

## **Are Right-Wing Populists Immune to Covid-19?**

### **Health Risks, Elite Cues, and Compliance Among Right-Wing Populist Voters in France**

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**Abstract:** We argue that the Covid-19 pandemic presents a dilemma for supporters of right-wing populist parties. On one hand, their political values predispose them to express discontent with governments' handling of the pandemic or protest government restrictions of everyday social and private behaviors. On the other hand, their attraction to notions of social order, hierarchy, and authority, should make right-wing populist voters more reluctant to defy state directives than meets the eye, especially when these come from traditional figures of authority. Using individual-level panel data from France – a country with a well-established and successful right-wing populist party – we find that supporters of right-wing populist parties are no less compliant with health and policy measures, all the while they express disapproval of the government and its pandemic response. Moreover, we find that citizens attached to right-wing populist parties are sensitive to elite cues, especially when there is an objective risk to their health. In particular, right-wing populists report higher levels of compliance after a speech by French President Emmanuel Macron announcing lockdown measures if they live in areas with increased mortality rates from the pandemic. Taken together, our findings suggest that, when push comes to shove, right-wing populists listen to public authority.

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During the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, citizens across a number of contemporary democracies expressed their discontent with government-imposed restrictions aimed at curbing the spread of the virus. For example, beginning in mid-April 2020, a wave of demonstrations broke out around the United States to protest stay-at-home orders and business restrictions imposed by state governments. Involving far-right groups as well as mainstream Republicans, protestors demanded that their states be re-opened for normal economic and personal activity (Pleyers, 2020). The U.S. case was hardly exceptional, as thousands marched in the streets of Berlin, London, and Paris in the summer of 2020 to demonstrate against coronavirus restrictions, arguing they infringed their constitutional rights. These protests have persisted, with demonstrations erupting again across Europe in March 2021, as the continent braced for new coronavirus restrictions to contain the third wave.

While these protesters are motivated by a variety of grievances, these demonstrations highlight the fact that significant segments of the population are willing to defy government measures in times of crisis. Prominent among them appear to be supporters of right-wing populist parties – citizens who hold anti-elite, anti-government, and anti-immigrant views.<sup>3</sup> These right-wing populists exhibit nativist beliefs and distrust the established political order and scientific institutions (Mudde, 2007).<sup>4</sup> Seen from this perspective, it would not be surprising to find that they are reluctant to comply with hygienic and health measures to combat the global pandemic. Yet, this penchant for defying political and scientific elites may butt up against a conflicting attraction for law and social order. Right-wing populists have been shown to have a distinct set of personality traits, including extreme obedience, a need for social control and security, and unquestioning compliance with political authorities. When push comes to shove and there is an objective threat to their physical wellbeing, are these right-wing authoritarians likely to follow their political attitudes and defy guidelines from mainstream governments or will they defer to their respect for law and order?

To answer this question, we exploit a set of surveys collected in France during the first acute phase of the pandemic to investigate people's response to an elite cue. Specifically, we evaluate how right-wing populists responded to President Emmanuel Macron's primetime address announcing the first lockdown on March 16, 2020, using individual-level panel surveys

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<sup>3</sup> Others include people subscribing to conspiracy and anti-vaccination beliefs, though there may also be overlaps among these.

<sup>4</sup> Among them are proponents of 'post-truth' politics who can pose a risk to population health by spreading misinformation and skepticism towards science (Gugushvili et al, 2020).

collected in March 16-17, 2020.<sup>5</sup> We examine whether this powerful and clear elite cue affected the willingness of right-wing populist supporters to adapt their routine behaviors in response to government guidance regarding hygiene practices (washing hands more frequently or sneezing into one's elbow), social distancing, and avoiding social occasions in an attempt to prevent the virus from spreading. We also test whether these individuals were more receptive to the President's speech when they were faced with an actual threat to their well-being in the form of rising mortality rates in their local areas.

We find that, contrary to anecdotal evidence and expectations, right-wing populists did not differ from the rest of the population when it came to complying with health and policy measures. Moreover, they were more likely to adjust their private behavior and comply following the Macron speech and when faced with a real threat of infection. We argue that right-wing populist partisans are more responsive because times of existential crisis activate their authoritarian instincts. Macron's speech – which had distinct martial and authoritarian undertones – pushed right-wing populists toward a greater willingness to comply because they are more receptive to the speech's rhetoric. Moreover, this tendency was especially pronounced among right-wing populists faced with objective infection risk. Thus, right-wing populists followed the coercive measures enforced by the government when faced with an actual threat to their well-being and when the head of state reminded them of the danger with the help of a clear, war-like address.

Our paper seeks to make several contributions. First, it provides an individual-level test of the partisan and political drivers of compliance with health regulations during the pandemic. While there is a growing number of studies of the effect of partisanship on pandemic-related behaviors in the United States as well as aggregate level studies elsewhere, studies of individual compliance attitudes and behaviors in multi-party systems and European countries more generally are scarce. In doing so, we also seek to examine how elite cues can affect people's willingness to comply, especially the behavior of citizens who may be harder to reach for mainstream politicians. Moreover, our paper seeks to contribute to understanding the factors that activate and motivate the behaviors of people with right-wing populist beliefs. By examining how these voters respond to an elite cue when faced with real threat, we seek to complement previous work on the deep-rooted psychological motivations of right-wing populists and particularly how they respond to societal threats. From the vantage point of understanding the power of elite cues, our study also contributes to understanding the impact

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<sup>5</sup> The fact that randomly assigned respondents replied to the survey before and after the speech allows us to test the causal effect of the discourse on right-wing populists' behavior.

that media messages can have on citizens, and especially those who may be in opposition to incumbents.

The paper proceeds as follows. We first develop our argument and several testable hypotheses. After laying out our individual-level data, we present our empirical strategy, results and robustness checks. The final section of the paper discusses the potential implications of our findings.

### **Right-Wing Populists in Times of Crisis**

It would have been difficult to predict a priori how supporters of right-wing populist parties would respond to the Covid-19 crisis. On one hand, their distrust towards traditional political and scientific institutions could be expected to make them less likely to comply with government regulations. On the other hand, their authoritarian beliefs should make them more willing to follow strict restrictions handed down from above. The pandemic produced countervailing pressures for right-wing populists – how did they manage to escaped this dilemma?

