

Populism and Vote Choice: A Meta-Analysis

Abstract

Does populism play a role in the electoral success of populist politicians and parties around the globe? And if so, how? We conduct a meta-analysis of 22 studies spanning 10 countries that assess the causal effect of populist appeals and their constituent parts on electoral support. First, we find that populist frames result in a small increase in a candidate's vote share. Second, we investigate the effects of populism's sub-dimensions as individual components on electability, finding that appeals to popular sovereignty, not anti-elitism, enhance a candidate's electoral fortunes. We also find that appeals to popular sovereignty are particularly effective on respondents that exhibit people-centric *or* anti-elite attitudes. Thus, it may not be populism per se that drives vote choice, but rather it is particular sub-dimensions of populism that do. Overall, these results motivate further evaluation of populism's sub-dimensions as individual components rather than a bundled treatment.

Introduction

The global resurgence of populism combined with related concerns about its implications for democracy has motivated a rich expansion of the populism literature. There is concern that populist rule is associated with negative outcomes, including democratic backsliding (Vachudova, 2021), macroeconomic mismanagement (Acemoglu et al., 2013; Funke et al., 2023), and an adverse effect on a country’s relationship with international organizations (Copelovitch and Pevehouse, 2019). However, cumulative knowledge about the appeal of populism is still underdeveloped, mostly due to scholarly focus on the thicker policy components that candidates and parties adopt such as anti-immigration and welfare chauvinism when discussing populism rather than populism itself (Hunger and Paxton, 2022). There exists an experimental literature that tries to assess the causal effects of populist appeals on electoral support, however overall findings are mixed.

This paper summarizes the effects of populism and its sub-dimensions through a meta-analysis of papers that examine the effect of populist appeals on electoral support. Beyond the question of whether populist appeals increase electoral support is the question of *how* they increase electoral support and *among whom* they increase electoral support. Moreover, it remains unclear how the different sub-dimensions of populism affect this support as populism itself is a bundled treatment. At stake is an understanding of the microfoundations for how populism helps candidates and parties win elections. Meta-analytically, we find that populist appeals, appeals that combine anti-elitism and people-centrism, on average, cause a four percentage point increase in electoral support. This small effect is substantively important given how close elections often are. Moreover, we find that it is people-centrism, not anti-elitism, that increases candidate electability. This is particularly true among those with high populist, anti-elite, and people-centric attitudes.

This paper has three main contributions. First, our meta-analytic finding that populist appeals increase candidate electability demonstrates the effectiveness of populist rhetoric as a political tactic. Second, we show how the various sub-dimensions of populism differ in

their electoral viability. Third, we offer empirical evidence that although populist appeals can sway those with high populist attitudes, the presence of people-centric *or* anti-elite attitudes alone increases a person’s susceptibility to populist appeals. Overall, these results help partially explain the stunning electoral success of populists across the globe.

The Demand Side of Populism

Existing literature suggests that the success of populist parties and candidates is because of their thicker policy positions first and foremost (Mudde, 2007, 2019), but thin populism still provides a valence advantage. Research finds mixed evidence that populist appeals can increase electoral support. For instance, Lendway (2023) meta-analyzes the effect of thin populist appeals on electoral support for the populist in a set of survey experiments, finding that the populist appeal does increase the probability that the subject would vote for the populist. Castanho Silva et al. (2023) find in the U.S. context that people-centrism and anti-elitism that targets political parties, increases a candidate’s vote share.

Other studies suggest that populist appeals may not be as effective at increasing electoral support. In their study examining populist support in Chile, Aguilar and Carlin (2017) do not find evidence that thin populist appeals increase electoral support for Roxana Miranda. Conducting a candidate conjoint experiment in Germany, Neuner and Wratil (2022) find that anti-immigration, pro-redistribution, and people-centric political stances increase electoral support for political candidates, evidence that the thick policy positions that populists often adopt are important, but no evidence that anti-elitism (and by extension a key component of thin populism) is. Moreover, this result holds for respondents that exhibit populist attitudes and those that do not. Lendway (2023) also provides support that people-centrism increases candidate vote share, but not anti-elitism.

