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Economic Distress and Populism: Examining the Role of Identity Threat and Feelings of Social Exclusion

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Populism has been a major political phenomenon in liberal democracies throughout the last decade. Focusing on economic distress as one of the basic triggers of populism, we proposed a model integrating individual-level indices of economic distress and status-based identity threat (i.e., frustration of identity motives) as predictors of populism. We conducted two survey studies operationalizing populism as an individual-level thin ideology among members of the general French population (Study 1: N = 458; Study 2: N = 1,050). Structural equation models supported status-based identity threat as a partial mediator in the links between indices of relative deprivation and populism (Study 1). Additional analyses revealed frustrated belonging (i.e., feelings of social exclusion) as the central identity motive in this pattern. Reproducing the same model with belonging frustration instead of global-identity motive frustration gave similar results (Studies 1 and 2). These findings provide the first evidence implicating identity threat—and belonging threat in particular—in the development of populist thin ideology and showed how identity motives are related to the economic distress pattern that predicts populism.

KEY WORDS: populism, identity threat, identity motives, economic distress, social exclusion

Populism has affected democratic debate in liberal democracies (Datts, 2020; Rooduijn, 2014). Although scholars debate the phenomenological nature of populism, consensus has emerged that it pivots on an antielitist view that leads to a conflictual relation with establishments and institutions (Laclau, 2005; Moffitt & Tormey, 2014; Mudde, 2017). In this sense, populism is considered a *thin ideology*, able to fit with any position on the right-left axis.

Evidence at both macro and individual levels has linked the increase of populism in liberal democracies to both economic and cultural crises (Corbet & Larkin, 2019; Inglehart & Norris, 2016; Oxendine, 2019; Rhodes-Purdy et al., 2021). Economic distress and cultural backlash have thus

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Highlights

- An integrative model of economic distress and identity threat predicts support for populist thin ideology.
- Findings provide original evidence of the association between economic status-based identity threat—the frustration of identity motives—and support for populist thin ideology.
- The frustration of belonging—feelings of social exclusion—was the one identity motive that robustly predicted endorsement of the populist thin ideology.
- Three different levels of relative deprivation (RD)—intergroup, interindividual, and temporal—were directly or indirectly involved in the economic distress pattern: Intergroup RD was the strongest predictor of populism.

emerged as key factors contributing to increased support for populist beliefs and politicians throughout the last decade. Specifically, the 2007 economic crisis had negative repercussions for people's actual and perceived economic status within society, fueling economic distress, whereas the migration crisis in Europe and the United States has provoked reactions against some progressivist societal changes (e.g., global values, openness towards differences, multiculturalism) that some perceive as a cultural threat. Thus, public opinion in western countries has questioned the legitimacy of several social groups related to political, economic (e.g., banks, multinational corporations), and/or cultural (e.g., journalists, academics) elites. Simultaneously, the populist thin ideology has spread in these countries.

Our current article focuses on the economic distress pattern. Employing a correlational design, we analyzed the relation between economic distress predictors and adhesion to the populist thin ideology, while exploring the potential role of motivated identity processes in explaining this pattern (Vignoles, 2011). We propose a new model of the economic distress pattern in which the frustration of identity motives relative to economic-status-based identity (Destin et al., 2017)—a form of identity threat—predicts adhesion to populist thin ideology. We further examined whether this identity threat in turn is predicted by indices of perceived economic deprivation.

THE IDEATIONAL APPROACH TO THE STUDY OF POPULISM

Mudde (2017) offered an exhaustive definition of populism as a thin ideology composed of two components: (1) that society is divided into a "good people" ingroup and a "corrupted élite" outgroup, and (2) that politics should be the direct expression of a people's general will without any institutional mediation. Mudde's theorization of populism inspired research considering populism as a set of specific measurable beliefs: the ideational approach. This approach has highlighted several individual-level predictors of populist endorsement, which refer to both the economic and the cultural threats often emphasized in theoretical literature on the link between populism and economic and cultural crises (Inglehart & Norris, 2016).

THE LINK BETWEEN ECONOMIC DISTRESS AND POPULISM

A commonly identified explanation for recent increases in populism in Europe and western democracies is economic distress. The underlying hypothesis is that the current wave of populism was originally triggered by the 2007–08 economic crisis and the subsequent economic structural changes that disrupted western societies and disintegrated their middle classes (Albertini, 2013; Schettino & Khan, 2020). Evidence in social and political sciences has supported the validity of this hypothesis at a macro level (Corbet & Larkin, 2019) and found that macro indices of economic disparity are related to support for populism at both regional and national levels (Oxendine, 2019).

Political and social psychology have investigated the relation between economic distress and populist endorsement at the individual level. Subjective economic and/or socioeconomic status indicators (Adler et al., 2000) and experiences of relative deprivation (RD) have been found to predict populism (Marchlewska et al., 2018; Urbanska & Guimond, 2018). Although subjective social status and RD are both indices of economic distress, the two constructs differ substantially from one another. The former is the economic and social position that someone perceives that they are in, whereas the latter is the extent to which they feel economically deprived in relation to a specific comparator. The RD construct represents an individual's perception of their economic situation in relation to one of several possible comparators, including intergroup (other groups in society), interindividual (other individuals), and/or temporal (one's past situation) comparison targets (Smith et al., 2012). Furthermore, RD includes both a cognitive and an affective dimension. The cognitive dimension taps into the extent to which individuals perceive that their own position is disadvantageous compared to the comparator. The affective dimension taps into the negative emotional reaction to the perception of being relatively deprived in relation to the comparator, specifically feelings of injustice and anger. Following Smith and coauthors' meta-analysis on RD, a good operationalization should include both cognitive and emotional dimensions.

Thus, in the present study we considered subjective social status as a potential predictor of RD. The perception of social status could be expected to directly influence perception and feelings of RD, such that low-status individuals would feel more deprived than high-status individuals. As we discuss next, we expected that economic status-based identity threat would partially or wholly mediate the relationship of these economic threat variables with endorsement of populism.

ECONOMIC STATUS-BASED IDENTITY THREAT

Although the effect of identity threat on individuals' adhesion to the populist thin ideology has received some theoretical attention (Hogg & Gøtzsche-Astrup, 2021), there are as yet few empirical studies supporting this assumption. The present studies aim to fill this empirical gap. We analyzed identity threat–in the form of frustration of identity motives–in relation to the perception of one's identity regarding their economic position, informed by motivated identity construction theory (MICT; Vignoles, 2011).

