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Populist Party Responsiveness and Populist Party Voter Satisfaction With Democracy in Europe

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Abstract

Voters of populist parties tend to be dissatisfied with democracy. Some scholars attribute this dissatisfaction with how our democracies function to poor representation by mainstream parties and a feeling of not being heard. We should see this representation improve with the success of populist parties. This improved representation should, in turn, have a positive impact on populist party voters' satisfaction with democracy (SWD). Existing case studies have only looked at the link between formal populist party representation in parliament or government, and populist party voters' SWD, with mixed findings, the most puzzling of which is that populist party voters may even become less satisfied with growing formal representation. There is no comparative study on populist parties' actual responsiveness to populist party voters and the connection to their SWD. Thus, we ask: How well do populist parties represent populist party voters, and how does this populist party responsiveness influence populist party voters' satisfaction with democracy? We define populist party responsiveness as issue-based agenda-responsiveness between populist party voters and populist parties and investigate the link to SWD using data on 21 countries from the 2019 European Election Studies. We find that populist parties in Europe are not generally more responsive to populist party voters than mainstream parties. Populist parties' agenda-responsiveness has a positive effect on populist voters' SWD while being in government does not increase the positive effect of populist party responsiveness on their voters' SWD. They may be disenchanted by how well their parties can eventually “walk the talk.”

Keywords

agenda-responsiveness; democracy; European Election Studies; European Union; issue congruence; populist parties; populist party voters; representation; satisfaction with democracy

1. Introduction

In modern democracies, the quality of representation shapes citizens' assessment of the political system and their satisfaction with democracy (SWD). Overall, the higher the congruence of policy priorities and positions between citizens and elites, the more satisfied these citizens are with the way democracy works (e.g., Ferland, 2021; Reher, 2015; Stecker & Tausendpfund, 2016). Voters of radical populist parties are a special case: Beyond a collective gloomy "zeitgeist" (van der Bles et al., 2015), they are not only overall less satisfied with the functioning of democracy (e.g., Bowler et al., 2017; Rovira Kaltwasser & Van Hauwaert, 2020) and their lives more generally (e.g., Burger & Eiselt, 2023) compared to non-populist party voters, but existing research also has mixed findings on the origins and dynamics of this dissatisfaction.

Some scholars attribute this dissatisfaction of populist party voters with how our democracies function to poor representation by mainstream parties (e.g., Kriesi et al., 2006; Werner & Giebler, 2019). There is evidence that these voter groups are indeed less well represented (e.g., Brause & Kinski, 2024; Kübler & Schäfer, 2022), with mainstream parties failing to adequately address crucial issues that concern them (e.g., Betz, 2019; Bornschier, 2019), such as immigration and cultural integration for voters of the populist radical right (e.g., Helms, 1997; van Kessel, 2011). Other explanations focus on populist actors themselves, who repeatedly stoke fear of potential threats (e.g., through immigration) and blame crises on the parties in government. In the EU, populist parties in government actively perpetuate a constant state of crisis to ensure continuous demand for populist supply (Zaun & Ripoll Servent, 2023). This reinforcement of negative communication at both the national and the EU level seems to be linked to lower satisfaction levels of populist voter groups (e.g., Hooghe & Dassonneville, 2018; Rooduijn et al., 2016).

With the growing success of populist parties, we should not only see the representation of populist party voters improve, but, intuitively, this improved representation should also positively affect these voters' assessment of the democratic system. Studies that have investigated the extent to which populist parties may "serve as a corrective to the crisis of representative democracy" by "incorporating citizens that were not (or did not feel) represented by established elites" (Huber & Ruth, 2017, p. 462) come to mixed conclusions. For 31 European countries from 1990 to 2014, Huber and Ruth (2017, p. 473) do not find any general effect of the presence of populist parties in parliament on ideological congruence as a proxy for substantive representation. In a recent case study, Kübler and Schäfer (2022) show that opinion congruence between parliamentarians and citizens increased as a result of the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) entering the German national parliament in 2017, although this increase was mostly driven by congruence on immigration.

We have quite a few studies on how populist representation in parliament and/or government shapes political trust among populist party voters. The findings are also mixed, with some authors showing that trust in democracy tends to increase among populist supporters (e.g., Hajdinjak, 2022; Juen, 2023), while others find the opposite to be the case (Haugsgjerd, 2019). In comparison, there is much less research on the link to populist party voters' SWD, which is surprising given that it is an equally important indicator of the health and legitimacy of a democracy.

The limited research that has investigated the link to populist party voters' SWD has only looked at formal representation, i.e., populist party presence in parliament and/or government. Case studies on Belgium (Rooduijn et al., 2016), France (Canalejo-Molero & Le Corre Juratic, 2024), and the Netherlands (Hooghe &

Dassonneville, 2018) come to the puzzling conclusion that populist voters actually become less satisfied with growing formal representation. In contrast, again for the Netherlands, Hartevelde et al. (2021) find that nativist voters become significantly more satisfied with democracy, at least in the very short term. Schäfer and Reinl (2022) also confirm this for Germany, where the short-term positive effect for populist party voters subsides very quickly post-election.

