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ARTICLE



The winner takes all the trust: populism, democracy, and winner-loser gaps in political trust in Central and Southern Europe

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ABSTRACT

Studies typically find that supporters of populist parties exhibit low political trust. Drawing on research on winner-loser gaps in political support and the consequences of political polarization on attitudes, I re-examine the association between populism and political trust taking into account the supported party's status in or outside of government, distinguishing between government leaders and junior coalition partners. I analyze data from the European Social Survey Rounds 1–9 from nine Central and Southern European countries that experienced populist parties as government leaders, combined with party characteristics from the Varieties of Party Identity and Organization as well as democracy scores from the Varieties of Democracy datasets. Results show that the effect of party status on political trust is stronger among supporters of populist than non-populist parties. Further, I find that supporters of populist governments enjoy greater trust advantages in less democratic contexts.

KEYWORDS

Political trust; populism; elections; European Social Survey; Varieties of Democracy

Introduction

After over two decades of very low political trust in post-communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe, in the last years trust has rebound in some of them. Notably, political trust has recently increased in Poland and Hungary, countries whose governments are being accused of violating political rights and civil liberties, undermining judicial independence, and dismantling the democratic order (Bakke and Sitter 2020; Cianetti, Dawson, and Hanley 2018). Given that, on the individual level, support for populist parties has been traditionally associated with lower-than-average political trust (Norris and Inglehart 2019; Rooduijn 2018), the increase in country-level political trust under populist governments constitutes a puzzle.

To address this puzzle, it is crucial to investigate whose political trust contributes to the overall increase when populists are in power, and – specifically – how political trust of supporters of populist parties changes depending on these parties' status in or out of government. Political trust among populist voters tends to be lower than average in many European countries, because in most of these countries populist parties are in the opposition or are at most junior coalition partners. Building on research on winner-loser gaps in political support, I expect the opposite to be true when populist parties win elections and lead governments. In order to increase the overall level of political trust, the increase in trust among populist winners would have to exceed the decline in trust among non-populist losers. A similar dynamic was studied in the Western European context by Harteveld et al.

(2021), who theorized that political trust is more robust to negative shocks among people who have enjoyed high trust for extended periods of time, in this case among non-populist voters. I additionally argue that populism itself, as well as the polarization it may cause, contribute to higher winner effects in political trust among populist voters.

Further, I hypothesize that the winner advantage in political trust among populist voters is particularly large in countries with lower levels of democracy. Linking the micro and macro levels of political trust, the analysis shows that if populist parties win elections and the level of democracy is low, supporters of the winning populist parties will see an increase in political trust that exceeds the decline in political trust among non-populist losers, thus increasing the overall average level of political trust in the country.

I test these hypotheses with data from nine Central and Southern European countries which have experienced populist-led governments in the period 2002–2019. I apply multilevel linear models to survey data on political trust and party support from the European Social Survey Rounds 1–9 combined with data on political party orientations from the Varieties of Party Identity and Organization as well as democracy scores from the Varieties of Democracy datasets. As an extension of earlier studies that tend to use a binary classification of winner and loser status, this study distinguishes between the supported party's status as government leader, junior coalition partner, and opposition party.

Results show that supporters of winning populist parties declare higher political trust than supporters of winning non-populist parties, while supporters of losing populist parties have lower trust than supporters of losing non-populist parties. Taken together, these two effects contribute to the winner-loser gap that is greater among supporters of populist than non-populist parties. Second, the analysis shows that these effects depend on the country's level of democracy: the winners' trust advantage is greatest among people who support populist governments in countries with lower levels of democracy. In other words, in weak democracies populist governments coincide with more polarization in political trust between electoral winners and losers. The analysis also shows that supporters of populist parties that are junior coalition partners are much more similar to electoral losers in terms of trust than to supporters of government leaders. Thus, treating winner-loser status as binary may conceal some of the characteristic features of supporters of populist parties. More generally, these findings show how democratic backsliding may coincide with an increase in political trust.

The paper is organized as follows. I start by discussing the nature of winner-loser gaps in political support, and the features of populism that can be expected to exacerbate these gaps, especially in less democratic contexts. Next, I present the data and modeling techniques, and proceed to describing the main findings. The final part discusses the results connecting them to the theoretical understanding of the links between political trust and democracy, points out limitations of the present study, and outlines possible extensions for future research.

