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**Empowered and Enraged:  
Political Efficacy, Anger, and Support for Populism in Europe**

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*Abstract:* This paper addresses the psychological dynamics between internal political efficacy, emotions, and support for populism. Contrary to the extended idea that populism is associated with low levels of political competence, we argue that individuals' self-competence beliefs enhance populist attitudes. Individuals who conceive themselves as able to understand and participate effectively in politics are more critical towards politicians and more prone to consider that citizens could do a better job. We also hypothesise that internal efficacy enhances the likelihood of experiencing anger, which in turn promotes populist attitudes. Experimental and comparative observational evidence shows robust direct effects of internal efficacy over populism, as well as a smaller indirect impact via feelings of anger. These findings raise important questions regarding the nature of populism and how to fight it in our emancipated and information-intensive democratic systems.

**Keywords:** Populism, internal political efficacy, anger

## Introduction

It is a common cliché that populist followers are politically naive. Populism has frequently been related to simplified and emotional discourses which, supposedly at odds with reason, are expected to be particularly appealing for citizens with low levels of political competence. Lipset, referring to extremist parties, summarized the idea by arguing that they “appeal to the disgruntled and the psychologically homeless, to the personal failures, the socially isolated, the economically insecure, the uneducated, unsophisticated, and authoritarian persons at every level of society” (Lipset, 1981, p. 178). As noted by Sidanius (1988, p. 37), “the dominant view in the Western world has been that political deviates and extremists [...] tend to possess overly simplistic, rigid, and generally unsophisticated political schemas”. A number of more recent works apply a parallel argument to populism, suggesting that, as the “flaunting of the low” (Ostiguy, 2017), populism should be particularly attractive for less politically competent citizens (e.g. Bos et al., 2013; Bovens & Wille, 2010; Kriesi et al., 2008; Madsen & Snow, 1991).

In this paper, we argue, in a different direction, that populist attitudes are positively related to *subjective* political competence, or internal political efficacy. Although studies find a correlation between objective and subjective indicators of political competence (Bennett, 1997; Jung et al., 2011), they are clearly two distinct aspects and may exert different influences on attitudes and behaviour. We contend that people’s self-perceived ability to understand and participate in politics should affect the assessment they make of both politicians’ and their own role in politics. The more an individual considers herself capable of dealing with politics, the more likely she will be to hold a populist view of politics, with its characteristic normative claim that the people should make political decisions. Accordingly, we expect that internal political efficacy will bring a more critical assessment of the elites and a stronger conviction that citizens, not politicians, should be at the centre of political decisions (i.e., populist attitudes). Based on insights from political research on emotions, we further argue that part of the effect of internal efficacy on populism will be mediated by feelings of anger. Specifically, we expect that internal efficacy will facilitate the arousal of feelings of

anger in the face of societal threat (Valentino et al., 2009), and that anger will, in turn, lead to enhanced populist attitudes (Rico et al., 2017).

We test our argument by using a two-fold empirical strategy combining experimental and observational data. Study 1 uses a survey experiment in Spain to investigate the influence of manipulated levels of internal efficacy on anger and populist attitudes. Study 2 uses survey data from nine European countries to generalize the hypothesised effects to a larger and more diverse sample. Results show strong support for a positive direct effect of internal efficacy on populist attitudes. The evidence also supports the existence of an indirect effect of internal efficacy on populism via the elicitation of anger related to the economic situation.

The identification of a relationship between perceived competence, emotions and populism is an important contribution for at least three reasons. First, it provides a compelling individual-level explanation for populism that works for different types of populism. While extant research has failed to find common explanations for the recent rise of both right- and left-wing manifestations of populism (Rooduijn, 2018, 2019), this association between internal political efficacy, anger, and populism should hold generally. Second, our results provide additional evidence of the relevance of subjective perceptions (internal efficacy) over objective conditions (factual knowledge) in explaining populism, with the former being more relevant than the latter (Spruyt et al., 2016). Third, our findings provide a different angle from which to assess and interpret populism. Populism is not exclusive of the disengaged and unsophisticated, but rather a phenomenon related to intrinsic characteristics of our information-intensive democratic systems.

### **Political competence and populist attitudes**

It has become commonplace to assume that populist citizens lack political competence. Indeed, some previous scholarly work on populism and oft-related phenomena would appear to point in that same direction. Populism has frequently been related to situations of vulnerability that come as a result of globalization processes, with supporters coming

disproportionately from those at a disadvantaged position to compete in a knowledge economy (Kriesi et al., 2008). Some analyses have reported that the lower educated have become more distinctively cynical and their concerns less well represented in parliaments, thus gradually shifting to populist (radical right) parties (Bovens & Wille, 2010). Bos et al. (2013) found that the lower educated are more likely to be persuaded by the populist style and rhetoric. These different analyses are aligned with conceptualizations of populism as a political style that appeals to the ordinary man, using his own (i.e., simplistic) language (Bischof & Senninger, 2018; Moffitt, 2016), opposed to the high politics of the educated, “politically correct” elite (Ostiguy, 2017). By looking at these works, the expectation would be that political competence would be negatively associated with higher levels of populism.

