

False consensus beliefs and populist attitudes

Nils D. Steiner¹ | Claudia Landwehr¹ | Philipp Harms²

¹Department of Political Science, Johannes Gutenberg University (JGU) Mainz, Mainz, Germany

²Department of Business and Economics, Johannes Gutenberg University (JGU) Mainz, Mainz, Germany

Correspondence

Nils D. Steiner, Department of Political Science, Johannes Gutenberg University (JGU) Mainz, Mainz 55099, Germany.
Email: steiner@politik.uni-mainz.de

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Abstract

A well-established finding from social psychology is that people tend to hold “false consensus beliefs,” that is, they regularly overestimate how many others agree with their own opinions. However, the consequences of such beliefs for citizens' assessment of democratic legitimacy are still largely unexplored. We reason that false consensus beliefs may give citizens the erroneous impression that most fellow citizens share their political preferences while political elites fail to follow this apparent will of the majority. False consensus beliefs might therefore play an important role in the development of populist attitudes to politics. Using original survey data from Germany, we document a robust observational relationship between false consensus beliefs and populist attitudes. This association applies to all subdimensions of populist attitudes, holds for individuals with different self-placements on the left–right scale, and extends to related measures of political support (external efficacy and political trust). Our findings suggest a novel cause of populist attitudes, rooted in humans' tendency to project their views onto others—a tendency that today's high-choice media environments could exacerbate.

KEYWORDS

belief polarization, beliefs about public opinion, false consensus beliefs, perceived responsiveness, political support, populist attitudes

INTRODUCTION

The rise of populist parties and candidates in Western democracies over the course of the last two decades has often been explained by referring to citizens' growing dissatisfaction with the way democracies are working (Berman, 2021; Mudde, 2021). There exists an apparent gap between expectations and evaluations of democracy that Norris (2011) has termed

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the “democratic deficit,” and that Ferrín and Kriesi (2016) have tried to map and measure. However, there is considerable variation not only in citizens' expectations, but also in their evaluations of democracy. Looking at indicators like satisfaction with democracy, political trust, and political efficacy across different surveys, we always see that some are (relatively) happy with the way democracy is working, while others are deeply frustrated. Where do these differences in the evaluation of democratic performance come from? Clearly, policymaking in contemporary democracies seems to serve some preferences—those of people with higher education and socioeconomic status—better than those of others (Elsässer & Schäfer, 2023; Mathisen et al., 2023). However, while the better-off tend to be more sanguine in their evaluation than less privileged groups (e.g., Schäfer, 2012), variation within the groups is considerable as well. Moreover, considering the offer populists make to dissatisfied citizens, namely, to prevent the “will of the people” from being obstructed by “corrupt elites,” it seems that dissatisfaction with democracy is driven by one particular aspect of its performance: responsiveness to citizens' preferences. Assuming that such responsiveness either prevails or does not, apparent differences in its perception must be due to differences in information and information-processing among citizens (Hillen et al., 2024).

With this paper, we seek to elucidate an informational misperception that may be central to the evaluation of democratic responsiveness and the formation of populist attitudes in particular: “false consensus beliefs.” By false consensus beliefs, we refer to the perception that one's own policy preferences are shared by more people overall than is actually the case.¹ The human tendency to overestimate support for one's own position is well established in a broad literature within social psychology (Krueger & Clement, 1994; Marks & Miller, 1987; Robbins & Krueger, 2005; Ross et al., 1977) and beyond (Bursztyn & Yang, 2022). Respective surveys and experiments show that, in the extreme, individuals whose views are shared only by a small minority may erroneously believe that their views are shared by a large majority. Such false consensus beliefs may have consequences for the evaluation of democratic responsiveness and legitimacy, as individuals subject to it will interpret the government or parliament's failure to pass legislation in keeping with own policy preferences as a failure to obey the majority will. It is easy to see how such impressions create a resonance base for populist sentiment and mobilization.

In this study, we will argue that false consensus beliefs may nurture—or at least reinforce—populist attitudes. Empirically, we test for an association between false consensus beliefs and populist attitudes through an analysis of observational survey data from the German GESIS Panel.pop (Bosnjak et al., 2018). To measure false consensus beliefs, we fielded a set of items that asked individuals for their estimates of public opinion on a set of controversial policy issues. Importantly, this (traditional) way of measuring false consensus beliefs from specific factual beliefs about public opinion, rather than as an attitude, sets our study apart from one previous study which has looked at the connection between false consensus beliefs and populist attitudes (Schulz et al., 2020). Our results document a robust observational relationship between false consensus beliefs and populist attitudes. This association applies to all subdimensions of populist attitudes, is robust to different ways of measuring false consensus beliefs, holds for individuals with different self-placements on the left–right scale, and extends to related measures of political support (external efficacy and political trust).

¹The literature usually ascribes “false consensus beliefs” to a “false consensus bias” or “effect.” Another closely related concept is “social projection,” which can be defined as “the process by which people come to believe that others are similar to them” (Krueger, 2007, p. 2). Notably, social projection can sometimes be a useful heuristic that helps to form accurate beliefs. Because we are not interested in the projection process per se but rather in the consequences of making *errors* in the direction of one's own opinion, we prefer the term “false consensus beliefs” over these alternatives for this article.

FALSE CONSENSUS BELIEFS AND THEIR RELEVANCE FOR POPULIST ATTITUDES

By describing the “false consensus effect,” numerous studies have shown that people's beliefs about other people's opinions are often erroneous and biased toward their own views (Bursztyn & Yang, 2022; Krueger & Clement, 1994; Marks & Miller, 1987; Robbins & Krueger, 2005; Ross et al., 1977). This body of research shows that the bias applies across a range of domains, including people's political preferences.

Various explanations for the false consensus effect have been proposed. In their seminal review, Marks and Miller (1987) identified four key mechanisms: (1) Selective exposure and cognitive availability, where individuals are disproportionately exposed to information suggesting that others share their positions; (2) salience and focus of attention, whereby individuals overestimate the prevalence of their own positions due to heightened cognitive attention to these positions; (3) logical information processing, where individuals think that others reason similarly and therefore come to similar positions; and (4) motivational processes, in which false consensus beliefs arise from goal-oriented motivated reasoning (Kunda, 1990) as individuals seek validation in assuming agreement with others. Regarding the first three cognitive mechanisms, Oeberst and Imhoff (2023) have recently proposed a more parsimonious account. Accordingly, false consensus beliefs result from a fundamental belief that one's own experience is a reasonable reference in combination with the tendency toward belief-consistent information processing. Despite such nuances, there is broad agreement in psychology that both cognitive and motivational mechanisms play a role, and that false consensus beliefs emerge from both human psychology and from social contexts that determine the information about the views of others that people encounter.

