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# The relationship between support for populist parties and a government's COVID-19 response

Case studies of the Netherlands and Italy

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## **ABSTRACT**

Populism has been on the rise for several decades. Its causes are complex and its effect on democracy can be detrimental. In the past year, COVID-19 has disrupted public life. Because of the profound effect populism and COVID-19 both have on society, it is important to understand the relationship between the two. This thesis examines whether there is a link between the response of a populist and non-populist government to COVID-19 and support for populist parties. To this end, a comparative analysis between the cases of the Netherlands and Italy is conducted. The analysis focuses on the stringency of the COVID-19 measures, public support for populist parties and support for the COVID-19 restrictions between 1 January 2020 and 1 April 2021.

No direct link between the government response to COVID-19 and change in support for populist parties could be established based on the examined data. However, it is not unlikely that the COVID-19 restrictions might have an indirect effect on populist support since factors such as technocracy, political trust and external efficacy can influence the attitudes of citizens towards the COVID-19 measures, as well as populist support.

**Keywords:** populism, populist support, COVID-19 crisis, COVID-19 responses, the Netherlands, Italy

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AfD	Alternative für Deutschland ( <i>Alternative for Germany</i> )
CDA	Christen-Democratisch Appèl ( <i>Christian Democratic Appeal</i> )
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
CU	ChristenUnie ( <i>Christian Union</i> )
D66	Democraten 66 ( <i>Democrats 66</i> )
DF	Dansk Folkeparti ( <i>Danish People's Party</i> )
EU	European Union
FdI	Fratelli d'Italia ( <i>Brothers of Italy</i> )
FI	Forza Italia ( <i>Forward Italy</i> )
FPÖ	Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs ( <i>Freedom Party of Austria</i> )
FrP	Fremskrittspartiet ( <i>Progress Party</i> )
FvD	Forum voor Democratie ( <i>Forum for Democracy</i> )
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
HSC	Health Security Committee
IV	Italia Viva ( <i>Italy Alive</i> )
JA21	Juiste Antwoord 2021 ( <i>Right Answer 2021</i> )
LeU	Liberi e Uguali ( <i>Free and Equal</i> )
LN	Lega Nord ( <i>Northern League</i> )
M5S	Movimento 5 Stelle ( <i>Five Star Movement</i> )
MP	Member of Parliament
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development

OMT	Outbreak Management Team
OxCGRT	Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker
PD	Partito Democratico ( <i>Democratic Party</i> )
PHEIC	Public Health Emergency of International Concern
PiS	Prawo i Sprawiedliwość ( <i>Law and Justice</i> )
PM	Prime Minister
PVV	Partij voor de Vrijheid ( <i>Party for Freedom</i> )
RN	Rassemblement National ( <i>National Rally</i> )
SP	Socialistische Partij ( <i>Socialist Party</i> )
UK	United Kingdom
US	United States
VB	Vlaams Belang ( <i>Flemish Interest</i> )
VVD	Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie ( <i>People's Party for Freedom and Democracy</i> )
VWS	Volksgezondheid, Welzijn en Sport ( <i>(Ministry of) Health, Welfare and Sport</i> )
WHO	World Health Organization

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Populism is booming. In academia, the concept is increasingly being linked to a wide range of political and social phenomena such as Euroscepticism, nationalism and xenophobia (Deangelis, 2003; Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018; Pirro et al., 2018). The growing academic attention for the subject followed the global rise of populist parties and leaders. In 2020, there were three times more populist leaders and parties in power than at the beginning of the century (Kyle & Meyer, 2020). The overall populist vote share in Europe's national parliaments surpassed 25% in 2018 (Lewis et al., 2018). After Brexit and Donald Trump's election as president of the United States (US), the usage of the word also took a flight in the media. According to Rooduijn (2019), the New York Times used the terms 'populism' or 'populist' 671 times in 2015; this increased to 1,399 the year after and 2,537 times in 2017. Populism can rightfully be called a buzzword. But while the term has proven to be useful to help understand a variety of global developments over the past decades, the broad application has also created confusion and frustration (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 1).

Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017, p. 6) define populism as “*a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people*”. This definition captures three elements that make up the ideological core of different varieties of populism across space and time: homogeneity of the people, anti-elitism (“the corrupt elite”) and popular sovereignty (“politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale*”) (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018; Mudde, 2017; Müller, 2016; Wettstein et al., 2020). Additionally, defining populism as a thin-centred ideology explains the aforementioned conceptual confusion because populism needs other ideologies (such as nationalism) to make it ideologically whole (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). This also clarifies why populism is used to describe political parties and leaders on the left as well as the right side of the political spectrum, as diverse as Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, Bernie Sanders in the US and Viktor Orbán in Hungary.

Initially, academic research focused mainly on the supply side of populism, defining populism and analysing the populist discourse of political parties and leaders (Akkerman et al., 2013). Several types of populism can be identified on the supply side, such as cultural populism and socio-economic populism. In the past decade, research has expanded to the demand side of populism to gain a better understanding of why people vote for populist parties. Three distinguished sets of attitudes are associated

with voting for populists: voter's levels of political trust, external political efficacy and populist attitudes. Although these are different constructs, there is some overlap between the three because they all tap into the anti-elitist aspect of populism (Geurkink et al., 2020). Populist attitudes within an individual explain their support for left- as well as right-wing populist parties (Akkerman et al., 2017; Van Hauwaert & Van Kessel, 2018).

Populism has also been linked to the COVID-19 crisis in various ways. COVID-19 refers to Coronavirus Disease 2019, the infectious disease caused by a novel coronavirus that was first confirmed in Wuhan, China, in December 2019 and was declared a public health emergency of international concern (PHEIC) by the World Health Organization (WHO) in February 2020. The virus spread rapidly over the globe, causing major outbreaks in many countries such as Italy, Iran, Brazil, the United States and India (*Coronavirus*, n.d.). At the early stages of the pandemic, the downplay of the virus by Trump in the US and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil caused several scholars to argue that populist leaders were not as competent as their non-populist counterparts to handle the crisis. They stated that the pandemic exposed populism's weaknesses and that the crisis might even ultimately lead to populism's demise (Bufacchi, 2020; Holland & Aron, 2020). However, other scholars deemed populism's defeat unlikely since not all populist leaders responded to the situation in the same way (Mudde, 2020). Research has shown that only five out of 17 populist leaders in power downplayed the crisis; the others took serious measures to protect their citizens. The perception that populists were incapable of handling the pandemic was mostly based on a generalisation of the cases of Trump and Bolsonaro (Meyer, 2020a; Wondreys & Mudde, 2020). A leading populism scholar even argued that the pandemic will strengthen populists like Orbán, who took strict measures to contain the spread of the virus, because some populists "have used the pandemic to take their countries further in an authoritarian direction" (Müller, 2020b).

Furthermore, a survey conducted by the YouGov-Cambridge Globalism Project showed a decline in populist beliefs among Europeans after the start of the pandemic in spring 2020. However, the researchers believed that this was likely a result of the 'rally around the flag' effect of the pandemic: the human tendency to rally around an (incumbent) leader in times of crisis, who is then seen as a symbol of national unity. The researchers expected populist support to increase again once the economic effects of the pandemic became apparent (Henley & Duncan, 2020; Rooduijn, 2020). Lastly, populist attitudes are linked to decreased trust in political and scientific institutions and a heightened belief in conspiracy theories (Eberl et al., 2020). This finding may have consequences for the effectiveness of government communication about COVID-19 among citizens with populist attitudes.

The purpose of this thesis is to examine whether there is a relationship between a populist or non-populist government's policy response to COVID-19 and support for populist parties. Meyer (2020a) studied the responses of 17 populist leaders to the pandemic and classified the responses as follows: downplay (e.g. Trump in the US), serious-liberal (e.g. Bojko Borisov in Bulgaria or Giuseppe Conte in Italy) and serious-illiberal (e.g. Orbán in Hungary). To analyse if there is a link between support for populist parties and COVID-19 measures, this thesis focuses on the cases of the Netherlands and Italy. As these are both European countries, the research mostly concentrates on populism in Europe, but examples from other parts of the world are also provided throughout the thesis. The Netherlands had a non-populist government from the start of the pandemic until January 2021. Parliamentary elections were held in March 2021 and at the moment of writing, a new government still needs to be formed. Italy, on the other hand, has had two different governments during the pandemic, which both included populist parties. The Conte II government fell in January 2021 but no elections were held. Instead, a new technocratic government led by Prime Minister (PM) Mario Draghi was formed in February. The governments of both countries applied a serious-liberal response to the COVID-19 crisis. I selected governments with a serious-liberal response to rule out any potential backlash effect from voters against the government due to insufficient responses (in the case of a downplay) or authoritarian actions (in the case of serious-illiberal measures). Conducting a comparative analysis of the Netherlands and Italy aims to ultimately help answer the following research question: Is there a link between the COVID-19 measures imposed by populist and non-populist governments and an increase or decrease in voter support for populist parties?

To provide a substantiated answer to the research question, several subquestions need to be answered. First, what kind of government does the country at hand have (populist or non-populist)? This is relevant to establish whether there is a difference in support for COVID-19 measures if these are taken by either a populist or a non-populist government. Second, what kind of COVID-19 measures did the government take, and how did the public respond to these measures? Were the restrictions supported by the public? The relevance of these questions lies in the fact that if the COVID-19 measures were to be supported by 100% of the population, it is unlikely that an increase in populist support when populists are in opposition, or a decrease in populist support when populists are in power, would be a result of the COVID-19 measures. Third, has the support for populist political parties in Italy and the Netherlands changed since the beginning of the pandemic? If so, is there a correlation between this change in support and the COVID-19 measures that were taken by the government?

The research draws on data from different sources. Government parties are categorised as populist or non-populist based on classifications from the PopuList, a list of European parties from 31 countries that can be categorised as populist, far right, far left and/or Eurosceptic (Hawkins et al., 2019; Rooduijn et al., 2019). Voter support for populist parties is based on data from POLITICO Europe Poll of Polls (*POLITICO Europe Poll of Polls - Italy*, n.d.; *POLITICO Europe Poll of Polls - the Netherlands*, n.d.). To measure the stringency of government responses, the Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker (OxCGRT) stringency index is used (Hale et al., 2021). Public support for COVID-19 responses in the Netherlands is based on surveys commissioned by the government, namely the “Flitspeiling Coronavirus” and reports on the effects of the government COVID-19 campaign “Alleen Samen” (*Flitspeilingen coronavirus*, n.d.; *‘Alleen Samen’*, n.d.). For Italy, data on public support for the COVID-19 measures are derived from surveys conducted by Ipsos (*Italia Covid Oggi, Sondaggi*, n.d.). These quantitative data are then analysed in the context of other developments in Italy and the Netherlands that might influence populist attitudes, support for COVID-19 measures and political party preferences. A more detailed explanation of the methodology is presented in paragraph 4.3.

It is important to clarify the relationship between COVID-19 measures and support for populist parties for several reasons. The virus has wandered around the globe for nearly one and a half years now and while vaccine rates are rising, so are infection rates due to the highly contagious Delta variant. It is thus not unlikely that we are not seeing the end of the pandemic just yet, for instance, if vaccines turn out to be ineffective against new mutations of the virus. Compliance with COVID-19 measures, therefore, remains of utmost importance. Eberl et al. (2020) suggest that the correlation between populist attitudes and conspiracy beliefs impact acceptance of COVID-19 measures. Populist attitudes are associated with declined trust in political leaders and institutions (Eberl et al., 2020; Geurkink et al., 2020). Trust in government plays an essential role in a state’s ability to manage medical crises. For instance, during Ebola outbreaks in Africa, citizens “with greater trust in their governments were more likely to comply with government-mandated social distancing policies and to adopt less-risky behaviour” (Bosancianu et al., 2020, p. 11). Non-adherence to COVID-19 directives might jeopardise people’s health and needlessly prolong the pandemic.

Additionally, the expected economic downturn in the aftermath of the pandemic can in itself further strengthen populist support. European populists who are not in power criticise the policy responses taken by non-populist governments in an attempt to grow their electoral support (Meyer, 2020a). Generally speaking, populism is a strong force that can have a severe impact on the stability of

liberal democracies. Populists can undermine liberal institutions and turn democracies into autocracies (Mounk, 2018, pp. 9–10). They may even influence global financial markets, trade relationships and alliances when they lead systemically important countries such as the US (Kyle & Meyer, 2020). For these reasons, it is important to get a better understanding of the interaction between support for populist parties and COVID-19 responses. Adaptations to government communication styles might need to be made for voters holding populist attitudes. Lastly, this thesis aims to make a small contribution to a systemic understanding of populism by examining its manifestations in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The added value of this research lies in the comparative perspective between the Netherlands and Italy, two countries with a populist and non-populist government.

To answer the research question of how COVID-19 measures relate to support for populist parties, first, a proper understanding of the concept of populism is needed. To this end, the first two chapters of this thesis provide a theoretical framework for populism. Chapter 2 starts by examining what populism is and how it manifests. It discusses different approaches to populism, its core elements and various types of populism. Chapter 3 continues with the causes and effects of populism and explains why populism is problematic. This provides an incentive as to why populism needs to be understood and halted. In addition, the chapter discusses several factors that influence populism at the individual level: populist attitudes, external efficacy and political trust. Both chapters are of utmost importance for the later analysis of populism's manifestations in the Netherlands and Italy. After all, the (potential) influence of the variable of COVID-19 measures on populist support can only be properly understood with a sound knowledge of other factors that influence populism and populist support. In order to make any substantiated claims about a possible relationship between COVID-19 measures and populist support, it is essential to rule out that other factors have caused a change in populist support.

Chapter 4, then, dives into the specific relationship between populism and COVID-19. It scrutinises the link between crisis and populism and discusses the global government responses to COVID-19, as well as the responses of citizens to the virus and subsequent containment measures. The aforementioned forms the basis for the comparative analysis between the Netherlands and Italy that is the subject of the remainder of chapter 4. The case studies provide a timeline of the course of the COVID-19 pandemic and analyse the examined data in the political context of the respective countries. Based on the available data, a consistent relationship between COVID-19 measures and a change in support for populist parties cannot be established. This conclusion is discussed further in chapter 5, along with the limitations to this research and recommendations for future research.

## 2. POPULISM'S MEANINGS AND MANIFESTATIONS

There are almost as many interpretations of the concept of populism as there are populist scholars. To ensure conceptual clarity throughout this thesis, the current chapter starts by presenting a theoretical framework of the different meanings of populism. The first paragraph discusses the four main approaches to populism that are employed in academic literature. The second paragraph analyses the core elements of populism: the people, the elite and popular sovereignty. The various manifestations of populism are addressed in the third paragraph, in which three different types of populism are presented.

### 2.1 An essentially contested concept

It seems to be an academic tradition to start any article on populism with the notion that populism is an essentially contested concept. Acknowledging this fact is also becoming more customary and by acknowledging this acknowledgement, this thesis is reaching “a whole new level of meta-reflexivity”, to use the words of Moffitt and Tormey (2014, p. 382). Honouring tradition and self-banter aside: the rapidly expanding body of scholarship on populism can at first glance appear unwieldy, opaque, disparate and, consequently, somewhat overwhelming. Discussion on the topic not only revolves around the definition of populism and its nature but also around the much more fundamental question of whether the phenomenon even exists at all (see, for instance, Brubaker, 2017; Tamás, 2017). The concept *is* indeed essentially contested: it is a concept “the proper use of which inevitably involves endless disputes about their proper uses on the part of their users” (Gallie, 1955-6, p. 169).

Two objections to qualifying populism as a distinct category of analysis are the following. First, it is argued that the concept of populism lacks analytical distinctiveness because it “lumps together disparate political projects with disparate social bases and modes of action” (Brubaker, 2017, p. 358). Before the heydays of academic attention for populism, the term was regularly used to describe context-specific phenomena that applied to the country, political party or leader in the research at hand but were often not generalisable over space and time. Although conceptual obscurity occurs less frequently nowadays because of the vast amount of research that has been dedicated to improving theorisation, definition and conceptualisation over the past decade, the term is still sometimes confused or equated with distinct concepts such as nationalism, xenophobia or anti-elitism (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, pp. 1–2). However, this challenge cannot in itself be considered a solid argument to dismiss populism as a separate category of analysis altogether; it merely indicates that there is a tendency among scholars to avoid presenting a clear conceptualisation of populism in their articles. This should serve as

an incentive to improve conceptual clarity in populism studies, not as a reason to deny the existence of the phenomenon. The second point of criticism is that the term “populist” is politically charged and labelling an actor as such is therefore not purely an analytical tool but a political weapon as well (Brubaker, 2017, pp. 358–359). Indeed, populism can be used as a pejorative label to stigmatise and discredit political actors that are disliked by the mainstream. However, although the research results that qualify actors as populists might be used to political ends, this does not invalidate the analytical and academic substance of the qualification as such and can therefore not justify a dismissal of the existence of the concept of populism.

