0.605 | 0.048   |
| Age                                     |                                              |         | -0.098 | 0.206   | -0.200 | 0.201   |
| Education: Medium (Ref: Low)            |                                              |         | 0.070  | 0.789   | 0.136  | 0.801   |
| Education: High (Ref: Low)              |                                              |         | 0.306  | 0.159   | 0.714  | 0.166   |
| Party membership (Ref: No)              |                                              |         |        |         | 0.105  | 0.842   |
| Internal efficacy                       |                                              |         |        |         | 0.192  | 0.185   |
| R <sup>2</sup>                          |                                              | 0.069   |        | 0.22    |        | 0.243   |
| Sample Size                             |                                              | 988     |        | 988     |        | 988     |

Notes: Coefficients are not directly comparable since the variance of  $y^*$  changes when new variables are added to the model.

### **Immigrants: Center**

*Table 4: Regression table for ideologically-motivated freedom of speech (Figure 2)*

|                                         | Conditional Freedom of Speech (Split-ballot) |         |        |         |        |         |
|-----------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|---------|--------|---------|--------|---------|
|                                         | Pr                                           | p-value | Pr     | p-value | Pr     | p-value |
| Populist attitudes                      | 0.048                                        | 0.313   | 0.058  | 0.005   | 0.035  | 0.197   |
| French speaking Belgium (Ref: Flanders) |                                              |         | -0.020 | 0.776   | -0.053 | 0.757   |
| Female (Ref: Male)                      |                                              |         | -0.057 | 0.400   | -0.132 | 0.415   |
| Age                                     |                                              |         | -0.074 | 0.026   | -0.192 | 0.019   |
| Education: Medium (Ref: Low)            |                                              |         | 0.030  | 0.707   | 0.094  | 0.645   |
| Education: High (Ref: Low)              |                                              |         | -0.085 | 0.334   | -0.203 | 0.323   |
| Party membership (Ref: No)              |                                              |         |        |         | 0.328  | 0.336   |
| Internal efficacy                       |                                              |         |        |         | 0.192  | 0.022   |
| R <sup>2</sup>                          |                                              | 0.02    |        | 0.067   |        | 0.103   |
| Sample Size                             |                                              | 988     |        | 988     |        | 988     |

Notes: Coefficients are not directly comparable since the variance of  $y^*$  changes when new variables are added to the model.

### **Multinational: Right-wing**

Table 5: Regression table for ideologically-motivated freedom of speech (Figure 2)

|                                         | Conditional Freedom of Speech (Split-ballot) |         |        |         |        |         |
|-----------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|---------|--------|---------|--------|---------|
|                                         | Pr                                           | p-value | Pr     | p-value | Pr     | p-value |
| Populist attitudes                      | -0.076                                       | 0.05    | -0.051 | 0.063   | -0.100 | 0.039   |
| French speaking Belgium (Ref: Flanders) |                                              |         | 0.028  | 0.785   | 0.044  | 0.859   |
| Female (Ref: Male)                      |                                              |         | 0.039  | 0.696   | 0.057  | 0.817   |
| Age                                     |                                              |         | 0.027  | 0.546   | 0.084  | 0.482   |
| Education: Medium (Ref: Low)            |                                              |         | 0.233  | 0.051   | 0.680  | 0.056   |
| Education: High (Ref: Low)              |                                              |         | 0.200  | 0.093   | 0.569  | 0.095   |
| Party membership (Ref: No)              |                                              |         |        |         | -0.497 | 0.457   |
| Internal efficacy                       |                                              |         |        |         | 0.276  | 0.080   |
| R <sup>2</sup>                          |                                              | 0.02    |        | 0.072   |        | 0.131   |
| Sample Size                             |                                              | 988     |        | 988     |        | 988     |

Notes: Coefficients are not directly comparable since the variance of  $y^*$  changes when new variables are added to the model.

