



# Why Do Populist Republicans Oppose Supporting Ukraine?

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感谢我的父母对我无条件的支持和鼓励。同时，也感谢我的爷爷、奶奶、外公、外婆以及姑妈、姑丈和表姐对我的关爱和牵挂。

致我的妹妹梁诗晴：勇敢地追求你的梦，哥哥会全力支持你的每一个奇思妙想。

# Why Do Populist Republicans Oppose Supporting Ukraine?

## **ABSTRACT**

Why have populist Republicans ceased supporting Ukraine in its conflict against Russia? As the second anniversary of Russia's invasion of Ukraine approaches, a decline in willingness to continue supporting Ukraine among Western countries has been widely observed. Populism is often cited as a contributing factor to this growing reluctance, but the specific reasons behind populism's opposition to supporting Ukraine remain largely unexplored. Previous research on populism and its impact on international relations has primarily focused on Europe and Latin America, with such trends in the US receiving less exploration. Using voting records from the House, I employ regression analysis to address the theoretical gap in understanding this widely observed phenomenon. My analysis confirms a prevalent disinclination among populist Republicans to fund Ukraine. My research proposes and tests four potential factors. Firstly, I argue that the populist right in the US consistently opposes foreign aid more than their mainstream counterparts, regardless of the type of assistance or the recipient countries. Secondly, I examine whether the pro-Putin sentiments, associated with the populist right as identified in previous research in Europe, contribute to the particular dislike of funding Ukraine among populist Republicans. Thirdly, I explore the possibility that populist Republicans raise opposition merely for the sake of opposition, as a political signaling strategy. Lastly, I investigate the opportunistic tendencies of populists, wherein they are more inclined to support the stronger and winning party.

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1. Russian Invasion of Ukraine

Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24, 2022, marking the outbreak of the biggest war in Europe since World War II (D’Anieri, 2023). This outbreak was foreseeable, as media outlets like The Washington Post had warned of a possible massive armed offense since December 2021 (Harris and Sonne, 2021). Nonetheless, despite the well-foreshadowed intentions of Russia to invade Ukraine months before the actual military operation, it surprised many analysts who remained skeptical of any prospects for another major war on the European continent.

In his television broadcast to Russia, announcing his authorization and justifying what he called a “special military operation,” Putin stated,

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This array [of examples of the US’s disregard for international law] includes promises not to expand NATO eastwards even by an inch. To reiterate: they have deceived us, or, to put it simply, they have played us. Sure, one often hears that politics is a dirty business. It could be, but it shouldn’t be as dirty as it is now, not to such an extent.

.....

The purpose of this operation is to protect people who, for eight years now, have been facing humiliation and genocide perpetrated by the Kiev regime. To this end, we will seek to demilitarise and denazify Ukraine, as well as bring to trial those who perpetrated numerous bloody crimes against civilians, including against citizens of the Russian Federation.

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invoking the continuous eastward expansion of NATO into Ukraine, a former part of the Soviet Union, as well as the protection of the Russian-speaking *people* in Ukraine, whom he claimed had suffered from humiliation and genocide perpetrated by the Ukrainian government, as reasons for the military operation (Putin, 2022). In Putin’s reasoning of the war, he appeared averse to NATO’s expansion into the former Soviet Union’s scope and invoked this expansion as one of the main reasons for the invasion. However, such a claim is apparently not self-justified, since three former republics in the Soviet Union

– the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania – all have attained NATO membership back in 2004. Contrary to contemporary Ukraine, which has not yet become a NATO member state, these three countries were not invaded by Russia back then, nor are they likely to be attacked in the near future.

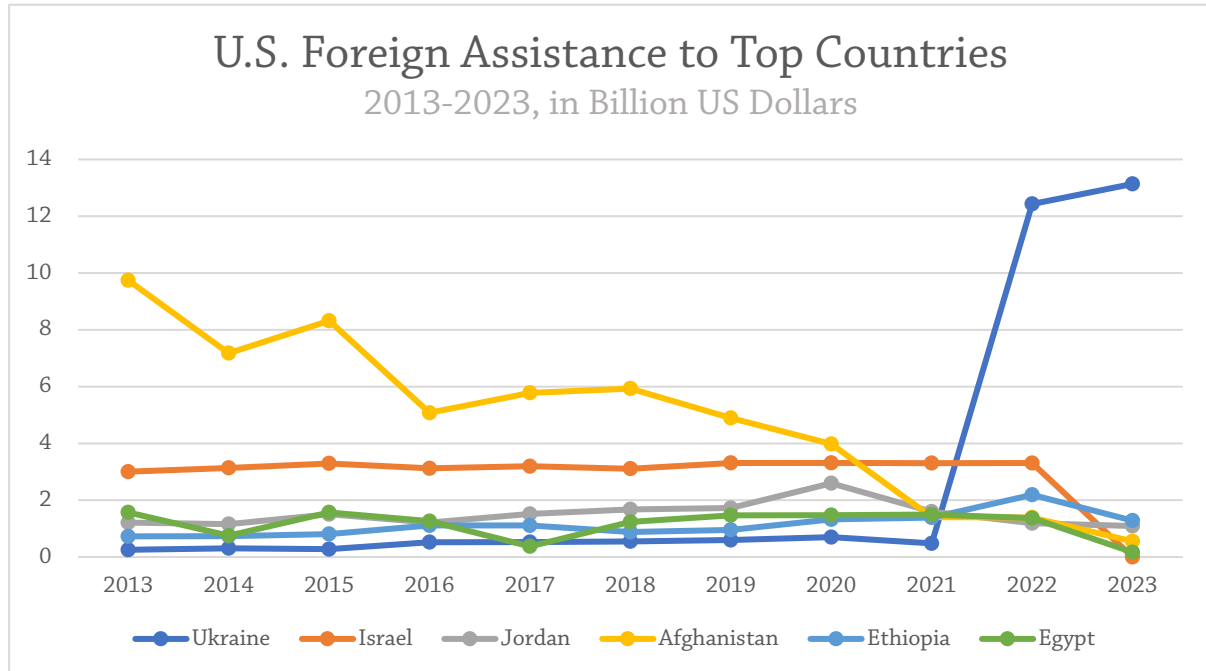
According to D’Anieri’s analysis, while the NATO expansion does constitute part of Putin’s current concerns, the very reason for his intolerance of Ukraine’s perceived “collusion” with Western power comes from his extreme interpretation of history (D’Anieri, 2023). In Putin’s eyes, “Russians and Ukrainians were one people – a single whole.” Therefore, there is no such thing as a Ukrainian race, only a Slavic monolithic race – Russians, as well as Ukrainians and Belarusians, should exist in unity, not against each other (Putin, 2021). Consequently, this war, from the very beginning, exhibits signs of nationalism and racism. Additionally, the war’s underlying claim, that Russians and Ukrainians, both being parts of the Slavic ethnicity, thus ought to work in unity, echoed one of the key philosophies of populism, as I will discuss in the literature review section.

## **1.2. U.S. Foreign Assistance Program**

### **1.2.1. Overview**

The U.S. foreign assistance program encompasses both economic and military aid. Economic assistance is given for developmental or humanitarian purposes, whereas military assistance primarily benefits the armed forces of the recipient country or substantially enhances its military capabilities (USAID, 2021). During peacetime, economic assistance typically exceeds military aid. However, military assistance significantly increases in times of regional instability and armed conflicts. According to the Congressional Research Service, even during peaceful periods, the primary objectives of U.S. foreign assistance focused on peace and security, followed by humanitarian assistance, investing in people, and then economic growth, justice, and democracy, as was exemplified by the spending in 2019 (Congressional Research Service, 2022). As reported by U.S. News, in 2021, the top five beneficiaries of U.S. foreign aid were Israel, Jordan, Afghanistan, Ethiopia, and Egypt (Haines, 2023). Israel has consistently been among the top three recipients. Conversely, Ukraine has often been outside the top ten, including in 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea during the Russo-Ukrainian War. [Figure 1](#) illustrates the trends in U.S. foreign aid over the past ten years for the top five recipients in 2021 and Ukraine, to provide context for the allocation of U.S. foreign aid (USAID, 2023).

The U.S. has steadily and significantly increased its foreign aid spending since 2001. The foreign assistance obligation in 2022 reached a historical high, marking the greatest amount since 1950 when adjusted for inflation to 2021 U.S. dollars (Congressional Research Service, 2022).



**Figure 1.** Annual U.S. foreign assistance spending to Ukraine, Israel, Jordan, Afghanistan, Ethiopia, and Egypt between 2013 and 2023, in billion US Dollars. (Source: U.S. Agency for International Development, [www.foreignassistance.gov](http://www.foreignassistance.gov))

### 1.2.2. U.S. Aid to Ukraine and Opposition

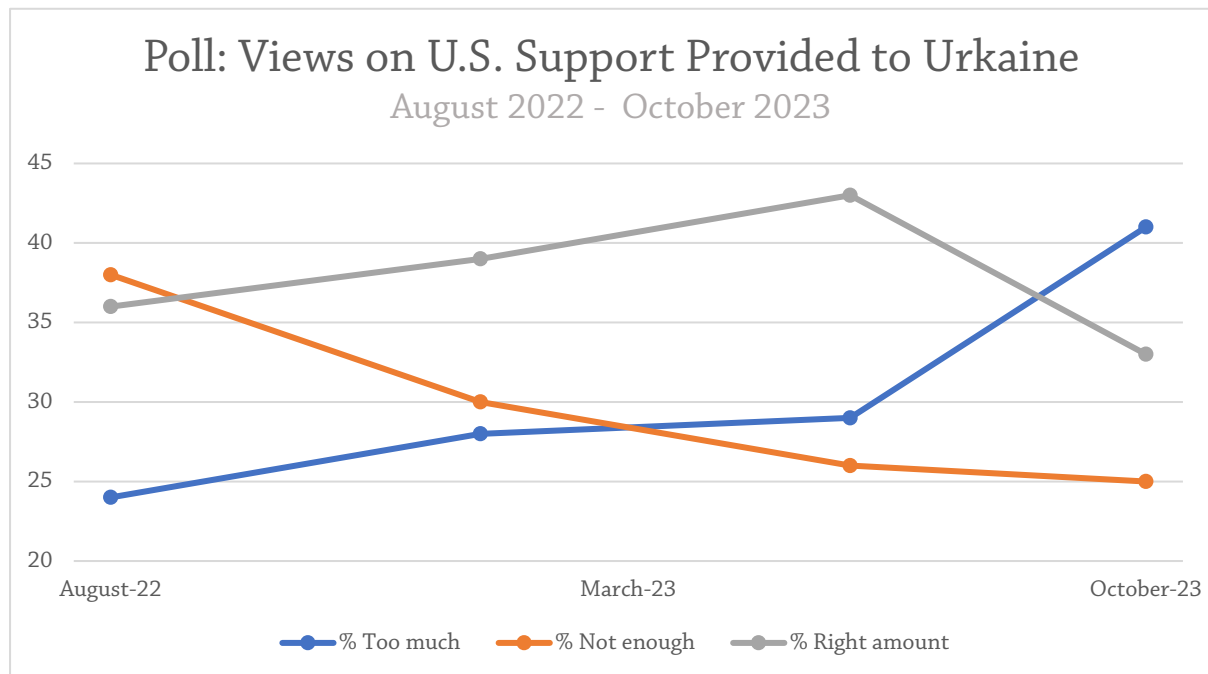
Following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2021, the Western world, predominantly the US and its allies, promptly responded with a series of sanctions against the aggressor (The White House, 2022). The Western nations, while unified, decisive, and swift in imposing sanctions on Russia, showed hesitation in providing economic and military aid to Ukraine. Military aid was particularly unwelcome. According to D’Anieri, although Ukraine received a considerable amount of munitions from several countries over time, these provisions were “almost always less than it requested, both qualitatively and quantitatively, and later than it wanted” (D’Anieri, 2023).

In the early stage of the war, President Zelensky successfully mustered support from the Western public by virtually engaging with leaders and legislative bodies in the Western world before the war turned into a deadlock a year later (D’Anieri, 2023). In the US, bipartisan consensus emerged in support of military aid to Ukraine. A year later in early March 2022, *H.R. 2471*, a security program offering



military support and aid to Ukraine, was passed in the House with a 361-69 vote. Of the members who voted, 206 Democrats out of 221 and 155 Republicans out of 209 voted in favor, indicating a strong bipartisan agreement (U.S. House of Representatives, 2022).

However, as the war extended into its second year and U.S. expenditure on foreign assistance reached historical highs, despite a lackluster domestic economy, reluctance in both the public and Congress grew over time. Public willingness to support Ukraine significantly diminished between June and October 2023. As indicated in [Figure 2](#), the percentage of participants believing the U.S. is doing too much for Ukraine increased from 29% to 41% in just four months, as per a GALLUP poll (Younis, 2023).



