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Abstract

This research examined the psychological mechanisms underlying anti-elite attitudes, focusing on the roles of economic insecurity and perceived economic inequality. In a preregistered study using a large representative sample in nine European countries (Belgium, Denmark, France, Greece, Hungary, Netherlands, Poland, Spain, and UK, $N = 11,217$), we investigated whether feelings of relative deprivation explain the association between perceived personal economic insecurity and two anti-elite attitudes (i.e., populist attitudes and distrust in institutions) and whether perceived societal economic inequality reinforces these effects. The results show that (i) the more individuals feel insecure about their economic situation, the more they report anti-elite attitudes, (ii) which is explained by a greater feeling of relative deprivation (between 43% and 59% of variance explained), (iii) and this relationship is stronger for individuals who perceive greater economic inequalities within their country. This research provides evidence of an important psychological process (feeling of relative deprivation) that underpins anti-elite attitudes across varied economic, cultural, and political contexts.

Across European countries, a growing number of people are questioning the legitimacy of political and economic elite groups, such as politicians, governments, and financial institutions (Perry, 2021). This skepticism is accompanied by increasing distrust in national institutions (Uslaner, 2018), and a rise of populist attitudes (Rooduijn, 2014). The erosion of general trust poses a significant challenge, as social cohesion is fundamental to the stability of democracy (Uslaner & Brown, 2005). While prior research has extensively examined the role of structural factors in moderating these democratic threats, less attention has been given to the role played by the feelings of personal economic insecurity. In the present research, we investigate the psychological processes that underlie the development of two anti-elite attitudes, namely populist attitudes and distrust in institutions. More precisely, we focus on perceived personal economic insecurity and societal economic inequality as two key factors that may contribute to anti-elite attitudes.

Populism and Distrust in Institutions

Populism is defined as a set of ideas focused on the existence of two relatively homogenous and antagonist groups: the “ordinary people” and the “elite” (Hawkins et al., 2018; Mudde, 2004). Populism includes four core components: (i) a large difference and distance between ordinary people and elites, (ii) an inherent antagonism between them, (iii) the portrayal of “the people” as virtuous in contrast to “the elite,” who is depicted as corrupt and deserving of denigration, and (iv) the belief politics should follow the will of the people (e.g., Akkerman et al., 2014; Rooduijn, 2019). This definition aligns with an ideational approach to populism, which suggests that rather than deeply endorsing populism itself (described as the ‘thin ideology’), individuals adopt a populist perspective that colors other ideologies (referred to as the ‘host ideologies’) depending on societal contexts (Mudde, 2004). This conceptualization accommodates the observed variations in populism, like economic populism that emerged during economic crises (Stavrakakis et al., 2018) or the prevalence of

right-wing populism in Europe and left-wing populism in Latin America (Hawkins, 2009). Populism has negative consequences for the social cohesion, such as threatening democracy (Cole & Schofer, 2023) and increasing belief in conspiracy theories (Pirro & Taggart, 2023).

Another related anti-elite attitude is distrust in institutions, defined as the perceived lack of legitimacy within societal organizations such as politics, government, and the justice system (Geurkink et al., 2020). Distrust toward institutions also encompasses the belief that these organizations are not working toward the common good (Rohde, 2023). Like populism, distrust in institutions has significant societal implications and poses a substantial threat to democracy because (dis)trust in institutions influences citizens' behaviors across several areas (Uslaner & Brown, 2005), especially in crisis situations where individuals may not comply with rules and regulations if they do not trust the authorities (Lalot et al., 2022).

Populism and institutional distrust might be considered as two facets of anti-elitism (Geurkink et al., 2020) because they both have an important anti-establishment component. The less people trust their political system and institutions or the more they endorse populist attitudes, the more likely they are to blame the elite for societal dysfunctions. Indeed, previous studies have confirmed the empirical relationship between these two constructs, showing medium-to-large positive correlations between populist attitudes and distrust in institutions, $r \approx .40$ (e.g., Akkerman et al., 2014; Ehrke et al., 2023) although populism tends to be more rooted in intergroup relations than distrust in institutions.

Why do individuals endorse anti-elite attitudes?

In the realm of social sciences, extensive research has explored the psychological and structural mechanisms that underpin the emergence of anti-elite attitudes. Anti-elite attitudes are often seen as the result of a perceived division between “us” and “them” (Obradović et al., 2020). Economic shifts—particularly the rapid globalization of the past three decades—are often cited as key drivers of rising anti-elite attitudes (e.g., Brubaker, 2017; Pappas &

Kriesi, 2015; Uslander, 2018). These transformations can bolster existing vulnerabilities, challenge perceptions of fairness, and erode trust in institutions perceived as aligned with elite interests (Jakovljevic et al., 2021; Kriesi et al., 2006; Spruyt et al., 2016). Crises, such as financial downturns or broader societal upheavals, exacerbate perceptions of institutional failure and systemic injustice. Supporting this claim, research has shown that exposure to cues of economic crisis decrease generalized trust (Navarro-Carrillo et al., 2018). Similarly, broader crises tend to amplify anti-elite sentiments by increasing economic insecurity and perceived competition (Algan et al., 2017; Delhey et al., 2023).

Research has also documented that individuals from lower socioeconomic status are generally more vulnerable to the consequences of economic crises, as they possess fewer resources to buffer against instability (e.g., Danziger et al., 2018; Pfeffer et al., 2013). They are also more likely to endorse anti-elite attitudes compared to their higher-socioeconomic status counterparts. For instance, in a large Dutch-speaking Belgian sample, Elchardus and Spruyt (2016) found that individuals with lower socioeconomic status—measured through education and occupational standing—were more likely to express populist attitudes. This pattern is commonly interpreted through the lens of the "losers of globalization" hypothesis (Kriesi et al., 2006), which posits that support for populism arises as a reaction to the adverse consequences of globalization among those who are more exposed to its economic and social disruptions. Consequently, lower-socioeconomic status individuals may feel alienated from the political establishment and more receptive to populist rhetoric that challenges their legitimacy.

