

Rightwing populism and public opinion on the Covid-19 pandemic in Sweden: The role of strategic party positioning and political cues

Joakim Kulin  | Ingemar Johansson Sevä 

Department of Sociology, Umeå University, Umeå, Sweden

Correspondence

Joakim Kulin, Department of Sociology, Umeå University, Umeå, Sweden.
Email: joakim.kulin@umu.se

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Abstract

During the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Swedish government did not implement the hard lockdowns and coercive measures found in many countries and instead relied on voluntary social distancing measures and work-from-home initiatives. Unlike its international counterparts in most countries, the rightwing populist party in Sweden early on took a critical approach toward the government's handling of the Covid-19 pandemic, calling for stricter government measures to curb virus transmission. Based on theories about strategic party positioning, and theories about political elite cues and framing effects, we use Swedish survey data from the early stages of the pandemic to show that the views of rightwing populist party supporters aligned with the rhetoric of the Swedish rightwing populist party in demanding more (rather than less) government intervention to curb the spread of SARS-COV-2. Our results suggest that they did so by drawing on core rightwing populist themes of anti-elitism and nationalism. Hence, our results speak to the role of elite cues and framing in public opinion formation during times of crisis, particularly among rightwing populists, who generally opposed stricter government measures to fight the Covid-19 pandemic.

KEYWORDS

Covid-19 pandemic, public opinion, rightwing populism, Sweden

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INTRODUCTION

In the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic, rightwing populist parties in many countries distinguished themselves by espousing antiscience and conspiratorial views that downplay the severity of the disease while adopting anti-elitist positions that opposed the Covid-19 counter measures introduced by many governments (Wondreys & Mudde, 2022). In doing so, they facilitated the spread of SARS-COV-2, with detrimental public health effects (McKee et al., 2021; Reinemann et al., 2022). This opposition to Covid-19 counter measures also spread among rightwing populist voters in many countries (e.g., Collignon et al., 2021), suggesting that their views on the pandemic were shaped by the anti-lockdown rhetoric of rightwing populist parties. This is in line with more general findings linking public opinion on the Covid-19 pandemic to politicians' cues and rhetoric (Nagler et al., 2020; Shurafa et al., 2020).

In this study, we focus on the case of Sweden, which in the early stages of the pandemic distinguished itself globally through its controversially “soft” pandemic response (Mishra et al., 2021). While previous public opinion studies in Sweden have investigated people's general views about the pandemic and the Swedish government's response to it (e.g., Kulin, Johansson Sevä, Hjern, et al., 2021) or public trust in government and its handling of the pandemic (Kallemsø et al., 2023; Nielsen & Lindvall, 2021), few studies have focused explicitly on rightwing populist responses to the pandemic in a Swedish context. In this study, we argue that Sweden's Covid-19 exceptionalism provided a unique set of circumstances that led the rightwing populist party in Sweden to adopt policy positions and rhetoric that diverged significantly from the typical responses of rightwing populist parties in other countries, which in turn affected the Covid-19 policy preferences of its voters.

Most governments responded to the Covid-19 pandemic with comprehensive measures such as hard lockdowns, mandatory mask mandates, school closures, travel restrictions, and bans on public gatherings, to enforce physical distancing and slow down the transmission of Covid-19 (Hale et al., 2021). With only a few exceptions, typical early reactions among rightwing populists were general disagreement with the scientific and medical expertise on how to best respond to the pandemic (Evans & Hargittai, 2020) and near universal opposition to the countermeasures introduced in many countries (Magnus, 2022). To the extent that rightwing populist leaders acknowledged the potential threat of the virus, they often did so from the vantage point of opportunism (Berti & Ruzza, 2022). Using anti-elitist and nativist/nationalist rhetoric to link the pandemic to their core themes of opposing immigration and scapegoating ethnic minorities, rightwing populists predictably called for stricter border controls, including enhanced testing at the border and outright border closures (Wondreys & Mudde, 2022).

Sweden, however, was an outlier in terms of government pandemic response, as it did not implement the coercive measures most other countries

did, including their neighboring Nordic countries (Mishra et al., 2021; Giritli Nygren & Olofsson, 2021). Internationally, the Swedish strategy was widely criticized for its anti-lockdown approach and overall lax response to the pandemic (ECFR, 2020; NY Times, 2020). Meanwhile, the rightwing populist party in Sweden (Sweden Democrats) distinguished themselves compared with their international counterparts, who relatively consistently opposed hard lockdowns and other coercive Covid-19 government measures (Collignon et al., 2021; Wondreys & Mudde, 2022). In contrast, the rightwing populist party in Sweden early on criticized the center-left government for “doing too little too late” to protect its people, not least the elderly and other risk groups (Swedish Radio, 2020), while calling for stricter government Covid-19 measures, such as school closures and increased testing (Dahlström & Lindvall, 2021; Wiggen, 2020).

Based on theories of strategic positioning (Downes et al., 2021) and Sweden's divergently “soft” Covid-19 approach, we argue that the right-wing populist party strategically embraced a pandemic rhetoric critiquing what they perceived as the Swedish government's passive and inadequate response to the crisis. This rhetoric starkly contrasted with the anti-lockdown stance of populist parties in many other countries, where governments had enforced comparatively strict and coercive measures. Using theories of political cues and framing effects, we further hypothesize that this strategic positioning shaped voters'/sympathizers' beliefs and preferences in relation to the pandemic to demand more (rather than less) strict Covid-19 measures.

However, given the opportunistic manner in which right-wing populist parties exploited the pandemic to advance their agendas—such as scapegoating ethnic minorities, calling for border closures, or exacerbating the antagonistic relationship between the people and the elites (Berti & Ruzza, 2022)—we expect that the Swedish right-wing populist party similarly leveraged their core themes of nativism/nationalism and anti-elitism (cf. Mudde, 2004) not only in issues directly linked to their agenda, such as immigration, but also in shaping their stance on general measures to reduce the spread of Covid-19 domestically. Hence, while rightwing populists in many countries used anti-elitist and nationalist arguments to mobilize opposition to government countermeasures while blaming other countries, the right-wing populists in Sweden adopted a different approach. By employing rightwing populist themes (voicing anti-establishment sentiments and the need to “protect the nation and its people”), the Swedish rightwing populist party advocated for more (rather than less) strict pandemic countermeasures, thereby challenging the conventional narratives on rightwing populism and the Covid-19 pandemic. To the extent that right-wing populist party supporters were influenced by the rhetoric employed by the party, they very likely drew on their core themes of anti-elitism and nationalism when forming their views about Covid-19 countermeasures.

