



# Voices unheard: How feelings of inefficacy fuel populism

Caner Şimşek<sup>1,2</sup>

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## Abstract

How do populist voters differ from other voters and among themselves? I argue that the commonality of populist voters is a perceived sense of political inefficacy. The feelings of inefficacy interact with grievances, which determine the party choice. Using the European Social Survey data, I show that when grievances are cultural, voters are more likely to vote for a right-wing populist party. In the same manner, economic grievances make left-wing populist voting more likely. Furthermore, I show that negative effect of political efficacy on populist voting declines as grievances become more severe. Thus, while grievances determine the type of populism, political efficacy determines the vote choice between populist parties and their alternatives.

**Keywords** Populism · Populist voting · Political efficacy · Grievances · Interaction · Moderation

## Introduction

What explains the remarkable electoral success of populist parties? The recent literature on the causes of populism has converged on two explanations: the economic insecurity thesis, which underlines the role of financial stress and the cultural backlash thesis, which underlines fears of cultural displacement (Inglehart and Norris 2016). While the economic arguments mainly emphasize large transformations in the workforce resulting in mass precarity, the cultural arguments emphasize the reaction to various progressive and post-materialist values. While helpful in explaining populist success in some contexts, these arguments cannot on their own fully explain the populist phenomenon. In particular, there are at least three problems. First, if labor-market insecurity

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✉ Caner Şimşek  
csimsek2@uni-muenster.de

<sup>1</sup> 224 Pond Laboratory, Department of Political Science, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA 16802, USA

<sup>2</sup> Universität Münster, Institut für Politikwissenschaft, Scharnhorststraße 100, D-48151 Münster, Germany



was the driving force, why did voters not migrate to left-wing parties that traditionally own this issue? One would not expect a surge on the authoritarian right, whose policy positions are not likely to alleviate the insecurity (Kitschelt and McGann 1997). While purely economic explanations cannot account for this irregularity, cultural explanations suggest that issues of community and identity outweigh economic grievances (Oesch 2008). Second, cultural explanations are largely based on advanced Western societies that have observed a shift toward emancipative values and experienced an influx of immigrants. Populism is prevalent in countries, such as Turkey, where those factors are weak or do not produce similar results. The populist incumbent enjoyed several electoral victories after allowing unrestricted immigration from neighboring Syria. Such explanations are limited in their ability to explain populism outside the developed world. In addition, cultural shifts that have taken place for decades do not really inform us about the timing of the upsurge. The silent revolution took place in the 60s and 70s (Inglehart 1977), yet the upsurge is very recent. Third, there are too many anomalies that resist explanation by these theories, such as working-class people endorsing policy positions that go against their economic interests (Cramer 2016) or the increasing appeal of populism among young people (Heiss and Matthes 2017). I propose an alternative explanation that is able to address these problems.

I argue that financial stress or fear of cultural displacement are not irrelevant for populist voting, but they alone are not what unite populists. I argue that the populist upsurge is not motivated by mild disagreements about tariffs or immigration policy but by a deeper frustration that stems from not being able to influence political processes. To better make sense of the populist upsurge, I employ Weber's (1922 [1978]) theory of stratification which emphasizes three dimensions: economic class, social status and power. Economic class and social status correspond respectively to economic and cultural explanations of populism. I claim that Weber's third dimension, power (efficacy as it is used in the paper) is a more decisive factor in explaining populism.

Apart from grievances, economic or cultural, populists share the perception that citizens are not allowed to have a say in the political decision-making process. I argue that this subjective feeling of political inefficacy is the commonality of populist voters. The choice between populist parties and their alternatives is a function of how politically efficacious an individual feels. Inefficacious individuals are more likely to vote for populist parties and the lack of efficacy exacerbates the effect of grievances for a great majority. Efficacious individuals, in general, are less likely to migrate to populist parties even when they have grievances as they feel that they are able to address those grievances. Sources of grievances, whether they are financial stress or fears of cultural displacement, determine whether populism will take a right-wing or left-wing turn. Financial stress, or economic grievances as I call them, lead to more left-wing populist voting. Fears of cultural displacement, or cultural grievances, have the same effect on right-wing populist voting.



## Causes of populist revolt

Although populism still remains an essentially contested concept, the recent scholarship on the subject has shown an increased consensus on the ideational definition offered by Cas Mudde:

*A thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, "the pure people" versus "the corrupt elite," and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale of the people.* (Mudde 2004, 543).

Thin-centered ideologies are those that do not offer comprehensive ideas to solve all the major social problems (Freeden 1996). Since they do not have a fully developed agenda of their own, they can be easily combined with other more comprehensive ideologies. Mudde and Kaltwasser (2012, 2) argue “which ideological features attach to populism depend upon the socio-political context within which the populist actors mobilize.”

The support for populist parties has increased globally in recent years (Moffitt 2016). Naturally, their growth has attracted considerable attention from many scholars across different disciplines. Since I am mainly interested in finding out the commonality between populist voters and how such voters are different from other voters, I will focus on the demand-side explanations which explore the motives for voting for populists.

The demand-side explanations put the emphasis on individual preferences, values and opinions (Akkerman et al. 2014; Ronald Inglehart and Norris 2016; Golder 2016; Guiso et al. 2017). The most common explanation for mass support for populism under this category is the increasing economic insecurity that causes a reaction among the poorer and less fortunate segments of the society. The insecurity is the direct result of the integration of world markets, which has benefitted capital owners and undermined the status of the working class (Autor et al. 2016; Colantone and Stanig 2018). The top one percent obtained the lion's share of the gains while poorer segments find it increasingly difficult to make ends meet (Stiglitz 2012). Combined with stagnating real wages, the automation process and manufacturing jobs sent overseas, globalization has created a considerable number of losers (Frey et al. 2018). It has contributed to anti-establishment and nativist feelings of those who are worse off and populist movements have been successful at mobilizing groups with such feelings (Betz 1994; Lubbers et al. 2002). Facing the imminent globalization threat to their lives, the poorer segments of the society have closed ranks behind a leader who would fight for them. These arguments are commonly employed when explaining the rise of rightwing populist parties especially in Europe. Such parties have attacked the governments for stagnating or even diminishing living standards, insufficient social safety nets and their “decaying” societies (Halla et al. 2017). They attributed the misfortunes of their constituencies to immigrants who took their jobs and contributed to the erosion of national identity. Voters across the ideological spectrum have migrated to populist parties which promised to restore the former prosperity again.



