

# WHAT DO POPULISTS WANT FROM THEIR REPRESENTATIVES AND WHY<sup>1</sup>?

Kevin Arceneaux

Directeur du Centre de recherches politiques de Sciences Po (CEVIPOF)

[kevin.arceneaux@sciencespo.fr](mailto:kevin.arceneaux@sciencespo.fr)

This research note picks up on the notion that populist voters may want *more* rather than *less* democracy. It does so by bringing measures of democratic support together with measures of preferences regarding the nature of democratic representation. These data were collected during the 2024 European elections via nationally representative samples in France, Germany and Italy. The data show that many populists want a form of “stealth democracy”<sup>2</sup> in which a strong leader enacts the political will of the majority. Populists are more satisfied with democracy than those who prefer authoritarian government. And yet, similarly to their authoritarian counterparts, they prioritize economic growth over democracy. Frustrations with their place in society, as individuals and as a social group seem to fuel populist sentiment.

1.

My thanks to Gilles Ivaldi and Luc Rouban for their insightful comments and suggestions, and my thanks also to Sciences Po, Bocconi University, and CIVICA for the generous grant that supported this research. All errors remain my own

2.

Hibbing, John R. and Theiss-Morse, Elizabeth, 2002. *Stealth Democracy: Americans' beliefs about how government should work*. Cambridge University Press

3.

Norris, Pippa and Inglehart, Ronald, 2019. *Cultural backlash: Trump, Brexit, and authoritarian populism*. Cambridge University Press

4.

Ivaldi, Gilles & Zankina, Emilia (Eds). (2024). *2024 EP Elections under the Shadow of Rising Populism*. European Centre for Populism Studies (ECPS). October 29, 2024. Brussels  
<https://doi.org/10.55271/rp0059>

Populist parties, especially those on the right, are on the rise in the west<sup>3</sup>. The recent victory of right-wing populist parties in the 2024 European Elections confirm this trend<sup>4</sup>. One interpretation of the rise in populism over the past decade is that it reflects an erosion in support for democracy and a desire for autocratic government<sup>5</sup>. This interpretation is bolstered by the fact that once elected, populist politicians seek to consolidate their power by removing the guardrails of liberal democracy and establishing autocratic political institutions<sup>6</sup>.

Cas Mudde offers another interpretation, which is that populism is an illiberal response to what he calls “undemocratic liberalism”<sup>7</sup>. The key aspect of undemocratic liberalism is the use of liberal democratic institutions to fashion a technocratic form of policy-making in which a broad coalition of politicians from the centre-left to the centre-right adopt similar economic and cultural policies that advance a neo-liberal economic order (e.g., free trade, open borders, and pro-immigration policies). According to Mudde, consensus among established political parties is clearest at the level of the European Union and policies toward European integration: “From the centre-left to the centre-right, fundamentally political decisions were depoliticized by the essentially anti-political argument that ‘there is no alternative’”. To the extent that a majority would prefer an alternative that does not seem to exist within the framework of European consensus, it is entirely understandable that many view the product of liberal democratic political institutions as anti-majoritarian.

5.

Foa, Roberto S. and Mounk, Yashca., 2016. The danger of deconsolidation: The democratic disconnect. *Journal of Democracy*, 27(3), pp.5-17; Hogg, Michael A., 2021. Uncertain self in a changing world: A foundation for radicalisation, populism, and autocratic leadership. *European Review of Social Psychology*, 32(2), pp.235-268

6.

Pappas, Takis S., 2019. Populists in power. *Journal of Democracy*, 30(2), pp.70-84

7.

Mudde, Cas, 2021. Populism in Europe: an illiberal democratic response to undemocratic liberalism (The Government and Opposition/Leonard Schapiro Lecture 2019). *Government and Opposition*, 56(4), pp.577-597

8.

Mudde, Cas, 2004. The populist zeitgeist. *Government and Opposition*, 39(4), pp.541-563. Of course, not all scholars agree that populism is best described as an ideology and instead view it as a rhetorical style. I remain agnostic regarding this debate, other than noting that both could be the case. Just to be clear about the goal of this analysis, my focus is on "populist attitudes," as opposed to an ideology per se

9.

Guth, James L. and Nelsen, Brent F., 2021. Party choice in Europe: Social cleavages and the rise of populist parties. *Party Politics*, 27(3), pp.453-464

10.

Urbinati, Nadia, 2019. *Me the People: How Populism Transforms Democracy*. Harvard University Press

11.

