Psychological Correlates of Populist Attitudes

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Studies of demand-side populism with a focus on attitudinal and behavioral factors are becoming more popular, but only a few have explored the phenomenon's psychological determinants. We tackle the lack of conversation between populism scholars and political psychologists and test the impact of conspiracy beliefs, moral disengagement, need for cognition, and belief in simple solutions on populist attitudes. We use the most widespread ideational definition in an attempt to bring clarity to demand-side populism, as the literature often conflates the concept of populism with adjacent ideological and psychological factors. We analyze representative samples from two very different countries (Italy and Turkey) to test our hypotheses. We use two of the most often-used measures of populist attitudes and also explore populism's individual building blocks: people-centrism, antielitism, and a Manichean worldview. We consistently find conspiracy beliefs (and our control variable of institutional trust) as primary sources of populist attitudes, whereas the impact of the other psychological factors is more dependent on context and operationalization. Our article calls for more conceptual clarity, careful theorization, and more work on the refinement of available survey measures. We also highlight the importance of national contexts and the dangers of generalization based on individual country studies.

KEY WORDS: populism, ideational approach, conspiracy mindset, moral disengagement, Italy, Turkey

The first week of 2021 was arguably the darkest week of the Anglo-Saxon world since the two World Wars. The United Kingdom officially and definitively left the European Union on January 1, and only 6 days later in the United States, an angry mob of Trump supporters stormed the U.S.

Capitol as they were certifying the election results, where Donald Trump lost in an attempt to forcibly change the outcome of the U.S. elections. What these two episodes have in common is that they grew out of radical-right populist movements. But it is not only right-wing populists who wreak havoc in their country. Populism in Ecuador also came close to a violent end when, in an election mirroring the closeness of Trump's elections, Evo Morales was ousted and had to flee the country. And Venezuela is, effectively, an economic disaster zone and a failed state after the left-wing populist Chávez and the populist rule of his successor Maduro. Populism, in and out of power, left these societies deeply divided, with little chance to heal.

The increased attention populist radical-right parties have received has posed more than opportunities for all of social science research; it came with its own set of challenges. Political psychology has long been at the forefront of research on nationalism, nativism, prejudice—all phenomena that are associated with the aforementioned political forces. But where does this leave populism? Can we get conceptual clarity on the construct at hand, or will populism become a term that people attach to things they have studied for decades only to emphasize a normative stand? These questions have been asked by populism researchers, who studied the phenomenon for decades before events in Europe directed the spotlight onto it. Populism in Latin America dates much further back than contemporary European populism. Interestingly, the populist parties of Latin America were nothing like their European counterparts ideologically. They were distinctly leftists: they were not nativist, or xenophobic. One would almost wonder what they had in common with the populists of Europe. Or, to cite another example, what does Bernie Sanders have in common with Donald Trump?

In this article, we hope to bring some conceptual clarity to the subject matter and argue that the topic is worth exploring through the lens of political psychology. We propose multiple mechanisms through which populist attitudes are influenced by psychological constructs. Specifically, we test the impact of conspiracy mentality, moral disengagement, the need for cognition. and a belief in simple solutions, and we do this by considering one of the most consistent correlates of populist attitudes: trust in political institutions. We consider both populist attitudes overall and their building blocks of people-centrism, antielitism, and Manichean outlook, and we empirically test the relationships on representative samples in two markedly different countries: Italy and Turkey.

Populism, historically, was a supply-side phenomenon in political science, with a focus on political leaders. While this offers some opportunities for political psychology, as the field is no stranger to the analysis of political leaders, the definition of populism both Europeanists and Latin Americanists are starting to coalesce around, the *ideational definition*, offers unprecedented opportunities to assess the phenomenon attitudinally and to understand the psychological precedence and individual differences underlying it.

Conceptualizing Populism

By the standards of political psychology, populism is a contested and convoluted concept. Although the debates surrounding what it actually is are nowhere close to being settled, most empirical researchers are starting to agree on the *ideational definition*. The ideational definition views populism as a discursive frame (or a thin-centered ideology) rooted in the cosmic struggle between the pure, homogeneous people and conniving elites that conspire to take advantage of them. In this worldview, populism takes a normative stance that politics should solely be an expression of the people's will (Hawkins, 2009; Hawkins, Carlin, Littvay, & Kaltwasser, 2018; Hawkins & Kaltwasser, 2017; Mudde, 2004). Without a need for a complete list, populism is also often conceptualized as a style concerned less with the content and more with the "tell it like it is" delivery of political rhetoric (Moffitt, 2016) or as a political strategy with a focus on rationalist vote maximization (Weyland, 2017). Increasingly, scholarship is emerging that conflates populism with left-right ideological manifestations. Historically, the primary example of this was the economic approach to populism focusing

on the radical leftist antimarket phenomena most observed among Latin America's populist leaders (Dornbusch & Edwards, 1991). More recently, many European scholars have made populism synonymous with the populist radical right (for a few examples, see Bos, Sheets, & Boomgaarden, 2018; Gründl & Aichholzer, 2020; Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Rothmund, Bromme, & Azevedo, 2020). Even though it is true that populism in Europe and the United States (and now also Brazil and the Philippines) co-occurs more often with radical-right ideologies, to achieve conceptual clarity it is crucial to separate populism from the ideologies to which it attaches itself (Rooduijn, 2019).

While all these approaches have a loyal scholarly base, the ideational approach is slowly winning out, due to its conceptual clarity and proven empirical utility, going beyond traditional ideological studies. The ideational approach is also compatible with many other approaches of populism. Most importantly, the ideational approach naturally extends to supply- (politician) and demand- (public) side studies of the phenomenon, showing the most promise for political psychology. For this reason, the study at hand will center around the ideational definition, leaving the other approaches aside.

Based on the ideational definition, the core of populism is identified as *people-centrism, antielitism*, with the struggle between the two highlighted by the dualistic *Manichean outlook* pitting the good people against the evil elites. It views both the people and the elites as homogeneous (even if this is not the case in reality) and offers majoritarian solutions to the struggle while ignoring the rights of those who are in the political (or ethnic) minority.[1] For our empirical purposes, we provide further discussion regarding each subdimension of populism.

People Centrism

At the core of populism is the belief in a good, homogeneous, and unified common people as the sovereign. It is the people that a populist leader receives her or his mandate from to represent their general will (*volonté générale*). The people are pure and moral in a Manichean conflict with the immoral and corrupt elites which conspire against them for their own benefit. But who the people actually are for a populist leader is not as simple as this perception perpetuated by populists.

Viewed through the ideational lens, populism, as an ideology, does not exist on its own. It attaches itself to a more conventional *host ideology* which can be on the Right, as in the case of Donald Trump, or to the Left, as was the case with Hugo Chávez (Akkerman, Zaslove, & Spruyt, 2017; Huber & Ruth, 2017; Loew & Faas, 2019). Even more hybrid forms can exist, as is the case with Italy's 5-Star Movement, which is difficult to place on the ideological Left-Right spectrum based on their core positions (Schadee, Segatti, & Vegetti, 2019). Beyond the traditional ideological positions, the main difference between left- and right-wing populism is how they view the people (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013). Left-wing populists have a highly inclusionary conception of the people. Chávez, for example, brought in the traditionally disenfranchised indigenous societies. Left-wing populists' behavior is in this respect opposite to the often-explicit racism of the more exclusionary nativist and nationalist right-wing populists. Exclusionary forms of populism strongly delineate who belongs to the people and who does not. The cleavage for the Left is founded more in social class. The similarities are maybe most visible in the case of Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders. Both are antielitist, people-centric, and Manichean, but ideologically and in their exclusionary-inclusionary view of the people, they are worlds apart.