Another distinct yet related explanation on the demands side is the cultural backlash thesis (Norris and Inglehart 2019). According to this account, rise of populism is in response to substantial cultural transformation that has taken place in developed societies. The so-called silent revolution (Inglehart 1977), the shift toward post-material values such as cosmopolitanism, triggered a counter-revolution among old generations, white men and less educated populations who embraced the populist agenda in reaction to such progressive values (Golder 2016). Data from various surveys, most notably the World Values Survey, consistently noted a trend of advanced industrial societies continuously becoming more tolerant about deeply controversial issues such as abortion or gay marriage (Inglehart et al. n.d.). Those who are born in affluent societies with a secure environment are more likely to accept cultural diversity than their parents who in general had an upbringing that involved more hardships (Inglehart 1997). This trend has resulted in displacement of traditional values by progressive values. For instance, the idea of marital role of women as homemakers gave way to the idea of mutual substitution of men and women. Moreover, young people value multiculturalism more and express more support for supranational institutions (Inglehart 1990). Silent revolution of post-industrialization and the post material values, it brought about alienated the people who embrace the material or traditional values the most: men, older generations and the less educated. These people feeling angry and lost, in turn have embraced the populist ideas (Ignazi 1992).

Above explanations both have their merits and are plausible. However, they also leave us with difficult questions. For instance, the literature on the material origins of populism do not fully explain why we have observed a surge in the right-wing populist parties vis-à-vis others. Or the cultural backlash hypothesis does not explain the strong appeal of populists among young people. For instance, in the 2017 French presidential elections, Mélenchon, a populist candidate, got almost one third of the vote cast by voters who were 24 years of age or younger while an estimated 44 percent of the same age group voted for another populist, Le Pen, in the run-off (*France 24* 2017). The current explanations do not offer satisfactory and comprehensive answers as to why populist upsurge is running throughout the world.

## Theoretical framework

The inability to adequately explain the populist upsurge calls for a move beyond explanations based on material interest or cultural displacement. Actors are not necessarily driven by and act according to their material interests (Akerlof and Kranton 2005; Shayo 2009; Rodrik and Mukand 2018). Interests are not the only basis that sets people apart. Weber (1922 [1978]) distinguishes three bases for social stratification: economic class, social status and political power. According to Weber, economic class is determined by the material resources that individuals have; social status is by the prestige they enjoy in the society, and political power is by their ability to achieve their goals despite opposition. “The people,” as the populism literature uses it, is associated with low economic status, social inferiority as well as political impotency (Laclau 2005; Pappas 2017; Stavrakakis et al. 2018). Perhaps



not coincidentally, these three correspond to the three bases of Weberian stratification. For instance, populism is argued to rise in response to economic inequalities when individuals feel left behind by economic policies. Yet, these arguments cannot account for previously mentioned anomalies, and they are certainly not common to all populists. Moving beyond a focus on economics, perhaps looking at the latter two, namely social status and political power, can help.

Social status, as defined by Weber, refers to the relative honor, prestige and respect that individuals enjoy in a society. Weber argues that actions of groups are better explained when their styles of life are taken into account, rather than purely in economic terms, since those actions reflect a sense of belonging. Goode (1978) argues that people care deeply about being respected and valued members of a society and they want their worth to be publicly recognized. Populism scholars have recently started to pay attention to the role of group dominance in explaining the populist upsurge. Gidron and Hall (2017) consider status anxiety as a proximate factor leading to support for right-wing populist parties. They argue that economic and cultural factors interact to augment status anxiety and it is men without college education who are more likely to suffer from this anxiety. In particular, the election of Donald Trump has been explained by threats to white dominance in the USA (Mutz 2018; Pettigrew 2017; Womick et al. 2018). When the dominance of a group is threatened, this triggers defensive reactions. The group members develop attitudes to reclaim the dominance such as outgroup hostility. Indeed, populist leaders aim to tap on status concerns, promising to address worries over cultural shifts.

If status was really key to understanding their motivations, however, we would expect other low-status individuals, such as immigrants themselves, to support populist candidates and movements. This is obviously not the case. Furthermore, status does not seem to be an end by itself. Typically, individuals do not pursue a higher status for its own sake. Rather, they think prestige is instrumental in achieving their goals. Then, we need to look at the last base of stratification, which is political power.

Power can be defined as the ability to influence the behavior of others or to achieve goals despite opposition. All three bases of Weberian stratification are highly correlated. A wealthy individual is more likely to acquire power or vice versa. Yet, power is the main base of stratification as the other two bases revolve around it. Classes determine the economic order of the society and status groups do the same for the social order. Parties, which determine the political order according to Weber (1922), are organizations of power. They may represent the interests of both social classes and status groups, and they strive to acquire political power to influence the decision-making process in the society. Interests of the different classes and status groups interact in the political sphere as they compete for more power.

It is possible to understand populism as the cry of the politically powerless. That means individuals who support populist movements are more likely to think that they are left out of the decision-making process. Indeed, many populist leaders use a rhetoric of taking the power from the corrupt elite and handing it back to the people. The very definition of populism calls attention to political efficacy. The sense of powerlessness leads to frustration and breeds alienation from and distrust toward traditional political institutions. Populist movements, by positioning themselves as



outsiders challenging the status quo, capitalize on this distrust and offer a sense of empowerment that can change the perceived corrupt system.

