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# Populist but Pluralist? Populist Attitudes and Preferences for Political Pluralism in Parliament and Government

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In the ideational approach to populism, populism and pluralism do not go together. While evidence indeed suggests that populist politicians consider a politically pluralist parliament as an obstacle to the expression of the true people's will in politics, it is however an open question whether 'the people', and especially those with high populist attitudes, are just as opposed towards pluralism in parliament and coalition government. Thus far, evidence of a negative relationship between populist attitudes and preferences for pluralism in politics has been inconclusive. We asked ca. 2000 Dutch respondents—raked to be representative of the population—to draw up their ideal assembly and to select the parties that they wish to be part of coalition government. Results show that populist attitudes positively associate with the total number of parties included in the assembly, and non-negatively with the number of parties in the coalition. Parties with government experience, however, are much less preferred. These results shed new light on the presumed incompatibility between populism and pluralism.

**Keywords:** Populism; Pluralism; Populist attitudes; Parliament; Assembly ballot; Democracy

Populist leaders around the world claim an unique capacity or ability to know, understand and represent a singular popular will. Subsequently, they predicate themselves as the only legitimate representatives of the community. Donald Trump's unfounded claims about election fraud, Geert Wilders' claim that the Dutch parliament is 'fake', and Beppe Grillo's claim that his party should in principle hold 100% of the seats of the assembly, all come to mind. According to the ideational approach to populism (Mudde, 2017; Hawkins, 2018), such claims are

typical of populism, which is an ideology that says that the people are a homogeneous whole with one single general will, and that politics should only be about expressing this will. Populism thus stands in opposition to the pluralist principles of liberal democracy: that the people are divided into different groups, each with their own legitimate will, and that politics is ultimately about compromise (Müller, 2014; Rummens, 2017; Urbinati, 2017).

Recent research has operationalised populism on the individual level in survey questions to measure respondents' level of populist attitudes (Akkerman *et al.*, 2014). Are citizens with high populist attitudes just as negatively predisposed towards political pluralism as populist leaders and politicians? Akkerman *et al.* (2014, p. 1336) found a weak, but positive correlation between populist attitudes and pluralist views that listening to other opinions and making compromises in politics are important. Moreover, in a more recent study on populist attitudes and political participation (Zaslove *et al.*, 2021), citizens with a populist inclination were found to favour deliberative forms of political participation. Deliberative politics is considered to be an inherently pluralist, and thus not a 'populist', type of politics (Bächtiger *et al.*, 2018).

Do these results bring into question whether anti-pluralism indeed is populism's defining characteristic, as some scholars suggest (see Katsambekis, 2020)? We investigate how citizens with a populist inclination regard political pluralism in parliament, a political institution in which inclusion and consensus are central to its proper functioning. If citizens with a populist preference are negatively predisposed towards political pluralism in parliament and its concomitant practice of coalition government, as the ideational approach would suggest, the theoretical expectations about the incompatibility of a populist and pluralist worldview (Müller, 2014; Herman, 2017) indeed manifest themselves on the individual level as well. If, instead, individuals with a populist inclination are positively, or at least not negatively, predisposed towards political pluralism in parliament and coalition government, the negative relationship between populism and pluralism anticipated by the ideational approach to populism might be less outspoken at the citizen level. This would in turn cast a new light on the presumed incompatibility of populism and liberal democracy, for which the belief that multiple parties can hold legitimate political claims is key (Muirhead, 2006).

To the best of our knowledge, an assessment and operationalisation of citizen preferences for political pluralism in parliament and coalition government have not been done before (but see Plescia and Eberl, 2021, for populist preferences on coalition formation). Our article examines the relationship between populist attitudes (Hawkins *et al.*, 2012; Akkerman *et al.*, 2014; Van Hauwaert and Van Kessel, 2018) and individuals' preference for party system size and the preferred size of the coalition government. In short, we ask what the relationship is between populist attitudes and citizens' predisposition towards political pluralism in

parliament and coalition government. This article contributes to theory-building on populism, particularly on the relationship between populism and pluralism, and helps us to understand what the prospects are for citizen support of liberal democratic institutions in the populist age.

To assess one's predisposition towards pluralism in parliament, we survey respondents about their ideal assembly composition with the assembly ballot (AB, see [Ellenbroek et al., 2021](#)). With the AB, respondents may distribute all parliamentary seats across all parties they want to see represented in parliament. A respondent may allocate seats to an unlimited number of different parties or attribute all seats to a single party. We regard respondents who use the AB to craft an ideal assembly with a multiplicity of parties to be positively predisposed towards political pluralism in parliament. In contrast, respondents who allocate all their votes to a single party are negatively predisposed towards a large and diverse party system. After respondents have cast their AB, we present a list of all the parties to the respondent, and ask them for each party to indicate whether the party should, or should not, participate in coalition government ([Brams and Fishburn, 1993](#)).

