Populist attitudes among parliamentary candidates in Britain

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Abstract

Rising support for populist parties and candidates has become a key story of recent decades, making headlines in Western democracies and beyond. While a growing body of populism research focuses on how parties use populist messaging and which voters are most drawn to these messages, we still know relatively little about the extent to which individual politicians hold populist views. Using data from the Representative Audit of Britain Survey, we examine populist sentiments among parliamentary candidates in Britain. Our findings show that populist attitudes among candidates remain modest, with anti-elite sentiments being most prominent. In addition, we find partisanship and incumbency to be the most consistent predictors for the extent to which candidates hold populist attitudes. Taken together, our findings suggest that populist sentiments are not particularly strong among parliamentary candidates in Britain, and that support for different types of populist views varies in terms of strength and motivation.

Introduction

Populism's increasing popularity in academia and practice has led to suggestions that we live in populist times (Moffitt 2016). The electoral success of right-wing populists in particular has risen to prominence since the turn of the century, with parties such as Fidesz in Hungary, Law and Justice in Poland, and Lega Nord in Italy being in government at different points of time. Furthermore, left-wing populist parties have also witnessed electoral success, from Syriza in Greece to Podemos in Spain, as have catch-all populist parties like the Five Star Movement in Italy.

Despite its historic unpopulist traditions (Canovan 1981), there is increasing talk about populism also in the context of Britain, with instances of left- and right-wing populism said to be present (March 2017). While this is primarily seen in outsider parties like Ukip (Bale 2018; Goodwin and Milazzo 2015), mainstream actors such as the former Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn have also been said to adopt populist discourse (Tindall 2021; Watts and Bale 2019), and even recent Prime Minister Boris Johnson appeared to utilise populist playfulness (Flinders 2020). Furthermore, populist divisions in Britain have been heightened following the 2016 EU referendum, which arguably revealed a divide between the 'left behind' and the political elites (Goodwin and Heath 2016). While there is a growing body of research on how parties and their leaders adopt populist messages, and which voters are drawn to these, less is known about how widespread populist attitudes are among the British 'political class' more broadly.

In this article, we expand the scope of the investigation to explore how prevalent different types of populist attitudes are among British parliamentary candidates, and what factors help explain variation in the strength of populist views held by different candidates. In doing so, we improve our understanding of how common populist sentiments are among those who seek to represent

us, alongside exploring what motivates certain politicians to adopt more salient populist views than others. It is undoubtedly important to understand the extent to which political leaders hold populist views, and how parties use populist messages in their communications, but it is also important to extend this strand of research to include a broader range of political actors. After all, it is not only parties and their leaders who engage with voters.

To evaluate the prominence of populist sentiments among parliamentary candidates in Britain, we use data from the Representative Audit of Britain Survey. We focus on candidates who ran at the 2015 and 2017 general elections. As populism is rarely self-defined (Canovan 1981), we obtain the strength of populist sentiments from candidates' responses to questions linked to populism's key attributes of being pro-people, elite antagonism, and popular sovereignty. We find that the overall levels of populist views are relatively modest, with anti-elite attitudes being the most prominent ones. There are, however, consistent patterns in terms of which candidates are more likely to hold populist views, with the effects of partisanship and incumbency standing out. We find that candidates of the Conservative Party are least likely to hold populist attitudes, and that incumbents tend to hold weaker populist sentiments than challengers. Taken together, populist attitudes are relatively modest among parliamentary candidates in Britain, but support for different types of populist sentiments varies both in terms of strength and motivation.

Conceptualisations of populism

There is considerable contestation in populism studies around what one should focus on when evaluating the presence of populism (Panizza 2005). Within social sciences, the most widely used populism theory is the ideational approach (Mudde 2017), arguing that ideas and beliefs should take primacy in understanding the features of populism (Albertazzi and Vampa 2021;

Mudde 2007).[1] Within the ideational approach, populism effectively constitutes a good versus evil Manichaean doctrine (Mudde 2007; Taggart 2000), believing that society is divided into two opposing groups. For Marxism, these camps are *proletariat* and *bourgeoise*. For populism, social antagonism is between the *people* and the *elite*. Arguably, the most influential scholar within the ideational approach is Cas Mudde (2004: 543), who defines populism as:

"an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people".

Three key themes are elucidated from this definition, 'the pure people', 'the corrupt elite', and 'the general will'. The first unites citizens as 'the people', while expressing a shared opposition to 'the elite', and the third indicates a demand for changing how politics is conducted.

Pro-people

The first element that is widely considered to be part of the populist ideology is a connection to 'the people'. Rather than appealing to a particular element of society, like the working class, rural communities, the well-educated, and so on, populism speaks the broader language of pro-people. Utilising general terms, populist rhetoric seeks to include the wider society in an open and expansive manner (Kim 2017; Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014). While such appeals to 'the people' correspond best with inclusionary populism (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013), open appeals to 'the people' can be seen across the political spectrum in Britain (Tindall 2021). Broad appeals are prudent as parties often gain more votes when adopting expansive discourses

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[1] There is a growing body of populism literature that goes beyond ideas, considering performance through political discourse and style (Moffitt 2016). While this is undoubtedly highly significant given the importance of political performance in representing populist divisions (Moffitt and Tormey 2014), this study focuses on populist attitudes as measured through survey data and, as such, utilises the more common ideational approach.

(Somer-Topcu 2015). Despite the people being broad, their individual concerns are unified by populists through the construction of a singular 'people' with shared common demands (Laclau 2005; Taggart 2000).

Important for populist beliefs is that the people should be empowered, imploring a shift toward citizen-led democracy. Populism is not committed to representative democracy in its current form (Krämer 2014). Instead, it is often supportive of referendums as instruments to overcome the power of the elite (Mudde 2004), as people-led decision-making can bridge the gap between people and political misrepresentation by the establishment (Canovan 2002). This also extends to supporting newer forms of direct democracy, such as citizens' initiatives that seek to bring power closer to the people (March 2017). Direct democracy is perceived to better reflect the common will of the people than representative democracy does (Laclau 2005; Mouffe 2018; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013), allowing politics to be ruled by the people and at the expense of the elite (Mudde 2007).

