To whom are “the people” opposed? Conceptualizing and measuring citizens’ populist attitudes as a multidimensional construct

Hameleers, M.; de Vreese, C.H.

DOI
10.1080/17457289.2018.1532434

Publication date
2020

Document Version
Final published version

Published in
Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties

License
CC BY-NC-ND

Citation for published version (APA):
To whom are “the people” opposed? Conceptualizing and measuring citizens’ populist attitudes as a multidimensional construct

Michael Hameleers and Claes H. de Vreese

Amsterdam School of Communication Research (ASCoR), Universiteit van Amsterdam, Amsterdam, Netherlands

ABSTRACT
Previous research has predominantly measured populist attitudes as a one-dimensional concept, tapping into the distinction between the ordinary people and the culprit elites. With growing differentiation of populist viewpoints across the globe, this unidimensional approach may not reflect the multifaceted reality of the people’s populism. Most importantly, albeit paramount in right-wing populist rhetoric, exclusionist perceptions of others threatening the monocultural nation of the people are typically not captured in one-dimensional conceptualizations. To assess more precisely how populist attitudes are structured, we collected original survey data (N = 809) among a representative sample of Dutch citizens. Using Multidimensional Scaling and Confirmatory Factor Analysis, we propose a two-dimensional structure: anti-establishment and exclusionism. This study further demonstrates how salient these different populist attitudes are among which voters.

Populism has received extensive attention in the scientific literature. In trying to decipher the concept, extant research has predominantly focused on populist ideology, style or discourse by analysing the degree of populism of political parties, their manifestos, and media content (e.g. Jagers and Walgrave 2007; Rooduijn 2014). To better understand how these populist ideas communicated on the supply-side resonate with attitudes held by the people on the demand-side, this paper aims to theoretically and empirically investigate the dimensional structure and antecedents of populist attitudes. Doing so, we can explore the extent to which populist political parties actually tap into an attitudinal structure held by the electorate (Zaller, 1992). Moreover, in...
line with issue voting literature, the precise mapping of citizens’ populist attitudes may explain why some people vote for specific populist parties whereas others oppose them (e.g. Himmelweit, Humphreys, and Jaeger 1985).

In lieu of a shared definition of populism, scholars at least have reached consensus that it is a relational concept. The ideational or thin-ideological core of populism revolves around the construction of a homogenous in-group, referred to as the “pure” or “ordinary” people. This in-group is framed in opposition to the “corrupt” elites. These elites are accused of failing to represent the people (Canovan 1999; Mudde 2004; Taggart 2000). Recently, scholars have started to measure populism as individual-level attitudes (e.g. Akkerman, Mudde, and Zaslove 2014; Hawkins, Riding, and Mudde 2012; Schulz et al. 2018; Van Hauwaert, Schimpf, and Azevedo 2016). Extending these measurement efforts, we explicitly distinguish between a vertical and horizontal out-group perceived in opposition to the pure, ordinary people. Hence, the ordinary people as an in-group can be juxtaposed to the corrupt elites that allow other groups in society to profit, but can additionally be perceived in opposition to societal out-groups that are themselves blamed for the injustice experienced by the in-group (Mols 2012; Polletta and Jasper 2001). Using this conceptualization, we extend beyond the ideational approach by measuring populist attitudes as social identity interpretation frames that exclude different out-groups. By incorporating citizens’ perceptions of an antagonistic relationship between the ordinary people and culprit societal out-groups on a vertical and horizontal level, this paper aims to expand measures proposed by Akkerman, Mudde, and Zaslove (2014) and Hawkins, Riding, and Mudde (2012). In doing so, we follow recent approaches that have defined populist attitudes as multidimensional constructs (e.g. Schulz et al. 2018; Van Hauwaert, Schimpf, and Azevedo 2016).

Our proposed conceptualization contributes to our understanding of the demand-side of populism by specifying the people’s perceived divide between “their” people and culpable others. We hereby contribute to the understanding of what divides and unites citizens with populist attitudes on different dimensions. As party choice is found to be driven by social identity (e.g. Bartle and Bellucci 2009), our conceptualization should contribute to a better understanding of populist voting based on identitarian considerations.

To investigate whether the proposed multidimensional structure holds on the demand-side of voters, this paper draws on survey data collected among a representative sample of citizens ($N = 809$). Using multidimensional scaling and confirmatory factor analysis, we found that populist attitudes are essentially structured by two dimensions: anti-establishment and exclusionism. Populist attitudes can empirically be distinguished from exclusionary attitudes. Additionally, we explored the common and differential foundations of populist attitudes on the distinguished dimensions, which sheds important light on the question whether citizens with populist attitudes positioned on the two
core dimensions are appealed differently to issue positions typically associated with populism on the left and right.