STRATEGIC PARTY POSITIONING

Following Downes et al. (2021), we view *strategic positioning* as “an entrepreneurial exploitation” of a political issue in political party competition over voters. Political parties often position themselves strategically on wedge issues that divide the base of the opposition (see also Van de Wardt et al., 2014). In previous research, the concept of strategic positioning has mainly been used to explain the electoral strategy of mainstream (often center-right) parties in the presence of rightwing populist challengers (Downes et al., 2021; Meguid, 2005). However, research focusing on rightwing populist parties has shown that these parties often “scan the horizon for ‘vacant electoral space’ and position themselves strategically vis-à-vis competitors” (Mols & Jetten, 2020), suggesting that strategic positioning can be a theoretically meaningful lens through which we can understand the political behaviors of rightwing populist parties.

In the early stages of the pandemic, many countries' governments implemented hard lockdowns and other coercive measures, such as school closures and mandatory mask wearing in public places, to limit the spread of SARS-COV-2. In pursuing their “classic populist strategy of fundamental opposition” (Bayerlein & Metten, 2022), rightwing populists in most countries opposed the government lockdowns and other mandatory measures. In Germany, although the rightwing populist party AfD initially supported the government's lockdowns, it quickly shifted their position to oppose them, calling it “virus hysteria.” According to Hansen and Olsen (2022), this enabled the AfD to exploit the situation electorally by taking a critical stance toward lockdowns and vaccinations, and thereby appeal to a broader voter base.

The comparably “soft” pandemic response in Sweden, however, deviated from most other comparable countries and rested on a national identity of Swedes as “exceptionally responsible” (Simonsen, 2022). Indeed, the Swedish government referred to Swedes as having exceptionally high levels of trust in authorities (Regeringen, 2020), which was assumed beneficial for compliance with voluntary measures (so-called “recommendations”) and for facilitating generally responsible conduct among citizens. Moreover, constitutional restrictions in Sweden prohibiting the suspension of rights and freedoms (e.g., freedom of movement) except during wartime (Jonung, 2020) severely constrained the implementation of coercive measures such as lockdowns, which led the Swedish government to advocate for the social and health benefits of its chosen strategy (Regeringen, 2020). The pandemic response in Sweden thereby relied heavily on encouraging voluntary social distancing measures and “work from home” initiatives, rather than hard lockdowns and other coercive measures (Andersson & Aylott, 2020).

During the early stages of the pandemic, Sweden was characterized by a high degree of political consensus over the pandemic response of the Swedish government, among both incumbent and opposition parties (SVT, 2020). By drawing on theories about strategic positioning, we argue that the rhetoric of

the Sweden Democrats deviated from many rightwing populist parties in other countries, mainly due to the ‘vacant electoral space’ (cf. Mols & Jetten, 2020) facilitated by the cross-party consensus about Sweden’s comparably “soft” Covid-19 strategy. Whereas rightwing populists elsewhere often opposed stricter measures such as lockdowns and shelter in place mandates, the Sweden Democrats criticized the center-left government led by the Social Democrats for not doing enough, for instance, to protect old people in elderly care homes (Swedish Radio, 2020). The leader of the Sweden Democrats even went so far as to call for the resignation of the chief epidemiologist at the Swedish Public Health Agency (Dagens Nyheter, 2020).

While RWP parties typically positioned themselves in opposition to the government measures and lockdowns imposed by many governments, some deviating cases beyond Sweden existed. In contrast to countries where rightwing populists were in opposition, incumbent rightwing populists in countries such as Hungary and Poland initially implemented stricter pandemic measures (e.g., Rovira Kaltwasser & Taggart, 2022), at the time viewed by some scholars as a continuation of Hungary’s progression toward autocracy and Poland’s ongoing attempts to erode liberal democracy (Guasti, 2020). In Germany, rightwing populists AfD were initially calling for stricter Covid-19 measures but later made a U-turn by switching to a more critical position in demanding that the German government lift their lockdowns and other restrictions (Lehmann & Zehnter, 2022). However, with these and a few less coherent exceptions where rightwing populists were in opposition, such as in the Netherlands (see, e.g., Wondreys & Mudde, 2022), the Sweden Democrats was one of very few rightwing populist parties to consistently demand stricter government Covid-19 measures, such as school closures and increased testing (Dahlström & Lindvall, 2021; Wiggen, 2020).

POLITICAL ELITE CUES AND FRAMING EFFECTS

Public opinion research has long contended that people often lack political sophistication to hold coherent political belief systems and instead take cues from political parties and politicians that they identify with (Converse, 1964; Zaller, 1992). The effects of partisan elite cues and framing on public opinion have been identified in relation to a wide range of issues, from climate change (Brulle et al., 2012; Tesler, 2018) to foreign policy (Berinsky, 2009) and government spending (Jacoby, 2000). Similarly, public responses to the pandemic have been linked to political party affiliation and identification (Bruine de Bruin et al., 2020; Druckman et al., 2021), often with crucial health outcomes (Sehgal et al., 2022), as several scholars suggest that political leaders have shaped public beliefs and behaviors in relation the Covid-19 pandemic (Béland et al., 2021; Shurafa et al., 2020). According to Woods et al. (2020, p. 816), “populist nationalist anti-elite and anti-science sentiments have undoubtedly led to higher Covid-19 infection

and mortality rates as a result,” suggesting that rightwing populist elite cues can not only shape public opinion among its constituencies but that it also can have detrimental health effects.

Using denial and distraction strategies, rightwing populist parties and their leaders have opposed hard lockdowns and other coercive government Covid-19 measures (Wondreys & Mudde, 2022), thereby subordinated public health to their core goals, by “blaming somebody else, be it the EU, WHO, or foreigners” (Falkenbach & Greer, 2021, p. 580). Rightwing populist parties' responses to the pandemic has thus been characterized by attempts “to shift the focus back to their usual scapegoats, predictably proposing stricter border enforcement to curtail the virus” (Casaglia et al., 2020, p. 2). According to Vega Macías (2021), the Covid-19 pandemic has reinforced anti-immigrant positions, by providing a Manichean argument that fuel xenophobia and prejudice. In their response to the pandemic, therefore, rightwing populist parties and politicians drew heavily on their core themes of nationalism and nativism (Wondreys & Mudde, 2022), and a continuity of antiscience and anti-elitism (Lacatus & Meibauer, 2021).

