

# Does populist voting rise where representative democracy is systemically failing?

Miriam Sorace<sup>\*,1</sup>

School of Politics & IR, University of Kent, University of Kent, United Kingdom  
Data Science Institute, London School of Economics and Political Science, United Kingdom

## ARTICLE INFO

**Keywords:**  
Populism  
Political representation  
Sociotropic incongruence  
European politics

## ABSTRACT

Recent scholarship views populist voting as a reaction to *systemic* failures in political representation. This argument is however controversial due to a lack of empirical evidence. Does this explanation of populist support simply mirror the strategic campaign messaging of populist parties, and should thus be discounted? This study leverages state-of-the-art measures of systemic and non-systemic (i.e. individual-level) representation failures, adopting the constructs of sociotropic and egocentric incongruence. It uses data from the CSES, IPU, the POPPA dataset and the World Bank, covering 64 elections from 2001 and 2018 in 24 Western and Eastern European countries. The study finds that populism owes its success primarily to individual-level representation gaps, and not systemic ones. However, system-level failures in representation do matter in the margins, and for specific subsets of citizens. Furthermore, failures in pluralist representation have more bearing on populist support than majoritarian representation failures.

## 1. Introduction

Is populism successful where there is a systemic failure of representative democracy? Populist actors believe they uniquely understand the popular will, and see populism as a remedy to the shortcomings of representative democracy. When serving as Italy's prime minister, Giuseppe Conte (Five Stars Movement), urged the European Union to become populist on the ground that it would help "better grasp the needs of the people" and to repair "the fracture between Europe and its citizens".<sup>2</sup> Referendums are often championed by these parties as solutions to the inadequacy of representative democracy (Mudde 2004, Kaltwasser et al. 2017, Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017, Van Kessel 2015, Roberts 2015, Urbinati 2019, Akkerman et al. 2014). Populists may associate themselves to either left or right ideologies: what truly distinguishes them is their ideological positioning on democracy (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017).

Some political theorists forcefully argue that populist ideology is the "ideology of democracy" as it invokes democracy's redemptive promise of realising the *will of the people* (Canovan 1999; 2002, Urbinati 2019). Canovan (2002; 1999), for example, believes that populism is fuelled by the inherent tension between the "redemptive" (populist) and the "pragmatic" (representative) face of democracy. On the one

hand, democracy promises salvation through direct, spontaneous exercise of power by the people (redemptive face). However, *pragmatically*, democratic institutions have to rely on delegation to representatives. This, according to Canovan, leads to a disconnect between people and decision-making (Canovan 2002 p. 28). Populist forces therefore succeed because they exploit the tendency of representative institutions to treat the popular will with contempt (Canovan 2002 p. 27). Similarly, Ernesto Laclau (2005) and Chantal Mouffe (2013; 2014) also depict populism as an antidote to the representative failures of contemporary democracies. Yascha Mounk, along the same lines, has claimed that "[...] political elites have insulated themselves from popular views to a remarkable extent" (Mounk 2018 p. 58) and that, to curb populist support, we need to reform our institutions "[...] to strike a better balance between expertise and responsiveness to the popular will" (Mounk 2018 p. 97).

If the hypothesis that failing to represent *the people* drives populist support is correct, then it follows that populist parties should be more successful when political representation breaks down *systemically*. In other words, populist parties would succeed in systems where representative institutions fail to represent the people *as a whole*. This study puts this hypothesis to the test, by contrasting it to individual-level representation failures, since utilitarian, 'personal alienation', explanations

\* Correspondence to: School of Politics & IR, University of Kent, United Kingdom.  
E-mail address: [m.sorace@kent.ac.uk](mailto:m.sorace@kent.ac.uk).

<sup>1</sup> Assistant Professor in Quantitative Politics, University of Kent and Senior Visiting Fellow in Data Science, London School of Economics and Political Science.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.rainews.it/dl/rainews/articoli/conte-europa-populista-a15015d5-14e3-4a92-864c-ca26bab5a8da.html>

of populism and democratic attitudes have also been advanced (Gidron and Hall 2020, Harms and Landwehr 2020, Graham and Svulik 2020, Mayne and Hakhverdian 2017).

## 2. Failures of representative democracy and populist support: What failures should matter most?

Assessing elites' preferences against the political preferences of the citizenry is an important test in various conceptualisations of political representation (Powell 2004b, Dalton et al. 2011, Huber and Powell 1994). In particular, political representation theory recognises that discrepancies between the entire representative body (e.g. a legislature) and the whole citizenry constitute serious democratic breaches (Pitkin 1967, May 1978). In representative democracy 'rule by the people' works through a delegation relationship between people and representatives whereby the latter faithfully voice the preferences of the former — the *responsive rule* (Pitkin 1967, Dahl 1971, May 1978). Failing to abide by the responsive rule can harm regime support and legitimacy (Rohrshneider 2002, Newton 2006). This study aims to test whether support for populist parties is another consequence of such systemic representation failures. If voters are concerned about the overall representation of the people as a political collective — as populist actors and some political theorists claim — systemic, sociotropic incongruence between elites and citizens should encourage them to vote for populist parties, given the salience populist parties attach to alleged systemic representation gaps.

It is also important to account for the 'critical citizen' hypothesis surrounding systemic democratic failures (Norris 2011). Following Norris, Dalton and Welzel (2014) theorise that it is the assertive 'critical' citizens — i.e. those who hold stronger democratic values — that are more likely to notice and punish systemic, normative breaches to representative democracy. Failure to represent the people as *a whole* is an important indicator of a democracy failing to meet democratic standards. The highly politically aware, 'critical' citizens, are more likely to notice and to react to fundamental democratic breaches (Ferrín and Kriesi 2016, Werner et al. 2020). Following this hypothesis, populist backlashes might be reactions to systemic representation failures at most for the highly politically aware. I test this hypothesis in the heterogeneous effects analysis below.

