

This is a pre-copyedited and author-produced version of the following article accepted for publication, after peer review:

---

Bernhard, Laurent, and Regula Hänggli (2018). Who holds populist attitudes? Evidence from Switzerland. *Swiss Political Science Review*, 24(4), 510-524.

---

Published version:

<https://doi.org/10.1111/spsr.12326>

SERVAL Repository:

[https://serval.unil.ch/en/notice/serval:BIB\\_CC68304D68A8](https://serval.unil.ch/en/notice/serval:BIB_CC68304D68A8)

[The article begins on the next page]

# Who Holds Populist Attitudes? Evidence from Switzerland

LAURENT BERNHARD\* AND REGULA HÄNGGLI\*\*

\*FORS, University of Lausanne (Switzerland)

\*\*Department of Communication and Media Research, University of Fribourg (Switzerland)

## Abstract

*So far, populism has mainly been studied by looking at the political supply side. This contribution focuses on the political demand side by explaining citizens' levels of support for populist attitudes. We formulate two competing hypotheses. The first hypothesis expects populist attitudes to be most pervasive on the ideological extremes, while the second one posits that individuals are more likely to hold these attitudes the more to the right of the political spectrum they position themselves. Our empirical analysis of a representative survey of the Swiss Electoral Study (SELECTS) supports the second hypothesis. We argue that this right-sided orientation among Swiss citizens can be attributed to context characteristics that are currently available in the northern part of Western Europe (i.e. the absence of a long-lasting crisis, the high saliency of identity politics, and a strong populist mobilization by the radical right).*

**Keywords:** populism, voter attitudes, radical right, radical left, Switzerland

## **1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

Populist parties and candidates have recently experienced an impressive rise in many parts of the world. The victory of Donald Trump in the 2016 US presidential election probably best symbolizes the tremendous success of populism among voters nowadays. In Europe, populists of various stripes have entered the political landscape and consolidated their positions all over the continent in recent decades. In countries such as Austria, Denmark, Finland, Greece, Italy, Norway, and Switzerland, populist parties have even managed to come to power. A well-documented case of an all-populist government is the coalition in Greece between Syriza from the left and the Independent Greeks from the right (see Andreadis and Stavrakakis 2017).

When reviewing the abundant empirical literature on the populist phenomenon, it is striking that scholars have looked predominantly at the political supply side so far. In contrast to this focus on political elites, this paper's contribution intends to shed light on the political demand side by addressing the populist attitudes of citizens. We believe it is important to examine the micro level. Given that populism is widely considered a major challenge to democracies (Kübler and Kriesi 2017), it seems crucial to draw the scholarly attention to individual attitudes. Indeed, it is the citizens who ultimately bring about electoral outcomes.

The state of the art highlights the usefulness of examining populist attitudes (Akkerman et al 2014; Elchardus and Spruyt 2016; Hawkins et al. 2012), which have been shown to be widespread among the citizenry across a wide range of countries. Items on populist attitudes have also been found to form consistent and distinctive scales. Moreover, several empirical studies have established that populist attitudes are a strong predictor of vote choice in favor of populist parties in established democracies (van Hauwaert and van Kessel 2018). However, scholars still lack deep knowledge about the determinants of populist attitudes.

---

<sup>1</sup> The authors would like to thank the three anonymous reviewers for their compelling comments as well as the participants of the 2017 SELECTS Workshop for their helpful feedback on an earlier version of this article, especially Anke Tresch, Nathalie Giger, Georg Lutz, Guillaume Zumofen, Pascal Sciarini, and Patrick Emmenegger.

This article thus proposes to take a step backwards by considering the determinants of populist attitudes. To that end, our study attempts, for the first time, to explain levels of populist attitudes in Switzerland. Based on a growing number of scholarly contributions that deal with the political demand side, we first aim to measure populist attitudes directly. Subsequently, we will focus our attention on explaining variations in these attitudes. Relying on a minimalist definition of populism as a thin-centered ideology, we show that the populist items of the Swiss Electoral Study (SELECTS) survey form a coherent set of populist attitudes. Regarding the explanation of populist attitudes, we focus on ideology by looking at the left-right orientations of citizens. We formulate two competing hypotheses. The first hypothesis expects populist attitudes to be most pervasive on the ideological extremes. The extremity hypothesis is based on a growing number of elite-level studies, according to which populism is increasingly available on both the radical right and the radical left in Western Europe.

The second hypothesis posits that individuals are more likely to hold populist attitudes the more to the right they position themselves. As has been the case for most countries in the northern part of Western Europe, Switzerland has been characterized by a rather benign economic situation since the eruption of the Great Recession in fall 2008. As opposed to crisis-ridden countries in Southern Europe, where some populist parties from the left have managed to gain momentum by focusing on socio-economic difficulties, identity politics are particularly salient in these more affluent contexts as a consequence of comparatively low levels of economic hardship. In the case of Switzerland, we thus argue that citizens' populist attitudes are likely to be influenced by the radical right.

The empirical analysis supports the second hypothesis, since we find that populist attitudes clearly lean towards the right in Switzerland. Besides that, we show that support for populism positively depends on age, political interest, and unemployed status and negatively correlates to education levels, and household income. Finally, women as well as residents of the French-

speaking part of Switzerland are shown to hold less pronounced populist attitudes than men and German-speakers.

