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Perceived Exclusionary Disadvantages and Populist Attitudes: Evidence from Comparative and Longitudinal Survey Data in Six European Countries

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Abstract:

Recent ethnographic research has argued that subjective impressions of disadvantage are important to explain support for radical populist parties. Yet, the question of how such perceived disadvantages relate to populist attitudes as an expression of populist ideas, has received less attention. In this regard, this study sets out to investigate the relationship between subjective group relative deprivation and populist attitudes. I argue that subjective group relative deprivation is positively related to populist attitudes. Going beyond previous research, I account for the possibility that populist attitudes also positively affect feelings of disadvantage, resulting in a vicious circle of disadvantage and populism. Results from three original cross-sectional surveys in six European countries show that subjective group relative deprivation is positively related to populist attitudes. More importantly, analyses of original panel data show that fully understanding the relationship between populism and disadvantage requires taking both directions of causality into account.

Keywords

Populist attitudes, Subjective disadvantage, Relative deprivation, Panel data,

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Introduction

Populism is one of the most debated topics in contemporary political science (Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018). Recent research has argued that subjective feelings of relative disadvantage are crucial in explaining people's support for radical politics such as right-wing populist parties (Cramer, 2016; Gest et al., 2018; Hochschild, 2016). These studies argue that both economic insecurity and cultural change have created a segment of the population that feels "left behind" and excluded. Thus, these authors argue that subjective impressions of reality are important to explain people's support for radical politics (Cramer, 2016; Hochschild, 2016). While such accounts emphasize the influence of specific feelings of disadvantage on support for radical right-wing populist parties, the question of how such perceived disadvantages relate to populist attitudes as an expression of populist ideas has received less attention (Elchardus and Spruyt, 2016; Spruyt et al., 2016).

Against this backdrop, this study aims to analyze whether and how perceived disadvantages relate to populist attitudes. While previous studies such as Elchardus and Spruyt (2016), Hameleers and de Vreese (2020), and Spruyt et al. (2016) focus on more general forms of individual-level relative disadvantage, I incorporate recent calls from ethnographic and social psychological research that underscore the importance of group identities in the context of relative deprivation as well as political attitudes (Bornschier et al., 2021; Hochschild, 2016; Smith et al., 2012). To that end, I investigate the relationship between perceived exclusionary group-level disadvantages – measured as subjective group relative deprivation – and populist attitudes in six European countries. Following seminal work in social psychology, subjective group relative deprivation is defined as a negative upward comparison leading to a perceived disadvantage that is regarded as

unfair, resulting in angry resentment (Pettigrew, 2015; Smith et al., 2012; Smith and Pettigrew, 2014).

Adding to recent studies that point towards the importance of both economic and cultural developments in explaining support for different manifestations of populism (Gest et al., 2018; Gidron and Hall, 2020; Rhodes-Purdy et al., 2021), I argue that feelings of subjective group relative deprivation are positively related to populist attitudes (Elchardus and Spruyt, 2016). Populist attitudes function as a (political) coping strategy that fosters political change to address the frustrating situation of feeling disadvantaged.

Going beyond previous research, I take into account that the relationship between populism and feelings of disadvantage is potentially dynamic in nature. As populism uses narratives of disadvantage and betrayal to fuel support, it is likely that populist attitudes increase feelings of subjective disadvantage. Following arguments from selective exposure (Stier et al., 2020; Stroud, 2017), I argue that people who hold populist attitudes are more likely to be exposed to populist information or rhetoric, which offers a narrative about how the “true” people are disadvantaged in society thereby fostering feelings of subjective group relative deprivation. Thus, holding populist attitudes is likely to increase feelings of subjective disadvantage.

To test these hypotheses, I rely on original survey data collected at three different points in 2020 and 2021. First, to offer systematic cross-country evidence on the relationship between subjective group relative deprivation and populist attitudes, I rely on three cross-sectional surveys collected in France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom (April – May 2020, November 2020 – January 2021, April – May 2021). The results of regression models show that subjective group relative deprivation is positively related to populist attitudes in all countries and surveys. More importantly, to take into account that the relationship between populism and feelings of

disadvantage is potentially dynamic in nature, I make use of a short panel in the same six countries (November 2020 – January 2021 to April – May 2021). The results of autoregressive cross-lagged panel models indicate that subjective group relative deprivation is positively related to populist attitudes but also that populist attitudes increase feelings of subjective relative deprivation resulting in a vicious circle of exclusionary disadvantage and populism. To that end, the results show that scholars need to take both directions of causality into account in order to fully understand the relationship between populism and disadvantage.

Rather than contradicting earlier work, this study sets out to contribute to the scholarly literature in four distinct ways. First, I offer a quantitative comparative test of the relationship between perceived exclusionary disadvantages and populist attitudes in six European countries. I shift the analytical focus to group-level deprivation to expand on previous studies that only focus on a more general form of individual relative deprivation (Elchardus and Spruyt, 2016; Hameleers and de Vreese, 2020; Spruyt et al., 2016). By doing so, I take the findings of ethnographic research and the calls from social psychology into account as both emphasize the importance of group comparisons for political attitudes. In addition, exclusionary disadvantages as studied in this article expand the findings of recent studies that advance explanations beyond structural economic grievances and cultural threat perceptions by offering an adequate empirical measure for subjective relative disadvantage (Carreras et al., 2019; Gidron and Hall, 2020; Rhodes-Purdy et al., 2021).

Second, I introduce a theoretical argument that accounts for the fact that the relationship between subjective group relative deprivation and populist attitudes is dynamic in nature thereby advancing our understanding of the relationship between populism and disadvantage. To that end, I expand on studies that look at relative

deprivation and populist attitudes only cross-sectionally (Elchardus and Spruyt, 2016; Spruyt et al., 2016) and I confirm the contention of Hameleers and de Vreese (2020), who suspected that perceived disadvantage and populist attitudes might be reciprocally related. Third, I offer cross-country and longitudinal evidence on the relationship between subjective group relative deprivation and populist attitudes in six European countries. By using panel data, I offer insights into the dynamic of the relationship between subjective group relative deprivation and populist attitudes that has previously been neglected. Fourth, rather than vote choice or party preferences, this study focuses on explaining the attitudes that underlie the support for populist politics, i.e., populist attitudes. One advantage of such an attitudinal approach is that “voters are always recruited on the basis of several issues and concerns”, which makes it difficult to extract support for populism from vote choice (Spruyt et al., 2016: 336).

