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UNDERSTANDING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN POLITICAL TRUST AND
POPULISM. EVIDENCE FROM 26 EUROPEAN COUNTRIES, 2020-2022

MA thesis

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Abstract

A comparative analysis of 26 European democracies between 2020 and 2022 examines how populist ideology and institutional trust interact under varying conditions of political power. Drawing on Cass Mudde’s thin-centred definition of populism and Pippa Norris’s multidimensional model of political trust, the work disaggregates two pathways: one in which low trust precedes populist support, and another in which populist success reshapes citizens’ confidence in state institutions. Harmonised data from the European Social Survey, PopuList, and ParlGov are used to construct an index of trust in parliament, the judiciary, and political parties, alongside a binary indicator of populist voting and measures of cabinet participation and parliamentary seat share. Fixed-effects OLS regressions with clustered standard errors and controls for demographic and socioeconomic covariates reveal a “power-contingent trust cycle.” In countries where populists remain in opposition, supporters exhibit significantly lower trust (over one point on a 0–10 scale), whereas in those where populists govern, support is associated with a modest trust boost. Seat-share magnitude exerts no consistent additional effect. These findings underscore that populism’s impact on democratic legitimacy is highly context-dependent: exclusion amplifies scepticism, while inclusion can restore or even elevate confidence among its electorate.

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Introduction

The study centres on political trust as shaped by populist ideology, explicitly examining the interactive causality between these two constructs. Although trust and populism have each attracted extensive scholarly attention, few investigations have disaggregated the distinct effects of electoral support versus formal officeholding on citizens' confidence in institutions. Instead, most research treats low political trust as an inevitable precursor to populist success, portraying populist parties as a monolithic bloc and overlooking the important distinction between anti-establishment sentiment and the institutional leverage conferred by parliamentary representation. This thesis addresses that gap by conceptualising the populist–trust nexus as conditional on both electoral backing and government inclusion, while also probing the reverse causality through which populist agency actively reshapes institutional trust. By disentangling these two dimensions, electoral support as a popular mandate and officeholding as a source of legitimacy and performance, the study offers a more nuanced lens on how populist dynamics influence citizens' evaluations of democratic legitimacy and effectiveness. Employing cross-national survey data and comparative case studies, the analysis tests whether parliamentary representation by populist parties elevates trust among their supporters and whether populist rhetoric in opposition erodes institutional confidence. In doing so, it refines existing models into a coherent framework that integrates both causal directions, advancing theoretical and empirical insights into the interplay of populist mobilisation, political trust, and democratic resilience.

Within the broader literature on trust and populism, a particularly compelling puzzle concerns how populist ideology itself shapes citizens' political trust, extending beyond the typical focus on generalised distrust to encompass shifts in affective polarisation and conditional confidence. This study proposes that for individuals who embrace a populist worldview, characterised by a moral division between “the people” and a “corrupt elite”, their allocation of trust is not simply unconditionally low, but rather becomes contingent on the electoral fortunes of their preferred populist parties. In other words, populist supporters may exhibit deep scepticism toward mainstream institutions when their party is in opposition, yet rapidly recalibrate their trust upward when populist representatives attain power. This dynamic reflects a transition from trust as a stable, generalised orientation to trust as an affective, performance-sensitive judgment: institutions are deemed worthy of confidence only insofar as they remain under populist influence. By reframing political trust as an outcome of populist mobilisation, this

research illuminates the reciprocal interplay between ideology, polarisation, and institutional legitimacy. Unravelling this conditional trust mechanism is essential for understanding not only how populist movements capitalise on existing grievances but also how they can reconstruct citizens' evaluations of democratic institutions once in office.

As populist ideology has moved beyond a transient surge to become a durable feature of the global political landscape, reshaping international relations and redefining norms of governance, it is imperative to shift scholarly focus from its antecedents to its consequences for representative democracy. Rather than cataloguing the socio-economic and cultural preconditions that fuel populist mobilisation, this study examines how entrenched populist actors reinterpret the legitimacy, accountability, and responsiveness of elected institutions once they hold power. By doing so, it is possible to assess whether populism's challenge to pluralist, mediated decision-making produces lasting transformations in citizens' conditional confidence: do constituents calibrate their trust not on the merits of institutional performance alone, but on the presence of populist officeholders? Moreover, exploring populism's enduring impact allows us to evaluate its capacity to recalibrate the balance of power between majority rule and institutional checks, potentially reshaping the very architecture of representative governance. This consequentialist lens thus complements—and crucially extends—existing research on populism's roots by interrogating how the ideology's ascendancy drives systemic change in democratic legitimacy and the citizen-state relationship.

The objective of this thesis is to disentangle and empirically test the impact of populist parties on political trust. Specifically, it asks: “How does the level of support for populist parties influence trust in political institutions, and to what extent is this relationship affected by the degree of populist party representation in parliament?” From this question, three hypotheses are derived. Hypothesis 1 (H1) predicts that in countries where populists remain excluded from government, voting for populist parties correlates with lower trust in political institutions. Hypothesis 2 (H2) anticipates the inverse pattern, higher trust, among populist voters when their parties hold cabinet seats. Hypothesis 3 (H3) further posits that, within populist-governed states, a larger parliamentary seat share will amplify the positive vote-to-trust effect. These expectations, grounded in theories of political efficacy and trust redistribution, will be tested through a rigorous comparative framework.

Methodologically, the research employs a cross-national comparative design encompassing twenty-six European democracies divided into two subgroups based on whether or not they

have populist representation in government, constituting an 8 to 18 split in cases, where Switzerland, Czechia, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Poland, Slovenia, Slovakia have populists in government and Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Germany, Estonia, Spain, Finland, France, United Kingdom, Greece, Croatia, Iceland, Ireland, Lithuania, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Sweden do not have populists in government. Survey data are drawn from Round 10 (2020–2022) of the European Social Survey (ESS), which offers standardised measures of citizens’ institutional trust alongside self-reported vote choice. Populist vote choice is coded manually by matching each country-specific answer card to peer-reviewed party classifications in the PopuList dataset. Parliamentary representation is measured via seat-share figures from the ParlGov database, ensuring precise alignment with ESS fieldwork periods. The core empirical strategy is based on statistical analysis using fixed-effects ordinary least squares regression with primary-sampling-unit-clustered standard errors (via the `fixest` package in R), supplemented by subgroup analyses and meta-regression techniques to examine heterogeneity. Control variables include gender, age, years of education, household income quintiles, and urban/rural domicile. By leveraging harmonised survey items and robust statistical controls, the study isolates within-country associations and minimises confounding influences

To guide the reader through the argument and findings, the thesis is structured into three main chapters. Chapter 1, “Political Trust and Populism within the Context of Politics,” reviews the scholarly literature on the multidimensional nature of political trust and the ideational underpinnings of populism, culminating in a conceptual framework linking the two phenomena. Chapter 2, “Data and Methods,” outlines the comparative research design, case-selection logic, data sources (ESS, PopuList, ParlGov), variable operationalisation, and analytical techniques. Chapter 3, “Empirical Analysis,” presents descriptive statistics, regression results testing H1 and H2 across non-populist and populist-governed subgroups, and a meta-analytic examination of H3, comparing the trust boost across countries with varying seat shares. A concluding section synthesises the findings, discusses theoretical and practical implications, and suggests avenues for future research.

1. Political Trust and Populism within the context of politics

1.1. Political Trust

In the contexts where representative democracy is a political framework within which the government functions, political trust is sometimes referred to as “the glue” that holds this democratic model together and “the oil that lubricates the policy machine” (Van Der Meer & Zmerli, 2017). This implies a certain significance that this phenomenon holds, as its levels can influence or explain the success of reform implementation, peaceful transition of power, productive governance, political participation, etc. (Dalton, 2017). In a way, political trust could be interpreted as a fuelling component of the relationship between the citizens and institutions of the state, be they

legislative, executive, judicial, economic, knowledge-based or other. (Zmerli et al., 2007)

Trust is a crucial concept in research within the realms of political and social science. Its roots can be traced back to the 1960s, when scholars began to investigate the conditions necessary for the stability of democratic regimes (Van Der Meer & Zmerli, 2017). This period was characterised by the emergence of foundational ideas and theories that would shape the field of knowledge into what we know today. Key works, such as Almond and Verba’s “The Civic Culture”(1963) and David Easton’s “A Framework for Political Analysis,”(1965) were published during this time. Both studies examined the functioning of democracies and the factors that contribute to the prosperity of states. Almond and Verba focused on analysing the conditions for the stability of democracy as a regime through the prism of political culture, suggesting that there is a certain predetermined inheritance to the way society’s function that is constituted by their past experiences and the traditions that are learned through socialisation. The authors proposed that social or interpersonal trust, is a determinant of the person’s ability to showcase support or trust in the political realm of life and is one of the key elements that foster cooperation and partisanship, respectively. Later, this belief was reinforced by the development of social capital theory introduced in “Making Democracy Work” (Putnam et al., 1994), revisited in “Bowling Alone”, (Putnam, 2000) with additional differentiation and added clarification of the importance that the notion of trust has in society for there to be a sensible level of well-being and progress.

Alongside the research on the notion of social trust, similar outcomes to those mentioned above are also a focal point in the literature exploring the phenomenon of political trust. Constituting its role as one of the essential elements for the proper functioning of democracy. (Van Der

Meer, 2017) Highlighting the significance of the effects it has in the realm of politics, such as constituting the success or failure of political leaders(Hetherington, 1998) and influencing the efficacy of governance and policymaking.(Whiteley et al., 2016) This approach is mainly concerned with the effects of social trust on that of a political kind, at times projecting the characteristics of the former onto the latter, which at times results in contradictions. Although both forms of trust share commonalities, a more precise identification of political trust that enhances our understanding of its multidimensional nature would be the one developed based on the works of David Easton (1965, 1975). Easton's works, such as "A Framework for Political Analysis"(1965), were concerned with the process of interaction between the citizens and their representative governments as something that is more transactional and conditional, introducing the concept of systems support that was later equated to political support. This term has encapsulated not only the importance of the phenomena of people's willingness to support political ideas, regimes, institutions, parties and incumbents but also gave way to perceive the multidimensionality of the relationship from the perspective of the citizen and was understood as a representation of orientations held regarding the state and its actors.

In his "Reassessment of the concept of political support"(1975), he analyses how support varies depending on the object, establishing a scale of diffusion. He clarifies the distinction between specific and diffused support while introducing the concept of political trust as it relates to these two types of support. Firstly, specific support was identified as a type of political support that targets elected and appointed officials who make and implement decisions in the nation-state. Key indicators include the popularity of incumbents like presidents, prime ministers, and party leaders, as well as support for political parties, both in government and opposition. Then, diffuse support or otherwise generalised political support was identified as a type of political support that reflects more intangible sentiments toward the nation-state and its institutions. Political structures continue to exist even when incumbent leaders change. Generalised support for notions like community and the regime allows citizens to recognise the state's legitimacy, along with its agencies and officeholders, even when individuals are critical of certain political procedures, party leaders, or particular public policies and their results. Finally, the author addresses the concept of trust within the discussion of political support, underlining that, at the time, it would still require further theoretical development. Within his work, he describes it as being similarly grounded in experience and a contributing aspect to diffused support whilst also maintaining difficulty in conceptual distinction from specific support.

This initial identification and exploration of political support was then expanded upon by one of the prominent scholars in the field, Pippa Norris. In her work “Critical Citizens” (1999), she and other contributors explored the ways in which political support interacts with other phenomena in the realm of politics by factoring in its ability to explain certain developments in people’s perception of democracy (Inglehart, 1999), economic performance (McAllister, 1999) and political performance (Miller & Listhaug, 1999). Yet, most importantly, she utilises the dimensions put forward by Easton to create a defined framework for assessing the diffusion of political support given by citizens to different political objects. Additionally, revisiting the concept of political trust and identifying it as comprising the two most specific levels of political support (which are the ones concerned with citizen attitudes toward regime institutions referring specifically to governments, parliaments, the legal system, police, political parties and incumbent officeholders). The model put forward by Norris has five levels in total, which range from the most diffused to the most specific, that give more conceptual expansion and distinct operational empirical measures. Respectively, those levels are the following (Norris, 2017):

The first level refers to attitudes towards national identity. It encompasses citizens’ general or otherwise fundamental feelings in regard to their belonging to a nation-state, with examples being patriotism, national identity and pride.

The second level denotes the approval of regime principles and values. It illustrates to which extent a person agrees with the core principles and normative values that underpin the regime, an example would be the approval of democratic values and/or ideals.

The third level focuses on the evaluation of regime performance. It embodies to what degree an individual is content with democratic governance, which is also exemplified by a generalised assessment of the workings of democratic processes and practices within the regime.

The fourth level centres around confidence in regime institutions. It represents the level of confidence a person has in institutions, examples of which are the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of government, the security forces, as well as central, state, and local governments.

The fifth level is specific to the approval of incumbent officeholders. It showcases the level of support and subsequent perception that the citizens have in regard to those in power. For example, party leaders, legislators, public officials, parties and leadership elites.

