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## Filling the Void? Political Responsiveness of Populist Parties

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### ABSTRACT

This paper examines the responsiveness of populist parties to the salience of issues amongst the public focusing on a large number of issues on which parties campaign during elections. The paper investigates both left- and right-wing populist parties comparatively in three countries, namely Austria, Germany and Italy. We find that while populist parties carry out an important responsiveness function, they are only slightly more responsive than their mainstream counterparts on the issues they own. The results of this paper have important implications for our understanding of political representation and the future of the populist appeal.

### KEYWORDS

Populism; responsiveness; representation; Austria; Germany; Italy

### Introduction

Recent general elections in Europe have one common denominator in their outcome: the electoral success of populist parties. Populist parties have been able to gain substantial vote share thus becoming important political actors – also in government formation processes. For instance, in 2017 the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) obtained 26 per cent of the vote, the Alternative for Germany (AfD) 12.6 per cent and in the Netherlands the Party for Freedom (PVV) obtained 13.1 per cent. In March 2018 in Italy, the two populist parties, the League and the Five Star Movement (M5S), were able to substantially increase their vote share to 17.4 and 32.7 per cent, respectively. Several populist parties have now entered governments either as partners in governing coalitions – like the FPÖ in Austria – or as leader of governments – like SYRIZA in Greece and the M5S and the League in Italy.

While populism has been a central concern for political science for some time (e.g. Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008), the relationship between populist parties and the public in terms of responsiveness has not yet been analysed in a fully-fledged empirical effort. For a party to be responsive to the public concerns, it needs to be paying attention to the preferences of the public by responding to its short-term demands.

Ezrow and Hellwig (2014) show that market integration compounds political parties with respect to their function of representing and expressing the political views of their electorates. In particular, economic globalisation as well as the consolidation of a liberal regime for international finance appear to compromise party responsiveness to public opinion. In Peter

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Mair's work (2009, 2014), this concern is epitomised by the tension between 'responsiveness' and 'responsibility': the internal and international systems constrain parties' manoeuvre so that the two roles of parties are increasingly incompatible. Kriesi (2014) argues that the most likely outcome is a division of roles between mainstream parties (responsible but not responsive) and peripheral populist parties (responsive but not responsible). Mair (2011) states that populist parties can potentially fulfil an important representation function that mainstream parties may no longer be able to deliver due to responsibility constraints.

In this paper, we aim to explore empirically whether populist parties are more responsive to the short-term demands of public opinion than their mainstream counterparts comparatively in three countries, namely Austria, Germany and Italy. Responsiveness is understood in this paper as 'the capacity to satisfy the governed by executing the policies that correspond to their demands' (Morlino, 2008, p. 54). Responsiveness is at the very core of democratic representation and it differs from representation in that it is more specific as it deals with the decisions taken by representatives after the election. We deliberately focus on issue salience rather than issue positioning to draw conclusions on parties' responsiveness function, as such building upon saliency theory, which states that parties compete by selectively highlighting certain issues during election campaigns (e.g. Jones & Baumgartner, 2005; Sagarzazu & Klüver, 2017).<sup>1</sup> We thus follow an established line of literature (e.g. Green-Pedersen & Mortensen, 2010; Klüver & Spoon, 2016; Wagner & Meyer, 2014) and the developments within issue yield theory (De Sio & Weber, 2014) to infer from parties' issue emphases their responsiveness to the public. In particular, we focus on whether and the extent to which populist parties present alternative agendas stressing issues that are often kept silent by mainstream parties. We investigate party responsiveness on a large variety of issues, exploring both left- and right-wing populist parties and comparing them to mainstream parties. As we conceive populism as a thin-centred ideology that is usually combined with other ideologies (Mudde, 2004), we include populist parties from both sides of the ideological spectrum to establish which responsiveness void they are able to fill and whether they differ from their mainstream counterparts.

The empirical tests rely on original datasets from the *Issue Competition Comparative Project*<sup>2</sup> (ICCP) that merge individual-level survey data with information on the salience of issues for parties in order to evaluate which responsiveness void populist parties may fill. The data include both a citizen survey to collect information on publics' issue preferences right before the heat of the election campaign, and party-level Twitter data to measure parties' issue priorities in their official communication during the electoral campaign. Election campaigns are key moments in representative democracies when parties interact with the public and attempt to be responsive to the demands and concerns of citizens.

Our findings indicate that populist parties appear to be slightly more responsive to the public compared to their mainstream counterparts on issues they own. These findings have important consequences for our understanding of political representation and the challenges and opportunities that populist parties bring in times of the so-called 'crisis' of mainstream politics (Mair, 2009), including how they will contribute to the transformation of the established party systems.

## Populism, Responsiveness and Liberal Democracy

The minimalistic definition of populism as a 'thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, "the pure

people” versus the “corrupt elite”, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people’ (Mudde, 2007, p. 23) has gained predominance in the existing literature. The specific definitions of the ‘people’ and ‘the corrupt elite’ are, however, often left purposely ambiguous by populist parties (Mudde, 2004), and they are likely to differ depending on the context (Canovan, 1984). For instance, the people can be identified as a nation (cultural definition), as belonging to a class (economic definition), or as being the sovereign (political definition) (e.g. Kriesi, 2014; Mény & Surel, 2001).

While Mudde (2004) points out that populism is often regarded as hostile to liberal democracy, Canovan stresses the populist appeal as being ‘democratic’ by virtue of appealing to disenfranchised citizens that may have been left behind by the political process. These contradictions are due to the two pillars enshrined in the concept of liberal democracy: populists focus mainly on the democratic pillar (= sovereignty of the people) while neglecting the liberal pillar which calls for independent control to guarantee democratic check and balances. Thus, the difficult relationship between populism and liberal democracy results from the latter allowing for restrictions on the general will of the sovereign – the people – by minorities and independent institutions. Indeed, populist politicians mostly claim that: ‘they speak for the “silent majority” of “ordinary, decent people”, whose interests and opinions are (they claim) regularly overridden by arrogant elites, corrupt politicians and strident minorities’ (Canovan, 1999, p. 5). By focusing only on the sovereignty of the people, populist actors claim that they would ensure closing the allegedly growing representational gap between the governed and governors (Rovira Kaltwasser 2012). In this sense, populist parties can be seen as democratically inclusive, since they are giving a voice to a ‘silent majority’ (e.g. Huber and Saskia 2017; Mény and Surel 2001; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012).