In light of their potential significance for legitimacy perceptions, it seems surprising that there is only limited research within political science on how false consensus beliefs matter in the political domain. At the level of political elites, studies show that even politicians, who face strong incentives to form accurate perceptions of public opinion, tend to hold false consensus beliefs (e.g., Broockman & Skovron, 2018; Pereira, 2021; Sevenans et al., 2023). This finding comes with worrisome implications: If democratically elected politicians hold inaccurate perceptions of what voters want, and act upon those, democratic responsiveness will suffer (Walgrave et al., 2024).

At the same time, there is little research on the potentially pernicious political consequences of false consensus beliefs among citizens. Specifically, we are not aware of research addressing the question of how false consensus beliefs among citizens are associated with their evaluation of democratic legitimacy, their levels of political support, or their inclination to hold populist attitudes (but see the discussion on Schulz et al., 2020 below). This is surprising, given that a core criterion of democratic legitimacy is policy responsiveness, that is, the degree to which political decisions are in line with what a majority of citizens want (Dahl, 1971; Pitkin, 1967). To the extent that citizens accept this criterion, they should perceive political decisions as more legitimate when they are believed to be supported by a (large) public majority. By extension, political institutions should be perceived as more legitimate if they regularly take decisions that are seen as congruent with perceived majority preferences.

In line with this reasoning, previous survey experimental studies indicate that citizens ascribe more legitimacy to decisions that are supported by most other citizens, regardless of their own preferences. Wrtil and Wäckerle (2023) find that fictitious policy decisions by the EU are rated as more legitimate when supported by “most citizens,” even when these are incongruent with individuals' own preference. Likewise, Arnesen et al. (2019) report that large majorities in fictitious referendums boost support for governments following referendum results, especially among those who personally perceive the outcome as unfavorable. While such experimental studies can purposefully manipulate information on majority support of policy decisions, in

the empirical world it is citizens' *perceptions* of public opinion, or second-order beliefs about majority preferences, that should matter for legitimacy assessments. If these are systematically biased toward their own views, citizens may perceive responsiveness as low and question the legitimacy of political decisions, even when these decisions are actually congruent with public majorities.

In this way, false consensus beliefs are likely to be especially crucial for the appeal of populism—the association we focus on in this study. According to the dominant ideational approach to populism (Hawkins et al., 2018; Mudde, 2004), populism is a political worldview, a “thin-centered ideology.” According to this populist worldview, there is a “general will of the people,” which should be implemented without distortion but is obstructed by an “evil” political elite. Scholars within the ideational school commonly distinguish three essential components of a populist worldview (Castanho Silva et al., 2018; Erisen et al., 2021; Hawkins et al., 2018; Wuttke et al., 2020): Popular sovereignty, anti-elitism, and Manichean outlook. Popular sovereignty (or people-centrism) refers to the belief in a single will of the homogenous “people” and the demand that it must be implemented without restriction (Schulz et al., 2018). Anti-elitism refers to a repudiation of “the elite,” which is seen as self-serving and corrupt and as betraying the “will of the people.” Partly inherent to these convictions is the Manichean outlook, an antagonistic worldview which sees politics as a moral struggle between these forces, that is, the “good people” and the “evil elite” (van Prooijen et al., 2022).

We argue that all three of these populist ideas are more appealing to individuals who hold false consensus beliefs. The connection is most obvious for popular sovereignty. First, the more someone believes that his/her policy preferences are widely shared by most other citizens, the more appealing it will become to think of public opinion in terms of a unified will of the people. In fact, false consensus beliefs and the belief in a general will of the people can be viewed as co-constitutive. Yet, while the former refers to (egocentrically biased) factual beliefs about the distribution of public opinion on specific policy issues, the latter refers to a generalized attitude. Second, for those who believe that most of the public agrees with their views, it will also appear attractive that political decisions should always follow the general will of the people (cf. Landwehr & Harms, 2020; Werner, 2020).

In addition, individuals who hold minority views but believe that these views are widely shared by their fellow citizens may often face policy decisions that do not conform with their own views. Yet, as they believe that these views are widely shared, they may come to perceive political elites as out of touch not only with their own views and preferences but also with those of the citizens at large. This is likely to fuel the impression of elites standing in the way of the will of the people, leading to resentment toward political elites. In short, false consensus beliefs may trigger anti-elitism. Taken together, false consensus beliefs may then also result in a Manichean worldview which conceives of politics as a moral struggle between “the good people” and “the evil elite.”

As holding false consensus beliefs may increase individuals' receptiveness to all three components of a populist worldview, we expect the following:

H1. Individuals who hold false consensus beliefs tend to score higher on populist attitudes.

While we, thus far, have presented arguments according to which holding false consensus may causally result in populist attitudes, an association between false consensus beliefs may also arise through other mechanisms. While the observational nature of our empirical study will not allow us to clarify the direction of causality, we discuss three such possibilities here to provide a nuanced theoretical argument—and a framework for future research on the nexus between false consensus beliefs and populist attitudes.

First, there could be reverse causality in that, when forming beliefs about public opinion, individuals adopt beliefs that validate their populist worldview. This hypothesis is proposed by Schulz et al. (2020, p. 208) who argue from a social identity perspective that “individuals who have strongly internalized this vision of the people could be prone to projecting their own opinion onto others in order to strengthen their in-group's status and confirm their impression of having legitimate yet suppressed positions.” Second, false consensus beliefs and populist attitudes could have common psychological antecedents. For example, it has been shown that certain traits such as the need for cognition may, by increasing the tendency for accuracy over goal-oriented motivated reasoning, lead to a reduced tendency to hold false consensus beliefs (Nir, 2011). A higher need for cognition could also predict lower levels of populist attitudes, though the empirical evidence is mixed (Erisen et al., 2021). Third, elite cueing may play a role, too: When populist politicians communicate to their supporters that their policy proposals are supported by large (silent) majorities, their supporters may come to believe such statements (cf. Schulz et al., 2020, p. 207). This may cause (populist) supporters of populist parties to overestimate how many others share their policy preferences as a result of the elite messages received.

It is important to note that these accounts are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, these mechanisms may be mutually reinforcing, contributing to a belief system among individuals with certain cognitive traits in which false consensus beliefs trigger populist sentiment, populist sentiment reinforces false consensus beliefs, and populist elite messages strengthen both false consensus beliefs and populist sentiment. Unraveling these mechanisms is challenging; we will discuss related suggestions in the conclusion. For now, our goal in this study is more modest: We aim to test for an observational association between false consensus beliefs and populist attitudes—which could in principle arise from any of these mechanisms or through a combination of those. Nevertheless, we seek to ensure that an association between false consensus beliefs and populist attitudes is not just due to both constructs being associated with holding certain policy positions. To do so, we measured false consensus beliefs on a diverse set of policy positions, ran regressions in which we control for policy positions, and tested whether the association holds for individuals with different positions on the left–right scale.

