

Right-Wing Populism and Counterterrorism Preferences: The Roles of Strongman Rule, Outgroup Attitudes, and Conspiratorial Thinking in Shaping Policy Support in the United States

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Abstract

How do right-wing populist attitudes shape citizens' counterterrorism policy preferences? While a growing literature examines the foreign policies pursued by populist leaders, far less is known about how populist attitudes at the mass level translate into preferences on international security issues. We address this gap by focusing on the United States. Drawing on the ideational approach to populism, we argue that the defining features of right-wing populism—anti-elitism, a Manichean worldview, and a nativist conception of “the people”—generate distinct counterterrorism preferences that operate through three mechanisms: support for strongman rule, perceived threats from outgroups, and conspiratorial thinking. Using an original survey of 1,940 U.S. respondents fielded in 2023, we find that individuals holding right-wing populist attitudes are more likely to support unilateral, militarized responses to terrorism abroad while expressing no greater support for multilateral cooperation or democracy promotion. Domestically, they favor restrictive immigration and border policies and expanded surveillance, detention, and arrest powers. Structural equation models show that support for strongman rule, outgroup threat perceptions, and conspiratorial thinking substantively mediate these relationships, with effects that persist after accounting for partisanship and

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ideological conservatism. The findings suggest that right-wing populist attitudes exert an independent influence on counterterrorism preferences in the U.S. context.

1 Introduction

What sorts of counterterrorism responses do Americans with right-wing populist attitudes¹ prefer in the wake of terrorist attacks? Several points motivate this question. First, right-wing populism as a political phenomenon has grown in the United States to the point where it is a core characteristic of contemporary U.S. politics (Norris, 2020). Second, references to terrorism feature prominently in the rhetoric of many right-wing populist political actors (Liang, 2007), who often frame terrorism as a fundamental threat to national security and societal stability (Hall, 2021). Prior research has shown that terrorist attacks can increase electoral support for populist parties in countries outside of the United States, particularly among individuals with right-wing predispositions (Jacobs and van Spanje, 2021). More broadly, scholars argue that the appeal of right-wing populism is, in part, reinforced by perceptions of threat and insecurity (Abadi et al., 2024), with Van Prooijen (2023) theorizing that support for populist politicians is a psychological coping mechanism for citizens experiencing anxiety in response to such perceived threats.

While much of the scholarly research on right-wing populism focuses on domestic politics and policy (Verbeek and Zaslove, 2017), there is a burgeoning literature on the ramifications of populism for foreign policy, including international security

¹Our study investigates the attitudes and preferences of U.S. survey subjects who hold pro-populist beliefs and values. It therefore focuses on what is sometimes called the “demand side” of populism (see Marcos-Marne et al. 2023), while much of the other literature focuses on populist leaders, populist regimes, and the “supply side” of populism. In the study, when we refer to populists, we mean individuals holding populist views.

policy (see, for example, Cadier et al. 2025; Chryssogelos 2017; Destradi et al. 2021; Löffmann 2022; Wajner et al. 2024). Current research on populism and foreign policy, however, concentrates on the foreign policies pursued by right-wing populist political leaders and governments, right-wing populist leader rhetoric on foreign policy, and the implications of right-wing populist leadership on states' policies toward multilateral cooperation. This literature uncovers critical implications of populist governance on international security policies pursued by states while challenges some preexisting notions about populist rule (see Eiran et al. 2025). However, the current literature on populism and foreign policy does not investigate the implications of right-wing populist attitudes among citizens and how they shape international security policy preferences, such as counterterrorism policies.

We complement the literature on populist leaders and international security policy by studying how individuals in the United States that hold populist preferences respond to the threat of terrorism along with the specific counterterrorism and security policies they prefer—both domestically and internationally—in the wake of a terrorist attack. Though we discuss literatures examining right-wing populism globally in our study, our focus is on the effects of right-wing populist attitudes on U.S. counterterrorism policies specifically. While this leaves us unable to make broader claims, we note that a U.S.-focused analysis is crucial given the central role the United States has played in global counterterrorism efforts since 2001. We contribute to the demand side literature by examining how terrorist threats shape right-wing populist individuals' preferences both for domestic counterterrorism policies associated with border control, immigration, and internal security as well as foreign counterterrorism policies such as the use of military force to address terrorism, provision of aid to allies, and promotion of democracy overseas.

We also explore the link between populist attitudes and support for various types

of responses to terrorism by investigating the roles played by preferences for concentrated executive power and strong leadership, perceived outgroup threat, and conspiratorial thinking patterns; all of which are identified in the literature as associated with populist sentiment. This contribution helps to join the demand-side literature on right-wing populism with the burgeoning research on populism and national and foreign security policy. Moreover, our study helps to identify whether right-wing populist attitudes in themselves are driving counterterrorism preferences in the aftermath or rather if they function as an epiphenomenon in driving elements such as authoritarianism, or conspiratorialism that reinforce individuals' reactions to terrorist attacks. In the next section of the paper, we provide a brief definition of right-wing populism. We then present our main theoretical arguments and discuss the literatures that support these arguments. We follow our theory section with a presentation of our hypotheses and then present our research design and empirical results. Finally, we provide a brief discussion of the implications and limitations of our study.

2 What is Right-Wing Populism?

Before presenting our theoretical arguments, we provide a brief conceptual definition of right-wing populism and how we apply it in our study. Populism itself is a contested concept (see Roccato et al. 2020), but most scholars regard it as a loose ideological framework that includes the following tenets: Populists argue that contemporary society is divided into two differentiated political-social-cultural forces. On one side is “the people” who are depicted as good, honest, moral, and representative of common sense. On the other side are “the elites” who are viewed as dishonest, corrupt, unpatriotic, pretentious, and often lacking in commonsensical

judgment (Akkerman et al., 2014).

Populist narratives therefore tend to interpret politics, society, and culture through a Manichean lens in which “the people” are seen as having the legitimate authority to govern but are obstructed by “the elites” who are perceived to undermine their interests (Hawkins et al., 2012). Furthermore, scholars argue that these features—Manichean view of politics, reverence for the people, and distrust of elites are reinforced by skepticism toward experts, perceived exclusion from mainstream political processes, and a tendency to interpret politics in moral rather than institutional or pluralist terms (Akkerman et al., 2014; Oliver and Rahn, 2016; Castanho Silva et al., 2018).

Populism is often described as a “thin centered” ideology because it can be linked to other formalized left-wing and right-wing ideological frameworks (Hawkins et al., 2012). Our study specifically focuses on right-wing populist beliefs. This is because right-wing populism has been the dominant form of populism in the United States in the past several decades. Moreover, we argue below that a key quality distinguishing the contemporary (right-wing) American populist moment is its nativism, and aversion toward and fear of ethnic, religious, and cultural outgroups. Our theory of American populist individuals’ preferences are consistent with Kriesi’s (2014) work showing that populist actors and publics in the United States and other Western countries often define “the people” in nativist terms, a pattern more commonly associated with populism on the political right².

²Our operationalization of populism / populist attitudes theoretically transcends partisan identity and political ideology, as shown in the nonpartisan, nonideological survey questions we use to construct our populism index. This is consistent with Mudde’s (2007) depiction of populism as a “thin-centered ideology” that can be grafted onto both left- and right-wing political movements. That said, we take several steps to address the possibility that what we really capture in our analysis is the effect of right-wing populist attitudes. First, we control for partisanship and political ideology in all of our models. Second, we calculate correlations between our populism index and all of the controls in the models (reported in the appendix). We find that while Republicans and

3 How Right-Wing Populism Shapes Individuals' Counterterrorism Response Preferences

Individuals who perceive a high threat of future terrorism tend to favor retaliatory anti-terrorism policies both domestically and internationally, including overseas military interventions and restrictive domestic responses (Huddy et al., 2005, 2007), especially when the threat is communicated in a graphic and emotionally powerful manner by the media (Gadarian, 2010, 2014). Right-wing populist individuals in the United States, we argue, express these preferences in a sharper form and for reasons related to their unique worldview.

We argue that terrorist threats occupy a distinctive place in the right-wing populist worldview. Our argument speaks directly to two central features of right-wing populism: a belief that political and institutional elites have failed or betrayed the ordinary people they are supposed to serve, and a belief that the unmediated will of the people should guide political action, against the slow and compromised machinery of procedural liberal democracy.

