

Measuring Populist Attitudes on Three Dimensions

Anne Schulz¹, Philipp Müller², Christian Schemer², Dominique Stefanie Wirz¹, Martin
Wettstein¹, Werner Wirth¹

¹University of Zurich

²Johannes Gutenberg University of Mainz

Author Note

Anne Schulz, Institute of Mass Communication and Media Research (IPMZ),
University of Zurich; Philipp Müller, Department of Communication, Johannes Gutenberg
University Mainz; Christian Schemer, Department of Communication, Johannes Gutenberg
University Mainz; Martin Wettstein, IPMZ, University of Zurich; Dominique Stefanie Wirz,
IPMZ, University of Zurich; Werner Wirth, IPMZ, University of Zurich.

This research is funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Anne Schulz, Institute
of Mass Communication and Media Research; Andreasstrasse 15; 8050 Zürich, Switzerland.

E-mail: a.schulz@ipmz.uzh.ch

Abstract

Theoretically, populism has been conceptualized as a political ideology with three sub-dimensions: anti-establishment attitudes, a preference for popular sovereignty, and a belief in the homogeneous virtuousness of the people. However, empirical research to date has treated populist attitudes as a unidimensional construct. To address this issue, we propose to conceptualize populist attitudes as a latent higher-order construct with three distinct first-order dimensions. A 12-item inventory was developed using two survey studies conducted in Switzerland in 2014 and 2015. Exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis were used to test the construct validity of this measure of populist attitudes. The measurement that is proposed allows for a fine grained study of populist attitudes in the general public.

Keywords: populism, populist attitudes, scale development, confirmatory factor analysis

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In the national elections of 2014 and 2015 the citizens of European countries such as Sweden, Finland, Poland, and Denmark have shown strong support for populist parties, as indicated by the proportion of voters who supported the Swedish Democrats (12.9%), the Finns (17.7%), the Law and Justice Party (51.5%), and the Danish People's Party (21.1%), respectively. Many authors are trying to identify the reasons for this growing success of populist parties (e.g., Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008a; Mény & Surel, 2002; Mudde, 2004). Voting for specific parties that are a priori categorized as populist has been connected with a set of populist attitudes. These attitudes have been found to correlate positively with support for populist parties and movements (Akkerman, Mudde & Zaslove, 2013; Hawkins, Riding & Mudde, 2012; Hawkins & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2014). In research to date, populist attitudes have been conceptualized as a unidimensional measure. However, we argue that a unidimensional model fails to adequately describe populist attitudes, as it does not account for the different political ideas that have been identified as distinct yet correlated facets of a populist ideology (Mudde, 2004). Therefore, the present study proposes and tests a three-dimensional hierarchical measurement of populist attitudes. Such a three-dimensional model is not only able to identify populist attitudes in its entirety (i.e., attitudes indicating strong support for all three dimensions), but can also distinguish between different varieties of populist support (i.e., attitudes strongly supporting only one or two dimensions).

Populism as an Ideology

Authors frequently argue that populism is a “notoriously vague term” (Canovan, 1999, p. 3), which entails a certain “conceptual slipperiness” (Taggart, 2000, p. 1). Most recently, populism has been defined as a communication style (e.g., Jagers & Walgrave, 2007), a political strategy (e.g., Weyland, 2001), and a political ideology (e.g., Mudde, 2004). This study takes the last perspective, defining populism as a “thin-centred ideology” (Mudde,

2004, p. 544) comprising a “set of political ideas” (Hawkins 2010, p. 5) about the structure of power in society (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008b). More precisely, according to the populist ideology, society is “ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus the ‘corrupt elite,’” and politics is nothing but “an expression of the general will of the people” (Mudde, 2004, p. 543). In the present paper, populism is defined as a thin ideology, which can become a thick ideology when it is combined with more complete ideologies, such as nativism—right-wing populism—or socialism—left-wing populism (Authors, in progress). From this definition we can extract three political ideas that populism is composed of: 1) an anti-establishment approach, with elites seen as corrupt, betraying and deceiving the people; 2) a belief in unrestricted popular sovereignty that leaves the power to the people; and 3) an understanding of the people as being homogeneously virtuous. When populism is conceived of as a set of political ideas or as a multi-dimensional construct, researchers should operationalize and measure populist attitudes accordingly. In the following section, we argue that this has not been followed with sufficient diligence in prior research on populist attitudes among the general public.