Consequently, political trust is understood as the general belief in the effectiveness of political institutions and/or the belief in the good intentions and efficacy of those in office. (Norris, 2017) In fact, research indicates that citizens tend to struggle to differentiate between the political institutions and the political actors within them. (Marien, 2017; Zmerli & Newton, 2017) Based on the two main approaches to understanding trust in the scholarship, through social trust and political trust, researchers often begin with certain assumptions about the causes and effects of social and political trust. Studies on social trust frequently focus on its relationship with themes prevalent in the social sciences. The literature highlights extensive findings, often centred on variables like the socialisation of individuals (Glanville & Paxton, 2007), as well as perceived happiness, unemployment, cultural background, education, income, and various life experiences.(Newton et al., 2017) While many results appear consistent, some findings vary across contexts, emphasising the importance of cultural and institutional differences in shaping social trust. For political trust, on the other hand, the explanations are not as simple. Research that utilises socio-economic indicators does not yield consistent results, and matters of micro-, mezzo-, and macro-level differ in their explanatory power, creating a certain intrigue around the notion. (Dalton, 2005)(Christensen & Lægheid, 2005)(Mahmud, 2021)(Mayne & Hakhverdian, 2017) Moreover, studies at times highlight reversed causal effects, where political trust helps explain certain outcomes like political participation exhibited by citizens, (Hooghe & Marien, 2013) compliance with the law (Marien & Hooghe, 2011) and support for policy implementation (Rudolph & Evans, 2005), whereas these variables do not consistently exert the same influence on it. A different example that adds to the uncertainty is its relationship with social trust. While some scholars hypothesise a reverse causal relationship between the two, this has not been conclusively proven.(Sønderskov & Dinesen, 2016)

An additional point of interest, besides its multifaceted nature that has drawn attention to its exploration and development, was the way it was perceived by researchers. A few changes in perception have taken place since political trust emerged in the realm of social and political science. More precisely, this stemmed from the way its measurements (of the levels in general and not the metrics used to quantify the notion) were viewed, as the initial approach was focused on the fact that trust was on a long-term decline, which raised concerns about how to reverse this trend and what the implications would be if a change in its trajectory was not an option. These concerns evolved into what then was considered a “crisis narrative”, whose defining characteristic is to perceive the levels of political trust with a heightened sense of

urgency and threat to the functioning of the system. (Listhaug & Jakobsen, 2017)(Carstens, 2023) Alternatively, the development of the works on trust and political support by Norris (1999, 2011) has given a different perspective on the matter, with her discussing it in a view more similar to “trendless fluctuation”, giving way to the incorporation of wider sets of factors of potential triggers rather than single major contributors to the shifts, which allows for the exploration of the phenomenon in isolated incidents, shifting the focus toward the specifics of the changes in those socio-political environments or time frames within which the fluctuations in trust levels took place.(Newton & Zmerli, 2011)

Furthermore, the latter perception of the trends in the levels of political trust displayed by citizens creates grounds for the analysis in this research to be conducted as it looks into the specifics of the relationship between political trust and populism (showcased through people’s support for populist parties) as an independent variable, maintaining an arguably narrow focus without it taking away from the inherent multidimensionality of the notions involved.

1.2 Populism

To better understand the nature of change that is prevalent in the current levels of political trust, this paper looks toward another prominent concept for an explanation, which is populism. Both have experienced significant growth in attention from the research perspective, as populism is consistently being described as “on the rise”, and political trust is said to be declining. These trends happening simultaneously are not enough of a reason to constitute a relationship. Yet, it does create space for further investigation to see if there is overlap within the way these concepts function/manifest and if there is a common link that would constitute a relationship. Considering that populism, as a notion, is deeply involved with trust and has a few common interconnected points with political trust. More specifically, it shares outcome measurement, which is most prominently done through the assessment of opinions and attitudes held by people on an individual level. Therefore, there is definite merit in exploring their association.

Populism as a phenomenon has been floating around in the research sphere since the 19th century, (Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser & Mudde, 2017) but its path to extensive theorisation and development of its scholarly understanding has gained prominence in the 20th century within the social and political science community. There is a significant amount of literature dedicated to researching populism, yet this does not translate into unanimity of opinion on its nature and identification on the conceptual level. A perfect word for its characterisation is polysemous, as there are many subfields that are dedicated to its research, one of which is

concerned with its definition. The conceptualisation of populism is riddled with debate, and multiple approaches to it have arisen over the years. They range from questioning the existence of populism to its typological distinctions, to the power it may hold in the realms outside the political landscape, and, most importantly, for the case of this research paper, the definition of the phenomenon. (Anselmi, 2018)

There are two distinct approaches to understanding the phenomenon of populism. The first focuses on its development over time, taking a historical and chronological perspective. This approach highlights the modernisation of the concept and the diversification of its effects as time passes, creating a stark distinction between classical populism and neo-populism.(Gherghina et al., 2013) It juxtaposes how populism manifested during the initial emergence of political systems with its more recent interference in democratic systems currently facing various crises, allowing for the exploration of its malleability and adaptability.(Taggart, 1996) The second approach to conceptually defining populism is based on its identification within the theoretical framework of social sciences. In the present-day debate, there are three most common ways of viewing it through this lens, which are as a strategy,(Weyland, 2001)(Jansen, 2011) as a communicative style(Aslanidis, 2016)(Panizza, 2005)(Moffitt & Tormey, 2014) and as an ideology.

Considering the complexity of the conceptualisation and the discourse surrounding it, there is no clear way of identifying which of the approaches is more universal in its application. Consequently, the decision to follow one or the other definition and its designated placement within political science research often hinges on which option aligns best with the research theme and purpose. In this regard, the definition put forth by Cas Mudde is particularly noteworthy. He adopts an ideational approach, drawing upon the contributions of Freedon (1998a, 1998b, 2001) to the dialogue on diversification and modernisation of political science. This evolution has led to the term "thin-centred ideology," which Mudde utilises to analyse the phenomenon of populism. This type of ideology would then be best described as a new form of ideology that is assimilative in nature and is capable of either challenging the relevance of additional ideological baggage or incorporating patterns from other ideologies to thicken itself. (Freedon, 1998a, 2001)

The main criticism of the way Mudde conceptualises populism is that it holds too much ambiguity in the definition, as some consider the concept of an ideology to be broad in itself. Mostly, this comes from the perspective of scholars who prefer to identify the phenomenon as

a discursive communication style.(Anselmi, 2018) Yet, he addresses this and many other concerns regarding populism within his works, some discussing the significance of the reappearance of the term "populism" and its overall phenomenon in mass discourse and providing a detailed explanation for the reasoning behind his conceptualisation. The key point he stresses is the necessity of properly and clearly defining the concept, as this can greatly impact the success of a research project, adding that the utilisation of the ideational approach allows for a nuanced reflection of the flexible nature of populism and facilitates comparative analysis across different regions, time periods, and sociopolitical contexts. Furthermore, it enables the examination of the core influences of populism on other phenomena, as well as the causes and implications of its emergence. He suggests that by implementing such a framework, researchers can gain deeper insights and extract more valuable information from existing studies on the topic.(Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser & Mudde, 2017; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018)

Within this perspective, the specific definition that he provides for the phenomenon of populism is the following: “a thin-centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people.”(Mudde, 2004)

From a glance, this definition might raise concern as there is presumably a lack of nuance as to how the entities operating under a populist framework are able to so simply divide society into two homogenous groups. There is specific reasoning for that, where the lack of specific bounds or boundaries to the definition of “the pure people” and “the corrupt elite” is intentional. Thus, this allows for flexibility in the constituency and broadens in reach of the messaging that is then determined by the narrative manufactured by the populist entities, which forms it in a way that fits the host ideology. Therefore, the exemplification of the ideology in practice manifests itself in diverse ways depending on the political context.(Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018) Furthermore, scholars who view populism as a thin-centred ideology additionally respond to criticisms regarding the broadness of its definition by clarifying what populism is not. This helps establish its role within the political landscape. In this context, the two ideologies contrasted with populism are elitism and pluralism. Elitism, even though it shares the significant trait of dividing the population into two homogenous groups, does so in a completely opposite way where “the elite” is perceived as a superior representation of “good” and “the people” should be perceived as “dangerous”, contributing with this view to the ideas

of rejection of democracy or support for limited democracy. (Pasquino, 2008) Pluralism, on the other hand, opposes both populism and elitism as it denounces the notion that society is homogenous and embraces its diversity as a strength. It centres around the idea that there should be an equal distribution of power, with the interests of as many different groups as possible being represented in the decision-making process and the determination to avoid specific groups acquiring the opportunity to impose their will on others.(Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser & Mudde, 2017)

With the understanding of the boundaries set above and the definition set, there is still a question of the host ideologies that are compatible with populism and how they manifest. There is a definite opportunity for populism to sustain itself, as it is able to address some concerns, yet the set of issues in its focus is fairly limited. In most cases, we see it attached to thick ideologies as it possesses limited morphology. (Freedon, 2017) Populism emerges from a desire to address a number of social grievances that are possessed within the defining actor within a particular case, which could be a political leader, a party or a leader of a social movement, the base convictions that they hold or the ideologies they follow/ feel aligned with then become the predetermining factors of identifying “the people” and “the elite”. A host ideology could be any of those that are within the conceptual boundary and is defined only by the regional and historic developments that contributed to the development of those utilising it in a specific case. In the case of left-wing populism, the underlying ideology is often similar to a form of socialism or social democracy, focusing on economic redistribution and opposing economic elites, while right-wing populism tends to align more closely with nationalism, conservatism, or authoritarianism, emphasising national identity, cultural conservatism, and anti-immigration stances, with a more rare in the modern context but still a possible case of centrist populism there would be harder to identify a host ideology as it would either be a form of technocracy or a mix of policies across the left-right spectrum, focusing on anti-corruption and systemic reforms.(Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser & Mudde, 2017)(Mudde, 2004)

There are multiple types of populist mobilisation present: personalist leadership, social movement, and political party. The most prevalent type of mobilisation in a particular setting is mainly determined by the political system within which the specific actor operates. For example, in the context of the European region, the most prominent would be populist parties due to the prevalence of parliamentary and semi-parliamentary forms of governing, whereas, in the context of South America, with the majority of countries functioning under presidential systems, it would be most likely be represented by populist leaders or, in other words,

individual personalities, similarly due to the limitations of a two-party system in the United States the most prominent populist actors in the recent years would also be individuals, even though they had a past history of populist social movements. (Roberts, 2017)(Barber, 2019)

A factor that partially determines the longevity or success of a populist entity is the power it has to mobilise. There is a distinct track that social movements and populist leaders can take regarding mobilisation. For the former, it is bottom-up mobilisation,(Della Porta & Portos, 2024) and for the latter, it is top-down mobilisation.(Venizelos & Markou, 2024) In turn, this creates limitations in their procedural functioning. On the other hand, political parties present a particularly interesting case as their structure allows for both top-down and bottom-up populist mobilisation and has proven to be more resilient than individual leaders. This resilience stems from the flexibility that exists within a party; if a leader falls out of favour with the constituency, does not align with the party's goals, or deviates from the exhibited strategic path, the party can support a different leader without significantly changing how the party is perceived. Political parties are viewed as being greater than any individual leader, functioning as institutions that can adapt to maintain their connection with the electorate. (Torre, 2015)

Another aspect that allows for the populist party to have more stable grounds for growth and development within the political system it functions in is that it utilises the system to its advantage by creating a network of closely aligned party activists, members and leadership that work as a unit on discovering salient issues and developing the appropriate policies to counteract them as any other party would in order to gain votes for the possibility of entering a representative position be it in government or any other form of political institution that allows for more powerful political action from within. Moreover, the populist ideology employed by the parties gives them an immediate advantage or a hint in structuring their political action plan as they are often times positioning themselves against those who are in power, which allows for the creation of a preliminary as this should be opposed the solutions that are already proposed by the governing entities, a different approach could manifest itself through the utilisation action of those analysed to find policy blind spots that are important to the constituency or making them important to the potential voting bloc in order to get their support, this could be supported by drawing attention to those areas of the decision-making processes that are not as transparent to the citizens or actions that the incumbent political actors poorly addressed. (Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser & Mudde, 2017)(Torre, 2015)

These manifestations of populist ideology then give grounds for the legitimisation of such parties in the case they make an effective and compelling presentation of these issues to the citizens to the point when they become a legitimate concern to where the parties and leaders that the populists question have to respond and engage with the arguments made, giving them credibility.

1.3 The relationship between the two concepts

There is a common theme in research examining the relationship between political trust and populism through the lens of political behaviour. This approach seeks to explain the reasons behind populist voting or, in other words, support for populist parties by comparing it to the level of political trust expressed by individuals, aiming to identify a causal link. In this paper, the objective is different, which is to explore the consequences of populist voting within the political context of each case. This analysis will use populist voting as a means of understanding the levels of political trust that citizens have toward institutions and elected officials. Acknowledging that populist voting is an existing trend, this study will focus not on what magnifies this phenomenon but rather on its implications for the future of political systems. To build on this foundation, this study poses the following research question: “How does the level of support for populist parties influence trust in political institutions, and to what extent is this relationship affected by the degree of populist party representation in parliament?”

In order to provide context for the grounds for exploring this relationship, the study utilises the following logic. Support for populism and political trust are both concepts that depend on the confidence of the people. Although they function in different ways and have inherent multidimensionality, trust is a fundamental factor influencing their development, which creates a common link between the two. To understand the possible influence populist entities have on political trust through their influence on trust and confidence granted to them by their constituencies, it is essential to first examine how populist ideology interacts with the concept of representative democracy, which heavily relies on political trust for its successful and efficient functioning.

As mentioned before in the discussion surrounding the theoretical background of the concept of populism, this thin-centred ideology functions on the basis of a core belief that societies are divided into two homogenous groups: “the pure people” and “the corrupt elite” (Mudde, 2004). Such rhetoric creates a binary perception of the citizens, who should fall into one of the two categories, which leads to antagonistic and exclusionary views and narratives being formed.

Such narratives are exemplified by populist sentiments that proclaim anti-elitism and people-centrism (Hajdinjak, 2022). The identification of “the people” within the communication put forth by populist actors is oftentimes intentionally vague, but the same cannot be said about the concept of “the elites.” When talking about “the corrupt elite,” regardless of the host ideology, the general descriptors tend to be similar and, most of the time, lead to an anti-establishment stance (Bélanger, 2017). This is powered by another core tenet of the ideology: that politics should be an extension of the people’s general will (Mauk, 2020), creating an environment that encourages questioning those in power and whether or not their decisions keep the people’s best interest in mind, instilling distrust in the establishment and the parties that represent it and nurturing scepticism toward the political system and its institutions as an extension (Hooghe, 2017). In short, populism frames society in a binary conflict between “the pure people” and “the corrupt elite” (Bélanger, 2017; Hajdinjak, 2022; Hooghe, 2017; Masala, 2020; Mauk, 2020; Mudde, 2004), that is characterised by anti-elitism and people-centrism (Hajdinjak, 2022; Juen, 2024; Mudde, 2004), promoting the “general will” as a contrast to established political systems (Hooghe, 2017; Masala, 2020; Mauk, 2020).

