

A justified bad reputation after all? Dark personality traits and populist attitudes in comparative perspective

Nathalie Hofstetter^{*}, Maximilian Filsinger

Institute of Political Science, University of Bern, Fabrikstrasse 8, CH 3012, Bern, Switzerland

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ABSTRACT

Although scholars have extensively studied populism in recent years, the empirical exploration of dispositional or personality underpinnings of populist attitudes is still in its infancy. Especially the role played by the Dark Triad traits of Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy is strikingly understudied. The few empirical studies on this subject fail to fully capture the multi-dimensionality and non-compensatory nature of populist attitudes, are confined to particular country contexts, and produced highly inconclusive results. Specifying and expanding previous research, our main aim is to investigate the darker nuances of populists' personalities across six European countries in 2020. Providing first cross-country evidence, our analyses reveal psychopathy as the most significant predictor of populist attitudes and their subdimensions with Machiavellianism playing a less robust role and narcissism appearing largely inconsequential. In general, most relationships seem non-universal, calling for future research into the contextuality of psychological predispositions for populist and other political attitudes.

1. Introduction

In an “age of populism” (Oswald et al. 2022), the worldwide appeal of populist ideas and actors has sparked considerable academic interest in the populist phenomenon, especially its conceptualization, measurement, and consequences (Hawkins et al. 2017, 267; Marcos-Marne 2022). We tap into a comparatively understudied line of research that scrutinizes the demand side of populism – including populist voting and populist attitudes – and more specifically the psychological bases of populism. The psychological imprint of populism is just beginning to be understood with recent research scrutinizing the role played by values (e.g., Marcos-Marne 2022), emotions (e.g., Filsinger et al. 2023; Rico et al. 2017), and in particular personality traits (Fatke 2019; Galais and Rico 2021).

Our focus is on the personality foundations of populism. More specifically, we investigate how darker personality traits – the Dark Triad of Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy (Paulhus and Williams 2002) – relate to populist attitudes in six European democracies. With the notable exceptions of Galais and Rico (2021) in Spain and Pruyssers (2020) in Canada, most studies in the field limit their attention to the relationship between broad and general personality traits as commonly captured by the Big Five model. Yet, darker personality traits are

important to investigate for three reasons.

First, research has argued that these traits are particularly relevant to the domain of politics and yield additional explanatory power for a variety of political outcomes (Chen et al. 2021, 580; Hart et al. 2018, 59), making their disregard a serious shortcoming, potentially limiting our understanding of the populist personality. Second, since populism is generally described in negative terms as it pits distinct groups in society against each other resulting in a confrontative style of politics, darker personality traits should be particularly conducive to this form of political action. This holds all the more considering how (elite) populists are commonly portrayed by political observers, experts, and the media: as transgressive, bad-mannered, provocative, disagreeable, or even insane – put simply: as socially rather unappreciated personalities (Nai 2022, 1337f.). As Galais and Rico (2021, 1) conclude from relevant research, “populist leaders stand out for their ‘dark personalities’”, giving the impression that there is something intrinsically “dark” and threatening in populism (Katsambekis 2017, 202). However, to date, it is largely unclear whether this also applies to populist citizens (Galais and Rico 2021, 1). Third, the notable exceptions that study the Dark Triad and populist attitudes do so in a single country context, not addressing the question of whether findings travel across different countries. Yet, since previous research shows that personality traits can play out in

^{*} Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: nathalie.hofstetter@unibe.ch (N. Hofstetter), maximilian.filsinger@unibe.ch (M. Filsinger).

different ways across different contexts (e.g., [Fatke 2017](#)) and that contingent effects of psychological attributes are crucial for our understanding of their potential political consequences, this is a key question. In this regard, [Federico and Malka \(2018\)](#) argue that the political information environment – specifically, differences in how political preferences are packaged into ideological bundles by elites – is fundamental in shaping the relationship between individual dispositions and political preferences. For the insights into populist citizens' personality to be relevant in political and social practice, they need to be context-sensitive, which is why cross-country research is needed. Applying a comparative approach also lives up to the call to conduct independent analyses with different data sets in order to enhance our understanding of the role personality plays in the political sphere ([Mondak et al. 2010](#)).

Building on these foundations, we study the relationship between personality traits and populist attitudes with a special focus on the Dark Triad. Instead of focusing on populist voting and candidate support like most of previous research (e.g., [Ackermann et al. 2018](#); [Aichholzer and Zandonella 2016](#); [Bakker et al. 2021](#); [Bakker et al. 2016](#); [Fortunato et al. 2018](#); [Hart et al. 2018](#); [Kenny and Bizumic 2020](#)), we are interested in the relationship of (dark) personality traits with populist attitudes, i.e., populism's underlying ideas ([Galais and Rico 2021](#); [Pruysers 2020](#)).

Crucially, we scrutinize these relationships across six European countries: Germany, France, Italy, Switzerland, Spain, and the United Kingdom. These countries offer contextual variation that allows testing the general arguments in different institutional, political, and social environments. More importantly, while all countries have seen a rise in populism in recent years, the history and ideological nature of populism varies across the countries. France, Italy, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom have populist parties at least since the 1990s as opposed to Germany and Spain where populism gained traction in the 2010s. And while France, Germany, and Spain have both sizeable radical left- and right-wing populist parties, relevant populist parties in Switzerland and the United Kingdom are only found at the radical right ideological pole and Italy has ideologically inconsistent populist parties ([Rooduijn et al., 2019](#)). Some of the countries even have experience with populist parties holding governmental office (e.g., Switzerland, Spain, Italy). Importantly, studying the (dark) personality imprint of populist attitudes across these six countries allows us to gain evidence on the generalizability of the populist personality profile and to identify potential country-differences.

We understand populist attitudes as a multidimensional and non-compensatory concept consisting of three relevant subdimensions: people centrism, anti-elitism, and Manicheanism ([Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser 2018](#); [Wuttke et al. 2020](#)). While [Galais and Rico \(2021\)](#) only investigate people centrism and anti-elitism, we argue that considering Manicheanism as another constituent dimension of populist attitudes contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of how personality shapes populist attitudes, in particular because the moral dimension of Manicheanism is prone to be shaped by personality traits. In addition to populist attitudes as a whole, we also take a look at the respective components separately as this allows us to see whether certain personality traits make people more susceptible to the respective subdimensions of populism. Given that political actors do not always use all three elements of populism at the same time and to the same extent, these analyses help to shed light on why certain individuals are attracted to certain populist messages and policies but not to others.

Our analyses of original survey data collected in spring 2020 reveal that psychopathy emerges as the most systematic predictor of populist attitudes and its subdimensions. Although people scoring high on psychopathy tend to be less people-centric, they hold comparatively stronger populist attitudes and are in particular characterized by a pronounced Manichean outlook on society and politics. Furthermore, Machiavellianism shows some consistency in promoting populist attitudes, but the cross-country evidence is less systematic, also regarding populism's subdimensions. For narcissism, hardly any significant effects

are found. Regarding the Big Five, our results suggest that conscientiousness and agreeableness in particular might be relevant in understanding the populist personality. As for the Dark Triad, we find some evidence that specific traits relate differently to different components of populist attitudes, which might help explain previous inconclusive findings on the personality foundations of populism. However, in general, most relationships between personality traits and populist attitudes and their subdimensions seem to be context-dependent rather than universal.