Aside from two early attempts at the end of the 20th century to identify populist attitudes within the United States (Axelrod, 1967; Farrell & Laughlin, 1976), it has only been recently that populist attitudes have received significant attention from researchers.

Akkerman, Mudde, and Zaslove (2013; see also Hawkins et al., 2012) developed a one-dimensional conceptualization of populist attitudes. This measure reflects two of the three key elements of populism identified above: popular sovereignty and antagonism towards what is perceived to be an evil political elite.¹ This instrument has been tested in the US (Hawkins, et al. 2012), the Netherlands (Akkerman, et al. 2013), and Chile (Hawkins & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2014). The latest version of the inventory is made up of six items measuring populist attitudes (e.g., “The politicians in Congress need to follow the will of the

people”). These researchers used principle component analysis to demonstrate that populist attitudes form a single dimension distinct from elitist and pluralist attitudes toward democracy. The successful replication of the model in three different countries leads to the conclusion that “populist attitudes are widespread and latent” (Hawkins & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2014, p. 5). To validate their measurement, these authors modeled correlates of their populism measure with demographic, social, and political indicators. While no correlations with demographics were revealed for the case of Chile, affiliates of leftist parties showed stronger populist attitudes compared with partisans of rightist parties—a plausible finding for the Southern American context (Hawkins & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2014). In the Netherlands, populist attitudes were correlated with support for parties that are often categorized as populist (i.e., the Socialist Party and the Party for Freedom) (Akkerman et al., 2013). Additionally, it was shown that in the US, populist attitudes correlate positively with strong affiliations to either liberal or conservative ideologies (Akkerman et al., 2013). However, two problems with this conceptualization remain. First, it lacks the idea that people are homogeneously wise and virtuous, a common tenet of populism.² Second, because of this conceptualization’s unidimensionality, it is impossible to detect varieties of populist attitudes, such as the branch of populist thinking that predominantly promotes the notion of a reified popular will and is less intensely attached to the notion of a conspiring elite.

A Three-Dimensional Construct

Building on the prior research outlined in the preceding section, the present paper aims to develop a more finely grained inventory with which to measure the concept of populism. Previous reasoning on populism suggests that the populist ideology is built on three main political ideas. If we wish to measure the degree of individual support of populism, an instrument is needed that delineates between support for each of these three ideas. As a full populist is assumed to hold strong anti-establishment attitudes, believe in

unrestricted popular sovereignty, and understand the people as being homogenously virtuous, then populist attitudes can be conceptualized as a second-order factor made up of these three distinct sub-dimensions as first-order factors.

There are several reasons to suggest a three-dimensional structure of populist attitudes. First, the empirical measurement of a construct of interest should reflect all facets that are derived from the underlying theory. When populist attitudes are defined by three elements, then it is reasonable to expect three dimensions that are part of a higher-order latent construct that represents populist attitudes. If one dimension were to be missing from the operationalization, the measurement would not reflect all facets of populist attitudes, but rather an incomplete version of the ideology. Second, if populism is conceptualized as a three-dimensional construct, then these attitude dimensions can be activated in varying degrees in an individual mind. For example, although there may be many people who hold anti-establishment attitudes, not all of them favor popular sovereignty or perceive the people as a homogenously virtuous group. This reality is not reflected in a one-dimensional measure, which treats individuals scoring high on one dimension as both similar to individuals scoring high on another dimension and to individuals scoring moderately on all dimensions. Applying this logic, people who hold anti-establishment attitudes but who do not see direct democratic procedures as a solution to compensate for the wrongdoings of the political elite would be indistinguishable from individuals who show the opposite pattern of attitudes—i.e., who do not see the political elite as corrupt, but who favor direct democracy. In treating populist attitudes as a single dimension, researchers cannot distinguish between these two very different views on politics. In contrast, a three-dimensional measurement would enable the researcher to detect these different attitude patterns.