**Mapping populist attitudes: a social identity approach**

It has been argued that social identity forms a key component of populism (e.g. Busby et al, forthcoming). The psychological mechanism underlying populist attitudes can be understood as identification with the in-group (i.e. the ordinary people) juxtaposed to out-groups (i.e. the culprit others). Populism thus cultivates identity by contrasting the ordinary or pure people to culpable out-groups (Busby et al., forthcoming). This is in line with the premises of social identity framing (Polletta and Jasper 2001; Van Zomeren, Postmes, and Spears 2008). Specifically, social identity frames emphasize the people’s perceived injustice in the face of threat, and mark the boundary between the in-group and contenders that pose a threat to this in-group (Polletta and Jasper 2001). In populism, these “contenders” are explicitly blamed for the injustice experienced by the in-group. This connects to the Manichean outlook of populism (Van Hauwaert, Schimpf, Azevedo 2016).

These theoretical premises can be extrapolated to the conceptualization of two dimensions of populist attitudes: anti-establishment and exclusionism. Here, we need to emphasize the distinction between left-wing and right-wing populism versus inclusionary and exclusionary populism. Left-wing and right-wing populism relate to issue positions that may resonate with the “thin” populist ideology (Mudde 2004). The dynamics of inclusion and exclusion relate to the composition of the populist divide. Vertical out-groups are “excluded” in anti-establishment populist attitudes, and horizontal out-groups are excluded in exclusionist populist attitudes.

**Anti-establishment populist attitudes**

The first dimension conceptualized in this paper, anti-establishment, marks the opposition between the good ordinary people and the culprit elites (Akkerman, Mudde, and Zaslove 2014; Jagers and Walgrave 2007). This first dimension is in line with extant conceptualizations of populist attitudes proposed and validated by Akkerman, Mudde, and Zaslove (2014) and Hawkins, Riding, and Mudde (2012). Anti-establishment populist attitudes consist of two necessary components: (1) references to the ordinary or pure people and (2) the construction of the elites as a culpable out-group that threatens the ordinary people.

*The people.* The ordinary or pure people are referred to as the in-group that is currently not represented in political decision-making (Canovan 1999; Mudde 2004). Hence, this in-group is cultivated by stressing the neglect of their voice, and the centrality of their monolithic will. Anti-establishment
populist attitudes capture the people’s perception of being silenced by politicians, and the belief that their voice should be central in democracy.

**The elites.** Generally, there are two types of elitist enemies that can be perceived as threatening the people from above: the *political* establishment (e.g. the government) and non-political elites (e.g. the economic elites). The perceived antagonism between the people and the political establishment corresponds to perceived distrust in mainstream politicians who are not acting on behalf of the ordinary people (Mudde 2004). This oppositional stance entails the perception of being silenced by the hegemony: the politicians reside in their ivory tower far-removed from the problems experienced by the ordinary people on the street (e.g. Mudde 2004; Taggart 2000).

Anti-establishment populist attitudes may also involve the people’s opposition to non-political elites, most saliently the economic elites that are assumed to hinder the ordinary people’s well-being (Ramiro 2017). Left-wing populist parties, for example, argue that social resources should be accessible to everyone in need. However, this access is blocked by economic elites, the rich minority and large corporations that are not fairly redistributing the nation’s wealth among the ordinary, hardworking people. Taken together, anti-establishment populist attitudes tap into the people’s opposition towards self-interested, corrupt elites who are not acting on behalf of, but rather against, the will of the ordinary people they should represent.

**Exclusionist populist attitudes**

Populist actors do not only blame the elites, they also frequently accuse immigrants or other out-groups of profiting from the in-group’s resources (e.g. Oesch 2008). On the demand-side of voters, the attitudinal base of populism is based on the people’s perceived divide between their in-group of ordinary, pure people and culpable others that threaten them from above (the elites) and within (societal out-groups). We can apply the same mechanisms of identification and the “constitutive outside” (e.g. Derrida 2005) underlying anti-establishment populist attitudes to conceptualize *exclusionist* populist attitudes. In the face of injustice, power discrepancies and perceived crisis situations, the ordinary people can thus also be contrasted to horizontal out-groups forwarded as credible scapegoats (also see e.g. Aalberg et al. 2017; Jagers and Walgrave 2007). This “enemy” poses a threat from within (i.e. immigrants) rather than above (i.e. the elites). Based on this theoretical foundation, we regard the mechanisms of in-group identification and out-group exclusion as central to both the “anti-establishment” dimension and the “exclusionist” dimension. In our definition of exclusionist populist attitudes, we focus on defining people as an out-group based on cultural, ethnic, economic or religious grounds. This ties in with the *horizontal* dimension of populism (Jagers and Walgrave 2007). We can define two central
components of exclusionist populist attitudes: (1) cultivating the centrality of the ordinary people and (2) who are opposed to horizontal out-groups.

The people. Exclusionist populist ideas can be distinguished from nationalism or anti-immigration attitudes by the way in which “the pure people” is constructed as an in-group. In populism, the people are defined as the in-group of people who perceive they have lost out more relative to other groups, or hard-working ordinary citizens that are not rewarded for their efforts. In nationalism, however, they belong to an in-group that identifies with the nation-state (see De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017, for an elaborate discussion).

The “dangerous” others. In exclusionary populism, the out-group is blamed for problems experienced by the ordinary people. This in-group (and not necessarily their nation) is threatened because the culpable out-groups (i.e. migrants) are taking more than they deserve. This threat and power discrepancy needs to be averted by excluding culprits from the heartland of the ordinary people (Taggart 2004). Exclusion from the ordinary people is thus a central component of these populist sentiments.