2. Personality traits and populist attitudes: theory and previous research

Despite the blooming research on populism in recent years, the concept remains highly contested ([Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017a](#); [Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017b](#); [Rooduijn 2019](#)). However, while populism is approached from different theoretical accounts (for a review, see [Gidron and Bonikowski 2013](#)), there is a growing consensus around an ideational conceptualization of populism ([Akkerman et al. 2014](#); [Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017a](#), [Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017b](#)). The ideational approach considers populism as a distinct set of ideas that center around a moral conflict between the homogeneous and glorified people and the vilified elite. Following from this, populism consists of three main features: a) people centrism, b) anti-elitism, and c) Manicheanism ([Akkerman et al., 2014](#); [Filsinger 2022](#); [Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser 2018](#)). People centrism follows the idea that “the people” form a virtuous and homogenous entity that is able to express a common general will, which should ultimately guide all political decisions ([Castanho Silva et al. 2018](#)). Anti-elitism focuses on the main villain of the people, which is the elite (whose exact definition depends upon time and place) who is accused of actively undermining the welfare of the people ([Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013](#)). The third subdimension, Manicheanism, is best understood as a cosmology that views politics as a moral struggle between the good and the bad, the right and the wrong ([Castanho Silva et al. 2018](#); [Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser 2018](#)). Through the concept of populist attitudes, the ideational approach allows us to study the demand side of populism ([Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017b](#)). Crucially, populist attitudes are theorized to represent an “attitudinal syndrome, which is characterized by the concurrent presence of its non-compensatory concept subdimensions” ([Wuttke et al. 2020](#), 356). Thus, populist attitudes are more than the sum of their (not uniquely populist) constituent dimensions but lie at the intersection of people centrism, anti-elitism, and Manicheanism ([Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser 2018](#), 6; [Wuttke et al. 2020](#)).

Personality refers to an enduring multifaceted system of psychological structures and processes by which individuals differ from each other ([Caprara and Vecchione 2013](#); [Mondak et al., 2010](#), 86). Core to this system are basic personality traits which present abstract, partly inherited, and considerably stable psychological potentials that characterize an individual across different situations. As such, following trait theory, traits shape more concrete manifestations of the personality system such as values, attitudes, and behavior in all spheres of life ([McCrae and Costa 2008](#)). This also applies to the political arena, with empirical evidence for personality effects on individual-level political outcomes nowadays abounds (for an early review, see [Gerber et al. 2011](#)). From both a theoretical and an empirical perspective, we can therefore assume that populist attitudes to some degree also reflect such basic dispositions.

Albeit our study is especially interested in the role played by dark personality traits, the so-called Big Five model of personality presents an almost natural starting point in the study of personality traits and populism. First, this is because the Big Five taxonomy describes personality on a decidedly general level, meaning that the model's five broad, empirically derived dimensions of personality traits aim to capture the most important differences in human personality ([Gosling et al. 2003](#), 506; [Mondak and Halperin 2008](#), 341). These dimensions are

openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism. Most generally, openness to experience refers to curiosity about new approaches to thinking and acting, while high conscientiousness requires pronounced responsibility, dependability, and diligence (Fatke 2017; Mondak and Halperin 2008). Extraversion describes an energetic approach towards the environment, and agreeableness captures a prosocial, communal, and trusting orientation towards others (Gerber et al. 2011). Finally, neuroticism contrasts emotional stability and is related to negativity and excitability (Mondak and Halperin 2008). Second, and related, the Big Five model is widely accepted and used in and beyond psychological research with political science almost exclusively focusing on it when studying personality and politics (Chen et al. 2021, 580). It follows that existing empirical evidence on the personality bases of populism is also strongly related to the Big Five.

The bulk of existing research on the Big Five and populism is devoted to right-wing populism, which attaches populism to nativism, and studies populist voting. While the respective evidence is far from being fully unambiguous, broadly concluding, this research paints a (right-wing) populist personality profile characterized in particular by low agreeableness and openness to experience, and further tends to include higher levels of conscientiousness and extraversion (and neuroticism) (cf. Ackermann et al. 2018; Aichholzer and Zandonella 2016; Bakker et al. 2016; Bakker et al. 2021; Fortunato et al. 2018; Kenny and Bizumic 2020; Schimpf and Schoen 2017; Vasilopoulos and Jost 2020). The evidence on the role played by the Big Five for populist attitudes net of specific issue, party, and candidate preferences and ideological alignment, is both more scant and more inconclusive, especially when it comes to populism's subdimensions. It is clearly evident, however, that the insights from studies on (right-wing) populist voting cannot simply be transferred to populist attitudes and their people centrist, anti-elitist, and Manichean components (cf. Fatke 2019; Galais and Rico 2021; Kenny and Bizumic 2020; Pruyssers 2020; Vasilopoulos and Jost 2020).

Previous research on personality and populism thus provides some tentative indications of a formative role of the Big Five personality traits for populist attitudes, although this research certainly needs to mature further in order to increase the certainty and generalizability of the revealed patterns and to make sense of inconclusive findings. Contributing to this process, we will examine the empirical associations between the Big Five and populist attitudes in six European countries, and fanning these out into the three constituent dimensions of populism.

However, the main focus of our study is not on the Big Five, but on the darker personality correlates of populist attitudes. While undoubtedly presenting one of the most important and widespread personality frameworks in psychology and beyond, it is still debated whether the Big Five model indeed is able to capture all relevant variation in human personality (Chen et al. 2021, 580). In this context, it has been argued that the model comprises "general" or "socially desirable" personality traits, but fails to discriminate between various antisocial tendencies and thus to fully capture darker, socially aversive personality nuances (Galais and Rico 2021; Nai and Maier 2018; Nai and Martínez i Coma 2019). This is where the so-called Dark Triad comes in, which aims to capture the darker nuances of personality with the trait constructs of Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy. While doubts about the

Dark Triad's incremental validity over the Big Five have been raised (Koehn et al. 2019, 11), there is empirical evidence suggesting that the latter are unable to adequately capture and predict the Dark Triad, which furthermore yield discrete or additional explanatory power for a variety of political outcomes (Chen et al. 2021, 580).¹ Hart et al. (2018, 59) even argue that malignant personalities can be considered particularly relevant to the domain of politics, however, they are not usually part of the scrutiny dedicated to the psychological underpinnings of political attitudes and behaviors in general and populism in particular (Chen et al. 2021; Hart et al. 2018, 59; Koehn et al. 2019, 7). Agreeing with Chen et al. (2021, 580) that "there is value in extending personality and politics research to include the Dark Triad" and in order to further complement the personality profile of populist citizens, the present study brings in the darker nuances of personality as captured by the Dark Triad (Paulhus and Williams 2002).

The triad comprises Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy as three partially heritable and socially-averse personality traits that however still lie within the normal range of functioning (Furnham et al. 2013; Koehn et al. 2019; Paulhus and Williams 2002). The latter is important to note since the concepts of narcissism and psychopathy are used in clinical research and practice and still describe a clinical syndrome therein (Furnham et al. 2013). Within the Dark Triad model, however, they describe subclinical forms of these personality traits and are therefore not to be understood as diagnostic labels, but represent non-pathological personality dimensions (Koehn et al. 2019, 12). Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy empirically overlap and share a "common core of callous-manipulation" as well as self-promoting, emotionally cold and aggressive behavioral tendencies, but the three traits are still conceptually different (Furnham et al. 2013, 199; Paulhus and Williams 2002, 557). Machiavellianism describes a tendency towards manipulative and calculating behavior which is exclusively focused on the accomplishment of own goals (Chen et al. 2021; Peterson and Palmer 2021). Machiavellians typically are cynical, behave expediently, and driven by ambition and power motives (Furnham et al. 2014, 115; Furnham et al. 2013, 201; Hart et al. 2018, 60). Narcissism includes exaggerated self-worth and vanity and refers to egoism, grandiosity, entitlement, dominance, and superiority (Koehn et al. 2019; Paulhus and Williams 2002; Peterson and Palmer 2021). Finally, psychopathy is characterized by high impulsivity, fearlessness, thrill-seeking behavior, and low empathy (Furnham et al. 2013; Hart et al. 2018, 60), with individuals scoring high on this trait are described as remorseless and (self-)destructive (Koehn et al. 2019; Pruyssers et al. 2019). While they undoubtedly have negative connotations and have been shown to relate to a wide range of negative behaviors and attitudes in social life (Peterson and Palmer 2021, 2), it should still be noted that each of the Dark Triad traits also has adaptive elements and can be beneficial for its carriers and others (Furnham et al. 2013).

