Populists Vote for Populists, Right?

How Populist Attitude Scales Fail to Capture Support for Populists in Power

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Abstract

Surveys of the attitudes of voters for populist parties generally measure three non-compensatory factors of populism: anti-elitism, people-centrism, and Manicheanism. Using Comparative Study of Electoral Systems Module 5 data for 23 countries, we evaluate whether this approach explains voting for populist parties across countries in Asia, Europe and the Americas. We show that the existing scale of populist attitudes effectively explains voting for populists in countries where populist leaders and parties are in opposition but fails to explain voting for populist parties in countries where they are in power. We argue that current approaches assume ‘the elite’ to mean ‘politicians’, thus failing to capture attitudes towards ‘non-political elites’ often targeted by populists in office – journalists, academics, bureaucrats, etc. The results reveal limits to the usefulness of existing survey batteries in cross-national studies of populism and emphasize the need to develop approaches that are more generalizable across political and national contexts.

Keywords: Measurement; Populism; Structural Equation Modeling; CSES; cross-national

With the rise of populist parties to power in many countries, it has become increasingly important to investigate not only the supply side of populism but also the demand for it. To do so, many (mostly European) scholars have developed several scales for measuring populist attitudes, most notably Akkerman et al. (2014), Castanho Silva et al. (2019a), Elchardus and Spruyt (2016), Oliver and Rahn (2016), Schulz et al. (2018) and Stanley (2011). Unfortunately, the application of these scales has for the most part been limited to Europe and the Americas. With the exception of a single study that used convenience samples to compare all of these scales against each other (Castanho Silva et al. 2019b), there has been little work on measuring populist attitudes cross-nationally in Africa, Asia or the Arab world. Module 5 of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) is the first study to have surveyed populist attitudes in all parts of the world using a representative sample of each national population. The data from CSES Module 5 therefore permit us to investigate the promises and pitfalls of using populist attitudes scales cross-nationally and under different political circumstances. Our analysis of this data finds that such scales work as expected in many countries, but there are severe limitations in countries where populist parties are actually in power – in which higher populist attitudes as measured on this scale actually decrease the likelihood to vote for populist parties. Robustness checks with various other populist attitudes scales indicated similar findings. The results highlight the existence of multiple varieties of populism in different political and social contexts, suggesting that existing definitions and methods may be unsuitable for cross-national comparisons.

Measuring Populist Attitudes Cross-Nationally

The *ideational approach* considers populism to be a thin-centered ideology which is grounded in a Manichean worldview of good against evil, in which evil elites conspire against the good people (Mudde 2004; Hawkins 2009; Hawkins et al. 2019). Ordinary citizens, characterized as good, pure, and homogeneous (Akkerman et al. 2014; Jagers and Walgrave 2007), are considered to constitute a silent majority whose *volonté générale* (general will) should rightly be the base of political decision-making, but is instead suppressed by a corrupt elite (Taggart 2000). The elite is often only vaguely specified and can refer to political or economic actors, state employees, intellectuals, journalists or the media in general (Jagers and Walgrave 2007). Populism results when these three elements – people-centrism, anti-elitism and a Manichean worldview – coincide. Populist attitudes are widespread among ordinary citizens in most if not all countries, regardless of the actual presence of populist political actors (Bonikowski et al. 2019; Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser 2019).

In general, cross-national measurement of attitudes can be subject to a variety of errors that may be grouped into three categories: construct, method, and item bias (van de Vijver 2010; Davidov et al. 2014; see also Johnson et al. 2019). Construct bias occurs when a construct has a different meaning in one country compared to another. Method bias occurs when there are differences in the data collection procedures. For instance, cross-national studies often vary in their sampling design (Heeringa and O’Muircheartaigh 2010), unit and item nonresponse patterns (Couper and Leeuw 2003), or in the administration of questionnaires (see Lyberg et al. 1997). Finally, item bias results from a different functioning of individual items in questionnaires.

Often, this is the result of poor translations from the original source questionnaire or the inclusion of country- or culture-specific terms that are understood differently across countries.

All of these can have substantial consequences for the cross-national measurement of populist attitudes. One factor however seems to be of particular importance to this kind of measurement: references to the “elite” in populist attitudes questions can leave substantial scope for variation in what and whom respondents actually consider to be the elite. As the elite is even often only vaguely specified by populists themselves, the concept can vary widely both between and within countries. In the United States, the anti-elite rhetoric of Donald Trump shifted between attacks on the Washington DC bureaucratic establishment (“the swamp”, or the “deep state”) and on the “lying media”¹. In Hungary, Viktor Orbán and the ruling FIDESZ party have often attacked academics, and certain journalists and media, labelling them as a liberal elite that conspires against him (Enyedi 2018; Krekó and Enyedi 2018), while in Poland, Andrzej Duda of the ruling Law and Justice Party implied during his 2020 presidential election campaign that sexual minorities were a conspiring elite with a “destructive” ideology. In Japan, regional populist leader Hashimoto Toru’s anti-elite rhetoric focused on the claimed corruption of local bureaucrats along with attacks on labor unions and school teachers (Arima 2017; Yoshida 2019; Fahey et al. 2021). In India, the populist conception of “the people” also differs from other nations and continues to evolve as Narendra Modi tries to redefine “the people” to mean Hindus (Jaffrelot and Tillin 2017). Evidence from Bolivia and Ecuador further shows that

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¹Unusually, Trump also frequently attacked establishment politicians of his own party during his time in office, often publicly decrying them as weak or disloyal.

populist supporters no longer perceived the federal government to be part of the political elite once their leader had been elected into power (Castanho Silva 2019). Thus, the perception of what constitutes the “evil elite” may differ significantly from country to country, and change when populist parties come into power.

