



Populist Attitudes, Subjective Social Status, and Resentment in Italy

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Abstract

Social identity is relevant to political attitudes. Recent studies show that perceived social positions particularly shape populist attitudes. Italy is an interesting test case that has been scarcely investigated by previous research. Thus, using original data collected in 2021, this paper analyses populist attitudes in Italy and the relationship between subjective social status, status mismatch, and social resentment. This study finds that subjective status matters more than objective conditions for populist attitudes. Those who perceive themselves as being at the bottom of the social hierarchy tend to have higher levels of populist attitudes than the rest of the population. However, low social resentment can partially absorb the effect of low status. The paper provides original data from which novel insights into the debate on populism are discernible, appearing to stem more from individual perceptions than objective positions. The results also suggest some possible remedies against rising populist attitudes.

Keywords Populism · Populist attitudes · Subjective social status · Status mismatch · Social resentment · Italy

1 Introduction

In recent years, the relevance of populism in the European political debate has grown, likely with lasting influence (Inglehart & Norris, 2017; Mudde, 2004). Previous research in the literature on populist attitudes—predispositions and beliefs that can translate into populist voting behaviour—focused on the relevance of objective conditions and social status and suggested that individuals facing adverse economic circumstances, such as unemployment, and those more affected by trends, such as skill-biased technological changes, are more prone to develop populist attitudes (Engler & Weisstanner, 2021; Guiso et al., 2023; Kurer, 2020; Rama & Santana, 2020; Rico & Anduiza, 2019). The same is true for

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(perceived) cultural threats (Arzheimer, 2008; Häusermann & Kriesi, 2015; Ivarsflaten, 2008; Mutz, 2018; Oesch, 2008). Also early socialisation, in terms of social origin, has a long-lasting influence on the political preferences of individuals (Bolet, 2023; Evans et al., 2022). While previous research on the determinants of political attitudes often focused on objective situations, recent studies increasingly underline the relevance of subjective or psychological factors (Bolet, 2023; Brown-Iannuzzi et al., 2015; Gidron & Hall, 2017, 2020; Kurer & Van Staaldunin, 2022). In line with this attention from more recent research, we focus on the role of *subjective social status* and status-based political mechanisms (Chan et al., 2020) in this study, which also acknowledges the idea that perceived social positions are not necessarily accurate representations of the objective conditions that generate them but likely have a prominent role in shaping political attitudes (Kroll & Delhey, 2013).

However, social status alone may not be conducive to developing populist attitudes. Research has shown that *resentment*, which is characterised by a sense of decline, perceived economic insecurity, and powerlessness (Mann & Fenton, 2017), can cultivate fertile ground for populist support (Abts & Baute, 2022; Burgoon et al., 2019; Thielmann & Hilbig, 2023; van der Bles et al., 2018). We analyse the extent to which social resentment—which we measure in terms of *generalised social distrust* and *perceived economic insecurity*—conveys the relevance of social standing and amplifies or deflates the importance of subjective social status for political attitudes. The idea is that a low level of social resentment can partially mitigate the effects of low (perceived) social position on populist attitudes.

We integrate different lines of research to enhance our understanding of how individuals form political preferences. Further, we focus on Italy, a country that is largely understudied in this research tradition but provides a privileged context for studying these dynamics, as it underwent a prolonged period of economic insecurity and lacking economic growth. Populist parties such as *Fratelli d'Italia*, *Lega*, and *Movimento Cinque Stelle* gained considerable popular support, showing the considerable extent of responsiveness from Italians to populist statements (Tarchi, 2015). Previous research on populism has focused on parties rather than individuals and their political attitudes, whereas our analysis is based on original data collected in June 2021 from a representative sample of the Italian population and provides a comprehensive measure of populism, social status, status discrepancy, and resentment. Moreover, attitudes precede vote choice and are influenced by individual characteristics (Ajzen, 1985), and voting behaviour—necessarily restricted by the party supply side of the country—is not always related to adherence to populist ideas. As a focus on electoral behaviour could veil the population's genuine potential for populist attitudes (Gidengil & Stolle, 2022), we measure and analyse populist attitudes instead of populist electoral behaviour.

Beyond contributing to the body of literature on the understudied Italian case, we provide insights into the social stratification of political attitudes. We examine the impact of subjective social status, allowing for its discordance with the objective position in social stratification and accounting for social background—here understood as a source of individual's perception in society. In an approach seldom considered previously, particularly in the Italian context, we also assess the *asymmetric impact of status mismatch*, i.e. the magnitude of the subjective misinterpretation of one's objective position, between the objective status according to the International Socio-Economic Index (ISEI) and subjective status on populist attitudes.

The results show that in regard to political attitudes, perceived standing in society is more relevant than objective positions, and individuals with a low subjective social status

tend to show higher levels of populist attitudes. Social resentment, a concomitant factor of subjective status, further boosts populism. However, a condition of low resentment can absorb part of the fostering effect that a perception of a low position on the social ladder has on populist attitudes: Individuals with low levels of resentment exhibit significantly lower populist attitudes than those with high social resentment. As other research findings confirm that perceived economic strain and low social integration are relevant drivers of populism (Scheiring et al., 2024), our results suggest how social trust, economic equality, and individual economic stability can serve as remedies against rising populism.

