

# The Role of Populist Attitudes on Support for Centrist Populist Candidates: Evidence from El Salvador

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## INTRODUCTION

Nayib Bukele, a centrist populist, was elected as El Salvador’s president in 2019.<sup>1</sup> The ideational approach views centrist populism as populist ideas that are not combined with another “thick” ideology.<sup>2</sup> Centrist populists are unencumbered by traditional ideological restraints and “free to tell the people what they want to hear.”<sup>3</sup> Therefore, traditional individual level explanations do not explain support for centrist populists.<sup>4</sup> Scholars have argued that support for populist leaders can be predicted using populist attitude scales that measure the key dimensions of populism, anti-elitism, people centrism, and a Manichean moral worldview.  
**What is the role of populist attitudes in relation to support for centrist populists?**

## METHODS

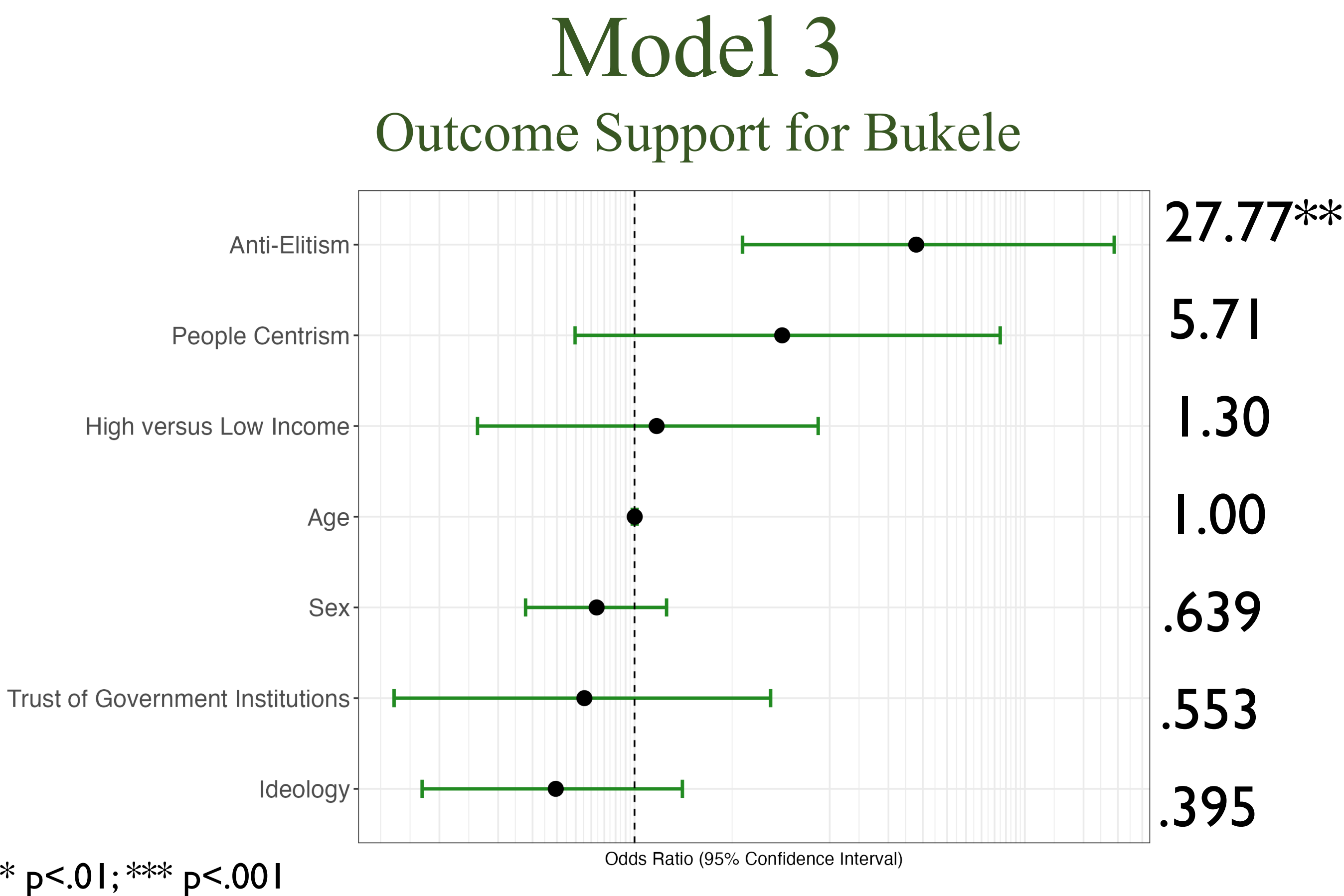