The picture, however, becomes less straightforward when one shifts perspective to consider the relationship between populism and the subjective dimension of political competence. Internal political efficacy is the belief that one has the competences “to understand, and participate effectively, in politics” (Niemi et al., 1991, p. 1407) to achieve the desired outcomes by an efficient use of one’s capacities and resources (Caprara et al., 2009). It forms a distinct dimension from external political efficacy, which refers to the political system’s perceived responsiveness to citizens’ demands (Balch, 1974; Niemi et al., 1991). The notion of internal efficacy is thus closely linked to Bandura’s (1986) more generic notion of self-efficacy, described as the belief in one’s ability to attain a certain outcome (see Caprara et al., 2009). Previous research has established that internal efficacy is positively related to education, political participation, interest in politics, and other indicators of political involvement (Morrell, 2003), but its association with populism has not been closely examined.

Despite the common impression, it is not difficult to identify a certain affinity between internal political efficacy and the core components of populism according to currently dominant understandings. Populism, from an ideational perspective, can be defined as a political discourse or thin-centred ideology that views politics as a Manichean struggle between a homogeneous and virtuous people, and a corrupt and self-serving elite (Hawkins & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2019; Mudde, 2004). Accordingly, populism glorifies the will of the people and defends the idea that people must be at the centre of political decisions. Hence, by challenging the authority of politicians and experts in the name of

the people, populists are implying that people are competent to understand politics and make appropriate political decisions—that is, “the people” are politically competent. Efficacy thus appears as a prerequisite for the adoption of populist ideas: unless citizens believe they are competent enough to understand and participate effectively in politics, they can hardly claim the primacy of popular sovereignty.

A similar argument has been suggested by other scholars. Eatwell (2003) points to rising personal efficacy as one reason for the increase in support for the extreme right. Mudde connects the growth of populism to increasing levels of perceived self-competence brought about by the process of cognitive mobilization (Dalton, 1984; Inglehart, 1977), which would have led citizens “to stop accepting that the elites think for them, and to no longer blindly swallow what the elites tell them” (Mudde, 2004, p. 554, see also 2007).<sup>1</sup>

While cognitive mobilization was first defined in the 1970s with an emphasis on the spread of formal education and mass communication (Inglehart, 1970), the process has recently acquired a new dimension. The rise of commercial media and the expansion of the internet, social media and citizen journalism imply, for a large part of the population, easy and immediate access to political information (Kroh & Neiss, 2012). This world of “communicative abundance” (Keane, 2013) has consequences for how individuals perceive their own competence and how this affects their views on the role of the elites and the people in the political realm.

One of the established consequences of the “democratization of knowledge” generated by technological and informational change is the advent of epistemological populism. Epistemological populism considers that personal experience coming from ordinary people is the only solid ground for valid and relevant knowledge (Saurette & Gunster, 2011) and is, in fact, much more reliable than mainstream academic sources, which are found to be inaccessible, too complex, and full of uncertainty and controversy as is typical of scientific research (Gressier, 2018). Take, for instance, the use of diets and

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<sup>1</sup> Along these lines, differences in internal political efficacy have been hypothesised to also account for the gender gap in support of the populist radical right, with women significantly more likely to shy away from extremist parties due to their lower levels of self-perceived political competence (Mudde, 2007).

alternative therapies (McQuaide, 2005). Here, epistemological populism involves a response to a critical situation (obesity, illness), an anti-elite sentiment (against mainstream medicine, food multinationals, pharmaceutical industry, government) and sometimes, conspiracy theories (Bergmann, 2018). Research has found that people who believe they know comparatively more than medical experts are more likely to endorse anti-vaccine policy attitudes (Motta et al., 2018). Perceptions of competence have altered people's perceptions of what constitutes valid, legitimate knowledge. This facilitates that people react against traditional institutions, thus regaining a sense of control in a context of crisis.

We expect this same phenomenon to have its own projection in the realm of politics. The key is that self-efficacious citizens are more likely to challenge, as populists do, elites' competence and authority, as well as a system that, even if for good reasons, is to a large extent designed to restrain and limit the will of the people. In this regard, populism is the response of citizens who perceive themselves as politically competent to the requirement and at the same time impossibility within democracy of "people speaking in their own name" (Frank, 2014, p. 631).

The assertion that people feel more politically competent today than they did in the past and that this is one of the reasons behind the global rise of populism is hard to test due to the dearth of comparative longitudinal data on internal political efficacy. Here, we consider the micro-foundations behind this argument, examining the basic individual premise that perceived self-competence, in contemporary democracies, facilitates populist attitudes.

