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POPULISM WITHIN THE POLITICAL LANDSCAPE: RIGHT, LEFT ... AND CENTRE

ABSTRACT

The article examines populism from the perspective of political demand, concentrating on analysis of populist attitudes held by the Slovenian population. The article opens with a conceptual discussion, addressing the debate on whether populist attitudes should be defined and measured across two or three dimensions. The study then investigates how populists position themselves on the political spectrum, seeking to determine whether populist attitudes transcend the traditional left–right political divide. Contrary to the general trend observed across European countries, the findings suggest that in Slovenia populist voters are largely situated at the political centre, with populist attitudes showing notable convergence between the centre and the far-right. The critical line dividing these two groups appears in their views on social inequality. The research was conducted online in early 2023.

KEY WORDS: populism, populist attitudes, measuring populism, populism in Slovenia

Populizem na političnem zemljevidu: desno, levo ... in v sredini

IZVLEČEK

Članek obravnava populizem z vidika političnega povpraševanja, pri čemer se osredotoča na analizo populističnih stališč prebivalstva v Sloveniji. Prispevek odpremo s konceptualno razpravo, ki naslavlja vprašanja o tem, kako opredeliti in meriti populistična stališča. V nadaljevanju raziskujemo, kako se populisti umeščajo v slovenski politični prostor in ali presegajo tradicionalno levo-desno politično razlikovanje. Rezultati kažejo, da se bazen populistov v Sloveniji nahaja predvsem v politični sredini, pri čemer prihaja do znatne konvergence stališč med

populisti v politični sredini in na skrajni desnici. Ključno ločnico med tema dvema skupinama populistov predstavlja odnos do ekonomskih neenakosti. Raziskava je bila izvedena v začetku leta 2023 preko spleta.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: populizem, populistična stališča, merjenje populizma, populizem v Sloveniji

*Somehow disruption doesn't begin to cover it.
Upheaval might be closer. Revolution maybe.*

(Baker 2024)

1 Introduction

Populism presents a significant challenge for democratic regimes, including those that are well-established and consolidated. Populist movements and political leaders portray current social conditions as dire and apocalyptic, leveraging strong emotional mobilization among their supporters and emphasizing profound social divides. They are often willing to compromise the rule of law and the established levels of rights necessary for the realization of their social vision and the affirmation of collective sovereignty. As such, populism tests the long-term sustainability of the democratic model. While most scholars agree that populism can rejuvenate democracy – particularly when it operates as opposition rather than holding power (Urbinati 2014) – it undeniably represents a precarious balancing act at the edges of liberal democracy's foundations. Rosanvallon (2021) views populism as a borderline case of democracy that risks devolving into "democratorship," an authoritarian form of political power that, unlike traditional authoritarianism, retains the potential to be overturned. Similarly, Canovan (1999) argues that populism is a perpetual possibility within democracy, stemming from the inherent tension between its two faces – the "pragmatic" and the "redemptive". When democracy assumes its "redemptive" face, the central claim of populists is that liberal regimes have hijacked authentic democracy.

An analysis of public speeches by heads of government and state in a sample of 40 countries revealed that the number of populist leaders has doubled since 2000 (Lewis et al. 2019), with most of them positioned on the right of the political spectrum. A study of 31 European countries, led by Matthijs Rooduijn from the University of Amsterdam, supports the finding of widespread populist mobilization. In 2022, as many as 32% of voters chose an anti-system, populist party, compared to 20% in the early 2000s and 12% in the early 1990s (Henley 2023). Half of these voters supported parties on the political right, which represents the fastest-growing segment of populist citizens. The remaining half

is divided roughly equally between voters supporting left-leaning and centrist parties. The 2024 elections to the European Parliament further confirmed the resilience of populism in the European Union, with 60 populist parties from 26 member states represented in the current mandate, compared to 40 populist parties from 22 member states in 2019 (Euronews 2024).

We live in a “populist atmosphere” (Rosanvallon 2021), characterized by the rejection of mainstream political leaders and parties. New political parties and coalitions win elections, bringing to power leaders whose most notable trait is being “a new political face” with no prior political career. Dissatisfaction with democratic politics and low trust in political institutions are fuelling the growing personalization of politics. Populist political parties and movements, particularly those on the right, tend to exhibit centralised decision-making processes, typically advancing a top-down political programme that relies on the support of citizens construed as “followers”. This populist political supply, provided by new parties, movements, and leaders, is further bolstered by the populist reconfiguration of traditional right- and left-wing political parties.

The renewed electoral success of Donald Trump, the political ties between the Slovenian right and the reconfigured GOP, and the forthcoming parliamentary elections in 2026 have triggered speculation in the Slovenian media regarding the mobilising power of populism in Slovenia – a phenomenon influenced not only by political supply but also by political demand. This article therefore seeks to present preliminary findings on the demand side of populism in Slovenia by assessing voters’ susceptibility to populist policies and rhetoric, and by estimating the share of the electorate that may be classified as populist. In line with this, the article pursues two specific objectives.

The first objective is methodological: we seek to evaluate the applicability of two distinct conceptualisations and operationalisations of populist attitudes within the Slovenian context. While recent empirical research has predominantly adopted a three-dimensional conceptualisation of populism – comprising *anti-elitism*, *anti-pluralism*, and *people-centrism* – certain theoretical perspectives advocate for a two-dimensional approach that omits the people-centrism component. This study examines whether these two alternative measures of populist attitudes produce significantly different empirical results.

The second goal is empirical and descriptive, involving an analysis of the political map of populism in Slovenia. Specifically, we examine whether populism cuts across the traditional left-right structure of the political space – replacing it with a vertical conflict between elites and the masses – or whether the ideological divisions between the political left and right persist within populist mobilization as well. Developments in other Western countries indicate that both ends of the

political spectrum are increasingly fragmenting under the influence of an intense “up-and-down” conflict. This dynamic has succeeded, among others, in mobilizing previously disengaged segments of the electorate and in bridging the divide between voters who have traditionally supported opposing political camps.

The 2008 global financial crisis, the 2015 migration crisis, and the COVID-19 pandemic have accelerated long-term processes that have been eroding the social fabric and fueling the rise of populism over the past three decades in European countries and beyond. The most significant of these processes include deindustrialization, globalization, growing economic inequalities, the erosion of social prestige for various social groups, and the emergence of new media capable of bypassing traditional information gatekeepers (Müller 2016; Brubaker 2017; Kaltwasser et al. 2017; Norris and Inglehart 2019; Arato and Cohen 2021).

