

Populist Attitudes and Party Preferences in Japan

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Abstract

While the study of populism in Japan remains an under-explored area, much of the literature on this topic suggests that certain leaders of the established ruling party, the LDP, along with some regional political figures, have extensively used populist rhetoric and strategies. However, recent survey investigations of populist attitudes in the electorate show a mismatch with this finding, revealing instead that people who vote for supposedly populist candidates and parties actually score very low on a scale of populism. We investigate this mismatch by examining two sources of data on populism among voters – the CSES electoral survey of the 2017 General Election, and a full archive of tweets about politics sent during the campaign period for the same election. We find that the mismatch is replicated here, with survey analysis showing that LDP voters have very low levels of populism while social media analysis shows LDP voters being the most common users of words and phrases which suggest elements of populism. We conclude the paper with a discussion of some problems with the current question sets used to measure populism in surveys and outline a new project which will test a set of questions that should work more reliably and flexibly across different national contexts.

Introduction

The question of whether Japan has been afflicted by, or has somehow remained immune from, the ongoing global wave of resurgent populism is one that has been hotly debated both within and without the country. Narratives of Japanese populism in the English language media are generally deeply polarised, with one common genre of article simply stating as an unexamined fact that Japan has no populist movement before going on to explore the socio-economic underpinnings of this largely unsupported claim, while another genre of reportage – popular both in some parts of the foreign press and in left-wing critiques of the Abe Administration within Japan – assumes Prime Minister Abe himself to be a right-wing, nativist, populist figure equivalent to the United States’ Donald Trump or Hungary’s Viktor Orban. These two positions are mutually contradictory – both cannot be true. Within Japan’s own commentaries and particularly in political scientific research on populism, some more nuanced arguments emerge, well summarised by a recent article by Toru Yoshida¹ which divided perspectives on Japanese populism into claims of populist behaviour and speech by national-level LDP leaders such as Shinzō Abe and Junichirō Koizumi, and by local-level political leaders such as Tokyo’s Yuriko Koike and Osaka’s Tōru Hashimoto. This division permits a much more detailed understanding of how and where populist rhetoric is being employed in Japan’s political spheres than the binary dichotomy – “Japan has no populist movement” versus “Japan is ruled by a populist nationalist” – implied in much mainstream writing.

Yet the title of Yoshida’s article itself – “Populism ‘Made in Japan’” – hints at one potential issue with much of the scientific literature on this topic, namely a tendency to try to define a new form or variety of populism which fits the behaviour of Japanese political actors rather than to examine Japan’s politicians using a framework that would permit rigorous cross-national comparison. This trend is found in a significant amount of literature on Japanese populism; while authors commonly cite the same foundational texts that are used to provide

¹ Toru Yoshida, ‘Populism “Made in Japan”: A New Species?’, *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics*, 29 April 2019, 2057891119844608, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2057891119844608>.

a functional definition of populism in studies of other countries², they often proceed to depart from these definitions in significant ways. In particular, a focus on “theatricality” as a key element of populism was established by Hideo Ōtake in the early 2000s³ and has become a common element of work on the subject⁴ despite having little correspondence with the broadly accepted elements of populism as it is studied in other national contexts. While it is undeniable that populism has unique elements in each national context, this significant redefinition of the term to create a “Japan-style Populism” arguably muddies the water and makes direct international comparison extremely difficult – a factor compounded by Japan’s exclusion, at least for the moment, from many cross-national studies of populism such as the Global Populism Dataset.⁵

A further issue in the study of Japan’s populism is that almost all research conducted to date has been on the “supply side” of populism – examining the speech, positioning and political marketing activities of politicians themselves, to the exclusion of any focus on Japanese voters and their attitudes. The substantive questions of what populist attitudes exist among voters and how they influence political behaviour have become much more urgent as more and more countries have seen rising trends of voting for populist parties and candidates over the past decade, and as a consequence a number of measurement scales have been proposed and tested⁶ in a variety of countries (though Asian nations including Japan have been notably absent from the development of these scales). A recent study by Hieda et al⁷ implemented the scale proposed by Schulz et al⁸ in a survey conducted after the 2017 Tokyo Metropolitan Assembly election, and its results suggest that there is a significant mismatch between the

² Cas Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe* (Cambridge University Press Cambridge, 2009); Kirk A. Hawkins, ‘Is Chávez Populist?: Measuring Populist Discourse in Comparative Perspective’, *Comparative Political Studies* 42, no. 8 (1 August 2009): 1040–67, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414009331721>.

