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Understanding the Populist Voter

KEY MESSAGES

- **Left-wing and right-wing populist voters differ the most on the issues of immigration, the importance of traditions, religiosity, and the need to dismantle the welfare state**
- **Populist voters from left and right share concerns about economic insecurity, a lack of empathy by politicians, and a perceived lack of opportunities**
- **They also share a low self-worth and differ in this dimension from non-populist voters**
- **Right-wing populist voters have higher identity misperceptions regarding immigration and immigrant groups, while both groups have lower corruption misperceptions compared to non-populist voters**

Populism is a somewhat elusive concept. The term is often used in public discourse in a demeaning manner. It is used to dismiss the views of others as rather simplistic. Or it is used to devalue politicians' actions or proposals as simply driven by opportunistic motives (Schwörer 2021); politicians are accused of choosing the path of least resistance. In every part of the political spectrum, however, we can identify arguments that are not well-thought-out and politicians from all parties that want to please their electorates. In search of a sustainable definition of populism, many investigations refer to Mudde (2004, 543); "an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people." Hence, "us vs. the elite" is seen as the common denominator

of modern populism. This definition works reasonably well across the political spectrum and countries. On the left of the political spectrum, we find parties that do not just want to redistribute more towards the poor (as do traditional left-leaning parties) but combine this call for redistribution with anti-elitist rhetoric claiming that rich elites divert the true people's resources in their direction. On the right of the political spectrum, it is corrupt elites who allow immigration from other parts of the world, which is seen as a threat to traditional values, eliminating national cultures and endangering the well-being of the native masses. The definition paints parties like the AfD in Germany, Rassemblement National in France, the UK Independence Party in the United Kingdom, or Vox in Spain as right-wing populists. The Spanish Unidas Podemos, the German Die Linke, and the French La France Insoumise are their left-wing populist counterparts.

This concept of populism is beneficial for tracking the development of the "us vs. the elite" thinking in national elections. The vote share of populist parties – classified according to the PopuList (Rooduijn et al. 2023) – has increased in Europe from 12 percent in 1993 to more than 30 percent in 2022. It can also be effectively used to analyze whether such populist parties create different policy outcomes than traditional non-populist parties. Dornbusch and Edwards (1990) described the vicious economic cycle typically triggered by populist regimes. More recently, Funke et al. (2023) investigated the performance of populist regimes worldwide in the last 120 years. After 15 years, countries with a populist government lost 10 percent of their GDP per capita compared to their non-populist counterfactual.

But who are the voters of populist parties? To better understand the rise in populism, it might be help-



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ful to know more about the socio-demographics, attitudes, information sets, and psychological patterns of those who vote or intend to vote for a populist party. Several papers tried to pinpoint the determinants of populist voting, albeit approaching the issue from various angles and with different methodologies. To name just a few dimensions that have been investigated, gender significantly predicts populist voting, with radical right parties garnering more support from men than women (Spierings and Zaslove 2015 and 2017). Men are also more likely to favor populist politicians on social media, particularly Facebook (Bobba et al. 2018).

In contrast to what is commonly discussed in public, age does not uniformly go along with populist voting. While in the UK, the UKIP voters were predominantly older (Ford and Goodwin 2014), it is younger, better-educated people who tend to support left- and right-wing populists in continental Western Europe (Zagorski et al. 2021; Foa and Mounk 2019). Next to socio-demographics, populist votes are influenced by macroeconomic factors such as increased unemployment during economic crises, skill-biased trade, and inequality (Guriev 2018; Pastor and Veronesi 2021; Dijkstra et al. 2020). Often, the perception of the economic situation rather than personal vulnerability impacts populist voting (Rico and Anduiza 2019; Algan et al. 2017). Biased perceptions, in general, as demonstrated by Kuklinski et al. (2000) regarding welfare recipients and budget allocation, have a significant impact. Right- and left-wing populist voters exhibit low political trust but differ, for instance, in their attitudes towards migration and income redistribution (Akkerman et al. 2017).