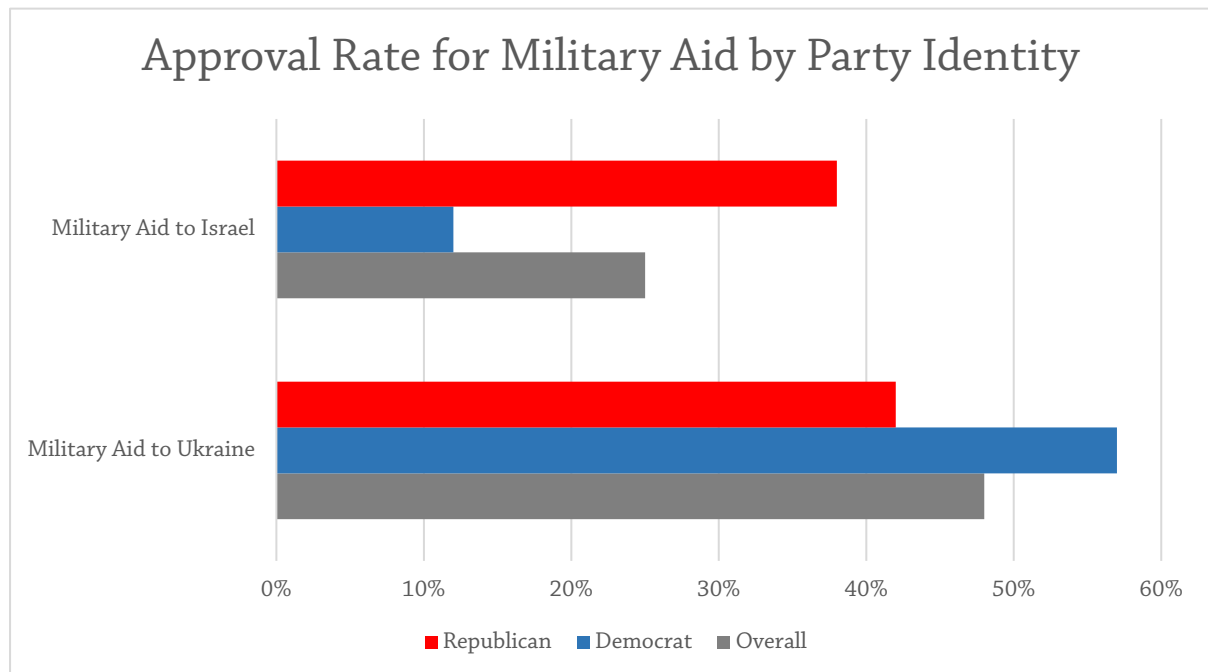
**Figure 2.** Americans’ views on U.S. support provided to Ukraine. Is the U.S. doing too much to help Ukraine, not enough or the right amount? August 2022 to October 2023. (Source: GALLUP, [www.gallup.com](http://www.gallup.com))

The shift in the House GOP’s stance on Ukraine aid bills reflects the change in public sentiment. On July 13, 2023, six amendments aimed at halting further funding to Ukraine were voted on in Congress. Although none of these amendments passed, as many as 129 House Republicans supported them. *The Ukraine Security Assistance and Oversight Supplemental Appropriations Act, 2024*, was passed by Congress on September 28, 2023. This vote, labeled as a “crucial tipping point” by The Guardian, saw 117 House Republicans opposing the additional funding for Ukraine (Greve, 2023).

Among the House representatives, populist Republicans have been particularly vocal against Ukraine aid. On September 28, 2023, the House Freedom Caucus, known for its populist and nationalist views, urged former House Speaker McCarthy to oppose the *Schumer-McConnell Continuing Resolution*, which included \$6.15 billion in funds for Ukraine (Brooks, 2023). As animosity towards former Speaker McCarthy intensified, on October 4, 2023, several hardline populist right representatives orchestrated the ousting of Republican Kevin McCarthy as US House Speaker, exposing a rift within the GOP over attitudes towards funding Ukraine (Krause-Jackson, 2023).

### 1.2.3. GOP’s Attitude Towards Israel: A Comparison

In contrast to the common impression that the Republicans, as the conservative right, are naturally more averse to foreign aid—a perspective validated by various empirical studies, as will be discussed in the literature review—the GOP is remarkably supportive of funding Israel. Israel remains one of the top recipients of US foreign assistance, yet encounters minimal opposition among Republicans. According to recent polls, Democrats are 15% more inclined to support providing weapons to Ukraine than Republicans; conversely, 26% more Republicans view the U.S.’s military aid to Israel as insufficient, compared to Democrats, as depicted in [Figure 3](#) (AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, 2023; Saad, 2023).



**Figure 3.** U.S. adult approval rate for military aid to Israel and Ukraine by party identity. (Source: GALLUP, [www.gallup.com](http://www.gallup.com); AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, [apnorc.org](http://apnorc.org))

### **1.3. Research Questions and Organization**

In light of recent developments, this thesis aims to examine the rationales behind populist Republicans' opposition to providing foreign assistance to Ukraine. Studies on populism's impact on foreign policy have flourished recently, as populist politicians have gained office in many countries worldwide. However, previous studies have mainly focused on populist foreign policies in Europe and South America, leaving theories pertaining to the U.S. largely undeveloped. By analyzing and understanding the decision-making mechanisms of populist right-wing politicians in the U.S., this thesis extends the scope of existing theories on populism and international relations, bridging the theoretical gap between the widely observed phenomenon and the scant systematic understanding of its pathology.

To address this question, I will first validate the already-evident populist tendencies to oppose foreign assistance to Ukraine. I will use voting records from the 117th and 118th Congress to analyze populist Republicans' stances on foreign aid to Ukraine. If vote analysis reveals a consistently more adverse position towards such assistance compared to moderate Republicans and overall representation, the thesis will confirm that U.S. populist Republicans are indeed more disinclined to support foreign aid to Ukraine.

The thesis then examines four competing hypotheses that may contribute to this policy preference. Firstly, it explores the general preference of populist Republicans toward foreign aid, hypothesizing that they consistently oppose foreign aid more than mainstream counterparts, regardless of the type of assistance or recipient countries. Secondly, I will investigate whether the pro-Putin sentiments associated with the populist right identified in previous research in Europe contributed to populist Republicans' particular dislike of funding Ukraine. The thesis will review the statements and floor speeches made by populist Republicans, in contrast to their non-populist counterparts in Congress, on Russia sanction bills and Ukraine aid bills during the 117th and 118th Congress, to assess the presence of pro-Putin sentiments. It argues that, even if such sentiments may be present, they do not constitute the determinant factors influencing the populist opposition towards Ukraine aid. Thirdly, I hypothesize that the populist right in the U.S. may be employing their negative votes more as a strategy for political signaling than as a reflection of policy conviction. Analysis of vote data on non-aid bills reveals an aversion among populist Republicans to compromising with Democrats. This aversion aligns with the core populist belief in a unified, "holy" people, and demonstrates a strong intolerance toward any compromise with what are perceived as corrupt elites and establishments. However, the thesis finds that

this pattern was not evident in votes on foreign aid bills, suggesting that the influence of such beliefs might be nonexistent or too insubstantial to impact this particular agenda. Lastly, I hypothesize that populist Republicans display opportunistic tendencies, showing a preference for funding countries perceived to have better prospects of success. This thesis investigates the potential correlation between Ukraine's performance in the conflict and populist Republicans' support for providing foreign assistance to the country. Such a tendency may stem from populism's nature as a thin ideology, which tends to overlook long-term benefits in favor of immediate gains. The emphasis towards short-term rewards within populism may lead to opportunistic reasoning in foreign aid decisions, favoring support for countries deemed to have a stronger chance of success.

The thesis utilizes both quantitative and qualitative methods to validate the hypotheses. Based on the observations, this thesis eventually concludes with a comprehensive argument on populist Republicans' reasoning in international affairs, and proposes possible implications for the findings, as well as potential areas for further research.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Identifying Right-wing Populism**

Populism remains a frequently referred to, but not properly defined, aspect of political science. The more frequent invocation of "populism" in recent political events is seen as problematic – it has become a catchall term for any insurgent and political anger, while the theoretical framework of the term itself is still deficient (Müller, 2016; Pappas, 2019; Chryssogelos, 2017; Pelinka, 2013). There are different interpretational approaches to structure and define populism. For many, populism is an ideological concept. They perceive populism as a "thin" political ideology, as exemplified in the analysis by Sorensen (2021), MacRae (1969), Akkerman et al. (2014). Alternatively, many emphasize interpreting populism based on its communication and exploitation of emotions such as anger, fears, and resentments (Hinshelwood, 2023; Wodak, 2015; Salmela and von Scheve, 2017). Moreover, some understand populism as a political strategy (Weyland, 2001; Ware, 2002); some consider populism as a political style (Bonikowski and Gidron, 2016; de Vreese et al, 2018). Nonetheless, these various approaches converge on certain descriptive features within the manifestation of populism. While this essay does not intend to propose a new definition of populism to the already vibrant and heated academic

discourses, I have selected three overlapping and imminent features identified in multiple scholarly arguments to describe the demographic of populist Republicans whose position on funding and aiding Ukraine will be examined in the later parts.

### **2.1.1. Far-right Ideology**

Many scholars associate right-wing populism with what is commonly referred to as the far-right, radical right, or populist right (Wahl, 2019; Pelinka, 2013; Mudde, 2007). Wahl (2019) argues that, although populist parties are less radical and violent compared to what he defines as the extreme right, violent and terrorist right, and totalitarian right parties, the populist right still belongs to the broader radical right in the ideological spectrum, often being more conservative than traditional conservatives and ultra-conservatives. Pelinka (2013) states that “contemporary populism is very much a phenomenon of the Far Right.” Similarly, Mudde (2007) pinpoints three core ideological features of the populist right-wing: nativism, authoritarianism, and populism. Collectively, these views indicate a scholarly agreement that right-wing populists are ideologically more extreme than conventional conservatives, yet they often represent the less extreme end within the far-right segment of the spectrum.

The sentiment-communicational approach to populism also indicates a similar connection. While many link populism with the emotions of anger, fear, and resentment (Salmela and von Scheve, 2017; Wahl, 2019; Wodak, 2015), a working paper by Ali et al. (2023) reveals that an angry population tends to gravitate towards the extremes of the ideological spectrum. By this logic, Populist Republicans, characterized by their conservatism and heightened emotional responses, such as anger, are likely to align themselves with the more extreme, radical right rather than with moderate mainstream conservatives.

Hence, I will consider the ideological stance within the moderate to far-right area of the spectrum as one of the identifiable traits of populist Republicans. Although this trait alone is not sufficient to classify someone as a right-wing populist, it is corroborated by multiple discussions across various interpretive approaches that suggest a far-right ideology is correlated to the populist right. Consequently, the ideological scores will be employed to validate the selection of subjects in the following sections.

### **2.1.2. Anti-Pluralism**

The narrative of the people versus the corrupt elites or establishment is a central theme in most populist discourse. The terms “populist” and “populism” stem from the Latin word *populus*, meaning

“the people” (McKnight, 2018). However, the concept of *the people* is not unique to populism. As Müller (2016) articulates, every politician, especially in electoral democracies, appeals to *the people*. According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, democracy is, “literally, rule by the people” (Shapiro et al. 2023). Clearly, *the people* is a key element of populism, but it is the distinct rationale behind it that is more telling.

The way populists define *the people* is more significant than the mere appeal to the term. At the heart of the populist notion of *the people* lies anti-pluralism. Populists claim to be the sole legitimate representatives of *the people* – not as the 99 percent, but as the unequivocal 100 percent (Müller, 2016). In the populist view, *the people* represent a generalized, abstract, idealized, moral, homogeneous, and undivided projection of popular will (West, 2023; Pappas, 2019; Müller, 2022). When confronted with internal dissent, populists do not acknowledge or deliberate it; rather, they denounce the dissenters as traitors or puppets of the corrupt elite (Müller, 2016). Hence, my approach is to look beyond the generic appeal to *the people* and focus on the essence of populism – its anti-pluralistic stance, which distinguishes populist Republicans from non-populists in Congress.

This anti-pluralist stance results in two distinct tendencies: a pronounced emphasis on internal unity and a strong aversion to external compromise. For populists, the notion of *the people* embodies a single truth and a unified belief, which Rosenblum (2008) terms “holism.” There is no acceptance of internal dissent; those who diverge from the group’s consensus are expelled and categorized as part of the establishment or its accomplices (Müller, 2016; Pappas, 2019). In line with this mindset, populist politicians, who claim to represent the authentic, homogeneous will of *the people*, are thus driven to act in extreme unity. Deviation from this unity would undermine the very logic of populism. Similarly, the concept of compromise is rejected; it is deemed meaningless because it implies the existence of valid alternatives, which is antithetical to their conviction. They are the bearers of the truth, and any yielding to other perspectives is not only unacceptable but also viewed as a betrayal of the sacred purity of the morals that populism professes to uphold (Pappas, 2019). These two tendencies explain why conservative parties today are more susceptible to internal schisms. The disagreements between moderate conservatives and radical rights often prove irreconcilable due to their dramatically different perceptions of democratic politics.

### **2.1.3. Democratic Illiberalism**

While the populist right is anti-pluralist, which fundamentally challenges the essence of liberalism and is often viewed as incompatible with democracy, this does not preclude their participation in electoral processes. This paradoxical stance has been termed *democratic illiberalism* by many scholars (Pappas, 2019; Zakaria, 2003). Populists may not endorse the notion that the populace holds diverse political opinions, which could logically extend to the argument that elections are redundant if there is a consensus on decision-making. Nonetheless, they regularly engage in democratic practices to manifest their political agendas.

Certain pundits, such as Müller (2016), critique the term, raising concerns that the word *democratic* might inadvertently suggest a harmless impact of populism on democracy. Democracy is underpinned by the protection of minority rights, a principle that populism opposes, denying the existence of minorities in favor of a singular “people” against “the enemies.” However, Müller’s reservations are more about the potential misinterpretation of the terminology rather than the phenomenon itself. He acknowledges that populists are active participants in democratic processes like elections, representations, and referenda, pointing out that “populists have no problem with representation as long as they are the representatives” (Müller, 2016). What Müller criticizes, in sum, is the generalization of these political strategies as being “democratic.”

Responding to the academic discourse, Pappas (2019) sets forth distinct and actionable criteria for what constitutes “democratic” and “illiberal.” The liberalism criteria, as shared by analysis of Gray (2000), include *1. a diversity of social divisions*, *2. a culture of political moderation and consensus*, and *3. the rule of law with minority rights*. Populism is classified as illiberal since it fails to meet any of these liberal benchmarks. On the more contentious concept of *democraticness*, Pappas identifies it through *1. the presence of electoral contestation*, and *2. a respect for parliamentary governance*. A party’s participation in competitive elections satisfies the first criterion, while its adherence to parliamentary rules and norms, without seeking to dismantle them after winning a majority, fulfills the second (Pappas, 2019). This thesis will adopt these criteria for their operational clarity and analytical utility.

