

National Identity and Populism.

The Relationship between Conceptions of Nationhood and Populist Attitudes

Abstract:

Conventional wisdom argues that national identity and populism go hand in hand. We disentangle this relationship by examining how populist attitudes relate to two distinct conceptions of nationhood: civic and ethnic national identity. We argue that a civic conception of nationhood is negatively related to populism, while an ethnic conception of nationhood is positively related. Additionally, we expect these relationships to be moderated by socio-economic status. Using data from the German Longitudinal Election Study from 2017, our analyses show that, on average, both civic and ethnic conceptions of nationhood relate positively to populist attitudes. This finding, however, changes substantially once we account for socio-economic status: For respondents with higher levels of education and/or a more positive evaluation of the state of the economy, the relationship between civic national identity and populism turns negative, which is more in line with our expectations. We find no moderation for an ethnic national identity.

Keywords: National identity, populist attitudes, civic national identity, ethnic national identity, economic grievances, conceptions of nationhood

Introduction

Following the collapse of the Communist bloc around 1989 and, more recently, the so-called European refugee and migration crisis, national identity has moved from being a bit player to center stage in contemporary political science (Schmidt & Quandt 2018). In parallel, scholars have observed the rise of populism in many countries throughout the Western hemisphere (Mudde 2004, 2007; Bonikowski 2017; Hawkins et al. 2018). Regarding their relationship, conventional wisdom argues that national identity and populism go hand in hand (Bonikowski 2017; de Cleen 2017). Evaluating the link between national identity as a multidimensional set of attitudes (Davidov 2009; Helbling et al. 2016) and populism in greater detail, we distinguish between two forms of national identity: civic and ethnic conceptions of nationhood (Kohn 1944; Brubaker 1992; Kunovich 2009). A civic national identity conceives people's belongingness to a nation as dependent on their adherence to national political institutions and laws (political culture), its democratic system and the equality of all groups (Reeskens & Hooghe 2010; Larsen 2017; Hadler & Flesken 2018; Lenard & Miller 2018). In contrast, an ethnic national identity focuses on criteria such as place of birth or ancestry (Ignatieff 1993; Reeskens & Hooghe 2010; Hadler & Flesken 2018). Consequently, the relationship between national identity and populism is not as straightforward as generally assumed.

As a civic conception of nationhood is based on a shared political culture devoid of all linkages to blood and birth, it draws a decisively less sharp distinction between in- and out-groups than an ethnic conception and should thus be negatively related to the dualistic nature of populism (Habermas 1991; Miller 1995; Müller 2010). In contrast, the sharp in- and out-group distinction inherent to an ethnic conception of nationhood contributes to the surge of populist attitudes as it resonates well with the Manichean distinction of "good" and "evil" in society that is a central component of populism.

In addition, recent research both on national identity and populism has shown that context matters considerably (Kriesi et al. 2006; Kunovich 2009; Shayo 2009; Wright 2011; Schmidt & Quandt 2018). In particular, we focus on socio-economic vulnerability and perceptions of economic conditions and argue that these factors moderate the relationship between different conceptions of nationhood and populist attitudes (Rico & Anduiza 2019). With regard to civic conceptions of nationhood, we contend that for those who experience socio-economic vulnerability and perceive the economy more negatively, the negative relationship between civic national identity and populist attitudes is less pronounced. In contrast, we do not expect such a moderation for an ethnic national identity. National membership based on objectivist criteria is viewed as stable and national borders as impermeable regardless of the extent of economic vulnerability or the evaluation of the state of the national economy (cf. Brubaker 1992; Wimmer 2008).

In order to test our hypotheses empirically, we draw on the German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES) Campaign Panel (2017). We find, as expected, that ethnic conceptions of nationhood are systematically and positively related to populist attitudes. However, contrary to our hypothesis, our analyses show that civic conceptions of nationhood are positively related to populist attitudes, too. Yet, this finding has to be qualified: We uncover that this only holds true for respondents with a lower education and negative perceptions of the economy. For well-educated individuals and/or people with a positive evaluation of the state of the economy, those with civic conceptions of nationhood are less likely to hold populist attitudes instead. We do not discover such a moderation for an ethnic conception of nationhood, as the relationship with populism remains positive irrespective of different conditions of vulnerability and economic perceptions.

Although our use of cross-sectional data cannot solve some problems identified in previous research, we contribute to the literature in three important ways. First, we provide a detailed

account for how civic and ethnic national identity differ empirically in terms of their relationship with populism. Second, we shed some light on how different forms of national identity and populist attitudes are connected. Moreover, by doing so, we add to accounts of structural or economic grievances by systematically assessing the populism-(national-)identity-link in detail. Third, we contribute to the growing field of studies on populist attitudes instead of populist vote choice.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: In the next chapter, we conceptualise our major concepts. In the subsequent chapter, we formulate our theoretical arguments and hypotheses. Thereafter, we introduce our dataset and method for the empirical analysis. The sixth chapter is dedicated to our empirical results and a brief discussion thereof, before we conclude with several remarks on the implications of our findings and possible avenues for future research.

Conceptualisation of populism and national identity

In popular discourses, populism is often associated with different forms of national identity. Yet, national identity and populism are distinct phenomena that do not necessarily occur together (de Cleen 2017). Despite some controversy, the ideational approach, which situates populism in the realm of ideas, is advocated as the most adequate approach for the study of populism (Mudde 2007; Hawkins et al. 2018; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2018). The most prominent definition in this tradition, formulated by Mudde, views populism as a

*“thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people” (Mudde 2007: 23).*

Populism in this sense is a moralistic rather than programmatic ideology with the concept of “the people” being of central importance (Mudde 2004). Three important sub-dimensions can be derived from the above definition. First, anti-elitism refers to a depiction of the elite as a vilified, corrupt group that only cares for its own benefits (Hawkins & Rovira Kaltwasser 2018). Second, a Manichean cosmology and morality puts the struggle between the “good” people and the “evil” elite at the centre of political conflict (ibid.). “People-centrism” as the third dimension is the view that the people are a homogeneous and virtuous group, which ought to have the ultimate decision-making power (Castanho Silva et al. 2019).