First, because individuals with a populist inclination should in theory be less likely to consider the representation of many political ideologies and viewpoints as important or legitimate, we expect respondents with higher populist tendencies to attribute seats to fewer parties (Hypothesis 1). Secondly, individuals with a populist inclination are presumed to hold negative views on compromising and power-sharing, and are subsequently expected to be negatively predisposed towards a large number of coalition parties. We therefore expect a negative association between an individual's level of populist attitudes and the number of parties preferred to participate in coalition government (Hypothesis 2).

We assess these expectations empirically among Dutch citizens. The Netherlands has one of the largest party systems in the world due to its nationwide district with proportional representation. Power-sharing, compromising, corporatist policy-making and broad cooperation in multi-party coalitions have thus been common practice in the Dutch party system for over a century ([Krouwel and Koedam, 2015](#)). At the same time, populist parties have gained a strong foothold in Dutch politics as is evidenced by the success of the 'Freedom Party' (PVV), 'Forum for Democracy' (FvD) and the 'Socialist Party' (SP) ([Meijers and Zaslove, 2021](#)). These parties have consistently framed mainstream parties' habitual cooperation in coalition government as failures of representation (see, e.g. [Baudet and Cliteur, 2016](#)). Lastly, the Dutch electorate exhibits a substantial adherence to populist attitudes ([Zaslove et al., 2020](#)).

We test our expectations with data collected via the Voting Advice Application Election Compass (*Kieskompas*) from which we constructed a representative sample of 2141 respondents after collection in March 2017 by matching

on a probability sample of Dutch respondents of the Longitudinal Studies for the Social sciences (LISS) panel (McCready, 2012). Surprisingly, our findings show that, in total, respondents with higher populist attitudes do not prefer fewer parties in the assembly in comparison with respondents with lower levels of populist attitudes, but that they prefer more parties. Whereas parties with government experience do poorly with respondents with a populist inclination, their preference for parties without government experience and outsider parties without representation results in a net positive number of parties elected in total. Also surprisingly, respondents with a populist inclination voice a preference for as many as four parties to participate in coalition government. The results indicate that individuals with high populist attitudes have anti-elitist but pluralist preferences for parliamentary representation.

## 1. Populism and pluralism

In the ideational approach to populism (Hawkins, 2018), populism is constituted by three core ideas. First, political sovereignty should reside with the ordinary people who constitute a virtuous and homogeneous community and whose interests are united by a general will. Secondly, the elite is a corrupt and self-serving entity. Thirdly, the juxtaposition between the ordinary people and the elite is of Manichaeic proportions as it constitutes a moral struggle between good and evil. Because populism considers ‘the people’ to be a homogeneous whole with a single, unitary ‘will’ that constitutes the only legitimate basis for political action, populism is a monist ideology that does not acknowledge the multitude of interests and the political and societal pluralism of modern democratic societies (Hawkins *et al.*, 2012; Müller, 2014; Kriesi and Pappas, 2015; Rummens, 2017). As a result, populists assign little utility to institutions and mechanisms that include or protect different and pluriform social interests in an attempt to achieve consensus or compromise (Kriesi and Pappas, 2015; Ruth, 2018; Kenny, 2020). Furthermore, these institutions and mechanisms may be alleged—as they are designed and maintained by a corrupt elite—to limit the power of the people in some way which in turn warrants their abolition or ‘reform’, as we see in Hungary and Poland (Kelemen, 2017; Meijers and Veer, 2019).

### 1.1 *Populism and pluralism on the individual level*

Research on the individual level by Akkerman *et al.* (2014) has operationalised the three core features of the ideational approach to populism on the individual level in survey questions to measure respondents’ level of populist attitudes (Akkerman *et al.*, 2014). The authors also operationalised a pluralist dimension, with questions that focus on the importance of compromise and listening to

other groups' opinions. While one would expect that populism's negative predisposition towards pluralism should also be discernable in attitudes and opinions of citizens with a populist inclination, Akkerman *et al.* (2014, p. 1336) showed that, surprisingly, there is positive, albeit weak, correlation between respondents' populist attitudes and pluralist attitudes, as some respondents with a high score on the populist attitudes scale also scored high on the pluralism scale. This begs the question of how inherently incompatible populism and pluralism actually are, as a growing number of scholars have begun to question (e.g. Katsambekis, 2020). Moreover, in a more recent study on populist attitudes and political participation (Zaslove *et al.*, 2020), citizens with a populist inclination were found to favour deliberative forms of political participation. Deliberative politics is considered to be an inherently pluralist, and thus not a 'populist', type of politics as it is a process in which listening to others, seeking for consensus and including all kinds of political views in the conversation are fundamental (Bächtiger *et al.*, 2018).