While objective socioeconomic status is relevant to consider in examining the prevalence of anti-elite attitudes, it is important to acknowledge that objective indicators alone may not fully account for the psychological mechanisms underlying these attitudes. As Elchardus and Spruyt (2016) argue, the interpretation of one's economic vulnerability plays a

critical role in shaping the relationship between objective socioeconomic status and populist attitudes. The psychological experience associated with being in a lower status position is also crucial. This idea aligns with recent findings indicating that, beyond objective socioeconomic status, subjective measures - like the feeling of sitting near the bottom of the social hierarchy or perceiving that one is losing status - foster anti-elite attitudes (Gidron & Hall, 2017; Kim et al., 2021; Manunta et al., 2022; 2024; Rico et al., 2012).

As such, the experience of economic insecurity offers a valuable lens through which to understand why individuals develop skepticism about elites. Indeed, populism and institutional distrust can occur as a reaction to the experience of economic insecurity, conceived as the extent to which people worry about their economic situation.

Perceived Economic Insecurity, Relative Deprivation, and Anti-elite Attitudes

Although there is a lack of consensus regarding the definition of economic insecurity (Wroe, 2015), scholars agree on its subjective nature, as well as on the fact that it is related to the fear of experiencing economic hardship (Dominitz & Manski, 1997). Economic insecurity results from possible exposure to adverse economic events and the anticipation of it being difficult to recover from them (Bossert & D'Ambrosio, 2013). This feeling stems from the cognitive evaluation that one's economic resources may be insufficient to maintain one's perceived standard of living, and reflects a broader sense of vulnerability about one's financial stability. Importantly, perceived personal economic insecurity may arise from various factors, including personal concerns (e.g., fear of losing one's socioeconomic status, anxiety about one's future) and intergroup processes (e.g., unfavorable intergroup comparisons, feelings of relative deprivation).

Previous work has empirically tested the specific role of perceived economic insecurity in the development of anti-elite attitudes. Watson and colleagues (2022), for example, showed that personal economic insecurity predicted lower trust in federal

government, especially when these feelings became chronic. It is also related to political distrust (Wroe, 2015). In the same vein, using European Social Survey and data from the World Inequality Database, Ivanov (2023) recently documented that perceived economic insecurity predicted populist voting, particularly amongst individuals who distrust institutions. Another recent study conducted during the pandemic demonstrated that perceived (Study 1) or manipulated (Study 2) feelings of personal economic insecurity increased perceived constraints associated with governmental restrictions (e.g., washing hands, not visiting peers and family) and increased transgressions of these restrictions (Normand et al., 2022). Taken together, these findings suggest that personal economic insecurity may be a key variable altering individuals' perception of the legitimacy of the institutions and authorities.

Importantly, one of the reasons why perceived economic insecurity may give rise to anti-elite attitudes is that being economically insecure is rooted in an unfavorable intergroup comparison. Indeed, perceiving oneself as economically at risk is associated with greater attention devoted to differences that exist between advantaged and disadvantaged groups in society. In other words, feeling economically insecure makes salient that some individuals and groups are better off than others. Drawing on the group-based control restoration model (Fritzsche et al., 2017; Fritzsche & Jugert, 2017), this sense of insecurity is likely to activate group-based identities, as the perceived distance between the ingroup (those similarly disadvantaged) and outgroups (those perceived as more privileged) may be amplified (Jetten et al., 2017). In such a context, developing negative attitudes toward outgroups and rejecting the stability of the political system can appear as relevant strategies to restore a certain sense of (group-based) control (Fritzsche et al., 2017; Fritzsche & Jugert, 2017; Garcia-Sanchez et al., 2024; Rodríguez-López et al., 2022). This response may emerge even when elites are not direct competitors for resources, as insecurity can lead individuals to construct blame and

resentment toward any group perceived as powerful or detached from “ordinary” citizens (Fritzsche, 2022).

For similar reasons, perceived economic insecurity may intensify perceptions that economic disparities are illegitimate and can increase the feeling of being relatively deprived (Spruyt et al., 2016). These perceptions of injustice can trigger self-integrity protective strategies, such as attributing blame to elite groups for perceived societal dysfunctions, ultimately reinforcing anti-elite attitudes. In other words, relative deprivation can be regarded as a key variable that predicts susceptibility to anti-elite attitudes (Elchardus & Spruyt 2012; Spruyt et al. 2016). Feelings of relative deprivation can be defined as the belief that the resources available in society are not distributed in a fair way (e.g., Hogg et al. 2010). It results from the perception that one’s lower status position is due to unfair treatment, a form of discrimination against ‘people like us’ (Elchardus & Spruyt 2012). Thus, feelings of relative deprivation are inherently relational, grounded in the perception that other groups—typically elites—are unfairly advantaged, while the ingroup (“ordinary people”) receives less than it deserves. This perceived imbalance makes the distinction between “the people” and “the elite” particularly salient. Individuals experiencing relative deprivation are more likely to endorse external attributions of responsibility for their condition, particularly when such attributions are directed toward powerful outgroups. Supporting this view, empirical findings indicate that relative deprivation mediates the negative association between economic position and populist attitudes (Spruyt et al., 2016).

Taken together, these results suggest that perceived economic insecurity can be a key predictor of the feeling that one’s ingroup (especially, ‘the people’) is deprived as compared to the outgroup (i.e., ‘the elite’), a feeling that, in turn, should explain the association between economic insecurity and anti-elite attitudes.