Hence, existing research has examined the impact of formal populist party representation, i.e., gaining parliamentary representation and government participation on populist voter SWD. There is, however, no study, let alone a comparative one, that investigates populist parties' actual responsiveness to populist party voters and the link between this substantive form of representation and populist party voters' SWD. Thus, we ask: *How well do populist parties represent populist party voters, and how does this populist party responsiveness influence populist voters' satisfaction with democracy?* This contributes to our understanding of the alternatives to representative party democracy that populist parties and voters envision, in that it allows us to capture how important actual, substantive representation is for populists and their voters. Do populists only cite popular grievances as justification for their actions or do they act upon them? Do populist party voters, in turn, respond with greater satisfaction with the functioning of conventional representative party democracy, which would make calling for alternatives less catchy? Could this, in the end, foster the resilience of representative democracy in the face of growing citizen disenchantment or may other, affective forms of representation be more decisive?

While representation in parliament and government is, of course, important, the focus in existing research on formal representation overlooks the substantive quality of this representation. This is crucial because populist parties in parliament, and even more so in government, may not deliver on their promises, thus weakening their representative appeal. Böhmelt and Ezrow (2023), for example, show that populists in government are, in fact, weak in fulfilling their electoral promises on immigration issues. Besides being among the first to look at the effects of actual responsiveness on populist party voters' SWD, the second feature that makes our comparative study unique is that we neither look at positional/ideological congruence nor policy congruence (Ferland, 2021), but investigate issue congruence, i.e., the match between voters' and parties' issue priorities (see also Brause & Kinski, 2024; Traber et al., 2022). This form of rhetorical (Hobolt & Klemmensen, 2008) or agenda-responsiveness (Alexandrova et al., 2016) is often overlooked but equally vital, as parties need to raise the issues citizens care about for those citizens to feel heard in the first place. Such agenda-responsiveness is an important precondition for policy and output responsiveness further down the line (Powell, 2004).

We anticipate that populist party voters will be more satisfied with democracy when issues of great importance to them are more frequently put on the political agenda. As populist parties become more successful, they gain greater access to political discourse, and should more prominently represent the concerns of populist party voters in the public sphere. This could, in turn, lead to a sense of being heard, which may increase these voters' SWD.

We investigate the link between populist party agenda-responsiveness and populist party voter SWD using a new measure of issue-based agenda-responsiveness (Brause & Kinski, 2024) comparing populist party voters' "Most Important Problem" (MIP) with salient issues in populist party manifestos for the 2019 European Parliament (EP) elections based on data from the 2019 European Election Studies (EES) in 21 member states of the EU. We then link this agenda-responsiveness to these voters' SWD. EP elections,

while still predominantly national electoral contests with national parties and candidates prioritising national EU issues (Schmitt & Toygür, 2016), offer a common temporal and spatial context.

We find that populist parties in Europe are not generally more responsive to populist party voters than mainstream parties. In many countries, populist parties do not represent populist party voters better than mainstream parties, while in others they do. Populist parties' agenda-responsiveness has a positive effect on populist party voters' SWD while being in government does not increase the positive effect of populist party responsiveness on their voters' SWD. They may be disenchanted by how well their parties can eventually "walk the talk" when in government. When we think in terms of alternatives to existing representative party democracy, these findings indicate that populist party voters may look at democratic representation not only from an instrumental, rational choice perspective of priority/preference alignment but also from an affective and expressive perspective centred on social identity (Mouffe, 2012; see also Huddy et al., 2018). Populist voters may seek representation that is built on emotional engagement and a sense of belonging. They may desire a form of representation that resonates with their identity and provides a clear and direct connection to their values and aspirations; something that populist narratives claim to achieve.

2. Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses: Populism, Representation, and SWD

The rise of populist parties in Europe is frequently attributed to a "crisis of representation" with populist parties claiming to better "represent the people" than their mainstream counterparts (Hawkins & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2019; Laclau, 2005). We know that citizens who are not well-represented and/or do not feel represented are more likely to be dissatisfied with the functioning of democracy (Dahlberg et al., 2015).

In the chain of responsiveness (Powell, 2004), putting issues on the political agenda is an important first step in substantive representation. If certain voters' priorities are not represented on the political agenda, they neither feel heard nor are they especially likely to be well represented further down the line, which in turn may lead to being dissatisfied with the way democracy works. Mainstream parties tend to struggle to adequately represent populist voters on issues such as EU integration and migration, leaving a representational gap for populist parties to fill (Kriesi et al., 2006). While mainstream parties are therefore less likely to represent populist voters well, populist parties may be able to mobilise this representational deficit (Bornschieer, 2019; Hawkins & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2019) by putting those issues that matter to populist voters on the agenda. As a result, these voters' perception of the functioning of democracy should improve as their (perceived) representation improves. The more rhetorically responsive populist parties are to populist voters, the higher these voters' SWD should be. Specifically, we argue that an *individual* populist party voter's SWD is affected by how responsive the populist party they vote for is to *its* voters. This is not only because populist party voters tend to be similar in their preferences (Backlund & Jungar, 2019; Van Hauwaert & van Kessel, 2018), but more importantly because of a network effect. Individual political preferences and attitudes are shaped by personal interactions with others and everyday political discussions (e.g., Huckfeldt et al., 2005; Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995; Song, 2015). Traditional media informs about the preferences of others (e.g., Mutz, 1998, p. 79), and social media platforms enable (populist) voters to share experiences and evaluate representation (e.g., Engesser et al., 2017). Hartevelde and van der Brug (2023) demonstrate that perceived alignment between voter preferences and party agendas significantly impacts an individual voter's democratic satisfaction. As populist party voters communicate with their peers, they assess whether their fellow voters are satisfied and whether they feel well-represented by the party. Taken

together, these network effects collectively influence individual SWD—and may even be stronger for populist party voters given their Manichean “us-vs.-them” perceptual lens.