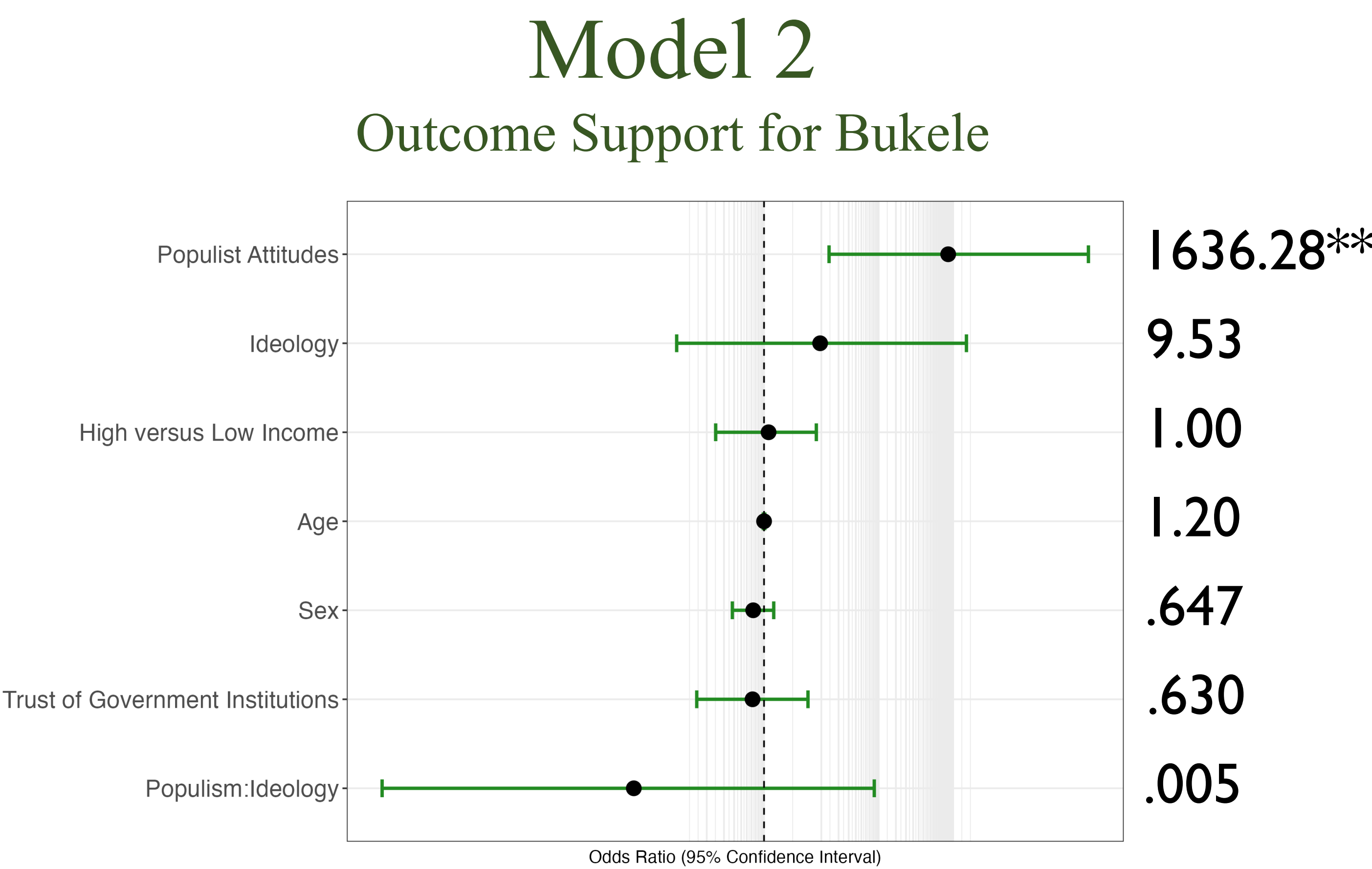
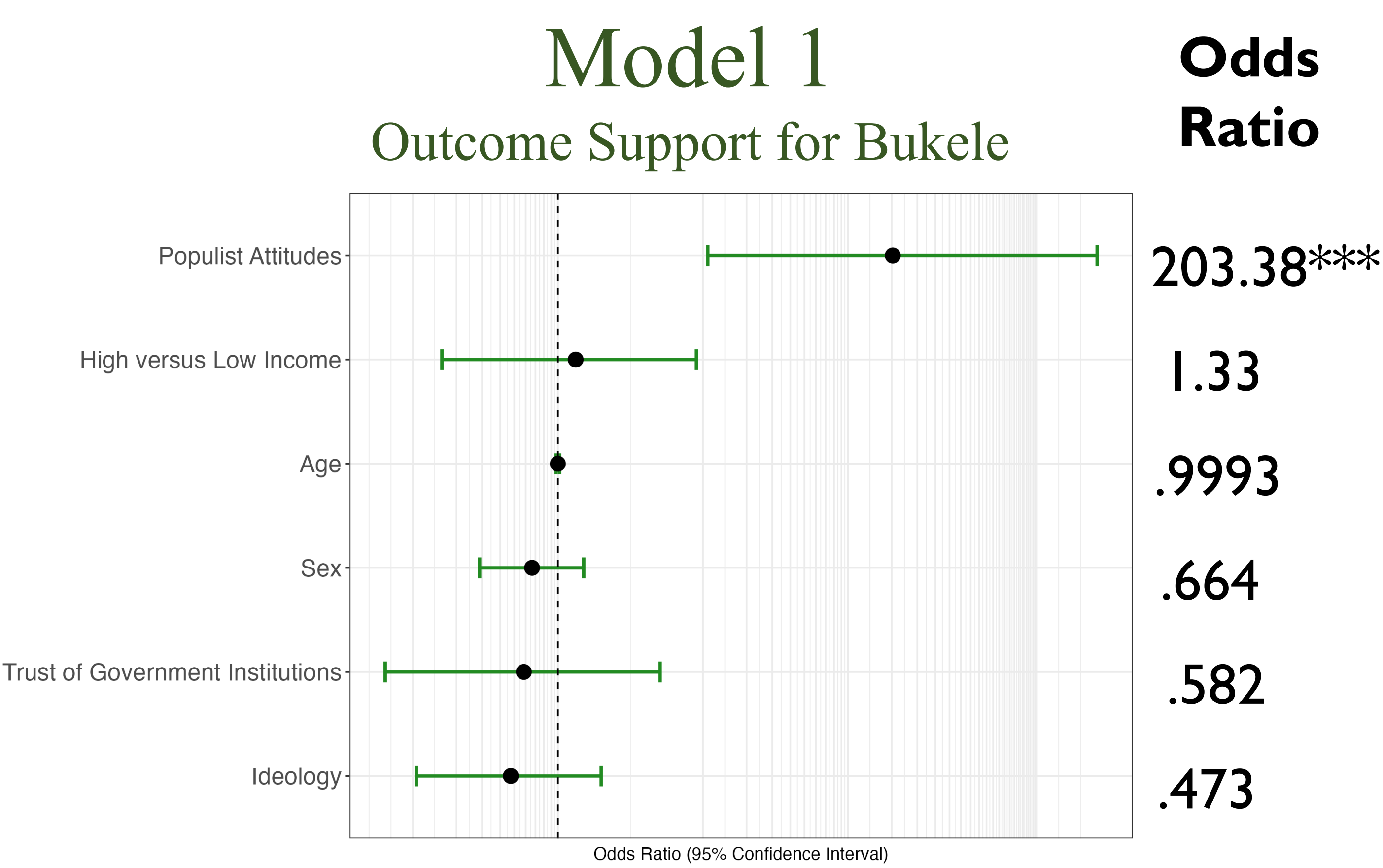
- The 2018 Wave of the Latin America Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) AmericasBarometer survey.
- Data collected in El Salvador by *Fundanugo* from November 18 – December 6, 2018.
- Random sample of the voting age population (*N* = 484).
- Principal components analysis was used to identify and predict factors for analyses.
- Logistic regression models were created with support for Bukele as the dependent variable.

