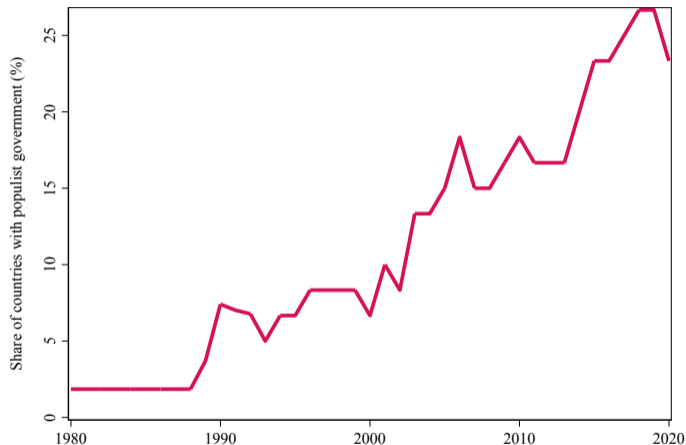# Populism and Narratives of Social Mobility

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Global Trends in Populism

Share of populist governments among 60 major advanced and emerging market economies, covering 95% of world GDP by Funke et al. (2023).

Contribution

Several economic factors driving **populism**:

- Globalization (Autor et al., 2020; Guriev, 2018; Rodrik, 2018)
- Financial crises (Algan et al., 2017; Funke et al., 2023)
- Migration (Dinas et al., 2019; Edo et al., 2019; Steinmayr, 2021)

Emerging interest in **low social mobility** as a driver of populism (Kurer and Van Staalduinen, 2022; Protzer, 2021)

Importance of **narratives** in shaping beliefs, delivering insights on reasoning and mechanisms (Andre et al., 2023; Bursztyn et al., 2023; Graeber et al., 2024; Haaland et al., 2024)

This paper:

1. Combines new survey data, admin data and electoral data to explore descriptively how local social mobility in the US relates to populist attitudes and voting behavior.
2. Collects over 3,450 respondent-generated narratives of upward mobility.
3. Uses an experimental approach with narratives of social mobility to test how populist attitudes shift when social ascent is driven by luck instead of individual merit.

Measuring Populism Beyond Party Preference

- **Definition:**

  "An ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite,' and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people." (Mudde, 2004)

- **Components:**
  1. Anti-elitism
  2. Anti-pluralism
  3. Demand for the sovereignty of the people

- **Measurement:**
  - 12 survey items from (Akkerman et al., 2014; Schulz et al., 2018) aligned with Mudde's definition.
  - Composite measure derived using Principal Component Score (PCS).
  - Advantages: Precise measure matching definition, independent of party preference, avoids the term "populism" due to negative connotation and experimenter demand effects