As Galais and Rico (2021, 2) note, there are several reasons to expect that "populist ideas might be particularly appealing to [...] individuals that score high on the three aforementioned dark personality traits" (see also Nai 2022). The first can be found in the conceptual and empirical overlap between the Big Five, especially agreeableness, and the Dark Triad (see footnote ⁴). Dark personalities are typically marked by low agreeableness, which in turn is commonly linked to populism, especially

¹ Considering a variety of empirical studies, Furnham et al. (2014: 117f.) conclude that all Dark Triad traits seem to be weakly negatively related to neuroticism and positively to disagreeableness, while narcissism is most consistently and highly related to extraversion and the major Big Five correlates of psychopathy as well as Machiavellianism being low agreeableness along with conscientiousness. Even stronger than their negative association with agreeableness seems the negative relationship between the Dark Triad traits the honesty-humility factor of the HEXACO model of personality (see Ashton and Lee 2008). Still, "[t]o dismiss the Dark Triad as simply low Agreeableness is not warranted" (Furnham et al., 2014, 116).

populist voting (Galais and Rico 2021). Second, research around *Nai* (Nai and Maier 2018; Nai and Martínez i Coma 2019) shows that populist politicians score comparatively high on Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy. Following the congruency theory of political preference (Caprara and Zimbardo 2004), voters select politicians and parties projecting personalities that match their own (Bakker et al. 2016). Empirically supporting such a similarity-liking effect, Hart et al. (2018) show that voters scoring high on dark traits are more attracted to politicians with dark personalities than voters with less socially aversive traits (see also Bakker et al. 2016). What is more, *Nai* (2022) finds that populist voters are significantly more likely to appreciate candidates who are disagreeable and score high on the Dark Triad. Although one must clearly distinguish populist attitudes from populist voting, the two are obviously related as populist voters can be considered most likely to hold populist attitudes (Pruysers 2020, 6).

However, while the above arguments would lead us to expect that (all) the Dark Triad personality traits and populist attitudes are positively related, both theoretical arguments and existing empirical evidence let us suspect that this relationship is more nuanced. As generally shown by previous research, each member of the Dark Triad has its unique social perceptions, and the antecedents and (political) consequences of the three traits differ (e.g. Anderson and Cheers 2018; Chen et al. 2021; Jonason et al. 2015; Rogoza et al. 2022). However, the Dark Triad traits might not only vary in their association with populist attitudes, each of them might also be differently connected to the three subdimensions which jointly constitute the populist mindset. To the best of our knowledge, there are only two studies which examine the relationship between both general and dark personality traits and populist attitudes: Pruyers (2020) in Canada and Galais and Rico (2021) in Spain. Both regress an additive populism score on either the Dark Triad (Pruysers 2020) or the Dark Triad and the Big Five (Galais and Rico 2021), while only Galais and Rico (2021) additionally scrutinize the relationships with the people-centrist and anti-elitist subdimensions. Although the two studies await with very different conclusions about the role played by the Dark Triad, both somehow challenge the bad reputation of populists' character, which is widely believed to be dark colored (Galais and Rico 2021). Since research on the darker personality aspects of populist citizens is still that underdeveloped, we refrain from formulating concrete hypotheses in the following. Instead, we limit ourselves to theoretical arguments raised by the relevant research and supplement them with our own theoretical considerations and the few empirical findings available. As a consequence, for many of the relationships under study, we present ambiguous, often even competing expectations, making our endeavor rather explorative.

Starting with Machiavellianism, one could argue that the typically highly cynical Machiavellians are prone to populist attitudes which "reflect a cynical stance towards politicians and established elites as well as political institutions and their functioning" (Papaioannou et al. 2023, 160). However, at least some aspects of populist attitudes seem to rather not fit this trait. Individuals scoring high on Machiavellianism are said to distrust others and to deceive and disregard them to maximize their self-interests (Hodson et al. 2009, 686). This makes it rather unlikely that such individuals are attracted by the people-centric narrative of populism. Yet, this tendency could translate into a general distrust of the elites making anti-elitism an attractive position (Galais and Rico 2021, 3). On the other hand, Machiavellians might, due to a perceived similarity, even sympathize with elites accused of ruthlessly realizing their own (and not the people's) interests. Given that they show immoral thinking (Rauthmann and Kolar 2012, 884), one could also expect that people scoring high on Machiavellianism do not perceive politics and society in moral terms and accordingly do not have a Manichean cosmology. However, Pruyers (2020, 6) argues that this trait might not be as political as is often assumed and thus be unrelated to political orientations in general and populist attitudes in particular. This is also what he finds for the Canadian case, while Galais and Rico (2021) report lower levels of populist attitudes, people centrism, and, to their surprise,

anti-elitism, among Machiavellians in Spain. Overall, there are theoretical arguments that suggest a positive relationship between Machiavellianism and populism while previous research seems to suggest otherwise, leaving us with conflicting expectations.

For narcissism, a negative relationship with populist attitudes in general is reported by Pruyers (2020), but no systematic association was found by Galais and Rico (2021). Narcissists are excessively self-loving, highly self-centered and see themselves as superior to others (Hodson et al. 2009, 686). Intuitively, these characteristics should not match the idea of being part of the ordinary people, understood as a virtuous and homogenous entity (Pruysers 2020). A different view is taken by Galais and Rico (2021, 3), who argue that people scoring high on narcissism should defend people centrism because their strong sense of entitlement demands a fundamental role in politics (see also Pruyers et al. 2019, 100). What is more, maintaining a grandiose self-image, narcissists might present themselves as extraordinarily communal (Rogoza et al. 2022, 2). Indeed, Galais and Rico (2021) find a significant and positive relationship between narcissism and people centrism in Spain. Additionally, as far as they do not perceive themselves as being part of it, feelings of superiority could lead narcissists to discredit the political elite as incapable and incompetent, abusing their authority (cf. Galais and Rico 2021). However, narcissism has been found to relate positively to respecting authorities within hierarchical relationships (Mededovic and Petrovic 2016), which is why a negative relationship with anti-elitism is also conceivable. Galais and Rico (2021)'s null-findings for this relationship do not give priority to either line of reasoning. Regarding Manicheism as the last subdimension of populism, one might argue that since narcissists are highly convinced of themselves and their opinions, and have a strong need to be right, they should be prone to Manichean thinking, at least in the way that they have rigid stances on who and what is right or wrong, good or bad (Filsinger 2022, 17).

