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What is in populist voters' minds? An investigation of the social psychological correlates of populist attitudes among Italian voters

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While much research in the past decade has sought to define populism as a novel political phenomenon and to identify the institutional, political, and economic conditions associated with its electoral success, we still know little about the individual-level differences linked to these attitudes. Findings from research on political communication, voting decisions, and attitudes toward political issues suggest that populist voters may differ from other voters not only in their values, beliefs, and worldviews, but also in how they understand political facts and process information from political campaigns. Our paper aims to shed light on the relationship between populist attitudes and specific individual features in terms of personality and cognitive tendencies. We analyzed data from 525 Italian participants who completed a survey on political opinions and information. Populist attitudes were measured using an 11-item scale. We also measured political orientation and attitudes toward several current political issues, as well as a range of individual psychological and psychosocial characteristics, namely: personality traits, need for cognition, and conspiracy mentality. Results showed a positive association between populist attitudes and the traits of agreeableness and neuroticism, as well as with conspiracy mentality. Populist attitudes were instead negatively associated with need for cognition. Participants with stronger populist attitudes were less able to distinguish between real and fake news, and specifically less likely to detect fake news. The discussion focuses on how a better understanding of the social psychological and cognitive profile of people with populist attitudes can help in understanding and predicting some dynamics of our democratic system.

KEYWORDS

bias, conspiracy theories, misinformation, personality, populism

1 Introduction

In recent years, several studies have investigated the global rise of populism as a political movement, and its success among voters. Most research on populism have focused on macro-level factors, developing different theories on how recent changes in the political, economic, social and cultural landscape might explain corresponding shifts in voters' attitudes and political orientations. The economic anxiety hypothesis (Hernández and Kriesi, 2016; Rooduijn and Burgoon, 2018) proposed a link between the global financial crises of 2008–2015 and a rise in perceived economic insecurity and dissatisfaction with mainstream political parties' response to such crises (Rooduijn, 2018). These two factors may have in turn made voters particularly receptive to populist narratives and political platforms, both on the right and the left of the political spectrum (Algan et al., 2017). Other authors have developed the cultural backlash hypothesis (Inglehart and Norris, 2016), which instead linked voters' turn to populist parties and movements with the perception of a changing cultural norms (Eatwell and Goodwin, 2018; Norris and Inglehart, 2019) due to secularization, multiculturalism, and immigration (Marchlewska et al., 2018; Stephan et al., 2016).

Both approaches remain valid and have been partially supported by empirical findings in recent years (see Jetten and Mols, 2021, for a review). However, a third option is also worth exploring, focusing on micro-level factors, specifically voters' individual characteristics associated with support for populist movements and voting intention. A substantial literature in political psychology has investigated how individual psychological features and personality traits (i.e., relatively stable individual differences in psychological needs, motives, and orientations) can be used to predict and explain differences in political orientation on the left-right dimension (Carney et al., 2008; Gerber et al., 2011; Sibley et al., 2012). Despite the difficulty of pinpointing populist positions on the traditional political axis, some studies have identified certain personality characteristics that appear prevalent among populist voters (Erisen et al., 2021; Fatke, 2019). Furthermore, studies in political communication suggest that these voters differ from others not only in the content of their beliefs personal orientations, and preferences, but also in how they process political information, evaluate leaders, and interpret campaign content (Bertolotti et al., 2021; Gerbaudo et al., 2023; Merkley, 2020). This is reflected in an association between populism and conspiratorial ideation (Pellegrini et al., 2024), as well as between populism and the consumption and diffusion of unreliable news contents (Schulz et al., 2020).

This study aims to explore the psychological underpinnings of populist attitudes, focusing on two key areas in which individuals with more populist attitudes might differ from other voters. The first area pertains to fundamental differences in personality (using the Big Five model of personality, Costa and McCrae, 1992) and cognitive styles, in particular the need for cognition (Petty et al., 2009) and conspiracy mentality (Bruder et al., 2013; Imhoff et al., 2022). The second area instead relates to differences in information processing, as reflected by the potential association between populist attitudes and susceptibility to misinformation, or a reduced ability to detect real and fake news, as a form of motivated reasoning (Guay and Johnston, 2022; Kahan, 2016). Together, findings from the investigation of these two areas could contribute to the definition of the psychological profile of populist voters.

1.1 Populist attitudes

Defining populism has been a central issue in the recent academic debate. An early definition by Mudde (2007, p.23) characterized populism as "a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' vs. 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* of the people". As such, populism has been associated with cultural and economic positions related both to the traditional right (e.g., nativism) and the traditional left (e.g., socialism), and populist movement have positioned themselves across the political spectrum, and sometimes outside it (Hawkins, 2009; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013; Rooduijn et al., 2014). Nevertheless, there is a general agreement that populist attitudes can be measured independently of their "host ideology", thereby identifying the beliefs, emotions and behavioral orientations that distinguish populist voters from the supporters of parties along the traditional political spectrum (Akkerman et al., 2014). Measures of populist attitudes have been used in several studies across numerous countries (see Geurkink et al., 2020; Castanho Silva et al., 2020 for reviews).

