Populism, anti-technocratic attitudes, and COVID-19 related conspiracy beliefs across Europe

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Abstract: This paper focuses on the puzzle of how a initially struggling populist party landscape is compatible with wide-spread beliefs in conspiracy theories during the COVID crisis (YouGov, 2020; Brubaker, 2021). Analyzing survey data collected in 16 countries (34,000 respondents) in June-July 2021, we offer three contributions to the literature on conspiracy beliefs and populism. First, building on the multidimensionality of the concept of populism (Castanho-Silva et al, 2018) but also of related anti-technocratic attitudes (Bertsou and Caramani 2021), we show that these attitudes are highly prevalent, despite an initial "rallying" effect in the beginning of the pandemic. We also show that both core-populist and related anti-technocratic attitudes are strongly associated to conspiracy beliefs. Second, we show that how well governments perform in the crisis matters net of trust and ideology and inquire into the moderating role that general dissatisfaction with the management of the crisis plays in the populism-conspiracy nexus. Thirdly, we examine the electoral link and seek to understand whether these attitudes are more likely to push citizens in the arms of populist parties. Our results indicate that conspiracy beliefs and populist attitudes have small, but significant consequences for vote intention for populist parties.

Introduction

For all their electoral breakthroughs over the last decade, the Covid-19 pandemic has initially created an inhospitable environment for populist forces across the Western world. With a newfound embrace of technocratic policy advice and expertise by large segments of the electorate, governments led by mainstream parties, such as in Italy, Germany, and New Zealand enjoyed wide-spread popular support, as shown by studies indicating a "rally-around-the-flag" effect in the first waves of the pandemic (Altiparmakis et al, 2021; Bol et al, 2020). At the same time, populist politicians from Trump to Bolsonaro and Salvini appeared to struggle, and survey-data evidenced a steep decline in populist support concomitant with an increase in conspiracy beliefs (YouGov, 2020). Arguably, the pandemic has initially thrown sand in the populist wave's gear by distracting public attention from populist politicians' preferred issues, such as immigration, crime, and the EU's alleged encroachment on national sovereignty. At the same time, the pandemic has also created fertile grounds for novel types of misinformation and conspiracy beliefs, the type of attitudes that populist parties tend to thrive on because they are closely linked to underlying populist attitudes (Guan and Yang, 2020; Oliver and Wood, 2014; Castanho-Silva et al, 2017). Building on a vibrant echo chamber of anti-vaccine pundits and their followers, Covid-19 has pushed some longstanding conspiracies, particularly the ones around the risks posed by mass vaccination, to the heart of the mainstream, evidenced by a substantial minority of citizens who refuse to get vaccinated (Eurofound, 2021).

Our paper seeks to disentangle the puzzle on how what could have been initially regarded as a defeat for the populist party landscape became an advantage as populists shifted gears into focusing on ever louder rejections of science and misinformation related to the Covid-19

pandemic. We do so by further exploring the link between COVID-19 conspiracy theories and populism and offering three contributions to the literature on conspiracy beliefs and populism. First, we build on the multidimensionality of the concept of populism (Akkerman et al, 2014; Scultz et al, 2017) and demonstrate that despite the loss of credibility of many of the most potent populist forces in Europe, many of the underlying populist attitudes survive, creating a highly receptive audience to conspiracy theories. In particular, we highlight the differential role that each dimension of populism and related anti-technocratic attitudes plays into conspiracy beliefs. Second, we inquire into the role that previous factors associated with populist attitudes, such as trust in institutions or ideology (Eberl et al, 2021; van Prooijen, 2018), but also understudied ones such as performance evaluations and (dis)satisfaction with the management of the crisis at the domestic and at the EU level play in the populism-conspiracy nexus. We expect populist sentiment and related attitudes to be strongly related to respondents' Covid-related conspiracy beliefs but also moderated by performance evaluations within the pandemic. Thirdly, we bring in the analysis the electoral link that the conspiracy literature has underexplored (though see, for exceptions Swami et al, 2018; Mancosu et al, 2021) and seek to understand the populist attitudes and conspiracy beliefs that are most likely to push citizens in the arms of populist challenger parties.

We test our claims with an original cross-national survey fielded in 16 EU member states at the end of the pandemic's third wave (June-July 2021) within which we rely on multiple items tapping into conspiracy beliefs, populist attitudes, performance evaluations, and electoral preferences. Our results show that most populism-related attitudes are associated to COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs (with the suprising exception of anti-elitist attitudes), and so are government performance evaluations. We also observe a moderation effect of government performance evaluations on the relationship between populism attitudes and conspiracy

beliefs. Finally, our results also show that conspiracy beliefs and populist attitudes have small, but significant consequences for political behavior as they increase vote intention for populist parties. The rest of the paper is structured as follows. In the next section, we build on the literature on conspiracy beliefs and populism to establish a connection between these attitudes on the one hand, and their electoral consequences on the other. In the third section, we introduce our original survey data. The fourth section presents our main findings, and the last section concludes.

Conspiracy beliefs, populism, and anti-technocratic attitudes during COVID-19

Conspiracies are usually defined as narratives or explanations of events that tend to favor some specific patterns over others, assuming that these events are the product of the deliberate actions of a specific group of people with malevolent intent (Byford's, 2011; Bale, 2007; Clarke, 2002; Uscinski, 2019:3). One important characteristic of such conspiracy theories is that they are unfalsifiable in that any evidence brought against the narrative is interpreted as another proof of the power of the specific group of people constituting the conspirators (Keeley, 1999; Vegetti and Littvay, 2021). Another important characteristic of conspiracy theories is that they try to reduce the complexity of a particular event to monistic and intrinsically deterministic explanations (Castanho-Silva et al. 2017), whilst refusing to contemplate the possibility that these events are the result of "unintended consequences of a multitude of decisions made by short-sighted bounded rational individual actors guided by conflicting purposes" (Mancosu et al, 2017 p.327).

These characteristics make conspiracy theories especially prevalent during societal crises and stressful events, though even in "normal times" a large plurality, or even a majority of citizens tend to express sympathy for at least one conspiracy theory (Oliver, 2016; Bergman, 2018). Crisis events, however, have been consistently linked in the literature with an increased belief in conspiracy theories due to the complexity of the event and the feeling of lack of control that these evoke. Conspiracy theories provide a way of coping with uncertainty and threat by adopting narratives that reduce the complexity of the crisis at hand and offer particular groups to blame for it as scapegoats (van Prooijen, 2018). Moreover, by acting as situational triggers (Radnitz and Underwood, 2015), crises have the potential to activate underlying attitudes that make people predisposed towards conspiracy beliefs in the first place, such as partisan-motivated reasoning (Enders and Smallpage, 2018; Miller et al, 2016), lack of political efficacy (Enders, 2019), authoritarian personality types (Richey, 2017), or just a general conspiratorial mindset that many studies in political psychology treat as a stable feature of individuals that make them subscribe to multiple conspiracy theories, even contradictory ones (Bruder et al, 2013; Wood et al, 2012).

Against this backdrop, due to its extent and complexity, the COVID-19 crisis provided fertile ground for a rise in such conspiracy theories and for a substantial group of believers in them, as shown by previous survey research on the matter (Sanders, 2020; YouGov, 2020). The wide-spread social anxiety triggered by daily mortality headlines coupled with stringent lockdown measures and economic uncertainty came together as a perfect storm for these beliefs to ripple across society, making their way from the fringes to the mainstream. This situation was further exacerbated by what was called a Covid "infodemic" by the World Health Organization, as people were exposed to a larger extent than usual to misinformation,

pseudoscientific information, and unverified content pertaining to COVID-19 through social media (Kouzy et al., 2020).

Existing research on COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs has focused on both their individual-level antecedents and their consequences. In terms of their *antecedents*, in addition to the usual suspect of a general conspiratorial mindset (Miller, 2020; Uscinski et al, 2020) most of the recent studies stress the role of the low level of information, perceived uncertainty and threat, and lack of trust in authorities or other people. For example, in a systematic review of the available research on COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs, van Mulukom et al 2021 show that low levels of information and trust in authorities, but high perceived uncertainty and threat are consistently linked with COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs. Using a survey fielded in Slovakia, Šrol et al (2021) show that feelings of anxiety and lack of control amidst the pandemic are an important predictor of conspiracy beliefs related to the origin and spread of COVID-19. Additionally, they also show that such feelings are not only associated with higher endorsement of coronavirus-specific conspiracy theories, but also with generic conspiracy and pseudoscientific beliefs.

