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Uncertainty Avoidance, Conspiracy Mentality and Populist Attitudes in Italy: The Role of Political Orientation

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the role of some psychological variables associated with populist attitudes, specifically focusing on Conspiracy Mentality (CM) and Uncertainty Avoidance (UA). This approach allows for the examination of both belief-system orientations and cognitive predispositions in explaining the psychological underpinnings of populism. Although CM has been previously linked to populism, our research reveals new insights into the interaction between UA and political orientation. Using data from a representative sample of 1000 Italians, we show that CM is consistently associated with populist attitudes across the political spectrum. Whereas, UA's impact is moderated by political orientation, influencing populist attitudes primarily among right-leaning individuals. These findings highlight the complex interplay of psychological factors and ideological leanings, contributing to the growing understanding of how epistemic and existential motivations might shape populist beliefs. This study advances the field by highlighting differentiated psychological patterns in populist attitudes, with UA emerging as especially salient among conservatives.

1 | Introduction

Over the past two decades, the term populism has pervaded global discourse, appearing frequently in the rhetoric of journalists, politicians and scholars. Despite its widespread usage, populism remains an elusive concept, often conflated with demagogy, nationalism, xenophobia and other ideological constructs (Collovald 2004; De Cleen et al. 2018; Glynos and Mondon 2016). This ambiguity has led many scholars to view populism as inherently contentious and polysemic, applied to varying and often contradictory movements (De Cleen et al. 2018; Laclau 2005). This ambiguity is further compounded by its use to describe both left- and right-wing movements, further blurring its conceptual boundaries (Akkerman et al. 2018; Papaioannou et al. 2023).

In response, a substantial body of literature has converged around Cas Mudde's minimal definition of populism. According to this approach (2004), populism is a thin-centred ideology that frames society as divided into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups: 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite'. It posits that politics should express the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people, unmediated by elite institutions. Mudde's conceptualisation highlights two central features: anti-elitism and a call for direct political representation of the people's will (Mudde 2004; Weyland 2001). Although influential, this approach tends to treat populism as a relatively stable attitudinal orientation measurable at the individual level.

At the same time, research highlights that populism should not be seen solely as a set of individual attitudes, but also as a

communicative and strategic practice—something performed and contextually mobilised (De Cleen et al. 2018; Laclau 2005; Moffitt 2015). From this perspective, populism emerges as a discursive response to crises in democratic representation, enacted through rhetoric, style, and performance. Acknowledging this duality is crucial: while treating populism as an attitudinal construct allows tractable psychological models, it risks reifying what is in practice a fluid and situational phenomenon. Although this study builds on the psychological tradition, we interpret our findings in light of broader discursive dynamics.

This conceptual complexity has also contributed to diversity in how populist attitudes are measured across studies. Although multidimensional instruments of populist attitudes have been proposed (e.g., Castanho Silva et al. 2018), measurement practices in the literature vary considerably. Some studies model anti-elitism, people-centrism (or sovereignty of the people), and Manicheanism as separate dimensions, whereas others integrate them into a single attitudinal construct. In the present study, we adopt the latter approach for analytical clarity and to maintain comparability with research that conceptualises populism as a unified, thin-centred ideology. Our composite score captures the shared attitudinal core of populism while remaining consistent with Mudde's (2004) minimal definition and with applications common in large-scale survey research.

Building on Mudde's framework, scholars have investigated the socio-psychological determinants of populist attitudes at the individual level (Kaltwasser 2021). Research has examined traits such as authoritarianism, uncertainty avoidance, social dominance orientation, and conspiracy mentality (e.g., Erisen et al. 2021; Gründl and Aichholzer 2020; Marchlewska et al. 2018). Yet findings remain inconsistent, partly due to differences in operationalisation and partly because attitudinal approaches have not been systematically connected to discursive and performative dimensions of populism.

This paper contributes by focusing on two key psychological constructs—Uncertainty Avoidance (UA) and Conspiracy Mentality (CM)—and their relation to populist attitudes. Although both have been studied independently, their overlap and interaction remain underexplored. Psychologically, UA and CM reflect complementary motivational responses to instability, sharing an epistemic drive to reduce uncertainty: CM reflects a tendency to interpret events as the result of malevolent, hidden groups (Dentith and Orr 2018; Sunstein and Vermeule 2008), aligning with populist narratives that depict politics as a moral struggle between 'pure people' and 'corrupt elite.' UA, by contrast, reflects discomfort with ambiguity and a preference for clear, structured systems (Gründl and Aichholzer 2020; Hofstede 2001), fostering attraction to the dichotomous worldviews typical of populist rhetoric. Examining them together allows us to integrate interpretive belief systems (CM) with cognitive predispositions (UA), offering a more comprehensive account of how psychological needs for certainty may underpin populism. At the same time, these dispositions operate within—and are activated by—the communicative strategies through which populism mobilises support.

Conspiracy Mentality has been consistently linked to populist attitudes (Castanho Silva et al. 2017; Christner 2022; Van Prooijen et al. 2022). Individuals who endorse conspiracy theories distrust elites and hold a Manichean worldview, core components of populism (Guinjoan and Galais 2023). This relationship holds across the political spectrum, with conspiracy beliefs found among individuals at both extremes (Imhoff et al. 2022; Van Prooijen et al. 2015). Uncertainty Avoidance, defined as a preference for predictability and the avoidance of ambiguity, also resonates with populist rhetoric. Movements often promise a simplified, predictable future in contrast to the complexity of governance (Gründl and Aichholzer 2020). Yet research suggests a more complex relationship, as UA's desire for stability may conflict with populism's anti-establishment tendencies (Gründl and Aichholzer 2020).

One limitation of existing research is the lack of attention to how political orientation moderates the UA–populism link. Although conspiracy beliefs (CM) are associated with populist attitudes regardless of ideology (Imhoff et al. 2022; Van Prooijen et al. 2015), we hypothesise that UA's influence is contingent on political orientation. Specifically, UA should be associated with populist attitudes primarily among right-wing individuals, more motivated by security and stability—core tenets of conservatism (Jost et al. 2003). Populism's promise to restore traditional values and reduce complexity may therefore be especially appealing to those on the political right who display high uncertainty avoidance.

In this study, we test these hypotheses using data from a representative Italian sample. We examine whether the relationship between CM, UA and populist attitudes is moderated by political orientation. We expect CM to be associated with populism across the spectrum, whereas UA should connect more strongly to populism among right-wing individuals. Exploring these interactions deepens understanding of the psychological foundations of populism and highlights how ideological orientation and epistemic motives jointly shape populist beliefs.

1.1 | Populism and 'the Crises'

The rise of populism is often closely linked to the experience and performance of the crisis (Laclau 2005; Moffitt 2015). Scholars argue over whether this crisis is primarily cultural or economic in nature. On the one hand, some suggest that populism represents a cultural backlash against progressive changes, particularly among those who feel their traditional values and social dominance are threatened (Inglehart and Norris 2016). Changes such as immigration and the rise of liberal values have created discomfort among more conservative sectors of society, prompting many to turn to authoritarian-populist parties that promise to halt or reverse them (Schäfer 2022).

On the other hand, a competing argument focuses on the material-economic dimension of crisis. According to this perspective, the surge in populism is a reaction to the economic instability that has plagued much of the 21st century, particularly in the Western world (Golder 2016; Santana and Rama 2018). Economic explanations often draw from the 'losers of globalization' framework (Kriesi et al. 2006), which posits that globalisation and post-industrialisation have divided society. Although some individuals possess the skills and resources to adapt to

these changes and thrive, others—unskilled workers, the unemployed, those with lower education, and those whose jobs are threatened by technological change—become economically marginalised For these 'losers,' populist parties offer an appealing alternative, as they feel abandoned by mainstream politics (Golder 2016).