While taking into account these objections to a greater or lesser extent, several interpretations of populism have gained support in academic circles. Four dominant conceptual approaches are discussed here: the political-strategic approach, the socio-cultural approach, the Laclauan approach and the ideational approach. Each of these approaches has a different understanding of populism and addresses the empirical analysis of the phenomenon in a distinct way (Rovira Kaltwasser et al., 2017, p. 31).

### ***2.1.1 The political-strategic approach***

Analysis of neoliberal populism and different types of government led to a political-strategic definition of populism as “a political strategy through which a personalistic leader seeks or exercises government power based on direct, unmediated, uninstitutionalised support from large numbers of mostly unorganised followers” (Weyland, 2001, p. 14). Individual political leaders and the tools they use to obtain, keep and grow their power thus play a central role in this approach. The leader aims to build a relationship with the people to unify and mobilise them in order to support the leader in their quest to fight for “the will of the people”. To give the relationship a personalistic character, the leader engages with followers directly through rallies and (social) media, which gives an impression of direct contact (Weyland, 2017, p. 74). Popular sovereignty is a key element, as the mass support of followers is considered the legitimate basis for the rule of the individual leader. The leader might ascertain “the will of the people” based on opinion polls and focus groups (*ibid.*, p. 84).

The political-strategic approach is highly associated with charismatic strongmen, although charisma is not necessarily required for leaders to be deemed extraordinary by the masses. However, strong and charismatic figures will generally be more successful in building and maintaining direct relationships with supporters and therefore gain more political support (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 4). The political-strategic conception of populism is not only completely personalistic but also considers leaders to be pragmatic and opportunistic. As a result, ideologic substance and consistency are

subordinate to electoral success and vote maximisation (Weyland, 2017, pp. 74–75). This is not surprising, as political-strategic populists aim to build their power on the mobilisation of large numbers of people, as opposed to private businesses (which can lead to an oligarchy when fully employed as a political strategy) or the military having a strong political voice. The leader often lacks institutionalised support (i.e. from a political party) and must therefore constantly seek reapproval of the people.

Personalistic leadership and the predominance of a powerful leader are thus key elements of the political-strategic approach. Although the leader bases his power on ‘the people’, populism in this sense is still a top-down rather than a bottom-up movement because it is the leader that mobilises and inspires the people. According to Weyland (2017, p. 80), this top-down characteristic becomes particularly apparent when a populist leader dies and a mass movement “loses steam and evaporates”, as, for instance, happened with the populist politician Pim Fortuyn in the Netherlands after his death. However, although the populist mass movement might evaporate after its main leader dies – at least temporarily until a new charismatic, populist leader enters the stage – it is a misconception that this would lead to the complete demise of populism. The populist attitudes that live within the individuals that make up the masses would still be very much alive. Having said that, the political-strategic approach can still be useful to explain the rapid rise and fall of populist leaders, as well as their volatility, unpredictability and shiftiness when in power (*ibid.*, p. 87).

### **2.1.2 The socio-cultural approach**

The socio-cultural approach to populism is fundamentally relational and differentiates political appeals between the “high” and the “low”. The high-low dimension is central to this understanding of populism. Like the political-strategic approach, political leadership plays a key role but in the socio-cultural conception, populism is seen as a two-way street, rather than a top-down phenomenon. Populist appeals are intended to shock or provoke and, in that sense, the approach also has some overlap with scholars who consider populism a political style. An empirical study of populism is possible by examining the performance and practices of politicians. In their performance, populist actors create the idea of closeness to the people and claim to be representing them (Ostiguy, 2017, pp. 104–106). The definition of populism in the socio-cultural approach can be articulated as “the antagonistic, mobilisational flaunting in politics of the culturally popular and native, and of personalism as a mode of decision-making” (*ibid.*, p. 117).

The high-low axis is made up of two components: the social-cultural appeal and the political-cultural appeal. The former entails characteristics such as the discourse, manners, vocabulary, ways of speaking and dressing and public presentation of the political actor. The high axis is associated with

politicians who present themselves as well-behaved, proper, politically correct, well-educated and well-mannered. On the flip side, these people can be considered rigid, distant and cold. On the low, political actors use “ordinary” vocabulary that can include slang or local dialect. They appear less inhibited than their high axis counterparts, are not concerned about being politically correct and might even express coarse language. As a result, they can come across as more authentic (*ibid.*, p. 110). The political-cultural appeal is the second component of the high-low dimension and shows striking similarities with the political-strategic approach. This appeal concerns forms of political leadership and modes of decision-making. Political appeals on the high emphasise formal, impersonal and legalistic models of authority, while on the low personalistic, strong leadership is preferred: the type of leader that does not talk but simply gets things done. Important elements of liberal democracy such as division of legislative, executive and judicial powers and rule of law are of secondary importance on the low and are perceived by populist leaders as unacceptable limitations to popular sovereignty (*ibid.*, pp. 114–115).

The tension between populism and liberal democracy is discussed in greater detail in paragraph 3.3. For now, it is important to note that in the political-cultural aspect of the high-low dimension, liberalism tends to be on the high and populism on the low. Criticism of institutions that create a barrier to unhindered expressions of popular will is not unique to populism. What is unique, is that populism appeals to the people through strong leaders who “make politics personal and immediate, instead of being remote and bureaucratic” (Canovan, 1999, p. 14). The populist leader claims to be fighting for a repressed or silent majority and might present themselves as the underdog, who asserts their rightful place in the public sphere in a manner that is deemed inappropriate by the elite who betrayed the repressed or silent majority. The majority, or the authentic people, believes their needs are not met because the elite rather listens to the voices of the minority (e.g. the oligarchy, the Jews, the immigrants, the 1 per cent, or another group that fits the ideology of choice) or caves to powerful international forces. A prime example of a populist according to the socio-cultural approach is former US President Donald Trump, who disregarded political tradition, appropriateness and even truth in his discourse, but is seen by many as someone who speaks the truth and simply says it “like it is”.

### ***2.1.3 The Laclauan approach***

In the Laclauan approach – named after Ernesto Laclau, an influential political theorist and philosopher – populism is considered a vital part of democracy. Apart from populism, Laclau studied complex topics such as (political) discourse, identity and mass psychology. These themes are reflected in his theorisation of populism. According to his discursive approach, populism is a dimension of political culture, a way

of constructing the political. It is an emancipatory social force that can be utilised by marginalised groups to challenge the political structures of the dominant group (Laclau, 2005). Followers of the Laclau tradition are mostly found within political philosophy and social theory, critical studies and studies on Western European and Latin American politics (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 3).

Scholars who apply the Laclauan approach in the North American and European context include elements such as “antagonistic re-politicisation” in their description of populism. This means that the populist (political leader) will claim to reassert political power and control over domains that have been removed from the sphere of influence of democratically chosen institutions by the elite, such as in the case of democratic decision-making of national parliaments and the transfer of sovereignty to the European Union (EU) (Brubaker, 2017, pp. 365–366). Many Eurosceptic political parties who claim to “take the power back to the people” can be considered populist in this Laclauan approach, such as the Dutch PVV (Partij voor de Vrijheid; Party for Freedom) or the Italian Lega (League). There is a strong anti-elite component to re-politicisation, posing a dichotomy between the people and the elite. Although other populism scholars regard this kind of populist rhetoric as polarising or Manichean (good versus evil), scholars who follow the Laclauan approach underline the enormous energies that this antagonistic language can summon (Katsambekis & Stavrakakis, 2013). They maintain that due to this mobilisation of the masses (i.e. the common people) and the re-politicisation of areas of life that were previously removed from the democratic process, populism can be seen as an essential element of radical democracy. It can give a voice and power to the excluded (Urbinati, 2019, p. 51). Nevertheless, critics of the Laclauan approach argue that the analytical utility of the theory is very limited because its conceptualisation is too broad and lacks practical applicability to the political reality (see, for instance, Moffitt & Tormey, 2014, pp. 384–385).

Contrary to supporters of the Laclauan approach, many scholars regard populism as inherently anti-democratic. Jan-Werner Müller, for instance, views populism as an exclusionary form of identity politics that as a result of its antipluralist nature poses a threat to democracy (Müller, 2016, p. 8). Because of the profound influence populism can have on democracy – positive as well as negative – more attention is paid to this subject in paragraph 3.3.

#### ***2.1.4 The ideational approach***

Cas Mudde, one of the main promoters of the ideational approach to populism, believes that depending on the stage of the process of democratisation, populism can be a friend or a foe to democracy (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 20). The ideational approach to populism has become more popular over

the past decade and is the most widely used conception of populism in scholarly literature today, particularly in studies on European populism but also in Latin American case studies (e.g. Hawkins, 2009; Rooduijn, 2017). The ideational approach is especially useful for comparative analysis, as it unifies the different approaches to populism. Moreover, the ideational approach has proven to be more versatile than other approaches, incorporating both qualitative and quantitative research methods and presenting a framework that allows for research into both the demand-side and the supply-side of populism (Mudde, 2017, p. 63). Because a comparative analysis of two case studies of the Netherlands and Italy forms the basis of this research, the ideational approach to populism is followed throughout this thesis.

As discussed, populism is a notoriously elusive concept. For this reason, the ideational approach refers to populism as a thin-centred ideology. It regards populism as a set of ideas that outlines some basic conceptions without developing into a rigid framework of principles (Stanley, 2008). ‘Thin’ ideologies have a more limited scope than ‘thick’ ideologies such as nationalism or socialism, as they do not formulate a wide range of principles and beliefs on socio-political issues. Populism is qualified as an ideology in the sense that it is “a body of normative and normative-related ideas about the nature of man and society as well as the organisation and purposes of society” (Mudde, 2017, p. 49). Many scholars adopt an ideational approach to populism, whether they explicitly define populism as an ideology, eschew the term ideology to define populism or fail to include a clear definition of populism altogether (*ibid.*, pp. 47–48). In some cases, their descriptions of populism are almost identical to the ideational approach, but instead, they prefer to define populism in other terms such as a communication style (e.g. Jagers & Walgrave, 2007), a political style (e.g. Moffitt & Tormey, 2014) or “a concept to gain power” (Mudde, 2017, p. 50).

The full definition of populism employed throughout this thesis is: “*a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people*” (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 6). While this definition of populism addresses the antagonistic societal division between ‘the pure people’ and ‘the corrupt elite’ and provides a general indication of the preferred political course (in line with popular will), it does not offer any specific guidance on how to address socio-political problems (Mudde, 2017, pp. 49–50). To provide a concrete solution for these issues, populism needs to be combined with more substantial ideologies referred to as host ideologies. For example, populist radical right parties in Western Europe blend nativism and populism when claiming that (non-Western) immigrants are favoured over the

(native) people by the (native) elite. On the left side of the political spectrum, populism is often combined with socialism to pit the (poor) people against the (rich and corrupt) elite who plunder the country's resources at the people's expense. The last combination is more commonly found in Latin America (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 104). Because of the fact that in the ideational approach to populism, populism needs to be combined with a 'thick' ideology, numerous political parties and leaders can be considered populist in this approach. For example, the Belgian VB (Vlaams Belang; Flemish Interest), the Norwegian FrP (Fremskrittspartiet; Progress Party), the American Democrat Sanders and the Venezuelan Chávez are all considered populist in the ideational definition of the term, although their political positions differ greatly (e.g. Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013) The following two paragraphs address the core elements and different types of populism that derive from the ideational approach in greater depth.

## **2.2 Core elements**

Three interrelated key components can be derived from the aforementioned definition of populism: the people, the elite and the general will of the people.

### **2.2.1 The people**

The word populism stems from the Latin word *populus* – people. It is thus unsurprising that 'the people' play a central role in populism. Even the other two elements derive their meaning from the term, as its antonym (the elite) and its expression (the general will). Like populism, 'the people' is an ambiguous term. Many scholars argue that 'the people' is a social construct that is created by populists and therefore does not truly exist. Although the people can indeed be considered a construct, this argument has also been brought forward with regard to key concepts of other ideologies, such as class and nation. The fact that the ideological concept of the people might be based on 'imagined communities' does not mean they are less relevant in society or politics or should be disregarded in relation to populism (Mudde, 2017, p. 51). As a matter of fact, according to Nadia Urbinati (2019, p. 77), it is precisely this "structural indeterminacy of the democratic people" that characterises populism, as populism capitalises on the fact that it can frame the vague concept of 'the people' in any form that appeals to the target audience through "populist discourses, leaders and movements".

The term 'the people' can have at least three different meanings. First of all, it can refer to the *plebs*, the common or ordinary people; second, to the people as *demos*, the collective sovereign; and third, to the people as members of a nation or an ethnic group (Brubaker, 2017, p. 359). The ambiguity of the notion of the people lies in the fact that the term can signify both a whole population, which

includes *everybody* but is abstract and undetermined in its exact composition, as well as only a part of the polity, one that is socially or culturally defined. Populist leaders aim to overcome this ambivalence by artificially constructing the people as one group that somehow unites all these meanings (Urbinati, 2019, pp. 77–78). A populist actor will claim that only a specific part of the ‘empirical people’ – a part that can be identified and represented exclusively by the populist actor – is the ‘true people’ (Müller, 2016, p. 17). To construct their perception of the people, populist actors use self-identification markers of the targeted community. This is nicely illustrated by Mudde (2017, p. 52) in his observation that “no American populist will describe the people as atheist and no West European populist will define the people as Muslim”.

The populist rule is legitimised by a notion of being “the most inclusive expression of the interests of the ordinary collective” (Urbinati, 2019, p. 78). The populist leader sees themselves as an almost godlike embodiment of ‘the real people’, as “a vessel of the sovereign will – the mouth from which the *vox populi* manifests itself” (*ibid.*, p. 125). Populist leaders represent the people in the sense of ‘the right people’: one homogenous group that is not only the sovereign but also good and virtuous, as opposed to the evil and corrupt elite. This Manichean view of politics creates a tension between the people and the elite that has an essentially moral quality (Hawkins, 2009; Mudde, 2004). In other words, the distinction between the people and the elite is not situational (based on power positions), socio-cultural (based on, for instance, religion or ethnicity) or socio-economic (e.g. wealth or class) but moral (pure versus corrupt).

### **2.2.2 The elite**

Elitism is often considered the mirror image of populism: it shares its Manichean underpinning but states that politics should express the views of the moral elite rather than the will of the amoral people (Mudde, 2004, pp. 543–544). There are similarities between populism and elitism. Populism as a political strategy or style has personalistic aspects and charismatic leadership plays a central role. There is a hierarchical concept of leadership that is often also present in elitism. Hence, populism and elitism are not necessarily mutually exclusive but might overlap to some extent (Akkerman et al., 2013, p. 1328).

Populism incorporates distinct anti-elitist aspects. Some argue that populism is not anti-elitist per se but rather anti-establishmentarian, as it calls for a change of the elite in power (Urbinati, 2019, p. 64). Populism is not the only ideology in which the people and the elite are fundamentally opposed. In socialism, the opposition is based on class, whereas in nationalism the opposition is based on the nation and its interests. In populism, the dichotomy is based on morality, in which the elite is corrupt, impure

and inauthentic. Although the elite stems from the same group as the people, they have chosen to betray them by putting the special interests of the elite before the interests of the people (Mudde, 2017, p. 49). Populist anti-elite or anti-establishment rhetoric is therefore not rooted in differences in class or wealth as such, which explains why members of the economic elite like Silvio Berlusconi or Trump were considered acceptable populist candidates by the people. Berlusconi and Trump both succeeded in presenting themselves as successful businessmen who shared the same values and worldview as ‘ordinary citizens’ and were thus considered more authentic representatives of the people than leaders with a less extraordinary socioeconomic status (Urbinati, 2019, p. 40).

Much has been written about the meaning of the people in populism and although it is clear that the distinction with the elite has a moral basis, the precise meaning of the elite has been less theorised. While Urbinati (2019) argues that the elite refers to ‘the establishment’, Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017, pp. 11-12) point out that populists not only have an aversion to the political establishment but also to the economic elite (e.g. “the 1%”), the cultural elite (e.g. “universities are leftist strongholds”) and the media elite who are often accused of being in cahoots with the establishment. Despite this broad array of actors, the elite is presented as one homogeneous group, in the same vein as the people. The common denominator shared by these actors seems to be that all elites exercise some form of power, be that political, economic, cultural or otherwise.