Finally, people scoring high on psychopathy, who are typically lacking empathy, are anti-social and generally negative towards others (Hodson et al. 2009, 686), should neither applaud the people nor the elites, which is why one could expect a negative relationship with people centrism and a positive one with anti-elitism (Galais and Rico 2021, 3). Regarding people centrism, this contention is empirically supported by Galais and Rico (2021), who, however, find lower levels of anti-elitism among individuals with pronounced psychopathic traits. Possibly, the way the elite and its behavior is depicted in the (Spanish) populist discourse awakens feelings of similarity and thus of sympathy among citizens that are manipulative, impulsive, and remorseless. Looking at populist attitudes generally, Galais and Rico (2021) find they are associated with lower psychopathy. However, no such systematic relationship shows up in the Canadian data (Pruysers 2020). Regarding Manicheism, previous research shows that people scoring high on psychopathy are morally rather insensitive: for example, psychopathy is negatively related to all moral values captured by the so-called "moral foundations" (Jonason et al. 2015) and to higher stages of moral development, which include a belief in the existence of ethical and "right vs. wrong" standards (Campbell et al. 2008). This might make individuals scoring high on this trait less likely to see the world as good vs. bad. Conversely, their generally negative attitudes towards others might prompt them to see other opinions as bad for themselves and society as a whole. What is more, Stathi et al. (2021, 535) find that (primary) psychopathy associates positively with right-wing authoritarianism, of which a dualistic worldview (bad people threatening good people) is an integral part (Duckitt 2001). This line of reasoning would imply a positive relationship between psychopathy and Manicheism.

In sum, it is anything but clear yet if and how the Dark Triad of personality relate to populist attitudes and their subdimensions. As shown above, from a conceptual point of view, different and partly conflicting arguments can be raised not only regarding the association between the Dark Triad traits and populist attitudes in general, but also on how they relate to populism's subdimensions separately. While

conflicting theoretical expectations might lead us to rely on previous empirical research, to the best of our knowledge, the empirical evidence so far is limited to two studies that both challenge the bad reputation of populists' personalities but await with very different conclusions regarding the role played by dark personality traits. The scarce and inconclusive existing evidence is of little help when it comes to assessing and weighing up different and sometimes competing theoretical arguments. We are thus left with competing expectations regarding the relationship between the Dark Triad and populist attitudes. In this vein, our discussion of potentially contradicting relationships will be put to an empirical test in order to help add another piece to the puzzle and potentially aid in further theory-building.

3. Data and method

In order to empirically scrutinize the relationships between both general and dark personality traits and populist attitudes across different contexts, we make use of original survey data collected in spring 2020 in six European countries: France, Germany, Italy, Switzerland, Spain, and the United Kingdom.² Given the different strength, shape, and historical background of populism in these countries hinted at in the introduction, they offer useful variation regarding our dependent variable (see Filsinger 2022). What is more, previous research on the relevance of personality in the political sphere shows that relationships likely differ between countries, which is why comparative research on personality traits and populist attitudes is necessary (cf. Fatke 2017; Federico and Malka 2018).

The approximately 1,000 respondents who completed the survey in each country were compensated by a small financial contribution and were recruited through Qualtrics access panels. Quota sampling in terms of age, gender, and education (for Switzerland also language) was used in order to obtain high representativeness of the samples and thus to allow broader conclusions for the respective populations. A detailed description of the survey and descriptive statistics can be found in the online appendix (A1 and A2).

Our primary independent variables of interest are the dark personality traits as captured by the Dark Triad. To measure the Dark Triad, we use a slightly adapted and shortened version of the Short Dark Triad (SD3) (Jones and Paulhus 2014). As Galais and Rico (2021), we measure Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy with two items each (see online appendix, A3). The selected items should reflect all three subscales and be distinguished by the highest possible factor loadings on the respective dimensions as well as negligible cross-loadings as presented by Jones and Paulhus (2014) and Persson et al. (2019). We calculate the arithmetic mean of the related items for each of the dark traits. In order to further complement the still very inconclusive empirical evidence on the associations between the Big Five and populist attitudes and to consider (the net effects of) both general and dark personality traits, we also include arithmetic means for the Big Five, measured via the widespread Ten-Item Personality Inventory (TIPI, see A3 in the online appendix) (Gosling et al. 2003). With the TIPI and the shortened SD3, we use two brief, efficiently administrable personality scales, an advantage that comes at the cost of limited nuance in measurement and the need to rest on a higher-order trait level, overlooking subordinate trait facets (cf. Bakker and Lelkes 2018). This is a shortcoming that needs to be acknowledged and accommodated in future research. We return to this point in the discussion. Irrespective of the shortcomings, such short personality measures enjoy high popularity

within and beyond psychological research, with the TIPI, for example, performing well in various validity tests (Ehrhart et al., 2009; Nunes et al., 2018). What is more, we use similar (dark) personality scales – that performed well – as previous studies (e.g., Galais and Rico 2021), making our findings more comparable.

To empirically measure populist attitudes in a theoretically sound way, we take into account that populism is both a multidimensional and a non-compensatory concept. Following the idea that being populist requires individuals to “[...] exhibit anti-elitist orientations *and* a Manichean outlook *and* support popular sovereignty” (Wuttke et al. 2020, 358, italics in original), we follow a methodological approach that accounts for this non-compensatory nature (Filsinger 2023; Mohrenberg et al. 2021). To capture each subdimension of populism, we sum up the three corresponding items listed in Table 1, which are chosen from previous research and combine items of different populism scales to benefit from their different advantages (Filsinger 2023).³ Cronbach's alpha as a measure of internal consistency of the subdimensions are reported in the last column of Table 1. That they are relatively low is most likely due to the fact that the respective items are designed to grasp different aspects of the relatively broad subdimensions. This is an unfortunate trade-off for many social science constructs given the limited space in surveys. Nevertheless, based on previous research, we consider our items as appropriate measures for populist attitudes. The correlations between the subdimensions support our idea of a

Table 1
Measurement of populist attitudes.

Items	Dimension	Mean	Cronbach's alpha
“The will of the people should be the highest principle in this country's politics.” (POP 1)	people centrism	2.97	.32
“Politicians don't have to spend time among ordinary people to do a good job.” (POP 2 – R)	people centrism	2.52	
“The differences between ordinary people and the ruling elite are much greater than the differences between ordinary people.” (POP 3)	people centrism	2.71	
“I would rather be represented by a citizen than by a specialized politician.” (POP 4)	anti-elitism	2.32	.56
“Government officials use their power to try to improve people's lives.” (POP 5 - R)	anti-elitism	2.04	
“The particular interests of the political class negatively affect the welfare of the people.” (POP 6)	anti-elitism	3.70	
“The people I disagree with politically are not evil.” (POP 7 – R)	Manicheanism	1.22	.50
“You can tell if a person is good or bad if you know their politics.” (POP 8)	Manicheanism	1.43	
“The people I disagree with politically are just misinformed.” (POP 9)	Manicheanism	1.74	

Notes: Items adjusted from different scales (Akkerman et al. 2014; Castanho Silva et al. 2018; Van Hauwaert et al. 2020). R= Reverse coded statements. Items range from 0 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). Means and Cronbach's alpha are based on the pooled sample.

² The six countries were selected in the context of a larger research project on the political-psychological consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic since they were among the most affected countries in Europe at the onset of the pandemic. However, the data collected allows to investigate research questions on other topics as well. Including measures of individual pandemic threat exposure does not alter our main conclusions.

