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# Why are Populist Parties so Successful in the EU?

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## The Method in a Nutshell

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Compare responses of parliamentarians (MPs) and voters to identical policy survey items

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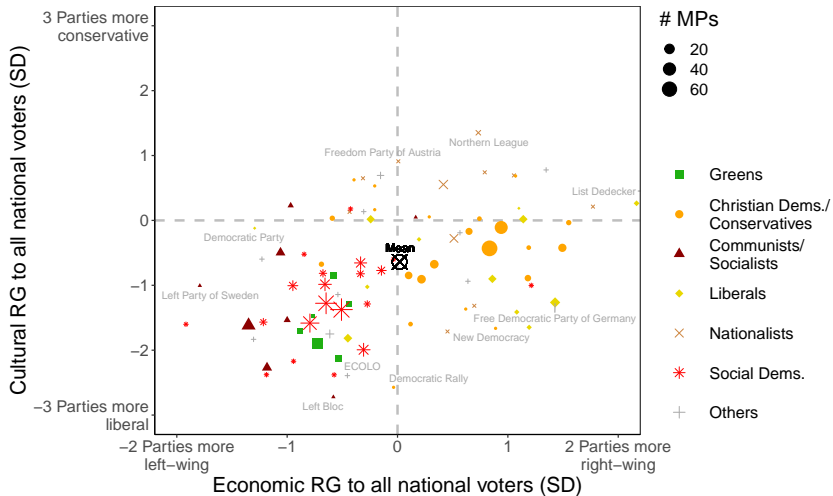
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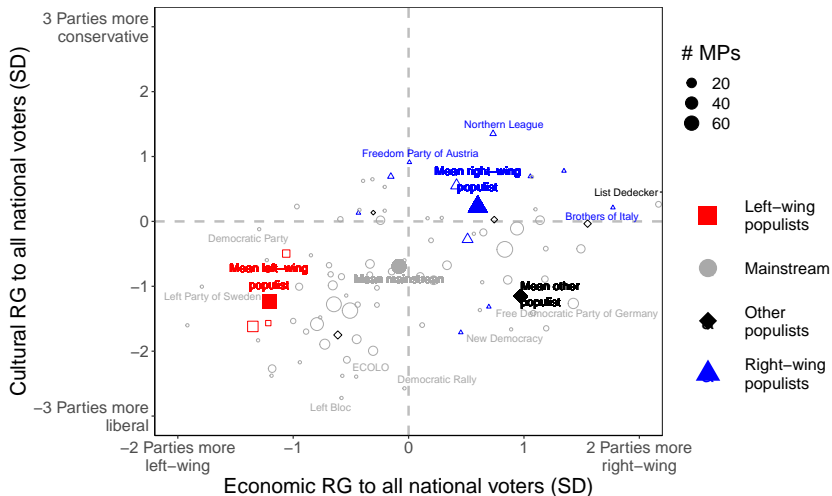
Compare responses of parliamentarians (MPs) and voters to identical policy survey items

- Questions on 15 issues (Immigration, redistribution...)
- I handly sort issues into the policy dimensions „culture“ and „economy“
- Anonymous surveys
- Samples are representative
- Nearly all MPs say that they decide based on their own attitudes
- Survey responses reflect voting in referenda
- The gaps I will show you are also perceived by voters and MPs

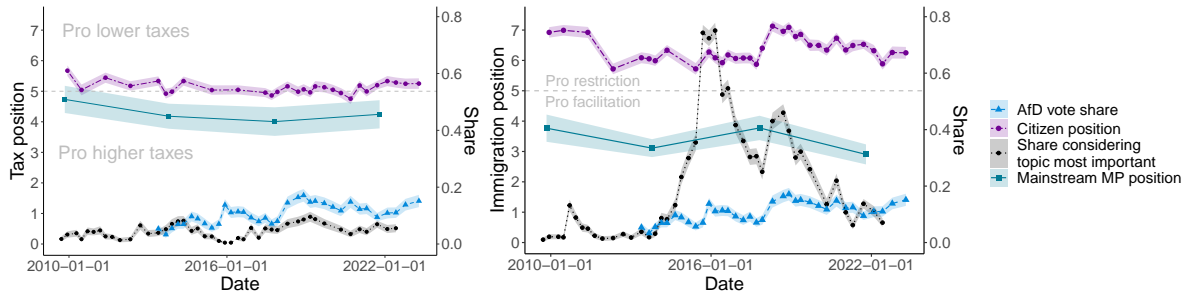
## There is a Cultural Representation Gap (2009)



## Right-wing Populists Fill Representation Gaps (2009)



## Representation Gaps Regarding Taxes (Left) and Immigration (Right)



## Representation Gaps As A Cause of Populism

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**Descriptive** evidence from Guenther (2023)

- Representation gaps exist on nearly all cultural topics
- Representation Gaps predict the rise of populist parties
- Only populists who fill representation gaps rise
- Citizens whose attitudes are less represented are more likely to vote for populists controlling for attitudes and demographics