In line with what we would expect based on theories about political cues and elite influence, public opinion research has shown that rightwing populist supporters are more likely than other voter groups to express conspiratorial views about the origins of the virus, the safety of vaccines, and the severity of the disease (Eberl et al., 2021; Wollebæk et al., 2022). While rightwing populist supporters predictably favored stricter border controls or border closures, they opposed most other government measures aiming to reduce the spread of the virus by placing restrictions on ordinary people in their everyday lives, such as lockdowns and other Covid-19 restrictions (Wondreys & Mudde, 2022). For instance, Collignon et al. (2021) show that support for lockdowns in the UK was weaker among UKIP voters and among people holding anti-immigrant attitudes. The authors therefore conclude that “attitudes of the populist right are key in explaining support for and consensus about the lockdown” (Collignon et al., 2021, p. 110). Considering the close correspondence between the rhetoric of rightwing populist parties and public opinion on the Covid-19 pandemic among their supporters, political elite cues very likely played a key role in shaping public perceptions (cf. Shurafa et al., 2020).

HYPOTHESES

In contrast to the trivialization of the virus and opposition to the lockdowns and other Covid-19 restrictions in many countries, right-wing populist reactions to the pandemic in Sweden diverged, with the right-wing populist party critiquing Sweden's relatively “soft” approach. Drawing on theoretical frameworks of strategic party positioning and elite cues, we contend that the Sweden Democrats' stance and rhetoric influenced their voter base to advocate for stricter Covid-19 government measures. Furthermore, given the persistency

with which rightwing populist parties in most other countries drew on core themes in their political platform and ideology when formulating their Covid-19 agenda, we argue that the Sweden Democrats and their voters very likely drew on these themes as well to justify their Covid-19 policy positions. Hence, similar to rightwing populists in other countries, we expect that rightwing populist party supporters in Sweden drew on anti-elitist and nationalist/nativist themes, for instance when forming their views about pandemic border policy and blaming foreign born for spreading the virus. However, the Swedish rightwing populist party and its leaders also highlighted the pandemic as a threat to the nation and its' people, while criticizing the incumbent government and its irresponsible handling of the pandemic. As a result, rightwing populist voters were very likely influenced by this rhetoric and its' nationalist and anti-elitist undertones, which very likely led to a demand for more (rather than less) strict pandemic counter measures compared with other groups of political party supporters.

Based on the above, we formulate the following hypotheses:

H1: RWP supporters express greater demand for stricter Covid-19 measures (e.g., school closures, shelter in place mandates, increased testing) compared with other groups of party supporters in Sweden.

H2: RWP supporters draw on their core themes of anti-elitism and nativism/nationalism in their response to the pandemic, not only in relation to their key issues (e.g., scapegoating ethnic minorities, calling for border closures) but also in justifying stricter Covid-19 measures.

DATA AND METHODS

To study rightwing populist beliefs and attitudes related to the Covid-19 pandemic in Sweden, we collected observational data by designing a unique survey that was fielded via IPSOS between 12 and 26 June, 2020. Respondents were recruited from a web-based online panel (>50,000 participants), with a sample size of 3040 respondents. Respondents gave their informed consent by agreeing to participate in the anonymized survey. Using a quota-based sampling strategy, we used interlocking (hard) quotas for age, gender, and region. Hence, our sample is representative of the Swedish population along these quotas. Our sample is also approximately representative with regard to party sympathies, which constitute a key variable in our analyses. Compared with the Party Sympathy Survey (PSU) by Statistics Sweden (SCB, 2020) administered in May 2020, and a compilation of election polls in the beginning of July by the Swedish National Election Studies Program at University of Gothenburg (SNES, 2020), our sample contain (SCB; SNES in parenthesis): Green 4.01 (4.1; 3.6), Left 12.6 (8.2; 8.6), Social Democrat 26.8 (33.7; 29.4),

Center 5.7 (6.0; 7.8), Liberal 4.4 (3.3; 3.3), Moderate/conservative 16.3 (20.1; 20.1), Christian Democrat 5.2 (6.4; 6.1), Sweden Democrat 21.1 (17.1; 19.3), and Other 3.0 (1.1; n/a).

In Table 1, we provide a list of all items used in our analyses, as well as item wordings and response scales. In the first part of the analysis, we investigate public views about the Covid-19 pandemic among different groups of party supporters, with a particular focus on rightwing populists. In doing so, we present figures with mean estimates (dots) and 95% confidence intervals (bars), by political party sympathy. In the second part of the analysis, we use regression analysis (OLS) to study demand for stricter government Covid-19 measures (dependent variable) and attempt to explain potential differences between rightwing populists and other voter groups, focusing on the role of nationalism/nativism and anti-elitism. In the regression analysis, we also include the following control variables: gender (1 = woman), age (four categories), education (four categories), and income (three categories).

In constructing the dependent variable (demand for stricter government Covid-19 measures) for the regression analysis, we used factor scores retrieved from a principal component analysis (PCA) based on four items, including an item capturing general demand for stricter government measures to reduce the spread of the virus, and three specific measures capturing demand for school closures, increased testing for Covid-19, and stricter shelter in place mandates. The PCA suggested a one factor solution (Eigenvalue = 2.49; Explained variance = 62.4%) with strong factor loadings (0.65–0.86) for all four items. In the analyses involving nationalist attitudes, we also relied on factor scores from a PCA based on three items capturing economic and cultural protectionism as well as national sovereignty (see “Nationalist attitudes” in Table 1 for details). The PCA for the nationalism items also suggested a one factor solution (Eigenvalue = 1.77; Explained variance = 58.9%) with strong factor loadings (0.75–0.78) for all three items.

RESULTS

In the following result section, the main aim is to test our two main hypotheses, namely, that RWP supporters in Sweden express greater demand for stricter Covid-19 measures compared with other party supporters (H1) and, in doing so, draw on their core themes of anti-elitism and nationalism (H2). However, we also examine related views that provide a broader perspective on how rightwing populist supporters in Sweden responded to the Covid-19 pandemic. We start by examining the extent to which rightwing populist supporters adhere to the typical rightwing populist core themes of anti-elitism and nationalism. We then continue by investigating beliefs and concerns directly in relation to the pandemic, including conspiracy-related perceptions, concern/worry about the pandemic, as well as views about border controls and foreign born's role

TABLE 1 Survey items, wordings and scales, by category.