This article is organized as follows. In Section 2 we present our understanding of populism, which is based on a minimalist definition as a thin-centered ideology. Section 3 deals with the demand side of populism, as we focus on the notion of populist attitudes and the latest research in this respect. In Section 4 we develop two competing hypotheses, the extremity hypothesis on the one hand, and the radical right hypothesis on the other. Section 5 outlines the major features of our research design, while Section 6 is devoted to our empirical results, which we then review in Section 7.

## **2. Defining Populism**

Due to its slipperiness and chameleonic nature (Taggart 2000), populism has long been regarded as a contested concept. Despite the fact that scholars still debate forcefully as to whether populism should be conceived of as an ideology, a political strategy, a discourse, or a communicational style, most scholars nowadays agree on its main features. In the following, we shall adopt the influential minimalist definition proposed by Mudde (2004: 543).

Accordingly, populism refers to an ideology that ‘considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups – ‘the pure people’ versus the ‘corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (i.e. the general will) of the people’. Based on this definition, Stanley (2008: 102) has identified the following four distinct but interrelated key elements of populism: 1) the existence of two homogeneous units of analysis: ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’, 2) the positive valorization of ‘the people’ and denigration of ‘the elite’, 3) the antagonistic relationship between the people and the elite, and 4) the idea of popular sovereignty.

Defined as a thin-centered ideology, populism has the potential to take various forms. Indeed, Mény and Surel (2002: 6) have compared populism to an empty shell that can be filled and

made meaningful by whatever is poured into it. To become a ‘thick’ ideology, populism as a thin-centered ideology needs to be complemented by substantive ideologies. In particular, populist meanings may vary depending on the understanding given to ‘the people’, i.e. to the idealized conception of the community (the ‘heartland’) to which it applies.

Broadly speaking, the academic literature distinguishes between *left and right* variants of populism. According to Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2013), the former tends to be inclusionary in nature, while the latter follows an exclusionary logic. This disparity can be traced back to varying notions of ‘the people’. Populists from the left typically conceive of the people in socio-economic terms. Given the prevalence of egalitarian ideals, left populism is considered to be primarily expressed on economic issues by emphasizing a moral opposition between the virtuous working classes on the one hand and the oppressing representatives of capital on the other (March 2007). The latter are typically held responsible for economic and political inequalities.

By contrast, populists from the right usually define the people in ethnic terms. As is observed by Rydgren (2013: 2), such parties share an emphasis on ethno-nationalism rooted in myths about the distant past. Their program is thus directed towards a supposed strengthening of the nation by making it more ethnically homogeneous. Scholars have established that the radical right has been the driving force of a cultural conflict dimension that opposes universalistic and traditionalist-communitarian values in Western Europe (Bornschieer 2015; Kriesi et al. 2008). This party family primarily opposes cosmopolitan conceptions of society, which are considered to undermine national sovereignty and local identities.

### **3. Demand Side Populism**

The surge of populism has triggered numerous scholarly contributions over the course of the last thirty years. So far, most studies have focused on the political supply side. The bulk of this work deals with aspects of the mobilization, leadership, and communication styles of elite

actors (Roberts 2015). Research on populism has only recently taken a slight turn towards the political demand side. Several researchers have developed the notion of *individual populist attitudes* (Akkerman et al. 2014; Hawkins et al. 2012; Stanley 2011). In line with some pioneering work (Axelrod 1967; Farrel and Laughlin 1976),<sup>2</sup> these authors contend that levels of support for populist views should be measured directly at the micro level. Akkerman et al. (2014) and Hawkins et al. (2012) have indeed demonstrated that populist attitudes form a scale distinctive from both pluralist and elitist attitudes.

As far as empirical micro-level analyses are concerned, populist attitudes have been used as independent or dependent variables. With the former, several scholars have dealt with the predictive power of populist attitudes regarding the vote choice for populist parties. Stanley's (2011) analysis of a Slovakian post-election survey about the 2010 national parliamentary election showed that the degree of populist attitudes was neither systematically associated with voting behavior nor with voting preferences. Things appear to be different in Western Europe, however. Akkerman et al. (2014) concluded that voters in the Netherlands with higher levels of populist attitudes are more likely to prefer the main populist parties (i.e. the Party for Freedom, and the Socialist Party). Ford et al. (2012) reported a similar finding for the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) regarding the 2009 European Parliament elections. This pattern has been confirmed recently by a comparative study that looked at nine European countries (van Hauwaert and van Kessel 2018).

The second category of studies has addressed the more fundamental question of who holds populist attitudes in the realm of politics. In the context of the United States, Hawkins et al. (2012) found that support for populism is related to lower education levels, third party identification, and ideological radicalism. However, these attitudes turned out to be neither a function of age nor gender. Based on a survey of the population of Flanders, Elchardus and

---

<sup>2</sup> Due to their context-specific and therefore somewhat outdated understandings of populism, we decided not to discuss these two early contributions here.

Spruyt (2016) also showed that support for populism negatively correlates to levels of education. In addition, this empirical analysis reveals that dissatisfaction with personal life or feelings of anomie foster populist attitudes. In a related study, Spruyt et al. (2016) concluded that very different feelings of economic, cultural, and political vulnerability come together when it comes to holding populist views. In addition, Rico et al. (2017) focus on the role played by emotions. The main finding that emerged from a three-wave panel survey of Spanish citizens is that anger over the economic crisis is positively related to support for populism. Finally, the empirical analysis by Tsatsanis et al. (2017) of Greek citizens in the framework of the national elections of January 2015 showed in particular that populist attitudes are a) most prevalent among the left, b) negatively related to household income, and c) driven by Euroscepticism and anti-immigrant attitudes.