We believe that this reasoning of exclusionism is closer to populism than nativist/nationalist sentiments (De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017). Exclusionary populism that is not nativist refers to an in-group of ordinary citizens that perceive a threat and severe injustice. This contextual threat can be perceived and cultivated on both an economic (they take our jobs) and cultural level (they pollute our culture). A central distinction between nativism and exclusionary populism is based on the conceptualization of the people. In populism, the in-group is composed of the ordinary, monolithic or pure people. Nativism, in contrast, unites people based on their attachment to national identity (De Cleen and Stavrakakis 2017). People with stronger exclusionist populist perceptions may actually feel distant from their nation, as their national identity is already lost, for example, because of the influx of refugees or European unification. Exclusionist populist sentiments tap into efficacy by emphasizing that the problems of the ordinary people may be resolved by excluding the threatening other, and that the ordinary people themselves have the agency to contribute to the solution. Identification with the nation is thus not necessarily part of these populist sentiments.

Cultural-symbolic threats. The horizontal “people versus societal out-groups” divide can be articulated in different ways. Following extant literature on right-wing populist parties around the globe, the people’s enemies are mainly constructed as immigrants, ethnic minorities or religious out-groups (e.g. Taggart 2000). In line with this, the first and most central component of exclusionism emphasizes the people’s opposition to others on a cultural and symbolic level (e.g. Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008). Others are horizontally constructed as undesired segments of the population, such as immigrants or people whose cultural or religious orientations differ from the in-group (e.g. Jagers and Walgrave 2007).
Economic threats. The second type of a populist horizontal out-group excluded from the people is rooted in an economic threat, for example, posed by profiteers of the in-group’s resources. Immigrants or people who receive unemployment benefits do not have the same rights as the ordinary hardworking citizens who have contributed to the wealth of the nation (Oesch 2008). This perception on redistribution is thus inherently exclusionist: the ordinary, native people deserve help whereas others should not be allowed to profit from the hardworking ordinary people’s resources. Not in the last place because these others caused the ordinary people’s crisis by depriving them from their wealth. It should be noted that this component of populism is not necessarily reserved to the right-wing. Hence, the extreme-rich minority, banks, and greedy managers may also be accused of posing a threat on the prosperity of the ordinary people.

It is important to note here that exclusionist populist attitudes should not necessarily be considered as orthogonal to anti-establishment populist attitudes. Rather, the proposed dimensional structure intends to locate citizens at different positions on both axes of the central “people versus an out-group” divide. The crucial difference between the dimensions is whether the out-group threatens the ordinary people from within (e.g. immigrants, profiteers) or above (e.g. the elites in government). We do, however, agree that anti-elitism is necessary for populist ideology to be identified (Mudde 2004). In this paper, we shift our focus to the interpretation of populist divides by citizens. Based on recent empirical evidence, it can be noted that the different components of populism do not necessarily occur simultaneously within a single interpretation. Populist ideas are more likely to be disseminated in a fragmented way (Engesser et al. 2016). Against this backdrop, our focus on populist interpretations on the demand-side responds to the fragmented nature in which populist ideas are spread in society.

The conceptualization of populist attitudes proposed in this paper should therefore allow for the measurement of populist attitudes as a matter of degree. Some citizens may, for example, have strong populist attitudes on the anti-establishment dimension only. In that case, their views largely resonate with the viewpoints of left-wing populist parties (March 2007). Others may have strong populist attitudes on both dimensions, which is more closely related to the “complete populism” of many right-wing populist parties in Europe that articulate the people’s opposition to both immigrants and elites, such as the French Front National or the Dutch Freedom Party (Jagers and Walgrave 2007).

Perceived relative deprivation and populist attitudes

Previous research suggests that populist attitudes may resonate with certain contextual factors (Aalberg et al. 2017). In line with recent empirical research,
it may specifically be argued that populist attitudes are rooted in perceptions of relative deprivation (e.g. Elchardus and Spruyt 2016). Relative deprivation can be defined as a perceived unfair distribution of society’s collective goods: the ordinary hardworking citizens “like us” never get what they deserve from society, whereas “others” always profit without giving anything in return (e.g. Elchardus and Spruyt 2016). Relative deprivation taps into feelings of dissent related to the belief that resources are not distributed fairly across society. The in-group is perceived as relatively worse off than out-groups, whereas the in-group should be prioritized (Elchardus and Spruyt 2016; Spruyt, Keppens, and Van Droogenbroeck 2016). Perceived relative deprivation thus relates to the perception of a threat of in-group injustice salient in social identity framing (e.g. Mols 2012).

Although the design of our study does not allow us to tease out the causal order of populist attitudes and perceived relative deprivation, we can infer this relationship theoretically. Perceptions of relative deprivation cultivate the threat experienced by the in-group, signaling in-group injustice (Polletta and Jasper 2001). Populism can be seen as a response to this threat, as it reconciles a positive image of the innocent in-group whilst foregrounding scapegoats for the people’s deprivation (e.g. Spruyt, Keppens, and Van Droogenbroeck 2016). At the same time, the causal order may be reversed in a reinforcing spiral: the cultivation of the populist divide between us and them may further strengthen the belief that the people are left behind.