In this article, we aim to describe the populist voter by highlighting those dimensions where left-wing populist voters differ from the most right-populist voters. We also identify those dimensions where there is hardly any difference between the two types of populists but they differ from non-populist voters. To achieve this goal, we use simple descriptive statistics for the determinants of populist votes.¹ Our analysis relies on a unique large-scale survey that contains a multitude of individual-level information (socio-demographics, attitudes, misperceptions, behavioral and psychological facets) for individuals in four major European countries.

SURVEY DATA

The survey, created by the authors using Qualtrics, was executed across four European countries: France, Germany, Spain, and the UK.² The survey was distributed via e-mail with the assistance of Respondi,³

a company known for its access to representative samples of survey participants. The survey was distributed in the national language of each country; compensation was offered only to those participants who successfully finished the survey.

The questionnaire prompted respondents to disclose their voting history in the previous election and indicate their intended vote in the upcoming one. Furthermore, the questionnaire gathered information on the respondents' self-identified political orientation, from left to right. We also collected details about the respondents' demographics and socio-economic status. Additionally, the survey included a series of questions regarding the individuals' perceptions of economic security, trust in political parties and institutions, and their ability to discern fake news. Additionally, respondents were asked about their sentiments regarding declinism and social loneliness. Finally, the questionnaire explored potential misperceptions of economic status, migration, religion, and corruption. Factual questions were posed to assess respondents' understanding of these issues, and their responses were compared with actual figures.

A total of 31,568 responses were received, with an average completion time of 24 minutes. We excluded from the analysis any respondents who did not complete all the questions and those who completed the survey unusually quickly (in less than 3 minutes). We performed manual grouping to manage the various name variants of a party.⁴ Cases with no responses to the questions of previous and future votes were disregarded. In addition, we filtered out participants whose responses regarding their previous or next vote included political parties that could not be matched with recognized parties in each country.

The final sample comprises 12,027 respondents aged 18 to 92 who completed the questionnaire. The sample closely approximates a representative distribution in each country, with final per-country sample sizes of 3,551 for Germany, 2,556 for France, 3,214 for the UK, and 2,706 for Spain.

The final step was to assign populist tags to the political parties that the respondents voted or planned to vote for, categorizing them as left or right based on classifications from Rooduijn et al. (2023) and the Pew Research Center (2019). We scrutinized party programs and publicly available information for parties absent from these sources to determine their classification as populist, adhering to the criteria in Rooduijn et al. (2023) and the Pew Research Center (2019).⁵ Depending on the stated voting behavior, we classified the respondents as right-wing populists, left-wing populists, or non-populist voters. For the subsequent analysis, we calculated the mean responses to each of the roughly 100 questions in the survey for the three voter groups. This allowed us to identify characteristics where left- and right-wing

¹ In an academic companion paper, we employ more advanced regularization methods (BMA, Lasso and Ridge regressions, as well as variations of Random Forests) to isolate statistically important drivers of populist votes; see Arin et al. (2024).

² For more details on the survey, see Arin et al. (2022, 2023 and 2024).

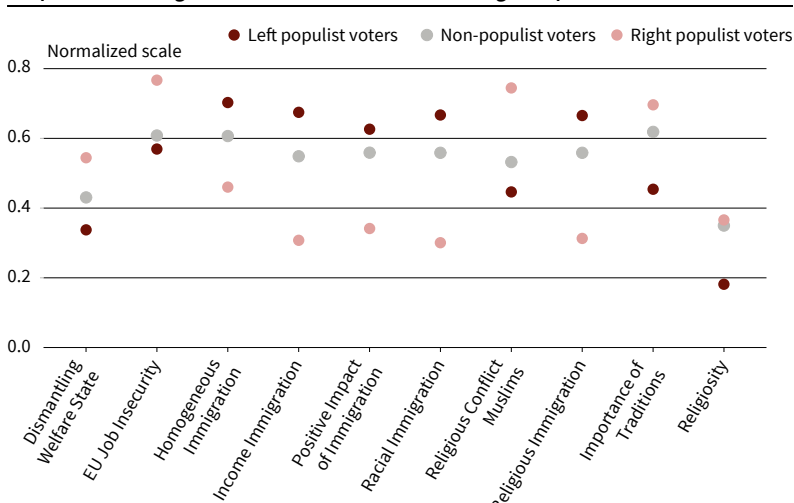
³ The company was recently renamed to Bilendi.