Category	Item	Wording	Scale
Political orientations	Party sympathy	Which political party do you feel closer to than any other party?	Categorical; Greens, Left, Social Democrat, Center, Liberal, Moderate/Conservative, Christian Democrat, Sweden Democrat
	Nationalist attitudes: Economic protectionism	Sweden should limit the import of foreign products in order to protect its national economy.	1–5; Likert scale
	Nationalist attitudes: Cultural protectionism	Sweden should limit immigration in order to protect our national way of life.	1–5; Likert scale
	Nationalist attitudes: National sovereignty	International organizations are taking away too much power from the Swedish government.	1–5; Likert scale
	Political trust	How much do you personally trust or not trust each of the following institutions or groups? Politicians/Swedish Parliament/European Union	0–10; where 0 = “No trust” and 10 = “Complete trust”
Covid-19 beliefs and concerns	Beliefs about severity of Covid-19	Covid-19 is more dangerous than the common flu.	1–5; Likert scale
	Covid-19 pandemic concern	How worried are you about the Covid-19 pandemic?	0–10; 0 = “Not worried at all” and 10 = “Extremely worried”
	Compliance perceptions	To what extent do you think that different groups in Sweden follow the recommendations by the public health agency? Natives/Foreign born	0–10; 0 = “To a very small extent” and 10 = “To a very large extent”
	Conspiracy-related beliefs: Vaccines	Vaccines are more risky than beneficial.	1–5; Likert scale

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Category	Item	Wording	Scale
Views about government Covid-19 pandemic response	Conspiracy-related beliefs: Covid-19 origin	SARS-COV-2 came from a lab.	1–5; Likert scale
	Trust/confidence in actors conduct during pandemic	When thinking about their conduct during the pandemic, how much trust/confidence do you have in... Swedish government/Public health agency/Public service media/Scientists/researchers	0–10; 0 = “No confidence” and 10 = “Complete confidence”
	Support for the Swedish Covid-19 strategy	Sweden has chosen the correct strategy to fight the Covid-19 pandemic.	1–5; Likert scale
	Support for stricter government measures	Swedish authorities should employ stricter measures to reduce the spread of the virus.	1–5; Likert scale
	Stricter measures: Schools	All schools in Sweden should be kept closed.	1–5; Likert scale
	Stricter measures: Testing	In Sweden, more people should be tested for Covid-19.	1–5; Likert scale
	Stricter measures: Shelter in place mandates	Sweden should have stricter rules to make people stay at home.	1–5; Likert scale
	Stricter measures: Border controls	Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, Sweden should enforce stricter border controls.	1–5; Likert scale

in virus transmission. We also focus on trust in key actors' (e.g., government and public health agencies) handling of the pandemic. Thereafter, we turn our attention to our main hypotheses, examining Covid-19 policy preferences, in particular demand for stricter government measures (H1), and whether anti-elitism and nationalism can explain potential differences between rightwing populists and other party supporters (H2).

Core themes: Anti-elitism and nationalism

Previous research suggests that rightwing populists drew on their core themes of anti-elitism and nationalism in their response to the pandemic. Before investigating the pandemic views among rightwing populists, we therefore examine the extent to which rightwing populists in Sweden distinguish themselves along the dimensions political (dis)trust (anti-elitism) and nationalist attitudes. In Figure 1, mean estimates (with 95% CI's) are presented for three scales measuring political trust, focusing on trust in "Politicians," "Parliament," and the "European Union," by party sympathy. The graph demonstrates that rightwing populists are distinguished by their low levels of trust in politicians and political institutions such as the Swedish parliament and the European Union, scoring around or below 3 on a 0–10 scale. This confirms the results in previous research showing that government distrust and anti-elitism are central themes among rightwing populists (e.g., Akkerman et al., 2014).

In Figure 2, we present estimates for nationalist attitudes, by party sympathy. Rightwing populist in Sweden clearly distinguish themselves by scoring

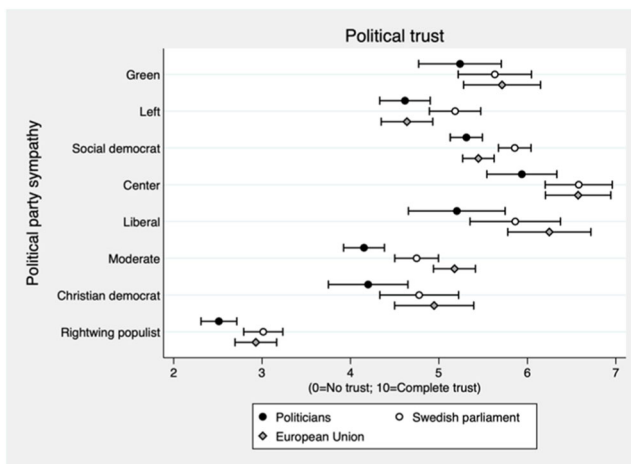


FIGURE 1 Political trust.

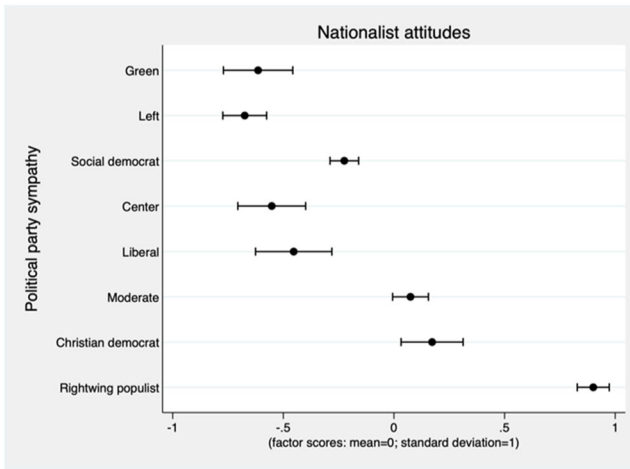


FIGURE 2 Nationalist attitudes.

comparably high relative to other groups of party supporters on the measure capturing nationalist attitudes. This confirms the findings in previous studies, demonstrating that nationalism constitute a core theme for rightwing populist supporters/voters (Eger & Valdez, 2015; Kulin, Johansson Sevä, & Dunlap, 2021; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018).