Political trust, populism, and democracy

Research generally finds that supporters of populist parties or candidates tend to have low trust in state institutions (Dahlberg and Linde 2017; Hooghe, Marien, and Pauwels 2011; Söderlund and Kestilä-Kekkonen 2009). There are two main explanations for the negative association between political trust and populist vote on the individual level. First, voting for populist parties or candidates may be understood as protest voting, and thus as an expression of disaffection with mainstream politics and political institutions (Bélanger and Aarts 2006), in line with the nature of populism as rejecting the entire political elite as corrupt and self-serving (Canovan 1999; Mudde 2004). The second explanation considers voting for populist parties as an expression of voters' policy preferences, which then leads to low political trust as a consequence of populist parties' anti-establishment rhetoric (Brug and Wouter 2003; Der Brug, Wouter, and Tillie 2005). Both explanations may be true at the same time, and there is reason to believe that the link between political trust and

populist support is indeed reciprocal (Hooghe and Dassonneville 2018; Matthijs, van der Brug, and de Lange 2016).

What many studies of the effects of populist voting on political trust seem to ignore is the fact that in most Western European countries, where much of the research on populism is conducted, populist parties have primarily been in the opposition and occasionally included in governments as junior partners. At the same time, research on winner-loser gaps in political trust has long found consistent differences in political trust and satisfaction between supporters of ruling parties and supporters of opposition parties (Anderson et al. 2005; Martini and Quaranta 2019). Analyzing voters of populist parties in contexts where they are typically in the position of electoral losers cannot answer the question whether low political trust is a distinguishing feature of populist voters in general. Indeed, in the analysis of voters of 15 populist parties in Western Europe, Rooduijn (2018) found that the negative effect of populist support on political trust is not universal, and some of the instances where no negative effect was found can in fact be explained by the populist party's inclusion in government.¹

Political trust expressed by supporters of populist parties tends to increase when these parties are included in governing. Haugsgjerd (2019) demonstrated this on the example of Fremskrittspartiet, the Norwegian Progress Party, whose joining the government as a junior coalition partner in 2013 was followed by a reduction of the satisfaction deficit among its supporters. The authors justify this increase by invoking the winner advantage in satisfaction (Anderson et al. 2005) and the moderation of the populists party's policy postulates and rhetoric after joining the government (Tjitske, de Lange, and Rooduijn 2016). Still, in the described example, the association between political trust and supporting Fremskrittspartiet remained negative.

If a populist party wins enough parliamentary seats to lead the government or to form a government on its own, there may be no need to become more moderate, as would be the case for junior coalition partners. Thus, populist governments may continue their rhetoric, while at the same time pursuing their ideological agendas. Populist party supporters that had been dissatisfied and distrustful of the political system under the previous non-populist government can now be expected to react to having their party rule with increases in political trust resulting from the perception of higher responsiveness of the political system and increased representation, as well as from the satisfaction with the possibility of implementation of their preferred policies. In short, given the mechanisms that drive the winner's advantage in political trust and the ubiquity of winner-loser gaps in political trust across countries and regions (Martini and Quaranta 2019; Moehler 2009; Monsiváis-Carrillo 2020), there is no reason to expect that supporters of populist parties would not experience its effects.

On the contrary, there are reasons to expect winner effects in political trust for supporters of populist parties to be greater than the decline in trust among supporters of mainstream parties following electoral defeats. In an analysis of twelve Western European countries, Hartevelt et al. (2021) used David Easton's concept of 'reservoir of goodwill' (1965) to argue and show that the inclusion of populist radical right parties in government is associated with a smaller decline in political satisfaction among people holding non-nativist views, than the increase in satisfaction and confidence among people holding nativist views. The reasoning is that the higher trust and satisfaction non-nativists had exhibited over longer periods of time has accumulated into more stable and diffuse support that protects them from sharp declines when the political system becomes less responsive to their preferences. In other words, being used to system responsiveness in the long run stabilizes political trust and satisfaction when responsiveness declines owing to reservoirs of diffuse system support.

The mechanism of the reservoir of good will should apply to all instances when a group of voters is used to having their interests represented for an extended period of time, whether it be preferences related to migration or others. In addition to this mechanism, populism² itself by its nature seems conducive to making political trust of populist voters more extreme than that of other voters, both in terms of low trust if their preferred party is in the opposition, and in terms of strong

increases in trust when the party is in government. The dichotomous character of populist rhetoric can be expected to make populists' electoral victories particularly rewarding, as they represent a triumph of 'the people' in a system that had earlier been serving 'the corrupt elite' and a victory of the good over the evil (Mudde 2004). Additionally, populist leaders tend to emphasize the need for direct democracy and close contact between leaders and voters (Bonikowski 2017), which – in the case of populist governments – may create a perception of reduced distance and increased responsiveness to their voters' needs.

