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Disentangling loneliness and trust in populist voting behaviour in Europe

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Abstract

This paper explores the relationship between loneliness, trust, and populist voting across both extremes of the ideological spectrum. The contribution of this research is mainly two-fold. First, it considers different dimensions of loneliness and accounts for its predetermined component stemming from social isolation in childhood and adverse childhood experiences. Second, it disentangles the effects of loneliness and trust by incorporating actual trust behaviour from a large-scale trust game experiment conducted in 27 European member states, involving more than 25,000 individuals. The richness of the data allows to account for and disentangle the impact of competitive explanatory factors such as emotions, objective social isolation, social media use and economic preferences. The main findings suggest the following: (i) social loneliness significantly impacts populist voting, particularly on the extreme right, whereas the emotional dimension of loneliness is associated with more left-leaning, but non-populist, voting preferences; (ii) higher levels of actual trust are associated with lower support for right-wing populist parties; (iii) loneliness and trust operate through distinct channels: loneliness exerts a greater impact on women and older individuals, while trust plays a more significant role among men and middle-aged individuals, and (iv) the effect of social loneliness on support of populist parties is significantly attenuated in contexts with a history of recurrent economic crises, suggesting a potential experience-based learning mechanism.

Keywords: Loneliness, interpersonal trust, political polarisation, populism.

JEL Classification: D72, D91, P00, C91, Z13.

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Declarations

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"From a policy perspective, we'd be wise to focus on loneliness not only as a public health problem but as a sociopolitical one, too."

Brad Stulberg, *Time*, 2022¹

1 Introduction

In recent years, rising political polarisation and the support for populist parties, on both the left and right of the ideological spectrum, have renewed scholarly interest in the psychological and social drivers of extreme political preferences. While factors such as economic inequality and political distrust have long been identified as crucial determinants of populist sentiments, this research takes an alternative perspective by investigating how loneliness, particularly its social and emotional dimensions, and interpersonal trust shape political preferences across Europe.

We argue that loneliness is not just a personal or psychological concern but a potentially concerning sociopolitical issue that can foster support for populist ideologies. Drawing on data from over 25,000 individuals across the 27 EU member states, we explore how loneliness and interpersonal trust influence populist voting behaviour. We rely on rich survey data (the European Union Loneliness Survey, EU-LS) together with experimental evidence from a large-scale trust game to investigate how these factors contribute to the support of populist parties. By distinguishing between social loneliness (lack of social integration or meaningful community ties) and emotional loneliness (lack of close emotional bonds), this research offers a better understanding of how different facets of social disconnection relate to political radicalisation.

The conceptual framework underlying the analysis proposes two key mechanisms. First, socially lonely individuals may be more susceptible to right-wing populist narratives that emphasize in-group identity, nationalism, and traditional norms/rhetoric that offers a sense

¹Taken from the original article: <https://time.com/6223229/loneliness-vulnerable-extremist-views/>

of belonging and stability. Second, emotionally lonely individuals, in contrast, may gravitate toward left-wing populist or progressive parties, whose platforms tend to highlight unity, inclusion, quality, and systemic reform through more positive emotional appeals. Additionally, trust plays a crucial role in shaping populist voting behaviour by influencing how individuals perceive others and political institutions. Low levels of trust make individuals more susceptible to populist narratives that emphasize division, threat, and anti-elite sentiments, particularly on the right. Right-wing populism thrives in environments of distrust, as it often appeals to exclusionary identities and promises protection from perceived outsiders. In contrast, higher levels of trust are associated with greater social cohesion and lower support for populist parties, especially those on the far right.

The novelty of our approach is two-fold. First, most existing studies treat social connectedness as a proxy for loneliness, often relying on overall scales without distinguishing between its social and emotional dimensions. However, this distinction may be crucial in the context of populist attitudes. Second, studies examining trust typically rely on self-reported measures of generalized trust, which present two key issues: (i) they partially overlap with items used in loneliness scales, particularly those assessing social aspects of loneliness, and (ii) they are subject to various biases, such as social desirability bias, making it difficult to clearly distinguish between trust and loneliness. By using a measure of individual trust elicited through a large-scale trust experiment, we are able to quantify the direct and independent association between trust and populism. This allows us to offer a more nuanced understanding of the role of trust and its potentially differential effects on populist preferences across age, gender, and other socio-economic characteristics. While we cannot fully address the issues of omitted variable bias and reverse causality between loneliness and populist preferences due to limitations inherent in the data, we mitigate these concerns by including a rich set of explanatory and control variables, such as social media use, other negative emotions, measures of objective social isolation at the time of the interview and in childhood, and adverse family environments in which individuals were raised.

The empirical results confirm several hypotheses. Social loneliness is consistently as-

sociated with support for right-wing populist parties, even after controlling for a range of socio-economic variables and measures of social connectedness. Conversely, emotional loneliness is linked to left-leaning but not necessarily populist orientations. Trust, as measured through actual behaviour in a trust game, significantly reduces the likelihood of supporting populist parties, especially on the right. These effects are robust across different model specifications and hold after controlling for confounding factors such as risk preferences, childhood experiences, and social media use.

Moreover, the findings highlight significant heterogeneity across demographic groups. Older individuals are more influenced by social loneliness, while younger, especially middle-aged, voters' populist leanings are more strongly associated with (dis)trust. Women tend to be more affected by emotional loneliness, whereas men's populist preferences are more closely linked to a lack of trust. Additionally, excessive social media use is positively correlated with support for right-wing populism, further illustrating the interplay between digital behaviour and political extremism.

Finally, the results provide important insights into the role of contextual factors, such as the history of economic downturns and socialist political systems. Specifically, residents of countries with a historical experience of frequent economic downturns are significantly less inclined toward right-wing populist options, consistent with the experience-based learning literature. A socialist past, on the other hand, is positively associated with preferences for right-wing populist rhetoric.

Our results have significant policy and societal relevance. First, the strong link between social loneliness, especially among older individuals, and right-wing populism suggests that policies fostering community engagement and intergenerational social inclusion could help reduce extremist political tendencies. Second, since low trust is a key driver of populist support among younger individuals, especially men, initiatives that enhance civic education, real-life civic engagement, and participatory governance can be pivotal in fostering resilience against populist rhetoric. Third, with women more affected by loneliness and men more influenced by a lack of interpersonal trust, tailored interventions, ranging from mental health

services to gender-aware civic programs, can help prevent radicalization across demographic lines.

Despite its strengths, the study has some important limitations, particularly its cross-sectional design, which restricts causal inference and leaves open the possibility that individuals who support populist parties may experience social exclusion or polarization that heightens feelings of loneliness. Moreover, although the rich set of controls, the findings may still be subject to omitted variable bias due to unmeasured individual traits or contextual factors, and while the trust game offers valuable behavioural insights, it may not fully capture the complexity of interpersonal trust in political settings.

The rest of the article is organised as follows. Section 2 outlines the mechanisms linking loneliness, trust, and populism, along with the relevant literature. In Section 3, we describe the data and present the empirical strategy. Section 4 reports the main results, followed by Section 5, where we analyse heterogeneities in the results by socio-economic and contextual factors. Finally, Section 6 offers concluding remarks.

2 Mechanisms linking loneliness, trust and political polarisation

The connection between loneliness, trust, and populism has increasingly captured the attention of both scholars and the broader public. Loneliness and social isolation, often accompanied by diminished interpersonal trust, create a fertile ground for the rise of populist movements. Populists frequently exploit societal divisions, widespread distrust, and deep feelings of alienation, positioning themselves as the voice of those who feel disconnected and excluded. Uncovering the mechanisms linking loneliness, trust, and political polarisation is crucial for policymakers seeking to design effective interventions that reduce loneliness, strengthen social cohesion and trust, and diminish the appeal of populism.

According to Zaslove et al. (2024), among others, right-wing populists are more likely to emphasize the *Manichean worldview*, *i.e.*, seeing politics as a struggle between "good people" and "evil elites" (De Vreese et al., 2018; Mudde, 2004), *indivisible people* (*i.e.*, viewing "the

people" as a homogeneous entity), and *anti-elitism*, though often framed against cultural and political elites rather than economic elites. Left-wing populists, on the other hand, tend to emphasize *people-centrism* (i.e., the idea that sovereignty should lie exclusively with the ordinary people), *general will* (i.e., the notion that the people's interests are singular and unified), and *anti-elitism*, but often targeting economic elites and large corporations rather than cultural or political elites. All in all, right-wing populists often combine nativism and authoritarianism with populism, whereas left-wing populists align it more with economic leftist policies. From the individuals' preferences side, on the other hand, left-wing populist rhetoric often emphasizes positive emotions to foster unity and collective identity among supporters. Caiani and Di Cocco (2023) find that left-wing populism employs positive emotional appeals, contrasting with the negative emotions predominantly used by right-wing populists. Right-wing populist narratives, on the other hand, often exploit feelings of social isolation by promoting a traditionalist worldview that emphasizes the preservation of established norms and reduction of uncertainty. This approach resonates with individuals experiencing deficiencies in social belonging and connectedness, as it offers a sense of a consolidated group and identity (Langenkamp and Bienstman, 2022). Table A.1 (in the appendix) summarises the main differences between left- and right-wing political views.

Several studies focus on the relationship between social connectedness and populism. Langenkamp and Bienstman (2022) consider different measures of social belonging such as contact frequency, perceived relative social activity, and relationship quality, and find that strong social belonging reduces the probability to support populist parties on the right, while it is only weakly associated with support for the populist left. Relatedly, Boeri et al. (2021) and Buzogány (2021) report significantly lower rates of populist voting among individuals belonging to civic associations, churches and voluntary associations. Coffé et al. (2007) focus on Dutch municipalities and find that a higher territorial concentration of social and cultural associations is significantly correlated with lower shares of extreme right voting.

Yet, loneliness is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that goes beyond mere contact frequency and perceived relative social activity, as considered by most existing studies. As

a subjective feeling, it can increase susceptibility to populist narratives through mechanisms such as the search for belonging, heightened emotional vulnerability, feelings of emptiness, and diminished trust. However, few empirical studies have examined the relationship between loneliness and preferences for populist political parties. Peterson et al. (2025) find that loneliness is positively associated with support for the populist radical right in the Netherlands, and that this effect is comparable to common health correlates of loneliness, such as high blood pressure, heart diseases, and depression. Floyd (2017), relying on Cacioppo et al. (2014)'s evolutionary theory of loneliness, shows that anxiety and perceptions of threat embedded in feelings of loneliness, significantly correlate with xenophobia and endorsement of right-wing authoritarianism. Similarly, Filsinger (2024) confirm that individuals who are more socially isolated or feel lonelier tend to exhibit stronger populist sentiments, a pattern observed consistently across six European countries. Moreover, the author also shows that anger is as a key emotional mechanism linking loneliness to populism. Ward et al. (2023) and Jacobs et al. (2025) confirm the importance of negative emotions in voting for radical left and right parties. Yang and Nino (2023) add to this battery of results by claiming that a rise in conservative political views is related to increases in loneliness for Black Americans. All these studies rely on overall measures of loneliness, without distinguishing between its social and emotional dimensions, an important distinction that may offer crucial insights into the direction of populist preferences. Given the distinct characteristics of populist rhetoric across the ideological spectrum, right-wing populism appears to be more closely associated with the social dimension of loneliness, while its connection to the emotional aspect is comparatively weaker, an area where left-wing ideologies may exert greater influence.