Anti-elitism

This leads to the second element of populist attitudes, which is anti-elitism. The relationship between the people and the elite is fundamentally antagonistic (Mouffe 2018), with the camps divided by an internal frontier (Laclau 2005). The people are united against a variety of elites, ranging from politicians to corporate and financial elites (Mudde 2007). Those holding populist views tend to see the establishment as corrupt, immoral, and unaccountable (Maiguashca and Dean 2019). Moreover, populists often consider the elite to be a colluding interwoven network, with political elites thought to work hand in glove with cultural and economic elites (Edwards 2019; Mudde 2017), oppressing the people and effectively being a source of societal problems (Moffitt 2016; Mudde 2007).

Within populist attitudes, society is considered to be divided by power relations (Mouffe 2018), with the boundary between 'the people' and 'the elite' often expressed through the economic inequality between the 'haves' and 'the have nots' (Norris and Inglehart 2018). Differences are espoused based upon perceived social and economic injustices, with the rich being complicit elite conspirators and thwarting the autonomy of the people. Populist beliefs consequently encourage support for those perceived to be immune from the rich elite (Acemoglu et al. 2013). Economic unfairness in particular helps stimulate antagonism against the elite and encourage citizens to participate in political protest (Mouffe 2018). In Britain, populists display hostility towards 'corporate giants', seen as elitist enemies of the common people (Tindall 2021). This follows the common populist belief that hegemonic inequality exists between ordinary people and powerful elites.

Popular sovereignty

Linking together the demands of the people and anti-elite antagonism leads to the final aspect of populism, popular sovereignty. Simply put, populism demands that power is taken from the elite and bestowed to sovereign people (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008). Rather than expertise being at the forefront of political decision-making, populists regard the common sense of the people to best represent the common will (Akkerman et al. 2014). By restricting power to the elite few, the system is believed to prevent the political influence of the people (Panizza 2005). Therefore, for populists, delegitimising established power structures and empowering everyday citizens is the necessary first step towards positive transformation (Norris and Inglehart 2019). As those in power are believed to have failed the people, change is behoved. Such change, for populists, utilises 'the people' as a multiplier of popular power (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014), uniting citizens to create a new hegemony to challenge the status quo (Mouffe 2018).

Those with populist attitudes believe that political legitimacy rests on the democratic ideology of popular sovereignty and majority rule (Canovan 2002). Henceforth, populism demands 'self-emancipation' of the masses (Katsambekis and Kioupkiolis 2019), with common people being the central protagonist of politics (Laclau 2005). In the British context, this often plays out as popular sovereignty (Eatwell and Goodwin 2018; March 2017), whereby power is restored to the populous. In recent times, populist desire for popular sovereignty was witnessed during the 2016 EU Referendum (Eatwell and Goodwin 2018), followed by calls for a 'people's vote' on the terms of Brexit. This develops the core populist attitude of believing that the people should play the key role in the political process (Katsambekis and Kioupkiolis 2019). More political influence can be provided to voters through referendums, which allow the people a more active role in politics than representative democracy (Krämer 2014), and an opportunity to overcome the power of the elite.

The rise of populism

Studies of populist attitudes have so far primarily focused on measuring populism in terms of political parties, their leaders, or citizen attitudes (Stavrakakis et al. 2017). The broad consensus in this literature is that parties and leaders are increasingly adopting populist messages (Mudde 2017). Populism's growth has been found in established Western democracies such as the rise of the former President Trump in the United States, but also in post-communist democracies like the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia (Kim 2022). Furthermore, rather than being political outsiders, several populist parties from Europe to Latin America have managed to consolidate power (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2016). We also know a lot about which voters tend to be receptive to populist messages. Existing studies have, for example, shown support for populist parties to be stronger among those with low levels of trust in politics and who are

disillusioned with politics (Goodwin and Eatwell 2018), and those influenced by cultural shifts in the society (Norris and Inglehart 2019).

That said, we still know little about how strong populist attitudes are among the 'political class' more broadly. A pilot study of parliamentary candidates who stood for office in Greece in 2015 found variation in the strength of populist attitudes across members of different political parties (Stavrakakis et al. 2017), suggesting that a closer look at the extent to which those who seek to represent us hold populist sentiments is warranted. Our study builds upon the work of Stavrakis et al. (2017) by utilising a similar approach to extend this line of enquiry to Britain,[2] where a gap remains in our understanding of how salient populist views are among would-be MPs, as well as how the strength of populist attitudes varies across different types of populist views and across different candidates.

Expectations

Individual-level characteristics and contextual factors are both likely to explain the strength of populist attitudes. Therefore, the following analysis accounts for the potential effects associated with candidates' political profile, political positions, and personal characteristics, but also those associated with various contextual factors.

First, there are reasons to believe that candidates' political profile and experience influence their views. Candidates who have had electoral success – at local and/or national level – should be less populist in their attitudes, as they have experienced being part of the political elite and, thus, become more appreciative of the 'political system' and the expertise of those within it.

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[2] Similar to Stavrakis et al. (2017), our study relies on data from a candidate survey and uses candidates' responses to a battery of questions relating to populist sentiments to create populism indexes for individual respondents. We build on it by extending the focus to Britain, utilise a bigger range of survey items, and explain variation in populist sentiments through candidates' personal and political profile as well as partisanship.

Similarly, candidates who have worked within their party organisation have been subject to the socialisation that comes with it and should have a more positive view of the 'political system'. Studies have shown that those in power are less likely to be populist (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2016), with populist attitudes typical of political outsiders (Bale 2018; Goodwin and Milazzo 2015). As such, we expect to observe stronger populist attitudes among challengers, those who have not previously been local councilors or held a party office.

