

# Everything for the people, but trust? Exploring the link between populist attitudes and social trust in Italy, Portugal, and Spain

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## Abstract

While it is largely unquestioned that populist individuals are more likely to distrust politics and politicians, the empirical association between populist attitudes and social trust is far less clear. In principle, the people-centrist component of populism could trigger higher levels of social trust among individuals with stronger populist attitudes. Empirically, however, the relationship seems more complex and could be influenced by the boundaries of the group identified as ‘the people’. This paper examines this association using data from three South European countries: Italy, Portugal, and Spain. The main results show that stronger populist attitudes correlate with lower levels of generalized social trust but with higher levels of trust towards the group identified with ‘the people’. These results underline the conceptual consistence of populist attitudes and help to theorize about the effects of widespread populist attitudes.

## KEYWORDS

people-centrism, Populism, populist attitudes, social trust

## Zusammenfassung

Es ist weitgehend unbestritten, dass populistische Personen zu Misstrauen gegenüber der Politik und Politiker:innen neigen. Hingegen bleibt der empirische Zusammenhang zwischen populistischen Einstellungen und sozialem Vertrauen weniger eindeutig. Im Prinzip könnte die volkszentrierte Komponente des Populismus bei Personen mit stärkeren populistischen Einstellungen ein höheres Maß an sozialem Vertrauen bedingen. Empirisch gesehen

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scheint diese Beziehung jedoch komplexer zu sein. Insbesondere könnte sie davon beeinflusst sein, welche spezifische Gruppe als ‘das Volk’ identifiziert wird. In diesem Beitrag wird dieser Zusammenhang anhand von Daten aus drei südeuropäischen Ländern – Italien, Portugal und Spanien – untersucht. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass stärkere populistische Einstellungen mit niedrigerem allgemeinem sozialen Vertrauen, aber mit höherem Vertrauen gegenüber der Gruppe, die als ‘das Volk’ identifiziert wird, korrelieren. Diese Ergebnisse unterstreichen die konzeptionelle Robustheit populistischer Einstellungen und helfen, die Folgen weit verbreiteter populistischer Einstellungen besser zu verstehen.

### Résumé

Il est largement admis que les individus populistes tendent à se méfier davantage de la politique et des hommes et femmes politiques. En revanche, l'association empirique entre les attitudes populistes et la confiance sociale demeure beaucoup moins évidente. En principe, la composante *people-centrist* du populisme pourrait susciter des niveaux élevés de confiance sociale parmi les individus ayant des attitudes populistes marquées. Cependant, d'un point de vue empirique, la relation semble plus complexe et pourrait être influencée par les frontières définissant le groupe identifié comme ‘le peuple’. Cet article examine cette association en utilisant des données provenant de trois pays de l'Europe du Sud: l'Italie, le Portugal et l'Espagne. Les principaux résultats indiquent que de fortes attitudes populistes sont corrélées avec de faibles niveaux de confiance sociale généralisée, mais avec des niveaux plus élevés de confiance envers le groupe identifié comme ‘le peuple’. Ces résultats mettent en évidence la cohérence conceptuelle des attitudes populistes et contribuent à la théorisation des effets de la généralisation des attitudes populistes.

### Riassunto

Se da un lato viene dato per scontato che gli individui populistici hanno maggiori probabilità di non fidarsi della politica e dei politici, il nesso empirico tra attitudini populiste e fiducia sociale è molto meno chiaro. In linea di principio, la componente popolo-centrica del populismo potrebbe portare a livelli più elevati di fiducia sociale tra gli individui con attitudini populiste più forti. Dal punto di vista empirico, tuttavia, la relazione sembra più complessa e potrebbe essere influenzata dalla definizione del gruppo identificato come ‘popolo’. Il presente articolo esamina questo nesso utilizzando i dati di tre paesi del Sud Europa: Italia, Portogallo e Spagna. I risultati mostrano che le attitudini populiste più forti sono correlate a livelli più bassi di fiducia sociale generalizzata, ma a livelli più

alti di fiducia verso il gruppo identificato come ‘il popolo’. Questi risultati sottolineano la consistenza concettuale delle attitudini populiste e aiutano a teorizzare gli effetti di attitudini populiste diffuse.

## INTRODUCTION

The relationship between populism and trust is theoretically and empirically well established in the literature (Canovan, 1999; Algan et al., 2017). A consistent finding from this stream of research is that demand-side populism is associated with lower levels of *political* trust (Rooduijn, 2018; Geurkink et al., 2020). However, a negative association with *social* trust has also been suggested (Fieschi & Heywood, 2004; Keefer et al., 2021; Elçi, 2022). While the justification for the negative correlation between populist attitudes and political trust is both intuitive and largely unquestioned, the link with lower levels of social trust seems more puzzling. In principle, the combination of anti-elitism and people-centrism that defines populism—together with a Manichean understanding of politics (Hawkins et al., 2019)—should make populist individuals more inclined to distrust political elites, but also to trust fellow citizens. Why is this trust not found?

