

CHAPTER 34:

POPULISM FACING THE CORONAVIRUS OUTBREAK

Cecilia Biancalana, Reinhard Heinisch and Oscar Mazzoleni

Introduction

Populism has already received much attention in academic literature since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. While the role of populism in the pandemic has been examined particularly from the perspective of political parties (Gugushvili et al. 2020; Katsambekis and Stavrakakis 2020; Kavakil 2020; Mayer 2020; Wondreys and Mudde 2020; McKee et al. 2021), some contributions have also addressed voters holding populist attitudes (Barnieri and Bonini 2020; Ebler et al. 2020; Vieten 2020). Although the behaviour of populist actors in opposition has been the subject of few studies (Katsambekis and Stavrakakis 2020; Wondreys and Mudde 2020), the debate has generally focused on the policy responses of populist government officials (Gugushvili et al. 2020; Kavakil 2020; Mayer 2020; McKee et al. 2021). Other work has been devoted to the populist attitudes prevalent in society, focusing on the perception of lockdown measures (Barbieri and Bonini 2020), the belief in conspiracy theories (Eberl et al. 2020) and the mobilising effect of the pandemic on populist sentiment in society (Vieten 2020).

For anyone embarking on research on the COVID-19 pandemic, the literature on populism provides an important starting point. The clearest nexus between populism and the pandemic is the fact that, in this field, policy decisions typically rely on experts, especially medical and health policy professionals. To the extent that populism is defined by its inherent hostility to elites, the tension between decision-making informed by scientists and experts on the one hand, and the sensibilities of ‘common people’ struggling with an unfamiliar threat on the other is an important factor. In this chapter, we review the literature on both populists’ responses to the ongoing crisis, and on established concepts and theories that can be related to the link between populism and the pandemic. Finally, we provide an empirical case study based on a survey from Austria focused on the connection between populist attitudes and attitudes toward the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Coronavirus Outbreak and Populists’ Responses

The pandemic represented a worldwide social, political, and economic challenge. Governments have faced significant pushback on and criticism about almost every decision regarding

This research is part of the Project ‘PaCE’ and received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation program under the grant agreement n. 822337.

lockdowns and distancing measures, financial support for the economy and vaccination policies. Instead of upstaging populists for their seeming lack of evidence-based and responsible policy solutions in a pandemic, the crisis represented an opportunity for many parties and leaders to spread populist messages. As such, these actors tried to create or maintain an active and visible role in the pandemic landscape to achieve electoral and political advantages. The opportunities to spread populist messages were not the same in every phase of the pandemic. For parties in opposition, the first lockdown was the most difficult moment in terms of public visibility, as many of them aligned themselves with government decisions, at least in Europe (Bobba and Hubé 2021). The pandemic reshaped the agenda and some of the key right-wing issues of populist discourse were temporarily relegated to the margins. However, as soon as it became possible, leaders and parties tried to reinsert their traditional issues into the national agenda. Uncertainty about whether to open or close schools, shut down or reopen businesses, and trade off local, national, and supranational interests opened windows of opportunity for anti-establishment formations, including populist ones.

In particular, linking with their legacies, many right-wing parties reacted to the pandemic by rallying against open borders and illegal immigrants, framing them as spreaders of the virus and a menace to the welfare state, and by criticising the EU's handling of the pandemic and the way it undermined national sovereignty (Betz 2020; Wondreys and Mudde 2020). At the same time, new issues such as medical-related conspiracy theories and criticisms against expertise emerged. Conspiracy theories on the origin of the virus or its use as a bioweapon by the Chinese regime gained support among right-wing populist grassroots factions and leaders. Denial and scepticism towards medical authorities became a way to counter official expertise and denounce them as elite machinations. Especially in Western countries, populists called for personal freedoms and individual rights to be defended against the excesses of state power (Bialasiewicz and Eckes 2020). Since populist actors usually claim to protect the people from collective and typically external threats, populist advocacy on behalf of individual freedom seems rather unusual. However, in some cases the mistrust towards the establishment prevailed (Brubaker 2021).

The first wave of studies addressing this topic from a supply-side perspective showed that populists' response to the pandemic, inside and outside Europe, strongly differs in terms of framing and impact (Katsambekis and Stavrakakis 2020; Meyer 2020; Bobba and Hubé 2021). Populists' responses vary between right-wing and left-wing actors, but also within the same ideological field. During lockdowns and restrictions, two prevalent tendencies arose. In countries such as the Netherlands and Sweden, populist parties asked that more restrictive measures be taken; in others, such as Germany, right-wing populists denounced what they called authoritarian decision-making by an establishment headed by experts. Differences also emerged regarding the timing of the lockdown, the use of masks and vaccines. While the positions of Matteo Salvini, leader of the Italian League (Lega), have been ambivalent (as at times he favoured more restrictions and at others he did not), the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán was clearly in favour of restrictions both in the first period of the pandemic and later. The Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland, AfD) and Nigel Farage of the UKIP (UK Independence Party) criticised the lockdowns and similar measures for going against citizens' freedom and economic stability (Wondrey and Mudde 2020).

This variation in populist discourse and behaviour also depended on mainstream parties' responses to the pandemic and the role played by populists within institutions. In Europe, for

populist parties being in opposition or in government matters. Oppositional parties tended to use the pandemic as a weapon against government and mainstream parties, accusing them of being incapable of responding to the pandemic, as cases from France (Baloge and Hube 2021) and Spain (Magre and Pano 2021) show. By contrast, when in government, and especially in a dominant position within a coalition, populists have tried to capitalise on the pandemic to enhance their power. First, they decided in favour of strict lockdowns such as in Hungary under Viktor Orbán, the Czech Republic under Andrej Babis, Slovakia under Igor Matovič and eventually Slovenia under Janez Janša. By politicising the pandemic and pushing for massive state intervention in support for the economy, these leaders sought to portray themselves as national father figures protecting their countries from an imported disease (Buštková and Baboš 2020; Guasti 2020). On the other hand, Donald Trump and Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro sought to maintain power by downplaying the pandemic and avoiding restrictions in a strategy intent on delegitimising expertise and offering comparatively less public support in fighting the pandemic (Agnew 2020; Brubaker 2021).