Despite these illuminating studies, it is still the case that very little is known about the distribution of populist attitudes within the citizenry (Elchardus and Spruyt 2016: 111). This article precisely aims to contribute to filling this void in the populist demand side literature. As will be outlined in the next section, we propose to focus on ideological determinants by considering the left-right orientation.

#### **4. Who Holds Populist Attitudes?**

In the following, we will develop two competing hypotheses. First, we will argue that populist attitudes are more pervasive among individuals who place themselves on the ideological extremes. Due to an obvious lack of micro-level explanations in the academic literature, we rely on elite-based accounts, which suggest that populism is increasingly available on both the radical left and the radical right in Western Europe. Thereafter, we will consider the Swiss context, which represents a country in the northern part of the continent. We argue that due to a comparatively benign macroeconomic situation, identity politics are of major importance there. This favors successful populist mobilization by the radical right. Hence, our second



hypothesis posits that support for populist attitudes increases the more to the right individuals position themselves.

### ***The Extremity Hypothesis***

In the Western European context, populism has been primarily associated with the radical right over the past few decades. In addition to nativism and authoritarianism, many scholars have considered populism to be a major characteristic of this party family (Betz 1993; Mudde 2007; Rooduijn 2015; Rydgren 2013; Taggart 2000). The contemporary radical right tends to embrace populism by accusing elites of betraying the interests of the indigenous people due to their preference for internationalism over the nation. It is well established that the radical right has met electoral success in many countries by repeatedly tapping into people's resentments against the establishment on the cultural dimension of the two-dimensional policy space. From a theoretical point of view, however, populism cannot be regarded as a distinctive feature of the radical right. Other party families may similarly rely on a populist worldview. Van Kessel (2015) has drawn attention to the fact that populism is not restricted to the radical right in Europe. More specifically, a growing number of contributions reveal that many parties from the *radical left* also tend to rely strongly on populism. Taken together, comparative analyses of party manifestos (Pauwels 2014; Rooduijn and Pauwels 2011; Rooduijn et al. 2014) suggest that parties such as the Dutch SP, the French Communist Party, and The Left in Germany run on populist platforms. In the case of the United Kingdom, March (2017) showed that radical parties make use of a higher degree of populism than mainstream parties on both sides of the left-right divide. Rooduijn and Akkerman (2017) arrived at the same conclusion by means of a content analysis of the election manifestos of five countries (France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom) from 1989 to 2008. Similarly, based on the holistic grading of party manifestos and candidate speeches in Western Europe, Castanho Silva (2017) found that populism is associated with extremism

in general, and not necessarily with either left or right politics. In a recent contribution on eleven national elections across Western Europe, Bernhard and Kriesi (forthcoming) have similarly shown that parties from both the radical right and the radical left make more frequent use of populist appeals than mainstream parties.

The scholarly literature on left populism in Western Europe is still in its infancy, and therefore the reasons for its rise are underdeveloped. Nevertheless, the end of the Cold War may have opened up the space for a new type of left populism (March (2007: 67). Many communist parties have abandoned their doctrinaire and conservative forms of organized socialism. At the same time, Social Democrats have moved to the center, thereby increasing the perception that the mainstream left is an integral part of the establishment. Another major event that might potentially have contributed to the rise of left populism was the eruption of the Great Recession in 2008. The economic crisis and its disastrous consequences may have fostered an affinity between socialism and populism (March 2011: 121). This line of reasoning applies especially to the radical left whose anti-capitalistic ideas have gained currency after the emergence of the Great Recession (March and Keith 2016).

Given that populism seems primarily to be available on both the radical left and the radical right, our first hypothesis reads as follows:

*H1: Individuals on the ideological extremes are more likely to hold populist attitudes than more moderate individuals.*

### ***The Radical Right Hypothesis***

Yet it is conceivable that, instead of being located at the extremes, populist attitudes systematically lean towards one end of the ideological spectrum. This is precisely the picture that emerged from the only two studies so far to account for ideological orientation as a determinant of populist attitudes. Rico et al (2017) show that Spanish citizens hold higher

levels of populist attitudes the more to the left their self-reported positioning. Tsatsanis et al. (2017) reported a similar finding in the case of Greece.

In the following, we argue that the ideological direction in terms of populist attitudes follows a context-dependent logic. The left-sided pattern that is visible in Spain and Greece may be attributable to the presence of (right-wing) dictatorships until the mid-1970s, the severity of the economic crisis, and a successful populist mobilization by the radical left as a direct consequence of the resulting socio-economic dissatisfaction. By contrast, populist attitudes may lean towards the right in the northern part of Western Europe. The countries of this region are not only more affluent, but have also been characterized by a rather benign economic development since the eruption of the Great Recession in fall 2008. Hence, identity politics may be particularly salient there. Indeed, several studies have suggested that, as a consequence of comparatively low levels of economic hardship, globalization-related conflicts primarily fought out on the cultural front in the northern part of Europe (e.g. Bechtel et al. 2014; Hainmueller and Hiscox 2007; Kriesi et al. 2012).

