The politicization of populism in the 2017 Dutch Parliamentary elections

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Very first draft, most analyses are still very basic, but please quote as much as you want. Comments are welcome too.

Summary

Anti-elite opinions combined with strong ideas about the purity of ‘the people’ and support for popular sovereignty, together also known as ‘populism’, are said to have played a big role in the Dutch national elections of 2017. The underlying idea of this paper is the hypothesis that ‘populism’ as an individual-level trait is to a large extent the successor of less politicized attitudes such as alienation and external political efficacy. Furthermore, attitudes of political discontent used to be only weakly related to opinions about political issues like immigration and European integration. More recently, however, negative feelings towards politics seem to have become politicized, partly because of the activities of parties like the PVV, FvD and, to a lesser extent, the SP. As a consequence, we expect that general attitudes of political discontent have become part of what can by now be considered a second dimension of political contestation in Dutch politics. This idea is explored using the data from the Dutch Parliamentary Election Study of 2017 and similar data from 1994 onwards.

Introduction and research questions

In recent years, political scientists have started studying ‘populism’ as an individual level trait. The start of this recent surge in the measurement of populism as an individual trait can be found in a paper by (Hawkins, Riding, & Mudde, 2012). The populism scale developed in that paper is related to an earlier operationalization of ‘stealth democracy’. In their footsteps, similar scales have been developed, most notably in (Akkerman, Mudde, & Zaslove, 2014) and in (Spruyt, Keppens, & Van Droogenbroeck, 2016). Even more recently, scholars have started considering the possibility that ‘populism’ is actually a set of independent but strongly related dimensions (Schulz et al., 2017; Silva et al., 2017).
Despite the emphasis on its specific identity and distinct usefulness, there seems to be a strong conceptual and operational overlap between attempts to measure ‘populism’ as an individual level characteristic and older measurements of ‘political discontent’. There is even some debate about the question whether the new populism scales are nothing more than ‘old wine in new bottles or barrels’.

The first question we would like to address in this paper is whether ‘populism’ should be seen as similar to older measures of political discontent. We will argue that there are conceptual and empirical arguments to build on the assumption that populism is indeed a continuation of feelings of political discontent (Wright, 1981).

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1 A 1967 paper by Axelrod also uses the word ‘populism’ to refer to a latent trait, but the items used to measure that trait are diverse and do not link well with the current usage of the word ‘populism’ (Axelrod, 1967). The scale developed in (Farrell & Laughlin, 1976) was not used after its description and is substantially very broad, including items about the distribution of wealth, the power of banks and big companies, and the extent to which people are ‘concerned about people like me’. A scale called “populism” used in the 2006 AmericasBarometer, was supposed to measure ‘citizens’ willingness to push aside parties, legislatures, and courts in order to hand power to the executive” (Seligson, 2007). However, this seems to be measuring ‘authoritarianism’. Some items of the latter scale, however, were used in the scale developed by (Hawkins et al 2012).

2 Political discontent is used here as an umbrella term for distinct but strongly related concepts like political alienation, political cynicism and external political efficacy. Somewhat foreshadowing the current debate about the ‘proper’ meaning of ‘populism’, political scientists have debated endlessly about the various meanings of internal political efficacy (the actual or felt ability to do something politically), external political efficacy (the extent to which people/voters are listened to, input) and political trust (the extent to which people feel they are actually getting what they want or need, output) (Wright, 1981, pp. 22-23). Concepts like ‘political cynicism’, ‘political powerlessness’ and even concepts like ‘political satisfaction’ are used to refer to strongly related ideas.

3 An accessible article in Foreign Affairs discussing this very issue can be found here https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2016-10-06/trump-and-american-populism. A recent paper with a similar title was presented at the politicologenetaal 2018 in Leiden. In this paper factor analysis was used to show that populism is distinct from operationalizations of political discontent. For a similar critique of conceptual unclarity, see Aalberg, T. (Ed.), Esser, F. (Ed.), Reinemann, C. (Ed.), Stromback, J. (Ed.), De Vreese, C. (Ed.). (2017). Populist Political Communication in Europe. New York: Routledge, especially chapter 2.

4 Those studying the causes and consequences of populism, should take note of the disappointing or humbling findings of the study of political discontent. They seem to foreshadow the ones shown in more recent research on populism.

With regard to its antecedents, political discontent or political disaffection, for example, was found to be somewhat related to various dimensions of social status: income, education, (self-defined) social class, albeit not as strongly as some seem to think and the relationship was variant over time (Wright, 1981, p. 38). All
national election study, we will empirically address the question to what extent populism as an individual level attribute should be distinguished from other types or aspects of political discontent.