MICT (Vignoles, 2011) suggests that, beyond social identity theory's emphasis on self-esteem and distinctiveness (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), at least four other identity motives are involved in the identity-construction process: belonging, continuity, meaning, and efficacy. The motive for self-esteem is the need to perceive oneself positively; belonging is the need to perceive oneself as accepted by important others and one's social groups; distinctiveness is the need for a sense of identity that is clearly distinguishable from others; continuity is the need to perceive that there is a continuity between the past, present, and future projections of the self; meaning is the need to perceive that one's existence matters in the grand scheme of things; and efficacy is the need to perceive oneself as able to act and impact one's environment. The frustration of these psychological motives induces identity threat and is associated with negative emotions, depressive states, and other forms of mental health conditions. Furthermore, identity motives have been shown to drive self-regulation: Vignoles et al. (2006) found that individuals tend to perceive aspects of the self that satisfy identity motives as more important or self-defining, whereas they perceive identity aspects that frustrate identity motives as more peripheral to self-definition.

MICT argues that identity motives are relevant to both personal and collective identities and that any aspect of one's life that satisfies the identity motives can become a salient identity element within one's self-definition (Vignoles, 2018). Accordingly, in this study we made no marked distinction between collective (social) and personal (individual) identity. The identity element that we considered in our two studies was that related to their economic position in society. The status-based identity has been conceived as a specific identity content, which is the outcome of an integrative narrative, social and future-oriented identity-construction process (Destin et al., 2017).

Thus, this identity combines collective and individual levels: It might be perceived both in relation to other group members sharing this peculiar condition and as an element reflecting their individual position. Both are likely to incorporate changes in the past as well as perceived chances of improvement or decline in the future.

Here, the economic status-based identity element was made salient in order to determine the extent to which it frustrates (or satisfies) the identity motives. We investigated the frustration of identity motives in general (Study 1)—and, in particular, the belonging motive (Study 2)—relative to economic status-related identity as a predictor of the populist thin ideology and as a mediator between the economic distress pattern and populism.

THE PRESENT STUDIES: INTEGRATING IDENTITY THREAT TO THE ECONOMIC DISTRESS PATTERN OF POPULISM

Recently, scholars have proposed that economic distress may be an antecedent to populism (Inglehart & Norris, 2016; Oxendine, 2019; Rhodes-Purdy et al., 2021). The underlying assumption is that economic crises threaten the basic motivational pattern that is required to make individuals perceive that democracies are the most appropriate form of government. According to Bar-Tal and Magal (2021), democratic systems endure as long as they are perceived as able to satisfy citizens' epistemic and security needs. This is more generally related to the fact that economic and social inequality threats account for a variety of motivated collective and individual reactions to satisfy need for control and need for self-esteem (Fritsche & Jugert, 2017).

In this paper, we aimed to integrate economic distress factors with motivated identity-construction processes (Vignoles, 2011) to pursue a better understanding of populism. We therefore integrated subjective socioeconomic status, RD, and identity threat into a single model predicting support for populism and populist voting.

We conducted two studies on the French population aiming to analyze the role of frustration (versus satisfaction) of identity motives as a predictor of endorsing the populist thin ideology. In Study 1, we focused on the role of identity threat including the frustration of all six identity motives proposed in MICT. In Study 2, we built on the results of Study 1 by focusing more closely on the role of social exclusion (frustration of the belonging identity motive) and its effects on populist beliefs.

These objectives were expressed in six hypotheses (see Figure 1).

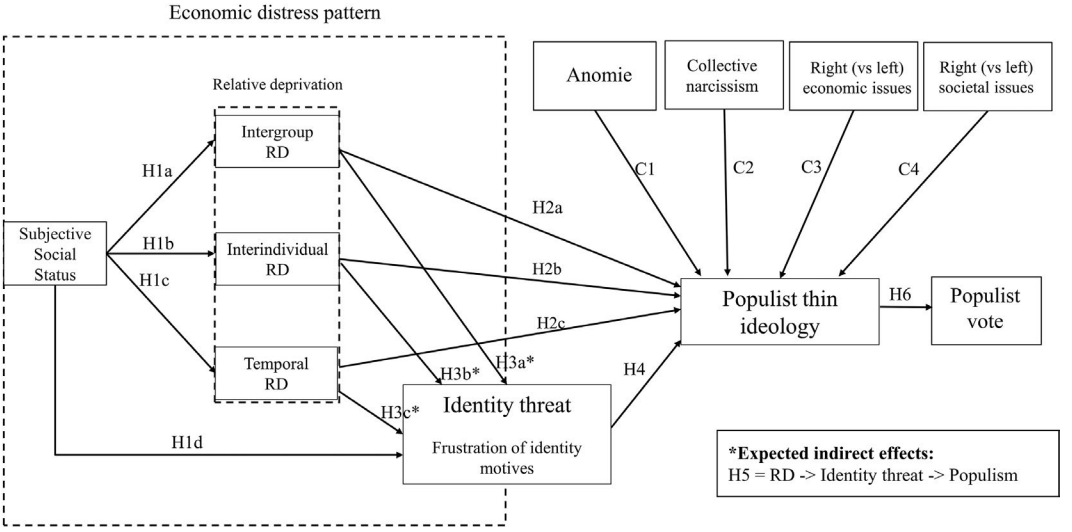

Figure 1. Summary of the hypotheses in Study 1.

H1: Subjective social status was expected to be a negative predictor of three levels of RD (intergroup, interindividual, and temporal) and of economic-based identity threat (identity motives frustration).

H2: Intergroup, interindividual, and temporal RD would be positive predictors of the adhesion to the populist thin ideology.

H3: The three levels of RD were expected to be positive predictors of the frustration (versus satisfaction) of identity motives.

H4: Economic-based identity threat would be a positive predictor of the populist thin ideology.

H5: Positive indirect effects of the three forms of RD on populism through identity threat (mediator) were expected.

H6: Populist thin ideology endorsement was expected to be a positive predictor of populist vote intentions.

In this model, subjective social status is an antecedent of RD and economic-based identity threat but is not expected to have a direct effect on populism. This is because subjective social status concerns one's perceived position in society and is not an index of threat on its own (Adler et al., 2000). Rather, we expected populism to be directly predicted by threat indicators (i.e., RD and status-related identity threat). RD was distinguished at the intergroup, intraindividual, and temporal levels, three of the possible object comparisons proposed by Smith et al. (2012). These levels were expected to be correlated but not redundant.

Populist vote intention was modeled as the final outcome predicted by the populist thin ideology. French politics at the time of data collection was an appropriate context for studying populism. Indeed, both right- and left-leaning populism has showed strong vitality throughout the last decade in France: For instance, Jean-Luc Mélenchon (*La France Insoumise*) is considered a left-wing populist leader, and Marine Le Pen (*Le Rassemblement National*) is considered a right-wing populist leader (Ivaldi, 2019). Both leaders exceeded 15% of votes at the first round of the presidential election in 2017 and were considered compelling candidates in the presidential election in 2022.