DATA AND METHODS

We use survey data from the GESIS Panel.pop (Bosnjak et al., 2018) to examine the association between false consensus beliefs and populist attitudes.² The GESIS Panel.pop Population Sample (formerly known as the “GESIS Panel”) is a mixed-mode panel based on random survey samples of the adult German-speaking population in Germany. It started in February 2014 with a cohort of about 4900 panelists, based on a register-based probabilistic sample of the German-speaking population aged between 18 and 70 years with permanent residence in Germany. Refreshment samples, consisting of randomly recruited respondents aged 18 and above, have been added in 2016, 2018, 2021, and 2023. As of April 2024, the GESIS Panel.pop included about 5400 panelists in the active panel. Due to wave and item nonresponse, we are able to include about 3500 individuals in our regression analyses based on data from 2021 (see below). The surveys, currently four per year, are carried out in mixed mode consisting of either postal or online questionnaires.

In terms of similarity to census data, the GESIS Panel.pop achieves a similar quality as other established general population surveys in Germany (Bosnjak et al., 2018). Moreover, distributions of voting intentions for national elections in the panel track the results reported

²Extensive documentation for the GESIS Panel.pop is available at <https://www.gesis.org/en/gesis-panel/documentation/documentation-gesis-panelpop>.

TABLE 1 Issue items for measuring false consensus beliefs.

Short name	Wording	Against (%)	Partly/Partly (%)	In favor (%)	N (valid)
Lift COVID measures	“The regulations to combat the corona pandemic should now be lifted as they restrict the economy and civil liberties too much”	39.8	34.2	26.0	4332
Abolish right to asylum	“In order to limit immigration to Germany, the basic right to asylum should be abolished”	52.5	30.1	17.4	4320
Return EU powers	“Central decision-making powers of the European Union should be returned to the nation states”	32.4	40.1	26.8	4305
Restrict import	“In order to protect the German economy, the import of foreign products should be restricted”	42.0	41.0	17.0	4328
Mandatory women's quota	“The representation of women in all important political, economic and social bodies should be enforced with a mandatory quota of women”	31.4	33.4	35.1	4328
Higher taxes on the rich	“High incomes should be taxed much more heavily in Germany”	12.7	25.0	62.3	4331
Higher unemployment benefits	“The welfare state benefits for the poor and the unemployed (“Hartz IV”) should be increased significantly”	32.1	41.1	26.8	4327

Note: Percentage shares are based on weighted data.

by high-quality pollsters closely (Steiner & Landwehr, 2018). Though imperfections remain,³ the GESIS Panel.pop is thus a high-quality survey which represents the German public overall reasonably well. For our endeavor, this is crucial as we aim to assess to which extent respondents' estimates of public opinion in Germany deviate from the true value. All our analyses also make use of the design weights provided by the GESIS Panel.pop.

The questionnaires of the GESIS Panel.pop include both longitudinal core studies as well as studies by third-party researchers. Our study, entitled "False Consensus Beliefs in Politics and Populist Attitudes" (the study description is available at <https://www.gesis.org/en/gesis-panel/documentation/documentation-gesis-panelpop>, see description of study "da"), was admitted to the panel after going through a peer-review process. The proposal contained a motivation for the study, the questionnaire, and a brief sketch of planned analyses and was evaluated by three anonymous reviewers. Designed with the goal to test for an association between false consensus beliefs and populist attitudes, our study included (1) questions on own positions on policy proposals, (2) questions on perceived public opinion on these policy proposals and (3) the populist attitude scale by Akkerman et al. (2014). Further covariates are drawn from the regular core modules. Next, we discuss our measures of false consensus beliefs and populist attitudes based on these data in more detail, before turning to the model specification.

Measuring false consensus beliefs

In measuring false consensus beliefs, our study follows the traditional approach used in social psychology (e.g., Krueger & Clement, 1994; Ross et al., 1977). This approach involves asking individuals for concrete, numerical estimates of how many people hold certain views, while also recording their own views on the issues in question. This distinguishes our study from a previous study by Schulz et al. (2020), which found that populist attitudes are associated with the perception that public opinion aligns with one's own views (see also the discussion in the theory section). By directly asking respondents whether they think that "most people share" their opinions, Schulz and colleagues employ an attitudinal measure that is conceptually closer to the measurement of populist attitudes than the factual measure of false consensus beliefs that we use in the present study.

Specifically, we included items asking for respondents' own positions and their estimates of public opinion on seven controversial policy proposals in wave *ib* of the GESIS Panel.pop. This wave was in the field from May to July 2021. We opted for a set of diverse items, that is, policy proposals from different policy domains that are ideologically balanced. Our goal was to select the items in such a way that it would not always be the same individuals with the same ideological position who ended up holding a minority position.⁴ Respondents were first asked for their own opinion on these policy proposals on 5-point Likert scales. For our analyses, we use a collapsed version of this variable recording whether respondents are in favor, against, or undecided.⁵ We list the items in Table 1, including information on the distribution of opinions on these proposals, with the minority position marked in bold.

After having indicated their own position on these policy proposals, respondents were asked to "estimate the proportion of people in Germany who are in favour of the respective

³One imperfection is that the initial sample did not include individuals above the age of 70. However, given the aging of respondents over time and the refreshment panels, there are still many respondents in the data aged 70 or older: About 20% of the respondents were 70 or older in 2021.

⁴While those on the far-right of the ideological spectrum tend to hold minority positions for a larger share of items, differences across the left–right spectrum are modest (see Figure A1 in the Appendix S1).

⁵We offered a middle category (labeled "partly/partly") because we did not want to force respondents to take a stance on issues on which they do not have a clear position.

