Electoral Studies 81 (2023) 102574

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Electoral Studies

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/electstud

I want to believe: The relationship between conspiratorial beliefs and populist attitudes in Spain

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Populism
Manicheism
Conspiratorial beliefs
Experimental data
Spain

ABSTRACT

While research on the relationship between conspiratorial beliefs and populist attitudes has expanded over the years, concerns about causality in said relationship have not been successfully addressed. This research uses a two-pronged methodology combining observational and experimental data to put to empirical test the possibility that conspiratorial thinking breeds populist attitudes relying on Spain as a case study. A first study uses an online survey (N = 2887) to test how conspiratorial thinking covaries with the different dimensions of populist attitudes, accounting for the most likely confounders in this relationship. Results show that conspiratorial thinking and populist attitudes are associated even when considering potential spurious variables. We next use an online experiment (N = 537) in which we expose a randomly selected group to a vignette on three 9/11 conspiratorial stories, then they are asked about their populist attitudes. Our results lend credence to the literature pointing that conspiratorial beliefs led people to develop only one dimension of populist attitudes, the Manichean outlook.

1. Introduction

Both academic interest in populism and public concerns about it have grown over the last few years, leading scholars to suggest some new explanatory factors for this phenomenon. If we define populism as the belief that society is ultimately separated into two groups, the good people and the corrupt elite, and that politics should be an expression of the general will (Mudde, 2004), one of the newest and most intriguing potential causes of it are conspiratorial beliefs (i.e. an individual's beliefs in specific conspiracy theories, see Uscinski et al., 2016). Nevertheless, the relationship between the two phenomena is far from clear.

While some authors claim that both phenomena belong to the same underlying construct or are the product of the same explanatory factors (Castanho Silva et al., 2017; Ylä-Anttila, 2018), others suggest that the rhetoric used by populist parties makes their audiences more likely to develop conspiratorial beliefs (Müller, 2016; Oliver and Rahn, 2016; van Prooijen et al., 2015). Finally, other scholars point out that the success of populism is actually due to the popularisation of conspiracy theories (Mancosu et al., 2017; van Prooijen, 2018), which are able to marshal support for populist leaders and parties (Taggart and Pirro, 2021). Robust evidence sustaining the causal effect that goes from conspiratorial beliefs (henceforth CB) to populist attitudes is scant (but see Hameleers, 2021), and it seldom covers the subdimensions of populism: people-centrism, anti-elitism and Manicheism (e.g. Salvati et al., 2022). Given the moralistic, antagonistic common ground shared by both conspiratorial beliefs and Manicheism, in this paper we contend that conspiratorial beliefs can precede and spur populist attitudes, and that this effect is especially relevant in the Manichean populist subdimension.

To test this proposition, we rely on a two-pronged methodology that combines observational and experimental data. The observational study aims to prove that conspiratorial thinking and populist attitudes covary, and that this variation is not due to a spurious relationship driven by some confounding factor. The relationship is then further put to empirical test by means of an experimental study. The experiment randomly exposes a sample of Spanish adults to three conspiratorial stories about the 9/11 terrorist attacks, which we expect to boost conspiratorial beliefs and, ultimately, to spur higher levels of populist attitudes.

Our research makes an effort to systematise measures of both CB and populist attitudes, instead of focusing on the electoral success of populist parties, as most previous research do. In addition, this research complements previous work on CB, which has been very much focused on countries where populism tends to lean towards the right of the

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https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2022.102574
Received 28 March 2022; Received in revised form 14 December 2022; Accepted 15 December 2022
Available online 21 December 2022

ideological spectrum. For this, we use data from Spain; a country that provides a wide range of populist attitudes that span the ideological spectrum; unlike data used in previous research, these include left-leaning populist attitudes, for which there is very little research on CB.

The results of our observational study confirm that conspiratorial thinking and populist attitudes do indeed covary and that this relationship holds even after controlling for potential confounders. The results of the experimental study suggest that being exposed to conspiracy stories breeds conspiratorial beliefs, which can ultimately trigger populist attitudes—although this effect might be limited to only one populist dimension: Manicheism.

2. Populist attitudes and conspiratorial beliefs

Most political behaviour scholars follow the ideational approach to populism (Hawkins and Rovira-Kaltwasser, 2019), which understands populism as a thin-centred ideology that conceives the "people" as a pure group that pursues the "common will", in opposition to the corrupt elite (Mudde, 2004). Multidimensional approaches to the study of populist attitudes identify three pillars within the construct of populism (Akkerman et al., 2014). The first is *people-centrism*, relying on the idea that popular sovereignty is the ultimate democratic value and that the people are those that should hold the power. The second is *anti-elitism*, characterised by a rejection of individuals and institutions that hold power. Finally, *Manicheism* implies conceiving the world in a polarised way: while the people are seen as homogenous and virtuous, the elite is "bad" (Rooduijn and Akkerman, 2017, p. 23). Notoriously, despite long been considered a component of populist attitudes, whether this belongs to the populist latent construct has seldom been tested empirically (Castanho Silva et al., 2019).

Typical populists are men with low levels of education who are not middle-aged (Arzheimer, 2009). Low levels of political trust and external political efficacy—yet high levels of internal political efficacy (Rico et al., 2019a)—have also been found to partly explain populist attitudes (Akkerman et al., 2017; Spruyt et al., 2016). A recent fruitful research strand examines the psychological underpinnings of populist attitudes, such as emotions (Rico et al., 2017) and personality traits (Bakker et al., 2016; Galais and Rico, 2021). Among other relevant psychological correlates of populist attitudes, scholars have considered authoritarianism (for a review, see Hawkins et al., 2012) and grievances (Rico et al., 2020; Spruyt et al., 2016). In addition, cognitive styles have been linked to populist attitudes, given that the populist style often reflects a relatively simplistic Manichean worldview that is associated with a less critical evaluation of epistemic claims (Barkun, 2013; Erisen et al., 2021; Giry, 2016; van Prooijen et al., 2022). Finally, recent work from Erisen et al. (2021) has shown that populist attitudes are negatively related to a high need for cognition.