Mair (2011) points out that it is actually the populist parties that fulfil the responsiveness function, as mainstream parties nowadays have greater difficulties to ‘deliver’. Mair theorises that mainstream parties face external constraints that restrict their room for policy manoeuvre, which may not allow them to be responsive towards the concerns of their electorate. Particularly in times of crisis, populist parties claim to be able to represent the demands of the public on substantive issues by taking up the ‘grievances of a specific part of the population’ (Kriesi, 2014, p. 369), while mainstream (governing) parties are often forced to take unpopular political decisions due to external constraints like multi-level governance (see also Karremans and Lefkofridi 2018). Such external constraints affect the links between parties and the public, and create a strong tension between *responsiveness* to public opinion on the one hand, and governing *responsibility* on the other, where responsibility is defined as prudent government based on accepted norms and practices (Mair 2014). This tension between responsibility and responsiveness should be minimised in the case of populist parties, which continue to put forward policies in spite of these constraints and hence claim to better represent the needs of the public. Hence, while external constraints hamper mainstream parties’ competitiveness by limiting their capacity to highlight issues that they cannot fulfil once elected, populist parties act freely, presenting alternative agendas and stressing issues that are often kept silent by mainstream parties.

From this perspective populist parties do fulfil a central representation function as they fill a responsiveness gap that exists on certain issues. This might lead to a re-alignment and

a re-structuring of old ideological conflict structures. As Kriesi states: ‘populism is a productive force that may serve as the catalyst for a profound realignment of West European party systems’ (2014, p. 361). Unconstrained by responsibility, populist parties tend to compete by stressing issues that mainstream parties have avoided for a long time (e.g. Bardi et al. 2014; Hino 2012). Hence, our first hypothesis is that populist parties are more responsive to the salience of issues for the public than mainstream parties (*Hypothesis 1*).

### The Responsiveness of Left- and Right-Wing Populism

To explore the responsiveness of populist parties vis-à-vis their mainstream counterparts, neither the generic left-right dimension nor a two-dimensional ideological space (socio-economic and cultural one) will be sufficient. In fact, we need to take into account recent societal and economic transformations that have especially characterised Western European societies (Kriesi et al. 2008), and therefore examine more refined issue groups to capture the potential responsiveness spaces of populist parties.

To define specific issue groups, we follow the theoretical insights of the work by Häusermann and Kriesi (2015) who point out that both the cultural and economic dimensions transformed in a more fine-grained political space over the years. Turning first to the cultural dimension, for one, it now includes both issues that can be summarised under *cultural liberalism*, such as gay marriages and environmental protection, and issues that focus on the *cultural diversity* within a society, spanning issues such as immigration and cultural integration. Concerns related to *European integration* and *national political sovereignty* relate to this cultural dimension as well, albeit they would not necessarily subside into it (Häusermann and Kriesi, 2015, pp. 204–207).

Transformations also affected the substance of the general socio-economic dimension, which, if ever the case, can no longer be considered unidimensional (see also Kriesi et al. 2008). In this regard, Häusermann and Kriesi (2015) point toward the distinction between *income redistribution* and *social investment policies*. As they discuss, while welfare states in Europe typically redistribute on the basis of contributions rather than needs, voter preferences have recently shown signs of attentiveness to a ‘dualisation of benefits’, which has become politically relevant. Instead of redistributive policies based on contributions, these social investment policies are driven by voter preferences on ‘general welfare expansion’ (Häusermann and Kriesi, 2015, pp. 207–210; see also Esping-Andersen et al. 2002). As far as the argument can be applied here, we should thus separate socio-economic policies based upon contributions from those social investment policies designed to offset inequality.

Mainstream parties could potentially face constraints on all these specific issue groups. With regard to issues of European integration for example, Hooghe et al. (2002) point out that mainstream parties generally align to the status quo and are thus favourable of their country’s membership in the EU and the ‘dictat’ of the community. European integration affects economic issues (e.g. monetary and fiscal policies) for which policy-making has been largely transferred from national to European institutions (Hellwig 2001), thus constraining national governments room for manoeuvre especially in relation to welfare redistribution. Mainstream parties may also be constrained in their issue presentation on immigration. Discourses entailing extreme (right) issue positions on immigration might alienate their European partners both with regard to welfare distributions only foreseen

for nationals, but also on ethnical tolerance of other EU-citizens. While these few examples show that the room of manoeuvre may be restricted for mainstream parties, populist parties often reject these constraints in an attempt to mobilise voters on exactly these same constrained issues. We do however expect differences with regard to the responsiveness void populist right and populist left parties aim to fulfil.

The different definitions of ‘the people’ populist parties on the right and the left employ already provide some information with regard to which gap they may aim to fill and on which specific issue group populist parties should be more responsive. Specifically, while populist left parties classify the people mainly from an economic perspective – the weak socio-economic groups as the ‘ordinary’ people –, in the discourses of the populist right parties cultural – the belonging to a certain nation – and political perspectives – against the elites – dominate. Thus, populist right parties are expected to tap into the responsiveness void on the cultural dimension and reject constraints on immigration, while the populist left parties are expected do so mainly on the economic dimension by pushing issues on state investments and welfare provisions (e.g. Akkerman et al. 2014; Rooduijn and Akkerman 2017). For instance, populist left parties will be more likely to focus on peoples’ frustration with the unresponsiveness of mainstream parties on issues like unemployment and poverty that fall under the category of redistribution and social investment policy. Meanwhile, populist right parties may appeal more to issues pertaining to immigration and European integration, and thus to fill this void left by mainstream parties on the right. While populist right parties also consider economic issues when addressing people on the cultural dimension (see Mény and Surel 2001), Hainmueller and Hiscox (2007) show that the conflict over immigration is mainly dominated by a cultural discourse.