The article examines the populist attitudes of Slovenia’s residents, as measured by cross-sectional quantitative data collected at the beginning of 2023. This was one year after the last parliamentary election – in which Golob’s Freedom Movement (Gibanje Svoboda) party secured the majority – and one year after Janša’s government repealed the Ordinance on Temporary Measures in Health Care to Contain and Control the COVID-19 Epidemic. This period was marked by high inflation, which reached 8.83% in 2022 and 7.45% in 2023, alongside a declining unemployment rate (from 5.1% in Q4 2020 to 3.5% in Q4 2022). Comparable post-pandemic social and economic conditions have toppled or severely weakened many incumbent parties worldwide. In Slovenia, the Freedom Movement capitalized on the strong public dissatisfaction with the previous government, winning a record 42 out of 90 seats in the parliamentary elections. The historical development of populism in Slovenia has been extensively examined by Fink-Hafner (2016; 2019). In her analysis, she specifically focuses on the post-transitional period, during which she identifies three key instances of populism: Ivan Kramberger’s messianic populism, the political mobilization led by Jelinčič’s Slovenian National Party, and Drnovšek’s Movement for Justice and Development. She associates these cases with distinct forms of populist mobilization – namely, pre-modern populism, modern national populism, and post-modern populism. Drawing on Crooks et al.’s (1992: 2) claim that various forms of modernity can coexist and interact within evolving societies, Fink-Hafner argues that this also applies to the different types of populism observed in Slovenia. A decade later, in the early 2020s, we once again witness the coexistence of very different forms of populism. These include the Wednesday protests, organized by the Stevanović’s political party Resni.ca; the Friday protests, whose participants were later among the supporters of the newly formed Golob’s Freedom Movement political party; and the Retirees’ Councils movement, which maintains close affiliations with the

Janša's Social Democratic Party. Their common characteristic is a rhetoric of rejecting ruling elites and expressing deep distrust in political and other societal institutions.

2 Populist electorate and left-right ideology

In democracies, populist politics emerges from the interaction between populist leaders (the supply side) and voters (the demand side). Political parties and movements seeking power strive to secure as many votes as possible, while voters typically cast their votes strategically, based on preferences that best reflect their interests and identities. Most studies on populism aim at analyzing the supply side, examining party platforms, leaders' political styles and mobilization strategies, their discourse, and organizational resources. Only recently has scholarly attention shifted toward the populist electorate, with research examining the psychological, sociological, and communicative characteristics of individuals who support populist parties or display populist attitudes. A comprehensive study by Marcos Marne et al. (2023) identified 138 articles – most published since 2017 – that investigate populist attitudes both as dependent and independent variables.

Mudde (2017: 5) laid the groundwork for studying populist attitudes through the so-called ideational approach, which conceptualizes populism as “a discourse, an ideology, or a worldview” observable both at the level of political parties and movements, as well as among individuals. Populism is understood as a thin-centred ideology that “considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, 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 and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 6). As a thin-centered ideology, populism can attach itself to various host – thick-centered – ideologies such as conservatism and socialism. This flexibility of populism in terms of its attachment to broader ideological frameworks accounts for the diversity of populisms in terms of their placement along the left–right political spectrum (Akkerman and Rooduijn 2015; Müller 2016; Rovira Kaltwasser et al. 2017; Kochi 2023).

Rosanvallón (2021) argues that today the ideological positions of left- and right-wing populists are increasingly converging, resulting in ideological eclecticism. Their stances on various issues are growing more alike, blurring the traditional differences. To mobilize the followers, populist leaders use discourse centered on “the people,” seeking to form a broad people's front emerging around selected common issues rather than a traditional left- or right-wing ideological coalitions. Thus, contemporary European left- and right-wing populists

increasingly share patriotism, nativism, Euroscepticism, and leniency toward Putin's authoritarianism. They also display certain programmatic convergences on economic issues and attitudes toward inequality, with limited "economic nationalism" now part of the New Right's populist political platform (for example, Ausserladscheider 2022). An analysis by Mudde and Greilinger (2024) of voting patterns among far-right party representatives in the previous European Parliament legislature, which focused on socio-economic issues, revealed that, despite their pro-worker rhetoric, far-right parties did not consistently adopt a pro-worker stance. However, these parties do exhibit considerable internal variation with regards to socio-economic issues and their policy positions are often contradictory.

Drawing on the French context, Rosanvallon (2021: 55) notes that the key remaining line of demarcation between left- and right-wing populism is their stance on immigrants and refugees, and that the political future of populism hinges on whether this division endures. Several indications suggest it may not hold as populists across the political spectrum are becoming increasingly hostile to migration. Few trade unions in the West today regard migrant labour as an opportunity to strengthen overall worker power.

In the United States, political right seems to be outpacing the left in crafting a hegemonic populist platform by fusing moral conservatism, which centers on anti-immigration and anti-social inclusion attitudes, with economic populism (Javers 2024; Ullmann 2024), transforming the traditional right-wing political party in the process. Economic populism in the form of "economic nationalism" aligns with the "spontaneous ideology of the people" (Norris and Inglehart 2019) since populism on the right is not just a revolt against established institutions and elites. It is also a challenge to the dominant ideas and values advocated by experts and educated elites, who are seen as agents of progressive social change and policies favouring social inclusion. Clearly, the situation in the United States is not an inevitable outcome of the blurring of lines between left-wing and right-wing populism. We can also observe instances where an ideologically eclectic populist wave is appropriated by the political left, or even by centrist parties.

Lipset's (1955) classic analysis of American far-right populist movements offers insights into the conditions fostering the link between economic populism and values that promote social exclusion. Lipset argues that during economic depressions, left-wing movements advocating for greater income and wealth redistribution gain prominence. In contrast, during periods of economic growth – particularly when high employment is accompanied by inflation – movements focused on social status issues become more influential. According to Lipset, frustration stemming from status dynamics triggers strong emotional reactions,

such as anger and hatred. People begin to perceive certain social groups as the “culprits” threatening their current or desired (yet unattainable) status. Conversely, leftist movements tend to generate less emotional intensity and hostility, as the issues they address can often be resolved through redistributive policies within the political system.