Whether cultural or economic, objectively present, or subjectively perceived, crises are experienced by individuals as heightened insecurity and uncertainty. Psychological research shows that under such conditions, individuals often turn towards ideologies that promise order, stability and clarity (Jost et al. 2017) or seek belonging in groups with shared beliefs and behaviours (Hogg and Gøtzsche-Astrup 2021). In this sense, populism resonates with uncertainty-avoidant dispositions by offering simplified narratives, strong leaders, and unambiguous solutions. In times of upheaval, individuals gravitate towards charismatic leaders who promise to restore order and protect them from uncertainty (Obradović et al. 2020).

At the same time, a growing body of work highlights that 'the crises' is not merely an objective backdrop or subjective experience but also a discursive performance central to populist politics (Moffitt 2015; la De Torre 2014; Kriesi 2018; Ostiguy et al. 2020). Populist leaders exploit this insecurity, framing narratives around fear and crisis to attract disaffected voters. By presenting society as in a state of emergency, where 'the pure people' are under threat from a 'corrupt elite' or dangerous outsiders (Mudde 2004), populists justify drastic political change. Moffitt (2015) argues that the 'performance of crisis' is central to populism—not only do populists react to crises, they actively create and amplify them. By stressing urgency, they simplify complex issues, make them accessible, and present themselves as the only viable solution.

This spectacle of failure—the deliberate magnification of problems—serves multiple purposes. First, it identifies a clear enemy, pitting 'the people' against immigrants, elites, or global institutions. Second, it simplifies the political landscape, reducing nuanced issues to digestible terms, which helps craft a narrative that resonates with a broader audience. Atlast, it promotes the idea that strong, decisive leadership is the only effective response, positioning the populist leader as the people's saviour.

By framing crises this way, populists not only provide a rationale for reinstating popular sovereignty but also evoke optimism by presenting themselves as agents of constructive change. In contrast to the perceived negativity of the political establishment, populist rhetoric offers a vision of hope and restoration. This optimism, combined with belonging, helps populist leaders build a loyal base among those who feel marginalised or disconnected from the mainstream (Obradović et al. 2020).

This dual perspective—crisis as both objective condition and communicative construction—helps explain the psychological appeal of populism. On one level, crises generate genuine uncertainty and threat, fostering demand for stability. On the other, populist leaders strategically frame crises in dichotomous and moralised terms, offering narratives that both explain anxieties and promise redemptive change. In this way, populist rhetoric provides not only cognitive closure and emotional reassurance, but also collective optimism and empowerment (Obradović et al. 2020). This broader crisis framework provides important context for understanding why certain psychological dispositions—such as Uncertainty Avoidance—may render individuals more responsive to populist appeals.

1.2 | Populism and Uncertainty Avoidance

Populist leaders and movements frequently exploit social and economic crises to consolidate power, positioning themselves as the solution to society's problems. By presenting simple, decisive solutions, they reassure those experiencing insecurity and uncertainty. Support for populist parties may thus be explained as a psychological response to the instability and complexity brought about by societal change (Hogg et al. 2013). Although many ideologies, particularly right-wing ones, provide stability through clear, consistent belief systems (Jost et al. 2009), this function is especially pronounced in populist movements. Populist rhetoric offers oversimplified, polarised solutions to complex problems, effectively serving as a political heuristic.

Psychological traits related to epistemic needs—such as system justification, conspiracy beliefs, need for cognitive closure, need for cognition and uncertainty avoidance—have all been linked to populist attitudes and voting (Christner 2022; Erisen et al. 2021; Gründl and Aichholzer 2020; Kruglanski et al. 2021; Miglietta et al. 2023; Owuamalam et al. 2022; Papaioannou et al. 2023). However, only a limited number of studies have examined the relationship between Uncertainty Avoidance (UA) and populism.

UA is a personality trait reflecting an individual's cognitive motivation to manage uncertainty and ambiguity. It manifests as a preference for predictability, familiarity, and structured environments, and is typically associated with a bias towards maintaining the status quo (Gründl and Aichholzer 2020). Individuals with high UA also tend to form exclusive identities, favouring homogeneous ingroups and derogating outgroups (Hogg 2000). Consequently, UA aligns with ideological platforms that promise to reduce societal and political uncertainty.

Despite its theoretical relevance, research on UA and populism remains scarce and fragmented (Gründl and Aichholzer 2020; Owuamalam et al. 2022). For example, Owuamalam et al. (2022) explored the relationship using Brexit voting as a proxy for populism. Their findings showed UA was more strongly related to Remain than Leave voting, consistent with the idea that high-UA individuals favour the perceived stability of remaining in the EU over the uncertainty of leaving.

In contrast, Gründl and Aichholzer (2020) examined UA and support for the Populist Radical Right (PRR). Their model tested populist attitudes as mediators in the UA–PRR link. Results showed UA was negatively associated with populist attitudes in general, but this association turned positive when mediated by radical-right core attitudes, particularly authoritarianism and nativism. In other words, UA was linked to stronger adherence to these exclusionary, status-quo-oriented beliefs, which in turn predicted support for PRR parties. These mediation results suggest UA does not inherently foster

populist attitudes; rather, its association is shaped by underlying belief systems.

These seemingly contradictory findings suggest that the relationship between UA and populism is not linear but conditional. On one hand, high-UA individuals seek predictability and stability, making them less likely to support movements promoting radical change, conflict or disruption—features often associated with populism. This is supported by Owuamalam et al. (2022), where UA predicted Remain rather than Leave voting, suggesting a preference for the relative certainty of the status quo.

On the other hand, populism is not ideologically uniform. As Gründl and Aichholzer (2020) show, UA can align positively with populist attitudes when embedded in ideologies that promise restoration of order and security, such as those espoused by the PRR. In such contexts, populist appeals are not disruptive in a general sense, but are framed as protecting the nation, reasserting hierarchies, and defending the status quo against threats (e.g., immigration, globalisation elites).

We propose that the indirect association of UA with populist attitudes via ideology may reflect an elective affinity (Jost et al. 2007)—a mutually reinforcing connection between epistemic motives to reduce uncertainty, conservatism and populist attitudes.

The need to manage threat and ambiguity, central to UA, overlaps with the motivational basis of conservatism, which favours structure and resistance to change. Prior research shows conservatives are generally more sensitive to threat and loss (Adorno et al. 1950; Altemeyer 1988; Wilson 1973). This sensitivity may amplify the appeal of populist narratives that frame society in stark oppositional terms—'the pure people' against 'the corrupt elite'. For individuals high in UA, such narratives dovetail with discomfort with ambiguity, offering simplified explanations of conflict and the promise of restored clarity and order through direct popular will.

In this sense, the UA–conservatism interaction creates fertile ground for populist attitudes: conservatism supplies the threat-oriented framing, UA provides the need for certainty, and populist rhetoric integrates the two into a compelling worldview. When embedded within conservative ideologies emphasising tradition, nationalism, and law and order, populist discourse becomes especially coherent for individuals high in UA. In such contexts, populism is no longer perceived as disruptive but instead as a restorative project—one that reasserts the primacy of 'the people' over 'the elite' and that satisfies the desire for predictability.