1.2 Social psychological correlates of populist attitudes

Scholarly work has sought to explain the prevalence of populist attitudes by examining individual psychological differences among voters (Forgas et al., 2021). Early studies focused on the role of personality traits (e.g., Aichholzer and Zandonella, 2016; Van Assche et al., 2018, 2019), finding a link between agreeableness and voting for populist parties (Bakker et al., 2016). Further cross-national research, however, indicated that this association may depend on the national context (Fatke, 2019). Favoring the in-group (but not the out-group, represented by minorities, immigrants, or malicious elites) might be seen by voters with high agreeableness as a socially and politically acceptable way of expressing their personal dispositions toward others. In a study on Spanish voters, Rico et al. (2017) also found that high levels of populist attitudes were associated with high sensitivity to some negative emotion (i.e., anger but not fear), which is in turn associated with neuroticism. This could again be reflected by populist voters' negative views of immigrants, asylum seekers, and minorities (Akkerman, 2012), often presented (by populist parties and leaders themselves) as a threat to the people.

Need for cognition refers to the tendency to engage in and enjoy thinking, as opposed to avoiding cognitively demanding tasks. Those who display a high need for cognition are consistently interested in learning new things, are comfortable with complex problems, willing change their opinions when presented with persuasive messages, and are less likely to engage in heuristic processing (Cacioppo and Petty, 1982; Kosic et al., 2004). Moreover, individuals found to have a high need for cognition are more likely to endorse complex explanations of human behavior, including abstract and external causes of behavior). Despite being more complex and nuanced, these individuals' opinions also tend to be stronger, and thus more resistant to counterarguments (Haugtvedt et al., 1992). Conversely, those who score low on need for cognition prefer to think superficially about information, considering fewer dimensions and forming judgments through superficial evaluation, without much effort. In attitude formation, individuals with a high need for cognition are more likely to process persuasive messages in arguments, while those low in need for cognition are more likely to adopt low-effort strategies, such as heuristics (Cacioppo et al., 1996). People with low need for cognition are therefore more likely to endorse a Manichean outlook, the simplistic worldview that divides good and evil, which is typical of populist attitudes

Conspiracy mentality is defined as "the general propensity to subscribe to theories blaming a conspiracy of ill-intending individuals or groups for important societal phenomena" (Bruder et al., 2013, p. 2), and has been conceptualized as a predisposition to engage in and endorse specific conspiracy theories (Imhoff et al., 2022). Conspiracy theories are narratives and explanations of political or historical events that contradict those commonly accepted by the political establishment, and argue for the existence of vast and powerful machinations that control social, political, and economic events to oppress the population, or parts of it (Douglas et al., 2017). Specific conspiracist beliefs, as well as the general worldview underlying them, share several elements with central themes of populism, such as Manichaeism (Hawkins, 2009), political and social distrust (Goertzel, 1994), and the tendency to seek and endorse simple explanations for complex social events to justify the status of their own in-group. There is also growing evidence that populist movements and leaders actively use conspiracist narratives to gain support and use their platforms to spread conspiracy theories into the mainstream public discourse (Castanho Silva et al., 2017; Hameleers, 2020; Van Prooijen, 2019). Past research has shown that individuals with a high conspiracy mentality are considerably more likely than average to distrust institutional and mainstream media sources and, conversely, to believe in fake news disseminated online (Mancosu et al., 2021; Swami et al., 2017).

To test the hypothesis that populist attitudes are associated with individual differences in these social psychological dimensions, we first adopted a simple exploratory and correlational approach. In a survey of Italian adults of voting age, we measured the prevalence and strength of populist attitudes, as well as several other relevant social psychological dimensions, ranging from personality traits to need for cognition and conspiracy mentality. We then investigated the correlations between populist attitudes and individual socio-demographic and psychological characteristics, focusing on the social psychological variables most likely to serve as a "bridge" between cognitive and social psychological differences and political attitudes.

1.3 Populist attitudes, biased information processing, and misinformation

As the rise of populist attitudes across several countries in recent years has coincided with a sharp increase in the spread of online misinformation (Guess et al., 2019), several studies investigated the relationship between the two phenomena. It has been argued that while the diffusion of inaccurate, misleading and sometimes fraudulent content online may have contributed to the popularity and electoral success of populist leaders and movements (D'Alimonte, 2019; Zimmermann and Kohring, 2020), but it may have not equally affected the whole electorate, as susceptibility to misinformation appears to be linked with certain individual characteristics, many of which are known to be associated with populist attitudes. While past research has shown some empirical evidence of the former mechanism, that is the exposure to misinformation leading to greater support for populist positions (see Cantarella et al., 2023 for a quasi-experimental study on the Italian case), we will focus on the latter, that is the cognitive and motivational mechanisms that may make individuals less likely to detect misinformation, and subsequently incorporate it in their political attitudes and opinions.

Research on the link between conspiracist beliefs, mentality, and populist attitudes has provided insight into the tendency of populist voters to deviate from strictly objective and fact-based evaluations in favor of simplistic narratives consistent with prior beliefs. Although this phenomenon is present among voters across the political spectrum, and particularly at its extremes (Flynn et al., 2017; Kahan, 2016; Leeper and Slothuus, 2014; Lodge and Taber, 2013), right-wing and populist voters may be more prone to this type of biased information processing (Federico and Malka, 2018; Jost et al., 2003; Van Kessel et al., 2020). However, only a few studies have empirically tested this association. One study on Italian voters' hindsight bias (Bertolotti et al., 2021) found that participants with stronger populist attitudes were more likely to retrospectively exaggerate the foreseeability of electoral results that aligned with their wishes, and conversely to underplay it when results deviated from their wishes. This was interpreted both as a form of motivated reasoning, to emphasize the merit of their electoral success (Bertolotti and Catellani, 2021), and as a general tendency to see the world as simple, orderly, and predictable. Another study on American voters (Nai and Maier, 2024) found that populist attitudes were associated with higher likelihood of affective polarization (Iyengar and Krupenkin, 2018) after exposure to negative information about candidates, indicating a difference in the way populist voters process political information when forming their opinions and, ultimately, making their voting decisions. An experimental study by Bertolotti et al. (2024) further confirmed this hypothesis, showing that participants with stronger populist attitudes tended to use gender-normative standards when evaluating political candidates (e.g., applying higher standards for female candidates' morality and male candidates' competence than vice-versa) to a greater extent than participants with weaker populist attitudes.

