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Populism, Economic Distress, Cultural Backlash, and Identity Threat:

Integrating Patterns and Testing Cross-National Validity

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**Populism, Economic Distress, Cultural Backlash, and Identity Threat:
Integrating Patterns and Testing Cross-National Validity**

Abstract

Populism is on the rise across liberal democracies. The sociopsychological underpinnings of this increasing endorsement of populist ideology should be uncovered. In an online cross-sectional survey study among adult samples from five countries (Chile, France, Italy, Romania, and the United Kingdom; $N = 9105$), we aimed to replicate an *economic distress* pattern in which relative deprivation and identity threat are associated with populism. We further tested a *cultural backlash* pattern—including perceived anomie, collective narcissism, and identity threat as predictors of populism. Multigroup structural equation models supported both economic distress and cultural backlash paths as predictors of populist thin ideology endorsement. In both paths, identity threat to belonging played a significant role as partial mediator. Furthermore, an integrative model showed that the two patterns were not mutually exclusive. These findings emphasize the implication of identity threat to belonging as an explanatory mediator, and demonstrate the cross-national generalisability of these patterns.

Keywords: populism, identity threat, social exclusion, economic distress, cultural backlash

Populism, Economic Distress, Cultural Backlash, and Identity Threat:

Integrating Patterns and Testing Cross-National Validity

Populism has become one of the most influential political phenomena in contemporary liberal democracies. Over the last two decades, support for leaders/parties adopting populist discourse has increased continuously (Kneuer, 2019). A social-psychological analysis identifying underlying processes of populism is crucial, yet has so far tended to overlook or confound it with far-right/conservative political orientation (Lammers & Baldwin, 2020; Marchlewska et al., 2018). Populism goes beyond right versus left positions and needs to be treated as a specific construct that is useful to understand the current state of liberal democracies (Manunta & Becker, in press).

The concept of *populist thin ideology* highlights the nature of populism as a set of beliefs independent of the right-left political axis, and research in social psychology needs to analyse in-depth psychological processes involved in the adhesion to this ideology. *Populist thin ideology* is composed of two beliefs: (1) that society is divided into a “good people” ingroup and a “corrupt élite” outgroup, and (2) that politics should be the direct expression of a people’s general will without any institutional mediation (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). The attribute of *thin* refers to the observation that these beliefs can be adapted to right-, centre-, or left-wing ideologies. Indeed, populist leaders and movements exist across the right-left axis: e.g., *France Insoumise* in France (left), *Movimento 5 Stelle* in Italy (post-ideologic), and *Alternative für Deutschland* in Germany (right; Rooduijn et al., 2019). This conceptualisation of populism founded the ideational approach (Mudde, 2017), which analyses populism as an individual-level variable measured by attitudinal scales (Castanho Silva et al., 2020; Schulz et al., 2018) and aims to identify correlates and predictors of individuals’ populist attitudes (e.g., Dennison & Turnbull-Dugarte, 2022; Prooijen et al., 2022).

Researchers have advanced two major hypotheses regarding the source of populism: The economic distress and the cultural backlash hypotheses (Inglehart & Norris, 2016; Oxendine, 2019; Rhodes-Purdy et al., 2021). The former proposes that populism is a consequence of economic crises, while the latter views populism as a consequence of threat related to increasingly multicultural and open (or globalised) societies. These patterns have often been treated as separate in previous research, but integrating them would be useful and necessary for a better understanding of populism (Carreras et al., 2019). Here, we focused on the psychological processes underlying the populist thin ideology. We analysed two specific types of identity threat as mediators within the economic distress and the cultural backlash patterns, respectively. The former threat tapped economic status-based identity—how people conceive themselves in relation to their economic position. The latter threat tapped society-based identity—how people conceive themselves as members of their society.

Identity Threat and Populism

The common ground between the economic distress hypothesis and the cultural backlash hypothesis is that they both indirectly posit populism as a response to feelings of threat (Bonansinga, 2022; Dennison & Turnbull-Dugarte, 2022; Hinckley, 2021; Oxendine, 2019). Psychological research has shown how threat can affect political outcomes (Onraet et al., 2014; Riek et al., 2006). However, identity threat, a particular form of threat that can arise when a person evaluates specific elements of their identity, has been overlooked in the field of populism (Hogg & Gøtzsche-Astrup, 2021). The first objective of this study was to show the relevance of identity threat in both economic distress (status-based identity threat) and cultural backlash (society-based identity threat) patterns of populism.

We define identity threat as a condition in which specific identity elements (e.g., an ingroup or an individual characteristic) affect one or several fundamental psychological needs that are functional for a fulfilled self (Breakwell, 1988). According to the Motivated Identity

Construction Theory (MICT, Vignoles, 2011), people construct their identities aiming to fulfil motives for self-esteem (perceiving themselves in a positive way), belonging (feeling included and accepted by others), distinctiveness (feeling that one is distinguishable from others), continuity (feeling a thread linking one's past, present and future), meaning (feeling their existence is meaningful), and efficacy (feeling in control and able to cope with issues). Thus, henceforth we refer to identity threat as the perceived frustration of these identity motives.

Identity threat has mainly been associated with the devaluation of collective identities (social identity; Blanz et al., 1998; Hogg, 2016; Tajfel, 1974). Here, we broadened the approach by indistinctly applying the concept of identity threat to collective and/or individual identity elements. MICT argues that identity motives are relevant to both personal and collective identities and that any aspect of one's life that satisfies identity motives can become a central identity element within one's self-definition (Vignoles, 2018). Two specific identities were considered in this study: Status-based identity and society-based identity. They were considered as both collective and individual layers of the self, since they can be situated at both social and personal levels of categorisation.

Economic Status-Based Identity Threat

Economic status-based identity is a particular identity related to one's economic situation (Destin et al., 2017). Two previous studies focusing on the economic distress pattern of populism (Manunta et al., 2022) showed that economic status-based identity threat predicted adhesion to the populist thin ideology, even when controlling for intergroup, interindividual, and temporal relative deprivation, and socioeconomic status, in a sample of French participants. Manunta and colleagues measured the extent to which people felt that their economic status frustrated (vs. satisfied) each of the six identity motives. They found that status-based identity threat to belonging (i.e., feeling of social exclusion) was a partial

mediator between the three forms of relative deprivation and populism. This suggests that social exclusion is an important psychological process triggering the adoption of populist thin ideology. In the present study, we tested the extent to which this pattern can be generalised across five different political contexts, by conducting a replication of the studies previously conducted in France. We expected the status-based identity threat to belonging to be a mediator between economic distress indices and populism (see *Economic Distress Model of Populism*).

Society-Based Identity Threat

Economic status-based identity is most relevant to the economic distress pattern of populism, whereas identity as a member of society would be a more suitable focus in a cultural backlash pattern. Hence, we measured how individuals perceive themselves in relation to the society they belong to and as a member of it (Hafer & Ran, 2016; Zhang et al., 2019). We measured the frustration (vs. satisfaction) of identity motives relative to society-based identity, to test whether society-based identity threat is part of the cultural backlash pattern of populism. To the best of our knowledge, there are no previous studies investigating the identity motives involved in the relation between cultural backlash and the populist thin ideology. We expected global identity threat (i.e., the undistinguished frustration of all the identity motives) to be associated with populist thin ideology, and to partially mediate the role of cultural backlash indices on populism (see *Cultural Backlash Model of Populism*). Each identity motive was also explored as a direct predictor of the populist thin ideology individually.