Besides loneliness, heightened distrust can directly or indirectly amplify populist tendencies. Higher levels of trust are expected to diminish support for populist parties, particularly those on the right. Cocco et al. (2024) find evidence that lower levels of generalised trust significantly increase support for populist parties. This effect is particularly pronounced for right-wing populist voting which can be explained by the fact that lower trust fosters hostility towards "outsiders", such as immigrants, which aligns with their predominant nativist and

nationalist rhetoric. For left-wing populists, the effect is much weaker (1.5 times) and potentially moderated by other factors such as economic grievances and country-specific political contexts. More precisely, left-wing populists do not primarily capitalize on hostility toward immigrants or nativism but rather on economic grievances and anti-elite sentiments. The authors further suggest that in more trusting countries (such as the Netherlands, Germany, Ireland), left-wing populist parties actually receive higher support, which can be interpreted as an indication that trust alone does not drive left-populist support, rather other factors like economic inequality may play a larger role. Similar evidence is provided by Berning and Ziller (2016), who reveal that individual social trust reduces preferences for radical right-wing populist parties in the Netherlands.

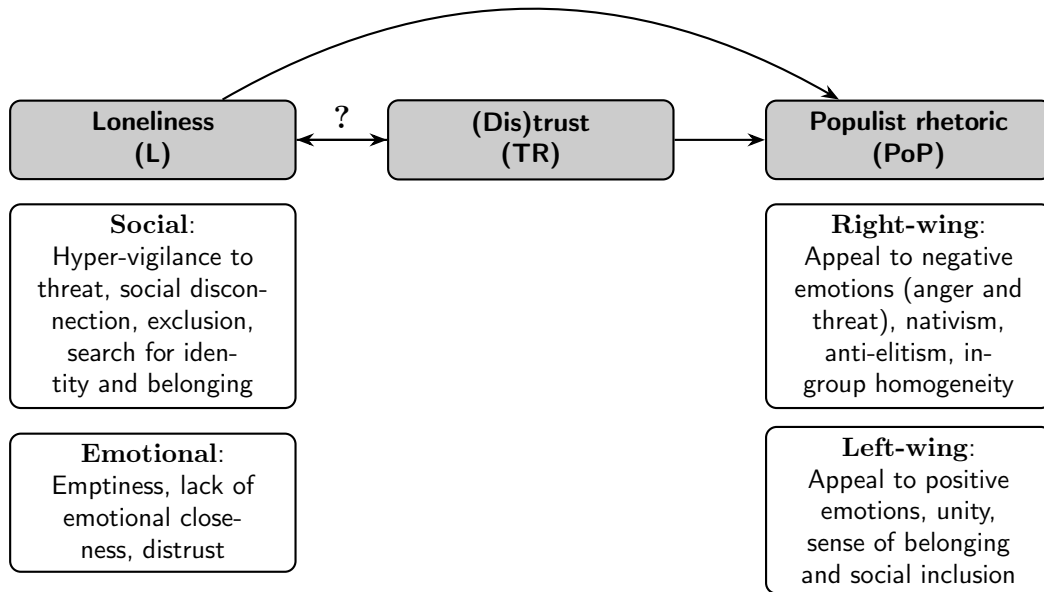
Nevertheless, some literature suggests that trust and loneliness may be interconnected. Survey-based analyses generally show that loneliness is inversely related to generalised and interpersonal trust: societies and individuals with higher trust tend to experience less loneliness, whereas distrust and social isolation reinforce one another (Rapolienè and Aartsen, 2021). Experimental evidence, however, presents mixed findings. Some studies suggest that lonely individuals tend to be less trusting (Rapolienè and Aartsen, 2021), while others report the opposite. For example, Hopfensitz et al. (2024) found that lonely individuals entrusted more money on average to their counterparts than did non-lonely individuals in an incentivized trust game experiment, despite not exhibiting greater optimism about others' trustworthiness. This result, also documented in psychology studies (Bellucci and Park, 2024), suggests that lonelier individuals may sometimes over-trust despite low expectations of others' trustworthiness. Such behaviour could indicate a tendency to take greater social risks in an effort to form connections (Hopfensitz et al., 2024).

Despite valuable insights into the relationship between loneliness, trust, and populism, the existing literature still presents notable limitations: (i) it fails to clearly differentiate between the social and emotional dimensions of loneliness, and (ii) it relies on self-reported generalized measures of trust, which captures a particular form of trust which is likely to be shaped by personal experiences, cultural norms, and socialization, and as such is susceptible

to biases such as social desirability and recall errors. Indeed, Nyqvist et al. (2016), for instance, find that loneliness correlates positively with distrust, while Buecker et al. (2020) claim that this relationship is complex since loneliness and trust beliefs are associated with time invariant characteristics such as personality traits.

In this paper we propose a consolidated approach depicted in Figure 1 to separately account for different dimensions of loneliness, and to account for a direct and independent effect of trust on populist preferences, irrespective of experiences of loneliness and other relevant indicators of social connectedness.

Figure 1: Conceptual framework linking loneliness, trust and political polarisation



We define and test the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1 *Lonelier individuals are generally more likely to support populist parties.*

Hypothesis 2 *Individuals experiencing a deficiency in social relationships tend to align with the far-right end of the populist spectrum, whereas those experiencing emotional deficiency are more inclined toward the far-left extreme.*

Hypothesis 3 *Loneliness and trust exert independent effects on populism. Lower levels of trust significantly enhance support for right-wing populist parties, irrespective of loneliness and overall social connectedness.*

3 Data and empirical strategy

3.1 Data

Information on individuals' political preferences, loneliness, and other demographic and socio-economic variables come from the European Union Loneliness Survey (EU-LS). This is the first ad-hoc survey specifically designed to gather detailed information on the prevalence of loneliness, its determinants and associated risks in all 27 member states of the European Union. The sample includes 25,646 individuals aged 16 and above interviewed at the end of 2022, with approximately 1,000 respondents per country except for Cyprus, Luxembourg and Malta (around 500).²

The survey results particularly suited for the purposes of our research since it features a targeted question about the political party each respondent would support in an upcoming election. To ensure accuracy and relevance, eligible participants, defined as those with voting rights, were presented with a comprehensive list of political parties specific to their country of residence. This list accounted for regional distinctions, including both national-level and large subnational political parties, in each European member state.

In addition to a detailed information on political preferences, the survey contains three well-established and reliable measures of loneliness: a direct measure and two indirect measures, namely the University of California Los Angeles Loneliness (UCLA) Scale (Russell, 1996; Hughes et al., 2004) and the De Jong Gierveld (DJG) scale (de Jong-Gierveld and Kamphuis, 1985; Gierveld and Tilburg, 2006). Moreover, the EU-LS includes several items on social connectedness, such as the frequency of contacts with family members and friends

²Quotas based on the population of each member state were used for sample selection from the online consumer panels to reflect the target population in terms of age, gender, education and region of residence (NUTS). In addition, ex-post weights were calculated to account for possible further under-representation of the above-mentioned socio-economic groups (Berlingieri et al., 2024b).

(either in person or via phone/internet), the number of close friends and family members, as well as a battery of multiple-choice questions on stressful life events, adverse childhood experiences, other negative feelings and emotions such as anger, and current physical and mental health conditions. Separate survey modules offer a detailed information on individuals' social media consumption, in terms of time, patterns, motivations, and potential overuses. Finally, the survey asked individuals about perceived trust and attitudes towards risk and patience. In addition to self-reported generalised trust, the EU-LS measures the interpersonal trust and willingness to reciprocate trust through a widely recognized two-player, one-shot trust game, as in Berg et al. (1995). More details on the game are provided in the appendix.

Information on the characteristics of political parties comes from the Populism and Political Parties Expert Survey (POPPA, henceforth) by Zaslove et al. (2024).³ POPPA aims at measuring key attributes of political parties in European democracies based on expert judgments. It measures positions and attitudes of 312 parties on key characteristics related to populism and party ideology in 31 European countries. The survey follows a multidimensional, continuous, and comprehensive method for capturing populism. This approach differs from other expert surveys, which use a limited number of questions to measure populism, such as the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (Polk et al., 2017) which contains a single anti-elitism question, or V-Party which uses two questions, an anti-elitism and people-centrism question.⁴ The Global Party Survey (GPS), on the other hand, uses two approaches: a single question and four individual items to measure populism (Norris, 2020). Differently from these data sources, POPPA adopts the ideational approach (Mudde, 2004), treating populism as a latent variable that is measured by operationalizing each of the sub-dimensions of populism.

Our main variable of interest (populism) is assessed using a factor score derived from five scales: Manichean, indivisible, general will, people-centrism, and anti-elitism (Zaslove et al., 2024). Anti-elitism reflects a critical attitude toward the establishment and elites, emphasiz-

³For more information, see <https://poppa-data.eu/>

⁴For more information on the V-Party dataset, see <https://v-dem.net/data/v-party-dataset/>.

ing opposition to their influence in politics. People-centrism asserts that sovereignty should rest solely with ordinary citizens, advocating that political decisions should ultimately be determined by the general population rather than elites. The notion of the general will implies that the interests of the ordinary people are singular and unified, allowing one to speak of a collective will that represents the entire population. A Manichean perspective frames politics as a fundamental moral struggle between good and evil, portraying political conflicts in absolute terms. Finally, the concept of the indivisible people suggests that the ordinary people are viewed as a homogeneous entity, reinforcing the idea that they share a unified and undifferentiated identity. These dimensions collectively shape the ideological orientations of various political parties, influencing their rhetoric, policy positions, and broader political strategies.

Additionally, the data include a direct measure of economic left-right positions on an 11-point scale, ranging from 0 (economic left) to 10 (economic right). The POPPA survey does not offer a direct measure of cultural left-right positions. Instead, they provide positions on various issues that typically align closely with the cultural left-right spectrum, such as immigration, nativism, law and order, and lifestyle. Each of these topics is evaluated using the same 11-point scale as economic left-right positions.

Our final dataset consists of 15,147 individuals for whom we have complete information on political preferences, loneliness, and a full range of demographic and socio-economic characteristics. We have valid data on 238 political parties, categorized into 11 ideological political families, spanning the spectrum from the radical right to the radical left.⁵ The number of political parties varies across countries, ranging from 3 in Malta to 19 in the Netherlands. We are able to merge the information on political parties from the POPPA dataset for 65% of all respondents, which is a good coverage given that the information on political preferences in EU-LS is available for 71% of individuals.⁶ 11% of respondents reply that they most likely would not vote in an upcoming election, 1% reply that they vote in

⁵Political parties are spanned across the following families: Radical Right, Conservatives, Liberal, Christian Democratic, Social Democratic, Radical Left, Green, Regionalist, Confessional, Agrarian, and No family.

⁶The difference is due to reported parties which were not available in the POPPA dataset.

another country, 13% reply with don't know, while 4% refuse to answer the question on party support.

Regarding economic trust, as measured through the trust game, our sample includes 7,614 individuals in the role of trustors (senders) for which we have a complete information on loneliness and other socio-economic variables.⁷ Descriptive statistics for the main variables are reported in Table A.2 in the appendix.

3.2 Empirical strategy

In order to empirically validate our hypotheses, we estimate a set of linear models. We first run our baseline estimations by regressing the main political preference indicators on the full set of individual-specific demographic and socio-economic variables, and loneliness:

$$Y_{it} = \omega_0 + \omega_1 L_{it} + \omega_2 \mathbf{X}_{it} + \psi_c + \epsilon_{it}, \quad (1)$$

where Y_{it} represents a set of characteristics of political parties preferred by respondents capturing the degree of populism on both the right and left extremes of the ideological scale, as well as several other cultural dimensions emphasised in political parties' programs, such as immigration concerns, tradition and the respect of law and order. L_{it} indicates the frequency and type of loneliness experiences (measured by the UCLA indirect scale and De Jong Gierveld social and emotional scales), X_{it} is a vector of individual-specific demographic and socio-economic characteristic, such as age, gender, education, occupation, relationship status, number of kids, income quantile, rural versus urban residential area, as well as a set of dummy variables for individuals' immigrant status and sexual orientation. Furthermore, it includes a set of mental health or emotional conditions potentially relevant for both loneliness and individuals' positioning on the populist scale. Finally, ψ_c includes country dummies and ϵ_i is the error term.