The focus of the present research was on the economic distress pattern within the study of populism, examining the potential role of economic status-related identity threat in explaining this pattern. Although we were not looking to test a comprehensive predictive model of populism, we controlled for expected effects of four additional variables in order to strengthen results relative to our specific focus. Based on the cultural threat pattern, we expected perception of anomie (C1) and national collective narcissism (C2) to be significant positive predictors of populism (Elçi, 2022; Hartwich & Becker, 2019; Lammers & Baldwin, 2020; Marchlewska et al., 2018; Oliver & Rahn, 2016). National collective narcissism is the belief that one's national ingroup is somehow better than other nations (Golec de Zavala et al., 2009). Perceived anomie is the perception that society and its traditional points of reference—such as morality, rules, predictability—are eroding, so that it is difficult to feel properly oriented into society (Hartwich & Becker, 2019; Sprong et al., 2019; Teymoori et al., 2016).[1] Lastly, right (versus left) political orientation on economic (C3) and societal/moral issues (C4) were expected to show a negative and a positive effect on the populist thin ideology, respectively (Manunta & Becker, manuscript under preparation).

[1]Note that effects of perceived anomie and cultural narcissism on populism theoretically might also be mediated by identity threats. However, the focus of such threats would be individuals' sense of cultural identity, rather than their economic status in society. Since we did not measure cultural identity threat in the current studies, we treated these variables as direct predictors of populism in our hypotheses (Figure 1).

STUDY 1

Methods

Sample

Study 1 was conducted on a sample (n = 458) of the French adult population aged from 18 to 81 years (M = 40.22, SD = 13.42). We excluded from our analyses respondents who declared not being French citizens and did not fully complete the survey. The sample was composed of 63.97% women, 34.72% men, 1.31% nonbinary or other genders. Data were collected between the March 17 and May 22, 2020. During this period, the entire French territory was under strict lockdown due to the Covid-19 pandemic: Schools and nonessential services were closed, nonessential travels and gatherings banned, and remote working was mandatory. This period also corresponded to the end of the two-year-long Yellow Vest crisis.

Instruments and Procedure

Participants were invited to respond to an online survey and were mostly recruited by announcements on social networks. The survey was composed by a set of items referring to social-psychological and/or political measures (intergroup, interindividual, and temporal RD, identity motives threat, collective narcissism, anomie, populism thin ideology, political position on social and economic issues, populist vote), subjective social status, and sociodemographic measures (age, education, and gender). The order of the measures was randomized but sociodemographic variables and subjective social status always appeared after political- and social-psychological ones.

Identity Threat (Identity Motives Frustration Versus Satisfaction)

Each identity motive was measured by a balanced 4-item scale (2 reversed items per motive), self-esteem, efficacy, belonging, distinctiveness, continuity, and meaning. This scale was specifically created for this study, inspired by other ones used in previous studies into identity motives (Easterbrook & Vignoles, 2012; Thomas et al., 2017). In Study 1, we were interested in the general identity threat, so we treated the frustration of all identity motives indistinctly, as part of a single identity-threat variable. The internal coherence was satisfactory (Ω_h = .71) and was calculated following recommendations for variables that present an underlying multidimensional structure (Viladrich et al., 2017). Response scales were formulated in a 7-point Likert format requiring respondents to express agreement versus disagreement towards statements such as “My economic position in society makes me feel excluded” (one of the items for frustration of belonging motive). All items highlighted the status-based identity (Destin et al., 2017) focusing on the economic position occupied in society, in order to explicitly measure how the perception of this particular identity content frustrates (versus fulfils) identity motives. Scores were calculated such that the higher the score, the higher the frustration/threat (versus satisfaction). For analyses using observed scores, we computed the sum of all 24 items. For analyses using identity threat as a latent variable, we treated the sums for each of the six motives as observed indicators. In a set of exploratory analyses, we further used this scale to consider the frustration of each identity motive separately (following Vignoles et al., 2006; Vignoles, 2011).

Relative Deprivation

RD was divided into three dimensions that were treated distinctly in our analyses: intergroup (Ω = .88), interindividual (Ω = .81), and temporal RD (Ω = .92). The intergroup level consists in RD perceived for one's ingroup in relation to outgroups; the interindividual level consists in the individual perception of RD compared to other members of the same economic ingroup; finally, the temporal level refers to the perception that one's economic resources were higher in the past than the present. Each dimension was composed of 4 items (2 of which reversed) inspired by Smith et al.'s (2012) meta-analysis that offered an in-depth conceptualization of RD. As suggested by Smith and colleagues, every dimension was composed of items measuring both the perceived extent of the economic difference with the object of comparison (intergroup, interindividual, or temporal) and emotions related to the perception of this difference. Example items for each dimension: "In general, to what extent do you think that your social class has fewer economic resources than the other social classes in society?" (intergroup RD); "To what extent do you feel that the difference in economic status between you personally and other people in your social class is unfair?" (interindividual RD); and "How satisfied are you with the difference between your personal economic condition in the past and the present?" (temporal RD). Participants responded using 7-point scales, and points were attributed in such a way that higher scores corresponded to higher RD levels. Both observed scores (sum of the items) and latent variables (with items as indicators) were employed for each depending on the kind of statistical analysis.

Subjective Social Status

Subjective social status was measured by the ladder measure of Subjective Social Status (Adler et al., 2000). This is a measure of the perceived socioeconomic position in society. Responses were coded so that the higher the score, the higher the perceived level of social status (1 = *the bottom of society*; 7 = *the top of society*).

National Collective Narcissism (Towards French National Group)

We used the 5-item version of the collective narcissism scale (Golec de Zavala et al., 2009; Ω = .78) translated in French (Bertin et al., 2021), and with items referring to the French national group (e.g., "If French people had a major say in the world, the world would be a much better place"). Participants expressed their level of dis/agreement using 7-point Likert scales. Scores were calculated so that higher scores corresponded to higher collective narcissism levels. Both observed scores and latent variables were employed in our analyses.

Anomie

We used a 6-item (Ω = .86) scale with three items taken from Elchardus and Spruyt (2016)'s scale (e.g., "I no longer understand what is happening in the world today"). The remaining three items were reversed items created by us specifically for this study. Participants expressed their level of dis/agreement on 7-point Likert scales. Scores were calculated so that higher scores corresponded to higher levels of anomie. Both observed scores and latent variables were employed in our analyses.

Right (versus left) Political Orientation

We used two self-placement measures of political orientation (Lesschaeve, 2017). Right (versus left) economic concerned right-left orientation regarding economic politics issues ("Please indicate

your political beliefs, between left and right, regarding economic issues [such as social benefits, government spending, tax cuts]"). Right (versus left) social concerned right-left orientation regarding societal/moral issues. Responses were given on 7-point response scales (1 = *left* and 7 = *right*).

Sociodemographics

Data on age and education levels were collected using multiple response items. Education was measured by the highest education degree obtained. Following the French education system, seven response options were provided (1 = *no education degree*; 7 = *master or above*). Gender was measured as a binary variable (1 = *male*, 2 = *female*; the response "other/I don't recognise myself on the binary spectrum" was also proposed in the survey but treated as a missing value in the analyses given a low frequency).

