The Importance of Perception and Populism: Explaining voters' choices using the proximity model of voting

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The Importance of Perception and Populism
Explaining voters' choices using the proximity model of voting

Abstract

This paper analyzes the interaction between policy distance and issue salience using the proximity model of voting. It uses a quantitative analysis of items from the Dutch Parliamentary Electoral Survey (2021) and POPPA (2018) to research whether the more salience is attached to economic, socio-cultural, and political issues by voters, the more important the chosen dimension will be for their vote. The examination provides data on voters' and party positions on these three dimensions, and the binary logistic regression finds that the effect is strongest for the socio-cultural issues, but also somewhat significant for political issues, which confirms the importance of populism in contemporary Western European democracy.

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1. Introduction

It has been argued in recent years that in addition to the traditional economic left-right political spectrum, a political division has arisen between the 'winners' and 'losers' of globalization (Kriesi 2008). Along this socio-cultural cleavage lie issues like immigration, multiculturalism, LGBT rights and the environment, dividing conservatives and progressives. Parallel to this evolution lies perhaps the most important development in Western democratic politics since the turn of the century, namely the rise of populism, and especially populist radical right-wing parties. Populism itself is not limited to right-wing parties. Rather, it is understood as being a 'discursive framework' that considers society to be "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 general will of the people" (Mudde, 2004, p. 543; Schmuck & Hameleers 2020). These populist political parties have been able to capitalize on what appears to be voters losing interest in traditional mainstream parties, especially on the left wing (Kriesi 2008; Gidron 2022; Gidron & Mijs 2019). As a result of more moderate left-wing parties being unable to stop these voters slipping away, a crisis has arisen for social democratic parties in Europe in recent years (Abou-Chadi & Wagner 2020).

The formation of this new socio-cultural dimension has created a discrepancy between the traditional supply of political parties and ideologies, and the demand for ideological representation by voters. In other words, many voters are now left with no party that is truly able to represent them ideologically (Hillen & Steiner, 2020; 2021). This issue is particularly relevant when it comes to voters who have left-wing attitudes concerning the economy, but conservative or authoritarian views on socio-cultural issues. Not only do these voters appear to be moving quickly between different parties that are sometimes on completely opposite ends of the spectrum, but they are also one of the first groups to completely stop participating in elections (Hillen & Steiner 2020; Federico et al. 2017; Van der Brug & Van Spanje 2009).

The appearance of this new political cleavage, and a lack of parties to truly fill it ideologically, has meant that a battle has ensued between parties on both ends of the spectrum to reach these voters. When faced with a lack of parties matching their opinions, left-wing conservative voters are forced to choose between a left-wing party whose economic standpoint matches theirs, or a right-wing party whose conservative socio-cultural opinions are similar. This base of left-wing conservative voters has thus created a struggle between existing parties, often culminating in the use of populist politics in order to appear 'closer' to the voter. Parties are simply attempting to appeal to an electorate that is shown to base its vote on the perceived importance of major relevant issues such as immigration and economic

inequality (Hillen & Steiner 2021; Lefkofridi et al. 2014).

In the meanwhile, centre-left social democratic parties are unable to tap into this demand for left-wing conservatism. A problem not restricted to more moderate left-wing parties, however, as existing further left-wing parties closest to the 'conservative' corner of the spectrum are also struggling to capitalize on a large group of voters close to sharing their views. This has been attributed to these voters being more reluctant to go vote for them when they are smaller, leaving these parties in a vicious cycle (Hillen & Steiner 2020). In the Netherlands, this has left traditional parties like the social democratic PvdA ('*Partij van de Arbeid*') and the more far-left Socialist Party SP ('*Socialistische Partij*') receiving only 9 seats each – from the total of 150 seats in the Dutch parliament – in the most recent election that was yet again considered a major loss for the traditional left. At the same time, right-wing populists remain strong, and voters are shown to turn right-wing more easily than left-wing when it is time to enter the voting booth (Gidron 2022).

But what causes voters to abandon traditional, mainstream left-wing parties for those that are culturally right-wing? If it is not personal material circumstances – for instance during times of economic crisis – that cause this shift (Gidron & Mijs 2019), then what motivates these voters in their decision? This research will explore the reasons of Dutch economically left-wing, yet culturally conservative voters for making their decision, and hopefully shed light on how these voters' lacking representation could be improved. In other words, this research will attempt to find where democratic politics is failing these voters in the representation they were promised. Furthermore, it will attempt to discover why voters in general are more likely to lean right than left-wing when faced with a decision. This poses the research question: "How do salience and policy distance interact in deciding voters' choice to vote for a specific political party, and what is the relevance of populism?".

2. Theory
2.1 The 'traditional' political spectrum

The leading assumption behind the consideration of this issue is the idea that voters can now be spread out across a political space consisting of two dimensions, namely the economy and socio-cultural issues (Kriesi 2008; Van der Brug & Van Spanje 2009). These dimensions are explained to be separate and perpendicular to each other, allowing for the ideological placement of voters' attitudes, and existing political parties. The 'political space' created by this can be divided into four different 'ideological corners' (Image 1), namely an economically left-wing, socio-culturally progressive corner (from now on left-wing

progressive), an economically right-wing, socio-culturally progressive corner (right-wing progressive), an economically right-wing, socio-culturally conservative corner (right-wing conservative), and finally an economically left-wing, yet socio-culturally conservative corner (left-wing conservative).

Especially this final group, the conservative left-wing voters, are in a situation lacking parties that fully represent them on both the economic and socio-cultural dimensions (Thomassen 2012; Van der Brug & Van Spanje 2009; Hillen & Steiner 2020; 2021). They are stuck in a position where they have to choose between their perceived importance of either the economy or socio-cultural issues, in order to find a party that might represent them on just one political dimension. This is because traditionally, political parties have been divided along an axis running from left-wing progressive parties, to right-wing conservative ones (Van der Brug & Van Spanje 2009). This simple lack of parties to properly represent them is one explanation for the increasing withdrawal of left-wing conservative voters from political participation (Federico et al. 2017).
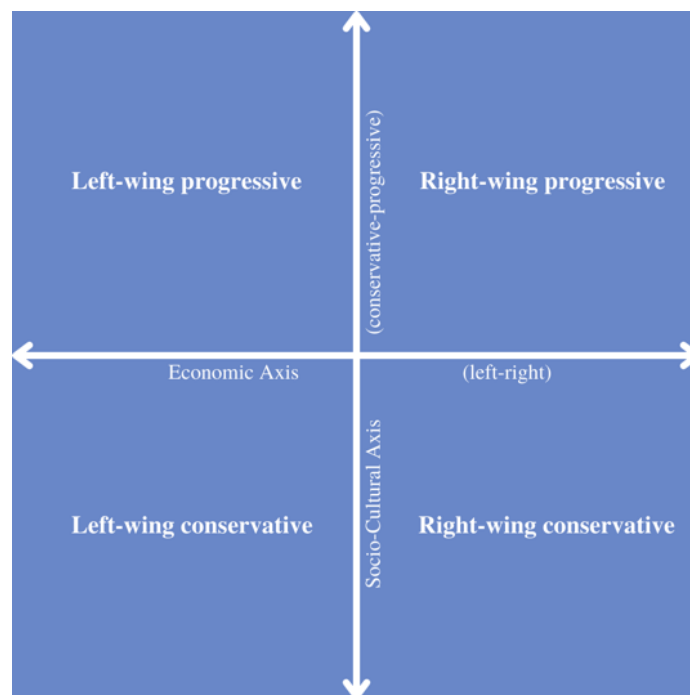

