

False Consensus Beliefs and Populist Attitudes

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Motivation and overview

- Well-known tendency to overestimate support for one's own views ("false consensus effect")
- Political consequences not well understood
 - Potentially an important cause of populist attitudes
- Observational analyses of survey items we fielded via the German GESIS Panel in 2021

False consensus beliefs

- „False consensus effect“ well established in social psychology (Ross et al. 1977; Mullen et al. 1985)
- Mechanisms
 - Goal-oriented motivated reasoning: Reduction of cognitive dissonance
 - Nonmotivational cognitive bias: Selective exposure to information & selective processing of information
- Selective exposure may be of increased relevance in today's high-choice media environments (Wojcieszak 2008; Bunker & Varnum 2021; Luzsa & Mair 2021)

False consensus beliefs in politics: Previous research

- Research on political *elites* shows that politicians are more likely to misperceive what the public majority wants when they personally have a different preference (Pereira 2021)
- Surprisingly, relatively little research on *citizens'* false consensus beliefs and their consequences
 - Some survey-experimental evidence showing that citizens perceive decisions as more legitimate when supported by a (large) public majority (Arnesen et al. 2019; Wrátil & Wäckerle 2022; for more mixed results, see: Esaiasson et al. 2017)
 - Schulz et al. (2020): Association between agreeing that “most people share [one’s] opinion about politics” and populist attitudes

False consensus beliefs & populist attitudes: Hypothesis

- Populist attitudes: belief in general will of the people that is suppressed by ruling elites (Mudde 2004; Hawkins et al. 2018)
- Viewpoint more convincing to people who overestimate public agreement with their own views
 - In the extreme: people with minority views believe these to be shared by large majorities → perceive politics as unresponsiveness to these perceived majorities → form populist attitudes
- Hypothesis: *False consensus beliefs are associated with populist attitudes.*

Data

- Items included in the GESIS Panel
 - Probability-based mixed-mode panel
 - Probabilistic sample of the German-speaking population aged between 18 and 70 years and permanently resident in Germany in 2013; several refreshment samples
 - Currently contains four cohorts (2013, 2016, 2018 and 2021) with about 5,200 panelists in total
- Our items
 - 05/2021 – 07/2021: Items on own opinion and perceived public opinion
 - 08/2021 – 10/2021: Items on populist attitudes (Akkerman et al. 2014)