⁴ For instance, National Front and National Rally in France.

⁵ The classified list of populist parties is available upon request.

Figure 1

Responses with Highest Distance between Left and Right Populist Voters



Note: All response scales are normalised between 0 and 1 to facilitate comparability. 1. Dismantling Welfare State: In order to face the competition of other countries, we will have to dismantle our welfare state. 2. EU Job Insecurity: Opening the European frontiers means that our employers will prefer the low-cost workers from poorer countries to our own workers. 3. Homogeneous Immigration: To what extent do you think the home country should allow people of the same race or ethnic group as the majority of the home country people to come and live here? 4. Income Immigration: To what extent you think the home country should allow people from poorer countries outside Europe to come and live here? 5. Positive Impact of Immigration: To what extent you think the home country has become a worse or a better place to live by people coming to live here from other countries? 6. Racial Immigration: To what extent you think the home country should allow people of the different race or ethnic group than the majority of the home country people to come and live here? 7. Religious Conflict Muslims: The relationship between Christians and Muslims is bound to become violent in the future. 8. Religious Immigration: To what extent you think the home country should allow people of different religious faith than the majority of the home country people to come and live here? 9. Importance of Traditions: It is important to follow traditions and customs handed down by religion or family. 10. Religiosity: How religious are you?

Source: Authors' survey.

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populists differ but also where populists agree and diverge from non-populists.

RESULTS

Figure 1 displays the survey questions where right- and left-wing populist voters differ the most. We have normalized all response scales between 0 and 1 to facilitate comparability. For instance, when confronted with the statement, “In order to face the competition of other countries, we will have to dismantle our welfare state,” left-wing populist voters express a strong stance against dismantling the welfare state, emphasizing their commitment to social safety nets. Right-wing populist voters show a high degree of consent for the need to dismantle the welfare state; non-populist voters’ views are in between the two populist groups. Hence, the design and extent of the welfare state is a policy area where left and right populist voters diverge from each other but also from non-populist voters.

Left and right populist voters also diverge in their responses regarding job insecurity due to EU borders opening (“Opening the European frontiers means that our employers will prefer the low-cost workers from poorer countries to our own workers”). Voters of right-wing populists view the EU’s open borders for goods, services, capital, and, to some extent, labor as a threat to job security, while the approval of those voting for left-wing populists is even below the non-populist voters, suggesting another area of the

ideological divide. It is somewhat surprising that left-wing populist voters express so little concern about the threats from globalization, while left-wing populist parties typically emphasize that globalization increases the income and wealth of the elites at the expense of “normal people.”⁶ As we will see below, the response of left-wing populist voters is more negative when directly asked about globalization rather than indirectly via the openness of borders.

Several questions in this top-ten list of divergent views deal with immigration and its consequences. These inquiries explore the willingness of respondents to accept immigrants of the same race or ethnicity (“homogeneous immigration”), different races or ethnicities (“racial immigration”), different religions (“religious immigration”), or from poorer countries (“income immigration”). The immigration-related questions also elicit the respondents’ beliefs about whether immigration has a positive or negative impact on their country (“positive impact of immigration”) and whether immigration has the potential for violent conflicts between Muslims and Christians in the future (“religious conflict Muslims”). In all these dimensions, there is a noticeable disparity in responses between left- and right-wing populist voters. Left-wing populist voters express a notably more positive outlook, irrespective of the immigrants’ race, religion, or income, surpassing even the optimism of non-populist voters.

The last two areas of divergence between left- and right-wing opinions pertain to religiosity and the significance attributed to traditions (“importance of traditions”). Left-wing populist voters are significantly less religious than both non-populist voters and right-wing populist voters. Also, they do not assign considerable importance to traditions, and their responses here also differ from non-populist voters. In these particular questions, non-populist voters align more closely with right-wing populist voters.

Except for the importance attributed to traditions and religion, where non-populist voters align more closely with the right wing, those voting for non-populist parties tend to share opinions more akin to the left wing than the right wing. Especially regarding immigration-related questions, there is a significant divide between right-wing populist voters and the broader electorate.

