UNIVERSITY OF AMSTERDAM

# UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

## Backlash among the dominant

*Assessing support for elitism in four European countries*

Spruyt, Bram; Caluwaerts, Didier; Darnon, Céline; Easterbrook, Matthew; Kavadias, Leandros; Kesberg, Rebekka; Kuppens, Toon; Manstead, Antony; Smets, Lien; Van Noord, Jochem

**DOI**
10.1111/pops.70010

**Publication date**
2025

**Document Version**
Final published version

**Published in**
Political Psychology

**License**
CC BY-NC-ND

Link to publication

**Citation for published version (APA):**
Spruyt, B., Caluwaerts, D., Darnon, C., Easterbrook, M., Kavadias, L., Kesberg, R., Kuppens, T., Manstead, A., Smets, L., & Van Noord, J. (2025). Backlash among the dominant: Assessing support for elitism in four European countries. *Political Psychology*, *46*(6), 1768-1787. https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.70010

**General rights**
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

**Disclaimer/Complaints regulations**
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, P.O. Box 19185, 1000 GD Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.
*UvA-DARE is a service provided by the library of the University of Amsterdam (https://dare.uva.nl)*

Download date:15 Sept 2026

Check for updates

DOI: 10.1111/pops.70010

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

*Political Psychology*

# Backlash among the dominant: Assessing support for elitism in four European countries

**Bram Spruyt**[1] | **Didier Caluwaerts**[1] | **Céline Darnon**[2] | **Matthew Easterbrook**[3] | **Leandros Kavadias**[1] | **Rebekka Kesberg**[4] | **Toon Kuppens**[5] | **Antony Manstead**[6] | **Lien Smets**[1] | **Jochem Van Noord**[1]

[1]Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Brussels, Belgium

[2]Université Clermont Auvergne, Clermont-Ferrand, France

[3]University of Sussex, Brighton, UK

[4]University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

[5]University of Groningen, Groningen, The Netherlands

[6]Cardiff University, Cardiff, UK

**Correspondence**
Bram Spruyt, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, 1050 Brussels, Belgium.
Email: bram.spruyt@vub.be

**Funding information**
NORFACE Joint Research Programme on Democratic Governance in a Turbulent Age and co-funded by [AEI, ANR, ESRC, FWO, NCN, NWO], Grant/Award Number: 822166; FWO—Flanders, Grant/Award Number: G0A5D25N

**Abstract**

In recent decades, populism has gained momentum in many Western countries and has increased the salience of the category "the people" in contemporary politics. This success of populist politics may evoke a backlash effect among more dominant groups in general, and the higher educated in particular, potentially triggering support for elitism. Based on preregistered analyses of survey data from four countries (the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Denmark, and Greece), we find that support for elitism is more prevalent among members of groups that occupy dominant social positions in society (i.e., the higher educated, higher subjective income). We also find that education-based identity, but not income-based identity, amplifies these differences. Finally, elitist attitudes are embedded in a broader worldview that represents the status quo as fair (system justification) and opposes measures aimed at increasing social equality (anti-egalitarianism).

**KEYWORDS**

education, elitism, populism, social identities, survey research

## INTRODUCTION

In many Western countries, populist politics have gained momentum in recent decades. In response, a voluminous literature has examined who supports populist politics under what circumstances. That research has convincingly shown (1) that populist attitudes are held by

This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs License, which permits use and distribution in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, the use is non-commercial and no modifications or adaptations are made.
© 2025 The Author(s). *Political Psychology* published by Wiley Periodicals LLC on behalf of International Society of Political Psychology.

people with widely diverging grievances (Steiner et al., 2023), (2) that populist attitudes are related to intergroup dynamics (Bornschier et al., 2021), and (3) that the salience of the category "the people" plays a crucial role in the success of populism (Canovan, 1999). Much less is known, however, about the impact of these developments on citizens who do not support populist politics (but see Bornschier et al., 2021). Do they feel threatened by "the people" and are they for that reason inclined to adopt an elitist view on politics?

Answering these questions is important for two reasons. First, a thorough understanding of the societal and political dynamics created by populism requires that we understand how people who do not support populism react to the success and mainstreaming of populism, especially because their reactions may *contribute* to the support for populism. Second, as we show later, it is relatively easy to identify clear traces of "anti-people" elitism (1) in contemporary politics, and all the more so in (2) philosophical political literature on the future of democracy (e.g., Bell, 2015; Brennan, 2016) and (3) public opinion research (Akkerman et al., 2014; Bertsou & Caramani, 2022; Caramani, 2017; Fernández-Vásquez et al., 2023). Such manifestations argue that ordinary people simply do not have sufficient knowledge and skills to make sensible political judgments. This concern leads some scholars to advocate a political meritocracy, an argument that is grounded in an "epistocratic" (i.e., rule of the "knowledgeable") view on politics (e.g., Bell, 2015; Brennan, 2016). Public opinion research has found clear support for elitist views and has shown complex relationships between support for elitism and populism, indicating that elitism is not simply the antithesis of populism and therefore deserves to be studied in its own right (Akkerman et al., 2014; Bertsou & Caramani, 2022; Caramani, 2017; Fernández-Vásquez et al., 2023). The current study builds on that research by studying *who supports elitism and why*.

Based on preregistered analyses of new data ($N=4842$) gathered in four countries (the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Denmark, and Greece), we contribute to the literature in two ways. First, against the background of an emerging literature studying (different forms of) elitism (e.g., Akkerman et al., 2014; Bertsou & Caramani, 2022; Fernández-Vásquez et al., 2023), we show that support for political elitism is anchored in clear and theoretically meaningful social differences and worldviews. Elitism is more prevalent among people who occupy dominant social positions (e.g., higher educated) and who hold attitudes that resist social changes. Second, our paper contributes to a growing literature (e.g., Noordzij et al., 2023; Stubager, 2009; van Noord et al., 2023) that argues for an integration of an intergroup perspective and its associated identity measures into the study of political opinion. More specifically, we show that education-based identity, but not income-based identity, amplifies differences in support for elitism. Taken together, our results demonstrate that in contemporary societies, concern about a too central role of "the people" in politics and support for elitism are not marginal phenomena. This support is related to people's educational and income-based positions and embedded in general views on society. If we are concerned about the state of democracy, we should develop a better understanding of elitism. Such understanding will only be achieved if we take into account the social identities associated with people's social positions in general and with their educational level in particular.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### Elitism

In this paper, we define elitism as a view of democracy that stresses "ordinary people's" lack of political ability, rejects the primacy of "the people" in politics and argues that politicians should lead rather than follow "the people." Although elitism is certainly not a new phenomenon, the success of populist parties may have triggered concerned reactions among those who

14679221, 2025, 6, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/pops.70010 by Uva Universiteitsbibliotheek, Wiley Online Library on [19/02/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

do not align themselves with "the people" or those who stand to lose from populists' agendas. To understand that claim, one needs a good understanding of the meaning of the category "the people" and how it is used in politics. Two elements are crucial here.

First, the category "the people" is a key element in populism. Indeed, populism is about "*government of the people, by the people, for the people*" (Canovan, 1999, p. 10). In populism, "the people" are considered good and wise. Indeed, the people-centrism element renders populism a politics of hope: the hope that, where established parties and elites have failed, common sense, ordinary folk and the politicians who give them a voice, can find solutions (i.e., "redemptive politics," Badiou et al., 2016). This hope element provides populism with its mobilizing potential and distinguishes it from mere political discontent (Taggart, 2002). Consequently, the success of populist politics has increased the general saliency of the category "the people" in contemporary politics. Some scholars even argue that politics in Western countries has evolved toward a "technopopulism" in which all parties claim to represent "the people" (Bickerton & Accetti, 2021). This tendency has further enhanced the salience of the category "the people."