Hence, while one would theoretically expect a negative relationship between populist attitudes and attitudes towards political pluralism, the empirical evidence seems to point towards a *positive* relationship between populist attitudes and preferences for listening to others and including different political views in the political process. To illuminate the citizen-level relationship between populist attitudes and preferences for political pluralism in politics, we therefore investigate the relationship between populist attitudes and preferences for political pluralism in parliament and coalition government. If citizens with a populist inclination are positively predisposed towards political pluralism in parliament and coalition government, this would cast more doubt about the presumed negative association between populism and pluralism, at least at the individual level. It would also shed new light on the presumed incompatibility of populism and the liberal dimension of liberal democracy, for which it is prerrequired that citizens do not believe that only they or only one party hold(s) a legitimate political claim to power (Muirhead, 2006).

### *1.2 Populist attitudes towards political pluralism in parliament: size of the ideal party system and ideal coalition government*

What predisposition towards pluralism in parliament may we expect for individuals with high populist attitudes? First, in contrast to the liberal democratic idea that political power should not be embodied by a single politician or party (Lefort, 1988, pp. 9–20), and that one party alone cannot truly represent the political community (Mouffe, 2000; Herman, 2017), populists say that the power resides with the 'One People' (Rummens, 2017) whose will holds for the whole of the society (Mudde, 2007, p. 151). In other words, there is one popular will as

opposed to a variety of popular wills. Populist leaders in turn claim an unique capacity or ability to know, understand and represent that singular popular will so that, subsequently, they are predicated to be the only legitimate representatives of the community. Italian Five Star Movement's Beppe Grillo, for instance, claimed that his party should hold 100% of the seats as no other party has a legitimate claim to represent the community in parliament (Müller, 2014). Populists nullify the need of, or the rationale for, a large party system in which illegitimate others are represented (Herman, 2017).

We expect that individuals with high populist attitudes also consider populist leaders to be the only legitimate representatives of the community and are therefore less likely to consider the representation of many political ideologies and viewpoints as important and/or legitimate. We thus expect that populist attitudes negatively relate to the preferred number of parties in the party system. For this measure, we draw inspiration from free-list proportional representation systems, such as in Luxembourg, El Salvador and Honduras, in which voters may cast their ballot in support of one or multiple parties (*panachage*). In our survey, we give our respondents a number of seats equal to the total number of seats of the assembly, and all seats must be allocated to any number of parties, in any way they see fit. We explicitly instruct respondents that they can determine their ideal assembly composition. The ballot in question will henceforth be referred to as the *assembly ballot*. The more parties that are allocated seats to in the AB, the more positively one is predisposed towards political pluralism in the parliament. We postulate hypothesis 1 as follows.

*Hypothesis 1: The higher a respondent's populist attitudes, the lower the number of parties allocated votes to in the assembly ballot.*

Secondly, in the absence of a single-party majority, the consociational practice of cooperation and compromising (in coalition government) among the other, usually mainstream, parties is negatively viewed upon by populist politicians. As it is the populists' understanding that one sells out one's principles in a compromise (see Akkerman *et al.*, 2014), they allege that these practices do not preserve the people's true will in politics (see, e.g. the thinking by Baudet and Cliteur, 2016, p. 36). Populist parties challenge the 'collusion' (van Biezen, 2014, p. 179) by these types of 'cartel parties' (Katz and Mair, 1995) and frame compromises for the sake of coalition formation as failures of representation (Krouwel, 2012; Hawkins *et al.*, 2020).

We expect that individuals with higher degrees of populist attitudes are also less inclined to support power-sharing between parties in coalition government. Prior research has indeed found that individuals with a populist inclination favour referendums as direct, compromise-less, forms of democracy (Zaslave *et al.*, 2020). Also, Plescia and Eberl (2021) found that citizens with a populist

inclination are less willing to acknowledge the largest party's victory and its concomitant *formateur* role and more willing to exclude certain parties from coalition formation. We draw inspiration from [Brams and Fishburn \(1993\)](#) who suggested to give voters the ability to indicate for each party whether it should, or should not, be included in the government coalition. The higher the number of parties a respondent wants included in coalition government, the more the respondent is positively predisposed towards inclusion and compromise, and the lower the number of parties the less so. We therefore postulate the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 2: The higher a respondent's populist attitudes, the fewer parties preferred to be included in the government coalition.*

## 2. Data and methods

In this section, we discuss our case selection, the operationalisation of our key variables, the data used in the analyses and model specification.

### 2.1 Case selection

In terms of populism, both at the individual and party system level, the Netherlands is broadly representative of other European countries. First, populist attitudes in the Netherlands are comparable to those of other Western and Northern European democracies ([Van Hauwaert and Van Kessel, 2018](#)). Secondly, like most other contemporary party systems in Europe, populist parties feature prominently in the Dutch party system ([Meijers and Zaslove, 2021](#)). The *Partij voor de Vrijheid* (PVV) entered the Second Chamber in 2006 and has been one of the largest parties since then. Most recently, *Forum voor Democratie* (FvD) gained representation in 2017 and won the highest vote share in the 2019 provincial elections. Despite a drop in popularity following a scandal related to anti-Semitism in the party, the FvD increased their vote share again in the 2021 Dutch parliamentary elections. The Netherlands also hosts a considerably successful left-wing populist party, the *Socialistische Partij* (SP), which has secured between 9 and 25 seats since the 2002 elections.