One of the most interesting findings in the study of political discontent is the absence of a strong association between political discontent and political issues. “The notion that politically alienated individuals are attracted to rightist political ideologies is a central element in political-alienation theory” (Wright, 1981, p. 53). However, on the basis of a review of empirical research available in the 1980’s, Wright concluded: “Just as the alienated share little among themselves by sharing objective background or material circumstances, so too do they share very little by way of political outlook, disposition, or belief. Most studies exploring the political-attitude correlates of political alienation report either no difference or, at best, marginal differences between politically alienated and the remainder of the population” (Wright, 1981, p. 58).

In the Dutch context the past twenty years have seen a major change in this regard. The late Pim Fortuyn and his List Pim Fortuyn on the far right and the Socialist Party on the far left were early harbingers of this trend. The group of populist parties in the Dutch Parliament has expanded ever since to include the Party for the Animals on the left whereas the Freedom Party and Forum for Democracy have taken over the LPF’s place. (Experimental) research has shown that the populist messages sent by these types of parties may have an effect on voters, particularly those who are already predisposed towards cynicism (Bos, van der Brug, & de Vreese, 2013; Hameleers & Schmuck, 2017). Because of this populist discourse, alienated voters in particular became more alienated, while non-alienated voters may have been affected in the opposite direction.^{5} In addition, most of these political parties have spread a distinct anti-European and anti-immigration agenda.

Other associations were even weaker: “Uncertain though this conclusion (about the association between social status and political discontent, HvDK/HA) may be, however, it is substantially firmer than the conclusion that can be advanced about most other background correlates of political discontent” (Wright, 1981, p. 39). Are there also some examples in populism studies showing relatively weak associations of populism with background characteristics? If not, this may point in the direction of an improvement of the measurement of political discontent… **

Similar findings can be reported about the consequences of political discontent and populism. To quote Wright’s review article again: “(The alienated) bother to vote only when there is a candidate present who adequately represents their ideological point of view (...)”(Wright, 1981, p. 63), but Wright acknowledges that the relationship between alienation and party choice is weak at most. Here too, we can find similar results in populism research. Populism is found to be somewhat associated with voting for so called ‘populist’ political parties (Akkerman et al., 2014, p. 1339), The populism scale in the article by Akkerman et al. ranges from 1 to 5. The means of the least populist electorate (of the liberal VVD) and the most populist electorates (PVV and SP) are 3.2 and 3.8 respectively, which is not very substantial. The conclusion of Stanley, who focused on the Slovak elections of 2010 using a different battery of survey questions measuring populism is even stronger: “Populist sentiments have only a limited influence on deter- mining sympathies for government or opposition parties and on voting choices” (Stanley, 2011, p. 268). Ford et al conclude: “Both xenophobia and populism are significantly correlated with UKIP support, although the impact of these motivations (as shown by the standardized coefficients) is roughly one-tenth of that of Euroscepticism” (Ford, Goodwin, & Cutts, 2012, p. 218). A stronger relationship is reported in the cross national study in (Van Hauwaert & Van Kessel, 2017).^{5} This divergent effect of populist messages may be an explanation for the lack of an overall effect of populist parties on the general issue position in a country (Dunn & Singh, 2011). Please note that the causal order of
This raises the question whether or not political discontent and its various constituent attitudes have become more strongly associated with attitudes that are traditionally espoused by populist parties, most clearly European integration and migration and to a lesser extent income inequality. If so, can it be argued that political discontent, or its modern namesake ‘populism’, is more strongly politicized than ever before, perhaps even becoming part of a distinct issue dimension? This is the central question addressed in this paper.

The paper is structured as follows. Firstly, we will more extensively discuss research on populism. We will focus on attempts to define and measure populism as something independent from other types of political alienation. Secondly, we trace the association between political issues and aspects of political discontent to see whether political discontent has gradually become more politicized between 1998 and 2017.

**Research on populism**

*Conceptualizing ‘populism’*

The discussion about the conceptualization of ‘populism’ as a characteristic of individuals, converges around the often-quoted definition of Mudde: “an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people” (2004, p. 543). If this definition is used for a characterization of individuals, individuals should to some extent have:

(a) ideas or opinions, that can be called an ‘ideology’. This ideology consists of the idea that
(b) society consists of two groups only:
(c) a corrupt elite (anti-elitism) and
(d) a ‘good’ people (a homogenous population). In addition, there is the idea that
(e) government should govern in line with ‘the will of the people’ (popular sovereignty).