Second, and important for our general argument, "the people" in contemporary political discourse does not refer to a clearly delineated group of people (Badiou et al., 2016). In populism, "the people" refers primarily to a specific way of observing, interpreting, and thinking that is reflected in the opinions of "ordinary" citizens. These opinions are presented as homogeneous, broadly shared, and undivided (Diani, 1996). Research on how the notion of "the people" is used by populists has revealed that when the same populist politician addresses different audiences, the specific meaning of the category "the people" varies (Canovan, 1999). This observation dovetails with Laclau's (2005) idea that in populism the categories "the people" and "the elite" function as "empty signifiers" whose meaning (and we suggest even their delineation) is fully determined by their antagonistic relationship. In populism, "the people" are everything that "the elite" is not, and vice versa. So rather than seeing "the people" as a strictly delineated category, it is a *flexible discursive element* in talking about politics. The vagueness and the consequent flexibility of this "us versus them" distinction in populist rhetoric is a useful way of classifying oneself as belonging to a particular group and thereby depersonalizing one's own experiences: "populism emerges when 'he' becomes 'them'. In a parallel fashion, 'I' becomes 'we' as the people are envisioned as a generalized entity subject to the same conditions and frustrations as the individual" (Taggart, 2002, p. 74). Indeed, it is the combination of (1) the centrality of a broad category like "the people" (that can be used for identity politics), as well as (2) the flexibility of the notion itself, that (a) explains why populism can unite diverse grievances (Steiner et al., 2023) and (b) renders populism appealing to groups who struggle to find a positive social identity (Spruyt et al., 2016). For those people "we, the people" may serve as a rhetorical way of placing oneself under the safe umbrella of a group (Hogg et al., 2008).

If some segments of the population are concerned about the centrality of "the people" in contemporary politics, a potential repercussion of this concern is that some citizens develop an elitist view of democracy that argues against a central role of "the people" in politics (Bertsou & Caramani, 2022). In three different areas, we identify clear traces of such elitism, underscoring the ecological validity of the phenomenon.

First, some political actors hold this view, as illustrated by Hillary Clinton's statement at a campaign fundraising event (September 9, 2016) that "you could put half of Trump supporters into what I call a basket of deplorables." In most cases, however, pleas for a more elitist approach to politics are not openly negative toward "the people," but rather formulated in terms of "smart" politics. Sandel (2020) argues that referring to "smart politics" has become a way of avoiding the morally charged distinction between "good" and "bad" politics. Second, some political-philosophical thought adopts a more overtly negative attitude toward the less politically sophisticated. Bell (2015) and Brennan (2016), for example,

14679221, 2025, 6, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/pops.70010 by Uva Universiteitsbibliotheek, Wiley Online Library on [19/02/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

argue for political meritocracy and for exams that test for politically relevant intellectual abilities: "the uncomfortable truth is that the best (perhaps only) way to reduce the political influence of ignorant voters is to deprive them of the vote" (Brennan, 2016, p. 30). These authors hold that societies should invest in giving all people an equal opportunity to develop themselves, but at the same time acknowledge that not all people will do so. Although democracy as a political principle is generally considered desirable, there are arguments and proposed practices that conflict with it. Third, the latter conclusion is supported by public opinion research that reveals public support for technocracy and/or elitism (Akkerman et al., 2014; Bertsou & Caramani, 2022; Fernández-Vásquez et al., 2023). Here, we are interested in the social differences in support for elitism.

## Who supports elitism and why?

The above arguments reveal two elements that need to be taken into account when theorizing about who is likely to support elitism. *First*, because populism contains a strong anti-establishment element that renders it a form of "radical politics" (Barr, 2009), the success of populism is likely to be perceived as threatening by people who benefit from the status quo. This element directs the attention to *groups that occupy a dominant position* in society and politics. In complex societies such as those studied here, these groups can be defined according to different criteria. For reasons outlined below, we will focus on groups defined by education and (subjective) income.

*Second*, if the centrality of the categories "the people" and "the elite" renders populism a form of identity politics, any examination of perceived concern about the centrality of 'the people' in politics among the general public should take people's subjective social identities into account. Taking both elements together suggests studying support for elitism from an intergroup perspective. Who, then, is likely to support elitism?

One of the oldest theories on intergroup conflicts is based on a rational choice perspective. *Realistic group-conflict theory* holds that group competition emerges when there is a perceived imbalance of resources like power or wealth (Jackson, 1993) and that people adopt attitudes that serve their perceived (material) interests in that competition. From this, it follows that to the extent that populism challenges the status quo, we would expect groups having a dominant position in politics (e.g., the higher educated, higher subjective income) to feel more concerned about the power of "the people" in contemporary politics and to be more supportive of anti-people elitism. Because realistic group-conflict theory only focuses on objective interests and power positions, the expectations that can be derived from this theory are the same for education and for (subjective) income. Based on this approach, we expect that:

> **H1a.** People who are higher educated support elitism to a greater extent than the less educated.

> **H1b.** People who score higher on a measure of subjective income support elitism to a greater extent than people with lower subjective income.

There are, however, also some reasons to anticipate that these hypotheses will *not* be supported by the data. Indeed, theories that focus on the role of institutions and legitimizing myths—for example, Jackman's (1994) theory of asymmetric group relations or social dominance theory (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999)—argue that the status of dominant groups is institutionally guaranteed. As a result, dominant groups will generally not feel threatened and have little to gain by expressing openly negative attitudes toward dominated groups: "[the] inertia is on their side" and "institutions […] do much of society's dirty work in reproducing privilege

14679221, 2025, 6, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/pops.70010 by Uva Universiteitsbibliotheek, Wiley Online Library on [19/02/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

and disadvantage" (DiMaggio, 2012, p. 15). For dominant groups, displaying paternalism and denying social conflict are ways of preserving the status quo (Livingstone et al., 2021). Applied to our topic, this raises the possibility that we will *not* find that higher educated or people with higher subjective income (i.e., dominant groups in society) support elitism (and hence reject H1a and H1b). A similar expectation can also be derived from system justification theory (Jost, 2020) which holds that *all* people are motivated to see the current state of affairs in society as fair, leading to the expectation that *both* dominant and dominated groups will support elitism and hence no social differences will be found. Experimental research indeed shows that perceived competence is one of the most important elements that people, regardless of their social position, take into account when voting for politicians and dominant groups (i.e., higher educated, high-income groups) are typically associated with competence (van Noord et al., 2023).

The preceding arguments lead to contrasting expectations regarding social differences in support for elitism. One explanation for this is that, so far, two elements have been ignored, namely (1) the role of social identities and (2) the particularities of the group conflict (and hence the specificity of the groups involved). Social Identity Theory (SIT) enables us to include both elements and explain why we expect that the patterns observed for education-based groups will differ from those observed for groups based on (subjective) income.

Social Identity Theory (SIT) puts social identities center stage to understand intergroup conflicts. According to SIT, it is not only important whether one is highly or less highly educated, but also whether one *feels* that being highly or less highly educated is important for one's (social) identity. Rather than simply assuming that social identities follow from objective group membership (as Realistic Group Conflict theory does), SIT has convincingly shown that social identities can have independent effects or moderate the effect of their objective group membership (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). More specifically, SIT holds that when membership in a social group (such as the less educated or lower income) is framed by comparison with another group (such as the higher educated), one's attitudes and behavior within one's own group and toward the other group can be seen as reflecting the value and meaning that the group membership provides (Spears, 2021). It follows that the extent to which one identifies with the group will moderate attitudes and behavior in such a way that it *reinforces* group differences.

Following this reasoning, we expect that:

> **H2a.** Education-based identities moderate educational differences in support for elitism so that they are larger among people who identify with their educational group.

> **H2b.** Income-based identities moderate (subjective) income differences in support for elitism so that they are larger among people who identify with their income group.

Whereas these arguments may apply in general, there are good reasons to expect that they will be especially relevant for educational differences. For this reason, we will compare the results for education with those obtained for (subjective) income. First, self-categorization theory as integrated in SIT claims that sharp distinctions increase the relevance of group identity (Turner et al., 1987). Compared to economic capital, education credentials (1) introduce sharp distinctions rather than mere gradients between groups, and (2) are institutionally guaranteed. Credentials provide an "official identity" or "title" (Sayer, 2005). The saliency of educational categories is further enhanced by the tendency in public discourse to "educationalize" social problems (i.e., represent them in such a way as to frame

14679221, 2025, 6, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/pops.70010 by Uva Universiteitsbibliotheek, Wiley Online Library on [19/02/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

education as a universal problem-solver) (Smeyers & Depaepe, 2011). These elements are absent for income-based distinctions.

Second, educational attainment is one of the most consistent predictors of populist voting and attitudes. At least in European countries, discussions about populism are also often linked to "status politics" (Gidron & Hall, 2020). Bovens and Wille (2017) coined the term "diploma democracy" to refer to the trend in which not only the educational level of politicians rises at a much faster rate compared to that of the general population, but higher educated people also become overrepresented in all forms of political participation (Schakel & Van Der Pas, 2021). While today there is no political party that rallies support in terms of educational attainment, research has shown that people's awareness of education-based groups is consistently related to political attitudes (Spruyt et al., 2016; Stubager, 2009). So far, however, discussions about "diploma democracy" have predominantly focused on the less educated. This is an important gap because we will never develop a full understanding of an intergroup dynamic by studying only one group (Noordzij et al., 2023). By studying support for elitism, we aim to shed more light on the position of *the higher educated* in diploma democracies. Do they feel threatened by the success of populist parties and adopt a more elitist view on politics?

