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# Capitalising on Crisis? Western European Populists and Covid-19, Past and Future

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## Key Takeaways

- In our previous report Pandemic Populism, we found that while populist leaders in power around the world differed in their responses to Covid-19, most – 12 of 17 – took it seriously while only five downplayed it.
- But because many of the most notable cases of populism are countries in which populists are in opposition, in this piece, we examine the responses of cultural populist parties in opposition to their governments’ policies in nine western European countries: Austria, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain and Sweden.
- Populists are torn because they typically attack their governments but the public tends to “rally around the flag” and support the government during a time of crisis. While we find that all cultural populist parties in western Europe took Covid-19 seriously, we also find that they varied in how much they attacked their governments in the early weeks of the pandemic. Populists attacked their government in countries in which case/death rates were higher.
- By mid-summer, even those parties which had been less aggressive in the early months became more critical and aggressive towards their governments, focusing on concerns about policymaking transparency, restrictions on freedoms and support for struggling businesses.
- China-blaming and promotion of conspiracy theories like QAnon were limited among western European cultural populist politicians, but received support from some of their followers, especially in Germany.
- Finally, we turn to the implications of the economic fallout from Covid-19 for cultural populists. Job-retention schemes have limited the economic fallout from Covid-19 but as these are lifted, job losses will likely increase in small businesses and among service-sector workers and should increase support for populists among these two groups – already more likely than others to support populists.
- And recent technological changes and employers’ realisation that the transition to remote working is not so difficult will make many white-collar workers susceptible to replacement by “telemigrants” and “white collar robots”. Mass job loss among this group, which had been minimally affected by technological change, and the attendant loss of social status could fuel the discontent on which cultural populists thrive.

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## Introduction

At first glance, 2020 does not appear to have been a good year for cultural populist parties<sup>1</sup> in western Europe. They lost their pre-eminent supporter in US president Donald Trump, whom many western European populist leaders had enthusiastically supported in return. And the predominant issue throughout the year, Covid-19, focused everyone's attention on public-health policy – an area on which cultural populists historically place little importance. A public-health crisis reminds voters of the importance of expertise in policymaking – the type of expertise that populists scorn. People also tend to “rally around the flag” and support their leaders in times of crisis. Populists spend much of their time criticising those leaders.

This created a difficult landscape for cultural populist parties, especially during the first weeks of the pandemic. Many tend to almost reflexively attack their governments, but it is difficult to do this during a crisis in which there's such widespread uncertainty and fear and the public wants to trust the government. But unlike Trump or Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro, cultural populist parties in Europe didn't try to downplay Covid-19. Leading populism scholars Cas Mudde and Jakub Wondreys found that cultural populists across Europe took Covid-19 seriously. Yet western European cultural populists still found ways to attack their governments, sometimes for doing too little, sometimes for doing too much, and sometimes for doing the wrong things.

In this report, we analyse the responses of cultural populist parties to Covid-19 in nine western European countries: Austria, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain and Sweden. We analyse differences in these parties' early responses to their governments' actions, how their positions on Covid-19 evolved throughout the year, and what the economic fallout from Covid-19 will likely mean for their future success.

Although cultural populist parties in these countries took Covid-19 seriously, their rhetoric towards their governments differed in the early weeks of the pandemic. Contrary to what we would see in the summer and fall, those who attacked their governments in the early weeks of the pandemic, like France's Marine Le Pen and the Netherlands' Geert Wilders, accused them of not doing enough to prevent the pandemic. Yet other populist leaders, like Finland's Jussi Halla-aho, took a more deferential approach to their governments and admonished party members who attacked it.

Why did we see such variation in cultural populist parties' responses? We investigated the relationship between the degree to which the parties attacked their governments in the first three months of Covid-19 and their countries' case and death rates. We found a positive correlation, suggesting populists were more likely to attack if the government was struggling with Covid-19. But this correlation is both less than perfect and open to multiple interpretations. We argue that electoral concerns are important

for explaining populists' responses, and that several may have chosen to refrain from attacking their governments in order to demonstrate their suitability as partners in future right-wing coalitions.