2 Background

2.1 Populist Attitudes

Populism can be described as a ‘thin ideology’ that ‘considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite”’ (Mudde, 2004, p. 543). It endorses a Manichean worldview, an ‘us-versus-them’ perspective in which ‘us’ refers to the ‘people’—the common citizens, a culturally and economically homogeneous group—who are neglected by ‘them’, established elites who run the ‘rigged’ economic and cultural system (Berman, 2021). The ‘people’ are holders of moral purity and honourability, so any compromise with the elites is to be abrogated due to their corrupting nature (Mansbridge & Macedo, 2019; Mudde, 2004). Populist attitudes can be considered the individual propensity of adherence and agreement to populist stances and are to be considered antecedent to voting behaviour (Ajzen, 1985). This study focuses on the potential for populist attitudes in the population and this potential’s association with subjective social status.

According to the literature, measuring populist attitudes is far from straightforward (Castanho Silva et al., 2020; Erisen et al., 2021; Gidengil & Stolle, 2022). In the following, based on the definition of populism described above, we focus on this ideology’s three main aspects: (1) a Manichean worldview, which indicates an utter and radical division between the people and the elites; (2) anti-elitism, which considers elites to be corrupt and bearers of interests that conflict with those of the people; (3) people-centric attitudes, which regard the ‘people’ as holders of moral superiority, thus promoting their predominance in the decision-making process and motivation to avoid compromise by out-groups.

Although patterns of sociodemographic determinants of populist attitudes are not wholly consolidated, ‘only people with higher-status jobs and higher income and education tend not to display populist attitudes’ (Gidengil & Stolle, 2022, p. 447). In other words, one’s (perceived) social position influences one’s populist attitudes in the social hierarchy. Amid structural economic change, the perception of declining relative status (Burgoon et al., 2019; Gidron & Hall, 2020; Kurer, 2020), exacerbated by a sense that the cultural context is threatened by decline among traditional values and minority group mobilisation, may have generated a counter-reaction among the individuals most exposed to these processes (Bornschier & Kriesi, 2013; Gidron & Hall, 2017; Kurer et al., 2019). An observed discrepancy between people’s current subjective social status and their family of origin is also a critical driver of support for the radical right (Bolet, 2023; Gest et al., 2018). Researchers have also shown how worsening relative positions in society and exposure to conditions of greater economic risk are associated with increased support for radical parties (Abou-Chadi & Kurer, 2021; Burgoon et al., 2019; Gidron & Mijs, 2019) as well as

populist attitudes (Häusermann & Kriesi, 2015; Manunta et al., 2022; Rico & Anduiza, 2019).

2.2 Subjective Social Status

Social status can be conceptualised as a combination of social esteem in terms of positive or negative privileges linked to education, income, and occupational status (Weber, 1968). It determines the positioning of individuals in the social hierarchy of prestige—the ‘structure of relations of perceived, and in some degree accepted, social superiority, equality, and inferiority among individuals’ (Chan & Goldthorpe, 2007, p. 513). More specifically, subjective social status can be considered a relational variable that expresses an individual’s perception and beliefs about their personal standing in society relative to others (Gidron & Hall, 2017, 2020; Lundberg & Kristenson, 2008; Sudo, 2021). It is conceptually and empirically distinct from social class and objective social status, which are formed by objective indicators.

Research has long focused on subjective status formation processes (see Thomas & Thomas, 1928). Previous researchers have observed a lasting effect of early socialisation on individual attitudes—the ‘gradient constraint hypothesis’ (Bartley & Plewis, 2007)—and underlined the role of peers in shaping subjective status identification (Evans & Kelley, 2004; Kim & Lee, 2021). Still, the influence of objective conditions on perceived position is also acknowledged as crucial (Kirsten et al., 2023). Nolan and Weisstanner (2022) showed that along with social class, economic conditions play a prominent role in shaping perceived social status but without determining it completely. Individuals subjectively position themselves amid social stratification by drawing on the memories and socialised culture of their past as well as biased images of the social structure, which they deduce from their material reality and generalisations of subjective samples from homogeneous and non-casual social networks. Past experiences and peers are used as reference points and samples, respectively, encouraging the tendency that individuals usually have to place themselves in the middle of the social structure.

Social origin is an influential factor of social status in both objective and subjective terms (Evans et al., 2022). Following what is suggested by the abovementioned ‘gradient constraint hypothesis’ (Bartley & Plewis, 2007), perceived social status depends on the subjective and objective contexts of socialisation, which can also influence objective possibilities to achieve a higher position on the social ladder. The long-lasting echoes of social origin can also be reflected in the emergence of populist attitudes. For instance, the feeling of being raised in a low relative position can foster a need to achieve more and a feeling that one is or has been treated unfairly (Bolet, 2023; Gest et al., 2018).