Covid-19 beliefs and concerns

To test whether we find a heightened pandemic concern among rightwing populists, we investigate two measures capturing beliefs about the severity of the disease Covid-19 and general worry about the pandemic. In Figure 3, we present estimates for the measure capturing the belief that “Covid-19 is more dangerous than the common flu.” We find no evidence supporting the notion that rightwing populists deviate from other groups of party supporters in their beliefs about the severity of the disease, as all groups score around 4 on the Likert-type scale (1–5). This suggests that most people, regardless of political party sympathy, believe that Covid-19 is more dangerous than the common flu, and that rightwing populists, in contrast to some previous studies from other countries (Küppers & Reiser, 2022), are not more likely to trivialize the severity of Covid-19. In Figure 4, we find that rightwing populists do not deviate in their level of pandemic concern, as indicated by their similar levels of “worry about the Covid-19 pandemic” compared with other party supporters, with the exception of Moderates who display slightly lower levels of concern/worry. As most estimates are found at or around 6 on the 11-point scale (0–10), we find

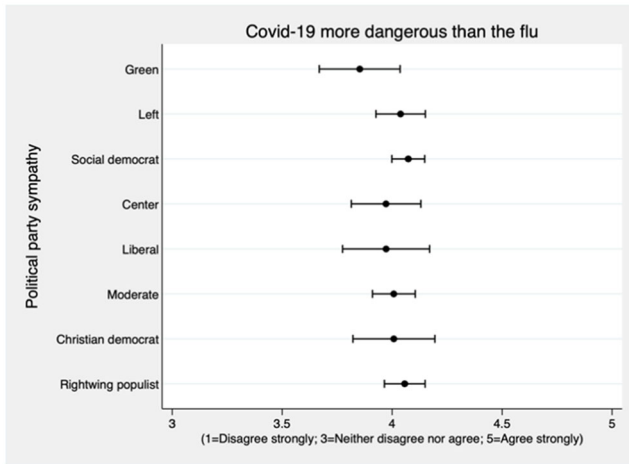


FIGURE 3 Beliefs about whether Covid-19 is more dangerous than the flu.

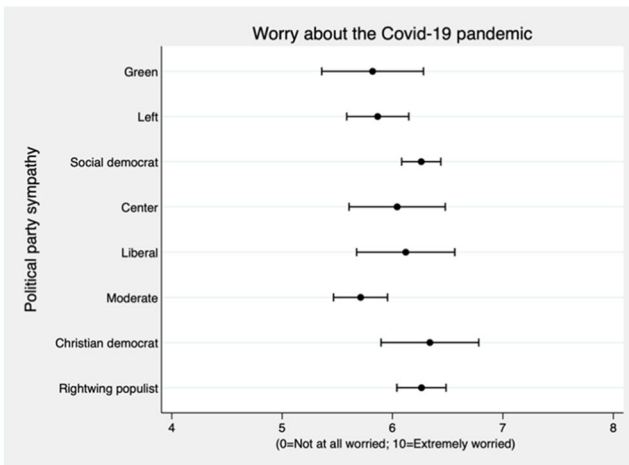


FIGURE 4 Worry about the Covid-19 pandemic.

that while many Swedes were worried about the pandemic (cf. Kulin, Johansson Sevä, Hjerm, et al., 2021), the level of worry does not appear to be related to party sympathies. Hence, while these results do not indicate a heightened level of concern among rightwing populists, the results deviate from studies in other countries finding that rightwing populists display lower levels of concern about the pandemic compared with other groups of party supporters (cf. Reinemann et al., 2022).

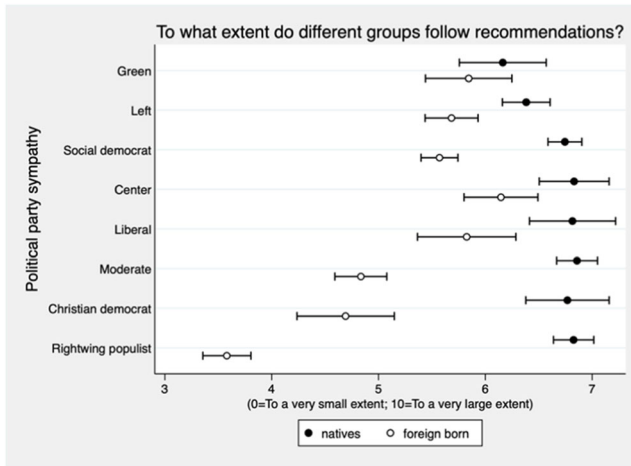


FIGURE 5 Beliefs about natives and foreign borns' compliance with recommendations.

We now turn to perceptions about compliance with voluntary measures (“recommendations”) among different groups in society (focusing on native/foreign born), as well as conspiracy-related beliefs. In Figure 5, we find that most groups of party supporters perceive that natives follow recommendations from the authorities to a relatively large extent (between 6–7 on the 11-point scale) while they at least to some extent perceive foreign born as less compliant, which is perhaps not surprising given potential language barriers and/or limited consumption of Swedish speaking media. However, here we find striking differences (both in absolute and relative terms) in rightwing populists' perceptions about compliance among natives and foreign born, who distinguish themselves from all other voter groups by reporting markedly low levels of perceived compliance among foreign born (3.58 on the 11-point scale). Further, although our previous results suggest that rightwing populists are not more inclined to hold conspiratorial beliefs with regard to the severity of Covid-19 and the pandemic (Figures 3 & 4), in Figure 6 we find that rightwing populists in Sweden are indeed more likely than other groups to perceive vaccines as unsafe and that SARS-COV-2 originated from a lab.

Focusing on trust and confidence in different actors' handling of the Covid-19 pandemic, we find that rightwing populists are generally less trusting compared with other groups of party supporters. In line with previous studies, the results in Figure 7 demonstrate that rightwing populists have substantially less confidence in the government's executive branch as well as the public health agency in their handling of the pandemic. In Figure 8, we find that rightwing populists also have considerably less confidence in the public service media's handling of the pandemic. However, when it comes to confidence in scientists'

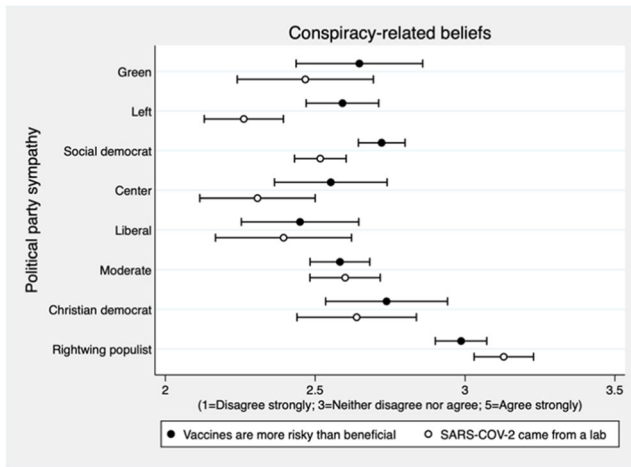


FIGURE 6 Conspiracy-related beliefs.

