

Winning is the only thing. Election outcomes, satisfaction with democracy and political trust among populist voters in Europe

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Abstract

Recent comparative and single-case studies have investigated the link between the electoral performance of populist parties and the political attitudes and behaviors of populist voters. However, they have not addressed what happens to populist voters' satisfaction with democracy and political trust when populist parties gain representation in parliament or join cabinets across countries and over time in Europe. This study argues that there are two possible expectations. According to a 'winner-loser' mechanism, populist voters' political trust and satisfaction might increase, thus bridging the gap with mainstream voters. Conversely, according to a 'spiral of distrust' mechanism, populist parties fuel discontent and populist voters' political trust and satisfaction might decrease. Analyses of nine rounds of the European Social Survey from 22 countries and LISS panel data from the Netherlands find that voters of populist parties have less satisfaction with democracy, trust in parliament, and politicians than voters of mainstream parties. However, these differences narrow over time when populist parties gain seats in parliament and enter the cabinet. This article shows that voters for populist parties might be 'losers in disguise' and that the performance of the parties they support serves as a corrective mechanism for their political dissatisfaction and distrust.

Key words: Satisfaction with democracy; political trust; populist parties; elections; European Social Survey; LISS panel data.

1. Introduction

The upsurge of populist parties across Europe – both left and right – raises the question of whether their voters show similar levels of political satisfaction and trust to voters for mainstream parties. The literature tends to agree that while populist voters divide on political values and policies, they share a distrust towards institutions, and political dissatisfaction with the way democracy works (Bélanger 2017). One explanation for this is that populism conceives of society as divided into two groups, the ‘people’, understood as pure and the sole legitimate holders of sovereignty, and the corrupt ‘elite’, which threatens its security (Hawkins et al. 2018; Mudde 2007). Thus, populist parties would be more able than mainstream political parties to mobilize public resentment for electoral purposes.

However, while we often observe a gap in political support between populist and mainstream voters across countries, this is not ubiquitous (e.g., Rooduijn et al. 2017; Rooduijn 2018; Dassonneville and McAllister 2023). More importantly, recent research, both comparative and single-case, has investigated the link between election outcomes and the political attitudes and behaviors of populist voters (Haugsgjerd 2019; Krause and Wagner 2019; Kriesi and Schulte-Cloos 2021; Hartevelde et al. 2021; Muis et al. 2022; Juen 2024), but this has not addressed what happens to the satisfaction with democracy and political trust of populist voters when their parties gain more representation in parliament or join cabinets across countries in Europe and over time. Indeed, the success of populist parties is evident in various countries and over the years, as has occurred in countries like Finland and Sweden in northern Europe; Austria, France, Switzerland, and the Netherlands in the continental area; Greece and Italy in the south; and Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia in the east (Albertazzi and Mueller 2013; Kriesi and Pappas 2015; van Kessel 2015; Bichay 2024). The topic is pivotal for our understanding of democratic legitimacy, as we do not have a clear view of whether elections and representation act as a corrective mechanism for this gap in support between

these groups of voters or, vice versa, whether the greater strength of these parties will reinforce a reservoir of distrust and dissatisfaction (Hooghe 2017).

Building on studies of representation, populism, and political support, we might expect alternative effects of election outcomes on supportive attitudes of populist and mainstream voters. Following a ‘winner-loser’ mechanism, the levels of democratic satisfaction and political trust of populist voters might be higher when the parties they voted for gain electoral ground because this would ensure better representation of the policy options proposed by these political parties and increase congruence between the preferences of citizens and the elite (Blais et al. 2017). Above all, being in government determines whether policies will be implemented, produces positive emotional reactions, and leads individuals to adjust their attitudes and opinions to avoid cognitive dissonance (Anderson et al. 2005). As a result, populist parties would operate as ‘safety valves’ to voice concerns and re-align voters (Miller and Listhaug 1990), so more favorable election outcomes for populist parties would narrow the gap in support between populist and mainstream voters.

Conversely, according to a ‘spiral of distrust’ mechanism, populist parties do not only appeal to dissatisfied and distrustful voters but they also ‘fuel discontent’, since their rhetoric often contrasts with the principles of liberal democracy, reinforcing disenchantment (van der Brug 2003; Hooghe and Dassonneville 2018). In this case, the effect might be even stronger when they acquire representation or join the government. In this respect, there are case studies as well as comparative research showing that the level of contention by populist parties may even increase when in office (Albertazzi and Mueller 2013; McDonnell and Newell 2011). At the same time, mainstream parties may shift their policy platforms closer to the one promoted by populists as a result of party competition on salient political issues (Abou-Chadi and Krause 2020). Thus, with more favorable election outcomes for populist parties, we should observe a larger gap in support between populist and mainstream voters leading to a polarization of political satisfaction and trust.

To test these arguments, we use two complementary empirical strategies. First, we apply multilevel models to nine rounds of the European Social Survey (ESS) across 22 countries between 2002 and 2019. This allows us to assess whether the populist-mainstream gap in support varies across diverse political systems and periods. Although it leverages a comparative design, ESS data does not track the same individuals over time. To overcome this limitation, we use data from the LISS panel (Longitudinal Internet studies for the Social Sciences) managed by the non-profit research institute Centerdata (Tilburg University, the Netherlands), collected in the Netherlands from 2007 to 2021, which allow us to test the mechanisms through the assessment of individual changes in satisfaction and trust. Both analyses show that there is a difference in satisfaction with democracy and trust in parliament and politicians between voters for populist and mainstream parties. However, when populist parties gain representation in parliament and enter (or support) cabinets, the political satisfaction and trust of their voters become similar to or exceed those of mainstream voters.

These findings contribute to the literature, suggesting that the lower levels of distrust and dissatisfaction of populist voters might be mitigated by their parties being represented in parliament and are in the cabinet. Thus, populists might be ‘losers in disguise’ and their tendency towards dissatisfaction and distrust is not a feature of the ‘populist voter’ but may have to do with whether and how they are represented in parliaments and cabinets. This suggests that populist parties’ performance may serve as a corrective for political support for this group of voters. Therefore, the article also offers insights into the nature of political satisfaction and trust *latu sensu*, emphasizing that besides being the result of an evaluation of the functioning of democracy and its institutions, they also depend on the parliamentary and cabinet strength of the parties people voted for.

