


RESEARCH ARTICLE

The populist citizen: Empirical evidence from Europe and Latin America

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Abstract

Scholars are increasingly interested in ‘populist attitudes’, which – studies show – can explain party support and vote choice. However, current research has not yet analyzed in detail the characteristics of those individuals with populist proclivities, or so-called *populist citizens*. To address this research gap, we harmonize survey data on populist attitudes for nine European countries, five Latin American countries, and Turkey in order to uncover shared or distinct features of populist citizens. Our findings are threefold. First, we identify differences in the sociodemographic characteristics of populist citizens, notably between Europe and Latin America. Second, we find similar patterns of heterogeneity in the political features of populist citizens. Third, we show that populist citizens across all countries have the same democratic profile. They systematically support democracy over other forms of government, while being dissatisfied with its implementation. This suggests populist attitudes are intrinsic to the political culture of contemporary democracies.

Keywords: populism; comparative politics; attitudes; democratic deficit

Introduction

Research on populism is booming. This growing interest in the populist phenomenon did not come out of the blue. In the last few years, populist forces of different stripes have emerged in the electoral arenas in countries as diverse as Austria, Bolivia, Ecuador, Germany, Hungary, Poland, Spain, and the USA, among others. In some of these countries, populist forces are electorally quite successful and have even entered government. The increasing amount of research on populism is also related to an important transformation in the academic field: while not long ago there was an abundance of ad hoc definitions that often treated the specificities of national or regional manifestations of populism as generalizable (for instance, clientelism in Latin America or xenophobia in Western Europe), we now witness a growing consensus on an ideational approach to populism. This defines populism as a set of ideas characterized not only by the Manichean distinction between ‘the pure people’ and ‘the corrupt elite’ but also by the unconditional defense of popular sovereignty (Mudde, 2004; Stanley, 2008; Hawkins, 2009; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017; Hawkins *et al.*, 2018a).

In contrast to other conceptual traditions, the ideational approach permits the analysis of the supply of and demand for populist ideas. While the former refers to the empirical study of the actors who employ populism, the latter alludes to the empirical study of populist beliefs at the mass level and constitutes one of the principal advantages of the ideational approach. If we are interested in understanding the democratic challenges of populism, we cannot undervalue

or underestimate its expression among the population. After all, in representative democracies, everything starts and ends with the citizens, what they believe in and what type of political forces they support. By considering populism at the mass level, one can grasp how many citizens share the populist set of ideas, independently of the existence of an electorally strong or weak populist supply. Differently put, we can think of populism as an important element of the political culture.

In recent years, a growing number of scholars are undertaking survey research to examine how populist citizens are and explore what is commonly termed *populist attitudes*. To hold populist attitudes means to hold a set of beliefs about the political world, characterized by seeing politics in Manichean terms, i.e., as a struggle between ‘the pure people’ and ‘the corrupt establishment’. Of course, the existence of populist ideas at the mass level does not imply that populist forces automatically receive public support. It is important to make that distinction. As Hawkins *et al.* (2017: 276–277) indicate, ‘[p]opulist ideas behave [. . .] as a disposition that generally lies latent. These ideas may be widespread amongst individuals, but they coexist with other discourses and must be activated through a context of actual material conditions and linguistic cues’. Accordingly, the activation of populist attitudes is not unanticipated, but it is rather the result of failures of democratic representation that can be attributed to intentional elite behavior (Busby *et al.*, 2018; Hawkins *et al.*, 2018b). The resulting representative gap is thus intertwined with populist ideas. By casting doubts about the integrity of the establishment and advocating the defense of the general will of the people, such ideas invite citizens to go beyond the classic model of ‘allegiant political culture’, which is marked by the respect of political authority and acceptance of governmental decisions (Dalton and Welzel, 2014: 6–7).

One of the first attempts to measure populist attitudes in modern times was the pioneering study by Hawkins and Riding (2010).¹ This paved the way for Akkerman *et al.* (2014), who developed a similar battery of six survey items to gauge populist ideas in the Netherlands. Since then, a developing literature uses the same or a close variant of these items to undertake empirical research in various European and Latin American contexts (Akkerman *et al.*, 2017; Jacobs *et al.*, 2018; Hawkins *et al.*, 2018b; Meléndez and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2019; Marcos-Marne *et al.*, 2019). What do these contributions tell us about populism at the mass level? In a nutshell, they show that populist attitudes are widespread across countries, typically high and explain political behavior. Such omnipresence can be thought of as a ‘populist Zeitgeist’ (Mudde, 2004) and thus a ‘pathological normalcy’ at the mass level (Mudde, 2010). Most of these analyses, however, are single-country studies, primarily because conducting surveys is an expensive endeavor. To the best of our knowledge, one of the few contributions that examines populist attitudes for a broader set of European countries is the study by Van Hauwaert and van Kessel (2018). They demonstrate that, among other things, populist attitudes across nine European countries are important predictors of support for populist parties.

Most research into populism among the masses sets out to explain different expressions (or active translations) of populist potential (e.g. populist support or vote choice). While this research pits populism as part of democratic politics, it often overlooks their core unifying component, namely populist attitudes. From a conceptual perspective, this core is likely to extend the political culture of a country, as the populist set of ideas might be shared by large sections of society. Not by chance, scholars of political culture have been using survey data to show not only that citizens have different types of beliefs and orientations, but also that contemporary societies are characterized by the increasing presence of so-called assertive rather than allegiant citizens (Dalton and Welzel, 2014). While the latter tend to be politically passive, trust institutions and deferent toward authorities, the former are more inclined to be politically active, distrust existing institutions, and be skeptical toward authorities. Seen in this light, one could think that populist attitudes are part and parcel of a new type of citizen that is becoming prevalent across

¹We also recognize the pioneering work by Axelrod (1967), Farrell and Laughlin (1976) and Dryzek and Berejikian (1993) in developing the individual-level construct that we today refer to as *populist attitudes*.

contemporary societies because of growing levels of education and the subsequent process of cognitive mobilization (Dalton, 1984).