The idea that right-wing populist supporters could be expected to chafe at and actively contest strict government regulations of social and economic behavior is rooted in the supposition that their anti-elitist stance should make them question the legitimacy of the established political order and those who pull the levers of power (Mudde, 2007). This should be especially true during a public health crisis, given their skepticism of scientific evidence and thinking, including well-documented sympathies for climate change denial (Fraune and Knodt, 2018) and vaccine hesitancy (Kennedy, 2019). Moreover, populist party leaders across Europe prominently sought to benefit from this latent opposition to incumbent governments by mobilizing supporters against government measures.

This mobilization should have paid dividends, given the elite- and government-driven nature of the political response to the pandemic, coupled with the prominent role of health experts in decision making. Combined, these could be expected to provide grist on the mills of right-wing populists' motivations to oppose containment measures and believe in conspiracy theories (Ahmed et al, 2020, Bursztyn et al., 2020). There is emerging evidence to support this conjecture. Supporters of far-right ideologies taking to the streets across the western world to protest the lockdown measures are among the anecdotal examples of this non-compliance. Moreover, recent studies using aggregate-level data have shown links between right-wing

populism and lower compliance rates in the first wave of the pandemic (Barbieri and Bonini, 2020; Bargain and Aminjonov, 2020).<sup>6</sup>

**Hypothesis 1:** Supporters of right-wing populist parties should be less likely to comply with government directives restricting social and economic life.

At the same time, a number of studies have documented a consistent link between authoritarian attitudes and support for right-wing populist parties and across a number of countries (Aicholzer and Zandonella, 2016; Vasilopoulos and Lachat, 2018; Vasilopoulos and Lachat, 2020). Political psychologists conceptualize authoritarianism as a set of personality traits that seek order, clarity, and stability (Oliver and Rahn, 2016). Individuals who score highly on these traits value conventionalism, moral absolutism, and obedience to authority (Altemeyer, 1988; Stenner, 2005). They obey strong leaders, have little tolerance for deviance, find scapegoats, and demand conformity to traditional norms. These traits are especially likely to be activated in times of crisis, given that external threat has been shown to activate authoritarian predispositions (Feldman and Stenner, 1997). In fact, it is plausible to assume that supporters of right-wing populist parties should appreciate harsh lockdown measures, which some have characterized as authoritarian policies in disguise.

**Hypothesis 2:** Right wing populists should be more likely to comply with government restrictions than other citizens.

Existing research on the attitudes of right-wing populist partisans would suggest that they should be especially responsive to messages from political authorities in times of crisis. Individuals with authoritarian attitudes perceive the world around them as threatening and dangerous (Altemeyer, 1988). Thus, given their chronic perceptions of threat even in ordinary times, right-wing populists should be predisposed to respond even more readily when a crisis breaks out (Lodge et al., 2002). In fact, if anything, they should overestimate a threat like the Covid-19 pandemic (Oliver and Rahn, 2016; Russo, Roccato, and Merlone, 2020).<sup>7</sup> Taken

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<sup>6</sup> Barbieri and Bonini (2020), for example, find that residents in Italian provinces leaning towards right-wing populism had lower rates of compliance with social distancing measures. While not examining right-wing populism directly, Bargain and Aminjonov (2020) demonstrate that high-trust regions across Europe register a larger reduction in non-essential mobility i.e. higher levels of compliance. No evidence has been found at the individual level yet.

<sup>7</sup> For instance, authoritarian right-wing populists saw the Zika or Ebola virus and the addiction to prescription drugs as more of a risk to themselves than car accidents and gun violence, whereas it's the opposite for people with lower levels of authoritarianism (Oliver and Rahn, 2016).

together, then, authoritarian right-wing populists should be highly sensitive to a threat like the pandemic that affects stability and social order as well as the physical integrity of the in-group. If this view is indeed accurate, right-wing populist supporters should react more quickly to containment measures, and especially when they perceive an existential threat to their well-being. We therefore hypothesize the following:

**Hypothesis 3:** The willingness of supporters of right-wing populist parties to comply with harsh government restrictions should be more pronounced, the greater the risk to their well-being.

Right-wing populists are therefore faced with a dilemma. They can either follow their anti-elite and anti-science views and contest lockdown measures or they can follow their authoritarian predispositions and comply with the demands of traditional political authorities. We investigate the case of France to understand whether and how supporters of right-wing populist parties resolved this dilemma.

### **Messages From Political Authorities and Right-Wing Populists During Crisis**

At 8pm on Monday, March 16, 2020, President Emmanuel Macron addressed the French nation in a televised speech that was watched by a record 36.7 million people (e.g., over half of the population). In it, he announced drastic measures to curb the spread of the pandemic that were put into effect by decree on the same day. More prominently, these measures included a mandatory home lockdown: from noon on March 17, 2020, residents of France were not allowed to leave their homes unless they needed to buy groceries, travel to work, exercise or seek medical care. Individuals wanting to leave their homes had to carry a written declaration justifying the reason for being outside. The army, local prefects and police forces were mobilized to enforce the confinement order and issue fines for those committing lockdown violations.

It would be difficult to imagine a stricter and encompassing set of restrictions on people's daily lives in a contemporary democracy during peacetime. The Macron speech thus sent an unambiguous signal to promote individuals' behavioral change in public health. Previous studies have shown that speeches are efficient channels for spreading messages about positive changes in health behavior (Alatas et al, 2019, Boudreau and MacKenzie, 2014, Bursztyn et al., 2020). In fact, the influence of leaders on individuals' behavior is particularly strong in times of crisis when individuals may not be informed about the situation and developments of the crisis (Dewan and Myatt, 2008).

We argue that the tone of the Macron speech was especially appealing for one segment of the population: right-wing populist partisans with authoritarian tendencies. Macron adopted an explicitly martial tone in his speech, mentioning twenty times that the country was “at war.” This type of speech was tailored to an audience that believes in a strong leader, a strong state, and in robust law and order, touching on all the value dimensions of authoritarian attitudes. Macron also used a patriotic narrative to unite and coordinate the nation, highlighting state power with rules and punishment, and calling for individual responsibility and discipline to protect the nation.