Some studies provide indications that higher educated people engage in education-based intergroup behavior. For example, van Noord et al. (2023) studied preferences for political candidates. They experimentally manipulated both the educational level *and* the political competence of candidates. Less-educated citizens only preferred higher educated candidates when they were also high in political competence. Among higher educated respondents, a higher educated politician was preferred *regardless* of their level of competence, signaling in-group favoritism. Sainz and Vásquez (2023) even found that certain segments of the higher educated support the idea that the less educated should be denied voting rights or not get the opportunity to run for public candidacies.

In line with this, Kuppens et al. (2018; Studies 6 and 7) showed that the higher educated exhibited more education-based intergroup bias than the less educated. They conclude that *educationism* may be "the last bastion of acceptable prejudice among the higher educated" (Kuppens et al., 2018, p. 17). Here, we argue that a rejection of populist attitudes—and more specifically the primacy of "the people" in politics—and a plea for more elitism are plausible political outcomes of such educationism.

Based on these arguments,[1] we hypothesize that:

> **H2c.** The moderation by education-based identification is stronger than the moderation by income-based identification.

In this paper, we focus on group processes associated with education and (subjective) income. However, support for elitism is likely to be influenced by other factors as well. More specifically, it seems reasonable to propose that elitism, like any other political attitude, will be embedded in a citizen's more general worldview. So far, we have argued that support for populism is grounded in a concern about (societal) change and that dominant groups are therefore likely to support elitism. This also implies that people who endorse attitudes supportive of the status quo (e.g., because they perceive the current state of affairs as fair and as reflecting deservingness) will feel more threatened by "the people" and argue for a more elitist society, regardless of their educational or subjective income position. Therefore, we added measures of

[1]This paper is based on preregistered hypotheses. For all expectations, including the control variables, we formulated different hypotheses. For ease of presentation, in this paper, we only mention the hypotheses related to education and income. The control variables are entered into the analyses as preregistered. Hypothesis 2c was formulated in advance but not labeled as a hypothesis.

14679221, 2025, 6, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/pops.70010 by Uva Universiteitsbibliotheek, Wiley Online Library on [19/02/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

attitudes that represent the status quo as fair, namely system justification beliefs and anti-egalitarianism.[2] We expect that:

> **H3.** Anti-egalitarianism (H3a) and economic system justification (H3b) are positively related to support for elitism.

Testing Hypotheses H3a and H3b not only assesses whether elitism is embedded in a broader and theoretically consistent worldview but also enables us to put the explanation in terms of group processes (H1-2) to a strict empirical test.

## Exploring the role of context

Although our primary focus is on individual-level patterns, there are important country-level differences in both (1) the "supply side" of politics and (2) the development of "diploma democracies." Therefore, there is also a more exploratory comparative part in our analysis.

First, countries differ in the presence of strong populist parties, the difference between left- and right-wing populism, and the extent to which populist forces have had strong and tangible consequences for countries (e.g., Brexit). As a result, countries probably differ in the extent to which the "threat of populism" feels realistic. The countries in our sample cover both regional diversity in Europe, with substantial differences in economic prosperity and educational distribution, and also clear differences in terms of the presence of populist parties and the electoral system. The Netherlands (e.g., The Party for Freedom) and Denmark (e.g., the Danish People's Party) have a long history of successful right-wing populist parties (Van Kessel, 2015). The low electoral threshold in both countries has resulted in a highly fragmented party landscape, where these parties can rally support based on a limited number of (right-wing) issues. The 'first-past-the-post' electoral system in the United Kingdom means that populist actors are more strongly embedded in existing mainstream parties. Brexit showed the United Kingdom that populist rhetoric can be highly consequential (Iakhnis et al., 2018), and having received higher education was strongly correlated with voting Remain (Zhang, 2018). Greece is one of the few countries in Europe where (in addition to the extreme-right party Golden Dawn) a left-wing populist party (SYRIZA) has been successful and participated in government (Font et al., 2021).

Second, although traces of education-based group processes have been found in many (Western) European countries, countries differ in terms of the centrality of schooling as an institution and the dominance of the higher educated in political life. Bovens and Wille (2017, pp. 118–120), for example, compared the education levels between the postwar decades (1946–1984) and 2016 for six West European countries, including three countries that we study, namely Denmark, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands. In all countries, the number of university-educated cabinet ministers in 2016 was close to or over 90%, illustrating the dominance of the higher educated in the executive branch. Countries differ, however, regarding the speed of this process. In the Netherlands, for example, in 2019, 93% of the ministers in the Dutch cabinet had a graduate diploma. In the decades between 1946 and 1984, this was already 82%. This means the increase in the last 30 years started from a high level. This differs from Denmark or the United Kingdom, where they experienced a much sharper increase (Denmark: from 65% [1946–1984] to about 88% in 2016; United Kingdom: from 72 to 92%).

Furthermore, the growth of diploma democracy is itself part of a much broader trend whereby schooling has become a central institution in society. Kavadias et al. (2024)

[2]For two countries, we also measured belief in school meritocracy, for which we expected the same pattern. In the preregistered analysis plan, we entered the variables one by one and also assessed interaction terms with education and income. Here, we report a summary of the results. The full models are presented in Appendix E.

14679221, 2025, 6, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/pops.70010 by Uva Universiteitsbibliotheek, Wiley Online Library on [19/02/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

constructed an index that reflected the growth of "schooled society" (Baker, 2014), that is, the extent to which education has become an authoritative institution in society. On a scale from 0 to 100, the four countries we study here varied from 89.81 (Denmark) to 56.65 (Greece) with the Netherlands (72.92) and the United Kingdom (67.48) in between. These data confirm Bovens and Wille's (2017) analysis showing that the share of the higher educated in Greece is much lower when compared to the Netherlands, Denmark, and the United Kingdom. All this raises the question of whether the patterns for education (−based identity) will vary between contexts.

Previous research has already found that educational differences in status processes vary in terms of the relative share of the higher educated in the population (Gidron & Hall, 2020; van Noord et al., 2019), leading to the expectation that any education-identification moderation pattern that we observe will vary in terms of the extent to which countries can be labeled "diploma democracies." Although four countries are not sufficient to formally test cross-national differences, the preceding arguments suggest that education-based identities may be less important in Greece (left wing-populism, less developed schooled society, and high economic instability) than in the other countries. Moreover, education-based identities can be expected to be especially prevalent in Denmark, given the rapid increase in the educational level of members of the executive branch in recent decades. Based on these arguments, we reestimated all models separately for each country.

## DATA AND MEASURES

Our data come from a cross-national survey conducted in nine European countries (Belgium, Denmark, France, Greece, Hungary, Netherlands, Poland, Spain, and the United Kingdom), with a total sample of 11,218 respondents ($n$ = ~1200 per country). Data were gathered online between December 2021 and January 2022 by a market research agency (Ipsos). Information about the fieldwork can be found in the survey's technical report (https://doi.org/10.34894/IME1EY). The survey recruited a representative sample of people aged 18 years and older in each country, with quotas based on age, gender, education, and region. The questionnaire covered a broad spectrum of sociopolitical attitudes and psychological constructs related to political attitudes and behavior. The core survey was run in all nine countries. A further battery of items, including those used in this study, was rotated in a reduced selection of countries, namely the Netherlands ($N$ = 1202), Denmark ($N$ = 1215), the United Kingdom ($N$ = 1212), and Greece ($N$ = 1213).

### Dependent variables

Our analyses focus on elitism. In developing the items for our measure, we started from the work of Bertsou and Caramani (2022). Building on their work, we aimed to tap into two subdimensions of elitism: (1) one element that reflects a perceived concern about the centrality of "the people" in politics and (2) another element that refers more purely to the "procedural preference" (i.e., not blindly following the will of the people).

Perceived concern about the role of "the people" in contemporary politics was measured with three items. The first item (*Ordinary people don't have the necessary knowledge to determine policies*) is from Bertsou and Caramani (2022) and stresses people's (perceived) lack of political ability. We added two items focusing on the perceived potential harm that could be caused by listening too much to "the people" (*It may harm society if we directly translate people's political preferences into policies; Blindly following the will of the people may lead society in the wrong direction*).