3 Conceptualization of populist attitudes

In this section, we discuss two approaches to conceptualizing populist attitudes, each highlighting the dilemmas involved in examining individuals’ predisposition to populism. The first approach, advocated by Mansbridge and Macedo (2019), distinguishes between core and peripheral elements of populism. This approach adopts a milder definition of populism, considering only *anti-elitism* and *anti-pluralism* as core elements. The second approach, proposed by Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017), is more restrictive, adding *people-centrism* to the two-dimensional concept of populism outlined by Mansbridge and Macedo.

According to Mansbridge and Macedo (2019: 60), the two core elements of populism stem from the belief that “the people” are engaged in a morally justified struggle against the elites. While “the people” are viewed as morally virtuous and exploited, the elites are portrayed as immoral, corrupt, and exploitative, with the relationship between these two groups inherently antagonistic. From this perspective, an unjust social order necessitates mobilizing those at the bottom against the existing authorities and those at the top.

The identity of “the people” is largely constructed through the process of populist mobilization (Laclau 2005: 202), although it is also shaped by the boundaries of the political community in which a populist movement emerges – particularly when this mobilization is orchestrated by a political party seeking power within that community (Arato and Cohen 2021). “The people,” often described as ordinary citizens or people like ourselves, may encompass a range of social groups: workers, farmers, small business owners, and their middle-class allies; residents of declining urban centers and rural areas; young individuals lacking opportunities; and disadvantaged older populations. These diverse groups are unified into a single social body that stands in opposition to cohesive financial, political, capitalist, military, and cultural elites – those who concentrate social power and act contrary to the people’s interests and demands.

“The people” present themselves as the societal majority, an essential normative element in democratic regimes, which reinforces the legitimacy of their resistance: in democracies, the majority’s interests should be the central norm of politics. Thus, “the people” and the elites form two opposing blocs –

not necessarily homogeneous in terms of religion, ethnicity, or historical ties, but unified in their opposition to one another. This aspect of populism is encapsulated in its *anti-elitism* dimension.

All aspects of social conflict between “the people” and the elites are reduced to a single axis, with any conflicts outside this framework dismissed as irrelevant. The antagonism between the people and the elites runs so deep that no peaceful or rational solution is seen as possible. The people view the opposing side not merely as competitors with differing interests but as morally inferior enemies in an all-or-nothing struggle where only one party can prevail. They perceive the elites as a social group that has become morally and socially detached from the society inhabited by ordinary people.

Populism, therefore, entails a radicalization of politics – fundamentally different from the liberal perspective, which holds that conflicting interests and demands can be reconciled through compromise. The “us versus them” divide is regarded as insurmountable, and populist movements place a strong emphasis on emotional appeals. This aspect of populism is referred to as *anti-pluralism*.

In addition to the minimal, two-dimensional core described above, Mansbridge and Macedo (2019: 62–65) identify several non-core characteristics frequently associated with populism that influence its practical politics. These include the demographic and religious homogeneity of “the people” and their exclusivity, calls for greater direct popular rule, nationalism, extreme hostility toward vilified out-groups, and the valorization of “authentic folk knowledge”.

Since these characteristics are not part of the core definition that classifies an individual as populist, they will not be further analysed here, except for the concept of direct political rule. Populists typically emphasize the need for more direct participation in governance, advocating a departure from liberal democracy. In their view, representative democracy – with its party structures, bureaucratic procedures, and constitutionally enshrined rights – obstructs the realization of the people’s will.

Populists therefore seek greater direct influence over decision-making, often clashing with constitutionally protected pluralism, minority rights, separation of powers, and the rule of law. For populists, the “illiberal” character of democracy is, paradoxically, seen as a prerequisite for authentic democracy. Achieving this vision often necessitates radicalizing politics and dismantling the existing liberal political order. Greater public influence over political decisions may be pursued through direct democracy tools, such as referendums, or by enhancing the powers of the executive branch when a populist leader – viewed as the embodiment of the general will – holds executive office.

Proposing an alternative definition of populism, Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017) expand its core structure from two to three dimensions by incorporating an emphasis on the direct will of the people – referred to as the *people-centrism* dimension. Many scholars engaged in the operationalisation and measurement of populist attitudes have adopted this approach. Similarly, Calhoun (2018: 2) highlights in his historical survey of populisms that a recognizable form of populism necessitates some concept of citizenship in which political legitimacy, at least partially, derives from the people's will and well-being.

Defined by the three dimensions outlined above, populism has a long historical trajectory and is not confined to democratic regimes; it also manifests in non-democratic contexts. One early modern figure frequently identified as a populist is Girolamo Savonarola, a Dominican preacher in Florence and contemporary of Machiavelli. His brief rule was characterised by book burnings, the destruction of artworks, and fierce denunciations of aristocratic and clerical lifestyles. However, Savonarola's populist appeal proved short-lived, as it relied excessively on mass support and emotional mobilisation, ultimately failing to establish stable political relations (Calhoun 2018: 6)

The debate over whether populist attitudes should encompass two or three core elements reflects a broader conceptual dilemma: how expansively should the boundaries of populism be defined, and to what extent should the concept account for a wide range of empirical phenomena? The fewer the definitional components included, the broader its empirical reach. While all scholars discussed here acknowledge the Manichaean framing of "the people" versus "the elite" as central, those who advocate a three-dimensional definition of populism caution that omitting the element of popular sovereignty risks categorising any political campaign that fervently denounces corruption or governmental inefficiency as populist, thereby weakening the concept's theoretical precision and analytical utility.

Conversely, advocates of a two-element definition warn that an overly narrow focus might restrict the understanding of populism to just one form – primarily that which emerges on the political left because, typically, left-wing populism – such as Podemos in Spain and Syriza in Greece – emphasizes mechanisms of direct democracy that encourage the inclusion of diverse perspectives and highlight the plurality of popular sovereignty (Roch and Cordero 2023). Right-wing populism, by contrast, often portrays the populist leader as the embodiment of the general will and places less emphasis on direct democracy.