Populist attitudes and relative deprivation can theoretically be connected in the light of the “losers of modernization thesis” (e.g. Elchardus and Spruyt 2016; Kriesi et al. 2006). This thesis postulates that people who experience to have lost something that has been taken away by profiting others, are appealed most to populist ideas. The perception of a severe threat forms the foundation for citizens’ experience of relative deprivation: the deprived ordinary people feel that their in-group is victimized more by the crisis than the others that caused the crisis in the first place. This crisis can have cultural and economic components. Hence, the out-group can deprive the people of economic resources (i.e. they take our jobs) or may pose a threat on their social and cultural superiority/unity (i.e. our traditions disappear). People with stronger perceptions of relative deprivation should be appealed most to populist ideas that voice their grievances of being worse off than other groups (Elchardus and Spruyt 2016). Populist attitudes may thus be seen as a consequence of perceived deprivation: the perceived divide between the ordinary people and the culpable elites and/or others responds to the perception of in-group injustice and threat (Spruyt, Keppens, and Van Droogenbroeck 2016).

As the others accused of depriving the ordinary people can be constructed both vertically (i.e. the elites take tax money away from our elderly people) and horizontally (i.e. immigrants take our jobs), we expect that perceived
relative deprivation provides the common core for both dimensions of populist attitudes. H1: Citizens with higher anti-establishment and exclusionist populist attitudes have stronger perceptions of relative deprivation.

**Issue positions salient among citizens with populist attitudes**

Populism has commonly been defined as a “thin” ideology, which can be supplemented by a plethora of host ideologies (Mudde 2004; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013). In line with this, the core idea of a moral and causal divide between the “good” ordinary people and the “culprit” other can be enriched by issue positions that give substance to the divide between “us” and “them”. But what issue positions may be salient among citizens with stronger anti-establishment and exclusionist populist attitudes?

For inclusionary populism, such as in Latin America, all ordinary people can be perceived of as being united against the common enemy from above (March 2007; Rooduijn, de Lange, and van der Brug 2014). That is, the elites who do not care for or represent the needs of the ordinary people (e.g. Canovan 1999). Although left-wing stances postulate that collective resources should be accessible to everyone who needs them, populist ideas emphasize that the self-interested elites are not redistributing society’s collective resources in a fair manner (Elchardus and Spruyt 2012). To be clear, this does not mean that left-wing populism includes all citizens: the extreme-rich minority can be seen as an out-group accused of filling their own pockets at the cost of the ordinary people (e.g. Ramiro 2017). Inclusion can, however, transcend national borders by including citizens with different social and cultural backgrounds (e.g. Moffitt 2017). Against this backdrop, economic inclusionism provides a salient position that may supplement the ideational core of populism. But which part of the populist electorate should be attracted to it?

Citizens with anti-establishment populist attitudes may be appealed to both left-wing and right-wing host ideologies. Citizens who also have stronger exclusionist populist attitudes should be less likely to perceive that ordinary citizens from different social and cultural backgrounds can form a unity. Therefore, economic inclusionism/equality should appeal more to citizens with anti-establishment populist attitudes than those with exclusionist populist attitudes.

People with exclusionist populist attitudes are opposed to certain groups of citizens that live amongst them in society. For these people, the perceived in-group threat comes from within the nation. Immigrants and refugees are, for example, accused of taking more than they deserve. On a cultural level, however, the out-group threat stems from a different root: the perception that the out-group has a substantially different, backwards, undesirable, or even dangerous cultural background (e.g. Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008).
Such nativist issue positions can thus be regarded as appealing most to citizens with exclusionist populist attitudes. These issue positions, for example, revolve around the assimilation of immigrants, who are not allowed to retain their own culture. Hence, citizens with exclusionist populist attitudes may not only want to exclude societal out-groups, they may also envision themselves as the managers of their heartland, entitled with the power to tolerate some well-adjusted “others” above those that are unwilling or unable to integrate.

To explore the extent to which these issue positions resonate with establishment and exclusionist populist attitudes, we pose the following exploratory research question: To what extent are people with anti-establishment and exclusionist populist attitudes appealed to different left-wing and right-wing issue positions?

Taken together, this research aims to dissect a typology of people with populist attitudes – what unites populist citizens, and what divides citizens with divergent scores on the distinguished dimensions of populist attitudes?

**Data and measures**

To empirically assess whether populist attitudes can be structured along the two theoretically proposed dimensions, we draw on nationally representative survey data that was collected in The Netherlands. Institutional Review Board approval was obtained. A polling agency collected the data by means of a web-based survey. To ensure participants are willing and able to adequately respond to survey items without being routinized, panel members of this agency are not allowed to participate in more than three surveys a month. From a large online panel of 124,000 citizens representative of the Dutch voting population, 1425 citizens were invited to participate in the survey. These eligible participants over 18 years were randomly selected and received an invitation via e-mail or telephone. 809 participants completed the survey, which results in a response and cooperation rate of 57% (AAPOR RR1 and COOP1). Upon completion, participants were rewarded with credits from the research organization, which they could use to buy vouchers. The sample was by and large representative of the population in terms of age, gender, region, family size, social class, and voting behavior (see Appendix A for comparison sample with census data). The mean age of participants was 51.07 years ($SD = 17.25$), 48.5% was female and 23.9% was lower educated.

