

Research note: Office participation and the dissipating populism-distrust connection

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ABSTRACT

Recent studies have shown that the correlation between political distrust and support for populist and radical parties dissipates when these parties are in office or have office experience. In this research note we argue and demonstrate that it is not so much office experience that matters, but actually being in office. Moreover, we show that the populism-distrust connection (1) exists *before* populists enter a government coalition; (2) dissipates *during* their time in office; and (3) can resurface *after* they have left office again. Finally, we show that the ‘dissipation effect’ exists among all types of populist parties (also those that are not radical left or right), but not among other non-mainstream parties like, for instance, green or regionalist parties. These are important findings because they suggest that this effect is only temporary, and, at least partly, due to parties’ populist messages.

1. Introduction

Populist parties are often conceived of as ‘mobilizers of distrust’. They either attract voters with high levels of political distrust (Pauwels, 2014; Van Kessel, 2015), or they fuel distrust among those who already support them (Hooghe and Dassonneville, 2018; Rooduijn et al., 2016). Recent studies, however, show that the correlation between political distrust and support for populist radical left and right parties is strongly reduced or even absent when these parties are in government (see Cohen, 2020; Jungkunz et al., 2021; Krause and Wagner, 2019; Kriesi and Schulte-Cloos, 2020; Muis2021).

In this research note we build on these studies and make three main contributions. First, we disentangle the effects of holding office *experience* from actually *being in office*. This matters theoretically because the latter is by definition much more volatile. Second, we examine what happens as soon as populist parties *leave office* again. Does the populism-distrust connection then resurface? Third, we assess whether the effects of government participation are unique for parties at the radical fringes of the political spectrum or whether they also hold for other parties. What is the core party characteristic that drives the ‘dissipation effect’?

Employing European Social Survey (ESS) data we confirm earlier findings that the correlation between political distrust and populist support does not exist when populist parties are in office. Moreover, we demonstrate that this finding is driven more strongly by parties’

government *participation* than by their office *experience*. And based on several case studies of populist parties that have either entered or left office we show that when populist parties enter office the association between political distrust and populist support abates and disappears, and that this relationship can reappear when these parties leave office again. Finally, we demonstrate that the found moderation effects not only hold for radical left-wing and right-wing populists, but also for other types of populists. There is no ‘dissipation effect’ among other (non-populist) non-mainstream parties.

2. The populism-distrust connection and office participation

We conceive of populism as “an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups: ‘the pure people’ and ‘the corrupt elite’, and argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people” (Mudde, 2004, p. 543). Populism thus consists of at least two core elements: people-centrism and anti-elitism. Populists are people-centric because they argue that the people are good and virtuous, and that they, therefore, should form the point of departure of every political decision. Populists are anti-elitist because they argue that the good people are neglected, exploited, or betrayed by a corrupt and condescending elite.

Who vote for parties that express a populist message? Many studies have indicated that these parties are particularly popular among citizens

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who are distrustful towards politics (see Doyle, 2011; Pauwels, 2014). Political (dis)trust is a relational concept, defined by a subject who trusts and an object that is trusted (or not) (Citrin and Stoker, 2018; Hardin, 2000). Here we focus on trust in the main political actors in parliament (i.e., parties and politicians, and the institution of parliament itself) because these actors form the core of the political process (Van der Meer, 2017), and because the main target of populists consists of precisely these actors (Mudde, 2004).

Recent studies have indicated, however, that populist parties are not always mobilizers of distrust. A comparison of the electorates of populist parties in 15 countries, for instance, shows that political distrust does not always exert a statistically significant effect on populist voting (Rooduijn, 2018). Why not? In a recent study, Krause and Wagner (2019) show that the association between political distrust and populist support depends on the extent to which a party is an ‘established player’ in the party system. More specifically, they demonstrate that there is no correlation between political distrust (measured as external political efficacy) and support for populist parties that are older, larger, and with office experience.