### **Multinational: Left-wing**

Table 6: Regression table for ideologically-motivated freedom of speech (Figure 2)

|                                         | Conditional Freedom of Speech (Split-ballot) |         |        |         |        |         |
|-----------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|---------|--------|---------|--------|---------|
|                                         | Pr                                           | p-value | Pr     | p-value | Pr     | p-value |
| Populist attitudes                      | 0.048                                        | 0.002   | 0.105  | 0.016   | 0.255  | 0.008   |
| French speaking Belgium (Ref: Flanders) |                                              |         | 0.107  | 0.443   | 0.233  | 0.430   |
| Female (Ref: Male)                      |                                              |         | -0.098 | 0.525   | -0.197 | 0.507   |
| Age                                     |                                              |         | -0.061 | 0.409   | -0.126 | 0.414   |
| Education: Medium (Ref: Low)            |                                              |         | 0.061  | 0.772   | 0.109  | 0.799   |
| Education: High (Ref: Low)              |                                              |         | 0.238  | 0.189   | 0.527  | 0.201   |
| Party membership (Ref: No)              |                                              |         |        |         | -0.166 | 0.740   |
| Internal efficacy                       |                                              |         |        |         | -0.554 | 0.012   |
| R <sup>2</sup>                          |                                              | 0.006   |        | 0.102   |        | 0.274   |
| Sample Size                             |                                              | 988     |        | 988     |        | 988     |

Notes: Coefficients are not directly comparable since the variance of  $y^*$  changes when new variables are added to the model.

### **Multinational: Center**

Table 7: Regression table for ideologically-motivated freedom of speech (Figure 2)

|                                         | Conditional Freedom of Speech (Split-ballot) |         |        |         |        |         |
|-----------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|---------|--------|---------|--------|---------|
|                                         | Pr                                           | p-value | Pr     | p-value | Pr     | p-value |
| Populist attitudes                      | 0.020                                        | 0.473   | 0.025  | 0.393   | 0.063  | 0.120   |
| French speaking Belgium (Ref: Flanders) |                                              |         | 0.051  | 0.611   | 0.128  | 0.490   |
| Female (Ref: Male)                      |                                              |         | -0.044 | 0.654   | -0.067 | 0.696   |
| Age                                     |                                              |         | -0.141 | 0.010   | -0.256 | 0.007   |
| Education: Medium (Ref: Low)            |                                              |         | -0.107 | 0.440   | -0.217 | 0.365   |
| Education: High (Ref: Low)              |                                              |         | 0.008  | 0.955   | 0.028  | 0.907   |
| Party membership (Ref: No)              |                                              |         |        |         | 0.580  | 0.108   |
| Internal efficacy                       |                                              |         |        |         | -0.179 | 0.052   |
| R <sup>2</sup>                          |                                              | 0.001   |        | 0.068   |        | 0.109   |
| Sample Size                             |                                              | 988     |        | 988     |        | 988     |

Notes: Coefficients are not directly comparable since the variance of  $y^*$  changes when new variables are added to the model.

### CFA and invariance

Table 8: Standardized (Std.) factor loadings for populist attitudes and political efficacy

|                           | Std. factor loadings | p-value |
|---------------------------|----------------------|---------|
| <b>Populist attitudes</b> |                      |         |
| q67_1                     | 0.71                 | ≤ .001  |
| q67_2                     | 0.76                 | ≤ .001  |
| q67_3                     | 0.81                 | ≤ .001  |
| q67_4                     | 0.66                 | ≤ .001  |
| q67_5                     | 0.67                 | ≤ .001  |
| <b>Political Efficacy</b> |                      |         |
| q41_1                     | 0.79                 | ≤ .001  |
| q41_2                     | 0.81                 | ≤ .001  |

|                                 | <b>Std. factor loadings</b> | <b>p-value</b> |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------|
| q41_3                           | 0.72                        | $\leq .001$    |
| CFI=0.986 RMSE=0.054 SRMR=0.028 |                             |                |

### **Invariance testing**

All the estimated latent constructs reach scalar invariance allowing us to compare the coefficients of populism across the different ideological groups (i.e. Left, Right, Center) and experimental conditions (Chen 2007).

*Table 9: Invariance testing for the Left, Right, Centre identifiers*

| Model      | df | $\Delta$ df | CFI   | $\Delta$ CFI | RMSEA | $\Delta$ RMSEA | SRMR  | $\Delta$ SRMR |
|------------|----|-------------|-------|--------------|-------|----------------|-------|---------------|
| Configural | 30 |             | 1     |              | 0     |                | 0     |               |
| Metric     | 50 | 20          | 0.997 | 0.000        | 0.027 | -0.009         | 0.045 | 0.021         |
| Scalar     | 70 | 20          | 0.999 | 0.002        | 0.011 | -0.016         | 0.049 | 0.004         |

### **Robustness**

#### ***Universal freedom of speech as continuous***

Treating the measure of universal freedom of speech as continuous does not change any of the results presented in the manuscript. In fact, the coefficient of populism in the probit model presented in the main text that uses a latent variable  $y^*$  approach has a very similar coefficient to the one estimated using a linear model ( $\beta = 0.103, \sigma = 0.034$ ). In addition to confirming the validity of the presented results, this suggests that the value selected for the dichotomization of the variable is appropriate.

