

Left Behind Economically or Politically? Economic Grievances, Representation, and Populist Attitudes

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Abstract

Research on the relationship between discontent and populist attitudes abounds. However, whether this discontent arises in response to economic grievances or a perceived lack of representation remains understudied. While previous research has considered both as independent factors, we assume their interaction drives populist attitudes. We argue that deprivation and sentiments of being left behind exacerbate the feeling that one’s policy positions are not recognized and represented in politics. To test this claim empirically, we draw on recent data from the German Longitudinal Election Study of 2021. We combine egocentric and sociotropic indicators of being left behind and interact these with the perceived distance of one’s own policy positions to the positions of the opposition and government parties represented in parliament. We find that both perceptions of personal and societal deprivation, as well as a greater perceived distance from the government, are associated with populist attitudes. Furthermore, we find that the effect of distance from the government is contingent on someone’s economic position, albeit the direction of the interaction effect contradicts our initial expectations: The effect of perceived ideological distance from the government on populist attitudes is primarily reinforced among those who are better off rather than for those who struggle economically. This implies that populist attitudes ought to be addressed depending on the source of discontent rather than treating populism as a general expression of indiscriminate protest. Our analysis contributes to understanding the various origins of populist attitudes and to developing possible ways of mitigation.

Keywords

democracy; deprivation; grievances; populist attitudes; representation

1. Introduction

The rise of populist parties in Europe challenges traditional party competition and threatens liberal democracy (Huber & Schimpf, 2017; Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012), which has spurred research into the causes of this development. Notably, research on populism has shifted its focus from the supply side to the demand side of politics as scholars seek to explain why people support populist parties and hold populist attitudes (Akkerman et al., 2014; Castanho Silva et al., 2020; Schulz et al., 2018). In this vein, populist attitudes are conceived in ideational terms as a set of beliefs—i.e., anti-elitism, people-centrism, and a Manichean view on politics as a moral struggle between the good people and the corrupt elite (Hawkins et al., 2018; Mudde, 2004). Populist attitudes have been shown to be fairly widespread in the general population yet often remain dormant unless activated through political mobilization (Hawkins et al., 2020). Even though populist attitudes lack the stability of a trait that would consistently influence other concepts, there is a small core of people for whom “populism is a (permanent) way to view the world” (Schimpf et al., 2023, p. 11).

Given the challenge that populism poses to liberal democracy, recent research has increasingly focused on the causes of populist views among citizens. While extensive research acknowledges the significance of economic and political marginalization for adopting populist beliefs, the exact mechanisms through which these experiences translate into populist attitudes remain a point of contention. However, since populist politicians and parties use their rhetoric to mobilize disenfranchised citizens in particular, it is important to examine the specific causes and related mechanisms of populist attitudes.

The central objective of this article is to examine the role of economic and political grievances in forming populist attitudes. Recent research suggests that, in addition to individuals’ socio-economic status and experiences of deprivation, economic views regarding society (Giebler et al., 2021) and a lack of societal recognition of one’s economic needs are important drivers of populist attitudes (Steiner et al., 2023). Another line of research suggests that (the perception of) a lack of political representation leads citizens to see themselves as politically disregarded and, therefore, to adopt populist attitudes (Castanho Silva & Wratil, 2023; Huber et al., 2023). While we take into account the individual role of these factors, we propose a novel argument in this article by combining these two strands of research and seek to reconcile models of economic grievance with political perspectives on populist attitudes. Specifically, we posit that grievances and a sense of being politically overlooked interplay to increase populist attitudes: The experience of economic deprivation and being left behind should reinforce the feeling that one’s own policy positions are not considered and represented in politics.