In the first three months of Covid-19, however, there was great uncertainty about how the virus would spread and everyone, including populists, was erring on the side of caution. How did populists' responses change moving into the summer, when cases started declining and concerns about the effects of prolonged lockdowns on the economy and individual freedoms increased? We found that even though their tone became more aggressive, their substantive concerns were not very different from those of mainstream opposition parties. Populists voiced concerns about the effects of lockdowns on individual freedoms and the economy, and about policymaking non-transparency. Some populist leaders who had attacked their governments for doing too little to combat the virus in the initial weeks now attacked them for doing too much. We also find that, with a few exceptions, cultural populist politicians mostly refrained from attacks on China and from spreading conspiracy theories.

Finally, this report addresses what Covid-19 and its economic fallout will likely mean for the future of cultural populism and party politics in western Europe. The long-term effects of the Covid-19 pandemic will provide cultural populists with several opportunities. Their main demographic support groups include small business owners and manual/service production workers, two groups that have borne the brunt of the pandemic's economic effects. Cultural populists may benefit from the increased hardship that many in these groups will face. But recent technological change and the sudden shift to remote work may also accelerate the trend towards offshoring work that is currently being performed by highly educated individuals whose jobs were previously impervious to offshoring. The loss of social status among these higher-status workers may increase the attractiveness of cultural populist parties to them as well.

## Cultural Populists' Early Responses to Covid-19

Covid-19 presented a challenge to European cultural populist parties because they tend to be niche issue parties, focusing largely on immigration and the EU. The pandemic drew attention away from these issues and towards health policy, on which cultural populist parties tend to place little emphasis. Even when cultural populists do focus on economic issues, these tend to be secondary and instrumental to their core nativist concerns.<sup>2</sup>

Covid-19 also put cultural populists in a difficult position because they are used to attacking their governments. But the public tends to rally around leaders during crises. In a survey of nine western European countries, US think tank Pew found that most respondents in all countries except the UK felt their governments had handled Covid-19 well. Moreover, the taste for populist beliefs and rhetoric has declined. As we examined in our recent piece, the main governing parties have benefitted from a short-term “rally around the flag” effect in their polling.

But like most populist leaders around the world, western European populists took Covid-19 seriously. There are only scattered examples in the early weeks of members of populist parties downplaying the virus, and no party leadership in western Europe appears to have downplayed the virus in the way that more high-profile global figures like Trump and Bolsonaro did. We also found in our recent blog post that while they took a polling hit in the first few months, cultural populist parties have returned to close to pre-Covid-19 levels of support.

### Cultural Populists' Positions Towards Their Governments

While all cultural populist parties in western Europe appear to have taken the virus seriously in the early weeks of Covid-19, they differed in how harshly they attacked their governments. Below, we rate parties on a 1-5 scale of how harshly they attacked their governments during this time. We developed these data based on a review of articles, party leaders' speeches and statements, and party websites including, but not limited to, the sources cited in the case studies below. We define the categories as follows:

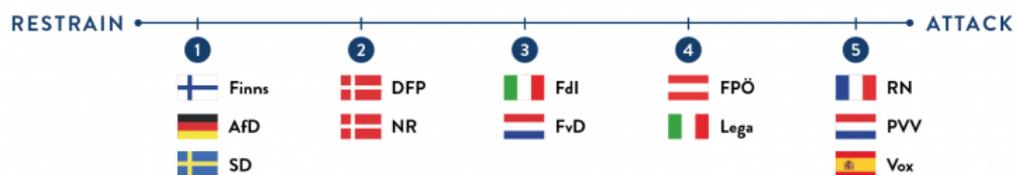
- 1:** These parties refrained from attacking the government and using harsh rhetoric throughout the first three months of the pandemic. Individual members of the party may have attacked the government or used harsh rhetoric but were admonished by at least some of the party leadership for this.
- 2:** These parties refrained from attacking the government and used restrained rhetoric in the early weeks of the pandemic. They became more critical of the governments' policies but continued to use restrained rhetoric as the pandemic went on.