Focusing on support for *far-right* parties instead of *populist* parties, Cohen (2020) examines public opinion and voting in 11 Western European countries. He shows that in government these parties fail to appeal to voters who are dissatisfied with politics. Similarly, Muis et al. (2021) conclude, based on an examination of far-right voting in Western, Central and Eastern European countries, that political distrust is a less important predictor of support for these parties when they are in office. Finally, assessing support for far-right and far-left parties in Western Europe, Kriesi and Schulte-Cloos (2020) also find that being in government or not moderates the effect of political dissatisfaction on party support.¹ All these studies convincingly show that the effect of political discontent on radical/populist voting is conditional on the political context in which a party finds itself. How can this moderation effect of government participation be explained? We distinguish three possible mechanisms. First, it could be due to the fact that when populist parties enter a government coalition they are involved in making national-level political decisions. It has been shown that those who vote for a party that participates in government are more satisfied with politics than those who opt for a party that ends up in opposition (Anderson and Guillory, 1997; Anderson and Tverdova, 2001). Second, radical parties that enter a government coalition will have to moderate because the ideological distances between the various participating parties need to be bridged. Populist parties “lose the purity of their message by being seen to cooperate with the political establishment” (Van Spanje, 2011, pp. 609–610). This will likely make them less attractive to the more discontented and more attractive to the less discontented. Finally, it could be that populist parties do not moderate their populism when in office, but only shift the target at which they direct their anti-elitism. Once in power, populists might decide not to criticize the *political* elite anymore because it has become difficult to distinguish themselves from it. Instead, they might choose to now blame other elites – like the media, bureaucrats or scientists (see Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2015). If this happens, such blame shifts might well be transferred to their voters, leading to lower levels of *political* discontent (see Castanho Silva, 2019; Jungkunz et al., 2021).

Although in this study we will not adjudicate between these three possible mechanisms, we advance the field in three main ways. First, we make a distinction between the effect of populist parties having office *experience* and populist parties actually *being in office* at the time of

analysis. Second, we examine what happens when populist parties *leave* office again. We theorize that populist parties will cease to be mobilizers of distrust once they have entered a government (coalition), but that the populism-distrust connection is likely to resurface once they have left office again. Third, we assess whether it is *populism* that does the trick. Does the ‘dissipation effect’ only pertain to radical populists? Or also to non-radical ones? And how about non-mainstream non-populist (NMNP) parties? We also include Central and Eastern European countries in our study since they harbor quite some non-radical populist parties (like, for instance, GERB in Bulgaria, ANO in the Czech Republic, and Smer and OĽaNO in Slovakia).

Our first general expectation is the following:

General Office Hypothesis: The association between political distrust and support for populist parties is less pronounced when these parties are (or have been) in office.

We do not have clear expectations about whether it is office *experience* or actually *being in office* that steers the ‘dissipation effect’. We will explore both possibilities in our analysis. Imagine that we indeed find that the correlation between distrust and populist support is dampened by office participation. This would not necessarily mean that this dampening effect is actually due to populist parties’ government participation. It could, for instance, be the case that the most powerful mobilizers of distrust are also less likely to end up in a government coalition. In other words, it could be that the moderation effect is the result of a selection process.

We would be more confident that government participation itself is what dampens the populism-distrust linkage if we could demonstrate that the association between distrust and populist support decreases after a populist party has entered government. We, therefore, also formulate the following expectation:

Entering Office Hypothesis: The association between political distrust and support for a specific populist party becomes less pronounced after this party has entered office.

This begs the question what can be expected to happen when populist parties leave office again. We argue that it might be the case that when populists leave office, their loyal supporters will become more distrustful (Anderson and Guillory, 1997; Anderson and Tverdova, 2001). After all, their party now does not turn the knobs of power anymore.

At the same time, those who do not vote populist will likely become less distrustful now populists have left office. Moreover, Akkerman et al. (2016) have shown that once populist parties are not part of a government coalition anymore, they resume their fierce anti-establishment rhetoric. Thereby they might become more attractive (again) for those who are more distrustful towards politics, and less for those who are less distrustful. This leads to the following hypothesis:

Leaving Office Hypothesis: The association between political distrust and support for a specific populist party becomes more pronounced after this party has left office.

3. Research design and measures

We employed the European Social Survey (ESS, 2002–2018, 9 waves) to test these hypotheses. First, we focus on the *General Office Hypothesis* by exploiting cross-sectional variation to assess the correlation between political distrust and support for populists, and the extent to which this relationship is moderated by office participation. Here we make a distinction between office experience and actual government participation. We also distinguish different types of (populist) parties. Second, we examine the *Entering* and *Leaving Office Hypotheses* by assessing aggregate-level over time changes in the populism-distrust linkage as a result of office entering and leaving.

Our dependent variable is based on an item in the ESS that asks

¹ Note that the authors of this latter study also examine to what extent the effect of dissatisfaction is conditional on whether a party is established or recently rising. They find that when it comes to radical right parties, government participation only diminishes the effect of dissatisfaction when a party is an established actor. This suggests that new, rising parties can remain successful in presenting themselves as political outsiders.

respondents which party they felt ‘closest to’ at the time of the survey.² We employed ParlGov to categorize parties (Döring and Manow, 2019). To assess whether parties are populist or not, we use The PopuList (Rooduijn et al., 2019), a database including all populist parties in Europe that have either won at least one seat or at least 2 percent of the votes in one national parliamentary election since 1989. Following The PopuList we make a distinction between radical right-wing populists (RRPs), radical left-wing populists (RLPs) and non-radical populists (NRPs).³ We compare those who vote for these parties with individuals who vote for one of the mainstream parties (i.e. a Liberal, Social Democratic, Conservative, or Christian Democratic party). To investigate if the hypothesized mechanism only holds for populist parties, we also assessed support for non-mainstream non-populist (NMNP) parties compared to mainstream support. This has led to four dichotomous dependent variables where supporters of mainstream parties are coded as ‘0’ and supporters of RRP, RLP, NRP and NMNP parties as ‘1’.