The notion that internal political efficacy should bring higher levels of populist attitudes connects with various strands of research in political psychology. Studies in system justification theory find that people who feel uninformed or unable to understand complex issues, who have feelings of powerlessness or lowered levels of perceived personal control, tend to show more support for authorities and are more willing to trust them (Kay et al., 2008; Shepherd & Kay, 2012; van der Toorn et al., 2015). Likewise, it has been shown that policy language complexity (which is expected to reduce internal efficacy) motivates trust in institutional elites (Shockley & Fairdosi, 2015). Conversely, we should expect that when an individual feels competent to cope with politics, she is

expected to be more likely to challenge the elite and perceive that political decisions should be left to the people's rule. Other works suggest that confidence in one's own abilities enhances political extremism and related phenomena. Consistent with the notion that high levels of self-competence and self-esteem are required for individuals to deviate from social norms and expose themselves to social censorship, Sidanius (1988) finds that feelings of efficacy contribute significantly to political deviance. Past research also shows that self-perceptions of high expertise increase political dogmatism and closed-mindedness (Fernbach et al., 2013; Ottati et al., 2015).

Despite the above arguments supporting the role of internal political efficacy in shaping populist attitudes, we cannot rule out the possibility that the association between efficacy and populist attitudes is partly driven by populist politicians' own communication efforts—which introduces a potential issue of reverse causality. Indeed, a number of studies suggest a positive influence of populist discourses on self-perceived political competence. For instance, Bovens and Wille (2010) found that when populist politicians manage to make visible the issues that low education voters care for, these voters see their efficacy boosted. Marx and Nguyen (2018) show that anti-elite, typically populist, rhetoric reduces the gap in internal efficacy across different levels of income. Polarization between mainstream and populist parties simplifies political decisions and promotes interest among poor voters, hence increasing their otherwise comparatively lower level of internal political efficacy. Also, populist parties and candidates communicate simpler campaign messages (Bischof & Senninger, 2018)—as well as more negative and confrontational messages (Nai, 2018)—making it easier for voters to correctly locate them in the ideological space. These simpler discourses, not prone to nuance, self-scrutiny and respect for different views, are expected to boost subjective perceptions of competence.

This suggests a more complex relationship between perceptions of self-political competence and populism than that embedded in the posited hypothesis, or in the extended idea that populism is particularly attractive to unsophisticated citizens. While the relationship may of course run in both directions, it seems important to clarify whether internal efficacy bears an independent effect over populist attitudes, and whether this effect is negative, as some previous work would suggest, or positive, as our argument goes.



Hypothesis 1. Internal efficacy increases populist attitudes.

### **The mediating role of anger**

We expect perceptions of political self-competence to not only exert a direct effect over populist attitudes, but also an indirect effect via emotional reactions of anger. The posited mechanism builds on two underlying arguments: (1) internal efficacy increases the likelihood of experiencing anger in the face of threat, and (2) feelings of anger in turn promote support for populist ideas. We consider each in turn.

Cognitive appraisal theories of emotions theorize that discrete emotions are shaped by individuals' assessments of a given situation (Frijda et al., 1989; Lazarus, 1991; Roseman, 1996; Smith & Ellsworth, 1985). For example, whether individuals experience anger when confronted with a negative event will crucially depend on their evaluation of the event in connection with their personal goals. Key to the arousal of anger, particularly as compared to that of other recurrent negative emotions such as anxiety (i.e., fear), are the appraisal dimensions of certainty, responsibility and control (Roseman, 1996, 2018; Smith & Ellsworth, 1985).<sup>2</sup> If an undesirable outcome is certain, and responsibility can be ascribed to an external agent, but one still feels able to cope with the situation, anger is likely to arise. If, by contrast, the threat is uncertain, there is no clear culprit to blame, and the self-perceived ability to deal with the situation is low, fear is a more likely emotional reaction.

As argued by Valentino, Gregorowicz, and Groenendyk (2009), internal efficacy heightens the sense of certainty and control in the presence of threat, hence favouring the emergence of anger. People with confidence about their ability to understand and participate effectively in politics will be more likely to experience the high sense of assurance and strength typically contributing to anger elicitation. Grievances can only be perceived as such when there is entitlement. Consistent with this view, their analysis

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<sup>2</sup> We use the terms “anxiety” and “fear” interchangeably, consistent with most research in political psychology (see Brader & Marcus, 2013, p. 177).

shows that voters' pre-existing levels of internal efficacy facilitate anger about candidates in response to perceived policy threats during presidential campaigns. Other studies, particularly in the field of collective action, provide further empirical evidence of the link between self-confidence and the occurrence of anger. Individuals with high in-group efficacy are more likely to experience anger towards out-groups (Mackie et al., 2000). Immigrants who perceive they are being treated unfairly display greater levels of anger when they feel highly politically efficacious (Klandermans et al., 2008). Group efficacy predicts the degree of anger felt by students after protest action against tuition fees failed to achieve its goals (Tausch & Becker, 2013). Importantly, these works often find that fear, unlike anger, tends to decrease with efficacy or is just unaffected by it.<sup>3</sup>