Hence, we hypothesise that populist parties on the right are more responsive to the issues that are salient for the public related to immigration and European integration (*Hypothesis 2a*). Meanwhile, populist left parties will be more responsive on issues related to redistribution and social investment compared to other issues (*Hypothesis 2b*).

### Populist Parties in Comparison: The cases of Austria, Germany and Italy

Although there are many populist parties and leaders in Europe and beyond, in this paper we focus on countries in which populist parties on both the left and the right are present in order to compare their behaviour, holding the electoral context constant. In particular, we focus on the *Austrian Freedom Party* (FPÖ) in Austria, the *Alternative for Germany* (AfD) in Germany, and the *League* (Lega) in Italy – up until 2017 known as the Northern League<sup>3</sup> – as prototypical cases of populist parties on the right of the ideological spectrum, and on the *Austrian List Peter Pilz* (LPP),<sup>4</sup> the German *Die Linke* and the Italian *Five Star Movement* (M5S) as cases of populist parties on the left.<sup>5</sup> Particularly, the populist right parties in Austria and Italy are among the oldest, stable and most established cases of the populist radical right party family in Europe and can be seen as prime examples of the type of populism that is predominant in contemporary Europe on the right (Pauwels 2011). The populist left parties LPP and M5S are relatively new phenomena while *Die Linke* has been part of the German party system for some time.<sup>6</sup> None of the parties included in this paper were in government before the election considered in the paper. Only the FPÖ and the Lega have had government experience in the past

respectively in 2002 and in 2008. The government status is key in terms of responsiveness as it constrains party action via responsibility.

Austria's FPÖ was in the past a relatively small party focused mainly on economic liberalism and nationalism (Luther 1987); the leadership of Jörg Haider starting in 1986 has brought increasing success to the party by intensifying its focus on nationalism, but also a drop in success after its first government participation between 2000 and 2002. The more recent general elections saw a surge in support for the FPÖ reaching 26 per cent of the vote share in 2017 and entering into government with the centre-right party, the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP).

Moving to the Italian Lega, the early literature has stressed three main factors behind its success: anti-government attitudes, hostility towards the underdeveloped south, and immigration (Diamanti 1996). The Lega has since then expanded its focus also following its government experience in 2001–2006 and 2008–2011. Recently, under the new leadership of Matteo Salvini, the Lega went from a party mainly focused on the so-called 'Northern question' to a party embracing the concerns of all (ethnic) Italians with a populist programme that is strongly anti-immigrant, anti-globalisation, and Eurosceptic (e.g. Kriesi and Pappas 2015). The party gained 17.4% of the vote in the 2018 election and formed a government with the M5S.

The AfD was founded in 2013 as a party on the right interested mainly in economic issues but already including Eurosceptic positions (Decker 2015). While in the 2013 national election the party missed the electoral threshold to enter the German Bundestag, in 2017 the AfD went well above obtaining 12.6 per cent of the votes. Its main focus steadily shifted towards issues of immigration and integration. Together with its focus on direct democracy measures, Lewandowsky et al. (2016) classified the AfD as a classical populist right party.

Moving to the left, the LPP was founded in July 2017 as a Green spin-off party by Peter Pilz – a long-standing Green MP – when the party did not guarantee him a safe seat for the 2017 election (Bodlos and Plescia 2018). Peter Pilz has been known as corruption fighter and has claimed for several years that the Green party needs to become more populist – particular on issues related to immigration, but also on social affairs in the aftermath of the economic and financial crisis.

The M5S party was founded in 2009 by Beppe Grillo, a long-time famous comedian, then activist and blogger.<sup>7</sup> The M5S grew very fast and in the two subsequent national elections, 2013 and 2018, became the largest party in Italy. From the very outset, the M5S has fiercely criticised Italy's political class, focused on the struggle against corruption, and is in favour of the direct participation of Italian citizens (Biorcio 2014). The M5S claims to be neither left-wing nor right-wing with its voters in 2013 on average standing somewhere around the centre of the left-right ideological spectrum (Colloca and Corbetta 2015). In the most recent election held in March 2018, the M5S attempted to distance itself from radical right-wing positions on immigration and stressed the intention to collaborate, first of all, with parties on the left after the elections. Yet, after the rejection of the mainstream left party, the Democratic Party (PD), to form a government, the M5S coalesced with the Lega to form the first all populist government in Europe.

Die Linke was established in 2007 by merging the successor of the communist party of Eastern Germany (PDS) and a splinter party of the Social Democratic Party (SPD). One aim of Die Linke is to overcome capitalism via democratic and social reforms. Overall, it

refers to the peoples' economic interest, which stand in sharp contrast to the interests of economic elites.<sup>8</sup> With regard to immigration and integration, Die Linke does not propose any clear policy position. In the most recent general election in 2017 it received 9.2 per cent of the vote increasing its vote share by 0.6 per cent since 2013.

In our empirical analysis, we will compare the behaviour in terms of responsiveness of these populist parties to their mainstream counterparts: the Peoples' Party (ÖVP), the Social Democratic Party (SPÖ), the liberal NEOS and the Greens in Austria, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU-CSU), the Social Democratic Party (SPD), the Free Democratic Party (FDP) and the Greens in Germany and the PD, Go Italy (FI) and Free and Equal (LeU) in Italy.

## Data and Methods

To test our hypotheses we need reliable measures of citizens' policy priorities and parties' responsiveness to these same priorities. To this end, we rely on data from the ICCP project, a comparative project that collected information on both voters' and parties' issue priorities on a large amount of policy issues.

For each of the countries analysed, about 6–8 weeks before the respective general election, country experts were asked to provide a list of issues that would most likely characterise the electoral campaign. In terms of citizens, during a pre-electoral survey<sup>9</sup> conducted immediately *before* the heat of the election campaign, respondents were asked to first position themselves on these issues on a scale from 1 (extreme left) to 6 (extreme right) and then to assign a priority to the issues on a scale from 0 (low saliency) to 1 (high saliency) with 0.5 representing medium saliency.<sup>10</sup> Despite a few issues that are specific to certain country-election campaigns, the ICCP project is highly consistent across countries in the issues covered. In particular, in this paper we retain for the empirical analyses all the issues asked similarly in the three countries and that can be classified into the five theoretically identified groups discussed earlier, namely *cultural diversity*, *welfare redistribution*, *socio-economic-investments* that we label as *egalitarianism*, *EU integration* and *cultural liberalism*.