Along these lines, the argument of ‘self-serving bias in causal attribution’ (Mezulis et al., 2004; Miller & Ross, 1975) suggests that the outcomes of an incongruent perceived status differ depending on whether the perception is over- or understated. Individuals are likelier to explain their achievements as occurring due to their own effort and abilities while tending to blame their failures on structural factors beyond their control (Mezulis et al., 2004; Miller & Ross, 1975). In the latter case, individuals may be likelier to develop animosity toward the country’s ruling elites and those they believe are responsible for their failure, making them more receptive to populist claims. A further logical step might suggest that not only the direction but the magnitude of the status mismatch is relevant. The greater the distance between the subjective and objective position, the greater the individuals’ misperceptions and the greater the effects described above should be. This aspect of

the relationship between subjective and objective social position has been scarcely analysed in the literature thus far.

2.3 Resentment, Status Threat, and Populist Attitudes

Social resentment refers to ‘enduring collective sentiments, close to anger and envy, associated with a sense of loss of entitlement, regard, and position, in comparison and relations with others’ (Mann & Fenton, 2017, p. 33). This definition consists of several conceptual individual and collective elements, such as the chronic powerlessness individuals perceive to have when dealing with hostile events (Abts & Baute, 2022; Ferrari, 2021)—in other words, individual-level awareness of being unable to achieve one’s desired lifestyle due to an unknown external agent refusing to allow one what one thinks is due and deserved (Barbalet, 1992; Reginster, 1997). Another element is a combination of a generalised distrust towards society and others (Thielmann & Hilbig, 2023) and a collective sentiment of discontent (van der Bles et al., 2018), each of which can be a harbinger of populist attitude emergence. Finally, one’s social location in the hierarchical social structure of unequal power relations and the accompanying social connotations also factor into social resentment (Barbalet, 1992; Mann & Fenton, 2017; Scheler, 1992). Resentful sentiments generally begin to form when ‘people’s hopes are unfulfilled, their familiar world is endangered, their sense of security is lost, and they lose simultaneously what they had gained in social regard’ (Mann & Fenton, 2017, p. 37).

At first glance, subjective social status and social resentment would seem to align strongly in their conceptual meanings. For example, individuals who feel they belong to a relatively high rung on the social ladder may feel resentment towards welfare recipients who are perceived to receive benefits without ‘doing their part’ (Barbalet, 1992). Similarly, according to such perceptions, some members of ‘vulnerable groups feel disadvantaged because “undeserving” others are treated favourably by the state while the “common people” work hard but get nothing in return’ (Van Hootegeem et al., 2021, p. 129). The main differences between these concepts lie in sources and positions. On the one hand, regarding sources, whereas subjective social status results from a deductive process of the individuals who position themselves in their biased image of the social structure, social resentment derives from disappointed expectations, distrust in others, and perceived threats to material living conditions. On the other hand, regarding position, subjective status is part of individuals’ social self-images and is thus personal, while resentment, which derives from inequalities inherent in the hierarchical social structure, is projected toward others and is a collective and social feeling.

We here follow the approach proposed by Van Hootegeem et al. (2021), who advance a relational approach to resentment, considering it as characterised by a generalised feeling of distrust towards others, perceived economic insecurity, and group-based deprivation. The authors show how social resentment mediates the relationship between (objective) social status and populist attitudes, highlighting how a condition of distrust and perceived group-based deprivation enhances criticism of the established system (Van Hootegeem et al., 2021). Modifying their approach, we instead focus on the *moderation* of social resentments, as resentment creates the premise for an ‘us-versus-them’ identity group division (Cramer, 2016). When exposed to specific political contexts, the feeling of resentment can give rise to populist attitudes in the most exposed individuals, who will then be able to channel this feeling—which would otherwise remain stagnant—towards elites and others (Abts & Baute, 2022; Mann & Fenton, 2017; Van Hootegeem et al., 2021).

2.4 Italian Context

Research on the political dimension of social stratification in the Italian context has focused mainly on intergenerational social mobility (Acciari et al., 2019; Ballarino et al., 2021) and the association between class structure and electoral behaviour (Ballarino et al., 2009), while populism has mainly been approached through a focus on parties (Caiani & Graziano, 2016). Compared to other countries, Italy shows average populist attitudes in line with other southern European countries, such as Greece, Spain, and France (Rico & Anduiza, 2019). Populist attitudes in Italy are coupled with a feeling of distrust in the political system and a perception of powerlessness in the ability to influence it (Biorcio, 2007; Segatti, 2006). This feeling of political disaffection was ultimately not directly connected to electoral behaviour (Segatti & Vezzoni, 2007), even though it likely created a fertile ground for the rise of populist attitudes (and parties). This mechanism appears to have a stronger impact among the poorly educated and is influenced by the contingent political context and political shocks (Biorcio, 2007; Segatti, 2006).

Accordingly, we also expect status-based mechanisms to play a role in determining political attitudes, including populism, in Italy. More precisely, we expect *subjective social status to be more relevant than objective positions (H1)*, and that *lower subjective social status should come with higher populist attitudes (H2)*. Considering the inconsistency between subjective and objective social status, the literature suggests two directions: *Individuals who underestimate their subjective social status have higher populist attitudes (H3a)*, and *individuals who overestimate their social status have lower populist attitudes (H3b)*.