**3:** These parties refrained from attacking the government and used restrained rhetoric in the early weeks of the pandemic but became very critical of government actions and policies after the first few weeks. Their rhetoric remained less aggressive than parties scoring a 4 or 5 throughout the first three months.

**4:** These parties restrained themselves in the earliest days of the pandemic and may have supported early government legislation but were attacking the government by the beginning of April. After that, they were always critical and their rhetoric became aggressive.

**5:** These parties began attacking their governments within days of the beginning of the pandemic and we found little if any evidence of conciliatory language. They remained critical and used aggressive rhetoric throughout.

**Figure 1 – The “Restrain-Attack” scale of cultural populist response to governments during the early weeks of the pandemic**



Abbreviations: Finns—Finns Party; AfD—Alternative for Germany; SD—Sweden Democrats; DFP—Danish People’s Party; NR—New Right; Fdl—Brothers of Italy; FvD—Forum for Democracy; FPÖ—Freedom Party; Lega—League; RN—National Rally; PVV—Party for Freedom; Vox—Vox.

The parties that consistently attacked their government through the beginning of the Covid-19 crisis included the Dutch Party for Freedom (PVV), the French National Rally (RN) and the Spanish Vox. The PVV and RN are led by Wilders and Le Pen, respectively, which are the governments’ main challenger parties on the right in their respective countries. Both criticised their governments’ initial responses as too weak, with Wilders calling for a total lockdown and voting against all the government’s measures as too relaxed.<sup>3</sup> Le Pen called for the borders to be closed on 29 January 2020 and questioned the government about the shortage of masks in February. In early May, she called for making masks compulsory and then published a book about how the crisis reflects the failure of Macron and other “ultra-liberal elites” who pushed globalisation policies that left France vulnerable.

Vox and the Italian Lega also attacked their governments in the early weeks of Covid-19. Unlike the other attacking parties, Vox attacked the government for violating the people’s right to free movement. They blamed the government for promoting feminist marches in cities on 7 and 8 March, which they claimed helped spread the virus. But then in May, they encouraged marches against the lockdown. Lega has been the highest polling party in Italy for several years and while it was in the previous government,

leader Matteo Salvini withdrew the party because he thought that he could force an election and become the prime minister. That failed and save for a brief period in the middle of March, he has attacked the government for not going far enough with its lockdowns and for its confusing decrees.

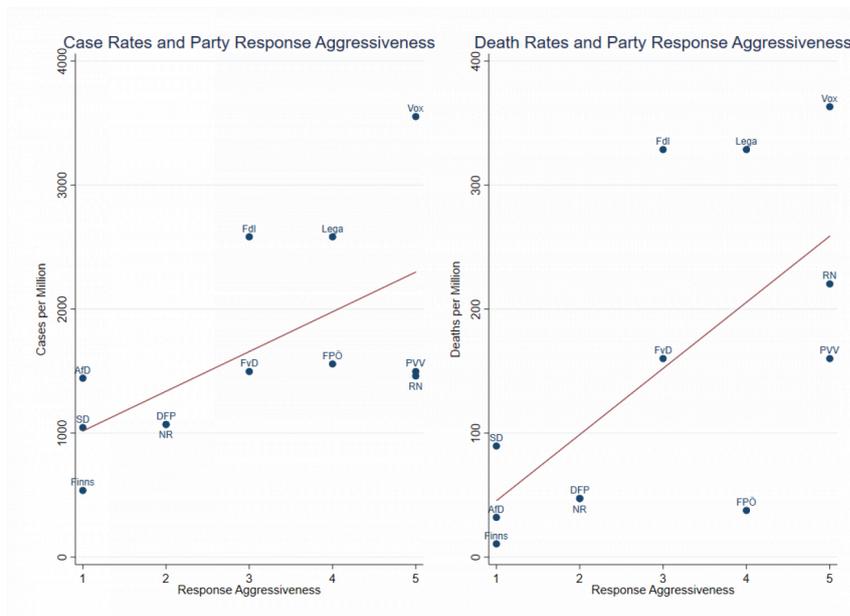
The Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ), Dutch Forum for Democracy (FvD) and Brothers of Italy (Fdl) also started attacking their governments after the first few weeks of the pandemic. Both the FPÖ and FvD voted for major Covid-19 legislation<sup>4</sup> in the middle of March, but then returned to criticising the government in subsequent weeks. At the end of March, the FPÖ accused the government of lying about plans to open by Easter and complained about excessive government monitoring. Despite its early support for the government, the FvD was criticising the government by May because its plans to ease the lockdown didn't go far enough. The Fdl is a new cultural populist party that shares Lega's anti-EU and anti-immigration positions but is more socially conservative. Its leader, Giorgia Meloni has criticised the government for opacity and for governing by decree, but has tried to distinguish herself from Salvini by eschewing his harsh tone and political stunts.