Empirically, scholars often observe that populism is attached to other worldviews. One example is “inclusionary populism”, which usually combines populist conceptions of society with some forms of socialism (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2018). The opposite of this kind of populism – exclusionary populism, often also labelled radical right populism – combines populism with authoritarian and nativist sentiments (Mudde 2007; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2018). Nevertheless, populist conceptions of society can be analysed without focusing on the host ideology. Irrespective of the attached policy positions, populist conceptions play an important role in politics and therefore warrant an investigation without closer inspection of the ideological attachment (van Hauwaert & van Kessel 2018; Loew & Faas 2019).

According to Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017: 529), one of the key advantages of this ideational approach is “that it invites us to study both the supply side and the demand side of populism”. Put differently, defining populism as a thin ideology allows for investigating to what extent the electorate or the public hold attitudes that are populist in nature. Thus, populist attitudes can be defined as a “set of evaluative reactions to these [abovementioned] elements” (van Hauwaert et al. 2020: 5). One crucial advantage of investigating attitudes compared to vote choice is that the latter complicates the identification of populism “because voters are always

recruited on the basis of several issues and concerns” (Spruyt et al. 2016: 336), while attitudes paint a more accurate picture of the support for populist positions.

In recent years, scholarly research has taken up the question why voters and citizens hold populist attitudes (Akkerman et al. 2014; Castanho Silva et al. 2019; van Hauwaert et al. 2020). The explanations range from economic hardship (Rico & Anduiza 2019), political ideology (Bernhard & Hänggli 2018) to feelings of disadvantage and deprivation (Spruyt et al. 2016). This paper contributes to this burgeoning literature on populist attitudes by taking a novel approach and investigating whether different forms of national identity are related to populist attitudes. While national identity has often been connected with populism, no study has systematically investigated how different forms of national identity relate to populist attitudes.

Generally, national identity can be defined as a “deeply felt affective attachment to the nation” (Conover and Feldman 1987 cit. in Rapp 2018: 3), with members of that nation sharing the notion of having something in common (Anderson 2006; Greenfeld & Eastwood 2007; Bonikowski 2016). As the overarching concept of national identity is difficult to analyse empirically in its broad sense, previous research suggests to treat this concept as multifaceted and to study its various dimensions (Citrin et al. 2001; Blank & Schmidt 2003; Davidov 2009; Helbling et al. 2016; Schmidt & Quandt 2018). The content dimension of national identity, which reflects the criteria set for defining national belongingness, has emerged as the major dimension in the field (Kunovich 2009; Berg & Hjerm 2010; Reeskens & Hooghe 2010; Lenard & Miller 2018).¹ Given its widespread use, “[t]he importance of this dimension cannot be overstated” (Helbling et al. 2016: 746). It builds on a long-standing tradition of scholarly research distinguishing nationalist ideologies that construct the respective nation by means of ethnic descent from those that emphasize a shared political organisation (Meinecke 1908; Kohn 1944; Smith 1998). It builds on a long-standing tradition of scholarly research distinguishing ethnic and civic conceptions of nationhood as ideal types. Civic conceptions of nationhood focus on respect for

national institutions and adherence to legal norms for national membership (Citrin et al. 2001; Reeskens & Hooghe 2010; Larsen 2017; Hadler & Flesken 2018; Lenard & Miller 2018). For individuals holding such conceptions of nationhood defined by a political culture, these voluntarist criteria offer anyone the possibility to change her nation deliberately (Habermas 1994; Lamont & Molnár 2002). Ethnic conceptions of nationhood, on the contrary, define belongingness to the nation by objectivist criteria, such as having national ancestry, being born in the country or sometimes being a member of the country's dominant religious denomination (Ignatieff 1993; Reeskens & Hooghe 2010; Helbling et al. 2016; Hadler & Flesken 2018). Under such a conception of nationhood, it is next to impossible to change membership of a nation and national boundaries offer little permeability (Wimmer 2008).

Theory and hypotheses: the relationship between conceptions of nationhood and populist attitudes

We expect a civic conception of nationhood to be negatively related to populism. Since it is based on a shared political culture and devoid of all linkages to blood and birth, it draws a decisively less sharp distinction between in- and out-groups than an ethnic conception of nationhood (Habermas 1991; Miller 1995; Müller 2010)², which should work against a Manichean outlook on society that separates the “good” from the “bad” parts of humanity. Further, a civic national identity contradicts anti-elitist sentiments, because it considers the institutionalised exchange between political elites and the overall citizenry as a normal part of the democratic political process (Habermas 1994; Miller 1995, 2000; Citrin et al. 2001). The third dimension of populist attitudes, people-centrism, is less clearly related to civic national identity. While the notion of popular sovereignty is certainly compatible with voluntarist criteria for defining national membership, the permeability of national borders linked to these criteria is substantially contradictory to any populist notions of a unified or homogenous will of the people. If national

membership is founded on an explicitly *political* culture and membership is in principle open to everyone complying with these *political* norms and values, this should result in more diversity relating to traditions, customs and belief systems outside the political sphere than is tolerable by those holding a populist notion of one general will by the people. Overall, civic conceptions of nationhood contradict most characteristics of a populist ideology. We thus formulate hypothesis 1 as follows:

H1: Civic conceptions of nationhood are negatively related to populist attitudes.

An ethnic conception of nationhood, conversely, is likely to foster populist attitudes because it complements a populist worldview. First, its sharp in-group-out-group distinction resonates well with the Manichean outlook on society that is inherent in populist ideology. In a populist worldview, the society is divided in “good” and “evil” and both are in constant struggle (Mudde 2007). People with an ethnic conception of nationhood are more likely to follow such a conflictual view of society as their sense of belonging is based on sharp membership criteria. Furthermore, these borders of membership are not permeable. Those without national ancestry and those who were not born in the country cannot become a member of the nation since they do not possess the necessary requirements (Hadler & Flesken 2018). This strong delineation between in- and out-group resonates well with the populist division of society into “good” and “bad” (Mudde 2007; Sanders et al. 2017). Moreover, belongingness to the nation defined by objectivist criteria makes people more likely to support people-centrism. An ethnic national identity conceives the members of the nation as sharing certain traits that separate them from all other nations, which makes members of the respective nation more similar towards other members of this nation than to members of any out-group (Anderson 2006; Greenfeld & Eastwood 2007). A populist mind-set postulates a similar claim: The people are seen as a virtuous and homogeneous entity that is betrayed by evil elements (i.e. elites or foreigners) and should

strive to retain popular sovereignty by implementing the “*volonté générale*” (general will) (Mudde 2007). This rigid construction of belongingness inherent to ethnic conceptions of nationhood also inclines people to focus on their in-group (members of the nation) and regard them as more virtuous than others. In addition, support for anti-elitism can be linked to the impression that current elites (political, economic, or cultural) are limiting the nation’s potential achievements or undermine the cultural superiority of the nation. Overall, ethnic conceptions of nationhood resonate well with important characteristics of a populist ideology. Based on these arguments, we formulate hypothesis 2 as follows:

H2: Ethnic conceptions of nationhood are positively related to populist attitudes.