4 Operationalisation of populist attitudes

In order to assess the extent of voters' support for populist ideas, the concept of populist attitudes must be operationalised. To this end, several indices of populist attitudes have been developed in previous studies, and their quality has been evaluated in the study by Castanho Silva et al. (2019). This evaluation included indices proposed by Stanley (2011), Akkerman, Mudde, and Zaslove (2014), Elchardus and Spruyt (2016), Hobolt et al. (2016), Oliver and Rahn (2016), Schulz et al. (2018), and Castanho Silva et al. (2018). The findings indicate that most of these indices exhibit notable methodological and validity shortcomings in at least one of the dimensions they seek to measure.

Drawing on these insights, we developed a new measure of populism by selecting items that demonstrated the strongest performance in previous studies. The resulting index is economical, employing only two items per dimension, with each item specifically designed to capture a single dimension. Table 1 displays the questions used to measure the three core dimensions of populism – anti-elitism, people-centrism, and anti-pluralism – yielding a total of six items. Respondents indicated their level of agreement with each statement on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 10 (strongly agree).

Table 1: Operationalization of the three dimensions of populist attitudes.

Anti-elitism

1. Politics today is hijacked by elites and other influential groups in society.
2. Politicians mostly pursue the interests of powerful minorities, which are contrary to the well-being of the society.

People-centrism

3. People, not politicians, should make the most important decisions.
4. Politicians in the parliament should always follow the will of the people, because people know best what is good for them.

Anti-pluralism

5. People can be defined as good or bad, depending on the kind of politics they support.
6. What people call political compromise is, in reality, a betrayal of their political principles.

We ensured that the two items assessing anti-elitism were not confined to political parties and politicians, but allowed respondents to define "powerful minorities" themselves and answer with various elites and interest groups in mind – such as political, economic and financial elites, intellectuals and professionals. Such approach increases generalizability across different political contexts. The people-centrism dimension comprises two attitudes: one favouring direct democracy, asserting that the people should make the most important decisions;

and another emphasizing popular sovereignty, which holds that the people know best what is good for them. The third dimension, anti-pluralism, was measured by an item expressing a division of people into “good” and “bad,” as well as another that equates political compromise with betraying one’s political principles.

Research on populist attitudes varies in its criteria for labelling someone as populist – whether an individual can be considered populist by scoring high on just one dimension or must score high on all three dimensions (Wuttke, Schimpf, and Schoen 2020). In the former approach, scholars construct an additive populism index, where a high score on one dimension can compensate for lower scores on others, or they may analyse each dimension separately. In the latter approach, an individual is labelled populist only if their score on each dimension exceeds a certain threshold set by the researcher, meaning the presence of populism requires the simultaneous manifestation of all core components. Our analysis adopts the latter approach, treating populism as a non-compensatory, multidimensional concept.

Finally, it is important to highlight the need for a specialized instrument to measure populist attitudes. Other widely used measures – such as those measuring institutional confidence, external political efficacy, and satisfaction with democracy – are sometimes utilized to assess populist attitudes. However, evidence suggests that populist attitudes are not merely “old wine in new bottles.” Instead, political confidence, external political efficacy, and populism represent distinct latent dimensions, as demonstrated through confirmatory factor analysis, and they exhibit different associations with populist voting preferences (Geurkin et al. 2020).

5 Results

Data on populist attitudes in Slovenia were collected within the framework of the research project *“The Relational Basis of Everyday Life, Politics, and Work”* (RCSG, 2023). Data collection was carried out using computer-assisted web interviewing (CAWI), conducted through the Jazvem online panel, owned by the company Valicon d.o.o. The survey was conducted over a period of two weeks, with an average completion time of 35 minutes. The sampling frame for the study included all panel members aged 18 to 65, totalling 17,496 individuals at the start of the research. Eligible panellists were divided into strata, defined in agreement with the research client as a combination of 2 gender categories, 4 age groups, and 12 statistical regions. This resulted in 96 quota cells, which served as the basis for distributing survey invitations. To maximize the number of responses, up to four reminders were sent. From the final dataset, surveys were excluded if respondents completed the survey in a time significantly shorter than the minimum

threshold set by the client, or provided illogical or inconsistent responses. The response rate was calculated based on the number of fully completed surveys (achieved sample) in relation to the total number of invitations sent. A total of 4,189 individuals were contacted, of whom 1,027 responded, resulting in a response rate of 25%.

In what follows, we present the results of analyses addressing the following issues: the prevalence of populist attitudes in Slovenia (section 5.1); the positioning of populists on the left-right political spectrum (section 5.2); the voting preferences of populists (section 5.3); the role of party mobilization as opposed to personal characteristics in defining populists (section 5.4); the social issues that mobilize populists (section 5.5).

5.1 The Prevalence of Populism

The empirical analysis begins by examining the prevalence of populist attitudes among Slovenia's population. Table 2 displays the frequency distribution for two populism indexes. The first column presents results for Index I, which incorporates three dimensions of populism (anti-elitism, people-centrism, and anti-pluralism). The second column shows results for Index II, which includes only two dimensions (anti-elitism and anti-pluralism).

An individual is classified as a populist (coded as "1") if they score above 6.5 on all relevant dimensions – three for Index I and two for Index II – using a scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 10 (strongly agree). Conversely, a person is not considered a populist (coded as "0") if their score on any dimension falls below 6.5, even if they achieve very high scores on the other dimensions.

Table 2: The prevalence of populism.

	Index I		Index II	
Populism	N	%	N	%
(0)	682	78.1	620	71.0
(1)	191	21.9	253	29.0
N	873	100	873	100

According to the stricter (three-dimension) definition of populism, nearly 22% of the Slovenian population can be classified as populists. Using the broader (two-dimension) definition raises this share to 29%. Thus, at least one-fifth of the population aged 18–65 believes that political decisions in Slovenia predominantly favour elites at the expense of ordinary people, while rejecting political compromise and perceiving the opposing side as immoral and corrupt.

Index II—which includes only two dimensions—captures a larger share of individuals than Index I. This is because some populists place relatively low importance on direct public involvement in political decision-making, yet still adhere to a Manichean view of the conflict between elites and “the people”.

Further (unreported) analysis reveals that attitudes toward popular sovereignty significantly distinguish Index I from Index II. The average scores across all three dimensions – anti-elitism, anti-pluralism, and people-centrism – are lower for Index II populists than for Index I populists, with the most pronounced difference appearing in the people-centrism dimension. Individuals identified as populists only by Index II (and not by Index I) score the lowest in people-centrism within the entire sample. These individuals tend to be older, more educated, and more likely to have voted for opposition parties in the most recent parliamentary election. They are, therefore, better described as “critical elitists” rather than populists: citizens who are strongly critical of elites – particularly the current government – but unconvinced that the solution lies in more (or more authentic) democracy. Based on this result, we will use only Index I, which defines populists across three dimensions, in future analyses.