Our main individual-level independent variable is *Political distrust*. This variable is the average of three questions asking about trust in three institutions (national parliament, politicians and political parties).⁴ We recoded our independent variable so that it ranges from 0 (‘complete trust’) to 10 (‘no trust at all’).⁵ Our moderator is a variable that consists of two dummies indicating whether the supported party is in office (*In office* = 1) or whether it has office experience (but is currently not in office) (*Office experience* = 1) – i.e., the reference category refers to being neither in office nor having office experience. We include various control variables. See for an overview of these variables and the descriptive statistics the Supporting Information (SI) Table A2.

In the first part of our analysis, we estimate multilevel fixed effect random intercept logistic regression models in which individuals are nested in country-years, including country- and year-fixed effects. Because we want to compare effect sizes between different statistical models, odds ratios are biased since they are sensitive to the model conditions (Norton and Dowd, 2018). Therefore, we report for all our models the Average Marginal Effects (AME’s), which are better interpretable across models (Mood, 2010; Norton et al., 2019). AME’s can be interpreted as the average increase/decrease in percentage points on the dependent variable per one value increase on the independent variable. Standard errors are robust-clustered, and observations are weighted using the population size weights and the design weights provided by the ESS. Observations with missing values have been deleted list-wise (creating a sample of 120,131 respondents from 187 different country-year combinations). We standardized all the non-dichotomous variables over the total sample.

In the second part of our analysis we conduct a longitudinal analysis

² For our main analyses, we do not use the related ESS variable that asks which party a respondent actually voted for during the last election, because often that election has taken place years before the survey was conducted and in the meantime political preferences and attitudes can change. Moreover, the actual vote choice item cannot easily be compared across countries as different voting systems cause differences between countries regarding the strategic electoral decisions people make. It has been found that the ‘closest to’ and ‘actual vote’ variables are strongly correlated (Burgooon et al., 2019). However, because an unfortunate consequence of our decision is that all those citizens who do not feel close to any political party are excluded from our analysis, we have conducted a robustness check with ‘actual vote’ as the dependent variable. No major changes occurred, except that government participation did not matter for NRP parties. The results are shown in SI Tables A7-A8.

³ For an overview of the selected RRP, RLP and NRP parties, see SI Table A1.

⁴ The first wave of the ESS did not include a question on trust in parliament. Therefore, for these respondents we took the average of two questions, while for the others we used the average of all three questions.

⁵ As a robustness check, we have also employed another variable to measure political distrust: the extent to which respondents are satisfied with the way democracy works in their country. The substantive results are the same for both parts of the analyses, shown in SI Tables A5 and SI Tables B21-B25.

at the country-year level to see what happens to the populism-distrust connection when populist parties enter or leave office. We have only selected those populist and NMNP parties that have either entered or left office within the time frame. We have selected those cases where: (1) entering/leaving office has taken place between 2003 and 2017, so we have a pre and post measure in the ESS; (2) both the pre and post measures in the ESS include at least 30 populist/NMNP supporters; and (3) the populist/NMNP party has stayed in office for at least a year. Regarding the populist parties, this leaves us with 14 cases (eight entering and six leaving office) of nine different parties (seven RRP parties and two NRP parties), all in different countries. See for a full overview SI Table B9. When it comes to NMNP parties, this has left us with 25 instances (11 entering office and 14 leaving office) of 12 different parties, in ten different countries. These 12 parties include seven green parties, three non-populist radical-left parties, a non-mainstream Christian party, and a minority party (see SI Table B10).

We estimated for each party and per wave logistic regression models in which feeling closest to the party under consideration is the dependent variable. We included the same independent variables as in the previous analysis, except for *In office* and *Office experience*. We again report the AME’s of *Political distrust*.⁶ Our main expectation is that the effect is positive and statistically significant before a populist party enters office, that this effect will decrease and become insignificant (or maybe even negative and significant) after the party has entered office, and as long as the party is in office. We expect that the effect will increase and becomes significantly positive again after a populist party has left office. We do not expect this to happen when it comes to NMNP parties.