One of the major and most recurrent threats in the mind of citizens has to do with the national economic situation. Indeed, evidence suggests that citizens' perceptions of the state of the national economy were a crucial factor to account for individual differences in populist attitudes in Europe in the aftermath of the Great Recession (Rico & Anduiza, 2019). Accordingly, and for the purpose of empirical testing, this paper focuses on the threat posed by the national economy, as captured by citizens' subjective assessments, and feelings of anger about national economic conditions, although the same logic may be extended to other types of threat and their corresponding emotions. Hence, we expect that anger about the economy will primarily arise among individuals with a high degree of internal efficacy.

Hypothesis 2. Internal political efficacy increases anger about the national economy.

Our second argument for the mediation effect is that feelings of anger will boost populist attitudes among citizens. This is because of the close affinity between the core components of populist discourse and the appraisal pattern and the response tendencies of anger (Betz, 2002; Demertzis, 2006; Rico et al., 2017). Whereas the sense of uncertainty and low control potential associated with anxiety prompts the anxious to

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<sup>3</sup> Previous research suggests that that emotions may evoke judgments that are in line with the emotion's core appraisal pattern (see Lerner et al., 2015). Anger, according to appraisal theory, is driven by perceived self-efficacy, but, as an approach emotion, may itself prompt feelings of internal efficacy.

seek conciliation, prevention, protection, and other risk-averse strategies (Albertson & Gadarian, 2015; Lerner et al., 2003; Nabi, 2003), the sense of strength and illegitimate harm motivates the angry to take action against the offender, fostering support for corrective and punitive responses (Gault & Sabini, 2000; Huddy et al., 2007; Petersen, 2010; Van Troost et al., 2014). With its confrontational and moralizing rhetoric, the populist worldview is particularly well suited for the expression of politically-evoked anger. The Manichean and aggressive outlook of populism (Nai, 2018) should be more appealing to angry citizens than to anxious citizens.

Although it has become commonplace among political commentators and scholars to ascribe the rise of populist movements to voters' economic and cultural "anxiety", recent research in a variety of contexts suggests a closer link with anger. Using survey panel data, Rico et al. (2017) found that feelings of anger, but not fear, elicited by the economic crisis predict changes in populist attitudes among Spanish voters in the aftermath of the Great Recession. Webster (2018) demonstrated that experimentally manipulated incidental anger makes individuals more likely to believe that the national government is unresponsive to the concerns and interests of the public. Oliver and Rahn (2016) found that anger about the US federal government correlated with a measure of anti-elitism, capturing feelings of marginalisation of the people relative to wealth and political power. Similarly, Gaffney et al. (2018) found, in a study of demonstrators at the major US party national conventions, that participants who viewed their own anger toward politicians as prototypical of most Americans reported higher levels of populist attitudes. There is also some evidence of anger playing a relevant role in recent electoral episodes with more or less populist overtones. Examining the impact of emotional reactions to the 2015 Paris terror attacks, Vasilopoulos et al. (2019) found that anger increased the likelihood of voting for the Front National in the French regional elections, while fear was negatively related to support for the populist radical right. Vasilopoulou and Wagner (2017) showed that British citizens feeling angry about European integration were more likely than anxious citizens to favour leaving the EU in the run-up to the Brexit vote, while Oliver and Rahn (2016) found that Trump's supporters reported distinctively high levels of anger at the American government. Hence, we expect anger to have a positive effect on populist attitudes.

Hypothesis 3. Anger about the national economic situation increases populist attitudes.

The expected corollary of the two preceding hypotheses is that anger about the country's economic conditions will mediate part of the total influence of self-perceived political competence on populist attitudes. A number of studies looking at the relationship between efficacy and participation report a similar sequence, where the impact of subjective (individual or group) efficacy on the likelihood to take political action is carried, to a certain degree, by feelings of anger (Mackie et al., 2000; Valentino et al., 2009).

Hypothesis 4. Internal political efficacy has an indirect effect on populist attitudes by facilitating feelings of anger about the national economy.

Figure 1 schematically summarizes the relationships between the main variables of interest. It is important to consider that we do not expect anger about the national economic situation to carry all, or even most, of the influence of self-perceived efficacy on populist attitudes. First, because our data do not allow us to capture emotional reactions to other perceived threats that might be contributing to the said influence; and second because, as outlined in the previous section, efficacy might heighten populism through mechanisms other than feelings of anger.