Terrorist attacks speak directly to both beliefs. For one, successful terrorist attacks are likely to be perceived as a failure of the institutions charged with preventing them, such as intelligence services, border enforcement, diplomatic channels, or even international cooperation. For individuals who already view these institutions with suspicion, a terrorist attack can very well read as confirming evidence of elite incompetence. At the same time, terrorism is the kind of threat where procedural

conservatives are more likely to score higher on the populism index, African Americans and women do as well, suggesting a complex picture. Finally, we robustness check models that interact left- and right-wing political ideology with the populism index. This allows us to determine whether left- or right-wing populist individuals have unique CT responses. The results of these checks (reported in the appendix) do not show that left- and right-wing populists have unique CT preferences in the wake of an attack. Rather, the non-partisan, cross-ideological populism index bears the same relationship with CT preferences of subjects as that found in the main models.

responses, such as negotiations, multilateral coordination, legal processes, democracy promotion, can feel inadequate to the urgency of the moment. It therefore can invite the populist intuition that normal politics has broken down and that decisive action expressing the people's will is required.

We therefore expect right-wing populist individuals to respond to terrorism through a manner in which the attack is evidence of institutional failure and the appropriate response is direct, concentrated, and unmediated. To theorize both their international and domestic policy responses, we consider three international CT policies represent major strategies the United States has used in prosecuting the Global War on Terror since 2001: 1) the deployment of U.S. ground troops abroad to terrorism "hotspots" to confront terrorist organizations; 2) the provision of U.S. military aid and intelligence to allied countries to bolster their security and help them neutralize terrorists; 3) U.S. promotion of democracy abroad to countries affected by terrorism in order to neutralize grievances that may fuel terrorism. Taken together, these policies comprise unilateral use of U.S. hard power, multilateral cooperative measures, and use of soft power to combat terrorist threats to the U.S. We further consider three domestic CT policies implemented in the U.S. in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks: 1) increasing U.S. border security; 2) reduction of immigration to the United States to prevent the entry of terrorists into the United States; and 3) U.S. government use of arrests, detention, and surveillance of people from the same communities as terrorist suspects and offenders.

We theorize that right-wing populist individuals' contention that terrorist threats are evidence of institutional failure and the appropriate response to them should be direct and unmediated will shape their counterterrorism preferences in a recognizable pattern: support for unilateral militarized action abroad rather than cooperative or liberal approaches, and support for expanded executive authority and restrictive

domestic measures rather than procedural, legal safeguards.

On the international front, unilateral military action offers a direct and visible response to a terrorist attack, while cooperative approaches such as multilateral coordination or democracy promotion rely more heavily on the kinds of institutions right-wing populists tend to view with skepticism. For one, populist leaders are generally opposed to multilateral military missions (Verbeek and Zaslove, 2017), are skeptical of multilateral governing bodies and international institutions (Chrysogelos, 2010; Destradi et al., 2021; Eiran et al., 2025; Mead, 2011; Mudde, 2023; Wajner et al., 2024) seeing them as threats to national sovereignty (Zürn, 2004; Amstutz, 2014)³. Moreover, researchers show that populist politicians deprioritize foreign policies that promote democracy abroad (see Buzogany et al. 2022; Monkos 2022); reflecting their broader skepticism toward mainstream institutions (see, for example, Bergh 2004; Roccato et al. 2020).

We expect the foreign policy rhetoric and orientation of right-wing populist leaders and governments to shape the preferences of individuals who share their worldview. Accordingly, right-wing populist individuals should see military force as a straightforward tool for addressing security threats, and view multilateral or liberal alternatives as filtered through institutions they do not trust. Similarly, Isernia et al. (2024) explain that individuals with populist attitudes favor hard power, militarist internationalism and unilateralism, while disdaining cooperative internationalism and are also less supportive of foreign policy options such as humanitarian assistance, or promoting democracy and human rights abroad. Isernia et al. (2024) attribute this

³At least philosophically or rhetorically. Destradi et al. (2021) note some skepticism that populist leaders are more likely to pursue unilateral, bellicose international security policies and eschew multilateral cooperation in fact. However, we expect that the philosophical and rhetorical investment in unilateralism by populist leaders affects populist individuals' attitudes about international security and shapes their responses to terrorism threats.

to the populist view that military force is an uncorrupted means of addressing international security threats while multilateral institutions are viewed as compromised by elite interests. Right-wing populist individuals, thus, should respond to terrorism through a lens that favor unilateral military CT responses over cooperative or liberal ones.

On the domestic front, restrictive immigration, border, and surveillance measures align with a conception of "the people" that is often defined in nativist terms among right-wing populists in the United States. Immigration control is a paramount domestic policy issue for right-wing populists (Ivarsflaten, 2008). For instance, Mudde (2007) observes that immigration control dovetails with the nationalist ethos of right-wing populism (see Liang 2007). Perceived terrorism threats also play a role in supporting stricter border policies among right-wing populists (Jacobs and van Spanje, 2021; Altheide, 2017). Experimental research further shows that right-wing populism is associated with skepticism toward outgroups (Bonikowski and Zhang, 2023; Magalhães and Costa-Lopes, 2024). Populists are therefore less supportive of extending political rights to groups they do not identify with (Huber and Schimpf, 2017; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018). Given that right-wing populists treat immigration, border, and internal security measures as tools for protecting a national community whose boundaries are drawn along nativist lines, and we expect terrorism to sharpen the perceived stakes of that protection.

We further argue that three mediators — support for strongman rule, perceived threat from outgroups, and conspiratorial thinking — will help explain why populists react to terrorist threats in this manner because they each trace back to our claim that terrorist attacks reinforce right-wing populists' beliefs that institutions are corrupt and decisive action is preferred. Strongman preferences reflect the demand for direct action by a leader who embodies the people's will. Outgroup threat per-

ceptions reflect the right-wing populist definition of who counts as "the people" and whose interests the failed institutions should have protected. Conspiratorial thinking reflects the belief that elite failure is deliberate.

4 The Mediating Role of Strongman Rule, Outgroup Threat, and Conspiratorial Thinking

We argue that three factors mediate the relationship between right-wing populism and CT preferences: a preference for strong, centralized leadership; distrust or suspicion toward social outgroups; and a propensity for conspiratorial attitudes. In focusing on these mediators, we are able to discern whether right-wing populist outlooks directly shape subjects' responses to terrorism threats or if rather right-wing populism works through other factors. We discuss these mediating factors in turn.

4.1 Right-Wing Populism, Support for Strongman Rule, and CT Preferences

If right-wing populist individuals view terrorist attacks as evidence of institutional failure, then the appropriate response, in their eyes, is a leader who can act decisively without being slowed down by the checks and procedures of liberal democracy. This is the first of our three mediators: support for strongman rule. Scholars have amply documented the pro-strongman preferences of both right-wing populist elites (e.g., leaders and political parties) and individuals holding right-wing populist attitudes. Due to the anti-establishment ethos of populism writ large, left and right-wing populist individuals often express skepticism toward liberal democracy, viewing it as compromised by elites and overly accommodating to groups perceived as outside the core national community (Kriesi, 2014). In response, many populists advocate for a

strong leader who embodies the will of the “true people” and operates with limited constraints from institutional checks and balances.

When in office, populist leaders and political parties often implement policies that emphasize majoritarianism, framing such measures as necessary to combat elite corruption (Akkerman et al., 2014; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018). Behavioral studies further find that individuals holding populist beliefs are more likely to express skepticism toward liberal norms (Donovan, 2021; Lewandowsky and Jankowski, 2023) and to support “strong man” leaders who promise to eliminate elite corruption through concentrated executive authority, even at the expense of institutional checks, or protections for minority groups (Piazza, 2024b).

We argue that, this preference for strong, centralized leadership is what connects right-wing populists’ worldview to their CT preferences. On the international front, it should push them toward unilateral military responses and away from multilateral cooperation or liberal approaches such as democracy promotion. On the domestic front, it should push them toward reduced immigration, increased border security, and expanded surveillance, arrests, and detentions in the service of CT.

For instance, Kertzer et al. (2014) find that individuals with lower support for liberal norms are more likely to favor militarized international engagement over cooperative foreign policy frameworks, attributing this to a pattern of deference to authority—an individual-level psychological trait associated with support for strong leadership, which is negatively associated with support for cooperative internationalism. Similarly, extant work on U.S. public responses to terrorism links variation in support for the use of force to address national security threats to individual differences in authoritarian predispositions (Hetherington and Weiler, 2009). Even those who do not typically exhibit these predispositions may adopt more hawkish policy preferences when exposed to terrorist threats (Hetherington and Suhay, 2011).