In terms of political pluralism in parliament, the Netherlands is rather extreme. The Dutch parliament hosts a relatively high effective number of political parties due to its permissive proportional representation system in a nationwide district with an electoral threshold that lies below one percentage of the total vote. Besides the fact that both pluralism in parliament and populism are prevalent in the Dutch case, the mainstream parties' habitual cooperation in coalition government, which is necessary in the absence of a single-party majority, has



consistently been framed as a failure of representation by Dutch populists (see, e.g. [Baudet and Cliteur, 2016](#)). Moreover, the strong association between populist attitudes and preferences for referenda among Dutch citizens implies that citizens with a populist inclination prefer reforms that lower the importance of the legislature in policy making ([Zaslove et al., 2020](#)). From this perspective, the Dutch case may be considered a likely case for finding a negative predisposition against pluralism in parliament among citizens with a populist inclination, which means that we expect that a negative association between populist attitudes and preferences for pluralism in parliament should be discovered in the Netherlands if it indeed exists. If, on the other hand, one would expect that even the staunchest populists would be positively predisposed to multi-party representation when socialised in the extremely pluralist system of the Netherlands, the Netherlands should be considered a less likely or even least-likely case for finding an outspoken negative association between populist attitudes and preferences for political pluralism in parliament and coalition government. We therefore advise reader discretion on generalising the Dutch case to other modern democracies and welcome future cross-national research.

## 2.2 Operationalisation: populist attitudes

We measure respondents' level of populist attitudes with the six items proposed by [Akkerman et al. \(2014\)](#). These assess the degree to which a respondent stands in agreement with the three core features of (the minimal definition of) populism ([Mudde, 2004](#), p. 543): (1) the sovereignty of the people; (2) the distinction between the pure people and the elite and (3) the idea that there exists an antagonistic 'Manichean' relationship between the 'good' people and the 'evil' elite. Respondents answered the statements presented in [Table 1](#) on a Likert scale, ranging from 1 (I very much disagree) to 5 (I very much agree). Based on the regression scores yielded by a principal axis factor analysis using varimax rotation, we derive the latent variable 'populist attitudes' (Chronbach's  $\alpha = 0.8063$ ). A score of 1 denotes a very non-populist respondent, a score of 5 a very populist respondent. We also include the two pluralist questions that [Akkerman et al.](#) proposed for a pluralist attitudes scale, that pertain to the importance of listening to others and making compromises. The principal axis factor analysis did not show that a latent variable 'pluralist attitudes' could be retained (Factor II has an Eigenvalue below one), and such a variable is thus not included. Nevertheless, we suspect that the two questions about the importance of compromise (PLU1) and listening to other opinions (PLU2) could associate with preferred levels of political pluralism in parliament and therefore they are included as controls. Further analysis shows, in contrast to what [Akkerman et al.](#) initially found, that almost all

**Table 1** Items measuring populist and pluralist attitudes and results of principal axis factor analysis

Item	Factor I Eigenvalue 1.86	Factor II Eigenvalue 0.64
Item: % squared loadings (after rotation)	72.02%	24.75%
POP1: The politicians in the Dutch Parliament need to follow the will of the people	0.321	
POP2: The people, and not politicians, should make our most important policy decisions	0.477	
POP3: The political differences between the elite and the people are larger than the differences among the people.	0.611	
POP4: I would rather be represented by a citizen than by a specialised politician.	0.539	
POP5: Elected officials talk too much and take too little action	0.655	
POP6: What people call 'compromise' is really just selling out on one's principals.	0.593	
PLU1: In a democracy it is important to make compromises among differing viewpoints.		0.533
PLU2: It is important to listen to the opinion of other groups.		0.443

Rotated factor loadings below 0.3 not shown.

Source: Election Compass Survey Dutch Elections March 2017.

items of the populist scale negatively and significantly correlate with the two pluralist items, see [Supplementary Appendix Table A1](#).

### 2.3 Operationalisation: dependent variables

As mentioned above, we employ a so-called free-list ballot to capture whether, how and to what degree citizens hold positive or negative attitudes towards political pluralism in parliament. With such a free-list ballot, used in, for example, Luxembourg or local elections in Germany, voters may cast their ballot in support of one or multiple parties (*panachage*). We give our respondents a number of seats, equal to the total number of seats of the national assembly, and *all seats* must be allocated to one or more parties, in any way our respondents see fit. We introduced the ballot to our respondents as a '*Kamerstem*', Dutch for AB, with which, they were told, they can determine what their ideal parliament (*Tweede Kamer*) looks like. A respondent could, for example, give one party 30% of the seats and distribute the remaining 70% over ten other parties. Or, if one confers all parliamentary seats to a single party, a preference is voiced for a one-party parliament. The AB, thus, conveys the extent to which citizens are or are not

positively predisposed towards political pluralism in parliament, in terms of party system size.<sup>1</sup> This, *the number of parties in one's ideal assembly*, would be our first dependent variable. Our respondents, like actual Dutch voters, could voice support for as many as 28 parties during the 2017 elections, 'only' 13 of which were already represented in the *Tweede Kamer*, of which 5 parties with government experience.