However, this mechanism is context dependent. In the Brexit referendum studied by Owuamalam et al. (2022), the 'Remain' option represented continuity and stability, whereas 'Leave'—despite its populist appeal—signalled radical change. For high-UA individuals, supporting Remain aligned with their preference for the predictable, even if it meant rejecting populist arguments. This highlights that UA does not predict populism per se but aligns with whichever option—mainstream or radical—appears most capable of delivering certainty.

Given the scarcity and ambiguity of studies on UA and populism, this paper seeks to examine the connection more comprehensively by focusing on populist attitudes rather than only voting behaviour, in a representative Italian sample. Building on the notion of elective affinity between epistemic motives, conservatism, and populist attitudes, we expect that the need to minimise threat and ambiguity—central to conservative styles—will align with right-wing ideologies and resonate strongly with populist attitudes. Such attitudes, marked by oversimplified explanations, offer order and structure in a complex world. We thus test whether the UA–populism relationship is moderated by political orientation.

1.3 | Populism and Belief in Conspiracies

Just as crises heighten the appeal of certainty, they also increase reliance on conspiracy explanations, which offer seemingly coherent causal stories.

Conspiracy theories attempt to explain social or political events—whether past, present, or future—by attributing their causes to a group of individuals acting in secret, typically with malevolent and unfair intentions (Dentith and Orr 2018; Sunstein and Vermeule 2008). These theories are grounded in the belief that powerful elites, operating covertly, conceal significant events or actions in opposition to laws, morality or the public good. Research indicates that belief in one conspiracy theory strongly correlates with belief in others, even when the theories are mutually contradictory (Goertzel 1994; Wood et al. 2012).

This has led scholars to propose the existence of an underlying disposition or general tendency to believe in conspiracy theories, referred to in the literature by various terms such as 'conspiracy predispositions' (Strömbäck et al. 2022), 'conspiracist ideation' (Leone et al. 2018), 'conspiracy mindset' (Frenken and Imhoff 2021) or 'conspiracy mentality' (Bruder et al. 2013). These concepts refer to a general tendency to interpret major events as the result of conspiracies (Enders et al. 2021).

However, not all suspicions of hidden power are irrational. Some reflect legitimate scepticism about political actors or institutions rather than implausible narratives. Scholars in fact distinguish between 'conspiracy hypotheses', which investigate plausible plots with specific goals and actors, and 'conspiracy fantasies', which involve more far-reaching claims (Stojanov and Halberstadt 2019; Ming 2021). Recent evidence suggests these forms differ in consequences: only fantasies, not hypotheses, were associated with reduced political efficacy (Rullo and Telesca 2023). Recognising this distinction situates conspiracy beliefs in broader socio-political contexts and highlights their varied implications. It also points to the psychological functions conspiracy beliefs may serve, helping explain why people adopt them under uncertainty or threat.

Research suggests that endorsement of conspiracy theories serves specific psychological functions, fulfilling epistemic, existential, and social needs (Douglas et al. 2017, 2019). Epistemically, conspiracies simplify complex events, offering a sense of control in uncertain circumstances, thereby making the world appear more comprehensible. According

to Van Prooijen and Acker (2015), the relationship between conspiracy thinking and perceived control is bidirectional: threats to personal or societal control increase belief in conspiracy theories, whereas affirmations of control can decrease such beliefs. Conspiracy theories are also associated with a heightened need for cognitive closure—a desire for clear-cut explanations and definitive conclusions, which reduces ambiguity and uncertainty (Marchlewska et al. 2017; Webster and Kruglanski 1994). As such, belief in conspiracies and political ideology share a common psychological function: both provide cognitive frameworks that reduce ambiguity, offering a predictable and structured worldview that helps individuals navigate complex events.

Empirical evidence strongly links conspiracy beliefs with political attitudes, particularly among individuals with extreme political orientations on both the left and right (Imhoff et al. 2022; Van Prooijen et al. 2015). Some scholars suggest that conspiracy mentality may function as a broad, enduring political attitude (Imhoff and Bruder 2014), and several studies consistently show a positive relationship between belief in conspiracies and populist attitudes (Erisen et al. 2021; Papaioannou et al. 2023). Conspiracy mentality has been found to predict populist attitudes and behaviours and conceptual overlaps between these phenomena have been empirically identified (Christner 2022). Specifically, the conspiratorial mindset aligns with the core characteristics of populism, as defined by the thin-centred approach: Anti-Elitism, People-Centrism (or popular sovereignty), and a Manichaean worldview (Castanho Silva et al. 2018; Guinjoan and Galais 2023).

Populist attitudes and conspiracy beliefs often rise during periods of crisis and change (Van Prooijen and Douglas 2017). Research investigating the appeal of conspiracy theories in such contexts, particularly among individuals who feel disconnected from authorities or power structures, identifies three key motives: epistemic, existential, and social (Douglas et al. 2017). In addition to the desire for knowledge (epistemic), conspiracy theories provide a sense of security (existential) and help preserve a positive image of the in-group (social), especially when that group feels threatened. These same motives also explain the appeal of populist attitudes during crises, as populism offers simple, reassuring explanations for complex problems.

From an epistemic standpoint, both populism and conspiracy theories reduce the complexity of world events by offering straightforward explanations. Both rely on a narrative of victimhood, where blame is assigned to specific factions—whether 'the elite' or 'the conspirators'—for the disadvantaged position of ordinary people (Pirro and Taggart 2022). In terms of existential motives, both provide individuals with a sense of security through their simplistic and definitive answers to complex societal challenges. Lastly, from a social perspective, both use a Manichean worldview to distinguish between a virtuous in-group (the 'ordinary people') and a corrupt, immoral out-group (the 'elite' or conspirators), reinforcing cohesion within the in-group (Castanho Silva et al. 2018).

These shared psychological motives suggest that conspiracy theories and populist attitudes are connected, as both seek to provide individuals with certainty and security. Yet a divergence exists with Uncertainty Avoidance (UA): Although conspiracy beliefs typically advocate for change and challenge the status quo, uncertainty avoidance is associated with a desire to maintain the existing system, potentially creating tension between UA and populist attitudes (Jost et al. 2003; Papaioannou et al. 2024).

Although there is substantial evidence linking both uncertainty avoidance and conspiracy mentality to populist attitudes, this area of research remains underdeveloped. Psychological mechanisms underlying these relationships are often underexplored, and the role of UA remains ambiguous, with contradictory findings. Moreover, many studies overlook potential interactions between factors shaping populist attitudes, particularly political ideology.

1.4 | Populism in Italy

Italy has long been fertile ground for populism, from Berlusconi's rise in the 1990s to the emergence of the Five Star Movement and the current leadership of Giorgia Meloni and Matteo Salvini (Bobba and McDonnell 2015; Tarchi 2015). Economic crises, corruption, and cultural divisions have fostered disillusionment with institutions, creating opportunities for leaders who claim to defend 'the people' against a corrupt elite (Agnew and Shin 2017; D'Alimonte 2019; Donà 2022).

Within this setting, three interrelated dynamics heighten susceptibility to populist appeals. First, Italians show a paradoxical orientation towards uncertainty avoidance: Although culturally inclined to seek stability through rules, they live in a context of chronic political volatility and weak institutional enforcement, which generates persistent perceptions of unpredictability (Diamanti 2014; Hofstede et al. 2010; Putnam 1993). Second, Italy's history of opaque power struggles and denied truths—from the Ustica affair to the 'anni di piombo'—has cultivated a conspiracy mentality that attributes intentionality and agency to hidden elites (Ginsborg 2003; Mammone and Veltri 2020). Third, Italy is among the most polarised societies globally (Edelman Trust Barometer 2023), a condition that amplifies the appeal of both conspiracist explanations and populist rhetoric. Taken together, these factors interact to produce a fertile environment for populism: high uncertainty avoidance fosters a demand for order, conspiracy mentality provides cognitively simple narratives of blame, and polarisation channels both into sustained populist support.