Image 1: Two-dimensional political space with different corners conceptualised

2.2 The proximity model of voting

One theory that has been forwarded as an explanation for which party these voters decide to vote for, is the relevance of voters' perceived policy distance to political parties, as well as issue salience. Firstly, policy distance refers to the difference between a voter's position and

the position of the party. The 'proximity voting model' argues voters are more likely to vote for a party that is closest to them policy-wise. Secondly, issue salience refers to the importance voters attach to a certain issue and argues this attached importance is decisive in their choice to vote for a specific party (Lefkofridi et al. 2014; Bakker et al. 2018). This theory is based on the idea that voters' political considerations are stored in their memory, but that some of these are more accessible – and thus more salient to voters – than others (Iyengar & Kinder 1987; Scheufele 2000; Scheufele & Tewksbury 2006; Zaller 1992; Zaller & Feldman 1992). This should then lead to these 'partyless' voters opting to vote for a party whose stance is closest to their own, on the issue they prioritize. In other words, left-wing conservatives who believe the economy is more important than socio-cultural issues will vote for left-wing progressive parties, and left-wing conservatives who favour socio-cultural issues will vote for right-wing conservative ones. This is somewhat corroborated by research showing that negative changes to voters' personal financial situation – which could be conceived as a measure of a voter's issue salience on the economy – makes them more susceptible to voting for an economically left-wing party (Gidron & Mijs 2019).

Lefkofridi et al. (2014) attempt to confirm this relationship between issue salience and party preference through an analysis of the European Election Studies (EES) dataset. They measure voters' attitudes in order to find left-authoritarians, place parties on a spectrum using their political positions, and finally attempt to measure salience. For this final assessment, voters' 'concernedness' with the economy, as well as immigration, are used as a measure of their salience of either political dimension. The results found using these indicators are significant, as well as generally supportive of the authors' hypothesis, but rely on a simple conceptualization of only voters' attitudes on 'immigration' as being a measure of socio-cultural salience. Furthermore, a robustness check is carried out using the 'most important problem'-question from the EES, an open-ended question asking voters to describe the most important issue facing their country at that moment. Its results are described as being "largely consistent with those reported" from the authors' first analysis (p. 73). However, upon closer inspection they show far less statistically significant results, with results for voters who favour the economy even showing a reverse effect, considering them still more likely to vote right-wing conservative, as if prioritizing the socio-cultural dimension (p. 88). Aside from this, the coding of answers to the open-ended question asking voters to identify the most important problem, is also questionable.

The 'most important problem'-question has been criticized before as a measure of issue salience for being negative, as well as focussed on short-term problems (Wlezien 2005).

However, the method used by Lefkofridi et al. (2014), ranking voters' concern with the economy and immigration seems even more plain and focussed on the short-term 'concernedness' of voters. This is largely due to its use of 'immigration' as a purely right-wing conservative issue, as well as apparently the only issue that defines socio-cultural conservatism. The weak results found in the robustness check using the 'most important problem'-question therefore provide an interesting opening for further research, since they call into question the validity of the conclusion that "left-authoritarians privilege economic concerns and therefore prefer parties that are left-liberal" (p. 65). Lefkofridi et al. (2014) are stark in their claim that "whether these citizens privilege economic or socio-cultural congruence in their electoral preferences depends on the issues they are concerned about" (p. 65) and appear convinced of the importance of salience. However, this conclusion would require further statistical analysis of these voters' considerations. Therefore, it could be hypothesized that: "*The more salience voters attach to economic issues, the more important the economic dimension will be for their voting behaviour*" (H_1). And also, that: "*The more salience voters attach to socio-cultural issues, the more important the socio-cultural dimension will be for their voting behaviour*" (H_2).

2.3 The rise of populism – and the need for a new model

However, newer research suggests that such 'cross-pressured' voters, lacking parties that represent them, might actually be more likely to lean right than left when it comes to their vote (Gidron 2022). It shows how "while support for the left is common among voters with bundled progressive attitudes, it is enough to be conservative on one issue to turn right" (p. 157). And it has mainly been the radical right that has made use of this, using 'position blurring' techniques around their economic policy in order to attract left-wing conservative voters by creating misperceived congruence and salience on these issues (Hillen & Steiner 2021; Rovny 2012; 2013; 2020). In the Netherlands, the far-right PVV (*'Partij voor de Vrijheid'*) has for instance consistently adopted economically left-wing positions to appeal to a voter base that might be somewhat more economically left-wing than the party itself. Therefore vitally, rather than relying on the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) to plot concrete party positions – as used by Lefkofridi et al. (2014) – the analysis in this paper will rely on voters' perceived positions of political parties to measure policy distance, in order to control for any such misperceived congruence.

However, these cross-pressured voters' reasons for being more likely to lean right than left-wing might also have different explanations. More than fifty years ago in 1970, political

scientist Seymour Martin Lipset described the paradoxical nature of conservative politics. He used the term 'backlash politics' to describe how conservatives tend to favour maintaining a status quo, but turn anti-establishment once the institutions of the 'establishment' have been taken over by progressives (Lipset & Raab 1970). This description fits the rising trend of populism in European politics recent times, which has led to the development of 'deeply-rooted' anti-elite attitudes against an establishment that is increasingly perceived by conservative voters as being left-wing progressive (Ivaldi 2006; Adamson 2019).

To understand populism's success, it is explained by Mudde (2004) as consisting of three components. It is based on a 'Manichean' dichotomy that is antagonistic and thus supposed to have some moral value (1), pitting the 'pure people' against a 'corrupt elite' (2), arguing politics should be an expression of the 'will of the people' (3). Its rise, using anti-establishment politics, could also be a sign of an increasingly important factor in determining voters' choices these days. It has been shown that these anti-establishment, populist politicians are more effective communicators, both in their use of emotions, as well as at being perceived as 'authentic' by the electorate (Thomas et al. 2012; Gunn & Rosenberg 2018). These factors contribute to the fact that populism is better understood as 'a discursive framework of communication' (Schmuck & Hameleers 2020), that also appears to be very effective at getting left-wing conservative voters to vote for right-wing conservative parties.