Populist Thin Ideology

The populist thin ideology was measured by the POPulist Thin Ideology Scale (POP-ThIS, Manunta & Becker, manuscript under preparation). This is composed of 10 Likert scale items (Ω = .88; 7-point response scales), half of which are reversed. Two example items are "Banks, politicians and all the establishments belong to the same corrupt caste"; and "The Elite is *not* more corrupt than the People" (reversed). Scores were coded such that higher scores corresponded to higher levels of populism. This was used as both observed and latent variable depending on the analyses.

Populist Vote Intention

Populist vote intention was measured by asking respondents to think about their own upcoming potential vote. Participants were asked to indicate for which political party they would vote. These voting intentions were then transformed into a dichotomous variable (1 = *populist*; 0 = *nonpopulist*) drawing on a categorization of French electoral lists in the last European elections in 2019 provided by three independent raters. The categorization between populist and not populist parties was independent from the right-left axis. Raters were asked to categorize between populist and not populist parties no matter their position on the right-left axis by taking into account the kind of political discourses led by the members of each party. As a result, both right and left parties were categorized as populist (e.g., for the left: *La France Insoumise*; for the right: *Le Rassemblement National*), as well as both right and left parties were categorized as not populist (e.g., for the left: *Génération.s*, for the right: *Les Republicains*). Raters were French master's students in political sciences. Using this measure, the conditions in which participants expressed their vote intention were very similar to the actual conditions in the voting booth (secrecy, confidentiality, etc.). It might therefore be considered a proxy for the corresponding behavioral variable.

Analytical Steps

This study drew on a cross-sectional design (correlation matrix: Table S1 in the online supporting information). Beyond the already mentioned descriptive statistics and internal coherence estimations, we conducted linear regressions and structural equation models (SEM). First, multiple linear regression with observed measures was used to test Hypothesis 3 and Hypothesis 4 controlling for anomie, collective narcissism, right (versus left) economic and social, and sociodemographics. Second, a SEM with the expected regression paths was employed to test all the hypotheses simultaneously, as shown in Figure 1. All the hypothesized direct effects on populism were expected to be

significant in both the regressions and the SEM to be corroborated. Variables for which the direct effect on populist thin ideology was expected but not found were excluded from SEMs, unless they were expected to be involved in other paths. Additional regressions and structural equation models were performed for exploratory purposes.

Since all hypotheses were expressed with specific relation (positive or negative), respective *t*-tests for Beta indices presented below correspond to the one-tailed versions. In contrast, *t*-tests for Beta indices relative to paths for which no specific hypotheses were formulated were performed in their two-sided versions. Hypotheses were corroborated when $p < .05$. Finally, all the analyses were conducted with *R v 4.0.2* (R Core Team, 2020) and its packages *lavaan 0.6.-7* (Rosseel, 2012) and *psych 2.0.7* (Revelle, 2021).

Results

Direct Effects on Populism

First, a multiple linear regression (Table S2 in the online supporting information) predicting the populist thin ideology was run to test the effects of identity threat ($\beta = .14$, $p = .002$, 95% CI [.06, .22]), intergroup RD ($\beta = .16$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.08, .24]), interindividual RD ($\beta = .09$, $p = .010$, 95% CI [.03, .16]), and temporal RD ($\beta = .16$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.09, .24]). Controls were also included: national collective narcissism ($\beta = .09$, $p = .019$, 95% CI [.02, .16]), anomie ($\beta = .01$, $p = .443$, 95% CI [−.06, .07]), right-left position for economic politics ($\beta = -.39$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−.46, −.32]), right-left position for social/moral politics ($\beta = .09$, $p = .019$, 95% CI [.02, .16]), age ($\beta = -.04$, $p = .362$, 95% CI [−.12, .04]), education ($\beta = .00$, $p = .978$, 95% CI [−.08, .09]), gender ($\beta = -.08$, $p = .033$, 95% CI [−.16, −.01]), and subjective social status ($\beta = -.02$, $p = .613$, 95% CI [−.12, .07]). The regression accounted for approximately 37% of variance in populist thin ideology.

Testing Our Model

A structural equation model was performed as described in Figure 2. Anomie was excluded from this model because the expected direct effect was not found in the previous regression analysis. The model showed satisfactory fit (X^2 [$df = 604$, $N = 380$] = 1,596.91, $p < .001$, robust CFI = .904, robust RMSEA = .075[.072, .077]). Structural paths from the model are shown in Figure 2: Expected direct effects on populism were similar to the above-described regression analysis. The direct effects of subjective social status on the other dimensions of the "economic distress" pattern were confirmed for intergroup RD ($\beta = -.54$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−.60, −.47]), temporal RD ($\beta = -.42$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−.49, −.35]), and identity threat ($\beta = -.33$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−.42, −.24]), but not for interindividual RD ($\beta = -.02$, $p = .381$, 95% CI [−.11, .07]). Indirect effects of intergroup ($\beta = .02$, $p = .039$, 95% CI [.002, .050]), interindividual ($\beta = .05$, $p = .005$, 95% CI [.02, .08]), and temporal RD ($\beta = .02$, $p = .034$, 95% CI [.002, .042]) on populist thin ideology were significant. The direct effect of the populist thin ideology on populist vote intentions was significant ($\beta = .72$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.65, .79]).

Exploratory Analyses

We conducted an additional set of analyses (Table S4 in the online supporting information and Figure 3) to explore the roles of the six separate identity motives as predictors of populism. First, a two-block linear regression analysis was conducted to explore the role of each identity motive as a predictor of the populist thin ideology distinctly. This first regression block, including frustration of the six identity motives as parallel predictors, showed that frustration of belonging was the only identity motive that significantly predicted populist thin ideology ($\beta = .26$, $p < .001$,