To test our hypotheses, we employ data from the German Longitudinal Election Study ahead of the 2021 German national election. This dataset is particularly appropriate due to Germany’s unique political landscape, which has seen both left-wing and right-wing populist parties gain significant traction, activating populist attitudes among citizens (Hawkins et al., 2020). Our findings indicate a significant but complex interaction between economic grievances and political discontent about representation regarding populist attitudes. In line with current research, we find that, in addition to egocentric motivations linked to experiences of economic deprivation, sociotropic attitudes about the state of society also drive populist attitudes. Furthermore, we find that individuals who perceive themselves as ideologically more distant from the government tend to hold stronger populist attitudes and that this effect is independent of the specific policy dimension. What is crucial for our argument, however, is that the perception of societal grievances

does not amplify this effect; rather, it depends on individuals' economic situation. Yet contrary to our expectations, the effect of ideological distance from the government on populist attitudes is not reinforced by lower but by higher income. These insights suggest that, while fostering inclusivity and political representation is vital, these strategies alone may not fully mitigate the rise of populism. The findings thus shed new light on the psychological mechanisms of the relationship between economic grievances, representation, and populist attitudes.

2. Theoretical Discussion

The predominant explanatory approaches for populist attitudes center around socio-cultural and economic grievances in conjunction with emotional pre-dispositions, and citizens' views regarding political representation itself. In the following, we will briefly discuss these individual perspectives before turning to the main theoretical argument about the interaction of economic and political grievances, through which we seek to reconcile two of the most prominent explanations.

2.1. Economic and Cultural Grievances

Traditional mass-society explanations of populism tend to focus on structural societal change as a trigger of social disintegration, which increases individuals' susceptibility to populism, and especially to populist charismatic leaders (Laclau, 2005). However, while traditional approaches stress the role of populism as a provider of a unifying identity and understand populism as an essential element of democracy (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985), explanations embedded in modernization theory suggest that values and value change are at the heart of the appeal that populism holds. In this vein, scholars have argued that authoritarian views can explain the support for right-wing populism among the working class (Betz, 1994). Norris and Inglehart (2019) argue that a cultural backlash against progressive values plays a significant role in fostering populist sentiments and that this backlash is strongest among those who feel their traditional values and national identity to be undermined.

While the distinction between economic and cultural grievances is a key feature of the literature on the resurgence of right-wing populism (Mudde, 2007), the "losers of globalization" thesis highlights the overlap between the two theories. Perceived economic grievances often stem from inequality, economic injustice, and the impacts of globalization, which can fuel a sense of disenfranchisement and "resentment" among individuals (Betz, 1994; Kriesi et al., 2012). Furthermore, economic transformations lead to economic anxieties that are exacerbated by the perception of cultural threats related to multiculturalism and immigration (Oesch, 2008). Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2018) hence argue that, while economic factors create a fertile ground for populism to gain traction, the cultural framing of economic anxieties often provides a potent narrative for mobilization.

However, while strongly associated with nativist views and voting for right-wing populist parties (Rydgren, 2007), the causal link between economic grievances and populist attitudes remains contested (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018). Empirical evidence regarding the effect of personal economic deprivation on populist attitudes and populist vote choice has largely been mixed, as the unemployed and left-behind tend to be more likely to abstain rather than being staunch supporters of populist actors (Norris, 2005; however, see Arzheimer, 2009). Although economic deprivation and discontent—not just with politics but also with

social life in general—are often closely linked to populist attitudes (Spruyt et al., 2016), surprisingly little is known about the mechanisms linking economic fears to populism.

Recent research has, however, suggested that it is essential to distinguish and disentangle the effects of egocentric and sociotropic attitudes with regard to deprivation. In addition to personal economic hardship, perceptions regarding the state of the economy and the general state of society, i.e., sociotropic attitudes, also appear to play an important role (Giebler et al., 2021; Rico & Anduiza, 2019). In other words, populist sentiments arise not only from personal grievances but also in response to broader societal issues. However, recent findings also suggest that cognitive capacities and emotional pre-dispositions amplify the effect of economic attitudes on both populist vote choice and populist attitudes (Magni, 2017; Rico et al., 2017, 2020; Verner et al., 2023).