While populists present themselves as defenders of democracy, their emphasis on direct democracy raises questions about their approach to governance. This focus challenges the checks and balances shared among different branches of government and casts doubt on the delegation of power to institutions (Hajdinjak, 2022; Masala, 2020; Mauk, 2020). By criticising elected and non-elected bodies alike, populist rhetoric manipulates perceptions of these entities, undermining trust and the foundational principles of representative democracy. Populism undermines constitutional norms and the principles of representative democracy by rejecting mediation and representation (Hooghe, 2017; Masala, 2020). Populist rhetoric simplifies politics into a binary of “good” people versus “evil” elites (Bélanger, 2017; Hooghe, 2017; Masala, 2020). While populism can address flaws in democracy, it often risks destabilising the system (Hajdinjak, 2022; Juen, 2024; Mauk, 2020). Such simplifications of the elements that constitute the political system allow populist actors to garner support by vilifying the political elites, painting them out as untrustworthy and incompetent, and arguing that they, the populists, will perform better in those positions, presumably by working on behalf of “the people” (Bélanger, 2017). With the adoption of such discourse, populist entities often blur the lines between the institutions and the incumbents, which leads to undermining the norms and principles of representative democracy by discrediting the mediatory bodies, elected and non-elected institutions (Masala, 2020). They argue that the processes, which are reliant on the

citizens' political trust, serve the interests of the political elites and are corrupt and opaque. This damages the institutional confidence of the constituency, only to present solutions that would be of utmost benefit to the populists' ideology – direct democracy (Hajdinjak, 2022).

Direct democracy, in this case, is viewed as the solution because it could bring power to the people by replacing the representative forms of governing with instruments of direct political participation. However, the lack of nuance in these tools creates limitations for public expression of will. As a result, populists address the flaws in the democratic systems of their respective contexts, but the majority of the discussion around them is geared toward reducing trust rather than creating meaningful change, which leads to the destabilisation of trust in the system and its institutions (Mauk, 2020). Populist actors often leverage low levels of political trust to amplify their anti-establishment sentiment and position themselves as champions of democracy (Bélanger, 2017; Hooghe, 2017; Masala, 2020). This strategy helps them garner support as prospective representatives of “the people” and gain legitimacy in government.

Having established the conceptual foundations of both populism and political trust in the preceding subchapters, this study now turns to the extant literature that directly examines their intersection. It is essential first to identify prior investigations into how Mudde's thin-centred populism, which pits a morally virtuous “people” against a corrupt “elite”, and Norris's multidimensional conception of political trust, a citizen's assessment of institutional competence, fairness, and integrity, interrelate. Together, these theoretical frameworks imply an empirical nexus: the rhetoric and mobilisation strategies of populist actors both draw on and reshape citizens' confidence in political institutions. Moreover, the inherently fluctuating nature of political trust, which responds to events, scandals, and policy outputs, suggests a dynamic interplay with populist attitudes, creating fertile ground for reciprocal effects. To map this terrain, the literature can be broadly organised into two streams distinguished by causal ordering: those treating political trust as the antecedent of populist support, and those conceptualising populism as the driver of institutional trust. In so doing, it is possible to assess what has been discovered, where findings converge or diverge, and where scholarly gaps remain ripe for further inquiry.

First Approach: Political Trust as Predictor of Populist Support.

The prevailing literature treats political trust as an antecedent of populist voting and support, arguing that when citizens' confidence in institutions wanes, they become more receptive to thin-centred populist appeals. Five core mechanisms illustrate this dynamic. First,

delegitimation, or a “crisis of confidence”, draws on Pippa Norris’s legitimacy framework, which defines trust in terms of perceived fairness, competence, and integrity. When these judgments collapse, mainstream institutions lose their warrant to govern, and populist actors step in as the sole authentic voice of “the people” versus a corrupt elite. Regional data from post-Great Recession Europe show that areas with the steepest declines in trust witnessed the largest swings toward anti-establishment parties (Algan et al., 2017), and cross-national OECD analyses corroborate that sudden trust drops predict surges in populist attitudes (Masala, 2020). Second, political alienation and cynicism distinguish affective disengagement (“I don’t care”) from cognitive distrust (“they’re all corrupt”). It is this latter form, rooted in low institutional trust, that primes citizens to accept the Manichean framing central to Mudde’s thin-centred populism. Dutch referendum data reveal that high cynicism uniquely forecasts populist support, even after controlling for broader distrust and external efficacy (Geurkink et al., 2020).

The third mechanism, the demand–supply framework, views low trust as signalling unmet socio-political needs, representation, responsiveness, moral clarity, while populist parties supply a simple, moralistic narrative promising to bypass corrupt channels. Analyses of European Social Survey waves find that economic insecurity and collapsing trust drive voters toward populist platforms, and that new populist parties emerge precisely where these grievances concentrate (Guiso et al., 2017). Fourth, the rational choice and retrospective voting model interprets low trust as a verdict on incumbent performance. Under this logic, voting for a populist outsider becomes a utility-maximising protest when mainstream parties fail to deliver. Eight-wave ESS data show that low life satisfaction, a proxy for perceived poor governance, significantly increases the likelihood of casting a ballot for right-wing populists (Lindholm et al., 2024), and Belgian panel data confirm that precipitous trust declines predict protest-style voting for populist challengers (Hooghe & Dassonneville, 2018). Finally, relative deprivation and grievance theory argues that perceptions of unfair advantage erode trust and fuel mobilisation. Case studies in Hungary and Italy demonstrate that personal feelings of being left behind robustly predict both populist orientations and actual votes for populist parties (Tóth & Lantos, 2024; Lorenzo Cena et al., 2022).

While existing studies robustly link low political trust to rising populist support, tracing pathways from institutional delegitimation to grievance-driven mobilisation, these analyses share a common limitation: they foreground political trust as an exogenous precondition or a retrospective response to electoral outcomes. In doing so, they privilege the antecedents of

populist voting rather than examining whether populist ideology itself can proactively reshape citizens' affective orientations toward political institutions. Although delegitimation, cynicism, demand–supply dynamics, retrospective sanction voting, and relative deprivation have been rigorously tested as drivers of populist support, a systematic account of whether and how populism, conceived as an independent variable, exerts substantive leverage over institutional trust is still lacking. This gap matters because populist discourse does more than reflect public discontent; it frames institutions as moral actors and offers competing legitimacy narratives. If populist ideas can meaningfully influence citizens' evaluations of competence, fairness, and integrity, then treating political trust solely as a predictor risks overlooking a reciprocal dynamic in which populism actively constructs and reconstructs trust. To address this blind spot, the present study reverses the conventional causal arrow, investigating the capacity of populist ideology to shape political trust directly.

Second approach: Populism as the Driver of Political Trust

The in scholarship reverses the causal arrow, treating populist ideology or support as the independent variable that shapes citizens' confidence in political institutions. Five estimated mechanisms have emerged under this paradigm. First, the discursive-framing pathway builds on Entman's (1993) framing theory to argue that exposure to populist rhetoric, whether via speeches, campaign messaging, or media, undermines trust by repeatedly depicting institutions as corrupt, self-serving elites. Van Hauwaert and Van Kessel's (2018) cross-national survey experiment, for example, found that reading a single populist-framed news article lowered institutional trust scores by several points compared to a neutral control (Bos, 2024). Second, the social-identity or affective-polarisation mechanism, rooted in Tajfel and Turner's (1979) social identity theory, posits that populist attitudes crystallise a "people-vs.-elite" identity lens: institutions associated with the out-group are distrusted, while those perceived as allied with the in-group retain or even gain trust. Reeskens and Van der Meer (2021) demonstrate this effect, showing that strong populist identifiers report significantly lower trust in courts and electoral commissions but stable or higher trust in local bodies considered "of the people."

A third mechanism, often labelled institutional substitution or the "parallel trust" model, asserts that populism redirects citizens' allegiance from traditional representative bodies toward alternative democratic arenas, referenda, plebiscites, and citizens' assemblies. Drawing on Norris's legitimacy framework (2017) and direct-democracy theory (Donovan et al., 2009), Foa and Mounk (2017) find that high-populism respondents across five democracies rate their

trust in national parliaments below the mean, yet their trust in referenda exceeds the mean. Finally, the macro-institutional feedback or policy-output pathway emphasises how populist governments' concrete actions feed back into trust evaluations. Grounded in Easton's (1965) concept of output legitimacy and Pierson's (1993) policy feedback theory, studies in Latin America reveal that redistributive and anti-corruption measures by left-wing populist administrations account for more than half of the observed trust increase among their supporters (Baccini et al., 2025). Together, these four pathways illustrate how populist actors, whether in opposition or in office, actively construct, erode, and reconstruct citizens' political trust.

There is also a fifth approach present in the literature that targets specifically the issue this study is trying to address, which is called the Power-Contingent Trust Cycle or the Incumbency Paradox. Empirical research consistently demonstrates a conditional, two-stage dynamic in which populist supporters' institutional trust hinges on whether their preferred party is in opposition or in government. In opposition, populist voters view "the system" as irredeemably corrupt, an Opposition-Driven Delegitimation that aligns with Mudde's "people-vs.-elite" framing and Norris's delegitimation crisis. Distrust becomes instrumental, fuelling protest voting and reinforcing the narrative that only "we," the true people, can cleanse the establishment. Once populists assume office, however, those same supporters rapidly re-legitimate institutions: performance and fairness evaluations shift, as the new rulers cast themselves not as part of the elite, but as authentic representatives of the people. This Incumbency-Induced Re-Legitimation often restores—and even elevates—trust above levels observed among mainstream-party backers. Three cornerstone studies illustrate this paradox: Juen (2024) uses Austrian panel data to show trust rebounds when populists enter a coalition, and Hajdinjak (2019) finds Central European populist voters' trust rises with executive power. Collectively, these findings reveal how institutional trust is not a stable orientation but a contingent attitude shaped by electoral context and partisan identity.

The populist trust paradox hinges on four defining features. Instrumental trust: supporters strategically lower confidence out of office and raise it in power. Elite substitution: populists redraw the boundary of "whose" trust matters by positioning themselves as replacements for a corrupt elite. Motivated reasoning: cognitive dissonance is resolved by reclassifying institutions as either irredeemably corrupt or legitimately "of the people," depending on partisan status. Dynamic legitimacy evaluations: trust reflects a real-time moral judgment of power-holders. Empirical applications range from survey experiments isolating single

mechanisms to structural-equation models that integrate multiple pathways. Recognising this diversity underscores that the incumbency paradox is one of several lenses for understanding how populism, whether in opposition or government, actively constructs, erodes, and reconstructs political trust.

Alternatively, this process of weakening trust in political institutions could be reversed by the populists themselves. Technically, it could be understood as the case of creating a problem with the intent of then providing the solution for it to win favourability (Hooghe, 2017). Some authors theorise, based on previous research, that there is a way by which populist representation within executive bodies could help rebuild trust in the people who showcase support for populists (Juen, 2024). Specifically, for those who have been affected by the populist sentiment, the representation of such parties in political institutions and government coalitions and their ability to influence decision-making on the national level would mitigate the previously reduced political trust (Kołczyńska, 2023). Institutions are central to political trust in representative democracies, but populists often target them as corrupt or conspiratorial (Hooghe, 2017; Masala, 2020). Representation within institutions can restore trust, particularly in weak democracies (Juen, 2024; Kołczyńska, 2023; Mauk, 2020). The inclusion of populist parties in governance mitigates trust deficits among their supporters (Hajdinjak, 2022; Juen, 2024; Kołczyńska, 2023). The reasoning behind this claim lies in the perception of the institutions manufactured by these parties for their supporters, as they are portrayed as corrupt and conspiratorial. If a populist entity were to become a part of said bodies, it would not be corrupted by the system. Instead, the assertion is that they would work against “the corrupt elite” from within, with the guiding purpose of ensuring the execution of the will of the people (Hajdinjak, 2022).

Consequently, there is a reason to believe that there is a relationship between populist support and political trust. Populist actors thrive by benefiting from preexisting low levels of political trust or by creating circumstances that lower political trust within their potential constituency (Hooghe, 2017). They position themselves as anti-establishment, contrasting with those perceived as corrupt elites, in order to increase confidence in themselves (Bélanger, 2017). This creates a more reactionary response from their supporters, which then manifests as political participation, possibly even as a form of protest voting against the establishment parties (Kołczyńska, 2023). As a result, there is an increase in political trust among populist voters if their preferred party secures a position in government (Juen, 2024; Kołczyńska, 2023). The level of trust is heightened when the populist party has the opportunity to influence decision-

making, such as being part of a government coalition, and when it creates the impression that it can fulfil its promise of bringing the people's will into the political process (Hajdinjak, 2022; Mauk, 2020).

Thus, this is referred to as a boosting effect of populist ideology on political trust. A more detailed approach to understanding the underlying factors that can help explain this occurrence is brought forward by Sanja Hajdinjak in her work “Populism as a Political Trust Booster?” (Hajdinjak, 2022) Populist support and degrees of political power in Central Europe. In this research paper, she describes three mechanisms that can help populists have a positive effect on political trust.

The first is ideological congruence, whereby, by virtue of achieving electoral success, those who share the same ideological views as the winning party should have an increased level of political trust compared to the supporters of those who lose in the elections. Simply put, populists can increase the level of political trust in their constituency by winning the elections (Hajdinjak, 2022). The second is regime outputs, which suggests that when a populist entity is in power, they can target governance issues that were identified as the driving forces for their campaign, such as anti-establishment sentiment and issues that incumbents overlook, presented as the neglect of citizens' needs, and increase citizens' satisfaction by providing specific regime outputs. Examples of these outputs could include reforms, policy changes, or shifts in the state's development focus (Hajdinjak, 2022). Finally, electoral success itself may improve the perception of democratic institutions, such as elections, by signalling to populist voters that the system functions well. These voters perceive the victory of their preferred party as a sign of the party's achievement rather than an inherent trait of the existing system (Hajdinjak, 2022).

Based on the analysis conducted, the author, within her work, examines three mechanisms that have the power to boost political trust in populist voters. Compared to the supporters of other parties, these mechanisms, when used by populist parties, showcase results of a higher probability of increasing trust levels. The author suggests that one reason for this is that populist supporters often feel unheard; thus, as their chosen representatives gain power, their confidence in political institutions increases (Hajdinjak, 2022). Hajdinjak concludes that these three mechanisms significantly boost political trust among populist voters. Compared to supporters of other parties, populist voters show a greater increase in trust levels as a result of these mechanisms (Hajdinjak, 2022). While the mechanisms outlined above illustrate how populist parties influence political trust, the relationship varies significantly depending on whether

populists are in government or remain in opposition. This variation underscores the importance of political context in shaping trust dynamics, particularly as populists transition from anti-establishment challengers to institutional actors. This study seeks to explore these contextual effects by examining how populist governance and parliamentary representation influence institutional trust among voters.