Within this literature, one explanatory factor stands out for its novelty, but also because its relationship with populism is far from clear: beliefs in conspiracy theories (Bergmann, 2018; Castanho Silva et al., 2017; Golec de Zavala, 2020; Hameleers, 2021; Oliver and Rahn, 2016; B. T. Rutjens and Brandt, 2018; van Prooijen, 2018). Conspiracy theories are stories or narratives that allude to the collusion of some actors in the pursuit of a goal that is seen as being against the common good (Bale, 2007; Zonis and Joseph, 1994). These theories are somewhat related to politics since they refer to power (Imhoff et al., 2018), and can be understood as interpretations "of an event or public action centring on a secret plan of a small group of individuals or groups, whose goals and intentions are partially hidden, though usually directed at assuming power" (Enders et al., 2018). Some examples of conspiracy theories are that Barack Obama was born outside the US, that Princess Diana's death was not accidental or, more recently, the Democrats' "Pizzagate scandal". Endorsement of these theories indicate internalised conspiratorial beliefs (CB), which are quite widespread worldwide (Oliver and Wood, 2014; Sunstein and Vermeule, 2009).

While there are few doubts about the existence of a theoretical and empirical relationship between CB and populist attitudes (but see Balta et al., 2021), the precise nature of this link is unclear. First, for some authors, CB and populism are simply closely related phenomena that are connected by attitudes such as political interest and ideology (Salvati et al., 2022). Stecula and Pickup (2021), for instance, find an association between populism and conspiracy beliefs about COVID-19 in the US, above and beyond partisanship, but their work does not claim a causal relationship between the two phenomena. Similarly, recent cross-country research confirms that there is covariance between populist attitudes and conspiratorial thinking, a precursor of CB (van Prooijen et al., 2022).[1]

Second, other scholars claim that both CB and populism belong to the same underlying construct. Castanho Silva et al. (2017) assert that the two phenomena cannot be separated, to the extent that, "to make a musical analogy, one could maintain that if populism is the theme, then many conspiracy theories are variations on the theme" (p. 415). This perspective implies that populist attitudes and conspiratorial thinking tap into the same dimension, i.e. they are conceptually (and empirically) so close that they are, in fact, manifestations of the same phenomenon. According to this view, conspiracy theories (and, therefore, beliefs in them) can be regarded as non-necessary elements of populist ideology (all conspiracies are populist, but not all populisms are conspiracy-prone, see Fenster, 2008; Taggart Paul., 2018), the implications being that both phenomena are built on the same latent construct and share several psychological, economic and social bases (Douglas et al., 2019).

Third, other theoretical works suggest that the overlap only concerns one particular populist dimension (see Wuttke et al., 2020). For some authors, populists and conspiracy theorists come together in a Manichean worldview that portraits a binary struggle between "good versus evil, right versus wrong, victims versus conspirators" (Bergmann, 2018, p. 101; see also Bergmann and Butter, 2020; Oliver and Wood, 2014; Pirro and Taggart, 2022).[2] Some even imply that only references to a hidden truth (conspiratorial content) that juxtapose the ordinary people with the evil elites (the Manichean outlook) are able to boost populist attitudes (Hameleers, 2021). For other authors, it is not Manicheism that unites CB and populism, but instead, anti-elitism (Oliver and Rahn, 2016). According to these authors, populists tend to perceive the elite as the enemy of the people and are therefore more prone to believing allegations of collusion within the "establishment" that go against the interests of the citizens (Müller, 2016).

To clarify if the relationship between the two phenomena at stake is limited to one or several aspects of populism, we need to use a multidimensional approach to examine it. In this sense, Salvati et al. (2022) find that people that hold populist attitudes are more prone to endorsing conspiracy beliefs, but they also acknowledge that their work does not consider the different dimensions of populism, and that further research should be carried out to corroborate their results. This is precisely one of the purposes of this research.

In parallel to all these works, some scholars have ventured—implicitly or explicitly—into the territory of causality by arguing that one variable explains the other, despite the evidence being, at best, mixed. In this debate, Oliver and Rahn's (2016) work suggests that

[1] Although some scholars use beliefs in specific conspiracies to tap into the more abstract construct of conspiratorial thinking (aka conspiratorial mentality or mindset), this is a different concept that refers to the tendency to view major social and political events as the product of conspiracies (Uscinski et al., 2020) "uncontaminated by concrete events, actors or contexts" (Imhoff et al., 2022, p. 392). When they are compared, beliefs in specific conspiracy theories are less stable that a conspiracy mentality, as well as less skewed and contaminated by ideology (Imhoff et al., 2022).

[2] More specifically, Pirro and Taggart (2022) state that the common elements that conspiracy and populism have are Manicheism, a sense of victimhood and ambivalence towards representative politics.

populist attitudes come before conspiratorial beliefs, one reason why populists tend to include them in their discourses. Also, Zavala and Keenan (2021) suggest that populism and collective narcissism make people more prone to endorsing conspiracy theories and that they breed conspiratorial beliefs. Eberl et al. (2021), using a Structural Equation Model and survey data from Austria, show that an increase in populist attitudes results in an increase in COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs, via diminished levels of trust in science and political institutions. Also in relation with the recent pandemic, Jakob-Moritz and colleagues (2021) use two waves of an Austrian panel survey and find that lagged populism positively affects underlying conspiracy beliefs via reducing trust in science and political institutions.

Conversely, other scholars suggest that the effect goes (or should be expected to go) in the opposite direction. In this sense, Stecula and Pickup (2021) acknowledge that the possibility that conspiratorial thinking comes before populist attitudes must be tested with an appropriate research design—in the authors' view, by picking the right controls. Erisen et al. (2021) find that CB are the primary source of populist attitudes in Turkey and Italy, while the role of other psychological factors is less clear. Finally, using quantitative content analysis in the US and Netherlands, as well as experimental data on healthcare budgets in the Netherlands, Hameleers (2021) shows that populist conspiracy theories activate populist attitudes more than mere exposure to populist ideas.

Our position in this debate is that the causality between CB and populist attitudes probably goes in both directions. However, the evidence supporting conspiratorial beliefs being able to fuel populist attitudes is considerably less abundant and robust than the other way round. Hence, we aim to contribute to this literature by adding empirical evidence to the claim that conspiratorial beliefs precede—and can cause—populist attitudes.