³ Hideo Ōtake, *日本型ポピュリズム—政治への期待と幻滅* (Tōkyō: 中央公論新社, 2003).

⁴ Shinsaku Arima, *劇場型ポピュリズムの誕生: 橋下劇場と変貌する地方政治* (ミネルヴァ書房, 2017); Yoshida, ‘Populism “Made in Japan”’.

⁵ Kirk A Hawkins et al., ‘Global Populism Database: Populism Dataset for Leaders 1.0’, 2019, populism.byu.edu.

⁶ Anne Schulz et al., ‘Measuring Populist Attitudes on Three Dimensions’, *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 30, no. 2 (1 June 2018): 316–26, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ijpor/edw037>; Bruno Castanho Silva et al., ‘Public Opinion Surveys : A New Scale’, *The Ideational Approach to Populism*, 11 October 2018, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315196923-8>.

⁷ Takeshi Hieda, Masahiro Zenkyo, and Masaru Nishikawa, ‘Do Populists Support Populism? An Examination through an Online Survey Following the 2017 Tokyo Metropolitan Assembly Election’, *Party Politics*, 10 May 2019, 1354068819848112, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068819848112>.

⁸ Schulz et al., ‘Measuring Populist Attitudes on Three Dimensions’.

literature on populism among Japanese political actors and the measurement of populism among Japanese voters. Specifically, the study found that voters for the Tokyoites First Party – led by Yuriko Koike, who has been commonly defined as a regional populist leader – did not register as particularly populist on Schulz’ scale. Instead, the higher-scoring voters on this scale of populism had a propensity to vote for the Japanese Communist Party, whose leadership and messaging has never, to our knowledge, been defined as “populist”.

The present study aims to investigate this apparent mismatch between the extant literature and the measured survey results by looking at two additional data sources to reveal voters’ populist tendencies – firstly, the CSES (Comparative Studies of Electoral Systems) survey data from Japan’s 2017 General Election, which for the first time included questions designed to measure populist sentiment (as part of CSES Module 5); and secondly, social media data gathered from Twitter during the campaigning period for the same election, which we analysed for insights into the public expression of populist sentiments by online supporters of each party. Finally, we outline a possible solution to the mismatch in the form of a new survey design which we are presently testing in Japan and believe has the potential to significantly improve the cross-national robustness of existing measures of voters’ populism.

Survey Data

We first looked to the survey data, which is based on a large-scale electoral survey conducted for the 2017 General Election incorporating the CSES Module 5 question set. This set of questions includes a new section specifically designed to measure the populism of voters, which shares some commonalities with other question sets such as Schulz’ or Castanho Silva’s items but uses significantly different wordings⁹. This data is especially valuable because the same questions are asked in a large number of different countries, in theory permitting the direct comparison of levels of populism among voters in different nations.

⁹ Sara Hobolt et al., ‘CSES Module 5 Democracy Divided? People, Politicians and the Politics of Populism’, n.d., 16.

We were particularly interested in the impact which this scale of populism would have on respondents' voting propensity, and began with the hypothesis that voters with a higher degree of populism would be more inclined to vote for parties that are identified in the existing literature as being populist in nature. We used the CSES populism items to run structural equational models with a multinomial dependent variable and predicted the probability to vote for each party. The measure of populism in the CSES questions can be captured either as a single overarching dimension, or as a trio of dimensions measuring anti-elite attitudes, attitudes to popular sovereignty and attitudes to out-groups separately. In our analysis, we found that switching between one and three dimensions made little difference to the outcomes. In the subsequent figures, the horizontal axis shows a latent variable, "populist attitudes", from very low to very high. Note that the absolute values of this scale are not comparable between countries. Also note that while all parties, including small parties, were included in the structural equation models, the small parties are omitted from the figures; this is partially in order to ensure readability, but also because the absolute levels of propensity to vote for a party depend on how many people actually voted for the party overall, so parties with overall low levels of support see little change in absolute vote propensity in this analysis.