Compared to their psychological determinants, there has been relatively less emphasis on how conspiracy beliefs link up with other political attitudes in the context of the Covid-19 crisis. In this respect, a common antecedent that shows up is partisan-motivated reasoning. Miller's study (2020) based on an online survey of American adults clearly shows that Republican sympathizers are more likely to sign up to Covid-related conspiracy theories than Democrats, most probably because of the psychological need to shift blame away from a Republican president's manifest mishandling of the pandemic. Closer to our interest, Eberl et al (2021), using panel survey data from the Austrian Corona Panel Project, show an overall

positive relationship of populist attitudes – measured on a single scale – and conspiracy beliefs that is independent of political ideology, but that is driven by trust in science and in political institutions. Given that the core attribute underpinning Covid-related conspiracy beliefs is a rejection of official accounts on the pandemic, it is highly plausible that such attitudes go hand in hand with political orientations that share a deep sense of distrust of official accounts of events, as narrated by experts and the elite. Such distrust in the elite lies at the core of a broader package of political orientations that the literature collectively discusses under the label of populist attitudes. Populism is usually understood as a "thin ideology" that views social reality as a Manichean struggle between a pure and homogenous people and a conniving and corrupt elite that seeks to undermine the expression of popular sovereignty *("la volonte generale")* for its selfish ends (Mudde, 2004). Just like the literature on conspiracy beliefs, such populist attitudes have been linked to a common core of antecedents, such as the experience of socioeconomic grievances (Spruyt et al, 2016; Rico and Anduiza, 2019), emotional stimuli in the form of anger and fear (Rico et al 2017), and even gender-specific socialization (Spierings and Zaslove, 2017).

Importantly, however, not only is populism a multidimensional construct (Akkerman et al, 2014; Castanho-Silva et al, 2020; Hameleers and de Vreese, 2020; Wuttke et al, 2020; Hawkins and Kaltwasser 2018), but it is also highly conceptually and empirically related to neighboring attitudes which might make an equally natural fit with conspiracy beliefs. The most commonly used empirical disaggregation of this fairly complex political orientation is offered by Akkerman et al. (2014) who distinguish between the core of populist attitudes – focused on people-centrism – from two related ideological constructs: pluralism and elitism. Others investigate all these different dimensions as part of a wider populism concept. For example, Castanho-Silva et al. (2018), examine a battery of 145 items proposed for ten

dimensions in order to examine populism. Following exploratory analysis on a cross-national survey sample, they end up proposing three stable constructs that they consider as definitional parts of populism: people-centrism, anti-elitism, and a Manichean view of the world. Schultz et al. (2018) also claim against treating populist attitudes as a unidimensional construct and argue for the use of three distinct dimensions: anti-elitism attitudes, a preference for popular sovereignty, and a belief in the homogeneity and virtuousness of the people. Going further, Bertsou and Caramani (2021) claim that the dissatisfaction with the workings of party-based representative democracy does not result only in core populist attitudes, but also in (anti-) technocratic ones that partially overlap with some dimensions of populism. Apart from the core of populist attitudes focused on people-centrism and a Manichean view of the world in line with Akkerman et al. (2014), they propose three additional dimensions of elitism, expertise, and anti-politics to differentiate between these various attitudes. We must stress at this point, that, beyond this overview, the goal of discerning between the various conceptualizations of populism is beyond the scope of this paper. In line with the proposal of Bertsou and Caramani (2021), we treat these dimensions here as neighboring attitudes which we measure separately showing that they can be meaningfully distinguished from each other empirically, while leaving the question of their theoretical relationship open for further study.

Therefore, taking into account this strain of literature on the multidimensionality of populism and its neighboring attitudes, we posit that while other crises in the recent past have been more explicitly linked to rise of populism, such as the euro crisis (Marcos-Marne et al, 2020; Rico and Anduiza, 2019), the refugee crisis (Evans and Ivaldi, 2021), the Brexit process (Pellegata and Franchino, 2017) and even the climate crisis (Huber, 2020), the Covid-19 crisis has also activated populism-related dimensions in spite of an initial rallying effect. Unlike threats from immigration that lay at the core of the refugee crisis and Brexit, the

Covid-19 pandemic did not present a wide-spread perception of threat to the cultural homogeneity of the people. Also, unlike the deeply unpopular austerity packages the followed in the wake of euro crisis and the Great Recession (Bojar et al, 2021), the policy response to Covid-19 met with generally high approval, at least until the later stages of the pandemic (Altiparmakis et al, 2021; Bol et al, 2020). Therefore, given the choices that policymakers faced in the wake of the initial Covid-19 shock, it was a hardly tenable accusation that choices were made against the "general will of the people". The policymaking response to the pandemic was a quintessential technocratic moment with scientific experts put in quasi policymaking positions and emergency powers imposed to curtail the room for consultation and deliberation with the people. In line with Brubaker (2021), we contend that while the pandemic has not generated a coherent or large-scale populist response, it might have heightened distrust of expertise and exacerbated antipathy to intrusive government regulation. We thus expect that those who hold such anti-technocratic views were more likely to challenge the official accounts of events. Since a large part of such challenges were formulated in the form of conspiracy theories and misinformation, we expect to not only confirm a link between populism and conspiracy beliefs that the literature has uncovered previously, but to find an even strong link between anti-technocratic attitudes and conspiracy beliefs in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic.

H1a. Core populist attitudes focused on people-centrism are positively related to respondents' covid-related conspiracy beliefs.

H1b. Anti-expertise, anti-politics, and anti-elitism sentiments are more strongly related to respondents' covid-related conspiracy beliefs than core populist attitudes focused on people-centrism.

However, as argued above, the Covid-19 emergency is a special crisis moment because of the wide-spread acceptance of stringent lockdown measures that the population had to accept in its wake. In fact, the initial popular response to pandemic was much like the "rally-around the flag phenomenon" familiar from the literature on international conflicts (Baker and O'Neal, 2001; Callaghan and Virtanen) and natural disasters (Reeves, 2011; Velez and Martin, 2013). The most important characteristic of these rare periods is that a substantial part of the critical public – including opposition voters, or in our framework, those who hold populist, anti-elitist, anti-expertise, and anti-politics sentiments – approve of government policy. Though by the time our survey was fielded, such unqualified rally gave in to partisan contestation and popular discontent with some of the measures and the vaccination roll-out, it is a plausible conjecture that the initial support for government policies cross-cut wide segments of the electorate regardless of their underlying populist sentiments, partisan orientation, or general feelings of trust. Therefore, going beyond the already shown relationship between populist attitudes and general trust (Eberl et al. 2021), we expect to find variation among those with populism related views in the degree to which they approve of the pandemic response. More specifically, we expect policy approval to moderate the link between populism related sentiments and beliefs in Covid-related conspiracy theories. We test this hypothesis in both what regards the performance of national governments and the performance of the EU.

H2. Performance evaluations of the national governments and the EU within the pandemic are related to conspiracy beliefs net of trust in political institutions and populist attitudes. Moreover, they moderate the relationship between populist attitudes and covid-related conspiracy beliefs. Positive evaluations diminish this effect, whereas negative evaluations enhance it.

The relationship between the various dimensions of populism and its neighboring concepts gains relevance only to the extent that they have discernible consequences on citizens` behavior. While the literature on conspiracy beliefs mostly focused on citizens' precautionary behavior in the context of Covid-19 pandemic (Prichard and Christman, 2020; Teovanovic 2020), the populist attitude literature has put forward a more encompassing research agenda on these attitudes' impact on diverse aspects of electoral behavior, ranging from support for direct democracy and voting patterns in referenda (Jacobs et al, 2018; Mohrenberg et al, 2021) to electoral behavior in general and support for populist parties in particular (Giebler et al, 2020; Marcos-Marne, 2021; Neuner and Wratil, 2020; Van Hauwaert and Van Kessel, 2018). The well-established link that emerges from this literature between populist attitudes and support for populist parties – both on the left and the right end of the ideological spectrum – takes us back to the original puzzle we formulated in the set-up of this paper: despite its apparent potential to activate conspiracy beliefs and populist attitudes, the Covid crisis did not seem to, at least on the face it, systematically boost support for populist parties.