## **2.2. Foreign Affairs Preferences of Right-wing Populism**

Historically, scholars have mostly focused on the domestic and inward policy preferences of populism. However, recent years have seen a notable increase in literature that examines the influence of populist politics on foreign policy. This surge in scholarly interest coincides with more right-wing populist parties gaining executive power, a trend most notably exemplified by the election of Donald Trump, as discussed by Zaslove and Verbeek (2017) and Heinrich et al. (2021). Most of the discussion to date, nonetheless, focuses on populists' explicit preferences on trade and international cooperation, while only a few explore the populist stance on other issues such as international security. It remains unclear how populists reason in international affairs, given that there is no readily conceivable division similar to the "people" versus the elites in domestic context. Moreover, some argue that given that populism is a "thin" ideology, it is more often what populism is attached to that creates such policy preferences (Zaslove and Verbeek, 2017; Hammerschmidt et al, 2022; Mijis, 2023). That said, existing literature has converged on certain observations of radical rights' foreign policy preferences. Those that could have implications for this thesis's discussion on foreign aid to Ukraine against Russia include *1. populists' general disinclination towards foreign aid, 2. the populist right's pro-Russia or pro-Putin tendencies, and 3. its isolationist, principled realist foreign affair styles that disregard international commitments and values, and disfavor multilateral organizations*. I will discuss these three proclivities below.

### **2.2.1. Disinclination for Foreign Aid**

Right-wing populists typically disfavor foreign aid for several reasons. Primarily, the rationale behind providing foreign aid rests on the expectation of moral or material returns (Heinrich et al., 2021). Populists posit that foreign aid is justifiable only if it yields direct benefits to the people. Some scholars suggest that populist cost-benefit analyses prioritize the financial well-being of the people, with less regard for intangible benefits such as the promotion of values that are often perceived as less tangible and thus tend to be disregarded (Hammerschmidt et al., 2022; Wojczewski, 2023). Their simplistic narrations also emphasize more on immediate profits rather than focusing on long-term rewards (Müller, 2016). However, foreign aid usually benefits the nation as a whole rather than individual citizens, and the feedback loop is not instant (Heinrich et al., 2021). In other words, populists are more concerned with relative gains rather than absolute gains; their simplified narratives also render long-term benefits



unperceivable. Populists not only expect immediate, direct, and individual returns from foreign aid but are also averse to seeing recipients in other countries obtaining greater short-term benefits in a comparative context.

Heinrich et al. (2021) also contend that providing foreign aid creates a delegation problem. In a well-functioned representative democracy, the populace delegates the power to decide on the allocation of collective resources – taxes – to the parliament, expecting that these funds will be used prudently and profitably. However, the feedback loop for foreign aid is typically prolonged. As a result, short-term benefits are often imperceptible, which can leave room for the ruling elites to exploit (Martens et al., 2002; Heinrich et al., 2021). For instance, Donald Trump famously claimed that the venal elites misuse foreign aid and international cooperation and gain profits from it at the people’s expense (Jakupec, 2018). This led to the entrenched anti-establishment sentiment within populist narratives, making them less inclined to trust their money to the ruling elites, especially in matters in which effective oversight is challenging and susceptible to malfeasance. As Heinrich et al. (2021) have posited, the less people trust that those in power truly represent their will – a trust inherently lacking in populist narratives – the less supportive they are of foreign aid. Hence, populists are less inclined to support foreign aid in general.

### **2.2.2. Pro-Russia / Pro-Putin Penchant**

It has been widely noted that certain populist right parties exhibit pro-Russia tendencies in their foreign policy preferences (Mijis, 2023; Chryssogelos, 2021). Although many such observations pertain to European far-right populists, a similar tendency has been noted among U.S. right-wing populist politicians including Donald Trump (Polyakova, 2018). The reasons behind the European and U.S. populist rights’ pro-Russia or pro-Putin tendencies may differ, as many European far-right groups view Russia favorably to counterbalance the U.S. influence, aligning with their political ideologies (Chryssogelos, 2021; Carlotti, 2023). Yet, there could be shared underlying reasons for the pro-Russia or pro-Putin preferences observed in right-wing populist parties on both sides of the Atlantic.

Carlotti (2023) investigated the roots of the close relationship between European radical rights and Putin-led Russia, concluding that radical right populists often venerate Putin as an archetype of populist leadership. Pappas suggests that populists are disillusioned with the current political system and yearn for a savior. Hence, there is considerable enthusiasm for charismatic populist leaders who represent hope for this redemption (Pappas, 2019). Putin, with his strong, authoritarian, culturally conservative,

and arguably populist leadership style, epitomizes the ideal remedy for the disenchanting populists against what they perceive as a corrupt domestic political landscape. His populist charisma endears him to many populist politicians who seek to emulate Putin's illiberal and authoritarian tactics to combat the perceived corrupt establishment.

Another factor identified by Carlotti, which may resonate across the Atlantic, is the ideological similarity. Whether or not Putin is labeled a populist or an autocrat, Carlotti (2023) posits that Putin's political philosophy is deeply rooted in nativism and authoritarianism, both of which are central to populist ideology (Mudde, 2007). Klapsis (2015) has noted that the European populist right mirrors Putin's stance on nativism, authoritarianism, and cultural conservatism, such as their antagonistic policies towards LGBTQ+ communities. This ideological congruence has been recognized in the U.S. as well (Dutkiewicz and Stecuła, 2022). A political figure does not need to be a populist to gain the admiration of populists; rather, it is the close ideological alignment with populist parties that may lead to the categorization of Putin as an ally rather than a foe.

While recent scholarship has attempted to explain the pro-Putin tendencies among populist right-wingers, the focus has been predominantly on European populists. Whether these explanations are applicable to their U.S. counterparts is still underexplored. Carlotti's analysis, although seemingly credible, has not been substantiated in the U.S. context. Moreover, the shift in Europe's populist right becoming more critical of Putin during the later stages of the Ukraine war (Carlotti, 2023) presents a contrasting trend compared to the U.S., highlighting a significant theoretical gap in understanding the pro-Russia and pro-Putin inclinations in the U.S. political landscape.

### **2.2.3. Isolationism, Principled Realism, and Others**

Right-wing populists often adopt isolationist positions, leading to reduced engagement in international cooperation, reluctance to participate in military activities abroad, and a preference for unilateral actions and bilateral agreements over multilateral resolutions. Barbieri (2021) notes that such isolationism is not a direct consequence of populism but an epiphenomenon of the nativism intrinsic to right-wing populism. Verbeek and Zaslove's study of the Italian Northern League suggests that the populist right generally downplays the importance of military operations abroad and international security. Populist parties are averse to military interventions unless their core identities are at risk (Verbeek and Zaslove, 2015).

The Trump Administration's frequent reference to "principled realism" also indicates a right-wing populist approach to international relations. This approach prioritizes America's interests, the country's freedom to act independently, and its suspicion towards multinational organizations (Ettinger, 2020). Several scholars have linked anti-establishment and anti-elite sentiments with a disdain for existing multilateral organizations within the liberal international order. Institutions like NATO, the IMF, and the WHO are often viewed by populists as ineffective in addressing current challenges while imposing additional burdens on leading nations such as the U.S. Thus, the aversion to multinational organizations can be interpreted within the populist narrative of *the people* versus *the elite and establishment* (Dutkiewicz and Stecula, 2022; Jungar, 2022; Bjork-James, 2020). Additionally, Trump's "principled realism" underscores the independence of U.S. foreign policy, favoring bilateral agreements made directly with the recipient country and eschewing the frameworks of the liberal international order (Ettinger, 2020). I propose that this stance is a confluence of anti-elite and anti-establishment sentiment, with nativist and isolationist principles.

Furthermore, populist right politicians tend to dismiss international commitments and values, often appearing ambiguous about joint agreements and placing little emphasis on morals and international reputation. Some analysts describe this as "hyper-realist," where right-wing populists are excessively driven by interests (Chryssogelos, 2021; Ettinger, 2020; Jakupc, 2018). This attitude aligns with earlier discussions about the populist right's tendency to prioritize financial interests and tangible benefits over moral values (Heinrich et al., 2021; Wojczewski, 2023). Such traits may have implications in discerning the motives behind support or opposition to Ukraine, as the self-defense war raises issues of international security, along with debates on moral and ethical values.

### **3. Hypotheses and Theory**

Building on the previous theoretical framework of right-wing populists' tendencies and rationales in foreign affairs, I hypothesize that the observed lack of interest in providing foreign aid to Ukraine among populist Republicans is a result of their specific beliefs or perceptions rooted in their populist ideologies. Since my argument is that such a preference is unique to the group of right-wing populists, the decreased interest in funding Ukraine should be both absolute and relative to other politicians and types of foreign aid. In this thesis, I propose four hypotheses which I will then individually validate in subsequent sections.

## **H1. The populist right is generally opposed to all foreign aid due to low government trust.**

According to Heinrich et al., the populist right is generally more skeptical of foreign aid since they do not trust that the ruling establishment will use the money well (2021). In other words, their disinclination for foreign aid is universal to all forms of aid, regardless of the purposes and the recipients, as long as the distrust of the ruling elites remains constant. Consequently, to validate this hypothesis, a universal pattern of disapproval to all foreign aid in comparison to other politicians under the same ruling administration was expected. The change in administrations, resulting in different trust levels of the ruling figures, should also result in a respective change in the general support rate from the right-wing populists. For instance, it is reasonable to assume that the populist Republicans would trust the government to distribute foreign aid more responsibly during Trump's Administration compared to Biden's Administration, and their general preference for foreign aid should change accordingly.

The thesis will then further explore the validity of the theoretical foundation of this hypothesis, should the results correspond to predictions made in this hypothesis. I theorize that the general dislike of foreign aid among the populist right is a result of their belief that delegating the power of allocating and distributing foreign aid to the ruling "elites" condones their cheating on *the people*. That is, I argue that the distrust of the government and the portrayal of it as the corrupt elite increases disapproval for foreign aid, echoing the academic conclusions previously made (Heinrich et al., 2021).

## **H2. The populist right's pro-Putin and pro-populist-leader inclinations cause their reluctance to support Ukraine against Russia.**

Previous academic discourse focusing on European populist right parties has concluded that the perception of Putin as an ideal populist leader and the proximity of political ideologies may have caused the populist right to be less critical of Putin and Putin-led Russia (Mijis, 2023; Chryssogelos, 2021; Carlotti, 2023; Klapsis, 2015). Some argue that US populist right-wing groups are similarly prone to pro-Putin sentiment (Polyakova, 2018; Dutkiewicz and Stecuła, 2022). However, the implications of such sentiment for actual foreign policy preferences have not yet been examined by empirical research focusing on the region.

I propose that pro-Putin and pro-Russia sentiments held by the US populist right could impact their stances on funding Russia's adversary—Ukraine. In other words, it is not that they have a general dislike for Ukraine, but that they are reluctant to support the enemies of Putin and Putin-led Russia, whom they

admire. I further propose that pro-Putin sentiments could extend to a preference for all strong populist leaders with aligning values to the populist Republicans. Previous research attempting to explain European populists' pro-Putin tendencies did not explore this potential expansion, yet the reasons they concluded appear not exclusive to Putin and Russia (Mijis, 2023; Chryssogelos, 2021; Carlotti, 2023; Klapsis, 2015). Should this theory be accurate, I expect the highest passion from the populist right to provide foreign aid to populist-led countries such as Israel and minimal motivation to fund countries, such as Ukraine, that are rivals to a populist-led nation. However, such a trend alone is insufficient in deducing the perception of populist Republicans on Putin and Russia, as well as on populist leaders in general. The thesis would also review statements on foreign aid bills to conduct qualitative analysis and complement the finding of the patterns.

**H3. *Opposition for opposition's sake. The opposition to topics that have bipartisan consensus among the moderate mainstream serves as a political signaling strategy by the populist right to distinguish themselves from the mainstream.***

Rosenblum (2008) describes the phenomenon of political “holism,” which emphasizes a single truth, a single correct opinion, and one homogenous interest of the people. According to Pappas (2019), such perceptions result in an extreme aversion to compromise, and any yielding is intrinsically incompatible with this hallowed image of the people. Consequently, I conceptualize that for right-wing populists, the bipartisan consensus reached in the moderate mainstream is an act of betrayal and collusion, and therefore they stand against that bipartisan agreement not based on rational cost-benefit analysis but simply to demonstrate that they are different from the corrupt. In other words, they should be generally more critical of topics where a bipartisan consensus exists, regardless of the topic's nature, whether it be foreign aid or anything else.

**H4. *The populist right takes an opportunistic and strictly interest-oriented approach to deciding whether to support foreign aid or not.***

Many have identified the populist right's “hyper-realist” tendencies in decision-making and storytelling (Chryssogelos, 2021; Ettinger, 2020; Jakupec, 2018). This tendency indicates that right-wing populists are extremely interest-driven and purposeful in making foreign policy decisions. The interests, as identified in the literature review, tend to be immediate and perceivable (Müller, 2016). I argue that one short-term perceivable interest in supporting Ukraine is its performance in the war, and

populists are using this as an indicator of the worthiness of the aid they give. Populists would support Ukraine if and only if Ukraine can win its war. There is nothing profitable in funding a loser, aside from the moral values, which right-wing populists tend to disparage and disregard.