As a result of defining the elite in terms of power, individual members of the people do not have to be personally moral, pure and uncorrupt, since the immorality of the elite is associated with their power holding. It is based on the idea that ‘power corrupts’. The people cannot be corrupt because they do not hold leading positions within politics, academia, the economy, arts or media (Urbinati, 2019, p. 57). Moreover, because the nature of the distinction between the people and the elite is moral and not situational, the populists themselves are also excluded from being part of the elite, even if they rise to power. Populists in power will blame the elite for any (political) failures, claiming that “shadowy forces (...) continue to hold on to illegitimate powers to undermine the voice of the people” (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 12). As long as the populist leaders (appear to) execute the people’s general will and do not betray the people’s trust, it is not even an issue if the populist leader is a *de facto* member of any of the aforementioned elites (Müller, 2016, p. 21).

### 2.2.3 Popular sovereignty

The concept of the *volonté générale*, or general will of the people, is the third core element of populism. Following in the footsteps of the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), populists argue that a government is only legitimate if it is subject to popular sovereignty, i.e. if it adheres to the general will of the people. The sole purpose of politicians is to identify the general will and to bring the people together as a coherent community (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 16). However, whereas the formation of Rousseau's *volonté générale* requires active political participation by the people, populists deduct the substance of the 'general will' from the people's identity, e.g. what it means to be 'a real American'. As a result, they do not truly represent the general will but merely a symbol of it (Müller, 2016, pp. 20–21). As mentioned before, 'the people' can be considered a social construct; by the same token, the expression of the people's general will can be considered a fabrication.

Populists seem to be critical of representative government, which is seen as an elitist form of power that puts the people in a passive position. Many populists are staunch advocates of more direct democracy in the form of referenda and plebiscites because it helps them to establish a direct connection with their supporters. They often argue (and not without reason) that 'the establishment' shows insufficient interest in the will of the people, for instance when criticising the elitist, technocratic nature of the EU. The promotion of direct democratic mechanisms that allow for the formation and expression of the (supposed) general will can therefore be seen as a practical consequence of populism (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 17). This is in line with the Laclauan approach, which sees populism as a democratising force since it promotes popular sovereignty.

However, qualifying populism as a positive element of direct democracy is problematic because it is based on the conception of 'the people' as a homogeneous group and, consequently, sees homogeneity as a prerequisite for democracy. Since this (putative) homogeneity implies that the people's general will is absolute, this can pave the way for authoritarianism and illiberalism when the homogeneity is threatened (*ibid.*, p. 18). Additionally, although referenda and plebiscites can be useful tools to promote direct democracy among citizens, they can also be easily used by politicians to manipulate the electorate in giving consent to policies and goals that were already in place, as exemplified by Brexit. The main goal of the Brexit referendum called by PM David Cameron was to weaken opposition within his own Conservative Party by strengthening his popular support among the British. Given the Eurosceptic attitudes within the British electorate, Cameron knew that playing the anti-EU card while exploiting fears about employment and immigration would gain him a lot of support (Urbinati, 2019, pp. 160–161).

## **2.3 Types of populism**

From the ideational approach of populism as a thin-centred ideology follows that populism needs to be combined with other ideologies to make it ideologically whole. Other ideologies add new dimensions, which explains the wide variety in populism's manifestations. As a result, it is rare to observe populism in its pure moral form. This can be illustrated by the combination of populism and nationalism. Nativist populists exclude groups such as immigrants from the true people (as the members of the nation) based on ethnic rather than moral criteria, meaning that this exclusion is a result of the nativist ideology rather than the populist ideology. On the other hand, the exclusion of the elite is primarily based on moral criteria (Mudde, 2017, p. 53).

Populists thrive on a sense of national crisis – whether real or imaginary – and may actively contribute to creating a sense of urgency among the people. This (supposed) crisis can take many forms, for instance cultural (e.g. “the native people will lose their country due to migrants and the cosmopolitan elite”) or economic (e.g. “multinationals will plunder the country and take everything from the common man”). Any crisis can be exploited to amplify the division between the people and the elite when the latter is framed as the one who is responsible for the crisis (Moffitt, 2015). Additionally, a prolonged sense of crisis may further strengthen populist support because it allows the populist leader to present themselves as the lifesaver who is the only one capable of solving the crisis. The line between different crisis narratives is not always clear-cut and they might overlap, for example when populist leaders and parties claim that migration will lead to a loss of national identity as well as a decline in employment opportunities for native citizens. However, populists will typically have a predominant narrative through which they frame the crisis and the subsequent conflict between the people and the elite (Kyle & Meyer, 2020). Based on the primary crisis narrative that populist leaders and parties emphasise, Kyle and Gultchin (2018) have classified the different manifestations of populism into three categories: cultural populism, socio-economic populism and anti-establishment populism. In paragraph 4.1, the relationship between populism and crisis in the context of the COVID-19 crisis is addressed more in detail.

### ***2.3.1 Cultural populism***

The most prevalent form of populism nowadays is cultural populism (Kyle & Meyer, 2020, p. 18). Cultural populists argue that the native members of the nation-state are ‘the true people’, although the interpretation of ‘native’ can be quite selective: for example, American cultural populists would not consider Indigenous Americans to be ‘the true Americans’. ‘The other’, as opposed to ‘the people’, is considered a threat to the nation-state and can include a broad group of actors, such as ethnic and religious

minorities but also members of mainstream political parties who open the nation's borders and culture to outsiders (Kyle & Gultchin, 2018, p. 23). 'The other' supposedly poses a threat to native religious traditions, law and order and/or national sovereignty. Because cultural populist leaders and parties emphasise ethnicity, race, religion and (national) identity in their rhetoric, they often have "issue ownership" over topics such as immigration, ethnic diversity and identity politics (Abou-Chadi, 2016). Consequently, they can greatly influence debates and government policies on these issues, even if they do not hold a large vote share.

Cultural populism includes several manifestations of populism (Kyle & Gultchin, 2018, p. 34). First is the aforementioned nativist populism, which is particularly thriving in Europe where most populist political parties are also nativist, such as the German AfD (Alternative für Deutschland; Alternative for Germany), the Danish DF (Dansk Folkeparti; Danish People's Party) and the French RN (Rassemblement National; National Rally, formerly known as Front National). In 2017, 74 out of 102 European populist parties were also nativist (*ibid.*, p. 7). The terms nativist populism, populist radical right and national populism are often used interchangeably but nativism can be seen as a combination of nationalism and xenophobia (Mudde, 2019; Newth, 2021). A key feature of nativist populism is welfare chauvinism, the idea that welfare benefits should be limited to certain groups because the welfare state cannot support natives as well as non-natives (compare Trump's "America first" rhetoric). For many nativist populists, traditional values, shared customs and a strong national identity go to the heart of the social contract that lies at the basis of tax payment, redistributive policies and the welfare state (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018, p. 196). Some nativist populists even take it a step further, like Orbán who envisions an ethnically homogeneous Hungary, with far-reaching consequences for migrants and minorities in the country. Cultural populism also includes combinations of populism and anti-Semitism, which is mostly found in Eastern and Central Europe. Populist parties such as Атака (Ataka; Attack) in Bulgaria, for instance, have claimed that the national elite are Zionist pawns who look after Jewish interests instead of the interests of Bulgarian citizens (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 14).

Cultural populism is also associated with majoritarianism, the idea that a simple majority of a population (i.e. >50%) should be able to make decisions without interference from independent institutions like the judiciary to safeguard minority rights. Populism can be seen as a form of extreme majoritarianism (Mudde, 2013, p. 3). In this respect, it is important to note that populists believe that the majority of the population should call the shots, yet, based on their definition of 'the people' this might not equal a state's full constituency. When majoritarianism appears in an ethnic context, ethnic minorities

in a country may be considered less legitimate members of the constituency. While cultural populism is particularly dominant in Europe, it is on the rise in other parts of the world as well, such as Asia. For instance, before the February 2021 military coup, ethnic majoritarianism in Myanmar was present in a cultural populist context with regard to the Bamar majority in the country (Htun, 2020). Another cultural populist in Asia is India's PM Narendra Modi, who uses Hindutva – Hindu nationalism as a form of cultural and religious identity – to appeal to the electorate and build popular support (Kyle & Gultchin, 2018, p. 43).

### **2.3.2 Socio-economic populism**

Socio-economic populists argue that the crisis that needs to be solved by the populist leader or party is of an economic nature. They frame the division between 'the people' and 'the elite' as a division between the honest working-class citizens and corrupt outsiders such as foreign multinationals, international institutions and capital owners. There is strong opposition towards the influence of international powers on domestic markets. Initially, socio-economic populism was most common in Latin America. After the Great Recession (the 2007-2008 financial crisis), however, it also started to expand in Europe as a left-wing variant of populism. Political parties such as ΣΥΡΙΖΑ (Syriza; Coalition of the Radical Left – Progressive Alliance) in Greece and Podemos ("We Can") in Spain particularly objected to the strict austerity measures imposed by the EU and use a strong Eurosceptic and anti-capitalist rhetoric (Rovira Kaltwasser et al., 2017, p. 25).

Whereas cultural populism tends to be exclusionary, socio-economic populism is inclusionary: minority groups who were marginalised by the elite are considered members of the working class and are thus incorporated in the socio-economic populist notion of 'the people' (Kyle & Gultchin, 2018, p. 24). Exclusion and inclusion have a material, political and symbolic dimension. Material exclusion refers to the situation where specific groups are excluded from having access to state resources, whereas material inclusion means that groups are specifically targeted to receive resources from the state. This clarifies the difference between exclusionary cultural and inclusionary socio-economic populism: socio-economic populism focuses on establishing the requirements needed to have a good quality of life for the people, while cultural populists emphasise protecting these (acquired) rights from outside threats (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013, pp. 158–160). The political dimension of exclusion and inclusion refers to the extent to which specific groups are prevented (in the case of exclusion) or encouraged (in the case of inclusion) to participate in politics. Symbolic exclusion and inclusion are a little less tangible but refer to the implicit or explicit definition of 'the people' and subsequent forming of 'the elite' (*ibid.*,

pp. 161–164). Inclusion is an important characteristic of socio-economic populism and leads to previously excluded groups in society being included in political decision-making. For example, former Thai PM Thaksin Shinawatra divided the Thai population between the hard-working, rural population, who was underrepresented by Thai politicians, and the Thai royals, elite aristocracy and urban middle class (Phongpaichit & Baker, 2008).

### **2.3.3 *Anti-establishment populism***

As discussed in the second paragraph of this chapter, all forms of populism tend to be anti-establishment, yet this is also considered a separate type of populism. Anti-establishment populists frame the primary national crisis as a conflict between the political establishment and the rest of the people. They do not provoke as many inter-group conflicts within society as cultural or socio-economic populists and, therefore, tend to be less socially divisive (Kyle & Gultchin, 2018, p. 4).

Anti-establishment populism sees the true people as honest, hard-working people, who are victims of corrupt political elites that have put their special interests before the general interests of the people. It represents a break with prior political regimes and their loyalists. Because the political establishment in many European countries has put free-market policies in place over the past decades, today's anti-establishment populism is often against market liberalism and government austerity. Anti-establishment populists blame the political establishment for “an economy that does not deliver for the people” (Kyle & Gultchin, 2018, p. 37). Additionally, they focus on corruption within the political elite, governmental reform and promoting transparency in government. An example of an anti-establishment populist party is Italy's Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S; Five Star Movement) (*ibid.*).

This chapter has discussed what populism entails and how it manifests. The ideational approach to populism is employed throughout this thesis because it is applicable across time and space, which makes it particularly useful for comparative analyses. Three interrelated elements can be derived from the ideational definition of populism: the people, the elite and the general will of the people. In addition, various types of populism have been analysed. The next chapter goes into detail about the causes of populism and its (problematic) effects, especially the contentious relationship between populism and democracy.

### 3. POPULISM'S CAUSES AND EFFECTS

Now that populism's different meanings and manifestations have been established, in addition, it is important to gain insight into its causes and effects in order to understand the full scope of the populist issue. This chapter aims to provide a basis for a distinction between general causes and effects of populism (regardless of the specific context) and the influence of COVID-19 measures on support for populist parties that is analysed in chapter 4 of this thesis.

The causes of populism are as widely discussed as its definition and manifestations. Some of populism's effects, such as lower political trust, also appear to be a causal factor of populism and in this respect, populism can be considered self-reinforcing (Rooduijn et al., 2016). The first paragraph of this chapter discusses the causes of populism at the aggregate level. The second paragraph analyses populist attitudes, political trust and external efficacy as grounds for populist support in individuals. Both paragraphs also touch upon some of the effects of populism at the macro- and micro-level. Finally, the third paragraph of this chapter discusses the detrimental effect that populism can have on liberal democracy.

#### 3.1 Causes of populism

The definition of populism as “*a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people*” (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 6) somewhat implies that populists are successful because the people have lost their trust in state institutions that are in the hands of the corrupt, conspirational elites. Populists call for systemic change and promise to purge the system of corrupt forces, so the power can be reclaimed by the people. Trump, for instance, vowed to “drain the swamp” in Washington under his presidency, even though he ended up using his presidential pardons for his own benefit and that of his business partners – which demonstrates that his statement was a rhetorical trick rather than an actual ideal of anti-corruption (Frum, 2021). There are multiple causes for the decrease in the perceived legitimacy of state institutions by populist supporters. Populism is often associated with crisis; however, although some crises indeed give birth to populists, others do not (Castanho Silva, 2017, pp. 61–62). It can be argued that crisis is a facilitating factor for populism rather than a cause (Bobba & Hubé, 2021, p. 5). For this reason, the relationship between populism and crisis is discussed in paragraph 4.1 in the context of populism and the COVID-19 crisis, instead of in the current chapter.

Hawkins et al. (2017) have identified roughly two causal mechanism theses on populism in the academic literature, that both have their strengths and weaknesses: a Durkheimian mass society theory that is based on (perceived) threats to culture and identity and a Downsian economic theory that focuses on political representation. In addition, Hawkins et al. have extended the ideational approach to populism to develop an ideational theory of populism's causes that bridges the shortcomings in the Durkheimian and Downsian theories (Hawkins et al., 2017, pp. 342–343).

### **3.1.1 Mass society theory**

The Durkheimian or mass society theory refers to Émile Durkheim, the French sociologist whose 1893 dissertation “De la division du travail social” influenced many modern sociological theories. Durkheim held that industrialisation fundamentally changed the ‘social glue’ that holds a society together. The restructuring of the division of labour caused a dramatic shift from institutions such as the church and family to impersonal and bureaucratic state institutions as mediators of social interaction and integration. During this transition, mass society may be characterised by disconnection and normlessness (*ibid.*, p. 343).

Populist theories that appropriated Durkheim's mass society theory claim that populism is a result of the weakness or absence of mass-based civil society institutions such as labour organisations. The global workforce has drastically changed as a result of modernisation and globalisation. When there are no powerful unions through which individuals can mobilise, such as in many Latin American countries, people have no avenue to channel their frustrations, grievances and discontent about the labour changes and subsequent loss of status, prestige and identity. Populist mass society theory argues that this identity gap is filled by populist politicians who speak to people's sense of social decay. The notion of populism as a form of identity politics as such is supported by a wide range of scholars (see, for instance, Fukuyama, 2018). However, outside of Latin America, there is little empirical evidence to support the mass society theory (Hawkins et al., 2017, pp. 343–345).

### **3.1.2 Economic theory**

In his groundbreaking work “An Economic Theory of Democracy”, Anthony Downs (1957) applied economic rational-choice theory to political decision-making. He argues that under conditions of uncertainty, voters, as well as politicians, will make strategic choices that are most likely to maximise their self-interest. In his model, politicians respond to voters' uncertainties by providing ideological packages that on the one hand address these uncertainties while on the other hand maximise politicians' electoral success. In majoritarian voting systems, for example, this usually leads to political parties taking

a centrist position in order to appeal to the median voter (*ibid.*, p. 345). Most populist scholars implicitly follow this Downsian logic. For instance, they see the rise of populism as the voter response to corruption, weak governance or the failure of the establishment to adequately address voter demands in the face of socio-economic change (e.g. Kyle & Gultchin, 2018, p. 5). The theory is particularly common among European scholars, who use the ‘globalisation losers thesis’ to explain the rise of radical right populism in Europe. This thesis argues that people will vote for populist parties because they feel abandoned by the political establishment and feel like they are not the ones benefitting from, for instance, free-market or migration policies. In addition, Downsian scholars address the role of electoral systems and party organisation in creating the preconditions for populist parties to rise, thus not only focussing on the material demands of voters but also on political strategies employed by politicians to address voter demands (Hawkins et al., 2017, pp. 346–348).