Economic Distress Model of Populism

In political science, the economic distress pattern suggests that the current wave of populism in liberal democracies is a direct consequence of the financial crisis that hit European and North American economies following the 2007-08 Lehman Brothers

bankruptcy. European countries and other advanced economies experienced several years of economic recession, weak growth, and spending cuts associated with policies that weakened public services and increased inequalities (Di Marco et al., 2013; Walshe & Smith, 2015). The economic distress hypothesis argues that the middle class's perception of economic distress increased negative resentment towards political and economic establishments.

Consistent with the economic distress hypothesis, individual-level indices of economic distress correlate with or predict populist attitudes. For example, subjective social status and feelings of relative deprivation predict populist indices (Marchlewska et al., 2018; Urbanska & Guimond, 2018). Subjective social status is the perception of one's individual position in society considering both economic and social dimensions (Adler et al., 2000). Relative deprivation is a person's perception of having a disadvantaged economic condition relative to comparators, and the injustice sentiments related to this perception (Smith et al., 2012). Thus, relative deprivation can be measured at the intergroup (one's social class compared to other social classes), interindividual (one's individual economic situation relative to other members of the same social class), and temporal level (one's current economic situation relative to one's past situation).

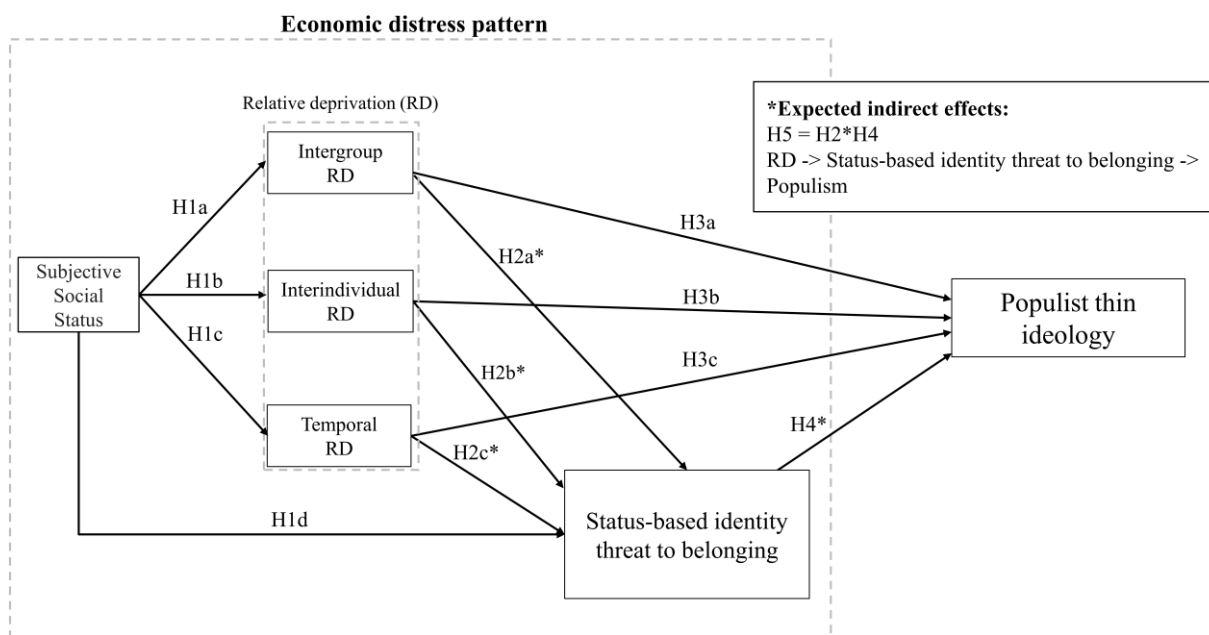
The second objective of this study was to investigate a model of economic distress in which low-status individuals would feel more (of the three types of) relative deprivation than high-status individuals, which, in turn, would predict populist thin ideology both directly and indirectly via status-based identity threat to belonging (i.e., social exclusion). This model is a replication of the model investigated in Manunta et al. (2022) and can be resumed in the following directional hypotheses (Figure 1):

- H1: Subjective social status is a negative predictor of intergroup (H1a), interindividual (H1b), and temporal relative deprivation (H1c), and (status-based) identity threat to belonging (H1d).

- H2a, H2b, and H2c: The three forms of relative deprivation are positive predictors of the (status-based) identity threat to belonging.
- H3a, H3b, and H3c: The three forms of relative deprivation are positive predictors of the populist thin ideology.
- H4: Identity threat to belonging (relative to status-based identity) is a positive predictor of the populist thin ideology.
- H5: Identity threat to belonging (relative to status-based identity) is a mediator between the three forms of relative deprivation and the populist thin ideology.

Figure 1.

Summary of the Hypotheses Relative to the Economic Distress Pattern of Populism.



Cultural Backlash Model of Populism

The cultural backlash hypothesis of populism posits that cultural reactions against progressive cultural changes underlie current populist waves in liberal democratic societies (Inglehart & Norris, 2016). For example, the migrant crisis that affected Europe and the United States during the 2010s have provoked a cultural backlash against the tolerance for

multi-ethnic open societies (Caiani & Graziano, 2019). These anti-globalism attitudes include raising negative resentments towards political establishments responsible for these policies.

Cultural backlash can be measured by the perception of anomie. Anomie is a sociological concept describing a condition in which society is disrupted by the absence of clear cohesive values and social norms regulating its flux (Durkheim, 1897). Thus, the perception of anomie is the feeling of breakdown of the social fabric associated with lack of clear values and norms (Teymoori et al., 2016), which has been found to correlate with populism (Hartwich & Becker, 2019; Oliver & Rahn, 2016).

Another construct within the cultural backlash pattern is collective narcissism, the belief of unrealistic greatness related to one's social group (Golec de Zavala et al., 2009). National collective narcissism is a predictor of negative attitudes towards immigration, and of populism (Lammers & Baldwin, 2020; Marchlewska et al., 2018).

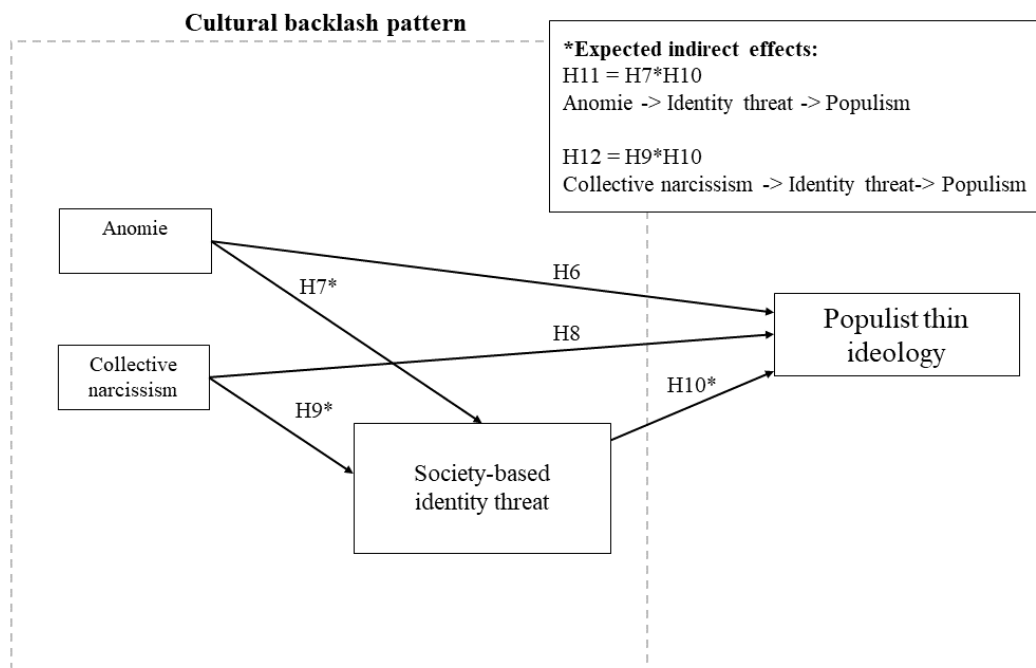
The third objective of this study was to investigate a cultural backlash model in which anomie and national collective narcissism significantly predict the populist thin ideology. Within this pattern, society-based identity threat (i.e., frustration of identity motives) was modelled as a partial mediator between national collective narcissism/anomie and the populist thin ideology. Directional hypotheses for the model of populism as an outcome of cultural backlash were formulated (Figure 2):

- H6: Anomie is a positive predictor of identity threat (relative to society-based identity).
- H7: Anomie is a positive predictor of the populist thin ideology.
- H8: Collective narcissism is a positive predictor of identity threat (relative to society-based identity).
- H9: Collective narcissism is a positive predictor of the populist thin ideology.