A related body of work right-wing authoritarianism and social dominance orientation reaches similar conclusions, finding that individuals scoring higher on these scales prefer hawkish foreign policies and the use of military force against both state and nonstate actors over cooperative or multilateral approaches (Albuyeh and Paradis, 2018; Mutz and Kim, 2017; Rathbun et al., 2016). Rathbun (2020), for example, argues that right-wing authoritarianism is associated with heightened perceptions of threat, which tends to reinforce preferences for more confrontational foreign policy positions. This leads to our first hypothesis:

H1. Right-wing populist individuals are more likely to prefer unilateral deployment of military forces abroad to address terrorism threats and are less likely to prefer multilateral cooperation with allies or policies such as democracy promotion due to their preference for strongman governance.

The same preference for strongman rule should reinforce subjects' support for domestic CT policies that prioritize reducing immigration, tightening border security, and expanding government authority in areas such as surveillance, detention, and arrests in response to terrorist threats. Merolla and Zechmeister (2009) show individuals under terrorist threat place a greater value on strong leadership and granting increased authority to these leaders. Furthermore, individuals with populist views express skepticism toward of mainstream institutions and legal frameworks that protect individual and minority rights (Arato and Cohen, 2021; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018; Piazza, 2024b), which is consistent with a broader preference for strong leadership that emphasizes decisive state action over procedural constraints.

Right-wing populist movements also frequently prioritize the preservation of security and public order (Salvati et al., 2022). Accordingly, we expect greater support among individuals with right-wing populist views for (1) increased border security

as a measure to prevent terrorist entry, (2) immigration restrictions aimed at reducing perceived security threats from foreign populations, and (3) the expanded use of surveillance, arrests, and detention targeting communities linked to suspected terrorists. This leads to our second hypothesis:

H2. Right-wing populist individuals are more likely to support immigration and border restrictions, and surveillance, arrest, and detention of communities linked to suspected terrorists to address terrorist threats due to their preference for strongman governance.

4.2 Right-wing Populism, Perceived Outgroup Threat, and CT Preferences

Our second mediator concerns who right-wing populists count as "the people" whose interests the failed institutions should have protected. Right-wing populists tend to define "the people" in majoritarian terms grounded in racial, ethnic, religious, and cultural identity, and often exclude minorities or immigrants from this category (Roccatto et al., 2020). When a terrorist attack is read as evidence that institutions have failed to safeguard the national community, the groups placed outside that community can become the natural targets of a more restrictive response. Right-wing populist leaders often portray minorities and immigrants not only as culturally distinct but also as potential risks to national security and social cohesion (Berman, 2021; Oliver and Rahn, 2016) and they frequently challenge pluralist democratic institutions that protect minority group rights (Akkerman et al., 2014; Kokkonen and Linde, 2023)

These outgroup perceptions shape political behavior in ways that are well documented. For instance, individuals who hold nativist attitudes are more likely to vote for right-wing populist parties and candidates (Maier et al., 2023). Piazza (2023)

finds that right-wing populist individuals respond to increasing social diversity by expressing heightened sensitivity to perceived threats to racial and ethnic status, consistent with intergroup conflict theory (see Brewer 1999). Experimental research by Martinez et al. (2023) also shows a link between right-wing populist attitudes and skepticism toward social outgroups. We therefore expect right-wing populist individuals to express lower regard for racial, ethnic, and cultural minority groups and, in turn, to support CT policies that emphasize the protection of ingroup status and cohesion, both through U.S. military CT operations abroad and through endorsement of domestic CT enforcement measures.

On the international front, social ingroup identification and loyalty – as conceptualized by Brewer (1999) in her model of intergroup conflict theory – are positively associated with support for militarized international engagement, including the use of military force abroad to defend perceived members of the ingroup from domestic and international security threats, and negatively associated with cooperative internationalism (Kertzer et al., 2014; Rathbun, 2020; Rathbun et al., 2016). Kam and Kinder (2007), for instance, show that ethnocentric individuals in the U.S. were most supportive of the US’s use of military force in the prosecution of the Global War on Terror.

On the domestic front, we argue that skepticism toward social outgroups and their claims to rights reinforces support among populist individuals for domestic CT policies that include immigration restrictions, tighter controls on cross-border movement, and expanded state authority. Terrorism is known to increase threat sensitivity. In contexts of sustained terrorist threat, individuals often respond by seeking to restore a sense of control, which can manifest as heightened wariness of those perceived to fall outside the societal mainstream (Merolla and Zechmeister, 2009). This dynamic can reduce political tolerance among individuals, who become

more supportive of policies that constrain the rights of groups perceived to be associated with the sources of threat (Peffley et al., 2015, 2022). Mason et al. (2021), for instance, show that concerns among white Americans about the perceived erosion of their sociopolitical status amid increasing immigration are a key factor in explaining support for immigration restrictions, stricter border enforcement, and the prioritization of domestic security. This leads to our next set of hypotheses:

H3. Right-wing populist individuals are more likely to prefer unilateral deployment of military forces abroad to address terrorism threats and are less likely to prefer multilateral cooperation with allies or policies such as democracy promotion due to perceived threats from outgroups.

H4. Right-wing populist individuals are more likely to support restrictive immigration and border policies, as well as expanded domestic security measures, such as surveillance, arrest, and detention of communities linked to suspected terrorists to address terrorist threats due to perceived threats from outgroups.

4.3 Right-Wing Populism, Conspiratorial Thinking, and CT Preferences

Our third mediator concerns the belief that elite failure is deliberate rather than accidental. If right-wing populists read a terrorist attack as evidence that institutions have failed the people, conspiratorial thinking supplies the further claim that the failure was engineered by corrupt elites working against the national interest. This sharpens both the sense of threat and the demand for a response that bypasses the institutions held responsible.

Populism of all types, including right-wing populism in the United States, is closely associated with conspiracy beliefs and that populist individuals are more likely to exhibit conspiratorial thinking (Castanho Silva et al., 2017). Conspiracies

are understood by political scientists to be explanations that attribute significant political or economic events to covert actions by powerful actors aiming to subvert institutions, or conceal critical information (Douglas et al., 2019, p. 4). The belief that the people's will is surverted by corrupt elites operating behind the scenes, often in collusion with unaccountable institutions or official actors is a core element of populist discourse (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013).

Both left and right-wing populist political actors have been shown to promote conspiracy theories that challenge the legitimacy of mainstream political norms and institutions in both European countries (Rydgren, 2004) and in the United States (Postel, 2007). Empirical studies consistently find that populist attitudes correlate with a greater propensity to endorse conspiracy theories (Castanho Silva et al., 2017; Salvati et al., 2022; Uscinski et al., 2022; van Prooijen et al., 2022). In that sense, conspiratorial thinking functions as a cognitive framework through which populist individuals interpret political and security threats.

We do not expect conspiratorial thinking to have a discernible impact on preferences for international CT policies. To our knowledge, existing empirical research does not indicate that individuals with conspiratorial worldviews are more likely to support hawkish, cooperative, or liberal foreign security policies. However, we do expect that right-wing populists who hold conspiratorial beliefs are more likely to prefer CT policies directed at perceived internal threats, including immigration restrictions and expanded state powers.

Conspiratorial thinking is directly linked with reduced support for liberal democratic rights and increased suspicion toward outgroups. For instance, Van Prooijen (2024) demonstrates that conspiracy theories shape group responses to perceived threats by amplifying perceptions that outgroups are dangerous, while simultaneously fostering ingroup cohesion and a motivation to defend perceived ingroup in-

terests. One policy-relevant manifestation of this dynamic, we argue, is increased support for restrictive immigrant and border enforcement measures, along with expanded surveillance, arrest, and detention powers, particularly when these are viewed to target groups associated with the perceived national or social threats.

Right-wing populist variants of conspiratorial thinking often portray political and security threats as the result of deliberate actions by corrupt elites who are framed as undermining national security. Van Prooijen and Douglas (2018) argue that this democratic skepticism is rooted in feelings of powerlessness in the face of perceived threats, which conspiracy theories help to explain by attributing blame to identifiable outgroups. For right-wing populist individuals who view democracy itself as compromised by unaccountable elites, CT policies that place less emphasis on pluralist protections can appear defensible, and liberal democratic guarantees can come to be viewed as enabling the very threats they are meant to address. The result is support for domestic counterterrorism policies that emphasize coercive state action and heightened scrutiny of groups perceived as connected to those threats. This leads to our final hypothesis:

H5. Right-wing populist individuals are more likely to support restrictive immigration and border policies, as well as expanded domestic security measures, such as surveillance, arrest, and detention of communities linked to suspected terrorists to address terrorist threats due to conspiratorial thinking patterns.