In order to separate the effects of trust and loneliness on individuals' preferences for

⁷This represents approximately half of the sample. To the other half of the sample it was assigned the role of trustee (receiver) that we do not consider in the present analysis.

populist political parties, as a second step we estimate the following empirical model:

$$Y_{it} = \omega_0 + \omega_1 L_{it} + \omega_2 \mathbf{X}_{it} + \omega_3 T_{it}^G + \omega_4 \mathbf{G}_{it} + \psi_c + \epsilon_{it}, \quad (2)$$

where T_{it}^G denotes the individual level of economic trust elicited from the game, G_{it} is the vector of controls specific to the trust game including the expected amount returned by the counterpart and a dummy variable denoting whether individuals have been informed about the loneliness status of the counterpart. As additional sensitivity checks, we consider individual-specific risk preferences across three different domains, namely adventure, financial and health risk taking, as well as an indicator of long-term orientation or patience and a variable denoting the correct comprehension about the rules of the trust game. Finally, we also account for a set of indicators related to social media use, several characteristics of individual' networks (number of close friends and family members, the frequency of meeting them, and a dummy variable denoting whether individuals are living alone), as well as indicators of childhood social isolation and experiences of traumatic childhood conditions. In both (1) and (2), standard errors are clustered at the country of residence level.

4 Results

This section presents the core findings of our analysis. We begin by examining the associations between various dimensions of loneliness and individuals' preferences for populist parties. In the second stage, we estimate a series of regression models to investigate the interplay between loneliness and trust, as well as the mechanisms through which these psychological factors influence populist voting behaviour. We then conduct an extensive set of robustness checks and provide evidence on the role of contextual factors in shaping support for extreme political rhetoric. Furthermore, we address potential endogeneity concerns by discussing the problem of omitted variable bias and the possibility of reverse causality, and we propose partial solutions to mitigate these issues.

4.1 Loneliness and political polarisation

Table 1 examines three key characteristics of political parties as voted by respondents: their position on the populist scale (models 1–2), their placement on the left-right ideological spectrum (models 3–4), and a combination of populism and left-right positioning (models 5–6). We consider two distinct measures of loneliness: the UCLA Loneliness Scale and the De Jong Gierveld (DJG) Loneliness Scale. The widely used UCLA scale captures the overall intensity of loneliness but does not differentiate between its various dimensions. In contrast, the DJG scale distinguishes between social and emotional loneliness, offering a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon. Some individuals may experience only social loneliness, only emotional loneliness, or both simultaneously, depending on their circumstances (de Jong-Gierveld and Kamphuis, 1985; Gierveld and Tilburg, 2006). Even though the DJG social scale and, to some extent, the UCLA scale already capture certain aspects of individuals’ social networks, loneliness and physical social isolation remain distinct and context-dependent phenomena.

The results suggest that the relationship between loneliness and political preferences depends on the type of loneliness experienced. Individuals experiencing social loneliness are significantly more likely to support right-wing parties, including those at the radical or populist end of the ideological spectrum. In contrast, those experiencing emotional loneliness tend to favour left-wing parties. A similar result is found when using dummies denoting support of radical left and radical right parties as dependent variables (Table A.3 in the appendix).

This suggests that the quantitative aspects of social networks or the absence of fulfilling community connections, rather than a lack of deep emotional bonds, may contribute to the adoption of more radicalized views on economic and social issues. In other words, the right-populist rhetoric focused on belonging and in-group homogeneity may prove particularly effective in attracting socially lonely individuals. This is an important finding that contributes to the existing literature, as it suggests that aggregate measures of loneliness may obscure key aspects of the mechanism linking loneliness to populist preferences.

As for the other covariates, individuals who frequently experience feelings of anger are more likely to support right-wing populists, a pattern well-documented in the literature (Rico et al., 2017, 2020). Moreover, middle-aged individuals (i.e., those aged 46–55) exhibit stronger preferences for populist parties, particularly on the right of the ideological spectrum, compared to both younger and older cohorts, who tend to hold more moderate views. Conversely, women, highly educated and wealthier individuals, as well as those residing in urban areas, second-generation migrants, and sexual minorities, are significantly less likely to support populist parties (see also Table A.4 in the appendix).

Table 1: Loneliness and degree of populism, left-right placement on the political scale, and the direction of populism.

	Pop	Pop	L-R	L-R	PopR	PopR
Loneliness (UCLA)	0.001 (0.015)		-0.058*** (0.017)		-0.325* (0.182)	
DJG social		0.063** (0.025)		0.031 (0.025)		0.633** (0.267)
DJG emotional		-0.025 (0.025)		-0.051** (0.020)		-0.473** (0.218)
Female	-0.084* (0.048)	-0.083* (0.048)	-0.283*** (0.062)	-0.287*** (0.062)	-1.986*** (0.562)	-1.997*** (0.562)
26-35	0.258** (0.097)	0.249** (0.095)	0.001 (0.117)	-0.013 (0.119)	1.764** (0.858)	1.617* (0.865)
36-45	0.390*** (0.107)	0.370*** (0.107)	0.062 (0.127)	0.046 (0.130)	3.079*** (0.951)	2.846*** (0.971)
46-55	0.408*** (0.104)	0.381*** (0.106)	0.100 (0.162)	0.087 (0.164)	3.427** (1.245)	3.160** (1.243)
56-65	0.337** (0.125)	0.310** (0.130)	-0.081 (0.139)	-0.086 (0.140)	1.976 (1.162)	1.748 (1.180)
65+	0.174 (0.145)	0.156 (0.151)	-0.170 (0.194)	-0.162 (0.194)	-0.122 (1.476)	-0.204 (1.472)
Depressed	-0.042 (0.048)	-0.040 (0.044)	0.006 (0.066)	-0.036 (0.067)	-0.213 (0.538)	-0.442 (0.493)
Angry	0.331*** (0.079)	0.334*** (0.078)	0.199** (0.080)	0.188** (0.079)	3.358*** (0.715)	3.322*** (0.714)
Nervous	-0.009 (0.043)	-0.009 (0.045)	-0.016 (0.054)	-0.040 (0.053)	-0.147 (0.417)	-0.286 (0.399)
Country FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Socio-Demographic	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
N	15147	15147	15147	15147	15147	15147
R2	0.173	0.174	0.079	0.078	0.118	0.118

Notes: The method of estimation is OLS. Models 1-2 consider the degree of populism (0 = Not at all populist; 10 = Very populist); models 3-4 consider left-right placement (0 = Left; 10 = Right), and models 5-6 consider the interaction between populism and left-right placement (the higher the value, the more right-wing populist). Socio-demographic controls include: education, occupational status, relationship status, rural versus urban, income quantile, number of kids (under 6 and 6-15), immigrant dummy, sexual orientation, and self-assessed health. Robust standard errors clustered at the country level are reported in parenthesis. Significance levels: * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

The above patterns are further corroborated by alternative characteristics of political parties that align with right- and left-wing ideologies, as shown in Tables 2 and 3, which

include stances on immigration, law and order, and the salience of economic and cultural issues. In particular, socially lonely individuals prefer parties that emphasize cultural and general social issues (i.e. immigration, nativism, social lifestyle, and civil liberties/law and order) but put less emphasis on economic issues (Table 2).

Table 2: Loneliness and party position on economic and cultural issues, and nativism.

	Econ.	Econ.	Cult.	Cult.	Nat.	Nat.
Loneliness (UCLA)	-0.001 (0.009)		-0.002 (0.012)		-0.052** (0.021)	
DJG social		-0.048*** (0.016)		0.046** (0.017)		0.054* (0.029)
DJG emotional		0.029* (0.014)		-0.021 (0.014)		-0.070** (0.026)
N	15133	15133	15054	15054	15147	15147
R2	0.104	0.105	0.118	0.119	0.118	0.118

Notes: The method of estimation is OLS. The dependent variables are indicators ranging from 0 to 10 indicating the salience of economic issues (econ.), the salience of cultural issues (cult.) and nativism (nat.), i.e. whether natives have a priority over immigrants. Control variables included are as in Table 1. Robust standard errors clustered at the country level are reported in parenthesis. Significance levels: * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

This is further confirmed in Table 3 with emotionally lonely individuals being significantly more inclined toward political actors advocating liberal positions on moral values (e.g., acceptance of homosexuality and same-sex marriage) compared to traditionalists, who prioritize conventional family structures (e.g., marriage and child-rearing). Emotionally lonely individuals are also less likely to support strict law enforcement policies, such as increased policing or harsher sentencing. Overall, the findings suggest that, differently from socially lonely individuals, emotionally lonely tend to be less traditional and conservative in their political orientations.

Table 3: Loneliness and party position on immigration, liberalism and law enforcement.

	Imm.	Imm.	Lib.	Lib.	Law	Law
Loneliness (UCLA)	0.040** (0.018)		0.047** (0.018)		-0.049*** (0.015)	
DJG social		-0.032 (0.031)		-0.039 (0.027)		0.039* (0.022)
DJG emotional		0.043 (0.027)		0.055** (0.023)		-0.055** (0.020)
N	15100	15100	15131	15131	15126	15126
R2	0.147	0.147	0.124	0.124	0.095	0.095

Notes: The method of estimation is OLS. The dependent variables are indicators ranging from 0 to 10 indicating being in favour of immigration (imm.), having liberal positions on social lifestyle (lib.) and law enforcement (stricter policing, harsher sentencing). Control variables included are as in Table 1. Robust standard errors clustered at the country level are reported in parenthesis. Significance levels: * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

4.2 The interplay between loneliness and trust, and political polarisation

Besides loneliness, preferences for populist parties may also be influenced by levels of trust, both interpersonal trust and trust in political institutions and the broader system. Individuals with low levels of trust are more likely to perceive others as threats, making them more receptive to populist rhetoric that emphasizes social division and exclusionary policies. Studies examining the relationship between populist attitudes and generalized social trust found that stronger populist attitudes correlate with lower levels of generalized trust, which suggests that individuals with lower trust may turn to populist parties that promise to address their grievances (Marcos-Marne and Sendra, 2024). Moreover, Cocco et al. (2024) find that a one standard deviation decrease in interpersonal generalised trust leads to a 2-6% increase in populist voting, and the magnitude of these effects is similar for both far-right as well as far-left populist parties. The study further suggests that a lack of generalised trust may act as a trigger that helps promote populism under certain conditions, such as economic shocks.

Any attempt to separate the effects of trust from loneliness should take into account the following two aspects. First, self-reported loneliness and generalised trust are intercon-

nected, since lower levels of trust can lead to low quality relations and/or social isolation, which in turn may further boost distrust towards others (Langenkamp and Bienstman, 2022; Langenkamp and Stepanova, 2024). This bidirectional relationship represent a fertile ground for populist rhetoric, since populist parties often emphasize the sense of belonging and capitalising the unmet need for belonging (Peterson et al., 2025), appealing to those who feel left behind. Second, social trust captures a particular form of trust that reflects an individual’s view on whether people are generally trustworthy or not. This personality trait is likely to be shaped by personal experiences, cultural norms, and socialization, and as such is susceptible to biases such as social desirability and recall errors, as individuals may report an idealized version of their trust attitudes rather than their actual behaviour in real-world trust situations.

As already mentioned in Section 3, in addition to a common measure of generalised trust, the EU-LS survey measures interpersonal trust and willingness to reciprocate trust through a large one-shot trust game experiment, in which respondents were randomly matched and assigned to the role of either trustor or trustee, each accounting for approximately half of the total sample. This measure of trust captures a distinct psychological construct compared to the self-reported generalised trust. The game elicits trust as a decision under uncertainty, requiring participants to place faith in an anonymous partner without guarantees of reciprocity. This measure captures risk-taking behaviour in interpersonal exchanges, which is influenced not only by generalized beliefs about trustworthiness but also by immediate contextual factors such as risk preferences and expectations of reciprocity. Figure A.1 (in the appendix) shows a non-linear relationship between trust elicited from the game experiment and self-reported generalised trust. Individuals’ trust and trustworthiness elicited from the game, therefore, provides a more objective attitude obtained under controlled incentives, reducing the impact of social desirability bias (Glaeser et al., 2000) and taking into account individuals’ risk preferences, expectations, and reciprocity internalised in their interpersonal interactions (Sapienza et al., 2013).