An alternative view is that support for populist actors is chiefly self-interested and derives from personal alienation (Gidron and Hall 2020), and thus not from any real concern with the systemic health of representative democracy in one's country. Many studies have found that democratic preferences are often utilitarian and based on individual-level political alienation, rather than normative concerns (Graham and Svulik 2020, Harms and Landwehr 2020, Landwehr and Harms 2020, Anderson et al. 2005, Mayne and Hakhverdian 2017, Bakker et al. 2020). Breaches of fundamental representative democracy principles — such as the 'responsive rule' (May 1978, Pitkin 1967) — might not be important for populist support either, therefore. Testing for the role of egocentric incongruence allows to ascertain whether the populist vote is a self-interested act, merely an outlet for *individual-level* representation failures. Furthermore, voters might be better able to perceive representation flaws when they relate to their own experience of being represented, so they might react more to egocentric incongruence than to sociotropic incongruence. Following this, individuals that feel politically 'left behind' and not represented by political parties should support populist parties more, whether the country's political representation actually works or not.

## 3. Failures of representative democracy and populist support: What we know so far

Existing empirical studies have found that low political efficacy, distrust or dissatisfaction with democracy are associated with voting for anti-system and populist challenger parties (Hernández 2018, Bélanger

and Nadeau 2005, Belanger and Aarts 2006, Hooghe and Dassonneville 2018, Vidal 2018, Schumacher and Rooduijn 2013, Lavezolo and Ramiro 2018, Camatarri 2019). Perceptions of corruption levels or low quality of governance also appear to be associated to populist support (Agerberg 2017, Di Tella and Rotemberg 2018). Parties' ideological convergence also correlates with the success of anti-system parties (Mair 2013, Hopkin 2020), albeit only inconsistently (Carter 2005, Arzheimer and Carter 2006, Kriesi et al. 2006; 2012, Arzheimer 2009). Finally, empirical analyses of populism and "undemocratic liberalism" draw parallels between the rise in political professionalisation and technocracy and the rise of populism (Taggart 2002, Mounk 2018, Eatwell and Goodwin 2018).

The majority of existing empirical studies either only tackles partisan supply (e.g. by equating party convergence to representation failure without assessing public opinion convergence), or it examines respondents' self-reported evaluations of the political system. This is problematic since subjective assessments of democratic institutions may be endogenous to the presence and exposure to the rhetoric of populist actors. The populism literature rarely leverages objective measures from the literature on political representation (Powell 2004a) to capture the quality of party-based representation. The study by Bakker et al. (2020) is a notable exception, however it chiefly measures the effect of individual-level (and thus not system-level) representation failures.

This study leverages individual-level survey data and party data from 64 country-years. It builds various measures of representation failures, chiefly distinguishing between sociotropic and egocentric forms of party-voter ideological incongruence.

## 4. Method and data

### 4.1. Measuring systemic and non-systemic representation failures

Representative failure takes various forms, and can be measured in various ways (Powell 2004b; 2009). Following Mayne and Hakhverdian (2017) I chiefly distinguish between sociotropic and egocentric types of representation failure: sociotropic incongruence compares a *collective* of voters to a *collective* of representatives, and is akin to what Golder and Stramski (2010) call *many-to-many congruence*; while egocentric incongruence (in parliamentary systems, as those analysed here) captures the distance between the *individual* respondent and the *collective* of representatives (Mayne and Hakhverdian 2017) — i.e. 'one-to-many' congruence (Golder and Stramski 2010). This distinction allows to test whether the populist vote is simply an outlet for individual frustration at not being represented, or whether it is the consequence of system-wide representation failures — i.e. "undemocratic liberalism" (Mounk 2018).

Secondly, I distinguish between pluralist and majoritarian versions of both sociotropic and egocentric incongruence. Measures based on central tendency — i.e. the distance between the median voter and the median legislator (sociotropic); or between the individual voter and the median legislator (egocentric) — are standard measures in the political representation literature (Achen 1978, Powell 2004a). Central-tendency based measures, however, capture majoritarian democracy, as they fail to take into account the heterogeneity of both the collectives of voters and of representatives (Golder and Stramski 2010). Failure to account for dispersion can lead to inaccurate inferences whenever two distributions have similar means but differently shaped distributions. The majoritarian versions of both sociotropic and egocentric incongruence will be denoted with the roman numeral 'I'.

When measuring sociotropic and egocentric incongruence following pluralist conceptions of political representation, one needs to take into account the entire *distribution* of elite/citizen preferences, and not simply their averages. Existing distribution-based incongruence measures compare: (a) the absolute sum of deviations of each voter from the mean/median voter with the absolute sum of deviations of each

voter from the mean/median representative (centrism measure) (Achen 1978), and (b) the ideological distribution of representatives with the ideological distribution of party voters (many-to-many congruence). The latter strategy is what I adopt here to measure sociotropic incongruence. The difference between two ideological distributions can be measured in two ways: (1) via the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test statistic (Golder and Stramski 2010); and (2) via the Earth Mover’s Distance (EMD) (Lupu et al. 2017). To capture pluralist egocentric incongruence, I measure the distance between the individual respondent and the ideologically closest political party (and thus not simply the median legislator). This captures the pluralist notion that what matters for the individual is that their voice has at least some representation, some ‘input’ in the system, even if it does not reach the centre of power or policy outputs (Dahl 1989). The pluralist version of both sociotropic and egocentric incongruence will be denoted with the roman numeral ‘II’.

To sum up, this analysis deploys four main measures of representation failure: (1) sociotropic I (majoritarian) — the absolute ideological difference between the median voter and the median legislator; (2) sociotropic II (pluralist) — the difference between voters’ and legislators’ ideological distributions, either the Kolmogorov–Smirnov Distance (KSD) or the Earth’s Mover Distance (EMD) further explained below; (3) egocentric I (majoritarian) — the absolute ideological difference between the individual respondent and the median legislator; (4) egocentric II (pluralist) — the absolute ideological difference between the individual respondent and the ideologically closest party.

As introduced above, in order to measure sociotropic incongruence II, I rely on (a) the Kolmogorov–Smirnov Distance (KSD) measure (Golder and Stramski 2010), and (b) the Earth Mover’s Distance (EMD) measure (Lupu et al. 2017) (in the robustness tests).<sup>3</sup> The KSD statistic tests the equality between the two cumulative distribution functions (CDF) of voters’ and parties’ ideological preferences. It captures the supremum distance between two empirical CDFs, which is related to the size of the non-overlapping area between the two. The EMD, instead, proceeds by matching voters’ and parties’ distributions via minimisation, and it computes the minimum steps required to change one distribution into the other. The EMD then is defined as the ‘flow’, or ‘work’, required to move the parties’ probability distribution so that it is identical to the probability distribution of voters’ preferences. Larger absolute values of both KSD and EMD indicate larger incongruence. The EMD measure is strictly non-negative.

