Populism and Layers of Social Belonging: Support of Populist Parties in Europe

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Although scholars hypothesized early on that social belonging is an important predictor for voting behavior, its role for populist voting remains empirically ambiguous and underexplored. This contribution investigates how different aspects of social belonging, that is, quality, quantity, and perception of one's own social relationships, relate to electoral abstention and to populist voting on the left and right. Employing multilevel regression models using data from four waves of the European Social Survey, this study finds that all measures of social belonging foster turnout, but they exert an incoherent influence on populist voting depending on the party's ideological leaning. While social belonging plays a subordinate role for left populist support, strong social belonging reduces the probability to support populist parties on the right. With that, the study analysis offers a nuanced view on how different dimensions of social belonging relate to electoral behavior. By doing so, this study sheds light on what aspects of social belonging encourage, or inhibit, which form of "protest at the ballot box."

KEY WORDS: social inclusion, social belonging, populism, populist party support, voter turnout

Not every crisis appears suddenly. For decades, sociodemographic trends such as rising individualism, aging societies, shrinking social networks, and widespread loneliness led experts to warn that social belonging will become a growing issue for western democracies (Buecker et al., 2021; Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2018b; Olds & Schwartz, 2009). Media reports picked up these warnings and framed it as an emerging "epidemic of loneliness" and first governments put the issue on their official agenda (Easton, 2018). Alongside concerns about consequences for well-being and public health, some authors drew the connection between this creeping crisis of social belonging and the rise of populism, stating that lonely individuals are a vulnerable target group for extremist and populist parties (Buechler, 2013; Hertz, 2021).

However, despite the uncontested view that social relationships play an important role in voter mobilization and political decision-making, a person's social belonging is only rarely considered in empirical models explaining populist party preference (Stockemer et al., 2018). If considered, authors operationalize it with classic measures of social capital, that is, group membership and

Highlights

- Weak social belonging is associated with lower voter turnout
- Weak social belonging is associated with an increased probability to vote for populist parties
- This does apply for populist parties on the political right, but not on the left.
- This indicates that trends of decreasing social belonging may benefit right wing populist parties in particular

generalized trust, and investigate its association with electoral right-wing support (Berning & Ziller, 2017; Zhirkov, 2014).[1]

This operationalization faces two major limitations. First, it ignores other important dimensions of social belonging such as the quality of these relationships or the perceived relative social activity compared to similar others. Secondly, the question of whether different dimensions of social belonging exert a uniform or heterogeneous influence on populist party support on the left and right end of the political spectrum remains underexplored.

Despite an ambivalent empirical picture, it is commonly assumed that social capital, social ties, and emotional belonging foster electoral turnout and exert a homogeneous (shielding) effect against populism, independent of the party's ideological position (Rydgren, 2011). However, it is far from obvious that these dimensions of social belonging exert a uniform influence on populist parties on the left and the right. Our argument is based on the premise that the right- and left-populist narratives correspond to a different degree with the affective needs of individuals with weak social belonging, which leads to a heterogeneous relationship between belonging and support for populist parties depending on their ideological standing.

By investigating to what extent different dimensions of social belonging are associated with right-populist support, left-populist support, or nonvoting, this study aims to fill this gap in the literature. Seen as *voice* and *exit* strategies for political discontent (Wingrove & Hirschman, 1971), the analysis offers a nuanced view on how subjective and objective dimensions of relationships relate to electoral behavior. By doing so, the study sheds light on what aspects of social belonging encourage, or inhibit, which form of "protest at the ballot box."

To that end, we first review the concept of populism and discuss commonalities and differences between left- and right-wing populist parties. Second, we review why social belonging is commonly expected to shield from nonvoting and populist-party support in general. Third, we extend this prevailing view by arguing why social belonging is expected to exert an inconsistent effect on populist parties on the left and right. Finally, we put our argument to an empirical test by utilizing four waves (6–9) of the European Social Survey.

Populism and Host Ideologies: Commonalities and Differences

Multiple electoral successes of populist parties and corresponding growing media coverage led to substantial growth in research concerned with populist voting (Bernhard & Kriesi, 2019; Rooduijn, 2019). In Europe, political populism is most often associated with the radical right, and, consequentially, most studies focus on right-leaning populist parties (Mudde, 2007). However, the successes of populist parties on the left side of the political spectrum raise questions about whether insights about right-wing populism can be generalized to the populist left (Damiani, 2020).

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[1]A noteworthy exception is a paper from Rydgren (2009), which finds only marginal predictive power of social relations for right-wing voting. However, the analysis relies on data from the early 2000s, a period with substantially fewer populist voters. As the author notes, the number of populist voters varied between 57 and 249 cases per country. Hence, the results potentially stem from limited observations.

Although populism is a contested concept (Hunger & Paxton, 2021), most studies define populism as a thin ideology with a conceptual core that can be linked to various host ideologies (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). This study follows this ideational approach of populism as it provides a useful framework to conceptualize the shared core of populist parties as well as the ideological differences between parties on the left and right, which in turn explain potential differences in the relationship between weak social belonging and populist party support.

With respect to the conceptual core, populist parties and leaders typically utilize dividing rhetoric stating that society consists of two antagonistic groups. On the one side, the righteous people, on the other side the misguided and corrupt elites (Ivaldi et al., 2017; Mudde, 2004). This narrative encapsulates three central ideas: (1) an antipluralistic view of civil society with a homogeneous and cohesive population; (2) a universally shared "will of the people"; and (3) a small and corrupted elite that opposes the will of the people.

The conceptual core of populist parties explains empirical findings that the electoral base of populist parties on the left and right have a similar socioeconomic profile with respect to lower education, weaker socioeconomic position, and economic or political discontent (Kaltwasser & Van Hauwaert, 2020; Rooduijn, 2018; Rooduijn et al., 2017). In line with that, prominent explanations for populist voting are the "losers of modernization" and "cultural backlash" perspectives (Gidron & Mijs, 2019; Norris & Inglehart, 2019).