This also applies to Switzerland, which lies at the heart of this study. The country can be regarded as a paradigmatic case of the populist success of the radical right (Albertazzi 2008). This is primarily attributable to the Swiss People's Party (SVP), which is currently the radical right party with the largest vote share in Western Europe. Its rise has probably been the most striking feature of the Swiss party system since World War II (Kriesi et al. 2005; Mazzoleni 2008). Capitalizing on widespread popular xenophobia, and negative attitudes towards the European integration process, the party has been able to tap into people's resentment on various occasions by attacking the government over immigration and European integration. On these issues, three popular initiatives of the radical right have been accepted by Swiss citizens in referenda in recent years - a ban on minarets in 2009, the mandatory deportation of foreign criminals in 2010, and a proposal 'against mass immigration' imposing immigration quotas in 2014. Most importantly in terms of populist attitudes, there have been rather

intensive public debates about their implementation. In particular, the radical right has criticized the federal authorities for flouting the popular will. These accusations relate to the fact that some constitutional amendments adopted by citizens have not been or have only partially been translated into law so far, notably due to international constraints (such as bilateral agreements with the European Union and international law).<sup>3</sup> This public debate illustrates the tensions between popular sovereignty and the rule of law, a tension that is currently highly salient in the semi-direct democratic system of Switzerland, and which may have fostered populist attitudes among supporters of the radical right in recent years.

In contrast to the radical right, left populism proves to be almost absent in present-day Switzerland. The main parties from the left (i.e. the Social Democrats and the Greens) have been shown to refrain from making use of a coherent populist communication in recent years (Bernhard 2017). The radical left, from which populist mobilizations may potentially emanate, is very weak there.<sup>4</sup> Hence, instances of left populism occur rather episodically in the recent past, one example being the campaign rhetoric of the Young Socialists regarding a direct-democratic vote on executive pay that took place in fall 2013 (Luginbühl 2014).

Based on these considerations, we are now equipped to articulate our second hypothesis:

*H2: Individuals are more likely to hold populist attitudes the more to the right they position themselves.*

## **5. Research Design**

This empirical analysis draws on data from a combined online panel/rolling cross-section survey of the Swiss Electoral Study (SELECTS) in the context of the 2015 Swiss federal elections. The data we use here stem from the first or the second waves, both of which took

---

<sup>3</sup> The most prominent examples include the initiative against mass immigration, and on deportations of foreign criminals. With respect to the latter, the Swiss People's Party (SVP) launched a so-called 'enforcement initiative', which was defeated by Swiss citizens in 2016.

<sup>4</sup> According to Chiochetti (2017: 66), the vote share of the parties from the Swiss radical left reached 1.2% in 2015, which is far below the West European average (9.6%).

place several months in advance of the vote (SELECTS 2016). The number of respondents amounts to 7295. The sample can be considered representative of the Swiss citizenry (see Lutz 2016 for more details).

We believe the focus on Switzerland presents three main advantages. First, the country offers the opportunity to study populist attitudes in a political context that is characterized by a particularly strong presence of the populist radical right. The cumulative vote share of this party family reaches slightly more than 30%.<sup>5</sup> Second, given that populist discourses are topical in contemporary Switzerland as a result of public debates that are often related to direct-democratic votes, citizens can be expected to have formed coherent preferences on populist attitudes. Thus, the risk of capturing statistical artifacts in the framework of opinion surveys appears to be comparatively low in the Swiss context. Third, we would like to put forward a pragmatic consideration. To our knowledge, the Swiss Electoral Study is one of the few national election surveys to have included a series of question on populist attitudes.

We now present the indicators of our empirical analysis.<sup>6</sup> The dependent variable refers to the respondents' levels of populist attitudes. Based on a minimal definition of populism as a thin-centered ideology, we selected four items that are available from the second wave of the panel/rolling cross-section survey of SELECTS. The translated wordings of POP1 to POP4 are visible in Table 1. These four survey questions were designed to tap into the core of populism, i.e. the antagonistic relationship between the people and the elites. In addition, the first and last items take into account demands for populist sovereignty. Survey participants were asked to indicate their levels of agreement with these statements on a five-point Likert scale we coded from '0' (strongly disagree) to '4' (strongly agree).

---

<sup>5</sup> In addition to the Swiss People's Party (29.4%), two regional parties need to be accounted for (Bernhard 2017). The Ticino League (Lega) accounted for 1.0% of the vote and the Geneva Citizens' Movement (MCG) for 0.3% of the vote.

<sup>6</sup> The detailed construction of the variables used is shown in the online appendix of this article.

Following the approach adopted by several studies in this field (Bernhard et al. 2015; Bernhard 2017; Stavrakakis et al. 2017; Tstatsanis et al. 2017), we rely on Mokken scale analysis in order to address the dimensionality of the selected indicators. It turns out that the four populist items form a strong hierarchical scale. As is reported in Table 1, Loevinger's H coefficient attains 0.56. This means that levels of support towards the four items occur more together than randomly. POP3 turns out to be the item on which respondents agreed most (M=2.44), followed by POP1 (M=2.42), POP2 (M=2.32), and POP4 (M=2.15). As a consequence of the Mokken scale analysis, we decided to build an additive index containing the answers to the four survey questions. The indicator for the dependent variable we employ in this study thus ranges from 0 (minimum) to 16 (maximum).<sup>7</sup>

Let us now turn to the independent variable. For the ideological orientation, we rely on a single indicator. In line with Rico et al. (2017) and Tsatsanis et al. (2017), we use the respondents' positioning on the left-right axis. Survey participants were asked to place themselves on an eleven-point scale that ranges from 0 ('completely left') to 10 ('completely right').