The formulas below exemplify the KSD and EMD measures. The subscript ‘c’ denotes citizens’ preferences on the left–right, while ‘l’ refers to legislators’ preferences :

$$KSD = \max_n |F_l(ideology) - F_c(ideology)| \tag{1}$$

$$EMD = \frac{\sum_{l=1}^m \sum_{c=1}^n f_{lc}^* d_{lc}}{\sum_{l=1}^m \sum_{c=1}^n f_{lc}^*} \tag{2}$$

where the optimal flow equals:

$$\sum_{l=1}^m \sum_{c=1}^n f_{lc}^* = \min \left( \sum_{l=1}^m p_l(ideology_l), \sum_{c=1}^n p_c(ideology_c) \right) \tag{3}$$

and  $d_{lc}$  is the ground distance matrix that captures the similarity between each element of the legislators’ and respondents’ distributions.

Figs. 1 and 2 exemplify the KSD and EMD measures of sociotropic incongruence for four country-years in the sample. Norway 2005 is an example of good sociotropic congruence, with voters’ and representatives’ left–right distributions overlapping neatly. Italy 2006, Greece 2015 and Poland 2005 show increasingly serious deviations from the normative ideal, with significant areas where voters and representatives’ left–right distributions do not overlap.

<sup>3</sup> The first was computed via the `ksmirnov` test in Stata, looped through all elections, while the second was built using R, using Lupu et al.’s (2017) R script ([=doi:10.7910/DVN/NO90AJ/IAZBS4&version=1.0](https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/NO90AJ/IAZBS4&version=1.0)). See section 1.3 in the Appendix for further details.

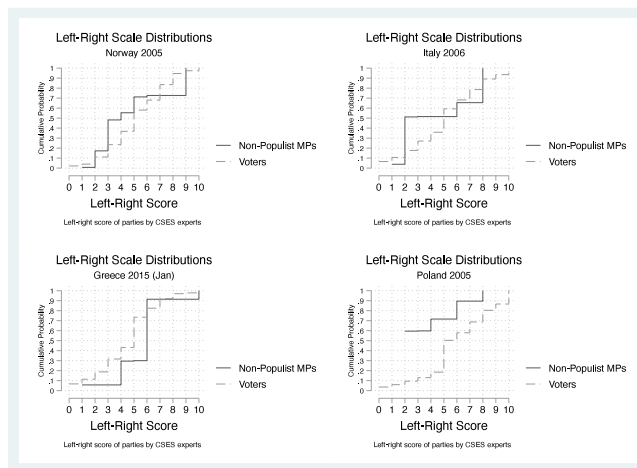


Fig. 1. Sample of cumulative distribution functions of voters’ and non-populist legislators — KSD is the supremum distance between the two.

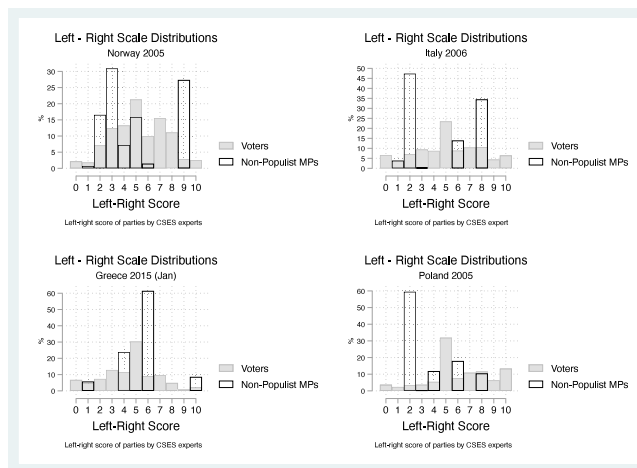


Fig. 2. Sample of Voters’ and non-populist legislators left–right scale distributions — EMD represents the ‘flow’ needed to transform one distribution into the other.

To build the ideological distribution in each country’s outgoing legislature, political parties’ scores were weighted according to the number of seats each party won in the *previous* legislature, retrieved from the elections archive of the Inter-Parliamentary Union’s (IPU) Parline database (<http://archive.ipu.org/parline/parlinesearch.asp>).<sup>4</sup> Table A4 in the Appendix provides numerical summaries of all these measures.

It is important to note that populist parties were excluded from all incongruence measures outlined above. This is because the dependent variable captures aggregate populist support, without distinguishing between old vs. new populist parties. Furthermore, the representation failure hypothesis implies that voters turn to populist when *mainstream* parties fail in their duty to represent (Mair 2013, Arzheimer and Carter 2006). To make sure that the sociotropic incongruence tests are not overstated in cases where the previous legislature had a lot of populist

<sup>4</sup> When the parties in the dataset did not match the parties in IPU’s election archives (due, for example, to party mergers, changes of name, electoral coalitions etc.) the relevant country’s parliamentary websites, archives or other official websites were searched to assign the correct number of seats to each party group. When a brand new party was involved – i.e. the party in question had no seats in the previous legislature – the party had 0 seat and was therefore not included in the ideological distribution of a country’s outgoing party system.

parties, the models all control for previous populist seat share. This keeps the pre-existing level of populism in a country constant: therefore the estimated effects of sociotropic incongruence account for countries that had sizeable populist presence in the previous legislature.

Furthermore, the measures of ideological incongruence use respondents' and parties' positions on the general left–right scale (summaries in Table A3 in the Appendix). Self-reports are used to measure respondents' left–right positions. Parties positions were retrieved by using the CSES experts' party placements (variables: A5004 B5018 C5017 D5017 E5018). These scores correlated highly ( $r = 0.89$ ) with both CHES scores and with left–right scores obtained using the reported party scores by the top 40% educated in each country. The study does not engage with multi-dimensional representation (Bakker et al. 2020) because of the sparsity of public opinion data on more granular dimensions of political competition. Because sociotropic incongruence can only be measured at the election-year level – and thus is already under-powered when compared to egocentric incongruence measures – losing further data points would have seriously limited the study.