*Table 10: Coefficient of populist attitudes on the continuous measure of universal freedom of speech, controlling for all the other variables included in the model. The dependent variable is*

*the original 5-point question asking to what extent people agree with the fact that every individual should say what he/she wants. Estimates are from a SEM model.*

| Universal Freedom of Speech (y=1, 56%)  |                |         |
|-----------------------------------------|----------------|---------|
|                                         | Beta           | p-value |
| Populist attitudes                      | 0.104 (0.042)  | 0.012   |
| French speaking Belgium (Ref: Flanders) | 0.108 (0.070)  | 0.121   |
| Female (Ref: Male)                      | -0.096 (0.068) | 0.156   |
| Age                                     | -0.039 (0.034) | 0.242   |
| Education: Medium (Ref: Low)            | -0.208 (0.092) | 0.024   |
| Education: High (Ref: Low)              | -0.164 (0.095) | 0.085   |
| Party Membership (Ref: No)              | -0.260 (0.140) | 0.064   |
| Left-wing (Ref: Centre)                 | -0.019 (0.084) | 0.821   |
| Right-wing (Ref: Centre)                | 0.039 (0.083)  | 0.640   |
| Internal Efficacy                       | 0.071 (0.044)  | 0.105   |
| R <sup>2</sup>                          |                | 0.037   |
| Sample Size                             |                | 988     |

Notes: Std. errors in parenthesis.

### ***Universal freedom of speech model using an ordered probit model***

Using an ordered probit model where the values of the universal freedom of speech variable are treated as ordered categories. Results are virtually unchanged from the linear model, indicating the presence of a linear relationship between populism and abstract support for freedom of speech.

*Table 11: Coefficient of populist attitudes treating the measure of universal freedom of speech as ordered, controlling for all the other variables included in the model. The dependent*

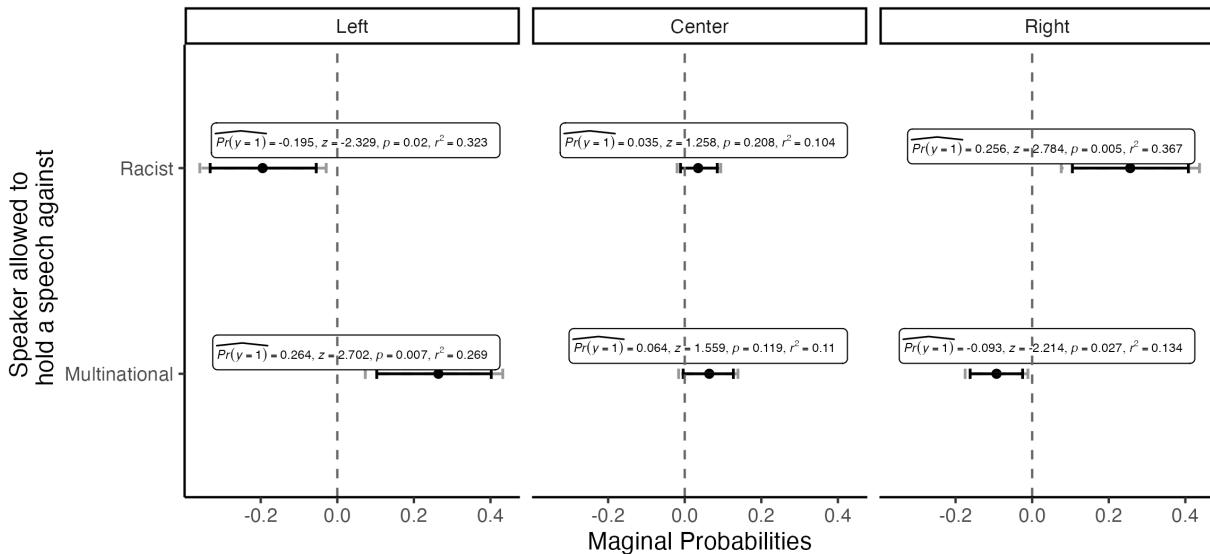
*variable is the original 5-point question asking to what extent people agree with the fact that every individual should say what he/she wants. Estimates are from a SEM model.*