To measure the two dimensions of populist attitudes, we used a battery of survey items. These items are a mix of existing and newly developed statements. For the anti-establishment dimension, we derived items from previous research on populist attitudes (Akkerman, Mudde, and Zaslove 2014; Hawkins, Riding, and Mudde 2012; Rooduijn 2014). Additionally, we included items...
measuring the people’s opposition to economic elites (Elchardus and Spruyt 2012). The item wordings are: The people instead of politicians should make our most important policy decisions ($\lambda = .68$); Politicians in the government are corrupt ($\lambda = .68$); Politicians make decisions that harm the interests of the ordinary people ($\lambda = .65$); The ordinary people should have more influence in political decision making than corporations that only want to make profits ($\lambda = .61$).

The measures of exclusionist populism were newly developed for the purpose of this study. These items were informed by theory on right-wing exclusionist populism, nativism and anti-immigration attitudes (e.g. Duckitt and Sibley 2010). However, by explicitly referring to the Manichean outlook constructing the ordinary people as innocent and the horizontally opposed other as culprit, these items were adjusted to reflect populist attitudes (e.g. Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008). All items were measured on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 7 (completely agree). The included items are: Immigrants are threatening the purity of our culture ($\lambda = .83$); Our Dutch borders should be closed for immigrants ($\lambda = .87$); Immigrants are responsible for most of our nation’s problems ($\lambda = .83$); Immigrants cost our country a lot of money that should be invested in our own people ($\lambda = .90$); Social benefits, such as unemployment benefits and health insurance benefits, are given to people who don’t really deserve it ($\lambda = .70$); People coming from outside the Netherlands should not receive any of our social benefits ($\lambda = .76$).

Perceived relative deprivation was measured with three items: (1) If we need anything from the government, ordinary people like us always have to wait longer than others; (2) I never received what I in fact deserved; (3) It’s always the other people who profit from all kinds of advantages offered in society. These items are based on Elchardus and Spruyt (2016). With these items, a 7-point scale was constructed (Eigenvalue = 2.23; 77% explained variance; Cronbach’s $\alpha = .85$) Left-wing issue positions towards income equality were measured with the following item: Some people believe that income differences in our country should increase. Others believe they should decrease. Of course, people also have opinions anywhere between these extremes. Where would you place yourself on a scale from 1 (income differences should increase) to 7 (income differences should decrease)?

Attitudes towards the assimilation of immigrants, an indicator of a right-wing issue position, was measured with the following item: In the Netherlands, some people believe that immigrants can live here while keeping their own culture. Others believe they should fully adjust to our cultural values and beliefs. Where would you place yourself on a scale from 1 (immigrants can keep their own culture) to 7 (immigrants have to fully adjust to our culture)? We included measures of age, gender, education, left–right self-placement, occupation, voting behavior, political knowledge, and EU integration as controls.
Analysis

Multidimensional Scaling (MDS) was used to assess whether the data supported the hypothesized number of dimensions. Next, we estimated the factor structure with Confirmatory Factor Analysis in Structural Equation Modeling. We used maximum likelihood estimation to analyse the models. Standardized factor loadings higher than .60 were regarded as satisfactory for the fit of indicators (e.g. Kline 2011). OLS-regression models were estimated to explore the foundations of populist attitudes on both dimensions.

Results

Estimating the two-dimensional structure of populist attitudes

In the first step, and as a validity test, we estimated a five-dimensional structure of populist attitudes, which consisted of all separate fragmented components highlighted in extant literature: people centrality, anti-political elites, anti-economic elites, exclusionism, and welfare state chauvinism. This model did not fit the data well: $\chi^2(160) = 964.82$, $\chi^2/df = 6.03$, $p < .001$; RMSEA = 0.08, 90% CI [0.07, 0.08]; CFI = 0.86. The problematic discriminant and convergent validity of this model indicate that populist attitudes are essentially structured by the vertical distinction between the people and the elites and the horizontal opposition between the people and societal outgroups.

The multidimensional scaling procedure supported this hypothesized two-dimensional structure of populist attitudes. The plot of the MDS space (Figure 1) shows that the populist attitude items are clustered in two main groups. The anti-establishment and exclusionist items thus occupy different spaces. A two-dimensional solution explains the data substantially better than a one-dimensional one. The fit improved less substantially moving from two to three dimensions (see Figure A1). The explained variance of the two-dimensional model is excellent ($R^2 = .94$). Based on this outcome, we further estimated the dimensional structure of populist attitudes with Confirmatory Factor Analysis.