Specifically, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: In countries where populists are not in government, voting for populist parties is associated with decreased trust in political institutions

H2: In countries where populists are in government, voting for populist parties is associated with increased trust in political institutions.

H3: In countries where populists are in government, a larger seat share of populists in parliament is associated with a more pronounced positive effect of voting for populists on institutional trust.

2 Data and Methods

This chapter outlines the methodological framework that supports this study's investigation of the relationship between populism and trust. It presents the research design aimed at addressing the research question outlined in the theoretical chapter, using a comparative cross-national approach to examine how individual support for populist parties correlates with institutional trust under different conditions of populist representation. The choice of twenty-six European countries is justified by the availability of harmonised survey data, ideological classification, and government coalition information. These factors ensure both theoretical relevance and empirical comparability. The chapter further explores the data sources and provides justifications for their reliability and suitability as the foundation for the analysis. It details how these sources are used to operationalise the variables and describes the research methods employed to answer the research questions and test the hypotheses developed from the theoretical exploration of the relationship between populism and trust.

2.1 Research design and Case selection

In this study, the research design is meticulously structured to address two interrelated research questions: (1) How does the level of support for populist parties influence trust in political institutions? and (2) to what extent is this relationship affected by the degree of populist party representation in parliament? To answer these questions, the study operationalises three key variables: political trust as “trust in political institutions”, populist ideology through “support for populist parties”, and the level of populist representation in legislative bodies. Recognising that political trust is inherently multidimensional, shaped by historical legacies, socioeconomic conditions, and institutional performance, the research employs a large-scale comparative survey-based dataset to capture sufficient variance across contexts and avoid potential misinterpretations associated with small-sample analyses. The empirical strategy incorporates robust measurement techniques, including validated survey items for assessing institutional trust and systematic ideological coding of party platforms to gauge populist support. Moreover, multilevel regression models are applied to account for country-level heterogeneity in political culture and institutional frameworks, while controlling for confounding factors. The analysis draws on data from the European Social Survey (ESS), the PopuList and the Parliament and Government composition database (ParlGov) to ensure broad temporal and geographic coverage. By situating the analysis within a comprehensive comparative framework and

employing rigorous methodological safeguards, the study aims to isolate the specific impact of populist dynamics on institutional trust.

Clarifying the theoretical constructs underlying these research questions is essential to ensure conceptual coherence and analytical precision. Trust in political institutions is defined through the citizens' attitudes towards political institutions represented by parliament, the legal system, and political parties, and is measured using standardised survey instruments drawn from established sources. Support for populist parties is conceptualised within the ideational framework. While this ideological coherence allows for cross-national comparability, populist parties exhibit context-specific variations in their policy platforms, organisational structures, and electoral strategies. To account for this heterogeneity, the second research question introduces the dimension of parliamentary representation, thereby distinguishing between mere electoral support and the institutional influence wielded by populist actors once they occupy legislative seats, which is developed more in the construction of hypotheses. This approach functions as an internal validity mechanism: it enables the disentanglement of whether changes in institutional trust arise from populist electoral appeal per se or from the extra leverage afforded by parliamentary representation. Consequently, the study advances a nuanced analytical model that captures both ideological and institutional dimensions of populist influence on political trust (Figure 2.1).

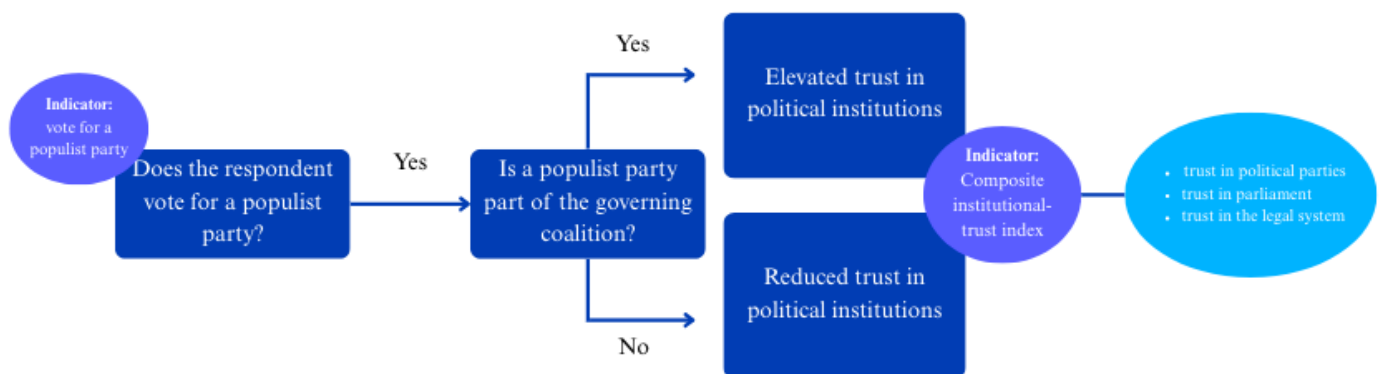


Figure 2.1: Conceptual Model of Populist Support, Government Participation, and Institutional Trust (This diagram illustrates how voting for a populist party influences institutional trust, moderated by whether that party is in government, with trust measured via a composite index)

The empirical scope of this study is driven by two interlocking needs: (1) a sufficiently large and diverse set of cases to generate reliable statistical inferences, and (2) the availability of

harmonised survey measures in multiparty parliamentary systems. Europe emerges as the optimal geographical focus. First, most European democracies operate under competitive, multiparty regimes in which parliaments exercise significant legislative authority, ensuring that variations in both electoral support and institutional representation of populist actors can be meaningfully analysed. Second, well-established cross-national surveys, including the European Social Survey (ESS), provide standardised indicators of citizens' trust in core political institutions (alongside respondents' reported vote choice. Compared to hybrid or authoritarian regimes, European democracies offer a more reliable context for measuring both public attitudes and sincere electoral behaviour. Finally, by concentrating on European states, the study maximises both the number of cases and the comparability of institutional frameworks, thus reducing the risk of confounding influences arising from divergent regime types or data inconsistencies.

To operationalise key variables, the study draws on two primary data sources. Citizens' trust in political institutions and vote-choice data are obtained from the ESS. Populist parties are identified using a consistent ideational framework, aligning with the theoretical chapter's definition of populism as a thin-centred ideology. For this purpose, relying on the PopuList dataset, which classifies European parties according to standardised populist criteria. Parliamentary representation is measured as the share of seats held by these identified populist parties, sourced from the ParlGov database, which currently reports legislative seat distributions for thirty-seven European democracies. By matching these data on survey respondents' trust and vote choice with country-level seat shares, the analysis can disentangle the effects of popular support per se from the additional institutional influence secured through parliamentary presence.

Case selection

A broad case-selection strategy underpins this study, aiming to assess the hypothesised relationship across diverse political contexts and institutional frameworks. By including all European states participating in ESS Round 10 and which are represented in the PopuList research database, the study maximises external validity and evaluates whether the link between trust and populist support holds regardless of regime type, electoral system, or socio-economic development. The resulting sample spans established representative democracies, post-communist states, and Nordic welfare regimes, allowing investigation of potential macro-level moderators, such as GDP per capita, electoral volatility, and institutional quality, which

may strengthen or weaken individual-level effects. Within the available cases, there are 26 countries that provide the data needed for the analysis. Those are Belgium, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, France, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Slovenia, Slovakia, Switzerland and the United Kingdom and from the self-completion part of the round Austria, Cyprus, Germany, Latvia, Poland, Spain, Sweden.

A key data limitation arises from incomplete coverage in the PopuList country reports, which precludes the inclusion of several Round 10 ESS participants, namely, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Israel, in the analysis. Although these states provided survey data, they either fall outside the study's geographic remit or lack the standardised populist-party classification essential for operationalisation. A further exclusion concerns Bulgaria: despite participating in Round 10 of the ESS, its vote-choice data, populist seat-share figures, and government-composition indicators prove unreliable. Specifically, a general election was held immediately before the ESS fieldwork, additional elections transpired during and shortly after data collection, and protracted difficulties in government formation depressed voter turnout. These circumstances introduce substantial measurement error and missing values, undermining the validity of any inferences regarding citizens' trust and populist influence in Bulgaria. Consequently, the empirical analysis is confined to the remaining European democracies for which both high-quality survey measures and consistent, comparable indicators of populist representation are available. By transparently acknowledging these exclusions, the study maintains analytical rigour while clearly delineating the universe of cases underpinning the subsequent statistical models.

2.3 Data

This research will draw on three established cross-national sources: the European Social Survey (ESS) Round 10 on "Democracy, Digital Social Contacts," the PopuList 3.0 database of European populist parties, and the Parliament and Government composition data infrastructure on parliamentary and government composition. The ESS subsection will outline its biennial, cross-sectional sampling across 31 countries, sample-size thresholds (1,500 respondents per country, 800 for small populations), rigorous translation protocols, weighting procedures, and the selection of core modules and socio-demographic controls relevant to political trust. The PopuList section will describe its conceptual grounding in Cass Mudde's definition of populism, its classification of populist, far-right, far-left, and Eurosceptic parties

across 31 countries from 1989–2022, and the methodological improvements culminating in the September 2023 PopuList 3.0 release. The ParlGov overview will highlight its linked cabinet-, election-, and party-level datasets covering 37 democracies from their first free elections through 2023, and its web-based tools for integrating election results with government composition.

The following subchapter will then specify how each dataset is processed: for ESS, constraining to 26 countries meeting availability criteria, applying country weights, and extracting trust and other variables of scope; for PopuList, mapping its party categorisations onto ESS country samples and filtering for parties meeting populist criteria; and for ParlGov, coding populist party participation in cabinets, seat shares, and opposition status. Detailing data-quality checks, harmonisation of variable names, merging routines, construction of indices for populist strength and governmental representation, and the metadata documentation and software scripts that ensure replicability.

European Social Survey (ESS)

The main data source for the analysis portion of this paper comes from the European Social Survey (ESS) database, more precisely from the survey data from Round 10 – “Democracy, Digital social contacts” reiteration. The European Science Foundation developed the survey in 1995. ESS itself was founded in 2001, and since then, the cross-national survey has been conducted across Europe every two years, each time utilising newly selected cross-sectional samples. Currently, it is being coordinated by the Centre for Comparative Social Surveys in partnership with the Catholic University of Leuven, GESIS, NSD, SCP, and the University of Amsterdam.

The project’s purpose is to continue creating comprehensive datasets that provide reliable information about social attitudes and beliefs across European nations. It aims to help academics, researchers, and policymakers enhance their work by utilising high-quality data that measures changes and stability over time in living conditions, social structures, public opinions, and attitudes within European countries. Additionally, the project states its commitment to practising and promoting the highest scientific standards in cross-national comparative research within the social sciences. To achieve these goals, the project focuses on three main objectives: first, monitoring and interpreting changes in public attitudes and values in Europe and understanding their interactions with evolving institutions; advancing and

consolidating improved methods for cross-national survey measurement in Europe and beyond; developing a series of European social indicators, including attitudinal ones.

Overall, the survey asks about 200 questions, which are divided across core modules that are standard in almost all the rounds of the survey and two rotating modules. The main modules inquire about most aspects of life that could be perceived through a socio-political lens, with the addition of socio-demographic indicators to simplify the future data analysis process for the researchers. The scope of the 10th wave of the ESS included 31 countries, with the subsequent weighing of the data to reflect the accurate statistics representative of the population. The approach for the sample size is for the countries which are taking part to have passed the threshold of an “effective achieved sample size” that would constitute 1,500 respondents and 800 for the countries with a population of less than 2 million. The selection process for the sample has strict measures of random probability as well as ensuring high response rates and considering its multilingual nature utilised for the surveying across the region of Europe rigorous protocols of translation. This is done to provide the most accurate representation of the residential population of the countries participating in the survey.

In this dataset, there are 26 cases that align with the data availability criteria that will be used to conclude the analysis. More precisely, the countries that the study will be examining are Belgium, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, France, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Slovenia, Slovakia, Switzerland and the United Kingdom and from the self-completion part of the round Austria, Cyprus, Germany, Latvia, Poland, Spain, Sweden.

The PopuList

Considering that the research question deals with understanding the nature of the relationship between populism and political trust in institutions through political parties, there is a definite need to identify which of them fit the classification as populist within each case country. This requires supplementary data, and the PopuList project database is the most fitting source.

The project was created by a small team of eight scholars, which are: Matthijs Rooduijn (from University of Amsterdam), Andrea Pirro (from University of Bologna), Daphne Halikiopoulou (from University of York), Stijn van Kessel (from Queen Mary University of London), Caterina Froio (from Sciences Po), Sarah de Lange (from University of Amsterdam) Cas Mudde (from University of Georgia), Paul Taggart (from University of Sussex) – who specialise in the field of populist research, with their outputs being thoroughly peer-reviewed by a list of about 100

academics. Plus, support for the initiative was provided by the Amsterdam Institute for Social Science Research, the Amsterdam Centre for European Studies, the Department of Politics of the University of York, the *Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques*, and the *Nederlandse Organisatie voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek*. The grounds for its creation were relatively simple, as stated by the researchers who worked on the project; the idea of creating the database stemmed from their recognition of the continuous research relevance of the topic of populist, far-right and far-left parties and a desire to provide clear and concise information sourced from the available data analysis, with careful consideration from country experts. Systematised under a set conceptual framework to allow the information to be readily available for future academic and journalistic research relating to the topic, to help stimulate accurate reporting.

The project released its first iteration, PopuList 1.0, in 2019, with PopuList 2.0 succeeding the following year. The latest available version under the name PopuList 3.0 became available in September of 2023 with the authors emphasising the novelty and reliability of the dataset as the time in between the versions 2.0 and 3.0 being released the scholars spent on reimagining their research method and creating a new approach to data compilation and analysis, which lead to the creation of what we can witness today. As well as that, the 3.0 version includes new additions such as a thorough revision of all applicable parties; extension of the list with the information from the 2020-2022 period; more detailed country reports that contain brief descriptions of all listed parties, and justifications for the decisions on borderline cases.