The patriotic - or, as some may say, nationalistic - rhetoric helps promote both the acceptance of legitimate measures and authoritarian policies disguised as such (Nossem, 2020). Right-wing populists generally are motivated to support stringent policies that are commanded by a strongman leader in the attempt to protect the nation (Fetchenhauer and Bierhoff, 2004). They will agree with coercive policies that protect the ingroup regardless of negative consequences, including the use of violence to address social problems (Fetchenhauer and Bierhoff, 2004; Hetherington and Suhay, 2011). They also approve of the use of military force in the pandemic fight. Additionally, due to their chronic perception of threat, authoritarian right-wing populists should be susceptible to a discourse that provides sources of comfort. Respecting and complying with authority are comforting for those who feel threatened and functions as a coping mechanism (Hetherington and Suhay, 2011). We can therefore argue that people are more likely to be receptive to the thinly veiled authoritarian’s rhetoric of Macron speech and accept strict policies as a result. The speech pushes them to comply because Macron explicitly expressed the danger they are faced, reinforcing their protection mechanisms. We therefore hypothesize that:

**Hypothesis 4:** President Macron’s speech should make supporters of right-wing populist parties more likely to comply with lockdown orders and public health regulations.

**Hypothesis 5:** The effect of President Macron’s speech on the compliance behaviors of right-wing populist supporters should be more pronounced, the greater the risk to their well-being.

## Data and Research Design

We used individual-level panel data from the French National Election Study (Enquête Electorale Française-ENEF) to examine how right-wing populists responded to the crisis. These panel surveys have been conducted since November 2015 and are based on a representative sample of the French adult population (Brouard, 2020). We used two surveys collected during a key moment of the pandemic: one survey that was collected well before the announcement of a national lockdown by President Macron (between March 3-10) and one survey collected during the day of the speech and the day after (March 16-17).

## Measuring Behavioral Compliance

To measure compliance behaviors, we rely on a large set of questions that asked people about their hygiene behaviors, social distancing and meeting with friends (for details, see Brouard 2020 and Brouard et al., 2020). These questions were asked during the survey conducted on March 16 and 17. Our dependent variable refers to compliance with health and policy requirements. Respondents were asked whether, on a scale from 0 (not at all) to 10 (completely), they had changed these daily behaviors as a result of the pandemic:

“Because of the coronavirus epidemic, in your daily behavior, would you say that ...?”

- You wash your hands more often and / or longer
- You cough or sneeze into your elbow or a handkerchief
- You stopped greeting by shaking hands or kissing
  - You keep a distance of one meter from other people outside your home
- You have reduced your trips
- You avoid crowded places (public transport, restaurants, sports training ...)
- You have stopped meeting your friends”

All items for compliance loaded on a single factor<sup>8</sup>. Since the variable is heavily skewed due to high levels of compliance among respondents, we recoded the compliance measure into a binary variable where compliance levels higher than 9 take the value of 1 and the rest takes the value of 0.

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<sup>8</sup> Factor analyses were conducted on the full March 16-17 wave. Only one factor achieved an Eigenvalue greater than 1 (March 16 wave: 3.854). The scale of reliability for this single construct is very high as Cronbach’s alpha was 0.894 for compliance levels in the two waves.

## **Measuring Right-Wing Populism**

We measured support for right-wing populist parties with the help of a question asked in a panel survey conducted prior to March 16-17 to mitigate potential endogeneity concerns. Specifically, we used the question that asked about a respondent's attachment to a political party during a survey conducted March 3-8, 2020 (see Table 1 in the Appendix). This means that partisanship was collected at least one week before compliance behaviors were reported. We coded individuals who support right-wing populist parties (the National Rally and France Arise) as 1 and those who support other parties as 0. Those who did not support any party were coded as missing values. The National Rally (formerly known as the National Front) is the main far-right populist party in France, led by Marine Le Pen since 2011. It is considered a prototypical radical right party that shares a nativist policy agenda and focuses on the importance of law and order (Mayer, 2013). The other right-wing populist party we include in our analysis is France Arise, a small anti-immigrant and Eurosceptic party committed to working closely with the National Rally. The majority of its executives joined the National Rally in December 2020 to support Le Pen ahead of the upcoming 2022 presidential election.

## **Measuring Objective Risk**

We estimate the actual level of health risk by including the excess rate of deaths registered during the weeks of the interviews (March 9-March 25) at the level of French regions (départements). We then match this information to the region where respondents live. Data are taken from the French National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies and include the raw number of deaths observed during the week of the survey, and subtracting the average number of deaths in that week during the previous year. Research has shown that excess mortality data is the most reliable information to estimate the gravity of the pandemic situation as it avoids miscounting deaths from the under-reporting of Covid-19-related deaths and other health conditions left untreated, despite not directly registering covid-related deaths (Aron et al., 2020)<sup>9</sup>.

To test whether excess death rate truly captures the actual threat felt by the population, we examined whether individuals perceived a greater threat when the regions they live in registered higher levels of excess mortality. First of all, the fact that Macron mentioned in his

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<sup>9</sup> Limited testing and post-mortem diagnosis about an unknown virus with emerging symptoms in March make the daily covid-related significantly more prone to error. For instance, if no reference is made in the death certificate to Covid-19 (such as when pneumonia is cited as the official cause of death although it was caused by the virus), then that death would not be included in the official Covid-19 death count.

speech that the Paris region and the Northeast region were the two most affected regions in March 2020 should have helped individuals locate the most high-risk areas. Secondly, we undertook two checks. We first show that people who live in regions with excess deaths were more pessimistic about the future of their municipality<sup>10</sup>. The dependent variable measure asked people's opinion about the future prospects for their municipality on March 16-17. Holding pessimistic views about the future of their municipality takes the value of 1, whereas optimistic views take the value of 0. The first model in Table 1 shows the results of a regression with excess death rate as main independent variable and socio-demographic controls (age, gender, education). We find that higher levels of excess mortality were linked to more negative perceptions about the future prospects for the individual's municipality.

Another way to examine whether people were aware of the actual risk in their regions involves testing whether people who live in highly affected areas were less likely to go to the polls for the municipal elections. The first round of the municipal elections was held on March 14, two days before Macron speech and the implementation of lockdown<sup>11</sup>. We collected data on voter abstention rates in the first round of the municipal elections for each département and regressed these against excess death rates and socio-demographic controls. The second model in Table 1 shows the results.

VARIABLES	(1) Concerns about Municipalities' Future	(2) Abstention
Excess Death Rate	0.698** [0.338]	3.636*** [0.498]
Age	0.004 [0.005]	-0.012 [0.007]
Female	0.005 [0.145]	0.240 [0.220]
Education	0.005 [0.082]	0.284** [0.116]
Constant	5.278*** [0.491]	54.705*** [0.702]
Observations	1,010	2,233
R-squared	0.005	0.027

Robust standard errors in brackets

\*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

Table 1. Actual and Perceived Threat

<sup>10</sup> We do not use the risk questions because they ask if people are ready to take risks (in general, health-related or political circumstances) but not if they are aware of the risk in their municipalities.