A closer look at the actual usage of the concept in empirical studies of individual-level populism shows that most elements are not taken too strictly.

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6 Mudde’s aim was to describe an ideology, which can also be seen as a characteristic of a host of political actors and institutions, among which ‘the media’, ‘political parties’ or ‘policies’. However, in his 2014 article the definition is also used to describe individuals (Akkerman et al., 2014).

7 See (Mudde, 2017, p. 33) for a fourfold characterization of the definition. See (Stanley, 2008) for a similar but different fourfold characterization of the definition. The way we broke up the definition here is based on a combination of both characterizations.
The idea that populism as a characteristic of individuals is a type of ‘(thin) ideology’ is not extensively discussed. ‘Ideology’ most frequently refers to something people hold consciously as a system of thought, a ‘reasoned’ and abstract position and therefore rather stable over time. It seems, however, that this is not the definition implicitly held by most researchers working in this context. Even in Mudde’s own work, populism as an individual-level trait is simply referred to as ‘an attitude’, not as an ideology. Note that in doing so the concept of populism as an individual-level concept brings it in close proximity to similar attitudes such as political cynicism and political alienation.

The second part of the definition where society is perceived of as consisting of two groups is also somewhat problematic. Even though it is now fashionable to use the word ‘Manichean’ (moral dualist, good versus bad) to describe populism, most researchers do not assume there are really only two groups in society, the people and the elite, as there may be other societal groups not belonging to either of those. To argue that populists view society as consisting of two groups only, is therefore confusing. One should at least be open to the idea that these are the only two groups ‘that really matter’. For ‘outsiders’ (if any) should not matter.

The third part of the definition, anti-elitism, seems to be less contested, although it is not very clear what ‘the elite’ consists of. Do ‘banks and big companies’ belong to ‘the elite’? Journalists? Judges, the army and NATO? Most operationalizations of populism refer to ‘politicians’ as being the ‘elite’, but is that really what the elite is according to this definition? If so, this is clearly closely related to political discontent.

The fourth part, ‘the (pure) people’, is notoriously vague. Mudde & Kaltwasser (2013) for example argue that Southern American populism is mainly ‘inclusionary’ (not excluding specific groups not belonging to ‘the people’), while European populism is mainly ‘exclusionary’ (excluding groups, apart from the elite, that do not belong to ‘the pure people’). This implies that populism does not by definition tell what is meant by ‘the people’. Most operationalizations also assume that ‘the people’ are ‘better than’ the elite. But then the whole idea of the ‘good people’ is the same thing as having a corrupt elite.

The fifth and final part refers to ‘the will of the people’. In some operationalizations this is equated with referenda, but that is definitely not what is intended with the definition because ‘the will of the people’ or ‘common sense’ may not be seen as inherent part of ‘referenda’. Some will even argue that a strong leader can represent the people too and referenda are not seen by everyone as an instrument revealing common sense. In a battery

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8 Older research on “individual ideologies” shows that most people do not have these. Although the extent to which people have ideologies is contested, the conclusion of Converse “[W]e come to expect hypotheses about wide-ranging yet highly integrated belief systems and their behavioral consequences to show results among relative elites but to be largely disconfirmed below them” still stands (Converse, 2006, p. 65). Since populism as ‘thin’ ideology is expected to be more widely spread among the non-elite, the association of the word ‘ideology’ with ‘populism’ in the context of individuals, seems to be a bit off-track.

9 See (Akkerman et al., 2014). Please note that the more general discussion about the concept populism is very much also about whether this is an ideology, merely a thin ideology, a discursive frame, or just a loosely coupled set of ideas. See for example (Aslanidis, 2016). Mudde discusses this criticism in (Mudde, 2017, pp. 30-31) and concludes that in most cases it is ‘in most cases of secondary importance’.
of questions suggested for the DPES one of the items was even about a ‘strong leader, willing to bend the rules’, so to equate populism with ‘referendums’ is problematic, even though populists might be in favour of direct democracy as a method of circumventing conventional party-political channels of mediation.

In sum, good as it may be at describing political strategies or media content, the usage of Mudde’s definition of ‘populism’ to describe an individual-level trait is therefore conceptually vague.