2. The puzzle of political support among populist voters

In recent decades, in many European countries, political parties belonging to traditional political families have gradually suffered from a decrease in electoral support, giving way to the success of populist parties. This process of de-alignment has even worsened since the Great Recession started in 2008, to the extent that citizens have increasingly detached from mainstream politics, being attracted by the alternative solutions to government provided by political parties demanding procedural changes and increasing participation in decision-making (see Hernández and Kriesi 2016; Hobolt and Tilley 2016; Kriesi and Pappas 2015; van Kessel 2015).

Populism can be defined as ‘thin-ideology’, i.e., a set of ideas founded on the principle that democratic power rests on popular sovereignty (see Hawkins et al. 2018; Mudde 2007). The ‘people’ are seen as a virtuous homogeneous group defined in opposition to an elite, which is instead commonly deemed to be corrupt, hold privileges and be unresponsive to the public. Overall, populism sees politics as an interpretation of the ‘general will’ of the people against the interests of the few. A populist worldview can then be anchored to more elaborated and substantive ideologies such as conservatism or socialism, to give birth to different political parties that span the left-right ideological spectrum.

Since populism emphasizes popular sovereignty, the people have to rule without intermediaries, developing a conception of political action which often comes into tension with basic principles of liberal democracy based on delegation, well-structured representative institutions and checks and balances (see Urbinati 2019; Bichay 2024). Alternatively, some view populism not as a challenge to the liberal democratic model, but as something that complements it. Populists employ a ‘democratic’ style, engaging with ordinary citizens. In this sense, populism seeks to transcend a purely pragmatic approach to democracy, which is primarily focused on peacefully managing conflicting interests. It advocates for institutional renewal to bridge the gap between democratic ideals and reality, as well as between promises and outcomes (see Canovan 1999).

Given these premises, it is not surprising that dissatisfaction with democracy and political distrust have been linked to voting for these parties, regardless of one's interpretation of the nexus between populism and democracy, since a populist outburst is anti-establishment in nature (Citrin and Stoker 2018; van Kessel 2015). In a variant of the protest-voting model, populist parties can mobilize people who are discontented with current politics. When representative institutions and traditional parties, i.e., the establishment, do not meet people's expectations, citizens may either reject politics by abstaining from voting or turn to actors challenging the status quo. Conversely, voters of more established political parties, i.e., mainstream voters, are deemed to score, on average, higher on political support than populist voters. Mainstream voters sustain political parties that back the status quo and have had a dominating role in post-war European politics. These voters should in principle show more loyalty to the liberal democratic regime and its norms and values and consent to the basic institutional pillars of representative democracy (Koch et al. 2023).

These expectations have been gradually confirmed by studies of single elections in specific countries (e.g., Austria, Denmark, Italy, Norway, the Netherlands), showing that lower levels of political satisfaction and trust are associated with voting for populist parties (see Bélanger and Aarts 2015; Bergh 2004; Hooghe et al. 2013; Lubbers et al. 2002; Schumacher and Rooduijn 2013).¹

If we look at more countries and elections, however, results are less consistent, raising doubts about whether populist voters are any different along levels of political support. For instance, using ESS data, and considering 18 European countries in two time periods (2002-2003 and 2008-2009)

¹ That said, we are not arguing that political distrust and dissatisfaction are the only relevant factors. Voters are attracted to populist parties also according to their positions on relevant policy issues, such as immigration or economic redistribution, depending on how these are located on the ideological spectrum (see Bélanger 2017; Kriesi and Pappas 2015).

Werts et al. 2013 we observe that political distrust is a significant predictor of voting for a radical right-wing party versus voting for another party. On the other hand, if we consider voters of populist parties in 15 countries, pooling ESS data between 2002 and 2012, Rooduijn 2018, we observe that political distrust does not always turn out to be a statistically significant condition for populist voting. At this point, it is worth noting that these contributions rely on different classifications of populist parties, and, above all, they count on varying numbers of countries and years. Thus, the overall results they provide may mask context-specific nuances, and the gap in support between populist and mainstream voters may change across countries, and, in particular, periods.

Therefore, there are good reasons for questioning whether a ‘populist voter’ exists when it comes to satisfaction with democracy and trust in representative institutions. Indeed, both indicators are evaluative dimensions of political support (Levi and Stoker 2000; van Erkel and van der Meer 2016). Satisfaction with democracy can be considered an assessment of regime procedures in practice, in which an individual balances her/his expectations against perceptions of actual performance. Political trust, instead, involves a relationship in which a citizen expects the beneficial conduct of a political agency. Therefore, it is not surprising that the two indicators tend to fluctuate over time according to contextual characteristics (e.g., Zmerli and Hooghe 2013; Martini and Quaranta 2020).

3. Electoral outcomes and the mainstream-populist gap in political support

There is upcoming research on the role of election outcomes for political attitudes among different party voters. Yet this suffers from several shortcomings.

One strand of this literature has investigated how the link between political distrust and the populist vote tends to attenuate with the inclusion of populist parties in government. In 13 Western European countries between 2002 and 2016, Kriesi and Schulte-Cloos (2021) show that political discontent increases the likelihood of voting for radical-right parties when they are in opposition.

Similarly, in 22 European political systems over the same period, Muis et al. (2022) find that the ‘protest voting’ explanation for far-right support is weaker when these parties are in government. Lastly, narrowing down the scope to the 2014 European elections in 23 European Union member states, Krause and Wagner (2019) find that the effect of perceptions of political efficacy on voting for populist parties decreases when these are established actors. One common problem of these contributions is that the vote choice, the *explanandum*, refers to a past behavior (i.e., a previous general election), and thus before the *explanans*, the political attitude being measured at the time of the survey.

Another strand, instead, assesses how populist supporters’ evaluations of the systems and its institutions (this time the outcome to be explained) change with populist parties gaining government positions (the main explanation). Therefore, it takes a different empirical strategy, accounting for the fact that the gathering of information on vote choice is antecedent to the attitude. However, these studies often rely on single countries. For example, Haugsgjerd (2019) and Juen (2024) studying respectively Norway and Austria, show that satisfaction with democracy, and political trust increase among voters for populist parties when these are part of the cabinet. Other research has taken a comparative scope, addressing a different theoretical question, that is, focusing on how the negative effect of ‘nativism’ on satisfaction with democracy and the government weakens if radical-right parties are included in governments (Harteveld et al. 2021). All in all, both lines of investigation look at the electoral outcomes almost exclusively in terms of government participation.

Given these inconsistencies, we build on the latter approach and test two alternative mechanisms explaining how electoral outcomes might affect the gap in political support between populist and mainstream party voters. Moreover, for a more comprehensive investigation, we propose to do this by considering different levels of representation – in parliament and government.