5.2 The left, the right ... and the centre

It is commonly assumed that populism aligns easily with political extremes – either the far-right or the far-left – because both promote anti-establishment views and rely on strong emotional mobilization. However, in Europe, populists predominantly emerge on the right end of the political spectrum, where traditional far-right parties have adopted populist outlook and adjusted their political platforms accordingly. The far-right positions itself as the sole defender of workers’ interests and as an advocate for social groups disadvantaged by neoliberal globalization and deindustrialization. In contrast, the far-left, which also seeks to address the social challenges faced by “those left behind,” has been less successful due to internal tensions between economic populism and cultural progressivism. While left-wing economic programs propose more comprehensive solutions to economic deprivation and inequality, the far-right appeals to voters by espousing moral conservatism. Additionally, some populist voters favour a “politics of opportunity” over the left’s emphasis on a “politics of solidarity”.

Centrist parties, often seen as representing the middle and especially the upper-middle class, are generally considered the least populist in terms of their membership, programs, and rhetoric. However, it is believed that even centrist parties are increasingly compelled to adopt and normalize aspects of populist discourse in their competition for voters.

Table 3: Coss-tabulation of populism (Index I) and political orientation.

Political orientation	Index I		
	Non-populists	Populists	Total
Far-left (1,2)	59 79.7 % 10.8 %	15 20.3 % 9.8 %	74 100.0 % 10.6 %
Left (3,4)	177 81.2 % 32.3 %	41 18.8 % 26.8 %	218 100.0 % 31.1 %
Centre (5,6)	178 83.0 % 32.5 %	59 24.9 % 38.6 %	237 100.0 % 33.8 %
Right (7,8)	98 82.4 % 17.9 %	21 17.6 % 13.7 %	119 100.0 % 17.0 %
Far-right (9,10)	36 67.9 % 6.6 %	17 32.1 % 11.1 %	53 100.0 % 7.6 %
Total	548 78.2 % 100.0 %	153 21.8 % 100.0 %	701 100.0 % 100.0 %

To determine the position of Slovenian populists on the left–right political spectrum, political orientation was measured using a self-placement question, whereby respondents located themselves on a scale ranging from 1 (far-left) to 10 (far-right). For the purposes of analysis, these values were grouped into five categories: far-left (values 1–2), left (3–4), centre (5–6), right (7–8), and far-right (9–10).

The mean political orientation score in the sample is 5.08, closely mirroring the national average reported for Slovenia in the 2023 European Social Survey. Approximately one-third of respondents (33.8%) identify with the political centre (see Table 3). Around 10.6% and 7.6% position themselves on the far-left and far-right, respectively, while the remaining respondents align with either the left or right. The left group is marginally larger than the right, a trend similarly observed in previous Slovenian studies.

Among populists identified by Index I, the average political orientation is 5.24, compared to 5.03 among non-populists. Thus, both groups fall within the political centre. Furthermore, Table 3 shows that over one-third (38.6%) of populists place themselves in the political centre, followed by the left, with 26.8%. The extreme

poles, the far-left and far-right, together account for only one-fifth of populists. Therefore, populism in Slovenia is thus far predominantly a phenomenon of the political centre and, to a lesser degree, of political left, but not far-left.

However, when examining the prevalence of populists within specific political orientations, it becomes evident that the highest proportion is found on the far right (32.1%), followed by the political centre (24.9%). Thus, although the majority of populists are located in the political centre, the far right exhibits the greatest concentration of populist individuals relative to its overall composition. In contrast, within the political centre, populists are comparatively diluted among non-populists.

In summary, populists in Slovenia are relatively dispersed across the left-right ideological spectrum, reflecting the broader ideological distribution of the Slovenian population. This supports the conceptualisation of populism as a "thin-centred" ideology, which can be readily combined with a range of left- and right-wing ideological orientations, as indicated by individuals' self-placement on the ideological continuum. While individuals retain their broader ideological commitments, they simultaneously exhibit populist tendencies. As the analysis will later demonstrate, shared positions on key societal issues that typically mobilise populist sentiment serve to unite individuals from across the ideological spectrum. This convergence creates fertile ground for the emergence of new political actors (or the transformation of the old ones), capable of subordinating traditional ideological identification to a more pronounced populist alignment.

Centrist voters ultimately determine the outcome of elections in Slovenia, and parties on the left and right compete for their support. Centrist voters generally lack strong ideological affinities and can easily shift somewhat left or right during elections. Their political involvement is typically weaker, and they exhibit the lowest levels of political interest compared to other groups. For many, centrism reflects their distancing – or even alienation – from politics. This also applies to centrist populists.

So far, centrist populists have not, for the most part, been drawn to extreme political positions, including far-right populist rhetoric, as such positions require a strong commitment to right-wing political ideology – something the average Slovenian populist does not find appealing. Furthermore, Slovenian centrist populists exhibit stronger populist attitudes than those on the left or right, suggesting that they are predominantly mobilized into the political arena by "thin-centered" populist appeals offered by the centrist parties.

5.3 Populists as voters

In the previous section, we analysed populists based on their political orientation. Here, we examine their voting choices in the 2022 parliamentary election to determine the extent to which they voted strategically for larger parties with a realistic chance of entering parliament, or whether they preferred smaller, non-parliamentary parties that reject compromise and refuse to be absorbed under the umbrella of major parties. Since an uncompromising attitude is a key characteristic of populism, we would expect to find many populists among the voters of smaller parties that failed to enter parliament.

The analysis reports results for each parliamentary party separately: Freedom Movement (Slovene: Gibanje Svoboda, GS), Slovenian Democratic Party (Slovene: Slovenska demokratska stranka, SDS), New Slovenia – Christian Democrats (Slovene: NovSlovenija – Krščanski demokrati, NSi), Social Democrats (Slovene: Socialni demokrati, SD), The Left (Slovene: Levica), while grouping non-parliamentary parties into one category labelled “Others”. The category “Others” includes Marjan Šarec List (Slovene: Lista Marjana Šarca, LMŠ), Resni.ca (Slovene: Državljanско gibanje Resni.ca), Pirate Party of Slovenia (Slovene: Piratska stranka Slovenije), Slovenian National Party (Slovene: Slovenska nacionalna stranka, SNS), VESNA - Green Party (Slovene: VESNA – Zelena stranka), Connect Slovenia (Slovene: Povežimo Slovenijo) and others. Respondents who answered “I don’t know” or “I prefer not to answer” were excluded from the analysis.