| Universal Freedom of Speech (y=1, 56%)  |                |         |
|-----------------------------------------|----------------|---------|
|                                         | Beta           | p-value |
| Populist attitudes                      | 0.095 (0.035)  | 0.007   |
| French speaking Belgium (Ref: Flanders) | 0.134 (0.072)  | 0.062   |
| Female (Ref: Male)                      | -0.054 (0.070) | 0.438   |
| Age                                     | -0.042 (0.034) | 0.219   |
| Education: Medium (Ref: Low)            | -0.234 (0.097) | 0.016   |
| Education: High (Ref: Low)              | -0.280 (0.094) | 0.003   |
| Party Membership (Ref: No)              | -0.317 (0.133) | 0.017   |
| Left-wing (Ref: Centre)                 | -0.017 (0.089) | 0.849   |
| Right-wing (Ref: Centre)                | 0.031 (0.083)  | 0.709   |
| Internal Efficacy                       | 0.064 (0.042)  | 0.127   |
| R <sup>2</sup>                          |                | 0.042   |
| Sample Size                             |                | 986     |

Notes: Std. errors in parenthesis.

### ***Inclusion of strength of Left-Right ideological identity***

As robustness, we fit a model adding a measure of the strength of ideological self-placement by folding in half the L-R self-placement measure ([Mason 2018](#)). This rules out the possibility that the results are driven by those ideologically extreme respondents that place themselves at both ends of the scale (i.e., 0 and 10). Results are unchanged.



N:988.

*Figure 3: Coefficient of populist attitudes on allowing ideologically motivated speeches adding strength of Left-Right ideological identity, controlling for all the other variables included in the model. Estimates are from a SEM multi-group model. The dependent variable is the split-ballot experiment in which the object of criticism varied (i.e., immigrants and corporations). Error bars represent 90% and 95% confidence intervals around the estimates.*

### Instruments

*Table 12: Dependent variables (freedom of speech)*

| Item Ref. | Label                      | Question                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|-----------|----------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| q78_1     | Abstract freedom of speech | Every individual should say what he/she wants, even if this hurts others. (1. Completely disagree – 5. Completely Agree)                                                                        |
| q80       | Split-Ballot experiment    | A speaker at a public gathering, on television, or on the internet holds a speech against [RANDOMIZED: immigrants/multinational corporations]. (1. should not be stopped, 2. should be stopped) |

*Table 13: Populism*

| Item Ref. | Label    | Question                                                                                            |
|-----------|----------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| q67_1     | Populism | People and not the politicians should take decisions (1. Completely disagree – 5. Completely Agree) |

| <b>Item Ref.</b> | <b>Label</b> | <b>Question</b>                                                                                           |
|------------------|--------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| q67_2            | Populism     | People would be better represented by ordinary citizens (1. Completely disagree – 5. Completely Agree)    |
| q67_3            | Populism     | Power should be returned to the people (1. Completely disagree – 5. Completely Agree)                     |
| q67_4            | Populism     | Better if politicians just followed the will of the people (1. Completely disagree – 5. Completely Agree) |
| q67_5            | Populism     | Ordinary people know better than politicians (1. Completely disagree – 5. Completely Agree)               |

*Table 11: Control variables*

| <b>Item Ref.</b> | <b>Label</b>       | <b>Question</b>                                                                                               |
|------------------|--------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| age6             | Age                | Respondent age (Recoded in 6 categories, continuous)                                                          |
| edu3             | Education          | Respondent's highest level of education (Recoded in 3 categories, Low, Middle, High)                          |
| q81              | PID                | Respondent identify with any political party (No, Yes)                                                        |
| q2               | Gender             | Respondent assigned sex at birth (1. Man, 2. Woman)                                                           |
| region           | Place of residence | Respondent place of residence (1. French-speaking Belgium, 2. Flanders)                                       |
| q41_1            | Efficacy           | Nowadays I don't understand what is happening any more (1. Completely disagree – 5. Completely Agree)         |
| q41_2            | Efficacy           | These days, things are so complicated I don't know what to do (1. Completely disagree – 5. Completely Agree)  |
| q41_3            | Efficacy           | I feel like I am completely powerless over the current changes (1. Completely disagree – 5. Completely Agree) |