Antielitism

One might ask who the elite is. As a concept, the notion of the elite is particularly fluid and varies according to political opportunism and political circumstance. In the populists' view, the elite

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[1]Focused on the importance of electoral majorities, some also suggested popular sovereignty as a core component of populism (Kaltwasser 2013; Kriesi 2018; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017; Schulz et al., 2018; Wettstein et al., 2020).

is always immoral and corrupt, and it seeks to exploit the pure and moral people. This, of course, perpetuates feelings of the world as an unfair place, where the undeserving have it better. For the stereotypical populist parties of Western Europe that are mostly on the opposition, this elite is the government. The picture becomes more complicated when populists gain power, as they need to rein-vent the elite when they become the political elite themselves. Donald Trump successfully called out the "deep state" as the conspiring elite; for Latin American populists, the elite is the IMF, the United States or past governments whose economic resources did not diminish as they lost power; for Viktor Orban, it is the European Union (EU), George Soros, the Central European University, civil society at large, the liberal media, the former communists, or whatever flavor of the month that bothered his political goals ended up playing this role (Enyedi, 2018; Jenne & Mudde, 2012; Kornai, 2015). It is also the case when populist leaders refer to "outside forces" in control of world affairs, which aim to stall the development of the country or meddle with the course of domestic affairs.

Universally, the elite may not be pinpointed specifically, but it can be anyone in a position of perceived or actual power looking to exploit the country's good people. So, it is better to tap the general sentiment in (especially comparative) tools of measurement than to target the specific elites. In countries with multiple populist forces, it is not uncommon that the targeted elites are different for the parties involved. For Silvio Berlusconi, this conspiring elite was the Left or the judges who in his view had long held political power in Italy; for Matteo Salvini, it is the elites outside of Italy, the EU institutions when addressing economic problems, or NGOs when considering immigration, while the 5-Star Movement targets the corrupt political class (especially Silvio Berlusconi and the Right) as the elite that has exploited the country.

Manichean Outlook

Finally, in the cosmic moral struggle between the pure people and the evil, conspiring elites are presented in a highly polarized, good-versus-evil framework characteristic of a Manichean outlook. It is usually in this context that, through some divine fate, the leader emerges to help the people over-come evil. Their fight is for the very soul of the nation, for their entire existence. The implication of this worldview is that if someone sees politics as a supernatural moral struggle to protect the existing norms of those who are worthy, or their values, or some absolute "truth," by the same token this per-son will also perceive other issues in life, whether political or not, through the same lens.

Actual manifestations of this are really at the core of all populist discourse that, instead of fram-ing politics in political terms, attributes blame. But populist discourse goes beyond the mystification of the struggle. It is not uncommon for supporters of populists to attribute mystical or superhuman characteristics to their leader. Silvio Berlusconi was often cited as the savior of Italy and the embod-iment of a "new Italian Miracle." Donald Trump, despite not being a holy man of God himself, was often compared to imperfect Biblical figures essential for the survival of fate and humanity, such as King Cyrus or King David (Gabbatt, 2020). Similarly, Recep Tayyip Erdogan is often portrayed as the new primary leader of a neo-Ottoman region (almost like a Sultan) whose power is perceived to be above all and divine.

From Subdimensions to a Populist Scale

The aggregation of the subconstructs is where measuring populism becomes tricky. Unlike the additive scales which political psychologists are used to, populism is a noncompensatory concept. Therefore, all of its subcomponents must be present simultaneously to tap populism (Castanho Silva et al., 2018, Wuttke, Schimpf, & Schoen, 2020). For example, someone may be in favor of giving

most of the power to the people, but in the absence of the corresponding antielitism, and the view of a polarized struggle, this person would not be considered to have strong populist attitudes. Equally important is to explore the distinct predictors of each subfacet to tease out the differences and similarities. Since each dimension relies on a particular conceptual discussion, the foundations of each may offer more information regarding specific predictors. In fact, these subfacets of populism often do not even correlate with each other, making them, psychometrically speaking, poor candidates to be part of a scale.

Ironically, very few connections are present between the supply and demand sides of populism. Based on the limited comparative attitudinal evidence, the vast majority of the variation in populist attitudes is individual differences within the countries. The national averages are surprisingly consistent across countries. The little variation that is present has little to do with the populism of those country leaders or the presence of populists in the given country's party system. For example, using three survey questions that were asked in several country surveys in the same way, Hawkins and Littvay (2019) present average levels of populism for a handful of countries. The lowest of these was Switzerland, a country with a prominent populist party, and the second highest was Chile where, at the time, there was no populist party in the party system.

Given this background and the scarcity of psychology-driven work on populist attitudes, our goal in this article is to address this issue. We offer a broader test of the explanatory role of a number of relevant psychological drivers of populism such as conspiracy mentality, moral disengagement, the need for cognition, and a belief in simple solutions. In collaboration with these psychological factors, we also evaluate the role that trust in national political institutions plays in altering, and most especially mitigating, one's attachment to populism.

Psychological Correlates of Populist Attitudes

Psychologists and other social scientists have identified a number of differences among individuals who are relatively stable over a person's lifespan. There is no doubt that many of these dispositions influence political opinions in a direct fashion. Scholarly work in recent years has aimed at explaining the potential psychological precedents of populism (for a recently published contribution, see Forgas, Crano, & Fiedler, 2021). Empirical research has focused in particular on the role of personality traits, finding a link between low agreeableness and voting for populist parties (Bakker, Rooduijn, & Schumacher, 2016)—although this association seems to depend on the country context (Fatke, 2019). Another strand of empirical studies has instead focused on the role of uncertainty avoidance, showing its relevance when it comes to casting a ballot for radical-right populist parties (Gründl & Aichholzer, 2020). Also, a few studies have explored the role of emotions, most especially anger, in connection with the populist view of politics (Marcus, 2021; Rico, Guinjoan, & Anduiza, 2017).

However, most of this research considers far-right populism and takes vote choice as the principal measure of populism.[2] Whilst the use of vote choice could function as a proxy for populism, it can also be problematic, as voting for a populist party (whether on the Right or the Left) may not be the same thing as holding populist attitudes. Besides, none of these studies directly consider the psychological domains that we introduce here. We thus focus directly on actual populist attitudes measured through two related conceptualizations of the ideational approach to populism. In line with the ideational approach, we argue that populism is equally likely on both sides of the political spectrum, and we investigate whether any psychological differences directly influence both the overall construct of populism and the three specific subdimensions.

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[2]For notable exceptions using measures of populist attitudes, see Rico et al. (2017) or Vasilopoulos and Jost (2020).

Conspiracy Mentality

Belief in conspiracy theories is commonly defined as a belief that a group of powerful actors collude in secret to reach malevolent goals (Bale, 2007; Uscinski, 2019). Conspiracies typically attempt to take control of political or economic power through the use of secret agreements that violate legal rights or alter political institutions. By definition, conspiracies carry a negative connotation of the powerful elite, whether it is a group of people, an institution, or a firm, leading to a general animosity toward officials who are seen as engaged in a motivated deception of the public (Miller, Saunders, & Farhart, 2016; Wood, Douglas, & Sutton, 2012).