Conceptualization of populism and populist attitudes

While populism remains a somewhat contested concept, the ideational approach that situates populism in the realm of ideas can be regarded as the most common approach (Hawkins et al., 2018; Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018; Mudde, 2007). Thus, populism is defined 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).¹*

From this definition, three distinct dimensions can be extracted: a Manichean outlook on society, anti-elitism, and people centrism. The Manichean outlook essentially

regards politics as a dualistic moral struggle between good and bad rather than a competition of political ideas (Hawkins et al., 2018; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013). The people-centrism and anti-elitism fill these categories of good and bad. The people form a homogeneous and virtuous entity that is capable of articulating a general will which ultimately should guide all political decisions unmediated by intermediary institutions (Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018). Opposed to the ‘good’ people is the ‘vilified’ elite which has found a way to obscure the functioning of the political system for their own benefit and by doing so betrays the people of their rights and resources (Hawkins, 2009).²

Populism in this sense is a moralistic rather than programmatic ideology with the concept of ‘the people’ being of central importance (Mudde, 2007). The ideational approach enables scholars to “analyse whether these ideas are widespread across certain segments of the electorate, irrespective of the presence of populist actors” (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018: 1671) and “[b]ecause populism is the combination of [the aforementioned] different aspects [...] populist attitudes are the set of evaluative reactions to these elements” (van Hauwaert et al., 2020: 3).

Explaining populist attitudes: The role of subjective group relative deprivation

The literature on explaining populism evolves mainly around two distinct research strands. The first approach focuses on economic causes and argues that processes usually associated with globalization have created winners and losers (Kriesi et al., 2012). Kriesi et al. (2012) emphasize that the changes brought about by the globalization of economy and society led to a transformation to a globally integrated knowledge and information society, which, in turn, created insecurities and vulnerabilities for certain segments of the

population (Kriesi et al., 2012; Kurer, 2020). Populism offers a simple answer to these insecurities by putting the people first (Engler and Weisstanner, 2021). Empirically, studies have found that economic vulnerability and grievances positively relate to populist attitudes (Rico and Anduiza, 2019). Furthermore, Kurer (2020) shows that a perception of relative economic decline increases the support for right-wing populist parties.

Proponents of the cultural explanation argue that globalization cannot be confined to economic processes, but that it also implies “a cultural evolution in which a particular cosmopolitan identity is being actively promoted” (Spruyt et al., 2016: 337). This entails a shift in values and traditions leading people to feel that their way of life and their values are not reflected in the public and elite discourse (Norris and Inglehart, 2019). In particular, immigration, accompanied by increasing cultural and ethnic diversity, poses a threat to the image of a homogeneous populace (Mudde, 2007). Consequently, immigration is supposed to not only threaten the country’s economy, but also its culture and traditions (Ivarsflaten, 2008).

However, it could be argued that for many people, economic and cultural globalization seem to have produced a subjective feeling of disadvantage and marginalization. In this regard, a too rigid conceptualization of economic or cultural explanations might not be beneficial (Carreras et al., 2019; Cramer, 2016; Gest et al., 2018; Hochschild, 2016; Rhodes-Purdy et al., 2021). Rhodes-Purdy et al. (2021), for example, show that economic distortions lead to negative emotional reactions that in turn activate cultural stereotypes and discontent. These expressions of cultural discontent activate populist attitudes.

Furthermore, Hochschild (2016) points out that supporters of the Tea Party share an underlying ‘deep story’ that reflects their subjective impressions of reality which often

combine economic and cultural aspects. A key element is that her interview partners have the impression that they are disadvantaged compared to other groups (such as women, Blacks, refugees, unemployed, or government officials) and that these groups move by and ahead of ‘people like them’ (Hochschild, 2016). In a similar vein, Gest et al. (2018) argue that nostalgic deprivation – i.e., the impression of how the own social status has decreased over time – significantly predicts support for the radical right. Nostalgic deprivation is subjective and may thus not be objectively real, undergirding the idea that support for radical and populist ideas is predicted by subjective impression of reality that often revolve around perceived disadvantages (Gest et al., 2018).

Despite the convincing evidence on the importance of feelings of disadvantage for support for radical (right-wing) populist parties, the question of how such perceived disadvantages relate to a populist ideology – i.e., populist attitudes – remains under-scrutinized. To capture these subjective feelings of disadvantage, I follow seminal work from social psychology and employ the concept of subjective group relative deprivation (Pettigrew, 2015; Runciman, 1966; Stouffer et al., 1949). Subjective relative deprivation is defined “as a judgment that one or one’s in-group is disadvantaged compared to a relevant referent and that this judgment invokes feelings of anger, resentment, and entitlement” (Pettigrew, 2015: 12). People make comparisons within their socio-economic context and through cognitive appraisals arrive at the conclusion that they are disadvantaged (Pettigrew, 2015; Smith and Pettigrew, 2014). Emotional appraisals lead to the judgment that the disadvantage is unfair and illegitimate, arousing affective responses such as angry resentment (Smith et al., 2012).

Focusing on *group* instead of *individual* subjective relative deprivation captures the importance of group membership that has been put forward by recent studies (Gest et al., 2018; Hochschild, 2016). People see themselves as members of a neglected group that

is side-lined to the fringes of society (Gest et al., 2018; Gidron and Hall, 2020). To that end, research in social psychology has shown that subjective *group* relative deprivation has more explanatory value for intergroup attitudes than subjective *individual* relative deprivation (Runciman, 1966; Smith et al., 2012). Thus, subjective *group* relative deprivation offers more theoretical as well as analytical value in the context of this study (Pettigrew, 2015; Urbanska and Guimond, 2018).

Some previous studies have connected relative deprivation with populism. For example, Elchardus and Spruyt (2016) and Spruyt et al. (2016) find a positive correlation between relative deprivation and populist attitudes in Flanders. Similar results are reported by Hameleers and de Vreese (2020) for the Netherlands. Marchlewska et al. (2018) show that subjective relative deprivation predicted support for Donald Trump in the US and Urbanska and Guimond (2018) find that subjective group relative deprivation compared to immigrants predicts support for the French populist radical right-party Front National.

However, most of these studies focus on a single country (Elchardus and Spruyt, 2016; Hameleers and de Vreese, 2020; Spruyt et al., 2016). Furthermore, some of these studies focus on vote choice as opposed to populist attitudes (Marchlewska et al., 2018; Urbanska and Guimond, 2018). In addition, I shift the analytical focus to the group-level while previous research focused on general or individual-level forms of deprivation. Lastly, these studies do not explicitly investigate subjective group-level relative deprivation and its connection with populist attitudes over time. In this regard, I expand these studies by focusing on the relationship between subjective group relative deprivation and populist attitudes across countries and by taking into account that the relationship might be reciprocal in nature. Put differently, I investigate subjective group relative deprivation and populist attitudes in a comparative and longitudinal perspective.

With regard to the relationship with populist attitudes, I argue that perceived exclusionary disadvantages expressed by subjective group relative deprivation are positively related to populist attitudes. Feelings of subjective group relative deprivation evoke an increasing awareness of in-group discrimination, which in turn results in the assessment of a frustrating status quo (Abrams et al., 2020). Frustrating situations require a coping strategy that prompts the desired changes. Such a coping strategy would address group-based disadvantages and perceived status inferiority (Abrams and Grant, 2012; Mummendey et al., 1999; Tajfel and Turner, 1979). Populist attitudes can be regarded as a coping strategy that prompts such changes as populism advances a conception of politics and society that departs from the status quo.