Previous research suggests that social resentment is pivotal in shaping populist attitudes because social resentment mediates the relationship between subjective social status and populist attitudes. However, establishing a causal order between subjective social status and social resentment is not straightforward despite each element's undeniable usefulness in explaining the emergence of populist attitudes. To resolve this problem, we consider social resentment—an expression of a general feeling of threat and distrust—a conditional determinant concomitant to subjective social status, i.e., individuals' perceptions of themselves in society. We argue that it is highly pertinent to analyse the concomitant effect of these factors allowing for an interaction between the two. Therefore, we focus on the moderating role of social resentment in the relationship between subjective social status and populist attitudes and between a status discrepancy and populist attitudes with the expectations that *low social resentment will absorb part of the enhancing effect of low subjective social status on populist attitudes (H4a)* and that *part of the enhancing effect will be driven by the impact of deflated social status on populist attitudes (H4b)*.

3 Data and Variables

The analysis¹ employed an original dataset collected in June 2021 in Italy from a representative sample of the Italian working-age population. The data² were collected via CAWI for 1019 individuals between 20 and 54 years old. As often occurs in research on attitudes, we lost some observations due to missing values, although we took steps to minimise this and checked for the representativeness of the sample.³ After a listwise exclusion of missing values, the final sample was composed of 745 individuals. Descriptive statistics of the analytical sample are reported in Table A1 in the Supplementary Materials. Sample weights were applied; compared to the use of other available data, this had the advantage of providing measures of populism and details on social positions—both current and past.

Populist attitudes were measured by five-point Likert scale items with options ranging from (1) ‘Strongly agree’ to (5) ‘Strongly disagree’. The final index was composed of the sum of the levels of agreement with the following four items: (1) ‘Representatives elected in the Parliament quickly lose touch with the needs of the people’; (2) ‘The differences between the common population and the so-called elites are significantly more pronounced than the differences within the common population’; (3) ‘Ordinary people have no power over government choices’; (4) ‘The people and not the politicians should make the most important political decisions’ (Castanho Silva et al., 2020; Gidengil & Stolle, 2022). A Principal Component factor analysis confirmed that these items strongly load on one latent factor.⁴ The results showed the scale to have a high level of internal consistency (Cronbach’s Alpha=0.75, McDonald’s Omega=0.77).⁵ We rescaled this index to a more comprehensible measure—the final Populist Attitudes Index—with a scale that ranges from 1 (‘Low Populist Attitudes’) to 10 (‘High Populist Attitudes’). In the sample, its average is 7.24, and its median is 7.19.

We focus on subjective and objective social status and the mismatch between the two. First, we measured subjective social status by drawing upon research from the fields of health and psychology (Evans & Kelley, 2004; Operario et al., 2004) and employed the widely used MacArthur Scale (Adler et al., 2000). To do so, we first included a 10-point-scale question that is well-established in the literature on subjective social status: ‘In our society, there are people/groups of people who occupy higher positions and others who occupy lower positions. Where would you place yourself on the scale

¹ Details are here: <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/UDER7>.

² Data were collected by an established data collection research institution (SWG: www.swg.it, an institute responsible for regularly executing electoral foresight in the Italian context) based on a pre-recruited web panel and guarantees representativeness of the sample. A comparison with similar samples can be found in Table A2 in the Supplementary Material.

³ To minimise the loss of representativeness of the sample due to missing cases, we applied many techniques, including Inverse Probability Weighting for the dependent variable. We believe that the high quality of the original sample and the techniques implemented to minimise the loss of individuals made it unnecessary to apply more elaborate techniques, such as multiple imputation.

⁴ Full results are reported in Section B of the Supplementary Material.

⁵ To minimize missing cases, given the high internal consistency of the items, we also included those individuals with up to two missing answers on the four items, corresponding to 3.6% of the sample. Table B1 in the Supplementary Materials shows that missingness on populist attitudes is mainly random, except for a slight tendency of those at the left to not answer some questions on populism. We accounted for this by weighting for the inverse of the probability of non-response in at least one item, together with the sample weights. Whether we included these weights did not change the results to a relevant degree. The density distribution is reported in Fig. A1 in the Supplementary Materials.

presented here?’ (Gidron & Hall, 2017, 2020; Lindemann & Saar, 2014; Nolan & Weisstanner, 2022; Oesch & Vigna, 2022). As only twenty-three individuals placed themselves in the ninth or tenth rung of the scale, we aggregated all such respondents with those in the eighth step, leading to a range from 1 (‘Low’) to 8 (‘High’) in our analyses. A question on class identification was included for us to use as a confirmatory check of the results. Second, we measured objective social status by converting individuals’ occupational codes in the International Standard Classification of Occupation (ISCO08) into the ISEI for occupational status (Ganzeboom et al., 1992) using the ‘iscogen’ package in Stata (Jann, 2019). In our dataset, this index comprised the weighted sum of the average education and average income of occupational groups, thus ‘measur[ing] the attributes of occupations that convert individuals’ main resources—education—into their main rewards—income’ (Ganzeboom et al., 1992, p. 9). To compare subjective and objective social status more readily, we rescaled this index to obtain a range from 1 to 10. As a robustness check, social status was replaced by social class, which was operationalised according to the European Socio-Economic Classification (Rose & Harrison, 2007). As expected, the identified relationship between subjective and objective social status is positive, but the association is far from perfect: Individuals with lower ISEI tend to overestimate their social position, while individuals with higher ISEI tend to underestimate it.