This issue of authenticity in communication is best explained by Brett (2013), who argues "perhaps politicians need to find language which reflects the unpredictable nature of democratic politics. One of the chief complaints which people make about politicians is that they seem somehow abnormal, as if from another planet" (p. 412). This is a problem that right-wing conservative populists generally do not suffer from. Their harsh use of taboo topics like immigration, multiculturalism and minority rights, places them in a position where they must be viewed as authentic, since their rhetoric is perceived by voters as being far outside the frame of what is deemed acceptable by 'the establishment'. Formisano (2005) explains this clearly by stating that "reactionary populists are known for their blunt speech and for not observing the constraints imposed by the norm", but that "some of the outrageous comments that European right-wing populist leaders make about immigrants or cultural issues are calculated to establish their antiparty, anti-politician, and anti-establishment bona fides as much as a posture on the issue being addressed" (p. 248). In other words, populists may be good at appearing to be on the side of 'the people', simply because what they say is not acceptable to, and could never be said by the establishment. Their success shows how being perceived as being outside of the establishment as a political party must be a relevant factor

for voters in determining which party to vote for.

This allows for the third hypothesis that: "*The more salience voters attach to the issue of politics itself, as opposed to substantive political (policy) issues, the more important the anti-establishment dimension will be for their voting behaviour*" (H₃). Whilst issue salience on the economy and socio-cultural issues might be a relevant factor in determining who left-wing conservatives vote for, the rise of populist politics cannot simply be explained as a 'discursive framework of communication' by this development. It does not explain the important role of changing communication and anti-establishment politics in recent years. Therefore, this hypothesis (H₃), in combination with the first two (H₁, H₂) argues for the addition of another dimension to the political space, in essence turning it three-dimensional. The overarching hypothesis (H₁,₂,₃) including all three dimensions – the economic, socio-cultural, and political – can therefore be stated as:

$$Vote = Sal_{Eco} + Dist_{Eco} + Sal_{Eco} * Dist_{Eco} + Sal_{SoCul} + Dist_{SoCul} + Sal_{SoCul} * Dist_{SoCul} + Sal_{Pol} + Dist_{Pol} + Sal_{Pol} * Dist_{Pol}$$

Here, '*Sal*' is the salience of a specific dimension and '*Dist*' refers to the policy distance from the voter to the different parties. This research will thus seek to confirm the importance of issue salience, as well as attempt to establish a new dimension in the political space, based on the successful populist claim of a battle between 'the people' and 'the establishment'. It has been argued that voters decide who to vote for based on their perceived importance of specific political issues such as economic inequality and immigration, but what if the most salient issue to voters is politics itself?

3. Case Selection

A comprehensive analysis of voters' choices along these hypotheses requires a case in which voters are offered a varied supply of political parties from different ends of the spectrum, including parties that are populist. Furthermore, since the analysis specifically considers left-wing conservatives and the decisions they make, a case is needed with a significantly large share of these voters is reported by Lefkofridi et al. (2014).

The decision was made to investigate the hypotheses based on the case of the Netherlands because the country can be considered an extreme case when it comes to left-wing conservative voters (Gerring 2006). This is due to the large proportion of voters whose attitudes can be considered as such, namely 31.6% of the electorate. Only Greece – with a

staggering 36.3% of voters being left-wing conservatives – has a larger proportion of this group of voters in Western Europe (Table 1). The Netherlands is also 'extreme' in that it is a country with a rich and stable, yet relatively recent history of populist politics from parties on either side of these voters, inching ever closer to meet their standpoints. It is one of the few countries where left-wing populists have been in parliament together with right-wing populists (Table 1), and stable in the sense that they have been there the longest in Europe, spanning multiple parliamentary terms at this point (Otjes & Louwerse 2015). The presence of the Socialist Party ('*Socialistische Partij*'), joined by the Freedom Party ('*Partij voor de Vrijheid*') since 2006, and even the Forum for Democracy ('*Forum voor Democratie*') since 2017, not only allows for a strong analysis of the first hypotheses (H_1, H_2) on left-wing conservatives, but also fits an analysis of the importance of anti-establishment, populist politics to voters in general (H_3).

The diverse list of Dutch parties, including right-wing as well as left-wing populist parties, could help to showcase the differences among populist parties themselves as well. Whereas left-wing populists tend to fight an economic 'battle' in which they claim the political elite only favour the interests of the business elite, right-wing populists tend to achieve this through authoritarianism and nationalism, for instance through nativist calls against migrants (Mudde 2007). This supply of parties that attempt to cater to the needs of those examined in this study, combined with their anti-establishment attitudes – though maybe from differing angles – make the Dutch case perfect for an analysis of the importance of anti-establishment politics in contemporary democracy, as well as for the considerations of left-wing conservative voters in voting for a specific party.

Country	Proportion of left-wing conservatives (%)	No. of populist parties in parliament (2022)	
		Left-wing	Right-wing
Austria	13.8	0	1
Belgium	20.3	0	1
Denmark	7.0	1	2
Finland	27.8	0	1
France	23.1	1	1
Germany	8.8	1	1
Greece	36.2	2	1
Ireland	22.3	0	0
Italy	25.2	0	3
Netherlands	**31.6**	**1**	**2**
Portugal	25.7	0	1
Spain	25.7	1	1
Sweden	15.9	0	1
United Kingdom	28.4	0	0

Table 1: Proportion of left-wing conservatives by country (Lefkofridi et al. 2014) and the number of populist parties in parliament as of 2022 (Mudde 2007; Geurkink et al. 2020)

This group of voters – the left-wing conservatives – was selected also based on the extremeness of their case, with them making up the largest 'section' of the electorate, aside from the exceptions in the cases of Austria, Germany, Denmark, and Sweden – (Lefkofridi et al. 2014). This is especially significant due to left-wing conservative voters completely lacking any representation in any Western European country, with only the Danish social democrats as a possible exception since they could "almost be classified as a left-authoritarian party" (p. 72).

4. Research Methods
4.1 Measuring voters' perceptions of party positions

The feasibility of these hypotheses (H_1, H_2) will be demonstrated through an examination of issue salience and policy distance in voter surveys in the Netherlands using parliamentary electoral surveys. It will rely on data collected from the Dutch Parliamentary Election Survey (DPES/NKO), with the survey after the parliamentary elections of 2021 forming the basis of this research. This dataset includes 9 established Dutch political parties (see 8.2), thus including multiple populist parties from both sides of the political spectrum.

In this analysis, issue salience will be measured by using the open-ended survey question from the DPES: "What do you consider to be the most important national problem?". Answers are subsequently coded as belonging to the economic, socio-cultural, or political dimension. For robustness, as well as attempting to solidify their earlier findings, the analysis will also be conducted using the coding found in Lefkofridi et al. (2014) (see 8.2).

The first hypotheses (H_1, H_2) aiming to find the relevance of issue salience and policy distance on economic and socio-cultural issues, will require a measure of policy distance. This is the difference between the positions of the voters and the parties. However, this analysis will – unlike the one conducted by Lefkofridi et al. (2014) – not merely rely on expert's surveys to establish party positions. Instead, it will measure voters' perceptions of political parties' positions, rather than their actual positions. As mentioned before, populist parties have a tendency to blur their position on some issues, which may for instance lead to them being perceived as more economically left-wing. Using the question "where do you perceive (specific party) to stand concerning income differences?" provides a strong measure of economic position, as it accurately captures the core of the economically left-right debate.