1.5 | The Research on an Italian Sample

Taken together, Italy represents a unique yet theoretically informative context for examining the psychological underpinnings of populist attitudes. The persistent salience of populist rhetoric, combined with cultural ambivalence towards uncertainty and a historical legacy of conspiratorial suspicion, provides fertile ground for investigating how uncertainty avoidance and conspiracy mentality interact with political orientation in shaping support for populism.

Accordingly, the present study aims to clarify the relationships between uncertainty avoidance, conspiracy mentality, and populist attitudes, whereas accounting for the role of political orientation. Specifically, we hypothesise that:

H1. *Conspiracy mentality is positively associated with populist attitudes, regardless of political orientation.*

H2. *Uncertainty avoidance is positively associated with populist attitudes.*

H3. *The relationship between uncertainty avoidance and populist attitudes will be especially strong among individuals who identify with the political centre-right.*

2 | Data and Method

2.1 | Participants

A total of 1000 Italians (483 females, 517 males) participated in an online survey and received compensation for their participation. Participants were recruited through Data Contact, a private survey company that collected the data on commission. The sample was proportional to the Italian population (ISTAT 2022) by Nielsen area, gender, and age. The survey covered a broad range of topics, including attitudes towards immigrants, extremism, and feelings of political powerlessness. For the purposes of this study, we focused on variables related to populist attitudes, conspiracy mentality (CM), and uncertainty avoidance (UA).

The sample was designed to be representative of the Italian population in terms of gender, age, and geographic distribution across Nielsen areas (North-West: 27%, North-East: 19.7%, Centre: 19.9%, South and Islands: 33.4%). Participants were grouped into four age brackets: 18–30 years (15.5%), 31–45 years (21.6%), 46–60 years (28.3%) and over 60 years (34.6%); these quotas are in line with the ageing Italian population (ISTAT 2023). Participants' highest level of education included lower secondary education (11.5%), high school diploma (51.9%), bachelor's degree (12.5%), master's degree (20.8%), and PhD (3.3%). No participants were excluded from the analysis.

2.2 | Procedures and Materials

The study was conducted in February 2023 through web-based surveys. Participants were invited to share their views on key social issues. Proportional sampling was used to ensure the target population was representative of Italian citizens. The study adhered to the ethical guidelines outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki and received approval from the University's Ethics Committee (protocol 17/2021).

Participants provided informed consent and completed demographic questions, including age, gender, education level, and perceived income. Additionally, they were asked to indicate their political orientation on a scale from 1 (Extreme Left) to 6 (Extreme Right), with an option to opt out: 'Prefer not to answer', selected by 21.5% of participants.

2.3 | Populist Attitudes

Populist attitudes were assessed using four items adapted from the European Social Survey (European Social Survey 2020) and the Pew Research Center (2018). Although multidimensional instruments exist that operationalise anti-elitism, people-centrism (or sovereignty e.g., Akkerman et al. 2014), and Manichaeanism as distinct yet related components (e.g., Castanho Silva et al. 2018), measurement practices in the literature remain heterogeneous. Many studies assess these dimensions separately or emphasise only one or two of them, whereas others employ composite indices that treat populism as a unified attitudinal construct. Consistent with this latter approach—and in line with large-scale comparative surveys—we used a brief composite capturing anti-elitism and popular sovereignty, two of the most consensually validated dimensions of populist attitudes. This solution prioritises parsimony and cross-national comparability while retaining the construct's core ideational content. An exploratory factor analysis (see Supporting Information, Tables S1, S2 and S4) of polychoric correlations suggested two dimensions interpretable as anti-elitism and sovereignty, which were moderately correlated ($r = 0.59$), supporting treatment of the scale as essentially unidimensional. Reliability for the four-item scale was adequate across various estimation methods (for detailed reliability indices, see Supporting Information, Table S3; ordinal $\alpha = 0.78$, $\omega\_total = 0.72$). Participants rated agreement on a 4-point scale, and a mean score was computed ($M = 2.76$, $SD = 0.74$).

2.4 | Conspiracy Mentality

To measure conspiracy mentality, we employed the Conspiracy Mentality Questionnaire (CMQ; Bruder et al. 2013), a widely used instrument consisting of five items. Participants rated the likelihood of various conspiratorial statements (e.g., 'Politicians usually do not tell us the true motives for their decisions') on a 100-point scale (0 = 'Completely unlikely' to 100 = 'Completely likely'). The CMQ assesses a generalised conspiratorial worldview and therefore primarily captures broad 'conspiracy fantasies' rather than specific, evidence-based 'conspiracy hypotheses.' The scale was chosen for its broad applicability and high reliability ($\alpha = 0.88$, $M = 63.40$, $SD = 22.09$).

2.5 | Uncertainty Avoidance

Uncertainty Avoidance (UA) was measured using items from Wagner et al. (2018), in the English version provided by Gründl and Aichholzer (2020). Since no Italian version was available, items were translated via back-translation and rated on a six-point scale (1 = 'Strongly disagree' to 6 = 'Strongly agree').

After conducting item-level diagnostics on the six-item Italian version of Wagner et al.'s (2018) scale (Supporting Information, Table S5), we removed two reverse-coded items that loaded on a separate component and one additional weak item, resulting in a coherent three-item Uncertainty Avoidance (UA) measure. Classical reliability for this reduced scale was modest (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.53$; $M = 3.73$, $SD = 0.98$), and a reliability estimate based on a polychoric correlation matrix was

TABLE 1 | Means, standard deviations and correlations among variables in study.

Measures	Min	Max	*M*	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Populist attitudes	1	4	2.76	0.74	—	0.07*	−0.05	−0.05	0.04	0.01	0.11***	0.38***
2. Age						—	−0.14***	0.01	0.05	0.04	0.05	0.16***
3. Education	1	5	2.53	1.05			—	0.27***	−0.05	−0.07**	−0.11***	−0.10***
4. Income	1	5	2.59	0.81				—	−0.07*	0.05	0.14***	−0.04
5. Gender									—	−0.03	0.13***	0.01
6. Pol. Orient	1	6	3.66	1.21						—	0.18**	0.11**
7. UA	1	6	3.73	0.98							—	0.03
8. CM	0	100	63.41	22.1								—

Note: *$p \leq 0.05$, **$p \leq 0.01$, ***$p \leq 0.001$.

similar (ordinal $\alpha = 0.56$). To further evaluate measurement quality, we estimated a one-factor CFA treating the items as ordinal and using DWLS estimation. The model was saturated (df = 0), yielding trivially perfect fit indices (CFI = 1.00, TLI = 1.00, RMSEA = 0.00, SRMR = 0.00), as expected for a three-indicator model. The latent factor was well defined, with moderate standardised loadings (UnAv1 $\lambda = 0.51$; UnAv3 $\lambda = 0.57$; UnAv6 $\lambda = 0.56$). Although reliability was limited, the items consistently captured aversion to ambiguity and unpredictability, and UA was modelled as a latent variable in all SEM analyses to account for measurement error.