Yet, an in-depth analysis of the characteristics of individuals with populist attitudes remains largely absent. In other words, we have little empirical knowledge about the populist masses, or *populist citizens* as we will refer to them, and whether they share a similar outlook across contexts. This study begins to fill this research gap by examining populist attitudes across five Latin American and nine European countries, plus Turkey. By pooling such a diverse selection of countries, our main aim is to examine what characteristics unite and distinguish populist individuals. Differently put, to what extent can we speak of *the* populist citizen, or homogeneity among populist citizens? As we will show, despite notable heterogeneity across contexts, there is one important similarity that deserves further empirical examination: populist citizens are thoroughly homogenous in terms of their democratic profile. On average, citizens tend to be more populist when the gap between pragmatic opinions and normative expectations of democracy is larger, which suggests that populist ideas are related to democratic discomfort and can be thought of as part of an assertive citizen's profile.

We structure the study as follows. We start by discussing the current literature on populism and argue it is possible to expect some distinct and shared patterns in the sociodemographic, political, and democratic profiles of populist citizens. The next section focuses on the methodological strategy and outlines the countries under study, data, and measurements. The subsequent empirical analysis considers the average levels of populism within each country and describes the sociodemographic, political, and democratic profiles of populist citizens across the countries under scrutiny. Here, the primary focus is on patterns of variance between and within world regions. Finally, we summarize the main findings of the study and discuss their broader implications, as well as some avenues for future research on populist attitudes.

Theoretical expectations: the characteristics of populist citizens

Not uncommon in earlier populism research is the assumption or expectation of homogeneity among populist citizens. An important argument here is that 'the pure people' is a virtuous entity marked by a single *moral* essence that holds no relevant sociological differences (Taggart, 2000). While this certainly holds some truth from a theoretical perspective, we argue that such a generic statement omits important patterns of variance at an empirical level. Laclau (2005) and his followers even argue that populism is a discourse that seeks to generate a 'chain of equivalences' articulating social groups with different ideas and interests in order to construct not only a common will but also a common enemy. It is then not surprising that citizens with different socioeconomic and sociopolitical characteristics interpret political reality through a populist lens. Despite widespread acceptance, the empirical validity of this claim, particularly across different countries and world regions, remains underdeveloped. We directly address this enigma and contribute to the ongoing debates by examining the sociodemographic, political, and democratic profiles of populist citizens.²

The sociodemographic profile of populist citizens

A classic literature maintains that citizens with an affinity for radicalism are typically older men with lower levels of education and a precarious job situation (Betz, 1994; Kriesi *et al.*, 2008). More recently, some scholars have tried to assert this same sociodemographic profile applies to populist

²It is important to highlight that this study sets out to examine populist citizens, that is, individuals who share the populist set of ideas. This is distinct from populist voters or supporters, that is, individuals who actively support populist forces. Recent literature mostly provides insights in the latter. Determinants of the former are less explored (but, see Van Hauwaert *et al.*, 2019b).

citizens (Goodhart, 2017; Inglehart and Norris, 2016). For both strands of scholarship, the overall argument resembles the so-called ‘losers of modernization’ thesis, which contends that certain segments of society demand economic protection and the recovery of national sovereignty as they suffer from the transformations associated with globalization. Because of this, disadvantaged groups subsequently turn to political actors who wish to undo these societal changes and promise to insulate them from such developments. Most commonly, various scholars studying Europe argue this stimulates (right-wing) populist mobilization (Inglehart and Norris, 2016; Goodhart, 2017; Eichengreen, 2018; Mouffe, 2018). A paradigmatic example in this regard was the 2016 Brexit referendum, which mobilized an underlying divide between socially liberal cosmopolitans (typically younger and well-educated) and older, less educated social conservatives (Hobolt, 2018). Similarly, across Latin America, debates surrounding the Washington Consensus divided electorates and eventually contributed to the emergence of (populist) radical left forces toward the end of the 1990s (Weyland *et al.*, 2010; Levitsky and Roberts, 2011).

Nevertheless, the literature raises noteworthy concerns about the ‘losers of modernization’ thesis. Scholars looking to specifically relate the thesis to populism are (too) quick to assume there is a uniform group of citizens who might or might not share populist proclivities due to modernization dynamics and who look to support populist parties. This line of reasoning, at least as a cross-national expectation, is highly problematic, however. We can identify conceptual, theoretical, and empirical concerns in this regard.

First, it confuses populist voters with populist citizens. Nevertheless, as many scholars have shown, the populist potential vastly outweighs the populist vote in any society, and we must therefore carefully distinguish between the two. Second, there is no theoretical reason why economic modernization would stimulate populism by itself. As Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2018: 8) argue, ‘this theory goes back decades [. . .] but in almost all previous cases, it explained nationalism or the radical right, not populism *per se*’. Third, and closely related to the previous argument, empirical evidence for the ‘losers of modernization’ thesis remains – at best – ambiguous. For example, Remmer (2012) shows that increasing support for leftist populist leaders in Latin America has been driven by economic improvement, not deterioration, and the subsequent improvement of subjective well-being (cf. also, Wiesehomeier and Doyle, 2013). Something similar can be said of Europe, where indicators of absolute deprivation, such as low income and unemployment, and indicators of relative deprivation, such as socioeconomic inequality, only partially explain support for the populist radical right (Arzheimer, 2011; Spier, 2010). Not by chance, some scholars argue that the rise of populist forces has less to do with objective changes and more with subjective feelings, such as social status perceptions (e.g. Gidron and Hall, 2017) and nostalgic deprivation (e.g. Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018).

Even more, the electorates of populist forces are not as uniform as the ‘losers of modernization’ thesis would lead us to believe. Rooduijn (2018) demonstrates there is no such thing as *the* populist voter in contemporary Europe, since those who back populist parties are not always male, lower educated, older, and unemployed, nor do they share opinions on issues such as European integration, immigration, and redistribution. Similarly, Rooduijn *et al.* (2017) and Rooduijn and Burgoon (2018) find that populist electorates across European democracies are quite diverse in terms of their socioeconomic status. In addition, the broader literature highlights a clear distinction between left-wing and right-wing populist electorates. The former typically attracts young individuals with secondary and high education living in urban areas (Rodríguez-Teruel *et al.*, 2016; Ramiro and Gomez, 2017), whereas the latter typically engages lower educated men with a working-class background (Arzheimer, 2009, 2011; van der Brug and van Spanje 2009; Rydgren 2012). Van Hauwaert and van Kessel (2018) further confirm that left-wing and right-wing populist forces across Europe draw support from different constituencies.