We have several reasons for defending an effect that leads from CB to populist attitudes. First, populist parties' widespread use of conspiracy theories, which are believed to have fuelled their electoral successes. Todosijević, 2015 victory has been linked to the spread of rumours about the pharmaceutical industry or about Hillary Clinton's allegedly illegal activities; the Brexit referendum outcome might partially be explained by beliefs about a conspiracy between the UK government and the secret services (van Prooijen, 2018); in Germany, conspiracy theories allowed the populist AfD to appeal to voters by using emotive narratives which offer a dualistic outlook on global politics (Wojczewski, 2021); and conspiracy theories have been linked to voting for the populist Movimento 5 Stelle in Italy (Mancosu et al., 2017), as well as to referendum vote choices in Italy in 2016 (Mancosu et al., 2020). Likewise, Pirro and Taggart (2022) present three cases of populism in power where conspiracy theories were used as functional devices for populist narratives—Viktor Orbán and ethnic substitution; Trump's deep state and QAnon; and Chávez and the US plots—, all of them successfully sustaining populists' antagonistic role and rallying support, presumably boosting populist attitudes at the same time.

Second, populism is a relatively new phenomenon in certain countries (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017), while conspiracy theories have been around for centuries (Brotherton, 2015) to explain power and authority: from the Great Fire of Rome in 64 AD to the Protocols of the Elders of Zion in 1903 or suspicions about the 9–11 attacks in 2001. Consequently, since populism and populist attitudes are a novelty, there is room for conspiracies and CB to affect them. Note that this does not mean that we are willing to challenge the possibility that populism and populist attitudes breed conspiracy beliefs; we concede that both effects can coexist, but our aim is to test only one of these possible effects, the one for which evidence is more scant and less convincing.

As for the relationship between conspiratorial beliefs and the specific dimensions of the populism construct, we align ourselves with Hameleers' (2021) view and expect it to be stronger for *Manicheism*. Hameleers (2021) implies that the Manichean element of populism is the one that resonates more with conspiracies, and that being exposed to populist ideas can activate populist attitudes, with conspiracies being part of the usual populist repertoire. In addition, conspiratorial beliefs refer to *concrete* stories with *identifiable* culprits, which foster the activation of frames of blame, anger, and ultimately populist attitudes (Hameleers et al., 2017). Anger is a moral emotion (Lazarus, 1991), and Manicheism is the most moralistic component of populism (Katsambekis, 2019), constricting choice to two options where both sides claim the moral higher ground and declare the opponent to be "evil" (Nethersole, 2022). For this, we can expect CB to be particularly linked to the Manichean dimension of populist attitudes.

In sum, this research will empirically test the association between CB and populist attitudes, and more specifically the possibility that the former affects the latter. Our main contribution aims to be to provide empirical evidence for the rationale that CB can breed populist attitudes. Furthermore, given that the existing works on the overlap between the two phenomena do not consider the multidimensionality of populism or, alternatively, do not agree on which populist dimension correlates more with CB, an additional goal of this research is to clarify which populist dimension is more closely related to CB. In this respect, we posit that the relationship with Manicheism will be stronger.

3. Data and methods

Our study focuses on Spain. Most research on populism and conspiracy relies on countries where populism has a distinctive right-wing slant (Hameleers, 2021; Smallpage et al., 2020; Castanho Silva et al., 2017; Erisen et al., 2021; Hameleers, 2021; Wuttke et al., 2020). This can make their conclusions on the overlap between the two phenomena context-dependent. More specifically, recent research confirms that individuals with right-wing leanings are more prone to developing conspiratorial thinking (which is also related to populist attitudes in most cases), except for some countries in the centre and south of Europe such as Hungary, Romania and Spain. As such, the link from CB to populist attitudes should be studied in contexts where populism and CB are not that clearly connected to right-wing parties and ideology—thus limiting the degree of overlap between the two research objects.

Data from Spain provides a full range of populist attitudes, both right and left-wing (Anduiza et al., 2017). Ever since Podemos became a relevant political actor (European Parliament elections in 2014) and until the emergence of the radical right-wing populist party Vox in 2018 (Marcos-Marne, 2021), populism and populist attitudes were primarily a matter related to the left of the ideological spectrum in Spain. Furthermore, very little is known about Spaniards' CB, let alone their connections with populism. A 2017 survey in 10 European countries (Stoeckel and Tasker, 2019) reveals that Spain ranked fourth according to the percentage of its population that agreed that "actually, it is not the government that runs the country: we don't know who pulls the strings" (66%), very close to Italy, Portugal or the Czech Republic.[3] The conclusions of our research are thus potentially applicable to several countries where both populism and CB are present.

[3] See also Imhoff et al. (2022) where an Andalusian sample represents Spain in a comparative study including 26 countries on the relationship between CB and ideology.

To put our theoretical expectations to empirical test, we rely on two different studies.[4] To begin with, we use an online survey conducted in Spain between 27 September and November 28, 2018 by Qualtrics, via an e-mail invitation sent to a pool of previously preregistered potential panellists. Quota sampling was applied to approximately match Spain's population statistics in terms of sex, age, and education level.[5] The sample includes 2887 adults (Margin of error: ±1.82% for a 95% confidence level and p = q = 0.5). This cross-sectional survey will serve to put to empirical test the existence of an association between CB and populist attitudes and the non-spurious character of this association.

Second, we draw on an online survey experiment conducted between December 19, 2019 and January 5, 2020, that aimed to test the existence of a causal relationship from CB to populist attitudes. The experiment was performed using the Qualtrics platform and was propagated through social networks (Twitter), following a snowball strategy.[6] The first questions in the survey make sure that respondents are over 18 years old and residents in Spain. The final sample contained 537 adults (67% male; age M = 35, SD = 11; 73% of them had at least a university education; Margin of error: ±4.23% for a 95% confidence level and p = q = 0.5). The experiment consisted of exposing a randomly selected group of participants to a conspiratorial story about the September 11 attacks in New York, then comparing their responses regarding populist attitudes to the responses given by the control group, which had not been exposed to this story.

Tables S2a and S2b in Appendix S2of the Supplementary Materials provide detailed descriptive statistics for the two datasets.