Items on own opinion and perceived public opinion

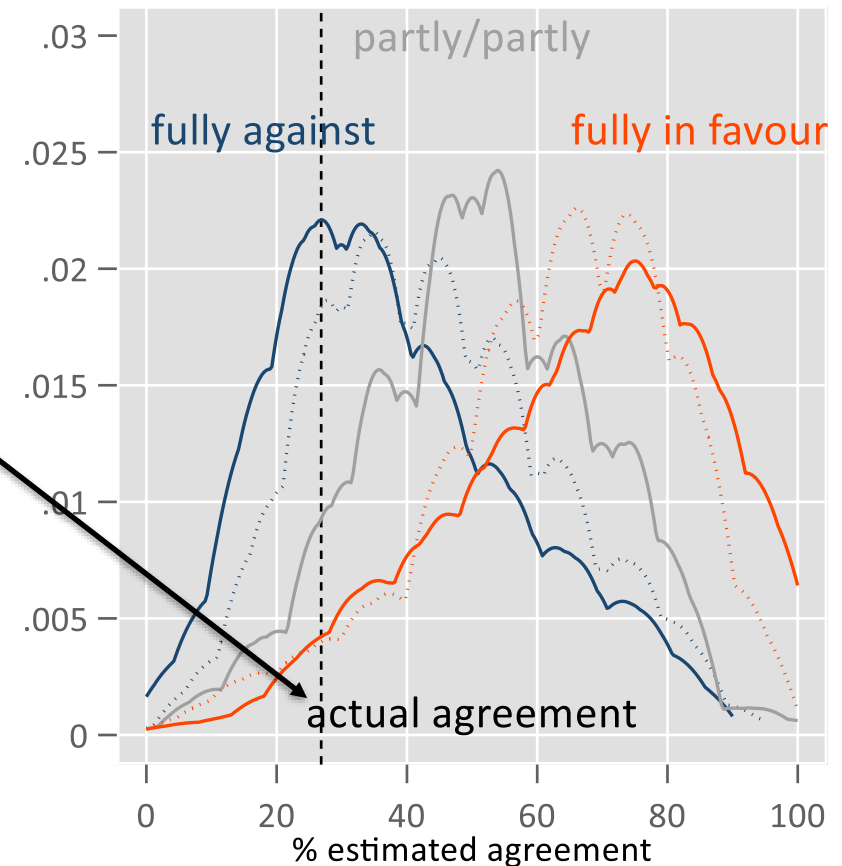
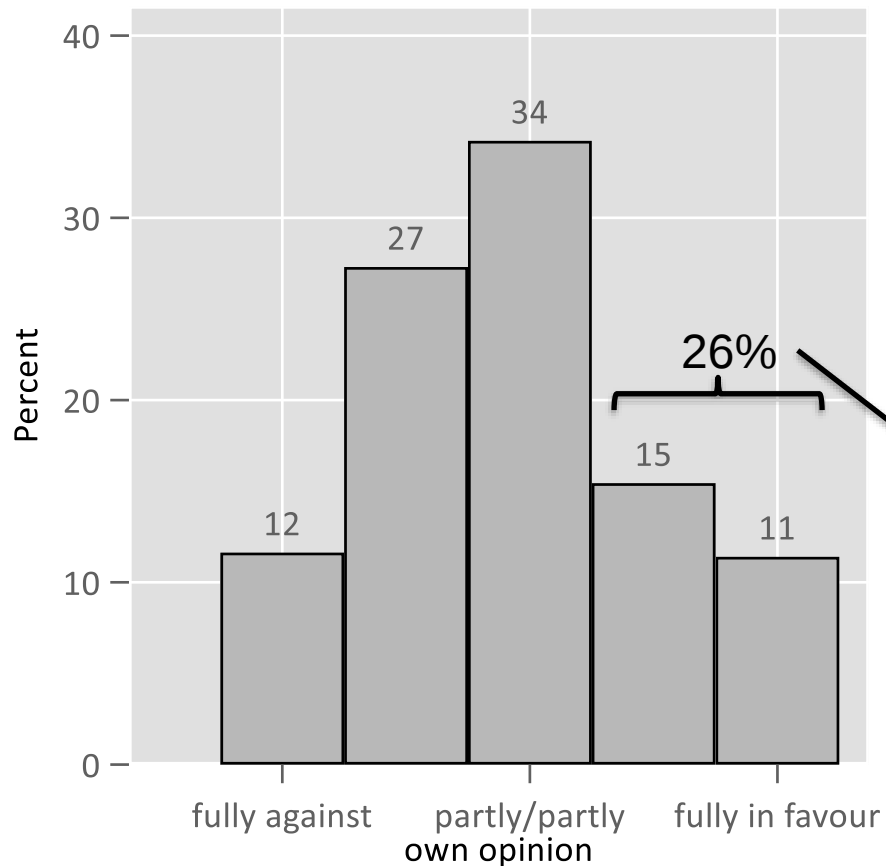
1. “Are you for or against the proposed measures?”
 - 1: absolutely in favor ... 5: absolutely against
2. “Now we are interested in your assessment of the approval of these political measures among the people in Germany. What is your **estimate of the share of those who are in favor** of the respective measures? Enter a number between 0 and 100 as percentage:”
 - _____