It is, thus, not surprising that populist electorates and supporters show quite some heterogeneity in terms of their sociodemographic features. Yet, considering the broader populist potential, the question remains whether this also translates to populist citizens. That is, can we identify

populist citizens by a shared set of characteristics? For instance, Elchardus and Spruyt (2016) suggest that populist citizens in Flanders tend to be lower educated (and male). Van Hauwaert *et al.* (2019b) confirm this for regional populist demand across Europe and additionally highlight the interrelation with deteriorating economic development, stronger regional identities, and increased distance from the capital. We wonder, however, to what extent these observations are generalizable to other countries, even across world regions. For the moment, there is no such indication and we have no conclusive reasons to expect that populist citizens share any specific sociodemographics across countries and between continents (except maybe lower educational attainment).

The political profile of populist citizens

The ideational interpretation of populism relies on the construction of a morally homogeneous but sociologically heterogeneous understanding of ‘the people’. That means populist citizens are not inevitably leftist or rightist and their ideological affinities are not path-dependent. Of course, populist forces almost always appear attached to other sets of ideas (the host ideology) that are crucial for mobilizing larger sections of the population (Mudde, 2004; Stanley, 2008).³ For instance, inclusionary left-wing forces usually combine populism with socialism to depict ‘the pure people’ as the socioeconomic underdogs, while exclusionary right-wing actors typically combine populism with nativism to portray ‘the pure people’ as the only ones that should make up the nation-state (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013). Therefore, in terms of ideology or policy positions, we expect populist citizens to be rather heterogeneous, even when populist forces dominate only one side of the political spectrum.

The populist set of ideas is an expression of citizens’ discontent with the establishment because of the latter’s unwillingness to take into account ‘the silent majority’. In effect, the presence and activation of populist ideas at the mass level are related to the growing tension between responsiveness and responsibility: the more traditional political actors behave responsibly toward the international markets and supranational institutions, the less they can respond to citizens (Mair, 2009). Citizens perceive these conditions, base their experiences on them, and formulate interests, which – in turn – guide their political behavior. This is not a minor point, because it brings to light that those who support populist ideas do not only challenge the current state of affairs, and therefore ‘the establishment’, but are also interested in the political situation and engage in discussions about the problems faced by society. While recent generations are more critical and unhappy with democratic functioning, and therefore have a higher populist potential, Dalton (2013) argues they remain strongly interested in and well-informed about politics. Van Hauwaert and van Kessel (2018) conclude that populist individuals should not be thought of as apathetic individuals, but rather as politically attentive citizens. With that in mind, we expect that populist citizens will collectively be interested in politics, perhaps even more than their non-populist peers.

This is emblematic of the active political aptitude of populist citizens. Therefore, we also anticipate an empirical relationship between partisan affinity and populist attitudes. Given that the populist set of ideas helps to give a voice to those who do not feel properly represented and are at odds with ‘the corrupt establishment’, we expect populist citizens to be less likely to identify with or show sympathy for one of the crucial actors in representative democracy: political parties. Roberts (2017) argues that populism usually depicts political parties as self-serving entities that act against the will of ‘the pure people’. Following the depoliticization of politics (and the rise of

³As Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017) argue, populism rarely appears in its pure form and this is why one can identify subtypes of populism in the real world. The differences between these subtypes are directly related to the adoption of specific host ideologies (e.g. nativism or socialism), which lead to distinctive interpretations of who are the members of both ‘the corrupt elite’ and ‘the pure people’. It is worth noting that the adoption of specific host ideologies is triggered by the social grievances (e.g. economic or cultural conflicts) that are predominant in different national and regional contexts.

identity politics), mainstream politicians and parties have become increasingly similar, thereby making it easier to portray them as a homogeneous elite, regardless of their ideological profile and sociological background.

Populist individuals, thus, have little motivation to feel affectionate toward parties, let alone show partisan support. Meléndez and Rovira Kaltwasser (2019) provide a first empirical assessment of this argument by examining the link between political identities and populist attitudes in Chile. Their contribution reveals that citizens who have a positive identification with established political parties tend to reject populism, while those who have a negative identity toward established political parties are coalesced by populist attitudes. As this goes to the heart of populism, we expect populist citizens across countries, who are more critical and – per definition – think of the elites as ‘bad’, to be less likely to position themselves close to or be sympathetic with a party.

The democratic profile of populist citizens

To a great extent, the growing interest in populism relates to the debate about its consequences for democracy. On the one hand, populism can be a democratic threat, since it supports a dualistic worldview that promotes polarization and the moralization of the political debate. Müller (2016: 3–4), for instance, maintains that ‘the idea of single, homogenous, authentic people [...] is a dangerous fantasy, because populists do not just thrive on conflict and encourage polarization; they also treat their political opponents as “enemies of the people” and seek to exclude them altogether’. On the other hand, populism can also be a democratic corrective, since it helps to give voice to excluded sectors and construct a common identity against the establishment. For example, Mouffe (2018: 5) claims that (left-wing) populism, ‘understood as a discursive strategy of construction of the political frontier between “the people” and “the oligarchy”, constitutes, in the present conjuncture, the type of politics needed to recover and deepen democracy’.

In line with this, an extensive scholarship argues and shows that the populist set of ideas is not hostile to democracy *per se* but is rather at odds with the existence of unelected actors and institutions that can make decisions against the will of ‘the pure people’ (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012; Huber and Schimpf 2016a, b, 2017; Huber and Ruth 2017). After all, the very notion of democracy means that political power comes from the ‘demos’, implying that the ultimate political authority is vested in the people and not in unelected bodies composed of experts. To paraphrase the work of Canovan (1999: 10), populism is about enacting the redemptive side of democracy: the mobilization of popular enthusiasm around the idea that ‘the people are the only source of legitimate authority, and salvation is promised as when they take charge of their own lives’.