The outcome of this analysis, however, runs contrary to this hypothesis. Shown in Figure 1, the results reveal that far from benefitting from populist attitudes among voters thanks to its purportedly populist leader, the LDP actually sees a sharp and consistent decline in its support rate as voters' populism rises. Around half of the least populist voters on the scale voted for the LDP, compared to less than 20% of the most populist voters. The LDP's primary rival in this election, the CDPJ – a party which has rarely if ever been labelled as populist, with its leader Yukio Edano largely viewed as something of a technocrat – saw some minor rise in voting propensity as levels of populism rose, but by far the biggest beneficiary (of sorts) of populist sentiment was "no vote", meaning that as populist sentiment rises in Japanese voters, so too does the propensity not to go out and vote at all. This result corresponds with the finding of Hieda et al¹⁰, who saw support for the party of the purportedly populist Yuriko Koike

¹⁰ Hieda, Zenkyo, and Nishikawa, 'Do Populists Support Populism?'

fall as levels of populism among the voters rose, and confirms the existence of a significant mismatch between the existing literature on Japanese populism and the empirical measurement strategies being employed internationally.

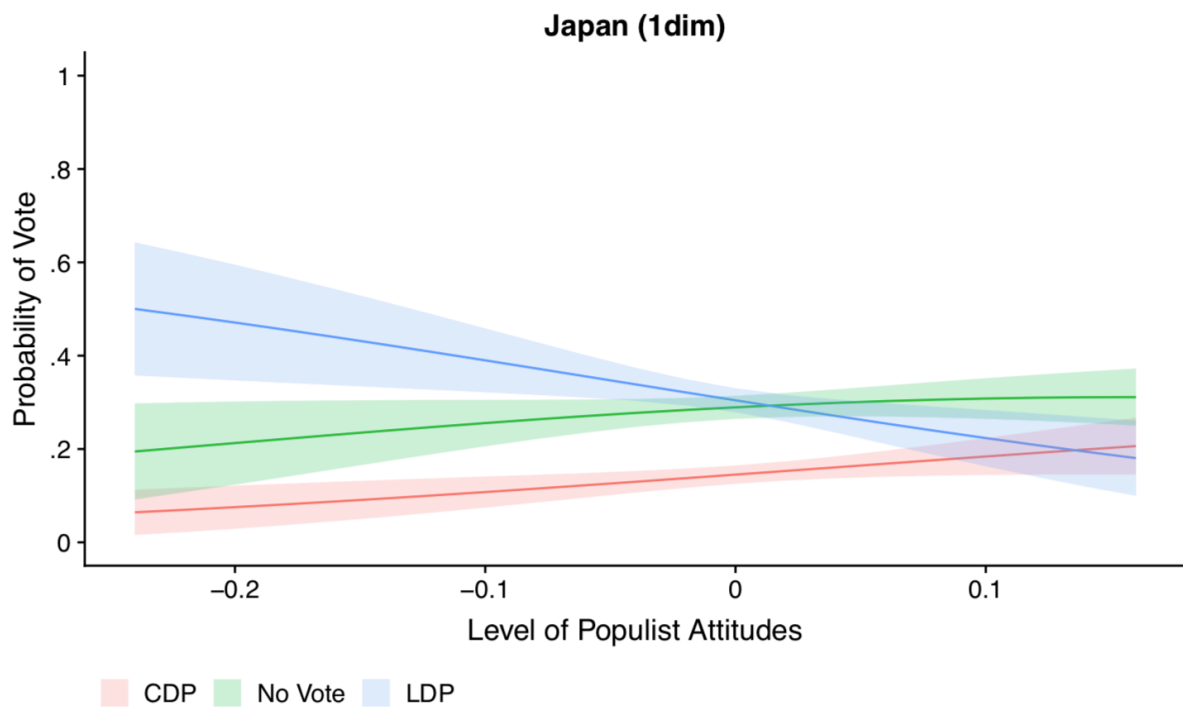


Figure 1

Since this is the first time that CSES Module 5 data has been available for researchers to use, we judged it prudent to test the scale in a number of other countries – to see whether Japan was an outlier in regards to its scale not matching conventional expectations, or part of a broader trend in the data. Figure 2, 3 and 4 below present the results for Germany, Hungary and Italy respectively. Both Germany and Italy behave according to expectations from previous literature and political commentary, with establishment parties’ vote propensity dropping off as populism rises, and the main beneficiary of populist sentiment being Alternative fur Deutschland in Germany and the Five-Star Movement in Italy – both noted populist parties (note that this data predates the entry of the Lega Nord and M5S into government in Italy, which actually occurred at this election). Hungary, however, showed a surprising result. Viktor Orban’s Fidesz, a party broadly accepted as populist and led by one of the most prominent populist leaders in Europe, saw its vote propensity decline dramatically as populist sentiment among voters rose – with the primary beneficiary of populism, just as

in Japan, being “no vote”. While the political climates of Japan and Hungary are unquestionably very different, in this survey analysis they behaved in remarkably similar fashions, which suggests that the mismatch between literature and measurement which we (and Hieda et al before us) had found in Japan was not isolated to Japan, but was also present in at least one other significant case.