## **4. Research Design**

### **4.1. Identifying Populist Republicans**

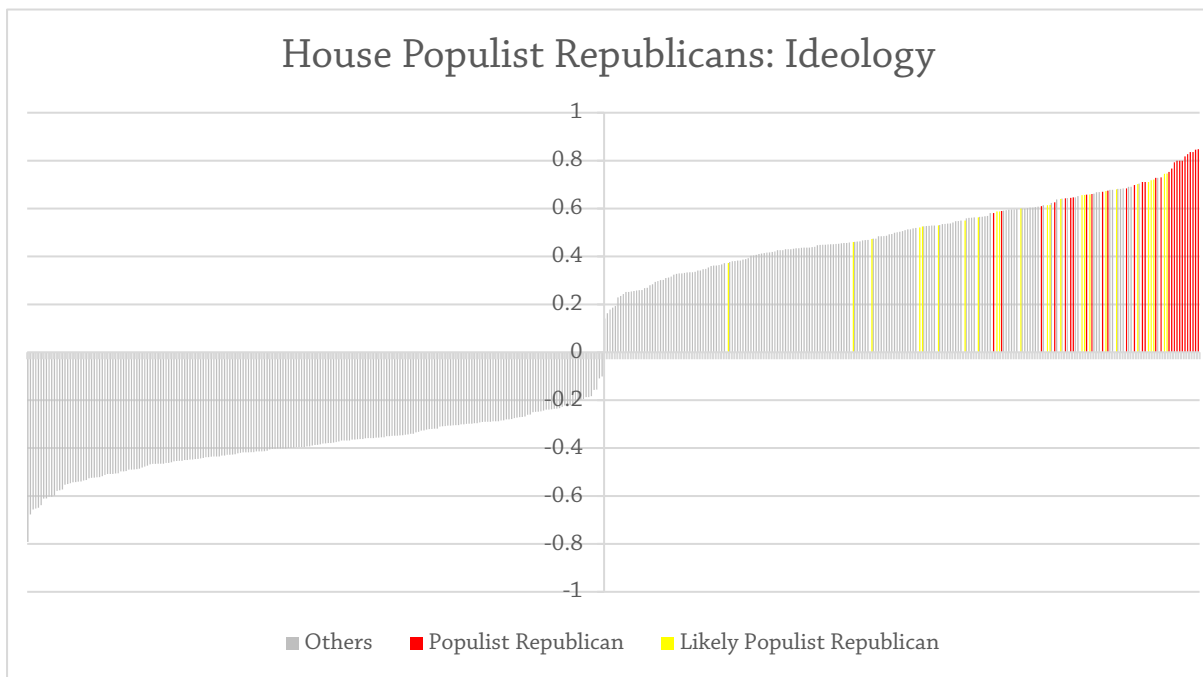
As discussed in the literature review, three characteristics identify the populist right: far-right ideology, anti-pluralism, and democratic illiberalism. Far-right ideology suggests that populist Republicans are more conservative than mainstream conservatives, positioning them closer to the end of the political ideology spectrum. Anti-pluralism manifests as a rejection of opposition and differing opinions, often shown in their aversion to compromise and cooperation with adversaries like Democrats, who they categorize as part of corrupt establishments (Pappas, 2019). Democratic illiberalism implies that while populist Republicans participate in democratic elections, they do not concede election results that contradict their worldview. Instead, they become election deniers, accusing unfavorable election outcomes as rigged.

To correspond with these parameters, this thesis will use three lists from different sources to identify populist Republicans in Congress. Firstly, The Washington Post published a report on April 17, 2023, analyzing House Republicans' ideological affiliations, claiming the House Freedom Caucus as the most hardline group in Congress (Blanco et al., 2023). The list of 34 members of the Freedom Caucus identified in the report reflects the far-right characteristics of populist Republicans in Congress.

For anti-pluralism, direct quantitative measures of this trait are lacking. Therefore, this thesis uses its derivative, aversion to compromise, as a marker. On September 28, 2023, following perceived collusion between former House Speaker McCarthy and the Democratic Party on issues like funding for Ukraine and supporting the stop-gap funding measure, the House Freedom Caucus published a letter on its official social account on X (formerly Twitter), demanding McCarthy's clarification of his position and urging opposition to the *Schumer-McConnell Continuing Resolution*, which included \$6.15 billion in funds for Ukraine (House Freedom Caucus, 2023). The 27 members who signed this letter indicate their anti-pluralistic tendencies.

Lastly, I reference The New York Times' report identifying 2020 election deniers elected or reelected into the 118th Congress (Yourish et al., 2022). The 32 current House representatives identified will be considered as possessing the characteristic of democratic illiberalism.

Based on the three name lists, a total of 54 Republicans in the 118th Congress are identified with populist tendencies. This thesis characterizes the 29 Republicans that appear on two or more of these lists as populist Republicans, while the remaining 25 representatives will be labeled as likely populist Republicans (Appendix A1; Appendix A2). [Figure 4](#) presents the ideological distribution of these Congresspeople based on DW-NOMINATE scores, showing a clear concentration of populist Republicans in the far-right ideological area. This distribution further validates the accuracy of this identification method (Lewis et al., 2023).



**Figure 4.** Ideology distribution of populist Republicans and likely populist Republicans among all representatives in the 118<sup>th</sup> Congress. (Source: Voteview: Congressional Roll-Call Votes Database. [voteview.com](http://voteview.com))

#### 4.2. Foreign Assistance Bills and Amendments

Foreign support is provided in various forms, each displaying a different policy preference, and therefore requires separation when necessary. The narrow definition of foreign assistance pertains to spending money on other countries, which involves two subcategories: economic and military aid. In addition to these two commonly analyzed forms of foreign support, this thesis also looked into other

forms, including vocal support, and punishments or sanctions imposed on the adversaries of the beneficiary countries. For instance, bills to end the importation of Russian oil are categorized as punishments on adversaries, and seldom do previous works cover these non-expenditure foreign supports in their analyses.

Certain bills and amendments are excluded from the scope of my analysis. Bills that only modify the recipient criteria are not considered foreign aid. Bills that do not support the ruling authority in the recipient country are also not excluded, given the difficulty in determining the recipient. Additionally, funding and support provided to certain individuals, not to the government as a whole, do not fall into the categorization of foreign aid in this article. Neither would I consider military actions in adversary countries to the US, such as Syria, as any form of foreign support. Moreover, simply permitting to sell weapons, while the receiving countries pay for those, is not considered foreign assistance, given that the US indeed benefits financially from issuing that permission. Lastly, for practical reasons, bills and amendments that are passed by voice vote, without objection, or by other non-roll call procedures are excluded from the analysis, given that there are no reliable ways to assess individual voting positions.

### **4.3. Quantitative Analysis**

This thesis relies primarily on quantitative analysis of congressional voting records. Congresspeople are grouped into four categories: “Populist Republican,” “Likely Populist Republican,” “Mainstream Republican,” and “Democrat.” Regressions are then run to determine the effects of each independent variable, including the type of foreign assistance, recipient countries, time, and congress, on the dependent variable, which is the voting patterns among each of the congresspeople groups.

The dataset this research mainly utilizes is the Voteview Congressional Roll-Call Votes Database (Lewis, et al., 2024). I used the 116th to 118th Congress as the scope, which covers the latter half of Donald J. Trump’s presidency, and the first third of Biden’s presidency, as well as the outbreak of two significant regional armed conflicts: Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, and the Israel-Hamas War. The cutoff date for the vote analysis is December 31, 2023, and the thesis will only look into the first session of the 118th Congress for quantitative analysis.

I also calculated the “vote against party” data for House members in the 116<sup>th</sup> to 118<sup>th</sup> Congress, based on the Voteview database, which indicates how likely it is for a member to vote against the party. The result is then utilized to supplement the validation of the third hypothesis that I proposed.



#### **4.4. Qualitative Analysis**

This thesis utilizes a qualitative review of congressional floor speeches and statements made by Republicans in the House regarding bills relevant to foreign aid, to determine whether there exists a generalizable pattern of Populists expressing admiration for Putin. The qualitative observations also complement the validation of Hypothesis 1, which argues that low government trust results in a reluctance to provide foreign assistance, and Hypothesis 4, which considers the possibility of an opportunist mindset and its implications for the decision-making process in support of Ukraine.

To determine whether Populist Republicans may be fond of Putin, I focus specifically on all bills that sanction Russia, while also considering the more general Ukraine aid bills and daily talks and statements made by Congresspeople. This strategy allows me to negate many financial and political considerations and focus better on their sentimental traits towards Putin. I am purposefully seeking evidence from the following aspects: Firstly, whether the Populist right is supportive of punishing Putin and his Russia, which is the direct indication of whether these members perceive Putin as a positive figure. There is much less motivation to sanction someone perceived as beneficial. Secondly, the thesis analyzes the descriptive vocabularies used by Republicans towards Putin, discussing whether there are differences in the narrative between Populist Republicans and non-Populist ones. Finally, a comparison between these narratives over Ukraine aid bills and foreign assistance bills benefiting other countries will be offered, based on which I will determine whether the discovered tendencies, if any, are specific to the Russia-Ukraine case or apply to a broader context.

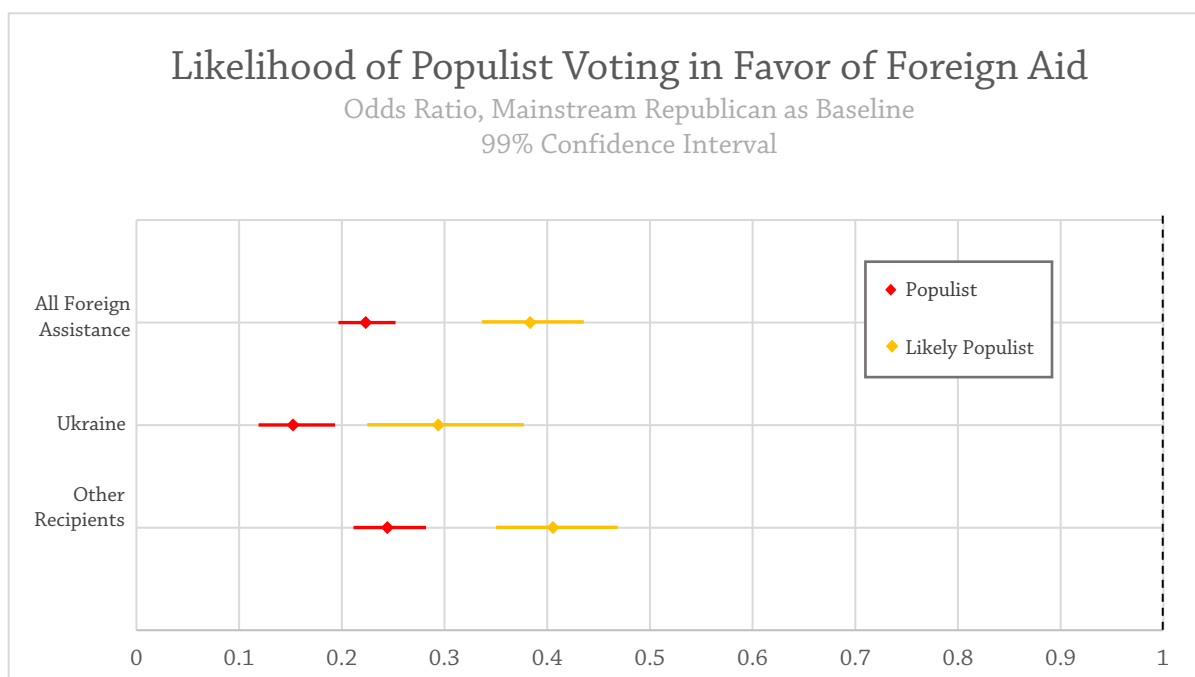
In discussing government trust, I make a distinction between low government trust and low government recognition. Fundamentally, those with low government trust tend to question the intentions of the people in power, whereas those with low government recognition tend to disagree with the strategies and question the abilities of the ruling party. These two sentiments often coexist, and it is virtually impossible to clearly distinguish one from the other. Nonetheless, based on the narrative tones of these scripts, the essay finds it viable to argue that certain expressions reflect low government trust, while others are more the products of partisan and ideological confrontation rather than low government trust, as will be argued in subsequent sections.

For opportunism, the thesis primarily seeks to identify the opportunist traits displayed in the comments and arguments of Populist Republicans. The most prominent trait, intrinsic to the definition of opportunism, sees opportunists emphasizing short-term, tangible returns, while disregarding

principles and the repercussions on external parties. Additionally, given that opportunists care little about principles, it is unlikely for them to establish a firm position on a particular topic. In contrast, opportunists support the agenda when they perceive tangible returns and oppose the same agenda when the context changes, and no substantial rewards are perceived. In other words, the second trait of opportunists I will be looking for is an inconsistent stance on the same topic at different times.