Survey questions designed to measure anti-elite attitudes often fall into one of two broad camps, either leaving it entirely up to the respondent to interpret “the elite” as they see fit, or, perhaps more commonly, asking specifically about attitudes towards politicians and the government – in effect narrowing the definition of the concept to *political* elites. Each of these approaches has major potential pitfalls, especially in comparative research, as respondents in different contexts may have very different interpretations of anti-elitism, including the possibility that some individuals may hold strongly populist attitudes whose anti-elite component is not especially focused on politicians or government. This creates the risk for survey researchers and comparativists of comparing apples to oranges (Stegmueller 2011), as it is impossible to tell whether a difference between two groups is the result of a true difference or merely a different understanding of survey items (Horn and McArdle 1992). Unfortunately, it has been shown that a variety of constructs are not fully invariant across nations and cultures, e.g. attitudes towards democracy (Ariely and Davidov 2011), left-right orientation (Piurko et al. 2011), trust in government (Poznyak et al. 2014), values (Alemán and Woods 2016) or xenophobia (Braun et al. 2013). Such measurement problems are not confined to ordinary survey respondents, but are also found among experts in the field, as Castanho Silva and Littvay (2019) have shown in the case of the Perceptions of Electoral Integrity (PEI) data.

The questions on “anti-elite” attitudes in the CSES Module 5 data we use in this study fall into the latter of the two groups — they assume *a priori* that respondents’ anti-elite attitudes will be targeted at political and governmental figures. In a context where populist attitudes are strongly focused on a different “elite” group — such as journalists, business leaders, or an ethnic or religious minority group, for example — these questions would fail to capture the anti-elite dimension entirely, since they simply do not ask about anti-elite attitudes targeting any group other than politicians. As the dimensions of populism are generally considered to be a non-compensatory construct (see Wuttke et al. 2020) — meaning that all of the dimensions must be present, and a high score in one dimension cannot compensate for the absence of another dimension — this failure to measure the anti-elite dimension would result in the respondent being labelled as non-populist overall. Hypothetically, one can imagine a situation where the supporters of a populist challenger party (which has campaigned on a platform of strongly anti-government, anti-politican populist rhetoric) score very highly in a survey battery on populist attitudes conducted prior to an election — but if the same voters were to be re-surveyed some time after their preferred populist party had won that election and taken power, subsequently shifting its anti-elite rhetoric to target bureaucrats, the media, labour unions or some other group, the voters’ attitudes would no longer register as populist due to the failure to measure their newly refocused anti-elite views. If this data were instead to be a snapshot (like the CSES data), it would appear, paradoxically, that a populist party had been voted into power by non-populist voters — in fact, the satisfaction of those voters with their party now being in power could create an unexpected negative relationship

between populist sentiment among voters and likelihood of voting for the populist party. Of course, if the survey were instead to ask about voters' anti-elite attitudes towards the specific targets of the party's new anti-elite rhetoric, quite a different measurement would result, one that would be more in line with the basic expectation that populist voters vote for populist parties.

This study aims to test the external validity of the measurement of populist attitudes across cultures and contexts, including those in which populist parties are in power (or in which populist rhetoric has been embraced by mainstream parties) rather than being challenger parties. To test the external validity of these items, it is necessary to check how strongly they correlate with related constructs (Castanho Silva et al. [2019b](#); Wettstein et al. [2019](#)). In theory, populist attitudes are supposed to predict vote choice for populist parties in each country. Thus, we should expect that a high level of populist attitudes increases the likelihood of voting for populist parties, as has been shown elsewhere in Europe (van Hauwaert and van Kessel [2017](#)) – but as in the hypothetical example given above, we hypothesize that this connection will disappear or reverse in situations where the populist party is in power. To investigate this proposition, we first assess the model fit in each country and test whether the scale fits equally well in nations where populists are in power. We then look at how well this measurement of populist attitudes actually predicts vote choice for populist parties. If the measurement of populist attitudes works equally well across countries (including those where populists are in power), we should consistently find positive relationships with populist vote choice. If, however, the survey items fail to capture anti-elite sentiments in situations where populists are in power, as we hypothesize,

this would lead to a failure to correctly identify voters with populist attitudes in those countries (specifically, the model would misidentify voters for populist parties in power as being non-populist). We would therefore expect to find diverging patterns for countries where populist parties are in power.

Data & Operationalization

In order to investigate the structure and predictive potential of populist attitudes batteries we use data from the *Advanced Release 2* of CSES Module 5, which surveys populist attitudes in 21 countries (Comparative Study of Electoral Systems 2019). We add to these the data from election surveys in Japan², the Netherlands, the UK (in 2017), and the US (in 2020), as they have already been released but not yet added to the CSES Advanced Release. In sum, the data include 50,755 respondents in 23 countries. An overview can be found in Table A1 in the Appendix.

Unfortunately, operationalizing populist attitudes in the CSES Module 5 is not straightforward, as its questions are not drawn from one of the major previously available scales for populist attitudes. Instead, it proposes a multidimensional concept which measures three “core themes” of populism: attitudes towards political elites, attitudes towards representative democracy and majority rule, and attitudes towards out-groups. Although the CSES Planning Committee refers to the work of Mudde (Hobolt et al. 2016, p. 5), it is less clear which of these themes are considered necessary elements of populism and which are related constructs. For instance, attitudes towards out-groups are not considered to be a central element by all scholars

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²The data has been released to the members who collected the CSES Japan data.