Among whom should populist appeals be more effective in increasing electoral support? Populist attitudes have been found to be correlated with voting for populist candidates and

parties cross-nationally conditional on ideological congruence, particularly in Europe and the United States (Akkerman et al., 2014; Andreadis et al., 2018; Marcos-Marne et al., 2020). Dostálová and Havlík (2024) find using voting data from the 2021 Czech legislative election that populist attitudes play an important role in predicting vote choice independent from thicker ideological concerns. Importantly, we should expect that populist voting behavior should occur when citizens endorse all of populism’s sub-dimensions (Wuttke et al., 2020). However, existing research has also shown that populist appeals are not always more effective among those with high populist attitudes (e.g., Castanho Silva et al., 2023; Dai and Kustov, 2023; Neuner and Wratil, 2022). To address these mixed results, we conduct a meta-analytically assess the extent to which populist attitudes (and anti-elite and people-centric attitudes individually) moderate the effect of populist appeals on candidate electability.

Research Design

Following Mudde (2004), we define (thin) populism as a thin-centered ideology consisting of anti-elitism and people-centrism. The former primarily focuses on depicting a political or economic elite as corrupt, self-serving, and unfit to lead society, while the latter establishes that “the people” are society’s rightful political sovereigns. Even with this definition, included papers are also consistent with populism as a discursive frame (Aslanidis, 2016). We conducted a meta-analysis where studies included in our analysis had to satisfy the following two conditions: 1) people-centrism, anti-elitism, or a bundle of the two (populism) were randomly assigned to respondents and 2) the outcome variable either was or could be transformed into a binary vote choice variable either for or against a candidate. For analytical clarity, we conduct three separate analyses: 1) people-centric appeals on vote choice, 2) anti-elitism on vote choice, and 3) populism on vote choice.¹²

¹The point estimates for Duell et al. (2023) do not measure vote choice but rather they measure support for a rebel MP. Results are the same with or without this study’s inclusion

²We exclude Busby et al. (2019) from our meta-analysis because the study features an experimental elaboration task which serves to have respondents consider political problems in a particular way rather

When possible, we used publicly available data to generate estimates for each study. Otherwise, we reached out to the authors to ask if they could provide either the raw data or estimates based on their data and code. When unable to obtain the raw data or estimates from the authors, we aimed to use the plots and tables in the published articles. Countries included in the analysis are the United States, France, Finland, United Kingdom, Germany, Italy, Spain, Denmark, Japan, and Chile. We do not exclude any studies based on the sampling procedure deployed, and we describe the sample for each study in Appendix A.³ We did not require that a paper be published to be included in our analysis.

For the included experiments, we measured the Average Treatment Effect (ATE) to determine the effect of populism. For conjoint experiments, the ATE is referred to as the Average Marginal Component Effect (AMCE), where the derived estimate for each study is dependent on the baseline attribute of the political candidate (Hainmueller et al., 2014). For each study, we measured the ATE by using difference-in-means via regression without covariates, since we required treatments to be randomly assigned in our meta-analysis. Our design choices are in line with other meta-analyses (e.g., Schwarz and Coppock (2022) on candidate gender and vote choice). We further detail our research methodology, study treatments and procedures for locating studies in the Appendix. Following data collection, we computed a meta-analytic average using the metafor package in R. Some studies included in our meta-analysis had more than one point estimate (e.g., one study has two populist treatments). In these instances, we corrected for the fact that the standard errors were not independent by running a random effects meta-regression that accounts for the covariance that exists between two points that share a baseline.

than a more traditional vignette or conjoint.

³Notably Gonthier and Guerra (2022) have a sample of Yellow Vest protesters in France, where women and those with higher populist attitudes are over-represented. Results are robust to excluding this study from the analysis, which we show in Appendix H.