Earlier studies on conspiracy theories have outlined three major insights (Douglas, Sutton, & Cichocka, 2019). The first one is that, although conspiracy theories differ widely in content, the underlying psychological foundation is similar. While many conceptually distinct conspiracy theories exist, the tendency to believe in them appears to be underpinned by a conspiracy mindset, a monological belief system based on a connection of interrelated and self-reinforcing cognitions that shape a worldview (Sutton & Douglas, 2014). In one way, a conspiracy mindset is potentially a predisposition that varies between different persons (Imhoff & Bruder, 2014). Despite the high variability in conspiracy theories—involving topics that range from assassinations through vaccinations to terrorist attacks—research demonstrates that largely similar and predictable psychological processes drive people's belief in them (Goertzel, 1994).

The second insight is that belief in conspiracy theories is highly sensitive to social context (Roberts-Miller, 2015; Uscinski & Parent, 2014). People tend to fill the uncertainty in life with conspiracies, particularly in times of significant societal crisis situations, such as terrorist attacks, wars, economic crises, political turmoil (van Prooijen & Douglas, 2017), and global pandemics as well. Indeed, populist attitudes and conspiracy beliefs about COVID-19 are positively related, regardless of political ideology (Eberl, Huber, & Greussing, 2020).

The third insight is that conspiracy theories allow people to maintain internally consistent explanations, most especially in the face of uncertainty. Thus, believing in conspiracies fulfils the need for order, control, and security (Swami & Coles, 2010). A conspiracy mindset induces people to seek a coherent reasoning between a series of complicated events through a deterministic causal explanation based on unseen forces. Complexity is reduced to a binary Manichean narrative, with the two separate sides distinguished upon moral grounds (Oliver & Wood, 2014; van Prooijen & Jostmann, 2013).

Overall, a structure of thought aimed at making sense of events through beliefs in conspiracy theories could be one of the factors underpinning the development of populist attitudes. As a result,

> *H1*: We expect both overall populist attitudes, and the three subfacets of populism, to be associated with an underlying conspiracy way of thinking.

Moral Disengagement

Extended from social cognitive theory, moral disengagement focuses on how cognitive dissociation between transgressive behavior and self-regulation takes place (Bandura, 1986, 1991). Moral disengagement is an individual-based construct that captures one's propensity to confirm unethical decisions. Individuals who engage in moral disengagement do not feel distress when involved in morally questionable behavior (Moore, Detert, Treviño, Baker, & Mayer, 2012). Moreover, such behavior is justified as personally and socially acceptable. This explains why even ordinary people have committed atrocities in the name of righteous ideologies, religious principles, nationalistic

imperatives, or simple obedience to authority (Brief, Buttram, & Dukerich, 2001; Moore, 2008; Rapoport & Alexander, 2013).

Moore (2015) lays out a comprehensive list of mechanisms that facilitate moral disengagement. For instance, moral justifications in which individuals believe that unethical behavior is a means to an end substantiate acceptance of any kind of undesirable "means" as long as the "end" is morally desired. Similarly, euphemistic labeling—such as using the concept of "collateral damage" instead of civilian killings—is a mechanism through which immoral actions appear more acceptable to individuals. Also, attribution of blame and dehumanization strategies push people to believe that the target of unethical behavior deserves the treatment she or he receives, or that she or he is subhuman (Kelman, 1973). Overall, those who score highly on a scale of moral disengagement feel less guilty for their actions, are less social, are less likely to take a group-centric stand, and are prone to engage in aggression, regardless of demographic differences across age, sex, race, religious affiliation, and social class (Bandura, 1999).

We focus on moral disengagement as a correlate of populist attitudes, especially since it is a mechanism which influences people's decision-making regarding others' well-being—for example, the public support for immediate retaliatory military action in the aftermath of 9/11 (McAlister, 2005). Morally disengaged individuals maintain a worldview with limited ethical considerations, viewing dichotomous struggles everywhere in the world—similarly to those holding a Manichean outlook of the world. These individuals choose their side, disregarding any distress they may face as a result of unethical decisions or behavior. For this reason,

H2: We expect moral disengagement to be positively associated with an attachment for populist attitudes.

Need for Cognition

Need for cognition indicates the tendency to engage in and enjoy thinking. Going back to seminal works on personality and social psychology (Asch, 1952; Cohen, Stotland, & Wolfe, 1955; Maslow, 1943), the construct measures the need to structure significant situations in meaningful ways to understand how the world works. Those who display a high need for cognition are consistently interested in thinking and learning new things, are comfortable with complex problems, change their opinions when faced with persuasive messages, and are less likely to engage in heuristic processing (Cacioppo & Petty, 1982; Cacioppo, Petty, Feinstein, & Jarvis, 1996; Kosic, Kruglanski, Pierro, & Mannetti, 2004).

Moreover, individuals found to have a high need for cognition are more likely to endorse complex explanations of human behavior, including abstract and external causes of behavior (Fletcher, Danilovics, Fernandez, Peterson, & Reeder, 1986). Because these individuals' judgments are more thoughtful, they tend to have stronger opinions, which are resistant to counterarguments (Haugtvedt & Petty, 1992).[3] Conversely, those who score low on need for cognition prefer thinking superficially about the information they encounter, by considering fewer dimensions and forming their judgments through a superficial evaluation, without much effort or thinking.

Regarding attitude formation on any kind of object, individuals who have a high need for cognition are more likely to process persuasive messages in arguments. In contrast, individuals low on need for cognition are more likely to adopt low-effort strategies, such as heuristics (Cacioppo et al., 1996). This attributional complexity stemming from the need for cognition has political implications.

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[3]Although the construct of the need of cognition relates to the use of cognition, it is important to note that it is not synonymous with cognitive ability (e.g., Pennycook, Ross, Koehler, & Fugelsang, 2017).

For instance, individuals who have a higher need for cognition are less supportive of punitive responses to crime (Sargent, 2004).

People with high need for cognition should be less likely to maintain the Manichean outlook, the simplistic worldview on the separation of good and evil in the construction of populist attitudes. Considering the importance of the Manichean outlook for the combined scale of populism,

H3: We expect that those who score high on the need for cognition scale would be less likely to hold populist attitudes overall.

Belief in Simple Solutions

Believing in simple solutions allows people to form the impression that the world is understandable and predictable. More importantly, simple solutions help us make sense of the world, to cope with uncertainty and fear (Kruglanski, Pierro, Mannetti, & Grada, 2006; van Prooijen, Krouwel, & Pollet, 2015). To avoid the psychological burdens of uncertainty, people tend to rely on dichotomous, arguably Manichean thinking via the belief that there are always simple solutions to complex societal problems (McGregor, 2006). This dichotomy is present for both liberal and conservative extremists, making them rigid in their beliefs. From either standpoint, these individuals view their extreme solutions as simple solutions to problems that cannot be solved in other ways (Fernbach, Rogers, Fox, & Sloman, 2013).