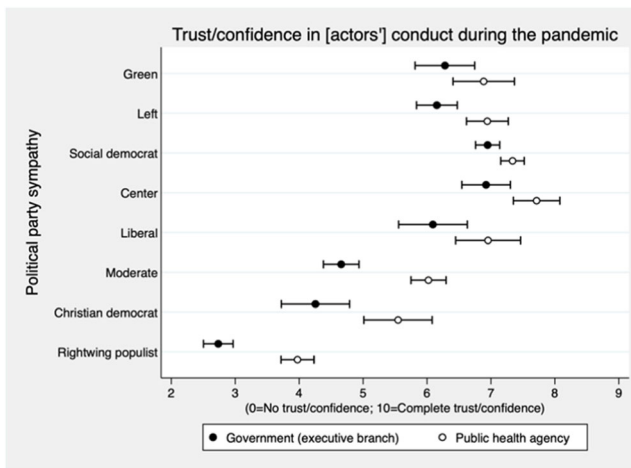


FIGURE 7 Trust/confidence in governments' conduct during the pandemic.

handling of the pandemic, we only find slightly lower levels of confidence among rightwing populists compared with other groups. Taken together, however, these results suggest that rightwing populist supporters held clear anti-establishment and anti-elitist views, as they were exceptionally critical toward the conduct of a range of key government actors during the pandemic.

We now focus on public attitudes toward government measures to reduce the spread of the virus, such as school closures, increased testing, and shelter in

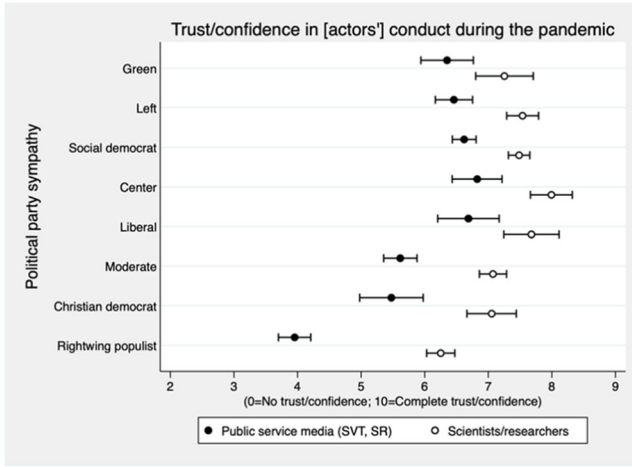


FIGURE 8 Trust/confidence in public service media and scientists/researchers' conduct during the pandemic.

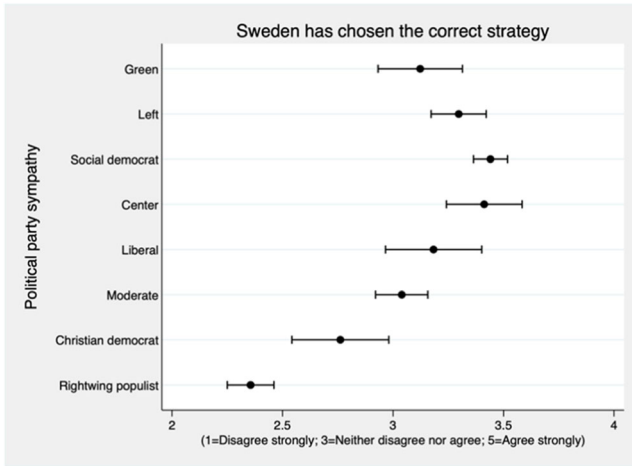


FIGURE 9 Beliefs about whether Sweden has chosen the correct strategy.

place mandates. Focusing first on people's general views about the pandemic response of the Swedish government, in Figure 9 we find that Swedish rightwing populists, similar to their international counterparts, are less likely than all other voter groups to think that their country (Sweden) has chosen the correct strategy to fight the pandemic. However, in contrast to most studies from other countries, the results in Figure 10 show that rightwing populists in Sweden

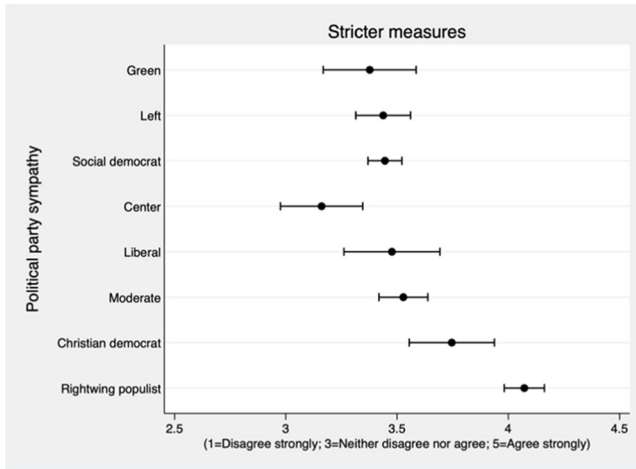


FIGURE 10 General preferences for stricter government measures.

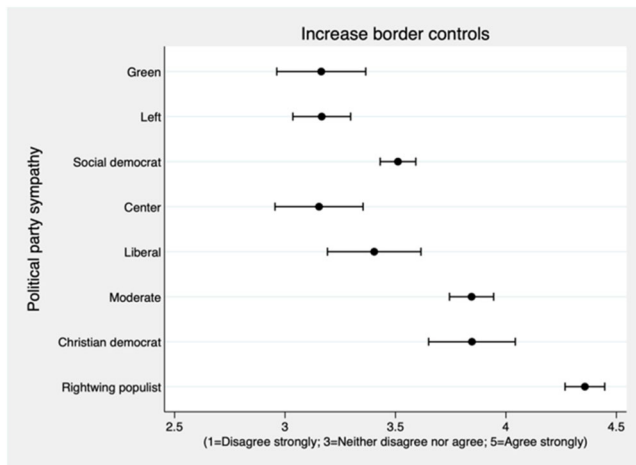


FIGURE 11 Preferences for increasing border controls.

generally demand more (rather than less) strict measures to reduce the spread of the virus.