Kaltwasser, Cristóbal Rovira. 2011. "The Ambivalence of Populism: Threat and Corrective for Democracy." *Democratization* 19 (2): 184–208

With this idea as a backdrop, populism - and its "thin-centred" ideology that frames politics as a conflict between the monolithic good people (e.g., "the silent majority") and the corrupt elite, who unjustly ignore the majority<sup>8</sup> - is a logical antidote to there-is-no-alternative consensus politics, as it promises to follow the will of the people at the expense of the out-of-touch elites. Right-wing populist parties combine this thin-centred ideology with a thick-centred one that defines 'good' people in a nativist fashion. They thus emphasize the need to recentre politics on the nation by supporting policies that give preference to citizens over non-citizens. These parties tend to attract support from less educated voters who tend to be young, working class, and male, and who see immigrants as an economic and cultural threat<sup>9</sup>. While populism poses a threat to *liberal* democratic institutions<sup>10</sup>, it is not inherently authoritarian, as it seeks a form of government that is more responsive to 'ordinary' citizens<sup>11</sup>. In fact, voters who subscribe to populist ideas are often disappointed with how democracy works, as opposed to being less supportive of democracy in principle<sup>12</sup>. In consistence with populist ideology, they want *popular* democracy, as opposed to *liberal* democracy<sup>13</sup>. Why should this be so? As the survey results show, the answer to this question is rooted in the social psychology of interpersonal and intergroup comparisons. The issue for those who favour populist government is less about their absolute conditions (e.g., in terms of economic well-being or social status), but rather their condition relative to others: they feel that they have been made worse off by politics as usual.

### Data and Measures

The two-wave CEVIPOF-Bocconi European Election Study (CBEES) provided the basis for this analysis. CBEES recruited a nationally representative sample in France, Germany and Italy around the European Parliamentary Elections that took place between 6 and 9 June 2024. The survey research group, OpinionWay, recruited 8,953 respondents (France = 2,971; Germany = 3,050; Italy = 2,932) in the first wave (interviews took place from 31 May 2024 to 7 June) and successfully recontacted 6,501 (France = 2,234; Germany = 3,026; Italy = 2,241) in the second wave (interviews took place from 12 June to 2 July). The survey design oversampled youth voters (defined as respondents aged 18-34), and thus all the analyses reported below weight the sample by age.

The CBEES asked respondents to answer the three survey battery questions developed by Elchardus and Spruyt to measure populism<sup>14</sup>. It asks respondents to what extent they agree with a series of statements on a five-point Likert scale (The opinion of ordinary people is worth more than that of experts and politicians/People who have studied for a long time and have many qualifications do not really know what makes the world go round / Official government accounts of events cannot be trusted). Responses to these questions were summed up in an index.

The post-election survey included questions to respondents asking them what they wanted from elected officials by presenting them with a list of opposing actions that they could take: talk and deliberate less/more; stick to their principles/compromise; listen less to ordinary people/listen more; pay less attention to experts/pay more attention; go with their gut when making decisions/do more research; have little political experience/have a lot<sup>15</sup>.

12.

Kaltwasser, Cristóbal Rovira, and Steven M. Van Hauwaert, 2020. "The populist citizen: Empirical evidence from Europe and Latin America." *European Political Science Review* 12 (1): 1-18; Kriesi, Hanspeter, 2020. Is there a crisis of democracy in Europe? *Politische Vierteljahresschrift*, 61(2), pp.237-260; Wuttke, Alexander, Christian Schimpf, and Harald Schoen, 2023. "Populist Citizens in four European Countries: Widespread Dissatisfaction goes with Contradictory but Pro-democratic Regime Preferences." *Swiss Political Science Review* 29 (2): 246-257; Zaslove, Andrej, and Meijers, Maurtis, 2024. Populist democrats? Unpacking the relationship between populist and democratic attitudes at the citizen level. *Political Studies*, 72(3), pp.1133-1159

13.

To be clear, the focus here is on what ordinary citizens who subscribe to populist attitudes want from government and not on populist politicians, who may use populist rhetoric as a vehicle to gain and consolidate power in an attempt to fashion an autocratic regime

14.

Elchardus, Mark, and Bram Spruyt. 2016. "Populism, persistent republicanism and declinism: An empirical analysis of populism as a thin ideology." *Government and Opposition* 51 (1): 111-133

15.

