

The Populist Marketplace: Unpacking the Role of “Thin” and “Thick” Ideology

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Abstract

A growing body of work adopts a “thin” ideology conception of populism, which attributes populist parties’ electoral success to anti-elite and people-centric appeals that resonate with voters holding populist attitudes. A second tradition, however, has attributed the success of populist parties to particular “thick” or “host” ideologies, such as anti-immigration, anti-globalization, or pro-redistribution positions. This creates a need to unpack which *exact* components of thin and/or thick populist ideology attract voters to these parties. We address this question by leveraging conjoint survey experiments that allow us to causally identify the effects of several thin and thick populist attributes on vote choice. Examining the case of Germany, results from experiments embedded in two high-quality panel surveys demonstrate that populist anti-immigration and pro-redistribution positions as well as people-centric political priorities are the most vote-maximizing components of populist ideology. In contrast, anti-elite priorities as well as Eurosceptic and anti-globalization positions do not boost support, not even among voters with strong populist attitudes. Our findings also call into question conventional wisdom about the interplay between supply and

demand in the electoral marketplace. Surprisingly, populist voters, in general, are not significantly more attracted to candidates who advocate populist priorities than non-populist voters.

Keywords: populist voting, populist attitudes, extremist parties, conjoint experiment, Germany

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The election of Donald Trump in the US and the Brexit vote in the UK in 2016 ushered in a frenzied explosion of research and journalism on the resurgence of populism. Some observers attribute the electoral successes of populist forces to their anti-elite or people-centric appeals. Others focus on the role of populists' anti-globalization or anti-immigration positions. In this paper, we leverage new experimental tools to causally unpack what particular ideological components of populism attract voters.

In line with much recent research, we adopt an “ideational approach” to populism. This approach commonly assumes that populism should be primarily understood as a “thin ideology” (Mudde 2004) that sees politics as a struggle between the corrupt political elite and the pure people. In this view, populist political forces win votes by attacking the “corrupt” elites, calling for direct influence of the “people”, and stressing the homogeneity of the people. The ideational approach defines populism as a coherent set of ideas, and while some (e.g., Mudde 2004) suggest that it constitutes an ideology, others simply describe it as a discourse that is part of a political rhetoric or style (e.g., Jagers and Walgrave 2007). Our operationalization of populism is compatible with both approaches as we examine how populist appeals affect voters, and such appeals could be considered as an ideology or simply the result of a performative rhetorical style.

Importantly, the ideational approach encourages us to consider how political parties blend this “thin” ideology of populism with various “thick” or host ideologies (e.g., Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013). While some academics and pundits continue to use “populism” as a shorthand for the far-right (see e.g., Rydgren 2017), the ideational approach highlights that populism exists on both the extreme left and the extreme right and can even be a feature of centrist political parties (Rooduijn et al. 2014). Several “thick” ideological positions have been associated with typical right- and/or left-wing populist parties: xenophobia/anti-immigration (e.g., Mudde 2013), anti-

globalization (e.g., Rodrik 2018), pro-redistribution (e.g., Acemoglu et al. 2013), or – more specific to European cases – Euroscepticism (e.g., Taggart 1998).

Populist parties and politicians blend such thin and thick populist ideologies when appealing to voters, and the exact blend of appeals is most likely responsive to different national and temporal contexts. This presents a challenge for researchers wishing to study the appeal of populism (Rooduijn 2019). As Bornschier (2017) notes, it is crucial to distinguish the relative impact of thin and thick ideology on populist voting:

“While more and more phenomena are looked at through the lens of populism, it is important to know how important this thin ideology is compared to the host ideologies that these parties or movements almost invariably also exhibit [...]” (Bornschier 2017: 301)

This paper thus sets out to examine how thin ideology (*populist valence*) and thick ideologies (*policy positions*) affect vote choice as well as how these factors interact with individual-level populist attitudes. For this purpose, we first outline the “populist electoral marketplace”. On the one hand, we discuss the extant supply-side literature that explains populist parties’ electoral strategies. On the other hand, we consider the demand-side literature that studies support for populist parties. In each case, we identify the key thin and thick ideology components that have been used to explain populist voting. We conclude that the extant literature has not sufficiently disentangled how these different components affect populist voting and highlight that doing so with observational data is difficult given that thin and thick ideologies are interwoven both within populist parties’ appeals and voters’ attitudes (e.g., in Europe many voters and parties that condemn the “corrupt elite” also embrace Eurosceptic positions).

To overcome these limitations, we design novel candidate conjoint experiments that present voters with a large universe of political candidates in which thin and thick populist characteristics

are orthogonal (e.g., some candidates are only thick or only thin populists). We apply this approach to the case of Germany and test how candidates' thin ideology and thick/host ideology components affect vote choice as well as how these effects are conditioned by respondents' own populist attitudes. We implement these experiments in panel surveys fielded on two high-quality samples of German voters drawn from the "Payback Online Panel" whose sampling frame comprises around 75% of German households. Conducting our experiments in the run-up to the 2017 German federal election as well as in the summer of 2018, we find that whereas some components of thin and thick populism attract German voters, others do not. While anti-immigration and pro-redistribution positions as well as people-centric political priorities garner electoral support, anti-EU and anti-globalization as well as anti-elite components of populist ideology are rejected by voters in Germany, even by those with strong populist attitudes. Moreover, we find no evidence that voters holding populist attitudes are more strongly attracted by parties' populist priorities. This calls into question conventional assumptions of how a match of populist supply and demand clears the electoral marketplace.

The Supply Side: The Traders at the Market Stalls

The supply-side literature on populism examines how parties use populist appeals as strategies when competing with other parties for electoral support. In this section, we survey this literature to identify the appeals that are regularly classified as "populist" and discuss why they are electorally attractive.

Much recent work builds on Mudde's (2004) "thin ideology" conception and argues that emphasizing *people-centric* and *anti-elite* ideology are two key strategies of populist parties (e.g., Hawkins 2009; Jagers and Walgrave 2007; Rooduijn and Pauwels 2011; Van Kessel 2015). Here,

people-centrism has two constitutive parts. On the one hand, it means that parties advocate popular sovereignty, the idea that the will of the people should be the driving force underlying all political decisions (Rooduijn 2014, 2018). On the other hand, people-centrism entails the notion of the homogeneity of a unified people, which renders populist ideology an anti-thesis to pluralist conceptions of society that stress the diversity of interests. Some argue that it is this inherent anti-pluralism of populism that is its most defining feature (Müller 2016). In turn, anti-elite ideology focuses on attacks on the ruling political (and economic) elites that are accused of corruption (Mudde 2004). In a qualitative comparative study of several parties considered “populist”, Rooduijn (2014) identifies the proclamation of a “*crisis*” as one further populist strategy complementing people-centrism and anti-elitism.