In Table 4, we consider actual trust behaviour from the trust game along social and emo-

tional aspects of loneliness. To disentangle trust behaviour from expectations of reciprocity, we account for the expected amount sent back by trustees in all specifications. The results indicate that behavioural aspects of trust significantly reduce extreme populist preferences.⁸ The inclusion of trust does not alter the coefficients of loneliness, suggesting that trust and loneliness relate to populist voting through independent channels, and that loneliness does not appear to boost populist support by eroding interpersonal trust. Moreover, as shown in Table A.5, the interaction between (dis)trust and loneliness is not statistically significant for populist preferences, whereas it has a significant positive combined effect on general right-wing orientation.

Table 4: Loneliness and degree of populism, left-right placement on the political scale, and the direction of populism: Trust behaviour (trust game)

	Pop	L-R	PopR	Pop	L-R	PopR
DJG social	0.071** (0.028)	0.052** (0.023)	0.766** (0.294)	0.069** (0.028)	0.051** (0.023)	0.753** (0.291)
DJG emotional	-0.017 (0.030)	-0.067* (0.033)	-0.466 (0.306)	-0.016 (0.030)	-0.066* (0.033)	-0.461 (0.305)
Distrust				0.062** (0.028)	0.068* (0.033)	0.768** (0.306)
Socio-Demographic	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Health	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Country FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Expectations	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
N	7614	7614	7614	7614	7614	7614
R2	0.191	0.094	0.139	0.192	0.095	0.140

Notes: The method of estimation is OLS. The dependent variables are the degree of populism (Pop), left-right (L-R) placement (i.e. right vs. left-wing), and the interaction between populism and left-right placement (PopR). Socio-demographic controls include: age, gender, education, occupational status, relationship status, rural versus urban, income quantile, number of kids (under 6 and 6-15), immigrant dummy, sexual orientation. Health indicators include: self-assessed health (SAH), depression, nervousness and angeriness. All regression models include country fixed effects and controls for expectations in trustees' reciprocity. Robust standard errors clustered at the country level are reported in parenthesis. Significance levels: * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

The fact that loneliness and trust elicited from the game are orthogonal is further confirmed in Table A.6 and Figure A.2 (in the appendix). Interpersonal trust does not correlate

⁸In each regression model, we include a dummy variable to indicate the treated subsample of individuals participating in the trust game. In Table A.8, we present separate regressions for the treated and untreated samples.

with any of the three measures of loneliness. By contrast, generalised self-reported trust is significantly associated with both the overall measure of loneliness (UCLA) and the social component of loneliness, suggesting some degree of overlap and indicating that empirically distinguishing between the two can be challenging.

Table 5 considers five dimensions of populism, i.e., anti-elitism (AE), people-centrism (PC), general-will (GW), Manichean (MN), and invisible people (IP), net of social and emotional components of loneliness. The results indicate that actual trust behaviour is well-correlated with some of the main "societal" dimensions of populism connected to the concerns of inequality, governance, and societal representation (i.e., general-will, Manichean worldview and indivisible people). These results also hold when loneliness is not considered in the model (not shown for the sake of space and clarity).

Similarly, when it comes to specific concerns political parties place on issues like economics (Econ.), culture (Cult.), immigration (Imm.), nativisms (Nat.), liberalism (Lib.), the respect of law and order (Law), and being in favour of the EU and European integration, actual trust behaviour reveals as a good predictor of individual political preferences (Table 6).

Table 5: Loneliness, trust and five dimensions of populism.

	AE	PC	GW	MN	IP
DJG social	0.084** (0.040)	0.064** (0.029)	0.063** (0.028)	0.081*** (0.026)	0.055** (0.024)
DJG emotional	0.007 (0.042)	0.012 (0.031)	-0.029 (0.030)	-0.029 (0.027)	-0.043 (0.029)
Distrust	0.046 (0.038)	0.053 (0.031)	0.083*** (0.029)	0.049** (0.023)	0.076*** (0.026)
N	7614	7614	7614	7614	7614
R2	0.181	0.176	0.220	0.257	0.199

Notes: The method of estimation is OLS. The dependent variables are indicators ranging from 0 to 10 denoting anti-elitism (AE), people-centrism (PC), general-will (GW), Manichean (MN), and invisible people (IP). Control variables included are as in Table 4. Robust standard errors clustered at the country level are reported in parenthesis. Significance levels: * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

Table 6: Loneliness, trust and different concerns raised by political parties.

	Econ.	Cult.	Imm.	Nat.	Lib.	Law	EU
DJG social	-0.048*** (0.017)	0.055*** (0.019)	-0.045 (0.029)	0.066** (0.032)	-0.041 (0.028)	0.047* (0.026)	-0.088** (0.033)
DJG emotional	0.021 (0.017)	-0.023 (0.021)	0.070* (0.037)	-0.099** (0.039)	0.086** (0.037)	-0.081** (0.031)	0.035 (0.030)
Distrust	-0.007 (0.016)	0.043** (0.020)	-0.092** (0.037)	0.102** (0.042)	-0.097** (0.036)	0.111*** (0.037)	-0.083** (0.039)
N	7604	7573	7590	7614	7606	7604	7590
R2	0.120	0.125	0.168	0.136	0.133	0.109	0.155

Notes: The method of estimation is OLS. The dependent variables are indicators ranging from 0 to 10 indicating the salience of economic issues (econ.), the salience of cultural issues (cult.), being in favour of immigration (imm.), nativism (nat.), i.e. whether natives have a priority over immigrants, having liberal positions on social lifestyle (lib.), law enforcement (stricter policing, harsher sentencing), and being in favour of the EU and European integration (EU). Control variables included are as in Table 4. Robust standard errors clustered at the country level are reported in parenthesis. Significance levels: * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

4.3 Sensitivity analysis

Having shown the relevance of the interplay between loneliness, trust and political polarization in the previous section, in this section we perform several sensitivity checks to rule out potential biases due to omitted variables or reverse causality. First, we address concerns about the quality of our trust behaviour proxy stemming from the trust game. Second, we control for important variables that may impact loneliness, trust and support for populist parties, such as social media use and objective social isolation in adulthood and childhood.

As stressed by Sapienza et al. (2013) and Schechter (2007), among others, trust behaviour in the trust game is affected by several other factors, such as risk aversion. According to the authors, for any given level of expectations, a more altruistic or a less risk averse sender will send more (Sapienza et al., 2013). In Table A.7 in the appendix, we replicate the estimations from Table 4 and control for the individuals' risk preferences in three different dimensions, namely the adventure risk taking (driving, riding a bike, etc.), financial risk taking taking (financial decisions) and risk taking in the health domain. In addition, we account for individual levels of patience (long-term orientation) and for their correct comprehension about the rules of the trust game. The results show that the inclusion of these additional controls slightly reduces the magnitude of the coefficients of trust, although they remain

statistically different from zero in all specifications. This suggests that our measure of trust correctly captures trust behaviour rather than risk preferences or long-term orientation.

In the trust game, participants were assigned to one of two experimental treatments, which varied in the amount of information disclosed about their counterpart. In the baseline condition, participants received no background information about their counterpart, while in the information treatment, they were informed that their counterpart had previously reported experiencing frequent loneliness. This treatment aimed to investigate the behavioural consequences of making an individual’s psychological state, specifically loneliness, explicitly known and the potential ramifications for those who make less effort to conceal such information. Even though we already control for the treatment effect in all regression models, in Table A.8 in the appendix we run our model only on the untreated sample of individuals who did not obtain any specific information about their partners in the game. Trust and social loneliness remain significant also for this sub-sample of individuals, suggesting that the results are not driven by the treatment.

Recent studies indicate that intensive social media use can significantly influence support for populist parties. Online platforms allow populist leaders to spread anti-elite, divisive narratives directly to citizens (Schaub and Morisi, 2020). Cross-country evidence shows that digital media use correlates with higher populist popularity and messaging in established democracies. For instance Lorenz-Spreen et al. (2022) show that rising social media consumption coincided with declining institutional trust and a shift of low-trust voters toward the extreme right-wing populism in Germany. Fujiwara et al. (2024) find that increased Twitter use reduced the vote share of a right-wing populist candidate in the US, while Fortunato and Pecoraro (2022) show that frequent exposure to political content on social media heightens Euroscepticism among individuals with low levels of education, whereas general internet use has no such effect. Along similar lines, Mutascu et al. (2025) find that politically oriented communication on platforms such as Facebook and LinkedIn contributes to the electoral success of right-wing parties. Finally, Allcott et al. (2020) suggest that deactivating Facebook in an experimental setting significantly reduced news knowledge and

political attention, leading to lower polarization of views on policy issues.

In Table 7, we expand the set of potential confounders to include indicators related to the intensity and purpose of social media use. We consider two different aspects of social media consumption, namely the time spend on a daily basis on social networking sites which may be centred on images (such as Instagram and TikTok), text (such as X), or both (such as Facebook), and instant messaging tools that enable individuals to have private, real-time conversations online (e.g. WhatsApp, MSN Messenger, and Snap messaging). Despite the increasing convergence of functionalities and the evolution of communication platforms, we consider two indicators separately.

Table 7: Loneliness, trust and populism: Social media use.

	Pop	L-R	PopR
DJG social	0.068** (0.028)	0.053** (0.023)	0.756** (0.295)
DJG emotional	-0.024 (0.029)	-0.069** (0.032)	-0.512* (0.293)
Distrust	0.058* (0.029)	0.067* (0.033)	0.739** (0.303)
SN < 30 m/d	0.107* (0.059)	-0.037 (0.114)	0.412 (0.861)
SN 30-120 m/d	0.211*** (0.069)	-0.114 (0.108)	0.662 (0.886)
SN > 120 m/d	0.254** (0.094)	-0.073 (0.100)	1.187 (1.038)
IM < 30 m/d	-0.111 (0.117)	-0.053 (0.096)	-1.201 (1.056)
IM 30-120 m/d	-0.137 (0.112)	0.091 (0.106)	-0.618 (1.004)
IM > 120 m/d	-0.044 (0.146)	0.126 (0.090)	0.147 (1.220)
N	7586	7586	7586
R2	0.194	0.096	0.142

Notes: The method of estimation is OLS. The dependent variables are the degree of populism (Pop), left-right (L-R) placement (i.e. right vs. left-wing), and the interaction between populism and left-right placement (PopR). SN stays for "social networking sites", IM stays for "instant messaging tools". Reference category is: "never". Control variables included are as in Table 4. Robust standard errors clustered at the country level are reported in parenthesis. Significance levels: * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

The results suggest that spending more than half an hour per day on social media is positively associated with populism, although the direction of this association remains unclear. However, controlling for social media use does not impact the associations between loneliness, trust and support for populist parties. Interestingly, the association between social media consumption and populist voting differs by age group. More intensive social media use makes individuals aged 55 and older (baby boomers) more prone to populist voting, whereas no significant association is observed among younger individuals (see Table A.9 in the appendix). Moreover, baby boomers who use social media intensively also appear more inclined toward right-wing populist movements.

To further separate the effects of loneliness and trust from that of objective social isolation, we control for having few social connections at the time of the survey as well as in childhood. In particular, we add controls for living alone, having few close family members and close friends (less than 3), meeting friends and family members frequently (more than once a week) and having had few friends at the school age. In separate models, we also add a proxy for the quality of the parent-child relationship in childhood both with the mother and the father, as well as the presence of close relatives with drinking and mental health problems. Controlling for social isolation in childhood should help mitigate the endogeneity of current loneliness experiences, as these factors are predetermined and precede the formation of political preferences in adulthood. Reassuringly, neither the associations between loneliness and populist parties preferences nor the ones between trust behaviour and populism are affected by the inclusion of these controls (see Table 8).