3.1. The role of representation and winning: bridging the gap?

Voters for populist parties have usually been relegated to the opposition camp, or, more generally, to the role of ‘political underdogs’ (Bélanger 2017). Therefore, there are several motives for expecting populist voters to react positively in terms of political satisfaction and trust as their parties approach power.

The first step in this direction consists of gaining seats in parliament. One expectation of voters, regardless of the party they prefer, is to see their preferences mirrored by elected politicians. This helps their ideals and values to be promoted, enabling officials to respond to their preferences through enacted policies, a key aspect of representative democracies (see Dahl 1971). Briefly put, citizens and voters are expected to perceive greater political utility from legislatures that approximate their positions on the ideological space. Cross-national research finds that the quality of representation matters for political support, especially when citizens’ ideological positions are close to or congruent with those of the elected representatives (Blais et al. 2017; Curini et al. 2012). Thus, the relationship between voting for populist parties and political satisfaction and trust should result from an interaction between demand and supply, such that we find an increase in satisfaction and trust among populist voters when the share of representatives belonging to populist parties increases, in line with instrumental reasons.

The second step in accessing democratic power is to hold positions in government, the main institution responsible for decisions to be implemented. If the difference in political satisfaction and trust between populist and mainstream voters changes when populist parties increase their share of representatives in parliament, it should change even more when they enter the cabinet. In addition to utilitarian motives, the experience of winning carries positive emotional implications in terms of individuals’ perceived opportunities to influence the political process and beliefs in a brighter future (Anderson et al. 2005; Pierce et al. 2016). Individuals, then, often need to adjust their beliefs and

opinions according to election outcomes to avoid dissonance. Therefore, reactions in terms of satisfaction and trust may result from a cognitive adjustment rather than through an evaluation of how the system and its institutions are managed (Lodge and Taber 2013).

The winner-loser electoral status is associated with differences in political attitudes (Anderson et al. 2005). Moreover, the effects of winning and losing seem to depend on the number of seats a party wins (Blais et al. 2017). In addition, voting for a party that enters government leads to a greater boost in political satisfaction and trust than voting for a party that only enters the legislature (Singh et al. 2012). In this vein, it could also be possible that voters for populist parties become more satisfied and trustful than mainstream voters when entering government, with an inversion in the sign of the gap in satisfaction and trust between the two electoral groups.

Moreover, it has been argued that an increase in satisfaction among populist voters might occur because when populist parties are in office they tend to assume more moderate positions (Haugsgjerd 2019). This is in line with studies on the strategies of populist parties in government which argue that ‘the move towards government may often coincide with the abandonment or modification of the former radical or anti-system goals responsible for the parties’ outsider status in the first place’ (McDonnell and Newell 2011: 447). As previously noticed, recent studies have shown that government inclusion of radical right parties is associated with an increase in satisfaction with democracy among their voters (Haugsgjerd 2019; Hartevelde et al. 2021; Juen 2024).

On their part, mainstream voters may follow perceived utility, becoming more dissatisfied with the democratic process and distrustful of representative institutions, since the chances of seeing their policy preferences met are reduced. Conversely, their satisfaction and trust might remain stable, following a value-based rationale. Indeed, the success of populist parties may be considered a normal procedure in the democratic game, which needs to adapt to the corrective demands of new or fringe

political actors (Bélanger 2017; Miller and Listhaug 1990; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012).

Thus, the first hypothesis anticipates that:

H1: The more seats populist parties gain in parliament/cabinet compared to mainstream parties, the narrower the gap in political support between populist voters and mainstream voters.

3.2. Power and the populists' anti-establishment character: a polarizing effect?

Following an opposite logic, there are reasons to expect populist voters to react negatively in terms of political support when their parties approach power. Indeed, populist parties and leaders may not abandon their anti-establishment character when they enter parliament. On the contrary, they might leverage on their rhetoric to mobilize political discontent and distrust. In this respect, populists use elections as a ritual to celebrate the people and to find a majority which they consider the 'good' part of society (Urbinati 2019).

When they achieve cabinet positions, they may then opt for a 'one foot in and one foot out' strategy, preserving their 'pure opposition' status, balancing ideological goals with compromise and control of office. Evidence from the cases of Austria, Italy, Poland and Hungary shows that when populist parties have held government posts, they often 'kept putting forward proposals and championing initiatives that repeatedly, consistently and purposely clashed with the fundamental tenets of liberal democracy' (Albertazzi and Mueller 2013: 346; see also McDonnell and Newell 2011). Populists usually overemphasize the principle of majority rule, discrediting the minorities (Urbinati 2019). Research has shown that right-wing populist parties in government may be associated with a deterioration of democratic quality, especially as far as institutional constraints on power are concerned (Bichay 2024).

Last but not least, when they gain power, populists tend towards a permanent mobilization of the people's opinion in support of their leader in government, trying to reinvent their antielite discourse as they become part of the system themselves.²

We know that partisan preferences provide a perceptual screen through which people filter political information (Green et al. 2002; Lodge and Taber 2013). More importantly, people often use political heuristics and information shortcuts to overcome limited information and make decisions in complex environments (Lupia et al. 2000). This often takes the form of party endorsements to form opinions on the functioning of the system and to have a baseline from which to judge the trustworthiness of the political elites (Bullock 2019; see also Torcal et al. 2024). Thus, voters for populist parties may be attentive to anti-establishment messages which will reinforce their gloomy image of a corrupt elite. In this regard, voting for populist parties might be associated with an increase in political dissatisfaction and distrust leading to a spiral of disenchantment (van der Brug 2003). Research on Belgium and the Netherlands has in fact shown that distrust and protest voting reinforce one another (Hooghe and Dassonneville 2018; Rooduijn et al. 2016; van der Brug 2003). In light of this, despite the possible instrumental and cognitive effects of gaining representation and power in the political sphere, populist voters may see their political support decrease as their parties perform better.

At this point, it is worth noting that not only may populist parties maintain their antiestablishment character while they have government responsibilities, but their success also pushes mainstream parties to adopt more radical policy positions such that party system transformation is driven by a

² Examples are Viktor Orbán, who has often indicated as the corrupt elite the 'European Union' or 'George Soros'; Silvio Berlusconi, for whom the conspiring elite was the 'former communists' or the 'judges'. The 5-Star Movement targets the 'corrupt political class', responsible for exploiting Italy.

strategic interaction between party competitors (Abou-Chadi and Krause 2020). This might reduce the possible disadvantages in terms of policy gains experienced by mainstream voters from losing representation in the main democratic arenas.