4. Results vis-à-vis the General Office Hypothesis

Fig. 1 shows the correlates of the different types of populist and NMNP support (see for full tables SI Table A3). The effects on *Populist* support are displayed in blue (RRP), pink (RLP) and green (NRP). Political distrust has a significant positive effect on RRP support (AME = 0.026, $p < 0.001$) and RLP support (AME = 0.037, $p < 0.001$). This means that on average, one standard deviation increase in political distrust will increase support for RRP parties by 2.6 per cent and support for RLP parties by 3.7 per cent (where all parties not included in the analysis are excluded from the total percentage). When it comes to RRP voting, only someone’s left-right position and immigration attitudes exert a stronger effect. Regarding RLP voting, only the effect of left-right position exceeds the impact of political distrust. These results are in line with previous studies showing a positive correlation between political distrust and populist or radical voting. Surprisingly, however, there is no correlation between political distrust and NRP support. A possible reason could be that NRP parties are more often in government than radical populist parties. The AME’s in orange display the effects on NMNP support. Also vis-à-vis these parties there exists an effect of political distrust.

Fig. 2 shows to what extent the effect of political distrust is conditional on a party’s office position. Since no RLP party had office

⁶ For these analyses, we again use the variable that asks which party a respondent is closest to instead of which party the respondent voted for. We have no other choice since the goal of this analyses is to examine over-time changes. Such changes are not possible to examine with actual voting, because respondents’ actual voting behavior sometimes predates the date of the survey with several years. Hence, when voting most respondents did not know which parties would eventually form the government. Yet because party identification is in decline, in our analyses that focus on party closeness we likely exclude parts of the electorate. For that reason, we have added a robustness check in which we have repeated our analyses using voting behaviour as a dependent variable. The broad patterns remain the same, but the effects are a bit less accentuated. This makes sense, given the big time difference in most cases. The results are presented in SI Table B16-B20.

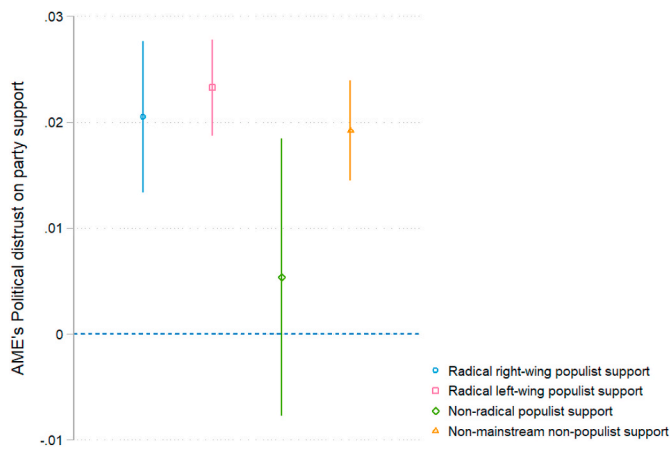


Fig. 1. The association between political distrust and support for RRP, RLP, NRP and NMNP parties (Average Marginal Effects).

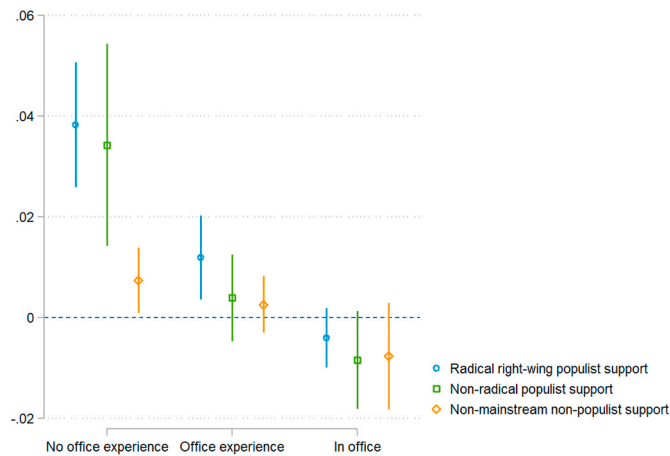


Fig. 2. The association between political distrust and support for RRP, NRP and NMNP parties, conditional on a party's office position.

experience or was in government in our dataset, we have excluded them from the analyses. Again, the blue AME's represent RRP support, the green AME's NRP support, and the orange AME's NMNP support. For the full regression tables, see SI Table A4. The figure shows that when it comes to both kinds of populists, the effect of distrust is moderated by participation in office. The effect is statistically significant when a RRP or NRP party has never been in office. The effect is less pronounced, and for NRP parties not significant anymore, regarding parties that have past government experience. When a party is in office, the effect for both RRP and NRP support switches direction and is not statistically significant. Clearly, the populism-distrust connection changes with the office position of a party. It seems that both government *experience* and *actually being in office* exert a dampening effect.

A similar story can be told about the NMNP parties (see the orange AME's). There is a significant positive correlation between political distrust and NMNP party support when this party has no office experience. Note, though, that this effect is much smaller than for the populist parties, showing only an average increase of less than one per cent with every standard deviation increase of political distrust. In addition, the effect disappears for parties that have office experience, or are in office.