The Nordic cultural populist parties and the Alternative for Germany (AfD) largely refrained from attacking their governments in the early weeks of the pandemic. Leader Jussi Halla-aho of the Finns Party supported the government's response to Covid-19 and reproached those in his ranks who attacked the government. Even when he criticized the government's actions, he refrained from populist style and argued that there was nothing that they could have done about the lack of PPE. Despite the Swedish government's much more relaxed approach to Covid-19, the Sweden Democrats (SD) praised the government in the early weeks of the pandemic. The AfD was divided over how to respond to Covid-19, with one of its parliamentary leaders, Alice Weidel, advocating restraint while others wanted the party to attack the government. Merkel's actions have also been popular with the German public, which has made it difficult for the party to criticise her. The Danish People's Party (DfP) and the New Right (NR), a new cultural populist party that has been winning support from the DfP, have supported the government and voted for its measures, but criticised its lack of transparency and aspects of the lockdowns.

## Explaining Party Positions in the Early Weeks of Covid-19

As we've seen above, different populist parties took different approaches towards their governments in the early months of Covid-19. Some populist parties in the same country took different approaches. Why do we see such variation in the responses of populists to their governments' actions? A leading possibility is that populists took a more aggressive response in countries where cases and deaths were higher. We collected data on cumulative cases and deaths per million inhabitants through the second week of April (commencing 12 April). Below, we have plotted these against our measure of party aggressiveness.

**Figure 2 – Case/death rates and party-response aggressiveness**



**Note:** Data on cases and deaths come from [https://ncov.dxy.cn/ncovh5/view/en\\_pneumonia?from=dxy&](https://ncov.dxy.cn/ncovh5/view/en_pneumonia?from=dxy&). Calculations of case and death rates by author based on end of 2019 population statistics from <https://worldpopulationreview.com>.

As we can see, there's a positive correlation between case/death rates in the first month of Covid-19 and cultural populist parties' response aggressiveness. In one sense, this is the relationship that we might expect to see because when a country is hit hard by a crisis, the opposition can blame the government for having created the conditions that made it so bad. This was especially true in France and Spain, where Le Pen and the leaders of Vox attacked their governments for allowing travel and political events that might have helped spread the virus.

In another sense, it may be a bit surprising that populists attacked the government most harshly in countries which suffered most in the early weeks of the pandemic. We might expect the strongest “rally around the flag” effect in the countries which are most severely affected. Even if populists want to attack the government and have reason to do it, harsh criticisms may not sit well with the public.

To understand why several populist parties in countries facing the worst of the early pandemic attacked the government, we need to understand their underlying political incentives, especially regarding future coalition formation. Attacking the government would not hurt or could even possibly improve the future government formation prospects of the RN, Vox, Lega, FPÖ and PVV. The RN and Lega are the largest opposition parties in their countries and would seek to lead a future coalition. They may benefit in the long run by establishing a track record of distinguishing their policy proposals from those of the government. Vox and the FPÖ's prospects of joining a future right-wing government are likely secure because there is no alternative to Vox in Spain and the FPÖ has already participated in several governments. The PVV has assumed the role of a permanent opposition party.