Based on previous work regarding the explanation of populist attitudes, we control for the influence of a series of variables. We decided to account for gender by distinguishing between women (1) and men (2). In addition, we take into consideration formal education. To that end, we rely on a question about the highest completed education level. This indicator is measured on a 12-level classification that ranges from 1 (no education) to 12 (university degree). We also include the respondents' age (in years) as well as household income (in Swiss francs), employment status (dichotomous variable), and levels of political interest by using a scale that ranges from 1 to 4. Finally, we control for a main cultural characteristic of Switzerland by

---

<sup>7</sup> We need to mention that the results of our study remain unchanged when relying on factor analyses. With respect to the populist attitude scale, we also checked for the proportional odds assumption.

including an item on the respondents' affiliation to language regions. We distinguish between German-, French-, and Italian-speaking parts, with the former serving as reference category.<sup>8</sup>

## 6. Results

### *Descriptive Analysis*

The average level of the populist attitudes index reaches 9.02. The standard deviation of 3.61 indicates that there is a great deal of variation. To get a first impression of the empirical validity regarding the two competing hypotheses, we rely on descriptive analyses. Figure 1 depicts the arithmetic means for each category of the eleven-point left-right scale. The basic pattern clearly points to a positive relationship between right positioning and populist attitudes, thus supporting the second hypothesis. By contrast, we observe lower levels of populist attitudes on the far left. In the absence of a U-shaped curve, the first hypothesis thus has to be rejected.

The highest levels of populist attitudes are to be found on the right end of the ideological spectrum. Respondents who self-report to be 'completely right' (i.e. answer '10') exhibit the maximum value (M=11.4), followed by those who opted for the categories '9' (M=10.3) and '8' (M=9.6). Levels of populist attitudes continuously decrease when moving further to the left. Yet there are two exceptions to this general trend. Individuals who chose the middle category '5' (M=9.4) as well as those who considered themselves to be completely on the left (M=8.9) display higher average scores than expected. It thus appears that there is an increased left populist potential only as far as the extreme edge of the ideological spectrum is concerned. As to the middle category, a possible explanation relates to its rather heterogeneous composition. In fact, this category attracted by far the most respondents

---

<sup>8</sup> Due to the low number of respondents from the Romansh-speaking community (N=31), we decided to assign these individuals to the German-speaking language region.

(N=1101), many of whom cannot necessarily be expected to hold genuinely moderate political views.

### *Multivariate Analysis*

We now turn to the multivariate analysis. Table 2 presents the results of two ordered probit regression estimations. The first model includes the left-right scale as well as the control variables. In line with the impression gained from the descriptive analysis, populist attitudes are found to lean towards the right. There is strong evidence for a positive association between the self-reported placement on the left-right scale and the support for populist attitudes. This statistical relationship proves to be significant at the 0.1% error level. Hence, our empirical analysis supports the second hypothesis.

With respect to the control variables, there are a number of significant results. Interestingly enough, it turns out that men are much more likely than women to hold populist attitudes. Similar findings have been reported by Elachardus and Spruyt (2016) in the case of Flanders, while the remaining studies on the determinants of populist attitudes did not detect any systematic gender gaps. In order to dig deeper into this phenomenon, we multiplied the gender indicator with the left-right scale in Model II. This interaction term proves to be significantly positive, thus indicating that men are more likely than women to support populist attitudes the more to the right they position themselves. Hence, the gender gap appears to be ideologically driven in the context of Switzerland.

In addition, populist attitudes are found to negatively correlate to the respondents' formal degree of education. These results are consistent throughout the two models at the 0.1% error level and in line with some previous studies (Rico et al. 2017; Spruyt 2016). In addition, age seems to positively correlate to populist attitudes, thus confirming empirical analyses conducted in Southern European countries (Rico et al. 2017; Tsatsanis et al. 2017). The negative coefficients of the squared term we report in Table 2 point to a curvilinear



relationship. A reviewer compellingly maintained that one has to be cautious about these two significant effects, given that age seems to be more associated with right-wing indicators such as ethnic nationalism and xenophobia. Hence, the association between age and populist attitudes may be limited to right populism only.

Moreover, levels of political interest are found to be positively correlated with the dependent variable. Hence, motivation seems to be instrumental when it comes to developing populist attitudes. Remarkably, Spruyt et al. (2016) showed the opposite pattern in Flanders. In line with the latest research (Hawkins et al. 2012; Rico et al. 2017; Tsatsanis 2017), there is also evidence that people with difficult life situations are more likely to hold populist views.

Indeed, we report statistically significant negative correlation for household income levels and positive correlation for unemployed persons. Finally, we find that inhabitants of the French-speaking parts of Switzerland are less prone to support populist attitudes than their compatriots from the German language region, who form the reference category here. Italian speakers, for their parts, do not distinguish themselves from the German-speakers according to the results of the two regression models we present in Table 2.

## **7. Conclusion**

Numerous political parties that are commonly labeled as populist have succeeded in durably establishing themselves as powerful players in various democracies. When reviewing the empirical literature on populism, it is striking that scholars have focused on the political supply side, as their accounts have mainly dealt with political elites. Building on a growing number of micro-level contributions, this empirical analysis has attempted to shed light on the political demand side by looking for the first time at the Swiss context.

The purpose of this paper was twofold. First, we have measured populism attitudes at the individual level. We have shown that the four items under investigation consistently form a single scale. Second, we have examined the determinants of populist attitudes. To that end,

we have formulated two competing hypotheses. The first hypothesis expected populist attitudes to be most pervasive on the ideological extremes, while the second one posited that individuals are more likely to hold these attitudes the more to the right they position themselves. This empirical analysis supports the second hypothesis. Hence, populist attitudes clearly lean towards the right in Switzerland.