14679221, 2025, 6, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/pops.70010 by Uva Universiteitsbibliotheek, Wiley Online Library on [19/02/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

To measure the procedural component of *anti-people elitism*, we used three items that oppose the people-centrism element in populism. Again, we borrowed one item from Bertsou and Caramani (*Political leaders should make decisions according to their best judgment, not the will of the people*) which articulates a trustee model of representation. We added two items that underscore this idea (*Politicians should lead the people not follow them* and *the most important decisions in society should be taken by elected politicians not by ordinary people*). We deliberately chose to use items involving elements of elitism that are not blatantly anti-democratic because responses to more blatant items would likely be influenced by social desirability concerns.

Exploratory factor analysis of these items revealed two dimensions with eigenvalues greater than one, with items measuring perceived threat by the people loading on one dimension and items that articulate a preference for anti-people elitism loading on the other (Appendix A). However, because (1) the two dimensions were highly correlated (Pearson's $r_{\text{Total Sample}} = .608$, $p < .001$), (2) the results for both dimensions were highly similar (Appendix C), and (3) from a theoretical standpoint, it could be argued that both dimensions cover different dimensions of an overarching elitist view on contemporary politics; here, we present the results for a measure that combines all items into a single scale (Cronbach's $\alpha_{\text{Total Sample}} = .778$) and rescaled to a 0–1 continuum and subsequently centered on the overall mean (M = .52; SD = .18). This "Elitism" measure, then, articulates key concerns that underlie pleas for an epistocratic view on politics (Brennan, 2016), namely that many ordinary citizens simply do not have sufficient political knowledge and that following these uninformed voters may lead society in the "wrong direction."

## Predictors

Regarding *educational level*, respondents were asked about the highest level they had attained. Students were assigned to the level at which they were currently studying. The country-specific educational levels were recoded into ISCED levels. In the preregistration plan, we specified that we would use a three-level categorization for education: less educated (secondary education not completed), middle educated (secondary education), and higher educated (higher education). However, when running the analyses, it became evident that clearer results were obtained using a dummy variable reflecting whether or not respondents had completed higher education. A possible reason for this is that in a comparative setting, it is much easier to make a consistent distinction between those who have and those who have not received higher education than it is to make finer distinctions between those who have not received higher education. Moreover, research into the meaning of the labels "less" and "higher" education showed that there is consensus among both higher and less educated citizens that people who obtained a tertiary degree should be considered "higher educated" (Spruyt & Kuppens, 2015). Research on subjective social status found that for (Western) countries, the tertiary versus non-tertiary difference was the main distinction in people's own estimated social status (van Noord et al., 2019). For these reasons, we report the results with a three-category educational variable in Appendix D, but focus here on the results using education as a dummy variable.

To assess differences in *income*, we focused on *subjective income*. This was a deliberate and preregistered choice. The data do not include a measure for objective income because such measures are known to suffer from at least two important limitations. First, nonresponse bias is much higher for income than for other sociodemographic variables (for an overview, see Davern et al., 2005, p. 1535). Second, to define "objective" income groups, much information about the family situation (e.g., family composition, level and nature of debt) is needed, and this increases the risk that the questionnaire becomes unduly intrusive for the respondent. To measure subjective income, respondents were asked to indicate to

14679221, 2025, 6, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/pops.70010 by Uva Universiteitsbibliotheek, Wiley Online Library on [19/02/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

what extent they felt that they were able to live a comfortable life with their current household income (1: very easy to 5: very difficult). We reverse-coded this item so that higher scores reflect higher subjective income. This type of subjective measure of income is often used in public opinion research, but it is of course less specific than an objective measure and is also the result of an implicit combination of respondents' objective income and their expectations regarding a comfortable life. Regarding the specificity point, it is worth noting that our measure of educational level was also not very specific (e.g., it did not ask about the reputation of the school or university and is operationalized as a dummy variable). Regarding the point about ability to live a comfortable life, it is worth noting that this corresponds to how citizens are often addressed by politicians, who discuss topics related to income using broad categories (e.g., the poor, the rich, people who have difficulties in making ends meet). People respond depending on whether they feel addressed by such categories, regardless of whether they objectively belong to them. If people feel that they can lead a comfortable life, they will behave accordingly. So even if subjective income is not a perfect reflection of people' objective income, it is reasonable to assume that subjective income has an impact on people's political opinions and behavior.

*Social identities* were measured with one item asking respondents to indicate (1: Not at all to 6: Extremely) whether they identified with *People with a similar (level of income/educational level) to my own*. Previous research has shown that single-item measures of identification perform well (Postmes et al., 2013). Moreover, because the two items were identically formulated for subjective income and education, they allow us to directly compare their potential moderating effects.

We also added variables referring to people's more general outlook on society. *Economic system justification orientation* was measured using three items borrowed from Jost and Thompson (2000) (*Economic positions are legitimate reflections of people's achievements; If people work hard, they almost always get what they want; Most people who don't get ahead in our society should not blame the system; they have only themselves to blame*), designed to assess respondents' tendency to legitimize economic inequality (Cronbach's $\alpha_{\text{Total Sample}} = .764$). *Anti-egalitarianism* was measured with two items in which respondents had to position themselves (on an 11-point scale) between anchor statements, one anti-egalitarian and the other pro-egalitarian (e.g., *The state should take more responsibility to ensure that everyone is provided for* and *We need larger income differences*; Cronbach's $\alpha_{\text{Total Sample}} = .656$).

## Control variables

Several control variables known to be related to political attitudes were included. *Gender* was entered as a dummy (0: Woman). *Age* was entered as a continuous variable. Because support for (right-wing) populism is found to be higher in nonurban areas (Rickardsson, 2021), *rural/urban* was entered as a dummy (0: Urban).

Although the notions of "Left" and "Right" in politics may have different meanings for different people, Left–Right orientation remains an important source of (political) identity. In addition, populism is often seen as a "thin" ideology that connects with a more leftist or rightist host ideology, and the countries that we study also differ in the presence of left- versus right-wing populism. Controlling for L-R orientation, then, not only puts the identity moderation patterns that we study to a strict empirical test, but it also enables us to assess whether support for elitism varies depending on whether right- or left-wing populism is present in the political context. Left–Right orientation was measured with one item (0–10) asking respondents *Where would you place yourself on a scale, where 0 means the left and 10 means the right?* As a robustness check, we also added a quadratic term of L-R orientation to assess the nonlinearity of its relationship with elitism.

14679221, 2025, 6, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/pops.70010 by Uva Universiteitsbibliotheek, Wiley Online Library on [19/02/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

## Model specification and data handling

Respondents were not allowed to skip questions, so there were no missing values. Because the data were clustered with respondents nested into the four countries, we used a fixed effects model with three dummy variables for the countries. Following Enders and Tofighi (2007), all predictors were centered on the country mean. This removes all between-cluster variation from the predictor and yields a "pure" estimate of the pooled within-cluster (individual-level) regression coefficient. After estimating all models on the pooled dataset, we reestimated these models on the country-specific datasets to explore whether there were interesting country differences in the patterns of the level-1 predictors (Appendix E).

The analyses were preregistered (https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/QHEG2). As a result of reviewer feedback, we deviated somewhat from the preregistered plan. A full description of the model specification of the preregistered analyses is nevertheless provided in Appendix C, together with all results. For ease of presentation and consistency with the focus of this paper, we present a selection of these models in the main text.

In Model 0, we included all social background characteristics. This baseline model is used to evaluate (1) hypotheses H1a and H1b and (2) the added value of more complex models. In Model 1a, we added an interaction term between education and education-based identity. This model tests whether identifying with people who have a similar level of education moderates the relationships with our dependent variables for those with and without higher education (Hypothesis 2a).

To test Hypothesis 3 and put Hypothesis 2a to a strict empirical test, in Model 2a, we added the two beliefs that resist social change (i.e., economic system justification, anti-egalitarianism) and L-R orientation. We entered these attitudes one by one. We also specified models in which we tested interaction terms between education and these attitudes. Because these analyses did not provide additional insights, we report them in Appendix C.

As it is unclear to what extent education-based identification differs from identification based on other aspects of one's socioeconomic position, we compared the results obtained regarding education-based identity with those when income-based identity is included (Models 1b and 2b; H2c and H3).