To overcome relative deprivation, populist attitudes provide change through popular sovereignty so “that where established parties and elites have failed, ordinary folks, common sense, and the politicians who give them a voice can find solutions” (Spruyt et al., 2016: 336). Additionally, relative deprivation is shown to increase out-group derogation and prejudice to improve one’s own in-group’s self-image, thereby also strengthening positive feelings towards the own in-group (Dambrun et al., 2006; Gurr, 1970; Marchlewska et al., 2018; Meuleman et al., 2020; Pettigrew et al., 2008; Smith et al., 2012). In this vein, populist attitudes offer a good coping strategy as the Manichean outlook and people centrism construct a homogenous, virtuous, and glorified in-group (the people) that is juxtaposed to a vilified and self-serving out-group (the elite and various societal out-groups) (Hameleers and de Vreese, 2020; Marchlewska et al., 2018; Spruyt et al., 2016).

This antagonistic conception divides society in two groups. As relative deprivation increases out-group derogation and prejudice, populist attitudes are likely fueled by feelings of subjective group relative deprivation. As subjective group relative

deprivation implies responsibility of an external actor (Smith and Pettigrew, 2014), the anti-elitism of populist attitudes offers an adequate strategy to externalize the blame for the perceived disadvantage (Hameleers and de Vreese, 2020) while at the same time offering a solution by driving the elites deemed responsible for the in-group's adverse situation out of office. Overall, as subjective group, relative deprivation is a frustrating mental state that makes group differences more salient and demands for (political) change. Against this backdrop, populist attitudes offer a suitable (political) coping strategy to overcome the unfair disadvantage of one's own in-group. Based on this reasoning, I formulate hypothesis 1 as follows:

H1: Subjective group relative deprivation is positively related to populist attitudes.

Populist attitudes and subjective group level relative deprivation: the reversed relationship

When looking at the relationship between populist attitudes and subjective group relative deprivation, it could also be argued that populist attitudes make individuals more likely to feel disadvantaged compared to other groups because populism is essentially a narrative of disadvantage and betrayal. Following a selective exposure framework (Stier et al., 2020; Stroud, 2017), I argue that individuals with populist attitudes select their information based on their prior political beliefs. Thus, I argue that people who hold populist attitudes are more likely to consume news that are populist in nature or are exposed to messages from populist actors (Stier et al., 2020). For example, Rooduijn et al. (2016) argue that populist individuals are more likely to be exposed to messages that exemplify the perceived disadvantages of the people. Similarly, Lipset (1955: 198) argued that “[o]ver and over again runs the theme, the common men in America have been victimized by the members of the upper classes, by the prosperous, by the wealthy,

by the well-educated.” Even more so, populist individuals are not only more likely to be exposed to such messages but are also more likely to respond positively to such messages (Bos et al., 2020; Hameleers et al., 2018). Those who support populist positions are more likely to be affected by the claims that the true people are unfairly disadvantaged (Rooduijn et al., 2016).

Populism in itself can be regarded as a narrative of disadvantage and betrayal that depicts the disadvantaged situation of the “ordinary people” (Rooduijn et al., 2016). Thus, what follows from selective exposure is a confrontation with perceived in-group disadvantages even if the objective situation does not necessarily imply such a disadvantage (Mols and Jetten, 2016). Being exposed to such narratives activates or exacerbates perceived in-group disadvantages (Hameleers et al., 2018; Hochschild, 2016). Put differently, as populism focuses on the disadvantage of the people, populist attitudes foster feelings of deprivation and discontent through selective exposure (Bos et al., 2020; Hameleers and Fawzi, 2020; Rooduijn et al., 2016).

Overall, following arguments from selective exposure, people who hold populist attitudes are more likely to be exposed to populist information or rhetoric, which offers a narrative about how the “true” people are disadvantaged in society (Stier et al., 2020; Stroud, 2017). This in turn activates or exacerbates feelings of subjective group relative deprivation (Bos et al., 2020; Hameleers et al., 2018). Based on the reasoning above, I formulate hypothesis 2 as follows:

H2: Populist attitudes are positively related to subjective group relative deprivation.

Research design

Study 1: Cross-country evidence

To investigate the relationship between subjective group relative deprivation and populist attitudes in a comparative perspective, I rely on three different original web-based surveys with quota sampling (with regard to sex, age, and education) collected in France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom at three different points in time. The first survey was conducted between 17th April and 11th May 2020, the second between 24th November 2020 and 18th January 2021, and the third between 22nd April and 21st May 2021. There were around 1,000 respondents per country (18,000 respondents in total) and they received a small monetary incentive to complete the survey (see Table S1-1 in supplement 1 for more information on the surveys).

Respondents were recruited using quota sampling through the survey companies' access panels. We provided the survey companies with quotas for sex, age, and education (and language for Switzerland) to allow broader conclusions to the respective populations. The quotas were drawn from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (2019) and Wirtschaftskammer Österreich (2020). While most of the quotas were fulfilled, there are some minor discrepancies between the intended and realized quotas (see Tables S1-2 to S1-4). Although these discrepancies are mainly minor deviations, I include specific weights to accommodate these deviations. Not using weights does not alter the main findings. Thus, the analyses should allow meaningful interpretations, given that the samples resemble the respective countries' population when it comes to age, gender, and education. Descriptive statistics are presented in supplement 1 Tables S1-5 to S1-7. With regard to the survey questions, all three surveys include almost the same items.

I study France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. It is important to describe the context in which the data was collected, although the observational nature of the data, does not allow any causal claims. Regarding the context,

several aspects are worth noting. First, in recent years populism has seen a rise in all six countries. While France, Italy, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom have a longer history of populism dating back at least to the 1990s (in some instances longer), Germany and Spain have only recently started to experience notable populist parties and discourses in the 2010s. Irrespective, populism plays a significant role in each of the countries making them particularly useful for the research question at hand. Second, the countries selected offer valuable variation with some countries having sizeable radical left-wing *and* radical right-wing populist parties (e.g. France, Germany, and Spain) while others *only* have radical right-wing populist parties (Switzerland and United Kingdom) or even ideologically inconsistent populist parties (Italy) (Rooduijn et al., 2019). Third, when it comes to the influence of populism on perceptions of relative deprivation, the inclusion of Switzerland and Spain is particularly interesting as the Swiss People's Party and Podemos are part of the respective national government, thereby offering an additionally insightful context for the study.