5 Research Design

We test our hypotheses using original survey data of 1,940 individuals living in the United States⁴. The survey was conducted on Lucid Theorem and was fielded between January 17 and February 7, 2023. The Lucid online panel is representative of the U.S. adult population (Coppock and McClellan, 2019) and has been utilized in numerous recent studies on U.S. public opinion, including those that examine support for retaliation and more authoritarian forms of rule amidst terrorist threats (Caton and Mullinix, 2023; Piazza, 2023; Wayne, 2023). The survey was fielded in four batches across several days and times in order to accommodate participants from different time zones. Before beginning the survey, participants gave their informed consent.

Prior to measuring respondents' counterterrorism preferences, we presented them with a stimulus in the form of a fictional news report of a terrorist attack. We slightly varied, at random, attribution, claiming, and denial of responsibility for the purported terrorist attack to hold constant the effect that the name of the perpetrator had on subjects' responses⁵. We included this stimulus to increase the

⁴While the United States shares some contextual similarity with other countries – it is facing a populist moment in its politics, immigration is a highly salient political topic, and conspiratorial thinking has become a prominent factor in national political life – it also has some features that make it more unique. The U.S. has experienced large, transnational terrorist attacks that have had a profound effect on politics and society, has a greater counterterrorism capacity due to its military hegemonic status, and has a robust recent legacy of engaging in militarized and soft and unilateral and multilateral counterterrorism projects embodied in the Global War on Terror. We therefore do not claim that our findings are necessarily reproducible in other national contexts. Future research might explore how similar dynamics manifest in Europe (where multilateralism constrains unilateral action), Latin America (where populism targets domestic crime more than transnational terrorism), the Middle East (where regime-led populism and securitization intersect), and South Asia (where populist nationalism fuses with majoritarian identity politics).

⁵As a robustness check, we reran our analyses while controlling for these different conditions and found that they do not change the main results. These robustness checks along with the full text of the vignettes are included in the appendix.

salience and realism of the issue for all respondents (Druckman, 2022)⁶. Research on political persuasion suggests that individuals engage with political messages at different levels of cognitive effort depending on how salient the issue is to them (Druckman, 2022). Studies in cognitive psychology suggest that priming stimuli, even in non-experimental settings, can activate specific thoughts, emotions, or biases before questioning (Schmidt et al., 2011). This is particularly relevant to the study of public preferences, as citizens’ levels of knowledge, interest in political issues, and perceptions of issue salience play a critical role in shaping their assessments (Krosnick and Brannon, 1993; Donovan et al., 2008; Ciuk and Yost, 2016). By simulating a sudden and dramatic event, our stimulus mirrors how real-world events can abruptly heighten the salience of an issue and provide a context in which respondents expressed preferences are more likely to resemble those formed in response to actual events such as under actual conditions of threat. Without such stimulus, respondents who are already informed and concerned about terrorism may naturally express the reactions they would have had to a real terror attack due to terrorism’s higher baseline salience for them, while less-informed individuals may fail to reveal how they would react under genuine threat conditions because the issue lacks immediacy in their minds. The stimulus thus temporarily elevates the salience of terrorism for all respondents, enabling a more accurate assessment of how counterterrorism preferences might shift, as it would be in the wake of a real attack. After completing the survey, participants were debriefed and informed that the news story they had read before the survey was entirely fictional. Throughout the survey, multiple attention tests were used to address concerns over subject inattentiveness⁷. The median respondent took 13.6

⁶Please see the appendix for a discussion of the effects of issue salience on experimental subjects.

⁷Consistent with recommendations in the literature (Berinsky et al., 2014), we recognize the value of comparing models that include and exclude respondents who fail attention checks. In our case, however, respondents who failed the attention checks were removed from the survey, and their

minutes to complete the survey. The full survey instrument is published in the appendix along with descriptive, scalability, and distribution statistics for all variables used in the study.

5.1 Dependent Variables

To measure respondents' counterterrorism preferences, we employ six dependent variables—three addressing preferences for militarized or cooperative approaches in international counterterrorism responses and three focusing on domestic security measures in domestic counterterrorism responses. In the former category, international counterterrorism responses, we measure respondent support for (1) deploying ground troops to countries where terrorists are based to apprehend suspects, (2) providing military aid and intelligence to governments of those countries to assist in combating terrorism, and (3) promoting democracy, human rights, and civil liberties in those countries as a means of addressing terrorism at its source. In the latter category, domestic counterterrorism responses, we measure support for (4) increasing border security in the U.S., (5) reducing immigration to the U.S., and (6) arresting, detaining, or increasing surveillance of domestic communities perceived as potential supporters of terrorism.

All six measures are based on responses to questions with four answer choices—*strongly disagree*, *somewhat disagree*, *somewhat agree*, *strongly agree*⁸—and are treated as ordinal variables ranging from 1 (indicating the lowest level of support for the specified

data were therefore not retained. While this limits our ability to assess potential differences, we note that our sample includes respondents with varying levels of engagement reflected by how long they spent completing the survey, and we account for this variation in our models.

⁸To prevent “midpoint response bias”, we did not include a middle category on our response scale. Respondents may select the middle category to reduce cognitive effort (Morii et al., 2017) or as a result of satisficing (Krosnick, 1991).

counterterrorism response) to 4 (indicating the highest level of support). Overall, support for different international and domestic counterterrorism responses among respondents exhibits varied trends. This is illustrated by Figure 1. For instance, respondents show stronger support for cooperative international counterterrorism strategies (like providing aid to foreign countries to assist in combating terrorism) than direct military intervention (deploying ground troops abroad). As for domestic responses, respondents tend to favor border security measures but show mixed views on immigration restrictions and surveillance.

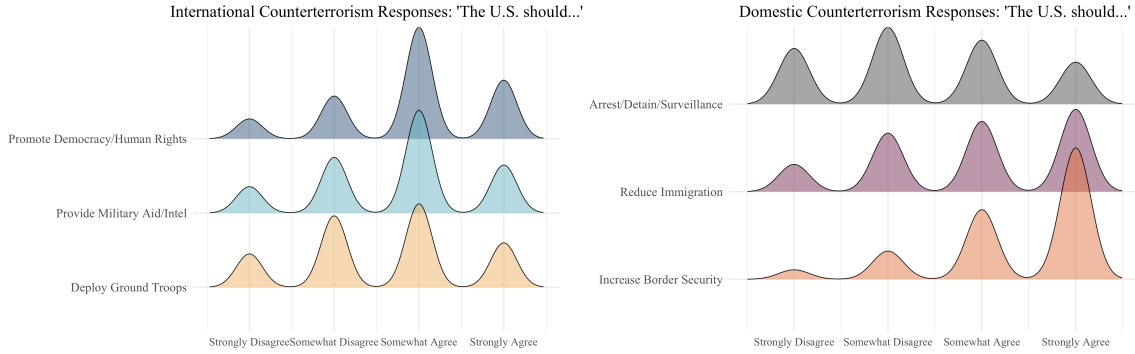


Figure 1: Distribution of Preferences for Counterterrorism Responses by Policy Type

5.2 Independent Variable

Our main independent variable measures respondents’ right-wing populist attitudes. For our study we used eight questions that were developed by Oliver and Rahn (?), specifically for the study of populist attitudes in the U.S and have been used by previous studies on how populist attitudes influence U.S. public opinion about a variety of contentious issues (Armaly and Enders, 2024b,a; Piazza, 2024b). We presented all eight questions with four answer choices—*strongly disagree*, *somewhat*

disagree, somewhat agree, strongly agree. We construct a mean-scaled unweighted additive index of populist attitudes by summing responses to these eight survey. The resulting populist attitudes index is continuous and ranges from 1, indicating an absence of populist attitudes, and to 4, indicating the highest level of populist sentiments.

The mean and median scores on the populism index for respondents are 2.74 and 2.75, respectively, suggesting a normal distribution of populist attitudes across the sample. This is illustrated in Figure 2.