An Association Strengthened by Perceived Economic Inequality

The above reasoning implies that the perceived differences between one's ingroup (i.e., 'the people') and its perceived antagonistic outgroup (i.e., 'the elite') contribute to the emergence of anti-elite attitudes. Consequently, contexts that highlight these differences should strengthen this effect. In other words, the link between perceived economic insecurity and anti-elite attitudes should be particularly likely to occur in settings where the differences between advantaged and disadvantaged groups are large and visible, such as in contexts of high societal economic inequality (Del-Fresno et al., 2022; Peters et al., 2022). Indeed, research has shown that both objective and subjective perception of economic inequality are significant factors shaping social perceptions and psychological outcomes, by increasing the (perceived) salience of the existing economic hierarchy (for recent reviews, see Peters & Jetten, 2023; Sommet & Elliot, 2023; Willis et al., 2022). When economic inequality in society is perceived as large, people are more likely to adopt a dichotomous view of society—between “the haves” and “the have-nots”—which can reinforce intergroup conflict and anti-elite sentiment (Jetten et al., 2017; Peters et al., 2022; Tanjitpiyanond et al., 2023).

Therefore, perceiving greater economic inequalities in society might lead to the perception that relevant outgroups are less trustworthy (Sánchez-Rodríguez et al., 2019; Tanjitpiyanond et al., 2023). Supporting this claim, perceived economic inequality is associated with lower trust in both fellow citizens and government institutions (Buttrick & Oishi, 2017; Chi & Kwon, 2016; Rothstein & Uslaner, 2005), as well as lower support for democracy (Andersen, 2012), and higher support for far-right populist movements (Jay et al., 2019; Jetten et al., 2015). Perceived level of economic inequality is also associated with higher search for systemic change (Hoyt et al., 2018; Schneider, 2019) and political engagement through non-normative channels (e.g., the yellow vest movement in France, Jetten et al., 2020; protests in the republic of Ireland, Power, 2018).

Both objective and perceived economic inequalities shape societal perceptions (Klebl & Jetten, 2024). Yet, in this area of research, the subjective experience of inequality appears to be particularly predictive of subsequent perceptions (Willis et al., 2022). This is also the case for anti-elite attitudes. For instance, Kim et al. (2021) found no direct relationship between objective income inequality and institutional trust, whereas perceived economic inequality has been consistently associated with higher levels of generalized and institutional distrust (García-Sánchez et al., 2024; Kirkland et al., 2023).

Overview and Hypotheses

Previous research has documented the role of economic position in predicting the endorsement of anti-elite attitudes (e.g., Inglehart & Norris, 2016; Manunta et al., 2022; Rohde, 2023). However, literature has mostly focused on objective economic position. In the current research, we argue that worries about one's economic situation (i.e., perceived economic insecurity) could also impact anti-elite attitudes. More precisely, we argue that perceived economic insecurity increases feelings of deprivation, relative to more privileged groups. This, in turn, should lead to more negative attitudes against the 'elite' group (i.e., stronger populist attitudes and greater distrust in institutions). Furthermore, since it increases the salience of the differences between the 'haves' and the 'have nots' (e.g., Jetten et al., 2017; Peters & Jetten, 2022), the perceived level of existing economic inequality in society should strengthen the association between perceived economic insecurity and relative deprivation (for a graphical representation of the model, see Figure 1).

To sum-up, in this research we investigated whether the association between perceived economic insecurity and anti-elite attitudes is explained by relative deprivation and bolstered by perceived economic inequality in society. Thus, our research was designed to test the following two pre-registered sets of hypotheses:

(i) Relative deprivation mediates the positive associations between personal economic

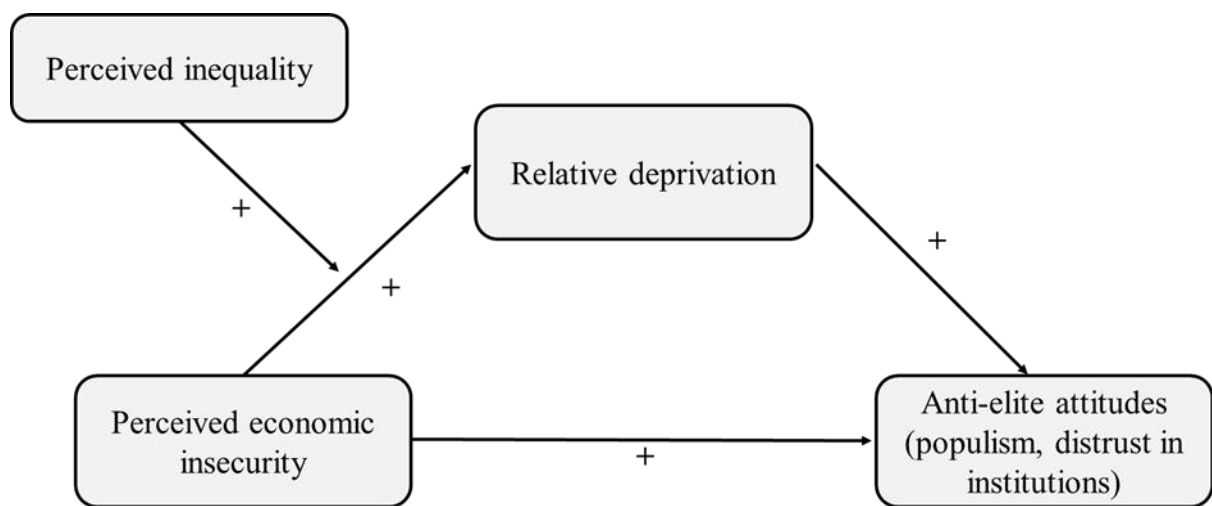
insecurity and populism (Hypothesis 1a) and distrust in institutions (Hypothesis 1b);

(ii) The higher the perceived level of economic inequality, the stronger the association between economic insecurity and relative deprivation will be (Hypotheses 2a-2b).