Our analysis also uncovers several noteworthy commonalities between the two groups of populist voters. In Figure 2, we demonstrate the questions where the mean responses of left- and right-wing populist voters are almost identical but differ – to some extent – from non-populist voters; we disregard items where all three groups show the same average responses. First, both groups of populist voters share concerns about economic insecurity, a (lack of) empathy by politicians, and a perceived lack of

⁶ Note that the question does not aim at labor migration but more generally at international differences in labor costs.

opportunities. Despite their ideological differences, there is a common ground in recognizing and experiencing economic uncertainties and limited opportunities, but also in challenging the political status quo of their country. Both groups also view globalization as harming them and their families and are wary of the proliferation of multinational corporations (“SME suffering”). Finally, somewhat surprisingly, both groups tend to receive news from news websites or apps with a lower frequency than non-populist voters.

Voters affiliated with populist parties, whether leaning left or right, tend to possess a lower self-perception of their societal standing (“self worth”). This illuminates a shared mechanism that might contribute to individuals aligning with populist voting patterns. In contrast to voters of non-populist parties, who, on average, position themselves slightly above the midpoint in terms of their perceived societal hierarchy, supporters of populist parties (both left and right) tend to place themselves slightly below the midpoint. Based on our survey, right-wing populist voters have even somewhat higher incomes than non-populist and left-wing populist voters.⁷ The variance in self-perception could potentially be a factor leveraged by populist politicians.

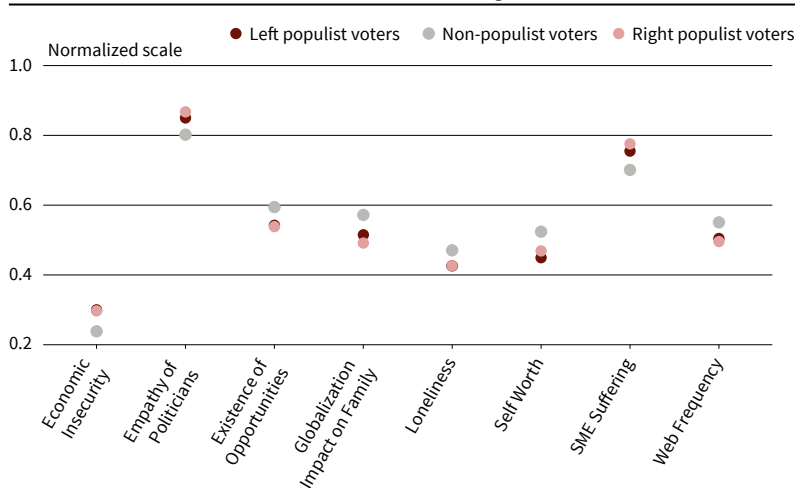
This perceived below-average standing in society – somewhat surprisingly – is not driven by being marginalized or isolated in terms of personal contacts. When asked whether they “miss having people around” (“loneliness”), populist voters from the left and right feel less lonely than non-populist voters. We cannot tell whether populist voters are, per se, better connected to other people, or whether their sense of being different from the rest of the population creates a sentiment of camaraderie among like-minded people, which may reduce feelings of loneliness. This sense of “belonging” may be strengthened by the language of “us against them” often used by populist politicians.

Some differences in the assessment of migration, globalization, and the welfare state might stem from different perceptions of reality. In recent years, comprehensive literature on various misperceptions has emerged (Arin et al. 2021). In Figure 3, we demonstrate some key differences in misperceptions among the three groups. We have normalized each type of misperception to values between 0 and 1, with the voter group with the highest mean assigned a value of one and the group with the lowest mean a value of zero.

Right-wing populist voters exhibit higher misperceptions regarding both immigration and immigrant crime, as measured here by the (estimated) proportion of foreign-born prison inmates. This aligns with our earlier findings that concerns about immigration and potential demographic shifts in the future are pronounced among right-wing populist voters. While

⁷ The question about incomes uses fixed scales to gauge the average weekly income of the respondents.