3 | Results

3.1 | Correlation Analysis

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, and correlations among the variables. Among the socio-demographic factors, only age showed a significant correlation with populist attitudes, indicating that older participants tend to exhibit stronger populist sentiments ($r = 0.07$, $p = 0.027$). Notably, political orientation, gender, income, and education level did not show significant correlations with populist attitudes. In terms of the relationships between socio-psychological factors, we observed positive correlations between populist attitudes, UA, and conspiracy mentality (CM). Specifically, higher levels of CM corresponded to increased populist attitudes ($r = 0.38$, $p < 0.001$), whereas UA also positively correlated with populist attitudes ($r = 0.11$, $p < 0.001$).

3.2 | Regression Analysis

To test our primary hypotheses, we conducted a multiple linear regression analysis with populist attitudes as the dependent variable. The model included centred scores for CM, UA, political orientation, the interaction between political orientation and UA, and the interaction between political orientation and CM, whereas controlling for age, gender, income, and education level. The overall model was significant, $R = 0.41$, $F(9, 753) = 17.44$, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.17$, $R^2\text{Adj} = 0.16$ (see Table 2).

TABLE 2 | Multiple regression predicting populist attitudes from conspiracy mentality, uncertainty avoidance, political orientation and controls.

Populist attitudes	β	Adj R^2
		0.16
Conspiracy mentality	0.39***	
Uncertainty avoidance	0.11***	
Political orientation	−0.06 ns	
Education	−0.01 ns	
Income	−0.01 ns	
Age	0.01 ns	
Gender	−0.01 ns	
CMxPolOr	−0.05 ns	
UAxPolOr	−0.09**	

Note: *$p \leq 0.05$, **$p \leq 0.01$, ***$p \leq 0.001$. Multicollinearity was not a problem as the highest VIF value was just above 1.

Interestingly, our results revealed that neither political orientation nor any of the socio-demographic variables significantly explained populist attitudes. In contrast, CM and UA exhibited a relationship with populist attitudes, confirming H1 and H2. CM demonstrated the strongest explanatory power ($\beta = 0.39$, $t = 11.56$, $p < 0.001$), followed by UA ($\beta = 0.11$, $t = 3.19$, $p < 0.001$).

A salient finding was the significant interaction effect between UA and political orientation on populist attitudes ($\beta = 0.09$, $t = 2.63$, $p < 0.01$), supporting H3. To better understand this interaction, we conducted simple slopes analysis for participants with left political orientation (−1 SD) and right political orientation (+1 SD). For individuals identifying on the left end of the political spectrum, UA was not associated with populist attitudes ($B = -0.02$, SE = 0.05, $\beta = -0.02$, $p = 0.75$). Conversely, among those on the right end of the political spectrum, UA was positively linked with populist attitudes ($B = 0.02$, SE = 0.06, $\beta = 0.24$, $p < 0.001$).

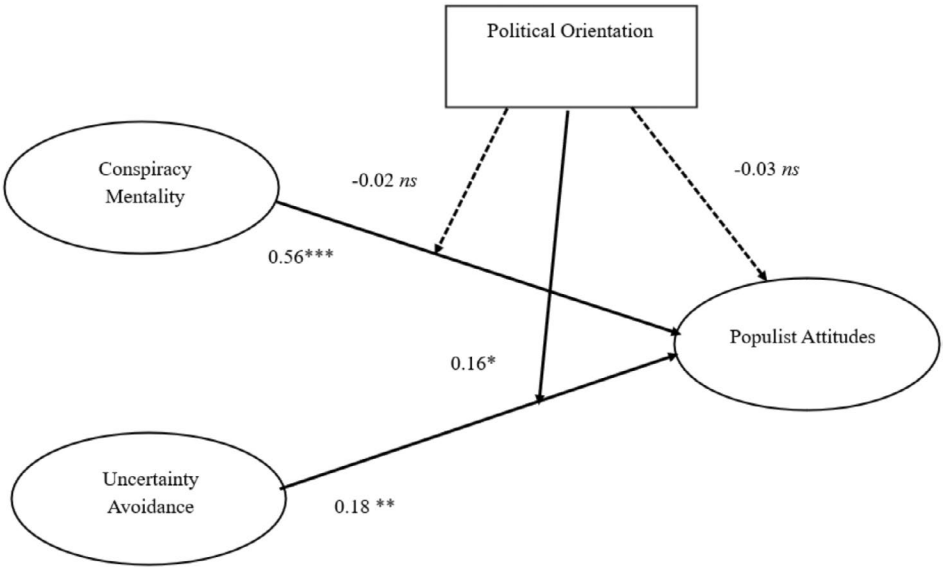

FIGURE 1 | Structural equation model illustrating the associations between Conspiracy Mentality, Uncertainty Avoidance, Political Orientation and Populist Attitudes. Standardised path coefficients are displayed ($p < 0.05$, $p < 0.01$, $p < 0.001$, ns = non-significant). Solid lines represent significant associations; dashed lines represent non-significant associations.

3.3 | Structural Equation Model

To investigate whether the relationships between Uncertainty Avoidance (UA), Conspiracy Mentality (CM), and populist attitudes depend on political orientation, we estimated a structural equation model (SEM) with latent interactions using the *semTools* package (see Figure 1). Latent constructs were defined for UA (three items), CM (five items), and Populism (four items). Prior to creating product indicators, all observed indicators and the political-orientation moderator were z-standardised, as recommended for latent interaction models to stabilise product-term scaling and facilitate interpretation. Latent interaction terms for UA × Political Orientation and CM × Political Orientation were then generated via orthogonalised product indicators. Populism was regressed on UA, CM, political orientation, their latent interactions and four covariates (gender, age, education and income).

The latent interaction models were estimated using nonparametric bootstrapping (5000 draws) to obtain robust standard errors and confidence intervals. As is common in product-indicator latent interaction models, a small proportion of bootstrap samples (4 out of 5000; 0.08%) failed to converge and 543 resulted in non-admissible solutions (e.g., negative variance estimates). These cases were automatically excluded from the computation of bootstrap confidence intervals, leaving 4996 successful replications. This proportion is well within acceptable limits for bootstrap-based inference and does not affect the stability of the reported estimates.

The model showed excellent fit to the data, $\chi^2(243) = 527.62$, $p < 0.001$, CFI = 0.947, TLI = 0.936, RMSEA = 0.039, 90% CI (0.035, 0.044), SRMR = 0.047. The latent factors were well defined by their observed indicators. All factor loadings reported below are fully standardised estimates (Std.all).

TABLE 3 | Standardised factor loadings for latent constructs in the structural equation model.

Latent construct	Indicator	Standardised loading (λ)	SE	*p*
Uncertainty Avoidance (UA)	UnAv1	0.52	—	< 0.001
	UnAv3	0.58	0.24	< 0.001
	UnAv6	0.49	0.20	< 0.001
Conspiracy Mentality (CM)	cosp1	0.67	—	< 0.001
	cosp2	0.69	0.05	< 0.001
	cosp3	0.75	0.07	< 0.001
	cosp4	0.85	0.08	< 0.001
	cosp5	0.83	0.07	< 0.001
Populism (POP)	PopESS1	0.40	—	< 0.001
	PopESS2	0.51	0.17	< 0.001
	PopPew1	0.61	0.22	< 0.001
	PopPew2	0.65	0.27	< 0.001

Note: All values represent *fully standardised loadings* (Std.all) from the confirmatory factor analysis. For identification, the first loading of each latent construct was fixed to 1.0; therefore, standard errors are not reported for those reference indicators. All loadings are statistically significant at $p < 0.001$, indicating satisfactory construct validity.