Most social network characteristics end up not being significant in the regressions with few exceptions. Specifically, having few family members is associated with support for right-wing populist parties, while reporting a close relationship with the father in childhood reduces the support for populist parties, especially for right-wings ones.

Table 8: Loneliness, trust and populism: Social isolation in adulthood and childhood, and adverse childhood experiences.

	Pop	L-R	PopR	Pop	L-R	PopR
DJG social	0.060** (0.026)	0.047** (0.022)	0.648** (0.265)	0.062** (0.026)	0.051** (0.022)	0.677** (0.262)
DJG emotional	-0.024 (0.031)	-0.072** (0.032)	-0.557* (0.306)	-0.025 (0.030)	-0.065* (0.032)	-0.526* (0.301)
Distrust	0.062** (0.028)	0.070* (0.034)	0.771** (0.308)	0.060** (0.028)	0.068* (0.034)	0.756** (0.308)
Few friends (chld.)	0.009 (0.111)	-0.112 (0.122)	-0.320 (1.260)	0.008 (0.107)	-0.089 (0.119)	-0.199 (1.218)
Freq. friends	-0.024 (0.061)	0.055 (0.065)	0.073 (0.670)	-0.026 (0.062)	0.057 (0.065)	0.071 (0.677)
Freq. family	-0.022 (0.055)	0.092 (0.084)	0.329 (0.693)	-0.024 (0.055)	0.091 (0.084)	0.307 (0.687)
Few friends (now)	-0.008 (0.056)	0.066 (0.069)	0.445 (0.638)	-0.005 (0.056)	0.070 (0.069)	0.483 (0.640)
Few family m. (now)	0.146** (0.056)	0.103 (0.065)	1.569*** (0.537)	0.147** (0.059)	0.110 (0.066)	1.614*** (0.562)
Lives alone	-0.129** (0.061)	-0.114 (0.070)	-1.401** (0.658)	-0.129** (0.061)	-0.116 (0.070)	-1.402** (0.653)
Closeness mother (chld.)				0.139 (0.111)	0.050 (0.141)	1.173 (1.326)
Closeness father (chld.)				-0.128* (0.070)	-0.093 (0.056)	-1.324* (0.658)
Mental relatives (chld.)				-0.015 (0.072)	-0.217** (0.090)	-1.319* (0.656)
Drink relatives (chld.)				0.021 (0.057)	-0.175* (0.088)	-0.757 (0.694)
N	7614	7614	7614	7614	7614	7614
R2	0.194	0.097	0.143	0.195	0.100	0.144

Notes: The method of estimation is OLS. The dependent variables are the degree of populism (Pop), left-right (L-R) placement (i.e. right vs. left-wing), and the interaction between populism and left-right placement (PopR). Control variables included are as in Table 4. Robust standard errors clustered at the country level are reported in parenthesis. Significance levels: * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

5 Heterogeneity analysis and contextual factors

In this section, we analyse relevant heterogeneities in the main results. We start with key socio-demographic factors that we showed to be associated with a different propensity of

populist preferences in tables 1 and A.4 like age, gender, education, socio-economic status and sexual orientation. We then consider contextual factors known to correlate with voting behaviour and trust, including the exposure to past macroeconomic shocks (recessions) and socialist political systems.

5.1 Heterogenous results by socio-demographic characteristics

Age represents a relevant factor since loneliness makes individuals more susceptible to the community-focused rhetoric of populists promising to restore belonging and social cohesion and older generations may feel "left behind" or unheard which closely aligns with right-wing populist themes. Some studies suggest that older populist supporters may have initially been motivated by social disconnection; however, once they rally behind a populist movement, they often report less loneliness than non-populists, presumably because the movement itself provides a new sense of community (Arin et al., 2024). Younger populist supporters, on the other hand, are characterized by an erosion of social trust and cynicism toward the system (Burger and Eiselt, 2023). Our results seem to confirm these conjectures (Table 9). The association between trust and loneliness is not linear with respect to age. Social loneliness appears to be more important for both younger individuals (under 40) and older individuals (over 55), whereas the political preferences of middle-aged individuals are primarily influenced by trust. This is an interesting result, suggesting that the economic dimensions of trust are particularly relevant during the most active periods of an individual's working career and/or family life. In fact, middle-aged individuals with lower levels of trust are significantly more inclined to support right-wing populist parties. Social loneliness among older individuals appears as a stronger correlate of right-wing populist voting compared to younger individuals, although the coefficients are not significantly different between the two age groups. This is an interesting result, suggesting that particular attention should be paid to baby boomers (*i.e.*, those born between 1946 and 1964), as experiences of social loneliness may make them especially susceptible to populist movements. Generation X (*i.e.*, those born between 1965 and 1980), on the other hand, appear more influenced by distrust as a driver of their populist preferences. These results, however, are not explained by a higher prevalence

of loneliness among baby boomers or lower levels of trust among Generation X compared to other birth cohorts.⁹

Table 9: Loneliness, trust and populism: by age group.

	Pop ≤ 40	L-R ≤ 40	PopR ≤ 40	Pop 40-55	L-R 40-55	PopR 40-55	Pop > 55	L-R > 55	PopR > 55
DJG soc.	0.071** (0.034)	0.072 (0.043)	0.874** (0.363)	0.020 (0.037)	-0.002 (0.050)	0.022 (0.419)	0.139*** (0.037)	0.089** (0.038)	1.515*** (0.413)
DJG emo.	-0.012 (0.041)	-0.051 (0.048)	-0.397 (0.415)	-0.013 (0.039)	-0.063 (0.058)	-0.360 (0.496)	-0.038 (0.056)	-0.089** (0.040)	-0.839* (0.485)
Distrust	0.020 (0.035)	0.062 (0.044)	0.391 (0.363)	0.109*** (0.037)	0.072 (0.051)	1.078** (0.435)	0.050 (0.045)	0.048 (0.058)	0.679 (0.487)
N	2760	2760	2760	2523	2523	2523	2294	2294	2294
R2	0.213	0.156	0.185	0.209	0.107	0.166	0.209	0.099	0.134

Notes: The method of estimation is OLS. The dependent variables are the degree of populism (Pop), left-right (L-R) placement (i.e. right vs. left-wing), and the interaction between populism and left-right placement (PopR). Control variables included are as in Table 4. Robust standard errors clustered at the country level are reported in parenthesis. Significance levels: * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

When it comes to gender differences, men and women may differ in populist support. Populist movements, especially on the right have tended to attract more men than women. Men experiencing social loneliness are more prone to externalize these frustrations as political anger or anti-establishment voting, whereas women may internalize loneliness or seek support through personal networks rather than radical politics (Coffe et al., 2023). As for trust, men (and especially those adhering to "strong" masculinity norms), are more likely to distrust out-groups and institutions, a mindset populists often capitalize on. Green and Shorrocks (2021), for instance, show that men with a certain anti-establishment attitude rooted in economic loss, cultural resentment, or low trust, were indeed more inclined to vote for Brexit than similarly disaffected women, suggesting that men and women may deal with low trust or anti-elite sentiments differently. In sum, loneliness and low trust among men have shown a clearer link to right-populist support, whereas women appear somewhat less likely to translate their social isolation or distrust into populist votes, possibly due to socialization that encourages maintaining relationships. The results in Table 10 confirm that social loneliness and trust are jointly more important for men's populist political preferences, while emotional discontent

⁹Indeed, levels of loneliness are highest among Generations X and Y, while trust is relatively higher in these generations compared to baby boomers.

is relatively more important among women.

Table 10: Loneliness, trust and populism: by gender.

	Pop M	L-R M	PopR M	Pop F	L-R F	PopR F
DJG social	0.052 (0.031)	0.047 (0.032)	0.599* (0.319)	0.101*** (0.033)	0.067 (0.040)	1.074** (0.418)
DJG emotional	0.018 (0.040)	-0.051 (0.041)	-0.099 (0.418)	-0.051 (0.034)	-0.082** (0.037)	-0.838** (0.331)
Distrust	0.060 (0.036)	0.073** (0.035)	0.756** (0.345)	0.053 (0.039)	0.052 (0.052)	0.622 (0.494)
N	3922	3922	3922	3655	3655	3655
R2	0.186	0.094	0.126	0.217	0.118	0.177

Notes: The method of estimation is OLS. The dependent variables are the degree of populism (Pop), left-right (L-R) placement (i.e. right vs. left-wing), and the interaction between populism and left-right placement (PopR). Control variables included are as in Table 4. Robust standard errors clustered at the country level are reported in parenthesis. Significance levels: * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

Education level may shape as well the effects of loneliness and trust on populist preferences. Voters with lower education (secondary or less), often feeling socially and economically marginalized, have been a target of many populist movements. This group may experience more loneliness (Berlingieri et al., 2024a), making them receptive to populist anti-elite messages that speak to their sense of exclusion (Gidron and Hall, 2020). For individuals with lower education, loneliness can significantly boost the appeal of "people versus elites" narratives. In contrast, those with higher education typically report greater institutional and interpersonal trust (Pew, 2020) and tend to engage in politics through established channels.

The results in Table 11 suggest that lower educational attainment significantly increases the likelihood of voting for right-wing populist parties. The interaction between schooling and loneliness is not statistically significant, suggesting that the association between loneliness and populism voting holds for both low and high educated individuals. Conversely, the interaction between low educational attainment and distrust is positive and significant. Notably, while higher trust does not appear to have a significant impact among more educated individuals, it plays a crucial role in distancing those with lower educational attainment from right-wing populist parties.

Table 11: Loneliness, trust and populism: by educational attainment.

	Pop	L-R	PopR	Pop	L-R	PopR
DJG social	0.071** (0.028)	0.051** (0.023)	0.766** (0.293)	0.077** (0.033)	0.058** (0.024)	0.817** (0.301)
DJG emotional	-0.022 (0.030)	-0.067* (0.033)	-0.494 (0.308)	-0.002 (0.032)	-0.066* (0.032)	-0.291 (0.271)
Distrust	0.063** (0.029)	0.068* (0.033)	0.774** (0.310)	0.015 (0.030)	0.063 (0.043)	0.404 (0.354)
Sec. of less (SL)	0.371*** (0.058)	0.046 (0.086)	2.855*** (0.662)	0.469*** (0.104)	0.080 (0.136)	3.816*** (0.960)
SL*Distrust				0.131*** (0.042)	0.014 (0.064)	1.018* (0.507)
SL*DJG soc.				-0.020 (0.049)	-0.018 (0.059)	-0.170 (0.513)
SL*DJG emo.				-0.052 (0.050)	-0.002 (0.069)	-0.545 (0.586)
N	7614	7614	7614	7614	7614	7614
R2	0.188	0.095	0.139	0.189	0.095	0.139

Notes: The method of estimation is OLS. The dependent variables are the degree of populism (Pop), left-right (L-R) placement (i.e. right vs. left-wing), and the interaction between populism and left-right placement (PopR). Control variables included are as in Table 4. Robust standard errors clustered at the country level are reported in parenthesis. Significance levels: * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

Besides education, also income and experiencing economic difficulties is likely to be related both to trust and populist parties support. Guiso et al. (2024) find that economic insecurity shocks significantly increase populist voting both directly, and indirectly, by reducing trust in institutions and altering voter attitudes. We follow their approach and consider an aggregate indicator of economic insecurity given by the first principal component of a combination between three individual-specific variables: loss of employment in the last 12 months, being a blue collar worker, and having low household income (first quantile). Our results are in line with their findings and suggest that right-wing populist parties benefit more from economic insecurity probably because their rhetoric aligns with the fears and frustrations of economically insecure people (Table 12). At the same time, distrust plays a major role, with people suffering from economic insecurity and having lower trust being more likely to vote (right-wing) populist parties. On the contrary, the coefficient of trust for those not suffering from economic insecurity is smaller and not statistically different from

zero. Moreover, similarly as for education, we do not find evidence that relationship between loneliness and populism support differs by exposure to economic insecurity.

Table 12: Loneliness, trust and populism: by economic insecurity.