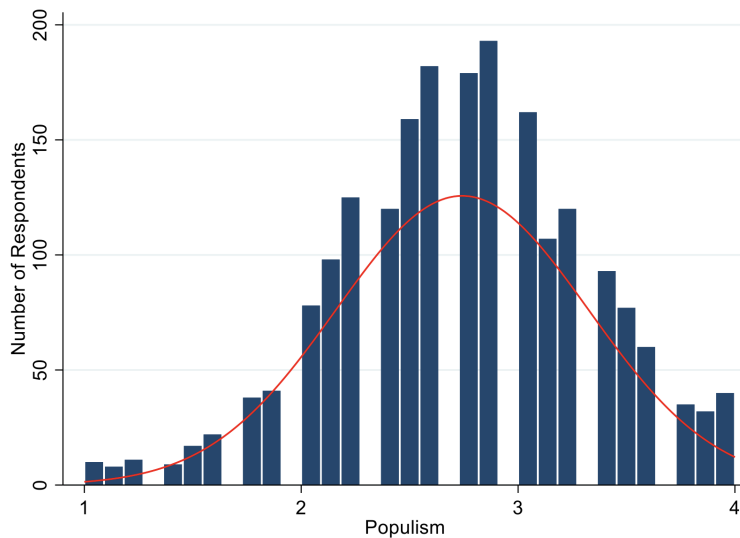


Figure 2: Histogram of Right-Wing Populism Scores with Density Estimate

5.3 Mediators

We employ three mediators to test our hypotheses: support for “strongman” rule, distrust or skepticism towards outgroups, and conspiratorial thinking. To measure support for strongman rule we asked respondents to what extent they agreed with the following statement: “having a strong and honest leader who does not have to

bother with Congress or elections be a good way of governing the United States”. This way of measuring support for strongman rule is consistent with other studies (see, for example, Piazza 2024a)⁹. Preference for strongman rule is relatively evenly distributed across categories in the sample. Approximately 31.4 percent of subjects indicated that they strongly disagreed with this sort of rule for the United States while around 24.2 somewhat disagreed. Around 28.0 percent somewhat agreed while 16.3 percent strongly agreed.

To measure perceived outgroup threat, we asked respondents the extent to which they agreed with the following statements: (1) “discrimination against other racial, religious or other minority groups is a problem today”, (2) “members of racial, religious or other minority groups are too demanding in their push for equal rights”, and (3) “there is too much concern for the rights of minority groups nowadays”. The first item was then reverse-coded so that higher values across all items indicate greater perceived threat. We combine responses to these three questions into an additive index, ranging from 2 to 13, where higher scores indicate a higher level of perceived threat, and then divide the measure by three to create an average score across all responses. The median score for our respondents is 6, on the 2 to 13 scale.

To measure conspiratorial thinking, we surveyed respondents on the extent to which they agreed with a set of four statements devised and validated in previous studies (Uscinski et al., 2016; Enders et al., 2020; Uscinski et al., 2022; Enders et al., 2023). We combine responses to these four questions into an additive index, ranging from 4 to 20, where higher scores indicate a higher aptitude for conspiratorial thinking. The median score for our respondents is 15.

⁹Prior research suggests that support for a strong executive may be influenced by which party controls the government (Littvay et al., 2024). However, since our survey was fielded during a Democratic administration, we view our use of this measure as a conservative test—likely dampening, rather than inflating, expressions of support for strongman rule among right-leaning respondents.

5.4 Controls

In the models we control for respondents' age, gender, marital status, parental status, race and ethnicity, education level, income level, employment status, partisan affiliation, political conservatism, religious affiliation, news consumption habits, perceived personal threat from terrorism, residential context (e.g., urban, or rural), the U.S. region where they reside (e.g., Northeast, Midwest, South, or West), and survey completion time (in seconds).

In the sample, the median age for respondents was 45 and around 47.2 percent were male. Approximately 41.7 percent were married and 56.8 percent reported having children. In terms of race, around 68.3 percent of respondents identified as white, non-Hispanic, 10.4 percent as black, non-Hispanic, 12.2 percent as Hispanic or Latino, 4.6 percent as Asian or Pacific Islander. Approximately 11.0 percent identified as another race or ethnicity or of mixed race. The median respondent reported having completed some college but did not obtain a degree. The median household income of subjects was between U.S. \$40,000 and \$44,999 annually. Around 11.3 percent of respondents reported being unemployed and seeking work. Around 24.8 percent of subjects stated that they lived in a rural area.

Around 43.1 percent identified as Democrats, 35.1 percent as Republicans, and 21.7 percent as Independents. 63.7 percent of respondents identified as Christians (of multiple denominations) while around 29.6 percent stated that they were "born again." The median respondent stated that they followed news between several times a week and daily, and around 38.1 percent stated that they obtained most of their news through social media.

In terms of perceived personal threat from terrorism, around 56.4 percent of subjects stated that thought that it was somewhat or very likely that they themselves

or someone that they knew would be hurt or killed in a terrorist attack sometime in their lifetimes, indicating that a majority of respondents expressed perceived personal threat from terrorism. This relatively high level is likely the product of our exposing subjects to the fictitious news event depicting a terrorist attack.

Around 20.1 percent of subjects resided in the Northeast, 19.1 from the Midwest, 37.7 from the South, and 23.1 from the West. Finally, we also include a Duration variable, which captures the logged time (in seconds) each respondent spent completing the survey, to account for variation in respondent engagement or attentiveness.

An outline of the survey instrument is provided in the appendix along with a table reporting descriptive statistics for all variables used in the analysis.

5.5 Estimation

We test our primary hypotheses, which assert that individuals with right-wing populist attitudes are more likely to endorse more muscular international counterterrorism policies and more security-focused domestic counterterrorism measures, using ordinary least squares estimations (OLS). To investigate the other hypotheses regarding how support for strongman rule, perceived outgroup threat, and conspiratorial thinking mediates these relationships, we rely on structural equation models (SEM) with bootstrapped replications.

6 Results

Our analysis provides strong evidence that right-wing populist attitudes shape counterterrorism preferences. Before examining the mediating roles of support for strongman rule, perceived outgroup threat, and conspiratorial thinking, we first present the

baseline findings, as illustrated in Figures 3 and 4. The corresponding regression tables are available in the appendix.

Figure 3 displays coefficient plot results from the three foreign counterterrorism policy models, each assessing support for a different international counterterrorism strategy¹⁰. The first model—Ground Troops Abroad—yields evidence that individuals with higher right-wing populism scores are significantly more likely to support deploying U.S. troops abroad to combat terrorism. This aligns with prior research suggesting that populists favor militarized, unilateral foreign policy approaches (Isernia et al., 2024). However, the second and third models—Military Aid/Intel to Allies and Promote Democracy Abroad—yield null results, suggesting that right-wing populist attitudes do not significantly influence support for multilateral cooperation or liberal counterterrorism strategies. Collectively, these findings indicate that while populists may not explicitly reject multilateral or liberal policies, their preferences strongly favor unilateral and militaristic counterterrorism responses. Notably, the Ground Troops Abroad model suggests that right-wing populist sentiment has a greater substantive effect on support for troop deployment than party identification or ideological orientation. Figure 3 further visualizes the predicted effect of populist sentiment on support for troop deployment, comporting with an 28.9% increase in support between individuals with the lowest and highest levels of right-wing populist attitudes¹¹.

Turning to domestic counterterrorism policies, Figure 4 presents coefficient plots for models assessing the relationship between right-wing populism and support for increasing border security, reducing immigration, and expanding government au-

¹⁰Predicted probability graphs for all models are presented in the appendix.

¹¹Note, we present graphs of postestimation marginal effects of the impact of right-wing populism on the six dependent variables of the study in the appendix.