2.2. Political Representation

A second strand of literature regards populism through a rational choice lens, borrowing from economic theories of democracy and spatial voting (Downs, 1957). Scholars who take this route contend that populist attitudes arise in response to (perceived) failures of representation; that is, the inability or unwillingness of political elites to serve and fulfill their constituents' interests. This approach regards citizens' discontent with representation and disenchantment with representative democracy (Canovan, 1999) as a critical element fueling the emergence of populist actors. Compared to the cultural and economic grievance models, which often revolve around the individual, the strength of the political approach lies in highlighting the interaction between demand-side and supply-side causes of populism. In this light, the rise of populism reflects a growing tension in democracies, where the challenges of effective governance clash with increasing demands for responsiveness to and empowerment of "the people" (Bardi et al., 2017; Mair, 2014, pp. 581–596).

While political conditions play a key role in this reading of populism, recent research has also highlighted that how resilient or receptive citizens are to populist mobilization is a function of their specific notions of democracy and expectations of democratic representation in the first place (Wegscheider et al., 2023). Contextual elements such as high corruption levels create an environment conducive to the emergence of populist attitudes (Busby et al., 2018), and Castanho Silva and Wratil (2023) demonstrate that failures in party representation can elicit populist attitudes in citizens who would otherwise not exhibit such tendencies. Similarly, Huber et al. (2023) find that general policy discontent drives populist attitudes more so than any specific policy preferences on their own. In line with these findings, dissatisfaction with politics and democracy more generally is interpreted as a consequence of a (perceived) lack of political representation (see also Spruyt et al., 2016). The extent to which individuals adopt and act on populist attitudes is thus deeply intertwined with the political landscape, including the performance of governing parties and the presence of populist actors who mobilize around these attitudes (Hameleers et al., 2021; Hawkins et al., 2020). However, individuals' own expectations of democratic rule (Fölsch et al., 2024; Mohrenberg et al., 2021; Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012; Zaslove & Meijers, 2023) alongside their personal predispositions critically moderate the impact of such contextual factors on populist attitudes.

2.3. Hypotheses

Taken together, it is particularly disaffection with the political system that consistently matches the profile of “the populist citizen.” In contrast, the socio-demographic characteristics of citizens who hold populist attitudes are relatively heterogeneous across regions and across left-wing and right-wing manifestations of populism (Rovira Kaltwasser & Van Hauwaert, 2020; see also Schimpf et al., 2023 on the (in)stability of populist attitudes on the individual level). However, while unemployment and objective indicators of economic deprivation appear to be related to the degree to which people adopt populist views, their views regarding society’s general and economic state also exhibit a specific relationship with populist attitudes. This indicates that, besides objective measures of economic circumstances, subjective perceptions of economic deprivation at the societal level significantly drive populist sentiments. We, therefore, expect both individuals’ income and discontent with the state of society to impact populist attitudes:

H1: Experiences of personal economic deprivation increase populist attitudes (*egocentric discontent*).

H2: Discontent with the economic state of society increases populist attitudes (*sociotropic discontent*).

Sentiments of social exclusion and of “feeling left behind” (Gidron & Hall, 2017, 2020) are prominent explanatory factors in the literature on populist attitudes. In particular, status-based identity threats play a major role in forming populist attitudes. Most importantly, these explanations view economic and social factors as interacting rather than competing explanations (Manunta et al., 2022). While research has traditionally drawn on income satisfaction, social status, and labor market skills to operationalize deprivation, more recent survey-based studies trace the roots of feelings of deprivation and argue that it is a “lack of societal [and political] recognition” (Steiner et al., 2023, p. 114) more so than any substantive measure of deprivation that explains why people adopt populist attitudes. According to Steiner et al. (2023), populist attitudes originate not only from income dissatisfaction and social conservatism but also from experiencing a lack of recognition related to these issues. Although their study acknowledges the direct effects of factors of deprivation, it also underscores the importance of the moderating role of experiences of lack of societal recognition in forming populist attitudes. This insight resonates with the literature on populist citizens, highlighting the heterogeneity in characteristics and substantive policy preferences of populist voters, suggesting that political alienation and sentiments of not being heard are key unifying elements (Rovira Kaltwasser & Van Hauwaert, 2020).