The effect of populism may operate in two main ways: through populist attitudes or through support for a populist party. In the first scenario, voters who hold populist attitudes would react more strongly to their party's electoral outcome regardless of whether the party is populist or not. In the second scenario, regardless of individual populist orientations, support for populist parties would inflate winner-loser effects. To the extent that individual populist attitudes predict populist party support (Hauwaert, Steven, and Van Kessel 2017; Akkerman, Mudde, and Zaslove 2013), both mechanisms are hard to distinguish empirically.

Elections with populist parties as major players are likely to take place in a climate of overall high political polarization, or 'political sectarianism', which consists of three core ingredients: othering of opposing parties and their supporters, aversion to opposing partisans, and portraying them as immoral (Finkel et al. 2020), all of which are compatible with a populist outlook. Among other consequences, political sectarianism and polarization stimulate partisan motivated reasoning, thus affecting how people select and process information depending on whether it is favorable for the party they support, leading to increasingly partisan views of the state of affairs (Bavel, Jay, and Pereira 2018; Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus 2013; Peterson and Iyengar 2020; Enns, Kellstedt, and McAvoy 2012). The winner-loser gap in political trust may be further exacerbated by media partisanship or parallelism (Lelkes 2016), which may occur when populist governments use state television as a propaganda outlet or put pressure on civil society organizations as they did in Italy, Hungary and Poland (Albertazzi and Mueller 2013; Bill 2020; Krekó and Enyedi 2018).

Research also shows that people are ready to trade democratic norms for political ideology, partisan loyalty, and policy preferences, and will maintain support for parties that violate democratic principles such as electoral integrity or respect for the rule of law in favor of partisan goals (Graham and Svobik 2020; Arbatli and Rosenberg 2020). These trade-offs would manifest most strongly in less democratic contexts, where violations of democratic principles may be occurring behind the facade of serving the will of the people. In such contexts, evaluations of democracy and governance by supporters of populist governments would reflect the messages of the ruling party and state-controlled media. At the same time, reduced democratic performance would be more soberly evaluated by opponents of ruling populists. Additionally, observing developments that violate democratic norms and hurt the fairness of political competition may lead electoral losers to lose confidence in their ability to become winners in the near future (Nadeau, Daoust, and Dassonneville 2021). Taken together, these processes lead to a greater mismatch between the assessment of state performance by electoral winners and losers.

Cross-national survey analyses using data from Latin America found that electoral victory indeed colors the evaluation of the supply of freedoms, with electoral losers perceiving substantially less freedom of speech, of the press, and respect for human rights, and more so in countries with flawed democracies (Monsiváis-Carrillo 2020). Similarly, winner-loser gaps in political satisfaction are found to be greater in countries with higher levels of corruption (Anderson and Tverdova 2003). A recent study found that winner-loser gaps in trust increased in Poland in a period of democratic backsliding and high polarization (Kołczyńska and Sadowski 2022). There is also ample evidence of large winner-loser gaps in evaluations of electoral integrity, especially in less democratic contexts (Norris 2018; McAllister and White 2011; Moehler 2009). The winner-loser gap in political support depends on the level of democracy, in that countries with a higher quality of the electoral process and rule of law see smaller gaps in satisfaction with democracy (Dahlberg and Linde 2016; Nadeau,

Daoust, and Dassonneville 2021). Altogether, evaluations of state performance tend to be driven to a larger extent by electoral winner status in contexts characterized by poorer institutional performance compared to those with high performance. If low democratic and institutional performance is conducive to greater differences in expressed attitudes about the state due to differential information selection and processing, populism can be expected to further exacerbate these effects.

Based on the above discussion, I formulate two hypotheses about the associations between political trust, populism, and democracy:

Hypothesis 1: The trust advantage of supporters of ruling populist parties is higher than among supporters of ruling non-populist parties. In other words, the winner-loser gap is greater for populists than for non-populists.

Hypothesis 2: The trust advantage of supporters of ruling populist parties is higher in countries with lower levels of democracy.

Data and methods

The study uses individual-level data from the European Social Survey Rounds 1–9, an academically driven biennial survey of European societies (European Social Survey 2002, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2012, 2014, 2016, 2018). The ESS relies on probability samples of adult populations with surveys conducted in most European countries, and questionnaires including questions on a wide range of social and political topics, such as items about political support, voting in last national election and feeling close to a particular political party that are used for the present study.

As the dependent variable I use trust in the national parliament, which is perhaps the most widely used measure of trust in the political system (Dalton, Van Sickle, and Weldon 2010; Newton and Zmerli 2011; Klingemann 1999). In the ESS, trust in the national parliament is measured on an 11-point scale, ranging from 0 to 10, where 0 indicates 'not trust at all' and 10 indicates 'complete trust' (European Social Survey 2020). Replicating the analysis with two alternative dependent variables that are often used as indicators of political support, trust in politicians and satisfaction with democracy, leads to substantively similar conclusions. These additional analyses are presented in the Online Supplement.