Going beyond the conceptual core, populism can be coupled with various political "host ideologies" on the left and right whose worldviews and political goals are largely diametrically opposed. Depending on this host ideology, parties can vary in their concept of who belongs to "the people," who belongs to the opposing elite, and how society should be organized based on the general will of the people (Ivaldi et al., 2017; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). Therefore, due to the varying host ideologies, populist parties differ in their sociopsychological messaging and vision of how society should develop in the future. Following this reasoning, populist parties can be differentiated in aspects that are associated with their historical ideological roots and their stance on social change.

The opposing ideological view on social change and corresponding communicated messages are of particular importance for this study. As will be argued in more detail later on, we theorize that the opposing ideological narratives correspond to different degrees with the affective needs of individuals with weak social belonging. Left- and right-populist parties differ in their envisioned direction the society should develop. Societal pessimism, law and order narratives, and a nostalgia for the past are important characteristics of right-wing messaging (Steenvoorden & Harteveld, 2018). In line with that, right-wing populist parties represent authoritarian, conservative, and protectionist values (Göpffarth, 2021; Mudde, 2007). With that, right-wing populism typically promotes social change in the sense of preservation and reconstitution of old values from "better times of the past," while taking a stance against progressive social change pursued by liberal elites.

In contrast, left-populist parties promote progressive social change, tend to reject the current capitalist, socioeconomic structure, and envision alternative economic and social systems (Damiani, 2020; March, 2012). With that, they represent social change in terms of a new social order, financial redistribution, and cultural pluralism (Ivaldi et al., 2017). This corresponds with their appeal for people experiencing perceived economic hardship (Gidron & Mijs, 2019; Kurer, 2020). Likewise, studies investigating the association between values and left-right ideological positioning confirm that political orientation and basic human values are interlinked, suggesting that right- and left-wing voters differ in their personal values and needs (Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Schwartz et al., 2010).

These differences become apparent in studies comparing party manifestos of populist parties (March, 2017). For instance, in the British case, populist parties on the left and right alike present themselves as popular identities in juxtaposition to antagonistic elites. However, the party manifestos also indicate that right-wing populist parties are characterized by a strong people centrism and anti-immigrant stance. In contrast, left-wing parties focus on more traditional social divides such as

social class and inequality. Furthermore, "left-wing populists are even more inclined to devote attention to particular constituencies whose interests diverge from those of the people as a whole, such as the unemployed (both parties); women, the disabled and LGBT groups (especially the SSP); and immigrants and religious (especially Muslim) minorities (Respect)" (March, 2017). Many of these findings are mirrored by studies analyzing populist parties in other countries as well (Bernhard & Kriesi, 2019; Castanho, 2017; Rooduijn & Akkerman, 2017).

These reviewed similarities and differences between populist parties raise two questions this contribution aims to investigate. First, how social belonging relates to voting behavior, that is, non-voting and populist voting in general. Second, how social belonging corresponds with the varying messaging of populist parties on the left and right. While the next section focuses on the first question and links the consequences of weak social belonging to the conceptual core of populism, the subsequent section elaborates on the latter by linking the affective needs of poorly included individuals to the ideological narratives of left- and right-wing populist parties.

Social Belonging, Electoral Abstention, and Populist Party Support

Considering the first question, sociological and psychological perspectives help to explain why social belonging, or perceived lack thereof, causes a lower probability to vote and is expected to cause an increased propensity to vote for populist parties in general. As reviewed by Rydgren (2011), scholars in the tradition of mass society theory argue that modern democracies are characterized by an increasing atomization of society. This causes a structural erosion of social networks and social capital which leads, in consequence, to two central outcomes. First, citizens lose their social support network that provides important resources vital for political participation. Second, on an emotional level, they lose their sense of community, security, and belonging. While the first outcome offers an explanation for why weak social embeddedness might be associated with political demobilization, the latter highlights the role of social belonging for electoral support of populist and radical parties.

The resource-based perspective builds on the premise that turnout can be understood as a function of motivation to vote, ability to vote, and costs of voting (Harder & Krosnick, 2008). While scholars have found countless predictors for voter turnout (Smets & van Ham, 2013), social ties and social networks play a prominent role as they provide important resources such as economic support, information, and social control via reinforcing social norms which foster motivation and ability to participate (Bhandari & Yasunobu, 2009; Bhatti et al., 2020).

The second link is based on sociopsychological mechanisms. Social belonging is a fundamental human desire (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) and a weak sense of community and belonging motivates individuals to seek out interpersonal relationships and groups that provide meaning, belonging, and shared identity (Jost et al., 2003; Qualter et al., 2015; Spithoven et al., 2017). Given that populist parties promote the concept of a unified, homogeneous society and provide an ideological identity, poorly integrated individuals are likely to respond to this narrative.

Furthermore, authors in the tradition of social capital theory state that a strong sense of belonging and inclusion in communal networks or organizations foster social trust, civic virtues, and tolerance (Olson, 1972; Putnam, 2000), which reduces receptiveness to the friend-or-foe paradigm of populist parties and promotes electoral turnout as a civic duty in democratic societies (Blais & Achen, 2019). Therefore, belonging can be expected to increase both the propensity to turn out as well as the probability to turn out for a party that does not draw on populist strategies.

Linking the summarized arguments together, weak social belonging can be expected to generate a stronger affinity to populist parties as well as a higher probability to abstain from elections. In line with that reasoning, recent studies highlighted that both social ties and perceived

loneliness are relevant predictors of abstention/participation (Bhatti et al., 2020; Langenkamp, 2021).

> *H1*: Weak social belonging is positively related to populist-party support.
> *H2*: Weak social belonging is positively related to nonvoting.

Psychological Consequences of Belonging and Ideological Narratives

After deriving the argument why weak social belonging should foster populist voting and reduce electoral turnout, this section extends this view and derives why the affective needs of individuals with weak belonging likely correspond to a different degree with the preservation-progress distinction of populist left- and right-wing parties. This question can be answered by linking the psychological consequences of weak social belonging to the ideological narratives of the right- and left-wing populist parties reviewed before.