H1: The higher the agenda-responsiveness of populist parties, the more satisfied a populist party voter is with the way democracy works.

From the literature on the winner–loser gap, we know that voters of winning parties tend to report higher levels of SWD compared to supporters of losing parties. Two mechanisms may be at play here (Daoust & Nadeau, 2023) that speak to the broader literature on instrumental and expressive partisanship (e.g., Huddy et al., 2018). Instrumental partisans care about responsiveness and party performance, while expressive partisans mainly try to preserve (affective) positive party identity. According to the utilitarian argument, voters of winning parties are more satisfied because they expect their party in government to keep its promises and implement their policy preferences. The second mechanism is more emotional and affective in that winners will simply feel happier and more satisfied because their party has won. Concerning populist party voters, Canalejo-Molero and Le Corre Juratic (2024) argue, and show this for the case of France, that strong negative feelings towards a mainstream winning party offset to some extent the perceived utility they receive from their party’s first-time representation in parliament.

The winner–loser gap is a key explanation for existing differences in the level of SWD with mixed findings on the effect of government participation on populist party voters’ SWD. Similarly, we can formulate two competing hypotheses on how government participation of a populist party moderates the link between agenda-responsiveness and SWD. On the one hand, we may expect government participation to strengthen the positive effect of agenda-responsiveness on SWD in that the likelihood of items on the agenda being implemented into actual policy output is higher for governing as compared to opposition parties (e.g., Thomson et al., 2017). Put differently, agenda-responsiveness becomes more credible because it will more likely be followed through in the chain of responsiveness. If it becomes more likely that populist party voters’ priorities will be reflected in policy output, their SWD should increase.

H2a: When a populist party is in government, the positive effect of populist party agenda-responsiveness on populist party voter satisfaction is stronger.

On the other hand, parties in government face multiple constraints when putting their words into action and implementing their policies, including international responsibilities, interdependencies, and commitments (Mair, 2009), external shocks and unexpected crises (Alexandrova et al., 2016), or coalition agreements and the need for compromise in multiparty governments (e.g., Klüver & Spoon, 2017; Thomson et al., 2017). These potential constraints are especially present for governments of EU member states given the supranational governance structure and governing coalitions as the norm in most member states. Against this background, it would become less likely for populist party voters’ priorities to be reflected in policy output, which should dampen the positive effect of agenda-responsiveness on populist party voter satisfaction.

H2b: When a populist party is in government, the positive effect of populist party agenda-responsiveness on populist party voter satisfaction is weaker.

3. Data and Methodology

3.1. Case Selection and Data

We focus on 21 member states of the EU (at the time): Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. These countries share a common supranational framework, and similar political and economic surroundings, while simultaneously offering enough variance between countries and parties (e.g., established democracies and young democracies, majority and consensus systems). We investigate the 2019 elections to the EP, which was dubbed a “fateful” election particularly successful for populist parties (Treib, 2021).

We identify populist parties using the PopuList dataset (Rooduijn et al., 2024) and exclude radical left and radical right parties that were not populist according to the dataset and borderline cases such as Forza Italia or Die Linke. In total, we cover 35 populist parties, 21 radical right populist parties, 10 moderate populist parties, and 4 radical left populist parties (see A.1 in the Supplementary File). For both voters and parties, we use data from the 2019 EES post-election Voter Study (Schmitt et al., 2022) and the 2019 Manifesto Project (Reinl & Braun, 2023a). We identify populist party voters as the respondents who said that they voted for that respective populist party in the 2019 EP elections. Unfortunately, a comparison across time was not possible as the 2014 EES wave does not include the SWD variable and, in 2009, there were comparatively few populist parties. The EES offers distinct advantages over national election studies (where only a few countries provide recent and consistent data on our main variables) as it employs standardised question wording and surveys all EU member states. The EES includes data on all our variables of interest: SWD in a respondent’s country, vote choice, the “Most Important Problem” in a respondent’s country on the demand side, and data on the issue saliences in manifestos for the EP elections for each party on the supply side. Besides these practical reasons for using EES data, there are several substantive reasons for measuring the agenda-responsiveness of populist parties across the EU in the context of the EP elections. EP elections are still considered predominantly national elections (Schmitt & Toygür, 2016). National parties nominate the candidates, have control over their national party manifestos, and base their campaigns on them. Although parties tend to emphasise EU issues more in EP than in national elections (Braun & Schmitt, 2020), they do focus on national EU issues. For example, if citizens see immigration as the most important issue in the country, a party from this country may prioritise EU migration and asylum policies in its manifesto. At the same time, given that parties place a significant emphasis on EU topics and those topics tend to be of lesser importance to their voters, we can consider EP elections the least likely case for agenda-responsiveness.

3.2. Operationalisation and Measurement

Our dependent variable is the classic *satisfaction with democracy* variable (“On the whole, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in [country]?”). In the EES, the variable is ordinal with four categories: “very satisfied,” “fairly satisfied,” “not very satisfied,” and “not at all satisfied” (Schmitt et al., 2022).