	Pop	L-R	PopR	Pop	L-R	PopR
DJG social	0.068** (0.028)	0.052** (0.023)	0.740** (0.289)	0.091*** (0.032)	0.049 (0.030)	0.874** (0.339)
DJG emotional	-0.021 (0.030)	-0.063* (0.033)	-0.488 (0.302)	-0.029 (0.035)	-0.066* (0.037)	-0.523 (0.342)
Distrust	0.062** (0.029)	0.068* (0.034)	0.767** (0.314)	0.035 (0.031)	0.033 (0.032)	0.388 (0.302)
Econ. insecurity (EI)	0.754*** (0.251)	0.156 (0.257)	7.037*** (2.530)	1.010*** (0.341)	0.113 (0.316)	8.730** (3.332)
EI*Distrust				0.212* (0.120)	0.257** (0.118)	2.838** (1.254)
EI*DJG soc.				-0.189 (0.114)	0.009 (0.117)	-1.170 (1.209)
EI*DJG emo.				0.059 (0.120)	0.019 (0.142)	0.288 (1.410)
N	7600	7600	7600	7600	7600	7600
R2	0.195	0.095	0.142	0.196	0.095	0.143

Notes: The method of estimation is OLS. The dependent variables are the degree of populism (Pop), left-right (L-R) placement (i.e. right vs. left-wing), and the interaction between populism and left-right placement (PopR). Control variables included are as in Table 4. Robust standard errors clustered at the country level are reported in parenthesis. Significance levels: * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

Finally, loneliness effects might be stronger for sexual minorities due to social marginalization, while trust may play a lesser role. Sexual minorities often face stigma or lack of acceptance, which can lead to greater social isolation. Empirical studies confirm that sexual minorities report significantly higher levels of loneliness and, in general, lower relationship quality than their heterosexual counterparts (Berlingieri and Kovacic, 2025). The feeling of being "left out" might drive them to become politically active in movements that promise acceptance and equality. The role of trust, however, is more complex. It is also worth noting that loneliness in the general population has been correlated with more intolerant and authoritarian attitudes (Peterson et al., 2025), suggesting that social isolation can breed anger that populists (especially right-wing) exploit. Are sexual minorities an exception in that their loneliness stems from being targets of intolerance, is questionable. The results in Table

13 confirm that non-heterosexual individuals are less likely to support populist rhetoric and tend to favour leftist political options.

Table 13: Loneliness, trust and populism: by sexual orientation (LGB+ versus heterosexuals).

	Pop	L-R	PopR	Pop	L-R	PopR
DJG social	0.070** (0.028)	0.051** (0.022)	0.755** (0.285)	0.072** (0.030)	0.044* (0.023)	0.736** (0.304)
DJG emotional	-0.016 (0.030)	-0.067* (0.034)	-0.462 (0.312)	-0.026 (0.031)	-0.074** (0.033)	-0.573* (0.311)
Distrust	0.060** (0.029)	0.069* (0.034)	0.768** (0.316)	0.070** (0.031)	0.065* (0.037)	0.833** (0.357)
LGB+	-0.160 (0.094)	-0.576*** (0.125)	-3.976*** (1.046)	-0.349 (0.218)	-0.928*** (0.237)	-7.101*** (2.227)
LGB+*Distrust				-0.109 (0.083)	0.067 (0.100)	-0.716 (0.986)
LGB+*DJG soc.				-0.009 (0.078)	0.095 (0.094)	0.417 (0.849)
LGB+*DJG emo.				0.129* (0.067)	0.109 (0.077)	1.455* (0.710)
N	7614	7614	7614	7614	7614	7614
r ²	0.192	0.094	0.140	0.192	0.094	0.140

Notes: The method of estimation is OLS. The dependent variables are the degree of populism (Pop), left-right (L-R) placement (i.e. right vs. left-wing), and the interaction between populism and left-right placement (PopR). Control variables included are as in Table 4. Robust standard errors clustered at the country level are reported in parenthesis. Significance levels: * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

Interestingly, we do not find any strong effect of loneliness. Unlike their heterosexual counterparts, emotional loneliness may even increase their likelihood of voting for populist right-wing parties, although this effect is only marginally significant. The effect of trust, on the other hand, does not significantly differ between sexual minorities and the rest of the population.

5.2 Contextual factors: economic downturns and political past

Economic insecurity caused by major downturns has been shown to significantly boost the electoral appeal of populist parties in Europe. Guiso et al. (2024) document that adverse economic shocks not only directly increase support for populist candidates (as voters seek

protection from hardship) but also indirectly fuel populism by eroding trust in established political institutions. Crises undermine citizens' confidence in mainstream parties and government, inducing disillusionment that often translates into voter apathy. This drop in electoral participation creates an opening for outsider movements: indeed, over one-third of the rise in populist vote share following an insecurity shock is attributable to the abstention of disaffected voters who would otherwise support traditional parties. At the same time, populist leaders actively capitalize on the climate of distrust, offering anti-elite, institution-sceptical platforms that resonate with individuals who have lost faith in incumbent authorities. In sum, economic downturns trigger material grievance, collapse of institutional trust, and altered voting patterns (including lower turnout) that amplifies the public's preference for populist alternatives.

Beyond immediate crises, the timing and frequency of one's exposure to economic crisis plays a critical role in shaping populist attitudes. Gavresi and Litina (2023) find that Europeans who experienced a major recession during one's late teens or twenties (the so-called impressionable years) exhibit lower trust in national and European institutions and a greater propensity to support populist parties, even many years later. Early-life economic hardships thus create a cohort more sceptical of institutions and receptive to populist rhetoric in the long run. At the same time, personal experience effects are not entirely immutable. Malmendier (2021) shows that the influence of major economic events gradually decays as new experiences accumulate over the life course. Consistent with this, prior exposure to a crisis can temper responses to subsequent shocks. Gavresi and Litina (2023) observe a mitigating effect: individuals who had already lived through a recession in their formative years were less likely to embrace populist attitudes during a new crisis. Taken together, these findings highlight that populist preferences do not emerge in isolation, rather they are shaped by a combination of current contextual pressures and earlier formative experiences. While economic downturns may trigger populist sentiment, the extent to which individuals respond and whether they support anti-establishment politics, depends on the trust and attitudes developed over the course of their lives.

Furthermore, some existing literature indicates that a communist or socialist past can profoundly shape populist voting patterns today. Generally, the literature links the legacy of one-party rule and abrupt post-socialist market transitions to widespread anti-establishment sentiments, weakened traditional parties, and voters receptive to populist promises. Berman and Snegovaya (2019), for instance, argue that many former socialist or communist parties in the two decades following the failure of communisms, have shifted toward pro-market centrism, diluting their traditional working-class appeal, and losing many blue-collar and rural voters feeling unrepresented. Moreover, those parties revealed unable to take advantage of widespread discontent over the fallout from neo-liberal reforms and the 2008 financial crisis, which created incentives for individuals to focus more on parties emphasising cultural and social rather than economic or class appeals, shifting them toward right-populism. Pop-Eleches (2010) and Pop-Eleches and Tucker (2020), among others, confirm significant link between post-socialist transitions and populist voting, while Nikolova et al. (2022) argues that certain characteristics of communist political regimes, such as the political repressions during the Stalin era, have eroded social trust and civic engagement.

In Table 14, we control for a potential business cycle effect operating through economic conditions. More precisely, we consider the number of recession periods (defined as three consecutive years of negative GDP growth) since 1979, as well as a binary variable indicating whether an individual experienced a severe downturn between the ages of 18 and 25. Overall, during the last 45 years, the number of severe economic downturns varied considerably, ranging from zero in countries such as France and the Netherlands, two in Finland, Poland, Greece and Slovenia, to three in Croatia. The total duration of recession spans from three to 13 years.¹⁰ Residents of countries with a historical experience of frequent economic downturns are significantly less inclined toward populist political options. This finding supports the experience-based learning hypothesis and aligns with the results reported by Gavresi and Litina (2023) and Malmendier (2021).

Interestingly, the interaction between social loneliness and exposure to recessions during the impressionable years, as well as the total number of recessions experienced in a country,

¹⁰The data on economic downturns come from Brugiavini and Weber (2014).

reveals that the effect of social loneliness is significant only among individuals who did not experience a recession between the ages of 18 and 25. For those who did face economic downturns during those formative years, the effect of social loneliness on attitudes is almost negligible. This is a striking finding: populist rhetoric, which often capitalizes on feelings of economic threat and insecurity (emotions that tend to be stronger among the socially lonely) does not resonate as strongly with individuals who have already experienced economic crises. Their lived experience appears to inoculate them, making them less susceptible to populist narratives centred on economic fear and uncertainty. This result carries important policy implications. It suggests that appealing to the specific psychological vulnerabilities of socially lonely individuals can be a powerful tool for populist movements. Conversely, reducing social loneliness could play a meaningful role in weakening the appeal of populist messages and enhancing societal resilience against such rhetoric.

As for the political past, the results show that individuals residing in former communist and socialist countries exhibit a stronger inclination toward supporting right-wing populist parties.¹¹ Regarding loneliness, socially isolated individuals in these countries are more likely to vote for right-wing populist parties; however, this effect does not differ significantly from that observed in countries without a communist or socialist past. Additionally, while the effect of trust is notably weaker in post-communist countries, the interaction term remains statistically insignificant. These findings suggest that in this specific group of countries, populist rhetoric is likely shaped by economic and social factors rooted in their historical legacy of communism and socialism.

¹¹For Germany, we distinguish between regions that formerly belonged to East and West Germany.

Table 14: Loneliness, trust and populism: Exposure to economic downturns and to socialist past.

	Pop	L-R	PopR	Pop	L-R	PopR	Pop	L-R	PopR
DJG social	0.068** (0.028)	0.054** (0.023)	0.753** (0.286)	0.081** (0.031)	0.075*** (0.023)	0.948*** (0.294)	0.139*** (0.045)	0.122*** (0.030)	1.577*** (0.435)
DJG emotional	-0.019 (0.031)	-0.070** (0.033)	-0.500 (0.313)	-0.012 (0.034)	-0.063 (0.039)	-0.413 (0.363)	-0.058 (0.044)	-0.101** (0.049)	-0.895* (0.455)
Distrust	0.061** (0.029)	0.066* (0.033)	0.750** (0.307)	0.074** (0.032)	0.076** (0.037)	0.888** (0.346)	0.069* (0.039)	0.098** (0.047)	0.927** (0.431)
Recessions (18-25)	-0.112* (0.062)	-0.235*** (0.075)	-2.303*** (0.666)	0.089 (0.124)	0.070 (0.101)	0.645 (1.167)	-0.103* (0.059)	-0.225*** (0.074)	-2.195*** (0.639)
N. recessions	0.073 (0.049)	-1.996*** (0.040)	-14.174*** (0.400)	0.082 (0.056)	-1.980*** (0.048)	-14.038*** (0.476)	0.170* (0.086)	-1.898*** (0.069)	-12.975*** (0.780)
Socialism	0.446*** (0.032)	0.413*** (0.027)	3.974*** (0.263)	0.443*** (0.032)	0.412*** (0.026)	3.953*** (0.258)	0.457*** (0.034)	0.421*** (0.029)	4.091*** (0.272)
Rec.(18-25)*Distrust				-0.089 (0.057)	-0.058 (0.069)	-0.875 (0.616)			
Rec.(18-25)*DJG soc.				-0.082 (0.063)	-0.142** (0.057)	-1.288** (0.502)			
Rec.(18-25)*DJG emo.				-0.048 (0.069)	-0.048 (0.080)	-0.595 (0.653)			
N. rec.*Distrust							-0.007 (0.034)	-0.036 (0.031)	-0.185 (0.347)
N. rec.*DJG soc.							-0.087** (0.034)	-0.084*** (0.028)	-1.016*** (0.342)
N. rec.*DJG emo.							0.049 (0.032)	0.038 (0.044)	0.493 (0.319)
N	7577	7577	7577	7577	7577	7577	7577	7577	7577
R2	0.193	0.096	0.142	0.193	0.097	0.143	0.194	0.097	0.143

Notes: The method of estimation is OLS. The dependent variables are the degree of populism (Pop), left-right (L-R) placement (i.e. right vs. left-wing), and the interaction between populism and left-right placement (PopR). Control variables included are as in Table 4. Robust standard errors clustered at the country level are reported in parenthesis. Significance levels: * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

6 Conclusions

This study investigates the relationship between loneliness, trust, and support for populist parties across the ideological spectrum in the European Union. Drawing on rich survey data from over 25,000 individuals and behavioural data from a large-scale trust experiment, the analysis highlights several key findings. First, loneliness and trust exert distinct and independent effects on political preferences. Specifically, social loneliness is positively associated with support for right-wing populist parties, while emotional loneliness correlates with left-leaning, though not necessarily populist, voting preferences. Second, actual trust behaviour, elicited through a trust game, is negatively associated with support for right-wing populist parties. This effect remains robust even when controlling for a broad set of socio-demographic variables, risk preferences, and social connectedness indicators.