To make sure that the issue grouping is theoretically-led and consistent across countries, we have followed the following steps. First of all, and guided by the theory, we classified each issue into a specific issue group being consistent across countries. Second, we checked this theoretical grouping with the help of exploratory factor analysis – based on respondent issue positioning – and excluded issues that do not belong to any of the five theoretically defined groups.<sup>11</sup> These are usually issues that have characterised the election campaign in only one of the countries examined, and their ideologically cross-cutting nature does not allow us to include them in any of the discussed groups.<sup>12</sup> Exploratory factor analysis is conducted using respondent issue positioning instead of respondent issue saliency because we are interested in line with previous attempts (Häusermann and Kriesi 2015) to map the multidimensionality of the ideological space of the electorate in the three countries examined. Finally, with the remaining issues, we performed Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) – again based on respondent issue positioning – to check for the belongingness of each issue to the assigned group (see the [Appendix](#) for CFA results).

Specifically, we build the cultural liberalism scale using items referring to gender quotas and gay marriages as well as issues related to environmental protection when available.



Cultural diversity includes all the items related to immigration spanning the relevance of asylum rules regulations, foreigners' adaptation to the national culture and rules on the number of refugees. European integration is operationalised using items on each country's EU membership as well as euro membership. Two main items represent egalitarianism that is, income redistribution and an increase in the minimum wage. For Italy only we include two additional items in this group namely the introduction of a basic income and university fees as specifically characterising this country's election campaign. Finally, the group of issues related to welfare redistribution encompasses job market regulation, redistribution through taxation, pension age and unemployment (see [Table 1](#) for the full categorisation).

To measure salience of issues for parties on these same issues, we focus on Twitter feeds of parties and their leading candidates during the entire campaign period.<sup>13</sup> During the six weeks before the election campaign, the Twitter content of the main parties running for elections and their leading candidates were collected and coded by two independent coders in each country to assess intercoder reliability of the coding scheme.<sup>14</sup> As for any other source of party communication, the reliance on Twitter comes with a trade-off. On the one hand, studying party communication on Twitter might provide a better alternative to party manifestos and party press releases to measure parties' issue emphases. In fact, while Twitter represents a more dynamic instrument for parties allowing them to adapt their political messages to actual campaign events, party manifestos for example are a rather static often time not read resource (e.g. [Barbera 2015](#); [Graham et al. 2013](#)). On the

**Table 1.** Full issue categorisation.

Issue group	Countries/Items		
	Austria	Germany	Italy
Cultural diversity	asylum rules welfare for immigrants foreigners' cultural adaptation	asylum rules  foreigners' cultural adaptation	welfare for immigrants  immigrant citizenship refugees care
	freedom of movement	number of refugees	
Cultural liberalism	gender quotas gay marriages sustainable energy diesel cars	gender quotas gay marriages  diesel cars nuclear phase wind turbines	gay marriages   euthanasia soft drugs legalise prostitution
EU integration	EU refugee quotas EU membership	EU refugee quotas EU membership	EU membership Euro membership
Egalitarianism	income differences minimum wage	Germany paying EU poorer countries income differences minimum wage	income differences minimum wage  basic income no university fees
Welfare redistribution	job market regulations taxation pension age unemployment	job market regulations taxation pension age	job market regulations taxation pension age  family bonus

Notes: the blank space in the single issue-row signifies that issue has not been included in the respective citizen survey.

other hand, the use of Twitter is not without drawbacks. In particular, the validity of our conclusions is conditional on a necessary theoretical assumption, the so-called *press-release assumption* that is defined as follows:

[...] regardless of how many followers (and of which type) a party's Twitter account might have, and regardless of how unrepresentative and elitist the Twitter audience might be in a given country, [...] parties will use Twitter to communicate their desired messages to the media, just like in a press release (De Sio et al. 2017, p. 11).

The appropriateness of this assumption appears well supported by previous empirical research also in the three countries examined in this paper (Bruns and Burgess 2011; Parmelee and Bichard 2011).

The *dependent* variable of our empirical models is the share of parties' Twitter emphasis on each issue for each party. The main *independent* variable of our study is *public saliency*, which simply represents the percentage of all respondents (in the whole sample) that reports the issue as having high priority.<sup>15</sup> To test the first hypothesis of our study we simply interact public saliency with a categorical variable that separates mainstream parties from populist parties on the left and right of the ideological spectrum. To test the second and third hypothesis we additionally interact public saliency and party type with a categorical variable of issue type. We recognise that there might be a reciprocal relationship between voters and parties with not only parties responding to voters' priorities but also the other way round. Our assumption however, is that *campaigns* matter, i.e. party emphasis efforts will be different *before* and *during* the campaign. This is why we designed the CAWI survey to be run *before* the beginning of the campaign. The idea here is that this would be a time where party strategists are aware of public priorities, but have not yet unleashed the full power of their campaign issue emphasis efforts.

We run Tobit models, with country fixed effects and errors clustered by party. Following previous applications of this research design (De Sio et al. 2017), we choose Tobit rather than linear regression models since our dependent variable is a proportion – constrained between 0 and 1 – with a strong asymmetrical distribution. In cases like this, predictions from a linear model are likely to lead to an underestimation of the uncertainty in our inferences and therefore, we opt to treat our dependent variable as a distribution censored at 0. Clustering by party allows us to take into account, on the one hand, that we have repeated observations by party for each issue, and on the other, to partially control for party-level differences – like size and organisational structure – and variation in their use of Twitter.<sup>16</sup> In our dataset, each row represents a party × issue saliency combination.