#### 4.2. Data and empirical strategy

The analysis below leverages public opinion data from 64 post-election studies collected by the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (<http://www.cses.org/>) — Modules 1 to 5. I cover elections in European countries from 2001 until 2018, totalling 106,105 respondents. Table A1 in the Appendix lists the countries and election years covered. I have restricted my analysis to Western and Eastern European countries within these 17 years mainly due to the limited availability of comparative classifications of political parties as populist versus non-populist outside Europe (see Section 1.2 in the Appendix). The country-years included offer sufficient institutional, regime and economic variation to test the models.

The dependent variable, *Populist Vote*, comes from the vote choice variable of the CSES. The party voted for (either for the lower house elections or for presidential elections) by the respondent in a given election-year was manually coded as populist (1) vs. not (0) following Van Kessel's (2015) classification, as well as the populism index from the POPPA dataset (Meijers and Zaslove 2020). It is important to note that the binary dependent variable can capture different populist parties if there are more than one in the relevant election-year contesting the election. Van Kessel leverages primary party literature, secondary literature and expert assessments; he classifies a party as populist if (a) it supports a vision of society as split into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite”; (b) it supports direct democracy and unmediated government powers, criticising institutional procedures hindering the ‘will of the people’. The populism indicator is derived from factor regression scores of indicators such as the degree of Manichean discourse, of popular sovereignty, of anti-elitism and of discourse around the importance of the general will. The POPPA dataset's populism indicator is built using similar indicators. Section 1.2 in the Appendix further describes, and justifies, how European parties were classified as populist or not.

Fixed effects logistic regression is leveraged to test the central hypothesis on system-level representation failures, together with the corollary hypothesis on the role of individual-level representation failures. I leverage country and year fixed effects to deal with the clustered nature of the data (respondents nested within country and years). Due to 3 elections having 100% missingness on the rural–urban (BE 2003; IT 2018) and on the employment (DK 2001) control variables, we are left with 61 elections in the below analyses. The multiple imputation robustness checks (see Section 1.5.3 in the Appendix) deal with this issue and include all 64 elections and all respondents. The regression tables present exponentiated coefficients to ease interpretation. Values above 1 indicate a positive effect, while values below 1 indicate a negative effect.

In the regression models, the key predictors of populist voting are: (a) sociotropic incongruence (of type I/majoritarian — i.e. the absolute ideological difference between the median voter and the median legislator; and of type II/pluralist — i.e. the difference between voters' and legislators' ideological distributions); and (b) egocentric incongruence (of type I/majoritarian — i.e. the absolute ideological difference between the individual respondent and the median legislator; and of type II/pluralist — i.e. the absolute ideological difference between the individual respondent and the ideologically closest party). No significant multi-collinearity is present between sociotropic and egocentric incongruence, therefore the two types of representation failure could be modelled together.

In my models, I use demographic controls for income quintiles, education (university, secondary or lower), age, urban–rural residency, unemployment and gender from the CSES. Moreover, I control for populist party success, by including a variable capturing the share of legislative seats held by populist parties in the outgoing legislature. This is crucial, as discussed above, since measures of the ideological distribution of legislators examines the representativeness of mainstream parties only. This control could also be thought of as capturing the effect of populist legitimation on the propensity to vote for a populist party in the country. I also include election year estimates of net migration (number of net immigrants as a proportion of the country's population size), annual GDP growth (%) and unemployment (%), gathered from the World Bank.

I have implemented a number of robustness tests (see Section 1.5 in the Appendix for full details). I re-ran all models by: (1) using the EMD measure to capture sociotropic incongruence; (2) adopting multiple imputation<sup>5</sup> to check whether results change when the missing data problem is taken care of; (3) looking specifically at respondents that *switched* their vote to populist parties from their reported past vote choice, as a strategy to further tackle any potential endogeneity. The dependent variable in this last robustness test captures whether the respondent voting for a populist party switched his/her vote from the previous election (1) or whether the respondent is not a switcher (both if voting for a mainstream or a populist party), coded as 0. If past vote choice was not available, the respondent is coded as missing in this new dependent variable.

#### 5. Findings

An initial descriptive analysis of the data (see Fig. 3), shows that countries with higher levels of sociotropic incongruence indeed appear to have higher levels of populist support. Table A5 in the Appendix gives an in-depth description of sociotropic incongruence and populist support levels for each election in the sample.

Fig. 4 presents the same descriptive analysis for the measures of egocentric incongruence. We see again a positive descriptive association. The logistic regression analyses below test this relationship more systematically via fixed effects and all relevant political, demographic and country-year controls. All coefficients in the regression models are exponentiated.

The results from the baseline models (Table 1) – expressed via exponentiated coefficients – show that sociotropic incongruence has inconsistent effects on populist support. Only sociotropic incongruence of the pluralist type (type II) has a statistically significant coefficient above 1, and thus significantly heightens an individual's propensity to vote for a populist party. This might make sense, since failure to represent the citizenry *as a whole* (rather than just the median voter) might be a more serious breach of the responsive rule. The typical

<sup>5</sup> For the multiple imputation robustness test, I employ multiple imputation with chained equations and regression imputation (either linear, logit or ordered logit, depending on the variable) using all fully observed covariates as well as fixed effects for country and election year.