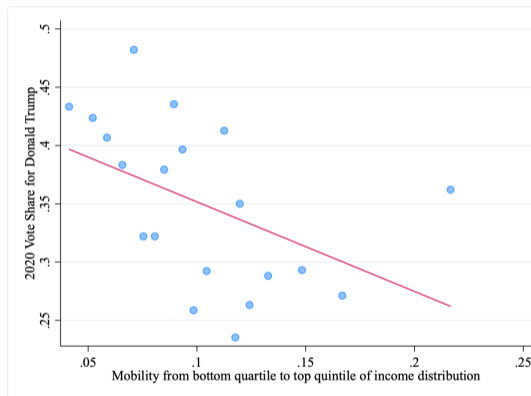# Populism vs. County-Level Upward Mobility
Populist Attitudes vs. Bottom Quartile to Top Quintile Mobility
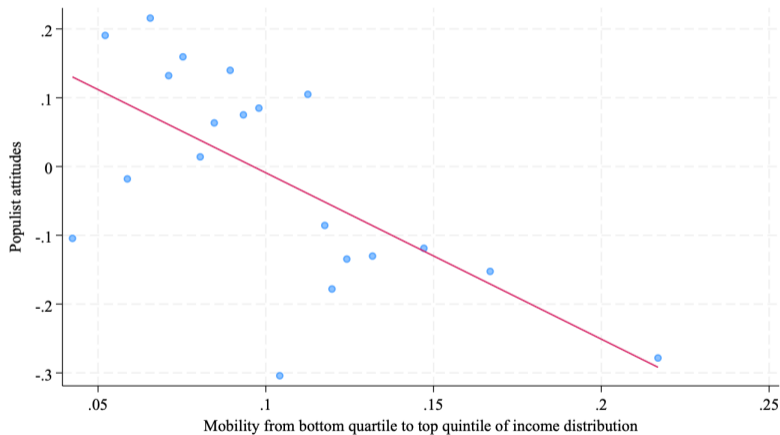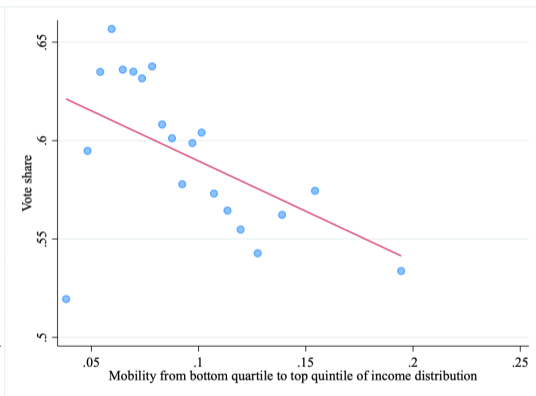

Sources: Own survey and Opportunity Atlas (Chetty et al., 2018).

Electoral vs. Survey Data: Trump Votes vs. Upward Mobility, by County

Trump 2020 Vote Shares vs. Bottom Quartile to Top Quintile Mobility

(a) Survey data.

(b) Electoral data (MIT Election Lab).

Social mobility measure from Opportunity Atlas (Chetty et al., 2018).

Negative Association btw. Populism and Social Mobility, esp. Anti-Elitism

	Main Results				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
				Populist Components	
	Trump Votes	Populism	Anti-Elitism	Sov. People	Anti-Pluralism
Social Mobility (P25-top20)	-1.336***	-2.167***	-2.864***	-1.789**	0.436
	(0.503)	(0.797)	(0.896)	(0.819)	(0.878)
Age	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Education	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Race	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Migration background	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Income group	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Employment status	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	1,174	1,415	1,416	1,415	1,415
R-squared	0.066	0.087	0.085	0.073	0.039

Robust standard errors in parentheses
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Experimental Design:

- <u>Treatment group</u>: Exposure to 1 out of 4 previously collected "lucky-ascent" narratives
- <u>Control group</u>: No exposure, but everyone provides a social mobility narrative
- <u>Belief update</u>: Role of luck for economic outcomes, i.e. being poor & social ascent
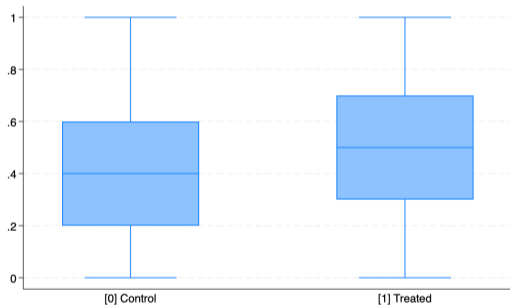- <u>Outcome</u>: Populist attitudes, as before

$$Populism_i = \phi_1 + \phi_2(Treated_i \times LuckUpdate_i) + \phi_3 Treated_i + \phi_4 LuckUpdate_i + \kappa_i \quad (1)$$

