

Populism on the American Left: How Populist is the Sanders Electorate?

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Abstract

Since the 2016 US presidential elections, political commentators and academics have often attributed the rise of both Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump to a general ‘populist’ wave affecting the country. While the two politicians are often juxtaposed with each other in terms of their alleged ‘populism’, there are grounds to question this characterisation for Bernie Sanders on the left. While others have articulated their doubts as to the level of populist attitudes in the Sanders movement, in our study, we move in the direction of analysing the political beliefs of Sanders’ supporters. With the use of ANES survey data, our regression models demonstrate that while a small cohort of populist voters did support Sanders during the 2016 primary, they were much smaller in size than traditional left-wing groups that exhibited negative correlations with populist attitudes. When compared with other presidential candidates running in the 2016 primaries, the results demonstrate that those with populist attitudes were much more inclined to vote for the Republican candidate Donald Trump than the Bernie Sanders. Finally, when we run regressions on the disaggregated components of our index for populist attitudes, the results only demonstrate positive relationships with certain components of the populist worldview, such as anti-elitism, but not for others. Our results, thus, bring significant contributions to the study of populism in the United States by pointing primarily to a populist revolt from the right and less so on the left.

Keywords: populism, left-wing populism, social democracy, American politics, Bernie Sanders, Donald Trump, left-libertarianism values, 2016 election

1. Introduction

As populist parties of all forms have witnessed a rise in support throughout Europe and North America, political observers have been apt to identifying “populists” and “populism” in everyday political life, often conceptually misusing the term or applying it to political actors in attempts to demonize them (Kaltwasser, et al. 2017). In the US, the rise of two seemingly anti-establishment candidates, Donald Trump on the right, and Bernie Sanders on the left, seemed to embody this transformation in electoral politics. In the media, both candidates were commonly described as “populists” (Judis 2016) and riding a “populist wave” (Cassidy 2016), while academics have often juxtaposed the rise of Donald Trump with that of Sanders and his electorate (Dyck, Pearson-Merkowitz, and Coates 2018; Jensen and Bang 2017; Lacatus 2019; Steger 2017).

There are a number of reasons, however, to question this characterisation of Sanders. While Lacatus (2018) has shown that populist rhetoric did play an important role in the 2016 election, her study demonstrates that Sanders was much more likely to focus on the issues that he deemed important such as income inequality, universal healthcare, and climate change, whereas

Trump's rhetoric focused much more on criticizing "Washington elites", both Democrats and Republicans, and the mass media. Moreover, while Cas Mudde notes Sanders' usage of the discursive constructions used by the Occupy Wall Street protesters, the 99% and the 1% (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017), ultimately, he disagrees with Sanders' characterisation as "populist" since Sanders' discourse is "interest-based" and lacks the Manichean dimension common to populist ideology (Mudde 2016). Similarly, Müller (2016, 2020, 23 January) comes to a similar conclusion; while Sanders' rhetoric is clearly anti-elitist in nature, this is a necessary but not a sufficient condition to be labeled a populist, and the lack of an anti-liberal component indicates that he should not be characterized as such.¹ This study contributes to the discussion on Sanders' supposed "populism" by examining populist sentiments in the "wave" that brought him to prominence during the 2016 Democratic primaries. In so doing, we investigate the extent to which the Sanders electorate could be considered populist. Besides clarifying the positions of supporters of a recent left-wing contender for the US presidency, our study's findings contribute to the larger literature seeking to clarify and operationalize definitions of populism.

This study begins with a brief review of left-wing populism within the American political system as well as transformations in American politics that have affected the political left over the last few decades. Following this is a description of the materials and methods used to test for the level of populist beliefs in the Sanders coalition. In brief, survey questions were taken from the 2016 ANES (2016) dataset and used to create variables denoting populist attitudes and other worldviews. Using regression analysis, we test for the level of populist attitudes in Bernie Sanders voters (1) relative to other ideologies of the left; (2) relative to the level of populist attitudes among the other primary contenders in the 2016 presidential primaries. The results show that not only were the other left-wing worldviews more prominent in the Sanders electorate than those with populist attitudes, but also that when compared to other candidates, such as Donald Trump, populist attitudes were significantly lower among those who voted for Sanders in the primaries. This study concludes with several final remarks and directions for future research.

2. Left-Wing Populism in the United States

Left-wing populism has a long history in the United States, dating back to the agrarian mobilisations of the People's Party in the late 19th century and the 1930s when Huey Long dominated Louisiana politics and provided a prominent critique of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal from the left (Hair 1991; White 2006). While the American left would witness the rise and fall of numerous movements and ideological tendencies throughout the 20th century, left-wing populism would eventually mark its return in the wake of the Great Recession of 2008 with Occupy Wall Street (March and Mudde 2005; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2018). The movement claimed to represent the '99%' who were adversely affected by the economic crisis and positioned itself against the 'corrupt' economic elites and members of the Bush and Obama administrations (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2018, p. 44-5). Central to the ideology of the participants were its inclusive interpretation of 'the people', their advocacy of direct democratic and participatory practices, which were put in place during the occupation of Zuccotti Park,

¹ In fact, simply 'calling out elites' is consistent with the basic notion of democratic oversight of political representatives.

and their homogenous conception of the elite (Castells 2015; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2018). As Mudde and Kaltwasser (2018) rightly point out, much of the rhetoric of the Occupy movement would later go on to be adopted by the Sanders campaign during the 2016 election.

Conceptually, populism can be understood as a “thin-centered 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 general will of the people” (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2018, p. 19). It is “thin-centered” insofar as it alone cannot provide the individual with a full worldview as with liberalism, socialism, or fascism, and is always found “attached” to a “host-ideology”. Thus, populism manifests itself in a chameleon-like way, appearing on the left, right, and centre, and adapting itself to its different contexts.

Populism is closely linked to the notion of popular sovereignty originating in the liberal revolutions of the 18th and 19th centuries. At the core of democracy is the belief that government should be, “of the people, by the people, and for the people”, which implies that the “sovereign people” are to be the ultimate power in a democracy and are justified in replacing politicians they believe are not properly representing them. For populists, perceived violations of popular sovereignty can lead these citizens to develop grievances. While other negative attitudes, such as distrust (Hooghe and Marien 2012) or dissatisfaction (Miller 1980; Torcal and Montero 2006), have been shown to be correlated with populist attitudes (Demertzis 2006), the most common emotional association is anger (Abramowitz 2018; Vasilopoulou and Wagner 2017; Vasilopoulos, et al. 2018). Anger is an emotion that arises from contexts in which the individual perceives personal harm or the threat of harm to be the result of negligent or intentional behavior of other actors. In the case of the populist, these other actors are the elite.