<sup>11</sup> The second round of elections, which were initially scheduled for March 22 were postponed to June 28.

The excess death rate has a strong and positive correlation with the abstention rate – that is, turnout was higher in regions with lower excess death rates. This suggests that individuals who lived in regions more severely affected by Covid-19 were more reluctant to vote, presumably because they were aware of the danger it entailed. Observing this effect before the Macron speech indicates that individuals who were surveyed before the speech were already aware of the actual risk in their region. We are therefore confident that these two tests show that excess death rate is a good proxy for measuring real and perceived risk to individuals’ well-being.

### **Control Variables**

We also included two variables that measure how respondents gauge the severity of the pandemic threat to France’s public health and the country’s economy, both of which are likely to affect their commitment to engage in less risky health and social behaviors. We also controlled for a set of variables that can affect people’s level of compliance and attitudes towards stringent policies: age, gender, level of education, risk perceptions<sup>12</sup>, personal health and support for extreme left. Our summary statistics are reported in Table 2 in the Appendix.

### **Results**

As a first step, we evaluate how right-wing populists responded to the pandemic with the help of logistic regressions of compliance with respondents clustered at the level of region, given the uneven incidence of the pandemic across different areas of France. The Northeast region of France and the Paris region reported the highest reported cases per capita during this period. We also estimated a series of models using regional fixed effects (see Table 3 in the Appendix).

### **Behavioral Compliance Among Right-Wing Populists**

Model 1 in Table 2 displays estimates of right-wing populist support on compliance behaviors regardless of risk. Results indicate that right-wing populists do not stand out – their reports of compliance were not measurably different from those of other respondents. Thus, right-wing populists were no less compliant than other citizens. This finding is in line with studies that show no evidence of partisan differences in Belgium (Dyevre and Yeung, 2020)

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<sup>12</sup> The variable ‘risk perceptions’ is an average of general risk, health-related risk, and risk affecting political choices. The three variables are correlated (average of .47), so we generate one common variable that captures general risk.

and Canada (Merkley et al, 2020), though the U.S. has been a prominent exception to this pattern (Allcott et al, 2020).

This finding also suggests that the behavioral response of right-wing populists to the pandemic potentially goes in two directions. They can either comply with lockdown measures, given their appeals to law and stringent policies, or disregard them because of their anti-elitist sentiment and skepticism towards science. These two behavioral tendencies may well cancel each other out, producing a null effect. Interestingly, the excess death rate is strongly negatively correlated with levels of compliance, suggesting that compliance rates were lower in regions with excess death rates. This makes intuitive sense, as we would assume mortality rates to be higher in less compliant regions.

Model 2 shows that the interaction effect between right-wing populism and excess death rate is strongly significant and positive. This indicates that right-wing populists in fact were more likely to comply with health and policy measures when there was an actual risk to their well-being. Figure 1, which graphs the substantive size of these effects, shows no behavioral difference between right-wing populists and others when there is no or little mortality rate in their region. However, as soon as actual risk is positive – that is, when there is excess mortality – levels of compliance increase for right-wing populists but decrease for other individuals.

When we calculate the estimated substantive impact of the groups of individuals on compliance, we find that right-wing populist support moved the odds of compliance by two percentage points for every 10% increase in the excess death rate. These behavioral effects are substantively meaningful since excess mortality rates were as high as 60% at the peak of the crisis (on April 5)<sup>13</sup> (Aron et al., 2020). In another model (see Table 4 in the Appendix), we examined whether these effects persist a week later using data collected on the same individuals on March 24-25. We find that the behavioral differences between right-wing populists and other partisans dissipated in the following week, indicating that virtually everyone complied by the time the full lockdown was in force.

Table 2 also shows the socio-demographics and attitudes associated with adherence to public health guidelines. Being a woman, risk averse, and perceiving the public health threat to be severe strongly predict higher levels of compliance with health and policy guidance (see also Brouard et al., 2020). Age, level of education, personal health, the perception of the effect of

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<sup>13</sup> Some countries were more affected than others at the beginning of the pandemic. Excess mortality went up to 150% in Spain on April 5 and 115% in England and Wales on April 19 but only to 20% in Germany on August 6.

the crisis on the economy, and extreme left self-placement show no effect, in line with previous studies (Brouard et al., 2020).

VARIABLES	(1)	(2)
	Compliance Levels	
Right-Wing Populists	0.258 [0.244]	0.075 [0.268]
Excess Death Rate	-0.862*** [0.235]	-1.458*** [0.417]
Right-Wing Populists x Excess Death Rate		2.560** [1.106]
Female	0.765*** [0.220]	0.781*** [0.223]
Age	0.008 [0.006]	0.007 [0.006]
Education	-0.098 [0.108]	-0.094 [0.109]
Personal Health	-0.220 [0.147]	-0.222 [0.143]
General Risk	-0.099*** [0.034]	-0.103*** [0.035]
Public Health Threat	0.618*** [0.146]	0.599*** [0.156]
Economic Threat	0.007 [0.162]	-0.002 [0.167]
Extreme Left Support	-0.072 [0.164]	-0.084 [0.167]
Constant	-3.159*** [1.191]	-2.933** [1.211]
Observations	659	659
Region Clusters	Yes	Yes

Robust standard errors in brackets  
 \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