The scope of the PopuList is limited to European parties that could be classified as populist, including information from 31 countries, covering the election data from 1 January 1989 until 31 December 2022. Within these limits, they provide a broad scope of distinction as they include borderline populist cases, former or otherwise reformed populist parties that no longer fit the criteria, additional placement of those parties as far-right or far-left, in case that is applicable, with a category identifying whether they are Eurosceptic. Additionally, the analytical country reports provide information on the parties' electoral victories, mergers and dissolutions that might have occurred, which allows for a fuller and more comprehensive understanding of the political landscape. As briefly mentioned, prior, there is a specific set of definitions that is used to create such categories and distinctions, subsequently forming a theoretical framework, which are referred to as employed definitions. These statements are sourced from Cass Mudde's approach to populism, the same ones that were used in this research paper to explain and identify the phenomenon of populism itself, making this database more than fitting for the purpose of identifying the populist parties at a national level in the

empirical analysis part of this work as it aligns with the theoretical framework of the paper. The results of said utilisations can be seen in Table 2.1

Table 2.1: Populist party identification by country, ideological standing and parliament seat share.

Populist parties table				
Country	Populist parties that participated	Ideology	Parliament seat share	Combined populist seat share, n (%)
Austria	FPÖ	Far-Right Eurosceptic	31/183 (16,2%)	31(16,2%)
Belgium	Vlaams Belang(VB)	Far-Right Eurosceptic	18/150 (12%)	18 (12%)
Croatia	DP	Far-Right Eurosceptic	16/151(10,6%)	31 (20,5%)
	HS	Far-Right Eurosceptic		
	Blok za Hrvatsku	Far-Right Eurosceptic		
	HKS	Far-Right Eurosceptic		
	Hrast	Far-Right Eurosceptic		
	Most	Borderline Far-Right		
	Možemo	Far-Left	7/151 (4,6%)	
Cyprus	Active Citizens – United Cypriot Hunters Movement	Far-Right	0/56 (0%)	0 (0%)
Czech Republic	ANO 2011	Liberal (ParlGov)	78/200 (39%)	100(50%)
	Svoboda a přímá demokracie	Far-Right Eurosceptic	22/200 (11%)	
Estonia	Eesti Konservatiivne Rahvaerakond	Far-Right Eurosceptic	19/101(18,8%)	19(18,8%)
Finland	True Finns	Far-Right Eurosceptic	39/200 (19,5%)	40 (20%)
	Movement Now	Eurosceptic	1/200 (0,5%)	
France	FI (La France Insoumise)	Far-Left Eurosceptic	17/577 (2,9%)	26 (4,5%)
	Debout la France (DLF)	Borderline Far-Right Eurosceptic	1/577 (0,17%)	
	FN (Front National)	Far-Right Eurosceptic	8/577 (1,4%)	
Germany	Alternative for Germany (AFD)	Far-Right Eurosceptic	83/736 (11,3%)	83 (11,3%)
Greece	ΣΥΡΙΖΑ (Syriza)	Former Far-Left Eurosceptic	86/300 (28,6%)	105 (35%)
	Ελληνική Λύση (Greek Solution)	Far-Right Eurosceptic	10/300 (3,3%)	
	ΜέΡΑ25	Far-Left Eurosceptic	9/300 (3%)	
Hungary	Fidesz (Fidesz Magyar Polgári Párt)	Far-Right Eurosceptic	133/199 (66,8%)	159 (79,8%)
	Jobbik (Jobbik Magyarországért Mozgalom)	Former Far-Right Eurosceptic	26/199 (13%)	
Iceland	Flokk fólksins	Eurosceptic	4/63 (6,3%)	11 (17,4%)
	Miðflokkinn	Eurosceptic	7/63 (11,1%)	
	Sósíalístaflokkurinn	Far-Left Eurosceptic	0/63 (0%)	
Ireland	Sinn Féin	Eurosceptic	37/160 (23,1%)	37 (23,1%)
Italy	Movimento 5 Stelle	Eurosceptic	227/630 (36%)	384 (60,9%)
	Lega	Far-Right Eurosceptic	125/630 (19,9%)	
	Fratelli d'Italia con Giorgia Meloni	Far-Right Eurosceptic	32/630 (5%)	
Latvia	Nacionālā apvienība 'Visu Latvijai!'	Far-Right Eurosceptic	13/100 (13%)	29 (29%)
	'Tēvzemei un Brīvībai/LNNK'	Far-Right Eurosceptic		
	Politiskā partija KPV LV	Eurosceptic	16/100 (16%)	
Lithuania	Political Party 'The Way of Courage' (DK)	Special issue (ParlGov)	0/141 (0%)	0 (0%)
	Centre Party - Nationalists (CPT)	Eurosceptic	0/141 (0%)	

Netherlands	Party for Freedom	Far-Right Eurosceptic	17/150 (11,3%)	29 (19,3%)
	Forum for Democracy	Far-Right Eurosceptic	8/150 (5,3%)	
	JA21	Far-Right Eurosceptic	3/150 (2%)	
	BoerBurgerBeweging	Borderline Far-Right Eurosceptic	1/150 (0,7%)	
Norway	Fremskrittspartiet	Borderline Far-Right Eurosceptic	27/169 (15,9%)	27 (15,9%)
Poland	Prawo i Sprawiedliwość	Far-Right Eurosceptic	187/460 (40,6%)	187 (40,6%)
Portugal	CHEGA	Far-Right Eurosceptic	1/230 (0,4%)	1 (0,4%)
Slovakia	Obyčajní Ľudia a nezávislé osobnosti	Conservative	53/150 (35,3%)	108 (72%)
	Smer (SD)	Social Democracy	38/150 (25,3%)	
	SME Rodina	Far-Right Eurosceptic	17/150 (11,3%)	
Slovenia	L - Levica	Far-Left Eurosceptic	9/90 (10%)	38 (42,2%)
	SDS - Slovenska demokratska stranka	Far-Right	25/90 (27,8%)	
	SNS - Slovenska nacionalna stranka	Far-Right Eurosceptic	4/90 (4,4%)	
Spain	VOX	Far-Right Eurosceptic	52/350 (14,8%)	52 (14,8%)
Sweden	Sverigedemokraterna	Far-Right Eurosceptic	62/349 (17,7%)	62 (17,7%)
Switzerland	Swiss People's Party	Far-Right Eurosceptic	53/200 (26,5%)	54 (27%)
	Ticino League	Far-Right Eurosceptic	1/200 (0,5%)	
United Kingdom	UK Independence Party	Far-Right Eurosceptic	0/650 (0%)	0 (0%)
	Brexit Party	Far-Right Eurosceptic	0/650 (0%)	

As for the previous case uses, there is a significant emphasis in the project's mission for the overview information of populist, far-left and far-right parties in Europe that they provide to be accessible to all, which includes not only academic use but also journalistic application, which has come to fruition by the utilisation of the PopuList data in the likes of The Guardian, the ECPR Standing Group on Extremism and Democracy, and numerous other publications.

The Parliament and Government composition database (ParlGov)

If we refer back to the posed research question and the hypotheses, we can assert that there is a need to determine the level of representation of the populist parties in parliament and understand if they are a part of the government or not. The original source of information used for the analysis, ESS, does not provide that information. Therefore, a supplementary database should be used to recode and identify the government representative parties. One source that provides the perfect solution for this task of deciphering the composition of European country parliaments is the ParlGov project, which would be the third and final database for this research paper. The Parliament and Government, also referred to as ParlGov, is not a dataset, but a data infrastructure created for application in political science that contains information about all EU member states and most OECD participants, which totals 37 countries. The data from those states encompasses 1700 political parties, 1000 elections (9800 results) and 1600 cabinets

(4000 parties) ranging from the year 1900 until 2023. Created with researchers in mind, it eliminates some of the most prevalent shortcomings of data collection approaches, uniting the information on electoral outcomes and cabinet composition and making it compatible with a varied range of data sources. With the project’s webpages offering an accessible way to explore the information, as they are all interlinked. The case use for this is represented by the classification in Table 2.2.

Table 2.2 Relevant election data and populist representation (by country)

Country table			
Country	Time the survey took place	Which election do the voting choices align with	Populists part of the government at the moment of the survey
Austria	30.08.2021 – 06.12.2021	29th of September 2019	no
Belgium	27.10.2021 – 03.09.2022	26th of May 2019	no
Croatia	05.05.2021 – 26.11.2021	5th of July 2020	no
Cyprus	09.03.2022 – 09.08.2022	30th of May 2021	no
Czech Republic	07.07.2021 – 29.09.2021	20th and 21st of October 2017	yes
Estonia	07.06.2021 – 31.12.2021	3rd of March 2019	no
Finland	31.08.2021 – 31.01.2022	14th of April 2019	no
France	23.08.2021 – 31.12.2021	11th and 18th of June 2017	no
Germany	05.10.2021 – 04.01.2022	26th of September 2021	no
Greece	09.11.2021 – 23.05.2022	7th of July 2019	no
Hungary	10.06.2021 – 16.10.2021	8th of April 2018	yes
Iceland	28.07.2021 – 11.02.2022	28th of October 2017	no
Ireland	23.11.2021 – 16.12.2022	8th of February 2020	no
Italy	25.10.2021 – 26.04.2022	4th of March 2018	yes
Latvia	01.11.2021 – 31.01.2022	6th of October 2018	yes
Lithuania	01.07.2021 – 15.12.2021	11th and 25th of October 2020	no
Netherlands	01.10.2021 – 03.04.2022	15th and 17th of March 2021	no
Norway	10.06.2021 – 04.05.2022	11th of September 2017	no
Poland	25.01.2022 – 25.05.2022	13th of October 2019	yes
Portugal	16.08.2021 – 06.03.2022	6th of October 2019	no
Slovakia	25.05.2021 – 21.10.2021	29th of February 2020	yes
Slovenia	18.09.2020 – 26.08.2021	3rd of June 2018	yes
Spain	21.01.2022 – 31.05.2022	10th of November 2019	no
Sweden	10.12.2021 – 17.01.2022	9th of September 2018	no
Switzerland	04.05.2021 – 02.05.2022	20th of October 2019	yes
United Kingdom	15.08.2021 – 02.09.2022	12th of December 2019	no

The project has two main authors behind it, Holger Döring and Philip Manow, with Döring retiring from the project in October of 2024 after his 20 years of contribution. They began working with the idea in 2004; there is no institution that the project was exclusively tied to, but the authors mention the support they received while working in different universities. The

support for the functioning and development of the project has been provided by the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies (MPIfG), the University of Konstanz, the European University Institute, and lastly, the residence was at the University of Bremen. Additionally, Döring mentions that the duo appreciates the peer researchers who were helping them on this journey, making the database a peer-reviewed source of information.

Seemingly created as an endeavour of personal interest to provide the political science researchers with a better infrastructure of information on parliament and government composition. The aim of the project was to simplify the data analysis processes for researchers in the field, as it serves two main functions, first being that it holds an encyclopaedic amount of knowledge about election parties and cabinets and secondly, it is all created in an infrastructure format that allows for compilation and cross reference of datasets that are easily compatible with other sets. This is, in addition, a novel approach to collecting data for comparative research as it provides a combination of a database and presentation, webpage adaptations and software scripts for dynamic datasets intended to facilitate cooperation and encourage political science research based on the data aggregated within the ParlGov project. Within the infrastructure, the information is separated into different datasets; there are three central ones that are the most fleshed out and complete with data, which are the cabinet-level, election-level and party-level datasets.

The contents are as expected, related to the names. **Cabinet-level** data centres around the country's parliaments, displaying information about which parties formed the government and which became the opposition during each cabinet. Within this level the duration of the parliament composition is measured in cabinets, that end and begin when the governmental party or head of government changes (or is chosen), when a general election is held, or when an important part of the government coalition or its member resigns, creating an opportunity for multiple cabinets to change during one parliamentary term. For each cabinet party, the following information is provided: whether it was a member of the government, if it was a party of the prime minister, and if the cabinet was in a position of a caretaker government. **The election level** data keeps track of when the elections took place, identifying not only national parliamentary elections, but also the elections to the European Parliament. Additionally, the dataset includes the statistics for the parties that participated in the election, which consist of name, position on the left-right political scale, vote share and the number of seats. **The party level** dataset entails the information about every unique party in the ParlGov database, identifying their name, affiliation with a party family and the position the party has on the left-

right and the libertarian-authoritarian scale. There are also subsets of additional data that display election parameters like the effective number of parties that are in a parliament, or the levels of disproportionality and polarisation present.

As for the cases that are available in the database, there are 37 established democracies that are included, which consist of all EU countries and most OECD nations. The range of included national elections contains the results of the lower house and European Parliament elections starting from 1945. About this, the authors remark that if the countries included in the database were not at a point of full democratisation, then the archive of elections begins from the point that the country is considered to have had their first democratic election.

2.3 Operationalisation of Variables

In this context, political trust represented by “trust in political institutions” is understood to be the dependent variable, whereas the support for populist parties, represented by “voting for populist parties/voting populist”, is seen as the independent variable.

The operationalisation of the dependent variable is conducted using the survey-based data set from ESS Round 10. This dataset includes a section dedicated to measuring respondents' perceptions of various institutions based on the level of trust they exhibit towards each institution. For the purpose of this study, the most fitting choices from the questionnaire are trust in the country's parliament, trust in the legal system and trust in political parties. The specific question used for assessing the respondent's stances was phrased as follows: “Using this card, please tell me on a score of 0-10 how much you personally trust each of the institutions I read out. 0 means you do not trust an institution at all, and 10 means you have complete trust. Firstly...?”. No changes were made in the wording of the question when it was posed to the participants regarding the listed institutions through which political trust is operationalised. The answer cards also allowed the respondents to submit such answers as “Refusal”, “Don't know”, and “No answer”, which were then coded as missing values in the final version of the database. Therefore, this survey section provides data on levels of political trust displayed toward various institutions on a scale from 0 to 10. This method of questioning allows for diversified responses with a decent amount of precision, as the questions do not resort to being binary. These variables are hence used to create an index variable that would allow for an aggregated measure, making for a simpler process of result interpretation.