In order to better understand the mechanisms behind any observed relationship, we disaggregate populist attitudes into its three sub-dimensions: people-centrism, anti-elitism and Manicheism. To measure the three pillars within the populism construct (Akkerman et al., 2014), we use the nine-item battery proposed by Castanho Silva et al. (2019). This is a psychometrically validated scale to measure populism as an attitude, and it has several advantages over existing alternatives: it has cross-cultural validity; it has a validated translation (including Spanish); and it divides populism into its subcomponents to measure each one separately, thus granting flexibility to investigate both populist attitudes at large and its subcomponents. In this measure, respondents' agreement with each of the statements is measured using a 5-point scale, running from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". Each of the three dimensions of populism contains three items that we average out to obtain separate measures of people-centrism, anti-elitism and Manicheism. The exact wording for the nine questions on populist attitudes is displayed in Table 1:

Finally, we built a populism scale following a Goertzian approach (Goertz, 2006, 2020; Wuttke et al., 2020), for which the three different components of populism are *non-compensatory* and, therefore, each component constitutes a necessary condition for the presence of the concept. The final measure of populist attitudes is hence obtained by multiplying the (mean value of the) three sub-dimensions of populism.

4. Study 1: association and non-spuriousness

Study 1 uses observational data to address the association between the two phenomena in question, while tackling concerns of spuriousness that are driven by the many studies highlighting the common ground shared by both populist attitudes and CB. Our main independent variable is a battery of four CB that have been used in previous studies (Brotherton et al., 2013; Castanho Silva et al., 2017; Hawkins, 2010) and that cover the most important facets of conspiracy beliefs: *government malfeasance* (the belief that governments commit secret criminal acts against their own citizens), *malevolent global conspiracies* (the belief that small global elites control important events), *extra-terrestrial cover-up*, *personal well-being* (concerns about diseases or technologies kept hidden from the public) and *control of information* (by governments and other organisations, see Brotherton et al., 2013). Like Bruder et al. (2013), we asked respondents to rate how true they thought each conspiracy was. We used a five-point scale, running from "totally false" to "totally true". We also included a "don't know/I've never heard anything about this issue" category that we coded as the midpoint of the scale.[7] Appendix S1 of the Supplementary Materials provides the exact wording for the four questions on CB.

Fig. 1 displays the percentage of agreement across our four conspiracy theories. Up to 34% ("somewhat true" and "totally true") of the sample believe in the involvement of the US government in the 9–11 terrorist attacks, and in the illicit practices of the pharmaceutical industry. The existence of intelligent alien life having been hushed up by the authorities has even more believers (38%). The most credible theory for the sample is that of the secret club or group that rules the world from the shadows and holds more actual power than governments (46%). The scale resulting from adding up the items has a Cronbach's alpha level of 0.65 and, after normalisation, our final "conspiratorial beliefs" scale ranges from 0 to 1 (M = 0.53, SD = 0.23).

When testing the non-spurious character of the relationship between CB and populist attitudes, there are some potential confounders that

Table 1
Populist attitudes questions (Castanho Silva et al., 2019).

Wording	Dimension
Politicians should always listen closely to the problems of the people	People-centrism
Politicians don't have to spend time among ordinary people to do a good job	People-centrism[a]
The will of the people should be the highest principle in this country's politics	People-centrism
The government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves	Anti-elitism
Government officials use their power to try to improve people's lives	Anti-elitism[a]
Quite a few of the people running the government are crooks	Anti-elitism
You can tell if a person is good or bad if you know their politics	Manicheism
The people I disagree with politically are not evil	Manicheism[a]
The people I disagree with politically are just misinformed	Manicheism

[a] Reversed items.

[4] Replication materials can be found at Harvard Dataverse: https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/OOVEFK.

[5] Quotas were established to approximately match the Spanish population, while making it feasible to collect the data over a limited period of time: 51% female and 49% male (real figures in Spain); 30% primary education, 40% secondary education and 30% university education (20%, 50% and 30% in the total population). Given the online character of the sample, the age distribution was representative for individuals up to 65 years old (18–24 years old: 11%; 25–34: 19%; 35–49: 39%; 50–64: 31%). Definitive figures in the survey match the predetermined quotas quite well (see Appendix S2 of the Supplementary Materials). All sociodemographic figures for Spain can be found on the *Instituto Nacional de Estadística* website (http://ine.es).

[6] Several precautions were taken to avoid bots: captchas, clocks and, most importantly, requiring email addresses as a prerequisite to be able to take part in the study. The fieldwork lasted 20 days, although most of the answers (81%) were collected in the first three days. Despite the resulting sample being far from representative of the Spanish population, we do not consider that this hampers the goal of the experiment. The tweet launching the survey mentioned an incentive of 2 Amazon vouchers worth 20€ to be drafted among participants. It was retweeted 86 times, obtained 36,000 impressions and 1222 interactions. Of those that retweeted it, only 30 profiles followed the Twitter account used to launch the survey, which suggests that the invitation quickly reached individuals beyond the network of the research group account that launched the call.

[7] Our analyses were replicated excluding these people and the results were virtually the same; if anything, the effect of conspiratorial thinking on people-centrism was slightly higher.