The second dependent variable is the *number of parties supported to participate in coalition government*. Respondents were presented a list of the parties and asked to indicate what parties they would like to be part of the new government, which would effectively be an approval voting method for coalition government (Brams and Fishburn, 1993). The higher the number of coalition parties a respondent approves of, the more the respondent may be assumed to be positively predisposed, or at least not to be negatively predisposed, towards inter-party cooperation in coalition government.

#### 2.4 Data and sample construction

Data were collected through a survey on an opt-in panel of Dutch individuals collected via the Dutch VAA Kieskompas (Krouwel *et al.*, 2012). Our survey was fielded in the weeks leading up to the 2017 parliamentary elections, and ca. 5500 respondents casted an AB. Online opt-in surveys generate non-probability samples that may lead to biased estimates. The benefits of opt-in web surveys, however, are the willingness of respondents to answer many questions more accurately relative to traditional probability surveys resulting in smaller measurement error. Another benefit is the size of the panel which we leveraged to construct a matched (McCready, 2012), representative sample of Dutch citizens after data collection (see also Otjes and Krouwel, 2019) on the basis of a probability sample of Dutch respondents of the LISS panel administered by CentERdata (Tilburg University, The Netherlands). For every respondent in the LISS sample, we *take one from the VAA* dataset that corresponds on key variables (Daniel, 2012, p. 91).<sup>2</sup> We create an exact match on respondents' level of education and gender, and match observations on age within a certain 'calliper range' (10 years range from a total range of 74). To ensure a stringent test, we not only matched the two samples on respondents' socio-demographic characteristics, but we also matched on key ideological variables of interest that were measured for both samples: left–right self-placement (1.5 points for a total scale of 11) and populist

<sup>1</sup>The survey questions can be found in the Supplementary Appendix, Figures A1 and A2.

<sup>2</sup>For the respondents of the LISS panel, demographic variables were obtained from the Background variables dataset from March 2017. Ideological left–right placement from the Politics and Values dataset wave 9. Populist attitudes from the 2019 Political Discontent survey.

attitudes (0.4 points for a total scale of 5). This matching procedure yields a sample of 2141 respondents.<sup>3</sup>

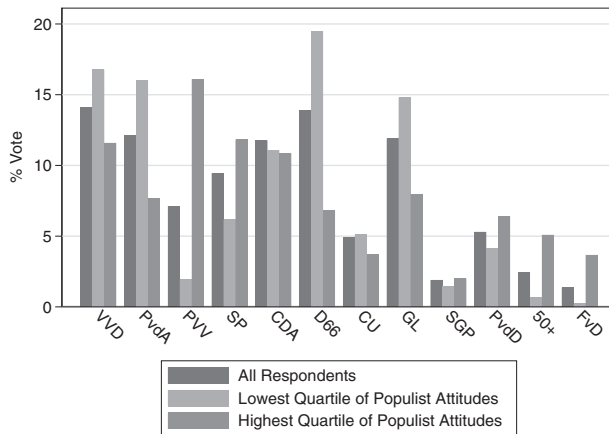
### 2.5 Model specification

We use negative binomial regression analysis to determine the association between populist attitudes and preferences for the ideal number of parties in the assembly and coalition government. Both are ‘count’ variables consisting only of non-negative integers and overdispersion (variance substantially greater than the mean) will in some models need to be accounted for. If overdispersion is not present in the dependent variable, the negative binomial regression reduces to the Poisson model. In all models, we control for the two pluralist items, gender, education and age. Also, we assess one’s economic (left–right) and cultural (conservative–progressive) ideological self-placement on a 1–11 scale. The former dimension relates to issues on state intervention in the economy, and one can be either more left or right wing. The latter relates to ethic or moral issues or issues that pertain to national identity. On this dimension one takes a position that can be best described as either more liberal/progressive, or more conservative. For these ideological self-placements, we assume that a nonlinear relationship as centrist individuals on either dimension is presumed to be more positively predisposed towards parliamentary inclusion of parties that are positioned to either side of them. We also control for one’s proximity to the most closely located party on these two scales. This is to gauge whether and how a respondent’s preference for a diverse party system is affected by the degree to which political supply does (low distance) or does not (high distance) match the respondent’s demand.

## 3. Results

In this section, we first discuss descriptive analyses on the AB and the approval voting method for coalition government. We give an insight on how our respondents put their ideal assembly together, as well as what parties they prefer to be in the coalition, and how these preferences are different between respondents with lower and higher scores on the populist attitudes scale. Subsequently, we discuss the regression results that show how populist attitudes associate positively, and not negatively, with the ideally preferred number of parties in parliament (rejection of Hypothesis 1), and how it does not associate negatively with the ideally preferred number of coalition parties (rejection of Hypothesis 2).