To measure populist attitudes, I follow recent research that uses three sets of items to measure the respective dimensions of populism: people centrism, anti-elitism, and Manichean outlook (Akkerman et al., 2014; Castanho Silva et al., 2020; van Hauwaert et al., 2020; van Hauwaert and van Kessel, 2018). I follow a theoretical approach where the items are grouped according to their respective sub-dimension. While the measurement of populist attitudes has been discussed at length in the literature, recently, Wuttke et al. (2020) argued that most studies thus far display a significant discrepancy between the conceptualization of populist attitudes and their measurement. The “peculiarity of the populist set of ideas lies precisely in the combination of” people centrism, anti-elitism, and a Manichean outlook, making populist attitudes a non-compensatory concept (Wuttke et al., 2020: 358). Yet, conventionally the literature regards the latent concept (populist

attitudes) as a common cause of the indicators that are empirically measured, i.e., a populist attitude is the common cause of the observed measures (Bollen and Lennox, 1991). When conceptualizing populism as a non-compensatory concept this perspective cannot adequately capture populism (for a thorough and excellent discussion see Wuttke et al., 2020).

Wuttke et al. (2020) provide two important reasons. First, the causal approach implies a correlation between the different sub-dimensions and indicators, yet there is no theoretical argument for a correlation between the sub-dimensions of populist attitudes (Wuttke et al., 2020). For populist individuals these sub-dimensions should overlap but others might agree only with some or no parts of populism: “Hence the concept of populist attitudes as an attitudinal syndrome describes attitudinal configurations among individuals, but it is agnostic about correlations between the concept attributes” (Wuttke et al., 2020: 359). Second, disregarding differences between the attributes of the concept as measurement error as done by the causal perspective is not compatible with the non-compensatory nature of populism (Wuttke et al., 2020). Thus, methods such as factor analyses or mean scores are not adequately capturing the nature of populist attitudes (Wuttke et al., 2020). Fortunately, there are ways to measure and aggregate populist attitudes in conceptually consistent way.

Generally, I follow the approach of Mohrenberg et al. (2021) that minimizes the problem that high values on one dimension compensate low values on another dimension. Table 1 shows the items and their respective dimensions included in the surveys. The items in surveys 2 and 3 differ slightly from survey but still offer an encompassing measure for populist attitudes.

For all three surveys, I use the same approach. I sum up the items of each dimension separately and then take the geometric mean of all three dimensions

(Mohrenberg et al., 2021). Mohrenberg et al. (2021) argue that this procedure ensures that people who score 0 on either dimension of populism have an overall 0 on the combined populism scale. For ease of interpretation, I rescale the variable to range from 0 (no populism) to 1 (high levels of populism). This approach fits the conceptualization of populist attitudes as each dimension is necessary and only the combination of these elements can be labelled populist attitudes. Yet, it also allows to investigate populism as a matter of degree (more or less populism) rather than as a dichotomous concept (van Hauwaert and van Kessel, 2018; Wuttke et al., 2020). Previous research has successfully used this approach to reduce the problem that high values on one dimension compensate for low values on another dimension (Filsinger et al., 2021; Mohrenberg et al., 2021; Wuttke et al., 2020).

Table 1 Items for populist attitudes in survey 1 and surveys 2 and 3

| Items | Dimension |
|---|-------------------|
| Survey 1 | |
| “The will of the people should be the highest principle in this country’s politics.” (POP 1) | People Centrist |
| “Politicians don’t have to spend time among ordinary people to do a good job.” (POP 2) | People Centrist |
| “The differences between ordinary people and the ruling elite are much greater than the differences between ordinary people.” (POP 3) | People Centrist |
| “I would rather be represented by a citizen than by a specialized politician.” (POP 4) | Anti-Elitism |
| “Government officials use their power to try to improve people’s lives.” (POP5) | Anti-Elitism |
| “The particular interests of the political class negatively affect the welfare of the people.” (POP 6) | Anti-Elitism |
| “The people I disagree with politically are not evil.” (POP 7) ^a | Manichean Outlook |
| “You can tell if a person is good or bad if you know their politics.” (POP 8) | Manichean Outlook |
| “The people I disagree with politically are just misinformed.” (POP 9) | Manichean Outlook |
| Survey 2 and 3 | |
| “The will of the people should be the highest principle in this country’s politics.” (POP 1) | People Centrist |
| “The differences between ordinary people and the ruling elite are much greater than the differences between ordinary people.” (POP 3) | People Centrist |
| “I would rather be represented by a citizen than by a specialized politician.” (POP 4) | Anti-Elitism |
| “Government officials use their power to try to improve people’s lives.” (POP5) | Anti-Elitism |

| | |
|---|-------------------|
| “The particular interests of the political class negatively affect the welfare of the people.” (POP 6) | Anti-Elitism |
| “You can tell if a person is good or bad if you know their politics.” (POP 8) | Manichean Outlook |
| “The people I disagree with politically are just misinformed.” (POP 9) | Manichean Outlook |

Notes: Items adjusted from (Akkerman et al., 2014; Castanho Silva et al., 2018; van Hauwaert et al., 2020; van Hauwaert and van Kessel, 2018). Reversed coded statements are POP 2, POP 5 and POP 7. In surveys 2 and 3 the reversed coded statement is POP 5.

To measure subjective group relative deprivation, all three surveys offer the same items. As subjective group relative deprivation consists of a cognitive (perceived disadvantage) and an affective component (negative emotional reaction to the disadvantage), I use two statements that capture each dimension. First, I use the statement *“People like me have been systematically disadvantaged, while other groups have received more than they deserve”*. This captures the cognitive component of subjective group relative deprivation, i.e., the appraisal that an individual realizes that she, as a representative of her in-group, is disadvantaged compared to members of an out-group.

Within this study, I focus on a statement without a concrete reference group as certain reference groups are often only connected to a certain form of populism, for example, right-wing populism when using immigrants as a reference group (Urbanska and Guimond, 2018). Thus, when investigating populist attitudes based on a thin ideology, the chosen approach is more suitable. Furthermore, this has the advantage that the survey unobtrusively asks about a group disadvantage rather than prompting individuals towards a specific in- or out-group. Looking at the literature on relative deprivation, the question of the relevant referent is still unresolved (Festinger, 1954; Tajfel, 1978; Vanneman and Pettigrew, 1972). For the analysis at hand, however, this discussion is only of minor importance, as people would not feel relative deprivation if the group they are comparing themselves to is not relevant (Walker and Pettigrew, 1984).

Furthermore, research in social psychology has emphasized that a necessary condition for subjective relative deprivation to be present is the affective component signifying the angry resentment evoked by the unfair disadvantage (Smith and Pettigrew, 2014). Even more so, studies show that this affective component is crucial for relative deprivation to have an influence on attitudes or behavior and that studies neglecting this component consistently underestimate the influence of subjective relative deprivation (Smith et al., 2012). To include this component, I combine the statement above with a measure for this affective component: *“It bothers me when other groups are undeservedly better off than people like me”*.