We argued that populist parties are limited to appeal to new voters for two reasons. First, populist parties have been part and parcel of the political landscape for decades and as such, are becoming an established part of the political elite. The more established they are in the political landscape, the more their anti-politics and anti-elitist messages might start to ring hollow to an otherwise receptive audience. Second, as we argued before, the policy-making response to Covid-19 was inevitably an experts and elite affair, which met with a generally wide acceptance by the population. It is one thing to blame bankers and the financial elite in a financial crisis, or urban cosmopolitans, socio-cultural professionals, and NGOs in a refugee crisis for their alleged complicity in the suffering of "ordinary people". It is another thing to

blame healthcare professionals – or pharmaceutical companies for that matter – in a public health crisis, without whom the human toll of the pandemic would have been manifestly more severe. In sum, the public health crisis triggered by the pandemic was different from other crises moments in the recent past in the sense that it was difficult to frame the domain-specific part of the professional elite as a part of the problem, rather than the solution.

That said, these considerations do not automatically need to imply that populist parties are inherently unable to benefit from the pandemic. Since the primary object of conspiracy beliefs are those in decision-making positions, populist parties can credibly signal that they played no role in the scheming of these powerful actors, whether it is national governments, pharmaceutical companies, or other external forces. In other words, while populist leaders may struggle to place themselves above the rather diffuse targets of anti-elitist sentiments alone, they are better placed to benefit from the suspicion and anger targeted at a narrower group of decision-maker. In sum, we expect conspiracy belief to increase the electoral appeal of populist parties above and beyond populist attitudes.

H3: Conspiracy beliefs about the pandemic increase the probability of support for populist challenger parties net of populist attitudes.

Data and Operationalization

The data for this study was collected as part of an original cross-national survey fielded in 16 EU member states at the end of the pandemic's thirds wave (June-July 2021) in the framework of the SOLID research project "Policy Crisis and Crisis Politics, Sovereignty, Solidarity and Identity in the EU Post-2008". The national samples were obtained using a

quota design based on gender, age, area of residence, and education and consist of more than 2000 respondents per country, amounting to a total of 34200 respondents. The timing of the survey, June-July 2021, is also particularly suitable for our research question in several regards. First, the main issue on the agenda of European countries before and during the fielding of our questionnaire was the vaccination rollout. As indicated by the high rates of vaccine hesitancy across Europe (Eurofound, 2021), the vaccination issue can be presumed to have provided fertile ground for a host of conspiracy beliefs. Secondly, rather than fielding our survey at the beginning of the pandemic when its consequences and implications might not have been apparent yet, fielding it after more than a year since the start of the pandemic allowed for enough time for conspiracy beliefs to form.

Beyond specific items measuring conspiracy beliefs related to Covid, the survey includes multiple items related to broader attitudes concerning the Covid pandemic, such as policy evaluation targeted at national governments and the EU as well as a host of sociodemographic and political attitudes. This allows for a systematic investigation of the correlates of Covid conspiracy theories. In the following, we focus on the two batteries of questions that form the core of our study: the one measuring populist attitudes, and the one measuring conspiracy beliefs.

Measuring populism and (anti-)technocratic attitudes

For measuring populist and related attitudes, we include a series of items commonly used in the populism literature starting from the classic Akkerman et al. (2014) populism scale and complementing it by items from the Castanho Silva et al. (2019) scale. This combination of items has been tested out and applied in Bertsou and Caramani (2020) in a cross-national setting. The battery has the twofold advantage that it allows us to capture the core features of populism: people-centrism and the Manichean view of the world as opposition between

"good" and "evil" while also holding on a single factor loading and, therefore, can be easily aggregated into an index of populist attitudes (Bertsou and Caramani, 2020).

In addition to the classic populism measures, in order to further capture both the multidimensionality of the populism concept, but also measure particular attitudes related to neighboring concepts such as anti-elitism, ani-expertise, and anti-politics, we include an additional battery of items catering specifically to these three concepts. We do so by using the items with the highest factor loadings on these dimensions based on the Bertsou and Caramani (2020) study. We, therefore, include two items that measure anti-elitism and relate to the political involvement of ordinary people[1], two items that measure preference for expert decision-making (inverted to anti-expertise), and two items that tap into dissatisfaction with representative politics (anti-politics). The entire battery of items included in the survey can be found in Appendix A2 with all items measure on scales from 0 to 10.

Figure 1 presents the results of exploratory factor analysis on these items and further validates their usage[2]. These results replicate the findings of Bertsou and Caramani (2020) on a different, geographically broader, and larger cross-sectional sample. The items in our battery load into four dimensions with Eigenscores higher than 1. The first dimension, PA1, includes most of the populism items representing the people-centrism and Manichean view of the world dimension. The second dimension, PA2, corresponds to the anti-elitism items, while the third, PA3, corresponds to the anti-expertise items. Finally, the last dimension, PA4, includes the anti-politics items, but also the third populism item (POP3) which is voiced

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[1] The scale for the items ELI1 and ELI2 in Appendix A2 has been inverted to measure anti-elitism.
[2] We used principal axis factoring with oblimin rotation using the *psych* package in R. Appendix Figure A1 shows that there are four factors with eigenvalues higher than 1, confirming our selection of four factors is optimal. Additionally, the four-factor model presented good model fit statistics (TLI = 0.972 and RMSEA = 0.036). Appendix Table A6 shows item loadings on all factors.

in rather anti-political terms. This partial overlap between the populism dimension and anti-politics in the case of POP3 is also found in Bertsou and Caramani (2020) and is expected given that this item implies a critical approach to parties and politicians. Given these results, in what follows we aggregate the items into four different sets of attitudes (populism including POP3, anti-politics, anti-elitism, and anti-expertise) by averaging across the items forming the dimension.

Figure 1. Exploratory factor analysis for populist attitudes
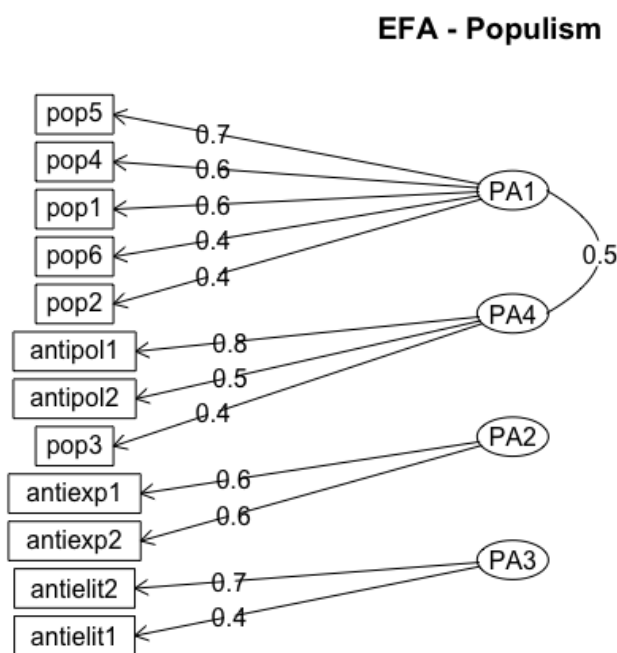
We explore the share of respondents holding populist attitudes across regions in Europe in Figure 2. When it comes to the main populism scale focused on people-centrism we see that more than 80 per cent of the respondents in our sample score higher than 5 on our 0 to 10 scale across all European regions. Slightly lower shares (between 65 per cent and 70 per cent) are obtained for anti-politics attitudes. By contrast anti-elitist attitudes are expressed by less than half of respondents (41 per cent to51 per cent), while anti-expertise attitudes are the least common in our sample (only around 10% of respondents). There is also some interesting cross-regional variation whereas southern European countries appear to be the most people-

centric, western European countries the most anti-elitist, and eastern European countries the most anti-political and pro-expertise. All in all, this figure indicates that, even if the populist party landscape might be struggling, the underlying populist attitudes survive and might create a highly receptive audience for conspiracy theories.