In the political arena, power manifests itself as influence over decision-making processes. The distribution of power, in turn, affects how meaningfully individuals can participate in the political process. If individuals think that they are excluded from the process, they will have lower political efficacy. Populism then surfaces when the elites have disproportionately high power at the expense of ordinary people. This sense of inefficacy is the driving force behind populist movements through which the people take on the establishment and reclaim a sense of agency.

Campbell et al. (1954) describe political efficacy as the feeling that actions of the individuals can impact the political process. More contemporary studies distinguish between two dimensions of political efficacy: internal efficacy, which pertains to being competent enough to participate in the process, and external efficacy, the feeling that the process is amenable to individuals' actions (Moy 2008). In my framework, frustration is possible and even likely when factors beyond their control prevent individuals from addressing their concerns. While my understanding of efficacy aligns more closely with external efficacy in this sense, it goes beyond participation and also considers trust and satisfaction dimensions. In other words, my efficacy scale captures not only ability to participate but also whether individuals are content with that ability.

I argue that perception of political inefficacy is an important source of frustration, and it is what unites the bases of populist movements. Feelings of political inefficacy foster a belief that individuals' voices and actions are inconsequential in the political arena. This disempowerment can lead to resentment, frustration and a yearning for alternative leadership that promises to restore agency and influence. Populists all around the world often tap into this sense of powerlessness by promising empowerment. Populist rhetoric, whether right-wing or left-wing, primarily emphasizes the corrupt elites who have hijacked the decision-making process and blocked the input of the people. Frustrated social groups whose voices go unheard are called upon by the populist entrepreneurs to unite and effectively take on the establishment that stands as an obstacle in the way of political participation. Mounting an effective campaign against the establishment would result in being able to influence the decision-making.

The underlying factor that unites populist voters is a subjective sense of political inefficacy. The choice between populist and non-populist parties hinges on an individual's perceived political efficacy. Those who feel politically efficacious are less likely to gravitate toward populist parties, even when they hold grievances. Conversely, individuals with low political efficacy are more susceptible to populist appeals. This is the first hypothesis to be tested:

**Efficacy hypotheses** *As individuals feel more politically inefficacious, they are more likely to vote for a populist party.*



## From grievances to action

The concept of grievances is used rather loosely in the literature. The first point of ambiguity is that many scholars do not specify whether the grievances they refer to are at the individual or the group levels. Grievances can be at both levels, though Gurr (1993, 2000) focuses on grievances at the group level. Secondly, grievances can be perceived and subjective or real and objective. While some studies view grievances as objective (Collier and Hoeffler 2004), I argue that perception matters more. The most important reason for this is that expectations of groups might differ significantly. In other words, deprivation can be relative to different groups. In fact, groups do not need to compare themselves with other groups. The group itself at another point in time can be the basis of comparison. Thus, grievances, as I refer to them, are subjective and at the group level.

Political exclusion itself can be a grievance. However, to isolate the effect of political efficacy, which is common to all populism, from the specific issue grievances that give populism its distinctive character, I refrain from referring to political exclusion as a grievance. Where does the political inefficacy originate from then? Why do people feel that they do not have any influence in the decision-making process? To answer these questions, one first needs to realize the conflict between globalization and democracy. A couple of years after the socialist regimes collapsed in Eastern Europe without a major war, Fukuyama (1993) notoriously announced “the end of history.” He argued that Western-style liberalism with its capitalist mode of production won a decisive victory against its only viable alternative. As early as the mid-80s, scholars who work on transition to democracy have started to emphasize the role of political elites (O’Donnell et al. 1986; Przeworski 1991). Merkel (2010) calls such accounts that consider elites as the deciding factor in the transition “action theory.” Democracy was deemed possible everywhere when elites agree to democratize. Action theory became dominant in transition research at the expense of modernization theory which emphasized the socioeconomic requisites of democracy. These ideas went beyond the academic circles and informed ambitious policies of democracy promotion (Merkel 2010). As Krastev and Holmes (2018) convincingly argue, resentment toward liberal democracy and its obligatory institutions and practices were the main impetus for the populist wave in Eastern Europe among other places. The new liberal democrat orthodoxy and its refusal to even acknowledge any other alternatives have led to alienation and frustration, which in turn have contributed to feelings of inefficacy. A bit more than two decades later, the optimism has faded. Populists everywhere are rioting and rejecting liberal democracy and its associated economic institutions. What should be clear after all the populist victories is that “the people” want to be in control. They want to be bound by the rules of their making, not by the ones imposed from outside.

How did the grievances that populists have come about? Economic and cultural grievances overlap to a great extent, yet they are represented by different narratives. I argue that the direction of populist sentiment, whether left-wing or right-wing, is determined by the type of grievance driving it. Financial hardships, or economic



grievances, tend to push individuals toward left-wing populism. Conversely, cultural anxieties, or cultural grievances, fuel support for right-wing populism.

Globalization spreads at the expense of domestic democratic space where citizens voice their policy preferences. It also requires standardization and harmony, which means restrictions on national sovereignty. Rodrik (2012) presents a political impossible trinity where it is not possible to have democracy, globalization and national sovereignty at the same time. One of them has to be sacrificed. The aggressive push for globalization in recent decades has resulted in increasingly forgoing the other two. Liberal democracy has been imposed on countries where no significant value change took place (Krastev and Holmes 2018). This aggressive push for multiculturalism and diversity created cultural grievances and resulted in a backlash. This mismatch between what populist voters want and what their governments have done is most clearly observed in the issue of immigration. A myriad of studies consistently showed that concern over immigration is the single best predictor of right-wing populist support (Hainmueller and Hopkins 2014). Though anti-immigration can be considered to be the unique selling point of right-wing populist parties, they also emphasized various issues such as erosion of traditions and family values.

I argue that feelings of inefficacy interact with grievances to produce support for populist parties and political efficacy plays a moderating role in the impact of grievances. As grievances become more prominent, the negative effect of political efficacy on populist voting decreases. The efficacy hypothesis suggests that an increase in political efficacy reduces the probability of populist voting. However, the impact of efficacy is not uniform across the spectrum of grievances.