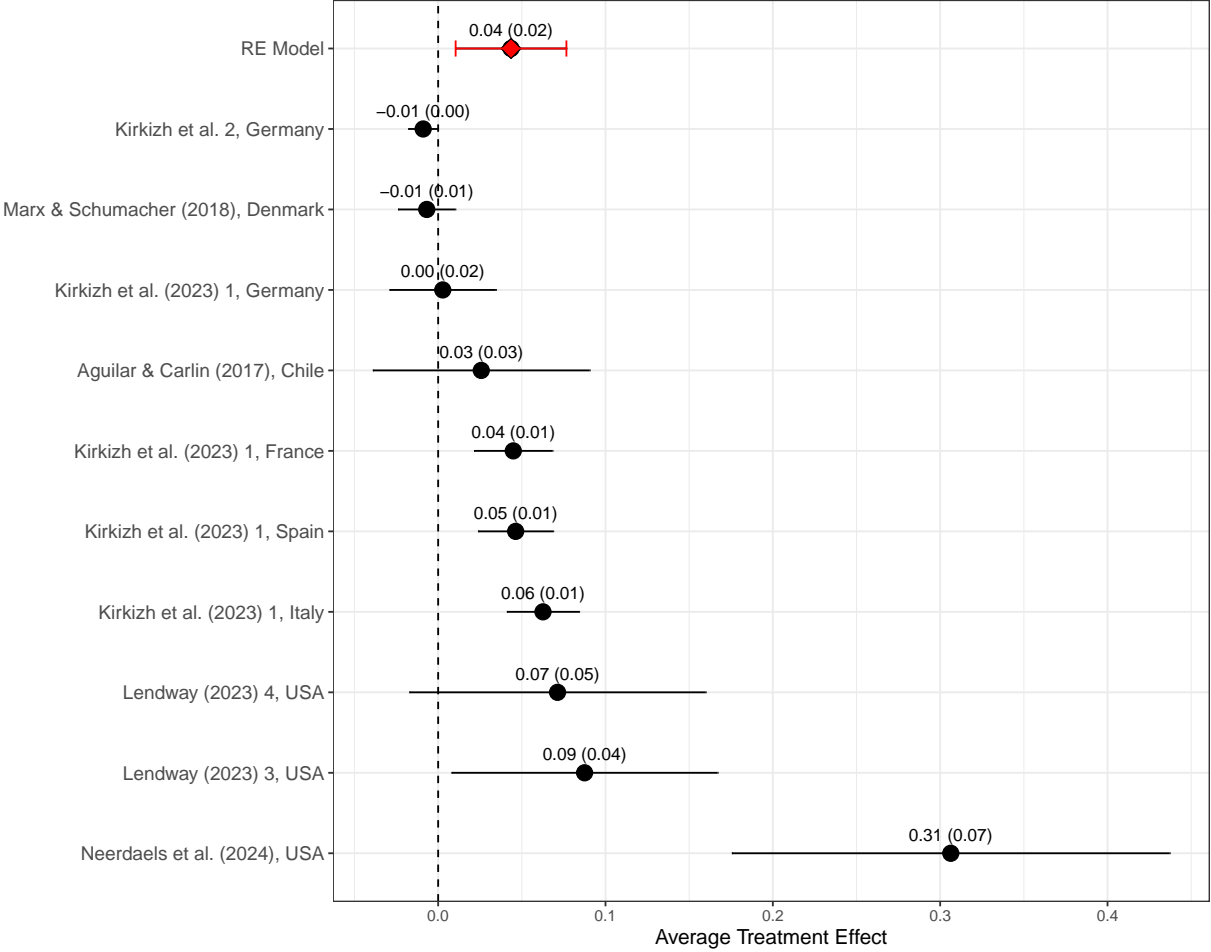
What is the Effect of Populism and Its Sub-dimensions?

Are populist appeals effective at increasing the electoral prospects of candidates who use them? For the studies where we could get the requisite data, [Figure 1](#) displays a meta-analysis of the effect of populist appeals on electoral support. Additional details of included studies are summarized in Appendix Table A1. On average, populist appeals increase electoral support ($\beta = 0.04$, S.E. = 0.01). Although this effect size is small, it is substantively significant given how close elections often are. While individual studies are sometimes short of statistical significance, the increased certainty of the meta-analysis clarifies the effectiveness of populist appeals in aiding candidates' effort to reach an elected office.⁴ Notice that in two instances the treatment effect is negative. This suggests the possibility of a populist backfire, which is explored more below.