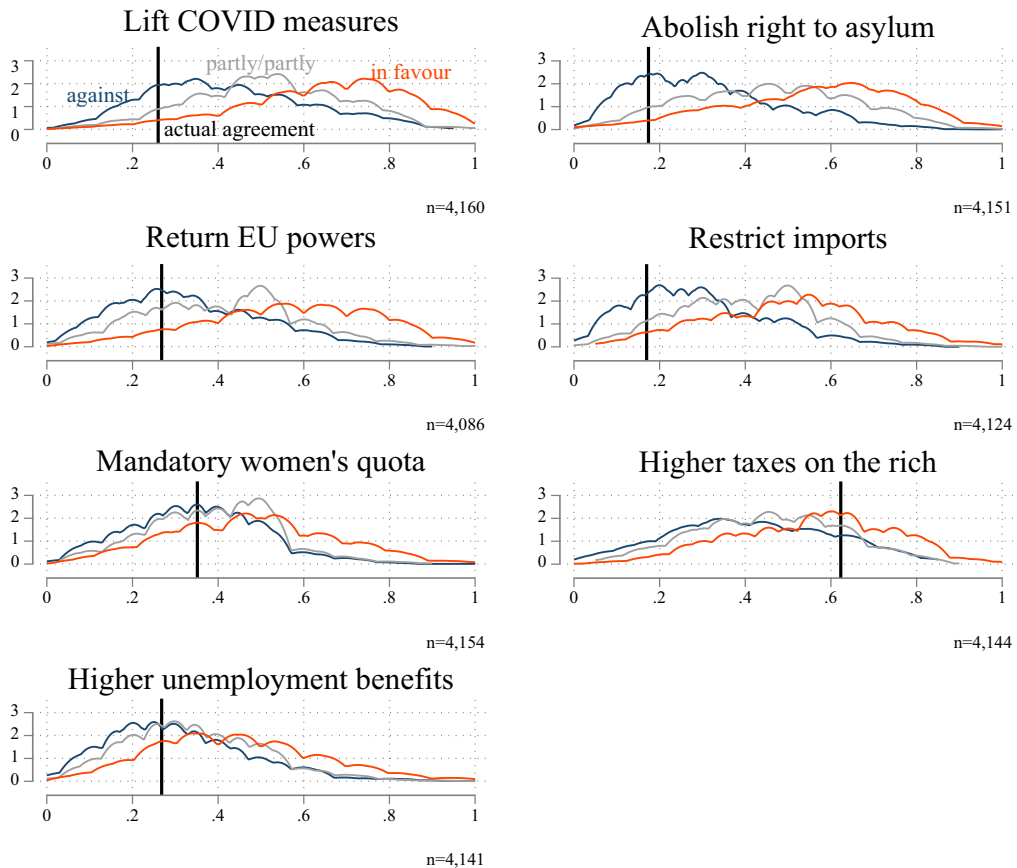


FIGURE 1 Estimated agreement on the seven policy proposals by own position. Distribution of respondents 'estimates of the population share that is in favor of the respective measure, depending on respondents' own position toward the policy proposal. The vertical lines in black indicate the percentage actually in favor of the respective measure as measured by (weighted) own positions in the GESIS panel (excluding item nonresponse).

measure." Respondents were instructed to indicate a percentage number between 0 and 100 in an open-answer field.

In Figure 1, we show kernel density plots of the (valid) answers by respondents' own position. The figure shows that individual estimates of public opinion differ, depending on the positions individuals themselves hold, suggesting the prevalence of false consensus beliefs. On every issue, those who are against the proposal perceive less public support than those who are in favor, with the undecided falling in between.

To combine this information into one summary measure that indicates the extent to which an individual holds false consensus beliefs, we computed a measure that we label *mean of error in direction of own opinion*: For each individual and for each proposal on which this individual holds a position against or in favor, we compute the absolute difference, or "error," between estimated and actual public opinion (expressed as shares, that is scaled between 0 and 1). If the error is in the "wrong" direction (i.e., underestimation if individuals are in favor, overestimation if individuals are against), we set this value to zero.⁶

⁶An alternative would be to set the absolute error to negative values in these cases. This alternative measure correlates at .92 with the one proposed here. As our argument is about differences in the extent of false consensus beliefs rather than about whether some individuals might even err in the opposite direction, we prefer setting errors in the opposite direction to zero.

We then take the average of the resulting values per individual across issues. This gives a measure of how strongly perceptions of public opinion are biased in the direction of an individual's own position. We chose this as our preferred measure because it is intuitive, relatively easy to interpret, and captures the intensity of false consensus beliefs. Below, we will discuss the robustness of our results to three alternative measures of false consensus beliefs (see the second subsection of "Empirical results"). For now, we highlight that these alternatives show reasonably strong correlations with our preferred measures (Pearson correlations of .68–.76, see [Table B1](#) in the [Appendix S1](#)).⁷

Measurement of populist attitudes

To measure populist attitudes, our main outcome variable, we included the scale by Akkerman et al. (2014) in the subsequent wave of the GESIS Panel.pop, that is, wave *ic*, which was in the field from August to October 2021. We deliberately avoided running the items in the same wave as our measure of false consensus beliefs to prevent halo effects. The Akkerman et al. (2014) scale is one of the most widely used measures of populist attitudes and is among the two best-performing measures in the empirical assessment of populist attitude scales by Castanho Silva et al. (2020). The battery consists of seven items covering the three populist subdimensions of popular sovereignty, anti-elitism, and Manichean worldview.

For our main analysis, we follow the advice to aggregate the items in a manner that reflects the concepts' nature as an attitude syndrome that consists of subdimensions that are necessary components of a populist worldview (Castanho Silva et al., 2018; Erisen et al., 2021; Wuttke et al., 2020). According to this conception, a high populist score necessitates high scores on all three subdimensions, and high scores on one subdimension cannot fully compensate for low scores on another subdimension. An often-used aggregation rule in line with this conceptual understanding consists of multiplying values on the populist subdimensions (Castanho Silva et al., 2018; Erisen et al., 2021; Wuttke et al., 2020). We follow a suggestion by Wuttke et al. (2020) for how to implement this rule with the Akkerman et al. (2014) items. Thus, we computed mean indices for the three subdimensions (popular sovereignty, anti-elitism, and Manichean worldview; see [Table B1](#) in the [Appendix S1](#) for the assignment of the items to the three subdimensions) scaled between zero and one and then multiplied the values for the three subdimensions. This aggregation rule ensures that high populist attitude scores are only achieved when scoring high on all its subdimensions, resulting in an index with a lower mean value of populist attitudes (mean: .23; standard deviation [SD]: .22) than when using an additive aggregation rule.⁸

In addition to this measure, we also look at the scores on the three subdimensions individually. As argued above, we expect a positive association between false consensus beliefs and all three populist subdimensions. Moreover, we also consider a conventional additive measure, for which we combine the seven items into one variable via a principal component factor analysis (see [Table B1](#) in the [Appendix S1](#)). We standardize this variable to range from zero to one (mean: .60, SD: .18). This measure correlates with the multiplicative measure at $r = .89$.

⁷Section B1 of the [Appendix S1](#) offers a formal description of our measures of false consensus beliefs.

⁸Note that the Akkerman et al. (2014) scale was not explicitly designed as a multidimensional measure of populist attitudes. We assigned the items to subdimensions following Wuttke et al. (2020). A resulting limitation is that the Manichean worldview is measured with only one item. Follow-up studies may want to consider using populist attitude scales that are developed from a multidimensional conceptualization, such as Schulz et al. (2018).

Model specification and control variables

We estimate OLS regressions for these outcome variables with the design weight for wave *ib* of the GESIS Panel.pop employed as probability weight. In addition to the measure of false consensus beliefs, the regressions include a set of standard sociodemographic control variables: age group, gender, school education in three categories, and living in the Eastern part of Germany, that is, the former GDR. These control variables are taken from the latest wave in which they had been included prior to wave *ib*. We also control for self-reported political interest (from wave *ia*), given that politically less interested individuals might make larger errors when guessing public opinion.