Consider an example of environment becoming destabilized and uncertain (Hogg, Meehan, & Farquharson, 2010; McGregor, Prentice, & Nash, 2013), just as happened in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. George W. Bush's separation of the world, "You're either with us or against us," formalized the psychological mechanism that united the American people (Lambert, Schott, & Scherer, 2011). This trend was in line with an increasing belief that the world was composed of two groups: good Americans and evil terrorists, which signified an increased Manichean worldview and possibly also a heightened people-centrism among American citizens.[4] Just as the "rally around the flag" effect, religious beliefs and ideologies decrease ambiguity and increase control, allowing people to make sense of their experiences (Hill & Williamson, 2005) as a result of belief in simple solutions.

When it comes to populism, extremist solutions that disregard the diversity of positions and the complexity of the issue may appear as simple when confronting problems that seem unsolvable (Fernbach et al., 2013). Due to this dualistic style of thought, populists appear as less tolerant to different moral views (van Prooijen & Jostmann, 2013). So,

H4: Belief in simple solutions is expected to correlate positively with populist attitudes and its subdimensions.

Cases, Data, and Measurement

We test our hypotheses in two quite different countries: Italy and Turkey. This makes our analysis akin to a most-different-systems design. While in both countries populist forces are predominantly right-wing, Italy also has the now governing 5-Star Movement which is more ideologically ambiguous. At the time of the data collection, the 5-Star Movement was in government with the League; at the time of writing, they are both part of a large majority including the center-Left Democratic Party

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[4]Though notably the "with us or against us" framing proposed by Bush did not affect antielitism, as the "enemy" was not an elite.

and Berlusconi's center-Right party *Forza Italia*. In both countries, populist forces are in power now. Italy is the bedrock of European populism, with Silvio Berlusconi governing the country for over 10 years in all recent decades. Turkey's Erdoğan, while initially not a populist politician, has started adopting a populist frame in more recent years. Most importantly, we do not measure populism by relying on party preference or vote choice, but we directly measure populist attitudes and their building blocks.

The Italian data come from two online panel studies carried out in parallel. The first survey was collected from May 28 to June 26, 2019, on a sample of the Italian population aged 14 years or older ($N = 3179$); the second survey was collected from June 19 to July 24, on a subset of panelists who participated in the previous survey, aged 18 years or older ($N = 2047$). The samples of individuals were selected within a probability panel held and managed by GfK Italy.[5]

The Turkish data come from a random-probability representative sample. All household addresses were obtained from the Turkey Statistical Institute (TURKSTAT). The sample was distributed across geographical areas and provinces based on the NUTS classification to cover the entire country, including urban and rural settlements. In total, 1028 surveys were completed. All interviews were conducted face to face between September 8 and October 14, 2020.[6]

Measurement of Populist Attitudes

Most demand-side populism studies, to date, do not conflate the concept with authoritarianism, nativism, or the ideology of the radical right but are instead built on the ideational definition. Studies that directly measured (ideational) populist attitudes, most often, relied on the Akkerman, Mudde, and Zaslove's scale (2014).[7] The Akkerman et al. scale approached populism holistically and formulated questions that broadly tap ideational populism. Later, Schulz et al. (2018) and Castanho Silva et al. (2018) applied psychometric scale-development techniques to arrive at arguably more refined and multidimensional measurement tools. Following the same measurement foundations, the study at hand uses two measures of populist attitudes: (1) the most popular Akkerman, Mudde, and Zaslove (2014) scale and (2) the Castanho Silva et al. (2018) scale developed by Team Populism. We decided to test the hypotheses on two different scales, due to (1) the prevalence and widespread use of the Akkerman et al. scale and (2) the Castanho Silva et al. scale's ability to effectively tap the subdimensions of populist attitudes in addition to the overall concept.

The Akkerman et al. (2014) scale includes the following six items, for which responses may range from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly agree*): "The politicians in the [country] parliament need to follow the will of the people"; "The people, and not politicians, should make our most important policy decisions"; "The political differences between the elite and the people are larger than the differences among the people"; "I would rather be represented by a citizen than by a specialized politician"; "Elected officials talk too much and take too little action"; and "What people call 'compromise' in politics is really just selling out on one's principles." Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) for the Akkerman et al. scale shows that the six items are positively correlated with the populist latent trait. For the Italian sample, the fit indices for these models (CFI = 0.92; TLI = 0.86; RMSEA = 0.11,

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[5]The Italian sample distribution on a number of sociodemographic characteristics compares quite closely to that of the general population. However, the sample is more skewed toward the highly educated than the general population. For this reason, we have used weights (based on gender, age, geographical area, population of municipality of residence, education) in the regression analyses. For more details, please refer to Appendix S1 in the online supporting information.

[6]Appendix S1 in the online supporting information provides more detail regarding the sampling procedure of the Turkish study.

[7]The Akkerman et al. (2014) scale was preceded by a working paper by Hawkins and collaborators' Committee on Concepts and Methods applying these same questions to a U.S. survey in 2008.

α = .77) indicate a good but not fully adequate fit. In the Turkish sample, the fit indices for these models are slightly less satisfactory (CFI = 0.84; TLI = 0.74; RMSEA = 0.08, α = .56).[8]

The Castanho Silva et al. (2018) scale has nine items, three in each subdimension, in which responses can range from 1 (*Strongly agree*) to 5 (*Strongly disagree*). People centrism is measured by three items: "Politicians should always listen closely to the problems of the people"; "Politicians don't have to spend time among ordinary people to do a good job"; and "The will of the people should be the highest principle in this country's politics." Antielitism is measured by the items: "The government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves"; "Government officials use their power to try to improve people's lives"; and "Quite a few of the people running the government are crooked." Finally, a Manichean outlook is expected to emerge from the items "You can tell if a person is good or bad if you know their politics"; "The people I disagree with politically are not evil"; and "The people I disagree with politically are just misinformed."[9] Since this is a balanced scale (with some items expected to correlate positively with the latent traits and others expected to correlate negatively), we added a "method factor" in addition to the three factors (People centrism, Antielitism, and Manichean outlook) that the scale measures (DiStefano & Motl, 2006).[10] Goodness-of-fit indicators for this scale are satisfactory (CFI = 0.99; TLI = 0.99; RMSEA = 0.03, α = .45 in the Italian sample; CFI = 1; TLI = 0.99; RMSEA = 0.01, α = .28 in the Turkish sample), although, contrary to expectations in the Turkish sample, Item 9 is not positively but negatively associated with the Manichean outlook factor.[11]

Since populism is a noncompensatory construct where one dimension cannot be substituted for the others (Wuttke et al., 2020), populist attitudes require the simultaneous presence of all three subfacets. At the same time, the subfacets of noncompensatory constructs do not necessarily co-occur. The factor correlations for both countries highlight this nature of populism's building blocks. They are barely correlated, and, in fact, the Manichean outlook factor correlates negatively with the other two in the Italian sample (and with people-centrism in the Turkish sample). For this reason, the aggregation of the building blocks needs to take this into account. Following the recommendation of Castanho Silva, Jungkunz, Helbling, and Littvay (2020), we do not only calculate the factor scores for each dimension, but we also compute a combined score by multiplying the three scores, after having rescaled them to range between 0 and 1. Conceptually, this means that if a person scores low on any of the subdimensions of populism, they will get a low score even if they are high on the other two.

This gives us five separate dependent variables included in all our models. Our first variable is the Akkerman et al. (2014) scale. The remaining four variables relate to the Castanho Silva et al. (2018) scale: they are the combined score described above and the three subdimensions. Given the unusual nature of the aggregation of populism's subdimensions, research on both their predictors and the mechanisms and processes of how the parts aggregate up is not straightforward and fertile ground for psychological research. Our article only takes the first step in this general direction.