Alternatively, with populists threatening the physiology of democratic systems by targeting representative institutions with either actual policies or blame-shifting rhetoric, mainstream voters may respond as ‘true’ defendants of the status-quo. Thus, their evaluations of democracy and representative democratic institutions may remain steady or decline marginally less than those of populist voters. Following this line of reasoning, we might expect an alternative path for the relationship between election outcomes and the gap in political support between populist and mainstream voters. Thus, in a second hypothesis we anticipate a possible polarization effect, that is:

H2: The more seats populist parties gain in parliament/cabinet compared to mainstream parties, the larger the gap in political support between populist voters and mainstream voters.

4. Research design

We test our hypotheses with a twofold design. We first take a comparative view by using a repeated cross-sectional analysis using the European Social Survey (ESS), allowing us to assess gaps in the political support of our two groups of voters along the electoral performance of mainstream and populist parties across time and countries. We then complement this with a panel analysis of data from the Longitudinal Internet studies for the Social Sciences (LISS) conducted in the Netherlands. This enables us to zoom into a specific country context and evaluate changes in attitudes at the individual level.

4.1. Repeated cross-sectional analysis

In our repeated cross-sectional analysis, we pooled 9 rounds of the ESS.³ The ESS includes variables measuring attitudes to political institutions and vote choices covering the period 2002 to 2019. We use 167 surveys from 22 countries (Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom), which are selected according to: a) presence of populist parties among the vote choices in each ESS survey for the country; b) availability of the country for at least four rounds of the ESS.

4.1.1. Dependent variables

The dependent variables are indicators of political satisfaction and trust used in the literature on political support. This concept can be applied to several political objects – community, regime, authorities – and it might refer to different types of attitudes, such as evaluations of the performance and output of the system, i.e., specific support, or affective beliefs, i.e., diffuse support (see Dalton 2004; Easton 1975). As stated above, we use indicators as part of the evaluative dimension of political support, covering judgments ranging from assessments of the functioning of the system in general to trust in specific institutions and authorities.

We use an indicator measuring the extent to which respondents are satisfied with the way democracy works in their country on a scale from 0 (not at all) to 10 (extremely satisfied). We then use two indicators measuring trust in national parliaments and politicians to gauge evaluations of a core institution in representative democracies and its actors. Parliaments and politicians have been targets of populist parties, which they often attack for being ‘corrupt’ or ‘not responsive to the citizens’

³ See Tables A1 in the Appendix for the data sources.

(see Vidal 2017). The indicators of political trust are measured on a scale from 0 (no trust at all) to 10 (complete trust).

4.1.2. Explanatory variables

Our main explanatory factor is measured at the individual level and is the *vote choice*. We distinguish between respondents who voted for a ‘populist party’ versus a ‘mainstream party’ in the previous general election. The voting choice is temporally antecedent to satisfaction and trust as this information refers to a choice made by the respondent in the past. This offers a reliable test of how the electoral status is associated with attitudes measured at the time of the survey. Populist parties and their voters are identified according to the PopuList database (Rooduijn et al. 2024), which relies on the Expert-Informed Qualitative Comparative Classification method to identify populist parties in Europe, including parties that either won at least one seat or at least 2 percent of the votes in one national parliamentary election over the 1989-2022 period. Mainstream parties and voters, instead, are those referring to the traditional established party families (i.e., Christian Democratic, Conservative, Liberal or Social Democratic parties). Lastly, non-mainstream, non-populist party voters are not considered in the main analysis (i.e., green, regionalist, or non-populist radical-left parties).⁴

We then consider two time-varying country characteristics: a) the percentages of seats held by *populist* and *mainstream* parties in each legislature, and b) the percentages of seats held by *populist* and *mainstream* parties in each cabinet in office before the beginning of the ESS data collection in each country (so as to link this information to the individual data). To calculate the percentage of seats held by populist or mainstream parties in each cabinet we divide the number of their seats by

⁴ See Appendix A for the classification of parties.

the number of seats held by all parties which are part of the cabinet. Therefore, if the score is 0, then there are no populist or mainstream parties in a cabinet. Conversely, if it is 100, the cabinet is formed by only populist or mainstream parties (the same applies in the case of the parliament). Both are calculated using the ParlGov database (Doering et al. 2023).⁵

As the percentages of seats (in the parliament or cabinet) held by mainstream and populist parties are not independent, we compute the difference between these percentages. This measure ranges theoretically from -100 (parliaments or cabinets completely formed by mainstream parties) to 100 (parliaments or cabinets completely formed by populist parties).

4.1.3. Control variables

Individual-level control variables are selected according to the literature on political support and populist voting (see Dalton 2004; Lubbers et al. 2002; Rooduijn 2018). These are: gender, age, education in years, employment status, feelings about household income, a summary measure of attitudes towards immigration, the left-right scale and political interest. Individual-level controls included in the models minimize a potential confounding effect of the changing compositions of the two voter groups.⁶

At the contextual-level, we also include variables controlling for political and populist party support (see Ageberg 2017; Burgoon et al. 2018; Kriesi and Pappas 2015; van Erkel and van der Meer 2016; Wagner et al. 2009). We use the unemployment rate to control for macro-economic conditions (International Monetary Fund 2024); an index that takes the mean of three indicators from the

⁵ We considered only the parties available as party choices in the ESS.

⁶ The description of the individual-level variables and their descriptive statistics are reported in Tables A1 and A3 in the Appendix.

Worldwide Governance Indicators (Kaufmann and Kraay 2023) – government effectiveness, rule of law and control of corruption – to assess the ‘quality of government’ (QoG); the Gini index to account for income inequality (Solt 2020) and, to control for the role of the institutional structure, the ‘executive-parties’ dimension as in Lijphart (1999) and provided in Armingeon et al. (2023).⁷

4.1.4. Model

The structure of the data entails that respondents are nested in surveys (i.e., country-years), which are nested in countries and years. The format of the data requires a hierarchical (multilevel) model (see Gelman and Hill 2006) specified as follows:

$$y_{ij} = \alpha_j + \beta_j \text{vote choice}_{ij} + \epsilon \quad (1)$$

$$\alpha_j = \mu_\alpha + \gamma_1 \text{Seats share difference}_j + \gamma_2 \text{Unemployment}_j + \gamma_3 \text{QoG}_j + \gamma_4 \text{Gini index}_j + \gamma_5 \text{Executive-parties index}_j + \delta_k^{(\alpha)} + \delta_t^{(\alpha)} + u^{(\alpha)} \quad (2)$$

$$\beta_j = \mu_\beta + v_1 \text{Seats share difference}_j + v_2 \text{Unemployment}_j + v_3 \text{QoG}_j + v_4 \text{Gini index}_j + v_5 \text{Executive-parties index}_j + \delta_k^{(\beta)} + \delta_t^{(\beta)} + u^{(\beta)} \quad (3)$$

Equation (1) represents the individual level. The term y_{ij} indicates the dependent variables for individual i in country-year (i.e., survey) j – that is, a combination of country k and year t . The term α_j indicates the variation in y across country-years. The coefficient β_j captures the effect of the vote choice, and it varies across the j country-years. The term represents the difference in y between respondents who voted for mainstream parties vs. populist parties across country-years. The term β

⁷ These variables are included in the models one year lagged. The description of the varying contextual-level variables and their descriptive statistics are reported in Tables A2 and A3 in the Appendix.

represents the fixed coefficients of the individual-level control variables x . The term ϵ represents the residual with σ_ϵ as its standard deviation.