The findings reveal significant heterogeneity in the influence of loneliness and trust across demographic groups. Social loneliness exerts a stronger influence on older individuals, while lower trust plays a more significant role among middle-aged men. Women are more affected by emotional loneliness, while men are more influenced by lack of trust. These patterns are consistent across multiple model specifications and robustness checks. Additionally, high levels of social media use, particularly among older individuals, are positively correlated with right-wing populist support. However, the inclusion of social media controls does not alter the main relationships between loneliness, trust, and populist preferences.

The results further suggest that the observed effects are not confounded by objective social isolation or adverse childhood experiences. Controls for social network size, living arrangements, frequency of social interactions, and the quality of childhood relationships do not significantly affect the associations between loneliness, trust, and populist voting. Experimental variation in the trust game and additional checks accounting for risk preferences and reciprocity expectations confirm the robustness of the trust measure used.

Finally, the analysis considers contextual and historical factors. It finds that individuals living in countries with a history of frequent economic downturns are less likely to support right-wing populist parties, whereas a socialist political past is associated with a greater

inclination toward right-wing populist rhetoric. These findings contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how psychological and behavioural factors such as loneliness and trust shape political polarisation in contemporary Europe. The paper highlights the importance of distinguishing between social and emotional loneliness, and of relying on behavioural rather than self-reported trust measures to better capture their distinct effects on populist attitudes.

Despite the strengths of the study, some limitations remain. First, the cross-sectional design of the data restricts the ability to draw definitive causal inferences. In particular, the relationship between loneliness and political preferences may be subject to reverse causality. It is plausible that individuals who support populist parties encounter social marginalization, strained personal ties, or exclusion from dominant social circles, which may, in turn, foster greater feelings of loneliness. Furthermore, political polarization and the prevalence of ideologically homogeneous networks ("echo chambers") may deepen interpersonal distrust and diminish the quality of social interactions. Second, although we account for a wide array of control variables, the potential influence of unobserved individual characteristics or contextual dynamics cannot be fully dismissed, raising the possibility of omitted variable bias. Third, while the trust game employed in the study provides a valuable behavioural indicator, it may not encompass the full spectrum of interpersonal trust as it pertains to political behaviour and decision-making.

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A Appendix

Table A.1: Key differences: left-wing vs. right-wing populism

Feature	Left-Wing Populism	Right-Wing Populism
Opponent	Economic elites, corporations, global financial institutions	Political, cultural, and globalist elites, minorities, immigrants
Core Ideology	Inclusive, Economic justice, wealth redistribution, against neoliberalism	Nationalism, nativism, protectionism, cultural conservatism, traditional identity
Economic Policy	State intervention, pro welfare, tax the rich	Free-market or protectionist, focus on national industries
Immigration	Generally in favour of immigration, supports multiculturalism	Anti-immigration, supports strict border policies
Democracy	Participatory, direct democracy reforms	Prefers strong leadership, law and order, scepticism of institutions
EU/globalisation	Anti neo-liberal globalization, mixed on EU	Strongly anti-EU, supports national sovereignty

Table A.2: Summary statistics (main variables)

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min.	Max.	N
Populism (mean)	4.951	2.152	1.244	9	15147
LR Placement	5.548	2.376	0.333	10	15147
Populist-right	28.968	21.999	2.419	90	15147
Loneliness (UCLA)	1.882	1.823	0	6	15147
DJG social	1.709	1.187	0	3	15147
DJG emotional	1.25	1.153	0	3	15147
Trust (game)	0.006	0.984	-1.6	1.754	7614
Expectation: counterpart	-0.007	0.992	-1.977	2.456	7614
Treated	0.5	0.5	0	1	7614
Age 16-25	0.1	0.3	0	1	15147
Age 26-35	0.178	0.382	0	1	15147
Age 36-45	0.21	0.407	0	1	15147
Age 46-55	0.227	0.419	0	1	15147
Age 56-65	0.151	0.358	0	1	15147
Age 65+	0.134	0.341	0	1	15147
Secondary or less	0.351	0.477	0	1	15147
Post-secondary, up to undergr.	0.378	0.485	0	1	15147
Postgraduate	0.272	0.445	0	1	15147
Female	0.481	0.5	0	1	15147
Income Q1	0.11	0.313	0	1	15147
Income Q2	0.163	0.37	0	1	15147
Income Q3	0.219	0.414	0	1	15147
Income Q4	0.247	0.431	0	1	15147
Income Q5	0.22	0.415	0	1	15147
Income "Prefer not say"	0.04	0.197	0	1	15147
FG immigrant	0.073	0.26	0	1	15147
SG immigrant	0.144	0.351	0	1	15147
Heterosexual	0.899	0.302	0	1	15147
Lesbian/gay	0.027	0.163	0	1	15147
Bisexual	0.039	0.194	0	1	15147
Other SO	0.009	0.092	0	1	15147
Prefer not say	0.026	0.16	0	1	15147
Rural area	0.229	0.42	0	1	15147
Small/medium-sized town	0.304	0.46	0	1	15147
Large town/ city	0.464	0.499	0	1	15147
Don't know	0.003	0.053	0	1	15147

Table A.2: cntd.

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min.	Max.	N
Single	0.194	0.395	0	1	15147
In a relationship	0.134	0.341	0	1	15147
Married or cohabitating	0.572	0.495	0	1	15147
Separated or divorced	0.072	0.259	0	1	15147
Widowed	0.027	0.163	0	1	15147
Employed	0.667	0.471	0	1	15147
Unemployed	0.059	0.236	0	1	15147
Retired	0.167	0.373	0	1	15147
In education	0.049	0.216	0	1	15147
Disabled	0.02	0.14	0	1	15147
Housework	0.026	0.16	0	1	15147
Children 0 to 5	0.224	0.601	0	10	15147
Children 6 to 15	0.434	0.949	0	20	15147
SAH	0.134	0.341	0	1	15147
Depression	0.133	0.34	0	1	15147
Angriness	0.113	0.317	0	1	15147
Nervousness	0.17	0.376	0	1	15147

Table A.3: Loneliness and radical right (RR) and radical left (RL).

	RR	RR	RL	RL
Loneliness (UCLA)	-0.003 (0.003)		0.004*** (0.001)	
DJG social		0.016*** (0.004)		0.001 (0.002)
DJG emotional		-0.006** (0.003)		0.003* (0.002)
N	15156	15156	15156	15156
R2	0.142	0.144	0.138	0.138
Country FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Socio-Demographic	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Network & emotions	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Notes: The method of estimation is OLS. Models 1-2 consider radical-right parties; models 3-4 consider radical left-right placement. Socio-demographic controls include: age, gender, education, occupational status, relationship status, rural versus urban, income quantile, number of kids (under 6 and 6-15), immigrant dummy, sexual orientation, and self-assessed health. Network and emotions include: number of close friends and family members and the frequency of contact, feelings of angriness, nervousness and depression. Robust standard errors clustered at the country level are reported in parenthesis. Significance levels: * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

Table A.4: Loneliness and populism: Further control variables from Table 1.

	Pop	Pop	L-R	L-R	PopR	PopR
<i>Highest education (ref.cat: post-secondary)</i>						
Secondary or less	0.255*** (0.041)	0.258*** (0.041)	0.126** (0.058)	0.127** (0.058)	2.515*** (0.382)	2.546*** (0.388)
Postgraduate	-0.289*** (0.048)	-0.283*** (0.047)	-0.063 (0.049)	-0.064 (0.049)	-2.183*** (0.519)	-2.150*** (0.507)
<i>Household income (ref.cat: quantile 3)</i>						
Quintile 1	0.248*** (0.075)	0.241*** (0.075)	-0.022 (0.127)	-0.034 (0.129)	1.462 (0.946)	1.338 (0.957)
Quintile 2	0.076 (0.060)	0.070 (0.058)	-0.051 (0.075)	-0.057 (0.076)	0.156 (0.629)	0.084 (0.624)
Quintile 4	-0.066 (0.052)	-0.067 (0.052)	0.065 (0.062)	0.068 (0.062)	0.086 (0.499)	0.098 (0.493)
Quintile 5	-0.282*** (0.060)	-0.277*** (0.060)	0.086 (0.068)	0.102 (0.066)	-1.612*** (0.488)	-1.484*** (0.470)
<i>Immigration background (ref.cat: none)</i>						
First generation	-0.064 (0.078)	-0.063 (0.077)	0.062 (0.082)	0.072 (0.084)	-0.076 (0.809)	-0.009 (0.814)
Second generation	-0.094 (0.063)	-0.098 (0.064)	-0.348*** (0.057)	-0.357*** (0.058)	-2.546*** (0.440)	-2.626*** (0.454)
<i>Sexual orientation (ref.cat: heterosexual)</i>						
Lesbian/gay	-0.304** (0.113)	-0.302** (0.113)	-0.437** (0.170)	-0.434** (0.172)	-3.907*** (1.380)	-3.881** (1.398)
Bisexual	0.039 (0.095)	0.031 (0.096)	-0.552*** (0.145)	-0.568*** (0.145)	-2.416** (1.127)	-2.571** (1.134)
<i>Urbanisation (ref.cat: rural area)</i>						
Small town	-0.112** (0.053)	-0.116** (0.053)	-0.148* (0.074)	-0.154** (0.074)	-1.442** (0.630)	-1.508** (0.631)
City	-0.287*** (0.056)	-0.288*** (0.056)	-0.290*** (0.078)	-0.293*** (0.077)	-3.307*** (0.666)	-3.333*** (0.658)
N	15147	15147	15147	15147	15147	15147
R2	0.173	0.174	0.079	0.078	0.118	0.118
Country FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Loneliness (UCLA)	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Loneliness (DJG)	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Socio-Demographic	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Notes: The method of estimation is OLS. Models 1-2 consider the degree of populism (0 = Not at all populist; 10 = Very populist); models 3-4 consider left-right placement (0 = Left; 10 = Right), and models 5-6 consider the interaction between populism and left-right placement (the higher the value, the more right-wing populist). Socio-demographic controls include also: age, gender, occupational status, relationship status, number of kids (under 6 and 6-15), and self-assessed health. Robust standard errors clustered at the country level are reported in parenthesis. Significance levels: * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

Table A.5: Loneliness and populism: Interaction between distrust and loneliness.