Figure 2. Percentage of respondents with populism-related attitudes
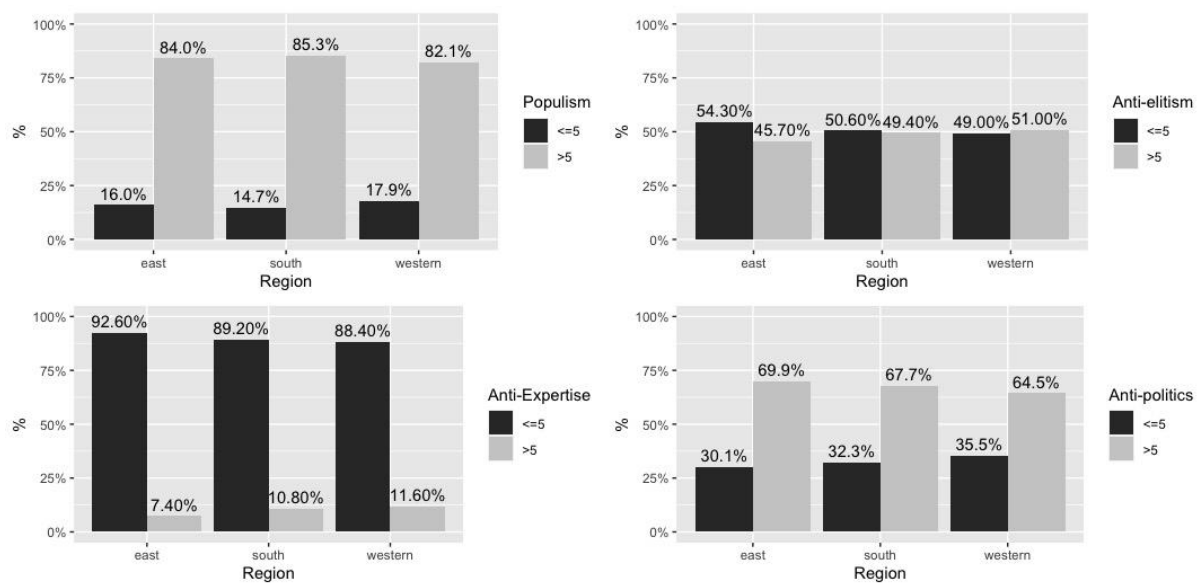
Measuring conspiracy beliefs

For measuring conspiracy beliefs during COVID-19 we use an original battery of items that captures specific and presumably popular COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs. Appendix A1 showcases our battery with all items measured on 0-10 scales. Three items in our battery (CONS1, CONS2, and CONS3) capture different conspiracy theories involving different issues and culpable actors: one relates to the national governments hiding important Covid-related information, another relates to the purposeful creation of the virus for personal gains, and a third related to governments and/or pharmaceutical companies covering up the dangers

of vaccines. In addition to these items, we have also included two more items as benchmarks for our questions. The literature on conspiracy theories in general suggests that individuals who endorse one conspiracy theory tend to endorse others thus forming a general conspiratorial mindset (Swami et al., 2011). More specifically, research on COVID-19 related conspiracies has also been shown to be consistent with this general conspiratorial mindset (Miller, 2020; Uscinski et al, 2020). We have, therefore, included an item designed to capture this general conspiracist ideation element that askes about authorities hiding the official version of events irrespective of COVID-19 (item BASE). We will use this benchmark item as an important control in our empirical models. Finally, we have also included a "true" statement in the battery (item TRUE related to vaccination) as a further check on how our battery works and on the consistency of these beliefs. The inclusion of this "true" statement also guards against the risk coming from the similarity of question content and response format that may distract a respondent from giving full attention to what information is being asked.

Figure 3 presents the results of exploratory factor analysis on this battery and shows that, expectedly, the conspiracy related items together with the baseline item all load highly on the same dimension, whereas the "true" item loads negatively on this same dimension[3]. Given this, but also comparing the model fit of a one-factor with a two-factor model, the "true" item in the scale is separated and not included into the aggregation. Generally, this supports the aggregation of the different conspiracy items into a single scale, and also confirms expectations in the literature on conspiracy theories of a general conspiratorial mindset

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[3] We used principal axis factoring with oblimin rotation using the *psych* package in R. Appendix Figure A2 shows that there is only one factor with eigenvalues higher than 1. Additionally, the one-factor model presented acceptable model fit statistics (TLI = 0.942 and RMSEA = 0.114). We also run our factor analysis on a two-factor model which presented a lower BIC value (BIC = 844 compared to BIC = 2190), which indicated that the "true" item in the scale can be separated and not included into the aggregation. Appendix Table A7 shows item loadings on this factor.

driving most conspiracy beliefs. In what follows, as a hard test on our hypotheses, we

combine items CONS1, CONS2, and CONS3 into a scale by averaging them and include the

baseline item as control variable (but also include it directly in the conspiracy scale as a

robustness check in Appendix A4 with results remaining stable).

Figure 3. Exploratory factor analysis for conspiracy attitudes

EFA - Conspiracy beliefs
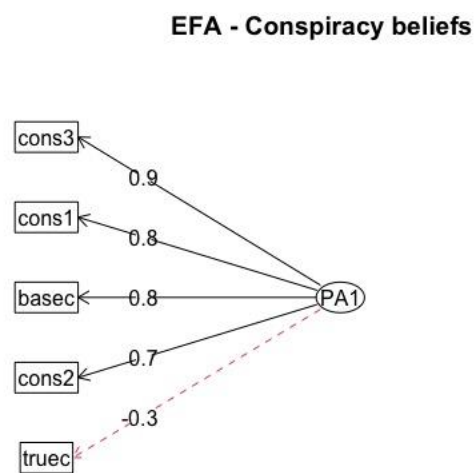
Lastly, before proceeding to the results, Figure 4 presents the distribution of people believing

in COVID-19 conspiracy theories (left graph) and sharing a general conspiratorial mindset

(right graph) across regions in Europe. Both graphs indicate that believing conspiracy

theories of particular or general nature is the norm, rather than the exception across all

European regions. More than half of the respondents report these theories more likely to be

true than not. This shows that rather than being a fringe phenomenon, this is widespread and

further underscores the importance of studying its relation to populist attitudes and its

implications for political behavior.

Figure 4. Percentage of respondents strongly believing in conspiracy theories
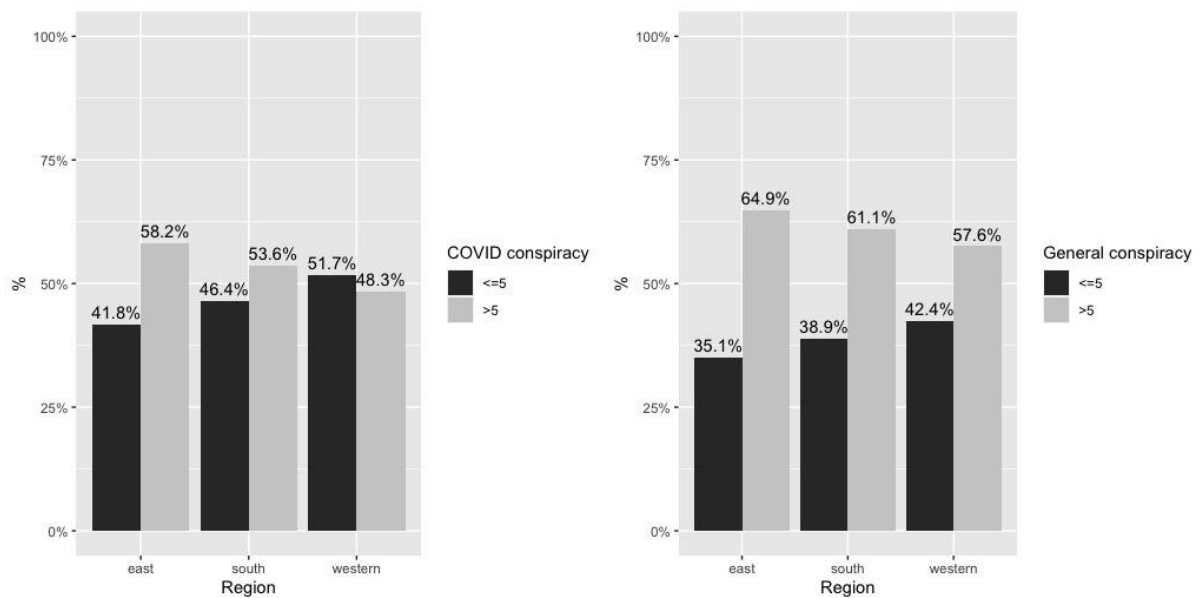
Results