(e.g. Pappas 2016; Urbinati 2014). Moreover, the dimension is measured with items which ask about respondents' attitudes towards immigrants and the importance of nationality and national customs and traditions. Such an operationalization may be applied if researchers want to measure *right-wing* populist attitudes, but it is definitely too specific as a general, non-ideological operationalization of the thin-ideology that populism is regarded to be.³

To address these issues, we decided to test multiple operationalizations of populist attitudes in the CSES, based on two previous works (see Table 1). The study by Castanho Silva et al. (2019b) uses a selection of the CSES items in order to compare a wide range of currently available populist attitudes scales. These items can basically be grouped into the traditional dimensions of the work by Mudde, i.e. anti-elitism, people-centrism and Manichean worldview. In addition to that, we use the operationalization by Wuttke et al. (2020) which is closer to the original proposal by the CSES Planning Committee, excluding the out-group and minority dimension. All items were measured on five-point Likert scales.⁴

Just as it is difficult to agree on which items to use, it is also questionable which method of aggregation is best to capture the concept of populist attitudes. For most populist attitudes scales, scholars use a simple mean or additive index in which the mean is taken across all items. This works well for compensatory concepts, i.e. if all items are considered to be equally important. However, this can become complicated

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³For a more detailed description of the measurement of populist attitudes in the CSES see the Supplementary Material of Wuttke et al. (2020).

⁴Item E3004_1 is worded positively in Greece, Hong Kong, Ireland, South Korea and Taiwan, as the data was part of a pre-test: "In a democracy it is important to seek compromise among different viewpoints."

Table 1: Populist Attitudes Items in the CSES Module 5

Item	Wording	Castanho Silva et al. (2019b)	Wuttke et al. (2020)
E3004_1	What people call compromise in politics is really just selling out on one's principles.	Manichean Worldview	Challenges to representative democracy
E3004_2	Most politicians do not care about the people.	Anti-Elitism	Anti-Elitism
E3004_3	Most politicians are trustworthy.	Anti-Elitism	Anti-Elitism
E3004_4	Politicians are the main problem in [COUNTRY].	Anti-Elitism	Anti-Elitism
E3004_6	The people, and not politicians, should make our most important policy decisions.	People-Centrism	Challenges to representative democracy
E3004_7	Most politicians care only about the interests of the rich and powerful.	Anti-Elitism	–
E3005_2	The will of the majority should always prevail, even over the rights of minorities.	–	Challenges to representative democracy
E3007	How widespread do you think corruption such as bribe taking is among politicians in [COUNTRY]?	–	Anti-Elitism

Note: Castanho Silva et al. (2019b) used a one-dimensional operationalization and did not specify specific sub-dimensions for the CSES items. We added these to indicate how a possible three-dimensional operationalization might look.

if the list of items is unbalanced, i.e. there are more items that belong to one dimension as compared to another one. As we can see in Table 1 this applies to both operationalizations. More advanced or weighted versions of measurement therefore try to aggregate dimensions and then calculate means across dimensions. Although technically superior, this logic also applies to the use of structural equation modelling and second-order confirmatory factor analyses. Unfortunately, such approaches are not ideal for measuring non-compensatory concepts, i.e. when a lack in one dimension cannot be made up for with high values on another one. As populism is considered to be the intersection of anti-elitism *and* people-centrism *and* Manichean worldview at the same time, it is considered a non-compensatory concept. To score high on a populist attitudes variable, respondents would thus need to have high values on all three dimensions. Wuttke et al. (2020) therefore proposed a different approach based on the work of Goertz (2006, 2020), which takes the minimum value of all subdimensions.

In sum, we thus use two different versions of the CSES items along with three methods of aggregation. For the more traditional version used by Castanho Silva et al. (2019b) we use structural equation modelling (a) to form a one-dimensional scale and (b) to form a three-dimensional scale. For both versions we further use (c) the favored method by Wuttke et al. (2020), taking the minimum value of both dimensions. Accordingly, we first standardized all items by country to a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1. We then calculated the average values of each dimension and recoded the dimensions to a scale from 0 to 1. To build the Goertzian version of the scales we then took the minimum values across the two, respectively

three dimensions ($Goertz := \min|Dimension_1, \dots, Dimension_n|$).

Finally, we also ran additional robustness checks with different populist attitudes scales using an online survey in Japan — a complex edge-case in terms of populist politics — in 2019, and we used the 2016 Greek data from Castanho Silva et al. (2019a) to predict vote choice for SYRIZA, a clear-cut populist party in power at that time.⁵ The results are basically in line with the findings presented in the text (see Supplementary Material).

Psychometric Assessment

In a first step we investigate how well the proposed operationalizations fit the data in each country in the CSES.⁶ As shown in Table 2, the one-dimensional CSES scale by Castanho Silva et al. (2019b) has a medium to good fit in most countries according to common goodness-of-fit criteria (Hu and Bentler 1999). Only in Hong Kong and Lithuania does the scale fit rather poorly, and also to some degree in Chile. Overall, there does not seem to be a strong cross-cultural difference in model fit, i.e. we tentatively argue that populism, as it was modeled here, fits the data well.⁷ We can, however, identify differences in the average loadings across cultures. The average loadings in Asian and Latin American countries are substantially lower than in European countries or the United States. Thus, it seems that the concept

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⁵We thank Bruno Castanho Silva for making the data available to us.

⁶For all analyses we used *Mplus* version 8 (Muthén and Muthén 1998-2017) through the *R* package *MplusAutomation* (Hallquist and Wiley 2018).

⁷Unfortunately, we cannot test for measurement invariance here, as one item (E3004_1) has a positive wording in those countries that were part of the CSES pre-test. Thus, it is highly likely that variance in measurement across countries is somewhat subject to question wording and not different understanding of the concept of populism as such.

works better in those countries where it was originally developed. It is therefore questionable whether populism can be measured in a fully invariant manner across cultures. Future research could test for this once more data is available. Finally, we see that the minimum loading in most countries pertains to the same item, “What people call compromise in politics is really just selling out on one’s principles,” which has a low loading in many countries regardless of whether the item has a positive (as in the CSES pre-test) or a negative wording. In a three-dimensional measurement model this item would constitute the sole measurement of Manicheanism in the scale, but it is questionable whether it adequately captures the Manicheanism dimension (we note that Wuttke et al. (2020) classifies it instead as one of three items measuring “challenges to representative democracy”). Aside from the consistently low loading raising concerns about how well this item fits with the scale, the wording itself is focused narrowly on political compromise, which may fail to capture the “good vs. evil” mindset of some respondents. This potential problem is consistent with the larger issue we believe to exist with the items measuring anti-elite attitudes — in each case, the wording narrows the concept by specifically locating it in the realm of politics and politicians. In the absence of an alternative item to measure Manicheanism, we use it here despite the low loading, but note that this is another dimension of populist measurement which researchers should be cautious about using without due attention to precisely what is being asked and measured, and how it differs from the original concept outlined in the literature.