To investigate the distinction between nativist perception and exclusionist populist attitudes, we assessed whether exclusionist populist attitudes were empirically distinct from nativist or anti-immigration attitudes. To do so, we compared the hypothesized model with an alternative factor structure that included nativist/anti-immigration perceptions as indicators of the exclusionist dimension, which fitted significantly and substantially worse ($\Delta \chi^2 (1) = 499.99$, $p < .001$). In line with our expectations, we found that the newly developed measure of exclusionist populist attitudes tapped into a different construct than related nativist perceptions, which may indeed be interpreted as a host ideology separate from the ideational core of populism. Exclusionist...
populist attitudes – which cultivate a central divide between ordinary, pure people and horizontally excluded others – are thus different from nativist sentiments that revolve around national identity at the core of in-group unification.

The two-dimensional structure demonstrated good model fit: $\chi^2(23) = 34.09$, $\chi^2/df = 1.48$, $p = .06$; RMSEA = 0.024, 90% CI [0.00, 0.04]; CFI = 0.99. Two minor theoretically driven specifications were made to the model. As shown in Figure 2, two error correlations were added to the exclusionist dimension. First, the error terms of the items *Immigrants are threatening the purity of our culture* and *Immigrants are responsible for a lot of our nation’s problems* were correlated, which was based on the theoretical consideration that immigrants are framed as the cause of the people’s problems in both items. Second, we added a correlation between the error terms of the items *Our borders should be closed for immigrants* and *Social benefits such as unemployment benefits and health insurance benefits are given to people who don’t really deserve it*. This error correlation is theoretically justifiable as both items tap into people’s perceptions of limited rights reserved for others: immigrants and profiteers do not deserve to be part of the heartland and should therefore not be tolerated. We compared this model to a model without these error correlations. Although the fit indices are sub-optimal, model fit was still acceptable: $\chi^2(21) = 58.17$, $\chi^2/df = 1.82$, $p = .03$; RMSEA = 0.044, 90% CI [0.032, 0.055]; CFI = 0.98. We also compared the two-dimensional model to a model specification that regarded populist attitudes as unidimensional.

**Figure 1.** Graphical depiction of item locations in MDS-space.

![Graphical depiction of item locations in MDS-space](image-url)
Figure 2. Graphical depiction of the two-dimensional structure underlying populist attitudes. Model fit: $\chi^2(23) = 34.09$, $\chi^2/df = 1.48$, $p = 0.06$; RMSEA = 0.024, 90% CI [0.00, 0.04]; CFI = 0.99. Reported estimates are standardized regression coefficients, correlations and squared multiple correlations.

(with and without error structure). The unidimensional model had a sub-optimal model fit ($\chi^2(35) = 406.37$, $\chi^2/df = 11.61$, $p < .001$; RMSEA = 0.11, 90% CI [0.11, 0.13]; CFI = 0.91). The model fitted the data substantially and significantly worse than the two-dimensional solution ($\Delta \chi^2(2) = 28.01$, $p < .001$).

The convergent validity of the two-dimensional model is satisfactory. The correlation between both dimensions was moderately strong ($r = .66$). Comparing the two-dimensional model with a unidimensional solution in which both factors were merged, model fit decreased substantially and significantly: $\Delta \chi^2(1) = 209.97$, $p < .001$, which indicates a good discriminant validity. The two dimensions of our model thus tap into separate dimensions of participants’ populist perceptions.

The degree of populism among the electorate

First, we constructed scales for both dimensions (measured on a 7-point scale (1 = completely disagree, 7 = completely agree): vertical anti-establishment populism (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .71$, $M = 4.04$, $SD = 1.11$) and horizontal exclusionist populism (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .91$, $M = 3.70$, $SD = 1.47$). In Table 1, we compared
Table 1. Comparing mean scores on both dimensions of populist attitudes for different vote choices.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vote choice</th>
<th>PVV (right-populist)</th>
<th>SP (left-populist)</th>
<th>Government</th>
<th>Opposition</th>
<th>Non-voting</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dimension</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti-establishment</td>
<td>4.97(_a)</td>
<td>4.34(_b)</td>
<td>3.88(_c)</td>
<td>3.49(_d)</td>
<td>4.25(_b)</td>
<td>4.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1.04)</td>
<td>(1.10)</td>
<td>(1.06)</td>
<td>(0.99)</td>
<td>(1.01)</td>
<td>(1.11)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exclusionism</td>
<td>5.39(_a)</td>
<td>3.24(_b)</td>
<td>3.61(_c)</td>
<td>3.00(_d)</td>
<td>3.99(_d)</td>
<td>3.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.97)</td>
<td>(1.49)</td>
<td>(1.39)</td>
<td>(1.39)</td>
<td>(1.34)</td>
<td>(1.47)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(N)</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>292</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>192</td>
<td>809</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Standard deviations are reported in parentheses below means. The included governmental parties are: VVD and PvdA. The included opposition parties are: CDA, D66, GroenLinks, SGP, CU and PvdD. Means with differing subscripts within rows differ significantly at the \(p < .05\) level.

populist party voters with voters for established parties in the government and opposition on their mean scores on both dimensions. As shown in this table, voters for the right-wing complete populist party PVV scored significantly and substantially higher on both dimensions of populist attitudes than voters for established parties or the left-wing party SP. Voters for the SP scored significantly higher on the anti-establishment dimension than voters for parties in government. Non-voters scored just as high on the anti-establishment dimension as voters for the left-wing populist party SP.