[Figure 1]

### **Empirical strategy**

Because it lacks any true programmatic content, populism is ubiquitous and may attach itself to different full-fledged ideologies on both sides of the left-right spectrum. This makes it difficult in practice to “separate populism from features that might regularly occur together with it, but are not part of it” (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012, p. 2). Importantly, populism is most often a secondary feature of populist parties—e.g., the primary feature of populist radical right parties being their nativism or ethnic

nationalism, rather than their populist discourse (Mudde, 2007; Rydgren, 2017). Hence, to assess the consequences of efficacy and anger on populism, net of other ideological elements, our analysis focuses on populist attitudes, not support for populist parties.

To test the posited hypotheses, we rely on a two-pronged empirical strategy. First, we draw on an online survey experiment conducted in September-October 2018 on a sample of adult residents in Spain. The experiment was performed on a sample selected by Qualtrics using quota sampling to approximately match Spain's population statistics in terms of sex, age and education level (see the Online Appendix for detailed descriptive statistics and balance tests).

The main objective of this study was to assess the causal influence of internal political efficacy on the outcomes of interest. The experiment was designed to address the concerns over reverse causality that often arise when examining relationships between attitudinal variables in observational studies and, specifically, to control for the possibility that differences in efficacy are in part driven by differences in anger (Lerner et al., 2015) or populist attitudes and discourses (Bischof & Senninger, 2018; Marx & Nguyen, 2018). By randomly manipulating the individual's perceived level of political self-competence, the experiment allows for identifying the causal effect of internal efficacy on both emotions and support for populism.

Second, we use a survey conducted online in June 2015 in nine European countries: France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. The samples, of approximately 2,000 adults for each country, were recruited by YouGov using quotas for sex, age, and education level. This cross-national design allows for testing the direct association between an individual's degree of internal efficacy and populist attitudes, as well as the relationship mediated through the elicitation of anger related to the economic situation in each respondent's country. Using observational cross-country data also provides external validity to the inferences previously drawn using experimental data from a single-case study.

Our empirical strategy is common for the two studies and involves two stages. First, we use a series of regression models to estimate the effects posited by our theory. Hence, Model 1 estimates the total effect (both direct and indirect) of internal efficacy on

populist attitudes (to test Hypothesis 1). In Model 2, we regress anger on internal efficacy to identify the first step of the indirect relationship (Hypothesis 2). In Model 3, populist attitudes are regressed on both anger and internal efficacy, thus allowing for assessing their direct effects (Hypothesis 3). Finally, we test the robustness of the estimated effects by including feelings of anxiety as an additional variable. This control allows us to properly identify the impact of anger on populist attitudes, net of the impact of a potential confounder (Valentino et al., 2011). In sum:

$$\text{Model 1: } Y_{\text{Populist attitudes}} = \alpha + \beta_{\text{Internal efficacy}} + \varepsilon$$

$$\text{Model 2: } Y_{\text{Anger}} = \alpha + \beta_{\text{Internal efficacy}} + \varepsilon$$

$$\text{Model 3: } Y_{\text{Populist attitudes}} = \alpha + \beta_{\text{Internal efficacy}} + \beta_{\text{Anger}} + \varepsilon$$

$$\text{Model 4: } Y_{\text{Populist attitudes}} = \alpha + \beta_{\text{Internal efficacy}} + \beta_{\text{Anger}} + \beta_{\text{Anxiety}} + \varepsilon$$

Second, we follow Imai et al.'s (2011) methodology to conduct a formal test of the indirect effect of internal efficacy on populist attitudes via anger (Hypothesis 4). This causal mediation analysis allows us to decompose the total effect of internal efficacy on populist attitudes into direct and indirect effects—the average direct effect (ADE) and the average causal mediation effect (ACME), respectively.<sup>4</sup>

### **Study 1: Manipulating efficacy**

Although altering perceived levels of internal political efficacy in experimental settings is a challenging task (Bullock & Ha, 2011), researchers have devised a variety of creative strategies that allow them to manipulate self-competence beliefs (for a review, see Bandura & Locke, 2003). A common procedure is to expose treated subjects to persuasive messages designed to heighten or diminish feelings of efficacy by conveying the belief that they have (or lack) the tools they need to achieve their goals. For example, to manipulate perceived internal efficacy in the context of climate change, Hart and Feldman (2016) showed participants a news story that included text emphasizing the ease (or difficulty) with which individuals can take political action to

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<sup>4</sup> We use the R Package *mediation* (Tingley et al., 2014).

address the issue. In another common strategy, participants receive positive or negative feedback on their performance in certain tasks, such as knowledge quizzes, of varying levels of complexity. For example, Preece (2016) manipulated perceived self-efficacy by providing veridical and bogus feedback concerning respondents' performance in a short political knowledge test. However, performance feedback has been found to affect respondents' affective states, with failure experiences increasing feelings of anger and irritability, among others (Ottati et al., 2015).