At lower levels of efficacy, individuals are already more inclined toward populist parties. As political efficacy increases, individuals require stronger grievances to align themselves with populist parties. In other words, grievances become more influential in determining populist support as efficacy levels rise. Thus, the marginal effect of grievances should be higher as political efficacy increases. I further argue that the negative effect of political efficacy should diminish in the presence of strong grievances. For instance, an individual with staunch anti-immigrant views may be less swayed by their sense of efficacy, as their strong anti-immigration stance already predisposes them toward right-wing populism. In other words, how efficacious the individual feels should matter less since a strong anti-immigration stance already makes that individual very likely to vote for a right-wing populist party. This leads to the following set of predictions:

**Cultural grievances hypotheses** *An increase in cultural grievances has a positive effect on probability of voting for a right-wing populist party. This positive effect is larger when political efficacy is high. An increase in efficacy reduces probability of voting for a right-wing populist party. This negative effect is smaller when cultural grievances are high.*

In a similar vein, the reforms that globalization necessitates left large segments of the society economically worse off. This can be justified in the name of greater efficiency but when the gains are not distributed fairly and those who





are worse-off are not compensated, serious economic grievances emerge (Stiglitz 2012). Rising income inequality and issues it brought about have been widely emphasized by many left-wing populist movements all over the world.

The interplay between efficacy and cultural grievances in influencing right-wing populist voting should be similar to that between efficacy and economic grievances in influencing left-wing populist voting. In other words, the marginal effect of economic grievances should be higher as political efficacy increases. Furthermore, when individuals have stronger economic grievances, the negative effect of political efficacy on left-wing populist voting should be smaller. This leads to the following predictions:

**Economic grievances hypotheses** *An increase in economic grievances has a positive effect on probability of voting for a left-wing populist party. This positive effect is larger when political efficacy is high. An increase in efficacy reduces probability of voting for a left-wing populist party. This negative effect is smaller when economic grievances are high.*

In summary, higher political efficacy reduces the likelihood of populist voting. Political efficacy moderates the impact of grievances on populist voting. As grievances become more significant, the usual negative influence of political efficacy on populist voting weakens.

## Data

I test the hypotheses by relying on the European Social Survey (ESS) Round 8 and 9 data.<sup>1</sup> First, to explore how populist voters differ from others, I classify parties into six categories: mainstream right, mainstream left, populist right, populist left, far right and far left. Our main interest is in understanding the differences between populist and non-populist voters. However, as robustness checks, it is desirable to divide these two large groups into subgroups. To decide which parties are populist, I rely on the PopuList, a classification proposed by Roodujin et al. (2020). The PopuList is, in my view, the most complete and up-to-date classification of populist parties. It also has been peer-reviewed by more than 80 scholars. The classification also includes far right and far left parties. In the frequent case that a party is both populist and far right, it was coded as a right-wing populist party. The examples include Freedom Party of Austria, United Kingdom Independence Party and Jobbik in Hungary. Similarly, a party that is both populist and far left was coded as

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<sup>1</sup> The data collection for ESS 8 started in 2016 and the 2.1 edition of the dataset that I use made available in December 2018. The data collection for the ESS 9 started in 2018 and the 1.2 edition made available in January 2020. The reason I only pool data from the ESS 8 and ESS 9 is that political efficacy questions about system responsiveness were incorporated to the main questionnaire starting from the ESS 8. The combined dataset includes observations from Austria, Bulgaria, Belgium, Cyprus, Czechia, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and United Kingdom.



left-wing populist party. Examples include France Unbowed and Podemos in Spain. Note that this coding scheme allows for a populist party that is neither left-wing nor right-wing. Five Star Movement in Italy, for instance, is one such party.

Far right parties that are not populists is an extremely limited category; I only identify 4 such parties in this study: Vuzrazhdane in Bulgaria, National Popular Front in Cyprus, Tricolor Flame Social Movement and CasaPound in Italy. Far left parties that are not populists are more numerous. Examples include the French Communist Party and Hungarian Worker's Party. The mainstream parties were coded according to their overall left–right score in Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) 2014 and 2017. The overall left–right score is between 0 and 10 with lower values denoting left-wing parties and higher ones denoting right-wing parties. The cutoff point between left-wing and right-wing parties is 5. In the rare case when a party is not in the PopuList or the CHES, I relied on secondary sources available on the Internet. This mostly involved visiting the Wikipedia article of the party in the original language and using Google Translate to infer its ideological position. Such cases that required my judgment are reported in the “Online appendix” and excluding them does not change the findings.

The main response variable is declared vote for populist parties, which is a dichotomous variable with a value of 1 if the respondent declares voting for a party classified as populist and 0 otherwise. Likewise, additional dichotomous dependent variables were created to allow comparisons between different type of parties. Out of 33,598 individuals in the sample, around 43.3 percent voted for the mainstream right and around 32 percent voted for the mainstream left. Right-wing populists were the third most numerous group with 13.5 percent compared to around 3 percent left-wing populists. The far-left voters were 3.3 percent, and there were only 13 individuals who declared voting for a party that is deemed far right by this study.

The political efficacy, cultural and economic grievances variables are all latent variables that manifest themselves on different batteries of questions. I use the standardized factor scores in the analysis. The political efficacy battery includes questions about ability to participate in politics, system responsiveness, satisfaction with the democracy in a country. Cultural grievances battery asks about immigration attitude, whether gays and lesbians are free to live as they wish and how important it is to follow customs and traditions. Economic grievances battery measures the feelings about household's income, satisfaction with the economy and whether government should reduce income inequality. The ESS variables that went into creating the latent variables can be found in the “Online appendix”. It is often claimed that voter bases of populist parties are mostly made up of those without higher education, old people and men (Arzheimer and Carter 2006; Ronald Inglehart and Norris 2016; Gidron and Hall 2017). Thus, in addition to efficacy and grievances variables, the most commonly employed predictors of populist vote are included in the analysis as control variables: education level, age, gender and income. Educational attainment is measured in terms of years of full-time education completed, while income is assessed based on total household income, considering all sources of income.