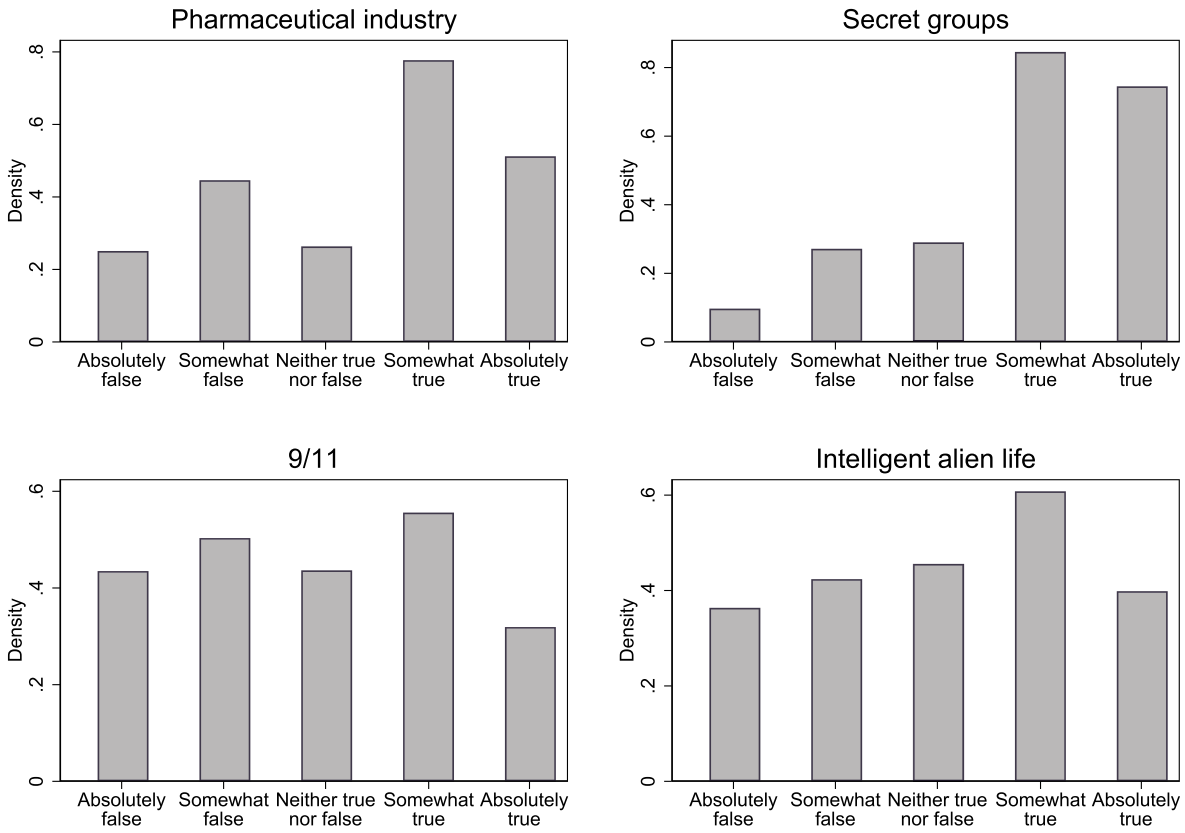

Fig. 1. Distribution of the agreement with four conspiracy theories.

need to be considered. First, both CB and populist attitudes are rooted in beliefs about the deceptive nature of the authorities at large (Castanho Silva et al., 2017) and, hence, citizens' *perceptions of the authorities* must undeniably be considered as one of the potential variables that may cause a spurious relationship between conspiratorial thinking and populist attitudes (van Prooijen et al., 2022). Other scholars agree that a negative perception of authority (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999; Swami et al., 2011) and negative stereotypes of powerful groups (Imhoff and Bruder, 2014) are drivers of conspiratorial thinking. Yet, surprisingly, authoritarianism has been found to correlate positively with conspiratorial thinking (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999; Enders, 2019), as it does with populist attitudes (Hawkins et al., 2012). Hence, attitudes towards authority are a plausible, but not an obvious antecedent of both CB and populism.

A second potential confounder for the relationship between CB and populist attitudes is *internal political efficacy*, i.e. the extent to which individuals consider that they can understand and participate in political processes. Most scholars agree that beliefs in conspiracy theories are grounded in the desire to make sense of one's social environment (van Prooijen and Acker, 2015; van Prooijen and van Lange, 2014), particularly for those people who feel voiceless or incapable of understanding complex and distressing societal events (Bale, 2007; Hofstadter, 1966). Previous works have found that paranormal and superstitious ideas correlate with low self-efficacy (Tobacyk and Shrader, 2016) and that the phenomenon arises as a response to the need for an illusion of control among powerless individuals. Hence, we expect internal political efficacy to be negatively associated with embracing CB. In turn, populist attitudes have been found to be positively related to internal political efficacy (Rico et al., 2019b), but at least in one instance—the Netherlands during the nineties—it was found that a lack of internal efficacy could lead to populist attitudes (Todosijević 2015).

Finally, both populist attitudes and beliefs in conspiracy theories reflect a preference for simplistic solutions to complex problems (Castanho Silva et al., 2017; Moffitt, 2016). This leads us to consider the role of cognitive styles as our third and last potential confounder. *Cognitive styles* refers to the way individuals process, organise and represent information (Messick, 1984). Most dual conceptions of cognitive styles distinguish between i) an experiential/intuitive style and an ii) rational/analytical style (Epstein et al., 1996). Intuitive thinking rejects expert opinions and tends to prefer personal appraisals instead (Sunstein and Vermeule, 2009; Swami et al., 2011), leading to an individual's overconfidence in her own cognition and beliefs. As such, faith in intuition—the intuitive cognitive style—is positively associated with both populist attitudes and credulity in obscure and politically neutral items (van Prooijen et al., 2022). Similarly, populist attitudes are negatively related to need for cognition —the rational cognitive style— (Erisen et al., 2021).

We operationalise the potential confounding factors as follows (the exact wording of each variable can be found in Appendix S1 of the Supplementary Materials)[8]

i) *Views on authority:* We ask respondents whether they think that people should respect individuals in roles of authority or, conversely, be critical towards these people, which yields a six-rung pro-authority scale.
ii) *Internal efficacy:* We gauge this sense of powerlessness by using a Likert five-point scale on three conventional measures of internal efficacy that we have added into a single scale (Cronbach's alpha

[8] We have considered the presence of other spurious variables that may interfere in the relationship between CB and populism such as personality (agreeableness) or political sophistication. The inclusion of these potential confounders does not affect the relationship between CB and populism and, for the sake of simplicity, we have kept the results out of the empirical analysis. The evidence for this will be provided by the authors on request.

= 0.63) where high values indicate high levels of internal efficacy.

iii) *Cognitive styles:* We adapt the Rational-Experiential Inventory that taps into *Need for Cognition (NFC)* and *Faith in Intuition (FI)* (see Epstein et al., 1996). The NFC scale includes three items (Cronbach's alpha = 0.64) where high values correspond to higher need for cognition; the FI also includes three items (Cronbach's alpha = 0.72) where high values correspond to a rational/analytical cognitive style.