*Table 2: Logistic regression with respondents clustered at region of residence*

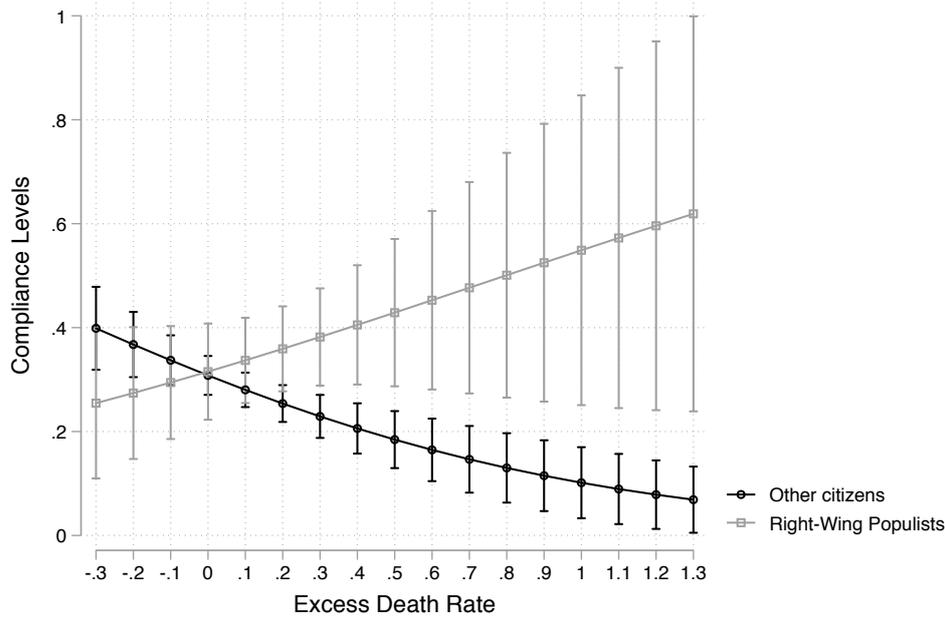


Figure 1: Compliant Behavior Of Right-Wing Populists and Other Individuals Conditional on Risk

### The Impact of the Macron Speech

We expected these effects to vary as a function of exposure to Macron speech on March 16 and the presence of a formal lockdown from March 17. To examine the impact of the Macron speech on reports of compliance we rely on survey responses collected before and after the speech. To use experimental language, the March 16 speech by Macron is the ‘treatment’ of our respondents, as one half of the March 16-17 survey wave was coincidentally interviewed before and the other after the speech, producing a ‘between-participants’ factor reflecting the “Macron intervention” (pre/post).<sup>14</sup> Balance statistics show no difference in means between the pre-speech/post-speech groups in terms of socio-demographics (age, gender, education, risk perceptions, personal health, public health treat, economic threat and extreme left). This means that these two groups are comparable, as shown in Table 2 of the Appendix.

The signal sent by President Macron’s speech in terms of timing (8pm on a Saturday evening), staging (a speech to the French nation from the Élysée Palace), and content could hardly have been clearer. Of course, because this is an observational study, there are several potential challenges to internal validity. For example, the analysis follows the “intention to treat” principle since Macron’s speech wasn’t watched by everyone. Moreover, given that the

<sup>14</sup> The within-respondent analysis is restricted to individuals who answered both waves so that the N is the same for each wave.

share of population who watched the speech is self-selected, assignment is not fully random, and it is plausible that respondents surveyed before President Macron's speech or before the government began to enforce restrictions anticipated a lockdown. In fact, they likely did, given that people had been aware of the threat from the virus for a number of weeks. However, if anything, this should produce high levels of reported compliance by the time of Macron's speech and therefore should make it more, rather than less, difficult to identify an effect for the treatment.

Table 3 displays the levels of voluntary compliance of right-wing populists before and after the speech. Once again, we do not see any difference between right-wing populists and other individuals before and after the speech. Macron speech did not affect the behavior of right-wing populist supporters on its own. It is only when these individuals are faced with an actual threat that they become more likely to comply after the speech. Thus, the combination of a war-like speech announcing the implementation of coercive measures and the presence of real risk is what pushes right-wing populists to report higher levels of compliance. We suspect that the speech activates the authoritarian personality, but only if they live in high-risk areas. The speech might have acted as a signal to alert right-wing populists to the gravity of the situation. Since they tend to be more responsive to threats, they might have become more self-conscious of the danger of the virus when they live in affected areas and reported higher levels of compliance as a result. This finding corroborates our hypothesis that the speech appeals to authoritarian right-wing populists, but this effect is conditional on whether these individuals live under actual threat.

Figure 2 confirms this pattern and shows that it is substantively meaningful. The odds of compliance among right-wing populists increase by two percentage points for every 10% increase in the excess death rate. The speech and the national lockdown therefore convinced these individuals to comply with strict restrictions when they are in a situation of danger in their region. This highlights a potentially positive aspect of right-wing populism. People who would normally contest official guidelines from the (non-populist) government actually follow lockdown measures to slow down rates of the transmission of the virus, and especially so if the health threat is real. Right-wing populists rationalize their actions and respond more quickly to collective threat than other citizens in times of existential threat.

VARIABLES	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Compliance Levels			
	Pre-Speech	Pre-Speech	Post-Speech	Post-Speech
Right-Wing Populists	0.350 [0.525]	0.265 [0.566]	0.302 [0.284]	0.053 [0.337]
Excess Death Rate	-0.464 [0.555]	-0.646 [0.576]	-1.170* [0.629]	-2.208*** [0.754]
Right-Wing Populists x Excess Death Rate		1.379 [1.657]		3.187** [1.375]
Female	1.033*** [0.375]	1.025*** [0.378]	0.595*** [0.220]	0.651*** [0.226]
Age	0.003 [0.007]	0.003 [0.008]	0.012 [0.010]	0.011 [0.009]
Education	-0.021 [0.186]	-0.019 [0.187]	-0.140 [0.122]	-0.136 [0.126]
Personal Health	-0.263 [0.213]	-0.260 [0.214]	-0.228 [0.162]	-0.237 [0.160]
General Risk	-0.144** [0.073]	-0.148** [0.073]	-0.068 [0.069]	-0.072 [0.070]
Public Health Threat	0.829*** [0.225]	0.815*** [0.228]	0.543*** [0.170]	0.528*** [0.179]
Economic Threat	-0.151 [0.253]	-0.150 [0.253]	0.033 [0.182]	0.005 [0.192]
Extreme Left Support	-0.279 [0.243]	-0.291 [0.241]	0.137 [0.310]	0.127 [0.305]
Constant	-3.428** [1.449]	-3.324** [1.438]	-2.856* [1.491]	-2.481 [1.556]
Observations	338	338	321	321
Region Clusters	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Robust standard errors in brackets