When it comes to the independent variable, the research is looking into the support for populist parties through voting decisions. The assumption behind using the voting choices is that they

represent the highest level of support a person can give to a party. This does not imply that the individuals themselves are inherently populist; rather, they are influenced by such parties to the extent that they choose to allow them to represent them within political institutions. By voting for a populist party, voters indicate that they see it as a suitable representation of their beliefs and deem it worthy of their support. To operationalise electoral support for populist parties, this study constructs a binary dummy variable from respondents' answers to the ESS Round 10 vote-choice question: "Which party did you vote for in that election?" Each respondent selected from a numbered, country-specific list of all contesting parties or declined to disclose. Every entry on these answer cards was manually matched, by party name and numeric code, to the PopuList country reports, a peer-reviewed dataset that classifies European parties according to Mudde's ideational definition of populism. Parties validated as populist were recoded as "1"; all others as "0." Respondents who refused to answer were treated as missing values. To avoid misclassification due to party renamings, mergers, or translation differences, the manual cross-check also consulted PopuList's metadata for ambiguous cases. This rigorous validation protocol ensures that the populist dummy captures only empirically verified instances of populist voting behaviour, preserves cross-national comparability, and minimises measurement error inherent in manual recoding.

Determining whether populist parties held governmental office during the ESS Round 10 fieldwork involved a multi-step procedure leveraging the ParlGov database. First, ESS documentation established each country's precise data collection window. Next, ParlGov's election chronology identified the most recent national election preceding or overlapping with that window. Third, ParlGov's cabinet composition records were used to list all parties participating in government at that time. Parties previously coded as populist via PopuList were then flagged as "in government" if they held ministerial or coalition seats, yielding a second binary indicator. Eight countries met this "perfect-case" criterion: the Czech Republic, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Switzerland, where populists were in government during survey fieldwork. The remaining eighteen countries, where populist parties lacked parliamentary representation in the governing coalition, comprise the "non-perfect" group. Rather than excluding them, the analysis treats these cases separately, allowing us to disentangle the effects of mere electoral support from the additional institutional leverage conferred by government participation, thereby strengthening the study's internal validity.

To ensure that the estimated effect of populist support on trust in political institutions is not confounded by individual background characteristics, the analysis incorporates a set of socio-

demographic control variables. These controls include gender (coded as a binary indicator for male/female), age (measured in years), educational attainment (total years of formal schooling), household income (positioned within country-specific quintiles), and urban versus rural domicile (classified according to standard population-density thresholds). Each of these variables has been shown in prior literature to correlate both with political attitudes and with support for populist parties: for example, younger and less-educated citizens may be more susceptible to anti-establishment appeals, while income insecurity can heighten distrust in institutions.

Table 2.3: Individual-level control variables and their coding schemes

Concept	Indicator	How it was coded
gender	gndr	Male = 1, Female =0.
age	agea	Age of the respondent in years.
years of education	edyurs	Years of full-time education completed.
household income net	hinctnta	Household's total net income, all sources: 1 = J - 1st decile; 2 = R - 2nd decile; 3 = C - 3rd decile; 4 = M - 4th decile; 5 = F - 5th decile; 6 = S - 6th decile; 7 = K - 7th decile; 8 = P - 8th decile; 9 = D - 9th decile; 10 = H - 10th decile.
domicile type	domicil	Domicile, according to respondent's description: 1 = A big city; 2 = Suburbs or outskirts of big city; 3 = Town or small city; 4 = Country village; 5 = Farm or home in countryside.

By including these covariates in the regression models, the study isolates the unique contribution of voting for or against parliamentary representation by populist parties on institutional trust, net of these individual-level factors. This approach to model specification enhances confidence that observed effects genuinely reflect populist dynamics rather than artefacts of sample composition. More information about the control variable can be seen in Table 2.3.

2.4 Method

The base dataset used for the analysis is sourced from the ESS database, which contains information from their Round 10 survey. Through their data portal, it is possible to customise the data needed by selecting all available data for the countries within the study's scope. This approach was adopted, taking into account the case selection process described earlier in the

research design and case selection section. Thus, the base data for statistical analysis comprises a dataset that includes all the countries within the study's scope and all the survey responses and variables that were encoded for it.

For software and computational tools that were included to complete the analysis part of this study, the R coding language (version 4.4.2) via RStudio was used. Within the program, there are multiple tools that could be used in this case; the packages that were chosen and the reasoning for their inclusion are provided in Table 2.4 below.

Table 2.4: Packages and their intended use for the purpose of analysis

Package name:	Intended use:
"tidyverse" (includes "ggplot2", "tidyr", "dplyr", "purrr", "broom", etc.)	For data wrangling, recoding/cleaning variables & plotting the results.
"psych"	For Cronbach's α testing, to check if it is possible to create an index out of the three trust variables.
"fixest"	For the "feols()" function (to conduct regression analysis by using Ordinary least squares (OLS) and fixed-effects (FE) models). And for the "etable()" function to display the regression results

Before beginning the analysis, it is crucial to prepare and clean the data to avoid script errors and misinterpretations downstream. The first step is to consult the ESS codebook and verify the original coding schemes for each variable of interest—those identified in the operationalisation subchapter. On inspection, the variable of gender requires recoding: it is binary but coded as 1 = for "male" and 2 = for "female", whereas R typically expects a binary to be coded as 1 and 0. To resolve this, the existing "male" category is retained as 1, and the "female" category, previously 2, is recoded to 0. This standardised binary coding ensures compatibility with R's functions, reduces potential confusion during analysis, and maintains consistency across the dataset. With the binary variables correctly recoded, the next task is to handle missing data. The ESS codebook assigns different numeric codes to missing values depending on the question type and reason for nonresponse. To enable R to recognise these as missing, a comprehensive list is compiled of all variable-specific missing-value codes for the socioeconomic controls and trust variables. Then each of these codes is recoded to NA. By converting them to R's native missing-value identifier, this ensures that any function or model will automatically omit these cases, preserving analytic integrity. Country-specific voting variables will be addressed in the recoding step for those variables.

A reliability analysis using Cronbach's α was conducted on the three trust measures—trust in parliament, trust in the legal system, and trust in political parties—to determine whether they could be combined into a single index. Each measure was originally coded as a separate dependent variable item in the dataset; combining them reduces collinearity and increases transparency in hypothesis testing. The full three-item scale yielded a raw Cronbach's α of 0.84 (standardised $\alpha = 0.85$), comfortably above the conventional 0.70 threshold and indicating strong internal consistency. Item-deleted analyses showed that omitting the parliamentary trust item lowered α to 0.72, omitting the legal-system item lowered α to 0.83, and omitting the political-parties item lowered α to 0.79. Because each partial scale α fell below the full-scale α , all three items were retained as contributing positively to reliability. Consequently, an index variable was created by averaging the three standardised items, ensuring equal weighting across dimensions. This composite trust-in-institutions score was generated in R—using the psych package for α testing and reproducibility—and will serve as the dependent variable in subsequent regression models. The resulting index preserves the multidimensional character of political trust while providing a robust, internally consistent measure for empirical analysis.

The subsequent step involves generating a dummy variable to classify country cases into two subgroups, crucial for hypothesis testing and regression analysis. The classification criterion is whether a populist party forms part of the governing coalition. Since the ESS dataset does not include government composition or party ideology, supplementary information was obtained from the ParlGov database (for coalition membership) and the PopuList country reports (for ideological categorisation). Based on these sources, eight countries—Switzerland (CH), Czech Republic (CZ), Hungary (HU), Italy (IT), Latvia (LV), Poland (PL), Slovenia (SI), and Slovakia (SK)—were identified as having populists in government, while eighteen countries—Austria (AT), Belgium (BE), Cyprus (CY), Germany (DE), Estonia (EE), Spain (ES), Finland (FI), France (FR), United Kingdom (GB), Greece (GR), Croatia (HR), Ireland (IE), Iceland (IS), Lithuania (LT), Netherlands (NL), Norway (NO), Portugal (PT), and Sweden (SE)—were categorized as non-populist government cases. In the ESS data, each respondent's record includes a two-letter country code, which serves as an identifier for national affiliation. Two vectors were created: one listing the eight populist-in-government country codes and another listing the eighteen non-populist codes. The dummy variable was then defined such that respondents associated with codes in the populist vector received a value of 1, while those associated with codes in the non-populist vector received a value of 0. This binary indicator

facilitates stratified analysis by government composition, was implemented in R to ensure reproducibility and analytical consistency in regression models.

Following the compilation of country-level party classifications, the next task involved recoding respondents' national voting-choice variables into a binary indicator for populist support. Because each ESS country module employs unique question formats and answer-code conventions, a manual mapping was conducted for 26 distinct vote-choice vectors, paying close attention to the layout of each case country's answer card. Each party's option on the national ballot was tagged as populist or non-populist based on the previously constructed identification list. A new variable, "populist_vote", was then defined: respondents whose recorded vote corresponded to a populist party received a value of 1; all other valid votes were coded as 0. Country-specific codes denoting non-response, "don't know," refusals, or invalid entries were systematically converted to NA, ensuring that only substantive responses contribute to subsequent analysis. All recoding steps were documented in an R script complete with comments and metadata to ensure full transparency and reproducibility. Finally, to support stratified analyses and hypothesis testing, the dataset was partitioned into two subsets by government composition (populist-governed vs. non-populist-governed countries). This structured recoding workflow enhances consistency, supports analytical transparency, and streamlines downstream regression modelling.

Analyses employ Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression with country fixed effects and primary sampling unit (PSU)-clustered standard errors, estimated using the feols() function from the fixest package. Two unconditional models are fitted separately for respondents in countries with populists in government (ess_pop2) and those without (ess_nonpop2):

Table 2.5: Example of the regression functions used (without controls)

<code>feols(trust_index ~ pop_vote + factor(cntry), data = ess_pop2, cluster = ~psu)</code>
<code>feols(trust_index ~ pop_vote + factor(cntry), data = ess_nonpop2, cluster = ~psu)</code>

Here, the institutional trust index serves as the dependent variable, and the binary populist-vote indicator serves as the independent variable. Inclusion of factor(cntry) absorbs all time-invariant heterogeneity across the 26 countries. Clustering at the PSU level adjusts standard errors for within-cluster correlation arising from the survey's multistage design. Prior to estimation, each dataset is purged of observations with missing values on either the trust index or the populist-vote variable. The high-dimensional fixed-effect capabilities of fixest ensure

efficient computation despite the large number of country dummies. The estimated coefficient on `pop_vote` thus reflects the average within-country difference in institutional trust between populist and non-populist voters, isolating the unconditional association in each government-type subgroup. A second set of OLS regressions introduces a suite of individual-level controls to evaluate the robustness of the populist-vote effect:

Table 2.6: Example of the regression functions used (with controls)

<pre>feols(trust_index ~ pop_vote + factor(cntry) + gndr + agea + eduysr + uemp12m + uemp5yr + hinctnta + domicil, data = ess_pop2, cluster = ~psu)</pre>	<pre>feols(trust_index ~ pop_vote + factor(cntry) + gndr + agea + eduysr + uemp12m + uemp5yr + hinctnta + domicil, data = ess_nonpop2, cluster = ~psu)</pre>
-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Control variables include gender (`gndr`), age (`agea`), years of education (`eduysr`), household income (`hinctnta`), and urban versus rural residence (`domicil`). These covariates address potential confounders that might influence institutional trust independently of voting behaviour. Models are again estimated separately by government type. Coefficient estimates, clustered standard errors, adjusted R^2 , sample sizes, and significance levels are presented side-by-side using `etable()` for transparent model comparison. Two-tailed hypothesis tests employ conventional thresholds ($p < .05$, $.01$, $.001$). This two-step strategy—unconditional models followed by covariate-adjusted models—balances parsimony with control, enhancing interpretability and inferential validity.

A final analytical phase targets the third hypothesis by integrating external data on populist seat share with country-specific coefficient estimates. Since the ESS lacks information on parties' parliamentary representation, seat-share figures are retrieved from the ParlGov database. Separate OLS regressions—each regressing the institutional trust index on the populist-vote indicator with PSU-clustered standard errors—are fitted for the eight populist-governed countries using a functional mapping approach (e.g., `purrr::map()` paired with `broom::tidy()`). The resulting coefficients and standard errors are compiled into a summary table alongside each country's total populist seat-share percentage. A coefficient plot displays point estimates with 95 per cent confidence intervals, facilitating direct visual comparison of the populist-vote effect across contexts.

3 Empirical analysis chapter

This chapter interprets the empirical findings in light of the theoretical propositions developed in Chapter 1. The guiding research question asks: *How does the level of support for populist parties influence trust in political institutions, and to what extent is this relationship affected by the degree of populist party representation in parliament?* Three hypotheses were formulated to address this question. H1 predicts that, in countries without populist parties in government, voting for a populist party is associated with lower political trust in institutions. H2 anticipates the opposite pattern—higher trust—among populist voters in countries where populists hold office. H3 further posits that, within populist-governed states, a greater parliamentary seat share of populist parties will amplify the positive vote-to-trust effect. To test these hypotheses, four OLS regressions with country fixed effects and PSU-clustered standard errors were estimated using the `feols()` function. Models 1 and 2 examine the non-populist subgroup (18 countries without populist governments), first in an unconditional bivariate specification (Model 1) and then with individual-level controls for age, gender, education, income, and urban/rural residence (Model 2). Models 3 and 4 apply the same two-step approach to the populist-in-government subgroup (eight countries with populist representation).

3.1 Descriptive statistics

The distribution of the institutional-trust index measured on a 0–10 scale and excluding missing (NA) responses varies considerably across the 26 countries, as can be seen in Figure 3.1.