In Austria, the populist Freedom Party (Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs, FPÖ) used the COVID-19 pandemic to rebuild its flagging support following the FPÖ's collapse in government a year earlier. Realising that the number of sceptics about the virus was actually larger than its electorate at the time, it repositioned itself in opposition to anti-COVID measures. However, the Austrian government headed by the Conservative Chancellor Sebastian Kurz was also not immune to engaging in populist rhetoric when he suggested that to fight the pandemic effectively one could not always respect all 'constitutional niceties'. As such, the Austrian case seemed to follow the pattern in which populist opposition tended to play down the pandemic, whereas the Conservative-led government, at least during the first wave, adopted extremely restrictive measures and a menacing public discourse. According to a comparative study by Bobba and Hubé (2021), European right-wing parties did not benefit from the COVID-19 crisis, although this is difficult to evaluate at least in the short term. Beyond Europe, it is impossible to argue that populism failed in terms of electoral performance: despite denialist strategies, lacklustre containment measures, and very high rates of COVID-related deaths, the 2020 local elections in Brazil saw Bolsonaro's party and allies do reasonably well. Also, the 2020 US presidential election was not the spectacular failure for Donald Trump that his detractors had hoped for and expected.

Turning to the political demand side, we see that initial attempts to understand the public's opinion about the pandemic in connection with populism yielded mixed results. A survey conducted in four European countries and in the US in September 2020 showed that economic concerns related to the COVID-19 pandemic exerted a positive effect on the probability of voting for the National Rally (Rassemblement National, RN) in France as well as the Lega and Brothers of Italy (Fratelli d'Italia, FdI) in Italy, the AfD in Germany and the Swiss People's Party (Schweizerische Volkspartei, SVP) in Switzerland. By contrast, US voters most worried about the economic consequences of the pandemic were significantly less likely to support Donald Trump (Ivaldi and Mazzoleni 2020). A survey of Austrian citizens conducted in May 2020 showed that populists tended to exhibit low trust in political institutions as well as science and research and that these orientations were positively related to COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs (Eberl et al. 2020). However, radical right ideology seemed to play only a marginal role in populist attitudes, despite the Freedom Party of Austria being the most sceptical of COVID-19 in the Austrian party system. Likewise, a survey conducted in May 2020 in the US

provided evidence about the polarisation of public values towards scientists involved in the country's COVID-19 policy responses. The analysis confirmed the existence of a divide between Democrats, Republicans and Independents, and showed that working-class men and people living in non-urban areas were more sceptical towards experts. The opinions expressed by Trump's supporters seemed to fit well with the scepticism expressed by the US president vis-à-vis experts (Evans and Hargittai 2020).

Old Concepts and New Directions in the Research on Populism and Pandemics

While it is true that, in some respects, the coronavirus outbreak disrupted a previously consolidated balance of power and that populist actors faced (and were trying to adapt to) unforeseen circumstances, there are several established concepts and theories we can readily apply in order to understand the relationship between populism and the pandemic. These concern the relationship between populism and expert-based knowledge, the way in which populists typically address medical and health-related issues, and the connection between populist discourse and conspiracy theories.

Populism and Expert Knowledge

The coronavirus outbreak has brought experts to the forefront. We know that populism is based on a certain form of opposition between 'the people' and 'the elite'. However, the 'people' and the 'elite' are not addressed in the same way by every populist actor, and these opposite categories are not monolithic. Populist notions of elites include not only politicians or, more generally, members of the political elite, but also experts of various types, such as scholars, academics and intellectuals (Caramani 2017; Merkley 2020). Indeed, scientific knowledge production with its long-established gatekeepers and formal criteria is often part of populists' stereotype about the 'out-of-touch elites' (Mede and Schäfer 2020). The antagonistic relation between 'ordinary people' and the 'academic elite' may be defined as a struggle for epistemic authority, that is, for sovereignty over how 'true knowledge' is produced. For populists, the knowledge generated by experts represents an unaccountable restriction on the power of the people (Turner 2001; Collins et al. 2020): for instance, Donald Trump very publicly disagreed with the findings of his intelligence experts, climate scientists and health policy advisors. Several scholars present empirical evidence of the discourse of populists combining the denigration of criticism of professional expertise with the elevation of people's 'common sense' as superior and authoritative (Saurette and Gunster 2011; Oliver and Rahn 2016). Others have pointed out that populists not only suggest relying on what has been called 'folk wisdom' or 'epistemological populism' – i.e. practical knowledge that common people have access to through everyday experience – but also advocate alternative forms of knowledge produced by authorities outside 'the mainstream' (Tuukka Ylä-Anttila 2018). Here, populists can tap into grievances of people who perceive the professionalisation, economisation and academisation in many areas, especially in health-related fields, as overly technocratic and instead turn to non-mainstream and esoteric explanations. In all these cases, the underlying assumption is that

allegedly evil, arrogant or uncaring elites (whether they belong to the political or the scientific domain, or both) are hiding the real truth from the good people.

On a structural and systemic level, social, economic and political changes have paved the way for the diffusion of this kind of discourse that is sceptical of experts by populist actors. In some respects, the crisis of the cultural authority of science began in the 1970s (Collins et. al 2020), resulting in the rise of alternative epistemologies (van Zoonen 2012). This offered populist actors alternatives to the dominant scientific epistemology and tools for attacking organised science. More recently, the enormous spread of digital media and the increasingly lower cost of accessing communication have given populists a channel through which to express their ideas directly to the 'people', bypassing traditional media, which are considered to be close to the elite. In this way, populists can gather a like-minded support base online (Gerbaudo 2018). Nonetheless, the relationship between populism and knowledge remains far from settled and is still significantly under-researched, in particular from a comparative European perspective. After all, populists are not blind to the prestige that scientific breakthroughs, feats of engineering, Nobel prizes and world class universities can bestow on a country. Thus, as with everything in populism, the discourses are full of ambivalence and situational flexibility.