We next tested the same version of the scale and constructed a three-dimensional model as outlined in the second column of Table 1. The advantage of this approach

Table 2: Confirmatory Factor Analysis Models Castanho Silva et al. version (one dimension)

Country	N	RMSEA	SRMR	CFI	Avg. Loading	Min. Loading	Lowest Loading
Austria	1020	0.063	0.024	0.982	0.671	0.436	E3004_6
Australia	1666	0.062	0.026	0.978	0.633	0.524	E3004_6
Brazil	1933	0.035	0.021	0.977	0.432	0.199	E3004_3
Chile	1324	0.073	0.038	0.914	0.428	0.138	E3004_1
France	1286	0.072	0.029	0.968	0.606	0.386	E3004_1
Germany	1659	0.025	0.011	0.997	0.689	0.540	E3004_3
Greece ¹	717	0.080	0.038	0.923	0.462	0.125	E3004_1
Hong Kong ¹	722	0.066	0.038	0.811	0.321	0.097	E3004_1
Hungary	832	0.077	0.032	0.961	0.565	0.208	E3004_1
Iceland 2016	848	0.055	0.023	0.983	0.624	0.395	E3004_6
Iceland 2017	1381	0.044	0.018	0.989	0.614	0.372	E3004_6
Ireland ¹	827	0.034	0.017	0.992	0.531	0.034	E3004_1
Italy	1260	0.079	0.036	0.937	0.520	0.280	E3004_1
Japan	1352	0.057	0.027	0.959	0.464	0.112	E3004_1
Lithuania	1008	0.101	0.045	0.916	0.527	0.181	E3004_1
Montenegro	806	0.062	0.026	0.978	0.588	0.158	E3004_3
Netherlands	2355	0.074	0.022	0.979	0.706	0.585	E3004_3
New Zealand	1290	0.064	0.025	0.977	0.620	0.488	E3004_3
Norway	1583	0.052	0.021	0.984	0.629	0.506	E3004_6
South Korea ¹	1179	0.047	0.028	0.944	0.379	0.128	E3004_1
Taiwan ¹	1248	0.058	0.032	0.936	0.407	0.069	E3004_1
Turkey	912	0.064	0.030	0.955	0.485	0.135	E3004_1
United Kingdom	834	0.097	0.036	0.949	0.628	0.453	E3004_3
United States 2016	3481	0.061	0.027	0.966	0.540	0.372	E3004_6
United States 2020	6734	0.066	0.026	0.966	0.566	0.393	E3004_6

¹ Part of the pre-test with reversed E3004_1 item. Shown are standardized loadings.

is that equal weight is put on all three dimensions, which then form an overarching second-order factor of populist attitudes. Accordingly, items E3004_2, E3004_3, E3004_4 and E3004_7 constitute the anti-elitism factor, whereas people-centrism (E3004_6) and Manichean worldview (E3004_1) were single indicator latent variables. Technically these are estimated by setting the factor loading of E3004_7 and E3004_1 to 1 and the error variance to a non-zero value in order to account for the non-perfect reliability (Hayduk and Littvay 2012). The value is set as: $\delta_x = Var(x) * (1 - \rho)$ (Brown 2015, p. 122), using scale reliability ρ from an earlier project which measured these dimensions with multiple items (see Castanho Silva et al. 2019a), giving scale reliability for people-centrism and Manichean worldview of 0.765 and 0.790 respectively. The results of the three-dimensional model in Table A2 in the Supplementary Material show similar model fit results to those presented in the text.⁸

Finally, we estimated the model fit of the CSES populist items suggested by Wuttke et al. (2020) (Table 3).⁹ In general, the model seems to fit the data well in most countries. Only Lithuania and to some degree Turkey show a somewhat lower fit. That said, we have to recognize though that one item experiences substantially lower loadings in almost all countries. As we can see in the last two columns of Table 3, E3005_2 which asks whether “The will of the majority should always prevail, even over the rights of minorities,” does not seem to be related to the concept of populist attitudes quite that much. In fact, one could argue that the item probably taps into

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⁸Of course we cannot compare the size of the loadings, as those are much higher by nature when using single-item latent variables.

⁹Countries from the pre-test are excluded, as they did not ask about E3005_2.

related right-wing concepts, but not the general thin ideology of populism. Hence, we will use this version of the scale with care in the remaining part of the paper.

Table 3: Confirmatory Factor Analysis Models Wuttke et al. version (two dimensions)

Country	N	RMSEA	SRMR	CFI	Avg. Loading	Min. Loading	Lowest Loading
Austria	986	0.082	0.030	0.961	0.650	0.452	E3004_6
Australia	1638	0.076	0.040	0.949	0.568	0.125	E3005_2
Brazil	1898	0.051	0.021	0.977	0.432	0.199	E3005_2
Chile	1311	0.046	0.032	0.904	0.418	0.050	E3005_2
France	1406	0.089	0.045	0.908	0.503	0.118	E3005_2
Germany	1592	0.062	0.030	0.975	0.627	0.378	E3005_2
Hungary	813	0.068	0.043	0.915	0.490	0.075	E3005_2
Iceland 2016	805	0.067	0.034	0.958	0.519	0.090	E3005_2
Iceland 2017	1275	0.069	0.032	0.956	0.528	0.086	E3005_2
Italy	1268	0.074	0.039	0.911	0.507	0.332	E3004_1
Japan	1234	0.051	0.030	0.928	0.357	-0.013	E3005_2
Lithuania	994	0.090	0.047	0.873	0.474	0.131	E3004_1
Montenegro	786	0.086	0.045	0.918	0.490	0.182	E3004_3
Netherlands	1518	0.055	0.025	0.979	0.629	0.379	E3005_2
New Zealand	1099	0.064	0.032	0.963	0.565	0.270	E3005_2
Norway	1577	0.055	0.026	0.972	0.563	0.325	E3005_2
Turkey	729	0.073	0.043	0.899	0.335	-0.075	E3005_2
United Kingdom	748	0.101	0.047	0.921	0.591	0.305	E3005_2
United States 2016	3448	0.073	0.040	0.930	0.538	0.370	E3005_2
United States 2020	6693	0.074	0.038	0.936	0.571	0.301	E3005_2