As for the empirical results, Table 2 shows the correlations between the three populist dimensions and their composite measure, on the one hand, and the conspiracy scale, on the other. The coefficients for each pair of variables that couple the CB scale with each populism attitude is 0.03 (people-centrism, non-significant), 0.13 (anti-elitism), 0.21 (Manicheism), and 0.22 for the composite scale. The strength of these associations does not suggest that the four scales are pointing to the same underlying construct.[9] The correlation between CB, on the one hand, and Manicheism and anti-elitism, on the other, contradicts the findings of Wuttke et al. (2020) using data from Castanho Silva et al. (2019) for nine countries—including Spain. Those authors show that the Manichean outlook is only positively correlated with conspiratorial thinking in the US, the UK and Ireland, while people-centrism and anti-elitism are positively correlated with conspiratorial thinking (with the US being the exception). In contrast, our results seem to be aligned with Bergmann's (2018) proposition that CB is mostly related to the Manicheist dimension of populism. Further analysis using factor analysis (varimax rotation), confirm that the four indicators used to tap CB load in the same factor (with factor loadings higher than 0.65) and that no other populist attitude scores more than 0.1 in this same factor. We thus conclude that CB and populist attitudes are indeed associated, but not to a point that they can be considered part of the same underlying construct.

We next move onto testing the non-spurious nature of the relationship. To do so, we rely on a series of multivariate estimations computed using OLS regressions. All the variables have been recoded to range between 0 and 1. We include controls for sex (0 man, 1 woman), educational level (nine levels), interest in politics (four levels) and an individual's position on the left-right axis, on a scale of 0 (left) to 10 (right), as well as age (in years). Each model includes one confounder at a time, and the effects of that confounder are subsequently assessed. According to Rosenberg (1968), a change in the initial coefficient for the relationship between conspiratorial thinking and populism might point to a spurious inflation of it, while spuriousness can be ruled out when the inclusion of a confounder does not affect the initial relationship.

The estimations in Fig. 2 test six different models to predict the values of each populist dimension on the populism scale, while Table S2e in Appendix S2of the Supplementary Materials displays the results for the full model including all the control variables at the same time. The first populist dimension, *people-centrism* (see first panel in Fig. 2) seems only marginally affected by CB. The baseline model shows a small positive relationship that is only significant at $p < 0.10$. Political efficacy does not have an appreciable impact on people-centrism, while opinions on authority have a negative, significant association. Need for cognition and faith in intuition both have a positive, significant relationship with people-centrism; but only faith in intuition seems to affect the initial impact of CB, reducing it. This points to the possibility that this variable might be a precursor of both people-centrism and CB.

Conversely, CB have a positive and appreciable impact on *anti-elitism*: the higher the value on our conspiratorial mindset scale, the higher the value on our anti-elitism indicator. This relationship seems mostly unaffected by including further potential confounders, although all the independent variables included in the models exhibit significant coefficients (except for internal political efficacy in the last model, which includes all confounders and controls at once).

The third panel in Fig. 2 shows the results of the six different estimations for *Manicheism*. CB hold a strong, positive significant relationship with this attitudinal dimension regardless of the model specifications, therefore pointing to a credible independent effect. All the potential confounders exhibit significant coefficients (Need for cognition is statistically significant only at the 10% level), yet most of these relationships go in the opposite direction to the ones examined for people-centrism and anti-elitism.

Finally, the last panel in Fig. 2 displays the results for the populism scale, and confirms the positive, significant effect of CB, which remains mostly unaltered by the inclusion of the confounders. It also shows a negative, significant effect of authoritarianism and a positive, significant effect of internal political efficacy and faith in intuition. The initial positive effect of need for cognition disappears when controls are considered.

If we take a closer look at each potential confounder, we can see that pro-authority attitudes coincide with lower people-centrism, anti-elitism and the Goertzian measure of populism, and with higher Manichean attitudes, which is at odds with the expectations of Castanho Silva et al. (2017). In any case, the inclusion of attitudes towards authority does not affect the initial relationship between conspiratorial thinking and populist attitudes. As a result, we can rule out the possibility that this potential confounder is causing a spurious relationship between our two variables of interest: a finding that certainly adds to our understanding of this relationship. The same conclusion applies to internal political efficacy.

As for the variables tapping cognitive styles, we find that the need for cognition variable boosts people-centrism and anti-elitism, and reduces Manicheism, although the inclusion of this variable does not affect the relationship between CB and any of the dimensions of populist attitudes. In turn, faith in intuition is positively associated with people-centrism, anti-elitism and the combined measure of populist attitudes, and negatively related to Manicheism. In contrast with the need for cognition indicator, faith in intuition has a noteworthy role that manages to make the initial impact of conspiratorial thinking on people-centrism disappear. This finding is relevant, since it might explain previous results that emphasise the effects of CB on people-centrism (Castanho Silva et al., 2017; or Wuttke et al., 2020 using data from Castanho Silva et al., 2019), which might vanish if this confounder is considered. A mediation analysis (Imai et al., 2011, see Table S3a in the Supplementary Materials) shows that faith in intuition might indeed be a precursor of conspiratorial beliefs—which will ultimately enhance people-centrism—, despite the evidence being not statistically significant. Finally, in the case of anti-elitism, the inclusion of faith in intuition moderately reduces the association of CB with this dimension of populism—a result consistent with partial mediation—while the inclusion of this confounder in the Manicheism and the Goertzian operationalisation of populism does not change the coefficient registered by CB. Overall, the evidence seems to confirm the need to include faith in intuition when assessing the relationship between CB and people-centrism.

5. Study 2: is there an actual effect?

Study 2 further addresses the possible effect of CB on populist attitudes by manipulating exposure to a conspiracy theory. The experiment takes a randomly selected group of respondents to an online survey and exposes them to a vignette about the 9/11 attacks featuring three conspiratorial stories about the event. We selected the 9/11 case for different reasons. First, our initial study demonstrates that this is the hardest-to-believe conspiracy of our four tested theories. This implies that it is a hard test for an experiment that aims to trigger CB and populist attitudes. Second, the 9/11 item has the virtue of tapping two

[9] The negative correlation between people-centrism and anti-elitism, on the one hand, and Manicheism, on the other, is neither an unexpected phenomenon, nor an exception for the Spanish case. We direct the reader to Castanho Silva et al. (2019) and Wuttke et al. (2020) for similar results.

Table 2
Correlation matrix: conspiracy beliefs and populist attitudes, by dimensions.