Seven diverse issue items

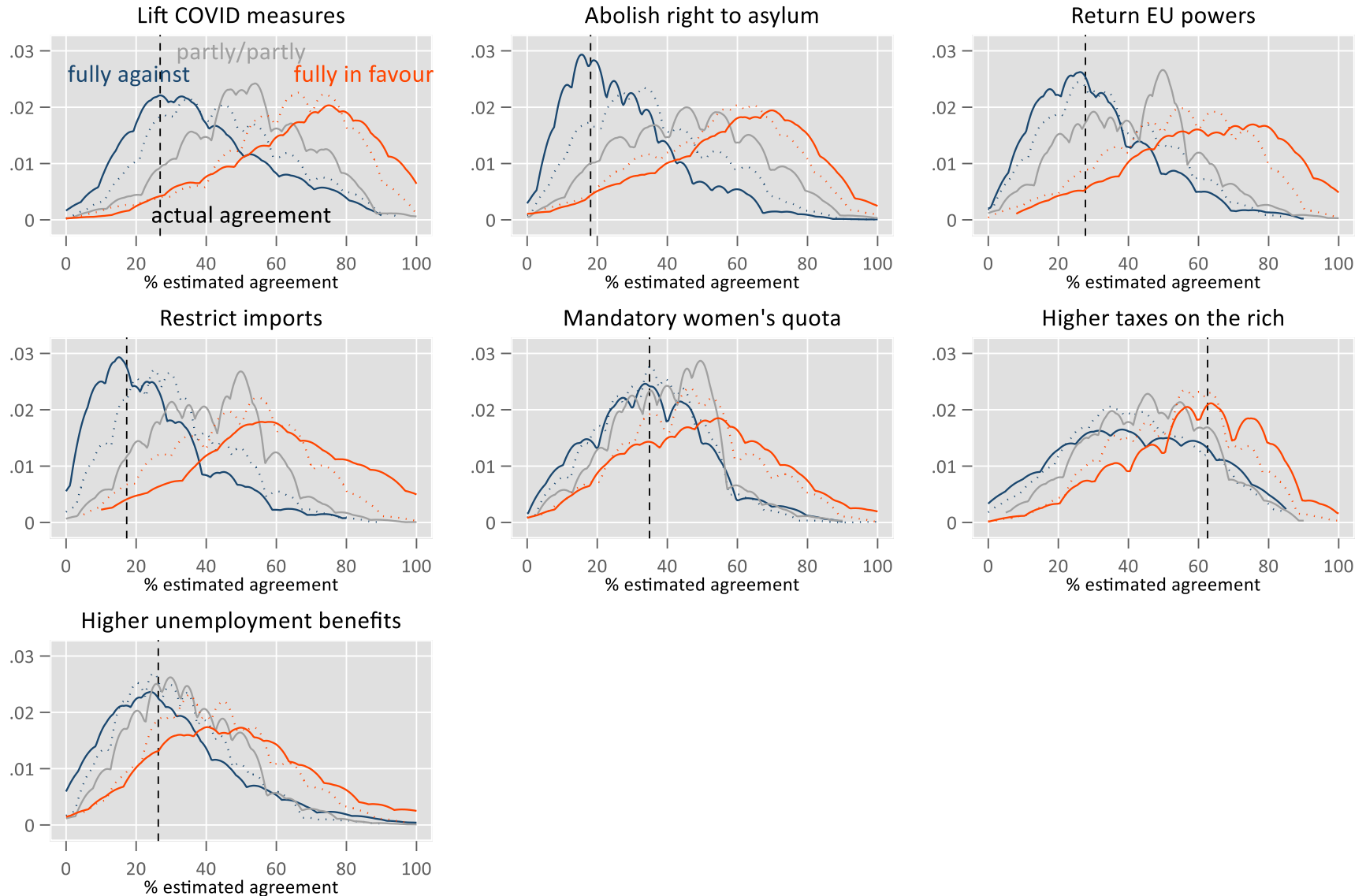
1. **Lift COVID measures:** “The regulations to combat the corona pandemic should now be lifted as they restrict the economy and civil liberties too much.”
2. **Abolish right to asylum:** “In order to limit immigration to Germany, the basic right to asylum should be abolished.”
3. **Return EU powers:** “Central decision-making powers of the European Union should be returned to the nation states.”
4. **Restrict imports:** “In order to protect the German economy, the import of foreign products should be restricted.”
5. **Mandatory women’s quota:** “The representation of women in all important political, economic and social bodies should be enforced with a mandatory quota of women.”
6. **Higher taxes on the rich:** “High incomes should be taxed much more heavily in Germany.”
7. **Higher unemployment benefits:** “The welfare state benefits for the poor and the unemployed (“Hartz IV”) should be increased significantly.”

Example: Lift COVID measures

The regulations to combat the Corona pandemic should now be lifted
as they restrict the economy and civil liberties too much