Next, candidates' broader ideological positioning might influence their tendency to hold strong populist views. In particular, candidates' self-perceived ideological distance from the political centre and views on Brexit stand out as potentially relevant. While much research indicates an affinity between populism and far-right ideology in Europe (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008; Mudde 2017), there is also a growing body of literature outlining strong prevalence of populism on the left of the spectrum (Katsambekis and Kioupkiolis 2019; Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014). With regards to the 2016 EU referendum, the Leave campaign has often been framed as typifying a populist moment (Eatwell and Goodwin 2018; Flinders 2020). Therefore, we expect to observe stronger populist sentiments among candidates who supported Leave in the Brexit referendum, as well as those who feel ideologically further from the political centre.

Third, personal characteristics often shape political attitudes, which may also extend to the strength of populist views. We capture here the potential effects associated with age, education, and gender. In terms of age, evidence from the voter side suggests that older people are more likely to hold traditional, populist values (Norris and Inglehart 2019). In terms of education, existing studies find that higher academic attainment tends to be linked with a lower likelihood of supporting populist parties and candidates (Eatwell and Goodwin 2018; Norris and Inglehart 2019). Therefore, we expect to find stronger populist views among older candidates and those

who have not attained a university degree. Moving on to gender, its relationship to populism is less clear (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013). Despite men being generally more likely to vote for populist right-wing parties, research indicates that this is heavily influenced by their views on immigration, instead of populist sentiments specifically (Eatwell and Goodwin 2018). We expect to find stronger populist views among male candidates than female candidates, but this is more of an exploratory expectation.

Finally, it is not only the different individual-level factors that are likely to shape the extent to which candidates hold populist views. The common thesis states that populism, especially in Europe, is a growing phenomenon (Moffitt 2016; Mudde 2017; Norris and Inglehart 2019). As such, we expect to find that populist attitudes will slightly increase over time and, therefore, be higher in subsequent elections. The other contextual factor that is likely to be relevant is the political party a candidate stands for. Research indicates that parties in power can struggle to maintain populist attitudes (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2016). Therefore, we expect candidates of the Conservative Party to be the least populist, with relatively weak populist sentiments also held by candidates of the Liberal Democrats due to the party's participation in the 2010-2015 coalition government. With regards to the Labour Party candidates, we expect to find stronger populist sentiments than those held by their Conservative and Liberal Democrat counterparts, given that the party was in opposition during the period in question and its electoral campaign under its former leader Jeremy Corbyn is seen to have had elements of populism (Maiguashca and Dean 2019). With regards to the other parties, the archetypal populist party in Britain is Ukip (Bale 2018; Goodwin and Milazzo 2015), while Plaid Cymru and the Scottish National Party are also considered to hold populist attitudes in their criticism of the British elite (Massetti 2018). Therefore, their candidates are likely to hold mostly populist attitudes.

Data and methods

The theoretical expectations are evaluated using data from the Representative Audit of Britain Survey project (Campbell et al. 2017). These data derive from surveys of candidates who stood at the 2015 and 2017 general elections in Britain. They include questions about candidates' personal background, political experience, and political attitudes. Taken together, they provide insight into the profile and mind-set of those who seek to represent us.[3]

The multivariate analyses presented below include data from a total of 2,260 survey responses.[4] These include 1,276 candidates who stood at the 2015 general election (40% response rate) and 984 candidates who stood at the 2017 general election (35% response rate). These samples are broadly representative with regards to partisanship, nation, and electoral performance.[5]

The data from the Representative Audit of Britain Survey project are well-suited for providing insights into the extent to which parliamentary candidates hold populist attitudes. First, to our knowledge, it is the most comprehensive survey of candidates in Britain that not only captures their personal profile and political background, but also their attitudes regarding a broad range of populism-related statements. Second, the surveys include both successful and unsuccessful candidates. While successful candidates are more important when it comes to understanding legislative outcomes and policymaking, voters interact with both successful and unsuccessful

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[3] The focus on candidates has multiple benefits. It allows us to go beyond party leaders and voters to explore the strength of populist sentiments within a group that has received relatively little attention so far, better evaluate the extent to which populist attitudes have taken foothold within the broader political system and society, and, while most parliamentary candidates do not win a seat, a significant minority of them do or serve in other positions such as local councillors where they have access to political power of some kind. Moreover, candidates' attitudes have already been successfully used to explore, for example, issues of representation (e.g., Campbell and Heath 2021; Sobolewska et al. 2018; Trumm and Barclay 2021).

[4] There is some variation in the number of responses included in the various multivariate models – 1,257 (Model 1), 2,239 (Model 2), and 1,329 (Model 3) – because some candidates answered only a selection of the populism-related questions. Estimates from models that use a constant sample – i.e., only those candidates for whom we have information on all variables used in this study – are robust to those presented here.

[5] Further details about the samples are provided in Appendix A.

candidates during campaigns. Accounting for the attitudes of both types of candidates provides a more accurate picture of the kind of views voters are potentially exposed to when interacting with the 'political class' more broadly, at the time when their interest in politics is likely to be most acute. In addition, the overlap in questions means that we can check whether there was change in the attitudes of candidates before and after the 2016 EU referendum.

Dependent variables

The dependent variables in this study are based on the block of questions in the Representative Audit of Britain Survey questionnaire that relate to different aspects of populism, asking about the extent to which candidates agree with certain statements. This follows similar studies which utilise several questions relating to popular sovereignty, anti-elitism, and the people, to measure the extent to which respondents hold populist views (e.g., Akkerman et al. 2014; Stavrakakis et al. 2017; Van Hauwaert et al. 2020).

Notably, the measures adopted in this study focus on the people as a political force, rather than the Manichean outlook. As the Manichean element of populism is fundamentally contested by other populism approaches (Stavrakakis et al. 2017), this study consciously avoids a moral dimension of populism, focusing instead on a generalised and well-established understanding of its core features. This retains a minimal populism definition that reduces the potential of concept stretching. Nevertheless, a limitation of the data is that the measures of anti-elitism, while importantly addressing elite power and wealth, offer less consideration to contemporary cultural forms of elite antagonism, such as hostility towards the 'liberal, cosmopolitan elite'. It does mean our findings will be limited to the traditional economic populism conceptualisation (Edwards 2019) and the claims narrowed to this well embedded populism theoretical approach.

The survey items relating to populism are as follows:

- the people, and not politicians, should make our most important policy decisions (item 1)

- Parliament, not voters, should make final decisions on law and policy (item 2)

- it should be possible for a certain number of citizens to initiate a referendum (item 3)

- there is one law for the rich and one law for the poor (item 4)

- big business takes advantage of ordinary people (item 5)

- ordinary working people do not get their fair share of the nation's wealth (item 6)

- management will always try to get the better of employees if it gets the chance (item 7)

- special interests have too much influence on legislation (item 8)

- citizens have ample opportunity to participate in political decisions (item 9)

- legislation reflects the interest of the majority of citizens (item 10)

- Parliament is full of political advisors and communication experts without any real-life experience (item 11)

- our government would run better if decisions were left to non-elected, independent experts rather than politicians or the people (item 12)

- our government would run better if decisions were left up to successful businesspeople (item 13)

The original coding of all these items runs from 1 'strongly agree to 5 'strongly disagree'. We have retained the 1-5 scale, but recoded items where higher values originally corresponded to weaker populist sentiments, so that higher values for all items would capture stronger populist attitudes.[6] As the next step, we carried out a factor analysis.[7] It identified four dimensions, with

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[6] The values were recoded for items 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, and 11.
[7] Factor analysis is appropriate with these items as the related Bartlett's test for sphericity is significant at $p<0.01$ level (p=0.00) and the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy is above 0.50 (KMO=0.816). We

three of these having a sufficiently high internal consistency.[8] The individual survey items load onto the dimensions as follows:

- items 1-3 (dimension 1)

- items 4-7 (dimension 2)

- items 8-10 (dimension 3)

The three dependent variables reflect the three dimensions revealed by the factor analysis. The indexes are operationalised as mean scores for the relevant survey items, all ranging from 1 to 5, with higher values corresponding to stronger populist attitudes. The first dependent variable, *pro-people*, is based on items 1-3. It captures candidates' view about the relationship between people and the political system and, in particular, where power should lay in that relationship. The stronger populist attitudes correspond to stronger beliefs that people should make most important policy decisions, have the final say on law and policy, and have the ability to initiate referendums. Our second dependent variable, *anti-elitism*, is based on survey items 4-7. It taps into an 'us versus them' attitude, which suggest that the 'system' does not work for ordinary people. Instead, it prioritises the rich, big businesses, employers, and is economically unfair towards ordinary people in general. It is possible that these issues may also correlate with the traditional left-right dichotomy, given that there is a significant overlap between populism and class-based economic antagonism (Tindall 2021). That said, even if so, these questions address fundamentally antagonism against elite wealth and power. This is a bit broader measure of populist attitudes, making a clear distinction between the elites on the one hand and 'ordinary people' on the other hand, and highlighting the belief that the 'system' is unfairly biased in

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executed the factor analysis using Stata's factor, pcf command to obtain rescaled estimates that conform to a principal component analysis.

[8] The Cronbach's alpha scores for these three dimensions range from 0.65 to 0.80. The Cronbach's score for the fourth dimensions was too low (0.46) to include in the empirical analysis. In addition, item 11 cross-loaded onto two dimensions and, therefore, was also omitted from the empirical analysis.

favour of the former. Finally, our third dependent variable, *popular sovereignty*, is based on items 8-10. It focuses on access to, and outcomes of, the legislative decision-making process. Higher values capture a stronger perception that special interests have too much influence over legislation, and voters are not featured enough in political decisions both in terms of input and output. The three dependent variables capture slightly different aspects of populist sentiments. Taken together, they provide a nuanced account of the kind of populist views, if any, candidates in Britain hold.

Table 1 shows the per cent of candidates who agree or strongly agree with the different populist sentiments within the ten survey items, providing a first-cut indication of how strong, or weak, populist sentiments tend to be. There is notable variation in the extent to which candidates tend to hold different populist attitudes. At the lower end, only 15.4% of candidates agree or strongly agree that voters, not Parliament, should make final decisions on law and policy, while roughly one-in-four (25.4%) believe that people, not politicians, should make the most important policy decisions. In general, populist sentiments tend to be relatively weak for items within dimension 1 (*pro-people*). At the same time, three of the four highest scores are for items in dimension 2 (*anti-elitism*). As many as 78.8% of candidates agree or strongly agree with the sentiment that ordinary working people do not get their fair share of the nation's wealth, while 71.6% believe that big business takes advantage of ordinary people, and nearly two-thirds (66.1%) think there is one law for the rich and one law for the poor. In terms of dimension 3 (*popular sovereignty*), all three items show a majority agreement with the respective populist sentiment. The standout item here is item 8, with over three-quarter of candidates (76.9%) agreeing or strongly agreeing with the sentiment that special interests have too much influence on legislation. It does appear that, while some populist sentiments are limited to a minority of candidates, there are populist views that are shared by many.

[TABLE 1 HERE]

Independent variables

The analysis of variation in the extent to which candidates hold populist attitudes accounts for the effects associated with their political profile, political positions, personal characteristics, as well as relevant contextual factors.

Beginning with candidates' political profile, we account for the effects associated with three different indicators. *Incumbency* captures whether a candidate was an incumbent MP (coded 1) or a challenger (coded 0), while *councillor* separates candidates who have served as elected councillors on local level (coded 1) and those who have not (coded 0). We also include an indicator for whether a candidate has held a *party office* (coded 1) or not (coded 0).[9] Taken together, they describe candidates' profile within their party organisation as well as experience as a legislator. We expect candidates with experience of working as party officials and elected legislators to be less likely to hold populist views.

Next, we include two measures related to candidates' ideological outlook. *Ideological distance* describes how centrist a candidate is. It is operationalised as an absolute distance between 5 – i.e., the middle point of the 0 to 10 left-right spectrum – and the candidates' self-placement on the same 0 to 10 scale. Hence, the measure ranges from 0 to 5, with higher values corresponding to being further away from ideological, left-right centrism. We also capture candidates' vote at the 2016 *EU referendum* by distinguishing between those who voted for Leave (coded 1) versus

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[9] The survey question that party office is based on was phrased as follows: "Regarding your political experience, have you ever held national party office?". It is possible for respondents to have different interpretations of what roles could be classified as holding national party office. Estimates from models that do not include national party are robust to those presented here.

Remain (coded 2). Our expectations are that candidates who are further from the ideological centre and those who supported Leave hold stronger populist views.

With regards to personal characteristics, we first include *gender*. It is a dichotomous measure, with male candidates coded 1 and female candidates coded 2. We also account for candidates' *age* through the following categories – 18-29 (coded 1), 30-39 (coded 2), 40-49 (coded 3), 50-59 (coded 4), and 60+ (coded 5) –, and whether they have attended *university* (coded 1) or not (coded 0). We expect to find stronger populist views among male candidates, older candidates, and those who have not attended a university.

Finally, we account for two contextual factors. *Year* identifies whether the survey response is from 2015 (coded 0) or 2017 (coded 1). As highlighted earlier, we expect to see 2017 general election candidates holding slightly stronger populist sentiments than their 2015 counterparts. We also control for *party* by separating candidates who ran under the labels of the Conservative Party (coded 1), the Labour Party (coded 2), the Liberal Democrats (coded 3), the Green Party (coded 4), Ukip (coded 5), and the Scottish National Party or Plaid Cymru (coded 6). Our expectation is that it is the Conservative Party candidates who display the weakest populist attitudes, and that it is the candidates from Ukip and nationalist parties who tend to hold most populist attitudes.

Empirical strategy

This study uses a combination of descriptive statistics and multivariate regressions. We provide a descriptive account of the strength of populist sentiments among candidates, on aggregate as well as by year and party, before moving on to examining variation in the strength of populist sentiments across candidates. We do the latter through ordinary least squares regression models

with robust standard errors, and examining predicted values for independent variables that had statistically significant effects.

Findings

We start by providing a brief descriptive overview of the extent to which candidates in Britain hold populist attitudes. Table 2 presents mean scores for all three dimensions for all candidates, but it also provides the breakdown of the scores by year and partisanship.

Note first that populist sentiments, at least at the aggregate level, do not seem to be particularly strong. The mean score for the pro-people dimension, capturing where power ought to lay in the relationship between the people and the political system, is as low as 2.69. With the indices having a 1-5 range, the mean score of 2.69 suggests that candidates are in fact quite unlikely to believe that people, rather than politicians, should take primacy when it comes to making policy decisions. There does not appear to be strong desire among politicians for direct democracy, nor for placing voters over politicians in the legislative decision-making process. The populist sentiments, however, are a bit stronger when looking at the anti-elitism and popular sovereignty dimensions. The mean scores for these are at 3.72 and 3.59, respectively. This does suggest that there are quite a few candidates who do believe that the (economic) 'system' is not working for ordinary people and that citizens – and their interests – should feature more prominently in the legislative process. It is important to note, however, that these mean scores, while higher than the corresponding score for the pro-people dimension, are still rather close to the middle point of the indices. These kinds of populist sentiments are stronger, but they, nonetheless, do not reveal the presence of widespread and very strong populist beliefs. The populist sentiments among candidates remain relatively modest in Britain.

Breaking the aggregate pattern down by year and partisanship suggests that there is much more heterogeneity in populist sentiments across parties than over time. The comparison of mean scores in 2015 and 2017 reveals a notable difference only for the pro-people dimension, with 2017 general election candidates being less populist on the said dimension than their 2015 counterparts (2.44 versus 2.87). The differences in the mean scores for the other dimensions in 2017 and 2015 both remain below 0.10. The 2016 EU referendum has undeniably had profound impact on many aspects of British politics, but this initial evidence suggests that it did not – at least immediately – lead to a more populist cohort of candidates. Instead, the immediate impact was limited and, where we can see over-time change, pointing to weakening of populist views among candidates. A different story, however, emerges when comparing the extent to which candidates of different parties tend to hold populist attitudes. On the one hand, it is candidates running under the Conservative Party banner who tend to hold the least populist attitudes, with their mean scores on the anti-elitism and popular sovereignty dimensions (2.37 and 2.47, respectively) being significantly lower than the corresponding mean scores for all other parties, and their mean score on the pro-people dimension (2.21) being lower than the corresponding mean scores for all other parties except the Labour Party (2.16). Moreover, the Conservative Party is the only party whose candidates have a mean score closer to the minimum (1) than the maximum (5) on all three dimensions. They do not tend to believe that it is people, rather than politicians, who should take primacy when it comes to making policy decisions for the country, but while this is a commonly held belief among candidates of almost all parties, they tend to be much less inclined to believe that the 'system' – economic and political – is not working for ordinary people than candidates of all other parties. On the other hand, it is candidates standing for the Green Party who tend to hold most populist views. Their mean scores for anti-elitism and popular sovereignty dimensions – 4.31 and 4.20, respectively – are higher than those for candidates of all other parties, and their mean score on the pro-people dimension (3.16) is

exceeded only by Ukip candidates (3.61). In addition, the mean scores for candidates of the nationalist parties stand out as being higher than the aggregate mean scores on all dimensions, following findings of previous studies (Massetti 2018), and the mean scores for Liberal Democrat candidates are lower than the aggregate mean scores on all three dimensions. There is notable variation, across all dimensions, in populist attitudes along party lines.

[TABLE 2 HERE]

We now turn to the multivariate regression models to explore what factors explain variation in how strong populist attitudes different candidates hold. The findings are presented in Table 3.

There are two factors that stand out by having a significant effect on the strength of candidates' populist attitudes on all three dimensions – incumbency and party. The negative and significant coefficients for incumbency (-0.22, -0.18, and -0.29) suggest that incumbents are less likely to hold populist attitudes, irrespective of which aspect of populism we focus on, than challengers. They are less likely to believe that people, rather than politicians, should take primacy when it comes to making policy decisions for the country and that the (economic and political) 'system' is not working for ordinary people. This is not surprising as incumbents are the politicians who only recently were making decisions on policy – or at least were in a position to influence these decisions – and part of the 'system' that populists argue against. The political socialisation that comes with such experience is likely to have a positive impact on their view of politicians and their judgement, and how well the 'system' works. Moving on, partisanship also stands out as having a significant impact on how strong populist attitudes candidates hold. The positive and significant coefficients associated with all parties, across all dimensions, shows that it is the Conservative Party candidates who tend to hold the weakest populist sentiments. With regards

to the different types of populist sentiments, it is Ukip candidates who tend to hold the strongest pro-people sentiments, and Green Party candidates who tend to hold strongest anti-elitism and popular sovereignty sentiments. Interestingly, it is also worth noting that strong pro-people and popular sovereignty views tend to be associated with the smaller and nationalist parties, while strong anti-elite views are associated with left-leaning parties, indicating an overlap between populist and class-based economic elite antagonism.

The story that unfolds with regards to the other explanatory variables is more mixed. Focusing first on the pro-people dimension, the negative coefficient of -0.12 and the positive coefficient of 0.11 for councillor and gender, respectively, mean that candidates who have served as local councillors are less likely to believe that people should take primacy when it comes to making policy decisions than those without such experience, and that female candidates are also more likely to believe that than their male counterparts. We also observe effects linked to the 2016 EU referendum, with the negative coefficient of -0.41 for EU referendum suggesting that it is the Remain-voting candidates who tend to hold weaker pro-people sentiments than their Leave-voting counterparts, while the negative coefficient of -0.39 for year suggests that pro-people views are weaker among 2017 general election candidates than those who ran in 2015, which does go against the conventional wisdom of populist attitudes increasing over time. Moving on to the anti-elitism dimension, the effect standing out – in addition to incumbency and party – is that of ideological distance. The positive coefficient of 0.05 suggests that candidates who view themselves as ideologically more distant from their party tend to hold stronger anti-elite sentiments. Finally, with regards to the popular sovereignty dimension, three additional effects – besides incumbency and party – stand out. The negative coefficients of -0.09 for councillor and -0.13 for year suggest that candidates who have been local councillors and those who ran in 2017 are less likely to believe that people need to feature more prominently in the legislative

process than candidates without the experience of having been a local councillor and those who stood in 2015, respectively, while the positive coefficients for the age categories suggest that this sentiment tends to be weakest among the youngest candidates.

[TABLE 3 HERE]

To provide a more intuitive comparison of the effect sizes, we present predicted values for all populist indices in Table 4. For each effect, the characteristic in question is allowed to vary and others are held constant.

Starting with the pro-people dimension, the effect associated with candidates' partisanship stands out, as predicted values range from 1.93 for Conservative Party candidates to 3.28 for Ukip candidates. It does, however, appear again that the levels of pro-people populist attitudes tend to be relatively weak across candidates of all parties. The other effects that stand out more are those associated with the EU referendum vote choice and year. There does appear to be an over-time and Brexit effect, with Leave-voting candidates having a 0.41-point higher predicted score than their Remain-voting counterparts (3.02 versus 2.61), and 2015 candidates having a 0.39-point higher score than their 2017 counterparts (2.85 versus 2.46). The effect associated with incumbency is smaller at 0.22-points, albeit still substantively meaningful, as challengers tend to hold more populist attitudes on this dimension than incumbents (2.70 versus 2.48). The effects associated with councillor as well as gender are both smaller, and display an overlap in the 95% confidence intervals.

Moving on to the anti-elitism dimension, it is partisanship that stands out again, with predicted values ranging from 2.38 for Conservative Party candidates to 4.26 for Green Party candidates.

Interestingly, however, it is this populist dimension where we observe highest predicted values for candidates of most parties; the exceptions being Conservative Party and Ukip candidates as their highest predicted value is for the popular sovereignty dimension. With regards to the two other characteristics that had a significant effect on the extent to which candidates display anti-elitism attitudes, the effect associated with ideological distance is marginally bigger at 0.26 (from 3.65 for no distance to 3.91 for highest recorded distance) than the 0.19 effect associated with incumbency (from 3.58 for incumbents to 3.77 for challengers).

Finally, looking at the popular sovereignty dimension, the effect sizes associated with year and councillor remain small at 0.13 and 0.08, respectively. The effects are stronger for incumbency and age, with the predicted value for challengers being 0.29-points higher than that for incumbents (3.63 versus 3.34), and the biggest difference across age groups being 0.26-points when comparing predicted values for 18–29-year-olds and 50–59-year-olds (3.40 versus 3.66). The largest differences are, however, once again related to party. The predicted value ranges from 2.45 for Conservative Party candidates to 4.17 for Green Party candidates. Taken together, the patterns that we observe suggest that, while the strength of candidates' populist sentiments is a function of a variety of different factors, it is partisanship that tends to be the best predictor for it.