Building on this research, we thus argue that a lack of *political* recognition and dissatisfaction with political representation is a key factor that can reconcile the grievance model with political approaches to populism. While recent research has shown that personal ideological closeness to the government affects people’s perceived policy responsiveness (Hillen et al., 2024) and that elite–citizen policy congruency matters for individuals’ satisfaction with democracy (Stecker & Tausendpfund, 2016), the specific mechanism that links this dimension to populist attitudes remains under-examined. We argue that populist attitudes should be understood as a consequence of the perception that one’s own policy positions are not adequately represented by the government or in parliament. As a baseline, we thus posit that ideological distance from the government, as a measure of lack of political recognition, effectively increases populist attitudes:

H3: Greater ideological distance from the government increases populist attitudes (*ideological distance*).

More specifically, we contend that experiences of personal and societal deprivation exacerbate this baseline effect of ideological distance on populist attitudes. This is because those who suffer from economic deprivation tend to adhere more strongly to populist attitudes and, hence, respond more sensitively to populist mobilization (Gidron & Hall, 2017; Rico & Anduiza, 2019). Individuals will thus feel greater dissatisfaction with seemingly non-responsive government policies when they simultaneously struggle to make ends meet. We assume this interaction effect holds for personal and societal economic conditions:

H4: Experiences of personal economic deprivation moderate the effect of ideological distance from the government on populist attitudes—The effect of distance on populist attitudes is stronger among those who are economically left behind (*egocentric moderation*).

H5: Discontent with the economic state of society moderates the effect of ideological distance from the government on populist attitudes—The effect of distance on populist attitudes is stronger among those who perceive societal injustice (*sociotropic moderation*).

3. Research Design

3.1. Data and Case Selection

To test our hypotheses, we draw on the German Longitudinal Election Study cross-section ahead of the 2021 German national election (Roßteutscher et al., 2023), with a sample size of around $N = 4,000$. The case of Germany is particularly well-suited for our endeavor. Its party system has historically been considered a “laggard” by international standards, given the long-running weakness of populist actors (Fawzi et al., 2017). While Die Linke, often labeled as a left-wing populist party, secured its position in the national parliament following reunification in 1990, the national ascent of right-wing populism and rise of the Alternative for Germany (AfD) did not occur until 2013 (Berbair et al., 2015). Since then, the AfD underwent a considerable transition (Arzheimer & Berning, 2019; Betz & Habersack, 2019) and is today a modern populist radical right party. The German case thus promises valuable insights into the phenomenon of populist attitudes among voters, as left-wing and, particularly so, right-wing populism has gained traction in the German party landscape.

3.2. Measurement of Populist Attitudes

Utilizing the populism scale of Akkerman et al. (2014), we conduct a confirmatory factor analysis to arrive at a combined measure of populist attitudes. The confirmatory factor analysis results in Table A.1 in the Supplementary File indicate high internal coherence, in line with Akkerman et al. (2014). Likewise, in agreement with previous empirical studies, we find populist attitudes to be fairly “widespread attitudes among ordinary citizens” (Hawkins et al., 2018, p. iii) and approximately normally distributed with a mean of 0.57 on the continuous 0 to 1 scale and a slightly higher tail towards the right end—see Figure A.1 in the Supplementary File for the distribution of populist attitudes within our sample.

3.3. Measurement of Independent Variables

As one of the main independent variables, we draw on respondents' net household income across 13 categories to assess their economic situation ("Please indicate what the monthly net income of your household is? This refers to the amount that you have left after taxes and social security"; d63), which we rescale to range between 0 and 1 to facilitate interpretation. In addition, we draw on respondents' assessment of social justice with respect to society at large ("Thinking about the state of German society, how fair or unfair is it overall?"; q100), which we consider a suitable proxy for sociotropic concerns as a result of perceived societal deprivation. We use this indicator to tap into sociotropic attitudes and to gauge the interaction between societal views and ideological distance from the government.

