

Populist Attitudes and Support for Democracy

Mapping the Relationship between Populism,
Authoritarianism, and Illiberalism

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The Growing Field of Populist Attitudes

How Populist Are the People? Measuring Populist Attitudes in Voters

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When the Whole Is Greater than the Sum of Its Parts: On the Conceptualization and Measurement of Populist Attitudes and Other Multidimensional Constructs

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An Empirical Comparison of Seven Populist Attitudes Scales

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RESEARCH NOTE

Measuring Populist Attitudes on Three Dimensions

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Werner Wirth¹

Looking for a “Populist Attitudes Scale”

Akkerman et al., 2014

A1 The politicians in the [National] Parliament need to follow the will of the people.

A2 The people, and not politicians, should make our most important policy decisions.

A3 The political differences between the elite and the people are larger than the differences among the people.

A4 I would rather be represented by a citizen than by a specialized politician.

A5 Elected officials talk too much and take too little action.

A6 What people call “compromise” in politics is really just selling out on ones principles.

Source: Castanho-Silva et al. (2020)

The Unanswered Question

Are “populist citizens”
less supportive of democracy
than non-populists?

Populist Attitudes and Democratic Support: The Intuitive Picture

Populist Dimension	Conflict with Democratic Support
Antielitism	Rejection of the representative principle
People-centrism	Majoritarian rule over liberal limited government
Manicheism	Monistic general will over pluralism

Populist Attitudes and Democratic Support: The Empirical Evidence

Paper	Countries	Conclusion
Ellenbroek, Meijers, and Krouwel (2023)	NLD	Populists are not antipluralist
Guinjoan (2023)	ESP	Only right-wing populists have an illiberal conception of democracy
Heinisch and Wegscheider (2020)	AUT, DEU	Populists are antipluralist but do not have a majoritarian conception of democracy
König (2022)	DEU	Populists have a majoritarian conception of democracy
Rovira-Kaltwasser and van Hauwaert (2020)	CHE, CHI, DEU, ESP, FRA, GBR, GRC, ITA, POL, SWE, TUR	Populists are dissatisfied democrats
Spruyt, Rooduijn, and Zaslove (2021)	NLD	Only politically unsophisticated populists are also pluralists
Wuttke, Schimpf, and Schoen (2022)	CHE, DEU, FRA, GBR	Populists are just as liberal as non-populists but have inconsistent conceptions of democracy
Zaslove and Meijers (2023)	NLD	Populists are just as liberal as non-populists but hold majoritarian conceptions of democracy

In short...

The evidence up to date

“paints a complex association between populist individuals and democracy that seems much better described by lights and shades rather than as a clear threat to it.”

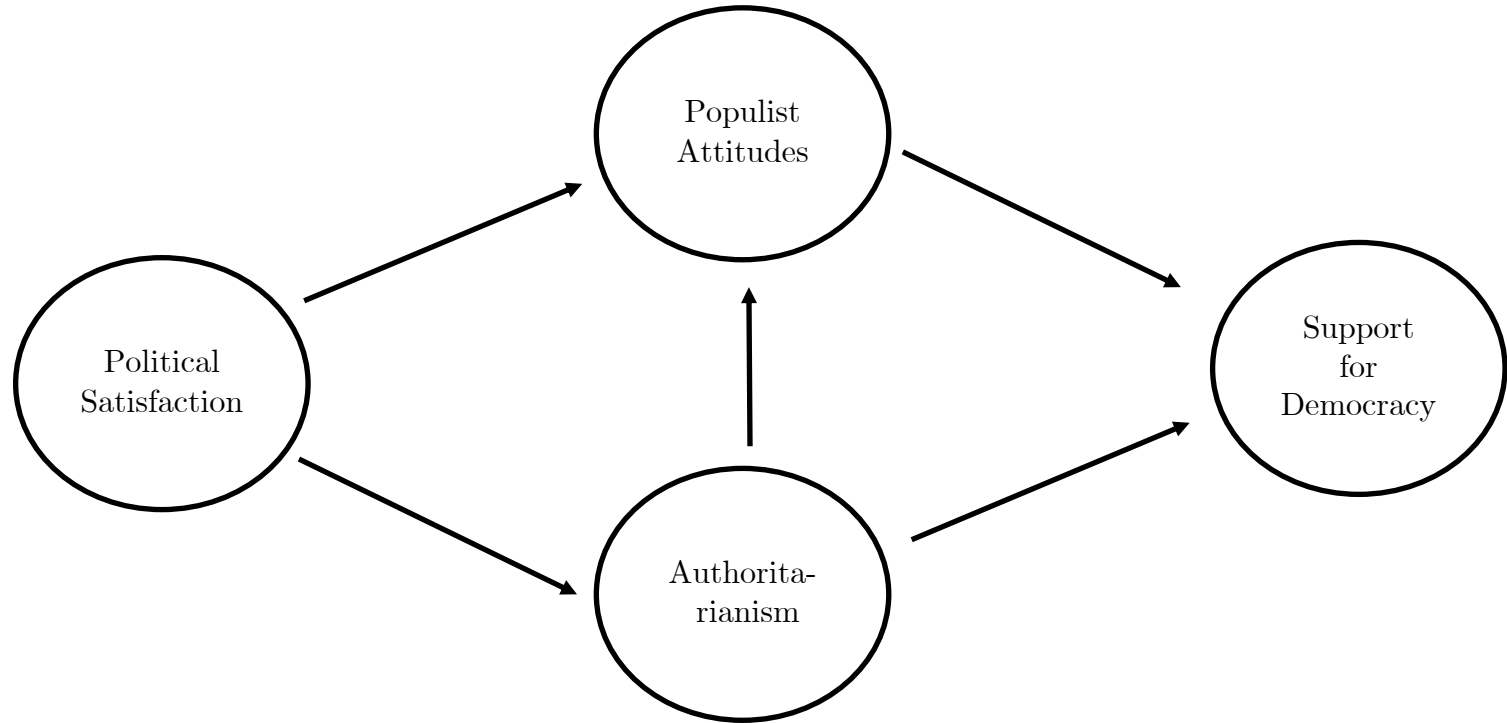
(Marcos-Marne et al. 2022)