The moderating role of the socio-economic situation: national identity, socio-economic vulnerability, economic perceptions and populist attitudes

Recent research on both national identity and populism has shown that context matters decisively in shaping these attitudes (Kriesi et al. 2006; Shayo 2009; Ariely 2012; Gidron & Hall 2017; Schmidt & Quandt 2018). We focus on socio-economic vulnerability and perceptions of economic conditions as moderators as both have been shown to be particularly relevant in the context of populist attitudes (Rico & Anduiza 2019). We expect, however, that these moderation effects differ for civic and ethnic national identities.

We argue that socio-economic vulnerability and negative perceptions of the economy moderate the relationship between a civic national identity and populism by creating a perception of threat that induces people to re-evaluate certain attitudes (Coenders & Scheepers 2003; Davidov et al. 2020). Individuals having obtained lower levels of education or perceiving the national economy in a negative way should be particularly affected by threat scenarios. To cope with such threat scenarios, these individuals will likely tighten their views on how permeable national boundaries actually are. While the civic criteria for membership remain the same, members of

out-groups are deemed unable to embrace and maintain the respect for the national political culture that is at the heart of a civic conception of nationhood (Brubaker 1992; Citrin et al. 2001; Reeskens & Hooghe 2010; Lenard & Miller 2018). This narrowing-down of border permeability also relates to uncertainty-identity theory, which postulates that people turn to a more closed identity in times of uncertainty (Hogg et al. 2010). In addition, uncertainty and threat scenarios induce people to focus on in-group members instead of embracing out-group members (Kenworthy & Jones 2009) and to hold more contracted views on who is a member of their nation (Abascal 2020), leading to a narrower definition of who fulfils the civic criteria of nationhood. Examples for these phenomena can be found in nationalist discourses throughout Europe (Brubaker 2017; Simonsen & Bonikowski 2019).

This re-definition of membership criteria resembles a dualistic distinction between an out-group, for whom national membership is virtually impossible, on the one hand, and the national in-group on the other. Since such a clear-cut divide resembles the dualistic nature inherent in populism, individuals facing socio-economic vulnerability should be more likely to support a populist worldview.

H3a: The negative relationship between civic national identity and populist attitudes decreases for individuals who experience socio-economic vulnerability and have negative perceptions of the economy.

For ethnic conceptions of nationhood, we generally expect the relationship with populist attitudes to be largely independent of socio-economic vulnerability and economic perceptions. The objectivist criteria that are fundamental to ethnic conceptions of nationhood are unlikely to change with the degree of socio-economic vulnerability and, given the rigidity of national boundaries, should retain their binary distinction between being a member of the nation or not (Hadler & Flesken 2018). Even people with low levels of vulnerability (high education) have

sharp conceptions of who belongs to the nation and who does not. The same holds true for people who are vulnerable to economic threats. Consequently, socio-economic vulnerability and perceptions of the economy are unlikely to moderate the relationship between ethnic conceptions of nationhood and populist attitudes.

H3b: The relationship between ethnic national identity and populist attitudes is independent of socio-economic vulnerability and perceptions of the economy.

Research design: data and method

In the remainder of the article, the relationships presented above are put to an empirical test. We use the German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES) Campaign Panel (2017) as our data source (Roßteutscher et al. 2018), which offers a wide variety of attitudinal variables that are important for the study of national identity as well as populism. The data was collected through an online panel. The population are eligible voters for the German election in 2017, yet only members of the access panel were eligible for participation. The sample is quoted for education, age and sex (Roßteutscher et al. 2018). After variable selection, we ended up with around 9,000 observations for our basic model.

Germany offers an interesting case for our study for three reasons. First, in recent years, populism has been growing in Germany, especially with the recent electoral successes of the “Alternative für Deutschland” (AfD) (Arzheimer 2015). Second, Germany has a multifaceted history of national identity. In light of the key role that German nationalism has played in both World Wars, nationalism and national pride have since been eyed with suspicion and have been lower than in other countries (Blank & Schmidt 2003; Smith & Kim 2006). Further, various authors have emphasized the role of an entirely civic definition of national membership combined with a focus on promoting European integration for reconstructing German national identity (e.g. Habermas 1991; Müller 2010), whereas policies on immigration and citizenship were very

much based on the principle of descent until at least the early 2000s (e.g. Ditzmann & Kopf-Beck 2019). Third, national identity has recently become a central element in societal discourse in Germany as in most other European countries. Especially in the context of the refugee crisis, both conceptions of nationhood have become manifest. On the one hand, there were demonstrations expressing support for the decision to accept refugees and welcoming them in Germany, which relates to the civic notion that, in principle, everybody is welcome to join the nation (Citrin et al. 2001). On the other hand, nationalist protests and even violence against both immigrants and people supporting their arrival in Germany were also present, articulating strong opposition against immigration. This is a stark expression of xenophobic and nationalist arguments, which builds entirely on the ethnic conception of nationhood and emphasizes the rigidity of national borders.