## 5. Quantitative Observations

### 5.1. Populist Republicans Dislike Ukraine Aid: A General Trend

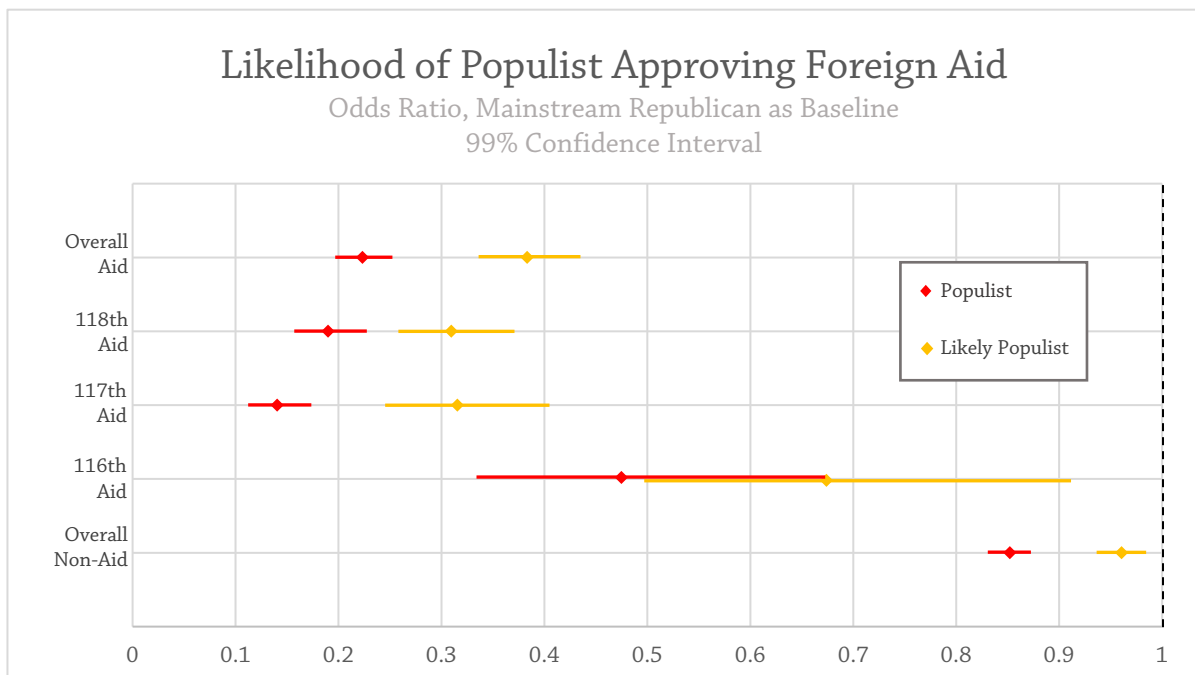


**Figure 5.** Odds ratios of Populist and Likely Populist Republicans voting in favor of foreign assistance with regard to different recipients, using Mainstream Republicans as the baseline. (Source: Voteview: Congressional Roll-Call Votes Database. [voteview.com](http://voteview.com))

Regression analysis of voting records from the 116th Congress to the first session of the 118th Congress shows that, in general, Populist Republicans are less likely to support foreign aid of any kind compared to their Mainstream Republican counterparts. Specifically, Populist Republicans are only 22.33% as likely, and Likely Populist Republicans are 38.33% as likely, to vote in favor of a foreign aid bill when compared to Mainstream Republicans, regardless of the aid’s recipients. This indicates a universal pattern of Populist Republicans voting against foreign support bills. However, Populist and Likely Populist Republicans are even less likely to vote in favor of Ukraine aid bills, displaying odds

ratios of 15.25% and 29.39% respectively, with Mainstream Republicans serving as the baseline. All these figures are associated with a  $P > |z|$  value of 0.000, indicating high statistical significance. Given that Populist Republicans are more inclined to vote against foreign aid bills targeting Ukraine compared to those for other recipients, as illustrated in Figure 5 above, this thesis confirms that Populist Republicans indeed oppose supporting Ukraine. The analysis will continue by exploring the reasons behind this pattern.

## 5.2. Populist Republicans Are Generally Opposed to All Foreign Aid



**Figure 6.** Odds ratios of Populist and Likely Populist Republicans voting in favor of foreign-aid and non-foreign-aid bills and amendments, using Mainstream Republicans as the baseline. (Source: Voteview: Congressional Roll-Call Votes Database. [voteview.com](http://voteview.com))

A regression analysis was conducted on votes on all bills and amendments not categorized as foreign assistance from the 116th Congress to the 118th Congress. Results show that Populist Republicans are 85.22% as likely, and Likely Populist Republicans are 96.07% as likely, to vote in favor of a non-foreign aid bill compared to Mainstream Republicans. The results are statistically significant, with a  $P > |z|$  value of 0.000, and indicate that the populist right votes similarly to the mainstream on non-foreign assistance bills most of the time. This is a sharp contrast to their voting patterns on foreign aid bills, in which they are less than 50% as likely to vote in favor when compared to the mainstream.

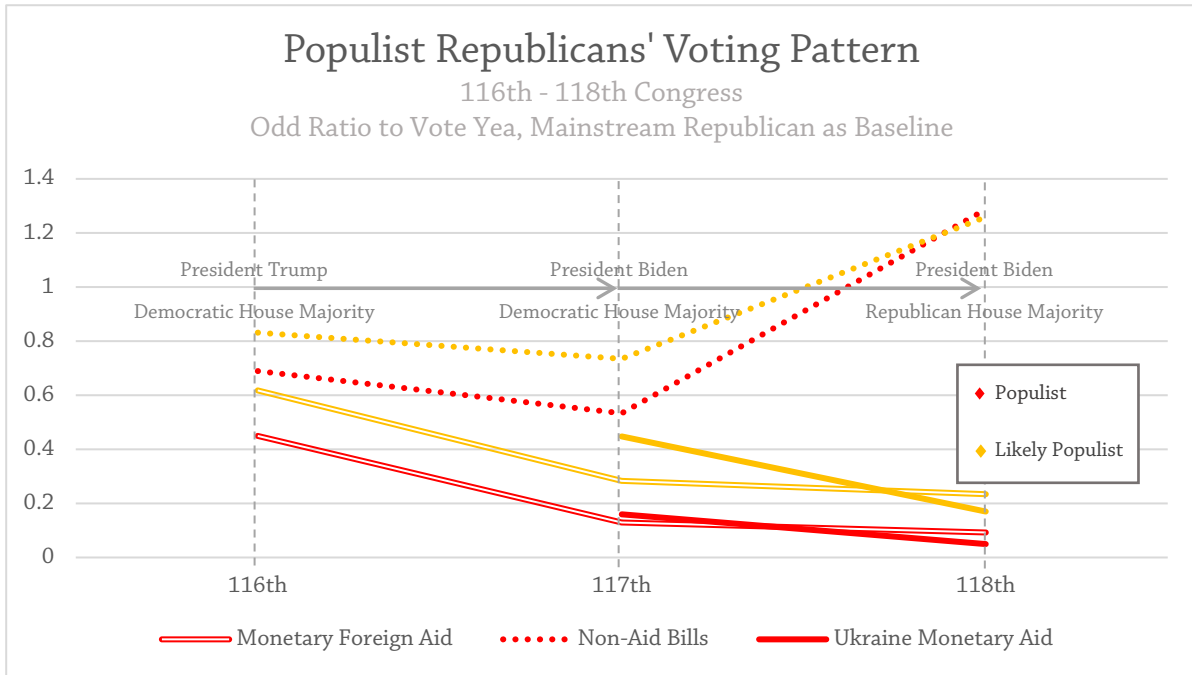
Based on the comparison, as shown in [Figure 6](#), I therefore conclude that Populist Republicans are indeed generally opposed to foreign aid of all types.

### **5.3. Populist Republicans' Vote Patterns Change with Government Structure**

Donald Trump served as the president of the United States during the entire 116th Congress; President Biden took office in January 2021, serving during the 117th Congress and the 118th Congress. Meanwhile, the Democratic Party held the majority in the House in both the 116th and 117th Congresses, while the Republican Party reclaimed the House majority in the 118th Congress. Consequently, reviewing the voting patterns of Populist Republicans during these three periods provides insights into how changes in government structure and political contexts may have influenced their voting preference.

A few assumptions can be made for these three Congresses. Firstly, Populist Republicans' trust in the government was highest during the 116th Congress, as the head of government was Donald Trump, a Republican and notably a populist. This trust level is then expected to fall significantly with President Biden, a Democrat, taking over. It then remained roughly at the same low level across the 117th and 118th Congresses, as no significant change in government leadership composition was observed since then. Additionally, the Republican Party had relatively low agenda-setting capability during both the 116th and 117th Congresses, as the majority party during these periods was the Democratic Party. Given that, many of the bills and amendments that made it to the voting stage during that time may not have favored the majority of the Republican Party, aligning more with Democratic values. As Republicans retake the House majority in the 118th Congress, they then have more agenda-setting capabilities, and it is assumed that bills and amendments entering the voting procedures more or less align more with the Republican Party.

The voting pattern of Populist Republicans during these three periods is calculated and shown below in [Figure 7](#). Monetary foreign aid is defined as all economic and military assistance provided to a foreign government or international governmental organization, and non-aid bills as all other bills that underwent a roll-call procedure and were not categorized as any type of foreign support, including vocal support and sanctions on adversaries. Special attention was also given to bills that provide economic and military aid to Ukraine, where data is available only for the 117th and 118th Congresses, not the 116th.



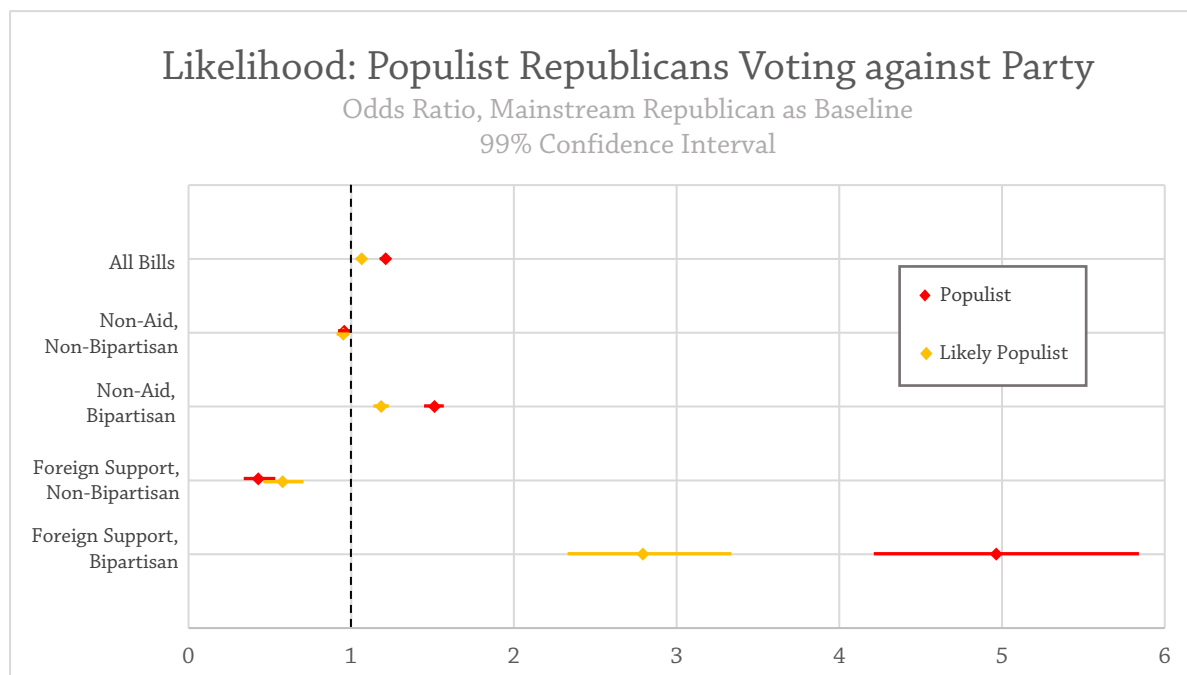
**Figure 7.** Voting patterns of Populist Republicans and Likely Populist Republicans in the 116th-118th Congress: Analysis of monetary foreign aid, non-aid bills, and Ukraine monetary aid. (Source: Voteview: Congressional Roll-Call Votes Database. [voteview.com](http://voteview.com))

It is observed that as President Donald Trump was replaced by President Biden, a slight drop in the overall likelihood of Populist Republicans voting in favor of bills and amendments in Congress is observed between the 116th and 117th Congresses as expected. When the government trust level is low, it is less likely for one to vote in favor of proposals set by the opposite party. Between the two congresses, a greater drop in the likelihood of voting for monetary foreign assistance among both Populist Republicans and Likely Populist Republicans is also observed, indicating that Populist Republicans' voting preference on monetary aid to other countries is even more significantly affected by the change in their trust level in the government.

Between the 117th and 118th Congresses, a different trend is observed. Populist and Likely Populist Republicans become more likely to vote in favor of amendments and bills as the Republicans reclaim the House majority. They were indeed even more likely to vote for amendments and bills in the 118th Congress than their mainstream counterparts, as the odds ratios for non-aid bills are both around 1.2, which is greater than the baseline of 1.0. On the other hand, their likelihood to vote toward monetary foreign aid, especially economic and military aid provided to Ukraine, continues to decrease, indicating a divergence within the Republican Party on foreign aid bills. Ukraine monetary aid is losing popularity

among Populists at a higher rate compared to all monetary foreign aid, indicating that factors other than government trust are also affecting the voting preference for foreign aid to Ukraine, which will be explained in the analysis section.