## Empirical Findings

The baseline model in Table 2 (Model 1) is an empty model including only the country fixed effects. The coefficients of the fixed effects are non-significant and the variance explained by the model is extremely low, a sign that the contextual level explains very little variation of our dependent variable. Model 2 in Table 2 includes the variable saliency and we see a substantial increase in the variance explained.<sup>17</sup> Specifically, the public saliency variable has a positive and significant effect on party Twitter emphasis, a result that suggests that parties – in general – do indeed respond to public opinion. In Model

**Table 2.** Explaining party issue emphasis: Tobit models.

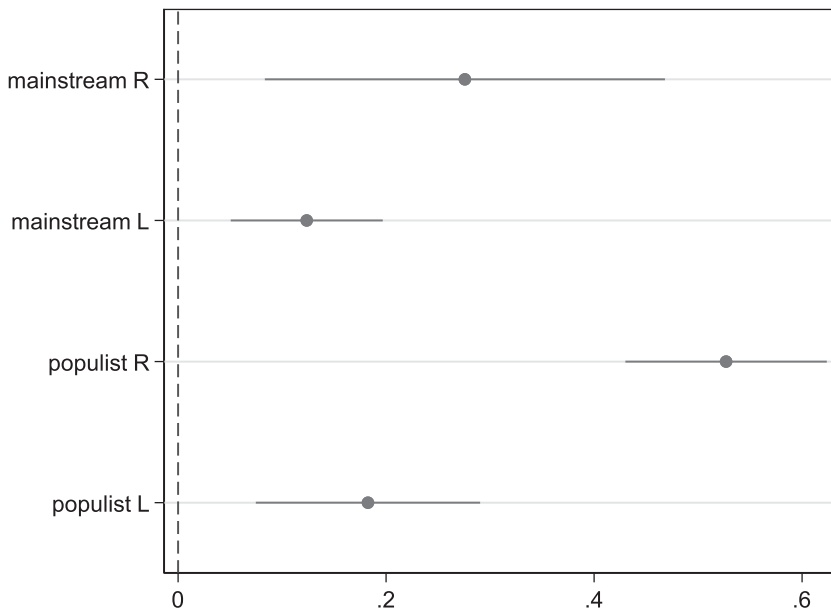
	Dependent variable: Twitter party issue saliency								
	(M1)	(M2)	(M3)	(M4)	(M5)	(M6)	(M7)	(M8)	
saliency		0.239***	(0.059)	0.276**	(0.098)	0.480***	(0.124)	0.530**	(0.202)
Reference: mainstream R									
mainstream L				0.092	(0.065)			0.128	(0.149)
populist R				-0.161*	(0.067)			-0.051	(0.194)
populist L				0.027	(0.067)			-0.085	(0.194)
Reference: mainstream R × saliency									
mainstream L × saliency				-0.152	(0.096)			-0.213	(0.209)
populist R × saliency				0.251*	(0.097)			0.160	(0.333)
populist L × saliency				-0.093	(0.094)			0.057	(0.265)
Reference: Cult diversity									
Welfare						0.623***	(0.128)	0.625***	(0.159)
Egalitarianism						0.333***	(0.097)	0.495***	(0.148)
EU						0.128	(0.090)	0.179	(0.131)
Cult liberalism						0.125	(0.080)	0.151	(0.107)
Welfare × saliency						-0.883***	(0.189)	-0.871***	(0.230)
Egalitarianism × saliency						-0.494**	(0.153)	-0.839***	(0.245)
EU × saliency						-0.168	(0.143)	-0.199	(0.244)
Cult liberalism × saliency						-0.167	(0.120)	-0.193	(0.161)
mainstream L × Welfare								-0.005	(0.200)
mainstream L × Egalitarianism								-0.210	(0.184)
mainstream L × EU								-0.285	(0.163)
mainstream L × Cult liberalism								-0.020	(0.129)
populist R × Welfare								-0.702**	(0.243)
populist R × Egalitarianism								-0.076	(0.210)
populist R × EU								0.043	(0.215)
populist R × Cult liberalism								-0.123	(0.143)
populist L × Welfare								0.535*	(0.214)
populist L × Egalitarianism								-0.265	(0.161)
populist L × EU								0.195	(0.205)
populist L × Cult liberalism								0.045	(0.196)
mainstream L × Welfare × saliency								0.027	(0.283)
mainstream L × Egalitarianism × saliency								0.446	(0.288)
mainstream L × EU × saliency								0.376	(0.278)
mainstream L × Cult liberalism × saliency								0.031	(0.180)
populist R × Welfare × saliency								0.852	(0.434)
populist R × Egalitarianism × saliency								0.119	(0.376)
populist R × EU × saliency								-0.169	(0.398)

populist R × Cult liberalism × saliency									0.131	(0.265)
populist L × Welfare × saliency									−0.726*	(0.310)
populist L × Egalitarianism × saliency									0.610*	(0.268)
populist L × EU × saliency									−0.344	(0.343)
populist L × Cult liberalism × saliency									−0.091	(0.281)
Reference: Austria										
Germany	0.014	(0.008)	0.023*	(0.009)	0.026**	(0.010)	0.031***	(0.009)	0.033***	(0.009)
Italy	−0.024	(0.015)	−0.018	(0.016)	−0.015	(0.011)	−0.006	(0.016)	−0.002	(0.009)
constant	0.014	(0.007)	−0.148***	(0.044)	−0.167*	(0.069)	−0.327***	(0.088)	−0.361*	(0.142)
variance (party)	0.073***	(0.010)	0.069***	(0.009)	0.066***	(0.008)	0.065***	(0.008)	0.047***	(0.005)
<i>N</i>	247		247		247		247		247	
<i>AIC</i>	−255.786		−282.454		−288.478		−287.214		−254.715	
<i>BIC</i>	−241.748		−264.907		−249.875		−241.592		−195.056	
VarExp	0.018		0.123		0.199		0.213		0.587	

Standard errors in parentheses: \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

3, we distinguish between parties by interacting public saliency with party type. To ease the interpretation of the results, Figure 1 plots the marginal effect of public saliency on Twitter emphasis by party type holding constant all the other variables in the model. We see that saliency has a positive effect on Twitter emphasis for all parties: as the salience of an issue for the public increases, so does party emphasis. The marginal effect is the largest for right-wing populist parties compared to all other parties with a statistically significant difference for both mainstream and populist parties on the left ( $p < 0.001$ ) and for mainstream right ( $p < 0.05$ ). Hence, our first hypothesis that populist parties are more responsive to the issue saliency of the public than mainstream parties finds partial support given that only right-wing populist parties appear to be more responsive.