- H10: Identity threat (relative to society-based identity) is a positive predictor of the populist thin ideology.
- H11: Identity threat (relative to society-based identity) is a mediator between anomie and the populist thin ideology.
- H12: Identity threat (relative to society-based identity) is a mediator between collective narcissism and the populist thin ideology.

Figure 2.

Summary of the Hypotheses Relative to the Cultural Backlash Pattern of Populism.



In this cross-sectional study the directions of the (one-tailed) hypotheses are founded on the above-mentioned theoretical and empirical literature. Furthermore, our hypotheses were pre-registered ([pre-registration](#)), so that any opposite effects could not be considered as confirming results.

A Cross-National Study

The two models described were expected to show acceptable fit and satisfactory invariance across five liberal democratic contexts that present political differences. The five countries were: France and Italy as Western EU countries, the latter often considered a laboratory for novel political experiences in Western democracies (Tarchi, 2015); Romania as an example of Eastern EU countries with a communist past (Kalemaj, 2021; Pogany, 1996); United Kingdom as an Anglo-Saxon country, a unique case of European country having abandoned the EU market, as well as an example of constitutional monarchy (Tridimas, 2021); and Chile as example of stable liberal democracy in South-America (Hawkins et al., 2020). In addition to their distinct political profiles, these five countries vary in major cultural dimensions, such as Individualism-Collectivism (France and UK high, Chile and Italy intermediate, and Romania low) and Flexibility-Monumentalism (France and UK high, Chile, Italy, and Romania low; Minkov & Kaasa, 2022). On a scale of psychological and cultural distance (Muthukrishna et al., 2020), Chile and Italy are both moderately distant from the other four countries, Romania is highly distant from the other four countries, UK and France are close to each other, and moderately to highly distant from the other three countries.

Methods

We collected data between April and August 2022. Significant political events during data collection were: French presidential and legislative elections, leading to the re-election of Emmanuel Macron without parliamentary majority, collapse of the Italian government led by Mario Draghi, and following electoral campaign for the upcoming Italian elections (held in September 2022), Romanian citizens and government facing numerous refugees due to war in Ukraine, collapse of the Boris Johnson-led British government, campaign for the forthcoming referendum on the new Chilean constitution (held in September 2022), and EU countries'

energy crisis generated by the war in Ukraine. The complete material, dataset, script, and codebook employed in this study are available online ([trust repository](#)).

Power Analysis

Following Wang and Rhemtulla (2021), we conducted a power analysis of the most theoretically relevant effect, drawing on the weakest effect size obtained in previous studies ($\beta=.11$, the observed direct effect of identity threat to belonging on populism in Manunta et al., 2022). Results suggested that our minimal target of participants per country ($n > 1599$) would correspond to 93% statistical power within each sample.

Participants

We targeted the general adult citizen population of the five selected nations (unique inclusion criteria: having the right to vote in the targeted nation). Data were collected online using the Qualtrics platform. To reach a broad and varied audience, we recruited via Meta advertisements (Facebook/Instagram). This technique has the advantages of 1) showing the recruiting announcement to representative portions of the target populations by a randomised algorithm, 2) avoiding an overrepresentation of students and scholars' networks in the sample, and 3) allowing for adjustments in the sociodemographics of the target population if needed.

In total, we sampled $N = 9105$ participants who completed the survey until the last block (socio-demographics), thus reaching the minimal pre-registered target of $n = 1599$ completing the survey per country. Participants were similarly distributed among countries: United Kingdom ($n = 1800$), France ($n = 1909$), Italy ($n = 2001$), Romania ($n = 1746$), and Chile ($n = 1649$). We excluded 294 participants who did not complete the attention check questions correctly.

To avoid an overrepresentation of female participants, we restricted the target of the advertisements (only men) in some countries during the last week of sampling. We aimed to avoid major differences in gender balance between countries and reduce the gap we observed

in the UK, French, Italian, and Chilean samples at that time. This increased the number of male participants where needed. Final samples had similar gender balance, varying from 19.9% (Chile) to 31.6% men (Romania); 0.4% (Chile) to 2.0% non-binary individuals (United Kingdom); and 67.7% (Romania) to 79.6% women (Chile).

Measures

We used a cross-sectional design. To reduce the risk of method common variance, the order of multi-item scales and their items was randomised, reversed wording items were employed in multi-item measures (43.3%), two attention check items were employed, and all measures were translated from French or English to the other languages following translation and back-translation procedures (Brislin, 1970). For all multiple-item measures, we used sum scores or latent factor scores, depending on the analysis.

The POPulist Thin Ideology Scale (POP-THIS)

The POPulist Thin Ideology scale (Table 1; Manunta & Becker, in press) is composed of 10 Likert scale items ($\alpha=.85$; 7-point response scales; 5 reversed items), with higher scores corresponding to higher levels of populist thin ideology. This measure was determined to be strongly related to the populist vote (Manunta et al., 2022).

Table 1.

Items of the POP-THIS (English version).

	Item content
<i>Intergroup bias</i>	
POP.A_01	Banks, politicians and all the establishment belong to the same corrupt caste.
POP.A_02	The Elite represents something negative.
POP.A_03 [†]	The conflict between the People and the Elite is not a fact.
POP.A_04 [†]	The Elite does not carry out any form of tyranny against the People.

POP.A_05 The People have been being subjected to several unfair acts coming from the Elite.

POP.A_06[†] The Elite is **not** more corrupt than the People.

People's general will

POP.A_07[†] Currently, all citizens have the possibility to express their opinion and talk with democratic institutions.

POP.A_08 The People rather than politicians should take the most important decisions for the country.

POP.A_09 The People should directly hold the political power.

POP.A_10[†] The election of political representatives is the best of all possible forms of Democracy.

Note. [†] Reversed item. Other versions (French, Italian, Romanian and Spanish) are available in the repository folder.

Subjective Social Status

We used the scale of subjective social status (Adler et al., 2000) to assess participants' perceptions of their socioeconomic position. Participants were asked to self-place onto a virtual scale of society. Responses were coded so that the higher the score, the higher the perceived level of socioeconomic status (1 = the bottom of society; 10 = the top of society).

Relative Deprivation

We measured relative deprivation at three levels of comparison: intergroup (between one's social class and other social classes; $\Omega=.84$), interindividual (towards the other members of the same social class; $\Omega=.90$), and temporal (between past, and current personal economic condition; $\Omega=.90$). This measure was first employed by Manunta et al. (2022), inspired by an analytic review on relative deprivation (Smith et al., 2012). Each level is employed separately and composed of 4 items (two reversed): e.g., "In general, to what extent do you think that your social class has fewer economic resources than the other social classes in society?" (intergroup relative deprivation); "In general, to what extent do you feel you have fewer economic and material resources than other people in your social class?" (interindividual

relative deprivation); “In general, to what extent do you think that today you personally have fewer economic resources compared to the past?” (temporal relative deprivation). Participants responded using 7-point scales, and responses coded so that higher scores corresponded to higher relative deprivation levels.