From an evolutionary psychological perspective (Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2018a; Spithoven et al., 2017), being included in a social group provides resources such as food, security, and support that are essential for survival. As humans are inherently social beings, losing this social support structure was life threatening for most of human history. Loneliness is the emotional response to the perception that one's social support network is qualitatively or quantitatively insufficient and serves to motivate people to reaffiliate with others (Qualter et al., 2015). As such, loneliness is not a mere product of the quantity of social contact but rather depends on an interplay of norms, social comparisons with relevant others, and the desired quantity and quality of social ties (Gierveld et al., 2018).

Being unresolved, loneliness is associated with numerous emotional and psychological outcomes. Among others, lonely individuals are more likely to desire shared identity, community, and reaffiliation (Qualter et al., 2015), while they also tend to suffer from increased social anxiousness, more negative expectations of future events, increased fear of being negatively perceived by others, and lower social trust (Cacioppo et al., 2006; Rotenberg et al., 2010). Likewise, loneliness is associated with prevention-oriented goals instead of promotion-oriented goals (Spithoven et al., 2017).

As illustrated earlier, populist parties of the left and right build on the same conceptual core (i.e., corrupt elites who betray the "common will" of the people), while at the same time coupling this thin ideology with different host ideologies. Correspondingly, populist parties differ in their messaging on how they aim to solve social issues and which vision they have for society depending on their ideological roots. The right-wing populist narrative typically builds on a traditionalist worldview that aims for the preservation of the old and reduction of uncertainty (Jost et al., 2003), which likely corresponds with the affective reactions to loneliness. In line with that reasoning, studies were able to show that lonely individuals tend to endorse politically conservative values and that citizens living in societies with low social cohesion are more likely to hold racist beliefs (Caller & Gorodzeisky, 2021; Floyd, 2017). Likewise, given that individuals with weak social belonging desire community and security, these desires are likely to correspond with the strong people-centric (nativist) rhetoric of right-wing populist parties in particular (March, 2017).

If this holds true, weak social belonging should be positively associated with right-wing populism, as it answers directly to the affective need of lonely individuals to protect themselves and avoid insecurity. In contrast, the narrative of the populist left contains goals of progressive, transformative policies that are unlikely to correspond with the anxious and security-seeking affective reaction of lonely individuals. Likewise, their focus on progressive social groups, social diversity, and minorities might not correspond with the mentioned tendency towards conservatism of individuals with weak social belonging.

This proposition is in line with recent research showing that, while populist voters are very similar in terms of life satisfaction, discontent, and frustration (about the political system and the economic situation), it is the combination of these emotions and generalized social trust that sets populist left and right voters apart (Yann et al., 2019). Whereas those who vote for the populist left have high levels of trust, populist-right voters and absentees are particularly distrusting. According to Yann et al. (2019), this subjective-emotional dimension has become a decisive factor in whether one casts a vote for the left or right because it structures a person's outlook on the world and, consequently, political values and orientations (especially concerning anti-immigrant sentiment and questions of redistribution). Since weak social belonging and loneliness foster distrust and anxiety (Cacioppo et al., 2006; Rotenberg et al., 2010), these arguments further support the notion of heterogeneous effects of social belonging on populist voting.

H3: Weak social belonging at the individual level is positively associated with right-wing populism, but not with left-wing populism.

To summarize, our theoretical argument starts from the presumption that a lack of social belonging elicits anxiousness, distrust, and insecurity. Simultaneously, it fosters a strong desire for social unity, group identity, and security. These psychological dispositions and emotional needs, in turn, correspond in particular with typical narratives of right-wing populist parties. By focusing on the concept of social belonging, we integrate an important, yet often overlooked sociopsychological predictor of political-attitude formation into our explanatory model of populist voting behavior. By considering quantitative, qualitative, and relative aspects of social belonging, the study uses a broad spectrum of measures that constitute social belonging and therefore extends on works in the tradition of social capital theory that focus on generalized trust and formal group membership.

Data and Methods

Individual-level data come from the European Social Survey (ESS). We pool rounds 6 to 9 of the ESS to maximize the sample of populist voters. The four waves cover an observation period from 2012 to 2018.

The dependent variable is based on two retrospective vote variables. Respondents were asked whether they voted in the last national election and, if that is answered in the affirmative, which party they voted for. We use this information to distinguish persons who did not vote (including Blanco and nonvalid votes) and persons who voted for either any populist party, a populist-left party, a populist-right party, or a mainstream party. The populist party classification is based on The PopuList 2.0 (Rooduijn et al., 2019), a dataset resulting from the collaborative efforts of journalists and academic experts. There, parties classify as populist when they fit the following definition: "Parties that endorse the set of ideas that society is ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, "the pure people" versus "the corrupt elite," and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people" (Mudde, 2004:543). We use the PopuList's record of parties' host ideologies to distinguish between parties that are populist far-left and populist far-right. Far-left and far-right nonpopulist parties are excluded from all analyses. We treat as mainstream parties those that are not populist. Parties that are populist but without a clear host ideology, so-called "valence populism" (Zulianello, 2020), are included in our first analysis concerned with populist voting independent of underlying ideology (H1 and H2), but they are not part of our analysis of populist party support differentiated by ideology (H3). A list of populist parties included in our analysis is provided in Table S1 in the online supporting information.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