Possible Explanations

Why do existing studies arrive at contradictory conclusions?

Problem	Populist Attitudes	Democratic Support
<i>Multidimensionality</i>	Antielitism, people-centrism, and Manicheism	Conflicting conceptions of democratic models
<i>Multicausality</i>	Different dimensions have different effects	Mediating role of other political attitudes
<i>Measurement difficulties</i>	Populism is “more than the sum of its parts”	Democrats “with adjectives” and democratic support as “truism”

Theoretical Framework



Data

Online surveys fielded in Greece, Italy, and Spain ($n = 3,000$)

IV: Populist Attitudes	IV: Authoritarianism	DV: Democratic Support
Akkerman et al. (2014) scale	Traditionalism	Illiberal conception of democracy (Zanotti and Rama 2021)
	Identitarianism	‘Importance of democracy’ item
	Anti-immigration views	Strongman support
		Pluralism

Estimation Strategy

- **Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA)** to measure latent variables
- **Structural Equation Model (SEM)** to simultaneously estimate multiple regression paths and test mediation effects between latent variables

CFA – Authoritarian Attitudes

Latent variable	Item wording	Loading	omega
<i>Traditionalism</i>	When jobs are scarce, men should have priority over women to access them	0.395	0.89
	Homosexual couples should have the same right to adopt than heterosexuals	-0.587	
	Authoritarian predispositions index (Feldman and Stenner 1997)	0.424	
<i>Identitarianism</i>	I feel my national identity is threatened	0.664	
	The preservation of the national identity should be one of government's priorities	0.778	
	The people must remain united against those who threaten our values and way of life	0.513	
	Our identity and way of life must be preserved at all costs	0.645	
	Changes in our identity, culture and way of life are natural and should not be feared	-0.352	
<i>Anti-immigration</i>	Immigration threatens our culture	0.855	
	Immigrants raise criminality	0.854	
	Border controls should be strengthened	0.727	
	[Country] would be stronger if we stopped immigration	0.886	
	When jobs are scarce, employers should give priority to country nationals over immigrants	0.737	
	Immigrants take away jobs from real [country's nationals]	0.830	
	Immigrants take away social services from real [country's nationals]	0.850	