This finding stands in contrast to survey studies conducted in Southern Europe (Rico et al. 2017; Tsatsanis et al. 2017). In Spain and Greece, populist attitudes have been found to be associated with the left. In the theoretical part of this article we have argued that this divergence is attributable to context factors. Apart from past dictatorships, the devastating Great Recession, which increased the salience of socio-economic issues and favored mobilizations by parties from the radical left, may explain the leftist orientation of populist attitudes in these countries. By contrast, Switzerland stands as a representative of the northern part of Europe. In the absence of a major economic crisis, identity politics is much more topical there, thus playing into the hands of the radical right. According to this line of reasoning, we anticipate that similar results would emerge from studies dealing with countries such as Germany, Austria and the United Kingdom, as well as the Benelux region and Scandinavia.

Despite the right-sided distribution of populist attitudes among the Swiss citizenry, our descriptive analysis suggests that there is some potential for populism on the left end of the ideological spectrum. This begs the question of whether political actors from the radical left, such as Communists, Trotskyists, and Alternatives would be able to benefit in electoral terms from engaging in a coherent populist discourse. Yet we need to consider that this party family has traditionally faced a rather hostile environment in Switzerland, notably due to a thriving economy, low levels of unemployment, and a high degree of satisfaction with democracy expressed by citizens (Mannewitz 2012: 294).

Our empirical analysis has also shown that several additional factors matter when it comes to explaining populist attitudes. Taken together, the results of the control variables strongly resemble the voter profile of the radical right in general and the Swiss People's Party in particular (Manatschal and Rapp 2015), since populist attitudes are most pervasively held by lower-educated men in the German-speaking region of Switzerland. In our view, a particularly interesting finding concerns the lower propensity to hold populist attitudes displayed by women. We would like to encourage scholars to take a closer look at populism-related gender gaps. Indeed, Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2015) have maintained that this topic has been largely neglected in the academic literature so far. To the extent that gender gaps in terms of populist attitudes are present in other country contexts, it appears crucial to establish whether such discrepancies can be explained by socio-economic factors (e.g. types of employment), ideological predispositions, or differences in political socialization (de Lange and Mügge 2015; Spierings and Zaslove 2017).

## References

- Akkerman, A., C. Mudde and A. Zaslove (2014). How Populist Are the People? Measuring Populist Attitudes in Voters. *Comparative Political Studies* 47(9): 1324-1353.
- Albertazzi, D. (2008). Switzerland: Yet another Populist Paradise. In D. Albertazzi and D. McDonnell (eds.), *Twenty-First Century Populism*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan (100-118).
- Andreadis, I. and Y. Stavrakakis (2017). European Populist Parties in Government: How Well Are Voters Represented? Evidence from Greece. *Swiss Political Science Review* 23(4): 485-508.
- Axelrod, R. (1967). The Structure of Public Opinion on Policy Issues. *Public Opinion Quarterly* 31(1): 51-60.
- Bechtel, M. M., J. Hainmüller and Y. Margalit (2014). Preferences for International Redistribution: The Divide over the Eurozone Bailouts. *American Journal of Political Science* 58(4): 835-856.
- Bernhard, L. (2017). Three Faces of Populism in Current Switzerland: Comparing the Populist Communication of the Swiss People's Party, the Ticino League, and the Geneva Citizens' Movement. *Swiss Political Science Review* 23(4): 509-525.
- Bernhard, L. and H. Kriesi (forthcoming). Populism in Election Times: A Comparative Analysis of Eleven Countries in Western Europe. *West European Politics*.
- Bernhard, L., H. Kriesi and E. Weber (2015). The Populist Discourse of the Swiss People's Party. In Hanspeter Kriesi and Takis S. Pappas (eds.), *European Populism in the Shadow of the Great Recession*. Colchester: ECPR Press (123-137).
- Betz, H.-G. (1993). The New Politics of Resentment: Radical Right-Wing populist Parties in Western Europe. *Comparative Politics* 25(4): 413-427.
- Bornschieer, S. (2015). The New Cultural Conflict, Polarization, and Representation in the Swiss Party System, 1975-2011. *Swiss Political Science Review* 21(4) 680-701.
- Castanho Silva, B. (2017). *Contemporary Populism: Actors, Causes and Consequences across 28 Democracies*. PhD thesis, Central European University.
- Chiocchetti, P. (2017). *The Radical Left Party Family in Western Europe, 1989-2015*. London: Routledge.
- de Lange, S. L. and L. M. Mügge (2015). Gender and Right-Wing Populism in the Low Countries: Ideological Variations across Parties and Time. *Patterns of Prejudice* 49(1-2): 61-80.

Elchardus, M. and B. Spruyt (2016). Populism, Persistent Republicanism and Declinism: An Empirical Analysis of Populism as a Thin Ideology. *Government and Opposition* 51(1): 111-133.

Farrell, J.J. and P.R. Laughlin (1976). A Scale to Measure Populist Attitudes. *The Journal of Psychology* 94(1): 33-38.

Ford, R., M. J. Goodwin and David Cutts (2012). Strategic Eurosceptics and Polite Xenophobes: Support for the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) in the 2009 European Parliament Elections. *European Journal of Political Research* 51(2): 204-234.

Hainmueller, J. and M. J. Hiscox (2007). Explaining Attitudes toward Immigration in Europe. *International Organization* 61(2): 399-442.

Hawkins, K. A., S. Riding and C. Mudde (2012). Measuring Populist Attitudes. *Political Concepts Committee on Concepts and Methods Working Paper Series* 55: 1-35.