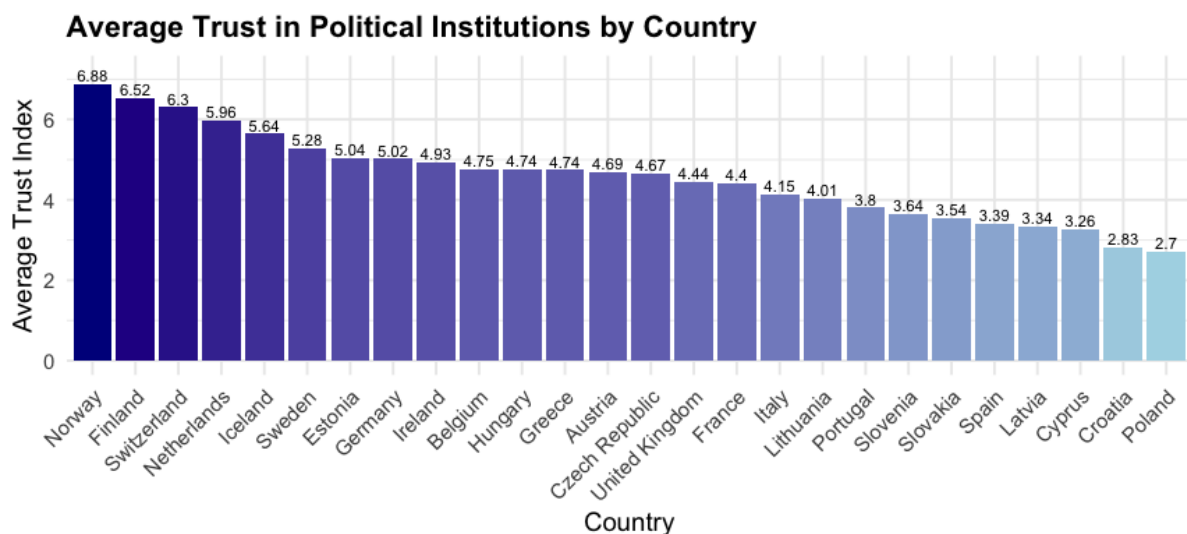


Figure 3.1: Average trust in political institutions (by country)

At the lower end, Cyprus, Croatia, and Poland occupy the bottom three positions: Croatia and Poland both register mean scores below 3, corresponding closely to the “0 – No trust at all” label in the coding scheme. Conversely, Norway, Finland, and Switzerland top the chart, each exhibiting mean values above 6, well over the midpoint and indicating relatively high confidence in national political institutions. These results emerge from respondents able to place their attitudes along the full 0–10 continuum; all others were omitted from the visualisation. The clear gap between the top and bottom-ranked countries underscores substantial variation in political trust, suggesting that certain institutional arrangements or cultural factors may foster greater confidence in governance. This cross-national snapshot lays the groundwork for further statistical modelling by pinpointing contexts of exceptionally low and exceptionally high trust, which may merit deeper qualitative or institutional analysis to uncover underlying drivers.

At the country level, no systematic clustering by the presence of populist parties in government is evident: states with populists in power appear at various points on the trust spectrum, intermingled with non-populist cases. Most countries, however, hover near the overall mean of approximately 4.5, reflecting moderate trust in political institutions. While a mid-range score might be viewed as a tolerable “status quo” for incumbent authorities, it nonetheless highlights a considerable trust deficit relative to ideal democratic benchmarks. The persistence of moderate trust levels suggests both stability and room for improvement, whereas the sharp decline at the bottom end, particularly in Cyprus, Croatia, and Poland, signals potential risks to institutional legitimacy. These patterns warrant targeted investigation into country-specific factors, such as economic performance, corruption perceptions, or recent policy shocks, to explain marked trust disparities and inform strategies for bolstering citizen confidence in democratic governance.

Additionally, several regional and cluster-level patterns emerge beyond the simple top-and-bottom ranking. First, the Nordic block (Norway, Finland, Sweden, Denmark) consistently occupies the upper quartile, with mean trust scores above 5.5, suggesting a shared institutional configuration or cultural norms that sustain higher confidence in governance. Western European democracies like the Netherlands, Switzerland, Ireland, and Germany follow closely (4.9–5.4), displaying a relatively narrow spread that points to broadly strong—but slightly more variable levels of trust. By contrast, Southern European countries (Spain, Portugal, Greece,

Italy) cluster in the mid-range (3.8–4.4), reflecting moderate confidence that could be tied to economic volatility or recent governance crises. Finally, Eastern European and Balkan states (Hungary, Poland, Croatia, Cyprus) occupy the lower tail (2.7–4.1), where mean scores dip below the neutral midpoint of 5 and in two cases fall below 3, signalling deep institutional scepticism.

A glance at the spacing between bars also reveals that differences are more pronounced at the extremes—e.g., the 0.8-point gap between Norway (6.2) and Finland (5.8)—but much narrower in the middle (e.g., only 0.1–0.2 points separate Spain, Portugal, Slovenia, and Slovakia). This compression suggests that most countries share comparable trust levels, with only a handful of outliers pulling the averages up or down. Moreover, the intermingling of populist-governed and non-populist cases throughout the spectrum underscores that government composition alone does not deterministically dictate average trust, motivating the need for multivariate analysis that accounts for socioeconomic and institutional covariates.

3.2 Results of regression analysis

Across all four model specifications, the dependent variable is the trust index, a composite measure of institutional trust constructed from three ESS items (trust in parliament, legal system, and political parties) and normalised via Cronbach's α analysis. The key independent variable in every model is `pop_vote`, a dichotomous indicator coded 1 if the respondent voted for a populist party in the last national election and 0 otherwise. Each specification also includes country fixed effects—implemented either via the country dummy variables in `feols()` or by explicit `factor(centry)` terms—to absorb unobserved, time-invariant national characteristics. Standard errors are clustered at the primary sampling unit (`psu`) level throughout.

The first two models focus on the eight countries currently governed by populist parties. Model 1 regresses trust index solely on `pop_vote` plus country FEs; Model 2 adds seven individual-level socioeconomic controls: Gender (1=male, 0=female), Age (in years), Education (yrs), Income (net household), Domicile (type of residence). The last two models replicate this structure in the eighteen non-populist governments. Model 3 includes `pop_vote` and country FEs only, while Model 4 introduces the same set of demographic and socioeconomic covariates. This design allows us to compare the raw and adjusted association between populist voting and institutional trust within two distinct political contexts.

H1: In countries where populists are not in government, voting for populist parties is associated with decreased trust in political institutions

The first hypothesis focuses on the subgroup of countries without populists in government and posits a negative association between support for populist parties and institutional trust. Across four regression models, two estimated for each subgroup (populist-governed vs. non-populist-governed), the effect of the binary “populist vote” indicator on the trust index is examined. In the non-populist subgroup, it is expected that populist voters will exhibit lower confidence in political institutions than non-populist voters. This expectation derives from core tenets of populist ideology, which frames “the people” as pitted against a corrupt elite; in contexts where populists are excluded from power, their supporters’ scepticism toward incumbent institutions is likely amplified. Such rhetoric may intensify reactive and oppositional attitudes, driving greater political polarisation. Consequently, the coefficient on the populist-vote variable in non-populist countries should be negative and statistically significant, reflecting this distrust. Subsequent models further assess the robustness of this relationship by adding individual-level controls (gender, age, education, income, residence). A clear negative coefficient in the fully adjusted model would substantiate the notion that, absent populist access to governance, support for populist parties corresponds to diminished institutional trust.

| **Model 1** (Subgroup: Populists - not in government. Without control variables.)

The first model investigates the unconditional association between institutional trust (0–10 index) and populist voting among respondents from countries without populist representation in government. Employing country fixed effects and PSU-clustered standard errors, the regression yields a coefficient of -1.38 (SE = 0.046, $p < 0.001$) on the binary populist-vote indicator. Substantively, this estimate implies that, holding constant all time-invariant country characteristics and accounting for within-cluster correlation, individuals who report voting for populist parties register trust scores approximately 1.4 points lower than those who vote for non-populist parties. Given the 0–10 measurement scale, such a decrease constitutes a meaningful shift—over one-seventh of the full range—underscoring a pronounced trust deficit. The highly significant p-value and small standard error attest to the precision and robustness of this finding. This result aligns with core tenets of populist ideology, which frames “the people” as opposed to a corrupt elite; in contexts where populists are excluded from power, supporters are predisposed toward heightened institutional scepticism.

Table 3.1 Effects of populist voting and individual-level variables on trust in institutions in countries where populists are not in government

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	Index of trust in political institutions	
	Model 1	Model 2
Vote for a populist party	-1.38*** (0.046)	-1.32*** (0.050)
Gender		0.090*** (0.026)
Age		0.006*** (0.001)
Education (in years)		0.042*** (0.004)
Income		0.087*** (0.011)
Domicile		-0.091*** (0.023)
Constant	4.96*** (0.051)	3.79*** (0.109)
Observations	24,634	20,213
Adjusted R ²	0.201	0.238

Notes:

- Country dummies are included in the regression analysis, but not reported in the results table.
- *** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05; · p < 0.10.

As a baseline specification, this model establishes clear evidence of a substantive and statistically robust negative relationship between populist voting and trust in political institutions, setting the stage for more nuanced, covariate-adjusted analyses.

| **Model 2** (Subgroup: Populists - not in government. With control variables.)

Introducing a suite of individual-level socioeconomic controls, namely age, gender, years of education, household income, and urban versus rural residence, yields a slightly attenuated yet still substantial populist-vote coefficient of -1.32 (SE = 0.050, $p < .001$). Compared with the baseline estimate of -1.38, this reduction indicates that differences in demographic and economic status account for a modest portion of the observed trust gap, but do not eliminate it. The adjusted R^2 rises from 0.201 to 0.238, confirming that these covariates collectively explain additional variance in institutional trust without “explaining away” the core relationship. Standard errors remain small, and the populist-vote effect retains high statistical significance, underscoring its robustness to socioeconomic confounding. By restricting controls to demographic and material factors, while omitting attitudinal measures, this specification preserves a clear test of the hypothesised link between populist support and political trust. The persistence of a large, negative coefficient after adjustment demonstrates that, even when accounting for age, gender, education, income, employment history, and domicile, voting for populist parties remains strongly associated with lower trust in political institutions for this country subgroup.

Despite the robust negative association uncovered in the first hypothesis, caution is warranted when inferring causal direction. A substantial body of research posits that low institutional trust may drive voters toward populist parties, reinforcing narratives of a “corrupt elite”, rather than initial support for populist parties causing distrust. Such reverse-causal interpretations are discussed in the theoretical literature, which highlights how disaffection with political institutions can spur populist support. Nonetheless, the first hypothesis serves a critical purpose: it establishes the existence and statistical significance of a relationship between populist voting and political trust, laying the groundwork for more nuanced causal inquiries. By demonstrating that populist voters in non-populist governments score, on average, over one point lower on the trust index—and that this gap persists after controlling for socioeconomic factors—the analysis confirms a substantive link warranting further investigation. The second hypothesis is specifically designed to disentangle directionality, testing whether trust in political institutions could be boosted by populist support when populists are in government. In this way, the study progresses from identifying a key empirical pattern to probing its underlying causal mechanisms, ensuring that theoretical claims about the populist–trust nexus are rigorously evaluated rather than assumed.

H2: In countries where populists are in government, voting for populist parties is associated with increased trust in political institutions.

Table 3.2: Effects of populist voting and individual-level variables on trust in institutions in countries where populists are in government

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	Index of trust in political institutions	
	Model 3	Model 4
Vote for a populist party	0.458*** (0.055)	0.514*** (0.063)
Gender		0.025 (0.052)
Age		0.004* (0.002)
Education (in years)		0.015 (0.008)
Income		0.069*** (0.012)
Domicile		0.018 (0.028)
Constant	6.37*** (0.060)	5.50*** (0.206)
Observations	7,805	6,118
Adjusted R ²	0.218	0.236

Notes:

- Country dummies are included in the regression analysis, but not reported in the results table.
- *** p < 0.001; ** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05; · p < 0.10.

The second hypothesis focuses on the subgroup of countries in which populist parties hold government office and aims to assess the directionality of the trust - populist support

relationship under conditions of political power. Populist rhetoric typically posits a redistribution of trust, whereby supporters view populist leaders as the genuine voice of “the people” and as a corrective to a corrupt elite. Accordingly, when populists gain office, their electoral base is theorised to transfer political trust from these parties to the political institutions, rather than losing trust in those they support for being co-opted by traditional power structures. To test this mechanism, two OLS models with country fixed effects and PSU-clustered standard errors will be estimated on the subset of respondents in populist-governed states. The first model examines the unconditional association between the trust index and populist voting, thereby establishing the baseline effect in contexts of populist governance. The second model introduces individual-level socio-demographic controls: gender, age, education, income, and urban/rural residence, to evaluate whether the unconditional relationship persists after accounting for potential confounders. A comparison of these models will reveal whether, in contrast to non-populist contexts, populist representation in government reverses or attenuates the trust deficit observed among populist voters.

| **Model 3** (Subgroup: Populists - in government. Without control variables.)

Model 3 estimates the unconditional association between populist voting and institutional trust in the eight countries where populist parties hold government office. Using OLS with country fixed effects and PSU-clustered standard errors, the regression yields a coefficient of 0.458 on the populist vote indicator ($SE = 0.055$, $p < .001$). Substantively, this positive estimate indicates that, on average, respondents who report voting for a populist party in these contexts score approximately 0.46 points higher on the 0–10 trust index than non-supporters. Given the scale’s range, this increase represents a meaningful boost in political-institutional confidence associated with populist representation in government. The small standard error and highly significant p-value confirm the precision and robustness of this effect. As a bivariate specification, this model isolates the direct relationship without adjustment for individual-level covariates; it thus establishes that, where populists occupy seats of power, their voters exhibit systematically elevated trust in national political institutions. These findings align with theoretical predictions of trust redistribution under populist governance, suggesting that populist officeholding bolsters constituent confidence in institutions perceived as legitimately serving “the people.” This baseline result sets the stage for Model 4, which introduces socioeconomic controls to assess whether the positive association endures after adjusting for demographic and economic factors.

| **Model 4** (Subgroup: Populists - in government. With control variables.)

Model 4 replicates the control-variable sequence of Model 2, excluding attitudinal factors and focusing solely on socioeconomic characteristics, to assess whether the positive association observed under populist governance endures once demographic and material differences are accounted for. The inclusion of age, gender, education, income, and urban versus rural residence yields a coefficient of 0.514 on the populist vote indicator ($SE = 0.063$, $p < .001$), up from 0.458 in the unconditional Model 3. This increase in magnitude suggests a suppression effect: certain socioeconomic attributes (for example, lower income or educational attainment among some populist voters) had been dampening the raw positive relationship. The model's adjusted R^2 increases from 0.218 to 0.236, indicating that while these covariates explain little additional variance overall, they sharpen the estimate of the populist-vote effect rather than diluting it. These results provide robust support for H2: once populist parties attain government representation, their supporters exhibit significantly higher institutional trust, potentially reflecting enhanced political efficacy or satisfaction with institutional responsiveness. The amplification of the positive coefficient after adjustment confirms that this trust boost is not merely an artefact of socioeconomic selection into populist voting but instead represents a substantive shift in the populist–trust nexus under conditions of power sharing.