### Populist Vote by Sociotropic Incongruence Descriptive Bivariate Plot

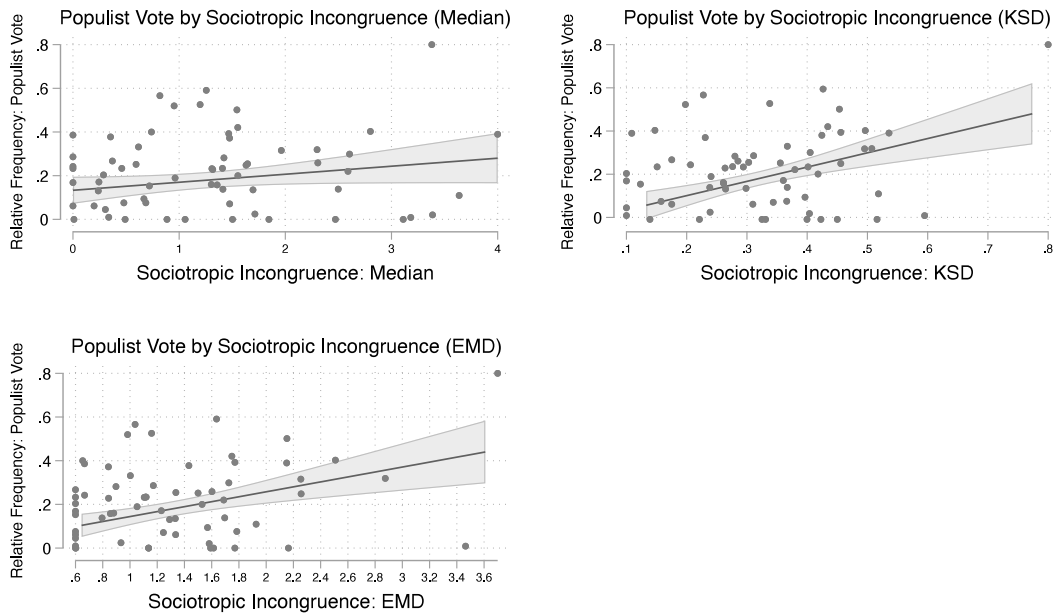


Fig. 3. Populist support & sociotropic incongruence.

### Populist Vote by Egocentric Incongruence Descriptive Bivariate Plot

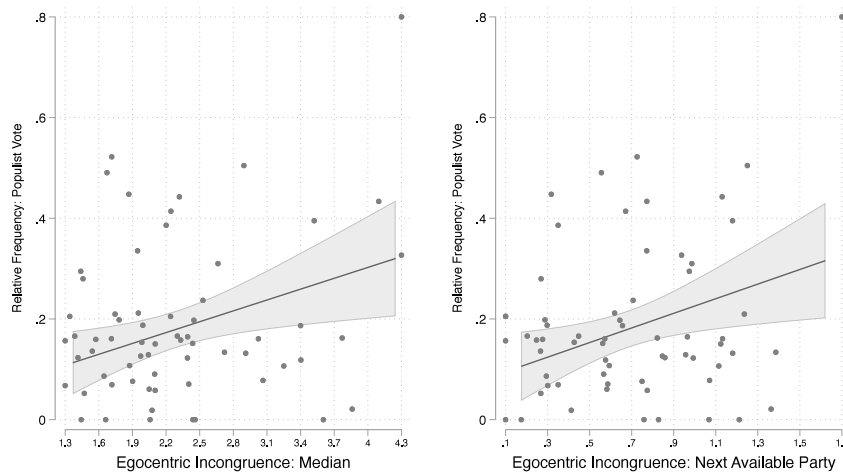


Fig. 4. Populist support & egocentric incongruence.

measure capturing the simple distance between the median voter and the median legislator has instead a negative (coefficient below 1) effect on populist voting. The association between system-level representation failures and populist voting is again lower than 1 when using the EMD measure of sociotropic incongruence (see section 1.5.1 in the Appendix). Arguably, EMD provides a more nuanced measure of distribution dissimilarity, that does not place disproportionate weight on extreme measures (supremum – or maximum – deviation is the central parameter of KSD), and that looks more comprehensively at the spatial arrangement of the whole distribution. Note, however, that the effect of sociotropic incongruence is more consistently positive (sociotropic incongruence type I & II (KSD)) when vote switching is the dependent variable (see section 1.5.2 in the Appendix).

In sum: there is some (albeit inconsistent) evidence that contexts of heightened sociotropic incongruence drive individuals to vote for populist parties. However, this signal is not robust to alternative measurement and/or modelling strategies.

When turning to egocentric incongruence, the effect on populist voting appears consistently robust across model specifications and operationalisation of egocentric incongruence (type I/majoritarian and type II/pluralist). Each additional Likert-scale unit distance between the individual respondent and the next available (non-populist) party increases the odds of voting for a populist by 14 to 36%. The effect of egocentric incongruence is stronger: when examining marginal effects plots (Figs. 5, and 6), an increase from the minimum to the maximum level of sociotropic incongruence (of type II/pluralist) increase individuals' probability to vote for a populist from roughly 0.15 to

**Table 1**  
*Fixed Effects Logistic Regression-Baseline Models.* The table reports the baseline models with all measures of incongruence. The distributional measure of sociotropic incongruence is the KSD distance. Incongruence measures denoted with the roman numeral 'I' capture majoritarian incongruence, while incongruence measures denoted by 'II' capture pluralist incongruence.

	(1) Populist_Vote	(2) Populist_Vote
Soc I	0.890 (0.0203)***	
Ego I	1.139 (0.00743)***	
Soc II (KSD)		2.443 (0.821)**
Ego II		1.364 (0.0165)***
Populist Seat Share $t_{-1}$	1.016 (0.00325)***	1.005 (0.00364)
Inc: 2nd Quintile	0.902 (0.0342)**	0.904 (0.0344)**
Inc: 3rd Quintile	0.874 (0.0329)***	0.876 (0.0331)***
Inc: 4th Quintile	0.750 (0.0295)***	0.756 (0.0299)***
Inc: 5th Quintile	0.631 (0.0267)***	0.634 (0.0269)***
Inc: DK/Refused/Missing	0.820 (0.0348)***	0.806 (0.0343)***
Edu: Lower and Upper Secondary	0.929 (0.0389)+	0.936 (0.0393)
Edu: University	0.533 (0.0256)***	0.539 (0.0259)***
Age	0.992 (0.000691)***	0.992 (0.000692)***
Female	0.745 (0.0169)***	0.748 (0.0170)***
Small/Mid Town	0.973 (0.0304)	0.973 (0.0304)
Suburbia	0.882 (0.0328)***	0.883 (0.0329)***
Large Town/City	0.839 (0.0264)***	0.844 (0.0266)***
Unemployed	1.224 (0.0621)***	1.231 (0.0627)***
Unemployment (% of tot. labour force - ILO)	1.130 (0.00726)***	1.132 (0.00733)***
GDP growth (annual %)	1.184 (0.0167)***	1.179 (0.0168)***
Perc_Net_Migr	0.835 (0.0182)***	0.811 (0.0172)***
Country FE	Y	Y
Year FE	Y	Y
Observations	64911	64911
AIC	51395.6	51142.0
BIC	51931.3	51677.8
ll	-25638.8	-25512.0
pr2		

Exponentiated coefficients; Standard errors in parentheses  
 +  $p < 0.1$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