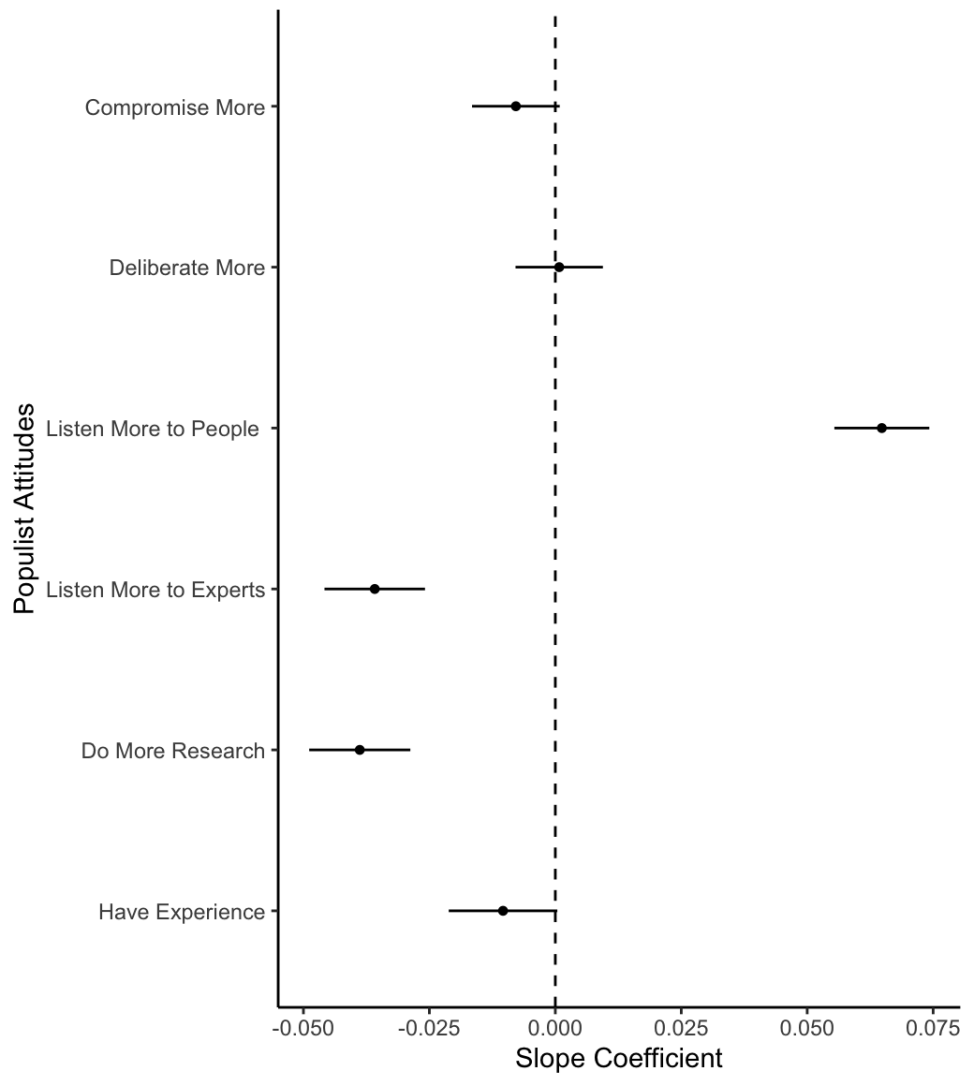
Measure drawn from Hibbing, John R., Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, Matthew V. Hibbing, and David Fortunato. 2023. "Who do the people want to govern?" *Party Politics* 29 (1): 3-15

Respondents placed their responses on an 11-point scale where 0 reflected a strong preference for one option and 10 reflected a strong preference for the opposing option.

**What do populist want from their representatives?**

Figure 1 shows that Mudde’s analysis is mostly correct. Populist attitudes positively correlate with a preference for elected officials to have less political experience, to follow their gut more, and to listen less to experts and more to ordinary people (which should not be surprising since this particular sentiment is included in the measure of populist attitudes). Yet, in contrast to Mudde’s description of populists, those who score high in populist attitudes are no more or less likely to want politicians to deliberate more and are only slightly less likely to support compromise. If this finding is accurate, it suggests that rank and file populists might be just as open to these cardinal aspects of democracy as anyone else.