Uncertainty Avoidance items loaded significantly on the latent construct, with standardised loadings of 0.52 (UnAv1), 0.58 (UnAv3), and 0.49 (UnAv6), all $p < 0.001$.

Conspiracy Mentality items also showed strong and consistent loadings, ranging from 0.67 (cosp1) to 0.85 (cosp4), all $p < 0.001$. Populism items displayed moderate-to-strong

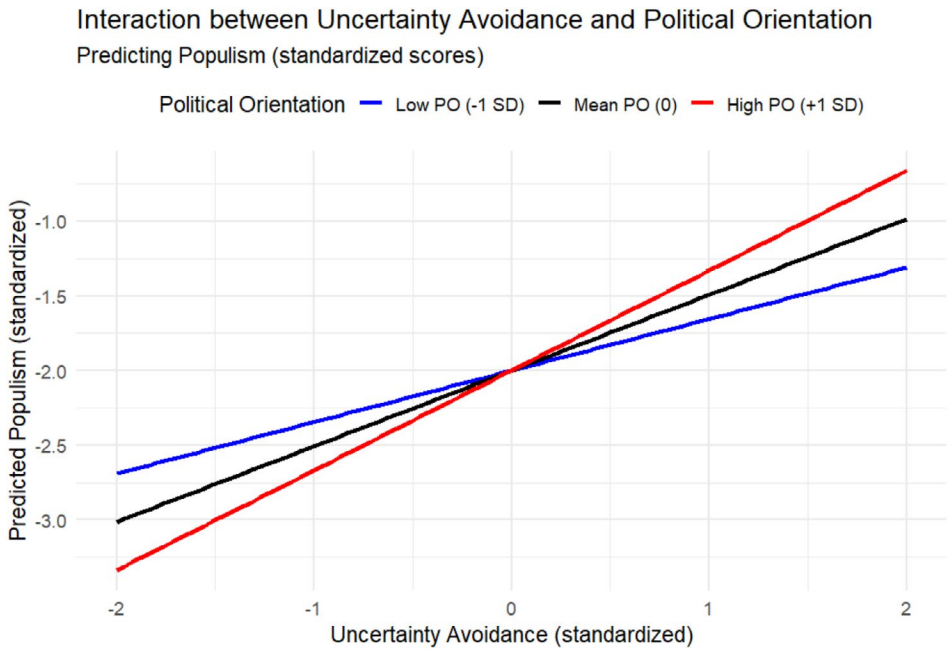

FIGURE 2 | Interaction between Uncertainty Avoidance and Political Orientation in predicting populist attitudes. Predicted populism (standardised) is shown as a function of Uncertainty Avoidance at three political orientations: low (−1 SD, blue), mean (0, black), and high (+1 SD, red). The positive link between Uncertainty Avoidance and populism was strongest on the right (red), moderate at the centre (black), and weakest on the left (blue).

loadings, from 0.40 (PopESS1) to 0.64 (Popew2), all $p < 0.001$ (see Table 3).

For identification, the first loading of each latent construct was fixed to 1.0, and thus no standard error is reported for those reference indicators. All item loadings were statistically significant, indicating satisfactory construct validity. The latent interaction terms were measured using orthogonalised product indicators (three for UA × Political Orientation and five for CM × Political Orientation), which also exhibited acceptable loadings (0.51–0.87, all $p < 0.01$).

The structural paths revealed that Conspiracy Mentality had a strong positive association with Populism ($\beta = 0.56$, $p < 0.001$), whereas Uncertainty Avoidance showed a smaller but significant positive effect ($\beta = 0.18$, $p = 0.007$). The interaction between UA and political orientation was also significant ($\beta = 0.16$, $p = 0.044$), whereas the CM × political orientation interaction was not ($\beta = -0.04$, $p = 0.46$). Simple slope analysis (see Figure 2) showed that the effect of UA on Populism was negligible among left-leaning individuals (−1 SD; $\beta = 0.02$, $p = 0.62$), moderate at the mean ($\beta = 0.18$, $p = 0.007$), and strongest among right-leaning individuals (+1 SD; $\beta = 0.35$, $p = 0.002$).

The model explained 37% of the variance in Populism ($R^2 = 0.37$). These findings suggest that while conspiracy beliefs are broadly linked to populist attitudes across the political spectrum, the influence of uncertainty avoidance is moderated by ideology—becoming more pronounced among individuals on the political right.

To evaluate the robustness of the latent interaction results, we conducted a set of sensitivity analyses. First, we confirmed the stability of the model across various specifications; Table S6 details model fit and standardised path coefficients across outlier-exclusion and alternative estimation specifications (WLSMV vs. MLR), whereas Table S7 provides the corresponding bootstrapped simple slopes at different ideology levels. Second, we compared the main SEM—where Uncertainty Avoidance (UA) was modelled as a latent construct—to an alternative specification in which UA was treated as an observed composite score. This comparison, including structural path estimates and model fit for both specifications, is detailed in Table S8 and its accompanying note. All structural paths, including the UA × political orientation interaction, remained substantively unchanged. Finally, we tested the robustness of the findings by modelling the two dimensions of populism separately; results for the Anti-Elitism model are reported in Table S9, and results for the Sovereignty/People-Centrism model are reported in Table S10.

4 | General Discussion

A growing body of empirical research has explored the intricate relationships between populist attitudes and various personality traits associated with epistemic needs—particularly those that help individuals cope with uncertainty and ambiguity. Notably, studies have examined how System Justification Beliefs, Conspiracy Mentality (CM), Need for Cognitive Closure, Need for Cognition and Uncertainty Avoidance (UA) relate to populist attitudes and voting behaviour (Christner 2022; Erisen et al. 2021; Kruglanski et al. 2021; Miglietta et al. 2023; Gründl and Aichholzer 2020; Owuamalam et al. 2022; Papaioannou et al. 2023). This literature suggests that populist ideologies often provide simplistic certainties in an uncertain world, creating fertile ground

for the growth of populist sentiments among disenchanted individuals.

Although prior research has examined the relationships between CM and populism, as well as UA and populism, our study represents the first comprehensive analysis of these psychological constructs in tandem, simultaneously assessing belief-system and cognitive components underlying populist attitudes within a representative Italian sample. We examined how CM, UA and political orientation jointly influence populist attitudes and whether these relationships vary by political alignment.

Although the effects of Uncertainty Avoidance (UA) were smaller and emerged particularly among right-leaning respondents, several checks indicate that this conditional pattern is not attributable to measurement limitations. The UA items showed adequate loadings, and a dedicated sensitivity analysis comparing the latent UA model with a parallel specification using an observed, standardised UA composite produced virtually identical structural paths. In both models, UA predicted populist attitudes only among right-leaning individuals, whereas Conspiracy Mentality remained a robust predictor across the political spectrum. These results therefore suggest that the conditional UA effect does not stem from attenuation due to measurement error but reflects a substantive psychological process whereby certainty-seeking motives translate into populist attitudes particularly when such narratives align with conservative ideological frames.

Our framework posited that both CM and UA stem from a shared epistemic need to mitigate uncertainty, though they reflect different strategies. Conspiracy theories fulfil this function by offering straightforward, albeit unfounded, explanations for complex phenomena. These explanations are often rooted in anti-elitist rhetoric, suggesting powerful elites manipulate significant events, thus reducing complexity and providing a sense of control. Such narratives mirror populist calls to disrupt the status quo and elevate popular sovereignty.