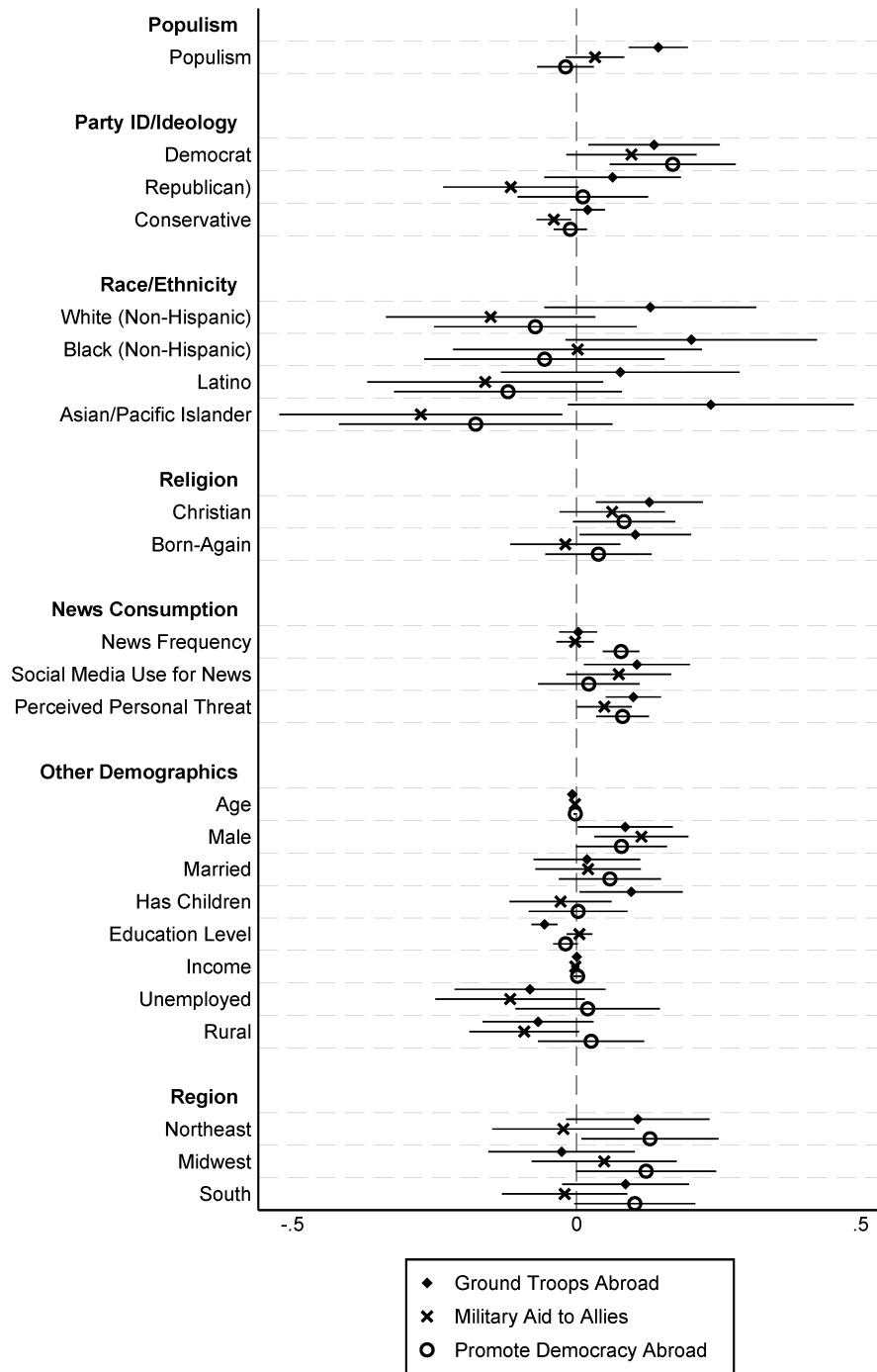


Figure 3: Coefficient Plots, Foreign CT Policy
 Note: 95% Confidence Intervals. Non-Standardized Coefficients.

thority to surveil/detain/arrest individuals perceived as potential domestic security threats. Across all three models, right-wing populist attitudes are positive, strong and significant predictors of support for more restrictive domestic counterterrorism measures. These results align with prior studies linking right-wing populism to skepticism toward outgroups (Jacobs and van Spanje, 2021; Bonikowski and Zhang, 2023; Magalhães and Costa-Lopes, 2024). Strikingly, our models indicate that populist sentiment have a larger substantive effect on support for these measures than either Republican Party affiliation or general ideological conservatism.

6.1 Mediation Analysis

We hypothesized that right-wing populist individuals' support for international and domestic CT policy responses is mediated through affection toward strongman rule, perceptions of outgroup threat, and conspiratorial thinking. To test thisTo test for mediation, we conducted structural equation modeling (SEM) with bootstrapped replications using the sem package in STATA. The results, summarized in Figures 5–8, provide strong evidence for our hypotheses, suggesting right-wing populist attitudes work through other factors to shape individuals responses to terrorist attacks¹².

Figure 5 evaluates the effects of our three mediators on support for deploying ground troops abroad. Right-wing populism is a strong positive predictor of support for strongman rule, which, in turn, is associated with support for foreign troop deployments (H1). This finding aligns with prior research linking authoritarian political attitudes to muscular foreign policy preferences (Rathbun et al., 2016; Mutz and Kim, 2017; Albuyeh and Paradis, 2018). Similarly, perceptions of outgroup

¹²Note that mediation requires the independent variable to be significantly associated with the dependent variable (see Baron and Kenny 1986). Because we did not find populism to significantly predict provision of military aid and intelligence to allies and democracy promotion in our first set of analyses, we therefore cannot conduct mediation tests on them.

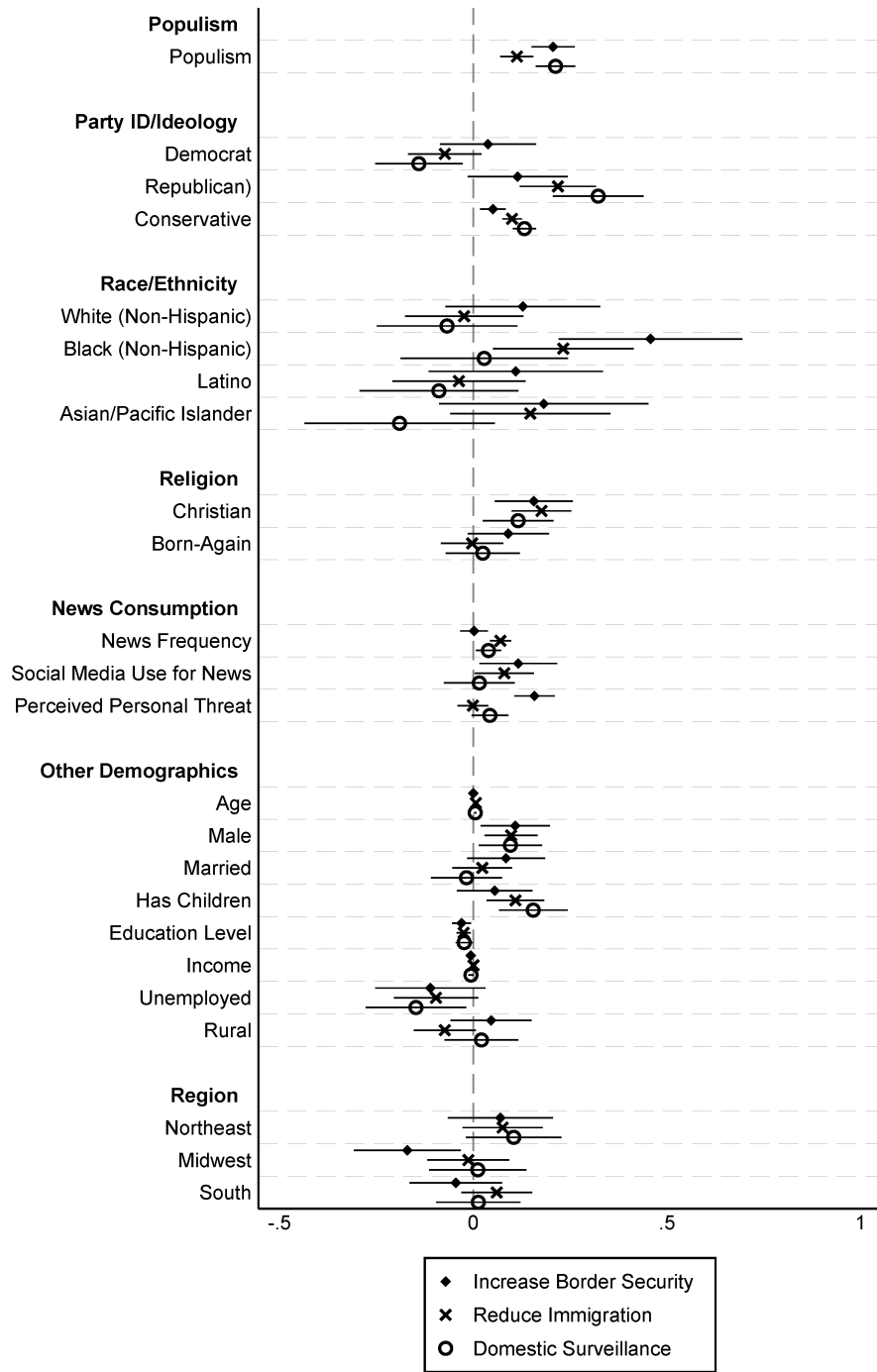


Figure 4: Coefficient Plots, Domestic CT Policy
 Note: 95% Confidence Intervals. Non-Standardized Coefficients.

threat significantly mediate the relationship between right-wing populism and support for troop deployments (H3), echoing studies associating ethnocentrism with unilateral militarism (Kam and Kinder, 2007; Kertzer et al., 2014; Rathbun et al., 2016). However, while right-wing populism strongly correlates with conspiratorial beliefs, conspiratorial thinking does not significantly predict support for militarized counterterrorism policies. Support for strongman rule mediates approximately 48.8 percent of the effect of right-wing populism on support for deploying ground troops abroad to counter terrorist threats. Perceived outgroup threat mediates a much smaller percent: 9.6 percent.