To measure our main independent variable, *issue-based agenda-responsiveness*, we use the approach recently introduced by Brause and Kinski (2024). We match the issue salience among populist party voters (demand side) with the issue salience of populist parties (supply side). As the best available option to comparatively

capture the former (Spoon & Klüver, 2014), we take the “Most Important Problem” in your country variable (“What do you think is the most important issue or problem facing [your country] at the moment?”; Schmitt et al., 2022). For the 2019 wave, only the raw data was available, so we automatically translated and manually coded the open answers. We use DeepL, supplemented by Google Translate verification, for the translation (see also Kinski & Ripoll Servent, 2022). Subsequently, three different coders independently coded the first mentioned problem into 13 categories that correspond well to the manifesto coding categories. This allows us to match them and calculate the responsiveness index (for details, see A.2 in the Supplementary File). The categories include classic policy fields such as Economics, Employment, Environment, Foreign Policy & Defence, Immigration, Law, Crime & Terrorism, Social Policies & Welfare State, but also polity-related issues such as Democracy & Political Systems, Corruption, or EU system. We also include societal issues such as Social Fabric or Emigration & Demographic Change. Reliability test results far exceed accepted standards (see A.3 in the Supplementary File).

The national EP manifesto coding (Reinl & Braun, 2023b) is based on the well-known Manifesto Project’s coding scheme but offers a more nuanced differentiation within each issue category across three levels—General, European, and National. We classify all Manifesto variables consistently into the 13 categories established for the MIP. Based on Brause and Kinski (2024), issue-based agenda-responsiveness is measured by comparing the mean Most Important Problem salience of each populist party’s voters against its manifesto salience, akin to a many-to-one congruence analysis on the party level (Golder & Stramski, 2010). Put differently, we calculate differences between the salience scores of each party electorate and each populist party. A score of 100 indicates full issue congruence, whereas a score of 0 indicates no issue congruence at all (Brause & Kinski, 2024, p. 305). A populist party’s government participation is also based on data from the 2019 European Manifesto Study (Reinl & Braun, 2023a).

As controls, we include both demand-side and supply-side factors at the individual, party, and country levels (see also A.4 in the Supplementary File). While objective deprivation is not unequivocally linked to populist party support and their voters’ dissatisfaction with democracy, economic anxiety is a crucial factor (Mols & Jetten, 2017, 2020; Mudde, 2007; see also Inglehart & Norris, 2016). To control for both, we add the individual outlook on the economy as a measure of subjective deprivation, and unemployment rates at the country level as a measure of objective economic conditions (Eurostat, 2020a). To account for the dynamics of cultural backlash, which contrasts younger, well-educated, progressive individuals with older, conservative, less well-educated groups (Inglehart & Norris, 2016), we include age and education as individual-level controls. Additionally, we control for cultural anxiety linked to immigration by including immigration inflow at the country level (Eurostat 2020b; Gidron & Hall, 2017; Golder, 2016; Mols & Jetten, 2020). This is crucial because perceptions of immigration often do not align with actual migration rates (Mols & Jetten, 2020). At the party level, we control for the party’s national government status at election time, ideological orientation (Rile), party age, and electoral performance in the 2019 EP elections (increased vote share). These data are sourced from the EES Manifesto Study and the MAPP Project (van Haute & Paulis, 2016). At the country level, additional controls include the level of political corruption based on the V-Dem project (Coppedge et al., 2023) and the age of democracy, measured by the most recent significant change in the political system (Marschall & Gurr, 2020).

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive Analysis: Not (so Well) Represented, and Still Dissatisfied

Turning to populist party voters' SWD, we see that a large majority (58.7%) expresses dissatisfaction with the way democracy works in their country ("not very satisfied," "not at all satisfied"). However, there is a significant variance between countries (Figure 1). Poland (91.2%) leads with a very high satisfaction rate, followed by Denmark (69.9%). In contrast, Germany (10.1%) and Sweden (12.5%) exhibit the lowest satisfaction levels. Overall, populist party voter SWD is higher in Central and Eastern Europe than in Western Europe.