³ Not in all accounts of populism, Manicheanism is used as a part of the concept. Some scholars focus on a less stringent antagonism that zooms in on the conflict between the people and the elite (Hobolt and Tilley 2016, Schulz et al., 2018). However, we follow Castanho Castanho Silva et al. (2018) to include Manicheanism. This is because populism has an inherent tendency to paint political and societal conflict in an antagonistic way, pitting not only people and elite against each other but also different groups of people as well as making politics not about differences of opinion but a question of right and wrong (Castanho Silva et al., 2020).

non-compensatory approach as they are relatively weak, and in the case of people centrist and Manicheism even slightly negative (see [online appendix, A4](#)). Yet, as pointed out by [Wuttke et al. \(2020\)](#), populism is agnostic about correlations between the subdimensions. After summing up the respective subdimensions, we take the geometric mean of the three to obtain a combined populism scale which is finally rescaled to range from 0 to 1 to facilitate interpretation ([Mohrenberg et al. 2021](#)). This means that individuals scoring 0 on either subdimension also score 0 on the overall scale. In addition to this approach, we also re-estimate our models with an arithmetic mean. Previewing our results, we see that both approaches are mainly in line with each other. A look at the descriptive statistics shows that populist attitudes are relatively widespread across the six countries with an overall mean of 0.49 on scale from 0 to 1. Yet, there is also considerable variation across countries with France and Spain having a mean of 0.53 at the upper end of the distribution and Switzerland with a mean of 0.43 at the lower end.

In our models, we include the same controls as [Galais and Rico \(2021\)](#) in their study. Accordingly, the relationships between personality traits and populist attitudes are tested holding constant the respondents' age, gender, education, and ideological left-right self-placement (11-point measure). The last is squared in order to account for extremity.

In a first series of models, we regress populist attitudes on both the Big Five and the Dark Triad personality traits as well as the control variables outlined above.⁴ We use OLS-regressions with country-fixed effects and region clustered standard errors to mitigate bias due to potential non-independence of observations exposed to similar environmental conditions (e.g. in terms of the economic context, political institutions, or parties).⁵ We provide coefficients for the full sample, but also present coefficients for each country separately. The same strategy is then employed to model the relationships between personality traits and the three subdimensions of populism. Even though we clearly understand populist attitudes as a non-compensatory combination of people centrist, anti-elitist, and Manicheism, we believe this somewhat more fine-grained analysis is still worthwhile by being able to reveal potentially divergent associations between different aspects of personality and particular components of the populist mindset (see [Filsinger et al. 2023](#); [Galais and Rico 2021](#)). Given that political actors do not always emphasize all three elements of populism equally, our analyses of the subdimensions potentially can help to shed light on why certain individuals are attracted to certain populist messages and policies but not to others.

4. Empirical results

We start our analyses with a pooled sample analysis where we regress populist attitudes on the Dark Triad, the Big Five, and the control variables. [Fig. 1](#) shows the coefficients for our main variables of interest, the Dark Triad. We find significant coefficients for two dimensions. First, higher levels of Machiavellianism are associated with higher levels of populist attitudes. Compared to those with the highest level, people with

⁴ Regarding potential overlaps between the personality traits, the highest correlations are found for extraversion and narcissism (0.35), conscientiousness and agreeableness (0.37), and conscientiousness and neuroticism (-0.34). As [Galais and Rico, 2021](#), we do not consider these correlations high enough to justify an exclusion of any of these variables nor does it cause multicollinearity problems. Excluding the Big Five from the analyses does not alter our main conclusions.

⁵ In order to cluster at the level of the highest politically meaningful subdivision in each country, we refer to different stages of the European NUTS-standard: NUTS1 in Germany, France, and the United Kingdom, NUTS2 in Italy and Spain, and NUTS3 in Switzerland. This allows us to account for specific political, economic, and social circumstances on a regional level. For example, in Germany, certain Bundesländer such as Saxony have particularly high level of populist support.

the lowest level of Machiavellianism have around a quarter of a standard deviation lower level of populist attitudes (0.46 compared to 0.5). Second, psychopathy also displays a positive and significant coefficient that is almost double the size, revealing that people with psychopathic personality traits have higher levels of populist attitudes (0.46 for the least psychopathic compared to 0.53 for the most psychopathic). Conversely, narcissism does not have a significant relationship with populist attitudes.

One of the aims of our study is to see whether (dark) personality traits relate the same way to populist attitudes across the different countries in our sample. Turning to the country-specific coefficients, our analyses reveal considerable variation in the relationship between the Dark Triad and populist attitudes. Starting with Machiavellianism, we find that it relates positively and significantly to populist attitudes in three out of the six countries, namely in Germany, Switzerland, and the UK. Psychopathy displays five positive and significant coefficients, whereby only in France populist attitudes are unrelated to this socially aversive trait. Narcissism only displays one significant and positive coefficient in Italy (at the 10% level) but is not systematically related to populist attitudes in the other countries. Overall, we see that there is considerable cross-country variation when it comes to the relationship between the Dark Triad and populist attitudes. While the pooled sample coefficients for Machiavellianism and psychopathy are significant, these findings do not replicate in every country. This might hint at contextual factors that might shape how attractive populism is for certain personalities. We will return to this in the discussion.

When using an arithmetic index as a different aggregation technique for populist attitudes, our results remain largely the same so that overall, this robustness check is in line with our initial findings (see [online appendix, A6 and A7](#)).⁶

Since we also include the Big Five in our models, it is worthwhile to discuss their association with populist attitudes in a little detail (full results are presented in the [online appendix, A11](#)). In general, our findings for the Big Five echo the mixed evidence from previous research. We find no significant relationship between extraversion, openness to experience and populist attitudes in the pooled sample or in any of the six countries. For the other three personality traits, we do find significant coefficients. For the pooled sample and half of the countries under study (France, Italy, and the UK), these imply that people who are more agreeable have lower levels of populist attitudes. We find a similar negative relationship for conscientiousness and populist attitudes, although the coefficient is only significant in the pooled sample, Germany, and the UK. Lastly, for neuroticism, we find a positive and significant coefficient in the pooled sample, Switzerland, and the UK. The control variables are mainly in line with the literature: People with higher education express lower levels of populist attitudes while people with extreme right or left political ideology have higher levels of populist attitudes (see [online appendix, A5](#)).

Another aim of our study is to see whether the dark personality traits relate the same way to people centrist, anti-elitist, and Manicheism (across countries). To do so, we re-estimated our models with the dependent variable being one of the three subdimension scores individually. [Fig. 2](#) shows the results for the relationships between the Dark Triad and people centrist. Starting with Machiavellianism, we find a positive and significant coefficient in the pooled sample as well as in Germany, Spain, and the UK, implying that people who score high on this dark personality trait are more likely to think of the people as a homogeneous and glorified group that articulates a common will, at least in these three countries. For narcissism, we find no overall significant coefficient, but a negative relationship in Spain. Lastly, while psychopathy showed a positive coefficient for populist attitudes in

⁶ Only three of the 21 coefficients are somewhat different: The coefficient for Machiavellianism is positive and significant in Spain and psychopathy turns insignificant in Spain and Switzerland when using the arithmetic mean.