Our experimental treatment was designed to alter self-perceptions of internal efficacy without raising participants' suspicions or producing reactions that would interfere with the emotional response we meant to elicit. Our strategy builds on the notion that individuals tend to overestimate their knowledge and ability in the political domain, as occurs across many areas in life (Fischhoff et al., 1977; Kuklinski et al., 2000). Paradoxically, overconfidence stems in part from the observation that "ignorance is often invisible to those to suffer from it" (Dunning, 2011, p. 250; see Kruger & Dunning, 1999; Anson, 2018). Particularly when levels of knowledge are low, people tend to lack the meta-cognitive awareness needed to recognize their deficits: they simply do not know they are missing relevant information and thus tend to overestimate their knowledge. Just as citizens remain largely uninformed about basic political facts (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996), average levels of economic and financial literacy have been shown to be generally rather low (Lusardi & Mitchell, 2014; OECD, 2016). However, most people tend to overestimate their knowledge in these domains (Lusardi & Mitchell, 2014). Hence, in our experiment, we exposed treated subjects to a financial literacy test to heighten awareness of their knowledge limitations, thereby prompting self-perceptions of low competence regarding the country's economic policy.

Respondents were randomly assigned to one of two conditions. Participants in the treatment condition completed a short financial knowledge test, comprising four (intricate) multiple-choice questions related to basic loan regulation, interest compounding in savings, private investment, and the limits for budget deficit and public debt (the exact wording of these and all questions used in the analyses is presented in

the Online Appendix).<sup>5</sup> Respondents in the control condition were not asked to perform any specific task and directly answered the post-test questionnaire.<sup>6</sup> Hence, we expected the treatment to *reduce* respondents' internal efficacy beliefs, compared to respondents in the control group.

To measure populism, our main outcome variable, we asked respondents how they thought a country's economic policy should be decided, either by public representatives and experts or directly by citizens—the latter being the populist choice. We then asked respondents the extent to which they agreed with the chosen option (very much, somewhat, a little). Combining the answers to these questions, we obtain a six-point scale of populist attitudes, running from the highest level of agreement with representatives and experts deciding economic policy to the highest agreement with citizens directly deciding. We measured emotional reactions by asking respondents the extent to which the country's economic situation made them feel anger, fear—as a measure of anxiety—and optimism (not at all, a little, somewhat a fair amount, very much). All variables have been rescaled to range from 0 to 1. Descriptive statistics can be found in Table A1 of the Online Appendix.<sup>7</sup>

Table 1 presents the results of OLS models with populist attitudes and anger as the dependent variables. Model 1 shows that the total effect of the internal efficacy

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<sup>5</sup> Some of these questions were adapted from existing financial literacy measures (OECD, 2016; van Rooij et al., 2011). The average number of questions answered correctly was 1, with only 25% of respondents correctly answering 2 or more questions. The percentage of correct answers was 39% (loan regulation), 29% (compound interest), 18% (bond prices), and 13% (deficit and debt limits).

<sup>6</sup> We dismissed including a positive contrast condition with easy knowledge questions to enhance efficacy beliefs. Existing studies indicate that people tend to be unfamiliar with even the most basic economic principles, and many lack the ability to perform simple numeric calculations (Lusardi & Mitchell, 2014). Because financial illiteracy appears to be the rule, even the easiest questions might have raised awareness of knowledge shortcomings, pushing respondents' self-confidence downwards rather than upwards.

<sup>7</sup> As a manipulation check, we included two questions asking respondents about their perceived ability to understand the country's economic and financial issues and to have a say in the national economic policy. As shown in tables A1 and A2 of the Online Appendix, respondents in the treatment condition reported significantly lower levels of post-treatment internal efficacy than those in the control condition. Moreover, when analysed separately, the treatment had a similarly-sized and statistically significant effect on each of the two items of the post-treatment efficacy measure.



treatment on populist attitudes is negative and statistically significant. According to the estimates, respondents exposed to our financial and economic knowledge test display levels of populism 0.08 points lower (on a 0-1 scale) than respondents in the control group. This evidence supports Hypothesis 1. The dependent variable in Model 2 is the degree of anger elicited by the country's economic situation. Consistent with Hypothesis 2, respondents in the treatment condition also felt significantly less angry when compared to individuals in the control group.<sup>8</sup> Model 3 regresses populist attitudes on both the treatment and feelings of anger. Results show that, in line with Hypothesis 3, anger has a significant effect on populism. Specifically, a change in anger from its lowest to its highest level increases populism by 0.13 points. The direct effect of (reduced) internal efficacy on populist attitudes remains statistically significant and is only slightly smaller than the total effect as estimated in Model 1. As shown in Model 4, anxiety about the national economy does not significantly affect populist attitudes, and including this variable does not substantially change the estimated effects of anger and efficacy.

[Table 1]

Table 2 presents the results of the causal mediation analysis. The coefficient for the average causal mediation effect—the impact of internal efficacy on populist attitudes mediated by anger—is negative and statistically significant. This evidence is consistent with Hypothesis 4. Note, however, that this represents a modest proportion (4.2%) of the total effect of internal efficacy on populist attitudes.