Populism is measured based on survey responses to questions about supported political parties mapped to Party Facts IDs (Bederke, Döring, and Regel 2020), which were then merged with populism scores from the Varieties of Party Identity and Organisation, V-Party (Lührmann et al. 2020). I used questions about the party the respondent voted for in the last election or – if that information was missing – the party the respondent reported feeling close to. V-Party provides expert-coded indicators of populism of political parties in most countries of the world through 2019. The populism index measures the extent to which 'representatives of the party use populist rhetoric' (Lührmann et al. 2020, 19), including anti-elite rhetoric and the glorification of the ordinary people and self-identification as part of them (Lührmann et al. 2020, 24). Only parties that have reached at least 5% of votes in parliamentary elections are included in the dataset.

The V-Party dataset also provides information about the parties' government support, identifying parties that were part of the cabinet as the senior partner or the only cabinet party, a junior partner, or were not part of the government. The analysis includes only data from countries that have experienced a populist party (with the V-Party populist index above 0.5) in the role of government leader in the period covered by the ESS data, i.e. Bulgaria, Czechia, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia. Populism scores and party government status for the analyzed countries are provided in the Online Supplement.

The information on party ideologies and winner-loser status from the V-Party data was matched to the ESS data taking into account dates of fieldwork and of elections, to make sure that the coding reflects the situation of respondents at the time of the interview. Of the analyzed countries, the only time ESS fieldwork coincided with elections was in Greece, which held snap elections in October 2009 while ESS Round 4 fieldwork was ongoing, so this survey was excluded from the analysis. Additionally, respondents who reported not having voted and not feeling close to any particular party, and those who support parties for which populism scores are not available (i.e. very small parties) were excluded as well. Respondents below voting age (17 years in Greece and 18 years in the remaining countries) were excluded as well. Cases with missing values on any of the variables were also excluded, leaving the sample with 52,763 observations from 58 country-years and nine countries. Information about the countries and years used in the analysis is provided in the Appendix, [Tables A1](#).

To measure the quality of democracy, I use the Liberal Democracy index from the Varieties of Democracy project, which evaluates the extent to which countries protect individual and minority rights, including civil liberties, rule of law, independence of the judiciary, and effective checks and balances, also taking into account an evaluation of electoral democracy (Coppedge et al. [2021b](#); 43, Coppedge et al. [2021a](#)).

I control for economic performance, which is known to be an important predictor of political trust. For this purpose I use GDP *per capita* data from the World Bank (World Development Indicators [2020](#)). I further control for sociodemographic factors: age, sex, and education in years of schooling top-coded at 20 years. Summary statistics are available in the Appendix, [Table A2](#).

The data have a multilevel structure with respondents nested in country-years, which in turn are nested in countries. I estimate a series of Bayesian linear three-level models with political trust as the dependent variable. Analyses were performed in R (R Core Team [2020](#)) with the *brms* package (Bürkner [2017](#)), an interface to the Stan language (Carpenter et al. [2017](#)) for Bayesian analysis. Priors for all parameters were chosen as weakly-informative, thus having only minimal influence on the obtained inference while ensuring sufficient sampling efficiency (Gelman et al. [2008](#)). I report inference on model parameters in terms of posterior means, quantile-based 95% posterior uncertainty intervals (credible intervals, CI), and posterior probabilities as a continuous measure of evidence in favor of or against the expected effect. The data processing and modelling code are available in the online replication materials.

Results

The first hypothesis focuses on the association between trust in parliament and the level of populism of the supported political party, depending on the party's position on the political scene. To start, Model 1.1 in [Table 1](#) includes additive effects of all variables without any interactions. The model reveals familiar patterns of associations. Supporters of more populist parties tend to report lower levels of trust in parliament, but the effects are relatively small: the difference between trust in parliament among supporters of the most populist countries (populism level of 1) and supporters of the least populist parties (populism level of 0) is estimated at 0.28 units (95% CI = [−0.36; −0.19]) on the 0–10 trust scale, net of the other factors.