The mismatch between individuals’ subjective and objective social status was measured by subtracting the objective status score from the original 10-step subjective social status scale score, leading to a status mismatch ranging from -9 (highest deflated) to 9 (highest inflated). To ensure this measure could be easily understood, we re-coded it into three categories, measuring whether the subjective status is inflated, deflated, or concordant. We considered status concordance to occur if the absolute value of the mismatch is lower than the one. From a theoretical point of view, we expected that the influence of inflated or deflated social status would differ, and these operationalisations would allow for the analysis of the expected non-symmetric effect of status mismatch on populist attitudes.

To measure social resentment, we partly followed Van Hootegeem et al. (2021), measuring social resentment through two dimensions: social distrust and perceived economic insecurity. As per Stolle (2002), generalised social trust was measured on a four-point scale with the question, ‘Overall, would you say that you can trust other people in life or that you can never be too careful?’ The final scale used high values to represent high levels of distrust. Perceived economic insecurity was captured with the fill-in-the-blank statement, ‘In the months previous to the pandemic (in 2019), your household income allowed you to live...’, which was measured on a five-point scale (1: ‘Comfortably’, 2: ‘With ease’, 3: ‘I experienced difficulties’, 4: ‘I made ends meet with many difficulties’, 5: ‘I never made ends meet’). The two questions theoretically and empirically covered two separate dimensions, and we found that these items’ correlation is 0.21. Accordingly, they were first included separately in the models for us to analyse their independent effects, then together so we could analyse their combined effect on the outcome. Next, the two measures were dichotomised and combined into a single synthetic scale to ensure we could test the moderating effect of social resentment. The Social Resentment scale takes 0 if both distrust and perceived economic insecurity are low, 2 if both dimensions are high, and 1 for the intermediate combinations.

In addition to gender and age, education was included in the models as a control to distinguish three levels (a more fine-grained scale led to the same results). As Italy is known for its strong regional diversities (Putnam et al., 1994), we controlled for the macroarea of residence: North-West (Piemonte, Lombardia, Liguria), North-East (Trentino, Alto Adige/

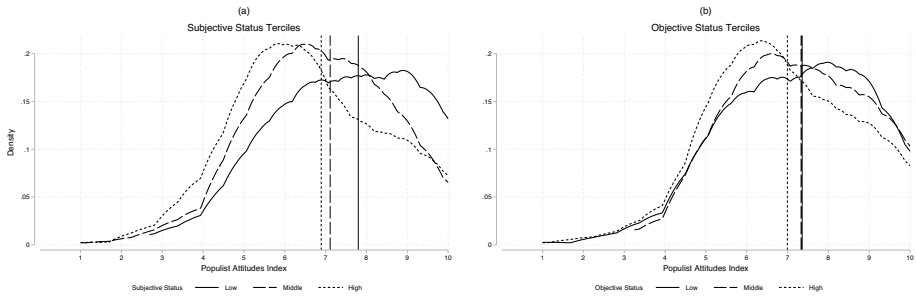


Fig. 1 Populist Attitudes Index Distributions for Subjective and Objective Social Status. *Note:* Original data, weighted. Vertical lines represent group averages. kernel=epanechnikov, bandwidth=0.7

Südtirol, Veneto, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Emilia-Romagna), Centre (Toscana, Umbria, Marche, Lazio), South (Abruzzo, Molise, Campania, Puglia, Basilicata, Calabria), and the Isles (Sicilia, Sardegna). We also controlled for family income.

We also employed social background as a control since it influences subjective and objective status, social resentment, and populism. Subjective social status of origin was measured with the MacArthur Scale item. We also controlled for the objective class of origin, which we operationalised as the parents' highest occupation when the respondent was fourteen years old. This treatment of the variable has a lower risk of suffering from retrospective bias. Subjective and objective background positions have rarely been included together in previous analyses of the relationship between perceived status and populist attitudes, so considering subjective and objective conditions of people's current and origin class statuses offers novel contributions to the literature. The two measures were found to be obviously related but not multicollinear.

In addition to using perceived income security to detect social resentment, we accounted for the level of yearly family income by measuring it in eight categories. To reduce missing values on this notoriously difficult-to-answer question, we substituted it with personal income when possible and included those with completely missing income information as a separate category. Finally, some models also controlled for self-reported political orientation to account for the fact that those reporting an extreme value on the scale will usually show higher populist attitudes than those in more central positions (Rama & Santana, 2020). Political ideology was measured with a five-point scale ranging from 1 ('Left') to 5 ('Right') and was used in the analysis as a factor variable.