In addition, we include positions on all seven issues, using the original 5-point Likert scale in all regressions. This way, we aim to distinguish effects of false consensus beliefs from associations that might arise because holding certain issue attitudes is related to holding populist attitudes. Note that our measures of false consensus beliefs tend to score higher among individuals who hold minority positions. This is because the potential to err in the direction of one's opinion when guessing public opinion is larger when one holds a position that few others hold. As our measures are thus confounded by holding certain issue positions by design, we control for the issue positions that individuals hold.

EMPIRICAL RESULTS

Main results: The association between false consensus beliefs and populist attitudes

Before turning to the regression results, we present a scatterplot of the bivariate association between our default measure of false consensus beliefs (on the *x*-axes) and our default measure of populist attitudes (on the *y*-axes). There is a (modest) positive correlation of $r = .42$. As indicated by the dashed LOWESS line in Figure 2, the association is close to linear.

Table 2 shows our main regression results. It presents six models. The first five models differ in the measure of populist attitudes used as the outcome variable. In the first column, we show results from our main model with the multiplicative measure. In the second column, we utilize the factor score instead. Models 3–5 study the scores on the three subdimensions separately. In the final column, we return to the multiplicative measure and explore whether the association between false consensus beliefs and populist attitudes holds across positions on the left–right scale.

Beginning with model 1, we obtain a positive coefficient of false consensus beliefs that is statistically significant with $p < .001$. The coefficient of .24 indicates that when the average error in the direction of one's own opinion increases by 10 percentage points (i.e., by .1), the predicted value of populist attitudes increases by .024. This corresponds to a standardized regression coefficient of .12.

To better illustrate the substantive relevance of the implied association, Figure 3 plots predicted values of populist attitudes across the observed spectrum of false consensus beliefs from model 1. The plot also shows a histogram with the observed values of false consensus beliefs in the estimation sample. It deserves noting that the measure of false consensus beliefs is right skewed. This follows from the nature of this measure, which captures whether an individual holds false consensus beliefs and, (only) if so, how large the bias is. While extremely high values are accordingly rare, Figure 3 shows that when evaluated across its full range, false consensus beliefs can result in a fairly relevant substantive difference in populist attitudes. Moving from its lowest to its highest observed value goes along with a predicted increase in populist

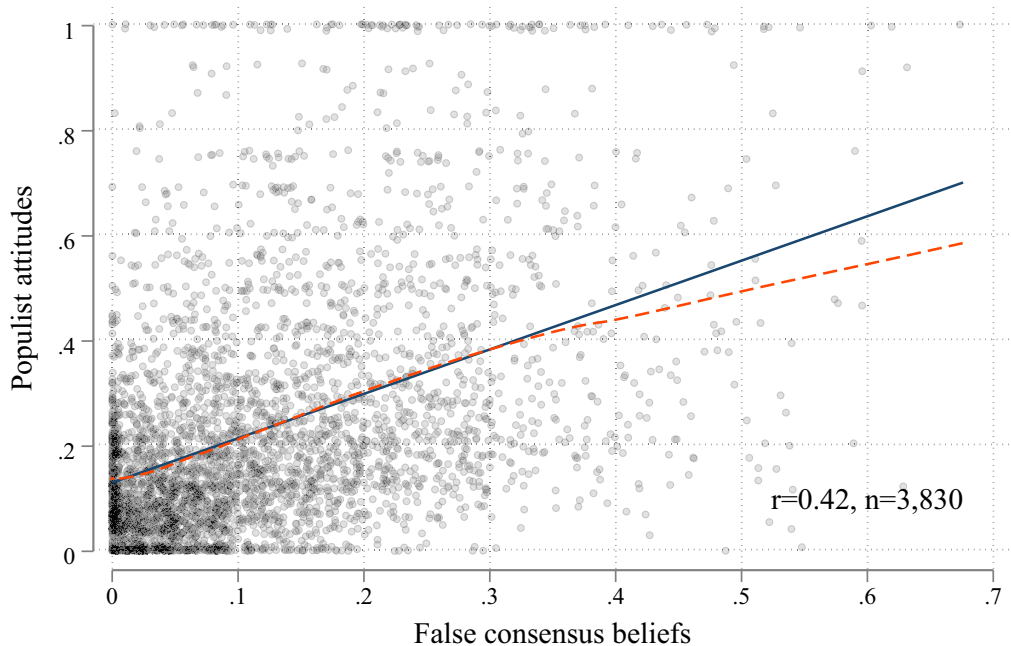


FIGURE 2 Bivariate association between false consensus beliefs and populist attitudes. Jitter added to prevent overlaying. Linear fit line in blue (solid) and lowest line in red (dashed). Pearson correlation added.

attitudes from .20 to .36. Notably, this holds while adjusting for positions on the seven issues, most of which are statistically significantly associated with populist attitudes (see Table 2).

Model 2 in Table 2 reveals that false consensus beliefs are also associated with populist attitudes when we measure these through the factor score instead. Models 3–5 indicate that we obtain a statistically significant and substantively relevant effect of false consensus beliefs for all three populist subdimensions: False consensus beliefs are associated with the demand for popular sovereignty (model 3), with anti-elitist attitudes (model 4), and with a Manichean political outlook (model 5). The association is slightly stronger for popular sovereignty (standardized coefficient of .093) than for the other two subdimensions (standardized coefficients of .063 for anti-elitist attitudes and of .069 for Manichean outlook). That the effect is largest for popular sovereignty points to a close association between erroneous factual beliefs that most others share one's policy positions and a preference for the popular will to be implemented without restriction.

Via model 6 in Table 2, we explore whether the association between false consensus beliefs and populist attitudes holds across the left–right spectrum. We thereby aim to further weaken the concern that the results are confounded by false consensus beliefs being associated with holding certain ideological positions, which are in turn related to populist attitudes. We therefore ran regressions including interactions between left–right positions, as measured through self-placements on a 0–10 left–right scale, and false consensus beliefs. The results in Table 2 indicate a positive main effect of false consensus beliefs (for those with a centrist position) that is amplified for those who place themselves on the far-right.