## Representation Gaps As A Cause of Populism

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**Causal** evidence from Silva and Wratil (2023)

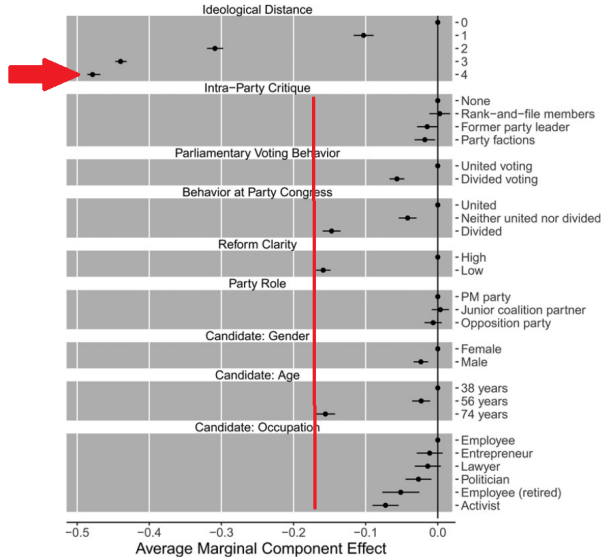
- Survey experiment
- Representation gaps cause populist attitudes

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## **The Perspective of Mainstream Parties**

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# Ideological Representation Is Key for Voting (from Lehrer et al. 2024)



## Three Strategies to Improve Ideological Representation

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**Strategy 1:** Make voters' policy attitudes more culturally liberal

**Strategy 2:** Make voters find cultural issues less important

**Strategy 3:** Make policymaking more culturally conservative

## Strategy 1: Make Voters' Policy Attitudes More Culturally Liberal

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## Strategy 1: Make Voters' Policy Attitudes More Culturally Liberal

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**Practically not doable** because it is quite difficult to change attitudes

- Attitudes are very stable over time Kustov et al. (2021), Danieli et al. (2022)
- **Speeches** do not change attitudes Selb and Munzert (2018)
- **Information interventions** have small and inconsistent effects Hopkins et al. (2019), Barrera et al. (2020), Grigorieff et al. (2020), Alesina et al. (2023)
- Fake news do not affect elections decisively Allcott & Gentzkow (2017) Grinberg et al. (2019), Guess et al. (2019), Eady et al. (2023)
- **Fact checking** does not work Swire et al. 2017, Nyhan et al. 2019, Barrera et al. 2020
- **Media campaigns** have small effects on voting Durante % Knight (2012), DellaVigna & Kaplan (2007)  
Effect of Fox News on voting: 0.4-0.7pp.

## Strategy 2: Make Voters Find Cultural Issues Less Important

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### A bit more promising

- Perceived importance is much more volatile than attitudes Danieli et al. (2022)



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Key challenge: Mainstream parties cannot control perceived importance tightly

- The media and populists have their own agenda
- ⇒ But can make other topics perceived as more important
- ⇒ Or reduce immigration to make it less relevant

## Strategy 3: Make Policymaking More Culturally Conservative

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### Risky

Small changes in policymaking or rhetoric do not weaken populists

e.g., Hjorth and Larsen (2020), Krause et al. (2022)

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Changes in policymaking might work if the are...

- ... large (Frederiksen in Denmark)
- ... committed Bellodi et al. (2023)
- ... enduring

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# The Welfare Perspective

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## Let's Not Miss the Forest for the Trees

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## Populism is a Symptom

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⇒ Representation gaps also reflect differences regarding deep preferences

- Politicians are more risk-seeking than voters Heß et al. (2023)
- more universalist Günther (2023)
- more efficiency oriented Fisman et al. (2015)

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⇒ Populism might be a **symptom** of mainstream parties not implementing **welfare**-maximizing policies

As long as this is true populism will come back Galasso et al. (2022)

Maybe in a more dangerous form:

List experiment suggest 22% of Germans would support a "revolution to enforce the will of the people"



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## **On Institutional Reforms**

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## Many Institutional Reforms Will Not Close Representation Gaps

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Established institutions that are biased similarly:

- European Parliament
- National parliaments
- Upper/lower chambers
- National governments
- Established parties
- Candidates for parliaments

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"Deliberative Democracy"

- "Ordinary citizens" discuss and send proposals to parliaments
- Will be ineffective because **MPs already know** representation gaps
- They choose to overrule the popular will

## Semi-direct Democracy Might Work

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Move the needle toward direct democracy

- ⇒ Less need for populists who fill representation gaps
- ⇒ If populists come to power they are less powerful
  - No representation gap on climate change
  - Good policy outcomes in Switzerland
- ⇒ "Better" policymaking
  - The United States of Europe as a semi-direct Democracy



## Take-home Messages

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Populism is a symptom of mainstream parties not representing many voters

Responding by **only** fighting populists will neither defeat them nor improve welfare

Trying to improve welfare through popular policies might achieve both

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# Appendix

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# Strategy 3: Make Policymaking More Culturally Conservative