Populism and Healthcare Issues

Scholars have recently started to scrutinise the relationship between populist ideology and discourses on medical issues, especially with respect to anti-vaccine movements (e.g. Žuk and Žuk 2020). Due to the enormous salience of medical and health-related issues at this time, we can expect literature on this topic to grow substantially in the near future (see, for instance, Lasco 2020). Here, the point of departure is populism's hostility to elites and thus the rejection of medical experts and their influence on policy. Lasco and Curato (2019) use four examples from Africa and South East Asia to illustrate how populists mobilise health crises by emphasising threats to public health, through the simplification and spectacularisation of complex public health issues and by creating a shared image of the people as the victims of diseases at the hands of their enemies, who range from 'the state' to medical experts and to 'big pharma'. This is what the authors define as 'medical populism'. More specifically, in their investigation of the linkages between anti-vaccine movements and right-wing populism in Poland, Žuk and Žuk (2020) point to several features the two have in common, such as the rejection of scientific and medical elites, the claim to defend the health of ordinary people from a conspiracy of doctors and pharmaceutical companies, and, among others, the aversion to international organisations and experts. Indeed, both anti-vaccine movements and right-wing populist actors favour a simple narrative and distrust 'official' science. The connection between populism and health can also be approached from a different angle, that is, an examination of citizens' opinions. An analysis of 14 West European countries suggests a positive correlation between the percentage of people in a country who vote for populist parties and the percentage of citizens who believe that vaccines are not important or effective (Kennedy 2019). Nonetheless, except for some tentative and initial studies, the link between populist attitudes and citizens' opinions on these issues remains largely underexplored.

Populism and Conspiracy Theories

The COVID-19 pandemic has been the subject of numerous conspiracy theories about its origins, spread and the allegedly malevolent intentions of pharmaceutical companies. Indeed, we can expect that there will be many more such claims in the future, especially in connection with vaccine development and distribution. Conspiracy theories have been widely propagated by populists too, such as Matteo Salvini, the Italian Lega's leader, who suggested in March 2020 that the virus had been created in a laboratory. Also, Donald Trump made numerous unsubstantiated claims on this issue, including suggesting that it had been created by the Chinese. Although scholarship on populism has so far relatively rarely addressed conspiracy theories, we have long known that populists peddle such theories in their discourses. Here, it is useful to remind ourselves of the seminal reflections by Edward S. Shils (1956), whose book *The Torment of Secrecy* underlined how 'hyperpatriotism' (i.e. nationalism) and (especially right-wing) populism employed conspiracies allegedly implicating political elites and also scientists in the 1950s (Shils 1996: 44ff; see also Hofstadter 1964 on the 'paranoid style' in American politics). A more recently perceptive insight into the use of conspiracy theories is their 'function as a form of populist discourse' (Fenster 2008). Conspiracy theories can be defined as a proposed explanation of events that cites as the main causal factor a small group of persons (the conspirators) acting in secret for their own benefit and against the common good (Keeley 1999). Indeed, populism and conspiracy theories are said to 'walk hand-in-hand' (Castanho Silva, Vegetti and Littvay 2017: 423). Both assume an elite that is morally corrupt and authorities who are malevolent towards people (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008): elites are suspected of 'concealing their evil-doing, and that official explanations for major events may be lies' (Sutton and Douglas 2014). Both narratives are based on Manichean logic and anti-elitism (Bergmann 2018: 14). These world views are firmly dualistic: Neither of them leaves much room for individuality or differentiation within the categories of us versus them (the people vs. the elites; the unknowing people vs. the conspirators). Both present simple narratives and are 'rooted in general animosity toward anything official' (Castanho Silva, Vegetti and Littvay 2017: 427). However, not all populist discourse refers to a conspiracy theory, and not all conspiracies point to an antagonistic divide between ordinary people and corrupt elites (Hameleers 2021).

Although there is an important strand of the literature devoted to the spread of conspiracy beliefs in public opinion—defined by Uscinski et al. (2016) as an individual's belief in a specific conspiracy theory—the demand-side literature on populism in political science has rarely shown an interest in dealing with the impact of conspiracy theories (Oliver and Rahn 2016). With regard to party preferences and ideological orientation, research shows that (both left-wing and right-wing) political extremism predicts belief in conspiracy theories (van Prooijen et al. 2015). Moreover, although still very rare, some studies on the impact of conspiracy theories have also examined electoral behaviour. For instance, in an exploratory analysis on the Italian case, Mancosu et al. (2017) show that conspiracism is more widespread among the supporters of populist parties. Several relevant factors that have been found to predict conspiratorial beliefs, such as authoritarianism, powerlessness and low interpersonal and political trust, are also typical of the populists' world view (Mudde 2004; Ivaldi 2017). For instance, Uscinski and Parent (2014) argue that conspiracy theories 'are for losers' in the sense that they tend to resonate when groups are suffering from loss, weakness or disunity and, in general, when they

face a loss of power or the threat of losing it. This resonates with Betz's well-known claim that supporters of far-right parties are 'the losers' of the transformation from an industrial to a post-industrial economy (Betz 1994). Nevertheless, there are a few studies that bridge the two strands of literature.

Basing his analysis on a review of the empirical literature on this subject, van Prooijen (2018) shows the connection between some dimensions of populism and the belief in conspiracy theories. The belief in conspiracy theories is related to some core dimensions of populism, including a) anti-elitism, namely an aversion to those in power and a feeling of powerlessness; b) anti-pluralism, that is, a tendency to perceive simple solutions to complex problems and a propensity to respond with hostility if one's beliefs are challenged; and c) an inclination to believe in the superiority of one's nation and the perception that a valued but vulnerable in-group is under threat from external forces. An empirical analysis conducted by Castanho Silva, Vegetti and Littvay (2017) takes into account the specific link between populism and conspiracy beliefs as it demonstrates that populist attitudes correlate with some sub-facets of belief in conspiracy theories: Populists tend to believe in malevolent global conspiracies, according to which a small but powerful group controls world events, and a few individuals with access to information control how it spreads and does so for private material gain at the expense of the public. Hameelers (2020) also shows that exposure to populist communication can activate or prime populist attitudes. Yet, it should be abundantly clear from this short overview that much empirical work, both qualitative and quantitative, remains to be done to understand this crucially important research area, which has garnered so much attention during the pandemic.