#### 5.4. Populist Republicans Have Similar Rate to Vote Against Party as Mainstream

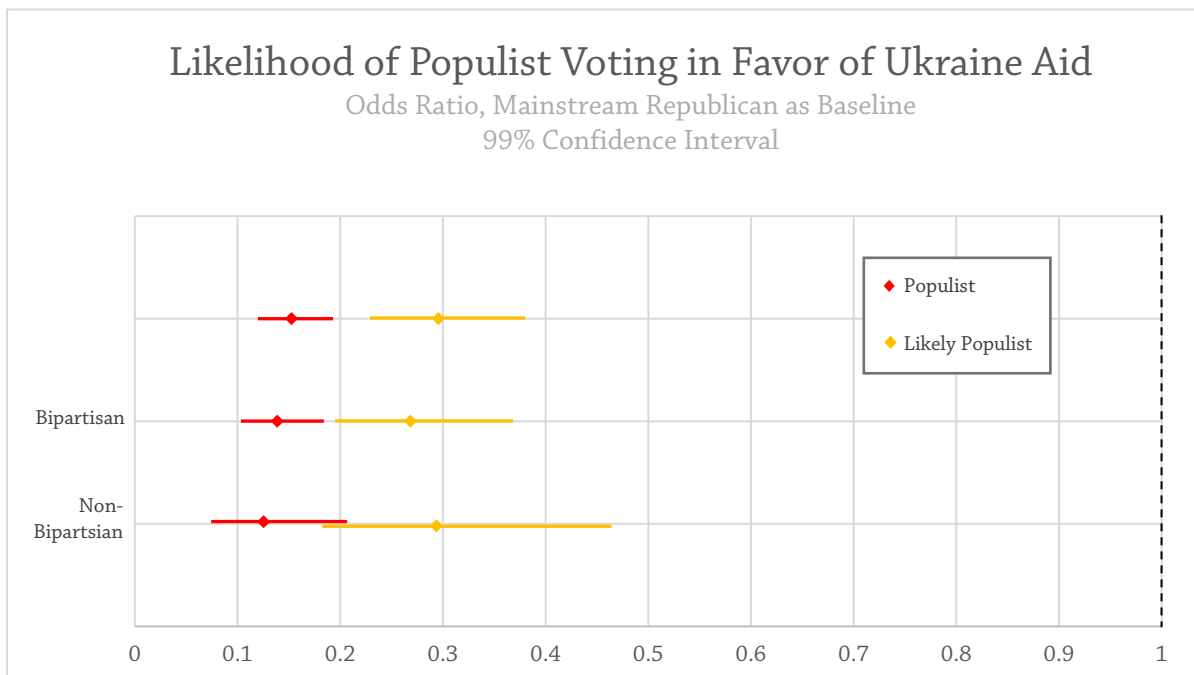


**Figure 8.** Odds ratio of Populist Republicans and Likely Populist Republicans voting against the party on different vote types, using Mainstream Republicans as the baseline. (Source: Voteview: Congressional Roll-Call Votes Database. [voteview.com](http://voteview.com))

Contrary to many’s perceptions that Populist Republicans are more likely to vote against their party given their more extreme location on the ideological spectrum, data regression indicates a different trend. By defining party positions as the position within the party that is taken by more than 50% of the party members in a particular vote, I was able to identify bills and amendments that passed with a bipartisan majority, as well as congresspeople that voted against their party. Regression shows that while Populist Republicans are approximately 21% more likely, and Likely Populist Republicans 6% more likely, to vote against their party compared to their mainstream counterparts when no filters are applied, they are indeed less likely to vote against the party on bills and amendments that do not have a bipartisan consensus. For votes that are not passed with a bipartisan majority, and do not include foreign assistance content, both Populist and Likely Populist Republicans are approximately 5% less likely to vote against the Republican Party compared to other Republicans that are not categorized as Populist. For votes that

are not passed with a bipartisan majority, where the contents involve foreign assistance, a more dramatic, but similar trend exists. Populist and Likely Populist Republicans are only half as likely as Mainstream Republicans to vote against the party on those votes, showing a high degree of unity. In contrast, for those votes where the majority of both parties converge, the Populist rights become more likely to vote against their party. While such a tendency of defiance exists universally on all bipartisan votes, it is particularly noticeable on bipartisan foreign assistance bills and amendments, where Populist Republicans are five times as likely, and Likely Populist Republicans nearly three times as likely, to vote against their party compared to Mainstream Republicans. These results all have a  $P>|t|$  value of less than 0.05, many with a value of 0.000, indicating a high level of statistical significance, and are displayed in [Figure 8](#).

### 5.5. Bipartisanship Does Not Affect Voting Patterns to Ukraine Aid Bills



**Figure 9.** Odds ratio of Populist Right voting in favor of Ukraine aid bills under different bipartisanship conditions, using Mainstream Republicans as the baseline. (Source: Voteview: Congressional Roll-Call Votes Database. [voteview.com](http://voteview.com))

Regression shows that on bills providing aid to Ukraine, whether there exists a bipartisan consensus does not have a noticeable effect on the likelihood of Populist Republicans voting against the bill. As shown in [Figure 9](#), the odds ratios of both Populist and Likely Populist Republicans on voting for a Ukraine aid bill are almost identical in both bipartisan and non-bipartisan votes. These results all have

a  $P > |t|$  value of 0.000, indicating an extremely high level of statistical significance. The results are rather surprising, in that they show bipartisanship does not affect the judgment of Populist Republicans over providing aid to Ukraine, which is contrary to the general trend discussed in the previous part. I will discuss the relevance of this finding in the discussion section.

## 6. Qualitative Observations

### 6.1. Populist Sentiments towards Putin

#### 6.1.1. Attitude on Sanctions and Punishments

There have been multiple sanction bills targeting Russia and Belarus during the Second Sessions of the 117th Congress, including *H.R.6968*, *H.R.7108*, *H.R.496*, *H.R.6930*, *H.R.6891*, and *H.R.6899* (U.S. House of Representatives, 2022). Several populist Republicans identified by this thesis have been observed as frequent opposers of these sanction bills towards Russia. The list includes Dan Bishop, Chip Roy, Paul Gosar, Clay Higgins, Taylor Marjorie Greene, Scott DesJarlais, and several others. However, it would be logically flawed to argue, based on their frequent objections towards punishing Russia, that admiration towards Putin contributes to the demonstrated voting pattern. Several other factors discussed in this thesis, such as partisan politics, low government trust, and others, can also explain this trend. This is best illustrated by the fact that many non-populist Republicans, such as Brady, and even some Democrats, voted against some Russia sanction bills. Consequently, instead of relying on voting patterns, which lead towards different unverifiable pathologies, the thesis analyzes the floor speeches and explanatory statements congresspeople made on the bills to determine their position towards punishing Russia.

This thesis concludes that, based on the scripts reviewed, Populist Republicans are not significantly less supportive of the idea of punishing Putin. This is exemplified by the statement released by Chip Roy following his negative vote on *H.R.6930*, in which he states:

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This bill wasn't just about taking Russian assets to support Ukraine, which I **support generally**; instead, as usual, this Congress is blindly giving power to the executive branch to fund poorly-defined 'democracy and human rights programming and monitoring.' I will not support that, especially when this



administration views such things as pro-life policies, traditional views on marriage, and elementary understandings of human biology as potential threats to human rights.

---

He reiterates his claim that he “generally supports the underlying purpose” of giving Putin repercussions for his hostile offense when he talks about his decision to vote against *H.R. 7108* and credits his objection to the bill being muddled with other off-topic agendas. In other words, he claims that it is not that he is against punishing Putin, but that he is displeased by the other agendas that he sees as polluting the entire bill.

Chip Roy is not the only one who voted against these bills and claimed that they would have supported the bills if their sole intention was to punish Russia and help Ukraine. Dan Bishop is another populist Republican making similar excuses. Also, on *H.R. 7108*, Representative Bishop states:

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I remain ready and willing to supply Ukraine’s defense effort and to sanction Russia, but war fever can no longer be an excuse for Congress to transfer its power and responsibility to the executive branch and global bodies with blank checks.

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The similar claim made by different populist Republicans indicates that the populist right wants harsh and decisive countermeasures against Putin’s Russia. It will be impossible to determine whether they truly want it or are simply pretending, but this is the message they want to send to their constituencies, which are also highly likely to be populist. Therefore, it is likely that populists do not dislike bills that place sanctions on Russia. Populist Republicans on the list, including Rep. Cloud and Rep. Clyde, expressed their reservations on *H.R. 6968*, which echo those raised in the statements of Rep. Roy and Rep. Bishop, further corroborating the potentials. Rep. Cloud and Rep. Clyde voted in favor of *H.R. 6968* despite all the reservations they had. From the thesis’s perspective, these votes in favor of by Cloud, Clyde, and many other populist Republicans who did not speak in Congress, is another strong indication that fondness for Putin, even if it exists universally among the populist right, is not significant enough to alter the decision of whether populists will vote for or against foreign support bills.

### 6.1.2. Descriptive Vocabularies

Word choices reflect the subconscious perception of the speakers. Descriptive vocabularies used on a hostile counterpart are certainly more negative and harsher than those used towards an akin person. I therefore paid attention to the phrases populist Republicans used to describe Putin and Russia's aggression towards Ukraine, and compared those to the ones used by non-populist Republicans. Based on my observation, the severity and negation of the vocabularies used by populists towards Putin are of similar levels to their mainstream counterparts. The thesis argues that this similarity in word choices suggests a similar level of hostility against Putin.

This thesis sources floor speeches and statements made by Republicans on bills *H.R.6968*, *H.R.7108*, *H.R.496*, *H.R.6930*, *H.R.6891*, and *H.R.6899*. The congresspeople who have argued for their positions on the bills, which include two populist Republicans, Rep. Bishop and Rep. Roy, along with approximately ten non-populist Republicans, were analyzed holistically by the thesis. Below is an example of an excerpt from Rep. Wilson's floor speech, which this thesis utilizes to induce attitudes based on the vocabularies used. The vocabularies of interest are highlighted in bold:

---

Sadly, on February 24, **war criminal** Putin launched an **unprovoked, unjustified murderous** war of aggression against the people of Ukraine.

The humanitarian toll has been **devastating**. More than 5 million refugees have fled Ukraine. More than 7 million are believed to be internally displaced, and we have seen on our screens the **heart-wrenching** images of Putin's **horrific** war crimes in Bucha, Mariupol, and elsewhere.

The economic toll for Ukraine is no less **devastating**. The World Bank has forecasted that Ukraine's economy could contract by 45 percent this year with a worst-case scenario seeing its GDP shrink by 75 percent.

---

It is clear that non-populist Republicans dislike, and even hate, Putin. "War criminal" has been frequently used to refer to Putin by multiple different members, and Rep. Hill, one of the non-populist Republicans, used "czar Putin" in his comment on *H.R.6899*. The descriptive vocabularies also tell a clear story of their negative sentiments towards the Russian political leader. "Murderous," "devastating," "unjust," "illegal," and "egregious" are all words that are attached to negative and disdainful emotions.

This unreserved criticism of Putin’s hostility indicates that mainstream Republicans have little positive feeling towards the figure, and provides grounds for comparison to the perception of populist Republicans.

The thesis finds that populist Republicans use negative vocabularies of a similar, but slightly lighter level on Putin compared to their mainstream counterparts. Rep. Cloud, a populist Republican defined by this thesis, made the following call when speaking on *H.R.6968*:

---

Mr. Speaker, Putin’s decision to bring this **horrific tragedy** upon the people of Ukraine is rightly to be condemned, and it is right at this moment in history that we do not fund this **aggression** by proxy through the purchase and importing of Russian oil.

---

The expression is slightly weaker than those made by non-populist Republicans. While “horrific tragedy” does contain strong sentimental strength, it is more of a condolence for the people of Ukraine than a condemnation of Putin. However, it is noted that while Rep. Cloud uses weaker vocabularies on Putin, the congressperson indeed voted in favor of the Russia sanction bill.

Rep. Roy also made several descriptive narrations about Putin in a statement he released to his constituency. He said,

---

Today I voted against H.R. 7108. I **generally support** the underlying purpose of this bill, and likely would have voted for it had that been the sole focus. Putin is **actively killing** thousands of innocent people in an **unjust** war, **de-stabilizing** the world economy, and **saddling up** with China and Iran in the process. This body needs to stop throwing together important legislation at the last minute and allow its members to vote on clean, single-issue bills.

---

This statement is stronger than the one Rep. Cloud made, for it contains more direct criticism of Putin and his war efforts. The vocabularies used are more similar to those made by non-populists, such as “unjust” and “destabilizing.” While this statement may appear slightly less condemning than the strongest ones made by non-populist Republicans, such as Wilson’s statement that I quoted, it generally matches the intensity of many other congressmembers in the mainstream. The thesis, while

acknowledging some slight differences in intensity in wordings between the two groups, also considers that these are the only two available statements that contain substantive descriptive phrases, therefore it would be hasty to make any conclusion based on the limited samples and the noticeable, but small differences. Out of caution, I will not make such a determination and maintain that populist Republicans are fundamentally similar in terms of wording used to describe Putin.

### 6.1.3. Comparison: Russia vs. Hamas

The thesis also compares the expressions used by populist and non-populist Republicans when they talk about Hamas. Hamas's attack on Israel is one of the two major regional conflicts that broke out in the timeframe this thesis concentrates on. The United States, similar to how it reacts to the invasion of Ukraine by Russia, stands firmly in supporting Israel but reacts quickly to sanction Hamas. Republicans, in contrast to their reservations towards supporting Ukraine, are firm advocates in supporting Israel. Consequently, by comparing the accounts of Hamas's offense to those of Russia, I will be able to tell whether the emotional values are different.

I reviewed the relevant statements made on bills in the 118th Congress that support Israel and contested Hamas, including *H.Res. 771*, *H.R. 6126*, *H.R. 340*, *H.Res. 793*, and *H.Res. 888*. It is discovered that both populist and non-populist Republicans used negative descriptive language on Hamas similar to those seen in their discussions over Putin and Putin's Russia. For example, on *H.R. 6126*, Rep. Moore, an identified populist, made the following statement:

---

Israel, our strategic ally for nearly 75 years, is working to defend itself against **brazen terrorists** who want to extinguish them. At least 1,400 Israelis and 30 Americans have lost their lives. It is imperative we support and supply Israel with resources and demonstrate strength on the world's stage in a time of **grave danger**. Instead of taking more money out of Americans' bank accounts, this legislation cuts \$14 billion in Democrat funding to the weaponized IRS to protect Israel.

---

Rep. Posey, a congress member whom this thesis deems likely to be a populist, also uses similarly negative language about Hamas:

---

Israel has the inherent right to defend itself, and its citizens, against **barbaric** attacks committed by Hamas and Hezbollah. The **unthinkable brutality** of Hamas terrorists continues to come into view and is **beyond what even the most evil** of people could contemplate.