When existing political forces and institutions fail to represent citizens’ interests, the corresponding gap between ‘what is’ and ‘what should be’ the will of the people can strain core democratic tenets and put representative principles under stress. This is in line with the functionalist account of democracy conceptualized by Easton (1965) and the conflict Mair (2009) saw between responsive and responsible government. In this light, citizens employ populist ideas to express their discontent with the existing state of affairs and their willingness to repoliticize problems that are – intentionally or unintentionally – not being addressed by the establishment (Rovira Kaltwasser, 2014). Citizens who adhere to these ideas typically hold that the democratic system is working improperly as ‘the people’ are not being heard and have the impression that ‘the elites’ only care about themselves (Hawkins *et al.*, 2018a).

Based on this understanding of populism, we argue that populist citizens are not necessarily authoritarians. Rather, populist citizens are more likely to be democrats who feel slighted by democratic functioning and the lack of (accurate) representation. They are supportive of democratic principles, but largely dissatisfied with their practical implementation. As Mudde (2004: 562) states, ‘[...] after years of reading and hearing about dysfunctional national and supranational

democracies, more and more people have become both sensitised to the problem, and convinced that things can and should be better'. Such 'critical citizens' can be a resource for the improvement of democratic processes and structures (Klingemann, 1999; Dahlberg *et al.*, 2015). Alternatively, such 'disillusioned citizens' can also undermine governmental effectiveness, weaken institutions, erode faith in democracy, and lead to crisis and breakdowns (Stoker, 2006). In line with the threat/corrective interpretation of the populism vs. democracy relationship, that means such 'dissatisfied democrats' (to use a more value-neutral term) can either challenge democratic stability or promote democratic reform. While their presence is undeniable, their relationship with populist attitudes remains unclear.

Both these interpretations are largely theoretical, without much empirical support. Vehrkamp and Wratil (2017) provide an initial account. They empirically demonstrate that German populist citizens 'are not enemies of democracy, but are rather disappointed democrats. The populist criticism of democracy is by no means a radical criticism of the system itself. [...] Populists in Germany are certainly much more dissatisfied with the functioning of democracy, but they have not – or at least not yet – turned their backs on democracy as a political system' (2017: 25). We have similar expectations across countries. Increasing gaps in mass–elite congruence and democratic representation provide a fertile breeding ground for the proliferation of populist ideas at the mass level regardless of the effectiveness of the democratic system, the economic situation, and/or the electoral presence of populist forces.

In sum, recent scholarship examines a wide variety of characteristics that we might attribute to populist citizens, yet the patterns of variance between countries and across world regions remain – at best – underdeveloped. We anticipate the sociodemographic profile of populist citizens to be rather unique to the context and the situation, and therefore relatively idiosyncratic. We also expect high levels of heterogeneity in the political profile of populist citizens because political identifiers are typically context-specific. We, most importantly, expect extensive homogeneity in the democratic profile of populist citizens between countries, regardless of world region, because populism and democracy are what we can refer to as 'necessarily accompanying factors'. In the follow sections, we examine these expectations empirically.

Data, measurement, and method

The analysis contains nine European countries (France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and UK), five Latin American countries (Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Honduras, and Mexico), and Turkey. While these countries are not a random or representative selection, they do provide sufficiently diverse contexts (with different levels of economic development, political cultures, and political institutions) to examine the characteristics of populist citizens and their patterns of variance between and within select world regions. We pool data from different sources. For more information about the surveys and the sampling, we refer to section A of the supplementary materials.

The dependent variable: Populist citizens

We harmonize eight separate items (see Table 1) that have previously been used to measure populist attitudes (e.g. Van Hauwaert and van Kessel, 2018).⁴ By selecting these eight items,

⁴The first six items draw from previous scale development studies (Hawkins and Riding, 2010; Akkerman *et al.*, 2014) and are commonly used to measure populist attitudes. Following recent measurement studies, we expand the original scale with two items because of the high information levels of these specific items, as well as the highly informative nature of the consolidated 8-item scale (Van Hauwaert *et al.*, 2018, 2019a). For Turkey, the item 'popatt7' is unavailable so we use a consolidated 7-item scale. All results remain substantially the same for all countries when we use a 7-item or 6-item scale. The same is true when we dichotomize the scale and distinguish between various operationalizations of populists and non-populists. The substantive interpretations of such analyses remain the same.

Table 1. Question wording for populist items

Survey questions	
popatt1	The politicians in [country] need to follow the will of the people
popatt2	The people, not the politicians, should make our most important policy decisions
popatt3	The political differences between the people and the elite are larger than the differences among the people
popatt4	I would rather be represented by an ordinary citizen than an experienced politician
popatt5	Politicians (elected officials) talk too much and take too little action
popatt6	What people call ‘compromise’ in politics is really just selling out on one’s principles
popatt7	The particular interests of the political class negatively affect the welfare of the people
popatt8	Politicians always end up agreeing when it comes to protecting their privileges

Note: We include the country-specific wordings of the populist items in Section B of the supplementary materials.

we tap into the three dimensions of the ideational approach to populism, namely the extent to which citizens are of the opinion that (a) ‘the people’ is a virtuous and homogeneous entity, (b) portray themselves at odds with ‘the elite’, and (c) advocate popular sovereignty set against elitist rule. Across all countries, individual items consist of 5-point Likert scales, with higher values indicating higher levels of populist attitudes (cross-country Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.83$). We estimate a latent populist construct through item response theory (IRT). This particular technique has a number of advantages over the more traditional estimation methods.⁵ For each step of the empirical analysis, we estimate the populism scale across the set of included countries.⁶

Independent variables and predictors

We examine the intrinsic characteristics of populist citizens across different countries through three specific profiles, namely sociodemographic, political, and democratic. For each profile, we use a set of variables. Considering we harmonize several datasets, we standardize the indicators with different question wordings or answer categories between countries.⁷

First, we include five traditional variables to gauge the typical sociodemographic profile of populist citizens, namely gender (0 = female), age, age squared, educational attainment, capital region (0 = no), and main professional activity. The original education variables are recoded into three categories: no secondary education (reference category), completed secondary education, and completed university. The capital region variable refers to the broader (and available) administrative region that includes the capital city of each country. The original ‘main professional activity’ variable is recoded into five categories: employed (reference category), studying, unemployed, housework, and retired. These variables are available for all countries.