Distribution of estimated public opinion by own opinion



Measuring egocentric bias across issues

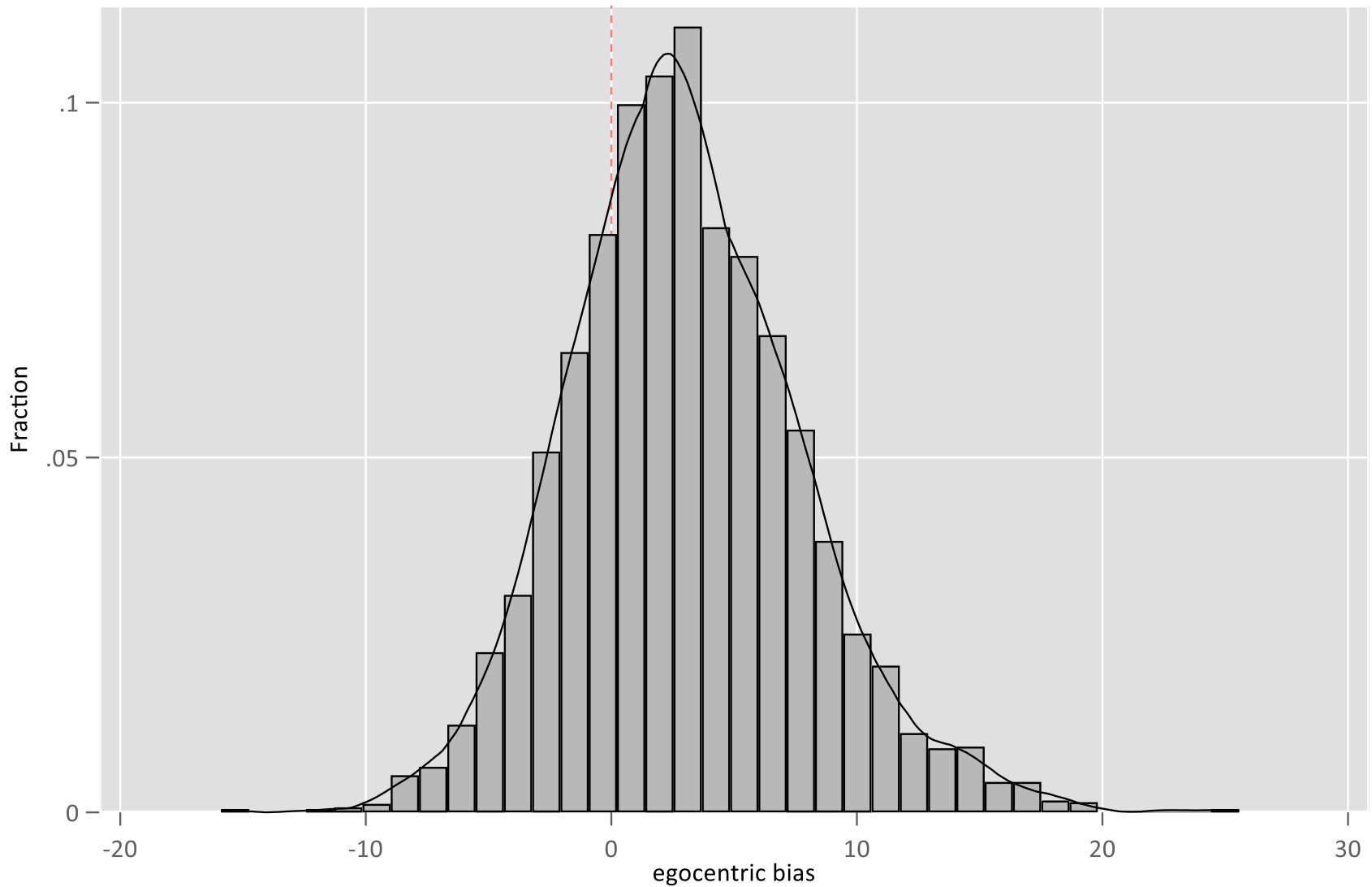
1. Run the following regression (on the stacked data)

$$\text{Perceived Public Opinion}_{i,j} - \text{Actual Public Opinion}_j = \alpha_i + \beta_i \text{Own Opinion}_{i,j} + \epsilon_{i,j}$$