To test the hypothesis that populist attitudes are not only the political manifestation of deeply rooted individual characteristics (i.e., personality dimensions and cognitive styles), but also reflect a distinctive way of approaching political matters and information, we employed a second, more experimental approach. We introduced participants to a relatively new but polarizing issue on the political agenda (i.e., climate change, Cole et al., 2025; Falkenberg et al., 2022), measured their pre-existing attitudes toward it, and then asked them to perform a mock headline sorting task (Pennycook and Rand, 2019; Ross et al., 2021), distinguishing real news from fake news among a set of randomized stimuli. We then analyzed whether participants' performance in this task was associated with their endorsement of populist attitudes, their initial attitudes on the topic, or an interaction between the two.

2 Methods

2.1 Participants

Participants were 525 volunteers recruited by students of the Catholic University of Milan, Italy. There were more females (N = 305, 58.1%) than males (N = 213, 40.6%), with a small number of participants reporting as non-binary (N = 4) or refusing to indicate their gender (N = 3). The average age was M = 41.33 (SD = 16.83), ranging from 18 to 98. Most participants had higher levels of education, reporting either a Bachelor (20.6%) or Master (20.0%) degree, or other forms of higher education (PhD or other, 6.7%). An additional 10.5% were currently attending university, whereas the remaining participants had either a secondary school degree (35.5%) or a middle school degree (6.7%). A plurality of participants were employees (45.5%), with 15.2% reporting as self-employed, 5.0% as homemakers, 6.1% as pensioners, and 23.8% as students (3.8% as part-time workers). Finally, 4.2% reported being unemployed.

2.2 Procedure

Participants were invited to join an online study administered through the proprietary mobile app PsyMe (Catellani et al., 2023). Upon entering a study-specific code, participants were prompted to complete an initial questionnaire containing most of the measures of the social psychological variables analyzed in the study (see below). After completing the questionnaire, participants were recontacted 2 days later, to complete a second questionnaire. This second part included a fake news recognition task adapted from Bertolotti and Catellani (2023), in which participants were presented, on the same app, with six mock news headlines on the topic of climate change. This topic was chosen for its relevance and the known prevalence of online misinformation in this domain (Lewandowsky, 2021), which allowed us to design stimulus headlines that were not necessarily tied to the specific national context or the time of data collection, as would have been the case with political, economic, or local news. It should be noted that the choice of a single topic came at the expense of full generalizability to other domains of online misinformation. After reading each headline (Figure 1), participants were asked to indicate whether they thought the headline was real or fake news. They then proceeded to the following sections of the questionnaire, including their political orientation (see the Measures section below). After completing this final set of measures, participants were thanked and debriefed on the app.

2.3 Measures

2.3.1 Personality traits

The Big Five personality traits were measured using an adapted version of the TIPI questionnaire (Gosling et al., 2003), which asked participants to report their agreement with 10 self-description statements (e.g., "I am an extroverted, enthusiastic person", "I am a hypercritical, litigious person", etc.) on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 ("completely disagree") to 7 ("completely agree"). Each trait was measured by 2 items, one with positive and one with negative adjectives. Five average scores of Extraversion, Agreeableness, Neuroticism, Conscientiousness, and Openness were computed, averaging the respective two items (after reversing the negatively formulated ones).

2.3.2 Need for cognition

Participants' need for cognition was measured using an Italian adaptation of the NFC scale (Aquino et al., 2018), which included 6 items (e.g., "I prefer complex problems to simple ones"). Participants were asked to rate to what extent each statement was representative of themselves, on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 ("not representative at all") to 7 ("very representative"). A single average need for cognition index was later computed ($\alpha = 0.733$).

2.3.3 Conspiracy mentality

Participants were asked their agreement with 5 statements, adapted from the conspiracy mentality scale (Bruder et al., 2013), using a scale from 1 ("Completely disagree") to 7 ("Completely agree"). The item scores were later averaged into a single conspiracy mentality index ($\alpha = 0.798$).

2.3.4 Populist attitudes

A set of 11 items were used to measure participants' populist attitudes. The first eight items were based on the Akkerman et al. (2014) scale and included statements such as: "Politicians must follow the citizens' will"; "Citizens and not politicians should take the most important political decisions"; "I would prefer being represented by a common person rather than by a professional politician". Three additional statements, derived from another commonly used measure of populist attitudes (Elchardus and Spruyt, 2016) were added: "Politicians speak too much and do too little"; "Those in power should spend less time behind their desks, and more time among the ordinary people", "People who have studied for a long time and have many diplomas do not really know what makes the world go round". Participants were asked to report their agreement with each statement on a scale ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 7 (Strongly agree). A single populist attitudes index was then computed ($\alpha = 0.845$).