Table 1 shows the results of three linear models analyzing the impact of populist attitudes, basic socio-demographics, and general political attitudes on the COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs scale, and a fourth, full model. All the independent variables are significant in separate models and remain significant in the full model (model 4), on which we focus on below. Expectedly, we can see that a general conspiratorial mindset is strongly associated with COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs even after controlling for socio-demographics, populism, and other political attitudes. In what regards populist attitudes, we can see that indeed the basic populism scale focused on people-centrism and a Manichean view of the world has a positive and statistically significant effect on COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs. A 1-point increase on the populism scale produces, on average, around 0.18 increase in the COVID-19 conspiracy scale (both measured from 0 to 10). Additionally, the other related attitudes included in our battery also have significant effects in different directions. This lends support to hypothesis H1a, but only partially support H1b as these dimensions have effect sizes that,

while non-trivial, are slightly smaller than the one obtained for the populist scale. Anti-politics attitudes impact positively on conspiracy beliefs, with a 1-point increase producing a 0.13 increase in the conspiracy scale. Anti-expertise is positively associated with conspiracy beliefs with a small effect size after the inclusion of other control variables in model 4. Surprisingly, anti-elitism is negatively associated with COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs. This last result is counter-intuitive, as one would expect that a critical attitude towards the elites would feed into the acceptance of COVID related misinformation and conspiracy beliefs[4]. We further explore this counter-intuitive effect below when testing H2.

The basic socio-demographics and general political attitudes included are all significantly associated with conspiracy beliefs. Older, male, highly educated, and more politically interested people are less likely to hold COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs. The results also support previous findings in the literature relating trust in government negatively with conspiracy beliefs (Eberl et al 2021). Additionally, ideology has a strong effect, as respondents placing themselves on the right of the ideology scale score 0.6 higher on average on the conspiracy beliefs scale, than those on the left. Finally, performance evaluations of governments are negatively associated with conspiracy beliefs above and beyond the trust people lend these governments (supporting to H2). The performance of the EU has a much smaller effect in comparison and this result is also not robust to the specification of the conspiracy scale (see Table A4 in the Appendix). This suggests that what governments, and to a lesser extent the EU, do policy-wise during the pandemic does matter and, while small, they have the potential to offset conspiracy beliefs.

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[4] Furthermore, this negative effect is robust to various model specification and to disaggregation of the anti-elitism index. In Appendix A8 we explore bivariate relations between anti-elitism and conspiracy beliefs, relations by European region, but also relations between each item composing the anti-elitism index. The result remains significantly negative in all these various models.

Table 1. Predicting COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs[5]

	Dependent variable:			
	COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Base consp.	0.620*** (0.007)			0.587*** (0.008)
Populism	0.148*** (0.012)			0.177*** (0.013)
Anti-elitism	-0.106*** (0.008)			-0.122*** (0.009)
Anti-expertise	0.133*** (0.009)			0.094*** (0.010)
Anti-politics	0.171*** (0.010)			0.132*** (0.010)
Age 35-60		-0.002 (0.057)		-0.155*** (0.044)
Age > 60		-0.713*** (0.066)		-0.614*** (0.052)
Female		0.197*** (0.049)		0.161*** (0.037)
Edu. middle		-0.438*** (0.065)		-0.262*** (0.049)
Edu. high		-0.943*** (0.070)		-0.375*** (0.053)
Ideology right			1.476*** (0.073)	0.571*** (0.054)
Ideology center			0.771*** (0.066)	0.403*** (0.048)
Pol. Interest			-0.139*** (0.032)	-0.104*** (0.023)
Trust gov.			-0.170*** (0.011)	-0.015* (0.009)
Gov. perf.			-0.126*** (0.013)	-0.058*** (0.009)
EU perf			0.007 (0.012)	-0.018** (0.009)
Constant	-0.793*** (0.117)	5.066*** (0.119)	5.405*** (0.151)	0.359** (0.168)
Observations	10,799	12,223	10,268	9,406
R^2	0.577	0.089	0.162	0.595
Adjusted R^2	0.577	0.088	0.160	0.594
Residual Std. Error	1.808 (df = 10778)	2.703 (df = 12202)	2.548 (df = 10246)	1.744 (df = 9374)
F Statistic	736.079*** (df = 20; 10778)	59.930*** (df = 20; 12202)	94.210*** (df = 21; 10246)	444.670*** (df = 31; 9374)
Note:				*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Further exploring the effects of government performance, Figure 5 (based on Table A3 in the Appendix) tests its moderating effect on populist attitudes. We can see that generally those with more positive performance evaluations (solid black line) score less on the conspiracy scale. Nevertheless, the moderating effects are mixed. Performance evaluations have little to no interaction effects with two of the populism related attitudes: core populism and anti-expertise (upper left and lower left graphs). When it comes to anti-elitism we have a significant negative interaction effect: those with more positive performance evaluations

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[5] The models include country fixed effects not reported here due to space considerations.

Figure 5. Interaction effects between populist attitudes and government performance[6]
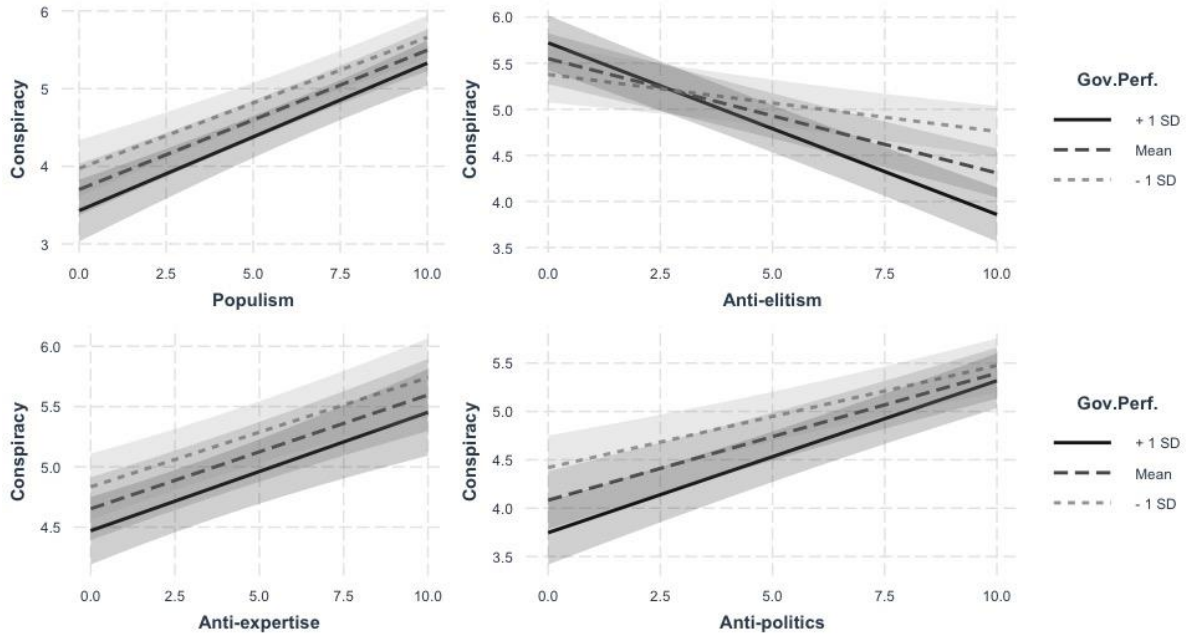
increase the negative effect of anti-elitism on conspiracy beliefs (upper right graph). In line

with expectations, this indicates that those respondents holding anti-elitist views but evaluate

government performance positively are less inclined to hold conspiracy beliefs than those

who evaluate the government negatively. This partially offsets the counter-intuitive results on

the relationship between anti-elitism and conspiracy beliefs previously obtained.