## Results

To test the efficacy hypothesis, I run a base logit model where the dependent variable is a vote for populist parties. My theory predicts that inefficacious individuals should be more likely to vote for populist parties, implying that political efficacy variable should be significant and negatively signed. To ensure that this relationship is not driven by a subset of populists, I run two additional models with the same specification but the dependent variables are declared vote for right-wing populist party in one model and declared vote for left-wing populist party in another. My theory predicts that the effect of political efficacy should be similar across three models. To test the effect of grievances, I add interaction terms to these additive models. My theory predicts that having more cultural grievances increases the probability of voting for a right-wing populist party and having more economic grievances increases the probability of voting for left-wing populist party. Both effects should be larger when individuals feel politically more efficacious.

Table 1 shows regression estimates for all 6 logit models estimated with country dummies.<sup>2</sup> First model is an additive one (without interaction effects) where the dependent variable is declared vote for populist parties (right-wing and left-wing populist parties combined). Thus, in this model I compare all populists to all non-populists. The first model is consistent with the efficacy hypothesis. Political efficacy is strongly and negatively related to voting populist; people who do not think political system allows people have influence on politics are more likely to vote for populist parties. When we run the same model for right-wing and left-wing populists separately (models 2 and 3), the relationship remains the same. Thus, the suggested relationship is not driven by a subset of populists.

Figure 1 illustrates the predicted probabilities of voting for populist parties from Model 1 at different levels of political efficacy. Consistent with the efficacy hypothesis, the probability of voting for a populist party goes down as political efficacy increases. As models 2 and 3 demonstrate, the effect of efficacy is consistent for both right-wing and left-wing populist voting.

Both interactions of economic and cultural grievances with political efficacy are statistically significant, indicating that the effect of grievances on populist voting depends on the value of political efficacy. It does not, however, tell us how substantial this conditional effect is. In their influential paper, Brambor et al. (2006) suggest using marginal effects plots to reveal such conditional effects. The left plot in Fig. 2 shows the marginal effect of cultural grievances on the propensity to vote

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<sup>2</sup> Country dummies were included to address the suspicion that there might be unobserved and therefore omitted variables that are correlated with the IVs and to control for such biases. The analysis was carried out with complete observations after deleting all the observations with missing data in the variables of interest. The standard way to deal with missing values have been using multiple imputation (King et al. 2008). Yet, a growing literature suggests that listwise deletion is not problematic as we had previously thought (Allison 2014). Particularly, Pepinsky (2018) shows that when data are missing not at random, which is likely to be the case with our data, multiple imputation leads to more biased and inefficient results compared to listwise deletion.



Table 1 Populist versus non-populist comparison

	Populist additive (1)	RW populist additive (2)	LW populist additive (3)	Populist interaction (4)	RW populist interaction (5)	LW populist interaction (6)
Political Efficacy	-0.185*** (0.020)	-0.208*** (0.023)	-0.396*** (0.042)	-0.264*** (0.020)	-0.314*** (0.025)	-0.371*** (0.045)
Economic Grievances	0.049** (0.022)	-0.082*** (0.027)	0.306*** (0.044)	0.084*** (0.023)	-0.020 (0.028)	0.356*** (0.048)
Cultural Grievances	0.322*** (0.018)	0.576*** (0.022)	-0.346*** (0.038)	0.390*** (0.019)	0.631*** (0.023)	-0.291*** (0.043)
Efficacy*Economic				0.060*** (0.015)	0.110*** (0.018)	0.065** (0.030)
Efficacy*Cultural				0.223*** (0.016)	0.177*** (0.019)	0.094*** (0.034)
Gender	-0.284*** (0.032)	-0.303*** (0.038)	-0.384*** (0.068)	-0.288*** (0.032)	-0.306*** (0.038)	-0.387*** (0.068)
Income	-0.046*** (0.007)	-0.030*** (0.008)	-0.075*** (0.014)	-0.044*** (0.007)	-0.028*** (0.008)	-0.073*** (0.014)
Education	-0.046*** (0.005)	-0.071*** (0.006)	0.001 (0.010)	-0.044*** (0.005)	-0.069*** (0.006)	0.002 (0.010)
Age	-0.017*** (0.001)	-0.016*** (0.001)	-0.014*** (0.002)	-0.017*** (0.001)	-0.016*** (0.001)	-0.014*** (0.002)
Observations	33,598	33,598	33,598	33,598	33,598	33,598
Log Likelihood	-13,163.10	-9,481.116	-3,251.009	-13,044.98	-9,406.036	-3,244.127
Akaike Inf. Crit	26,384.200	19,014.230	6,560.018	26,151.960	18,874.070	6,550.255