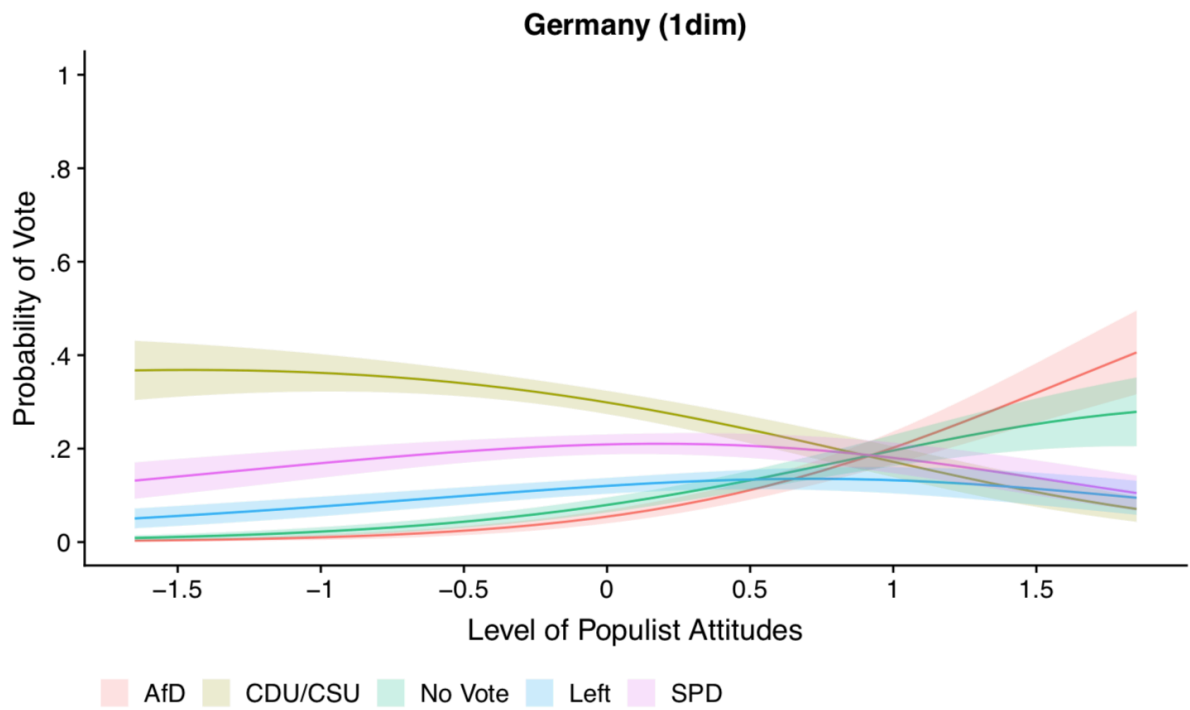


Figure 2

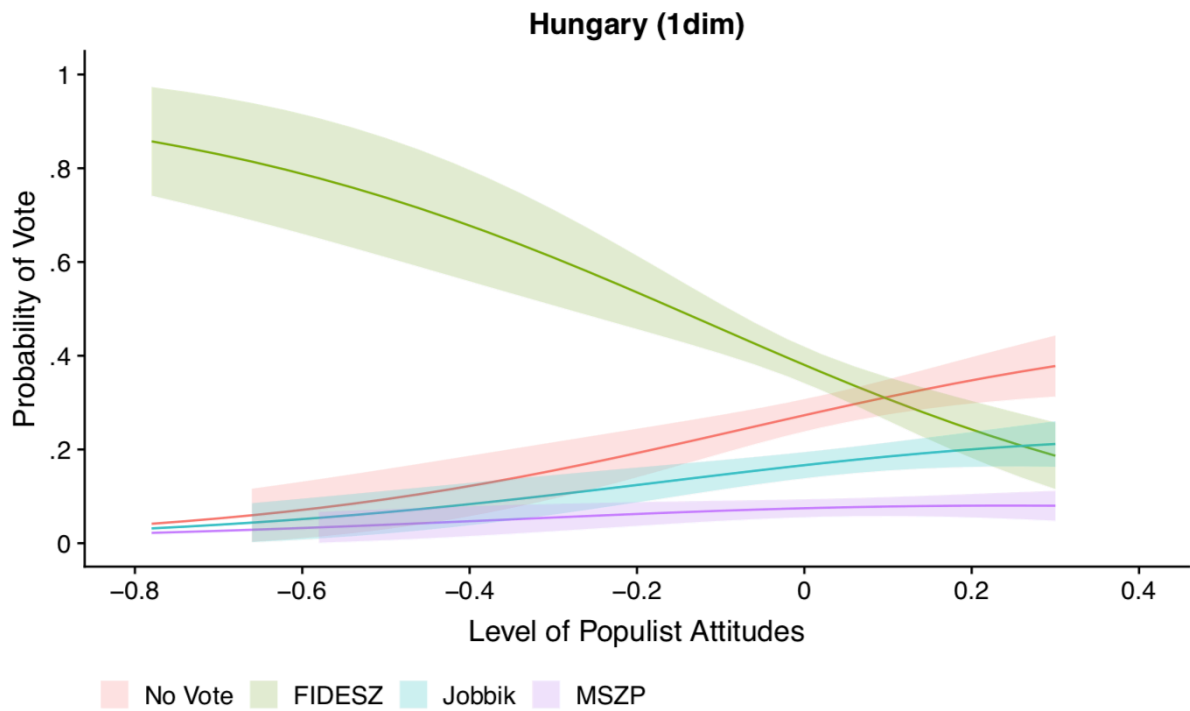


Figure 3

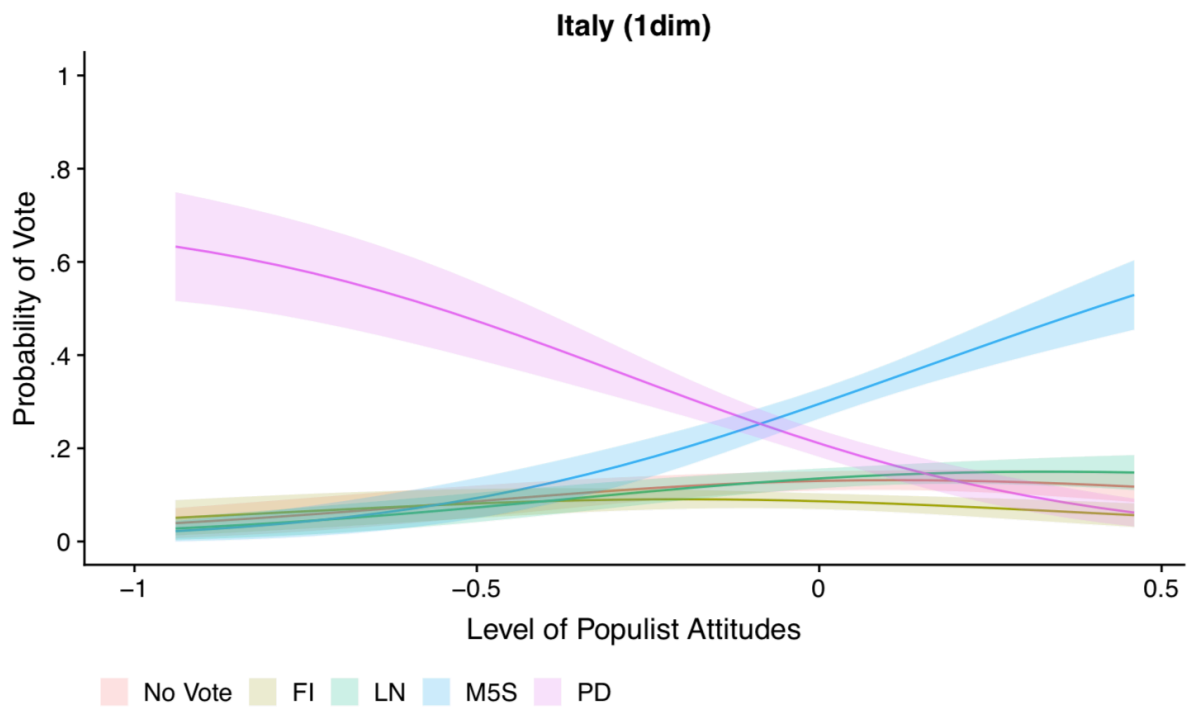


Figure 4

Social Media Data

We next turned to our second source of data on populism, social media. For this analysis, we used an archive containing every Tweet sent during the campaign period for the 2017 General Election which contained the name (full-size or abbreviated) of one of the national political parties. To narrow our focus to politically active social media users, and to ensure that we had a reasonable sample of text from each user, we compiled a list of users who had sent more than 5 political tweets during the campaign period. In addition to the text content of the tweets they had sent, we also gathered a list of the accounts followed on Twitter by each of these “politically active users”. This allowed us to identify which political accounts (parties and candidates) they followed, through which we could estimate their affinity for each party – an account following a disproportionate number of LDP accounts being recorded as having an affinity for the LDP, for example. This per-user variable does not map exactly onto the vote propensity which was used as an outcome variable in the survey analysis, but it does allow us to capture a similar concept of party alignment.