2.3.5 Political orientation

Participants indicated their political orientation on a 10-point scale ranging from left (1) to right (10). In addition, a "none of the above" (11) option was available.

2.3.6 Belief in climate change

Participants' beliefs about climate change were measured using a single item that is frequently used in research on this topic (Leiserowitz et al., 2010; ESS, 2016): "As far as you know, do you personally believe that the global climate is changing?". Answers were given on a 7-point scale from 1 ("Not at all") to 7 ("Very much").

Towards a mass extinction A recent study shows that by the end of the century, more than one in ten animal species are at risk of extinction.	**The greenhouse effect: oil companies knew it all along** As early as the 1980s, oil and gas companies were aware of the negative effects of their activities on the environment.	**Global warming: solar cycles are an irrelevant factor** Data shows that the current increase in temperatures cannot be explained only as an effect of the influence of solar cycles.
Recent floods show that the danger of drought was just propaganda The intense rains of the second half of the year unmask the false alarmism about climate change.	**Climate: the forecast models were wrong** Past predictions by climate experts were based on incorrect parameters, and do not correspond to the real data.	**Global average temperatures in line with recent decades** The alleged increase in temperatures is only a subjective perception, not supported by the data.

FIGURE 1
Real news (upper row) and fake news (bottom row) headlines presented to participants (English translation).

2.3.7 News recognition

After reading each headline, participants were asked whether they thought it was true or fake. The response options were "Real" or "Fake". A single news recognition index was later computed, assigning 1 point to fake news correctly recognized as fake and real news correctly recognized as real, and 0 points to incorrectly identified headlines. The news recognition index consequently ranged from 0 to 6, Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.683$. Separate indexes for the correct recognition of real news ($\alpha = 0.703$) and fake news ($\alpha = 0.742$) were also computed. Importantly, since the headlines were all on a single specific topic (climate change), the news recognition scores we recorded should be taken as a measure of participants' ability to discern real and fake news on that specific topic, which may or may not extend to other information domains. This is a known limitation of several measures of misinformation susceptibility (see Roozenbeek et al., 2022), which is being progressively addressed by the development of psychometrically validated scales (e.g., the MIST scale, Maertens et al., 2024). At the time of data collection for this study, however, no robust measure of cross-domain susceptibility to misinformation was available in Italian. Another relevant limitation of our measure was that it did not include corollary measures of participants' knowledge of or prior exposure to the content the headlines referred to. It is therefore possible that some participants had already read similar news (both real and fake), and their responses were in part affected by such prior knowledge.

2.4 Analytic strategy

We tested our hypotheses using three main analytical strategies.

We examined the associations between populist attitudes and sociodemographic and social psychological variables through standard correlational analyses (Pearson's correlations for continuous variables, t-tests or ANOVAs for categorical ones). The analyses were conducted with SPSS (version 30.0).

To test the associations between the Big Five personality traits and populist attitudes, we entered each trait index as a predictor in the following multiple linear regression model:

$$\begin{aligned} y_{\text{PopulistAttitudes}} = &\ \beta_{\text{Extraversion}} + \beta_{\text{Agreeableness}} + \beta_{\text{Conscientiousness}} \\ &+ \beta_{\text{Neuroticism}} + \beta_{\text{Openness}} + \beta_{\text{Age}} + \beta_{\text{Gender}} \\ &+ \beta_{\text{Education}} + \varepsilon_{\text{Error}} \end{aligned}$$

This approach reflected the underlying assumption that personality traits contribute jointly to defining one's personality, which in turn may make the endorsement of political attitudes, including populist attitudes, more or less likely.

For the association between populist attitudes and susceptibility to misinformation, we also used a multiple linear regression model, but in this case the populist attitudes index was entered not as the dependent variable, but as a predictor and moderator of the effect of pre-existing beliefs on the object of the news headlines presented to participants (i.e., climate change). Furthermore, to account for possible non-linear effects of populist attitudes and belief in climate change, we also included in the model the respective quadratic terms and the interaction between them. The regression model was as follows, tested on three dependent variables: discernment between real and fake news, fake news detection and real news detection:

$$\begin{aligned} y_{\text{NewsRecognition}} = &\ \beta_{\text{PopulistAttitudes}} + \beta_{\text{ClimateChangeBelief}} + \beta_{\text{Interaction}} \\ &+ \beta_{\text{PopulistAttitudes}^2} + \beta_{\text{ClimateChangeBelief}^2} + \beta_{\text{Interaction}^2} \\ &+ \beta_{\text{Age}} + \beta_{\text{Gender}} + \beta_{\text{Education}} + \varepsilon_{\text{Error}} \end{aligned}$$

This approach reflected the idea that the endorsement of populist attitudes may influence how individuals process new information, making them more or less inclined to accept as true (or reject as false) pieces of new information (i.e., the headline stimuli) that align or do not align with their pre-existing beliefs. The regression analyses were conducted using Jamovi (version 2.7.6) and the GAMLj3 module (Gallucci, 2019). Additional model fit statistics and parametric assumption tests are reported in the results.