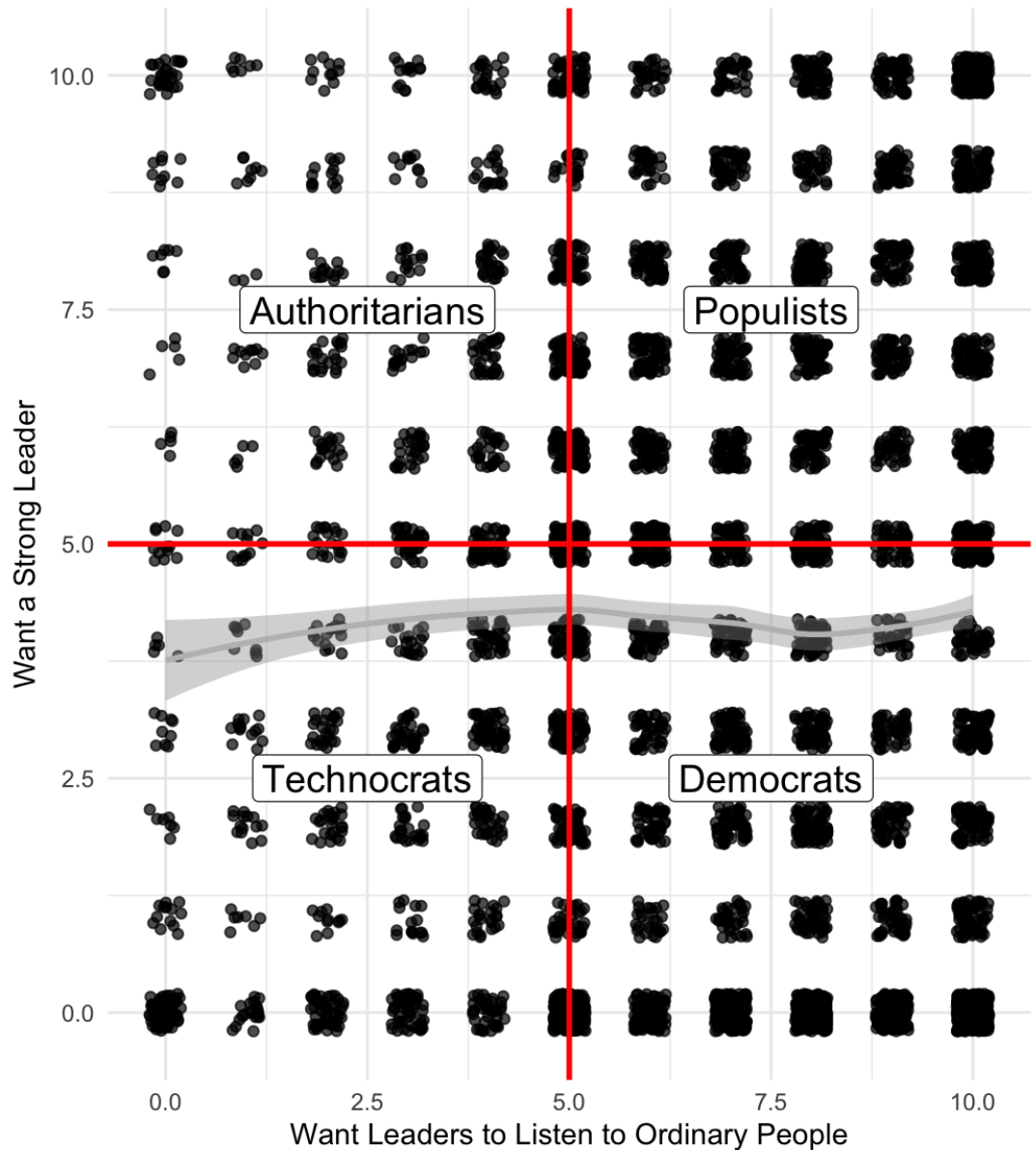
Figure 1: The correlation between populist attitudes and representation preferences



In the pre-election survey, we asked a standard question from the World Values Survey that measured the degree to which respondents wanted the country to have “a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliaments or

elections.” This allowed us to measure respondents’ preferences for a strong leader. They recorded their responses on an 11-point scale where 0 indicated that they were extremely unfavourable and 10 that they were extremely favourable. Figure 2 shows the relationship between the desire that representatives listen more (or less) to ordinary people and the desire for a strong leader.

Figure 2: The overlap between preference for a strong leader and preference for a leader who listens to ordinary people