We now proceed to test our final expectations; that is, that we should see differences across populist parties on the right and on the left in terms of being responsive on certain types of issues. First of all, in Model 4 we interact saliency with issue type and note that all parties are generally less responsive to the public saliency on issue related to egalitarianism and especially welfare redistribution compared to cultural diversity. In other words, both economic issues receive far less responsiveness compared to non-economic issues, such as cultural diversity. Investigating recent election campaigns in Europe, De Sio and Lachat (2018) find that polarisation for both voters and parties is much higher on the cultural dimension compared to the economic one. This suggests that the opportunities for parties to present distinct packages of issue positions are more limited in the economic domain compared to the cultural domain, which aligns well with the findings from our analysis suggesting that parties respond to the issues that are salient for the public more on the cultural rather than on the economic domain. In this regard, we notice that welfare redistribution is the issue that by far receives less responsiveness.

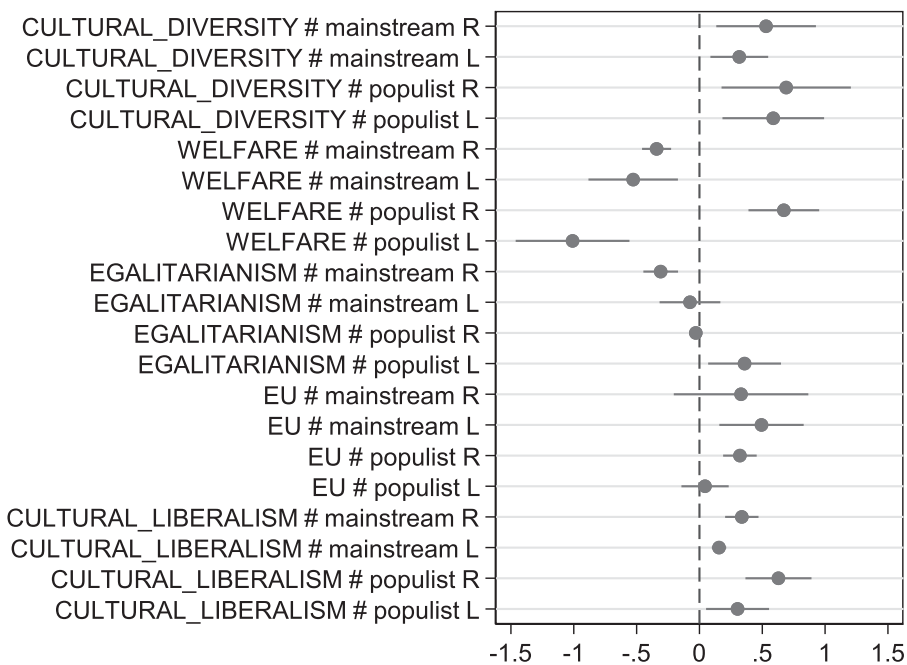


**Figure 1.** Marginal effect of systemic saliency on party issue emphasis by party type.

Note: results based on Model 3 in Table 2.

We can further probe this when interacting public saliency with party and issue type (Model 5). Figure 2 shows again the marginal effects to ease interpretation. Starting with cultural diversity, the marginal effect is positive for all parties and only slightly more for mainstream and populist parties on the right but the differences across parties are not statistically significant. Moving to welfare redistribution, Figure 2 shows a negative effect for all parties except for the populist right that appears much more responsive on this issue. The opposite is true for egalitarianism: for this issue, the marginal effects are negative or null for all parties except for the populist parties on the left which appear to be the most responsive on this issue (albeit the difference is not significant when compared to mainstream left parties). On issues related to EU integration, while the marginal effects are all positive, we see no conspicuous differences across parties. On the last issue considered in this paper, cultural liberalism, all marginal effects are positive while being larger for populist right and significantly larger when compared to the mainstream parties.

There are at least two important conclusions from this analysis. First, populist parties on the right and the left appear to be slightly more responsive to public opinion on the issues they own: cultural diversity and cultural liberalism for the right populists and egalitarianism for the left populists. However, the differences are not statistically significant when they are compared to mainstream parties on the same side of the ideological spectrum. Hence, populist right parties do not respond more or less compared to their mainstream counterparts and the same holds true for the left-wing populist parties. Second, the negative effect of saliency on welfare redistribution for all parties except for the populist parties points out the tension between responsibility and responsiveness: mainstream parties seem to downplay as much as possible those issues where they recognise that



**Figure 2.** Marginal effect of systemic saliency on party issue emphasis by party type.

Note: results based on Model 5 in Table 2.

they cannot deliver, due to budget and external constraints. These findings suggest even a sort of *negative saliency responsiveness* and sit well with recent findings that parties are more limited in presenting strong pledges on economic issues and that party competition has shifted accordingly (Oesch 2012). Interestingly, we find a positive and significant effect of saliency for the issue of welfare for right populist parties, which might reflect these parties' efforts to establish themselves on these issues next to the cultural profile. The FPÖ as well as Front National in France are typical examples of this strategy combining appeals against globalisation and for the protection of ordinary people, starting from a cultural nationalisation perspective.<sup>18</sup>

In sum, taking all the findings from this paper together we can conclude that overall populist parties appear to be slightly more responsive to the public compared to their mainstream counterparts on issues they own. This could well be due to the fact that in all three cases examined in this paper, issue saliency in the respective national elections was generally the highest on 'their' issues including immigration and egalitarianism.

While we do not examine party success at elections, we know that in all three countries examined in this paper, populist parties have performed extremely well ending up in government in Austria and Italy and entering in Parliament for the first time in Germany. Feeling free from responsibility constraints has allowed them to even go beyond the saliency of the overall electorate relying on the 'representation of salient dichotomies and the identity/difference dialectic' (Andreadis and Stavrakakis, 2017, p. 504) capitalising on the creation of an enemy of the *people* at both the national and transnational level.