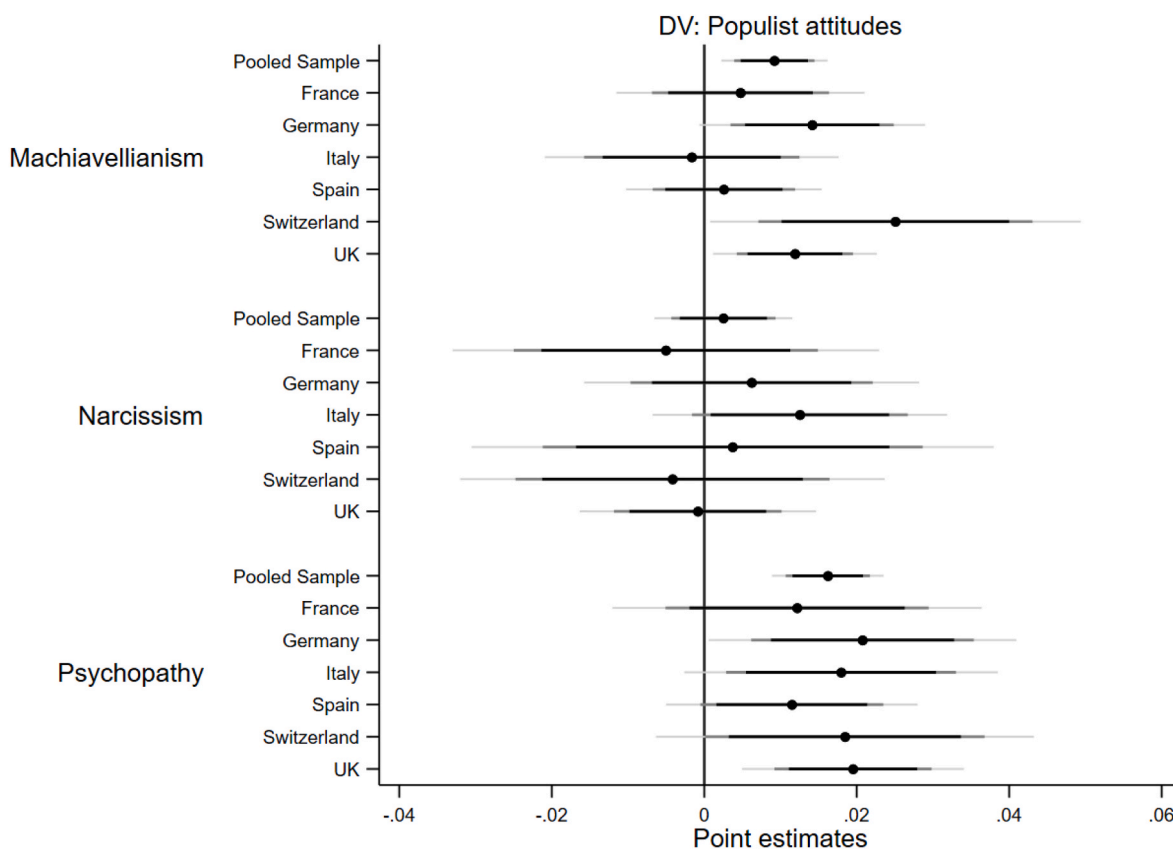


Fig. 1. Coefficient plot for the country-wise relationships between the Dark Triad traits and populist attitudes
 Notes: Estimates are based on the models in Table A5 in the online appendix. Displayed are coefficients of the personality traits with 99% (light grey bars), 95% (dark grey bars), and 90% (black bars) confidence intervals. Source: original survey data.

general, we find the reverse relationship for people centrism in the pooled sample as well as in France, Italy, Spain, and the UK: people who score high on psychopathy are less supportive of the idea that there is a homogeneous group of the people which should guide all political decisions. Although one might generally expect that such individuals are attracted to the confrontative style of populism, this might not be true for people centrism as this form follows a collectivist idea of decision-making potentially unattractive for a psychopathic personality type. This finding is also in line with the results from Galais and Rico (2021).

Next, we look at the dark personality correlates of anti-elitism (see Fig. 3). Starting with Machiavellianism, we find a significant positive relationship in the pooled sample, Spain, and the UK. It seems that in these countries, a personality trait associated with egocentric and manipulating behavior seems to be in line with a general aversion to the elites. Narcissism shows a negative and significant coefficient in the pooled sample, France, Germany, and Spain, which is in line with the findings by Galais and Rico (2021). Lastly, for psychopathy, we find a significant negative relationship with anti-elitist stances, at least in Italy and Spain.

Lastly and opposed to previous research, we also look at Manicheanism as a third subdimension of populist attitudes (see Fig. 4). Here, we do not find a significant coefficient for Machiavellianism in any country nor in the pooled sample. For narcissism, we find positive and significant coefficients in the pooled sample, Germany, and Italy. The most consistent findings are for psychopathy. In the pooled sample and across all six countries, people scoring high on psychopathy are more likely to have a dualistic, Manichean perception of politics and society.

Overall, we find a relatively inconsistent picture regarding the relationships between the Dark Triad and populist attitudes and their subdimensions. Psychopathy emerges as the most systematic dark personality correlate of populist attitudes and their subdimensions with 20

out of 28 coefficients reaching statistical significance, which however vary in their direction (positive for populist attitudes and Manicheanism, negative for people centrism). Noteworthy is also Machiavellianism with 12 significant coefficients out of 28 possible coefficients, nearly all of them indicating positive relationships. Still, in general, most relationships seem to be differentiated and context-dependent rather than universal. This calls for future research into the contextual effects of different personality foundations of populist and other political attitudes.

We close the results section with a short note on the role played by the Big Five (for a detailed account, see online appendix A11-A14): Our results suggest that conscientiousness and agreeableness in particular might be relevant for understanding the populist personality, while the three remaining traits only occasionally gain statistical significance. At least among half of the countries studied, agreeableness is negatively related to populist attitudes and their Manichean component. Conscientiousness consistently prevents such a dualistic worldview, and in a few countries also populist attitudes in general. Contrary, people centrism is higher among conscientious individuals in nearly all countries. Accordingly, as for the Dark Triad, we find some evidence that specific traits relate differently to different components of populist attitudes, which might help explain previous inconclusive findings on the role played by personality for populism.

5. Discussion and conclusion

In this study, we extend the relatively new line of research that investigates the role personality traits play in shaping populist attitudes. While most research featured general personality traits, we focus on the role of darker nuances of personality about which even less is known. This is surprising as populism is generally described in negative terms as