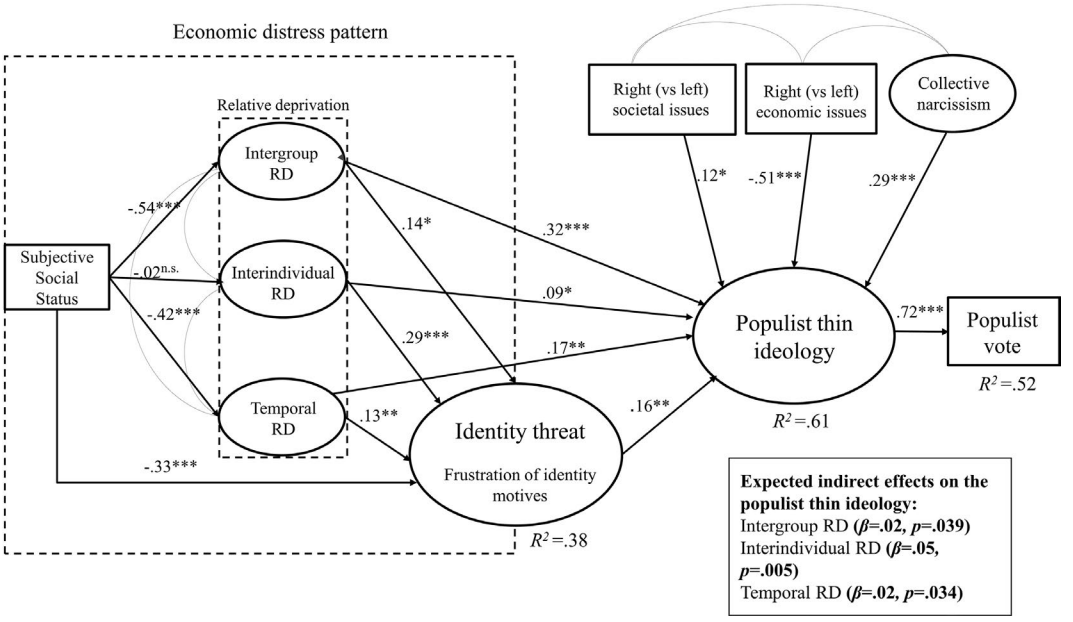

Figure 2. Structural equation model (DWLS method) to test the hypotheses of Study 1, including social status deprivation, relative deprivation, identity threat, right (versus left) positions on economic and social issues, collective narcissism, populist thin ideology, and populist vote. N = 380. Participants who did not express their vote intention were excluded from these analyses. All regression weights and covariances were standardized. Fit indexes: (X^2 (df = 604, N = 380) = 1596.91, p < .001, Robust CFI = .904, Robust RMSEA = .075[.072, .077]). *p < .05, **p < .01 ***p < .001.

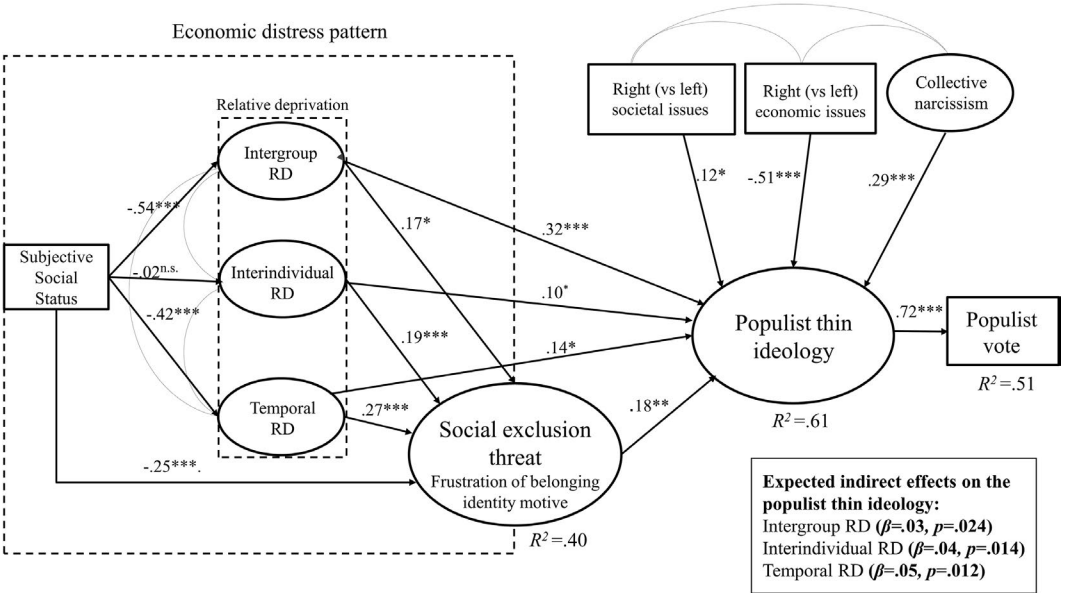

Figure 3. Structural equation model (DWLS method) to explore results with a model including the frustration of belonging instead of the global latent factor of identity threat. This model includes social status deprivation, relative deprivation, identity threat, right (versus left) positions on economic and social issues, collective narcissism, social exclusion (frustration of belonging) and populist vote. N = 380. Participants who did not express their vote intention were excluded from these analyses. All regression weights and covariances were standardized. Fit indexes: (X^2 (df = 538, N = 380) = 1423.57, p < .001, Robust CFI = .902, Robust RMSEA = .075[.072, .078]). *p < .05, **p < .01 ***p < .001.

95% CI [.15, .37]). In the second regression block, controlling for anomie, collective narcissism, right-left axes, and sociodemographics, the effect of frustration of belonging remained significant (β = .18, p = .001, 95% CI [.08, .28]) and was the identity motive with the strongest effect; an additional effect of continuity became significant in this model (β = .10, p = .026, 95% CI [.01, .19]).

Consequently, we replicated the same structural equation model run previously to test the hypotheses (Figure 2) but replacing (latent) identity threat with a latent measure based only on the 4 items regarding the frustration of the belonging motive (social exclusion). This SEM (Figure 3) yielded very similar results to the previous one. First, it showed satisfactory fit (X^2 [df = 538, N = 380] = 1,423.57, p < .001, robust CFI = .902, robust RMSEA = .075[.072, .078]). In this model, the frustration of belonging motive had a significant effect on the populist thin ideology (β = .18, p = .003, 95% CI [.07, .30]) and was a significant partial mediator between the three forms of RD—intergroup (indirect effect: β = .03, p = .024, 95% CI [.01, .06]), interindividual (indirect effect: β = .04, p = .014, 95% CI [.01, .06]) and temporal RD (indirect effect: β = .05, p = .012, 95% CI [.01, .09])—and endorsement of the populist thin ideology.

STUDY 2

Study 2 was a replication of Study 1, carried out to confirm the exploratory findings following which the frustration of belonging motive was a direct predictor of the populist thin ideology and a mediator in the economic distress pattern. Results from Study 1 were consistent with previous findings that social exclusion exacerbates ingroup/outgroup distinctions and similarities between ingroup members (Bernstein et al., 2014; Sacco et al., 2011). Since the populist thin ideology is characterized by the perception of an intergroup bias opposing the ingroup people versus the outgroup élite (Obradović et al., 2020), the purpose of this study was to test the role of feelings of social exclusion (i.e., threat to or frustration of the belonging identity motive) as a predictor of adhesion to the populist thin ideology and as underlying key-factor of the economic distress pattern. This purpose was operationalized in the same set of hypotheses as those of Study 1, only replacing the global identity threat with the more specific threat to the belonging identity motive (Figure 4, H4). Also, the effect of anomie (C1, Figure 1), which failed to reach