We use three variables to provide insights into the political profile of populist citizens. First, we use a standardized ‘left-right self-identification’ variable as a summary item of an individual’s political positioning. Second, we include a standardized ‘political interest’ variable (higher values = more political interest). Third, we gauge respondents’ ‘partisan affinity’ with a dummy variable

⁵For a detailed overview of scale construction in general and some of the main advantages of IRT more specifically, see Kankaraš *et al.* (2011), Raju *et al.* (2002) and Reise *et al.* (1993).

⁶We include descriptive statistics for the separate populism items and the aggregate populism scale in Section C of the supplementary materials. We also recognize that measurement invariance across countries (and world regions) remains a challenge in political science (Castanho Silva and Littvay, 2019). This is no different for studies using populist attitudes scales (Castanho Silva *et al.*, 2019; Van Hauwaert *et al.*, 2019a).

⁷We include the exact question wordings and answer categories for each country, as well as descriptive statistics of all independent variables in Sections D and E of the supplementary materials.

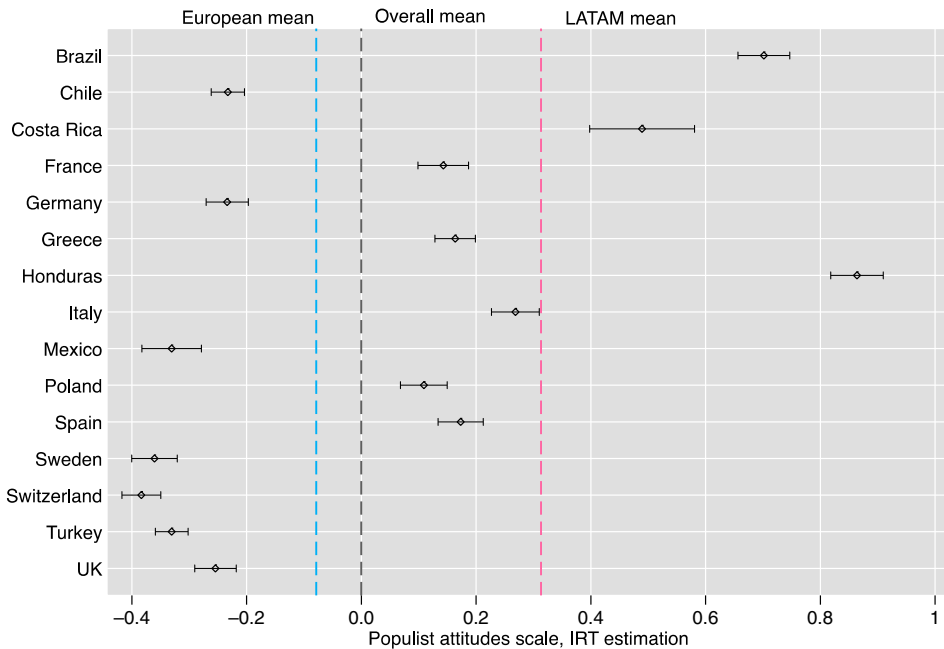


Figure 1. Mean values of populist attitudes, by country.

Note: The European mean includes the value for Turkey.

(0 = no affinity).⁸ The availability of these variables differs between countries, so we model each variable separately.

Finally, we use two separate variables to tap into the shared democratic profile of populist citizens across countries. First, we use a standardized version of the ‘satisfaction with democracy’ variable (higher values = more satisfied). Second, we complement this with the so-called ‘Churchillian democracy question’, that is, a standardized variable asking whether democracy is better than any other form of government (higher values = stronger agreement). Both tools are simultaneously available in the nine European countries, Turkey, and Chile.

Method

We use pooled OLS regressions for our analysis. We additionally include country-fixed effects to control for country-specific features on the dependent variable, even when the number of countries becomes more limited. This is particularly relevant as we engage in separate analyses between Europe and Latin America. In those instances, we also confirm our findings with country-specific models. Considering the right-skew of the dependent variable and the unequal variance of the errors within each country, we also apply robust standard errors and use a GLM regression to cross-validate our analyses. The substantive interpretation of all models remains the same.

Findings

We first take a closer look at the country-specific levels of populism through a descriptive analysis. Figure 1 displays the mean scores of the latent populism construct. The overall average is

⁸We recoded all those who expressed affection for a party, regardless of its populist nature, as having partisan affinity. We recoded all those who did not indicate affection toward any political party as not having partisan affinity. Substantive interpretations remain the same when we exclude ‘populist partisans’, indicating partisan attachment to populist parties is not driving results and reinforcing the argument that populist citizens are not equivalent to populist voters.

approximately 0 because the IRT estimations are calculated and standardized across the countries under analysis. That being said, Figure 1 shows notable patterns of variance that are worth exploring.

When we compare levels of populist attitudes between Europe and Latin America, it is clear that, on average, the latter (0.31) is significantly higher than the former (-0.08). Differently put, we find suggestive evidence that citizens are – on average – more populist in Latin America than in Europe. While a theoretical differentiation between (levels of) populism in Europe and Latin America might not be new for populism scholars (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013), this is the first study of its kind (that we know of) to provide empirical support of a clear populist demarcation between *citizens* from different world regions.

Figure 1 also suggests that citizens' mean populism levels within world regions are – to a certain degree – geographically dispersed. We notice two distinct clusters of countries within Europe and Latin America. In Europe, citizens in Southern and Eastern democracies (France, Greece, Italy, Poland, and Spain) have above-average levels of populist attitudes, whereas North and West European citizens (Germany, Sweden, Switzerland, and the UK) have below-average levels. A notable outlier here is Turkey, which aligns more closely with the latter category in terms of populist potential. In Latin America, we observe above-average levels of populism in Brazil, Costa Rica, and Honduras, whereas Chile and Mexico have below-average levels of populism. Even more, average levels of populism for Chile and Mexico are far below those of South and East European countries.

In and of itself, the level of populist demand seems to differ across countries without a clear-cut pattern. At first sight, there appears no unequivocal parallel between economic and political development and the intensity of populist attitudes. At the same time, there seems to be no clear or direct link between the existence of electorally strong populist forces and the presence of above-average levels of populist attitudes. Even though small-N studies often hint at this heterogeneity in populist potential, truly comparative evidence remained largely absent until now. While there is some similarity in citizens' mean levels of populism within clusters of countries in each world region, the overall story of this descriptive analysis is one of heterogeneity, rather than homogeneity.