This moderated mediation model was tested on a large, representative sample recruited from nine different European countries. This enabled us to explore the psychological processes underlying anti-elite attitudes across a range of economic, cultural, and political European contexts. Data collection was part of a larger project. Pre-registration, complete materials including data and R script reproducing the findings are available on OSF (<https://osf.io/ykd8u>).

Figure 1

The theoretical model tested in the present research



Method

Participants

The sample comprised 11,217 adults from nine European countries (Belgium, Denmark, France, Greece, Hungary, Poland, Spain, The Netherlands, United Kingdom, $n \approx$

1200 per country¹). For each country, the sample was representative based on age (3 categories: 18-34, 35-54, 55+), gender (2 categories: male, female), and educational level (2 categories: low/middle, high)². Data collection was carried out between December 8 2021 and January 12 2022 by Ipsos and Pollster Research Institute online panels.

Variables

Zero-order correlations between variables are reported in Table S1 (Supplementary Materials). All items were identical across countries and were back-translated for each language. Only the country name within the brackets was adapted to the respective context.

Perceived Personal Economic Insecurity

We averaged two items to measure perceived economic insecurity (“To what extent do you feel that you are able to live a comfortable life with your current household income?”, 1 = Very easy, to 5 = Very difficult, and “To what degree are you worried about your current financial situation?” 1 = Not at all, to 5 = A great deal; the pooled within country Cronbach’s alpha was $M(\alpha) = .68$, $SD(\alpha) = .05$; $M = 3.06$, $SD = 1.04$). A higher score reflects a stronger feeling of personal economic insecurity.

Populism

We used the Akkerman et al. (2014) 7-item measure of populism (e.g., “The politicians in Parliament need to follow the will of the people”; “The established politicians who claim to defend our interest, have often betrayed the people”, 1 = Strongly disagree, to 5 = Strongly agree; the pooled within country Cronbach’s alpha was $M(\alpha) = 0.82$, $SD(\alpha) = .03$; $M = 3.76$, $SD = 0.74$). A higher score reflects a greater endorsement of populist attitudes.

¹ Belgium ($N = 1215$), Denmark ($N = 1215$), France ($N = 1201$), Greece ($N = 1213$), Hungary ($N = 1215$), Netherlands ($N = 1202$), Poland ($N = 1529$), Spain ($N = 1215$), or the UK ($N = 1212$).

² The distribution of the quota variables is based on Eurostat 2020 figures. The sample was different in Poland, where we used a combined quota for the gender by age categories, and separate quota for education and region. The distribution of these quota variables in the Polish sample was based on the Central Statistical Office (GUS, Poland).

Distrust in institutions

We used three items to measure distrust in institutions (i.e., “Do you trust the [country] parliament/government/justice system?”; 1 = No trust at all, to 10 = Complete trust [reversed]; the pooled within country Cronbach’s alpha was $M(\alpha) = .87$, $SD(\alpha) = .03$; $M = 3.78$, $SD = 2.40$). Scores were reversed so that a higher score reflects a greater distrust in institutions.

Feelings of Relative Deprivation

We used three items to measure feelings of relative deprivation (e.g., “Whichever way you look at it, people like me always get short-changed;” “If we need something from the government, people like me always have to wait longer;” “When an economic crisis strikes, people like me are always the first to be laid off;” Elchardus & Spruyt, 2016; 1 = Strongly disagree, to 5 = Strongly agree; the pooled within country Cronbach’s alpha was $M(\alpha) = .76$, $SD(\alpha) = .06$; $M = 3.09$, $SD = 1.00$). A higher score reflects greater feelings of relative deprivation.

Perceived Societal Economic Inequality

We used two items to measure perceived economic inequality (“To what extent do you think that the distribution of the resources in [Country] is equal;” To what extent do you think that the distribution of the resources in [Country] is unequal...”; 1 = Strongly disagree, to 5 = Strongly agree; the pooled within country Cronbach’s alpha was $M(\alpha) = .76$, $SD(\alpha) = .06$; $M = 3.86$, $SD = 0.92$). A higher score reflects greater perceived societal economic inequality.

Results

Analysis Strategy

We used structural equation modeling to build two series of models using the classical thresholds for fit indices ($CFI \geq .90$; $TLI \geq .90$; $RMSEA \leq .08$; $SRMR < .08$; and $\chi^2/df < 3$;

Kline, 2015). First, we built the two following pre-registered mediation models: Economic insecurity $\rightarrow$ relative deprivation $\rightarrow$ populism (Model 1a) / distrust in institutions (Model 1b). Second, we built the two following pre-registered moderated mediation models: Economic insecurity $\times$ subjective income inequality $\rightarrow$ relative deprivation $\rightarrow$ populism (Model 2a) / distrust in institutions (Model 2b).³ To test the moderation, we used the Product-Indicators approach (Schoemann & Jorgensen, 2021), which involves creating variables corresponding to the interactions. For each model, we estimated the indirect effect with 2000 bootstraps. Finally, we controlled for participants' age and gender⁴, as well as the country-level with dummy coding. Because the number of sampled countries was too small to perform multilevel analyses, we used instead a fixed-effect model including 8 dummy contrasts coding for the countries effect. Following the recommendations of Enders and Tofighi (2007), we centered all our predictors around the country-mean to remove between-cluster variations and focus on the pooled within-cluster (i.e., individual-level) regression coefficients. Finally, we ran non-preregistered multigroup analyses to explore whether our results are stable across countries (See *Supplementary Materials* for the results in each country).