---

Rep. Chris Smith, a non-populist Republican, also used the term “monstrous crimes” to refer to the wrongdoings of Hamas in his statement. The consistent usage of these emotional and negative vocabularies establishes a clear connection between emotional disinclination and their language choice. While “brazen,” “barbaric,” and “unthinkable brutality” appears to be harsher than words such as “unjust,” “illegal,” and “horrific” used on Russia, the underlying emotions are fundamentally the same. Based on this comparison, the thesis contends that populist Republicans have a negative perspective on Putin and Putin’s Russia, despite such a perspective may be less intense compared to their feelings towards Hamas.

## **6.2. Government Trust**

By defining government trust narrowly as the level of certainty one has about the intentions of the person in question, the thesis is then able to separate such traits from low government recognition, which refers to low confidence in the person’s capability or strategic choice. In other words, low government trust is manifested in doubts about the ruling party’s intentions and principles to provide collective goods, while people with low government recognition have little concern about the ruling party’s goals being to serve the country and the people but are not confident in their abilities to carry out such goals.

The thesis finds that non-populist Republicans more often question Biden’s ruling strategy and capabilities and appear not so concerned with Biden’s intention to serve the country. Rep. Brady, a non-populist Republican, made the following comment on *H.R. 6968*:

---

Thanks to the White House, America is in a dangerous wage-price spiral, and as a result of the President’s failed economic leadership more and more experts are predicting a recession this year. No wonder most Americans believe our economy is already in a recession or depression and have lost faith in the President’s ability to rebuild our economy.

---

The congressperson questions President Biden’s economic leadership, and said that Americans have lost faith in Biden’s ability. This is a typical partisan politics comment, where politicians from one party question the strategy and political abilities of politicians from the other party. Such a statement does not qualify as a signal of low government trust under the narrow definition used in this thesis.

Rep. Brady is not the only person who questioned Biden’s policies. Rep. Graves made a similar argument on the same bill, saying:

---

The administration’s failed policies have limited us to what they will tell you are two options and only two options. We can either buy Russian oil and fund the aggression of Putin into Ukraine, or we can pay higher prices in the United States.

---

“Fail” is the keyword that represents the reservations about the government’s ability and strategy. I found such a proposition in the statements of Rep. Brady, Rep. Graves, and Rep. Kean, all being non-populist Republicans, made on various different bills. Rep. Kean’s criticism of Biden that “It is not wise statesmanship; it is weakness” on *H.R.5692* provides a strong indication of the reservation. However, none of the congresspeople above directly questioned Biden’s intention to serve the United States.

Populist Republicans, on the other hand, exhibit a much lower level of government trust compared to their mainstream counterparts. Chip Roy, for example, criticized the Democrats’ government’s intention to serve the good of its people:

---

Last night, after Democrats blocked a sensible approach to impose a strict Russian energy import ban, sever normal trade relations with Russia and Belarus, and unleash American energy to change the balance of power, I voted ‘no’ on the subsequent, so-called Russian oil ban bill. **It is designed purposefully to depress American oil and gas production**, will likely empower adversaries in Iran and Venezuela, is filled with loopholes, and cedes power to the Executive branch to easily waive its provisions.

---

By asserting that the Democrats’ bills are designed to “purposefully depress” the American interest, Rep. Roy’s comment goes beyond mere criticism over strategy and political decision; it is an attack on

the intention of the other party, which establishes the key indication of low government trust. Such expressions are not uncommon among populist Republicans, and I will provide more examples below.

Rep. Cloud's comment on *H.R. 6989* also questions the intention of the government, despite being less obvious and explicit. Cloud says:

---

But it is also tragic that the Biden administration and Democrats in this Chamber would rather turn to dictatorial, terrorist-sponsoring regimes to fill the energy gap rather than the world-renowned work ethic and innovation of the American people.

This administration should be doing everything it can to ramp up production and increase energy exports.

It is past time to stop Biden's **assault** on American energy and restore America's energy dominance.

---

The thesis argues that the phrase “assault” contains the judgment over intention which “fail” does not have, despite both words being used to express that American interests are undermined. “Assault” is more of a proactive move, which implies strong consciousness and will; “fail” may or may not be intentional and are more often passive results of incompetency. Consequently, by using the vocabulary “assault,” Rep. Cloud is challenging Biden's intention to serve the good of the people, similar to the criticism made by his populist colleague Rep. Roy.

Biggs, another populist Republican, has also made comments like, “Democrats were not serious about sanctioning Russia.” This accusation goes beyond criticism of strategic choice and involves questions about the real intention. These expressions, based on the extensive statements and floor speeches made by both populist and non-populist Republicans, appear disproportionately more in the statements of populists, indicating that the radical right has a significantly lower level of government trust than their non-populist counterparts.

### **6.3. Opportunism in Foreign Aid**

Foreign aid is somewhat opportunistic in nature, based on the assumption that every action taken by a country is rational and interest-oriented. However, the populist right appears to be more opportunistic because they tend to overlook the moral values of foreign aid and emphasize the financial

returns, which are tangible, short-term, and noticeable, as discussed in the literature review. I find clear indications from floor speeches and statements that populist Republicans show this exact tendency, and therefore can be considered more opportunistic.

At the beginning of the invasion, there was a consensus among all members, populist or not, that the United States had a moral obligation to support Ukraine against Russia's offense. Cori Bush, a non-populist Democrat, made the following statement in March 2022:

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Our approach to the crisis in Ukraine must be rooted in ending human suffering, ensuring accountability, and creating pathways to peace and justice for all. That's why last week, I voted in favor of H.Res 956, which strongly condemned Putin's invasion and affirmed the United States' support for the Ukrainian people.

---

The emphasis on "ending human suffering, ensuring accountability, and creating pathways to peace and justice for all" are all moral conceptions. There was no discussion of whether the United States should make money from the war. Congress supports Ukraine against Russia's invasion not because it can benefit from the event by doing so, but because it is the *right* thing to do.

In the early stage of the conflict, the populist side gave a similar message that talks more about the ethical and moral values instead of economic returns. Chip Roy made the following statement following Russia's invasion of Ukraine:

---

America indeed has a moral responsibility to help Ukraine to some degree based on previous agreements; more importantly, it is not in our national security interest to allow Putin to advance, strengthen, and partner with Iran or China.

---

Rep. Roy acknowledged the moral responsibility to help Ukraine at the early stages of the war, and based on this, the thesis can reasonably argue that at the early developments of the armed conflict, even the populist right appears less opportunistic.

The tone of these conversations soon changed towards a more opportunistic direction on the populist side. In September 2023, a year and a half since the outbreak of the war, Rep. Roy sent another message to the White House questioning the decision to further fund Ukraine. In the message, he states:



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The American people deserve to know what their money has gone to. How is the counteroffensive going? Are the Ukrainians any closer to victory than they were 6 months ago? What is our strategy, and what is the president’s exit plan? What does the administration define as victory in Ukraine? What assistance has the United States provided Ukraine under Title 10? It would be an absurd abdication of congressional responsibility to grant this request without knowing the answers to these questions. For these reasons—and certainly until we receive answers to the questions above and others forthcoming—we oppose the additional expenditure for war in Ukraine included in your request.

---

This time, the congressperson no longer mentioned the moral responsibility, his very own proposition, and focused on the realistic topic of whether funding Ukraine will lead to its victory. This indicates that at the later stage of the war, the motivation of populist Republicans’ involvement in the Russia-Ukraine war became much more opportunistic and speculative. This observation is supported by the statement of Paul Gosar, in which he rejects any ethical obligations and only discusses national security interests:

---

The United States has now wasted more than \$100 billion footing the bill for a war in which we have no national security interest.

---

The vocabulary “wasted” also hints at a strong desire to benefit from spending money on Ukraine, a clear characteristic of a speculative mindset.

## 7. Discussion

This thesis finds clear indications that Populist Republicans are generally less likely to support foreign assistance to Ukraine. As shown in [Figure 5](#), not only are Populist Republicans significantly less likely to vote in favor of foreign assistance of all kinds, approximately 78% less likely compared to Republicans that are not Populist, but they particularly dislike foreign aid to Ukraine. The odds ratio of them voting in favor of Ukraine, using non-Populist Republicans as the baseline, is around 0.15, demonstrating that the extreme Populist right almost never votes in favor of Ukraine aid compared to the mainstream. [Figure 6](#) provides a clear comparison between their likelihood to support foreign aid

votes compared to non-foreign-aid ones. The differences when filtering based on whether the votes involve foreign aid testify that foreign aid is a strategic choice that Populist Republicans especially disapprove. Consequently, I argue that the subject this thesis focuses on is not merely a subjective accusation but a statistically supported tendency, which has not been analyzed and explained beforehand. In the subsequent discussion, I will focus on providing my version of the explanation, echoing the quantitative and qualitative evidence I have provided in the previous sections.

### **7.1. Populist Republicans are money sensitive as a result of their low government trust level.**

Previous literature already concluded that populists often dislike foreign aid because the lack of transparency and oversight over the process is inherent in this type of spending. What is hidden in this conclusion is that Populist Republicans are more likely to be against foreign support provided in a monetary form compared to other types, such as vocal support or sanctions. [Figure 7](#) corroborates this assumption, as it is clearly shown that regardless of the government structure and period of time, non-aid bills have constantly been less likely to be voted against by Populist Republicans. However, validation of Hypothesis 1 does not stop here; as explained in the hypothesis section, it is also necessary to explain why such a pattern exists. In this thesis, I argue that the government trust level is positively correlated with the likelihood of the Populist right supporting foreign aid spending.

The transition from the 116th Congress to the 117th Congress coincided with a change in the presidency. During the entire 116th Congress, Donald J. Trump was the president of the United States. Biden then was inaugurated as the 46th president of the United States as the 117th Congress began. In the meantime, the party composition in the House between the two congresses remained fundamentally similar. The Democratic Party held the House majority in both congresses, indicating that the partisan politics context in Congress is largely unchanged. As the presidency transitioned from Donald Trump, a Republican and a populist, to President Biden, a Democrat and a non-populist, there would be a drop in government trust level among all Republicans. Additionally, as the qualitative observation has provided, the drop in government trust level among populist Republicans is more dramatic than the drop among non-populist Republicans, given that the populist right is not only against Biden's policy and ideology; they categorically question Biden's intention to serve the country.

The results from [Figure 7](#) echo the hypothesis, showing that there was a slight drop in the likelihood of Populist Republicans and likely Populist Republicans voting in favor of all non-aid bills as the

presidency was taken up by a non-populist Democrat. In addition, there was a notable drop in their probability to support foreign monetary aid bills in the 117th Congress compared to the 116th Congress, more dramatic than the general trend, and implies that certain attributes common to all monetary foreign aid may also be responsible for their disinclination, other than the mere party politics. I argue that money is the key issue. The process of allocating and providing foreign aid mirrors the classic agency dilemma, where Congress, or the Congressional Representative, is the principal, and the president, or the executive branch in general, is the agent. If the principal distrusts the agent, meaning that the principal perceives a high risk of the agent defaulting, there is less likelihood that the principal would authorize the agent to manage the tasks, especially ones that are more difficult to supervise and easier to cheat on.

Therefore, this thesis is able to validate the first hypothesis, that Populist Republicans are generally averse to foreign aid because of a lack of trust in the government and insufficient oversight capabilities over the executive branch in the aid allocation process. The theory also explains why Populist Republicans keep alleging bribery and corruption in the debate over foreign aid, but not so much in other topics, as there are often checks and balances schemes on the executive branch.

## **7.2. There is no clear indication of a universal pro-Putin sentiment within the Populist Republicans group.**

There is no clear indication of a universal pro-Putin sentiment within the Populist Republicans group. Observing many Populist Republicans voting against Ukraine support bills, which include not only monetary aid but also vocal support and sanctions against Russia, might lead some to conclude that the extreme right harbors a pro-Russian inclination. Indeed, several Democrats and some non-Populist Republicans have publicly leveled this accusation. However, it is logically flawed to deduce their preference based solely on observable voting patterns, as this approach does not provide a reliable means to validate such an assumption without succumbing to circular reasoning. It is not tenable to presume Populist Republicans possess a pro-Putin sentiment and then seek to confirm this assumption based on their voting against certain anti-Russia and anti-Putin bills, given that the initial assumption is derived from these very observations. Any attempt to do so would inevitably result in a logical loop, precluding any deviation between the assumption and its foundational observation.

To ascertain the motivations behind Populist Republicans' votes against anti-Russia legislation, I delved into their floor speeches concerning the pertinent bills, as well as their statements and

communications with their constituents. While it remains possible that they might disguise their true intentions behind a facade, exploring these communications offers a more reliable methodology than basing conclusions on unverifiable assumptions. This thesis lends further credibility by examining not only the content and arguments of these statements but also the choice of vocabulary, aiding in accurately discerning the real sentiments and preferences of Populist Republicans towards Putin.

The qualitative analysis reveals that Populist Republicans do not exhibit a strong aversion to bills sanctioning Putin and his regime. Thus, even if some members hold a favorable view of Putin as a populist figure, such sentiment does not significantly influence their legislative decisions. They are willing to vote against Putin, regardless of any admiration they might harbor.

Furthermore, the thesis argues that Putin is generally viewed negatively by Populist Republicans, albeit less so than other adversaries, such as Hamas. The language used to describe Hamas, including terms like “brazen,” “barbaric,” and “unthinkable brutality,” is overtly hostile. In contrast, descriptions of Putin, such as “unprovoked,” “murderous,” “horrific,” and “war criminal,” are also decidedly negative, far from neutral or positive.