Principal Components Analysis for Populism Measure

Item	Trust	Populist Attitudes	
		Anti-Elitism	People Centrism
Approval of the Legislative Assembly	.543	.350	-.349
Confidence in the Legislative Assembly	.797	.216	-.049
Confidence in political parties	.634	.377	.176
Confidence in the Supreme Court	.788	.256	.078
Confidence in the Media	.750	-.061	-.123
Confidence in Elections	.690	.301	.180
Confidence in the Constitutional Court	.801	.081	.147
Approval of the President (FMLN)	.021	.885	-.037
The Government is interested in what people like me think	.402	.419	.106
Confidence in the President (FMLN)	.393	.764	.143
You understand the important issues in your country	.083	-.027	.789
Trust in Others	0.16	.102	.551

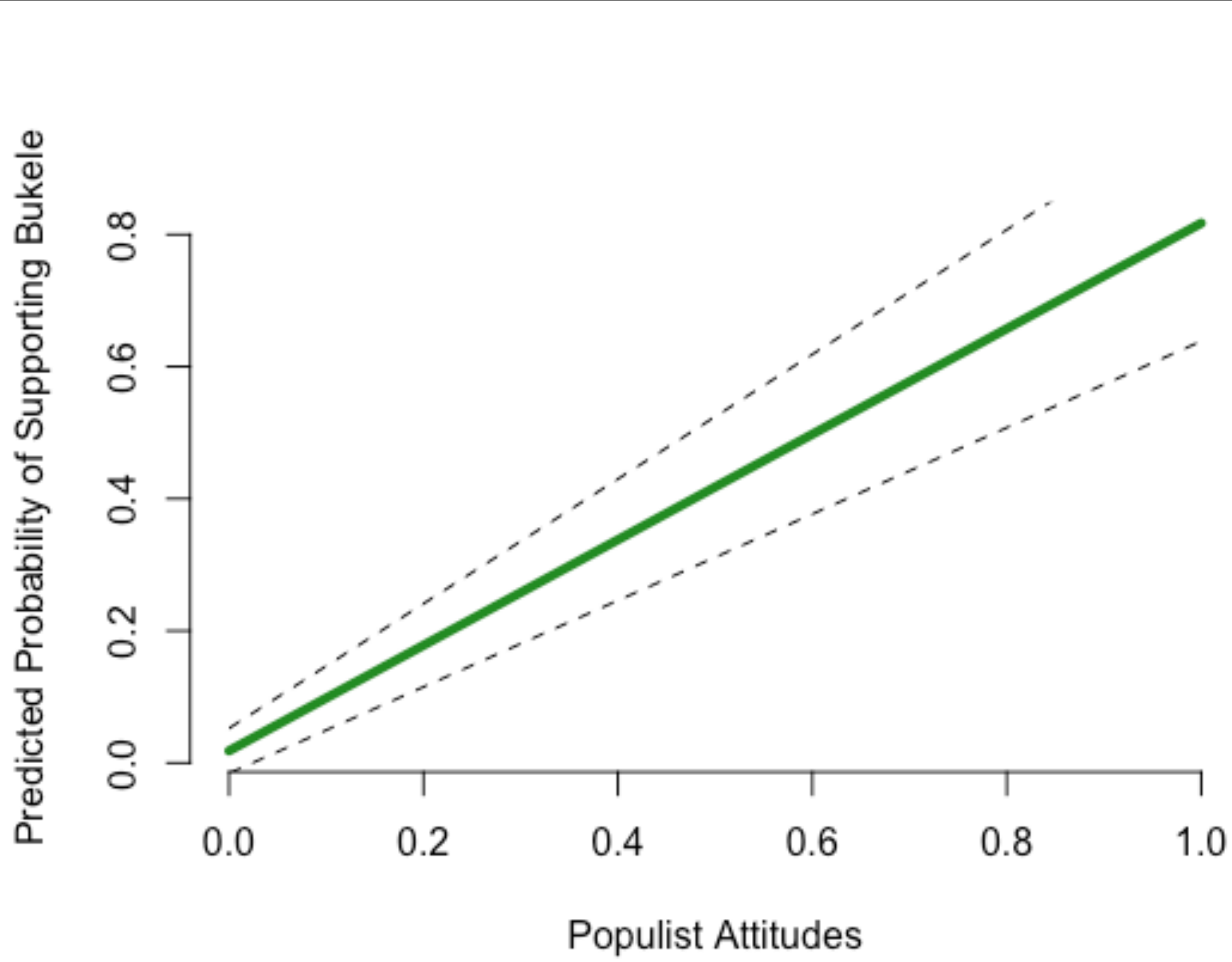
Principal Component Analysis with Varimax Rotation and Kaiser Normalization (LAPOP, 2019)