Equations (2) and (3) represent the contextual level. The terms α_j and β_j are random effects capturing the variation in the intercepts (i.e., levels of y) and slopes (i.e., differences in y between voters for mainstream parties vs. populist parties over time). The variations are modelled using linear combinations of the terms μ_α and μ_β (the overall levels in y among those who voted for mainstream parties, and the overall difference in y for those who voted for populist parties), and the same set of time-varying variables (i.e. ‘Seats share difference’ and controls) with their coefficients γ (for the intercepts) and ν (for the slopes).

To remove the variation across countries and years in the intercepts and in the slopes and to account for time-invariant and country-invariant unobserved factors (Allison 2009), we include country ($\delta_k^{(\alpha)}$ and $\delta_k^{(\beta)}$) and year ($\delta_t^{(\alpha)}$ and $\delta_t^{(\beta)}$) fixed-effects.⁸ The terms $u^{(\alpha)}$ and $u^{(\beta)}$ in equations (2) and (3) represent the country-year-level residuals for intercepts and random slopes with $\sigma_{u^{(\alpha)}}$ and $\sigma_{u^{(\beta)}}$ as their standard deviations.

Combining the three equations we obtain a two-level multilevel model with cross-level interactions. This means that not only do we include the cross-level interaction between vote choice and the seats difference, but also between the vote choice and all time-varying variables, including the country and the time fixed-effects. Such a model allows us to test our hypotheses – whether the difference in attitudes between populist and mainstream voters varies according to within-country changes in seats share between the two groups of parties in Europe. This is similar to a model for panel data (i.e., respondents observed over time) but it is applied to repeated cross-sectional data (Bell and Jones 2015).

⁸ These are a set of dichotomous indicators for $k - 1$ countries and for $t - 1$ years.

4.1.5. *Robustness tests*

In Appendix B we present the results of additional models to test the robustness of the results. First, the seats share might not reflect the votes parties received at the elections, given the variety of electoral laws in a comparative setting, in particular when electoral laws are disproportional. One way of accounting for this issue is controlling for the institutional setting, as we did by including the executive-parties dimension following Lijphart (1999), as this capture consensual vs. majoritarian systems that are characterized by more proportional vs. disproportional electoral laws. However, the seats share might not be perceived by citizens as easily as the votes share obtained by the parties at the elections. Indeed, citizens' perception of how votes are converted in seats might change according to the context (see Plescia et al. 2020).

Therefore, the models were also estimated including indices computed using the votes shares. These models are presented in Table B1 and show that the results are similar to those presented in this article. Second, we estimated models including a dichotomous variable capturing the effect of the presence of populist parties in the cabinet (Table B2), to assess the role of the simple inclusion of populist parties in cabinets. Third, to make sure no countries are driving the results we ran additional models excluding from them one country at a time (Tables B3 and B4). Fourth, we estimated models including an additional category for the excluded parties that are labelled 'other parties' (non-populist non-mainstream parties) to show that the effect of seats share does not affect the satisfaction and trust of those who voted for such parties (Table B5). Fifth, we ran models excluding left-wing populist parties (Table B6) to make sure that results were not driven by such parties. Fifth, we ran the models including the survey weights (Table B7). Eventually, to test for potential heterogeneous effects we estimated models including an interaction term between the seats share difference and a dichotomous variable for Eastern vs. Western countries (Table B8). Although, there are some heterogeneities in the

effects of seats share difference (in parliament or cabinet) on the gaps in satisfaction and trust among groups of voters, such effects are statistically significant in both geographical areas.

Figure B1 in Appendix B reports the marginal effects.

4.2. Panel data analysis

A repeated cross-section analysis provides a comparative and temporally informed picture of how the presence of populist parties in parliaments and cabinets may affect populist voters' democratic satisfaction and political trust. Nevertheless, this design does not allow us to study individual change in attitudes of voters. A remedy for this issue is to use longitudinal panel data. Such data track satisfaction with democracy and political trust 'within' individuals and allows testing whether these attitudes change as a consequence of the vote choice and the electoral performance of the party voted for by the individual. This analysis would provide additional evidence on individual changes in attitudes due to electoral outcomes.

For the panel analysis, we use the LISS. This is a relatively long panel survey (waves 1–13, 2007-2021, 'Politics and Values' core study) including a large number of individuals (about 11,000) conducted in a country – the Netherlands – where populist parties are part of the national parliament (Party for Freedom, PVV, and the Socialist Party, SP). During the period of the panel, the PVV provided confidence and supply to the First Rutte minority cabinet (in October 2010) (van Holsteyn 2014). This case study – a populist party joining a minority government and not taking direct responsibility for cabinet positions – provides a more conservative test compared to when a populist party fully joins a cabinet.

The dependent variables are the same as those used in the ESS data. We use satisfaction with democracy, trust (confidence) in parliament and trust (confidence) in politicians, all measured from 0 (very dissatisfied/no confidence at all) to 10 (very satisfied/full confidence).

The independent variables of interest are the following. We use the recalled vote choice (whether the respondent has voted for the PVV or the SP vs. a mainstream party) so as to capture the gap in satisfaction and trust between voters for mainstream vs. populist parties. To measure the strength of each party in the national parliament and in cabinets we matched the seats share of each party to the respondent's vote choice (see Blais et al. 2017). To test whether the gap in satisfaction and trust among populist voters changes as populist parties gain seats (in parliament or cabinet) we include an interaction term between the vote choice and the percentage of seats.

Finally, we include the following control variables: left-right scale, political interest, attitudes towards income inequality and attitudes towards foreigners. The model setup recalls the hierarchical model, except for the data (repeated cross-national cross-section vs. national panel data). We use fixed-effects so that the unvarying characteristics of the individuals are accounted for and varying characteristics capture within-individual effects (Allison 2009).