Another key element of our models relates to the perceived ideological distance between the government parties on one hand and oneself on the other. To construct this variable, we utilize respondents' assessment of parties' left-right placement (q35b-f) and their own self-placement along the same 11-point left-right scale (q37). For this measure, we focus on the absolute spatial difference between the respondent and their closest party in the government coalition (i.e., minimum distance). For instance, if a respondent self-identifies as a 5 and assigns the scores of 3 (SPD), 6 (CDU), and 8 (CSU) to the grand coalition in office at the time of data collection, the absolute distance would be calculated as $|5 - 6| = 1$. As we show in Figure A.2 in the Supplementary File, there is a low to moderate correlation between our main independent and dependent variables.

Lastly, we draw on two positional issues to tap into respondents' socio-economic ("And what position do you take on taxes and social services?"; q40) and socio-cultural left-right positions ("And what position do you take on immigration for foreigners?"; q43). Responses were measured along an 11-point scale in both cases and ranged from "Lower taxes and fewer social services" to "More social services and higher taxes" and "Facilitate immigration for foreigners" to "Restrict immigration of foreigners," respectively. These economic and cultural policy scales serve as an alternative measure of ideological distance. As demonstrated in Table 1, results remain stable irrespective of which dimension is used (i.e., general left-right, economic, or cultural).

We additionally control for age, gender, education (high or low education as indicated by somebody's attainment of a university entrance qualification), regional differences (East or West Germany), and political interest. Table A.2 in the Supplementary File shows descriptive statistics of all variables.

4. Results

Turning to the empirical test of our hypotheses, we run a series of regression models (models 1–3) to gauge the absolute effects of personal deprivation, societal deprivation, and ideological distance from the government, which are summarized in Table 1. In line with our expectations, we find that higher household income leads to lower populist attitudes and that egocentric deprivation thus plays an important role (H1). Furthermore, we find that the perception of social injustice as a proxy for social deprivation has a strong positive influence on populist attitudes. Thus, sociotropic deprivation is also important for explaining populist attitudes (H2). Regarding the role of political dissatisfaction resulting from a perceived ideological distance, we find that greater distance from the government increases populist attitudes, while this is not the case for distance from the opposition (H3).

Table 1. The absolute and interaction effects of personal/societal deprivation and distance from government.

	Dependent variable: Populist attitudes				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Household net income	−0.07*** (0.01)	−0.08*** (0.01)	−0.07*** (0.01)	−0.11*** (0.02)	
Injustice society	0.19*** (0.02)	0.17*** (0.02)	0.18*** (0.02)		0.22*** (0.02)
LR distance government	0.06** (0.02)			−0.03 (0.06)	0.16** (0.06)
LR distance opposition	0.04 (0.03)			0.04 (0.03)	0.05* (0.03)
Econ. distance government		0.08*** (0.02)			
Econ. distance opposition		−0.01 (0.02)			
Cult. distance government			0.10*** (0.01)		
Cult. distance opposition			−0.04* (0.02)		
Age	0.0003 (0.0002)	0.0003 (0.0002)	0.0003 (0.0002)	0.0001 (0.0002)	0.0003* (0.0002)
Female	−0.02** (0.01)	−0.02** (0.01)	−0.02** (0.01)	−0.01* (0.01)	−0.02*** (0.01)
Education	−0.21*** (0.02)	−0.22*** (0.02)	−0.20*** (0.02)	−0.23*** (0.02)	−0.18*** (0.02)
East Germany	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)
Political interest	−0.08*** (0.01)	−0.08*** (0.01)	−0.07*** (0.01)	−0.07*** (0.01)	−0.09*** (0.01)
Satisfaction with democracy	−0.31*** (0.01)	−0.32*** (0.01)	−0.29*** (0.01)	−0.36*** (0.01)	−0.31*** (0.01)
Income × LR distance government				0.22* (0.10)	
Injustice society × LR distance government					−0.13 (0.08)
Constant	0.80*** (0.02)	0.83*** (0.02)	0.79*** (0.02)	0.96*** (0.02)	0.74*** (0.02)
Observations	3,708	3,517	3,716	3,723	4,183
R ²	0.36	0.37	0.37	0.33	0.35
Adjusted R ²	0.36	0.37	0.37	0.33	0.35
Residual Std. Error	0.16 (df = 3,697)	0.16 (df = 3,506)	0.16 (df = 3,705)	0.16 (df = 3,712)	0.16 (df = 4,172)

Notes: OLS regression estimates (Std. Error in parentheses); * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$; LR = left–right.