The two items show a sufficiently high Spearman-Brown reliability coefficient of .68 (France: .72, Germany: .72, Italy: .65, Spain: .56, Switzerland: .70, UK: .68) in survey 1. In survey 2, the Spearman-Brown reliability coefficient is .74 (France: .74, Germany: .76, Italy: .77, Spain: .67, Switzerland: .75, UK: .73) and in survey 3, the two items show a Spearman-Brown reliability coefficient of .70 (France: .70, Germany: .73, Italy: .73, Spain: .61, Switzerland: .71, UK: .71)

To obtain a distinct measure, I take the geometric mean of the cognitive and the affective component to make sure that people who feel disadvantaged but not angry do not display high values. Afterwards, I recode the variable to range from 0 (no relative deprivation) to 1 (high levels of relative deprivation). Thus, I include the affective component as a necessary condition and thereby take the emotional nature of subjective group relative deprivation into account.

Compared to previous studies, this measurement has three advantages. First, opposed to previous studies, I explicitly include the emotional component of relative deprivation that has been found to be crucial for behavioral and attitudinal consequences (Smith et al., 2012). Second, the statement is without a concrete reference group, which

avoids biasing the results towards, for example, right-wing populism when using immigrants as a reference group. Similarly, the measures do not include any mention of the government. Third, the formulation used for the disadvantage clearly refers to an in-group disadvantage that at the same time laments an undeserved out-group advantage. In this vein, this investigation serves as a test of whether perceived exclusionary disadvantages compared to an out-group relate to populist attitudes.

Naturally, I include a range of control variables that might influence the relationships under study. Existing studies provide evidence that women are less likely to hold populist attitudes (Spierings and Zaslove, 2017). Thus, I include sex as control variable with female as the reference category. I also control for age measured in years. A lot of previous research suggests that people's social and economic positions influence whether they support populism (Rico and Anduiza, 2019). I use education, income situation, and occupation status as control variables. For an attitudinal control, I include the left-right self-placement and political interest (Rooduijn and Akkerman, 2017; van Kessel et al., 2021). For the former, I use the squared term to account for the u-shaped effect of politically extreme positions.

Methodologically, I rely on ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models with robust standard errors. For the full sample, I also include country fixed-effects as respondents are nested within countries and direct effects of country-level variables are not of interest. Thus, models with country fixed-effects and robust standard errors are an adequate alternative to multi-level models as they control for all potential differences between the countries.

Study 2: Longitudinal evidence from six-country panel study

To investigate the dynamic of the relationship between subjective group relative deprivation and populist attitudes, I rely on a short panel that uses a subset of the respondents from survey 2 (November 24, 2020 and January 18, 2021) and survey 3 (April 22, 2020 and May 21, 2021) introduced above. This creates a short panel structure with a time lag of around three to four months (see Supplement 2, Table S2-1 for more information).

As opposed to a classical panel study, I use a subset of respondents from survey 2 that was re-contacted by the survey company. Overall, 3,165 respondents responded in survey 2 and survey 3. As a result, there are differences between the sample used in the panel analyses and the samples used in study 1. Unfortunately, the quotas set in study 1 were not fulfilled in the panel. However, to obtain meaningful interpretations with this subset of respondents, I use country specific weights for sex, age, and, education.

The data set offers the same set of items as introduced in study 1 above and the main variables, populist attitudes and subjective group relative deprivation, are operationalized with the same items as introduced above. Furthermore, I introduce the same control variables as in study 1, including sex, age, education, income situation, occupation, left-right-self-placement (squared), and political interest. Descriptive statistics for all variables can be found in Supplement 2 (Table S2-2; Figure S2-1 for distribution of populist attitudes and subjective group relative deprivation).

Methodologically, I rely on an autoregressive cross-lagged panel design. Introduced in developmental psychology, these models allow to test whether two variables are causally related (Kenny, 1975; Rico and Anduiza, 2019; Selig and Little, 2012).³ This approach is particularly well-suited to provide an empirical test of the hypotheses presented above. As a requirement, both variables must be measured simultaneously. Moreover, at least two different points in time need to be included. Each

variable is regressed on its lagged value, lagged values of the independent variable, as well as lagged control variables. In this paper, the main variables of interest are populist attitudes of an individual respondent in a given wave Pop_{it} , subjective group relative deprivation $SGRD_{it}$ as well as a range of control variables C_{it} . The two following equations formally summarise the model:

$$Pop_{it} = \alpha + \rho Pop_{it-1} + \beta SGRD_{it-1} + \gamma C_{it-1} + \varepsilon_i \quad (1)$$

$$SGRD_{it} = \alpha + \rho SGRD_{it-1} + \beta Pop_{it-1} + \gamma C_{it-1} + \varepsilon_i \quad (2)$$

By including a lagged-dependent variable, the cross-lagged parameters $\beta SGRD_{it-1}$ and βPop_{it-1} are thus effectively predicting change in the respective dependent variable (Hamaker et al., 2015). Since both variables are continuous, I use ordinary least squares regression models to test my hypotheses. This modelling strategy is suited as a priori both directions are theoretically plausible and explicitly theorized in the hypotheses. Consequently, I can account for the possibility of a “reinforcing spiral” where populist sentiments fuel feelings of relative deprivation and these feelings increase populist attitudes (Hameleers and de Vreese, 2020: 261).