	Min	Max	Mean	*SD*	Median	*N* Valid	%Valid
Populist vs. Mainstream	0	1	0.179	0.384	0	95,866	81.260
Left vs. Mainstream	0	1	0.030	0.171	0	81,144	68.781
Right vs. Mainstream	0	1	0.110	0.313	0	88,430	74.957
Nonvoter vs. Mainstream	0	1	0.219	0.414	0	100,795	85.438
Relative social activity	0	4	1.735	0.919	2	117,974	100.000
Contact frequency	0	6	3.784	1.522	4	117,974	100.000
Relationship quality	0	6	2.874	1.427	3	117,974	100.000
Group membership	0	1	0.492	0.500	0	117,974	100.000
Age	18	101	51.716	17.343	52	117,974	100.000
Gender	1	2	1.521	0.500	2	117,974	100.000
Education	1	5	3.443	1.273	3	117,974	100.000
Income	1	6	3.411	1.653	3	117,974	100.000
Unemployed	0	1	0.047	0.212	0	117,974	100.000
Migration background	0	1	0.124	0.329	0	117,974	100.000
HH size	1	10	2.514	1.296	2	117,974	100.000
Political orientation	0	10	5.176	2.179	5	117,974	100.000
ESS round	1	4	2.549	1.145	3	117,974	100.000

As for indicators for social belonging at the individual level, we include contact frequency, perceived relative social activity, and relationship quality. Contact frequency is measured by the following question: "[…] How often do you meet socially with friends, relatives, or work colleagues?" Respondents then indicate on a 7-point scale whether they meet never, less than once a month, several times a month, once a week, several times a week, or every day. Relative social activity measures on a 5-point scale whether respondents take part in social activities "much less than most" up to "much more than most" other people of their age. The quality of social relationships is measured with a 7-point scale asking the participants "How many people, if any, are there with whom you can discuss intimate and personal matters?" With that, we capture the frequentist dimension, the mental relative representation of one's social relationships compared to the larger social environment and the availability of qualitatively important social relationships. Given the importance of formal group networks for identity formation, social capital, and local integration, we further include formal group membership as the fourth indicator for social belonging. We measure group membership with a dummy for respondents who are currently in a trade union, an organization or association other than parties and activist groups, or in a religious community. The latter is a dummy variable for persons who attend religious services at least once a month, indicating a certain degree of integration in religious communities.

To investigate the relationship between belonging and voting behavior, we considered several additional covariates. Most importantly, we control for the respondent's age, gender, education, and income as these sociodemographic characteristics are well-established confounders in the literature (Rooduijn, 2018). We recode the income measure to quintiles of the country's income distribution and add an additional category to retain cases with missing income information. Educational level is measured by the International Standard Classification of Education, distinguishing those with none or primary education (ISCED 0-1), lower secondary (ISCED 2), upper secondary and higher non-tertiary education (ISCED 3-4), or tertiary education (ISCED 5–6). Because a migration background has previously been found to be related to both civic participation and voting behavior (Strijbis, 2014), we also include a dummy indicating whether respondents or any of their parents were not born in the country of residence. In addition, we control for household size (top-coded at 10 persons), unemployment, and political orientation measured by the 11-point left-right scale. Descriptive statistics for all variables are provided in Table 1.

We fit linear probability models with country and wave (i.e., "two-way"-) fixed effects and heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors. We do so for each type of electoral behavior contrasted
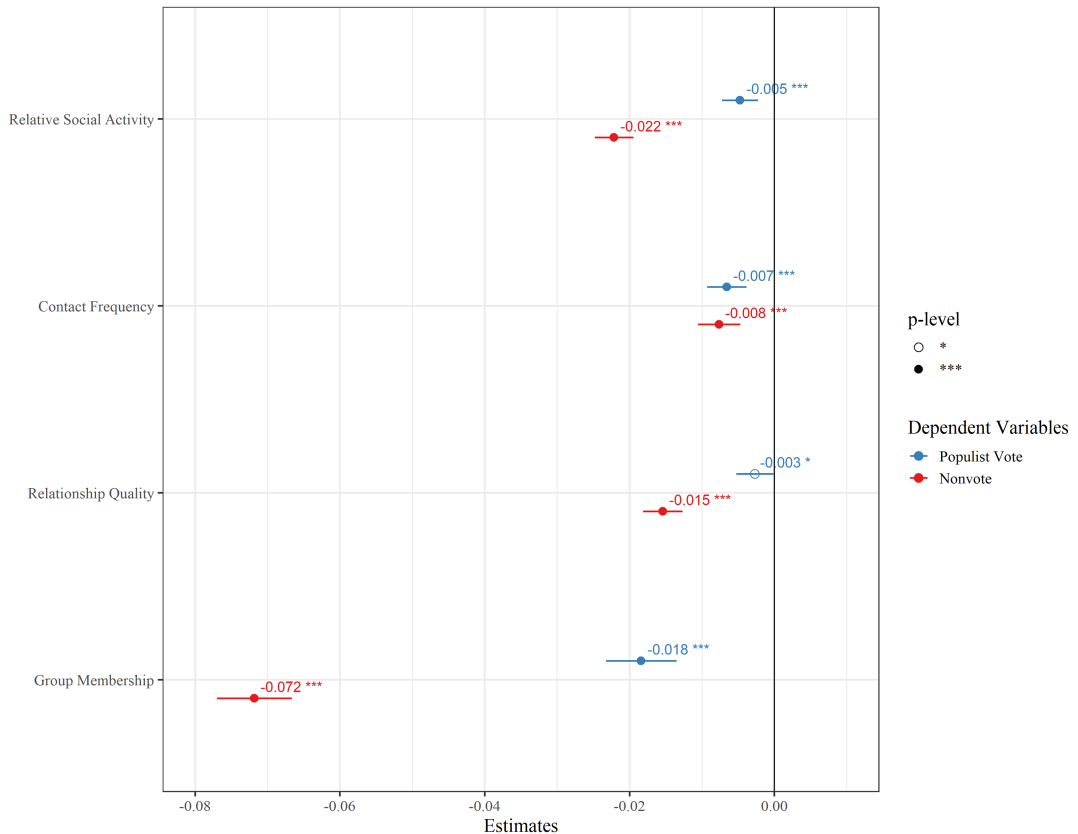
Figure 1. Populist vote or nonvoting versus mainstream party: fixed effects linear probability models. Linear probability models (ESS 6-9), *N* of models: Populist Vote = 95,866; Nonvote = 100,795. Controls: Age, gender, education, HH income, unemployment, migration background, and political orientation Includes country and year fixed effects with heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors.

against voting for a mainstream party. In the first part of the analysis, we model the effects of social belonging on undifferentiated populist voting and nonvoting. In the second part, we differentiate between the ideological positions of populist parties (Table A1).