Our research relies on cross-sectional data. This might raise questions regarding the causal ordering of the variables included in the analysis. Our analytic models are based on predictions derived from Social Identity Theory, and experimental research inspired by SIT has produced strong experimental evidence that social identities cause changes in attitudes and behavior (Smith & Hogg, 2008; Spears, 2021). Moreover, a growing literature documents that people are aware of educational differences and the dominance of the higher educated in society and politics (Noordzij et al., 2023; Spruyt et al., 2016; van Noord et al., 2023). This paper aims to assess the consequences of such an awareness. We focus not simply on identities but more specifically on how identities moderate differences in education and subjective income. This is not to deny that the reverse pattern, whereby attitudes become a basis for a shared identity, may also exist (as exemplified by the Rejection-Identification model). Identity processes are mutually reinforcing processes rather than unidirectional phenomena (Turner et al., 1987). Similarly, the attitudinal controls are added to the models to (1) put our key hypotheses to a strict empirical test (readers can also focus on Models 1a and 1b if they do not accept this reasoning) and (2) demonstrate that elitism is not a stand-alone phenomenon but rather embedded in a broader worldview.

# RESULTS

The frequency distribution for the items measuring elitism reveals three interesting features (Table 1). First, a considerable proportion of the population warned against placing "the

14679221, 2025, 6, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/pops.70010 by Uva Universiteitsbibliotheek, Wiley Online Library on [19/02/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

**TABLE 1** Frequency distribution items tapping into support for elitism.

| | Sample | % disagree | | % agree |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Concern about the role of "the people" in politics | | | | |
| Ordinary people don't have the necessary knowledge to determine policies | Total | 31.8 | 33.1 | 35.1 |
| | NL | 27.9 | 36.6 | 35.5 |
| | DK | 36.6 | 31.7 | 31.7 |
| | GR | 31.1 | 32.7 | 36.2 |
| | UK | 31.7 | 31.4 | 36.9 |
| It may harm society if we directly translate peoples political preferences into policies | Total | 15.4 | 46.7 | 37.9 |
| | NL | 17.7 | 41.7 | 40.6 |
| | DK | 12.4 | 50.5 | 37.1 |
| | GR | 19.1 | 45.8 | 35.0 |
| | UK | 12.4 | 48.8 | 38.8 |
| Blindly following the will of the people may lead society in the wrong direction | Total | 15.9 | 33.7 | 50.4 |
| | NL | 17.2 | 30.8 | 52.0 |
| | DK | 12.9 | 31.7 | 55.4 |
| | GR | 20.8 | 37.9 | 41.3 |
| | UK | 12.8 | 34.5 | 52.7 |
| Anti-people elitism | | | | |
| Politicians should lead the people not follow them | Total | 27.2 | 34.8 | 38.0 |
| | NL | 27.5 | 37.6 | 34.9 |
| | DK | 29.0 | 35.4 | 35.6 |
| | GR | 32.8 | 32.2 | 35.0 |
| | UK | 19.5 | 34.2 | 46.3 |
| The most important decisions in society should be taken by elected politicians not by ordinary people | Total | 27.4 | 36.4 | 36.1 |
| | NL | 26.1 | 37.3 | 36.6 |
| | DK | 21.2 | 35.0 | 43.8 |
| | GR | 35.8 | 35.9 | 28.3 |
| | UK | 26.6 | 37.5 | 35.9 |
| Political leaders should make decisions according to their best judgment, not the will of the people | Total | 46.8 | 33.3 | 19.9 |
| | NL | 39.2 | 39.3 | 21.5 |
| | DK | 47.8 | 30.9 | 21.3 |
| | GR | 63.1 | 26.2 | 10.7 |
| | UK | 37.2 | 36.7 | 26.1 |

*Note*: Items judged on a 1–5 Likert scale. Outer categories collapsed for presentation (1–2, 3, 4–5).

people" too centrally in contemporary politics. A majority (50.4%) agreed (completely or slightly) that *blindly following the will of the people may lead society in the wrong direction*. More than 35% agreed that *ordinary people do not have the necessary knowledge to determine policies*, so that directly translating people's political preferences into policies may harm society. Second, the items measuring the procedural subdimension of elitism also received considerable (albeit lower) support. Some 38% of the respondents agreed that *politicians should lead rather than follow the people*, and about 20% endorsed the idea that *political leaders should make decisions according to their best judgment, not the will of the people.* These numbers show that elitism is not a marginal phenomenon. Third, there are also clear

14679221, 2025, 6, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/pops.70010 by Uva Universiteitsbibliotheek, Wiley Online Library on [19/02/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

**TABLE 2** Results of regression analysis on elitism in four countries (United Kingdom, Denmark, The Netherlands, and Greece).

| | Model 0[a] | | Model 1a[a] | | Model 1b[a] | | Model 2a[a] | | Model 2b[a] | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | B | (S.E.)[b] | B | (S.E.) | B | (S.E.) | B | (S.E.) | B | (S.E.) |
| *(Centered means: Centered on the country M)* | | | | | | | | | | |
| Constant | −.002 | .007 | .000 | .007 | −.001 | .007 | −.001 | .007 | −.002 | .007 |
| Gender (1 = man) | .021 | .005*** | .020 | .005*** | .020 | .005*** | .017 | .005*** | .016 | .005*** |
| Age (centered) | −.003 | .012 | .002 | .012 | −.001 | .012 | −.002 | .012 | −.005 | .012 |
| Education (0 = not higher educated) | .027 | .005*** | .022 | .005*** | .026 | .005*** | .026 | .005*** | .029 | .005*** |
| Subjective income (centered) | .079 | .010*** | .075 | .010*** | .078 | .010*** | .048 | .010*** | .050 | .010*** |
| Urban | .009 | .006 | .008 | .006 | .009 | .006 | .010 | .006(*) | .011 | .006(*) |
| Identification with education (centered) | | | .031 | .013* | – | – | .014 | .013 | – | – |
| Identification with subjective income | | | – | – | .026 | .010* | – | – | .029 | .034 |
| Economic system justification (centered) | | | | | | | .137 | .012*** | .142 | .012*** |
| Anti-egalitarianism (centered) | | | | | | | .056 | .013*** | .056 | .013*** |
| Left–Right Orientation (centered) | | | | | | | −.026 | .012* | −.026 | .012* |
| Interaction terms | | | | | | | | | | |
| Higher educated × Identification with Education | | | .070 | .021*** | – | – | .066 | .021*** | – | – |
| Subjective income × Identification with Income | | | – | – | .053 | .035 | – | – | .029 | .034 |
| Adjusted $R^2$ | .044 | | .052 | | .045 | | .088 | | .083 | |

*Note*: Cell entries (B) are unstandardized regression coefficients with their standard errors (S.E.).

[a]Fixed effect models with country-levels entered as dummy variables. For ease of presentation, we do not report the coefficients for the country dummies.

[b]Significance levels: ***$p < .001$; **$p < .010$; *$p < .050$; (*)$p < .100$.

14679221, 2025, 6, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/pops.70010 by Uva Universiteitsbibliotheek, Wiley Online Library on [19/02/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

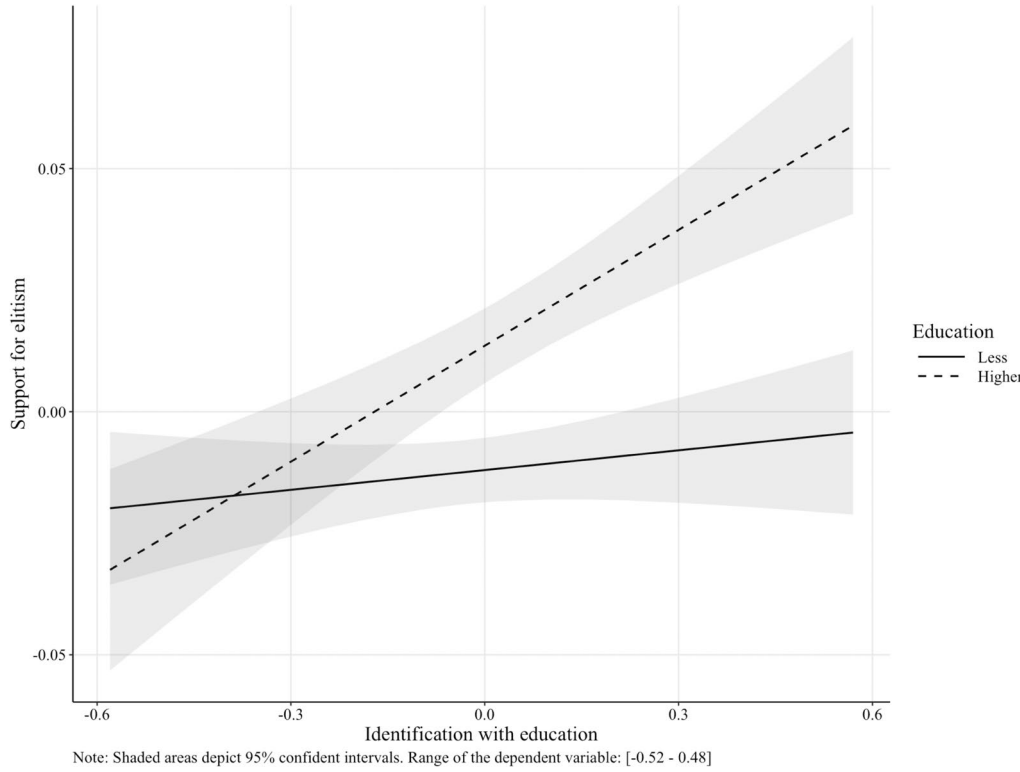


**FIGURE 1** Interaction plot between education and education-based identity for support for elitism.

country differences ($\eta = .137$, $p < .001$), with support for elitism being highest in the United Kingdom and lowest in Greece.