Although the foregoing meta-analysis finds that populist appeals do, on average, increase a candidate's electoral support, it is unclear which component of the populist appeal does so since the populism treatment is a bundled treatment in those studies. Thus, we turn to finding the effect of two of populism's core sub-dimensions: people-centrism and anti-elitism. Panel A of [Figure 2](#) meta-analyzes the effect of anti-elitism on electoral support whereas panel B of [Figure 2](#) meta-analyzes the effect of people-centrism on electoral support. The results in panel A show that anti-elitism does not affect vote choice ($\beta = -.01$, SE = .02). On the other hand, panel B of [Figure 2](#) provides strong evidence that people-centrism increases electoral support ($\beta = .05$, SE = .01). Examination of panel A of [Figure 2](#) shows large variation in how a candidate's anti-elitism affects electoral support. In some cases, anti-elitism hurts electoral support significantly. The possibility that populist appeals can backfire depending on context, intensity, and credibility of elite blame attribution has not escaped scholarly attention.

⁴The particularly high point estimate for the Neerdaels et al. (2024) study could be an artifact of the sample size and the cutoff for the binary vote choice.

Figure 1: The Effect of Populist Frames on Electoral Support



Note: Error bars reflect 95% confidence intervals.

Dai and Kustov (2022) theoretically formalize populism as campaign gamble and derive the conditions under which it can demobilize potential voters, and Wirz et al. (2019) argue that exposure to populist appeals can lower support for the Swiss People’s Party among certain groups. It may very well be the anti-elite component of populism fueling this potential backfire. Notably, it is mostly in Germany where anti-elite appeals tend to not perform well. Relative to several Western European countries, Germany has not had a history of electorally strong populist parties during the 1900s; the results may reflect this history.

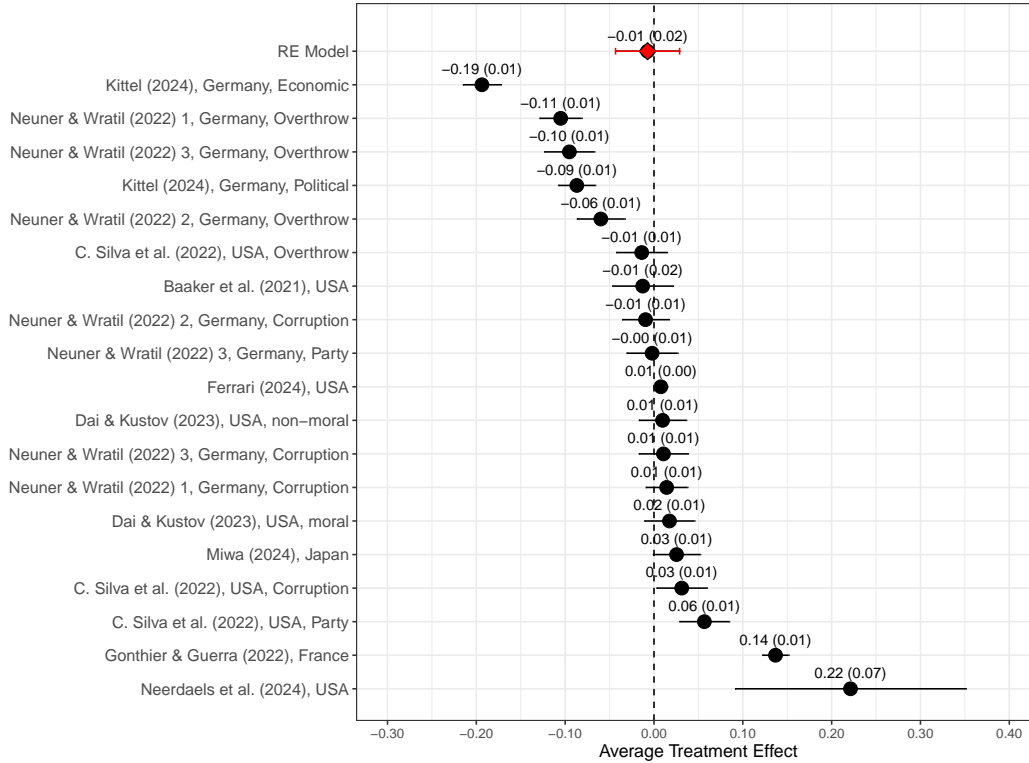
People-centrism on the other hand appears to have a positive effect in the vast majority