UA, in contrast, reflects a preference for predictability and familiarity, often manifesting as aversion to ambiguity and change. Although it resonates with some populist themes—such as in-group solidarity and out-group derogation (Hogg 2000)—it can also conflict with populism's disruptive tendencies. This duality led us to hypothesise that UA would predict populist stances primarily among conservatives. Right-leaning individuals, often more sensitive to threats and change, may find populist rhetoric especially appealing. A conservative worldview might also reconcile the desire for stability with populism's disruptive potential by framing change as a return to traditional values.

Populist appeals to uncertainty also gain traction when considering how populist actors construct and perform crises. As Palonen (2009) argues, polarisation is not merely a social condition but a political tool: elites actively produce crises by drawing sharp moral frontiers between 'us' and 'them', identifying enemies, and attributing blame for societal failures. Individuals high in Uncertainty Avoidance or Conspiracy Mentality may therefore be especially receptive to such crisis-performance rhetoric—UA because dramatised crises promise clarity, predictability, and restored stability, and CM because these narratives provide agentic explanations that locate responsibility in powerful and malevolent actors.

Our results confirmed this divergence. Conspiracy mentality was a robust predictor of populist attitudes across the political spectrum, consistent with prior work linking conspiracy beliefs and populist narratives (Christner 2022; Van Prooijen et al. 2022). By providing simplified causal stories and blaming powerful groups, CM mirrors populist rhetoric that pits 'the pure people' against 'corrupt elites'. Because these explanatory frames are broadly compatible with populism's core structure, CM operates as a *trans-ideological channel* into populist attitudes.

UA, in contrast, was only conditionally associated with populism. In our study, populism measured as an attitude was predicted by UA among right-leaning but not left-leaning individuals. Specifically, individuals on the political right exhibited stronger populist attitudes when high in UA, whereas this association was negligible on the left. This asymmetry is consistent with evidence that conservatives are more sensitive to threat and loss (Adorno et al. 1950; Altemeyer 1988; Wilson 1973). Right-leaning ideological frames may render populist rhetoric compatible with certainty-seeking motives, transforming populism from a disruptive force into a restorative one. A conservative worldview may therefore reconcile UA's preference for stability with populism's disruptive character by framing change as a return to traditional values, which helps explain why UA is often associated with populism when it is operationalised as support for right-wing populist parties.

Our findings resonate strongly with the Italian case, where contemporary right-wing populist leaders such as Salvini (Lega Nord) and Meloni (Fratelli d'Italia) have built electoral success by portraying international institutions, immigration, and other external forces as threats to national sovereignty and security (Gianfreda 2018). Their rhetoric casts populism as a protective and restorative project, making it especially appealing to individuals high in Uncertainty Avoidance who seek order and stability. The Italian case therefore provides valuable insights into the broader rise of populism in the West. It illustrates how populist movements can thrive in contexts of economic instability, political disillusionment, and cultural division by offering simplified solutions to complex problems and by channelling public anger and frustration into political support (Roccato et al. 2020; Rooduijn 2018).

By contrast, ideological frames that stress systemic change and redistribution may be at odds with UA's desire for predictability, thereby weakening the link between UA and populist attitudes in more left-leaning ideological contexts. These results align with Gründl and Aichholzer's (2020) finding that UA fosters populist support only in ideologically congenial narratives, though our evidence suggests this conditionality operates through direct interaction rather than mediation via radical-right beliefs.

Theoretically, these findings enrich uncertainty-reduction approaches to populism. They demonstrate that epistemic needs are not monolithic: the same broad motive (reducing uncertainty) can manifest through different psychological

strategies with distinct political effects. CM illustrates the universal appeal of explanatory closure, fueling populism across ideological lines. UA illustrates the ideological contingency of certainty-seeking motives, which strengthens populism only when combined with conservative and right-leaning ideological frames. This distinction moves beyond treating uncertainty reduction as a uniform driver of populism and highlights the importance of examining how different uncertainty-management strategies are mobilised by specific ideological contexts. To further rule out alternative ideological patterns, we conducted a quadratic interaction analysis; the results provided no evidence for a U-shaped moderation for either CM or UA, confirming the linear nature of the observed effects (see Supporting Information, Table S11, and Figures S1 and S2).

Our results also shed light on apparent contradictions in the literature. For instance, Owuamalam et al. (2022) found that high-UA individuals in the UK were more likely to support Remain in the Brexit referendum—the status quo option. In that context, leaving the EU represented systemic disruption and uncertainty, making UA align with the non-populist stance. By contrast, in contemporary Italy—under a conservative government led by Fratelli d'Italia—right-wing populist narratives are framed as efforts to 'take back control' of national borders, cultural identity, and political sovereignty. For high-UA individuals, these narratives may not evoke disruption but promise restored order. This comparison underscores the context dependence of UA's political effects.

By emphasising this conditionality, our study shifts the conversation from 'does Uncertainty Avoidance predict populism?' to 'under what ideological conditions does Uncertainty Avoidance align with populist attitudes?'—highlighting the central role of ideological framing in mobilising epistemic motives for political ends.

In conclusion, our findings highlight that although both Conspiracy Mentality (CM) and Uncertainty Avoidance (UA) reflect attempts to cope with uncertainty, they connect to populist attitudes in fundamentally different ways. CM provides a universal cognitive channel into populism: by offering simplified and agentic narratives, it aligns seamlessly with populist rhetoric across the political spectrum. UA, in contrast, operates as a conditional channel that depends on ideological framing. It strengthens populist attitudes primarily among right-leaning individuals, for whom uncertainty reduction is key and for whom populism is cast as a project of protection and restoration rather than disruption. This distinction underscores that epistemic needs should not be treated as a single, uniform driver of populism. Instead, theories of populism must account for the diverse psychological strategies through which individuals seek to reduce uncertainty, and for the ideological contexts that determine whether those strategies resonate with populist appeals.

By clarifying these differential relationships, our study contributes to the epistemology of populism. Understanding how psychological constructs interact with ideology enhances comprehension of populism's appeal in times of uncertainty and change. Ultimately, addressing these sentiments requires a nuanced approach that accounts for the multiple psychological factors linked with variation in populist attitudes.

5 | Conclusions and Limitations

Prior research has linked populism to psychological traits related to uncertainty—such as conspiracy beliefs, system justification and need for closure (Christner 2022; Erisen et al. 2021; Kruglanski et al. 2021; Miglietta et al. 2023; Gründl and Aichholzer 2020; Owuamalam et al. 2022; Papaioannou et al. 2023)—however, most work has focused on far-right populism, often equating it with radical-right ideologies or operationalising it through vote choice. Although informative, such approaches risk overlooking how populist attitudes manifest across the broader political spectrum. By conceptualising populism as an attitude rather than a voting outcome, our study disentangles it from specific ideological affiliations and provides a more nuanced account of its psychological underpinnings.

Building on these considerations, this study is, to our knowledge, the first to examine Uncertainty Avoidance (UA) and Conspiracy Mentality (CM) simultaneously as socio-psychological factors associated with populist attitudes. Both constructs capture psychological needs for certainty and control that shape political orientations, but they operate in distinct ways. CM was consistently associated with populist attitudes across the ideological spectrum, suggesting that conspiracy beliefs provide cognitive comfort by offering simplified explanations of complex realities. UA, in contrast, was only conditionally associated with populism—emerging primarily among right-leaning individuals whose heightened sensitivity to threat and loss resonates with threat-oriented populist narratives. This asymmetry aligns with prior evidence that conservatives are more responsive to threat and uncertainty (Adorno et al. 1950; Altemeyer 1988; Wilson 1973) and with Gründl and Aichholzer's (2020) finding that UA fosters support for populism when embedded in ideologically congenial frames. Our results extend this literature by showing that the effect arises through direct interactions between UA and political orientation rather than through mediation by radical-right beliefs.