5. Findings

5.1. Repeated cross-sectional analysis

Table 1 reports the effects of vote choice and the seats share difference on satisfaction with democracy, trust in parliament and in politicians, controlling for the individual, time varying variables, countries and time fixed-effects. The models include random-intercepts and random coefficients for the effect of the vote choice (mainstream vs. populist). This means that the coefficients vary across country-years. The estimates reported in the table are thus the overall means of the levels of the dependent variables (i.e., satisfaction and trust among mainstream party voters) and the overall effect of the populist party vote choice (i.e., the difference in satisfaction and trust between mainstream and populist party voters).

The models show that across countries and years in Europe, voters for populist parties have consistently lower levels of satisfaction and trust compared to voters for mainstream parties. In the case of satisfaction with democracy the difference is about 0.543, while in the case of trust in the national parliament it is about 0.6. The difference in trust in politicians is slightly smaller: about 0.483. The models indicate that the differences between groups of voters seem to be quite important considering that the scales range is from 0 to 10. The inclusion of either the seats share difference in parliament or cabinet makes little difference to the gap in satisfaction and trust between voters, as coefficients in the models predicting the same dependent variables are almost the same.

Table 1: Two-level hierarchical models predicting satisfaction with democracy, trust in parliament and trust in politicians in 22 European countries, 2002–2019. Baseline models.

	Sat. democracy		Tr. parliament		Tr. politicians	
	Parliament	Cabinet	Parliament	Cabinet	Parliament	Cabinet
Intercept	5.041*** (0.210)	5.022*** (0.207)	4.460*** (0.207)	4.450*** (0.204)	3.225*** (0.181)	3.246*** (0.179)
Populist party vote	-0.543*** (0.065)	-0.544*** (0.065)	-0.597*** (0.062)	-0.597*** (0.062)	-0.483*** (0.048)	-0.483*** (0.048)
Seats share difference	0.001 (0.002)	0.002* (0.001)	0.001 (0.002)	0.002* (0.001)	0.003 (0.002)	0.002** (0.001)
<i>Country-year-level controls</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>Country and year fixed-effects</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>Individual-level controls</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Random effects						
$\sigma_u^{(\alpha)}$	0.402	0.436	0.373	0.403	0.304	0.317
$\sigma_u^{(\beta)}$	0.792	0.790	0.756	0.753	0.573	0.572
σ_ϵ	2.031	2.031	2.100	2.100	2.002	2.002
<i>N</i>	154183	154183	155111	155111	155263	155263
<i>Country-years</i>	167	167	167	167	167	167

Note. Sig: *** = $p \leq 0.001$, ** = $p \leq 0.01$, * = $p \leq 0.05$. Standard errors in parentheses, continuous variables are centered around the mean.

The coefficient capturing the effect of the seats share difference has a positive sign and, on some occasions, this is statistically significant. When the share of seats in cabinet moves in favor of populist parties (thus, they increase their seats share at the expense of mainstream parties) the *overall* level of

satisfaction with democracy, trust in parliament and politicians increases. This provides already some indications that when populist parties enter a cabinet their voters might be more satisfied or trustful, while mainstream voters might be less satisfied or trustful, yet to a lesser extent. This way the number of satisfied and trustful respondents increases, as a group of individuals who were once dissatisfied and distrustful are now less so.

As mentioned above, the effect of vote choice varies across country and years. The amount of variation is indicated by the standard deviations of the random slopes for satisfaction with democracy, trust in parliament and trust in politicians ($\sigma_u^{(\beta)}$) at the bottom of Table 1. These suggest that the effects of voting for populist parties rather than mainstream parties on the dependent variables vary substantially. How can such a variation be explained?

Table 2 reports the models predicting the variation in both random intercepts (i.e., satisfaction and trust among mainstream party voters) and slopes (i.e., the difference in satisfaction and trust between mainstream and populist party voters). Starting from models which account for representation in parliament, we can observe that the variable measuring the difference in the share of seats between populist and mainstream parties does not affect the satisfaction with democracy, trust in parliament and in politicians of respondents who voted for mainstream parties. In contrast, as the seats share difference increases (i.e., populist parties gain seats) the satisfaction with democracy, trust in parliament and in politicians of respondents who voted for populist parties increases by 0.018, 0.018 and 0.010, respectively. This means that trust in parliament among voters of populist parties, for example, increases, on average, by about 1.8 points when a parliament with previously only mainstream party representatives (Seats share difference = -100) becomes one where the populist party representatives equal those of mainstream parties (Seats share difference = 0).

Turning our attention to the models which account for cabinets, the seats share difference indicates that when populist parties gain seats at the expense of mainstream parties, mainstream party voters

tend to be less satisfied with democracy and have less trust in parliament. Instead, voters for populist parties see their satisfaction with democracy and their trust in parliament and in politicians increasing by 0.012, 0.011 and 0.007, respectively. These results imply that, for instance, the levels of satisfaction with democracy among voters for populist parties increase by 1.2 points when the majority supporting the cabinet, from containing only mainstream party representatives (Seats share difference = -100) becomes one where these are just as many populist party representatives (Seats share difference = 0). The satisfaction levels further increase by 1.2 points if the majority is made up of only populist party representatives (Seats share difference = +100).

Table 2: Two-level hierarchical models predicting satisfaction with democracy, trust in parliament and trust in politicians in 22 European countries, 2002–2019. Models predicting random-intercepts and random-slopes by means of time varying-variables and country and year fixed-effects.

	Sat. democracy		Tr. parliament		Tr. politicians	
	Parliament	Cabinet	Parliament	Cabinet	Parliament	Cabinet
Mainstream party vote						
Intercept	5.221*** (0.229)	5.170*** (0.220)	4.571*** (0.217)	4.530*** (0.213)	3.276*** (0.184)	3.293*** (0.183)
Seats share difference	-0.004 (0.002)	-0.003** (0.001)	-0.003 (0.002)	-0.002* (0.001)	0.002 (0.002)	0.000 (0.001)
Country-year-level controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Country and year fixed-effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Populist party vote						
Intercept	-1.261*** (0.379)	-0.983*** (0.251)	-1.144*** (0.335)	-0.888*** (0.228)	-0.881*** (0.261)	-0.772*** (0.193)
Seats share difference	0.018*** (0.004)	0.012*** (0.001)	0.018*** (0.003)	0.011*** (0.001)	0.010*** (0.002)	0.007*** (0.001)
Country-year-level controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Country and year fixed-effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Individual-level controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Random effects						
$\sigma_u^{(\alpha)}$	0.378	0.367	0.356	0.353	0.299	0.300
$\sigma_u^{(\beta)}$	0.583	0.361	0.500	0.312	0.371	0.248
σ_ϵ	2.031	2.031	2.100	2.100	2.002	2.002
<i>N</i>	154183	154183	155111	155111	155263	155263
Surveys	167	167	167	167	167	167

Note. Sig: *** = $p \leq 0.001$, ** = $p \leq 0.01$, * = $p \leq 0.05$. Standard errors in parentheses, continuous variables are centered around the mean.