Making the Empirical Case: Populism and Individual Perceptions of COVID-19's Effect

In this segment, we present the results of an original survey and survey experiment conducted in Austria between the first and second waves of the pandemic, which is intended to show how populism affected individual perceptions of the disease in terms of health and economic well-being. Another aim was to ascertain to what extent people were willing give up democratic principles in favour of greater effectiveness in counteracting the pandemic. Austria initially reacted quite resolutely to the COVID-19 outbreak and instituted a strict lockdown as early as the beginning of March 2020. This came about largely under the impression of the increasingly dire situation in neighbouring Italy. The Conservative–Green coalition government under Chancellor Kurz clearly saw this as an opportunity to demonstrate resolve and leadership, whereas Germany, always the key reference country for Austria, exhibited a more disorganised initial response. Since the refugee crisis of 2015, the Austrian chancellor had been critical of both German and EU leadership when dealing with crises, and this time was no exception. Kurz also framed the virus as a threat coming from abroad to Austria with the result that border closures along with a strict lockdown became early means of combating the pandemic.

Austria's relative success in coping with the first wave and its disproportionate dependence on tourism led to a rapid and nearly complete opening up of the country in June, which made it difficult to adopt stringent measures when in early autumn the daily numbers of new infec-

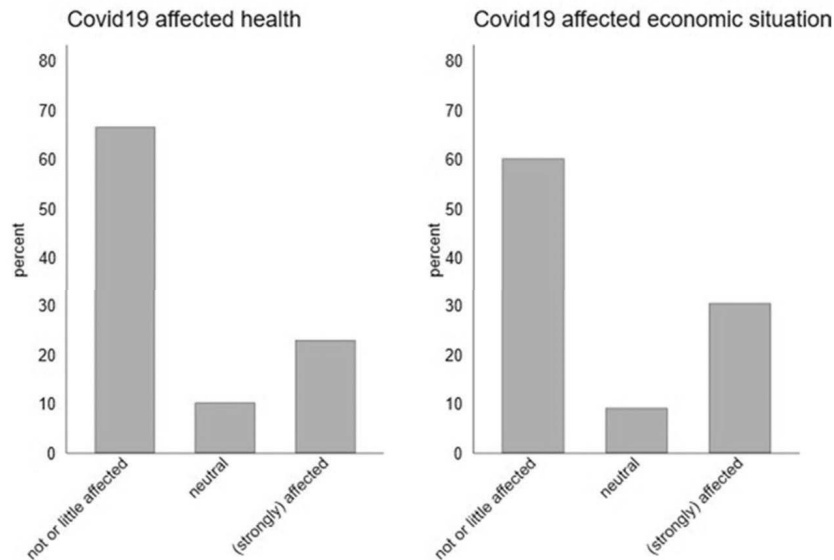
tions climbed beyond even the highest figures in the first wave. The government seemed paralysed and unsure about how to respond. A structural problem for the government was that Austria's constitutional court had retroactively ruled that several of the anti-COVID measures adopted were unconstitutional. Moreover, the fact that the health ministry was controlled by the Greens created friction the longer the pandemic lasted. The messaging by the coalition was increasingly confused and in the context of regional elections, the Conservatives blamed the Social Democratic government in Vienna for aggravating the pandemic. This not only ignored similar problems in Conservative-governed provinces but also politicised the pandemic. The opposition no longer saw any need to show restraint and the Freedom Party especially went on the offensive. Whereas the Social Democrats accused the government of doing too little too late and the Liberals denounced its incompetence, the FPÖ took the opposite tack, criticising what they called the high-handed and authoritarian nature of the decisions. It was in this context, shortly before the second wave, that we conducted a survey about political attitudes and their effect on the perceptions of COVID-19.

In this survey, we follow the idea that populism is characterised by a belief in an antagonistic relationship between the good people and the corrupt elite, whose power must be broken (Hawkins et al. 2018; Mudde 2004; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2018; Rooduijn 2014; Taggart 2004). Since populists imagine that 'the people' are always right, common sense forms the basis for all decisions (Mudde 2004). However, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, governments introduced stringent measures that severely restricted the lives of many citizens, but these were primarily based on expert assessments of the situation rather than popular demand (Bruhaker 2020; Katsambekis and Stavrakakis 2020) and were often selective in their application (Bruhaker 2020). At the same time, there is no comprehensive scientific consensus on the proper way to deal with the coronavirus (Katsambekis and Stavrakakis 2020). Specifically, the scientific practice of mutual criticism and the formulation of statements based on probabilities and risk assessments are very unfamiliar to a population with a high need for safety. In addition, access to alternative information is very easy, especially via social media, so the prescriptions of experts can be constantly questioned and seemingly easily refuted (Bruhaker 2020; Katsambekis and Stavrakakis 2020; Mede and Schäfer 2020). Despite potential similarities, such populist notions are conceptually distinct from attitudes due to the distrust of government, political and ideological disagreements, and/or differences in interest (Caramani 2018). Feeling unrepresented or abandoned by the government or not trusting its judgement may also be reasons for people feeling negatively affected, but they are different from populist rejections of the elites. Thus, we hypothesise that the subjective feeling of being affected by COVID-19 should be higher among individuals with populist attitudes than among individuals who do not hold these attitudes. The reason for this is the lack of belief in the countermeasures taken and the political and scientific actors seen as responsible for them.

To test this hypothesis empirically, we designed a representative survey in Austria that went into the field in early September 2020 with a sample size of 1,200 people. Since – as acknowledged by the World Health Organisation, and the World Economic Forum – the COVID-19 pandemic has a clear health and economic dimension, the data gleaned provide information on both the degree of health and economic concern that was prevalent in Austrian society at that time. As we focus exclusively on the subjective perception of people, health affectedness is not limited to contracting the disease itself, but it is left to respondents and their subjective assessment whether and to what extent they felt affected. This subjective feeling of being affected

was measured with the following questions: On a scale of 0 to 10, how much did you feel negatively affected [in your health well-being] or [economically] by the COVID-19 crisis?

Figure 34.1: Health and Economic Feelings of Being Affected by the COVID-19 pandemic



Source: own survey, Austria, Sept. 2020, n=1200.