3 Results

3.1 Populist attitudes and their correlates

Participants had, on average, intermediate levels of populist attitudes, $M = 4.33$, $SD = 1.02$. Age was positively correlated with populist attitudes, $r(519) = 0.123$, $p = 0.005$, and negatively correlated with education, $r(520) = -0.134$, $p = 0.002$. As for gender differences, females ($M = 4.44$, $SD = 0.95$) had on average more populist attitudes than males ($M = 4.17$, $SD = 1.07$), $t(514)$ 3.04, $p = 0.003$. Some differences among professions also emerged, $F(7,515) = 3.00$, $p = 0.004$, as students reported the least populist attitudes ($M = 3.99$, $SD = 0.79$), whereas homemakers ($M = 4.64$, $SD = 0.81$) and unemployed participants ($M = 4.56$, $SD = 1.47$) reported the most populist attitudes. Employees ($M = 4.43$, $SD = 0.99$), self-employed ($M = 4.32$, $SD = 1.11$), and pensioner participants ($M = 4.35$, $SD = 1.21$) reported intermediate scores, close to the total average. Zero-order correlations among populist attitudes and all the other main variables are reported in Table 1.

Only a weak and non-significant correlation between populist attitudes and political orientation emerged, $r(459) = 0.079$, $p = 0.091$, indicating slightly more populist attitudes among right-wing participants than left-wing participants. When we included in the analysis participants who did not report their political orientation, however, this latter group emerged as the one with significantly more populist attitudes ($M = 4.71$, $SD = 1.25$) than the others, $F(3,519) = 4.54$, $p = 0.004$.

Populist attitudes were significantly and negatively correlated with the need for cognition, $r(520) = -0.089$, $p = 0.042$, and positively correlated with conspiracy mentality, $r(520) = 0.362$, $p < 0.001$.

To test the associations between personality traits and populist attitudes, we conducted a multiple linear regression with the five personality trait scores (Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Neuroticism, and Openness) as predictors of populist attitudes, including gender, age, and education as covariates. We used heteroskedasticity-consistent, non-clustered standard errors, as the initial assumption check (Breusch-Pagan test) indicated that our data deviated from normality, $\chi^2(8) = 23.0$, $p = 0.003$. The normality of residuals test (Shapiro-Wilk) was also unsatisfactory, $W = 0.988$, $p < 0.001$. No multicollinearity issues emerged, VIFs ≤ 1.22. Results (Table 2) showed that participants' Agreeableness positively predicted populist attitudes, as did Neuroticism, to a lesser extent. The other three personality traits had no significant effects on populist attitudes. Overall, personality traits explained only a modest share of the variance in populist attitudes, $R^2 = 0.076$, $F(8,510) = 5.22$, $p < 0.001$, compared to the sociodemographic controls, $R^2 = 0.053$, $F(3,515) = 9.560$, $p < 0.001$.

Overall, our findings indicated that populist attitudes were associated not only with participants sociodemographic characteristics, but also with some key psychological variables which can help us define the social psychological profile of individuals with these attitudes, and, ultimately, voters of populist parties and movements. Conspiracy mentality appears to be strongly associated with populist attitudes, as already suggested by past research (Castanho Silva et al., 2017). Furthermore, participants with lower need for cognition, that is those more likely to prefer simplified solutions to more cognitively taxing ones, also had more populist attitudes, thus showing a tendency to extend the same approach to political stances. Finally, the associations between populist attitudes and personality traits confirmed some of the findings of past research conducted in other national contexts (e.g. the UK and Germany, Fatke, 2019). The positive and significant association with Agreeableness and Neuroticism suggests that individuals are more likely to endorse populist attitudes if they care more for the unity and welfare of their social group, but also if they feel threatened by negative emotions.

3.2 Populist attitudes and susceptibility to misinformation

In the second part of the analyses, we investigated whether populist attitudes were associated with a lower ability to detect fake news and whether they moderated the effect of prior attitudes on the topic (in this case, climate change). In other words, we tested whether participants with stronger populist attitudes were more likely to have difficulty distinguishing between real and fake news than those with less populist attitudes, and whether they were more prone to motivated reasoning in doing so.

We ran a regression model with the headline recognition index score as the dependent variable, participants' belief in climate change as the main predictor, and populist attitudes scores as the moderator. We also included the quadratic terms of each predictor and of the interaction to test for a potential non-linear association with the dependent variable. Participants' gender, age, and education level were entered as covariates. The initial assumption checks did not raise concerns regarding heteroskedasticity, $\chi^2(9) = 10.8$, $p = 0.288$, or multicollinearity, VIFs ≤ 2.52, but normality assumptions were not fully met, $W = 0.968$, $p < 0.001$. Robust standard errors were estimated to address these issues. Results are shown in Table 3. A main effect of belief in climate change was found, indicating that participants who believed more in climate change tended to correctly distinguish real from fake news more than those who did not. The linear and quadratic terms of populist attitudes both had negative effects, but these did not reach the conventional significance threshold ($p = 0.053$ and $p = 0.085$, respectively). A positive interaction effect between belief in climate change and populist attitudes also came just short of significance ($p = 0.065$). No other effects were found, except a positive effect of education.

We then tested the same regression model using the fake news recognition and real news recognition sub-indexes as separate dependent variables. Fake news recognition was positively associated with belief in climate change, whereas negative effects emerged for both the linear and quadratic terms of populist attitudes, indicating that recognition of fake news was lower for participants with very low or very high populist attitudes scores, but higher at midrange scores (Figure 2, left pane). The interaction effect was not significant, and among the covariates, only education had a positive effect, as in the case of the total score (see Table 4). Real news recognition showed a different pattern, with a positive effect of belief in climate change, but no direct effect (linear or quadratic) of populist attitudes. The interaction effect between

TABLE 1 Correlations among the main study variables.