***Descriptive statistics***

*Table 14: Descriptive statistics for the main analysis sample*

| Variable                                                  | N     | N = 1,077           |
|-----------------------------------------------------------|-------|---------------------|
| <b>Abstract free speech (q78_1)</b>                       | 1,077 |                     |
| Not in favour                                             |       | 468 / 1,077 (43%)   |
| In favour                                                 |       | 609 / 1,077 (57%)   |
| <b>Ideologically-oriented speech (q80)</b>                | 1,077 |                     |
| Stopped                                                   |       | 601 / 1,077 (56%)   |
| Allowed                                                   |       | 476 / 1,077 (44%)   |
| <b>Speech target (split-ballot condition, expq80cond)</b> | 1,077 |                     |
| Multinational                                             |       | 507 / 1,077 (47%)   |
| Racist                                                    |       | 570 / 1,077 (53%)   |
| <b>Identify with any political party (q81)</b>            | 1,070 |                     |
| No                                                        |       | 1,003 / 1,070 (94%) |
| Yes                                                       |       | 67 / 1,070 (6.3%)   |
| <b>Age (age6)</b>                                         | 1,070 |                     |
| Mean (SD)                                                 |       | 4.11 (1.65)         |
| Median (IQR)                                              |       | 4.00 (3.00, 6.00)   |
| Range                                                     |       | 1.00 - 6.00         |
| <b>Left-Right self-placement (q57)</b>                    | 1,033 |                     |
| Center                                                    |       | 561 / 1,033 (54%)   |
| Left                                                      |       | 223 / 1,033 (22%)   |
| Right                                                     |       | 249 / 1,033 (24%)   |
| <b>Region of residence (region)</b>                       | 1,077 |                     |
| Flanders                                                  |       | 667 / 1,077 (62%)   |
| French-speaking Belgium                                   |       | 410 / 1,077 (38%)   |
| <b>Education (edu3)</b>                                   | 1,059 |                     |
| None, Lower and Lower secondary                           |       | 254 / 1,059 (24%)   |
| Higher secondary                                          |       | 369 / 1,059 (35%)   |

| Variable                          | N     | N = 1,077         |
|-----------------------------------|-------|-------------------|
| Higher and university             |       | 436 / 1,059 (41%) |
| <b>Assigned Sex at Birth (q2)</b> | 1,077 |                   |
| Male                              |       | 564 / 1,077 (52%) |
| Female                            |       | 513 / 1,077 (48%) |
| <b>Internal efficacy (q41_1)</b>  | 1,072 |                   |
| Mean (SD)                         |       | 3.31 (1.11)       |
| Median (IQR)                      |       | 4.00 (2.00, 4.00) |
| Range                             |       | 1.00 - 5.00       |
| <b>Internal efficacy (q41_2)</b>  | 1,071 |                   |
| Mean (SD)                         |       | 3.06 (1.12)       |
| Median (IQR)                      |       | 3.00 (2.00, 4.00) |
| Range                             |       | 1.00 - 5.00       |
| <b>Internal efficacy (q41_3)</b>  | 1,071 |                   |
| Mean (SD)                         |       | 3.26 (1.07)       |
| Median (IQR)                      |       | 3.00 (2.00, 4.00) |
| Range                             |       | 1.00 - 5.00       |
| <b>Populism (q67_1)</b>           | 1,068 |                   |
| Mean (SD)                         |       | 2.96 (1.03)       |
| Median (IQR)                      |       | 3.00 (2.00, 4.00) |
| Range                             |       | 1.00 - 5.00       |
| <b>Populism (q67_2)</b>           | 1,069 |                   |
| Mean (SD)                         |       | 3.02 (0.99)       |
| Median (IQR)                      |       | 3.00 (2.00, 4.00) |
| Range                             |       | 1.00 - 5.00       |
| <b>Populism (q67_3)</b>           | 1,068 |                   |
| Mean (SD)                         |       | 2.66 (0.98)       |

| Variable                | N     | N = 1,077         |
|-------------------------|-------|-------------------|
| Median (IQR)            |       | 2.00 (2.00, 3.00) |
| Range                   |       | 1.00 - 5.00       |
| <b>Populism (q67_4)</b> | 1,064 |                   |
| Mean (SD)               |       | 2.88 (1.01)       |
| Median (IQR)            |       | 3.00 (2.00, 4.00) |
| Range                   |       | 1.00 - 5.00       |
| <b>Populism (q67_5)</b> | 1,067 |                   |
| Mean (SD)               |       | 2.54 (0.97)       |
| Median (IQR)            |       | 2.00 (2.00, 3.00) |
| Range                   |       | 1.00 - 5.00       |

<sup>1</sup>n / N (%)

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