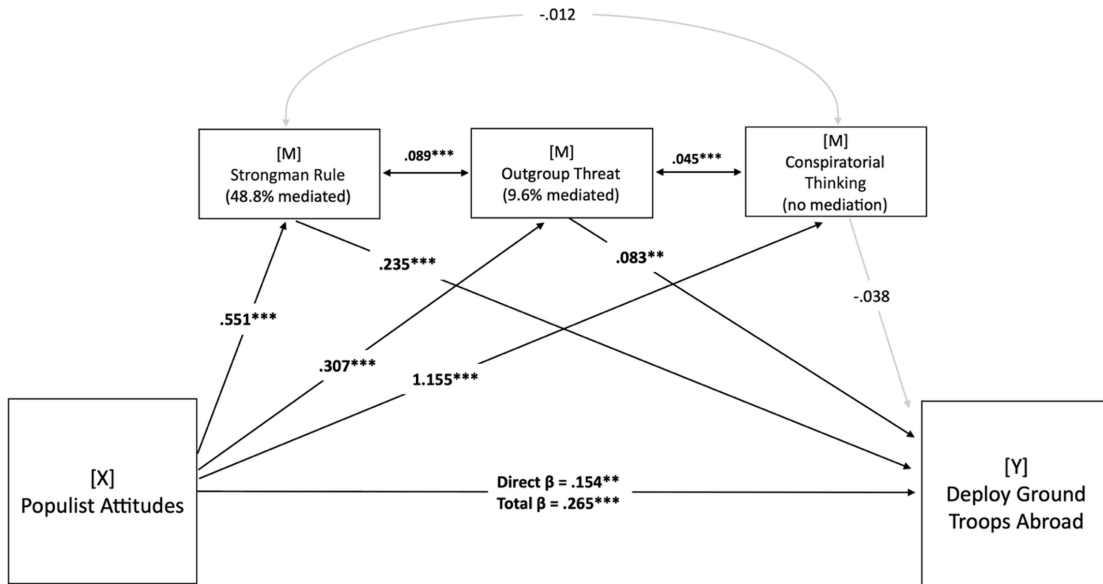


Figure 5: Mediation, Populist Attitudes, Support for Strongman Rule, Perceived Outgroup Threat, Conspiratorial Thinking and Deploying Ground Troops Abroad to Address Terrorist Threats

Note: Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). $*** p \leq .000$, $** p \leq .01$, $* p \leq .1$. 1,000 bootstrapped iterations. Controls: age, gender, marital status, children, race, education level, income level, rural residence, partisan affiliation, political ideology, religious affiliation, religious attitudes, news consumption, social media usage, fear of being a victim of terrorism, region of residence in U.S., duration of survey (log).

Figures 6–8 assess how our three mediators shape the relationship between right-wing populist attitudes and support for border security, immigration restrictions, and domestic surveillance/arrests. Across all models, support for strongman rule, outgroup threat, and conspiratorial beliefs significantly predict support for these domestic security measures (with the exception of conspiratorial thinking not predicting support for domestic surveillance).

First, support for strongman rule mediates the link between right-wing populist sentiment and support for increasing border security (Figure 6), reducing immigration (Figure 7), and expanding surveillance/arrests of domestic populations perceived as terrorist sympathizers (Figure 8) (H2). This finding aligns with prior research showing that individuals with populist views tend to prioritize security over institutional checks on executive power, or civil liberties (Piazza, 2023; Salvati et al., 2022). Similarly, perceived outgroup threat mediates these relationships (H4), as right-wing populists’ skepticism toward outgroups is associated with increased support for expanded domestic security measures. Together, support for strongman rule and perceived outgroup threat account for 48% of the relationship between right-wing populism and support for border security and 55% of the relationship between right-wing populism and increased domestic surveillance.

Finally, conspiratorial thinking mediates the relationship between right-wing populism and most—but not all—domestic security responses (H5). As shown in Figures 6 and 7, conspiratorial thinking significantly predicts greater support for border security and immigration restrictions, mediating approximately 53% of the relationship between right-wing populism and support for increased border security and 27.6% of the relationship between right-wing populism and support for reducing immigration. This finding is consistent with research linking right-wing populism to conspiracy beliefs (Salvati et al., 2022; Uscinski et al., 2022) and conspiratorial skepticism toward

outgroups (van Prooijen, 2018; Papaioannou et al., 2023). However, as shown in Figure 8, conspiratorial thinking does not significantly predict support for surveillance, arrests, or detention of domestic groups perceived as terrorist sympathizers.

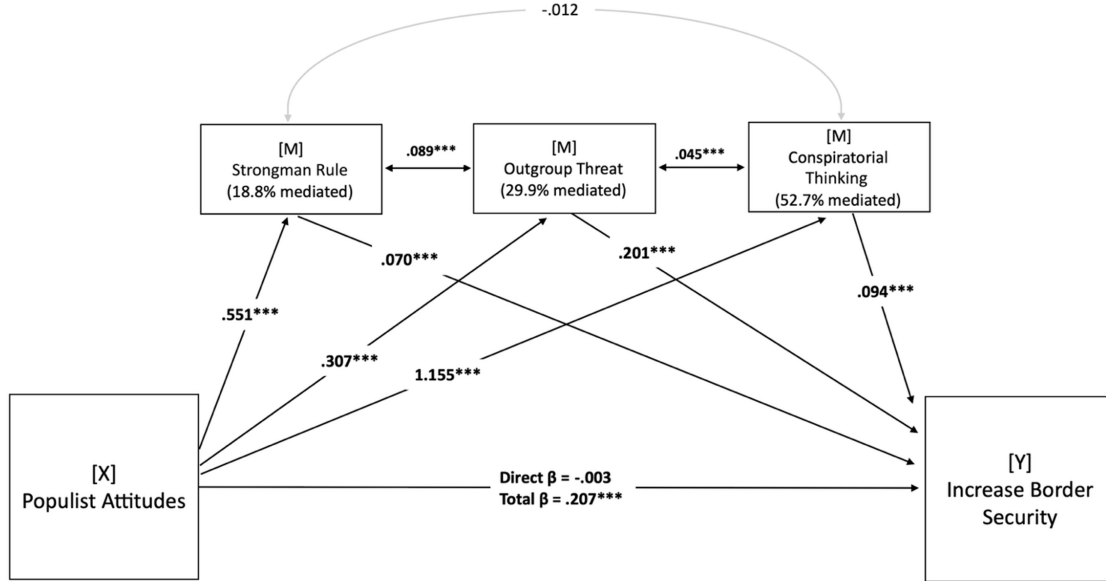


Figure 6: Mediation, Populist Attitudes, Support for Strongman Rule, Perceived Outgroup Threat, Conspiratorial Thinking and Increasing Border Security to Address Terrorist Threats

Note: Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). $*** p \leq .000$, $** p \leq .01$, $* p \leq .1$. 1,000 bootstrapped iterations. Controls: age, gender, marital status, children, race, education level, income level, rural residence, partisan affiliation, political ideology, religious affiliation, religious attitudes, news consumption, social media usage, fear of being a victim of terrorism, region of residence in U.S., duration of survey (log).