Belief Update on the Role of Luck for Social Ascent

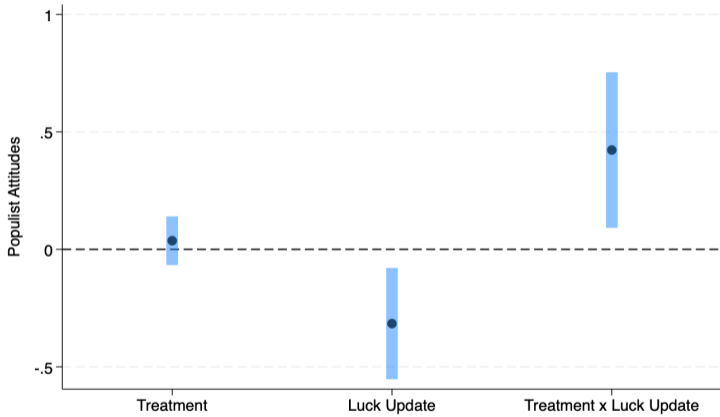Prior and posterior on the role of luck, by treatment group
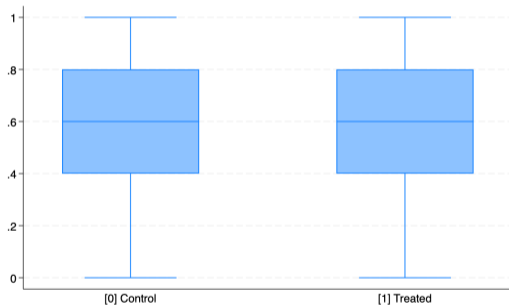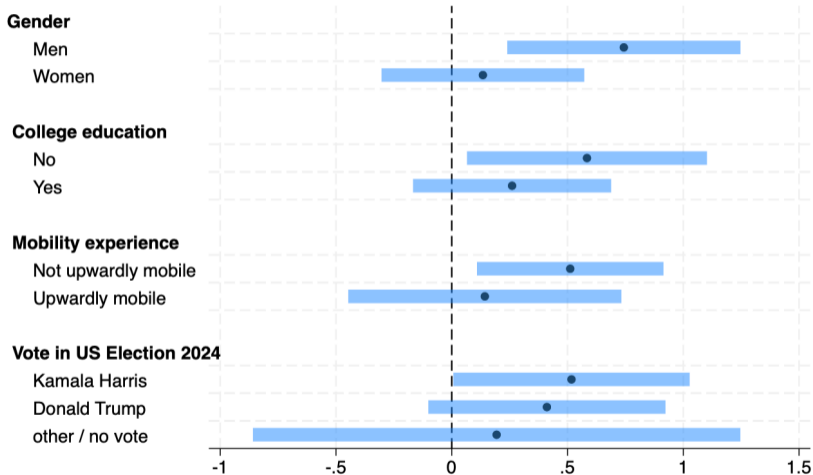

(a) Prior: Poor because of circumstances. (b) Posterior: Social ascent because of luck.

Lucky-Ascent Perception increases Populist Attitudes

Effect driven by Men, Low-Educated, and Absent Mobility Experience

Conclusion

1. Negative relationship between social mobility and votes for Donald Trump, across various data sources and levels of aggregation.
2. Negative relationship between social mobility and populist attitudes, especially in relation with anti-elitism and demand for popular sovereignty.
3. Experimental evidence shows that perceived unfairness in the process of social ascent (factor luck) fuels populist attitudes.
4. Effects are largest for those, commonly referred to as "left-behind":
   - Men
   - Low-educated individuals
   - Those without upward mobility experience

Outlook: Conduct experiments on general perception of social mobility and on identity narratives. Explore narratives more generally.