\*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

*Table 3: Logistic regression with respondents clustered at region of residence*

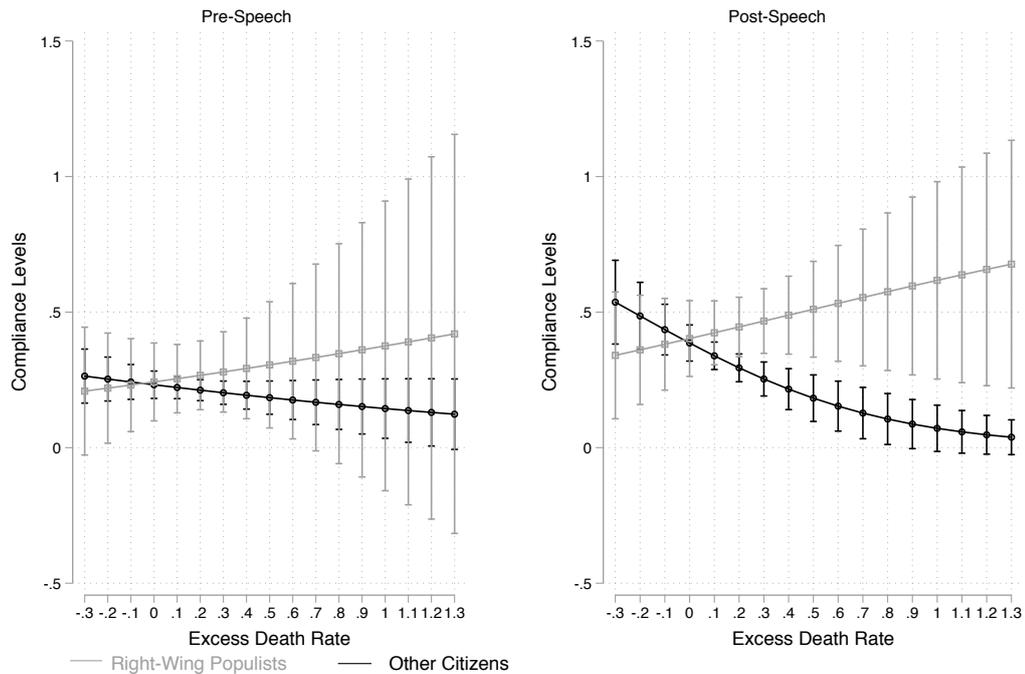


Figure 2: Compliant Behavior for Right-Wing Populists and other citizens according to Actual Risk, Pre/Post Speech

### Potential Mechanisms: The Role of Authoritarian Attitudes

We are interested in identifying the factors that push right-wing populists to adopt compliant behaviors when there is a threat to their well-being. While extant research in France and elsewhere has shown a link between authoritarian attitudes and right-wing populist support, our survey unfortunately does not include specific questions typically used to construct right-wing authoritarian scales. As a result, we have to rely on proxy measures to investigate whether authoritarian and related attitudes connect right-wing populist affinities and higher compliance rates. We begin with a question that asks whether respondents thought lockdown measures were insufficient or exaggerated.<sup>15</sup> If an authoritarian mindset is at work, we expect right-wing populists to view the lockdown measures as insufficient and as less sufficient than other respondents.

Table 4 displays the percentage of support for measures to protect health before and after the Macron speech. Before the speech, 63.89% of right-wing populists reported that they

<sup>15</sup> This measure is related to two of the three psychological tendencies of the right-wing authoritarianism from Altemeyer's (1988) seminal work. They include attitudes favoring conformity to established group norms and values (conventionalism) and submission to legitimate authorities. The third dimension is aggression towards minority groups whom authorities identified as targets for sanctioned political violence (for more information, see Altemeyer, 1981 and 1988).

found the measures to protect public health insufficient; in contrast, 42.86% of the remaining sample thought so. While the percentage of respondents viewing the measures as insufficient decreased somewhat after the speech across both groups, it remained significantly higher among right-wing populist supporters (53.03% v. 27.84%). This suggests that right-wing populists were strongly in favor of more coercive policies, given that more than half of them thought the current restrictions were not strict enough *even after the implementation of the lockdown*. These patterns indicate right-wing populists' views on government regulations were consistent with a more authoritarian mindset.

Interestingly, the speech did not make right-wing populists more trusting of political authorities (see Table 5). Levels of trust towards the President were, in general and unsurprisingly, very low compared to other individuals (around 16.67% for right-wing populists and 54.37% for the rest of the population) and did not move after the speech (they remained at 16.67%). This was true of their levels of trust in government in general, remaining at a very low level throughout (15.28% before and 13.64% after the speech). Only their trust in scientists increased from before to after the Macron speech (76.39% to 83.33%).

These patterns stand in stark contrast to the general population whose trust in the President and government increased significantly as a result of the speech. We find similar results for levels of satisfaction with the way the government handles the crisis (see Table 6). The levels are very low for right-wing populists as opposed to other individuals. Right-wing populists only slightly increase their levels of satisfaction by 2.65 percentage points, going from 29.17% to 31.82%, as opposed to a 5.37% increase for other respondents. So, regardless of their position towards the authorities, right-wing populists abided by the coercive policies enforced by the authorities because of their attachment to such measures.

<b>Protect Health</b>	<b>Right-Wing Populists</b>		<b>Others</b>	
	<b>Pre-Speech</b>	<b>Post-Speech</b>	<b>Pre-Speech</b>	<b>Post-Speech</b>
Measures were exaggerated	11.11	13.64	7.52	7.45
Neither	22.22	31.82	47.37	61.18
Measures were insufficient	63.89	53.03	42.86	27.84
Don't Know	2.78	1.52	2.26	3.53

*Table 4: Position Towards Lockdown Measures*

<b>Levels of Trust (%)</b>	<b>Right-Wing Populists</b>		<b>Others</b>	
	<b>Pre-Speech</b>	<b>Post-Speech</b>	<b>Pre-Speech</b>	<b>Post-Speech</b>
President	16.67	16.67	51.50	57.25
Government	15.28	13.64	47.37	55.29
Scientists	76.39	83.33	92.11	93.73

*Table 5: Levels of Political Trust*

	<b>Right-Wing Populists</b>		<b>Others</b>	
	<b>Pre-Speech</b>	<b>Post-Speech</b>	<b>Pre-Speech</b>	<b>Post-Speech</b>
Satisfied with government handling of the crisis	29.17	31.82	60.90	66.27

*Table 6: Satisfaction with the Government*

## **Conclusion**

On Monday, March 16, as the COVID-19 pandemic was raging, President Emmanuel Macron spoke to the French nation.<sup>16</sup> Using language usually reserved for times of war, he called on his compatriots to sacrifice their liberties and mobilize in the fight against an “invisible enemy” in order to protect the nation. He announced that France, one of the oldest democracies in the world and a founding member of the European Union, would confine citizens to their homes, suspend the second round of municipal elections originally scheduled for the following week, enact emergency measures to give the government extraordinary powers to enforce the lockdown, and close all borders to EU neighbors for a month.