Empirical analyses

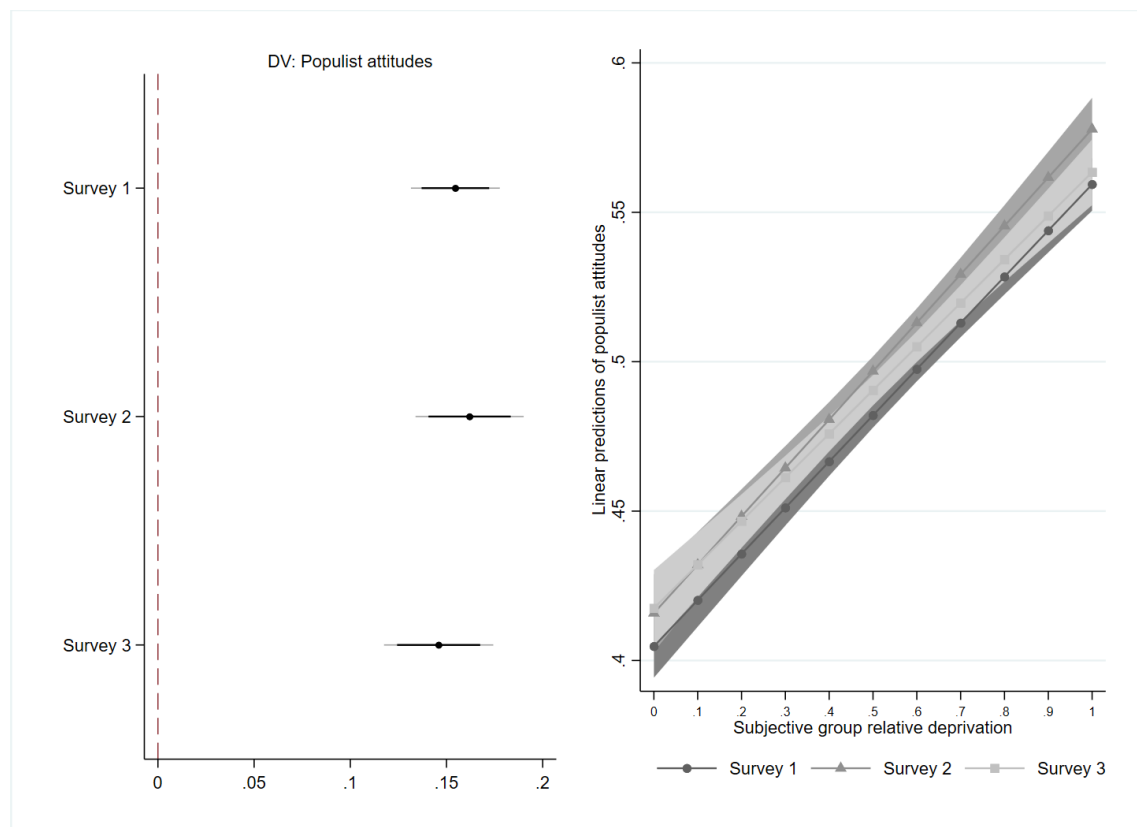
Study 1: Comparative evidence

In the following, I present the results of the linear regression models based on the three cross-sectional surveys conducted in France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. The left panel of figure 1 plots the coefficients of subjective group relative deprivation by survey. In line with hypothesis 1, subjective group relative deprivation is positively and significantly related to populist attitudes in the full sample in all three surveys. The coefficients are similar in size. The right panel of figure 1 reveals

that an increase from one standard deviation below the mean to one standard deviation above the mean in subjective group relative deprivation corresponds to an increase in populist attitudes of around 58 percent of a standard deviation in survey 1 and around 50 percent of a standard deviation in surveys 2 and 3. That is, individuals who feel subjectively deprived compared to other groups in society have higher levels of populist attitudes compared to those that do not feel relatively deprived at three different points in time in the years 2020 and 2021.

A short note on the control variables for populist attitudes based on these full sample analyses (see table S1-8). The results for the control variables show remarkable consistency across the surveys. Men, those who live less comfortable on their income, those who are more politically interested and those at the respective extremes of the political spectrum have higher levels of populist attitudes.

Figure 1 Relationship between subjective group relative deprivation and populist attitudes (Survey 1-3)

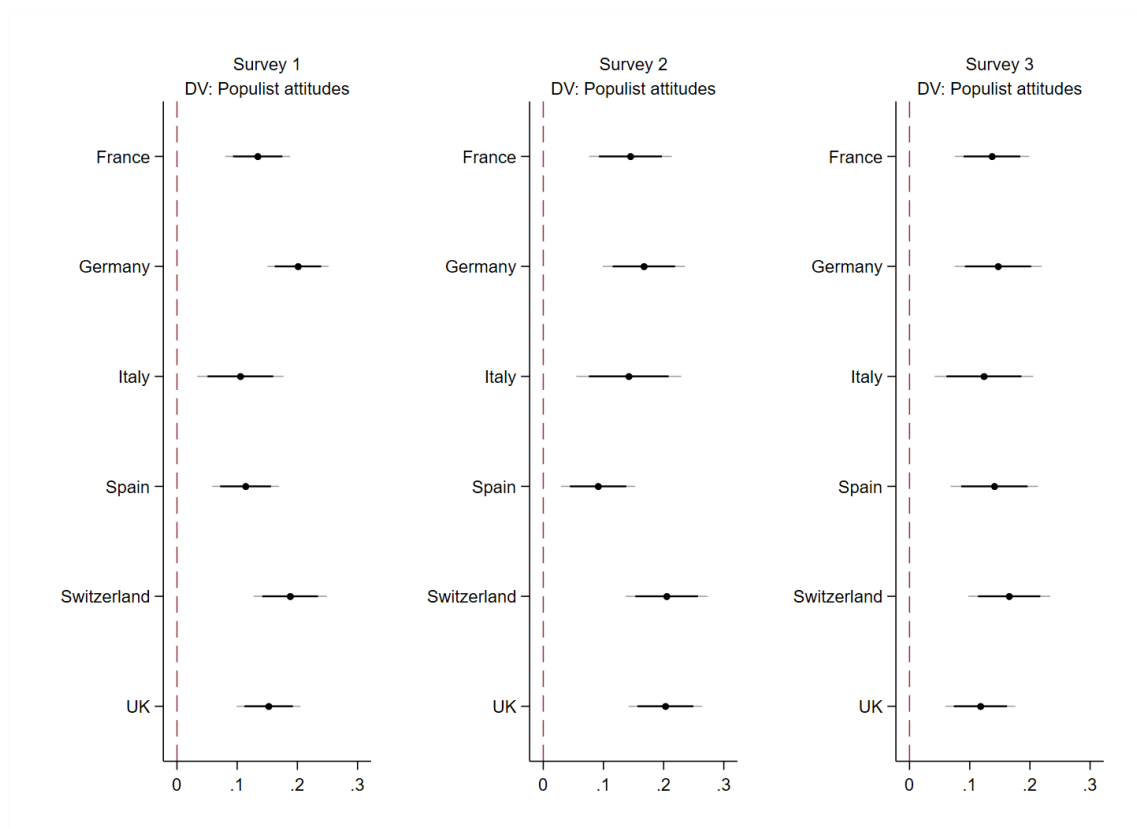


Notes: Estimates are based on table S1-8 in Supplement 1. The left panel displays the coefficients of subjective group relative deprivation with 99% (light grey bars) and 95% (dark grey bars) confidence intervals. The right panel shows

the average marginal effects of subjective group relative deprivation on populist attitudes with 95% confidence intervals. Source: original survey data; Survey 1 was conducted between 17th April and 11th May 2020, survey 2 between 24th November 2020 and 18th January 2021, and survey 3 between 22nd April and 21st May 2021.

While the findings from full sample analyses support hypothesis 1, it is prudent to check whether these results also hold within the countries or whether there are significant differences between the countries, for example, due to institutional or cultural factors. Figure 2 shows the results of the country-by-country analyses for each survey (full results in tables S1-9 – S1-11). The relationship between subjective group relative deprivation and populist attitudes is consistently positive and significant across all six countries and all three surveys, strengthening the findings from the full sample analyses.

Figure 2 Coefficient plot for the country-wise relationship between subjective group relative deprivation and populist attitudes



Notes: Estimates are based on the models in tables S1-9, S1-10, and S1-11 in Supplement 1. Displayed are coefficients of subjective group relative deprivation with 99% (light grey bars) and 95% (dark grey bars) confidence intervals. Source: original survey data; Survey 1 was conducted between 17th April and 11th May 2020, survey 2 between 24th November 2020 and 18th January 2021, and survey 3 between 22nd April and 21st May 2021

Overall, these analyses provide crucial comparative evidence that subjective group relative deprivation is an important predictor of populist attitudes, which potentially function as coping strategy that fosters political change to address the frustrating situation of a perceived disadvantage. Importantly, these analyses show the robustness of the relationship across countries and at three different points in time, thereby strongly supporting hypothesis 1. Yet, this study set out to offer a step forward in solving the puzzle about the direction of the relationship, which is addressed in the next section.