Measuring populism

In the past decade, researchers have come up of with batteries of items covering some or all of the aforementioned aspects. Researchers clearly share our conceptual unease when delineating populism from related concepts. Akkerman et al., for example, want to distinguish between trust and satisfaction with democracy on the one hand and populism on the other and argue that “even though low levels of trust and satisfaction with democracy may constitute a breeding ground for populism, they are not direct measures of populist attitudes among the voting public per se (emphasis by HvdK/AH)” (Akkerman et al., 2014, p. 1325).

Of course, one can differentiate between these two concepts rather easily. Not being satisfied with democracy, for example, may be modelled as a consequence of both ‘populism’ (“because the elite is evil and not listening to the good people, I am not satisfied with contemporary democracy”) and ‘pluralism’ (“there are many different groups in society, but not all groups are included in democratic decision making, therefore I am not satisfied with democracy”) making ‘satisfaction with democracy’ conceptually different from ‘populism’. However, is this sufficient reason to distinguish between these concepts?

Similarly, in a model predicting party choice, (Van Hauwaert & Van Kessel, 2017) include many overlapping variables like trust, cynicism, satisfaction with democracy and populism and some interactions of these variables with issue positions in predicting party choice. This does not directly lead to a model clarifying the effects of populism.

Ideally, social science concepts should be the outcome of an interaction between theorizing on the one hand as is done in the work of Mudde and others and empirical research on the other. This empirical research should be about the extent to which the items are empirically measuring an individual trait (by using scale analysis to show the internal consistency (reliability), and by using panels to show the over-time stability (reliability), and finally by using factor analysis and similar techniques to show the discriminant validity of the concept. It should also be about the extent to which this new concept can be meaningfully related to other variables (predictive validity, using regression analysis). Ideally this should result in parsimonious models.

Some papers have attempted to do exactly this. They have tried to show the extent to which the measurement of ‘populism’ is one-dimensional or multi-dimensional and can indeed be empirically distinguished in a meaningful manner from related concepts such as external political efficacy and political cynicism. In (Spruyt et al., 2016) data from Flanders have been
used to demonstrate that the support for populism can be empirically distinguished from feelings of a lack of external political efficacy by using confirmatory factor analysis. However, secondary analysis of these data shows that other interpretations of the data are possible too and that the items, including the ones referring to individual level alienation, may actually measure one single individual trait.\(^\text{10}\) (Geurkink, Zaslove, Jacobs, & Sluiter, 2018) have explicitly addressed the issue of discriminant validity. Since they have used data very similar to the data we are using here, we will discuss their analysis in the next section. These studies argue that populism forms one dimension and that it is different from similar concepts like political alienation and cynicism.

In some recent studies populism is seen as a three-dimensional construct in which the three facets (for Schultz/Wirth et al these are anti-elitism, popular sovereignty and the idea that there is a homogenous ‘good’ population, for the group of researchers around Team Populism, these are anti-elitism, popular sovereignty (called ‘people centrism’) and a slightly more complex facet called ‘Manichean outlook’) are strongly related (Castanho Silva et al., 2018; Schulz et al., 2017; Wirth et al., 2017). In these studies, however, the new populism scale(s) is (are) not yet contrasted with or related to existing measures of political alienation, although especially the anti-elitism items are substantially very similar to older ‘external efficacy items’ and ‘political cynicism’ items.

To summarize: it seems that populism is conceptually mainly about thinking that there is a corrupt elite. This makes it conceptually rather close to older ideas linked to ‘political discontent’. Moreover, despite recent empirical attempts to address the issue of discriminant validity, the arguments are not yet convincing enough to reject the idea that we are actually dealing with an attitude very similar to older conceptualizations and operationalizations of political discontent. We will use some data from the Dutch Parliamentary Election study to see whether this conclusion needs to be rejected.

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**Populism and political discontent in 2017 in The Netherlands**\(^\text{11}\)

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\(^{10}\) All replication data were available via the publisher’s website. Great. Thanks. This should be standard in social science as a collaborative enterprise. An exploratory factor analysis of these data is not clearly giving two factors. If Kaisers criterion is used, is does. However, the scree plot points more in the direction of a single dimension. Moreover, some of the items of the populism scale load on the same latent dimension as the external efficacy items in this exploratory analysis. Of course, one could argue that there are strong theoretical arguments to use two different scales. That is why confirmatory factor analysis is used and the confirmatory factor analysis (with quite some tweaks by allowing for item correlations) for a two-factor solution is clearly better, but given the fact that the sets of questions were in different places of the questionnaire, other factors could account for this two-dimensionality as well. Moreover, the combined items form a very strong, simple scale (alpha 0.89).