The core antagonistic binary relationship between the people and the elite is not exclusive to populism. What distinguishes populism from socialism, which views history as a struggle between socio-economic classes, and nationalism, whose central antagonism is based on the concept of the nation, is that populism views the difference between the people and the elite through the lens of morality; rather than having differences of opinion or interests, the elite are corrupt or evil whereas the people are pure in nature.² This can be seen, for example, in Huey Long’s response to those inquiring about the practicalities of his “Share the Wealth” program:

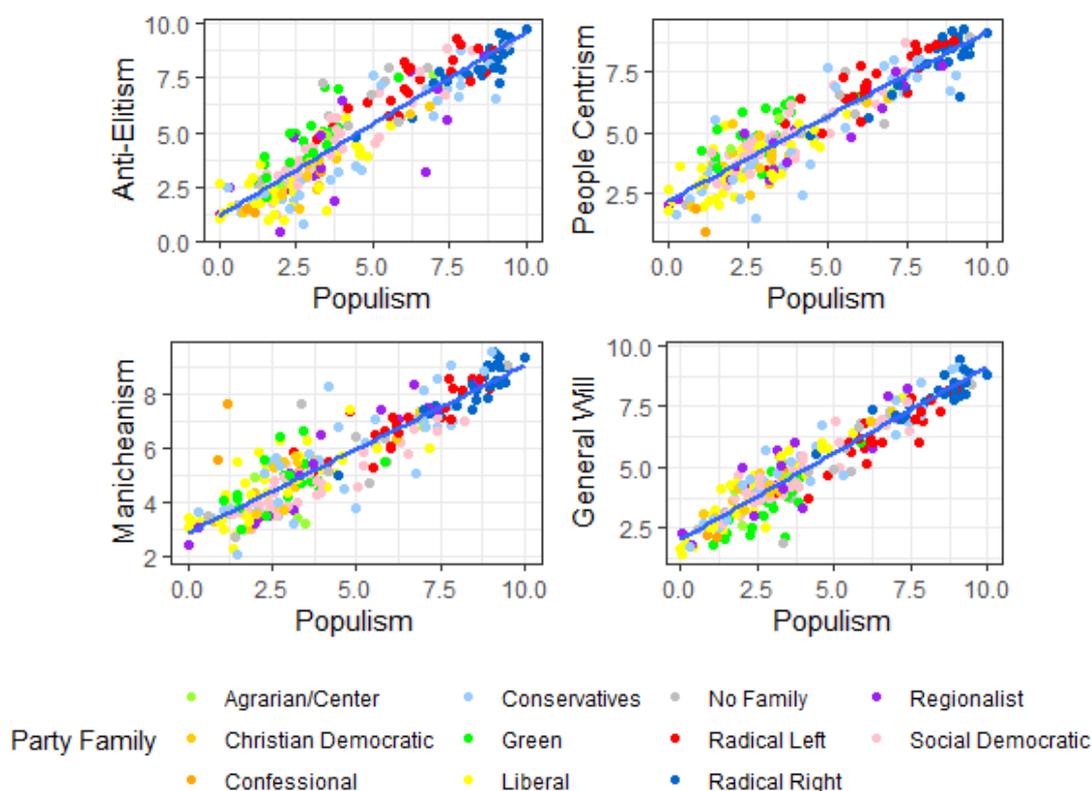
“I never read a line of Marx or Henry George or any of them economists. It's all in the law of God” (White 2006, p. 246).

This struggle between ‘good’ and ‘evil’ plays a fundamental role in populist ideology. In lieu of seeing compromise as being to the benefit of all in society, populists often see their opponents and the politics they represent as existential threats to the people (Hofstadter 1965). As a consequence, the logical conclusion held by those who view the world in such Manichean terms is that the “will of the people” should be the core of all political life and that liberal democratic institutions, such as an independent media, separation of powers, and rights for

² It is for this reason that populists usually employ rather emotive vocabulary to describe their opponents, such as “the caste” (Podemos), “terrorists” (Syriza), and “gang of plunderers” (AMLO) (Obrador 2018).

minorities, should not override the will of the pure ‘majority’, thus leading to a vulgar majoritarianism. These dimensions of populist ideology can be observed in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Dimensions of Populism as an Ideology



Source: Reproduced by the authors from Meijers and Zaslove (2020a, 2020b).

Note: Each observation denotes a political party in continental Europe

Left, or inclusive populism, is ‘populist’ in so far as the pure people versus the corrupt elite is central to their ideology and ‘left’ in that their political project focuses on the promotion of egalitarianism in society (March 2007, 2011). Advocacy for collective economic and social rights for the ‘people’ form the central pillars of their platform, with the rights of the “working poor” being their main priority. In many left-wing populist movements, this inclusivity also extends to ethnic minorities, migrants, and women, who are also included in the concept of “the people”.³ These groups, which have been historically disenfranchised in their proper societies, either due to market forces or national cultural practices that excluded them from equal participation in society, tend to be represented in left-populist movements that seek to make their voices heard. The host ideology that populism attaches itself to is a form of social democracy or socialism, and tends to focus on anti-globalisation, anti-neoliberal, or even anti-capitalist causes. Democratic socialism, a form of socialism that opposes itself to the communists on their left and the third-way social democrats to their right, is a radical left-wing

³ This contrasts with the radical right, for example, that sees “the people” primarily consisting of the ‘native’ population. While there are a number of ‘social populist’ parties in places such as Eastern Europe that are also anti-immigrant in nature (ex. Robert Fico’s SMER - Social Democracy in Slovakia), this distinction is not at the core of their vision of the people-elite dichotomy.

host-ideology that commonly combines with populism.⁴ For other “social populist” parties, left-wing language and policy proposals are combined with a non-ideological anti-establishment disposition and a party organization characterised by a dominant personalist leader (March, 2011). The ideological core of both of these party types is overlaid with a strong anti-elite appeal, more ideological eclecticism, and an emphasis on issues of identity (e.g. regionalism, nationalism, law and order, etc.) instead of class or lifestyle issues (March 2011). The populist left imagines an idealized ‘heartland’ of the social democratic society that existed prior to the transition to neoliberalism and the ‘betrayal’ by mainstream centre-left parties (March 2007). Instead of the socialist’s support for a strictly-defined proletariat, left-wing populist parties pledge their loyalty to the loosely defined category of “working people” which can include any number of individuals regardless of occupation, nationality, or ethnicity. ‘The elite’, on the other hand, are seen in economic terms and are considered to be responsible for both the destruction of the social democratic heartland and the corruption of the mainstream political parties. Left-wing populism generally incorporates language that is hostile to the rich, financial elites, and big corporations (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017; Plattner 2010). Left-wing populists will often advocate for agendas which are inclusionary of “Main Street” and opposed to “Wall Street”, with a progressive social-justice agenda (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). In other words, left-wing populism generally tends to incorporate policies related to economics (Bonikowski and Gidron 2016).