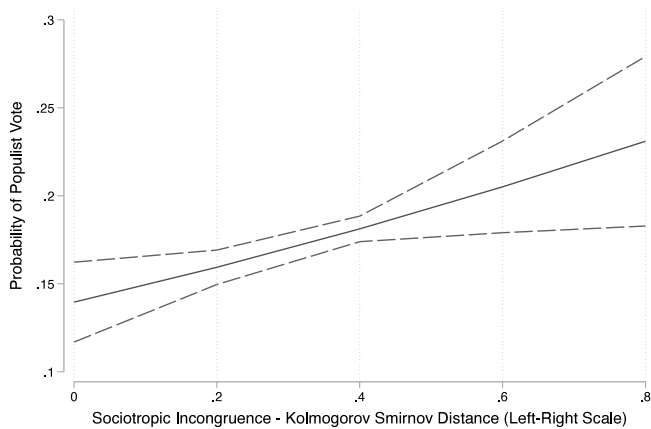


Fig. 5. Marginal effects, Populist vote — sociotropic incongruence (Kolmogorov–Smirnov distance).

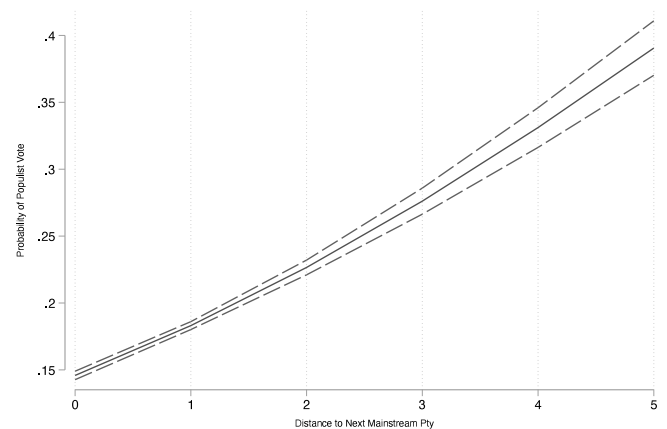
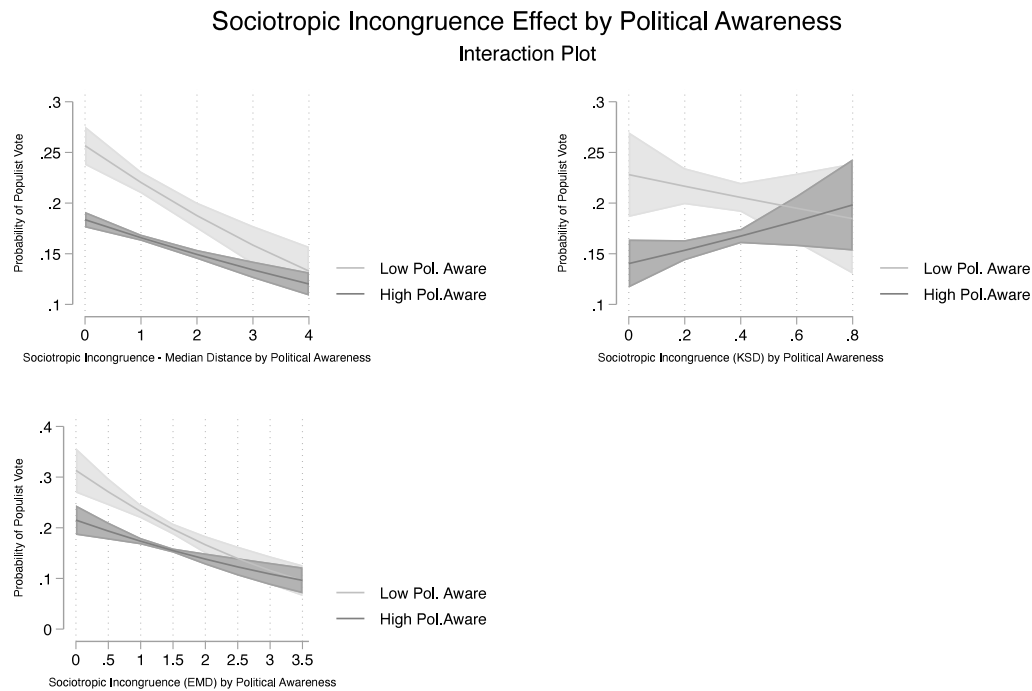


Fig. 6. Marginal effects, populist vote — egocentric incongruence from closest (Non-Populist) party.

roughly 0.22. However, moving from the minimum (0) to the maximum (5) egocentric distance from the closest mainstream party (egocentric incongruence - type II/pluralist) increases the probability of the individual voting for a populist party from roughly 0.15 to roughly 0.38.

Having one's *own* interests channelled within decision-making institutions is more important to fend off populist support than functioning representation at the system level. Similarly to findings from the literature on democratic attitudes and satisfaction (Graham and Svobik 2020, Harms and Landwehr 2020, Landwehr and Harms 2020, Anderson



**Fig. 7.** Marginal effects, populist vote — sociotropic incongruence and political awareness (Low: political awareness scores of 0; high: political aware scores of 1+) Note: Full regression model in the Appendix-Table A6.

et al. 2005, Mayne and Hakhverdian 2017), populist support is more utilitarian/instrumental than driven by the desire to hold representatives accountable for breaching democratic normative standards.

It is noteworthy that pluralist failures of representation (sociotropic II and egocentric II incongruence measures) are more strongly linked to support for the populist vision of democracy than majoritarian representation breaches. Citizens react more strongly to input failures, rather than failures of the median legislator to represent them.

## 6. Heterogeneous effects

Some scholars note that breaches of fundamental normative principles – such as the ‘responsive rule’ (May 1978, Pitkin 1967) – might only be important for a subset of citizens, and notably the politically engaged and highly educated: the ‘critical citizens’ (Norris 2011, Dalton and Welzel 2014). Tables A6 and A8 in the Appendix explores whether sociotropic incongruence (both majoritarian and pluralist versions, and using both KSD and EMD distributional measures) has heterogeneous effects, and particularly whether its inconsistent and non-systematic effects are due to the differential likelihood among the politically aware and unaware to take notice of democratic normative breaches. The individuals were scored on their political awareness based on political interest and political knowledge CSES survey questions.