	Pop	L-R	PopR	Pop	L-R	PopR
DJG social	0.079** (0.029)	0.049* (0.024)	0.806** (0.309)	0.079** (0.029)	0.048* (0.024)	0.804** (0.307)
DJG emotional	-0.022 (0.031)	-0.073** (0.034)	-0.538* (0.306)	-0.022 (0.031)	-0.071** (0.034)	-0.534* (0.306)
Distrust (game)	0.062** (0.029)	0.074** (0.032)	0.838** (0.305)	0.044 (0.040)	0.014 (0.047)	0.625 (0.423)
Distrust*DJG social				-0.003 (0.019)	0.039** (0.019)	0.115 (0.173)
Distrust*DJG emot				0.017 (0.024)	-0.005 (0.027)	0.016 (0.256)
N	7247	7247	7247	7247	7247	7247
R2	0.197	0.099	0.144	0.197	0.099	0.144

Notes: The method of estimation is OLS. The dependent variables are the degree of populism (Pop), left-right (L-R) placement (i.e. right vs. left-wing), and the interaction between populism and left-right placement (PopR). Socio-demographic controls include: age, gender, education, occupational status, relationship status, rural versus urban, income quantile, number of kids (under 6 and 6-15), immigrant dummy, sexual orientation. Health indicators include: SAH, depression, nervousness and angriness. All regression models include country fixed effects. Robust standard errors clustered at the country level are reported in parenthesis. Significance levels: * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

Table A.6: Trust and Loneliness.

	UCLA	DJG soc.	DJG emo.	UCLA	DJG soc.	DJG emo.
Distrust (game)	-0.021 (0.019)	0.021 (0.014)	-0.003 (0.013)			
Distrust (generalised)				0.082*** (0.014)	0.160*** (0.010)	0.005 (0.008)
N	7515	7614	7614	7428	7524	7524
R2	0.297	0.109	0.280	0.307	0.185	0.283

Notes: The method of estimation is OLS. Socio-demographic controls include: age, gender, education, occupational status, relationship status, rural versus urban, income quantile, number of kids (under 6 and 6-15), immigrant dummy, sexual orientation. Health indicators include: SAH, depression, nervousness and angriness. All regression models include country fixed effects. Robust standard errors clustered at the country level are reported in parenthesis. Significance levels: * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

Table A.7: Loneliness, trust and populism: Controlling for risk taking, impatience and game comprehension.

	Pop	L-R	PopR	Pop	L-R	PopR
DJG social	0.069** (0.028)	0.051** (0.023)	0.753** (0.291)	0.074** (0.028)	0.062** (0.024)	0.835** (0.303)
DJG emotional	-0.016 (0.030)	-0.066* (0.033)	-0.460 (0.305)	-0.020 (0.030)	-0.078** (0.033)	-0.544* (0.304)
Distrust	0.063** (0.027)	0.071** (0.031)	0.815*** (0.285)	0.053* (0.027)	0.062* (0.034)	0.683** (0.302)
Risk preferences	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Impatience	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Game comprehension	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
N	7614	7614	7614	7614	7614	7614
R2	0.192	0.095	0.140	0.201	0.105	0.151

Notes: The method of estimation is OLS. The dependent variables are the degree of populism (Pop), left-right (L-R) placement (i.e. right vs. left-wing), and the interaction between populism and left-right placement (PopR). Socio-demographic controls include: age, gender, education, occupational status, relationship status, rural versus urban, income quantile, number of kids (under 6 and 6-15), immigrant dummy, sexual orientation. Health indicators include: SAH, depression, nervousness and angeriness. All regression models include country fixed effects and controls for expectations in trustees' reciprocity. Robust standard errors clustered at the country level are reported in parenthesis. Significance levels: * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

Table A.8: Loneliness, trust and populism: Untreated sample from the game.

	Pop	L-R	PopR	Pop	L-R	PopR
DJG social	0.093** (0.035)	0.083** (0.035)	1.045** (0.399)	0.092** (0.034)	0.082** (0.035)	1.038** (0.397)
DJG emotional	-0.014 (0.041)	-0.062* (0.036)	-0.415 (0.406)	-0.014 (0.041)	-0.061 (0.036)	-0.404 (0.402)
Distrust				0.073* (0.037)	0.059 (0.046)	0.815** (0.377)
N	3806	3806	3806	3806	3806	3806
R2	0.196	0.113	0.156	0.197	0.114	0.157

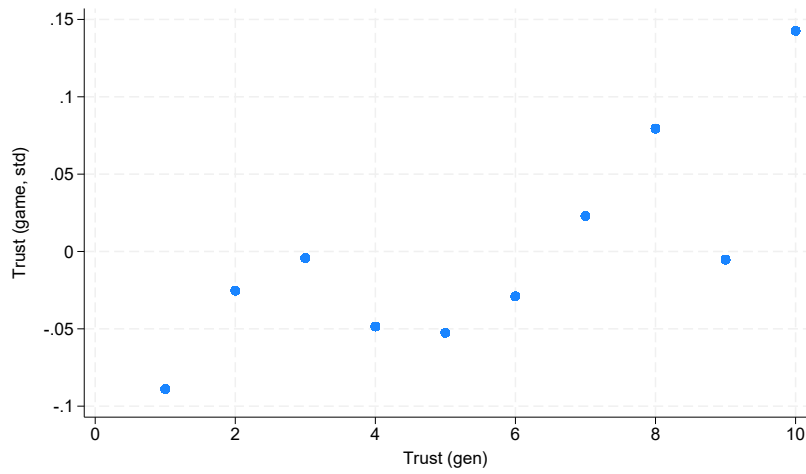
Notes: The method of estimation is OLS. The dependent variables are the degree of populism (Pop), left-right (L-R) placement (i.e. right vs. left-wing), and the interaction between populism and left-right placement (PopR). Socio-demographic controls include: age, gender, education, occupational status, relationship status, rural versus urban, income quantile, number of kids (under 6 and 6-15), immigrant dummy, sexual orientation. Health indicators include: SAH, depression, nervousness and angeriness. All regression models include country fixed effects and controls for expectations in trustees' reciprocity. Robust standard errors clustered at the country level are reported in parenthesis. Significance levels: * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

Table A.9: Loneliness, trust and populism: Social media use by age groups.

	Pop ≤ 40	L-R ≤ 40	PopR ≤ 40	Pop 40-55	L-R 40-55	PopR 40-55	Pop > 55	L-R > 55	PopR > 55
DJG soc.	0.070** (0.033)	0.076* (0.042)	0.893** (0.360)	0.017 (0.038)	-0.005 (0.053)	-0.007 (0.441)	0.147*** (0.038)	0.089** (0.038)	1.560*** (0.425)
DJG emo.	-0.013 (0.040)	-0.058 (0.048)	-0.422 (0.401)	-0.028 (0.038)	-0.062 (0.055)	-0.458 (0.463)	-0.051 (0.056)	-0.089** (0.040)	-0.905* (0.487)
Distrust	0.018 (0.036)	0.058 (0.043)	0.355 (0.360)	0.106*** (0.037)	0.070 (0.050)	1.046** (0.439)	0.049 (0.046)	0.047 (0.059)	0.673 (0.502)
SN < 30 m/d	-0.056 (0.236)	-0.247 (0.206)	-1.396 (2.192)	0.134 (0.167)	-0.074 (0.244)	0.462 (2.057)	0.130 (0.130)	0.103 (0.134)	1.058 (1.450)
SN 30-120 m/d	-0.077 (0.214)	-0.278 (0.208)	-2.146 (2.021)	0.222 (0.141)	-0.075 (0.230)	1.561 (1.846)	0.376*** (0.131)	-0.124 (0.147)	1.139 (1.541)
SN > 120 m/d	-0.056 (0.255)	-0.382 (0.234)	-2.507 (2.383)	0.258 (0.158)	0.115 (0.269)	2.853 (2.219)	0.591*** (0.180)	0.122 (0.195)	3.911* (2.058)
IM < 30 m/d	-0.144 (0.266)	0.009 (0.297)	-0.447 (2.704)	-0.143 (0.199)	-0.041 (0.191)	-1.605 (1.652)	-0.098 (0.152)	-0.117 (0.118)	-1.329 (1.440)
IM 30-120 m/d	-0.246 (0.246)	0.182 (0.261)	-0.329 (2.568)	-0.073 (0.244)	0.013 (0.210)	-1.031 (2.124)	-0.029 (0.140)	0.182 (0.173)	1.012 (1.364)
IM > 120 m/d	-0.075 (0.304)	0.316 (0.283)	1.426 (2.726)	-0.071 (0.237)	-0.099 (0.261)	-1.627 (2.382)	-0.219 (0.238)	-0.006 (0.226)	-0.910 (2.289)
N	2744	2744	2744	2517	2517	2517	2289	2289	2289
R2	0.218	0.160	0.190	0.210	0.108	0.168	0.215	0.102	0.137

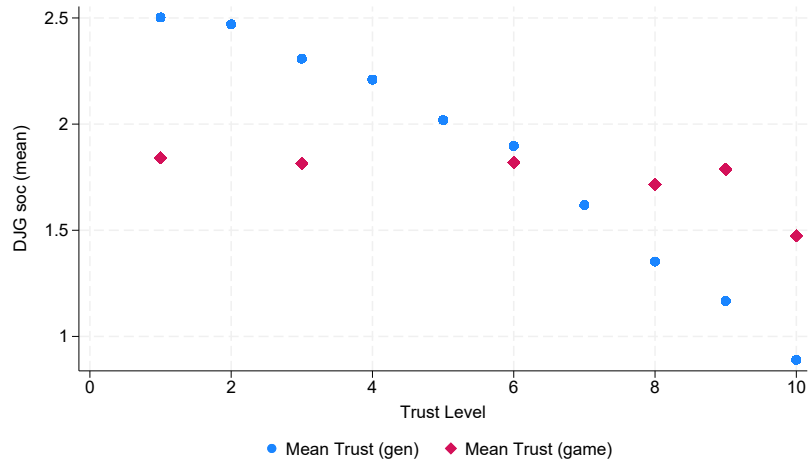
Notes: The method of estimation is OLS. The dependent variables are the degree of populism (Pop), left-right (L-R) placement (i.e. right vs. left-wing), and the interaction between populism and left-right placement (PopR). SNS stays for "social networking sites", IMT stays for "instant messaging tools". Reference category is: "never". Socio-demographic controls include: age, gender, education, occupational status, relationship status, rural versus urban, income quantile, number of kids (under 6 and 6-15), immigrant dummy, sexual orientation. Health indicators include: self-assessed health (SAH), depression, nervousness and angeriness. All regression models include country fixed effects and controls for expectations in trustees' reciprocity. Robust standard errors clustered at the country level are reported in parenthesis. Significance levels: * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

Figure A.1: Generalised trust versus trust behaviour elicited from the trust game experiment

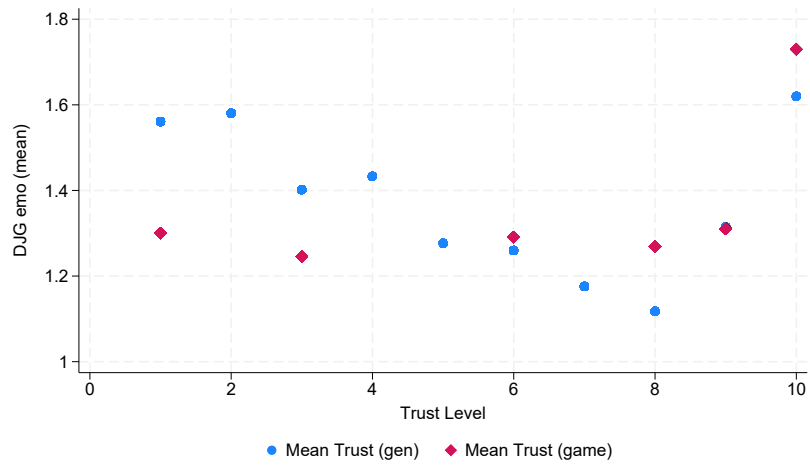


Note: The y-axis represents the average level of trust (as measured by the amount of coins sent by trustors to trustees), for each level of generalised trust (x-axis).

Figure A.2: Generalised trust and trust behaviour elicited from the trust game experiment versus social and emotional loneliness



(a) DJG social scale



(b) DJG emotional scale

Notes: The y-axis represents the average of the DJG social and emotional scales for each level of trust. Trust behaviour from the game is reported in deciles.