4 Results

Populist attitudes are stratified by social status. Figure 1 displays the Populist Attitudes Index density distributions by subjective and objective status terciles. Subjectively perceived social status is negatively associated with populist attitudes, as is shown across ISEI terciles. Notably, regardless of the objective position, the lower the subjective social status, the higher the populist attitudes.

Here, we examine the results of our analysis on how the Populist Attitudes Index depends on subjective and objective social status in a multiple regression model. Overall, subjective social status has a sizeable and stable negative effect on populist attitudes,

Table 1 Populist attitudes index and social status

| Variables | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) | (6) | (7) |
|---|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| ISEI scores (1–10) | −0.093*** (0.0327) | −0.0380 (0.0343) | 0.0114 (0.0369) | | −0.164*** (0.0362) | −0.0596 (0.0497) | −0.0128 (0.0486) |
| Subjective Social Status | | −0.210*** (0.0412) | −0.234*** (0.0482) | | | −0.185*** (0.0584) | −0.204*** (0.0626) |
| Decomposed status mismatch (continuous) | | | | | | | |
| <i>Inflated Social Status</i> | | | | −0.0916 (0.0629) | −0.230*** (0.0696) | −0.0485 (0.0907) | −0.0559 (0.0845) |
| <i>Deflated Social Status</i> | | | | 0.0381 (0.0449) | 0.0385 (0.0438) | 0.00795 (0.0436) | 0.0141 (0.0417) |
| Controls | <i>No</i> | <i>No</i> | <i>Yes</i> | <i>No</i> | <i>No</i> | <i>No</i> | <i>Yes</i> |
| constant | 7.729*** (0.191) | 8.538*** (0.230) | 6.769*** (0.456) | 7.240*** (0.104) | 8.250*** (0.238) | 8.552*** (0.250) | 6.771*** (0.472) |
| Observations | 745 | 745 | 745 | 745 | 745 | 745 | 745 |
| Adjusted R-squared | 0.014 | 0.054 | 0.136 | 0.007 | 0.038 | 0.053 | 0.134 |
| BIC | 2928.053 | 2902.565 | 2986.075 | 2938.812 | 2949.859 | 2943.563 | 2998.556 |

Original and weighted data. Results based on ordinary least squares (OLS) linear regressions. Controls include gender, age, educational level, Italian macroarea, left–right political ideology, family income, and subjective social origin. Robust standard errors are in parentheses. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$; BIC, Bayesian Information Criterion. Full Table is reported in Table S5 in the Supplementary Materials

meaning that the lower the individuals' self-placement in society, the higher their populist attitudes, as Table 1 shows. By comparing Model 1 against Models 2 and 3 (which consider subjective and objective status together), one observes that the effect of subjective social status remains unvaried across the models, while ISEI scores have no relevant effect. Therefore, it becomes evident that compared to objective conditions (ISEI scores), subjective social status has a greater influence on populist attitudes. This also holds true when controlling for sociodemographic characteristics.⁶ These results support our initial hypotheses H1 and H2.⁷ Interestingly, we found the relationship between subjective status and populist attitudes to be negative and linear, while Gidron and Hall (2017), in their study of populist voting behaviour, suggest a non-linear relationship that peaks in the lower half of the subjective status ladder. We might argue that only after a certain level of populist attitudes is achieved do they transform into a vote.

In addition, we also predicted that the mismatch between objective and subjective positions would matter. In Table 1, Models 4 and 5 show that the mismatch comes with a small negative effect on populist attitudes,⁸ a result that holds when controlling for political

⁶ We also accounted for the possible effect of age on the relationship, finding that the relationship between subjective social status and populist attitudes does not change across the life course.

⁷ Section C of the Supplementary Materials quantifies how much of the objective social status effect on populist attitudes is mediated by subjective status (Breen et al., 2021). Mediation is statistically significant.

⁸ Individuals with lower objective conditions tend to overestimate their social position, while individuals with high objective conditions tend to underestimate it. Women, young individuals, and those with

ideology and when checked for non-linearities. To test for non-symmetric effects of social status mismatch, we compared individuals with deflated and inflated social positions against those with concordant positions, finding that only those with inflated social status—people with a higher subjective status than objective status—have significantly lower populist attitudes than the rest of the sample. These results indicate support for our initial hypothesis H3b but not hypothesis H3a, which they counter. However, once we also accounted for the absolute levels of social positions, focusing only on the mismatch, the associations disappeared, supporting the views that it is subjectively assessed social position that influences populist attitudes and that objective conditions count only to the extent to which they influence people's assessment. These results hold when the status mismatch is treated categorically.

Moreover, the social position in which a person is born might have a relevant (direct) role in shaping political attitudes also beyond its influence on current social positions, whether objective or subjective (Evans et al., 2022). Although social background generally has a weakly direct influence on populist attitudes, high-class origin (father or mother in intellectual or managerial occupation) significantly reduces adherence to populist stances. This finding clearly suggests that a high-class origin, also independent of one's current social position, has a long-lasting effect by impeding its offspring from identifying with the 'people' in populist claims.