Sociotropic incongruence indeed appears robustly more highly associated with populist voting for the politically sophisticated — as expected by the critical citizen hypothesis (Norris 2011, Dalton and Welzel 2014). Highly politically aware individuals are more likely to react to sociotropic incongruence by turning to populist parties than the less politically aware. These findings are robust to several measurement and modelling strategies, and to distinguishing between left-wing and right-wing populists (see Appendix-Table A7). The politically sophisticated, in fact, also appear more likely than the non-sophisticated to vote for radical right populists when exposed to systemic representation failure, they do not just turn to the left-wing populists.

Sociotropic incongruence, therefore, mostly influences populist support in the expected direction for people who are more likely to take notice and to hold higher democratic standards. The marginal effects plots (Fig. 7) illustrate the findings from the interaction effects with the various measures of sociotropic incongruence. The full regression tables are available in Tables A6 and A8 of the Appendix.

## 7. Conclusion

Is populism successful where representative democracy fails systematically? This study leverages several measures of representation failure at the system-level: the standard central-tendency based measure (the absolute distance between the median voter and the median legislator), together with innovative measures comparing parties’ and voters’ ideological distributions (e.g. the Kolmogorov–Smirnov Distance (Golder and Stramski 2010) and the Earth Mover Distance (Lupu et al. 2017)). The second typology of measures captures pluralist, rather than majoritarian representation at the system level.

The study, furthermore, tests the role of sociotropic incongruence by taking egocentric incongruence into account. Egocentric incongruence was again measured by using standard central-tendency based measures (egocentric incongruence I, i.e. the absolute distance between the individual respondent and the median legislator) and measures capturing ‘input representation’ and pluralism — i.e. egocentric incongruence II: the absolute distance between the individual respondent and the closest party in the legislature.

In the main, looking across 64 elections in 24 Western and Eastern European countries, the results reveal that the effect of egocentric incongruence on populist voting is more robustly associated with populist voting than sociotropic incongruence. Sociotropic incongruence is less consistently linked to populist voting and mainly works conditionally: for people that are politically aware. Systemic failures of the responsive rule, therefore, are particularly important in driving populist support for the subsets of voters for whom sociotropic incongruence is more easily noticeable and/or clearly linked to democratic norms. The findings

have important implications: whether the representative process works for *one's benefit* matters most in turning against the system by voting for a populist party. This study thus highlights important parallels between the study of populism and the study of democratic preferences and norms (Graham and Svobik 2020, Harms and Landwehr 2020, Anderson et al. 2005, Mayne and Hakhverdian 2017).

It is furthermore noteworthy that pluralist representation failures matter more than failures to represent the median voter or to be represented by the median legislator. Citizens do not necessarily mind their preferences not ending up in policy outcomes (e.g. being represented by the median legislator is likely to have policy consequences), but they particularly care about their voice having at least an input in the political system.

In sum, populism is not particularly indebted to system-level failures of liberal representative democracy, or “undemocratic liberalism”. However, such failures do matter in the margins. While the argument needs to be downplayed, it should not be entirely discounted either.

### 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 available on request.

### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Christopher Wratil and acknowledge his extensive contribution to the early stages of this study. Christopher unfortunately had to withdraw from the project due workload and time constraints. I am grateful for all his invaluable insights, and for the data collection and analysis work he provided while part of the project. I am grateful to Timothy Hellwig, Simon Hix, Chris Anderson, Lucas Leeman, Diane Bolet and Matthew Loveless for very helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper. I would also like to thank Sara Hobolt, Ed Morgan-Jones, Paolo Dardanelli and Ben Seyd for very helpful comments on earlier versions of this work, as well as all participants at the 2019 LSE Political Behaviour Seminar and the 2019 European Political Science Association Annual Meeting. I would like to also acknowledge the invaluable research assistance by Felix Reich. Any errors or omissions are the responsibility of the author.

### Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary material related to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2023.102658>.