Perceived Anomie

Anomie ($\Omega=.77$) was measured employing a scale of social fabric breakdown (Teymoori et al., 2016). The scale is composed of 5 items (one reversed) with a 7-point Likert scale format (e.g., “People do not know who they can trust and rely on”), with higher scores reflecting higher levels of perceived anomie.

National Collective Narcissism

We used a 5-item version of the collective narcissism scale (Bertin et al., 2021; Golec de Zavala et al., 2009; $\Omega=.84$) with items referring to participant’s national groups (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.

Status-Based Identity Threat to Belonging

We measured how the economic status-based identity, related to one’s perceived economic position in society (Manunta et al., 2022), frustrates the need of being accepted and included by others (belonging identity motive). This scale was composed of four items ($\Omega=.85$; two reversed) with a Likert scale format; e.g., “My economic position makes me feel excluded”. Higher scores reflected higher identity threat to the belonging motive.

Society-Based Identity Threat

Society based-identity threat is a measure of how being a member of a given society frustrates (vs. satisfies) the six identity motives posited by MICT (Vignoles, 2011). The frustration (vs. satisfaction) of each identity motive—self-esteem ($\Omega=.85$), efficacy ($\Omega=.80$),

belonging ($\Omega=.84$), continuity ($\Omega=.81$), distinctiveness ($\Omega=.81$), and meaning ($\Omega=.88$)—was measured by 4 items per motive (2 reversed), employing a 7-point Likert scale format (24 items in total); e.g., “The society in which I live makes me feel excluded”. A global measure of identity threat ($\Omega_h=.80$) was obtained by a latent factor with the six sum-scores of the identity motives as observed variables. This latent factor was used in confirmatory analyses testing the cultural backlash pattern of populism. Identity motive threats were also analysed individually in exploratory analyses and coded so that the higher the score, the higher the identity threat.

Socio-Demographics

Data on education level, gender, and age were collected using multiple response items. Education was measured as the highest degree obtained. This measure was adjusted to fit the specific education systems in each country, aiming to obtain comparable responses (1 = neither A-level nor equivalent; 5 = doctoral degree). Gender was measured as a binary variable (-1 = male, 1 = female; the response “other/I don’t recognise myself on the binary spectrum” was proposed but treated as a missing value in the analyses given low frequency). The sociodemographic block was presented at the end of the survey and without question randomisation.

Analytical Steps

First, a multi-group structural equation model (SEM; maximum likelihood) distinguishing the five national groups was conducted to test hypotheses from the economic distress pattern (Figure 1). We modelled multi-item measures as latent factors, and single-item measures as observed variables. We compared a configural (without constraining parameters) and a constrained model (regression paths and loadings constrained to be equal across the five countries) to determine whether results were similar across countries.

Second, a multi-group SEM (maximum likelihood) distinguishing the five national groups was conducted to test hypotheses from the cultural backlash pattern (Figure 2). Multi-item measures were modelled as latent factors. Again, we compared a configural and a constrained model to determine whether results were similar across countries.

Third, we conducted exploratory analyses aiming to test the role of each specific identity motive relative to society-based identity in the cultural backlash model: Bivariate correlations and a regression analysis were used to determine the relative predictive effects of society-based identity threat per each identity motive on the adherence to the populist thin ideology. Only those found to be robust predictors of the populist thin ideology were included within the final integrative model.

Then, drawing on previous results, we specified and tested an integrative model including both the economic distress and the cultural backlash patterns in a final integrative multi-group SEM. Finally, the economic distress, the cultural backlash and the integrative model were compared in terms of variance explained (R^2) for the key outcome (the populist thin ideology).

All hypotheses were directional, and therefore confirmed if the t-tests relative to the paths of the SEMs yielded a one-tailed $p < .05$ (McNeil & Beggs, 1971). Multigroup SEMs were considered acceptable if both the configural and constrained models showed acceptable fit ($CFI > .90$, $TLI > .90$ and $RMSEA = < .10$) and if the invariance analysis showed an acceptable level of equivalence between the configural and the constrained model. Testing for invariance, we applied Yuan and Chan's method (2016), and considered invariant if the equivalence test yielded at least mediocre equivalence index (below the adjusted $RMSEA_0$ cut-off corresponding to $RMSEA > .10$).

Analyses were conducted with *R v 4.0.2* (R Core Team, 2020) and its packages *lavaan 0.6.-7* (Rosseel, 2012), *arm 1.13-1* (Gelman et al., 2022), *Hmisc 4.7-1* (Harrell & Dupont, 2022), and *psych 2.0.7* (Revelle, 2021).

Results

Economic Distress Model

The configural model of the multigroup SEM referring to the economic distress pattern showed acceptable fit ($\chi^2 [df = 1535; N = 8498] = 9029.50, p < .001, CFI = .93; TLI = .92; RMSEA = .05 [.05, .06]$). The constrained model also showed acceptable fit ($\chi^2 [df = 1663; N = 8498] = 9918.57, p < .001, CFI = .93; TLI = .92; RMSEA = .05 [.05, .06]$), and met fair invariance criteria relative to the configural model ($ncp = 859.34, \epsilon_0 = .10, RMSEA_0 = .06, Adjusted RMSEA_0 cutoff < .11$; Yuan & Chan, 2016). Thus, we considered its paths as globally valid across samples.

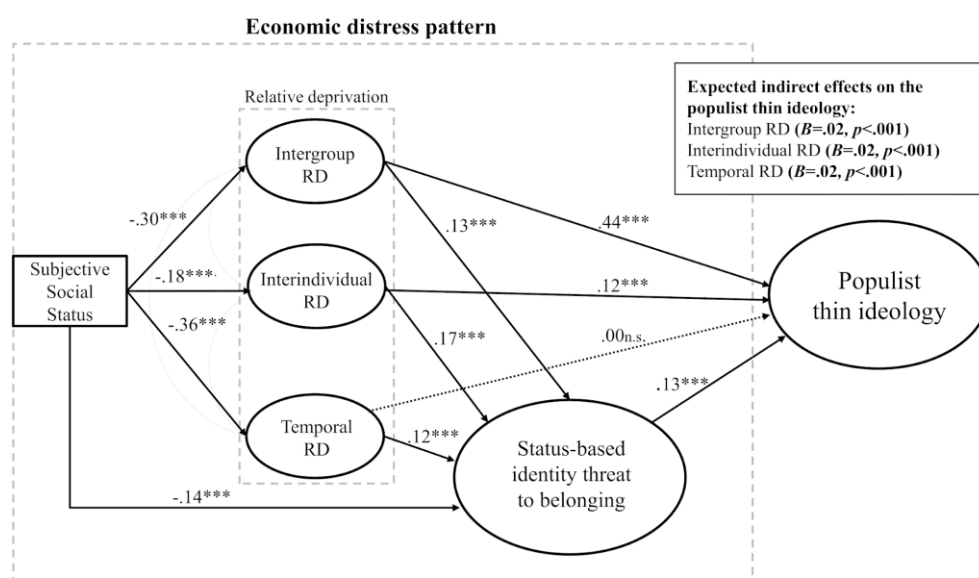
Consistent with our hypotheses, the constrained model (Figure 3; paths and loadings constrained to be equal across the five groups) showed that subjective social status was a negative predictor of the three levels of relative deprivation—intergroup (H1a; $B = -.30, 95\% CI [-.32, -.29], p < .001$), interindividual (H1b; $B = -.18, 95\% CI [-.19, -.17], p < .001$), and temporal (H1c; $B = -.36, 95\% CI [-.38, -.35], p < .001$)—which, in turn, were significant positive predictors of status-based identity threat to belonging (H2a - H2c; intergroup: $B = .13, 95\% CI [.10, .15], p < .001$; interindividual: $B = .17, 95\% CI [.14, .19], p < .001$; temporal: $B = .12, 95\% CI [.10, .14], p < .001$). The status-based identity threat to belonging was, in turn, a significant predictor of the populist thin ideology (H4; $B = .13, 95\% CI [.10, .16], p < .001$). The direct positive effects of relative deprivation on the populist thin ideology were significant for intergroup (H3a; $B = .44, 95\% CI [.40, .47], p < .001$), and interindividual levels of relative deprivation (H3b; $B = .12, 95\% CI [.08, .15], p < .001$), but non-significant for temporal relative deprivation (H3c; $B = .00, 95\% CI [-.02, .02], p = .467$). The indirect effects