Regarding the party's position in or outside of government, political trust is highest among supporters of leading or only government parties, lower among supporters of junior coalition parties, and lower still (by almost an entire point compared to trust among winners) among supporters of opposition parties. Interestingly, among the nine countries included in the analysis, countries with higher levels of democracy on average see lower levels of trust in parliament. A change from the highest to the lowest level of democracy represented in the data, i.e. from 0.83 in Poland in 2012 to 0.37 in Hungary in 2019, would be associated with a decline in trust in parliament by 1.11 points on the 0–10 scale (CI = [−2.20, −0.06]). Looking at the control variables, countries with higher GDP *per*

Table 1. Model results: **Trust in parliament**

Variable	Model 1.1		Model 1.2		Model 1.3	
	Estimate	95% interval	Estimate	95% interval	Estimate	95% interval
Populism	-0.28	[-0.36; -0.19]	0.50	[-0.03; 1.07]	4.01	[-0.29; 8.29]
Party status (ref. Government senior)						
Junior	-0.36	[-0.42; -0.29]	0.36	[0.10; 0.65]	2.95	[0.38; 5.88]
Opposition	-0.90	[-0.94; -0.85]	-0.28	[-0.54; -0.02]	-0.56	[-3.59; 2.54]
Populism*Junior			-1.84	[-2.81; -1.03]	-8.68	[-15.24; -3.02]
Populism*Opposition			-1.25	[-1.84; -0.66]	-4.31	[-8.55; -0.01]
Populism*Democracy					-5.24	[-10.82; 0.39]
Junior*Democracy					-3.56	[-7.27; -0.28]
Opposition*Democracy					0.26	[-3.67; 4.19]
Populism*Junior*Democracy					9.69	[2.34; 18.00]
Populism*Opposition*Democracy					4.59	[-1.13; 10.15]
Liberal democracy	-2.16	[-4.39; -0.06]	-1.19	[-4.12; 1.66]	0.42	[-4.10; 4.88]
Control variables						
GDP per capita	0.47	[0.06; 0.83]	0.43	[0.02; 0.80]	0.43	[0.01; 0.82]
Age (10 years)	-0.29	[-0.36; -0.22]	-0.29	[-0.35; -0.22]	-0.29	[-0.36; -0.22]
Age (10 years), squared	0.03	[0.03; 0.04]	0.03	[0.03; 0.04]	0.03	[0.03; 0.04]
Women	-0.11	[-0.15; -0.07]	-0.11	[-0.15; -0.07]	-0.11	[-0.15; -0.07]
Schooling years	0.05	[0.05; 0.06]	0.05	[0.05; 0.06]	0.05	[0.05; 0.06]
Intercept	4.52	[2.40; 6.98]	3.48	[0.85; 6.53]	2.41	[-1.32; 6.44]
Random effects						
sd country intercept	0.51	[0.18; 1.09]	0.50	[0.09; 1.15]	0.53	[0.05; 1.30]
sd country-wave intercept	0.61	[0.49; 0.75]	0.64	[0.42; 0.88]	0.63	[0.46; 0.84]
sd Populism			0.71	[0.32; 1.18]	0.47	[0.05; 0.89]
sd Junior			0.30	[0.02; 0.66]	0.17	[0.01; 0.47]
sd Opposition			0.46	[0.27; 0.68]	0.47	[0.28; 0.71]
sd Populism*Junior			1.27	[0.45; 2.41]	0.90	[0.31; 1.81]
sd Populism*Opposition			0.68	[0.15; 1.18]	0.63	[0.16; 1.10]
cor Intercept, Populism			-0.27	[-0.77; 0.43]	-0.20	[-0.72; 0.55]
cor Intercept, Junior			0.24	[-0.40; 0.76]	0.17	[-0.54; 0.78]
cor Populism, Junior			0.15	[-0.60; 0.78]	0.10	[-0.66; 0.76]
cor Intercept, Opposition			0.19	[-0.28; 0.67]	0.09	[-0.36; 0.57]
cor Populism, Opposition			-0.30	[-0.81; 0.33]	-0.26	[-0.77; 0.32]
cor Junior, Opposition			-0.04	[-0.64; 0.62]	0.03	[-0.64; 0.71]
cor Intercept, Populism*Junior			-0.01	[-0.52; 0.49]	-0.00	[-0.50; 0.51]
cor Populism, Populism*Junior			-0.30	[-0.81; 0.36]	-0.16	[-0.75; 0.53]
cor Junior, Populism*Junior			-0.51	[-0.91; 0.38]	-0.27	[-0.88; 0.56]
cor Opposition, Populism*Junior			0.54	[0.04; 0.88]	0.50	[-0.07; 0.88]
cor Intercept, Populism*Opposition			-0.19	[-0.72; 0.38]	-0.18	[-0.73; 0.35]
cor Populism, Populism*Opposition			-0.23	[-0.73; 0.49]	0.10	[-0.54; 0.74]
cor Junior, Populism*Opposition			0.09	[-0.58; 0.70]	0.03	[-0.68; 0.71]
cor Opposition, Populism*Opposition			-0.24	[-0.73; 0.46]	-0.47	[-0.84; 0.31]
Cor Populism*Junior, Populism*Opposition			-0.06	[-0.65; 0.55]	-0.20	[-0.77; 0.51]
sd Democracy					0.48	[0.02; 1.40]
cor Intercept, Democracy					-0.22	[-0.98; 0.92]

Note: cor = correlation, sd = standard deviation. Sample size: 52,763 observations, 58 country-years, 9 countries.

capita enjoy higher trust, and people with less education, women, and younger people tend to have lower trust.