For the perceived socio-cultural positions a more complicated measure will be used, since one of the weaknesses in Lefkofridi et al. (2014) is their use of only immigration as a measure of socio-cultural opinion. This analysis will be conducted using an average of

perceptions on party positions on three different issues that together accurately describe this dimension. The questions "where do you stand concerning foreigners?", as well as "…concerning euthanasia?" and "…concerning European unification?", together provide a solid measure of socio-cultural positions (see 8.1). This is because the socio-cultural dimension is more complicated than the economic and cannot be encompassed with only the question on foreigners. Moreover, political debate on this dimension in the Netherlands is often broader, and centres around issues like euthanasia, or globalization in a larger sense, of which the question on European unification is an accurate measure.

The relevant policy distance can subsequently be calculated by using the question asking voters to rank their own opinion along the same scale. The result of this calculation is then the perceived policy distance between a voter and a political party.

4.2 Measuring populism

The third hypothesis (H_3), that focusses on the importance of voters' salience on populist, anti-establishment politics will also be based on data collected from voter surveys in the Netherlands. However, the analysis of policy distance on populism will be somewhat different to the ones on the economy and socio-cultural issues, mentioned earlier. Since the Dutch Parliamentary Election Survey of 2021 does not contain any questions on perceptions of populism, it will be impossible to measure policy distance on this topic using the perceived positions of parties. Instead, voters' and parties' populist attitudes will be used to determine this variable, since they are available.

Research by Akkerman et al. (2014) and Geurkink et al. (2020) into populist attitudes among voters provides a strong basis for this analysis. Their use of the three core elements of populism as presented by Mudde (2004), provides the broadest and strongest possible measurement of such attitudes among voters. The DPES for 2021 does contain the same six questions as used by Geurkink (2020), that will thus be used to establish voters' populist attitudes. These will be contrasted with the populist attitudes of parties as found by the Populism and Political Parties Expert Survey (POPPA)(2018). This survey uses expert's opinions on similar items (see 8.1) as presented by Geurkink (2020), along the definition by Mudde (2004), to assign parties an average level of populism that can be used to calculate the distance from the voters in the DPES.

The DPES dataset was selected as it provides the most comprehensive data of Dutch voters' perceptions, salient issues, and stances on the elite. The POPPA provides a reasonably comprehensive examination of parties' populist attitudes, of which anti-establishment-

thinking is an important part. Most importantly, they were selected since the items presented on populism – all based on Mudde's (2004) definition – are similar, and thus usable in this analysis of policy distance. Obviously however, the main weakness of this research is in the fact that (H₃), unlike the earlier hypotheses, does not rely on perceived party positions to calculate the policy distance. Sadly, concerning populism, where perception may be of the highest importance, distance will have a more abstract measure of populist attitudes.

Using a binary logistic regression on a 'stacked dataset', as well as specifically for the populist parties, the data presented here will be used to determine the relevance of issue salience and policy distance, as well as the impact of anti-establishment, populist politics on voters' choices. The abundance of data on populism from the Netherlands shows not only the relevance of this topic, but also the reasoning behind picking an extreme case.

5. Results

5.1 Voters' positions

The results obtained from the data also allow the plotting of the distribution of voters across the two-dimensional political spectrum (See Image 2). Using economic inequality as a measure of the economic position of voters, and their average position on foreigners, euthanasia, and European unification as a measure of their socio-cultural position, gives the following results. In contrast to the data found by Lefkofridi et al. (2014) that only used immigration as a measure of voters' socio-cultural positions, this more comprehensive analysis shows that the electorate might be somewhat more progressive than found Lefkofridi et al. (2014). Despite the percentage of left-wing conservatives also growing from 31.6%,
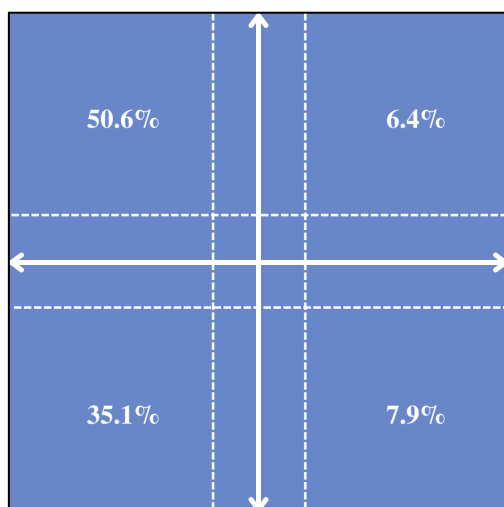
	%
Populist voters	18.3
Median voters	15.8
Non-populist voters	65.9

Image 2: Distribution of voters across a two-dimensional political spectrum (median range = 4.5 - 5.5)

Table 2: Distribution of voters along the populist scale (median range = 4.5 - 5.5)

what is most significant is the dramatic increase of left-wing progressive voters from the 15.4% found by Lefkofridi et al. (2014) to a staggering 50.6%. This might be explained by a rather large 'middle section' used in the earlier analysis, leading to almost half the electorate not ending up in one of the four corners. Still, the percentage of left-wing conservatives found is rather large, and surprising due to the lack of political parties in that area.

Conducting the same analysis for voters' level of populism shows that around 18.3% of the electorate could be considered populist, with another 15.8% showing medium levels of populism. Despite the rise of populist parties in recent years, it seems the largest section of the electorate does not carry these attitudes.

5.2 (Perceived) party positions

Not only can voters' positions in the political space be plotted, the same can be done for political parties. However, since this analysis relies on the perception of the positions of political parties on the economy and socio-cultural issues, these party positions can be massively different from where parties are traditionally thought to belong on the spectrum. In other words, since it is based on voters' perceptions, it could provide an interesting result of the position blurring behavior of some parties, for instance. The populist PVV for instance, is perceived to be almost an economically far-left party, ranking further on the economic left than the Socialist Party, that is perceived to be more to the center (See Image 3). Another populist party that is being perceived to be around the center concerning the economy, is the far-right Forum for Democracy *('Forum voor Democratie')*.