### References

- Achen, C., 1978. Measuring representation. *Am. J. Political Sci.* 22 (3).
- Agerberg, M., 2017. Failed expectations: Quality of government and support for populist parties in Europe. *Eur. J. Political Res.* 56 (3), 578–600.
- Akkerman, A., Mudde, C., Zaslove, A., 2014. How populist are the people? Measuring populist attitudes in voters. *Comp. Political Stud.* 47 (9), 1324–1353.
- Anderson, C., Blais, A., Bowler, S., Donovan, T., Listhaug, O., 2005. *Loser's Consent*. Oxford University Press.
- Arzheimer, K., 2009. Contextual factors and the extreme right vote in Western Europe, 1980–2002. *Am. J. Political Sci.* 53 (2), 259–275.
- Arzheimer, K., Carter, E., 2006. Political opportunity structures and right-wing extremist party success. *Eur. J. Political Res.* 45 (3), 419–443.
- Bakker, Ryan, Jolly, Seth, Polk, Jonathan, 2020. Multidimensional incongruence, political disaffection, and support for anti-establishment parties. *J. Eur. Public Policy* 27 (2), 292–309.
- Belanger, Eric, Aarts, Kees, 2006. Explaining the rise of the LPF: issues, discontent, and the 2002 Dutch election. *Acta Politica* 41 (1), 4–20.
- Bélanger, Éric, Nadeau, Richard, 2005. Political trust and the vote in multiparty elections: The Canadian case. *Eur. J. Political Res.* 44 (1), 121–146.
- Camatarri, Stefano, 2019. Piecing the puzzle together: A critical review of contemporary research on protest voting. *Political Stud. Rev.* 1478929919862149.
- Canovan, Margaret, 1999. Trust the people! Populism and the two faces of democracy. *Political Stud.* 47 (1), 2–16.
- Canovan, Margaret, 2002. Taking politics to the people: Populism as the ideology of democracy. In: *Democracies and the Populist Challenge*. Springer, pp. 25–44.
- Carter, E., 2005. *The Extreme Right in Western Europe: Success or Failure?* Manchester University Press, Manchester.
- Dahl, R.A., 1971. *Who Governs? Democracy and Power in an American City*. Yale University Press, New Haven.
- Dahl, R.A., 1989. *Democracy and Its Critics*. Yale University Press, New Haven.
- Dalton, R.J., Farrell, D.M., McAllister, L., 2011. *Political Parties and Democratic Linkage: How Parties Organize Democracy*. Oxford University Press.
- Dalton, Russell J., Welzel, Christian, 2014. *The Civic Culture Transformed: From Allegiant to Assertive Citizens*. Cambridge University Press.
- Di Tella, R., Rotemberg, J.J., 2018. Populism and the return of the “paranoid style”: Some evidence and a simple model of demand for incompetence as insurance against elite betrayal. *J. Comp. Econ.*
- Eatwell, R., Goodwin, M., 2018. *National Populism - The Revolt Against Liberal Democracy*. Pelican Books.
- Ferrín, Mónica, Kriesi, Hanspeter, 2016. *How Europeans View and Evaluate Democracy*. Oxford University Press.
- Gidron, Noam, Hall, Peter A., 2020. Populism as a problem of social integration. *Comp. Political Stud.* 53 (7), 1027–1059.
- Golder, Matt, Stramski, Jacek, 2010. Ideological congruence and electoral institutions. *Am. J. Political Sci.* 54 (1).
- Graham, Matthew H., Svobik, Milan W., 2020. Democracy in America? Partisanship, polarization, and the robustness of support for democracy in the United States. *Am. Political Sci. Rev.* 114 (2), 392–409.
- Harms, Philipp, Landwehr, Claudia, 2020. Is money where the fun ends? Material interests and individuals' preference for direct democracy. *Eur. J. Political Econ.* 61, 101818.
- Hernández, Enrique, 2018. Democratic discontent and support for mainstream and challenger parties: Democratic protest voting. *Eur. Union Politics* 19 (3), 458–480.
- Hooghe, Marc, Dassonneville, Ruth, 2018. A spiral of distrust: A panel study on the relation between political distrust and protest voting in Belgium. *Gov. Oppos.* 53 (1), 104–130.
- Hopkin, Jonathan, 2020. *Anti-System Politics: The Crisis of Market Liberalism in Rich Democracies*. Oxford University Press.
- Huber, J.D., Powell, G. Bingham, 1994. Congruence between citizens and policymakers in two visions of liberal democracy. *World Politics* 46 (3).
- Kaltwasser, C.R., Taggart, P.A., Espejo, P.O., Ostiguy, P., 2017. *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*. Oxford University Press.
- Kriesi, H., Grande, E., Dolezal, M., Helbling, M., Höglinger, D., Hutter, S., Wüest, B., 2012. *Political Conflict in Western Europe*. Cambridge University Press.
- Kriesi, H., Grande, E., Lachat, R., Dolezal, M., Bornschieer, S., Frey, T., 2006. Globalization and the transformation of the national political space: Six European countries compared. *Eur. J. Political Res.* 45 (6), 921–956.
- Laclau, E., 2005. *On Populist Reason*. Verso.
- Landwehr, Claudia, Harms, Philipp, 2020. Preferences for referenda: Intrinsic or instrumental? Evidence from a survey experiment. *Political Stud.* 68 (4), 875–894.
- Lavezzolo, Sebastián, Ramiro, Luis, 2018. Stealth democracy and the support for new and challenger parties. *Eur. Political Sci. Rev.* 10 (2), 267–289.
- Lupu, Noam, Selios, Lucia, Warner, Zach, 2017. A new measure of congruence: The earth mover's distance. *Political Analysis* 25 (1), 95–113.
- Mair, Peter, 2013. *Ruling the Void: The Hollowing of Western Democracy*. Verso Trade.
- May, John D., 1978. *Defining democracy: A bid for coherence and consensus*. *Political Stud.* 26 (1).
- Mayne, Q., Hakhverdian, A., 2017. Ideological congruence and citizen satisfaction: Evidence from 25 advanced democracies. *Comp. Political Stud.* 50 (6), 822–849.
- Meijers, Maurits, Zaslove, Andrej, 2020. *Populism and Political Parties Expert Survey 2018 (POPPA)*. Harvard Dataverse, <http://dx.doi.org/10.7910/DVN/8NEL7B>.
- Mouffe, Chantal, 2013. *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically*. Verso Books.
- Mouffe, Chantal, 2014. *Populism is a necessity*. The European.
- Mounk, Y., 2018. *The People Vs. Democracy: Why Our Freedom is in Danger and How to Save it*. Harvard University Press.
- Mudde, C., 2004. The populist zeitgeist. *Gov. Oppos.* 39 (4), 541–563.
- Mudde, C., Kaltwasser, C.R., 2017. *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press.
- Newton, K., 2006. Political support: Social capital, civil society and political and economic performance. *Political Stud.* 54 (4).
- Norris, Pippa, 2011. *Democratic Deficit: Critical Citizens Revisited*. Cambridge University Press.
- Pitkin, Hanna F., 1967. *The Concept of Representation*. University of California Press, Berkeley.
- Powell, G. Bingham, 2004a. The chain of responsiveness. *J. Democr.* 15 (4), 91–105.
- Powell, G. Bingham, 2004b. Political representation in comparative politics. *Annu. Rev. Polit. Sci.* 7, 273–296.



- Powell, G. Bingham, 2009. The ideological congruence controversy: The impact of alternative measures, data, and time periods on the effects of election rules. *Comp. Political Stud.* 1–23.
- Roberts, K.M., 2015. Populism and political representation. In: *The Oxford Handbook of Politics of Development*.
- Rohrschneider, R., 2002. The democratic deficit and mass support for an EU-wide government. *Am. J. Political Sci.* 46 (2), 463–475.
- Schumacher, Gijs, Rooduijn, Matthijs, 2013. Sympathy for the 'devil'? Voting for populists in the 2006 and 2010 dutch general elections. *Elect. Stud.* 32 (1), 124–133.
- Taggart, P., 2002. Populism and the pathology of representative politics. In: *Democracies and the Populist Challenge*. Springer, pp. 62–80.
- Urbinati, Nadia, 2019. Political theory of populism. *Annu. Rev. Political Sci.* 22, 111–127.
- Van Kessel, S., 2015. *Populist Parties in Europe: Agents of Discontent?*. Springer.
- Vidal, Guillem, 2018. Challenging business as usual? The rise of new parties in Spain in times of crisis. *West Eur. Politics* 41 (2), 261–286.
- Werner, Hannah, Marien, Sofie, Felicetti, Andrea, 2020. A problem-based approach to understanding public support for referendums. *Eur. J. Political Res.* 59 (3), 538–554.