Study 2: Longitudinal evidence from a six-country panel

To uncover which dynamic underlies the relationship between subjective group relative deprivation and populist attitudes, study 2 relies on an original short panel in the six countries introduced above. Using autoregressive cross-lagged panel models, the following analyses shed some light on this question. Starting with the influence of subjective group relative deprivation on populist attitudes, Table 2 shows a positive and significant coefficient for subjective group relative deprivation indicating that subjective group relative deprivation increases populist attitudes. This offers additional support for hypothesis 1 and shows that the relationship seems to hold over time.

Model 2 in Table 2 shows the results for the reversed relationship, i.e., the models consist of subjective group relative deprivation as the dependent and populist attitudes as the main independent variable as well as the lagged dependent variable and the standard socio-demographic and attitudinal control variables. The results reveal a positive and significant coefficient for populist attitudes, supporting hypothesis 2. Put differently, people who hold populist attitudes feel more disadvantaged than those with lower levels of populist attitudes. Consequently, populist attitudes and subjective group relative

deprivation both affect each other substantially in a vicious circle of populism and perceived disadvantage (cf. Hameleers and de Vreese, 2020). The coefficients for the control variables in study 2 are mostly in line with the findings of the cross-sectional study and previous research.

Table 2 Autoregressive regression models for the relationship between populist attitudes and subjective group relative deprivation

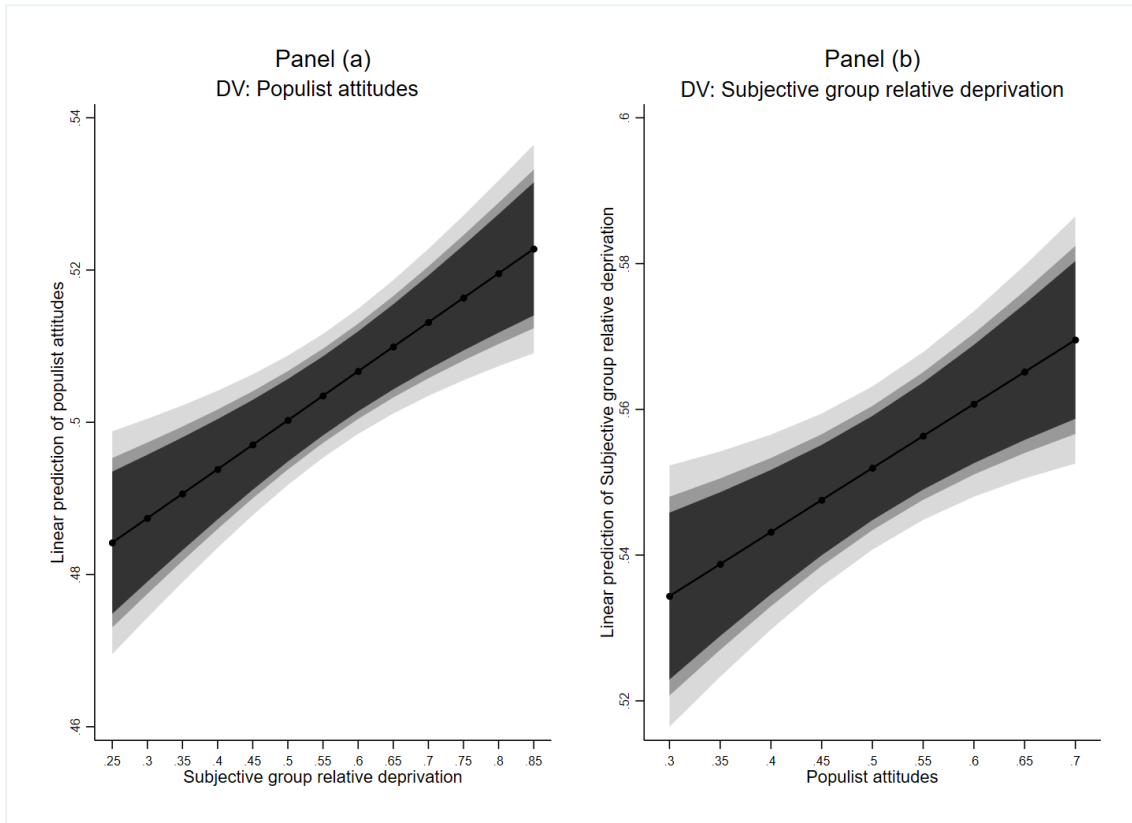
| | Model 1 DV: Populist attitudes | Model 2 DV: Subjective group relative deprivation |
|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|---|
| Subjective group relative deprivation | 0.064*** (0.015) | 0.471*** (0.021) |
| Populist attitudes | 0.452*** (0.023) | 0.088*** (0.026) |
| Age | -0.001** (0.000) | -0.000 (0.000) |
| <i>Sex</i> | | |
| Male | 0.005 (0.007) | -0.013 (0.009) |
| <i>Education</i> | | |
| Upper, post-secondary | -0.002 (0.008) | -0.017 (0.012) |
| Tertiary | -0.017 (0.009) | -0.019 (0.013) |
| Income situation | -0.029 (0.015) | -0.071*** (0.020) |
| <i>Occupation status</i> | | |
| Manual worker | 0.008 (0.016) | 0.017 (0.020) |
| In public service | -0.000 (0.013) | 0.024 (0.018) |
| Self-employed with no employees | -0.007 (0.017) | -0.005 (0.019) |
| Self-employed with employees | -0.017 (0.032) | -0.091* (0.040) |
| Retired | 0.027* (0.011) | -0.004 (0.015) |
| Student or otherwise in training | -0.027 (0.020) | -0.039 (0.030) |
| Unemployed | 0.004 (0.011) | 0.018 (0.016) |
| Other | -0.013 (0.017) | 0.002 (0.024) |
| Left-right self-placement | -0.097* (0.048) | -0.045 (0.066) |
| Left-right self-placement (squared) | 0.001 (0.000) | 0.001 (0.001) |
| Political interest | 0.044*** (0.013) | -0.024 (0.018) |
| Constant | 0.254*** (0.030) | 0.337*** (0.038) |
| Observations | 3066 | 3066 |
| Country fixed-effects | ✓ | ✓ |

| | | |
|----------------|-------|-------|
| R^2 | 0.289 | 0.293 |
| Adjusted R^2 | 0.283 | 0.288 |

Notes: Clustered standard errors in parentheses: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. Reference Category (RF) for sex: female; RF Education: lower secondary or less; RF Occupation status: Employee. All independent variables are lagged. Source: Original survey data collected from November 2020 to January 2021 and April 2021 to May 2021 by SurveyEngine.