A stylized response to this question could be structured as follows: First, populist individuals have different interpretations of who belongs to the people (e.g., based on culture, ethnicity, economics...), and many survey questions designed to measure generalized/interpersonal/social trust are not able to tap into these nuances. If this is so, more populist individuals will indeed be more likely to trust ‘their people’, but that group does not include all individuals that they encounter (the so-called “radius of trust problem”, see Delhey et al., 2011). Second, it could also be that some of the psychological predispositions associated with populist attitudes make these individuals less willing to trust large groups, regardless of who they consider belongs to ‘the people’ (Fatke, 2019). Each response carries different implications for how we think of populist attitudes and their consequences.

To shed light on this puzzle, we collected and analyzed online survey data from three Southern European countries – Italy, Portugal, and Spain – using innovative questions to measure trust towards the group that respondents identify as ‘the people’. Our results indicate that individuals who display stronger populist attitudes tend to have lower levels of general social trust. Nevertheless, they trust the group identified with ‘the people’ more. We believe that these results matter for two reasons. First, they carry consequences for how we theorize the consequences of widespread populist attitudes (Rovira Kaltwasser & Van Hauwaert, 2020), and second, they underline the conceptual consistency of populist attitudes.

## POPULIST ATTITUDES AND TRUST

The ideational approach, which is increasingly popular among political scientists, defines populism as a set of ideas concerned with anti-elitism, people-centrism, and a Manichean understanding of politics (Hawkins et al., 2019). A key advantage of ideational definitions is that they can consider populism as both a demand and a supply-side phenomenon, and it is in this regard that the concept of populist attitudes gained traction in contemporary research (Hawkins & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017).

What lies at the core of this article is the association between populist attitudes and trust, the latter understood as a relational phenomenon characterized by the belief that a “trustee will not take advantage of the trustor's vulnerability” (Cook & Cook, 2021, p. 281). It is expected that individuals with whom populist ideas resonate will develop differing levels of trust towards political institutions and individuals who belong to the people. Crucially, this is explained by two of

the attributes of populism: anti-elitism, which might make populists more distrustful of political actors and institutions; and people-centrism, which may have a positive effect on trust towards the others. Therefore, populist attitudes will not have a unique effect on trust, but rather different expressions depending on whether the trustees are political institutions or actors, or people. The following section outlines the state of the art regarding the link between populist attitudes and political trust, and also delves into the less explored association with social trust.

The relationship between populist attitudes and political trust, understood as an evaluative orientation towards political actors and institutions (Hetherington, 1998), underpins much of the populism literature. More populist individuals distrust political institutions to a higher extent, and it is suggested that measures to improve levels of political trust will reduce populist attitudes (Erisen et al., 2021). This makes sense given that political distrust taps into the anti-elite component of populism, even if populism has more ingredients and different implications for the study of political behavior (Geurkink et al., 2020). We may even think of political distrust as a precondition for strong populist attitudes, though not all who distrust politics will necessarily develop strong populist attitudes (because people-centrism and Manicheism are needed, too) (Geurkink et al., 2020; Wuttke et al., 2020). Unlike political trust, the empirical association between populist attitudes and social trust is less explored and therefore less clear.

Social trust has been extensively considered both as an antecedent and an outcome of a wide range of attitudes and behaviors (Newton et al., 2018; Uslaner, 2017; Schilke et al., 2021; Robbins, 2023). According to Uslaner (2002), social trust can be defined as “a general outlook on human nature” (p. 17), which makes trusting individuals more likely to believe that people behave with good will (Freitag & Bauer, 2013). While empirical and theoretical contributions have helped in refining social trust to accommodate trust towards different groups such as strangers, members of the in/out-group, or neighbors (Freitag & Bauer, 2013; Dinesen et al., 2020), and despite advances suggesting that social trust cannot be equated with trust towards strangers and should be measured across different situations (Freitag & Traunmüller, 2009; Sturgis & Smith, 2010; Bauer & Freitag, 2018; Robbins, 2023), most of the literature on the connection with populist attitudes has focused so far on whether populist individuals are more likely to trust the others without precise delimitation of who the potential trustees are.

A stream of this literature has considered the connection between social trust and populism using individuals' vote choices (i.e., individuals are populist if they voted for a populist party). While the association between lower levels of social trust and voting for populist parties of the right exists (Rydgren, 2009; Berning & Ziller, 2017; Staerklé & Green, 2018), the making of a general argument out of this evidence can be problematic for at least three reasons: First, populist attitudes help explain voting for populist parties, but non-populist individuals who agree with the policy proposals of the party can also vote for them, that is, we cannot be sure that all voters of populist parties are populist themselves (van Hauwaert & van Kessel, 2018). Second, even if we assume that these individuals are populists, we cannot be sure if the effect is due to populism or preferences associated with the radical right (i.e., we cannot rule out that the effect is due to the host ideology to which populism attaches) (Heller et al., 2022). Third, populist attitudes can sometimes be associated with voting for parties that do not display populist discourses (Marcos-Marne et al., 2020). Thus, to make sure that the observed effects can be attributed to populism, we need to move beyond voting decisions and consider populist attitudes themselves.