In general, according to major theories of party competition, the electoral rationale for new or challenger parties to adopt populist ideology is straightforward. Perhaps articulated most elegantly in de Sio and Weber's (2014) theory of “issue yield”, people-centrism – presented in pro-democracy and pro-popular sovereignty frames – as well as anti-corruption are valence issues with very high popular support (Stanley 2017). While, according to the theory, all parties should strive to make such issues salient, non-mainstream parties can do so more credibly, since an emphasis on “fighting the corrupt elite” or strengthening the “popular will” directly challenges those that rule the country – the mainstream party elites. Indeed, research has shown that mainstream, governing parties systematically de-emphasize anti-elitism, anti-corruption, and people-centrism (Bågenholm and Charron 2014; Rooduijn et al. 2014). However, this may of course change once populists themselves become established, take office, or take over mainstream parties (see e.g., the election of Donald Trump).

We know a lot less about why parties choose to emphasize certain aspects of thin populism and not others. Polk et al. (2017) find that anti-elitism is more prevalent among left-wing parties, while the salience of anti-corruption narratives is largely unrelated to left-right ideology (see also Rooduijn and Akkerman 2017). This suggests that the adoption of some elements of populism fits better with certain host ideologies (e.g., anti-elitism may resonate with the idea of progressivism and equality espoused by leftist parties). Consequently, which element is emphasized may also vary across countries, given varying party systems.

In contrast to understanding populism as a thin ideology, some scholars have advocated more “thick” definitions, in which populism is identified by extremist stances on the traditional left-right as well as emerging, substantive policy dimensions. Perhaps the most prominent thread in this literature identifies populism on the basis of party strategies that emphasize xenophobic and *anti-immigrant* stances. In fact, when scholars speak of “populist radical right parties” (Mudde 2007, 2013), they usually identify such parties by their pronounced immigration critique. Eatwell and Goodwin (2018) go a step further by terming the phenomenon “national populism”, highlighting parties’ strong “emphasis on immigration and ethnic change” (2018: 80). Indeed, this understanding is weakly linked to the “thin” populist idea of people-centrism, when what constitutes the “people” is defined in an exclusionary and nativist fashion (e.g., co-nationals or co-ethnics). A plethora of studies analyze how other parties react to populist parties attributing salience to immigration (e.g., Abou-Chadi 2016; Bale et al. 2010; van Spanje 2010), but few investigate (beyond the general electoral appeal of the immigration issue) which factors incentivize populist parties to emphasize immigration compared to other populist issues (see as a notable exception, Mols and Jetten 2016).

A second thread in the thick populism literature, in the European context, highlights anti-EU or *Eurosceptic* stances as a key electoral strategy of populist parties (e.g., Mudde 2007; Taggart 1998, 2004). Some work stresses a relationship between parties' nationalism, a concept closely connected to the thin populist conception of the pure and homogeneous "people", and Euroscepticism (Halikiopoulou et al. 2012). Other work shows that public Euroscepticism increases the support for populist radical left parties (March and Rommerskirchen 2015), and that populist radical right parties are also establishing links to their voters over European integration (e.g., Gómez-Reino and Llamazares 2013). Some case study work further highlights that populist parties provide their own "populist versions" of the Eurosceptic critique (Tournier-Sol 2015).

A third thread stresses that populist parties differentiate themselves by vigorous criticism of *globalization* (e.g., Mudde 2007; Rodrik 2018). According to Kriesi et al. (2008), globalization leads to a restructuring of societal cleavages creating a divide between the "winners" and "losers" of globalization, and populist right parties are expected to exploit this situation by advocating anti-globalization stances. Some work investigates the conditions under which parties stress anti-globalization positions in their manifestos and finds that economic inequality is a prime driver for parties to make globalization salient (Burgoon 2013). However, this work does not explicitly look at populist parties. With regard to right-wing populist parties, Swank and Betz (2003) find that a universal welfare state can mute the effect of economic globalization on the success of these parties. This weakly suggests that focusing on globalization may be a less promising populist strategy in countries with universal welfare states, highlighting the potential context-specificity of populist party strategies.

A fourth, less developed thread identifies populist parties through their economic and fiscal policy stances. While largely confined to the (political) economics literature and inspired by the

experience with populist parties in Latin America, some work equates populism with radical leftist stances on *redistribution* (e.g., Acemoglu et al. 2013; Dornbusch and Edwards 1991; Edwards 2010), or at least considers such stances as a defining strategy for some class of populist parties (Madrid 2008).

In summary, we have identified and discussed the thin (people-centrism, anti-elitism, crisis narrative) as well as thick (anti-immigrant, Eurosceptic, anti-globalization, pro-redistribution) ideology components, which the extant literature links to populist parties' electoral appeal. Moreover, we have emphasized that the salience of different components of thin and thick populism may differ across different countries and party systems. However, as we will discuss in more detail in a subsequent section, it is also clear that these thin and thick components are not orthogonal. For instance, evidence from Europe shows that the anti-elite rhetoric that is central to the thin ideology conception of populism is most pronounced in parties of the extreme left and the extreme right (see e.g., Polk et al. 2017).

The Demand Side: The Buyers at the Market Stalls

The demand-side literature examines what attracts voters to populist parties. In this section, we identify the specific voter attitudes and issue positions that the literature offers as explanations of populist party support. The extant demand-side literature can be divided into two strands of research.

First, a literature on populist attitudes emanated from a desire to develop individual-level measures of the thin ideology concept. The argument here is that if one conceives of populism as a thin ideology on the supply side there should be an analogous construct on the demand side. An important step in this relatively new literature was Akkerman et al.'s (2014; see also Hawkins et

al. 2012) development of a populist attitudes scale. Their survey questions are explicitly designed to measure thin ideology. For example, the two items that loaded most strongly in their factor analyses measure different aspects of people-centrism: “The people, and not politicians, should make our most important policy decisions” and “The politicians in the Dutch parliament need to follow the will of the people”. Many scholars have joined the quest to measure voters’ populist attitudes. Studies have sought to validate a variety of survey items, examine the multidimensionality of the thin populist concept, and distinguish it from related concepts (e.g., Castanho Silva et al. 2017; Oliver and Rahn 2016; Schulz et al. 2018; Spruyt et al. 2016; van Hauwaert and van Kessel 2018).