Exploring patterns of variance: The characteristics of populist citizens

We further explore the variation from Figure 1 and scrutinize the populist demand and its origins by conducting a set of multivariate analyses that examine the different profiles we theorized above. In a first step, we only probe sociodemographic variables to describe typical populist citizens and acquire insights into their sociological characteristics. Table 2 presents the pooled results for all countries (column 1), as well as the pooled results for the European and Latin American clusters separately (columns 2 and 3, respectively).⁹

The most general model in Table 2 suggests that – across world regions – populist citizens tend to be male, older (although this tends to be less prolific as respondents get older), lower educated, not in the capital region, and unemployed. To a certain extent, this corresponds to recent literature suggesting that populist potential is prominent among 'modernization losers' (Goodhart, 2017). It means that if we focus just on the average for all countries and without undertaking a more fine-grained analysis of regional differences, this generic sociodemographic profile describes more populist citizens.

Yet, given that our collection of countries is remarkably diverse in terms of sociodemographic composition, we are of the opinion that a more detailed analysis is in order to obtain an accurate picture. Therefore, to examine how homogenous – and robust – these results really are, we assess what unites and differentiates populist citizens in Europe and Latin America in the second and

⁹For the purpose of the analyses within world regions (in Tables 2 and 3), we include Turkey in the European cluster.

Table 2. The sociodemographic profile of populist citizens – pooled models

	Model 1 – All	Model 1 – Europe	Model 1 – LATAM
Gender	0.072* (0.011)	0.084* (0.013)	0.001 (0.024)
Age	0.022* (0.002)	0.031* (0.003)	-0.002 (0.004)
Age squared	-0.000* (0.000)	-0.000* (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)
Education: secondary school	0.005 (0.014)	-0.012 (0.016)	0.022 (0.025)
Education: university	-0.073* (0.015)	-0.103* (0.017)	0.020 (0.031)
Capital region	-0.059* (0.014)	-0.048* (0.017)	-0.087* (0.024)
Main activity: studying	-0.010 (0.026)	-0.002 (0.030)	-0.007 (0.049)
Main activity: unemployed	0.116* (0.017)	0.122* (0.019)	0.043 (0.050)
Main activity: housework	-0.020 (0.019)	-0.018 (0.024)	-0.034 (0.031)
Main activity: retired	0.030 (0.021)	0.007 (0.025)	0.092* (0.045)
Constant	-0.555* (0.051)	-0.762* (0.062)	0.066 (0.083)
Observations	26,216	20,993	5223
R-squared	0.015	0.022	0.004
Countries	15	10	5

Note: Standard errors in parentheses, * $P < 0.05$. All models include country-fixed effects.

third columns of Table 2, respectively.¹⁰ The pooled regression for Europe suggests the previously highlighted profile applies to populist citizens in Europe (Spruyt *et al.* 2016; Castanho Silva *et al.* 2017; Van Hauwaert and van Kessel, 2018; Stanley, 2019). From both a theoretical and empirical perspective, this is largely unsurprising, considering that most studies of populist potential only focus on European countries.

In Latin America, there appears much more heterogeneity in terms of what sociodemographics describe populist citizens. We only find evidence that populists typically live outside the capital region and tend to be retired. This is equally unsurprising as populist leaders and their corresponding regimes usually have been able to mobilize long-standing resentments in rural populations and the non-cosmopolitan countryside against urban elites (Canovan, 1999; Taggart, 2000). This type of conflict is not new in Latin America, a region characterized by large socioeconomic disparities that, in turn, provide a fertile breeding ground for widespread resentment of the ruling elites. This also explains the lack of support for a relationship between (lower levels of) education and populist attitudes. Education-based categories are not necessarily politicized status markers across Latin America, rendering it plausible that educational differences are not as pronounced when compared to the European context.

When comparing the sociodemographic profiles of European and Latin American populist citizens, we notice that living outside a country's capital region is the only shared identifier of populism – or rather, *populists* – across world regions. This, of course, does not mean populists only live in rural areas or are per definition less cultured and provincial. Our finding merely highlights it is more likely that, on average and across world regions, living outside the capital

¹⁰We also recognize that each world region still includes heterogeneity in terms of the sociodemographic populist profile. This is not unsurprising given the various contextual factors that undoubtedly also shape populist potential. Considering we are primarily interested in patterns of variance between world regions and across countries, a more detailed country-by-country and/or subregional analysis of the sociodemographic profile does not fall within the scope of this study.

Table 3. The political profile of populist citizens – pooled models across world regions

	Model 2			Model 3			Model 4		
	Pooled	Europe	LATAM	Pooled	Europe	LATAM	Pooled	Europe	LATAM
Left-right	-0.031* (0.006)	-0.024* (0.007)	-0.076* (0.012)						
Political interest				0.049* (0.006)	0.050* (0.006)	0.025 (0.046)			
Partisan affinity							-0.056* (0.013)	-0.084* (0.016)	0.026 (0.023)
Observations	22,090	18,085	4005	21,008	20,609	399	24,382	19,596	4786
R-squared	0.016	0.022	0.014	0.025	0.024	0.058	0.015	0.022	0.006
Countries	15	10	5	11	10	1	15	10	5

Note: Standard errors in parentheses, * $P < 0.05$. All multicountry models include country-fixed effects. All pooled models include the nine European countries and Turkey. Pooled models 2 and 4 also include all five Latin American countries. Pooled model 3 also includes Costa Rica. All models include the sociodemographic variables specified in Table 2. We refer to section F of the supplementary materials for full models.

region serves as an identifier of populist citizens. Living outside capital regions renders citizens more prone to populist proclivities, something that reinforces the argument that cosmopolitanism is an antithesis of populism. After all, populist forces usually argue that the elite represents the ideas and interests of privileged sectors of society, that is, the so-called ‘high culture’, which more often than not disdain the values and opinions of the ‘low culture’ (Ostiguy, 2017).

Building on this, we turn to the political profile of populist citizens. We examine political positioning, political interest, and partisan affinity in two steps. First, we provide pooled models for these separate variables across world regions. Second, we specify the same three models for Europe and Latin America separately. Like in Table 2, such an approach provides us with important insights into how united or divided the political features of populist citizens are between and across world regions.