The third advantage of a three-dimensional measurement is the more precise predictions it allows researchers to make. In the example given in the preceding paragraph—

describing people who hold anti-establishment attitudes yet who do not demand popular sovereignty—the degree of populism within a given society could easily be overestimated if a one-dimensional measure was used. Such an instrument could identify individuals as populists even if they were in fact only dissatisfied with the work of the current government. In contrast, an instrument based on a three-dimensional conceptualization would require that individuals score sufficiently highly on all three dimensions to be considered to hold populist attitudes. Therefore, our assumption is that populist attitudes are a latent second-order construct made up of three lower-order dimensions: anti-establishment attitudes, a preference for unrestricted popular sovereignty, and a belief in the homogeneous virtuousness of the people.

Method

Data and Procedure

To develop a scale for the three-dimensional structure of populist attitudes, two surveys were conducted over the course of six months. The first study was an online survey conducted in December 2014 on a nation-wide sample of Swiss respondents ($N = 400$). The second survey was conducted online in April 2015, but based on a Swiss sample only taken from the region surrounding Zurich ($N = 1260$). In both studies, samples were recruited from online access panels, applying a quota procedure with regard to age and gender. These samples approach the population of interest's characteristics in terms of age (National sample: $M = 43.71$; $SD = 15.57$; Regional sample: $M = 51.86$; $SD = 13.80$) and gender (National sample: 50% female; Regional sample: 47.1% female).

Measurement

We examined populist attitudes by measuring three sub-dimensions: anti-establishment attitudes, demand for popular sovereignty, and belief in the homogeneous

virtuousness of the people. The initial item pool comprised 21 items that were assumed to reflect the three dimensions. Most of these items were taken from previous studies (Akkerman et al., 2013; Hawkins et al., 2012; Hawkins & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2014). The development of additional items was guided by literature review and by a preliminary analysis of news coverage containing populist communication. Of these additional items, nine items reflected anti-establishment attitudes (*anti*) and another six items reflected a demand for popular sovereignty (*sov*). After consulting literature on the perception of in-group homogeneity and entitativity (e.g., Quattrone & Jones, 1980; Lickel, et al. 2000; Carpenter & Radhakrishnan, 2002), six items were chosen to assess the belief in a homogeneously virtuous people (*hom*). Survey participants rated all items using 5-point Likert scales ranging from 1 = “strongly disagree” to 5 = “strongly agree” (see Supplementary Appendix for question wording).

Results

An exploratory factor analysis using the promax rotation method was conducted on the items using the data from the national sample, revealing a three-dimensional structure. To optimize the solution, items were excluded when communalities or factor loadings were too low or when items loaded on more than one factor. This process was then stopped before factors reached an item number lower than four. At the end of this process, 15 items remained: five items that reflect an anti-establishment attitude, four items that reflect the support of sovereignty of the people, and six items that expressed a belief in a homogeneously virtuous people. These items share variance to a very high degree ($KMO = .89$). The three factors together account for 55% of the variance (Factor 1 = 35%; Factor 2 = 12%; Factor 3 = 8%, eigenvalues = 5.68, 2.26, 1.59, respectively). Factor loadings ranged between .632 and .896. Homogeneity items loaded strongly on the first factor, anti-establishment items on the second factor, and sovereignty items on the third factor. No serious cross-loadings occurred

and reliability was satisfactory for all three factors (see Table 1 in supplementary appendix for commonalities, loadings, and Cronbach's Alpha scores). Results of the factor analysis using data from the regional sample replicate the findings. Thus, preliminary exploratory factor analyses support the assumed three-dimensional structure of populist attitudes.

Interestingly, these analyses led to the exclusion of some of the items used in previous studies (Akkerman et al., 2013; Hawkins et al., 2012; 2014); these items were all replaced by new items. However, four out of six items employed in prior studies were retained in the updated version of the measure developed in the present paper.