<sup>3</sup>In the [Supplementary Appendix](#), we also present the results of the larger, unmatched, sample ( $N = 5,627$ ) in [Table A4](#).



**Figure 1.** Party vote shares based on ABs cast by all respondents, respondents in the lowest quartile of populist attitudes, and respondents in the highest quartile of populist attitudes

### 3.1 Descriptive statistics

On average respondents distributed their 150 seats over approximately 7.8 parties, whereby the largest party in a respondent's ideal assembly was attributed ~33%, or 50, seats. Only 1.11% of respondents attributed all seats to one party. In Figure 1, we present a bar chart that shows the percentage of seats that were attributed to each party out of all the 321,150 seats that our 2141 respondents distributed in total (outermost left bar for each party). The other bars show the percentage of the seats attributed to each party by the quartile of respondents that scored lowest on the populist attitudes scale ( $N = 493$ , the light grey bar in the middle), and by the quartile of respondents that scored highest on the populist attitudes scale ( $N = 576$ , the dark grey bars on the right).

As was to be expected the populist parties, the PVV, the SP and the FvD, do much better among respondents with higher scores on the populist attitudes scale than among respondents who scored lower. This is also true for the Fifty Plus party, a party for the elderly, and the Party for the Animals (PvdD). Parties like Democrats 66 (D66) and the Green Left (GL), that are progressive on the cultural dimension which pertains to ethic or moral issues or issues about national identity, do better among respondents who score lower on the populist attitudes scale. Also 'mainstream' parties with a lot of government experience, like the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) and the Labor Party (PvdA) tend to do better among respondents with lower populist attitudes, although the Christian Democratic Party (CDA) does equally well among respondents in the highest and lowest quartiles of the populist attitudes scale. For participation in coalition government, the most popular parties among all respondents are D66

(approved by 64.5% of respondents), CDA (51.9%), GL (51.8%), PvdA (49.7%) and VVD (43.3%). The PVV (16%) was among the less popular parties. Among the respondents who are in the highest quartile of populist attitudes, in contrast, the PVV was approved by 40.3% of respondents preceded only by CDA (50.9%) and SP (45.1%).<sup>4</sup>

### 3.2 Regression analysis

Do populist attitudes negatively relate to the number of parties that people prefer to occupy the party system? The negative binomial regression estimates are given in [Table 2](#). The Wald chi-square statistic indicated that all models were statistically significant. In Model 1, the results pertaining to the preferred number of parties in parliament are presented. We see that populist attitudes positively associate with the preferred number of parties in the assembly with a coefficient of 0.054, meaning that a 1-U increase on the populist attitudes scale associates with a 0.054-U difference in the logs of expected counts for the total number of parties keeping all other variables constant. This relationship is statistically significant at an  $\alpha$  of 0.01. We thus reject Hypothesis 1, which stated that populist attitudes *negatively* relate to the preferred number of parties in the party system.

Exploratory analyses show that populist attitudes associate differently with different parties. We examine parties from the following three categories: parties with government experience (Model 1a), parties without government experience but with seats prior to the elections (Model 1b) and ‘outsider’ or newcomer parties that had no seats at the time of the elections (Model 1c) ([Wieringa and Meijers, 2020](#)). When we estimate our model on the number of parties from each of these subtypes of parties included in the assembly, we see that populist attitudes positively associate with the inclusion of parties without government experience and outsider parties, while there is a negative association with attributing seats to parties with government experience. The two divergent effects result, in the end, in a net positive total number of parties the higher a respondent scores on the populist attitudes scale. To ease interpretation of our results, we visualised the expected counts for each of the party types at five levels of populist attitudes, keeping all other variables at their mean, in [Figure 2](#).

Interestingly, respondents who agree with the pluralist item that it is important to listen to other opinions, also tend to include more parties in their ideal assembly. This is particularly the case for parties without government experience (Model 1b, significant at the 0.05 level). Respondents who agree that compromise is important, in contrast, tend to include parties *with* government experience (Model 1a). This is also true for voters who have placed themselves in the middle

<sup>4</sup>See all approval ratings in [Supplementary Appendix Table A3](#).