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[8]Appendix S3 in the online supporting information reports the confirmatory factor analysis results for all constructs used in empirical analysis in both studies.

[9]Castanho Silva et al. (2020) conducted an extensive comparison of various scales proposed to measure populism collected on the same survey respondents and found the Akkerman et al. (2014) and the Castanho Silva et al. (2018) scales to be the best functioning across a number of criteria including internal coherence, conceptual breadth, measurement invariance across several countries, and external validity.

[10]A method factor is a factor that is expected to be associated with all the negative (or all the positive) items. Considering fit and convergence, we use a method factor associated with all positive items. See Tables S3.3 and S3.4 in the online supporting information.

[11]Appendix S2 in the online supporting information includes the wording of the complete list of items used in empirical analysis in both studies.

Measurement of Explanatory Variables

Our explanatory variables were also derived from multiple items combined through CFA. To estimate the impact of a conspiracy mindset in relation to populist attitudes, we employ the Conspiracy Mentality scale developed by Bruder, Haffke, Neave, Nouripanah, and Imhoff (2013). Respondents are asked to what extent they believe that five statements presented to them are certain or not, using an 11-point scale (from "0% certainly not" to "100% certain"). The statements revolve around things that happen in politics that are not explained to the public, or are decided by secret organizations, and that politicians control the population and prevent it from knowing the truth (the fit indices are CFI = 0.96, TLI = 0.92, RMSEA = 0.12, α = .84, in the Italian sample; CFI = 0.93, TLI = 0.85, RMSEA = 0.12, α = .72, in the Turkish sample).

We measure moral disengagement, using Moore et al.'s (2012) scale. The eight items of this scale capture—with a 7-point scale from "Totally disagree" to "Totally agree"—the extent to which people are willing to act unethically if they perceive that this serves their own interests, if they believe that most people would do the same, or if they can claim to bear no responsibility for these actions (the fit indices are CFI = 0.94, TLI = 0.91, RMSEA = 0.09, α = .83, in the Italian sample; CFI = 0.85, TLI = 0.7, RMSEA = 0.21, α = .79, in the Turkish sample).[12]

The need for cognition scale (Lins de Holanda Coelho, Hanel, & Wolf, 2020) measures the respondents' ability (and enjoyment) in facing complex problems and finding innovative solutions. Questions are presented as statements with which respondents are asked to answer whether what is said characterizes them appropriately (on a 5-point scale from *extremely uncharacteristic of me* to *extremely characteristic of me*). Unlike the two scales above, this one employs both positively and negatively correlated items with the latent trait (the fit indices are CFI = 0.84, TLI = 0.73, RMSEA = 0.16, α = .74, in the Italian sample; CFI = 0.91, TLI = 0.84, RMSEA = 0.08, α = .59, in the Turkish sample).[13]

The belief in simple-solutions scale (van Prooijen, 2017) is composed of three items measuring to what extent someone believes that: most social problems are easy to solve with the right policies; if she or he were in charge, the most important social problems would be solved quickly; most social problems have a clear cause and a simple solution. These items share a general refusal of complexity and a sense of self-assurance. Having just three items, the CFA model is saturated, and we are unable to compute standard fit indices. However, since all the items prove to be significantly correlated with the latent trait, we use the CFA scores as a proxy for it (α = .76 in the Italian sample; α = .67 in the Turkish sample).

For the sake of simplicity and comparability, all the scores derived from confirmatory factor analyses have been rescaled to range between 0 and 1.

Control Variables

Trust, specifically political trust or institutional trust, has been consistently cited as one of the main predictors of populist attitudes and vote for populist parties (e.g., Bélanger, 2017; Doyle, 2011; Hooghe & Dassonneville, 2018). In addition to demographics, we are including this as our main control variable and are reporting its results. We measured trust using questions referring to national representative institutions (α = .87 in both the Italian and Turkish samples), and for consistency, we rescaled to range between 0 to 1, like the psychological factors.[14]

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[12]The Turkish study includes only the first five items in the moral-disengagement battery.
[13]We attempted to fit this scale as well using a method factor (as for the Castanho Silva et al., 2018, populism scale), but the model did not converge. The results presented in the online supporting information and the score employed in the regression analysis has therefore been computed without estimating any method factor.
[14]The Italian study included three national institutions (Parliament, political parties, and politicians), whereas the Turkish study included four (Parliament, political parties, presidency, and government).

Finally, we control for several sociodemographic variables, including a dummy for female respondents, age as measured in years, and education as measured by the level of grade received. Last, since populist attitudes are expected to depend on grievances and perceived economic vulnerability (Hernández & Kriesi, 2016; Kriesi & Pappas, 2015; Rico & Anduiza, 2019; Rodrik, 2018), we add a dummy variable scoring 1 if the respondent is unemployed (either actively looking or not actively looking for a job) and 0 otherwise. Then, we elicited the socioeconomic status via response to a question on the perceived household income in Italy and class status in Turkey. These controls—with exception of trust—are omitted from the figures but presented in full in the appendix tables in the online supporting information.

Results

Reviewing the descriptive results first, overall, both the Italian and Turkish studies present similar distributions in line with earlier findings reported in other contexts (e.g., Hawkins & Littvay, 2019). People-centrism and Antielitism are two domains where the average is higher than the midpoint. By contrast, Manichean Outlook appears to be on the lower side of the distribution. In the overall assessment of populist constructs, the Akkerman et al. (2014) scale ranks on the higher end of the distribution, whereas the Castanho Silva et al. (2018) scale stands on the lower end of the distribution.[15]

Figure 1 reports bivariate correlations among the psychological variables and measures of populist attitudes. When considering populist attitudes measured via the composite scales, conspiracy mindset has the largest coefficient of correlation. Yet, this is true when populism is measured using the Akkerman et al. (2014) (.31 in Italy and .28 in Turkey), while correlation becomes much smaller (.17), or null (.04), when considering the Castanho Silva et al. (2018) scale in Italy and Turkey, respectively. Also, those who believe in simple solutions seem to score higher on the Akkerman et al. scale in Italy (.24), although the correlation is not relevant when looking at the Castanho Silva et al. scale in the same country, and smaller or even reversed across the two scales when taking into account the Turkish context. We do not find relevant correlations for all the other factors, with the exception of trust in national institutions, which proves to be negatively correlated across scales and national contexts (with values between −.24 and −.29).

Looking now at the associations with the subdimensions of populism, conspiracy mindset appears to be relevant for the three facets in Italy, although results are not completely in line with our expectations. Indeed, conspiracy thinkers tend to score higher on people-centrism (.26) and antielitism (.26), and lower on Manichaeism (−.25). The pattern is similar in Turkey, although weaker in strength (values between −.15 and .16). Meanwhile, we find differences across contexts when considering moral disengagement. This is negatively correlated to people-centrism (−.40) and antielitism (−.26) and positively linked to Manichaeism (.36) in Italy, but only the first one concerning people-centrism holds true in the Turkish context (−.24). Lastly, political trust is confirmed as a negative correlate of populist subfacets, especially for people-centrism (−.28 in Italy and −.23 in Turkey) and antielitism (−.37 in Italy and −.46 in Turkey).