Populism speaks to “a purely good common people” (Castanho Silva et al., 2017), perceived as a “homogeneous entity” (Rooduijn, 2014, p. 573), and “exalts ordinary people for their wisdom, common sense, and moral superiority” (Bertsou & Caramani, 2020, p. 8). One of the things that most clearly distinguishes populism from other anti-elitist discourses is the focus on a positively conceived people—homogenous and good (Mohrenberg et al., 2019; Neuner & Wrtil, 2020; Erisen et al., 2021)—in stark contrast to the ‘evil’ elite.

The connection between perceptions of the people as good and homogeneous and (expected) higher levels of social trust can be explained by considering the robust link between attributed

benevolence, group membership, and trust (Williams, 2001; Jones & Shah, 2016). In essence, the more we believe someone is benevolent and belongs to the same group as we identify with, the more likely it is we trust them, complementing the suggested link between politically defined populism and perceptions of social trust. Starting from a group identity (the people), and considering dynamics of in-group favoritism, populist individuals might employ group heuristics to derive levels of trust using positive stereotypes (Carlin & Love, 2013). Subsequently, populist individuals who think of the people as good, homogeneous, and part of their kind could be more likely to trust them to a higher extent (e.g., Foddy et al., 2009). Moreover, the association should be reinforced by the effects of anti-elitism and Manicheism operating via increased in-group solidarity and out-group animosity, which would bring together the three subdimensions of populism in relation to trust.

While few studies have explicitly addressed the empirical link between populist attitudes and social trust, researchers have approached this relationship indirectly via agreeableness. This trait, often understood as one of the Big-Five personality traits, taps into the “positivity of interpersonal motivations and behaviors” and is used as a predictor of trust (McCarthy et al., 2017). The link between agreeableness and populist attitudes is far from clear, as researchers have found negative, positive, and null results depending on the country where data were gathered (Galais & Rico, 2021). Therefore, while theory supports a positive association between populist attitudes and social trust (Canovan, 1999), empirical evidence is mixed.

In this paper, we contend that the relationship between populist attitudes and trust may be influenced by perceptions of who belongs to the people. As Canovan (2004) acknowledges, “by immemorial tradition, ‘people’ has meant both the whole political community and some smaller group within it” (p. 249). Textbook examples in this regard are definitions of the people based on ethno-cultural criteria (often excluding ethnic minorities and immigrants), or socio-economic positions (people as plebs or underdogs) (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013; de Cleen, 2019). Acknowledging that multiple definitions of the people exist, it may very well be that questions designed to measure general social trust fail to account for different interpretations of who is inside and outside the (populist) community (see in this regard Freitag & Bauer, 2013). If that is the case, we should see that more populist individuals are more likely to trust the populist people even if they are not thinking of that group (positively conceived, homogeneous, opposed to evil elites) when they answer questions referring to general social trust (i.e., the boundaries of the ingroup are not so porous as to admit all individuals with whom they interact or with whom they coexist in a society). Therefore, moving beyond general social trust, we suggest that: *individuals with stronger populist attitudes will display higher levels of trust towards the collective they identify with the people (H1)*.

In this research we adhere to the widely accepted idea that ‘the people’ is an empty construct subjectively defined by populists (both leaders and citizens, even if the former are likely to play a more relevant role in this regard) (Laclau, 2005), and thus the host ideology to which populism attaches is fundamental, with right-wing populists often emphasizing ethno-cultural ideas, and left-wing populists underlining economic ones, sometimes even without a clear construction of a homogeneous people (Akkerman et al., 2017; Ivaldi et al., 2017). In line with this, our goal is not to find a fixed meaning of ‘the people’, but rather to investigate if respondents trust the group they more easily identify with to a higher extent. Accordingly, we also posit that: *the association between populist attitudes and trust towards ‘the people’ will exist regardless of how ‘the people’ is defined (H2)*.

While the cross-sectional data available only allows us to measure associations between variables, we assume a causal line from populist attitudes to social trust, for both theoretical and technical reasons. Theoretically, the proposed mechanism starts with the identification of people and elites as antagonistic groups in the political arena, followed by the attribution of positive characteristics to the people. Building upon this categorization, populist individuals are expected to be more likely to identify as part of ‘the people’. The final stage involves the



attribution of positive characteristics, including trustworthiness, to the in-group. In line with this, the technical design of the survey, explained above, was intended to force respondents to first think of who belongs to the people, and later to assign levels of trustworthiness.