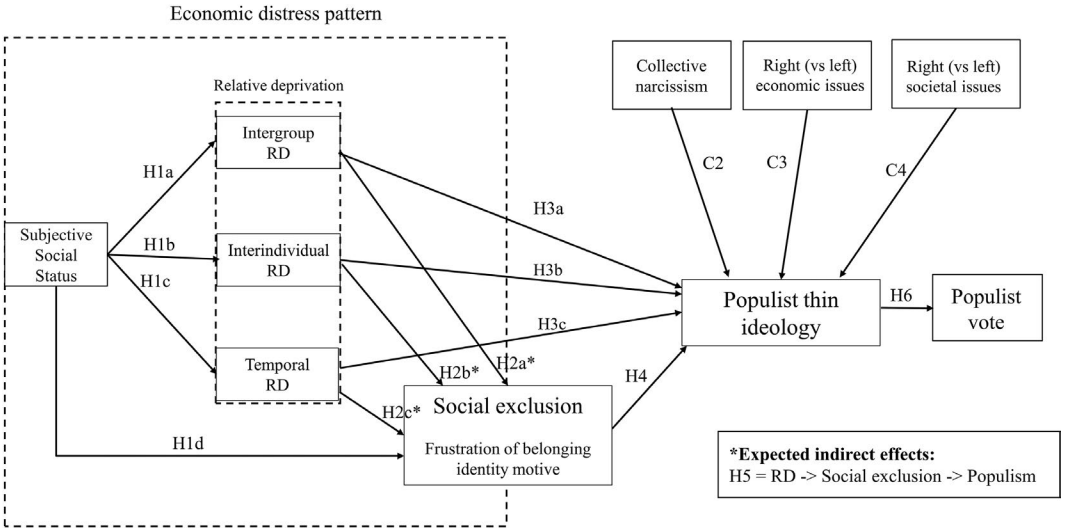

Figure 4. Summary of the hypotheses in Study 2.

significance in Study 1, was not expected in Study 2. Hypotheses were preregistered[2] before data collection was launched (preregistration).

Based on theoretical arguments combined with the findings in Study 1, we designed Study 2 to conduct a confirmatory analysis regarding the role of frustration of belonging in the economic distress pattern. Nevertheless, in addition to the frustration of belonging, the frustration of continuity was also found to be a significant predictor of the populist thin ideology in Study 1, but this effect was unstable—that is, it was not significant in the first block of the regression in Table S4 in the online supporting information. Thus, we also conducted, and present below, further exploratory analyses of continuity as a predictor of populism, in view of future research.

Methods

Sample

Study 2 was conducted on a sample (n = 1,050) of the French adult population aged from 18 to 90 years (M = 48.86, SD = 15.51). The only inclusion criterion was to be a French citizen. Respondents who were not French or did not fully complete the survey were excluded from our analyses. The sample was composed of 63.71% females, 33.91% males, and 2.38% nonbinary or other genders. Data were collected between January 25 and February 11, 2021. During this period, restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic in France were less strict compared to those during Study 1. There was no general lockdown, schools were open, remote working was recommended but not mandatory, and indoor private visits were not banned even though meeting outdoor was encouraged. Some restrictions were active: Indoor services were not allowed for bars and restaurants and a night curfew was implemented.

Instruments and Procedure

Procedures and instruments were the same as in Study 1. Instruments were described under Study 1. The reliability indices computed on the Study 2 sample were:

- Social exclusion/ frustration of belonging identity motive (Ω = .83)
- Frustration of continuity (Ω = .75)
- Frustration of distinctiveness (Ω = .64)
- Frustration of efficacy (Ω = .79)
- Frustration of self-esteem (Ω = .83)
- Frustration of meaning (Ω = .78)
- Intergroup RD (Ω = .87)
- Interindividual RD (Ω = .83)
- Temporal RD (Ω = .92)
- National collective narcissism (Ω = .83)
- Populist thin ideology (Ω = .89)

[2]Numbering of hypotheses differed between paper and preregistration. The effects of subjective social status in the preregistration were expected to be positive because we anticipated scoring this variable in the opposite direction (the higher the score the lower the economic position), but this was reversed for a better understanding after reviewers' suggestion, thus reversing also the direction of the stated relation in the hypothesis. Due to an error, the paths Hypothesis 1b, Hypothesis 1d, and Hypothesis 3b (Figure 4) were not preregistered. Nevertheless, we decided to include them because there were no theoretical arguments for their exclusion. These paths were consistent with findings in Study 1 and the theoretical sense of the preregistered model.

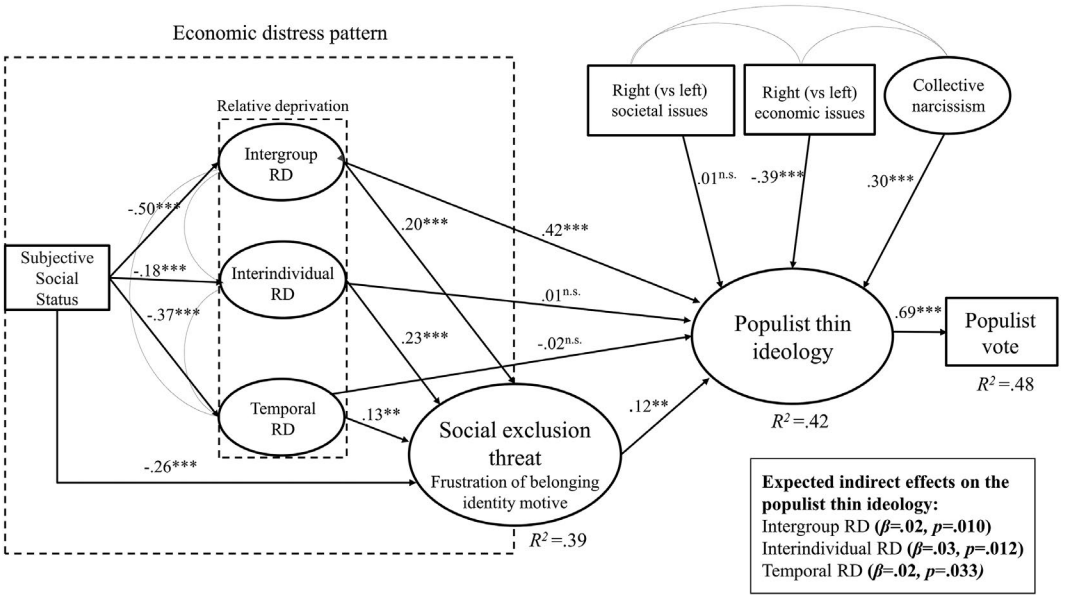

Figure 5. Structural equation model (DWLS method) to test the hypotheses from Study 2. The model includes social status deprivation, relative deprivation, identity threat, right (versus left) positions on economic and social issues, collective narcissism, social exclusion (frustration of belonging), and populist vote. N = 860. Participants who did not express their vote intention were excluded from these analyses. All regression weights and covariances were standardized. Fit indexes: (X^2 (df = 538, N = 860) = 2004.19, p < .001, Robust CFI = .936, Robust RMSEA = .06. [.06, .06]). *p < .05, **p < .01 ***p < .001.