Figure 34.1 indicates that 23.9 per cent of respondents thought their health was affected and 30.5 per cent felt economically impacted. The large share of people claiming to have experienced health effects was a surprise given the relatively low number of officially reported cases in the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in Austria. Among the political factors we queried, populist attitudes, distrust of the government and authoritarian tendencies show up as widespread among Austrians. After all, 73.92 per cent of respondents agree with the statement that ‘in our country, the powerful listen far too little to the common people’. To test our hypotheses about how populist attitudes shape subjective feelings about health-related and economic well-being, we use OLS regression models, as depicted in Table 34.1. These allow us to examine not only the effect of populist attitudes but also the possible influence of other factors on subjective affectedness by the COVID-19 pandemic. Among the control variables, we include socio-demographic factors such as gender, age, education level, and the subjective assessment of the respondents’ own income as well as political attitudes such as left–right self-ranking, trust in the government, and party preference in the previous national election.

As with the descriptive statistics, the explanatory models show both health and economic concerns. The results of the four regression models, two with and two without trust in the government as a control variable, are displayed in Table 34.1. The dependent variable is the subjectively perceived level of affectedness, both health-related (middle column) and economic (right column). The explanatory variables are listed in the left column. The populism variable was measured by the response to the question ‘In our country, the powerful listen far too little to the common people’, with a response scale ranging from 0 (strongly disagree) to 10 (strongly

agree). For each type of impact—health effect and economic effect—two regression models were calculated: one that also took into account a respondent’s trust in government. This was necessary to show that the effect of populist (anti-elite) attitudes is different from a lack of trust in a specific government, which may have different sources. This concept was measured through respondents evaluating the statement ‘On the whole, you can trust that the government wants only the best for the country’ (response scale: agree very much [0] to disagree completely [10]). This way, we are confident that we have not measured merely opposing attitudes to the government.

Table 34.1: Regression Models for the Degree of Perceived Affectedness by COVID-19

	Health situation				Economic situation			
	Model without trust		Model with trust		Model without trust		Model with trust	
	Coef	se	Coef	se	Coef	se	Coef	se
Populist	0.51***	(0.19)	0.51***	(0.20)	0.71***	(0.20)	0.61***	(0.20)
No trust in government			0.02	(0.19)			0.63***	(0.20)
Left-right Self-placement	-0.00	(0.05)	-0.00	(0.05)	0.06	(0.06)	0.06	(0.06)
Female	-0.20	(0.17)	-0.21	(0.17)	-0.11	(0.18)	-0.11	(0.18)
Age	-0.01**	(0.01)	-0.01**	(0.01)	-0.04***	(0.01)	-0.04***	(0.01)
Education (base: low)								
medium	-0.02	(0.22)	-0.02	(0.23)	-0.10	(0.24)	-0.06	(0.24)
high	-0.69**	(0.29)	-0.69**	(0.29)	-0.58*	(0.30)	-0.56*	(0.30)
Vote (base: non-voter)								
SPÖ	-0.28	(0.30)	-0.28	(0.30)	-0.62**	(0.32)	-0.61*	(0.32)
ÖVP	-0.60**	(0.27)	-0.60**	(0.27)	-0.68**	(0.28)	-0.53*	(0.28)
FPÖ	-0.32	(0.37)	-0.32	(0.37)	0.13	(0.39)	0.06	(0.39)
Greens	-0.70**	(0.30)	-0.70**	(0.30)	-0.65**	(0.31)	-0.61*	(0.31)
NEOS	-0.55	(0.37)	-0.54	(0.37)	-0.60	(0.38)	-0.51	(0.38)
Other party	-0.19	(0.54)	-0.19	(0.54)	0.40	(0.56)	0.25	(0.56)
Does not cope with income	0.02***	(0.01)	0.02***	(0.01)	0.01	(0.01)	0.01*	(0.01)
Constants	3.98***	(0.51)	3.98***	(0.52)	5.68***	(0.54)	5.42***	(0.54)
N	1.177		1.177		1.177		1.177	
R-squared	0.04		0.04		0.09		0.10	

Standard errors in parentheses; *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

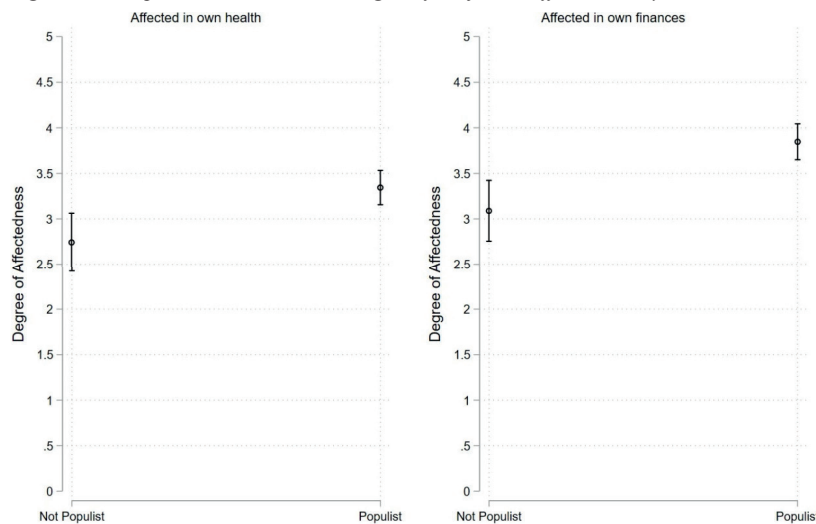
Note: 0 not affected, 10 very affected
 Source: own survey, Austria, September 2020.

The variables showing a significant effect on Austrians feeling negatively impacted in their health due to the COVID-19 pandemic are populist attitudes, age, low education level, and the subjective perception of income scarcity. Thus, in terms of political factors, we notice that populist individuals feel more affected by the crisis, but at the same time it is also evident that voters for the current governing parties feel significantly less impacted compared to non-voters. The fact that the variable ‘perceived income scarcity’ (as opposed to actual income level) turns out to be highly significant in explaining the perceived negative health effects among the Austrians surveyed underscores also the subjective dimension of individual affectedness. In the adjacent model with the variable trust in government, all previously measured effects remain de facto the same. Crucially, ideological orientation and lack of trust in the government have no effect, but populism does and is highly significant in both models. This shows us that populism is a decisive and stand-alone factor and not merely the result of political opposition or general distrust in the government. Regardless of ideology and political preferences, people with populist orientations view themselves as significantly more affected in their health.