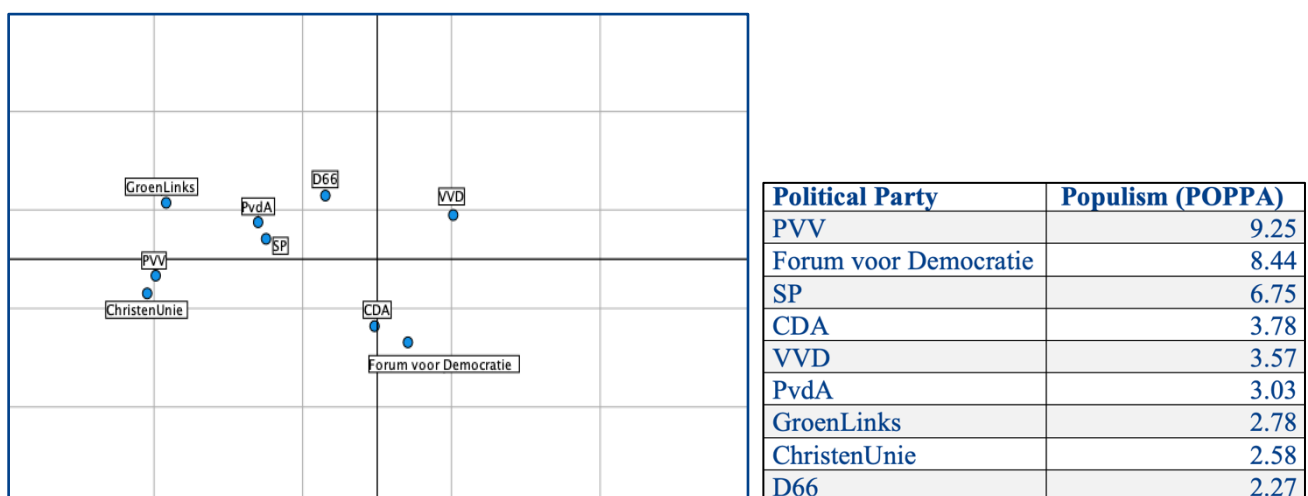| Political Party	Populism (POPPA)
PVV	9.25
Forum voor Democratie	8.44
SP	6.75
CDA	3.78
VVD	3.57
PvdA	3.03
GroenLinks	2.78
ChristenUnie	2.58
D66	2.27

Image 3: Perceived party positions across a two-dimensional political spectrum

Table 3: Populism-rating for specific parties (POPPA)

Using the POPPA allows for the calculation of average populist attitudes per party (See Table 3). What becomes visible immediately is that the three parties that rank highest on the populism scale are also the ones that seem to be perceived quite far from their traditionally assumed positions.

5.3 Results of the analysis on 'stacked dataset'

The analysis was conducted using a 'stacked dataset method', in which the respondents are stacked on top of one another to be able to conduct the analysis for all parties (Van Spanje & Van der Brug 2009). However, this leads to observations being copied, and their number thus artificially raised. Therefore, the analysis of such a 'stacked dataset' would require controlling for 'clustered standard errors'. However, this was impossible for the analysis in this paper (See 8.4).

A binary logistic regression was conducted using three different models. Firstly, the effect of policy distance on the decision to vote for a party was calculated. Secondly, a model was made to show the interaction between salience of a specific dimension, and the policy distance on that dimension. Thirdly, as a control for robustness, the same model is used but using the slightly different coding by Lefkofridi et al. (2014). Since this model is two-dimensional, political salience is excluded from this analysis (See Table 4).

The results from Model 1 show that socio-cultural policy distance is the most important distance in determining a voter's choice. However, it is followed relatively closely by political policy distance, and finally economic distance, for which the coefficient is lower.

Results of Binary Logistic Regression on Stacked Data

		Model 1 Distance			Model 2 Distance + Salience Coding 1			Model 3 Distance + Salience Lefkofridi et al. (2014)		
		B	*S.E.*	*Sig.*	*B*	*S.E.*	*Sig.*	*B*	*S.E.*	*Sig.*
Economic Distance		-.066	.016	<.001						
"	**Economic Salience**				-.076	.021	<.001	-.065	.017	<.001
"	**Socio-Cultural Salience**				-.055	.026	.032	-.075	.038	.050
"	**Political Salience**				-.063	.044	.149			
Socio-Cultural Distance		-.537	.026	<.001						
"	**Economic Salience**				-.524	.034	<.001	-.546	.029	<.001
"	**Socio-Cultural Salience**				-.574	.040	<.001	-.526	.051	<.001
"	**Political Salience**				-.521	.068	<.001			
Political Distance		-.325	.023	<.001						
"	**Economic Salience**				-.354	.030	<.001	-.345	.026	<.001
"	**Socio-Cultural Salience**				-.268	.068	<.001	-.217	.044	<.001
"	**Political Salience**				-.298	.058	<.001			
-2 Log Likelihood		7384.215			6980.922			6974.801		
Cox & Snell R^2		.079			.080			.081		
Nagelkerke R^2		.157			.158			.159		

Table 4: Results of Binary Logistic Regression on 'stacked dataset', using distance and distance + salience

Concerning the first hypothesis: "*The more salience voters attach to economic issues, the more important the economic dimension will be for their voting behaviour*" (H_1), the interaction between policy distance and salience in Model 2 shows that the effect of economic distance is relatively small. Voters with economic salience are still more affected by the socio-cultural policy distance than the economic. The results have been visualized (See Image 4) to show the coefficients, including a 95% confidence interval. The results using the robustness check of the coding of the 'most important problem'-question by Lefkofridi et al. (2014) are similar, showing socio-cultural and political policy distance to be more important in deciding an economically salient voter's vote than economic policy distance itself is.

The second hypothesis: "*The more salience voters attach to socio-cultural issues, the more important the socio-cultural dimension will be for their voting behaviour*" (H_2), is tested using the interaction between socio-cultural distance and socio-cultural salience. The results show that not only is policy distance on the socio-cultural dimension the most important factor, but also that when a voter's most salient issue is socio-cultural, the effect is largest. The robustness check using the coding from Lefkofridi et al. (2014) shows a similar effect, with voters with socio-cultural salience being most influenced by the distance on this same dimension.

Finally, the third hypothesis: "*The more salience voters attach to the issue of politics itself, as opposed to substantive political (policy) issues, the more important the anti-establishment dimension will be for their voting behaviour*" (H_3) was also tested. The results show that the effect of political policy distance is relatively large, but also that for voters
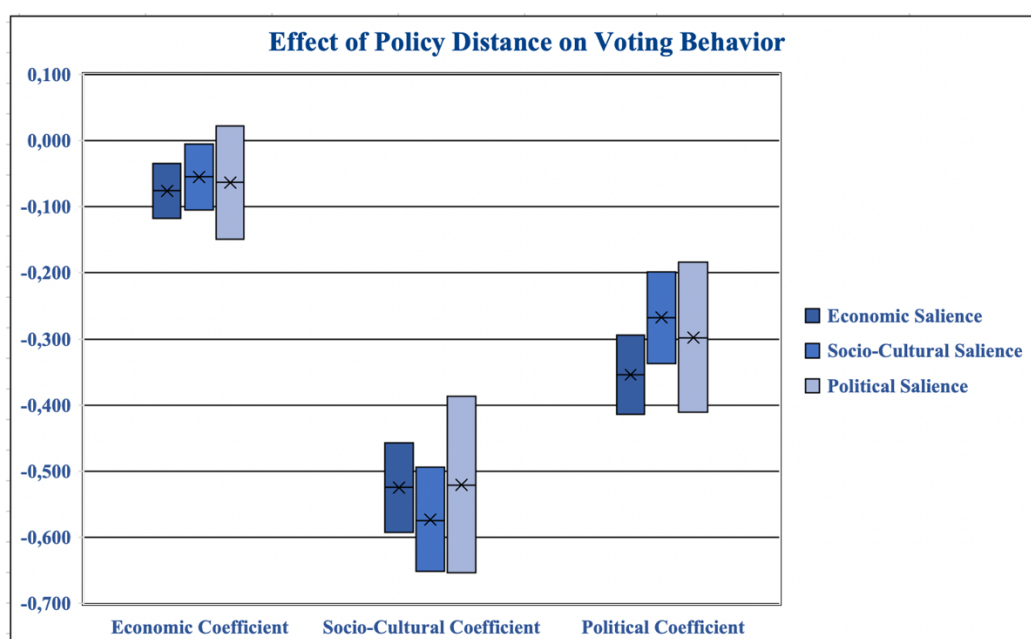