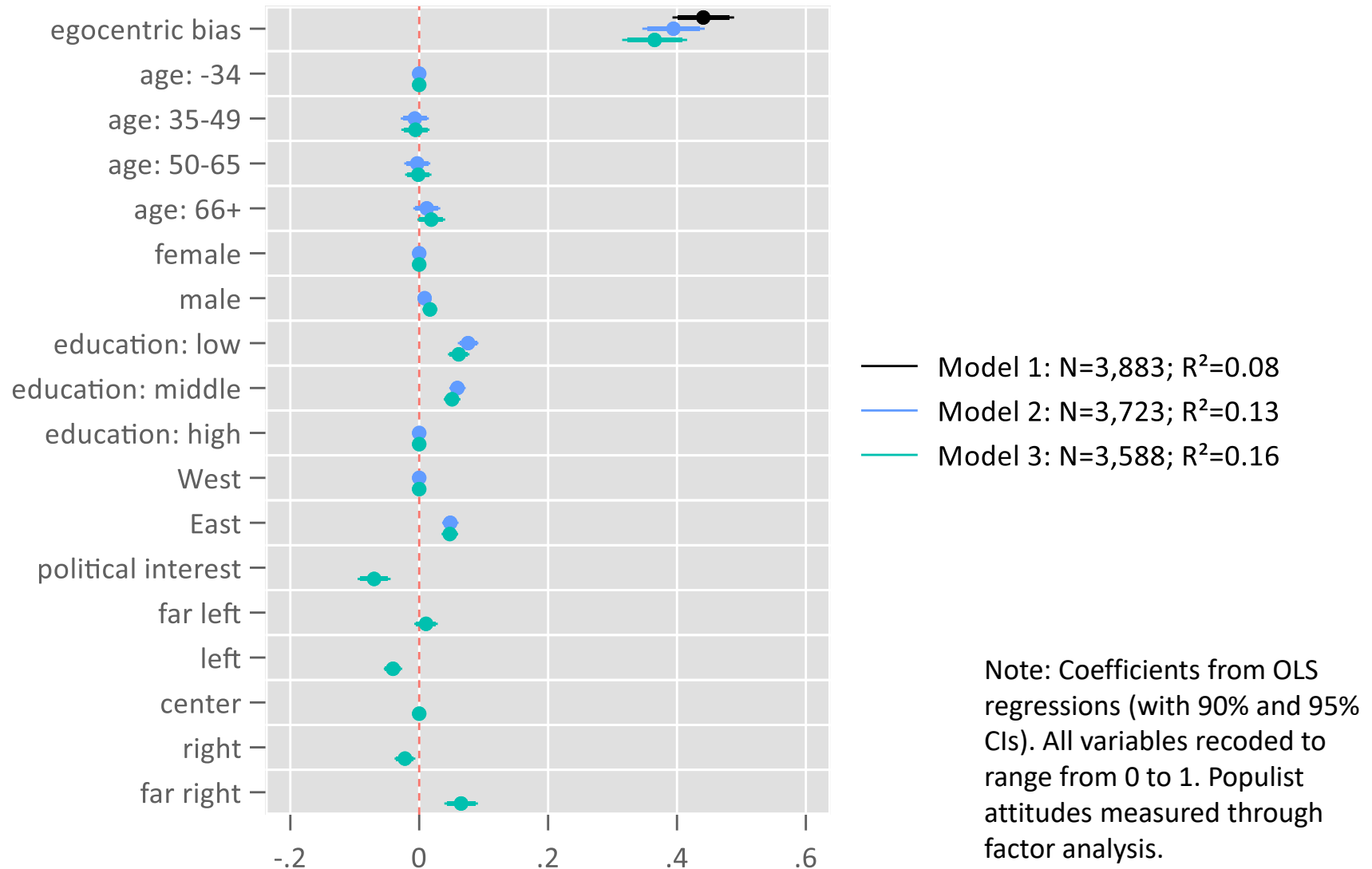
- i : individuals, j : issues
- own opinion: -1 $\rightarrow$ against, 0 $\rightarrow$ partly/partly, +1 $\rightarrow$ in favor
- estimated in a multi-level model with random slope, i.e., β_i is allowed to vary across individuals