Most important for our purpose is the emerging literature that uses these populist attitude scales as independent variables to explain populist voting. While this relationship remains understudied, some evidence has emerged that these attitudes can predict support for populist parties. Akkerman et al.'s (2014) study in the Netherlands used their original scale to show that it can predict support for both the right-wing populist Freedom Party as well as the left-wing populist Socialist Party. Using data from nine European countries, van Hauwaert and van Kessel (2018) confirm these findings showing that populist attitudes are key predictors of voting for left-wing and right-wing populist parties. Additionally, there are studies that – while not explicitly referring to the thin ideology concept – show how components of thin populism such as anti-elitist or protest attitudes predict support for populist parties (e.g., Ramiro and Gomez 2017; Schumacher and Rooduijn 2013). Though it should be noted that some studies challenge this majority view of a substantial impact of thin populist attitudes on populist voting (e.g., Stanley 2011).

Second, beyond this scholarship on thin populist attitudes, another strand of the literature has uncovered a set of typically far-right or far-left voter issue positions (i.e. thick attitudes) that are

associated with populist party support. This literature assumes that similar to vote choice for traditional left or right parties, vote choice for populist parties can also be explained by policy motivations (see e.g., Schumacher and Rooduijn 2013; van der Brug and van Spanje 2009). The key issue attitudes thought to fuel populist party support mirror the thick ideology components introduced in the supply-side section: 1) *anti-immigration* and nationalist/nativist positions – recently situated in the context of anti-refugee sentiment (Ivarsflaten 2008; Mughan and Paxton 2006; Zhirkov 2014), 2) *Euroscepticism* and anti-EU sentiment (e.g., Ford et al. 2012), and 3) *opposition to globalization* (e.g., Kriesi et al. 2008). Note that there is a much larger literature on the impact of these voters’ positions on voting for far-right or far-left parties that does not focus on voting for populist parties specifically. This is not surprising, since what we discuss as thick populist positions is a mix of issue positions that have traditionally been associated with the left (e.g., anti-globalization), the right (e.g., anti-immigration) or both sides of the ideological spectrum (e.g., Euroscepticism). Many populist parties combine these positions and, as we show below, so do voters to a significant degree.

Some recent studies show that voters often simultaneously hold thin as well as thick (especially, anti-immigrant, Eurosceptic, left-extremist and right-extremist) populist attitudes (Hawkins et al. 2012; Tsatsanis et al. 2018; Wettstein et al. 2019). Building on this observation, Hawkins et al. (2018) have recently argued that thin populist attitudes become particularly important for vote choice among individuals who also hold thick populist attitudes that are mirrored by parties in the system. Moreover, several experimental studies have also investigated potential interaction effects of voters’ thin and thick populist ideology on vote choice (Hameleers et al. 2018; Sheets et al. 2016). For example, Hameleers et al. (2018) show that support for the Dutch Freedom Party increased when respondents read a newspaper article containing populist narratives blaming the

“failing” and “incompetent” elites (the EU or the Dutch government). While their treatment aims to activate thin populist ideology, it also articulates anti-EU sentiment.

In summary, the ideological components of populist demand put forward in the literature largely mirror those of populist supply, focusing on people-centrism and anti-elitism as foundations of thin populist attitudes, and issue positions on immigration, European integration and globalization as thick attitudes. However, most of the demand side studies rely on correlational analyses examining the relationship between attitudinal measures and vote choice rather than examining the interplay of populist appeals, receptivity, and vote choice. Below we argue that what is needed is an experimental design that is able to test the effects of various thin and thick populist appeals on voters with varying combinations of thin and thick populist attitudes.

The Real-World Enmeshment of “Thin” and “Thick” Populist Ideology

The preceding discussions have demonstrated that there are significant strands in the populism literature that seek to explain the appeal of populism as a function of thin or thick ideology components. Table 1 provides a simplified overview of this discussion.

At first glance, this suggests a coherent picture between the supply and demand sides: we know that some parties emphasize thin populist ideology by advocating people-centrism, stressing the fight against the elite and its alleged political corruption, and proclaiming a crisis. In turn, on the demand side, citizens vote for these parties if they hold related attitudes. Furthermore, with regard to thick ideology, we know that some parties mobilize around anti-immigration, Euroscepticism, anti-globalization, or redistribution, and thus appeal to voters with matching attitudes.

Table 1: “Thin” and “Thick” Populism in the Electoral Marketplace

	“Thin” Populism	“Thick” Populism
Supply Side	Parties emphasizing: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● People-centrism (popular sovereignty, homogeneity) ● Anti-elitism ● Crisis narrative 	Parties emphasizing: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Anti-immigration/nationalism/xenophobia ● Euroscepticism ● Globalization critique ● Redistribution endorsement
Demand Side	Voters driven by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● People-centrism ● Anti-elitism 	Voters driven by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Anti-immigration/nativism/nationalism ● Euroscepticism ● Anti-globalization

A key problem however is that, in the real world, thin and thick populist ideology are deeply enmeshed. On the supply side, many parties combine thin populist anti-elitist and people-centric ideology with, for instance, pronounced nationalist anti-immigration or Eurosceptic positions (e.g., Kriesi et al. 2008; Mudde 2007). Similarly, on the demand side, many voters hold thin as well as thick populist attitudes (e.g., Hawkins et al. 2012; Tsatsanis et al. 2018; Wettstein et al. 2019). As a consequence, causal examinations of the determinants of populist voting are complicated. How can we know whether a voter casts her ballot for the Dutch Freedom party because of the party’s rhetoric about corrupt elites and not because she is drawn to its anti-Islam positions? Similarly, is it anti-elite or anti-EU attitudes that are driving support for populist parties that combine thin and thick populist appeals by railing against “EU elites”?

As many components of populist supply and demand tend to co-occur, they are potentially confounds for each other. While, in theory, we could control for all confounders, the causal effects of all components of populist ideology can only be identified if these components, at least

sometimes, occur in all kinds of combinations with the other components (i.e., common support). On the demand side, a large sample of voters may guarantee that all possible constellations of thin and thick populist attitudes are observed. However, on the supply side, a finite number of parties leaves some cells empty: for instance, which party is anti-elite but not people-centric and Europhile but pro-redistribution? If we accept, for instance, that some components of parties' populism virtually never occur in isolation but always alongside others, then causally identifying these effects using observational data will not be possible because we lack a counterfactual.

Therefore, we posit that researchers have to leverage experimental designs in which populist ideology components can be randomly assigned to political parties or candidates, which creates common support and excludes confounding between components. Below we take an important step in this direction by proposing and testing original survey conjoint experiments, in which we study respondents' vote choice for thousands of fictitious political candidates whose populist ideology components are randomly drawn and orthogonal to each other.