Image 4: Coefficients of distance by the salience of dimensions, bars show 95% confidence interval

whose most salient topic is political, socio-cultural policy distance is still slightly more important.

5.4 Results of the analysis of specific political parties

Based on the results found in the analysis of the (perceived) positions of political parties, and on the ranking of their populism, five parties will be specifically analysed. These are VVD, PVV, D66, SP and Forum for Democracy. This includes the three highest-ranked populist parties, as well as 'establishment parties' D66 and VVD to incorporate all different corners of the political space.

Using a binary logistic regression, results were found for these parties, pertaining to only the distance on the three dimensions (See Table 5). What becomes clear is that – when the results are statistically significant – the policy distance dimension with the most effect is likely dependent on the issues a party identifies with. For the economically right-wing VVD we see that economic distance is the most important factor in determining a vote. For other progressive establishment party D66 this is the case for the socio-cultural policy distance, which makes the most impact. Finally, for the three populist parties, the political policy distance turns out to be the most relevant factor in deciding a vote. For Forum for Democracy the socio-cultural policy distance is only slightly more relevant, however.

Another binary logistic regression was conducted for specific political parties, but this time also including the interaction with salience (See Table 6). The hypothesis: *The more salience voters attach to economic issues, the more important the economic dimension will be for their voting behaviour*" (H_1) is confirmed by the results found for VVD. However, the results for other parties do not, since they are barely significant, and show no strong economic coefficient for economic salience. For the hypothesis: "*The more salience voters attach to socio-cultural issues, the more important the socio-cultural dimension will be for their voting*

Results of Binary Logistic Regression on distance only per Political Party															
Political Party	**VVD**			**PVV**			**D66**			**SP**			**Forum voor Democratie**		
	Distance Coding 1			**Distance Coding 1**			**Distance Coding 1**			**Distance Coding 1**			**Distance Coding 1**		
	B	*S.E.*	*Sig.*	*B*	*S.E.*	*Sig.*	*B*	*S.E.*	*Sig.*	*B*	*S.E.*	*Sig.*	*B*	*S.E.*	*Sig.*
Economic Distance	-.482	.037	<.001	.092	.055	.096	.027	.036	.451	.314	.054	<.001	-.132	.096	.170
Socio-Cultural Distance	-.361	.061	<.001	-.136	.091	.138	-.579	.074	<.001	-.428	.095	<.001	-.771	.203	<.001
Political Distance	-.336	.087	<.001	-.830	.083	<.001	-.484	.072	<.001	-.510	.089	<.001	-.738	.161	<.001
-2 Log Likelihood	1277.501			568.606			1326.685			582.197			195.926		
Cox & Snell R²	.220			.105			.104			.067			.082		
Nagelkerke R²	.328			.242			.162			.165			.349		

Table 5: Results of Binary Logistic Regression on specific political parties, distance only

Results of Binary Logistic Regression per Political Party

Political Party		VVD Distance + Salience Coding 1			PVV Distance + Salience Coding 1			D66 Distance + Salience Coding 1			SP Distance + Salience Coding 1			FvD Distance + Salience Coding 1		
		B	S.E.	Sig.	B	S.E.	Sig.	B	S.E.	Sig.	B	S.E.	Sig.	B	S.E.	Sig.
Economic Distance																
"	Economic Salience	-.490	.048	<.001	-.038	.097	.700	-.029	.050	.567	.374	.070	<.001	-.046	.133	.732
"	Socio-Cultural Salience	-.509	.064	<.001	.165	.081	.041	.074	.055	.175	.232	.112	.039	-.340	.201	.091
"	Political Salience	-.509	.130	<.001	.191	.150	.205	.028	.102	.786	.381	.128	.003	-.026	.235	.913
Socio-Cultural Distance																
"	Economic Salience	-.322	.081	<.001	-.005	.136	.971	-.554	.096	<.001	-.447	.139	.001	-.795	.312	.011
"	Socio-Cultural Salience	-.475	.101	<.001	-.187	.147	.203	-.595	.111	<.001	-.438	.165	.008	-.793	.414	.055
"	Political Salience	-.295	.213	.165	-.398	.248	.108	-.552	.211	.009	-.382	.193	.047	-.856	.474	.071
Political Distance																
"	Economic Salience	-.242	.109	.026	-.952	.112	<.001	-.440	.094	<.001	-.487	.107	<.001	-.835	.208	<.001
"	Socio-Cultural Salience	-.277	.137	.043	-.743	.103	<.001	-.471	.117	<.001	-.470	.139	<.001	-.685	.227	.003
"	Political Salience	-.896	.282	.001	-.694	.149	<.001	-.436	.173	.012	-.534	.199	.007	-.618	.259	.017
-2 Log Likelihood		1172.428			512.942			1265.594			540.102			178.218		
Cox & Snell R²		.235			.118			.103			.076			.087		
Nagelkerke R²		.351			.273			.160			.185			.371		