of the three relative deprivation levels on populist thin ideology through identity threat to belonging were all confirmed (H5a - H5c; intergroup: $B = .02$, 95% CI [.02, .02], $p < .001$; interindividual: $B = .02$, 95% CI [.02, .03], $p < .001$; temporal: $B = .02$, 95% CI [.01, .02], $p < .001$). In the constrained model, the explained variances of the most important outcome—populist thin ideology—differed in each country because they are standardised indexes that also depend on parameters that were not constrained to be equal: 29% in the United Kingdom, 24% in France, 28% in Italy, 30% in Romania, and 30% in Chile. Complete standardised results of the configural model are available per country in the [Online Appendix](#) (Figures A1-A5).

Supplemental analyses were conducted to compare the economic distress model with two alternative models with the same variables. These analyses provided evidence in favour of the theoretical direction of paths, and for the partial mediation effects ([Online Appendix, Comparison between Pre-Registered and Alternative Models](#)).

Figure 3.

Constrained Model (Loadings and Paths Constrained) of the Multigroup Structural Equation Model (ML Method) Representing the Economic Distress Pattern of Populism including: Subjective Social Status, Relative Deprivation, Identity Threat to Belonging relative to Status-Based Identity, and the Populist Thin Ideology.



Note. Regression weights were not standardized, and p -values were adjusted for one-tailed testing. Fit indices: χ^2 [$df = 1,663$; $N = 8,498$] = 9,918.57, $p < .001$, $CFI = .93$; $TLI = .92$; $RMSEA = .05$ [.05, .06]. This constrained model showed invariance with the configural one ($ncp = 859.34$, $\epsilon_0 = .10$, $RMSEA_0 = .06$, *Adjusted RMSEA₀ cutoff* < .11). Correlations were allowed between the residuals of the three forms of relative deprivation, and as method-effect control between items worded in the same direction in the measure of populism (POP-THIS). CFI = comparative fit index; TLI = Tucker–Lewis index; RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation; POP-THIS = POPulist Thin Ideology Scale.
* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$, n.s. non-significant.

Cultural Backlash Model

The configural model of the multigroup SEM referring to the cultural backlash pattern showed acceptable fit (χ^2 [$df = 1570$; $N = 8315$] = 8069.98, $p < .001$, $CFI = .93$; $TLI = .92$; $RMSEA = .05$ [.05, .05]). The constrained model also showed acceptable fit (χ^2 [$df = 1682$; $N = 8315$] = 9462.78, $p < .001$, $CFI = .91$; $TLI = .91$; $RMSEA = .05$ [.05, .05]), and met fair invariance criteria ($ncp = 1404.83$, $\epsilon_0 = .17$, $RMSEA_0 = .09$, *Adjusted RMSEA₀ cutoff* < .11; Yuan & Chan, 2016). Thus, the fixed paths can be considered as globally valid for all the countries. Results of the corresponding constrained model are presented in Figure 4.

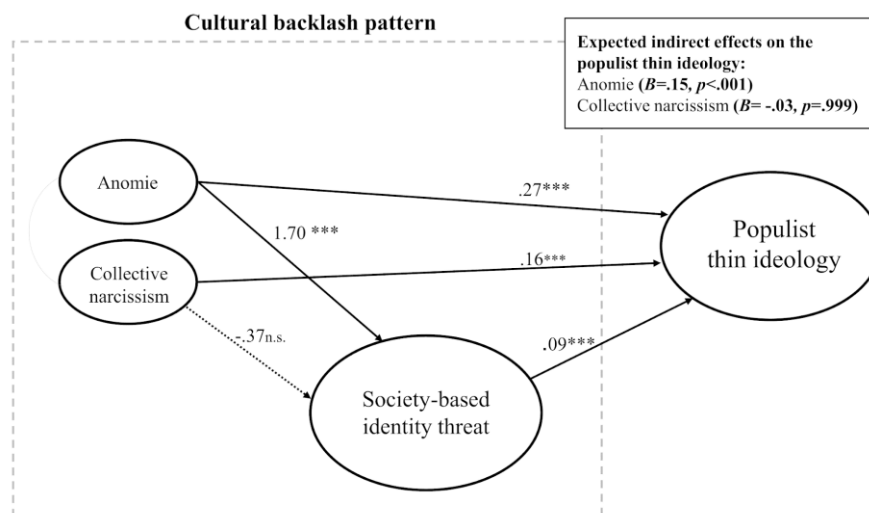
Anomie (H6; $B = .27$, 95% CI [.24, .30], $p < .001$), collective narcissism (H8; $B = .16$, 95% CI [.13, .18], $p < .001$), and identity threat (H10; $B = .09$, 95% CI [.08, .10], $p < .001$) were positive direct predictors of populist thin ideology. Anomie was also a positive direct predictor of identity threat (H7; $B = .170$, 95% CI [1.60, 1.79], $p < .001$), whereas collective narcissism had no significant positive direct effect on identity threat (H9; $B = -.38$, 95% CI [-.46, -.30], $p = .999$). The positive indirect effect of anomie on populist thin ideology via identity threat was confirmed (H11; $B = .15$, 95% CI [.13, .17], $p < .001$), whereas the corresponding positive indirect effect of collective narcissism was not confirmed (H12; $B = -.03$, 95% CI [-.04, -.02], $p = .999$). In the constrained model, the explained variances of the most important outcome—populist thin ideology—differed in each country because they are standardised indexes that also depend on parameters that were not constrained to be equal: 14% in France, 16% in the United Kingdom, 17% in Chile, 21% in Romania, and 22% in

Italy. Complete standardised results of the configural model per country are available in the [Online Appendix](#) (Figures A6-A10).

Supplemental analyses were conducted to compare the cultural backlash model with two alternative models with the same variables. These analyses provided evidence in favour of the theoretical direction of paths ([Online Appendix](#), *Comparison between Pre-Registered and Alternative Models*).

Figure 4.

Constrained Model (Loadings and Paths Constrained) of the Multigroup Structural Equation Model Analysis (ML Method) Representing the Cultural Backlash Pattern of Populism: Including Anomie, Collective Narcissism, Identity Threat relative to Society-Based Identity, and the Populist Thin Ideology.



Note. Regression weights were not standardized, and p -values were adjusted for one-tailed testing. Fit indices: χ^2 [$df = 1,682; N = 8,315$] = 9,462.78, $p < .001$, $CFI = .91$; $TLI = .91$; $RMSEA = .05$ [.05, .05]. This constrained model showed invariance with the configural one ($n\chi^2 = 1,404.83$, $\epsilon_0 = .17$, $RMSEA_0 = .09$, *Adjusted RMSEA0 cutoff* < .11). Correlation was allowed between residuals of anomie and collective narcissism. Method-effect controls were allowed between items worded in the same direction and that were part of the same subdimension in the measure of populism (POP-ThIS). CFI = comparative fit index; TLI = Tucker–Lewis index; RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation; POP-ThIS = POPulist Thin Ideology Scale.
* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$, n.s. non-significant.