External Validity: Predicting Vote Choice

To test to external validity of populist attitude scales estimated the effect of populist attitudes on vote choice.¹⁰ For the Castanho Silva et al. (2019b) version of the

¹⁰The CSES distinguished between vote choice in parliamentary and presidential elections. We used vote choice in parliamentary elections except in Brazil, Chile, France, Turkey, Taiwan, and the US, where we used presidential elections.

CSES items we ran structural equation models (SEM) with a multinomial dependent variable. Figure 1 gives a conceptual overview of the model using the one-dimensional operationalization. As such models can become difficult to estimate if there are only few cases in some of the categories of the dependent variable, we recoded the country-specific variables for voting behavior to include only those respondents who voted for a party which was elected to parliament in the election surveyed. We also added all those respondents who indicated that they did not vote in the election.¹¹

Figure 1: Multinomial SEM Model

The predictions of populist vote choice using the one-dimensional Castanho Silva et al. (2019b) version of the CSES items are visualized in Figures 2 and 3. Parties generally considered to be populist are highlighted in red and labels of interesting other parties are added to the individual plots.¹² If the CSES populist attitudes scale has a high external validity, we should find an upward curve for all populist

¹¹Due to the very large number of respondents in Hong Kong who refused to answer the question about vote choice (n=296), we also included “refused” as an additional category in Hong Kong.

¹²We coded populist parties along the schema provided by the *PopuList* (Rooduijn et al. 2019) except for borderline cases. For Asia and Latin America we used the recommendations of local experts and prior literature. Parties with a low number of cases were omitted for the sake of readability.

parties and a downward slope for all non-populist parties.¹³ From these results we can conclude that populist vote prediction works well in most countries, with a high degree of populist attitudes coinciding with a higher probability to vote for a populist party.¹⁴ On the other hand, we find mixed effects in countries that were considered to lack a populist party at the election surveyed. Whereas Labour parties in the Commonwealth seem to attract voters with high populist attitudes (Australia, New Zealand and UK), other countries experienced only small positive effects of populist attitudes on vote choice for some parties (Chile, Hong Kong, Taiwan and the US).

That said, the far more interesting results here are the cases in which we see the opposite relationship. In Hungary, Montenegro and Turkey, higher populist attitudes actually *decrease* the probability to vote for the respective populist party in each country. Voting for Japan's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and South Korea's Saenuri Party, both of which are argued by some scholars (albeit not uncontroversially) to be examples of mainstream conservative parties that have adopted a subset of populist strategies, also have negative relationships with populist attitudes.¹⁵

These seemingly paradoxical results are in line with our expectations outlined above:

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¹³Of course, the relationship is not perfect, as populist attitudes are held across the political spectrum (see Bonikowski et al. 2019; Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser 2019). But at least we should find trends in that direction.

¹⁴The absolute probability to vote for a party is of course subject to the number of respondents who voted for the party in the first place. Thus the UK's UKIP, for instance, shows a low overall probability, though it increases slightly as populist attitudes increase.

¹⁵As the Japanese and South Korean cases are both contested, we have not labelled these parties as populist. However, the LDP has been argued to have embraced some aspects of populist rhetoric and strategy, most notably under Junichiro Koizumi (Prime Minister from 2001-2006) but also under his successor Shinzo Abe (Prime Minister 2006-2007, 2012-2020) (Kobori 2013; Yoshida 2019; Fahey et al. 2021), while both the Saenuri Party during the rule of Park Geun-hye and the leaders of the protest movement which ultimately deposed her from the presidency have been labelled populist by some scholars (see for example Kim 2017; Shin and Moon 2017).

in all of these countries the populist party was the incumbent ruling party at the surveyed election. The CSES populist attitudes scale measures the anti-elite dimension of populism through items that refer explicitly to *politicians* as being corrupt or not trustworthy — and in these cases, political and governmental power was associated with the preferred party or leaders of populist voters. This is not just a problem of the CSES populist attitudes items, but one common to almost all such scales. The supporters of populist parties in power are unlikely to agree with statements about the corruption of political leaders; having installed their preferred leaders, they no longer consider political leaders to be the major problem of the country or to be conspiring against the good and honest people (see also Castanho Silva [2019](#)). In turn, populist parties who win power often change their communication to focus condemnation on other, non-political elites, e.g. academics, bureaucrats, journalists or the media. Consequently, the scale fails to correctly identify populist attitudes, and thus to predict populist vote choice, in these cases where populists were in power.

One notable exception to this pattern is the United States, where the incumbency of President Donald Trump at the 2020 election does not appear to have impacted the scale’s measurement of populist attitudes among his voters — in fact, the populist attitudes of Republican voters in 2020 are more clearly delineated than they were in 2016. This does not, however, contradict the overall argument regarding the over-specification of the anti-elite dimension, since Trump had an unusually fractious and combative relationship with his own political party, to the point of overtly attacking senior Republicans whom he perceived as disloyal or weak. This rhetoric stepped up during his reelection campaign in 2020 and intensified further

during his subsequent attempts to discredit the election results, to the point where the Trump supporters who attacked Congress in January 2021 were heard chanting slogans calling for the execution of Trump’s own Vice President, veteran Republican Mike Pence. Given these events, we would not reasonably expect to see Trump’s voters following the trend observed elsewhere of refocusing their anti-elite sentiments away from politicians.