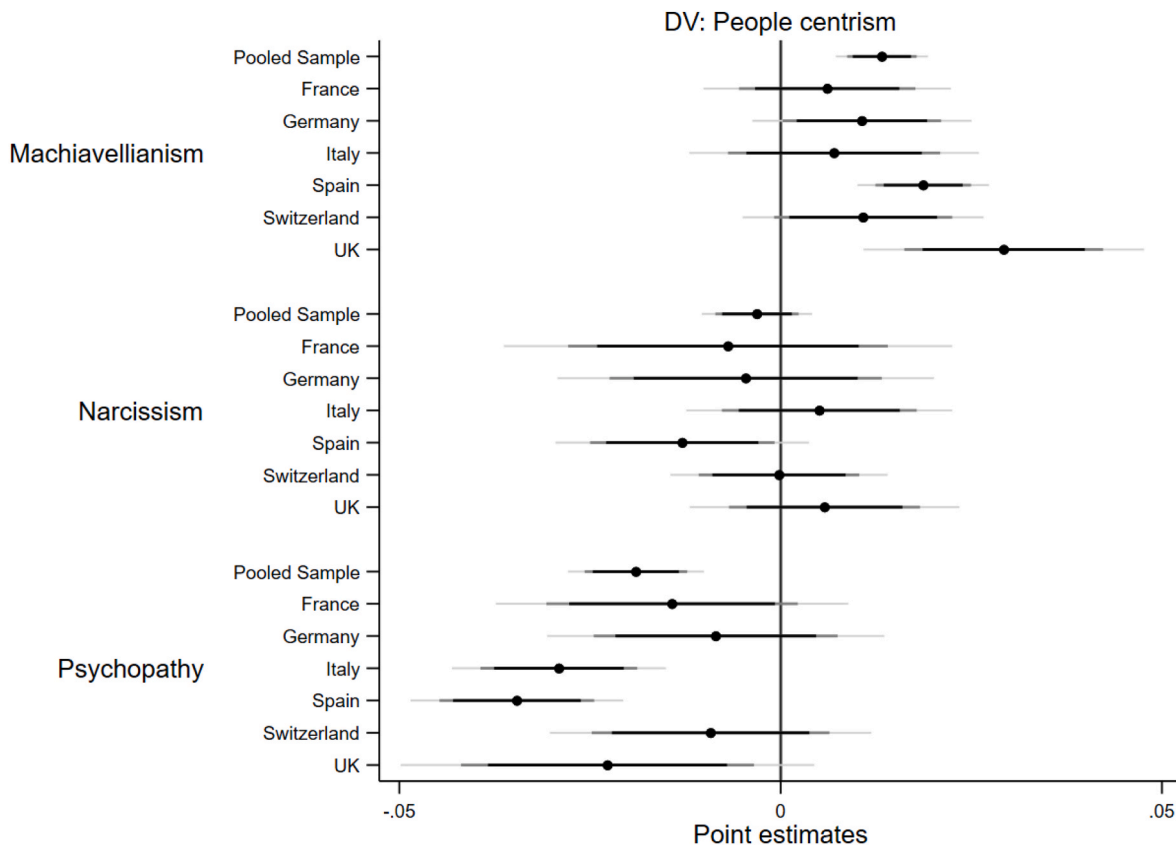


Fig. 2. Coefficient plot for the country-wise relationships between the Dark Triad traits and people centrisms. Notes: Estimates are based on the models in Table A8 in the online appendix. Displayed are coefficients of the personality traits with 99% (light grey bars), 95% (dark grey bars), and 90% (black bars) confidence intervals. Source: original survey data.

it pits distinct groups against each other resulting in a confrontative style of politics. Furthermore, the Dark Triad traits of Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy are believed to have distinct relevance to the domain of politics (Hart et al. 2018, 59) and have been shown to characterize populist leaders (e.g., Nai and Maier 2018; Nai and Martínez i Coma 2019).

We extend the few existing empirical studies that question the bad reputation of populists' character by investigating how the Dark Triad personality traits relate to populist attitudes and their subdimensions in six European countries. Our analyses of original survey data in 2020 reveal that the populists' personality profile is highly differentiated and context-dependent. Yet, what seems to emerge is that psychopathy is a relatively consistent trait of populist individuals. Interestingly, people scoring high on psychopathy tend to be less people-centric, but they hold comparatively stronger populist attitudes in general and are in particular characterized by a pronounced Manichean outlook on society and politics. For Machiavellianism, regardless the dependent measure, we find almost exclusively positive coefficients, which however do not always gain statistical significance. Narcissism does not seem to be very predictive, neither for populist attitudes nor their specific components. Regarding the Big Five, our analyses suggest that conscientiousness and agreeableness in particular might be relevant in understanding the populist personality. While both traits tend to prevent populist attitudes in general and their Manichean component in particular, conscientiousness consistently relates positively to people centrisms.

In essence, our study indicates that it is difficult to speak of a consistent personality profile of populist individuals, echoing the inconclusiveness of previous research with regard to the Dark Triad, the Big Five, and populist attitudes. One tentative explanation for these findings are the respective country contexts. In this vein, it seems that the supply side has a crucial role to play when it comes to whether

certain personalities are attracted to populism and its ideas. The way in which populism manifests itself in the political system varies with ideology, institutional, historical, and cultural factors, which seem to crucially condition the way personality affects populist stances. While our data does not allow an empirical illumination of country differences with multilevel analyses, there are potential supply side effects to be found here that can inform future research (cf. Federico and Malka 2018). For example, our findings reveal that populist attitudes are driven by Machiavellianism only in Germany, Switzerland, and the UK as opposed to the three Southern European countries. Looking at the supply side, one potential explanation is that in these countries, right-wing populism is the dominant form of populism. As opposed to left-wing populism or valence populism, right-wing populism is more exclusionary, relating to Machiavellianism's exclusive focus on the accomplishment of own goals (Chen et al. 2021; Peterson and Palmer 2021). Similarly, radical right-wing parties are increasingly cynical about the political system as well as focused on gaining power to overthrow the status quo. While France, Italy, and Spain also have strong radical right-wing populist parties, they also have more inclusive populist movements such as "Podemos" or "La Fance Insoumise" that potentially act as counterweight. Irrespective, the interaction of context and personality traits is a promising avenue for future studies.

Following from this, our study has several limitations that need to be addressed. Most obviously, while moving beyond previous single case studies in scrutinizing the relationship between (dark) personality traits and populist attitudes and proving contextual variation is an indispensable first step, our inconclusive findings and tentative explanations call for future cross-context research. Such research should develop and test specific arguments regarding the contingent effects of personality traits across contexts, also beyond our selection of Western and Southern European democracies. It could for example capitalize on the

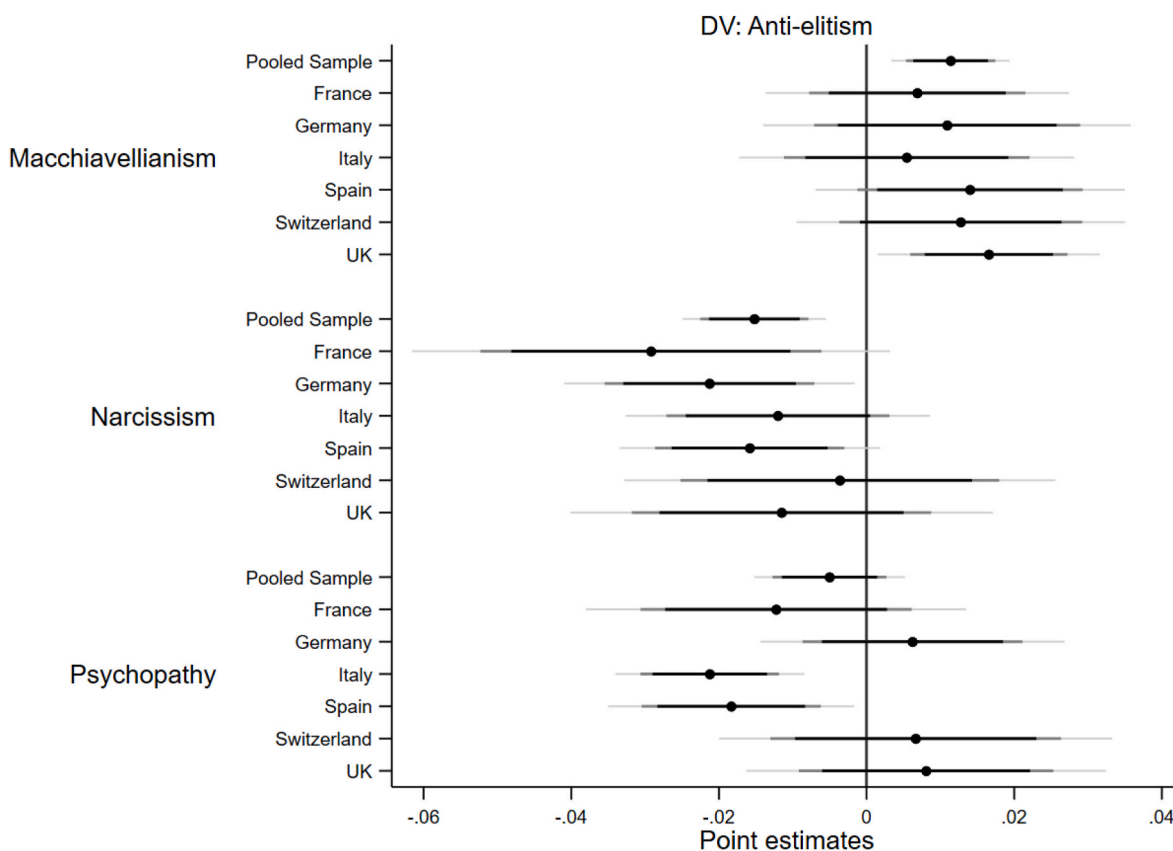


Fig. 3. Coefficient plot for the country-wise relationships between the Dark Triad traits and anti-elitism
 Notes: Estimates are based on the models in Table A9 in the online appendix. Displayed are coefficients of the personality traits with 99% (light grey bars), 95% (dark grey bars), and 90% (black bars) confidence intervals. Source: original survey data.