In the following sections, we examine (social) variation in elitism, the main focus of this paper. Model 0 included only the socio-demographic variables (Table 2). As predicted, the higher educated held a more elitist view on politics when compared to the less educated ($B = .027$, $p < .001$; supports Hypothesis 1a), although the difference was a small one. Moreover, the examination of the country-specific results (Appendix B) showed that this general pattern only held for Denmark ($B = .031$, $p < .001$; Table D.1) and the Netherlands ($B = .049$, $p < .001$; Table NL.1). In the United Kingdom, the difference was only significant at the 10% level ($B = .019$; $p = .065$; Table UK.1). No educational differences in support for elitism were observed in Greece ($B = .002$, $p = .891$; Table GR.1). However, the absence of educational differences in support for elitism in Greece does not imply that elitist attitudes were unrelated to social differences. Indeed, in Greece ($B = .102$, $p < .001$; Table GR.1) (as well as in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, B's .068 and .130 respectively, $p$'s $< .001$), elitism was higher among respondents with higher subjective income. No significant relationship between subjective income and support for elitism was found in Denmark ($B = .026$, $p = .148$). These observations provide a first indication that even though both subjective income and education are indicators of people's more general socioeconomic position, they may operate differently when it concerns sociopolitical attitudes, *and* that this pattern varies between contexts. Gender predicted support for elitism, with women supporting elitism more than men ($B = .021$, $p < .001$). No urban/rural or age differences were found.

In Model 1a, we added education-based identity and its interaction term with educational attainment. We found a statistically significant interaction ($B = .070$; $p < .001$), indicating that

14679221, 2025, 6, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/pops.70010 by Uva Universiteitsbibliotheek, Wiley Online Library on [19/02/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

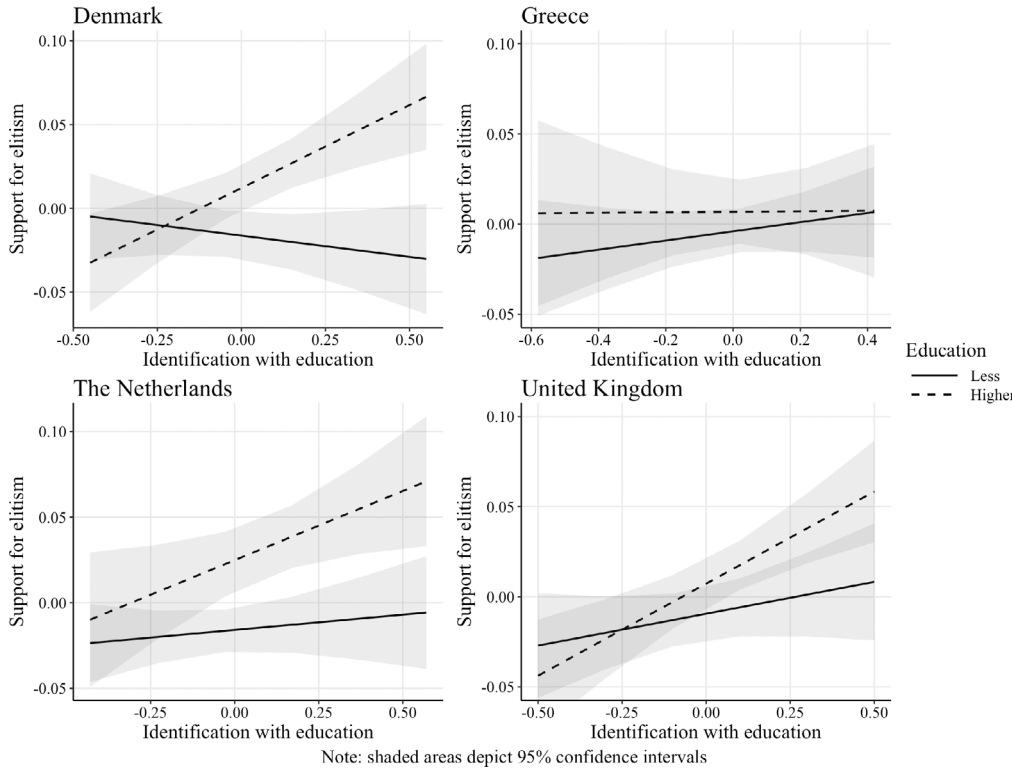


**FIGURE 2** Interaction plot between education and education-based identity for support for elitism in four countries.

educational differences in support for elitism were larger among people who identify with others who have a similar educational level, supporting Hypothesis 2a (see Figure 1). The simple effects indicated that among the less educated, education-based identity was only weakly related to elitism ($B = .029$, $p = .026$). The higher educated, on the other hand, reported more support for elitism the more they identified with people who have a similar level of education ($B = .101$, $p < .001$). This education-identity moderation is consistent with SIT and shows that education-based groups have the potential to become the object of intergroup processes.

However, country-specific results revealed that this interaction effect was found in Denmark ($B = .124$; $p = .001$; Table DN.1), the Netherlands ($B = .071$; $p = .059$; Table NL.1) and the United Kingdom ($B = .065$; $p = .097$; Table UK.1), but not in Greece ($B = -.017$; $p = .736$; Table GR.1) (Figure 2).

This pattern is in line with cross-national differences in the development of schooled society and the emergence of diploma democracy. Indeed, the education-identity moderation is strongest in Denmark, the country that has experienced a sharp increase in the level of education of ministers during the most recent decades. The education-moderation pattern was absent in Greece, which scores lowest on all indicators of the development of schooled society.

To get a better grip on this education–identity interaction, we reestimated all models assessing whether income-based identity moderates the effects of subjective income. This turned out not to be the case ($B = .053$, $p = .133$; Model 1b), rejecting Hypothesis 2b. Again, this underscores both the importance and particularity of education-based identity over subjective income-based identity.

In Model 2, we added economic system justification, anti-egalitarianism, and L-R orientation (Table 2). Support for elitism was higher among citizens who justify the status quo

14679221, 2025, 6, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/pops.70010 by Uva Universiteitsbibliotheek, Wiley Online Library on [19/02/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

($B = .137$, $p < .001$) and those who oppose egalitarian measures ($B = .056$, $p < .001$), supporting H3a and H3b. This indicates that elitist attitudes are embedded in a broader resistance to (societal) change.

For L-R orientation, the effect parameter is negative, indicating that after controlling for the anti-egalitarianism and system justification beliefs, people who self-identified as left-wing reported slightly more support for elitism. Inspection of the country-specific results, however, showed that this pattern was much stronger in the Netherlands ($B = -.101$, $p < .001$) when compared to the United Kingdom and Denmark ($B$'s $= -.058$ and $-.040$, respectively). Moreover, in Greece, even after taking the conservative beliefs into account, people who self-identified as right-wing showed more concern about the role of "the people" in politics ($B = .098$; $p < .001$; Table GR.1). This is interesting, given that Greece is the only country in our sample with a strong left-wing populist party. These findings suggest that there is a backlash effect, such that in countries where populism is predominantly right wing, people on the left support elitism more, and vice versa. Support for this interpretation is found when adding the quadratic term for L-R orientation. Neither in the sample with fixed effects for the countries ($B = -.001$, S.E. $= .037$, $p = .975$) nor in the country-specific samples (Denmark: $B = .044$, $p = .500$; Greece: $B = -.110$, $p = .105$; the Netherlands: $B = -.050$, $p = .554$; United Kingdom: $B = .086$, $p = .288$) did this term reach statistical significance. This makes sense in view of the fact that in each country that we study, populism is predominantly left- or right-wing. In each country, people who oppose populism the most will not only oppose populism but also the "host" ideology.