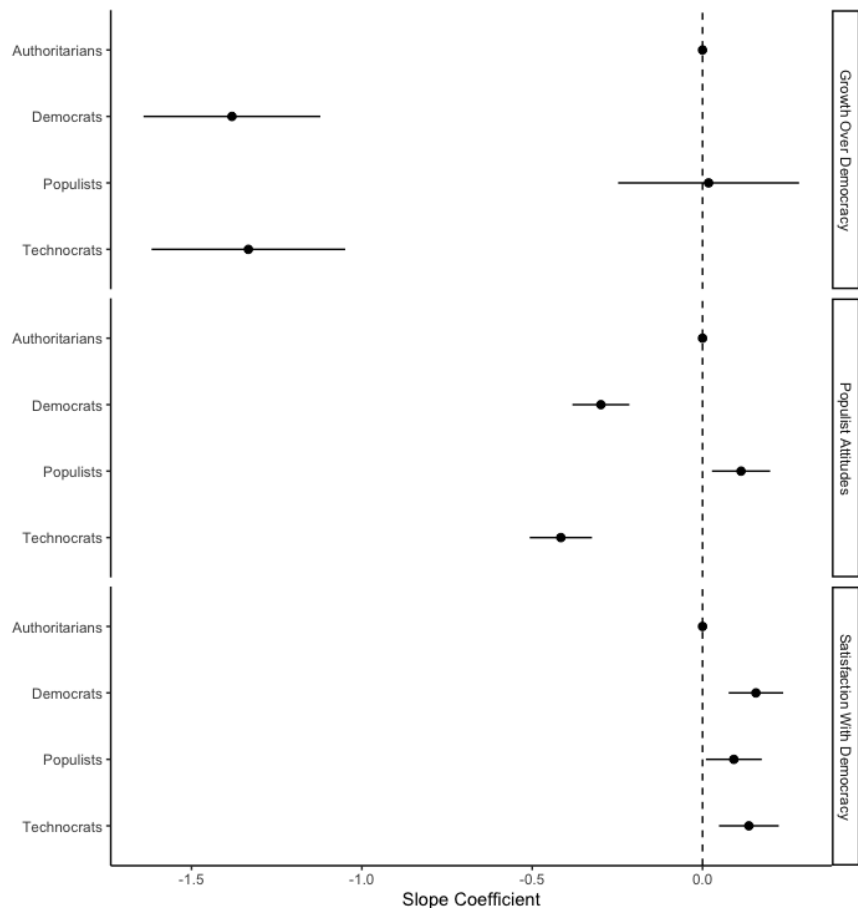
Surprisingly, the two sentiments are uncorrelated ( $r=0.01$ ). The red lines in Figure 2 refer to the mid-points of both measures. Above the mid-point, respondents indicate a preference for a strong leader and a preference for leaders who listen to ordinary people. This exercise creates four quadrants. In the lower-right quadrant are respondents that I call “Democrats” who do not want a strong leader and who want their elected officials to listen more to ordinary people (44% of the sample). In the upper-left quadrant are those who want a strong leader who listens less to ordinary people. I label these individuals

“Authoritarians” (10% of the sample). In the lower-left quadrant are those who do not want a strong leader, but they also want politicians to listen less to ordinary people, suggesting a support for what Mudde calls “undemocratic liberalism,” and which I label “Technocrats” (20.4% of the sample). Finally, in the upper-right quadrant are those who paradoxically prefer a strong leader who listens more to ordinary people. This seems to be what populists want: a strong leader who will listen to them but who will also act decisively, without allowing the mandarins to get in the way (25.6% of the sample).

**Attitudes toward democracy and the social psychological motivations for preferring populist government**

Figure 3 shows the correlation between leadership style preferences and, satisfaction with democracy, populist attitudes, and a willingness to prioritize economic growth over democracy. These correlations are adjusted by several control variables (age, gender, education, geography, ideology, and country). Autocrats are the reference category. The bottom panel shows that Democrats, Technocrats, and Populists are more satisfied with democracy than Autocrats. Consistent with recent research, Populists are less satisfied with democracy than Democrats, but they are not opposed to it. The middle panel of Figure 3 shows that Democrats and Technocrats are less likely than Autocrats (and Populists) to express populist attitudes, while Populists (as one would expect) are more likely to express populist attitudes than Autocrats. The same is true for Democrats and Technocrats. The top panel shows that both Populists and Authoritarians are willing to sacrifice a democratic form of government for economic growth. In contrast, both Democrats and Technocrats are solidly opposed to making such a trade-off.

**Figure 3: Correlations between leadership style preferences and populist attitudes, satisfaction with democracy, and/or support for democracy**



**16.**

See also Rouban, Luc. 2024. "Les Français Préfèrent le bien-être à la Démocratie." CEVIPOF Note de recherche

**17.**

Stouffer, Samuel A., Edward A. Suchman, Leland C. DeVinney, Shirley A. Star, and Robin M. Williams Jr, 1949. The American soldier: adjustment during army life. Studies in Social Psychology in World War II, Vol. 1

**18.**

Smith, Heather J., Thomas F. Pettigrew, Gina M. Pippin, and Silvana Bialosiewicz. 2012. "Relative Deprivation: A Theoretical and Meta-Analytic Review." *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 16(3): 203–32

**19.**

Runciman, W. G. 1966. *Relative Deprivation and Social Justice*. London, UK: Routledge

**20.**

Smith, et al. 2012

**21.**

Nicholson, Stephen P. 2011. "Dominating Cues and the Limits of Elite Influence." *Journal of Politics* 73(4): 1165–77

**22.**

Crevaschi, Simone, Paula Rettl, Marco Cappelluti, and Catherine E. De Vries. 2024. "Geographies of Discontent: Public Service Deprivation and the Rise of the Far Right in Italy." *American Journal of Political Science*, forthcoming; Moscatelli, Silvia, Flavia Albarello, Francesca Prati, and Monica Rubini. 2014. "Badly off or Better off than Them? The Impact of Relative Deprivation and Relative Gratification on Intergroup Discrimination." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 107(2): 248–64