To measure our dependent variable – populist attitudes – we rely on recent scholarly literature that has taken up the task of investigating populist attitudes more explicitly (Akkerman et al. 2014; Castanho Silva et al. 2019; van Hauwaert et al. 2020). The GLES offers some items that have been used to measure populist attitudes. We use eight items that reflect the different dimensions of populism established in section 2. The items are listed in Table 1. We performed a confirmatory factor analysis to address the dimensionality of the selected items. The results show that two distinct factors emerge. First, we see a factor that captures the items measuring people-centrism and anti-elitism. Mainly, these items are concerned with the ultimate decision power of the “people” as well as the lack of responsiveness of the political elite. The second factor describes the homogeneity of the “true people” and implies a sharp boundary making towards the unspecified other (Manichean outlook). To capture populism as a multidimensional concept, we follow Mohrenberg et al. (2019): We sum up the items of each dimension separately and then take the geometric mean of the two dimensions. Afterwards, we rescale the variable to range from 0 to 1. Mohrenberg et al. (2019) argue that this procedure ensures that

people who score 0 on either one dimension of populism have an overall 0 on the combined populism scale. This matches our conceptualisation of populism as we view each dimension as a necessary part of populism. Consequently, we avoid that high values on one dimension can compensate low values on the other dimension (Wuttke et al. 2020). The index ranges from 0 (no populism) to 1 (high levels of populism). Figure OA1 in the online appendix shows the distribution of our populism index for our sample.

For our key independent variable, ethnic and civic national identity, the GLES dataset entails nine items on which criteria are important to be considered a member of the nation. As with populist attitudes, we combine the multiple items covering different facets of the respective concepts into two distinct factor variables (Reeskens & Hooghe 2010; Helbling et al. 2016). A confirmatory factor analysis with promax rotation confirms that each set of variables fits very well into the two index variables for ethnic and civic national identity. Further, there is very little cross-variation ($corr = .121$), which shows once more that both forms of national identity are conceptually and empirically distinct.

Table 1 Factor Analysis of the items for populist attitudes

Items	Eigenvalues	Eigenvalues
“Elected officials talk too much and take too little action.”	0.78	-0.16
“The people should have the final say on the most important political issues by voting on them directly in referendums”	0.78	0.10
“The political differences between the elite and the people are larger than the differences among the people”	0.66	0.07
“The people, not the politicians, should make our most important policy decisions”	0.82	0.06
“The politicians in the Parliament need to follow the will of the people.”	0.76	-0.03
“Ordinary people are of good and honest character.”	0.05	0.77
“Ordinary people share the same values and interests”	0.05	0.84
“Ordinary people all pull together”	-0.05	0.89
Factor	0.91	0.70

Notes: Range of the items is 0 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree); Confirmatory factor analysis with promax rotation. Source: (Roßteutscher et al. 2018)

For an ethnic national identity, we rely on five items. In particular the first two items in Table 2, ancestry and being born in the country, are commonly assigned to the ethnic spectrum of national identity (Kunovich 2009; Berg & Hjerm 2010; Reeskens & Hooghe 2010; Helbling et al. 2016). In addition, having lived the whole life in Germany also closely relates to an ethnic conception as it necessitates being born in Germany. Sharing German norms and customs is not undisputedly related to ethnic conceptions (Shulman 2002; Reeskens & Hooghe 2010) but our factor analysis shows that it loads on the factor (see Table 2). Language requirements are often connected to a civic approach (Reeskens & Hooghe 2010: 588), yet the addition of speaking German “properly” without an accent leads us to believe that it corresponds more strongly to an ethnic conception, which is supported by the factor analysis.

Civic national identity is measured with four items, namely the importance of respecting political institutions and the law (Reeskens & Hooghe 2010), having democratic beliefs, fulfilling one’s civic duties (Habermas 1991: 9) and the fair treatment of all societal groups (Brubaker 1992: 43). Such an operationalisation gives a full and encompassing picture of the constituent parts of civic and ethnic national identity respectively. In this vein, we combine the aforementioned items into two distinct additive indexes that were divided by the respective number of items and normalised to range from 0 to 1. Figure OA2 in the online appendix shows the distribution of civic and ethnic national identity in our sample.

In addition, as argued in the theoretical section, we expect the relationship between a civic national identity and populist attitudes to be moderated by the socio-economic situation (Kriesi et al. 2006; Gidron & Hall 2017; Rico & Anduiza 2019). We use two different indicators for our interaction models. First, we use education, which has been regarded as an important factor in influencing people’s vulnerability and how they process information (Kriesi et al. 2006; Spruyt et al. 2016). Second, we use the subjective evaluation of the general economic situation, which ranges from very good (1) to very bad (5).

Furthermore, we introduce a range of potential control variables that may influence the relationships we study. First, we include the socio-demographic variables age, sex, social status, personal economic situation and the type of community people live in. The second set of control variables is attitudinal in nature and includes the left-right self-placement (squared to account for extremism) and the position on migration as both have been connected with populism (Akkerman et al. 2017; Bernhard & Hänggli 2018). Left-right-self-placement is the standard question on whether people situate themselves on the left or the right of the political spectrum with (1) being left and (11) being right. The position on migration is operationalised with the question: “*What do you personally think, should immigration be facilitated or restricted?*”. The answers range from facilitating (1) to restricting (7). We included the variable on immigration because research often suggests that opposition to immigration is a major explanatory factor for populism (Akkerman et al. 2017). Summary statistics for all variables can be found in table OA1 in the online appendix.

Table 2 Factor Analysis of the items for ethnic and civic national identity

Items	Factor 1	Factor 2
“Important to be born in Germany”	0.87	-0.03
“Important to have German ancestors”	0.89	-0.07
“Important to have lived the whole life in Germany”	0.86	-0.03
“Important to share German norms and customs”	0.71	0.27
“Important to be able to speak German without an accent”	0.69	0.07
“Important to respect German political institutions and laws”	0.07	0.83
“Important to have democratic beliefs”	-0.04	0.83
“Important to fulfill your civic duties”	0.12	0.85
“Important to treat all societal groups equally”	-0.3	0.68
Factor	0.93	0.88

Notes: Range of the items is 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree); Confirmatory factor analysis with promax rotation. Source: Roßteutscher et al. (2018).

Methodologically, we rely on ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models. Since respondents are nested within the German states (*Bundesländer*) and previous research as well as recent elections have shown that populist success varies across German states, we include fixed effects for the German states. Moreover, we use robust standard errors. Unfortunately, our dataset does not offer a time dimension, so our analyses remain correlational and no causal claims can be substantiated. Yet, we believe that our analyses offer explanatory value as the data set includes a rich amount of attitudinal variables that are not present in many other recent datasets. Distinguishing between different forms of national identity and properly measuring populist attitudes is important and the dataset at hand allows us to do so.