The findings convincingly corroborate the *General Office Hypothesis*.

Although there exists an overall effect of political distrust on support for the different populist party families, this effect is conditional on whether a party has government experience and is in government or not. Specifically, the effect is absent if we only examine parties that are in power. Interestingly, the effect is still present for RRP parties that are not in government, but have been in office in the past, whereas this is not the case for NRP parties. This suggests that what matters most is whether populist parties are *actually in office*, but that past experience matters as well.

5. Results vis-à-vis the *Entering and Leaving Office Hypotheses*

In the next part of our study we explore to what extent the found moderation is due to a selection effect by assessing the correlation between distrust and support per party over time. More precisely, we test: (1) whether the effect of distrust decreases after a populist party has entered government (*Entering Office Hypothesis*); and (2) whether it increases again after it has left office (*Leaving Office Hypothesis*).

Fig. 3 shows the results for the populist parties. The vertical orange lines indicate when a party enters government and the green lines when a party leaves office.

Claims regarding the significance of differences are based on SI Tables B11-B12, where for every case study all years are pooled into pre-government, during-government and post-government groups. Let us first assess the eight cases where a populist party has entered office. The effect of distrust on supporting PS in Finland was positive and significant when the party was in opposition, but decreased and became insignificant after the party had entered government in 2015. When we pool all pre-years, the difference between pre-government and during-government is statistically significant (see SI Table B11). The effect of distrust on supporting Fidesz in Hungary was positive and significant (when all years are combined) when the party was in opposition, and decreased and became significantly negative after the party had entered government in 2010. In Lithuania, the positive effect on supporting TT became negative (but insignificant) after the party had entered government. The differences between pre- and during-government are not statistically significant though. In Bulgaria, the borderline positive effect on supporting GERB became negative (but insignificant). The difference between pre-entering and post-entering is significant. Looking at the Norwegian FrP, we see a significant and positive effect before government participation, that became insignificant in the party's first office year (it is important to emphasize that the difference between pre and post is not statistically significant). Also, the effect became significant again in the last two years (while the party was still in government). Yet the interaction between political distrust and government participation is statistically significant when all the years are pooled together. In 2014 and 2016, when the Austrian FPÖ was an opposition party, the effect of distrust on support for the party was statistically significant. When the party entered government, the effect dropped to insignificance. The difference between pre-office and during-office is statistically significant. In the Netherlands, the effect of distrust on the PVV was significant before the PVV supported the government. When they assumed a supporting role in 2010, the effect became statistically insignificant. The difference between pre-entering and post-entering is not statistically significant. Finally, regarding the Polish PiS, we see a very clear picture. The effect of distrust was positive and significant in all opposition years before the party entered government in 2015. During the following two examined years in which the party was in office the effects of distrust were negative and statistically significant.

To summarize, in all cases the effect of distrust dropped to insignificance or became even negative after entering government. In six of