To better understand this interaction, we turn to Figure 4. The left-hand side shows mean levels of false consensus beliefs across left–right positions. The right-hand side shows the conditional effects of false consensus beliefs for different positions on the left–right scale based on model 6. Looking at the left-hand side first, we see that false consensus beliefs are least widespread on the moderate left and most widespread on the far right. The conditional effects on the right-hand side indicate that there is a significant association (at least with

TABLE 2 Regressing populist attitudes on false consensus beliefs.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	Multiplicative	Factor	Subdim.: Popular sovereignty	Subdim.: Anti-elitism	Subdim.: Manichean outlook	Multiplicative
False consensus beliefs (FCB)	.24** (.048)	.15*** (.032)	.17*** (.038)	.12** (.039)	.15** (.047)	.23** (.068)
Age: 35–49	-.027* (.011)	-.038*** (.0099)	-.042*** (.012)	-.045*** (.013)	-.015 (.015)	-.024* (.011)
Age: 50–65	-.021+ (.011)	-.033*** (.0092)	-.037*** (.011)	-.028* (.012)	-.027+ (.014)	-.021+ (.011)
Age: 66+	-.017 (.012)	-.024* (.010)	-.033** (.012)	-.013 (.013)	-.014 (.015)	-.016 (.011)
Male	.016* (.0067)	.019*** (.0054)	.028*** (.0065)	.022*** (.0068)	-.013+ (.0079)	.019** (.0067)
Education: middle	.0093 (.011)	.00044 (.0079)	.0043 (.0095)	.0020 (.0092)	-.014 (.012)	.013 (.011)
Education: high	-.0071 (.010)	-.011 (.0079)	.0011 (.0095)	-.0077 (.0093)	-.057*** (.012)	-.0037 (.010)
East	.013+ (.0079)	.016** (.0060)	.024*** (.0071)	.0088 (.0073)	.0042 (.0086)	.012 (.0080)
Political interest	.041* (.017)	-.013 (.012)	-.0012 (.015)	-.021 (.015)	-.020 (.018)	.032+ (.017)
Right to asylum abolished	.17*** (.016)	.12*** (.012)	.12*** (.014)	.11*** (.014)	.17*** (.017)	.17*** (.017)
Higher taxes for the rich	.089*** (.015)	.078*** (.012)	.071*** (.013)	.11*** (.014)	.042* (.017)	.084*** (.015)
Higher welfare benefits	.020 (.016)	.021+ (.012)	.022 (.014)	.025+ (.015)	.011 (.017)	.015 (.016)

TABLE 2 (Continued)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	Multiplicative	Factor	Subdim.: Popular sovereignty	Subdim.: Anti-elitism	Subdim.: Manichean outlook	Multiplicative
Mandatory women quota	-.021 (.013)	-.0058 (.010)	.019 (.012)	-.033* (.013)	-.025 (.015)	-.026 ⁺ (.013)
Lift COVID measures	.091*** (.015)	.081*** (.011)	.088*** (.013)	.077*** (.014)	.066*** (.016)	.092*** (.015)
Restrict imports	.036* (.018)	.053*** (.014)	.049*** (.016)	.049*** (.017)	.066*** (.020)	.036* (.018)
Return EU powers	.20*** (.017)	.19*** (.013)	.20*** (.016)	.18*** (.016)	.19*** (.019)	.19*** (.017)
Far left						.025 ⁺ (.015)
Left						-.0051 (.010)
Right						-.020 (.013)
Far right						-.023 (.025)
FCB×far left						.053 (.12)
FCB×left						-.099 (.090)
FCB×right						-.049 (.093)
FCB×far right						.38** (.13)

(Continues)

TABLE 2 (Continued)

(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Multiplicative	Factor	Subdim.: Popular sovereignty	Subdim.: Anti-elitism	Subdim.: Manichean outlook	Multiplicative
Constant	-.090*** (.021)	.32*** (.019)	.42*** (.021)	.28*** (.025)	-.077*** (.021)
Observations	3489	3489	3489	3489	3489
R ²	.35	.30	.25	.28	.36

Note: Coefficients from OLS regression with standard errors in parentheses. False consensus beliefs are measured by the mean of error in the direction of one's own opinion. Reference categories: age: -34, female, education: low, Western Germany, centrist position on the left-right dimension. Political interest and issue items scaled from zero to one. Design weight employed. Observations held constant across models.

+p < .10;

*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.

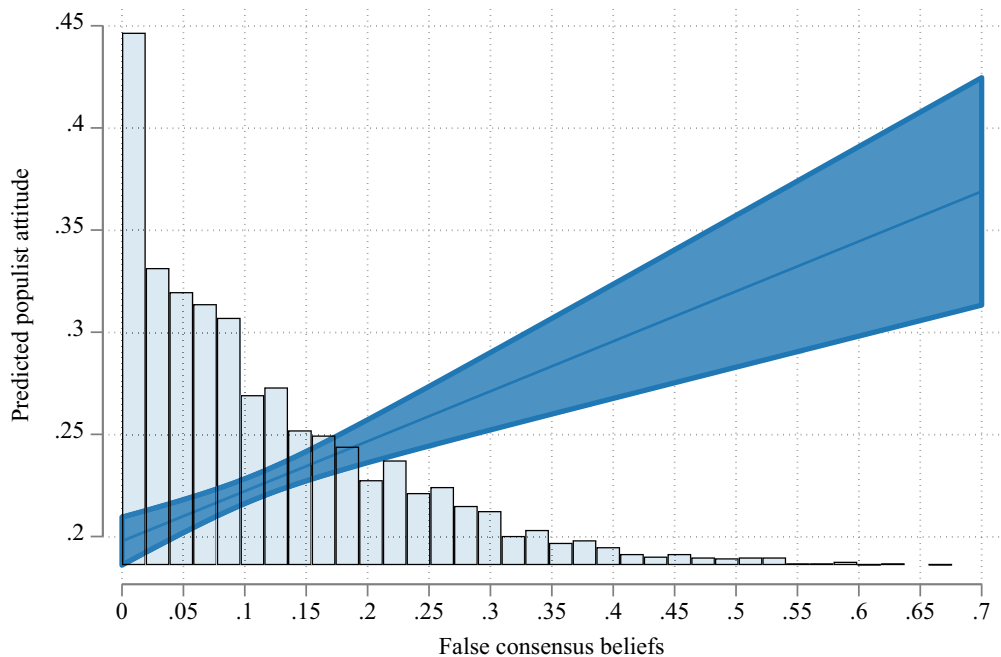


FIGURE 3 Predicted values of populist attitudes across levels of false consensus beliefs. Predicted values of populist attitudes (multiplicative measure) with 95% confidence intervals across levels of false consensus beliefs based on model 1 of Table 1. Histograms with observed distribution of false consensus beliefs added.

$p < .10$) between false consensus beliefs and populist attitudes across the entire left–right spectrum. At the same time, the association is stronger for those respondents who locate themselves on the far right. These differences should be interpreted with some caution, since the measurement of false consensus beliefs is likely sensitive to the choice of items used to measure false consensus beliefs. Nevertheless, that false consensus beliefs are more widespread—and more consequential for populist attitudes—at the extreme right could be seen as in line with a higher proclivity for rigid thinking on the ideological right (Costello et al., 2023).⁹ Most importantly, however, these findings suggest that false consensus beliefs are associated with populist attitudes irrespective of one's left–right position, with only the strength of this association varying.