Interestingly, including people's political attitudes did not affect the moderation pattern between education and education-based identity (compare Models 1a and 2a; Table 2), suggesting that these variables relate to concern about the role of "the people" in politics through independent mechanisms.

Finally, we explored country-level differences (some of which have already been discussed; see Appendix B). Overall, the results for Greece deviated substantially from those obtained for Denmark, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom. In Greece, support for elitism was largely unrelated to education-based differences. It was, however, clearly related to differences in subjective income ($B = .102$; $p = .011$; Table GR.1) and also to economic system justification ($B = .231$; $p < .001$; Table GR.1). Moreover, whereas we found no education–identity moderation pattern in Greece, there was a significant subjective income–identity interaction term ($B = .228$, $p < .001$). Among high subjective income individuals in Greece, identification with their income group increased support for elitism. Based on the overall level of explained variance, social differences in elitist attitudes were larger in Greece than in the other countries in the analysis (Adjusted $R^2 = 14.5\%$; Table GR.1), mainly due to the large effect parameter for economic system justification. Taken together, the results showed some fascinating specific country differences, especially concerning the role of social identities associated with education versus subjective income.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The success of populism in Western societies has rendered the category "the people" salient in contemporary politics. Little is known, however, about a possible backlash among people who do not support the people-centrism component of populism: Are they concerned about the centrality of "the people" in contemporary politics and support elitism? In this study, we engage with an emerging literature on elitist attitudes and link this to the literature on intergroup dynamics with a specific focus on education-based identities. Data from four European countries show that people occupying a dominant position in society (i.e., the higher educated, those with higher subjective income) reported more support for elitism. Elitist attitudes turned out to be embedded in a broader worldview that represents the status quo as fair and opposes

14679221, 2025, 6, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/pops.70010 by Uva Universiteitsbibliotheek, Wiley Online Library on [19/02/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

measures aimed at increasing social equality. Importantly, education-based identity amplifies educational differences in support of elitism. Our findings have several implications and raise new questions for both the emerging literature on elitist attitudes among the public and the literature on education-based group dynamics.

We found broad public support for elitism, which corroborates findings from Bertsou and Caramani (2022) and Fernández-Vásquez et al. (2023) about support for elitism and a more technocratic view of politics. Thus, in an era when populist attitudes command strong support (Akkerman et al., 2014), there is also considerable support for attitudes that are in some ways radically opposed to populism. We know that the relationship between populism and elitist and/or technocratic views on politics is both theoretically and empirically complex (Caramani, 2017). The relatively strong public support for both in contemporary societies mirrors at the voter level what Bickerton and Accetti (2021, p. 3) have described at the party level. Over time, the focus of political parties on representing specific values and interests within society (and thus segments of citizens in society) has been replaced by a logic that starts from an unmediated conception of "the common good." In elitism, this conception of the common good is often linked to a technocratic view of "the truth," whereas in populism, it is linked to the monolithic conception of the "will of the people." Thus, although elitism and populism differ fundamentally regarding the *content* of politics (i.e., the goals), they agree on the *process* in that they share a longing for an unmediated and uncompromised form of politics. Kuusela and Kantola (2023) refer to this as *unpolitical solutionism*, a plea for simple solutions that are presented as self-evident but that one has not the courage to execute. This common political *process preference* explains why both populist attitudes and elitism can attract considerable support among the public at large. It also implies that in many Western democracies today, key democratic principles are challenged both by populist *and* elitist views. Therefore, it is remarkable that populist attitudes have attracted so much more scholarly attention when compared to elitist attitudes. This is especially true because our study shows that support for elitism is embedded in a broader worldview and intergroup processes. Elitist attitudes are not an "isolated" phenomenon.

Further research should focus on studying the behavioral consequences of elitist attitudes. In response to the success of populism and to feelings of political discontent, for example, many initiatives for democratic innovation have been proposed. Along with doubts about whether citizens are genuinely interested in getting involved in politics (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002) and specific worries that such initiatives might increase social differences in political involvement (Holdo, 2015), the present study adds another concern: Some people might be opposed to involving all people in politics. In the Appendix, we present additional findings suggesting that elitism is related to opposition to democratic innovations when they lead to binding (rather than consultative) results.

Regarding educational differences, our analysis contributes to an emerging literature arguing that research on the persistent educational differences in (political) thought and behavior would benefit from studying these differences from an intergroup perspective (e.g., Kuppens et al., 2018; Noordzij et al., 2023; Sainz & Vásquez, 2023; Stubager, 2009). This perspective implies that concerns about the growth of "diploma democracy" should not be confined to the less educated. If we want to understand intergroup conflict, both sides should be studied (Noordzij et al., 2023). In that context, our study makes two contributions.

First, our results align with research (Kuppens et al., 2018; Sainz & Vásquez, 2023; van Noord et al., 2023) showing that although the higher educated are often found to be more tolerant toward certain groups than the less educated, they nevertheless show clear outgroup hostility regarding the less educated and/or in-group bias toward the higher educated. Our findings extend that research by showing that (1) in several Western European countries, the higher educated express more support for elitism than their less educated counterparts, and (2) this tendency is stronger among the higher educated who identify more strongly with those

14679221, 2025, 6, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/pops.70010 by Uva Universiteitsbibliotheek, Wiley Online Library on [19/02/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

who have a similar level of education. The latter finding shows that educational differences in sociopolitical attitudes are associated not only with differences in political knowledge/sophistication or differences in social network positions but also with intergroup processes and social identities (Bornschier et al., 2021; Spruyt et al., 2016; Stubager, 2009).

The general pattern observed for subjective income-based differences was similar to that for education but differed notably between countries. One of the most striking differences was that between Denmark and Greece, two countries that differ strongly in terms of the development of schooled society and/or diploma democracy. In Denmark, we found a strong education–identity interaction but no income–identity moderation. In Greece, we found exactly the opposite pattern. In our analysis, we deliberately used a subjective measure for income. Although a more detailed measure for objective income might provide a finer grained picture and/or yield stronger results, our findings clearly suggest that the relevance of both education and (subjective) income varies across contexts. Our data do not enable us to fully explain or disentangle the roles played by the supply side of politics (e.g., the stronger presence of left-wing populism in Greece, and the fact that left-wing populism is often based on a more bottom-up movement) or the economic and institutional context. What the results do show is that (1) education- and income-based group processes should not be automatically assumed to work in similar ways, and (2) research on education-based group identities should be expanded in scope.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We acknowledge the reviewers for their valuable comments on earlier versions of this paper.

## ORCID

*Bram Spruyt* https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0573-724X
*Didier Caluwaerts* https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1641-0886
*Céline Darnon* https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2613-689X
*Matthew Easterbrook* https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9353-5957
*Leandros Kavadias* https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4985-8396
*Rebekka Kesberg* https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2240-2401
*Toon Kuppens* https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7056-4288
*Antony Manstead* https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7540-2096
*Lien Smets* https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0737-8578
*Jochem Van Noord* https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2351-0260

## REFERENCES

Akkerman, A., Mudde, C., & Zaslove, A. (2014). How populist are the people? Measuring populist attitudes in voters. *Comparative Political Studies, 47*(9), 1324–1353.

Badiou, A., Bourdieu, P., Butler, J., Didi-Huberman, G., Khiari, S., & Rancière, J. (2016). *What is a people?* Columbia University Press.

Baker, D. P. (2014). *The schooled society. The educational transformation of global culture*. Stanford University Press.

Barr, R. R. (2009). Populists, outsiders and anti-establishment politics. *Party Politics, 15*(1), 29–48.

Bell, D. A. (2015). *The China model. Political meritocracy and the limits of democracy*. Princeton University Press.

Bertsou, E., & Caramani, D. (2022). People haven't had enough of experts: Technocratic attitudes among citizens in nine European democracies. *American Journal of Political Science, 66*(1), 5–23.

Bickerton, C., & Accetti, C. I. (2021). *Technopopulism: The new logic of democratic politics*. Oxford University Press.

Bornschier, S., Häusermann, S., Zollinger, D., & Colombo, C. (2021). How "us" and "them" relates to voting behavior: Social structure, social identities, and electoral choice. *Comparative Political Studies, 54*(12), 2087–2122.