To get some idea about whether populist attitudes or relative deprivation is more consequential, the size of the respective coefficients can give some indications. Figure 3 shows average marginal effects of a) subjective group relative deprivation (left panel) and of b) populist attitudes (right panel). For the influence of subjective group relative deprivation on populist attitudes, an increase from one standard deviation below the mean to one standard deviation above the mean corresponds to an increase in populist attitudes of around 20 % of a standard deviation. For the reversed relationship and the influence of populist attitudes on subjective group relative deprivation, an increase from one standard deviation below the mean to one standard deviation above the mean corresponds to an increase in subjective group relative deprivation of around 10 % of a standard deviation. Consequently, the influence of subjective group relative deprivation on populist attitudes seems to be (slightly) stronger than the influence of populist attitudes on subjective group relative deprivation. These findings hold when using a fixed-effects estimator (see Table S2-3).

Figure 3 Average marginal effects of a) subjective group relative deprivation (left panel) and b) populist attitudes (right panel)



Notes: Estimates are based on the models in table 1. Displayed are average marginal effects of a) subjective group relative deprivation (left panel) and b) populist attitudes (right panel) with 99% (light grey area), 95% (dark grey area) and 90% (black area) confidence intervals. Source: Original survey data collected from November 2020 to January 2021 and April 2021 to May 2021 through SurveyEngine.

As with the cross-sectional analyses, I perform the panel analyses country-wise but these should be interpreted cautiously due to the lower number of observations. Figure S2-2 in Supplement 2 shows a relatively consistent picture with regard to the influence of subjective group relative deprivation on populist attitudes, as the coefficients are positive and significant in France, Germany, and Spain. With regard to the reversed relationship, it becomes evident that populist attitudes have a significant impact on subjective group relative deprivation in France, Spain, and the United Kingdom. This supports the idea of a vicious circle in France and Spain as the data shows a reciprocal relationship. As these country-wise analyses should be interpreted with caution, they

already suggest avenues for future research that takes the supply-side more explicitly into account.

Overall, study 2 offers crucial longitudinal evidence for the contention that subjective group relative deprivation increases populist attitudes. More importantly, however, the longitudinal analyses suggest that both populist attitudes and subjective group relative deprivation reinforce each other, with a slightly stronger influence of perceived exclusionary disadvantages on populist attitudes. To that end, the analyses of this study show that taking both directions of causality into account is crucial in understanding the relationship between populism and disadvantage, as it seems to be more complex than previously assumed.

Discussion and conclusion

The link between subjective disadvantage and the support for radical and populist politics has been exemplified by recent ethnographic studies such as Hochschild (2016: 144) who summarizes her interview partners: “You are a stranger in your own land. You do not recognize yourself in how others see you. It is a struggle to feel seen and honored”. While such accounts emphasize the influence of specific feelings of neglect and disadvantage in explaining support for radical (right-wing) populist parties, the question of how such perceived disadvantages relate to populist attitudes as an expression of populist ideas, has received less attention. To that end, this study set out to expand on recent theoretical and empirical advances in the literature to test the proposition that subjective group relative deprivation is positively related to populist attitudes as well as shed light on the dynamic underlying this relationship.

Analyses based on original survey data from six European countries at three different points in 2020 and 2021 show that such perceived exclusionary disadvantages are positively related to populist attitudes. Furthermore, going beyond previous research by using panel data from the same six countries, I show that both populist attitudes and subjective group relative deprivation affect each other reciprocally, with a slightly stronger influence of perceived exclusionary disadvantages on populist attitudes. Consequently, to fully understand the relationship between disadvantage and populism, scholars need to account for the dynamic of the relationship.

In sum, this paper offers a comparative and a longitudinal test of the relationship between subjective group relative deprivation and populist attitudes. While the evidence is robust across countries, future research should continue to explore the topic in additional depth. Although the analyses of the panel data indicate a reciprocal relationship, future studies should use panels with more waves and greater time lags. A longer time span might allow making robust claims about whether subjective group relative deprivation causes populist attitudes or vice versa. More importantly, the current design does not allow causally identifying effects of relative deprivation on populist attitudes (or vice versa). Future studies should make use of experimental manipulation to overcome this issue (see for example Rhodes-Purdy et al., 2021). Investigating additional countries could also expand the radius of countries towards Eastern and Northern European countries as well as beyond Europe to add further leverage and generalizability. Moreover, future studies could account for specific supply-side effects that are only hinted at in the analyses of the paper. Lastly, future studies might also dive deeper in testing the mechanisms that link subjective relative deprivation and populist attitudes, in particular regarding social identity theory and its coping mechanisms as well as selective exposure.

Despite its caveats, this paper contributes to moving the research field forward in four ways. First, I offer a quantitative comparative test of the relationship between perceived exclusionary disadvantages and populist attitudes in six European countries. Subjective group relative deprivation as studied in this article advances previous studies that solely focus on general forms of disadvantage or individual-level deprivation. By doing so, I follow recent calls from ethnographic and social psychological research to take the importance of group comparisons for political attitudes into account. In addition, my study is in line with recent studies that advance explanations beyond structural economic grievances and cultural threat perceptions (Gest et al., 2018; Gidron and Hall, 2020; Rhodes-Purdy et al., 2021).

Second, I introduce a theoretical argument that accounts for the fact that the relationship between subjective group relative deprivation and populist attitudes is dynamic in nature. While populist attitudes might function as a political coping strategy to overcome unfair disadvantages, selective exposure activates or exacerbates perceived in-group disadvantages accounting for the positive effect of populist attitudes on subjective relative deprivation. In this regard, these arguments help us to fully understand the relationship between subjective disadvantage and populist attitudes in Europe.

Third, by using original survey data from six European countries, I offer comparative and longitudinal evidence on the relationship between subjective group relative deprivation and populist attitudes. As the result implies a reciprocal relationship, this study has important implications for future studies on populist attitudes and subjective disadvantage as the relationship seems to be more complex than previously assumed. Future studies should dive deeper into the potential mechanisms that link populist attitudes and subjective disadvantage. Fourth, by using an attitudinal approach,

my study explicitly investigates how perceived exclusionary disadvantages relate to populism rather than the whole ideological package of specific (populist) parties.

Endnotes:

¹ As opposed to full ideologies, thin ideologies have “a restricted core attached to a narrower range of political concepts” (Freeden, 1998: 750). Thus, thin ideologies do not provide answers to all social, political, or economic questions.

² Yet, who is categorized as elite varies over time and context but often involves governmental officials, politicians in general, the media, economic elites but also supranational organizations or the judiciary (Hawkins, 2009).

³ Although these models are often used to causally interpret relationships, I refrain from making claims about causality.

Notes on contributor:

Maximilian Filsinger, is a Postdoctoral Researcher at the Chair of Political Sociology at the Institute of Political Science at the University of Bern, Switzerland. His research interests lie in the fields of comparative public opinion research and political sociology with particular emphasis on (affective) polarization, political attitudes such democratic regime preferences, populist attitudes and political trust as well as social capital theory.

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Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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