Robustness to alternative measures of false consensus beliefs

To further probe the robustness of the association between false consensus beliefs and populist attitudes, we reran the models from Table 2 while using three alternative measures of false consensus beliefs:

⁹These patterns may also reflect the effects of elite messaging, as Germany's main radical right populist party, the AfD, frequently claims majority support for its policies. Indeed, we find that AfD supporters exhibit particularly high levels of false consensus beliefs (see below and Section D of the Appendix SI). However, it remains unclear to what extent false consensus beliefs attract voters to the AfD and its populist rhetoric and to what extent support for the party fosters such beliefs through elite cueing.

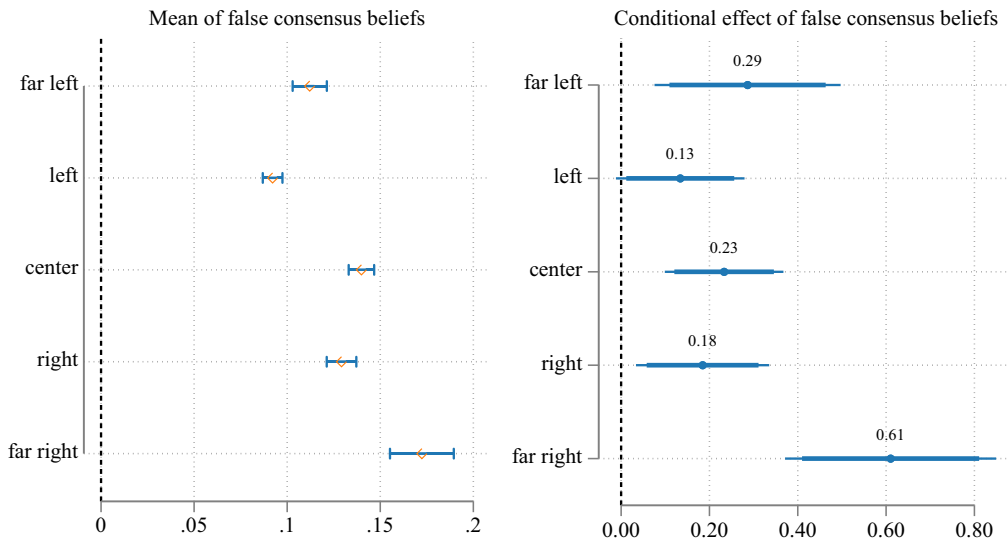


FIGURE 4 False consensus beliefs and their effects on populist attitudes across the left–right scale. False consensus beliefs are measured by the *mean of the error in the direction of one's opinion*. Left-hand side: Mean with 95% confidence intervals. Right-hand side: Marginal effects (with 95% confidence intervals) from OLS regression with interaction between false consensus beliefs and left–right self-placement (model 6 in Table 2). Left–right position, measured on a 0–10 self-placement scale, coded as follows: far left: 0–2, left: 3–4, center: 5, right: 6–7; and far right: 8–10.

Minority position and perceived majority share

A second measure starts from the idea that the most dramatic consequences of false consensus beliefs should result when individuals hold minority positions but believe these to be supported by a majority. We counted how often this is the case, that is, how often an individual holds the minority position (as indicated by the bold numbers in Table 1) but believes that more (when the minority position is in favor)/less (when the minority position is against) than .50 of the public support the measure. We standardize this count measure by expressing it as a share of the number of items for which we have valid information on a respondent's own position and his/her perception of public opinion. A disadvantage of this measure is that it discards a lot of information as it essentially dichotomizes perceptions of public opinion.

Coefficient from multilevel model

This approach starts from the idea of estimating the degree of projection, that is how large the effect of the own position on individuals' error is. Accordingly, we estimate multilevel regressions with a stacked dataset in which the level-1 observations are individual-issue combinations, and the level-2 observations are individuals. The outcome variable is the perceptual “error,” that is the difference between perceived and actual public approval of an item. We regress this error on the own position (coded as –1: against, 0: neutral, +1: in favor) and include a random slope for its coefficient, thus allowing the extent of “projection” to vary across individuals. We then save the resulting slope coefficients. This approach results in a measure

that is positively signed for almost three fourth of the respondents (73%), in line with an overall tendency toward false consensus beliefs.

Coefficient from multilevel model with negative values set to zero

As our theoretical argument is not concerned with variation among those with a bias in the opposite direction but rather with the extent of false consensus beliefs, we “correct” the third measure by setting all negative slopes to zero.

In [Tables B2–B4](#) in the [Appendix S1](#), we present results that replicate the six models in [Table 2](#) when using these alternative measures of false consensus beliefs. The results remain qualitatively similar. We always obtain a statistically significant positive effect of false consensus beliefs on populist attitudes, and with one exception, they are all statistically significant with $p < .05$. The one exception pertains to the effect of the *coefficient from the multilevel model* on the populist subdimension Manichean outlook. However, when using the *coefficient from the multilevel model with negative values set to zero*, which is conceptually better in line with our theoretical argument, the respective coefficient turns statistically significant.

We also tested for nonlinear relations between our four measures of false consensus beliefs and populist attitudes by adding a squared term to the specification of model 1. We display predicted values of populist attitudes across levels of false consensus beliefs based on these models in [Figure B1](#) of the [Appendix S1](#). For the *coefficient from the multilevel model*, we observe a U-shaped association with higher values of false consensus beliefs being associated with higher populist attitude scores only in the positive value range. This result is in line with our rationale for setting negative values to zero, as implemented in the fourth measure. For the other three measures, the associations are close to linear.

In sum, the association between false consensus beliefs and populist attitudes, be they measured through a multiplicative or additive aggregation rule or as individual subdimensions, holds for different ways of measuring false consensus beliefs.

Associations with other outcome variables

While this study focuses on the association between false consensus beliefs and populist attitudes, our discussion implies that there may be broader deleterious consequences for individuals' levels of perceived democratic legitimacy or political support. In particular, external efficacy—as an attitude that is closely connected to perceptions of policy responsiveness, though more generalized and affectively charged (Esaïasson et al., 2015)—is likely to suffer when individuals hold false consensus beliefs. This, in turn, may translate into lower levels of political support in the form of lower levels of political trust and satisfaction with the way democracy works. Previous research indicates that external efficacy and political trust are associated with populist attitudes, in particular its anti-elitism component, but that these are all distinct constructs (Geurkink et al., 2020, p. 251). In our data, the (negative) correlation with populist attitudes is largest for external efficacy ($r = -.64$), followed by political trust (mean of trust in government, parliament, parties, and politicians) ($r = -.56$), and then satisfaction with democracy ($r = -.49$) (see [Table A2](#) in the [Appendix S1](#)). Given that we are dealing with related but distinct concepts, it seems useful to explore whether holding false consensus beliefs is also associated with lower levels on these facets of political support.