After pre-processing the text of the tweets (tokenisation, lemmatisation etc.) we then proceeded to examine the broad differences between the tweets sent by LDP-aligned voters and those sent by opposition-aligned (CDPJ and JCP) voters. For the purposes of this analysis we ignored the Party of Hope (who had very few aligned voters and very little coherence between them in messaging) and the Japan Restoration Party (who we found to be almost exclusively focused on local Osaka-related issues in our text analysis). An algorithm called Craig’s Zeta was used to calculate which words distinguished the LDP texts from the Opposition texts both by their proportionally higher and proportionally lower frequencies. If the results of this analysis were in line with the findings of the survey analysis reported above, we would expect to find far more words and phrases in the Opposition texts indicating populist sentiment (i.e. indicating elements of anti-elitism, exclusive and homogeneous views of Japanese identity, strong support for popular sovereignty and/or a Manichean world-view) than we would find in the texts posted by LDP-aligned users.

The results of this analysis can be seen in Figure 5 and, contrary to the above hypothesis, the analysis instead appears to support the narrative of Japanese populism that appears in prior literature. Indeed, it is striking how many phrases (marked in bold lettering in Figure 5) with a conceivably populist reading stand out in the LDP’s texts in this unsupervised analysis.

References to Japanese identity (“Japan”, “Japanese”) and to elites (“Mass Media”), along with phrases indicative of a Manichean world-view attached to those concepts (“Anti-Japanese”, “Communist”, “Far-Left”, “Idiot/Fool”), all rank among the top phrases which distinguish the LDP texts. By comparison, none of the Opposition’s words or phrases are conceivably populist in nature.

The results of the social media analysis must be considered alongside an important caveat; while the CSES data can be considered broadly representative of the Japanese electorate, users who choose to engage in political speech on Twitter are a self-selected and non-representative group. Their sheer numbers (even after filtering and sampling, this analysis considered tweets sent by over 20,000 individual users) help to compensate for small divergences in representativeness, but broader differences from the actual population – for example, the under-representation of older voters – persist strongly. As such, the strikingly populist and indeed quite aggressive terminology used by LDP voters in this analysis should not be viewed as representative of LDP voters overall but may in fact imply a cleavage between the LDP’s actual broad support base and its narrower group of online supporters.