3. The American Left

Social Democracy

Though he has taken up the mantle of ‘democratic socialism’, Sanders points to the social democratic model in Scandinavia as the ideal that the United States should be moving towards. Social democracy is one of the oldest political movements within continental Europe. While there is much debate on the contrasts between the traditional social democratic and contemporary third-way approaches, there are a few key characteristics which exist almost universally among social democratic movements (see Stammers 2001, pp. 30-1). First, common to both traditional and contemporary views of social democracy is the belief that liberal democracy not only works, but also is desirable, as opposed to the communist parties who opted for the revolutionary path. Social democrats also assume that capitalism is inevitable and accept its role in the modernisation process. Yet, social democracy also recognizes the shortcomings of capitalism and thus attempts to mitigate these drawbacks. In other words, social democracy recognizes that capitalism can lead to inequalities and deprivation but believes that these drawbacks can be reduced by economic and social intervention. Social Democracy upholds an elitist relationship between political leadership and the people and

⁴ By employing the term “radical left”, the authors refer to, as per March (2011) “parties that reject the underlying socio-economic structure of contemporary capitalism and advocate alternative economic and power structures. They see economic inequality as the basis of existing political and social arrangements and call for a major redistribution of resources from existing political elites”. The usage of “radical” is commonly used in the populist literature (see March, 2011; Mudde, 2009) to denote an orientation towards “root-and-branch” transformative changes of the political system. While they are not necessarily anti-democratic at their core (as are the Marxist-Leninists), their view of democracy fundamentally contrasts with that of liberal democracy as can be seen in the cases of Evo Morales in Ecuador and Hugo Chavez in Venezuela who argue that the participatory component of democracy is more democratic than the classical liberal components.

assumes a top-down, hierarchical approach to governance. The application of the social democratic model of governance is highly ‘statist’.

Social democracy originally began as an attempt to reorganize society from a capitalist economy, where the logic of the free-market prevailed, to a mixed-economy where the state played a vital role in economic development (Keman and Pennings 2006; Powell 2004). This was to be accomplished largely by incorporating elements of Keynesian economics (Powell 2004). It also advocated for corporatism in the sense that the markets would still play an active role in implementing full employment and a strong welfare state, thus resulting in a more egalitarian society (Powell 2004). They also advocated for income redistribution along with strengthening labour power in order to promote economic growth (Keman and Pennings 2006). Before the 1990s, the Democratic Party within the US embraced more policies more akin to the traditional social democrats. The two most notable cases were the New Deal by Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Great Society by Lyndon B. Johnson. The New Deal focused on what historians refer to as the “3 Rs” which consisted of relief for the unemployed and poor, recovery of the economy, and reform of the financial sector (Fishback, Kantor, and Wallis 2002). As for the Great Society, the goal was the elimination of poverty and racial injustice. This was to be done largely by spending programs which addressed education and medical care along with civil rights legislation (Reifman 2014). Today’s social democrats, however, have largely moved away from these ideas as third-way Democrats arrived on the scene.

Analysts have noted the decline in popularity with Keynesian economics due to the stagflation of the 1970s which played a crucial role in the defeat of progressive policies within the Democratic Party (Zinn 2013). Prior to the 1970s, progressive policies such as the New Deal and the Great Society were popular among the electorate and relied heavily on Keynesian economic policies (Zinn 2013). Yet with the stagflation of the 1970s and the emergence of new economic theories, such as monetarism, the populace began to cast doubts on Keynesian economics and as a result, progressive candidates within the Democratic Party were defeated in elections to follow (Zinn 2013).

The main contributing factors leading to the rise of the third-way ‘New Democrats’ was a series of political defeats for the Democratic Party in 1968, 1972, 1984, and 1988 due to their nomination of left-wing progressive candidates (Ribuffo 2010). The Democratic Party eventually won the 1992 presidential election by nominating the more moderate candidate, Bill Clinton. This led to the belief within the Democratic Party that centrism and more market-friendly approaches to the economy were necessary to win elections within the US (Hale 1995).

Third-way politics came into prominence in the US with the presidency of Bill Clinton and the formation of the New Democrats coalition within the Democratic Party which advocated for socially progressive policies but only moderate fiscal spending (Hale 1995). On taxes, the third-way Democrats advocate for modest increases in taxes for all (Hale 1995). Yet for the wealthy their policies are more focused on taxes towards dividends and capital gains. With regards to welfare, many third-way advocates have embraced replacing welfare with workfare, meaning that welfare recipients must meet certain criteria to be eligible for benefits, such as job training, rehabilitation, or community service. (Hale 1995). Clinton’s welfare reform, which limited the amount of time a person is eligible for welfare benefits, is the most prominent example of this embrace of third-way Democrats. In general, third-way Democrats reject Keynesian economics as well as the nationalisation of important industries, major state

intervention in the economy, and the politics of class compromise that were prominent in American politics in the mid-twentieth century (Hale 1995). Healthcare, an issue that has become more prominent in recent decades, has become a central focus for reform-minded Democrats. While the centrist-wing of the party favours more regulation of markets in order to achieve a more optimal and egalitarian distribution of healthcare services, the more progressive wing prefers a universal single-payer public option (Jost 2016 October).

Left-Libertarians

New political parties, factions, and social movements are commonly understood to arise as a result of new political cleavages (Bale 2005). While the social democratic parties, and their New Deal counterparts in the United States were in part a reaction to the labour-capital cleavage originating with the industrial revolution, beginning in the 1970s, the ‘new social movements’ arose based on an ever-increasing values-cleavage (Inglehart 1990; Inglehart and Welzel 2005). As the argument goes, the newer generations of Americans who grew up in relative economic security developed ‘post-materialist values’ of self-expression instead of their parents’ materialist values of survival which led them to a politics focused on improving their quality of life instead of the general standard of living (Inglehart and Welzel 2005). In the political arena, this cohort of younger voters living in the decades of the 1960s and 1970s focused on a number of issues such as anti-militarism, anti-discrimination, solidarity with the developing world, social justice, and tolerance of non-traditional lifestyles (Bale 2005).

These new social movements, generally associated with the New Left, split from the ‘Old Left’ on the basis of these cultural issues (Inglehart 1990). The ‘new social movements’ generally consisted of various factions that arose during the tumultuous years of the late 60s and early 70s (Tilly and Wood 2009). The ‘left-libertarian’ parties that eventually arose from these conflicts developed a stance that opposed the priority that economic growth has on the political agenda, the policy prescriptions that restrict democratic participation, and the bureaucratic welfare state (Kitschelt 1988). Instead of the logic of development associated with the institutions of the compromise between capital and labour, they advocate for policies that expand individual autonomy and popular participation.