To interpret the results substantively, we visualized the main effects of our analysis. Figure 1 displays the primary effects, i.e., predicted values of personal and societal deprivation alongside ideological distance from the government on populist attitudes; this figure is based on model 1 in Table 1. The significant coefficients for

personal deprivation suggest that experiences of economic hardship on the individual level modestly increase populist attitudes. While citizens with a low household net income score an average of 0.6 on the populist attitudes scale, people with a high household income score just above 0.5, which is significantly below the average of 0.57. This finding aligns well with our theoretical expectations that personal economic struggles directly contribute to feelings of disenfranchisement, which in turn fuel populist leanings.

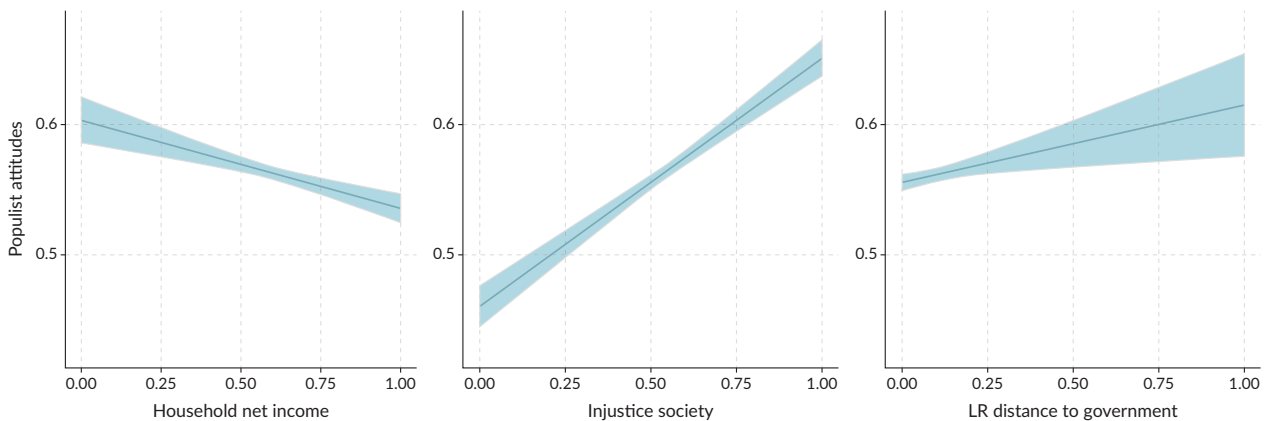


Figure 1. Main effects of personal/societal deprivation and distance to government, 95% confidence interval. Note: LR = left-right.

The more robust effect of societal deprivation underscores the substantial role of perceived economic injustices at a societal level in fostering populist attitudes. This suggests that, beyond personal circumstances, broader concerns about societal fairness and equity are potent drivers of populist sentiments. This aligns with the notion that individuals who perceive the economic state of society negatively are more likely to adopt populist views, reflecting broader sociotropic concerns. While both personal and societal deprivation display significant effects at $p < 0.001$, the effect size of concerns about the state of society is more than twice as large as that of being personally left behind. Accordingly, people who do not perceive any inequality in society have an average score of populist attitudes of around 0.45, while people who perceive strong societal inequality score well above 0.65.

Although smaller, the effect of ideological distance from the government is likewise significant at $p < 0.001$ and indicates that the greater the perceived ideological gap between individuals and the government, the stronger the inclination towards populist attitudes. Importantly, we find this result for the perceived distance on the left-right scale and also for the perceived distance on socio-economic and socio-cultural left-right positions (see models 2 and 3 in Table 1). This demonstrates that populist attitudes can arise independently of the policy issue. More generally, our findings support the notion that feelings of political alienation and lack of representation contribute to populist attitudes, suggesting that political disenfranchisement also plays a role in shaping such sentiments. On average, people who perceive a large political distance from the government score about 0.1 points higher on the populist attitudes scale.