The pooled models from Table 3 indicate that populist citizens tend to identify more with the left, be more politically interested than the average citizen, and not sympathize with any parties (regardless of the existence of populist parties). While these latter two results are not surprising considering some of the literature’s recent findings concerning political identifiers of populist potential (Van Hauwaert and van Kessel, 2018; Meléndez and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2019), the former is likely a construct of aggregation, as classic literature firmly posits that populism is not necessarily left or right (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012). The potential interaction of these political variables with contextual factors is something to consider. With that in mind, we further disaggregate the three models according to world region.¹¹ Here, we notice the political profile of populist citizens is quite distinct within each world region. At least with the data available to us, this inhibits the creation of a composite political profile of populist citizens. Nonetheless, we can highlight a number of interesting findings.

Table 3 suggests populist citizens across Europe tend to be more interested in politics and unsympathetic to political parties. Neither of these observations is surprising and they remain largely in line with recent findings (Webb, 2013; Dahlberg *et al.*, 2015; Bowler *et al.*, 2017; Van Hauwaert and van Kessel, 2018). The data does not provide any conclusive evidence regarding political interest and party apathy of populist citizens in Latin America. Both in Europe and Latin America, model 2 finds populist citizens – on average – tend to identify with the left side of a one-dimensional ideological spectrum. We remain cautious interpreting this finding (and drawing inferences from it), as populism is – by definition – neither left-wing nor right-wing in nature. It would be overzealous to interpret these results as most citizens with populist affinities being

¹¹From a methodological perspective, this also makes more sense, considering that question wordings of political indicators are much more akin (nearly identical) within world regions (see Section D in the supplementary materials).

Table 4. The democratic profile of populist citizens

	Democratic satisfaction		Democratic support		Obs.	R-squared
Pooled (11 countries)	-0.300*	(0.006)	0.194*	(0.006)	21,276	0.160
Chile	-0.266*	(0.027)	0.140*	(0.027)	1125	0.121
France	-0.364*	(0.020)	0.279*	(0.020)	1904	0.216
Germany	-0.429*	(0.020)	0.201*	(0.020)	1996	0.234
Greece	-0.322*	(0.019)	0.191*	(0.019)	2029	0.190
Italy	-0.331*	(0.019)	0.276*	(0.019)	1993	0.202
Poland	-0.262*	(0.021)	0.306*	(0.021)	1907	0.150
Spain	-0.326*	(0.019)	0.269*	(0.019)	1987	0.196
Sweden	-0.513*	(0.019)	0.105*	(0.019)	1905	0.331
Switzerland	-0.233*	(0.020)	0.187*	(0.020)	1971	0.125
Turkey	-0.160*	(0.016)	0.185*	(0.016)	2543	0.095
UK	-0.383*	(0.021)	0.099*	(0.021)	1916	0.206

Note: Standard errors in parentheses, * $P < 0.05$. All models include country-fixed effects and the sociodemographic variables specified in Table 2. We refer to section F of the supplementary materials for full models.

leftist. In line with the European populism literature, we believe this finding illustrates country-level heterogeneity (this is further substantiated when we look at country-specific results).¹² This is in line with recent findings from Latin America (Andreadis *et al.*, 2018; Bornschier, 2018), as well as previous scholarship on the correspondence between the exhaustion of the conservative modernization project and the rise of radical leftist populism in Latin America (Weyland *et al.*, 2010; Levitsky and Roberts, 2011).

As a final step, we examine the democratic profile of populist citizens by exploring the role of two specific variables, namely democratic satisfaction and democratic support. Table 4 provides pooled and country-specific results for both indicators.

First and foremost, we notice that the direction and significance of both democracy coefficients remain stable throughout all models. In essence, this indicates an important and unseen degree of homogeneity in the democratic profiles of populist citizens, both between world regions and across countries. The democratic satisfaction coefficient is systematically negative throughout the different models, meaning populist citizens tend to be more dissatisfied with democracy – regardless of their national context. The democratic support coefficient is systematically positive, which suggests that populist citizens are more likely to prefer democracy, despite all its flaws, to any other form of government (such as authoritarianism).¹³

The two indicators together highlight that populist citizens across countries adhere to democracy as a political system but are disgruntled with how the democratic regime functions in their countries. This confirms that populism and democracy are not inevitable opposites (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012; Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012) and, to some extent, substantiates populism as a ‘pathological normalcy’, rather than a ‘normal pathology’ (Betz, 1994; Mudde, 2004, 2010). It further shows that populist citizens cannot be reduced to alienated voters, authoritarians, or anti-establishment electorates. Rather, those who support populist ideas are more accurately described as ‘dissatisfied democrats’.

These results reinforce the argument that the gap between democratic ideals and their practical implementation fosters the rise of populist ideas. Previous scholarship describes this difference between what the principal (the citizen) wants and what the agent (the government) delivers as ‘agency loss’ or an inevitable level of incongruence (Grossman and Hart, 1983). In this case,

¹²Even more, when we exclude Turkey from the European analysis in model 2, the left–right coefficient returns insignificant.

¹³We do not include Honduras in the analysis because the survey does not have an indicator of democratic satisfaction. The coefficient of the democratic support item for Honduras, however, also returns positive, similar to other countries in Table 4.

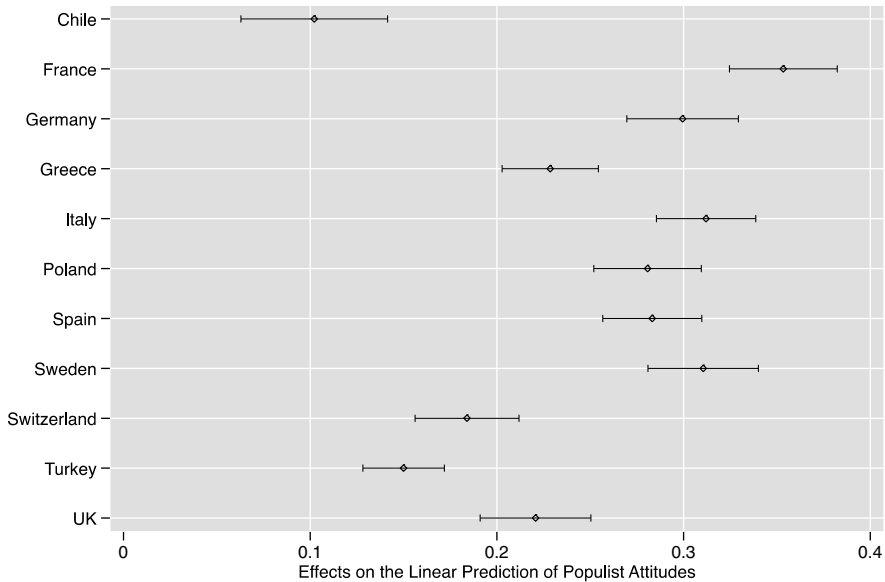


Figure 2. Average marginal effects of democratic deficit on populist attitudes.