### Concluding Remarks

The ongoing electoral success of populist parties across Europe has fuelled debates about the future of *representative* democracies. While critics consider populist parties as a danger for liberal democracies, others point to the representation function that populist parties can fulfil as mainstream parties are increasingly restricted by external constraints due to multi-level governance. In this paper, we examine whether and how populist parties can fill representation voids by looking at party responsiveness and by distinguishing between populist parties on the left and the right of the ideological spectrum in Austria, Germany and Italy.

Using original data on both voters and parties, our findings show that overall parties are more responsive towards citizens' issue concerns on the cultural dimension while more likely neglecting the economic one. However, the differences between populist parties on the one hand and mainstream parties on the other are rather marginal. While we see that populist right parties are overall responsive towards public salience, particularly in issue categories such as cultural diversity, European integration and cultural liberalism, the populist left parties are not as responsive towards public salience on 'their' issues, like welfare redistribution, albeit they remain more responsive on egalitarianism. Populist left parties also try to be responsive on the issue categories of cultural diversity and cultural liberalism – as do the mainstream parties on the left and the right as well. The question arises what the long-term repercussion might be when neglecting *their* issues and riding-the-wave on issues purported by populist right parties.

Populist right parties stressing 'their' issues and reacting in a responsive manner to public salience of issues can be part of a well-thought-out strategy: as we in fact observe

in terms of party positions (see Kedar 2005), voters may choose to support parties that are a bit more extreme than themselves since they know that the constraints of party government will force parties to water down their electoral pledges. From this perspective, populist parties will certainly contribute to the transformation of the existing party systems as they enlarge the political discourse by pushing further those issues mainstream parties tried to avoid but now may have to react upon.

The important question is of course what the populist parties will do once in government as the implications can have significant impact on the quality of representation. On the one hand, if they choose to be responsive, they may risk the status of the country and its relations with its partners; on the other hand, choosing to be responsible can lead to a serious disillusionment of the electorate that was mobilised by them during the election campaign. The linkages between parties and the electorate thus need to be closely observed in the coming years with an increasing number of populist parties entering government. While this paper was unable to address such question given the small number of parties included in the analysis, future works should investigate the extent to which parties' organisational structure, such as party size, can make them more or less likely to be responsive to the electorate.

## Notes

1. The *issue yield* theory (De Sio & Weber, 2014) has further developed this idea, by conceptualising and operationalising the electoral incentives and disincentives associated to different issues for each party.
2. <http://cise.luiss.it/iccp/>.
3. During the latest national election held on March 4, 2018, the new party leader Matteo Salvini has dropped 'Northern' from the party name, using simply 'The League'.
4. In November 2018 *List Peter Pilz* was renamed into *Jetzt* (Now). As we focus on the election of 2017 we stick to the party name used during the electoral campaign.
5. The other countries included in the *Issue Competition Comparative Project* (ICCP) that is, the UK, the Netherlands and France either do not have populist parties currently represented in the Parliament (UK) or do not have both a right-wing and left-wing populist party competing in elections.
6. While there exists a common agreement on which party can be characterised as populist right party, with regard to populist left parties the classification is less straightforward. Some commentators regard Die Linke and M5S as populist left parties (see comments in *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 30 July 2015), but others shy away to do so and would characterise Die Linke as a party that is clearly oriented towards the left ideology but not populist, and M5S to embrace both a right-wing and a left-wing ideology. Given recent policy activities of these two parties (for instance, Sahra Wagenknecht of Die Linke who aims to establish a left movement 'Aufstehen' whose slogan is to listen to the *people*, or M5S who introduced a legislation on 'labour dignity' in summer 2018), we consider these two parties as proponents of populism on the left (see also Spierings and Zaslove (2017) for the classification of M5S as a populist left party). LPP meanwhile simply characterises itself as a populist left party. The classification we adopt also reflects the left-right ideological orientation of those parties' supporters being mostly on the left for Die Linke, M5S and LPP (data available upon request).
7. The M5S focused on five key issues (the so-called 'Five Stars'): public water, sustainable transport, sustainable development, Internet access and the environment – issues that overall are connected with a left ideology.
8. See <https://archiv2017.die-linke.de/die-linke/wahlen/archiv/archiv-bundestagswahl-2009/positionen/themen-a-z/u-z/wirtschaftspolitik/>



9. Surveys were administered through CAWI to samples (N=1,000) representative of the voting age population by sex-age combinations and geographical units.
10. While survey data measure both respondents' position and saliency for each issue, only saliency is used to measure responsiveness; issue positioning is exclusively used for exploratory factor analysis.
11. The grouping of issues is not aimed to be analysed for the purpose of identifying issue opportunities for party strategy, but only for assessing which issues are related to common areas of meaning in respondents' minds. An obvious choice to do this is to investigate the *content* of the issues, i.e. through issues positions, guided by the theory.
12. Specifically, we excluded five issues in Austria (on surveillance measures, property tax on inheritance, direct democracy, comprehensive school and obligatory membership); five issues in Italy (on tax evasion, economic globalisation, EU economic policies, vaccination and self-defence); and one issue in Germany on binding referenda. While our results are largely consistent to the inclusion of these issues, their cross-cutting nature render their classification in one of the five considered groups problematic.
13. Note that the *Issue Competition Comparative Project* (ICCP) only measures party issue saliency not party positioning.
14. The coders have been instructed to code the Tweets into specific issue categories as well as to identify Tweets dealing with non-issue content. Intercoder reliability is Kappa = 0.72 for Austria, Kappa=0.91 for Germany and Kappa= 0.90 for Italy.
15. With respondents reporting 'medium' priority being counted as half.
16. Specific country analysis in the three countries investigated – see (Plescia et al. [in press](#)) – show that exception made for the FPÖ, populist parties do not appear to use Twitter significantly less than their mainstream counterparts.
17.  $\text{VarExp} = v_0 - v_1/v_0$  where  $v$  stands for the variance of the residual on the lowest level estimated by the mixed effects tobit model, index 0 indicates the empty model, and index 1 indicates the model of interest.
18. Given that we only have 250 cases for a model with many interactions, we have incrementally simplified Model 5 to test for the robustness of our findings. The results show that the three-way interactions significant in Model 5 keep their significance, and no other significant interactions emerge. The only exception is the interaction 'populist R  $\times$  Welfare  $\times$  saliency' that is significant at  $p < 0.1$  in Model 5 and would turn significant at  $p < 0.001$  in simpler models.