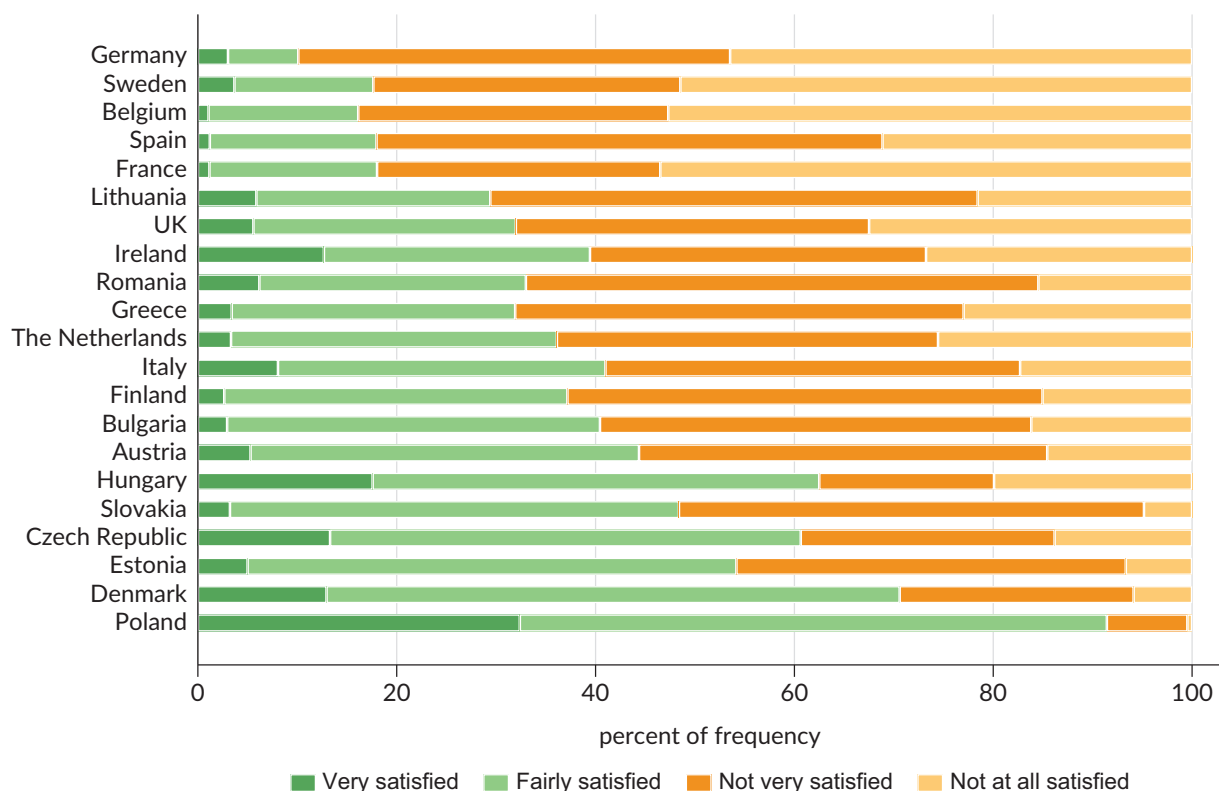


Figure 1. SWD of populist party voters across Europe.

Looking at the agenda-responsiveness between populist parties and populist party voters, which can range from 0 (no issue congruence) to 100 (perfect issue congruence), the mean is 42.28 ($SD = 11.81$). Ninety percent of all surveyed populist parties display a value between 30 and 60. As a standard of comparison, we also calculate the agenda-responsiveness between all mainstream parties and populist party voters. Here the mean is higher at 45.53 ($SD = 6.87$). Thus, on average, populist parties display a lower level of responsiveness towards their electorates than the average mainstream party. However, we again see significant country differences (Figure 2).

In some countries, populist parties indeed represent populist party voters better than their mainstream counterparts (e.g., Denmark, Austria, Romania, Hungary), but in many they do not—by quite a large margin (e.g., France, Ireland, the Netherlands, Estonia). The average responsiveness score in Western Europe is notably lower at 37.80 ($SD = 12.57$), compared to Central and Eastern Europe, which has a higher mean of 47.45 ($SD = 8.13$; Figure 3). This difference is statistically significant (t-test, $p = 0.000$).