Bovens, M. A. P., & Wille, A. (2017). *Diploma democracy. The rise of political meritocracy*. Oxford University Press.

Brennan, J. (2016). *Against democracy*. Princeton University Press.

Canovan, M. (1999). Trust the people! Populism and the two faces of democracy. *Political Studies, 47*(1), 2–16.

Caramani, D. (2017). Will vs. reason: The populist and technocratic forms of political representation and their critique to party government. *American Political Science Review, 111*(1), 54–67.

14679221, 2025, 6, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/pops.70010 by Uva Universiteitsbibliotheek, Wiley Online Library on [19/02/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

Davern, M., Rodin, H., Beebe, T. J., & Call, K. T. (2005). The effect of income question design in health surveys on family income, poverty and eligibility estimate. *Health Services Research, 40*(5), 1534–1552.
Diani, M. (1996). Linking mobilization frames and political opportunities: Insights from regional populism. *American Sociological Review, 61*(6), 1053–1069.
DiMaggio, P. (2012). Sociological perspectives on the face-to-face enactment of class distinctions. In S. Fiske & H. R. Markus (Eds.), *Facing social class: How societal rank influences interaction* (pp. 15–38). Russell Sage Foundation.
Enders, C. K., & Tofighi, D. (2007). Centering predictor variables in cross-sectional multilevel models: A new look at an old issue. *Psychological Methods, 12*(2), 121–138.
Fernández-Vásquez, P., Lavezzola, S., & Ramiro, L. (2023). The technocratic side of populist attitudes: Evidence from the Spanish case. *West European Politics, 46*(1), 73–99.
Font, N., Graziano, P., & Tsakatika, M. (2021). Varieties of inclusionary populism? SYRIZA, Podemos and the five star movement. *Government and Opposition, 56*(1), 163–183.
Gidron, N., & Hall, P. A. (2020). Populism as a problem of social integration. *Comparative Political Studies, 53*(7), 1027–1059.
Hibbing, J. R., & Theiss-Morse, E. (2002). *Stealth democracy. Americans' belief about how government should work*. Cambridge University Press.
Hogg, M. A., Hohmann, Z. P., & Rivera, J. E. (2008). Why do people join groups? Three motivational accounts from social psychology. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass, 2*(3), 1269–1280.
Holdo, M. (2015). Strategies of deliberation: Bourdieu and struggles over legitimate positions. *Political Studies, 63*(5), 1103–1119.
Iakhnis, E., Rathbun, B., Reifler, J., & Scotto, T. J. (2018). Populist referendum: Was 'Brexit' an expression of nativist and anti-elitist sentiment? *Research & Politics, 5*(2), 2053168018773964. https://doi.org/10.1177/2053168018773964
Jackman, M. R. (1994). *The velvet glove: Paternalism and conflict in gender, class, and race relations*. University of California Press.
Jackson, J. W. (1993). Realistic group conflict theory: A review and evaluation of the theoretical and empirical literature. *The Psychological Record, 43*(3), 395–413.
Jost, J. T. (2020). *A theory of system justification*. Harvard University Press.
Jost, J. T., & Thompson, E. P. (2000). Group-based dominance and opposition to equality as independent predictors of self-esteem, ethnocentrism, and social policy attitudes among African Americans and European Americans. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 36*(3), 209–232.
Kavadias, L., Spruyt, B., & Kuppens, T. (2024). Religious life in schooled society? A global study of the relationship between schooling and religiosity in 76 countries. *International Journal of Comparative Sociology, 65,* 247–270. https://doi.org/10.1177/00207152231177238
Kuppens, T., Spears, R., Manstead, A. S. R., Spruyt, B., & Easterbrook, M. J. (2018). Educationism and the irony of meritocracy: Negative attitudes of higher educated people towards the less educated. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 76,* 429–447.
Kuusela, H., & Kantola, A. (2023). Unpolitical solutionism: Wealth elite sentiments against democracy and politics. *British Journal of Sociology, 74*(4), 566–580.
Laclau, E. (2005). *On populist reason*. Verso.
Livingstone, A. G., Sweetman, J., & Haslam, S. A. (2021). Conflict, what conflict? Evidence that playing down "conflict" can be a weapon of choice for high-status groups. *European Journal of Social Psychology, 51*(4–5), 659–674.
Noordzij, K., de Koster, W., & van der Waal, J. (2023). Explaining the educational gradient in trust in politicians: Video-vignette survey experiment. *West European Politics, 47*(4), 784–812.
Postmes, T., Haslam, S. A., & Jans, L. (2013). A single-item measure of social identification: Reliability, validity, and utility. *British Journal of Social Psychology, 52*(4), 597–617.
Rickardsson, J. (2021). The urban–rural divide in radical right populist support: The role of resident's characteristics, urbanization trends and public service supply. *The Annals of Regional Science, 67*(1), 211–242.
Sainz, M., & Vásquez, A. (2023). Not all ballots should be considered equal: How education-based dehumanization undermines the democratic contract. *British Journal of Social Psychology, 63*(2), 658–680.
Sandel, M. J. (2020). *The tyranny of merit. What's become of the common good?* Allen Lane.
Sayer, A. (2005). *The moral significance of class*. Cambridge University Press.
Schakel, W., & Van Der Pas, D. (2021). Degrees of influence: Educational inequalities in policy representation. *European Journal of Political Research, 60*(2), 418–437.
Sidanius, J., & Pratto, F. (1999). *Social dominance. An intergroup theory of social hierarchy and oppression*. Cambridge University Press.
Smeyers, P., & Depaepe, M. (2011). *The educationalization of social problems*. Springer.
Smith, J. R., & Hogg, M. A. (2008). Social identity and attitudes. In W. D. Crano & R. Prislin (Eds.), *Attitudes and attitude change* (pp. 337–360). Psychology Press.

14679221, 2025, 6, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/pops.70010 by Uva Universiteitsbibliotheek, Wiley Online Library on [19/02/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

Spears, R. (2021). Social influence and group identity. *Annual Review of Psychology, 72,* 367–390.
Spruyt, B., Keppens, G., & Van Droogenbroeck, F. (2016). Who supports populism and what attracts people to it? *Political Research Quarterly, 69*(2), 335–346.
Spruyt, B., & Kuppens, T. (2015). Education-based thinking and acting? Towards an identity perspective for studying education differentials in public opinion and political participation. *European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology, 2*(3-4), 291–312.
Steiner, N. D., Schimpf, C. H., & Wuttke, A. (2023). Left behind and united by populism? Populism's multiple roots in feeling of lacking societal recognition. *Polit Vierteljahresschr, 64,* 107–132.
Stubager, R. (2009). Education-based group identity and consciousness in the authoritarian-libertarian value conflict. *European Journal of Political Research, 48*(2), 204–233.
Taggart, P. (2002). Populism and the pathology of representative politics. In Y. Mény & Y. Surel (Eds.), *Democracies and the populist challenge* (pp. 62–80). Palgrave.
Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1986). The social identity theory of intergroup behavior. In S. Worchel & W. G. Austin (Eds.), *Psychology of intergroup relations* (pp. 7–24). Nelson Hall.
Turner, J. C., Hogg, M. A., Oakes, P. J., Reicher, S. D., & Wetherell, M. S. (1987). *Rediscovering the social group: A self-categorization theory*. Basil Blackwell.
Van Kessel, S. (2015). *Populist parties in Europe: Agents of discontent?* Palgrave Macmillan.
van Noord, J., Kuppens, T., Spruyt, B., & Spears, R. (2023). When and why people prefer higher educated politicians: Ingroup bias, deference, and resistance. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 49*(4), 585–599.
van Noord, J., Spruyt, B., Kuppens, T., & Spears, R. (2019). Education-based status in comparative perspective: The legitimization of education as a basis for social stratification. *Social Forces, 98*(2), 649–676.
Zhang, A. (2018). New findings on key factors influencing the UK's referendum on leaving the EU. *World Development, 102,* 304–314.

## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

**How to cite this article:** Spruyt, B., Caluwaerts, D., Darnon, C., Easterbrook, M., Kavadias, L., Kesberg, R., Kuppens, T., Manstead, A., Smets, L., & Van Noord, J. (2025). Backlash among the dominant: Assessing support for elitism in four European countries. *Political Psychology*, *46*, 1768–1787. https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.70010

14679221, 2025, 6, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/pops.70010 by Uva Universiteitsbibliotheek, Wiley Online Library on [19/02/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License