	People-centrism	Anti-elitism	Manicheism	Populist attitudes	Conspiracy beliefs
People-centrism	1				
Anti-elitism	0.45**	1			
Manicheism	−0.23**	−0.10**	1		
Populist attitudes scale (Goertzian)	0.40**	0.52**	0.67**	1	
Conspiracy beliefs	0.03	0.14**	0.21**	0.22**	1

Sign. **p < 0.001, *p < 0.05, + p < 0.10.

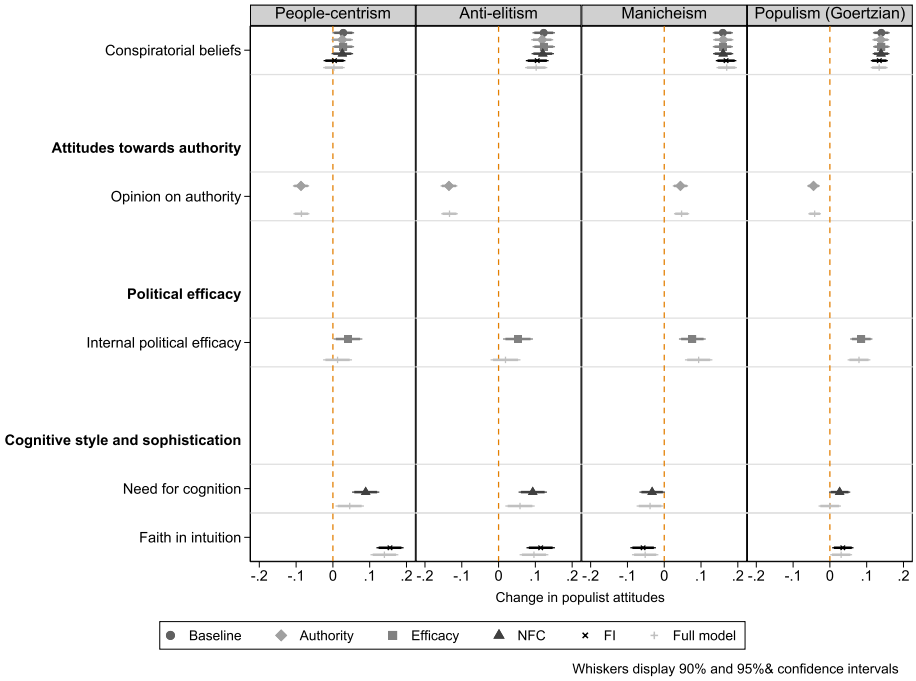

Fig. 2. Tests for spuriousness. Conspiratorial beliefs, populist attitudes and confounders.

different dimensions of CB: government malfeasance and control of information. Last, the 9/11 conspiracy case is a well-known conspiracy theory all over the world. This avoids case-specific treatments while making our research design comprehensible for an international audience, as well as replicable elsewhere.

The treatment condition (featuring a photo of the Twin Towers on fire) lays out three theories (announced as "unofficial versions") that question the official version of the facts, and suggest that the US Government was somehow involved, namely that: a) the Twin Towers were actually blown up with explosives, b) the damage to the Pentagon was caused by a rocket, and not by a plane crash and c) the US government allowed the attacks to happen to justify invading Iraq and Afghanistan. At the time and in the place the survey was conducted, 9/11 stories could be considered low-salience conspiracy theories. There was some possibility, however, that some individuals were aware of and supported such stories, which might limit the effects of our treatment. Nevertheless, it is common practice in the literature to use real-world conspiracy theories as experimental treatments (Lyons et al., 2019).[10]Moreover, previous research has shown that exposing individuals to—actual—conspiracy theories not only increases conspiratorial beliefs, both in the short term and in the long term (Kim and Cao, 2016), but even does so when participants are warned about the conspiratorial nature of the treatment (Uscinski et al., 2016). Building upon this work, we then asked treated participants to what extent they believed the main assertions in the account to be true, fashioning a manipulation check. Evidence shows that treated participants attribute up to 5 percent point more credibility to the questions addressing the 9/11 stories than participants in the control group ($p < 0.05$).[11]This evidence is in line with previous, similar studies (Kim and Cao, 2016; Uscinski et al., 2016), and suggests that the treatment does indeed boost CB among the participants.

Fig. 3 plots the treatment effect by dimension. The results reflect promising but non-significant results for people-centrism. Those exposed to the 9/11 story exhibit higher levels of this populist subdimension, but the differences with the control group are non-significant. In the same vein, there are no significant differences between the two groups regarding anti-elitism.

Finally, we observe a noteworthy, positive and significant effect for the last populist dimension: those exposed to the 9/11 account exhibit

[10] For an alternative strategy to induce CB, see Imhoff and Meuer (2020). Participants are asked to imagine a society where "powerful groups decided about the fate of millions of people and that politicians were nothing more than marionettes controlled by disguised powers" (page 4).

[11] Credibility questions were asked just after the exposure to the treatment for the treated group, and only after the populist attitudes battery for the control group. The average value of the three credibility questions was calculated, and the resulting scale recoded to range from 0 to 1. Table S4a in Appendix S4 of the Supplementary Materials displays the results of the randomisation checks, and Fig. S4a displays a screenshot of what treated participants saw and its English translation. Finally, Table S4b shows the wording of the treatment check and Fig. S4b displays the survey flow for both the treatment condition and the control group.