The sample’s distribution of party support differs somewhat from the official election results, with Slovenian Democratic Party voters underrepresented and The Left voters overrepresented (Table 4). Drawing on the average political orientation of each party’s voters (Table 4, last column), the Freedom Movement falls within the left, with an average score of 4.38 (its supporters are roughly equally split between left and centre). Positioned further to the left are the Marjan Šarec List (3.58), the Social Democrats (3.36), and The Left (2.69). On the right side, the New Slovenia – Christian Democrats voters average 6.87, and the Slovenian Democratic Party voters average 7.81. In the following discussion, we refer to The Left party as far-left and the Slovenian Social Democratic Party as far-right, based on how their voters position themselves on the left–right ideological spectrum.

According to the political orientation of voters, non-parliamentary parties span the entire political spectrum, though most are located near the political centre. For example, the average political orientation of voters who voted for Resni.ca is 5.00, for Pirate Party of Slovenia 5.22, for VESNA – Green Party 5.00, and for Slovenian National Party 5.83. Their voters are more issue oriented and do not identify with the comprehensive and complex political programs characteristic

for the traditional parties on the right and left. Among these are parties that base their appeal on a highly critical stance towards political and social institutions, which they perceive as having been captured by corrupt elites.

Table 4: Coss-tabulation of populism (Index I) and political party.

Political party	Index I			Political orientation
	Non-populists	Populists	Total	
The Left	51 83.6 % 10.3 %	10 16.4 % 7.2 %	61 100.0 % 9.6 %	2.69
Social Democrats	42 82.4 % 8.5 %	9 17.6 % 6.5 %	51 100.0 % 8.0 %	3.36
Freedom Movement	165 70.5 % 33.3 %	69 29.5 % 50.0 %	234 100.0 % 36.9 %	4.38
New Slovenia – Christian Democrats	42 89.4 % 8.5 %	5 10.6 % 3.6 %	47 100.0 % 7.4 %	6.87
Slovenian Democratic Party	80 81.6 % 16.1 %	18 18.4 % 13.0 %	98 100.0 % 15.5 %	7.81
Others	116 81.1 % 23.4 %	27 18.9 % 19.5 %	143 100.0 % 22.6 %	5.35
Total	509 78.2 % 100.0 %	141 21.8 % 100.0 %	650 100.0 % 100.0 %	5.03

The results indicate that the centre-left Freedom Movement attracted 50% of Slovenian populists, followed by predominantly centrist non-parliamentary parties with 19.5%, and the far-right Slovenian Democratic Party with 13.0%. However, this latter figure should be interpreted with some caution due to the underrepresentation of Slovenian Democratic Party voters in our sample. Still, the substantial difference in support for the Freedom Movement and non-parliamentary parties, and the Slovenian Democratic Party, cannot be attributed solely to sampling bias. All other parties captured less than 10% of the populist electorate.

Like other voters, populists tend to vote strategically, opting for parties with a realistic chance of entering parliament, provided these parties can address their

anger and disappointment. In the last election, this role has been successfully fulfilled by the newly formed centrist Freedom Movement, which emerged shortly before the elections, led by a businessman without a long-established political career but who nevertheless managed to inspire political trust in the otherwise low-trust Slovenian political context.

Thus, currently, approximately half of Slovenian populists are represented in parliament by the newly established centrist party, the Freedom Movement, while roughly one fifth remain unrepresented. As the Freedom Movement is not yet an institutionalized party with loyal membership and electoral basis, it remains to be seen whether it will succeed in retaining populist voters in the next parliamentary election, or whether these »disillusioned« voters will once again seek an alternative political home.

5.4 Political mobilisation or personal characteristics?

Political parties serve the dual functions of aggregating and presenting the political preferences of citizens while simultaneously shaping these very preferences. This chapter examines the extent to which populism – or the likelihood of holding populist views – depends on personal characteristics as opposed to party mobilization. The personal characteristics analysed include gender, age, education, income, and political orientation. The first four variables capture the effects of economic deprivation and cultural backlash, two dominant theories explaining the long-term rise of populism in Western democracies (Norris and Inglehart 2019).

Men (influenced by "bro" culture) and older adults (due to generational effects) are expected to develop populist attitudes as a reaction to rapid and comprehensive cultural changes, as posited by the cultural backlash theory. On the other hand, the rise of populism is also attributed to deteriorating economic conditions and a lack of material security among the lower middle and working classes – an effect measured here by income. Education can have a dual impact: on the one hand, it may be linked to lower income and thus economic deprivation; on the other, it may also involve resistance to the social changes advocated by the progressive upper-middle class and younger generations.

We present the results of two regression models. First, we assess the isolated influence of political parties on populism; then, we add socio-demographic variables and political orientation to the regression. Comparing the two models reveals to what extent an individual's likelihood of being populist is shaped by party mobilization and personal characteristics.

According to Model 1 (Table 5), the Freedom Movement voters are more likely to be populist compared to voters of other parties. The reference category for these

comparisons is the “Others” group (i.e., non-parliamentary parties). Voters of the New Slovenia – Christian Democrats and the Left show a statistically significant lower probability of being populist than voters of non-parliamentary parties. Even after accounting for other variables (Model 2), the effect of the Freedom Movement remains highly positive and statistically significant. New Slovenia – Christian Democrats continues to show a lower probability of having populist voters, joined in this regard by the Slovenian Social Democratic Party.

Table 5: Logistic regression of populism (Index I) on political party, sociodemographic characteristics and political orientation.