In the United States, the new social movements expanded to include mobilisations in favour of second wave feminism, rights for homosexuals, military non-intervention, non-medicinal drugs, rights for indigenous people and minority groups, and the environment (Tilly and Wood 2009). Democratic politicians eventually began to position their policies to appeal to these voter cohorts beginning in the 1980s when candidates began pivoting towards culturally liberal social policies and away from state-focused economic policy (Ribuffo 2010). The election of Bill Clinton in 1992 was the epitome of these changes as most voters viewed him as a “new kind of Democrat” (Ribuffo 2010).

4. The Sanders Electorate

In a post on the online publishing platform *Medium*, Joe Biden stated, "Senator Sanders and his supporters have changed the dialogue in America. Issues which had been given little attention—or little hope of ever passing—are now at the center of the political debate. Income inequality, universal health care, climate change, free college, relieving students from the

crushing debt of student loans. These are just a few of the issues Bernie and his supporters have given life to" (Biden, 2020).

During the 2016 campaign, Sanders advocated for policies that were both similar to those of Hillary Clinton and in line with the Democratic Party's platform. This included gun control, and an open domestic-integration policy toward immigrants. Yet, unlike Clinton and the Democratic Party platform, Sanders's discourse was hostile to the rich, the unregulated financial sector, multinational corporations, and the "Washington establishment" (Savoy, 2017). Sanders also advocated for policies which included integration of minorities, an embrace of liberal internationalism, diplomatic cooperation, and environmental policies which stressed the urgency of addressing the potential risks regarding climate change. While Clinton equated wealth inequality with differing taxation policies among income levels, Sanders, on the other hand, linked wealth inequality to structural social and economic factors, which benefitted Wall Street, corporations, and the "Washington elites". Sanders called for a change in social and political values to create political transformations as the only means of fixing the system. This included free education and universal healthcare to everyone regardless of income level or immigration status.

Part of Bernie Sanders' appeal among younger voters is a perception of consistency among political values over time. While observers have noted a significant shift in the Democratic Party platform towards the ideological center by advocating for third-way policies, Sanders was seen by the public as not having conceded his values in advocating for an unchanging left-wing platform throughout his career. Sanders supporters saw his uncompromising views as a sign of authenticity, which was largely viewed as lacking within the American political system. Another aspect of Sanders' appeal among younger voters is his open embrace of the term 'democratic socialism' to describe his political ideology. While older generations are typically regarded as being hostile towards socialism, many younger voters have been more open to embracing the Nordic model of political economy with regards to healthcare and education (Barkan, 2015). The policies of Bernie Sanders which have gained particular prominence over the course of the 2016 presidential elections to the present include transforming Medicare into a universal healthcare program, increasing the minimum wage, instituting major environmental reforms, introducing free college, and doing away with the immigration policies of the Trump administration.

4. Methods and Materials

Empirical Strategy

In order to identify the level of populist attitudes in the Sanders coalition, two tests involving regression analysis are introduced which aim to analyse (1) the strength of populist attitudes in the Sanders electorate relative to other ideologies typical of Sanders voters; (2) the strength of populist attitudes relative to the other political candidates in the 2016 presidential primaries. If it is the case that the Sanders electorate is heavily populist in their worldview, strong positive relationships would be expected to be observed between those with populist attitudes and those who voted for Sanders.

The dataset used for this study comes from the 2016 American National Election Studies (ANES) Time Series Study data (ANES Data Center 2016). The 2016 ANES survey data

includes 1180 face-to-face interviews and 3090 internet interviews for a total sample size of 4270. The reader should note, though, that not every respondent was asked every question while some respondents refused to answer some questions asked of them, which resulted in several missing observations.

Operationalizing Populism

The concept of “populism” has been notoriously difficult to conceptualize and the underlying theory behind the term necessarily affects which parties, politicians, and movements are included into the category. Considering that the argument made in the theoretical section is based on the ideas that populists have of politics, data points for the populist variable will be based on the ideational approach which renders survey data useful for our purposes (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2018).

This scale is not native to the ANES dataset, but is based on the operationalization technique used by other scholars (see Akkerman, Mudde, and Zaslove, 2014; Sawyer, 2021). The intention of this variable is to capture the full ideology of populism, as well as its conception of what democracy is, with a particular focus on central aspects such as the binary struggle between the people and elite, as well as their majoritarian, and moralistic beliefs. The first question which was included in our index (**Pop 1**) refers to the belief that the will of the majority should always prevail, as a variable encapsulating populism’s exaggerated belief in popular sovereignty. Our second variable (**Pop 2**) asks the respondent how many politicians in government they believe to be corrupt (with the highest value denoting “all of them”), in order to take into account aspects of anti-elitism and homogeneity. The third variable (**Pop 3**) included is a question where respondents were asked whether they agreed that “people not politicians should make most important policy decisions”, so as to account for the people-centric view of populists. The fourth variable (**Pop 4**) is a question asking respondents whether they believe that “compromise in politics is selling out on one’s principles”, which captures the zero-sum game between forces of good and evil that populists believe themselves to be engaged in, as well as their anti-liberal beliefs. The fifth variable included (**Pop 5**) asks respondents whether they believe that “government is run by a few large interests” for aspects of anti-elitism, and popular sovereignty. The sixth variable (**Pop 6**), which asks whether respondents agree that “most politicians do not care about the people”, accounts for most, if not all aspects of populist attitudes (homogeneity, anti-elitism, moralism, etc.). Finally, for a clear inclusion of a variable denoting belief in politics being a struggle between forces of ‘good’ and ‘evil’, we include a variable (**Pop 7**) which asks respondents whether they agree with the following statement: “What our country really needs is a strong, determined leader who will crush evil and take us back to our true path”. Each variable was placed on the same scale and then combined to create the variable for populist attitudes.⁵ The descriptive statistics for this variable, and others, can be found in Table A.2 in the Appendix.

⁵ The reader should note the similarity that most of our variables have to those used in the populist scale by Akkerman, Mudde, and Zaslove (2014) and note that the same variables from the ANES dataset were used by other studies to create a scale denoting populist attitudes (see Sawyer, 2021).

Dependent Variables

So as to test for the level of populist attitudes in the Sanders coalition relative to other political ideologies common to the left, the variable chosen for the dependent variable in the first series of tests is a dichotomous one which denotes respondents who voted for Bernie Sanders in the Democratic Primaries. It should be noted that this variable includes not only those who voted in the primary elections, but also those who abstained from voting. Naturally, with such a variable, a logistic regression was believed to be the appropriate one.

As previously mentioned, the second series of testing investigates the level of populist attitudes in the Sanders electorate relative to other presidential candidates. With this in mind, the ‘populist’ scale, mentioned above, was used for the dependent variable. Due to the more normal distribution of values associated with this variable, an OLS regression model was employed.