## ANALYTICAL STRATEGY

### Case Selection

To conduct this study, we chose to focus on three Southern European countries: Italy, Portugal, and Spain. These are often studied together in comparative research due to the existence of relevant common characteristics such as authoritarian legacies, current levels of democratic performance, cultural traits, and economic features (Roccas & Schwartz, 1997; Andreotti et al., 2001; Luque & González, 2015; Freedom House, 2023). They also share comparatively low levels of political trust (Torcal, 2017), and medium to low levels of social trust, and this is especially low in Portugal (ESS ERIC, 2023). Nevertheless, they are crucially different in the extent to which populist parties have made an inroad into the political scene, and likewise regarding the host ideology to which populism attaches in the electoral competition. Populism has long been present in Italian politics, mostly among radical-right parties, but populism of the left only appeared in Spain with Podemos in 2015, and Chega's right-wing populism became relevant for the first time after the 2021 presidential election (Gómez-Reino & Llamazares, 2019; Heyne & Manucci, 2021; Baldini et al., 2022; Pimenta et al., 2022). This allows us to test the association between populist attitudes and trust towards the people in countries that share relevant macro-level characteristics but differ on the relevance, thick ideology, and consolidation of populist parties. Examining the association in these countries guarantees a common denominator that allows for the comparison while also incorporating diversity in key variables as means to test its consistency.

### Data and methods

This study relies on original survey data collected online by Netquest<sup>1</sup> in Italy (N=1,000), Portugal (N=1,055), and Spain (N=1,228), in the year 2020. The participants were selected using quota sampling to reflect country-census data for age, gender, education, and subnational distribution of the population (see details in online appendix, Table A1).<sup>2</sup>

Our *dependent variable* was built using two interconnected questions based on the perception of who 'the people' are according to the respondents, and how much they trust them. The wording of the first question is as follows: Which of the following definitions best reflects your perception of who belongs to 'the people'? Possible answers were: 1. All persons living in the same territory, 2. All who share a common history, culture, and language, 3. All who belong to the same ethnic group, and 4. All who suffer economic hardship. We also included a fifth 'Other' option that could be chosen if none of the definitions fitted respondents' understandings of the people (see Table 1).<sup>3</sup> Though not an exhaustive list of possibilities, we chose these options because they reflect the main conceptions of 'the

<sup>1</sup>This internet panel provider works in agreement with the ISO Standard 26362 of panels in market, opinion, and social research. For more information see: <https://www.netquest.com/en/panel>

<sup>2</sup>This sampling strategy can be problematic to make generalizations about the state of public opinion in a given country, but it works much better to consider associations between variables (Baker et al., 2010).

<sup>3</sup>Results in Table 1 evidence that more than 90% of the respondents understood the people in terms of territory or culture. The idea of hardship attached to an economic understanding of the people builds upon the vertical relationship between people and elites that characterizes populism (i.e., the people as the underdog threatened by economic deprivation) (e.g., Brubaker, 2020, or De Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2017).

**TABLE 1** Percentage of respondents in each category, per country.

	Italy	Portugal	Spain	Total
Territory	32.46	43.45	57.44	45.88
Culture	59.06	43.80	35.36	44.8
Ethnic	3.91	1.30	0.75	1.83
Economy	2.48	8.03	2.15	4.10
Other	2.09	3.42	4.30	3.39
Total	100	100	100	100

Note: authors' elaboration with the online survey data.

people' as emphasized by populist parties of the left and the right (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013; Caiani & Graziano, 2019; Lisi et al., 2019; Moffitt, 2020). Previous research has already demonstrated that the wording of the questions designed to measure populist attitudes may render distinct results depending on the ethnic/civic connotations of the terms used (Meijers & Van Der Velden, 2023). In this first step, our goal was to scrutinize respondents' understanding of the people building upon the most common usage in the three countries under consideration (*povo*, *popolo*, *pueblo*).<sup>4</sup> The most obvious alternative to this operationalization was an open-ended question where respondents could write down their own definition of the people. Despite advantages regarding the accuracy of individual responses, we discarded that option in order to facilitate a comparative-systematic analysis more in line with the goals of this research.

The second question, designed to measure levels of trust towards the collective identified with 'the people' was formulated as follows: Thinking about *your understanding of 'the people'*, do you think that in general people can be trusted or that you can never be too careful? Responses were scaled from 1 (You cannot be careful enough), to 10 (In general, people can be trusted) so higher values represent higher levels of trust. With that question, we aimed to measure levels of identity-based trust tapping into group membership (Filsinger et al., 2021) using populist attitudes as an indirect measure of such membership (to avoid the biases that may appear if respondents are explicitly asked about their membership in the group and later about trust towards that group). The two questions always appeared together in the questionnaires, in the order presented here.

Populist attitudes are our *independent variable*. To measure them, we included the 6-item scale developed by Akkerman et al. (2014) (Table 2) in our survey. This decision is supported by methodological analysis on the scale's validity and informative capacity (Castanho Silva et al., 2020; Wuttke et al., 2020), and considering that the scale is the most used in the literature (Marcos-Marne et al., 2022), it was useful in order to engage with broader debates on populist attitudes. We used a Confirmatory Factor Analysis with varimax rotation to calculate new scores that were later used in the analyses (Factanal function from the R FAiR package).<sup>5</sup>

We included the following *controls*: education (categorical), gender (male as reference), age (continuous), and life satisfaction (scale ranging from 1, not satisfied at all, to 10, very satisfied), all of which are commonly used in studies of social trust (e.g., Delhey & Newton, 2005; Korol & Bevelander, 2023). Furthermore, we included assessments of the political and economic situation (scale ranging from 1, very good to 5, very bad, which were reversed for the analysis) to clarify the effect of populist attitudes beyond related concepts associated with discontent (van Hauwaert and van Kessel, 2018; Geurkink et al., 2020), and controlled for self-positioning on the left–right political scale (scale ranging from 1, extreme left to 10, extreme right) to account for the heterogeneous

<sup>4</sup>Additional information can be consulted at Ramos-González et al. (2024).