To explore this, we reran the specification from [Table 2](#) (models 1–5), with these measures specified as outcome variables in turn. In [Figure 5](#), we show regression coefficients for our preferred measure of false consensus beliefs; the corresponding full regression results are shown in [Table C1](#) of the [Appendix S1](#).

All three regression coefficients are negatively signed. While the effects on external efficacy and political trust are statistically significant, the one on satisfaction with democracy is not. These results may reflect that external efficacy and political trust are conceptually and empirically closer to populist attitudes than satisfaction with democracy. Overall, these findings indicate that the deleterious consequences of false consensus beliefs for democratic legitimacy may not be limited to populist attitudes in that false consensus beliefs also go hand in hand with lower levels of external efficacy and political trust.¹⁰

Finally, we explored whether holding false consensus beliefs may be associated with voting for populist parties as well (see a detailed in [Section D](#) of the [Appendix SI](#)). We indeed find that false consensus beliefs are far more widespread among supporters of the populist radical right AfD (“Alternative für Deutschland”). In a multivariate regression framework, false consensus beliefs are predictive of voting intentions for the AfD for our default measure of false consensus beliefs but not for the others.

CONCLUSION

In a complex world full of uncertainties, feeling that others share own views and opinions provides reassurance and comfort. It is easy to see how cognitive biases can arise from the human need for validation. This paper has studied political implications of a phenomenon well-known in social psychology: false consensus beliefs. On the basis of a broad literature on the topic in psychology and a relatively scarce literature on their consequences in political science, we theorized that false consensus beliefs can result in citizens misperceiving democratic majorities to share their preferences. In consequence, actual decision-making and ruling elites are perceived as unresponsive and democratic legitimacy questioned. This provides fertile ground for the development of populist attitudes as a Manichean political worldview that combines a preference for the unrestricted implementation of the alleged “will of the people” with a disdain of “the political elite.”

Measuring false consensus beliefs on the basis of individuals' beliefs about public opinion on a set of controversial policy issues, we found a strong observational link between false consensus beliefs and populist attitudes using survey data from Germany. This relationship is consistent across all subdimensions of populist attitudes, remains robust regardless of how false consensus beliefs are measured, applies to individuals across the left–right spectrum, and extends to external efficacy and political trust—two related measures of political support. These results suggest that holding egocentrically biased beliefs about public opinion could be a driver of populist attitudes—and political discontent more broadly.

At the same time, the evidence we have presented is entirely observational and consistent with other possible pathways that may connect false consensus beliefs and populist attitudes as discussed in the theory section: It appears equally plausible that false consensus beliefs may originate from a populist worldview (Schulz et al., 2020), be a result of “majority cues” (Schulz et al., 2020, p. 207) provided by populist political elites, or that both false consensus beliefs and populist attitudes originate from cognitive traits that render individuals susceptible to black-and-white thinking. To us, it appears plausible that these mechanisms are mutually reinforcing.

We highlight three avenues for future research. First, we encourage future research to examine the association between false consensus beliefs and populist attitudes (as well as other measures of political support) in different contexts. Given the general nature of our argument,

¹⁰Again, we checked whether these results are robust to the alternative measures of false consensus beliefs (see [Table C2](#) in the [Appendix SI](#)). We obtain negative effects of false consensus beliefs on external efficacy and political trust for all three measures, with the effects being statistically significant for the *minority position and perceived majority share* and the *coefficient from multilevel model with negative values set to zero*.

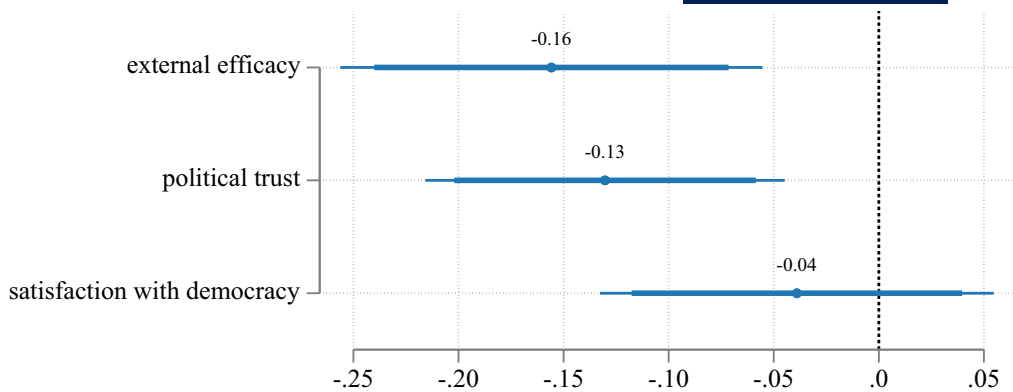


FIGURE 5 Effects of false consensus beliefs on other indicators of political support. Shown are regression coefficients from OLS regressions with 90% (thin) and 95% (thick) confidence intervals. Weights employed. False consensus beliefs are measured by the *mean of error in the direction of own opinion*. Outcome variables are scaled from zero to one.

we see no particular reason why our findings should be specific to the German context we studied. However, this remains an important question for further investigation. Second, another important task for future research will be to better understand the causal effects driving this association. From the perspective of our argument that highlights public opinion perceptions as a potential driver of populist attitudes and legitimacy perceptions more broadly, causally identified effects could result from survey-experimental studies: Does providing information about actual public opinion affect how individuals assess the legitimacy of political decisions? And are such interventions particularly consequential among those who previously held erroneous, egocentrically biased beliefs about public opinion? It is also of great interest how claims by political elites about which positions garner majority support resonate among citizens. Third, another important, related task is to better understand the origins of false consensus beliefs in the political realm. While there is extensive scholarship on the basic psychological processes underlying false consensus beliefs, there is less research on how beliefs about public opinion are affected by the political and media contexts that human beings operate in. One intriguing possibility is raised by studies that point to a connection between interactions in (homogeneous) online social networks and false consensus beliefs (Bunker & Varnum, 2021; Luzsa & Mayr, 2021; Wojcieszak, 2008). While this suggests that the move to “high-choice media environments” (Van Aelst et al., 2017) may have increased the prevalence of false consensus beliefs, other work raises caution about the prevalence of online “filter bubbles” (e.g., Barberá et al., 2015). More research seems needed to understand how false consensus beliefs may be affected by evolving media contexts.

For now, we have provided novel evidence of an observational association between false consensus beliefs, as measured through individuals' beliefs about the policy positions of others, and populist attitudes. We hope that this stimulates further research on the origins and consequences of citizens' false consensus beliefs in the political realm.

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ORCID

Nils D. Steiner  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3433-4079>

Claudia Landwehr  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0814-3028>

Philipp Harms  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1388-0652>

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