These results are confirmed using various other operationalizations of populist attitudes.¹⁶ Figure 4 provides an overview for all countries where populist parties were in power prior to the election at which the survey took place. As a result, we find that the negative relationship between populist attitudes and vote choice for populist parties holds in all countries where populist parties were in power prior to the election regardless of operationalization procedure. Using the three-dimensional version which puts equal weight on all three dimensions (anti-elitism, people-centrism and Manichaenism) yields more or less similar effects in Hungary, Montenegro and Turkey, as well as in the edge-case of Japan. Somewhat less clear-cut but still exhibiting a downward trend are the results from the Goertzian operationalization of the Castanho Silva et al. (2019b) items of the CSES scale. Especially in Hungary and Turkey the effects are smaller when we use the minimum value of the three dimensions. Only in South Korea there is no effect of populist attitudes on voting for the Saenuri Party. Moreover, if we use the same method of operationalization for the suggested items by Wuttke et al. (2020), the effects again indicate a strong negative relationship between populist attitudes and populist vote choice (with the exception

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¹⁶Figures A1 to A6 in the Supplementary Material report effects for all countries

Figure 2: Predicting Populist Vote Across Countries I

Figure 3: Predicting Populist Vote Across Countries II

of the Japanese edge-case).¹⁷ The results from Hungary provide particularly strong evidence for our hypothesis that populist attitudes scales may fail to function when populist parties are in power. Here we find that the propensity to vote for the ruling FIDESZ party decreases quite substantially as populist attitudes increase. However, higher populist attitudes increase the propensity to vote for Jobbik — a rival right-wing populist party which was not in power.

Finally, we carried out further robustness checks using six other populist attitudes scales using additional data from Greece (2016) and Japan (2019). In the analysis of the Greek data, we found only one case in which there was a positive, albeit small, relationship between populist attitudes and vote choice for SYRIZA, the populist party which was elected to power in September 2015 (see Figure B1). All other scales indicate either no effect or a slightly negative effect. As discussed above, Japan, unlike Greece, is an edge-case in terms of populism; there is an ongoing debate over the extent and nature of populism in the country, but some scholars argue that the party in government, the LDP, has nullified challenges from populists by itself adopting certain aspects of populist rhetoric and strategy (see for example Kobori 2013; Warren 2019; Fahey et al. 2021). We conducted an online survey of Japanese voters to test alternative populism scales (Castanho Silva et al. (2019a) and Schulz et al. (2018)) and found that the results were consistent with our analysis of the CSES Module 5 data in this case, with the same strong negative relationship between populist attitudes and vote for the LDP (see Figure B2). However, both

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¹⁷Effects for populist attitudes on populist vote choice are very similar in all other countries as compared to the findings presented in Figures 2 and 3. The lone exception is Brazil where the Goertzian version of the Wuttke et al. (2020) items indicates a positive relationship with the PSL vote.

Figure 4: Predicting Populist Vote Across Countries (Robustness Checks)

scales had some issues regarding goodness of fit — the Castanho Silva et al. (2019a) scale had poor fit metrics (CFI is less than .95 and RMSEA is over .06, per Hu and Bentler (1999)) and its anti-elitism dimension correlated only weakly with the other two dimensions, while the Schulz et al. (2018) scale, though it scored well on fit measurements, had an unexpectedly negative loading on the populism factor for one of its dimensions (related to national homogeneity). These problems are consistent with our expectation that existing scales of populism are unsuited to complex cases, such as those where populist parties have entered government, or where existing mainstream parties have adopted populist strategies to appeal to certain voters. Our contention is not that the results for the Japanese case are “wrong”, *per se*, since even most scholars who argue that the LDP has adopted populist rhetoric do not go so far as to claim that it’s actually a populist party; rather, it’s that when used in this context, the populist attitudes scales are not actually measuring what they purport to measure, and that their results may be meaningless or worse, actually misleading.

Discussion and Conclusions

Overall, we conclude that populist attitudes scales, as they are currently operationalized, fail to predict vote choice for populist parties which are in power. In our eyes, this appears mainly be driven by the fact that all scales use items for the anti-elite dimension which over-specify the concept by focusing on negative aspects of parties and politicians. Although anti-establishment rhetoric of some form is a key selling

point of populist parties around the world, its targets can be varied and flexible; a challenger party which has campaigned on an anti-government, anti-politician platform will likely refocus on other elites like the media, academics, bureaucrats or large corporations once they are in office, while a mainstream party that has only adopted aspects of populist rhetoric (perhaps to counteract the appeal of such a challenger party) will likely focus on non-political elites as its primary scapegoat from the outset.

One underlying reason for this problem with populist attitudes scales may be the somewhat homogeneous contexts in which the various scales used to study the demand side of populism have been developed. Unfortunately for cross-national research, the studies which led to the creation of these scales were often carried out in single countries and mostly in Western Europe — contexts in which populism was, until recently, almost exclusively the realm of small challenger parties . This homogeneity makes it especially important to test how populist attitudes scales work in other countries and political contexts. Our study is the first to date to investigate populist attitudes across multiple Asian countries and to provide direct comparison with countries in Europe and the Americas. This wide set of comparisons also allowed us to investigate the connection between populist demand and supply both in countries where populists are in opposition (as was the case in almost all places where these scales were developed) and in countries where populists are in government, either through having taken power as a challenger party, or through a mainstream party having adopted populist rhetoric for strategic purposes.