Although the Durkheimian and Downsian approach both have their strengths, neither provides a solid unified causal explanation for populism that is applicable over space and time, other than the people’s general discontent with politics. In addition, neither theory addresses populism at the individual level. Whereas the Durkheimian approach provided a good explanation for older waves of populism in Latin America, it fails to explain contemporary populism in Western Europe, while the Downsian approach falls short in explaining populism in Latin America and Eastern Europe. The Durkheimian mass society theory does not explain how exactly populism fills the presumed identity gap of people or why the Manichean populist message is so appealing. Similarly, the Downsian economic theory does not necessarily link the success of populist parties to their populist characteristics but rather to issue positions in general. Moreover, the Durkheimian and Downsian theories do not consider the inherently populist notion of a Manichean society. To unify the variety of causal mechanisms that predicate populism, an ideational approach to these causes is thus needed (*ibid.*, pp. 350–352).

### **3.1.3 Ideational theory**

If populism is defined as an ideology that pits the virtuous people against the corrupt elite, then its causes should also be connected to these aspects, rather than only being linked to issues that are rooted in the more thick-centred ideologies that populism is often combined with, such as nationalism. Populism is characterised by a Manichean view of society, which is associated with a low level of trust in politics (Castanho Silva, 2017, p. 17). Low political trust is closely related to populist attitudes within individuals (Geurkink et al., 2020). The ideational theory of causes of populism thus links causes of populism at the aggregate level to causes of populism at the individual level.

### **3.2 Populism at the micro-level: populist attitudes, external efficacy and political trust**

In the earlier days of populist studies, scholars mostly explained voter support for populist parties by looking at proxy indicators of populism, such as anti-immigration stances. Although these studies were useful to explain support for specific types of populism such as cultural populism, they did not address why voters were drawn to the *populist* ideology of these political parties (Hawkins et al., 2020, p. 284). The concept of populist attitudes at the individual level does include this ideational element (Akkerman et al., 2013; Hawkins et al., 2012). Populism at the micro-level can thus be considered a set of attitudes about society, democracy and politics that exists within individuals and that can be activated by populist politicians (Hawkins et al., 2017, p. 352). This paragraph discusses how these populist attitudes are activated, how populism can be measured, what characterises populist attitudes and how these relate to other concepts such as external efficacy and political trust, that are also associated with support for populist parties.

#### ***3.2.1 Activation of populist attitudes***

Hawkins et al. (2017) argue that populist attitudes, like personality traits such as neuroticism, are widespread among individuals. However, they usually lie dormant until they are activated in a specific context through certain material conditions and linguistic cues (*ibid.*, p. 352). This context is typically provided by systemic failures that reveal malpractices by the political (non-populist) establishment. In its most extreme form, this manifests as corruption; in countries where rampant corruption is rare, as elite collusion or backroom politics. Elite collusion occurs when the political elite attempts to keep certain issues off the political agenda (and, therefore, out of the sphere of democratic decision-making) for practical or ideological reasons. In the eyes of voters, elite collusion causes mainstream parties to lump together as one indistinguishable party (Castanho Silva, 2017, p. 62). Even established, well-functioning democracies such as Norway or the Netherlands are familiar with some form of elite collusion, as concessions need to be made in government coalitions and because of “the ever-present challenge of competing with incumbent politicians and established party leadership”. Still, populist parties tend to be more moderate in these kinds of countries (Hawkins et al., 2017, p. 355). Rather than being a binary concept, populism manifests in different degrees (Müller, 2016, p. 26).

In addition to a suitable context, populism requires a populist framing of this context so that voters interpret these conditions in a way that activates populist attitudes. For instance, voters might be uncertain about the exact background of unwanted or untransparent policy-making, the cause of the latest economic downturn or the involvement of politicians in corruption scandals. When politicians frame these

circumstances in a populist manner, they will pit the people against the elite, for instance by blaming issues caused by impersonal forces or force majeure on members of the establishment (*ibid.*, p. 353). The populist message then causes people to interpret the failures of the incumbent political parties as an attack on democratic norms and popular sovereignty. When the context for populist mobilisation is strong enough, such as in countries with widespread corruption, populist voters will feel such contempt for the political system that populist framing can easily activate populist attitudes, which in turn leads to popular support for overturning the system by populists. Contextual factors that might activate populist attitudes when interpreted through a populist lens include topics such as government performance, perceived corruption and quality of representation (*ibid.*, p. 357). The most notable conditions under which populist attitudes are activated are corruption and elite unresponsiveness (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 109).

### ***3.2.2 How to measure populism***

To measure populism on the supply side, scholars usually analyse party manifestoes, leader speeches or party platforms (e.g. party websites or social media messages) to establish whether a political party or leader employs populist ideas. To explain voter demand for populist parties and leaders, initially, academics mainly focused on proxy indicators of populism. In the past decade, further research on the demand side of populism and in particular on populist attitudes has taken flight (e.g. Akkerman et al., 2013; Hawkins et al., 2012; Wettstein et al., 2020). Hawkins et al. (2012) laid the basis for measuring populist attitudes at the individual level by conducting voter surveys to develop a unidimensional scale for assessing populist attitudes. This approach has been widely followed. Not only did they measure populist attitudes, but also two opposites of populism, namely pluralism and elitism, so as to clearly distinguish between the three. Other scholars aim to measure populism on a multidimensional scale (e.g. Schulz et al., 2018). Regardless of which measurement approach is used, most scholars follow the ideational definition of populism as a Manichean dichotomy between the good people and the corrupt elite combined with a demand for popular sovereignty (Wettstein et al., 2020, p. 3).

In subsequent research, the questions used in voter surveys have been further refined to best capture populist attitudes. Akkerman et al. (2013) developed a variety of survey questions and statements for Dutch citizens to measure populist attitudes (e.g. “The politicians in the Dutch Parliament need to follow the will of the people”, “The people, and not politicians, should make our most important policy decisions” or “Interest groups have too much influence over political decisions”), pluralist attitudes (e.g. “In a democracy, it is important to make compromises among differing viewpoints”), elitist attitudes (e.g.

“Politicians should lead rather than follow the people”) and voting preference (“What party would you vote for, if elections for parliament were held today?”). This research resulted in three important findings. First, there is some overlap between populist and elitist attitudes, as both share a Manichean worldview; however, populism is the mirror image of elitism. Second, a negative correlation exists between pluralist attitudes on the one hand and populist and elitist attitudes on the other. Third, populist attitudes positively correlate to voter support for populist parties (Akkerman et al., 2013, pp. 345–355). Later research shows that populist attitudes explain voter support for populists on the right as well as the left side of the political spectrum (Akkerman et al., 2017). These findings have been strengthened in further cross-national analyses of populist attitudes and populist party support and are thus not country-specific (Van Hauwaert & Van Kessel, 2018).

### ***3.2.3 External efficacy and political trust***

Besides populist attitudes, two other sets of attitudes are associated with voting for populists: voter’s levels of political trust and external political efficacy (Geurkink et al., 2020, p. 248). So how do these concepts relate to one another?

Research suggests that people who have a lower level of trust in political elites or institutions are more likely to vote for populist parties (Geurkink et al., 2020; Rooduijn, 2018). Political trust refers to individual beliefs about the extent to which the government and other politicians “[function] and [produce] outputs in accord with individual [policy] expectations” (Craig et al., 1990, p. 291). In other words, when an individual possesses high levels of political trust, this means that they trust that political institutions will act in the public interest. Political trust is not about the actual responsiveness of institutions to people’s demands. For instance, an individual can have a high level of trust in an institution with very little political accountability, such as an independent central bank (Geurkink et al., 2020, p. 250). Political trust taps into the anti-elitist element of populism where the elite is formed by the political establishment and political institutions. Rooduijn (2018, p. 356) labels voters who support populist parties out of political distrust “protest voters”. However, since the concept of political trust does not take into account populism’s other two core elements (namely people-centredness and popular sovereignty), it does not provide a fully satisfactory explanation for populist support. In addition, research suggests that populism is not only caused by low levels of political trust but also has a diminishing effect on it, thus reinforcing itself (Rooduijn et al., 2016).

Many scholars argue that trust in government is in decline worldwide. Research conducted by the Pew Research Center shows that American trust in government has deteriorated from about 75 per cent

of citizens trusting the federal government to usually do the right thing in the 1960s, to 24 per cent in April 2021 ('Public Trust in Government', 2021). Other research, based on Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) country data, suggests that trust in government has always been low, is not necessarily lower than before and might therefore not be declining in general but is rather fluctuating as a result of specific policies and events (Rauh, 2021). In either case, public trust in government is generally low. Trust in government does play an important role in successfully managing medical crises, however, which is exemplified by the Ebola outbreaks in Africa. Citizens who had "greater trust in their governments were more likely to comply with government-mandated social distancing policies and to adopt less-risky behaviour" (Bosancianu et al., 2020, p. 11). Research has indeed confirmed that higher trust in government is associated with higher adoption of health and prosocial behaviours during the COVID-19 pandemic (Han et al., 2020).

External political efficacy is the belief that the government and political institutions will respond to an individual's policy demands. It refers to the extent to which citizens feel like they can influence the political process or its outcomes by expressing their needs and concerns (Craig et al., 1990, p. 291). When an individual lacks external political efficacy, they feel like their needs, demands and opinions are not heard or seen by (non-populist) politicians. Consequently, they are more susceptible to the populist message, since populists reject the political elite and claim that the elite does not care about the concerns of the ordinary people. As a result, it is thought that people who lack external political efficacy are more likely to vote for populist parties; however, empirical findings are inconsistent. Like political trust, external political efficacy taps into the anti-elitist aspect of populism. However, it does not define the relationship between the people and the elite as deeply antagonistic, nor does it address the element of popular sovereignty (Geurkink et al., 2020, pp. 251–252).

It is this antagonistic relationship between the people and the elite, in particular, that is central to the populist attitudes construct – in addition to people-centrism, anti-elitism and a focus on the people's general will. Although political trust, external political efficacy and populist attitudes overlap to some extent because they all tap into the anti-elitist component of populism, they are fundamentally different constructs because they address different underlying dimensions (*ibid.*, p. 249). Low levels of political trust and external political efficacy are both manifestations of general political discontent. Populism adds an extra layer to this, as it proposes a people-centred solution of systemic change driven by popular sovereignty to address this disgruntlement. Populism is deeply rooted in feelings of discontent among individuals, not only political discontent but also with societal life in general (Spruyt et al., 2016, p. 342).

Nevertheless, populist support differs from simple political discontent in that populism “remains a politics of hope, that is, the hope that where established parties and elites have failed, ordinary folks, common sense, and the politicians who give them a voice can find solutions” (*ibid.*, p. 343).

It is clear that populist attitudes are widespread among the public. What is yet unclear is how populist attitudes develop within individuals. Populist attitudes vary within populations and the cause of this variation is unknown, although it is thought that this might be related to factors such as recurring crises, corruption, genetics and social circumstances such as education (Hawkins et al., 2017, p. 357). Additionally, research indicates that personality traits such as low Agreeableness may play a role but scholars are far from reaching a consensus on this topic (Bakker et al., 2021).

### **3.3 Populism and its effect on democracy**

Chapter 2 already briefly touched upon the tension that exists between populism and democracy. Because populism can affect democracy in deeply troubling ways, a separate paragraph is dedicated to this subject.

Like populism, democracy can be considered an essentially contested concept (Mounk, 2018, p. 92). Unfortunately, the scope of this thesis does not allow us to go into detail about this. Therefore, this thesis simply follows a dictionary definition of democracy as “a government in which the supreme power is vested in the people and exercised by them directly or indirectly through a system of representation usually involving periodically held free elections” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

Many scholars see populism as a threat to democracy, or more specifically as a threat to liberal democracy (e.g. Mounk, 2018; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017; Müller, 2016). This observation provides an important reason as to why populism needs to be understood and why its expansion should be curbed. For the past 14 years, more countries have moved away from democracy than towards it. Democracy and pluralism are under pressure globally (Repucci, 2020). This is problematic because liberal democracy, particularly when contrasted with other forms of political organisation like authoritarianism, is the system that provides for the greatest well-being for the largest amount of people, allowing them self-determination and fundamental rights and freedoms. In addition, democracy is associated with higher levels of life satisfaction and is a significant determinant of economic growth (Orviska et al., 2014; Rivera-Batiz, 2002). Populism’s threat to democracy is thus problematic. However, following the ideational approach, populism is not a thick-centred, comprehensive ideology that systematically rejects democratic values. As a matter of fact, populists radically support majority rule in

government, which is another dictionary definition of democracy (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). So how exactly does populism pose a threat to democracy, given that they seem to be based on the same principle?

### ***3.3.1 Antipluralist nature***

In addition to being anti-elitist or anti-establishmentarian, populism is inherently antipluralist. Populists claim to exclusively represent the virtuous, true people who form one homogeneous group. According to populists, a person who falls outside of this group of ‘real people’ can be considered unauthentic, dishonest and/or immoral. In his victory speech after the Brexit referendum, for instance, former UK Independence Party (UKIP) leader Nigel Farage proclaimed that it was “a victory for real people, a victory for ordinary people, a victory for decent people” (Withnall, 2016). With this choice of words, he implied that over 16 million British citizens who had voted to remain in the EU could not be seen as a part of the real people. Instead, these kinds of people are seen by Farage and other populists as illegitimate members of the political community who lack the legitimacy to participate or be represented in politics and, consequently, as citizens whose interests do not have to be considered in policymaking, since that prerogative is reserved for the real people. This exclusionary worldview is at odds with pluralism, as pluralism requires a representation of diverse interests, opinions and viewpoints to guarantee the peaceful coexistence of different groups in society. The belief that there is such a thing as a “single, homogeneous, authentic people” is dangerous because pluralism is an essential part of a healthy democracy (Müller, 2016, p. 8).

Some core characteristics of people who hold pluralist attitudes are to seek compromise, to acknowledge and respect different viewpoints and to listen to dissenting voices (Akkerman et al., 2013, p. 8). Populism cannot be pluralistic because ideologically it is driven by unanimity, which is seen by its supporters as more inclusive and more unified and, therefore, most democratic. However, as discussed in paragraph 1.2, the people are an imaginary social construct rather than an actual homogeneous group, which also makes it hard to maintain that there truly is a single popular will. Behind the supposed homogeneity of the people lies a multitude of opinions, interests and viewpoints, so in reality, populism is driven by the majority, or the largest part acting against the smaller part(s) (Urbinati, 2019, p. 111). When understood in this way, populism equals majoritarianism. Populists do not value compromise nor do they consider different viewpoints or dissenting (minority) voices.

Pretending that the people are a homogeneous group with a general will can also lead to a lack of democratic accountability for politicians, which poses another threat to democracy. Populist politicians in government derive their power from the people who, in theory, exercise their single general will by

issuing a sort of imperative mandate that tells politicians exactly what they have to do, as opposed to a free mandate that leaves policymaking at the discretion of the representative. However, because the people are not truly one homogeneous group and the popular will needs to be interpreted by the populist politician, the popular will does not really exist, nor does the imperative mandate that is supposed to be an expression of this popular will. No politician can rightfully claim that they do exactly what the people want. Nevertheless, this illusion may undermine democracy by weakening democratic accountability. Populists can still hide behind the (fictitious) imperative mandate when their policies turn out to be unsuccessful by appealing to this mandate and claiming that all their actions were authorised by the people. A free mandate, on the other hand, puts the full responsibility for public policies on the democratically chosen representatives, who have to own up to any mistakes they might have made when elections arrive. Free mandates thus put more democratic accountability on politicians and are in this sense more democratic than imperative mandates (Müller, 2016, pp. 21–22). In the long run, a decreased democratic accountability for politicians can also undermine trust in political institutions.

In summary, pluralism is the opposite of populism. Whereas pluralists acknowledge the heterogeneity of the population and see the population as divided into various ever-changing groups, populists reject these societal divisions and label various social groups as either part of the elite or as groups whose special interests are protected by the elite. Because the division between the people and the elite has an essentially moral quality, to compromise with these social groups would corrupt the people. For this reason, populists reject compromise (Mudde, 2017, p. 55). In addition, populists are critical of mediating institutions and procedures that aim to secure pluralism in a democratic society, like the ones that safeguard minority rights (Akkerman et al., 2013, p. 4). It is this aspect of populism in particular that demonstrates that populism is at odds with liberal democracy, which is the subject of the next paragraph: populism as a form of illiberal democracy.