Analytical Steps

This study drew on a cross-sectional design (correlation matrix: Table S5 in the online supporting information). The analysis conducted in this study was the exact replication of the structural equation model performed in the exploratory analyses of Study 1, only using the more focused measure of identity threat in the form of threat to belonging (social exclusion). This SEM with the expected regression paths was employed to test all the hypotheses simultaneously. *T*-tests' *p*-values for Beta indices presented for this structural equation model correspond to one-tailed versions.

A multiple linear regression on the populist thin ideology, including all identity motives distinctly and other control factors, was run to explore further evidence about the role of continuity to predict populist thin ideology.

Results

Testing the Hypotheses by the Structural Equation Model

The SEM (Figure 5) showed satisfactory fit (X^2 [df = 538, N = 860] = 2,004.19, p < .001, robust CFI = .936, robust RMSEA = .06. [.06, .06]). All results were similar to the corresponding model in Study 1. The direct effects of subjective social status on the dimensions of the "economic-identity threat" pattern were confirmed for intergroup RD (β = −.50, p < .001, 95% CI [−.55, −.45]), interindividual RD (β = −.18, p < .001, 95% CI [−.24, −.13]), temporal RD (β = −.37, p < .001, 95% CI [−.42, −.32]), and frustration of belonging (β = −.26, p < .001, 95% CI [−.32, −.21]). Indirect effects of intergroup (β = .02, p = .010, 95% CI [.01, .04]), interindividual (β = .03, p = .012, 95%

CI [.01, .05]), and temporal RD (β = .02, p = .033, 95% CI [.002, .029]) on populism through the frustration of belonging were significant.

Expected direct effects on the populist thin ideology were confirmed for: frustration of belonging/social exclusion (β = .12, p = .006, 95% CI [.04, .19]), intergroup RD (β = .42, p < .001, 95% CI [.33, .50]), right-left position on economic issues (β = −.39, p < .001, 95% CI [−.45, −.34]), and collective narcissism (β = .30, p < .001, 95% CI [.24, .36]). Moreover, the direct effect of the populist-thin-ideology scale on the populist voting intentions was significant (β = .69, p < .001, 95% CI [.64, .74]). Interindividual, temporal RD, and right (versus left) positions on the social/moral political issues did not show significant direct effects on populism.

Exploring the Role of Continuity and Other Identity Motives

A multiple linear regression of the populist thin ideology was run. In the first block, only the frustrations of each identity motive were included as factors (Table S7 in the online supporting information). In the second block, controls were added. Frustration of continuity showed a significant effect neither in the first (β = −.01, p = .643, 95% CI [−.08, .05]) nor in the second block (β = .00, p = .936, 95% CI [−.06, .06]). Only the frustration of belonging showed a significant positive effect in both the first (β = .30, p < .001, 95% CI [.22, .38]) and the second block (β = .20, p < .001, 95% CI [.12, .28]). Surprisingly, the frustration of efficacy presented a negative effect on populism in both the first (β = −.11, p = .004, 95% CI [−.19, −.04]) and second block (β = −.12, p = .004, 95% CI [−.20, −.05]). This may be due to strong collinearity with belonging (r = .57, p < .001); in fact, the bivariate correlation between the frustration of efficacy and populism was weak but positive (r = .10, p = .002).

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Hypotheses related to the main focus of these studies were confirmed. Participants perceiving themselves to occupy a low position in society were more likely to feel deprived compared to other social classes (intergroup), other individuals from the same social class (interindividual), and their own past position (temporal). These feelings of RD, as well as participants' perceived social status, were associated with holding an economic status-based identity that was experienced as psychologically threatening. This, in turn, predicted participants agreement with populist ideas.

In both studies, participants who felt a stronger sense of RD were more likely to report feelings of social exclusion (frustration of belonging) linked to their economic position in society, and these feelings of exclusion were linked to greater endorsement of populist thin ideology. Crucially, in Study 2 and replicating the results of Study 1, frustration of the belonging motive fully or partially mediated the pathways from all three forms of RD to populism. Further, our findings provided evidence concerning other predictors of populism outlined in previous literature. These results are discussed below and highlight how the roles of subjective economic indicators and identity threat (in particular social exclusion) might be interpreted within an economic distress model that predicts the adhesion to the populist thin ideology.

Identity Threat and Populist Thin Ideology

Investigating the role of identity threat as a direct predictor of the populist thin ideology was one of the main aims of our research. Although theoretical contributions have suggested investigating the role of identity processes (Hogg & Gøtzsche-Astrup, 2021; Obradović et al., 2020), to the best of our

knowledge there was not any empirical evidence on the implication of motivated identity construction nor any form of identity threat on the populist thin ideology.

The model that we corroborated suggests that starting from the perception of having a lower social position, individuals develop RD feelings which predict economic status-based identity threat which, in turn, predicts populism. Using the frustration of status-based identity motives as a measure of the identity threat allowed us to establish a missing link in the relationship between social-economic distress and populism.

Albeit novel, these findings are consistent with the theoretical literature which implicates identity processes in populism (Hogg & Gøtzsche-Astrup, 2021; Obradović et al., 2020), as well as with empirical findings associating various perceptions of threat to major political attitudes and behaviors (Ben-Nun Bloom et al., 2015; Jost, 2017).

These results might be interpreted as indicating an identity management strategy (Blanz et al., 1998) activated in response to the identity threat experienced from occupying a subordinate social-economic position: The perception of low socioeconomic status provokes sentiments of RD and identity threat, which, in turn, provoke the adhesion to the populist thin ideology providing a positive "good people" identity opposed to the negative outgroup "corrupt elite." Future research could investigate this further, for example by testing whether experimental manipulations of social exclusion lead people to increase their endorsement of populist ideology.

The Economic Distress Pattern and Its Integration With Identity Threat

Recent evidence from social and political sciences has highlighted the idea that economic distress fuels populism (Oxendine, 2019; Rhodes-Purdy et al., 2021). This hypothesis was confirmed in Study 1 and in Study 2. In particular, intergroup RD (Figures 2 and 5) produced the highest effect size in Study 1 and was the only type of RD that was directly related to populism in Study 2. Further, intergroup RD was the strongest direct predictor of populism in both studies (Figures 2 and 5). These findings fit well with the theoretical definition of populism given by Mudde (2017), particularly with the first characteristic—that society is divided into a "good people" ingroup and a "corrupted élite" outgroup, in other words, the intergroup conflict between the people and the elite (Obradović et al., 2020).

To the best of our knowledge, this was the first time the distinction between these three levels of RD was employed to investigate populism, and this helped us deepen our understanding of the phenomenon from an inner-attitudinal perspective (Smith et al., 2012). In both studies, all three levels were directly or indirectly related to populism.

The distinction between interindividual and intergroup levels seemed particularly relevant because of their moderate correlation (Table S1 in the online supporting information) showing a substantial distinction of these two dimensions. This is also consistent with empirical evidence that integrates the concept of RD with social identity theory and suggests that intergroup and interindividual levels of deprivation should both be taken into account (Abrams & Grant, 2012; Mummendey et al., 1999).