\(^{11}\) The main argument made in this paper is, that populism became politicized: more strongly related to some political issues. For this we first need to show that populism and other forms of political discontent are strongly related. In a recent paper, using similar data, focusing on exactly this question, it has been argued that populism seems to measure something different than older measurements. We read a preliminary version of this paper and are still considering how this relates to what we do here. In this context we are not yet claiming a refutation of that argument (Geurkink et al., 2018). An important difference between the data used in that
In the past decades the populist discourse, blaming ‘the elite’ for many if not all of the social problems, has become more accepted in the Dutch political context. This discourse is mainly used by representatives of the PVV (Vossen, 2010) and to a lesser extent the SP. Populism in this context has a specific flavour related to both immigration and European integration: the elite is blamed for increased levels of immigration from mainly outside Europe, and for the loss of national sovereignty in the European context.

To see whether populist attitudes were present in the general public, populist items were included in the Dutch Parliamentary Election Study (DPES) of 2017. The populism items are presented in Table 1. Answering categories are 1 Strongly agree, 2 Somewhat agree, 3 Neither agree nor disagree, 4 Somewhat disagree, 5 Strongly disagree.

Table 1: set of populism items included in the DPES 2017

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Dutch text</th>
<th>English summary text</th>
<th>To be included in a populism scale in this paper?</th>
<th>Included in (Akkerman et al., 2014)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>V320</td>
<td>Wat men in de politiek ‘het sluiten van compromissen’ noemt, is eigenlijk gewoon het verraden van je principes.</td>
<td>Compromise is selling out principles</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V321</td>
<td>De meeste politici geven niets om het volk.</td>
<td>Politicians do not care about the people</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V322</td>
<td>De meeste politici zijn te vertrouwen.</td>
<td>Most politicians are trustworthy</td>
<td>Yes, but reversed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V323</td>
<td>Politici vormen het grootste probleem in Nederland.</td>
<td>Politicians are the main problem in the Netherlands</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V324</td>
<td>Een sterke regeringsleider is goed voor Nederland, ook als die leider de regels wat oprekt om dingen voor elkaar te krijgen.</td>
<td>Strong leader is good even if bends rules</td>
<td>No, not necessarily a core element of populism</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V325</td>
<td>De belangrijkste politieke beslissingen moeten worden genomen door het volk en niet door politici.</td>
<td>People not politicians should make most important decisions</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V326</td>
<td>De meeste politici zijn alleen maar geïnteresseerd in de belangen van rijke en</td>
<td>Politicians care only about interests of rich and powerful</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The rather complex structure of the DPES 2017 will not be explained in this paper. The aim of the study was to create a representative sample of the Dutch voting population. Response rates of the various parts of the study varied and are explained in the codebook.
Politici moeten zich laten leiden door de mening van het volk.

De politieke tegenstellingen zijn groter tussen de elite en gewone burgers dan tussen burgers onderling.

Ik word liever vertegenwoordigd door een gewone burger dan door een beroepspoliticus.

Politici praten te veel en doen te weinig.

The items all refer to ‘politicians’ as the elite (with the notable exception of V328 and implicitly V326). This makes the items substantively rather close to items related to political cynicism, external efficacy and political alienation.

Exploratory factor analysis of the items reveals that this set is clearly one dimensional, with only one factor with an Eigenvalue above 1 and a scree-plot indicating one relevant factor only. Explained variance by this single factor is about 50%. This is clearly reflected in the quality of the scale: alpha of this scale is 0.89. The same is true for the shorter Akkerman version (check Table 1, six items only, one single dimension, alpha 0.81).

Efficacy

The set of populism items is rather new. The DPES 2017 has a few other sets of items measuring similar attitudes related to political discontent. It is important to note that these other items are located as sets in different places in the questionnaire and that various types of answering categories (dichotomies, four-point scales) have been used. Before we focus on the relationship between these scales, let us analyse these scales separately.

One set of items is often considered to be an indicator of (internal and external) efficacy.

Table 2: Scales measuring aspects of political discontent: efficacy (items indicated with * can be used to trace changes over a longer period of time in The Netherlands)
Interesting to note is that the three trend items form a reasonable efficacy scale (alpha 0.79). The other items do not relate that well to each other, but this may because of the different types of answering categories. In the remainder we focus on the three items that are also used in previous versions of the DPES.