In the next step, we estimated a logistic regression model to explore how the two dimensions of populist attitudes and relevant issue attitudes corresponded to people’s populist party preferences (see Table 2). First of all, vote intentions for the right-wing populist Freedom Party positively correlate with both dimensions of populist attitudes. Specifically, people with higher anti-establishment populist attitudes are 1.62 times more likely to vote for this populist party. People with higher exclusionist populist attitudes are 1.93 times more likely to do so. In addition, relative deprivation and lower education positively correlated with populist vote intentions. Although ideological self-placement does not play a role for populist vote intentions (contrasted to non-voters), it does relate to governmental party preferences (see Table 2). Moreover, higher educated and less relatively deprived participants are more likely to vote on the government compared to other parties. If we split up party preferences in the left-wing coalition partner PvdA and the right-wing coalition leader VVD, we see that the patterns are similar.

**Issue positions and populist attitudes**

Table 3 reports the results of the OLS-regression analyses for each dimension separately. In support of hypothesis 1, the more people experienced feelings of relative deprivation, the stronger their populist attitudes on both the anti-establishment \((b = .31, SE = .03, p < .001)\) and exclusionist dimension \((b = .40, SE = .03, p < .001)\). Perceived relative deprivation is thus related to populist attitudes on both dimensions (see Table 3).
Next, as can be seen in Table 3, the results indicate that participants who supported the left-wing issue position of income equality did not score significantly higher on the anti-establishment scale ($b = -.01, SE = .03, p = n. s.$). Citizens who opposed a more equal distribution of income, in contrast, had significantly stronger exclusionist populist attitudes ($b = -.08, SE = .02, p < .001$).

**Table 3.** Describing populist citizens.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Anti-establishment</th>
<th></th>
<th>Exclusionist</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$b$</td>
<td>SE</td>
<td>$b$</td>
<td>SE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>2.21***</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>1.33***</td>
<td>0.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender (female)</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>-0.15*</td>
<td>0.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education (higher)</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>-0.14</td>
<td>0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working Class</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>-0.12</td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relative deprivation</td>
<td>0.31***</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.40***</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voting establishment 2012</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voting populist party 2012</td>
<td>0.52***</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>0.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-voting in 2012</td>
<td>0.26*</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political knowledge</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>-0.08*</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left self-placement</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>-0.22*</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right self-placement</td>
<td>-0.11</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left-inclusionist</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>-0.08***</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right-nativist</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.20***</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti EU-integration</td>
<td>0.06*</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.07**</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PVV Preference</td>
<td>0.03*</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.11***</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SP Preference</td>
<td>0.03*</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted $R^2$</td>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$F$</td>
<td>21.34***</td>
<td>72.84***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$N$</td>
<td>809</td>
<td></td>
<td>809</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

***$p < .001$, **$p < .01$, *$p < .05$.
We expected that the position that immigrants should adjust to “our” culture would only be positively correlated with the exclusionist dimension of populist attitudes. As can be seen in Table 3, participants with stronger exclusionist populist attitudes indeed articulated support for the position that immigrants should fully adjust to the culture of the in-group. This issue position was not salient among participants with higher anti-establishment populist attitudes.

Discussion

Populism is a multifaceted concept. It can be both inclusionary and exclusionary, and it can be attached to left-wing and right-wing stances (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013). Reasoned from social identity theory, populist attitudes cultivate the perceived divide between ordinary people and both horizontally and vertically constructed out-groups blamed for the in-group’s problems (e.g. Jagers and Walgrave 2007). Although different types of populism incorporating this variety of the ordinary people’s opposition have been distinguished on the supply-side of populist parties or communication, no such differentiation of vertical or horizontal out-groups exists for populist attitudes (e.g. Jagers and Walgrave 2007). Therefore, to better understand to what extent populist parties on the left and right tap into an attitudinal structure held by citizens, this paper relied on a social identity framework to understand how voters’ populist attitudes are structured. Engaging with recent measurement endeavors, we regarded populist attitudes as multidimensional (e.g. Van Hauwaert, Schimpf, and Azevedo 2016). We specifically proposed a two-dimensional structure of populist attitudes, consisting of anti-establishment and exclusionism. This model was tested empirically and demonstrated a good fit with the data. Using the populist attitudes scales, we measured populist attitudes as a matter of degree, and the findings of our study allowed us to assess how populist the people actually are on the different dimensions. Crucially, populist attitudes do not necessarily coincide with exclusionary attitudes – as frequently assumed in extant literature.

This study demonstrated that people with stronger populist attitudes are more likely to vote for populist parties. Although some scholars disagree on whether the Socialist Party (SP) can be categorized as a populist party (e.g. March 2007; Rooduijn, de Lange, and van der Brug 2014), we found evidence that citizens who voted for this party are significantly more populist on the anti-establishment dimension than people who voted for parties in the government or opposition. People who opposed the elites and out-groups among “the people” voted for the PVV, a right-wing “complete” populist party.