**23.**

Jungkunz, Sebastian, and Julia Weiss. 2024. "Populist Attitudes among Teenagers: How Negative Relationships with Socialization Agents Are Linked to Populist Attitudes." *Perspectives on Politics*: 1–17.  
doi:[10.1017/S1537592724000434](https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592724000434)

**24.**

Both survey items were drawn from Petersen, Michael Bang, Mathias Osmundsen, and Kevin Arceneaux. 2023. "The 'need for chaos' and motivations to share hostile political rumors." *American Political Science Review* 117 (4): 1486-1505

Why would Populists, who report being more satisfied with the functioning of democracy than Authoritarians, be willing to trade it off for economic growth? An obvious explanation would be that individuals who subscribe to populist attitudes tend to be less well-off economically than non-Populists. While this is likely part of the explanation, it would appear that this willingness does not simply represent being less well-off in an absolute sense<sup>16</sup>. More meaningfully, it also reflects the perception that one is worse off than deserved when compared to others – a sentiment called *Relative Deprivation* (RD) by social psychologists. In many cases, RD has a more powerful effect on an individual's feelings and attitudes than their absolute conditions. For instance, in their study of American soldiers during World War II, Stouffer and colleagues (who coined the term) noted that well-educated army officers were less happy about their chances for promotion than less well-educated soldiers<sup>17</sup>. Viewed in absolute terms, these findings are puzzling given that well-educated army officers were better off financially and promoted faster than their less well-educated counterparts. Yet, as Stouffer et al. explained, for educated soldiers, their frame of reference was not less well-educated soldiers, but rather their own peers. In this context, they often experienced disappointment and disillusionment when they saw so many others promoted while they waited, creating a sense of being deprived in a relative sense, if not in an absolute one.

When people perceive that they are doing worse off than others and believe this to be unfair and unmerited, they become motivated to find a way to alleviate the problem<sup>18</sup>. Importantly, perceptions of RD can result from interpersonal comparisons (Individual Relative Deprivation, IRD) or intergroup comparisons (Group Relative Deprivation, GRD)<sup>19</sup>. Those that result from GRD are especially likely to influence collective responses, such as voting, as well as intergroup attitudes, such as prejudice<sup>20</sup>. Social groups are central to understanding how an individual forms political attitudes, as many people reason about politics in terms of which groups benefit from public policies<sup>21</sup>. Consequently, feelings of RD, and especially GRD, have the power to shape people's political attitudes. Recent research shows that perceptions that one's group is worse off relative to others motivates anti-immigrant attitudes and support for right-wing parties that promise to improve the conditions of native citizens relative to immigrants<sup>22</sup>.

Feelings of RD, especially GRD, can result in adherence to populist attitudes. Populism takes as its foundation the notion that "ordinary people" are being taken advantage of by a corrupt elite. To the extent that those who experience RD see themselves as belonging to the category of "ordinary people," populism attributes blame to corrupt elites for creating unfair outcomes and offers a clear solution to this problem: the empowerment and valorisation of those who have been made worse off by the corrupt elite. Indeed, the link between feeling that one is mistreated by others, and especially by authority figures, motivates adherence to populist attitudes - including among teenagers<sup>23</sup>.

Two items from the CBEES designed to measure RD provide the data needed to test this explanation. Respondents were asked how much they agreed or disagreed with the statement that "I feel that my deserved place in society is being taken away from me". Responses to this question provided a measure of IRD. They were also asked how much they agreed with the statement that "I feel that my group's deserved place in society is being taken away from them". Answers to this question provided a measure of GRD<sup>24</sup>. They placed their answers on a 7-point scale in which higher values indicate stronger levels of