Model 1.2 adds an interaction effect between the level of populism of the supported party, and the position of that party in or out of government. Figure 1 presents these associations graphically, showing that political trust among supporters of government populist parties strongly depends on whether the party is government leader or a smaller coalition partner. Trust among supporters of populist parties that are junior coalition partners is similar to when the parties are in the opposition. In other words, only leading the government represents a true victory for populist party supporters. At the same time, among supporters of non-populist parties, the differences in trust are overall much smaller, and the important distinction is between the party being in the government at all, and outside of government.

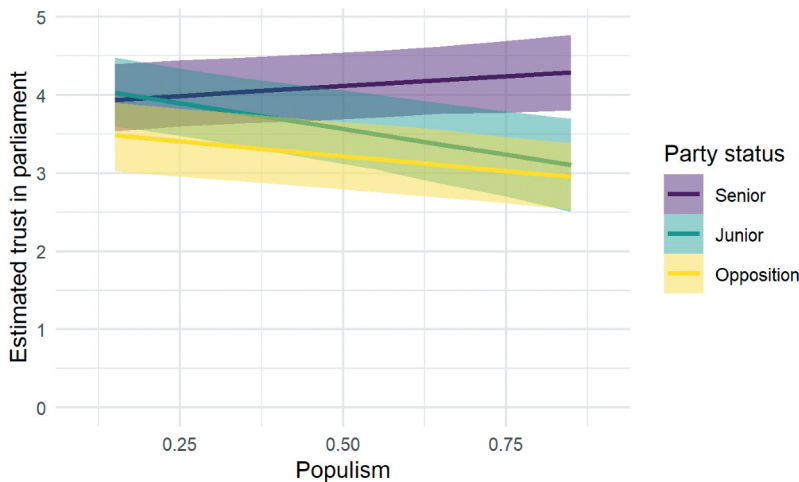


Figure 1. Estimated levels of trust in parliament by level of populism of the supported party and the party's winner-loser status. Lines indicate posterior medians, and ribbons indicate 95% posterior credible intervals. Data from Bulgaria, Czechia, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia. *Data source:* European Social Survey Rounds 1–9, V-Party V1 and V-Dem V11.1 datasets.

A closer look at estimated trust levels based on Model 1.2 shows that for voters for the most populist parties (populism score of 0.95), the estimated difference in trust between supporters of coalition leaders and opposition parties is 1.46, 95%-CI = [1.09, 1.85], while the same difference for supporters of the least populist parties (populism score of 0.05) is by over one point smaller and amounts to 0.34, CI = [0.11, 0.58]. The posterior probability of the winner-loser gap in trust among populist voters being greater than the winner-loser gap among non-populist voters exceeds 0.99.

These results support the first hypothesis, which expected a greater winner-loser gap among supporters of populist parties than among supporters of non-populist parties. When a populist party wins elections, the increase in trust among its supporters exceeds the decline in trust among supporters of non-populist losers. As a consequence, overall average trust increases.

This analysis also shows that populist preferences need not necessarily mean low trust, as the analysis by Norris and Inglehart (2019) suggests, and that low trust in parliament or politicians is not a distinguishing feature of populist party supporters (Rooduijn 2018). Additionally, the results point to the importance of distinguishing between support for government leaders and junior coalition partners. Among non-populist voters, trust is very similar regardless of the supported party's status in government. Among populist voters, trust is much higher if the supported party is leading the government than if it is a junior partner.

The second hypothesis considers the role of democracy. Model 1.3 adds the country's quality of democracy to the interaction between the supported party's level of populism and the party's status. To facilitate interpretation, Figure 2 presents estimated levels of trust in parliament depending on the supported party's level of populism and that party's position in relation to the government for two levels of democracy, which approximately correspond to the 15th and 85th percentile of the democracy distribution of the country-years represented in the data.