Analyses

Mediation Models

Figure 2 presents the full results for the models testing the hypotheses 1a-b.

Populism (Model 1a). The model showed excellent fit indices ($CFI = .945$, $TLI = .924$, $RMSEA = .041$; $SRMR = .027$). Consistent with the pre-registered hypothesis, perceived

³ We preregistered the prediction that the percentage of GDP invested in welfare might moderate the mediation model. However, testing this prediction would imply the presence of cross-level interactions (country-level $\times$ individual-level), which, with nine units at the country level, would be highly underpowered (Arend & Schäfer, 2019). Nevertheless, because the prediction was pre-registered, the results are reported in the Supplementary Materials (Figure S2).

⁴ We preregistered age and gender as demographic control variables. However, we also tested the models without these controls, and the results did not differ significantly from those of our preregistered model.

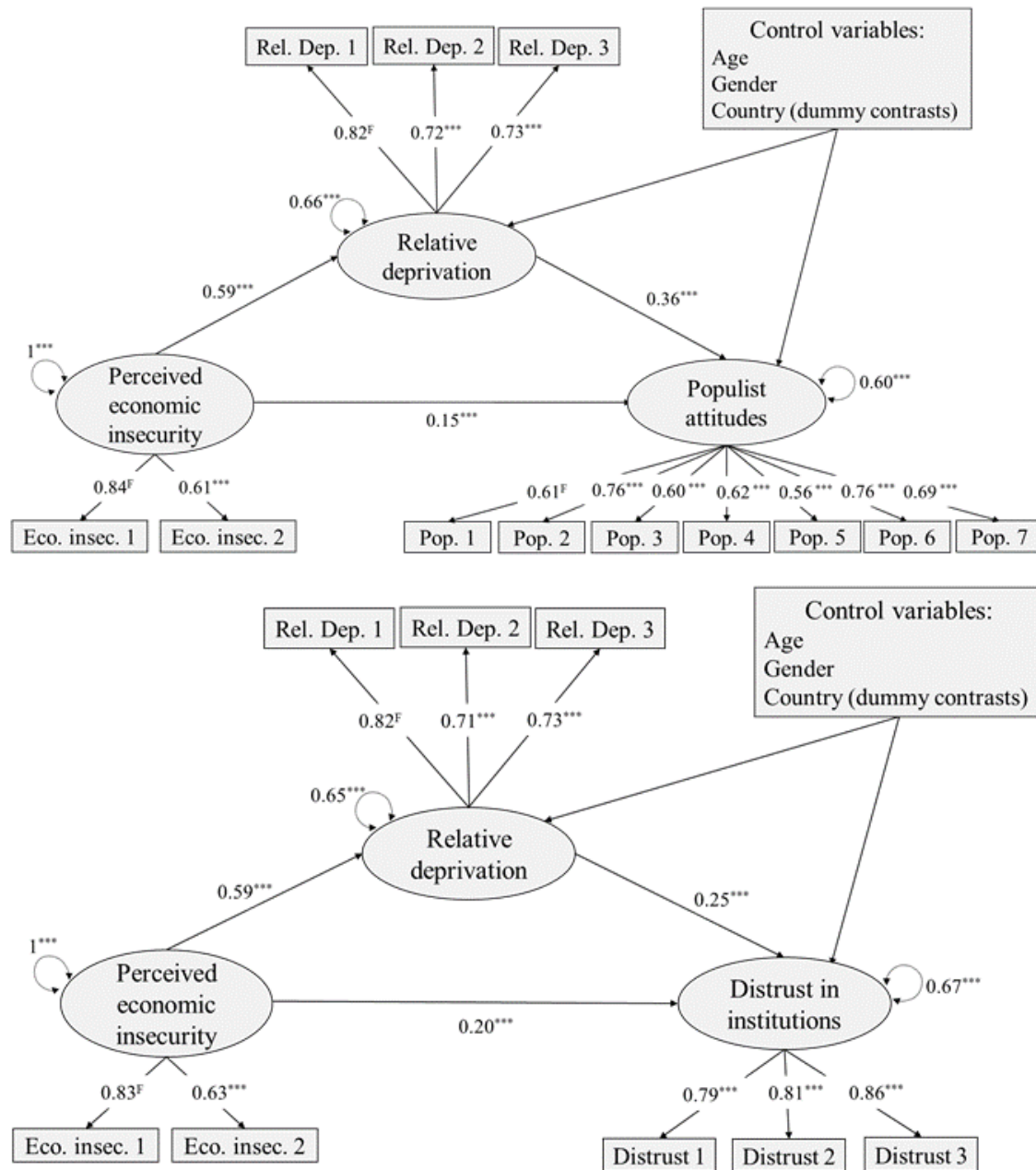
ECONOMIC INSECURITY, DEPRIVATION, INEQUALITY, AND ANTI-ELITE

economic insecurity was a significant positive predictor of relative deprivation and populist attitudes: The higher the perceived economic insecurity, the higher the feeling of being deprived, $\beta = 0.59$ [95%CI 0.56, 0.61], $p < .001$ [$0.53 < \beta_{\text{country}} < 0.64$], and the greater the endorsement of populist attitudes, $\beta = 0.15$ [95%CI 0.12, 0.18], $p < .001$ [$0.04 < \beta_{\text{country}} < 0.37$]. In addition, relative deprivation was a significant positive predictor of populist attitudes, $\beta = 0.36$ [95%CI 0.33, 0.39], $p < .001$ [$0.16 < \beta_{\text{country}} < 0.48$]. Consistent with the hypothesis, the analysis showed that relative deprivation accounted for 59.1% of the positive association between economic insecurity and populist attitudes, $\beta_{\text{indirect}} = 0.21$ [95%CI 0.19, 0.23], $p < .001$ [$0.09 < \beta_{\text{country}} < 0.29$, variance accounted are ranged from 20% to 86% across country].