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## Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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## Appendix. Filling the Void? Political Responsiveness of Populist Parties

**Table A1.** Confirmatory Factor Analysis (Austria): standardised coefficients.

	Coef.	Std. Err.
CULTURAL DIVERSITY		
Asylum rules	0.861***	(0.013)
_constant	3.202***	(0.081)
Welfare benefits for immigrants	0.865***	(0.013)
_constant	3.221***	(0.081)
Foreigners' adaptation to Austrian culture	0.702***	(0.019)
_constant	3.632***	(0.090)
Freedom of movement	0.543***	(0.026)
_constant	1.919***	(0.056)
WELFARE		
Pension age	0.421***	(0.042)
_constant	1.378***	(0.046)
Redistribution – taxation	0.391***	(0.042)
_constant	2.780***	(0.072)
Job market regulation	0.323***	(0.038)
_constant	1.632***	(0.050)
Unemployment vs national debt	0.469***	(0.037)
_constant	1.957***	(0.056)
EGALITARIANISM		
Income differences	0.524***	(0.033)
_constant	1.664***	(0.051)
Minimum wage	0.603***	(0.034)
_constant	1.561***	(0.049)
EU		
Refugee quotas	0.481***	(0.039)
_constant	1.497***	(0.048)
EU membership	0.673***	(0.045)

(Continued)

**Table A1.** Continued.

	Coef.	Std. Err.
__constant	1.358***	(0.045)
CULTURAL LIBERALISM		
Gender quotas	0.508***	(0.035)
__constant	1.973***	(0.056)
Gay marriages	0.544***	(0.034)
__constant	1.385***	(0.046)
Production sustainable energy	0.383***	(0.038)
__constant	1.609***	(0.049)
Diesel cars	0.365***	(0.038)
__constant	2.660***	(0.070)
N	935	
LL	-27246.46	
BIC	54889.66	
AIC	54608.91	
CFI	0.847	
TLI	0.805	
RMSEA	0.075	

Standard errors in parentheses: \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

**Table A2.** Confirmatory Factor Analysis (Germany): standardised coefficients.

	Coef.	Std. Err.
CULTURAL DIVERSITY		
Number of refugees	0.908***	(0.013)
__constant	2.889***	(0.073)
Asylum rules	0.868***	(0.014)
__constant	2.960***	(0.075)
Foreigners' adaptation to German culture	0.612***	(0.022)
__constant	2.727***	(0.070)
WELFARE		
Taxation – budget deficit	0.197***	(0.050)
__constant	2.322***	(0.062)
Pension age	0.466***	(0.054)
__constant	2.880***	(0.073)
Job market regulation	0.619***	(0.065)
__constant	3.264***	(0.081)
EGALITARIANISM		
Income differences	0.458***	(0.041)
__constant	1.660***	(0.050)
Minimum wage	0.659***	(0.050)
__constant	1.379***	(0.045)
EU		
Refugee quotas	0.315***	(0.036)
__constant	1.604***	(0.049)
EU membership	0.568***	(0.031)
__constant	1.295***	(0.044)
EU transfer money	0.682***	(0.030)
__constant	2.345***	(0.062)
CULTURAL LIBERALISM		
Nuclear power	0.673***	(0.030)
__constant	1.609***	(0.049)
Gender quotas	0.355***	(0.036)
__constant	1.981***	(0.055)
Wind turbines	0.505***	(0.032)
__constant	1.827***	(0.052)
Diesel cars	0.388***	(0.034)
__constant	2.152***	(0.058)
Gay marriages	0.383***	(0.035)
__constant	1.296***	(0.044)
N	969	

(Continued)

**Table A2.** Continued.

	Coef.	Std. Err.
LL	-27876.28	
BIC	56151.38	
AIC	55868.56	
CFI	0.889	
TLI	0.858	
RMSEA	0.061	

Standard errors in parentheses: \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

**Table A3.** Confirmatory Factor Analysis (Italy): standardised coefficients.

	Coef.	Std. Err.
CULTURAL DIVERSITY		
Citizenship to immigrants	0.763***	(0.023)
_constant	1.950***	(0.057)
Welfare for immigrants	0.714***	(0.024)
_constant	2.183***	(0.062)
Number of refugees	0.706***	(0.023)
_constant	3.055***	(0.080)
WELFARE		
Job market regulation	0.152***	(0.041)
_constant	1.873***	(0.056)
Pension age	0.169***	(0.049)
_constant	1.441***	(0.048)
Taxation	0.401***	(0.051)
_constant	1.325***	(0.046)
Bonus for families	0.445***	(0.042)
_constant	1.543***	(0.050)
EGALITARIANISM		
Income differences	0.435***	(0.037)
_constant	1.474***	(0.048)
University tuitions	0.429***	(0.039)
_constant	1.838***	(0.055)
Minimum wage	0.230***	(0.040)
_constant	1.436***	(0.048)
Basic income	0.612***	(0.039)
_constant	1.511***	(0.049)
EU		
Euro membership	0.805***	(0.024)
_constant	2.111***	(0.060)
EU membership	0.894***	(0.025)
_constant	2.370***	(0.065)
CULTURAL LIBERALISM		
End of life legislation	0.495***	(0.042)
_constant	1.462***	(0.048)
Gay marriages	0.465***	(0.042)
_constant	1.438***	(0.048)
Soft drugs legalisation	0.598***	(0.045)
_constant	1.850***	(0.055)
Prostitution legalisation	0.367***	(0.047)
_constant	1.503***	(0.049)
<i>N</i>	889	
LL	-28202.05	
BIC	56818.30	
AIC	56526.11	
CFI	0.761	
TLI	0.702	
RMSEA	0.087	

Standard errors in parentheses: \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .