

REVIEW ARTICLE

# The Demand and Supply of Pandemic Populism: A Global Overview

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## Abstract

This review article provides a comprehensive overview of the relationship between the COVID-19 pandemic and populism. We analyse the demand and supply sides of the populist phenomenon during the pandemic. On the demand side, we focus on the interplay between populist attitudes and COVID-19 restrictions by assessing the role of conspiracy theories, social media and alternative news media. On the supply side, we identify similarities and differences in the responses of populist actors globally. Hence, we focus on the main ideational varieties of the contemporary populist phenomenon (right-wing, left-wing and valence populism) while also distinguishing between populists in government and opposition. The analysis reveals that complexity is the defining feature of both the demand and supply sides of populism in times of pandemic.

**Keywords:** COVID-19; populism; conspiracy theories; populist attitudes; populist parties; populist governments

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a dramatic economic, social and political impact worldwide and quickly emerged as a global critical juncture. As a result, the virus dominated the public agenda from the beginning of 2020 until 2021, redefining how other salient topics predating it were discussed, including populism, one of the most appealing topics within and outside academia in recent years. Indeed, since the early phases of the pandemic, considerable attention has been paid to the relationship between populism and COVID-19 (e.g. McKee et al. 2021; Pickup et al. 2020).

This review article examines the major features and patterns of populism during the pandemic. While it has become a cliché to argue that populism is a disputed concept, an increasing number of scholars agree with the so-called ‘ideational approach’, which we will adopt in the present contribution. According to the ideational approach, populism is a set of ideas based on the struggle between the ‘pure

people' and the 'corrupt elite' and maintaining that popular sovereignty is at the core of politics (Mudde 2004).

A pandemic is a major crisis, and the interaction between populism and crisis was often discussed well before COVID-19 (e.g. Moffitt 2015; Taggart 2004). However, the COVID-19 pandemic is a *sui generis* multidimensional crisis, which makes it different from more strictly economic or political crises (for details, see Bobba and Hubé 2021), calling for a multidimensional and systematic perspective. Accordingly, this article aims to contribute to the debate in at least two respects. First, rather than adopting a single analytical angle, we carry out an overview of pandemic populism by focusing on the level of mass attitudes (i.e. the demand side) and the level of political actors themselves (i.e. the supply side). Thus we will be exploiting the potential of the ideational approach; as Kirk Hawkins and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (2017: 529) underline, 'one of [its] key advantages is that it invites us to study both the supply side and the demand side of populism'. Second, we seek to adopt a global perspective. Even though most of the research has been conducted on (Western) Europe and the United States, we include, as much as possible, findings from across the world.

This contribution is structured as follows. In the first section, we focus on the supply side. We explore the relationship between populist attitudes and COVID-19-related measures by considering the role of conspiracy theories, social media and alternative news media. The second and third sections focus on the supply side of pandemic populism. We do this by covering the varieties of the populist phenomenon in the contemporary world: right-wing, left-wing and valence populism (Zulianello 2020; Zulianello and Larsen 2021). More specifically, in the second section, we investigate how populists in opposition reacted to the pandemic, while in the third section, we assess the behaviour of the populists in power. Finally, we conclude by highlighting the patterns of complexity on both the demand and the supply sides.

### **The demand side: populist attitudes and the pandemic**

Even before the pandemic, the relationship between populist attitudes towards vaccines and vaccinations was an important research topic. For instance, in his analysis of Western Europe, Jonathan Kennedy (2019) found a positive association between the votes for populist parties in a given country and the percentage of people who believe vaccines are unimportant. Similarly, Almudena Recio-Román et al. (2021), focusing on data collected in 2019, argued that countries with higher levels of attitudes associated with populism also tend to have higher rates of vaccine hesitancy. In addition, research conducted on the COVID-19 pandemic suggests that populist attitudes are associated with vaccine scepticism. In their study of the Australian case, Ben Edwards et al. (2021) found that those with stronger populist views were less likely to support vaccination, while Michele Roccato and Silvia Russo (2021) argue that a broader populist orientation is positively associated with vaccine refusal in Italy, independent of other factors.

According to Niels Mede and Mike Schäfer (2020: 484), 'science-related populism' is mainly fuelled by strong anti-establishment sentiments towards the academic elite; they argue that, 'unlike political populism, however, science-related

populism focuses on the core logic of science and epistemic authority'. In particular, experts are perceived to be part of the elite that the populists oppose: scientists are often seen as not being legitimized by the people, while the choices made by scientists may be portrayed as being motivated by their interests in building a career or obtaining personal gains (Sarithchandra and Haltinner 2020). Interestingly, a study focused on the Polish case conducted before the pandemic underlined that 'anti-vaccinists reject the "official and manipulated medical knowledge"; according to them, 'pharmaceutical companies, "corrupt doctors" and "manipulated knowledge" are symbols of the establishment' (Žuk and Žuk 2020: 11).

Scepticism towards science is often explained as a gap between an individual's personal experiences and more distant, unverifiable forms of knowledge (Mede and Schäfer 2020; on pseudoscience, see Bordignon 2023). During the COVID-19 pandemic, this gap increased as media coverage of the events conflicted with the direct experiences of the people who lived in less affected areas, such as rural contexts. For instance, in his assessment of the US case, Rogers Brubaker (2021: 75) argued that 'many residents of rural and small-town America – and even many residents of metropolitan America – could easily think that the crisis was overblown and the lockdown unnecessary'. Following the populist set of ideas, ordinary people's 'common sense' is paramount (Scott 2022). The everyday experience becomes much more 'valuable' than expert evaluations and scientific evidence as a form of knowledge (Mede et al. 2021). Furthermore, in their study of five European countries, Christian Staerkle et al. (2022) identified 'common sense as a political weapon', stressing the importance of politicized common sense in opposition towards policy measures grounded on scientific expertise.

Jan-Willem van Prooijen and Karen Douglas (2017: 330) maintain that 'human history is replete with widespread belief in conspiracy theories', and they tend to flourish in times of crisis. This trend is evident in the circulation of COVID-19 conspiracy theories (Birchall and Knight 2023: 3), even though the affinity between populism and conspiracy thinking was already identified before the pandemic (e.g. Castanho Silva et al. 2017). In their study focused on the Austrian case, Jakob-Moritz Eberl et al. (2021: 280) argue that there are 'two causal paths' in which populist attitudes and COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs relate:

Populist attitudes decrease trust in political institutions (1) as well as trust in science and research (2), both negatively relate to COVID-19 conspiracy belief. While right-wing populist actors, in particular, seem to be actively contributing to the COVID-19 conspiracy theory supply as well as its spread, our individual level evidence suggests that right-wing ideology plays only a subordinate role to populist attitudes.

Ioana-Elena Oana and Abel Bojar (2023: 17), in a study covering 16 EU member states, found that 'core populist attitudes are strongly related to conspiracy beliefs and show that this relationship holds during the COVID-19 crisis as well, despite an initial paradoxical coupling of a decline in populist attitudes with an increase in conspiracy beliefs'. Similarly, in his analysis of the Italian case, Danilo Serani (2022) found that anti-vax positions and the belief in conspiracies are particularly evident in the case of the voters inclined to vote for populist radical right (PRR) parties.

The literature has suggested that partisanship plays a substantial role in attitudes regarding COVID-19 (Pickup et al. 2020; Wichowsky and Condon 2022). For instance, in an overview of Western countries, Chelsea Moran et al. (2021: 749) maintained that ‘related to decreased adherence to COVID-19 public health guidelines were political conservatism and belief in conspiracy theories’. However, various works have stressed the link between right-wing (rather than left-wing) populism and negative attitudes towards the vaccine and COVID-19-related restrictions. When it comes to the controversial policy trade-off between health and the economy, findings from Oscar Mazzoleni and Gilles Ivaldi (2021) suggest that the supporters of PRR parties such as the League and Brothers of Italy have a clear tendency to prefer the economy over health, while the voters of other populist parties, such as the German Left Party, La France Insoumise and the Italian Five Star Movement were more likely to prioritize the protection of health over the economy. Similarly, a study of the Norwegian case (Wollebæk et al. 2022) suggests that respondents with a right-wing ideology are associated with vaccine hesitancy, even after controlling for many factors. They also tend to promote conspiracy theories and distrust institutions and medical research. The same attributes apply to the voters of the country’s right-wing populist actor, the Progress Party. In their Austrian study, Katharina Paul et al. (2021) found that supporters of the PRR Freedom Party were less inclined to be vaccinated and less likely to support mandatory vaccination. Finally, a study in Germany (Juen et al. 2021) found that populist attitudes played a key role in the refusal of mandatory COVID-19 vaccination due to scepticism towards science. Most notably, they found that the attitude towards compulsory vaccination is not influenced directly by left–right placement but by the interaction between right-wing and populist attitudes.

The literature has also suggested that support or opposition to social distancing, mask-wearing and vaccine scepticism are influenced by partisan exposure and media diets (Ash et al. 2020; Chadwick et al. 2021). For instance, Matt Motta et al. (2020: 340) argue that ‘right-leaning outlets were more likely to make inaccurate claims about the origins and treatment of COVID-19, and people who self-reported consuming more right-leaning news were subsequently more likely to express misinformed views’. Dominik Stecula and Mark Pickup (2021) found that the consumption of conservative media strongly predicts belief in conspiracy theories and does so irrespectively of the degree of populist attitudes. In addition, they also show that conspiracy beliefs lead to less compliance with COVID-19-related measures and guidance.

Social media played an important role in shaping attitudes towards the pandemic. In this respect, it is useful to refer to the term ‘infodemic’, which points to the unmediated circulation of information and misinformation about COVID-19 on social media (Semenaro et al. 2022), also characterized by strong emotional tones (Zarocostas 2020). Social media has helped to disseminate scientific knowledge and findings across various countries, but they also provided a springboard for the quick spread of fake news (Venegas-Vera et al. 2020). Andrew Chadwick et al. (2021: 4) argue, ‘Much health information on social media originates in vertically directed, top-down flows initiated by professional media ... But social media also played a key role in maintaining a public infrastructure of visibility for false [information].’ The affinity between populism and the

online world is well documented, as the latter offers the populists the chance to establish direct links with ‘the people’, bypassing the traditional media (Engesser et al. 2017). For instance, in their study of the Chilean case, Sebastián Valenzuela et al. (2019) maintain that there is a positive relationship between the use of social media and the dissemination of inaccurate information, while in the American context Nicolas Anspach and Taylor Carlson (2020: 704) noted a greater propensity for users of social media such as Twitter and Facebook to be misinformed, and to believe ‘factually incorrect information’. Furthermore, Daniel Allington et al. (2021), in a study focused on the UK during the early phase of the pandemic, showed that the greater the use of Twitter, Facebook or YouTube as main sources of information, the more likely the acceptance of the various conspiracy theories related to the pandemic.

Fake news has spread on social media since the beginning of the pandemic, also thanks to the role of alternative news media, enabling it to create a counter-public to challenge mainstream discourse (Downey and Fenton 2003). The literature has stressed the importance of dissatisfaction towards conventional media in shaping the rise of alternative news media (Holt 2018). Levels of trust in traditional media are particularly low among people with populist attitudes (Mitchell et al. 2018), who also view traditional media with hostility (Schulz et al. 2018). As Matthew Barnidge and Cynthia Peacock (2019: 5) maintain, ‘hyper-partisan news is not just partisan, but also alternative. As non-mainstream media that eschew journalistic norms and routines, alternative media typically challenge or subvert mainstream narratives and establishment politics.’ Hence, alternative news outlets have the potential to target important political niches: this is particularly important for the present purposes because journalists and the media system are typically included in the group of corrupt elites blamed by the populists (e.g. Fawzi 2019). In this respect, Maria Rae (2021: 1121) argues that ‘populism’s key ideological pillar of the “people” against the “elites” or “us” versus “them” is reflected in the practices of hyper-partisan news’. As Annett Heft et al. (2021) underline, alternative news media blend journalistic and political movement perspectives, using reporting and argumentation styles similar to journalism but with an activist interpretation of events. This cocktail also characterized the coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic, as shown by research conducted in various countries (e.g. Al-Hashedi et al. 2022; Frischlich et al. 2023; Kant and Varea 2021). In particular, thanks to a study focused on the German case, Svenja Boberg et al. (2020: 17) argue that ‘the Corona crisis ... shows how world events are adjusted and assimilated to their respective ideology ... these stories were strongly linked to alternative news media’s general worldview and pre-existing narratives’.

COVID-19 and related measures have also been associated with increased emotionalization and polarization (Jungkunz 2021), both on more traditional media (Wichowsky and Condon 2022) and especially on social media (e.g. Lang et al. 2021). Tobias Widmann (2022) finds an interesting pattern in his analysis of four European countries. While in non-crisis times governments focused on positive emotions and populist parties stressed negative ones, this mechanism was inverted during the first phase of the pandemic (on the relationship between the PRR and affective polarization, see Harteveld et al. 2022). Most notably, he found that, ‘with rising case numbers, government parties emphasize the severity

of the COVID-19 crisis by increasing the level of fear appeals and decreasing hope appeals in their messages. Radical populist parties exhibit the opposite pattern' (Widmann 2022: 829). Maximilian Filsinger et al. (2023), in an analysis of six European countries, found that the anger produced by the pandemic is positively associated with populist attitudes, while the relationship between such attitudes and fear is negative. Daniel Thiele (2022) found that COVID-19 has escalated populist comments on the Facebook pages of the mass media in Austria and Germany. The trend increased over time, and such comments were seen as the manifestation of 'reactance' as the outcome of ineffective 'fear appeals' (Thiele 2022: 193).

Right-wing populists often supported demonstrations and public protests against government decisions and management of the crisis (e.g. Lehmann and Zehnter 2022; Zanotti and Turnbull-Dugarte 2022). Ulrike Vieten (2020: 9) explores the relationship between the COVID-19 pandemic and the rise of far-right populism, stressing how online activism and street protests interact in fostering what he calls 'anti-hygienic populist protests' in Germany. On the contrary, at times, populist attitudes led to spontaneous cooperation with the police, as shown by the Italian case, where people with such orientation reported the alleged transgressors of restrictions (Scalia 2021). However, this pattern of behaviour appears related to 'the lack of a negotiated, participatory policing model' (Scalia 2021: 250) in Italy.

### The supply side, part 1: patterns of populism in opposition

Nils Ringe et al. (2023) maintain that the strategies of populist opposition parties tended to be similar worldwide. After an initial phase in which the populist opposition backed government policies, the support declined after the summer of 2020. In particular, 'they did not perpetuate the public health crisis as such; rather, they framed the social, economic, and political consequences of the pandemic as indicative of the more general systemic failures they have been identifying and decrying all along' (Ringe and Rennó 2023: 278). Given the high number of populist parties in opposition at the time of the pandemic and the overrepresentation of Western (European) cases in the literature, we illustrate some key patterns emerging from an assessment of the main varieties of the populist phenomenon: right-wing, left-wing or valence populism (Zulianello 2020; Zulianello and Larsen 2021).

Right-wing populists are widespread in Europe, especially in the form of their most successful subtype: the PRR party family (Mudde 2007). However, as Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser and Paul Taggart (2022: 18–19) underline, 'Belonging to a similar ideological family did not mean that there was a common response to [COVID-19].' On the contrary, PRR parties in opposition tried to frame COVID-19 via nativism, the most important ideological feature of this party family (Mudde 2007), in the early phases of the pandemic (Wondreys and Mudde 2022) also by articulating Sinophobic sentiments in some cases (e.g. Katsambekis and Stavrakakis 2020). This notwithstanding, 'nativism did play a role in almost all PRR instances, but in different degrees and shapes' (Rovira Kaltwasser and Taggart 2022: 15). Indeed, the most consistent link made by PRR parties in opposition with nativism points to their emphasis on stronger border

closures and more controls on immigration (see also Katsambekis and Stavrakakis 2020; Ringe and Rennó 2023; Wondreys and Mudde 2022).

The reason for this trend relies on the peculiar nature of the pandemic crisis (Bobba and Hubé 2021), which provided incentives to emphasize populism rather than nativism itself (Schwörer and Fernández-García 2022). As Jakub Wondreys and Cas Mudde (2022: 89) underline, PRR parties ‘integrated the government response to COVID-19 into their populist discourse’. Most notably, national governments were criticized by the PRR in opposition virtually everywhere – for instance, in contexts where restrictions were virtually absent, such as in Sweden and where a large number of restrictions (e.g. state-wide lockdowns, then mandatory green passes for workers) were implemented over time, such as in Italy (e.g. Bobba and Hubé 2021; Ringe and Rennó 2023; Wondreys and Mudde 2022). Furthermore, being in opposition enabled the PRR to criticize the EU from different angles. For instance, the Czech Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD) argued that the ‘EU was unable to deal with the current crisis in the same way that it failed to cope with the 2015 migration crisis’ (Čísař and Kubát 2021: 107).

At specific stages of the pandemic, PRR parties in opposition have shifted their positions and focus of attention many times and often erratically. Although there are some exceptions to this broad trend (see below), the PRR typically first downplayed the menace posed by the virus, then magnified it, then returned to minimizing the threat by lamenting the authoritarian approach adopted by the incumbents, who were portrayed as being interested in exploiting the virus to erase freedoms, stifle the opposition and deliberately kill the national economy. A good example is provided by the Italian case, as both the Brothers of Italy and the League initially attempted to minimize the severity of COVID-19, then criticized the government for the way it implemented the lockdown, the EU for the lack of solidarity, and soon moved on to emphasize the negative economic impact of COVID-19 restrictions (Albertazzi et al. 2021; Pirro 2022). The strategy of the Brothers of Italy and the League was similar as long as they both stayed in opposition (Zanotti and Meléndez 2023). At the beginning of 2021, the Brothers of Italy remained in opposition after the League joined the national unity government led by Mario Draghi. The League’s move allowed the Brothers of Italy and their leader, Giorgia Meloni, to focus on ‘developing credibility, stressing the consistency and coherence of their choices, while communicating a clear identity’ (Zulianello 2022) and to oppose ‘the repression of freedoms’ (Meloni, Twitter, 30 December 2021).

Like the Brothers of Italy, many PRR parties in opposition framed government activities as authoritarian and a threat to democracy. As Wondreys and Mudde (2022: 89) underline, it was common that ‘the same parties that criticized the government for doing too little and too late, also (often just a few weeks later) started to speak out against the alleged “anti-democratic” and “unconstitutional” nature of some of the government policies’. The Alternative for Germany initially backed stringent measures, especially border closures, but later adopted a libertarian stance, attacking lockdown measures and presenting itself as a champion of freedom (Lehmann and Zehnter 2022; Lewandowsky et al. 2022), while Vox in Spain equated the government approach to that of communist countries such as Cuba and Venezuela (Zanotti and Turnbull-Dugarte 2022). Finally, ‘with some notable exceptions, far-right parties were not actively spreading fake news, but several have

expressed particularly open positions to fringe theories' (Wondreys and Mudde 2022: 90). Among them, the most extreme case was represented by the Dutch Forum for Democracy, which increasingly radicalized over time and argued that the pandemic was linked to the Great Reset, while 'COVID-19 vaccines will be used to implant microchips that will control citizens' lives' (de Lange 2022: 266).

Some PRR parties also tried to exploit the pandemic to develop credibility and break long-standing isolation. Two of the most important PRR parties that are at the margins of their national party system, the Flemish Interest and the French Rassemblement National (Zulianello 2020), have attempted to use the pandemic to develop legitimacy. The Flemish Interest in Flanders called for 'border policies, testing, face masks, sanitary measures, lockdown policies and vaccine uptake' as a part of a longer-term 'office seeking behaviour and relatively moderate strategy' aimed at breaking the cordon sanitaire (Sijstermans and Van Hauwaert 2022: 251; 260). The Rassemblement National (RN) in France also tried to exploit COVID-19 to normalize itself: even though it was 'very inconsistent about lockdown and vaccine policies', differently from the vast majority of PRR parties, it 'had very coherent stances in favour of compulsory mask wearing' (Froio 2022: 12). As Marta Lorimer and Ethan vanderWilden (2023: 233) explain, the party adopted a twofold strategy aimed at fostering its image as a legitimate actor:

By criticizing President Macron and his government while still respecting and deferring to scientific experts, the RN struck a balance between the poles of radicalization and moderation. On the one hand, the party's reputation could be softened, and its respectability could grow: it was advancing mostly responsible and expert-advised recommendations. But on the other hand, the RN could maintain its core populist message of anti-elitism, though here specifically critiquing governing elites.

Left-wing populist parties tended to adopt a collaborative approach during the early phase of the pandemic. The Dutch Socialist Party initially adopted an accommodating approach, resurrecting 'an explicitly populist strategy after the first wave of the pandemic had passed' (de Lange 2022: 270 n.2). In Greece, as Antonis Galanopoulos (2020: 26) underlines, 'SYRIZA adopted a responsible stance, supported the main choices of the ND [New Democracy] government ... and clearly respected the scientific advice and policy recommendations, debunking claims that populism is equated to anti-science or that it necessarily rejects expert's knowledge.' However, once restrictive policies began to be relaxed, SYRIZA lamented that the economic implications were amplified by the poor economic choices of the right-wing government (Ladi et al. 2021). The Slovenian Left Party, together with the other opposition parties, pledged 'to be constructive in helping the government fight the epidemic [but also] announced they would be closely monitoring any actions that might be deemed excessive and harmful to democracy' given the closeness of the Slovenian Democratic Party to Viktor Orban (Krašovec 2021: 7).

In line with their 'thick' ideology, left-wing populists dealt with the pandemic by emphasizing its economic and social consequences, especially its impact on the most vulnerable groups in society, such as low-wage workers, unemployed people and marginalized groups such as immigrants and refugees. For example, the



German Left Party favoured restrictions and lockdowns but asked them to be in a broader framework of solidarity by increasing welfare benefits for the poor and more taxation for the rich (Lewandowsky et al. 2022: 243). Furthermore, while the German Left Party did not express concern for the impact on democracy of restrictions, La France Insoumise opposed health passes and claimed ‘that they discriminate against the unvaccinated and increase a worrisome trend of government surveillance’ (Lorimer and vanderWilden 2023: 232).

More generally, during the health crisis, left-wing populists condemned the lack of public investment in healthcare. They referred to a structural deficit in the responses to the neoliberalism of the EU (Bobba and Hubé 2021). La France Insoumise focused on a typical socialist approach grounded on ‘collectivism, planning, requisitioning’ (Chazel 2020: 21–22), while the Greek SYRIZA (2020) argued that ‘the coronavirus pandemic clearly shows the failure of the predominant neoliberal economic and social model’ and stressed that ‘the homeless, incarcerated individuals, as well as refugees and asylum seekers, are automatically and disproportionately vulnerable to the virus’. In South Africa, the Economic Freedom Fighters blamed the lack of vaccines in the country on ‘the government’s reliance on “Western” vaccines’ and the persistence of ‘imperialism’ (Brunette and Fogel 2023: 224).

There were only a few valence populist parties in opposition during the pandemic, and the literature on the responses of such actors to COVID-19 is virtually non-existent. However, as valence populists lack a ‘thick’ ideology, a feature that enables an extreme degree of competitive flexibility, their responses to COVID-19 have varied, especially with regards to vaccination. For instance, when Pauline Hanson, the leader of the Australian populist radical right One Nation, introduced a bill to ban vaccine mandates, Jacqui Lambie, the leader of the valence populist Jacqui Lambie Network and senator for Tasmania, maintained that vaccination ‘is the only weapon we have, and we need to do everything we possibly can to keep ourselves safe, our kids safe, our grandchildren safe and our friends and family safe’ (Open Australia 2021). Diametrically different was the attitude of other valence populist actors: for instance, Slavi Trifonov in Bulgaria embraced conspiracy theories, COVID-19-denialism and anti-vaxerism (Marinov and Popova 2021), similar to Ivan Pernar in Croatia, who previously had been a leading figure of Human Shield.

### The supply side, part 2: patterns of populism in office

Populism in power undermines democracy by distorting horizontal accountability, limiting electoral competition, undermining media and constraining civil society (Caiani and Graziano 2022; Falkenbach 2022; Guasti 2020; Hartevelt et al. 2022; Vittori 2022). Populism in power during the pandemic faced a double-edged sword of maintaining support and popularity while adopting unpopular measures (Roberts 2022). Subsequently, ‘populist leaders and parties deviate from mainstream public health recommendation, reject expert advice on the protocols and measures to attenuate the impact of pandemic, and deny the severity of the public health crisis’ (Ringe and Rennó 2023: 273; see also Falkenbach 2022).

Some populist leaders in power politicized the pandemic, attempting to link COVID-19 to their traditional grievances, signature issues and designated scapegoats (Ringe and Rennó 2023: 278). Kenneth Roberts discusses how US President Donald J. Trump transformed resistance to public health safeguards into a ‘badge of partisan identity’ (Roberts 2022: 1). Cesar Renteria and David Arellano-Gault show that in neighbouring Mexico, the pandemic response was a major source of political tension among the states (Renteria and Arellano-Gault 2021). However, Daniel Béland et al. (2021) showed that the populist response could be (to some degree) mitigated by subnational governments.

Unlike in a manufactured crisis (Moffitt 2015), in a pandemic, most populists in power engage in blame-avoiding and blame-shifting. Research on this shows that the key for a populist leader in power during the pandemic was to avoid personal blame by shifting blame onto experts, cabinet members, the media or the opposition (Batory 2022; Burni and Tamaki 2021; Guasti and Bílek 2022; Renteria and Arellano-Gault 2021; Ringe and Rennó 2023; Roberts 2022; Taraktaş et al. 2022; Von Bülow and Abers 2022). The consequences of blame-avoidance and blame-shifting are catastrophic for public health – in a pandemic, the failure of political leadership and public policy can lead to loss of life (Roberts 2022). Contrary to these findings, Ringe and Rennó (2023: 279) find that the much-covered cases of the US and Brazil are outliers. Crisis performance in Argentina, Poland, Spain, the UK and Mexico shows that invoking ‘the people’ and politicizing the pandemic ‘is not distinctly populist’.

Right-wing populist leaders initially engaged in denial, tending to downplay the pandemic for as long as possible (Kaltwasser and Taggart 2022; Taraktaş et al. 2022) before shifting to minimizing health risks and effects while highlighting the negative economic impacts of restrictive measures (Burni and Tamaki 2021; Renteria and Arellano-Gault 2021) and searching for scapegoats – experts, minorities, refugees, media, opposition (see also Prasad 2020; Renteria and Arellano-Gault 2021; Rutledge 2020). Furthermore, populists in power tended to be ‘slow to adopt any strategy to face the crisis’ and adopted strategies tended to ‘reinforce prior beliefs and agendas of political and administrative reforms’ (Renteria and Arellano-Gault 2021: 192). For instance, in Italy, the populist-led ‘government visibly reeled under the impact of the first wave, with the virus close to becoming out of control’ (Bull 2021: 161).

The tension between responsiveness and responsibility (Mair 2009) is never as urgent as in a pandemic. Responsiveness is about being able ‘to read and aggregate preferences and to persuade voters to align behind their policies’. Responsibility implies ‘seeking to act responsibly – that is, in trying to do what they are expected to do as governments and in trying to meet the everyday responsibilities of office’ (Mair 2009: 13–14). Focusing on the case of Mexico, Renteria and Arellano-Gault (2021: 192) show that ‘the populist government did little to no scanning for emergent information to inform their policy choices’. To maintain support, populist leaders in a pandemic (continue to) prioritize responsiveness over responsibility. In a pandemic, this might include refraining from following expert advice (e.g. Trump in the US, Obrador in Mexico) and withholding information (Erdogan in Turkey), but it also explains variation among populist leaders (Agnew 2020; Laebens and Öztürk 2022; Renteria and Arellano-Gault 2021). Comparing

Johnson (in the UK), Modi (in India) and Trump, Basak Taraktaş et al. (2022: 18) show that,

initially, all three leaders downplayed the severity of the coronavirus, ... Boris Johnson took the coronavirus most seriously ... Modi also addressed the severity of the global pandemic but the coronavirus added to the main themes of his existing discourse (i.e. the Hindu culture and foreign policy). Meanwhile, Trump continued to de-emphasize the health risk as he was primarily preoccupied with the 2020 presidential elections.

Variation across time, countries and types of populists in power in adopting or lifting restrictions is better explained by popular attitudes rather than objective measures such as infection rates. For example, when asked about lifting mask mandates, both Donald Trump and Andrej Babis (Czechia) highlighted the unpopularity of masks as their rationale (Agnew 2020; Guasti and Bílek 2022). During the pandemic, Trump and Babis's daily press conferences became substitutes for rallies. Managing real rather than manufactured crises places different demands on a populist leader, as the former, unlike the latter, do not allow the populist leader full control over the agenda (Hartikainen 2021 on Czechia).

In the pandemic response of populist leaders, context and regime type matters, as does their ideological leaning (Kaltwasser and Taggart 2022). Populist leaders in presidential systems were more likely than populist leaders in parliamentary systems to radicalize their positions (Ringe and Rennó 2023). Further contributing factors include 'high levels of poverty and inequality, and comparatively low levels of economic development and state capacity' (Ringe and Rennó 2023: 286). In presidential systems, the pandemic tended to strengthen the pre-existing higher degrees of personalization and executive power grabs, as 'executive-legislative relations are not designed to be cooperative' (Ringe and Rennó 2023: 281–282; see also Guasti and Bustikova 2022).

Populist leaders facing elections (e.g. Trump, Bolsonaro, Orban, Babis, Vucic (in Serbia)) had further incentives to prioritize responsiveness over responsibility as their political future was tied to the pandemic (Ringe and Rennó 2023; Rovira Kaltwasser and Taggart 2022). However, the outcomes are mixed – Trump, Bolsonaro and Babis lost the elections. At the same time, Orban and Vucic won. Thus, a clear causal link cannot be established between objective measures such as surplus death and populists' re-election fortunes.

Rovira Kaltwasser and Taggart (2022), as well as Ringe and Rennó (2023), show that the responses of populists in power varied (Rovira Kaltwasser and Taggart 2022: 19). Structural conditions might be an additional factor in explaining their policy responses. Hence, right-wing and left-wing populists (Bolsonaro, Obrador, Fernandez) might adopt similar responses, as structural conditions (economy, healthcare system) restrict the policies and funding available (see also Ringe and Rennó 2023). John Agnew (2020: 229) concludes, 'Trump's angry incompetence is best framed in terms of a longstanding set of ideological-institutional trends in the US that have systematically weakened the role of the federal government and thus laid the groundwork for the failures manifest in the US response to the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020.' Most notably, the responses varied even within

the same party family. Rovira Kaltwasser and Taggart (2022: 19) maintain that, ‘For those PRR actors in government the responses varied from supporting a technocratic response (Erdoğan) to vacillation (Bolsonaro and Trump) to grabbing powers to take a stringent response (Orbán).’

On vaccination, Petra Guasti and Jaroslav Bílek (2022) show that the Global North (US, UK, EU) engaged in temporary vaccine nationalism – banning the export of COVID-19 vaccines and their components (Trump) or engaging in illegal practices (Johnson) – while also adopting a complex domestic vaccine politics that prioritized responsiveness over responsibility, following public opinion among populist voters (see also Roberts 2022). In addition, the temporary scarcity of Western vaccines created an opportunity for geopolitical realignment and strengthening of authoritarian linkages, as well as for executive aggrandizement (see also Ádám and Csaba 2022). Countries such as Russia and India instrumentalized domestically produced vaccines to pursue foreign policy goals versus their allies (Guasti and Bílek 2022).

During the pandemic, populists in power sought to aggrandize power by (further) dismantling checks and balances. An example is Viktor Orbán’s rule by decree during the first pandemic wave that turned the Hungarian parliament, where Orbán holds the absolute majority, into a rubber stamp (Guasti 2020). Muhyiddin’s administration in Malaysia also significantly reduced legislative powers through an emergency decree (Noor 2022). Populists in power ‘exploited this critical situation to foster their political centrality and legitimacy’ (Bobba and Hubé 2021: 134), a pattern shown in the most controversial cases such as Czechia, Hungary and Poland, but also Italy and Spain.

In the Global South (Philippines, Brazil, India, Indonesia, Nicaragua) and on Europe’s periphery (Serbia), populist leaders facing vaccine scarcity engaged in anti-vax rhetoric or (later) embraced non-Western vaccines as well as alternative ‘remedies’ and marginalized the pandemic measures (Arguelles 2021; Fonseca et al. 2021; Lasco 2020; Oliveira et al. 2021; Teehankee 2021). Hence the pandemic became an opportunity to reshape or strengthen domestic coalitions and geopolitical alliances (Guasti and Bílek 2022). Moreover, the pandemic enhanced the power of personalist populist leaders: ‘in the context of vaccine scarcity, vaccine production shortages, and distribution delays; securing any vaccine enables these leaders to establish “heroic leadership”, gaining mass support’ (Guasti and Bílek 2022: 15).

## Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic represents a unique challenge to public health, the economy, societal cohesion and politics. Governance during a pandemic requires state capacity in terms of preparedness and effectiveness, the ability to adapt and persuasion – communication to the public (see also Capano et al. 2020). This review aimed to provide an overview of the literature on the interplay between populism and the pandemic.

On the demand side, the review highlights four important findings. First, anti-science attitudes are an important element of populist, anti-establishment sentiments – prioritizing common sense and direct personal experience over a more distant expert knowledge. Those holding populist attitudes and voting for

populist parties had more negative attitudes towards vaccines and vaccination, as well as to medical expertise and information on pandemic measures provided by the government (see also Mede and Schäfer 2020). Second, closely associated with populist scepticism of science and expertise, are conspiracy theories. Like vaccine scepticism, belief in conspiracy theories existed before the pandemic but it flourished in the COVID-19 era. Belief in conspiracy theories and scientific scepticism is positively associated with populist attitudes and a propensity to vote for populist parties, especially PRR ones (Oana and Bojar 2023; Serani 2022). Third, partisanship generally shapes behaviours and beliefs towards COVID-19 and mitigation measures (Pickup et al. 2020; Wichowsky and Condon 2022). Fourth, the interaction between right-wing and populist attitudes influences negative attitudes towards mandatory vaccination. In contrast, support or opposition to social distancing, mask-wearing and vaccine scepticism are influenced by partisan exposure and media diets. Finally, the consumption of alternative news and social media is closely linked to negative attitudes to mainstream media, which is perceived to be part of the establishment (Ash et al. 2020; Chadwick et al. 2021; Wollebæk et al. 2022).

On the supply side, the review first focused on populist opposition parties. As Rovira Kaltwasser and Taggart (2022: 18–19) underline, ‘opposition PRR actors used [COVID-19] to attack government’ and ‘they did so in different ways – for not being stringent enough or for being too stringent, for example’. In contrast, left-wing populist parties tended to adopt a much more collaborative approach, while the pattern for valence populists is much more diversified. After the initial phase, the behaviour of populist parties aligned with their broader ideological profile. Right-wing populists attempted to link the crisis to a nativist agenda, even though the specific nature of the crisis provided incentives to emphasize populism rather than nativism, by labelling government responses as authoritarian and anti-democratic (see also Schwörer and Fernández-García 2022; Wondreys and Mudde 2022). Right-wing populists also prioritized economic concerns over health, emphasizing the damage produced by restrictions on the national economy. Left-wing populists, instead, typically emphasized the economic and social consequences of the pandemic, but especially its impact on the most vulnerable groups in society and structural deficits in healthcare (see also Bobba and Hubé 2021; Chazel 2020: 21–22; Lewandowsky et al. 2022). Valence populists, lacking a thick ideology (see Zulianello and Larsen 2023), varied greatly, ranging from promoting conspiracy theories, COVID-19-denialism and anti-vax stances to full support for vaccination and mitigation measures.

Many populist parties and leaders in power initially engaged in denial before shifting to blame-avoidance and blame-shifting. Populist leaders try to avoid personal responsibility and accountability by shifting blame onto experts, cabinet members, the media or the opposition (see also Roberts 2022; Taraktaş et al. 2022). Context and responsiveness to popular attitudes is a hallmark of populist leaders and helps to explain variation across time and countries in adopting or lifting restrictions. Responsiveness is prioritized over responsibility, in particular for populist leaders facing elections. Depending on structural conditions (economy, health-care system), right-wing and left-wing populists might adopt similar responses (see also Renteria and Arellano-Gault 2021; Ringe and Rennó 2023). Vaccine scarcity was conducive to temporary vaccine nationalism in the Global North and

contributed to geopolitical realignment and strengthening of authoritarian linkages in the Global South (Guasti and Bílek 2022). Furthermore, populists in power sought and, in many cases, succeeded in aggrandizing power by (further) dismantling checks and balances (see also Agnew 2020; Noor 2022).

More research is needed to fully grasp the complex and multifaceted nature of pandemic populism, especially outside the traditional geographical areas of interest and beyond the populist (radical right). Nevertheless, this review article shows that the relationship between populism and COVID-19 has been much more complex than many claimed at the onset of the pandemic. We agree that ‘there is not one populist response to the COVID-19 crisis’ and ‘the sensationalist cases that have received the most widespread attention are not, in fact, typical’ (Ringe and Rennó 2023: 278).

The main takeaway of this review article is that the relationship between COVID-19 and populism has been far from straightforward, not just on the supply side but also on the demand side. The interplay between populism and the pandemic is complex and resists simplification. There is no single, unambiguous response to COVID-19 by populist actors, be they in government or opposition. Populist attitudes at the mass level are equally varied.

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