**Table 2** Negative binomial (Poisson) regression estimates on preferred number of parties in assembly (Models 1) and coalition government (Models 2)

Item	Number of parties in parliament			Number of parties in coalition			
	Model 1: N parties	Model 1a: Government experience	Model 1b: no govern- ment experience	Model 1c: outsider parties	Model 2: coalition parties	Model 2a: Government experience	Model 2b: no govern- ment experience
Populist attitudes	0.054** (0.017)	-0.098*** (0.014)	0.084*** (0.017)	0.518*** (0.065)	0.005 (0.010)	-0.206*** (0.015)	0.316*** (0.020)
Importance of compromise	0.014 (0.018)	0.046*** (0.015)	-0.008 (0.018)	-0.006 (0.056)	0.008 (0.011)	0.083*** (0.017)	-0.093*** (0.019)
Importance of listening to other opinions	0.044* (0.021)	0.025 (0.016)	0.052* (0.023)	0.030 (0.071)	0.005 (0.014)	-0.008 (0.018)	0.018 (0.025)
Economic self-placement (left-right)	0.041 (0.028)	0.074** (0.027)	0.001 (0.028)	0.077 (0.096)	-0.019 (0.017)	0.131*** (0.027)	-0.157*** (0.031)
Economic self-placement squared	-0.003 (0.002)	-0.005* (0.002)	-0.002 (0.002)	-0.001 (0.008)	0.000 (0.001)	-0.008*** (0.002)	0.006 (0.003)
Cultural self-placement (conservative-progressive)	0.054 (0.034)	0.093** (0.033)	0.004 (0.038)	0.049 (0.106)	-0.032 (0.020)	0.060* (0.030)	-0.139** (0.042)
Cultural self-placement squared	-0.004 (0.003)	-0.007** (0.002)	-0.001 (0.003)	-0.001 (0.008)	0.003 (0.002)	-0.005 (0.002)	0.012 (0.003)
Distance to closest party economic dimension	-0.068 (0.036)	-0.004 (0.029)	-0.061 (0.043)	-0.335* (0.150)	-0.001 (0.022)	0.037 (0.030)	-0.051 (0.052)
Distance to closest party cultural dimension	0.083* (0.039)	0.028 (0.029)	0.106* (0.044)	0.213 (0.170)	0.056* (0.026)	0.071* (0.033)	0.021 (0.059)
Female ( <i>Baseline is male</i> )	-0.145*** (0.023)	-0.115*** (0.019)	-0.147*** (0.025)	-0.208*** (0.098)	-0.018 (0.015)	-0.066*** (0.020)	0.075* (0.030)
Age	0.002* (0.001)	0.004*** (0.001)	0.004*** (0.001)	-0.012*** (0.001)	0.005*** (0.001)	0.007*** (0.001)	0.001 (0.001)

Education middle ( <i>baseline is low</i> )	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.003)	(0.000)	(0.001)	(0.001)
	0.054	0.046	-0.082	-0.004	-0.031	0.048
	(0.040)	(0.030)	(0.163)	(0.023)	(0.032)	(0.046)
Education high ( <i>baseline is low</i> )	0.031	0.057*	-0.157	0.008	0.002	0.020
	(0.040)	(0.029)	(0.165)	(0.023)	(0.031)	(0.047)
Constant	1.285***	0.606***	-1.712**	1.216***	0.175	0.634**
	(0.181)	(0.152)	(0.598)	(0.110)	(0.153)	(0.221)
N	2141	2141	2141	2141	2141	2141
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.0096	0.0207	0.0272	0.0084	0.0421	0.0693

Robust standard errors in parentheses.

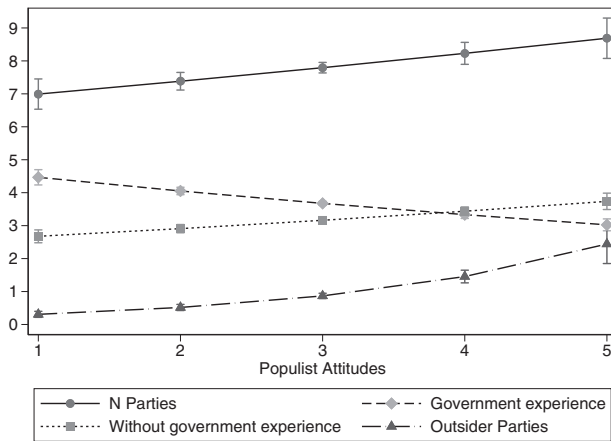
\*  $p < 0.05$ ,

\*\*  $p < 0.01$ ,

\*\*\*  $p < 0.001$  (two-tailed).

Source: Election Compass Survey Dutch Elections March 2017.



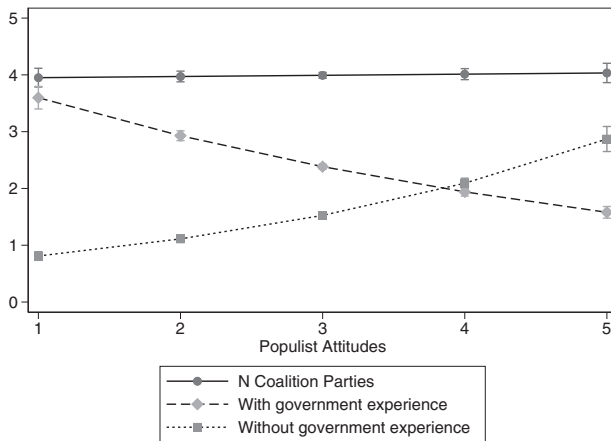


**Figure 2.** Predicted counts for the number of parties ideally preferred in assembly (Model 1), the number of parties with government experience (Model 1a), the number of parties without government experience (Model 1b) and the number of outsider parties (Model 1c) at each level of populist attitudes

of the socio-economic and socio-cultural political dimensions, as the estimates suggest a concave curvilinear relationship in Model 1a.