Independent and Control Variables

In the first series of tests, populist attitudes are compared to those of other typical worldviews on the American left. For our purposes, the same populist variable mentioned above is used for the independent variable, and for controls, we have included two other scales common to the American left; social democracy and left-libertarianism.⁶ These variables were calculated in a similar way to the populism variable, though, taking into account the specifics of their ideologies as explored in the theoretical section. The questions associated with these scales can be seen in Table 1 shown below. Controls are added for income, education, ideology, gender, white voters, age, and whether the respondent considers themselves to be an independent voter.

In the second series of tests, the same variable denoting votes for Bernie Sanders in the Democratic primaries was used for the independent variable while other dichotomous variables denoting votes for the other main contenders for the presidency, Hillary Clinton, John Kasich, Marco Rubio, Ted Cruz, and Donald Trump, were also included as controls. Here, the purpose is to understand which factors predict the likelihood that an individual holds populist attitudes, which was used for our dependent variable. All of the previously-mentioned controls are added, as well as the two indices denoting ideologies on the political left: social democracy and left-libertarianism. To control for factions on the political right, we add a control for authoritarianism in the second series of tests. In most classifications of the populist radical right party family, authoritarianism remains a core ideological tenant (Mudde, 2007; Norris and Inglehart, 2019). The variable used for authoritarianism uses the Social Conformity Autonomy (SCA) scale based on Stenner (2005) and Feldman’s (2003) research and that focuses on patterns in parenting in the individual that are interested in the respondent’s preferences for either conformity to group norms or individual autonomy in their children.

⁶ Note that while there are no variables in the ANES dataset specific to the democratic socialist ideology, the questions used for the social democracy scale could just as easily measure support for socialism, which in many aspects, is simply a matter of a difference of degree.

Table 1. The Three Scales Compared

Populism Scale	Social Democracy Scale	Left-Libertarian Scale	Authoritarianism Scale
POP 1 <i>The will of the majority should always prevail</i>	SocDem 1 <i>Do you favor, oppose, or neither favor nor oppose increasing income taxes on people making over one million dollars per year?</i>	Libert 1 <i>Do you consider yourself a feminist?</i>	Auth1 <i>Please tell me which one you think is more important for a child to have: Independence or respect for elders?</i>
POP 2 <i>How many in government are corrupt?</i>	SocDem 2 <i>Should federal spending on welfare programs be increased, decreased, or kept the same?</i>	Libert 2 <i>Do you think the federal government should be doing more about rising temperatures, should be doing less, or is it currently doing the right amount?</i>	Auth2 <i>Which one is more important for a child to have: Curiosity or good manners?</i>
POP 3 <i>People not politicians should make most important policy decisions</i>	SocDem 3 <i>How much government regulation of business is good for society?</i>	Libert 3 <i>Generations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for blacks to work their way out of the lower class. Agree/Disagree?</i>	Auth3 <i>Which one is more important for a child to have: Being considerate or well behaved?</i>
POP 4 <i>Compromise in politics is selling out on one's principles.</i>	SocDem 4 <i>How would you rate labor unions?</i>	Libert 4 <i>How willing should the United States be to use military force to solve international problems?</i>	Auth4 <i>Which one is more important for a child to have: Obedience or self-reliance?</i>
POP 5 <i>Is government run by a few big interests or for the benefit of all?</i>	SocDem 5 <i>Where would you place yourself on this scale? (Private Healthcare - Government Healthcare)</i>	Libert 5 <i>What should government policy be toward unauthorized immigrants now living in the United States?</i>	
POP 6 <i>Most politicians do not care about the people.</i>	SocDem 6 <i>How much more or less should the government do to regulate banks?</i>	Libert 6 <i>Do you favor, oppose, or neither favor nor oppose the use of marijuana being legal?</i>	

<p>Pop 7 <i>What our country really needs is a strong, determined leader who will crush evil and take us back to our true path.</i></p>			
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5. Results

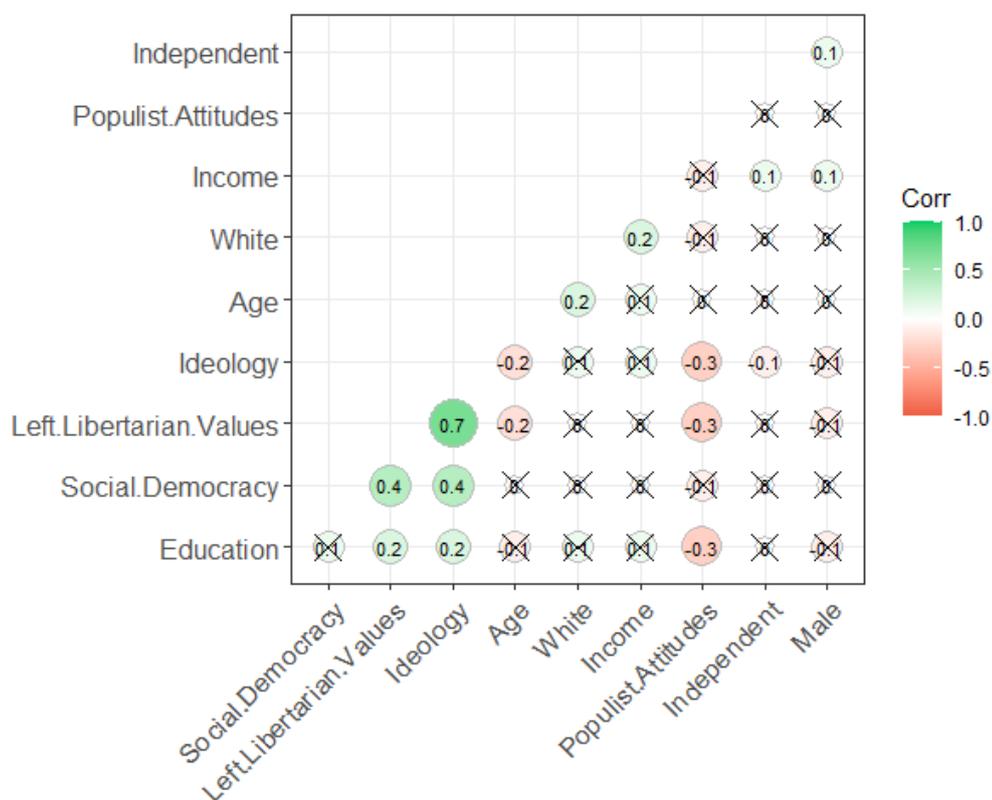
In accordance with the aforementioned methodology, a logistic regression on votes for Bernie Sanders demonstrates that the scale denoting populist attitudes is generally not a statistically significant predictor of a Bernie Sanders voter (see Model 1). The only other indicator that does demonstrate a significant result is, as expected, the indicator for ideology. This would indicate that the Sanders voters skew heavily towards the left side of the political spectrum. Moreover, the insignificant result for the populist variable is a clear indicator that, on the whole, the average Sanders voter does not hold populist attitudes, a result that contrasts with the views of many contemporary analysts. In Model 2, the scales for social democracy and left-libertarianism are added and demonstrate strong positive correlations in both instances, indicating that both voter cohorts are relevant segments to the Sanders coalition. Finally, in Model 3, all variables are added to the model. The results demonstrate significant positive relationships for all three predictor variables, populism, social democracy, and left-libertarianism. That said, a clear distinction can be observed between populism and the latter two variables, both in terms of the strength of the correlation and their statistical significance. The populist variable would seem to be a much weaker predictor of votes for Bernie Sanders in the 2016 Democratic Primaries than those with social democratic beliefs or left-libertarian cultural views.