Empirical results

We start with our basic models, which are presented in Table 3. Model 1a includes civic, model 1b ethnic national identity as well as our control variables. Both models can be seen as a baseline for the independent relationships of the respective forms of national identity with populist attitudes. Model 1c includes both forms of national identity to jointly test their explanatory value.

Starting with model 1a in the left column of Table 3, we find that – contrary to hypothesis 1 – a civic conception of nationhood is positively related to populist attitudes. While the coefficient is significant, it is very small. The graphical illustration (Figure 1 upper left panel) shows that a change of one standard deviation departing from the mean value of civic national identity equals an increase on the populism scale from .575 to .588, all other things being equal. For people who fully disagree with a civic conception of nationhood (minimum value) the predicted support for populism is .527, while for those in full support of a civic conception, the predicted support for populism is .592.

Turning to model 1b, we find that individuals holding an ethnic conception seem to be more populist. The coefficient is significant and modest in size. The graphical illustration (Figure 1 upper right panel) shows that a change of one standard deviation departing from the mean value of an ethnic conception of nationhood is equal to an increase on the populism scale from .573 to .611, all other things being equal. For people who fully disagree with an ethnic conception of nationhood (minimum value) the predicted support for populism is .489, while for those in full support of an ethnic conception the predicted support for populism is .641. Consequently, we find support for hypothesis 2, which postulates that an ethnic conception of nationhood is positively related to populist attitudes due to their similar conception of an antagonistic society. Model 1c incorporates both conceptions of nationhood into one single model to assess their relation to populist attitudes simultaneously. The results remain largely stable. The coefficient for civic national identity is still significant but only half the size. The coefficient of ethnic conceptions of nationhood is still positive and significant and does not change in size.

The control variables are mainly in line with the literature. Starting with education, we see a negative relation between having obtained a high school certificate (“Abitur”) and holding populist attitudes compared to those with lower secondary or no education. With regard to the economic situation, we find that people with a more negative view on the general economic situation are more likely to support a populist conception of society, while this does not hold true for the personal economic situation. Age is positively related to populist attitudes and women are less likely to support populism than men are. The type of community people live in does not matter for the support of populism. In terms of subjective social status, members of the working class are significantly more likely to support populist attitudes compared to lower class members, while members of other classes do not differ with regard to populism. Interestingly, left-right self-placement has no systematic relationship with populism, neither in a linear nor in a curvilinear form. Lastly, supporting a more restrictive immigration policy relates positively

to populist attitudes.

Overall, models 1a-c reject hypothesis 1 but support hypothesis 2. Contrary to our theoretical expectations, both conceptions of nationhood are consistently positively linked to populist attitudes. Nevertheless, ethnic conceptions seem to be a decisively stronger predictor than civic conceptions.

Table 3 Linear regression models on populist attitudes with Bundesländer fixed-effects

	Model 1a	Model 1b	Model 1c
<i>DV: Populist attitudes</i>			
Civic national identity	0.065*** (0.012)	-	0.03** (0.012)
Ethnic national identity	-	0.152*** (0.009)	0.148*** (0.009)
<i>Education</i>			
Secondary school	-0.001 (0.005)	0.004 (0.005)	0.004 (0.005)
Advanced technical certificate	-0.019*** (0.007)	-0.007 (0.007)	-0.008 (0.007)
High school certificate	-0.072*** (0.006)	-0.058*** (0.006)	-0.06*** (0.006)
General economic situation	0.018*** (0.003)	0.015*** (0.003)	0.016*** (0.003)
Personal economic situation	-0.001 (0.003)	-0.000 (0.003)	0.000 (0.003)
Age	0.002*** (0.000)	0.002*** (0.000)	0.002*** (0.000)
<i>Sex</i>			
Female	-0.009** (0.004)	-0.007* (0.004)	-0.007** (0.004)
<i>Type of community</i>			
Suburban area	0.001 (0.005)	0.002 (0.005)	0.002 (0.005)
Rural area	0.002 (0.005)	0.003 (0.005)	0.003 (0.005)
<i>Social status</i>			
Working class	0.023*** (0.009)	0.02** (0.009)	0.02** (0.009)
Lower middle class	0.001 (0.008)	0.002 (0.008)	0.001 (0.008)
“Middle” middle class	0.001 (0.009)	-0.001 (0.009)	-0.001 (0.009)
Higher middle class / upper class	-0.01 (0.011)	-0.012 (0.011)	-0.012 (0.011)
Left-right-self-placement	-0.004 (0.004)	-0.005 (0.004)	-0.005 (0.004)

Left-right-self-placement (squared)	0.001** (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	0.001 (0.000)
Position on migration	0.025*** (0.001)	0.017*** (0.001)	0.017*** (0.001)
Constant	0.298*** (0.022)	0.314*** (0.020)	0.293*** (0.022)
Observations	8852	8852	8852
<i>R squared</i>	0.17	0.20	0.20
<i>Fixed effects</i>	✓	✓	✓

Notes: Reference Category (RF) social status = lower class; Education = no formal education / lower secondary education; RF for sex = male; RF for type of community = urban area; robust standard errors in parentheses: * p<0.1, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01.

Besides the direct relationships, we expect socio-economic vulnerability and perceptions of the national economy to moderate the relationship between civic national identity and populism, but not between ethnic national identity and populism. The full models are presented in the online appendix (Tables OA3 and OA4), while the visualizations of the interactions for civic national identity are presented in Figures 2 and 3 and the interactions for ethnic national identity in the online appendix in Figures OA3 and OA4.