We thus set out to answer two relatively straightforward research questions:

***RQ1:** To what extent do different components of a candidate's thin and thick populist ideology causally affect respondents' likelihood of voting for her?*

***RQ2:** To what extent are the causal effects of these components heterogenous by respondents' thin and thick populist attitudes?*

Thus, we are essentially asking how the demand and supply of thin as well as thick ideology condition the clearance of the electoral marketplace.

Experimental Design and Measurement Instruments

In this section, we describe our experimental design and how it operationalizes populist supply as well as our measurement instruments for populist demand as thin and thick attitudes.

Experimental Design: Operationalizing Thin and Thick Populist Supply

We leverage conjoint experimental designs to examine the above research questions.¹ Conjoint experiments are an increasingly popular tool that allow researchers to simultaneously test the causal effects of a multitude of factors (Hainmueller et al. 2014). We use paired² conjoint tasks in which survey respondents are presented with five pairs of fictitious political candidate profiles that can exhibit different populist attributes. Respondents are then asked to choose which candidate in each pair they would rather cast their vote for.

In order to minimize associations of profiles with existing parties and render profiles that rarely occur in reality (e.g., pro-elite but anti-immigrant) more credible, we study vote choice for political candidates rather than parties and do not provide party labels. Obviously, from a voter's perspective there can be many more unusual candidates than parties, and many profiles would not

¹ All data and scripts required to replicate the analyses in the manuscript and the Online Appendix are deposited in the Political Behavior Dataverse and available at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/Z66XXP>.

² This design has been recommended by Hainmueller et al. (2015), who show that estimates based on it are slightly closer to behavioral benchmarks than those based on single-profile or vignette text designs. Note that Hainmueller et al. (2015) suggest a paired conjoint design without forced choice response options. However, their experiments on voting for the naturalization of immigrants in Switzerland represent a case in which voters can in actuality vote to naturalize both immigrants. In contrast, in our case, voters can only vote for one candidate in reality, which is why we use a forced choice design.

be credible if the candidates were associated with a particular party. Hence, our design allows us to represent the whole universe of possible combinations of thin and thick populist components as well as study vote choice without being constrained by existing party platforms.

We operationalize populist supply through various candidate attributes. On the one hand, we argue that thin populist ideology can be operationalized through particular “political priorities”, because thin ideology components, such as anti-elite or people-centrism, are essentially valence and not positional issues. To illustrate this point: we rarely observe politicians publicly take positions opposed to thin populism, which would mean, for instance, being *against* centering politics on the people or in *favor* of political elitism. Research has shown that non-populist mainstream parties primarily de-emphasize thin populism (Bågenholm and Charron 2014; Rooduijn et al. 2014) but do not oppose it, which illustrates the valence instead of positional nature of the concept. Specifically, in the baseline version of our experiment, candidates can have the following priorities operationalizing anti-elitism, people-centrism and the crisis narrative (cf. Rooduijn 2014): “fighting political corruption”, “overthrowing the political elite”, “strengthening direct democracy”, “defending citizens’ interests”, and “leading Germany out of the crisis”. We also include a host of priorities that are not typically considered populist (see Table 2). These additional priorities range from relatively uncontroversial statements such as “improving economic growth” or “fighting crime” to more charged priorities such as “stopping Islamization”. Importantly, we do not deny that populist politicians often adopt some of the priorities we label non-populist but rather argue that they are not generally considered defining features of thin populism. The breadth of priorities allows us to operationalize a broad range of political candidates and cover key issues parties stress according to saliency theories of party competition (see e.g., Budge and Farlie 1983).

On the other hand, we operationalize thick populist ideology through extreme positions on the four issue dimensions identified above. First, we represent anti-immigration/xenophobia with candidates advocating the “deportation of a great many refugees”, while alternative positions are more lenient or in favor of accepting refugees. Second, we operationalize a Eurosceptic position as being for “Germany’s withdrawal from the EU”. Alternative non-populist positions range from preferring weaker cooperation in the EU to calls for developing the EU into a common state. Third, candidates can take a strong populist pro-redistribution position by demanding “much higher taxes on the rich”, whereas non-populist candidates are more moderate or want to cut taxes. Fourth, a populist anti-globalization position is reflected in candidates that call for “much less free trade and globalization”. Other candidates adopt more pro-globalization positions. While we deem these operationalizations of the four thick populist components adequate for our case of Germany (see below), we also note that other researchers can easily adopt this approach and adjust framing and wording to country-specific factors if studying populist voting in other contexts.³

Table 2: Attributes and Attribute Levels in Conjoint Experiment (2017 Baseline version)

Attribute	Attribute Levels
<i>First political priority</i>	Fight political corruption Overthrow the political elite Strengthen direct democracy Defend citizens’ interests Lead Germany out of the crisis Improve environmental protection Promote economic growth Strengthen social justice

³ Researchers could also add less prominent components of thin or thick populist ideology (e.g., populist positions on punitive justice).

	Stop Islamization Fight crime Strengthen civil rights and civil liberties Make globalization fairer Create a social Europe
<i>Second political priority</i>	<i>Same levels as above but constrained to be distinct from first priority</i>
<i>Position on refugees</i>	Is for the admission of a great many new refugees Is for the admission of some new refugees Is for the deportation of some refugees Is for the deportation of a great many refugees
<i>Position on the European Union</i>	Is for the development of the EU into a common state Is for stronger cooperation within the EU Is for weaker cooperation within the EU Is for Germany's withdrawal from the EU
<i>Position on the taxation of the rich</i>	Is for much lower taxes on the rich Is for somewhat lower taxes on the rich Is for somewhat higher taxes on the rich Is for much higher taxes on the rich
<i>Position on free trade and globalization</i>	Is for much more free trade and globalization Is for somewhat more free trade and globalization Is for somewhat less free trade and globalization Is for much less free trade and globalization

Note: Levels operationalizing populist ideology are bolded.

All attributes and attribute levels of our baseline design are provided in Table 2, with populist ideology components bolded (see Figure A1 in the Online Appendix for a screenshot of the task). Note that in our design, respondents see a candidate's randomly drawn first and second priority as two attributes with the same attribute levels and the imposed restriction that the levels for the first and second priority cannot be identical. Since we think that respondents do not distinguish much between the first and the second priority (which is supported by robustness checks), we *ex post*

redefined the design and rendered each priority to be an attribute with levels “Priority” versus “No priority”, depending on whether it was drawn as first or second priority *or* neither.⁴

Measurement Instruments: Thin and Thick Populist Demand

We are also interested in whether any effects of populist attributes vary by respondents’ populist attitudes. To measure respondents’ thin populism we use a battery of eight populist items that largely overlap with items used in existing studies (e.g., Akkerman et al. 2014; Hawkins et al. 2012; van Hauwaert and van Kessel 2018). These items capture an underlying populist attitude by tapping into the dimensions that are central to the thin ideology conception of populism: anti-elitism, pro popular sovereignty, and a belief in the homogeneity of the people (full question wordings and justifications for all items can be found in Section 2 of the Online Appendix). To measure respondents’ demand for thick populism, we draw on six items tapping into respondents’ attitudes towards refugees, immigrants, EU membership, the deepening of European integration, globalization, and taxation of the rich. An initial factor analysis revealed that five of the six items strongly loaded on a common factor, with the “taxation of the rich” item being the sole exception.