### ***3.3.2 Illiberal democracy***

Although many scholars see populism as a threat to democracy, others see it as a token of democratic strength and as an indispensable tool to put topics of popular discontent on the political agenda, that ultimately makes society more democratic. Arditì (2007, p. 78), for instance, compares populism to a drunken, awkward guest at a party, who makes the host and other guests feel uncomfortable by “[disrupting] table manners and the tacit rules of sociability by speaking loudly, interrupting the conversations of others, and perhaps flirting with them beyond what passes for acceptable cheekiness”. Yet, in doing so, the drunken guest or populist might also challenge the status quo with his disruption,

shaking up possibly rigid or stale social (political) systems or blurting out some uncensored but truthful criticism about controversial topics, such as undemocratic elements in liberal democracy.

How justified is this criticism of liberal democracy? To answer this question in the European context, it is useful to take a step back and consider the influence of WWII and its aftermath on modern liberal democracy in Europe. With the horrors that totalitarianism and fascism had brought upon the continent still fresh in their minds, post-war politicians were determined to develop a political order that would make it impossible for these atrocities to ever happen again. To this end, they created a system of checks and balances to ensure that not all power would end up in the hands of one person or party. To prevent a dictatorship of the majority of the people, they established unelected technocratic institutions and institutions that are not subject to electoral accountability (e.g. constitutional courts). A distrust of unfragmented political power and unrestrained popular sovereignty thus lay at the basis of the modern framework of liberal democracy in many European countries (Müller, 2016, pp. 53–54).

Whereas democracy can simply refer to majority rule, liberal democracy also takes into account the rights, wishes and interests of the minority. This can lead to government decisions being overruled by unelected institutions such as the judiciary, that safeguards these minority rights. Bearing in mind that, in the populist worldview, politics ought to express the people's general will without impediments, it is easy to see how this creates a tension between populism and liberal democracy. But more importantly, populists might have good reason to be sceptical about the power of unelected institutions.

Technocratic institutions like the European Central Bank (ECB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) have exerted a far-reaching influence on the domestic policies of EU Member States, in particular since the Great Recession. In addition, neoliberal reforms over the past decades have led to the privatisation of the public sector, in which power has been transferred to private companies, market forces and transnational organisations at the expense of the power of national governments. The vast majority of financial benefits derived from privatisation and globalisation ended up in the hands of a small number of people and multinationals, who then used this wealth to fund lobbying activities and gain political influence. The decisions that these unelected actors make can directly affect people's personal lives, e.g. through forced pension cuts as a result of austerity measures imposed by the ECB and IMF (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, pp. 116–117). Especially when decisions have such a profound effect on citizens, one might argue that the people should have a bigger seat at the table in the decision-

making process and that institutions like the EU suffer from a democratic deficit.<sup>1</sup> Otherwise, a situation of undemocratic liberalism instead of liberal democracy arises. Undemocratic decision-making is grist to the mill of populists. For example, it is unlikely that a political party such as Syriza would have been as successful without the austerity measures imposed by the European troika.

Moreover, populist supporters might feel like their non-populist political representatives let them down. In part, this is a result of (non-populist) politicians' negligence: neoliberal reforms and EU policies were often not 'sold' to the public but simply presented as essential or inevitable. In consequence, these measures and their possible consequences for the population were hardly ever properly debated. Furthermore, the non-populist political establishment of many countries gladly hides behind 'EU policy' or 'globalisation' when it comes to contentious topics such as immigration, in an attempt to minimise the electoral backlash of unpopular political decisions they (have to) make (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, pp. 117–118). This fuels populist perceptions of political representatives as nothing other than a self-serving, corrupt elite.

It is safe to say, then, that populist criticism of liberal democracy is somewhat legitimate. Indeed, some important topics might be (too far) removed from the sphere of influence of democratically chosen institutions. It is this element of populism that supporters of the Laclauan approach tap into when they argue that populism strengthens democracy. Be that as it may, the populist cure to undemocratic liberalism might be worse than the disease. Empirical research shows that democratic erosion occurs significantly more often under populist governments. Democratic deconsolidation, albeit more common nowadays, is still rare because political institutions tend to be 'sticky', i.e. resistant to change (Kyle & Mounk, 2018, p. 7). However, whereas 6 per cent of non-populist governments were responsible for a democratic decline between 1990 and 2018, 24 per cent of populist governments initiated democratic backsliding over this period. Populist governments are thus four times more likely to cause democratic deconsolidation and harm political systems (*ibid.*, pp. 16–17). In addition, under populist governments,

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<sup>1</sup> The call for more democracy also became apparent in the resistance among many European citizens against free trade agreements such as the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP). One major objection was the commercial arbitration clause in the treaty, which would make dispute settlement private instead of public. The TTIP negotiations itself took place behind closed doors and the content of the TTIP proposals was classified, adding to a sense of secrecy and lack of transparency (Boren, 2015).

freedom of the press decreased by 7 per cent, civil liberties by 8 per cent and political rights by 13 per cent (*ibid.*, pp. 21–22).

Populism attacks any restraints on popular sovereignty, erodes checks and balances and diminishes the protection of minority rights. This democratic deconsolidation usually happens slowly over time. When a democratically elected populist leader rises to power, they often openly proclaim the ambition to transform the political system as a way to bring ‘power to the people’. They use the narrative of a fight against a corrupt establishment to justify their expansion of the executive power and their breakdown of independent institutions. But once they lose popular support, they abuse these changes to stay in power against the will of the people (*ibid.*, pp. 10–11). This happened in Venezuela, for example, where Chávez and his successor Nicolás Maduro (initially) enjoyed immense popular support. However, when Venezuela’s economy collapsed in 2013, the support quickly dwindled. Since 2015, Maduro has ruled the country by decree. Civil liberties and fundamental rights are not respected and the opposition is intimidated and not allowed to do their job. The 2020 elections were not free or fair, and as a result, the main opposition parties boycotted them (Watson, 2020). In addition, independent institutions such as the media and journalists are censored, threatened or even murdered. Similar observations can be made for countries like Turkey or Hungary. It is evident why the populist response to undemocratic liberalism is unacceptable: it is a slippery slope that easily turns into outright authoritarianism. Using the term ‘illiberal democracy’ to describe populist regimes is therefore erroneous because, in the end, populism harms democracy itself (Müller, 2016, p. 31).

Paradoxically, populists often claim that the democratic constitutional state is being undermined by the elite. Although this is a somewhat laughable allegation in light of the aforementioned – after all, populists themselves seem to pose the greatest threat to the rule of law – it is nevertheless a disturbing statement that aggravates the already low trust of citizens in politics. Like fundamental rights and checks and balances, trust is essential to establish a well-functioning liberal democracy. Low political trust and populist attitudes are important causes of populist support, while populism can have a detrimental effect on democracy and minority rights. The next chapter addresses the interaction between crisis as another influencing factor on the emergence of populism. It then discusses the responses of governments and citizens to the COVID-19 crisis, before continuing with the case studies of the Netherlands and Italy.

## 4. POPULISM AND COVID-19: TWO CASE STUDIES

In December 2019, the first case of COVID-19 was reported in Wuhan, China. The WHO declared COVID-19 a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) about three months later, when the virus was rapidly spreading over the world, shutting down public life and overloading many health care systems in its wake. A PHEIC is “an extraordinary event which is determined to constitute a public health risk to other States through the international spread of disease and to potentially require a coordinated international response”. Furthermore, the event “implies a situation that is serious, sudden, unusual or unexpected; carries implications for public health beyond the affected State’s national border; and may require immediate international action” (*Emergencies*, 2019). These alarming words are a testament to the nature of the COVID-19 pandemic as a global health crisis.

Populism has often been linked to crises and it is therefore interesting to see how the COVID-19 crisis has affected populism (and vice versa). This chapter thus begins by scrutinising the relationship between populism and crisis. It then goes on to discuss the COVID-19 measures that were imposed by various governments to curb the spread of the disease and the responses of citizens to the virus as well as subsequent containment measures. These paragraphs, combined with the previous chapters, form the basis for the comparative analysis between the case studies of the Netherlands and Italy that is the subject of the remainder of this chapter. These case studies analyse the COVID-19 measures taken by the governments of the Netherlands and Italy and aim to investigate whether a link can be established between the COVID-19 measures taken by national governments and change in support for populist parties in the respective countries.

### 4.1 Populism and crisis

As discussed in paragraph 2.3, populists thrive on a sense of crisis, which can be used to create and amplify the division between the people and the elite. To understand any possible effects of the COVID-19 crisis on populist support, therefore, it is first important to dive deeper into the relationship between crisis and populism. The concept of ‘crisis’ has been linked to populism in various ways, in addition to being widely discussed in political philosophy and sciences in general. Scholars such as Karl Marx saw a crisis as a critical set of circumstances with the potential to undermine State authority and bring about systemic change. Furthermore, a crisis is an objective as well as a subjective concept: it needs to be perceived and/or framed as such by political actors (Bobba & Hubé, 2021, pp. 2–3). The exact nature of

the relationship between populism and crisis, however, has been debated. Scholars see crises as a cause, a prerequisite or a facilitating factor for populism.

#### ***4.1.1 Crisis as a cause, prerequisite or facilitating factor for populism***

Laclau (2005, p. 177) argued that crisis is “a necessary precondition for populism”. In his view, any emergence of populism has historically been linked to some form of crisis, in particular to a crisis of political representation. Several scholars agree that these political crises form the basis of populist success (e.g. Canovan, 1999). For instance, the rise of populist parties in many European countries, such as Italy and Greece, has been linked to the Great Recession and the European debt crisis in a wider context of a system of failing political representation in which the established political parties were consistently insufficiently responsive to the ordinary people’s needs (Kriesi et al., 2016). Other authors have pointed to Europe’s migration crisis as a cause of populist electoral success (Brubaker, 2017). These scholars generally explain the emergence of populism through the economic theory, as discussed in paragraph 3.1.2, and argue that crisis is the main cause of or a necessary prerequisite for populism.

However, although populism and crisis are often linked, global empirical evidence for a causal relationship between the two lacks and it is thus hard to maintain that crisis is by definition an external cause of or a prerequisite for populism (Bobba & Hubé, 2021, p. 5). For example, the Great Recession has not caused populist parties to rise in all European countries. No significant rise in populist support could be observed in countries such as Ireland or Portugal, which were also hit hard by the crisis (Castanho Silva, 2017, pp. 61–62). Therefore, some scholars are less convinced that such a strong link between crisis and populism exists. Mudde (2007) argued that the concept of crisis is too vague to make any substantiated claims about causality or preconditions, stating that the concept of crisis is under-theorised and therefore not reliable (Mudde, 2007, p. 205). In this understanding of crises, a crisis can be seen as a facilitating factor for populism but not necessarily as a cause or prerequisite (Bobba & Hubé, 2021, p. 5). Nonetheless, in their later work, Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017, p. 106) emphasise that populists do actively contribute to creating a sense of crisis – sometimes helped by media who value clicks and advertising revenue over truth-finding and nuance – and that as a result, a crisis can not only boost populism, but populism can also trigger crisis (Moffitt, 2015). Regardless of whether a crisis is considered a cause, a prerequisite or a facilitating factor for populism, two components can be identified in the dance between populism and crisis: a real component of systemic failure and a symbolic component of populist framing.

#### ***4.1.2. Real and symbolic aspects of crisis***

Moffitt (2015), like Babba and Hubé (2021), poses that any crisis has an objective and a subjective element. These can also be referred to as real and symbolic aspects of crisis (Stavrakakis et al., 2018). The objective element points to systemic failure and can sometimes be demonstrated in quantitative terms, such as a drop in gross domestic product (GDP) or an immigration surge. The symbolic element refers to the social construct that can be used to make this systemic failure more ‘sensational’ and create a sense of crisis. Crises are not neutral events but are framed and ‘performed’ by political actors through populist discourse. Therefore, they should not be seen as solely external factors that influence populism but also as an internal element that is created by populist actors (Moffitt, 2015, p. 190). When populists create a sense of crisis, they aim to create a more fertile breeding ground for populism. This is exemplified by the case of Finland. After the Great Recession, Finland experienced a drop in GDP but only a slight increase in external debt and unemployment rates. The average Finnish citizen was thus not hit very hard by the financial crisis and the ‘real’ aspect of the crisis was therefore limited. Nevertheless, the populist party *Perussuomalaiset* (the True Finns) framed the crisis in a way that created a sense of urgency, by claiming that the Finnish welfare state was under threat because of the EU bailout programs, in addition to the “invasion” of immigrants. This discourse proved effective: the True Finns obtained 39 seats in the 2011 parliamentary elections, compared to five seats in 2007 (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 106).

Populists thus utilise real and symbolic components of crisis through the Manichean framing and politicisation of the specific issues that underlie them, such as economic policies, corruption or border control. For some problems, this politicisation is easier than for others. It is more complex to politicise a natural disaster (such as an earthquake, a flood, or the COVID-19 crisis) than an economic crisis that was caused or facilitated by political decisions, because it is harder to attribute political accountability and responsibility to specific persons for natural disasters. Especially in the initial phase of the pandemic, there was no direct responsibility for its origin and consequences. While governments tried to emphasise the non-political, scientific nature of COVID-19, many (populist) opposition parties tried to politicise the pandemic, for instance by bringing in issues of globalisation (Bobba & Hubé, 2021, pp. 7–8). However, as the COVID-19 crisis progressed, it became easier for populists to politicise the pandemic, as more decisions had to be made about containment measures, for which politicians were responsible. Nevertheless, the nature of the COVID-19 crisis differs from a financial or migration crisis in the sense that *force majeure* has a greater share in its causes and that the disease itself is, consequently, harder to politicise.

## **4.2 COVID-19: Responses from government and society**

The COVID-19 pandemic came unexpectedly for any government around the world, whether populist or non-populist. Because medical experts and virologists also knew little about the disease, it was unclear what was the best way to contain the virus as quickly as possible. This uncertainty provided a breeding ground for scepticism and distrust towards government and COVID-19 measures, as well as for conspiracy theories. This paragraph explains the various ways in which governments, as well as citizens, responded to the virus and the subsequent containment measures.

### ***4.2.1 Government responses to COVID-19***

Government responses aimed at containing the spread of COVID-19 included voluntary and involuntary measures such as stay-at-home orders, international and national travel restrictions, curfews, quarantines, prohibition of or limitations to public and private gatherings, the closing of shops, schools, bars and restaurants, mask-wearing and social distancing measures. The stringency of the measures varied between countries. The Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker (OxCGRT) has been gathering systematic information on COVID-19 policy measures since 1 January 2020. Based on this information, a COVID-19 stringency index for over 180 countries has been developed. The government responses are coded into 23 indicators, such as travel restrictions, income support and vaccination policies which are organised into five groups: containment and closure policies, economic policies, health system policies, vaccination policies and miscellaneous. This data helps to understand and systematically and consistently compare various government responses to the pandemic (Hale et al., 2021). Therefore, the OxCGRT is used for the comparative analysis of the COVID-19 responses in the Netherlands and Italy later in this chapter.

Landwehr and Schäfer (2020) distinguished three response patterns among governments worldwide in the initial phase of the COVID-19 pandemic: erratic-populist response patterns, authoritarian-populist response patterns and rational-technocratic response patterns. Erratic-populist response patterns were, for instance, observed in the United Kingdom (UK) and the US, where PM Boris Johnson and President Trump tried to downplay the virus as a “mild flu”. Both countries developed extremely high numbers of reported cases and COVID-19 related deaths and were eventually forced to implement stricter measures. Authoritarian-populist responses were more common in less consolidated democracies, such as Hungary and Poland, where strict containment measures against COVID-19 were quickly implemented. Hungarian PM Orbán’s governing party Fidesz used the pandemic to declare a state of emergency that to this day allows Orbán to rule by decree while essentially bypassing parliament.

The state of emergency has been extended twice and as a result, Orbán has had nearly absolute power since the start of the pandemic. The Polish leading party Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS, Law and Justice) also used the pandemic to tighten their grip on power, by amending electoral laws so that elections could be held despite the impediments that opposition parties faced in their campaigns as a result of COVID-19 measures. Hungary and Poland have both slipped further towards authoritarianism during the pandemic. Rational-technocratic responses were found in countries like the Netherlands and Germany, where the implementation of COVID-19 measures was predominantly based on expert advice from doctors, virologists and epidemiologists (Landwehr & Schäfer, 2020).