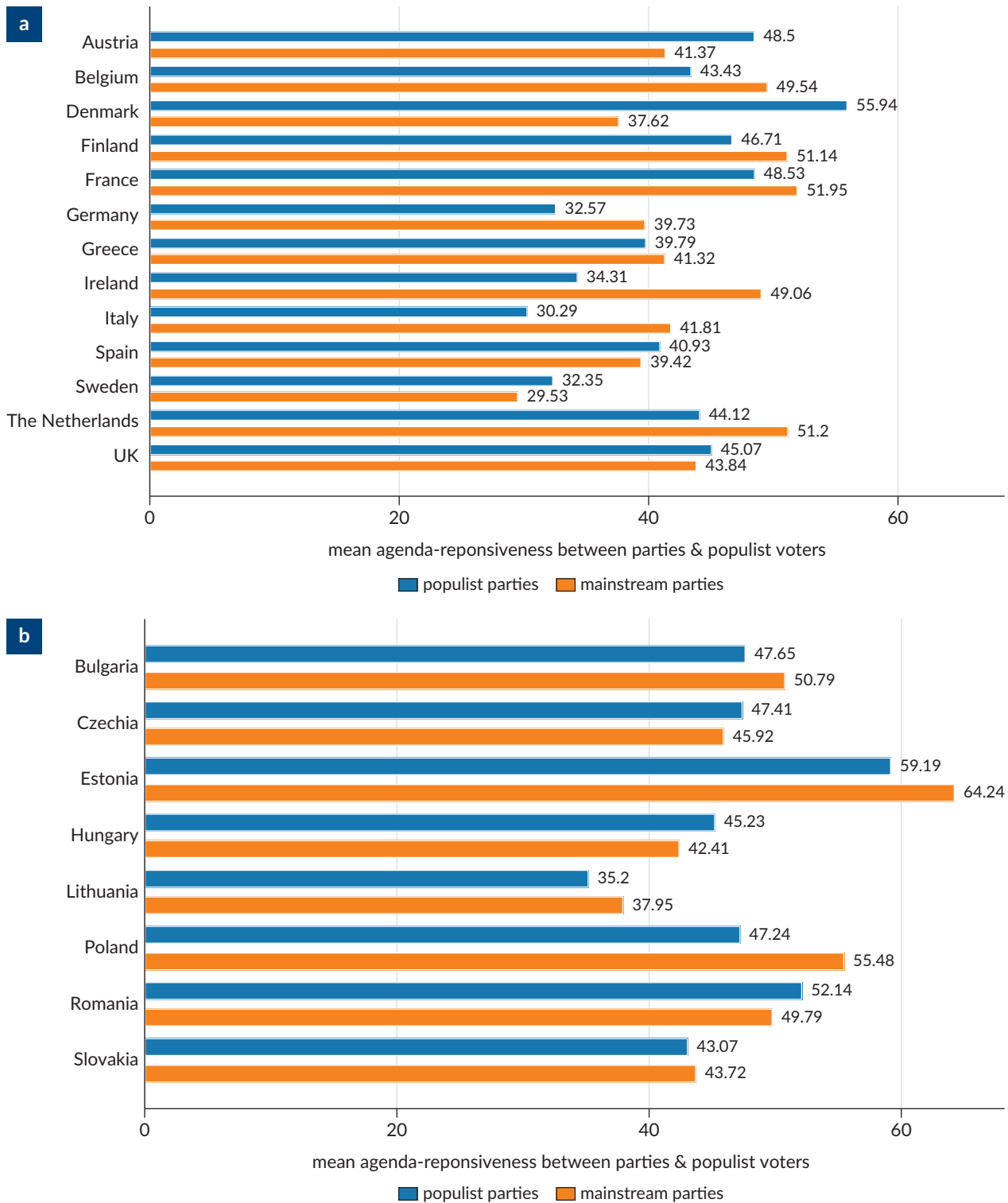


Figure 2. Agenda-responsiveness of populist parties vs. mainstream parties towards populist party voters in (a) Western and (b) Central and Eastern European countries.

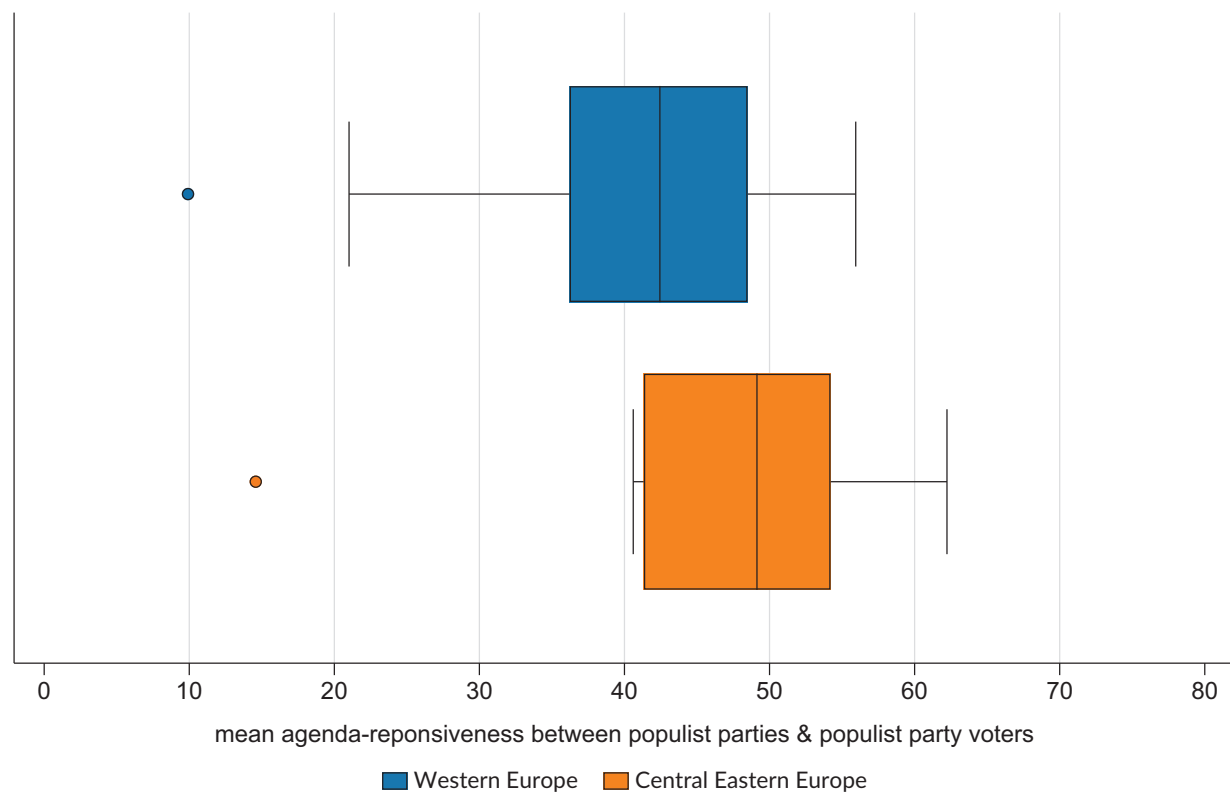


Figure 3. Agenda-responsiveness in Western and Central and Eastern Europe.

The Estonian Centre Party has the highest responsiveness value (63.72), while the Italian Northern League displays the lowest responsiveness score (8.21) in the sample. Despite being central concerns for populist party voters, both economic and socio-cultural issues, but also polity issues are not as effectively addressed by populist parties as one might expect (see A.5 in the Supplementary File for a more detailed analysis).

This descriptive analysis reveals that populist parties do not exhibit the high level of agenda-responsiveness towards their electorate that might be expected. In fact, they display a lower average level of responsiveness compared to mainstream parties. Populist parties underperform especially in core issues that resonate with populist party voters, such as immigration, economic concerns, and EU policies. Furthermore, this study highlights considerable variation in agenda-responsiveness across countries and regions. In Central and Eastern Europe, populist parties speak to their voters' priorities more effectively than in Western Europe.