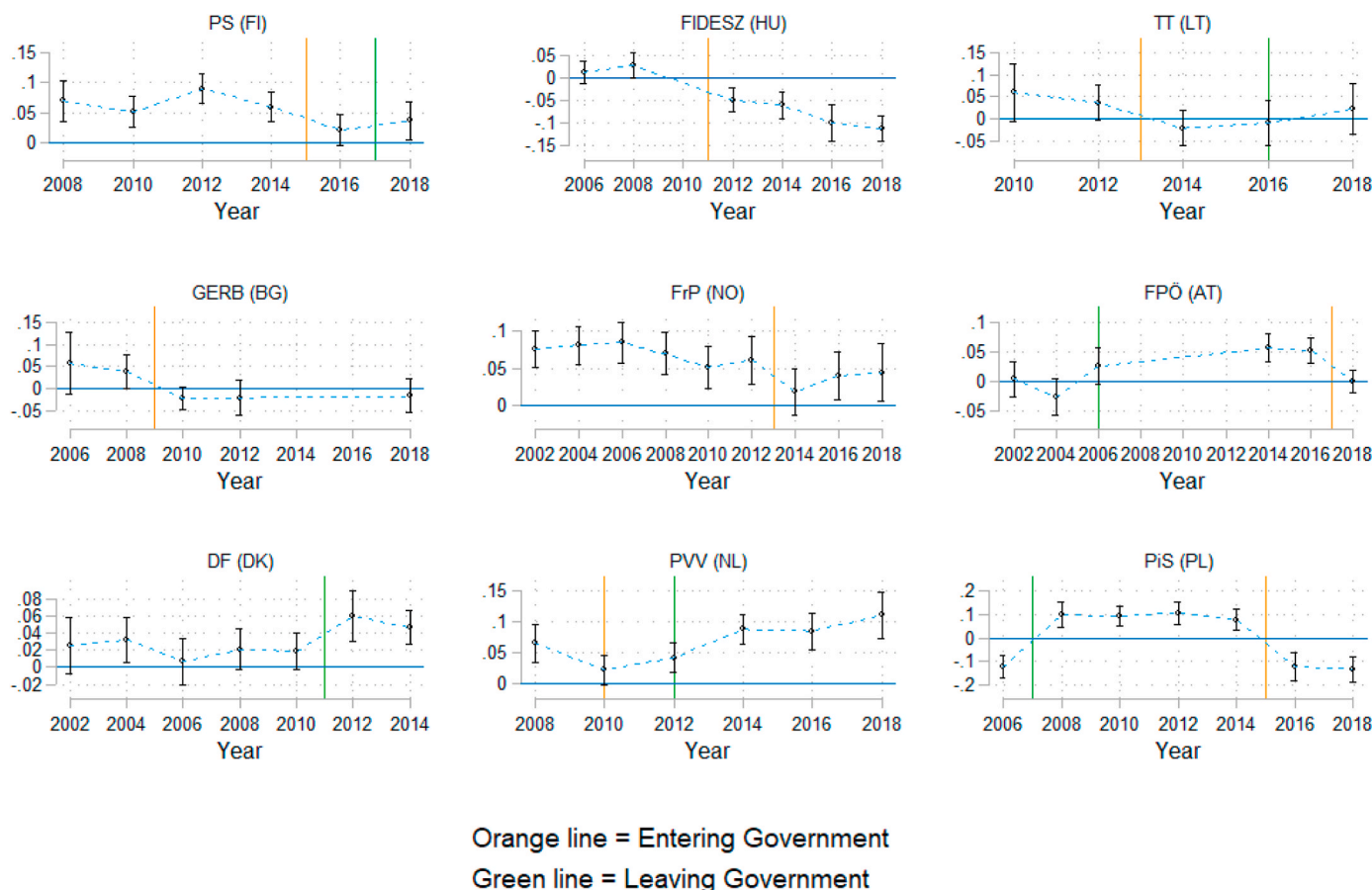


Fig. 3. Average marginal effects of political distrust on support for 9 populist parties.

these eight cases the difference between pooled pre-entering and in-government years is statistically significant.

Let us now turn to the six leaving-office cases. When PS in Finland left the government in 2017, the effect of distrust changed from insignificant to significant. Note, however, that this change is not statistically significant. When TT left the government in Lithuania in 2016 the effect of distrust switched from negative to positive. None of these effects are significant, however, and the over-time changes are modest. We see a clear effect when we look at the FPÖ in Austria. When the party was in government (before 2006), the effect of distrust was insignificant. Yet, when the party left office in 2006, the effect became significantly positive and remained like that. The difference between the pooled during-government and post-government years is statistically significant. When the Danish DF was in government, the effect of distrust was insignificant in three of the five years. Yet, when the party left office, the effect almost doubled in size and became significantly positive. When all the years are pooled together, the interaction between political distrust and government participation was statistically significant. When the Dutch PVV withdrew its government support in 2012, the effect of distrust changed to positive and significant. In 2014, 2016 and 2018 the effect is significantly different from the year in which the party supported the government. Finally, the effect of distrust was negative and significant when the Polish party PiS was in office. It became positive and significant when the party left office in 2007 and remained like that during all years in opposition.

In sum, in five out of six cases the effect of distrust changed from insignificant or significantly negative to significantly positive. In three out of these six cases the difference between pooled pre-leaving and post-leaving years is statistically significant. Exceptions are the PVV

(only significant at an alpha of .10), and the PS and TT. The latter two could be explained due to lack of statistical power, especially since they have merely one wave after leaving office. It could also be that the resurfacing of the populism-distrust connection is dependent on other factors, such as parties' communication strategies, their record in office, or their behavior towards their previous coalition partners.

In Fig. 4 we assess over-time changes vis-à-vis NMNP parties (for the full analyses see SI Tables B13-B15). We will not discuss all cases separately because there are many of them. When looking at all years separately, for the *Entering Office Hypothesis*, there is no case (out of 12 in total) in which the correlation switches from being positive and significant when the party was in opposition to insignificant when the party was in government. When it comes to the *Leaving Office Hypothesis*, we have only three out of 13 cases where the effect switches from insignificant to positive and significant (VAS, SF and Vihř). Furthermore, only the two times that VAS left office resulted in a significant change in the effect of *Political distrust* (of which the last in the opposite direction).

These results corroborate both the *Entering* and *Leaving Office Hypotheses* regarding populist parties. When populists enter office, the populism-distrust connection tends to dissipate, and when they leave office, it is likely to resurface again. This pattern is absent when it comes to NMNP parties. This suggests that when it comes to populist parties the dampening effect we found is due to government participation itself – and not to selection or other possible confounders (like past government experience). After all, we observe the disappearance and reappearance of the populism-distrust connection only when populist parties enter and leave office, respectively. Moreover, this happens consistently in a large number of contextually highly different cases and regarding different types of populists.