Exploratory Analyses

Bivariate correlations between the populist thin ideology, and (society-based) identity threats were all significant and positive (Table 2). Identity threat to belonging correlated most strongly with the populist thin ideology ($r = .33, p < .001$).

Table 2.

Bivariate Correlations (Pearson coefficients) between the Populist Thin Ideology (POP-ThIS) and the Identity Threats to each Identity Motives relative to Society-Based Identity Calculated on the Overall Sample.

Correlations with POP-ThIS	
	POP-ThIS
Identity threat to belonging	.33***
Identity threat to distinctiveness	.16***
Identity threat to efficacy	.30***
Identity threat to continuity	.26***
Identity threat to self-esteem	.24***
Identity threat to meaning	.27***

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

A linear regression conducted on the entire sample, including identity threat to each identity motive as separate predictors of the populist thin ideology, and controlling for socio-demographics (gender, age, education level, and subjective social status) and country (with dummy variables for Chile, Italy, Romania, and United Kingdom) confirmed that, among the six identity motives, identity threat to belonging was the strongest predictor of the populist thin ideology (Table 3). Also, identity threat to belonging was the only predictor that showed significant positive effect in all five countries when we conducted this regression analysis separately by country: United Kingdom ($\beta = .13, 95\% \text{ CI } [.08, .19], p < .001$), France ($\beta = .11,$

95% CI [.06, .16], $p < .001$), Italy ($\beta = .20$, 95% CI [.15, .25], $p < .001$), Romania ($\beta = .16$, 95% CI [.10, .21], $p < .001$), and Chile ($\beta = .22$, 95% CI [.16, .27], $p < .001$). These results were consistent with previous findings indicating that belonging was the most involved identity motive in the economic distress pattern of populism (Manunta et al., 2022). Therefore, we focused on society-based identity threat to belonging motive instead of the global measure of identity threat in subsequent analyses.

Table 3.

Linear Regression of the Populist Thin Ideology including all the Society-Based Identity Threats to each Identity Motive as predictors—Belonging, Distinctiveness, Efficacy, Continuity, Self-esteem, and Meaning—and controlling for Subjective Social Status and socio-demographic variables (Gender, Age, and Education).

	β	<i>S.E.</i>	95% CI [LL, UL]	<i>p</i>
Intercept	4.10	.10		
Identity threat to belonging	.16	.01	[.14, .19]	< .001
Identity threat to distinctiveness	-.02	.01	[-.04, .00]	.089
Identity threat to efficacy	.12	.02	[.08, .15]	< .001
Identity threat to continuity	.07	.02	[.04, .10]	< .001
Identity threat to self-esteem	-.06	.02	[-.09, -.03]	< .001
Identity threat to meaning	.03	.02	[-.01, .06]	.123
Subjective social status	-.14	.01	[-.16, -.12]	< .001
Gender [†]	.01	.01	[-.01, .03]	.165
Age	-.06	.01	[-.08, -.04]	< .001
Education	-.02	.01	[-.04, -.00]	.039
<i>Countries^{††}:</i>				
Chile	.01	.01	[-.01, .03]	.459
Italy	-.20	.01	[-.23, -.18]	< .001
Romania	-.12	.01	[-.14, -.09]	< .001
United Kingdom	.03	.01	[.01, .06]	.008
R^2		.20		

Note. Model POP-ThIS: $N = 8194$. Two-tailed t-tests were employed. Regression weights were standardised.

[†]Male participants were coded -1 and Female participants were coded 1.

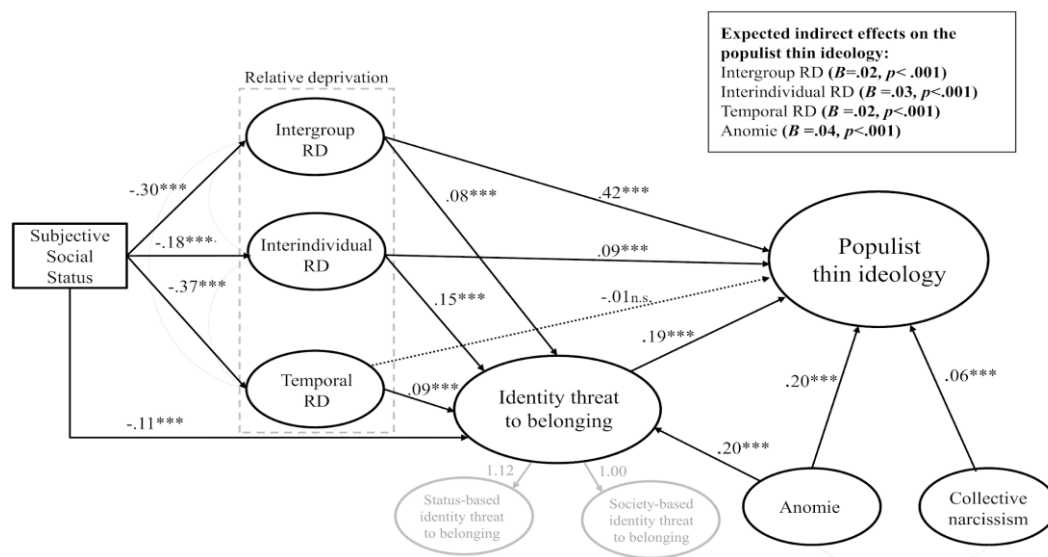
^{††}France was employed as reference level.

Integrative Model

Next, we tested a multigroup SEM in which the economic distress and cultural backlash patterns were integrated (Figure 5). In this model we used a second-order factor for identity threat to belonging computed on the status- and society-based first-order factors. We made this choice to avoid collinearity problems when including both measures as predictors of populism: Even though status- and society-based identity threat to belonging were showed to be two clearly distinguishable factors in an EFA ([Online Appendix](#), Table A2), they were strongly correlated ($r = .71, p < .001$). We excluded the path between collective narcissism and society-based identity threat to belonging because it was non-significant in the confirmatory analyses above.

Figure 5.

Constrained Model (Loadings and Paths Constrained) of the Multigroup Structural Equation Model Analysis (ML Method) representing the Integrative Pattern: Including Subjective Social Status, Relative Deprivation, Anomie, Collective Narcissism, Identity Threat to Belonging relative to Society-Based Identity, and the Populist Thin Ideology.



Note. Regression weights were not standardized, and p -values were adjusted for one-tailed testing. Fit indices: $\chi^2 [df = 4,152; N = 8,359] = 19,200.88, p < .001, CFI = .91; TLI = .90; RMSEA = .05 [.05, .05]$. This constrained model showed invariance with the configural one ($ncp = 1,534.86, \epsilon 0 = .18, RMSEA0 = .07, Adjusted RMSEA0 cutoff < .11$). Correlations were allowed between residuals of the three levels of relative deprivation, and between anomie and collective narcissism's residuals. Method-effect controls were allowed between items worded in the same direction and that were part of the same subdimension in the measure of populism (POP-ThIS). Also, method-effect control correlations were allowed between items of status- and society-based identity threat to belonging that had identical formulation (the two measures had the same four items with identical formulations except the identity category they referred to: status- or society-based identity). CFI = comparative

fit index; TLI = Tucker–Lewis index; RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation; POP-ThIS = POPulist Thin Ideology Scale.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$, n.s. non-significant.