2. Save β_i as a measure of “egocentric bias”

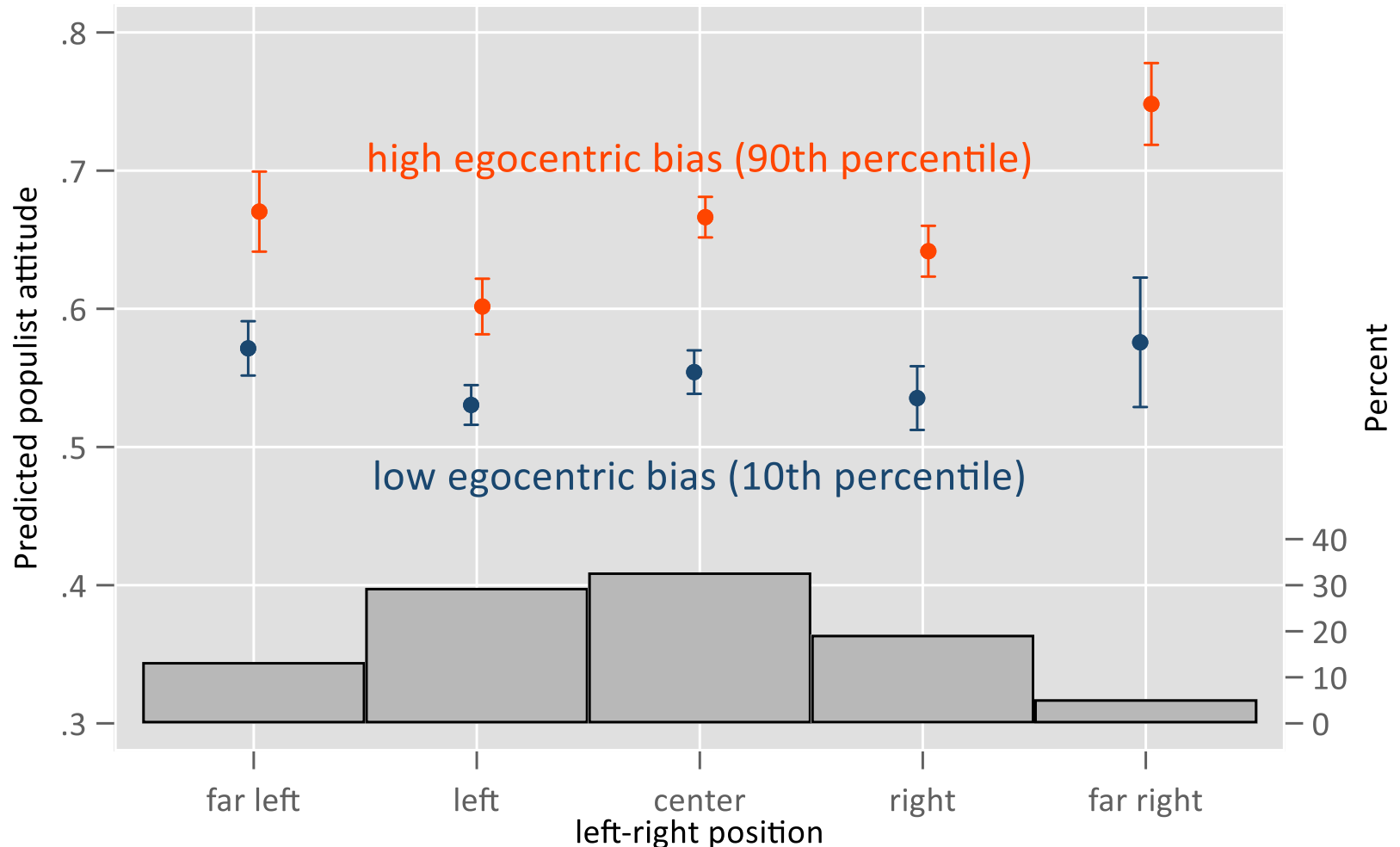
Distribution of egocentric bias



Regressing populist attitudes on egocentric bias: First models

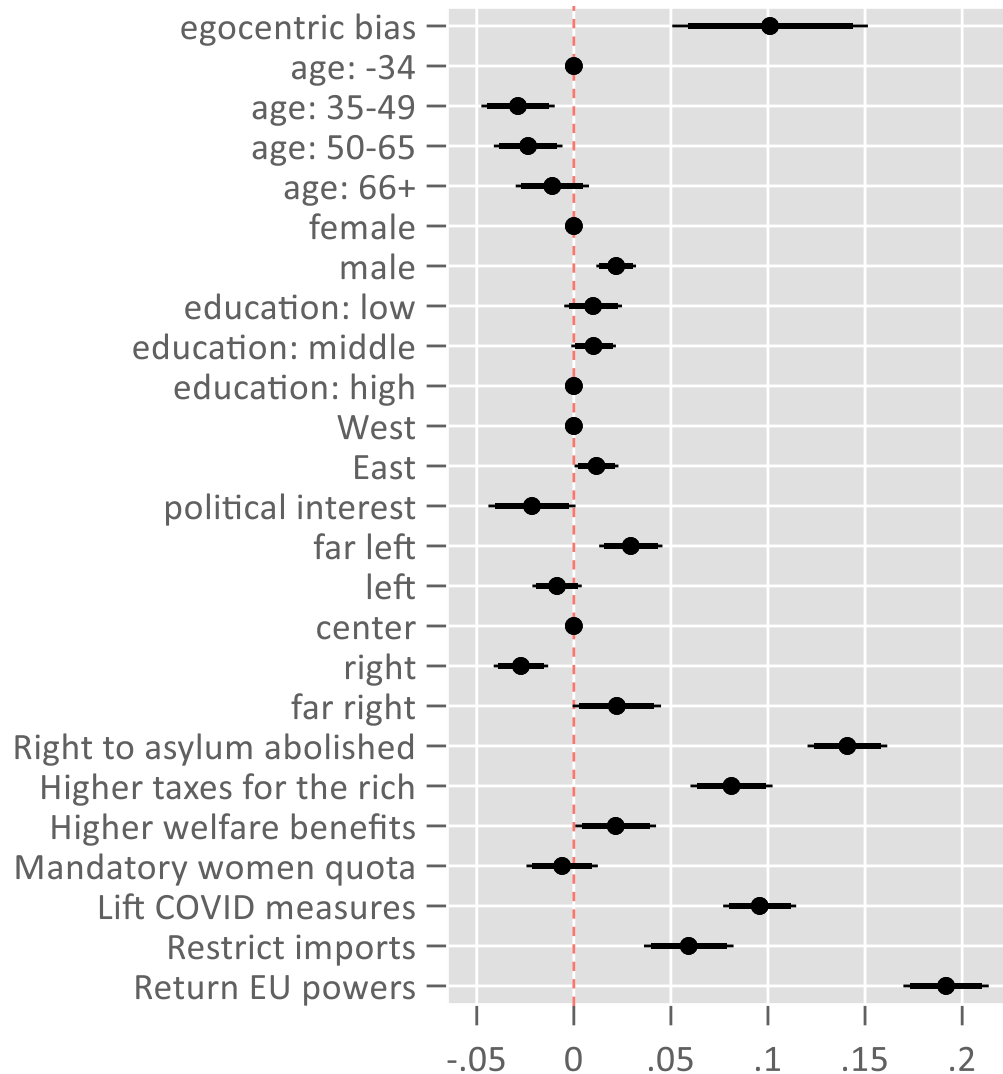


Regressing populist attitudes on egocentric bias: Does the effect hold across left-right positions?



Note: Predicted values from a model with interactions between egocentric bias and (categorical) left-right position.