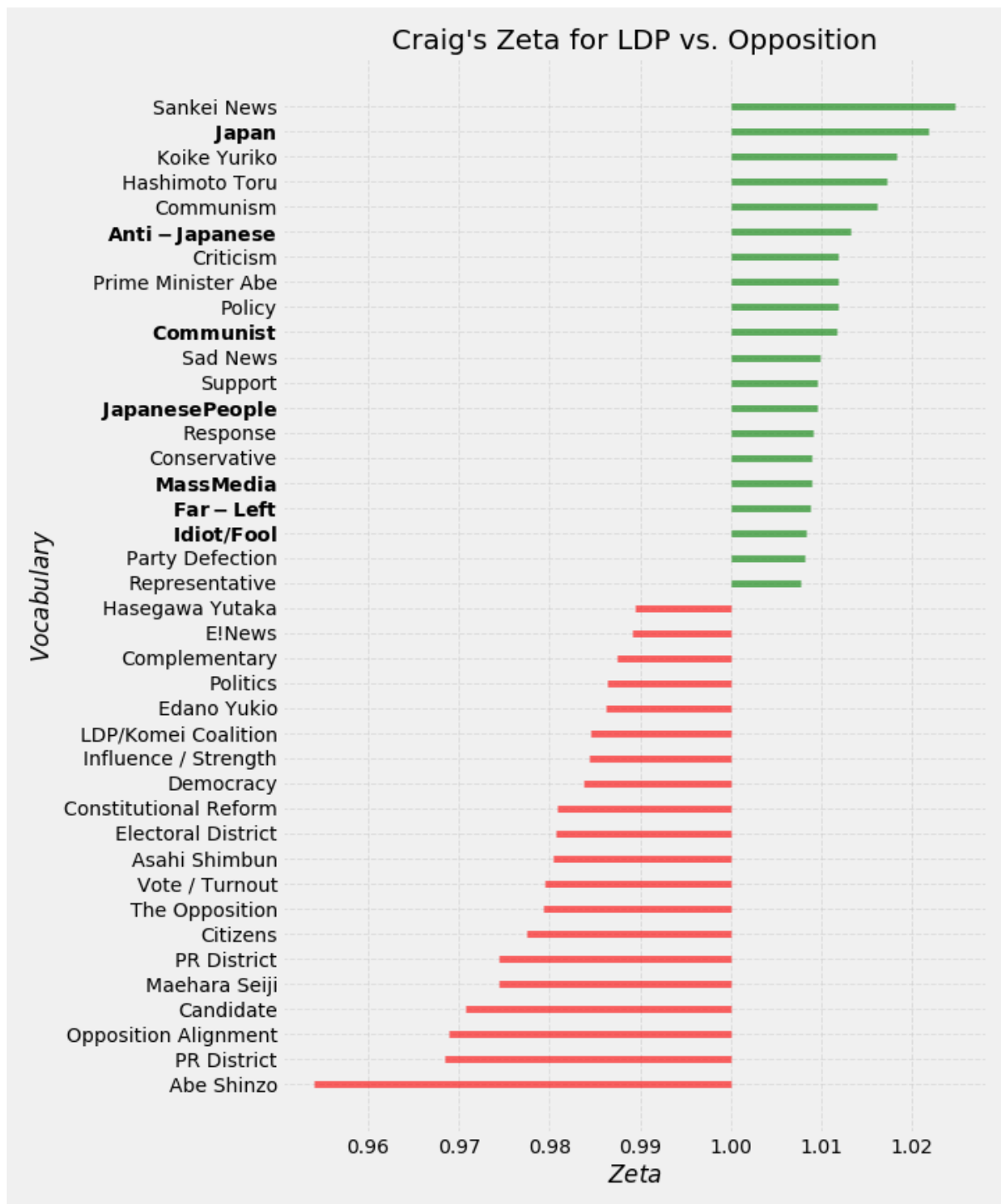


Figure 5

The two analyses we had carried out so far – using CSES survey data and Twitter social media data – actually compound the disagreement between observations of populism among Japanese voters in surveys and theories of Japanese populism in prior literature. Our analysis of the CSES survey data supported the idea of LDP voters being non-populist while populist views actually drive opposition support (or non-voting), just as Hieda et al had found.

However, our analysis of social media data showed that LDP-aligned voters were far more likely than opposition-aligned voters to use key words and phrases that are indicative of elements of populist discourse.

Solving the Mismatch

Based on a study of the results of both analyses, we believe that we have located the root cause of this mismatch between theory and measurement – and if we are correct, it may have significant impact on how populism is measured not just in Japan, but in every country. Our key insight was that the question sets being used to measure populism – not just the CSES Module 5 set, but also the Schulz items (as used by Hieda et al) and the Castanho Silva items – all used two key assumptions which were not necessarily true in the Japanese case. Firstly, they assumed that the “elites” whom populists rail against would necessarily be political elites, either politicians themselves or members of government. This assumption can be clearly seen in the CSES items (shown in Table 1) and the Schulz items (shown in Table 2), which consistently refer explicitly to politicians and governmental figures rather than allowing respondents to reply based on their own definition of “elite”. While it is true that voters do identify political figures as “elites” in a great many cases, we have seen in other countries how the definition of “elite” can actually be very flexible – and in particular, a populist who enters political power often shifts the target of their attacks away from government (or at least their own branch of government) and onto a non-governmental target. In the United States, Donald Trump rarely speaks of “draining the swamp” (his euphemism for Washington, D.C.’s political establishment) any more, but continues to attack the “fake news media”, while in Hungary, Viktor Orban has recently focused many of his attacks on Central European University, forcing it to move a large part of its operations out of Hungary entirely. Our analyses suggested that LDP supporters might also be focusing any anti-elite sentiment away from political elites – perhaps a direct consequence of the LDP being the party of government for so long, which would make holding “anti-government” sentiments into quite a dissonant stance for LDP supporters. Instead, we might expect to see those sentiments directed at the mass media, bureaucrats or perhaps even academics – in which case they would not be effectively captured by the any of the existing question sets for measuring populist sentiment.