To test the robustness of this factor structure, the dimensionality of populist attitudes was further examined in a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) using the R 3.2.0 package *lavaan* (Rosseel, 2012). This was done for both the national and regional sample. Populist attitudes were modeled as a second-order factor with three distinct sub-dimensions: anti-establishment attitudes, a demand for sovereignty of the people, and a belief in a homogeneously virtuous people. Items were permitted to load only on the factors they were expected to load on. A first test of a three-dimensional second-order factor model with the national data indicated an acceptable fit ($\chi^2 = 210.7$, $df = 87$, $p \leq .001$; CFI = .954; RMSEA = .06). To improve model fit, modification indices were examined. The output indicated that three items caused problems (i.e., high covariation with other items on their factor, and even with items across factors). These three items were excluded from the analysis. The resulting model showed a better fit to our data (Table 1, Panel A). All items load substantially (loadings higher than .5 in all cases) on their hypothesized latent factors. Furthermore, the latent first-order factors show significant loadings on the proposed second-order factor that represents populist attitudes (Table 1, Panel B). This result is in line with the hypothesis that populist attitudes are a latent higher-order construct made up of the three lower-order

dimensions of anti-establishment attitudes, a preference for unrestricted popular sovereignty, and a belief in the homogeneous virtuousness of the people.

[Table 1 about here]

To further corroborate the validity of this conceptualization of populist attitudes, the three-dimensional second-order factor model was compared to a one-dimensional model of populist attitudes using the same items. The one-factor model assumes that the covariance among the items can be accounted for by a single latent variable, as suggested by existing operationalizations of populist attitudes (e.g., Hawkins et al., 2012). The fit statistics in Panel A of Table 1 indicate that a hierarchical multidimensional model of populist attitudes is superior to a one-dimensional model. However, four out of six items taken from prior scales (Items 2, 5, 8, and 9) remain in the new instrument.

Discussion

Research on measuring populism in public opinion surveys has grown in the past decade due to the rise of populist parties in Western democracies. The present article introduces a refined instrument for measuring populist attitudes. By employing a deductive approach and pulling three theoretical dimensions of populism from its definition, the present findings demonstrate that a three-dimensional assessment of populist attitudes is superior to a one-dimensional conceptualization in a number of ways.

First, as our goal was to create a theoretically sound and exhaustive instrument to measure populist attitudes, we followed a deductive approach: Operationalization was strictly derived from a broadly accepted definition of populism, from which the three most important notions underlying the theoretical concept were extracted. Second, the robustness of the three-dimensional second-order factor model was successfully tested using CFA. In prior

studies, only exploratory factor analyses were employed. However, exploratory factor analysis is not suitable for construct validity testing, as all items are assumed to load on all factors, making CFA more appropriate for testing hypotheses that incorporate the dimensionality of populist attitudes. Third, the successful replication of the model in two independent samples—the findings from both the national and regional samples confirmed the hypothesized model structure—further increases the credibility of the present approach. Finally, looking at possible applications of this instrument in future research, this tool allows researchers to investigate very specific research questions. Researchers may want to examine to what extent affiliation to populist parties stems from anti-establishment attitudes, a general support of the idea of popular sovereignty, the perception of the people as homogeneously virtuous, or a combination of these dimensions. Prediction of vote choice can be further improved by adding a specific political ideology (i.e., left- or right-wing) as a fourth dimension to the model. The three dimensions measure the thin ideology of populism, yet the model is flexible enough to be extended to measure thick forms of populism as well. Furthermore, regarding a large corpus of research dealing with populist communication in media content (e.g., Akkerman, 2011; Rooduijn, 2014), this new instrument enables researchers to trace specific communication effects on the three attitude dimensions, as not all populist statements found in the media will influence all of the three dimensions in the same way.