<sup>5</sup>Alternative operationalizations were also conducted to check the reliability of the analyses, as suggested by Wuttke et al. (2020).

**TABLE 2** Mean values for each of the items used to measure populist (standard deviation in brackets).

Items	Italy	Portugal	Spain
1. Politicians in Parliament must follow the will of the people	4.26 (0.83)	4.31 (0.87)	4.35 (0.75)
2. The most important decisions should be made by the people and not by politicians	3.64 (1.09)	3.4 (1.23)	3.65 (1.08)
3. I would rather be represented by an ordinary citizen than by an experienced politician.	3.34 (1.18)	3.14 (1.22)	3.19 (1.09)
4. The political differences between the elite and the people are larger than the differences among the people	3.77 (0.92)	3.88 (1.02)	3.86 (0.98)
5. Politicians talk too much and take too little action	4.24 (0.89)	4.24 (0.94)	4.31 (0.87)
6. What people call “compromise” in politics is just selling out on one's principles	3.36 (1.05)	3.36 (1.11)	3.46 (1.05)
Average populist attitudes	3.77 (0.71)	3.72 (0.71)	3.80 (0.66)
Cronbach alpha	0.80	0.75	0.76

Note: authors' elaboration with the online survey data.<sup>6</sup>

effects that different ideologies may have (Akkerman et al., 2017; Hawkins et al., 2019). Last, we also included general social trust as a control in the models, assuming that general levels of trust towards the others will also explain trust towards the group identified with the populist people. General social trust was also used as the dependent variable in a preliminary analysis that aimed to test if the negative association with populist attitudes found in other studies also came up with our data<sup>7</sup> (see descriptive statistics in online appendix, Table A2).

Listwise deletion was used to deal with missing cases, and bivariate correlations between main variables can be seen in Figure A1 (Online Appendix). The moderate to low correlation index between social trust and trust towards the collective identified with ‘the people’ makes us confident that our innovative question presented above is measuring something different, an intuition confirmed by the results presented in the section below.

Considering the nature of our dependent variable, we utilized linear regression models with fixed effects at the country level. This allowed us to control for unobserved heterogeneity between countries (Abadie et al., 2023). In addition, separate analyses for each country are presented in the online appendix. Coefficients presented below should be read as the average change in the dependent variable for each unit increase in the corresponding independent variable. 95% confidence intervals are also reported in the tables and included in the figures (Cumming, 2008; Romer, 2020). All non-dichotomous variables (populist attitudes, social trust, trust towards the group identified with ‘the people’, ideology on the left–right scale, life satisfaction and political and economic situation assessment) were standardized by subtracting the mean and dividing by the standard deviation.

## RESULTS

In the preliminary analysis, we first deal with the association between populist attitudes and general levels of social trust.<sup>8</sup> The negative association between these two variables in bivariate

<sup>6</sup>Complete questionnaires and associated information are available at Ramos-González et al. (2024).

<sup>7</sup>The questions used to measure social trust were: Italy: In generale, lei pensa che ci si possa fidare della gran parte delle persone, o è meglio essere prudente?; Portugal: De uma forma geral, acha que todo o cidadão é pouco quando se lida com as pessoas ou acha que se pode confiar na maioria das pessoas?; Spain: Diría usted que, por lo general, se puede confiar en la mayoría de la gente, o que nunca se es lo bastante prudente en el trato con los demás? (responses ranging in a scale between 1 and 10).

<sup>8</sup>For that we used the general social trust question, not our people-trust one.