Using the two-dimensional conceptualization, we further investigated the common core underlying populist attitudes, as well as issue positions that were salient among citizens with populist attitudes. After controlling for the
“usual suspects” such as age, gender, education, political knowledge, and occupation, we found that both dimensions correlated strongly with feelings of relative deprivation. This finding ties in with previous literature on populism arguing that people’s perceptions of getting less than they deserve provides a fertile breeding ground for populist viewpoints (e.g. Elchardus and Spruyt 2016). This captures citizens’ perceptions of losing out relatively more than other groups. The source of deprivation can be located on both an economic and cultural level. Populism may be seen as a response to these feelings of dissent (also see Spruyt, Keppens, and Van Droogenbroeck 2016). This finding also ties in with the “losers of modernization” hypothesis, which postulates that the experience of loss relative to others is salient amongst people supporting populism (e.g. Kriesi et al. 2006). Yet, the causal order may also work the other way around, as a reinforcing spiral of contextual level-factors and populist sentiments, which is in line with the fueling discontent thesis proposed by Rooduijn (2014). Future (experimental) research may offer more empirical evidence of this causal order.

Next to this common core, we found that people with exclusionist populist attitudes opposed income equality, whereas they were inclined to believe that immigrants should adjust to the native people’s culture. People with exclusionist populist attitudes can thus be distinguished from those with anti-establishment populist attitudes based on these issue positions. Advancing research on populist attitudes, we thus found evidence for the existence of a populist attitude distinct from exclusionism, which is in line with the conceptualization proposed by Akkerman, Mudde, and Zaslove (2014). However, we also identified an exclusionist populist attitude distinct from the anti-establishment dimension. To precisely relate the people’s populism to the plethora of populist political parties on the left and right, as well as citizens’ issue positions, both dimensions are needed.

This does, however, not necessarily mean that we oppose the dominant conceptualization of populism as a “thin-cored ideology” (Mudde 2004). We do, however, believe that the exclusionist component of right-wing populism should not necessarily be treated as just a host ideology. We believe that the perceived opposition between the blameless ordinary people and societal out-groups excluded from the in-group can actually be part of populism’s core. Put differently, in light of social identity theory, the same mechanisms of in-group favoritism and out-group opposition underlie anti-establishment and exclusionist populism (Tajfel 1978). Because populist interpretations occur in a fragmented way (Engesser et al. 2016), it is important to assess the degree of populist attitudes on different components.

This definition may raise the concern of orthogonality. Can people with high scores on the exclusionist dimension and low scores on the anti-establishment dimension be regarded as populist? We believe that the comparisons of scores on both dimensions for different party preferences
demonstrate that this is not the case. People who vote for the Freedom Party have higher populist attitudes on both dimensions. People who vote for the Socialist Party score higher on the anti-establishment dimension only. Exclusionism thus differentiates voters for right-wing populist parties from left-wing populist parties.

Our study has some limitations that can be addressed in future research. First, we deduced our conceptualization of populist attitudes mostly from theory on the supply-side of populism. It could well be the case that this approach overlooks dimensions that only exist among populist citizens. However, we linked our theoretical exploration with the rich literature on populism, and we assured that the variety captured in the core definitions of the concept was reflected in our attitudinal approach. Future research may build further on this by inductively exploring the populism of the people using qualitative methods, such as individual interviews or focus groups.

Second, we measured populist attitudes in one single European country, a context that mostly hosts exclusionary, right-wing populism. For this reason, it can be argued that populist attitudes are structured differently in countries with inclusionary populism, most saliently in Latin America. However, we defined populism by its lowest common denominator, which allows for contextual differences in expressing the “people versus an out-group divide”. In other words, citizens in Latin America may score higher on the anti-establishment dimension and lower on the exclusionist dimension whereas this may be the other way around for European citizens. As our two-dimensional model measures populist attitudes as a matter of degree on these two core dimensions, future comparative research may shed more light on how contextual differences are reflected in citizens’ positions on the dimensions of populist attitudes, for example, by proposing a typology of exclusionary and inclusionary populisms on the demand-side of voters.

All in all, this study has demonstrated that a multidimensional structuring of populist attitudes allows for both theoretical and empirical refinement of the concept. Based on this study’s findings, it can be concluded that “the” populist citizen cannot be defined only by his or her “people versus elites” perceptions. Rather, the variety on the supply-side of populism is congruent with the different manifestations of the people’s populism. Future research can build further on this by assessing the discrepancy or overlap between populism of the sender-side and receiver-side.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.
Notes on contributors

**Michael Hameleers** is Assistant Professor in Political Communication at the Amsterdam School of Communication Research (ASCoR), Amsterdam, The Netherlands. His research interests include populism, framing, (affective) polarization and the role of social identity in media effects.

**Claes H. de Vreese** is Professor and Chair of Political Communication in The Amsterdam School of Communication Research (ASCoR) in the Department of Communication Science at the University of Amsterdam. His research interests span from political journalism to media effects on public opinion, evaluations of politics, and (electoral) behavior.

References