Variable	*M* (*SD*)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1. Populist attitudes	4.33(1.02)	-													
2. Extraversion	0.84(2.64)	0.032	-												
3. Agreeableness	3.06(2.26)	0.120**	0.172**	-											
4. Conscientiousness	3.19(2.40)	0.032	−0.023	0.203**	-										
5. Neuroticism	−0.85(2.77)	0.087*	0.015	−0.248**	−0.205**	-									
6. Openness	2.33(2.37)	−0.013	0.323**	0.265**	0.107*	−0.105*	-								
7. Need for cognition	4.65(1.12)	−0.089*	0.133**	0.115**	0.241**	−0.265**	0.406**	-							
8. Consp. mentality	4.66(1.23)	0.362**	−0.001	0.048	0.058	0.004	0.027	0.013	-						
9. Correct class of real news headlines	2.33(0.75)	−0.026	−0.077	0.086*	−0.081	0.048	0.055	0.033	−0.042	-					
10. Correct class of fake news headlines	2.46(0.77)	−0.068	−0.039	0.159**	0.105*	0.008	0.052	0.058	−0.130**	0.205**					
11. Polit. orientation	5.71(2.67)	0.079	0.111*	−0.074	−0.009	−0.035	−0.047	−0.075	0.090	−0.066	−0.159**	-			
12. Gender (0 = F, 1 = M)	0.40(0.51)	−0.141**	0.030	−0.079	−0.085	−0.229**	0.047	0.129**	−0.106*	−0.002	−0.049	0.130**	-		
13. Age	41.3(16.8)	0.123**	−0.040	0.016	0.083	−0.115**	−0.138**	−0.049	0.077	−0.069	−0.023	−0.033	0.040	-	
14. Education	3.25(1.78)	−0.134**	−0.034	0.099*	0.074	−0.103*	0.110*	0.212**	−0.119**	0.122**	0.112*	−0.138**	−0.063	−0.118**	1

*$p < 0.05$.
**$p < 0.001$.
For political orientation, participants who did not indicate a value on the left-right axis ($N = 46$) are excluded.

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TABLE 2 Linear regression model of populist attitudes as a function of personality traits and socio-demographic controls.

Predictor	β	B	SE	t	p	95% C.I.	
						LL	UL
Gender	−0.121	−0.243	0.091	2.675	0.008	−0.422	−0.065
Age	0.117	0.007	0.003	2.568	0.011	0.002	0.013
Education	−0.132	−0.077	0.026	2.963	0.003	−0.128	−0.026
Extraversion	0.012	0.005	0.020	0.243	0.808	−0.034	0.044
Agreeableness	0.146	0.067	0.021	3.215	0.001	0.026	0.107
Conscientiousness	0.008	0.003	0.018	0.165	0.869	−0.036	0.043
Neuroticism	0.097	0.035	0.021	1.974	0.049	0.000	0.071
Openness	−0.007	−0.003	0.091	0.149	0.882	−0.045	0.039

Model $R^2 = 0.076$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.061$, RMSE = 2.520; $F(8, 510) = 5.22$, $p < 0.001$.

TABLE 3 Linear regression model of news headline discernment as a function of populist attitudes, belief in climate change, and socio-demographic controls.

Predictor	β	B	SE	t	p	95% C.I.	
						LL	UL
(Intercept)	0.108	6.169	0.164	37.708	<0.001	5.851	6.487
Gender	0.033	0.176	0.234	0.752	0.452	−0.270	0.621
Age	0.002	0.000	0.007	0.046	0.963	−0.013	0.014
Education	0.145	0.225	0.065	3.484	<0.001	0.097	0.353
Populist attitudes	−0.089	−0.237	0.122	−1.940	0.053	−0.466	−0.007
Belief in climate change	0.246	0.520	0.133	3.896	<0.001	0.267	0.772
Populist attitudes^2	−0.058	−0.152	0.088	−1.728	0.085	−0.309	0.005
Belief in climate change^2	−0.053	−0.086	0.054	−1.586	0.113	−0.195	0.023
Populist attitudes × belief in climate change	0.088	0.182	0.099	1.848	0.065	−0.012	0.377
Populist attitudes^2 × belief in climate change^2	−0.008	−0.013	0.020	−0.619	0.536	−0.043	0.018

Model $R^2 = 0.141$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.126$, RMSE = 0.716; $F(9, 509) = 9.31$, $p < 0.001$.

populist attitudes and belief in climate change was significant, showing diverging trends among participants with high populist attitudes scores (Figure 2, right pane). Education again had a positive effect (see Table 5).

Taken together, these findings indicate that populist attitudes were weakly associated with the ability to discern between real and fake news, and that such association was curvilinear. This effect was more evident when we focused on the detection of fake news, showing that participants at the two opposite ends of the populist attitude spectrum were the ones less likely to recognize "suspicious" headlines, independent of their prior beliefs on the topic. Conversely, in the case of the detection of real news, participants with stronger populist attitudes appeared to selectively reject real news headlines, but only when the content did not align with their beliefs on climate change. This can be interpreted as evidence of motivated reasoning applied to genuine, but counter-attitudinal information (i.e., the real news headlines).

To assess a potential confounding effect of participants' education level, given that our participants had, on average, higher educational attainment than the general Italian population, we ran a modified regression model that included additional two-way interactions between education and populist attitudes, education and climate change belief, as well as a three-way interaction among the three variables. No new significant effects emerged in these adapted models for general headline discernment scores, $ts < 1.39$, $ps > 0.165$, fake news detection, $ts < 0.34$, $ps > 0.734$, or real news detection, $ts < 1.34$, $ps > 0.180$.