Additionally, Figure A3 in the Appendix shows a similar negative interaction effect in what

regards trust in government, which similarly offsets the initial negative effect of anti-elitism

on conspiracy beliefs. Finally, against H2, there is also a very small significant positive

interaction effect between performance and anti-politics. As performance evaluations are

more positive, the effect of anti-politics on conspiracy theories slightly increases, though as

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[6] The regression table for the interaction plots presented here can be found in Appendix A3.

the lower right graph in Figure 4 shows, this effect is very small as the lines are close to being parallel. All in all, these results show only mixed evidence for H2.

Last but not least, we explore the consequences of populist attitudes and conspiracy beliefs on political behavior. Table A5 in the Appendix presents logit models on vote intention for populist parties, including basic socio-demographics and general political attitudes. In Figure 6 we plot the predicted probabilities of vote intention for radical right parties for our variables of interest from these models. First, the results indicate that most of the different populist related attitudes are significantly associated with vote intention for populist parties in expected directions. Populism, anti-elitism, and anti-expertise increase the probability of voting for these parties, whereas anti-politics has a null effect. Importantly, conspiracy beliefs also significantly increase the probability of voting for populist parties net of populism-related attitudes. Nevertheless, while significant, these effect sizes are rather small. An increase of 5 point on the 0-10 conspiracy scale increases the probability of voting for populist parties with about 2 percentage points. A slightly higher effect can be observed in the case on core-populist attitudes where a 5-point higher score increases the probability of voting for populist by about 5 percentage points. By contrast, general socio-demographics and political attitudes fare much better in predicting intention to vote for populist parties. Having higher education decreases the predicted probability of voting by 2 percent compared to lower education, whereas self-placing on the right of an ideological scale increases it by 13 per cent compared to self-placing on the left. All in all, these results suggest that while conspiracy beliefs and populist attitudes do have significant consequences on political behavior, these consequences are small and such behavior is better predicted by long-standing political attitudes and socio-demographics.

Figure 6. Predicted probabilities of vote intention for populist parties
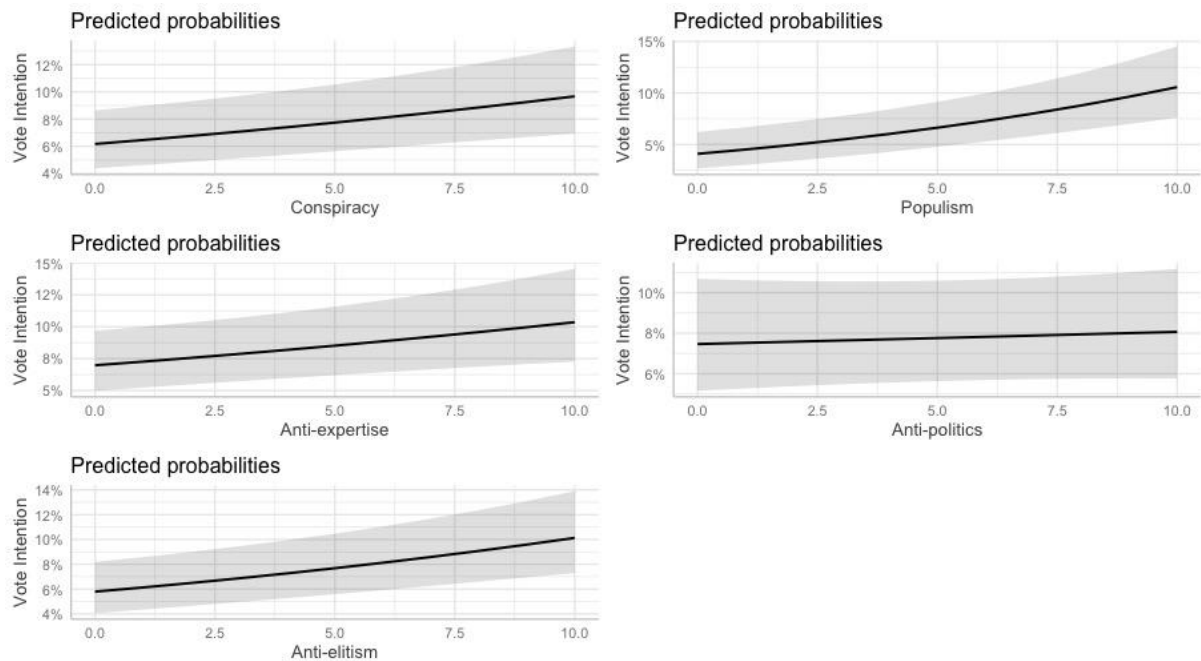
Conclusions

Our paper focused on the puzzle of how a supposedly struggling populist party landscape is compatible with wide-spread beliefs in conspiracy theories during the COVID crisis. Analyzing original survey data collected in 16 countries in the summer of 2021, we aimed to offered three contributions to the literature on conspiracy beliefs and populism. First, we built on the multidimensionality of the concept of populism, but also of related anti-technocratic attitudes, and show that many of these attitudes are highly prevalent, despite an initial "rally-around-the-flag" effect in the first waves of the pandemic and the initial loss of electoral potential of populist parties. We also show that these attitudes are strongly related to conspiracy theories and that this relation holds not only for core-populist attitudes, but also for related anti-technocratic attitudes.

Second, the present study also provides important implications for policy making. Going beyond the literature exploring the relationship between trust and populism, we also inquire into the role that general (dis)satisfaction with the management of the crisis at both the domestic and the EU level plays in this populism-conspiracy nexus. Our results indicate that how well governments did in handling the crisis is consequential, net of the trust that people have in them, of their ideology, and of populist attitudes, having the potential to not only reduce conspiracy beliefs in their own term, but also to offset the relationship between populist attitudes and conspiracy beliefs. By contrast, performance evaluations of the EU play a much more limited role, which indicates that the heavy lifting in offsetting such beliefs falls in the hands of national goverrnments.

Finally, we also bring in the analysis the electoral link and show that conspiracy beliefs are likely to push citizens in the arms of populist challenger parties on their own terms, net of underlying populist and anti-technocratic attitudes. While the small effect sizes on the relationships between populist attitudes, conspiracy beliefs, and vote intention for populist parties might be considered cause for optimism, we must stress that we are limited here in capturing only developments happening in the summer of 2021. More recent times seem to indicate that anti-vaccination and anti-restrictions attitudes fueled by conspiracy theories have further intensified, capturing media headlines across Europe. Additionally, while the novelty of the crisis might have made political parties reluctant to position themselves clearly in the anti-vaccination debate at the beginning of the crisis, as the vaccination rollout is progressing populist parties might begin to take a clearer stance on the issue and increase their electoral benefit from these issues. Going further, future research could examine whether the strength of these relationship has intensified over time and its implications for the electoral credibility of populist parties.

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Appendix

A1. Final question wording of COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs question

In your opinion, how likely is it that the following statements are true? Please, select a value from 0 to 10, where 0 means "not likely to be true at all" and 10 means "extremely likely to be true".

Table A1. Battery on conspiracy beliefs

CONS1	The [COUNTRY] government is hiding important information related to COVID-19 from the public
CONS2	The virus has been created by some influential figures or organizations to increase their power in the world and/or because some of them can directly profit from it
TRUE	The vaccines that have been so far developed and approved against COVID-19 greatly reduce the risk of infection and present little risk for our health
CONS3	Governments and/or pharmaceutical companies cover up the dangers of the vaccines developed so far
BASE	Regardless of the issue in question, the official version of the events given by the authorities very often hides the truth

A2. Question wording of the populism question in June – 2021

To what extent you agree or disagree with the following statements? Please, select a value from 0 to 10, where 0 means "completely disagree" and 10 means "completely agree".