After excluding respondents who were not eligible to vote in the reference election as well as those with missing information on any of the variables in the analysis, we retain a sample of 25 countries and 100,795 respondents in the analyses of nonvoters and 95,866 respondents in 25 countries in the models for general populism. The analysis of the populist left is based on seven countries ($N = 32,881$) and that for the populist right on 22 countries ($N = 80,904$, see also Table S3 in the online supporting information). The number of populist-left voters range from 20 in the United Kingdom to 683 in Germany. For the populist right, this ranges from 7 in Lithuania to 2,330 in Hungary.

Results

We begin our analysis by investigating the relationship between social belonging and electoral protest by keeping the populist voting variable undifferentiated. Since we are interested in the effects of social belonging on the probability to vote for a populist party or to abstain from voting, we do not discuss the control variables in further detail but show complete results in Table A2 in the appendix.

Figure 1 displays the standardized parameter estimates of the final linear probability models concerned with Hypotheses 1 and 2.

The results show a clear effect of social belonging on nonvoting. Relative social activity ($\beta = -0.022$, $SE = 0.001$, $p < .001$), contact frequency ($\beta = -0.008$, $SE = 0.001$, $p < .001$), relationship quality ($\beta = -0.015$, $SE = 0.001$, $p < .001$), and formal group involvement ($\beta = -0.072$, $SE = 0.003$, $p < .001$) all significantly increase the probability to vote. Formal group involvement exerts a strong effect on turnout, as group members are roughly 7.2% more likely to vote compared to nonmembers. In comparison, every standard deviation increase in perceived relative social activity increases the probability for turnout by 2.2%, accumulating to a maximum effect of 9.64% over the whole scale. Overall, all four measures exert a substantial effect on turnout, even under the control of one another.

In the model contrasting populist voters and mainstream voters, the results show a uniformly negative effect. All social-belonging indicators reduce the probability to vote for a populist party, although the effect sizes are smaller compared to their influence on turnout. The separate indicators for interpersonal relationships decrease the probability to vote for a populist party by 0.3% to 0.7% per standard deviation. The predicted difference in the probability to vote for a populist party instead of a center party between individuals with the lowest and highest standardized relative social-activity scores is 2.07%, ceteris paribus. For contact frequency, this is 2.59, and for relationship quality 1.13. Being a member of a religious community, trade union, or another voluntary organization reduces the probability to vote for a populist party by 1.84%. As the absolute values of the effect sizes do not appear large at first, it is important to put them into perspective by comparing them with other well-established predictors as a benchmark. For instance, the accumulated effect of relative social activity is about half as strong as unemployment ($\beta = 0.042$, $SE = 0.007$, $p < .001$) or education (where having a university degree compared to none or primary education decreases the probability to vote for a populist party by 4.8%).

Our analysis so far supports the general notion that social belonging fosters voter turnout and, to slightly lesser degree, shields from casting a vote for populist parties. As we have argued, social inclusion might have disparate effects on populist voting depending on party ideology. The subsequent analysis aims for a more differentiated view on the consequences of social belonging for electoral behavior. To test Hypothesis 3, we fit separate models for left- and right-wing populism. Figure 2 shows the relevant standardized parameter estimates of the final models for the three types of electoral protest (for the complete results, see Table A3 in the appendix). Note that the model for nonvoting is unchanged and is included for reference only.

The central insight of the differentiated analysis is the heterogeneous effect of social belonging for populist parties on the left and the right. In line with the previous results reported in Figure 1, Figure 2 shows that social belonging is negatively and significantly related to voting for a populist-right party, irrespective of the specific indicator. Contact frequency and relationship quality decrease the probability to vote for a populist right versus a mainstream party by 0.4% per unit increase. The effect of relative social activity is slightly larger ($\beta = -0.007$, $SE = 0.001$, $p < .001$).

However, the results for left-wing populist voting deviate from the findings reported in Figure 1. Among the indicators for interpersonal relationships, the results indicate that only contact frequency ($\beta = -0.009$, $SE = 0.002$, $p < .001$) reduces the probability to vote for a populist-left party, whereas the other indicators have null effects. Interestingly, while perceived relative social activity is statistically nonsignificant, it is the only predictor suggesting a positive effect on left-populist voting ($\beta = 0.003$, $SE = 0.002$, $p = .094$). While nonsignificant effects should not be overinterpreted, it illustrates the deviating pattern for left-populist voting.