## RESULTS



\*\* *p* < .01; \*\*\* *p* < .001

## RESULTS



Predicted probability of supporting Bukele by populist attitudes with all other variables held at the mean or mode.

## DISCUSSION

- Populist attitudes predict support for Bukele, even when controlling for other variables such as ideology.
- Ideology plays a minimal role in predicting support for Bukele, a centrist populist.
- Anti-elitism is the most important element of populism for predicting support for Bukele.
- Results support the idea that Bukele is a centrist populist.
- Populist attitudes predict support for centrist populists.
  - Therefore, centrist populist voters are distinct from ideologically committed populist voters.
- Populist attitudes are still a useful concept for understanding centrist populist leaders.<sup>5</sup>

## REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup>Meléndez-Sánchez, M. (2021). Latin America Erupts: Millennial Authoritarianism in El Salvador. *Journal of Democracy*, 32(3), 19-32.  
<sup>2</sup>Hawkins, K.A. & Rovira Kaltwasser, C. (2019). Introduction. In Hawkins, K.A., Carlin, R.E., Littvay, L., Rovira Kaltwasser, C. (Eds.), *The Ideational Approach to Populism: Concept, Theory, and Analysis*. (pp. 1-25) Routledge.  
<sup>3</sup>Pop-Eleches, G. (2010). Throwing out the bums: Protest voting and unorthodox parties after communism. *World Politics*, 62(2), 221-260.  
<sup>4</sup>Učen, P. (2004). Centrist populism as a new competitive and mobilization strategy in Slovak politics. *Party government in Slovakia: Experience and perspectives*, 45-73.  
<sup>5</sup>Havlik, V., & Voda, P. (2018). Cleavages, protest or voting for hope? The rise of centrist populist parties in the Czech Republic. *Swiss Political Science Review*, 24(2), 161-186.  
<sup>6</sup>Castanho Silva, B., Fuks, M., & Tamaki, E. R. (2022). So thin it's almost invisible: Populist attitudes and voting behavior in Brazil. *Electoral Studies*, 75, 102434.