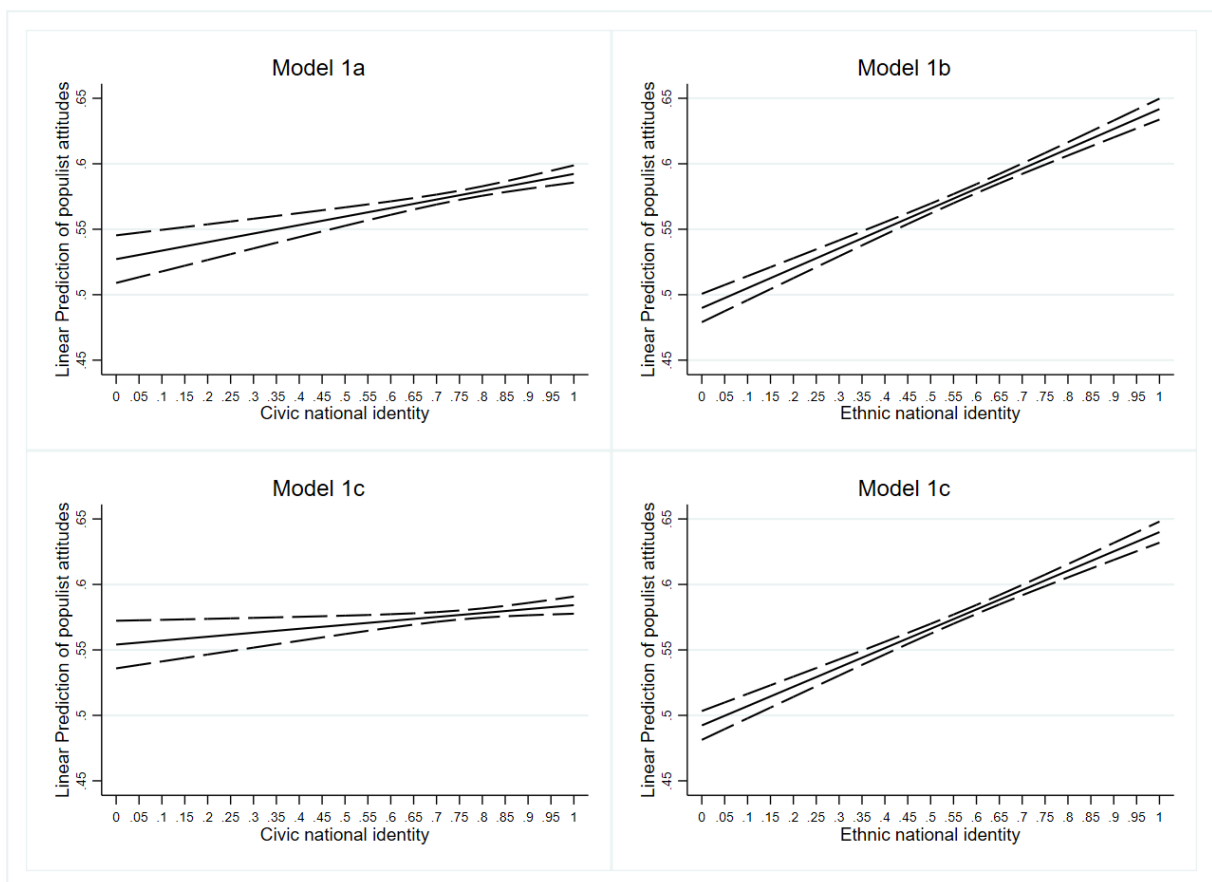


Figure 1 Marginal effects with 95-% confidence intervals of civic and ethnic national identity

Starting with the interaction between a civic national identity and the level of education, we find the expected moderating effect. For people with lower secondary or secondary education, a civic conception of nationhood is positively related with populist attitudes (see Figure 2). In contrast, for people with a high school certificate (“Abitur”), it is negatively related to populism. Looking at the interaction with the general economic situation, we essentially find a similar result. The graphical exploration in Figure 3 shows that for respondents who regard the general economic situation as very good, civic conceptions of nationhood decrease the affinity for populism, while for respondents who evaluate the economic situation as medium or worse, the relationship is positive. Overall, this provides substantial support for our hypothesis 3a. The results show that our initial argument that a civic national identity reduces populism is only valid for those with low levels of socio-economic vulnerability. Therefore, it seems that a civic national identity cannot be regarded as a safeguard against the current wave of populism, at least not for society as a whole. For those in a socio-economically vulnerable position, a civic national identity instead promotes populist attitudes.