But several of the other cultural populist parties have faced a *cordon sanitaire* against their participation in government and want to build a reputation as suitable partners for a right-wing coalition. Future political concerns, especially regarding coalition formation, likely played an important role in cultural populists' early responses to Covid-19. The SD and Finns Party are trying to make themselves potential coalition candidates in future right-wing governments. There's been a taboo among all parties in Sweden against forming a coalition with the SD and there's been a taboo in Finland against forming a coalition with the Finns since the party split in 2017 and the moderate faction left the party. The same applies to the FvD, which has similar positions to the PVV, but has positioned itself as a more mainstream alternative.<sup>5</sup>

## The Evolution of Cultural Populists' Responses

While cultural populist parties varied in the degree to which they attacked their governments in the first few weeks of the Covid-19 pandemic, all parties that initially refrained from attacking the government became more critical in the subsequent months as the “rally around the flag” effect wore off and governments’ errors became more apparent. Most have continued to restrain themselves relative to the more aggressive parties – except for the Sweden Democrats, which have accused the government of not listening to international experts about the value of masks and called the government’s relaxed Covid-19 policies a corona massacre. The parties that attacked their governments from the beginning have continued to attack, although in some cases, they have gone from criticising their governments for doing too little to criticising them for doing too much.

Cultural populist parties’ criticisms of the government have been in three main areas: their alleged lack of transparency in Covid-19 policymaking, excessive intrusions into personal freedom and for harming businesses without sufficient compensation. While the most critical parties raised some of these concerns within the first few weeks of the pandemic, they have become the most widely shared concerns in the subsequent months. Several have also criticised their governments for inappropriate safety precautions at nursing homes. Cultural populists’ positions and arguments often have not been very different from those of non-populist opposition parties in these areas, but they have used harsher rhetoric to convey these positions. Some cultural populist parties and politicians have followed Trump in blaming the Chinese government for the pandemic and encouraging conspiracy theories, but these positions have been less widespread.

Increasingly, cultural populist parties have attacked their governments for being opaque in their decision-making. The FPÖ attacked the government for non-transparency and leader Norbert Hofer accused it of treating Austrians like small children. While they remained divided over how to respond to the government, the AfD decided to follow its playbook from the refugee crisis and accuse the government of dictatorial action for lack of responsiveness to their questions. Party leader Alexander Gauland went from complimenting Merkel’s handling of the crisis in March to accusing her of leading a “war cabinet” that was attacking the basic rights and freedoms of Germans in October.

The second area in which cultural populists have increased their attacks on the government has been with the effect of lockdowns on personal freedoms. The main criticism is that while restrictions on freedom were necessary in the beginning because of the growing number of cases and uncertainty surrounding the virus, they were no longer necessary by mid-summer because the number of cases had started to decline by mid-summer and the virus was better understood. Cultural populists accused governments of maintaining lockdowns beyond what was “objectively justified”. The FvD raised concerns about the effect that restrictions on freedom were having on mental health. Several leaders argued that lockdowns should

have been differentiated by region to prevent excessive restrictions on freedom where case numbers were low.

Related to their concerns about excessive restrictions on personal freedoms, cultural populist parties began to express greater concerns about the effect of lockdowns on the economy. Vox called for the Spanish government to allow small businesses to open in March if they took the proper precautions. The Danish New Right has focused on the impact on small business since the beginning of Covid-19. The FPÖ argued that the government paid too little attention to the economic fallout and that there should be special support for the most affected industries, like restaurants and tourism. The debate in Finland has shifted away from medicine towards economic issues. Even in Sweden, which never had a lockdown, the Sweden Democrats have called for more government support for small- and medium-sized businesses.

## Cultural Populists, China and Covid-19 Conspiracies

In these areas however, while cultural populists' rhetoric was usually more heated, their positions did not differ significantly from other right-wing parties in opposition. Two areas in which some cultural populist parties went further than mainstream conservatives were in their criticisms of China and their encouragement of those peddling Covid-19 conspiracy theories. But we should also note that neither of these positions appears to have been widespread among western European cultural populist politicians, and certainly not as widespread as their criticisms of government transparency and restrictions on freedom.