In Figure 11, we find that rightwing populists are more likely to demand stricter border controls, thereby confirming the findings in previous research demonstrating that rightwing populists can embrace stricter measures if they have clear implications for the core themes in their political ideology, such as restricting immigration (cf. Wondreys & Mudde, 2022). In Figure 12, we also find

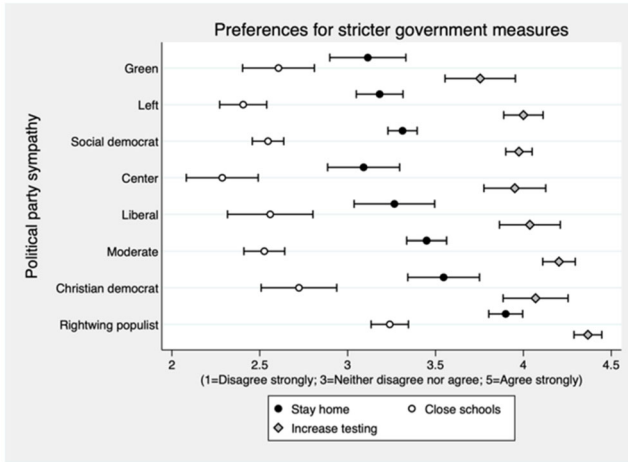


FIGURE 12 Preferences for stricter government measures (close schools, stay home & increase testing).

that rightwing populists are, compared with other groups of party supporters, more likely to demand stricter measures, such as school closures, increased testing for Covid-19, and shelter in place mandates to compel people to stay at home. While border closures were embraced by rightwing populists in many countries, as it provided ample opportunities to advance their anti-immigrant agenda, policies without anti-immigrant connotations that were merely aiming to reduce spread of the virus were less well received. In a Swedish context, however, our results show that rightwing populists were aligned with the rightwing populist party's position, not only supporting stricter border controls but also demanding more strict domestic measures to reduce spread, thus confirming our first main hypothesis (H1).

Regression analysis

As stated in our second main hypothesis, in addition to perceptions about insufficient border controls (see Figure 11) and about foreign born as high transmitters of SARS-COV-2 (due to lack of compliance with “recommendations,” see Figure 5), we also expect that the rightwing populist party leveraged their anti-elitist and nationalist concerns in demanding more (rather than less) strict government Covid-19 measures (H2). We argue that the strategic positioning of the rightwing populist party in Sweden, by criticizing the government for doing “too little, too late” to protect its (native) people, very likely influenced the pandemic views among rightwing populist supporters. In this part of the analysis, we use regression analysis (OLS) to study the

relationship between rightwing populist party sympathies and demand for stricter government Covid-19 measures and investigate whether this relationship can be explained by anti-elitist and nationalist concerns. In other words, we here focus on whether the effect of rightwing populist party sympathy on demand for stricter measures in Sweden is reduced when core themes of rightwing populist ideology—political (dis)trust and nationalist attitudes—are introduced in the analyses.

In Table 2, we present results from four regression models where the dependent variable, that is, the standardized measure/factor (mean = 0, standard deviation = 1) capturing demand for stricter Covid-19 measures are (stepwise) regressed on our explanatory factors. In Model 1, we present the results for our baseline model, including control variables and a dummy for rightwing populist sympathies. In line with Figures 10 and 11, the results show that rightwing populists are more likely to demand stricter measures compared with other groups of party supporters, as indicated by the statistically significant estimate ($b = 0.58$; $p < 0.001$) associated with the dummy variable distinguishing rightwing populists from other voter groups (reference category). To ensure that this greater demand for stricter measures among rightwing populists is not due to their level of concern about the pandemic, we include the measure capturing worry about the Covid-19 pandemic in Model 2. The results show that while worry is positively linked to greater demand for stricter Covid-19 measures, the coefficient for rightwing populist remain statistically significant and relatively unchanged ($b = 0.53$; $p < 0.001$). In Model 3, we include or measure for nationalist attitudes (factor), showing that the effect is not only statistically significant and sizeable ($b = 0.30$; $p < 0.001$) but that it also substantially reduces the coefficient for rightwing populist party sympathy ($b = 0.21$; $p < 0.001$). Finally, in Model 4, we also include the measure capturing trust/confidence in government during the pandemic. The results show that while this effect is statistically significant and negative ($b = -0.10$; $p < 0.001$), the rightwing populist coefficient is weak and no longer statistically significant ($b = 0.01$; $p > 0.05$). Taken together, these results support our second hypothesis (H2), stating that the comparably greater demand for stricter Covid-19 measures among rightwing populists in Sweden can be attributed to their core themes of nationalism and anti-elitism, suggesting that rightwing populist voters drew on nationalist/protectionist and anti-establishment arguments to justify their preferences for stricter government measures.

DISCUSSION

In the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic, many countries responded by imposing hard lockdowns and other restrictions to curtail the spread of the SARS-COV-2 virus. Rightwing populist parties and politicians predictably regurgitated their anti-elitist agenda by adopting opposing stances, for instance

TABLE 2 Regression analysis (OLS): Demand for stricter government Covid-19 measures.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)	Coef. (S.E.)
Gender (ref: man)	0.16 (0.034)***	0.08 (0.032)*	0.10 (0.030)**	0.11 (0.028)***
Age (ref: 18–29)				
30–49	0.01 (0.048)	–0.03 (0.045)	–0.06 (0.042)	–0.03 (0.039)
50–64	0.03 (0.052)	–0.03 (0.048)	–0.11 (0.046)*	–0.04 (0.043)
65–	0.03 (0.055)	–0.09 (0.051)	–0.14 (0.048)**	–0.07 (0.045)
Education (ref: Primary)				
Secondary	–0.09 (0.066)	–0.07 (0.061)	0.00 (0.057)	–0.01 (0.054)
Vocational	–0.10 (0.073)	–0.07 (0.068)	–0.01 (0.064)	–0.05 (0.060)
University	–0.28 (0.066)***	–0.27 (0.062)***	–0.15 (0.059)*	–0.16 (0.055)**
Income (ref: Low)				
Medium	–0.06 (0.039)	–0.05 (0.036)	–0.06 (0.034)	–0.02 (0.032)
High	–0.12 (0.046)*	–0.08 (0.043)	–0.06 (0.041)	–0.03 (0.038)
Rightwing populist sympathy	0.58 (0.044)***	0.53 (0.041)***	0.21 (0.042)***	0.01 (0.041)
Worry about pandemic		0.13 (0.006)***	0.13 (0.006)***	0.13 (0.005)***
Nationalist attitudes			0.30 (0.016)***	0.20 (0.016)***
Trust in government				–0.10 (0.005)***
Intercept	–0.02 (0.072)	–0.72 (0.075)***	–0.71 (0.071)***	–0.23 (0.070)**
R ²	0.091	0.215	0.305	0.397
n	2649	2649	2649	2649