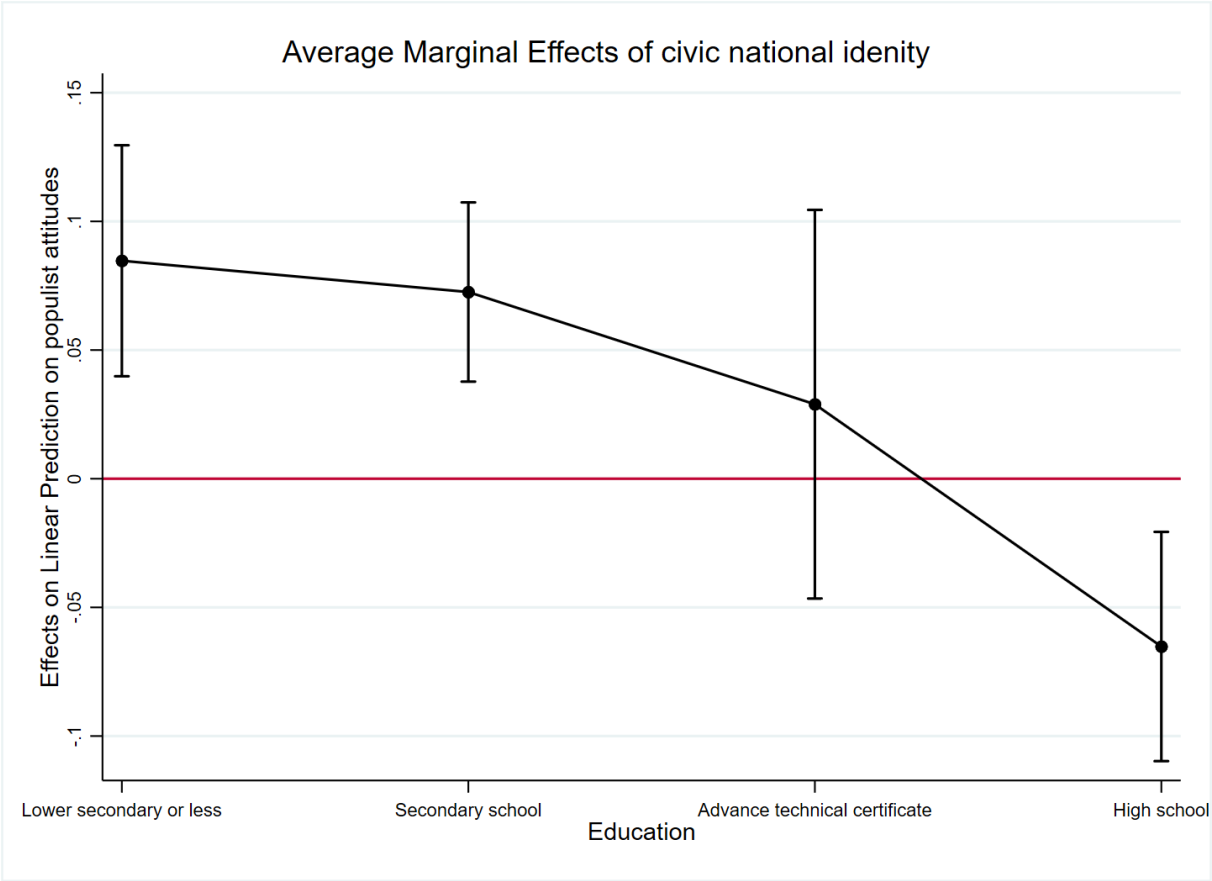


Figure 2 Conditional marginal effect of civic national identity on populist attitudes

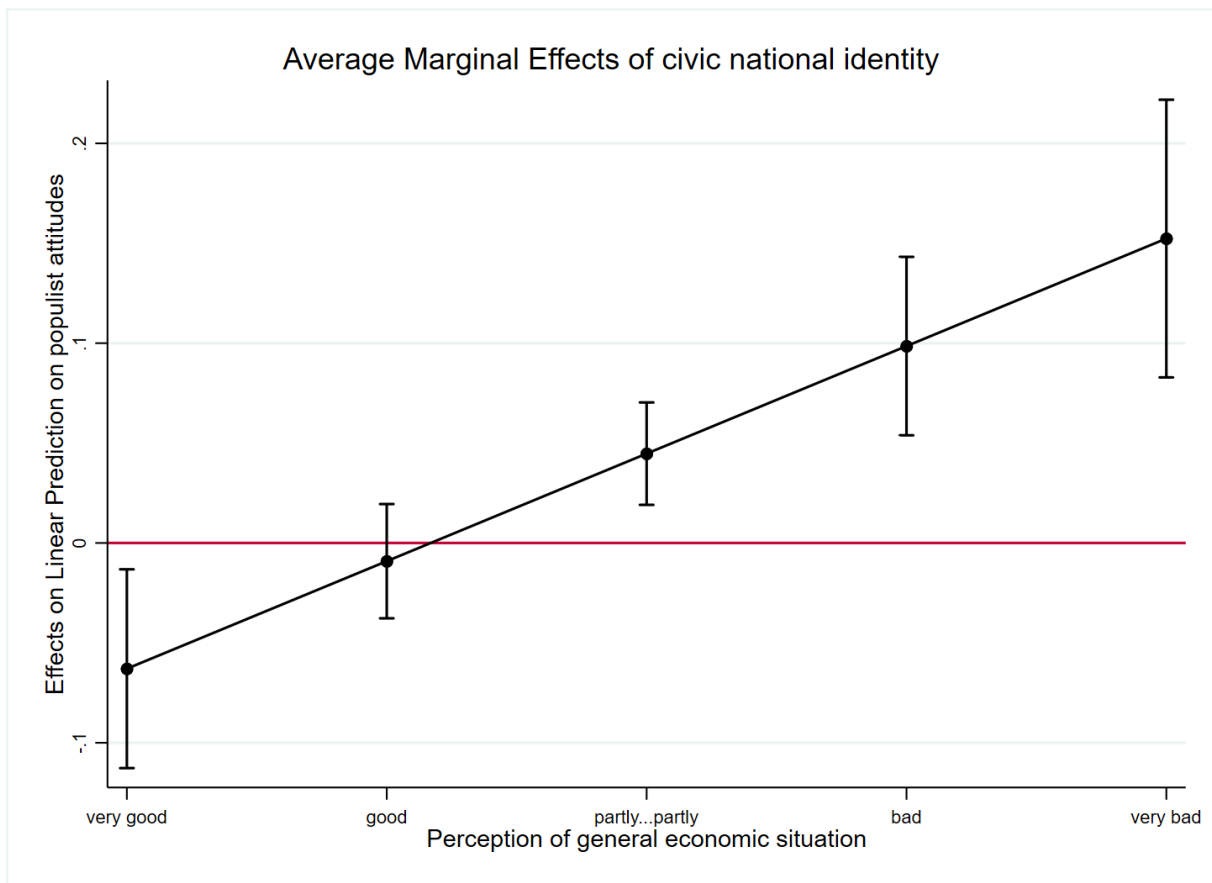


Figure 3 Conditional marginal effect of civic national identity on populist attitudes

With regard to hypothesis 3b, we also tested the interactions between education or the perception of the general economic situation and an ethnic conception of nationhood. We present these results in the online appendix (Figures OA3 and OA4; Table OA4). The models reveal that neither the interaction with education nor the interaction with the perception of the general economic situation is significant. The graphical illustrations support this contention (see Figures OA3 and OA4). The positive relationship between ethnic national identity and populism does not vary with the socio-economic vulnerability of the respondents, supporting our postulated hypothesis.

To sum up, our empirical investigation lends mixed support to our hypotheses. Contrary to hypothesis 1, we find that a civic conception of nationhood is positively related to populist attitudes. However, we find that there are significant interactions between a civic conception of nationhood and education as well as perceptions of the national economy, showing that a civic

conception is only positively related to populist attitudes among respondents with high levels of socio-economic vulnerability, while it is negatively related to populist attitudes among respondents with low levels of socio-economic vulnerability. Furthermore, we confirm hypothesis 2 as an ethnic national identity is positively related to populism. In line with our expectations, we find no moderation effect for an ethnic conception.