While Trump and members of his administration blamed the Chinese government and called Covid-19 the "China Virus" (or some variant thereof) throughout the pandemic, most cultural populist party leaders in Europe showed restraint in criticising China. Sweden Democrats' leader Jimmie Åkesson penned an op-ed blaming the Chinese government for the spread of the virus, but this focused on sanitary conditions and animal welfare in wet markets. In the early weeks of the pandemic, Le Pen noted that it was reasonable to question whether the origins of the virus were natural or lab-produced but went out of her way to defend French citizens of Chinese origins against suspicion. The European Conservatives and Reformists, a political group in the European Parliament consisting of several cultural populist members including the Fdl, Vox and the Sweden Democrats called for an international investigation into China's handling of the epidemic and its links to the WHO in April.

Populist leaders in Italy and especially Spain have been more critical of China as the pandemic has worn on. China has been an important political issue in Italy for the past few years as Italy was the only member of the G7 to sign China's Memorandum of Understanding on its Belt and Road Initiative. The anti-establishment populist Five Star Movement strongly supported this but both Lega leader Salvini and Fdl leader Meloni have been more critical. Both cultural populist leaders shared videos on social media about Chinese experiments with coronaviruses as a potential source of the outbreak. Leaders of Vox in Spain have been even more critical, consistently calling Covid-19 the Chinese Virus and accusing the Chinese government of wanting to impose a progressive and globalist tyranny on Europe. They supported Trump's move to withhold funding from the WHO, saying that it was beholden to the Chinese government. Party leader Santiago Abascal has suggested that China created the virus.

Covid-19 and government responses have also given rise to a variety of conspiracy theories which, while not attracting much open support from cultural populist politicians, have attracted support from some of their followers. The most prominent have so-called anti-hygiene movements, such as Widerstand 2020 and Querdenken 711 in Germany.<sup>6</sup> These groups oppose government requirements to wear masks and

other measures that they see as unreasonable impositions on freedom. Conspiracy theories abound in these movements, including the infamous QAnon conspiracy that Trump is fighting a shadowy international cabal of paedophiles and the conspiracy that governments and/or Bill Gates are using 5G towers to spread Covid-19. These conspiracies have gained followers in other European countries but are most prominent in Germany. The leadership of the AfD has kept its distance from these protestors, but they have received support from members of the far-right wing of the party.

## The Return of Cultural Populists' Core Issues?

What has happened with cultural populists' core issues: the EU and immigration? While the EU came under criticism in the early weeks of the pandemic for its lack of an organised response, it passed a massive recovery fund that represented a significant compromise between northern and southern member states. There were riots in [Sweden](#) and terrorist attacks in [France](#) and [Austria](#), but concern about these issues appears to be more limited in scope and duration than previous waves. Immigration has been of low salience but may become more important if populists continue efforts to link Covid-19 to border security and globalisation.

The EU's performance in the early weeks of the pandemic was widely seen as [lacklustre](#). But by November, majorities of survey respondents in eight EU countries had a [favourable view](#) of how the EU had responded to Covid-19. The EU had a [breakthrough](#) at the end of July as the member countries agreed to a €750 billion recovery fund for 2021 through to 2026, more than half of which will be distributed as direct grants, with much of that money going to Italy and Spain. There was strong opposition to any form of common debt from the "Frugal Five" countries (Austria, Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands and Sweden), which wanted funds to be [distributed](#) as loans rather than grants. But the programme earmarks the grants for specific purposes including the green transition, job creation and tackling inequality. It requires states to create national recovery [plans](#) for how they will disburse the funds. While southern European cultural populists may balk at restrictions on how their countries spend the money, that the funds won't come in the form of loans is a major victory for them and their countries and, barring any major changes in countries' fiscal states, this should help reduce intra-EU conflict over fiscal issues and populists' ability to exploit them.