[Table 2]

## **Study 2: Cross-national evidence**

The purpose of Study 2 was to examine observational data to generalize the evidence provided by the survey experiment to a larger number of countries and more diverse

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<sup>8</sup> By contrast, the treatment did not affect levels of anxiety or optimism about the economy, as shown in Table A2 of the Online Appendix.

pool of political contexts. To this end, we make use of the same dependent, mediating, and independent variables as in Study 1 (populism, anger, and internal efficacy, respectively), along with a series of control variables to avoid the confounding influence of related factors.

We measured populist attitudes using the six-item scale proposed by Akkerman et al. (2014). The six statements, displayed in the Online Appendix, are designed to tap the core ideas that make up the populist discourse, namely, people-centrism, anti-elitism, the antagonism between the people and the elite, and the primacy of popular sovereignty ( $\alpha = 0.83$ ). Respondents' agreement with each statement was measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

Internal political efficacy was measured with three items addressing the extent to which the respondents consider themselves well-qualified to participate in politics, having a good understanding of political issues, and being as well-informed about politics and government as most people (Morrell, 2003; Niemi et al., 1991). Respondents indicated the extent of their agreement with each statement using a five-point scale running from strongly disagree to strongly agree ( $\alpha = 0.81$ ).<sup>9</sup>

To measure emotional reactions to the national economic situation, respondents were asked to report, on a ten-point scale ranging from “not at all” to “very much”, the degree to which the economic situation in their country made them feel a series of emotions. An overall scale of anger was created combining the “angry” and “disgusted” items; the anxiety scale combined the “fearful” and “anxious” indicators.

All our models include standard controls for gender and age (coded in years). Some studies have found populist attitudes to be more prevalent among men (Bernhard & Hänggli, 2018; Elchardus & Spruyt, 2012) and older cohorts (Bernhard & Hänggli,

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<sup>9</sup> Note that this measure is unbalanced towards the knowledge facet of the internal efficacy construct (i.e., it includes two questions asking respondents whether they have a good understanding and are well-informed about politics). However, our conclusions remain substantively unaffected if the non-knowledge item (i.e., whether they consider themselves well-qualified to participate in politics) is given the same weight as the combination of the two knowledge items.

2018; Rico & Anduiza, 2019), although no consistent pattern is evident across extant research. We also control for education (nine levels, following a standardized coding scheme from primary education to PhD) and political knowledge (an additive index based on four factual questions). This allows us to purge the effect of internal efficacy, as subjective political competence, from the effect of objective cognitive skills and political awareness. Finally, we include country-level fixed effects to account for any systematic differences in the outcome variables across countries. All variables except age (in years) have been coded to run from 0 to 1.

Table 3 presents the results of the OLS models of populism and anger. The estimates in Model 1 indicate that the total effect of internal efficacy on populist attitudes is, as expected by Hypothesis 1, positive and statistically significant. Moving internal political efficacy from the lowest level to the highest level increases populist attitudes nearly 0.10 points on the 0-1 scale. Model 2 estimates the path between internal efficacy and anger related to the country's economic situation. Consistent with Hypothesis 2, the impact of efficacy is positive and statistically significant, increasing levels of anger by up to 0.10 points on the 0-1 scale.

Model 3 shows the direct effect of both anger and internal efficacy on populist attitudes. According to the estimates, efficacy directly increases populism by 0.08 points, which involves a drop of 0.02 points compared to the total effect obtained in Model 1. In line with Hypothesis 3, anger has a positive and statistically significant impact on support for populist ideas. Model 4 replicates Model 3 by adding anxiety as a control. In this case, the direct impact of internal efficacy on populism remains virtually unchanged, while the effect of anger on populism only slightly diminishes. The coefficient for anxiety is positive and statistically significant, but 4.5 times smaller than that of anger. This evidence is in line with previous work showing that anger, not anxiety, is the main emotional driver of populist attitudes (Rico et al., 2017).

[Table 3]

The results of a mediation analysis, displayed in Table 4, indicate that the ACME for anger is positive and statistically significant, representing 19% of the total effect of internal efficacy on support for populist ideas. A substantial part of the influence of self-

perceived political competence thus appears to be mediated by feelings of anger motivated by the country's economic situation. This evidence is also consistent with Hypothesis 4.

[Table 4]

It is worth noting the estimated effect of education and political knowledge, given their close association with internal efficacy. Educational level has a negative impact on both populist attitudes and feelings of anger, while the impact of knowledge is positive for populism and negative for anger. That is, less-educated people are more likely to hold populist beliefs, which appears to be in line with the common conception and part of extant research (Bernhard & Hänggli, 2018; Hawkins et al., 2012; Spruyt et al., 2016). Intriguingly, however, political awareness seems to enhance support for populism. This suggests that populist attitudes benefit not only from self-perceived political competence but also from objective political competence. Finally, results indicate that age correlates positively with populism and negatively with anger, whereas differences between men and women are only significant for anger, with women more likely to feel angry about the national economy.