The present analysis also carries limitations. Data were collected using online access panels from only one country, and online surveys always carry a high risk of participants being distracted while filling out the questionnaire or quickly clicking through the questions without paying real attention to the content. We therefore recommend that future studies replicate the present findings using different samples and survey modes. Moreover, we did not test for correlations between our measure of populist attitudes with related constructs

such as vote choice, education, or political ideologies. Thus, another avenue for follow-up research would be to look at how the updated measure predicts vote choice or party affiliation, further corroborating the construct validity of the present measure.

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Footnotes

¹ Akkerman et al. (2013) report three core features of populism: “sovereignty of the people, opposition to the elite, and the Manichean division between ‘good’ and ‘evil’” (p. 1331). We understand the Manichean division between good and evil as part of the anti-establishment dimension of populist attitudes.

² Stanley (2011) implemented a single item to measure homogeneity of the people in Slovakia. This item was worded negatively and showed no influence on the dependent variable of government/opposition voting.

List of Tables and Figures

Table 1

One- and Three-Factor Attitude Models

A. Fit Statistics for One- and Three-Factor Models				
	National Sample Switzerland ($N = 400$)		Regional Sample Zurich ($N = 1260$)	
	One-Factor Model	Three Factor Model	One-Factor Model	Three-Factor Model
χ^2	731.575	97.541	2729.825	136.207
df	54	51	54	51
CFI	.655	.976	.591	.987
RMSEA	.177	.048	.198	.036
SRMR	.126	.044	.136	.029

Note. CFI is the comparative fit index; RMSEA is the root mean squared error of approximation; SRMR is the standardized root mean square residual.

B. Standardized Factor Loadings for the Three Factor Models

	National Sample Switzerland				Regional Sample Zurich			
	Anti-Establishment Attitudes	Demand for Sovereignty of the People	Belief in Homogeneity of the People	Populist Attitude (2 nd order)	Anti-Establishment Attitudes	Demand for Sovereignty of the People	Belief in Homogeneity of the People	Populist Attitude (2 nd order)
anti1 ^{ref}	.802**				.798**			
anti2	.730**				.736**			
anti3	.613**				.574**			
anti5	.717**				.694**			
sov1 ^{ref}		.838**				.818**		
sov2		.799**				.805**		
sov3		.819**				.855**		
sov4		.670**				.694**		
hom1			.773**				.812**	
hom2 ^{ref}			.697**				.817**	
hom3			.798**				.807**	
hom4			.559**				.547**	
anti				.824**				.678**
souv				.712**				.659**
hom				.556**				.641**

Note. ** $p \leq .001$; ^{ref} – reference item

APPENDIX

Table 1

Items Measuring Populist Attitudes

N°	Item	Wording	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	h^2
1	anti1	MPs in Parliament very quickly lose touch with ordinary people. ■		.771		.635
2	anti2	The differences between ordinary people and the ruling elite are much greater than the differences between ordinary people. ■		.677		.519
3	anti3	People like me have no influence on what the government does. ■		.686		.446
4	anti4	Politicians are not really interested in what people like me think.		.882		.749
5	anti5	Politicians talk too much and take too little action. ■		.632		.508
6	sov1	The people should have the final say on the most important political issues by voting on them directly in referendums. ■			.896	.756
7	sov2	The people should be asked whenever important decisions are taken. ■			.747	.612
8	sov3	The people, not the politicians, should make our most important policy decisions. ■			.738	.650
9	sov4	The politicians in Parliament need to follow the will of the people. ■			.653	.452
10	hom1	Ordinary people all pull together. ■	.746			.564
11	hom2	Ordinary people are of good and honest character. ■	.642			.463
12	hom3	Ordinary people share the same values and interests. ■	.698			.566
13	hom4	Although the Swiss are very different from each other, when it comes down to it they all think the same. ■	.653			.411
14	hom5	The Swiss are basically honest and upright.	.679			.446
15	hom6	The Swiss are a coherent entity, rather than just a bunch of individuals.	.645			.450
explained variance 53%			35%	12%	8%	
Cronbach's Alpha			.83	.85	.84	

Note. Forced 3-factor factor analysis applying principle axis method and promax rotation; factor loadings lower than .2 were suppressed; $N = 377$. ■ items part of the final factor solution.