While immigration has been less salient during the pandemic, cultural populists are likely to use the pandemic to promote their longstanding concerns with globalisation and open borders. Cultural populists will tell – and [have been telling](#) – voters that if they had been in charge, there would have been enough restrictions on entry to have prevented the mass spread of Covid-19. Le Pen and other French far-right politicians have been [arguing](#) since the beginning of the pandemic that open borders and globalisation have increased countries' vulnerabilities to pandemics and stripped them of their capacity to manufacture the necessary equipment. Other cultural populists will likely adopt the same messaging and citizens may become more accepting of border controls and the economic trade-offs involved in reshoring some manufacturing.

Although the pandemic has not presented cultural populists with an opportunity to press their core issues of the EU and immigration, it should provide them with opportunities on border security and globalisation – especially considering the likely economic fallout from the pandemic.

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## Economic Fallout and the Future of Support for Cultural Populists

EU-wide unemployment was up from a multi-year low of about 6.5 per cent at the beginning of 2020 to just over 7.5 per cent by the year's end. But this is likely an underestimate of true EU-wide unemployment, because much of the economic fallout from the Covid-19 pandemic likely had not been felt yet. Job-retention schemes across Europe were supporting about 50 million workers in May, and while these were winding down by the end of the year, they were still supporting many workers whose jobs are not likely to return.

The Covid-19 pandemic and its economic fallout could create opportunities for cultural populists to increase their support both with the general population and with specific occupational groups. Historically, severe economic downturns have benefitted populists in the long-run and the economic effects of Covid-19 in advanced economies are likely to be long lasting. Moreover, the effects of Covid-19 and recent technological change have fallen hardest on some of the occupational groups that are most likely to support cultural populist parties. Finally, among those occupational groups that don't typically support cultural populists, Covid-19 has accelerated the adoption of technological changes that will make their jobs easier to offshore and automate, potentially creating a loss of social status that has been an important determinant of support for cultural populist parties.

Beyond a general opportunity to benefit from economic fallout, cultural populists can use Covid-19 and the fallout from the rapid adoption of new technologies as an opportunity to increase their support among groups that are already disproportionately likely to support them. Political sociologists Daniel Oesch and Line Rennwald found that support for cultural populists is overrepresented in three occupational categories: small-business owners, manual-production workers and service-sector workers. Covid-19 has had an especially harsh impact on these groups. Many small businesses have had to close their doors and while most of these businesses in Europe have been supported throughout the pandemic by job-retention schemes, many may not be viable when these schemes end. Many manufacturing firms continued production under strict hygiene standards, but service workers in restaurants, hospitality and the arts have borne the brunt of pandemic-induced shutdowns.

Furthermore, Covid-19 has accelerated disruptive economic trends that recent technological change had already started. While labour market changes over the past few decades have largely affected workers in manufacturing, recent technological changes have increased pressure on small businesses and service-sector workers. Covid-19 has educated everyone about the possibility of working from home and several scholars were arguing even before Covid-19 that improvements in video-conference and collaborative-work software were increasing the number of jobs that could be done at home. Large internet platforms

like Amazon allow for goods to be delivered almost anywhere, and their purchasing power allows them to outcompete smaller businesses.

These changes have had a negative impact on small brick-and-mortar businesses, and service workers for large and small businesses in the food, entertainment, retail, hospitality and travel sectors. This has fuelled discussion that the recovery after the first few months of Covid-19 was K-shaped, where industries and workers that can work remotely either haven't felt the impact of Covid-19 or have recovered, while those that can't have experienced the brunt of the negative effects. If increases in working from home and reductions in work travel become permanent, many of the small businesses and service jobs that cater to workplaces, commuters and business travellers could disappear.

This creates an opportunity for cultural populist parties to win over more voters in these occupational groups. Research shows that previous job losses due to technological change and trade with China increased support for nationalism and cultural populists in Europe. The after-effects of Covid-19 and technological change could allow cultural populist parties to make similar gains among small business owners and service-sector workers.