How did citizens with right-wing populist tendencies react to this announcement? We suspect that the policies of the French state, announced by its most powerful and visible proponent, presented them with a dilemma. On one hand, their anti-elite, anti-establishment world views should make them more likely to dismiss the message and the messenger, producing lower levels of compliance with state regulations. On the other hand, their

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<sup>16</sup> President Macron’s March 16 speech was seen by an estimated 35 million viewers, the largest TV audience in French history. <http://www.leparisien.fr/culture-loisirs/coronavirus-35-millions-de-francais-devant-l-allocation-de-macron-un-record-d-audience-absolu-17-03-2020-8281773.php>

authoritarian mindset should make them amenable to coercive and restrictive measures taken in the face of the most severe threat to the nation since World War II.

To examine the reactions of right-wing populist supporters, we investigated their attitudes and reported behaviors with the help of surveys collected before and after the President's speech. We found that right-wing populists responded favorably to this very visible and powerful elite cue. Using a quasi-experimental study, we find that right-wing populists became more likely to report compliance with restrictive, and some might say coercive, public health measures following their announcement by a figure of ultimate authority in the country and when they were faced with an actual threat to their well-being. We suggest that authoritarian personality traits more common among right-wing populist supporters may explain this behavioral responsiveness. Not only were they more receptive to the authoritarian subtext of Macron's speech on March 16, 2020, but they were also more sensitive to objective societal threats than individuals with lower levels of authoritarian attitudes. Yet, without the elite cue and in the absence of higher levels of risk, right-wing populists report compliance in line with other citizens.

Given the radical and novel nature of many of the restrictions enacted by democratic governments, the potential for upheaval in democratic societies is significant. To understand the motivations of those most likely to oppose governments during times of crisis, we examined the attitudes of some of the most visible and perhaps most perennial malcontents: supporters of right-wing populist parties. While studies have examined the behavioral response of individuals during the Covid-19 pandemic from various political affiliations, they have most prominently done so with the help of aggregate-level analyses or have focused on co-partisans of incumbent officeholders. Thus, Barbieri and Bonini (2020), for example, found that higher vote shares for Italy's most prominent extreme right-wing party were associated with lower adherence to lockdown measures across Italian regions. Similarly, Allcott et al. (2020) used geolocation data from a large sample of smartphones and google mobility data in the United States to show that Republicans engaged in less social distancing than Democrats. Similarly, survey based studies in the U.S. have shown Republicans to be less compliant with lockdown measures, while studies from European countries and Canada generally have found few to no partisan differences.

This paper is the first study to make use of individual-level panel data to evaluate the behavior of right-wing populists during the first wave of the pandemic. This group of citizens is especially interesting, given their countervailing inclinations to comply or defy government instructions. As importantly, we sought to examine how they responded to a prominent elite cue in times of crisis in order to contribute to what we know about the effectiveness of political

cues in influencing public opinion. While studies have shown that elites play a central role in shaping citizens' evaluations of policy preferences, this effect can be mediated by the content of the political information (Boudreau and MacKenzie, 2014; Colombo and Kriesi, 2017) or citizens' political predispositions (Slothuus, 2010). By showing that right-wing populists adapt their behavior following the elite's recommendations, this quasi-experimental study stresses the power of elite cues on influencing citizens' behavior, even among those who are in habitual political opposition to them.

This paper also examines an underdeveloped factor in the right-wing populist party support literature - right-wing authoritarianism. Although a number of studies of right-wing populist party support have investigated the psychological foundations of these political preferences (Aicholzer and Zandonella, 2016; Vasilopoulos and Lachat, 2018; Vasilopoulos and Lachat, 2020), most researchers have focused on attitudinal correlates such as anti-elitist, anti-immigration, or Eurosceptic stances (Billiet and De Witte, 1995; Stockemer et al, 2018). While not directly measuring right-wing authoritarianism, we are able to show that a speech that invokes authority in unambiguous terms can affect the willingness to comply with government directives among right-wing populist supporters. In doing so, this research complements previous work on deep-rooted psychological motivations of right-wing populists. It also specifically looks at how authoritarian right-wing populists respond to this elite cue when they are faced with real threat. Our findings about the importance of an actual threat in activating compliance among right-wing populists provides new evidence for the idea that authoritarians are particularly responsive to perceived societal threats (Duckitt and Sibley, 2009) or that people endorse authoritarian attitudes when they are exposed to threat (Altemeyer, 1988; Duckitt and Fisher, 2003; Stenner, 2005)..

While our case study is focused on right-wing populist supporters in France, our findings speak to the politics and political behavior in other liberal democracies. After all, the pandemic has affected all countries and most leaders delivered similar nationalistic discourse when they announced lockdown measures. A similar behavioral response from right-wing populists can therefore be expected in other liberal democracies, though future studies should investigate the extent to which this is the case.

Our findings also have implications for elite communication regarding crisis mitigation. Studies have shown that, in times of crisis, individuals rely on information provided by politically likeminded public officials to evaluate policies (Alatas et al, 2019, Boudreau and MacKenzie, 2014, Dewan and Myatt, 2008). This may be problematic in environments like the United States that are politically polarized, where the conflicting views of Republican and

Democratic elites have led to a fractured national response of the pandemic in 2020 because citizens were responsive only to the message of co-partisans (Green et al, 2020). We show that the cues sent by political elites can affect the behavior of citizens who do not traditionally support the elite or the incumbent. In fact, the French case shows that a unified message can help counter partisan response and even change the behavior of non-followers. Elite consensus thus presents a remedy to political divisions that slow down the mitigation and response of crises.

Finally, this study has important implications for the understanding of right-wing populism in times of crisis. Contrary to expectations, those who hold authoritarian attitudes are not necessarily inclined to defy guidelines. This finding speaks to a nascent body of research that has looked at the role of (right-wing) populism on compliant behavior and the effects of the crisis on populist attitudes (Woods et al., 2020). While some scholars suggest that the anti-elite and anti-science sentiments of right-wing populists may have contributed to higher COVID-19 infection and mortality rates (Woods et al., 2020), we draw a more positive conclusion. People who would normally contest official guidelines from the government are willing to adopt lockdown measures to slow down rates of transmission of the virus, especially if the health threat is significant. This poses an obstacle to the mobilization of populist grievances against traditional institutions. Thus, in times of extreme (health) crisis, right-wing populists are responsive to mainstream elite discourses and cooperate in the attempt to protect themselves and others.