**Attitudes towards politicians**

A third set of items, included in the DPES since 2006, is about politicians. The items are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3: Scales measuring aspects of political discontent: distrust ing politicians (items indicated with * are trend questions and can be used to trace some changes over time in The Netherlands), all items measured on a 5-point scale, ranging from fully agree to fully disagree

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Dutch text</th>
<th>English translation</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>V260</td>
<td>Politici zijn eerlijk</td>
<td>Politicians are honest</td>
<td>Reversed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V261</td>
<td>Politici zijn profiteers</td>
<td>Politicians are profiteers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V262</td>
<td>Politici houden zich aan hun beloftes</td>
<td>Politicians keep their promises</td>
<td>Reversed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V263</td>
<td>Politici zijn corrupt</td>
<td>Politicians are corrupt</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These four items form a reasonable scale as well (alpha is 0.75).

**Trust in institutions**

A fourth set of items sometimes argued to be an aspect of political discontent is ‘trust’. In the DPES 2017 questions have been asked for many institutions. An exploratory factor analysis clearly shows that there are three easily interpretable dimensions of trust: non-elected law and stability (judges, the army, the police, NATO), business (banks and big companies) and political institutions. We focus on political institutions. Answering categories are 1 Very much, 2 Fairly much, 3 Not so much, 4 No trust at all. These questions have been asked before and can thus be used to describe some trends.

Table 4: Scales measuring aspects of political discontent: trust (these items are trend questions and can be used to trace changes over a longer period of time in The Netherlands)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Dutch text</th>
<th>Items (English short form)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>S049</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>Trust: Government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S050</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>Trust: National Parliament</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S051</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>Trust: Civil servants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S053</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>Trust: European Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S056</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>Trust: Political parties</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
These five items form a scale with an alpha of 0,87.

Satisfaction with democracy
A fifth indication of political discontent, is the (single) item ‘satisfaction with (Dutch) democracy’.

Correlates between scales
The four scales and the item satisfaction with democracy correlate, but not perfectly. Since the reliability of the scales is not perfect, at least some of these differences can be attributed to unreliability.

Table 5: Pearson correlations between the four scales measuring discontent (high levels are showing discontent: a lack of efficacy, high levels of distrust)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>No efficacy</th>
<th>No institutional trust</th>
<th>Distrusting politicians</th>
<th>Dissatisfaction with democracy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Populism</strong></td>
<td>Corr. .654</td>
<td>.627</td>
<td>.722</td>
<td>.497</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N 1776</td>
<td>1351</td>
<td>2166</td>
<td>2252</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>No efficacy</strong></td>
<td>Corr. .537</td>
<td>.595</td>
<td>.400</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N 1178</td>
<td>1963</td>
<td>2076</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>No institutional trust</strong></td>
<td>Corr. .585</td>
<td>.431</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N 1501</td>
<td>1605</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Distrusting politicians</strong></td>
<td>Corr. .481</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N 2544</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Are the scales tapping into different aspects of political discontent?
The argument in this paper is built on the hypothesis that ‘populism’ is very similar to a lack of efficacy, institutional distrust and negative attitudes towards politicians (political discontent), and that ‘populism’ became only recently more politicized by a stronger connection to political issues about Europe and migration/integration. It is also argued that these political issues themselves became more connected in this context, thus creating a second conflict dimension in Dutch politics.

Unfortunately, the items in the DPES 2017 are presented in different blocks of questions and are using different answering formats (with two, four or five answering categories). Because of this, items of different sets will not correlate perfectly, even when they tap into the same latent trait.\(^{13}\) The weak relationship between two very similar items in the DPES is showing this problem very clearly. In the efficacy battery it is stated “Kamerleden bekommeren zich niet om de mening van mensen zoals ik (is zo, is niet zo)” [MPs do not care about people like me]. The populism battery includes the statement “De meeste politici geven niets om het volk (five point scale)” [most politicians do not care about the people]. These two items clearly state more or less the same thing. However the relationship

\(^{13}\) In (Geurkink et al., 2018) this fundamental problem is even stronger, because data were collected in different waves of one panel. Since part of the DPES data were collected in the same panel, internal stability of populism can be studied for a small group of people. The merger of the various datasets, however, was not done yet.
between these two items is rather weak (Kendall’s tau-b = 0.47). Since substantive differences are probably small, this weakness may be attributed to other factors such as the answering categories and the context of the questionnaire. Because items are presented in blocks, some internal cohesion is created by order and context effects. This creates a bigger consistency than would otherwise have been observed.