Kriesi, H., E. Grande, R. Lachat, M. Dolezal, S. Bornschier and T. Frei (2008). *West European Politics in the Age of Globalization*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kriesi, H., R. Lachat, P. Selb, S. Bornschier and M. Helbling (2005). *Der Aufstieg der SVP: Acht Kantone im Vergleich*. Zürich: Verlag Neue Zürcher Zeitung.

Kübler, D. and H. Kriesi (2017). How Globalization and Mediatisation Challenge our Democracies. *Swiss Political Science Review* 23(3): 231-245.

Luginbühl, M. (2014). Politische Positionierung im crossmedialen Angebot: Kommunikation der Schweizer SVP und der JUSO Schweiz über "Neue Medien". In Franz Januschek and Martin Reisingl (Hrsg.), *Populismus in der digitalen Mediendemokratie*. Duisburg: Universitätsverlag Rhein-Ruhr (101-132).

Lutz, G. (2016). *Eidgenössische Wahlen 2015 : Wahlteilnahme und Wahlentscheid*. Lausanne: FORS.

Manatschal, A. and C. Rapp (2015). Welche Schweizer wählen die SVP und warum? In Markus Freitag and Adrian Vatter (Hrsg.), *Wahlen und Wählerschaft in der Schweiz*. Zürich: NZZ Verlag (187-215=).

Mannewitz, T. (2012). *Linksextremistische Parteien in Europa nach 1990: Ursachen für Wahlerfolge und -misserfolge*. Baden-Baden: Nomos.

March, L. (2007). From Vanguard of the Proletariat to Vox Populi: Left-Populism as a 'Shadow' of Contemporary Socialism. *SAIS Review of International Affairs* 27(1): 63-77.

March, L. (2011). *Radical Left Parties in Europe*. Abingdon: Routledge.

March, L. (2017). Left and Right Populism Compared: The British Case. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 19(2): 282-303.

March, L and D. Keith (2016). *Europe's Radical Left : From Marginality to the Mainstream?* London: Rowman & Littlefield International.

Mazzoleni, O. (2008). *Nationalisme et populisme en Suisse: La radicalisation de la "nouvelle" UDC*. Lausanne : Presses polytechniques et universitaires romandes (2<sup>nd</sup> edition).

Mény, Y. and Y. Surel (2002). *Democracies and the Populist Challenge*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Mudde, C. (2004). The Populist Zeitgeist. *Government and Opposition* 39(4): 542-563.

Mudde, C. (2007). *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Mudde, C. and C. Rovira Kaltwasser (2013). *Populism in Europe and the Americas: Threat or Corrective for Democracy?* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Mudde, C. and C. Rovira Kaltwasser (2015). Vox Populi or Vox Masculini? Populism and Gender in Northern Europe and South America. *Patterns of Prejudice* 49(1-2): 16-36.

Pauwels, T. (2014). *Populism in Western Europe: Comparing Belgium, Germany and The Netherlands*. London: Routledge.

Rico, G., M. Guinjoan and E. Anduiza (2017). The Emotional Underpinnings of Populism: How Anger and Fear Affect Populist Attitudes. *Swiss Political Science Review* 23(4): 444-461.

Roberts, K. M. (2015). Populism, Political Mobilizations, and Crises of Political Representation. In Carlos de la Torre (ed.), *The Promise and Perils of Populism: Global Perspectives*. Lexington. University Press of Kentucky (140-158).

Rooduijn, M. (2015). The Rise of the Populist Radical Right in Western Europe. *European View* 14: 3-11.

Rooduijn, M. and T. Akkerman (2017). Flank Attacks: Populism and the Left-Right Radicalism in Western Europe. *Party Politics*: 23(3): 193-204.

Rooduijn, M., S. L. de Lange and W. van der Brug (2014). A Populist Zeitgeist? Programmatic Contagion by Populist Parties in Western Europe. *Party Politics* 20(4): 563-575.

Rooduijn, M. and T. Pauwels (2011). Measuring Populism: Comparing Two Methods of Content Analysis. *West European Politics* 34(6): 1272-1283.

Rydgren, J. (2013). *Class Politics and the Radical Right*. London: Routledge.

SELECTS (2016). Panel / Rolling Cross-Section Study 2015 [Dataset]. Distributed by FORS, Lausanne. [www.selects.ch](http://www.selects.ch).

- Spierings, N. and A. Zaslove (2017). Gender, Populist Attitudes, and Voting: Explaining the Gender Gap in Voting for Populist Radical Right and Populist Radical Left Parties. *West European Politics* 40(4): 821-847.
- Spruyt, B., G. Keppens and F. van Droogenbroeck (2016). Who Supports Populism and What Attracts People to it? *Political Research Quarterly* 69(2): 335-346.
- Stanley, Ben (2008). The Thin Ideology of Populism. *Journal of Political Ideologies* 13(1): 95-110.
- Stanley, B. (2011). Populism, Nationalism, or National Populism? An Analysis of Slovak Voting Behaviour at the 2010 Parliamentary Election. *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 44(4): 257-270.
- Stavrakakis, Y., I. Andreadis and G. Katsambekis (2017). A New Populism Index at Work: Identifying Populist Candidates and Parties in the Contemporary Greek Context. *European Politics and Society* 18(4): 446-464.
- Taggart, P. (2000). *Populism*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Tsatsanis, E., I. Andreadis and E. Teperoglou (2017). *Populism From Below: The Ideological and Societal Correlates of Populist Attitudes in Greece*. Paper presented at the 11<sup>th</sup> ECPR General Conference, Oslo.
- van Hauwaert, S.M. and S. van Kessel (2018). Beyond Protest and Discontent: A Cross National Analysis of the Effect of Populist Attitudes and Issue Positions on Populist Party Support. *European Journal of Political Research* 57(1): 68-92.
- van Kessel, S. (2015). *Populist Parties in Europe: Agents of Discontent?* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

## **Biographies**

*Laurent Bernhard* is a postdoctoral researcher at the Swiss Center of Expertise in the Social Sciences (FORS), which is hosted by the University of Lausanne. His main research interests include populism, direct democracy, political communication, and asylum policies. Contact: [laurent.bernhard@fors.unil.ch](mailto:laurent.bernhard@fors.unil.ch).