Note: Point estimates with 95% confidence intervals. The underlying models include the sociodemographic variables specified in Table 2. We refer to Section F of the supplementary materials for full models.

however, considerable agency loss could indicate that populist citizens reject the notion of Schumpeterian democracy, namely democracy as a division of labor where citizens elect representatives and subsequently trust them to be responsible (Mair, 2009).

The resulting democratic deficit, by consequence, indicates that citizens clearly want to express their discomfort with the existing state of affairs, exercise their civic duty, and actively impact decision-making. We, thus, expect there to be a positive correlation between the (perceived) democratic deficit and populist attitudes. To further examine this, we calculate the democratic deficit by subtracting the democratic satisfaction score from the democratic support score.¹⁴ We interact the subsequent variable with country dummies and then regress this on populist attitudes. Figure 2 plots the average marginal effects of these interactions.

As expected, Figure 2 indicates the effect of the democratic deficit variable is consistently significant and positive. This means citizens tend to be more populist when there is an increasing gap between pragmatic and normative opinions of democracy. We, thus, find initial evidence that populist citizens are not per definition looking to overthrow democracy, but actually favor some form of overhaul within the democratic framework. Even though the analysis relies on fewer countries than the previous models (due to the availability of the democracy items), we are confident the results translate beyond these contexts, as the countries included in this step of the analysis range from Chile to Turkey, as well as various countries covering a broad geographical spectrum within Europe.

Conclusion

Populist forces of different kinds have been gaining electoral preponderance across the world. This trend has fostered a much-needed dialogue between experts working on different countries and world regions. When looking at the extant body of scholarship, one can identify a growing consensus around an ideational approach to populism, which invites scholars to study not only

¹⁴We provide descriptive statistics of this new variable in Section C of the supplementary materials.

the supply of populist ideas, but also their demand at the mass level. Although the measurement of populist attitudes is a relatively new endeavor, there are empirical studies showing that large segments of the citizenry share the populist set of ideas and that the latter explain important societal phenomena, such as party support, political identities, and vote choice (Akkerman *et al.*, 2017; Hawkins *et al.*, 2018b; Jacobs *et al.*, 2018; Van Hauwaert and van Kessel, 2018; Meléndez and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2019).

Despite the growing attention to populist attitudes, we have limited knowledge of what populist citizens look like. All too often, they are either equated to populist voters/supporters (which they should not) or they remain overlooked. Considering the prominence of populist attitudes across different countries, this study argues it is worth studying *who* shares these ideas and subsequently understanding this particular element of political culture. By examining a unique combination of survey data that employs the same measure of populist attitudes for nine European countries, five Latin American countries, and Turkey, we are able to provide the first study that explores differences and similarities between populist citizens in a cross-national and cross-regional fashion. We particularly emphasize the empirical analysis of the sociodemographic, political, and democratic profiles of populist citizens. The main findings are threefold.

First, we identify a largely distinct set of sociodemographic characteristics of populist citizens, most notably between world regions. Populist citizens across Europe tend to be male, older, lower educated, not in the capital region, and unemployed, while populist citizens in Latin America tend to be primarily identified by retirement and their residence outside the capital region (and not their lower levels of education). That means we only find evidence that populist citizens across world regions share a very basic feature, namely they tend to live away from the country's geopolitical center and therefore are probably less cosmopolitan. Second, we find heterogeneity across world regions in the political profile of populist citizens. That is, populist citizens across Europe tend to be interested in politics and unsympathetic to political parties, while we find no such evidence for Latin America. With the limited number of indicators available to us, we do not find evidence of unequivocal commonalities between world regions. Third, populist citizens across countries and world regions are exceptionally homogeneous in terms of their democratic profile: they support the democratic regime but are dissatisfied with actual democratic functioning. That is, we find a clear positive correlation between populist attitudes and the democratic deficit perceived by citizens.

The homogeneity in the democratic profile of populist citizens and the systematic correlation between populist attitudes and the democratic deficit is an important contribution of this study. Our evidence suggests that populists are politically engaged citizens who do not want to overthrow the democratic system but rather push for the democratization of democracy. This finding supports the argument advanced by Dalton and Welzel (2014), who demonstrate that we can observe a transformation from allegiant to assertive citizens. While the latter tend to be politically passive, trustful of institutions and deferent toward authorities, the former are more inclined to be politically active, distrust existing institutions, and be skeptical toward authorities. In other words, the presence of populism at the mass level is not a random phenomenon, but rather the expression of a type of political culture characterized by citizens who spare no effort in monitoring those in power and reminding them that in a democracy political power derives from the demos.

Although this empirical finding suggests homogeneity across a wide range of countries, we remain cautious interpreting this evidence because we do not have indicators about the understandings of democracy that populist citizens have. Here, again, we highlight the inherent difficulties of cross-national comparisons of concepts (Castanho Silva and Littvay, 2019). After all, it is possible that populist citizens share a peculiar notion of democracy that challenges liberal values and, therefore, supports the formation of illiberal democratic regimes without necessarily endorsing authoritarianism *per se*. If this is the case, the demand for populism can be interpreted as an illiberal democratic response to undemocratic liberalism (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017: 116). We, therefore, urge future studies to undertake more in-depth analyses of the concept

of democracy held by populist citizens, as well as examine this across a wider selection of countries (most notable outside Europe and Latin America). This will allow us to further explore the extent to which populist citizens are supporters or rather detractors of *liberal* democracy.

Supplementary material. To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755773919000262>. All replication and supplementary materials are also available from the authors.

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