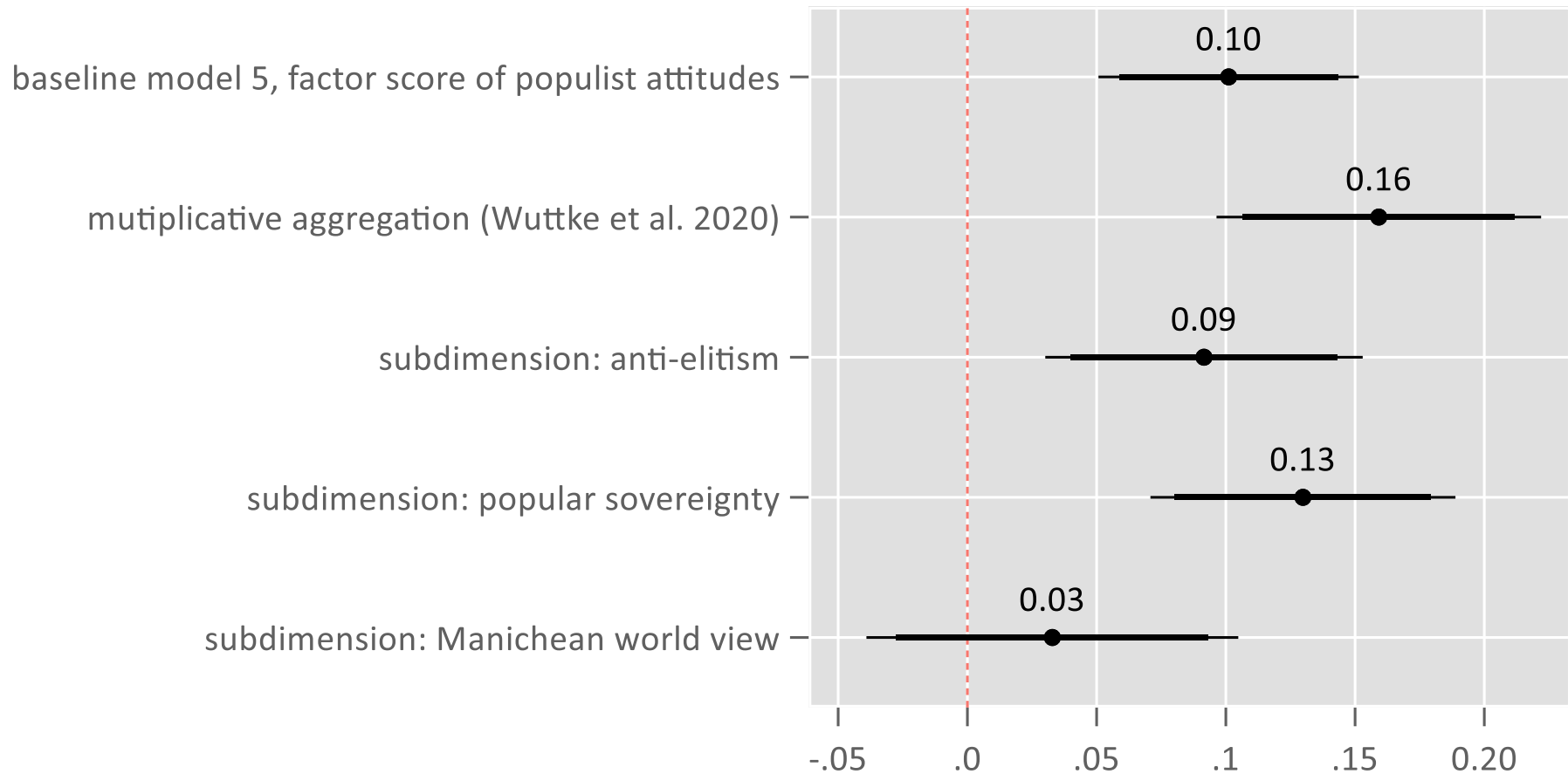
Regressing populist attitudes on egocentric bias: Controlling for all individual issue positions