Existing measurements did not work to predict populist vote choice in countries

where populist parties are in power. The main reason for this lies in a conceptual problem with the construction of these scales, whereby questions designed to measure “anti-elite” feelings are written in ways that solely concern negative feelings about political or governmental elites. This excludes the possibility of respondents’ anti-elite attitudes instead being directed at other groups, either internal or external to their country — a factor which becomes especially pressing when populist parties are in power, as the election to office of their preferred populist leaders make citizens with populist attitudes, having “won” within the rules of the existing political system, less likely to agree with broadly anti-political or anti-governmental statements. As populist actors change their rhetoric to shift the empty signifiers of the “evil elite” from politicians to academics, journalists, judges, or minority groups, their supporters’ perceptions also change. The perceived obstacle to the exercise of the popular will is no longer those in political office (now occupied by populists, whom they see as instruments of the popular will), but other conspiratorial forces in the media, academia, civil society or elsewhere. It is important to keep this shifting and multifarious nature of the concept of “eliteness” in mind when conducting this kind of research. Moreover, as survey batteries investigating citizens’ populist attitudes are further developed and refined, finding ways to effectively allow for this complex and dynamic construction of anti-elite attitudes will be of significant value to comparative and cross-national studies.

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Appendix A: Main Study

Table A1: Overview CSES Data and Populist Parties

Country	Year	N	Populist Parties	In Power before election
Austria	2017	1203	FPÖ	no
Australia	2017	2000	–	–
Brazil	2018	2506	PSL	no
Chile	2017	2000	–	–
France	2017	1830	FN	no
Germany	2017	2032	AfD	no
Greece ¹	2015	1078	SYRIZA	no
Hong Kong ¹	2016	1020	–	–
Hungary	2018	1208	FIDESZ, Jobbik	yes, no
Iceland	2016	1295	–	–
Iceland	2017	2073	–	–
Ireland ¹	2016	1000	Sinn Féin	no
Italy	2018	2001	LN, M5S	no, no
Japan	2017	1688	(LDP) ²	yes
Lithuania	2016	1500	Order and Justice	no
Montenegro	2016	1213	DPS	yes
Netherlands	2017	3428	FvD, PVV	no, no
New Zealand	2017	1808	–	no
Norway	2017	1792	FrP	no
South Korea ¹	2016	1199	(Saenuri) ²	yes
Taiwan ¹	2016	1690	–	–
Turkey	2018	1069	AKP	yes
United Kingdom	2017	2194	UKIP	no
United States	2016	3648	–	–
United States	2020	8280	–	–

“In Power” indicates whether a populist party has been the ruling party already prior to the respective election survey.

¹ Part of the CSES pre-test with reversed E3004_1 item.

² Neither the LDP nor Saenuri are formally classified as populist parties, and we do not treat them as such in this study. However, each of them has been argued to have adopted elements of populist rhetorical strategy and we therefore highlight them as “edge-cases” in the study’s results.

Table A2: Confirmatory Factor Analysis Models (3 Dimensions)

Country	N	RMSEA	SRMR	CFI	Avg. Loading	Min. Loading	Lowest Loading
Austria	1020	0.068	0.024	0.982	0.679	0.701	E3004_4
Australia	1666	0.054	0.022	0.985	0.751	0.550	E3004_3
Brazil	1933	0.031	0.018	0.984	0.620	0.201	E3004_3
Chile	1324	0.078	0.038	0.914	0.492	0.250	E3004_3
France	1286	0.072	0.029	0.968	0.627	0.518	E3004_3
Germany	1659	0.024	0.010	0.998	0.653	0.541	E3004_3
Greece ¹	717	0.082	0.035	0.929	0.587	0.420	E3004_3
Hong Kong ¹	722	0.066	0.038	0.811	0.470	0.190	E3004_3
Hungary	832	0.079	0.031	0.963	0.634	0.435	E3004_3
Iceland 2016	848	0.055	0.023	0.983	0.770	0.679	E3004_3
Iceland 2017	1381	0.044	0.018	0.989	0.766	0.604	E3004_3
Ireland ¹	827	0.036	0.016	0.992	0.602	0.482	E3004_3
Italy	1260	0.082	0.034	0.941	0.583	0.398	E3004_3
Japan	1352	0.061	0.027	0.958	0.584	0.462	E3004_3
Lithuania	1008	0.101	0.045	0.916	0.612	0.408	E3004_3
Montenegro	806	0.062	0.026	0.978	0.589	0.158	E3004_3
Netherlands	2355	0.074	0.022	0.979	0.780	0.585	E3004_3
New Zealand	1290	0.064	0.025	0.977	0.745	0.488	E3004_3
Norway	1583	0.052	0.021	0.984	0.748	0.589	E3004_3
South Korea ¹	1179	0.042	0.024	0.960	0.539	0.425	E3004_3
Taiwan ¹	1248	0.062	0.031	0.935	0.555	0.411	E3004_4
Turkey	912	0.068	0.030	0.954	0.692	0.426	E3004_3
United Kingdom	834	0.103	0.036	0.948	0.612	0.455	E3004_3
United States 2016	3481	0.061	0.024	0.970	0.607	0.457	E3004_3
United States 2020	6734	0.070	0.026	0.967	0.695	0.480	E3004_6

¹ Part of the pre-test with reversed E3004_1 item. Shown are standardized loadings.

Figure A1: Predicting Populist Vote Across Countries (3 Dimensions) I

Figure A2: Predicting Populist Vote Across Countries (3 Dimensions) II

Figure A3: Predicting Populist Vote Across Countries (Goertz: 3 Dimensions) I

Figure A4: Predicting Populist Vote Across Countries (Goertz: 3 Dimensions) II

Figure A5: Predicting Populist Vote Across Countries (Goertz: Wuttke et al. 2020)

I

Figure A6: Predicting Populist Vote Across Countries (Goertz: Wuttke et al. 2020)
II

Appendix B: Robustness Checks

Greece (2016)

The first robustness check uses the Greek data from Castanho Silva et al. (2019a) who sampled 310 adults via CrowdFlower as part of a nine country survey between December 2016 and March 2017 (median age: 32 years, 55% females, median years of education: 15, median income decile: 3rd, mean left-right self-placement on a 1-9 scale, where 1 is the left: 5.2). At the time of the survey, SYRIZA has been the ruling party since the January 2015 elections.