of cases. Whereas anti-elitism creates a negatively valanced group (the elite) and focuses on de-legitimizing this group, people-centrism creates a positively valanced group (the people) and legitimizes it. The difference in results between the two dimensions may very well reflect this fact.

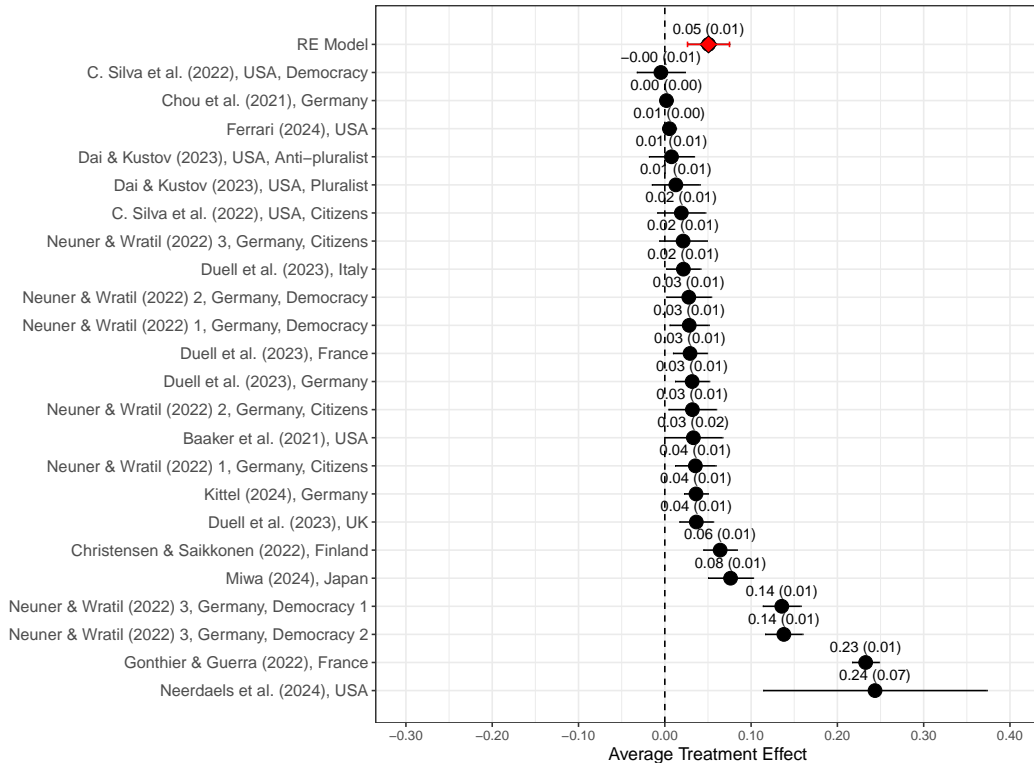
Having demonstrated that people-centrism improves a candidate’s electoral fortunes, we then assessed heterogeneous effects for the populist sub-components on electoral support at the respondent level. For studies in which we had the requisite data, we analyzed pretreatment covariates that are commonly argued to moderate the effect of populist appeals: populist attitudes and political ideology. We also assessed heterogeneous effects of people-centrism and anti-elitism conditional on candidate level immigration and redistribution policy positions. We focus on the analysis for populist attitudes here in the main text, while we discuss results for the other heterogeneous effects in Appendix section B. For populist attitudes, we partitioned respondents into those with low populist attitudes or high populist attitudes. In order for respondents to be classified as having high populist attitudes, they must average a strong agreement score on *both* the anti-elite dimension and people-centrism dimension (i.e., at least a 4 (6) on a 5 (7) point scale). We discuss the batteries measuring populist attitudes, and what questions we classify as people-centric and anti-elite more at length in Appendix G.