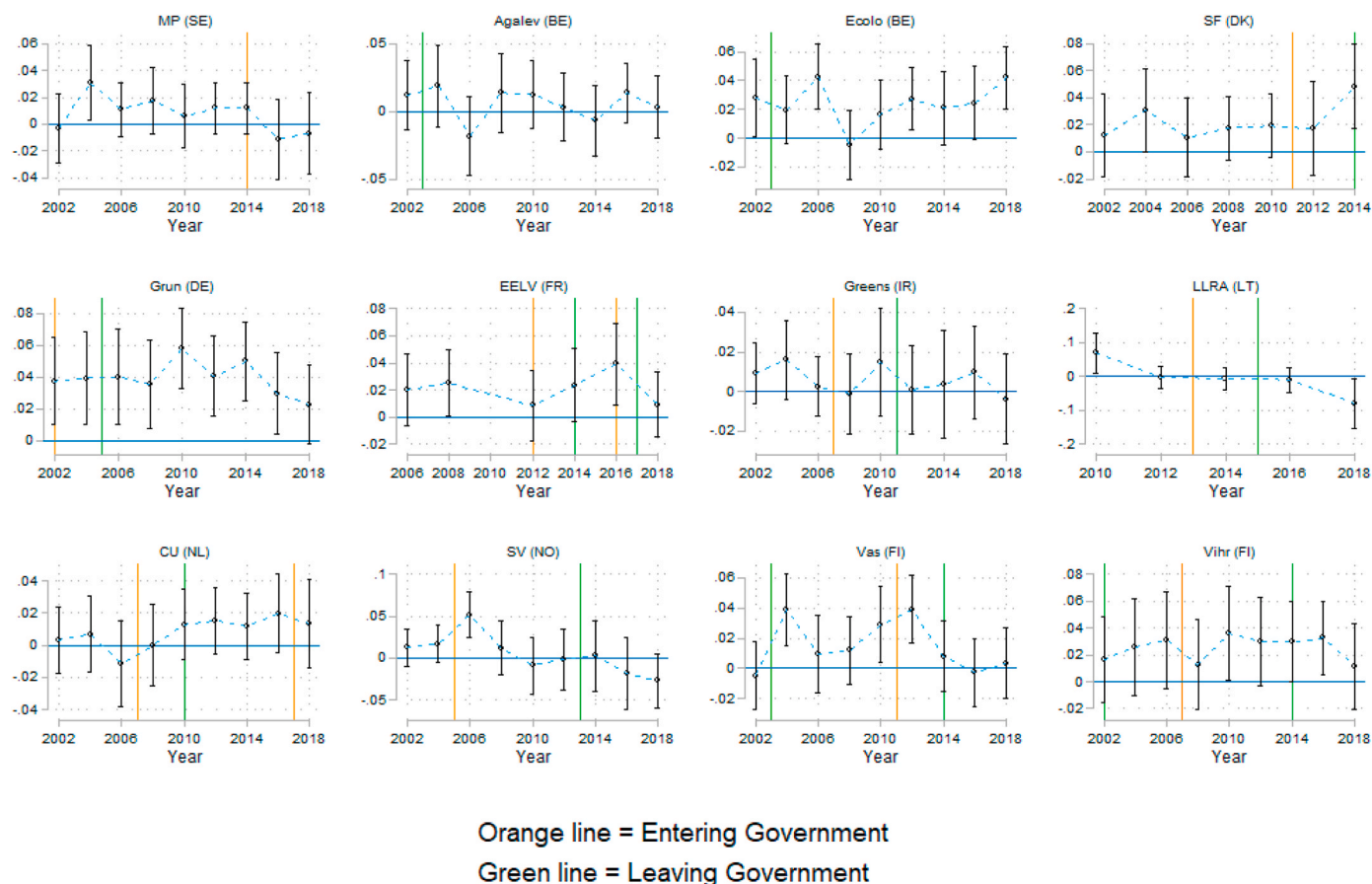


Fig. 4. Average marginal effects of political distrust on support for 12 NMNP parties.

6. Conclusion

Many studies have shown that populist parties are ‘mobilizers of distrust’ (Pauwels, 2014; Rooduijn et al., 2016). But what happens when populists enter government? Extending recent work (see Cohen, 2020; Krause and Wagner, 2019; Kriesi and Schulte-Cloos, 2020; Muis et al., 2021), we confirm that the association between political distrust and populist support does not exist when populist parties are in office. In addition to this, our study makes three important contributions. First, it shows that it is not just whether populist parties have government *experience* that affects whether these parties are mobilizers of distrust. We have provided strong evidence that it also matters whether these parties are *actually in office*.