Distrust in institutions (Model 1b). The model showed excellent fit indices ($CFI = .976$, $TLI = .965$, $RMSEA = .036$; $SRMR = .020$). Consistent with the preregistered hypothesis, economic insecurity was a significant positive predictor of relative deprivation and a negative predictor of trust in institutions: The higher the economic insecurity, the higher the feelings of relative deprivation, $\beta = 0.59$ [95%CI 0.57, 0.62], $p < .001$ [$0.53 < \beta_{\text{country}} < 0.64$], and the higher the distrust in institutions, $\beta = 0.20$ [95%CI 0.17, 0.23], $p < .001$ [$0.03 < \beta_{\text{country}} < 0.30$]. In addition, relative deprivation was a significant positive predictor of distrust in institutions, $\beta = 0.25$ [95%CI 0.22, 0.28], $p < .001$ [$0.09 < \beta_{\text{country}} < 0.36$]. Consistent with the hypothesis, the analysis showed that relative deprivation accounted for 43.9% of the positive association between perceived economic insecurity and distrust in institutions, $\beta_{\text{indirect}} = 0.15$ [95%CI 0.13, 0.17], $p < .001$ [$0.05 < \beta_{\text{country}} < 0.23$, variance accounted are ranged from 14% to 89% across country].

Figure 2

Association between perceived economic insecurity and anti-elite attitudes (upper panel: populist attitudes, lower panel: distrust in institutions), as mediated by relative deprivation and moderated by perceived economic inequality.



Note: the effects are standardized. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$

Moderated Mediation Models

Figures 3 presents the full results for the models testing the hypotheses 2a-b.

Populism (Model 2a). The model showed excellent fit indices ($CFI = .940$, $TLI = .928$, $RMSEA = .037$; $SRMR = .032$). Consistent with the hypothesis, the analysis revealed that economic insecurity and perceived economic inequality are positive predictors of relative deprivation: The higher the economic insecurity and the perceived income inequality, the higher the feelings of relative deprivation, $\beta = 0.52$ [95%CI 0.50, 0.55], $p < .001$ [$0.48 < \beta_{\text{country}} < 0.58$] and $\beta = 0.19$ [95%CI 0.16, 0.22], $p < .001$ [$0.13 < \beta_{\text{country}} < 0.24$], respectively. In addition, the analyses showed a significant positive interaction between economic insecurity and perceived economic inequality on relative deprivation, $\beta = 0.04$ [95%CI 0.01, 0.08], $p = .005$ [$0.02 < \beta_{\text{country}} < 0.13$], which accounted for the indirect effect of economic insecurity on populism through relative deprivation, $\beta_{\text{indirect}} = 0.02$ [95%CI 0.00, 0.03], $p = .005$ [$0.01 < \beta_{\text{country}} < 0.04$]. Simple slopes analysis revealed that individuals perceiving higher economic inequality (+1SD) showed a stronger association between economic insecurity and relative deprivation, $\beta = 0.56$ [95%CI 0.52, 0.60], $p < .001$, than individuals perceiving lower economic inequality (-1SD), $\beta = 0.48$ [95%CI 0.44, 0.53], $p < .001$. Moreover, for individuals perceiving higher economic inequality (+1SD), the feelings of relative deprivation accounted for the negative association between economic insecurity and populism attitudes, indirect effect of economic insecurity on populism through relative deprivation, $\beta = 0.23$ [95%CI 0.21, 0.26], $p < .001$, to a greater extent than for individuals perceiving lower economic inequality (-1SD), $\beta = 0.20$ [95%CI 0.18, 0.23], $p < .001$.