Table A2. Battery on populism, (anti-)elitism, expertise, and anti-politics

Question:	Dimension	Source:

POP1	Politicians need to follow the will of the people.	Populism – People-centrism	Akkerman et al. (2014)
POP2	The people, not the politicians, should make our most important policy decisions.	Populism – People-centrism	Akkerman et al. (2014)
POP3	I would rather be represented by an ordinary citizen than by a specialized politician.	Populism – People-centrism	Akkerman et al. (2014)
POP4	I take pride in being an ordinary citizen.	Populism – People-centrism	Castanho Silva et al. (2019)
POP5	It's important for a political leader to be like the people he or she represents	Populism – People-centrism	Castanho Silva et al. (2019)
POP6	Politics is ultimately a struggle between good and evil.	Populism – Manichean	Akkerman et al. (2014)
ELI1	Ordinary citizens don't know what policies are good for them.	Elitism (Inverted to Anti-elitism)	Bertsou and Caramani (2020)
ELI2	Political leaders should make decisions according to their best judgment, not the will of the people.	Elitism (Inverted to Anti-elitism)	Bertsou and Caramani (2020)
EXP1	The leaders of my country should be more educated and skilled than ordinary citizens.	Expertise (Inverted to Anti-expertise)	Bertsou and Caramani (2020)
EXP2	The problems facing my country require experts to solve them.	Expertise (Inverted to Anti-expertise)	Bertsou and Caramani (2020)
ANTIPOL1	Political parties do more harm than good to society.	Anti-politics	Bertsou and Caramani (2020)
ANTIPOL2	Politicians just want to promote the interests of those who vote for them and not the interest of the whole country.	Anti-politics	Bertsou and Caramani (2020)

A3. Interactions between populism components and performance evaluations

Table A3. Models with interaction effects between populism dimensions and government performance[7]

	Dependent variable:			
	COVID-19 Conspiracy Beliefs			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Generic consp.	0.587*** (0.008)	0.580*** (0.008)	0.587*** (0.008)	0.586*** (0.008)
Populism	0.161*** (0.020)	0.175*** (0.013)	0.177*** (0.013)	0.178*** (0.013)
Anti-elitism	-0.122*** (0.009)	-0.020 (0.014)	-0.122*** (0.009)	-0.119*** (0.009)
Anti-expertise	0.093*** (0.010)	0.090*** (0.010)	0.088*** (0.016)	0.090*** (0.010)
Anti-politics	0.132*** (0.010)	0.125*** (0.010)	0.132*** (0.010)	0.088*** (0.016)
Age 35-60	-0.153*** (0.044)	-0.163*** (0.044)	-0.155*** (0.044)	-0.149*** (0.044)
Age > 60	-0.611*** (0.052)	-0.604*** (0.051)	-0.614*** (0.052)	-0.604*** (0.052)
Female	0.161*** (0.037)	0.173*** (0.037)	0.161*** (0.037)	0.162*** (0.037)
Edu. middle	-0.259*** (0.049)	-0.246*** (0.049)	-0.262*** (0.049)	-0.252*** (0.049)
Edu. high	-0.372*** (0.053)	-0.369*** (0.053)	-0.375*** (0.053)	-0.368*** (0.053)
Ideology right	0.571*** (0.054)	0.559*** (0.054)	0.571*** (0.054)	0.571*** (0.054)
Ideology center	0.404*** (0.048)	0.408*** (0.048)	0.402*** (0.048)	0.404*** (0.048)
Pol. Interest	-0.104*** (0.023)	-0.113*** (0.023)	-0.104*** (0.023)	-0.104*** (0.023)
Trust gov.	-0.016* (0.009)	-0.017* (0.009)	-0.015* (0.009)	-0.015* (0.009)
EU perf.	-0.018** (0.009)	-0.020** (0.009)	-0.018** (0.009)	-0.019** (0.009)
Gov. perf.	-0.083*** (0.025)	0.058*** (0.016)	-0.061*** (0.012)	-0.113*** (0.019)
Populism*Gov. perf.	0.004 (0.003)			
Anti-elitism*Gov. perf.		**-0.021*** (0.002)**		
Expertise*Gov. perf.			0.001 (0.003)	
Anti-politics*Gov. perf.				**0.009*** (0.003)**
Constant	0.480** (0.201)	-0.097 (0.175)	0.375** (0.172)	0.645*** (0.187)
Observations	9,406	9,406	9,406	9,406
R^2	0.595	0.599	0.595	0.596
Adjusted R^2	0.594	0.597	0.594	0.594
Residual Std. Error (df = 9443)	1.744	1.737	1.745	1.743
F Statistic (df = 31; 9443)	430.822***	436.735***	430.744***	431.653***
Note:	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01			

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[7] All the models include country fixed effects.

A4. Robustness test with generic conspiracy item included in the scale

Table A4. Models including the generic conspiracy item in the DV scale[8]

	Dependent variable:			
	COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Populism	0.379*** (0.014)			0.405*** (0.015)
Anti-elitism	-0.072*** (0.009)			-0.148*** (0.010)
Anti-expertise	0.119*** (0.011)			0.061*** (0.012)
Anti-politics	0.400*** (0.011)			0.286*** (0.012)
Age 35-60		0.046 (0.055)		-0.148*** (0.053)
Age > 60		-0.567*** (0.064)		-0.663*** (0.062)
Female		0.209*** (0.047)		0.297*** (0.045)
Edu. middle		-0.366*** (0.062)		-0.226*** (0.059)
Edu. high		-0.859*** (0.067)		-0.420*** (0.063)
Ideology right			1.363*** (0.069)	0.850*** (0.064)
Ideology center			0.686*** (0.062)	0.532*** (0.057)
Pol. Interest			-0.102*** (0.030)	-0.082*** (0.028)
Trust gov.			-0.189*** (0.011)	-0.128*** (0.010)
Gov. perf.			-0.120*** (0.012)	-0.112*** (0.011)
EU perf			0.014 (0.011)	-0.006 (0.010)
Constant	0.077 (0.144)	5.256*** (0.113)	5.714*** (0.143)	2.370*** (0.200)
Observations	10,799	12,090	10,190	9,406
R²	0.289	0.085	0.171	0.358
Adjusted R²	0.288	0.084	0.169	0.356
Residual Std. Error	2.228 (df = 10779)	2.575 (df = 12069)	2.407 (df = 10168)	2.088 (df = 9375)
F Statistic	230.976*** (df = 19; 10779)	56.170*** (df = 20; 12069)	99.877*** (df = 21; 10168)	174.173*** (df = 30; 9375)
Note:				*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

A5. Vote intention for populist parties

Table A5. Logit model for vote intention for populist parties[9]

	Dependent variable:			
	Vote intention for populist parties			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Conspiracy	0.064*** (0.011)			0.049*** (0.013)
Populism	0.108*** (0.018)			0.102*** (0.021)
Anti-elitism	0.047*** (0.011)			0.061*** (0.014)
Expertise	0.026* (0.013)			0.043*** (0.015)
Anti-politics	0.026* (0.014)			0.008 (0.016)
Age 35-60		0.335*** (0.035)		0.169** (0.070)

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[8] All the models include country fixed effects.

[9] All the models include country fixed effects.