Like (Geurkink et al., 2018) we performed an exploratory factor analysis with all items in the previous analyses. A four factor solution is a possible interpretation of the data, with populist items, trust items and efficacy items forming the core of three separate dimensions and the items about politicians spread over the populist and the other dimensions. Satisfaction with democracy is also not clearly related to one of the four factors. These four factors exceed the threshold of an Eigenvalue above 1.0. However, the scree-plot clearly indicates a one-factor solution, because the second, third and fourth factor only explain some of the variance. Given the different ways the questions were asked, and because of the weak relationship between at least two very similar items, on the basis of this analysis we should not exclude the possibility that the four factors are actually merely a reflection of the structure of the questionnaire.

**Same determinants?**

An obvious extension of the aforementioned analysis to see whether we are actually dealing with one dimension, is to examine whether the various scales relate differently to relevant variables in the expectations related to populism and political discontent (check also: (Geurkink et al., 2018)). This analysis is somewhat problematic. Because of the structure of the DPES 2017, not all questions were asked to all respondents. A listwise deletion of cases, however, would have reduced the number of cases substantially. We therefore ignore this problem for now.

Figure 1. Mean scores on measurements of political discontent for various levels of education

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14 We used maximum likelihood extraction and oblimin rotation.
15 More sophisticated analyses are maybe necessary to make a convincing argument that populism and these other measures are actually referring to the same individual characteristic. Even these more sophisticated analyses should consider that the populism scale is the most reliable scale of the ones presented here. Therefore, we expect relationships between populism and other variables to be somewhat stronger than the relationship between these other, somewhat less reliable scales and these variables. The predictive value of the various scales differs a bit, but are not much stronger for populism than for the other scales.
Figure 1 shows that populism and our other measures of political discontent are in predictable yet similar ways related to education. This is yet another argument for taking various measures of political discontent to be tapping into the same latent trait.

**Same predictions?**
Measures of political discontent are also clearly associated with non-voting in similar ways (Figure 2). Populist voting is often said to be closely associated with attitudes of political discontent. Indeed, all our measures are closely associated with the binary choice for a populist party.\(^{16}\)

**To summarize:** it seems that populism is *empirically* strongly related to older operationalizations of ‘political discontent’ in the DPES 2017. It also seems that the various scales are similarly related to determinants like education, and to effects like non-voting and party choice. We might therefore have reasons to assume that what is now called ‘populism’ in the academic literature is largely the same thing what was called ‘political discontent, political inefficacy, distrust in politicians’ in previous studies. Although the measures, often based on only a few items, are not extremely reliable, we can use them to show the changing relationship between discontent and substantial issues.

\(^{16}\) The analysis here was still limited. We performed a simple logistic regression with the choice for either PVV (the biggest party) or FvD as the dependent variable. The beta coefficient of the populism scale was slightly bigger than the effect of the set of statements about politicians, but the differences with most indicators of political discontent were small. Trust in institutions seems to perform worst.
Trends in the relationship between political discontent and political issues

One of the main outcomes of research in political discontent was the weak and inconsistent relationship with political issues. Discontent was seen as spread across the political spectrum. In the context of the study of populism, it has been argued that populist political parties have been mobilizing political discontent. In 2002 Fortuyn was the first Dutch politician able to mobilize voters who were frustrated with the established political parties (Pellikaan, Lange, & Meer, 2007). Mudde argued that populism is characterized by mobilizing the normally inactive discontent: “what sets the populist heartland apart from other protest-prone groups is their reactivity; they generally have to be mobilized by a populist actor, rather than taking the initiative themselves” (Mudde, 2004). Thus, in the context of the study of populism, it is assumed that a form of political discontent is mobilized by populist parties.

This mobilization effort, however, is not ‘neutral’. This is why ‘populism’ itself is said to be a ‘thin’ ideology. It can be used in the context of various substantive political positions. And if the populist mobilization strategy is used by various political actors spread along the various political axes, there is no need to expect that this populist sentiment itself becomes politicized, connected to specific substantive issues.

There has been some debate about the extent to which various political parties in the past decades have been using populist strategies to attract voters. Both on the right (predominantly the LPF in 2002 and 2003, and the PVV from 2005 onwards) and on the left the SP was clearly using populist terminology and arguments. However, it seems that the
strategy is dominantly (exclusively) used on the right side of the political spectrum, especially since 2004 (Rooduijn & Pauwels, 2011).