Table 6: Results of Binary Logistic Regression on specific political parties, distance + salience
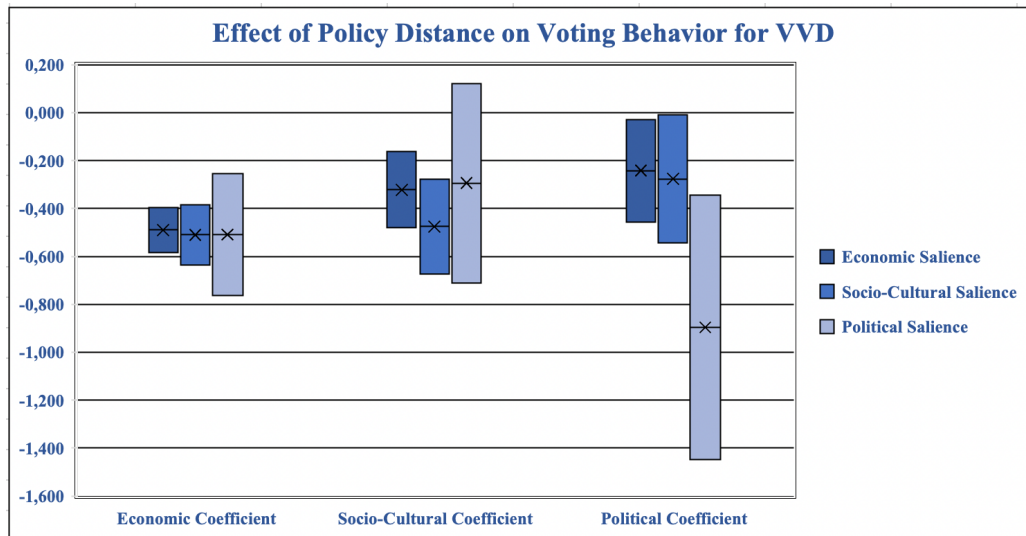
Image 5: Coefficients of distance by the salience of dimensions, bars show 95% confidence interval, VVD

behaviour" (H$_2$), the results show that it is indeed the case for D66, but not for other parties. The results of many of the other parties are insignificant when it comes to socio-cultural salience of voters.

Finally, the hypothesis: "*The more salience voters attach to the issue of politics itself, as opposed to substantive political (policy) issues, the more important the anti-establishment dimension will be for their voting behaviour*" (H$_3$) should be discussed. The results of the analysis confirm the hypothesis for VVD, PVV and SP. When political issues are the most salient to a voter, they are thus most likely to consider policy distance on this dimension as important to their vote. These results are visualized for VVD and PVV, including 95%
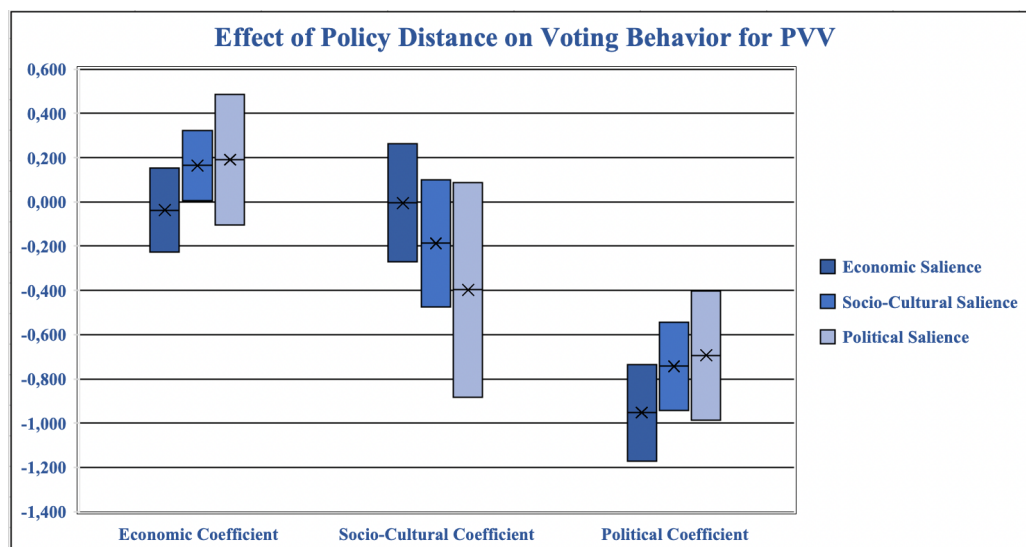

Image 6: Coefficients of distance by the salience of dimensions, bars show 95% confidence interval, PVV

confidence intervals (See Image 5&6). The true impact of policy distance on the populist, political dimension, might thus become clear from the analysis of specific parties.

6. Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to analyze the interaction between salience and policy distance in deciding voters' choices to vote for a specific political party. It furthermore aimed to gain an understanding of how populism affects the traditional two-dimensional political spectrum, attempting to establish a third axis along which the vote is decided. The proximity model of voting was used to analyze voters' perceptions and their salience of the different dimensions, trying to test the hypotheses presented earlier.

Using a stronger measure of voter's socio-cultural position from the DPES than Lefkofridi et al. (2014), this paper showed that the percentage of left-wing conservative voters might be somewhat accurate, between 31-35%, but that the number of left-wing progressives is much higher, growing from the 15.4% found earlier to 50.6% of the electorate. Concerning populist attitudes, the calculation shows that only 18.3% of Dutch voters are populist, with another 15.8% being classed as 'medium populism'. Aside from voters, parties' positions were also plotted. However, instead of measuring parties' values, this paper vitally uses voters' perceptions of the positions of parties to determine their positions and the distance on both the economic and socio-cultural axes. This at the same time provides an accurate image of how 'position blurring' behavior of parties is interpreted, while also not allowing any of this 'blur' to affect the analysis, since voters determine the policy distance by giving perceived party positions. The three parties furthest away from their 'traditional' positions on the spectrum are coincidentally the three populist parties, as determined by POPPA.

Firstly, the results of the binary logistic regression on the 'stacked dataset', as well as on specific parties, showed that the hypothesis "*the more salience voters attach to economic issues, the more important the economic dimension will be for their voting behaviour*" (H_1) cannot be confirmed, as the results are – unlike those found by Lefkofridi et al. (2014) – statistically significant, however the coefficient is not strong. Neither the analysis of distance only, nor the combined analysis of policy distance and salience provided strong results. However, the examination also shows that the coefficient for distance only for the economically right-wing VVD did provide significant and strong results. Concerning VVD voters are therefore most impacted by the policy distance between themselves and the party on the economy.

Secondly, the results show that the second hypothesis: "*the more salience voters*

attach to socio-cultural issues, the more important the socio-cultural dimension will be for their voting behaviour" (H$_2$) can be confirmed. Not only is policy distance on the socio-cultural dimension the most important to voters in general, but also for voters whose most salient issue is socio-cultural, since the analysis showed that distance on the socio-cultural dimension is the most important in determining their vote. An examination of this interaction for specific parties revealed that for the progressive D66, the hypothesis can be confirmed too. Sadly, many other per party results on socio-cultural salience are statistically not significant.

Thirdly, alongside the two existing dimensions – or axes – of the political space, this paper attempted to establish another, by hypothesizing that "*the more salience voters attach to the issue of politics itself, as opposed to substantive political (policy) issues, the more important the anti-establishment dimension will be for their voting behaviour*" (H$_3$). The results of the binary logistic regression on the 'stacked dataset' reveal that the effect of political policy distance is larger than distance on the economy, despite still being smaller than the effect of socio-cultural distance only. Also, for voters whose most salient topic is political, socio-cultural policy distance is still slightly more important in determining voting behaviour. Furthermore, the results from the per party analysis revealed that the hypothesis (H$_3$) stands strongly for VVD, PVV and SP, meaning that for voters with political salience, the policy distance to these parties will have the largest impact.