Table 1 - CSES Populism Items (sample)

E3004_1	What people call compromise in politics is really just selling out one's principles.
E3004_2	Most politicians do not care about the people.
E3004_3	Most politicians are trustworthy.
E3004_4	Politicians are the main problem in Japan.
E3004_6	The people and not politicians should make our most important policy decisions.
E3004_7	Most politicians care only about the interests of the rich and powerful.

Table 2 - Schulz 2018 Populism Items

ANT1	Politicians in office very quickly lose touch with ordinary people.
ANT2	The differences between ordinary people and the ruling elite are much greater than the differences between ordinary people.
ANT3	People like me have no influence on what the government does.
SOV1	The people should have the final say on the most important political issues by voting on them directly in referendums.
SOV2	The people should be asked whenever important decisions are taken.
SOV3	The people, not politicians, should make our most important policy decisions.
HOM1	Ordinary people all pull together.
HOM2	Ordinary people are of good and honest character.
HOM3	Ordinary people share the same values and interests.

Secondly, we hypothesise that just as the targets of anti-elite sentiment may be quite flexible – differing from country to country and shifting to adapt when populist leaders actually gain

power – so too may the conception of popular sovereignty. This is perhaps a more controversial claim, since full-throated support of popular sovereignty, or “the will of the people”, is a fundamental component of almost every workable definition of populism. However, we noted that this element appeared to be lacking among LDP supporters in Japan – and also took note of developments such as the strong opposition to a second referendum on Brexit in the UK, or the unabashed support for voter suppression efforts from many populists in the USA. We propose that while belief in popular sovereignty does not change, and nor does the lip-service paid to the concept, the entry of a populist leader or group into power does materially change their supporters’ conception of what that actually means. When the populist group is in power, popular sovereignty no longer means democratic voting; rather, it means that the “will of the people” is now embodied in the person of that leader (or party), and any attempt to block them from carrying out their policies, even if that attempt is in the form of another election, becomes “anti-democratic”. Hence, we might expect to see supporters of a populist in power – Trump in the USA, Fidesz in Hungary, or perhaps to some extent the LDP in Japan – to score poorly on existing measures of support for popular sovereignty, because they interpret questions such as “the people should have the final say on important political decisions” as being a suggestion that there should be barriers to the populist leader carrying out his will, rather than as a prioritisation of the popular will itself.

Further Research

To test this hypothesised weakness of the existing scales of voter populism – which we believe fail to correctly measure populism in instances where voters’ ire is focused on non-political elite groups, or where populists have been voted into power – we are in the process of conducting a series of surveys in Japan, using an electoral study of 2019’s Upper House election as a basis. It is our intention not only to provide a more complete account of populism in the Japanese electorate, but also to propose and test a scale which will be more broadly applicable to a wider range of populist political environments than those scales which are currently in common usage.

Our proposed scale consists of three dimensions, following in the three-dimensional definitions of populism put forward by Mudde and Hawkins, but it avoids assumptions about

the definition of elites and the proximity of the populist actors to political power. The first dimension, "Views on Elites", comprises ten questions across five different categories (one positive and one negative for each) which will independently measure anti-elite attitudes targeted at politicians, bureaucrats, businesspeople/industrialists, journalists/media, and academics/experts. The second dimension, "Views on The People", integrates items from Schulz' homogeneity questions (aimed at measuring to what extent respondents view "the people" as a homogeneous and exclusive construct) with items from Castanho Silva's questions on Manichean world-view (aimed at measuring to what extent respondents view their political rivals or those who disagree with them as evil or ill-intentioned). The final dimension, "Views on Popular Sovereignty", includes two sets of three questions which we hypothesise will be mutually exclusive. The first is based on Schulz' sovereignty items and measures the respondent's level of focus on the "will of the people" as being the most important and inviolable force in politics. The second, which we label "populists in power", measures the extent to which the respondent thinks that the political leadership embodies the will of the people, and their attitudes towards political leaders' actions being restrained by institutions, norms or procedures.

This scale was based on a pre-test survey which incorporated a large range of populist scales and items and was carried out in late July 2019. The proposed scale itself was included in a post-election survey in early August and preliminary data will be available for analysis shortly.

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