The configural model of the multigroup SEM referring to the integrative pattern showed acceptable fit ($\chi^2 [df = 3960; N = 8359] = 17605.15, p < .001, CFI = .91; TLI = .91; RMSEA = .05 [.05, .05]$). The constrained model also showed acceptable fit ($\chi^2 [df = 4152; N = 8359] = 19200.88, p < .001, CFI = .91; TLI = .90; RMSEA = .05 [.05, .05]$), and met fair invariance criteria ($n\chi^2 = 1534.86, \varepsilon_0 = .18, RMSEA_0 = .07, Adjusted RMSEA_0 cutoff < .11$). Thus, the constrained path indices can be considered as globally valid for all the samples (Figure 5). All paths were in the same direction as in their original model (economic distress and cultural backlash pattern, respectively). The expected indirect effects were also confirmed. Explained variances of populist thin ideology in the constrained model were: 24% in France, 29% in the United Kingdom, 29% in Chile, 30% in Italy, and 32% in Romania. See the [Online Appendix](#) (Figures A11-A15) for complete standardised results per country of the configural (unconstrained) model.

Model Comparison

All models tested presented satisfactory fit, equivalence between their configural and constrained versions, and significantly predicted the populist thin ideology. In all countries, the constrained economic distress pattern explained more variance (24% to 30%) than the cultural backlash pattern (16% to 22%). Compared to the economic distress model, the integrative model increased the variance explained by around 2% in Italy, about 1.5% in Romania, but with no remarkable improvement in the United Kingdom, France, nor Chile.

In the standardised configural integrative model, intergroup relative deprivation was a better predictor of populist thin ideology than the two cultural backlash indicators (anomie and collective narcissism) in all countries except Italy (in which it was second best predictor behind anomie).

Discussion

The results confirmed our hypotheses. First, we found that the economic distress pattern, previously observed in France (Manunta et al., 2022), is generalisable across the five different liberal democratic contexts that we analysed. Second, for the first time, we tested a cultural backlash pattern as a parallel model and determined its cross-national validity. Third, integrating these patterns, identity threat to belonging was a key mediator between both patterns and the populist thin ideology.

The Economic Distress Pattern: The Role of Relative Deprivation

The economic distress pattern was empirically supported. As expected, subjective social status negatively predicted all three levels of relative deprivation and threat to belonging (H1). All three levels of relative deprivation directly predicted threat to belonging (H2), and indirectly predicted the populist thin ideology (H5). Furthermore, intergroup and interindividual levels of relative deprivation positively predicted the populist thin ideology, whereas no significant effect was found for the temporal level (H3).

These findings highlight how the populist thin ideology can be predicted by the feeling of being unjustly economically deprived relative to specific comparators, which can be outgroups (intergroup comparison), other similar individuals (interindividual comparison), or one's own past situation (temporal comparison; Smith et al., 2012). In particular, the feeling of being economically deprived compared to other groups (social classes)—intergroup relative deprivation—was the strongest direct predictor of the populist thin ideology. This is consistent with literature showing that the intergroup comparison is more strongly related to collective political outcomes than interindividual and temporal comparisons (e.g., collective actions, intergroup attitudes, and social change beliefs; Abrams & Grant, 2012; Smith et al., 2020). Furthermore, intergroup relative deprivation is associated with anti-immigrant attitudes (Pettigrew et al., 2008), and when the intergroup comparison is made towards citizens of other

countries this becomes a predictor of far-right populist vote in wealthy countries (Cena et al., 2022). This highlights the importance of the subjectivity and relativity in the disadvantaged comparison, and suggests the idea that the populist thin ideology might be analysed through the lens of a social identity process in which the ingroup “people” is opposed to the outgroup “elite” (Manunta & Becker, in press). This populist social comparison could also make individuals cope with their feelings of social exclusion (i.e., identity threat to belonging) associated with intergroup relative deprivation. This opens an original perspective on economic distress predicting populism through feelings of symbolic threat (i.e., intergroup comparison, identity threat, social exclusion).

These findings highlight how the perception of economic distress is linked to populism. They provide an in-depth explanation of how economic structural crises can be responsible for populism and extremisms in liberal democracies (Jay et al., 2019; Oxendine, 2019), that is by influencing perceived threats that have an impact on political behaviours and attitudes (Bonansinga, 2022; Hinckley, 2021; Onraet et al., 2014).

The Cultural Backlash Pattern: The Role of Anomie

The cultural backlash pattern was empirically supported. As expected, anomie and national collective narcissism were both positive predictors of the populist thin ideology (H6, and H8). Also, identity threat (i.e., overall frustration of identity motives) relative to society-based identity directly predicted the populist thin ideology (H10), and mediated the effect of anomie on populist thin ideology (H11).

However, the expected positive indirect link between national collective narcissism and the populist thin ideology through identity threat, was not found (H12). In addition, national collective narcissism showed opposite links to those expected with identity threat (H9), and in certain countries on the populist thin ideology when looking at the configural (unconstrained) models. This finding is inconsistent with previous results (Manunta et al.,

2022; Marchlewska et al., 2018) and suggests that the role of national collective narcissism in the cultural backlash pattern may be cross-culturally (or cross-nationally) unstable. Therefore, we suggest that anomie is the most relevant theoretical construct underlying the cultural backlash pattern across the national contexts examined here.

The cultural backlash hypothesis draws on the idea that current populist waves are the consequence of a conservative cultural backlash against constant progressive cultural changes in liberal democratic societies (Inglehart & Norris, 2016). Further, populist discourse is stronger under anomie (Teymoori et al., 2016), which corresponds to feelings of threat when facing societal changes, perceptions of misunderstood sophistication, and lack of traditional-morality in current society. Progressive positions defending multi-ethnic, multicultural societies, and minority-individual civil rights can be viewed by individuals adhering to reactionary beliefs as a spoiled form of the globalised elite's whim, often opposed to the interest and will of the "real pure people", and as a dangerous (and useless) progressive-liberal sophistication. This interpretation is consistent with literature showing that the exposure to neoliberal ideology increases anti-elite attitudes via feelings of anomie (Hartwich & Becker, 2019), and that recent migration crises and terrorist attacks related to Islamic fundamentalism have made these threats more salient (Dennison & Turnbull-Dugarte, 2022).

In comparison with economic distress, the cultural backlash predicted a smaller amount of variance. Further, the integrative model did not produce much increase in the explained variance relative to the economic distress pattern. Thus, based on the present findings, the latter would be the best explanation from a functionalist point of view. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the cultural backlash hypothesis is wrong. Indeed, the perception of anomie was a significant predictor of populism, even when it was a simultaneous predictor, alongside the economic distress pattern. Thus, our findings support

the idea that the integration of these models is possible and useful for a better understanding of populism and its roots.

The Role of Identity Threat: Integrating Economic and Cultural Threats

The economic distress and cultural backlash patterns are often described as two different explanations of populism but the integration between them has not been sufficiently investigated (Carreras et al., 2019). In the present study, we considered that feelings of threat are the common theme between economic distress and cultural backlash (Dennison & Turnbull-Dugarte, 2022). Indeed, relative deprivation and anomie can be considered different types of psychological threat associated with populism, and the integrative model underlines the role of identity threat to belonging (i.e., social exclusion) as a mediator of both cultural backlash and economic distress patterns. This implies that identity threat is a common outcome of economic distress and cultural backlash, which in turn directly predicts the populist thin ideology. Thus, identity threat—especially to belonging—appears central to the understanding of the populist thin ideology.