Table 2. Logistic Regression on Votes for Bernie Sanders during the 2016 Presidential Primaries

	Vote for Sanders		
	Coef.		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Populist Attitudes	0.072 (0.128)		0.388*** (0.139)
Social Democratic Views		0.512*** (0.180)	0.519*** (0.181)
Left Libertarian Values		0.951*** (0.163)	1.059*** (0.169)
Independent	0.145 (0.131)	0.222 (0.139)	0.198 (0.141)
Left-Wing Ideology	0.739*** (0.052)	0.408*** (0.066)	0.421*** (0.067)
Male	0.133 (0.126)	0.144 (0.134)	0.134 (0.135)
Education	0.010 (0.019)	-0.016 (0.019)	-0.005 (0.020)
White	0.007 (0.159)	0.118 (0.172)	0.114 (0.173)
Income	0.017** (0.008)	0.015* (0.008)	0.017** (0.009)
Age	-0.012*** (0.004)	-0.010** (0.004)	-0.009** (0.004)
Observations	3,341	2,897	2,864
Log Likelihood	-903.195	-795.829	-780.809
Akaike Inf. Crit.	1,824.391	1,611.658	1,583.619
Note:	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01		

Thus, these results would seem to indicate that while, on the whole, the Sanders voter does not tend to hold populist attitudes, there remains a smaller, but significant cohort of voters who do. These results are corroborated by the correlation matrix shown in Figure 3 in which the covariates of Sanders voters are displayed. These correlations show that, in fact, the populist voter in the Sanders coalition tends to be significantly less left leaning and score lower in the scale for left-libertarian views, implying that the populist voter is a distinct cohort of voters from the general left-wing voter base. Thus, this would explain the null results for Model 1 and the strong positive result in Model 3 when controlling for social democrats and those with left-libertarian values.

Figure 2. Correlation Matrix of Sanders Voters and their Covariates



Note. Correlations marked with an “X” are not statistically significant (P<0.05).

The results for the second series of testing, with populist attitudes as the dependent variable and votes for the presidential contenders as the independent and control variables, are displayed below (See Table 3).⁷ As with the tests in Table 2, Model 1 demonstrates another null result between Sanders voters and populist attitudes, which, as previously mentioned, indicates that the average Sanders voter does not hold strong populist attitudes. The negative results with the controls for education, income, and ideology confirm those of previous studies which show that these factors are prominent in the American populist movement. In terms of vote choices, Hillary Clinton and John Kasich voters, two candidates that represent the establishment wings of their respective parties, demonstrated strong negative relationships with populist sentiments, whereas those who voted for Donald Trump in the primaries showed a strong positive relationship with populist attitudes. In Model 2, the three scales for authoritarianism, social democracy, and left-libertarian values are added to control for the prominent ideological worldviews that combine with populism on the right and left sides of the political spectrum with social democracy showing a null result, left-libertarian values demonstrating a strong negative result, and authoritarianism demonstrating a positive one. Finally, in Model 3, all variables are included together, demonstrating that, as with the previous tests, the variable for Bernie Sanders voters becomes significantly positive when controlled for. With the addition of the variable for authoritarian values, however, the variable denoting Trump voters does not

⁷ The reader should recall that the purpose of this test is to distinguish which presidential primary candidates’ electorate most strongly predicts voters with populist attitudes.

diminish in statistical significance. While this shows that there is a small, yet significant cohort of populist voters who turned out to vote for Sanders during the primary elections, as can be seen with the standardized coefficients, the proportion of these voters is much lower than those who voted for Donald Trump. In fact, the significant negative correlation with the variable for left-wing ideology and strong positive relationship with authoritarianism demonstrates that the populist phenomena in the American electorate would seem to be skewed towards the political right.

When these variables are disaggregated from the general populist scale (see Table A.1 in the Appendix), we note that two of these variables demonstrate statistically negative results while three (Pop2, Pop5, and Pop6) demonstrate positive ones. Meanwhile, those who voted for Donald Trump in the Republican Primary were significantly correlated with five of the seven variables included in the scale. These results stand in stark contrast to the commonly held belief of a “revolt” from both the populist left and right during the 2016 presidential election and instead point to only a strong populist insurgency from the right. Moreover, these results demonstrate that issues of governmental corruption and the influence of powerful interest groups play a more prominent role for Sanders voters than any feelings of people-centrism, Manichaeism, and majoritarianism.

Table 3: OLS regression of the level of Populist Attitudes in the 2016 presidential primaries

	Dependent Variable: Populist Attitudes					
	Model 1	Stand. Coef	Model 2	Stand. Coef.	Model 3	Stand. Coef.
Vote for Sanders	-0.037 (0.030)	-0.0205			0.064** (0.031)	0.0361
Vote for Clinton	-0.220*** (0.027)	-0.1418			-0.164*** (0.029)	-0.1048
Vote for Kasich	-0.181*** (0.051)	-0.0566			-0.135*** (0.051)	-0.0431
Vote for Rubio	-0.103* (0.059)	-0.0276			-0.064 (0.060)	-0.0175
Vote for Cruz	0.033 (0.045)	0.01208			-0.016 (0.047)	-0.0057

Vote for Trump	0.191*** (0.030)	0.1089			0.162*** (0.031)	0.0921
Social Democratic Views			-0.017 (0.022)	-0.0144	-0.007 (0.022)	-0.0064
Left Libertarian Values			-0.198*** (0.021)	-0.2201	-0.182*** (0.021)	-0.2016
Authoritarianism			0.153*** (0.016)	0.1843	0.155*** (0.016)	0.1870
Ideology (7=Left)	-0.095*** (0.007)	-0.2562	-0.049*** (0.008)	-0.1325	-0.040*** (0.009)	-0.1094
Male	-0.057*** (0.017)	-0.0533	-0.055*** (0.018)	-0.0506	-0.059*** (0.018)	-0.0549
Education	-0.030*** (0.002)	-0.2077	-0.024*** (0.003)	-0.1601	-0.022*** (0.003)	-0.1509
White	0.018 (0.022)	0.0133	0.053** (0.024)	0.0369	0.027 (0.024)	0.0186
Income	-0.004*** (0.001)	-0.0562	-0.002* (0.001)	-0.0292	-0.002 (0.001)	-0.0253
Age	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.0189	-0.002*** (0.001)	-0.0620	-0.001*** (0.001)	-0.0462
Independent	0.045** (0.018)	0.0405	0.092*** (0.018)	0.0820	0.079*** (0.019)	0.0701
Observations	3,341		2,856		2,856	
R ²	0.211		0.257		0.281	