We now investigate our main argument, namely that personal and societal deprivation amplify the impact of a (perceived) lack of political representation, as measured by ideological distance from the government (H4 and H5). As summarized in models 4 and 5 in Table 1, we run two further models to analyze the interaction effects between ideological distance and personal/societal deprivation, respectively. We find that the interaction

between income and distance to government is significant at $p < 0.05$ and positive, while the interaction between social injustice and distance to government is not significant. Accordingly, the effect of a perceived lack of representation on populist attitudes is reinforced by egocentric motivations but not by societal ones. Contrary to our assumption, however, the effect is not amplified by lower income but by higher income.

Figure 2 visualizes the interaction between personal deprivation and ideological distance from the government. The predicted values indicate that the effect of being ideologically distant from the government on populist attitudes is amplified among those who are personally better off (+1 standard deviation). On the other hand, the effect of ideological distance from the government also increases among people with below-average income (-1 standard deviation), albeit to a lesser extent and not to a statistically significant degree. This suggests the possibility of a ceiling effect for low-income respondents, whose populist attitudes are already relatively high, even if the representation gap is not evident.

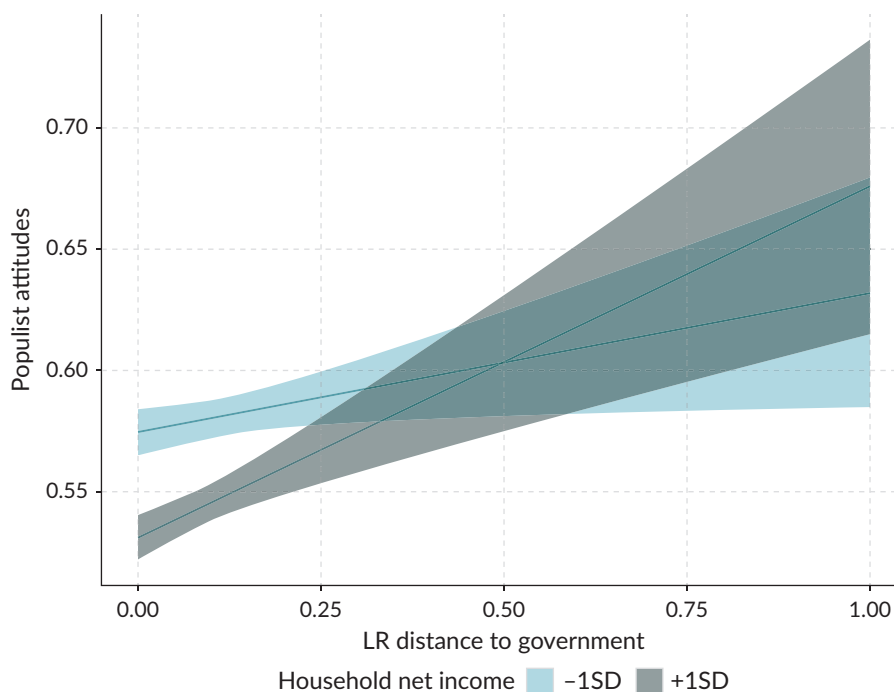


Figure 2. Interaction of personal and societal deprivation with distance to government, 95% confidence interval. Notes: LR = left-right; SD = standard deviation.

These results show that the causes of populist attitudes can vary depending on a person's economic situation. For those who find themselves in a good and secure economic situation, the baseline of populist attitudes is significantly lower and economic reasons seem to play only a minor role. Due to the secure economic situation and the low level of concern about one's own income, political factors become more relevant for developing populist views. Accordingly, the perceived distance to the government plays a substantial role, with political representation and being heard in policymaking becoming major concerns for those with a higher income. While political factors such as the feeling of being represented in and by the government's policy decisions also play a role for people on a low income, they do so to a lesser extent. We can, therefore, assume that the effects contribute equally to the development of populist attitudes, i.e., that both economic and political factors play a role and reinforce each other. Strikingly, this contrasts with the combination of the economic

state of society and ideological distance: Negative perceptions of the state of society as well as perceived ideological distance from the government influence populist attitudes—yet the two factors do not mutually reinforce or condition one another.