Table B1: Question Wording Akkerman et al. (2014) Items

Item	Wording
AKK1	The politicians in the Greek Parliament need to follow the will of the people.
AKK2	The people, and not politicians, should make our most important policy decisions.
AKK3	The political differences between the elite and the people are larger than the differences among the people.
AKK4	I would rather be represented by a citizen than by a specialized politician.
AKK5	Elected officials talk too much and take too little action.
AKK6	What people call “compromise” in politics is really just selling out on ones principles.

Table B2: Question Wording Castanho Silva et al. (2019a) Items

Item	Wording
CS-PPL1	Politicians should always listen closely to the problems of the people.
CS-PPL2	Politicians don't have to spend time among ordinary people to do a good job.
CS-PPL3	The will of the people should be the highest principle in this country's politics.
CS-ANT1	The government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves.
CS-ANT2	Government officials use their power to try to improve people's lives.
CS-ANT3	Quite a few of the people running the government are crooked.
CS-MAN1	You can tell if a person is good or bad if you know their politics.
CS-MAN2	The people I disagree with politically are not evil.
CS-MAN3	The people I disagree with politically are just misinformed.

Table B3: Question Wording Elchardus and Spruyt (2016) Items

Item	Wording
ES1	The opinion of ordinary people is worth more than that of experts and politicians.
ES2	Politicians should listen more closely to the problems the people have.
ES3	Ministers should spend less time behind their desks, and more among the ordinary people.
ES4	People who have studied for a long time and have many diplomas do not really know what makes the world go round.

Table B4: Question Wording Schulz et al. (2018) Items

Item	Wording
S-ANT1	MPs in Parliament very quickly lose touch with ordinary people.
S-ANT2	The differences between ordinary people and the ruling elite are much greater than the differences between ordinary people.
S-ANT3	People like me have no influence on what the government does.
S-SOV1	The people should have the final say on the most important political issues by voting on them directly in referendums.
S-SOV2	The people should be asked whenever important decisions are taken.
S-SOV3	The people, not the politicians, should make our most important policy decisions.
S-HOM1	Ordinary people are of good and honest character.
S-HOM2	Ordinary people all pull together.
S-HOM3	Although the [NATIONALS] are very different from each other, when it comes down to it they all think the same.

Table B5: Question Wording Stanley (2011) Items

Item	Wording
STAN1	The ordinary people are divided by many different values.
STAN2	The people who belong to the political elite are divided by many different values.
STAN3	Ordinary people are prevented from improving their lives by the actions of unaccountable elites.
STAN4	Not all politicians are the same; some genuinely care about what the people want.
STAN5	Democracy is about finding compromise between different interests and opinions.
STAN6	Ordinary people are unable to make the correct decisions about the future of our country.
STAN7	The majority of politicians are honest people.
STAN8	Modern politics is in essence a struggle between the good, honest people and the evil elite.

Table B6: Confirmatory Factor Analysis Models for Populist Attitudes Scales (Greece 2016)

Country	N	RMSEA	SRMR	CFI	Avg. Loading	Min. Loading	Lowest Loading
Akkerman et al. (2014)	254	0.077	0.038	0.948	0.570	0.507	AKK3
Castanho Silva et al. (2019a)	267	0.077	0.059	0.918	0.430	0.252	CS- MAN2
CSES	254	0.056	0.037	0.969	0.537	0.369	E3004_3
Elchardus and Spruyt (2016)	258	0.238	0.078	0.789	0.509	0.190	ES4
Schulz et al. (2018)	246	0.045	0.037	0.974	0.629	0.484	S- HOM3
Stanley (2011)	246	0.101	0.069	0.736	0.390	0.217	STAN7

Shown are standardized loadings.

Figure B1: Predicting SYRIZA Vote By Populist Attitudes Scale

Japan (2019)

We fielded an online survey through a Yahoo Cloud panel in Japan in August 2019 in which we included the items of the Castanho Silva et al. (2019b) and Schulz et al. (2018) scales along with questions on vote choice and political attitudes (N=1192). Prior research in Japan has indicated a disconnect between literature on populist leaders and parties and the actual voting behaviour of those voters classified as populists using existing survey scales (Hieda et al. 2019). Japan's ruling party, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), is an "edge case" in terms of the adoption of populist rhetoric and strategies; while the LDP cannot reasonably be bracketed alongside overtly populist parties such as Hungary's FIDESZ or Germany's AfD, the party (especially under recent influential leaders, Junichiro Koizumi and Shinzo Abe) is argued to have adopted a number of elements of populist rhetoric, embracing what Yoshida (2019) describes as a "Japanese style of populism" (see also Lindgren 2015; Fahey et al. 2021). This strategy has been argued to have been effective in limiting the appeal of potential populist challengers from outside the party (Warren 2019). Japan therefore presents a complex test case for the existing scales which could show whether they work similarly when applied to an incumbent party which only partially meets the definitions of populism.

Table B7: Confirmatory Factor Analysis Models for Castanho Silva et al. (2019a) and Schulz et al. (2018) scales (Japan 2019)

Country		N	RMSEA	SRMR	CFI	Avg. Loading	Min. Loading	Lowest Loading
Castanho Silva et al. (2019a)		907	0.077	0.058	0.905	0.512	0.358	PPL3
	Schulz et al. (2018)	920	0.057	0.037	0.970	0.703	0.374	ANT3

Shown are standardized loadings.

Figure B2: Predictions of LDP vote by Castanho Silva et al. (2019a) and Schulz et al. (2018) scales