Adjusted R ²	0.208	0.255	0.277
Log Likelihood	-2,256.843	-1,871.296	-1,825.984
Akaike Inf. Crit.	4,541.687	3,764.592	3,685.969

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

6. Discussion

From the tests performed in the previous section, our results would seem to indicate that while those with populist attitudes were highly correlated with votes for Donald Trump on the right, this is not necessarily the case for Bernie Sanders voters on the left. When a logistic regression, with votes for Bernie Sanders as the dependent variable and populist attitudes as the main independent variable are included in the model, an insignificant result appears, which implies that on the whole, populism is not a significant feature of the Sanders electorate. However, when additional controls for two other prominent voting blocs on the left are added, those with left libertarian values and social democratic beliefs, the relationship between populist attitudes and votes for Sanders turns significantly positive. This result would seem to indicate that there remains a smaller, yet still significant group of supporters with populist attitudes within the Sanders coalition, though, this group remains less important to the Sanders phenomenon than the traditional progressive voting blocs. In the correlation matrix in Figure 3, the significantly negative correlation between populist attitudes and left libertarian values and insignificant result for social democracy indicate that the populist voting bloc is indeed a distinct faction within the Sanders coalition. These voters correlate negatively with levels of education and are much less left-wing than the other Sanders voters. Finally, when the Sanders electorate is compared to the other main contenders for the presidency in the second series of tests, the results demonstrate that those who voted for Sanders were positively correlated with populist attitudes, though, much less so than voters for Donald Trump.

With this in mind, it would seem that while voters with populist attitudes were a factor in predicting support for Bernie Sanders in the 2016 Democratic Primaries, some nuance should be added to this conclusion. The populist voting bloc for Sanders is smaller than the other left-wing voting blocs (most of whom are significantly anti-populist) and much more so than the support that populist voters showed for Donald Trump. Moreover, when Sanders voters are regressed on the disaggregated populist index the results show that certain features relevant to the populist worldview, such as anti-elitism, were present, while other core features such as a Manichaen outlook, majoritarianism, and people-centrism were not, which further puts the characterisation of a left-populist movement in doubt. The principle conclusion derived from this study, thus, can be found in these results.

7. Conclusion

Since 2016, commentators have frequently juxtaposed the rise of the populist Donald Trump, and his coalition of supporters with that of Bernie Sanders on the left (Judis 2016). The common wisdom has been that these two forces are part of a larger populist ‘wave’ affecting the American political system (Cassidy 2016). With this paper, we add to a growing literature concerning the rise of populism in contemporary American politics. Moving beyond studies which take for granted the populist attitudes of each group of supporters, this study investigates the actual beliefs of the Sanders electorate, using the ideational approach to populism put forth by Mudde and Kaltwasser (2018), in order to identify the extent to which populism proliferates among these voter cohorts. In a manner similar to other studies which employ survey techniques, this is accomplished using questions from the American National Election Survey (ANES) (2016) dataset which are used to construct a scale for populist attitudes. Tests were then run for the level of populist attitudes in the Sanders electorate relative to other left-wing worldviews in the United States, and the level of populist attitudes in the Sanders electorate relative to the level of populist attitudes in the other presidential candidates’ electorates.

The results point to populist attitudes only being a minor force in the Sanders coalition. When a regression model is run for votes for Bernie Sanders in the 2016 Democratic Primaries, social democratic beliefs and left-libertarian values were much more prominent in the Sanders electorate than populist attitudes. A subsequent correlation matrix showed that not only were the populist voters a distinct voting bloc than the social democratic and left libertarian voters, that were statistically less left-wing and with lower levels of education, the largest voting bloc that supported Sanders in the primary, those with left libertarian values, were markedly anti-populist in nature. Moreover, when all of the presidential candidates were included in a regression model to observe which candidates’ electorates correlated most with populist attitudes, voters for Bernie Sanders tended to be positively correlated with such beliefs only after controls for the traditional left-wing factions were added, though much less so than voters for Donald Trump. Finally, when these variables were regressed on the disaggregated populist index (Table A.2 in the Appendix), only anti-elitist sentiments were significantly correlated with Sanders voters, while a Manichaen outlook on politics, people-centrist attitudes, and majoritarianism were not, whereas Trump voters consistently correlated positively with nearly all of these variables.

Instead of a populist revolt from both the left and the right, our study points to only a single populist movement emerging from the right as well as a more general cleavage based on the division between materialist and post-materialist values as argued by Norris and Inglehart (2017, 2019). As the argument goes, generational birth cohorts are influential in promoting the sort of socially conservative and authoritarian values that render populist radical right politicians, such as Donald Trump, electorally appealing when one’s generation is profoundly impacted by times of existential insecurity. For many in the United States, these were periods of economic insecurity, as was the case in the Great Depression or the Recession of 2008 (Norris and Inglehart 2019). With these ‘materialist’ values of survival installed in them, they become much more likely to develop an ‘Authoritarian Reflex’ to profound cultural changes that often accompany the modernisation process. The ‘Silent Revolution’ of post-materialist values, on the other hand, has tended to affect those cohorts of voters who grew up in times of relative security (Inglehart and Welzel 2005; Norris and Inglehart 2019). While Norris and

Inglehart (2019) have pointed to the possibility of there being a ‘libertarian’ form of populism, the results of our study indicate that the supporters of Bernie Sanders generally should not be seen in this light. That being said, 2016 was only the first presidential primary in which Bernie Sanders took part in and views can change within a span of four long years after a tumultuous period with Donald Trump as president. It is, of course, possible that the results for the 2020 primary contest could differ from that of 2016. This would seem to be a promising direction for future research.