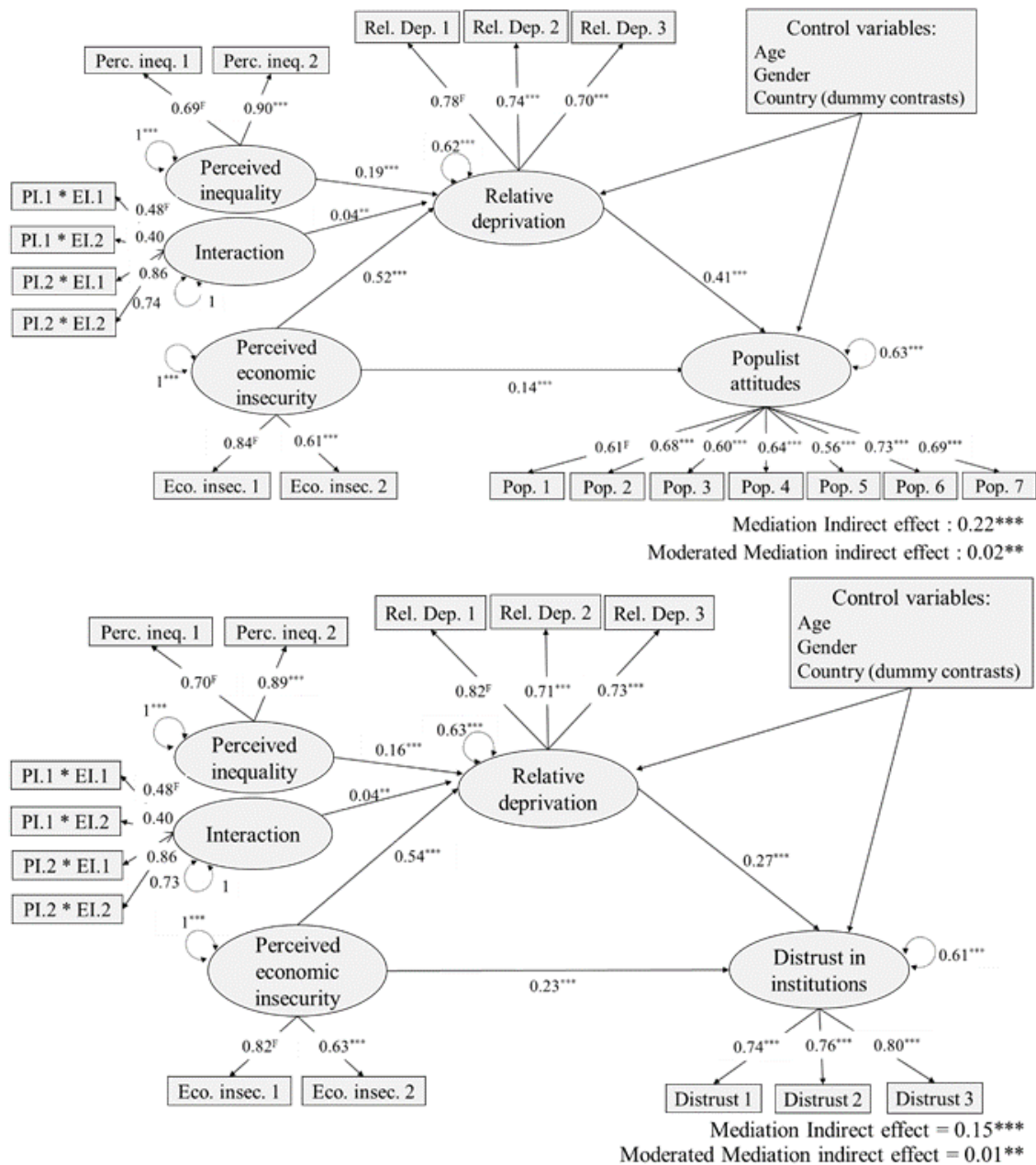
Distrust in institutions (Model 2b). The model showed excellent fit indices ($CFI = .961$, $TLI = .951$, $RMSEA = .036$; $SRMR = .031$) although 779 bootstraps resulted in non-admissible solutions and 189 models did not converge. Consistent with the preregistered hypothesis, the analysis revealed that economic insecurity and perceived economic inequality were positive predictors of relative deprivation: The higher the economic insecurity and the higher the perceived income inequality, the higher the feelings of relative deprivation, $\beta =$

ECONOMIC INSECURITY, DEPRIVATION, INEQUALITY, AND ANTI-ELITE

0.51 [95%CI 0.47, 0.53], $p < .001$ [$0.48 < \beta_{\text{country}} < 0.59$] and $\beta = 0.16$ [95%CI 0.14, 0.19], $p < .001$ [$0.12 < \beta_{\text{country}} < 0.24$], respectively. In addition, the analysis showed a significant positive interaction between economic insecurity and perceived income inequality on relative deprivation, $\beta = 0.04$ [95%CI 0.01, 0.08], $p = .003$ [$0.03 < \beta_{\text{country}} < 0.10$], which accounted for the indirect effect of economic insecurity on distrust in institutions through relative deprivation. Simple slopes analysis revealed that the indirect effect of economic insecurity on distrust in institutions through relative deprivation was stronger among individuals perceiving higher economic inequality (+1SD), $\beta = 0.16$ [95%CI 0.13, 0.18], $p < .001$, than among individuals perceiving lower economic inequality (-1SD), $\beta = 0.14$ [95%CI 0.11, 0.16], $p < .001$.

Figure 3

Association between perceived economic insecurity and anti-elite attitudes (upper panel: populist attitudes, lower panel: distrust in institutions), as mediated by relative deprivation and moderated by perceived economic inequality.



Note: the effects are standardized. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$

Discussion

The rise of populism and the crisis of confidence in institutions have been the subject of great concern in many European countries in recent years. The aim of the present research

was to investigate what leads individuals to develop these two forms of anti-elite attitude and to document the underlying psychological processes. More precisely, we investigated whether the association between perceived personal economic insecurity and anti-elite attitudes could be explained by relative deprivation and bolstered by perceived societal economic inequality. The findings revealed consistent patterns across models: perceived economic insecurity was robustly associated with higher levels of anti-elite attitudes, as measured by populist attitudes and distrust in institutions. Relative deprivation emerged as a significant mediator, accounting for approximatively half of the variance in this association. In addition, this mediating role of relative deprivation was more pronounced when economic inequalities were perceived as large. Thus, the more economically insecure individuals feel, the more they develop populist attitudes and lose confidence in institutions, in part because this economic insecurity leads them into feeling relatively deprived. Yet, it is when they believe they live in a highly unequal society that these effects are most pronounced.

The present results corroborate previous findings (Manunta et al, 2022, Elchardus & Spruyt, 2016), highlighting that, beyond objective socioeconomic status, the interplay between personal (economic insecurity) and societal economic threats (perceived inequality), interact to exacerbate anti-elitist attitudes. As previously documented in relation to economic position (Spruyt et al., 2016), feelings of relative deprivation are a key mediator of the relation between economic insecurity and populist attitudes. We extend previous research in three significant ways. First, the present results extend this association to another anti-elite attitude in that we demonstrate similar associations with distrust in institutions, relative deprivation accounting for around half of the variance in the association between perceived economic insecurity and distrust in institutions. Second, this mediation model was tested in a large representative sample ($N > 10,000$) drawn from nine different European countries, thereby showing that the psychological processes underlying anti-elite attitudes appear across