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Populist governments

Populist leader spells by country. Source: (Funke et al., 2016).
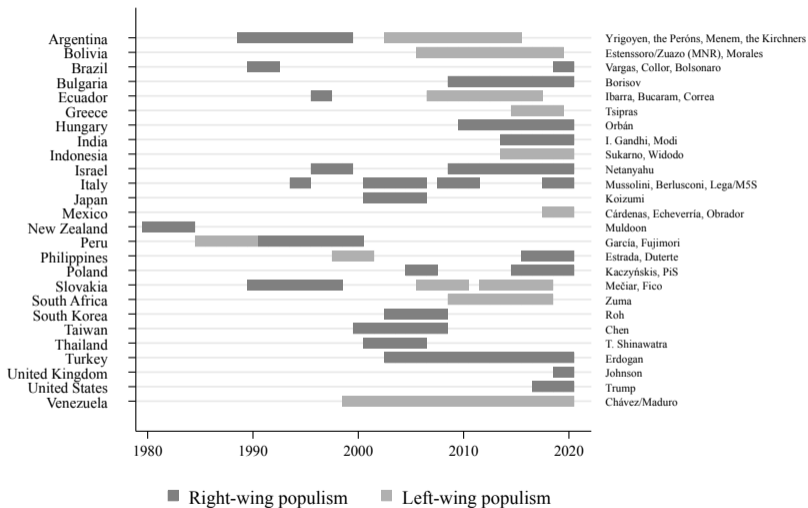
- **Anti-elitism**
  - Members of Congress very quickly lose touch with ordinary people.
  - The differences between ordinary people and the ruling elite are much greater than the difference between ordinary people.
  - People like me have no influence on what the government does.
  - Politicians talk too much and take too little action.
- **Popular sovereignty**
  - The people should have the final say on the most important political issues by voting on them directly in referendums.
  - The people should be asked whenever important decisions are taken.
  - The people, not the politicians, should make our most important policy decisions.
  - The politicians in Congress need to follow the will of the people.
- **Homogeneity of the people**
  - Ordinary people all pull together.
  - Ordinary people are of good and honest character.
  - Ordinary people share the same values and interests.
  - Although the Americans are very different from each other, when it comes down to it they all think the same.
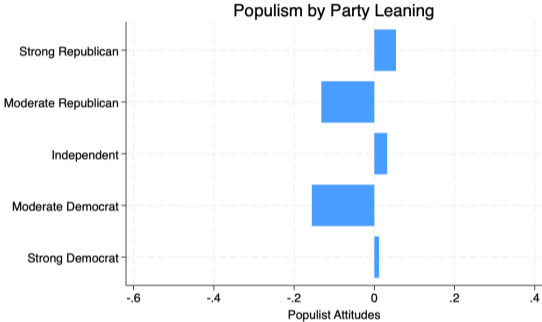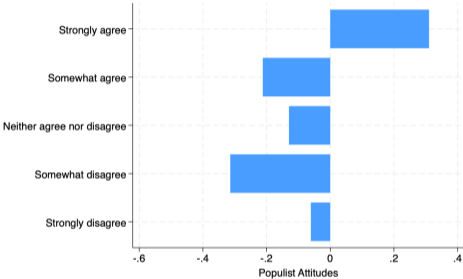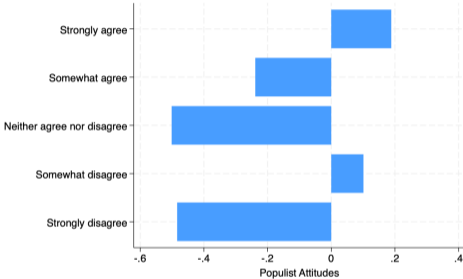
Figure 3: Populist support by party leaning.

(a) "Sanders ideal candidate for Democrats".

(b) "Trump ideal candidate for Republicans".

Q25. Please **share the story** of a person from your surroundings (but not yourself) who started from a middle-class background and has **improved their income position**, compared to their parents. Describe their career journey and highlight the **key factors and opportunities** that contributed to their **ascent**. Write 3-4 sentences.

- "I think we all know that one friend from high school who fits this description. She **believed that education would take her far** and so she worked her way up to get a **college scholarship and went on to do her masters**. She's now one of the most business savvy executives I know in a top firm."

- "My friend's **parents immigrated from a poor country to the states to give their children a better life**. They worked blue-collar jobs for their whole lives and sent their kids to school. My friend went to college with a scholarship and now is working a job that pays well."

- "I know Eric. He worked hard and saved his money. **He moved to a better area of town and raised his family there. His kids were able to go to better school district**."