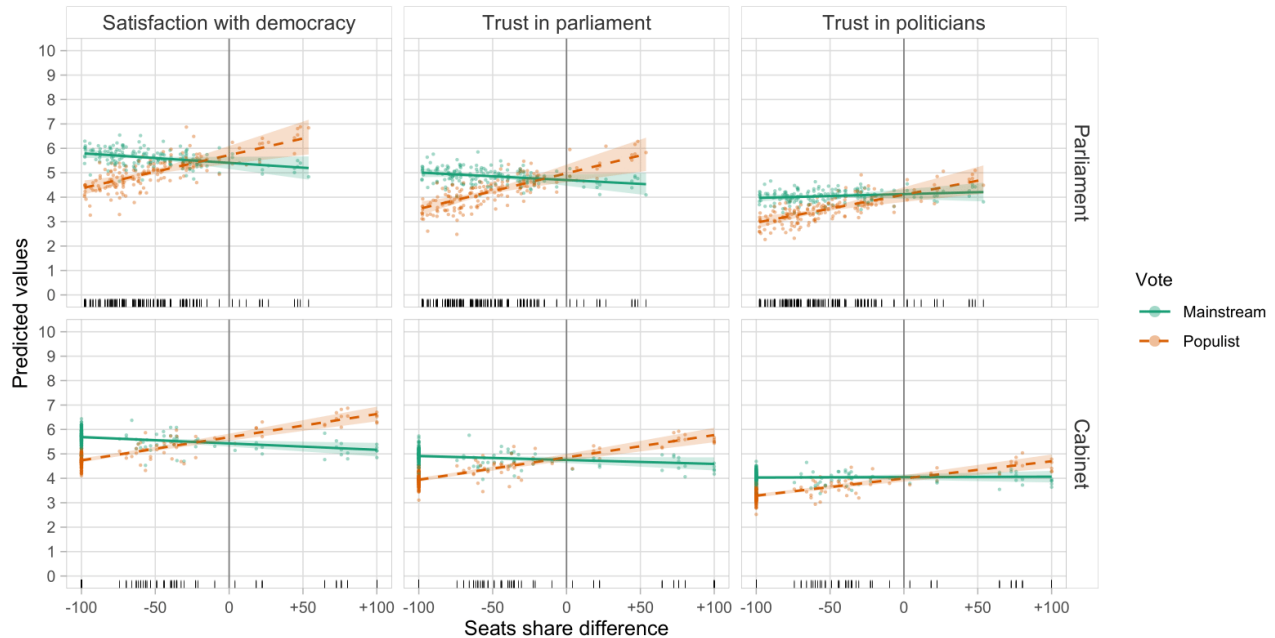
Thus, it seems that voters for populist parties gain satisfaction and trust when their parties increase their share of seats in parliaments and join cabinets. On the other hand, the satisfaction and trust of voters for mainstream parties does not suffer when populist parties become more successful in parliaments, but it does when they are part of the government.

To better illustrate these findings, we can consider Figure 1 which reports the levels of satisfaction with democracy and political trust among populist and mainstream party voters by the seat differences between populist and mainstream parties in parliaments and cabinets over time and across countries. The top panels in Figure 1 show that as the seat difference in parliament goes in favor of populist parties the gap in satisfaction between voters shrinks significantly.

Therefore, when in the parliament there are only mainstream parties (Seats difference = -100), the differences in satisfaction and trust range between about 2 and 1.5 points; when populists increase their presence in parliament and become the majority (Seats difference > 0), these differences switch signs. In contrast, the satisfaction and trust of mainstream voters are unaffected by the weakening presence of mainstream parties.

The bottom-panels in Figure 1 show that the more populist parties are part of a cabinet over time compared to mainstream parties, the higher the levels of satisfaction and trust of their voters. Unlike the case of parliament, we see that the more populists have weight in cabinets, the more voters for mainstream parties become dissatisfied with democracy. Mainstream voters might react negatively for several reasons compounding the emotional and cognitive effects of losing their pivotal role, with a decrease in perceived policy utility. In this case, the results show the importance of becoming part of a ruling majority, increasing political satisfaction and trust among citizens that sustain the parties in the winning camp, while depressing support among losers.

Figure 1: Satisfaction with democracy, trust in parliament and trust in politicians of voters for populist and mainstream parties by the difference between the percentage of seats held by populist parties and mainstream parties in national parliaments and cabinets, with 95% confidence intervals.



Note: Based on the estimates reported in Table 1.

In sum, these results tell us that the dissatisfaction and distrust of voters for populist parties may derive from a lack of parliamentary representation and cabinet positions. Thus, when these two elements become a reality, we see an increase in political satisfaction and trust among these voters, bridging the gap in support between populist and mainstream voters. We note that our results hold after controlling for the relevant socio-demographic and attitudinal features of respondents, as well as contextual heterogeneity via time and country fixed effects, ruling out potential compositional effects. Overall, our repeated cross-section analysis provides support for our first hypothesis (H1) while disconfirming the second hypothesis (H2).

5.2. Panel data analysis

Table 3 reports the estimates of the fixed-effects models for the Netherlands. It shows that the effect of the percentage of seats held in parliament by a mainstream party does not affect a respondent's satisfaction with democracy, while only marginally positively affecting confidence in parliament and in politicians (respectively by 0.010 and 0.009). In contrast, not only do populist party voters have much lower levels of satisfaction and confidence (-0.371 , -0.531 , -0.515), but as the percentage of seats held by populist parties increases, the levels in satisfaction and trust increase to a much greater extent compared to those of mainstream party voters. This means that as populist parties gain seats in parliament, the satisfaction with democracy and confidence in parliament and parties among populist voters rises more than among mainstream voters. For instance, the satisfaction with democracy of a voter for a mainstream party which wins 5% of seats is equal to 6.33, while the satisfaction of a voter for a populist party which also wins 5% of seats is equal to 6.05. As the percentage of seats of the voted party increases to, let us assume, 15%, the satisfaction of a mainstream party voter becomes 6.34, while that of a populist party voter rises to 6.24.

