

Populism in Europe as a mirror of an untrusting society

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Abstract: Several explanations to the recent rise of populism in Europe have been discussed in political science and economics, ranging from economic shocks to cultural backlash and immigration flows. Based on the very definition of populism and its confrontational political style, we explore the additional possibility that populist attitudes and political parties have flourished because individuals lack trust in others.

We use three different identification strategies to estimate the causal effect of trust on populist attitudes and voting. We first develop a between-country analysis where we estimate the relationship between the inherited trust of US immigrants, as in Algan and Cahuc (AER, 2010) and current outcomes in the World Values Survey (WVS). Then, we proceed with a cross-sectional analysis at individual level using the trust of non-Western people in the 80s and the 90s measured in the WVS as an instrument for the trust of more recently surveyed individuals in the European Social Survey with the same demographic characteristics. Finally, we use panel data on the UK and on Germany to estimate fixed effects models of the relationship between trust and populist attitudes and voting. Each analysis finds that the lack of trust is a crucial driver of populist attitudes like dissatisfaction with democracy and the European integration, right-wing populist attitudes like hostility toward migration, security concerns and gender/minorities discrimination, and voting for populist parties. On the other hand, trust does not have a consistent relationship with preferences for redistribution, left-right orientation or political participation. Interestingly, trust has similar impacts on populist attitudes and voting across demographic and socioeconomic groups, suggesting that its importance is orthogonal to other factors such as immigration and economic shocks that have been shown to have differential impacts across individuals.