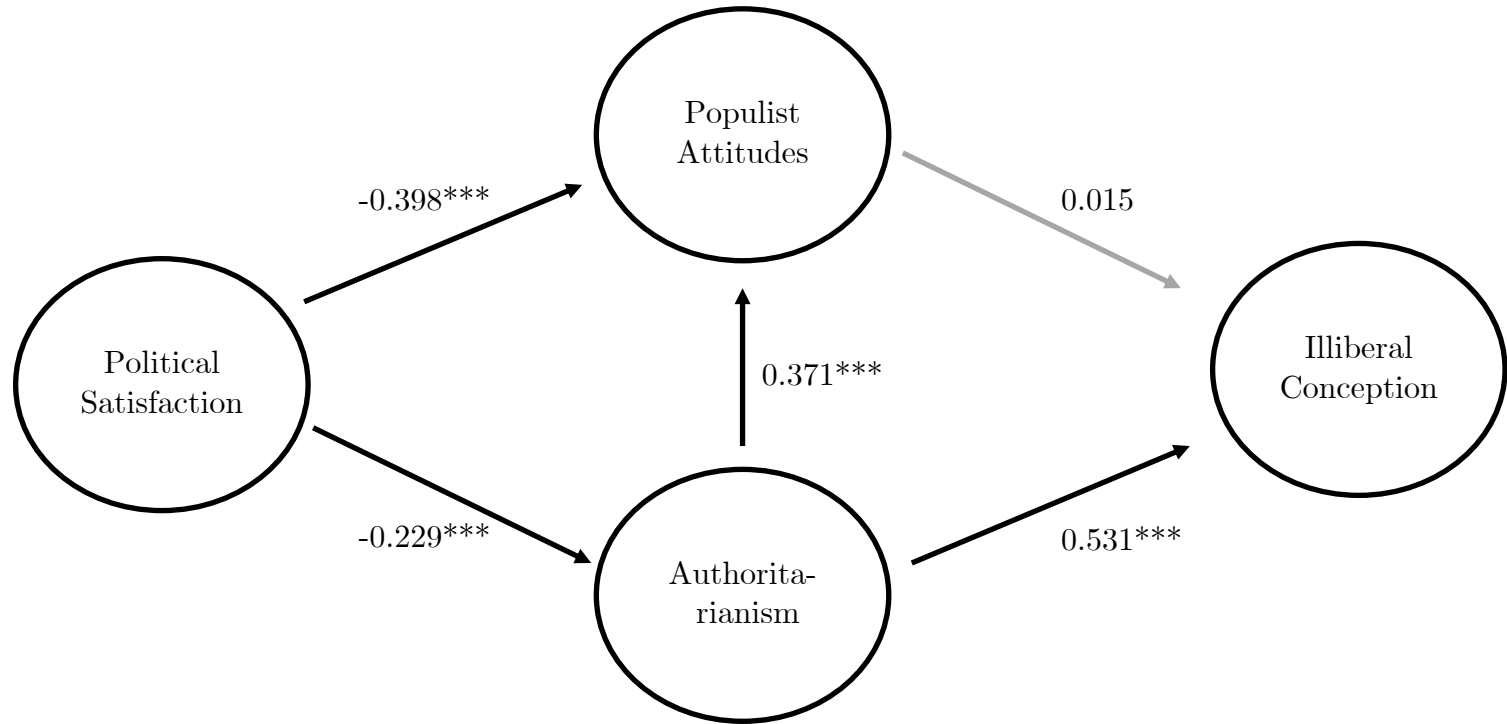
CFA – Support for Democracy

Latent variable	Item wording	Loading	Omega
<i>Illiberal conception</i>	A Prime Minister that shuts down Parliament in exchange for high economic growth rates	0.633	0.78
	A Prime Minister that suppresses a media outlet in exchange for better wealth distribution in the country	0.709	
	That a country's minorities are not acknowledged by the state in exchange for more effective policies against criminality	0.665	
	Heavy interference by the executive in the judiciary in exchange for a universal welfare state	0.724	
<i>Strongman support</i>	A strong leader is more important than political parties	0.695	0.64
	Great leaders should be able to act without interference of parties or other political institutions	0.800	
	Police should have illimited powers to deal with crime	0.307	
<i>Pluralism</i>	It is important to recognise the legitimacy of our political opponents and listen to them	0.663	0.78
	Moderation and consensus building are key to the success of democracy	0.643	
	A good political leader should always listen to other politicians, even if they belong to other parties	0.770	
	Leaders who defend ideas that are opposed to mine can be also right	0.692	

SEM Results (I)

	Illiberal conception		Importance of democracy		Strongman support		Pluralism	
<i>Populist Attitudes</i>	0.162*** (0.047)	0.033 (0.038)	-0.080** (0.122)	0.012 (0.113)	0.191*** (0.048)	0.027 (0.039)	0.088** (0.039)	0.161*** (0.037)
<i>Authoritarianism</i>	—	0.470*** (0.094)	—	-0.370*** (0.271)	—	0.569*** (0.106)	—	-0.285*** (0.074)
Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
N	2,443		2,443		2,443		2,443	

SEM Results (II)



Note: DWLS estimator, CFI = 0.950, TLI = 0.945, RMSEA = 0.059, SRMR = 0.060 (n = 2,443).

Discussion

- The negative effect of populist attitudes on support for democracy disappears when controlling for authoritarianism
- Populist attitudes are positively associated with pluralism – even after controlling for authoritarianism
- Authoritarianism does lead to populist attitudes: need to further investigate “varieties of populist attitudes”

Limitations

- Need to disentangle the **causal chain** between populist attitudes and the “authoritarian package”
- Analyzing **interaction effects** between latent variables

Thanks for you attention!

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