While the findings of our study place into doubt the classification of Sanders’ electorate as being ‘populist’, that is not to say that Sanders himself is not, though, given the close connection that populist leaders often have with their supporters, it would seem unlikely that so many supporters would be attracted to a candidate they differed from on such fundamental questions. It is interesting to note that the correlations between Sanders voters and the disaggregated populist variables correspond almost identically to the arguments put forth by Cas Mudde (2016) and Müller (2016, 2020, 23 January). As Mudde argues, our results point to a significant negative correlation between Sanders voters and variables denoting Manichean worldviews (See Pop4 and Pop7 in Table A.1). In addition, Müller’s point (2020, 23 January) also holds true for the Sanders electorate as these voters correlated negatively with majoritarian, and anti-liberal political beliefs (See Pop1 in Table A.1). With that said, the reader would do well to keep in mind that the framework employed for studying the level of populist attitudes in voters is based squarely on the ideational approach. Thus, while the test which utilizes a disaggregated populist index can be used to extend these conclusions to other similar approaches that incorporate some of these theoretical components, such as the political strategic approach to populism, this study is limited in presenting evidence which would indicate the identification of the Sanders’ coalition based on other conceptions of ‘populism’, such as the sociocultural approach.⁸

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⁸ The results for Pop1 and Pop7 in Table A.1, for example, demonstrate that the Sanders voter would not be characterised as populist according to the political strategic approach.

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Appendices

Table A.1 OLS regression of the level of Disaggregated Populist Attitudes during the 2016 presidential primaries

	Populism						
	Pop1 (1)	Pop2 (2)	Pop3 (3)	Pop4 (4)	Pop5 (5)	Pop6 (6)	Pop7 (7)
Sanders	-0.104 [*] (0.058)	0.167 ^{***} (0.064)	0.092 (0.061)	0.030 (0.062)	0.269 ^{***} (0.063)	0.152 ^{**} (0.061)	-0.172 ^{***} (0.054)
Clinton	-0.087 (0.054)	-0.255 ^{***} (0.059)	-0.136 ^{**} (0.057)	-0.202 ^{***} (0.057)	-0.192 ^{***} (0.059)	-0.076 (0.056)	-0.212 ^{***} (0.050)
Kasich	-0.191 ^{***} (0.095)	-0.189 [*] (0.103)	-0.144 (0.100)	-0.270 ^{***} (0.100)	0.143 (0.104)	-0.156 (0.099)	-0.141 (0.088)
Rubio	-0.163 (0.111)	-0.019 (0.121)	-0.166 (0.117)	-0.137 (0.117)	-0.063 (0.121)	0.057 (0.116)	-0.016 (0.103)
Cruz	-0.339 ^{***} (0.088)	0.143 (0.096)	-0.030 (0.092)	0.089 (0.093)	0.154 (0.095)	-0.025 (0.092)	-0.080 (0.081)
Trump	0.120 ^{**} (0.059)	0.218 ^{***} (0.064)	0.099 (0.062)	0.141 ^{**} (0.062)	0.249 ^{***} (0.063)	0.077 (0.061)	0.246 ^{***} (0.054)
Social Democracy	-0.001 (0.042)	-0.009 (0.045)	-0.025 (0.044)	0.076 [*] (0.044)	-0.058 (0.045)	-0.001 (0.043)	-0.013 (0.038)
Left Libertarian	-0.392 ^{***} (0.040)	-0.132 ^{***} (0.043)	-0.023 (0.042)	-0.272 ^{***} (0.042)	-0.020 (0.043)	-0.030 (0.041)	-0.409 ^{***} (0.037)
Left-Wing Ideology	-0.036 ^{**} (0.016)	-0.043 ^{**} (0.018)	0.014 (0.017)	-0.056 ^{***} (0.017)	-0.047 ^{***} (0.017)	-0.002 (0.017)	-0.110 ^{***} (0.015)
Male	-0.060 [*] (0.033)	-0.121 ^{***} (0.036)	-0.045 (0.034)	-0.082 ^{**} (0.035)	-0.006 (0.036)	-0.011 (0.034)	-0.097 ^{***} (0.030)
Education	-0.027 ^{***} (0.005)	-0.019 ^{***} (0.005)	-0.016 ^{***} (0.005)	-0.032 ^{***} (0.005)	-0.007 (0.005)	-0.030 ^{***} (0.005)	-0.024 ^{***} (0.004)
White	0.199 ^{***} (0.045)	0.062 (0.050)	-0.029 (0.048)	-0.222 ^{***} (0.048)	0.180 ^{***} (0.049)	-0.079 [*] (0.047)	0.051 (0.042)
Income	-0.002 (0.002)	-0.0005 (0.002)	-0.005 ^{**} (0.002)	-0.006 ^{***} (0.002)	0.008 ^{***} (0.002)	-0.002 (0.002)	-0.005 ^{**} (0.002)
Age	0.002 [*] (0.001)	-0.007 ^{***} (0.001)	0.0003 (0.001)	-0.004 ^{***} (0.001)	0.001 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)
Authoritarianism	0.182 ^{***} (0.029)	0.092 ^{***} (0.032)	0.104 ^{***} (0.031)	0.296 ^{***} (0.031)	-0.060 [*] (0.032)	0.078 ^{**} (0.030)	0.377 ^{***} (0.027)
Independent	0.062 [*] (0.035)	0.161 ^{***} (0.038)	0.033 (0.037)	0.064 [*] (0.037)	0.107 ^{***} (0.038)	0.117 ^{***} (0.036)	0.017 (0.032)
Observations	2,889	2,881	2,889	2,883	2,871	2,889	2,886
Log Likelihood	-3,670.932	-3,904.336	-3,816.904	-3,818.270	-3,872.020	-3,792.865	-3,436.816
Akaike Inf. Crit.	7,375.863	7,842.673	7,667.809	7,670.539	7,778.040	7,619.730	6,907.631
Note:	* p<0.1; ** p<0.05; *** p<0.01						

Table A.2: Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Min/Max	Mean	Median	Standard Deviation
Populism	- 1.6360/1.5329	0.0336	0.0845	0.5564104
Social Democracy	- 1.5234/1.2958	-0.0027	0.0454	0.5111184
Left-Libertarianism	- 1.6369/1.5941	0.0056	-0.0063	0.5860949
Authoritarianism	0/2	1.093	1	0.648736
Votes for Bernie Sanders	0/1	0.0918	0.0000	0.2887819
Votes for Hillary Clinton	0/1	0.1356	0.0000	0.3424004
Votes for John Kasich	0/1	0.0267	0.0000	0.1612179
Votes for Marco Rubio	0/1	0.01991	0.00000	0.1396948
Votes for Ted Cruz	0/1	0.03794	0.00000	0.1910714
Votes for Donald Trump	0/1	0.1044	0.0000	0.3058788
Ideology (7=Very Liberal)	1/7	3.863	4.000	1.410899
Male	0/1	0.4653	0.000	0.4988556
Education	0/16	10.32	10.00	3.781138
White	0/1	0.7991	1.000	0.4007478
Income	0/27	14.38	15.00	8.211544
Age	18/90	49.58	50.00	17.57779
Independent	0/1	0.3684	0.00	0.4824263