a range of economic, cultural, and political European contexts. Finally, and more importantly, the present research show that perceived societal economic inequality reinforces these associations: the higher the perception that the society is characterized by high levels of economic inequality, the stronger the link between perceived personal economic insecurity and relative deprivation, and the greater the amount of explained variance in anti-elite attitudes. This finding aligns with research showing that economic inequality heightens the salience of social hierarchy and the perceived differences between groups, leading to increases in tension between economic groups, intergroup hostility, and negative wealth-based stereotypes (Morselli & Glaeser, 2018). High level of economic inequality has also been shown to decrease social cohesion (Jay et al., 2019) and increase perceptions of threat, which further impacts the experience of relative deprivation among lower-income groups and status anxiety among higher-income groups (Jetten et al., 2017). Our results have shown that these dynamics may contribute to promote the development of anti-elite attitudes. Therefore, the present findings support the interpretation of the emergence of anti-elite attitudes as partially due to intergroup process, one that hinges on identity threat and intergroup conflict. In other words, the worry regarding one's personal economic situation may enhance intergroup comparison, especially when societal economic disparities are perceived to be large. In such contexts, blaming the elite seems a viable strategy for protecting self-integrity.

It is worth noting that the interaction effect was relatively small, showing modest differences ($\beta \approx \pm 0.02$) in the association between personal economic insecurity and feelings of relative deprivation between those perceiving their country as relatively equal (-1 SD) and those perceiving it as relatively unequal (+1 SD). Although modest, this finding is consistent with effect sizes typically observed for interaction effects, which are generally smaller than those for main effects (Sommet et al., 2023). This small effect size might also be explained by the focus on perceptions of country-level inequality rather than perceptions of inequality

at more local levels or in everyday life, as suggested by some research (e.g., Gimpelson & Treisman, 2018; Rodríguez-Bailón et al., 2025). Future research should replicate these findings and include different levels of perceived inequality to explore whether the effect sizes vary depending on the level of inequality measured.

Limitations

The main limitation of the present research pertains to its cross-sectional design and reliance on self-report measures, which constrain our ability to infer causality. This is even more a concern given the fact that because the data collection was part of a larger project, constructs were measured in a fixed order that did not align with the process tested in the moderated mediation model. Although this order prevents respondents from directly inferring the hypothesized causal sequence, they might have reinterpreted their level of economic insecurity, feelings of deprivation, or perceptions of societal economic inequality in light of their anti-elite attitudes. This reinterpretation could blur the assumed directionality in the mediation model and attenuate causal relationships. Nevertheless, there is no perfect way to overcome such biases, because attempts to reduce one source of bias may inadvertently introduce new ones (Blackwell et al., 2025; Podsakoff et al., 2024). Additionally, the predictors tested here (perceived societal economic inequality, relative deprivation, personal economic insecurity) are all known to be related to stronger belief in the zero-sum nature of economic success (Davidai, 2023; Ongis & Davidai, 2022). Consequently, we cannot rule out the possibility that this third variable – not included in our analyses – might explain some of the associations between the constructs. Experimental studies manipulating the level or the salience of economic insecurity and/or the level of societal economic inequality are needed to establish causality and confirm our interpretation. For example, recent research (Normand et al., 2022) has manipulated perceived economic insecurity by getting psychology students to focus on how the crisis would increase employment in the psychology sector (low economic

insecurity condition) vs. make it harder for young people to find a job (high economic insecurity condition). This manipulation has impacted the participants' propensity to comply with current health regulations. We might therefore expect it could also affect populist attitudes and confidence in institutions. Similarly, previous research has shown that the level of economic inequality can be manipulated (e.g., Moreno-Bella et al., 2023, Sanchez-Rodriguez et al., 2019) with important consequences on further attitudes. Finally, in the present research we focused on populism and distrust in institutions. Future research should examine whether the associations observed in the present study are specific to these anti-elite attitudes or could extend to other negative outgroup attitudes (e.g., welfare chauvinism, where the target group is not the elite but immigrants).

In addition, it is important to note that in the present research we measured group deprivation using the measure previously developed by Elchardus and Spruyt (2016). The particularity of this measure, coined "feelings of relative deprivation" is that it does not explicitly refer to any specific outgroup and ingroup. Thus, although we argue that the effects reported here are due to the salience of ingroup (i.e., the "people") - outgroup (i.e., the "elite") comparisons, the present research does not allow us to draw firm conclusions on this issue. In addition, we cannot rule out the possibility that individual-based relative deprivation, not only group-based relative deprivation, may at least partially explain the relations observed here (e.g., Cooley et al., 2024). Future research should replicate the findings using measures of relative deprivation that more clearly distinguish individual- and group-based deprivation to determine the unique effects of each of these constructs in explaining the association between perceived economic insecurity and anti-elite attitudes.

Finally, since the sample included nine countries, we country-centered the variables and controlled for country. This approach allows us to interpret the effects beyond the influence of any single country. However, our results cannot be generalized to all countries,

and non-preregistered multigroup analyses (see Supplementary Analyses) suggest that some country variations may exist, even though we lacked enough statistical power to properly test them. Future research could further examine these cross-country variations in larger samples.

Conclusion

In conclusion, our results confirm that perceptions of both personal economic situation (i.e., economic insecurity) and the broader societal context (i.e., perceived economic inequality) interact in predicting feelings of relative deprivation, as well as support for anti-elite attitudes (i.e., populist attitudes and distrust in institutions). The present research supports the view that feeling socially devalued, in comparison to more privileged groups, is an important factor in explaining why individuals who feel economically insecure adopt negative attitudes toward ‘the elite’ group. As highlighted, distrust in institutions and elites poses a significant threat to social cohesion, which will become increasingly important in coping with future societal challenges, such as economic crises or climate change. Reducing people’s economic vulnerability, ensuring they personally feel economically protected, and fostering a perception of greater equality in their country are therefore essential not only to mitigate the direct impacts of these crises on their personal situations but also in preventing the emergence of relative deprivation, general distrust, and the consequent erosion social cohesion.

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