All in all, this first descriptive overview provides us with a more complex picture than expected, as some psychological traits seem to be associated with populism, although with varying results across measurement of populist attitudes and countries.

Composite Scales of Populism

To further evaluate our expectations, we ran a series of linear regression models. In describing the results, we first take into account the combined scales of populism and then move to the subdimensions

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[15]Appendix S4 in the online supporting information reports more information regarding the descriptive statistics.
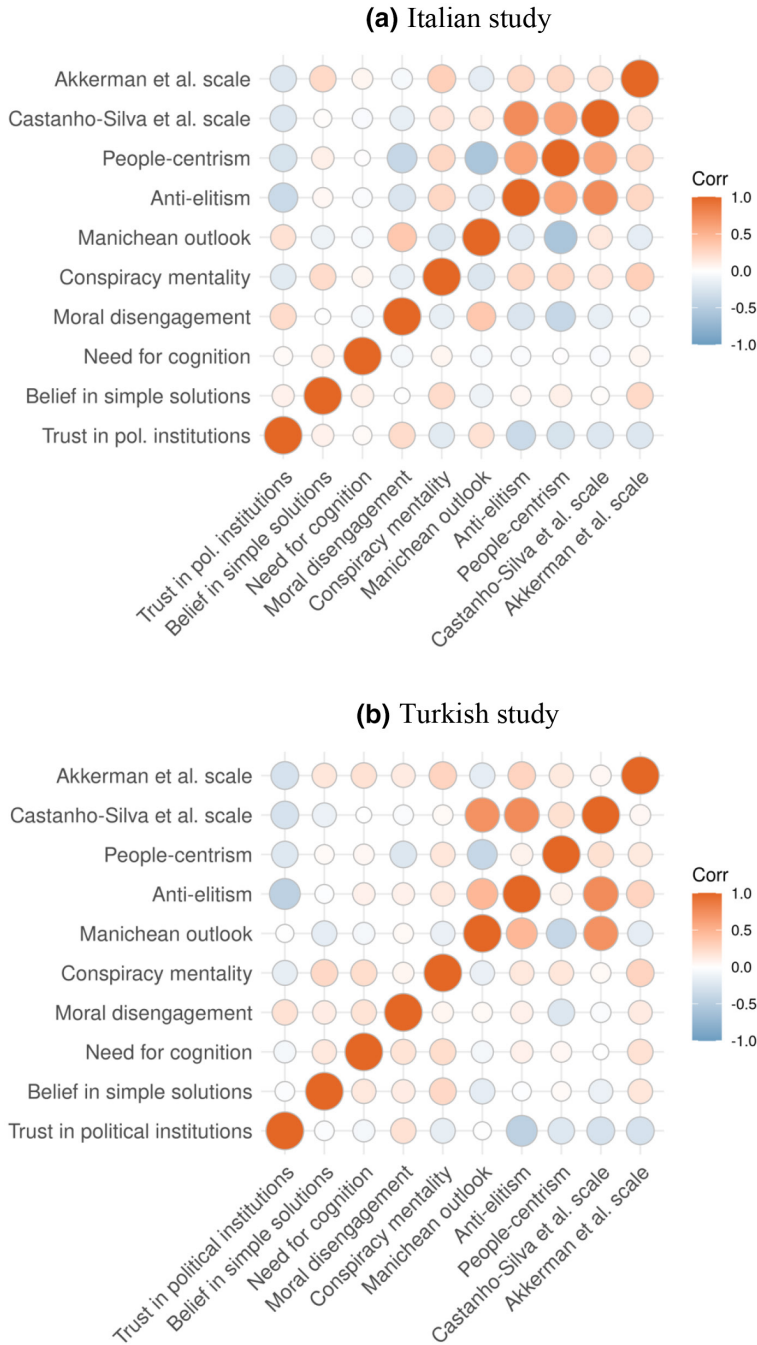
Figure 1. Correlation plot for the main variables used in the analysis. (a) Italian study, (b) Turkish study. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]
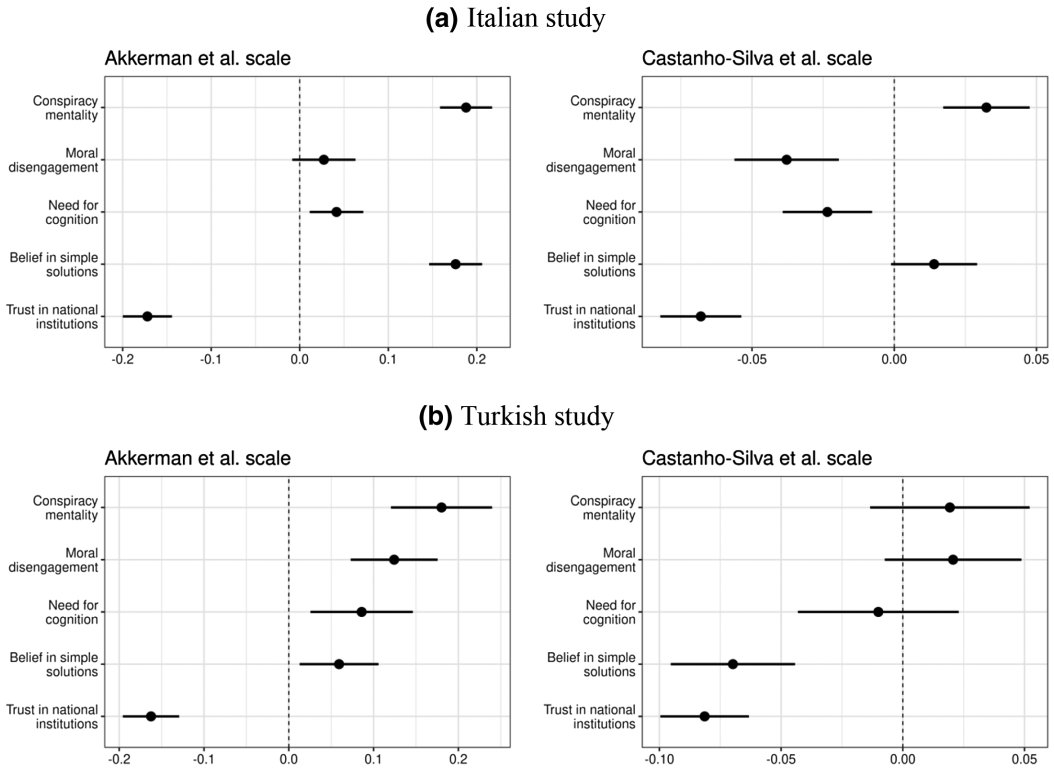
(a) Italian study

(b) Turkish study

Figure 2. OLS estimates (composite scales of populism). (a) Italian study, (b) Turkish study.

of populism. This allows us to disentangle which subfacet drives the nexus between psychological variables and populist attitudes.[16] Figure 2 reports the estimates for the psychological factors and trust across the two composite scales of populism. We go through these results in testing our hypotheses.

To begin with, it is worth mentioning that holding a conspiracy mentality seems to be the most consistent factor linked to populist attitudes. In line with our earlier discussion, those who hold a conspiracy mindset are more likely to show greater populism. The results seem to apply to both scales and across the two national contexts (with the exception of the coefficient for the Castanho Silva et al. (2018) scale in Turkey, which is not significant, but in the expected direction). The effects are robust and in line with our expectations that attachment to the belief that powerful actors are in control of world affairs with ill-founded goals directly relates to populism.