\* $p < 0.1$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ 

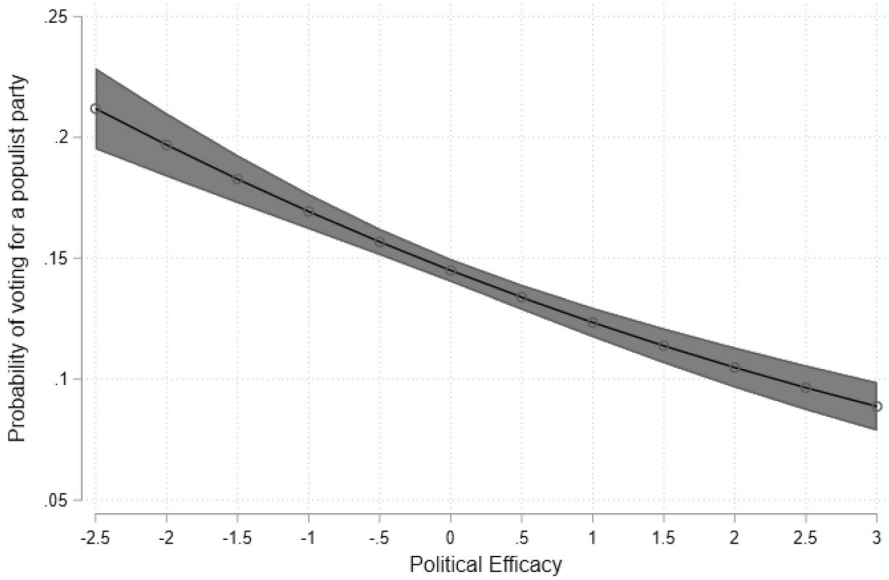


Fig. 1 Predicted probabilities of voting for a populist party

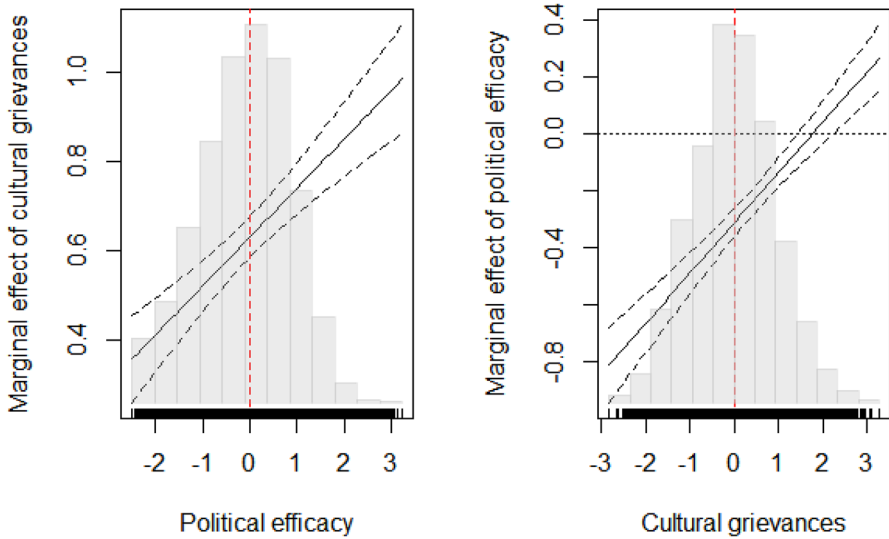


Fig. 2 Marginal effect plots for right-wing populist voting

for a right-wing populist party across different values of political efficacy. The right plot shows the marginal effect of political efficacy across different values of cultural grievances.



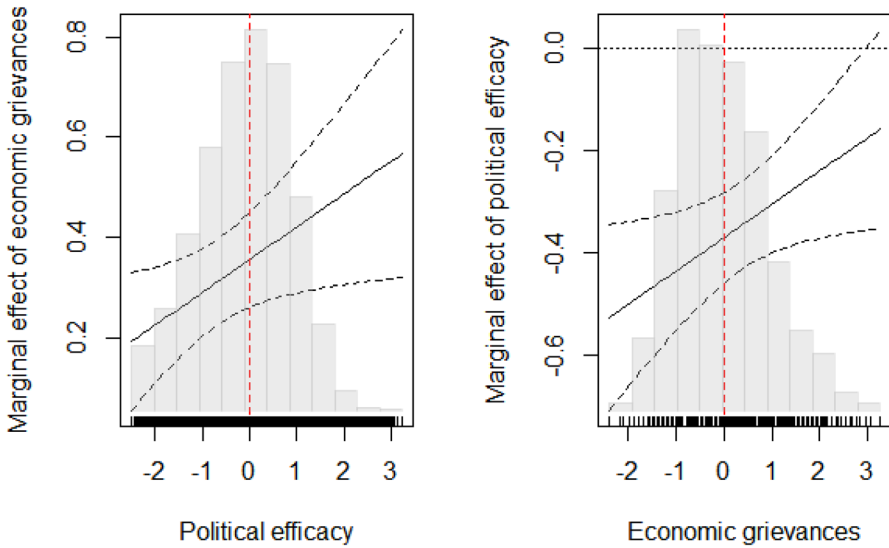


Fig. 3 Marginal effect plots for left-wing populist voting

Visual inspection of left plot of the Fig. 2 suggests that the effect of cultural grievances on voting right-wing populist is positive and this positive effect gets stronger as political efficacy increases. This is consistent with our theory. The right plot shows that negative effect of political efficacy on right-wing populist voting mostly declines in strength as cultural grievances increase. This is also consistent with the theory. However, when cultural grievances are around two standard deviations above the mean, the marginal effect of political efficacy becomes positive. This means that for an overwhelming majority, increasing efficacy reduces the propensity to vote for a right-wing populist party but for a small minority with the strongest cultural grievances, it has the opposite effect.

The left plot in Fig. 3 shows the marginal effect of economic grievances on propensity to vote for a left-wing populist party across different values of political efficacy. The right plot shows the marginal effect of political efficacy across different values of economic grievances. Consistent with the theory, the effect of economic grievances on voting left-wing populist is positive, and this positive effect gets stronger as political efficacy increases. Again, consistent with the theory, negative effect of political efficacy on left-wing populist voting declines in strength as economic grievances increase. Plots demonstrating predicted probabilities for both of the interaction terms can be consulted in the “Online appendix”.

The negative and significant coefficient in all models suggests that the effect of gender on populist voting is what the literature largely agrees on: men are more likely to vote for populist parties than women. However, the effect of age is the opposite of what is suggested by the literature: young people tend to vote for populist parties more than older people do. In the “Online appendix,” I estimate a model with a quadratic age variable to be able to detect a non-linear relationship.