According to the results, low levels of democracy exacerbate the effects observed in Model 1.2 and Figure 1. When the level of democracy is low, the trust advantage associated with supporting a ruling populist party is the highest and is estimated at 1.73, CI = [1.39, 2.06], which is higher than the trust advantage associated with supporting a non-populist party in a less democratic context (0.26, CI = [-0.18, 0.76]), and higher than the trust advantage associated with supporting a populist party (0.97, CI = [0.56, 1.37]) or non-populist party (0.4, CI = [0.17, 0.67]) in a more democratic context.

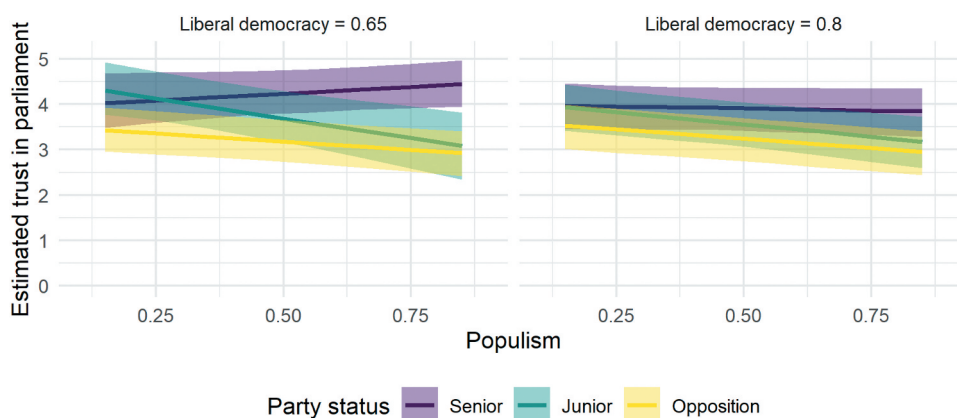


Figure 2. Estimated levels of trust in parliament by level of populism of the supported party, the party's winner-loser status, and the country's level of democracy. Lines indicate posterior medians, and ribbons indicate 95% posterior credible intervals. Data from Bulgaria, Czechia, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia. *Data source:* European Social Survey Rounds 1–9, V-Party V1 and V-Dem V11.1 datasets.

In less democratic contexts, supporters of parties that are government leaders tend to have higher trust if that party is populist than if it is not; the estimated difference is 0.8, $CI = [0.06, 1.52]$. At higher levels of democracy, there is no evidence of a difference between trust among supporters of ruling populist and ruling non-populist parties (estimated difference -0.15 , $CI = [-0.68, 0.37]$). But, there is a difference between trust among supporters of opposition populist and non-populist parties in that the latter is substantially higher, by 0.71 points on the 0–10 trust scale, $CI = [-1.0, -0.38]$. Overall, these results are consistent with hypothesis 2, which anticipated a higher winner-loser gap in political trust among supporters of populist parties in less democratic contexts compared to more democratic contexts.

Concluding remarks

In this paper I analyzed the links between political trust and support for populist parties in nine countries from Central and Southern Europe in the period 2002–2019, in an attempt to verify whether supporters of populist parties universally exhibit low political trust, and whether electoral victories of populist parties are associated with increases of winner-loser gaps in political support.

First, I found that the effect of political trust on supporting a populist party depends on this party's status in or out of government, but in a way that many analyses of winner-loser effects do not capture. The difference in political trust among supporters of populist government leaders and supporters of populist opposition parties is much greater than the same difference for supporters of non-populist parties. Additionally, among supporters of non-populist parties, political trust is similar among supporters of cabinet parties regardless of whether their junior or senior status. However, political trust among supporters of populist opposition parties is similar to that of supporters of populist parties that are junior coalition partners. The latter result suggests that parties in such situations may be under pressure to abandon their anti-establishment stance and focus on their roles in government. At the same time, populist parties leading the government face little pressure, at least on the domestic front, and may escalate their rhetoric instead of moderating it, thus earning greater support from their voters. Strong populist parties also have the capacity to normalize their rhetoric, a process aided – especially in Central and Eastern Europe – by mainstream parties who legitimize radical positions and narratives (Pytlas 2018).

The second hypothesis additionally considered the country's level of democracy, and found that the trust advantage of supporters of ruling populist parties is higher in countries with lower levels of democracy. Increased levels of political trust among supporters of populist governments in less

democratic countries can be expected to pull the overall societal mean of political trust upwards. However, such average increases conceal partisan polarization in political trust.