Concerning the role of moral disengagement—that is, preferences for accepting dehumanizing actions coupled with limited ethical considerations—our results do not yield definite conclusions. For the Akkerman et al. (2014) scale, we find a positive link in Turkey, while in Italy, even though the sign is in the expected direction, the result is not significant. If we consider the Castanho Silva et al. (2018) scale, the association becomes not significant in Turkey and even negative in Italy. We find incoherence also for need of cognition, since we observe a positive association with populism for the Akkerman et al scale in both countries, while the effect is either null in Turkey or negative in Italy for the Castanho et al. scale. Lastly, effects of belief in simple solutions are close to being in line with our expectations, as in three of the four models we see that a simplistic view of politics increases attachment to populist attitudes. This occurs in both countries in the case of the Akkerman

[16]Appendix S5 in the online supporting information presents the tables including the full models for the reported estimates.
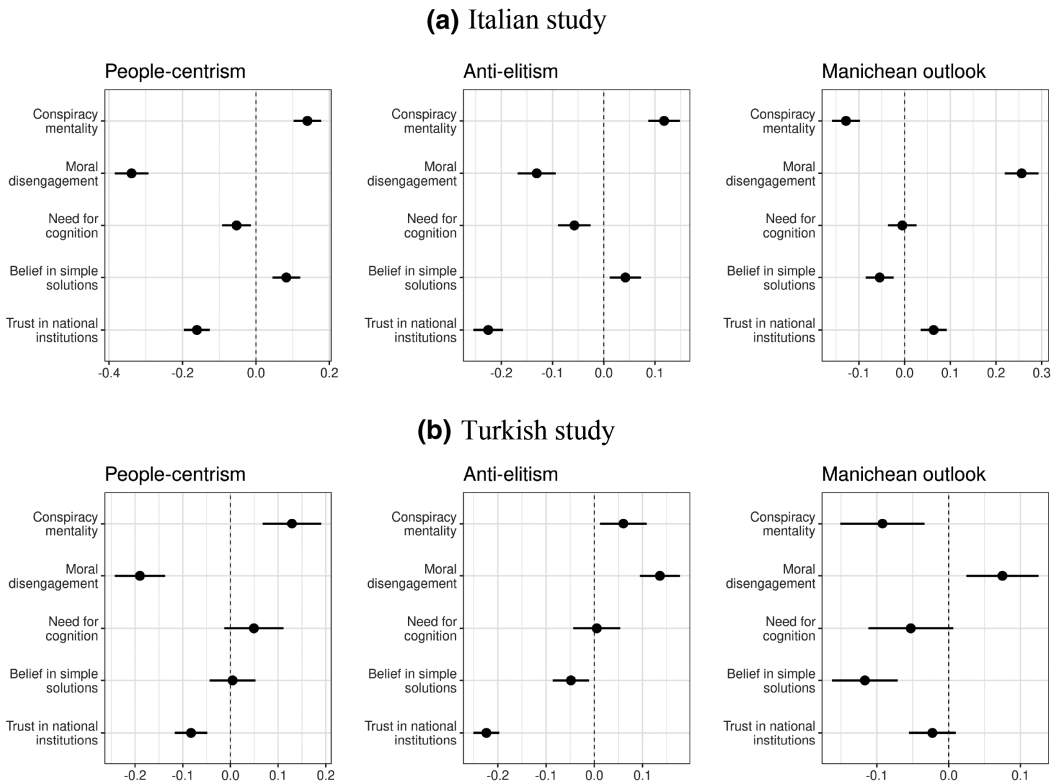
(a) Italian study

(b) Turkish study

Figure 3. OLS estimates (populism subdimensions). (a) Italian study, (b) Turkish study.

et al. scale. For the Castanho Silva et al. scale, the estimate is positive in Italy, although less precise ($p < .10$), while in the Turkish case this is negative and statistically significant.

When it comes to the influence of political trust, and comparing the combined populism measures, we see that the direction of the effect for both scales is quite similar. As expected, trust in political institutions, across the board, is significantly connected with lower attachment to populist attitudes. These results strongly support our expectation that the attachment to populist attitudes is strongly connected to one's level of trust in political institutions. Unlike psychological factors, which tend to remain more or less constant across time, improved political trust may generate meaningful solutions to growing populism.

To sum up, the empirical evidence with regard to the combined scales of populism suggests that the conspiracy mindset is a strong psychological predictor of populism, as its effect is fairly robust and consistent for both Italy and Turkey, especially when the Akkerman et al. (2014) populism measure is employed.[17]

Subdimensions of Populism

We now turn to the analysis of subdimensions of populist attitudes. This will allow us to discover whether and how the psychological correlates of our interest are associated with the subfacets of populism defined by Castanho Silva et al. (2018). Figure 3 shows estimates for our models.

[17]Considering our control measures, we find support for the perceived economic vulnerability argument for the Italian case only (see Appendix S5 in the online supporting information).

Starting with the measure of conspiracy mentality, we can clearly see that this construct is positively associated with two of the three subcomponents of populism—that is, people-centrism and antielitism—across the two countries. As per earlier findings, conspiracies fuel the need of finding security in an increasingly uncertain environment where people-centric attachments address these needs (Bilewicz, Cichocka, & Soral, 2015). Among various effects, the conspiracy mindset fuels the need for control and structure, which can be alleviated by a broader sense of belonging and group attachment. Moreover, since conspiracy thinkers are likely to explain events appealing to secret plots perpetrated by a conspiring group of (powerful) people, they are also more prone to show negative orientations toward those in control of their own country. We find robust evidence for this postulate. On the other hand, conspiracy mentality is negatively linked to holding a Manichaean outlook. Overall, these findings apply to both Italy and Turkey and confirm only partially our expectations and existing research (see e.g., Castanho Silva, Vegetti, & Littvay, 2017).

Considering moral disengagement, we find similar effects across countries. The construct is negatively related to people-centrism. More importantly, as hypothesized, results suggest that higher moral disengagement is paired with holding a Manichean view of politics. Nevertheless, we note also some differences in the effect moral disengagement has on antielitism (negative for Italy and positive for Turkey). While the construct of moral disengagement is robust in measurement, the understanding of antielitism may be different across Italy and Turkey.

Need for cognition seems to exert little effect on any of the subfacets of populism as measured by the Castanho Silva et al. (2018) scale, as it only has a negative relationship with people-centrism and antielitism in Italy, while the effect is negligible in Turkey.

Furthermore, we find that those who believe in simple solutions tend to score higher on people-centrism and antielitism. However, this holds true in the Italian study only, while in the Turkish study, this is not related to the former and is negatively associated with the latter. In contradiction with our expectations, belief in simple solutions seems to go hand in hand with lower Manichaeism.

We conclude our overview by commenting on the influence of trust on populist subfacets. Comparing the effects across the three subdimensions of populism, when trust in national institutions is higher, populist attitudes such as people-centrism and antielitism are lower. Trust in national political institutions helps avoid dividing society into homogeneous and antagonistic groups, challenging the view that politics is only about the general will of the people. Moreover, trust in the political institutions feeds the positive assessment of those in positions of power. When it comes to the Manichean outlook view of the world, the effect of trust is, by contrast, either positive or null, an aspect that conflicts with our expectations.