4 Discussion

This study examined the psychological landscape associated with populist attitudes among Italian voters, exploring individual traits, cognitive styles, and voters' biases in information processing.

By assessing personality dimensions, need for cognition, and conspiracy mentality, we identified a distinct psychological profile linked to populist attitudes, characterized by high agreeableness and neuroticism, low need for cognition, and a tendency toward conspiracist thinking. These findings partially confirm previous research on the personality dimensions of populist voters (Erisen et al., 2021; Fatke, 2019). Additionally, they extend our understanding to further basic psychological dimensions such as cognitive styles and mentality. These individual characteristics may be fundamental drivers of established ideological features

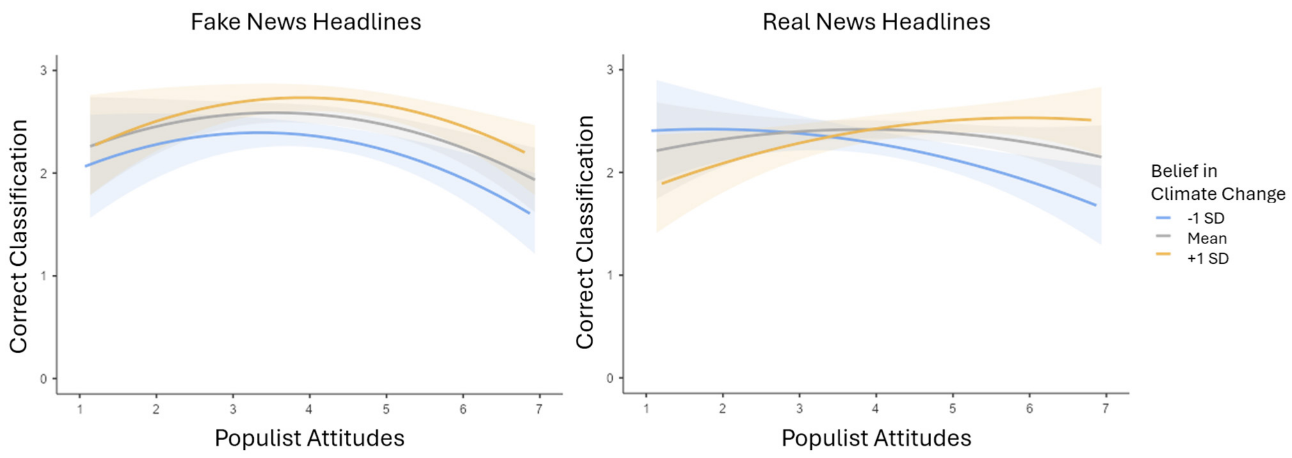

FIGURE 2
Correct classification of fake and real news headlines as a function of populist attitudes and belief in climate change.

TABLE 4 Linear regression model of fake news detection as a function of populist attitudes, belief in climate change, and socio-demographic controls.

Predictor	β	B	SE	t	p	95% C.I.	
						LL	UL
(Intercept)	0.111	2.553	0.049	52.184	<0.001	2.463	2.644
Gender	−0.012	−0.019	0.068	0.275	0.783	−0.145	0.108
Age	0.043	0.002	0.002	1.018	0.309	−0.002	0.006
Education	0.109	0.047	0.019	2.448	0.015	0.011	0.084
Populist attitudes	−0.117	−0.088	0.038	2.298	0.022	−0.153	−0.023
Belief in climate change	0.249	0.148	0.040	3.732	<0.001	0.076	0.219
Populist attitudes^2	−0.077	−0.057	0.028	2.029	0.043	−0.102	−0.013
Belief in climate change^2	−0.029	−0.013	0.017	0.761	0.447	−0.044	0.018
Populist attitudes × belief in climate change	0.037	0.022	0.034	0.633	0.527	−0.034	0.077
Populist attitudes^2 × belief in climate change^2	−0.009	−0.004	0.010	0.419	0.676	−0.013	0.005

Model $R^2 = 0.126$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.111$, RMSE = 0.707; $F(9, 509) = 8.15$, $p < 0.001$.

TABLE 5 Linear regression model of real news detection as a function of populist attitudes, belief in climate change, and socio-demographic controls.

Predictor	β	B	SE	t	p	95% C.I.	
						LL	UL
(Intercept)	0.107	2.413	0.047	51.827	<0.001	2.324	2.502
Gender	0.042	0.062	0.064	0.960	0.337	−0.063	0.186
Age	−0.027	−0.001	0.002	0.595	0.552	−0.005	0.003
Education	0.117	0.049	0.018	2.800	0.005	0.013	0.085
Populist attitudes	−0.048	−0.035	0.035	1.008	0.314	−0.099	0.029
Belief in climate change	0.147	0.084	0.038	2.238	0.026	0.014	0.155
Populist attitudes^2	−0.044	−0.032	0.023	1.395	0.164	−0.075	0.012
Belief in climate change^2	−0.078	−0.035	0.019	1.801	0.072	−0.065	−0.005
Populist attitudes × belief in climate change	0.133	0.075	0.034	2.234	0.026	0.021	0.129
Populist attitudes^2 × belief in climate change^2	0.002	−0.001	0.004	0.279	0.780	−0.010	0.008