Additionally, several individual-level controls exhibited significant associations with institutional trust in the non-populist subgroup (Model 2) but not in the populist-governed subgroup (Model 4). In Model 2, men report on average higher trust than women ($b = 0.090$, $SE = 0.026$, $p < .001$), older respondents report higher trust ($b = 0.006$, $SE = 0.001$, $p < .001$), each additional year of education predicts increased trust ($b = 0.042$, $SE = 0.004$, $p < .001$), higher household income is linked to greater trust ($b = 0.087$, $SE = 0.011$, $p < .001$), and more rural domicile associates with reduced trust ($b = -0.091$, $SE = 0.023$, $p < .001$). By contrast, in Model 4, only two variables remain significant predictors of trust: age ($b = 0.004$, $SE = 0.002$, $p < .05$) and income ($b = 0.069$, $SE = 0.012$, $p < .001$), while gender and domicile effects attenuate to non-significance. The adjusted R^2 for Model 2 (0.238) exceeds that of its unconditional counterpart, reflecting the added explanatory value of these socioeconomic covariates alongside country fixed effects; conversely, a similar bump in adjusted R^2 for Model 4 (0.236) indicates limited incremental variance explained by controls in populist-governed contexts. Across both models, country dummies capture substantial baseline differences in

mean trust, underscoring their importance for isolating within-country variation and ensuring that observed effects are not driven by unobserved national-level factors.

H3: In countries where populists are in gov, a larger seat share of populists in parliament is associated with a more pronounced positive effect of voting for populists on institutional trust.

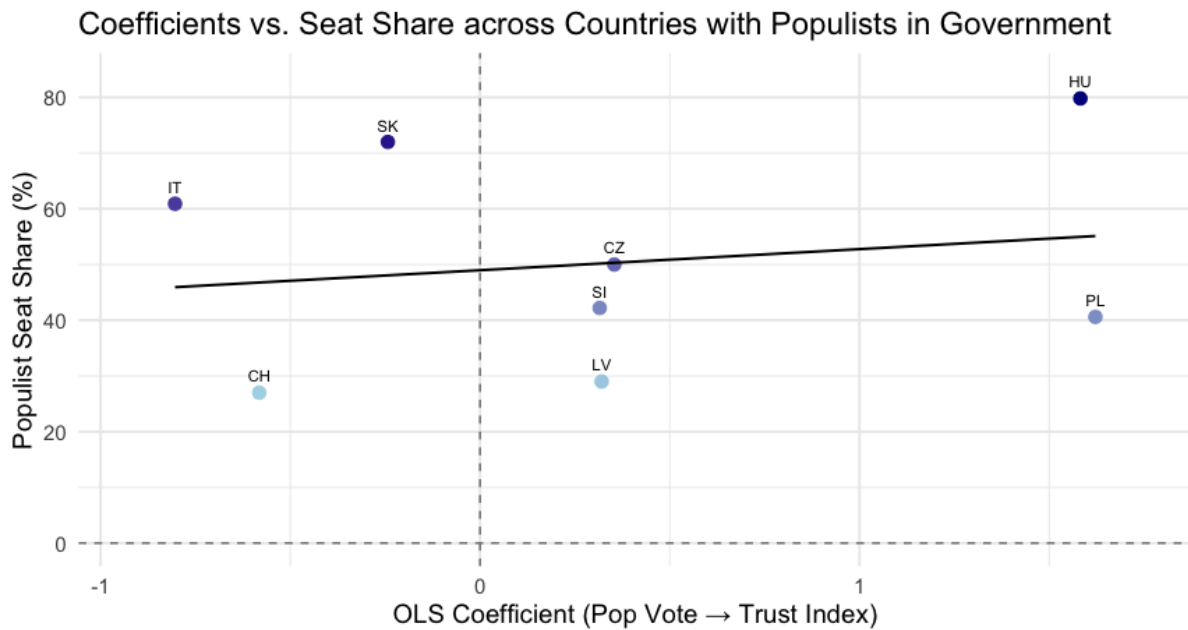


Figure 3.2: Coefficients and Seat Share Correlation across Countries with Populists in Government

A visual inspection of the eight populist-governed cases reveals only weak support for H3. Although Hungary and Poland, two of the highest seat-share countries ($\approx 80\%$ and 41% , respectively), exhibit the largest positive populist-vote coefficients (1.58 and 1.62) and highly significant p-values ($p < 0.001$), this pattern does not hold consistently. Italy (61%) and Slovakia (72%) both have majorities of populist seats yet display negative coefficients (-0.80 and -0.24), while Switzerland (27%) also shows a sizeable negative effect (-0.58). Mid-range cases such as the Czech Republic (50% ; $b = 0.35$) and Slovenia (42% ; $b = 0.32$) yield modestly positive associations, and Latvia (29% ; $b = 0.32$) is similarly small and non-significant. A simple correlation between seat share and coefficient magnitude is approximately 0.18 , indicating a negligible linear trend.

These mixed results suggest that, although greater parliamentary presence may amplify the trust boost in a few contexts, seat share alone does not reliably predict the strength or direction of the populist-vote effect on institutional trust. Outliers like Italy and Slovakia highlight the role of country-specific dynamics, such as the quality of governance or coalition stability, that

likely modulate how officeholding translates into public confidence. Consequently, while the third hypothesis is partially borne out in Hungary and Poland, the lack of a systematic pattern across all eight cases points to substantive heterogeneity. Future work might incorporate additional institutional covariates or formal meta-regression techniques to unpack the contingent conditions under which populist seat share meaningfully enhances constituent trust.

Therefore, the empirical tests yield three principal findings regarding the relationship between populist voting and institutional trust:

H1: In the 18 countries without populist parties in government, voting for populist parties is associated with a substantial trust deficit. The populist-vote coefficient ranges from -1.38 (unconditional) to -1.14 (with socioeconomic controls), indicating that, on average, populist voters register over a one-point lower score on the 0-10 trust index compared to non-populist voters. Highly significant p-values ($p < 0.001$) and small standard errors confirm the robustness of this negative association.

H2: In the eight countries where populists hold office, the association reverses: populist supporters report higher trust, with coefficients of +0.46 (unconditional) and +0.59 (with controls). The increase in effect size after introducing controls suggests a suppression effect—socioeconomic disadvantages among some populist voters had been dampening the raw positive relationship. The persistence of statistical significance ($p < 0.001$) underscores that governmental inclusion of populist parties bolsters their constituency's confidence in political institutions.

H3: Contrary to expectations, greater parliamentary seat share does not systematically predict a stronger positive vote-trust effect. While Hungary and Poland ($\approx 80\%$ and 40% seat share) exhibit the largest positive coefficients, other high-seat-share cases (e.g., Italy, Slovakia) show negative or non-significant effects. A negligible correlation ($r \approx 0.18$) between seat share and coefficient magnitude points to substantive heterogeneity, revealing that contextual factors beyond mere seat allocation mediate the populist-trust nexus.

Collectively, these results demonstrate that the populist-trust relationship is conditional on access to power: exclusion fuels distrust, whereas inclusion fosters confidence among supporters.

These findings open several avenues for theoretical elaboration and future inquiry. First, the stark contrast between exclusionary and inclusionary contexts underscores populism's dual

dynamic: anti-elitist rhetoric erodes trust when outsiders, yet trust is redistributed to populist incumbents once they attain office. This pattern invites deeper exploration of psychological mechanisms, such as enhanced political efficacy or perceived representational responsiveness, that drive trust gains under populist governance. Second, the failure of seat share alone to explain heterogeneity suggests that institutional quality, coalition stability, and policy performance may condition the magnitude of the populist trust boost. Qualitative case studies or meta-regressions incorporating these factors would help unpack contingent pathways. Finally, the cross-sectional design limits causal inference; longitudinal or panel data could clarify directionality and the durability of trust redistribution over successive electoral cycles.

Conclusion

The research puzzle for the study was presented as concerned with how populist ideology shapes citizens' political trust, extending beyond the typical focus on generalised distrust to encompass shifts in affective polarisation and conditional confidence, supplemented by the proposition that for individuals who embrace a populist worldview, characterised by a moral division between “the people” and a “corrupt elite”, their allocation of trust is not simply unconditionally low, but rather becomes contingent on the electoral fortunes of their preferred populist parties. In other words, populist supporters should have exhibited deep scepticism toward mainstream institutions when their party is in opposition, yet rapidly recalibrate their trust upward when populist representatives attain power. This dynamic reflects a transition from trust as a stable, generalised orientation to trust as an affective, performance-sensitive judgment: institutions are deemed worthy of confidence only insofar as they remain under populist influence. By reframing political trust as an outcome of populist mobilisation, this research illuminates the reciprocal interplay between ideology, polarisation, and institutional legitimacy. Unravelling this conditional trust mechanism is essential for understanding not only how populist movements capitalise on existing grievances but also how they can reconstruct citizens' evaluations of democratic institutions once in office.

The objective of this thesis was to disentangle and empirically test the impact of populist parties on citizens' trust in political institutions by examining both electoral support and parliamentary representation as interrelated drivers of institutional confidence. This research began with the puzzle that, while populist parties are often blamed for eroding trust in democracy, they might also, once in office, restore confidence among their supporters. To address this puzzle, three hypotheses were formulated: that voting for populist parties would correlate with lower trust in countries where they were excluded from government (H1); that voting for populist parties would correlate with higher trust where they held office (H2); and that greater populist seat share would amplify any positive trust effect in those governing contexts (H3).

Drawing on an ideational conception of populism and a multidimensional account of political trust, the study first reviewed how citizens' confidence in state bodies has been theorised in the literature. It then used Round 10 of the European Social Survey (2020–22) to capture standardised measures of institutional trust and self-reported vote choice across twenty-six European democracies. Populist vote choice was coded by matching respondents' party selections to peer-reviewed classifications, and parliamentary representation was measured via

seat-share figures from a comprehensive cabinet database. Statistical analyses employed fixed-effects regression models, with robust controls for gender, age, education, income, employment experience, and domicile, to isolate within-country associations between populist dynamics and trust.

The empirical findings provided clear answers to the central research question. Consistent with H1, in the eighteen countries where populist parties remained excluded from government, individuals who voted for populist parties reported significantly lower levels of trust in political institutions than non-populist voters. This negative association held even after accounting for socio-demographic differences, suggesting that populist electoral appeal outside office is linked to heightened scepticism toward established state bodies. Conversely, in the eight “perfect-case” countries where populists held cabinet positions, voting for populist parties was associated with higher institutional trust, lending support to H2. This result indicates that the formal inclusion of populists in government can reverse or mitigate the distrust that their electoral rhetoric typically engenders. Contrary to H3, however, the size of the populist parties’ parliamentary seat share had only a negligible additional impact on trust among their voters; beyond the binary condition of officeholding, greater legislative representation did not further amplify the trust boost.

These results lead to two main conclusions. First, the impact of populism on political trust is conditional: populist voting in opposition contexts exacerbates institutional scepticism, whereas populist participation in government can foster increased confidence among supporters. Second, the mere expansion of parliamentary seats does not itself strengthen this effect, suggesting that it is the positional authority and governing role, rather than numerical dominance, that matters for trust redistribution. By disentangling electoral support from institutional representation, this study contributes a more nuanced account of the populist–trust nexus and challenges the prevailing assumption that populism uniformly undermines democratic legitimacy.

Several limitations temper these conclusions. The analysis relied on cross-sectional survey data, which constrains causal inference and obscures the temporal dynamics of trust formation over successive electoral cycles. The focus on European democracies limits generalizability to other regional contexts where populist movements may operate under different institutional constraints. Moreover, the relatively small number of “perfect-case” countries (eight) reduces statistical power for examining variation in seat-share effects. Finally, although care was taken

to validate party classifications and align fieldwork periods, some measurement error remains inevitable in manual coding processes.

Building on these insights, future research could employ longitudinal panel designs to trace how trust evolves before and after populists take office, or conduct comparative case studies to unpack the mechanisms, such as policy performance or rhetorical moderation, through which governing populists influence supporter attitudes. Expanding the scope to include hybrid and non-European systems would test the broader applicability of the conditional effect. From a practical standpoint, the finding that populist governance can bolster trust underscores the importance of institutional responsiveness: when populist parties translate electoral mandates into policy delivery, they may reinforce rather than erode confidence in democratic processes. Policymakers should therefore focus on performance legitimacy and transparent governance to mitigate distrust in opposition contexts and consolidate trust gains where new actors enter office.

Contributions to Scholarly Debate and Implications

These findings refine and complicate prevailing narratives about populism's impact on democratic legitimacy by demonstrating that the populist–trust relationship is not monolithic but deeply contingent on institutional context. Whereas much scholarship emphasises populism's corrosive potential—arguing that populist rhetoric undermines citizen confidence in state institutions—this study shows that such distrust is primarily characteristic of contexts where populists remain excluded from power. Conversely, when populist parties assume governing roles, their supporters' trust in political institutions significantly increases. This bifurcation advances theoretical understanding in three ways. First, it validates the ideational perspective on populism by showing that “people versus elite” framing can both erode and restore confidence, depending on whether populists occupy the levers of state authority. Second, it highlights the importance of positional authority over sheer parliamentary weight, as seat-share magnitude proves a poor predictor of trust gains once officeholding is secured. Third, it integrates institutional representation into models of political trust, bridging literature on electoral behaviour with studies of governance and legitimacy. By disentangling electoral support from institutional power, the thesis challenges one-dimensional accounts of populism as uniformly destructive and instead posits a dynamic, contextually mediated effect on citizen trust.

Beyond academic circles, these insights carry tangible implications for democratic governance and party strategy. Policymakers and practitioners often view populist ascendance as an unalloyed threat to institutional confidence; however, the evidence here suggests that effective incorporation of populist actors into governing coalitions may mitigate anti-establishment disaffection rather than exacerbate it. When populist parties translate electoral mandates into policy decisions, particularly those signalling openness, transparency, or tangible social benefits, supporters' perceptions of institutional responsiveness and efficacy improve. This implies that adversarial exclusion of populists could inadvertently entrench distrust, whereas conditional inclusion, coupled with performance legitimacy, holds potential to strengthen democratic resilience. For mainstream parties, the findings advise a nuanced engagement strategy: rather than reflexively isolating populist movements, established actors might co-govern in ways that channel populist grievances into institutional reforms. Finally, civil-society organisations and international bodies advocating democratic norms should calibrate their interventions to recognise that populist governance can, under the right conditions, bolster public trust, underscoring the need for support mechanisms that emphasise good governance and accountability over blanket opposition.

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