Furthermore, all three levels of RD showed direct effects on the economic status-based identity threat, highlighting two important points: First, the employment of these three elements is not redundant but necessary to get a better understanding of some identity threat processes; second, the status-based identity is both a social (collective) and an individual identity and incorporates a comparison with the past. The latter strengthens the assumption that this economic element might be perceived as both a collective and an individual identity element (Vignoles, 2018). To conclude, the integration between economic distress pattern and identity threat as a predictive model of the populist thin ideology is an essential part of this framework.

The Role of Social Exclusion

In the present studies, the frustration of the belonging motive corresponded to the perception of social exclusion relative to the economic position occupied in society. Contrasting with the classic focus of social identity theory on positivity (i.e., self-esteem) and distinctiveness (e.g., Tajfel & Turner, 1979), our analyses showed that frustrated belonging was the best predictor of the populist thin ideology among identity motives. Moreover, this specific identity motive appeared to be central to this process: Firstly, when tested on the same data, the model with social exclusion (Figure 3) showed a very similar pattern to that with the global measure of identity threat (Figure 2). Second, the frustration of belonging was the only identity motive to show consistent and robust direct effects on the populist thin ideology across the two studies.

The role played by social exclusion here is consistent with findings that individuals who experience social exclusion tend to identify themselves with broader groups (e.g., the people instead of a specific social class; Knowles & Gardner, 2008) and overestimate the dimensions of their ingroup (Pickett et al., 2002). This finding could also be related to the strategy to redefine ingroup borders (Blanz et al., 1998). Future research could further investigate the implication of this particular identity motive within the economic distress pattern of populism.

Is the Cultural Backlash Pattern Also Related to Identity Threat?

Even though our main focus has been on predictors related to the economic distress pattern, we also included predictors linked to cultural backlash: national collective narcissism and anomie. The former was a direct predictor of populist thin ideology in both studies, whereas the latter did not show any effect on the populist thin ideology.

The lack of support for a direct effect of anomie contrasts with previous empirical evidence where anomie was a predictor of antielitist attitudes (Hartwich & Becker, 2019). The employed measure of anomie may not have caught all relevant aspects of the construct (Elchardus & Spruyt, 2016): This measure focused particularly on the difficulty to understand the current world and less on the perception of erosion of society (Teymoori et al., 2016). The role of anomie should be tested again using alternative measures. In contrast, the implication of national collective narcissism is coherent with studies showing a link between this construct and right-wing populism (Marchlewska et al., 2018).

Together, these results suggest that the cultural backlash pattern is not an alternative to the economic distress pattern, but they act by parallel paths on the populist thin ideology. Correlations between these predictors and identity threat (Table S1 in the online supporting information) suggest that identity threat may be a mediator for the cultural pattern as well. However, appropriate examination of this question requires future research that measures threats to cultural aspects of identity, rather than to economic status-based identity.

Limitations and Future Directions

Future research should illuminate questions related to the limitations of these studies. A cross-cultural approach could be adopted to test if these results are generalizable to other populations and contexts. Also, the cross-sectional design presents some limits: Correlations do not furnish a clear direction for causality, and the collinearity in regression models might, in some cases, yield artificial effects difficult to replicate. Our principal hypotheses were confirmed in both studies, and we did not find major problems of collinearity in these studies (except for the effect of efficacy mentioned in the results of Study 2), but experimental or longitudinal designs could help to provide more robust evidence for causal directions. Furthermore, a deeper focus on the role of social exclusion

is recommended, especially keeping in mind the particular context in which the two studies were conducted. For some individuals, social distancing might have increased general feelings of social exclusion (Graupmann & Pfundmair, 2022). Even though belonging motive frustration in these studies was in relation to the economic status-based identity element, we cannot be certain whether social distancing affected this particular form of social exclusion, nor, more importantly, whether the relation between this identity motive and populism was affected. Nevertheless, the social distancing context (and more generally pandemic-related restrictions) varied significantly between the periods of data collection for the two studies. Similarity in results between Study 1 (strong lockdown) and Study 2 (flexible social distancing) suggests a minor role of social distancing on our results. Still, it would be useful to replicate these studies out of emergency context. Finally, the potential mediating role of forms of identity threat should be tested also for predictors relative to the cultural backlash postulate.

These studies support the thesis that identity motive frustration—particularly frustration of the belonging motive—is a psychological predictor of populism and plays a central role in the process by which economic deprivation triggers populism. This is the first empirical evidence to our knowledge highlighting the implication of identity threat as a predictor of populism. The framework that emerged implies a pattern that starts from the perception of low social status and, going through RD and identity threat, ends up with the behavioral outcome of a populist vote.

CREDIT AUTHOR STATEMENT

E.M.: Conceptualization, Methodology, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Writing - Original Draft. M.B.: Conceptualization, Methodology, Supervision, Writing - Review & Editing. M.J.E.: Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing - Review & Editing. V.L.V.: Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing - Review & Editing.

DATA ACCESSIBILITY STATEMENT

The preregistration for study 2 is openly available on the Open Science Framework (OSF) website at this link: "https://osf.io/fc9y7/" https://osf.io/myu7b?view_only=38b17fa9f3594da68cc53ad32a49a527. The preregistration adheres to the disclosure requirements for the preregistered badge maintained by the Center for Open Science (https://osf.io/tvyxz/wiki/home/). Raw data and materials of both studies will be provided if requested by any scholar or scientific institution. This request must be addressed to the corresponding author.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher's web site:

Table S1. Study 1: Bi-variate Correlations between Populism, Identity Threat, Intergroup Relative Deprivation, Interindividual Relative Deprivation, Temporal Relative Deprivation, Collective Narcissism, Anomie, Right (vs. Left) (Economy and Social Political Issues), Age, Education Level, Gender, Social Status Deprivation, Social Exclusion (Frustration of Belonging)
Table S2. Study 1: Multiple Linear Regression of the Populist Thin Ideology
Table S3. Study 1: Bi-variate Correlations between the Frustrations of the Six Identity Motives: Belonging, Continuity, Self-Esteem, Efficacy, Meaning, and Distinctiveness
Table S4. Study 1: Linear Regression in which Each Identity Motive was Considered Singularly (Outcome: The Populist Thin Ideology)
Table S5. Study 2: Bi-variate Correlations between Populism, Social Exclusion (Frustration of Belonging), Intergroup Relative Deprivation, Interindividual Relative Deprivation, Temporal Relative Deprivation, Collective Narcissism, Anomie, Right (vs. Left) (Economy and Social Political Issues), Age, Education Level, Gender, Social Status Deprivation
Table S6. Study 2: Bi-variate Correlations between the Frustrations of the Six Identity Motives: Belonging, Continuity, Self-Esteem, Efficacy, Meaning, and Distinctiveness
Table S7. Study 2: Linear Regression in which Each Identity Motive was Considered Singularly (Outcome: The Populist Thin Ideology)