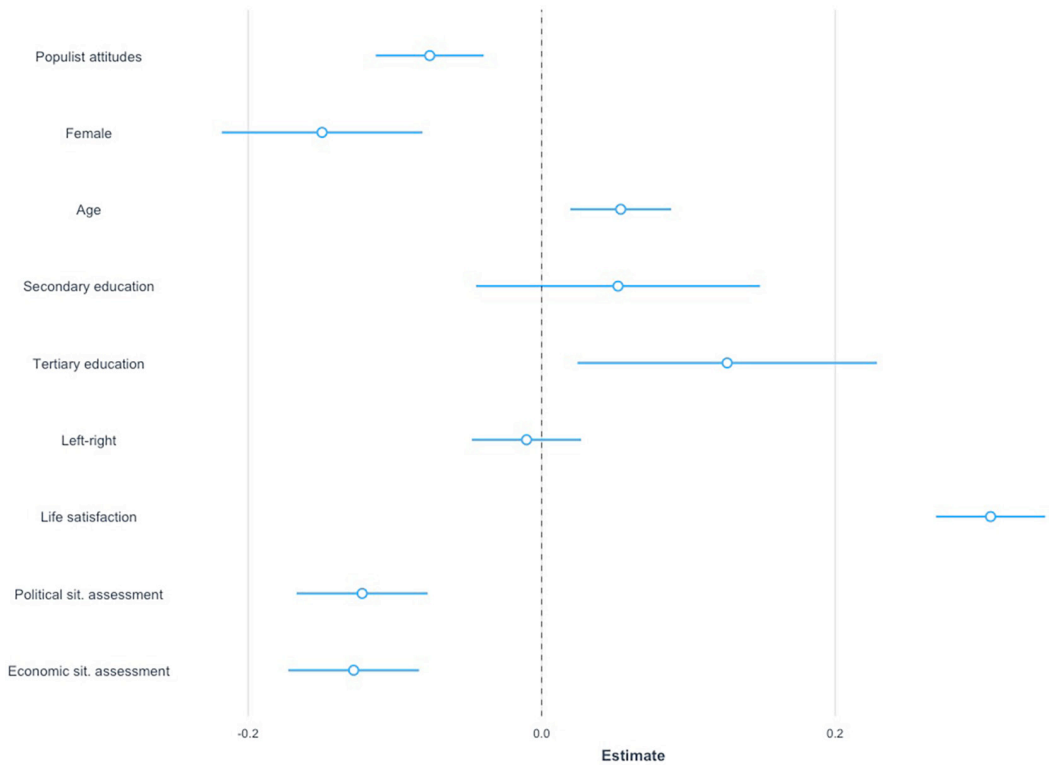


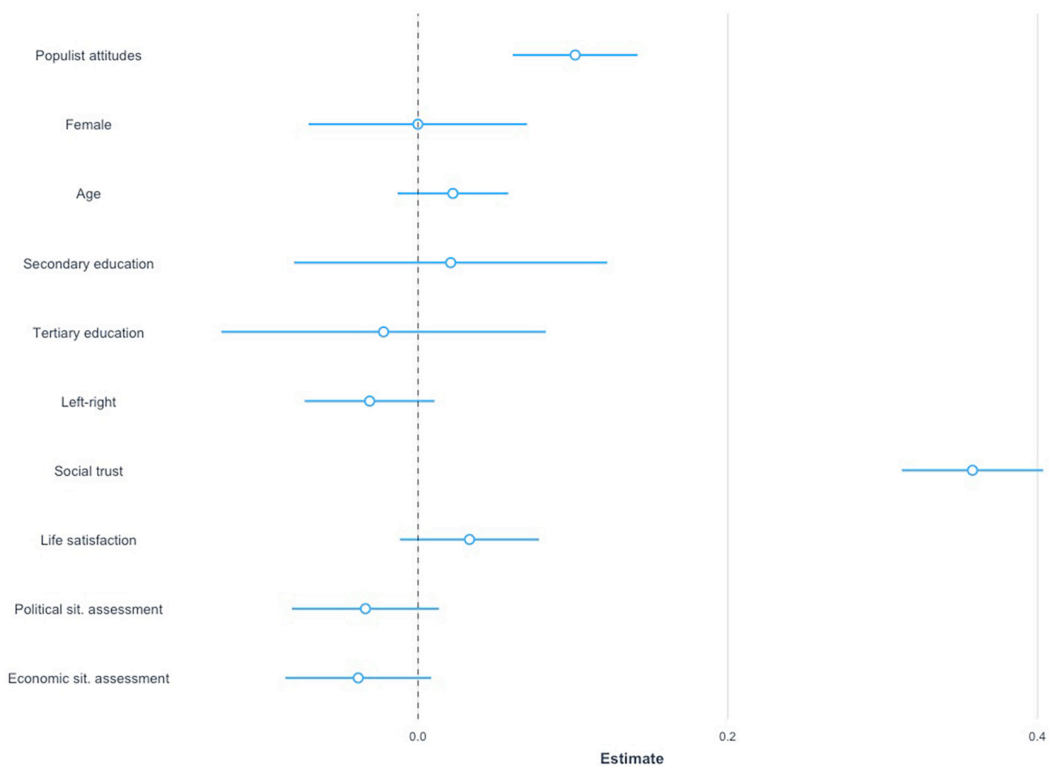
FIGURE 1 OLS regression with country-fixed effects, predicting general social trust.

correlations (Figure A1, Online Appendix) is confirmed in a multivariate regression with country-fixed-effects (Figure 1) (complete model included in the online appendix, Table A4). This vital step confirms the complex relationship between populist attitudes and general measures of social trust and underlines the relevance of our analysis that measures individuals' trust towards the group identified as ‘the people’.