Meyer (2020a) has developed a somewhat similar categorisation of response patterns within the global group of populist leaders. He classified these responses as downplay (e.g. Trump in the US or Bolsonaro in Brazil), serious-liberal (e.g. Borisov in Bulgaria or Conte in Italy) or serious-illiberal (e.g. Orbán in Hungary or Mateusz Morawiecki in Poland) (Meyer, 2020a). So unlike Landwehr and Schäfer (2020) suggested, populists have also been able to provide COVID-19 responses that were serious (i.e. not downplaying the virus) without limiting citizen's rights and freedoms more than necessary or using the pandemic to push their countries (further) in an authoritarian direction. Although some scholars initially argued that populist leaders and governments were less capable of handling the crisis than their non-populist counterparts, there is no empirical evidence that supports this. Populist governments were not generally more or less successful than non-populist governments in terms of preventing COVID-19 related deaths or hospitalisations (Meyer, 2020a; Wondreys & Mudde, 2020).

#### ***4.2.2 Citizen's responses: trust in government and experts***

The measures that governments took to halt the spread of COVID-19 came at a cost. First, the measures severely limited some of the people's fundamental rights and freedoms, such as the right to assembly. The restrictions also had a strong negative effect on economies, as businesses were forced to close and unemployment rose. In addition, the measures had an adverse impact on people's mental health as a result of isolation and on their physical health due to delayed medical procedures that were postponed to avoid the overload of health care systems. Although the restrictions were generally supported by the majority of the people in most countries, public protests did increase as the pandemic persisted and the measures endured, for instance in Germany, the UK and the Netherlands (Jones, 2021; Pleitgen, 2020). So to what extent were the COVID-19 measures supported by citizens and what explains the variation in support for government responses?

Jørgensen et al. (2021) conducted several large-scale surveys (of which the data between March and November 2020 was used for their paper) to answer these questions for eight Western democracies: Denmark, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, United Kingdom, United States and Sweden. The researchers found medium to high levels of support for the COVID-19 responses in all countries. In addition to looking at demographics, the authors considered personality traits (using the Big Five inventory: Openness to New Experiences, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness and Neuroticism), interpersonal trust and knowledge about COVID-19 and protective behaviours as variables to explain support for government responses (Jørgensen et al., 2021, pp. 5–6). They also looked at strong leadership as a measure of populism, by asking if respondents agreed with the statement “Our country needs a strong leader right now”. Positive associations were found for Denmark, Germany and Hungary, while for the other countries the associations were negative but small. According to the authors, this indicates a potential for populist mobilisation in some countries but not in others (*ibid.*, p. 8). Traditional demographic cleavages only explained support for government responses to a limited extent, although individuals who had voted for governing parties were more likely to support the COVID-19 measures. The greatest predictors of support for government responses were high levels of Agreeableness (leading to a prosocial attitude, wanting to protect others), high levels of interpersonal trust and self-assessed knowledge about COVID-19 and protective behaviours (*ibid.*, pp. 2–3).

The research of Jørgensen et al. (2021) does not present a clear relationship between populist support and support for COVID-19 measures. It does, however, provide some pointers that can be relevant for populist studies – in particular when it comes to the variable of interpersonal trust. Although interpersonal trust cannot be considered a precursor for or consequence of political trust, there is a positive correlation between the two, meaning that the more trusting a person is as an individual, the higher their levels of political trust tend to be (Kaase, 1999, pp. 12–14). As discussed in paragraph 3.2, low levels of political trust are a result as well as a cause of populist support (Rooduijn et al., 2016). Low levels of interpersonal trust, which are linked to lower support for COVID-19 measures, might therefore also increase populist support. Additionally, anti-elitism is a key element of populism. This not only concerns distrust towards the political establishment but naturally extends to distrust towards experts, scientists and academic institutions (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017; Müller, 2020a). The link between scientific scepticism and populism further decreases support for government COVID-19 responses among people who hold populist attitudes (Mede & Schäfer, 2020). Furthermore, populist attitudes negatively relate to COVID-19 conspiracy beliefs.

### 4.2.3 Conspiracy theories

When COVID-19 started to spread around the globe, conspiracy theories about the nature and causes of the disease followed. The WHO even speaks of an infodemic with regard to the substantial amount of misinformation and conspiracy theories that circulate in the context of COVID-19 (*Infodemic*, n.d.). Several populist leaders contributed to COVID-19 conspiracy theories. Trump, for instance, referred to the “deep state” when he made the evidenceless claim that the Food and Drug Administration was purposely delaying the development of vaccines until after the November 2020 presidential elections, while Wolfgang Gedeon – then still a state parliament member for AfD – stated that COVID-19 might be a bioweapon from the US (Eckert, 2020; So, 2020). Thierry Baudet, the leader of the Dutch populist party Forum voor Democratie (FvD, Forum for Democracy), stated at a dinner with prospective MPs in November 2020 that the coronavirus was brought into the world by George Soros “to take away our freedom” (den Hartog & Winterman, 2020). Since then, he appears to have gotten sucked into the conspiracy theory rabbit hole, as his recent contributions on social media support ‘alternative theories’ for 9/11, as well as claims that world leaders in the World Economic Forum use the COVID-19 pandemic to create a new world order, better known as ‘The Great Reset’ (Markus, 2021).

Be that as it may, the vast amount of populist leaders and parties, in government as well as in opposition, have distanced themselves from conspiracy theories and supported stringent measures to halt the spread of COVID-19. This is exemplified by Geert Wilders, opposition leader of the PVV, who has supported most of the COVID-19 measures taken by the Dutch government, albeit critical about their lack of stringency at the beginning of the pandemic and necessity in later phases (Julen, 2021). When it comes to populists in power, 12 out of 17 leaders have taken serious measures against COVID-19 (Meyer, 2020a, 2020b).

When analysing the demand side of populism in Austrian individuals, scholars found a negative correlation between populist attitudes and trust in political and scientific institutions, which in turn negatively relate to beliefs in conspiracy theories about COVID-19. In other words, there is a positive correlation between populist attitudes and conspiracy beliefs within individuals. This correlation transcends political ideology; so it is not relevant if citizens have voted for the populist right-wing opposition party Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ; Freedom Party of Austria). What matters is whether they hold populist attitudes. These can be observed on the left as well as the right side of the political spectrum (Eberl et al., 2020). The authors point out that this may have important consequences for the effectiveness of government communication about COVID-19.

### **4.3 Case selection and methodology: COVID-19 measures and populist support**

The foregoing can now be applied in a modest attempt to provide an answer to the research question that is central to this thesis: Is there a link between the COVID-19 measures imposed by populist and non-populist governments and an increase or decrease in voter support for populist parties? To examine if such a link can be established, the foregoing is applied in a comparative analysis between the cases of the Netherlands and Italy in the following two paragraphs. These cases have been selected for two reasons.

First of all, the comparison takes place between a country with a non-populist government (the Netherlands) and a country with a (partly) populist government (Italy). This choice was made to establish if populist support is, for instance, more likely to increase as a result of the COVID-19 measures when these are imposed by a non-populist government than if these are imposed by a populist government – that is, if populist support changes at all. Political parties are qualified as populist based on the PopuList dataset, which offers an overview of populist, far-right, far-left and Eurosceptic parties in Europe (Rooduijn et al., 2019). In this dataset, populist parties are defined as parties “that endorse the set of ideas that society is ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people” (Mudde, 2004). The list has been peer-reviewed by over 80 populism scholars and although a few borderline cases are still debated, a consensus has been reached for most parties. Careful, systematic and consistent consideration has been the basis for the overall classifications.

From October 2017 until January 2021, the Netherlands had a non-populist government formed by the centre-right VVD (Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie; People's Party for Freedom and Democracy), the centrist CDA (Christen-Democratisch Appèl; Christian Democratic Appeal), the centre-left D66 (Democraten 66; Democrats 66) and the centrist CU (ChristenUnie; Christian Union). The cabinet was forced to resign in January 2021 due to matters that were not related to the pandemic and general elections were held in March 2021. At the time of writing, a new government still needs to be formed and the outgoing government is managing ‘current affairs’ such as the COVID-19 crisis. The same non-populist government has thus been responsible for the COVID-19 measures in the Netherlands throughout the entire pandemic.

Italy, on the other hand, has had two different governments during the pandemic, which both included populist parties. The Conte II cabinet was formed in September 2019 from members of three political parties: the populist ‘catch-all’ party M5S, the centre-left PD (Partito Democratico; Democratic

Party) and the leftist LeU (Liberi e Uguali; Free and Equal). Soon after the government was sworn in, the centrist party IV (Italia Viva; Italy Alive) split from PD but continued to support the government coalition. In January 2021, however, the coalition lost IV's support and PM Conte resigned. No elections were held but a new technocratic government was formed, led by independent PM Draghi. The Draghi government consists of members from nine different political parties plus 12 independent members. Given the large corresponding majority that the government has in the Chamber of Deputies (the lower house) and the Senate, the government is also called a national unity government. The four biggest parties supporting the government are M5S (15 government members), the populist rightist Lega (12 members), the populist centre-right FI (9 members) and PD (9 members). Italy thus had two partly populist governments who have been responsible for the COVID-19 measures.

Second, the governments of both countries applied a serious-liberal response to the pandemic. This is relevant to avoid any distortion of the results due to a potential backlash effect from voters against the government due to insufficient COVID-19 responses (in the case of a downplay) or authoritarian actions (in the case of serious-illiberal measures).

One of the limitations to this research, however, as so often in the social sciences, is that political behaviours cannot be observed in a vacuum. Other factors and events influence support for political parties as well. The case studies therefore also pay attention to the broader societal context in which the COVID-19 measures were taken.

The analyses focus on a period of 15 months, from 1 January 2020 to 1 April 2021. There are several reasons for selecting this period. First, it includes a pre-COVID-19 stage, in which there were no COVID-19 infections nor restrictive measures in either country. Therefore, this stage can function as the baseline for further analysis of possible changes in populist support. Second, the period covers the first, second and third waves of COVID-19 and the subsequent restricting and easing of containment measures. This makes it possible to analyse with more certainty whether the measures affected populist support. Third, the advantage of a long-term analysis also means that effects of pandemic fatigue (if any) are visible in support for COVID-19 measures, which might impact support for opposition parties. In addition, the period includes the general elections in the Netherlands that were held from 15-17 March 2021, which can provide useful information about the extent to which populist support in voter polls translates to actual electoral support for populist parties.

#### **4.4 Case study: The Netherlands**

As mentioned in the previous paragraph, a non-populist government made up of members from VVD, CDA, D66 and CU has been responsible for the management of the COVID-19 crisis in the Netherlands since the start of the pandemic. Between January 2020 and April 2021, three populist parties have been in opposition: the right-wing FvD, PVV and the left-wing SP (Socialistische Partij; Socialist Party) (Rooduijn et al., 2019). In December 2020, the populist right-wing JA21 (Juiste Antwoord 2021; Right Answer 2021) split off from FvD, thereby creating a fourth populist opposition party. Now that the positions of these parties have been clarified, this paragraph firstly continues to discuss the course of the COVID-19 pandemic until April 2021. This provides the necessary context for the data analysis that follows in the second part, which presents data on the stringency of and public support for the COVID-19 measures that were taken by the Dutch government, as well as data on support for populist parties. The paragraph ends with an analysis and short conclusion about the relationship between the COVID-19 measures and support for populist parties in the Netherlands.

##### ***4.4.1 Timeline of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Netherlands***

When it became apparent how rapidly COVID-19 was spreading in China and that the disease posed a serious threat to public health, the rest of the world closely monitored its expansion and started taking preventive measures to mitigate the virus risks. In the Netherlands, the pandemic unfolded as follows.

The initial phase of the pandemic mostly took place at the international level. The EU Health Security Committee (HSC), an informal advisory group on health security in the EU, had its first discussion about the novel coronavirus on 17 January 2020 (HSC, n.d.). Delegates from the Dutch Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport (VWS) were present at this meeting and subsequently informed the Dutch parliament about the COVID-19 infections in China. No containment measures were taken yet. The first European COVID-19 infection was reported on 24 January in France. On the same date, the Dutch Outbreak Management Team (OMT) had their first meeting (*Coronavirus tijdslijn*, n.d.). The OMT consists of specialists and experts, such as doctors, virologists and epidemiologists, who regularly come together in varying compositions to discuss containment measures. The OMT has an important advisory function as they advise the Ministry of VWS about the (supposed) best approach to COVID-19 based on their professional expertise and scientific insights while taking into account risks and uncertainties of measures (OMT, n.d.).

The first measures were presented in early February when preventive quarantine was introduced for travellers returning from China. Later this month, the Dutch government started the (ongoing) measurement of the attitudes of Dutch citizens towards COVID-19 in the Flash Poll Coronavirus, of which data is used in this thesis to establish support for virus containment measures. The first COVID-19 case in the Netherlands was reported on 27 February. At the beginning of March, the number of COVID-19 cases swelled as a result of carnival celebrations and people returning from (skiing) holidays in countries such as Italy, which is then already fighting several virus outbreaks. The OMT stated that virus containment is no longer possible in several parts of the country. During March, the government gradually introduced more restrictions, ultimately resulting in an ‘intelligent lockdown’ on 23 March. PM Mark Rutte made clear that the COVID-19 exit strategy was aimed at creating herd immunity, which was why the government decided not to impose a full lockdown. The measures included hygienic precautions (e.g. no handshakes and regular handwashing), cancellation of major events, limitations to private gatherings, international travel restrictions, mandatory quarantine for every household member when a person in that household experiences COVID-19 symptoms, social distancing, the closure of non-essential businesses and schools as well as economic support measures for businesses. People were encouraged to stay at home as much as possible but were still allowed to go outside freely. There was a shortage of medical supplies such as mouth masks and gloves. In addition, the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) capacity fell short and there was a lack of COVID-19 testing capacity and equipment. Nine EU countries closed their internal borders, while the EU closed its external borders for non-essential travel (*Coronavirus tijdlijn*, n.d.). Public life came to a halt and this remained so until May 2020, when the measures were slowly lifted as a result of decreasing infection rates and declining COVID-19 related deaths and hospitalisations (*Coronadashboard*, n.d.).

Between May and August, public life went somewhat back to normal, as the first wave of COVID-19 had passed and the strictest measures were eased. Schools reopened and citizens were (a.o.) allowed to travel, have small gatherings and visit places such as stores, hairdressers and restaurants. During summer, some demonstrations against the COVID-19 measures were held throughout the country. In July and August, infections started to rise again. As a result, measures were once again tightened in August and September. Unfortunately, the restrictions proved insufficient to ‘flatten the curve’ and in October, the Netherlands went into a partial lockdown when the second wave of COVID-19 arrived. Although these new measures initially led to a drop in infection rates, the rates surged again in December, leading to the third wave of the virus and a subsequent full lockdown. Then, in January 2021, the contagious alfa variant made its appearance. Determined not to let infection rates escalate, the Dutch

government introduced the strictest COVID-19 measures thus far, including a curfew for all citizens. These restrictions were kept in place until 26 April 2021, when the curfew ended, schools, shops and terraces were allowed to reopen and restrictions on private gatherings were eased (*Coronavirus tijdlijn*, n.d.).

#### **4.4.2 Data presentation**

The aforementioned course of the COVID-19 measures taken by the Dutch government is clearly reflected in the OxCGRT stringency index, which has been discussed in paragraph 4.2. The index ranges from 0-100, where 100 represents the strictest measures possible (Hale et al., 2021). The average stringency index is calculated from the start of the measures and thus covers the period of 1 March 2020 until 1 April 2021.

The data on populist support originates from the POLITICO Europe Poll of Polls, which tracks polling data for every European election and country (*POLITICO Europe Poll of Polls - the Netherlands*, n.d.). Populist support is measured as a percentage of the total seats in the House of Representatives that a populist party would acquire if elections were to be held on that date. 1 January 2020 forms the baseline measure for the analysis, as there were not yet any COVID-19 cases nor containment measures on this date. Political parties are labelled populist based on the PopuList dataset (Rooduijn et al., 2019).

The support of Dutch citizens for the COVID-19 measures is based on two sets of data. For February 2020 until June 2020, “Flitspeiling corona” reports are used (*Flitspeilingen coronavirus*, n.d.). These reports contain the results of eight surveys that were held during this period among Dutch citizens of voting age. Each survey had approximately 1,000 respondents and the samples were weighted to be representative of the target group (Dutch citizens over the age of 18). Unfortunately, the surveys were not always conducted on the 1<sup>st</sup> of each month. In these cases, the survey closest to this date was selected. Support for COVID-19 measures in the “Flitspeiling corona” is measured as the percentage of respondents that rated a 6 or higher (on a scale of 0-10) for trust in the measures taken by the government. This survey question was worded as: “How much confidence do you have in the measures taken by the government regarding novel coronavirus?”. In July 2020, the “Flitspeiling corona” was terminated but support for the COVID-19 measures continued to be measured in the “Alleen Samen” campaign reports that analyse the effects of the government COVID-19 campaign (*Alleen Samen*, n.d.). However, support for COVID-19 is expressed differently in these reports, namely as the percentage of respondents who agree with the statement that “the government is taking the right measures to curb the spread of COVID-19” (i.e. not too strict or easing measures too quickly). In addition, the statement “the government restricts

people’s freedom too much with the COVID-19 measures” tests the extent to which people believe that the measures are too strict. The difference in measurement between the “Flitspeiling corona” and “Alleen Samen” reports explains the sudden drop in support for the COVID-19 measures between 1 June 2020 (81%) and 1 July 2020 (60%).