Discussion

The demand side of populism has been receiving increased attention in recent years (e.g., Hawkins et al., 2018; Rooduijn, 2018, 2019), and political psychology is slowly starting to pay attention to the phenomenon of populism. Even though the concept of populism is hard to measure, the field that has contributed so much to the understanding of authoritarianism, nationalism, nativism, and radical-right sentiments is certainly able to latch on to these aspects of populism. And it certainly has done so (e.g., see Bos et al., 2018; Gründl & Aichholzer, 2020). At the same time, scholars of populism have treated the concept more holistically and have been converging on a definition broadly applicable from the political Left to the Right, from Chávez to Bolsonaro, from Sanders to Trump. For leftist populism that takes an inclusive view of the conception of the people, none of the above applies. In fact, demand-side studies of Latin American populism specifically show that authoritarians are not more, but rather less likely to be populists (Aguilar & Carlin, 2018).

Moreover, populism scholars have borrowed from psychology to develop scales to measure populist attitudes and their building blocks (Castanho Silva et al., 2018, 2020; Schulz et al., 2018) and

constructed operationalizations that argue that "the whole [of populism] is greater than the sum of its parts" (Wuttke et al., 2020). Most research on populist attitudes, however, utilizes measures that are not able to distinguish between populism's building blocks. Only in recent years have more nuanced metrics become available and, as our results also suggest, the comparison across measures already highlights the complexities associated with understanding populist attitudes.

While the utility of both populist attitudes and their building blocks has been established (Castanho Silva et al., 2020), there is little conversation about their psychological underpinnings or about the individual differences that drive them. Our article is an honest attempt to cut through the complexity of the construct and consider its most basic psychological causes in a comparative setting. The results are not necessarily straightforward and point to both the opportunities and the challenges that are associated with this research paradigm. As we selected our cases using a most-different-systems-design strategy, we ended up finding (mostly) different results. But we are not the first to run into this problem. Fatke (2019) highlights the cross-country inconsistencies with regard to personality traits, and the absence of such inconsistencies in the literature is probably due to a lack of comparative attitudinal research.

That being said, we find consistent results for conspiracy mentality and our control variable, trust. Across countries and both scales, we see that those with tendencies to believe in conspiracies attach with the populist view quite strongly. Second, our control variable of trust in national institutions is also consistently predictive.

Other results are less consistent. The impact of moral disengagement, need for cognition, and belief in simple solutions was dependent on either the scale used or the country studied, and sometimes both. All three of these psychological traits yielded both significant positive and negative results depending on which metric of populist attitudes was used or which country was studied. Had we, ourselves, only used one of these two samples, the discussion section would probably have looked very different. This should serve as a warning to those who may want to make generalizations about populist attitudes using a single country or even a single operationalization. We are a long way from understanding populist attitudes especially as they relate to psychological constructs of interest.

When looking at the building blocks of populism, it is important to keep in mind the noncompensatory nature of populism (Wuttke et al., 2020). These underlying constructs are not only scarcely correlated with each other: antielitism and a Manichean worldview are even negatively associated. And it is, indeed, the simultaneous co-occurrence of these otherwise negatively associated characteristics that makes up populist attitudes, something the earlier populist attitude scales were unable to tap. Consider a pro-people attitude in a normal democracy. It could hardly be considered populist. The same is true of a healthy skepticism of elites. But when combined and sprinkled with the highly antagonistic polarization of a Manichean worldview, it could become a detriment to a healthy society. In this respect, it is not surprising that findings for these building blocks are inconsistent both with each other and with a noncompensatory aggregation.

Similarly, looking at these three psychological traits' relationship to antielitism, they appear to be mirror images of each other when comparing Italy and Turkey. But let us put this in the context of today's politics in those countries. In Italy, the political system has been struggling with short-lived and unstable governments. At the same time, in Turkey the AKP has been in power since 2002 and has heavily solidified its control over the country. While at the time of the data collection both countries had populist governments, the elites, especially the political elites as measured by both populism scales used, meant something quite distinct in the two countries. Stronger beliefs in simple solutions may have meant less antielitism (or less anti-AKP sentiments) in Turkey, but vice versa in Italy. The discrepancy in the results concerning moral disengagement, by contrast, is more difficult to explain.[18]

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[18]We have done due diligence and cross-checked all multivariate findings with bivariate results. The inconsistencies across scales, subconstructs, and countries are not a function of multicollinearity.

There are many relevant issues we do not address in this article. We only offer an exploratory assessment of four constructs that theoretically should relate to populism. While our approach is driven by four well-established psychological constructs, we are lacking several important domains that can form the basis of future work on this research agenda.

One of these is the influence of emotions on populism. Some earlier research has explored the role that emotions play in promoting grievances that could drive people toward populist forces both on the Left and the Right (e.g., Marcus, 2021; Rico et al., 2017). As emotions are tackled in various distinct ways, some of which relate to attachment to extremist policies (Erisen, Vasilopoulou, & Kentmen-Cin, 2019), how they intervene and promote attachment to (or dissociation from) populist attitudes is still a gap to be addressed in the literature.

Most likely, additional work needs to be done in the design of a more context-independent measurement of populist attitudes. Psychometric tools have already been at the forefront of scale development in demand-side populism research. Looking at the context dependence of our results, one wonders if more is needed.

Much of the work in political psychology has so far focused on the populist radical right. We certainly would not suggest that populist attitudes are unrelated to characteristics historically more associated with radical-right politics like nationalism, nativism, or xenophobia. However, we argue for a more careful theorization and conceptualization and urge against the rehashing of existing radical-right research with populism as a term only to emphasize a normative stand against these forces. First of all, populism's impact needs to be disentangled from ideology. Once that is done, its effects should be explored carefully, as populism could provide additional mechanisms for their promotion. Exclusive conceptions of *the people* that rely on national identification to delineate who the people are could amplify a need for political domination and a sense of superiority over others (Huddy & Khatib, 2007) and national chauvinism, resulting in feelings of animosity toward outgroup members (Huddy & Del Ponte, 2019). Unlike national pride, national chauvinism leads to heightened xenophobia and greater perceived external threat (Blank, Schmidt, & Heinrich, 1997; Huddy & Khatib, 2007). But current findings suggests that national chauvinism is mostly the product of right-wing ideology and authoritarianism. Carefully disentangling these from populism will surely pose a difficult task. Further research should aim at better understanding the impact of people-centrism as opposed to authoritarianism, social dominance, or radical-right ideology. People-centrism that heavily delineates who are (and who are not) members of the people, theoretically, can serve as a catalyst to ingroup/outgroup distinction, animosity, and conflict, amplifying national chauvinism. Right-wing populists, hence, may believe that they hold a morally superior vision of what it means to be a true citizen of their nation (Müller, 2016), even beyond their more elitist radical-right counterparts, who give less importance to the sovereignty and the rule of the people.

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Supporting Information

Additional Supporting Information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher's web site:

Appendix S1. Sampling Details
Table S1.**1**. Sample Characteristics (Italian Study)—Survey 1
Table S1.**2**. Sample Characteristics (Italian Study)—Survey 2
Table S1.**3**. Sample Characteristics (Turkish Study)

Appendix S2. Question Wording of all Items Used in Both Studies

Appendix S3. Results of the Confirmatory Factor Analyses
Table S3.**1**. CFA Results—Akkerman et al. Scale (Italian Study)