Do populist attitudes negatively relate to the number of parties preferred to participate in coalition government? Our estimates in Model 2 in Table 2 do not suggest a significantly negative relationship. We therefore reject Hypothesis 2. Once again additional analyses show different effects for parties with and without government experience: Figure 3 visualises the expected counts for the total number of parties preferred to be part of the new government (Model 2), as well as estimates on parties preferred if they have (Model 2a) or do not have government experience (Model 2b) at five levels of populist attitudes, keeping all other variables at their mean. Respondents who score high on the populist attitudes scale clearly indicate that the new government should be more formed with parties without government experience, and less so with parties with government experience. The inverse is true for respondents who find that compromise is important. Similarly, respondents who placed themselves around the middle of the socio-economic and socio-cultural dimension were less likely to approve of coalition parties without government experience (convex for both dimensions in Model 2b), while socio-economic centrists were more likely to include parties with government experience (concave in Model 2a).<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup>Robustness checks: Analyses on the whole sample (Table A4), the results on the basis of a preference for a populist party (PVV, SP or FvD) instead of populist attitudes (Table A5), and populist party preferences as controls (Table A6), are presented in the Supplementary Appendix.



**Figure 3.** Predicted counts for number of parties approved to participate in coalition government for all parties (Model 2), parties with government experience (Model 2a) and without government experience (Model 2b) at each level of populist attitudes

#### 4. Conclusion

The ideational approach to populism suggests that populist leaders claim an unique capacity or ability to know, understand and represent a singular popular will which constitutes the only legitimate basis for political action, which makes them the ‘only’ legitimate representatives of the community (Hawkins *et al.*, 2012; Müller, 2014; Rummens, 2017). This precludes the need of, or the rationale for, a pluralistic and ideologically diverse parliament in which inter-party cooperation is required (Herman, 2017). While populist parties are increasingly successful across the world, we must not make the ecological fallacy that the citizens who support them hold the same monistic outlook on pluralism. Surprisingly, prior research has found that citizens with a populist inclination seem to have preferences for pluralist types of political representation, such as citizen deliberation (Zaslove *et al.*, 2020). Was this an expression of discontent with the political institutions of the status quo, rather than a genuine preference for a pluralist type of politics? Or has the ideational approach to populism overstated anti-pluralism as populism’s defining characteristic, as well as the degree to which this would manifest itself on the individual level?

To address this question, we investigated preferences for political pluralism in parliament and its coalition government. We asked 2141 Dutch respondents to allocate as many parliamentary seats to as many parties as they like with an AB, effectively creating their own ideal party system. For preferences for political pluralism in coalition government, we asked respondents which and how many parties they would like to see in a coalition government (Brams and Fishburn, 1992).

We show with negative binomial regression analyses that populist attitudes associate positively, and not negatively, with the preferred total number of parties in the assembly. The association is particularly strong for parties without government experience, both for established opposition parties and newcomers. Yet, the association is negative, and statistically significant, for parties with government experience. We see the same dynamics for parties that were preferred in coalition government, although the overall net number of coalition parties preferred did not significantly vary the higher or lower a respondent's populist attitudes were. Even though we did find strong negative correlations between populist attitudes and preferences for listening to others and compromise, in contrast to what Akkerman *et al.* initially found, we show that the lack of a negative relationship between populist attitudes and pluralist preferences found by previous research (Akkerman *et al.*, 2014; Zaslove *et al.*, 2020) seems to be robust, and not just an anomaly.

Having said that, we would welcome further (cross-national) research to help determine how robust the external validity of our findings is. One could justifiably hypothesise that Dutch citizens could instinctively prefer multi-party parliament and government, as this is what they have become accustomed to in comparison with citizens who, for example, have been socialised in the British two-party system. Also, whereas the level of educational attainment did not appear to affect preferences for political pluralism in parliament and coalition government, more research on socio-economic determinants would be welcomed given the relatively high share of highly educated respondents in our sample.

All in all, our findings that citizens with a populist inclination have pluralist but anti-mainstream or anti-elitist preferences for political pluralism in parliament and coalition government raise the question whether, more generally, the ideational approach overstates anti-pluralism as a core-defining element of populism, at least among citizens (Katsambekis, 2020). Our findings suggest that, contrary to what the ideational approach to populism would have anticipated, individuals with high populist attitudes may regard 'the people' as a collective whose unified interests are insufficiently represented by mainstream parties, but not sufficiently better by only one or a few parties.

### **Supplementary data**

[Supplementary data](#) are available at Parliamentary Affairs online.

### **Conflict of interest**

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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