supplementation of individual-level survey data with contextual data on party platforms, media discourse or political communication to see whether these factors have a role to play in the relationship between personality and populism. Hierarchical analyses that take contextual factors seriously and allow for empirical investigation into potential cross-level interactions thus represent a natural step forward.

Additionally, similar to previous studies, we rely on short scales to capture personality traits. While this allows for more comparability, these measures suffer in terms of conceptual breadth and empirical depth. This implies that some of our findings could be due to the lack of nuance in measuring a certain trait. Concerning Machiavellianism, for example, our items are more focused on cynical and distrusting aspects of this trait, rather than the power-driven ambition inherent in it (see Galais and Rico 2021). In this vein, more comprehensive scales that combine the advantages of different items would certainly be desirable regarding psychometric quality, conceptual breadth as well as empirical versatility. They would also allow to illuminate differentiated effects of individual traits, i.e., at their facet level. Lastly, as our analyses are based on cross-sectional (online) survey data, the issue of causality has to be addressed. Despite the genetic anchoring of personality traits and their high stability over the life course, we cannot rule out endogeneity issues and thus consciously refrain from making causal claims. More precisely, we encourage the use of more sophisticated research designs able to empirically address causal questions. Moreover, although online survey panels are popular, they come with well-known drawbacks.

Despite these caveats, we are confident that the present study is a meaningful contribution to the still very sparse and inconclusive literature on the (dark) personality correlates of populist attitudes and provides important implications for future research in the field. Our study investigates the dark personality foundations of citizens holding populist attitudes, thereby examining whether their personality profile

really matches the dark portrayal of populism, populist politics, and politicians. By using cross-country evidence, we provide a nuanced picture showing that the relationships between dark personality traits and populist attitudes are highly context-dependent, potentially in parts due to supply side factors such as the dominant ideological nature of populism. In this regard, our study provides a stepping-stone for a more rigorous testing of the contingent effects of personality on populist attitudes.

The question of whether populist citizens have a distinctively dark personality profile is not only of crucial importance for research on politics, but also bears electoral implications. If one aims to tackle the populist challenge to liberal democracy, it is crucial to know what populist citizens are, feel, and think like. Put differently, in order to reach populists socially and politically, scholars, practitioners, and politicians alike need to know what characterizes them psychologically. From the perspective of electoral politics, distinctive psychological profiles matter for the messages that parties can use to target voters, making this study also relevant for those that are more explicitly concerned with voting behavior as well as party strategy.

Despite the non-universality of most relationships, our findings show that certain personalities are generally more open or aversive towards populism. Somewhat challenging Galais and Rico (2021)'s notion of an unjustified bad reputation of the populist character, at least psychopathy and Machiavellianism seem to be darker aspects of personality conducive to the attitudinal syndrome of populism, though not for all its subdimensions individually. Agreeableness and conscientiousness, on the other hand, rather tend to prevent populist attitudes in general, with the latter however consistently being related to higher levels of people centrism.

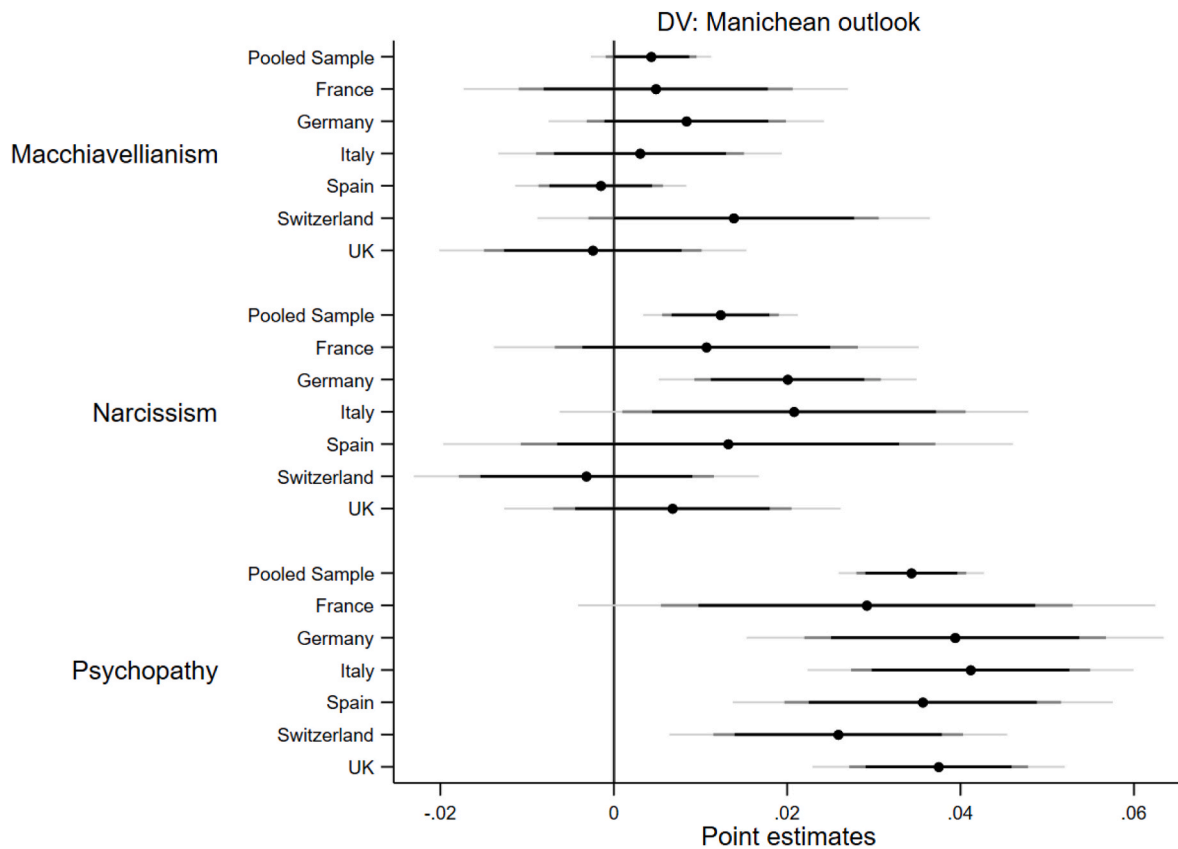


Fig. 4. Coefficient plot for the country-wise relationship between the Dark Triad traits and Manicheism
 Notes: Estimates are based on the models in Table A10 in the online appendix. Displayed are coefficients of the personality traits with 99% (light grey bars), 95% (dark grey bars), and 90% (black bars) confidence intervals. Source: original survey data.

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Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

Data will be made publicly available under the DOI 10.17605/OSF.IO/7C6TY via the OSF

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2023.102728>.

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