Model $R^2 = 0.098$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.082$, RMSE = 6.425; $F(9, 509) = 6.14$, $p < 0.001$.

of populism, such as hostility toward political and cultural outgroups (which may result from the combination of agreeable and neurotic traits), distrust of authorities (linked to a tendency to prefer conspiracist accounts of social and political events), and a preference for simplified and emotional narratives (stemming from low need for cognition). This last point is particularly interesting, as it provides empirical support and a theoretical framework for the notion that individuals with populist attitudes may differ from other voters not only in beliefs and policy preferences, but also in the way they process the political information on which they base such beliefs and preferences (as previous research has suggested, see Forgas et al., 2021). Our findings indicate that this difference stems from a basic epistemic and motivational aversion to complex and in-depth processing of information, a well-known phenomenon that has been widely investigated in other areas of psychology, such as attitude formation and change, persuasion, and consumer behavior.

Beyond identifying a baseline cognitive, personality, and social psychological profile of populist voters, it is also important to understand how these individuals interact with the political world, specifically, how they gather and evaluate political information through the news and other media, form opinions about political facts and issues, evaluate political leaders and movements, and ultimately make decisions regarding their vote and political participation. Our results contribute to this area of research by demonstrating crucial differences in information processing as a function of participants' populist attitudes. Interestingly, the effects we observed revealed a more complex picture than we initially anticipated. This picture takes into account the alignment between the veridicality of the news stimuli we used and their position on the issue of climate change. While real news reflected endorsement of the existence of climate change, fake news reflected its denial or dismissal as an issue. Our findings indicated a curvilinear association between populist attitudes and the correct identification of fake news headlines, such that participants with either high or very low levels of populist attitudes were less likely to detect them than participants with intermediate levels. Since no significant interaction with pre-existing beliefs on the topic emerged, this pattern might depend on individual differences in the acceptance of information that ostensibly goes against what is perceived as the mainstream consensus (namely, that climate change is actually occurring). Whereas participants with intermediate levels of populist attitudes might be reluctant to endorse the veridicality of a headline that deviates from the mainstream, participants with high levels of populist attitudes were more likely to "keep the door open" to this type of information. In other words, the effect we observed may reflect a higher or lower willingness to label a piece of dubious information as "fake news", rather than strictly belief in its factual accuracy.

The hypothesized association between populist attitudes and motivated reasoning (Marcus, 2021) was found in the case of real news, which were sorted in a way that reflected participants' own beliefs on the topic more often among those with high levels of populist attitudes than among those with intermediate and low levels. This pattern may be consistent with a form of motivated reasoning, as it indicates that individuals with populist attitudes prefer information that supports their strong and positively valued group identity (i.e., the "pure" people and their common sense), to the point of labeling as fake news the headlines that contrast with their prior beliefs. The repercussions of this tendency are likely not limited to the initial encounter with attitude-consistent information, as later attempts to correct misinformation endorsed and shared among populist voters and supporters may be hindered by the intended audience's relative indifference to accuracy and greater concern for internal consensus, resulting in poor efficacy or even reactance (Hameleers, 2019). It must be noted, however, that our study investigated a single political issue (i.e., climate change), and different patterns could emerge when examining populist voters' reactions to information and misinformation on other topics with different political alignments (Cole et al., 2025).

Our study has further important limitations that may affect the generalizability of our findings. In particular, the non-statistical convenience sampling method hindered its representativeness of the general population, especially regarding two key variables: gender and education.

Future research should examine how these dynamics develop across different cultural contexts and political systems, given that our study was limited to the Italian case, with its specific cultural, political, and institutional characteristics (Caiani and Padoan, 2021). At the applied level, a clear understanding of personality profiles and cognitive styles more common among populist voters may be help develop communication specifically targeted at this group. For example, given the established association between populist attitudes and the endorsement of conspiracy theories (Castanho Silva et al., 2017) and susceptibility to misinformation (Van Kessel et al., 2020), interventions could adopt formats, frames, and linguistic nuances more likely to persuade individuals with these profiles. These interventions could also be implemented on a scale, thanks to the emerging capabilities of AI models to detect the personality and psychographic characteristics of users (Bakir, 2020; Piastra and Catellani, 2025). Future research may also investigate the extent to which the associations we found between cognitive and social psychological characteristics and populist attitudes extend to individuals' actual voting behavior (i.e., voting for populist parties and movements), or to other variables along the attitude-behavior spectrum, such as voting intention and propensity to vote (Van der Eijk et al., 2006).

In conclusion, our findings contribute to the growing literature that expands the understanding of populism beyond its purely political features, viewing it as a reflection of cultural and social norms, as well as personality and cognitive characteristics, which result in a preference for certain types of political leaders, issues and policies. This multifaceted perspective has previously been applied to other political orientations (e.g., authoritarianism, Sibley and Duckitt, 2010; liberal vs. conservative, Jost et al., 2022) and could also be extended to populism. Furthermore, investigating the individual characteristics and processes associated with populist attitudes from a developmental perspective may help us understand how personal experiences and socialization factors can lead to the endorsement of populist beliefs, narratives, and worldviews.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by CERPS - Ethics Committee for Research in Psychology Department of Psychology, Catholic University of the Sacred Heart. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

MB: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Software, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. PC: Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Supervision, Validation, Writing – review & editing.

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Supplementary material

The Supplementary Material for this article can be found online at: https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpos.2025.1718881/full#supplementary-material

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