We measured identity threat as the frustration of specific motives that individuals seek to satisfy, aiming to construct a positive and well-functional psychological perception of themselves (Vignoles, 2011). We focused on identity threat towards two identities: Status-based identity (Destin et al., 2017) and society-based identity (Hafer & Ran, 2016; Zhang et al., 2019). In previous research analysing the status-based identity the frustration of belonging was the most robust predictor of the populist thin ideology among identity motives (Manunta et al., 2022). Similarly, in the present study society-based identity threat to belonging was the most robust predictor of the populist thin ideology among identity motives. Its effect was significant in all countries, and when controlling for cultural backlash distress indices. This is consistent with literature showing that social exclusion is an important factor in how economic distress, and cultural backlash, are related to populism (Langenkamp & Bienstman,

2022). Individuals, for whom the thought of themselves as a member of society—or as a person of a certain social status—frustrates the belonging motive, attempt to manage this identity threat (Blanz et al., 1998). They become more likely to adhere to a simplistic political narrative that gives them a positive moral ingroup identity (the People) compared to an immoral corrupt outgroup (the elite). Whereas this social categorisation does not correspond to clear existent group-borders, it could alleviate negative emotions related to the society- and status-based identity threat by adhering to an alternative positive “good people” identity opposed to the “corrupt elite” outgroup. This is consistent with literature showing that identity threat to ingroup-esteem and distinctiveness are associated with negative attitudes towards outgroups (Riek et al., 2006), and that populism is linked to forms of collective victimhood (Meijen & Vermeersch, 2023). In this view, populism could be considered as a form of ingroup victimhood and outgroup denigration towards political, cultural and economic elites.

Furthermore, the role of identity threat is also highlighted by intergroup relative deprivation being the strongest predictor of the populist thin ideology. Following the social identity framework, intergroup disadvantage is strictly connected to profound feelings of identity threat (Hogg, 2016; Tajfel, 1974). It is possible that our intergroup relative deprivation measure indirectly captures a form of social identity threat. Also, other identity elements can be linked to populism. Filsinger et al. (2022) found that the identification to ethnic and civic forms of national identity were linked to populism. Although this goes beyond our present findings, we propose that future research examines whether populism can be partially explained in terms of a political belief that has a compensative psychological role when facing identity threat.

The need for examining identity and threats as important links between society-level factors (or their individual-level perception) and populism has also been claimed and demanded by other scholars in social psychology (Bar-Tal & Magal, 2021; Hogg & Gøtzsche-

Astrup, 2021). Our findings contribute to a broader literature demonstrating the role of perceived threat in politics (Onraet et al., 2014; Riek et al., 2006). Future research should integrate other inner-psychological threats as additional mediators and predictors of populism (e.g., collective nostalgia, Prooijen et al., 2022). Also, the possibility that the links of anomie and relative deprivation on populism are completely mediated by psychological threats should be investigated. The present results do not allow such far-reaching conclusions, but the aim of this study was not to obtain a complete predictive model of the populist thin ideology.

Cross-National Generalization

All models tested met criteria for between-group invariance. This means that both the economic distress and the cultural backlash pattern showed evidence of cross-national validity. Collective narcissism, however, clearly showed opposite associations than expected depending on the country, some of which were incompatible with theoretical arguments. We included national collective narcissism as an index of cultural backlash, but this was contradicted by the global negative association observed between national collective narcissism and identity threat, and the negative association with the populist thin ideology found in the United Kingdom when looking at the unconstrained models per country. These results are in conflict with previous literature where national narcissism is a positive predictor of populism (Golec de Zavala & Keenan, 2020; Marchlewska et al., 2018). A possible explanation is that these studies focus on voting behaviours related to right-wing populism (e.g., the vote for Donald Trump in the United States of America, the vote for *Law and Justice Party* in Poland, the vote for Brexit in the United Kingdom). Although correlated, this voting behaviour cannot be equated with populist thin ideology. This discrepancy highlights the need for clarity when referring to populism in social science literature.

Despite the contradictory role of national collective narcissism, the cross-national validation of economic distress and cultural backlash patterns highlight similarities in the

populist phenomenon across five liberal democratic contexts presenting significant differences in cultural and political characteristics. Evidence of invariance among the five countries also relate to the cross-national validity of measures and support psychometric generalisability for the constructs used here. They further lend support to the generalisability of the psychological theories involved in the here tested models of populism.

The Hypothesis of Different Forms of Threat for Different Kinds of Populism

This study investigated populism as phenomenon independent from the right-left positions and/or ideologies. We argued the need of investigating populism as a thin ideology that does not belong to any position of the right-left axis and analysing the social-psychological processes of it (identity threat). However, the attribute of *thin* ideology refers to the idea that these beliefs can be adapted to *thick* (host) ideologies. Thus, both exclusionary (right-wing) and inclusive (left-wing) versions of populism exist (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013). The way the right-left axis is linked to populism may occur by the specific social groups tapping into the *People vs elite* social categorisation. Thus, a right-wing populist could see progressivist politicians and cultural establishments as being the corrupt elite conspiring against the good People's interests by imposing substantial changes in traditional values. In contrast, inclusivist populists would perceive the neoliberalist and capitalistic establishments as being the corrupt elite conspiring to impose substantial changes in the system to the detriment of the good People. It may be that different kinds of psychological threats would predict different forms of populism. Thus, economic distress could be associated with support for left-wing forms of populist discourse, and cultural backlash could be linked to support for right-wing forms of populism. In both cases identity threat would play a fundamental role in this process. Future research should investigate in-depth the role of both patterns in predicting different kinds of populism.

Limitations

The main limitation of the present study is its cross-sectional design that prohibits conclusions regarding causation. Both the economic distress and the cultural distress patterns should be replicated by employing longitudinal and experimental approaches. To mitigate this issue, the declared direction (in terms of causation) of our regression and SEMs are founded on strong theoretical arguments supported by robust previous empirical findings. Also, SEM has some important advantages: 1) It tests models composed of complex variable relations, 2) it uses latent scores for unobservable variables, 3) and it provides general fit and parsimony indices. Lastly, we showed that alternative models presenting the same links but opposite path directions had weaker parsimony than our theoretical models (*Comparison between Pre-Registered and Alternative Models*, [Online Appendix](#)).

An additional limitation of the reported study is related to the choice of the countries included. The list of countries does not cover all the possible prototypes of liberal democratic countries, especially from a cultural point of view. For instance, it could be relevant to include Asian (e.g., Japan or South-Korea), and Middle Eastern liberal democratic countries (e.g., Israel). However, the variety of cultural and political contexts involved here makes the results promising in terms of their generalisability.

Conclusions

The present study has several implications of interest for the literature into populism. First, it provides original empirical evidence supporting that economic distress and cultural backlash patterns can be considered parallel explanations of populism, although the economic distress hypothesis is a comparatively stronger predictive explanation of the populist thin ideology. Second, this study constitutes original evidence of cross-national validity of the links between populism and the employed predictors across five different liberal democratic contexts. Further, this study represents confirmatory evidence of the implication of identity threat in terms of frustration of identity motives within those patterns, especially threat to

belonging (Manunta et al., 2022; Vignoles, 2011). This particular form of social exclusion/identity threat was a partial mediator of both economic distress and cultural backlash patterns. These findings highlight the central role of inner-psychological threats in political turmoil, such as populism in contemporary liberal democracies (Onraet et al., 2014), and suggest a possible interpretation of populism through the lens of social identity (Tajfel, 1974).

Pre-registration, Data and Analyses Accessibility Statement

The pre-registration for this study is openly available on the Open Science Framework (OSF) website at this link:

https://osf.io/9r5fv/?view_only=aa03a6cb71364a4e9d8d80ac6790a0f4 .

The pre-registration adheres to the disclosure requirements for the pre-registered badge maintained by the Center for Open Science (<https://osf.io/tvyxz/wiki/home/>).

Online Appendix, dataset, script, material and codebook employed for the studies presented in this paper are available at this link:

https://osf.io/bfj6x/files/osfstorage?view_only=733f557b604045fab9b5d9eed1323f92

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