- "My good friend, Andy, grew up middle-class. He went to college, got a really good job, and is now living at least one class higher than his parents. Key to his success was **very good and helpful advisors** as he moved **along his college path**. To obtain the great job a huge key was that he lived in a **small town where everyone knew him and referred him for the position**."

- "My friend would grow up to earn doctorate in education and run a facility for the mentally ill in another state. She owns her own home and takes lavish trips unlike her mother and siblings. She has no children and attributes this to being one key factor in her success as well as scholarship opportunities and how **society has changed some for Black Americans**."

- "This person was the first in her family to attend college and obtain a degree. She worked very hard throughout her life maintaining 2 to 3 jobs at once while also working hard on her in school. She graduated with her bachelor's and through connections from friends and people she met while in school, got a job in LA helping to manage a small **Black women-owned business**."
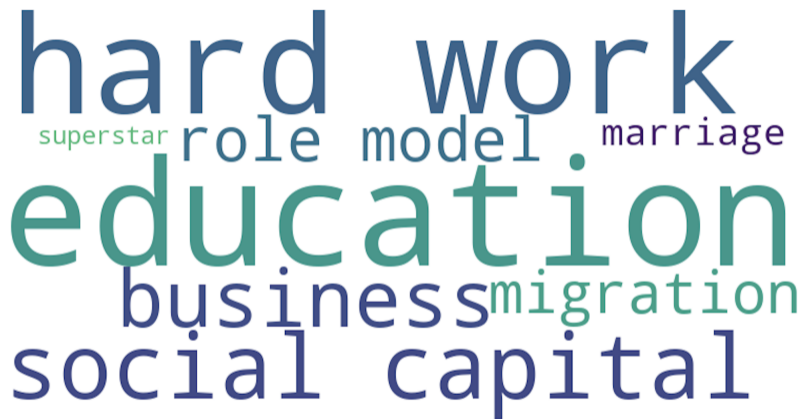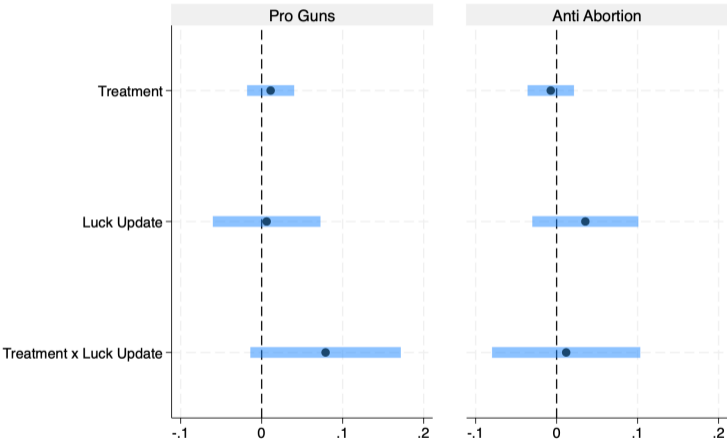
Figure 5: Hard work: 0.81, education: 0.67, business: 0.25, migration: 0.19, social capital: 0.21, role model: 0.11, marriage: 0.05, supestar: 0.02.

Robustness: Placebo Outcomes

Robustness: Omitting one Narrative at a Time

Experiment 1, omitting one narrative at a time

Variables	Populist Attitudes			
	(1) w/o N1	(2) w/o N2	(3) w/o N3	(4) w/o N4
Treatment $\times$ luck update	0.361**	0.426**	0.576***	0.310*
	(0.181)	(0.182)	(0.179)	(0.186)
Treatment	0.042	0.049	0.048	0.003
	(0.056)	(0.056)	(0.056)	(0.058)
Luck update	-0.316***	-0.316***	-0.316***	-0.316***
	(0.120)	(0.121)	(0.120)	(0.121)
Observations	1,747	1,747	1,750	1,744
R-squared	0.004	0.004	0.007	0.005