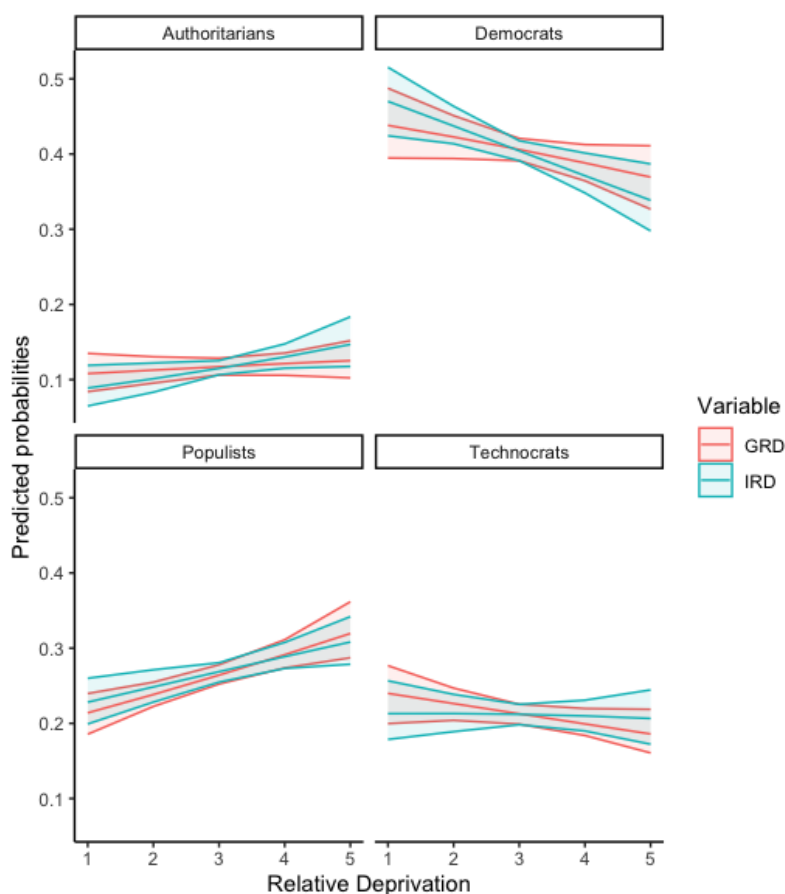
agreement with perceptions of RD. The next step was to specify a multinomial logit model in which leadership style preference is the dependent variable and IRD and GRD are the independent variables. The model also included controls for age, gender, geographical location (urban, rural, suburban), education (third-level education or not), left/right ideology, egocentric economic perceptions, socio-tropic economic perceptions, indicators of perceived social class, and fixed effects by country. Controlling for measures of absolute deprivation (education, economic conditions, and social class) strengthens the interpretation that any correlation between measures of RD and leadership style preference reflects *relative* deprivation as opposed to absolute deprivation.

The associations between measures of RD and leadership style preference are reported in Figure 4 where the y-axis represents the probability that respondents prefer a particular leadership style (Authoritarian, Democratic, Technocratic, Populistic) and the x-axis represents the level of RD. In line with expectations, as IRD and GRD increase, respondents are more likely to prefer populism - that is, a strong leader who listens to ordinary people - and less likely to prefer democracy or technocracy. Intriguingly, IRD is positively correlated with preferring authoritarianism (a strong leader who does not necessarily listen to ordinary people), whereas GRD is uncorrelated with a preference for authoritarianism. In any case, those who have a high score for both IRD and GRD remain much more likely to prefer populism to authoritarianism. Furthermore, it does not appear that age moderates the relationship between RD and populism. Feelings of RD correlate with a preference for populism among the young and less young alike (results available upon request). Figure 5 confirms that both IRD and GRD correlate with populist attitudes, a preference for a strong leader, and a willingness to prioritize economic growth over democracy<sup>25</sup>.

**25.**

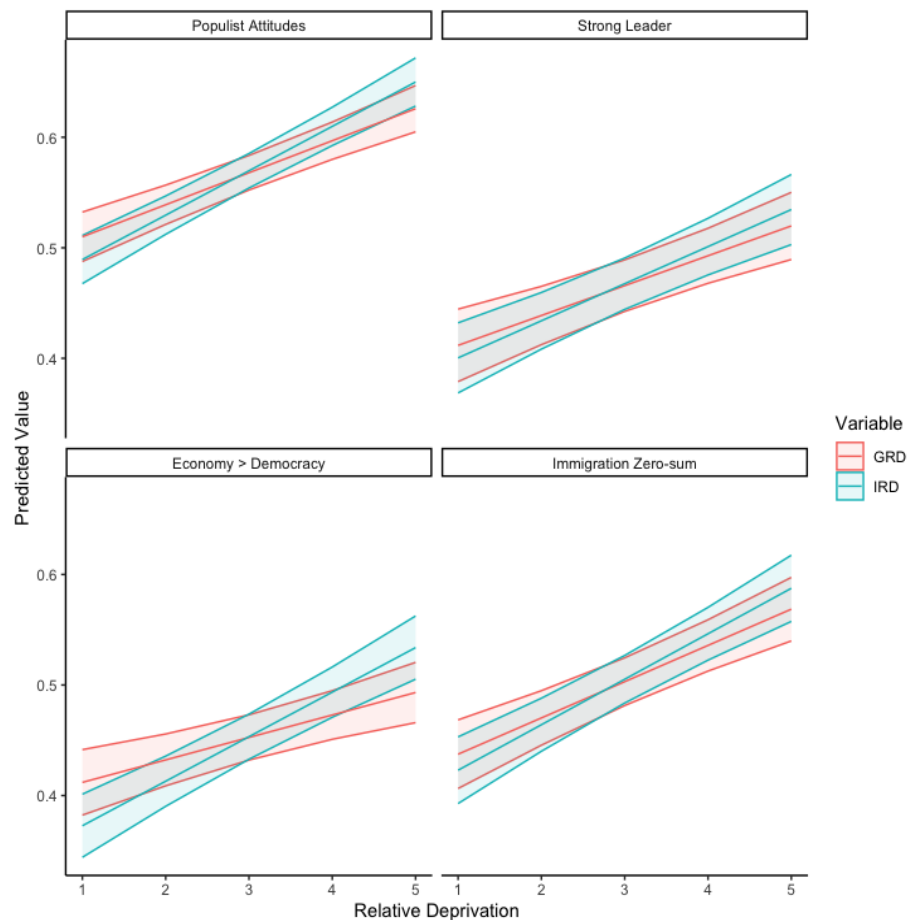
All models reported in Figure 5 included controls for age, gender, geographical location (urban, rural, suburban), education (third level education or not), left/right ideology, egocentric economic perceptions, socio-tropic economic perceptions, indicators of perceived social class, and fixed effects by country as well as survey weights