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## Appendix

<b>Compliance Behaviors</b>	<p>“Because of the coronavirus epidemic, in your daily behavior, would you say that ...?”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- You wash your hands more often and / or longer</li><li>- You cough or sneeze into your elbow or a handkerchief</li><li>- You stopped greeting by shaking hands or kissing</li><li>- You keep a distance of one meter from other people outside your home</li><li>- You have reduced your trips</li><li>- You avoid crowded places (public transport, restaurants, sports training ...)</li><li>- You have stopped meeting your friends</li></ul> <p>Respondents were asked to indicate agreement or disagreement on a 0 to 10 scale, with “0” meaning “no, not at all” and “10” meaning “yes, absolutely”.</p>
<b>Right-wing Populists</b>	<p>Based on a question that asks respondents “Which party do you feel the closest to”</p> <p>Responses were recoded so that 1 indicates support for a right-wing populist party (the National Rally or France Arise). Others: 0</p>
<b>Excess Death Rate</b>	<p>Difference (in %) between the number of deaths on March 16-17, 2020 and the number of deaths on March 16-17, 2019 for each département</p> <p>Data taken from the French National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies</p>
<b>Female</b>	Female (1), Male (0)
<b>Age</b>	Actual age (in years)
<b>Education</b>	<p>Based on highest level of formal education completed, ranging from low to high.</p> <p>Aucun diplôme, CEP (1)</p> <p>BEPC, CAP, BEP (2)</p> <p>BAC (3)</p> <p>Diplôme Supérieur (4)</p>
<b>Personal Health</b>	<p>Based on survey question that asked: “Generally speaking, you would say that your health is ...”</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Very good</li><li>2. Good</li><li>3. Fairly good</li><li>4. Bad</li><li>5. Very bad</li></ol> <p>This variable was reverse-coded, with 5 indicating “very good”.</p>

<b>General Risk</b>	<p>Based on survey question that asked:</p> <p>“Is it easy or difficult for you to accept or take general risks”?</p> <p>“Is it easy or difficult for you to accept or take risks that ... affect your health”?</p> <p>“Is it easy or difficult for you to accept or take risks on political choices/issues”?</p> <p>Respondents could indicate on a scale from 0 to 10, 0 indicating “very difficult” and 10 “very easy”.</p>
<b>Public Health Threat</b>	<p>Based on a question asking respondents: “Would you say that the consequences of the coronavirus epidemic on health in France today are ...?”</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Very serious</li> <li>2. Rather serious</li> <li>3. Moderately severe</li> <li>4. Not very serious</li> <li>5. Not at all serious</li> </ol> <p>This variable was reverse-coded, with 5 indicating “very serious”.</p>
<b>Economic Threat</b>	<p>Based on a question asking respondents: “Would you say that the consequences of the coronavirus epidemic on the economy in France today are ...?”</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Very serious</li> <li>2. Rather serious</li> <li>3. Moderately severe</li> <li>4. Not very serious</li> <li>5. Not at all serious</li> </ol> <p>This variable was reverse-coded, with 5 indicating “very serious”.</p>
<b>Extreme Left</b>	<p>Based on a question asking respondents: “On a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 corresponds to the left and 10 corresponds to the right, where would you say you are?”</p> <p>Respondents were recoded so that 0-1 were coded as extreme left.</p>

*Table 1. Variables and Coding for Individual-Level Survey and Contextual Data*

Variable	Pre-Speech			Post-Speech			
	Obs	Mean	SD	Obs	Mean	SD	Diff
Right-Wing Populists	338	.213	.022	321	.206	.023	.007
Excess Death Rate	488	.075	.010	522	.071	.010	.004
Female	488	1.523	.023	522	1.563	.022	-.041
Age	488	55.057	0.335	522	53.98	.667	1.077
Education	488	3.176	.042	522	3.141	.041	.034
Personal Health	487	2.337	.038	522	2.343	.038	-.006
General Risk	488	4.807	.079	522	4.688	.074	.120
Extreme Left Support	488	.232	.019	522	.191	.018	.041
Public Health Threat	488	4.328	.036	522	4.308	.034	.019
Economic Threat	488	4.481	.035	522	4.584	4.584	-.102*
Compliance Levels	488	.342	.429	522	.402	.490	

*Table 2: Summary Statistics for Balanced Sample*

VARIABLES	(1)	(2)
	Compliance Levels	
Right-Wing Populists	0.258 [0.232]	0.075 [0.248]
Excess Death Rate	-0.862* [0.473]	-1.457** [0.570]
Right-Wing Populists x Excess Death Rate		2.560** [1.125]
Female	0.765*** [0.184]	0.781*** [0.185]
Age	0.008 [0.008]	0.007 [0.008]
Education	-0.098 [0.099]	-0.094 [0.100]
Personal Health	-0.220* [0.113]	-0.222* [0.113]
General Risk	-0.099* [0.053]	-0.103* [0.053]
Public Health Threat	0.618*** [0.145]	0.599*** [0.145]
Economic Threat	0.007 [0.149]	-0.002 [0.149]
Extreme Left Support	-0.072 [0.214]	-0.084 [0.215]
Constant	-3.159*** [1.064]	-2.933*** [1.070]
Observations	659	659
Region Fixed Effects	Yes	Yes
Number of Regions	21	21

Standard errors in brackets

\*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

*Table 3: With Fixed Effects*

VARIABLES	(1)	(2)
	Compliance Levels (March 24-25)	
Right-Wing Populists	0.179 [0.247]	0.217 [0.277]
Excess Death Rate	-0.118 [0.782]	-0.028 [0.769]
Right-Wing Populists x Excess Death Rate		-0.519 [0.635]
Female	0.582*** [0.210]	0.577*** [0.213]
Age	0.006 [0.009]	0.006 [0.009]
Education	0.088 [0.083]	0.086 [0.083]
Personal Health	-0.154 [0.131]	-0.154 [0.130]
General Risk	-0.053 [0.054]	-0.052 [0.054]
Public Health Threat	0.448*** [0.111]	0.453*** [0.114]
Economic Threat	-0.049 [0.159]	-0.046 [0.159]
Extreme Left Support	-0.219 [0.227]	-0.217 [0.227]
Constant	-0.049 [1.464]	-0.111 [1.483]
Observations	538	538

Robust standard errors in brackets

\*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

*Table 4: Compliance Levels in March 24-25*