Up to approximately 30 years old, age has a slight positive impact on populist voting. Beyond the age of 30 years, individuals are increasingly less inclined to support a populist party as they grow older. Yet, it is advisable to take this overall finding with a grain of salt, as the effect of age seems to be heterogenous across countries. For instance, while young people in France are more likely to vote for populist candidates and parties both from the left and the right, both qualitative and quantitative evidence demonstrates that young people in Britain overwhelmingly favored staying in the EU in the Brexit referendum (Shuster 2016; Burn-Murdoch 2016). The level of education has a significant and negative relationship with right-wing populist voting. While less-educated individuals are more likely to vote for right-wing populist parties, education does not have a significant impact on left-wing populist voting. Finally, wealthier individuals are less likely to vote for populist parties.

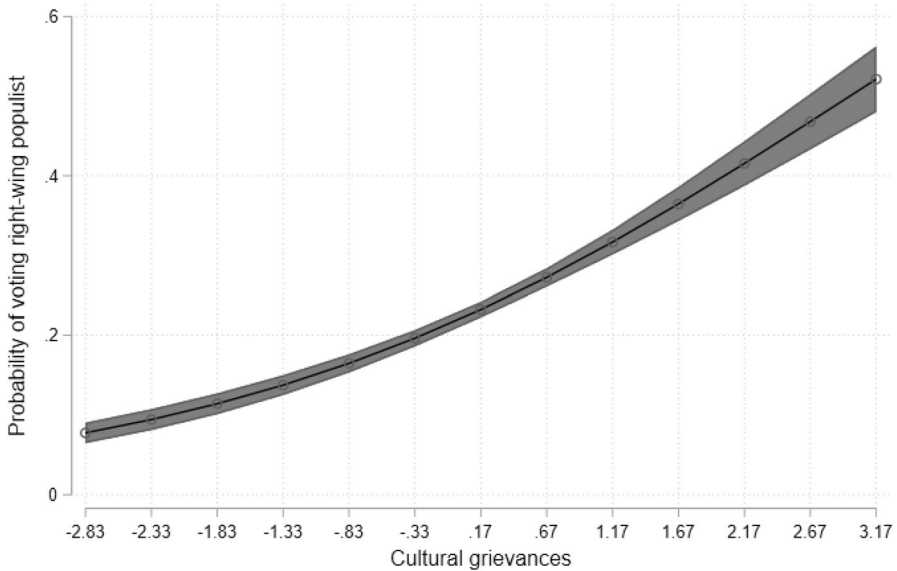
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As a robustness check, I compare populist voters to mainstream voters instead of the rest of the sample.<sup>3</sup> Comparing right-wing populist voters to mainstream right voters and left-wing populist voters to mainstream left voters can demonstrate whether they differ in terms of political efficacy and whether populists indeed have stronger grievances. The logit estimates for these models can be found in the “Online appendix.” The results are consistent with my theoretical expectations. Those with lower political efficacy are more likely to vote for a populist party rather than a mainstream party. As expected, those with stronger cultural grievances are more likely to vote for a right-wing populist rather than a mainstream right party.

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<sup>3</sup> I also run models that compare right-wing populist voters to left-wing populist voters, right-wing populist voters to far right voters and left-wing populist voters to far left voters. The regression estimates can be found in the “Online appendix.”





**Fig. 4** Predicted probabilities of voting right-wing populist

Figure 4 shows the predicted probabilities from this comparison across values of cultural grievances.

We had previously found that those with stronger economic grievances are more likely to vote for a left-wing populist party compared to other parties. Not surprisingly, those with stronger economic grievances are also more likely to vote for left-wing populist parties rather than a mainstream left party. What is surprising is that compared to mainstream right voters, right-wing populist voters too have significantly more economic grievances. Figure 5 predicts probabilities from this comparison across values of economic grievances.

Although economic grievances predict left-wing populist voting strongly, both left-wing and right-wing populists experience them. This is supportive of the claim that anxieties that the left and right populism are built on are not so different but interrelated. These results call for further scrutiny especially when we consider that many populist parties with strong anti-immigrant credentials also have sizable left-wing elements in their agendas. In many countries, a trend through which a substantial number of former left-wing party supporters turned devout right-wing populist party supporters has been observed (Stephens 2016; Lee and Sergent 2017). This was a result of another transformation through which anti-welfare populist parties have changed their policies to what the literature has recently started to call “welfare chauvinism” (Waal, Koster and Oorschot 2013; Keskinen, Norocel and Jørgensen 2016). Such parties are called welfare chauvinistic since they aim to expand the welfare state and provide benefits exclusively to the native people, not to the immigrants.

Finally, I employ a random forest classifier to evaluate the predictive capability of the model. Out of bag predictions have a 0.84 accuracy. Confusion matrices can be