[TABLE 4 HERE]

Conclusions

The rising support for populist parties and politicians has become a key story of recent decades, influencing electoral outcomes, and featuring in political commentary. We have witnessed the success of populist candidates like Donald Trump in the United States, but also populist parties

such as Fidesz in Hungary. While we know a lot by now how political parties and their leaders use populist performance and messages, existing evidence about how widespread populist views are among the 'political class' more broadly, and which politicians are particularly likely to hold populist attitudes, is much scarcer.

This study uses data from the Representative Audit of Britain Survey to address this lacuna. It explores the extent to which parliamentary candidates who stood at the 2015 and 2017 general elections in Britain hold different types of populist attitudes, and what factors explain variation in the strength of populist views held by different candidates. In doing so, we hope to improve our understanding of how common populist views are among the wider 'political class', as well as which would-be MPs are most likely to adopt such views. We find populist attitudes among candidates to be relatively modest in Britain, with anti-elite sentiments stronger than pro-people and popular sovereignty sentiments. In addition, we find partisanship and incumbency to be the factors that stand out as consistent predictors for the strength of populist views.

There are four broader points arising from this study and its findings. First, the extent to which the 'political class' holds populist sentiments may in fact not be as salient as one might think. There is much talk about populism in the current political discourse and high-profile examples of both populist parties and leaders are relatively easy to find, but the evidence presented here suggests that populist attitudes are not particularly prominent when looking beyond those who dominate the political landscape and news cycles. At the candidate level, while populist views are present and should by no means be discarded as immaterial, they do not stand out as being very strong or consistent across the different types of populist attitudes. Voters are exposed to populist messages by many political parties and leaders, but it does seem that local candidates, in general, are not in the forefront of the rise of populism.

Second, the findings highlight the importance of disentangling the notion of populism, not just theoretically, but also empirically. While we would certainly not claim to capture all potential aspects of populism in our analysis, we can nonetheless show that there is variation in the extent to which candidates hold different types of populist views. For example, we find stronger anti-elitism attitudes among candidates in our analysis than support for pro-people attitudes. It does transpire that populist attitudes are not necessarily uniform in their adoption by political actors. While some candidates may hold strong populist views in general, and others may hold weak populist views in general, there are nonetheless candidates for whom certain types of populist sentiments appear to be more appealing than others.

Third, there is substantial variation in the extent to which candidates from different parties hold populist sentiments. Interestingly, our findings show that it is the Green Party candidates who tend to hold most populist views, with their responses matching a desire to empower citizens at the expense of the elite. Ukip candidates, however, appear less populist than anticipated with none of the populist aspects deeply entrenched among them. It may indicate that the leadership, particularly the archetypal populist Nigel Farage, took a populist approach that was not broadly shared by the wider party. This highlights the value of considering the broader 'political class', rather than focusing upon party leaders' discourse, when it comes to evaluating how deeply rooted populist sentiments are within the political landscape. Candidates of the Scottish National Party and Plaid Cymru tend to hold relatively modest populist attitudes, with strong anti-elite views the only one really standing out, while candidates of the main three parties – the Conservative Party, the Labour Party, and Liberal Democrats – tend to hold even weaker populist sentiments. It appears that the populist Zeitgeist has had a limited effect on the 'political class' in Britain, countering the narrative of populism's increasing influence.

Finally, the empirical evidence shown here suggests no imminent decline in the extent to which politicians hold populist attitudes. There has been a lot of effort in recent decades across many countries to 'open up' politics and increase the representativeness of parliaments. For example, in the United Kingdom, the Labour Party has used all-women shortlists and campaign groups like Women2Win try to tackle gender imbalance among Conservative Party MPs. Our findings suggest, however, that demographic change in the makeup of the Parliament is unlikely to, in itself, lead to Parliaments where populist views are uncommon. No socio-demographic characteristic we accounted for had a consistent effect on the extent to which candidates held populist attitudes. Instead, it is political socialisation that comes from having been an MP that stands out as having a consistent negative effect on holding strong populist views.

Appendix A. The Representative Audit of Britain Survey

The Representative Audit of Britain Survey project provides data from surveys of candidates standing at general elections in Britain. Our analyses include 1,276 candidates who stood for office at the 2015 general election and 984 candidates who did so in 2017. We use the Duncan index of dissimilarity to evaluate the representativeness of the samples. It ranges from 0 to 1, with higher values indicating greater discrepancy between the sample and the full population.

Table A1 shows the distribution of candidates in the population and the sample, for the 2015 and 2017 general elections, by partisanship, nation, and electoral performance. The comparison of party yields values of 0.16 for 2015 and 0.18 for 2017, the Duncan index scores for nation are 0.00 for 2015 and 0.02 for 2017, and those for electoral performance are 0.09 for 2015 and 0.17 for 2017. This does suggest that the 2015 and 2017 samples remain broadly representative of the respective populations of candidates. That said, it is important to highlight the presence of some discrepancies, as is often the case with elite survey samples, with successful candidates and the Conservative Party candidates being under-represented in both samples, and Liberal Democrat and the Green Party candidates over-represented. Nevertheless, the discrepancies remain rather limited, with these data offering valuable insight into the views of a diverse, and broadly representative, range of would-be MPs.