Discussion

How does national identity relate to populist attitudes? We argue theoretically that it matters decisively which aspect of national identity is considered. A civic conception of nationhood should relate negatively to populist attitudes due to its emphasis on a shared political culture and the importance of an institutionalised exchange between the political elite and the citizens, which are both at odds with the Manichean outlook on society and the anti-elitism inherent in populism. Conversely, an ethnic conception of nationhood is expected to yield a positive relation with populist attitudes. This is due to the resemblance between the objectivist criteria of belongingness such as ancestry and birthplace and the Manichean distinction of “good” and “evil” that is a central component of populism. The sharp in- and out-group distinction inherent in an ethnic conception of nationhood makes people more likely to support populism as they conceive the members of the nation as sharing certain traits, which members of any out-group cannot attain. This resonates with the centrality of the “pure and homogeneous people” in a populist conception of society.

Our empirical analysis shows that – contrary to hypothesis 1 – a civic national identity is positively related to populism. While we argued that a civic national identity was opposed to the sharp exclusion inherent in populism, it seems that a civic national identity nevertheless constructs an in-group-out-group distinction that makes supporters of such an identity more prone

to populism. In line with hypotheses 2, an ethnic national identity is positively related to populist attitudes.

Moreover, we also postulated that an individual's socio-economic vulnerability and perception of the national economy moderates the relation between civic national identity and populist attitudes. Contextualising the influence of civic national identity, we find that the positive relationship only holds for respondents with higher levels of socio-economic vulnerability. In contrast, a civic conception of nationhood is negatively related with populist attitudes for people with a higher education and people with a very positive assessment of the national economy respectively. Consequently, a civic national identity cannot be regarded as a safeguard against populism. As expected, we do not find a moderation effect for an ethnic conception of nationhood. The objectivist criteria that are fundamental to ethnic conceptions of nationhood are unlikely to change with the degree of socio-economic vulnerability and should retain their binary distinction between being a member of the nation or not (Hadler & Flesken 2018).

However, our study has several caveats that one needs to keep in mind when interpreting the results. First, our data set only includes one point in time, which does not allow us to make causal claims. Our results show correlational relationships, whereas likely causal claims cannot be assessed with the available data. This is a common issue in research on both national identity and populist attitudes (Helbling et al. 2016). We nevertheless believe that the GLES data is most suitable for our purpose as the data allows us to distinguish between different forms of national identity and their relationship with populism, which contributes decisively to existing research. Our aim was to underline the importance of the conceptual differences between civic and ethnic national identity as well as their distinctive relationships with populist attitudes. A second limitation is the fact that our study is a single country investigation. Consequently, research needs to assess our findings beyond the German case comparatively. Although major

debates about the nature of national identity and the rise of populist parties mainly on the political right, but also on the left, might make Germany a typical case (at least within a European context), we cannot rule out that the development of German national identity following World War II (cf. Blank & Schmidt 2003) still leaves an imprint on Germans' conceptions of nationhood as well as their proclivity to hold populist attitudes. Notwithstanding, Germany with its multifaceted history of national identity offers an interesting case to study. At least since the so-called refugee crisis and with the rise of the AfD, different conceptions of nationhood have been more explicitly expressed in the public.

Although we differentiate between civic and ethnic national identity as two forms of national identity, in doing so, we neglect other dimensions of national identity. Some scholars, for example, focus on national identity based on attitudes towards out-groups (Schatz & Staub 1997; Davidov 2009; Green et al. 2011; Willis-Esqueda et al. 2017). Such analyses mostly compare forms of patriotism, which is regarded as non-derogatory towards out-groups, to nationalist attitudes, which view one's own nation as superior over other nations (Schatz et al. 1999; Citrin et al. 2001; Blank & Schmidt 2003; Sapountzis 2008; Davidov 2009). This dimension of national identity, however, is rather difficult to disentangle from immigration attitudes in general (e.g. Hainmueller & Hiscox 2010; McLaren 2011; Freitag & Rapp 2013; Hainmueller & Hopkins 2015) and is thus less valuable for our purpose than conceptions of nationhood. Another form of national identity that has been identified in previous literature is national attachment measured as (emotional) closeness to one's own nation (Rapp 2018; Lubbers 2019). Yet, this aspect of national identity is far less developed and receives substantially less attention in scholarly literature than conceptions of nationhood (cf. Reeskens & Hooghe 2010; Helbling et al. 2016). In consequence, for the purpose of this article, we have decided to focus on the most important aspect of national identity (Helbling et al. 2016: 746) and its relation to populist attitudes, since it is the content dimension of national identity that subjectively defines the borders

of the nation (Citrin et al. 2001). Further, this dimension is also well-suited for cross-national comparisons (Reeskens & Hooghe 2010) and thus enables applying our theoretical framework beyond the German case.

In summary, our analysis of the relation between two distinct conceptions of nationhood and populist attitudes with particular attention to the moderating role of an individual's socio-economic vulnerability as well as her perceptions of the national economy helps to advance the research field in at least three different ways. First, we provide a detailed account of how civic and ethnic conceptions of nationhood differ conceptually in their relationship with populist attitudes. Second, we shed light on a potential driver of populist attitudes and add to accounts of structural or economic grievances, which are regularly used arguments in many contemporary research articles, by systematically assessing the populism-(national-)identity-link in detail. Third, we contribute to the growing field of studies on populist attitudes instead of populist vote choice. Whereas the latter is fairly well understood, scholarly research has only recently begun to pay the necessary attention to the former.

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¹ Despite its widespread use, the civic-ethnic framework has also been subject to critique on the grounds of bearing normative connotations of “good” and “bad” national identities as well as for conceptual ambiguities (Brubaker 1999, Zimmer 2003, Wright et al. 2012, Larsen 2017). While we acknowledge that there are conceptual issues that are not sufficiently addressed yet, we argue that, given the lack of a convincing alternative and the lasting appeal of the framework (Eugster & Strijbis 2011; Hadler & Flesken 2018; Ditlmann & Kopf-Beck 2019), it is fitting to employ a conceptual framework that is comparable to previous studies.

² Although the permeability of national borders is a central component of a civic national identity, this does not necessarily make this kind of identity more inclusive with regards to foreigners that are not perceived as sharing the national political culture e.g. Markell (2000), Simonsen & Bonikowski (2019) and Tamir (2019).