	Index I		Index II	
	Model 1 Exp(B)	Model 2 Exp(B)	Model 3 Exp(B)	Model 4 Exp(B)
Political party				
Left	.843 *	1.257	1.023	1.149
Social Democrats	.921	1.175	.985	1.005
Freedom Movement	1.798 **	2.004 **	1.467 *	1.442
New Slovenia	.512 *	.347 *	.879	.623
Slovenian Democratic Party	.968	.325 **	1.332	.667
Others	base	base	base	base
Political orientation				
Far-left		1.015		1.381
Left		base		base
Centre		1.921 **		1.600 *
Right		2.401 **		2.257 **
Far-right		5.872 ***		2.543 **
Gender (women= 0)		1.742 **		1.602 **
Generation				
Generation (18-28)		base		base
Generation (29-43)		1.389		1.180
Generation (44-58)		2.199 **		2.153 **
Generation (59-65)		2.036 *		2.768 **
Education		.935		1.003
Income		.742 **		.842 *
Constant	.233 ***	.069 ***	.347 ***	.129 ***
Nagelkerke R Square	.035	.119	.011	.078
N	650	565	650	565

NOTE: * sig. < 0.10 ** sig. < 0.01. *** sig. < 0.001

Thus, whereas the centrist Freedom Movement succeeded in mobilising populist voters in the last parliamentary elections beyond what would be expected based on their individual characteristics, the far-right Slovenian Democratic Party appears unable to attract support beyond those voters whose personal traits already predispose them to favour the party. Separate analyses (not reported here) indicate that, for the latter party, the voter composition – characterized by a relatively high proportion of men, individuals with low education levels, and far-right supporters – accounts for their susceptibility to populism.

The influence of socio-demographic characteristics and political orientation on populism is as expected. Populists are more common among older individuals and men, supporting the cultural backlash hypothesis. Meanwhile, lower income increases the likelihood of populist attitudes, providing evidence for the economic deprivation theory. Education level does not show a statistically significant effect, likely due to its previously mentioned contradictory effects on populism. Political orientation also has a strong influence, especially on the far-right, where many views overlap with the commonly adopted populist ideology (e.g., on migration, LGBT communities, and climate change). In contrast, left-wing parties and a left-wing orientation do not foster populism, a finding consistent with their rejection of the currently dominant synthesis of populism and moral conservatism that tends to accompany populist movements.

5.5 Social issues mobilising populists

Finally, we discuss whether there is convergence among populists of different political orientations regarding the core social issues around which the populist electorate typically mobilizes. This analysis includes the following social issues: wearing masks during the pandemic, opposition to the rights of homosexual couples, opposition to immigration, concern about inequality, and denial of human responsibility for climate change. Table 6 shows how populists and non-populists differ in their attitudes toward these issues. A brief glance reveals that they differ in all of them: populists are more likely to oppose mask-wearing, gay rights, and migration; they are more likely to strongly agree that inequality is a significant social issue; and they more often reject scientific theories suggesting that human activity causes climate change.

On every social issue considered, populists score higher than non-populists, indicating that they tend to agree more strongly with these positions. This suggests a certain degree of convergence among populists concerning the selected social issues. The differences between the two groups are particularly pronounced regarding attitudes toward gay rights and migration, followed by concern over inequality.

Table 6: Agreement with various social issues by populism (Index I) and political orientation.

	Anti-mask		Anti-gay		Anti-immigration	
	Populists	Non-populists	Populists	Non-populists	Populists	Non-populists
Far-left	.443	-.135	.427	-.223	.429	-.311
Left	.114	-.160	.430	-.237	.188	-.309
Centre	.233	-.137	.458	-.223	.537	-.015
Right	-.160	-.216	.416	-.070	.469	.152
Far-right	-.274	-.339	.477	.213	.880	.394
Total	.158	-.088	.438	-.112	.461	-.084
N	873		781		861	
	Inequality too big		Climate denier			
	Populists	Non-populists	Populists	Non-populists		
Far-left	.453	.231	.178	-.450		
Left	.272	-.071	-.263	-.300		
Centre	.262	-.151	.308	.024		
Right	-.088	-.483	.234	.306		
Far-right	-.030	-.168	.743	.327		
Total	.241	-.078	.180	-.060		
N	871		857			

NOTE: Entries are average values. Variables are standardized.

A more detailed examination by political orientation reveals that within the populist group, there are no significant internal differences in attitudes toward same-sex couples' rights or the acceptance of intercultural diversity. The only notable variation is that left-wing populists deviate more sharply from left-wing non-populists than right-wing populists do from right-wing non-populists. Therefore, we can conclude that, although populists span the entire political spectrum in terms of their self-placement on the left-right axis, their populist stance aligns them more closely with the right-wing pole on key mobilizing issues. The positioning of populist voters in the political centre – or even on the centre-left – reveals an inherent contradiction between their support for specific populist issues, on the one hand, and their thick-centered ideology (or its absence thereof) which defines their self-placement on the left-right spectrum. This contradiction may prove to be temporary, potentially resulting in a substantial realignment of the populist electorate toward the right-wing political spectrum in future elections.

Ultimately, what keeps populists away from the right-wing pole – despite their similarity in the attitude to the same-sex rights and migration issues – is their stance on inequality. The view that inequality in Slovenia is excessively high mobilizes both centrist and left-wing populists. Although right-wing populists share this view far more than their non-populist counterparts on the right, they still diverge significantly in terms of the importance they assign to this issue. In Slovenia, the perception of inequality represents a demarcation line that keeps populists in the political center and in the left. Unsurprisingly, the belief that inequality is too high is strongest on the far-left – where it is shared by non-populists as well.

Another dividing line between populists on the centre and left, and the right is their attitude toward mask-wearing, which is a consequence of the unique circumstances of the pandemic. The right-wing coalition in power during the pandemic introduced measures to curb infections, including mask mandates. Strong opponents of these measures can be found among populists in the political center and on the left. As mentioned, we do not expect this issue to mobilize populists in the next election anymore.

Denying human responsibility for climate change is a relatively new issue that mobilizes populists. Based on current data, it is not possible to draw definitive conclusions. However, it is evident that among non-populists, this scepticism is mainly found on the right. Left-wing voters largely disagree with such scepticism. Nonetheless, a sizable share of centrist populists also deny human responsibility for climate change. The same holds – though to a lesser extent – for far-left populists, suggesting that this issue may be developing into a new axis of convergence that could cut across the traditional left–right divide.

In the next step, we produced several regression models in which the extent of agreement with various issues serves as the dependent variables, while the independent variables include both political orientation and socio-demographic factors (Table 7). The analyses have been conducted on a subsample of populists as defined by Index I.