⁴ Hence, even in its *ex post* transformation, our design has a number of constraints on attribute level combinations (e.g., combinations of fewer than two, or three or more issues being a priority are excluded). As a result, the marginal means of “Priority” versus “No priority” are hardly comparable, since they marginalize over different subsets of the possible levels for the other issues (e.g., with “No priority” all cells with combinations of two other issues as “Priority” are possible but they are excluded under “Priority”, since only one other issue can be a priority then). Below we therefore abstain from reporting marginal means for “No priority”. However, the marginal means for the “Priority” levels can be compared, as they marginalize over symmetrical sets of levels for the other variables.

Given this result and the fact that redistribution is the least discussed component of thick populism in the extant literature, we excluded the item from the scale and suggest that further work is needed to unpack the extent to which the issue can be considered a component of thick populism. Our remaining items measure thick populism as anti-EU, anti-globalization, anti-immigrant sentiment.

We use these two sets of items to construct thin and thick populism scales using factor analyses. Scree plots and an Eigenvalue smaller than 1 for the second factor suggest that a single factor describes the data sufficiently well for each set of items. Hence, we retain a single factor for thin and a single factor for thick populist attitudes. All factor loadings are stronger than +/- 0.5 and the majority of the items load stronger than +/- 0.7, indicating high internal consistency of the scales. Our measures of thin and thick populist attitudes are operationalized as the respondents' factor scores (from regressions) from the respective factor analysis (detailed results for all factor analyses can be found in Section 2 of the Online Appendix). In our samples, thin and thick populist attitudes are strongly related, with factor scores correlating at around 0.6. This is in line with previous work highlighting that thin populist attitudes co-occur with anti-immigrant or Eurosceptic attitudes (Hawkins et al. 2012; Tsatsanis et al. 2018). Nevertheless, our large sample still allows us to identify individuals that only hold *either* thin *or* thick populist attitudes (see below).

The German Case and Data

We implement our experimental design using Germany as an important case study for the recent surge in populist electoral strength. While populism was not particularly prominent in post-war Germany, populist ideology and discourse have recently become more salient: first, following German reunification in 1990, through the emergence of the left-populist “Die Linke” party (e.g, Hough and Koß 2009), and second, after 2013 with the emergence of the right-wing populist

“Alternative für Deutschland” (AfD), obtaining parliamentary representation for the first time after garnering 12.6 percent of the vote in the 2017 federal election (see e.g., Lewandowsky et al. 2016). Together these two parties now consistently receive support of upwards of 20 percent of the German electorate. The German party system thus features both major species of populist parties on both the left and the right of the political spectrum, providing a good backdrop for our analyses, since all populist ideology components should conceivably have an *a priori* chance to impact voting. However, it should be noted that we are not equivocating the two parties or suggesting that they are populist to the same degree. For instance, some scholars have pointed out that the populism of Die Linke is less pronounced than that of other parties (Rooduijn and Pauwels 2011; see also Hough and Koß 2009).

In addition to the presence of left- and right-wing populist parties, Germany’s mixed electoral system allows us to frame our candidate conjoint experiments in the form of an *Erststimme* voting decision that Germans have to make at each general election (see Online Appendix for exact framing). With the *Erststimme*, Germans directly select a candidate in their electoral district and votes are tallied using a first-past-the-post formula, with the plurality winner guaranteed to become a member of parliament. This system thus allows us to frame our candidate experiment within a familiar and politically relevant candidate-centered contest, while remaining within the context of a multi-party system that renders a variety of candidate positions credible.

However, the German case also poses limitations to the generalizability of our findings. First, Germany does not share the history of significant populist party support during the second half of the 20th century that other Western European countries like Austria, Denmark, France, Italy or the Netherlands experienced. Thus, we caution against generalizing from our results to other countries, especially those with long-established populist parties. Second, one specific peculiarity of the

German party system compared to many other European systems is the muted role of Euroscepticism. While it is true that the AfD as the larger of the two German populist parties emerged out of opposition to the government's handling of the euro crisis, it quickly shifted its programmatic focus from Euroscepticism towards xenophobia (Arzheimer 2015; Schmitt-Beck 2017). Similarly, Euroscepticism is one – but arguably not the central – feature of Die Linke's platform. Hence, our results on Euroscepticism may not generalize, particularly to party systems with strong Eurosceptic competitors such as the British or Greek cases.

Our surveys were fielded by infratest dimap, a leading German polling firm, and financed and co-developed by the Bertelsmann Stiftung, a German private foundation. All our data stem from respondents of the German Payback Online Panel. This panel is one of the highest quality online panels in Germany, since the panel's sampling frame comprises households participating in the Payback consumer loyalty program, which about 75% of all German households do. We use two samples from this panel. Our main sample was recruited in 2015 from a pool of 20,000 voting-eligible respondents who had completed a post-election survey after the 2013 German federal election. Respondents were interviewed in July 2015, April 2016, and March 2017 but this article relies only on data from the conjoint experiment which was embedded in the third wave of the study, fielded in March 2017, just a few months before the 2017 German federal election that September. This wave surveyed 1,464 respondents who had completed the two prior waves and a further 907 new respondents ($n = 2,371$). Supporters of the AfD and Die Linke were deliberately over-sampled in the third wave (each with more than 330 respondents) to allow us to make more precise inferences about these groups. For all results, we use survey weights that correct for differences between the sample and the overall German voting-eligible population as of the 2013

federal election. The weights adjust for residence (federal state), age, education and gender, as well as the over-sampling of Die Linke and AfD voters.

In addition, we also discuss results from a replication study as well as results from an amended version of our conjoint experiment. These results are based on a second sample ($n = 3,427$) that was drawn from a pool of 20,000 voting-eligible respondents who completed a post-election survey after the 2017 German federal election. Data used stem from the first wave of this panel with fieldwork in May/June 2018. Here, voters of all small parties were deliberately over-sampled. Using survey weights the results we present are adjusted to be representative of the overall German voting-eligible population as of the 2017 federal election.

Results

We follow recent advice by Leeper et al. (2020) and present the results from our conjoint experiments using Marginal Means (MMs) instead of the Average Marginal Component Effects (AMCEs) originally introduced by Hainmueller and colleagues (2014). In paired conjoint designs with binary forced choice outcomes, the MM of an attribute level has a straightforward interpretation. It is simply the probability that a profile will be chosen given the attribute level x is present and marginalizing across all other attribute levels: $\Pr(Y = 1|X = x)$. We analyze the data using the *cregg* R-package (Leeper 2018).⁵ For those familiar with AMCEs, note simply that AMCEs are nothing other than differences in MMs (between two attribute levels). Hence, using MMs is not a fundamentally different approach to analyses using AMCEs. But MMs allow for an

⁵ Note that the *cregg* package uses the *survey* package to calculate MMs as survey-weighted means with appropriate standard errors.

interpretation that is not inherently relative to a chosen baseline category, which is particularly advantageous when comparing the preferences of subgroups as we do below (see Online Appendix Section 3 for various tests of the identification assumptions).

Figure 1 displays MMs using the full sample for all attribute levels except for those levels that indicate that a priority was “No priority”. We exclude these estimates, since they are of little substantive interest (see also footnote 4). The red vertical line indicates the 0.5 probability of a candidate being chosen, that is, the grand mean probability in a choice task with two profiles. Hence, estimates to the right (left) of this line indicate that the attribute level has a positive (negative) effect on candidate support. This demonstrates that the various populist appeals fare very differently with the general voting-eligible population in Germany. On the one hand, the average voter very much favors candidates with thick populist positions advocating the deportation of refugees and higher taxation on the rich. On the other hand, on average voters strongly dislike populist Eurosceptic positions, such as being in favor of Germany’s withdrawal from the EU. Moreover, anti-globalization stances fare worse than pro-globalization stances. Hence, while some thick populist positions increase the probability of a candidate being chosen (i.e., anti-immigration, redistribution), others do not increase candidates’ vote shares (i.e., Euroscepticism, anti-globalization).

A similarly differentiated picture emerges with regard to thin populist appeals: while two populist priorities – “strengthen direct democracy” and “defend citizens’ interests” – are the two priorities associated with the highest support, candidates who want to “overthrow the political elite” have picked the priority that is likely to result in the lowest vote share. Interestingly, the two popular populist priorities (direct democracy, citizens’ interests) are both about people-centrism. This demonstrates that our design is able to unpack which specific components of thin and thick

populist supply garner support in the electoral marketplace, which would not be possible with observational data, in which the few existing parties exhibit many of these components simultaneously.

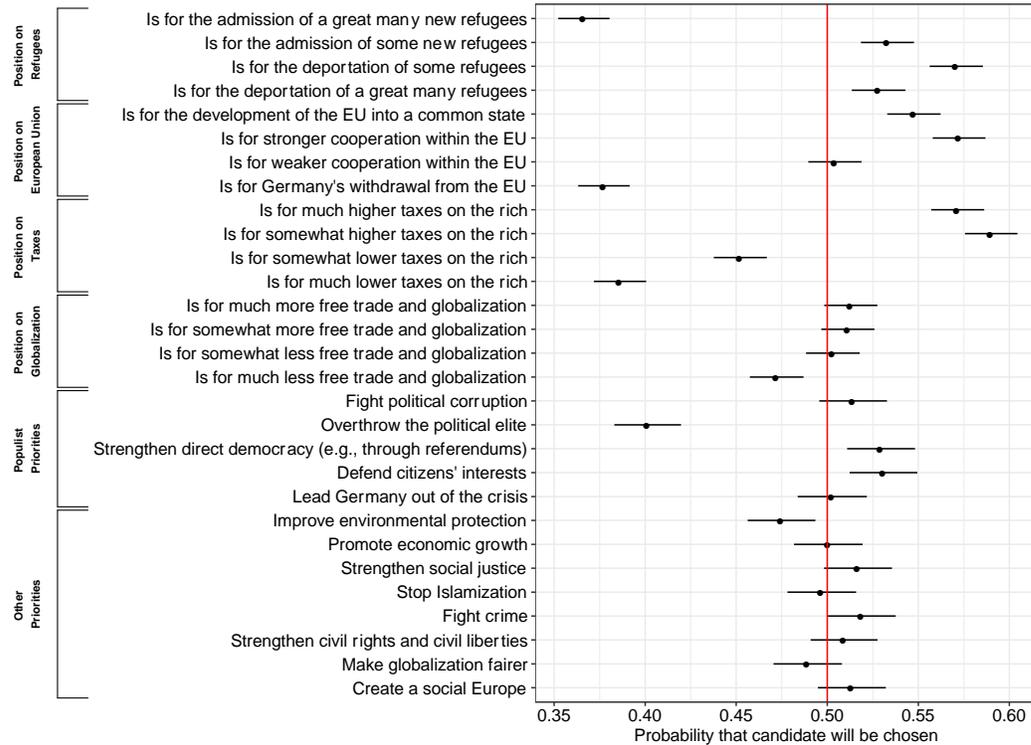


Figure 1: Marginal Means of Attribute Levels (2017 sample)

Notes: Marginal means; 95% confidence intervals as horizontal bars; red line indicates $\Pr(Y = 1) = 0.5$.

Next, we investigate how these MMs differ by populist demand. For simplicity, we compare four subgroups of voters with varying levels of thin and thick populist attitudes: 1) *non-populists* (factor scores below the mean on both attitude measures), 2) *thin populists* (thin populism above the mean, thick populism below), 3) *thick populists* (thick populism above the mean, thin below),

and 4) *thin-thick populists* (thin and thick populism above the mean).⁶ To ease interpretation, we only plot subgroup estimates for attribute levels operationalizing populist ideology (see Table 2), with populist positions presented in Figure 2.1 and populist priorities in Figure 2.2.

Figure 2.1 illustrates that the anti-immigrant position of “deporting a great many refugees” only increases support among thick and thin-thick populists while having rather repelling effects on non-populists and thin populists. Here, we observe a clear market clearance of candidates offering a thick populist position and only voters with thick populist attitudes reacting to it. In contrast, the Eurosceptic position of “withdrawing from the EU” diminishes support among all groups, except for thin-thick populists for whom the attribute does not move the probability away from the 0.5 midpoint. This means that populist Euroscepticism does not garner support in Germany – not even among populists. For the remaining two populist positions, there are no differences between subgroups, meaning that these positions have (in the case of redistribution) or do not have (in the case of anti-globalization) a sizable general impact on vote choice in our experiment, irrespective of voters’ populist attitudes. This limited relevance of the demand side is even more powerfully reflected in Figure 2.2, which reveals virtually no differences in the appeal of populist priorities by populist attitudes. Thin populists are not significantly more swayed by thin populist appeals than non-populists or thick populists. Importantly, even thin populists are significantly repelled by the anti-elite position of “overthrowing the political elite.”

⁶ In Section 8 of the Online Appendix, we show that our results are robust to using an alternative definition and operationalization of the subgroups.

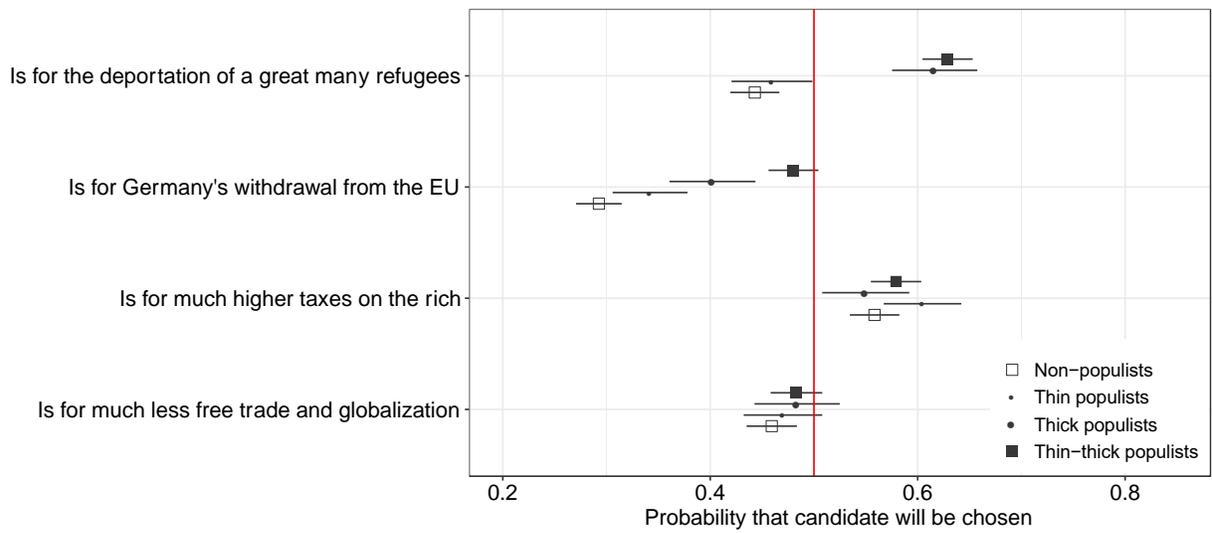


Figure 2.1: Marginal Means of Populist Positions by Subgroup

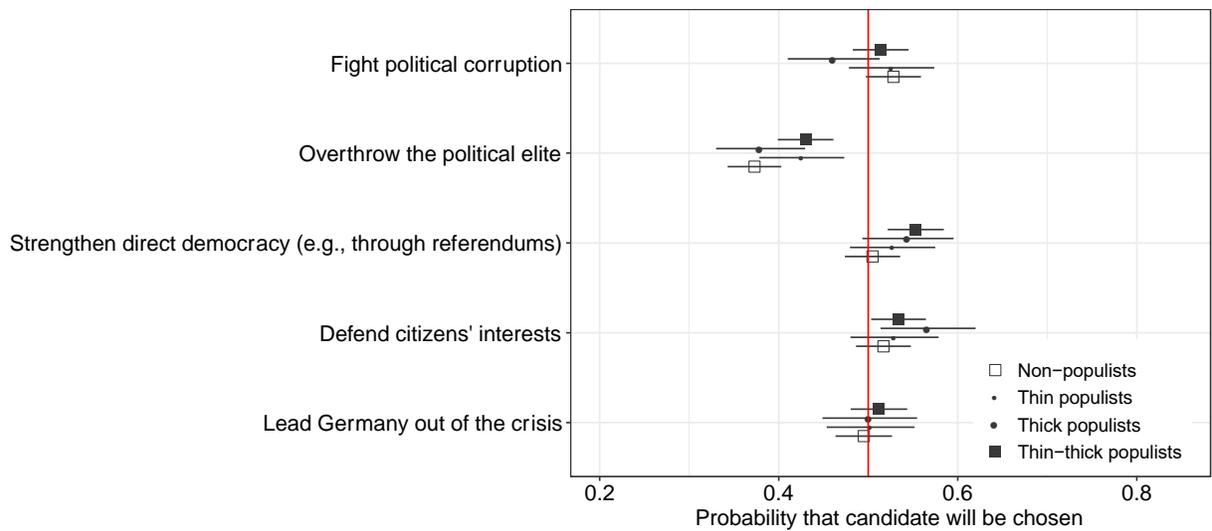


Figure 2.2: Marginal Means of Populist Priorities by Subgroup

Notes: Marginal means; 95% confidence intervals as horizontal bars; red line indicates $\Pr(Y = 1) = 0.5$.

In sum, these findings paint a picture of the components of populist ideology that dominate the electoral marketplace in Germany: in terms of thick populist positions, vigorous pro-redistribution stances increase candidates' expected vote shares in the electorate as a whole, while anti-immigration positions only increase support among thick populists, and Eurosceptic and anti-globalization stances are an electoral liability rather than an asset, even among populist voters. In terms of thin populist priorities, people-centric priorities appeal to the average voter, while anti-elite appeals are even rejected by the average populist voter. Hence, in Germany the electoral attractiveness of populist ideology derives from people-centric instead of anti-elite appeals, and from anti-immigrant as well as pro-redistribution instead of Eurosceptic or anti-globalization positions.

Replication and Robustness Checks

In May/June 2018, we conducted a second study. First, with half of this new sample we conducted an exact replication of the 2017 baseline design. The full results are provided in Section 4 of the Online Appendix. We were able to replicate all major findings from above: pro-redistribution positions increase the probability of a candidate being chosen for all voters, anti-immigration positions only for those with thick populist attitudes, and Eurosceptic and anti-globalization positions decrease candidates' vote shares, even among populists. In turn, regarding the populist priorities it is people-centric priorities (e.g., "defend citizens' interests") that create electoral support, with little heterogeneity across subgroups. This demonstrates that our findings

are not due to the particular context of the election campaign in 2017 but more broadly reflect contemporary voting dynamics in Germany.⁷

Second, we examined whether our findings were the result of certain design choices by fielding an amended version of the experiment with the remaining half of the respondents from our 2018 sample. We provide more details and full results in Section 5 of the Online Appendix. On the one hand, we vary the operationalizations of three populist positions and one populist priority: instead of positions on EU membership, we capture Euroscepticism through positions on economic cooperation of euro countries; instead of positions on taxation, we use positions on investment in social housing for the redistribution dimension; we use more specific anti-globalization positions that relate to higher “tariffs on foreign goods and services”; and we also test a “softer” anti-elite populist priority that calls for “ending the abuse of power by the parties”. While these changes influence effect sizes, the major substantive findings are unaffected. Eurosceptic and anti-globalization positions are still not an asset, not even among populists, and pro-redistribution positions are still garnering support across almost all subgroups. The softer anti-elite populist priority is not particularly unpopular but does not create significant support in any subgroup.