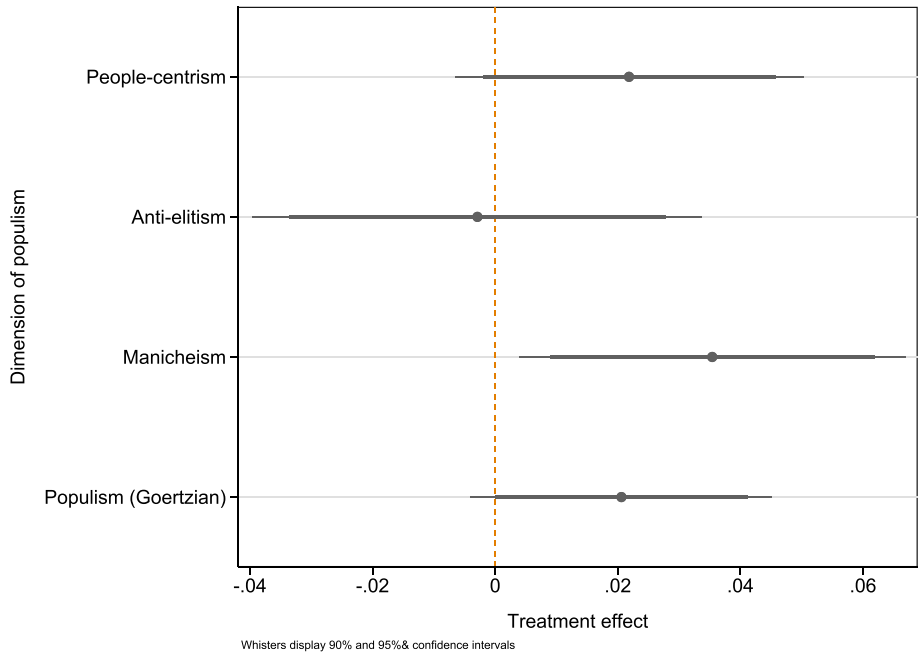

Fig. 3. Treatment effect on the different dimensions of populism. Note: Each estimate displays the effect of the treatment on each dependent variable in a series of regression models.

higher levels of Manicheism than those in the control condition. In particular, the treatment condition increases the degree of Manicheism by four percentage points. Hence, exposure to conspiracy stories—and subsequent activation of CB—positively affects populist attitudes, although the effect is mostly confined to its Manichean dimension. This evidence gives credit to Bergmann's (2018) and Oliver and Wood's (2014) claims that the association between populism and conspiracy theories particularly concerns Manicheism.

Our results, therefore, lend credence to the literature that points to CB leading people to develop Manichean attitudes. This result is in line with the association found by Oliver and Wood (2014), only that it posits the causality being in the opposite direction; and it talks to Hameleers' (2021) results, only that it turns Manicheism into a dependent variable, instead of considering it an aspect of the populist communication style—and, therefore, a stimulus. Our findings also contradict the clearest antecedent of our research, Castanho Silva et al. (2017), who found that CB were positively related to people-centrism and, especially, to anti-elitism, but not to a good-versus-evil worldview. Since their results refer to a US sample and ours to a Spanish sample, the discrepancy suggests that the relationship between conspiratorial thinking and populism might depend on cultural or institutional factors, and that further research should examine the role of the political context. Our evidence also contradicts the correlational results presented by Wuttke et al. (2020) using data from Castanho Silva et al. (2019) in nine countries (including Spain). The authors show that conspiratorial thinking is not associated with Manicheism, but positively associated with people-centrism and, especially, anti-elitism. The low number of observations included in the Castanho Silva et al. (2019) study, the characteristics of the sample and the lack of control variables may well explain the divergence between their results and ours.

Finally, when considering the composite measure of populism, our treatment condition was able to increase the degree of populist attitudes, despite the evidence being statistically significant only at the 10% level.

6. Conclusions

The new, flourishing literature on the relationship between CB and populist attitudes is mixed in regards the nature of the association between them. This research aligns with previous studies claiming that conspiracies can foster populist attitudes, and takes Spain as a case study to deploy a causal identification strategy that puts this link to empirical test.

To this effect, our research design builds upon two studies. An online survey addresses to what extent populism (and its three sub-dimensions) and CB covary, considering the variables regarded as potential confounders by previous works. The evidence points to a positive association of CB and each of the sub-dimensions of populism and its composite measure, with the relationship between CB and Manicheism being the strongest and most robust. Regardless of model specifications, being prone to believing in theories that do not have an empirical basis is indeed positively related to perceiving the world (and particularly politics) in a polarised, Manichean way. In a second study, we tested that CB precede populist attitudes and that the effect should be higher for the Manicheist dimension. Using experimental data from Spain, our results show causal evidence that exposure to conspiracy theories (related to 9/11) increases the Manicheist dimension of populist attitudes.

Importantly, our causal evidence is limited to this populist dimension, and we do not rule out that, under some circumstances, being exposed to populist frames and discourses can also pave the way for people to embrace conspiratorial beliefs. Further research should address the non-recursive relationship between populist attitudes and CB with appropriate research designs (e.g. panel data and cross-lagged estimations) to control for the opposite direction of the causality and to measure the size of both effects. These could be combined with measurement models to tackle the relationship between populist attitudes and conspiratorial beliefs indicators more specifically. Likewise, conspiratorial beliefs could be expanded to include local, international, and fictional stories, as well as neutral and ideologically loaded ones, along with more general conspiratorial thinking indicators.

Finally, despite the use of convenience samples—such as the one we use in Study 2—being seen to yield similar conclusions in terms of reliability and validity as conventional samples (e.g. Leiner, 2016), we should take our results with a pinch of salt, as the size of the effect in a representative sample might differ from the one we have found. More specifically, the characteristics of the sample used to run the experiment (a highly educated group of Twitter users) suggest that a similar stimulus

might have greater effects on a more representative sample. Similarly, we acknowledge that, in our experimental setting, some participants may have been "pre-treated" due to their age and previous exposure to 9/11 conspiracies. If this were indeed the case, we could probably expect an even stronger treatment effect with a younger sample (e.g. in the future).

Either way, in substantive terms, our results regarding Manicheism raise concerns about the future of party competition and, ultimately, about the way we conceive contemporary democratic societies. Manicheism has been deemed incompatible with pluralist and non-polarised political scenarios (de la Torre and Ortiz Lemos, 2016; Stavrakakis and Katsambekis, 2014). Moreover, Manicheism is conceptually close to affective polarisation, as individuals' emotional distance between their preferred parties and out-parties is probably boosted by polarised conceptions of the political arena. In turn, affective polarisation is believed to undermine collaboration and to promote political cynicism and incivility, while hampering political accountability (Heltzel and Laurin, 2020; Iyengar et al., 2019; Layman et al., 2006). Knowing some of the triggers of Manicheism might help the media and decision-makers in their challenge to stop the advance of this outgrowth of partisan social identity (Iyengar et al., 2019).

Data availability

Data and replication files are available at Harvard Dataverse: https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/OOVEFK

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2022.102574.

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