4.2. Regression Analyses: The More Responsive, the More Satisfied

We test our hypotheses using ordinary least squares and country fixed effect regression models with robust standard errors (Table 1, models 1 and 2). We use linear regression analysis as our dependent variable is quasi-metric (Breen et al., 2018, pp. 49–50), and opt against a multilevel model given that, for many countries, there is just one populist party in the sample. We also have unbalanced sub-samples on the demand side: While Italy has over 350 respondents coded as populist party voters, the minimum is only 44 in Lithuania. We integrate fixed effects to account for the unobserved heterogeneity at the country level but also estimate the models without country fixed effects to capture the effects of country-level control variables (Table 1, models 3 and 4). We centre the main independent variables for interpretability. Models 2 and 4 contain the

interaction effect. Our findings remain robust using logit and ordered logit models treating the dependent variable as dichotomous/ordinal (see A.6 in the Supplementary File).

Table 1. Regression results of populist party agenda-responsiveness on populist party voter SWD.

	Model 1 (fixed effects)	Model 2 (fixed effects)	Model 3	Model 4
Agenda-responsiveness	0.022*** (0.007)	0.026*** (0.005)	0.005*** (0.002)	0.007*** (0.002)
Government status	0.538*** (0.117)	0.461*** (0.126)	0.479*** (0.042)	0.519*** (0.042)
Agenda-responsiveness x government		0.016 (0.010)		−0.021*** (0.003)
Age	−0.002 (0.001)	−0.002 (0.001)	−0.002** (0.001)	−0.003*** (0.001)
Gender (female)	−0.065** (0.024)	−0.067** (0.024)	−0.060** (0.028)	−0.057** (0.028)
Economic outlook (decline)	−0.278*** (0.024)	−0.277*** (0.023)	−0.299*** (0.015)	−0.293*** (0.015)
Education: low	−0.137** (0.066)	−0.136* (0.066)	−0.200*** (0.065)	−0.204*** (0.065)
Education: medium	−0.060** (0.027)	−0.060** (0.028)	−0.095*** (0.031)	−0.099*** (0.031)
Living area: rural	−0.013 (0.032)	−0.011 (0.031)	−0.034 (0.040)	−0.039 (0.039)
Living area: medium town	−0.014 (0.039)	−0.012 (0.038)	−0.011 (0.033)	−0.025 (0.033)
Vote share increased 2019	0.022*** (0.006)	0.032*** (0.009)	0.002 (0.002)	−0.002 (0.002)
Rile (party left–right)	0.009*** (0.003)	0.007*** (0.002)	0.003*** (0.001)	0.005*** (0.001)
Age of populist parties	0.001 (0.002)	0.003 (0.003)	−0.000 (0.001)	−0.001 (0.001)
Age of democracy			−0.000 (0.001)	−0.000 (0.001)
Unemployment			−0.024*** (0.004)	−0.025*** (0.004)
Inflow of immigrants/population			−0.125*** (0.046)	−0.009 (0.049)
Political corruption			−0.867*** (0.113)	−0.837*** (0.112)
Constant	3.216*** (0.097)	3.166*** (0.096)	3.818*** (0.107)	3.739*** (0.108)
Observations	2,946	2,946	2,946	2,946
R-squared	0.193	0.195	0.289	0.298
Number of countries	21	21	21	21

Notes: Robust standard errors in parentheses; *** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.1$.

Across all models (Table 1), we find a consistent positive significant effect of populist party agenda-responsiveness on populist party voter SWD. Put differently, with increasing populist party agenda-responsiveness, populist party voters become more satisfied with democracy. This is in line with our first hypothesis: The more populist parties talk about the issues their voters care about in the election manifestos, the more satisfied these voters are with the way democracy works in their country. The effect holds with and without country fixed effects, regardless of whether we include the interaction effect.

Figure 4 plots the main effect of populist party agenda-responsiveness on populist party voter SWD based on model 2. All else constant, with a 10-point increase in agenda-responsiveness by their populist party, a populist party voter's SWD would increase by 0.22 on a 4-point scale.