Our results, thus, indicate that personal economic conditions can amplify the negative effects of perceived political disenfranchisement, leading to a stronger inclination towards populist attitudes among those who are well-off. Importantly, this interaction underscores the role of economic safety in heightening sensitivity to perceived ideological discrepancies in political representation. Satisfaction with one's economic status and living conditions gives way to a stronger desire for political representation. This means that ideological stances and policy responsiveness matter more directly for somebody's views on political elites when such engagement with politics is affordable. While future research could investigate this relationship's causal and psychological mechanisms in greater detail, for instance, by using panel data, we interpret our results as a strong indication that economic concerns combined with political attitudes effectively fuel populist attitudes and political disillusionment.

5. Conclusion

This article has sought to examine the role of economic and political grievances in forming populist attitudes, investigating the interaction between these two factors. Even though a wealth of literature acknowledges the importance of economic and political marginalization, few studies have considered how the two sides mutually condition one another. Building on recent research, we distinguish between egocentric and sociotropic attitudes (Giebler et al., 2021; Steiner et al., 2023) as well as perceptions of political representation (Castanho Silva & Wratil, 2023; Huber et al., 2023) and investigate the relative effect strengths of respondents' personal income condition, their attitudes towards the state of society, and their ideological distance to the government. Most importantly, we examine the main argument of whether and to what extent these two types of economic grievances reinforce the perception of a lack of political representation for the formation of populist attitudes.

Regarding their absolute effects, we find that sociotropic attitudes matter most when it comes to explaining why people adopt populist attitudes. However, someone's income and ideological distance from the government also contribute to higher populist attitudes. When it comes to their interaction, we find someone's personal income situation crucially moderates the effect of ideological distance—however, in a direction contrary to our argument. That is, while those who struggle to make ends meet may adhere more strongly to populist attitudes, the effect of distance from the government is reinforced above all among those who are not objectively threatened by economic grievances. Therefore, political representation is important for the emergence of populist attitudes, yet especially so for those with no or little financial concerns who can afford to develop political attitudes towards the government. This contributes to recent findings suggesting that perceptions of a lack of political representation leads citizens to see themselves as politically disregarded and adopt populist attitudes (Castanho Silva & Wratil, 2023; Huber et al., 2023). At the same time, it contradicts previous assumptions that economic and political grievances reinforce each other, thereby contributing to higher levels of populist attitudes. Our results thus help combine and reconcile the economic and political strands in explaining populist attitudes.

These findings bear significant theoretical and empirical implications for current and future research. They underscore the importance of seriously considering the diverse potential causes of populist attitudes rather than dismissing them as mere undirected protests. Depending on the source of discontent, different measures will be necessary for effective mitigation. The results indicate that focusing solely on cultural explanations while neglecting economic variables or treating economic deprivation and political factors as distinct obscures the interplay between these mechanisms. Economic hardship significantly contributes to political dissatisfaction and the rise of populist attitudes, yet political factors and perceptions of inadequate political representation are additional crucial contributors. Here, it is also important to note that political dissatisfaction because of a perceived ideological distance from the government contributes in particular to populist views among those who are not in a difficult economic situation and are therefore able to inform themselves more about politics and how their views are taken into account in the decision-making process.

Future research could use panel data to examine whether and to what extent these relationships change over time and are, thus, dependent on changing economic and political situations. On the one hand, the question arises as to whether an improvement or deterioration in the economic situation influences citizens' ability to engage with politics and, therefore, being more likely to appraise whether the existing government represented them well. On the other hand, it is possible to investigate whether populist attitudes change with different government constellations, e.g., after elections, and whether this is due to a change in the perception of political representation. This should lead to a change in the effect sizes and populist attitudes, and it might explain why populist attitudes are widespread in society despite different situations and backgrounds of citizens. Ultimately, our findings underscore the importance of following an integrated approach, considering the role of both economic and political marginalization in the rise of populism and its mitigation.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material and replication files for this article are available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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