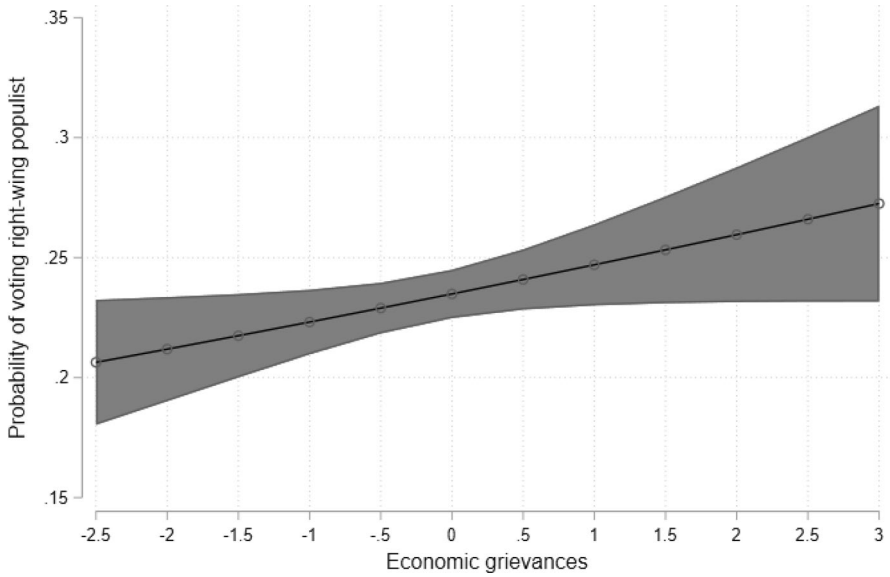


Fig. 5 Predicted probabilities of voting right-wing populist

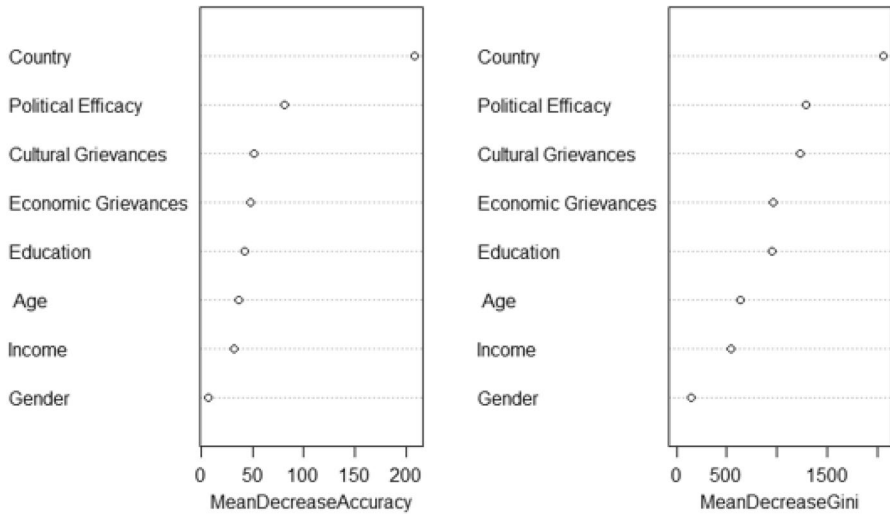


Fig. 6 Variable importance plots

found in the “Online appendix.” As shown in Fig. 6, variables have the same importance ranking according to two commonly used measures of importance. The mean decrease accuracy plot on the left shows how much accuracy is lost by excluding the variable in question. Higher decreases mean higher importance. On the right-side,



the mean decrease in Gini coefficient measures node purity, which is the difference between RSS before the split and after the split on the variable in question. Again, higher values indicate higher importance. In both measures, the country dummy is the most important variable. It is followed by theoretically relevant variables: political efficacy, cultural grievances and economic grievances.

The fact that country dummies are the most important variables draws attention to country-level differences. In the “Online appendix,” I replicate the analysis for each country. The efficacy argument holds up for an overwhelming majority of the countries, with the exception of Bulgaria, Czechia, Hungary, Italy and Poland. In these countries, more efficacious individuals are more likely to vote for populist parties. This is logical as these countries either currently have sitting populist leaders or have experienced a recent history of populist governance.

## Conclusion

While identifying what unites populists, I also investigated the causes of the recent populist upsurge. Leveraging Weberian stratification theory, I argued that a sense of political inefficacy is common to all populist voters. As populism can be seen as a strategy to mobilize indignant and resentful masses, the sources of grievances determine the flavor of populism. I demonstrated that when the sources of grievances are cultural and economic, populism is more likely to take a right-wing and a left-wing turn, respectively. Political efficacy moderates the effect of grievances. The negative effect of political efficacy on populist voting declines as grievances become more pronounced.

While the impact of efficacy and grievances on influencing populist voting is recognized, this study, to the best of my knowledge, is the first to examine their interaction. Individuals experiencing inefficacy are predisposed to support populist parties, and the absence of efficacy amplifies the influence of grievances for a substantial majority. Generally, those with a sense of efficacy are less inclined to align with populist parties, as they believe in their capacity to address their concerns.

The findings have clear policy implications. Voters migrate to populist parties due to not being able to influence the decision-making process. Although I show that grievances play an important role in populist voting, it is only half of the story. Those who vote for populist parties are not necessarily the ones with the strongest grievances. They are the ones with grievances who also think that they cannot influence the decision-making. It is true that a great majority of right-wing populist voters have an anti-immigrant stance. This, however, does not necessarily mean they dislike immigrants, they dislike not being in control of borders. Similarly, left-wing populist voters are not necessarily anti-trade but they dislike it is being forced on them when politicians do little to address the inequalities it creates. If the decision-making takes place in a way that allows input from all parts of society, the same output can be considered more legitimate and therefore more acceptable.



Some scholars argue that what the literature came to describe as populist attitudes (Akkerman et al. 2014) can actually be “old wine in a new bottle” as they resemble well-established concepts such as external political efficacy (Rooduijn 2019). This remains a point of controversy in the literature as Geurkink et al. (2020) demonstrate that political trust and external political efficacy tap into different attitudes than populist ones. Indeed, concepts like political distrust, political cynicism or political efficacy are interrelated. Yet, I argue that they are fairly distinct as well. My argument suggests that political trust and political cynicism are components of political efficacy, which predicts populism.

A limitation that needs to be acknowledged is the paper’s narrow focus. The reasons the paper specifies to explain populist voting, namely grievances and lack of opportunities to influence politics can lead to various outcomes. For instance, some individuals may abstain from voting or withdraw from politics altogether. For some others, the frustration and resentment might reach a tipping point where they find it futile to resist via conventional means and resort to more extreme measures. The futility of conventional means can be used to justify extreme acts of violence. What causes the alternation between voting versus non-voting and peaceful objection versus violent resistance? This paper is not equipped to address this important question. What I wanted to investigate was the vote choice of those who had already voted. That is why the dependent variable was specified as the declared vote for populist parties. The reasons for divergent responses to the same political conditions remain to be explored and is are tasks for future studies.

**Supplementary Information** The online version contains supplementary material available at <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41295-024-00378-4>.

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**Caner Şimşek** is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Institute of Political Science at the University of Münster. He earned a Dual PhD degree in Political Science and Social Data Analytics from Pennsylvania State University. His research focuses on authoritarianism, personalistic dictatorships, polarization, and the MENA region