Likewise, formal group membership is associated with a reduced probability to vote for right- as well as left-wing populist parties alike. The results indicate a small negative effect on right-wing populist voting ($\beta = -0.006$, $SE = 0.002$, $p = .007$) and a slightly stronger effect on left-wing populist voting ($\beta = -0.016$, $SE = 0.003$, $p < .001$). Group membership, therefore, has a smaller effect on
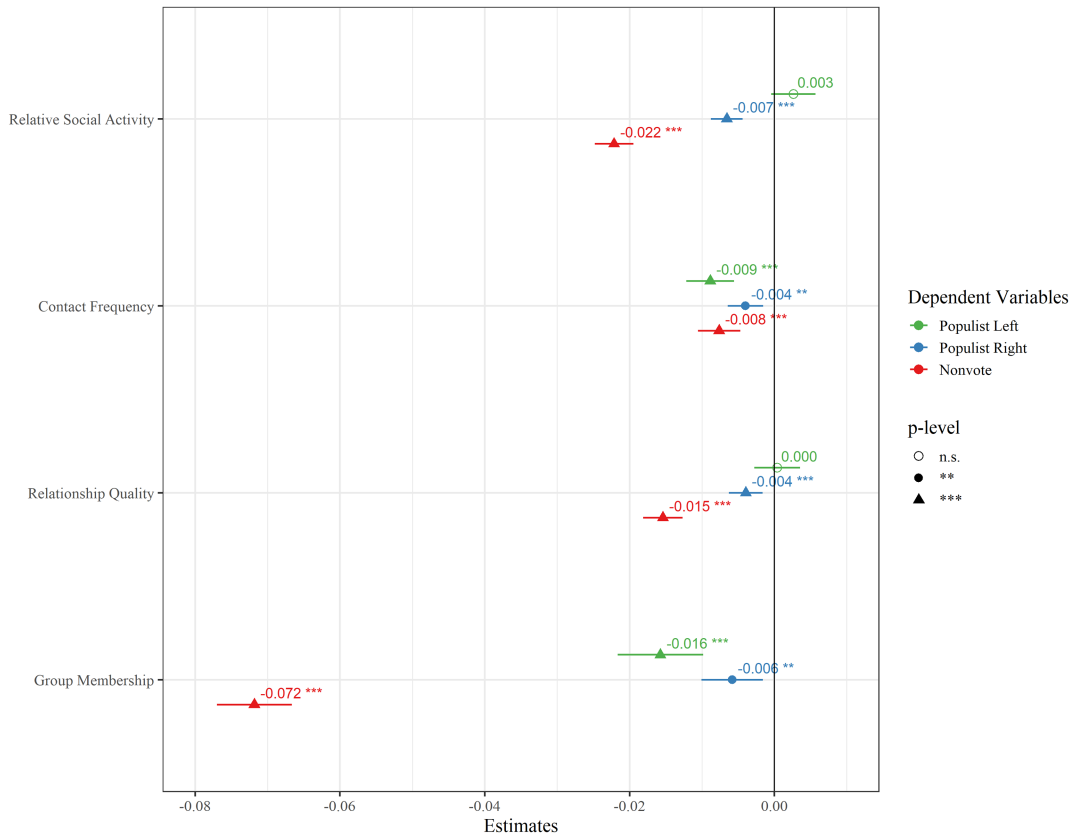
Figure 2. Differentiated populist and social inclusion: fixed effects linear probability models. Linear probability models (ESS 6-9), *N* of models: Populist Left = 32,881; Populist Right = 80,904; Nonvote = 100,795. Controls: Age, gender, education, HH income, unemployment, migration background, and political orientation. Includes country and year fixed effects with heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors.

right-wing populist voting than on left-wing populist voting. This is, however, most likely due to the indicator capturing membership in a religious community, which negatively correlates with left-wing voting but has, in some Central and Eastern European countries such as Poland and Hungary, a positive correlation with support for the populist right.

Taken together, we find that, on average, group membership reduces the probability to vote for a populist party on the left and right. However, more research is needed to differentiate under what circumstances which kind of group membership may actually be detrimental to democratic support. In light of research concerned with mobilization networks of radical groups, it is likely that social groups can potentially mobilize populist voters under certain circumstances and hence should be considered negative social capital (Caiani, 2017; Klandermans & Mayer, 2005). To summarize, the second part of our analysis shows that, whereas social belonging is beneficial for turnout per se, it depends when it comes to voting for populist parties. There are some indicators of belonging, such as group membership and contact frequency, which reduce the probability to vote for populist parties independent of ideology. Other dimensions, however, such as relative social activity and relationship quality, are more differentiated between populist right and populist left parties. Overall, our analyses suggest that social belonging plays an important role in voter mobilization and right-wing populist support, while it is of lesser importance for left-wing populist-party support. Considering that we

find these results under control of a range of covariates, as well as the interrelationships between the separate indicators of social belonging, this is a clear indication that social belonging affects populist voting and that it does so in different ways, depending on the host ideology.

Robustness Checks

When using alternative specifications, most of the estimates were highly robust and differed, if at all, only minimally from our main models. Omitting the control for political orientation did not alter any of the models substantially. When we included a social-trust index composed of respondents' assessment of people's fairness, helpfulness, and trustworthiness ($\alpha = 0.77$), the coefficient for relationship quality in both the model of undifferentiated populism and right-wing populism turned nonsignificant. The other social-belonging effects also became slightly smaller but remained significant. While this indicates that social trust might function as a mediator, these results show that social belonging has an independent effect on (right-wing) populism. Controlling for an index of immigration attitudes ($\alpha = 0.86$), composed of questions capturing respondent`s assessment of immigration's effect on the economy, the cultural life, and general living conditions, relationship quality and group membership became nonsignificant in the model for right-wing populism. Relationship quality also turned nonsignificant in the model for undifferentiated populism. The other estimates remained robust in this specification. However, given that the stance on immigration is one of the most salient differences between right- and left-wing populist parties, it is of little surprise that some coefficients in the models drop out of significance. Moreover, since conservative values and racist beliefs are related to feelings of loneliness and social cohesion (Caller & Gorodzeisky, 2021; Floyd, 2017), immigration attitudes may be regarded as mediating the relationship between social belonging and populist voting.

Furthermore, we refit the main models while additionally controlling for the place of residence (urban vs. rural), for a respondent's religion (Christian vs. other), and for social class instead of income (operationalized following Oesch, 2006). In the model for populist voting, this led the relationship quality indicator to become nonsignificant. This specification also reduced the effect of group membership on all types of populist voting, turning it nonsignificant in the model for right-wing populism. Most likely, this is because the Christianity indicator takes over the effect of being in a religious community. The corresponding Tables S2–S5 are in the online supporting information. These changes do, however, not lead us to modify our substantive conclusions.

We further reestimated each of the final models while excluding one country at a time ("jackknifing") in order to make sure that the results were not overly influenced by a single country (see Tables S6–S9 in the online supporting information). The results are generally robust, except for the coefficient for relationship quality in the model of populism, which remains negative but does not reach significance in 8 out of 26 specifications. For the same model, we find that the group-membership coefficient turns nonsignificant when Austria, Switzerland, Germany, or the Netherlands are excluded. We do not regard these results as a refutation of our theory since the other coefficients remain highly robust, and removing a large number of cases from any statistical analysis naturally reduces its power.