Overall, support for certain viewpoints is closely tied to socio-demographic characteristics and, to a lesser extent, political orientation. Still, political orientation continues to play a noticeable role. When personal attributes are controlled for, the smallest variation linked to political orientation appears in attitudes toward the rights of same-sex couples. With respect to this issue, the differences within the populist group are more associated with gender and age—specifically, men and older individuals are generally less tolerant and have lower levels of education, than with political orientation.

Table 7: Multiple regression of different social issues on political orientation and sociodemographic variables (for populists only, defined by Index I).

	Anti-mask β	Anti-gay β	Anti-immigration β	Inequality too high β	Climate denier β
Political orientation					
Far-left	.003	-.037	.068	.030	.096
Left	base	base	base	base	base
Centre	-.085	-.067	.158 *	-.106	.228 **
Right	-.169 *	.025	.061	-.125 *	.091
Far-right	-.175 *	-.076	.155 *	-.180 **	.283 ***
Gender (women= 0)	.047	.235 **	.002	-.100	.206 **
Generation					
Generation (18-28)	base	base	base	base	base
Generation (29-43)	.051	.062	.001	.463 ***	-.194 *
Generation (44-58)	-.057	.251 *	.043	.609 ***	-.198 *
Generation (59-65)	-.149 *	.234 *	.021	.511 ***	-.229 *
Education	.062	-.202 **	.142 *	-.173 **	.043
Income	-.121 *	.045	.083	.026	-.033
R-Square (Adj. R-Square)	.084(.025)	.166(.105)	.061(.038)	.240(.191)	.157(.102)
N	165	146	163	165	164

NOTE: * sig. < 0.10 ** sig. < 0.01. *** sig. < 0.001

Regarding immigration, centrist and far-right populists are quite similar to each other and both diverge significantly from their left-wing counterparts, with political orientation exerting a stronger influence than socio-demographic factors.

Again, the inequality issue creates a divide between left- and right-wing populists, with centrist populists aligning closer to the left than the right on this issue. Inequality is emphasized as a concern by all generations except the youngest, as well as by the less-educated segment of the populist electorate. Among the general population – not just populists – younger individuals are generally less sensitive to the issue of economic inequalities. However, this changes already in the next age category, encompassing individuals aged 29 to 43.

Centrist populists also align more closely with the left regarding attitudes toward mask-wearing during the pandemic. As expected, a less pronounced opposition to masks is found among right-wing populists, older individuals, and those with higher incomes.

On the other hand, attitudes toward climate change reduce the differences between centrist and far-right populists. Both groups deviate significantly from the base category, which is represented by left-wing populists. Among populists, climate change denial is more prevalent among younger individuals and men.

6 Conclusion

Populism has the potential to draw into the political sphere citizens who would otherwise exhibit low levels of political interest and weak partisan identification, thereby encouraging their participation in various forms of political engagement, including voting. It can also trigger political realignment, as individuals gradually relegate their thick-centered ideological commitments to the background and begin making electoral choices primarily based on thin-centered populist appeals. Political dynamics in this context largely revolve around the question of which political actors will play a leading role in shaping this process and where populists will ultimately align. Will they remain anchored to the traditional left–right ideological spectrum, transcend it by embracing a more eclectic political program, or will one side – left or right – prove more successful over time in drawing them toward one of the ideological poles? While populism is most often associated with the far right and far left, our study underscores the possibility that the political center, too, holds the potential to mobilize populists independently of their incorporation into far-left or far-right ideologies.

The analysis of Slovenian populists reveals that about one-fourth of the population can be defined as populists who, in the 2022 elections, were predominantly situated in the political centre and voted for the Freedom Movement, a newly formed party that has attracted a variety of voters, among them voters dissatisfied with the previous government and its handling of the Covid-19 pandemic, anti-vaccination voters, tactical left voters, etc. Populists unwilling to join the broad centre-left coalition under the umbrella of the new Freedom Movement party tended to support smaller, non-parliamentary parties, with the far-right Slovenian Democratic Party and other parties following. This was undoubtedly influenced by strategic party decisions and the adaptation of political programs as well as by the unique circumstances of the pandemic.

To adopt a dynamic view of populism, it is crucial to examine the extent of issue convergence among populists and to determine whether there are dividing lines between them and how strong those lines are. Our analysis included several issues around which populists are typically mobilized: attitudes toward same-sex couples' rights, immigration, the environment, masks, and inequality. The relationship between populism and attitudes toward the EU has already been

studied in the Slovenian context (Lovec 2019), so we did not deal with this issue in our research.

The results show significant convergence with respect to main mobilizing issue of populists across the left–right spectrum. In some cases, differences are being completely diminished—for example, in attitudes toward same-sex couples' rights. In other cases, there is considerable proximity between right-wing and centrist populists, as with attitudes toward immigration and climate change. The key dividing line that distinguishes Slovenian populists positioned in the political center or on the left from those on the right is their stance on inequality—an issue that appears to serve as a relatively stable point of differentiation. As long as moral conservatism and economic populism remain distinct political programs, it can be expected that the majority of populists will continue to align with the centre-left political coalition.

The emergence of climate change as a new field of political mobilization is also notable in Slovenia. Younger populists, who lack strong positions on inequality and are generally less hostile toward same-sex couples' rights, exhibit the strongest opinions on the environment compared to other generations. They often believe that scientists exaggerate the role of human activity in climate change. Similar to the UK, a segment of young people, positioned in opposition to the Youth Climate Movement, consistently rejects the latter's goals (Horton, 2024). This stance is particularly characteristic of young men aged 18 to 28.

Finally, the study confirmed a need for a specialized indicators to measure populist attitudes, rather than relying on the proxy measures. Such specialized measures are typically not included in major national and international social surveys. This is an important contribution of this research. The analysis confirms the validity of the indicators used to measure populism, as they produce meaningful results in terms of the statistical relationships with various independent and dependent variables. The comparison of Index I (three-dimensional concept of populism) and Index II (two-dimensional concept of populism) suggests that the latter measures "critical elitism" rather than populism. It remains unclear whether this group consists solely of individuals strongly opposed to the current government or whether it reflects a more enduring critical attitude toward politics and political institutions.

Acknowledgment

The author expresses her gratitude to the editors and anonymous reviewers for their thorough and helpful suggestions for improving the text.

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