With regard to the perceived economic concerns, a similar picture emerges. Once again, populist attitudes, age and a high level of education emerge as significant explanatory factors. We see that, compared to non-voters, party supporters of larger mainstream parties (ÖVP, SPÖ, Greens) show less concern than those of other parties. Political calculus plays a larger role in this question than one would expect, given that voters and parties differ according to defined economic preferences and philosophies. Accordingly, one's own economic concern is also evaluated on the basis of someone's level of trust in the government, which becomes evident once the variable trust in the government is included in the model. The role of subjective income scarcity is also smaller than in the case of health-related concerns, presumably because objective rather than subjective factors have more influence on the degree of economic concern. Nevertheless, the explanatory variable 'populism' is also central in these models, both in terms of significance and effect size.

The effect of populist attitudes can also be represented graphically by plotting the estimated mean values. Figure 34.2 shows that the degree of concern is significantly higher among people who, in our scale, show up as populist (from a value of 6 on the 0 to 10 scale) compared with other Austrians. In general, health concerns are 6 per cent higher on average among people with populist attitudes, and economic concerns are 7.6 per cent higher compared to other people. Thus, our survey data support the hypothesis that people with populist attitudes feel more affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Figure 34.2: Populist Attitudes and the Degree of Subjective Affectedness by the COVID-19 Crisis



Note: graphical representation of the effect of populism based on the regression model in Table 34.1

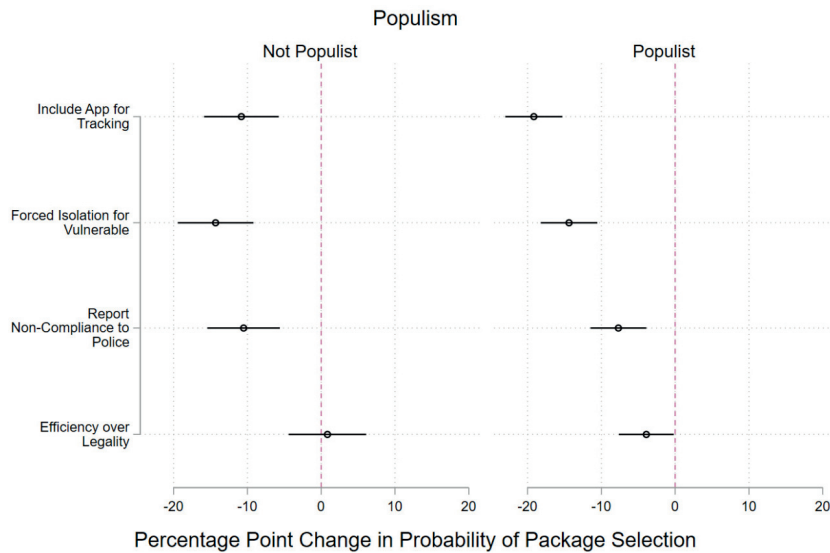
Source: own survey, Austria, September 2020, n=1200.

Attitudes towards COVID-19 are not only dependent variables but can themselves also be the causes of political choices and thus be independent variables. For example, fear of the pandemic or subjectively perceived threats may heighten illiberal or authoritarian attitudes (Ignazi 1992; Kitschelt and McGann 1995; Mudde 2007; Wodak 2015). In this case, we were investigating the assumption that, in the interest of combating the COVID-19 pandemic more effec-

tively, respondents might be willing to sacrifice certain constitutional rights and protections. Specifically, we wanted to find out whether populist and non-populists differ in their support for such unconstitutional policies. Thus, in conjunction with our survey, we conducted a conjoint experiment. Such methodological designs are used to gauge questions where researchers suspect that respondents may be more likely to conceal their real positions (Gaines 2007; Druckman et al. 2011; Campbell and Cowley 2014). In such a conjoint experiment, the survey respondents are asked to select one of two packages of options in accordance with their preferences. As each respondent cannot simply pick a single option but has to weigh the pros and cons of two entire packages each containing something he or she likes and dislikes, the researcher learns about how individuals in the survey respond when faced with such trade-offs; in this case having to decide between liberal democratic but less effective measures to fight the pandemic versus options that promise greater effectiveness but at the expense of democracy.

In our experiment, the respondents were presented with a hypothetical scenario of a second COVID-19 wave and asked to select packages of policy responses to combat the crisis. Each respondent was thus presented with sets of measures in four policy areas: a) having a mandatory tracking app installed (violating privacy protection), b) supporting the forced isolation of vulnerable groups (violating personal freedom), c) wanting people to act as police informers to report behaviour not compliant with containment measures (civilians acting as police), and d) supporting trading away constitutional protections for a more efficient implementation of the government's measures (violating the rule of law). Each policy area included an unconstitutional option or the opposite, a constitutionally sound alternative option. Each of the respondents was then shown two randomly selected sets of measures (policy packages) side by side. Each package had four pieces of information, one for each policy area, consisting of a random combination of unconstitutional and constitutional preferences. The respondent then had to choose the policy package that held the greater appeal overall.

Figure 34.3: Conjoint Experiment Showing the Change in Probability of Selecting Unconstitutional (towards right margin) Versus Constitutional (towards left margin) Anti-COVID Measures When Comparing Populist and Non-Populist Respondents



Source: own survey, Austria, September 2020, n=1200.

Figure 34.3 presents the results of this conjoint experiment. It indicates the change in the probability of populist versus non-populist respondents selecting a policy package that includes any of the unconstitutional policies. The closer the group mean is to the left margin, the less likely it is the group selected the constitutionally suspect measures, whereas placement further to the right indicates relatively greater support for those policy measures. The findings show that although these measures may be considered equally suspect from a rule of law standpoint, respondents clearly treated them differently. Even more perplexing at first sight is that non-populists seem to show a somewhat greater inclination to support unconstitutional and illiberal policies than populists. How can this be? If we consider that respondents were asked to back government policy measures and given that we must assume that populists distrust governments, it follows that they are probably less likely to support giving the government more power if they themselves are not in office. Thus, populist respondents appear especially sceptical of the government's ability to track people and dislike placing efficiency ahead of legality. Only with respect to reporting non-compliance to the police, do populists seem slightly more inclined to support this measure. Overall, this is merely a snapshot of a multistage analysis in which populism can be combined with perceived effectiveness and other variables to understand policy support in a pandemic.