These results have implications for the understanding of political trust regarding its link to legitimacy and democratic utility. If legitimacy presupposes broad consensus about the adequacy of the political system and its institutions, it is necessary to pay attention to the distribution of political support in society, not only to its average level. Despite the overall increases in political trust under populist-led governments, the simultaneous increase in the polarization of political trust indicates low democratic legitimacy and may threaten political stability (Anderson et al. 2005). As Svobik (2019) and Graham and Svobik (2020) argue, high political polarization makes it easier for people to tolerate democratic violations in favor of partisan interests. Arbatli and Rosenberg (2020) point to one concrete way in which polarization may erode democracy: by transforming political opinions into identities, which increases the cost of accepting failure and decreases the cost of tolerating violations of democratic norms, in this case intimidation of the opposition, and leading to the acceptance of lowered democratic standards.

Relatedly, in order to infer about the democratic utility of political trust, it is necessary to examine *who* trusts *whom*. Rather than representing support for the democratic political system and its institutions, it is likely that high political trust among supporters of populist governments reflects support for the situation of having ‘our people’ in charge of running the country. Much like for populists ‘only some of the people are really the people’ (Noury and Roland 2020, 3), it seems that for supporters of populist governments only part of the state is *the* state, and the trust in political institutions they declare should be interpreted accordingly. There has long been a debate about the position of political trust, as measured in most surveys, on the spectrum of specific-to-diffuse support (Bergh 2004; cf. Easton 1965), but the possibility that the character of political trust declarations depends on the individual’s partisanship has – to the best of my knowledge – not yet been entertained. While more targeted analyses are required to test this hypothesis, the results in the present paper suggest that the high political trust expressed by supporters of populist governments is conditional on the populist incumbents and represents satisfaction with the outcome rather than support for the rules of the game. ‘[D]emocracy is a system in which parties lose elections’ (Przeworski 1991, 10), and if populist parties are removed from power, the currently observed high levels of political trust are likely to return to earlier low levels.

It is worth remembering that the present analysis only included nine countries that have experienced populist government leaders in the period 2002–2019 covered by the ESS data. These countries are clustered in Central and Southern Europe, and the results may hence not be broadly generalizable. Even among the nine countries, the rise of popularity of populist parties is attributed to different events: to the financial crisis and austerity policies that followed in Southern Europe, and to the concern with migrants and refugees during the so-called refugee crisis in Central Europe (Vachudova 2021). Still, some of the countries analyzed in the present paper saw populist-led governments already earlier. Rooduijn (2018) also notes differences between attributes of voters of different populist parties questioning a single concept of a ‘populist voter’. The different sources of populism party support, voter characteristics, and ideological content (cf. e.g. Zulianello 2019) may affect how the findings apply to different settings.

Future research, in addition to extending the geographical scope of the analysis, may attempt to more closely identify the mechanism that leads to higher winner effects among supporters of populist parties and distinguish the partisanship mechanism from the attitudes mechanism. The data I used did not enable measuring populist attitudes, so the present analysis relied on support for populist parties as a proxy. Since not all people with populist orientations vote for populist parties and not all populist voters are themselves populist, a richer dataset would enable testing the relative importance of both mechanisms.

Notes

1. This is the case of Freedom Party of Austria and the Swiss People’s Party.
2. By populism I mean the ‘thin ideology’ or discursive frame, which tends to be combined with a ‘thick ideology’, such as nationalism or socialism (Mudde 2017a, 2017b).

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Data availability statement

Replication materials are available via this anonymous link:

https://osf.io/7j3ua/?view_only=209067bfb9d64417a46af9cc2ac8d647

Replication materials

Replication materials are available via this link: <https://osf.io/7j3ua/>.

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Appendices

Table A1. List of countries and years.

Country	Round 1	Round 2	Round 3	Round 4	Round 5	Round 6	Round 7	Round 8	Round 9
Bulgaria			2006	2009	2011	2013			2018
Czechia	2002	2004		2009	2011	2013	2015	2016	2019
Greece	2003	2005			2011				
Hungary	2002	2005	2006	2009	2010	2012	2015	2017	2019
Italy	2003					2013		2017	2019
Lithuania					2011	2013	2015	2017	2019
Poland	2002	2004	2006	2008	2010	2012	2015	2016	2018
Slovakia		2004	2007	2008	2010	2012			2019
Slovenia	2002	2004	2006	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018

Table A2. Descriptive statistics.

Variable	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Trust in parliament	3.76	2.53	0	10
Status of supported political party				
Senior government party	0.41		0	1
Junior government party	0.16		0	1
Opposition party	0.43		0	1
Populism	0.45	0.26	0.05	0.99
Liberal democracy	0.74	0.1	0.37	0.83
GDP per capita, 10,000 USD	2.91	0.68	1.59	4.38
Education years	12.29	3.52	0	20
Women	0.53		0	1
Age in years/10	5.15	1.69	1.7	10.2

Note: Sample size: 52,763 observations, 58 country-years, 9 countries.