Discussion

Developments such as shrinking household sizes, dwindling membership in social organizations, eroding social networks, and widespread loneliness have led experts to warn of an emerging crisis of social belonging (Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2018b; Holt-Lunstad, 2017). While consequences for health and well-being are well-established, our results suggest that these developments relate to voter turnout and support of populist parties as well.

Overall, our analysis indicates that strong social belonging does indeed foster voter turnout and is associated with reduced support for right-wing parties. However, our findings highlight that social

belonging does not shield from populism per se and that generalizing insights across variants of populism is of limited use for our understanding of political behavior. While social belonging on the individual level is just weakly and inconsistently associated with support for the populist left, it plays an important and homogeneous role in voting populist parties on the right. This highlights once more the importance of considering the host ideology of populist parties.

That being said, formal group membership plays a special role in this dynamic, as it seems to mobilize voters and reduce support for populist parties independent of the underlying ideology. This is in line with the expectations of social capital theory. However, this also highlights that the other considered indicators of social belonging are not interchangeable, but they exert an independent effect on voting behavior.

With that, our study adds to the literature in multiple ways. First, the results qualify earlier studies based on survey data from the early 2000s that did not find a relationship between social inclusion and populism (Rydgren, 2009). As more populist parties have emerged since then, our analysis of more recent data suggests that social belonging as a predictor for populist attitudes should not be discarded. On the contrary, our finding that weak social belonging is associated with electoral demobilization, as well as polarization, suggests an interesting dynamic between belonging and *voice* and *exit* strategies for political discontent (Wingrove & Hirschman, 1971). With that, this study is in line with other recent accounts from the social-marginalization literature that show that perceived social marginalization, that is, lack of strong attachment to norms and social engagement, fosters political alienation and support for radical parties (Gidron & Hall, 2020). This also aligns with studies showing that negative emotions that likely emanate from loneliness and isolation, such as disillusionment, can lead to extreme political believes (Maher et al., 2018).

Second, the results highlight that conclusions about right-wing populism cannot easily be generalized to left-populist parties. While certain similarities are present due to the shared populist ideology, the vastly different host ideologies make effect heterogeneity in respect of mobilizing factors very likely. Ideology serves as an interpretation scheme of the world, and our results support the idea that the affective needs of lonely individuals have a closer fit with the epistemic, existential, and relational functions served by right-wing political ideology (Jost et al., 2009). As we argued, right-wing populism is particularly fitting for anxious, insecure individuals, as it exploits typical motives of the conservative host ideology (Jost et al., 2003; Thorisdottir et al., 2007). While this current article did not explicitly test the underlying causal mechanisms leading from social belonging to populist voting, our results confirm the notion that the psychological dispositions of lonely individuals leave them receptive to right-wing populist parties in particular.

Third, we demonstrated that disentangling different dimensions of social belonging can bring potential benefits in comparison to bundling measures into rough scales for reasons of simplicity and statistical power.

That being said, our analysis and conclusions should be interpreted in light of several limitations. First, as we used multiple waves of cross-sectional data, the analysis is based on statistical associations and cannot empirically test causality. While we believe that these results are informative as they point to new fields of investigation, we believe it is important to recognize this issue in order to interpret the findings appropriately.

Secondly, the concept of populism is still debated, and the decision of which party should be labeled as left or right populist is difficult (Hunger & Paxton, 2021). Our operationalization relied on a widely used and well-established dataset, and we are confident that this is the most feasible procedure with respect to reliability and comparability across studies. Still, we acknowledge this issue.

Third, this study puts emphasis on demonstrating that the relationship between belonging and populist voting (in particular on the right side of the political spectrum) is theoretically sound,

empirically robust, and substantial in size. However, the analysis does not directly investigate the question of why this relationship is heterogeneous for left- and right-wing populist parties and should therefore be seen as a starting point for future research.

Fourth, the effect sizes found in our analysis appear small at first sight. Also, statistically significant effects do not necessarily suggest substantively meaningful relationships (Bernardi et al., 2017). However, we believe that our findings are indeed meaningful, as the size of an effect can be judged best in the context of a given model. As discussed in the result section, the effect sizes of the social-belonging indicators are comparable to other established predictors of voting behavior, such as unemployment or education. Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that our indicators of social belonging are intercorrelated with one another, and the joint effect of individual indicators is larger than the individual effects suggest. Taken together, both arguments speak in favor of the idea that social belonging has a substantial influence on populist voting.

While implications for greater societal developments have to be drawn with caution, we believe that our results speak to the general debate on how sociodemographic trends influence elections in the long run. Sociodemographic developments and a corresponding eroding sense of belonging and widespread loneliness might not only reduce voter turnout but also benefit right-wing populism in particular.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

We have no known conflict of interest to disclose.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher's web site:

Table S1. Parties in ESS & Populist Classification by PopuList
Table S2. Robustness Tests: Populist versus Mainstream—Additional Controls
Table S3. Robustness Tests: Nonvoter versus Mainstream—Additional Controls
Table S4. Robustness Tests: Left Populist versus Mainstream—Additional Controls
Table S5. Robustness Tests: Right Populist versus Mainstream—Additional Controls
Table S6. Jackknife Estimate and Significance Level—Populist versus Mainstream
Table S7. Jackknife Estimate and Significance Level—Nonvoter versus Mainstream
Table S8. Jackknife Estimate and Significance Level—Left versus Mainstream
Table S9. Jackknife Estimate and Significance Level—Right versus Mainstream