Conclusions

In this chapter, we surveyed the emerging literature on the COVID-19 pandemic and its connection to populism. As these lines were written, in early 2021, this theorising was still very much a work in progress. Nonetheless, the contours of this relationship were already clearly

visible as the COVID-19 outbreak evoked a significant growth in medical populism (Lasco and Curato 2019; Lasco 2020). This included in some cases the simplification and banalisation of the pandemic, and in others the dramatisation of the crisis, the conflict between the people and powerful elites (e.g. pharmaceutical companies, supranational bodies, the ‘medical establishment’), and controversial knowledge claims about the origin of the virus and related aspects. What is more, populists often responded differently when they were in opposition than when they were in government. Indeed, a significant part of the literature has thus far been devoted to policy responses by populists versus non-populists. There is also an emerging set of literature on the demand side, in which people coping with the pandemic or, increasingly, its side and after-effects evaluate different political actors and their policies. It is here where the above case study from Austria helps us to understand the link between populist attitudes and people’s perceptions of being affected by COVID-19. It also shows how party-political preferences (mainstream parties versus a populist party) are correlated with a person’s willingness to forego constitutional and liberal democratic principles in favour of a more effective means to fight the pandemic. The Austrian case provides an example of types of research which we would hope to see more of in order to better understand the effect of the COVID-19 crisis on populism and democratic governance.

Overall, the role of populism is likely to grow at this time, as people’s willingness to accept restrictions erodes, and governments and the European Union become embroiled in critical discussions over vaccine distribution and vaccination policies, continued lockdowns, social burden sharing, and financing the economic recovery. There are potentially many ‘COVID-losers’ who perceive themselves to be the victims of decisions by political and medical elites. Populists are versed in grievance politics and, especially when in opposition, may attack governments from both sides for not having done enough and having done too much. Moreover, it seems likely that, in particular, ‘the negative economic fallout of the pandemic is going to persist for years to come’ (Betz 2020). Thus, the mix of health-related and economic existential fears, the increased role of technical innovation, and intense international competition over effective crisis management will presumably provide populists and conspiracy theory movements around the world with a fertile agenda, which needs to be explored. Reflections on the use of the crisis by right-wing populists leave many questions open, above all the relations between populism and authoritarianism (Halikiopoulou 2020), populism and science, and their impact on the evolution of democratic regimes. In any case, we can state that the COVID-19 outbreak represented a stress-test for many democracies, radicalising ongoing trends: giving populist leaders room for manoeuvre to enhance their power and fostering scepticism towards science and medical expertise. For the academic community, this will provide a rich and relevant field of study.

References

- Agnew, J. (2020): ‘American “Populism” and the Spatial Contradictions of US Government in the Time of COVID-19’. In: *Geopolítica(s) Revista de estudios sobre espacio y poder*, 11, 15–23.
- Albertazzi, D. and D. McDonnell (eds.) (2008): *Twenty-First Century Populism: The Spectre of Western European Democracy*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Barbieri, P. and B. Bonini (2020): ‘Populism and Political (Mis-)Belief Effect on Individual Adherence to Lockdown during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Italy’. Working paper.

- Bergmann, E. (2018): *Conspiracy & Populism: The Politics of Misinformation*. Cham: Springer International Publishing.
- Betz, H. G. (1994): *Radical Right-Wing Populism in Western Europe*. New York: Springer.
- Betz, H. G. (2020): 'Covid-19, Deglobalization and the (Potentially) Bright Future of Radical Right-Wing Populism'. Working paper.
- Bialasiewicz, L. and C. Eckes (2021): "'Individual Sovereignty" in Pandemic Times – A Contradiction in Terms?'. In: *Political Geography*, 85, 1–3.
- Bobba, G. and N. Hubé (eds.) (2021): *Populism and the Politicization of the COVID-19 Crisis in Europe*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Brubaker, R. (2021): 'Paradoxes of populism during the pandemic'. In: *Thesis Eleven*, 164(1), 73–87.
- Bušítková, L. and P. Baboš (2020): 'Best in COVID: Populists in the Time of Pandemic'. In: *Politics and Governance*, 8(4), 496–508.
- Campbell, R. and P. Cowley (2014): 'What Voters Want: Reactions to Candidate Characteristics in a Survey Experiment'. In: *Political Studies*, 62(4), 745–765.
- Caramani, D. (2017): 'Will vs. Reason: The Populist and Technocratic Forms of Political Representation and Their Critique to Party Government'. In: *The American Political Science Review*, 111(1), 54.
- Castanho Silva, B., F. Vegetti and L. Littvay (2017): 'The Elite Is Up to Something: Exploring the Relation Between Populism and Belief in Conspiracy Theories'. In: *Swiss Political Science Review*, 23(4), 423–443.
- Collins, H. M., R. Evans, D. Durant and M. Weinel (2020): *Experts and the Will of the People*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Druckman, J. N., D. P. Greene, J. H. Kuklinski and A. Lupia (2011): *Cambridge Handbook of Experimental Political Science*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Eberl, Jakob-Moritz, Robert A. Huber & Esther Greussing (2021) 'From populism to the "plandemic": why populists believe in COVID-19 conspiracies'. In: *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, 31:sup1, 272-284, DOI: 10.1080/17457289.2021.1924730.
- Evans, John H. and Eszter Hargittai (2020): 'Who Doesn't Trust Fauci? The Public's Belief in the Expertise and Shared Values of Scientists in the COVID-19 Pandemic'. In: *Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World*, 6, 1–13.
- Fenster, M. (2008): *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Gaines, Brian J., J. H. Kuklinski and P. J. Quirk (2007): 'The Logic of the Survey Experiment Reexamined'. In: *Political Analysis*, 15(1), 1–20.
- Gerbaudo, P. (2018): 'Social Media and Populism: an Elective Affinity?'. In: *Media, Culture and Society*, 40(5), 745–753.
- Guasti, P. (2020): 'The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic in Central and Eastern Europe'. In: *Democratic Theory*, 7(2), 47–60.
- Gugushvili, A., J. Koltai, D. Stuckler and M. McKee (2020): 'Votes, Populism, and Pandemics'. In: *International Journal of Public Health*, 65(6), 721–722.
- Hameleers, M. (2021): 'They Are Selling Themselves Out to the Enemy! The Content and Effects of Populist Conspiracy Theories'. In: *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 33(1), 38–56.
- Hawkins, K. A., R. E. Carlin, L. Littvay and C. Rovira Kaltwasser (eds.) (2018): *The Ideational Approach to Populism: Concept, Theory, and Analysis*. London: Routledge.
- Hofstadter, R. (1964): 'The Paranoid Style in American Politics'. In: *Harper's Magazine*, November, 77–86.
- Ivaldi, G. (2017): 'Electoral Basis of Populist Parties'. In: R. Heinisch, C. Holtz-Bacha and O. Mazzoleni (eds.): *Political Populism. A Handbook*, Baden-Baden: Nomos, 153–168.
- Ivaldi, G. and O. Mazzoleni (2020): 'Inquiétudes économiques face à la covid-19: un terreau pour le vote nationalpopuliste?'. In: *Fondation Jean Jaurès*, November 18th.
- Kavakli, K. C. (2020): 'Did Populist Leaders Respond to the COVID-19 Pandemic More Slowly? Evidence From a Global Sample'. Working paper.
- Keeley, B. L. (1999): 'Of Conspiracy Theories'. In: *The Journal of Philosophy*, 96(3), 109–126.
- Kennedy, J. (2019): 'Populist Politics and Vaccine Hesitancy in Western Europe: An Analysis of National-Level data'. In: *European Journal of Public Health*, 29(3), 512–516.
- Kriesi, H. and T. S. Pappas (eds.) (2015): *European Populism in the shadow of the Great Recession*. Colchester: ECPR Press.
- Lasco, G. (2020): 'Medical Populism and the COVID-19 Pandemic'. In: *Global Public Health*, 15(10), 1417–1429.
- Lasco, G. and N. Curato (2019): 'Medical Populism'. In: *Social Science & Medicine*, 221, 1–8.