In a second step, to shed light on our key independent variable, we conducted a multinomial logit model predicting different understandings of the people using our socio-demographics variables and left–right ideology (the definition of the people with territorial connotations, which was the most frequent response, was used as baseline category). Results show that being older and positioned more to the right increases the likelihood that respondents think of ‘the people’ in cultural terms. Female respondents were more likely to choose the economic definition, and being younger and less educated increases the likelihood of choosing an ethnic definition (complete model included in the online appendix, Table A5).<sup>9</sup>

To test the association between populist attitudes and trust towards the group identified with the people (H1), we used an OLS regression with country-fixed effects. Besides our key independent variable (trust towards the people), we controlled for sociodemographic variables, left–right ideology, general social trust, life satisfaction, and political

<sup>9</sup>Furthermore, Table A6 in the Online Appendix shows the association between vote intention and definitions of the people, using intention to vote for the four most relevant political parties in each country. While some general patterns emerge, this association seems contingent on country and party characteristics and cannot be solely explained recurring to the ideological positioning of the parties. We believe this is an interesting piece of evidence that nevertheless does not interfere with our analysis, which is oriented towards the coherence between populist attitudes and social trust and not how different ideologies frame the people in comparative terms.

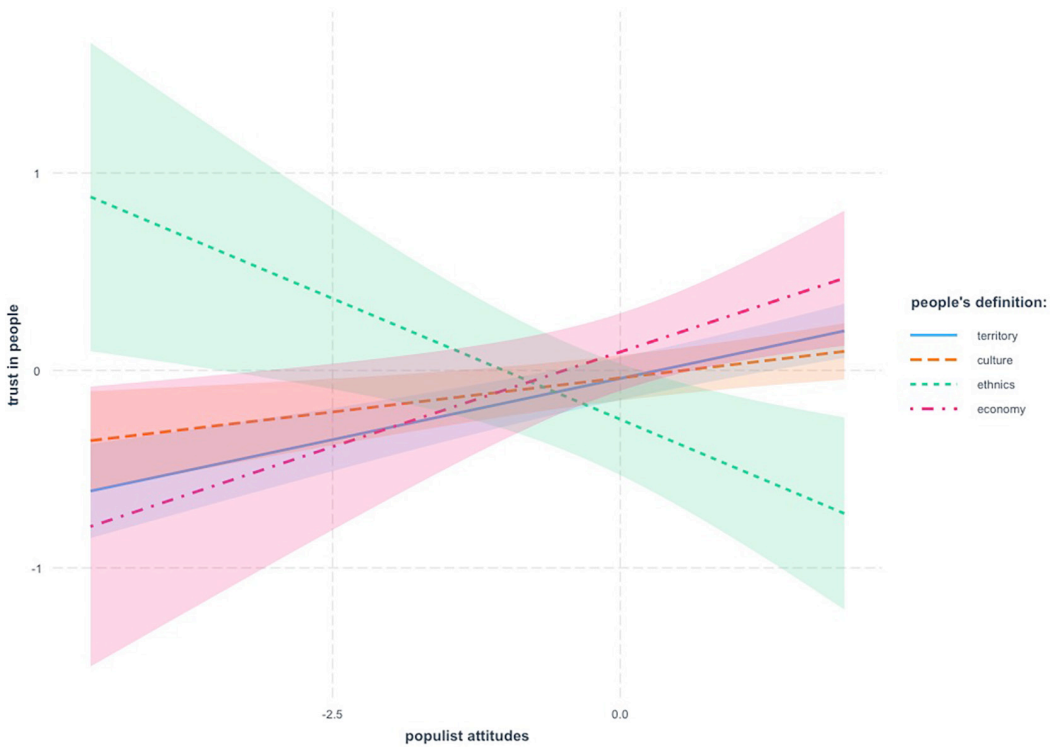


**FIGURE 2** OLS regression with country fixed effects, predicting trust towards the group identified with ‘the people’ (all definitions of people).

and economic assessments (complete model included in the online appendix, [Table A7](#)). Aggregate results ([Figure 2](#)) show that individuals tend to be more trusting of the collective they identified as ‘the people’ the stronger their populist attitudes are, which supports our main hypothesis (H1).

Among the controls, we see that those displaying higher levels of social trust tend to also trust more the self-defined people. However, we also acknowledge that this control can be too rigid because of its correlation with the outcome variable. Additional models that do not control for general social trust still show a positive association between populist attitudes and trust towards the self-defined people (complete model included in the online appendix, [Table A8](#)). We also included controls for religiosity and habitat (rural/urban). These were non-significant and did not affect the main associations presented between populist attitudes and trust.

In a final stage, to test our H2, we repeated the model presented in [Figure 2](#), including an interactive term between populist attitudes and the different (cultural, ethnic, economic, and territorial) interpretations of who ‘the people’ are. This analysis examines if the aggregated relationship found between populist attitudes and trust towards ‘the people’ existed across different understandings of the latter. Results displayed in [Figure 3](#) (complete model is included in the online appendix, [Table A9](#)) indicate that individuals who think of ‘the people’ in cultural, economic, and territorial terms tend to be more trusting of ‘the people’ the stronger their populist attitudes are, and differences between these three groups are non-significant. On the contrary, individuals who think of ‘the people’ in ethnic terms are less likely to trust them the stronger their populist attitudes are.