Appendix

Table A1. Analytical Samples by Country

Country	Left vs. Main	Left Votes	Right vs. Main	Right Votes	Populists vs. Main	Valence Votes	Nonvoter vs. Main	Nonvotes	Total
AT			4,384	673	4,410	26	4,388	677	5,087
BE			5,155	171	5,165	10	5,461	477	5,642
BG			1,323	94	2,201	878	1,751	522	2,723
CH			2,948	546	2,965	17	3,619	1,217	4,182
CZ			2,949	139	3,978	1,029	5,249	2,439	6,417
DE	7,834	683	7,406	255	8,089	0	8,438	1,287	9,376
DK			3,037	369	3,037	0	2,846	178	3,215
EE			4,312	153	4,312	0	5,460	1,301	5,613
ES	3,716	341	3,467	92	3,808	0	4,202	827	4,635
FI			5,997	690	5,997	0	6,267	960	6,957
FR	4,030	73	4,436	479	4,509	0	5,767	1,810	6,319
GB	5,101	20	5,305	224	5,325	0	6,483	1,402	6,727
HR			954	14	1,095	141	1,299	359	1,454
HU			3,993	2,330	3,993	0	2,748	1,085	5,078
IE	6,002	624			6,002	0	6,582	1,204	7,206
IS					1,861	109	1,945	193	2,054
IT			2,244	398	3,241	997	2,395	549	3,790
LT			2,753	7	3,505	752	4,196	1,450	4,955
LV					429	33	529	133	562
NL	4,782	461	4,696	375	5,157	0	5,283	962	6,119
NO			4,224	479	4,228	4	4,189	444	4,672
PL			3,614	1,407	3,614	0	3,385	1,178	4,792
SE			5,184	350	5,184	0	5,123	289	5,473
SI	1,416	255	1,566	405	1,934	113	1,747	586	2,520
SK			957	93	1,827	870	1,443	579	2,406
Total N	32,881	2,457	80,904	9,743	95,866	4,979	100,795	22,108	117,974
Total Country	7		22		25		25		25

Note Column „Left vs. Main" contains the analytical sample used for the model contrasting left-wing populist voters against mainstream voters. „Left Votes" contains the number of actual votes for the populist left.

Table A2. Linear Probability Models of Populist Vote or Nonvoting Versus Mainstream Party

	Populist vs. Main		Nonvoter vs. Main	
	M 1	M 2	M 3	M 4
Intercept	0.148***	0.180***	0.219***	0.302***
	(0.006)	(0.008)	(0.006)	(0.009)
Relative social activity	−0.007***	−0.005***	−0.033***	−0.022***
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Contact frequency	−0.004**	−0.007***	0.008***	−0.008***
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.002)	(0.001)
Relationship quality	−0.008***	−0.003*	−0.018***	−0.015***
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Group membership index	−0.025***	−0.018***	−0.101***	−0.072***
	(0.003)	(0.002)	(0.003)	(0.003)
HH size		−0.000		−0.014***
		(0.001)		(0.001)
Age		−0.021***		−0.089***
		(0.001)		(0.001)
Female		−0.028***		−0.003
		(0.002)		(0.002)
Education (Ref: ISCED 1)				
ISCED 2		0.026***		−0.008
		(0.005)		(0.006)
ISCED 3		0.008		−0.069***
		(0.005)		(0.006)
ISCED 4		−0.019**		−0.118***
		(0.006)		(0.007)
ISCED 5-6		−0.048***		−0.155***
		(0.005)		(0.006)
Income (Ref: 1st Quintile)				
2nd Quintile		−0.004		−0.037***
		(0.004)		(0.005)
3rd Quintile		−0.010*		−0.051***
		(0.004)		(0.005)
4th Quintile		−0.024***		−0.078***
		(0.004)		(0.005)
5th Quintile		−0.052***		−0.091***
		(0.005)		(0.005)
Missing income		−0.047***		−0.045***
		(0.005)		(0.005)
Unemployed		0.042***		0.075***
		(0.007)		(0.007)
Migration background		−0.006		0.049***
		(0.003)		(0.004)
Pol. orientation		0.044***		0.001
		(0.001)		(0.001)
R^2	0.151	0.177	0.093	0.152
Adj. R^2	0.151	0.176	0.093	0.152
Number obs.	95,866	95,866	100,795	100,795

Note Linear probability models with country and year fixed effects. Continuous variables were standardized.
*$p < .05$
**$p < .01$
***$p < .001$.

Table A3. Linear Probability Models of Populism, Differentiated

	Left Populist vs. Main		Right Populist vs. Main	
	M 5	M 6	M 7	M 8
Intercept	0.090***	0.099***	0.127***	0.172***
	(0.004)	(0.007)	(0.006)	(0.008)
Relative social activity	−0.000	0.003	−0.008***	−0.007***
	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Contact frequency	−0.008***	−0.009***	−0.002	−0.004**
	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Relationship quality	0.001	0.000	−0.010***	−0.004***
	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Group-membership index	−0.025***	−0.016***	−0.012***	−0.006**
	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.002)	(0.002)
HH Size		−0.001		−0.001
		(0.002)		(0.001)
Age		−0.008***		−0.016***
		(0.002)		(0.001)
Female		−0.014***		−0.026***
		(0.003)		(0.002)
Education (Ref: ISCED 1)				
ISCED 2		0.015**		0.018***
		(0.006)		(0.005)
ISCED 3		0.006		−0.005
		(0.005)		(0.005)
ISCED 4		0.005		−0.035***
		(0.008)		(0.006)
ISCED 5-6		−0.000		−0.060***
		(0.005)		(0.005)
Income (Ref: 1st Quintile)				
2nd Quintile		−0.015**		−0.002
		(0.005)		(0.004)
3rd Quintile		−0.024***		−0.008*
		(0.005)		(0.004)
4th Quintile		−0.039***		−0.017***
		(0.005)		(0.004)
5th Quintile		−0.051***		−0.038***
		(0.005)		(0.004)
Missing income		−0.043***		−0.034***
		(0.005)		(0.004)
Unemployed		0.058***		0.016**
		(0.010)		(0.006)
Migration background		−0.000		−0.011***
		(0.004)		(0.003)
Pol. orientation		−0.055***		0.067***
		(0.002)		(0.001)
R^2	0.032	0.083	0.175	0.231
Adj. R^2	0.032	0.083	0.174	0.231
Number obs.	32,881	32,881	80,904	80,904

Note Linear probability models with country and year fixed effects. Continuous variables were standardized.

*$p < .05$

**$p < .01$

***$p < .001$.