Next, we examine the results of our analysis on the effect of social resentment, allowing us to further disentangle the relationship between subjective perception of one's position in society and populist attitudes. We find that social resentment is higher in individuals with low education, low income, and low subjective origin, which is in line with previous assessments. Table 2 depicts the relation of social resentment with populist attitudes: The synthetic social resentment index shows that individuals with higher social resentment have much higher populist attitudes (Model 1) net of subjective and objective social status (Model 2), which is confirmed using more fine-grained operationalisations of social resentment (not reported here). However, the effect of social resentment diminishes once controls are added to the model, suggesting that objective conditions play a major role here.

As reported in Table 2 and contrary to findings on Belgium (Van Hoetegem et al., 2021), social resentment does not seem to mediate the relationship between subjective status and populist attitudes, suggesting that populist preferences are shaped more by individuals' interpretations rather than a sense of doom or pessimism toward their surroundings. We do, however, find support for the idea that resentment moderates social standing: Low social resentment seems able to absorb the negative effect of low subjective social status on populist attitudes, as Fig. 2 shows, which aligns with H4a. At higher levels of social status, differences between levels of resentment are of little relevance; the same is not true for status mismatch, which does not support H4b. These results on the moderating role of social resentment should be taken as indicative and exploratory, as the conformation of the data allows us to have only a few cases where low subjective social status and low social resentment coexist. Nevertheless, low social resentment is associated with lower levels of adherence to populist instances—further, there are signs that low social resentment can absorb part of the enhancing effect of low subjective social status on populist attitudes.

Footnote 8 (continued)

high education have a higher probability of overestimating their position; men, middle-aged individuals, and those with lower education have a higher probability of underestimating it. No significant differences emerge by Italian area of residence, political ideology, family income, or objective class of origin. See Table A3 of the Supplementary Materials for the full results.

Table 2 Populist attitudes index, subjective social status (SSS) and resentment

| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) | (6) | (7) |
|--|---------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|---|---|
| | Social Resentment | SSS and Social Resentment | + Controls | Interaction SSS and Social Resentment | Status Mismatch and Social Resentment | Interaction Deflated Status and Social Resentment | Interaction Deflated Status and Social Resentment |
| Subjective Social Status (8 categories) | | -0.200*** (0.0432) | -0.233*** (0.0489) | 0.0483 (0.140) | -0.200*** (0.0632) | -0.193*** (0.0624) | -0.193*** (0.0632) |
| Decomposed status mismatch (continuous) | | | | | | | |
| <i>Inflated Social Status</i> | | | | | | | |
| <i>Deflated Social Status</i> | | | | | | | |
| Social resentment (ref. Low) | | | | | | | |
| <i>Middle</i> | 0.596*** (0.195) | 0.422** (0.203) | 0.198 (0.195) | 1.793* (0.928) | 0.189 (0.195) | 0.271 (0.248) | 0.412* (0.220) |
| <i>High</i> | 0.642*** (0.203) | 0.214 (0.223) | -0.0517 (0.220) | 2.062** (0.919) | -0.0601 (0.219) | -0.259 (0.264) | 0.220 (0.248) |
| Subjective social status * social resentment | | | | | | | |
| SSS * <i>Middle</i> | | | | -0.248* (0.147) | | | |
| SSS * <i>High</i> | | | | -0.354** (0.017) | | | |
| Deflated social status * social resentment | | | | | | | |
| <i>Deflated * Middle</i> | | | | | | -0.0581 (0.126) | |
| <i>Deflated * High</i> | | | | | | 0.172 (0.125) | |

Table 2 (continued)

| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) | (6) | (7) |
|--|---------------------|---------------------------|----------------------|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|---|---|
| | Social Resentment | SSS and Social Resentment | + Controls | Interaction SSS and Social Resentment | Status Mismatch and Social Resentment | Interaction Deflated Status and Social Resentment | Interaction Deflated Status and Social Resentment |
| Inflated social status * social resentment | | | | | | | |
| <i>Inflated * Middle</i> | | | | | | | |
| <i>Inflated * High</i> | | | | | | | |
| ISEI scores (1–10) | | -0.0530 (0.0360) | -0.00760 (0.0375) | -0.00258 (0.0374) | -0.0352 (0.0491) | -0.0325 (0.0486) | -0.228 (0.146) |
| Controls | No | No | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Constant | 6.736*** (0.171) | 8.332*** (0.355) | 6.847*** (0.512) | 5.110*** (0.940) | 6.877*** (0.526) | 6.938*** (0.530) | 6.622*** (0.535) |
| Observations | 718 | 718 | 718 | 718 | 718 | 718 | 718 |
| Adjusted R-squared | 0.013 | 0.059 | 0.142 | 0.148 | 0.140 | 0.148 | 0.144 |
| BIC | 2823.969 | 2801.345 | 2884.896 | 2890.886 | 2897.166 | 2902.13 | 2905.092 |

Original and weighted data. Results based on OLS regressions. Robust standard errors are in parentheses. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$. Controls include gender, age, educational level, Italian macroarea, left-right political ideology, family income, and subjective social origin. Only individuals with valid answers for social distrust and perceived economic insecurity are considered. Full Table is reported in Table S6 in the Supplementary Materials