The exploration of perceived party positions revealed how position blurring techniques by populist parties may lead to them being perceived as more left-wing, like the PVV for instance. It also showed how the Dutch electorate might be somewhat more progressive than first thought based on the study of opinions on immigration by Lefkofridi et al. (2014). The results of the analysis of the hypothesis show that concerning the VVD, the more salience voters attach to economic issues, the more important the economic dimension will be for their voting behaviour (H$_1$). Concerning the second hypothesis, it is possible to conclude that for D66 and in general, the more salience voters attach to socio-cultural issues, the more important the socio-cultural dimension will be for their voting behaviour (H$_2$). Finally, it adds the political dimension and despite being overpowered by the socio-cultural dimension, the coefficients show more impact than for economic salience. Finally, concerning VVD, PVV and SP, it can be said the more salience voters attach to the issue of politics itself, as opposed to substantive political (policy) issues, the more important the anti-establishment dimension will be for their voting behaviour (H$_3$). These results, including two populist parties show the viability of adding the political dimension to the traditional two-dimensional space, based on calculations using salience and policy distance. More generally, this paper therefore also adds

to the literature on issue salience and the proximity model of voting (Lefkofridi et al. 2014; Iyengar & Kinder 1987; Scheufele 2000; Scheufele & Tewksbury 2006; Zaller 1992; Zaller & Feldman 1992).

The main flaw in the research conducted in this paper is most certainly the focus on the use of items on the perception of positions of political parties, while the new dimension – namely the political one – cannot be measured in this manner. The reliance on expert's data from POPPA to score political parties for their populism provides a different standard than the perceptions used for the other variables, which help 'control' for any position blurring by parties. Sadly, the DPES 2021 does not contain any perception items on populism, but obviously a future Parliamentary Electoral Survey could keep this into account, since perception data on populism might give more solid results.

Furthermore, the use of the 'stacked dataset' method, without controlling for 'clustered standard errors' is problematic. This only applies to the results in Table 4, as the other analyses did not require a stacked dataset (See 8.4).

With the rise of populism happening since the turn of the century, that mainstream parties have been largely unable to successfully respond to, the topic of this research is very much relevant. Discovering what decides a vote is at the heart of political science, but could also give insight into the problems facing contemporary democracies, of which populism is just one. Further research into this topic could be done through analyses of more or different cases than just the Netherlands, but also by exploring further the impact of perceptions of party positions on voters' decisions. It is in the end not the truth that matters, but what is perceived by those who have to act or vote, especially when it concerns populists.

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8. Appendix

8.1 Items

H$_1$	Measure	Items	Dataset
SAL$_{eco}$	Most important problem to voter	V061-V069	DPES/NKO
DIST$_{eco}$	Voters' political attitudes on economy	V098	DPES/NKO
	Perceived party positions on economy	V090-V097, N22	DPES/NKO
Vote RR	Party the voter voted for (2021)	V163	DPES/NKO

H$_2$	Measure	Items	Dataset
SAL$_{cult}$	Most important problem to voter	V061-V069	DPES/NKO
DIST$_{cult}$	Voters' attitudes on socio-cultural issues	V118, S127, V108	DPES/NKO
	Perceived party positions on socio-cultural issues (foreigners, euthanasia, and European unification)	V110-117, N33-34 S120-126, N190-191, V100-107.	DPES/NKO
Vote RR	Party the voter voted for (2021)	V163	DPES/NKO

H$_3$	Measure	Items	Dataset
SAL$_{pol}$	Most important problem to voter	V061-V069	DPES/NKO
DIST$_{pol}$	Voters' populist attitudes	V320, V325, V328-V330	DPES/NKO
	Populist attitudes in political parties	*	POPPA
Vote RR	Party the voter voted for (2021)	V163	DPES/NKO

* Based on the definition of populism by Mudde (2004), Akkerman et al. (2014) and Geurkink et al. (2020) conducted research on populist attitudes in voters using the same items as used here (V320, V325, V328-V330 of the DPES/NKO). The definition used in POPPA is based on the same research and the three defining elements of populism, but somewhat more broadly explained by Zaslove & Meijers (2021), yet similar. The questions the experts in the survey were asked in order to rank parties are the following items:

(1) "Politics is a moral struggle between good and bad"

(2) "The ordinary people to be indivisible (i.e., the people are seen as homogenous)"

(3) "The ordinary people's interests to be singular (i.e., a 'general will')"

(4) "Sovereignty should lie exclusively with the ordinary people (i.e., the ordinary people, not the elites, should have the final say in politics)"

(5) "Anti-elite dispositions"

8.2 Coding

The different ways of coding the respondent's answers to the 'most important problem'-question used in this analysis:

Coding Lefkofridi et al. (2014)

Economic	Socio-cultural
1 economy/financial situation	4 crime
2 social security	5 defense
3 politics	13 population
6 healthcare	14 minorities
7 education	15 norms and values
8 income/price levels/taxes	17 european integration
9 employment	19 intolerance/discrimination
10 traffic/mobility	20 foreign policy/international security
11 housing	22 polarisation/dividedness
12 environment	23 immigration
16 media	
18 inequality/poverty	
21 regulation/big government	
24 corona	

Coding 1

Economic	Socio-cultural	Political
1 economy/financial situation	4 crime	3 politics
2 social security	5 defense	22 polarisation/dividedness
6 healthcare	12 environment	
7 education	13 population	
8 income/price levels/taxes	14 minorities	
9 employment	15 norms and values	
10 traffic/mobility	16 media	
11 housing	17 european integration	
18 inequality/poverty	19 intolerance/discrimination	
21 regulation/big government	20 foreign policy/international security	
24 corona	23 immigration	

The difference between 'coding 1' and the coding used by Lefkfofridi et al. (2014) is that it creates a new category, namely the political one, encompassing all answers that stated either (3) politics, or (22) polarization/dividedness was the most important problem. Furthermore it changes some answers' coded differently by Lefkofridi et al. as well. This includes the answers (12) environment, and (16) media, both coded by Lefkofridi et al. as belonging on the economic axis.

The political parties included in the analysis using the DPES (2021) and POPPA (2018):

Party Code	Party Abbreviation	Full Party Name
1	VVD	Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie
2	PVV	Partij voor de Vrijheid
3	CDA	Christen-Democratisch Appèl
4	D66	Democraten 66
5	GL	GroenLinks
6	SP	Socialistische Partij
7	PvdA	Partij van de Arbeid
8	CU	ChristenUnie
13	FvD	Forum voor Democratie

8.4 Further explanation of decisions and word count

The decision to not control for 'clustered standard errors' in the analysis of the 'stacked dataset', was made due to the fact that SPSS does not allow running Binary Logistic Regression on the plan file that is necessary to control for 'clustered standard errors'. Furthermore, it was mentioned to me by my supervisor that being able to do this was not part of the programme, and thus excusable. Nevertheless, I realize it is a weakness of my paper. However, the further analyses were not conducted on a stacked dataset and do thus not contain any of the 'clustered standard errors' that this part does.

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