Age > 60		0.146*** (0.040)		0.006 (0.084)
Female		-0.400*** (0.030)		-0.260*** (0.060)
Edu. middle		0.068* (0.037)		0.050 (0.076)
Edu. high		-0.211*** (0.042)		-0.263*** (0.085)
Ideology right			1.210*** (0.047)	1.024*** (0.084)
Ideology center			0.148*** (0.046)	-0.010 (0.080)
Pol. Interest			0.146*** (0.020)	0.100*** (0.037)
Trust gov.			-0.071*** (0.007)	-0.054*** (0.014)
Gov. perf.			0.031*** (0.008)	0.050*** (0.014)
EU perf			-0.135*** (0.008)	-0.117*** (0.013)
Constant	-3.763*** (0.196)	-1.944*** (0.079)	-2.085*** (0.105)	-3.621*** (0.282)
Observations	10,850	34,245	27,618	9,442
Log Likelihood	-4,691.432	-15,186.310	-11,971.490	-3,917.218
Akaike Inf. Crit.	9,424.864	30,414.620	23,986.980	7,898.436
Note:				*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

A6. Exploratory factor analysis for the populist and related attitudes scales

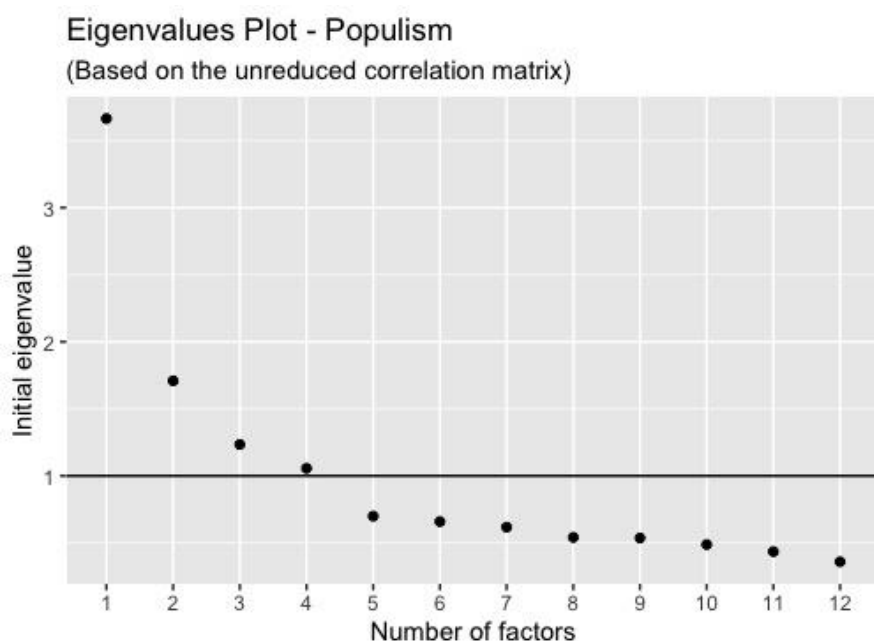Figure A1. Eigenvalues plot for the populism related attitudes scales

Table A6. Item loadings for the populism related attitudes scales[10]

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[10] Factor loadings lower than 0.3 not shown.

Item	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4
POP1	0.607			
POP2	0.449	0.390		
POP3	0.415	0.444		
POP4	0.637			
POP5	0.700			
POP6	0.449			-0.325
ANTIELI1				0.438
ANTIELI1				0.677
ANTIEXP1			0.644	
ANTIEXP2			0.591	
ANTIPOL1		0.762		
ANTIPOL2		0.534		

A7. Exploratory factor analysis for the populist and related attitudes scales

Figure A2. Eigenvalues plot for the conspiracy beliefs scale

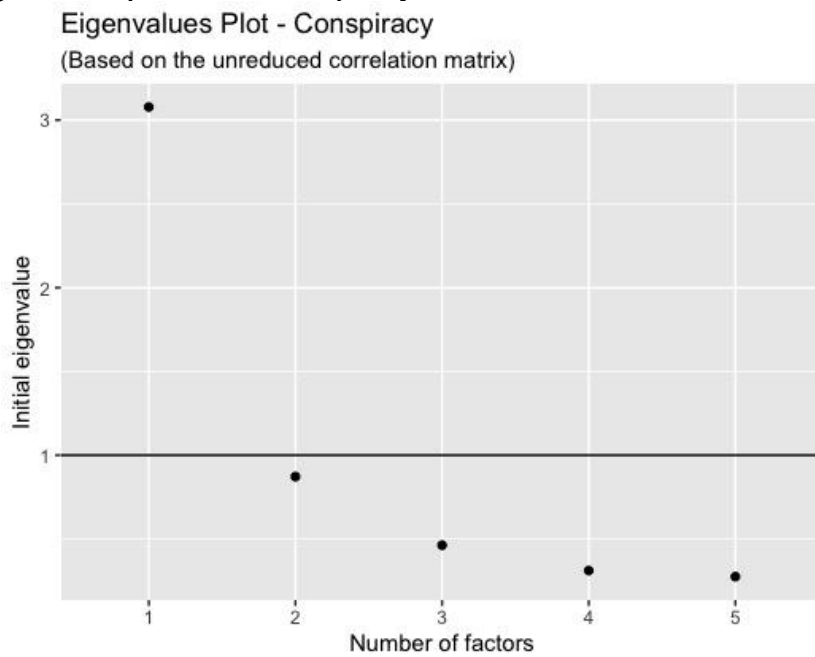Table A7. Item loadings for the conspiracy beliefs scale

Item	Factor 1
BASE	0.778
TRUE	-0.348

CONS1	0.849
CONS2	0.730
CONS3	0.850

A8. Further tests on anti-elitism

Table A8. Bivariate relations between anti-elitism and conspiracy theories by region

	Dependent variable:			
	Conspiracy beliefs			
	Overall	West	South	East
Anti-elitism	-0.088*** (0.011)	-0.110*** (0.016)	-0.063*** (0.019)	-0.046** (0.021)
Constant	5.824*** (0.064)	5.645*** (0.100)	5.722*** (0.113)	6.098*** (0.122)
Observations	11,825	5,019	3,975	2,831
R²	0.006	0.009	0.003	0.002
Adjusted R²	0.005	0.009	0.002	0.001
Residual Std. Error	2.812 (df = 11823)	2.859 (df = 5017)	2.728 (df = 3973)	2.767 (df = 2829)
F Statistic	65.916*** (df = 1; 11823)	44.802*** (df = 1; 5017)	10.880*** (df = 1; 3973)	4.699** (df = 1; 2829)
Note:	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01			

Table A9. Analysis with the disaggregated dimensions of anti-elitism

	Dependent variable:		
	Conspiracy beliefs		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Conspiracy	0.589*** (0.008)	0.591*** (0.008)	0.587*** (0.008)
Populism	0.152*** (0.013)	0.178*** (0.013)	0.181*** (0.013)
Anti-elitism 1	**-0.065*** (0.007)**		**-0.044*** (0.007)**
Anti-elitism 2		**-0.092*** (0.007)**	**-0.079*** (0.007)**
Expertise	0.087*** (0.010)	0.082*** (0.010)	0.091*** (0.010)
Anti-politics	0.144*** (0.010)	0.141*** (0.010)	0.133*** (0.010)
Age 35-60	-0.185*** (0.044)	-0.170*** (0.044)	-0.154*** (0.044)
Age > 60	-0.669*** (0.052)	-0.635*** (0.052)	-0.610*** (0.052)
Female	0.150*** (0.037)	0.145*** (0.037)	0.159*** (0.037)
Edu. middle	-0.286*** (0.050)	-0.270*** (0.049)	-0.259*** (0.049)
Edu. high	-0.390*** (0.053)	-0.386*** (0.053)	-0.375*** (0.053)
Ideology right	0.619*** (0.054)	0.579*** (0.054)	0.566*** (0.054)
Ideology center	0.436*** (0.048)	0.395*** (0.048)	0.397*** (0.048)
Pol. Interest	-0.102*** (0.024)	-0.109*** (0.023)	-0.106*** (0.023)
Trust gov.	0.003 (0.009)	-0.015* (0.009)	-0.018** (0.009)
Gov. perf.	-0.056*** (0.009)	-0.054*** (0.009)	-0.057*** (0.009)
EU perf	-0.012 (0.009)	-0.018** (0.009)	-0.019** (0.009)
Constant	0.002 (0.165)	0.185 (0.165)	0.375** (0.168)
Observations	9,423	9,440	9,406
R²	0.590	0.595	0.596
Adjusted R²	0.589	0.593	0.594

Residual Std. Error	1.756 (df = 9391)	1.747 (df = 9408)	1.744 (df = 9373)
F Statistic	436.292*** (df = 31; 9391)	445.158*** (df = 31; 9408)	431.430*** (df = 32; 9373)
Note:			*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Figure A3. Interaction between anti-elitism and trust in government