The stringency index of the COVID-19 measures taken by the Dutch government, support for populist parties and citizen’s support for the restrictions are presented in Table 1. These data can also be found in Appendix A, including the additional explanatory remarks.

**Table 1. An overview of the Stringency index of the COVID-19 measures, support for populist parties and support for the COVID-19 measures in the Netherlands between 1 January 2020 and 1 April 2021.**

Date	Stringency index	Overall populist support	Populist support per party				Support measures	
			PVV	FvD	SP	JA21	Right	Too strict
1-1-20	0	29%	12%	11%	6%	N/A	N/A	N/A
1-2-20	0	29%	12%	11%	6%	N/A	78%	N/A
1-3-20	5.56	28%	12%	10%	6%	N/A	73%	N/A
1-4-20	78.70	24%	10%	8%	6%	N/A	84%	N/A
1-5-20	78.70	24%	11%	7%	6%	N/A	88%	N/A
1-6-20	62.96	25%	11%	7%	7%	N/A	81%	N/A
1-7-20	39.81	24%	11%	7%	6%	N/A	60%	34%
1-8-20	39.81	26%	12%	7%	7%	N/A	53%	28%
1-9-20	50.93	28%	14%	7%	7%	N/A	51%	30%
1-10-20	62.04	27%	15%	5%	7%	N/A	48%	29%
1-11-20	62.04	27%	15%	5%	7%	N/A	50%	30%
1-12-20	56.48	25%	16%	3%	6%	N/A	50%	30%
1-1-21	78.70	24%	15%	2%	6%	1%	50%	32%
1-2-21	82.41	24%	14%	2%	7%	1%	48%	39%
1-3-21	78.70	23%	13%	3%	6%	1%	45%	40%
1-4-21	75.00	26%	11%	6%	6%	3%	40%	41%
<b>Average</b>	<b>60.85</b>							

#### 4.4.3 Analysis and conclusion

To establish whether there is a relationship between COVID-19 measures and support for populist parties, it is first necessary to examine whether there have been significant changes in support for populist parties between 1 January 2020 and 1 April 2021. A significant change is defined as a deviation >10%

from the baseline, i.e. a change in support  $>3\%$  (2.9% rounded up). No increase in populist support compared to the baseline measure could be observed during the period examined.

However, there is a significant decrease in populist support compared to the baseline during two distinct periods. This can be observed during the first and third waves of the virus and subsequent measures. The decline in populist support during the first wave is likely caused by a ‘rally around the flag’ effect (Meyer, 2020b, 2021). The ‘rally around the flag’ effect is used to explain a short-term surge in support for a country's government or political leaders that has often been observed in times of crisis or war. Evidence for a ‘rally around the flag’ effect during the first wave can be found in the fact that support for VVD (not included in table 1), the party of PM Rutte, increased from 15% on 1 January 2020 to 22% on 1 April 2020 and even 26% at its peak on 9 June 2020 (*POLITICO Europe Poll of Polls - the Netherlands*, n.d.). Although VVD's popularity has dropped again since then (21% on 1 April 2021), the party is still more popular than before the COVID-19 crisis. Perhaps the ‘rally around the flag’ effect persists longer in the Dutch case. In addition, support for political parties is influenced by many other factors besides crisis.

When examining the data, there does not seem to be a link between the COVID-19 measures and a change in support for populist parties. When the measures tightened again and the stringency index increased in September 2020, populist support increased as well and almost reached the pre-crisis level (28% in September 2020 compared to 29% in January 2020). On the other hand, when the COVID-19 measures reached their greatest stringency thus far (78,7-82,41) between January and March 2021, populist support reached its ultimate low compared to the baseline at 23-24%. Therefore, at first glance, there does not seem to be a direct connection between the stringency of the COVID-19 measures and a change in support for populist parties in the Netherlands.

Having said that, it is important to note once again that other factors besides COVID-19 measures also influence support for political parties. When compared to the baseline measures, FvD is the populist party that lost the largest share of popular support between January 2020 and April 2021, during the third wave of COVID-19. SP remained stable throughout the entire period examined at 6 or 7%, while PVV fluctuated but remained relatively stable. Because the decreased support for FvD explains the overall decline in populist support during the third wave of COVID-19 and subsequent containment measures, the analysis mainly focuses on this political party. The strong decline in support for FvD is most likely caused by internal party struggles.

FvD was established in 2015 and quickly gained popular support. Like so many new political parties, it struggled to find stability during this expansion. The youth section of the party, for instance, attracted many members who appeared to have some fascist and racist tendencies. As early as April 2020, it made the news that several youth wing members had sent fascist and antisemitic messages in their WhatsApp groups. In November 2020, the youth wing of the party once again reached the headlines when antisemitic and racist WhatsApp messages sent by their members were made public. For example, one of the youth wing members had referred to the antisemitic book ‘Der Untermensch’ as “a masterpiece”. As similar messages had emerged before, the board of FvD, as well as party leader Baudet, were accused of taking inadequate measures to ban these types of members and of insufficiently condemning the statements (Markus, 2020). In the commotion that ensued, Baudet decided to resign as party leader but changed his mind a few days later, confusing friend and foe and confirming concerns of members that he was not suited to be party leader (*FvD-bestuur vraagt om vertrek Baudet*, 2020). When Baudet made some antisemitic comments himself at a dinner with prospective MPs, this was the straw that broke the camel’s back for many supporters of the party. An exodus of members followed, resulting in plummeting electoral support and the split-off of JA21, a new populist right-wing party.

Nevertheless, FvD was one of the few political parties that fiercely opposed the COVID-19 measures taken by the government. PVV and SP have both generally supported the government’s COVID-19 policies, although PVV has criticised the government in the initial stages of the pandemic for not imposing stricter measures and strongly opposed the curfew that was introduced in January 2021 (Schaart, 2020). FvD turned the COVID-19 measures into the focal point of their electoral campaign for the March 2021 general elections and it looks like this stance has prevented a complete election defeat for FvD. The data on support for COVID-19 measures show that support declined from 50% in November 2020 to 40% in April 2021, while the percentage of respondents who considered the measures too restrictive grew from 30% to 41%, respectively. FvD likely appealed to this part of the electorate.

However, the fact that a populist party that opposes COVID-19-measures receives voter support, does not automatically mean that these voters are drawn to this party *because* they are *populist*. Baudet consistently uses populist rhetoric of the virtuous people who are being suppressed by a powerful, corrupt elite and combines this symbolic aspect of the COVID-19 crisis with ‘real’ aspects such as economic consequences and mental health issues. However, people can oppose COVID-19 measures without holding populist attitudes themselves, in other words, without seeing the world as a Manichean dichotomy between the people and the elite. Without insight into the (possibly populist) voter attitudes

that underlie the support for FvD, no substantiated statements can be made about what it is that drives these people. As infection rates were dropping, it appears that it was the curfew that was imposed in January 2021, in particular, that frustrated voters and caused a decline in support for the government restrictions. It is not inconceivable that a vote for FvD was simply a protest vote rather than a vote that was prompted by populist attitudes within the voter. In addition, even people who *would* vote for FvD based on either their own populist attitudes, the party's *populist* rhetoric or the party's opposition of COVID-19 measures, might still decide *not* to because of the *type* of populism that FvD represents. FvD can be categorised as a cultural populist party. The party combines the thin-centred populist ideology with a strong nativist majoritarian ideology, that might not necessarily sit well with voters who would be drawn to the party's populism or anti-COVID-19-measures stance. Therefore, it cannot be said, based on the data examined, that there is a direct link between COVID-19 measures and a change in support for populist parties.

#### **4.5 Case study: Italy**

In contrast to the Netherlands, two different governments have been responsible for the COVID-19 measures in Italy since the start of the pandemic. Both included populist parties. The Conte II government, which contained members from M5S, PD and LeU, could be categorised as a somewhat anti-establishmentarian government since M5S is an anti-establishment populist party (Kyle & Gultchin, 2018). As discussed in paragraph 2.3.3, anti-establishment populism is mainly characterised by a supposed conflict between the political establishment and the ordinary people. They tend to be less socially divisive than cultural or socio-economic populists. PM Draghi formed a technocratic government with members from nine different parties plus independent members in February 2021. The Draghi government includes members of three populist parties, namely M5S, Lega and FI.

The structure of this paragraph is the same as the previous case study of the Netherlands. First, the unfolding of the COVID-19 crisis in Italy is discussed, followed by the presentation of data on the stringency of the virus containment measures that were taken by the Italian government, as well as data on support for populist parties and the COVID-19 restrictions. The closing analysis compares the case of Italy to the Netherlands, followed by a concluding answer to the research question: is there a relationship between the COVID-19 measures taken by the Italian government and support for populist parties?

##### **4.5.1 Timeline of the COVID-19 pandemic in Italy**

The first COVID-19 cases in Italy were reported on 30 January 2020, when two Chinese tourists from Wuhan tested positive for the virus. PM Conte took quick action, declared a state of emergency and

flights to and from China were cancelled. In February 2020, eleven municipalities in northern Italy, located mostly in the Lombardy region, were identified as COVID-19 clusters and subsequently declared a red zone. The Conte II government issued a decree that imposed a strict quarantine on more than 50,000 people on 22 February 2020. Schools and non-essential businesses closed and the municipalities went into full lockdown, which was implemented and secured by military and law enforcement personnel. Mandatory quarantine was also imposed for people travelling from affected regions to other regions in Italy. Violations of the restrictions were punished with heavy fines and even prison sentences. Unfortunately, this did not prevent the further spread of the virus.

In March 2020, the government took nationwide containment measures and allocated emergency funds to support affected areas. Based on the severity of the COVID-19 situation in each region, Italy was divided into three zones: a red zone that went into full lockdown, a yellow zone in which events were cancelled and schools and cultural institutions were closed, and the rest of the national territory in which hygienic and safety measures were advised in public places ('Decreto coronavirus', 2020). The red and yellow zones were still mostly located in northern Italy. The lockdown affected more than 16 million people and the measures were strictly enforced (Lowen, 2020). Nevertheless, infection rates, hospitalisation numbers and deaths continued to soar. Images of overcrowded hospitals, makeshift ventilators and stacked coffins littered the national and international front pages. At its peak on 27 March, 26,790 new cases and 919 COVID-19 related deaths were registered (Beltekian et al., 2021) Further restrictions were imposed and expanded to other regions, as all non-essential production, industries and businesses throughout Italy were closed.

The lockdown continued during April but as hospitalisation and death rates dropped, some businesses were allowed to reopen. The government announced the easing of some travel restrictions as of 4 May 2020. More restrictions were lifted in the course of this month. On 18 May, the majority of businesses reopened and free movement within regions was allowed again. Initially, only essential movement across regions was permitted but this restriction is lifted on 3 June, which officially ended Italy's first lockdown.

In June and July 2020, COVID-19 cases slowly began to rise again. Nevertheless, containment measures were eased throughout the country. It was not until 7 October that tighter restrictions were put in place and mask-wearing became mandatory in all public places, inside and outside. As the second COVID-19 wave hit Italy, stricter rules were reintroduced, such as the prohibition of public and private gatherings and limited opening of bars and restaurants. The government announced a new lockdown and

curfew on 4 November and the red, orange and yellow zones were reinstated. The COVID-19 situation in November 2020 was at least as bad as it was in March. On 13 November, 40,902 new cases were reported. The highest number of COVID-19 related deaths in one day was registered on 3 December, with 993 new deaths (Beltekian et al., 2021).

In the meantime, the EU had agreed to provide a COVID-19 recovery package (Next Generation EU fund) to help Italy navigate the pandemic. However, the Conte II government could not come to an agreement on how these funds ought to be spent. As a result, the government members of IV resigned from their posts and Conte lost the support of IV in parliament. On 26 January 2021, Conte offered his resignation to Sergio Mattarella, the Italian President. Mattarella asked Draghi, the former President of the European Central Bank, to become PM and to form a new government. The unelected Draghi formed a technocratic government of national unity with broad support among parliamentarians. When the infection rates decreased in January and February 2021, COVID-19 measures were somewhat eased, but largely remained in place during the third COVID-19 wave that arrived in spring.

#### ***4.5.2 Data presentation***

In the same way as the Netherlands, the course of the COVID-19 measures taken by the Italian government is reflected in the OxCGRT stringency index (Hale et al., 2021). The average stringency index is calculated from the start of the first measures and therefore covers the period of 1 February 2020 until 1 April 2021. The data on populist support in Italy stems from the POLITICO Europe Poll of Polls (*POLITICO Europe Poll of Polls - Italy*, n.d.). Populist support is expressed as a percentage of the total seats in the national parliament that a populist party would acquire if elections were to be held on that date. Again, 1 January 2020 forms the baseline measure for the analysis and political parties are categorised as populist based on the PopuList dataset (Rooduijn et al., 2019).

Unfortunately, the Italian government was less meticulous than the Dutch government in collecting data on public support for the COVID-19 measures. However, some surveys on COVID-19 have been conducted by Ipsos among Italian adults (18 years and over) between March 2020 and February 2021 (*Italia Covid Oggi, Sondaggi*, n.d.). Although these reports mostly focus on citizen's perceptions of health risks, fear of economic consequences and compliance with the COVID-19 measures, the reports published between January and June as well as in November 2020 also contain some statements about support for the COVID-19 measures that were imposed by the government. In addition, Jørgensen et al. (2021, p. 12) measured an average level of support for COVID-19 measures of about 0.6 (scale 0-1) in Italy between March and November 2020.

The stringency index of the COVID-19 measures taken by the Italian government, support for populist parties and citizen's support for the restrictions are presented in Table 2. These data can also be found in Appendix B, including the additional explanatory remarks.

**Table 2. An overview of the Stringency index of the COVID-19 measures, support for populist parties and support for the COVID-19 measures in Italy between 1 January 2020 and 1 April 2021.**

Date	Stringency index	Overall populist support	Populist support per party				Support measures
			M5S	FI	Lega	FdI	
1-1-20	0	66%	16%	7%	32%	11%	N/A
1-2-20	19.44	63%	15%	6%	31%	11%	N/A
1-3-20	69.91	62%	14%	6%	30%	12%	58%
1-4-20	91.67	62%	14%	6%	29%	13%	67%
1-5-20	93.52	63%	15%	6%	28%	14%	62%
1-6-20	63.89	64%	15%	7%	27%	15%	53%
1-7-20	58.33	62%	15%	6%	26%	15%	N/A
1-8-20	50.93	64%	16%	7%	26%	15%	N/A
1-9-20	54.63	63%	15%	7%	26%	15%	N/A
1-10-20	47.22	62%	15%	6%	25%	16%	N/A
1-11-20	74.07	62%	15%	7%	24%	16%	43%
1-12-20	79.63	62%	15%	7%	24%	16%	N/A
1-1-21	84.26	62%	14%	8%	24%	16%	N/A
1-2-21	78.70	62%	15%	7%	24%	16%	N/A
1-3-21	82.41	64%	15%	8%	24%	17%	N/A
1-4-21	84.26	64%	16%	7%	23%	18%	N/A
<b>Average</b>	68.86						

#### 4.5.3 Analysis and conclusion

Four things stand out when comparing the Italian data to the Dutch data. First, the average stringency index since the first measures were taken, is 8 points higher in Italy than in the Netherlands, which means that the Italian response to COVID-19 has been more strict. This is probably due to the fact that Italy has been hit harder by the pandemic than the Netherlands. Although the Netherlands has had more confirmed cases of COVID-19 (75,934 total cases per million as of 1 April 2021, compared to 59,659 cases for Italy), the disease has been much more deadly for Italians (1,817 total deaths per million, versus 975 in the Netherlands as of 1 April 2021) (Beltekian et al., 2021). This justified a stricter response from the Italian government.