There are subtle indications that Populist Republicans may view Putin somewhat less negatively than mainstream Republicans do. While the populist right is “generally supportive” of sanctioning Putin, mainstream Republicans show unwavering support for such measures; the mainstream’s language is also more negative and accusatory than that of the populist right, as analyzed in this thesis. However, it is far from clear that this discrepancy significantly influences voting patterns for several reasons. Firstly, public statements from the populist faction are relatively sparse, with not all members speaking frequently, and some never addressing Ukraine at all. Members like Marjorie Taylor Greene and Thomas Massie, who are among the most prominent opponents of Russia sanction bills, have not disclosed their reasons for voting as they did. Secondly, comparing the intensity of sentiments based on wording is challenging, especially given individual differences in language style. While this thesis endeavors to control for such variability by comparing language used regarding Hamas, it concludes with reasonable confidence that Populist Republicans generally harbor negative perceptions of Putin. Despite difficulties in tracking statements by the same congressperson across different topics and times, the evidence collected strongly suggests that Hypothesis 2, regarding admiration for Putin, does not hold. Therefore, I consider Hypothesis 2 to be effectively refuted by the evidence presented.

### **7.3. Populist Republicans are more likely to vote against the party over bipartisan bills, but it is not a factor towards their disinclination over foreign aid to Ukraine.**

As discussed in the literature review section, populists are fond of political holism, which makes them less inclined to join any bipartisan agreement (Rosenblum, 2008). This thesis argues that voting against bipartisan bills is a political signaling strategy populist politicians use to signal such holism to their constituency. The proposition is supported by the data in [Figure 8](#), which shows that Populist Republicans are more likely to vote against their party when a bipartisan majority exists in the mainstream compared to non-Populist Republicans, while they are indeed less likely to vote against the party than the mainstream when no such bipartisan base exists. We see the same trend on both non-aid bills and foreign support bills, with the one over foreign support bills being more dramatic in both directions. This is a clear indication that the proposed tendency to rebel against norms and consensus among Populist Republicans does exist.

However, this thesis finds that whether or not there exists a bipartisan consensus does not affect the disinclination of Populist Republicans against foreign aid to Ukraine. As shown in [Figure 9](#), there are no substantial differences between Populist Republicans' likelihood to vote against a bipartisan Ukraine aid bill versus a non-bipartisan Ukraine aid bill. This indicates that although voting against the party could be one of the strategies Populist Republicans use to separate themselves from the mainstream and to maintain their political holism, such a strategy appears to be out of consideration when voting on supporting Ukraine. On one hand, their odds ratio of voting in favor of Ukraine aid is already extremely low, and therefore, any additional effects caused by this consideration may be unnoticeable given that the margin would be extremely small; on the other hand, it could be that foreign aid to Ukraine has been such a contested topic that the Populist right must have a very distinct and consistent position on the topic, and cannot risk diluting their opinion by pursuing the political signaling strategy. The clearer their political standpoint is, the less room there is for them to maneuver around to signal their identity and distinctions from other members.

Therefore, I argue that the third hypothesis, that Populist Republicans are opposing foreign aid to Ukraine because there is a clear bipartisan consensus and using their opposition as a high-profile political signaling strategy, is not supported by the regression results. While Populist Republicans do tend to vote against the mainstream more when there exists a bipartisan majority, such a pattern does not pertain to foreign aid to Ukraine, or is not great enough to be noticeable. In other words, the

statistical data undermines the third hypothesis when it applies to foreign aid to Ukraine but nonetheless supports the proposed pattern on a larger scale.

#### **7.4. Ukraine's battlefield performance is positively correlated with the intentions to send aid because of the opportunist expectation of returns.**

The transition from the 117th Congress to the 118th Congress saw no change in the presidency, with President Biden in office throughout both sessions. However, the party composition in the House of Representatives changed. The Democratic Party held the majority in the 117th Congress but performed relatively poorly in the 2022 Midterms and lost the House majority to the Republicans. This change in governing structure greatly enhanced the agenda-setting power of the Republicans, and therefore, bills that entered the voting procedures should be more or less favored by Republicans. Given this, it was expected that Populist Republicans would be less likely to vote against bills in the 118th Congress since they less frequently needed to make concessions to the Democrats.

As shown in [Figure 7](#), the change in their voting patterns over non-aid bills is perfectly predicted by the theory. Yet, their odds ratio of voting in favor of foreign aid, especially towards Ukraine aid, continued to drop, indicating a further schism over the topic within the Republican party. This abnormality suggests that the theory over government trust and support rate of foreign aid from Hypothesis 1, which has already been validated, does not fully explain the Populist Republicans' disinclination towards providing aid to Ukraine. Another factor, such as opportunism and speculation proposed in the fourth hypothesis, also contributes to the phenomenon and can be the major driver of the further decrease in support rate towards foreign aid to Ukraine between the transition from the 117th to the 118th Congress.

The word choice used by Populist Republicans when discussing foreign aid to Ukraine reflects an opportunist mindset. As discussed in the qualitative observation section, words such as "waste" indicate such a mindset, and Populist Republicans use this word most frequently. There are nuances between providing foreign aid due to perceived interest and providing foreign aid to profit from it. The former is a common expectation of return, which is universal among all, regardless of political ideology. In contrast, providing aid to profit from it emphasizes the outcome over the intentions. In the case of Ukraine, the Populist opportunistic way of perceiving aid to Ukraine is not to give a dime to them because of the disproportionate military capability between Ukraine and Russia, making it unlikely that

there are any rooms for profits or speculation, while Populists know very clearly that there is a good cause to provide such money. The cognition of non-Populists, on the other hand, is to treat such spending as an investment—i.e., the spending may or may not turn into real profit, but because there is a perceived need, they are willing to give it a try.

Ukraine's performance was less satisfactory in 2023, when the 118th Congress took place, and many were losing patience with the everlasting fight. On the other hand, the sentiment was more optimistic in 2022 when Ukraine managed to thwart Russia from its sudden offense, which indeed surpassed the expectations of many. Therefore, spending money in Ukraine in 2022 appears to be more advisable compared to spending money on Ukraine in 2023. While the overall likelihood for all congressional members should more or less drop as Ukraine failed to deliver a determining victory, it is important to note that using mainstream Republicans as the baseline already accounted for that background movement. In other words, what [Figure 7](#) shows indicates that Populists are more dramatically affected by the subsidence of the initial optimism, compared to non-Populists. This once again corroborates the qualitative observation that Populist Republicans are more opportunistic, and therefore, that further decreasing support rate from the 117th to the 118th Congress.

Consequently, I argue that the fourth hypothesis, that Populist Republicans are only willing to support countries that are stronger and more likely to win because of the speculative and opportunistic mindset, is validated by both the empirical observations and the statistical results.

## **8. Concluding Remarks**

### **8.1. Conclusion**

This thesis analyzes and discusses four possible theories in an attempt to explain the observed pattern of Populist Republicans not supporting aid to Ukraine in its wars against Russia the invader. Statistical regressions are run over the roll call vote records in the 116th, 117th, and 118th Congress, and I qualitatively evaluate the statements and floor speeches delivered by the House representatives to gain a better understanding of their reasons for casting a particular vote. I conclude that overall, Populist Republicans are concerned about spending money and prefer not to allocate money to systems where they have little oversight. The underlying cause of this trend is the nature of foreign aid being difficult to track and oversee, which creates an agency dilemma. Under such a mechanism, their likelihood to

support monetary aid to a foreign country increases when they have a higher government trust level and decreases when they doubt the government, not on their capability but on their good intentions. The thesis also finds that the Populist Republicans' intention to provide aid to Ukraine is closely related to Ukraine's performance, which translates into their perception of the profit potentials from sending the money. They place significant attention on not wasting money, while caring little about whether it is the right thing to do both in the short term and long terms. These findings echo the patterns discovered in previous literature on populism in Europe, therefore possessing both high external validity and internal validity.

The thesis eventually rejects the other two hypotheses regarding a pro-Putin sentiment and opposing foreign aid as a strategy of political signaling and identity separation. I found mixed signals over the Populists' perceptions of Putin. Some Populist Republicans are clear adherents to Putin, chanting his every movement and success against Ukraine, while others demand swifter and harsher countermeasures over Putin to punish what he has done. The lack of a universal pattern among all Populist Republicans makes this proposition weak and flawed. As predicted in my literature review, a major reason for the pro-Putin sentiment among the Populist right in Europe is that Putin is regarded as an external power that can balance the hegemony of the United States. It is less convincing that Populist Republicans in the US would necessarily love Putin as a commonly perceived enemy. I also find that despite the bipartisanship attribute of a vote significantly impacting the likelihood of being voted in favor of by Populist Republicans for all bills, there is no or dismal effect on their judgment on Ukraine. This tells us that they are not voting against Ukraine aid to use it as a political signaling strategy; anti-aid to Ukraine is their real position and actual intent.

## **8.2. Limitations**

The research methods used in this thesis contain certain limitations, as I now point out. One limitation lies in the dataset that I am using to conduct statistical analysis. All available data are based on roll call votes, as there are no viable ways to determine individual positions over votes by voice, passed without objections, and other non-roll call procedures. Meanwhile, a notable portion of foreign aid approved by Congress was through one of the non-roll call procedures, and the methods this thesis uses to analyze inevitably omit those bills. Therefore, it is possible that the patterns identified in analyzing the roll call votes do not apply to other bills and do not reflect the real preference of the



Populist right. I consider such risks as acceptable, nonetheless, given that I have exhausted the resources available, and that bills passed without a roll call are the ones that are less contested or important. The House representatives should have requested a roll call if they found it necessary, or where disagreement is large. Thus, the conclusions made based on the roll call votes should be reliable and generalizable, despite that the trend discovered could be more dramatic than in reality, given that many unanimous “yes” votes were omitted.

The thesis also handpicked the members who are categorized as Populist Republicans and those that are not. Despite providing my process and criteria in the methodology section and attempting to rely mostly on factual traits rather than subjective judgment, a certain level of subjectivity is inevitable. Also, since there are no readily available, widely recognized lists of Populists in Congress, it is possible that the name list identified in this thesis may differ from the ones identified by other literature. Therefore, the quantitative results presented in this paper may not be suitable for cross-literature comparison.

### **8.3. Future Research**

This study aims to fill in the gaps in the study of populism and the Populist foreign affairs preference in the United States. Whereas previous studies mostly focus on the European Continent, the rise of populism in contemporary US politics makes it theoretically inspiring to examine the American case and identify its unique foreign policy tendencies, which may or may not resemble those found in Europe. While this study provides some new insights into American Populist foreign affairs reasoning, there remains a huge vacancy that has yet to be discussed.

Further research may benefit from cross-validating the patterns identified in this thesis and determining the scope where such patterns may apply. Additionally, as discussed in the previous sections, why certain Populist Republicans and their constituencies harbor favorable views towards Putin is not fully understood within the existing literature and this study. The challenge will be explaining how Populists, whose ideology is built upon a narrow definition of a unified and holy people, may harbor positive impressions of someone clearly considered a member of an exogenous group. While previous results over Europe argue that the desire to counterbalance the US’s hegemony possibly fuels the pro-Putin sentiments in Europe, such an explanation simply does not apply to the US context. Consequently, addressing the unsolved puzzle using the American case as a starting point could

potentially provide better insights not only to the US context but also refine the theoretical framework of Populist foreign policy preferences to be universally applicable instead of being limited to a certain geographical scope.

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## Appendices

### A. Samples for Vote Analysis

#### A1 List of Populist Republicans in the 118<sup>th</sup> Congress

Name	State	District Number
<b>Biggs, Andy</b>	AZ	5
<b>Bishop, Dan</b>	NC	8
<b>Boebert, Lauren</b>	CO	3
<b>Brecheen, Josh</b>	OK	2
<b>Burlison, Eric</b>	MO	7
<b>Cloud, Michael</b>	TX	27
<b>Clyde, Andrew</b>	GA	9
<b>Crane, Elijah</b>	AZ	2
<b>Davidson, Warren</b>	OH	8
<b>DesJarlais, Scott</b>	TN	4
<b>Donalds, Byron</b>	FL	19
<b>Good, Bob</b>	VA	5
<b>Gosar, Paul</b>	AZ	9
<b>Greene, Marjorie</b>	GA	14
<b>Hageman, Harriet</b>	WY	1
<b>Harris, Andy</b>	MD	1
<b>Higgins, Clay</b>	LA	3
<b>Jackson, Ronny</b>	TX	13
<b>Luna, Anna Paulina</b>	FL	13
<b>Miller, Mary</b>	IL	15
<b>Moore, Barry</b>	AL	2
<b>Nehls, Troy</b>	TX	22
<b>Norman, Ralph</b>	SC	5
<b>Ogles, Andrew</b>	TN	5
<b>Perry, Scott</b>	PA	10
<b>Roy, Chip</b>	TX	21
<b>Self, Keith</b>	TX	3
<b>Tiffany, Thomas</b>	WI	7
<b>Weber, Randy</b>	TX	14

**A2** List of Likely Populist Republicans in the 118<sup>th</sup> Congress

<b>Name</b>	<b>State</b>	<b>District Number</b>
<b>Alford, Mark</b>	MO	4
<b>Babin, Brian</b>	TX	36
<b>Buck, Ken</b>	CO	4
<b>Cline, Ben</b>	VA	6
<b>Collins, Mike</b>	GA	10
<b>De La Cruz, Monica</b>	TX	15
<b>Duncan, Jeff</b>	SC	3
<b>Fry, Russell</b>	SC	7
<b>Fulcher, Russ</b>	ID	1
<b>Gaetz, Matt</b>	FL	1
<b>Gooden, Lance</b>	TX	5
<b>Green, Mark</b>	TN	7
<b>Griffith, H.</b>	VA	9
<b>Harshbarger, Diana</b>	TN	1
<b>Jordan, Jim</b>	OH	4
<b>Kelly, Mike</b>	PA	16
<b>Lesko, Debbie</b>	AZ	8
<b>Luttrell, Morgan</b>	TX	8
<b>McClain, Lisa</b>	MI	9
<b>Mills, Cory</b>	FL	7
<b>Mooney, Alexande</b>	WV	2
<b>Posey, Bill</b>	FL	8
<b>Rosendale, Matthew</b>	MT	2
<b>Santos, George</b>	NY	3
<b>Sessions, Pete</b>	TX	17