On the other hand, we also examined the influence of our decision to conceive of thin populist supply in terms of candidates’ political priorities rather than positions. Specifically, we

⁷ In particular, it demonstrates that our results are largely independent of trends in party support. In March 2017, when we fielded the design the first time, opinion polls by infratest dimap showed about 31-32% vote share for the SPD if a federal election were held that Sunday (a high level of SPD support that had not occurred for over five years). By May/June 2018, at the time of fieldwork for the replication, the SPD’s projected vote share had fallen to 17-19%. This drop in the SPD’s vote share was the most significant drop in vote share for a party in Germany in at least two decades. Our experimental estimates are entirely unaffected by this change in partisan context.

reformulated the “strengthen direct democracy (e.g., through referendums)” priority in terms of positions for holding more/fewer referendums.⁸ The results entirely corroborate our main findings: candidates favoring “many more referendums” attract more support and, while we find some heterogeneity by subgroups, these differences are not large, with thin and thin-thick populists most drawn to these candidates.

Third, in Section 6 of the Online Appendix we show subgroup analyses for all experiments for voters of Die Linke and the AfD, using populist vote choice as a proxy for potentially unobserved dimensions of populist attitudes which may not be captured by our populist attitudes scales. Neither Eurosceptic, anti-globalization positions, nor anti-elite priorities significantly increase support among these populist voters in any of the three experiments. Fourth, in Section 7 of the Online Appendix we also test whether the interaction of thin and thick populist supply is particularly powerful in creating support (i.e., an “activation hypothesis” on the candidate rather than the voter side) (cf. Hawkins et al. 2018). We find no support for this conjecture.

Conclusion

The populism literature appears to be increasingly embracing a (“thin”) ideational definition of populism. Thin populism, however, does not exist in a vacuum. Instead, populist parties and politicians blend this ideology with a limited, defined set of host or “thick” ideologies, such as xenophobia or Euroscepticism. To date, little work has sought to unpack the unique causal

⁸ We chose this particular component of thin populism, since it can most credibly be presented as a positional issue. For instance, we think that candidates who would advocate positions *for* political corruption or *against* defending citizens’ interests would be perceived as hardly credible by respondents.

contributions of both thin and thick populist ideology – both on the demand as well as the supply side – on support for populist forces. The major empirical obstacle for doing so is the enmeshment of various populist ideology components in the limited set of existing populist parties.

In this article, we leverage novel candidate conjoint experiments that allow us to causally identify the effect of different components of thin and thick populist ideology on candidates' electoral appeal. These instruments operationalize thick populism through positional, and thin populism through salience models of party competition. Three experiments conducted on two high-quality German samples yield consistent findings about German voters' preferences towards populist ideology: while we find that two prominent thick supply-side components, namely anti-immigration and pro-redistribution positions, do indeed attract the average German voter, two other components, Euroscepticism and anti-globalization, are a liability rather than an asset, even among voters who have strong populist attitudes. Moreover, with regard to thin components we find that people-centric priorities increase candidates' support in the German electorate, but anti-elite priorities never boost support in our experiments, not even among people with strong populist attitudes. Hence, on average, German voters appear to be attracted to people-centrism but not anti-elitism as well as being receptive to anti-immigration and pro-redistribution positions but not to Eurosceptic or anti-globalization positions.

Beyond the German case, our findings also have broader implications for the literature on populist voting. First, they reveal potential differences between observational and experimental findings on the appeal of parties' populist ideology. Our causal decomposition of populist supply into its constituent components reveals that not all the populist components posited in the literature appear to be causally linked to populist voting in Germany. The role of Euroscepticism is a case in point. For instance, some observational evidence on the role of the European integration issue

in the 2017 election finds an (albeit limited) effect on the AfD vote (Schoen 2019). In contrast, our experimental estimates do not identify a single subgroup in which Eurosceptic positions increase support – not even among AfD voters. While this may not be the case in countries with stronger party and public Euroscepticism (e.g., the UK), this discrepancy between observational and experimental findings highlights the importance of causal identification for future studies on populist voting.

Second, our results challenge recent claims regarding the strong impact of thin populist attitudes on support for populist parties (e.g., Akkerman et al. 2014; Hawkins et al. 2018; van Hauwaert and van Kessel 2018). In general, we do not find strong evidence that voters holding populist attitudes are significantly more electorally receptive to candidates' populist priorities. Thus, while thin populist attitudes may correlate with populist vote choice in the real world, we find little evidence that populist attitudes induce a stronger responsiveness to our thin-populist experimental treatments. This suggests that the connection between populist attitudes and vote choice may not actually run through a clearance of the electoral marketplace, i.e. voters with thin ideology seeking out politicians promoting this ideology. Alternative explanations may include populist ideology components on the supply side that are not captured in our design, or confounding factors that are simultaneously related to voters' populist attitudes and parties with populist ideology. Future work should investigate this issue. Moreover, this point is relevant beyond the literature on populist voting. Conventional wisdom of how parties' programmatic supply and voters' related attitudes explain voting may not necessarily find support in experimental studies (e.g., do parties' pro-environment positions causally mobilize voters with pro-environmental attitudes?).

In conclusion, the fact that our experimental results are partially at odds with both central conjectures of what drives support for populists and past observational findings highlights the

importance of studying when, and under what conditions, different facets of populism matter. Others have highlighted the need to disentangle the actual influence of thin ideology versus the thick/host ideologies that populist parties also exhibit (e.g., Bornschieer 2017; Rooduijn 2019). We have presented an approach that is able to do just that and, using the case of Germany, have demonstrated that it can elucidate the dynamics underlying populist voting. However, precisely because we think that these dynamics may vary across countries and contexts, we suggest taking our results as a strong justification for others to build on this work and study the effects of various components of populism in different contexts. Ultimately, this will allow us to disentangle which components of populist ideology are causally responsible for shaking many advanced democracies to their very foundations.

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