Figure 4: Relationship between relative deprivation and individuals' leadership style preferences



The analysis up to this point is consistent with the hypothesis that RD motivates a preference for a populist form of government. And yet, it does not explain why previous research shows a correlation between RD and electoral support for right-wing populists. The fact that there is no obvious answer to this question points to an indeterminacy that is inherent in social comparison theory. The theory does not specify what the frame of reference *should* be. People are free to compare to whomever they wish. It is only once a comparison is made, that social comparison theory can make meaningful predictions<sup>26</sup>. While it is impossible to provide an explanation for *why* people make the particular comparisons that they do, other data in the CBEES shows that both IRD and GRD are associated with perceiving immigrants as a source of competition for resources. The panel in the lower right corner of Figure 5 shows that as both measures of RD increase, respondents are more likely to agree with the statement that “When immigrants make economic gains, it means that [French people/Germans/Italians] lose out economically”. It also shows that these relationships are robust in the face of controls for other explanations for this sort of zero-sum economic belief, such as left/right ideology, education, and absolute measures of deprivation. To the extent that those who feel relatively deprived see immigrants as those who benefit at their expense, it offers an explanation for why feelings of RD tend to push individuals toward right-wing (as opposed to left-wing) populists.

**Figure 5: Relationships between relative deprivation and populist attitudes, preference for a strong leader, willingness to prioritize economic growth over democracy and zero-sum economic attitudes toward immigrants**





## Conclusion

The notion that economic and social marginalization leads people to support radical-right authoritarianism predates the rise of populism in European politics<sup>27</sup>. This research note illustrates that support for radical-right populism is not simply a reflection of absolute marginalization, but rather the perception that the individual or the individual's group is doing less well relative to other groups and that the political system is responsible for their predicament. The solution to this problem lies not so much in a preference for authoritarian government, but rather in a form of democracy ensured by a strong leader who has the power to thwart the sort of technocratic, "there-is-no-alternative" politics that has come to define establishment politics in current day liberal democracies. With this in mind, populist voters may not be searching for a "luder maximo" as much as a government that is more effective and efficient, together with an economic regime that favours social mobility<sup>28</sup>.

On one hand, it may seem that a preference for a sort of "stealth democracy" in which power is entrusted to a strong leader who is charged with being a delegate for "ordinary people" is a confused inconsistency. After all, the entire point of liberal democracy is to place constraints on leaders who may harm the various institutions that are designed to channel public opinion into public policy. So how can we have a system of strong-person rule with democracy? On the other hand, if we start from the perspective that liberal democracy, as it is practiced, systematically favours the interests of a minority (be it the rich and corporations or immigrants and ethnic minorities) at the expense of "ordinary people," then it is possible to understand why one might come to believe that only a radical solution can solve the problem. From this point of view, populism has much in common with communist political philosophy of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, which held that the only way to arrive at a communist system in which society was organized peacefully and equitably by ordinary people required a period of dictatorship. The aim here is not to defend this point of view, but rather to point out that the preferences of populist voters should not be treated as necessarily ignorant or incoherent.

### 27.

Lipset, Seymour M. 1960. *Political man: The social bases of politics*, New York: Double Day & Company

### 28.

My thanks to Luc Rouban for making this point clear to me. For his trenchant analysis regarding the rise of the *Rassemblement National* in France, see Rouban, Luc. 2024. *Les ressorts cachés du vote RN*, Paris: Les Presses de Sciences Po

**Proofed by:** Florent Parmentier

**Layout:** Marilyn Augé

If citing this paper: ARCENEUX (Kevin) « What Do Populists Want from Their Representatives and Why? », *Sciences Po CEVIPOF*, January 2025, 9 p.

© CEVIPOF, 2025 Kevin Arceneaux