## **Discussion**

In this paper we have assessed the consequences of internal political efficacy for populist attitudes. We have argued that an individual's perception of self-competence—net of the effect of the same individual's factual knowledge—facilitates the adoption of populist beliefs. Indeed, individuals who conceive themselves as able to understand and participate in politics are more critical towards existent politicians and tend to consider, to a larger extent, that citizens could do a better job than politicians themselves. We have further argued that perceptions of self-competence not only exert a direct effect over populist attitudes, but also have an indirect impact via emotional reactions of anger. Internal efficacy enhances the likelihood of experiencing feelings of anger, which in turn promote populist attitudes due to the close affinity between the core components of populist discourse and the appraisal pattern of anger.

Relying on a two-pronged experimental and observational empirical strategy, our results provide evidence to support the existence of both a direct effect of perceived self-competence over populist attitudes, as well as an indirect effect via the emotional reactions of anger related to the country's economic situation. Although our argument may seem contradictory to previous works that relate populism to low levels of political competence, we believe it has a complementary nature that provides a nuanced, while at the same time general, explanation of populism. The fact that internal efficacy increases populist attitudes is not necessarily incompatible with populism being more successful among people with lower levels of formal education, and our data seem to point into that direction. In addition, in explanations of populist attitudes, subjective elements such as the perception of one's self-competence seem to bear more weight than objective competence as measured by factual knowledge about politics. This is in line with Spruyt et al.'s (2016) assertion that it is not so much objective conditions as "subjectively experienced" conditions that matter when explaining support for populism (see also Elchardus & Spruyt, 2012; Rico & Anduiza, 2019).

An important aspect unexplored in our paper is the collective dimension of both political efficacy and emotional reactions to societal threats, along with the individual's sense of belongingness with "the people". Indeed, the belief that power should be given to the people makes populism an inherently collective enterprise. Our argument implies that self-efficacious citizens identify themselves with the people and believe in their peers' political competence, or, more precisely, in the group's conjoint capabilities to produce the desired outcomes—i.e., collective efficacy (Caprara et al., 2009). Future research should thus examine how perceived collective political efficacy relates to internal efficacy and what its role is in eliciting feelings of anger and promoting support for populism. Likewise, further work is required to establish how populist attitudes are influenced by feelings of group-based anger and perceptions that one's emotions are shared by the people as a whole (Gaffney et al., 2018).

An additional limitation of this study is that its focus was restricted to the economy and related emotions. One likely reason we found that anger at the economy is so consequential for populist attitudes may be precisely that economic threats, so often connected to global socio-structural shifts, are easily perceived to be affecting the nation

at large. A question that remains is whether the pattern of relationships uncovered here generalizes to emotional reactions elicited by other kinds of perceived societal threats, such as immigration and political corruption.

Two implications of our findings deserve discussion. From a methodological perspective, our experimental data suggest that batteries of factual political knowledge may affect attitudes of internal political efficacy. By heightening awareness of respondents' knowledge shortcomings, knowledge questions are likely to undermine self-perceived competence and other related attitudes. Hence, researchers using surveys that include knowledge tests should carefully consider potential question order effects.

From a more substantive perspective, our findings introduce an important challenge: how can we envisage fighting populism without reducing feelings of internal political efficacy? Most previous research has considered political efficacy as a good and desirable attitude in democratic contexts. Internal political efficacy is related to a number of positive outcomes, among which are most notably political engagement and participation. Dampening internal efficacy to reduce levels of populism would be throwing the baby out with the bath water. It would not be advisable, and it would probably be impossible. What can be done is to fight misinformation and promote political education and awareness of the inherent complexities of public policy, to bear increased but also more realistic levels of self-perceived competence. Future research should establish whether it is internal efficacy per se or just inflated overconfidence that boosts populist attitudes (Motta et al., 2018). To this end, more work is needed that explores the likely role of objective measures of political competence in moderating the effect of self-perceived efficacy.

Last, considering the connection between internal political efficacy and the prevalence of populism allows us to understand that populism is inextricably linked to some of the defining characteristics of our current democratic systems. On the one hand, we have intensive and permanent flows of political information and communication where citizens play a crucial role. On the other hand, self-enhancement values put individuals and their wishes at the centre, while authority faces increasing challenges. Populism reflects a sense of entitlement or empowerment that is unlikely to disappear in the near future of contemporary democracies. Liberal democracies need to work out how to find

a better balance between the space they give to citizens to speak with their own voice and the self-control and delayed gratification necessary for peaceful coexistence (Mazzarella, 2019). The psychological dynamics of the relationship between efficacy, emotions and populism highlight the difficulty of this task.

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