Second, because we assessed over-time changes in the association between distrust and support for specific populist parties, and, moreover, included various contextually divergent cases of populists entering and leaving governments, alternative explanations have become less likely. After all, we have demonstrated that the correlation between distrust and populism (1) exists *before* populists enter a government coalition; (2) abates and disappears *during* their time in office; and (3) can resurface *after* they have left office again.

Third, the found effects are unique for populist parties, and moreover, hold for *all* types of populist parties. The effects do not pertain to other non-mainstream parties like, for instance, green, regionalist, or non-populist radical-left parties. These non-mainstream non-populist (NMNP) parties also tend to mobilize distrust, and the association between distrust and support for these parties is also moderated by office participation. However, our analyses indicate that the clear over-time effects of entering and leaving office that we unearthed in the analyses of populist parties are absent here. We believe that this might very well be due to a selection effect: NMNP parties that participate in a coalition

are more likely to enter office precisely *because* they are less outspoken mobilizers of distrust.

Of course, this study also has its limitations. It might be the case that the characteristics of the coalition a populist party participates in (e.g., is the populist party a junior partner or not?), or the circumstances under which such a coalition takes shape (e.g., the election campaign), affect the populism-distrust connection. We encourage scholars to investigate to what extent this is the case. Also, we have not been able to distinguish between the different mechanisms that could explain the dissipating populism-distrust connection. For instance, future studies might well want to assess shifting blame attributions by populists. It has been shown that populists, once in office, are likely to shift their critique from the political establishment (of which they are now part) to other types of elites (like international (EU) elites, the ‘deep state’ or ‘hostile, fake news spreading’ media) (see Albertazzi et al., 2015). To what extent does this affect the way in which supporters of populists express their distrust? It has been shown, for instance, that supporters of populists in Latin America change their view of what exactly the establishment is once a populist is elected president (Castanho Silva, 2019). Future studies might want to assess if similar processes take place in the parliamentary systems in the European context.

In line with our study, Jungkunz et al. (2021) have shown that populist attitude scales fail to explain populist party support when these parties are in power. They argue that this moderation effect might be explained by populist parties shifting blame attributions when in power. Because existing measures of populism strongly focus on *political* anti-elitism instead of anti-elitism in general (in other words: they fail to incorporate other forms of anti-elitism), it is likely that these existing measures fail to tap into other forms of discontent with elites. We believe that this logic can also be applied to measures of political distrust. The dissipating populism-distrust connection we have investigated in this

paper has a very strong political focus – we focus, after all, only on *political* distrust. Hence, it could still be that the correlations between other forms of discontent and populist support do not dissipate when these parties enter office. In fact, the blame-shifting logic even suggests that such correlations could have become stronger as a result of government participation of populists. Take, for instance, our findings regarding Viktor Orbán's Fidesz in Hungary. The correlation between political distrust and populist support shifted from being positive to being negative when this party entered government, suggesting that the levels of political trust of those who supported Fidesz had grown when this party entered office. It might be the case that these higher levels of political trust coincided with very low levels of confidence in, for instance, European and global elites – groups that Orbán systematically blames for being responsible for many of Hungary's problems. Future studies might want to examine to what extent this blame-shifting logic indeed holds across cases.

Changes in the association between political distrust and support for a populist party could be due to various mechanisms. We have, unfortunately, not been able to explore these mechanisms, but we encourage future studies to do so. Looking at individual-level attitudinal changes and support-switching patterns, one can distinguish four possible transitions, and, hence, four possible groups. There are: (1) those who supported populist party X at time t-1 and again at time t (the Stayers); (2) individuals who supported party X at t-1, but not anymore at t (the Leavers); (3) voters who did not support party X at t-1, but did do so at t (the Arrivers); and (4) people who never supported populist party X (the Others). Assessing these possible transitions, four scenarios could explain why the association between distrust and support for populists might decrease when populists enter office. First, it could be the case that, on average, the Stayers become less distrustful when their party is in office. Second, it is possible that the Others on average become more distrustful because they are now being governed by a populist party that they strongly dislike. Third, it could be that, overall, the Leavers are those who are the most distrustful. And finally, it might be the case that the Arrivers are, on average, less distrustful than the 'traditional' populist party X voters. Future studies might want to try to adjudicate between these different mechanisms.

Despite these shortcomings, we have found strong support for our hypothesis that by entering office, populists cease to be mobilizers of political distrust. In other words: when populists participate in a government (coalition), there is no congruence anymore between one of their key messages (i.e., their political populism) and their supporters' attitudes on this issue (i.e., their political distrust). This has important implications because it means that the relationship between the party and its voter base has changed fundamentally: the unique (political) populism-distrust connection has evaporated.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

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