Our findings, thus, demonstrate that right-wing populist attitudes strongly influence counterterrorism preferences, aligning with our theoretical expectations. Right-wing populists favor unilateral, militarized responses to terrorism abroad while showing no significant support for multilateral cooperation or democracy promotion in foreign policy decisions around counterterrorism. Domestically, they are significantly more likely to endorse border security measures, immigration restrictions, and

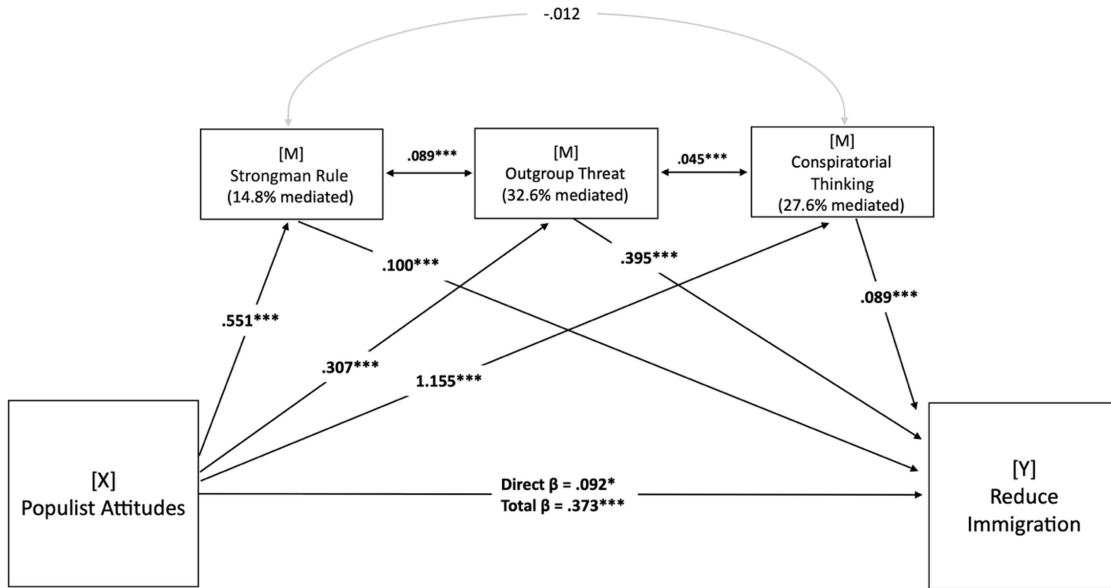


Figure 7: Mediation, Populist Attitudes, Support for Strongman Rule, Perceived Outgroup Threat, Conspiratorial Thinking and Reducing Immigration to Address Terrorist Threats

Note: Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). $*** p \leq .000$, $** p \leq .01$, $* p \leq .1$. 1,000 bootstrapped iterations. Controls: age, gender, marital status, children, race, education level, income level, rural residence, partisan affiliation, political ideology, religious affiliation, religious attitudes, news consumption, social media usage, fear of being a victim of terrorism, region of residence in U.S., duration of survey (log).

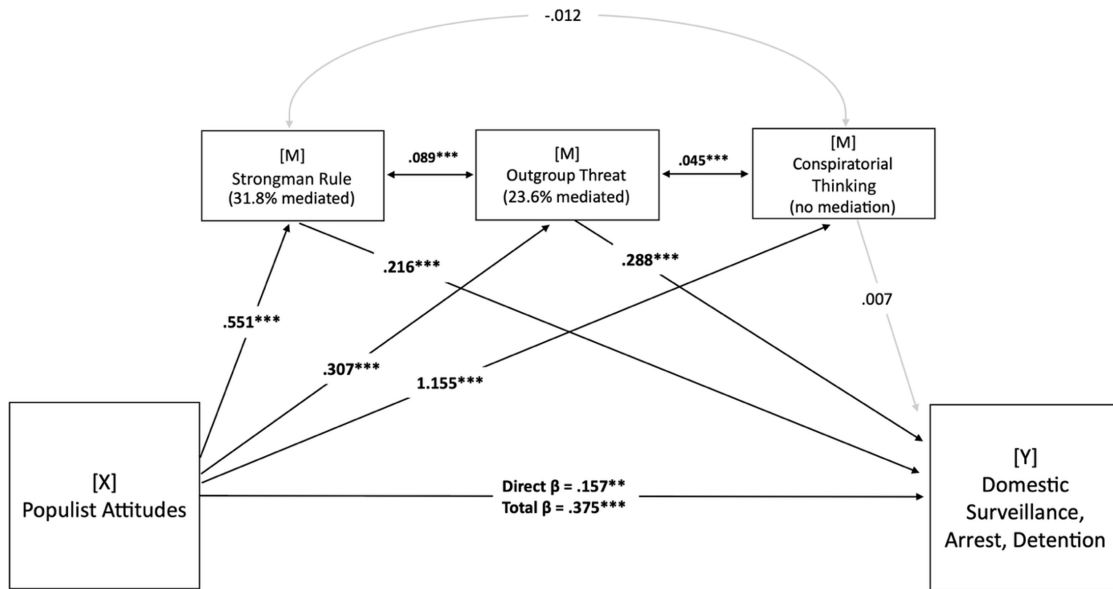


Figure 8: Mediation, Populist Attitudes, Support for Strongman Rule, Perceived Outgroup Threat, Conspiratorial Thinking and Domestic Surveillance, Arrest, and Detention of People from Same Communities as Terrorists to Address Terrorist Threats

Note: Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). $*** p \leq .000$, $** p \leq .01$, $* p \leq .1$. 1,000 bootstrapped iterations. Controls: age, gender, marital status, children, race, education level, income level, rural residence, partisan affiliation, political ideology, religious affiliation, religious attitudes, news consumption, social media usage, fear of being a victim of terrorism, region of residence in U.S., duration of survey (log).

surveillance or detention of perceived domestic security threats. Mediation analysis reveals that support for strongman rule and perceptions of outgroup threat largely drive these preferences of right-wing populists.

7 Conclusion

This study contributes to the body of research demonstrating that right-wing populism in the United States extends beyond electoral dynamics to shape policy preferences. Because our study exclusively focuses on right-wing populism in the U.S., it cannot make broader claims extending to right-wing populists in other countries. However, the findings highly American right-wing populist attitudes align with some of the broader global trends in populism, emphasizing skepticism toward international cooperation and a preference for unilateral action over multilateral engagement (Ivarsflaten, 2008; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018; Berman, 2021; Isernia et al., 2024).

On the international front, the findings reveal that right-wing populist individuals in the U.S. strongly favor a militarized, unilateral approach to counterterrorism over cooperative, or multilateral strategies. Notably, right-wing populism is not significantly associated with support for military aid to allies, intelligence sharing, or democracy promotion, whereas it strongly predicts support for troop deployment abroad. This preference aligns with broader populist skepticism toward international institutions and alliances, reinforcing a worldview that prioritizes national sovereignty. Unlike European populists, who are often wary of military entanglements beyond their region and skeptical of American global leadership, American right-wing populists show strong support for foreign military interventions for counterterrorism purposes. This distinct pattern may reflect post-9/11 legacies or a

broader U.S. tradition of military assertiveness. As right-wing populist sentiment grows, foreign policymakers may face increasing pressure to shift away from multilateral counterterrorism strategies in favor of go-it-alone tactics—a trend that could have significant implications for global security partnerships.

Domestically, the study finds that American right-wing populists strongly favor counterterrorism policies that emphasize border security, immigration restrictions, and heightened surveillance or detention, echoing some patterns observed among European right-wing populist electorates. The role of support for strongman governance and outgroup threat perceptions in shaping these preferences suggests that, for individuals with right-wing populist attitudes, counterterrorism policy may be informed both by security concerns and by efforts to reinforce boundaries around national identity. While our empirical results point to a general relationship between populist attitudes and support for hardline security policies across the left-right spectrum, the mechanisms we identify such as nativism, or out-group threat, are most consistent with right-wing variants of populism. Future research could explore how left-wing populist movements articulate different conceptions of societal threat.

Future research can build on our findings in several additional ways. First, we employed mediation analyses to better understand the role of strongman views, outgroup threat, and conspiratorial thinking in shaping how right-wing populist attitudes influence counterterrorism preferences. Future research might explore a broader range of potential mechanisms, such as institutional distrust, or affective polarization. Furthermore, since mediation analysis, like all observational methods, does not establish causal identification, future research can consider experimental designs better suited to testing causal pathways.

Secondly, future work might examine how the expression of populist attitudes varies across partisan lines. Given the centrality of party identity in American poli-

tics, studying the partisan contours of populist sentiment could shed further light on the conditions under which such attitudes translate into support for specific counterterrorism policies.

Finally, researchers can explore the role of media and online information ecosystems in reinforcing or challenging right-wing populist narratives, especially given the rising influence of social media as a news source. One promising direction is to assess how emerging digital technologies, including algorithmic news feeds and micro-targeted political messaging on social media, further reinforce populist narratives. Recent research indicates that individuals' demand for content moderation of incivility, intolerance, and violent threats on social media is rather low (Pradel et al., 2024), that increasing partisan polarization fuels the spread of "fake news" on social media (Osmundsen et al., 2021), and that users' exposure to political posts is driven not only by partisan alignment but also by the intensity of their political engagement (Haselswerdt and Fine, 2024). This suggests that highly engaged users—regardless of party identification or ideology—may be especially susceptible to digital messages that reinforce right-wing populist attitudes toward national security, as they are continually exposed to unmoderated and polarizing content.

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