Model 5: N=3,534; $R^2=0.39$

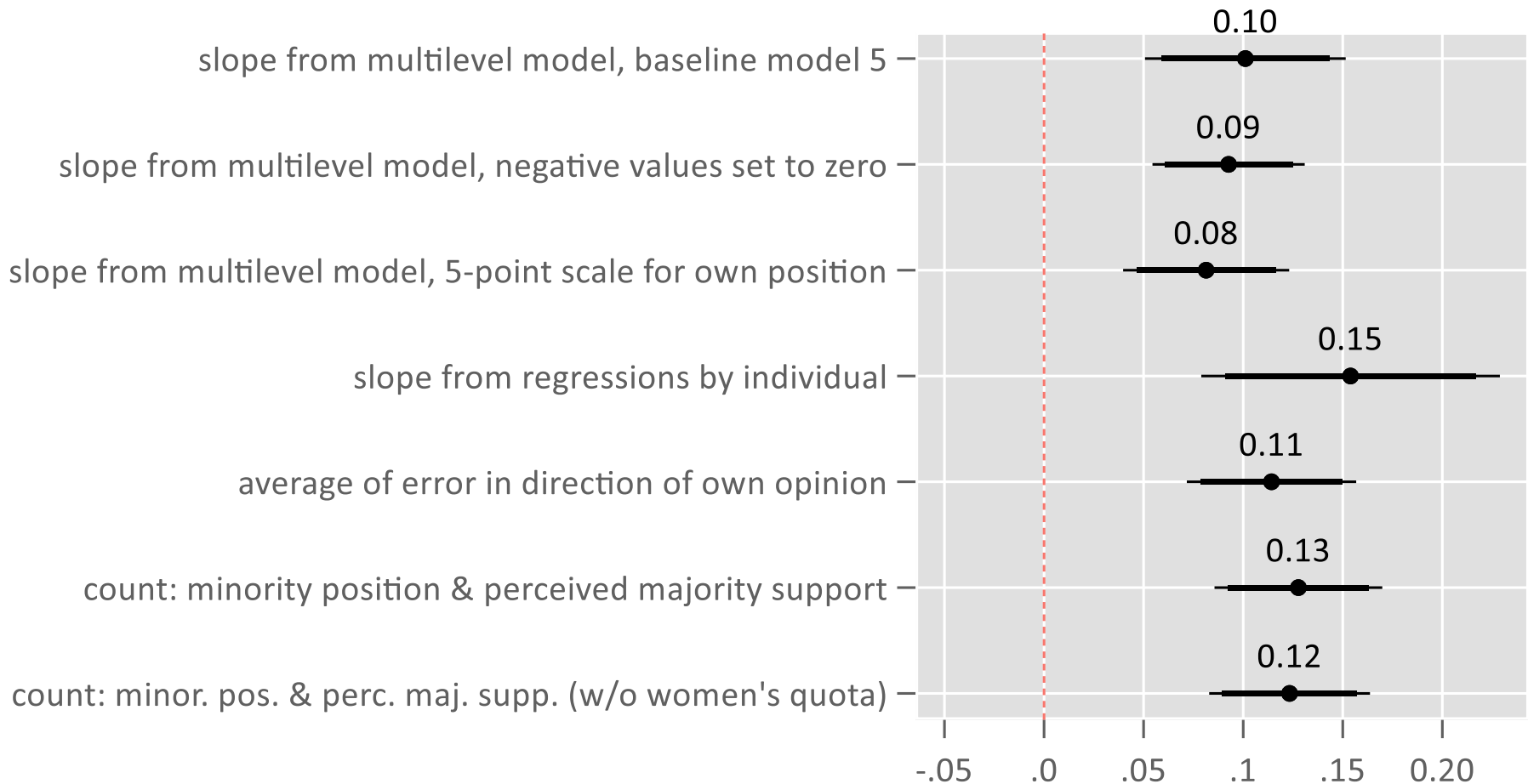
Note: Coefficients from OLS regressions (with 90% and 95% CIs). All variables recoded to range from 0 to 1. Populist attitudes measured through factor analysis.

Robustness: Alternative measures of populist attitudes



Note: Coefficients from separate OLS regressions (with 90% and 95% CIs) for different measures of populist attitudes as outcome variable. All variables scaled to range from 0 to 1.

Robustness: Alternative measures of egocentric bias



Note: Coefficients from separate OLS regressions (with 90% and 95% CIs) for different measures of egocentric bias. Outcome variable: factor score of populist attitudes. All variables scaled to range from 0 to 1.

Conclusion

- Empirical evidence of an association between false consensus beliefs and populist attitudes
- Potentially important explanation of the rise of populism
 - Transformed media environment increases selective exposure → increase in false consensus beliefs → increase in populist sentiment
 - Neglected dimension of polarization: Polarization in perceptions of public opinion
- Further steps:
 - Study interventions aim at reducing false consensus beliefs to study downstream consequences and establish causality
 - Study antecedents and opinion dynamics leading to false consensus beliefs

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Measurement of populist attitudes through factor analysis

	Loading on 1st factor
A citizen would represent my interests better than a professional politician. [popular sovereignty]	0.80
Politicians talk too much and do too little. [anti-elitism]	0.78
The people, not the politicians, should make the most important policy decisions. [popular sovereignty]	0.78
What is called compromise in politics is really just a betrayal of principles. [Manichean worldview]	0.71
The political differences between elites and the people are larger than the differences among the people. [anti-elitism]	0.68
The members of the German Bundestag need to follow the will of the people. [popular sovereignty]	0.64

Note: Results from principal component factor analysis. 1st factor has an Eigenvalue of 3.24 and accounts for 54.0 % of the variance in the variables.