Note: Cell entries are *b*-coefficients from OLS regressions with demand for stricter government Covid-19 measures (factor) as the dependent variable. Rightwing populist sympathy is a binary variable indicating rightwing populist party sympathies (=1) with other party sympathy as reference category (=0). Worry about the pandemic is measured on a 0–10 scale. Nationalist attitudes are (similar to the dependent variable demand for stricter Covid-19 measures) measured using factor scores, which are standardized (mean = 0, standard deviation = 1). The variable trust in government is measured on a 0–10 scale. See Table 1 for a detailed description of specific item wordings and scales. **p* < 0.05; ***p* < 0.01; ****p* < 0.001.

by trivializing the severity of the disease and opposing many of the coercive measures proposed by governments. Previous studies suggest that rightwing populist rhetoric influenced how voters experienced the pandemic, thereby confirming previous research demonstrating that political cues and framing

shape public opinion. To the extent that rightwing populists and their voters were forced to accept the realities of the pandemic, they often used it to their advantage, by blaming immigrants or the EU for causing or at least worsening the pandemic. Meanwhile, in contrast to many other countries, Sweden distinguished itself from most other comparable countries by its “soft” pandemic approach, relying on voluntary measures (“recommendations”) and individual responsibility rather than lockdowns and other coercive measures.

Based on theories about strategic political party positioning and theories about elite cues and framing, we argued that the rightwing populist party in Sweden adopted a rhetoric that was diametrically opposed to the anti-lockdown rhetoric of populist parties in many other countries, advocating for stricter Covid-19 measures to curb the spread of the virus domestically. Given how most rightwing populist parties used the pandemic to their advantage by drawing on their core themes of anti-elitism and nationalism (Mudde, 2004), we argue that the Swedish rightwing populist party used a rhetoric that enabled their supporters to relate these core themes to a demand for more (rather than less) strict government pandemic counter measures.

Our results show that rightwing populist supporters exhibited clearly diverging preferences about how the Swedish authorities should respond to the pandemic—not only compared with other voter groups in Sweden but also in stark contrast to rightwing populist party supporters in other countries—by demanding stricter domestic measures to curtail the spread of the virus, such as school closures, stay at home mandates and increased testing for Covid-19. These preferences coincided with anti-elitist views that the Swedish government and its agencies mishandled the pandemic as well as nationalist/nativist views concerning the need for stricter border controls and scapegoating of immigrants.

Our findings also demonstrate that rightwing populists' beliefs and concerns about the virus and the pandemic were similar to those among other party supporters. For instance, while we find some evidence of conspiratorial views among rightwing populists, we find neither heightened nor depressed levels of worry about the pandemic, or deviating perceptions about the seriousness of the disease (Covid-19), compared with other voter groups. We do, however, find clear evidence of scapegoating ethnic minorities, as rightwing populists in Sweden were more likely to believe that foreign born are much less likely to follow the recommendations from the authorities. This suggests that while rightwing populists were not more (or less) worried about the pandemic, they appeared to perceive the pandemic primarily as a threat to the nation and its native people, caused by open borders and excessive virus transmission by foreign born. Hence, the demand for stricter Covid-19 measures among rightwing populists could be seen, at least partly, as a response to this perceived threat.

While previous research has found that rightwing populist voters in most countries were either universally critical of their government's Covid-19 responses, or inconsistent in their views (Wondreys & Mudde, 2022), we have

shown that rightwing populists in Sweden were remarkably consistent in their demand for stricter measures. In our final analysis, we also demonstrate that the higher demand among rightwing populists were closely linked to core rightwing populist themes of anti-elitism and nationalism. This suggests that the rhetoric of the Swedish rightwing populist party enabled their voters to adopt preferences that were diametrically opposed to the anti-lockdown sentiments among rightwing populist voters elsewhere, but that they (similar to their international counterparts) did so by drawing on their core rightwing populist themes.

A potential limitation in our study is that the comparably greater demand for stricter government measures among the supporters of the Swedish rightwing populist party could be explained by the party's ability to attract voters from other parties that demanded stricter measures. However, the Sweden Democrats did not gain voters/supporters during the pandemic and polls showed that their support even decreased (SCB, 2020). This suggests that the greater demand for stricter measures among their supporters was not due to attracting voters from other parties (that were more supportive of government pandemic intervention but otherwise did not share the broader ideological agenda of rightwing populism). Instead, our results suggest that the rhetoric of the rightwing populist party in Sweden influenced the pandemic preferences of their core constituents, which is supported by our results in the regression analysis showing that demand for stricter measures can be explained by anti-elitist and nationalist concerns. Another potential limitation is the use of cross-sectional public opinion data, and the lack of reliable data on elite cues and framing during the pandemic, which prohibited us from formally testing the implied causal relationships between the political rhetoric and public opinion. If available, future studies could for instance use panel data (over time) or employ qualitative analyses to explore the character and intensity of various pandemic discourses used by (rightwing populist) politicians (but see Shurafa et al., 2020), in the media and other channels of political communication, and how these discourses have shaped public opinion on the pandemic.

CONCLUSION

Consistent with theories about strategic positioning, we have argued that the Swedish exceptionalism during the Covid-19 pandemic—and the political consensus that characterized its early stages—provided a vacant electoral space exploited by the Swedish rightwing populist party, which (in contrast to their international counterparts) demanded more (rather than less) strict government measures to mitigate the spread of SARS-COV-2. In line with theories about political elite cues and framing effects, we provide ample evidence suggesting that the pro-interventionist Covid-19 preferences of Swedish rightwing populist voters were very likely influenced by the distinctive rhetoric of the rightwing populist party in Sweden. Whereas rightwing populist parties and voters in

most countries opposed the hard lockdowns enforced by governments across the globe, the Swedish government offered little opportunity for such criticisms, as few mandatory and coercive measures were implemented. Not only was the Swedish pandemic response exceptional—so too was the positions taken by the rightwing populist party and consequently its supporters. Hence, our results contribute to the literature on how strategic party positioning and political elite cues and framing can constitute powerful forces in shaping public opinion during times of crisis, such as the Covid-19 pandemic.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

ORCID

Joakim Kulin  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7610-9104>

Ingemar Johansson Sevä  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3349-5778>

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