Where these changes create opportunities for cultural populists, they create challenges for centre-left and centre-right parties. Centre-left and centre-right parties compete with cultural populists over manual/service sector workers and small business owners respectively. These occupational groups comprise almost 30 per cent of the workforce in Europe and two-thirds of cultural populist parties' total supporters. But centre-left and centre-right parties get most of their support from highly educated, white-collar occupational groups like knowledge workers and managers. Many of them can work from home and have experienced little Covid-19-related work disruption and job loss. Covid-19 and technological change may introduce an economic cleavage into centre-left and centre-right parties between catering to those who can work from home and are largely shielded from adverse effects and those who experience the brunt of them. This may make it difficult for centre-left and centre-right parties to craft economic policies that appeal to both groups while cultural populist parties can focus their efforts on policies that benefit small business and service workers.

While Covid-19 has had a lower impact on most white-collar workers so far, technological change and employers' realisation that remote working can work will likely cause job loss in these occupational groups too. Technological change increases opportunities for "telemigration", where employers contract work to lower-paid foreign workers, and to deploy "white-collar robots". Populists may benefit from some of these job losses even if they occur among people who typically don't vote for populists. Recent research finds that the decline in social status because of job loss is an important determinant of support for cultural populist parties. While technological change in the past few decades has benefitted highly educated workers, remote work threatens up to 80 per cent of jobs— many of which have not previously been exposed to this type of competition. Even if only a small percentage of those potentially affected by these changes lose their jobs and have difficulty finding stable employment at a similar status level of

work (which was a major problem for those who lost high-paying manufacturing jobs), such a large-scale loss of social status could fuel the same types of grievances that have made workers in manufacturing a core component of cultural populist support.

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## Conclusion

There has been speculation that Covid-19 would kill populism because it would remind people of the importance of good governance. It doesn't appear that this has happened with populist leaders around the world or cultural populist parties in western Europe. Most populists around the world have taken Covid-19 seriously and we've found here that cultural populist parties in western Europe have been adept at highlighting the mistakes that their governments have made. Populists have used their governments' mistakes to highlight issues that they've long stressed – that there's too little control over borders and that the government hasn't taken concerns about globalisation seriously.

But populists haven't been able to take advantage of high case and death rates in some countries either. Even in Sweden, where the Social Democrat-led government downplayed Covid-19, the Sweden Democrats have only seen their poll numbers rebound to about where they were before Covid-19. It doesn't appear that populists have yet been able to capitalise on mainstream parties' policy mistakes in response to the virus. And while most cultural populist parties in western Europe have kept their distance from him, it's possible that the fallout from Trump's loss will diminish their support.

Altogether, the analysis that we've presented here suggests that cultural populist parties across western Europe will survive Covid-19 and could even thrive as a result. The restrained response of several of these parties will help them appeal to mainstream right parties during future coalition formation. Covid-19 threatens to weigh down western European economies for the next few years, which could increase support for cultural populists among employment groups with which they are already strong. But the bigger long-run boon to cultural populists may be structural changes in the economy that technological change will cause but which Covid-19 has accelerated. These threaten job loss and economic displacement on a scale potentially larger than the loss of manufacturing jobs over the last few decades. While the breadth of this disruption may draw strong responses from mainstream parties, a lack of stability and opportunity will generate plenty of the grievances that fuel support for cultural populists.

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## Footnotes

1. ^ In our [previous reports](#), we define cultural populist parties as parties claiming that “the true people are the native members of the nation-state, and outsiders can include immigrants, criminals, ethnic and religious minorities, and cosmopolitan elites.” This term is synonymous with Cas Mudde’s [Populist Radical Right Parties](#).
  2. ^ Cas Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*, ch. 5. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press (2007).
  3. ^ Tjitske Akkerman ‘The Netherlands’ in *Populism and the Pandemic*, eds. Giorgos Katsambekis and Yannis Stavrakakis.
  4. ^ Akkerman ‘The Netherlands.’
  5. ^ The FvD is unlikely to be in a coalition in the near-term however as their support [imploded](#) in late 2020 because of anti-semitism charges and their confused Covid-19 response.
  6. ^ Widerstand translates as ‘resistance’ while Querdenken roughly translates as ‘thinking outside the box.’
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