**FIGURE 3** Predicted levels of trust towards the ‘the people’, as populist attitudes increase, for different definitions of the people (95% confidence interval).

**Robustness checks**

First, to make sure our results were not affected by a combination of different sample sizes and country features we repeated the analyses for each country. Results by country largely reflect the same pattern, but we lose statistical power, and some coefficients are no longer significant (see online appendix, [Tables A10-A12](#)). Second, work by Wuttke et al. (2020) convincingly argued that we must be careful when considering average values to measure a multidimensional non-compensatory concept such as populism (i.e., theoretically populism only exists in the intersection between anti-elitism, people-centrism, and Manicheism). Wuttke and colleagues suggest taking instead the lowest value of the different subdimensions as a conservative solution. Since the scale developed by Akkerman et al. (2014) measures different subdimensions in the same item (Castanho Silva et al., 2020; Wettstein et al., 2020), we followed an even more stringent approach and took the lowest value of the six items measuring populist attitudes. The main results, included in the online appendix ([Table A13](#)), suggest consistency in the general association between stronger populist attitudes and trust towards the group identified as ‘the people’.

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

This research suggests that individuals ranking higher on populist attitudes are more likely to trust ‘the people’ and underlines that this group can be defined in different ways. General questions designed to measure social trust might not capture adequately who belongs to the community that is opposed to the elite in populists' minds. Thus, we believe the inconsistent

association found so far between populist attitudes and social trust can be explained because the imagined populist community does not overlap with the framing of questions designed to measure social trust more generally.

Our analysis of innovative survey data on populist attitudes and social trust has both theoretical and practical implications. In theoretical terms, the results of our paper indicate that definitions and operationalizations of demand-side populism correlate as expected with trust towards the people, even if that group does not necessarily include all individuals in a person's life. In practical terms, a major concern for populism scholars has to do with the consequences of populism. While abundant research exists on the effects of supply-side populism (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013; Huber & Schimpf, 2016; Huber & Ruth, 2017; Houle & Kenny, 2018; Hartevelt et al., 2021), the demand side has been comparatively less explored (but see Dekeyser & Roose, 2021; Wuttke et al., 2023). This manuscript delves into the relationship between populist attitudes and trust towards the people, and endeavors to theorize about the consequences of widespread populism among the people (Rovira Kaltwasser & Van Hauwaert, 2020), which we believe to be of utmost importance. As mentioned in the introduction, a major implication in this regard is whether populist attitudes might end up having a positive effect on democracy because higher levels of trust towards 'the people' positively influences associationism, cooperation, and overall involvement in politics (Dirks, 1999; Anheier & Kendall, 2002; Letki, 2004). The extent to which definitions of 'the people' are inclusive and build upon ascriptive elements are likely to be key in this regard, making more permeable definitions more likely to exert a positive effect for democracy due to inclusiveness. In this vein, the negative link between populist attitudes and trust for those who understand 'the people' in ethnic terms suggest that ethnic definitions are not only problematic because of their ascriptive nature (belonging to the group is based on ethnicity, a predetermined feature) but because they simply correlate negatively with social trust. Chiefly, it seems that people with ethnic understandings of the people trust everybody less as populist attitudes increase, regardless of their belonging to the group that opposes evil elites. Future research will be key to unravelling whether this effect is attributable to populism itself or conditioned by the host ideologies that more frequently conceptualize 'the people' in ethnic terms (Rosenberg, 1956; Rothstein & Uslaner, 2005).

A potential caveat of this research is that our survey includes a non-exhaustive list of understandings of 'the people'. While we believe this is justified because of practical concerns about the analysis of data, and even though the most common definitions of people were considered (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013), we acknowledge that it is not ideal. Future studies employing qualitative techniques such as interviews or focus groups may further advance our knowledge of how individuals think of 'the people', even if understandings are mutually exclusive, and these developments could greatly improve survey questions focusing on populist attitudes, trust, and adjacent topics. These complementary approaches will also be useful to justify the idea that both the people and the elite can be empty signifiers, which might be filled differently depending on characteristics that may vary or be adjusted during the course of interviews or focus groups. In this vein, both quantitative and qualitative techniques can be successfully combined to unravel who makes up part of the horizontal outgroup for populist individuals (the elites being the outgroup that is located in a vertical-hierarchical position). Particularly of interest might be the use of experimental designs that prompt different understandings of 'the people', and which later measure the association between populist attitudes and social trust.

Finally, our data comes from three European countries of the southern area that rank comparatively lower in social trust, especially Portugal. Additional analyses will be needed to test the extent to which the association exists in other places. In line with our argument, we would expect to see different distributions among the groups identified with 'the people', and similar links between populist attitudes and trust. Here, refinements to our classification of groups

identified with ‘the people’ can contribute to assessing if the overall positive link between populist attitudes and trust remains across specifications.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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