Second, it appears that no ‘rally around the flag’ effect can be observed in Italy. Support for governing populist party M5S even decreased slightly from 16% on 1 January 2020 to 14% on 1 March and April. However, support for governing party PD (not included in table 2) increased from 19% on 1 January to 21% on 1 March, April and May (*POLITICO Europe Poll of Polls - Italy*, n.d.). As support for LeU was stable at 3%, the overall government support remained the same.

Third, it seems that public support for the COVID-19 measures was significantly lower in Italy, especially in the initial stages of the pandemic. However, since different methods were used to measure support for the restrictions, the data might simply not be comparable. In the March 2020 Ipsos survey, 40% of Italians agreed to the statement that they were “willing to accept rigid limits”, which has been translated in this thesis as support for the strict COVID-19 measures that were implemented by the Conte II government in March. 55% of respondents, however, asked “to be able to continue to lead a normal existence”, which is not shown in table 2. In addition, in the November 2020 survey, 43% of respondents said that the government was handling the second wave well, while 53% disagreed with this statement. But 62% of respondents also said that they believed that the increased infection rates were a result of non-compliance with the COVID-19 measures by other Italians, while only 29% attributed the rise in infections to poor decisions by the government (*Italia Covid Oggi, Sondaggi*, n.d.). The Italian data on support for COVID-19 measures can therefore be called ambiguous, to say the least.

Fourth, the overall support for populist parties is much higher in Italy than in the Netherlands. In academic literature, Italy has been referred to as “the promised land” of or a “breeding ground” for populism because of the sustained success of populist parties (Bertero & Seddone, 2021, p. 46). Lega, or LN (Lega Nord; Northern League) emerged in the 1980s, while Berlusconi’s FI gathered popular support in the early 1990s. With the introduction of M5S, a non-right-wing populist party has come to the stage (*ibid.*).

No significant change in overall populist support can be observed in Italy between January 2020 and April 2021. A significant change is defined as a deviation >10% from the baseline, i.e. a change in support >7% (6.6% rounded up). As overall support fluctuated between 62% and 66%, no significant increase or decrease of overall populist support could be observed during the period examined. However, a significant change in support can be observed for two political parties at the non-aggregate level: Lega and FdI. Voter support for Lega has been gradually declining from 32% on 1 January 2020 to 23% on 1 April 2021, while support for FdI has risen from 11% to 18% during this period. The support for other political parties has been relatively stable. Therefore, the only trend that can be observed is increasing

support for FdI at the expense of Lega. FdI is the only party that has been in opposition under Conte II as well as Draghi. Could this be an indication that the COVID-19 measures imposed by the Italian government have contributed to increased support for FdI?

The data does not provide a sufficient basis to answer this question in the affirmative. Populist parties FI and Lega were both in opposition until February 2021. Only the support for Lega decreased, while support for FI remained stable at around 7%. The limited data that is available on public support for the COVID-19 measures in Italy shows no consistent correlation between support for measures and an increase or decrease in populist support. Between 1 March 2020 and 1 April 2020, support for the measures increased from 58% to 67% while FdI support grew from 12% to 13%. When support for the measures dropped to 62% and 53% in May and June, respectively, support for FdI continued to grow to 14% and 15%. In any case, since there is no data available for the months in which the COVID-19 measures were eased by the government, the data are too unreliable to make any substantiated statements about the relationship between COVID-19 measures and populist support.

## 5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This thesis provided an answer to the question of whether there is a relationship between the response of a government to COVID-19 and support for populist parties, by conducting a comparative analysis between the cases of the Netherlands and Italy. It found that no direct link between the government response to COVID-19 and support for populist parties could be established based on the examined data between 1 January 2020 and 1 April 2021.

A significant decrease in overall populist support could be observed in the Netherlands during the first and third COVID-19 wave and subsequent measures. However, the decline in populist support during the first wave was probably caused by a ‘rally around the flag’ effect that led to an increase in support for the governing parties, while the decreased support for the populist party FvD explained the overall decline in populist support during the third wave of COVID-19 and subsequent containment measures. The strong decline in support for FvD during the third wave was most likely caused by internal party struggles. Support for FvD increased again during the general elections in March 2021, which might have been a result of their opposition to the government’s COVID-19 measures. However, there are no indications that this support was a result of the populist nature of FvD. A vote for the populist FvD might simply have been a protest vote, based on frustration with the government COVID-19 measures. There are no clear correlations between a change in populist support in the Netherlands and a change in the stringency of the COVID-19 measures.

For the Italian case, there was one factor that might point towards a relationship between the COVID-19 measures taken by the government and populist support. While the overall populist support remained stable, support for the non-governing populist party FdI increased at the expense of the populist Lega. FdI is the only populist party that has been in opposition throughout the entire examined period, which might indicate support as a result of opposition to COVID-19 measures taken by the government. However, the available data on public support for the COVID-19 measures in Italy shows no consistent correlation between support for measures and an increase or decrease in populist support. In addition, no data were available for the months in which the COVID-19 measures were lifted. As a result, there are no reliable indications that there is a correlation between COVID-19 measures and populist support in Italy.

This shows one of the limitations of the data used for the comparative analysis between the Netherlands and Italy. To reliably and accurately determine whether COVID-19 measures that were taken by a government affect voter support for populist parties, or whether support for populist parties affects citizen's support for COVID-19 measures, it would have been best to conduct a survey to measure support for COVID-19 measures, populist attitudes and support for populist parties within individuals. Only then can be established if there is a (significant) correlation, over even causation, between the two variables. Unfortunately, the timeframe of this thesis did not allow for this type of data collection as it was too time-consuming.

Other limiting factors are the following. As discussed in chapter 3, many factors influence populist support, which might have distorted the current findings. For instance, this research has not extensively examined the influence of factors such as external efficacy or political trust, or COVID-19 related factors such as the number of COVID-19 related deaths, pandemic fatigue or economic effects of the pandemic (such as decreased GDP or increased unemployment rates) in Italy and the Netherlands. In addition, neither the Netherlands nor Italy has a government that is fully populist versus an opposition that is fully non-populist (or vice versa). This hypothetical situation would provide an ideal research design to observe the relationship between populist support and COVID-19 measures in their 'purest form' and allow any possible change in populist support to be accurately attributed to the right variable (support for COVID-19 measures). Furthermore, both case studies concern European countries. Although there is no indication that the chosen cases are not representative of other countries inside or outside of Europe, there is little ground for making generalisations based on the results of these case studies.

The antipluralist nature of populism implies that there is no room for dissenting voices. In the context of the pandemic, this can express itself as populists not being able to acknowledge that there might not be such a thing as the best approach to the pandemic. The nature of the COVID-19 crisis as a force majeure made it harder for populists to politicise the pandemic than a crisis such as the Great Recession or the European migrant crisis. Nevertheless, it is not unlikely that crisis and populism influence each other, since crisis can be considered a cause, prerequisite or facilitating factor for populism and populism strengthens a sense of crisis. As the pandemic progressed, more decisions had to be made by politicians about the virus containment measures. This opened a window of opportunity for populists to politicise the COVID-19 crisis.

In this regard, it is also relevant that in the Netherlands, as well as in Italy, technocratic actors exert great influence on the COVID-19 policies. Since February 2021, Draghi is the non-elected PM of Italy who formed a technocratic government. However, since the government is supported by a parliamentary majority, this non-democratic aspect might be sufficiently compensated. In the Netherlands, however, the OMT has an important advisory function and *de facto* decisive function on COVID-19 policies, as the Dutch government tends to follow the advice given by the OMT. Since the OMT consists of non-elected experts, this removes the COVID-19 measures somewhat out of the sphere of democratic decision-making. This is not in line with the populist notion that politics should, at all times, be a representation of the popular will. As discussed, undemocratic decision-making can lead to increased populist support.

Additionally, people with low political trust are more likely to have little trust in experts and are more likely to support populist parties. This can become self-reinforcing as populism also leads to lower political trust. Furthermore, stringent COVID-19 measures can have adverse effects on citizen's wellbeing. When these citizens feel like they have little influence on the situation that they are in, and do not feel heard by their political representatives, they can lack external efficacy, which in turn might also increase populist support. Therefore, although the analysed case studies do not present a direct relationship between the COVID-19 measures that were taken by the government and support for populist parties, it is not inconceivable that the COVID-19 restrictions might have an indirect effect on populist support.

Finally, there are some recommendations for areas of future research. As mentioned, an emphasis on data collection at the individual level might provide more solid and reliable information for analysis of the link between COVID-19 measures and populist support. This can provide new insights into the relationship between populist attitudes, support for populist parties and COVID-19 measures, and whether this dynamic changes when a government is populist or non-populist. In addition, research can focus on the best way to deal with populists in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Over the past decades, populism has proven to be here to stay, and the best way to deal with this is to engage with populist actors and supporters in order to gain a better understanding of the needs that underlie populist support.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A: Data COVID-19 response Stringency index, populist support and support for government measures (the Netherlands)

Date	Stringency index*	Populist support**	Populist support per party**				Support measures***	
			PVV	FvD	SP	JA21	Right measures	Too strict
1-1-20	0	29%	12%	11%	6%	N/A	N/A	N/A
1-2-20	0	29%	12%	11%	6%	N/A	78%	N/A
1-3-20	5,56	28%	12%	10%	6%	N/A	73%	N/A
1-4-20	78,7	24%	10%	8%	6%	N/A	84%	N/A
1-5-20	78,7	24%	11%	7%	6%	N/A	88%	N/A
1-6-20	62,96	25%	11%	7%	7%	N/A	81%	N/A
1-7-20	39,81	24%	11%	7%	6%	N/A	60%***	34%
1-8-20	39,81	26%	12%	7%	7%	N/A	53%	28%
1-9-20	50,93	28%	14%	7%	7%	N/A	51%	30%
1-10-20	62,04	27%	15%	5%	7%	N/A	48%	29%
1-11-20	62,04	27%	15%	5%	7%	N/A	50%	30%
1-12-20	56,48	25%	16%	3%	6%	N/A	50%	30%
1-1-21	78,7	24%	15%	2%	6%	1%	50%	32%
1-2-21	82,41	24%	14%	2%	7%	1%	48%	39%
1-3-21	78,7	23%	13%	3%	6%	1%	45%	40%
1-4-21	75	26%	11%	6%	6%	3%	40%	41%
Average since start measures	60,84571429							

<b>Date</b>	<b>Comments</b>
<b>1-1-20</b>	
<b>1-2-20</b>	
<b>1-3-20</b>	First wave. "Intelligent lockdown" 23-3-20 - 31-5-2020. Rally around the flag effect? VVD from 15% 1-1 to 22% 1-4, not much change for other governing parties
<b>1-4-20</b>	
<b>1-5-20</b>	
<b>1-6-20</b>	
<b>1-7-20</b>	
<b>1-8-20</b>	18-8-20 New limitation on visitors but primary and secondary schools fully reopen
<b>1-9-20</b>	29-9-20 Measures tightened due to rising infection rates
<b>1-10-20</b>	Second wave. 14-10-20 Partial lockdown
<b>1-11-20</b>	4-11-20 - 18-11-20 Further tightening partial lockdown
<b>1-12-20</b>	Third wave (or continuation of second). 1-12-20 Mandatory mask-wearing in public spaces, 15-12-20 full lockdown. Decline populist support caused by decreased support for FvD (internal party struggles)
<b>1-1-21</b>	6-1-21 First vaccination. 23-1-21 - 27-4-21 curfew imposed, despite decreasing total infection rates (however, contagious alfa variant on the rise)
<b>1-2-21</b>	Numbers remain stable/decrease, measures eased slightly per 1-3-21
<b>1-3-21</b>	General elections 15-17 March
<b>1-4-21</b>	

\* COVID measures Stringency Index OxCGRT (0-100, 100 = strictest)

\*\* Populist support measured as a percentage of total seats in the House of Representatives if elections were to be held on that date.

January 2020 is the baseline measure. Difference >3% (NL) from baseline is coloured red (>10% deviation from baseline).

Parties labelled as populist (based on the PopuList data):

NL: FvD (incl JA21 that split off in Dec 2020), PVV and SP. SP stable at 6-7%; variation caused by varying support for populist radical right parties.

\*\*\* Support for COVID-19 measures is based on the "Flitspeiling corona" for Feb 2020 - June 2020 and on the 'Alleen Samen' campaign reports from July 2020 onwards.

Flitspeiling corona: Support for measures is the percentage of respondents that gave a 6 or higher (scale 0-10) for trust in the measures taken by the government.

Alleen Samen campaign reports: support for COVID-19 measures is expressed as the number of people who believe the government is "taking the right measures to curb the spread of COVID-19" (not too strict or easing measures too quickly).

Unfortunately, the surveys were not always conducted on the 1st of each month, so there is some discrepancy between the stringency index and populist support data.

Flitspeiling corona:

0-measurement/baseline survey conducted between 14-17 Feb: used for February 78%

1-measurement 26-28 Feb: used for March 73%

2-measurement 6-8 Mar 73%

3-measurement 13-15 Mar 72%

4-measurement 27-29 Mar: used for April 84%

5-measurement 14 April - 17 April 88%

6-measurement 30 April - 1 May used for May 88%

7-measurement 14-15 May 84%

8-measurement 16-17 June: used for June 81%

‘Alleen Samen’ campaign reports:

Week 27 used for July 60%

Week 32 used for August 53%

Week 36 used for Sep 51%

Week 40 used for Oct 48%

Week 45 used for Nov 50%

Week 49 used for Dec 50%

Week 1 used for Jan 50%

Week 5 used for Feb 48%

Week 9 used for Mar 45%

Week 13 used for April 40%

**Appendix B: Data COVID-19 response Stringency index, populist support and support for government measures (Italy)**

Date	Stringency index*	Populist support*	Populist support per party**				Support measures***
			M5S	FI	Lega	FdI	
1-1-20	0	66%	16%	7%	32%	11%	N/A
1-2-20	19,44	63%	15%	6%	31%	11%	N/A
1-3-20	69,91	62%	14%	6%	30%	12%	58%
1-4-20	91,67	62%	14%	6%	29%	13%	67%
1-5-20	93,52	63%	15%	6%	28%	14%	62%
1-6-20	63,89	64%	15%	7%	27%	15%	53%
1-7-20	58,33	62%	15%	6%	26%	15%	N/A
1-8-20	50,93	64%	16%	7%	26%	15%	N/A
1-9-20	54,63	63%	15%	7%	26%	15%	N/A
1-10-20	47,22	62%	15%	6%	25%	16%	N/A
1-11-20	74,07	62%	15%	7%	24%	16%	43%
1-12-20	79,63	62%	15%	7%	24%	16%	N/A
1-1-21	84,26	62%	14%	8%	24%	16%	N/A
1-2-21	78,7	62%	15%	7%	24%	16%	N/A
1-3-21	82,41	64%	15%	8%	24%	17%	N/A
1-4-21	84,26	64%	16%	7%	23%	18%	N/A
<b>Average</b>	<b>68,858</b>						

\* COVID measures Stringency index OxCGRT (0-100, 100 = strictest)

\*\* Populist support measured as a percentage of total seats in the national parliament if elections were to be held on that date.

January 2020 is the baseline measure. Difference >6% (IT) from baseline is coloured red (>10% deviation from baseline).

Parties labelled as populist (based on the PopuList data):

IT: FI, FdI, LN and M5S.

\*\*\* Support for COVID-19 measures is based on surveys conducted by Ipsos, which were unfortunately limited.

<b>Date</b>	<b>Comments</b>
<b>1-1-20</b>	Slight decrease support Lega, FI and M5S (all 1%) compared to January. Non-populist parties benefit.
<b>1-2-20</b>	
<b>1-3-20</b>	First wave. March 2020 - June 2020: nationwide lockdown
<b>1-4-20</b>	No rally around the flag effect can be observed.
<b>1-5-20</b>	
<b>1-6-20</b>	Free movement within the whole national territory restored, de facto ending the lockdown
<b>1-7-20</b>	
<b>1-8-20</b>	
<b>1-9-20</b>	7 October: state of emergency extended until 31 January 2021. Mandatory mask wearing outside. 13 October: reintroduction of stricter rules (e.g. gatherings forbidden). 25-10 Bars close at 18:00, gyms and theatres close etc.
<b>1-10-20</b>	Second wave. 4-11 New lockdown announced, back to red, orange and yellow zones.
<b>1-11-20</b>	Curfew implemented.
<b>1-12-20</b>	Limitation of free movement between regions for the Christmas holiday season
<b>1-1-21</b>	Introduction of white zones from 16 Jan
<b>1-2-21</b>	Measures gradually eased as infection rates drop
<b>1-3-21</b>	Start of third wave. Tightening of containment measures.
<b>1-4-21</b>	