Taken together, these findings shed light on the psychological foundations of populism. Both UA and CM reflect common motivational processes aimed at reducing uncertainty: CM through explanatory narratives that impose order on complexity, and UA through a broader aversion to instability that aligns especially with conservative worldviews. Populist ideologies capitalise on these uncertainty-related motivations by framing politics in stark dichotomies ('the people vs. the elite,' 'friends vs. foes', 'nationals vs. immigrants'). Such rhetoric reduces the discomfort of ambiguity by offering simple and emotionally resonant narratives, but it also amplifies social fragmentation and political cynicism. Understanding when and for whom these appeals resonate is therefore crucial to explaining populism's broad yet asymmetrical appeal across the ideological spectrum.

Although our study provides valuable insights into the links between Conspiracy Mentality (CM), Uncertainty Avoidance (UA) and populist attitudes, several limitations should be

acknowledged. First, while our sample was representative of the Italian population, the findings are embedded in a specific cultural and political context, which constrains their generalisability to other settings. A second limitation concerns the measurement of Uncertainty Avoidance (UA). The Italian back-translated six-item version of Wagner et al.'s (2018) scale displayed poor internal consistency, primarily because two reverse-coded items loaded on a separate novelty-seeking factor and one additional item performed weakly. After their removal, the remaining three items—reflecting discomfort with unfamiliar people, unpredictable situations and controversial discussions—yielded a more coherent but still modestly reliable measure ($\alpha = 0.53$). We recognise this as a substantial limitation that constrains the precision of our assessment of UA. Nevertheless, the retained items capture a consistent pattern of aversiveness towards ambiguity and unpredictability, which constitutes the theoretical core of UA and directly relates to the epistemic need for certainty central to our framework. Moreover, by modelling UA as a latent construct within the SEM framework, we explicitly accounted for measurement error. Importantly, the pattern of associations involving UA was conceptually coherent and replicated across different analytical approaches, suggesting that the observed effects reflect a meaningful theoretical signal rather than statistical artefact. Still, future research should employ more comprehensive and psychometrically refined instruments—ideally validated in the Italian context—to confirm and extend these preliminary findings.

Third, the cross-sectional design limits causal inference. Although our findings suggest that UA interacts with political orientation to shape populist attitudes, longitudinal or experimental approaches (e.g., manipulating uncertainty) are needed to establish causal mechanisms. Relatedly, we explored the possibility—suggested in prior work (Pilch et al. 2023)—that UA may act as an antecedent of CM, but this link was not supported in our data (for the full mediation model and bootstrapped estimates, see Supporting Information, Table S12) and evidence in the literature remains mixed (e.g., Stojanov et al. 2020). The lack of association between uncertainty avoidance and conspiracy mentality may stem from both methodological and contextual factors. First, the operationalisation of UA may not have captured the specific psychological processes tied to conspiracy thinking, which involves suspicion, hidden-motive attributions, and generalised distrust (Douglas et al. 2017).

This issue may be amplified in the Italian context, where recent political dynamics—characterised by fluctuating institutional trust, populist rhetoric, and fragmented media—may drive conspiracy beliefs through mechanisms unrelated to personal discomfort with uncertainty. For example, factors such as institutional distrust, political cynicism, or exposure to partisan narratives may play more central roles, overshadowing dispositional contributions like UA (Papaioannou et al. 2023). Moreover, evidence from Szebeni et al. (2023) suggests that links between uncertainty-related dispositions and conspiracy beliefs can vary sharply by political orientation and government satisfaction, implying potential suppression or moderation effects. Similar dynamics in Italy may mask subgroup-specific associations when examined at the aggregate level. Overall, these considerations suggest that the UA–conspiracy link is likely context-dependent and nonlinear, underscoring the need for person-centered analyses and more granular measures of uncertainty-related constructs in future research.

Additionally, a substantial number of respondents ($N = 215$) did not disclose their ideological position and were therefore not included in the main analysis. Additional analyses (reported in the Supporting Information, Section S4. Subgroup and Descriptive Analyses) treating abstainers as a separate group showed they emerged as a psychologically distinct subgroup, reporting the highest levels of uncertainty avoidance, conspiracy mentality, and populist attitudes, with patterns resembling those of right-leaning respondents. Descriptive statistics for these subgroups are provided in Table S13, and the corresponding separate regression models for each group are reported in Table S14. This suggests that political disengagement and institutional distrust may themselves constitute fertile ground for populist orientations. Future research should therefore examine more closely the psychological profiles of politically unaffiliated citizens.

A further limitation concerns the ideological composition of our sample. Although representative in terms of age, gender, and geographical area, the sample was not fully representative with respect to political orientation, with political centrists being underrepresented. While this imbalance does not undermine the internal validity of the latent interaction—whose shape remained stable across sensitivity analyses—it does constrain the generalisability of our findings. In particular, estimates of the UA × political orientation effect around the ideological centre may be less precise, even though the overall pattern (i.e., the strengthening of the UA–populism association towards the political right) appears theoretically and empirically robust. Future research employing samples with a more balanced ideological distribution would help clarify how Uncertainty Avoidance operates specifically among political moderates.

Finally, the explanatory power of our models was modest. The observed-variable regression explained 17% of the variance in populist attitudes, and several effects—particularly for UA—were relatively small. Latent variable modelling improved predictive power substantially ($R^2 = 0.37$), underscoring the value of accounting for measurement error. Yet, these results also highlight that psychological dispositions are only one part of a broader constellation of factors—economic, institutional, and cultural—that shape populist attitudes.

Despite its limitations, this study offers important insights into the psychological foundations of populism. Overall, our results indicate that populism's appeal varies across ideological lines, with right-leaning individuals particularly susceptible to threat-oriented populist narratives, while conspiratorial explanations resonate more broadly across the ideological spectrum.

In conclusion, we suggest that although both CM and UA reflect efforts to cope with uncertainty, they are linked to populist attitudes in distinct ways. CM functions as a universal route into populism, its simplified and agentic explanations broadly aligning with populist rhetoric. UA, in contrast, operates conditionally, reinforcing populism primarily among right-leaning individuals, for whom populism is framed as a protective and

restorative project. This distinction underscores that epistemic needs are not a uniform driver of populism, but diverse strategies shaped by ideology. Recognising how populist rhetoric exploits these vulnerabilities is vital, as it helps to explain the cycle of threat, cynicism, and populist support. Addressing these dynamics therefore represents a crucial step towards fostering resilience against manipulative appeals and promoting a more informed and engaged electorate.

In this sense, our findings highlight the broader relevance of conspiracy mentality, uncertainty avoidance, and populist attitudes in contemporary political dynamics, pointing not only to theoretical implications but also to practical ones. Interventions such as educational workshops that train citizens to critically evaluate political information, media literacy campaigns that expose common features of conspiratorial or populist messaging, and community programs that foster dialogue across ideological divides may help reduce susceptibility to such narratives. By equipping individuals with tools to navigate uncertainty and critically assess political claims, these initiatives can strengthen democratic resilience and enhance the societal impact of our findings.

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Ethics Statement

The study adhered to the ethical guidelines outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki and received approval from the University's Ethics Committee (protocol 17/2021).

Consent

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section. **Data S1:** casp70228-sup-0001-Supinfo.docx.