Table 3: Fixed-effects panel models predicting satisfaction with democracy, trust in parliament and trust in politicians in the Netherlands, 2007–2021.

	Sat. democracy		Tr. parliament		Tr. politicians	
	Parliament	Cabinet	Parliament	Cabinet	Parliament	Cabinet
Populist vote	-0.371*** (0.053)	-0.185*** (0.027)	-0.531*** (0.055)	-0.089** (0.027)	-0.515*** (0.054)	-0.095*** (0.027)
Seats share	0.001 (0.001)	0.001** (0.000)	0.010*** (0.001)	0.006*** (0.000)	0.009*** (0.001)	0.006*** (0.000)
Populist vote × Seats share	0.018*** (0.004)	0.011*** (0.002)	0.039*** (0.004)	0.023*** (0.002)	0.038*** (0.004)	0.023*** (0.002)
<i>Control variables</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>N</i>	48019	48019	48227	48227	48727	48727
Individuals	10989	10989	11024	11024	11081	11081

Note. Sig: *** = $p \leq 0.001$, ** = $p \leq 0.01$, * = $p \leq 0.05$. Standard errors in parentheses.

Being in office positively affects the satisfaction with democracy, and trust in parliament and politicians of mainstream party voters, yet if a respondent voted for a populist party which supports the government, their increase in satisfaction and trust is much higher than for mainstream party voters (respectively, +0.011, +0.023 and +0.023). Thus, when a populist party is in the majority – as occurred in the Netherlands with the PVV providing confidence and supply to the First Rutte cabinet – the voters for this party see their political support increasing to a larger extent compared to the individuals who voted for the mainstream parties in the cabinet. This means, in short, that being in power has a stronger effect on the satisfaction and trust of populist voters than mainstream voters. Also in this case, the analysis provides support for a positive direct effect of election outcomes on the political support of populist voters and of a moderation effect when it comes to the gap, which narrows as populists approximate representation and power.

6. Conclusions

The last few years have seen the rise of a wave of politics focused on anti-establishment rhetoric, popular sovereignty and a confrontational view of the relationship between political groups (Mudde 2007; Hawkins et al. 2018). The dissent of populist parties to mechanisms of liberal democracy embodied by representative institutions has led scholars to explain this outburst by looking at the correlation between political dissatisfaction and distrust, on the one hand, and voting for populist parties, on the other. The underlying idea is that voters for populist parties are more politically dissatisfied and distrustful than voters for mainstream parties (Bélanger 2017).

Building on previous studies on the topic (Haugsgjerd 2019; Hartevelde et al. 2021; Juen 2024), this article argues that the gap in support between the two types of voters may hinge on election outcomes, and tests two alternative explanations concerning this link which are currently prominent in the populist literature. A winner-loser argument posits that the political satisfaction and trust of

populist voters should increase as their parties gain representation and power, reducing the gap in support as compared to mainstream voters. In line with a spiral of distrust rationale, instead, this should magnify as voters for populist parties would become more dissatisfied and distrustful.

To test these hypotheses, we used two empirical strategies. The first analysis was based on a large comparative and diachronic dataset of 22 European countries. This analysis found that a difference in political satisfaction and trust between populist voters and mainstream voters exists in European countries, although this varies across countries and over time. Such a difference changes when populist parties gain seats in parliament and in cabinets because populist voters improve their evaluations of democracy and its institutions while mainstream voters lower theirs, producing a turnover in the levels of satisfaction and trust. Given some limitations of the repeated cross-sectional survey data, the second empirical strategy used panel data from the Netherlands to study the individual-level change in the relationship between voting, political satisfaction and trust. This analysis provides confirmation of a positive effect of election outcomes on the political support of populist voters. It is worth noting that the examined case study – the First Rutte minority government – provides a conservative test. Thus, we expect our findings to apply to other contexts and with more favorable conditions for populist voters (i.e., joining a government with cabinet responsibility either as junior or major partner). It should also be said that although panel fixed-effects models are designed to reduce the omitted variable bias, as more variation is present within units than between them, such an issue is not completely removed, as variables varying over time might not have been included in the models (see Hill et al. 2020). Therefore, while the panel data analysis provides further confirmation of the findings of the comparative analysis, it should be acknowledged that it does not represent, of course, a complete test and therefore we encourage further research on the topic.

This article provides important contributions to the literature on voting, populism and political support. First, it shows that when it comes to satisfaction and trust, populists might be (or might have

been) losers in disguise. Therefore, similar to any other voter (e.g., Rooduijn et al. 2017; Rooduijn 2018; Dassonneville and McAllister 2023), they tend to show lower political satisfaction and trust when they are excluded from democratic arenas, while they recover them as they approximate representation and power, likely due to both instrumental and emotional reasons. This way, our finding provides support for the winner-loser argument (Anderson et al. 2005; Blais et al. 2017) over the spiral of distrust hypotheses (van der Brug 2003; Hooghe and Dassonneville 2018) by means of a twofold strategy which assessed the problem comparatively, considering a sizeable number of countries over more than fifteen years and a longitudinal panel analysis on a single country ranging over a similar time span.

Moreover, our findings speak to the literature on the implications of elections and party competition vis-à-vis political support (Hooghe 2017). In this respect, populist parties, at least given the spatial and temporal characteristics of our design, seem to act as a safety valve for political discontent (Miller and Listhaug 1990), such that the electoral mechanisms and the competition among parties contribute to correct the deficit in political support among voters. Additionally, an interesting by-product of our analysis is that, overall, we show an increase in satisfaction with democracy and institutional trust when populists achieve cabinet influence, since a not negligible segment of previously detached voters (re-)gain political representation.

Finally, the article emphasizes the role of partisan preferences in political attitudes across different groups of citizens (see Hetherington and Rudolph 2018). If an increase in trust and satisfaction is the result of a psychological adjustment due to a better representation both in parliament and in government, then we should wonder whether this is a real improvement in the judgement of the actual functioning of democracy and its institutions, or, instead the result of biased attitude formation alone. For this reason, whether or not our findings are good for democracy is hard to know, as this depends on the extent to which populist voters share democratic values and a liberal view of democracy,

something that future research should explore in depth. More relevantly, this will depend on what the parties they vote for actually do in terms of policies.

Data availability statement

Replication files are available from the Open Science Foundation platform at: <https://osf.io/6k8mn/>

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