Furthermore, we also examine the effect of populism’s sub-dimensions conditional on just anti-elite and people-centric attitudes. For respondents to have high anti-elite (people-centric) attitudes, they must average a strong agreement score on anti-elite (people-centrism) questions; respondents need not record high agreement scores on both dimensions. Certainly, it might be the case that respondent anti-elite and people-centric attitudes are correlated, but this is not always the case (Wuttke et al., 2020). [Table 1](#) summarizes the effect of populist sub-dimensions on electoral support conditional on respondents’ populist attitudes, anti-elite attitudes, and people-centric attitudes. The Appendix section B contains the corresponding coefficient plots for the meta-analytic point estimates provided in the table.

Figure 2: The Effect of Populist Subcomponents on Electoral Support



(a) The Effect of Anti-Elitism on Electoral Support



(b) The Effect of People-Centrism on Electoral Support

Table 1: Average Effect of Populism Sub-dimensions on Electoral Support conditional on Respondent Populist, Anti-Elite, and People-Centric Attitudes

Treatment Type	Low Populist Attitudes	High Populist Attitudes	Low Anti-Elite Attitudes	High Anti-Elite Attitudes	Low People-Centric Attitudes	High People-Centric Attitudes
People-Centrism	0.04*** (0.01)	0.08*** (0.02)	0.03** (0.01)	0.09*** (0.02)	0.03* (0.02)	0.09*** (0.02)
Anti-Elitism	-.03 (.02)	0.02 (.02)	-0.04* (0.03)	0.01 (0.02)	-0.04* (0.02)	-0.00 (0.02)

*** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.1$

Table 1 illustrates that people-centrism increases electoral support among those with both low and high populist attitudes. Appendix table A4 illustrates that these differences are statistically significant. Notice that anti-elite attributes did not increase electoral support among those with low populist attitudes ($\beta = -.02$, $SE = .03$) or those with high populist attitudes ($\beta = .00$, $SE = .02$). However, Table 1 shows that just the presence of anti-elite ($\beta = .09$, $SE = .02$) or people-centric attitudes ($\beta = .09$, $SE = .02$) is enough for respondents to reward people-centric candidates more than those who do not hold these attitudes. Anti-elite appeals do not have a statistically significant effect on vote choice among respondents with people-centric ($\beta = -.00$, $SE = .02$) or anti-elite attitudes ($\beta = .01$, $SE = .02$). This suggests that current measures of anti-elitism may not be successfully gauging who is attracted to anti-elite appeals, and that citizens do not necessarily need to hold all of populism’s sub-dimensions to find (parts) of populism attractive.

Conclusion

This paper has aimed to meta-analyze the literature on the effect of populist appeals on electoral support. First, we demonstrated that populist appeals increase electoral support. This helps partially explain the electoral victories of populist politicians and parties around the globe. Second, we showed that it is the people-centric component of populist appeals, not the anti-elite component, that is driving this effect. This suggests that anti-elitism is not an effective method of garnering electoral support as is commonly thought. Third, we show that respondents with anti-elite or people-centric attitudes find people-centrism more appealing.

These results cast important insights into the renewed electoral success of candidates that exhibit populist characteristics.

These findings motivate several avenues for future research. One key question is *why* people-centrism is electorally appealing but not anti-elitism. This is a key phenomenon that questions how useful it is to consider “populism” as a bundled treatment. Moreover the results suggest that and it may not be “populism” per se that increases candidate electability. Because anti-elitism and people-centrism have distinct effects, scholars need to properly distinguish between the two dimensions rather than bundling them together when discussing the effects of thin populism. Furthermore, there seems to be heterogeneity across context and country. Anti-elitism in Germany particularly does not seem to perform well, which warrants further scrutiny.

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