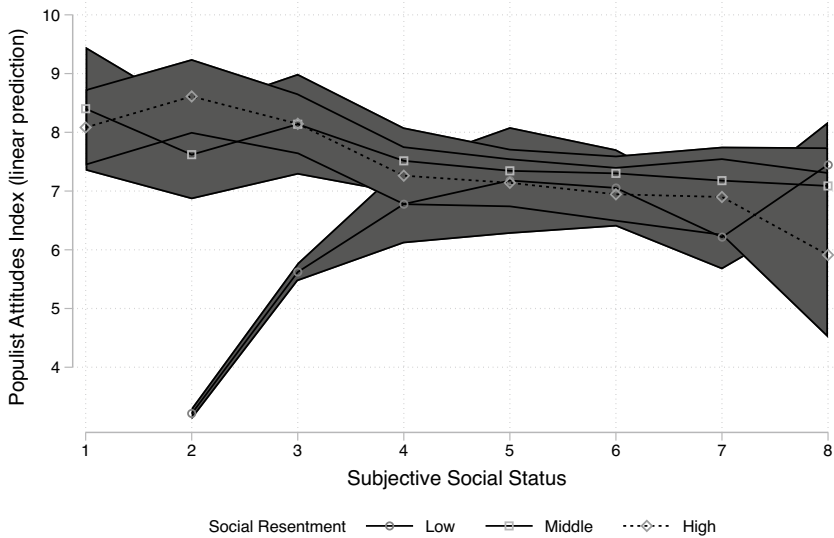


Fig. 2 Linear Prediction of the Populist Attitudes Index against Subjective Social Status for different levels of Social Resentment. *Note:* Original data, weighted. Computed from Model 3 in Table A8 in the Supplementary Materials, where subjective social status is treated as categorical

We conducted various tests to verify the robustness of our results. Among these, we used the social class ESeC (European Socio-economic Classification) and class identification, and we considered the different dimensions of resentment separately. The supplementary materials provide more detailed information.

5 Discussion and Conclusion

In addition to its focus on objective conditions, social research has been paying increasing attention to individuals' subjective perceptions of their position in society to explain political attitudes or behaviour (Oesch & Vigna, 2023). By focusing on populist attitudes and how they are influenced by subjective social status relative to objective positions and social resentment in this article, we contribute to this line of research—including several studies that investigated subjective social position's impact on the formation of populism (Gest et al., 2018; Gidron & Hall, 2017, 2020; Kurer & Van Staaldunin, 2022). Considering the victory in the 2022 parliamentary elections of a populist alliance led by a right-wing post-fascist party, we have done so for Italy based on original data collected at a very topical moment for these issues.

We provide evidence that the position individuals feel they hold in the social structure carries consequences for their populist attitudes, suggesting that self-perception in society has a greater influence than objective position in determining political attitudes. Objective characteristics are relevant as long as individuals perceive them. Results also showed that populist attitudes are much more common among individuals who feel they fall behind most of the population. We also introduced a measure for discordance in the perception of one's own social position—in other words, the mismatch between subjective and objective status—and found that it is irrelevant in shaping populist attitudes. In addition to

influencing individuals' social position, social origin prevents high-class descendants from expressing populist attitudes independently of their current status.

The study confirms that social resentment predicts populist attitudes, consistent with previous findings. Unlike a study on Belgian data (Van Hootegeem et al., 2021), we did not find evidence that resentment mediates social status, instead finding that social resentment moderates the effects of subjective social status on populist beliefs, which low levels of social resentment can mitigate. For individuals at a low rung of the subjective social ladder, feeling that they are part of a community of trusted peers and can rely on their material conditions could significantly reduce populist attitudes compared to people with low perceived social status and high resentment. At high levels of status identification, differences tend to disappear, with individuals with low social resentment showing populist attitudes that align with the rest of the sample. So, although subjectively assessed positions (independently of objective situations) seem responsible for populist attitudes, low social resentment can mitigate this effect, an observation with relevant implications.

Overall, our substantial findings align with the direction indicated by Gidron and Hall (2020), who see populism as a problem of social integration. In Italy and beyond, the recent rise in populism has explanations beyond those concerned with the worsening economic conditions of segments of the population. Political actors interested in countering the negative aspects of the populist phenomenon must pay particular attention to the social and economic integration of individuals by promoting economic equity and stability as well as a feeling of social trust, each of which functions as remedies to the rise of populism.

Our contributions are not free from limitations. First, the scope of our sample is restricted to the working-age Italian population, which prevents us from examining how these processes unfold at older ages. Moreover, in line with most similar studies, we relied on cross-sectional data, forestalling any causal claims. Likewise, some mechanisms should be examined more in-depth. For example, more research is needed to understand the social and psychological mechanisms and dynamics of subjective social status formation and how these perceptions translate into beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours over time. Longitudinal data is still rare in this field, but we provide, if nothing else, detailed measures of populism and social positions. Assessing the relevance of contextual effects and how they influence individuals' status identification processes and belief formation would be a natural extension to expand this research to a cross-country comparison, but this must be left for future research.

Supplementary Information The online version contains supplementary material available at <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/UDER7>.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors have no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this article, nor do they have any relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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