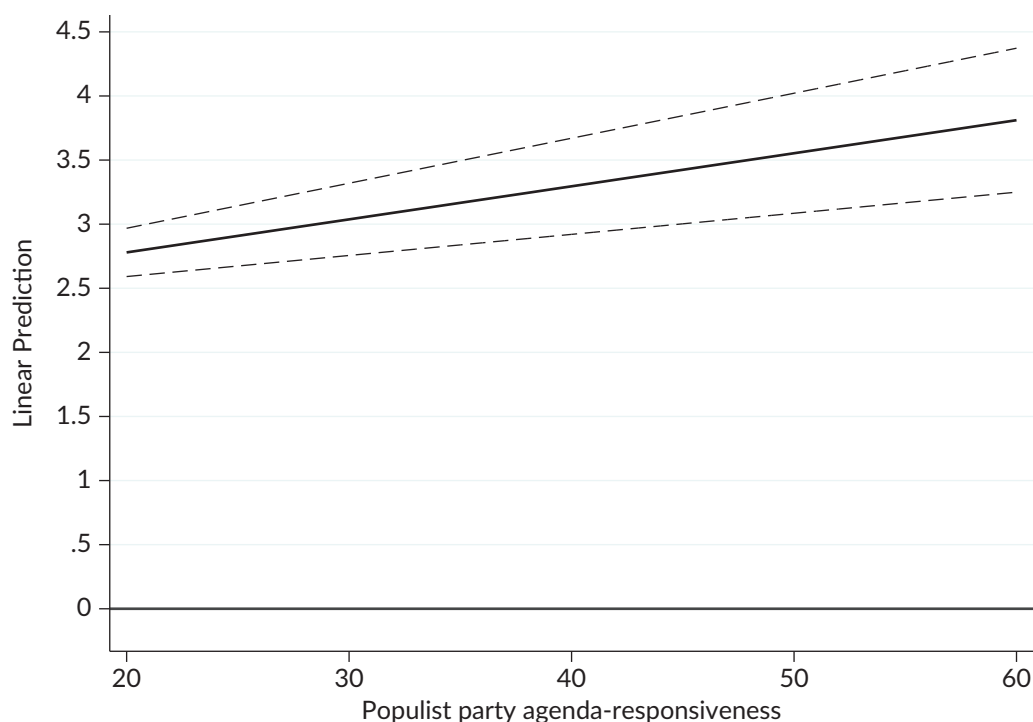


Figure 4. Linear prediction based on model 2, Table 1, 95% confidence interval.

We had competing hypotheses (H2a and H2b) on how a populist party's government status would shape this positive relationship between populist party agenda-responsiveness and populist party voter SWD in that it could either reinforce or dampen it. Looking first at the direct relationship between populist party government participation and populist party voter SWD, we again see a consistent positive significant effect across all models. Populist parties' formal representation in government increases their voters' SWD. When we now include the interaction term between agenda-responsiveness and government participation, we find no consistent support for either of the two competing hypotheses. In fixed-effect model 2, the interaction term is not significant, whereas it is negative and significant in model 4 without country fixed effects. The latter would suggest that the positive effect of agenda-responsiveness on SWD is weaker when populist parties are in government. Put differently, the impact of an extra unit of agenda-responsiveness is smaller among parties in government than it is among opposition parties. This would be in line with H2b, indicating that government status dampens the positive effect of agenda-responsiveness on SWD. This could be the result of disappointed populist party voters because populist government parties are constrained and not able to

fully “walk the talk.” We have to, however, be cautious not to over-interpret this result because we do not find the same effect controlling for unobserved differences across countries (fixed-effect model 2).

5. Conclusion

Scholars have identified a crisis of representation, where populist party voters feel unheard and unrepresented because their concerns are not reflected on the political agenda (Hawkins & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2019). It is argued that this leads to dissatisfaction with how liberal democracy works and a significant decrease in support for the system, pushing these disenchanted voters towards populist parties that often stand in opposition to liberal democratic principles. Populist parties are expected to provide better representation for populist party voters (Backlund & Jungar, 2019). Our findings, however, reveal that populist parties in Europe do not represent their voters better than mainstream parties do (see also Plescia et al., 2019). If anything, they are worse on average, especially when it comes to issues that populist party voters care about. In some EU member states, populist parties are more responsive, but in many, they are not, which challenges a key assumption that populist parties “can easily stylize themselves—and indeed be conceived by citizens—as saviors come to mend a broken system” (Mauk, 2020, p. 46).

At the same time, we show that the agenda-responsiveness of populist parties does indeed have a positive effect on populist party voters’ democratic satisfaction. The more populist parties put the issues on the agenda that their voters care about, such as immigration and socio-cultural issues, the more satisfied these voters are with democracy. The downside from a democratic perspective is that this tends to perpetuate a constant state of crisis. While formal representation in government boosts the populist party voters’ SWD, it does not increase the positive effect of populist party responsiveness on their voters’ SWD. They may be disenchanted by how well their parties can eventually “walk the talk.” All the while, other contextual factors matter. For example, the decline in a populist party voter’s economic situation shows a strong negative effect on their SWD as do a lower level of education and a higher level of unemployment within a country.

Our findings indicate that populist party voters evaluate populist parties based on their actual performance and responsiveness. At the same time, affective partisanship rooted in emotional connection and social identity (Huddy et al., 2018) helps us understand why populist party responsiveness can enhance populist party voter SWD, even when mainstream parties may be objectively better at representing their interests. It demonstrates that satisfaction with democracy is not only about policy outcomes but also about the emotional bonds and partisan identity that voters form with their parties. Despite mainstream parties representing populist voters better on average, these voters report higher satisfaction when represented by populist parties. This may indicate that populist party voters seek a specific type of democratic representation beyond policy representation.

In sum, these findings underscore the complexity of the relationship between populist parties and their electorate across Europe. Populist party voters are indeed disenchanted citizens and this disenchantment is particularly pronounced in countries in which populists are not in power. While agenda-responsiveness as a part of substantive representation has a positive effect on democratic satisfaction, it is not the sole determinant. There seems to be a limit to the benefits of issue representation and the utilitarian mechanisms behind this, beyond which other, more emotional and symbolic forms of representation and affective voter concerns may be of greater importance (Loew & Faas, 2019). To address the concerns of disenchanted

citizens, it is essential to move beyond mere performance metrics and ensure that these voters feel heard, ultimately renewing shared positive identities between parties and voters (Mouffe, 2012). We need to continue to study these alternative forms of democratic representation to understand what makes democracies resilient against the populist threat.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data Availability

The research data is available on ResearchGate via the corresponding author.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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