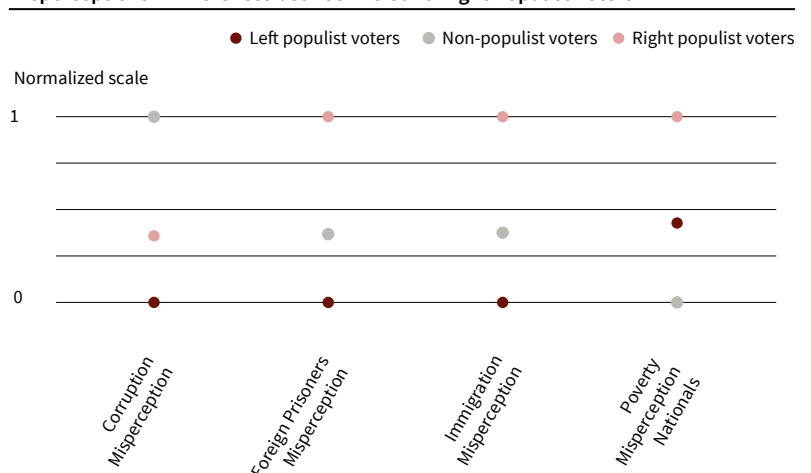
Figure 2
Responses with Lowest Distance between Left and Right Populist Voters



Note: All response scales are normalised between 0 and 1 to facilitate comparability. 1. Economic Insecurity: How you feel about your household's income nowadays? 2. Empathy of Politicians: Politicians should listen more closely to the problems the people have. 3. Existence of Opportunities: I have enough opportunities to advance in life. 4. Globalization Impact on Family: Globalization has had a negative or a positive effect on you and your immediate family. 5. Loneliness: I miss having people around me. 6. SME Suffering: Multinational enterprises will become increasingly powerful, small enterprises are bound to suffer. 7. Self Worth: There are people who tend to be towards the top of our society and people who tend to be towards the bottom. Where would you put yourself? 8. Web Frequency: How often do you get news from a news website or app?
Source: Authors' survey. © ifo Institute

we had expected a higher misperception of income inequality among left-wing populist voters, the survey data does not confirm this. The right-wing populist voters even overestimate the poverty rate of the native population slightly more than the left-wing populist voters. Also, somewhat surprisingly, both groups of populist voters expect a better rank in terms of corruption in their countries than non-populist voters. While, on average, populist voters are approximately right about their country's rank, non-populist voters believe that corruption is more prevalent than it actually is. We can only speculate that populist voters have their preferred parties or politicians in

Figure 3
Misperceptions – Differences between Left and Right Populist Voters



Note: 1. Corruption Misperception: In which position do you think the home country is on the Corruption Perceptions Index among the 27 European Union countries and the UK (28 countries in total)? 2. Foreign Prisoners Misperception: What percentage of the prison population in your country are foreign national prisoners? 3. Immigration Misperception: Out of every 100 people in the home country, how many are born in another country (legal immigrants only)? 4. Poverty Misperception Nationals: Out of every 100 adult people born in your country, how many live below the poverty line?
Source: Authors' survey. © ifo Institute

mind when answering this question and believe in their honesty.

POLICY CONCLUSION

Our analysis highlights significant differences between left-wing and right-wing populist voters and between both populist groups and non-populist voters. Immigration emerges as the key area of divergence, with left-wing populist voters emphasizing the positive effect of immigration. In contrast, right-wing populists view immigration as negative and see it as a bigger threat to domestic workers and the welfare state. Both populist groups share concerns about economic insecurity, perceived political disconnect, limited opportunities, and a cautious view of multinational corporations. The lower self-perception of societal standing among populist voters, regardless of left or right affiliation, suggests a shared mechanism that might contribute to their alignment with populist ideologies.

As our modest goal was to depict similarities and differences across populist and non-populist voter groups, we are cautious in drawing policy conclusions from our descriptive exercise. However, it suggests potential areas for further investigation and policy considerations, emphasizing the importance of addressing issues related to the perceived lack of opportunities and high economic uncertainty shared by populist voters across the political spectrum. Long-term strategies could focus on enhancing intergenerational mobility and reducing policy-induced economic uncertainty to mitigate the appeal of populist agendas.

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