- Mancosu, M., S. Vassallo and C. Vezzoni (2017): 'Believing in Conspiracy Theories: Evidence from an Exploratory Analysis of Italian Survey Data'. In: *South European Society and Politics*, 22(3), 327–344.
- McKee, M., A. Gugushvili, J. Koltai and D. Stuckler (2021): 'Are Populist Leaders Creating the Conditions for the Spread of COVID-19? Comment on "A Scoping Review of Populist Radical Right Parties' Influence on Welfare Policy and Its Implications for Population Health in Europe"'. In: *International Journal of Health Policy and Management*, 10(8), 511–515.
- Mede, N. G. and M. S. Schäfer (2020): 'Science-Related Populism: Conceptualizing Populist Demands Toward Science'. In: *Public Understanding of Science*, 29(5), 473–491.
- Merkley, E. (2020): 'Anti-Intellectualism, Populism, and Motivated Resistance to Expert Consensus'. In: *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 84(1), 24–48.
- Meyer, B. (2020): *Pandemic Populism: An Analysis of Populist Leaders' Responses to COVID-19*. Tony Blair Institute for Global Change.
- Mudde, C. (2004): 'The Populist Zeitgeist'. In: *Government and Opposition*, 39(4), 541–563.
- Mudde, C. (2007): *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mudde, C. and C. Rovira Kaltwasser (2018): 'Studying Populism in Comparative Perspective: Reflections on the Contemporary and Future Research Agenda'. In: *Comparative Political Studies*, 51(13), 1667–1693.
- Oliver, J. E. and W. M. Rahn (2016): 'Rise of the Trumpenvolk: Populism in the 2016 Election'. In: *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 667(1), 189–206.
- Rooduijn, M. (2014): 'The Nucleus of Populism: In Search of the Lowest Common Denominator'. *Government and Opposition*, 49(4), 573–599.
- Saurette, P. and S. Gunster (2011): 'Ears Wide Shut: Epistemological Populism, Argutainment and Canadian Conservative Talk Radio'. In: *Canadian Journal of Political Science/Revue canadienne de science politique*, 44(1), 195–218.
- Shils, E. (1996): *The Torment of Secrecy: The Background and Consequences of American Security Policies*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee.
- Katsambekis, G. and Stavrakakis, Y. (2020): 'Populism and the Pandemic: A Collaborative Report'. In: *Populismus Interventions*, 7.
- Taggart, P. (2004): 'Populism and Representative Politics in Contemporary Europe'. In: *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 9(3), 269–288.
- Turner, S. (2001): 'What Is the Problem with Experts?'. In: *Social Studies of Science*, 31(1), 123–149.
- Uscinski, J. E. and J. M. Parent (2014): *American Conspiracy Theories*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Uscinski, J. E., C. Klofstad and M. D. Atkinson (2016): 'What Drives Conspiratorial Beliefs? The Role of Informational Cues and Predispositions'. In: *Political Research Quarterly*, 69(1), 57–71.
- van Prooijen, J. W. (2018): 'Populism as Political Mentality Underlying Conspiracy Theories'. In: B. D. Rutjens and M. D. Brandt (eds.): *Belief Systems and the Perception of Reality*, London: Routledge, 79–96.
- van Prooijen, J. W., A. P. Krouwel and T. V. Pollet (2015): 'Political Extremism Predicts Belief in Conspiracy Theories'. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 6(5), 570–578.
- van Zoonen, L. (2012): 'I-Pistemology: Changing Truth Claims in Popular and Political Culture'. In: *European Journal of Communication*, 27(1), 56–67.
- Vieten, U. M. (2020): 'The "New Normal" and "Pandemic Populism": The COVID-19 Crisis and Anti-Hygienic Mobilisation of the Far-Right'. In: *Social Sciences*, 9(9), 165.
- Wondreys, J. and C. Mudde (2020): 'Victims of the Pandemic? European Far-Right Parties and COVID-19'. In: *Nationalities Papers*, 1–18.
- Ylä-Anttila, T. (2018): 'Populist Knowledge: "Post-Truth" Repertoires of Contesting Epistemic Authorities'. In: *European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology*, 5(4), 356–388.
- Žuk, P. and P. Žuk (2020): 'Right-Wing Populism in Poland and Anti-Vaccine Myths on YouTube: Political and Cultural Threats to Public Health'. In: *Global Public Health*, 15(6), 790–804.