It is known that political parties using populist discourse tend to strengthen political discontent among their followers (van der Brug, 2003). It is also known that partisanship tends to affect the way people look at politics. So, if specific political parties are mobilizing discontent, and are at the same time communicating relatively clear and coherent political messages about substantive issues, we expect the relationship between discontent and political issues to strengthen over time.

For the indications of political discontent identified in the previous section, we computed the relationship (computed as Pearson correlation) with the main political issues used in the electoral strategy of the PVV (and more recently the FvD). These pertain to the cultural integration of minorities (assimilation versus demarcation) and European integration. We also computed the association between measures of discontent and income distribution (higher more supportive of income distribution).

At this stage in our research we have only focused on two indicators of political discontent that were covered in the previous section: efficacy and political satisfaction ( coded such that higher values indicate discontent). As stated before the populism items from the 2017 DPES have very limited longitudinal range and can therefore not be used for our purposes. Efficacy, however, has the added benefit of being the attitude that was most strongly correlated with populism. We leave institutional trust and cynicism for future drafts. To measure attitudes towards European integration, minorities, and income inequality we employ the well-known 7-pointscales that have been a staple of the DPES for decades.

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17 “In the Netherlands (...) the SP in 2002 and 2006 is less populist than would be expected from the literature.”

18 The exact wording is as follows: **Income equality:** “Some people and parties think that the differences in incomes in our country should be decreased (at number 1). Others think that these differences should be increased (at number 7). Of course, there are also people whose opinion is somewhere in between. Where would you place yourself on this line?” **European integration:** “Some people and parties think that European unification should go further. Others think that European unification has already gone too far. Suppose the people and parties who think that European unification should go further are at the beginning of this line (at number 1) and the people and parties who think European unification has already gone too far are at the end of the line (at number 7). Where would you place yourself on this line?” **Multiculturalism:** “Some people and parties think that foreigners should be able to live in the Netherlands while preserving all customs of their own culture. Others think that these people, if they stay in the Netherlands, should completely adjust themselves to Dutch culture. At the beginning of this line are the people (and parties) who think that foreigners and ethnic minorities should be able to live in the Netherlands while preserving all customs of their own culture (at number 1); at the end of the line are the people (and parties) who think that these people should fully adjust themselves to Dutch culture (at number 7). Where would you place yourself on this line?”
Figure 3 shows that efficacy and dissatisfaction have clearly become more rooted in political issues as time goes by. In the early 1990s these feelings of discontent were at best very weakly correlated with Euroscepticism and nativism and not at all related to attitudes towards redistribution. But over time these correlations have increased in a linear fashion (the dashed lines in Figure 3). By 2017 the correlation coefficients between our measures of discontent on the one hand and Euroscepticism and nativism on the other hand has nearly doubled in size. Moreover, those on the political left (in economic terms) express higher levels of discontent than those on the right which we largely attribute to the continued electoral success of the left-populist SP. Still, Figure 3 also clearly shows that the politicization of discontent largely occurs on the cultural dimension of political competition. Formal significance tests of the linear trends further indicate that for five out of six of the abovementioned correlations the trend is statistically significant (at alpha = 10%). The only time trend that lies outside of this threshold is the one for political dissatisfaction and income inequality (lower left-hand graph in figure 3) with p = 0.12.
Conclusion

In this paper we have argued that what is currently studied as ‘populism’ may actually be a slightly different way of conceptualizing and measuring a more general and often studied political attitude: political discontent. This means that we should try to conceptually distinguish and relate different forms of discontent, including populism, instead of studying this attitude in isolation. The study of populism may be strengthened by relating its theorizing to the outcomes of the study of political discontent.

More specifically, we have argued that populist parties have strengthened the coherence of the political discourse among voters. Since that discourse in the Netherlands consists mainly of anti-European and anti-immigration positions, we expected the coherence of these sentiments to have become stronger in the general public. This was confirmed by our, still very basic, analyses of these relationships.

We think the increased strength of the relationship between political issues and political discontent is relevant in at least two ways. **Firstly**, it seems that the generally weak association between political discontent and political issues can become stronger under some circumstances. This may explain the contradicting outcomes of previous studies in political discontent. In this paper we suggested these circumstances are related to the supply side of politics.

**Secondly** the findings suggest that ‘populism’ will be less easily changed by ‘better politics’ or ‘more democracy’, because it became connected to substantially valid issue positions. As long as these issues are not ‘solved’ (meaning, accompanied by a radical change in the status quo), general discontent will be fuelled by debates about these issues.
References