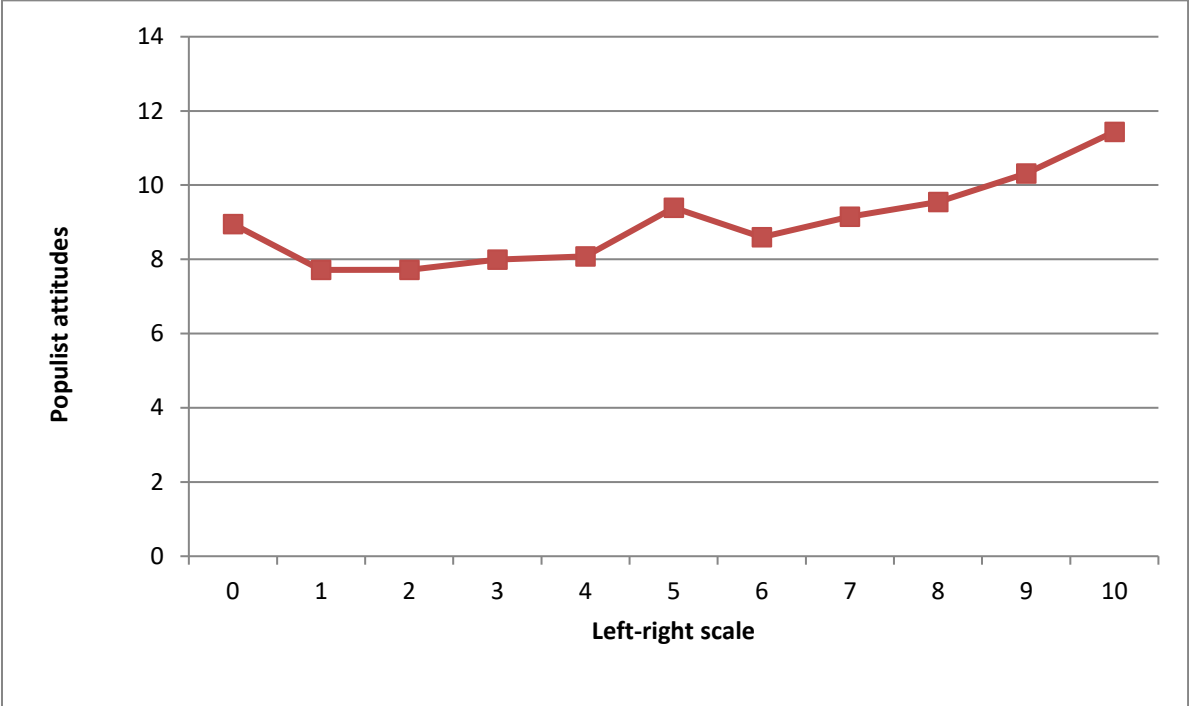
*Regula Hänggli* is full professor at the University of Fribourg (Switzerland). Her work deals with media, and democracy, opinion formation processes, and societal consequences of digitalization. Before she came to Fribourg, she was a professor at Amsterdam School of Communication Research (ASCoR). Contact: [regula.haenggli@unifr.ch](mailto:regula.haenggli@unifr.ch).



**Table 1: Mokken Scale Analysis of the Populist Attitudes Items**

Item	Mean (range: 0-4)	H- coefficient (scalability, max=1)
Switzerland would benefit if the opinion of the people would be more taken into account than the opinion of elites (POP2)	2.32	0.58
Politicians are not really interested in the opinion of ordinary people like me (POP4)	2.15	0.57
Politicians think more about their own rather than the people's interests (POP3)	2.44	0.56
The people, not politicians should make the important political decisions (POP1)	2.42	0.53
Scale		0.56

**Figure 1: Levels of Populist Attitudes According to the Individual Positioning on the Left-Right Scale**



**Table 2: Ordered Probit Models Explaining Levels of Populist Attitudes**

	Model (I)	Model (II)
Left-right	0.065*** (12.49)	0.050*** (6.70)
Men	0.216*** (8.22)	0.074 (1.25)
Men * left-right		0.027** (2.71)
Education	-0.055*** (-13.11)	-0.056*** (-13.23)
Age	0.013** (2.94)	0.013** (2.97)
Age <sup>2</sup>	-0.0001** (-2.71)	-0.0001** (-2.72)
Household income	-0.037*** (-10.19)	-0.037*** (-10.17)
Unemployed	0.257* (2.38)	0.256* (2.37)
Political Interest	0.065*** (3.39)	0.066*** (3.42)
French speakers	-0.076* (-2.46)	-0.076* (-2.46)
Italian speakers	0.093 (1.51)	0.093 (1.50)
N	6375	6375
Pseudo R2	0.021	0.021

Notes:

Z-values in brackets.

\* p<0.05, \*\* p<0.01, \*\*\* p<0.001.

Reference group for language region: German and Romansh speakers.

The models have been checked for multicollinearity using variance inflation factors.