Table A1. The Representative Audit of Britain Survey sample

	2017		2015	
	Candidates (%)	Sample (%)	Candidates (%)	Sample (%)
Party				
Conservative Party	22.3	8.0	19.9	8.6
Labour Party	22.3	24.8	19.9	19.9
Liberal Democrats	22.2	30.6	19.9	27.9
Green Party	16.3	23.8	17.9	24.2
Ukip	13.4	10.1	19.3	14.9
Nationalist parties	3.5	2.7	3.1	4.5
	Duncan index = 0.18		Duncan index = 0.16	
Nation				
England	84.1	85.6	82.9	83.2
Scotland	8.8	7.6	9.7	9.3
Wales	7.1	6.8	7.4	7.6
	Duncan index = 0.02		Duncan index = 0.00	
Electoral performance				
Successful	22.3	5.7	19.9	10.8
Unsuccessful	77.7	94.3	80.1	89.2
	Duncan index = 0.17		Duncan index = 0.09	

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Tables

Table 1. Survey items

	Agree or strongly agree (%)
Dimension 1	
People should make most important policy decisions (item 1)	25.4
Voters should make final decisions on law and policy (item 2)	15.4
Citizens should be able to initiate a referendum (item 3)	51.1
Dimension 2	
There is one law for the rich and on law for the poor (item 4)	66.1
Big business takes advantage of ordinary people (item 5)	71.6
Ordinary working people do not get fair share of nation's wealth (item 6)	78.8
Management will always try to get the better of employees (item 7)	40.9
Dimension 3	
Special interests have too much influence on legislation (item 8)	76.9
Citizens have limited opportunity to participate in political decision (item 9)	51.1
Legislation does not reflect the interests of the majority of citizens (item 10)	59.4

Table 2. Overview of populist attitudes

	Dimension 1 Pro-people	Dimension 2 Anti-elitism	Dimension 3 Popular sovereignty
Year			
2015	2.87	3.70	3.61
2017	2.44	3.75	3.54
Party			
Conservative	2.21	2.37	2.47
Labour	2.16	4.03	3.27
Lib Dems	2.36	3.55	3.48
Green	3.16	4.31	4.20
Ukip	3.61	3.50	3.79
Nationalist	2.93	4.07	3.64
All candidates	2.69	3.72	3.59

Note: higher values indicate stronger populist sentiment, range is 1-5.

Table 3. Explaining variation in populist attitudes

	Dimension 1 Pro-people	Dimension 2 Anti-elitism	Dimension 3 Popular sovereignty
Incumbency	-0.22** (0.08)	-0.18** (0.05)	-0.29** (0.08)
Councillor	-0.12* (0.05)	0.06 (0.03)	-0.09* (0.04)
Party office	0.05 (0.05)	-0.05 (0.03)	-0.01 (0.04)
Ideological distance	0.01 (0.02)	0.05** (0.01)	0.02 (0.02)
EU referendum	-0.41** (0.12)	-0.04 (0.07)	-0.12 (0.09)
Gender	0.11* (0.05)	-0.05 (0.03)	0.01 (0.04)
Age^			
30-39	-0.02 (0.11)	0.03 (0.06)	0.19* (0.09)
40-49	-0.02 (0.11)	0.08 (0.06)	0.24** (0.09)
50-59	-0.10 (0.10)	0.05 (0.06)	0.25** (0.08)
60+	-0.24* (0.10)	0.08 (0.06)	0.18* (0.08)
University	-0.01 (0.05)	-0.05 (0.03)	0.10* (0.04)
Party^^			
Labour Party	0.35** (0.11)	1.69** (0.07)	0.90** (0.09)
Liberal Democrats	0.53** (0.12)	1.21** (0.07)	1.08** (0.09)
Green Party	1.20** (0.12)	1.89** (0.07)	1.72** (0.09)
Ukip	1.35** (0.13)	1.09** (0.09)	1.24** (0.11)
Nationalist parties	1.13** (0.18)	1.73** (0.08)	1.29** (0.13)
Year^^^			
2017	-0.39** (0.05)	0.00 (0.03)	-0.13** (0.04)
Constant	2.85** (0.23)	2.39** (0.14)	2.46** (0.19)
Observations	1,257	2,239	1,329
R^2	0.36	0.43	0.31

Note: robust standard errors in parentheses; *$p<0.05$, **$p<0.01$.

^ Reference category is '18-29'.

^^ Reference category is 'Conservative Party'.

^^^ Reference category is '2015'.

Table 4. Predicted strength of populist attitudes

	Dimension 1 Pro-people	Dimension 2 Anti-elitism	Dimension 3 Popular sovereignty
Incumbency			
No	2.70 (2.65-2.74)	3.77 (3.74-3.79)	3.63 (3.59-3.66)
Yes	2.48 (2.32-2.64)	3.58 (3.48-3.69)	3.34 (3.18-3.49)
Councillor			
No	2.73 (2.67-2.79)		3.64 (3.59-3.69)
Yes	2.61 (2.54-2.68)		3.56 (3.49-3.62)
Ideological distance			
0		3.65 (3.59-3.71)	
5		3.91 (3.83-3.99)	
EU referendum			
Leave	3.02 (2.82-3.22)		
Remain	2.61 (2.55-2.67)		
Gender			
Male	2.65 (2.60-2.71)		
Female	2.76 (2.68-2.84)		
Age			
18-29			3.40 (3.26-3.55)
30-39			3.59 (3.49-3.69)
40-49			3.65 (3.56-3.74)
50-59			3.66 (3.59-3.73)
60+			3.59 (3.52-3.65)
Party			
Conservative Party	1.93 (1.74-2.12)	2.38 (2.26-2.49)	2.45 (2.30-2.59)
Labour Party	2.28 (2.18-2.37)	4.06 (4.01-4.12)	3.34 (3.26-3.43)
Liberal Democrats	2.45 (2.36-2.55)	3.58 (3.53-3.64)	3.53 (3.45-3.61)
Green Party	3.13 (3.03-3.23)	4.26 (4.21-4.32)	4.17 (4.09-4.25)
Ukip	3.28 (3.04-3.52)	3.46 (3.31-3.62)	3.69 (3.49-3.88)
Nationalist parties	3.06 (2.77-3.35)	4.11 (4.00-4.21)	3.73 (3.53-3.94)
Year			
2015	2.85 (2.79-2.91)		3.66 (3.61-3.71)
2017	2.46 (2.39-2.53)		3.53 (3.47-3.59)

Note: higher values indicate stronger populist sentiment; 95% confidence intervals in parentheses.